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The Verb for Art is Play: Aesthesis as Embodied Inquiry

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Abstract

To ask how we might learn through moving, this text blends writing and artistic research from my PhD dissertation, *How the line curves*, which considers aesthesis through Taijiquan, an internal martial art practised for both defence and nourishment. Deploying the Chinese word 術 (shu) to disentangle art from artifice, we think of art as technics in the sense of martial arts: art as embodied knowledge. How does this engender forms of knowledge production and relationality through continuous, non-linear learning? How does *play* in the sense of 打 (da) — the verb for martial arts — open understandings of knowing through moving, situating the self in processual relation with the world? How does art, in the sense of 術 (shu), open an alterity to colonial knowledge production? How does thinking from a mode of *play* undo the separation from work-leisure, theory-practice, to allow for a continuum of inquiring through doing?

Keywords Artistic inquiry; Embodied knowledge; Processual learning; Aesthetic practice.

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Introduction

打 *da* (Pleco, 2024)

1. strike; hit; knock
2. break; smash
3. beat; fight; attach
4. deal with somebody or something
5. construct; build
6. make (articles of daily use)
7. mix; stir; beat
8. tie up; pack
9. knit; weave
10. draw; paint; make a mark on
11. spray; spread
12. open; dig
13. hold up; hoist; raise
14. send; dispatch; project
15. DIALECT: issue or receive (a certificate, etc..)
16. remove; get rid of
17. ladle; draw
18. buy
19. catch; hunt
20. gather in; collect; reap
21. estimate; calculate; reckon
22. work out
23. do; engage in
24. play
25. go through (or perform) (some physical action)
26. adopt; use
27. [used to give a clue to the answer when setting a riddle]
28. take

打 *play* is different from playing the piano or games and jokes. Translating 打 as *play* flattens the verb — some touch is lost.

打 has 扌 the radical for hand, and carries the sense of contact, of *against* — a touch charged with a certain insistence.

Play is the verb for martial arts: 打功夫 *da gongfu*.

Gongfu — often spelled ‘kung-fu’ — encompasses martial arts and more broadly, embodied skill: *da gongfu* is *playing work*. If Chinese thought is “fundamentally a philosophy of body,” then 打 (Wang, 2012) is a verb for knowing through the body, through play. This is knowing by attending to *how things go* or what is called 道 *dao*, the way. Such knowing is a form of inquiring through the whole self — an expansive way of posing questions. This produces knowledge not as objects of the intellect, but as *aesthesis*: knowing through the senses — *making sense* — with the whole self, wherein mind and body are integrated, inseparable.

Squatting at the chopping block on the kitchen floor, my grandpa carves the roast duck. Using a cleaver is familiar from years of working as a cook. Deploying the least effort as the blade falls exactly where it needs to. Lifting its heft, letting the blade fall, its weight does the work. Carving happens by trusting yourself with the blade, knowing how it drops, knowing the give of meat. Knowledge is using only the strength required, nothing more or less.

In the story, Cook Ding (Zhuangzi, 350-250 BCE) cuts through the ox effortlessly. After many years of cutting, he no longer needs to try: he follows. After years of attending to the process, Cook Ding sees without seeing. The blade is an extension of him. Everything has its own grain. Following the grain, his blade never dulls because it encounters no obstacle. Cutting without obstacle is a way of ease. There is no singular way to cut. The only aim is never having to sharpen the knife.

Playing is how you find the grain, an inquiry of *how things go*. Playing is a way of studying with your whole self. Knowing takes shape through responding, doing, noticing, reflecting, transforming. Through this inquiry, *how* does not require *why* in order to proceed. “Practice answers questions with better questions,” Su-Feh says as we discuss dance and martial arts, “As you do it, the *whys* emerge.”

“You can practice stances while washing the dishes,” Dad says, cleaning up after dinner and integrating the posture and breathing foundational to karate practice.

Inquiring through movement, study is not separate from living. Study is not a contemplative vacuum. “Study is already going on” (Stefano and Moten, 2013). Study happens, obvious or not. Chopping wood and carrying water are the classic teachers of Dao, a way of studying wherein nothing really happens except doing what you are doing (Fung, 1958). Without a name, everything is possible as study. Like breathing, it is how you focus. “Studying,” Leo says, “is also a breathing.”



Figure 1. Video Still from Artistic Research Somatic Practice “*Sticky Hands*” with Philip Lee and Cara Spooner, 2019.

“We have no Art, we try to do everything well.” I come back to this saying that Mierle Laderman Ukeles attributes to the Balinese in her 1969 *Manifesto for Maintenance* (Ukeles, 1969). To understand art as a way of doing things well, there is no separation from living. Doing things well — or *with ease* — is an inquiry that leans towards 術 *shu*, a word for ‘art’ that does not derive from ‘artifice’. Art as 術 *shu* is a way of knowing through the senses, or *aesthesis*. This art is a technics that intertwines theory and practice, wherein thinking and doing reflect and engender each other. Yuk Hui points out that, unburdened by Promethean fire, Chinese technics follows a logic of 道器 *dao-qi*: the way and the vessel as interdependent and embedded in the broader processes of the world (Hui, 2016). This logic does not separate concept and form. Art in this sense of technics, inseparable from the grain of the world, is a form of study through the whole self. Such study eludes generalisation because it is situated in practice. Robin Wang writes that 術 is embedded in an understanding that the world is not “‘over there’ for us to grab or take as an object; rather we are already within the world, participating in it” (Wang, 2012).

Such study is rooted in the understanding that everything has its own way that accords with a vast way — the ease of things. What is ease? It is not measurable as efficiency or value. Ease is particular to each relation. Each cut, each breath. Without an ideal model that presides over form, study happens within the fabric of the world as it unfolds in each moment. Study does not happen in isolation. Leanne Betasamosake Simpson writes of Nishnaabeg pedagogy: “If you want to learn something, you need to take your body onto the land and do it. Get a practice” (Simpson 2017).

The first thing you learn is humility. Standing looks easy, like nothing is happening. Standing properly, you encounter difficulty without inventing it. Neither is there room for a display of excellence or ingenuity. When Dad describes posture, he says “natural” and then he says “proper” — what is the difference? *Proper* alignment does not oppose *natural*. Cultivating proper alignment introduces a certain tension that is directed towards ease. It only gets easy if you stay with it.

Standing properly is sinking and rising as a balanced whole. When aligned, you move as a whole, leaving no part behind. When not aligned, part of you lags; fissures form that leak or block the flow of energy, creating an opening for your opponent. Alignment is an integrity you can feel. It is not an ideological stance or an abstract model. With most things, humans notice what is immediate and obvious. Standing appears static but it is the smallest of movements. Alignment, like everything else, is dynamic — it is not a position to occupy. Alignment is a feeling that moves with you.

We practise Taijiquan in fragments, separating our movements to understand what is empty, what is full, what is expanding, what is contracting. Before the movements can flow together, we must understand these principles by how they feel. We practise writing in a grid. This framework outlines the correct placement of strokes to give beginners a feel for balance and alignment. After innumerable repetitions, the grid is unnecessary because the relation can be felt. As you layer your experience of writing you ingrain a sense of balance that is not constricted by the grid, but shows its aesthetic possibilities. Nothing is straight: there are only the infinite possibilities of strokes relating with one another as they emerge.

I watch my brother write 災 *disaster* : 川 *rivers* above, 火 *fire* below. He is meticulous and writes neatly. I notice that he writes 火 in the wrong stroke order. In his consistency, he repeats the mistake every time. Seeing the finished word on the page, you might not notice the mistake. Does the stroke order matter if we can ultimately read the word?

To write in the correct stroke order you pay attention to process. Copying the word is not simply going through the motions but ingraining the *how*. ‘Correct’, in this sense, is an awareness of *how*.

The stroke order may not be immediately visible on the page, but the process is inseparable from the output. No erasing, no fixing, no going back. As you copy, correct stroke order is not the only lesson. In this layering of experience, you learn that attending to process means knowing how to roll with it. You learn flexibility through rigour.

One of my dad’s karate training buddies described it like this: when you are receiving critical feedback from the *sensei*,¹¹ it’s like looking at a car motor together — everyone is focused on how things are working. Rather than aesthetic judgement, such critique is a way of noticing, reflecting and refining the inquiry through movement: how it feels. Such feeling is not emotional. Critical feedback involves self, without being self-involved. It is directed towards doing things with ease: self opens to this process by learning plasticity. “When self is too strong it breaks.”¹⁰ Corrections are not punitive, but a gradual way of prompting small, integral changes. This is how the self transforms, maintaining agility and resilience. Correcting does not categorise right from wrong, but in focusing on process, opens something beyond correct-ness.

Of learning calligraphy, Yuehping Yen writes: “Being disciplined is not an end in itself, or perhaps the notion of discipline should be expanded.”¹²

Often, my teacher explains the mechanics of a movement as if concerned that I will get bored by repeating them in silence. In turn, I explain that I have learned to not get bored with repetition. I can wait for the practising to explain itself. I have grown familiar with the long arc: how repeating gives you time to understand what repetition opens up.

Because our elementary school was located in Chinatown, once a week, we were separated from the non-Chinese students for ‘heritage class’. We were given sheets of paper with square grids instead of lines, copying out each word from our vocabulary lesson dozens of times. For each word: you see, you speak, and you memorise. I resented copying out words, it ran counter to everything that was rewarded in the ‘normal’ (Canadian) classroom where opinions and creative expression garnered success. These strategies did not work in Chinese class; you either memorised the words or not. I did not regard the gridded sheets, filled with row after row of seemingly identical words, as I would a story or a drawing. Once completed, I did not think to look at them again. I did not know what else they could tell me. I did not see how these grids of words could show a self in transformation.

My grandpa sits at the kitchen table and just writes. He surrounds himself with stacks of scrap paper. It never occurred to me that he needed to practise writing, since Chinese was the only language he knew. His desire to practise was not geared towards an eventuality, but simply to keep playing.

Old men push buggies with large brushes and pails of water, strolling around to find a spot of pavement in a Beijing park. They write in water. Wet strokes darken the paving stones only to fade into mottled marks, drying in the sunlight. People watch and banter, often in critique of each other's writing, while the words evaporate steadily. 'Evanescent calligraphy' is a form of 養生 *nourishing life*: there is only process, no product (Yen, 2005).

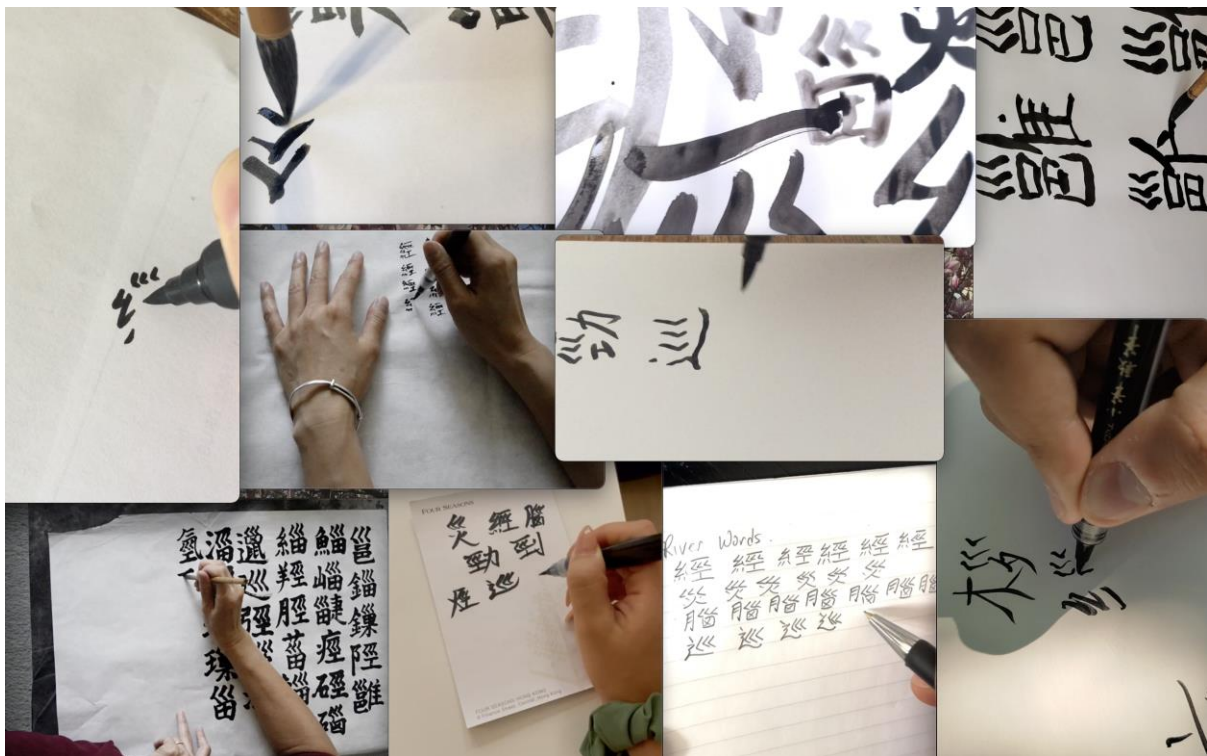


Figure 2. Video Still from Multi-Media Exhibition *Playing the Mountain* (2022), with Contributions from Friends and Family Members Writing Words with the Radical “ㄩ”.

There is no substitute for the experience of repeating.

I can tell that my teacher can tell if I am just going through the motions. Practising the piano, practising martial arts, the fluency goes beyond re-production — the teacher can tell when the student can tell, when they have found the rhythm. Mum says that after practising horizontal brushstrokes over and over again, the Chinese painting master comes to check on everyone's work. He silently marks his approval of certain lines with a tiny red dot. He does not need to explain why they are good. Having drawn enough of them, you can feel it.

We roll our eyes at ‘*The Matrix* jack’ (Warner Bros, 1999) — a cinematic fantasy of skills training, whereby the hero can plug his cortex into a database of capabilities, hit ‘download’, and instantly claim “I know kung-fu.” This trope portrays body-as-machine, as if learning were acquiring an upgrade. In the time it takes to download, learning is depicted as emancipated from the unglamorous process of ingraining knowledge.

Learning Taijiquan is not plotted on a timeline with prescribed outcomes; it is not a system with levels or achievements. In the process, there are no shortcuts. You cannot choose to learn faster. Without a standard formula, Mum says practising is “how you repeat the question of *how* and *why*.” When you keep practising, experience thickens. Like sediment gathering, this cannot be rushed. Sediment is not accumulated like informational knowledge objects.

Su-Feh tells me that sometimes their lessons were just walking around in the *bagua* circle for hours, or reading martial arts treatises, or helping their *sifu* translate things into English. The other students expected outcomes. Unfamiliar with such oblique pedagogy, would complain, “I don’t feel like I’m learning anything.” She reflects that fifty bucks for a lesson is a small price to pay to access the Sifu’s experience. Teaching comes from personal experience; learning cannot consume this. The student has a responsibility to receive teachings with respect. This does not take a declarative form: you carry the teachings by ingraining them in how you do things.

My teacher says he learns from teachers who also have teachers.

A teacher can take any form. Much of Taijiquan is practised alone; teachers are guides, but the continuity comes from learning by yourself, maintaining an enduring curiosity and not just going through the motions. Sustaining the practise is not a given, it is not easy.

My teacher says most students give up learning Taijiquan because it takes too long to mark ‘progress’ and they get distracted. Without prescribed outcomes and standardised curricula, inquiry is a slow burn. It requires tenacity. The challenge is in continuing to find your edges, to realise what you do not know.

Taijiquan is not a spectator sport — 打 playing cannot be consumed by an audience. This play invites a different sort of reading: an internal playing along, echoing as an inner feeling based on something you yourself have experienced. Playing along allows a shared recognition of process: to share in the performing, rather than consuming a performance. Richard Sennett has described prehension as an ingrained knowledge whereby “the body is ready to hold before it knows.”¹⁵ Such a

knowing is not a “fit-for-purpose” anticipation that presumes, but opens a resonant empathy. Watching one another practise becomes a way of participating in each other’s process: to recognise you without needing to identify with you. We recognise each other by how we do things. Like the experience of teacher and student “looking at a motor together”, sharing the desire to figure out how to do things well.

Through practise, the *hows* and *whys* fold into each other, a rhythm of making sense. Learning has to start from somewhere, but that somewhere is also where it is not. Learning happens in the midst, the *hows and whys* are not linear: they make sense by following and leading, engendering each other. Through repetition the process unfolds: layering, gathering, forgetting, ingraining, sinking in. Dad recalls Bruce Lee saying that when you are a beginner, a punch is just a punch, but the more you train, the more you learn how much is going on in that punch. “Even then, a master knows that a punch is still a punch.”

We spend an hour on dots. She explains the grid, the ratio, the balance, the tilt, the distribution, and the compensation. She can tell that I can tell that while these aspects can be explained, the dot is a feeling that only comes from practising. A dot itself means nothing, but how you write a dot says something else. She suggests that I get a softer pencil to see the nuances of weight. After a full page of repetitions, I can feel how it should look. How the last curve is not a mark you impress, but how you lift from the page.

We talk about swimming — finding ease in an economy of strokes.

Dad says: “Doing, feeling, making adjustments, understanding why.”

References

- [1] Pleco translation dictionary app, entry for ‘打’ *da*.
- [2] Wang, R. R. (2012) *Yinyang: The Way of Heaven and Earth in Chinese Thought and Culture*. New York, USA: Cambridge University Press. Wang quoting Zhang Zailin. (184)
- [3] Zhuangzi (莊子). Warring States period, 350-250 BCE. Retrieved from: <https://ctext.org/zhuangzi/> The story of Cook Ding is from *Zhuangzi*: “Mastery of Nourishing Life” (養生主), Section 2. 庖丁為文惠君解牛，手之所觸，肩之所倚，足之所履，膝之所踣，砉然騞然，奏刀騞然，莫不中音。合於《桑林》之舞，乃中《經首》之會。文惠君曰：「譔！善哉！技蓋至此乎？」庖丁釋刀對曰：「臣之所好者道也，進乎技矣。始臣之解牛之時，所見无非牛者。三年之後，未嘗見全牛也。方今之時，臣以神遇，而不以目視，官知止而神欲行。依乎天理，批大郤，導大窾，因其固然。技經肯綮之未嘗，而況大軋乎！良庖歲更刀，割也；族庖月更刀，折也。今臣之刀十九年矣，所解數千牛矣，而刀刃若新發於硎。彼節者有間，而刀刃者无厚，以无厚入有間，恢恢乎其

於遊刃必有餘地矣，是以十九年而刀刃若新發於硎。雖然，每至於族，吾見其難為，怵然為戒，視為止，行為遲。動刀甚微，謦然已解，如土委地。提刀而立，為之四顧，為之躊躇滿志，善刀而藏之。」文惠君曰：「善哉！吾聞庖丁之言，得養生焉。」

- [4] Harney, Stefano and Fred Moten. (2013) *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study*. New York, USA: Minor Compositions. Harney and Moten write: “If you truly understood what study is, you would know that it is this sort of sociality. That’s all that it is.” (111 - 112)
- [5] Fung Yu-Lan. (1958) *A Short History of Chinese Philosophy*. New York, USA: The Macmillan Company. Fung describes Chan (zen) enlightenment in terms of “attainment of non-attainment” wherein dao is followed in ordinary things, without attachment (262-265). Fung gives historical context to the influence of Indian Buddhism in China in Chapter 21: “The Foundation of Chinese Buddhism” (241-254), and the intermingling of dao (as philosophy) with Buddhism, the foundation for zen Buddhism, in Chapter 22: “Ch’anism: The Philosophy of Silence” (255-265)
- [6] Ukeles, M.L. (1969) *MANIFESTO FOR MAINTENANCE ART, 1969!* [Artwork]
- [7] Hui, Y. (2016/2019). *The Question Concerning Technology in China: An Essay in Cosmotronics*. Falmouth, UK: Urbanomic.
- Hui deploys the term *cosmotronics*, which “provides us with a conceptual tool with which to overcome the conventional opposition between technics and nature, and to understand the task of philosophy as that of seeking and affirming the organic unity of the two.” (19-20)
See also Hui, Y. (2021) *Art and Cosmotronics*. Minneapolis: e-flux. Hui suggests that Chinese cosmotronics concerns the unification of 道 dao and 器 qi: *the way and the vessel*. “The moral and cosmic inform each other and coalesce in technical activities.” (190)
- [8] Wang, R. R. (2012) *Yinyang: The Way of Heaven and Earth in Chinese Thought and Culture*. New York, USA: Cambridge University Press. (224)
- [9] Simpson, L. B. (2017) *As We Have Always Done: Indigenous Freedom through Radical Resistance*. Minneapolis, USA: University of Minnesota Press. (165)
- [10] Seok, B. (2015, March) “Moral Psychology of Shame in Early Confucian Philosophy,” *Frontiers of Philosophy in China*. pp. 21-57. Retrieved at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44156929>.
- Seok writes of shame as a form of self-reflection, in Confucian self-cultivation, which understands the self as relational and processual: “Fluid and expandable, rather than a fixed or stable entity, self is a process of continuous cultivation and improvement.” (46)
- [11] 先生 *sensei*: Japanese martial arts honorific term for a skilled master or teacher. In Chinese, 師傅 *sifu* / *shifu* is the equivalent term of respectful address.
- [12] Yen, Y. (2005) *Calligraphy and Power in Contemporary Chinese Society*. London, UK: RoutledgeCurzon. (128)
- [13] (ibid., 112) Also known as 地書 ground writing, this activity is popular with seniors frequenting China’s city squares and parks. Yen writes that “evanescent calligraphy” does not focus on creative expression, but, like Chinese herbal medicine, is a continuous practice “to strengthen and invigorate the body (jianshen) and relax the mind (yishen).”

- [14] Silver, J. & Wachowski, L. and L., Directors. (1999) *The Matrix* [Motion Picture] USA: Warner Brothers.

In this scene from the film *The Matrix*, the protagonist, Neo, is lying on a makeshift surgical chair, while his brain is connected to a computer. The hacker character inserts various disks into the computer from which numerous combat programs are downloaded into Neo's brain, as he lies twitching with his eyes squeezed closed. At the culmination of this scene, which lasts 1 minute and 20 seconds, Neo opens his eyes and says "I know kung-fu."

- [15] Sennett, R. *The Craftsman*. London: Penguin Books, 2008. (151)

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Author's Bio

Playing with artistic strategies, *Serena Lee* traces connections between aesthetics and practices of circulating energy as knowledge production, in the sense of *making sense*. Through expanded cinema, performance, place-making, music, and writing, Serena's artistic research often unfolds through collaborative processes at varying scales. Serena holds an MFA from the Piet Zwart Institute in Rotterdam, and an Associate Diploma in Piano Performance from Canada's Royal Conservatory of Music. Serena was born and raised in Toronto, Canada and she is currently based in Vienna where she is a PhD-in-Practice candidate in artistic research at the Academy of Fine Arts Vienna.