

Skillfull Striving In Times Of Crisis

Improvisation as mode of being and ecological practice

Make Life Poetry

This text came out of a need to explain and position myself in the context of a Master in Fine Arts and Performance at Glasgow School of Art.

From the very beginning I intended to share an outline that had emerged out of years of involvement in improvisational practices, inquiry and experience of working with land and animals, as well as deliberate, but also necessary examination and withdrawal from Western ways of perceiving, thinking and operating.

I had proposed the following title:

The Arts in Service – Interrelating Artistic, Ecological and Spiritual Understanding:

Learning to Live and to Die

To quote from the text:

Not unlike an ancient Japanese teamaster, whose abilities and knowledge had to range from the plantation and preparation of tea or food, to garden design and architecture, philosophy, spiritual understanding and practices, poetry, pottery or calligraphy, altogether laying out the Way of Tea, I would like to propose and investigate a concept of artistic expression that mirrors the understanding of the Way of Tea (Chado), or Teatism as a way of life.

...I propose to introduce this approach not only in the academic context, but also in the context of daily living or engaging with our so-called environment.

It is an approach based on an open and attentive way of listening and a way of seeing that transcends disciplines and compartmentalization.

It is an approach that also includes bravery in thought and action, fuelled by a love for all life.

Consequently, my engagement in the Master contributes to a certain spirit and dynamic, a certain 'change of narrative' more than anything else.

Being in service is (re)introduced as a concept of artistic expression and as a timely and relevant demand from the artist.

In a 'self-evaluation' after stage one of the Master, I posed the following questions:

What is the purpose or function of art in a time of cultural disintegration, ecological emergency and mass extinction?

Are there ethical implications or demands?

How are current modes of operation related to a certain paradigm and way to view the world?

How does this reflect in the artworld and its current trends?

What would be alternatives?

When stating those question in a presentation at the time, the urgency I felt seemingly translated (I was declared a self-confident speaker), but did not really resonate or spark any sort of discussion or feedback.

Interestingly, these questions have gained even greater depth and urgency in the last few months, where the Covid pandemic and expressions of racism have exhilarated processes and posed unprecedented challenges in very concrete ways.

Hence, at least to my understanding, the approach and scope of a certain way of artistic practice, reminiscent to that of a traditional Japanese tea master, also gained significantly in relevance.

To make this more tangible I will introduce the concept of 'Dō', which is underlying the Way of Tea (Cha-dō).

The Japanese symbol for Dō means 'path' and is to be found in combination with various traditional art forms in Japan.

Japanese *dō* are paths toward excellence. Contemplative and *active*, they also integrate theory and praxis. Prominent examples, some already enumerated in *Nothing New Under the Sun*, are *sodō* (書道), art of calligraphy, *Nō* (能) acting, *yakimono* (陶磁), art of pottery, *chanoyu* (茶の湯), *sadō*, or *chadō* (茶道) which refer to the way of tea, *ikebana*(生け花) or *kadō* (華道), art of flower arrangement, and of course, martial arts such as *Kyudō*, sumo (相撲) wrestling, and *kendō* (剣道) as the way of the sword. Each *dō* has methodological particularities that amount to different routes to the same ultimate goal. In a deep sense, *dō* realize an old saying known as *mumonkan* (無門關), The Gateless Gate: "The Great Way is gateless/Approached in a thousand ways/Once past this checkpoint /You stride through the Universe" (Sekida 2005, 26). They are all methods, ways, to get to enlightenment should they be engaged properly.

These paths are remarkable practical and normative ways that impart ethical, aesthetic, and existential principles and values.

(Jesús Ilundáin-Agurruza (2014) 9—Reflections on a Katana – The Japanese Pursuit of Performative Mastery, *Sport, Ethics and Philosophy*, 8:4, 455-502)

Further:

Art, philosophy, and religion are intertwined in Japanese culture, entangled like grapevines on an old wooden trellis. ... Ethics was not taught simply in the temples, in the schools and in the home, but also through the remarkably distinctive arts of Japan, including the martial arts.

To practice a *dō* is to learn how to live one's life, for through flower arranging, gardening, or the martial arts, we learn how to interrelate with other existing things. We learn what it means to be fully human.

(Robert E. Carter (2008), *The Japanese Arts and Self-Cultivation*)

This is a concept that does not exist in Western culture or the Western mind set.

It is, however, a concept I found operating in my practice and approach as an artist.

Consequently, the deepening research I undertook during this year into Japanese arts and self-cultivation were pleasantly revealing and providing me with a sense of familiarity, paired with a set of concepts and terms that help to convey, to name or contextualize.

To give another context:

Behind the Buddhist physiognomy of Japan, and behind the conventions of its civilization, there is Shinto, more secret, a direct inheritance from pre-history, taking us into a foreworld and concerned, not with Buddha, but with the natural phenomena, or perhaps rather the cosmic principles, of sun, moon, storm, sea, wind, thunder, lightning, rock, tree.. The repository of primitive Japanese thought, it is certainly one of the best representatives, at least so far as the records go, of primitive religious psychology in general. Writing of it, not very approvingly, G.W.Aston speaks of its 'rudimentary character', saying that it is 'perhaps the least developed of religions which have an adequate literary record'. When we see what

Aston means by 'development': the conception of a supreme and personal deity, a panoply of images, a moral code, and the recognition of a future state of life, we may feel grateful that Shinto is 'undeveloped'.

Here is a religion (or should we get rid of that word, too, and speak only of global apprehension?) which has no dogma, no metaphysical system, no moral code, no eschatology and, far from evolving the concept of a personal godhead, welters in a perfect orgy of pagan sacrality, with about 800 polymorphous divinities to 'cover', or put a halo over, practically every phenomenon in nature. Absolutely non-formalist, Shinto works with an unrestricted field of energy, a total cosmic economy. (Kenneth White, *On Scottish Ground*)

The same familiar encounters happened with further inquiry into Indigenous understanding and cosmologies, poetry and storytelling, as well as examining relationships to the Western concept of the arts.

Jamake Highwater expressed the "no word" sentiment in his book *The Primal Mind*, in which he observes, "For primal peoples . . . the relationship between experience and expression has remained so direct and spontaneous that they usually do not possess a word for art." Highwater adds, "We cannot readily translate Indian iconography and visions into terms that make realistic sense to the Western mind."

(Nancy Marie Mithlo (2012) *No Word For Art In Our Language? Old Questions, New Paradigms*)

In the Okanagan, our understanding of the land is that it's not just that we're part of the land, it's not just that we're part of the vast system that operates the land, but that the land is us. In our language, the word for our bodies contains the word for land, so when I say that word, it means that not only is my ability to think and to dream present in that word but the last part of that word also means 'the land'.

(*Jeanette Armstrong (2008) An Okanagan Worldview on Society*)

As students of literature, we are taught to think in terms of finished texts, beautifully honed and polished texts that sit pristinely on the shelves the way artworks hang on the walls of museums. This is fine as far as it goes and as long as it works, but just how far is that? The wild is all about process, not about product. There are plenty of artifacts in the wild – dung pellets, spruce cones and pine cones and maple keys, seashells and sand dollars, pebbles and footprints, owl pellets, bones – but none of these things is the end of the line or the final result. In the wild, there is no final result – except that some day the sun will run down, and then life will go out like a light.

All the native cultures of North America were oral. This means that every year, in every language on the continent, stories were told in the same way flowers bloom and snowflakes fall. The stories were simultaneously ancient and brand-new, and never told exactly the same way twice. That is the natural or wild way of literature.

(Robert Bringhurst (2003) *Wild Language*, Ralph Gustafson Lecture, Malaspina University College, Nainamo)

At this time, notions in the context of the contemporary artworld may be sensed, expressing these approaches and ways of seeing.

For example:

Conversation Hans Ulrich Obrist and Cecilia Vicuna: https://www.lehmannmaupin.com/artists/cecilia-vicuna/videos?fbclid=IwAR3X2FtUzweVfJY8X8NUpSQQF7kle_oArBZWJyAmL9-2a3w-loAKG_JEPI0

As I had stated in my proposal, a central aspect in my practice throughout this year was that of improvisation, another one the notion of giving, of serving, of honouring.

The inquiry of the intention of why to make art, and the notion of what it is one wants to give by doing so, were important guidelines. Here I proposed to be specific: To whom or what do I dedicate this piece? What do I wish for this person, this place, or this animal? What does this do to the process, to the outcome?

These questions appeared as an organic process, an inner necessity, rather than out of an effort to contextualize or research a specific topic. They generated work that varied in nature, from live art performances to site-specific sculptural work, or filmed performance.

At the same time, I also simply followed impulses, focussing more on process, listening to what I would be drawn 'to play with', while applying a sense of space, of atmosphere or color. Here I would mention some work I did with sound or painting.

To highlight the interplay of these approaches, as well as the connections to the above quotations, I shall provide further access to my understanding of the process of improvisation and form, and the context of ecological knowledge:

Improvisation and/as Ecological Practice

To me, ecological knowledge stands for understanding the context of where you live, how you live, with whom you live.

It means understanding interconnectedness and interdependence.

It means being familiar with basic principles and patterns that sustain life on Earth, and more specifically, how this looks in the region where you live.

It entails knowledge about the food you need, the water you drink, the air you breathe, as much as about the community of organisms, that live around, on and within you.

It also means understanding cooperation, exchange and dynamic balance.

The knowledge of ecology and the bioregion you inhabit, gives practical and factual insight in how to live in community with plants and animals, land and waters.

This knowledge, paired with the intuitive, spontaneous understanding that may be acquired through the practice of improvisation, consequently serve as guide and orientation.

They will inform and lay out a quite clear mode of operation and way of relating.

I think we are at a threshold.

We, as a species, cannot afford any more practice or research of any kind, that is not intended to serve the entire ecological community.

Improvisation and Nature, or The Nature of Improvisation

To be able to improvise I would describe as the ability to respond to a proposition in a way that is non-judgemental and serving a spontaneously emerging sense of unforeseeable and unconventional order.

You allow movement, sound, painting to happen.

It is not about expressing your own emotional life or intellectual disposition, or about acting out and releasing pent up energy.

It is about serving the moment as an expression of a coherent totality, and about giving up the ego in favour of the whole. Mind and body act as one.

It is this experience and ability, this knowledge of an empty, spontaneous mind, that engenders a sensation of being in awe and appreciative of the very process that is unfolding.

It also becomes clear that this process is the same process that makes a seed sprout and then turn into a flower - and a seed again.

The seed is not separate, it is not a separate entity or object. The flower is not separate, neither is the song or the dance.

They are phenomena, temporary appearances, cut out of a not at first glance perceivable continuum, and then given a name.

In that sense, the flower, the song, or the dance are always present.

They only disguise in different displays.

With that realization comes a sense of compassion, a subtle and yet mighty sensation of appreciation and wonder for all of existence. For all flowers and songs and dances. All different. All the same.

Consequently, an organic way of relating and responding to who- and whatever becomes possible.

This is why I believe that the experience and ability to improvise is fundamental for a society intending to live in a harmonious relationship with its surroundings.

It provides a guideline for a respectful way of relating and interacting, it is a tool in times of uncertainty or regeneration, as much as for spiritual insight.

Improvisation is the language of the wild. Mountains and rivers speak it. Birds and insects speak it. It is uncivilized and ever fresh. It is wonder-full.

Coming back to the course of the year and the practical application of the above, I would like to share some of the consequences the pandemic had and has on my pathway.

When I felt that there will be a lockdown in Glasgow, and since I had to leave the apartment one month later, without having any new place to stay, I inquired for a place on a farm.

I found a possibility in England, 4 hours South of Glasgow.

A long (and ongoing) period of emotional transition, challenge and adaptation followed.

But to focus on the inquiry and application of creative process: most of my creative energy in the beginning went into the interaction with the land.

In the beginning I was mostly observing and familiarizing myself with the wildlife, the soil and plant species, before facilitating regenerative processes of different nature. A similar process applied to the vegetable garden (planning, adjusting), and the building of a pond (a very satisfying process, since one is literally facilitating life by creating a little ecosystem, receiving feedback and noticing outcomes quite immediately). Occasionally there were little building or repair projects.

In all of these contexts I applied the approach of improvisational availability and attentiveness, paired with a certain practical and experiential knowledge of plant and animal life and ecological interplay.

A note on the side may be that the state of 'empty and attentive being' is a favourable state, if one wants to familiarize oneself with the other-than-human world.

What I noticed in general, though, was that I needed a transition time between the immediate immersion of the work outside, and the time dedicated to creative expression like fine arts, the notion of philosophical thought process, or artistic research.

Also, for a long time there was a certain dullness of mind, that made intellectual work almost impossible. I would think that this was due to the sudden outbreak of the pandemic with all its implications.

After a while a little ritual established itself.

Often, after a day of working outside, I would sit down, make green tea, be quiet and eventually start to paint, applying the same process I had described earlier, of attentive listening, action, at times reflection, listening and responding again.

I wrote: "Then you draw, then you create a pond. Both I'd call dancing. Both I'd call instant compositions. You listen, you allow form to take shape. And you see how it resonates. You listen again, adjust maybe. If it works it will have a life of its own."

This is at the center of what I would like to communicate, and it also refers to the questions I have posed earlier:

What is the purpose or function of art in a time of cultural disintegration, ecological emergency and mass extinction?

Are there ethical implications or demands?

How are current modes of operation related to a certain paradigm and way to view the world?

How does this reflect in the artworld and its current trends?

What would be alternatives?

What if art would be about a way of life, about learning to live?

What if everybody would be in touch, or at least familiar with these processes, these 'pathways'?

What if we learned a new way of being in the world? What would our human endeavours look like?

After three months I had to leave the farm, and since I did not find an adequate accommodation and living context in Scotland, I moved back towards Europe, recently ending up in Switzerland. So it is here where I will finish the Master and prepare the context for a final presentation in the context of Fine Arts and Performance.

Again, I have to adjust to the circumstances, and again these circumstances will inform and form my work.

Consequently, all the shortcomings from the side of the artschool context, as well as the outbreak of a pandemic provide the potential for learning to listen and adjust, as much as for recognizing, expressing and addressing practices and structures that are not supportive and based in a mind-set of separation and exploitation, hence only self-serving.

It becomes clear that my artistic position integrates questions of ethics and that it addresses and includes all of life's experience. Life and art are not separate to me. Neither do I experience the body-mind as separate from its environment, or everything else for that matter. To quote another phrase from my workbook: 'As a person I do not sense any greater importance than a leaf of the plant in front of my window, or a raindrop that fell last night.'

This, so I would say, corresponds to the following statements:

If we continue to operate in terms of a Cartesian dualism of mind versus matter, we shall probably also come to see the world in terms of God versus man; élite versus people; chosen race versus others; nation versus nation and man versus environment. It is doubtful whether a species having both an advanced technology and this strange way of looking at the world can endure...

The whole of our thinking about what we are and what other people are has got to be restructured.

(Gregory Bateson (1979) *Mind and Nature: A Necessary Unity*)

The cosmography of tribal peoples is marked by a degree of humility toward the natural world that is lacking in civilized society. Among the principles of the Koyukan worldview, as described by anthropologist Richard Nelson, are these two: "Each animal knows way more than you do" and "The physical environment is spiritual, conscious, and subject to rules of respectful behaviour."

(Paul Shepard (1998), *Coming Home To The Pleistocene*)

The new way of looking at reality is based on the realization that all phenomena - physical, biological, psychological, social and cultural - are basically connected with each other and depend on each other.

(Fritjof Capra (1983), *The Turning Point*)

Through my activity, may it be artistic or otherwise, I hope to contribute to what could be called the common good.

This notion, for me, integrates the physical, emotional and spiritual well-being of a community.

Also I perceive this common good as not exclusive to the human species.

That means that I see the term 'community' as inclusive of plants, animals, mountains, rivers...

I do not believe in the well-being of a human community, in the way described above, without the well-being of the greater context it is embedded in and dependent upon.

And yet, I surely would not want to encourage any certain manner of living, other than to follow your heart.

Again, to bring this back to the context of contemporary art and my positioning in it:

I would argue that the most adequate way of communication in my case seems to be the living embodiment of my position.

This poses a problem of placement and integration within a system focussed on products and lacking a concept for my proposal (hence, my introduction of the Japanese *Dō*).

With the lack of a concept and consequent understanding comes the fact, that there is no way of valuing or appreciating it.

If I accept this, I shall be able to cooperate, or at least to position myself, be it in the context of contemporary art or academia. Following intuitive understanding and a sense of maintaining integrity, I do not see any hindrance in supporting notions that lead to a post-industrial art education, or a post-industrial education through art.

Neither will I refrain from making artwork, no matter through which lenses it may be regarded, or what position it might take in a given society.

Whatever form (and roleplay) it will take in these special and obviously unforeseeable times, I would like to think that whatever emerges, emerges out of a continuing sense of learning and discovery, and that it fosters a sense of life at its profoundest depth, and its sacred value.

Lars Schmidt
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www.larsschmidt.org