

BPA// Exhibition 2022 at KW Institute for Contemporary Art Tang Han

Miss Ginkgo and Her Friends in Nature

It brings no surprise that Tang Han has made ginkgo the object for her new project. Everyday life for Tang is packed fully with intriguing objects to explore in intricate detail. She was just walking through the streets the other day when she noticed that the sidewalks were populated with the kind of trees—with their strong smell from butyric acid—that aggressively capture the attention of pedestrians at harvest time. Abruptly displaced in time and space, Tang recalled that, as a child, ginkgo trees would be mentioned in family conversations. Because of its medicinal value, *Ginkgo biloba* was a popular health supplement in China in the 1990s, and trading in it could bring in a significant amount of income for the average family. In Southern China, where Tang's great-grandparents lived, ginkgo trees grew lushly and were being traded in the midst of shifting human desires. In her work Tang begins to approach, and tries to understand, this living entity that has existed earlier than the Jurassic period.

I would like to briefly sort out Tang's ginkgo project with two threads, using the timescale as the first. Time is at the center of Tang's ginkgo project, *Ginkgo and Other Times* (2022), and is my key to unwinding it, which will further unlock the science fiction dimensions of this piece. The title of this work is in debt to Olga Tokarczuk's novel, *Primeval and Other Times* (2010). The notion of primeval is the concept of both space and time, encompassing humans and all time that is other than human. In the ginkgo project, Tang likewise contemplates the time of the ginkgo and the time of other existences. This is reminiscent of deep time in geology. The eighteenth-century geologist James Hutton introduced the concept of deep time to describe the formation of certain rocks beyond human comprehension. Coming to the contemporary context of object-oriented aesthetics, there are, for example, media theorists such as Jussi Parikka articulating that contemporary timescales are orchestrated by a range of the more-than-human. The entanglement of scale between the human and the nonhuman gives rise to a contemporary consciousness of historical discourses. Contemplating the nonhuman timescales of ginkgo trees, ants, and fossils allows Tang to sense that everything is connected, drawn to each other, and operating under laws.

Yet, what kind of laws do things in the world follow? In the science fiction novel, *The Three-Body Problem* (2014), author Cixin Liu borrows Bertrand Russell's "Farmer's Hypothesis," alluding, with veiled unease, to the Chaotic Era.

*Every morning on a turkey farm, the farmer comes to feed the turkeys. A scientist turkey, having observed this pattern to hold without change for almost a year, makes the following discovery: 'Every morning at eleven, food arrives.' On the morning of Thanksgiving, the scientist announces this law to the other turkeys. But that morning at eleven, food doesn't arrive; instead, the farmer comes and kills the entire flock.*¹

¹ Cixin Liu, *The Three-Body Problem*, trans. Ken Liu (New York: Tor Books, 2014), 94.

In Liu's writing, this messy world and chaotic irregularity is fatal. To be more concrete, it implies that the fundamental nature of the universe as observed and defined by humanity—the laws of time and motion—is itself a fiction. If the stable laws established by humans for the universe can only work temporarily within the human world, what is the origin of matter and the order of the universe? The questions in *The Three-Body Problem* may have appeared to be very different from the concept of time scale that Tang explores in her project, but the two are effectively intertwined. Without the quest for answers to the order of the universe, nonhuman existences—with or without traces of life—and the human narrative together shape the (un)known history of humanity.

The second thread is how Tang's ginkgo project echoes animism. China is the relict region of the oldest genealogy of ginkgo, introduced to Korea and Japan in the Middle Ages and then to Europe and the Americas at the beginning of colonial expansion and globalization in the eighteenth century.² The worship of trees has always existed in Chinese culture because of their longevity, and folk tales mostly attribute spirit to trees and believe in the life force in tree spirits. Tang found many stories related to tree spirits and nature worship in Chinese folklore, dating as far back as the *Classic of Mountains and Seas* (or *Shanhaijing*, c. 475 BC); she places deconstructed fragments from the tales about the personification and veneration of tree spirits in her work: the wounded tree sheds bright red blood and runs away in the form of Peng Hou, a human-faced dog. Tang's juxtaposition of the ancient worship of trees with other time scales of nonhuman existence leads me to the animist universe—there is no division between nature and culture. Entities in the universe are considered to be alive and therefore subjectivities fuse.

The notion of animism has engaged with different registers—referring here to Anselm Franke—from its beginnings as a religious approach to nature, to a colonialist critique of the "primitive other" that failed to distinguish between subject and object in a modern aesthetic, and then to the contemporary self-description of "the others" in the context of Indigenous political movements.³ What I would like to highlight is how animist practices are considered as primitive others in the context of colonialism and Western modernity. Modernity not only divides nature and culture, but also separates a modern "us" from our primitive, premodern ancestors. Would such an absolute bifurcation impose much weight on modern technologies, producing the objectified nature with "the real" and facts, while simultaneously neglecting the primitive? Per Bruno Latour, the "great divides" of modernity embody their own limits precisely in the separation of the modern from the priori. With this in mind, I find Tang's reference to *Primeval and Other Times* to be insightful. Is the primeval the past, or can it be an imagined future?

Humans live on the same planet with ginkgo—a living fossil that

² Peter Crane, *Ginkgo: The Tree That Time Forgot* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013).

³ Anselm Franke, *Animism* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2010).

has been around for 200 million years. This is a fascinating fact, but in our modern life, ginkgo may be nothing more than a street tree integrated with urban images, standing out among many other street trees because of its prominent ability to adapt to the climate and resist pollution and pests. It is perhaps because Tang came into close encounter with the ginkgo tree during the research process that she seemed to feel its ancient vitality physically and mentally, through the unique scent of the tree. With her exploration of the ginkgo tree, Tang gradually built up her understanding of it as a living entity. Tang observes the ginkgo with a soft glance, while critically examining the shifting human desires, the interconnectedness between humans and nonhuman, which connote a slight uncertainty on colonial subjugation. Yet, please don't forget that Tang is still an artist who really lives the nature in her practices and is skilled at playful takes on the everyday. She introduces some fun facts related to ginkgo in *Miss Ginkgo*, a series of short videos made in the style of a television show. In *Miss Ginkgo: Chapter 1* (2021), for instance, Tang explores the gender selection of ginkgo trees as urban street trees, and how to find and pick ginkgo nuts in the city and prepare them for cooking. Now, enjoy Tang's ginkgo video installation!

by Congle Fu

Tang Han is a Chinese artist working in Berlin. She received her MA in 2019 from the Berlin University of Arts and her work has been shown in exhibitions at Kunsthau Dresden (2021), OCAT Shenzhen (2020), and HOW Art Museum, Shanghai (2020). She has screened work at film festivals including the International Festival of Films on Art, Montréal (2022), Taiwan International Documentary Festival (2022), DOK Leipzig (2021), and Image Forum Festival, Tokyo (2020).

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Poster Tang Han, *Ginkgo and Other Times*, 2022

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