

CHAPTER EIGHT: CONCLUSION

Taoism, China's indigenous philosophy, has significantly influenced Western culture from early contact to today, an influence that is embedded in the form and content of contemporary visual art. The sometimes direct, but more often pervasive influences of Taoist cultural practices and philosophy on Western thinking and art forms have been established in the thesis, calibrated upon Gilles Deleuze's and Félix Guattari's theory that the structure of organic dissemination is best described metaphorically as rhizomic rather than arboreal. That is, cultural practices can be seen as a multi-directional synthesis rather than a linear hierarchy. Taoist precepts have infiltrated Western artists' thinking and processes to the extent that new means of expression, of great relevance to the West's contemporary visual arts language, are derived in part from artists' exposure to Taoist concepts and practices. This exposure has occurred through significant thinkers' interpretation of Taoist precepts, the trade of artefacts, exposure to translations of Taoism's ancient philosophical literature, the study of and direct exposure to abstraction, and Taoist graphic improvisation in calligraphy and painting, and the articulation of spatiality as a positive element of expression in East Asian art practices, derived directly or in part from Taoism. This exposure over approximately six centuries is tracked in a history of inter-cultural discourse between Sinicised Far Eastern cultures, and Western cultures.

The significance of Chinese garden landscaping, known as Chinoiserie,¹ to eighteenth and nineteenth century European garden design is an integral aspect of the historical influences of Chinese culture on the West and is established in this historical account. Examples of traditional features of Chinese gardens commonly adopted by European garden designers in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries are narrative devices such as follies, the grotto, text and episodic perspectives of wandering pathways. The formal devices of Chinoiserie, such as asymmetry, spatial placement, temporal themes, and kine-aesthesis animated these novel European gardens. In the thesis these features in the traditional (*feng shui*) gardens surrounding Prince Dong's residence in contemporary Beijing are documented and set beside eighteenth century English gardens and contemporary examples to illustrate how powerfully

¹ The term, Chinoiserie, referred to all artefacts from China at this time, including the features of European garden design derived from Chinese motifs.

these Taoist practices have reverberated to the twentieth century, providing for some artists a significant model for innovations in sculpture which led to installation art.

It is noted as part of a broader cultural flow that Taoist garden design was transplanted to Japan in the sixth century of the Christian Era to evolve into Ch'ên Buddhist, or Zen gardens, which retain identified aspects of their origins in Taoism. For example, it is in the spatiality, form and narrative of gardens of fifteenth century Muromachi Japan, such as Daisen-in, in Kyoto, that Chinese garden art, calligraphy, and brush and ink painting of the Sung Period coalesce. Reverberations of these three Taoist art practices are outlined and correlated through visual means throughout the thesis. Illustrated by the garden at Daisen-in, a representation of the experimental, spare landscape painting of the Sung Period in China, which was executed with the skill of master calligraphers, the austere, abstract aesthetic of Zen gardens is shown to powerfully influence sculptural innovation in the twentieth century, such as Ian Hamilton-Finlay's *Little Sparta*, and Isamu Noguchi's *Garden of the Future*.

Discourse during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries' colonial period gathered pace with Western Modernism's soaking up of new ways of thinking and doing from around the globe, including the influences of Taoism. Taoism first influenced countries neighbouring China, such as Vietnam and Japan, who incorporated Taoist and Ch'ên Buddhist principles into their indigenous cultures, Ch'ên Buddhism being a synthesis of Mahayanan Buddhism and Taoism. Respectively, Japan's and Vietnam's Zen Buddhism has been analysed and shown to be a significant vehicle for Taoist influence during the West's increasing globalisation, particularly after the Second World War, when artists of the counter culture movement, such as members of the Beat Generation, sought alternatives in Eastern epistemology to Europe's humanist ontology, engaging in an experimental, radical critique of social conformity. The Fluxus Movement also provided a loose affiliation for artists, who proved to be influenced by Taoism and Zen. The transgressive character of these experiments, derived in part from Taoism's anarchic precepts, changed the content and process of art making at this time and continues as a model of social engagement for artists today.

The thesis shows how globalism, multiculturalism, migration of the Chinese diaspora and cross-cultural communications, including the study of European Modernism by East Asian artists in Europe, and the reciprocal study of East Asian art in the West, have increased the porosity of Western cultures since early contact with China in the fifteenth century.

Calligraphic art and sumi brush painting in China, Vietnam and Japan, with their abstract imagery, exponential improvisations upon graphic themes, imaginative interpretation of motifs,

subjectivity, and focus on achieving a centred-ness of mind and body to transmit the energy of life force into the artworks' aesthetics, are now more commonly recognised to be a direct reflection of Taoist concepts and practices. A specific example of this explicit influence is Abstract Expressionism's gestural, improvisational methodology as an extension of Taoist painting and calligraphic art practices. How the premises of this influence on American painters were transferred to sculpture to evolve into the now dominant sub-set, sculptural installation art, is less recognised.

Having established the influence of corporeal, free flowing abstraction as an influence on painting, the Taoist provenance of context as a signifier is examined in relation to the thousands of graphic improvisations upon the one calligraphic character signifying *longevity*, which adorn and conceptualise architecture and artefacts in Hué, Vietnam. Although there is no evidence of direct connections to contemporary art's use of context as signifier in regard to the matrix of artefacts cited from Hué, this phenomenon does illustrate the intrinsic, inter-relatedness of the premises of Taoist philosophy. The theories of representation that explicate upon this pluralistic approach to engagement with the visual arts by Gilles Deleuze in his seminal thesis, *Repetition and Difference*, are found to have direct correlations with Taoist theories of creativity. The parallels in Taoism with this Post-Modernist, theoretical account, compounds the complex veracity of the thesis that Taoism is seamlessly synthesised into the contemporary epistemology of the West.

Having established this history of discourse, the manner in which the new discipline, installation art, has its fundamental *raison d'être* in precepts implicitly, or indirectly derived from Taoist philosophy and cultural practices is established in the thesis. Installation art came to be a dominant sculptural form in the second half of the twentieth century, so was selected for detailed, critical analysis. The conceptual concerns and processes of key visual arts practitioners, one from America, and the other from China, were selected to demonstrate how intrinsic Taoist principles are to an artist's experimental installation art practice in the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries, irrespective of their country of origin.

The first artwork to be examined for this purpose was Donald Judd's permanent, site specific installation, *Untitled* (1982– 1986) at Marfa, Texas. A pioneering representative of the Minimalist Movement, and a key player in the development of installation art, Donald Judd's artwork was selected for analysis because he did not profess any personal alliance with Taoism. Thus he provides a rigorous test case for its implicit influence on a Western artist at this time. Judd's preparatory drawings for *Untitled* (1982–1986), executed in the 1980s, were analysed to discern the relationship of his improvisational methods seen in his articulation of the internal spatiality of identical solids, in this case, the oblong, with the unique, Taoist,

calligraphic practice of improvising upon a singular motif as a model for creativity. The ephemeral, temporal qualities of the site for permanent installation of these boxes in two artillery huts, remodeled by Judd for this purpose, were studied and documented also in relation to aspects of Taoist philosophical precepts and aesthetic concerns of the Taoist practice of spatial articulation known as the 'art of placement', *feng shui*.

Retracing Judd's steps by methodically re-drawing his instructional drawings for the fabricator of the one hundred boxes for *Untitled* (1982–1986), and examining the sculptural objects in relation to his drawings' graphic improvisations, made possible a very clear, fresh analysis of Judd's process of creativity. His system, which Judd referred to as 'progressions', has not been unraveled in any previous research in relation to this specific series of drawings for the fabricator. Judd's process significantly reflects his emphasis on spontaneous transformation upon a circumscribed theme, achieved in uninhibited gesture characteristic of Taoist art forms such as calligraphy and ink and brush painting. This sequential way of articulating spatiality and form is also characteristic of his contemporaries' methodology, some of whom, such as Agnes Martin, explicitly expressed a Taoist influence on their visual arts practice. Examples of work by Judd's contemporaries, Sol Lewitt, Dan Flavin, Richard Serra and On Kawara, are also cited to confirm the sculptors' deployment of a contemporary improvisational methodology, which was implicit in the apparent pervasive influence of Taoism on the American zeitgeist at this time.

Further, the inter-relatedness to environs of Judd's carefully composed installation of oblongs in a permanent site is in keeping with his expressed knowledge, in his capacity as a writer and scholar, of the experiential properties that synthesise mind and body for the viewer of Zen and Taoist spatiality and materiality. As a consequence, it is argued that Judd's methodology, asserting immersive spatial qualities, turns away from metaphor as a vehicle of meaning to metonymy, where the viewer interprets the reality of their experience in space and time. This is in keeping with Taoist artistry, where axonomic perspectives draw the subjective viewer into the spatial experience of the painting, or garden, rather than the realist, singular view point of Western perspective drawing, where the viewer is an observer looking at the subject of the painting. At Marfa, Judd's installed artwork reveals itself and its reflective, episodic environs like an unfolding Chinese scroll painting as the viewer progresses through the interpolated oblongs, installed in their integrated, multi-faceted site.

Xu Bing's installation, *Book from the Sky* (1987–1991), is the next key artwork to be researched. Xu Bing is a Chinese international artist whose installation art developed after the country was opened up to the West in 1985. Paradoxically, Xu Bing therefore received

synthesised influences of Taoist cultural practices through exposure to Western contemporary art. In the literature about Xu Bing's artwork, *Book from the Sky*, there is scant attention given to Taoism as a factor in the form and content of his artwork. Rather than claiming Taoism as a direct influence or reference, he stated in an interview for this research that, as Taoism is embedded in the way of thinking and living in China, "Chinese tradition",² which is significantly influenced by Taoism, has a bearing on his artwork. The thesis critically analyses in detail all aspects of Taoist traditions as they manifest in the development of his oeuvre up to and including *Book from the Sky*.

In Western analysis of *Book from the Sky*, little attention has been given to the perception and interpretation of this artwork by readers of Chinese calligraphy. The acknowledgement of the Taoist context of the artwork, *Book from the Sky*, expands our knowledge of the aural as a trope in the Taoist creative traditions from which the artwork emerged. Taking as its starting point the structure of Chinese writing, that is, pictograms and their combinations to represent the spoken word, the thesis establishes that, for the literate viewer, a significant number of invented 'pictograms' are perceived by the mind's conditioned reflex to find meaning in incoherent text, to relate to or resemble real calligraphic characters. Hence the 'text' produces an incoherent quality of sound. To verify this conjecture, Xu Bing was asked if any of his imagery had meaning for readers of Chinese calligraphy, or resembled existing pictograms so that the text would have a 'sound' for reading viewers, as opposed to non-readers for whom the work is self evidently 'silent'. Xu Bing described the difference in interpretation of his artwork, *Book from the Sky*, by readers and non-readers, as equal but different. Readers of calligraphy would identify nuanced similarities with genuine calligraphic characters, making the experience like "concrete poetry". His perplexing strategy uses the Taoist pedagogic method *kung an*, more commonly known by its Zen equivalent, *koan*, to disrupt habitual thinking and responses, to cause the viewer to think more deeply. This clarification of the differentiated, interpretive receptions of the artwork, *Book from the Sky*, by readers of calligraphy and non-readers, adds to the understanding of this major cross-cultural, contemporary artwork.

During the candidature, artworks were produced essentially as an undifferentiated, on-going flow of engagement with my professional, contemporary art practice, rather than as specific illustrations of the thesis. The artworks were critically analysed in retrospect for evidence of explicit and implicit Taoist influences in an Australian Western artist's oeuvre. They are analysed using the first hand knowledge of the artist regarding the origins of creative ideas

² Bonita Ely's interview with Xu Bing, 3/10/2008, Beijing. Protocol #H6569

driving the form and aesthetics of the artworks, intended content, and tacit processes of fabrication in relation to the research that had established Taoism's direct and indirect influences embedded in experimental contemporary art. In addition, past artworks produced before the candidature since 1969 are examined as a chronological discourse running through and informing aspects of the thesis. The artworks are shown to contain clearly identifiable tropes and methods, ideas and tendencies originating in Taoism's influence on Western cultural practices. In particular, the characteristically transgressive stance of contemporary artists in relation to convention was observed, along with a thematic investigation of humanity's relationships to Nature in the light of growing environmental concerns, both of which correlate with Taoist precepts that have influenced Western thinking and creativity.

Another factor identified in contemporary art is the active rather than passive reception of artworks by the viewer because of the artists' use of a metonymic visual language, rather than culturally specific, predetermined metaphors as signifiers. This shift in visual language is gauged to illicit subjective responses. Viewers bring their own knowledge, experience, associations, corporeality and persona to the work's interpretation. Alongside this is an underlying theme distilled as the binary polarity - 'continuity and change'. The contemporary artist creates a place that asserts the transitional, whether in stasis or in ephemeral actuality, yet simultaneously evokes universal verities, placing the viewer in a paradoxical construction of reality fundamental to the Taoist ontology, where the relational self is contextualised by a non-absolutist, unifying matrix. Although speculative, the persistence of this philosophical theme in contemporary art points to the synthesis of a non-Cartesian construction of reality derived from the West's exposure to Eastern metaphysics, beginning with Leibniz in the sixteenth century, evidenced in the Beat and Hippy movements of the nineteen fifties to the seventies, and expounded upon by Gilles Deleuze in *Repetition and Difference*, his explorations of the nature of representation in contemporary visual arts.³

The particular research skills of the visual artist are identified as an enhanced visual literacy, which is applied in the thesis to critically analyse artworks and cultural practices. Illustrated by the photographic documentation of close examinations of the subtle complexities inherent in an artist's clinching of a unique aesthetic totality, the signifiers derived from Taoist sources are identified as explicit, or implicit, direct, or indirect. The experiential insights of the practising artist into the processes of creativity as they are applied to visual arts research, for example the re-drawing of Judd's drawings to help establish the basis of his creative methodology, uses a pragmatic skill set that enhances traditional academic research methodologies.

³ Gilles Deleuze, *Repetition and Difference*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1968.

The thesis contributes knowledge of the influences of East Asian art and philosophy on the West by focusing on Taoism rather than Zen Buddhism, the latter being the subject of most analysis in this field. The thesis also engages with the complexities surrounding the carriage of Taoist creative methodologies to the West by East Asian artists in the Modernist era, who have been disparagingly described as 'influenced by the West'. The nature of this two-way discourse is identified and acknowledged as significantly innovative and insightful in the thesis. Twenty-first century cultures could be described as an ontological mix of huge, radiating, multiple circles, overlapping, entwining, separating, encroaching, obscuring and blending to make a hybrid, global culture. In this thesis Taoism takes its place in this interdisciplinary, inter-cultural language that strives to find innovative ways of embedding experiential comprehension into the visual arts.

One example of where artists are taking this increasingly inter-cultural, exploratory fascination with inter-connectivity and uncertainties may be found in Nicolas Bourriaud's seminal text, *Relational Aesthetics*.⁴ Bourriaud describes artists' approaches to meaning as provisional; there are no philosophical or conceptual certainties in contemporary art practice, but rather, the use of creativity as a tool to interrogate the certainties of science and technology in relation to the subjective. This process is simultaneously inventing innovative approaches to the social concerns of applied science and technology. The artefact is no longer definable in terms of its pulchritude, or discrete discipline, or particular genre. It is no longer a "system of conceptual mastery"⁵ that defines its independence as a unique master work. Rather, using the collective Superflex as an exemplar, a provenance in Taoist precepts may be found in the performing of collective tasks such as gardening, of valuing soundly vernacular avenues for insight and creative innovation.⁶

The research helps to provide a basis for understanding some of the ways many artists today are working along the boundaries of art, addressing practical concerns through poetic means in order to reach an understanding of the world, using their art making as a tool to better their environment and cultivate social discourse.

⁴ Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics* (1998), pub. Les Presses du Réel. Translated by Simon Pleasance, Fronza Woods and Mathieu Copeland. English publication, 2002.

⁵ Ibid. P 100.

⁶ Superflex is a group of artists who solve environmental problems in collaboration with communities. For example, in Tanzania in 1997 they developed a method of converting biodegradable waste into a source of energy for a farming community, storing it in bright orange sculptural forms described as balloons. The technology is now used commercially. The installation of documentation of the project and its components is their artwork, *Superflex Biogas*. See:

http://www.arken.dk/content/us/arkens_collection/installation_and_media_art/superflex