

Yves Klein and Judo as a Sport and an Art

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ABSTRACT

In this article I develop three philosophical suppositions that link art and sport, in particular the martial arts of Judo. These suppositions, namely the integration of mind-and body; imagination and the trans-verbal or ineffable are then applied to a reading of the art of Yves Klein, who himself was also an expert judoka. The article suggests that art and aesthetics in general is pervasive and finds expression in sports, a thesis that is not new and has emerged as the so-named aesthetics of the everyday. What is perhaps new is the specific application of art to the realm of sport and thus the appellation “martial arts” is apt.

Keywords: art; judo; Yves Klein; mind-and-body

INTRODUCTION

In this article I develop three suppositions that devolve out of a comparison between art and sport. I then develop and apply these suppositions as they relate to judo and Yves Klein’s art. Yves Klein himself was an expert *Judoka* (judo practitioner) and refers to judo as instrumental in his art-making process and intentions. Having discerned a link between judo and art, based on the three suppositions, I wish to conclude that a martial art such as judo may be understood as an art-form which inverted, implies that art is a kind of martial art, that is, a subtle bodily mode of expression and reception. In this way, one might venture to say that the division between a (playful) discipline such as judo and an activity such as art is rather blurred.

SUPPOSITIONS 1: AN EXPRESSION ABOVE LANGUAGE AND TOWARD THE INEFFABLE

I begin with the supposition that fact physical activity and picture-making was/is crucial to our evolution; they need their primitive roots. Such activity, it will be noted, in both art-making and sport are also trans-rational and thus beyond the analytical mind. Furthermore, both are perfected through training and require the special inner drive or intuition. The upshot of all this is that the artist and sportsperson allows us to extend the range of our expressive powers beyond that which we find within our own resources. For example, one may say that a Rothko or Bannister’s running helps me to express a

feeling which defies description. One may attribute to such performances a kind of somberness, serenity, even the mystical. It is, perhaps as Kandinsky says: “...painting (sport)...needs its materiality for that very dematerialization that shows the road from the external to the internal” (In Janson, 1967:115).

Via the “external” of say, a Newman painting, the onlooker may become aware of his own body (via the painting’s presence). It is therefore no surprise that Newman asked his viewers to see his paintings close-up wherein a sense of the aliveness of the onlooker was conjured, a sense of place and awareness as opposed to separation. The visual experience may be said to be permeated with emotion. I would claim that the following of sports on television does a similar thing to the onlooker, the “external” close-up of the action vitalizes the viewer (obviously this aptly applies to his/her chosen sport). In this close-up, we may experience a kind of non-verbal identification with the “external” that borders on the ineffable.

As for the practitioner of art or sport, one may surmise that in striving he/she can experience wholeness. Through thus expressing themselves, they press themselves out, as it were. This “pressing themselves out” is like love and friendship which is both predicated on a lack and a giving of self. Similar perhaps to a Tolstoyan desire to communicate and share, the practitioner is in a position to express “...a gift of the abundance of what we all are” (Hyland 1990:41). This is expressed in the non-verbal

language of art and sport. The language of the sporting event or artwork may have the veneer of linear time and logic, but in reality, given their primitive origins, they are both expressions of an intense unnamed emotional need that defies verbal articulation. Metaphorically we can say it is like *that* ballet move or *that* sound without being able to pinpoint exactly what *that* movement or *that* sound expresses.

In order to perform at a high level, one has to become one with the game or one with the act of painting (or be in *that* ballet movement or in *that* sound), just flowing with it with full concentration. To the extent that one can do that, the sportsperson may say “the game played me” or the painting told me what *it* wanted. This attitude transcends competitiveness. Banister, the famous sub four minute miler expressed a great sense of thankfulness at fulfilling his aims, rather than a sense of vanquishing his opponent. In sport as in art, one is ultimately against oneself. This means that both sport and art require introspection and incessant refinement to find and express that spark within. That “spark” is not easy to define – one may be able to express it in the repetition of the same great play or by forging a style. One has thus said it non-verbally or beyond conventional language.

Keenan (in Osterhoudt 1973) argues that sport is like theatre, in that it consists in performances within a special and contrived world, as “an idealization of the everyday”. Like dramatic tragedy it has its “acts” (for example - half time), “players” refer both to sports men and woman and actors and actresses, there is clapping for a good performance and a quest for the great struggle. Camus (1913-1960) in Osterhoudt (1973:306) says: “...even today, the stadium crammed full of spectators for a Sunday match and the theatre which I loved with unequal intensity are the only places in the world where I felt innocent”. I believe that this “innocence” felt by Camus can be located in the primordial child-like quality to find meaning in games (sport, art...), the spirit demonstrated by the “players” and the inexpressible (beyond words) somehow represented to the senses.

Womack (2003:35) concurs that the arts and sport are mediums of expression without recourse to words when she says, “sport communicates through the language of symbols and, like art, it dramatizes complex ideas that cannot readily be expressed in words”. In this light, one can make the brief argument that Yves Klein (1930-1965), an artist and expert Judoka,

sought an overlap of his love for art and understanding of the art and science of judo. He sought to express that which is above words in his performances¹ and paintings. Klein’s blue monochromes were his language that creates a sense of weightlessness (the essence of a correct judo technique) and spatial determinacy. The viewer may feel drawn into the depth of blue that appeared to transmute the material substance of the painting support into an incorporeal quality, tranquil and serene (adapted from Weitemeier 1995:18). I cannot say it better than Yves Klein himself: “What is blue? Blue is the invisible becoming visible...blue has no dimensions. It is beyond the dimensions of which other colors partake” (in Weitemeier 1995:19). I believe it was this same ineffable search that he sought in art and through judo-movements that the latter could also suggest a boundless sensibility, that which “has no dimensions”. I shall return to Klein later in the article.

SUPPOSITION 2 - THE INTEGRATION OF MIND-AND-BODY

I have been arguing that emotions (or the pre-verbal) and the expression thereof play a pivotal role in both art and sport. Now if emotions can be construed as the link between the bodily and mental, then an expressive theory of both art and sport could account for a meaningful interweaving of mind-and-body through such endeavors. The benefit of such an “interweaving” is that art and sport galvanize people in meaningful ways. Weiss (1969:29) puts it like this: “...because art and sport involve a controlled expression of emotions, making it possible for minds and bodies to be harmonized clearly and intensely, they offer excellent agencies for unifying men.”

The individual too may benefit from this mind-body relationship. Weiss once more: “...only he who expresses his emotions through such a possessed and structured body can become well-unified and not be undone by what he feels” (Weiss 1969:21). In this process, the artist/sportsperson is said to have a mind to quicken and guide his body and a body as a source for acts desirable and effective. It is a body used, not simply worked on by what is external to it. Weiss thus uses the analogy of not hand-in-glove to represent the nature of the mind and body and its apparent dualism, a perennial problem in philosophy. Rather the mind-body interaction is like fingers to a hand – the fingers (or body) presuppose a hand (or

mind or self). Through practice both tend toward a rule-governed, well-controlled action. It is in this action that we can grasp a sense of unity and integration of the self (mind-and-body).

To unpack this further, we may say that there is a similar process and language at work in both art and sport. There is first a desire (intuition, subconscious feeling) then more clarified intentions followed by “performance” which contribute to the realization of a prospect (intentions) and finally commitment to continue acting (performing) in a certain way. This requires focus. I tend to a phenomenological position which describes the unity of mental and physical activity as a kind of “lived body” in opposition to dualism. In terms of the phenomenological position, expression itself is considered a unified whole or an “integration” mentioned above. Hyland (1990:54) puts it in these terms:

“...an amalgam of man’s incarnation reveals that man is an opaque and partially concealed being subject without clear and precise points of demarcation for the various aspects of his being; he is a unity of physical, background and psychological relationships necessarily interrelated and only meaningfully investigated when analyzed as a whole”

This “unity” means that I do not simply have a body, but, in some sense, I am my body, or in sharper terms: mind, senses and use of the body cannot be isolated and mechanically or reductively described, all act in unison which is an expression of the “I”.

Furthermore, in the same way that the artist forms a style or his individuality vitalized by artistic feeling and training in his craft, so too is the sportsman inspired by feeling and training in his craft. The net result of this may be perceived as “...a reunification of spiritual and corporeal faculties, that can be achieved only by an assiduous training in movement in time and space, and a diligent cultivation of a muscular strength” (Osterhoudt 1973:42). This point applies equally well to the arts as movement too is a basis for the arts. One needs to train our motor-tactile faculties and expression is a succession of movements. Even where the art is more conceptual or abstract as in the case of music, there is an imaginative construction of movement as the music has a rhythm which could be applied to a dance routine, and its “playing” certainly requires a certain dexterity and the like. In recognizing the indissoluble link between the mind-and-body in sport and art, one

can say both activities have the potential to express a unity of self.

SUPPOSITION 3 - OF IMAGINATION AND FANTASY

Art and sport consist in the imaginative construction of “another world”. They require a certain pretending or “make-believe”ⁱⁱ. We recognize that in a certain sense they are not real: the drama is staged or framed in a particular way.

One aspect of imagination is the conjuring of images in the “minds eye”. Both the sportsperson and artist need to imagine (to some extent) before expressing/externalization. Imagination may also refer to the manipulation and distortion of reality in order to comment more truly on reality. This was certainly the case with the de Brucke art movement of the early twentieth century, for example and one could say that the athleticism required in sport requires pushing the body to the limits. In other words, manipulating and trying to traverse beyond accepted boundaries of what can be done by the sportsperson at the highest levels of the game.

In both art and sport we praise the expression of an inner conviction well articulated which has the effect of enveloping the audience creating a memorable experience. This may be achieved through imagination where invention/creativity/a lateral solution to a problem may be expressed. In the same way that an artist will develop a unique technique in order to elucidate a concept and/or feeling, a sportsperson may show vision and ingenuity in a particular play which articulates a subtle nuance to the game: it provides for an imaginative realization.

Welsch (2005:142) argues that this “dramatic realization” (or lateral solution) in sport “can display (express) all the dramatic traits of human existence” (brackets my inclusion), that is, the human condition. That sport is drama without a script may be poetic, but perhaps at times it is even more artistic than some of the arts, for example the performing arts, which are completely dependent on a script, choreography or a composition. While “in sport...the drama is due to the event alone. The freedom and event character of sport’s production of meaning is eminently artistic” (Weitemeier 1973:42). My intention is not to assess whether in fact sport is art. I wish simply to draw the reader’s attention to the fact that in their both being expressive in varying degrees and in specific ways as well as

imaginative, there is a common theme that underlies them both. This, I have suggested is in their expressing the ineffable through a holistic vision of persons that requires imagination.

An imaginative conception may be gleaned by noting the difference between simply an aesthetic sport and an artistic one. In the case of the former the gap between the purpose and the aesthetic is never entirely closed, their purpose could still be achieved in absence of the aesthetic. Whereas in the latter case, along with art, there is no distinction between ends and means. As Arnold (1990:168) makes the point: “...each dance, unlike most sports, is a unique composition, expressing its own immanent structure and as such is subject only to its own inherent demands. Each dance, unlike most sports, seeks an imaginative response that is not governed or unduly influenced by what has been done or witnessed before”. So, one ought to conclude that insofar as some sports are more imaginative there are overlaps with the arts. Sport is generally imaginative as it is as distant from life as is art, even as, perhaps similarly to art, it developed from life and is symbolic in that it developed from types of aggressive action in ordinary life, but now the struggle is raised to the level of imagination. As Santayana puts it: “sport is a liberal form of war stripped from its compulsions and malignity”. (in Welsche 2005:152). For example: Why constantly drive at high speed or shoot unreal pigeons that will not be for food? And the stage or a painting for example, like the sporting field (ring, race track, and stage) is separated from life (neither actor nor sportsperson attack the other beyond this arena!). They are imaginative.

JUDO, THE THREE SUPPOSITIONS AND YVES KLEIN

Jigoro Kano developed judo from Ju Jitsu. His intention was to use and develop the most economical and efficient movements derived from Ju Jitsu, allowing for the conservation of energy, through the principles of balance, leverage and timing. “Ju” means gentle and “do” means way. The “ju” thus refers to the idea of giving way or giving in to gain victory, that is, not through force and sheer strength, but reason, and using the energy of one’s opponent (who is really a part of self). The “way” refers to the fact that judo is more than a sport; it is a way of life and inspired by Kano’s original motivation, namely, the peaceful co-existence of individuals and nations. It is through the non-verbal articulation of movement (supposition 1)

through interacting with (an) other(s) that we find an inner harmony and that may result in social upliftment. The ineffable that can be achieved during *randori* (free practice), *Kata* (a set of pre-arranged movements) and even *shihai* (contest) enables the practitioner to learn about himself/herself. The ritual of bowing (showing respect), cleanliness and equanimity regardless of success or failure is a means toward self-understanding and social harmony.

The above notions are achieved in that judo requires an integration of mind-and-body (supposition 2), in that one needs to think clearly (mind) and act decisively (body) at almost one and the same time, imploring a unity of self. The ritual of judo which consists of a well-defined set of throws, counters and grappling techniques cannot be adequately performed without practice. Practice teaches or develops the body to think and the mind to be focused or in other words, that thought should not consume but consist in motivating directed and intelligent action. The ideal “action” is effortless as it is simply well-timed and correct, wherein one skillfully takes advantage of the lack of balance (*kuzushi*) of one’s opponent (friend) rather than relying on brute strength and power.

The ineffable or non-verbal dimension of judo together with the mind-body integration is made possible in virtue of the imagined space (supposition 3) of the mat (the *tatami*), the codified rules of the sport and practice arena and the hierarchy of *judokas*. These elements of the sport create a kind of fantasy world (an imaginative construction) in which both the playful and serious collaborate to help refine character, improve skill level and act as a portal into another world, namely the ritual of judo. One may apply this to a self-defense situation in the real-world should that arise, but the *budo* way is perfection and economy of movement for the sake of peace – clearly an imagined realm that one hopes could apply in an ideal world.

Yves Klein certainly created this ideal space through his art and this was inspired by his love of judo. In this respect he expresses some of the ideas contained in the three suppositions enumerated above.

In the early 1950’s, Yves Klein envisioned a career as a high-ranking judoka, a champion and teacher. He did realize many of these goals. In 1953 he did a film in Japan about the correct performance of judo *kata* – the formal disciplines that form the grammar and aesthetics

of the discipline. He used stills to illustrate his book *Les Fondements du judo*, published in France in 1954, which brought the true Japanese Kodokan to France. “Judo”, he wrote, “is the discovery by the human body of a spiritual space” (Cheetham 2014:98). In this quote, one may make the connection between his experience of judo and my second supposition, the integration of mind- and-body.

There was a clear connection in Klein’s experience between the momentary weightlessness of a judo throw and his notorious *Leap into the Void* of 1960. He extolled the judo inspiration of *Leap into the Void* in a gloss on the famous photo published in a section of his mock newspaper, *Dimanche*, of 1960: “The monochrome, who is also a judo champion, black belt, 4th dan, trains regularly in dynamic levitation! (with or without a net, at great risk to his life)” (in Baas 2005:142).

It is not surprising that he wrote that “judo is always abstract and spiritual” (in Baas 2005:133). On the mat he was said to be serene and strong, inwardly at peace. Cheetham (2014:139) notes that “...Yves’ had learned in Japan judo as intensive discipline and asceticism, which confers on the body itself a knowledge that has never passed through the intellectual mind”. Success in these areas of exploration – judo and art – meant the effective elimination of the boundaries of the body, painterly materials, color, and even space itself, a goal reached most dramatically in Klein’s notorious leaps into the void (1960). He combined this sense of the spiritual in judo in his art as when he pigmented judoka so that their bodies could be preserved and contemplated during exercises. The resulting images of the *Leap* and his pigmented judokas, are non-verbal clues to the ineffable. I believe there is thus a link to my first supposition, the notion of the inarticulate *suchness* of the body captured in motion.

He is known for his performance work, whereby he uses naked females as a kind of brush and he claimed that “...the time of the brush had ended and finally my knowledge of judo was going to be useful. My models were my brushes...I devised a sort of ballet of girls smeared on a grand canvas which resembled the white mat of judo contests” (in Cheetham 2014:67). His judo school in Madrid had monochromes on the wall, as did his judo *Academie* in Paris, each seven to eight meters long – one blue, one white, one rose, one orange – to move from embodied, material presentations on a defined surface to a

sense of Zen limitlessness and oneness of spirit and form. Klein thus created an imaginary space wherein art and judo overlap and inform one another. In this sense, he created a fantasy world with both judo and art elements interspersed within and beyond one another. One may link this imaginative excursion, if you will, with my third supposition.

Klein said: “...the ordinary judoka does not practice spiritually but physically and emotionally. The true judoka practices spiritually and with a pure sensibility” and “painting is no longer a function of the eye today; it is a function of the only thing that is in us that does not belong to us: our life” (Cheetham 2014: 41) Jigoro Kano (1968:10), the founder of Kodokan Judo wrote: “the aim of judo is to utilize physical and mental strength most effectively. Its training is to understand the true meaning of life through the mental and physical training of attack and defense. You must develop yourself as a person and become a useful citizen to society”. Klein certainly developed (his) art, and it would seem the explosive power of judo helped him to innovate in so many ways (abstractionⁱⁱⁱ, performance, minimalism, conceptual art...). He refused to accept modernist boundaries of mediums or method. Thus his monochromes and sponge paintings are not special areas of competence (Greenberg’s formalism), but experiments, infections, contagions.

Klein argues that abstract art is not an autonomous, “pure” sphere, but “impure”. Not all recent monochromes are paintings. He experimented with pure space and light in an emptied room at the home of Colette Allendy that was part of a May 1957 exhibition. Here there is the nascent concept of the void as a palpable present absence – a sort of dematerialization in art that reflects the latent spirituality in judo.

This is so, because an *Ippon* – a perfect judo throw – is really predicated on absence, a disappearance of sorts that when well-timed result in such a throw. This “disappearance” is as a direct result of the sub-conscious mind^{iv} that is pivotal in coordinating a fusion between mind-and-body. He even experimented with music in keeping with the openness and spontaneity (the creative throw “out of nowhere”) that the true judoka could have. He composed a symphony based on a single, vibrating note and extended silence, “a two-part continuum of sound and soundlessness which,

as it were, formed the overture to his artistic career” (Weitemeier 1995:11). This parallels the His “Blue paintings” or monochromes were a “sensitized image”, “poetic image”, “pure energy”, a universal sense of space.

As Yves Klein would say: “For me every nuance of color is, in a sense, an individual, a living creature of the same species as the primary color, but with a character and personal soul of its own. There are many nuances – gentle, angry, violent, sublime, vulgar, peaceful” (in Weitemeier 1995:15). So as not to make it merely decorative, he concentrated on a specific blue (Y.K.B.) – symbolizing a unification of heaven and earth. He continues: “To sense the soul, without explanation, without words, and to depict this, I believe, is what led to monochrome painting” (in Weitemeier 1995:15). This pre-verbal or trans-verbal experience, as hitherto described as my first supposition, imply that art and judo both precede analyses, they resist analysis, that they are adequate expressions in themselves; in fact: the necessary language for an inner, but inarticulate feeling/thought.

A statement which I particularly like and which reflects his belief, like Duchamp, that life itself is the great artwork, is the following: “my paintings are the ashes of my life” (In Weitemeier 1995:76). Thus, it is not so curious when he presented the idea of art as nothing by emptying a Paris gallery (Iris Clert Gallery 1957) of furniture, painting it white and exhibiting empty space as art. His exhibition of emptiness was entitled: “the Specialization of Sensibility in the Raw Material State into the Stabilized Pictorial Sensibility: The Void”. Over the previous two days he had painted the gallery white, consciously filling it in the process with his artistic sensibility through a kind of meditative action. He writes (in Baas 2005:142):

“...my presence in action in the given space will create the climate and the radiating pictorial ambiance that habitually reigns in the studio of an artist endowed with real power...a sensible but real abstract density will exist and live by itself and for itself in places which are empty in appearance only. In short...I must simply say that the experience was decisive and made me realize that painting is not a function of the eye...”

In this passage, Yves Klein expresses the notion that art is primarily about the idea or more

sound and silence of training in the dojo, so one may surmise.

precisely, a certain energy. And energy or *ki* is of fundamental importance to the martial *arts*, in this case, judo. His energy led him to “paint” by burning surfaces of canvas and by exposing them to wind and rain (life-patterns). He actively sought to displace and even destroy easel painting, both by removing the usual viewing co-ordinates of the image and with his “fire” paintings. His “studio” was life itself. Pure sensibility to him was more a mystical than a perceptual category, one drawn from interests in Zen Buddhism.

He thought of his monochromes, and colour itself, as living presences, not fully belonging to the material world: “I am the painter of space. I am not an abstract painter, but on the contrary a representational one, a Realist” (in Baas 2005:133). But he also played within the language-game of art theory and claimed Giotto his forerunner, as he used a similar blue in his Y.K.B. Though one might say he is anti philosophical, unlike Duchamp or Reinhardt, even as his art (and judo) is about transcendence (mind), it is *also* aggressively physical (body).

Through kodokan judo (the apparently physical), Yves Klein found for himself a way to experience and express the relationship between the realm of the spirit and the physical realm of the body. He himself stated the monochromes came to him through studying the way of judo. As opposed to Reinhardt^v who specified meanings, Klein did not. Stich writes (in Baas 2005:139): “more than merely appealing to the eye or mind, the paintings aim to effect all the senses and to go beyond thinking into the realm of feeling, to combine corporeal with spiritual invigoration”. This is precisely the kind of integration that Kano envisaged for the art of judo.

CONCLUSION

In this article, I have argued that art and sport can be construed philosophically as articulating that which cannot be verbally expressed, a certain mind-body polarity that is at once harmonized and even unified and as an arena of imaginative projection. I then proceeded to argue that judo is an exemplary candidate for realizing these philosophical suppositions and that Yves Klein as both artist and judoka embellished on such ideas in his oeuvre. The far reaching conclusion is that judo is aptly named a martial art.

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ⁱ For example his performance piece “Leap into the void” (1960) demonstrates the freedom of art and judo simultaneously.

ⁱⁱ Although sport may be considered as real-life drama, it is still a category of make-believe. We recognize it as but a game or as a diversion (even if it may be a profession). It is thus at a remove from the vicissitudes of life itself, even as it may act as a bridge (or metaphorical illustration) of values that are deemed pertinent to life. In the same way, art is said to represent (re-present) or comment on life.

ⁱⁱⁱ He developed his own blue – Yves Klein Blue or Y.K.B., which is at once a saturated Rothko-like creation and a seeming tangible, visceral, absorbing substance. It is at once something to contemplate and appeals to the senses, to bodily, sensuous experience.

^{iv} Noakes, a sports scientist at the University of Cape Town, notes that it is the quieting down of the conscious, analytical mind that is a necessary prerequisite for successful sports performance. I conducted an interview with Professor Noakes on the 17th November 2010.

^v I was also going to include Reinhardt, a teacher of the art of the East, in my analysis of the relationship between art and judo. In his case, his solitude, his painting method, his polemical writings on art and philosophy and Zen Buddhism all reverberate with meanings one can extract from the martial arts.