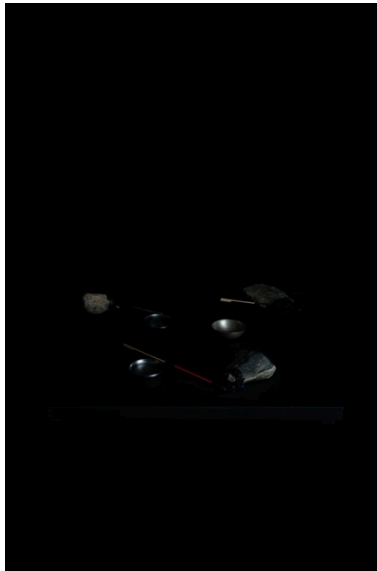


Le Contre-Ceil: The Counter Heaven
Counter Cosmology or Cosmology as Counter?
Bettina Funcke

Stepping into “Le Contre-Ciel” means stepping into darkness, into a cave filled with potential, with not knowing. Can we let go of expectations and open up to unfamiliar, unknown experience? A slow duet of large church bells and intermittent gongs calls. A female voice from further within insists, “When the sun rises, your morning will be mine. When the sun rises for your eyes, or your eyes rise for the sun, everything you see—it will be mine.” And on and on. This repetitive cadence mixes with a distant rhythmic clink of wood on metal maybe coming from below, and the whirring of a mottled steel disc spinning slowly on a base, somewhere else. It feels ritualistic, uncanny, timeless, recalling the sounds of temple prayer and meditation. An invitation to let our guard down, to call on all our senses, to feel, instead of relying on the clarity of straight-forward reading and seeing. Can we drop assumptions and resonate with our surroundings?

(Tom Thayer, *Rock Symphony*, 2024; Trisha Donnelly, *I Am Taking Your Morning*, 2003; Francis Alys, *Patriotic Tasks*, 1997; Vunkwan Tam, *Days of Generosity*, 2024)



This is what I imagine, as I have never set foot in Empty Gallery, or in Hong Kong. My internet search for images or descriptions of the works and artists in the show took me through more than 100 webpages, due not only to the cultural breadth of the works and artifacts and the millennia they span, but to curator Olivia Shao's skepticism towards digital documentation and the way that it is distributed. She deliberately protects our relationship to art—and, perhaps, to the world around us—from digital dissemination, with its supposed easy accessibility.

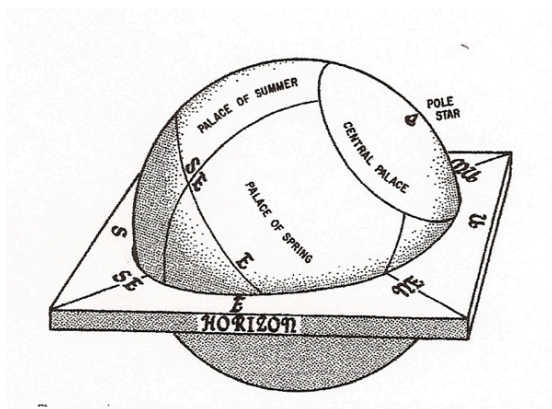
≈



Yu Ji's *Flesh-in-Stone Ghosts* (2018), a giant wall-mounted sculpture of a cement and plaster hand, gestures toward a plinth on which lie three small cóngs, the oldest works in the show, which beg the question: where does history begin? Cóngs are typical of the Neolithic Liangzhu culture (3300–2300 BCE), and are cylindrical in shape, with a square exterior and a circular interior. They have been recovered from tombs, and are believed to have been associated with ritual, perhaps as a symbol of power, but their function remains unknown. Some are low rings, and others are stacked and tall. They are composed of stones like nephrite or jade that are too

hard to have been carved, yet the precise lines and surfaces make it difficult to imagine they were made through rubbing or grinding.

Cóng may be situated somewhere within our relationship to nature and power. The square and the circle are symbols whose origin we can't fully know, but in both ancient and contemporary Chinese culture the square relates to Earth, and dense, dark, material reality—yin. The circle has always been associated with the sky and heaven: vast, luminous, ethereal—yang. Chinese philosophy can be considered as a cosmology of relationships always moving into and out of balance. Perhaps the cóng symbolically holds in relation the generative interdependence of darkness and light, yin and yang, and the opposing characteristics of Heaven and Earth, which reveals the relationship between all things. This diagram comes by way of astrologer Carol Ferris, who notes that “Very reductively, an early emergent idea of the cosmology/topology relationship was that Heaven was round and Earth was square.”



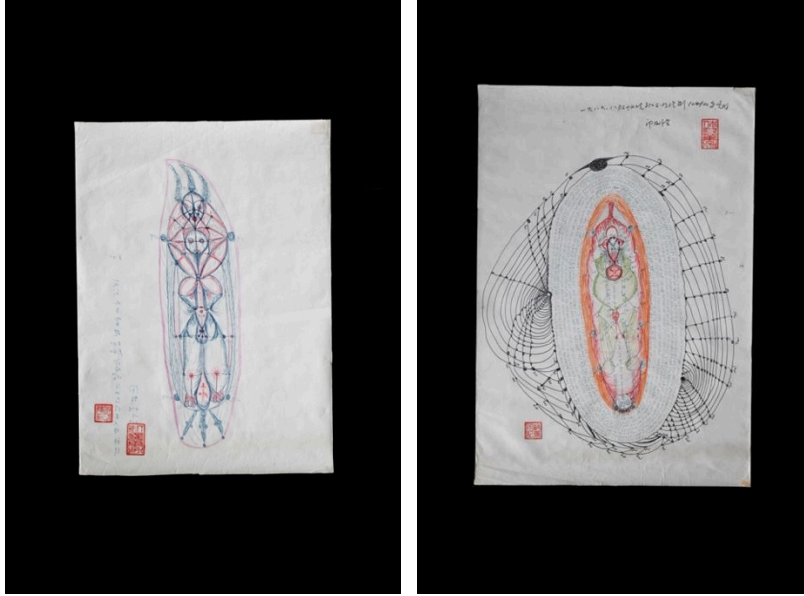
≈

We are told that only 4% of the universe is composed of matter that can be measured. The rest—almost everything!—is composed of dark matter and dark energy. Neither of those can be measured since anything that exceeds the speed of light cannot be grasped with our machines. But it's there! Another way to think about this is that modern science breaks down (measurable) matter into quarks and atoms, which exist in mostly empty space, another way to describe dark matter and dark energy. Hamilton Morris has demonstrated that the actual solid matter of Earth reduces to a sphere the size of a refrigerator.

If everything is connected, then considering any one thing in isolation misses 96% of reality. What might the connection be? What is the space that lies between measurable matter, what science calls dark matter and dark energy? What does it hold? Can it be described in terms such as ether, immateriality, black space, the numinous, energy, or qi?

I'll keep addressing the nagging thought, *That we know only of so little cannot be true*. So what is dark matter and what is dark energy? Scientists call dark matter the mysterious invisible substance that makes up 70% of the universe's matter. It's invisible because it doesn't interact with electromagnetic forces, meaning it doesn't reflect, absorb, or emit light. Science can only infer its existence from its gravitational effects on visible matter that influences the way galaxies are organized at large scale. Dark energy shares the unmeasurable characteristics of dark matter but instead of holding galaxies and galaxy clusters together, it is a repulsive force that causes the universe's expansion to accelerate.

Picture this vast immeasurable reality on the minutest scale, in each of our bodies' cells. Picture it on the largest scale of outer space. Picture it in Empty Gallery. Picture it in Gu Fengyi's qi going drawings from 1989, like *Diagram of Human Nervous System*. In the postnatal reality, we live in our body, which can be considered a vessel or container. Modern Western medicine, and most science, focuses on what can be seen and measured. The subject of diagnosis and treatment therefore only concerns the 4% of matter that is moving slower than the speed of light—plus the caring you receive from a doctor or nurse, which is immeasurable, immaterial, above light speed.

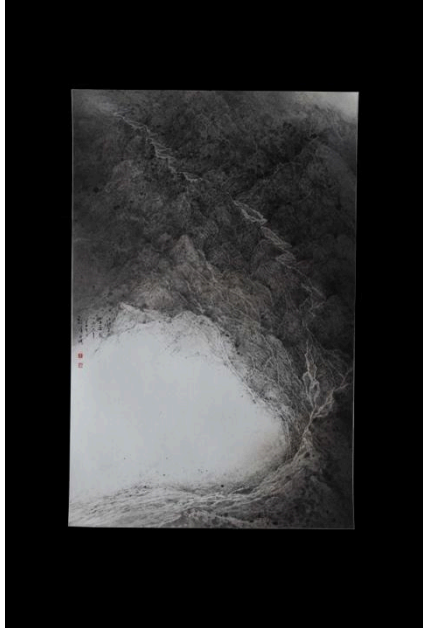


≈

When I was eleven years old, I asked the priest in my Bible study class: *If someone believes in a different God, are they in God's grace?* The answer was a clear *No*, and that was when I exited Catholicism. I could not believe that this was true, or just, or worth subscribing to. It was a step on the path to philosophy. So when I ask about the space between everything, it is a question not of religion but of *Geisteswissenschaften*, the science of mind and spirit, which in German are bound in one word and one idea: the science of the immaterial.

≈

We may not like it, but we are at the edge of a new time, in an extended dawn, incubating. The veil between esoteric and exoteric is thinnest at dawn, and “Le Contre-Ciel” invites us to step into that moment between night and day, dark and light, end and beginning, when size and depth are difficult to judge. This is the dream time, or the moment of time travel, from Nüwa to works by Trisha Donnelly, and Wucius Wong, whose *River Journey #2* (1986) balances form and void to express an elemental suspension of void, light, and form. What holds it together?



If we are in incubation, it may be useful to acknowledge that birth consists of several phases. First, enwombment: we have planted a seed. Contractions initiate labor, which is often difficult and lengthy as we labor to bring into the world something that is not ready. This is the in-between time of “Le Contre-Ciel.” Then comes liberation, the emergence of that which has been inside. The final step is the cutting of the connection. According to this metaphor, we might now find ourselves in the violent pains of contraction: something new is coming, and we cannot stop it. “Le Contre-Ciel” invites us into the dark moment of the channel, the cave, and looks toward the moment of emergence.

≈

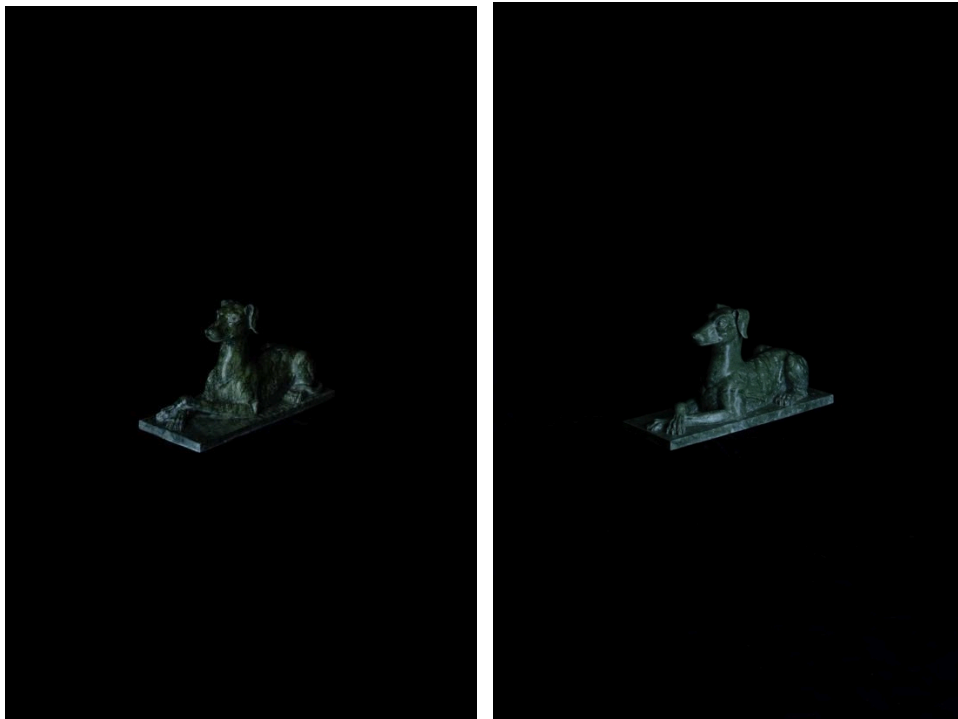
The exhibition has been documented object by object. Forget installation shots, forget context. Forget space and time. The photographer [name tk] has centered each work in a deep black non space, with just enough light that the object appears, an acknowledgment of the way that the sparsely lit works in the exhibition had appeared in the darkened gallery. Each work of the show dawns out of this collapsed space, one by one. Rather than seeing outright, we’re asked to decipher, to search. What we see is but a fraction of what is there. We must feel our way into Liz Deschenes’ photograms of the night sky, which capture the motion of the moon and stars, and

into Mel Chin's *Imperfect Pearls in the Ether of Infinite Labor* (1998), a complex print of fingertip marks surrounded by ethereal flames that float in a worn darkness. *Riddles of Light*, a 2015 video by Tang Kwok-Hin, makes me think I see the waxing and waning moon reflected on dark liquid, only to find that what I see is the artist drinking tea, maneuvering the cup so that a lamp's reflection resembles moonlight. This is a symbolic or poetic treatment that leaves reality, transporting us from quotidian life to universal experience.



The gallery's photo documentation of each artwork offers an invitation for intimate reflection. Space is swallowed by darkness, and all sense of scale is eliminated. *Gert & Gretel* (2022), Julia Scher's marble greyhounds that resemble lions guarding against evil, fit in my palm. All this undoing echoes a collection of poems by René Daumal from which the show gets its title. These

contemplative and philosophical poems circle the subject of death, a death that leads to life or eternal beginnings. The reader is lead through the process of negation as regeneration so “that his true self might emerge and become part of his conscious experience . . . thus affirming his identity as part of a greater and universal individuality.” [Kelton W. Knight, Introduction, 11] This perpetual shedding and reaffirmation is also directly connected, in the words of Daumal, to the act of artistic creation. According to one poem, “The individual mind attains its absolute through successive negations. I am that which thinks, not that which is thought.” I might add: I am that which thinks *and* feels, and I am entangled beyond control. “To be entangled,” writes Bayo Akomolafe, “is to see that we are not complete, removed, boundaried . . . In order to tell the stories of what is happening, we must come to the ends of ourselves, we must gravitate towards the edges in the middle.” (Bayo Akomolafe, *The Edges of the Middle*, 2017)



In alliance with Daumal the exhibition suggests a counter-poetics to challenge notions of cosmic order, sovereignty, and authority in both historical and contemporary contexts. Hong Kong, a gate between China and the West, inflects Empty Gallery’s own role: a bridge between Eastern and Western aesthetics and thinking. In this respect, “Le Contre-Ciel” could not be more

site-specific. The exhibition offers readings of contemporary art through Chinese cosmological ideas and aesthetics, and vice versa. The struggles of today are posed against timeless questions.

The young, Hong Kong-born philosopher Yuk Hui has explored the ways in which ancient Chinese cosmological thought might be woven into a world largely in ruins, a world both connected and dominated by a Western-born technology: “These technologies are carriers of Western thinking, Western models of individuation, modes of production, and a Western libidinal economy.” (*Post-Europe*, 16) Aristotle’s conception of space and time, of logos and technē is present in the technology that shapes our daily lives, but ancient Chinese cosmological notions, which describe our relationship to space and time through the cycle of nature and Heaven and Earth, are not. Yuk Hui points out, however, that while our technology may have origins in ancient Greek conceptions of space, time, and technē, and our current equipment may be geographically located in, say, server farms, the essential reality of technology has no particular place. He describes this paradox as a major failure of the twentieth century, calling it an “inability to articulate the relation between locality and technology, and an almost standardized ecological thinking endowed with a strong European humanism.” (*Post-Europe*, 27)

What is Chinese philosophy? Cosmology and earth sciences evolved in early China, and coalesced into a theoretical model during the Han Dynasty (c. 2. century BCE). As John C. Major reports in his introduction to *Heaven and Earth in Early Han Thought*:

The emerging philosophical synthesis of the early Han blended many strands of thought. From the Daoism of Laozi and Zhuangzi came the ideas of the primacy of the Dao and the existence of an ancient condition of primitive harmony before human schemes and contrivances brought disorder to the world. The astronomers, astrologers, and natural philosophers of the Naturalist School used their star maps and almanacs and observations of the natural world to develop an elaborate system of correlative and categorical reasoning, so that sense could be made, philosophically, of the organic, cyclical self-created universe in which we live [and of which we are a part]. . . . From the various strands of thought was produced a theory of statecraft according to which the enlightened ruler could align his own actions with those of the universe, and rule in accord with

natural rhythms and harmonies. [John C. Major, *Heaven and Earth in Early Han Thought*]

This describes the conception of what is known as the *Mandate of Heaven*: the Emperor's divine right to rule in correlation with Heaven and Earth, all supported by manual-like instructions regarding which activities should or should not take place at which time of year, and how the complex energies of a particular moment might be applied to his rule. Yuk Hui elaborates on this, describing it in *Essay on Cosmotechnics* as a *technē* of relational movements that bind the human to the cosmos: "It means the unification between the cosmic order and the moral order through technical activities." (*The Question Concerning Technology in China: Essay on Cosmotechnics*, 19) Early in this book, which interweaves Eastern cosmology and Western thinking on technology, he invokes Martin Heidegger's famous 1953 lecture, *Frage nach der Technik* [Martin Heidegger's 1949 talk in Bremen, published in 1953 as *The Question Concerning Technology*], "in which he announced that the essence of modern technology is nothing technological but rather enframing (*Ge-stell*)—a transformation of the relation between man and the world, a reduction to standardizing." [*Essay on Cosmotechnics*, 3] We can easily translate this idea into our lives. We know the standardizing effect of the digital, we walk through its preconceived spaces, its stilted information-verses and extractable experiences, which amount to a frustrating labyrinth without exit. We inhabit parallel universes, or give up our sense of direction, eyes glued to google maps. This is the experience of the *Ge-stell*, the enframing through standardization: powerful illusion, an ongoing, dark magic trick.

Yuk Hui hypothesizes that "the birth of philosophy in ancient Greece . . . was a process of rationalization, marking a gradual separation between myth and philosophy. . . . The dialectical movement between rationality and myth constitutes the dynamic of philosophy, without which there would be only positive sciences." [*Essay on Cosmotechnics*, 10, 11] This dynamic is also central to art. It registers the immeasurable space in-between. It acknowledges our capacity or instinct for wonder, play, and creation in response to ceaseless change, in response to what we don't know but feel. As Stephen Cheng says, "Darkness is to an artist what water is to a swimmer. They go to unknown places, to the hidden and the obscure, and reveal something of

ourselves and the times we live in—which are currently the darkest of all.” [Stephen Cheng, “On Ten Years of Empty Gallery,” Interview by Jaime Chu, *Spike*, April 2025]

I am trying to suggest some routes by which we might think beyond Western civilization, and touch on the realm of ancient Eastern thought. Readers of this text will be well-versed in contemporary art, itself rooted in the West, so I wanted to point to another sensibility and conception of how to relate to experience, to the objects we make and revere, and to the questions that provokes in all of us.

With that in mind, let’s close with contemplating *A Bamboo-Root Carving of a Finger Citron* from the seventeenth century, which blends natural form, symbolism, and skilled craftsmanship. Carved from bamboo root with its gnarled shape, each piece is unique. Finger Citrons are called Buddha’s hand fruit due to their resemblance to the idealized fingers of the Buddha. The word itself, *foshol*, sounds similar to the character “fu” (blessings) and “shou” (longevity). The chaotic gnarly form of the root reflects a certain chaotic nature of the cosmos as it meets the composed connotation of the object’s hand gesture of reverence and devotion, always keeping two opposites in balance.

