

ZEN MUSINGS

TEXT BY PETER ZHANG, PHOTOGRAPHS BY WEI-SHYUAN (STONE) PENG



Meditation

冥思

If a mantis can pray, then a great egret can certainly meditate. The posture is the message. As we meditate on its posture, the egret seems to be meditating on something else, or is it actually in a *wuxin* (无心) mode. The image mediates our meditator-becoming. We can identify with almost the entirety of the

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anthropomorphic stance except for the beak—which creates a sense of alterity. The tree trunks frame our view, but not the egret's. An irregular, opening frame isn't too bad at all but not as good as no frame. Beyond the frame, every element is purely an element of the self-so. The draw of the self-so is quiet but irresistible. The egret is at once me and not me. The frame, isn't it a threshold—a threshold of *throughness* (通). It suddenly occurs to me that meditation may well be a matter of forgetting language (忘言). If only I were on the other side of the threshold. That is, on the side of serenity and eternal oneness.



Interality

间性

What strikes me immediately is the rockness of the rock. Yet without the lighter color of the water, the cuddly size of the duck, the relative levitas of the grass, the tangible texture of the tree trunk, I doubt the rock would be this much in my face. Were it not for the composition of the picture, I wouldn't confront the singular solidity and shapeliness of the rock at all, let alone through the duck's body, which is precisely what allows me to have an embodied relationship with the rock. The rock looks towering precisely because, without realizing it, I have become one with the duck. Therein lies

the photographer's artistic will. There is no straight line or symmetry in the picture. Nor is there a single element that's repeated. Contrast is all there is. The life of the rock is brought out in a compelling way, to the point where it gives off a mystical aura. There is no such thing as a simple rock. "Rock" is a noise out of my mouth.



Haecceity

“此”性

The egret has the entire world to itself. At this singular moment, even water reveals its grain. Yet the grain of water is utterly unthinkable because it is ephemeral and once occurring. Each moment, a million patterns are formed and deformed, and the universe renews itself a million times. In this sea of changes, *this* egret cannot but be our linguistic projection. “It” inhabits a different world entirely—a world that is egoless, timeless, directionless, purposeless, and anxiety-free, in which there is nothing but free and easy wandering, a world that is beyond good and evil, beauty and ugliness. Only in a few rare moments are we capable of peeking into this other world—moments like this one when we open ourselves up so this creature can serve as our mediator.



Fasting of the Mind

心齋

If the picture were the Zen master's wordless koan, what then would be the secret message? If the configuration of the elements is the equivalent of a hexagram, how am I supposed to derive the six lines, and in what order? What do I need a hexagram for if there's no question on my mind in the first place? In the same way, the hooting of James Thurber's owl can be heard as "to wit" or "to woo," depending on the preoccupation of the auditor; the message I get from the picture, if any, will have more to do with the question I bring along than the so-called intention behind the configuration. The ducklings and water strider do not mean but be. They are in the realm of the carefree and self-so. Only by getting rid of all pre-occupations and mental constructs, including the idea of getting rid of them, do I get to appreciate the wonder of the moment and the idle pondness of the pond. There's more in the tiny water strider than what anybody can ever achieve.



Antiform

虚

It's true that the interplay of uprightness and obliquity creates a sense of dynamism, and that the curve of the white ibis and that of the bamboos create a sense of rhythm. But what makes the picture interesting is not so much the forms per se but the antiform, or the way empty space is shared by the forms. Antiform, although not attended to by our central vision, actually creates the overall aesthetic effect. The life or liveliness of the picture cannot but emerge from this zone of proximity between forms. Once the "air" in between the forms is taken away, there's not much to look at. The ibis creates its own space or field; so do the bamboos. What's of interest is how they share space or how their fields of existence come into contact with one another. This aesthetic is the same aesthetic that in-forms East Asian painting, calligraphy, gardening, ikebana, and whatnot. It's an interological aesthetic or simply a Zen aesthetic.



Contemplation

参

At the nth encounter, the Zen master points to this image of feather reed grass in the wind. “Contemplate!” Now the image is the koan, but what is the answer?

That the grass is the artist’s means of capturing the wind?

That “Zen” is a noise in the air?

That the Way lies in the suchness of the self-so?

That in the yielding posture resides an astonishing wisdom of morphogenesis?

That the grass always already implies the wind as an integral element of its being, and that being is inter-being?

Or is the Zen master simply pointing to the ineffable wonder of the world, to that which is nearer to us than the act of pointing, so one utters the sudden cry, “Ah, this!”



Folds

褶

“At twilight, dusk is a delightful quality of the whole world” (John Dewey). However shapely the white egret is, the message of the picture resides more in the curiously inebriating background, which sets the tone. As we look at the bird with our central vision, we are subliminally affected by what’s peripheral. In this sense, there is something Baroque about this picture.

“The most beautiful order is a heap of sweepings piled up at random” (Heraclitus). Our learned sense of order, how nihilistic it is. With the unper-turbed white egret as our mediator, we may finally appreciate the complex orderliness and delirious, psychedelic quality of the scene.



Ease

自得

We need images, words, and techno-images to orient ourselves in the world but end up being alienated from it. What an irony—to contemplate Zen through pictures. The “great egret” (what?) knows no left or right, hours or seconds. Its third eye is a lot more functional. It lifts its leg just to lift its leg, instead of posing. When it walks, it does not need a gadget to tell it what the proper pace is—it simply knows it. When it stays, it simply stays, not waiting for Pierre, Godot, or Lefty. Instead of pocketing things, it experiences. It possesses nothing, but what freedom! To spend a day and a night as an egret is to be one with the cosmos, and to savor eternity. It was bold of Eliade to say, “Man is the *umbilicus mundi*, the navel of the world.” Deleuze was Zen-minded in advocating becoming-animal.



Yin and Yang

阴阳

White creates black, and vice versa. Yin and Yang are mutually generative.

If one looks at the fence long enough, at some point, one's vision will diverge, and the trigrams will reveal their anti-formal presence, so Paul Virilio teaches us.

The picture pleases before it means. The fence creates a decorative quality. One's imagination takes off where the fence is truncated. Thus, the picture gestures beyond itself.

Zen does not lie in any one element. It's a holistic effect. With asymmetry, comes vitality.

There's elegance in black and white. To introduce color (and words) is to commit vandalism.

The house is where photography morphs into pencil sketching.

LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

This is the final issue of *ETC* for the year 2014—a time for reflection on what was, and of anticipation for what is yet to be. It's the new year, the dawn of possibilities and hope, and a time for resolutions and plans. It's when we read the past year's "greatest" or "worst" lists and revise our personal "bucket" or "improvement" list. It's the time of simultaneous endings and beginnings, where aspirational dreams of future possibilities run headlong into the stark realities of last year's unfulfilled promises. It is celebratory and reflective, hopeful and remorseful, joyous and sad—a *Yin* and *Yang* of emotions that herald in a hoped-for future built upon the realities of last year's accomplishments and failures. It is what time-binding is all about. It's called life.

New Year's is also a time for collective celebration when people around the globe gather asynchronously in their own time zones at "midnight"—in a seemingly synchronized celebration with every other community on the planet—to ritualistically commemorate the importance of the calendar to our collective consciousness. It's as if we annually experience a momentary lifting of the temporal laws that bind us and become the embodiment of McLuhan's "global village" in which "time and space is abolished"¹ for that one brief moment.

Much of this, of course, is digital trickery creating an illusion of global synchronicity. This is best symbolized by the midnight dropping of "The Ball" at Times Square in New York City—an event that is now the epicenter of a global "rave" of millions of partygoers festively ringing in the New Year perfectly in "sync" through the magic of television and social media. The ball itself, a geodesic dome made of 2,688 Waterford Crystal triangles and weighing close to twelve thousand pounds began dropping in Times Square in 1907. The notion of dropping a time ball actually dates back to 1833 with the Royal Observatory in Greenwich, England, dropping a wooden ball every afternoon at one o'clock so that nearby ship captains could precisely set their navigational chronometers. Over one-hundred time balls were soon constructed around the world, but few of them survive today.

Of course, the idea of celebrating the arrival of a new year dates back much further than the dropping of “time balls.” The Babylonians had a celebration of the vernal equinox nearly four thousand years ago that included promises to the gods, which began the custom of making personal New Year’s resolutions. And history is filled with a variety of rituals and celebrations honoring the annual rite of renewal and beginnings. And so too, the modern era is replete with a broad array of celebratory practices around the globe, which include the eating of pork in Cuba symbolizing progress and prosperity, and rice pudding in Sweden and Norway which is believed to bring good luck in the coming year.

While symbolic hope for better fortune in the coming year is a universal theme that undergirds all New Year’s Eve celebrations, it is important to remind ourselves that the most important moment is the one in hand. On this note, our lead essay in this issue of *ETC* is ideally suited to focus our attention on this important concept of “being in the moment.” Titled “Zen Musings,” this essay features text by Peter Zhang and photos by Wei-Shyuan (Stone) Peng, and leaves the reader feeling a sense of quiet and at peace. In this day and age, peaceful quietude is a rare commodity and something to be cherished. Peter and Stone’s essay certainly helps us move closer to this feeling of inner peace.

We are also pleased to feature in this issue the first of a two-part essay written by Robert K. Logan in which the Canadian physicist and Marshall McLuhan collaborator offers an in-depth analysis of Terrance Deacon’s *Incomplete Nature: How Mind Emerged from Matter*.² Terrance Deacon is professor of biological anthropology and neuroscience and chair of anthropology at the University of California, Berkeley. Many of you will recall Prof. Deacon’s 2013 address in New York at the Alfred Korzybski Memorial Lecture in which he provided an overview of his theoretical work in neural signal processing and language change with a focus on developing a scientific biosemiotics that contributes to both linguistic theory and cognitive neuroscience. Prof. Logan has been working with Terrance Deacon over the past year, and in this essay shares his insights and analyses into this seminal book that explores the very nature of symbolic abstraction and what it means to be human.

And so, with the dawning of the year 2015, we cue the band for one more round of “Auld Lang Sine” and wish all our readers the most peaceful of new years in the months ahead.

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