

## CHAPTER 7: THE STUDIO PRACTICE

In this chapter, a sample of five bodies of artwork produced during the doctoral studies will be presented as exemplars of Taoist influences, direct and indirect, on the conceptual and aesthetic development of the work.<sup>1</sup> Specifically, this is considered without a history of direct contact with mainland Chinese culture, or any formal affiliation with Taoism as a philosophical or mystical practice. The objective is to discern evidence of Taoist concepts and processes in Western art from the perspective of the artist, that is, viewed from the 'inside'. This method exploits the artist's intimate knowledge of the creative process and knowledge of the origins of ideas in the making, and of how the development of complex meanings in the artwork unfolds through the stages of making (page 88).<sup>2</sup>

Factors central to the significance of this chapter will be articulated under the section, "Background", including a clarification of any formal scholarship and research undertaken on Taoism before the candidature that cannot be categorised strictly as 'rhizomic' (see below) and in terms of these case studies.

Under the sub-heading of "Inter-disciplinary Art: an Indirect Taoist Factor", the Taoist approach to the common denominator, discipline, in all the artworks discussed in this chapter, will be analysed. Site specific installation art and time based installation art call upon an inter-disciplinary, multi-sensory approach to art making. In support of the thesis, examples of other artists' inter-disciplinary works will be cited where appropriate to further establish commonalities in relation to Taoism's influence on contemporary, experimental art practices.

The theoretical approach to establishing the parameters and nature of creativity that characterise both Taoism and the experimental contemporary art practice analysed in this chapter is outlined under the sub-heading, "Theoretical Approach".

Under the sub-heading, "Global, or Cross Cultural Art", a mitigating factor of inter-cultural discourse during the development in Vietnam of two of the artworks, a country historically

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<sup>1</sup> The major pieces produced during my PhD candidature have been selected for discussion: *Longevity: Scissors and Sickles* (2002); *Bonsai Landscape* (2003); *Wild Life Documentary* (2004); *Lake Thunder* (2006); *The Murray's Edge* (2007- 2009).

<sup>2</sup> See Chapter Three, *Mixed Methods*, for a description of the studio methodology.

exposed to Taoism, is discussed in relation to the increased porosity of cultural influence and the currency of 'global art'.

Reference to Taoist concepts in the artworks produced during the candidature will be categorised as either derived from 'direct' knowledge of Taoist principles, that is, consciously studied or researched during doctoral studies and before undertaking doctoral studies, or an 'indirect' application of Taoist principles that are encoded in Western thought through the rhizomic means outlined in Chapters Two and Three. To reiterate, those influences of Taoism, now identified as cultural norms in the West, with their origins in the rhizome-like infiltration of Taoist concepts and processes since first European contact with China, will be categorised as 'indirect' influences.

Grading will be made on the basis of the degree of improvisation employed in the creative process of each piece related to the Taoist art form, calligraphy, using Karl E. Weick's categories (page 112).<sup>3</sup> The analysis of each artwork will be preceded by a verbal description to accompany visual documentation. A detailed elucidation of the conceptual content of the artwork including the thematic subtext of 'Continuity and Change', will follow as background to arguing how Western art practice has been influenced by Taoist thought and Taoism's cultural practices. The analysis of the source and nature of Taoist influences on each piece, categorised as "Direct Taoist Inflections", and "Indirect Taoist Inflections" will then be identified.

## **BACKGROUND**

### DIRECT STUDY OF TAOISM

Research in Hué, Vietnam, prior to my candidature in 2000, of the calligraphic practice of improvising upon the common longevity character alerted me to Taoism as the source of an immense repository of graphic improvisation, and initiated this current enquiry of the Taoist art of calligraphy as an influential factor in the development of Western art. This research is described in Chapter Four. Another research project undertaken prior to my candidature, in 1993, that included inadvertent exposure to Taoist concepts related to the development of Ch'en Buddhism, was an investigation of the spatiality of Japanese Zen gardens and the conceptual significance of *ma*, or *in between-ness* for the articulation of space as an element of expression in installation art (page 35). In my research project for the Master of Arts in

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<sup>3</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.). P 545

Visual Arts entitled, *Relationships between Our Contemporary Psyche and Culturally Impacted Landscape*, various belief systems were cited, including Taoism.<sup>4</sup> A vernacular familiarity with Taoist concepts began during the 1960s, 'going with the flow', and consulting the *I Ching* as a curious oracle and profound philosophical text, followed a lecture about chance and the use of the *I Ching* to make aesthetic decisions by Alun Leach-Jones, a painting lecturer at the College of Fine Arts in Prahran, Melbourne (1968).

Apart from the above, and the accumulating knowledge of Taoism accompanying this present investigation, my experience of Taoism has been mostly through the indirect means applied to what is arguably the West's increasingly porous culture, described below, and elaborated upon in the Introduction, and Chapter Two.

#### INTER-DISCIPLINARY, MULTI-SENSORY ART: AN INDIRECT TAOIST FACTOR

All artworks produced during the candidacy analysed in this chapter are inter-disciplinary and multi-sensory, and lie within sub-sets of the discipline of sculpture, namely, site specific installation art, and time based installation art. These modes of practice have been examined in previous chapters in relation to Taoism's rhizome-like influence on Western experimental art practice.<sup>5</sup> To reiterate, the form of this inter-disciplinary approach to aesthetics and conceptualisation is arguably underpinned by cosmological verities central to the Taoist text, *Tao Te Ching*. In essence, time based installation art deploys sound, duration and motion in time as principal elements of expression to emphasise the ephemeral nature of phenomena, the transitional, transformational, all central Taoist precepts. Similarly, site specific installation reinforces the Taoist verity that all things are inter-relational, that the aesthetics and encoding of the spatiality of site, a trope for the void or the immaterial, is as significant as the materiality of object-ness. Further, Taoism's insistence upon the body and all its senses as a vehicle for enhanced awareness is present in the viewer's subjective responses and corporeal, kine-aesthetic engagement during exploratory perambulations of the artwork.

The creative process for the viewer of an open-ended approach to art interpretation is strengthened by this meditative, multi-faceted method of discerning meaning described in Ted Kafala's analysis of relationships to Deleuze's pluralist theory of aesthetics from his treatise on representation, *Repetition and Difference*.<sup>6</sup> Kafala establishes its provenance in the

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<sup>4</sup> Conferred, 1991, Sydney College of the Arts, University of Sydney.

<sup>5</sup> Donald Judd's *Untitled*, installed aluminium boxes in two remodeled artillery sheds in Marfa, Texas; Xu Bing's calligraphic installation, *Book from the Sky*; Ian Hamilton-Finlay's *Little Sparta*; Isamu Naguchi's *Garden of the Future*.

<sup>6</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Repetition and Difference*. 1968, Columbia University Press, New York. Chapters 4 and 5.

writings of Leibniz and Whitehead, and given the influence of Taoist cosmology on Leibniz, correlations to Deleuze's Post Modernist approach to non-didactic interpretation with Taoism's embracing of plurality as an outcome of the omnipotence of the transitional are note worthy:

Like the ideas of Leibniz and Whitehead, this aesthetics is premised on a perspectivism that accepts the possible existence of numerous profiles, styles, interpretations, and scenographies. Perspectivism encourages the diversity of ontological realities - constructed, plastic, and self-referential universes of the mind's inner space. As an important precept of the postmodern moment, perspectivism provides a viable explanation for a diversity of subjectivity and point of view in contemporary art.<sup>7</sup>

The meanings, or 'point of view', represented in inter-disciplinary installation art through the structural agencies of paradox - continuity and change, permanence and temporality – arguably have purchase in Western thought in part as a result of the longevity of Taoism's infiltration of Western philosophy, through the agency of Leibniz, his non-Euclidean theories, in his sixteenth century "monads of relation" and "pluralist ontology".

#### THEORETICAL APPROACH

To amplify the previous section, multiple references and paradoxical dualities problematise the artworks discussed in this chapter with the imperative of creating a conceptual complexity and the openness to change espoused by Deleuze in *Difference and Repetition*.<sup>8</sup> The thematic perimeters of each piece synthesise with fluidity, ideas and objects, quotation and imagery, to avoid a fixed, over-determined, singular meaning. Nuances, different sensations, fresh aesthetic delights (*is-nesses*) and alternative interpretations may present themselves to the viewer on each viewing. Deleuze puts it:

... pluralism is a more enticing and dangerous thought: fragmentation implies overturning. The discovery in any domain of a plurality of coexisting oppositions is inseparable from a more profound discovery, that of difference, which denounces the negative and opposition itself as no more than appearances in relation to the problematic field of a positive multiplicity.<sup>9</sup>

This "problematic field" of synthesised yet differentiated possibilities is reflected in the following observation of creative complexity from Lao Tzu's *Tao Te Ching*:

When the opposing forces unite within  
there comes a power abundant in its giving  
and unerring in its effect

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<sup>7</sup> Ted Kafala, *Deleuze's Aesthetics: Curvature and Perspectivism*. Enculturation, Vol. 4, No. 2, Fall 2002. [http://enculturation.gmu.edu/4\\_2/kafala.html](http://enculturation.gmu.edu/4_2/kafala.html) Cited June 2008

<sup>8</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Repetition and Difference*. 1968, Columbia University Press, New York. Chapters 4 and 5.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. P 204.

Flowing through everything  
It returns one to the First Breath  
Guiding everything  
It returns one to no limits  
Embracing everything  
It returns one to the uncarved block<sup>10</sup>

The “uncarved block” presents unlimited possibilities, whereas the singularity of the ‘carved block’, that is, a figure permanently fixed in form and meaning, is an anathema to creativity in Taoism’s paradigm, an alignment that points to its implicit, historic influences on contemporary thought and creativity.

#### GLOBAL, OR CROSS-CULTURAL ART

Qualities of Taoist influences on twenty-first century experimental visual arts identified in my artworks that are intentionally cross-cultural, and coined ‘global’, will be identified. The artworks produced in Vietnam and the United States of America illustrate how site specificity may enhance cultural cross-pollination. The previous chapter examined in detail one of the outcomes of cultural hybridity - the West’s easy reading in the late twentieth century of a Taoist modality as a familiar, yet unidentified trope in the work, *Book from the Sky*, by Chinese artist, Xu Bing. Similarly, Taoist qualities are invisible in a Western artist’s twenty-first century’s artworks as we shall see in the following examples.

To summarise, the thesis proposes that historically Taoism has influenced Western thinking and the development of Western art practice as a pervasive assimilation rather than as a powerful, direct force for change. This chapter identifies traces of the influence of Taoism in my site-specific installation art and time based installation art, as an Australian artist. Using the following series of artworks as exemplars, extrinsic and intrinsic references to Taoism as an influence on a particular Western contemporary, experimental artist’s practice will be identified and analysed from my perspective as the artist.

## THE ARTWORKS

### ***LONGEVITY: SCISSORS AND SICKLES***

This public sculpture, entitled *Longevity: Scissors and Sickles*, was produced in Hué, Vietnam in 2002 (*Fig 1*).<sup>11</sup> It is a filigreed three dimensional structure, 2.8 metres high and 1.26 metres

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<sup>10</sup> Lao Tzu, *Tao Te Ching*. Verse 28.

<sup>11</sup> Bonita Ely, *Longevity: Scissors and Sickles*, 2002. Sand cast bronze; 1.26m. diameter x 2.8m H. Public sculpture commission, *Third International Sculpture Symposium: Hué, Vietnam*. Location, Thuy Tien Lake, Thien An, Hué.

in diameter, composed of casts of scissors, sickles and machetes. A local foundry cast the tools in a 'bronze' composed of scrap metal, including shrapnel gleaned from the fields and bombed sites after the Vietnam War. The tools are braised together to form a three dimensional interpretation of a gourd-shaped longevity character. The longevity character was selected from a screen of one hundred embroidered characters from the Buddhist pagoda, Chua Van Phuoc (**Error! Reference source not found.**).



*Fig 1: Bonita Ely, Longevity: Scissors and Sickles (2002). Sand cast bronze; 2.8 metres high, 1.26 metres, diameter. Public sculpture commission, 3rd International Sculpture Symposium, Hué, Vietnam.*

The idea of the artwork is to celebrate Vietnamese women's hard manual work and the resilience of the feminine. The scissors used to construct it are different shapes and sizes - embroidery snips, dress maker's shears, hair cutting scissors, large kitchen shears, small nail scissors, and general purpose paper scissors - all associated with women's work, including midwifery. The sickles, machetes and knives are tools that are also used by women for agricultural labour (*Fig 3*).

All the tools have historical significance as traditional, handcrafted objects, fashioned by local blacksmiths to be sold in Hué's open markets (*Fig 2*). The second time I visited Hué, in 2000, I noticed factory-made scissors were beginning to appear, so, predictably, the artwork is becoming a record of the everyday tools that historically were crafted by blacksmiths in Hué.



Fig 2: Blacksmith at work in Hué, 2002.

Photo. B.Ely 2002.

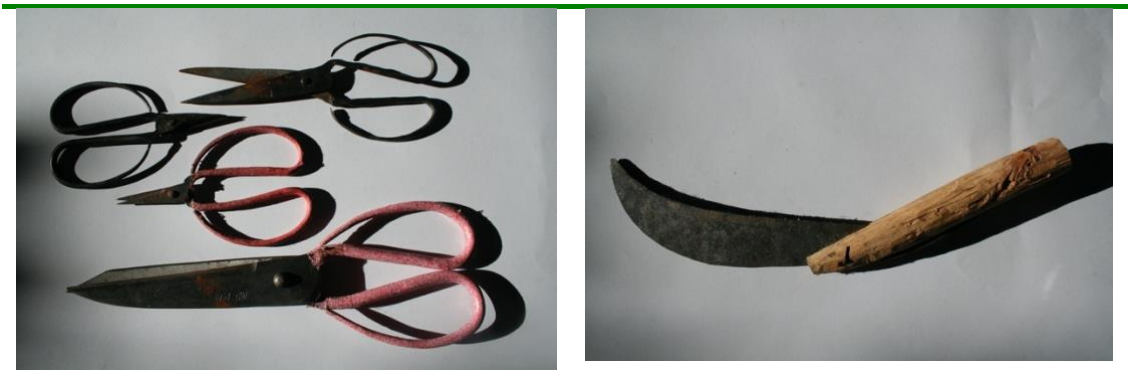


Fig 3: Examples of Hué's hand made scissors and sickles.

Photo: B. Ely, 2002.

*Longevity: Scissors and Sickles* is located in a garden outside Hué, at Hué Huy Tien Lake, Thien An. Now a recreation area with a large commercial tourist development, the lake with its surrounding natural environment endures in the community's memory as a historically significant place where, during the Vietnam War, people collected pinecones for their cooking fires when the usual sources were depleted.

*Longevity: Scissors and Sickles* is shaped like a gourd symbolising 'longevity'. Different forms of the longevity character are commonplace in Hué as familiar, resonant, Taoist symbols.<sup>12</sup> The longevity character shaped like a gourd has additional significance as a sign for 'good health', 'good fortune' in *feng shui*, and is associated with 'release', as "it is the emblem of Li

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<sup>12</sup> See Chapter Three.

Tie Guai, one of eight immortals of Taoist mythology. Li Tie Guai was a powerful magician who possessed not only the secret to immortality but the ability to travel outside his body. Li carried the elixir of immortality in a gourd, which is an allegory for the body as the container of the soul".<sup>13</sup>

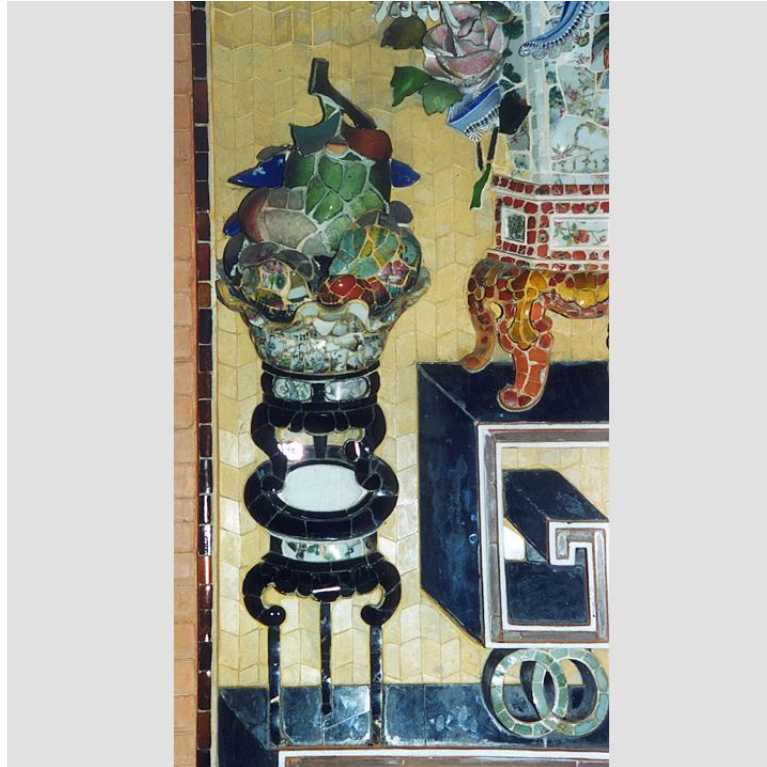


Fig 4: Example of a gourd-like vessel and furniture signifying longevity at the mausoleum of Emperor Khai Dinh. Bas relief mosaic using broken crockery. Photo. B.Ely 2000.



For Westerners, sickles as miniature scythes of the Grim Reaper have been associated with finality, the Big Snip, death.



Conversely in Communist Vietnam the sickle is also a symbol associated with the Communist Party. Cultural exchange between Vietnam and Russia was commonplace before 1996. After 1996, *doi moi*, an opening up to the West, became foreign policy along with a

<sup>13</sup><http://altreligion.about.com/library/glossary/symbols/bldefsgourd.htm> Cited, Oct., 2008.



distancing from the Soviet Union.<sup>14</sup> The multiple meanings associated with the sickle are a feature of cross-cultural artwork where familiar tropes from the viewer's culture arguably factor into interpretations as much as the artist's intentions, as discussed in Chapter Six regarding the reception of artworks by Xu Bing in the West.

The sickles at the top of the sculpture look like horns, or weapons, in contrast with the contained, maternal shape of the gourd. The 'horns' bring to mind Vietnam's historic struggles for independence. Responding as an Australian to Vietnamese culture and the graciousness of the people, it is impossible to forget Australia's part in the 'American War', the Vietnamese people's history, their prolonged, tenacious defense of their country.<sup>15</sup> It is noteworthy that the Taoist accepts that war is at times unavoidable, but peace is desired above all, which explains the Vietnamese people's capacity to proceed in peace despite justifiable grievances, without the rancor that so often poisons other cultures. Lao Tzu wrote in the *Tao Te Ching*:

One who knows the Tao never turns from life's calling  
When at home he honours the side of rest  
When at war he honours the side of action  
Peace and tranquillity are what he holds most dear  
so he does not obtain weapons  
But when their use is unavoidable  
he employs them with fortitude and zeal<sup>16</sup>

The 'horns' on the sculpture also signify the male principle in duality with the female form of the gourd. This harmonic duality is an intrinsic quality of the original Taoist longevity character, carried over to the sculpture.

In *Longevity: Scissors and Sickles* the gourd is fashioned from objects that paradoxically signify both cutting, and creating. This construct embodies continuity (enduring creativity) and change (the cut, the finish) – the tools for cutting, scissors and sickles, infer the end, mortality, yet cutting tools make up the symbol of longevity, signifying long life.

#### DIRECT TAOIST INFLECTIONS

My research in 2000, outlined in depth in Chapter Four, investigated graphic improvisation upon the longevity character, along with its interpolation in three dimensional forms, as a

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<sup>14</sup> <http://www.nationsencyclopedia.com/Asia-and-Oceania/Vietnam-HISTORY.html> Cited, Oct. 2008.

<sup>15</sup> Before the French and America and its allies, the Chinese had invaded and occupied Vietnam for the most part of a thousand years. "111 BC: The Nam Viet kingdom (spreading from the Red River delta to north of Canton) is annexed by the Han and becomes the Chinese district of Giao-chi. The next thousand years is marked by progress in civilization, but also in the national sentiment. Numerous uprisings most notably the Trung sisters (40-43) and Ly Bon (542-545) rebellions, are crushed. During the entire Vietnam history, China remains both a model and a threat."

<http://www.terragalleria.com/vietnam/info/timeline.html> Cited August, 2008.

<sup>16</sup> Lao-Tzu, *Tao Te Ching*. Verse 31.

reflection of the Taoist philosophy of creativity. The form of the sculpture, *Longevity: Scissors and Sickles*, is derived from one such longevity character, selected for its feminine, vessel-like imagery (Fig 5).

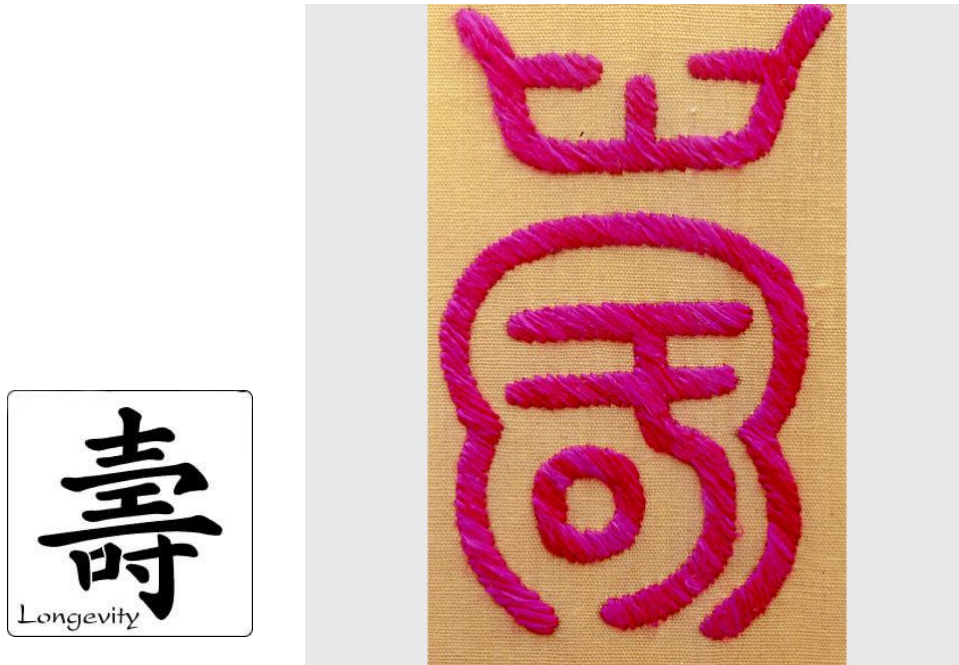


Fig 5: A gourd shape (row 1, #5) from the embroidered screen of longevity characters, Chua Van Phuoc, compared to the common longevity character (left) from which it is derived.

Returning to Karl E. Weick's categorisation of graded degrees of improvisation<sup>17</sup> (page 112), an examination of improvisation in the artworks discussed in this chapter will underscore the direct influence of Taoism upon my artworks. The degree of improvisation deployed in *Longevity: Scissors and Sickles* falls within Weick's second category, embellishment:

Embellishment requires a greater use of the imagination with departures from predictable or prescriptive themes, compositions or narratives.<sup>18</sup>

The common Longevity character is composed of seven pictograms. This version of the character quotes five of the pictograms from the common longevity character.<sup>19</sup>

From the top, pictogram #1 is inverted, opening up like a vessel's brim:

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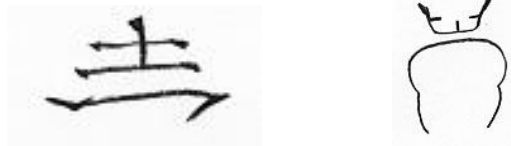
<sup>17</sup> Karl E. Weick, *Improvisation as a Mindset for Organizational Analysis*, for the *Special Issue: Jazz Improvisation and Organizing*. *Organisation Science*, Vol. 9, No. 5 (Sept. – Oct.). P 545

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.* P 545.

<sup>19</sup> See the section, *The Construction of the Longevity Character* in Chapter Three, page 111.



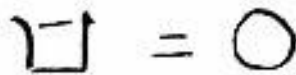
Pictogram #2 is extended down and curved, left and right, to describe the shape of a gourd.



Pictogram #3 is combined with pictogram #5.



Pictogram #7, the square shape is made into a circle.



Pictograms #4, 5, 6, and 7 are removed from my representation of this character, emptying the form. The conceptual significance of this emptying is discussed below.

My research of Taoist longevity characters in 2000 directly informed my manipulations of this motif for the artwork, *Longevity: Scissors and Sickles*.

#### INDIRECT TAOIST INFLECTIONS

The sculpture as vessel arguably emphasises spatiality as a Taoist vehicle for meaning, signifying the feminine principle. There are several sources in Taoist practices and iconography for the conceptual origins of this trope, principally in *feng shui* and the *yin yang* symbol. The following quote from the *Tao Te Ching* correlates cosmic emptiness (*wu*) with space, relates space to the vessel, the vessel (womb) with life (birth), implicating the duality of the Taoist *yin* and *yang* symbol,<sup>20</sup> where form is the male principle and spatiality signifies the feminine:

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<sup>20</sup> See Chapter One.

*Wu* is nothingness, emptiness, non existence

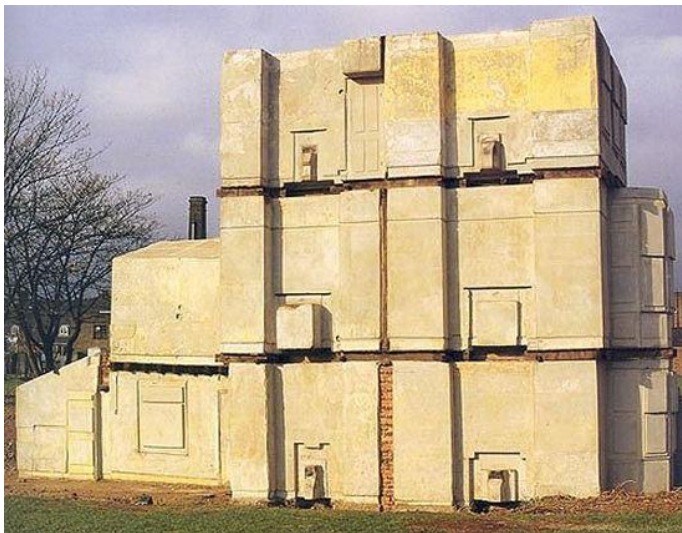
Thirty spokes of a wheel all join at a common hub  
yet only the hole at the centre  
allows the wheel to spin

Clay is molded to form a cup  
yet only the space within  
allows the cup to hold water ...

Thus, when a thing has existence alone  
it is a mere dead weight  
Only when it has *wu*, does it have life<sup>21</sup>

An extreme application of spatiality as a metaphor for the female principle can be found in the artwork, *House* (1993), by Rachel Whiteread (*Fig 6*).<sup>22</sup> Here the male principle, the house as object, is removed to reveal a cast of the subjective space in which families' intimate memories, nurture, domestic dramas and abject privacies are concentrated – emotional time condensed in base matter - a monumental home, naked for all to see, as James Lingwood expresses it:

It set a familiar past in the space-time of today; it made present something which was absent; it was the space of a house no longer there. Secondly, however, it worked spatially: it turned the space inside out. The private was open to public view....the intimate was made monumental and yet retained its intimacy.<sup>23</sup>



*Fig 6:* Rachel Whiteread, *House*, (1993), concrete. The cast house was the last terrace left after demolition for urban renewal in East London. After much controversy the council demolished the sculpture.

<sup>21</sup> From the *Tao Te Ching*, Verse 11. NB. *Wu* - nothingness.

<sup>22</sup> Rachel Whiteread (1963 - ), best known for her casts of the spaces of objects, rooms and most famously, a whole house for which she won the Turner Prize in 1993.

<sup>23</sup> James Lingwood (editor), Rachel Whiteread's *House*, Phaidon Press, 1995. P 36.  
[http://www.damonart.com/myth\\_uncanny.html](http://www.damonart.com/myth_uncanny.html)

Although other factors, such as metaphoric associations with the casting process may be read into the interpretation of Whiteread's oeuvre, such as absence, death, it could be argued that a reading of spatiality as the feminine principle, extending to associations with the female, is expressed and is powerfully present in *House*, indirectly linking it to Taoist symbology. The same sentiment of emphasising the female principle symbolised by a familiar Taoist trope is present in *Longevity: Scissors and Sickles*.

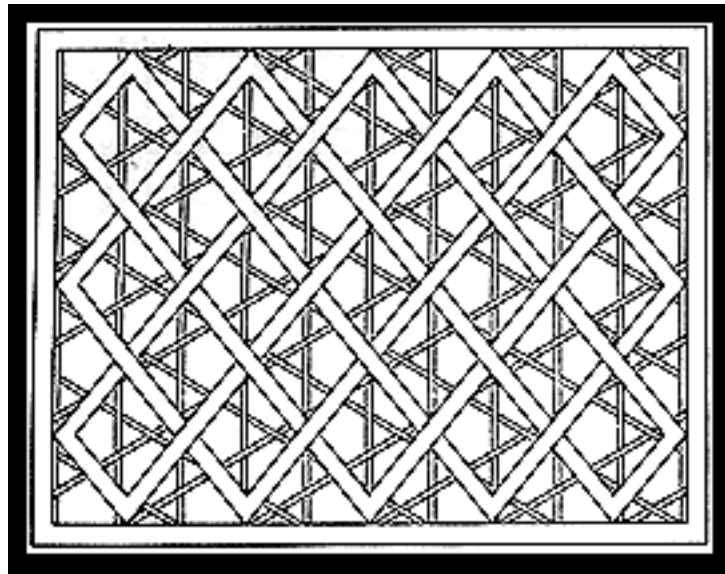


Fig 7: An example of Chinese lattice design showing interlocking linear elements to build tensile strength, a structural system symbolic of how small things come together to make a whole.

*Longevity: Scissors and Sickles* depends for its engineered strength on the structural properties of the Chinese lattice (Fig 7), a system that demonstrates the Taoist belief that the whole is dependant on the inter-relatedness of all things:

The pieces of a chariot are useless  
Unless they work in accordance with the whole  
A man's life brings nothing  
Unless he lives in accordance with the whole universe<sup>24</sup>

*Longevity: Scissors and Sickles* quotes the aesthetics of Arte Nouveau and Arte Deco which were significantly influenced by the West's exposure to Chinese culture in the Modernist Era.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>24</sup> Lao Tzu, *Tao Te Ching*, Verse 39.

<sup>25</sup> See Chapter Two, page 69.

Quotations of the lattice, Chinoiserie and English pleasure gardens also underpin Fiona Hall's pagoda entitled *Folly for Mrs. Macquarie* (2001) in Sydney's harbourside Botanical Gardens.<sup>26</sup> Here the imagery that makes up the lattice is barbed wire and endemic plants of the Sydney Basin (*Fig 8*). Her ironic combination of the 'masculine' imagery associated with colonial intrusion with the pagoda's feminine form relate closely to the Taoist tropes from Europe's colonial era discussed above – binary polarities that exploit the significance of place and spatiality for their reading and aesthetic.



*Fig 8:* Fiona Hall, *Folly for Mrs. Macquarie*, (2001)metal, Sandstone. Sydney Botanical Gardens, 2001. Photo. B. Ely, 2008.

Both *Longevity: Scissors and Sickles*, and *A Folly for Lady Macquarie* call upon the context of place, the enduring landscape, for a sense of continuity in which the changes wrought by historical events and humanity's endeavors are represented.

### **LAKE THUNDER**

The public sculpture, *Lake Thunder*,<sup>27</sup> is a towering metal structure in the form of a zig-zagging thunder bolt (*Fig 9*). It is painted electric blue using photovoltaic paint. During the day the paint stores solar energy so it glows in the dark at night. It is sited beside Thuy Tien Lake, outside Hué, Vietnam. Suggested by the following associations, the image has multiple meanings. Most obviously it is the international, industrial safety sign warning of the danger of electric shock. In an armoury, it is a warning of the danger posed by static electricity. The zig-zag also

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<sup>26</sup> Fiona Hall, born 1953, Sydney. *Folly for Mrs. Macquarie* was commissioned by the City of Sydney for the Sydney Sculpture Walk, on the occasion of the Sydney Olympic Games.

<sup>27</sup>*Lake Thunder* (2006). Tube steel, photovoltaic surface; 6 metres high. Public sculpture commission, Fourth International Sculpture Symposium, Hué, Vietnam. Located at Thuy Tien Lake, Thien An, Hué, Vietnam.

colloquially signifies thunder and lightning, energy and life. The zig-zag form quotes the sign used to indicate loud sound, violence or pain in the graphic language of comics. Here the thunderbolt is a complex sign rising up out of the earth, signifying the threat of global, environmental degradation, and its opposite, the abiding, mysterious power of nature. It sits ambiguously as a celebration of natural forces and an environmental warning signal.



*Fig 9: Bonita Ely, Lake Thunder (2006). Tube steel, photovoltaic surface; 6 metres high. Thuy Tien Lake, Thien An, Hué, Vietnam.*

Photo: B. Ely, 2006.

This reading is amplified by the luminous electric blue surface glowing in the dark at night, like a scepter (*Fig 10*).



Fig 10: Bonita Ely, *Lake Thunder* (2006) showing the effect of photovoltaic paint at night.  
Photo: Tien Le Thua, 2002.

#### DIRECT TAOIST INFLECTIONS

Like *Longevity: Scissors and Sickles*, the sculpture, *Lake Thunder*, is an interpolation of existing imagery but here it is derived from a sumi brush and ink drawing executed in 1987 (Fig 11).



Fig 11: Bonita Ely, *Thunderbolt*, (1987). Sumi brush and ink painting on water colour paper. This sculptural interpretation of two dimensional imagery corresponds with the Taoist practice of interpreting calligraphic characters in three dimensions. Here the interpretation is direct



rather than embellished, so it corresponds with Weick's first category of improvisation, interpretation:

The artist interprets a known subject, often using plans, drawings, sketches and marquettes to prepare for the execution of a pre-planned artwork.<sup>28</sup>

The painted image was first converted to three dimensions in 1991 for an exhibition composed of three installations entitled, *We Live to be Surprised*.<sup>29</sup> The first installation, a group of nine repeated forms entitled, *Thunderbolts*, stood 2.2 metres high, the sculptures' components slotted together without need for metal fittings like the joinery used in traditional Chinese architecture (Fig 12, Fig 13).



Fig 12: Bonita Ely, *Thunderbolts* (1990), the first of a trilogy of installations for *We Live to be Surprised*. Nine sculptures, stained plywood, 2.2 metres high.

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<sup>28</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.

<sup>29</sup> Bonita Ely, *We Live To Be Surprised* (1991). Sculptural installation, Performance Space, Sydney. Examination presentation for the degree, Master of Art (Visual Arts), Sydney College of the Arts, University of Sydney. Conferred in 1991.



Fig 13: Bonita Ely, *Thunderbolts* viewed from the yellow lit corridor.



The exhibition's composition as a whole intentionally reflected the Taoist *yin yang* diagram.<sup>30</sup> In the West this symbol is colloquially interpreted as a balance of opposites, which is essentially an overlay onto the symbol of the West's tendency to see wholeness as balanced yet conflicted binaries. The symbol's original Taoist meaning is significantly different. Rather than a symbol of static polarities, the Taoist *yin yang* symbol describes two complementary, interdependent phases that alternate in space and time. They evoke the *interplay* in a state of flux, of the binaries that make up the universe, each containing something of the other, never totally opposed, in harmony, not conflicted.

The *yin* and *yang* arise from the Chaos of the creation time. This chaos is inherently ambivalent and continues to inhabit all dualities, which may be distinguished in terms of 'nature', 'culture'. These opposites connect, the one subverting the essence of the other so that in Taoist cosmology order may be found in the chaos of nature, which brings to mind the example of fractals, and nature may disrupt the artificial conventions imposed by culture. In his *Introduction to Myth and Meaning in Early Taoism: the Theme of Chaos (Hun Tun)*,<sup>31</sup> Girardot describes the nature of Taoism in relation to chaos as:

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<sup>30</sup> See Chapter One: Introduction.

<sup>31</sup> N. J. Girardot, *Myth and Meaning in Early Taoism: the Theme of Chaos (Hun Tun)* (1983), University of California Press.

The acceptance of 'civil' order as the definitive and true meaning of all order, as well as the basis for the very structures of reality, is to efface the intrinsic mythological connection between the wild and polite orders of chaos and cosmos, nature and culture. The gulf spontaneously created by the primal grin of formless matter is the empty source of the light and sound of created nature and human culture.

The Tao is therefore seen as a regenerative system where the sage's goal is to cultivate flexibility to circumstance, transgressively returning to the chaos condition, the Great Unity, rather than live unthinkingly in conformity to social convention. It is seen as a cyclic regeneration, a way of living creatively in the world, by knowing the secret of creation.

Thus chaos, rather than order, provides a way of viewing the world. The Tao is the primal Mother of all things. The Tao brought into existence a chaotic wholeness before the creation of the world, which occurred when Heaven and Earth separated. "The two mingle, penetrate, come together, harmonise and all things are born thereof".<sup>32</sup> The *yin* and the *yang* together, where opposites merge, embodies the amorphous primal chaos where they merge and return to the Tao.

In 1990, Performance Space had two almost identically proportioned spaces that were divided by a corridor.<sup>33</sup> This architectural layout was used like a squared off version of the *yin yang* symbol for *We Live To Be Surprised*.

Placed in the first room, the fiery red, dynamic *Thunderbolts* reared up out of the 'ground', signifying both the forces of Nature and the Earth's distress signals. Rather than free flowing power of electric energy from the firmament, the lightning bolts had an ominous relation to the earth. The viewer experienced a changed corporeal state as they moved from this *yang* room through the corridor illuminated with dense, yellow light. The space was a void, a place of metamorphosis between fire and water, nature and culture, present and future. In the opposite room, hybrid creatures hid in towers made from watery, white washed timber. The decrepit towers, eroded by natural forces, represented past cultural endeavors, past architectures of an unknown function, now inhabited by *Snabbits*: improbable creatures genetically engineered from the rabbit and snail – nature perverted (*Fig 14*).

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid. Lao Tan explaining the cosmic scenario to Confucius.

<sup>33</sup> Performance Space in 1990 was upstairs in the Cleveland Street, Redfern address.



Fig 14: Bonita Ely, *Snabbits* (1990) from *We Live to be Surprised*, installation, Performance Space. Plaster, wood, white wash.

#### INDIRECT TAOIST INFLECTIONS

The initial translation of the thunderbolt image made with a sumi brush into a three dimensional figure in 1990 unknowingly followed the Taoist practice of converting two dimensional calligraphic forms into three dimensions. The gestural sumi painting, made spontaneously during a session of 'stream of consciousness' idea building in 1987, was converted using this Taoist method. Similarly, the spontaneity of the sumi brushwork, with its origins in Taoist calligraphy and brush and ink painting, endow the proportions of the lightning bolt image with dynamic energy, a conceptually sound, aesthetic basis for sculptural interpretation.

The title, *Lake Thunder* brings the sculpture's site into focus as an essential aspect of the work in accordance with the precepts of *feng shui* described previously in relation to the Taoist influence on landscaping and garden design, that arguably has so profoundly influenced earth art and installation art. The conjunction of lake and thunder refers to traditional Taoist philosophical tropes:

THUNDER stands for our true essence, LAKE stands for our true sense, WATER stands for our real knowledge, and FIRE stands for our conscious knowledge. These four are the true 'four forms' inherent in us ...<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Chang Po-Tuan, *The Inner Teachings of Taoism*, commentary by Liu I-Ming, translated by Thomas Cleary, Shambala Books, 1986. P 18, 19.

During the making of the piece, spectacular thunderstorms rent the sky above the lake. *The Inner Teachings of Taoism*<sup>35</sup> described the Taoist symbolism in the quote above, of the lake and thunder, water and fire. A site was chosen for the artwork in a grove of delicate pines beside the lake. The title, *Lake Thunder*, juxtaposes natural features observed at the site, and those dualities that in Taoist philosophy make up humanity's ideal, inherent nature.

The sculpture, *Lake Thunder*, intuitively embodies within a single integrated form, a complex intertwining of dualities that correlate with the Taoist symbol, *yin* and *yang* – the aggressive upward thrust of energy (male) is sited amongst gentle nature (female); a 'hot' form is painted icy blue; it simultaneously images creation and destruction, fire and water (*Fig 15*).



Fig 15: Bonita Ely, *Lake Thunder*, viewed from below.

The theme, continuity and change, is expressed in a dynamic image signifying the transitional, seasonal phenomenon of lightning storms, and fluid energy forces, within a place signifying the enduring qualities of the endemic, natural environment. The location is of historical and emotional significance about times of upheaval and deprivation for the local people.

### **BONSAI LANDSCAPE**



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<sup>35</sup> Ibid. P 18, 19.

Hundreds of small, crisp, white cardboard cut outs, folded and glued like free standing, 'point of a sale' advertisements make up the sculptural component of this installation.<sup>36</sup> The repeated objects are precisely placed in rows so they turn in increments of 45 degrees to the left, then to the right, robot-like, in controlled conformity. From one particular viewpoint the viewer can see only a dense forest; from the opposite vantage point the folded sculptures form an intricate, non-figurative, tonal panorama, emptied of imagery - a blank (Fig 16, Fig 17, Fig 18).

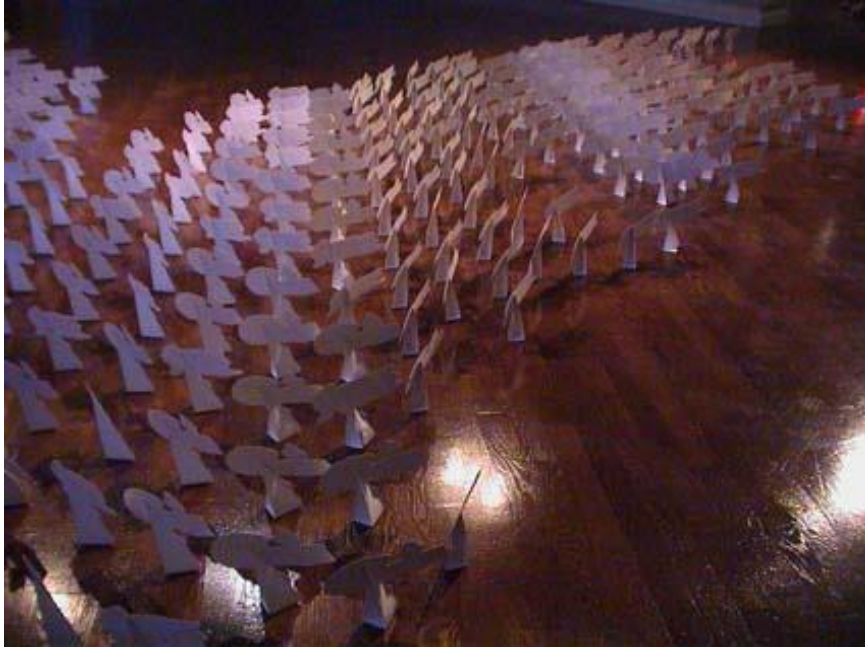


Fig 16: Bonita Ely, *Bonsai Landscape*, view showing the images.

Photo B. Ely, 2004.

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<sup>36</sup> Bonita Ely, *Bonsai Landscape* (2003 – 2004), installation for the survey exhibition of Australian site specific installation art, *Outside Inside: Fragments in Place*, Museum of Art, Brigham Young University, Salt Lake City, Utah, USA. Curated by Dr Campbell Grey, Director of the Museum of Art. The invitation to exhibit in the survey exhibition requested a site specific artwork in response to research of Salt Lake City, its contextual environs, including its Mormon context. During preparatory fieldwork iconic sites throughout the state of Utah were explored, along with observations of the Mormon religion, society and culture. The artwork, *Bonsai Landscape*, was adapted in 2005 for the National Sculpture Prize exhibition, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra.



*Fig 17:* Bonita Ely, *Bonsai Landscape*, view showing the images all facing away from the viewer like the backs of point of sale advertisements to reveal the landscape as a facade. Photo B. Ely, 2004.



*Fig 18:* The forms transform and shift like a slowly unfolding animation as the viewer perambulates around the ensemble. Photo B. Ely, 2004.

The most numerous image is of a bonsai tree derived from a shaped grove of trees on the hillside opposite the exhibition venue, the Museum of Art, that resembled a brush and ink painting of a bonsai tree (*Fig 19, Fig 20*).<sup>37</sup>



*Fig 19:* View from the Museum of Art, Brigham Young University, Salt Lake City. The incidental observation of the bonsai-like grove of trees (see below) on the hill outside the venue formed the basis for the installation of sculpture and video, *Bonsai Landscape*, for an exhibition in 2003 of Australian site specific art at the Museum of Art, Brigham Young University, Salt Lake City. Photo: B. Ely, 2003.



*Fig 20:* Bonsai tree imagery isolated from the photograph in *Fig. 164*.

This image was paired with a photograph of a rock and fire hydrant taken in a Salt Lake City suburban shopping mall.<sup>38</sup> A beautiful pink quartz rock had clearly been transported to the site as a decorative element for the car park's 'landscaping' and placed beside a bright yellow fire

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<sup>37</sup> Correlations between Taoist calligraphy and brush painting will be examined in the section, *The Art of the Brush*, on the artwork, *Wild Life Documentary*, page 258.



hydrant with two blue rectangles like masked eyes painted above its nozzle, on a small manicured shape of green lawn beside the vast, stark, asphalt surface (*Fig 21*).



*Fig 21*: Car park landscaping, Provo, Salt Lake City.

Photo: B. Ely, 2003.

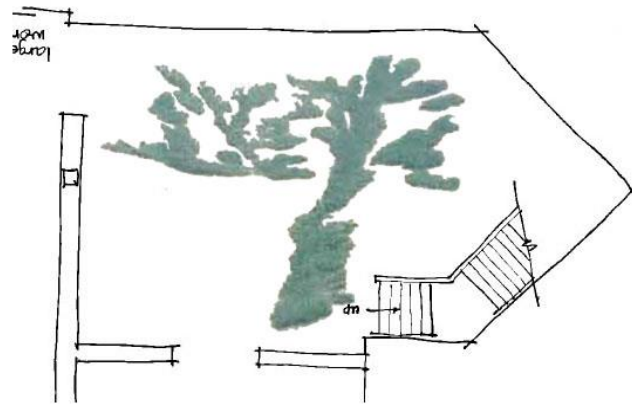
Scattered randomly throughout the installation are the anthropomorphised protagonists described above: a brain-like, inscrutable rock 'in dialogue' with a wicked-looking, masked fire hydrant on a neatly mowed nature strip. They are secured to a stem from the bonsai image to make a morphological sign (*Fig 22*).



*Fig 22*: The two protagonists randomly dispersed.

Photo: B. Ely, 2004.

These cardboard sculptures together inscribe a huge bonsai shape on the gallery floor (*Fig 23*).



*Fig 23:* Plan showing placement of the installation in the gallery space.

Two video monitors are located on the staircase above the installation (*Fig 24, Fig 26*).



*Fig 24:* Monitors framing repetitions of the 'bonsai' image as it appears on the hill outside the gallery in real time and a time-lapse video of a particular day. Photo: B. Ely, 2002.

A time-lapse video shows the transformations of this landmark outside the museum on a particular day, from the dark before dawn, to the dark of night. The footage was shot for fifteen

seconds at thirty minute intervals so the viewer sees the shifting sunlight and shadow metamorphise colour and tone, sees the weather changing with cloud shadow, a tree rustling in the rising wind, birds flying into shot.

Alongside the repetitions of time-lapse is a closed circuit television (CCTV) that shows the hillside in the viewer's real time, now, outside the museum, as they watch. This component in the installation quotes Yoko Ono's *Sky TV* (Fig 25). A Fluxus artist, Yoko Ono made perhaps the first video artwork of a similar theme, certainly her first and only video piece, in 1966. Foreshadowing the use of closed circuit television for surveillance, Yoko Ono placed a camera on the roof of the venue, trained onto the sky to transmit live footage of the ever changing sky to a monitor in the gallery, electronically penetrating architecture from outside to inside. The artwork focuses not on people, but on the infinity of space and the transience of natural phenomena, referring to the Zen and Taoist precept of contextualising the human ego with a greater matrix. Yoko Ono says of the piece:

The sky shines equally to us so it doesn't care who is rich. Everyone can share the sky all the time. When we got poor and have a hard time, the sky shines eternally.<sup>39</sup>



Fig 25: Yoko Ono, *Sky TV* (1966). A Fluxus artist, Yoko Ono's artwork often draws the viewer's attention in simple ways to their place within nature and its riches.

A direct, real time broadcast of pilots' radio communications with Salt Lake City airport's control tower is the soundtrack of the video works in *Bonsai Landscape*.

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<sup>39</sup> <http://www.orbit.zkm.de/?q=node/24> Cited, Feb. 2009.

The form of *Bonsai Landscape* evolved with exposure to the Salt Lake City environs and culture. The frequent use of biblical names to identify landscape features in Utah was noted during field trips to locations such as the Zion National Park, with its Virgin River, Angels Landing, Great White Throne, Cathedral Mountain, names superimposed over the landscape by early settlers to mythologise their sublime, unfamiliar environs. Mukuntuweap was the indigenous people's name for the canyon.<sup>40</sup> The title of the installation, *Bonsai Landscape*, ironically refers to the settlers' aggrandising culturalisation of the natural environment. The ironic reference to bonsai art, a 'virtual' tree, within the context of the American West's grand narrative of taming the wilderness against great odds uses the same imaginative method to culturalise a natural landscape feature used by the early European settlers, and before them, the Indigenous American inhabitants.



*Fig 26:* The installation, *Bonsai Landscape*, showing the video works on two monitors on the staircase landing, with radio transmitted sound of pilot's flying overhead, overlooking the bonsai shaped sculptural component.

The installation alludes to the high level of social conformity demanded by ideologically based strictures, which are by no means exclusive to the Mormon faith.<sup>41</sup> The grid structure also relegates life forms to the efficient systems of commerce. Both these meanings are an anathema to Taoist philosophy, which encourages spontaneity and individualism. Quoting advertisements, the installation's objects were commercially manufactured, using the same

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<sup>40</sup> "The biblical name of Zion National Park was given by the Mormons, who convinced President Wilson in 1918 to change the existing name of Mukuntuweap National Monument to Zion National Monument."

<http://www.zionnational-park.com/zion-national-park-landmarks.htm>

<sup>41</sup> The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

methods to make point of sale advertisements - free standing objects made from printed flat surfaces and folded cardboard. This alludes to the natural environment as a consumer item and reflects the aesthetic of mechanical repetition in commerce's visual environment.

Representing a regulated, cultivated, facade of nature, the installation philosophically invites meditation upon humanity's sense of separation from wild-ness, its perceived superiority over other species, that for the Taoist is delusional thinking. The ensuing compulsion to control and tame nature, humorously signalled by the rock and fire hydrant component, is accentuated by perambulation like a Colossus over the tiny landscape and the discovery that the reverse of the image reveals a facade, a blank, and alienation.

The fascinating quality of an otherwise banal image of a fire hydrant and a rock is its role as a catalyst for our compulsion to anthropomorphise vernacular objects – the viewer, like the artist, imagines that the rock resembles a brain, the fire hydrant a mechanised gangster-like figure. They seem to be in dialogue. Humanity's inventions of tools and accoutrements that extend the body to increase our corporeal capacities, is further extended by our imaginative projection of psychological narratives upon inanimate objects. This creative imagining is integral to Taoist brush and ink painting.<sup>42</sup>

Using repeated, highly processed imagery, this artwork expresses controlled yet fantasised constructions of concepts of Nature. The ironic image of a fictional, reproduced and mechanically repeated bonsai tree derived from Utah's 'as big as Texas' landscape alongside the fanciful fire hydrant and rock - a Zen, car park-style, Utah dry garden - suggests that, like Leonardo da Vinci's stains on a wall,<sup>43</sup> meanings can be ascribed to anything. This artwork examines our complicated ontological relationships to the natural environment. It reminds us that the transcendent sensations associated with our subjective experience of the aesthetic of 'wild-ness', where we feel a small part of a great unity, are matched by our impulse to culturalise nature. The transcendent sensation of 'is-ness' converges with concepts of 'wilder-ness' as we travel through the landscape, viewing it through glass windows, pointing out the names of features, feeling the restorative properties of nature as a psychological resource, consuming a compressed and packaged commodity called 'wilderness'.

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<sup>42</sup> See section on the Bithry Inlet paintings, *Wild Life Documentary*. Kiyohiko Munakata and Yoko H. Munakata (1974), *Ching Hao's Pi-fa-chi: A Note on the Art of Brush*. *Artibus Asiae Supplementum*. Vol. 31. Pp 1 -56.

<sup>43</sup> Leonardo da Vinci, from his *Treatise on Painting*: "just by throwing a sponge soaked with various colors against a wall to make a stain, one can find a beautiful landscape".  
[http://www.mirabilissimeinvenzioni.com/ing\\_treatiseonpainting\\_ing.html](http://www.mirabilissimeinvenzioni.com/ing_treatiseonpainting_ing.html)

Nature's actuality as a biological, geological phenomenon, an organic entity independent of our manipulations is alluded to in comparative imagery.

The sound of pilots communicating in the sky above the museum with Salt Lake City airport's control tower is a reminder of the hidden, multi-dimensionality of contemporary tendency towards social control, where the earth's atmosphere serves as a cultural conduit of the virtual. Spaces between the actual, mediated by technology, and the virtual, mediated by materiality, temporality and stasis, real time and representations of time passing, enjoins the viewer in a slippage between change and continuity.

Deleuze writes of the virtual:

Perhaps the highest object of art is to bring into play simultaneously all these repetitions, with their differences in kind and rhythm, their respective displacements and disguises, their divergences and decentrings; to embed them in one another in illusions the 'effect' of which varies in each case. Art does not imitate, above all because it repeats; it repeats all the repetitions, by virtue of an internal power (an imitation is a copy, but art is simulation, it reverses copies into simulacra).<sup>44</sup>

Lao Tsu wrote in the *Tao Te Ching* that:

Seeing your own smallness is insight<sup>45</sup>

By 'bonsai-ing' the natural environment, yet amplifying it by repetition to make a field of imagery, the installation shifts the corporeal scale of the viewer to that of Gulliver<sup>46</sup> as a catalyst towards contemplation of Deleuze's "internal power" of "simulation" and the Toa's "smallness" as "insight".

The time-lapse video of the bonsai image showing its transformations over a day's duration is an animation of change, temporality, the metamorphosis of organic, natural processes. Compared to this, the closed circuit televising (CCTV) of the actual hillside outside the venue, and the radio transmitted sound of the pilots overhead, accentuated inescapable presence of 'now', as well as the hidden, continuous surveillance of CCTV as a feature of contemporary, civic control.

The cardboard cut outs are static and unchanging. They represent social conformity and the efficient commodification of nature. But as the viewer perambulates around the piece, the

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<sup>44</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Repetition and Difference*. 1968, Columbia University Press, New York. P 293.

<sup>45</sup> Lao Tzu, *Tao Te Ching*, Verse 52.

<sup>46</sup> Jonathan Swift, *Travels into Several Remote Nations of the World by Lemuel Gulliver*, common title, *Gulliver's Travels* (pub. 1726, amended in 1735) where a traveller experiences being tiny and giant in comparison with the inhabitants of different 'worlds'. <http://www.jaffebros.com/lee/gulliver/> Cited Aug 2008.

static image transforms making the viewer a participant in change, bringing the sculptures 'to life', and, paradoxically, revealing the installation's simulacrum – a facade of nature.

#### DIRECT TAOIST INFLECTIONS

Returning to Karl E. Weick's categorisation of graded degrees of improvisation outlined in Chapter Three,<sup>47</sup> the degree of improvisation employed in *Bonsai Landscape* falls within Weick's third category of variation:

The relationship to traditional themes, subjects and narratives<sup>48</sup> is still evident, but are emphasised or extracted as subjects in their own right.<sup>49</sup>

Correlating this degree of improvisation to calligraphy, the original character is still recognisable, but aspects would be transformed sufficiently to create a distinctly different image. Applied to *Bonsai Landscape*, the origins of the imagery are evident but transformed to a degree that as signifiers, they are extended beyond their visual and conceptual origins.

#### INDIRECT TAOIST INFLECTIONS

The Taoist garden art of bonsai is the forced miniaturisation and aesthetic shaping of a tree in a pot to create a tiny representation of an aesthetically 'untamed' landscape, akin to the imagery of Taoist landscape painting. Bonsai gardening is commonly associated with Japanese culture, however it is a Chinese horticultural invention from the Chou Dynasty, 900 – 250 BC known as *pun-sai*. It was introduced to Japan by means of Ch'en Buddhism during the Kamakura period (1185 – 1333).

... the practice of creating miniature trees and landscapes should be viewed against the backdrop of two of China's great philosophical traditions, Daoism (Taoism) and Zen Buddhism ... Tuning into the rhythm of Nature and understanding the interrelatedness of all things around us are key components of Daoist teachings.<sup>50</sup>

At the time I made *Bonsai Landscape* I was not aware of the origins of the bonsai form in Taoist gardening practices, only its apt philosophical significance for the artwork.

A full appreciation of the artwork, *Bonsai Landscape* is largely achieved by perambulation so that the viewer experiences its transformation from a field of imagery to a blank. Experimental

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<sup>47</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.). P 545.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid. P 545.

<sup>48</sup> Here this refers to genres such as landscape, the journey, the vernacular.

<sup>49</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.

<sup>50</sup> <http://www.venuscomm.com/Penjingdef.html> Cited August, 2008.

contemporary installation art is characterised by the necessity for the viewer to explore the artwork rather than be a passive viewer, just as all aspects of a Chinese garden must be experientially discovered over time.<sup>51</sup> Installation art draws upon the practice of 'walking meditation', associated with Zen Buddhism, which has its origins in the Taoist's belief that the seeking of truth accompanies everyday activities. The Taoist practice of engaging in prescribed physical activity, such as *tai chi*, breathing exercises, includes the meditative engagement in everyday activities, such as walking and gardening.

Together the imaging of the theme, continuity and change, summarises the complex nuances of *Bonsai Landscape's* conceptual content using the conceptual structure of Taoism's *yin* and *yang* symbol. Earth is represented by the inert rock (*yin*); the tree represents living nature as changing and transitional (*yin*) yet here the image is mechanically reproduced, an inert facade of nature. The binary elements, fire (*yang*) and water (*yin*), are represented by the fire hydrant. Yet fire and water, the most volatile and changing of nature's forces, are represented by a mechanised object that embodies humanity's efforts to subdue the volatile, and preserve continuity. The rock is in stasis, bound by gravity and represents nature as continuity, yet is crystalline, delicately metamorphic, changing. Thus each element paradoxically contains its opposite, which can be ascribed as symbolic of continuity and change.

#### **WORLD WILD LIFE DOCUMENTARY**

This body of artworks, presented as a time based installation under the ironic title, *World Wild Life Documentary*, is composed of sumi brush and ink paintings on paper, depicting one relatively unknown location, Bithry Inlet on the South Coast of New South Wales (*Fig 27, Fig 28, Fig 29, Fig 30*).<sup>52</sup> Works on paper, produced over approximately twenty years, are contextualised by videos, and presented as an equivalent, time based medium. The videos combine real time and time-lapse footage so the viewer can see how the landscape transforms throughout a particular day, in a particular place.<sup>53</sup> The time-lapse videos are placed alongside a narrative based video entitled *Wild Life Documentary: Including Blue Heeler Buckley's Map of Australia*.

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<sup>51</sup> See discussion of Chinoiserie and Ian Hamilton-Finlay's garden, *Little Sparta* in Chapter Two, page 25.

<sup>52</sup> Exhibited in Sutton Gallery, Melbourne, 2004, Bellas Gallery, Brisbane, 2005, Performance Space, Sydney, 2006, in *The Cleveland Street Project*, a group exhibition to mark the closing of Performance Space's Cleveland Street venue in Redfern, and the opening of Performance Space at Carriage Works.

<sup>53</sup> The same method was used for the Bithry Inlet videos as for the time lapse/real time documentation for the installation, *Bonsai Landscape*.





Fig 27: Bonita Ely, brush and ink painting of Bithry Inlet.

Comparative examples of the works from *Wild Life Documentary*, painted on different occasions, illustrate the seemingly unending variations of meaning achieved by a spontaneous Taoist approach to interpretive landscape painting using the expressive qualities of sumi brush technique.



*Fig 28:* Bithry Inlet, dusk, 2006.

Photo. B. Ely, 2006.



*Fig 29:* Bithry Inlet, low tide, January, 2007.

Photo. B. Ely, 2007.



In January, 2007, on a crystal clear sunny day the treetops on the headland at Bithry Inlet were sharply defined by the direction of sunlight and shadow. I began with a simple tonal render of the headland opposite showing its form and tonal shifts using an economy of strokes (Fig 31).



Fig 31: Bonita Ely, Bithry Inlet, January, 2007. Ink on water colour paper.

During the second version I focused on the treetops' crenulations, thinking about our neighbour of past times, Manning Clark,<sup>54</sup> whose family property was the subject of my painting. I imagined his headland property looked like his large brain's folds contemplating Australia, thinking its way through our past, a brain pulsating with ideas in the Australian bushland opposite (Fig 34, Fig 33, Fig 36, Fig 37).

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<sup>54</sup> Manning Clark (1915-1991), Australian historian. Manning had died when the paintings were executed. His family holiday home nestles in the bush opposite the Grounds family property, Penders, where the paintings were made. <http://www.unimelb.edu.au/150/150people/clark.html>



*Fig 32: Bonita Ely, Manning Clark's Brain (2007). Soft strokes containing incisive marks suggestive of the folds of a brain. Ink on water colour paper.*



*Fig 33: Bonita Ely (2006). Crenulations of the tree tops. Ink on water colour paper.*

The tide was receding to expose a narrow channel through an unusually large expanse of exposed and undulating sand. The channel became a spinal cord attached to the 'brain' (*Fig 34, Fig 35*).



*Fig 34:* Bonita Ely (2006). Cranium with spinal cord. Ink on water colour paper.



*Fig 35:* Bonita Ely (2006). The paper was moved too soon, the ink ran, the 'brain' became a slug with a snail trail.



*Fig 36:* Bonita Ely (2007) Brain-like trees on Manning Clark's headland.



*Fig 37:* Bonita Ely (2007). Manning Clark's headland with trees that look like the crenulations of a brain in a certain direction of sunlight.

In comparison, a very wet and windy Easter in 2008 produced the following artworks (*Fig 38, Fig 39, Fig 40*):



*Fig 38:* Bonita Ely (2008). *Bithry Inlet, Wind*. Ink on water colour paper.



*Fig 39:* Bonita Ely (2008). *Bithry Inlet, Rain*. Ink on water colour paper.



*Fig 40: Bonita Ely (2008). A numinous fulcrum. Bithry Inlet. Ink on water colour paper.*

Storms had carried away sand at the mouth of the estuary exposing rocks that were often buried (*Fig 41*).



*Fig 41: Bonita Ely (2008). Rocks, water, waves. Bithry Inlet, Ink on water colour paper.*





Fig 42: Bonita Ely (2008). Exposed rocks. Bithry Inlet. Ink on water colour paper.

The objective of this repeated activity is to capture my *experience* of and thoughts about the landscape rather than a *realistic* image of it.<sup>55</sup> The Lao Tzu's *Tao Te Ching* metaphorically describes this imaginative bounty:

How the universe is like a bellows!  
Empty, yet it gives a supply that never fails;  
The more it is worked, the more it brings forth.<sup>56</sup>

These images are accompanied by videos that contextualise the temporal nature of the paintings with the time based medium, video. For example the video, *World Wild Life Documentary: Including Blue Heeler Buckley's Map of Australia* is composed of a bricolage of footage recorded over ten years that records uninformed and informal observations by the artist of natural phenomena, including the activities of human beings as a member of the animal kingdom. This video presents the artist as an amateur observer of nature. The autobiographical, episodic, anthropomorphic content is in ironic contrast to scientifically based wildlife documentaries such as those of David Attenborough, to which the title of the video ironically alludes.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Alva Noë, *Experience and Experiment in Art*, Journal of Consciousness Studies (August-September 2000), 7(8-9): pp 123-136.

<sup>56</sup> <http://alandpeters.tripod.com/taoteching> Lao Tzu, *Tao Te Ching*, Verse 5.

<sup>57</sup> [http://www.bbc.co.uk/nature/programmes/who/david\\_attenborough.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/nature/programmes/who/david_attenborough.shtml) Sir David Attenborough is a BBC television broadcaster, conservationist and writer who has specialised in producing informative, populist documentary nature programs such as *Life on Earth* (1984), *The Private Life of Plants* 1995) and *The Life of Mammals* (2002).

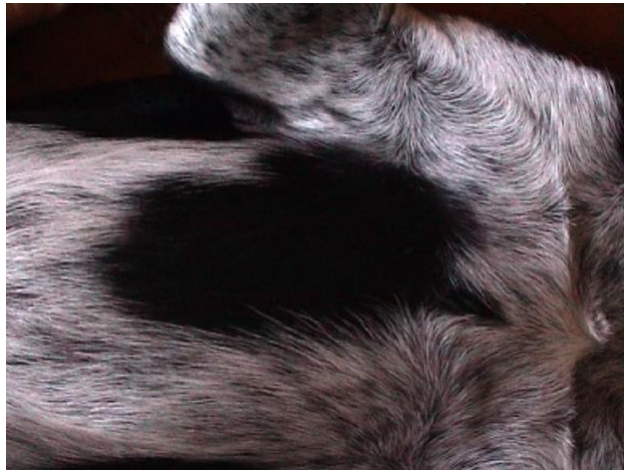


Fig 43: Showing off blue heeler Buckley's map of Australia.

Narrative episodes showing the intimacy of family and friends present the human as an animal intent on social interaction, and significantly, a compulsive desire for inter species communication (Fig 43). Aesthetic, rhetorical, disjunctive and subjective interventions overlay acute yet affectionate observation to define our stance when engaged in interactions with nature.

In contrast, time-lapse videos documenting the passage of time and change at Bithry Inlet record a day of nature's unedited processes from before dawn and after dusk. The artist is removed from the interpretive, selective process that usually determines art production, allowing natural phenomena to dictate aesthetics, action and content. For example, the fifteen seconds of the chanced activities occurring every thirty minutes may capture birds flying through shot, people, wallabies on the beach, changes of light, sounds, wind, weather and tide.

The removal of human determinism gives the viewer objective information on what actually occurred on a specific day, rather than the ultra subjectivity of the painting process and that of the video, *World Wild Life Documentary: Including Blue Heeler Buckley's Map of Australia*.

Whereas the installation *Bonsai Landscape* addresses concepts of continuity and change primarily through stasis, metamorphosis and temporality, this body of work, exhibited as a time

based installation, has one continuous subject, the location, Bithry Inlet, representing continuity, yet an accumulating collection of sumi brush paintings, produced over approximately twenty years, contextualised by the videos of this location, depicting different responses with each new encounter with the same landscape. Continuous phenomenological and perceptual change is in accord with Taoism's conception of the universe as a ceaseless flow of energy.

DIRECT TAOIST INFLECTIONS:

Returning to Karl E. Weick's categorisation of graded degrees of improvisation characteristic of Taoist art forms such as calligraphy,<sup>58</sup> the degree of improvisation employed in the *Wild Life Documentary* sumi brush paintings falls within all of Weick's categories – interpretation, embellishment, variation, and improvisation (page 112).

INDIRECT TAOIST INFLECTIONS:

A profound infusion of Taoist philosophy into Western thought concerns the sharpening of Western artists' sensibilities towards natural phenomenon and its conservation. The West has a tradition of romantic regard for nature as a sublime force that fundamentally, humanity wrestles with, either as a hapless victim, or as a tested but ultimately victorious superior being aided by a deity whose approbation is sought and received. Taoism in contrast integrates humanity within natural processes as one factor in a multitudinous, infinite, complex, cosmos.

The West's perception of humanity as *opposite to* nature is further problematised, as the paradigm carries over to build a construction of reality composed of conflicted binary correlations such as:

EITHER	OR
humanity	nature
culture	nature
masculine	feminine
mind	body
intellect	instinct
analytical	irrational
order	chaos
us	other
conscious	unconscious
rational	emotional
clear	obscure
science	arts
light	dark
good	evil
white	black
spirit	matter

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<sup>58</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 545 - 555.

day  
open  
exterior  
phallus

night  
enclosed  
interior  
vagina

This dualistic, oppositional way of ordering phenomena results in 'difference' being perceived in a way that has formed hierarchical cultural values based on simplistic oppositions. Social conflicts arising from Fascism [them/inferior/democratic - us/superior/authority], racism [black - white] and sexism [female - male] for example, are supported by these oppositional perceptions. Similarly, natural phenomenon is associated with the female principal, that is, 'Mother Nature', an instinctual entity of nurture, yet needing to be controlled, vulnerable to exploitation.

In this model, the complexities of the transitional, similarity within difference and the transgressive, that is, the indeterminate and non-conforming, the similar, the changing, are not factored in. Serendipitous complexities are also unaccounted for.

In contrast, the Taoist binary model is aimed at achieving a harmony of shifting oppositional forces to create a concept of unified universality, where opposites are perceived as making up the 'soup' of a chaos from which they emerged, and to which they belong as a shifting flux of intertwined inter relationships. Here nature is seen as the revered source of reality, not just sustenance.

Every return to Bithry Inlet revealed a changed character of landscape and a different imaginative response (*Fig 44*). This playful, metamorphic approach to painting aligns with Taoism's theme of the importance of a primordial accord with nature as a metamorphic totality, each particle transforming and returning, expressed in Taoist painting through imaginative innuendo rather than the realism of traditional Western art. Miranda Shaw summarises this as follows:

... motifs, in which energy spirals and becomes mountains, clouds and animals, express a vision of the unity of life in which all things are transformations of a universal substance moved by a single, unifying principal<sup>59</sup> ... even things often regarded in the West as inanimate – such as rivers, rocks , and clouds – are considered to be alive and sentient.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Miranda Shaw, *Buddhist and Taoist Influences on Chinese Landscape Painting*. Journal of the History of Ideas, Vol. 49, No. 2. (April – June, 1988). P 192.



Fig 44: Bithry Inlet as an imaginary sea creature from 1989. Ink on Water colour paper.

Atomistic visualisations of life forces characterise the history of Chinese metaphysics.<sup>61</sup> Joseph Needham<sup>62</sup> describes this as a “philosophy of organism”, which Joseph Wu points out was initiated by Leibniz, developed by Hegel and completed by Whitehead.<sup>63</sup> “This type of philosophy is obviously not static metaphysics, but process philosophy”.<sup>64</sup>

Joseph Wu, in his article *Chinese Language and Chinese Thought*, compares scientific and artistic method, the former describing the particular in general terms whilst the artist reveals universals by means of the particular, producing “the pleasure of empathy and the enjoyment of sensory qualities”.<sup>65</sup> It may be argued that the calligraphic approach to painting deployed by Modernists such as Bonnard and Matisse, the Abstract Expressionists, meets this definition, synchronistically spanning across to scientific thought to what Fritjof Capra coined as *The Tao of Physics*, his exploration of relationships between quantum physics and Taoist principals.<sup>66</sup>

In Verse Five of the *Tao Te Ching* Lao Tzu writes:

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<sup>61</sup> Joseph S. Wu, *Chinese Language and Chinese Thought*, Philosophy East and West, Vol. 19, No. 4, (Oct. 1969), p 431.

<sup>62</sup> Joseph Needham, *Science and Civilization in China*, (1956), 4 vols. New York, Cambridge University Press, II, Pp 291, 496, 505.

<sup>63</sup> See Chapter Two.

<sup>64</sup> Joseph S. Wu, *Chinese Language and Chinese Thought*, Philosophy East and West, Vol. 19, No. 4, (Oct. 1969), p 431.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid. P 432.

<sup>66</sup> Fritjof Capra, *The Tao of Physics: An Exploration of the Parallels Between Modern Physics and Eastern Mysticism* (1975), Shambhala Publications, Berkeley, California <http://www.spaceandmotion.com/Philosophy-Fritjof-Capra.htm>

The Sage is unkind:  
He treats the people like sacrificial straw-dogs.<sup>67</sup>

This verse expresses Taoist views upon the 'species-centric' beliefs of humanity as separate from and superior to other species. Straw dogs, used in ceremony, are discarded after their purpose is over. The Taoist philosopher believes humanity is part of the process of life like all other biological phenomena, not a special species. In this way Taoist principles have contributed to an increased awareness in the West of a need for humanity to realise the consequence of an ontological paradigm that sets humanity apart from nature, that arguably, has resulted in the rampant destruction of the natural environment. Taoist principals clarify the urgent need for environmental conservation against the increasing pollution of earth and atmosphere, the destruction of natural environments, global warming, species devastation and depletion of resources.

The video, *Wild Life Documentary: Including Blue Heeler Buckley's Map of Australia*, takes this secular view of the human condition, affectionately exploring humanity's interactions with nature, and unwitting status as a pest, the mammalian equivalent of cane toads.

The following investigation of relationships to Taoist calligraphy found in the Bithry Inlet sumi brush paintings is structured by Kiyohiko Munakata's and Yoko H. Munakata's<sup>68</sup> translation and analysis of the ancient text, Ching Hao's *Pi-fa-chi*, or, *A Note on the Art of Brush*, which they describe as "one of the most important documents in the history of Chinese art theory".<sup>69</sup>

### **The Art of the Brush**

For the sage, Ching Hao, the aim of painting is not a matter of representing forms:

..but of capturing Reality or Truth, and the Reality is only brought into painting when the artist in the process of painting is mystically unified with the Cosmic act of Creation. Through this process, the artist can create in his painting a true microcosm which is filled with *ch'i* [life force, or vital force] ... We can compare this idea with the Taoist concept of "inner elixer", which is this same microcosm developed within one's own body.<sup>70</sup>

This correlates with a summary in the Great Treatise of the *I Ching*:

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<sup>67</sup> <http://alandpeters.tripod.com/taoteching> Lao Tzu, *Tao Te Ching*, Verse Five.

<sup>68</sup> Kiyohiko Munakata and Yoko H. Munakata (1974), *Ching Hao's Pi-fa-chi: A Note on the Art of Brush*. Artibus Asiae Supplementum. Vol. 31. Pp 1 -56.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid. P 1. The principles described in this text apply to the West's adoption of China's gestural, abstracted, and spontaneous painting technique, such as in Abstract Expressionism. See Chapter Two.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid. P 3.

... in this way man comes to resemble heaven and earth and its order ... His wisdom embraces all things, and his tao brings order in the whole world.<sup>71</sup>

Ching Hao's document takes the form of a series of lessons in the art of painting by a Taoist sage who encounters a poor, untutored young farmer attempting to paint. The sage expounds upon Six Essentials that must be mastered to execute a painting of quality:

*Ch'i* – spirit or universal life;

*Yün* – resonance, or the resonating life force in individual objects;

*Ssu* – thought, or selectiveness in the defining of essential forms in nature;

*Ching* – Scene, or compositional or meteorological setting;

*Pi* – Brush, or movement and force of brushwork;

*Mo* – Ink, or the use of ink for naturalistic representation.<sup>72</sup>

The Six Essentials have their origins in Taoist calligraphy, which traditional Chinese artists mastered as a prerequisite for painting. There are six main strokes, with nine variants, that embody the Taoist principals of tensile strength, balance and aesthetic spatiality as an expression of figure and ground, form and space, *being and nothingness*, in calligraphy.<sup>73</sup> The horizontal stroke for instance must have the tensile strength of a bone, or bamboo bending slightly under its own weight – attenuated, bowed, elegantly thicker at each end. The action of making each stroke requires a balance of movement, back and forth: to go forward one must begin in reverse. To end a stroke, one expresses a balanced, linear energy. This action expresses equilibrium, the *yin* and *yang*, creating a characteristic 'knob' at the beginning of a stroke, and a defined yet free ending.

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid. P 4. Quoting from translation of *The Book of Changes* by Richard Wilhelm/ Cary F. Baynes [Princeton, 1967, pp. 293 – 295].

<sup>72</sup> Ibid. P 5.

<sup>73</sup> Prof. W. Simon, *How to Study and Write Chinese Characters: Chinese Radicals and Phonetics* (1967), pub. Percy Lund, Humphries and Co. Ltd, London. Pp xxviii – xliv.







1 horizontal stroke	( <i>heng</i> ) = R. 1	
2 vertical stroke	( <i>shu</i> ) = R. 2	
3 a dot	( <i>dean</i> ) = R. 3	
4 downstroke to the left	( <i>piei</i> ) = R. 4	
5 a hook	( <i>gou</i> ) = R. 6	
6 downstroke to the right	( <i>nan</i> )	

Fig 45: Calligraphic mark making comprised of combinations of six different strokes.

There are rules to follow in the construction of a character. For example, the top graphic units of a compound character must be written before the bottom units, working from left to right. These rules and subtleties combine to enliven the brushwork, creating *ch'i*, the *resonance* and *force* described in Ching Hao's *Six Essentials* for painters.

A master calligrapher may break all these rules.

Whist relatively untutored, I have, since art school, practised sumi brush painting using ink on rice paper and water colour paper to make rapidly executed works on paper (Fig 46). Pursued since approximately 1989 for relaxation each year at Bithry Inlet during family vacations, this activity could be described as a 'hobby', or 'bus driver's holiday'. This vernacular context need not diminish the artistic objective of the activity: to capture spontaneous responses to landscape by mastering the calligraphic brush, which is very different to the manipulation of a Western paint brush.



Fig 46: Bonita Ely, Bithry Inlet. Ink on Vietnamese rice paper.

The technique requires a different way of holding the brush: it is held vertically by laying the handle upright along all four fingers, holding it in place with the thumb. The action of painting engages the whole hand, wrist, arm and torso as the brush moves horizontally across the



page to create directional lines, whilst simultaneously moving vertically, up and down, to create the line's thicknesses and thinness. At times the brush is rolled between fingers and thumb, or is rotated, daubed and flicked by the wrist to splay the ink.

This requires a proprioceptive<sup>74</sup> mastery of a very different kind to Western painting technique as the mark making must be precise – there are no second chances offered by corrective over painting. A controlled spatial relationship between the tip of the brush and the surface of the paper must be maintained throughout the process, effecting a melding of body and mind, reconciling the mind/body split encouraged by the West's wilful, analytical thinking, the favouring of intellectual analysis, and concomitant unconsciousness of the corporeal as the vehicle of biological wholeness.<sup>75</sup>

The mind must be instantaneously cognoscente of the quality of line, *and*, simultaneously, the spatiality created by the lines on the blank page. The spatiality is the 'void' from which the image emerges as an abstracted, temporal phenomenon. In Taoist thinking the void, the amorphous flow of energy, represented by the blank page, is the reality. The compositional interplay of line and spatiality is compounded by the interpretative representation of the subject before the artist.

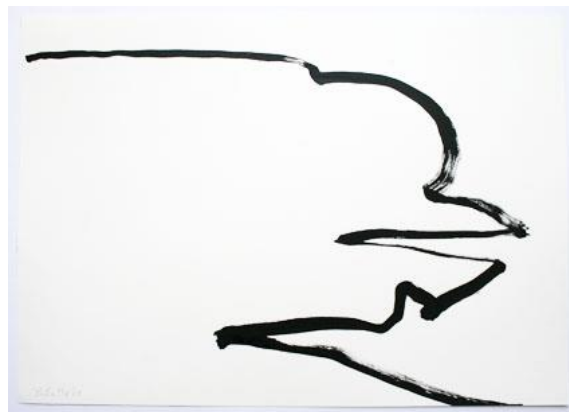


Fig 47: Bonita Ely, Bithry Inlet, low tide. Ink on water colour paper.

Serendipity tempers this process – the recognition of chance in concert with intentionality dictates rapid, discerning decision making during the process of creativity. This is in accord with the Taoist maxim to bend with and exploit circumstance rather than apply force to achieve a positive outcome, the foundation of the Taoist martial art and meditative exercise, *t'ai chi*.

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<sup>74</sup> Definition: proprioception, n: the ability to sense the position and location and orientation and movement of the body and its parts. <http://dictionary.die.net/proprioception> This includes an innate awareness of the position of the brush in motion in relation to the body and paper's surface.

<sup>75</sup> Descarte's maxim, "I think, therefore I am" epitomises this disjuncture of mind and body.

This holistic engagement of mind and body in subject, form and medium enables the expression of an imaginative immersion in the surroundings, cognitive processes and actions.

To conclude, this activity has been a meditative, rejuvenating process with the ecstatic dimensions of experience produced by “dwell[ing] at [the] centre”.<sup>76</sup> Hall promotes Taoism’s *t’ai chi* to reach centred-ness. He writes, “To be centred one must be relaxed, yet intent, focused and congruent with each aspect of one’s psychophysical being”,<sup>77</sup> a perfect description of sumi brush painting whilst on vacation.

### **THE MURRAY RIVER PROJECT**

In this section the Taoist process of creativity as an anarchic activity aimed at provoking social discourse will be examined in relation to environmental issues.

Rivers and streams are born of the ocean  
All creation is born of Tao  
Just as all water flows back to become the ocean  
All creation flows back to become Tao<sup>78</sup>

In 1977, in response to reports of rising levels of salination and a lowering water table - the cause of die back of red river gums, and the loss of arable land in the Murray River Basin - I drove from a location upstream from Corryong where the Murray River is a swift flowing, fresh mountain stream, downstream to the Coorong, stopping to document five locations that typify the different geological characteristics of the Murray River. They were:

Near Corryong: mountain stream with pebbled bed;  
Barmah Forest: slow, wide meandering river with a clay bed;  
Junction of the Murray and Murrumbidgee Rivers near Boundary Bend: sandbar;  
Near Swan Reach: cliffs of limestone combined with sandstone;  
Coorong, Lake Alexandrina and Lake Albert: the river’s estuary

To document these sites, an archeological, or cartographic-like method was used. Grids constructed momentarily from sticks and string at the river’s edge were photographed from above to capture and map the microcosm of the location’s characteristic features, along with

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<sup>76</sup> David Hall, *Process and Anarchy: a Taoist Vision of Creativity*, Philosophy East and West, Vol. 28, No. 3, (July 1978). P 282.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid. P 282.

<sup>78</sup> Lao Tzu, *Tao Te Ching*, Verse 32.

photographs of their context. This experience, and accumulative visual material, provided a rich resource for *The Murray River Project*, which continued from 1977 into the 1980s.

### **MURRAY RIVER PUNCH**

The most provocative artwork from 1980 was a performance entitled *Murray River Punch*<sup>79</sup> - a “smooth talking cooking demonstrator”<sup>80</sup> whose punch recipe comprised all the pollutants entering the river at that time, including sewage, European carp, salt and insecticide (*Fig 48, Fig 49, Fig 50*).

#### **RIVER MURRAY PUNCH**

The River Murray began etching its 2530 kilometers across the land 100,000,000 years ago. Its waters have sustained tens of thousands of generations of people.

Today, at the “estuary” of this mighty river, we can savour a quality of water surpassing in flavour the requirements of mere sustenance of life. This elixir has been carefully nurtured since the mid-1800s by enthusiasts dedicated only to improving nature’s often imperfect bounty. Here, for the first time in print, is the secret of their untiring efforts —

#### **— RECIPE —**

(Made with liquefier, serves 6)

Place the following ingredients in liquefier in order given.

**4½ cups Deoxygenated Water**

**1 Tbl. Sp. Powdered European Carp**

**2 Tbl. Sp. Agricultural Chemicals**

**¼ Cup Human Urine**

**¼ Cup Human Faeces**

Cover jar and run machine for 7-10 minutes. Simmer juice on low heat and add

**1½ Cups Salt**

stirring until salt is dissolved. Remove from heat and stir in

**2 Tbl. Sp. Phosphate Compound Fertilizer**

**2 Tbl. Sp. Nitrogenous Compound Fertilizer**

Cool to 6°C below room temperature. Garnish with fresh, finely chopped Venezuelan Water Hyacinth and dried rabbit dung. Serve in small glasses.

*Fig 48: The recipe for the Murray River Punch performance published in Lip magazine, 1980.*

<sup>79</sup> Exhibition history of *Murray River Punch*: 1980 George Paton and Ewing Gallery, Melbourne University. *Women at Work*, a festival of women’s performance art; 1981 *Murray River Punch*, performance, Rundle Street Mall, Adelaide, during an Experimental Art Foundation artist in residency. DOCUMENTATION: 1983, Continuum, Survey of Australian Art, G Art Gallery, Tokyo, Japan; 1994, *25 Years of Performance Art in Australia*, survey exhibition of performance art and documentation, (travelling) Ivan Dougherty Gallery, Sydney, Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane, Australian Centre of Contemporary Art, Melbourne; 2003, *This was the Future: Australian Sculpture of the 1950s, 60s, 70s and Today*, Heidi Museum of Modern Art, Melbourne; 2008, Solo exhibition, Milani Gallery, Brisbane; *Heat: Art and Climate Change*, RMIT Gallery, Melbourne.

<sup>80</sup> Linda Williams, *Heat: Art and Climate Change* (2008), catalogue, pub., RMIT University, Melbourne. P 9.



*Fig 49:* Bonita Ely (1980). Performing *Murray River Punch*, 1980, in the Melbourne University Union building; adding human faeces to the mixture.



*Fig 50:* Bonita Ely (1980). "Cheers", the *Murray River Punch* performance concludes in Rundle Mall, Adelaide.

### **THE MURRAY'S EDGE**

*The Murray River Project* has been revisited thirty years later in 2007, 2008 and 2009 in response to the critical disassembling of the Murray Darling Basin's ecology during thirty years of mismanagement, exacerbated by prolonged drought.<sup>81</sup>

The recent project, in addition to photographing the original 1977 locations to repeat the performative enactment of cartographic documentation, examined other locations where environmental damage is at crisis point (see Appendix #1). Lake Boga, Lake Benanee and Bottle Bend are uniquely endemic subsidiaries of the Murray River system. Normally the lakes are fed by the Murray. The creeks bringing water to these lakes have been blocked to save the water for irrigation. Bottle Bend, a billabong near Mildura, has urine coloured water turned to sulphuric acid, an outcome of the severity of the drought and the lowered water table, which is now out of reach of the vegetation's root systems.

Other locations near Tooleybuck, Robinvale and Euston were spontaneously photographed to present socio-psychological causes, an archeological approach, and the aesthetics of environmental indications of the severity of the river's degradation.

The Murray River works arise from a personal concern for the river as I was brought up in Robinvale, a Second World War Soldier Settlement town producing grapes and oranges by irrigation from the Murray River.

The most didactic of the artworks produced during the candidature, the objectives of *The Murray's Edge* project are twofold: to visualise for the viewer the severity of the environmental destruction of the river system, and the psychological attitudes that underlie the river's exploitation and neglect.<sup>82</sup>

The Murray River is the largest river in Australia, is the border of the two most populated States, Victoria and New South Wales, and as an outcome of its critical condition has often been featured in the media, but people remain ignorant of the river's location, its characteristics, and the reasons for its deplorable condition. The artworks bring to the viewer the aesthetic power of the river, the tipping point it has reached environmentally, and emotive evidence of humanity's disregard for essential natural resources.

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<sup>81</sup> Research for *The Murray's Edge* funded by a Faculty Research Grant, College of Fine Arts (COFA), University of New South Wales (UNSW).

<sup>82</sup> These were also the objectives of the research for the previous *Murray River Project*.

The objective of the Murray River research project is to capture a holistic sense of the why, how and what of the Murray River's parlous state. Comparison of the river in 2008 and 1978 through the *Murray River Punch* performance and *The River's Edge* bring to reality the sublime natural force of the river, and, paradoxically, the abject state of its degradation.<sup>83</sup> The tragic, aesthetic majesty of the river juxtaposed with evidence of its rapid, depleted decline reflects with urgency the Taoist thematic, 'continuity and change'.

#### INDIRECT TAOIST INFLECTIONS

David Hall writes in his essay, *Process and Anarchy: a Taoist Vision of Creativity*:

The reality of things is comprised by *aesthetic events*. These events are free, novel and transitory. Creativity, as the spontaneous realization of novelty, requires that there be freedom to produce the novel.<sup>84</sup>

That is, the artist's creative practice spontaneously captures our perception of the temporal as it brings new insights carried by unexpected, aesthetic experiences. Like Deleuze, Hall describes creativity as a "novel synthesis" of Lao Tzu's "many things of the world" that are in constant transition – as soon as a novel idea is realised, it is no longer a novelty. This paradox underlies the artist's drive to continuously unfold variations, improvisations upon ideas, returning again with fresh insights to themes, such as social and political issues.

The latter brings to mind Girardot's metaphoric description of the transgressive Taoist's table manners which suggests that we must transgress "polite" approaches to knowledge in order to surrender, unrestrained, into processes that uncover truth, or insight, the metaphoric "soup":

It is not ... polite to grin with a gaping mouth at a formal banquet. Civil and proper table manners require the control of one's bodily functions ... Taoists ... tend to grin somewhat idiotically while slurping their soup.<sup>85</sup>

Experimental contemporary art practice is arguably characterised by transgressive action and thinking. In many ways the social role of a contemporary artist is to be transgressive, to think for themselves rather than reify convention, the established hierarchies of power, including a religion or ideology, politics or rationality.

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<sup>83</sup> In addition to the 1977 locations, places were documented in 2007, 2008 where the degradation of the river is particularly acute, at Lake Boga, and Bottle Bend in Victoria, and incidental locations indicative of people's attitude towards the river near Toolybuck and Robinvale. In 2008 the headwaters of the Murray River in the Mount Kosciusko National Park were documented.

<sup>84</sup> David Hall, *Process and Anarchy: a Taoist Vision of Creativity*, Philosophy East and West, Vol. 28, No. 3, (July 1978). P 273.

<sup>85</sup> See N. J. Girardot, *Myth and Meaning in Early Taoism: the Theme of Chaos (Hun Tun)* (1983), University of California Press. P 6.

It could be argued that exposure to Taoism's visualisation that "the fundamental characteristics of creativity are freedom and reflexivity, expressed through the self-realization of events"<sup>86</sup> supported visual arts practitioners' intuitive and independent resolve when questioning social convention in the aftermath of Post World War Two, when Taoism first powerfully entered the vernacular of Western thought (page 62). This social enquiry in the visual arts relates to the description of the Tao as an "uncarved block", that is, the cosmos in a continual state of flux. If this 'block' is carved, that is, made into a permanent form, it goes against the natural processes that are the wellspring of creativity and the natural order of things. Similarly, the artist must shun the habitual, and 'see' phenomena, including society's morés, afresh.

*The Murray's Edge*,<sup>87</sup> although ostensibly a photographic project, is interdisciplinary, combining ecological research of the river with a performative, and sculptural sensibility that substitutes the click of a camera for the immediate, corporeal response whilst wielding a sumi brush.<sup>88</sup> Ching Hao's lessons in the art of painting expounding upon the Six Essentials are here applied to photography as a spontaneous, observational, immersive, meditative activity aimed at imaginatively capturing a sense of pluralistic universality.

For the Taoist, the mother is a metaphor for nature. Taoist cosmology places humanity in a familial relationship to nature and has thus guided Western conservationists in the formulation of policy and implementation of ecologically sound practices.<sup>89</sup> *The Murray's Edge* is a communication of the river's significance as a resource, but perhaps more particularly, it reflects upon us as delinquent offspring who need to be subservient to nature:

Tranquil, vast, standing alone, unchanging  
It provides for all things yet cannot be exhausted  
It is the mother of the universe ...  
Mankind depends on the laws of Earth<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> David Hall, *Process and Anarchy: a Taoist Vision of Creativity*, Philosophy East and West, Vol. 28, No. 3, (July 1978). P 274.

<sup>87</sup> Exhibition History: 2008, Solo exhibition, Milani Gallery, Brisbane; *Heat: Art and Climate Change*, RMIT Gallery, Melbourne; 2009, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney; COFA Gallery, UNSW, Sydney.

<sup>88</sup> See *Wild Life Documentary* above, and Kiyohiko Munakata and Yoko H. Munakata (1974), *Ching Hao's Pi-fa-chi: A Note on the Art of Brush*. Artibus Asiae Supplementum. Vol. 31. Pp 1 -56.

<sup>89</sup> For example, see [http://fore.research.yale.edu/religion/daoism/projects/alliance\\_religion.html](http://fore.research.yale.edu/religion/daoism/projects/alliance_religion.html) "The idea behind ARC emerged in 1986, when World Wildlife Fund (WWF)-International was celebrating its twenty-fifth anniversary. Its President at the time, Prince Philip, the Duke of Edinburgh, suggested marking the occasion by inviting representatives of ... religions ... to the event ... [such as] The China Taoist Association." Taoism is described as "international" on the website, acknowledging its penetration of Western thinking regarding conservation.

<sup>90</sup> Lao Tzu, *Tao Te Ching*, Verse 26.

The following section shows selected images from *The Murray's Edge* (Fig 197 – Fig 204) photographed in 2009 (see Appendix #1 for images from 2007 and 2008).

**SELECTED IMAGES FROM *THE MURRAY'S EDGE*:**



*Fig 51: Bonita Ely (2009) Lake Benanee: Testing the Odyssey.* Lake Benanee, near Euston, is now cut off from the Murray because authorities consider that the evaporation from its surface area wastes water. The purpose of this scientific apparatus seems a moot point. January, 2009.





*Fig 52: Bonita Ely (2009) Dry Lake.* The trees are not dead because of the drought. Many years ago, Dry Lake, which adjoins Lake Benanee and only periodically filled with water, was permanently flooded for irrigation, drowning a huge lake-shaped grove of red river gums. Now it is a dry lake once more. January, 2009.



*Fig 53: Bonita Ely (2009) Near Swan Reach: Channel.* This is all that is left of the anabranch of the Murray River near Swan Reach in South Australia. The river would normally spread across the flats forming many anabranches between the sandstone cliffs that define the river's channel in the terrain from the Victorian border near Renmark to Lake Alexandrina. January, 2009.



*Fig 54: Bonita Ely (2009) Dust Storm on 'Lake' Alexandrina.. The Murray River's estuary, Lake Alexandrina, is a dust bowl, its shallow water torpid and turning to sulphate acid. January, 2009.*



*Fig 55: Bonita Ely (2009) Barrage #4: The Coorong Meets Lake Alexandrina. Barrages hold back the ocean and the Coorong (left) from flooding Lake Alexandrina with saline water. January, 2009.*



*Fig 56: Bonita Ely (2009) Dried Lake Dust Storm: Hindmarsh Island Bridge.* This bridge from Goolwa to Hindmarsh Island near the mouth of the Murray was built against the wishes of the Indigenous Ngarrindjeri women, custodians of Hindmarsh Island. January, 2009.



*Fig 57: Bonita Ely (2009) Ngarrindjeri Country at Raukkan: Boat Wreck and Tree Fossils.* Near Raukkan on Lake Alexandrina the low water level has exposed a wrecked boat and tree trunk fossils. Raukkan, formally the mission, Point MacLeah, is the township of the Ngurrinderi people, traditional owners of the Corrong and Lakes.<sup>91</sup> January, 2009.

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<sup>91</sup> Location of the Point McLeay mission.



Fig 58: Bonita Ely (2009) *Metal Detritus: Lake Albert*. January, 2009. Compare with *Estuary*, page 332, Appendix 1, the same place photographed eighteen months earlier in Winter, 2007.

To conclude this chapter, it could be noted that threads of socio-political engagement unify what might be described as an eclectic and thematic, rather than stylistic approach to my studio practice. The multiple concerns and processes of my artworks demonstrate how intrinsic the correspondences to Taoist principles may be to a Western artist's practice in the twenty-first century. Described as the holistic, inter--related integration of natural forces in Taoism, the potential for an escalation of environmental damage caused by exponentially interacting natural forces is certainly uppermost in the minds of many artists who endeavor to both promote a greater awareness of these issues, and create mechanism's through which to address them. Citing Bourriaud:

A new game is announced as soon as the social setting radically changes, without the meaning of the game itself being challenged".

A more pragmatic social role for art will perhaps, as Donald Judd the conservationist in Marfa foreshadowed, be viewed in retrospect to be the major, innovative development in the visual arts of the twenty-first century.<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics* (1998), pub. Les Presses du Réel. Translated by Simon Pleasance, Fronza Woods and Mathieu Copeland. English publication, 2002.