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Drawing the Dao: Reflections on the Application of Daoist Theory of Action in Contemporary Drawing Practice

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Abstract

In this paper we engage resources in Daoist philosophy as a means for critically investigating theories of drawing in contemporary arts practice. The aims of the paper are twofold. First, we highlight the problematic metaphysical assumptions that inform contemporary drawing practice and its theorization around 'performance'. In particular, we criticize the tendency to conceive such performance in terms of transcendent or mystical expression, and relatedly, through notions of unthinking or pre-conceptual bodily practice. We suggest that such practices, and their corresponding theories, problematically bifurcate between 'thinking' and 'unthinking' action, thereby reinforcing a substance based metaphysics. Second, in response to this problem, we begin to outline how Daoist philosophies of action might provide a more robust theorization for undertaking such practices. We consider the philosophical implications of what Hans-Georg Moeller has termed 'the Dao Scenario', as a model for critical practice that can avoid such problematic mysticism.

Keywords: Daoism and art, Drawing performance art, Drawing practice, Theory of action, Chinese philosophy of action, Daoist aesthetics, Taoism and art, Taoist aesthetics.

Art has become one of the primary avenues for expressing contemporary thought creatively. Leading this trend is drawing, a practice now claimed by artists and theorists alike as engaging thinking through gesture, bodily action and performance. In this article we highlight problematic metaphysical assumptions informing contemporary drawing practice, especially those used in theorizing forms of performance. In particular, we criticize the tendency to conceive gestural drawing in terms of transcendent or mystical expression, and relatedly, through notions of unthinking or pre-conceptual bodily practice. We suggest that such practices, and their corresponding theories, constitute a problematic bifurcation between ‘thinking’ and ‘unthinking’ action, thereby reactively reinforcing a metaphysics of substance. Moreover and in response to this problem, we begin to outline how Daoist philosophies of action might provide a better avenue for theorizing and indeed for undertaking such practices. We consider the philosophical implications of, what Hans-Georg Moeller has termed, ‘the Dao Scenario’ (2006) as a model for ideal practice that can avoid such problematic mysticism.

We find Daoism particularly apt as a conceptual model for this attempt given the distinction between traditional Daoist and Western ontologies. In simple terms, the West has historically been dominated by dualist understandings of reality, those that distinguish mind from body, subject from object and, in religious-philosophical contexts, distinguish this world from another (divine) transcendent world. Whereas from the outset, Daoist thinking maintains no such distinctions. The body and mind are inextricably connected, and the only world that exists is this one. The immanent characteristics of Daoist ontology therefore provide a basis for thinking through bodily practice within a naturalist and non-dualist framework more appropriate to the context of contemporary drawing.

A Short History of Contemporary Drawing in Relation to Performance

In the recent history of art, practitioners have increasingly used drawing through performance. This discipline emerges from artists and theorists attempting to re-establish drawing as a specific medium, a practice in its own right. Since 1945, and especially after the 1970s, artists worldwide have come to use ‘drawing’ not only conventionally, to refer to works on paper, but experimentally and conceptually. Drawing has since continued to be used throughout art works in open-ended ways that are materially experimental and indeterminate in definition – ‘Drawing is the newest oldest medium. Drawing is impossible to define’ (Kurczynski 2014: 92). One of the ways in which contemporary drawing is engaged is through performance. The transition to performance-based

drawing has been a significant feature of the recent history of drawing. But to view performance as limited to something like an action one does privately, as in drawing in the privacy of one's studio, would reduce and trivialise this method. In contemporary performance, it is nonetheless often considered to be important how the artist attempts to see, feel and express a certain individual, in fact sometimes individualist, comportment. In its orientation toward thought, drawing is philosophically and critically reflective. In other words, the gesture of drawing is toward engaging a mode of existence in which thinking relates inwardly toward self and externally to others and world.

Rather than produce a painting or sculpture, drawing emphasizes processes, movements, or active ways through which art is created, in an embodied way. It is a practice that focuses on conceptual reflection, of certain forms of thinking elicited in active creation. This approach is different to conventional drawing. The conventional sense of drawing is that of using marks to compose pictures on any two-dimensional surface, such as paper, and of representing objects or scenes either figuratively or abstractly. However, drawing now appears broader in materials and approaches. It is a kind of practice that retains such focus on the making of marks and imprints made by the artist's hand or entire body. Throughout such mark-making the artist performs actions that, rather emphatically, elicit thoughts. For example, in his *Blind Time Drawings* (c. 1972), Robert Morris uses his hands to directly imprint paper, leaving abstract marks that trace his physical actions whilst blindfolded. Morris expresses his thoughts not merely using abstract mark making but also in writings, which appear primarily as instructions (written by him onto the drawing) and, on occasion, in writings about such works (see Morris, 1993). To give further examples, Joan Jonas makes figurative drawings that she later turns into animations and videos, some of which she presents in theatrical performances, such as *Reading Dante II* (2009). For Jonas, these engagements with action and different mediums demonstrate 'performance drawings' (Marranca and MacDonald 2014: 37). In her choreographic work *Its A Draw* (2002), the late Trisha Brown draws live in front of audiences, using charcoal sticks to trace a kind of improvised dance onto paper laid overtop the gallery floor.

Such examples involve artists predominantly from the American context, which is where much of contemporary forms of drawing have been established. Geographically however, these approaches are not exclusive to North America, nor Europe for that matter. For instance, South African artists William Kentridge and Robin Rhodes extend drawing into animations and photographic works. Korean artist Park Seo Bo creates abstractions of writing and drawing, or what he calls *écriture*: works that appear as recursive marks made seamlessly and almost mindlessly. Chinese artists such as Zhou Bin, or Lai Chih-Sheng from Taiwan, are part of an Asian cohort.

The role that action plays in Asian art and culture can have implications for how ‘thought’ is engaged. For instance, in *Puzzling Tracks* (2014) Zhou Bin uses a pencil to mark the movements of an ant meandering across a piece of rice paper [Figure 1]. Here marking has paradoxical and satirical undertones. The mark is made using a more radical action, a mode of vitiated engagement that is, so to say, effortless; whilst sitting over a table, upon which rests the paper, Zhou Bin moves his hand with only as much mental and physical effort as necessary to trace the ant’s tracks. Here he adopts a passive position in relation to the moving object: following the path (*Dao*) of the ant. This action thereby resonates with the Daoist tradition of thought. In the final section of this paper we shall examine this notion of Daoist action, since it can provide a broader context and critically robust theory of drawing with implications for transnational practice.

To return to the earlier history of contemporary drawing, we now look at how the mark has tended to be interpreted as a form of transcendence, particularly by Western theorists and practitioners. Process art is an approach to making art that has transformed interpretations of drawing as mark making. Here marks are not merely actual traces, made using physical action and mental effort. The mark itself takes central stage and is upheld as a kind of graphic display of ‘movement’. On the one hand, when made by the artist, the movement is physical. On the other hand, and more peculiarly, the feeling moving elicits becomes something subjective, and internal, such as the energies felt from heat and blood flow. In relation to this ‘experience’ of kinetic flux – or *élan vital*, in more philosophical terms – the artist can take liberties with interpretations of the mark ensuing from his action. The mark thereby becomes *de facto* a formal principle, popularly interpreted as ‘the line.’ However – and here the most peculiar, if not egregious perception arises – the attempt to embody this line is now interwoven with more substantive psychological and even cosmic connotations. The line still remains a key concept in process art and the ensuing history of contemporary drawing. To clarify, the line is both a formal part of the work – marks composing figurative or abstract representations – *and* is the embodied expression of a principle of inwardly felt movement – that has been conceptualized as being infinite, spontaneous, and fully coincident with profounder notions of self. From the 1960’s onwards, questions of moving and mark-making shifted from painting to a kind of conceptually experimental form of drawing, with the line increasingly given primacy. In this historical context, drawing is claimed to be *the* art form enabling the expression of movements, thoughts, concepts, and existence more profoundly. On this basis a particular emphasis has been given to action. The making of the drawing in real-time shifts the meaning of action to an expressive gesture, expressive in feeling movement not merely physically but, more emphatically, emotively engaging something that seems to transcend bodily gesture.

This aesthetic ideology is evident in a string of major exhibitions, most of which happen in New York's Museum of Modern Art: from the pioneering exhibition *Drawing Now* (1976) to the more recent *On Line: Drawing Through the Twentieth Century* (2011). Here drawing is presented largely in the form of gestural and abstract works. Works by artists such as Robert Morris or Marcia Hafif are exhibited around active engagements with marks and abstraction. The emphasis is on gestural mark-making and process-based practice. In turn, drawing is posed as 'the "drawing out" of ideas from the mind in the conceptual generative sketch' (Petherbridge 1991: 21). The genealogy of drawing in its contemporary sense then culminates in a certain emphasis and focus given to the mark. What this mark means or expresses as meaningful is complicated, to say the least, a problem that we return to shortly.

So far we can see how certain artworks reflect the process of drawing, and in ways that attempt to integrate different disciplines, materials and approaches. As we can see, movement and line are integral to contemporary drawing, both theoretically and in practice. These elements express the artist's mental and physical engagement with materials, and his/her relationship to the surrounding environments (e.g. studio, gallery, museum, outdoors). A drawn mark is thus deemed to be a line, not merely abstract but reflective of a profounder movement that is tangible through bodily action. Again, this movement is indeed physical; the artist uses his/her body to move hand, arm, even entire body to trace actions and, thus, create a drawing. But, as we have suggested, movement is conceived in a manner that is metaphysical and, even, mystical in its implications.

Critique of Drawing in Theory/Practice

In the following section we criticize tendencies in both drawing performance itself and its conceptualisation in art theory. Our criticisms focus on the problematic ontologies that appear to underlie their theoretical frameworks. There are a number of key figures in recent art theory that have attempted to give voice to developments in contemporary drawing practice. Seminal figures include Deanna Petherbridge, an artist and theorist specialising in drawing, and Catherine De Zehger, who is known as a curator and writer for her focus on performance drawing. In terms of performance and choreography, Peggy Phelan and André Lepecki are theorists extending the concepts of movement in relation to mark-making. While such theorists identify important developments, to the same extent they are reflecting on broader tendencies. They also highlight and thereby further cement problematic approaches to what drawing practice entails. The problem as we see it lies in an unwillingness to critically reflect on the underlying ontological assumptions that are implicit in the practices themselves, for example in the line and in movement. In other words, the

kind of action that drawing entails has been poorly theorized and in tandem, recklessly engaged in the practical arena.

This apparent lack of willingness to think through the philosophical implications of the work is ironic, because both theorists and practitioners are presently characterising these works as a form of *thinking through drawing*. For example, in Phelan's coining of the idiom 'movement based thinking' to describe such practice in the catalogue for the exhibition at the Hayward Gallery in 2011 *Move: Choreographing You*. This echoes de Zehger's claims that movement expresses '[t]he artist's decision between thinking and doing' (2001: 2).

In essence, the problem lies in the fact that such theorists are attempting to suggest that the performance of drawing captures something in excess of what is visually present in the so called 'embodied performance,' or the marks made on the page. In this case, the object of intrigue is the mind of the artist. As Jennifer Brody puts this, 'The mark choreographs and orchestrates thought' by expressing '(im)material events' (2008: 13). Through the performance we thereby supposedly gain access to, one may say, an expression of the inexpressible. The work is taken to be capable of transmitting a form of inner thought given in movement, through some vaguely determined capacity. On this account, movement becomes the mode of expression for some profounder – even metaphysical – dimension of reality that cannot be displayed or represented in visual terms (that is, which cannot, by definition, be given merely in the mark – the line on paper). Therefore a performance that involves drawing the line, which is taken to encompass both the physical mark and the movement that produces it, is conceived as the site of expression for something outside the artwork, namely a transcendence of sorts. Take for instance American choreographer Anna Halprin, who claims that moving and tracing movement create 'experiences that go beyond words, that go beyond your conscious thinking but are part of you' (in Thakara 2017). Here thinking is not about conscious action, rather the 'experiences' are of transcendent immaterial events in the minds of the practitioner. The audience appears to be granted access to shared participation in events that are otherwise pre-conceptual, inward and inexpressible, 'beyond words' as Halprin claims. The experience of drawing in purely gestural forms therefore clearly takes on metaphysical and romanticist implications. Movement, line, and mark are synonymous with this mysterious manner of access to fully constituted notions of presence or substance (Orrico 2014). And these elements are conceived by such theorists – and expressed indeed by artists – as an efficient cause of the work itself, the ground that makes the work possible, they are 'the genesis of the work as such' (Newman and de Zehger 2003: 103). To this effect we see the artist's expression and the audiences reception both formulated in explicitly ecstatic and psychological terms.

As Rosalind Krauss notes critically, the work becomes the ‘physical manifestation of a cause’ which expresses ‘the message of pure presence’ (1989: 211). To put this more plainly, artists are supposedly bringing an unrepresentable, conceptual source into direct presentation for the audience. By performing the drawing in this way, the audience purportedly gains access to a form of metaphysical presence, something ineffable that is subjectively felt in excess of mere visual representation.

In terms of explaining the peculiar role of performance in these works, we would hazard that neither the mark nor the physical performance are enough on their own to enable or explain this seemingly mystical communication. But, so think artists and theorists, the combination of the two, in the mark making performance, allows the work to manifest some form of possession, inspiration or incarnation in the theological sense. The work is imbued with the pure presence of ‘extra linguistic being’ (Krauss 1989: 211). The performance of mark-making thus enables a form of expression that would otherwise be impossible if either the performance or the mark were taken alone.

Throughout such notions of performance ‘the body becomes subservient to mysticism,’ as Benjamin Myers aptly states, ‘[i]t falls into the trap of searching for what it is that animates our bodies’ (2012: 169). Paradoxically, given the veneration of embodiment, the body is effectively usurped, the mark/trace expressing ‘a denial of the importance of the body’ (Barthes 2004: 35). In drawing performances the source animating the artist’s body is deemed immaterial, akin to forces essential to life. Myers will criticize this immaterial source in its connotation of ‘*élan vital*’, which is the vitalist philosophical sense of being as a constituted by essential life forces. Such forces are commonly understood as ‘energies’ one experiences kinesthetically, as in blood flows and bodily tensions. In the attempt to think critically about the immaterial (line, movement) ‘conversation stops.’ As Myers elaborates on his critique, ‘the experiences you have are not able to be understood by me. The *élan vital* is an acknowledgment that there is something that not only do we not understand, but we cannot understand’ (Myers 2012: 170). Since performance ‘often makes one feel outside oneself,’ writes Myers ‘this feeling of transcendence is beyond question’ (Ibid.).

Our concern is that this way of conceiving the act of drawing and the content of the artwork in drawing performance smacks of a problematic metaphysics. As Alain Badiou criticizes such works, they present ‘performance as a pure immanent becoming, opposed to representation or reflection’ (in Crone 2012: 23). Expressed by this romanticized interpretation of line/mark as felt through performance, ‘pure presence’ corresponds to a non-reflective and uncritically formless conception

of becoming and time. Expressively drawn thinking has become an affect of unthinking experience, or rather, an avowed rejection of radical thought. The mark reverts to ‘the trace of a condensing, displacing, figuring, elaborate energy, with no regard for the recognizable’ (Lyotard 2011: 232). In this way the movement used to make such a mark becomes nothing more than ‘temporal enslavement’ (Kunst 2015: 113).

Whereas the work has been characterised as a form of movement based thinking, in actual fact it comes to represent an outright rejection of reflective practice, and instead looks rather more like a form of secular mysticism. To put this in harsher terms, the new mysticism of movement expresses mere thoughtlessness. In Krauss’s terms a ‘meaningless meaning’ (1989: 206).

Sympathetic diagnosis

It is not enough to criticise this tendency without also explaining its origin. The desire in these works, to outwardly evade conceptual frameworks, but at the same time to retain the claim to being a meaningful expression of thinking, has its basis in the sense that such conceptual frameworks have been rendered null and void through their over-use. In other words, the work manifests a resistance to representing anything above its own immediacy, this based on the broader socio-cultural context of the supposedly post-theological West. But through the formless idea of ‘movement based thinking’ the very notion of ‘thought’ therefore becomes platitudinous. Rather than overcoming the religious and philosophical frameworks they would want to reject, this results in reasserting a problematic form of transcendence through the retreat into the inner thoughts and feelings of the subject and/or the artist. The work and its theory become ideologically contradictory, emotivist and individualist in the extreme.

Artists should be viewed as complicit in perpetuating this individualist ideology. For example when Robert Morris reflects on his *Blind Time Drawings* he writes about feeling ‘a voluntary renunciation of control and judgement [...] leading to revelations of a certain somatic knowledge that has nothing to do with the theorized wholeness of vision’ (Morris in Criqui 2005: 198). These ‘revelations’ remain obscure in feeling. For Morris, the ‘somatic knowledge’ generated by feeling paper, and sensing his body moving whilst engaged in drawing, produces the feeling of, as he says, ‘dark reason’ and ensuing ‘economy of excess’ (Morris 1993: 627). This mystical occurrence is visually echoed in Tony Orrico’s drawing performances, where Orrico uses his entire body to create abstract circles, traced in charcoal around his body whilst facedown on the gallery floor. The circles repeating into patterns and cosmic shapes ‘create substance from substance’ (Orrico 2014: 6). Either as pre-conceptual excess or cosmically patterned drawings, the ontology expressed is undeniably

substantive. The effort to express this ontology therefore flags up a ‘paradox of the performative’ (Luzar 2017: 63). The paradox is that whilst drawing the artist might feel some kind of unconscious movement or presence happening within herself, but the meaning of this movement as presence remains ‘beyond question’, to echo Myers’ criticism. The performative act then remains uncritical because the feeling of transcendence cannot be thought and understood either by the artist or the audience. Performative drawing practices paradoxically regress in thinking through formless kinds of substance.

A notion of transcendence expressed through practice reflects a form of secular mysticism. Indeed, art historians are now increasingly focusing on how modern and contemporary artists, interested in concepts of transformation, have employed sources from Indigenous religions and Eastern spiritualities (Pearlman 2012). For example, Jackson Pollock’s drip paintings and gesturally rendered drawings are influenced from his engagement with theosophists, such as Krishnamurti, and with Native American mysticism; John Cage’s experimental performances and drawings are sustained by his interpretation of D. T. Suzuki’s lessons on Zen Buddhism; and, more recently; Matthew Barney’s performances of drawing from self-imposed restraints, using harnesses and materials symbolizing transformative energies, take inspiration from Japanese Shintoism. As Elkins puts this, through practice, art ‘expresses such things as the hope of transcendence or the possibilities of the human spirit’ (2004: i).

At this stage it becomes clear that ongoing in the sphere of drawing practice are reflective of a wider socio-cultural discontent in the West, one that finds itself trapped between a rejection of its own historical basis in absolutist or transcendent conceptual frameworks, and the problematic alternative of a retreat into individualism and so called ‘radical’ finitude, informed by engagement with alternative spiritualities.

For precisely this reason we want to suggest that the theories of action given in classical Daoism, may provide the basis for a less problematic way of reconceiving such practices. Specifically, our assertion is that the Daoist view of action, properly understood, can enable the reconceptualization of drawing performance by allowing us to think through bodily practice from a perspective that doesn’t draw these types of ontological distinctions between the absolute and the finite in the first place.

Drawing and the Dao Scenario

In this final section we will briefly look at ideals of practice in the classical Daoist canon in order to start to think about how a less problematic ontology can assist in reconceiving what takes place in drawing practice. Here we refer to what Hans Georg Moeller has called, in passing, the ‘ideal scenario of the Dao’ (2004: 26). This examination will provide a basic account of the ideal relationship between the body and its environment in traditional Daoist thought and practice. Such an ideal, we assert, can then be written onto the context of contemporary drawing, providing new avenues for ways of thinking about the relationship between artist and practice in performance.

What is most important for the purposes of this application to drawing practice is that the *Dao scenario* allows for thinking of a way of relating to things – to tools, marks, objects, devices, the work itself, and the broader context of nature that surrounds us – in a way that doesn’t treat such external objects as substantive. Nor does it treat them as separate from the practitioner. At the same time, it also allows us to refrain from treating the *subject* (i.e. the artist) as a substantive existence, inwardly felt as if full in being and self-present, or as an individual somehow independent from the practice itself. In fact, the Daoist theory of practice, precludes making such sharp distinctions between practitioner and practice or subject and object.

As Moeller points out, the Dao of Daoist philosophy is built upon two primary elements: ‘ “Being” and “Nothingness,” or, more concretely, Emptiness and Fullness, or, more technically, Presence and Non-Presence’ (Moeller 2006: 25). Properly speaking, one can say that the Dao scenario constitutes a certain way of navigating the relationship between these two contrasting elements within and without the body. In terms of the relationship of consciousness or thinking to such a practice, Moeller likens the Dao scenario to discussions of ‘flow experience’ in recent psychology. He refers particularly to Mihaly Csikszentmihaly’s concept of flow (1990). In order to explain the Dao scenario, Moeller continues with the example of a runner absorbed in his/her activity, and what goes into the practice of running on a physical and psychological level:

While doing such activities, people stop consciously realizing that they are actually performing them. The activity seems to go on just by itself and the actor experiences some kind of “lightness of being.” This can happen for instance while jogging. One runs and runs, and at a certain point one ceases to feel any effort; the body seems to be running smoothly and easily by itself. In such a case something occurs that bears a resemblance to what the Daoists believed to be happening when a scenario of the Dao is established: While on the one hand the “ego” of the runner disappears and is, so to speak,

emptied, the running itself, on the other hand becomes an effortless, continuous and perfectly functioning going on. (Moeller 2006: 25).

What is interesting in this example are two key features that the Dao scenario entails. The first is the dissolution of the ego of the subject and how this egolessness can enable a better or more effective form of action. In such a case, the runner no longer thinks consciously about themselves as a substantive person that runs, rather the person and the running become one and the same. Secondly, if we extrapolate further based on Daoist principles, this kind of activity also entails a way of relating to the environment around oneself (the space in which the run takes place) in which the runner is also entirely absorbed. The runner is not separate from the run, and the runner is not separate from the place where the runner is running. Thus neither the subjective nor the objective context can be substantively segregated from the activity itself. In terms of the application to drawing practice, what we would want to claim here is that, in an ideal scenario, there is no sharp distinction between practitioner and practice, nor between the drawing and the drawn. In this sense, the profoundly ego-centred framework implied in the epithet 'Choreographing You', which addresses movement as a mystical thinking that grounds subjectivity, would be quite the inverse of any notion of artful action. So in the case of works such as Zhou Bin's *Puzzling Tracks* the drawing reflects not only his hand and body but the ant's movement as well. This act of wandering and passing no longer needs to be perceived as a kind of artistic performance; the actions he presents are ultra mundane (Dong 2010). The act of drawing therefore expresses a movement that is as expressive or profound as that of the ant's rather un-substantial presence. The marks and drawing left by such a performance reflect an approach where life forms and objects are dynamically engaging one another in an environment where the existence of the "leader" and the "follower" are not neatly segregated.

Importantly for our purposes, this type of dynamic engagement with the environment involves the Daoist idea of *wu-wei*: a form of non-action, action-through-non-action, or otherwise put, an effortless action (Slingerland 2003). The idea of effortless action elicits a special kind of relationship to thinking or conscious activity. The effortless engagement with the world entails something other than the bifurcation between thinking and unthinking activity that has been given in theories of contemporary drawing. It is neither the manifestation of the inner psyche of the practitioner, nor is it an intuitionist embodiment of a more general spiritual principle mystically derived from nature as a whole. Instead it represents a more singular way of offsetting such dichotomies. The mind of the actor in the Dao scenario is neither conscious in the rational, discerning, judgmental sense, nor is it some kind of unconscious, emotively felt intuition. Instead

the activity of the dao scenario is a form of alert presence, a more critical form of immediacy and intimacy with the environment. This way of engagement is missing entirely from contemporary drawing theories.

Furthermore, such activity is not somehow special or metaphysically meaningful in any absolute sense. Rather, it represents a way of being in the world that is spontaneous to everyday consciousness once the barriers to its realization have been removed. In a sense, what is unique about this Dao scenario is that it is not (ontologically, cosmically) unique and that is precisely what makes it radical. This is to say, realizing the Dao scenario means an overt revealing of how subjects engage with the world more generally, at an elementary and sometimes mundane level. To explain this, in terms of the relationship to artistic practices, we can provide further examples of the kind of experience or activity that takes place in the Dao scenario. Relevant examples can be drawn from both the very mundane to the very exceptional forms of human activity. What is also particularly useful about the dao scenario, in terms of its application to artistic bodily practice, is that this allows us to develop a better framework for thinking about excellence and mastery, and what is involved in developing these capacities. Slingerland has argued against reading *wu-wei* as a conceptual framework for thinking about mastery or skill (2003: 9), however, his argument rests on the claim that the notion is inseparable from the broader spiritual aims of Chinese philosophy. In other words, it is not enough to practice *wu-wei* in a given scenario, rather the ideal is only fully realisable by one committed to the project of attaining the status of a Daoist Sage. However, his argument here seems to ignore the manner in which the practice of *wu-wei*, is constituted by a focused realization of forms of bodily practice we can find in a range of mundane and everyday activities, such as the example, given in the Zhuangzi, of the masterful skill of Cook Ding, who we shall discuss shortly.

The first, more mundane, example comes from the familiar experience of learning to drive a car. As a beginner, hesitation, judgment, measurement and reactivity come to the forefront of the process. While learning to drive, as one is acquiring the skills and bodily knowledge needed for driving adequately, such decisional and discerning elements are primary. But it is not until the point at which one knows these aspects of the process of driving so fully, that one is able to start to forget them, that one can then be said to be capable of driving a car in the proper sense: to drive *well*. To put this another way, the first step in knowledge acquisition involves developing adjudicative skills, whereas its mastery, is a certain way of forgetting them, or letting them go. The proficient driver no longer has to think in a judgemental way in order to be able to drive. In fact, if he/she were to have to do so at every stage, the thinking would obstruct his/her ability to drive.

The same principles are apparent in the example of a musician, such as a pianist, when thinking about what it takes to master playing a piece of music. Whereas the method of learning to play the piano (or a given piece) likewise begins in technical acquisition, its mastery involves a certain kind of letting go. In order to be able to play a piece of complex music, one can no longer be thinking about the notes as distinct elements, rather individual notes, and technical knowhow are absorbed into the larger process of the performance.

This brings us to an example from one of Daoism's seminal figures, Zhuang-Zi's Cook Ding, the master butcher. Cook Ding comments on his own process of acquiring excellence in carving meat in the following way:

I have left skill behind me. When I first began to carve oxen, I saw nothing but oxen wherever I looked. Three years more and I never saw an ox as a whole. Nowadays, I am in touch through the daemonic in me, and do not look with the eye. With the senses I know where to stop, the daemonic [*sic.*] I desire to run its course. I rely on heaven's structuring, cleave along the main seams, let myself be guided by the main cavities, go by what is inherently so. A ligament or tendon I never touch, not to mention solid bone. A good cook changes his chopper once a year, because he hacks. A common cook changes it once a month because he smashes. Now I have had this chopper for nineteen years, and have taken apart several thousand oxen, but the edge is as though it were fresh from the grindstone (*Chuang-Tzu* 2001: 63-64).

In sum, one of the important aspects of the Cook Ding example, that is also missing from the context of contemporary drawing, is a more incisive conception of mastery or perfection, in practice. Readers may think that the 'daemonic' is some Asian form of metaphysical transcendence; however, it should be clear that the 'heaven's' are not referring to any cosmic order or substantive ontology. Here there is no divine principle of transcendence in the Dao scenario as there is no higher order concept of creation, no substantive and causal ground of Being. As Ziporyn puts this, 'no "one" and no "thing" causes anything to be what it is... Creation is without lord or master, and each thing creates itself' (Ziporyn 2003: 103). Like the example of the runner engaged in effortless action [*wu wei*], it is through the sense of withdrawing effort, and in some cases elation (feeling lighter on one's feet, spirited), that the subject can feel him/herself engaging a sense of daemonic mastery. Overall, the point here is that there is a significant difference between someone who has just picked up a cleaver and started hacking at a piece of meat, on the one hand. And on the other, the master butcher, who has undergone a deep process of skills acquisition, where he knows precisely how and when to begin letting his technical knowledge go, or relaxing the bow. But precisely in this letting go we can at the same time say that Cook Ding actually knows better the

objective conditions for his art: he is still guided by 'what is inherently so'. So he doesn't lose technicality in some chaotic possession, in fact, he becomes its most precise instrument.

We can thus say that his excellence in cutting of the meat is a kind of heuristic 'flow,' but not in any naive, egalitarian, or pagan sense of the term. He is not merely unthinking or intuitive in his actions. He is able to let go and yet retain his mastery to the same extent that his knowledge of his art form transcends the merely technical. The idea that flow is simply an unskilled activity or is a liberation from any formal requirements, is a misreading of Daoism, the same approach that can likewise lead to dilettantism in the arts.

In light of these examples what then would the Daoist scenario mean for contemporary drawing practice? This is a question about certain methods or approaches to drawing today. As seen in the case of Zhou Bin, the marks reflect modes of wandering, following and passing. Photography is also used to show how the artist not only marks but also appears in tandem with the surrounding context and objects (e.g. table, chair, room). This method deals with using one's own body in a far more prosaic way; the artist lets go of his presuppositions and follows through with actions that are more mundane, downplaying gestures that might appear overly expressive or dramatic. Gravity and weight largely dictate the actions of the artist. In Park Seo Bo's *Écriture* works, for instance, the sense of gravity appears through downward-strokes and diagonal markings. Or in Lee Kun-yong's works, like *Body Drawing* (1976), this gravitational mark-making appears in tandem with serial photography, the photographs showing a series of steps in which the artist's body is used like a kind of metronome, marking a flat board in recursive, downward strokes, from head to toe, air to earth. Here the weight of the artist's arms and torso dictates the physical actions. The marks in such cases spread and amass, echoing environments that then seem like rain or fog. The sense of skill in making such marks into drawings is therefore made possible by how the artist follows through with gravitational forces that make up the environment in which the art-work takes place.

Conclusion

Clearly the possibilities of further developing such models as a contribution to contemporary drawing theory are much broader than we have outlined so far. Not to mention the breadth of literature on this topic that exists in the Chinese context. Nonetheless we hope this serves as a preliminary basis for thinking about how such comparative work can actively contribute to contemporary art theory and practice in the West.

By critically analysing contemporary drawing, we have tried to expose an aesthetic ideology that continues to pervade creative practice, often silently. In its engagement with substantive ontologies, the notion of thinking through drawing is indeed problematic. Mystical thinking cannot think or represent the line/movement drawing practices currently privilege. What artists engaging drawing performances struggle to think, and fundamentally overcome, is the notion of pure presence that implicates the self in being subjectively focused, inwardly probing, and individualist in the extreme. What however does the the sense of performing drawings express; what does gestural mark making give to, either, artist or audience, self or other? If anything else, the experienced actions of drawing elicit struggles with experiencing anything beyond individual self-reflection. We close with some words that highlight this experience:

What makes me what I am, the will of which I am simply a materialization, is utterly indifferent to my individual identity, which it uses merely for its own pointless self-reproduction. At the very root of the human subject lies that which is implacably alien to it, so that in a devastating irony this will which is the very pith of my being, which I can feel from the inside of my body with incomparably greater immediacy than can know anything else, is absolutely unlike me at all, without conscious motive, as blankly unfeeling and anonymous as the force which stirs the waves. (Eagleton 1990: 161).

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