

Editorial

Toward a theory of the intercultural

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In memory of Alice Yang, 1961–1997¹

If the word “intercultural” is resonant in general discussion, it is surely at the price of resonating in very different ways. Within the specialized field of art history, it has no established usage as far as I know, although this is in part simply because it is little used. The lack of a widely accepted definition may appear to be a handicap, but for some purposes, it makes the term “intercultural” all the more attractive and useful, offering a flexibility and openness that are appropriate to the different situations the term evokes. Three definitions can be contrasted from an art-historical perspective: (1) contact between cultures, (2) what happens in the interstitial space between cultures, and (3) the constitutively hybrid nature of any given culture. I use the word “culture” in a broad sense, to include not only ethnic or political definitions, but also regional ones, all of these (and others) intersecting in various ways.

The cultural dynamic

Even as an initial schematic formulation, this tripartite definition of the intercultural is problematic, for a reason that has recently been well articulated by the anthropologist Arjun Appadurai in a different context—that “*culture* as a noun seems to carry associations with some sort of substance in ways that appear to conceal more than they reveal.” Appadurai prefers, as do I, the adjective “cultural”—in his words, “*cultural* the adjective moves one into a realm of differences, contrasts, and comparisons that is more helpful.” Less convincing is Appadurai’s attempt to associate the cultural specifically with the mobilization of group identities.² Implicit in this

is a willingness to jettison the internal structure of cultural practices as a necessary component of the definition of the cultural, which one finds equally in an aesthetically tin-eared dimension of the sociology of Pierre Bourdieu.³ In contemporary studies of Chinese art, a related approach, leading again to an artificial leveling of the constituent differences among cultural practices, is part of the larger cultural-studies reaction against art history, represented with greatest eloquence by the stimulating work of Craig Clunas.⁴ But those constituent differences are a large part of what has traditionally given art history its *raison d’être* as a discipline, and if art history has anything at all to teach us, it is that these differences cannot be wished away. Let me suggest, then, that it might be more plausible (and more fruitful for the study of artmaking) to modify Appadurai’s formulation and define the cultural as the dynamic that exists between, on the one hand, the mobilization of group identities and, on the other, the internally differentiated formal structure of cultural practices with their self-consciously maintained professional and craft traditions.⁵

The evocation of “culture” in the preliminary definition of the intercultural offered above should thus be understood as a reification and “fixing” of this dynamic, at once in historical practice and in our own analytic representation of what happened in history. In this sense, my tripartite formulation, while it is not exactly wrong, is certainly inadequate to define the fluidity of the intercultural as a practice and as a concept. Before trying to move toward a more sophisticated formulation, however, there is much that

1. The issues discussed in this editorial lie at the heart of the work of my friend Alice Yang, art critic, curator, and art historian, a selection of whose writings are published under the title *Why Asia? Contemporary Asian and Asian American Art* (New York: New York University Press, 1998). At the time of her death, she was embarking on a Ph.D. dissertation that was to explore the idea of the intercultural in the work of certain twentieth-century Chinese artists, and she would doubtless have been a contributor to this special issue of *RES*.

2. Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), pp. 12–13.

3. This is well illustrated by Bourdieu’s stimulating essays in *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993).

4. Craig Clunas, *Superfluous Things: Material Culture and Social Status in Early Modern China* (Urbana, University of Illinois Press, 1991); *Fruitful Sites: Garden Culture in Ming Dynasty China* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996); *Pictures and Visuality in Early Modern China* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997); *Art in China* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

5. For a related argument in the context of the cultural studies debate in art history, see the comments by Thomas Crow in *October* 77 (Summer 1996):34–36.

can be done with this initial one to map out a fruitful analytical terrain. The three contrasting types of art historical occurrences that it evokes are interrelated, and from one point of view might be considered to be different moments of a single larger process, or alternatively as shifting comings-into-focus of the parts of a larger field. Their differences are concrete differences in cultural practice that, for the art historian, highlight different kinds of artwork and context.

Intercultural space⁶

Thus *contact between cultures* always brings us back to the geographical transfer of makers, objects, or images. These last two have to be distinguished, since images (whether in three dimensions or two) can also travel, sometimes very effectively, through the medium of copies. To this list can be added technologies, but since the transmission of an artistic technology usually requires the physical transfer of either a maker or an object, it tends to represent a "secondary" case. It is no doubt true that no such transfer of maker, object, or image leaves that which is transferred untransformed, if only by the effects of the recontextualization on the reception of artworks. Nonetheless, the fundamental fact of the transfer can equally never be totally dissolved and is often crucial. The portable object arrived from afar, the memory over vast distances of an initial image never directly seen—these two recurrent phenomena, which are, for example, fundamental to the evolving matrix of Buddhist art in Asia, never cease to be capable of immensely powerful effects on people's imagination.

In attending to contact between cultures, art historians often call upon an established set of concepts and categories. Among the former is the concept of influence, about which John Hay notes, in his reconsideration of the question of influence in this volume: "A conventional model of influence implies, first, the reification of influence, like a ball on a snooker table, and second, a definition of a critical boundary between a cultural inside

and outside." As exemplified by James Cahill's now-classic discussion in *The Compelling Image* of Chinese painters' responses to Western pictorial imagery⁷ the conventional model of influence tends to lead to a focus on the identification of sources and borrowings, to the exclusion of epistemic shocks to the system that are harder to pin down but may ultimately be more far-reaching. Equally important in the art historian's lexicon is exoticism, which tends to be understood as the expression of an inherently limited interest in the outside world that stops Chinese culture from drawing the full consequences of transfers, as if adaptation means a missed opportunity.⁸ One might, on the other hand, interpret exoticism more dynamically as a mechanism regulating the fear and desire associated with awareness of the foreign (fear of difference, desire to know). Alongside such concepts, the problematic of culture contact has its own associated art-historical categories. Thus, for example, the enormous amount of art and more broadly material culture produced under the patronage of foreign communities on "Chinese" territory raises particular questions that are usually distorted by reliance on the Sinicization narrative as an interpretative prism. The great casualty of the Sinicization hypothesis has been all those transplanted, minimally adapted foreign practices (an example would be the Buddhist sculpture in the fifth-century caves at Yungang) that one might otherwise be able to see as participating in a larger juxtaposition of foreign and Chinese practices on "Chinese" soil, but that the Sinicization narrative incorporates into a teleology of acculturation.⁹ Similar questions are raised by so-called export art, a category of material culture that is usually understood in terms of the adaptation of Chinese producers to the foreign market. As such, being seen as a form of self-exoticization, it tends to be excluded from the history of Chinese art proper; yet its identification with the foreign market alone is little more than an unexamined assumption, just as its role as a conduit for the entry into China of foreign ideas has barely been researched.

7. James Cahill, *The Compelling Image: Nature and Style in Seventeenth-Century Chinese Painting* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982).

8. Thus Pirazzoli-t'Serstevens writes: "L'attitude chinoise traditionnelle face aux produits étrangers, et plus largement à l'exotisme, qui associe un intérêt superficiel à une indifférence de fond, mériterait à elle seule d'être étudiée" (see note 6, p. 29).

9. See, for example, Alexander C. Soper's highly influential article, "Northern Liang and Northern Wei in Kansu," *Artibus Asiae* 21, no. 2 (1958):131.

6. Many of the issues discussed in this section are also examined in an important article by Michèle Pirazzoli-t'Serstevens, "Pour une archéologie des échanges. Apports étrangers en Chine—transmission, réception, assimilation," *Arts Asiatiques* 49 (1994):21–33. The essay offers a multitude of methodological insights and specific documented examples within an overall view of the question that differs from the one presented here, not only by its less speculatively theoretical character but also, it seems fair to say, by a greater attachment to notions of a coherent Chinese world view, attitude, and tradition.

In contrast to the transfer-related issues associated with contact between cultures, the question of what happens in *the space between cultures* highlights the syncretic coexistence of elements from different cultural traditions within an artistic practice or artwork. But this syncretism can operate in many different ways. In some cases, it is defined by the ad hoc character of the relations established among culturally autonomous elements, these relations growing organically out of the population "mix" of the place in question and its place within a long-distance travel network. Much of the art produced in the commercial and religious centers along the Silk Routes—at least at those moments when Chinese or Tibetan imperialism was not in control—fits this description. But at the opposite pole, there are those many situations in Chinese history where power, including the power to set the cultural agenda, was in the hands of a displaced alien group, and artistic syncretism served an ideological purpose corresponding to the need to unify a disparate polity. The art of the Manchu Qing court is only one recent and particularly ambitious example of the political exploitation of an ensemble of practices that drains the relations between cultures of their dynamism in favor of stability and order. In yet other cases, syncretism is a function of a particular kind of liminality: China's successive windows on the world, which have always also been windows on China (most recently Canton, Shanghai, and Hong Kong) are the most striking examples of transitional spaces within which cultural syncretism is embodied in the dynamic form of artistic commodities.

Art history conventionally reifies the syncretisms that occur in the spaces between cultures, producing categories that effectively separate out syncretic practices as the embodiments of a boundary between inside and outside, in the process reaffirming the inside-outside model. The issue is essentially the same whether one is dealing with border cultures (such as the Liao state in the northeast or the Dali kingdom in the southwest) or with the post-Han trade-route cultures of the northwest; with the cosmopolitan microcultures of court and port under the Qing dynasty or with contemporary transnational artists.¹⁰ But as such bodies of material increasingly attract archaeological and art historical attention, they threaten to put in question the

inside/outside model itself, since the strength of the claims they make on both sides makes it difficult to view them statically as defining a specific cultural space. One might more convincingly characterize such syncretisms as fundamentally relational, in the sense that their internal logic is defined by the dynamic relations they establish among culturally "autonomous" elements.

The first two types of art historical occurrences evoked by the term "intercultural" conventionally suggest a view of cultures as internally coherent systems that can come into contact with each other but also unravel at their edges. As I have suggested, this view is not without its problems; moreover, it is contradicted by the third type of occurrence, which speaks to *the constitutively hybrid character of the cultural systems themselves*. There are questions of viewpoint and power at issue here. Under certain conditions, the heterogeneity or openness of a cultural system is eclipsed by an effect of coherence. This is particularly the case when geographically widely separated cultures come into contact with each other through diplomacy, or when the system is seen from the standpoint of the marginalized (always remembering that the imperially marginal can be locally dominant)—one thinks here of artistic responses in the outer provinces of the empire to metropolitan artmaking. A further important issue, especially relevant to China, concerns mechanisms of hybridity as they operate within a cultural system associated with claims of transdynastic continuity in the same approximate geographical territory. For here—especially in the realm of dynastic style—syncretism often gives way to synthesis, and so to the playing out in art of relations of cultural power: the foreign is exoticized, domesticated.

Synthesis and coherence have proved particularly attractive to art historians in their efforts to define the most essentially Chinese aspects of a culturally diverse heritage—efforts that today appear misguided. Leaving aside the obvious general problems attached to an essentializing view of China, it is perhaps more important to consider what is left out of consideration in such analyses even when they appear to be on most secure ground. Thus the "pure" Chinese element that art

art practices, adopts Homi Bhabha's concept of a "third space" (see Hou Hanru and Gao Minglu, "Strategies of Survival in the Third Space: A Conversation on the Situation of Overseas Chinese Artists in the 1990s," in *Inside Out: New Chinese Art*, ed. Gao Minglu [Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1998], pp. 183–189).

10. Thus, for the first case cited here, Pirazzoli-t-Serstevens cites Karl Wittfogel and Feng Chia-sheng's notion of a "third culture" (see note 6, p. 28) while the art critic Gao Minglu, writing on transnational

historians often highlight in the reworkings and adaptations of foreign elements (for example in the so-called Tang International style) is only identifiable by means of its abstraction from a larger context, denying the symbiosis that produces this "purity" as an effect. Equally, even apparently "pure" Chinese styles are rarely, if ever, innocently such and may more reasonably be seen as self-conscious constructions that incorporate an unspoken rejection, and thus acknowledgment, of the foreign. I offer three examples. The style of Buddhist icon developed in the fourth century under the Southern dynasties, which later had great influence in the north as well, replacing Inner Asian models, is closely associated with the name of Dai Kui (d. 396). It is said that Dai Kui specifically set out to create a new visualization of the Buddha to suit Chinese taste.¹¹ Song landscape painting takes on its full significance only as the result of an inward cultural turn that implies a rejection of the most visibly foreign elements of the Tang heritage, and a superior claim to cultural legitimacy over the contemporary Liao, Xi Xia, and Jin dynasties. Finally, the rhetoric of tradition that characterizes twentieth-century expressionistic (*xieyi*) ink painting, termed "national painting" for much of the century in China and often called "traditional" in the West, is the product of an urban environment in which cultural hybridity is perceived as leading to the erosion of Chineseness.

The intercultural as an operation of displacement

Enough has already been said, perhaps, to show that even in this limited formulation as a kind of *space*, ultimately wedded to a substantialist concept of culture, the intercultural is a useful and flexible concept that can be the starting point for a rather fine separation of art-historical occurrences. To go further requires a significant shift of viewpoint and assumptions. We would need (the conditional being the only appropriate tense) to move away from the unspoken assumption that art is essentially a special form of directed communication. In the areas of artistic practice to which the intercultural is especially relevant, this assumption, already powerfully operative within art history, is

reinforced by the tempting reference point that anthropology, with its drive to decipher the codes of the Other, affords to the art historian. But there is at least one alternative that would register the intercultural in a very different way; as it happens, it is to be found in the extreme Eurocentric formalism of Yve-Alain Bois and Rosalind Krauss, which links up with psychoanalysis and philosophy. Geared to practices rather than structures, to the psycho-physical rather than the discursive, their recent work on the "formless" highlights the artwork's status as a visual and material "utterance," independent of its message-bearing capacity. No other approach available to us allows a better possibility of seizing the intercultural on the wing, so to speak—in their terms, as an *operation*.¹²

The concept of an operation so brilliantly exploited by Bois and Krauss for contemporary artmaking derives from Bataille's work, where it designates a movement of slippage between categories, making it possible to seize a given practice in its character as movement, or event. The artwork, in particular, becomes analyzable as something close to an utterance without specific object, thus escaping its customary art-historical reduction to a specialized form of directed communication. Beneath the transitive *pavés*, the intransitive *plage*: across one specific operation, named by them as the *informe*, or formless, Bois and Krauss demonstrate that modernism's formalism—self-referential, unified, tied (agonistically or otherwise) to language—has obscured the existence of something no less important. This they sketch out as a practice of slippage disappointing all expectations of form and content, and speaking directly to the body. By their critical practice and by the analytic field they thus bring into existence, Bois and Krauss confirm twice over the indispensable role of formalism in modern culture.¹³

Approached in an analogous way, the intercultural can be defined as an operation of *displacement*. This idea makes it possible to focus on the interstice between frames of geocultural or ethnocultural reference at whatever level, which I would propose to seize as a movement or slippage between frames of intrinsic value and interest. In different theoretical

11. See *Some T'ang and Pre-T'ang Texts on Chinese Painting*, trans. William B. R. Acker (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1954), vol. 2, p. 49, for Zhang Yanyuan's mid-ninth-century *Lidai minghua ji* account.

12. Yve-Alain Bois and Rosalind E. Krauss, *Formless: A User's Guide* (New York: Zone Books, 1997), especially Yve-Alain Bois's introductory essay, "The Use Value of 'Formless.'"

13. For Michel Foucault's insightful remarks on the importance of formalism in modern culture, see *Dits et écrits, 1954–1988*. Vol. 4, 1980–1988 (Paris: Gallimard, 1994).

terms, one might speak of the mobilization of a latent nomadic energy in a constant acknowledgment of otherness, even within seemingly fixed structures. At issue here is the special kind of desire that makes us want to leave, to be elsewhere, to be culturally other than we are. If an argument can be made for the existence of the displacement operation in art over a period of millennia rather than just in a context of modernity, it has to be with the proviso that through much of history it operated within and, in a sense, beneath the intercultural space of artmaking as a hidden dimension of the artwork. The operation of displacement has to be excavated to become visible, through an effort to see the artwork as event rather than object, embodying and catalyzing a desire. However, over the long-term history of modernity (since the sixteenth century), in China as much as in the Euro-American world, its significance has shifted in line with a reflexive awareness. Displacement has become a more explicit, declared operation, resulting now in contemporary transnational practices of artmaking that often completely identify themselves with it. In our disappearing twentieth century, displacement has become central to artmaking in different parts of the world, suggesting that a recognition of its long-standing role in modernity worldwide may be a helpful antidote to the temptation to use the *informe* as the latest "proof" of the primacy of Euro-American modernity in art.

Intercultural China

Despite its omnipresence in the preceding discussion, for me now, at the end, to introduce "China" directly into the argument is much like dropping a boulder into a pond. There is a fundamental intractability in the massiveness of the concept of China, which fortunately is mitigated by the multiple initiatives by China scholars over the last decade aimed at deconstructing and reconstructing the knowledge system of sinology—a discipline whose original *raison d'être* was the assumption of a unitary China. Indeed, the problematization of China as a monolithic unity is no longer the monopoly of postmodern cultural theorists, but has now begun to make its way, crucially in this writer's opinion, among more empirically oriented historians. The constructedness of China—its artificiality in the face of vast regional and ethnic diversity and the patterns of conquest, but also the ideological efficacy of the China concept, which reflexively qualifies its

artificiality, creating a historical reality on another level—is emerging as one of China's constitutive elements from the earliest moments in history when the term "China" has descriptive meaning.¹⁴ This circuit of artificiality/ideological efficacy/reflexive qualification has its own layered history over several millennia, uneven in its development. It leaves us now with a formidable "archaeological" project (in the Foucauldian sense), one of whose major sites is the history of art and more broadly the history of visual and material culture.

In this project, the intercultural can, I believe, be one of our most useful tools, whether we understand it as a space, or as an operation, or, better still, in both senses in relation to each other. I have suggested above some of the ways in which it can illuminate specific areas of, and itineraries through, the Chinese art-historical past. But the twelve eclectic essays that follow do so much more vividly and effectively, all the more so because they were written without reference to any program and in the sole light of the authors' personal response to the two words "intercultural China."¹⁵ There has been no attempt here to be systematic in the historical coverage or in the range of artistic practices analyzed, beyond the desire to bring together essays on a very wide span of Chinese history (as it turns out, more or less the entire historical period with the regrettable exception of the Ming dynasty), to include regionalism alongside Chinese/foreign relations, and to look beyond painting and pictorial art alone. The order of the essays is generally in line with historical chronology, but the reader may notice along the way certain topical affinities among successive essays, notably the internal cultural diversity of Bronze Age "China," the inherently intercultural framework later provided by Buddhism, and the special imperial situations created by the Mongol and Manchu conquests, which put all of China under alien rule.

14. The constructedness of China as a concept is currently an important topic of debate among specialists of Early China, as seen in two reviews of Wu Hung's *Monumentality in Early Chinese Art and Architecture* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995) by Michael Nylan (*Artibus Asiae* 57, nos. 1–2 [1997]:157–166) and Robert Bagley (*Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 58, no. 1 [June 1998]:221–256). See also Wu Hung's as yet unpublished response to Bagley. Among earlier manifestations of interest in this issue, the wide-ranging conference, "The Subject of China," organized by Chris Connery and John Hay at the University of California, Santa Cruz, in 1993 deserves particular mention.

15. The single exception is Christine Guth's essay, which was not originally commissioned for this issue.