

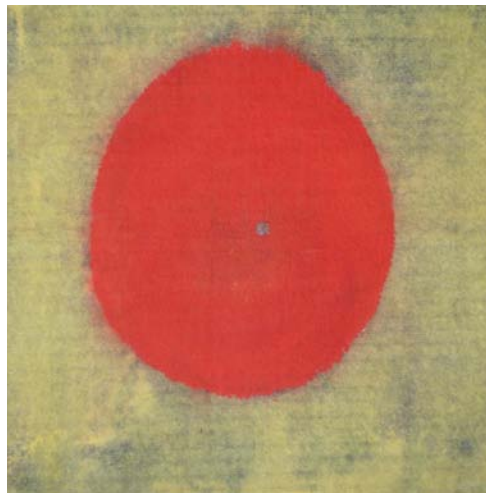
“Without Beginning or End” The Trans-Temporal Art of Yeachin Tsai

Robert R. Shane

“The circle...is the synthesis of the greatest
oppositions. ...it points most clearly to the fourth
dimension.”

—Vassily Kandinsky¹

I. Time and Timelessness



The Contentment of Mr. Orange, 2015, acrylic on paper mounted on canvas, 14x14 in

A blazing cadmium red-orange circle pulsates with mesmerizing force in Yeachin Tsai’s painting *The Contentment of Mr. Orange* (2015) from the artist’s series “Dot in the Space.” Compared to the small gray spot just off-center within its body, the orange circle looks unfathomably large, recalling graphic representations comparing the size of the Sun to the Earth. The orange form’s fuzzy borders give the sense that this monumental circle’s energy is ready to burst outward, a force countered only by the inward gravitational pull of its mass. Floating in a dull yellow and gray void, the circle seems to exist in a no-place and a timeless no-time, but its phenomenal impact on the viewer situates it in the here and now. As the retinas tire of the color’s intensity, the viewer begins to see its afterimage; the circle’s hitherto invisible opposite—always already contained within itself—is revealed with the unfolding of time.



Eternal Nowness 01, 2015, ink on paper, 13x16 in



Rainbow Circle, 2015, acrylic and ink on paper, 10.8x9.5 in

Circles recur throughout Tsai’s work. The circle, or *ensō*—an important figure in Zen Buddhist calligraphy—is a symbol of both emptiness and *nowness*.² The circle has also been deemed by many world religions to be the most spiritual of shapes because it has no beginning and no end.³ Both of these temporalities—*nowness* and eternity—play a role in Tsai’s circles. In *Eternal Nowness 01* a black sumi ink dot is nearly encompassed by a circle which, though broken, seems to complete itself across a void. Tsai calls this “a primordial symbol without beginning or end.”⁴ Following traditions in Chinese painting and calligraphy, the work also includes the artist’s red seal, itself a circle. A spectrum of color washes emanate from the black circle in *Rainbow Circle* (2015) which the artist signed “Endless” (無盡).

Tsai’s circles compel us to rethink those two temporalities that we normally consider distinct, if not opposite. *Nowness* or the present moment carries with it the sense of impermanence, transience, and ephemerality; it is so fleeting that philosopher William James famously described it as “the specious present.”⁵ By contrast, we associate the eternal (which subsumes and surpasses the present moment) with the permanent, the endless, and the monumental. The tension between these two times structures the formal tension that animates Tsai’s works: her black dot and circle form a “primordial symbol without beginning or end,” but that symbol was also made in an instant, in a present moment now past, when Tsai had thrust her brush onto the surface of her paper. The gestural quality of her mark bears witness to the spontaneity and instantaneity of the dot and circle’s creation. Their fleeting moment of birth—now permanently embedded in the fibers of the paper—contrasts with the timeless and eternal voids surrounding them. As emptiness—but not nothingness—the voids in *Eternal Nowness 01* and *Rainbow Circle* exhibit the same formidable presence of the orange circle in *The Contentment of Mr. Orange*.

II. Timelines



The Concept of Time, 2014, acrylic on paper, 11x19 in

Artist Paul Klee wrote: “...the longer a line, the more of the time element it contains. Distance is time whereas surface is apprehended more in terms of the moment.”⁶ Following the lines of Tsai’s circles in *Eternal Nowness 01* and *Rainbow Circle*, around and around again, their paths never end; the time they embody is eternal. (The voids of *Eternal Nowness 01* and *Rainbow Circle* act as surface in Klee’s model; they are apprehended in a moment.) However, time, especially in the west, is frequently represented as a straight line, a time line. In Tsai’s *The Concept of Time* from her “Icons” series, three such lines span the width of a horizontally oriented page. These are three multiple and parallel times, each partially fragmented by the gestural mark that describes them. They float above and through washes of a primordial blue atmosphere whose liquidity and dematerialization belie its steadfast omnipotence and omnipresence.

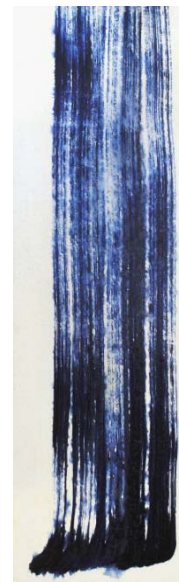
Presented in triplicate, the lines of *The Concept of Time* begin to unravel the conceit of a unified and shared linear time. Furthermore, like Constantin Brancusi’s sculpture *Endless Column* (1938, Târgu Jiu, Romania) which seems to extend vertically in both directions infinitely, the three lines of *The Concept of Time* seem as if they continue infinitely in both directions beyond the edges of the paper. Given such a suggestion of eternity, Tsai’s timelines seem to share more in common with her circles than with traditional constructions of linear time. Typically the linear and the cyclical are two contrasted conceptions of time. The former is associated with the arrow of time moving in one direction, the latter with repetition. (Psychoanalyst and philosopher Julia Kristeva has described the ways in which these two modes have been engendered in the west, masculine and feminine, respectively, and has critiqued the problematic dichotomization which corresponds linear time to male transcendence and cyclical time to female corporeal immanence.⁷) Tsai’s work confounds such a dualistic conception of linear and cyclical time. The circle as employed in *Eternal Nowness 01* and *Rainbow Circle* is itself a line, and as a line tracing eternity it is in fact a kind of timeline or linear time bent onto itself; like the circular ensō, Tsai’s three straight timelines in *The Concept of Time* are endless and their triplication suggests a kind of

repetition normally associated with cyclical time. Confounding dualisms between nowness and eternity, and linear and cyclical, Tsai’s work inhabits a trans-temporal territory.

III. Kinesis



Hooked, 2017, acrylic on paper, 26x14 in



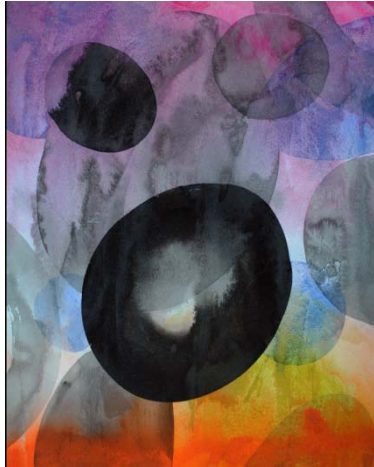
Waterfall 04, 2016, acrylic on wood panel, 24x7.3 in

Tsai’s lines—whether circular or straight—move. While literally static on the paper, they contain within them the energy of the artist’s gesture as they endlessly redraw themselves before the viewer. The two major traditions which inform Tsai’s work—traditional Chinese calligraphy and painting and modern abstraction—share an important kinesthetic ground. Critic Harold Rosenberg’s description of Abstract Expressionism as “action painting” is in many ways applicable to Chinese calligraphy and painting: the paper is akin to the canvas which becomes “an arena in which to act” and what we see in the finished work is “not a picture, but an event.”⁸ Tsai describes the action of her painting as “dancing in space and time with the brush.”⁹ Dance is a corporeal and temporal art form. What happens to all the corporeal movement of a dance as it is transferred to a painting? Where is its time? The energy or *chi* of Tsai’s dance is embodied in the form of works like *Hooked* (2017) from her “Icons” series. A thick black stroke broken by lines of light drives itself inexorably down the composition; but just past the halfway point the stroke stops and jerks itself impossibly upward against its own inertia, just momentarily, before gravity finally pulls it down again. As in *The Concept of Time*, the line in *Hooked* extends beyond the paper in both directions suggesting that we are glimpsing but a moment in a much larger, perhaps eternal, life of the line.

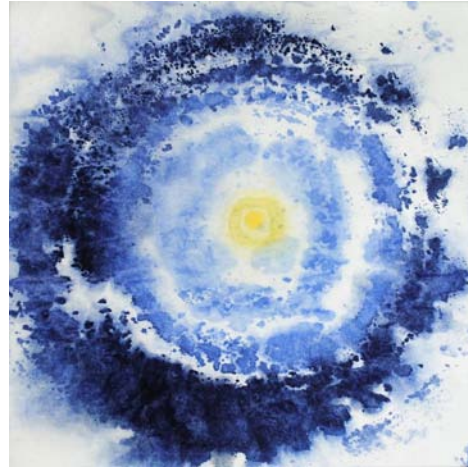
The velocity and force of *Hooked*, and of a similar work, *Waterfall 04*, are monumental. We generally think of monuments as immutable and immobile; but *Hooked* and *Waterfall 04* are monuments in motion. Their gestures are suspended in time yet always moving afresh as the viewer’s eye follows their

direction and the viewer’s body feels the magnitude of their force. Monuments are erected to be timeless in order to ensure the past is remembered in the future. In this way Tsai’s work is a permanent record of impermanence.

IV. The Cosmic and the Microcosmic



Stardust, 2015, acrylic on paper, 14x11 in



Birth of a Planet 02, 2015, acrylic on rice paper, 18x18 in

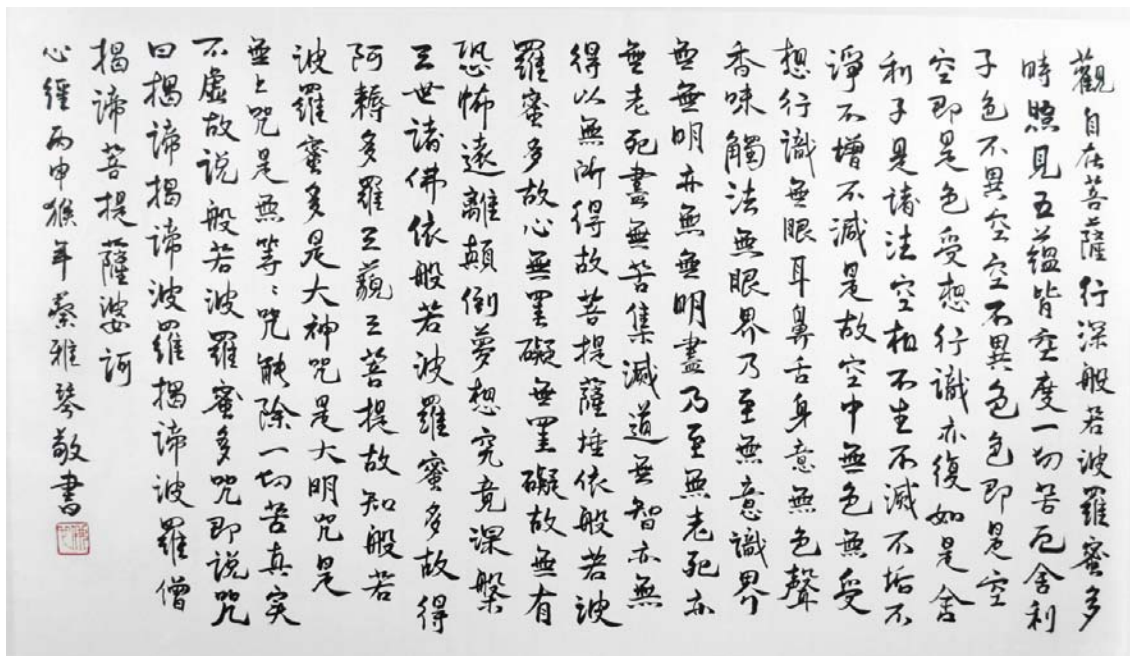
Within an art historical context, the title of Tsai’s “Floating World” series (2015-2016) is a witty play on the literal translation of “ukiyo-e,” a style of woodblock printmaking from Edo Japan, and it also recalls the curving profile of roofs that seem to levitate East Asian Buddhist architecture (e.g., Hoodo “Phoenix Hall” of Byodo-in Temple, c. 1053, Uji, Japan, which appears to float on the surface of the water before it); but more importantly it also suggests a rethinking of our world within the larger cosmos. Since the earth is the ground for our experience and source of the gravity that orients us, we do not usually experience or think of our world as floating. However, viewed from space, as in NASA’s *Blue Marble* (1972) photograph, the world is seen floating in a void.¹⁰ Painted from an imagined celestial vantage point, works within Tsai’s “Floating World” series such as *Stardust* and *Birth of a Planet 02* capture the sublime forces generated by cosmic entities falling in and out of being.

Again the circle is Tsai’s primary motif. In *Birth of a Planet 02* a yellow circle grows around a yellow dot. These circles are in turn encircled by concentric blue rings that reverberate with the power and force emanating from the small yellow point of origin. Just as the shape of Robert Smithson’s earthwork *Spiral Jetty* (1970, Great Salt Lake, Utah) calls to mind the spiral shape of galaxies and its counter clockwise pathway invites meditations on time, Tsai’s circles call to mind the spherical shape of the sun and the moon whose movements we use to measure time, as well as the circular, or more precisely, elliptical orbits of moons around planets and planets around stars. The massive scale of time used to measure the “life” of a planet and of the cosmos, which can be quantified in intellectual terms, remains

utterly meaningless in terms of our lived, corporeal experience. From the perspective of a human life, the time of the cosmos is essentially timeless, awe-inspiring, and beyond human comprehension.

But the works in the “Floating World” series do not just suggest the celestial realms. At times they look like cells, as in *Stardust* whose cosmic title belies its microcosmic imagery: black organic cells of various opacity and transparency floating in a primordial liquid spectrum. *Stardust* is the coming into being of worlds and, at the same time, the coming into being of elementary life forms. Carl Sagan famously pointed out that all the matter in our world, in our bodies, and in our cells was generated in red giant stars eons ago—we are stardust.¹¹ Overcoming the dualism between the cosmic and microcosmic, and between the timelessness of the universe and the finitude of human time, Tsai’s work demonstrates a profound connection between all things.

V. The Time of Compassion



The Heart Sutra, 2016, sumi ink on Chinese rice paper, 18x30 in

This profound interconnection of all things is expressed in the Buddhist notion of dependent origination (*pratīyasamutpāda*). This thesis that all things exist because of other things, or what Thich Nhat Hahn calls “interbeing,”¹² is the foundation for Buddhist compassion. These ideas are evoked in *The Heart Sūtra*, one of the most revered texts in the Mahayana branch of Buddhism. (In the Zen tradition, it is recited morning and evening by monks.) This sūtra is a dialogue mostly spoken by the Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara who embodies perhaps the greatest compassion in all of Buddhism. Following a long tradition of Chinese calligraphy, Tsai has copied the Heart Sūtra and by doing so she placed herself in the past, re-performing the strokes of earlier calligraphers, in order to inscribe the past in the present; at the

same time, she contributes to the future life of the sūtra by preserving it in a new form and awakening new audiences to it. Tsai’s act of transcribing the Heart Sūtra has the temporal structure of a ritual. The performance of ritual situates the present-day practitioner in the past while simultaneously pulling the past into the present. This trans-temporality of ritual is made possible by its iterability: the ability to repeat the movements, strokes, and words of the ritual means that even before its first performance the ritual already contains within it the possibility of its own future.¹³ Tsai’s strokes in the Heart Sūtra bind together future, past, and present in a heterogeneous yet inseparable unity. Referring to the centuries-old traditions in Chinese painting that she still practices today, Tsai has said: “Nothing is old, nothing is totally new.”¹⁴ Dependent origination applies not only to interconnections across space, but time as well.



Still Life #1, 2017, acrylic on canvas, 12x20 in



Pear Paradise, 2017, acrylic on canvas, 54x24 in

What is the relationship between the call to compassion contained in the Heart Sūtra, emptiness, and Tsai’s trans-temporal art? “Emptiness is form, form is emptiness,” is a line from the Heart Sūtra that has mystified and inspired twentieth-century artists in the United States and Europe, such as composer John Cage.¹⁵ Emptiness in Buddhism is the realization of the interconnectedness of all things and beings. One’s self is empty of ego when one realizes she is full of the world. Tsai’s still lifes awaken the viewer to the fullness of the world inside her. As we see the brilliant oranges, yellows, and greens and the vital forms in Tsai’s still life paintings, which are reflections of the phenomenal world, we recall philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty who wrote, “Quality, light, color, depth, which are there before us, are there only because they awaken an echo in our bodies and because the body welcomes them.”¹⁶ In this way, the dualism between artwork and audience dissolves as Tsai’s art awakens the viewer’s own inner capacity for beauty. Shambhala founder Chögyam Trungpa described this inner capacity as a

manifestation of a fundamental or “basic” goodness of being human: “When we see a bright color, we are witnessing our own inherent goodness... We can appreciate beauty...the yellowness of yellow, the redness of red, the greenness of green, the purpleness of purple.”¹⁷ Awakening to this basic goodness in oneself and others, which Tsai facilitates through her color, was for Trungpa the first step in creating an enlightened society.

The compassion evoked in Tsai’s work, while it is not overt, it is nonetheless transformative. On the surface, compassion and ethics might seem to be the furthest ideas from Tsai’s work given her interest in modernist abstraction, the interiority of the contemplative arts, and her absence of overt political or even narrative content. But as philosopher Theodor Adorno pointed out, it is often work that is ostensibly apolitical that transforms the world politically through its sensitivity and technique which produce a radical vision.¹⁸ Tsai describes the importance of the artist having a deep empathy with her medium. Speaking of the artist’s relation to her materials, Tsai says, “You must have a relationship with the brush as an extension of your arm and mind...a relationship with the paper as your life, knowing the paper as your friend, your stage...and you must take time to dance and meditate with your ink.”¹⁹ The line between artist and materials is blurred as Tsai knows them intimately; but to know them is also to understand their difference from the artist’s ego, to celebrate their own being. In this way, Tsai’s artistic practice is a model for engaging with the world and with others and moves beyond the dualism of aesthetics and ethics. This ethical-aesthetic life overcomes dualisms while embracing difference. Tsai’s beautiful and sublime forms coupled with her sensitivity to technique and materials unassumingly bring a radical change to our ways of thinking, moving us beyond the numerous dualisms and temporalities discussed here: time/timelessness, now/eternity, cosmic/microcosmic, human/inhuman, art/viewer. Tsai offers the viewer new ways of thinking by creatively confounding old ones.²⁰

The shapes of the colorful fruit in Tsai’s still lifes tend to be circles, bringing us full circle back to the circles of *The Contentment of Mr. Orange*, the *ensōs*, and the “Floating World” series. Abstraction and representation, calligraphy and painting—the range of Tsai’s work demonstrates not disunity, but on the contrary, a fundamental interconnectedness of visual arts practices. Tsai’s art, like the circle for Kandinsky, is “the synthesis of the greatest oppositions.” She explores the unity and heterogeneity of past-present-future and of human-inhuman providing a vital model for engaging ethically with ourselves and others. She awakens us to the beauty in the phenomenal world and within us. She teaches us how to see visually, kinesthetically, and compassionately.

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Notes

¹ Vasily Kandinsky to Will Grohmann, October 12, 1930, quoted in Angelica Zander Rudenstine, *The Guggenheim Museum: Paintings 1880–1945*, vol. 1 (New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, 1976), p. 310. Cited in Guggenheim Museum website <https://www.guggenheim.org/arts-curriculum/topic/the-bauhaus> (accessed 7 July 2017).

² In addition to emptiness and nowness, the *ensō* has been associated with enlightenment, power, the universe, thusness, this-moment-as-it-is, the “totality of the great void,” and “continuing and ceaseless action through all time.” See John Daido Looi’s forward to Audrey Yoshiko Seo’s *Ensō: Zen Circles of Enlightenment* (Boston and London: Weatherhill, 2007), pp. xi-xii.

³ Stonehenge, the Roman Pantheon, Christian halos, the Aztec “Sun Stone,” and circumambulation around Buddhist stupas are just a few of the many examples of circles in sacred art.

⁴ Yeachin Tsai, statement for *Eternal Nowness 01*, on artist blog *Everyday Ink: Daily Showcase of Yeachin Tsai’s Fine Art Work / Contemporary Meditative Art*, posted 2 August 2015, <http://everydayink.blogspot.com/2015/08/eternal-nowness-01.html> (accessed 30 June 2017).

⁵ William James, *The Principles of Psychology* (New York: Dover, 1890).

⁶ Paul Klee, *Exact Experiments in the Realm of Art* (1927), quoted in Anna Moszynska, *Abstract Art* (London and New York: Thames and Hudson, 1990), pp. 101-102.

⁷ Julia Kristeva, “Women’s Time” (1979) in *New Maladies of the Soul* [1993] Trans. Ross Guberman (New York: Columbia, 1995), pp. 201-224. For the ways in which Kristeva’s work overcomes this dualism by positing a temporal model based neither on linear “progress” (which is paradoxically reactionary, because by looking ahead and not critically reflecting on the past, the linear model ends up unconsciously repeating the past’s oppressive logic) nor on cyclical repetition, but rather on a new conception of cyclical temporality that critically returns to the past while opening up new, undetermined possibilities for the future, see: Fanny Söderbäck, “Revolutionary Time: Revolt as Temporal Return,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 37/2 (2012): 301-324. For more on the transcendence/immanence binary opposition as it relates to gender, see: Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* [1949] Trans. Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier (New York: Vintage, 2011). De Beauvoir does not attempt to overcome this dualism, rather, she argues the need for granting women access to the cultural modes of transcendence. For Kristeva and Söderbäck, de Beauvoir’s proposed solution is incomplete because it does not undo the logic that led to the asymmetrical division between culture-transcendence-men and nature-immanence-women in the first place.

⁸ Harold Rosenberg, “The American Action Painters” in *The Tradition of the New* (New York: Da Capo 1960), p. 25. Of course, often Chinese painting does render a picture or words; but even so, the action of the brushwork is given a certain primacy.

⁹ Tsai, “Dancing in the Space and Time with Brush Marks,” lecture given at the College of Saint Rose, Albany, New York (23 March 2017).

¹⁰ See: Kelly Oliver, *Earth and World: Philosophy after the Apollo Missions* (New York: Columbia, 2015). Oliver makes an important distinction between Earth and world which I have conflated here for the sake of simplicity. The former is more precisely the ground for experience; the latter, by contrast, is a way of conceptualizing the planet where we live and our spheres of relations with others.

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- ¹¹ Carl Sagan, *Cosmos*, (1980), television series, Episode 9: “The Lives of Stars” (aired 23 November 1980).
- ¹² Thich Naht Hahn, *Interbeing: Fourteen Guidelines for Engaged Buddhism* (1987), revised edition, Fred Eppsteiner, ed. (Berkeley, CA: Parallax, 1993).
- ¹³ A ritual’s first performance is in this respect already a repetition. Cf. Jacques Derrida’s deconstruction of the opposition between speech and writing. Typically we think of speech as primary, immediate, and present, whereas we think of writing as derived from speech, a mediated form of recording speech in its absence; by the time writing is read, it is already past. Derrida, however, insists that speech’s iterability, which makes communication possible (if the listener could not mentally reproduce what she hears the speaker saying, then the words would be unintelligible) marks speech as a form of writing inscribed upon the ear, and he thus overturns the conventional hierarchy between the speech and writing. See: Jacques Derrida, *Voice and Phenomenon: Introduction to the Problem of the Sign in Husserl’s Phenomenology* (1967), Trans. Leonard Lawlor (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern Univ, 2010).
- ¹⁴ Tsai, “Dancing in the Space and Time with Brush Marks.”
- ¹⁵ See: Ellen Pearlman, *Nothing & Everything: The Influence of Buddhism on the American Avant-Garde 1942-1962* (Berkeley, CA: Evolver Editions, 2012).
- ¹⁶ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, “Eye and Mind” (1964) in *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader: Philosophy and Painting*, Galen A. Johnson, ed. Trans. Michael B. Smith (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern Univ, 1993), p. 125.
- ¹⁷ Chögyam Trungpa, *Shambhala: The Sacred Path of the Warrior* (1984), Carolyn Rose Gimian, ed. (Boston and London: Shambhala Publications, 2007), pp. 12-13.
- ¹⁸ Theodor Adorno, “Commitment” (1962), Trans. Francis McDonagh, in *The Essential Frankfurt School Reader*, Andrew Arato and Eike Gebhardt, eds. (New York: Continuum, 1982/2000), pp. 300-318. See also: Lambert Zuidervaart, *Adorno’s Aesthetic Theory: The Redemption of Illusion* (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 1991), pp. 32-38.
- ¹⁹ Tsai, “Dancing in the Space and Time with Brush Marks.”
- ²⁰ In this respect, the Heart Sūtra becomes emblematic of Tsai’s oeuvre. Karl Brunnhölz has described the Heart Sūtra as a nesting doll of koans, one paradoxical contradictory negation after the other demolishing habitual modes of conceptual thinking. The koan, like Tsai’s art, brings together irreconcilable opposites in order to force one to move beyond habitual thinking. See: Karl Brunnhölz, *The Heart Attack Sūtra: A New Commentary on the Heart Sūtra* (Ithaca, NY: Snow Lion, 2012), p. 9.