

Overlooked Opportunities: Addressing Global Challenges through Cross-Cultural Political and Ecological Digital Art by Reinterpretation of Traditional Eastern Art and Philosophy

Christin Bolewski, Loughborough University, United Kingdom

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Abstract

This paper is informed by a series of digital moving image art works that address current global challenges such as climate change or decline of democracy in an alternative way to word-wide audiences in the East and West by re-investigating and celebrating some values and traditions of Eastern art and culture as an overlooked, rich resource. The research process is practice-based and cross-cultural artefacts are created which are informed by aesthetic and philosophical tradition of Eastern art as well as critical approach of Western contemporary practice. Using digital media technologies idea and materiality of traditional Chinese scrolls of landscape and cityscape are adapted and remediated into animated video scrolls or video paintings. By inclusion of documentary video footage each makes a critical comment on a different subject such as the Tsunami 2011 in Japan or Tianamen Square Events 2009 in Beijing. Adopting Eastern scroll paintings to digital moving image has become quite common for Eastern artists. The body of work presented here was made by a Western artist and therefore engages additionally in translation and interpretation of cultural heritage into different contexts and cultural paradigms. These cross-cultural artefacts act as agents to foster discussion about the nature of global art practice as well as new forms of digital moving image. It results in intermedia practice that provides slow moving, contemplative narrative progression and invites the viewer to reflect on habituated pattern of media reception and to see its contents with ‘fresh eyes’.

Keywords: East Asian Aesthetics, Cross-cultural Remediation, Digital Cinema, Video Painting

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Introduction

This paper seeks to contribute to the conference theme 'Fearful Futures' by presenting a series of digital moving image art works that address current global challenges such as climate change or decline of democracy in an alternative way to word-wide audiences in the East and West by re-investigating and celebrating some values and traditions of Eastern art and culture as an overlooked, rich resource.

After decades, where in the West East Asian ideas have mainly been approached as a kind of 'esoteric' hobby, there is now a growing interest and acceptance that East Asian aesthetics and philosophy has something to offer that could help human civilization to overcome some of its main challenges. In addition to this growing interest from the West, there are also in the East new forms of self-reflection emerging. A claim is made to contribute with own cultural tradition to global developments instead of mainly adopting Western ideas. *Contemporary Aesthetics*, an on-line publication dedicated in 2018 a special volume to *Aesthetic Consciousness in East Asia* (Special Volume 6, 2018) with Eastern scholars articulating that attention needs to be paid to the study of East Asian aesthetics now.

Joosik Min writes: 'Now, in the new century, a more integrated and higher-level aesthetics based on the panhuman perspective is required. In that sense, studies on East Asian aesthetics will have to be more actively conducted. Various challenges of our times need to be solved on the basis of values where the diversity and universality of our culture can coexist, and the Eastern and Western civilizations, nature and humans, and tradition and modernity can have a symbiotic relationship.' (Min 2018, p.1)

The arts practice presented in this article is the outcome of a research process that started in 2008. It stems from similar ideas as articulated by Min, realizing that traditional Eastern aesthetics and philosophy might offer a different perspective for Western mind, and here particularly, to develop other forms of moving image making. It results in the creation of cross-cultural artefacts - informed by Eastern art tradition as well as critical approach of Western contemporary art practice. The practice merges Taoist principles of harmony and coexistence with realities of a global loss of human values in an era of technological exploitation of ourselves and our environments.

Using digital media technologies idea and materiality of traditional Chinese scroll paintings of landscape and cityscape are transformed, adapted and remediated into the time-based format of animated video scrolls or video paintings. Each video painting makes a critical comment on a different subject such as the 2008 Tibetan Unrest, the Tsunami 2011 in Japan or Tianamen Square Events 2009 in Beijing by inclusion of documentary video footage into the content of traditional contemplative Eastern scroll paintings. This results in a hybrid, multilayered stream of diverse image and sound material referencing historical and contemporary still and moving image traditions as well as 3D computer generated imagery. The tradition of Chinese mountain-water (*shanshui*) painting, its compositional features and concepts of multiple perspectives are adapted to what Manovich has described as the 'language' of digital cinema, where 'cinema becomes a particular branch of painting - painting in time' and is basically a form of animation. (Manovich, 1995, p.20) It creates slow moving

contemplative images, which offer reflection on its intermedia form and hybrid content, but also acts as a model for producing awareness of the unification of self with our environments.

Media Saturation, Speed and Slowness

In our contemporary media saturated societies each of us is bombarded with information, images and sounds presented in rapid speed on a daily basis around the clock. We are accustomed to scan information quickly and as soon as we think we grasp the message we decide to move on to the next thing. A lot of recent research reports that our average attention span has decreased down to 8 seconds. When we watch television, we check our mobile phones frequently or change channels, and we lose concentration in meetings or conversations after a few minutes only.

In this flood of information it is difficult to attract and hold the viewers attention to communicate issues that matter. Here, the return to slowness by delivering moving image content that lingers between still and animated image and the unfamiliar compositional aesthetic of East Asian image tradition presented to an audience that is accustomed to conventional language and speed of film and television offers an opportunity to hold the attention for longer periods of time. It invites to calm down from our speedy life and to engage in a more profound and lasting way.

The video painting, an emerging genre in contemporary global art practice, uses modern high resolution video format and wall-mounted LCD flat screen display. It adapts content of still image tradition such as painting or photography and translates narrative pictorial structure to the time-based format.

Its main features are commonly described as:

- Strong reduction of movement or slow subject speed to facilitate contemplation
- Use of long term, single shot life action recordings with static camera position (aiming for transparent immediacy) or
- Multilayered complex image content based on spatial montage / digital collage with
- Seamless slow image transitions, reduced sequential editing and hard video cuts
- A mainly visual experience with reduced or no sound track

The Animated Contemplative Video Scroll

There are a number of contemporary Eastern Artists who explore the potential of video painting for reworking content and form of their painting tradition as contemplative video scroll. Art historian and sinologist Birgit Hopfener concludes that Chinese painting tradition is an important source of inspiration for Chinese video artists as China does not have a rich film history to offer. (Hopfener, 2012) This observation could explain this phenomenon, but is probably not the only reason. Under close examination, particularly content and form of traditional Eastern scroll painting are suitable candidates for adaptation to animated video painting. It is its emphasis on temporality (when unrolling the scroll and through the use of multiple perspectives integrated into one painting), as well as the contemplative content and

the overall openness and suggestiveness of Eastern art and culture, that assembles well with the ambient nature of video painting.

A prominent example is South Korean artist Lee Lee Nam who uses digital technology and LED monitors to animate and present his interpretation of traditional Asian sceneries. ‘This use creates a striking duality between both traditional and modern image of Asia, fitting perfectly with contemporary issues of globalization. This treatment by the artist appears like a positive message of hope: traditional and precious heritage continues to live through inventions of the XXI century. Those screens and modern technique do not delete and replace cultural heritage but rather support it, giving it a new light.’ (Ode To Art Gallery, 2018)

Most of Nam’s work sets the visual components of traditional landscape painting into motion: snowflakes or raindrops are falling down; mist drifts slowly through landscapes; water floats through rivers. Often the work is accompanied by supportive ambient natural soundtrack. In similar ways animates *River of Wisdom* presented at *World Expo Shanghai 2010 China Pavilion* the static content of an old Eastern masterpiece. The 128 x 6,5m projection using 12 seamless arranged projectors is a digital remake of one of the most cited and reworked traditional Chinese paintings *Along the River During the Qingming Festival* (original size: 26 cm x 5,25 m) by the Song dynasty artist Zhang Zeduan (1085–1145). It captures the daily life of people and the landscape of the old capital Bianjing.

Cross-Cultural Approaches: Reinterpreting Shanshui Painting as Video Painting

Whereas these two examples of Eastern digital video scrolls are mainly concerned with animating its narrative content, the artwork in this study expands beyond this approach. It fuses the original meditative content of Eastern art tradition grounded in Buddhist and Taoist philosophy with criticality of contemporary Western art practice. It incorporates documentary video footage into the traditional sceneries to make a contemporary and critical comment on its original content and values. These are in contrast to today’s environmental and political challenges in the West and East alike and seem to have lost its relevance for Eastern and Western society alike.



Figure 1: video still from 'horizontal video scroll' *mountain-water-painting* © Christin Bolewski 2009; 6,12 min, HD video presented on horizontal mounted flat screen display

David Adam Brubaker writes in his article *The Private Character of Natural Beauty: Shanshui Painting as a Model for Unity of Self and Nature*: 'Given concerns now about ecological imbalance, we have an urgent need to revitalize the appreciation of natural environment so that nature is no longer perceived materially as a set of objects of relative worth to be used and exploited. One way forward is to develop an aesthetics of environment that explains how a particular human being acquires an awareness of self as inseparable from nature, where the difference or distance between human interiority and objective environment is dissolved.' (Brubaker, 2018)

For a Western filmmaker, there is an additional inspiration next to Brubaker's argument to investigate contemporary ecological issues with reference to Shanshui Painting. It can be found in Western art history in the writings of Avantgarde filmmaker and film theorist Sergej Eisenstein who declared the Chinese hand scroll as the first moving image. He was inspired by the commonality between Chinese hand scrolls and the medium film in the development of his theory of film montage early in the 20th century. He discovered cinematic elements in the multi perspective composition of Chinese hanging and hand scrolls that fused in his mind a combined image of close-ups and composition in depth. (Eisenstein and Leda, 1969)

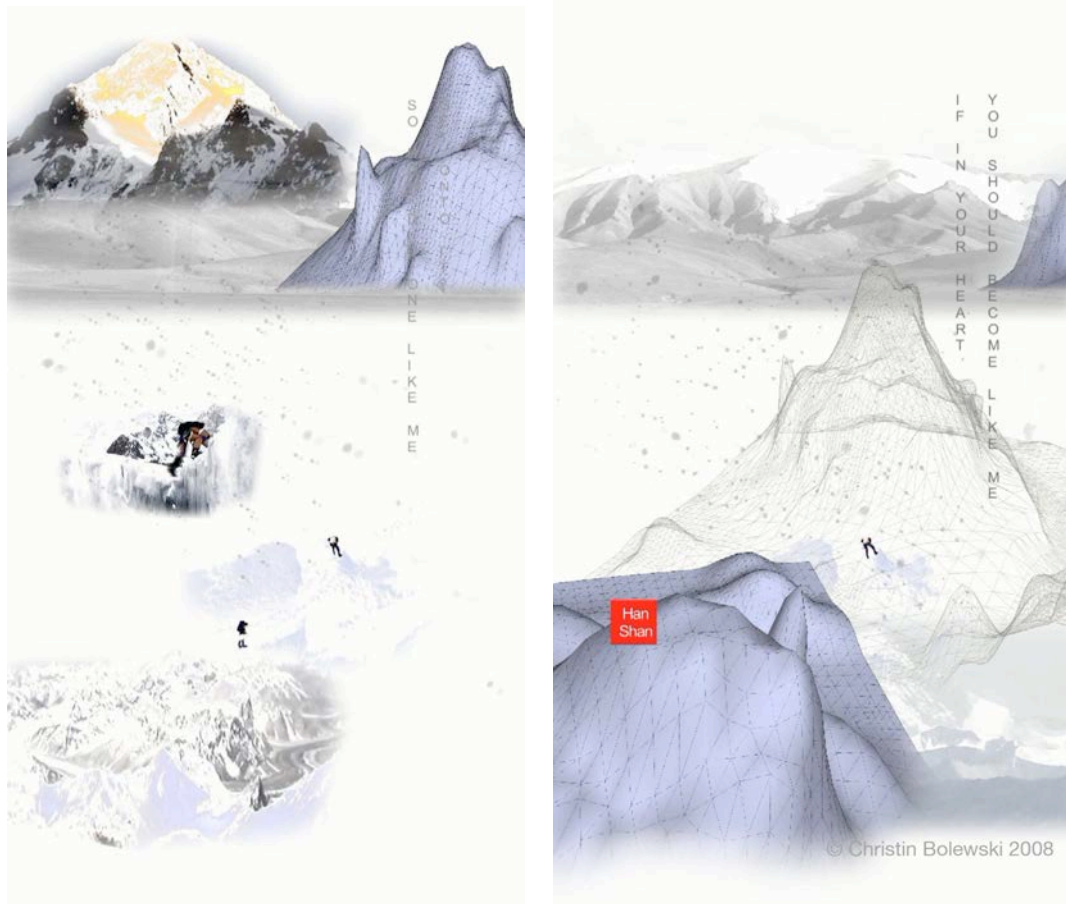


Figure 2 + 3: video stills from ‘vertical video scroll’ *Shan-Shui-Hua* © Christin Bolewski 2008; 15,19 min, HD video presented on vertical mounted flat screen

Figures 1-3 show video stills from the first two video paintings created in this research project. These practical outputs revisit Eisenstein’s observation that the Eastern scroll can be seen as kind of ‘moving image’. It translates content, aesthetic and compositional features of traditional Chinese landscape painting (vertical hanging scroll and horizontal hand scroll) into vertically and horizontally animated video scrolls by developing a unique concept of mainly ‘spatial montage’.

Chinese landscapes often include small human figures that blend harmoniously into the vast world around them. It is often a pilgrim who can be seen repeatedly at different locations in the landscape. With him, the viewer ‘travels in mind’ through the landscape. The animated video scroll transposes this symbiotic relationship into a different, 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 counterpointing Eastern and Western ideals.

Montage of Conflict: Eisenstein’s Concepts of Counterpoint

To make a critical comment about ecological imbalance and our current relationship to nature the artwork makes use of the concept of *intellectual montage* and *counterpoint* with reference to Eisenstein’s montage theory. The concept of

counterpoint stems from Western music theory and is a mediation of two or more equally important musical lines into a meaningful whole, in which they both maintain their independence and fuse together into consonant simultaneities. Eisenstein adapted this idea to film theory and proposed *montage of conflict* as an important tool for creating new meaning that emerges from collision of ideas – from two pieces in opposition from each other. To create what Eisenstein calls ‘consonant simultaneities’ the video scroll incorporates contemporary documentary video footage of mountaineers and traditional Chinese poetry into the traditional scenery, which contents contradict each other. The text inserts deliver quotes from the famous Chinese poet Han Shan (from the Chinese Tang Dynasty) and is placed in accordance with Eastern tradition in vertical direction. Its content acts as a reflection on the Western mountaineers fight against nature contradicting the Chinese attempt of spiritual harmony expressed in the poem.

Eastern Multiple Perspective and Digital Spatial Montage – A Logic of Co-Existence

With respect to how conventions of cinematic montage can be adapted to these cross-cultural video paintings the body of work investigates how temporality, space and (multi)-perspective is used in traditional Eastern visual art and relates this to modern digital film practice and 2D/3D computer animation. Texts of Jan Kricke on influence and use of traditional Eastern systems of visual perspective in current digital 3D computer visualization (Krikke, 2004) or Erwin Panowsky’s *Perspective as Symbolic Form* (1991) have informed the referential framework and conceptual approach to the making of these video paintings: The Eastern concept of shifting perspective *San Dian Tou Shi*, multi-perspective *San-e-ho* and the endless paper scroll format are explored simultaneously through digital animation, collage and compositing. Using numerous visual aesthetics including virtual camera and digital particle systems, documentary video footage and a variety of still image sources together creates a hybrid media practice that applies no sequential editing and no hard video cuts. Instead it uses mainly the concept of *spatial montage* - a key feature that Manovich (1995) has identified for *digital cinema*.

In *digital cinema* the sequential mode of traditional montage, usually an assembly line of shots, which appear on the screen one at a time, is replaced by a spatial one where within the screen a multitude of separate image components exist within a single space. It ‘offers an opportunity to move away from "a logic of replacement" towards "a logic of addition and co-existence" (Manovich, 2001, p.325) Spatial montage involves various images of various size and proportion appearing at the same time on one screen. This is essentially is a key feature of Shanshui painting using *San-e-ho* and *San Dian Tou Shi* that gets unintentionally revisited in a lot of contemporary computer and screen based media work.

The video scrolls are animated from the right to left direction, as one would unroll a traditional hand scroll painting. Additionally soft image transitions fade in and out separate image elements, which make it impossible to divide the film into temporal units. All these elements and different media are weaved together into a continuous flow. The horizontal video scroll allows the placement of separate image components and the unfolding narrative structure to be more in accordance with principles of ‘*San-e-ho*’ and refers stronger to cinematic conventions: It can also be projected in

traditional ways as a slow moving video art film in a cinema, so that its reception and the narrative progression can be compared to what a viewer would expect from cinematic storytelling. The vertical video scroll derived from the hanging scroll focuses more on adaption of 'San Dian Tou Shi' as it allows placement of different shot sizes employing different perspectives more freely on the screen. Its vertical format is quite unconventional for use of moving image practice and more familiar to reception of paintings.



Figure 4: video still from *Shizen?Natural* © Christin Bolewski 2015; 7,16 min, HD video animation presented on wall mounted flat screen display

Figure 4 shows another horizontal video painting titled *Shizen?Natural*. It adapts the Japanese *Makimono* - a set of 4 hanging scrolls which are changed in accordance with the 4 seasons of the year - to a narrative video scroll that makes in 4 seasons or chapters a critical comment on the destruction of our natural environment and the ecological disaster related to the Tsunami in Japan in 2011. With its far reaching effects it did not only had an impact on the Eastern parts of the world and has become a tragic and iconic event in the latest history of mankind. Images are taken again from different sources mixing still images, 2D/3D animation and digital particle systems with documentary video footage from Japanese gardens, Mt. Fuji and Fukushima. The text element presents a poem of the famous Japanese poet *Yamabe no Akahito* celebrating nature and Mount Fuji - one of Japan's holy mountains. The text acts here again as *counterpoint* to the unfolding disaster shown in the narrative progression of the video.

Video Painting and Intermedia Practice

With regard to inclusion of numerous visual aesthetics into these video paintings it can be described as hybrid media practice. But with regard to how video painting, as a new subgenre, references specific elements of the two involved media painting and cinema simultaneously, it is best described as *intermedia* practice. Intermedia work is something that seems to 'fall between media' - where different media are combined and transformed, but remain recognizable in a form of self-reflection. Yvonne

Spielmann writes in *Intermedia in Electronic Images* (2001): 'Formal aspects of different visual media, such as painting, film and electronic media are linked. In particular, those forms of an image that have occurred in one single medium undergo a process of remodeling and reshaping when they are transferred into the context of another visual medium. Transferring results in transformation when the structural elements of both media are made evident and visible in a form that reveals their differences.' (Spielmann 2001, p.60) This is exactly what video painting as a new sub genre in moving image practice does, as it deliberately makes reference to content and form of still and moving image tradition in a self-referential mode where the origins of the two references are kept 'visibly' on purpose and arise as a new concept. The concept of intermedia seems per Spielmann's definition something quite similar as Eisenstein's concept of counterpoint – where out of the collision something new arrives in which the different parts maintain their independence and fuse together into consonant simultaneities.

Theoretical Approach to the Practice: Western Contemporary Critical Art Practice and Theories of Cultural Hybridity

Whereas the East Asian examples discussed above mainly celebrate and set in motion traditions of Eastern art, this body of work adapts and re-interprets the traditional Eastern content and form to create new moving image innovation and to make a statement on the relevance of such traditions and narratives within contemporary context, societies and realities. Both ways of treatment illustrate some main features that are commonly allocated as stereotypes to each culture: The East being more attached to tradition - the West being obsessed by constant innovation, progress and development:

'The tendency of valuing old things and recognizing them as standards is deeply rooted in East Asian cultures, and such old customs seem to be no exception in aesthetics.' (Min 2018, p.2)

Western contemporary critical art practice recognizes its artists to work in a global and culturally diverse environment providing an opportunity to reflect on issues relevant to contemporary societies and the world around us. It puts an emphasis on self-reflection and interrogates its contexts and ways in which it engages with its audiences. It is built on a long history of previous developments of Western art traditions, in which 'the idea of culture as a process of reinterpretation and reusing inherited resources have often been noted in general ways, and emphasized by many recent scholars.' (Irvine, 2016, p.16)

In digital media theory this process of referencing and reinterpretation is described as *Remediation* and refers to the ways in which any new medium is always both a refashioning of an earlier medium and a novelty understood through previous media. 'Remediation did not begin with the introduction of digital media. We can identify the same process throughout the last several hundred years of Western visual representation.' (Bolter and Grusin, 2000, p.11)

Remix studies is a recent field of studies emerging in the West. Martin Irvine concludes in his essay *Remix and the Dialogic Engine of Culture*: 'Any work produced and received in a culture is, necessarily, a materialized symbolic structure

encoding an interpretive dialogic pattern of combinatorial units, meanings, values, and ideas that came from somewhere and are on their way to somewhere else.' (Irvine, 2016, p.31) This analysis of a *remix process* indicates that it is not necessarily important to reflect where the origin of these *combinatorial units* lies - if they stem from the same cultural context or not. And it works quite well with some other scholars' contributions, which recently propose *cultural hybridity* as alternative to comparative models based on East-West dichotomies. Cultural hybridity does not emphasize an imbalance of power of a minority culture against a dominant culture. It rather suggests that cultural exchange can take place between equally strong cultures. Irvine proposes the use of the concept of *rhizome* where hybridization (of media or cultures) can be explained as an association of pre-existing elements arranged in new configurations and contexts.

This model of the rhizome or the cultural hybrid could also work as an alternative to a concept of *cross-cultural remediation* when aiming to categorize the work undertaken in this research process. The concept of *rhizome* seems to make it obsolete to argue for the origins of the separate elements, but at the same time acknowledges that appropriation, remix or remediation are common strategies for any culture to develop further with a number of 'invisible' earlier cross-cultural influences and references included. Frank Vigneron writes in *Hybridization in the Visual Arts: Now You See Me, Now You Don't*: 'A cultural element only stays a hybrid as long as it is seen as such, but its visibility is subject to change.' (Vigneron, 2011, p.30) This comment and the quote from Irvine above both point out that such process of *hybridization* is not only a recent phenomenon, but indeed has taken place throughout the history of mankind with numerous and manifold forms of migration and colonization taking place on our planet and many former cross-cultural influences or hybrid elements being invisible today in each culture.

Cross-Cultural Video Painting and Political Commentary

As part of the research process that investigates the fusion of East Asian aesthetics with digital film making leading into cross-cultural practice or cultural and media hybrid outcomes, two further video paintings were created which use the same media approach and treatment as described above. But instead of making a comment on ecological imbalances, they both make a comment on political issues.



Figure 5: video still from *(No) We, I, Myself and Them?* © Christin Bolewski 2017; 8,55 min, HD video animation presented on wall mounted flat screen display

(No) We, I, Myself and Them? is a video painting that appropriates the ancient Chinese hand scroll of a cityscape *Along the River During the Qingming Festival* which for World Expo 2010 was already remade into an animated digital video scroll. *(No) We, I, Myself and Them?* reinterprets this old master piece again using similar strategies as explained above: Contemporary and historical documentary video footage recorded at Tianamen Square in Beijing including footage of *Tiananmen Square Incidents* in 1989 and excerpts from the poem *Massacre* (1989) of the Chinese author Liao Yiwu are digitally merged into the original painting to create consonant simultaneities and to articulate a critical political statement. This acts as a comment on the unfolding disaster shown in the narrative progression of the video.

The concept of shifting perspective *San Dian Tou Shi* is mainly explored in this work, as the original hand scroll uses multi-perspective *San-e-ho* only within limits and presents most of its compositional elements arranged parallel to the picture plane. Hence the separate image components in this digital work are mainly arranged and animated into right to left scroll direction. Spatial montage and digital collage is again the main process to combine the different image elements.

on global political, social and ecological issues in an alternative way. It uses the intermedia form and content of *video painting* - its ambient character, slowness and the “otherness” of its narrative structure and form of presentation - as a method to raise awareness amongst a global media and information saturated audience. These cross-cultural artefacts act as an agent to foster discussion about the nature of global or cross-cultural art practice as well as new forms of digital moving image making.

Traditional Eastern visual compositional features are adapted to the language of digital cinema: multiple image sources, camera positions and viewpoints are combined into a complex image composition referencing what Manovich has proposed as spatial montage by using its methods of digital collage, video layering, seamless image transitions, reduced sequential editing and hard video cuts, etc. Intellectually, it uses Eisenstein’s concept of counterpoint to combine colliding materials, aesthetics, messages and meanings of old traditions and realities of today into a complex mainly visually driven narrative composition. Taoist principles of wholeness, coexistence and harmony clash with the Western insatiable longing for constant technological progress.

In his essay *Art History as a Global Discipline* Elkins writes in 2006 that art history depends on Western conceptual schemata and concludes ‘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’ (Elkins, 2006, p. 19). He finally comes to the conclusion that ‘globalism means the use of Western forms, ideas, and institutions.’ (Elkins, 2006) This is one voice amongst many others, but demonstrates that perhaps the idea of something ‘global’ a few years ago was seen more critically than today. For example, art historian and sinologist Birgit Hopfener examines how ‘contemporary art is no longer constituted solely through Western narratives and epistemologies of art, but by multiple and entangled histories, knowledge and power structures by historicizing and localizing contemporary art practices and discourses and their transcultural entanglements.’ (Hopfener, 2018)

In returning to the beginning of this text and the quotes from the special volume *Aesthetic Consciousness in East Asia* (2018) it can be anticipated that in near future there will be more research undertaken from the East to articulate its own contributions to global frameworks so that many more cross-cultural influences or hybrid elements will exist in Eastern and Western culture alike.

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Contact email: C.Bolewski@lboro.ac.uk