

Exploring Bodily Engagement: An Analysis of Chinese Literati Painting and Installation Art

Meneroka Penglibatan Tubuh: Analisis Lukisan Literati Cina dan Seni Instalasi

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ABSTRACT - The article examines the contribution of the embodied involvement in two different art traditions, Chinese literati painting and contemporary installation art. Although the two works are distinct in various cultural, temporal, and medium contexts, they both have a centre of attention on the body as a medium of art. The article then resorts to the Taoist aesthetics and Merleau-Ponty phenomenology of embodiment and implements a qualitative comparative analysis to research the ways of how bodily engagement can perform differently in different situations. The critical analysis takes four interpretive areas, which are the locus of embodiment (artist vs. viewer) and the figuring of space versus positive space. Immersion, modality, time perception. The literati painters Ni Zan and Shen Zhou are the subjects of case studies, and their masterpieces portray a meditative unity with nature. Other artists, such as installation artists Yayoi Kusama and Ai Weiwei, among others, are also found in these studies, but the audience defines their interactive environments through participation. Results indicate that, by comparison of the literati painting, the role of the body is internalised to achieve the spiritual immersion in the practice, but installation art externalises it with the interaction of the dynamic viewer. Despite their distinctions, the role of the body in aesthetic perception is made clear in both. The juxtaposition of the two traditions presents trans-cultural perspectives of art embodiment. It refocuses the concept of literati painting in the modern discourse and shows that bodily involvement (reflection or engagement) is a major theme within the human art experience.

INTRODUCTION

The concept of corporal involvement now plays a significant role in the discussion of modern art, and this concept defines the development of the relationship between the body, perception, and the experience of art. Even though the word has gained prevalence since the introduction of installation art in the 1960s and 1970s (Van Rossem, 2021), the conceptual reflection can be traced back to the culture and history. However, this paper has explored the operations of bodily engagement in two body traditions of art: Chinese literati painting and the current state of installation art. Despite media, cultural contexts, and aesthetic applications, the two can be scrutinised in the shared perspective of embodied experience.

It is during the Tang dynasty that the idea of Chinese literati painting was established and was later developed towards the Song and Yuan dynasties. The scholar-official artists were encouraged to be creative by way of spiritual growth, and their artworks were profoundly influenced by the Taoist and Buddhist doctrine (Fan, 2023; Reynolds, 2009). It is concentrated on the inner world of the artist, and it takes the combination of spontaneous brush strokes, personal ideas and aesthetic of negative space (Liu et al., 2023; Fan et al., 2019). The art body is the critical medium that links the subject with the object, producing an aesthetic universe whereby being and non-being create each other (Wang, 2021; Heubel, 2021). On the contrary, installation art that appeared in the post-1960s is oriented toward the physiological experience of the viewer. It transforms audiences from passive consumers to active participants by building a feeling of immersion through tangible objects, visuals and new media (Bishop, 2005; Rebentisch and Hendrickson, 2012). The contact of the body of the viewer with the space situation also gains significance toward the interpretation of the meaning of the piece of work (Armstrong, 1999). This is deeply consistent with Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological position that 'perception is tied to the body and emerges via the interplay between the individual and the world' (Merleau-Ponty and Smith, 1962).

This article's primary research approach is qualitative comparative analysis, which allows for a methodical comparison of these two creative traditions. This technique, rather than just cataloguing similarities and differences, develops embodied cross-cultural theoretical insights by establishing a cohesive analytical framework and analysing the related qualities of typical cases. Concurrently, it uses Taoist philosophy to interpret the metaphysics and spatial concepts in literati painting, and Merleau-Ponty's embodied theory to analyse viewer experiences in installation art, resulting in a research system supported by two theoretical frameworks.

This article will begin with a literature review and theoretical framework, followed by research methods, comparative analysis and findings, and concluding remarks. It seeks to dive extensively into the interconnections of the body, space, and perception in creative practices throughout historical periods, giving theoretical foundations for embodied studies in cross-cultural arts.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Concept of Bodily Engagement and Embodiment (Phenomenological Perspective)

Bodily participation refers to the importance of the human body in creative perception, experience, and aesthetic engagement. Merleau-Ponty and Smith (1962) believe that the body should not be considered as a mere physical entity; this aspect is the dominant mode of perception and the practical channel by which human beings perceive the environment. Merleau-Ponty suggested that perception is contextual and relational, and embodied beings saw art in a two-way process between the self and the world and not as something that is viewed independently. This perspective would change aesthetic experience to focus not on solitary visual experience but on a multimodal experience, and this would allow the creation of a theoretical connection between the embodied practice of the creator of a literati painting and the embodied practice of the viewer in installation art. Contemporary art theory suggests that the human body, through its physiological capacities such as movement and touch, plays an essential role in shaping and generating artistic meaning (Kuhnappel et al., 2023; Linde, 2017).

Bodily Engagement in Installation Art (Audience-Centre Embodiment)

The immersive, participatory, and location-based nature of installation art requires people to enter the space and interact with the use of all their senses so as to undergo a complete, intimate aesthetic experience (Bishop, 2005), and this is closely related to the concept of embodied perception as articulated by Merleau-Ponty. The works created by Yayoi Kusama and Ai Weiwei are excellent examples of how sensual involvement and physical spatial orientation are significant elements in the meaning of the piece (Kuhnappel, 2023; Micollier, 2019). Installation art has caused a change in creative philosophy. As Marcel Duchamp observed, it is the spectator who ultimately completes the artwork, with meaning arising through interaction rather than direct representation (Duchamp et al., 1975). This interaction also makes bodily participation the differentiating feature between installation art and traditional means of viewing (Combrink & Allen, 2019).

Bodily Engagement in Chinese Literati Painting (Artist-Centred Embodiment)

Chinese literati painting, cultivated by scholar-officials during the Tang Dynasty, is deeply rooted in Taoist and Buddhist philosophical traditions. Its corporeal involvement is not the same as audience participation in installation art, but rather the integration of body, mind, and spirit into the creator's creative process (Fan, 2023; Duan, 2018). The corporeal viewpoint shown in literati art is not simply the result of Taoist philosophy. Literati academics embodied both the Confucian bodily discipline of 'restraining oneself and restoring propriety' and the unfettered expression of 'indulging in the arts.' This dual body consciousness pervaded their creative work (Wang, 2026), changing literati painting into a contemplative technique of self-cultivation and a method of integrating the creator with the essence of nature (Wang, 2021).

The aesthetic concept of being and non-being generate each other expresses the Taoist philosophy of 'attaining corporeal harmony with the universe to actualise the Tao' (Laozi, 1996). The method of negative space in literati painting tangibly incorporates this notion—artists endow their works with subjective spiritual significance through the interaction of blankness and brushwork (Liu et al., 2023; Fan et al., 2019). This was illustrated in the paintings by Ni Zan and Shen Zhou, who portrayed landscapes through minimal brush employment and vast negative space. They place their works into the realm of the natural perception and focus qi (living energy) into the brushstrokes they make (Heubel, 2021; Sullivan, 2008; Wang, 2021). On artistic ontological grounds, Gao (2025) feels that Chinese calligraphy and painting are once again the dynamic imprint of the action of expression of the artist, but not the fixed copy. As a result, the goal of literati painting is to create environments that allow for spiritual transcendence, rather than to reproduce landscapes. Viewers must interact with the work via their hearts, following the creator's bodily impressions to expand their imagination (Chaney, 2017).



Figure 1. Shen Zhou (1427-1509), *Appreciating Potted Chrysanthemum in Tranquillity*, hand scroll, ink and colour on paper, 23.4 cm x 86 cm, Liaoning Provincial Museum, Shenyang. Source: Liaoning Provincial Museum

This article, therefore, identifies two philosophically aligned yet distinct forms of bodily engagement in art. Installation art, shaped by existentialist ideas, centres on the viewer's embodied presence and highlights outward interaction with the space. In contrast, literati painting, informed by Daoist philosophy, emphasises the artist's bodily and spiritual immersion, privileging inward perception and contemplative experience. Although rooted in different cultural traditions, both approaches conceptualise the body as a medium of perception and a source of creative expression.

Comparative Conceptual Framework of Bodily Engagement

Table 1. Comparative Conceptual Framework

Dimension	Chinese Literati Painting (Artist-Centred)	Installation Art (Audience Centred)
Bodily Engagement	Artist's meditative creation	Viewer's interactive participation
Use of Space	Negative space (<i>liú bái</i>) for contemplation	An immersive environment requiring navigation
Subject-Object	Unity achieved by the artist; the viewer remains the observer	The viewer becomes part of the artwork
Temporal Experience	Timeless and reflective	Time-based, unfolding through interaction

The two distinct yet philosophically parallel models of artistic bodily involvement are introduced in this article. Installations are existential, as they focus on the presence of the viewer, who is very crucial in the interpretation of the work. Literati art, owing to Taoism, makes the overall physical and spiritual devotion of the artist central to the artistic process. The former is more concerned with external contacts, whereas the latter is concerned with the sensation in the body. These two contrasting yet intersecting practices reveal how diverse cultures have understood the body both as a site of perception and as a powerful source of creative potential.

METHODOLOGY

This article employs a qualitative comparative analysis that moves beyond merely identifying similarities and differences among creative traditions. It constructs a coherent conceptual framework, examines the core dimensions of representative case studies, and generates theoretical insights alongside cross-cultural findings on embodied artistic practice (Collier, 1993).

This article applies a four-step qualitative comparative analysis approach: First, develop a cross-cultural analytical framework for physical involvement based on Taoist aesthetics and Merleau-Ponty's embodied phenomenology. Second, analytical dimension extraction involves finding key comparable indicators across four dimensions: embodied subjectivity, spatial engagement, subject-object connections, and temporal experience. Third, case feature coding is the conceptual coding of instances using analytical indicators to distil the key qualities of physical participation. Fourth, compare similarities and differences with theoretical refinement: use cross-case comparison to analyse diverse forms of physical interaction while extracting their shared embodied essence.

Song's (2022) phenomenological research bears methodological similarities to the cross-cultural comparative methodology presented in this work. This research, based on the notion of 'bodily simulation,' demonstrates the inherent junction between the 'bodily self' in ancient Chinese painting and calligraphy and the 'material dimension' in modern and contemporary Western art. It contends that the body is more than just a means for creative depiction; it is actual artistic material in its own right. This method offers the theoretical foundation for the current article's use of bodily engagement as a prism to connect literati painting and installation art.

Data Sources and Case Selection

This article builds on three distinct bodies of literature to create a thorough conceptual and interpretive framework for research on traditional physical participation: (1) Ancient and current books on Chinese painting theory and Taoist aesthetics, which provide the aesthetic and intellectual basis for comprehending the corporeality of literati painting (2) Merleau-Ponty-centred phenomenological literature, which provides theoretical support for analysing the embodied experience of installation art; (3) Academic literature and installation art critiques, which trace the research narrative of physical engagement in contemporary installation art.

The case studies chosen for this article follow the concepts of typicality and representativeness: paintings by Ni Zan (1301-1374) and Shen Zhou (1427-1509) were chosen from the domain of literati painting. Both artists incorporated Taoist philosophy into their works, with their minimalist brushwork and use of negative space embodying the core characteristic of literati painting from the Song and Yuan dynasties to the Ming: 'perceiving nature through the body, crystallising spirit through brush and ink'. Yayoi Kusama and Ai Weiwei are two of the most popular installation artists today. Their individual works define important kinds of audience-centred physical involvement through immersive spatial experiences and the combination of bodily participation and social discourse. Their works have a large presence in the worldwide installation art realm, and the bodily interaction they provide is both deep and broad. Other artists' works are also integrated to provide more solid proof for the concept.

Analytical Dimensions

The comparison is organised around four analytical parameters derived from the literature on artistic embodiment:

1. The embodied focus: the artist's body in literati painting and the viewer's body in installation art;
 2. Use of space: negative space (*liú bái*) and immersive, occupied space;
 3. Subject-object relationship: inner meditative expression and outer interactive participation; and
 4. Temporal experience: contemplative timelessness and dynamic real-time participation.
- These qualities are provided as a prism through which to examine each artwork, meticulously identifying similarities and contrasts among them. In the discussion section, a comparison table summarises the findings along these thematic axes.

Validity and Scope

This interpretive research is focused more on the philosophical analysis than on the collection of empirical data. It is not quantifying how the audience reacts or behaves but assessing the theoretical and aesthetic implications of bodily presence within works of creative efforts. The weaknesses of the study consist of the small generalisability of their findings because of the nature of the research and the choice of cases. Its weakness, though, lies in the fact that it is so rich in offering a comprehensive understanding of the genesis of physical presence, presentation and reception in most historical and cultural contexts, offering ample theoretical and case-based understanding of cross-cultural embodied studies.

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

This part performs a comparative analysis of physical presence in Chinese literati painting and modern Chinese installation art in terms of four major parameters of analysis. It explores the difference between the bodily transactions of the "creator-centred" and the audience-centred of these traditions, deconstructing the inherent logic through which each of the artistic traditions develops its own forms of aesthetic experiences by its own treatment of the body, space, perception, and time.

Table 2. A Comparative Analysis of Bodily Engagement in Literati Painting and Installation Art

Dimension	Installation Art (Audience-Centred)	Chinese Literati Painting (Artist-Centred)
Embodiment Focus	Viewer's sensory and bodily perception	The artist engages bodily during the creation process
Philosophical Framework	Phenomenology (Merleau-Ponty): embodied intersubjectivity	Taoism: <i>qi</i> (life-energy), unity with nature, nihility and existence (<i>kōng-yǒu</i>)
Role of the Viewer	Active participant – completes the artwork through presence and interaction	Passive contemplator – interprets spiritual space through mental engagement
Use of Space	Immersive and occupied – requires physical navigation	Negative space (<i>liú bái</i>) – implies void, evoking imaginative participation

continued

Temporal Experience	Real-time, fluid – changes with the viewer's motion and environmental factors	Timeless stillness and contemplation	– invites reflective and philosophical
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Artist's Body vs Audience's Body: Who Engages?

Among the most striking differences between Chinese literati painting and modern installation art is the subjectivity and temporality of the physical interaction, i.e., what body is involved and where in the artistic process. This difference is central to comprehending how the two traditions make meaning through their means of embodiment.

Artist's Embodiment in Literati Painting

Breathing rhythm, the posture of painting, brush and ink (as well), all these in the works of the literati painting serve as the means of self-discipline and contact with the spirit of nature. This technique is not a trick of nature, but in fact an introspective piece of meditation conducted by Taoist philosophies. Brush painting in ink on paper enables artists to convey the state of oneness in body, mind and landscape, and creates an ontological unity with the landscape (Wang, 2021; Reynolds, 2009). The vast negative space in the Ni Zan in *Rongxi Studio* shows how the artist restrained himself in his body expression and reflected the intellectual insight in the understanding of the Taoist concept of Tao and its physical manifestation. Shen Zhou, however, achieved the fusion of the poem and landscape by the whole cycle of immersion of a body into nature - union of mind and nature - displaying brushwork, leading to self-reflection and transcendence of the soul (Fan, 2023; Duan, 2018).

This is a creative concept that is significant to contemporary art in the year 2025. *The Arrow Knot: Body Boundary Guide* by Zhang Wenchao and *the series Dike City-X* feature the artist dipping himself into the Great Wall and the Yangtze River, both to collect the extensive data of the bodily movement track. Having combined and ordered photos, movies, and data series, he has produced a list of body guides allowing visitors to experience the painting with their hearts (Meng, 2025). Ni Zan hinting ink-wash compositions with planned gaps to the data on Zhang Wenchao's body, between vitality and rhythm and trajectory generation - the logic of the body imprint behind the practice of literati painting has been redefined in an entirely new way in the era of digital media.



Figure 2. Ni Zan (1301-1373), *Rongxi Studio*, hanging scroll, ink on paper, 74.7cm x 35.5 cm.
Source: National Palace Museum, Taipei.

The physical interaction by literati artists happens in the actual process of creativity. What the spectator does is assume the role of a reflective thinker, where the brush work, texture and negative space in the piece become crystallised impressions of the mental and physical state of being in the artist. Although viewers can engage their feelings or philosophies with the work, their direct presence in it does not add to it. The scroll format of literati painting, along with its history of colophons and collecting, transforms the physical imprint of the artist into a community of papers (Li, 2025) so that a

communication of emotions can occur between the artist and the audience over centuries. This is a proliferation of corporal involvement.

Audience's Embodiment in Installation Art

The installation art takes the body experience to the post-creation stage, where body engagement by the viewer is needed to achieve the complete meaning of the work. It is the main marker of the transformation of modern aesthetics towards the so-called participation rather than the representation (Bishop, 2005).

Infinity Mirror Rooms (Figure 3), the physical movements: walking, turning, and gazing of the visitors help to create an illusion of unlimited space. The mirrors create a lack of differentiation between subject and object and introduce the body of the viewer into the space (Kuhnappel et al., 2023). In *Sunflower Seeds* (Figure 4) by Ai Weiwei, the area of mass production and individuality is challenged by the fact that the visitors have physical interactions with the porcelain seeds, stepping and caressing them. The sociopolitical commentary, therefore, is actualised in the physical connection in the work (Micollier, 2019).



Figure 3. Yoyoi Kusama, *Infinity Mirror Rooms* (1965-), mixed media installation, variable dimensions

In installation art, some of the most common bodily actions created to generate meaning within the work are walking, seeing, and touching; through the presence of an audience, the meaning of a work can be fully achieved. It is not only physical installations that can be described as such a mechanism of physical operation, i.e., generation, but also the case of digital media. Hasan et al. (2025) transformed the Malaysian kite Wau into a computer game. The physical abilities, such as finger manipulation, enable the players to familiarise themselves with the basic type of the game as well as broaden their understanding of the cultural significance of the game. Empirical evidence indicates that physical exercise helps to make cultural meaning complete. This affirms the statement of Duchamp that the spectator finalises the piece (Duchamp et al., 1975) and is closely connected with the idea expressed by Merleau-Ponty concerning the embodied perception: the full installation art can be completed only in the moment when a spectator enters the space and does something.

Comparison and Conceptual Bridge

The physical involvement in a literati painting is created at the stage of creating the painting, meaning that it imprints itself retroactively, meaning the body within the painting; whereas in the installation art, the physical interaction is engaged during the observing stage, meaning the prospective activation of the body within the artwork. The two types, as a result, possess distinct temporal and ontological qualities. Nevertheless, the differences are united by one shared quality: the primary role that physical presence plays in the aesthetic experience. Without the physical presence of an artist or an audience, the full meaning of an artwork cannot be achieved. In another perspective, Lin (2025) expands the way Chinese painting is perceived to the sense of touch. In Literati painting, the artist retains the agency of touching objects in the hand, and the viewer can only feel a spiritual story of touch in their imagination. Installation art has reinstated the right of the viewer to touch objects, allowing the process of touch to take place in real time in the exhibition space. As explained by phenomenology, both forms end up having significance of the encounter with the world (Merleau-Ponty and Smith, 1962), only that there is a variation in the extent of embodied subjectivity and activation. This illustrates how perception and

meaning production go beyond being a cerebral phenomenon or activity, that it is deeply rooted and embedded in real bodily experience found within particular situations.

Spatial Engagement: Negative Space vs. Immersive Space

The second major fundamental distinction of the two is an observed difference in their spatial concepts and methods of spatial encounter. Both reproduce the space relations based on the direction of physical activities, but their methods of dynamic subject-object relationship are quite different on the ontological level. This difference is based on the intellectual elements of Taoist metaphysics and phenomenological of Merleau-Ponty.

Literati Painting: Transcending Space Through Emptiness

The geographical landscape of the literati painting is concentrated on the merger of the creator with nature, and it is thoroughly consistent with the Taoist belief that reality itself is extended and being and non-being complete each other (Laozi, 1996). Through the body, the spirit of nature is enacted by the artist, specifically, with the concept of the so-called qi and consciousness of the interdependence of emptiness and form (Wang, 2021). Negative space, therefore, is the basic measure in the expression of this spatial philosophy. The expanses of negative space in the landscape paintings by Ni Zan are not associated with the concept of the void according to the Western paradigm of composition, but the mark of massive resonance of the artist in the body, mind, and the Tao. In the Triple World (Zhang & Luo, 2025), negative space is seen to exist as the material form of water fusing with sky, the flowing nature of qi, and the bodily imprint of the immeasurable Tao, all three connected to the pictorial composition and a structure of simultaneous presence and absence. The designer does not depict but creates a spatial atmosphere by negative space in which both the physical and the intangible make and fulfil each other, and it is through this space that the spirit of nature speaks.

Therefore, the space experience of the literati painting centers around the artist, which disintegrates the dualism of opposites of subject and object during the course of creative work. The visitor can just observe the remaining traces of this lost state of integration and experience the composition through the reflection of spirituality, without physical contact.

Merging Subject and Object in Installation Art

Installation art makes the viewer the centre of the meaning of the artwork, and the bodies of the spectators are taken as a valuable element of the spatial significance. The exhibition space becomes an ambivalent space purposely deindividualising the boundary between the observer and the seen item. This is profoundly in line with the concept of Merleau-Ponty regarding the fact that the body resides within the environment, and it can only understand it by becoming a part of it (Merleau-Ponty, 1962).

When visitors walk and feel the physical space of Ai Weiwei *Sunflower Seeds*, the latter becomes a 'space of meaning' that creates an interdependent connection between the people and the porcelain seeds. The interaction between the body and place constitutes the relevance of the piece (Micollier, 2019). Yayoi Kusama's *Infinity Mirror Room* creates a visual looping area using mirrored surfaces, making the viewer's body an intrinsic part of the setting. Each physiological movement modifies the spatial visual perception, blurring the distinction between self and space (Kuhnafel et al., 2023). Olafur Eliasson's *360° space for all colours* broadens body interaction from physical touch to visual immersion (Sedon and Isnin, 2019). Light no longer serves as a tool for lighting space, but rather as the space itself; the viewer's body is no longer a tourist, but an organic component of the spectral environment. This 'integration of the tangible and intangible' method broadens bodily interaction in installation art beyond physical tactility to include visual immersion (Liu & Shi, 2025).

The spatial experience of installation art is centred on the observer, and the dualistic antagonism between subject and object disappears during the period of bodily involvement. The viewer's physical presence enters and reshapes the item's space, changing the collaboration between subject and object into a real-time bodily performance.

Comparison and Spatial Implications

Literati painting is a creator-centred spatial structure in which the unification of topic and object emerges from the artist's inner change and bodily practice, placing the observer in a position of interpretation and detachment. In contrast, installation art creates a viewer-centred spatial creation in which the unity of subject and object is derived from the audience's direct physical involvement with the work, therefore eliminating the boundary between self and space object. Both aim for ontological unification between subject and object: literati painting via inward fusion of self and world, and installation art by outward bodily involvement with the environment. The artwork serves as a "field of encounter" in both cases, but the key distinction is in "the subjects and modes of encounter." This distinction illustrates that corporeal involvement is more than just a formal aspect; it is a philosophical position infused with certain cultural and philosophical conceptions. The posture and role of the body impact how subject-object unity is achieved.

Subject–Object Relationship: Artist-Centric vs Viewer-Centric Experience

The subject-object connection in art governs processes of perception and meaning formation. Both are reshaped via bodily interaction, but literati painting eliminates the subject-object distinction through the fundamental spiritual fusion inherent in the creative process, whereas installation art dismantles the subject-object barrier by the viewer's immediate physical absorption. These techniques connect to the philosophical ontologies of Taoist heaven-humanity unity and phenomenological intersubjectivity.

Literati Painting: Inner Unity Through Representation

Within the artistic context of Chinese literati painting, the creator and landscape are not opposed subjects and objects, but rather an interwoven totality. Meditation, physical absorption in nature, and the use of brushwork and negative space allow the creative to attain spiritual contact with the landscape (Wang, 2021; Fan et al., 2019). The body of the artist is not merely a means of representation, but also the one that could create contact with the spiritual harmony with the Tao (Heubel, 2021). The painting by literati does not represent an objective image of the landscapes, but the infinite vitality of nature (Chaney, 2017), which liberates both the artist and the viewers from strict subject-object duality. The negative space of the compositions by Ni Zan is the symbol of the existence of life, where the artist and nature are united. The unity of the subject and the object is achieved when the artist is making his creation; the viewer can only be able to view this unity of oneness through spiritual contemplation since they cannot be a part of this.

Installation Art: Co-Presence and Interactivity

Installation art is a process that erases the boundary between subject and object as the physical presence of the viewer is incorporated in the physical and conceptual construction of the work. The full meaning of the piece cannot be established before the viewer enters and plays with it. This is consistent with Merleau-Ponty's claim that 'perception is the cohabitation and mutual reaction of subject and object'; the seen object does not exist in isolation but is produced via its interaction with the subject's body. In Ai Weiwei's *Sunflower Seeds*, the uniqueness of each handcrafted porcelain seed is only given social and artistic importance by the viewer's physical contact and shared space experience (Micollier, 2019). Visitors to Yayoi Kusama's *Infinite Mirror Room* are attracted into a place of visual recursion in which the boundaries between observer and observed collapse and the meanings of subject and object are formed in real time through the audience's physical participation (Micollier, 2019).

It is worth noting that Zhang and Luo (2025) in *Fleeting Shadows* translate the logic of the traditional medium of shadow puppetry into a posthuman context—where robots act as “puppeteers”, audiences as “spectators”, and the “shadows” themselves become AI subjects endowed with autonomous agency. This also indicates that the concept of “bodily suspension” in traditional Chinese art is being reinvented in modern installation art. Thus, the subject-object connection in installation art is centred on the viewer, whose embodied subjectivity impacts the aesthetic experience. The spectator is no longer only an interpreter, but a co-creator of the piece (Duchamp et al., 1975).

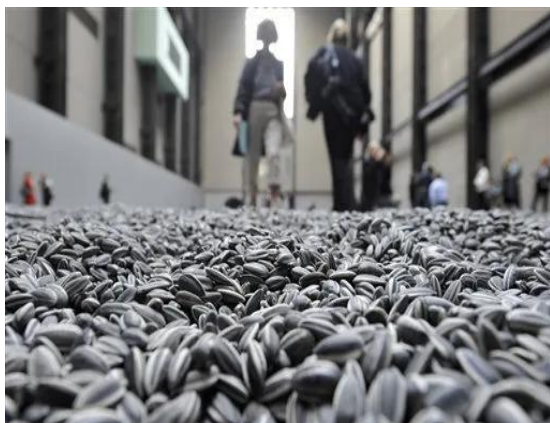


Figure 4. Ai Weiwei, *Sunflower Seeds* (2010), installation view at Tate Modern, London

Philosophical Bridge

Both seek to unify the self with the world; however, literati painting dissolves the dualistic opposition between subject and object through the artist’s spiritual embodiment within the work, whereas installation art dissolves this dualism through the viewer’s physical immersion outside the work. This duality sums up the basic difference between Taoism’s dismantling of internal thresholds and phenomenological sense of exterior relationality. Both of them are united by the fact that they both use the body as a medium of experience and that they enable communication between the inner and the outer world through the movements of the body and perception, and changes subject-object relation into an interactional process.

Temporal Experience: Stillness vs. Dynamism in Engagement

Time is an important feature in determining the properties of aesthetic engagement. Both styles use time as a medium for bodily awareness, but literati painting creates an introspective, meditative temporality, whereas installation art makes time the primary compositional aspect of the piece. This distinction in temporal quality reflects different cultural ideas and modalities of bodily engagement.

Timeless Contemplation in Literati Painting

The temporal features of literati painting are calm and introspection, which are instilled in the work from the moment it is created: informed by the Taoist worldview, the artist works with meditative patience, breathing, posture, and cognition rhythmically synchronised (Wang, 2021; Duan, 2018). As a result, the creative process becomes one in which the artist inhabits time, expanding their temporal consciousness. Yuan (2025) characterises this temporality as “embodied emptiness-time,” in which the passage of time is intrinsic in the beginning, continuance, transition, and resolution of every brushstroke. This has the same structural possibilities for expression as temporal arts like dance and music. Classic the handscroll works of Ni Zan and Shen Zhou phenomenologically appear to be motionless, but the compositions reflect the time flowing of breathing and bodily posture of the artist in a two-dimensional space. These works can be approached many times; five minutes, several hours, and even years can be spent in contemplation, and each time new spiritual resonance is made (Gu, 2026).

Simultaneously, a practice of appreciation of the classical Chinese calligraphy and painting is embodied, an intervention, appropriation, and contact of the body, in relation to the aesthetic object. Its reasoning is on the perception of pictures based on visuals, but not conceptual derivation (Niu, 2025). Subsequent viewers immediately connect with the work's material essence through the act of writing, activating its temporality through embodied bodily engagement (Gu, 2026), which extends the temporal experience inherent in literati painting.

The time dimension of literati painting is fundamental and subjective, determined by the viewer's thoughtful cadence. It exists independent of time, offering a sublime environment for spiritual thought and providing the observer with a spiritual or philosophical experience. This illustrates that literati painting does not follow a standardised format in which the artist's bodily involvement is limited to the creative process.

Evolving Interaction in Installation Art

Installation art uses time as a performative dimension, with the work's experience being in real time and heavily reliant on the audience's presence and physical movements. The installation is a time-based experience whose meaning is co-created through corporeal involvement, rather than a set picture. Throughout Ai Weiwei's *Sunflower Seeds* exhibition, imprints gradually gathered on the ceramic seeds' surfaces. The work's physical and symbolic states are constantly modified by visitors' body engagement, with each individual's movement becoming a vital aspect of the piece's ongoing meaning. In contrast, James Turrell's light works produced minor visual alterations within minutes, with visitors' duration of stay and physical position determining their perceptual experience of the area.

The types of corporeal participation in installation art are evolving—Verbeke and Ren's (2025) interactive installation. In *Vivo In / Vitro* depicts an imperceptible interaction in which viewers cause picture production through unconscious blinks but cannot see the result themselves—only others can. This 'perceptual asymmetry' and 'subconscious friction' take physical interaction beyond active, tangible activities and into involuntary physiological reactions, requiring a deeper posthuman assessment of the structural link between 'author-audience-meaning'.

In installation art, time is not just a backdrop, but also one of the work's primary media. The piece's significance is only revealed via the viewer's persistent physical involvement and investment of time; the experience becomes the work's heart, rather than a static object.

Comparison and Integration

Literati painting honours static topics favourable to contemplation, preserving the stamp of the creator's embodied moment of creation. Its presence transcends time, leading the spectator to a state of introspection. Installation art celebrates the development of present-moment circumstances, emphasising direct engagement and transformation, with meaning constantly formed via connection with time and body. Both need temporal commitment from their audiences; yet, literati painting necessitates contemplative, slow-paced interaction, whereas installation art requires instantaneous, dynamic temporal involvement. Literati painting is a "work-centred" crystallisation of previously embodied creativity, whereas installation art is a "process-centred" real-time event of current embodied experience. This opposition proves that the body matters to the temporal medium of art: in the case of literati painting, the participation of the body is contained within visual text, whereas in the case of installation art, physiological participation can be achieved only through its relationship with time. They both expose art as something beyond visual experience; it is temporal and bodily in essence.

CONCLUSION

This article takes bodily participation as its major perspective and develops a cross-cultural research paradigm for bodily engagement based on two theoretical foundations: Daoist aesthetics and Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of the body. Using qualitative comparative analysis, it gives methodological and theoretical reference points for future study into the embodied aspect of art. The article looks at the features of bodily interaction in Chinese literati painting and modern installation art in four dimensions. Key findings show that both traditions place bodily engagement at the heart of aesthetic experience and meaning formation, despite substantial formal variations. Despite their formal antagonism, they

complement one another aesthetically, proving that the body is the primary vehicle for aesthetic perception and meaning formation. Perception is not a completely cerebral process but is based on genuine bodily experience.

This article provides three scholarly contributions: Firstly, by choosing physical engagement as its core point of entrance, it provides a fresh cross-cultural approach for integrating literati painting studies into the modern discourse of art. Second, via dual theoretical foundations and four-dimensional analysis, it builds a cross-traditional comparative framework for creative bodily involvement, expanding the cross-cultural research implications of embodied phenomenology. Third, it establishes physical engagement as the central feature of human creative experience, providing a coherent analytical viewpoint for comparative studies of art throughout countries and eras.

This article is an interpretive investigation. In the future, its comparative analytical technique might be used for a wide range of contemporary art forms, including interactive network art and digital art, allowing for further exploration of innovative expressive qualities of physical interaction. Alternatively, it may be used in conjunction with empirical research methodologies to statistically examine audience experiences of bodily engagement across various art genres. The combination of theoretical analysis and empirical data would improve the rigor of the study into the embodied aspect of art.

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