

Change and Continuity: the Influences of Taoist Philosophy and Cultural Practices on Contemporary Art Practice

Bonita Ely

Doctor of Philosophy

2009

University of Western Sydney

ABSTRACT

The aim of this thesis is to identify in contemporary art practices the inflections that have either direct, or indirect origins in Taoism, the conceptual source of China's principle indigenous, cultural practices. The thesis argues that the increasingly cross cultural qualities of contemporary art practice owe much to the West's exposure to Taoism's non-absolutist, non-humanist tropes, a cultural borrowing that has received slight attention despite its increasingly pervasive presence. This critical analysis is structured by Deleuze and Guattari's theory of the rhizome as a metaphor for cultural influences that are pluralist permeations, rather than a linear hierarchy.

The thesis tracks discourse between the West and China from early contact to the present, tracing manifold aspects of Taoism's modes of visual representation in Western art. Chinese gardens, Chinoiserie, calligraphy, and their coalescence in Chinese painting, are analysed to locate Taoist precepts familiar to the West, principally citing the *Tao Te Ching* by Lao Tzu, Taoism's founder. Here Taoist philosophy, as synthesised in Western thought, is proven to be a source of identifiable innovations in contemporary art practice. For example, spatial articulation as a dominant element of expression in installation art is traced to Western artists' exposure to the conceptualised spatiality of Sinocised artefacts.

Taoist precepts are analysed in the Chinese tradition of improvising upon calligraphic characters as a key factor. This model is deployed using the skills set of studio-based research to identify the experimental nature and degree of improvisation in Western artists' adaptations of Taoist methods in innovative painting, then sculpture. Investigations of artworks are structured upon correlations between Deleuze's theories of representation and Taoist theories of creativity. A thematic connection with Taoism located in contemporary art, namely, notions of continuity and change, assists this detailed unraveling of creative processes, aesthetics, metonymy and meaning derived from Taoism in global, contemporary art.