

# **A Curve and A Line**

## **- Koānic Thinking on Performance Art -**

I would like to start this talk with Tomasz Sikorski, a Polish writer, educator and visual artist from Poland. He distinguishes four different languages in his book *ARTWORK as a koān*.

The first is the language of daily life, in which everything is mixed: senses and nonsense, information and emotions, habits and instincts, contents and pseudo-contents self-generated by using the language. The second is relative, common and dominating. This is the language of intellect and science. The third, used sporadically and mistrustfully, is the language of the world of the absolute paradox and mysticism. The fourth language is both relative and absolute. It is the language of poetry and art.“

And now I would like to invite to become at least bilingual, and change your perception and your receivers to the third and the fourth language.

Almost 19months ago, a special friend told me that I'm moving like a curve and a line at the same time. Well, first I was flattered, later confused and at the end I desperately tried to figure out what that means, to move like a curve and a line at the same time.

And I have even extended this challenging observation beyond symmetry and physics and focused, on the question, how to be a curve and line at the same time, how to represent, how to life, how to perform like a curve and a line at the same time, how to become a curve and a line at the same time.

You could say, I became obsessed with a simple remark, which fortunately have driven me in a creative sense, and not in an existential crisis.

Why a crisis? Because this simple notion probably exposes, our major barrier in life: Duality. Simple duality like black and white, love and hate, sinking and flying, active and passive, male and female, but also fabricated differences between being black and white, being in love or hate, being male or female.

We live in times of political and social vindicated diversity, in times of a constant self-reflection, strong self-questioning and separation because of it. It is easy to put us really of the grid and cause confusion.

Because these kind of barriers and challenges, are touching the profound concept of self.

Of who we are, of how we want to appear, how we want to connect and with whom? Since the very first time in our life, the self gets constructed by multiple factors which starts with names, ideas and opinions, which later becomes facts,

feed by where we grow up, what kind of education we received, in what kind of family culture we were embedded.

We are marked and driven by our environment, by stereotypes, by made up choices and given preferences. We exist in a fully marked space. So if I'm white, I can't live like a black person, if I'm Christian, I can't believe in Allah, if I love him, I can't love her, or him and her? If I'm male, I can't be female? Well, we could, but it's not that easy. Because this is how we navigate through the complexity of life, we simplify, and furthermore: we abide by these simplifications offered or dictated. We cling to them so much. And even we don't need to be the „other“, in order to accept the otherness. But again, it's not that simple.

We need our self, especial in opposition to the 'other'. It is essential, because we want to fit, we want to belong. Our self confirms our existence, it gives us a role and function, it makes us approachable and legible, it makes us predictable, it makes us seen.

This is how we are able to interact, exchange and find a place in life. We and our self want to be a fully functioning part in a given system, in a society and environment, labeled and marked by it. If we have never experienced this, we are homeless in a profound sense.

And therefore we get confused if we realise the fact, that our self is not definite. We learn and we feel, sometimes we even know deeply in ourself, without actually *knowing*. And especially in times of crisis, we face the danger of losing our self. But we have to realise that we don't have a permanent self, it changes frequently, because it was never alive in the first place.

Our self is a projection, a manufactured carrier. We are not born with one, we built it up. So our social mind of comparison, judgement, envy, and greed keeps spinning. Sadly, no realm of life remains immune, including the realm of spiritual and artistic aspiration and practice too. The believe in separation continues to have a devastating effect on our personal lives and the world. In the most extreme cases, it rationalizes aggressive actions against those we identify as the „other“, promoting racism, sexism, the decimation of nature.

The misery produced by these powerful influences, undermines our sense of wholeness and denies the reality of the interdependent fabric of life, what makes us all what we are.

Eihei Dogen (1200 – 1253), one of the great Zen Masters in the ancient world warns: „Caught in the grip of such discriminative thinking, there is no room for us to experience intimacy.“

The word „intimacy“ for Dogen means „close and inseparable“, the primary antidote to many causes of destruction. Intimacy is „oneness“, our natural state of mind and body. Hereby, Dogen fully understood, in body and mind, that from the very beginning, wholeness, is the fundamental reality for all beings; that in fact,

every form of life is an all-inclusive manifestation of what might be called 'original wholeness'.

We all carry this manifestation in us, but as we grow up, the wholeness becomes almost like an island we have to abandon, and we row and row away from us and everything else, to strand somewhere unknown in the endless ocean. We suffer from the ingrained pattern of dualistic thinking which prevents us from knowing our complete and original self.

So we have to try to follow back the tracks of duality and the self to what we have been before, in order to unify, in order to dissolve duality and separation, to become one again.

But once more it's not that easy.

To quote Philippe Jaccottet (a beautiful Swiss poet): "There are these curious moments in almost every life; everything happens then as if an umbrella, mentally and yet more impenetrable than bronze, which separates the universe from another universe, suddenly becomes very thin."

A "very thin" umbrella, having read these words again and again, I suddenly realised, what I have received 19 months ago (moving as a curve and a line at the same time) was a perfect example of duality, a great marking point right into the umbrella which forces the universes to stay away from each other. But furthermore, "moving as a curve and a line at the same time" is a beautiful koān!

A koān is a saying, a simple anecdote, which is used for the teaching of Zen masters in which they refer to the attitude of openness of the mind and the possibility of direct capturing of its reality. Their nature always lies in a revelation of the truth. But at the end, a Koān, just like a work of art in the Western tradition, does not have any absolutely right definition.

Basically, a koān is a model confrontation of conflicting senses, as a challenge to superficial logical reasoning based on duality. And this confrontation provokes an experience, usually sudden and short-lived, which, in the best case, releases the mind from a confusion of notions, and gives a chance for an insight, or even an illuminating awakening.

The way to 'solve' a koān is by practising zazen, giving yourself over, mind and body, completely, to meditate on the koān, so that, sooner or later, the koān, as a problem 'disappears'. Solution to a koān comes when Mind goes beyond intellectual, conceptual, binary, dualistic thinking (and smart-ass, verbal 'answers'.)

Hakuin, famous and highly distinguished Zen monk, wrote in the 18th century: "If you choose a koān and keep studying it continuously, your thoughts and desires of ego will die down. It will be as if an unfathomable precipice opened up before you and you would not have any support for your arms and legs. You are looking

straight into death's eyes and your heart is beating as if you had fire in your chest. Then you feel that you and koān make a unity, and the body and mind are leaving."

Such experience is considered to be an introspection into our nature, into oneness, and I would also add, into an unmarked space. A space, free of any signs, marks, desires, feature, ideas, opinions, facts. A space of the infinite equality.

But how about an example of a very old koān, which interestingly points in a similar direction to the one I received. (found in the book „The Gateless Barrier – Zen Comments on the Mumonkan“ by Zenkei Shibayama).

It's called "Sen-Jo and Her Soul Are Separated".

*The Gateless barrier page 247*

"Goso asked a monk, „Sen-jo and her soul are separated: which is the true one?"

The comment from the Zen Master Mumonkan, was the following: "If you can personally attain to the truth of this koān, then you will be able to declare that to live is to be a form of your True Self at one time and at one place, to die is also to be a form of your True Self at one time and at one place; life and death are not two different things."

Ok, now, you might say, ahhh, it's all interesting, the 'self' and the 'the other', oneness and duality, but why is the concept of koān overall, interesting for artists, and especially performance artists?

Well, another old Zen Master was asked this question too: "Can a work of art be a koān?" The answer was clear, "Either it is a koān, or it is not a work of art". But we may perceive similar aspirations, of penetrating into the nature of reality and its natural or fabricated textures.

Art functions through a free and loosely directed access. There is no one and only method of interpreting or making art, or rather there are freely confronted opinions and discussions. Unlike Koān, in the expression of art it is aesthetic experiences that play the key role; they relativize meanings and refer more to emotions than to intellect.

There are these kind of art works which make us speechless. Or we have a silent amazement and silent admiration. Not only we don't know how to say anything in response, we do not know what to say. We become a lump of doubt. The shaky state: comprehensibility – incomprehensibility, clarity – vagueness, certainty – uncertainty, similar to a pendulum which in its continuous motion, oscillates between the two extremes. It is in this zone of "between" that we usually remain: we neither understand nor not-understand, neither know nor not-know.

I remember some very few experiences while watching Performance Art pieces, that had a quite similar impact on me, as described. In all these examples

appeared a moment, just an instant of break down, of a profound shaking of my self-image, my self-conception, my state of mind and body, provoked by what I sensed right in that moment, in the Performance. This collapse of the known state must occur, so that after, a return to a relative level of consciousness, is possible again.

Kamil Guenatri a French/Algerian performance artist based in Toulouse.  
Here you can see few images from his performance "Le drame d'un homme"  
("The drama of a men")  
MPA/Berlin 2014

Preach R Sun an US American Fugitivist, Conjuror and Performance Artist  
Here you can see few images from his performance "For Whites only"  
VIPAW2016/ Venice 2016

Non Grata/ a performance collective from Estonia  
Here you can see few images from their performance for  
Interakcje/Piotrków Trybunalski 2011

This small selection is absolutely subjective and doesn't necessarily represent a special Performance Art stream, which could be probably called a "Performative Koān". Not at all. But I would like to propose, to rather mark an instant in a Performance, which could be called "koānic", in order to make this extract tangible and reflexive for further discussions and discourses.

I'm not aware of performance artists who would describe or identify their work as "koānic" altogether, but performance artists who practice Zen Buddhism and, or are interested in the topic of koān in their Performance Art work, are for example Alaistar McLennan, Boris Nieslony, Janusz Baldyga, Zygmunt Piotrowski (alias Noah Warsaw) or myself.

But to be strict and if we stay with the vivid core of a koān and it's aim to dissolve duality and opening a gate to the original wholeness. A koānic work of art, would not symbolize anything, would not want to delight, or excite with the form, would not communicate any particular meaning, would not moralize, agitate, protest, would not persuade us to do anything, would not indicate anything, would even not convey any, so called, "message".

It's contradictive, because I'm highly interested in these koānic splitter, koānic cracks and sparks, which shake what we take for granted to the deepest level of our projected and dictated image of the 'self' and the 'other'. I believe it's absolutely high time, to find ways to open to the true nature, to become unambiguously aware of how we are taking actions including all the consequences to our environment and society. This unification of the 'self' and the 'other', of the consciousness and sub consciousness, could lead us out of the confusion of

language, out of the reasoning mechanisms, cultural dogmas and dividing propaganda.

So, maybe it doesn't matter if a Performance Action might be koānic all together or not. What matters for our deliberations, is the fact that both, a Zen koān and a work of art can make people plunge into an abyss: abandon duality, certainties, knowledge and habits, language and the whole culture. Both could make us transgress the boundaries of intellect, release us from the confusion of words and cognitive schemata, linking together separated worlds, exposing the fictitiousness of ego and ownership (for example, you don't possess a performance you do, it's not your property), blurring the supposed boundaries between the physical, emotional, psychological, and mental aspects of our lives and constructed "selves"

As a specific concern, "koānic thinking", maybe "koānic awareness", might find its place in guidance or accompany the art we do, because in a powerful way it manifests radical aspirations towards our true nature or oneness. Coming back to Eihei Dogen's use of the word "intimacy", he points out: "[...]this means holding nothing back while giving oneself completely to the only moment in which we are. In this way the moment (time) and what we are doing in that moment (being) are one intimate expression of life. On the ground of Performance Art, this shows us the attitude of openness, we are fighting for.

And Toda Hozumi points in his essay "How social change actually happens through the body" to the following:

"Change happens in the present moment – in the wordless place of play and intimacy [...] Our rational mind deludes us into thinking the real work of oppression cessation is done at the level of 'planning', or even 'doing', when it is actually happening underneath at the level of 'being'. [...] When we live in our mind, we see oppression as something outside of ourselves that needs to be fixed. When we start to slow down, we begin to sense that what we need to do is heal the effects of oppression on us. But when we become fully present, we see that what we need to do is heal oppression itself. Because it is us."

The koān is a teaching method and awakening is not a thing, not a goal, not a concept. It is not something to be attained. It is a metamorphosis. And with the words of Ejo Takata: "If the caterpillar thinks about the butterfly it is to become, saying 'And then I shall have wings and antennae,' there will never be a butterfly. The caterpillar must accept its own disappearance in its transformation. When the marvellous butterfly takes wing, nothing of the caterpillar remains.

Alejandro Jodorowsky and his Zen Master Ejo Takata:

"How can you walk in a straight line through the forty-nine hairpin turns of a mountain path? [...] A labyrinth is only the illusory complication of a straight line, I said. Ejo smiled. [...] When you use words to conquer words, you find yourself ultimately on a battlefield full of corpses. By giving an intellectual explanation to a

mute gesture you become lost in the labyrinth. The disciple is not trying to demonstrate anything.”

*Silently, he stands up, leans over, moves in curving paths, climbs an imaginary mountain. But he does not change; he remains empty. He is who he is, without wondering who he is. He abides in the unity at the centre of the ten thousand things.*

Thank you very much for listening.

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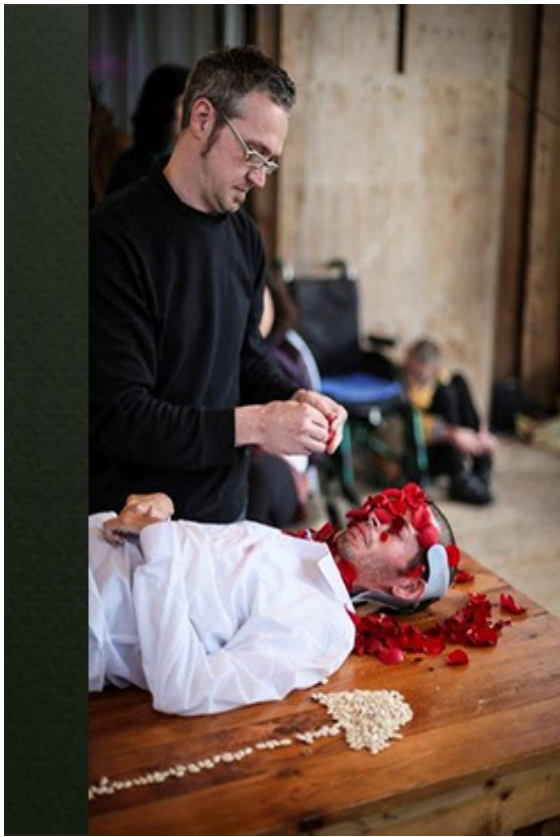


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