

ZEN IN THE ARTS: A LOOK AT
TRADITIONAL ASIAN ART AND ITS AFFECT ON
RECENT TRENDS IN CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN ART

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Introduction: Statement of Thesis

While the influence of Asian art on Western artists has been well documented in numerous art texts and more specifically, in books dealing with Japonisme, not much has been written about the religious and philosophical ideals that influenced this work. In book after book, the Japanese wood block prints of Hiroshige are set next to paintings by Van Gogh or Gauguin or Degas. The affect of Asian art on Western art is discussed in terms of the formal characteristics only. It is likely that not much was known about the Far Eastern religions of Taoism and Zen Buddhism in the mid-nineteenth century. Yet, during the last half of this century, the philosophical ideas of Asia have had a pervasive influence on contemporary American culture -- even though not much has been published of this influence on art.

By the mid 1960s, American contact with East Asia was occurring in politics (the Vietnam War), economics, music, poetry, and art. The impact of Asian philosophical systems on contemporary American culture can be seen at all levels, from the popularity of books such as Zen and the Art of Archery, to the plethora of books written by the Zen Scholar, Alan Watts, to the presence of the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi as the spiritual leader of the **Beatles**.¹

The ideas that artists found in the philosophies such as Zen Buddhism and Taoism offered an "inner journey" as well as a new way of looking at the world. F.S.C. Northrop, in his book The Meeting of East and West contends that "the cultures of the Orient, perhaps more so than all other cultures, emphasized the aesthetic mode in experiencing, apprehending and living in this world."² Northrop's argument is that Oriental cultures place primary importance on direct intuitive

experience. It is a mode of experience that apprehends the immediately sensed world as an “undifferentiated continuum.” This particular mode of viewing or experiencing the world is the basis for Zen Buddhism. In fact, Zen is fundamentally a method of awakening to this “undifferentiated continuum.” In Zen terms, this is called Emptiness realization or Sunyata (Sanskrit).³

Although it would require several volumes to comprehensively cover Zen art and thought, the following discussion is a brief overview of how Emptiness realization relates to the arts of the Orient and Occident. This study will trace Zen art in the context of its historical presence in China and Japan and propose how Zen’s influence might be affecting the work of selected contemporary American artists.

The Origins of Zen

According to Buddhism, every human being can become a Buddha.⁴ Unlike the nature of God as conceived by Christians -- as an absolute being distinct from man, the Buddha is not a creator, he is a man who has achieved enlightenment. It was the middle of the sixth century B.C., while sitting under the famous Bodhi tree in Northern India that Siddhartha Gautama, a Hindu prince, found enlightenment. He became the Buddha, or “The Enlightened One.”⁵

Gautama, the Buddha, taught that life, as we live it, is out of balance because of the selfish, possessive attitude to which we adhere. This attitude is called **trishna** (Sanskrit). Although **trishna** is often mistranslated as “desire,” it may be more appropriately understood as “craving to resist change.”⁶ Zen’s fundamental assertion is that the very nature of life is change. It is only in the minds of men that these concepts of resistance to change have arisen. It is this resistance to the very nature of life that causes human misery.

Zen is often described as a technique, method or "Way" to radically change this undesirable experiential state for the better. Alan Watts sums up Zen in two phrases: "Let go!" and "Walk on!"⁷ Gautama the Buddha never tired of saying that the Dharma (Buddhist teachings or law) was concerned only with the "Way to Enlightenment."⁸ He never claimed the Dharma to be a revelation of enlightenment and he was careful to avoid descriptions of the illumination which he experienced that night in Northern India. In other words, he was warning all Buddhist disciples not to confuse the teachings with wisdom itself. As Richard Pilgrim so aptly stated: "one must be wary of fingers pointing to the moon lest the fingers be mistaken for the moon."⁹

Legend says that Zen originated at the moment the Buddha attained enlightenment while sitting under the Bodhi tree. Furthermore, it is said that this insight was passed down through a line of 28 patriarchs until it came to Bodhidharma, who brought Zen to China in the sixth century A.D. This communication from one patriarch to the next was via direct transmission without the aid of any written doctrine or scripture. Therefore, it is important to emphasize that Zen can only be understandable to the person who is far enough along in their own experience to apprehend their own enlightenment as well as their masters. The purpose of Zen Buddhism is to go beyond words and ideas in order to bring back to life the original insight of the Buddha.¹⁰

Alan Watts, the Buddhist scholar, contends that Zen, as a specific Buddhist cult, is primarily a result of the Chinese mind. During the time when Zen was being passed down through the 28 patriarchs, Buddhism had concurrently divided into many sects. A great deal of these sects had developed Buddhism into a highly abstract system of philosophy; it had departed from being a path or "Way" of experiencing direct awakening and had become "a cult of sublime other worldliness."¹¹ Although the the type of Buddhism brought to China by Bodhidharma was part of that line of direct

communication from teacher to disciple, it wasn't until it came to China that the cult of Zen took on its iconoclastic nature. In China, Buddhism adapted itself to the practicality of the Chinese mind and became interwoven with Taoism as taught by Lao Tzu (sixth century B.C.) and Chuang Tzu (third century B.C.).¹²

Taoism can also be understood as a path or "Way." In fact, the Chinese character for Tao is an ideogram that denotes a path.¹³ As such, the Tao is sometimes called the "Way of Things."¹⁴ In China, after the death of Bodhidharma, succeeding Zen masters often used the word Tao synonymously with 'Buddha-nature' or 'Dharma' (law).¹⁵ As in Buddhism, the desire and craving for pleasant experiences and the avoidance of suffering are thought to stem from the belief that man is separate from the Tao. When one realizes that he is already at one with life, that he is a part of the undifferentiated continuum of the Tao, only then can one awaken to life itself. Like Taoism, Zen became a method for viewing life in a new way. As a process of realization, the problem of desire disappears when we realize we are the Tao - or in Zen Buddhist terms, the "Formless Self."

Although the word "formless" generally means lack of form, Hisamatsu concludes that, in Zen, it comes to have an additional meaning as well. For example, the human mind is considered to have no physical form and possess no shape. Formlessness in Zen terms means "that there is no form of any kind, either physical or mental."¹⁶ While it may be true that mind has no physical form, it does have a mental form as an idea or concept.

Whereas, the ideas of truth, beauty, goodness and evil have no form in a spatial sense, they are differentiated and defined. As such, they possess form as ideas or mental constructs. Concerning the mind, Hisamatsu raises this question; "is there any mental activity that is beyond differentiation - that is, is there any mind that is without distinction or beyond definition?"¹⁷ He then answers this question by explaining that

Zen is the experience of awakening to the Self that has no form - or the "Formless Self."

In Zen literature, this "Formless Self" is referred to as; "Emptiness or Sunyata (Sanskrit)," "Suchness or Tathata"¹⁸ "The Absolute Void," "your original face before your father and mother were born," "where not one particle of dust is raised," and so on.¹⁹ Richard Pilgrim, in his book, Buddhism and the Arts of Japan, explains Emptiness realization as "a transformation at the roots of consciousness and awareness, and an awakening to the immediacy of experienced reality prior to all description, naming, and reflection - prior, indeed to subject/object consciousness."²⁰ In other words, the nature of this experience of waking up to the Formless Self does not stop the flow of reality nor distance the experiencing subject from its object.

In Japan, the Shinto religious tradition has a similar way of apprehending the world as an undifferentiated continuum. Such a mode of apprehending the world can be described as a tendency to "find the fullness of being in the immediate flow of the aesthetic moment."²¹ Shinto refers to this kind of living as **naka ima** or "in the midst of now."²²

This aesthetic experience can best be described with the Japanese word **Ma**. Possessing a host of various meanings, **Ma** generally means "interval" or gaps in time and space. Pilgrim suggests that **Ma** "is particularly important as an aesthetic and technical term in architecture, its roots lie in ancient Shinto ideas concerning the nature and signs of **kami** ("gods" or "sacred power[s])."²³ **Ma** is not only related to the gaps or intervals in time and space, but to the apprehension of a spiritual atmosphere that can be described as ephemeral. Much like the undifferentiated continuum of the Tao, or the "pre - differentiated" world of Chinese Zen, the **kami** is a spiritual essence that shares these formless qualities. **Kami** can be described as spirits that endow all phenomena. Therefore, in this complex of related ideas, **Ma** can be seen as a mode of apprehending the presence of **kami**. Similar to Taoism and Zen, the

Shinto belief system is a method of apprehending the world in which “the undifferentiated continuum is experienced in, with, and in between the immediately experienced differentiated continuum.”²⁴

Although Buddhism had been introduced into Japan from Korea in the middle of the sixth century A.D., it wasn't until the middle of the fourteenth century during the Asikaga Period did Zen take hold. Zen's popularity in Japan was a result of its adaptability to the Japanese environment.²⁵ While Zen and Shintoism remained distinct from one another as traditional religions, it was the similar phenomena of **Ma** and the “Formless Self” or “Emptiness” that made their coexistence and influence on Japanese art pervasive. Along with Shintoism, The Zen tradition had an immense impact on the arts of Japan. Many aesthetic qualities that the world has come to know as distinctly Japanese were developed during the Asikaga period in which Zen played a dominant role. With this brief outline of Zen's history in mind, we shall examine how Emptiness realization is expressed in the arts of China and Japan.

Zen in the Arts of China and Japan

Since Zen is a sect of Buddhism, Zen art may clearly be classified as Buddhist art. However, Zen art differs greatly from ordinary Buddhist art. For example, traditional Buddhist painting usually depicts images of Buddhas or “incidents connected with the attainment of **Bodhi** or Buddhahood as described in the sutras,”²⁶ while Zen paintings do not depict other worldly or sacred Buddha images. The images in Zen paintings represent the actual world of men, mountains and rivers, birds, monkeys, and so on. As explained earlier, the Buddha is nothing more than a person who has found enlightenment. Consequently, there is no other worldly or sacred being apart from the world of men, mountains, birds, and monkeys.

This awakening to the Formless Self can be seen in Sakyamuni Descending the Mountain (Figure 1). Painted by Liang K'ai in the thirteenth century, this ink painting depicts Sakyamuni, the Buddha, descending the mountain after experiencing enlightenment. This painting symbolizes the ideal of freedom from attachment, which "is freedom from habit, convention, custom, formula, and rule."²⁷ His face and gesture exemplify a figure emerging from a long period of meditation. Sakyamuni's eyes are introspective, they are the eyes of "depth itself, or of Nothingness."²⁸ The dishevelled hair is painted with an unerring touch in a broken ink style that denies it any formality, thus expressing the Buddhist aesthetic character of Sublime Austerity. Hisamatsu describes Sublime Austerity as "being without sensuousness."²⁹

Painted in Chinese ink, with the clothing of the figure lightly colored in red, the manner in which the painting is executed is reflective of the experience of Zen; although there is some detail shown in the drape of his clothing, the whole composition is revealed with a minimum of brushstrokes. Such brush work denies detailed precision by means of what the artist has experienced himself, an awakening to the "Formless Self." Consequently, while this painting is simplistic in its composition and brush work, something detailed and precise still emerges.

As discussed above, The Zen experience of reality is often expressed in philosophical jargon as the undifferentiated continuum of the Formless Self or the Absolute Void. In Japanese, this Zen attitude is described by the word **yugen**, "an aesthetic term with connotations of limitless profundity and mystery."³⁰ The pictorial expressions of the Zen experience are called **Zenga**. By definition, the **yugen** quality must be present in the artwork if it is an expression of **Zenga**. Thus, a **Zenga** has the quality of the Absolute Void expressed through the artist. As such, a picture of this type is a direct reflection and statement of the development, the degree of experience, and the profundity of the artist. It is only when "the artist has experienced with his

being the truth of the teachings that the subject comes to life, and that **yugen** is present for the discernible audience.”³¹

Another example of Zen painting as an expression of the Formless Self can be seen in The Sixth Patriarch Destroying the Sutra (Figure 2). This ink painting, also by Liang K'ai depicts another human being who has achieved enlightenment. Hui Neng, a Chinese peasant from Canton became the sixth patriarch of Zen in the late seventh century. When his master Hung-jen, the fifth patriarch of Zen, asked him to write an ode expressing his original nature, Hui Neng wrote:

Fundamentally no wisdom tree exists,
Nor the stand of a mirror bright.
Since all is void from the beginning
Where can the dust alight?³²

This painting once again expresses the Formless Self in the composition and style of **Zenga**. The brush work is sparse, yet expresses the sureness of someone who has experienced non-attachment. This experience can be reiterated as the Formless Self that “is not bound to any form.”³³ Freedom from attachment or “No Hindrance” is an essential characteristic of all Zen artwork. The expression of non-attachment can be seen in the artist's abbreviated brush work and the portrayal of the human figure without the realism of balance or proportion that one might find in a classical Greek statue.

Another characteristic that expresses **Zenga** is asymmetry or “No Rule.”³⁴ Since Zen is a religion of non-holiness, the asymmetrical composition as well as the subject matter of The Sixth Patriarch Destroying the Sutras, best expresses the negation of sanctity. In this painting, the figure of Hui Neng stands left of center, his gesture implies motion and change, and the figure itself is crooked and bent. This negation of perfection and grace expresses the realization of what Zen calls “worldly passions fallen away, empty of holy intent.”³⁵ The didactic message delivered by this picture is

that holy scriptures will not help one know one's true nature, only when a person experiences the emptiness of all being, can one become the Buddha.

When viewing these paintings from a Western or Occidental point of view, Sakyamuni Descending the Mountain and The Sixth Patriarch Destroying the Sutras would be considered Buddhist paintings, whereas flowers or birds or mountains are representations of natural life and would be considered "still life" or "landscape" paintings. However, in Zen art, the distinction does not hold true. When Zen expression occurs, it is the Formless Self or "the creative subject expressing itself."³⁶ In other words, the subject of the painting is the Formless Self which expresses itself through the painting -- there is no subject and object here. Richard Pilgrim, in his book Buddhism and the Arts of Japan agrees with this and says, "The artistic expression of this awakened moment is -- strictly speaking -- Buddhist art in a formless mode. The subject matter is whatever form the mind takes at a living moment of Emptiness/Suchness artistically expressed, whether six persimmons, splendid dreams, blooming flowers, or blooming worlds."³⁷

In Pa-Pa Bird on an Old Pine Tree (Figure 3), the bird depicted gives the impression of tranquility. Painted in the monochromatic broken ink style by Mu Ch'i in the late thirteenth century, it fully disregards elaborate representation and, as such, is yet another example of Sublime Austerity. The pine tree, the vines and the legs of the bird intertwine to create a unity of composition that conveys the feeling of "unrestricted freedom in activity"³⁸ or freedom from attachment. The eyes of the Pa-Pa Bird are similar to Liang K'ai's Sakyamuni - they are sharp and penetrating. Viewing the painting from its stylistic aspects, the black ink splash of the bird can be seen as the center point around which all other elements are gathered, as such, the painting also expresses the negation of sanctity through its asymmetrical composition.

Mu ch'i became a Zen monk in mid-life and took "Mu ch'i" as his "art name." He became the first abbot of the Lu-t'ung Shan monastery in China. Although not

much is known about him as a painter, the characteristics of his style are the way he builds up many layers of ink to create a three-dimensional effect that gives depth to his compositions.³⁹ This can be seen in Six Persimmons (Figure 4). It is a small work in which nothing but six persimmons are depicted and yet, it is perhaps one of the most famous Zen paintings.⁴⁰ Expressing the characteristics of Asymmetry, Sublime Austerity and Non-attachment, Six Persimmons is a nonsymbolic or formless art. The dynamic character of this very ordinary subject matter is expressed by the lack of formalism and emotionalism that reveals these characteristics. As such, it is an ideal of Zen art. It is said that "when Mu ch'i opened himself to the universe he had six persimmons for his mind."⁴¹

Emptiness realization is likewise expressed in landscape painting. Landscape in Haboku Style (Figure 5) by Sesshu is a powerful example of a Zen painting where the actuality of the immediate present or emptiness realization is depicted by the rocks and bamboo sharply contrasted by the floating mountains in the background. This painting exemplifies the Ch'an or Zen Style Landscape in which form seems to float in space as the objects of the world come into and disappear within the emptiness of the mind.⁴² Sesshu was a Zen monk and a master of powerful and emphatic brushstrokes. The work is not contrived, it brings to mind once again, the expression of the Formless Self. The artist balances form with emptiness; it is an emptiness intrinsic to the painting and is not merely unfilled background.

Another example of Zen landscape painting that expresses Emptiness realization is Early Spring by Kuo Hsi (Figure 6) Painted in China in 1072, a description of Kuo Hsi's landscape from an imperial catalogue of the Northern Sung Dynasty reads:

Winding streams and abrupt bands, craggy cliffs and sheer precipices, rounded heights and sharp peaks rising in abundance; clouds and mists constantly transforming and dissolving, a thousand attitudes and ten thousand forms in the midst of their changing light.⁴³

This painting epitomizes the experience of Emptiness realization. The fluid nature of the painting reveals that nothing remains fixed, everything is in flux, turning into something else and pointing to a reality beyond form. Kuo Hsi emphasized the need for the artist to bring out the spiritual essence of his subject, he said “If he fails to get at the essential, he will fail to present the soul of his theme.”⁴⁴

Zen as an Artistic Way

As mentioned above, Zen at its most fundamental level is a method or technique for seeking enlightenment. We have discussed the art of Zen within the context of Emptiness realization. Not only does Zen art express a Buddhist experience and ideal, “it is also a vehicle into the very experience and ideals it expresses.”⁴⁵ In China and Japan, the arts became for Zen an appropriate expression of a religious tradition that found “the aesthetic central to the nature of its highest goals and to the atmosphere and environments of its practice.”⁴⁶

What underlies the ideals of Zen art, is the aesthetic sensitivity to **Ma** or to the Absolute Void as an in-between or formless experience. In this sense, art can be considered a spiritual exercise or practice. This kind of artistic pursuit has been defined in China and Japan as a “Way.”⁴⁷

Generally, artistic Ways merely refer to the tradition of a particular artistic form and practice. However, in China and Japan the artistic Ways took seriously the spiritual and religious practices of Taoism and Buddhism, as well as the formal aspects of artistic training. A famous seventeenth century Chinese text, The Mustard Seed Garden Manual of Painting approaches the Tao of painting through various stages of apprenticeship. As a “religio-aesthetic”⁴⁹ method, an artistic Way (do) can be described as:

The **do** in the field of art is a way of leading to spiritual enlightenment through art; the **do** consist here in making an art a means by which to achieve enlightenment as its ultimate goal. In the artistic **do**... particular emphasis is laid on the process, the way, by which one goes toward the goal. To every stage of the way a certain spiritual state corresponds, and at every stage the artist tries to get into communion with the quintessence of art through the corresponding spiritual state, and make himself bloom in the art.⁵⁰

A New "Way" in Contemporary American Art

While the influence of Oriental art has been well documented in books concerning the influence of Japanese prints on nineteenth century European artists (Van Gogh, Monet, Cezanne and so on), this influence has primarily been discussed only in terms of the formal artistic attributes. Thus far, we have discussed the expression of the Formless Self within the context of the traditional arts of China and Japan. As the philosophies and religions of the Far East moved into the United States, how have the ideals of Zen influenced the art of contemporary America?

Taoist and Zen influence can clearly be seen in the writings of the 1950s and 1960s. Books by popular authors include: Eugen Herrigel's Zen and the Art of Archery (1953), Joseph Campbell's The Hero with a Thousand Faces (1953), D. T. Suzuki's Zen and Japanese Culture (1962), Alan Watt's The Spirit of Zen (1958) and Philip Kapleau's Three Pillars of Zen (1965). Many artists found out how to achieve harmony and direct experience of reality in several of these popular texts. For example, Zen and the Art of Archery was required reading at the Art Institute of San Francisco and the Chicago Art Institute during this time period.⁵¹

In the same vein, works of fiction with an Asian philosophical theme in the 1950s and 1960s were impressing a profound influence on the American public in general. From New York to California, people were becoming "Dharma Bums," inspired by the alternative lifestyle of the protagonist in Jack Kerouac's On the Road.⁵² Similarly,

the following text from J.D. Salinger's Franny and Zooey clearly expresses the Zen ideal of non-attachment:

Detachment, buddy, and only detachment. Desireless
Cessation from all hankering... in one damn incarnation or another, if you like - - you not only had a hankering to be an actor or an actress but to be a good one. You're stuck with it now. You can't just walk out on the results of your own hankering... The only thing you can do now, the only religious thing you can do, is act.⁵³

Furthermore, John Cage the poet, musician and performance artist was a critical link in the transmission of the ideals of Taoism and Zen. During the 1950s and 1960s he was a student of D. T. Suzuki, the Zen master who has been credited for bringing Zen practice to the United States. Cage's music became "chance compositions that simulated the random noises we hear in life."⁵⁴ He acknowledges Suzuki for teaching him to see music and he shared these experiences with other artists. John Loftus said of Cage:

It was in the 50's that John Cage brought Zen downtown.
He gave his lectures on 'something' and 'nothing.' Then everyone seemed to be reading Suzuki, and later Alan Watts. They didn't talk about it, they acted. There was a feeling at the Club [Artists Club in New York]...that somewhere there were two people who would sort of walk by each other early in the morning and nod to one another and all the knowledge in the world would pass between them... There was also an attitude toward discursive exposition, it wasn't the thing to do.⁵⁵

In the visual arts, this new way of viewing and experiencing life can clearly be seen in the work of Carl Andre. In Cedar Piece (Figure 7), Andre stacked unfinished cedar beams one upon the other, so that they fit together where they crossed, much like the corners of a log cabin. The stacked cedar beams are all the same length. They are "stepped inward from the bottom toward the center of the structure, and outward again toward the top, so that their ends form an X pattern on each of the objects four sides."⁵⁶ Andre makes use of common objects that deny sentiment, metaphor and

whimsy. The use of modular units that are small enough to be lifted by hand seems to infer that "there is no hierarchy of position or relationship among the parts of his sculpture, and to affirm that anyone's labour would suffice to assemble his work."⁵⁷ The use of modular units and raw material, undecorated or transformed, is part of Andre's purpose -- it is to provoke a rethinking of the question, "who, or what, makes something a work of art."⁵⁸ This work calls to mind the Zenga characteristic of Sublime Austerity, the work is without sensuousness.

Andre's 1961 piece entitled Pyre (Figure 8) consists of eight cedar units, simply stacked like building blocks. In regard to the simplicity of his own work, Andre said, "Up to a certain time I was cutting into things. Then I realized that the thing I was cutting was the cut. Rather than cut into the material, I now use the material as the cut in space."⁵⁹ A similar symbol in Taoism and Zen is **Pu** or the "Uncarved Block." Andre acknowledges having been influenced by the Taoist text, The Tao te Ching and the I - Ching (Book of Changes). In displaying many versions of these "Uncarved Blocks," Andre's intention was to provide a foundation for the viewer to contemplate and experience art in a new "Way." This new "Way" was aimed at eliminating metaphor and uncovering the distinction between direct experience of life and mediated views of it.

After an exhibition of these Uncarved Blocks, the blocks are dismantled, stacked, and stored as mundane objects. This transitory relationship of object and viewer exemplifies the transitory nature of life. In Buddhism, this impermanence is called **annica**.⁶⁰ As discussed earlier, it is only our resistance to change that causes human misery. In this sense, the art of Carl Andre can be seen as a method of prodding the viewer to awaken to the transitory nature of the Formless Self.

Similarly, the work of Richard Serra reflects the influence of the transitory, undifferentiated continuum of the Tao. Like Carl Andre, Serra had read the Tao te Ching. Furthermore, a trip to Japan with Carl Andre is said to have had a tremendous

impact on his work.⁶¹ In To Encircle Base Plate Hexagram, Right Angles Inverted, 183rd St. and Webster Ave. (Figure 9), Serra imbedded a twenty-six foot steel circle into an asphalt street in the Bronx. One half of the circle had a wide flange, and the other half had a narrow one, referring to the **Yin and Yang** of **Tai-Chi**. As such, one flange does not exist without the other, the circle echoes the building's relationship to the people around it. Richard Serra said of his own work:

My works do not signify any esoteric self-referentiality. Their construction leads you into their structure and does not refer to the artist's persona. However, as soon as you put a work into a museum, its label points first to the author. The visitor is asked to recognize "The hand." Whose work is it? The institution of the museum creates self-referentiality, even when it is not implied.⁶²

In light of this statement, the work of Richard Serra investigates subject/object dichotomy. Serra's sculpture shifts the focus from art as object to art as process. An important issue for Serra was whether he could make his sculpture stand out against the "background of non-art reality,"⁶³ by means of standing in the present tense of history rather than negating the present, as monument-type art objects tend to do.

In Stacked (Figure 10), Serra managed to negate this monument-type art and work in the moment. Unlike a painting as an **objet d'art** fixed upon a wall, a sculpture such as Stacked cannot be removed without loss of meaning. Each piece is made where it stands. The sculpture's content is in the process of making it. As in Tao or Zen, art can no longer be discussed by the "use of subject / predicate / modifier."⁶⁴ In Serra's work, the "self" is considered transient. Consequently, art in Serra's terms, has become a "Way" of expressing the undifferentiated continuum of the Formless Self.

Patricia Johanson is yet another contemporary American artist who has been deeply influenced by Taoism and Zen. Trained as an artist and as a landscape architect, Johanson's main concern has been to "mediate between the human scale and the undifferentiated vastness of nature."⁶⁵ In addition to visiting Japanese

gardens, attending religious ceremonies at the Kokadera Temple in Japan, reading the sutras and haiku poetry, Johanson has read the Tao te Ching. In her copy of the book, she has underlined this passage twice, "The way of nature...is the process and not static. The way is not the path which nature might take, but is the movement of nature itself; it is an effortless movement...like the annual rhythm of the seasons."⁶⁶

Drowned Fern (Figure 11) echoes this passage directly. The work is based on the Chinese and Japanese stroll garden. These gardens are designed and intended to be viewed from various points along a path. The garden is ever-changing as is the point of view of the person moving along the path. The Drowned Fern is not just a fern, it is a landscape that must be experienced and viewed from various points. In this work, experience of life as an undifferentiated continuum is clearly revealed. The viewer must experience the fern (microcosm) as a garden or universe (macrocosm). The process is revealed as a Sung landscape scroll is revealed, little by little, unrolled before the spectator in such a way as to give the impression of a continuous view. This work eliminates the boundary between the subject and object or in Zen terms, "Body and mind fallen away"⁶⁷ -- revealing the Suchness or Emptiness of all things.

Conclusion

It is clear the Zen and Taoist influence on contemporary American artists reflect these traditions against a new backdrop. Instead of borrowing the formal aspects of Oriental art, as many nineteenth century predecessors did, these artists have adopted a new "Way" of seeing the world. Their art says that, ultimately we must transcend our emotional and sense world in order to experience the undifferentiated continuum. Like traditional Zen, this new "Way" seeks to restore the viewer/participant to experience in the rich fullness of Being.

Exemplified in the work of Johanson, Andre and Serra, this new "Way" aims at eliminating metaphor and uncovering the distinctions between direct experience of life and mediated views of it. As Suzuki and Watts related on many occasions to their students, "one must be wary of fingers pointing to the moon lest the fingers be mistaken for the moon."⁶⁸

These works do not point to anything beyond themselves, however, they do make a comment on life. Art as a process of realization allows the viewer/participant to experience life in a new way - the fundamental problem of **trishna** disappears when the subject/object dichotomy disappears. The experience of Emptiness realization is aptly summed up in this famous Zen parable:

It is said that to those who know nothing of Zen mountains are just mountains, trees are just trees, and men are just men. After one has studied Zen for a little time, the emptiness and transcendence of all forms is perceived, and mountains are no longer mountains, trees no longer trees, and men no longer men, for while ignorant people believe in the reality of objective things, the partially enlightened see that they are only appearances, that they have no abiding reality and pass away like drifting clouds. But, the parable concludes, to him who has a full understanding of Zen mountains are once again mountains, trees are trees, and men are men.⁶⁹

Zen and the art it has inspired, whether in the East or in the West, provides a means for the viewer to move beyond the surface forms of art and into the undifferentiated continuum of life. Art can now be considered a new "Way" of apprehending Formlessness in a world of forms.

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- Figure 10.** Richard Serra, Stacked, 1969. Steel, 32 x 30 x 25 ft. (Destroyed)
- Figure 11.** Patricia Johanson, Drowned Fern (Polypody Fern III), 1980



Figure 1.



Figure 2.



Figure 3.



Figure 4.



Figure 5.



Figure 6.

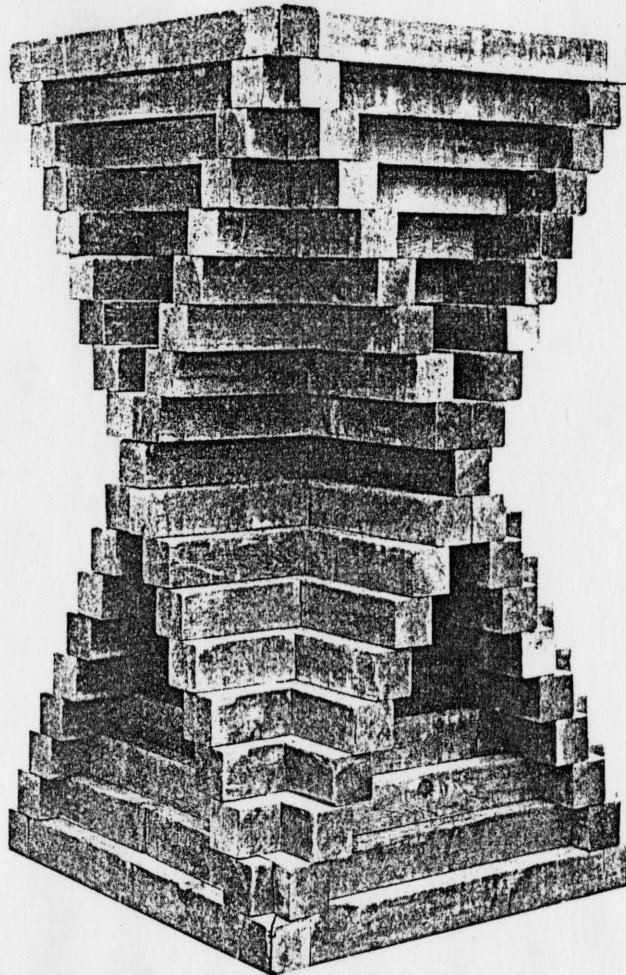


Figure 7.

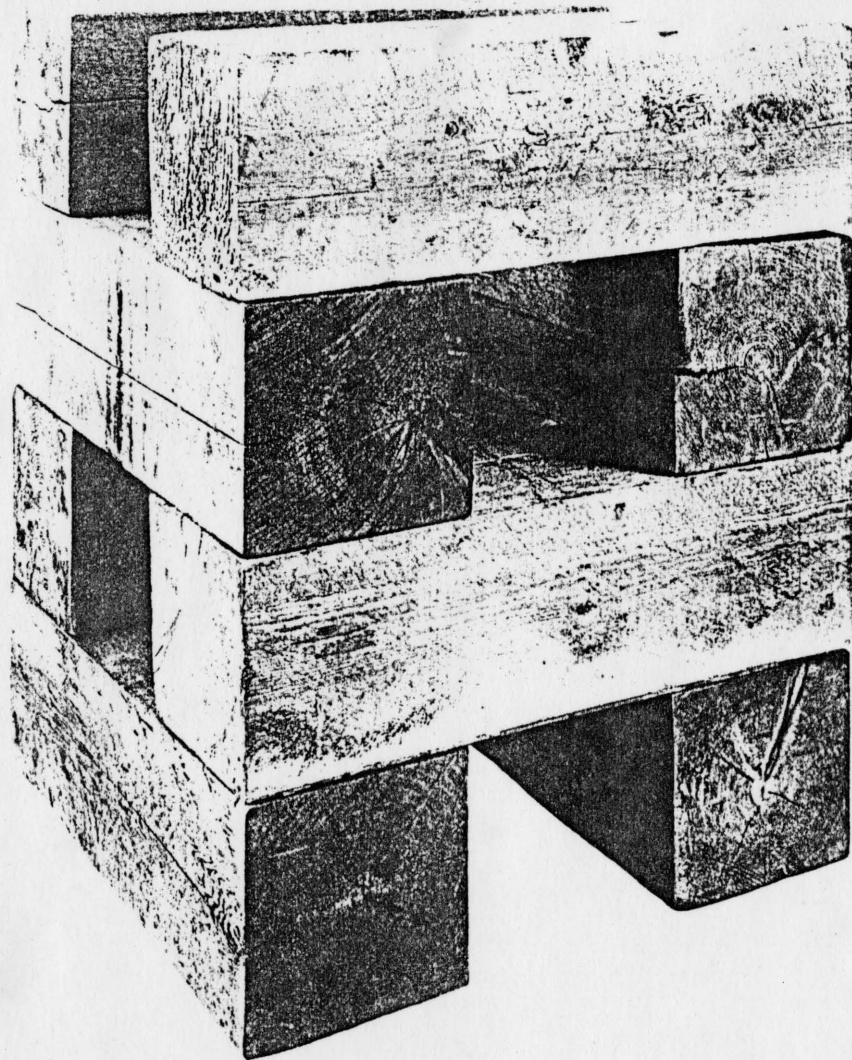


Figure 8.

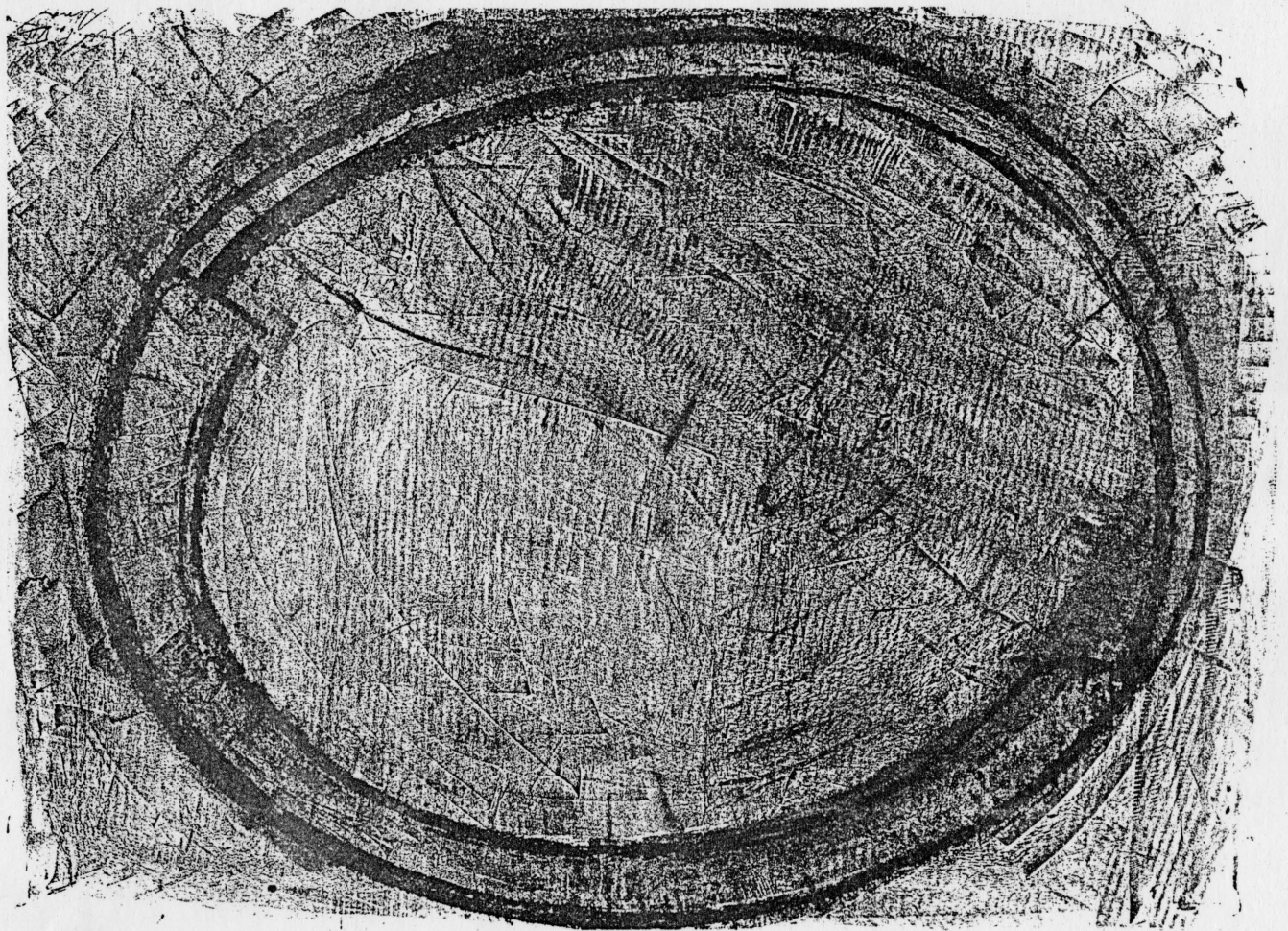


Figure 9.

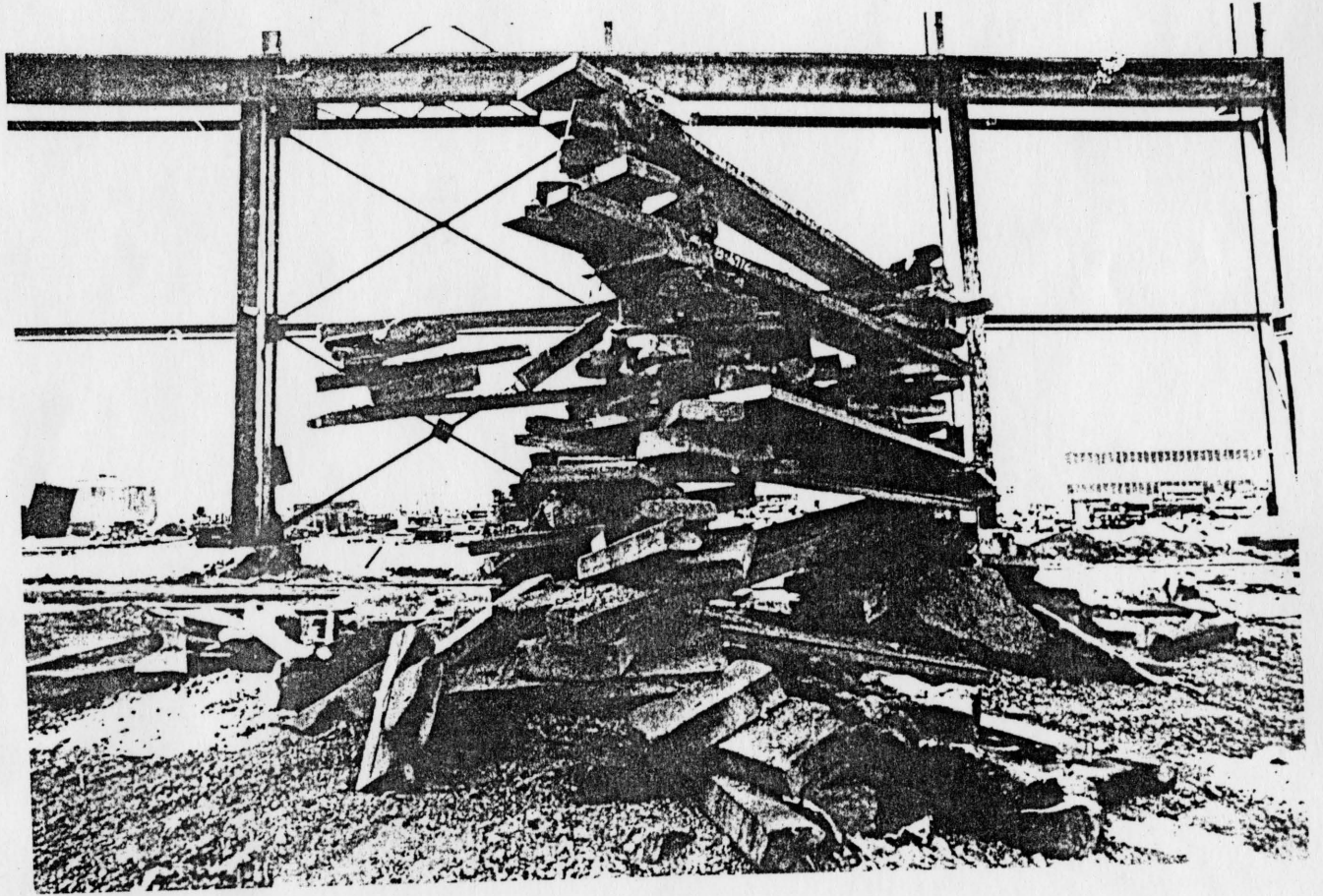


Figure 10.

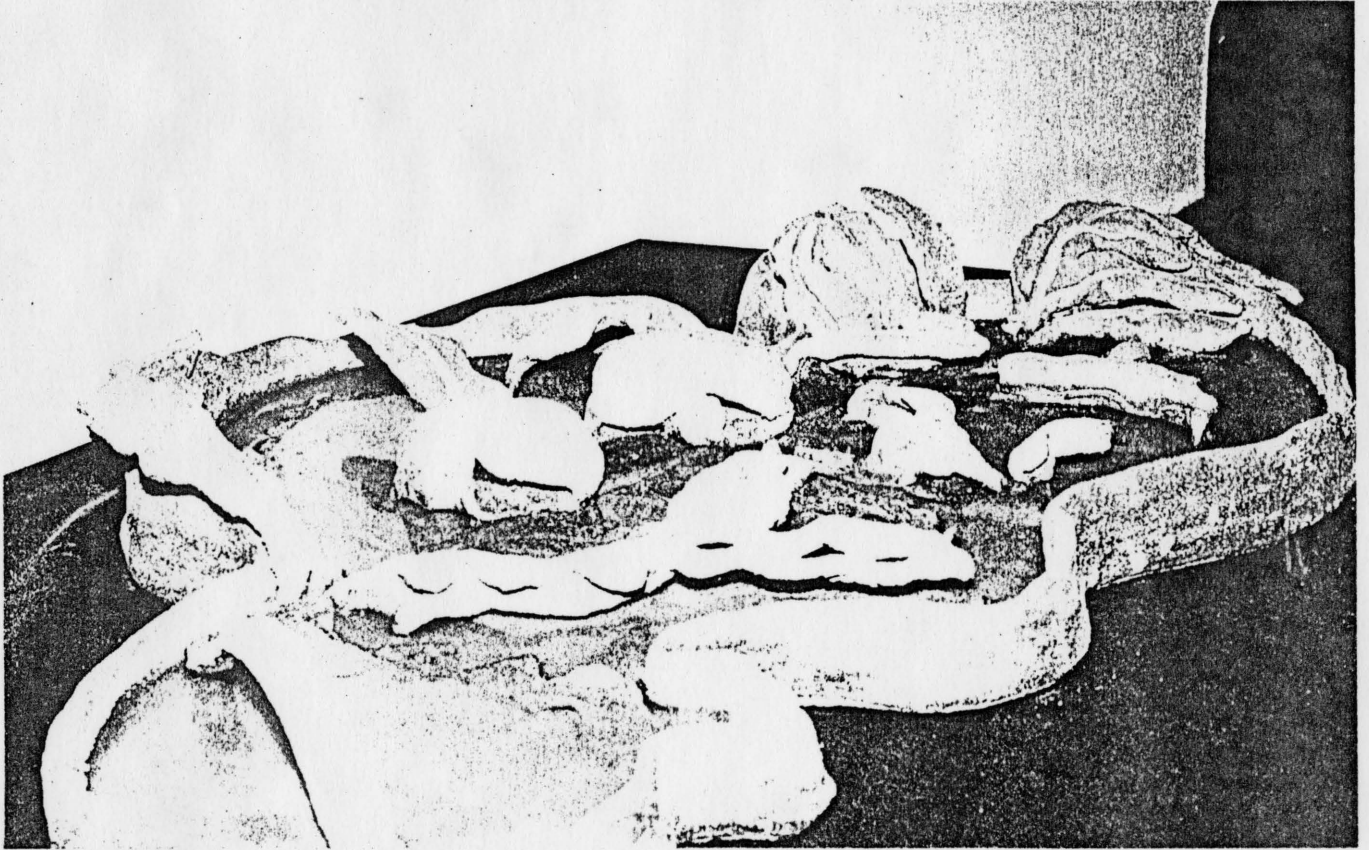


Figure 11.

Endnotes

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