

## CHAPTER 3: MIXED METHODS

This chapter describes the methodologies used to investigate the porosity of Western culture towards Taoism, China's indigenous philosophy, a discourse identified in Chapter Two: A History of Discourse – East West and Back Again, with a view to establishing the nature of this cross cultural influence and describing its qualities.

To summarise, the research methods described below have produced an expanded history of the influence of Taoism on experimental, contemporary art practice in the West. The method uses the frame of Taoist principals that correlate with Deleuze's Post Modern theories of representation<sup>1</sup> to demonstrate how notions associated with Taoism are now seamlessly embedded in Western, experimental, contemporary visual arts practice. Combining art history and art theory with the insight of an artist's visual intelligence, plus fieldwork and an interview with a key artist, these research methods reveal original material in case studies that draw upon the examination of artworks to determine the direct and indirect influence of traditional Taoist art forms and concepts on experimental contemporary art.

The methodologies employed to explore this complex cultural field are derived from three disciplines: art theory, art history, and visual arts practice. Within this interdisciplinary enquiry, the approach taken to theory and history is less than an orthodox academic one, as that of a practising visual artist. That is, the disciplines of art theory and history are combined with the multitudinous probings of a conceptual visual artist. It is argued below that this interdisciplinary approach may be seen to reflect a Taoist methodology aligned with the practice of the 'Way', which illustrates the intrinsic circularity and porosity of this topic.<sup>2</sup> This practice-based, interdisciplinary methodology is explained in the following sections: History as a Rhizome; Combining Scholarly Research with Visual Literacy; Capacity to Demystify Mythology; Capacity for Originality; Metonymy, Artists' Heightened Awareness of Aesthetic Qualities; The Physiological Mechanisms of the Studio Research Method; The Studio Research Method in Practice; Creative Research Parallels in Taoism and Deleuze; The Application of Taoist

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<sup>1</sup> Giles Deleuze, *Repetition and Difference* (1969). English translation, 1994 by Paul Patton, pub. 1994, Columbia University Press, NY.

<sup>2</sup> David L. Hall, *Process and Anarchy – a Taoist Vision of Creativity*, from *Philosophy East West*, Vol. 28, No. 3, (Jul., 1978). P 278.

Theory Concerning Creativity in the Thesis; Spontaneous Graphic Improvisation as a Taoist Art Form; Fieldwork, Marfa, Texas, New York and Beijing.

### History as a Rhizome

The methods used to trace the history of discourse between the West and Far East closely parallel the process metaphorically described as a rhizome in *One Thousand Plateaux: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* by French philosopher, Gilles Deleuze, and the psychoanalyst, Félix Guattari.<sup>3</sup> The influence of Taoism on Western cultures resembles the non-hierarchical, non-linear, multi-dimensional, inter-relational tendrils of a rhizome growing above and below ground. Deleuze and Guattari use this metaphor to dismiss ordered, hierarchical models for an understanding of how reality is structured. They describe reality as multiplicitous levels of energy and intensity, tendrils that interconnect each part to each other and the whole, encompassing movement, aggregations, polymorphous materialisations, metamorphosis. This theory conjures an evolving, organic-like system that perfectly describes the gradual reach of Taoism into Western thought, aesthetics and processes, just as the rhizome's structure might be accurately illustrated by the precepts of Taoism. By comparing the following quotes from Deleuze and Guattari on the rhizome, and Lao Tzu, author of the *Tao Te Ching* on the Tao, the relationship is clear:

... any point of a rhizome can be connected to anything other, and must be.<sup>4</sup>

... unlike trees and their roots, the rhizome connects any point to any other point, and its traits are not necessarily linked to the traits of the same nature.

It is composed not of units but ... of dimensions in motion.

... the rhizome operates by variation, expansion, conquest, capture, offshoots ... [it] is always detachable, connectable, reversible, modifiable, and has multiple entry ways and exits.<sup>5</sup>

A rhizome has no beginning or end; it is always in the middle, between things, interbeing, *intermezzo*.<sup>6</sup>

This clearly correlates with the principles of the Tao:

Though formless and intangible  
    It gives rise to form  
Though vague and illusive  
    It gives rise to shapes  
Though dark and obscure  
    It is the spirit, the essence,

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<sup>3</sup> Giles Deleuze , Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaux: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, University of Minnesota Press, 1993. Translation to English, Brian Massumi. See the first chapter, *Introduction: Rhizome*.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. P 7.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. P 21.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. P 25.

The life-breath of all things<sup>7</sup>

The movement of Tao is to return  
The way of Tao is to yield<sup>8</sup>

The most yielding thing in the world  
will overcome the most rigid  
The most empty thing ...  
Will overcome the most full<sup>9</sup>

Such is their unity  
that one does not exist without the other<sup>10</sup>

Similarly, the theory of representation formulated by Deleuze in *Difference and Repetition*<sup>11</sup> is deployed as a methodology to elaborate upon the rhizome as metaphor for new ways of perceiving and thinking by avoiding the repetition of habit, by re-presenting new connectivities in an atomistic, relational manner to fashion new concepts. This model, used in concert with an analysis of Taoist art forms such as calligraphy, explicates the nature of the strands of Taoism's influence. Throughout the thesis the methodology traces the nature of the influences of discourse between East and West as either a direct synthesis into Western culture, or as indirect, building upon previous discourse.

### **Combining Scholarly Research with Visual Literacy**

The research methodology employs the orthodox skills of scholarly research combined with the visual artist's primary method of studio research - *visual literacy*, or visual intelligence - "the ability to create, use and understand visual images".<sup>12</sup> This includes the artist's observational acuity and heightened aesthetic sensibilities. For this reason detailed discussions of the key artists' works include first hand descriptions of the artworks supported by detailed visual documentation to build a complete account of details pertinent to discerning the influence of Taoism. That is, the decision making in the studio by other artists is analytically dissected in the manner of a maker rather than a theoretician. The artist's dominant cognitive style, and hence research style,<sup>13</sup> are a combination of spatial/visual, tactile/kinetic skill sets interconnected to auditory awareness and logical thought. These are the complex

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<sup>7</sup> Lao-Tzu, *Tao Te Ching*, Verse 21.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. Verse 40.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. Verse 43.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. Verse 52.

<sup>11</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Repetition and Difference*. 1968, Columbia University Press, New York.

<sup>12</sup> K. L. Krause, S. Bochner, S. Duchesne, *Educational Psychology for Learning and Teaching*, 2003, pub. Thompson. P 367.

<sup>13</sup> James W. Keefe, *Assessment of Learning Style Variables: the NASSP Task Force Model*. Theory into Practice, Vol. 24, No. 2, *Learning and the Brain* (Spring, 1985). P 141.

interconnections between conceptual and sensory modes evident in the methodology used for this research project.

### **Capacity to Demystify Mythology**

The mythology surrounding the ‘intuitive’, ‘inspired’, subjective, even ‘mystical’ processes traditionally associated with the artist’s methodology as a creative maker may cloud an appraisal of the validity of research undertaken in the studio compared to the iterative processes of disciplines such as humanities and science, even though methodical experimentation associated with problem solving in the scientist’s laboratory often aligns with that of the studio. Functionally, a practice-based methodology employs the first hand knowledge of the visual artist from the inside, so to speak, to analyse their own and other artists’ works. To demystify the practising artist’s introspective and wide ranging, investigative ways of thinking through to insightful outcomes, research results of neurological science’s investigations of the activity of the brain when people are engaged in creative activities compared to routine activities are included here. These findings in the laboratory verify Taoism’s and Gilles Deleuze’s insistence upon a complexity that embraces the subjective rather than the West’s mythologising of the creative process that places the artist outside the norm, or its simplifying, reductive analysis.<sup>14</sup>

### **Capacity for Originality**

Peter Dallow’s explanation of the value of the artist’s research methodology as “an active cultural *process* for intellectually and technically organising and deploying certain knowledge and skill into new conceptual and effective *forms*” further supports art practice as a research tool.<sup>15</sup> In his article, *Outside ‘The True’?: research and complexity in contemporary arts practice*<sup>16</sup> Peter Dallow investigates the nature of originality and creativity in visual arts research. Against the Post Modern credo that nothing *new* can happen, that everything has been done before, he asks where the visual arts sit as a research activity, particularly as, unlike empirical disciplines such as science, “its products, material and seemingly immaterial cannot be reproduced or tested under controlled conditions”.<sup>17</sup> This thesis will demonstrate the verity of Dallow’s location of original thought as “new conceptual and effective forms” in the visual artist’s studio research.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Repetition and Difference*. 1968, pub. Columbia University Press, New York.

<sup>15</sup> Peter Dallow, *Outside ‘The True’?: research and complexity in contemporary arts practice*, Chapter 11, P 133 of *New Practices, New Pedagogies*, 2005. Ed. Malcolm Miles. Routledge.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.* P 133.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.* P 133.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.* P 134.

## **Metonymy**

Art is speculative. Its meaning is produced by an improvised testing of the illusive effectiveness of visual poetics that can become unhinged by an over-determined use of fact. Yet metaphor, the alternative to fact is not a reality; metaphor 'stands for' the truth the artist seeks. The *difference* Deleuze identifies as the artist's objective is born of repeating reality in a metamorphosed state, as a constructed representation.<sup>19</sup> Dallow suggests that art practice as a research tool can be viewed as *performative*, quoting Mikhail Bakhtin's description of the aesthetic world as "but a moment of Being-as-event", brought about "through an answerable consciousness – through an answerable deed by a participant".<sup>20</sup> If so, art as a research tool conveys new knowledge *metonymically*, centred in a realism of associative action. That is, "art is still best viewed as an active cultural *process* for intellectually and technically organising and deploying certain knowledge and skill into new conceptual and effective *forms*".<sup>21</sup>

The over riding objective of the visual arts practitioner's methodology is to inject IS-NESS into aestheticised, conceptually encoded materiality, into spatiality, into imagery and form. Who 'answers' this conceptual 'deed'? Without taking account of the viewer's response, that is, second-guessing another's response, the artist "experiment(s)" and "play(s)",<sup>22</sup> willfully manipulating aesthetic qualities, imagery, articulating spatiality to create an unexpected zone in which the viewer *performs* in response to artist's communicated intent. And in the process the viewer is brought alive through their senses and intellect to the artwork's is-ness, and through this, "learning something we did not know", that is, perceiving for themselves through subjective associations using the artist's research outcome as a metonymic catalyst.

## **Artists' Heightened Awareness of Aesthetic Qualities**

In the studio an exploratory trial and error approach to aesthetic, conceptual problem solving combined with the contemplation of lateral connectiveness, is powered by a spontaneity harnessed to a mastery of skills. An energised, almost hallucinatory perception of the reality of what *is* in front of us in the making characterises an artist's heightened awareness of

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<sup>19</sup> Gilles Deleuze, 1968, *Repetition and Difference*, Columbia University Press, New York.

<sup>20</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, 1993, *Towards a Philosophy of the Act*. Trans. Vadim Laipunov. Austin: University of Texas Press. P 18.

<sup>21</sup> Peter Dallow, *Outside 'The True'?: research and complexity in contemporary arts practice*, Chapter 11 of *New Practices, New Pedagogies*, 2005. Ed. Malcolm Miles. Routledge. P 134.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.* P 137.

aesthetic qualities.<sup>23</sup> For example, for artists, spatiality's aesthetic qualities are as keenly perceived as objects<sup>24</sup> to assess the relationship of figure/ground. This ability is demonstrated in the diagram below. The artist's eyes look at the whole image, including the background, not just the subject of the photograph (*Fig 1*).



*Fig 1:* These two diagrams show the non artist's eye motions (left) and an artist's eye motions (right) as they scan an image with the task of remembering the picture. Artists look at the whole image rather than favouring the human subject of the photograph.<sup>25</sup>

The contemporary installation artist's perception of spatiality as a 'thing' takes this focus to another dimension where, rather than 'negative space', spatiality is a positive element of expression. This is apparent in research photographs taken by the following sculptors. Rachel Whiteread's photographs render space as a 'thing'.<sup>26</sup> The subject of the photographs, steps and an amphitheatre, are of interest to Whiteread because of the qualities of space, spatiality, they create. Similarly, my photograph of the Levens Hall garden taken in 1996,<sup>27</sup> whilst researching architectural follies in European stroll gardens as a precursor to installation art, focuses on the spatiality of the placement of the spectacular topiary rather than the topiary as object, demonstrating the installation artist's 'eye' (*Fig 2, Fig 3*).

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<sup>23</sup> Helen Phillips, *Looking for Inspiration*, From the Creativity Special, New Scientist, 29 October 2005, issue 2523. "Creativity specialist Mark Runco of California State University, Fullerton has found, the 'creative personality' tends to place a high value on aesthetic qualities."

<sup>24</sup> Vogt, S. & Magnussen, S. (2007). *Expertise in pictorial perception: Eye-movement patterns and visual memory in artists and laymen*. *Perception*, 36, 91-100.

<sup>25</sup> [http://scienceblogs.com/cognitivedaily/2007/03/artists\\_look\\_different.php](http://scienceblogs.com/cognitivedaily/2007/03/artists_look_different.php) Cited March, 2008.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> Rachel Whiteread is a British artist whose sculptures objectify space as a material object. See Chapter Seven for an analysis of her artwork, *House* from the perspective of Taoist precepts.

<sup>27</sup> Established in the 1690s, designed by Guillaume Beaumont, Levens Hall garden began as a French parterre garden. The plants were allowed to grow to become more like a stroll garden, a design that became fashionable after accounts were published on Chinese gardens in the late seventeenth century, eighteenth century. Gervase Jackson-Stops, *The Country House Garden: a Grand Tour* (1995). Pub. Pavillion Books, London. Pp 17, 59, 60, 177.



Fig 2: Rachel Whiteread's photographs (left, above) are described as "predatory" in that they capture spatiality as an intrinsic aspect of her projects' preparatory research.<sup>28</sup>



Fig 3: Bonita Ely's photograph of Levens Garden, England, and Ryoanji Garden, Kyoto, focusing on spatiality rather than objects.

A comparison could be drawn between the installation artists' photography and the emphasis on spatiality in the Zen dry garden, Ryoanji in Kyoto. Its narrative form is derived from Taoist mythology and the Islands of the Immortals. The design demonstrates an application of principles of placement from Taoism's *feng shui*, where every aspect of the garden is energised by Taoism's *ch'i*, the life force animating all things, from the articulation of the ground plane to represent water, the placement, scale and imagery of the rocks to represent the element 'earth', to the wall enclosing the garden where moulds and weathering have been allowed to flourish to represent the infinity of space found in the tonal washes of traditional sumi brush and ink landscape paintings.

Thus the artist's cognisance of these correlations of installation art to Zen Buddhism, which is, historically, a hybrid mix of Taoism and Indian Buddhism (page **Error! Bookmark not defined.**), are used to diagnose the influences of Taoism on installation art. Although crudely

<sup>28</sup> Fiona Bradley, *Introduction*, from *Rachel Whiteread: Shedding Life* (1997). Ed. Fiona Bradley, pub. Tate Gallery Publishing, London. Pp 10,11.

argued here, it can be seen that the methodology uses a combination of imagery of the site of an artwork, the artwork itself, and its history, to trace the threads of influences into the present, supported by Post Modern theories of representation that correlate with Taoist precepts.

### **Physiological Mechanisms of the Studio Research Method**

The value of methodologies deployed in the studio are also verified by neurological research of people's brain activity whilst engaged in creative activity, which indicates the ability of an artist to make unusually complex connections between different areas of the brain and their different functions. For example, Ingegerd Carlsson, a psychologist from the University of Lund in Sweden and her colleagues have found the frontal lobes are significantly more active when people are engaged in creative activities, which allows a flexibility of focus and co-ordination of connectivity between different parts of the brain.<sup>29</sup> David Beversdorf of Ohio State University in California has discovered that, during creative problem solving exercises, low levels of a brain signalling chemical, noradrenalin, associated with dreaming, allow broad networks of neurons to communicate. The chemical is released by the frontal lobes, encouraging neurons to 'talk' to each other.<sup>30</sup>

The physiological mechanisms of this studio research method are further explained in the research of psychologist, Colin Martindale.<sup>31</sup> Using electroencephalograms to record the pattern of brain waves whilst people were engaged in creative activities, he observed a switch from a quiet, relaxed state, similar to the alpha waves of dreaming when thinking about ideas, showing a low level of cortical arousal. Increased cortical arousal and organised thinking began when art making began. "Increased cortical arousal and organised thinking" probably reflect the masterful control of mediums perversely matched by a readiness for serendipitous accidents, an ability to "sense oneself making sense",<sup>32</sup> an ability to be subjective and

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<sup>29</sup> Reported by Helen Phillips, *Looking for Inspiration*, From the *Creativity Special*, New Scientist journal, 29 October, 2005, issue 2523. P 40. Phillips cites Ingegerd Carlsson Peter E. Wendta and Jarl Risberga, *On the Neurobiology of Creativity. Differences in frontal activity between high and low creative subjects*. Department of Clinical Neuroscience, Division of Psychiatry, Lund University, Lund, Sweden. [http://www.sciencedirect.com/science?\\_ob=ArticleURL&\\_udi=B6T0D-3YMFJC914&\\_user=10&\\_rdoc=1&\\_fmt=&\\_orig=search&\\_sort=d&\\_view=c&\\_version=1&\\_urlVersion=0&\\_usrid=10&\\_md5=f5be529dfdcceedd50382ddeb36b207d](http://www.sciencedirect.com/science?_ob=ArticleURL&_udi=B6T0D-3YMFJC914&_user=10&_rdoc=1&_fmt=&_orig=search&_sort=d&_view=c&_version=1&_urlVersion=0&_usrid=10&_md5=f5be529dfdcceedd50382ddeb36b207d)

Accepted 6 September 1999. Available online 21 February 2000. Cited Sept 2008

<sup>30</sup> David Q. Beversdorf, Jessica K. Alexander, Ashleigh Hillier, Ryan M. Smith, Madalina E. Tivarus, *Beta-adrenergic Modulation of Cognitive Flexibility During Stress*. Journal of Cognitive Neuroscience archive, Volume 19, Issue 3 (March 2007) MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, USA.

<sup>31</sup> Reported by Helen Phillips, *Looking for Inspiration*, From the *Creativity Special*, New Scientist journal, 29 October 2005, issue 2523. P 40.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid, quoting Nancy (1997: 162).



objective simultaneously. These paradoxical, liminal states, where mind and body act in free unison, may be the creative source of insight that cannot be articulated in words.

### **The Studio Research Method in Practice**

An early example from my practice, *C20th Mythological Beasts: at Home with the Locust People* (1975), provides an account of the creative process of the research methodology employed in the studio.<sup>33</sup> The project's research question was: *Which life form combined with the human form best represents our contemporary belief system?*

Research included the study of mythological beasts in the sculpture of Egyptian and Greek antiquities; entomological studies of the locust's life cycle; human anatomy; metaphoric relationships of stereotypical gender and materiality; puppetry and doll making; strategies to lure the viewer into the 'sacred space' of an artwork;<sup>34</sup> video and sound production. The outcome was an installation, called 'environmental art' at this time, composed of the three hybrid figures, locust and human, watching sunsets on television, sitting in a lounge room that resembled a museum diorama, furnished with artificial representations of forms from nature (Fig 4 - Fig 7).



Fig 4: Bonita Ely, *C20th Mythological Beasts: At Home with the Locust People*, 1975. Mixed media installation, including *Sunset Video*. Here shown in the Sutton Gallery, Melbourne, 1995.

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<sup>33</sup> *Twentieth Century Mythological Beasts: at Home with the Locust People* became a series of paintings, photographs, video, sound, photocopies, drawings and an installation, executed between 1973 and 1975 in London, New York and Melbourne. Exhibited in 1975, West Street Gallery, Sydney; 1976, *Three Statements on Environment*, Ewing and George Patton Galleries, University of Melbourne; 1976, Post Object Show, Experimental Art Foundation, Adelaide; 1995, Sutton Gallery, Melbourne. Only the installation is discussed here.

<sup>34</sup> At the time of its first exhibition, 1975, viewers were reluctant to enter into the space of any artwork.



*Fig 5: Bonita Ely, C20th Mythological Beasts: At Home with the Locust People (detail), 1975. The female locust person with her daughter at Sutton Gallery, Melbourne, 1997.*



Fig 6: Bonita Ely, *C20th Mythological Beasts: At Home with the Locust People* (detail), 1975. Father and daughter, West Street Gallery, Sydney.

The materials, skill sets and technologies used were drawing, painting, sewing, printing, sculptural modeling, fiberglass casts, carpentry, photography, sound and video, found objects.



Fig 7: Photograph from *Sunset Video*, taken on the 2<sup>nd</sup> January, 1974, showing pollution on the horizon at sunset over New Jersey and the Statue of Liberty, New York.<sup>35</sup>

The concept was influenced by the contrast of my austere lifestyle in London where economic recovery from the Second World War was still underway, in contrast with New York, where the economy was booming, pollution and consumerism was conspicuous. I had experimented with viewer emersion in artworks at art school<sup>36</sup> and the efficacy of this tactic to enhance viewer engagement was reinforced by an exhibition of work by Ed Keinholz and Nancy Reddin,<sup>37</sup> American Fluxus artists,<sup>38</sup> seen at the Institute for Contemporary Art in London in 1971, including *Back Seat Dodge '38*. Their walk-in sculptures were very impressive.

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<sup>35</sup> *Sunset Video* was produced in 1975 at Melbourne's first free community video access workshop in Carlton. Cinematographer, Sue Ford, sound, Mark Freedman. Back projected, dissolving slides of New York sunsets were filmed as if panning and zooming out and into real landscapes. The video has been shown independently of *Twentieth Century Mythological Beasts: at Home with the Locust People* installation in 2004, Sutton Gallery, Melbourne; 2005, Bellas Milani Gallery, Brisbane; 2007, Performance Space, Sydney: Held in Monash University's Australian Video Art Archive. <http://www.videoartchive.org.au/bely/> Cited Feb. 2008.

<sup>36</sup> At the Prahran College of Fine Arts, Melbourne, in 1968, 1969 I made several inflated environments that could be entered through an air lock to experience a holistic and distorted spatiality. One of the environments, made from brown paper wrapping, was lit externally so the interior glowed. It had the scale of a medium-sized room, and was a completely integrated corporeal experience for the viewer.

<sup>37</sup> Ed Keinholz, 1927–1994. American sculptor, and installation artist who later acknowledged his partner, Nancy Reddin (1943 - ) as a collaborator. Their work combined found objects in large scale, detailed assemblages to make installations of acerbic social comment. Associated with the Fluxus Movement. From the 1970s they lived and worked between the USA and Berlin where I interviewed them in 1981 regarding my research for the performance, *Dogwoman Communicates with the Younger Generation*, and the installation and artist's book, *Dogwoman Makes History*.

<http://www.beatmuseum.org/keinholz/edkienholz.html> Cited Aug 2008.

<http://www.artchive.com/artchive/K/keinholz.html> Cited Aug 2008.

<sup>38</sup> Find discussion of the Fluxus Movement and Taoism in Chapter Two.



Fig 8: Edward Kienholz, *Back Seat Dodge '38*, 1964. Tableau: polyester resin, paint, fiberglass, flock, truncated 1938 Dodge, clothing, chicken wire, beer bottles, artificial grass, and plaster cast. 66 x 240 x 144 in. (167.6 x 609.6 x 365.8 cm). Collection, Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

At art school in 1968, lecturer Alun Leach-Jones<sup>39</sup> lectured on chance and the use of the Taoist *I Ching*<sup>40</sup> as a tool for decision making in painting. The importance of an affinity with nature, which was expressed in *Mythological Beasts*, was reinforced reading the *I Ching*. Its intriguing interpretations of a system of hexagrams to determine the actions of the 'superior man' use metaphors from natural phenomena. For example in hexagram 41, Sun / Decrease:



Hexagram Number 41: Decrease, loss

At the foot of the mountain, the lake:

The image of DECREASE

Thus the superior man controls his anger

And restrains his instincts<sup>41</sup>

Interpretation: When resources are scarce, superior people remain positive and live within their means.

Conceptually my thoughts about problems of environmental degradation were in accord with Taoist precepts regarding the integral importance of an affinity with nature, and concerns that alienation from nature would lead to disastrous consequences.

<sup>39</sup> Alun Leach-Jones 1935 -) Welsh Australian. In the late sixties his painting was aligned with abstract, formalist painting and abstract expressionism.

[http://www.rexirwin.com/artists/gallery\\_artists/leach\\_jones/2005/index.htm](http://www.rexirwin.com/artists/gallery_artists/leach_jones/2005/index.htm)

<sup>40</sup> *I Ching* or *Book of Changes*, Translated by Richard Wilhelm to German, Cary F. Baynes. to English. Pub. Penguin, 1967.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.* Hexagram No. 41.

## Creative Research Parallels Taoism and Deleuze

The methodology identifies parallels with this interdisciplinary process of creativity, described above, with Deleuzian and Taoist theories of creativity. These close parallels arguably account for Taoism's pervasive influence on the development of contemporary art movements that tap into the co-dependency of chaos and order, dynamic, spontaneous activity, and contemplation, to capture a vibrant essence of reality. In his article, *Process and Anarchy – A Taoist Vision of Creativity*, David Hall paraphrases the personal and scientific accounts described above of creative processes as a research method.<sup>42</sup> Hall defines the act of creation as a “conrescience, an act of becoming one”.<sup>43</sup> To quote scientist, Mark Runco, creative people “have broad interests, providing lots of resources to draw on and knowledge to recombine into novel solutions.”<sup>44</sup> Correlating with my own sense of creativity as primarily evoking ‘is-ness’, Hall writes,

Being is characterized in terms of its potentiality for novel synthesis. The “many things” of the world, in accordance with which the growing together of experience (the aesthetic event) *becomes*, constitute *beings*.<sup>45</sup>

This also reflects the rhizome theory of Deleuze and Guattari, described above, and encapsulates my experience, where disparate elements, over time, coalesce to create an aesthetic and conceptual totality of *being-ness*. Hall quotes philosopher, Alfred North Whitehead's philosophical correlation of science and aesthetics:

The creative process is rhythmic: it swings from the publicity of many things to the individual privacy; and it swings back from the private individual to the publicity of the objectified individual.<sup>46</sup>

In other words the artist responds to many factors in their external world and processes them internally as an innovative response. This response is then presented to the world to be interpreted by the viewer.

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<sup>42</sup> David L. Hall, *Process and Anarchy – a Taoist Vision of Creativity*, from *Philosophy East West*, Vol. 28, No. 3, (Jul., 1978), pp. 271 – 285.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid. P 273.

<sup>44</sup> Helen Phillips, *Looking for Inspiration*, From the Creativity Special, New Scientist, 29 October 2005, issue 2523. P 40.

<sup>45</sup> David L. Hall, *Process and Anarchy – a Taoist Vision of Creativity*, from *Philosophy East West*, Vol. 28, No. 3, (Jul., 1978), p 273.

<sup>46</sup> Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality: an Essay on Cosmology*, written in the 1920s where Whitehead investigates how reality can be defined as a process of becoming. The provenance of his philosophical position is partly Leibniz's Theory of Monism. Leibniz was influenced by accounts of Taoist philosophy in correspondence with Jesuit monks in the seventeenth, eighteenth centuries. Pub. The Free Press, New York, 1978. Pp 31 – 32. See also, Alfred North Whitehead's *Process and Reality*.

<http://www.angelfire.com/md2/timewarp/whitehead.html>

Hall explains that for the Taoist, “the fundamental characteristics of creativity are freedom and reflexivity, expressed through the self-realization of events.”<sup>47</sup> This describes the unfolding, graphic improvisations upon calligraphic characters practised by Taoist artists, which in part led to the immersion in corporeal process of Abstract Expressionists, discussed in detail in Chapter Four and Two respectively.

Quiet times of thinking, diversionary activity, waiting for a coalescence of inexplicable hunches, combined with factual information gathering pertinent to the research topic, however seemingly obscurely linked, leading to dynamic, hyper conscious activity where the brain and senses are firing on all cylinders describes my experience of creative research.

Hall describes the Tao as a process that:

... cannot be directly thought due to the static, form-endowing character of reason, anymore than permanence can be directly felt due to the dynamic, form-excluding quality of intuition ... The understanding of Tao-as-process requires the articulation of both the “nameless” and “nameable” aspects of the Tao.<sup>48</sup>

For Hall, “Being and non-being produce each other”, and, “Self-actualizing units of becoming contain both passive (*yin*) and active (*yang*) moments”.<sup>49</sup> The contemporary experimental artist’s transgressive tendencies are implied: Hall writes that the Taoist artist does not feel obliged to align with a specific line of reasoning, or social morés. Rather, ideas evolve as seemingly infinite improvisations that present inter-related alternatives rather than a specific end result. These ideas may conflict with convention, confound social mores, break taboos.<sup>50</sup> We should try to discern the true nature of things as they are; nothing is exempt from scrutiny but all knowledge is contingent – true nature is the “uncarved block” of the Tao.<sup>51</sup>

Nothing should be done to it. Whoever does anything to it will ruin it<sup>52</sup>

Guy Claxton has noted, "Creative synthesis requires a new pattern, to put the brain in a state where a large number of areas are simultaneously active."<sup>53</sup> Hall notes of the Tao, “Intuitive

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<sup>47</sup> David L. Hall, *Process and Anarchy – a Taoist Vision of Creativity*, from *Philosophy East West*, Vol. 28, No. 3, (Jul., 1978). P 274.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid. Pp 275, 277.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid. Chapter Two. P 103.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid. P 278. This will be expanded upon in relation to calligraphic improvisation in Chapter Four.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid. P 274.

<sup>52</sup> Lao Tzu, *Tao Te Ching*, Verse 28.

<sup>53</sup> Helen Phillips, *Looking for Inspiration*, From the Creativity Special, New Scientist, 29 October 2005, issue 2523. P 40.

understanding requires that one understands from within that which is intuited in such a manner as to appreciate the world from its perspective.”<sup>54</sup>

Hall illustrates his analysis of the Tao of creativity with a description of the quality of spatiality in Taoist painting. Spatial illusion created by the West’s technique of perspective, where the artist/viewer is on the outside, looking at, contrasts with Chinese artists’ emphasis on middle distances, where the point of view of the artist is not central to an appreciation of the painting. The viewer is drawn *into* the painting rather than looking *at* the painting.

Hall believes that to experience the excellence of the artwork:

it is necessary to experience it ecstatically, to dwell at its centre, and to envisage the universe from that perspective.<sup>55</sup>

This embodiment of the viewer in the artwork is a central axiom of much experimental contemporary art practice, particularly installation art.

### **The Application of Taoist Theory Regarding Creativity in the Thesis**

Two key artworks have been selected for detailed analysis to identify embodied characteristics that will demonstrate the infiltration of explicit and implicit Taoist influences on Western experimental visual art. These are Donald Judd’s *Untitled* (1982 – 1986), a site specific installation in the Chinati Foundation’s collection in Marfa, Texas,<sup>56</sup> and Xu Bing’s *Book from the Sky* (1987 - 1991), a text based installation.<sup>57</sup> Donald Judd’s installation is selected for several reasons, firstly because he was dedicated to a strategy of *refusal* regarding the origins and meanings of his artworks. This silence on the part of the artist tests the validity of the thesis with a challenging degree of difficulty to establish the implicit influences of Taoism. This challenge is not presented by an artist such as John Cage, who professed an interest in Taoism. Judd was, however, at the forefront of the development of installation art as an art critic, commentator as well as artist. So apart from evidence derived from analysis of his artwork, evidence may be distilled from his writings about the development of installation art.

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<sup>54</sup> David L. Hall, *Process and Anarchy – a Taoist Vision of Creativity*, from *Philosophy East West*, Vol. 28, No. 3, (Jul., 1978). Pp 281. Quote from Lao Tzu, *Tao Te Ching*, Verse 28.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid. P 282.

<sup>56</sup> Donald Judd, *Untitled*, 1982 – 1986, a permanent site specific installation of milled aluminium boxes, Chinati Foundation, Marfa, Texas

<sup>57</sup> Xu Bing’s *Book from the Sky* was produced between 1987 and 1991. The mediums are: woodblock prints, wood, leather, ivory, string, cloth. 19 boxes: 49.2 x 33.5 x 9.8cm (each containing four books). Posters for the walls (optional). Installation dimensions are variable.

Field research was carried out at Marfa Texas to analyse Judd's process of creativity in the context of Taoist creative processes. Judd's drawings for the sculptures in his installation were redrawn to more fully comprehend his thinking, then, matched with the actual sculptures to discern an improvisational method (Appendix #3). Judd's writings are also called upon to support the thesis. This methodical analysis of Judd's improvisational process for the Marfa installation is new research, its objective being to trace the nature of the influences of Taoist philosophy and cultural practices on the innovations of this Western artist's practice.

Central to the method used to research Xu Bing's artwork, *Book from the Sky*, is an interview with the artist to clarify issues related to the possibility of Taoist content and processes in his artwork, which arguably continues the Taoist process found in calligraphy of improvising upon imagery.<sup>58</sup> One would assume that Xu Bing's artwork, *Book from the Sky*, naturally lies within the province of the Tao and that, as a contemporary Chinese artist, Xu Bing's artwork lies outside the definition of Western art. First, the literature surrounding his practice refers to Taoism in passing, if at all, so analysis of his artwork from this perspective is slight. Secondly, during the nineteen eighties after the death of Mao Zedong when China opened its doors to contact with the West, experimental contemporary art began to bloom as a result of the influence of Western art forms, including installation art. Without this exposure to Western installation art it is unlikely, it can be said, that Xu Bing would have conceived of or executed such an artwork. What is of interest is the proposal that the Taoist thread implicit in installation art returned to China to be interpreted within the traditional, indigenous domain of Taoism, however assaulted the concept may have become during the Cultural Revolution. Thirdly, an analysis of this artwork, *Book from the Sky*, draws the globalisation of Western contemporary practice into the research topic's focus. These are the methodological reasons Xu Bing's artwork was selected for analysis.

Another aspect of the methodology is to use examples of artworks that illustrate specific aspects of the thesis pertinent to contemporary art from key periods since the nineteen fifties when temporal and spatial extensions of the three dimensionality of the discipline of sculpture began to take a prominent place as a locus for experimentation and innovation. For example, Rachel Whiteread's public installation, *House*, is cited as an example of Taoism's implicit influence on the development of experimental contemporary visual arts, leading to a British

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<sup>58</sup> Interview by Bonita Ely with Xu Bing, third of October, 2008 in Beijing. The interview was conducted with ethics approval from the University of Western Sydney's Human Research Ethics Committee. Project Title: *Continuity and Change: Practice based research on the influence of Taoist concepts and calligraphy on contemporary visual art practice*. The Protocol Number for this project is H6569.



artist deploying spatiality as the dominant expressive element in her sculpture (page **Error! Bookmark not defined.**).

In addition, examples will be drawn from my own studio practice for methodological reasons. These examples illustrate direct and indirect factors pertinent to identifying Taoism's influence on a Western contemporary visual artist in Australia whose experimental practice spans the period when installation art emerged as a major sub-set of the discipline of Sculpture in Australia in the nineteen sixties, to now. Citing works executed from 1969 to 2009 will indicate the evolution of the influence of Taoism on this practice, with a detailed focus upon major works produced during the candidacy between 2002 and 2009.<sup>59</sup> In this way it will become clear how my studio research from the late nineteen sixties to the present illustrates the implicit and explicit influences of Taoism on strands of contemporary art practice.<sup>60</sup> Painting, photomedia and sculptural disciplines, which deploy narratives of paradox and engage temporal/spatial qualities, typically use methodologies arguably derived in part from Taoism, of spontaneous, graphic improvisation, conceptualised using an intuitive, introspective yet intellectually informed imagination to represent ideas, or meaning.

### **Spontaneous, Graphic Improvisation as a Taoist Art Form**

Karl E. Weick's analysis of degrees of improvisation (which is usually associated with music) in the visual arts is used in the analysis of this unique aspect of Taoist graphic forms in painting and calligraphy that has profoundly influenced Western visual arts.<sup>61</sup> Calligraphic improvisation upon the longevity character is the case study used in the thesis (see Chapter Four). The influence of this creative methodology of Taoism on experimental contemporary art practice is a prime subject in the history of East West discourse examined in the thesis.<sup>62</sup> Weick devised definitions to grade the extent of graphic improvisation employed by visual artists in the planning, execution or fabrication of different kinds of artworks. His definitions are applied to key artworks in the thesis to determine their alignment with Taoist improvisational practices (page **Error! Bookmark not defined.**).

### **Fieldwork, Marfa, Texas, New York, Dia:Beacon and Beijing**

Fieldwork in Marfa, Texas, examined Donald Judd's permanent installation of aluminium boxes, *Untitled*, to analyse relationships to Taoism in his studio methodology and objectives

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<sup>59</sup> See Chapter Seven and Appendix #1.

<sup>60</sup> See Chapter One, Introduction, P 4.

<sup>61</sup> See Chapter Three for background to this influence.

<sup>62</sup> Karl E. Weick, *Improvisation as a Mindset for Organizational Analysis*, for the Special Issue: Jazz Improvisation and Organizing. *Organisation Science*, Vol. 9, No. 5 (Sept. – Oct.). Pp 543 – 555.

(page **Error! Bookmark not defined.**). For research of the influence of Taoism on Isamu Noguchi's garden and installation art, his artwork was analysed and documented in the Noguchi Museum, Queens, New York State (page **Error! Bookmark not defined.**).<sup>63</sup> The improvisational methodologies deployed in artworks by Donald Judd, Richard Serra, Agnes Martin, Dan Flavin, On Kawara and Cy Twombly were examined in the Dia Beacon collection, New York State (page 160). Fieldwork in Beijing was carried out to document and analyse, at first hand, examples of garden art based on Taoism's *fung shui* principles, to show visual evidence of its influence on European and English gardens featuring Chinoiserie. Images documented in 1996 of eighteenth century European and English garden design for the research of spatiality in garden design as a precursor of installation art have been used (page **Error! Bookmark not defined.**).<sup>64</sup>

The following chapter, Chapter Four, details the Taoist qualities embedded in calligraphy as an art form to demonstrate how Taoist principals are a model for the interpretation of contemporary art that features graphic improvisation, and site as a signifier.

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<sup>63</sup> <http://www.noguchi.org/>

<sup>64</sup> See Bonita Ely, *The Ancient History of Installation Art*, conference paper, Spatial Cultures Conference, University of Newcastle, 2 -3 June, 2001.