

# Conflating Dichotomies as Cultural Discourse

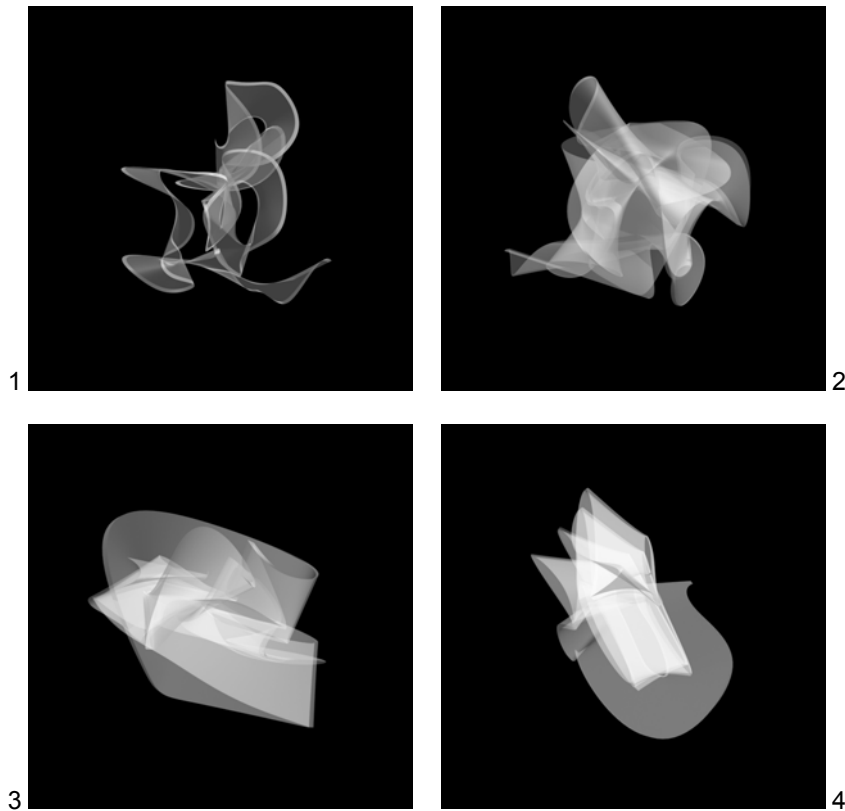
## Tao series by Kent K W Neo

2007

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Art in its highest exaltation hates exegesis; it therefore shuns the emphasis on meaning

*Gottfried Semper*



1. Tao\_t9 2. Tao\_t10 3. Tao\_t11 4. Tao\_t13  
Pigment ink on 75 x 75 artist's canvas

### ***Plate 1***

Calligraphy has always been seen as a two-dimensional art that expresses the artistry and sentiments of the calligrapher. The rules of calligraphy are based on paper space, with stylistic differences in the formal execution. The Tao series explores the permutations on the 'Tao' character when traditional rules are given a hypothetical premise to collide with the dimension of depth in digital space. Path and stroke rules were given a new interpretation with the absolute form of the 'Tao' character to transpose itself into different forms. In these four works, the basic profile or the path of the 'Tao' character remained unchanged. What has changed is the digital stroke that has been applied to it. This transpositional morphing is to me, in essence, the Tao in

action. The Tao, according to Lao Tze, is not final, absolute or can be fixated by a single meaning. In the very first passage of the Tao Te Ching, Lao Tze wrote:

*The Tao that can be expressed  
Is not the Tao of the Absolute.  
The name that can be named  
Is not the name of the Absolute.*

Essentially, the theme of my work questions the possible outcome of merging dichotomous entities, particularly between traditional Chinese calligraphy and digital art. Why investigate a dichotomous relationship between two anachronic art forms which possibly share no contiguity? If the answer to this question ends simply with a quest for connecting the future with the past, it would be superficial and banal. The past is dead and gone. Existence should not be preconditioned by either history or superhuman prophecies. Instead, we should unveil and investigate the real contradictions underlying the fabric of our contemporary society. It is hoped that through conflating the two distinct anachronic entities of brush and digits, a new discourse can emerge – a new reality with its own set of rules, contingencies and intentionality. From a historical point of view, new cultural definition arises when distinct cultures are conflated together. Throughout the ages, geographically and technologically differentiated cultures may collide violently or amicably in the creation of new cultures. Post-war Japan is about technological progress side-by-side with maintaining traditional customs. While on the other hand, pre-war Singapore and the rest of the Straits Settlements saw rapid exchanges between the various ethnic cultures under colonial governance. This is most evident in the architecture of Malacca with its mosques with distinctive Chinese influence or the Peranakan shophouses with Malay and European influences. Experimentation with diversity is not a new in the Singapore context either; Raffles introduced it, Farquhar executed it, the immigrants adapted to it and the Peranakans perfected it.

### **Between Brush calligraphy and Digital Art**

From the beginning of this journey of mine since 2003, I had wanted to experiment with two rather divergent art forms – calligraphy and digital art. Calligraphy to me is an extremely lyrical art form that is remote, timeless and personal. Digital art, conversely, is something that has become part of our contemporary environment. From the fractal screen saver on our laptops to the psychedelic projections in dance clubs, digital art is contemporaneous, ephemeral and popular. This media that we face daily is readily consumed and replaced by new consumption. This is, in fact, a mark of our times – the proliferation of disposable culture. Despite the ever-increasing internet speed of digital bytes, the ghost in the machine has unleashed an unprecedented level of freedom in personal expression and communicative powers over physical distances. Calligraphic art, on the other hand, emphasizes on the flow between body, mind and spirit. Zen calligraphers elevated the art of calligraphy into a meditative art where the calligraphist forgets in order to be absorbed in the act of executing the strokes. Philosophers and thinkers have written extensively on this sublime state that artists can achieve - from Plato's transcendental philosophy to Kant's theory of the sublime. Modern psychologists such as Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi has attributed certain qualities such as the nihilistic motivation of the Zen calligraphers as necessary conditions of 'flow'. The concept of 'flow' as expounded by the Hungarian psychologist Csikszentmihalyi relates to a state where a person momentarily forgets about the external world to become totally absorbed in an ecstatic experience.

The execution of the Tao series revealed some interesting phenomena. When brush calligraphic space is conflated with digital space, a displacement of values took place. Instead of usual mechanical inputs for a parametric modeling, the whole process of pulling and shaping the control points along the digital curves became almost an absorbing meditative act. Conversely, during the digital experimentation and execution of the Chinese character 'Tao', there was a sense of freedom with the myriad of permutations that could evolve from the digital manipulations, especially with the eventual transformations bearing little semblance of the original character.

Values that had originally belonged to either spatial domain have been swapped. Contradictory positions in the space-time continuum have conversed with one another through digital space. This new zone of dialogue can be seen in the four transformations of the 'Tao' series. In tao\_t09, the stroke of the 'Tao' character gravitates towards infinite depths of space where it has been set; in tao\_t10, the stroke expands in all directions as if engaged in a cosmic dance within the digital space; in tao\_t11, with the path remaining unchanged, the stroke envelopes itself, distancing itself from the typical image of the 'Tao' character; and in tao\_t13, the final transformation, the eventual stroke is a final departure from the 'Tao' character, albeit the path has remained constant in these four works.

From this experiment, it is evident that digital space allows a whole world of possibilities when conflated with other spatial realms. The versatility of 3D software allows for strange and interesting forms to be designed. However, we do not create strangeness for strangeness' sake, or the unusual for the purpose of attention-seeking. The fact that the digital realm allows for freedom of expression and imagination through its versatility has a high urban implication. As witnessed in the exhibition of 'Non Standard Architectures, 2003' at Pompidou Centre, architects are turning towards digitally generated designs. Cities in the world may benefit from the alternative forms that digital designs may generate. Instead of the analogous cityscape that one may experience from one global city to another, the future cities of tomorrow can be highly distinct because of plurality of design grammars that could be generated from the digital environment. On the other hand, the digital platform may also lead to cloning of familiar cityscapes worldwide in the future due to the use of a common design tool. Imagine an entire breed of designers who will be looking through the same looking glass. There is no certain answer at this juncture but at least the notion of free-expression allows designers now to look forward to a physical world that is distinct from one which has been created largely based on Cartesian ethos.

### **Biography of artist**

Born in 1971, Kent K.W. Neo has been practicing as an architect since late 1990's after graduating with a Bachelor of Architecture from the National University of Singapore. It was after his working stints in China that he realised the importance of understanding one's cultural identity amidst the avalanche of international influences.

In 2003, Kent took a break to pursue a Master's degree in Architectural Design, specialising in digital media at the University of Adelaide. He began experimenting on a series of digital improvisations on Toko Shinoda's calligraphic grammars. He was also interested in developing a non-Euclidean design language for the urban environment.

With the execution of 'Tao Series' in 2004, Kent documented his entire research on designing non-standard forms in digital media in a paper entitled 'AARI—Analysis, Abstraction, Re-Invention and Integration'. Neo was invited to present his findings at the prestigious DCC conference at MIT in 2004. Based on the AARI methodology, 'Strokehouse\_01' was completed in 2004. The design was based on a livable house conceived in one continuous digital brush stroke.

Kent graduated with a Master of Architecture (Digital Media) in 2004 with high distinctions from the University of Adelaide. Upon his return to Singapore, he continued working on his theoretical manifesto on calligraphic architecture whilst practicing as a design and visualization architect with renowned architect Mr. Tay Kheng Soon. Kent joint Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts shortly after his first solo exhibition on digital art and architecture in September 2005. Kent is presently a full-time lecturer at Nanyang of Academy of Fine Arts researching on design and visualisation methodologies for the diploma, degree and masters programme in 3D Design department. In particular, Kent hopes that the prevailing artistic culture in the academy will culminate into a new movement in art, design and architecture in Singapore and the region.