

## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

This thesis examines the influences of Taoism<sup>1</sup> on the development of contemporary visual art practice, focusing on the traditional Taoist art practices of calligraphy,<sup>2</sup> brush and ink painting, and Chinoiserie, the European interpretations of Chinese artefacts and cultural practices, which have served as vehicles for Taoist precepts.<sup>3</sup> The objective is not to quantify these influences but to identify the qualities, both in Taoist philosophy and Taoist cultural practices that have opened up new ways of thinking in the West about the nature of reality. How these experiences and insights may be represented in the visual arts through Taoism's spontaneous processes of graphic improvisation and elements of expression, spatiality, temporality and placement, is explored. This thesis will demonstrate that the Taoist's reverence for nature, Chinese garden art, brush and ink landscape painting, and the calligrapher's resolution of the binary opposites, continuity and change, coalesce as underlying influences on the experimental development of contemporary art as an outcome of the West's long exposure to Taoism's aesthetic processes, and artists' digestion of Taoist ideas and their synthesis into Western paradigms.

The pathways of the Chinese diaspora into neighbouring East Asian countries and to the West will be traced to establish the magnitude of Taoism's legacy. This line of critical enquiry develops in relation to a body of creative work, which serves as a practice-based means of research, complimenting and extending this perceived link between the principals of the Taoist 'Way' and the practices of contemporary visual artists.

---

<sup>1</sup> Also 'Daoism'.

<sup>2</sup> Calligraphy was first recognised as an art form in China in the first century AD. Gordon L. Barrass, *The Art of Calligraphy in Modern China*, 2002, University of California Press. The origins of this form of writing, symbols on tortoise shells in graves that resemble Chinese characters discovered in Jiahu in Henan Province, are dated 6500 BC. Jeff Hecht, *Oldest Known Chinese Script Discovered*, New Scientist magazine, issue 2393, 3/5/03, p 16. Chinese archaeologists contend this is the first evidence of a written language, predating the cuneiform writing of the Sumerians of southern Mesopotamia (3500 BC).

<sup>3</sup> Chinoiserie in eighteenth century European gardens is of particular pertinence to the thesis.

Taoism, translated into English as *The Way*,<sup>4</sup> is an indigenous Chinese philosophy attributed to the teachings of philosopher, Lao Tzu.<sup>5</sup> His teachings are recorded in the *Tao Te Ching (Classic of the Way and its Virtue)*, circa 500 BC.<sup>6</sup> Represented by the symbol, *yin* and *yang*, (translated as *dark side*, *light side*), Taoism paradoxically presents phenomena as “neither being nor non being”, as “chaos and cosmos”, “nature and culture”, “meaning and nonsense”, yet “the sum of all order” and universal totality (Fig 1).<sup>7</sup> Each binary contains a little of the other. In a state of continuously revolving flux, the binary opposites are not conflicted, rather, the symbol represents an integrated harmony of opposites.



Fig 1: Yin yang symbol.

In relation to philosophical and religious considerations, humanity is seen as inseparable from nature and a unified cosmos. Thus the Tao could be described as:

the spontaneous process regulating the natural cycle of the universe. It is in this process, along this way, that the world as we see it, the creation of which we are an integral part, finds its unity.<sup>8</sup>

Lao Tzu's *Tao Te Ching* emphasises *The Way* as an integration of humanity with nature, which “acts with complete spontaneity”.<sup>9</sup> We must spontaneously surrender to

<sup>4</sup> Webster's New Universal Unabridged Dictionary.

<sup>5</sup> Also Lao Tzi, born Li Erh. 6<sup>th</sup> century BC. <http://www.chebucto.ns.ca/Philosophy/Taichi/lao.html> Cited June 2008.

Note: “A growing body of scholarship supports that ... both the *Chuang Tzu* and Lao Tzu's *Tao Te Ching* are ...collections of writings by differing persons in differing times, rather than the single work of any one person”. H. G. Creel, *What is Taoism?* Journal of the American Oriental Society, Vol. 76, No. 3. (Jul. – Sept. 1956). P 139. See also Lin Yutang's translations of *Chuang Tzu*: <http://www.religiousworlds.com/taoism/cz-text2.html>

<sup>6</sup> Unless indicated otherwise, throughout this document I quote from Jonathan Star's translation of Lao-Tzu's *Tao Te Ching*. Published by the Jeremy P. Tarcher/Penguin Group, 2008.

<sup>7</sup> The *yin* and *yang* were first mentioned in the *Hsi Tz'u* (circa C4th BC), an appendix to the *I Ching*, or *Book of Changes*. See also N. J. Girardot, *Myth and Meaning in Early Taoism*, 1983, University of California Press. Pp 2, 3.

<sup>8</sup> Kristofer Schipper, *The Taoist Body*, 1993, University of California Press. Translated by Karen C. Duval. Pp 3, 4.

<sup>9</sup> Ninian Smart, *The World's Religions: Old Traditions and Modern Transformations*, 1989, Cambridge University Press. P 113. Another seminal text is *Chuang-tsu*, fourth century BC, authored by Chuang Tzu,

the cosmos in order to reach an *experience* of Reality. This distinguishes Taoism from religion where we see ourselves as a special case in Nature, capable of life after death through salvation or enlightenment, martyrdom, or ‘second chances’ through reincarnation.<sup>10</sup> The most Taoist philosophy offers in this respect is the possibility of serene longevity by living a healthy, engaged and harmonious life.<sup>11</sup> Then, through natural forces, death brings an integration into a universal wholeness, emptiness, described in Lao-Tzu’s *Tao Te Ching*, as “the return”:

See all things flourish and dance  
in endless variation  
And once again merge back into perfect emptiness -  
Their true repose  
Their true nature  
Emerging, flourishing, dissolving back again  
This is the eternal process of return<sup>12</sup>

The opening words of the *Tao Te Ching* are:

The way that can be walked is not The Way  
The name that can be named is not The Name<sup>13</sup>

As this suggests, the Way can be seen in all things rather than a particular ‘path’. It is defined as indefinable. *The Way* cannot be explained or taught, it must be experienced; the more forceful the effort, the more elusive the quest. The Taoist requires a quietist life of passive meditation to cultivate utter serenity in response to all circumstance (non action) rather than the pursuit of control and empirical knowledge; an anarchic response

---

whose personal name was Chou. Very little is known of him, which is typical of Taoist authors and texts, which are usually undated and attributed without certainty.

<sup>10</sup> In this thesis I refer to Taoism as a philosophy only. Taoism developed a religious dimension, over time “influenced by shamanic practices, Chinese folk religions, Confucianism, Buddhism, Islamic and Christian missionaries ... It is not a dogmatized creed”. (Lee Irwin, *Daoist Alchemy in the West: the Esoteric Paradigms*. <http://www.esoteric.msu.edu/VolumeVI/Dao.htm> Cited May 2008.

<sup>11</sup> Longevity may be achieved by “a whole apparatus of personal discipline mingled with magical alchemy” (including the use of talismans). See Chapter Two, Ninian Smart, *The World’s Religions: Old Traditions and Modern Transformations*, 1989, Cambridge University Press. P 127. In his revue of Taoist literature from the 1980s, *Taoism*, (Journal of Asian Studies, Vol. 54, No.2, (May 1995), pp.322 – 346), Fransciscus Verellen wrote, “down through the centuries, the mission of Taoism was to remain associated with the instruction of rulers, with political prophesy and legitimation, utopianism, messianism, and occasional insurgency”. He describes how the sage, Lao-tzu, “revered as the founder” became deified and the creation of Taoism as an “*ex nihilo*” religion evolved, along with alchemical, physiological and mental practices to aid in the attainment of immortality (pages 322, 326, 330). The integration of animist, or shamanic practices further complicates the study of Taoism for the disciplines, History and Theology, but these issues are irrelevant to this thesis.

<sup>12</sup> Lao-Tzu, *Tao Te Ching*, Verse 16.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid. Verse 1.

to order and convention (often Taoists have been viewed as subversive);<sup>14</sup> an intuitive rather than rational response (the integration of mind and body rather than intellectual objectivity detached from feeling and the corporeal).

If, in the above paragraph, the reader substitutes the word 'art' for 'the Way', and artist for 'Taoist', the precepts underlying the nature of creativity in Taoism are illustrated. This thesis will argue that in essence, many creative people and Taoists employ comparable methodologies.<sup>15</sup> More particularly, Taoist qualities arguably hold a key to understanding the meaning and processes of experimental contemporary art that is characterised by an engagement with corporeality, spontaneous improvisation, the deployment of spatiality and temporality to embed meaning in the artefact. Established research has identified Taoism as a major influence on the latter (page 55). Experimental approaches to sculpture led to innovation in sculptural practice after the Second World War coinciding with a more populist awareness in the West of the philosophy and cultural practices of Taoism following the increased and direct dialogue with East Asian countries with strong cultural ties to China,<sup>16</sup> that is, countries adjoining China and influenced by Chinese culture through invasion, occupation, trade, and religious conversion - Vietnam, Japan and Korea (page 62). The conceptualisation of spatiality found in Taoist artefacts, it is argued, was a factor in these innovations and the development of installation art.

Taoist improvisation upon calligraphic characters is a visual art form practised in all Sinicised cultures. This creative process embodies the conceptual qualities of Taoist paradigms. In improvised calligraphy ceaseless change, metamorphosis, co-exists with continuity. Continuity is expressed through the meaning of the character, which remains the same in contrast to the state of flux represented by grids of one hundred, or one thousand different characters, all signifying the same thing.<sup>17</sup> It is significant that longevity is also pictorially represented by a young maiden in the company of a wizened old man in Eastern iconography. This interpenetration of tradition, the past, and the

---

<sup>14</sup> Kristofer Schipper. *The Taoist Body* (1993), Pub. University of California Press. "The priority given to the human body over social and cultural systems may be seen in the predominance of the internal world over the external world and in the refusal to seek the absolute in our mind. Taoism is always rooted in the concrete, indeed the physical". P 4.

<sup>15</sup> This is elaborated upon in the section, Studio Methodology, in Chapter Three.

<sup>16</sup> See Chapter Two for background to this opening up, particularly in the United States of America, to Eastern philosophies at this time. In summary, increased translation of Taoist and Zen literature, travel to East Asia, the occupation of Japan, the Korean War, the Vietnam War, and the introduction of Asian studies in universities all contributed to this broadening awareness.

<sup>17</sup> The characters signifying longevity and happiness are most commonly improvised upon in this way as talismans.

temporal immediacy of the present are typically found in installation art where the context may signify historical readings that are combined into an artist's contemporary intervention, or transgressive disruption. The former is exemplified by Donald Judd's site specific artwork, *Untitled* (1982–1986), an installation of one hundred boxes installed in two decommissioned artillery sheds in Marfa, Texas,<sup>18</sup> the latter in Xu Bing's installation, *Book from the Sky* (1987 – 1991).<sup>19</sup> The past, present, and imminent continuation in the future are metabolised into a single artistic experience.

The distinction, 'contemporary', in the thesis distinguishes visual art practices that respond to "events and tendencies"<sup>20</sup> current at the time of the artwork's creation rather than continuing a traditional or established forms of visual art practice, impervious to new developments or consideration of contemporary issues.

The distinction 'West' refers to countries whose dominant culture has its origins in Europe, such as Australia and North America, as well as England, Germany, Italy and such like. The distinction 'Western' applies to cultural practices that are identified with the West. The distinction 'East' or 'Far East' refers to the countries China, Japan, Korea and Vietnam. The distinction 'Eastern' or 'Far Eastern' applies to cultural practices that are identified with the East.

Disciplines such as painting, performance and video art, will be discussed when pertinent to the influence of Taoism on contemporary art but it is beyond the scope of this thesis to analyse all experimental, contemporary Western fine art to diagnose the influences of Taoism. Likewise, this is not research of the influence of Taoism on a survey of Western installation art. Rather, the specific parameters of this research topic have been applied to selected examples of installation art. However, my artworks completed during the candidacy, which test the hypothesis at the beginning of the twenty-first century, are examples of contemporary art that is interdisciplinary, experimental, cross-cultural, sometimes site specific, and include the disciplines of painting, video, and photography, created with the sensibilities of a sculptor.

---

<sup>18</sup> Donald Judd, *Untitled*, (1982–1986), mill aluminum, each box 104 x 129.5 x 185.5 cm, 100 boxes. Installation, Chinati Foundation, Marfa, Texas. Discussed in depth in Chapter Five.

<sup>19</sup> *Book from the Sky* (1987 – 1991), woodblock prints, wood, leather, ivory, string, cloth. This installation is discussed in depth in Chapter Six.

<sup>20</sup> Jim Supangkat, from his discussion of definitions of 'contemporary' in traditional artwork, quoting Klaus Honnef's book, *Contemporary Art*, in his article, *Contemporary Art: What/When/Where* (1996), catalogue for the Second Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art. Pub. Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane. P 26.

The broad relevance of Taoist art forms to this interdisciplinary field of visual arts practice lies in both the relevance of Taoism's abstract concepts at a tipping point in Western history as a non-absolutist model towards considerations of non-humanist philosophy after the devastations of the Second World War, and the methods, or processes, deployed to embody these concepts in visual language. For example, the Taoist calligrapher's art emphasises the ephemeral and ambiguous, rather than a sense of permanence and empirical realism. It combines aesthetic articulations of spatiality, improvised gesture and invention, serial imagery that embody an expression of an integration with, rather than a domination of, one's medium. The Chinese calligrapher, in common with the subjective approach of contemporary Western artists, creates using dynamic, corporeal gesture, a "technique of attack"<sup>21</sup> and nuanced retreat out of a mastery of qualities of resolution to ensure a "strong internal organization".<sup>22</sup> Here, a memorised familiarity with thousands of different characters is combined with a specific, taut balance of mark and spatiality. The calligrapher must simultaneously create recognisable script whilst animating the space of the blank page, that is, be able to perceive, SEE, the creation of spatiality and imagery simultaneously, to energise the characters (and blank page) with "a life even more intense than the object to which it refers".<sup>23</sup>

The installation artist similarly articulates real space, placement of form and imagery, temporal elements of expression – serial variations, duration, narrative, movement or kine-aesthesia, proprioception - to provide a metonymic catalyst for viewers' interpolations derived from their peripatetic engagement, if not physical immersion in the space, perceiving into as a part of the whole, a relational self, rather than perceiving from the outside, looking at, from a supposedly objective view point.

In *The Chinese Art of Writing*, Billeter articulates Taoist calligraphy's corporeal and spatial qualities by comparing it to music:

What the calligraphic element and musical note have in common is that they are bodied and create a space. To the phenomenon of projection whereby we attribute a corporeal reality to an inked form, corresponds the phenomenon that we spontaneously relate a well-tempered note to a corporeal presence. The

---

<sup>21</sup> Jean Francois Billeter, *The Chinese Art of Writing*, 1990, Skira Rizzoli International Publications, NY. P 72.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid. P 33.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid P 33. See also David J. Clarke's discussion of Abstract Expressionist, Mark Tobey's use of the blank page to "represent an unbounded space" in his *Influence of Oriental Thought on Postwar American Painting and Sculpture* (1988). PhD thesis, Courtauld Institute. Pub. Imprint, New York. P 162.

human voice, especially a fine voice, forcibly conveys the idea of a physical presence in space.<sup>24</sup>

This ready reference to binary metaphors such as space/body (or imagery), spontaneity/rules, repetition/variation, continuity/change, mark/blank, figure/ground, form/space, attack/retreat, and poetic similes, such as voice/body, silence/space, silence/nothingness, movement/time, gesture/corporeality, characterise the structure and abstract content of a calligrapher's expression, which when resolved as a symbiosis, or fusion, manifest the manifold totality that is the Tao.<sup>25</sup> In relation to this, the fusion of binaries expressive of 'continuity and change' will be identified in discussion of representative examples of contemporary art throughout the thesis as vehicles for Taoist precepts.

Increasingly cross-cultural, or global qualities of contemporary art practice also owe much to the West's historical exposure to Chinese Taoist philosophy, a cultural borrowing that has received superficial attention in consideration of its pervasive conceptual, representational and process based presence in Western art. In particular, the research for this thesis has identified the influence of Taoism in concept-based contemporary art practices that deploy narratives of paradox, and are charged by an intuitive yet intellectualised imagination to represent ideas.

A key to relevant theories of representation to Taoist precepts are those developed by Gilles Deleuze in *Difference and Repetition*,<sup>26</sup> where he perversely collapses that which, on the surface, appears as binary opposites to seamlessly interlace a web of correlation – a very Taoist strategy. 'Difference' is commonly defined as *not the same; distinct; separate*. 'Repetition' is defined as the *iteration of the same act; the act of repeating; reproduction; replica; copy*.<sup>27</sup> *Difference and Repetition* emerge as mirrored binaries, bookends, to create a repetition of differentiation that defines the nature of

---

<sup>24</sup> Jean Francois Billeter, *The Chinese Art of Writing*, 1990, Skira Rizzoli International Publications, NY. P 90. This correlation of calligraphy to space and/or sound will be explored in detail in an analysis of Donald Judd's artwork, *Untitled*, at Marfa, Texas (Chapter 5), Xu Bing's artwork, *The Book from the Sky* (see Chapter 6) and works produced through the candidacy (see Chapter 7).

See also, Gordon L. Barrass, *The Art of Calligraphy in Modern China*, 2002, University of California Press. P 15.

<sup>25</sup> Kisho Kurakawa, *Rediscovering Japanese Space* (1988). Pub. John Metherall, New York, Tokyo. Pp 39 – 41.

<sup>26</sup> Gilles Deleuze (1925 – 1995), is a key figure in postmodern philosophy. Deleuze drew upon the writings of Franco-German philosopher, Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646 – 1716), who was profoundly influenced by exposure to Taoist philosophy in his correspondence on Chinese culture with Jesuit missionaries. Deleuze's *Repetition and Difference* was written in 1968. It was translated into English in 1994 by Paul Patton. Pub. Columbia University Press, New York.

See <http://www.iep.utm.edu/d/deleuze.htm>

<sup>27</sup> Webster's New Universal Unabridged Dictionary. My italics.

representation. In short, repetition equals representation, which equals difference. Representation, which could be said to be the primary function of art,<sup>28</sup> is the expression of, or an actualisation of manifold concepts or ideas, so infinite they are groundless, paradoxically inverting the sense of a stable identity inferred by 'repetition'.

Repetition thus becomes a 'groundless', that is, metamorphic, infinity of possibilities for discerning a concept's relation to its object, which is dependant on the viewer's associative memories, or recognition, and a self consciousness that aspires to original thought through the comprehension of a concept. Alone, repetition only defines itself. "Repetition thus appears as difference without a concept, repetition which escapes indefinitely continued conceptual difference".<sup>29</sup>

Novelty [difference] passes to the mind which represents itself: because the mind has memory or acquires habits, it is capable of forming concepts in general and drawing something new from the repetition it contemplates.<sup>30</sup>

When self consciousness, or the "I", is applied to interpreting representations, it functions as a freedom to the future ... the new. Consciousness "relates the representation to the "I" as if to a free faculty which does not allow itself to be confined within any one of its products".<sup>31</sup>

Deleuze's theory of representation describes a reverberation of new, or differentiated concepts, originating in the mind of the individual viewer. The viewer's "I", or particular memories, experiences, knowledge, recognitions, associations, draw from the representational, or repeated object, the possibility for infinite conceptual interpretations. This theory of representation will underpin the analysis of calligraphic art, Chinese garden art, Chinese landscape painting<sup>32</sup> and experimental contemporary art practice<sup>33</sup> that I propose are resonant of Taoist paradigms.

Chapter Two provides the historical background of Taoism's diffuse and direct influences on Western cultural practices, cosmology, epistemology and ontology from

---

<sup>28</sup> Art being the expression of culture, defined as "simply the sum of a particular group's characteristic ways of living, learned from one another and passed down the generations". Christine Kenneally, *So You Think You're Unique...*, New Scientist, Vol 198 # 2657, 24<sup>th</sup> May 2008. P 28.

<sup>29</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Repetition and Difference*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1968. P 13.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid. P 14. My bracketed insertion.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid. P 14. Deleuze qualifies this by listing blockages to this free association.

<sup>32</sup> Frances Ya-Sing Tsu, *Landscape Design in Chinese Gardens* (1988), McGraw-Hill Book Company, United States of America. Pp 18 – 19.

<sup>33</sup> See Chapters Two, Four, Five, Six and Seven.



the seventeenth century onwards. The Taoist cultural practices drawn out for scrutiny are calligraphy, brush and ink painting and garden landscaping,<sup>34</sup> including the aesthetic principles underlying *feng shui*, (translated as *wind water*, the source of universal energies; also known as geomancy), imported to the West and interpreted as Chinoiserie, the imitation of Chinese motifs for novel, exotic effect in Western artefacts, including eighteenth century European garden design. *Feng shui* can be defined as the 'art of placement', and aligns the topography of a garden to natural forces and elements resulting in an aesthetic of asymmetrical placement, complex, episodic, spatial articulation, a stimulating yet harmonious flow of energy (*chi*).<sup>35</sup> These Taoist influences on Western culture, from colonial times, of Chinese garden art, calligraphic art and Chinese painting are forms characterised by an articulation of spatiality as a principal element of expression, which, it is argued, have had a profound impact upon Western epistemology, imagery, form and methods of art production.<sup>36</sup> Examples of Isamu Noguchi's installations and Zen-style gardens, and the garden art of Ian Hamilton-Finlay, who was influenced by eighteenth century stroll gardens, are cited.

Chapter Two addresses the expansion of Taoist influence from China to neighboring countries, Japan, Korea, and Vietnam, with a particular focus on the influence of Taoism upon Ch'en Buddhism, to identify Taoism's footprint in Japanese and Vietnamese Zen Buddhism. Acknowledgement of Taoism as a cultural influence expressed through certain precepts and practices of Zen Buddhism has received scant attention in the analysis of Eastern cultural practices' influences on Western artists.

Chapter Three describes the methodology of this research, which combines orthodox academic research with the research tools of the practising artist. Deleuze's theory, summarised above, that underpins the structure of the thesis's argument, is described in detail in Chapter Three, *Mixed Methods*, with its correlations to the practising artist's deployment of studio practice as a research tool. Deleuze's text, *Difference and*

---

<sup>34</sup> Frances Ya-Sing Tsu., (1988) *Landscape Design in Chinese Gardens*. McGraw-Hill Book Company, United States of America, pp 18 – 22. Tsu describes five different ways the landscape, or nature is represented: landscape painting with its subjective, semi-abstract brush work derived from calligraphic technique; *pun-sai*, or miniature potted garden, a Chinese horticultural invention from the Chou Dynasty, 900 – 250 BC, commonly known by its Japanese name, *bonsai*; a scene framed by a window; a miniature landscape composition of rocks and plants in a courtyard; the large scale stroll garden that uses the natural features of the terrain along with artificially constructed motifs to simulate the vastness of nature.

<sup>35</sup> Maggie Keswick, *The Chinese Garden: History, Art and Architecture* (with contributions and conclusion by Charles Jencks). 1978. Academy Editions, London. St Martins, New York. Pp 55, 56; Chapter Four: *The Gardens of the Literati*. Pp 73 – 90.

Also:

[http://www.gardenvisit.com/history\\_theory/garden\\_landscape\\_design\\_articles/design\\_methods/feng\\_shui](http://www.gardenvisit.com/history_theory/garden_landscape_design_articles/design_methods/feng_shui)

<sup>36</sup> Jacques Gernet, *A History of Chinese Civilization*, 1982, Cambridge University Press. Chapters 21, 24.

*Repetition*,<sup>37</sup> which also has links to the seventeenth century mathematician and philosopher, Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz<sup>38</sup> and Taoism, is used to illuminate Taoist understandings in the West. Four key studies of studio practice<sup>39</sup> will identify the scope of the Taoist method of creativity to represent complex concepts through binaries in unified flux, expressed in Taoist art's improvisational structure.

Deleuze and Guattari's *Rhizome* as a metaphor for the method of infiltration of Taoist precepts into Western culture is the key to the art historical aspect of the methodology, described in Chapter Three: Mixed Methods.<sup>40</sup>

In Chapter Four, to establish the foundations of calligraphy's Taoist trope, correlations between Deleuze's theoretical analysis of the qualities of 'repetition' and 'difference' will be established with N. J. Girardot's interrogation of the structure of imagery and meaning in Taoism.<sup>41</sup> The 'synchronicity' (to borrow Jung's Taoist phrase)<sup>42</sup> of both scholars' outcomes is contained in the *yin* and *yang* symbol. This icon graphically illustrates that, when a force (the singular) is balanced with an opposing force, (the two) a numinous and cosmological merging of phenomena occurs (the three, represented by a merging of the *yin* and *yang*). Calligraphic art practice embodies this tensile, unified harmony. In the fourth chapter, thousands of graphic improvisations upon the calligraphic character that signifies *longevity* as it appears on architecture and artefacts in Hué, Vietnam, is analysed to elaborate upon the methodology used to express Taoist precepts.<sup>43</sup> The binary opposites, *continuity* and *change*, will be identified in the graphics of this study to demonstrate the calligraphic representation of temporality embodied in the artefact's conceptual meaning.

In Chapter Five, correlations between the improvisational process of traditional calligraphic art are made with Donald Judd's creative process in the planning and

<sup>37</sup> Giles Deleuze (1968). *Repetition and Difference*. New York: Columbia University Press.

<sup>38</sup> Giles Deleuze (1993) *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque*, University of Minnesota Press. Leibniz was profoundly influenced by Taoist axioms leading to his theory of 'monads', where phenomena is made up of multitudes of basic units that make up perceptual reality, foreshadowing atomic structure.

<sup>39</sup> The four key studies are traditional Taoist calligraphic art; Donald Judd's *Untitled* installation of aluminium boxes, Marfa, Texas; Xu Bing's installation, *The Book from the Sky*; the development of my own art practice, focusing in detail on major works produced during the PhD program.

<sup>40</sup> From Giles Deleuze, Félix Guattari. (1993) *A Thousand Plateaux: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Translated by B. Massumi: University of Minnesota Press. See Chapter Three.

<sup>41</sup> N. J. Girardot, *Myth and Meaning in Early Taoism*, 1983, University of California Press.

<sup>42</sup> Karl Jung, Preface, *I Ching: the Book of Changes* (1949). German translation, Richard Wilhelm (1923), English translation, Cary F. Baynes (1949), Arkana Press, 1967.

<sup>43</sup> As capital of the Nguyen Empire, which adopted Chinese civil organisational methods to maintain unity, Hue has multitudes of examples of improvised longevity characters adorning Imperial, sacred and vernacular architecture and artefacts. See Chapter Four (page 104).

installation of *Untitled* (1982–1986), his permanent, site specific installation of one hundred aluminium boxes in two decommissioned artillery sheds in Marfa, Texas. Possibilities of cultural exchange in countries associated with Taoist philosophy and cultural practices in his life experience, and his own writings and statements, are drawn upon to argue implicit and explicit Taoist influences upon the sculptural ideas of this artist. This broadens the discourse surrounding Judd's practice in general, and analyses graphic improvisation as a methodology specific to the Marfa installation, associations that have not been explored in the literature surrounding Judd's practice.

The invented calligraphy of Chinese contemporary artist, Xu Bing, in his seminal installation, *The Book from the Sky* (1987 – 1991)<sup>44</sup> will be analysed in the context of Taoist precepts and traditional Chinese cultural practices in Chapter Six. It is ironic, given the nationality of the artist, that Taoist content in his artwork has not been discussed in depth in the literature surrounding his practice. Lui Weijan's article, *The Dao in Modern Chinese Art* is the exception pointing out that "consciously or not" Chinese artists use "Daoist views of the world and the arts which were subsequently taken over by the West".<sup>45</sup> Lui gives examples to illustrate his point in very general terms. This thesis elaborates upon this observation and addresses this fundamental gap in the understanding of Xu Bing's oeuvre. Perception of *Book from the Sky* by readers of Chinese calligraphy, compared to non-readers, is also explicated in an interview with Xu Bing in Chapter Six, contributing to a greater understanding of this seminal contemporary artwork.<sup>46</sup> Now, in the twenty-first century, there is direct exposure within the West of unfiltered Taoist paradigms orchestrated by homegrown, international Chinese artists such as Xu Bing.<sup>47</sup> These artists bring to their practice an innate knowledge of Taoism that arguably endures as the structural underpinning of

---

<sup>44</sup> Xu Bing (born 1955, Sichuan) *The Book from the Sky, (Tianshu)*, 1987 – 1991. Xu Bing is one of the world's most prominent contemporary Chinese artists engaging in radical experiments with language and linguistic structures. He was part of the Chinese New Wave art movement in the mid 1980s. After graduating from Beijing's Central Academy of Fine Arts, in 1988 his calligraphic installation, *Book from the Sky*, was shown in Beijing. In 1990, he moved to the United States of America where he continued to experiment with language, codes and meaning. For his artistic inventions, Xu Bing was awarded the McArthur Genius Award in 1999. He was also the first living artist ever to be given a solo exhibition at the Smithsonian's Sackler Gallery in Washington, D.C. He is now Vice Chancellor of Beijing's Academy of Fine Arts, living and working in Brooklyn and Beijing.  
[http://www.artzinechina.com/display\\_vol\\_aid107\\_en.html](http://www.artzinechina.com/display_vol_aid107_en.html) Cited May, 2008

<sup>45</sup> Lui Weijan, *The Dao in Modern Chinese Art*, pp 55 – 69, in *China Avant-garde: Counter Currents in Art and Culture* (1993), Ed., Jochen Noth, Wolfger Pohlmann, Kai Reschke. Pub. Oxford University Press, Hong Kong.

<sup>46</sup> The interview was conducted with ethics approval from the University of Western Sydney's Human Research Ethics Committee. Project Title: *Continuity and Change: Practice based research on the influence of Taoist concepts and calligraphy on contemporary visual art practice*. The Protocol Number for this project is H6569.

<sup>47</sup> Many eminent Chinese artists, including Xu Bing have migrated to the West since 1985.

their creativity, despite the best efforts of Mao Zedong's Cultural Revolution<sup>48</sup> to obliterate China's ancient culture.

In Chapter Seven, my artworks produced during the candidacy are analysed to demonstrate different ways Taoism manifests in a Western artist's visual arts practice. Chapter Seven explores in detail references to specific Taoist precepts, setting them beside comparative examples of iconic artworks by other practitioners to illustrate a wider perspective and application. Throughout the thesis, examples of artwork from my oeuvre from 1969 to 2009 are drawn upon as examples that insightfully locate the impact of Taoism threading through the processes and conceptual terrain of an Australian contemporary visual artist. An additional outcome is a demonstration of how experimental contemporary Australian art has become increasingly cross-cultural due to past policies to promote multiculturalism in Australia, plus globalisation.

This research will identify a gap in accounts of colonial, post colonial, cultural exchange that informed the Modernist canon. Few art historians have recognised Taoism as a factor underlying Modernism's *zeitgeist*. For example in Daniel Belgrade's *The Culture of Spontaneity: Improvisation in the Arts of Post War America*, which focuses on improvisation, the essence of Taoist art practice, mentions Taoism only in passing.<sup>49</sup> Texts analysing the Fluxus Movement, such as *The Fluxus Reader*,<sup>50</sup> give slight attention to the influence of Taoism as a vehicle for paradox, or its ontological relationship with Zen Buddhism. Both Taoism and Zen were demonstrably studied by many Fluxus artists as alternative ways to approach an understanding of the nature of reality. However, background to Taoism's influence on Abstract Expressionism is provided by David J. Clarke's doctoral thesis, *The Influence of Oriental Thought on Postwar American Painting and Sculpture* (1988).<sup>51</sup> Clarke identifies specific artists, roughly between the mid-nineteen forties and nineteen sixties, who expressed interest in Taoist, Zen Buddhist and Hindu principles and practices. He suggests that rather than mimicking superficial aspects or adopting Eastern ideas wholesale, artists succeeded in synthesising concepts and forms with Western traditions to achieve

---

<sup>48</sup> "Critics say Xu Bing's experiments are a profound and compelling commentary on the deceptions and cultural miscues that come from language." [http://www.artzinechina.com/display\\_vol\\_aid107\\_en.html](http://www.artzinechina.com/display_vol_aid107_en.html) Cited May, 2008. I would add into the mix Mao's injunctions to destroy Chinese traditional culture during the Cultural Revolution (1964 – 1974). Refer to Jung Chang, *Wild Swans: Three Daughters of China*, Simon and Schuster, (London, 1991); Anchor paperback, (London, 1992).

<sup>49</sup> Daniel Belgrad, *The Culture of Spontaneity: Improvisation and the Arts in Post War America*, University of Chicago Press, 1998.

<sup>50</sup> *The Fluxus Reader*. Edited by Ken Friedman. Chichester UK: Academy Editions, 1998.

<sup>51</sup> David Clarke, *The Influence of Oriental Thought on Postwar American Painting and Sculpture* (1988). Garland Publishing, Inc., New York and London. Pp 22 – 23.

innovation. My thesis continues Clarke's Taoist narrative to trace the threads of Taoist influence from the nineteen-eighties to the present, also emphasising how artists have *digested* and *synthesised* Taoist ideas from disparate sources, sometimes applying conventions drawn from Taoist axioms unknowingly, therefore indirectly passing on past influences.

The more recent migration of Chinese artists to the West shifts the emphasis of cultural exchange between East to West, which began through the overlaid, filtered conduit of Western paradigms in the mid to late seventeenth century. In past analysis of the avant garde, the impact of the East was overlooked or down played,<sup>52</sup> and in the assessment of Asian modernist artists, it has been inferred that they, Asian artists, have been Westernised, whereas the Western artists have been *influenced*, or *inspired* by Asia.<sup>53</sup> This patrician attitude is reflected in Roger Benjamin's description of 'indigenous'<sup>54</sup> artist, Azouaou Mammeri's artwork as "quasi-modernist landscapes of an angular graphic style", whereas he quotes Matisse saying, "My revelation came from the Orient". One is revelatory; the 'Other' is 'quasi'.<sup>55</sup> This thesis aims to redress the hegemonic imbalances often inherent in cross-cultural commentary.

The next chapter, Chapter Two: A History Of Discourse – East West and Back Again, provides a history of the discourse between the West and East that underpins the thesis. It tracks salient strands of Taoist influence upon the West during the colonial period, examining significant factors with their origins in Taoism that contributed to avant garde artists' innovations in the Modernist and Post Modernist periods. Taoist currents and progenitors for the present will be identified, where the impetus of globalisation has allowed unprecedented discourse between cultures, including the direct impact of émigré artists after China's Cultural Revolution, from China to the West then back again.

---

<sup>52</sup> For example, *Avant Garde Art* (1967), edited by Thomas B. Hess and John Ashbury, MacMillan, New York, does not discuss the influence of the exotic at all; it is essentially Eurocentric. Another example, in *The Invention of the Avant Garde: France, 1830 – 80*, Nochlin focuses on the upheaval of political revolution in France and democratic Realism whereas colour theory, symbolist scientism and anarchy are the causes discussed in Françoise Nora's essay, *The Neo-Impressionist Avant-Garde*.

<sup>53</sup> This will be discussed in Chapter Two, illustrated by Thiat Diem Phung's modernist sculpture, based on calligraphic modules. Ref. Duong Dinh Chau, Ed., *L'Art de Diem Phung Thi*, 1997, pub. The Fine Arts Association of Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam.

<sup>54</sup> Benjamin's inverted commas.

<sup>55</sup> Roger Benjamin, *Orientalism – From Delacroix to Klee*. (1997), Catalogue, Art Gallery of New South Wales. *The Oriental Mirage*. P 28.