

# WORK IN PROGRESS

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When asked, "Who are you?" the mysterious protagonist of Andre Breton's *Nadja* answers, "I am the soul in limbo." She speaks, he tells us, "without a moment's hesitation," and thus, we might infer, she is certain even if her position is not fixed. (1) Breton's book may be read as a portrait of a supremely elusive woman – an irritant to certain feminist parts of my own soul. But at its heart the book is about movement: the ability of a woman to move a man, his and her movements through the city of Paris, the convulsive movement of his thought which aspires to beauty and genius. Nadja may be a figment of Breton's imagination, but not simply a figment, as his ability to narrate her volition as fluidly as he does indicates that the woman or the thought has possessed him. Nadja's self-given name is significant: "because in Russian it's the beginning of the word hope, and because it's only the beginning." (2) This sense of only the beginning sets things in motion.

At first, one might say that the soul in limbo is that soul which is without a body or temporarily without a home. It is a soul unsure about where it must move – heaven or hell, up or down, this or that side of the medieval picture. Limbo, deriving from *limbus* or boundary, is most often understood as a state in-between more certain entities. It is on their edge; it is even "borderline." Today, however, inhabiting borders is a condition that is the norm for increasing numbers of people. So limbo needs some fleshing out. What if we understand the border as a line not only to be crossed but also a flow to be persistently followed by someone who cannot answer, when asked, "Where are you from?" with the name of a single country, in a single language. Passports are a poor designation of this "where from," especially when one has two or more or none.

Jennifer Tee adopted the phrase "soul in limbo" as a kind of mantra and as a title for certain works beginning with the end of her studies at the Rijksakademie in Amsterdam (c. 2001). These works are also journeys involving travel to Mongolia, Brazil, or New Zealand, to name just a few important destinations. Along the way, Tee's work also ventures into zones of cultural invention which political geography cannot encompass, in large part because this discipline wants to map whereas Tee wants to move, to dance and not, I think, only with human bodies. The question of how to involve the human body is already posed in Tee's graduation work from the Rijksakademie in Amsterdam entitled simply *Jen & The Throatsingers*. The title invokes the human actors, but what must be understood is that it also included the so-called Myth-Tent,

which was made of textiles printed with various symbolic patterns that the artist had deployed throughout her residency and fulfilled a function, as a canopy for the singers; and the artist herself suspended (might we say comfortably in limbo?) on a swing and connected to the tent with a pulley system. The energy of the performers was shared with the public via guttural vibrations and a specially concocted throatsigner drink.

Bodily movement becomes differently pronounced in *Covert Entwined Heart* (2004-2011) which is at once a swirling sculpture – crafted from metal, bamboo beads, fabric decoration, foam mills, foam wings, neon lights, cacao fruits, porcelain letter tiles, power shells, and parts of a palm tree – and a stage for action. Components of the sculpture could be turned to activate its rotation, but there was also the action or performance entitled *Dear Heart*, which involved walking and recitation of words invented and also gleaned from *Tristes Tropiques*, Claude Lévi-Strauss's 1955 travelogue of time spent among indigenous tribes of central Brazil among other places. His sentimental journey, not so much to a geographical space but to a pre-Columbian ideal, is loosely employed by Tee for its poetry of laments. But the sadness (la tristesse) is not, I think, the end or aim of this work. It is just the beginning – a way of invoking sentiments to invoke the existence of a soul – something that art struggles with immensely in the West.

The Surrealists were fascinated by non-Western cultures. Breton formed a strong friendship with Aimé and Suzanne Césaire, the Martinican co-founders (with the help of René Menil and Aristide Maugée) of the journal *Tropiques*, which was more mad than sad. Using the mask of a review of Caribbean fables to avoid French censorship and also to give weight to literature deriving from ancient oral traditions, *Tropiques* was a vehicle for a nascent intellectual and spiritual militancy against colonial oppression and a proponent of the notion of *négritude*, which Senegal's first president, the poet and theorist Léopold Sédar Senghor defined as "a certain way of being a man, especially of living as a sensitivity, and as such, soul rather than thought." (3) Senghor has been criticized for the binary structure of "Negro emotion" and "Hellenic reason," but what cannot be denied is the force of forging a new language that he, the Césaires and several other proponents of the hotly debated, but nonetheless mobilizing term *négritude*, introduced into the struggle against colonization. Much of Jennifer Tee's work carries this emphasis on vocabulary, poetic invocation and naming, and of course the soul, which was also shared with the Surrealists. But she is not advocating for a people that have been racially or otherwise defined.

Sometimes the artist engages rather specific people – Mongolian throat singers (in *Jen & The Throatsingers*, her 2002 graduating work from the Rijksakademie in Amsterdam; modern dancers from Shanghai, in *Star-Crossed* (2010) a work we produced together for *Nether Land*, a group

exhibition at the Dutch Cultural Center, a temporary space organized for Shanghai's 2010 World Expo) and a man and a woman (for *What Men Knew Nothing About* installed in Olandu Burias, a Dutch group exhibition mounted at the CAC in Vilnius) – and often this specificity is used to complicate or even deflect the Dutchness of the given context. There can be no positive or singular constructs for colonizing cultures like that of the Netherlands in the vein of *négritude*. But what could be said of Tee's work is that it plays its part in a kind of mixing of cultures that Senghor advocates in his essay on miscegenation or *métissage* as the path to the liberty of the soul.(4)

If at the heart of the matter is indeed a soul that is liberated *and* in limbo (the two not being exclusive), that soul is also never conceived without a body. Here there is no clear duality, which could return to divisions, but a dynamism.(5) The bodies that Jennifer Tee deploys are not quite human, though they are often made up of organs or organic parts. Hence the heart, the DNA double helix and also (to my eyes) the ovaries in the aforementioned *Covert Entwined Heart*, a sculpture that Tee has redeployed several times since the 2004 São Paulo Biennial where her work was "the Dutch entry." There, within a presentation that also included a chandelier entitled *Un Autre Monde*, Tee orchestrated a performance titled precisely *I am the soul in limbo*, activating different objects, such as the *Covert Entwined Heart* and *Tiptoe into Hal*. Later, containers (or shall we call them, quite literally carriers of souls?) such as the twelve ceramic vessels of *Star-Crossed*, displayed in a line (or a line of a score, for dancers and a musician) make an appearance.(6)

When I first encountered Tee's work, part of me (perhaps it was the part trained to prioritize conceptual legacies, to downright distrust material because it seemed to some of my heroes from the 1970s [and so just before electronic money] to be more easily commodifiable than so-called dematerialized stuff, and to generally scoff at metaphysics or anything reminiscent of religion, psychedelia, wholism, or other so-called opiates for the masses (7)) struggled somewhat with the dynamic or downright juicy objects populating her installations and the language that swirled around it. Some of that language resonated with what I had been taught to dismiss as the New Age – for instance: "Tee attempted to arouse *a state of limbo*, a transition zone where people, objects, and the surroundings are connected in such a way that the viewer can experience a moment of intensification of life and consciousness." (8) As I continued to follow the work, a curious feature began to emerge which might best be described as a cosmic alphabetical impulse. This is not to subsume poetic passion into a strict order but to suggest that poetry becomes a malleable material. Hence, Tee's evolving syntax is not so much non-verbal (a term too often applied to art as a clunky alternative to the conceptual) but rather a fully fleshed out system where words, poses, postures, people, and things carry equal weight.

The line of ceramic vessels in *Star-Crossed* might at first appear as quite the opposite of the helix in *Covert Entwined Heart*, especially when this sculptural stage appeared as part of the more complex 2004 São Paulo Biennial installation [*feasting on the*] *E\*V\*O\*L E\*Y\*E- LAND\*S\*-END: An Outburst of Passion in Limbo*. But I do see a line (one straight one coiled) that energizes both and another line (more metaphorical, a kind of evolution of approach) that stretches from one work to the other. These are not the Alpha or the Omega of Tee's oeuvre but two instances of experiment – one earlier one later – that show a concern with movement and moreover a sense of progression. In São Paulo, *Tiptoe into Hal*, which was a structure reminiscent of the parade float so dear to the celebration of Carnival in Brazil, which was initially situated near the helix sculpture and then was populated and wandered off in a performance. *Star-Crossed* combined a row of ceramic urns, jars, vases, and other vessels and five hexagonal weavings in a gradation of complementary colors that doubled as surfaces for five dancers who used the vessels and the names stamped into them as a kind of vocabulary to trigger their movements. Tee's numinous use of a language that includes but is not limited to words facilitates a sense of movement with purpose.

Now purpose is something that art, with its Western traditions of autonomy and strategic use-lessness, shies away from, unless that purpose is a kind of pure contemplation devoid of prayer or any other passion. Tee's participatory, performative work, which often includes important elements from the handicrafts, could not be further from this tradition. But I do not think that her focus on the soul *returns* directly to any of the Surrealist, Sanskrit, Altaic, Animist, or otherwise modernized ancient ways that she is inspired by. They serve as inspiration, a breath that moves a body. But the work continues along, tracing not so much their exact steps but the path of their progress.

- (1) André Breton, *Nadja*. Translated by Richard Howard (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1960): 71.
- (2) Ibid., 66.
- (3) Léopold Sédar Senghor quoted in Molefi Kete Asante and Ama Mazam (Eds.), *Encyclopedia of Black Studies* (Thousand Oaks, London, New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2005): 369.
- (4) See Léopold Sédar Senghor, "De la liberté de l'âme ou l'éloge du métissage" in *Liberté I: Négritude et Humanisme*, 1964: 98-103 (first printed in 1950 in the review *Liberté du L'Esprit*).
- (5) I begin to wonder if this movement could be described as going beyond the logic of dialectics, or any other logic for that matter. My intuition is yes, but fleshing this out might take another essay.
- (6) The vessels in this work were made in collaboration with a master ceramist in the Chinese town of Jingdezhen, using a coiling technique. Each was assigned a title, all of which bear repeating: STAR-CROSSED; REPLACING; A GREAT MISS; ANCESTRAL SACRIFICE; HAIR, HEART, LIVER, OVARY; INFINITE WORLDS,

INNER PROCESS; RECOVERED MEMORY; TRANSCEND & ESCAPE; HEALING; SECRET SELVES; SPIRITUAL RETREAT. What, might one ask, would Breton or Senghor make of this vocabulary?

- (7) It is interesting to note how these rejected values or constructs – and here the Marxist and the Psycho-analytic critique of the fetish must be thought, not only as a critique of capitalism or of the confused psyche, but also as a thinly veiled and rather racist rejection of a set of relations to objects that is also always associated with and even rooted in non-Western cultures.
- (8) This is the official description of *[feasting on the] E\*V\*O\*L E\*Y\*E- LAND\*S\*-END: An Outburst of Passion in Limbo* at the 2004 São Paulo Biennial found on Tee's website.