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The Art of Being: A Study of the Relationship Between Daoism and Art

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Ever since the beginning of time, artists have been inspired by the religion they choose to follow. Sometimes religion was the subject, but more often than not, one had to really dig deeper into a work of art to understand the religious meaning. In my paper, I focused on contemporary Chinese artist Song Dong, who uses his artistic abilities to reflect the ideals of Daoism. Focusing on a couple of more well known works by Song Dong, one can see that he shows how one is able to move down the path to lead a more full life through the Dao. In this paper, I took my discussion along the path of the major themes of Daoism, relating it back to a piece from the Han era of China, and then related all of this to Song Dong's pieces and provided one with the inevitable fact of how religion, whether intentional or not, can influence a work of art.

THE ART OF BEING:
A STUDY OF THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN DAOISM AND ART

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Mentor: Alisa Eimen

Ever since the beginning of time, religion and philosophical ideas have been inspiration for artists, whether it is the subject or just a hint of an idea within the work. Song Dong, a contemporary Chinese artist, uses his abilities to craft works of art that reflect the ideals of Daoism. The Water Diary and Jump, both influential works by Song Dong, provide one with an understanding of how one is moved along the path of life through their relationship to the Dao.

Daoism is an ancient religion and way of life for the people who choose to follow it. Every religion has a center focal point and in Daoism it is known as the Dao. The Dao can be explained as the natural order of things, but cannot be easily explained plainly with words. According to Stephen Little, an American Asian art scholar, “the Dao is the Way of all things; it represents both the machinations and ultimate source of everything in the universe”¹. The Dao is therefore a mysterious and profound idea that is believed to be the source of all life. It encompasses everything in life and cannot be changed by humans, but must just be followed. The Dao is often translated as the road, which one makes their individual path down. Philippe Vergne, former deputy director of the Walker Art Center, states that the Dao cannot be explained easily because “it exceeds the senses, thoughts, and imagination.”² Even though the Dao transcends all of these components, it is still the driving force behind all living things.

¹ Little, Stephen. *Realm of the Immortals: Daoism in the Arts of China* (Cleveland, Ohio: The Cleveland Museum of Art, 1988), 1.

² Vergne, Philippe. “*Song Dong.*” How Latitudes Become Forms. Walker Art Center. <http://latitudes.walkerart.org/artists/index4133.html>.

The interesting thing about Daoism is it is very concerned with creating a marriage with the natural forces of the world, rather than going against them. This is seen as more of a philosophy of going with the flow of life, rather than fighting what will inevitably happen. This philosophy is called Wuwei or “non-action” which calls for a respect of the natural order.³ Letting yourself just be in that moment and just allowing something to happen, whether you are making a piece of art or you are going for a jog. Once you are able to let go of the ego, you are able to just be and what you are doing reaches its fullness and it becomes perfectly present.⁴ In essence, this is the main goal of Daoism: to reach fullness in everything in life that you do. There is a goal of creating a sense of fullness by letting go of the everyday distractions of life and becoming one with the Dao and with nature as it leads you down the path.

Daoism has been influencing the arts since it’s beginning and art has often been a way for the less literate people to understand the concepts of the Dao. Hans-Georg Moeller, Associate Professor and Chair of the Philosophy Department at Brock University, explains that art was seen as a part of the “techniques of perfect behavior, ideal production, and productivity.”⁵ Within Daoism, the follower attempts to perfect their behaviors and follow along with the path of life so that they might achieve immortality when they leave this earth. Making art or being a craftsman was a way in which one could achieve the ideal behavior in life and by achieving this ideal behavior one would achieve immortality. When looking back on the arts of ancient

³ Vergne. “Song Dong.”

⁴ Moeller, Hans-Georg. Daoism Explained (Peru, Illinois: Open Court Publishing, 2004), 26.

⁵ Moeller, *Daoism Explained*, 114.

China, one can see the influence Daoism had on the artists. One can also see many different subjects that are often depicted in a Daoist work, like fog, mist, clouds or bodies of water. These are often seen as being representations of the Dao because each element shares the same characteristics. They move and permeate through the painting, just like the Dao moves and permeates through the universe.⁶ By looking at a couple of examples, one can see how they show the relationship to Daoism reflected in the works.

Looking back to the Han era of China, one can see that the Censer (c. 113 B.C.E.) from Hebei has direct connections to Daoism. The Censer is an incense burner made of bronze with gold inlay. The top is in the shape of mountains and along the mountains there are birds, animals, and huntsmen. Sherman E. Lee, retired director of the Cleveland Museum of Art, points out that the Censer “...surely embodies an aristocratic taste for elegant technique, sophisticated representation, and knowing symbolism.”⁷

⁶ Smits, Gregory. “Early Daoism.” <http://www.east-asian-history.net/textbooks/PM-China/ch4.htm>.

⁷ Lee, Sherman E. A History of Far Eastern Art (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1994), 70.



Not only is the Censer a fantastic example of the beautifully crafted Han bronze work, it also shows one the influence that Daoism had through symbolism. The mountain is very representative of Daoism, as it shows us a journey through the mountain. The journey through the mountain is a direct example to the journey one makes with the Dao. Mountains are often depicted in Daoist influenced works because the immortals lived in mountain paradises and the goal of Daoism was to reach immortality.

The Censer is also a good example of Daoist works because of the smoke that appears when the incense is burned. Like the Dao, smoke cannot be caught in one's hands and held. The smoke is constantly getting away as one makes the attempt to contain it. The Dao is one thing that cannot be contained or controlled, and like trying to grab smoke, one tries to grasp the meaning of the Dao and it just slips away into nothingness. This doesn't necessarily mean that the smoke holds no meaning for

the Daoist, but it holds a spiritual and ritual meaning when lit for different Daoist functions.

Song Dong is a conceptual artist who uses a variety of different subjects and mediums to make his statements about the world around him. He uses the mediums of performance, video installation, calligraphy, sculpture, and site-specific projects. Through his use of several different mediums he is able to portray his different beliefs and influences. One of the major beliefs that influence an artist is religion. For any artist who believes in anything will be influenced by those beliefs. Although he does not necessarily come out and proclaim his work was done in a Daoist sense, by looking and analyzing his pieces, we can see how he has incorporated his beliefs into his art. Philippe Vergne has analyzed Song Dong's methods and work as "attempting to relocate our experience of somewhere between modernity and tradition, past and present..."⁸ This follows the way of Daoism, where the point is to follow the path of life and eventually one would achieve the fullness of life by creating a bridge between the opposites in ones life.

⁸ Vergne. "*Song Dong*."



Of all the works that Song Dong has produced, his ongoing project the Water Diary (1995-present) might be one of the most personal. It is his diary, his own personal thoughts, recorded on a stone with a calligraphy pen dipped in water. The use of water instead of ink might be the most extraordinary thing about this piece of work. It allows Song to record all of his inner thoughts without the possibility of someone potentially reading them at some point. As explained by Philippe Vergne, the Water Diary “became a way to release his emotions in absolute privacy, leaving no trace.”⁹ By keeping his inner thoughts this private, the process of writing the Diary and photographing it has several connections to his faith as a Daoist.

The Water Diary provides a good example of the Daoist principles. Daoism is not a religion where one worships in public with others. It is a very private exploration believers need to go about on their own path through meditative processes

⁹ Vergne. “*Song Dong*.”

and contemplation in order to find their way along. The private aspect of Daoism is important to each follower. In the Water Diary, Song Dong records his thoughts for his own development as a person. This way he can explore his thoughts about whatever he pleases and no one else can read them. Contemplating his path, as a diary is mainly used to contemplate ones thoughts about ones day and to work out problems, he is able to figure out his path in life. By creating his Water Diary, Song Dong is able to write his thoughts and they are only between him and his relationship to the Dao, which emphasizes the aspect of privacy important to Daoism.

Looking at the Water Diary we also see that it expresses the way of following the path. By keeping a daily diary, one has created a process. This is important for Daoism because one's following of the path is a process. All the events of one's life create the path that one has followed, and the events of the future shape one's path that will eventually be followed. By creating a daily writing regiment in a diary, one is creating a record of his/her thoughts for private reflection. This record allows the option of meditating on his or her thoughts and as stated, Daoism is a meditative private religion.

One of Song Dong's most notable works that can also be related to Daoism is his performance piece entitled Jump. Jump (1999) is a performance piece done by Song Dong that takes place in front of the Forbidden City in Beijing. Dressed and acting like a tourist, Song Dong, standing in front of a camera, jumps, moves right or left and then jumps again. This sixteen-minute video shows how Song Dong is

inspired by the idea that one person might affect the world in a new way.¹⁰ He is interested in creating something that will cause a change in how things are being dealt with in the present time. According to Philippe Vergne, Jump is a piece that can be traced back to a Chinese proverb: “Jump...no reason not to jump...no reason to jump.”¹¹ This proverb is full of the Daoist way of thinking because when it is talking about jumping, it is saying there is no reason that one shouldn't jump. If one is just standing around, why not jump? But at the same time, why disturb the order of things by stopping to jump up and down. As quoted in an interview with Francesca Dal Lago for the Art Journal, Song Dong has stated, “If this new possibility can make a person stop for a moment and interrupt for even a very short time the usual flow of his or her life, I think this is already quite interesting.”¹² He thinks that by stopping the flow of life for a moment, there is the possibility of an interesting effect coming from this. By stopping to jump in front of the Forbidden City, he is attempting to create some new outcome from this action. Therefore, it can be looked at two ways, and shows how it relates to Daoism.

Jump epitomizes several aspects of Daoism. It is a meditative performance piece full of repetition.¹³ Meditation is an aspect of Daoism that is meant to help achieve the balance of one's behaviors and help them along the way and closer to

¹⁰ Vergne. “*Song Dong*.”

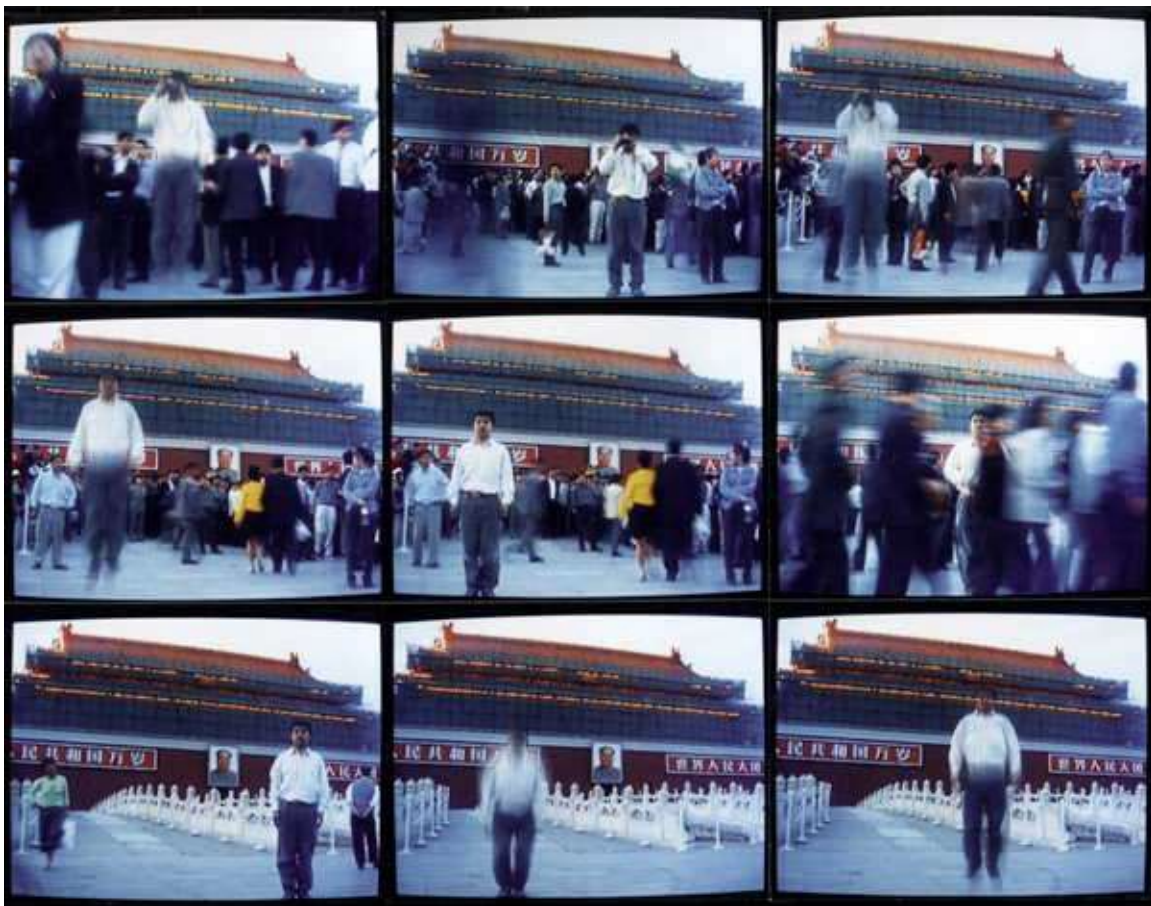
¹¹ Vergne. “*Song Dong*.”

¹² Dal Lago, Francesca. “Space and public: site specificity in Beijing.” *Art Journal* 59, no. 1 (Spring 2000): 74-87. Art Full Text, WilsonWeb (accessed October 20, 2010).

¹³ Pace Beijing. “*Song Dong*.” Accessed 20 October 2010.
<http://www.pacebeijing.com/Artists/songdong/biography.html>.

immortality. By jumping up and down repeatedly, he is creating a process, a rhythm to follow. Instead of being like all the other tourists around he had decided to break away from the status quo and challenge the agendas of the people around him. The crowd around pays no attention to his antics, and continues on with their business totally indifferent to his actions.¹⁴

When analyzing the performance more in depth, one can see that Song Dong is trying to break free of the preconceived notions of tradition. If the Dao is all about following a path and letting yourself be moved along with the flow of life, then Song Dong's performance can be seen from two different views.



¹⁴ Vergne. "Song Dong."

One being that by standing in front of the Forbidden City and jumping, he is trying to disrupt the flow of life and going against the natural flow of nature. By jumping instead of just milling around the Forbidden City like a common tourist, he is disrupting the way things are meant to be. By his own explanation Song Dong has said he is inspired by one person trying to affect the world in a new way, but this in its essence goes against the Dao, which states that life is the way it is and cannot be changed. A second way to see this is the exact opposite of the previous argument. Maybe it was in Song Dong's life path that he is meant to attempt to change the world by his performance. One cannot be sure, as it is so hard to exactly define the Dao, the only thing that is certain is that Jump, whether the artist claims it or not, is very influenced by the Daoist way of thinking.

Song Dong is just one of the many artists today whom has been influenced by his religion. Daoism is a major school of thought and will continue to be an influential one for artists in the future, due to its fundamentals of going with whatever life throws at you. Song Dong's interest in how opposites can become one and his ability to use several different mediums to show this interest make him an interesting artist to study. His ability to show how his life path is moving through his works gives his viewers a little better understanding of how the Dao moves through and shapes one's life.

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Faculty mentor: Alisa Eimen teaches Art History at Minnesota State University in Mankato. She has her doctorate degree in Art History from the University of Minnesota and her focus is on art of the Islamic world. She is a wonderful mentor to her students and really pushes them to reach their full potential in any of the projects they embark on.