

There is no Ink. Thoughts about a Cultural Matrix

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Spoon boy: Do not try and bend the spoon. That's impossible.
Instead... only try to realize the truth.
Neo: What truth?
Spoon boy: There is no spoon.
Neo: There is no spoon?
Spoon boy: Then you'll see that it is not the spoon that bends;
it is only yourself.

"There is no ink." alludes to the famous quote from the film *The Matrix*. There the statement "There is no spoon." stands for the awareness that our perception of reality is always conditioned by a specific system. This is also true for the reading of Chinese ink art. While in the film it is *the Matrix* setting the limits and conditions of perception, in regards to ink art, it is Chinese tradition with its clearly defined cultural canon that limits the understanding of its individual components. Several movements have tried to break away from this kind of cultural matrix; I here only want to mention the May Fourth Movement or the '85 New Wave Art Movement¹. Both attempted to overcome cultural schemata and semantic redundancy.

Chinese ink art is an integral part of Chinese literati culture, a system that has set the standards for the matrix of Chinese culture as such for more than a thousand years. The paper addresses the subject of how to relate ink art to another system, namely to that of contemporary art and visual culture, by asking if it is necessary to bend the object of our investigation to make it part of the new system, or if our perception itself has to be questioned and altered. What if our perception was the obstacle hindering us to use the object in the new system in a proper and natural way? I argue that we find comparable approaches to aesthetics and similar concepts in ink art and contemporary art, that ink art itself owns characteristics that we would qualify as contemporary; and similarly we can perceive characteristics typical of Chinese ink art in works of contemporary art executed in other media. Instead of categorizing ink art on the ground of technique and material, or approaching it from a quasi-ethnological point of view, we should rather evaluate its contemporary qualities. In different exhibitions curated by me, I tried to identify these essential qualities and to avoid a mere categorization on the ground of medium and technique by including also works realized in other media. In addition, I tried to conceive of the exhibition as a kind of discursive space, in which the visitor could approach the art works in different ways, for example through reading, through wandering, or through communicating. To evaluate my choice I distinguished different characteristics of Chinese ink art, of which one can find equivalents in contemporary art. I wish to name taste (quwei), gathering (literati gathering), communication, ad hoc painting (jiji huihao), the concept of the art work as an

intermediate product, that can be altered and completed for example through inscriptions, the coinciding of creation and discourse within the formal structure of the art work, for example in the inscriptions on the paintings, an aspect that German art historian Marcus Bröderlin named "discursive aesthetics" in regards to works of contemporary art², further, model and copy, and other aesthetic characteristics, like for example visual simplicity and crudeness, immediacy, etc.. In the following I will discuss several of these characteristics.

Taste

One important lead-in to the question of how to evaluate the contemporary qualities of ink art is the aspect of taste. I do not use the notion of taste in the mere sense of the appreciation of beauty. Taste here denotes a category of appreciation of aesthetic, intellectual and moral values expressed in art works. This kind of understanding of taste is a vital element of Chinese literati culture. Being high officials and at the same time amateurs and connoisseurs of art the literati united different aspects of the notion of taste in one person. In terms of Pierre Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital they incorporated the embodied state of cultural capital - hence the inherited and acquired disposition to understand and consume cultural objects - further the objectified state of cultural capital - which means they owned collections of antique objects, as well as paintings and calligraphies - and finally the institutionalized state of cultural capital - they had passed the imperial examinations, held academic titles and could therefore give a valid aesthetic judgment. They thus represented a kind of institution setting the aesthetic, intellectual and moral standards of the matrix of Chinese culture and embodied the unity of culture and political power. Taste is here directly linked to the domain of power and politics. It indicated a specific mind-set and attitude. Different styles and topoi not only expressed the personality, the spiritual endeavors and moral values of the author, but were also used as metaphors to show his political attitude. Social and political engagement is thus intrinsically linked to the aesthetics and the spiritual aspects of literati culture in general and to our subject - ink painting - in particular.

Literati Attitude

We see that the main motivation and certain practices of ink art and contemporary art are not too far apart. While in modern art the autonomy of art vis à vis the social and political reality was a major objective, in contemporary art the mingling and the interference with such realities and the relation to wider social and political dynamics is a core issue and aim.

In Zheng Guogu (b.1970) and Yangjiang Group's³ experimental works using calligraphy and other traditional Chinese art forms and customs, such as the Literati garden, calligraphy couplets, or the gathering of amateurs, for example, we can perceive the attempt to create a link to contemporary life as well as to the social and

political environment. For their installation *Last Day, Last Chance* (2006) they imported a bankrupt clothes shop into the museum, including shop assistants selling Yangjiang Group brand shirts. These shirts were printed with calligraphy slogans indicating the final sell-out of the shop, like for example "Mad prices, crazy prices, overall reduction", and others like for example "Suicide after Sale", "The boss ran away or again. The workers don't get paid. All on sale now.", reflecting the Manchester style economy and the insecure life of the majority of the people in the New China. The slogans were written onto the shirts as well as on posters and boards in a crude, amateurish calligraphy reminding on contemporary graffiti, but also on the voluntarily inept, natural and direct style reminiscent of Taoist aesthetics. Calligraphy, here executed by amateurs, creates the link between art and the social and political reality. Like in others of their installations and environments, such as *Indoor Courtyard* (shi nei tingyuan, 2005) or *Sofa, Sofa* (2004), calligraphy, ink art and the literati culture are not used as a mere citation of Chinese tradition or as a simulacrum of traditional practices but as an authentic practice related to reality.

We find a similar approach in Yang Jiechang's (b.1956) monumental meticulous color paintings and in his large calligraphic works that sometimes also include a multimedia component, such as sound or video. Yang combines traditional Chinese technique with a contemporary context and contemporary concepts. These works often deal with current events, like for example *Crying Landscape - No Plane hit the Pentagon* (2003), which is referring to September 11, or with the larger political and cultural situation, like *Stranger than Paradise* (2011), a monumental traditional landscape, in which Yang stages the interaction of animals of different species, as well as that of human beings with animals in a paradisiacal landscape. The dissimilar communication of the depicted couples ranges from curious discovery to playful contact and joyful mating. The depicted panorama relies on classical models stemming from the canon of traditional Chinese landscape painting, in particular Yuan Dynasty landscapes, thus suggesting a kind of universal, eternal landscape. In the actual time of crisis and conflict, Yang's image of a land where impartial communication and action is possible reminds on a globalized world based on equality, mutual respect and compassion. Yet, evidently the balance between the big and the small, the strong and the weak, the one on top and the one below is easily jeopardized only to turn into disparity, contempt, indifference, hate and aggression. Harmony still is based on power play. The artist here not only gives an engaged comment on the actual political situation but also encourages individual participation in the larger political context.

Discursive aesthetics, commentary and copy

We could read Yang Jiechang's *Stranger than Paradise* as a kind of political landscape, reminiscent of Yuan or early Qing Dynasty landscape painting. Next to the political engagement of the artist, or literati, we can further perceive the aspect of discursive

aesthetics mentioned above, namely the imbedding of discourse into the formal structure of the artwork.

This aspect is particularly evident in works with inscriptions, traditionally a commentary or appraisal of the respective painting, thus proposing a discourse for its reading. I used this practice in "Ink, Life, Taste", an exhibition I curated in 2006. I asked artists, art critics and collectors to write inscriptions for works in the exhibition, which then were placed in the exhibition space next to the respective works. The exhibition itself was thus defined as an aesthetic and discursive space. Chu Yun (b.1977) and Shen Piji (b. 1971), who participated in the same exhibition showed a series of printed paintings of gourds, entitled *Tracing a ladle following the Shape of a Gourd* (2006). Each painting had an inscription discussing the concept of innovation through copying prescribed models. The aesthetically extremely sober works reflected the aspect of copying and innovation through the visual repetition of similar shapes and through the use of mechanical reproduction. Let me cite one of these inscriptions:

"Innovation means tracing a ladle following the shape of a gourd. Look for the best gourd to trace the best ladle. To combine the best experience with the best model, the best method with the best practice and to explore the finest appropriate method means innovation; like for example, taking the Western model of market economy and combining it with the Chinese conditions and proceed with a Chinese-style socialism"

Yang Pei-Ming's (b.1960) set of five large watercolors, entitled *International Artificial Landscape* (2006), shows fifteen skulls orderly lined up across the paintings, like a dark horizon. The uniformity of the skulls and their nearly methodological arrangement create a formal rhythm that goes together with formal reduction: the use of only black and white, the superposition of the skulls on a monochrome black background and further the elimination of nearly all traces of the artist's intervention. Both rhythm and reduction seem to be a kind of lapidary comment on the international situation. Formal soberness and repetition further remind on the recurrence of facts heard in the news, as does Ming's use of the technique. This kind of discursive aesthetics and the work's title that has the same function as an inscription, proposes a specific reading to the public: We do not simply look at vanities but at the skulls of all the unknown victims of recent international conflicts.

Model and copy are other important factors in Chinese literati culture. The copy often proposes a new vision or commentary of the model. I wish to conclude with the witty commentary on a Bada Shanren painting. *Landscape with Birds* (2006) is a video realized by Italian artist couple Santomatteo.⁴ It shows the artists mimicking birds in a Bada Shanren painting. The video surprises through visual simplicity and an actual resemblance with its model even though the copy is realized in the contemporary medium video. Even much of Bada's bitter humor is discernible in the contemporary copy. The Italian artist couple grasped the great late Ming, early Qing Dynasty painter's message without difficulty and succeeded in

conveying it to a contemporary public not necessarily familiar with the original's cultural matrix.

There is no Ink?

Ink art and contemporary art, two systems with a distinctive and different cultural matrix? Certainly, but as I tried to show above, two systems at certain points overlapping each other. I think we do not need to bend the object of our investigation to escape from the matrix but should try to alter our perception.

As Hans Belting states, "beyond the West, contemporary art has a very different meaning (...). There it is hailed as a liberation from modernism's heritage and is identified with local art currents of recent origin. In such terms, it offers revolt against both art history, with its Western-based meaning, and against ethnic traditions, which seem like prisons for local culture in a global world.⁵ This means also if we consider ink art merely on the grounds of technique and as a specific category within the field of contemporary art, contemporary art from Chinese artists using this technique would be condemned to remain within the confines of their local culture, and it would never be able to leave the Chinese cultural matrix.

Certainly every system, museum and collection has to take into account its historical and geopolitical situation, yet, instead of inscribing oneself into a movement that still aims at liberating the local culture from modernism's and colonialism's heritage, one could simply opt for an open, let's say anti-historical approach. Every great work of art, no matter what culture, medium and technique precedes and transcends its time. I here wish to mention the concept of world art in comparison to that of global art. The concept of world art represents an early approach of overcoming the dualism between Western and non-Western art, designating works that transcend Western art discourse as well as a mere local significance and are a kind of highlight of "world art heritage"⁶, thus escaping from a local cultural matrix.

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¹ "'85 New Wave" or "'85 Art New Wave" is a Chinese avant-garde movement flourished between 1985 and 1989.

²Brüderlin, Markus, " Beitrag zu einer Ästhetik des Diskursiven. Die ästhetische Sinn- und Erfahrungsstruktur postmoderner Kunst." in:

Stöhr, Jürgen(ed.), *Ästhetische Erfahrung heute*, Köln: Dumont, 1996: pp. 282-307.

³ Yangjiang Group is an artistic group founded in 2002 by artists Zheng Guogu(b.1970), Chen Zaiyan(b.1971) and Sun Qinglin(b.1974) in Yangjiang, China. They often use the unique medium of Chinese calligraphy to develop a diverse contemporary art practices and activities.

⁴ Santomatteo is an art group formed in 2003 by the Italian artists, Santo Tolone (b.1979) and Matteo Mascheroni (b.1979). The group often intervenes through behavioral, interactive and dialectical ways and collaborates with artists from different backgrounds as the goal of their artistic creation.

⁵ Belting, Hans, "Contemporary Art and the Museum in the Global Age", in: *Contemporary Art and the Museum. A Global Perspective*, Peter Weibel/ Andrea Buddensieg (eds.), Hatje Cantz, Ostfildern, 2007: p. 22.

⁶ Ibid. p.33.