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Man, Nature and Technology – Eastern Philosophy, Global Issues and Western Digital Visualization Practice

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Abstract

This practice-based research project explores cross-cultural influences between the West and the East. It re-investigates relationships of man and nature in Eastern traditional art and philosophy and transposes the content to contemporary global environmental issues. The outcomes are two ambient digital video art animations presented as video painting on high-resolution wall-mounted flat screen displays. Keywords: Video Painting, Digital Visualization Practice, Eastern Philosophy, Remediation

The Chinese hand scroll is often referred to as first motion picture: it unrolls in time and space and is enjoyed as a progression while the painting is revealed foot by foot. Proceeding from Eastern thought and aesthetics the traditional concept of landscape painting ‘Shan-Shui-Hua’ (mountain-water-painting) is recreated as digital animated video painting.

The video painting is a hybrid concept between the still and the moving image using traditional pattern of film narration and painting practice. It emerges as a supremely pictorial form and due to its ambient and meditative character it seems to be privileged to represent the conceptual and philosophical ideas of the ‘Shan-Shui-Hua’.

Detour via China – Eastern and Contemporary Western Philosophy

In his book ‘The detour via China’ (free translation of the German title ‘Umweg ueber China’) [1] the French philosopher Francois Jullien attempts to create a new approach to Western culture: A ‘local change of thinking’, a process of distancing from Western thinking as an effective strategy where Eastern philosophy functions as an ‘outside’ from which to see more clearly the values and preoccupation of Western culture.

Fig. 1. mountain-water-painting, digital video scroll, 2009, HDV, 6,12min. (© Christin Bolewski.)

The two video scrolls apply this philosophical concept - in the sense of Francois Jullien the art work is a ‘detour via China’: Emphasizing to some extent philosophical as well as pictorial concepts and practical aspects of the Chinese painting process enables to distance and to take a fresh approach to Western thinking and film and digital visualization practice, but at the same time using software tools that generally have been devised to create 2D and 3D artefacts from a Western cultural perspective avoids the pitfalls of echoing and imitating Chinese landscape painting too closely.

Man and Nature in Chinese Philosophy

Chinese landscapes usually include small human figures that blend harmoniously into the vast world around them. Man and nature interact and complement each other to reach a state of balance and harmony. The two horizontal animated video ‘scrolls’ transpose this traditional relation into a different, more contemporary Western manner reflecting current environmental issues:

Fig. 2. shizen?natural, digital video scroll, 2013, HDV, 7,15min. (© Christin Bolewski.)

1) mountain-water-painting

This video scroll uses the figure of the Western mountaineer equipped with special tools and protective clothing to vanquish the highest peaks in order to conquer nature. It presents a poem of the famous Chinese poet Han Shan as a reflection on the mountaineers fight against nature counterpointing the Chinese attempt of spiritual harmony. Water, mist, or clouds divide the scene naturally through the interplay of mass and void. Mass and void is an important principle of composition. Empty space contains the possibility for transformation. Transformation is central to Taoist thought. It is like being in meditation, when the entire cosmos looks like a white mist, and one finds oneself in a world of white light. 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 live video recordings; illusionism meets reality. The Taoist principle of transformation becomes the transformation of an imaginary digital landscape.

2) shizen?natural

Shizen is the Japanese word for nature and the second video scroll reflects our relationship to nature by transposing the Makimono - the traditional Japanese horizontal scroll painting into a contemporary manner: Throughout the year seasonal motifs are changed - accordingly spring, summer, autumn and winter progress as well as the destruction of our environment.

The video refers to the nuclear meltdown after the Earthquake and Tsunami in Japan in 2011. A global question and challenge arise for mankind: to coexist in harmony or to control, master and exploit nature? The ambient video scroll presents a poem of the famous Japanese poet Yamabe no Akahito as a reflection on the conflicting relationship struggling between tradition and technological and cultural progress.

References and Notes