

On the Screen of the Visible: Outlines for an Aesthetic Research across Different Cultures

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Taking into account my personal path as a philosopher and as a painter, I try to sketch the perspective on aesthetics that was opened to me by a cross-cultural encounter. The European tradition, on one side, and the Sino-Japanese tradition, on the other side, are the two mirroring currents along which I moved in order to trace a sort of “deconstruction” and a “restructuring” of artistic and philosophical vision. In my painting, I aim for a confluence of different streams of thought by thinking about European informal art and landscape ink-painting of China and Japan. This confluence continues to produce a fertile dialogue, enlivening the deep resources that constitute the core of a subjectivity in process. Aesthetics converts itself into ethics: an ethical move, beyond the opposition of visible and invisible as dull substances, beyond the opposition of immanence and transcendence, is one of the inner goals of this pathway between art and philosophy.

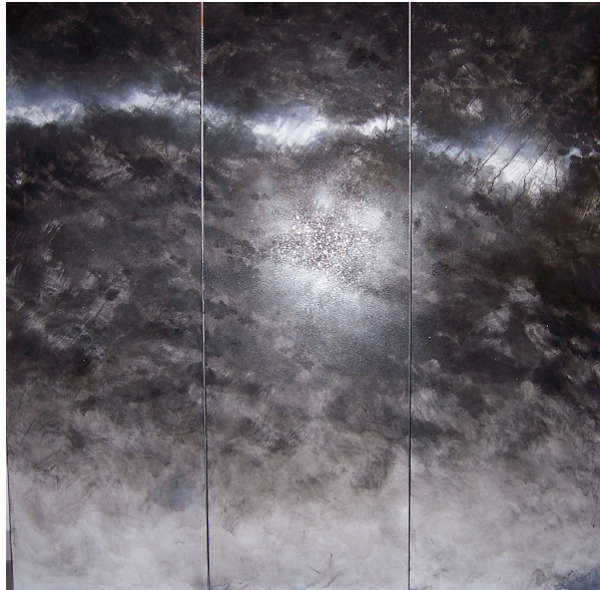
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At a time when the globalized market of ideas and arts intertwines and mixes different perspectives, it is quite common to focus more on a stereotype of plurality, rather than on a universalizing tension. The latter could, however, facilitate a translation of cultures and thoughts. I would like to imagine that in the act of drawing or painting a place opens up where you can meet and face new possible experiences of an intercultural exchange and transformation without clear borders.

Since the late 1980s, I grew up being increasingly excited and absorbed by the Chinese and Japanese cultural heritage. In particular, I was interested in the arts of Japanese *budō* 武道, in different kinds of Chinese *wushu gongfu* 武术功夫, and in ink-painting and calligraphy. Over time, I began to merge my studies in philosophy with the thought-provoking dimension of Sino-Japanese art. The motivation behind crisscrossing different cultural boundaries was not a search for solutions to long-standing philosophical and religious questions; it was to explore different resources for a “mutual fecundation”—to borrow a remarkable expression used by Raimon Panikkar (see Panikkar 1964).¹ The more I studied Chinese and Japanese thought, languages, and artistic expressions—in the broader sense of the term “art” (see Fongaro 2018)²—the more I was intrigued by making art and philosophy dialogue. Theoretical research represented an inner necessity for me, but this research needed to be enriched through a different kind of experience: artistic research. While in the European tradition a single person is not at the same time a philosopher and an artist, in Sino-Japanese history a painter, or calligrapher, is often a theoretician of art, too. As a result, even the distinction between theory and practice ends up being deprived of strict meaning.

The question that lies at the basis of my enterprise is that of the “source” of visibility, or the relation between visible, invisible, and visibility itself. These three dimensions are not three different “things” which we can approach as if they were simply substances or objects that stand in front of us (in German: *Gegen-stände*). Can we think, or experience, the relations between visible and invisible without summoning the notion of opposition between immanence and transcendence? By mirroring the modern path that has been followed in the west through informal painting with Chinese and



Figs. 1-2: *Kūge/Yō* 空花/陽 [*Flowers of Emptiness, yang side*]; *Kūge/In* 空花/陰 [*Flowers of Emptiness, yin side*], varnish and ink on multi-density screen, 150x160 cm, 2004

Japanese ink-painting, I plunged into artistic research. More specifically, I focused on the transition from a representational perspective to a “floating” one, where the image is neither a “thing” (or an object) nor “some-thing” that is to be fixed and defined. By trying to focus on the background, whence the image emerges, instead of focusing on a definite shape, the source of visibility emerges on a painted surface. Like Merleau-Ponty underlined in his analysis, an “absolute vision” takes place when the roles between the artist and the visible are reversed (Merleau-Ponty 1964: 167-69)³ and the represented objects appear as iridescent processes. Only when an image can give the impression of coming “from me, and yet from beyond me and over me” (Heidegger 1962: 320)⁴ can art reveal itself as an *intensification of a space-time*, of a gesture, and a vision. A work of art is not only a form, not only an event, but a simultaneous happening of form and event.

In attempting to feel, or to experience, the source of visibility by the means of a visible form/event, you can also experience a sort of “conversion” of the gaze. You are not simply in front of a painting, you find yourself *in* the painting, plunged into it, integrated into it. This is the great insight of Chinese landscape painting (*shanshui hua* 山水畫), where the invisible becomes “sensible,” and you feel a transition from the physical dimension to the spiritual one, back and forth. An example of this aesthetic move is the double-sided painted windscreen (figs. 1-2) that I titled in Japanese *Kūge* (*Flowers of Emptiness*). The two sides are distinguished from each other: one (the *yang* side) is a brilliant, bright surface; the other (the *yin* side) is a dark, overcast backcloth. When it is assembled and

mounted, the windscreen is not only a painting, but also an installation, and it asks the spectator (it induces him or her) to walk around it. In so doing, it appears that in order to get one side visible, you must be blind to the other. Although the latter thus becomes invisible, it is still vivid and “active.” Not by accident, I chose the Japanese Buddhist term *kejige*, meaning the evanescence, or impermanence of reality. The “flowers of emptiness” are the tiny spots that sometimes affect our eyes or blur our vision when we are tired, but the word expresses in a more philosophical yet symbolic form the changing and transient dimension of everything. All phenomena appear as exposed to a metamorphosis, to a constant transformation. Also, an image is not a fixed reality, but it is an alternating process in itself.

Through proceeding thus, I accord a preference to the evasive dimension in one image, rather than to an assignable, definite shape. Another painting, *Mattina* (*Morning*, fig. 3), has the saying by Tao Yuanming (365-427), *ci zhong you zhen yi* 此中有真意: “In this [landscape] there is [our] true authenticity.” A thin, dissolving scene in the Venetian lagoon, where the reeds melt into the shallow seabed, can be mistaken for a distant mountain landscape, immersed in the mists and clouds. This fruitful ambiguity is precisely what is of a high significance when we look at the picture as a space into which we can merge, as a place to meet ourselves. Not only intellectual knowledge is necessary, but a sort of bodily understanding. Again, the Japanese word *taitoku* 体得: “to get (*toku*) by the body (*tai*)” is useful. This binomial term is close to other words, like *rikai* 理解, or *etoku* 会得: they all generally mean “understanding,” but *taitoku* emphasizes the presence and role of our body in our uptake of the world. It is like when you are surrounded by water while swimming: you get used to a different gravity and to unusual movements, and at the same time you learn to be in the world in a different way, you learn a new posture or attitude, unprecedented gestures. You get accustomed to your own body in the water, and you re-discover yourself in it. In this sense, artworks are a sort of “diving sites,” by which we experience an enterprise of de-coincidence, in the way François Jullien explains this notion (see Jullien 2017).⁵ De-coinciding means to open up a “gap,” but the French term *écart* is more effective in this context. It means to get out of a fulfilled perspective, out of an order that inhibits any new solution and, finally, “sterilizes” coincidence, adequation, or adaptation.

Drawing and painting convey a gesture that is made into a visible sign. It is also a sign that exhibits its character of *gesture*. It carries within itself the trace of the original movement that generated it; it bears its memory. It is connected to a transit, a passage, and yet it is free from the pretention of owning time. The findings and traces of concentration that have become gaze, gesture, or brushstroke are measured in time and space; however, you can find a dimension there that lies beyond space and time. Tracing signs and choosing colors implies the rhythm of an encounter—but this encounter is concurrently a sort of detachment, it is not a simple union or embrace. You abandon a part of your psychological self in order to give space to the world as a growing line, or trace, or play between background and figures. The drawn image is the tentative result of a single touch, which weaves into the visible the intention and the senses of sight and touch.

Often the drawing itself, the ink, or even the color used are inspired by the objects that you perceive. They contribute to creation of those objects as such. They let them assume some tones, some aspects that otherwise they would not have had. They exhibit the cunning and hard-to-define link between image and thing. The picture, however, is not simply an object or something; it is rather also a mode of relation to the world. That particular image that you “objectify” on a surface is a sort of *metaxy*, an intermediary or mediating dimension that stretches out toward the subject and the world at the same time. It keeps them connected and it belongs to both of them; it shows that they are never disjointed, even if they are distinguished. The creation of the work is the upcoming of this reflection, its turning into experience; it is the movement—that coagulates in an object—that

the world makes in itself, a sort of self-drawing. Subject and image are not external to the world; they are peculiar modes of it.

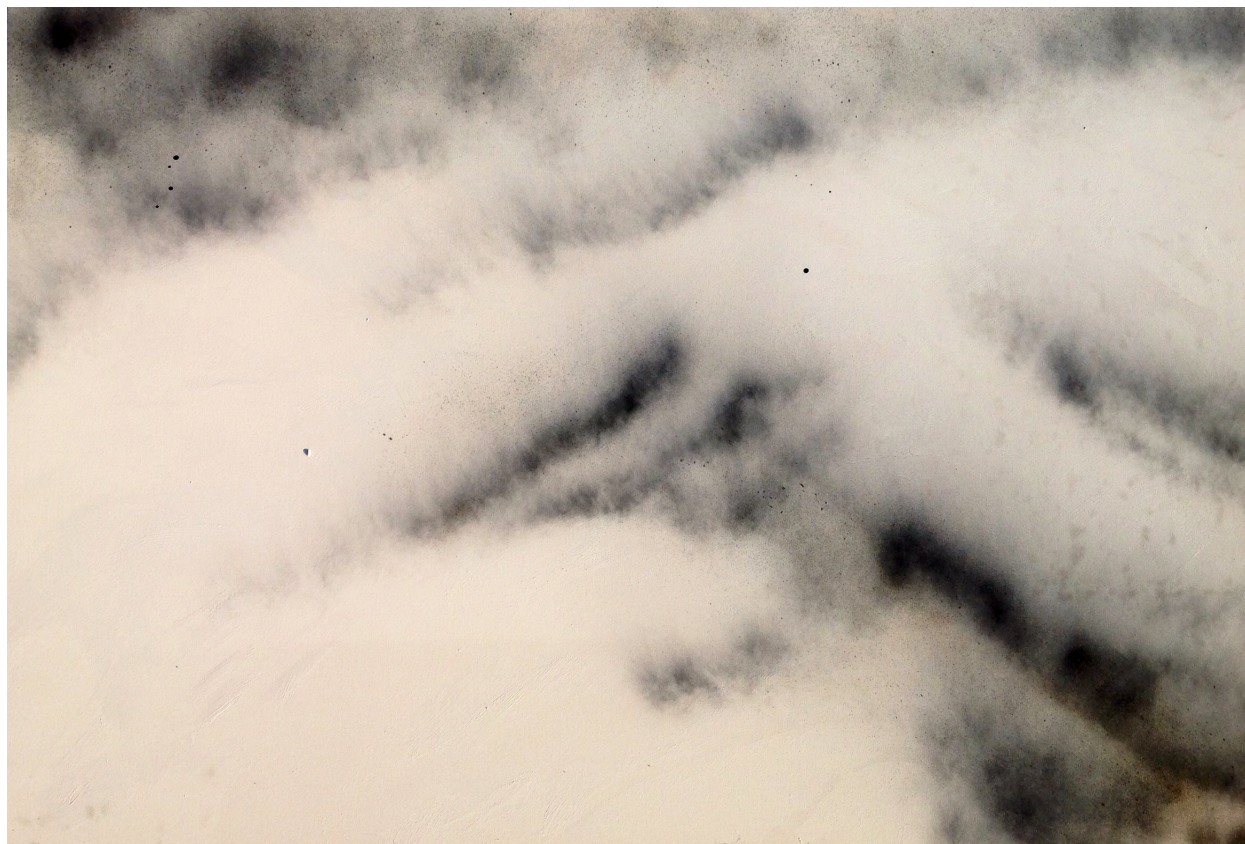


Fig. 3: *Mattina* [Morning], acrylic chalk, spray, and ink on canvas, 100x150 cm, 2014

In a certain sense, a particular form of blindness helps us see. There is no vision except in relation to a corresponding inability to circumscribe totality. An absolute gaze could not help drawing since it would not distinguish between creating and constantly transforming reality. For this reason, every drawing testifies to the traces of a passage. Every stroke implies what escapes the gaze, what has been removed. It is the result of an attentive moment that once took place; it is the record of an event you can reactivate if your eye turns on it. It wakes up again and repeats itself, but always differently—there is never an identical repetition, there is rather a continuous twisting of the same. From this sameness, the renewal of perception and its senses are fostered. So you can say that there is *askesis* (or *gongfu* 功夫), that is, discipline: a continuous renewal, a never exhausting exercise of the line.

The fact that each sign, or stroke, is the trace of a passage indicates that there is always an act of memory in both cases: when you look at bodies or objects of nature to be represented and when an image with no particular denotation arises. But drawing is not just the memory of what we have seen, of what the eye or the hand have found (sometimes independently, even if they are both involved and communicate in the brushstrokes). It is also the foreshadowing of what you are about to see; it is a hint, an indication for a different way of seeing. It is an opportunity to live the present time, knowing that we come from the past and hope to look towards the future. The past takes on a

new configuration on the basis of the lines that are drawn in the present; from time to time a new possible future is foreshadowed, giving space to what is not present but possible.

Looking back to the past, yet leaning forward, every drawing or painting has to do with something of an absence, which generates its internal vibration. It implies the unseen and the non-visible: not only as things that are not seen, but also as the making itself of each sign, its self-tracing. What gives rise to the visible is not visible in itself. It is no-thing, it is not a thing—or a ground, an ontological substance; it goes beyond, or stays below, the opposition between transcendence and immanence. “The Nothing on which even blandness pivots, does have something transcendent about it, though not to the exclusion of immanence, especially not of total immanence. Yet such *total* immanence transcends itself and can no longer be adequately conceptualized as only or exclusively ‘immanence.’ The idea of absolute transcendence cannot be excluded from it either. Immanence as such absolutely transcends every possible conception of it. *Total* immanence is without confines and involves or contaminates everything, transcending all limits” (Franke 2014: 16-7)⁶.

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From the Sino-Japanese traditions, I could learn a different approach to the notion of Nothingness (*mu*), or also Emptiness (*ken*), avoiding the idea that those terms can only express the lack, or absence, of Being. In these contexts, the notion of “representation” loses its importance in the debates about art. In western history of art, we can say that the image struggles with the phenomenon to attain true presence, showing to what extent the thing really “is” and placing the thing itself in *praesentia*, but Chinese and Japanese ink-paintings differ in one important respect. Here, every single brush stroke expresses a relational system. There is not an “inside” and an “outside,” two detached domains, but an energetic process, flowing by the means of the painter’s hand and brush in the work. When we speak about representation, we think implicitly to the notion of *presence*. It is the presence that we must *re-present* to the eye and to the mind. “Representing” means also bringing to a new presence what was concealed, hidden, or forgotten. The substance (*ousia*) should be taken in presence (*parousia*) in order to feel and live the actual living dimension of Being, of God: we can’t understand much of western art without these links between ontology, theology, and aesthetics. But if we read some lines by one of the most important texts in the Chinese pictorial tradition, the *Huayulu* 畫語錄 (*Treatise on Painting*) by Shitao (1642-1708), we can find precious hints which help us get closer to the theory of image and art in the Sino-Japanese tradition: “The inner nature of landscape is caught by getting the universe’s intimate structure. Possessing the techniques of brush and ink, one realizes the external aspects of landscape. [...] The landscape expresses the form and tensions of the whole universe. [...] Before I was fifty, I was not generated in the landscape. It is not to say that I treated landscape as a meaningless thing, but I let it [be] an independent thing, on its own. Now the landscape speaks by myself, it is expressed by me. It is generated by me, just like I am generated by the landscape” (Han Linde 2000: §8 200).⁷

The symbolic aspect of every artistic endeavor consists in the dissolution of the imaginary identity of the subject and the object as well. This uncovers, properly, a transformation or passage from an aesthetic concern to an ethical one. I trace lines and shape forms, and by doing so, I change myself and discover new possibilities for my being-in-the-world. At least this is the inner, intimate challenge. That is the reason why each ink stroke can also be figured out as a “threshold.” Each painting can be a shadow line that allows you to know in an unexpected way a fragment of the world, a fragment of yourself. Each time it can happen as a metamorphosis of the gaze. The vision

changes, transforms, and so do I: I look at something and I become what I look at. That subjectivity that I call “I” or “myself” reveals itself as a continuous flowing of meetings and events of the world, perceptions and thoughts. The Japanese contemporary calligrapher, Morita Shiryū (1912-1998), writes:

Because there is no self by itself and no brush by itself, no relationship comes about between some prior “me” and some prior “brush.”⁸ Rather, we must say that what exists is a whole we may call “I and my brush.” The one, inseparable whole lives here and now, and that is the very substance of my being a calligrapher here and now. Let us call this single totality *place*. [...] In the sense that I and my brush are born in a place and that a place gives birth to us. [...] In the unity of the place, I and the brush are one. I am the brush, the brush is me. I am not something restricted by the brush. I am not I (but rather this place), and therefore I am I. The brush is not a brush (but rather is this place), and therefore it is a brush. As a calligrapher I transcend myself and am released from myself (Morita 2011: 1201-02).

During the artistic expression, you undergo the experience of a shattering of all objectifications and reifications of the self, something that comes from beyond my own subjectivity.

It is the internal vibration of the picture that makes it unavailable to any determination of possession or knowledge. Trying to put the background as an image is like walking in the fog, in a cloud of unknowing in which we orient ourselves only as long as we do not want to stare into *anything*. From the picture and from the drawing to the ink-painting there is development of a progressive purification and decantation, a liberation from stereotypes, means and techniques that are taken for granted. The result is a new attention to the vital breath (*qi* 氣) that animates the act of painting, in order to get in touch with what emerges from the paper. One tries to be a receptive place for the *sign* of that event, of that apparition. In fact, you can contemplate a poetic landscape, but you cannot stare at it. You must learn to move in it, along with it, and feel it with all your senses, in order to capture a “figuration over the figuration” (in the Chinese artistic vocabulary: *xiangwai zhi xiang* 象外之象). The nature of landscape is as elusive as that of the vapor rising from the fields in the summer heat; you can contemplate the vapor, and the impalpable atmosphere, but you cannot fix it, because it is not an object you can catch.

For this reason, it seems interesting to me to try to draw empty, or nearly empty, backgrounds. You do not give the eye any foothold, any definite object to grasp or fix upon, so that you immerse in a space rather than determine a theme, a figure, a meaning. As an empty or nearly empty image, it can be the occasion of the gaze’s movement—being kept in suspension, the gaze stays alive. Beyond figuration lies the origin of every figure. As its origin or source, it never becomes a figure in itself. It is as the pure light that the eye cannot see, that the hand does not grasp, the light that allows all the other things to be seen and held. It is necessary that eye and hand try to shape the background and figures stemming out of it, so that they are traces leading to the source of visibility. So, the visible—what is offered to the gaze: the picture, the canvas, the paper and the traces that appear there—works as a screen. It is the screen on which the eye can notice that it cannot see directly the source of the visible, because as soon as it grasps *something* to see, it turns this “*something*” into an object and loses what it was looking for. *The visible is a screen that reveals by hiding what lies beyond the visible itself.*

At the same time, the exercise of “seeing” manifests the fact that every entity is empty. Spatially it has no autonomous, substantial nature but always exists in relation to something other than itself; it is always penetrated and permeated by that which surrounds it, and—temporally—

every physical or mental entity is impermanent, transitory. The world is structured as an infinite network of interdependent elements. And this “vacuity of essence” is not a matter of theory, but a question of experience. Breathing, in its alternation between fullness and emptiness, is the prime instrument of meditation in bringing the practitioner closer to the substance-less and impermanent dimension of being. It is not nihilism: the void is an infinite condition of possibility for the occurrence of any phenomenon, any physical, psychological, or metaphysical manifestation, which, like a wave, rises from the great ocean and returns to it.

And just like waves, events, phenomena, and the various activities of being human are processes, relations. Art can be one of the different ways of coming into contact with the experience of the void, of making it an operating principle. In this dimension there is no longer a subject who performs the work; the work occurs, gratuitously, giving a “sensible body” to the circulation of energy and interrelations. It is precisely the void that allows the circulation of the vital breath, the energetic exchange between subject and object, which are discovered to be one—not separate—in the process of generation and dissolution, inspiration-exhalation, emersion-immersion against the backdrop that animates and accommodates them. At the same time, however, the backdrop exists only in virtue of the phenomena played out against it. The backdrop is not a metaphysical foundation that exists *before* and *beyond* things, bodies, or events: backdrop and phenomena are one. The void is a phenomenological *here-and-now*, and can be made distinct from phenomena only by the intellect’s need to discern; in terms of processes it can never be separated or detached from them. Art is a function of the void: the power and efficacy of the void are brought back via figuration. The fullness emerges from the void while revealing it by contrast. It shows the efficacy of the void the same way that the void contains the potentials for fullness, without there being a splitting of planes—here the visible, the manifest, the tangible; there the latent, the extrasensory. The variation of fullness and emptiness confers dynamism and preserves the invisible within the visible; it is the only thing that can render the figuration in its totality.



Fig. 4: *La tempesta* [*The Tempest*], acrylic chalk, spray, watercolor on cardboard, 17x42 cm, 2014

The unproductive nature of art and its untimeliness make it so necessary. The market integrates it by inscribing it into the orbit of economic value, while the repeated gesture that realizes it extracts art from any monetary evaluation. The more a work of art is rooted in an age or in an existence that it influences, the more it is eccentric to the dynamics of production and fruition; it shows that there is something exceeding, something that does not fit into the logic of production, exchange, or usability. In this sense, the work of art goes beyond the idea of a linear progression of time, with an absolute beginning and a final destination, and with a necessary journey. A work of art is carried out in time and it translates it into space, but it is not limited to it. It is a way to resist and cope with the days, with the hours, without being inscribed in a chronological succession of moments.

A work of art is like a promise that constantly delays its fulfillment. The promise “is kept” because it continues to be pronounced and repeated in every brushstroke, like a fishing hook repeatedly thrown into water. What really matters is the gesture of throwing the hook, more than the final result, i.e. catching the fish. That is the reason why art requires extreme fidelity, the simple trust in its gesture. Unlike the psychological ego, art and the self that plunge into it do not ask for any compensation—hence the tension that one often feels. You do feel it, however, when you are not deeply immersed in the work. In the particular act that tradition generally defines as “artistic activity,” you find a unique kind of knowledge, and a particular type of practice—such as a form of ethics. Through the work of art, the world is not revealed as a set of things to be manipulated; it appears as a pure happening. Through the experience of the figure emerging from the paper or canvas, we experience the world as pure happening, where new forms continuously interweave with each other.

The figure emerges from the canvas, and at the same time it emerges from the world. Concomitantly, the world appears and is configured in each figure and single gesture. It is a circular movement: the world and the sign spring up together. Observing the world, and translating this observation in drawing or painting, you detach and approach existing things, which are regained and re-discovered in an unexpected way. So the relationship with the world is changed, the boundaries of disciplines such as aesthetics and ethics are surpassed. The line, the stroke that is traced by the pencil, by the brush, by one’s fingers or the whole body witnesses a form of stubbornness or obstinacy. It is not only a form of resistance to the virtual or digital image, to the lines that avoid dependency on the hand. It is a more hidden resistance to the kaleidoscope of colors and shapes that cross the visual field without carving and influencing it; it is a setback that diffracts time. On the one hand it imposes a slowing down, a disposition to patience, in order to observe and follow the line on the surface. On the other hand, it ushers the imminence of a possible discovery; it prepares to waiting without any immediate visible solution.

It is as if art were nothing but a way to pay the debt contracted when we were born, in search of a correct posture or perspective from which we can ask the right questions that help us to build a path in order to go on. It is also a way to enhance the quality of our own time, not wasting it, but without the claim of retaining it. Starting to work on a new painting does not depend on a calculation or on an intellectual choice. Immersing oneself in the background shows the concurrence of two opposite movements: a proximity and a distancing, a contact and a separation. The work you do and undo over days is a bet on the possibility to support the tension between the need for a contact and the necessity of a distance. It is a form of self-education to keep your feeling alive; otherwise it could dull and then extinguish—along with the question that once gave rise to the work

of art, to your path in life, starting from a gaze that was not initiated by your eyes but came to meet them. It is not by balancing forms that you can abolish the distance or find a final answer. The work of art is a continuous reactivation of a basic, original question. It is a slow and silent learning to stay in that question, proposing it again and again, creating in this way a possible access to life.

So the painter's task is not a representation of forms. The task is enhancing the image's energy, making the observer feel the *qi* in the image. Shitao underlines this issue many times: the inner accord is the most important, far beyond the imitation of the external shape. True "similarity" with the living character of nature can be attained only letting go of the worry for the external figuration. The true, the great, the wonderful image must be an effective image, carrying on the spiritual dimension, vibrating with nature itself. It involves a *different modality of seeing*. What really counts is a participating look that embraces and is embraced at the same time by what lies beyond the onlooker, detaching him or her from the usual subject-object distinction. The onlooker and the looked, subjectivity and environment, are elements inscribed one in each other. Their abstract division and separation is only formal; it comes from the analytical necessity of language. But the deeper seeing also becomes a hearing, a touching, a form of contemplation, in resonance with the environment, and the onlooker is in his/her turn looked at, and heard, and touched, embraced in the same environment in which his/her gaze wanders, moves, circulates—just like the *qi*. The gaze itself will no longer be a straightforward optical ray, but changes and transforms into a breathing, energetic circulation. In the true act of seeing, we recognize ourselves as *one* with what we see, parts of the whole, and not external elements, apart from the scene. The image should foster an experience of exploration and familiarizing: by the means of the image we can enter the landscape, becoming one with it and with all that encompasses us, finding our place. Landscape and painter, subject and object, I and thou penetrate each other, complete each other. This modality of experience of the world shows that looking at images, in particular through artistic expression and the creative movement it conveys, shows that the landscape is not *something to represent*, but rather *a way to see*.

How can we see such a reality? It will not be a simple ocular, retinal vision to keep in touch with the landscape, resonating with the circulating *qi*. The look, the gaze will be replaced by a form of meditation, of inner disposition—a sort of contemplation. We don't have to stare, exhausting our eyes, in order to capture the forms that nature offers to perception, but we do have to "listen" to the landscape, feeling our *xin* 心 (heart/mind/soul/emotion) vibrating with it. The term *xin* is difficult to translate, because it conveys different meaning and faculties of human nature: it is the heart as an organ, a muscle that pumps the blood in the veins; it is the mind, the intellective faculty; it is the soul or the spirit, i.e. the inner, invisible, and intimate dimension of human being; it is also used to indicate the "core" of a problem or the "essence" that defines a particular thing or aspect of reality. By this faculty, the human being can place him or herself in a resonating disposition, in which perception happens not only by the physical senses but also through a work of introspection. A great painter is thus able to paint an accomplished landscape even without seeing it. Expressing on paper the image of a stone, of a mountain, of a pond is important as far as re-creating the vital character, after having absorbed and transformed its qualities in his or her own inner dimension. Through the accord and harmony with the principle (*li* 理) that structures what the artist wants to enhance by the ink, the painter can transpose the *yi* 意—intentionality or inner disposition—by nature to his or her interiority, with a "formless figure" full of energy and breath. Pure attention is impersonal: only by this kind of attention and care for the world will the onlooker be able to go beyond the attachment to the form, to find in images the doorstep to link visible and invisible, art and morality, nature and ethics.

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