

## Mapping new aesthetic territories

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Before to begin talking about the importance and necessity of a new aesthetic map and providing suggestions on how is possible to delineating it, we may start from a general comment in order to better understand what we are really facing in today's society and what is the meaning of Sakya digital project in this context.

We also must admit that in art the relevance of each outcome is known in retrospect and so all judgments on digital art are now necessarily indeterminate and premature, however, it is not wrong to say that the digital technologies' phenomenon is bound to create a new aesthetic with strong and deep visual innovations. Digital technologies, in fact, are not a simple substitution of outdated media, but they do have such an innovative potential to produce substantial modifications by changing not only the meaning but also the substance art itself.

Since the appearance of Conceptualism, Behavioural Art, Land Art, Body Art and all those international movements, which have been spread out in the West since the '60s, art has been walking through a profound identity crisis. Science, art and technology began to be connected each other, cooperating and starting to use electronic instruments to create art and a new way to perform it. The intersection drawn attention of people from different background and this has been growing in size and scope. At that time experimentalism seemed able to break through all boundaries and it took artists to nihilist consequences where the jug of the meaning was nearly emptied. Since then, a gap has been defining gradually between artists and their public, as individuals who speak languages incomprehensible to each other, and furthermore, between art and the social reality. Art becomes an alien element in the society, no longer able to give answers and not capable anymore to use a comprehensible language. In fact, the idea of art is changing constantly, since it is a very ambiguous and metamorphic matter, which enclose a plurality of meanings not even concordant each other and escapes to a univocal definition. The definitions of visual art have extended far beyond the canvas since the increased availability of computers has caused a burgeoning of computer based visual art, also known as digital art. This has developed into a broad range of computer graphics, animation, cybernetic sculptures, laser shows and so on. While the aesthetic experience has always meant a one-way interaction between the creator and the viewer, the current electronic age allows also a two-way involvement, with the possibility of input from both the creator and the viewer altering the creation. In fact, the new technology enables everyone to digitally manipulate images.

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The intersection of information technology and art is an increasing trend that involves people from different disciplines with varying interests. During the last decade, the production and distribution of images has increased exponentially, together with the availability of inexpensive tools. This has been encouraging the mass to develop new images, exactly in the same ways the artist used to do. The thing is that the artists tend to use software that quite often consists in a cheap alternative as commercial and open source software. This situation creates even more confusion concerning the artist's person, who is not more the blessed depository of the creative gesture, and also regards to the meaning of art and its codified artistic languages. As tools and results are in fact quite the same, the only answer that art can give is refining its own languages and codes and to be conscious that at the end only the purpose makes the real different. Contemporary artists hold an extraordinary instrument that allows them to keep and enforce their social role in the society of images, which is the ability to filter, analyse and refine the codes of cultural communication. At this point, conceptual extra-sensory transmissions together with the final art intent represent a very important fundamental. In other words the extra dimensions is the knowledge system behind the image that artworks should encode.

It is probably right to affirm that art, like the technology, beyond a certain limit, it masters the needs that made it born before, and it no longer serves them anymore, but instead it uses them to continue to exist only for itself. In fact, art gradually became more and more autonomous and independent. We might say that art has been banished from the world choosing to live in protected areas, as museums, galleries and the "art system" in general. This is because art has lost its historical privilege, which is to draw the symbolic imaginary view of humankind. There is no doubt, in fact, that the media are now the holders of our imagination. So, one of the problems today is the art preservation in a world saturated of signs and images. The consequence is that lots of this art that circulates today, is not more than useless art unable to improve the society. This non-influential art, simply just self-referential and self-preservative, finds its place in a separate channel that is not connected with what surrounds us and does not redeem the story, but rather highlights the defeats.

It is now easy to deduce how art is not an easily mappable condition, but it is an instable space that lies on the proper transactions between the artist and his public. So, from my point of view, in order to keep undiminished the meaning of art in our lives we probably have to consider returning to the "public", both as reference but also as purpose. What I aim is an art that dares to be thought of as constitutive of the space where the man lives. This means to rediscover the original meaning of art connected with a sense of

belonging to the our universe. As like to say an art more human confident, deeply present and integrate with the life's texture.

So, due to this situation what is now called into question is not art, but the criteria of judgement that requires a radical revision in order to face the changes introduced by a new social environment and digital technologies, which have produced new artistic forms and disrupt the way used to express. Through the creation and manipulation of digital images, electronic is capable of producing a kind of visual thinking extraordinarily flexible, able to range within limits incredibly vast and to amplify the area of invention and creativity enormously. This gives us a new way of learning: the ability to use technology and to be related to it, express a new way of referring to the reality. I think that the new media at our disposal do constitute a system of thoughts capable of indicating new methods to see the world. The experimentation, that has characterized the vanguard of all the last century, seems destined to exasperate beyond all limits. The technique allows us to implement computerized ease and formal cultural contamination between different languages, in order to produce an art border, right on the limit between fiction and reality. We are facing a huge cyberspace where the mind strays easily between past and future and draws on emotions and sensations never experienced before. It is exactly for this reason that is fair and useful to combine the artistic experience with new technologies. These encourage us to accrue our inquiry to the reality and think about the world and art in a new way. Become aware of these changes may mean going into unknown territory. So is now very important to elaborate a new map, which includes new aesthetic paths. We have to change lots of parameters and modify ours knowledge in order to rearranging most of accepted notions concerning contemporary art. New challenges are waiting in front of us able to have a strong impact on our future worldwide.

Actually, China is already changing the way the world thinks about contemporary art. From my point of view, China seems to be a step forward: this is the proper territory for experimentation and without any doubt, all of this, seems to be very clear to Zhang Xiaotao. In fact, he shows to be aware about this peculiarity by directing his own researches into this way, since years, providing a new impetus to the artistic international practice.

What fascinates me most in an artist is the ability to be in tune with our present time and being able to capture aspects that normally escape the normal understanding and usually can be shown clearly only in retrospect after having accepted the changes. However, an artist should have the skill and the ability to perceive the potential of a trend in advance anticipating gradual spread.

Zhang Xiaotao is an international example for the cross- disciplinary study of contemporary art that, with lots of enthusiasm and ability, for years, has devoted himself to exploring different aspects related to analysis and interaction with the work of art through the computer. The transition to the digital field has allowed him to do that exceptionally well, thanks to a more immediate and also deeper attitude. Quoting the artist: “my work is to use classical spirit and contemporary methods to new encode today’s cultural society”.

Culture is that place where you can get in touch with new thoughts systems, it seems to suggest Zhang’s works, and it is where we conduct our experiments in order to constantly invent worlds able to give better sense to this one. Since most human behaviour arises from a package of values that other had decided for us before, his contention is that culture is the way we evolve intimately that matrix of values and the place where we can share them. We need a way of understanding this habitat, treating it with the respect and care it deserves. I believe the approach Zhang Xiaotao has outlined would help us get there.

So, through the use of computers, it opens and expands an area impossible to imagine only a few years ago. Zhang opens new perspectives, not just only aspects inherent in the near future, but also concerning the analysis and the meaning of our past and our present. We can see in his work a strong focus and deep pondering of all that is entailed in the rapid change of society. Also we can get a clear feeling of his anxiety and disappointment about the progressive disappearance of traditional culture and the universal loss of the spirit. The intent is to accomplish a more internal goal, that is, at the same time, intimate and personal, but also able to reach the universal and international level. In this way a challenge had began to narrate stories and spread out suggestions about some social or spiritual key theme. We cannot simply affirm that Zhang Xiaotao is an artist: he is a researcher and his research brings him travelling into different parallel worlds.

First focused on the China’s period of political and economical transformation, Zhang Xiaotao is recently working on restoration, or we can also say recovery, of both the culture and of the spirit as well. For Zhang, in fact, art is a thoughts’ care mechanism and to be focus on certain issues is crucial for his inner experience. In these terms, art is actually like a therapy to him, it is the torch that helps us to illuminate the darkness and dubiousness in front and inside us, in the future and in our soul. Perhaps the treatment he is suggesting us comes from the same root, event if it serves for him, humankind or culture. The key to understand this medication lie in his new virtual art project: Sakya.

In the process of human becoming, both artists and archaeologists are skilled mediators and translators of things. Today, artists and archaeologists are turning towards each

other to exchange experiences, narratives and revelations about our shared world, which is a palimpsest of temporalities, both things from the past and phenomena of today, but also possibilities for the future. From one side, is definitely true that we should get distance from the past in order to move forward, but from the other side, we are our past and we cannot ignore it. Of course, our past is not what we can see in a museum, as Zhang seems to suggest us: the past is exactly inside of us, flowing in our blood. Here, the DNAlike acentral threadkeeps alive and continues the ancestral energy from the past to the present. While our future right lines on our past and they both flow together inside our veins, we cannot choose to see just one side. We should get aware about this in order to be able to deeply understand ourselves, our soul and our society. So, this exhibition intends also to strengthen a new relationship between contemporary art and archaeology. Sakya presents the challenge of mediating and translating the relationships entwining humans and things, body and soul, tradition and contemporaneity. Precisely, it is made by two parts: a documentary that looks at things entirely from the perspective of the archaeologist, and an animated film, where the encounters of the characters in the labyrinth have a kind of prophetic tone with some game elements.

Sakya express the aim to develop a development's model based on the introduction of technological culture in order to no lose and destroy our traditions, but instead to preserves and enhances them, by integrating with traditional aesthetic potential. The survival of these sites allows people to gain an everyday, microscopic understanding of ancient urban culture that still flows concealed within our blood. The temple map that shows up in the animation actually reminds us the human structure and together with the human organs, as the hearth upon the ancient book, guides us into a reflection about the meaning of the history. Zhang Xiaotao, obsessed by research of our roots, explores, collects and re-uses large amounts of traces of history and visual material taken from popular culture. In this way, he tries to make the point about how art history can evolve and, in this specific case, he shows us how the perception, the knowledge and the dissemination of Tibetan heritage can change with the use of new technologies. In these terms, he surpasses the boundaries of the simple artistic mission: referring to all the humanity he indicates a possible way to orientate ourselves in the present life and in the art field. Through a sort of deconstructionist action Zhang hopes to be able to use some virtual elements to put some of our set views of the reality in doubts. For this reason, in this project he incorporated a lot of elements such as mandalas, mudras, stars, human organs, maps and digital cities, which become new visual channels that can inspire our reading of the relationships between classical civilizations and the contemporary one. The future is built on the foundation of the past,

but the thing is that we have destroyed too many cultural roots, cutting off our connection to classical civilization. In many instances, the modernization transition has been too drastic and traditional values as morals, ethics or faith have almost completely modified, moving on according to this commerce-oriented era. In this drastically transforming society, people have a pressing need for religion to repair their souls, since the rise of the material has brought more unhappiness. The question of how to reconstruct our inner world of faith is a massive topic, we need a profound rethinking, as well as to ponder, criticize and engage in self-searching as Zhang is suggesting us. Of course an artist cannot really give any answers, but he can enlarge our space for imagination by providing new thoughts directions and opening dialogues, like the one presented in Sakya project. Here, the attention is focused on society through the practices of contemporary art: the technological capabilities are torn in their usual meaning and delivered to the sacred where there are rediscovering their own being.

The important issue that Zhang Xiaotao deeply takes into consideration is the soul restoration. This mystic factor is present both in his daily life and in his art research. Even when the task is the past's recovery or the desire to record a specific situation, there is a strong connection between his spiritual devotion and his artistic view. He looks for understanding of the phenomena that concern life, believing that the reconstruction of morals and faith-based values is an important remedy for society. From this point of view, his works are not just a mere interpretation of religion and society issues but also a visual reflection of perplexities that we face in this era and concerning the artist's role. As he said: "Art created under the power of great belief and spirit is timeless. Artists should have a place in their hearts for religion. Art is the artist's personal religion, and the job of the artist is to follow the path of transcendence." A sort of same sentiments is also articulated in Leo Tolstoy's thought who explains, "Religious consciousness is nothing other than the indication of the new creative attitude of man towards the world".

The *Sakya* is a cross-media visual cultural research project that had started in 2007 from the above-mentioned fundamentals. This work looks especially at the issue of the secularization of religion from the intersection of Tibetology, archaeology, anthropology, Tibetan Buddhism, regional politics and other fields as digital technology science and biology. Here, Zhang touches on new fields of study and he takes on the complex challenge thanks to a strong motivation that actually comes from the Buddhist influence in his life. "Childhood influence is a seed, and when you grow up, it will surely flower and produce fruit." He said.

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With Sakya animation, Zhang Xiaotao analyses the paradox between the transcendental matter and the materialized reality. He brings the vast religious state of Tibetan Buddhism to compare it with today's materialism culture. Zhang makes us part of his inner experience resulting from the need to put everything into question and show a dispute between the material and the sacred dimension. The massive problem is that we really live capriciously enmeshed in a world of things, in a beautiful mirage of the material, and our spirits are in the wilderness. Materialism progressively erodes spirituality. The inner experience helps to liberate us from common rationality that binds existence and things to utility's slavery and give us the opportunity to cultivate the heart and mind and have a tranquil better life.

The evolutionary process of consciousness, or even the spiritual development, is an extraordinary moment of awareness of ourselves that nature has given to humanity and that unifies the most diverse cultures in a common task. This duty is the common thread that winds along this project, providing impetus and meaning to the realm of real life experience. We can recognize and assign a mandala as visual image for this.

In Sakya project, mandala plays the leading role. It is, in fact, from this image that the project's idea evolves and returns.

This work easily appears as visual and mental travel, a journey where the viewer is free to follow his heart in this adventure together with different encounters and conclusions. It is a journey for the viewer, which is beset by uncertainty, full of a sense of surprise and fear like creeping through the dark of night. At the end of the animated film, five characters run in circle through a mandala, which is an allegory for multiple dimensions, multiple worlds of reality, history and the virtual. It requires the artist to ponder and discover. According, to the Zhang Xiaotao, we need observations and thinking from different dimensions; this is the reason why the animation ends with an open-ended conclusion: the artist and his public are involved in a sort of digital visual game. As a role-playing, each one is free to choose his proper direction according with inborn attitude.

The mandala is the image of the self. The mandala is a universal archetype easily to recognize in every culture, in the archaic peoples of Africa, Australia and America or in the visions of the medieval mystics, in the formulas of the Renaissance alchemists, in the drawings on the Chinese or Tibetan monks' essays or even in dreams or hallucinations as well. The mandala appears in all religions because the circle has always been a symbol of the expression of God, infinity and creation. Symbolically, the circle has always been connected with the idea of infinity, so it's something that will last forever: just as life or as a good art project.

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The mandala, do not make any specific reference to religious dogmas, or rituals, but it is one of the most ancient and mysterious structures of all time, presents all cultures.

According to the traditional representations in the centre you can find a flower, a rose, a star or a ritual image such as the lotus or the Buddha as in Buddhist mandalas or a lamb symbol of Christ.

Mandalas are ancient as man but only at a later time it assumes a religious significance, especially in Tibetan Lamaism and tantric yoga. In the West, Christian's mandala probably refer to St. Augustine and his explanation of God through a circle. The circle thus appears in the first Christian Middle Ages, such as a rose, a round maze or a round container, for example, we can see it in the rose windows of cathedrals, in the mosaics of the floor, in the baptismal font or as domes or windows. The circle has always been a magical figure of containment and regeneration, as a therapeutic tool.

So it should be noted that the mandala does not refer only to the Eastern tradition in fact it is something that belongs to all of us. The mandala is based on an elementary design, which shows a concentric and symmetrical structure. Both from a spiritual, but also biological point of view, there are countless examples, just think about the structure of the universe or an atom, the section of the trunk of a tree or a shell, the shape of a flower, a crystal and a snowflake or simply consider our iris.

Each man is a mandala and all mankind may be placed within a structure divided into concentric microcosm and macrocosm that interfere and influence each other. In the centre there are the psyche and the life force, what we might paraphrase as 'the invisible project that guides our lives'. Here, the unconscious reveals its deeper meaning and directs it. This is the starting and finishing point of every thought and its implementation, it is the place in which is established the processes of reflection, planning, organization, elaboration and realization of an idea. The existence evolves and come back to the central light, through a path in which manifests externally its inner flowering.

Since everything that surround us and forms us is shaped by this pattern, why do not even try to imagine the whole art system enclose in such of system?

From an art point of view, the mandala symbolizes a course, or perhaps we might dare to say that art emulates a mandala and the art system can be delineated within this. Our life follows a project, which manifests itself in the research and in the affirmation of the centrality of our soul. Similarly, an art project must evolve from a very specific focus that is its nature: the substance and the mission for which it was called into existence. Zhang has always been curious about the relationship between the world of mysticism and things like science. The concept of the alchemist has always hovered in his memory where lie the idea of the artist as a cultural alchemist, while art is the gold in the artist's



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heart.

Assuming the system of art as a complex mandala, we can place in the central area, imagining this as a golden rose, the whole transcendental essence, the art and the artist. These three levels are distinct but have very fuzzy boundaries between them. Visually we might recognize the geometric shapes of circle, triangle and square. Outside, at the four cardinal points, there are the different artistic disciplines. Symbolically, they establish a close correlation with the fundamental elements; they are chasing each other along a clockwise direction. In the space between, the public lies joining the artistic process, while the whole creation is enclosing this microcosm. This is a cycle and a practice able to finally explain and connect art and all its disciplines, artistic substance and mission, tradition and technology, society and religion... . This representation aims to provide a visual image of a system otherwise difficult to understand. It can be an aid for those people who are not familiar with the art system, but also constitute a hypothetical map, a basic graphical model to orientate ourselves in this ambiguous and metamorphic world which is contemporary art.

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