

Western, non-Western or worldly?

*The implication of globalization on the contemporary visual art.*

Many art professionals today find themselves in a globalizing world, one which in, on the one hand, the blurring of 'national' identities has become an unavoidable consequence, while on the other hand, the need to anchor oneself in cultural authenticity has also increased. A tension between the identity of local cultural tradition(s) and the loss of it caused by global development is being demonstrated.

The artwork *Buddha*, 1971 – '73, (fig. 1) by the Dutch artist Daan van Golden (1936) and *Buddhist Medicine*, 2004 – '08, (fig. 2 and 3) by the Chinese artist Zhan Wang (1962) are selected for comparison in order to understand to what extent 'classification', when speaking in terms of 'western or non-western', is relevant. Why have concepts, such as Western and non-Western, become confusing? Why is this distinction still being used? These two artworks with Buddha as a starting point help to provide insight into globalization processes.

In order to understand the difference of cultural perspectives, I approach the contemplation of these artworks from the standpoint taken by the American art historian James Elkins.<sup>1</sup> The contribution of the Chinese art historian Cao Yiqiang and the Japanese art critic Shigemi Inaga show how their cultural background is originated from an old and rich tradition and explain why Western art history obtained dominance. In addition, it appears that cultural identity is closely allied with language. The German linguist Claire Kramsch gives insight how meanings can be interpreted differently and therefore culturally connected.

My focus on the classification of "Western" and "non-Western" as a problem has emerged from an interest in the essence of what cultural identity means and everything related to it in a "globalized" world. I'm especially trying to grasp the complexity of the cultural identity originating from cross-cultural, intercultural or multicultural

---

<sup>1</sup> Elkins, J. Can We Invent a World Art Studies?, In: Zijlmans. K en W. van Damme (ed.), *World Art Studies: Exploring Concepts and Approaches*, Valiz, Amsterdam, 2008, pp. 107-118.

connections.<sup>2</sup> Another cross-cultural development can be noticed in the worldwide spread of Buddhism.. Without elaborating on Buddhism as a religion or philosophy, in the West, Buddhism has already long been a source of inspiration for modern life.<sup>3</sup> In the contemporary Eastern context, Buddhism has undergone a revival, working together with western science.<sup>4</sup> This development can be considered as a good example of cross-culture. Eastern and Western culture find each other outside the boundaries of nations, and will be experienced differently by those in different places from different backgrounds.<sup>5</sup> It becomes clear how the distinction between Western and non-Western functions as a paradox rather than as a unit. The comparison between the selected art works makes clear why a distinction between Western and Eastern is not relevant anymore.

Since the 60s, an era caught up in the spirit of the post-war years, in which Zen Buddhism played a major role among Western artists and pop musicians, Van Golden made long journeys around the world, and stayed from early 1963 to late 1964 in Japan.<sup>6</sup> Since then, Van Golden's attitude is characterized as "Buddhist-like", shown in the establishment of his studio: tea ceremonials, meditation, a contemplative way of painting, in which the highest perfection was pursued.<sup>7</sup> In contrast to Daan van Golden's Buddhist-like attitude, the attitude of Beijing-born artist Zhan Wang (1962) could be considered Western. Zhan Wang trained at the Sculpture Research Institute part of the

---

<sup>2</sup> Kramsch calls "cross-cultural" the encounter between two cultures and two languages outside the political boundaries of nations. The term 'intercultural' refers to communication between people from different ethnic, social, gender-based culture within the limits of the same national language. As well the dialogue between the culture of minorities and the dominant culture, which is associated with issues such as bilingualism and more cultures. The term 'multicultural' is often used in two ways: in a social sense, where people forgather from different cultural backgrounds, and in the sense of how an individual belongs to several groups, where language and social behavior is adopted and identified with. Kramsch 2014 (1998), pp. 81,82.

<sup>3</sup> In an announcement on October 16, 2007, a Buddhist Conference will be held at the University of Toronto in cooperation with the Doris McCarthy Gallery, showing a Group exposition 'Reincarnations of Buddha' from Nov 1 – Dec 16, 2007. <http://ose.utoronto.ca/ose/story.php?id=785> Retrieved Feb 18, 2014.

<sup>4</sup> Ma, Tiaxiang, Analyses of Buddhism and a Contemporary study of Buddhism and Acience, In: *Frontiers of Philosophy in China*, Vol. 1. No. 4 (Dec.,2006), p. 595.

<sup>5</sup> Kramsch 1998, p. 81.

<sup>6</sup> Blotkamp 1999, p. 32.

<sup>7</sup> Vermeijden, Marianne, Over het leren groeten van de violen; Rotterdamse kunstenaar Daan van Golden naar Biënnale van Venetië, In: *NRC.nl*, 20 okt. 1998.

China Central Academy of Fine Art in Beijing. He became influenced by the so-called '85 New -Wave Movement' in the 80s.<sup>8</sup> With his installations in the early 90's, Zhan Wang introduced his "conceptual sculpture" in order to make major changes in, and break free from, the prevailing rigid opinions of visual arts in China.<sup>9</sup> Chinese Art education in the 80's was under the influence of Western art history and theories that had become accessible through translations. The exchange of cultural influences, results in a cross-cultural identity of both artists. The classification Eastern/Western based on the geographical backgrounds of Van Golden (Dutch) and Zhan Wang (Chinese) is called into question.

### ***Eastern***

In the case of both Buddha-artworks, Van Golden and Zhan Wang express the idea of coherence between 'concept and material' from a Buddhist point of view, i.e. no distinction exists between 'idea and material' or between 'mind and body'.<sup>10</sup> This functions as unit instead of a dichotomy. How is this Buddhist vision being expressed? Van Golden's *Buddha* is painted with egg tempera, glitter, flower and petal on canvas on panel framed behind glass.<sup>11</sup> The techniques of processing the materials confirm this Buddhist way of thinking. Indeed Van Golden uses the illusory character of painting, i.e. the paint loses its physical quality in the representation of the portrait. The suggestion of the golden color is created by the meticulous brushwork and equal use of colors like mustard- and cadmium- and light yellow in contrast with cobalt, ultramarine and navy blue, helping transform the Buddha portrait into a golden illusion. Yet, no gold foil has been used. Almost the entire background of the portrait and the suggestion of the body below the image of the face consist of a white primed surface. This absence of paint

---

<sup>8</sup> 85 New Wave Movement was an Avant-Garde movement in China that formulated its own culture. The 1980's represented in China a sort of explosive answer to the Cultural Revolution of the 1960's and 70's, when China was not only isolated from the rest of the world but was also forced to renounce and deny its own culture. Artnet on Zhan Wang. <http://www.artnet.com/artists/zhan%20wang/> Retrieved Feb 15, 2014.

<sup>9</sup> Erickson 2001, p. 76.

<sup>10</sup> The essence of Buddhism is said to exist in the 'Middleway' between rational cognition and transcendental argumentation', just as there is no absolute 'good or evil', 'right or wrong' or other form of binary paradoxes, according to Wang Xiaoxu. In: Tianxiang 2006, pp. 600, 601.

<sup>11</sup> According to the registered category information of artworks in the possession of Museum Van Beuningen. Dimensions: 114 X 92 cm without frame and 117,5 x 95,5 cm with frame Transfer Centrum Beeldende Kunst Rotterdam 1989.

confirms the dissemination of Buddhist ideas, after all, the “absence” can be considered as “emptiness”. This would refer to ‘any time, where everything is simultaneously born and decays, meaning that ‘nothing’ can take an unchanging state.<sup>12</sup> The absence of painting the body of the Buddha figure stresses this immaterialism as well. The omission of the suggested body reinforces the idea that, according to Wang Xianxu that the ‘void’ as ‘presence’ by *not* painting Buddha’s body, could indicate the achievement of “breaking with ego-centrism” as result of the human problems in this world, according to the Buddhist path of the Eightfold Consciousness.<sup>13</sup> The use of the dried flowers in the painting can be understood in the same way. I.e. the dried flowers represented as ‘void’ can be considered as every moment where everything is simultaneously been “born and perished.” The immutable condition of the dried flowers suggests that all things are impermanent, in accordance with the Buddhist vision, i.e. every moment and everything is synchronous. Just as the mostly unpainted part of the surface suggests ‘celestial space’ or ‘mind’, the facial expression of the portrait with half-closed eyes also emphasize ‘mind’ or ‘consciousness’, because the suggested look of the Buddha is turned inwards, as if the artist is expressing the act of meditation.<sup>14</sup>

The artwork Zhan Wang's *Buddhist Medicine* testifies likewise to an Eastern philosophy. The sculpture, as ‘concept-material’ combination, is derived from a deep-rooted traditional Chinese philosophy where ‘idea and material’ are not separately approached.<sup>15</sup> Zhan Wang, once obsessed by the traditional sculpture skills, changed his methods, but not his intention.

“... *Conceptual sculpture*’ is the organic combination of concept and material, it’s an indispensable whole, while the skill of sculpture Zhan learned before is the bridge to connect the two. It changed the traditional habit that contradicts skill and concept.”<sup>16</sup>

---

<sup>12</sup> Ma refers to the Buddha specialist Wang Xianxu in his article. Ma 2006, pp. 600, 601.

<sup>13</sup> Ibidem. pp. 595, 602.

<sup>14</sup> Tiangxiang 2006, pp. 601, 605.

<sup>15</sup> Erickson, Britta, Adrift with the Conceptual Sculptor Zhan Wang, In: *Art Journal*, Vol. 60, No. 2 (Summer, 2001) pp. 74, 76.

<sup>16</sup> Wang, Sue, *Several States of Zhan Wang’s Creation: Sonorous, Zeroing, Confronting and Moderate* (Part IV & V). 21, May 21, 2012.

There are two layers of meaning in the material used, the tablets and the cast or reproduction of the Buddha statue. Zhan Wang refers literally to the body and mind as unit in his use of the two layers, that is, the pills are used for the healing of the physical and Buddhism is used to cure mental ailments. The Buddhist concept of "suffering is universal" is literally applied in this sculpture. The artist's intention is confirmed by the Chinese acupuncture therapist doctor Erjie Wang - Hu (b. Beijing, 1963) to whom I presented the artwork of Zhan Wang. According to Dr. Wang - Hu Western medicine was introduced in China a century ago and healthcare has made a tremendous progress since. Western medicine works faster and more effectively than traditional Chinese medicine, however both forms are common.<sup>17</sup> Thanks to Dr. Wang- Hu's reaction, the argument of the Chinese art historian Yiqiang became clear to me. He suggests that (art) history traditionally was practiced on behalf of the government system from historic traditional goals focused on morality and utility. In China, the emphasis is on the constitutional function of history, in which the role of the historian/artist was considered part of the public service.<sup>18</sup> Both Yiqiang and Dr. Wang-Hu literally named the concept of curing as a commendation on modern society as part of the meaning of the artwork. No other underlying critics were considered. However, Wang-Hu's and Yiqiang's observations do not explain why Zhan Wang's sculptures are perceived in the West as a complicated mixture of Western and Eastern cultural identity that criticizes modern consumer society in Beijing.<sup>19</sup> The following section explains why Zhan Wang is considered as "social criticism".

### **Western**

Without considering the Eastern background, Zhan Wang's sculpture could be described as "conceptual" and indebted to Duchamp's ideas, as can Daan van Golden's workstyle, since it consists of copying already existing examples. Evidently *Buddhist Medicine* can be considered a readymade, because the object already exists, i.e. a reproduction of a stereotypical Buddha statue completely covered with 'real'

---

<sup>17</sup> On January 14, 2014 I visited the Chinese acupuncturist Erjie Wang - Hu. He studied Western and Eastern medicine in the late 1970's at the Capitol Medical University in Beijing.

<sup>18</sup> Yiqiang 2008, pp. 126, 127.

<sup>19</sup> Stomberg, John, Zhan Wang, Urban Landscape, In: Gastronomica: The Journal of Food and Culture, Vol. 7., No. 2 (Spring 2007), p. 9.

pharmaceutical tablets. These two 'daily' layers form the artwork *Buddhist Medicine* and show how Zhan Wang, like Van Golden, stops creating or inventing; both "reflects" and "edits" reality. Van Golden and Zhan Wang both appropriate the 'real', they don't 'make it up'. Like a 'readymade', the change of context changes the meaning. The use of Western iconological and/or semiotic models of analyses help to decipher deeper layers of meaning in the art work. As such, the deeper meaning in *Buddhist Medicine* is considered to be a social critique. The combination of the cast covered with white tablets could refer to commercialization of Buddhism or understood as a metaphor for the changing face or the loss of the traditional culture of China (read Beijing) to the influence of Western medicine.<sup>20</sup>

Van Golden's copying examples can be considered Western as well. Van Golden's *Buddha* shows the influences of the then-prevailing conceptions of the visual arts, as in Nouveau Realism, or the Zero Movement, and/or his debt to Duchamp's ideas.<sup>21</sup> Should therefore both artworks to be considered Western? On one hand this classification is justified, because both artworks derive from a Western art historical context, as James Elkins and Shigemi Inaga both claim, albeit from different standpoints. Elkin claims that new effective ways of thinking about art in relation to history is more difficult than expected, because no one is been inventive and free spirited enough in offering alternatives. Indeed, the idea of art has evolved according to Western methodologies, concepts. And Western art institutions hold the reins.<sup>22</sup> In fact, the whole idea of Western art originated from Western models that had been developed by both Elkins and Inaga. Inaga makes clear how the Western art historical and - philosophical dominance of the 20th century in the East is incorporated by translations. These translated texts have been fully studied and discussed since the 70's, and 80's. However the reverse never happened.<sup>23</sup> This suggests that the continued hegemony of the West is, in my opinion, still dominant, even though the 21st century is precisely characterized as a complex coherent world with different mutual cross-cultural, intercultural and

---

<sup>20</sup> Stomberg 2007, p. 10.

<sup>21</sup> Blotkamp 1999, pp. 42, 62, 64, 66.

<sup>22</sup> Elkins 2008, pp. 116,117.

<sup>23</sup> Inaga 2007, p. 5.

multicultural connections. As such, the Western approach of art history could be considered as "Global".

Yiqiang claims that 'world art studies' needs to reshape traditional ideas about universal history, however, a perpetual dilemma of 'world art studies' is how to interpret national art in a universal or global context without losing its unique importance.<sup>24</sup> Precisely this insight of Yiqiang helps me to understand the importance of everyone's own cultural background. However Yiqiang shows little insight into how the further development of 'cross-culture' as a result of globalization will manifest.

In the case of interpreting and thus classifying according to a Western strategy, of both 'Buddha- artworks' show that meanings can cause misconceptions.<sup>25</sup> Language barriers may pose an impossible task for the 'global' applicability in grasping the meanings from an 'other' cultural context.<sup>26</sup> Moreover, written language (academia) determines what is considered to be influential in speech, as has been correctly shown by Inaga.<sup>27</sup> Claire Kramsch also agrees that language causes a cultural dominance.<sup>28</sup> Most of the literature published about Daan van Golden and Zhan Wang, that is accessible to a global audience, is written in English. English functions as the standard of interpretation and acts as the dominant representative -means of communication.<sup>29</sup>

In conclusion, English, as the foremost language on the world platform, ensures that both artworks, from the context of contemporary art practice, can be considered Western. On the other hand, the cultural context introduced by the subject of the Buddha adds a dominant counterweight from the East. Both artworks possess a complex cross-cultural and intercultural identity where the distinction between Western and non-Western transcends into 'worldly'.

Karin de Jonge MA

---

<sup>24</sup> Yiqiang 2008, p. 132.

<sup>25</sup> Inaga 2007, p. 7.

<sup>26</sup> Kramsch 2014 (1998), p. 58, 59, 60.

<sup>27</sup> Inaga 2007, pp. 5, 6.

<sup>28</sup> Kramsch 2014 (1998), pp. 74, 75.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibidem* pp. 17, 20, 22, 70.



Fig. 1

Daan van Golden, *Buddha*



Fig. 2

Zhan Wang, *Buddhist Medicine*





Fig. 3 Detail

## References

Blotkamp, Carel, About Daan van Golden, In: *The pencil of nature*, XLVIII Biennale di Venezia, Dutch Pavilion/ Nederlands Paviljoen, 12-06-1999 tot 07-11-1999, cat. Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Daan van Golden and the authors, 1999.

Elkins, James, Can We Invent a World Art Studies?, In: Zijlmans, K & W. Van Damme (ed.) *World Art Studies: Exploring Concepts and Approaches*, Valiz, Amsterdam, 2008. Pp. 107-118.

Erickson, Britta, Material Illusions: Adrift with the Conceptual Sculpture Zhan Wang, In: *Art Journal*, Vol. 60, No. 2 (Summer, 2001), pp. 72-81.

Inaga, Shegimi, Is Art History Globalizable? A Critical Commentary from a Far Eastern Point of View, In: Elkins, J. *Is Art History Global?* London and New York: Routledge, 2007.

Stomberg, John, Zhan Wang, Urban Landscape, In: *Gastronomica: The Journal of Food and Culture*, Vol. 7., No. 2 (Spring 2007), pp. 9-11.

Tianxiang, Ma, Xiangzhen Kong, Andrew Herron, Analyses of Buddhism and a Comparative Study of Buddhism and Science, In: *Frontiers of Philosophy in China*, Vol. 1, No 4. (Dec. , 2006) pp. 594-629.

Yiqiang , Cao, World Art Studies and Historiography of Chinese Art, In: Zijlmans, K. , W. van Damme, (e.d.) *World Art Studies: Exploring Concepts and Approaches*, Valiz, Amsterdam, 2008, pp. 119 – 133.

Digital source

Shengtian, Zheng, Reincarnations of Buddha

<http://www.utoronto.ca/~dmg/html/publications/essays/shengtian.html> retrieved 18 febr. 2014.

Vermeijden, Marianne, Over het leren groeten van de violen; Rotterdamse kunstenaar Daan van Golden naar Biennale van Venetie, In: *NRC.nl*, 20 okt.

1998. <http://www.nrc.nl/handelsblad/van/1998/oktober/20/over-het-leren-groeten-van-de-violen-rotterdamse-kunstenaar-7419432> bezocht op 15 febr 2014.

Wang, Sue, Several States of Zhan Wang's Creation: Sonorous, Zeroing, Confronting and Moderate (Part IV & V). 21, May 21, 2012.

<http://en.cafa.com.cn/several-states-of-zhan-wangs-creation-sonorous-zeroing-confronting-and-moderate-part-iv-v.html> bezocht op 15 febr 2014

<http://www.utoronto.ca/~dmg/html/exhibitions/0708/reincarnation/index.html> bezocht op 18 febr. 2014-02-18