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Additional Information:

- This article was published in US-China Foreign Language [© David Publishing Company(DPC)] and the definitive version is available at: http://davidpublishing.com/

Metadata Record: https://dspace.lboro.ac.uk/2134/18925

Version: Accepted for publication

Publisher: © David Publishing Company

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Please cite the published version.
Cross-Cultural Art: A Contemporary Approach to Traditional Chinese Landscape Painting

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Is it possible today in the age of globalization to create new modes of cross-cultural art based on a comprehensive understanding of one culture without being accused of mimicking or exploiting another? This paper includes the presentation of an example of contemporary western video art that attempts to explore cross-cultural influences between the West and the East, and to discuss this question from the western perspective. Proceeding from Chinese thought and aesthetics, the traditional concept of landscape painting “Shan-Shui-Hua” (“mountain-water painting”) is recreated within the new western genre of the “video-painting” as a single (flat) screen video installation. Confronting the tools of modern computer visualisation with the East Asian concept creates an artistic artefact counter-pointing and reflecting both positions.

Keywords: cross-cultural art, Chinese landscape tradition, digital art

Introduction

This paper explores new modes of cross-cultural art within the current debate of a global art history. It specifically looks at the western position where the West meets the East and deals with difficulties of a post-colonial, post-imperialistic world where Western paradigms seem to dominate the creation and debate of contemporary art worldwide. The author is a western art practitioner, and the paper is a result of a practice-based research project that investigates analogies between traditional Chinese landscape painting and modern western film and visualisation techniques. (see Figure 1) During the practical process, it becomes obvious that it is impossible to create such a work without encountering difficulties of translation between eastern and western art tradition and without engaging in a debate on post-colonial issues.

This paper is not aiming to deliver a comprehensive in-depth research into the comparison of different cultural modes and global art issues. It would rather presents a single example of western video art that reveals some observations and invites to engage in alternative, competing and opposing cultural perspectives in the light of a multi-cultural globalized world where the understanding of other (visual) cultures becomes increasingly important.

Influences between Eastern and Western Art

In recent years, China emerged as the most influential eastern country on the global art market, and it became quite common for eastern contemporary artists to incorporate aspects of western art into their practice. Although often accused by western and Chinese critics of continuing to mimic western art historical
movements, there is great evidence of its worldwide success in various exhibitions in major museums and galleries and meanwhile a more complex relationship of influences has developed. Chinese artists are now reworking traditional eastern concepts combined with western ideas in a more independent way, which the Chinese art critic and curator FEI (as cited in LU, 2009) described as “gradually placing issues brought from Chinese context into the larger cultural background of the world, in a lively and creative way, so that it can set in motion a process of becoming ‘common’ and ‘extensive’” (p. 5). But otherwise, the adventure of mixing aspects of both cultures is rarely undertaken in the other direction from the West to the East. Although the incorporation of eastern aesthetics into western art has long precedent in modern art, it is today often regarded as “esoteric” or criticized as a “post-colonial attitude”. It seems to be quite difficult for a contemporary western artist to create “non-imperialistic” artwork that is originated by the eastern influences in the current “minefield”, where “according to some voices, globalization is the new guise under which colonialism has returned” (Singh, 2010, p. 1)

So there is a crucial question: Is it possible today in the age of globalization to create new modes of cross-cultural art based on a comprehensive understanding of one culture and without being accused of mimicking or exploiting another? Is it possible to have an equal exchange among the West, the East and other parts of the world within a global setting that is dominated by western paradigms and its imperialistic history?

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**Figure 1.** Video still from video scroll “Shan-Shui-Hua”, © Christin Bolewski.

**The Globalization of Contemporary Art**

In recent years, numerous publications on the globalization of contemporary art have been published worldwide. Most of them commonly agree that global art practice and history are mainly based on western principles.
The German art historians Belting and Buddensieg (2009) reported in “The Global Art World, Audiences, Market, and Museums” about a paradox situation where now in the 21st century the “de-colonial re-writing” of art history is initiated by the West by “dictating their post modern vocabularies to the rest of the world” (p. 48).

The book “Is Art History Global?” by Elkins (2006) includes contributions of international art historians and critics discussing the practice and responsibility of global thinking within the discipline. In his essay “Art History as a global discipline” (2006), Elkins argued that art history depends on western conceptual schemata:

Perhaps the most surprising fact about worldwide practices of art history is that there may be no conceptually independent national or regional traditions of art historical writing. Chinese art history, for example, demands expertise in very different kinds of source materials and formal concepts, but its interpretive strategies remain very Western. Chinese art historians, both in China and in universities in the West, study Chinese art using the same repertoire of theoretical texts and sources—psychoanalysis, semiotics, iconography, structuralism, anthropology, identity theory. (p. 19)

Elkins concluded that “it can be argued that there is no non-western tradition of art history, if by that is meant a tradition with its own interpretive strategies and forms of argument” (p. 19). He finally came to the conclusion that “globalism means the use of western forms, ideas, and institutions” (p. 19).

Supangkat (2009), an Indonesian artist and curator, talked about art “with an accent” and argued that since the beginning of the 19th century, art in Indonesia has interpreted as “art in the Western sense”. “The art in the western sense can be viewed as analogous to the development of English. Considering this analogy, the understanding of art in Asia can be viewed as ‘art with an accent’” (Supangkat, 2009, p. 1).

LU, a Chinese curator, critic and writer based in Beijing offered in her essay “Back to Normal” (2009) a diagnosis of the Chinese contemporary art scene:

Many of the “exiled” artists who left China to live and work abroad in the 1980s and 1990s have gradually returned to major cities in China, and these people brought back not only their updated practice and artistic thinking shaped by their overseas residence but have also presented formidable possibilities and influences on the art scene within China. (p. 4)

These are just a few examples demonstrating that contemporary art is mainly a western construct that is incorporated in global or cross-cultural art forms, and there seems to be no easy escape to develop original contemporary artwork or art writing of worldwide recognition which is not based on western principles.

Translation between Eastern and Western Culture

But how to proceed as a western artist when attempting to learn and understand eastern traditions and incorporate aspects of eastern art into their own practice, if in the East-West direction, an artist cannot create internationally recognized artwork without using western strategies, because he/she has to persist in the western art historical discourse. How can then a western artist create artwork containing eastern elements without not exploiting and using them as a foreign and “exotic” attribute that gets translated, reshaped, adopted, attached or incorporated into western concepts?

At first, East Asian aesthetics and philosophy are difficult to understand for the western mind. There is a difficulty involved in bridging the gaps of viewing and understanding Chinese art. The reception of the art is passed through filters of language and culture, and we in the West often realize that we cannot always grasp the full meaning. In her essay “Another Kind of Global Thinking” published in Is Art History Global? (2007) Stafford pointed out that translation and interpretation always involve transformation:

The pristine distinctiveness of other cultures cannot be maintained through the process of interpretation. It involves assimilation to the conceptual vocabulary and values of the other culture and does not overcome the basic fact that they are still being removed from the specific cultural context to which they belong, translated into an alien context and
idiom—Anglo-American art history—and set into a network of concepts and comparisons which transform their significance. (pp. 196-197)

There are some contemporary writers, such as the French philosopher and sinologist Francois Jullien (2005) or the Chinese French writer Francois Cheng (1994), who “translate” Chinese aesthetics for western understanding, offering some insights and interesting alternatives to compare and rethink western traditions. Francois Jullien is one of the most important contemporary writers in this cross-cultural field between the East and the West, although it has to be mentioned that some other sinologists criticize his method. Jullien has found his own way of dealing with difficulties of transformation and translation between cultures, and it is a more philosophical approach. Pointing out that it seems intellectually and politically imperative today to reinvigorate western thought with ideas from the East, Jullien seeks to create a space of mutual inquiry that maintains the integrity of both eastern and western thinking. Moving between the traditions of ancient Greece and China, Jullien does not attempt a simple comparison of the two civilizations. In his book Detour and Access (2004) Jullien attempted to create a new approach to Western culture, which he describes as a “detour via China”. He explained it as a “local change of thinking”, a process of distancing from western thinking as an effective strategy where Chinese philosophy functions as an “outside” from which to see more clearly the values and preoccupation of western culture. His detours about China always emanate from European philosophy with its Greek origins, and lead to reveal the contingencies of their principles and conditions. Jullien talks about the impossibility to compare the two separate cultures. Instead, he uses the perspective provided by each culture to gain access to the other culture. Eastern and western concepts are often not in opposition; they are rather based on different categories and different pattern of thought, which make a direct comparison impossible, and instead, he suggests distancing and reflecting each other’s preoccupations.

**The Western Video Scroll “Shan-Shui-Hua”**

The philosophical approach of Jullien offers an interesting possibility for a western contemporary artist, who also struggles with the difficulties of bridging the gaps of understanding and translation when approaching Chinese art tradition. Jullien’s thoughts have been used as a starting point for a practice-based art project and tested and applied for the creation of the western video scroll “Shan-Shui-Hua”, which is reworking Chinese landscape traditions. The video work “Shan-Shui-Hua” is not the research of an art historian or a specialist in Chinese art. It is an individual response of a contemporary western artist, and includes artistic freedom and subjective interpretations. In the sense of Jullien, the artwork is what he calls a “detour via China”. The methodology of the work process for the creation of the video scroll derives from Jullien’s philosophical approach. The subject of study is western film and digital visualisation practice, but the access is through eastern aesthetics. Emphasizing to some extent pictorial concepts and practical aspects of the Chinese painting process enables the artist to create distance, in order to take a fresh approach to Western visualisation practice. But at the same time, using software tools that generally have been devised to create two-dimensional and three-dimensional artefacts (or computer animation) from a western cultural perspective avoids the pitfalls of echoing and imitating Chinese landscape painting too closely. The concept of multi-perspective and the endless scroll of the Chinese landscape are explored through digital film-making, video-compositing and virtual camera, depths and particle systems. The main features of the original “Shan-Shui-Hua” merge with western moving image practice, and if its aims are to question western digital visualisation practice that intends to represent realistic space.
Wells reviewed the video scroll “Shan-Shui-Hua” in *Aspect Magazine—The Chronicle of New Media Art* (2010):

Bolewski preoccupations are about the ways in which digital technologies—primarily geared to Western applications—can facilitate exploration of spatial terrain, and how this revises aesthetic orthodoxies, Chinese or otherwise. Western perspective underpins the implied desire to create plausibly realistic representations of the material world, and that this in turn authenticates an accountable “truth”. “Truth” self-evidently, is a relative thing, and in encouraging a different way of seeing—aesthetically and culturally—Bolewski insists upon a re-interrogation of how tools help to define creative practice, and how our perceptual sense can be re-orientated by a different technical construction of pictorial elements. (quotation of audio commentary)

The Video Scroll: Is it Appropriation or Cultural Hybridization?

The video scroll “Shan-Shui-Hua” is a combination of traditional Chinese hanging and hand scroll. The horizontal scroll of the video unrolls in time and space but only in the moment of projection, and is composed and animated from right to left in analogy to the East Asian principle. It presents a permanent virtual camera movement gliding through an indefinite landscape containing original 2D video recordings as well as 2D and 3D computer-generated images and animations of landscapes. It is presented on a large high-resolution flat screen monitor, wall-mounted in vertical position as a “video painting”. It is simultaneously an exploration of ancient Chinese art practices and highly contemporary digital experiments in revising western frame aesthetics and moving image construction. The exploration of the Chinese scroll as a moving image practice has long precedent, but is seen afresh through the digital intervention. Confronting the tools of modern computer visualisation with the East Asian concept creates an artistic artefact counter-pointing and reflecting both positions. But it also tests if philosophical concepts can be used as a work methodology to create visual art, and it investigates if Eastern philosophy, tradition and thinking can be applied to western art and digital visualisation practice.

Appropriation has a long tradition in western art. In the visual arts, artists can adopt appropriate means, borrow, recycle sample aspects or the entire form of man-made visual culture. In fact, appropriation of visual culture and art, in some form or another, has always been part of human history. Inherent in the process of appropriation is the fact that the new work re-contextualizes whatever it borrows to create the new work.

The video scroll “Shan-Shui-Hua” (see Figure 2) specifically re-contextualizes aspects of eastern landscape tradition in the following areas:

The use of time and temporality: This is an important feature for both Chinese aesthetics and the medium film. The Chinese horizontal hand scroll is often referred to as the first motion picture: it unrolls in time and space and is enjoyed as a progression while the painting is revealed foot by foot.

The use of space and perspective: Based on the Renaissance tradition the achieving the effect of realistic space by the employment of linear perspective is a major preoccupation of Western visual culture, whereas the Eastern concept of using multiple vanishing points never aimed to create a realistic space.

Chinese philosophy: The video painting plays with absence and presence, totality and emptiness, materiality and transcendence. 3D computer generated forms and wire frame grids of mountain models mix with 2D video recordings; illusionism meets reality. The principle of transformation so central to Taoist thought becomes the transformation of an imaginary digital landscape.

Relation of man and nature: The video scroll transposes the traditional Eastern relation of man and nature into a more contemporary Western manner: it uses the figure of the Western mountaineer equipped with special
tools and protective clothing to vanquish the highest peaks in order to conquer nature rather than searching for harmonious existence, thus counter-pointing Eastern and Western ideals.

And there is an important historical reference to make: Once the Russian avant-garde filmmaker Sergej Eisenstein (Eisenstein & Leda, 1969) was inspired by the commonality between the medium film and the eastern art tradition in the development of his theory of film montage. He studied Japanese language and art and concluded that all the various branches of Japanese art were permeated by the same cinematic element, so that it was appropriate that the cinema should learn from other forms of Japanese artistic practice. Besides, extracting techniques from Chinese characters and the Kabuki theatre, Eisenstein also has drawn on traditional scroll paintings that fused in his mind a combined image of close-ups and composition in depth.

Unfortunately, the link between film and Chinese art is not very prominent today, so that it is very challenging—from the perspective of a contemporary digital media artist and film maker—to look closer to this relation and consider the early observations of Eisenstein specifically in an approach to digital film practice, nearly 100 years later. The video painting “Shan-Shui-Hua” follows the idea of Eisenstein and introduces the new genre of the digital “video painting” as a suitable form for development. The video painting is a new artefact in western contemporary moving image practice. It is a hybrid concept between the still and the moving image using traditional patterns of film narration and painting practice. It emerges as a supremely pictorial form, and due to its ambient and meditative character, the video painting seems to be privileged to represent the conceptual and philosophical ideas of the traditional “Shan-Shui-Hua”.

But some eastern artists appropriate and translate the traditional Chinese scroll into modern forms. In “The Tao of Chinese Landscape Painting” the contemporary artist Wong (1991) created an interesting analogy to digital visualisation practice:
But as he paints, the Chinese artist prefers to rely on his own imagination, and arranges the elements as though he were building a model. From his mind-heart he selects mountains, which he can then rotate and re-shape; through acquaintance with the elements, the artist will be able to visualize at will in fabricating his scene. Through understanding of the laws, the artist will position the elements in appropriate positions, directions, and proportions, with transitions, extensions, and overlaps conforming to a definite order. (p. 134)

Wong (1991) used terminology that sounds more familiar describing the construction of a virtual landscape within a digital software application rather than the traditional Chinese painting process. Here, it becomes obvious that the exchange among different cultures, visual tools and aesthetics continues to create a “unique global (visual) culture and language”.

The new technical genre of the high-resolution flat screen display wall-mounted as a video painting also inspires eastern artist to set their traditions in motion. The Korean artist Lee-Nam LEE is internationally very successful and transcends traditional eastern forms into digital sculptures and video paintings (“Korean Eight-Fold Screen” 2007) or animates and blends together Eastern and Western masterpieces (“The Conversation between Monet and Sotchi” 2009). And a very prominent example was presented at the Opening Ceremony of Beijing 2008 Olympics. Here a mega scroll was displayed and set in motion on probably one of the world’s biggest LED (Light-emitting Diode) screens: 22 meters wide and 147 meters long. As usual, the painting was a still image. It was not temporal art, but the scroll’s dynamic display set the painting in motion and was able to show both the still image and dynamic one.

So is there now a difference if eastern artists rework their own traditions or if a western artist does it?

Other Cross-Cultural Approaches

An interesting framework for the cross-cultural approach of the video scroll “Shan-Shui-Hua” and the eastern artists examples delivers the Tate Triennial 2009 exhibition at Tate Britain UK curated by the French art critic Nicolas Baurriand. This exhibition provided a framework for a new modernity that is emerging, reconfigured to an age of globalization, which Baurriand (2009) described as “altermodern” culture. This “altermodern” culture is based on increased communication, travel and migration. Multiculturalism and identity are being overtaken by creolisation, and artists are now starting from a globalized state of culture. “This new universalism is based on translations, subtitling and generalized dubbing” (Baurriand, 2009). He wrote in “The Altermodern Manifesto” published on the Tate website:

If twentieth-century modernism was above all a Western cultural phenomenon, “altermodernity” arises out of planetary negotiations, discussions between agents from different cultures. Stripped of a centre, it can only be polyglot. “Altermodern” art is thus read as a hypertext; artists translate and transpose information from one format to another, and wander in geography as well as in history. (Baurriand, 2009, http://www.tate.org.uk/britain/exhibitions/altermodern/manifesto.shtm)

Another framework delivered by Kavita Singh, one of the curators of the exhibition “Where in the world” at Devi Art Foundation Delhi India in an essay published in 2009 in the catalogue of the exhibition. He suggested one formula for international success as an artist, which is “national content” housed in “post-modern forms”.

That is, artists might use new genres, media and technologies of spectacle to reiterate icons from their own cultures, or to address current issues relating to their contexts that have already been made familiar by news. The artists can thus ensure that they appear “contemporary” in their art-language while remaining “authentic cultural insiders” in their content (p. 2). He continued,
Observers have pointed out that this leads to “self-ethnologizing” or presenting ourselves as others would wish to see us. Some even sharper critiques suggest that the nomadic contemporary artists of today are the 21st century equivalent of the living ethnographic specimens who toured with 19th century World’s Fairs. (Singh, 2010, p. 3)

Here, we have two different voices: Kavita Singh’s is quite critical and Baurriand does not even consider issues of power play between the East and the West, colonial and colonised countries and the use of western paradigms as a basis for the “creolisation” of contemporary art. He spoke about “dubbing and translation in a polyglot world stripped of a centre”, with equal access and knowledge and without all the worries of many art historians.-But it can be argued that his “polyglot” world is today still based on Western paradigms and then “polyglot” becomes another metaphor for what Dan Karlholm described in his essay “Does it work?—A note on pragmatic part and global wholes” (2006):

Global seems to be the latest incarnation of “universal” and is a quintessentially Western preoccupation. The anxiety to meet the standards of a global account (or narrative, or history) is certainly a product of the Western aspiration of conquering the world both literally and symbolically. (p. 227)

Conclusion

Stafford concluded in her essay “Another kind of global thinking” (2007) that “the only way one might mitigate such transformations (between cultures) would be to attempt to become assimilated to the culture of the other, and some have followed this course” (p. 197). One example is the French philosopher Jullien who has spent many years of studies in China to gain access to the other culture. LU (2009) reported on the Chinese art historian and critic LENG Lin who is widely considered one of the most influential players on the Chinese contemporary art scene. After being away in Berlin for two years he returned to Beijing, and managed and directed there one of the most important galleries in the world. LU (2009) wrote:

Leng has a deep understanding of and experience in both worlds and clearly stated that these are two completely different systems: “I need to develop two methodologies and languages to deal with these two worlds.” As he brings his full grasp of both worlds into his practice, they definitely show mutual influences on each other and possibly will give shape to a new model that makes the best of both systems. (p. 8)

Global, cross-cultural art or hybridisation and creolisation of art—all these concepts cannot be seen apart from the historical and political background of a western world dominance within the last centuries. In the 21st century, individuals who traverse between the cultures and get assimilated to different cultures, might be able to develop more authentic strategies. But the dominance of the western art historical discourse might still remain a standard for the worldwide appreciation and reception of art. Belting (2006), who has been thinking of concepts of ‘universal art’ for more than 10 years, said that the “global” in art has yet no definite meaning, but he spoke about “a ‘turning point’ where in the current moment the concept of art is shifting” and he expected that “in the time to come it will change more than we ever would expect” (Belting, 2006).

But meanwhile, for a single western visual artist using modern western visualisation tools day-to-day for the creation of own imagination and views of the world, it is fundamental to be remembered of the restriction that lies within his own cultural concepts, to be aware of a (self)limitation within his own practice and thinking, which is dictated by culture and soft- and hard- ware tools, which are designed to serve western preoccupations. It is important to be remembered of alternative modes of expression through this “detour via China” to be able to expand one’s own imagination.

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