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Rethinking Through Art:
East and West

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Rethinking Through Art: East and West

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This issue starts from a conviction that globalization is inevitable, and in this process, we journey together. Globalization for East Asia once meant Westernization, or less geographically specific, universal modernization. However, it became apparent that globalization cannot be simply defined in terms of assimilation and univocality, as insoluble disputes and radical differences in all aspects of life still occur and reoccur. Nonetheless, dialogue and interaction have been happening more frequently on a larger scale, even if sometimes concurrently appearing in the form of miscommunication.¹ Scientists question if the flap of a butterfly's wings in Brazil can set off a tornado in Texas while poets contemplate whether one falling leaf of a Chinese parasol informs the change of seasons in the whole world. From Turin to Wuhan, when our living conditions have never been more effectively integrated than they are now, it requires us not only to think more correlatively, but also to understand locality in a larger context from a holistic perspective.

Why art?

Philosophers are often disposed to the universal and the abstract, while we regard art as being a good place to start with our “waying” together. On the one hand, it appears that artistic practices are universally present in every known culture,² often

¹ E.g. fake news, information manipulation and filtering.

² This is a widely held belief in both academic and non-academic discussions. Dennis Dutton (2013: 267-268 and 273) argues that art is “a natural category of human activity and experience”, universally present in all known human cultures. He goes further to state that “it is possible to list the signal characteristics of art considered as a universal, cross-cultural category.” Ellen Dissanayake (2014: 126-127) offers an ethological view that “allows one to approach art as a human universal.” According to her, “by viewing art as a behaviour, the ethological approach – unlike the previously described ap-

leading to the discussion of art in terms of what is essentially human being.³ On the other hand, as a human practice, art seems to be inherently pluralistic – which is salient in the various forms of art, ever-changing artistic styles, endless newly created artworks, etc. It is fair to say that *art is universally human while culturally diverse*. There has been a famous slogan in the Chinese “artworld” that “*minzu de jiu shi shijie de*, 民族的就是世界的, (literally, the ethnic are the global).” With enthusiasm in cross-cultural philosophical investigation, what is more interesting for us in this proposition is not Chinese artists, celebrated strategy of achieving international recognition via an assertion of their ethnic particularity, but rather an implied solution to the tension between particularity and universality. The dilemma between universalism and cultural relativism confronts almost all explorations of cross-cultural issues. Interestingly, even philosophers who approach art as universal to humanity acknowledge the fundamental role of culture in its realization, while philosophers who defend the cultural diversity of artistic practices seldom deny the cross-cultural recognizability of artworks.

Inspired by hermeneutic traditions from the East and the West, notions such as “hermeneutic mechanism” have been promoted in order to dissolve an increasingly detrimental binary mode of thinking that endorses an over-simplistic universalism-relativism dichotomy.⁴ It is no accident that various philosophers of art use language as an analogue of artistic practice. Art, like language, is also a domain where the being-in-each-other nature of particularity (or individuality) and universality is highly visible. The *aboutness* of any artwork emerges from an accessible reality that is meaningful from an interior and spatiotemporally embedded perspective. We suggest that art is always “relationist”. Whatever the

proaches – considers art as a process rather than as an outcome or product of the process, or a feature (such as beauty) of that product... Thinking of art as an evolved – that is, adaptive – characteristic of human nature provides a new set of criteria to apply when considering claims by others about its nature or universality”.

³ For instance, in his article “Art and Human Nature”, Noël Carroll (2014) tries to “defend the plausibility of thinking of art, or, at least, of some art, in terms of human nature” (100). He argues that “culture, art, and human nature... are indissolubly intertwined and will continue to be... human nature may have something to tell us about why art has emerged and taken root crossculturally” (103). Although Stephen Davies (2013) is doubtful about any adaptive function of the arts, he acknowledges that “art gives vivid and powerful expression to these qualities [viz., intelligence, imagination, humor, sociality, emotionality, inventiveness, curiosity], which are central to our human nature and indicate our humanity” (185). He suggests that among the behaviors “[that] are the touchstones of our humanity...art behaviors are central. We are driven to be artists and art appreciators, as is testified by the place accorded to art in every society and epoch. Were we not so impelled, we would be less than fully human” (188).

⁴ For instance, see the article by Ouyang, “From Lloyd’s Analogy to a Proposal of Hermeneutic Mechanism”, in which it is elaborated a notion of “hermeneutic mechanism” inspired by the East and West hermeneutic practice and theory – there Ouyang attempts to overcome the dichotomy between universalism and cultural relativism (Ouyang 2017).

universals in the art are – for instance, disinterested pleasure, significant form, certain human biological make-up, a sort of institute, *Dao*, and so forth – they function and are expressed within a culturally-specific context. For us, relationism is not relativism, as it does not reject universality but regards universality as embodied in a particular way within a particular spatiotemporal context. In the Chinese tradition, distinct forms of arts converge into a common project of embodying the *Dao*, and “*Dao* is not merely the way. *Dao* is the journey – a human on the way. It does not only convey the human situatedness in the world, but also the unfolding context” (Ouyang 2017: 325) In other words, *Dao* is universal in the sense of being universally realizable, which is different from being universal as such, on the premise of context.

Nowadays, when political disagreements often cause heated international disputes and distrust, it is not a detour for us to resume and maintain interaction with other fields that define our human existence. With its advantage in communicating via immersive experience and imagination (often with aesthetic pleasure or emotional responses), would understanding through disagreement and agreement on art provide us with a safety net for cross-cultural engagements? At least, it is safe to say that failing to discern, acknowledge, and understand artistic matters from different cultural traditions can easily stir up antagonism.⁵

Why philosophy of art?

Over the centuries, art has been a prominent form of cultural exchange between the East and the West. This role has become even more prominent in the last three hundred years. Western painting and music introduced by European missionaries shaped the tastes of the Chinese imperial courts since the 17th century. The *Chinoiserie* style inspired by Chinese aesthetics contributed a great deal to the dynamics of the 18th-century European art-world. Japanese *Ukiyo-e* – the art of the “floating world” – was believed to have a significant impact on the Impressionists. It becomes evident that contemporary artists from the East and the West have formed a collaborative community of creativity. While more and more art historians are shifting part of their research interest to the Eastern art traditions – by either looking into them in their own right, or investigating art history in a greater trans-cultural context – many philosophers of art still remain relatively reluctant to either philosophize about art from a cross-cultural perspective, or to try to conceptualize its central issues by drawing on diverse cultural experiences and studies of the non-Western histories of art in general.

⁵ In two photos respectively from The Guardian and BBC about Chinese food for celebrating the 2022 Chinese new year, Chinese funeral items such as joss paper and funeral envelopes are featured to highlight Chinese culture. These insensitive (or hostile, as many believed) considerations have caused outrage from the domestic and overseas Chinese communities.

In the last several decades, the field of philosophy of art and aesthetics in the West has seen many great theoretical achievements, which enable us to think about and create art in a profoundly meaningful way, bringing art closer to “pure” philosophy more than ever.⁶ But when we look closely at these influential philosophical inquiries into art, we find they are, by and large, exclusively inspired and dominated by the European art tradition and engage research materials from very specific origins and times; they often shun potential challenges from non-Western art as well as the historical facts of artistic interaction and the on-going confluence of artistic practice in our age. As the articles collected in this issue show, cross-cultural engagement in philosophizing art and the experience of art is not only productive but also essentially remedial. Here we would like to raise a few more illustrative cases to show how *rethinking through art globally* may enrich and reshape the narratives of “philosophy of art”.

In the philosophy of music, Chinese musical tradition can provide a rich resource for comparative studies that may change its current narrative. For instance, Ji Kang’s (223-263) treatise *Sheng wu ai le lun* 声无哀乐论 (*On the Absence of Sentiments in Music*) has articulated several arguments for what we now would classify as a formalist position against expressional theories of music, much earlier than Eduard Hanslick’s (1825-1904) remarkable endeavour. Also, guqin (translated as Chinese zither or Chinese lute) provides a perfect Eastern example of “absolute music” – or in Peter Kivy’s term, “music alone” – with a developed musical aesthetics that we believe can contribute to the philosophy of music. Looking into the history of guqin music, one witnesses a salient shift in taste from emotional categories to non-emotional (often formalist) categories since the Song dynasties. The 17th-century treatise *Xi shan qin kuang* 溪山琴况 by Xu Qingshan 徐青山 (ca.1580 - ca.1660), arguably the most important writing on the aesthetics of guqin, proposes the idea of “*sheng zhong qiu jing* 声中求静 (seeking quiescence/tranquillity/peace/motionlessness in sound/music)” as one of its core aesthetic criteria,⁷ leading to what we call a “supra-musicology”.⁸ Guqin aesthetics seems to “participate” in the evolution of musical

⁶ For more details on this point cfr. Andina and Onnis (2019).

⁷ The first four criteria proposed by Xu Qingshan are harmony, tranquility, purity and profundity, which are not expressive but formal categories, recording a departure from traditional Chinese musicology characterized by expressive theories.

⁸ For a detailed argument, see Xiao Ouyang’s (2021) “试以朱熹心性论思想解析<溪山琴况> ‘声中求静’ 琴乐美学命题. Ouyang proposes a Neo-Confucian perspective of understanding this change of guqin aesthetics. He first argues that the notion *zhong* 中 (inner/center/middle) in “*jing you zhong chu* 静由中出” from the *Xi shan qin kuang* actually refers to the Neo-Confucian concept of the “yet to sprout” state of mind, which Zhu Xi mentions in saying: “the state when feelings such as anger, sorrow and joy are yet to sprout is called *zhong*”. Secondly, he points out that the significance of the proposition “*sheng zhong qiu jing*” then lies in its seeking an experience of the “yet-to-sprout” state of mind. Xu Qingshan’s aesthetics resonates with the earlier Neo-Confucian philosopher Zhou Dunyi’s 周敦颐 endorsement of subtle or light music for the

theorization seen in the West tradition and similarly function as avant-garde like Western classical music in its challenge of traditional definitions of art.⁹ Scholars also find “the great divide” phenomenon in the Chinese musical tradition facilitated by the development of guqin aesthetics (Peng 2021).

Arthur Danto, one of the most influential philosophers of art in the second half of the 20th century, proposed the thesis of the “end of art”, taking the idea, as is well known, from Hegel.¹⁰ This thesis has been debated all over the world, because it predicts the end of one of the oldest and, after all, most beloved human practices. However, it is important to note that the thesis of the end of art in Danto’s sense is only really plausible when it concerns Western art history, which is interpreted by Danto in terms of a linear or progressive pattern. Not only that: it also seems limited to the visual arts and hardly applicable - despite what Danto believed - to some other art forms such as literature or music. The “end of art” thesis thus seems rather problematic when read in a broader cross-cultural context. For instance, the history of Chinese painting may present a severe challenge to this thesis as it challenges Danto’s premise that “art is the business of perceptual equivalence” and consequently seems not to fit into the “linear or progressive model of art history”. From the very beginning, Chinese painting did not follow the theory of similarity.¹¹ Chinese art history, if it exists at all, is therefore likely to have undergone a different evolutionary process and can therefore be used to supplement the claims made on the basis of Western arts.

sake of inner calmness. However, in contrast to the Daoist and Buddhist proposal of spiritual tranquility, the Confucian project of self-cultivation via music ultimately has a practical concern. It orients musical practice, not toward a spiritual or metaphysical realm separate from the earthly world and human domain. Thirdly, the anti-musical appearance of Xu’s guqin aesthetics is better classified as a supra-musicology. It advocates for an innovative role for music in Confucian moral self-cultivation based on what music can do uniquely. In brief, holding that *jing* or tranquillity is one of the highest aesthetic criteria of guqin is not necessarily a product of Daoist or Buddhist influence request, but a coherent Neo-Confucian corollary.

⁹ Peter Kivy (1997: 6) argues that the rise of absolute music can be regarded as “*the* avant-garde art of the age of Enlightenment”, as it challenges the traditional understanding of fine arts in terms of mimesis.

¹⁰ “The end of art” does not point to the lack of or cessation of art, but that there is no progress of art, namely “there can be change without development”. (Danto 1986: 85) Danto argues that “it supposes that its own philosophy is what art aims at, so that art fulfills its destiny by becoming philosophy at last.” (*ibidem*: 81) “Art ends with the advent of its own philosophy”. (*ibidem*: 107).

¹¹ Ning Xiaomeng (forthcoming) points out, “it is worth noting that the most striking feature of Chinese literati painting lies in its non-representational characteristic. In the tradition of Chinese painting, the works aiming at live depicting are usually ascribed to the catalogue of graphics other than artworks of painting... [according to 5th century critic Wang Wei (王微)], if one only seeks to record the appearance accurately, then he will precisely miss the essence of painting. It is because the painting is not exactly a similitude that it got its own name of painting rather than a mere image of something”.

Danto's methodological approach is entirely aimed at separating the philosophy of art from aesthetics and bringing philosophical problems related to the arts into the realm of the philosophy of art. In order to realise this project, Danto used a theory of perception of a fodoric kind, which today's studies have indicated as highly problematic. This obviously implies, as a consequence, that Danto's philosophy of art should be updated by referring to scientifically better founded theories of perception, if this is really possible. However, in spite of these limitations, the basic idea sustained by Danto – namely that it is necessary to rethink the ontology of art in the light of what has been done during the twentieth century – remains decisive.

Just as decisive seems to be another aspect, namely the need to return to developing philosophical reflection on art in a theoretical and cultural context of that which traditionally belongs to analytical philosophy. Art – as Danto himself often noted in his capacity as critic – belongs to the complex of human practices and there is no real sense in attempting to read it outside of this context.¹² Through art, we express ideas and emotions, we build memories, we imagine stretches of the future, we relate to different cultures, we are prepared to listen, to dialogue, sometimes to conflict. Through the arts we transfigure the banal, we imagine and construct the political dimension. If this is the case, understanding the logical and linguistic dimension underlying artistic creation is one of the indispensable aspects of the philosopher's work, but certainly not the only one. In order to understand this, we can look at two philosophers who have been important to the European tradition insofar as the richness of their reflection may allow for further research, especially within the European and Chinese traditions. We refer to Gianbattista Vico and Benedetto Croce, the latter, above all, well known within the Chinese philosophical scene. In China, “*Meixue Yuanli* 美学原理 (literally, the principles of aesthetics)” is a standard course for many universities, while the name of the course itself is alleged to come from the Chinese translation of Benedetto Croce's *Estetica* (1902) by Zhu Guangqian, first published in 1947 in the name of *Meixue Yuanli* 美学原理. The introduction of Benedetto Croce's aesthetics since the mid 20th century has been well integrated with the establishment of this sub-discipline of philosophy in China, with his expressivism particularly resonating with traditional Chinese reflections on art.

Vico's contribution¹³ could also be significant since the Neapolitan philosopher identifies a natural and innate tendency of human beings to create art. In his perspective, art is essentially fantasy and feeling; as such, it represents a primary need of the human soul that does not necessarily depend either on cultural variables or on the ability to rationalise and logicalise our experience of the world. When he reflects on art, Vico also reflects on the history of peoples. In this way, he distinguishes two forms of wisdom: poetic, unreasoned wisdom and reasoned or philosophical wisdom. These two forms of wisdom correspond to three natures: the first two barbaric, the

¹² For more detailed considerations on this point, see Andina 2011.

¹³ Vico 1744.

third civil or human. Poetic sapeinza is the place of fantasy, reasoned sapeinza is the domain of reflection and reasoning. Man first “felt” human problems and exposed them with fantastic images, and then understood and organised them through the intellect. In Vico’s idea, poetry and philosophy divide their tasks somewhat: philosophy deals with the universal, while poetry deals with the particular or the individual. The first understanding of the world is then due to poetry, which creates its own metaphysics and logic: the fantastic world is born as a true world, in some ways no less true than the world of reflection. Poetry is the first true because it creates fantastic images without the poet, as a mere poet, seeing that they are fantastic.

This is a connection that brings the reflections on the arts back to the question of the articulation of human knowledge and that makes the poetic and the imagination a fundamental step in understanding the ways in which people – at every latitude – would structure their relationship with the outside world. In this sense, before becoming related to ontology, aesthetics has to do with the fantastic and poetic modes of human knowledge.

In a larger discourse on aesthetics, we find more and more scholars from the East and the West have joined forces to create new research trends. For instance, *shenghuo meixue* and everyday aesthetics, despite their disparity,¹⁴ are often seen as forming the same movement in contemporary aesthetics concurrently happening in the East and the West.¹⁵ As philosophers with interest in more integrated narratives and cultivating a communicating global and diverse research community, we feel the call to reopen a ground for rethinking some fundamental philosophical questions about art within a cross-cultural context. Art matters, and we ought to think about it globally. “Unless you pile up little steps, you can never journey a thousand *li*; unless you pile up tiny streams, you can never make a river or a sea.”¹⁶ There is still a long way to go before establishing any real global narratives of philosophies of arts. This issue of the RdE presents a little step on behalf of us and our colleagues, but we believe that “*de bu gu, bi you ling* 德不孤，必有邻 (she who possess *de* [virtue, virtuosity, efficacy] is not left to stand alone, and there must be her companies).”¹⁷ On the way towards forming more culturally diverse as well as integrated accounts of human experience, and cultivating a flourishing and future-oriented global community, we are not alone!

¹⁴ See Xiao Ouyang 2022, forthcoming. Ouyang argues that the differences between *shenghuo meixue* and everyday aesthetics can be observed from the critical reflection on everydayness, the recognition of negative aesthetic qualities and experience, and the expectation of defamiliarisation.

¹⁵ Ouyang (2022 forthcoming) argues that “despite the initial bifurcation between *shenghuo meixue* and everyday aesthetics, we find meaningful convergence, as seen in the resonance between Liu Yue’s and Thomas Leddy’s phenomenological approaches and their methods of defamiliarisation, or my elaboration of the Neo-Confucian *gewu* to join Yuriko Saito’s rank in promoting ‘experiencing the ordinary as ordinary’”.

¹⁶ *Xunzi*, “Chapter One: Quanxue”.

¹⁷ *Analects*, 4.25. My own translation.

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