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The Politics of Art in Modern Japan: The Fine Arts versus the Martial Arts

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Introduction

Understanding and accepting the values inherent to other cultures is something that—while easy to say—is, in fact, more difficult to do. Indeed, we can find problems in cross-cultural understanding behind many of the conflicts and confrontations which lead even to war. When taking up the issue of cross-cultural understanding, Japanese cultural anthropologist Tamotsu Aoki says we must first take into account the problem of “modernity.” Originating in Western Europe, concepts of modernity have influenced most cultures of the world.¹ In fact, so overwhelming has been its influence that it is sometimes described as the “cultural colonialism” of the non-Western world. One representative example of such practices can be uncovered in our concept of the fine arts. A product of modern Western European culture, the concept has long maintained a central place in European culture. Typical of cultural colonialist practices, it has wielded a striking hegemony throughout the modern world.

This paper will examine modern Japan’s acceptance of the Western concept of the fine arts within the context of cross-cultural understanding. At the beginning of the Meiji period (1868-1912), the Western concept of the fine arts was a distinctly foreign notion. The concept, however, quickly took such firm root in Japanese culture that few people consider it a foreign notion any longer. The fine arts not only takes up a central place in the culture itself, but it functions in such a way as to define other cultures outside its sphere as being Other, thereby effectively maintaining cultural homogeneity. One example of the politics of “exclusion” and “identification” is the common notion that the martial arts should not be considered as a fine art. While taken as a given today, in fact, this notion is nothing more than a viewing of the martial arts solely from the standpoint of modern Western fine arts. Under the traditional Japanese understanding of art, the martial arts are indeed considered as art. Through an examination of these issues, this paper will seek to create a bridge between cultures that view each other as Other from within the modern scheme of art and not-art.

1. Fine Arts as Foreign Culture

In taking up the topic of art as an issue of cross-cultural understanding, we must first start off by examining the state of affairs at what is the beginning of Japan’s modern period, the Meiji period. The Japanese word for art is *geijutsu*. The term is a translation of the Western word for the “fine arts”, as already pointed out.² In the very early stages, however, the “fine arts” were translated into Japanese as *bijutsu*—not *geijutsu*. This changed over time, and in current times, *bijutsu* is a word used to signify the plastic arts, such as painting and sculpture. In earlier times, however—namely at the beginning of

Japan's modern period, *bijutsu* was a word used as a comprehensive genus term signifying all art forms, including music, drama, dance, etc. Hence, during the early Meiji period, music was included as *bijutsu*. It was during the period at the turn of the 19th century that the term *geijutsu* replaced the term *bijutsu* as the comprehensive genus term and the contemporary Japanese usage of *geijutsu* (fine arts) and *bijutsu* (plastic arts) took root.³

Although its contemporary usage only dates back to the Meiji period, the Japanese word *geijutsu* existed prior to the Meiji Period. According to art historian Doshin Sato, the original meaning of the term was quite different from that of today. Sato explains that the Japanese term *geijutsu* came from the ancient Chinese concept of the "six arts," known in Japanese as the "six *gei*." The "six arts" of ancient China were known in Japan as *rei* (rites); *gaku* (music); *sha* (archery) *gyo* (horse riding); *sho* (calligraphy); and *su* (mathematics). Derived from this ancient Chinese concept, in its original form the Japanese term *geijutsu* encompassed not only the literary arts, but math and music as well as the martial arts.⁴ As the Western concept of the fine arts took root in Japan and became generally used, the original Japanese meaning of the word— that is, the Japanese concept of *geijutsu* prior to the Meiji Period— soon became all but forgotten. Indeed, the term *geijutsu* as it is used today is but a translation of the Western term for fine arts. In that sense, *geijutsu* was a product of foreign culture for Japanese people.

As the concept of Western modern fine arts was a product of the Western modern period which came about under specific circumstances, it can never be considered universal.⁵ And yet, this Western concept of fine arts is considered by most people today to be precisely that: a universal concept that exists as part of a shared world culture. The notion of high culture is a typical example of that. Also, because of its image of cultural universality, the fine arts are often ascribed a value that transcends cultures and languages. However, this type of cultural universality, whereby concepts and notions exist in a vacuum transcending cultures and languages, is quite simply not a reality; and indeed, when examining the concept of the fine arts within the context of cross-cultural understanding, we find that various interpretations of the meaning of the fine arts, in fact, already exist.

Some scholars, for example, see not just the word but the entire concept as being something foreign to Japan. As a Japanese scholar of aesthetics Masao Yamamoto puts it, "The systematic theory behind the fine arts produced during the Meiji period was something itself which had previously not existed in Japan"⁶ In other words, not only were the Western fine arts culturally new to Japan, but the fact that there was a systematic theory behind them was also a culturally foreign reality. The systematic theory is that of aesthetics. In the West, aesthetics has existed not only as the theoretical framework supporting the creation of the fine arts but has functioned to help shape the cultural physiognomy itself. Yamamoto said the following, "In general, in the East academic and intellectual areas were more practical than those in the West. In the East, various intellectual subject areas were not segmented into fields that theoretically stood on their own." Yamamoto further posited that the Japanese aesthetic was "completely opposite to that of the modern Western concept which is grounded fundamentally in the systematic theory of aesthetics which contains its own set of inherent and independent values."⁷

Interestingly, Yamamoto's approach coincides with the words of philosopher Yasuo Yuasa concerning what he termed, "Eastern mind-body theory." According to Yuasa, the Western philosophical tradition is founded on the dualist claim that there exists a separation between mind and body, and then, based on this claim, advances various means for overcoming the claim. Yuasa made the point that, while Western mind-body dualism has its roots in Aristotle's metaphysics and Christian theology; in contrast, the Eastern tradition was never grounded on such a form of metaphysics.⁸ To illustrate his point, he takes up the work Noh drama theorist and aesthetician Zeami (1363-1443?). Zeami's work *Fushikaden* was not a work of aesthetic theory in the Western sense, but functioned more along the lines of a textbook for practical training in the arts.

In the traditional understanding of the Japanese arts (*geijutsu*), what is important is the process of creation rather than that of the end product. "The observing of art created by other people has always been viewed as secondary because it was the enjoyment of the practice of the arts (*yugei*) as well as the artistic path (*geido*) which was seen as significant."⁹ In this scheme, there was no clear distinction made between the act of creation—the work created—and the practice of appreciating art. This is quite different from the Western conception of the fine arts, which is based on the aesthetic scheme whereby a work is viewed as an object to be observed, contemplated and theorized about. In the traditional Japanese arts, by contrast, whether we are talking about tea ceremony, flower arrangement or calligraphy, it is the self-practice of those arts that is fundamentally at issue. Indeed, the issue calls to mind the notion of *pensée sauvage*.

Keeping in mind the unique relationship that the academic field of aesthetics has had with the Western fine arts in maintaining the fine arts' centrality within culture; we can then readily grasp the significant role that the academic pursuits of "intellectuality" and "spirituality" have also played. This is in spite of the fact that attributing such characteristics to the fine arts may be dubious at best. As an exercise to both help clarify this problem and to relativize the generally held image of the fine arts as being intelligent and/or spiritual, I shall next turn my attention toward examining the fine arts in terms of "violence," a concept usually placed diametrically opposite to that of intelligence and spirituality.

Hideharu Matsumiya critically describes the Western concept of the museum in the following way, "The museum functions to try and absorb the entire world, and in its attempt to possess the contents of the world, it is in concept dangerously dominating. In particular, the museum is a European ideology that attempts to draw in the entire world into what can be called a Eurocentric 'world system.'"¹⁰ Finally, Matsumiya urges us to keep in mind that "the museum is not a static thing as people generally believe. This common concept of museum as a place in which educational, cultural and academic materials are housed to meet people's intellectual and spiritual needs, as well as promise the enjoyment of aesthetic satisfaction, is in reality an ideology that the concept of 'museum' itself has created."¹¹ Matsumiya's description of the concept of museum can be equally applied to that of the fine arts, and in our task to re-examine the fine arts in terms of cultural violence, this dominating aspect becomes apparent. In fact, most of the world's great collections of art which are housed in museums today have a dark history of war, invasion, looting and exploitation. In this way, the history of museum not only is associated with an ideological cultural dominance but can be linked with physical force and oppression as well.¹²

Concerning the practices of cultural violence brought about by the combination of art and academics, aesthetician, Shigemi Inaga, pointed out what he called the problem of the history of the fine arts. Inaga, in his examination of Japanese *ukiyo*e painter Katsushika Hokusai's phenomenal fame in Europe during the latter part of the 19th century, took issue with the way, while highly evaluated among French-speaking countries; Hokusai was given a much lower evaluation and status among Anglo-Saxon scholars. Terming this the "battle of interpretation," Inaga points to what he sees as an underlying current of dominance that exists within the academic field of art history. Inaga questions, "Why are only certain works classified as being fine art?" "Who are those artists that should be treated as such? And what are the reasons behind these evaluations?" These questions which seek to clarify the borders and criteria of validity that functions within the field of art history has tended to be almost completely ignored as something outside (or a priori to) the field. Inaga finally argues that without such practices of domination the discipline of art history as we know it today could not have been established as such.¹³

The practice of "domination" we find at work in the academic field of art history, rather than being something inherent to the field itself, is rather an inevitable byproduct of the academic practices of the field, such as the classifying, categorizing, analyzing and examination of human actions and social realities. The question, "What is art?" is one that never would have become necessary to ask as long as one remained within the context of such artistic forms as the practice of calligraphy(*sho*), painting(*ga*), music(*ongaku*) and dance(*mai*). The question only became necessary when the systematic theory of European aesthetics was embraced. In the same way that Inaga sought to shed light on the way in which Western art history functions to not only define the fine arts, but also to exclude those cultural products outside its field, we should also bear in mind that the question of "What is art?" results in the inevitable "art versus non-art" dichotomy. Moreover, this art/non-art dichotomy then functions as the assumed starting point for the study of art itself.

As I have already pointed out elsewhere,¹⁴ the practice of academic dominance and violence can be also found in Hans Sedlmayr's discussion on *Kunst – Nichtkunst*. However, I want to make the following point, fully aware that out of proper context it may be misunderstood. My aim here is not that we, as academics, need to rid our science of any and all forms of cultural violence, but rather to suggest that such a task is in reality impossible. For, agreeing with Inaga, I believe the true task at hand is to outline the topography that has created, solidified and, indeed, amplified the Western concept of the fine arts. In doing so, we must also take into account the background dynamics, and this needs to include an examination of the politics of the arts.

2. Martial Arts as Excluded from the Fine Arts

We will next turn our attention to examining art from an opposite approach. The European concept of the fine arts, in order to maintain its central authority within the culture, inevitably defines the cultural products of other culture as being culturally Other and therefore "not art."

Taking a look at figure-1 from Doshin Sato's book, *Meiji kokka to kindai bijutsu (The Meiji State and Japanese Modern Art.)*, we can more easily grasp the way in which the pre-modern Japanese term for the arts (*geijutsu*) was transformed into the modern term for the fine arts by way of the term *bijutsu* (which is the modern Japanese term for the

plastic arts). In addition to the plastic arts, many other artistic practices were included in the word art. For example, theatre, the martial arts, crafts as well as gardening were all considered *geijutsu* in pre-Meiji times in Japan. In this way, we can say that the original Japanese term had a richer meaning than the modern, Western-derived term. In addition, we can say that these various artistic practices were viewed as excluded from the concept of the fine arts from within the European context. In order to consider this point further, I now will take up the subject of the martial arts.

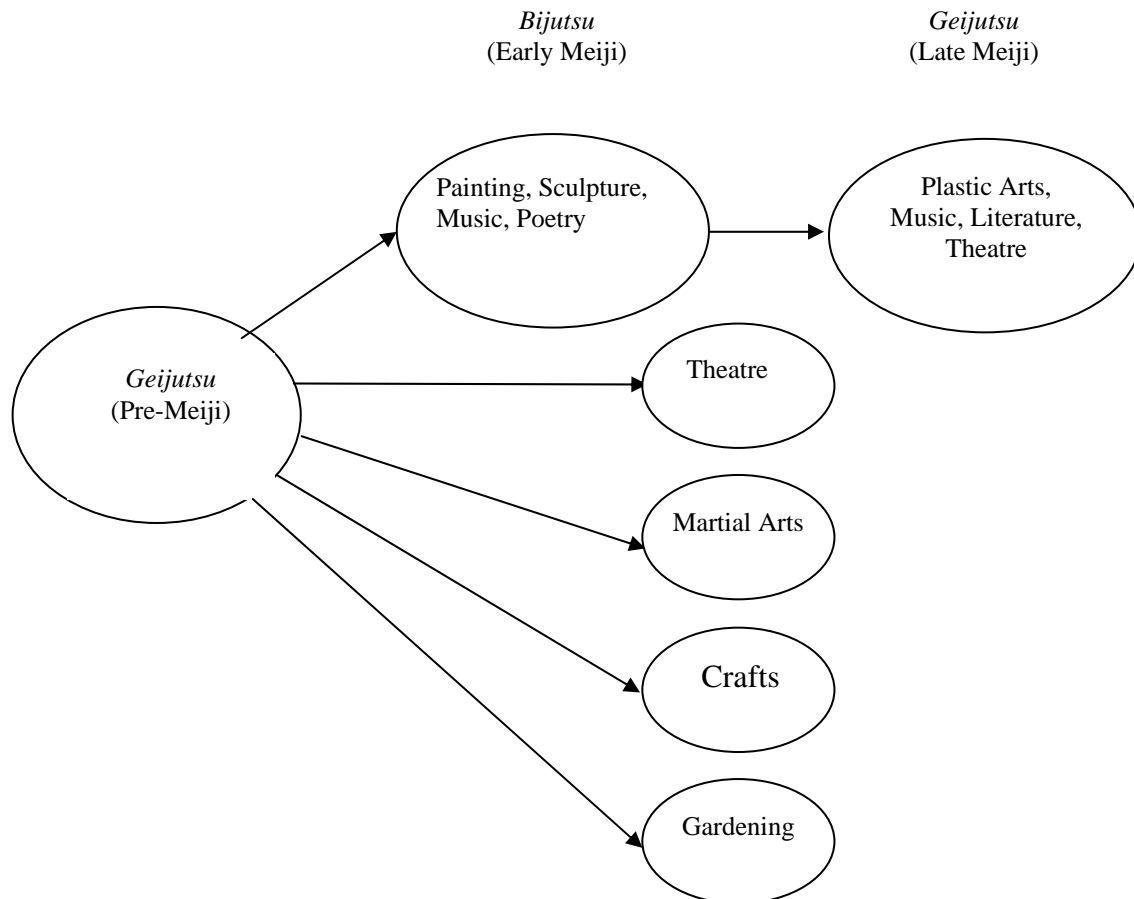


Figure 1. Japanese concepts of *geijutsu* and *bijutsu*
(From Doshin Sato. *The Meiji State and Japanese Modern Art*. 1999.)

The martial arts were viewed as one of the main three sub-categories of art in early modern times in Japan. Established during the Kamakura Period (1192-1333), the rise of the martial arts occurred as part of the ruling-warrior (or *samurai*) culture of the times. The martial arts were held in contrast to the aristocratic pastimes of *gagaku* court music, the ancient aristocratic ball game of *kemari* and the Noh Theater; as well as held in contrast to the popular arts of the common people, including *kabuki*, *yoruri* and street performances. Prior to the beginning of the 17th century, under the influence of China, the martial arts consisted of the “way of the bow and horse” (art of *shagyo* and way of *kyuba*) and artillery. In these times when swords and arrows were the weapons for warfare and killing, it quite simply wasn’t possible to come up with an absolute method. Therefore a technical form (or *kata*) was not possible as long as the ultimate aim was killing. It was only when a method for evaluating fighting strength that didn’t involve death was

conceived that the martial arts of swordsmanship and spearmanship came into existence.¹⁵

If we take the following definition that art is the act of creation as well as re-creation of cultural values via the human body, such as dancing, acting, drawing, smell, tasting, talking and play¹⁶; then a technique which has the aim of killing or harming another human being does not fall within the definition, and therefore cannot be considered art. For the martial arts to be taken as an art form, this physically violent aspect of the technique must be completely removed before we can term it an art form. Contrary to the fine arts, whose inherent violence exists quietly in the background, the martial arts have an overt physical violence that must be stripped away from the practice before it can be viewed as art.

As pointed out above, *bijutsu* was a translation of a Western term. It was coined during the early Meiji period around the time when Japan participated in the 1873 World Exposition held in Vienna.¹⁷ One of the first times we see the term used in Japanese is from this translation of the World Exposition Exhibit Rules, "In Western countries, music, drawing, sculpture, and poetry are referred to as art(*bijutsu*)."¹⁸ We also see the term used in Meiji period philosopher Nishi Amane's Lecture for the Emperor, given in 1877, titled "Aesthetics," in which he advocated the following: "In the West, the modern concept of art includes, in addition to painting, sculpture, carving and crafts, the art of poetry, prose, and music. In China, calligraphy is also categorized in a similar way as art. I believe that because *bugaku* (traditional Japanese court music accompanied by dancing) and theater also have aesthetics as their guiding principle that they too ought to be included as art."¹⁹ What is noteworthy here is that already by the early Meiji period a definition of the fine arts was being articulated in which the martial arts were no longer being categorized as art. Therefore, we see the martial arts being viewed as Other from within this context of the Western fine arts.

As the fine arts became institutionalized into the various genres of the plastic arts, music, literature, drama, and cinema, what happened to the martial arts? In his book, *Budo no tanjo (The Birth of the Martial Arts)*, scholar Shun Inoue explains that it was during the mid-Meiji period that the martial arts were modernized into the practice we know today of *budo*. Prior to this, the Edo period practice, which had been considered an art form during that time, had gone into decline by the beginning of Meiji period and was something performed in public as entertainment by the now disenfranchised *samurai* class. In the following period, the martial arts were modernized being transformed into the modern invention of *budo*.²⁰ In other words, today's practice of *budo* is not a relic of Japan's ancient traditional culture but rather is a product of modern Japan. As Inoue pointed out, it was Jigoro Kano, the founder of Judo, who played the most significant role in the birth of the *budo*.

There have been many studies done on the life and work of Jigoro Kano which show him to be a believer in Western science, a rationalist and a pragmatist through and through. Kano was also both industrious and an optimistic liberal.²¹ Of particular interest is a speech by Jigoro Kano titled "The Contribution of Judo to Education," which was given in English at the University of Southern California (USC) in Los Angeles on the occasion of 11th Olympiad, 1932.²²

In this speech, Kano attempted to explain to the American people what Judo is. He started off in his speech by briefly explaining that Judo had originated from the much

older martial art of *Jujutsu*. He then referred to his own school of martial arts, the Kodokan. Founded in 1882, the Kodokan was a school to teach a new form of martial arts called Judo. Discussing the meaning of the Japanese words, *ju* (gentleness and flexibility), *jutsu* (technique and practice), *do* (way), Kano pointed out that Judo is "an art or practice of gentleness;" in other words, a practice of "giving way" to win final victory. For Kano, this "giving way" or physical concession, was not a spiritual or psychological matter but rather was concerned with the physical skill that one was able to deflect their opponent through ducking or by throwing them off balance. What Kano was really aiming to perfect was the economy of physical energy.

However, Judo is not a practice solely concerned with effecting "fending off" of one's opponent as the name implies, but rather is based on practical offence as well. What Kano truly brought out through the practice of Judo was the principle of the maximum-efficient use of mind and body. In his lecture, he demonstrated this principle using one of his students. Judo had already become well-known throughout the world by this time, so this lecture and demonstration by the father of Judo and the founder of the famous Kodokan must have made a great impression on the audience in California.

The latter part of Kano's speech was devoted to the possibility of applying the above principle of maximum-efficient use of mind and body to education. Kano, by that time, had embraced the Meiji period concept, imported from the West, of a three-tiered education composed of the intellectual, moral and physical. Kano thought that one should begin with proper physical education since he felt that proper physical education will result in strengthening the human body to become both more healthy and useful. Kano, however, sought to expand this physical training to that of intellectual education and moral education through the application of the principles of Judo to such areas as human diet, clothing, housing, social interaction and work.

Kano defined the intellectual aspects of Judo in the following way: for free-style practice (*randori*), a trainee must be earnest, sincere, thoughtful, cautious and deliberate in all his dealings, and at the same time one is trained for quick decision and prompt action. Therefore the ability of imagination, logical thinking and judgment is also realized. The principle demands that even in terms of intellectual growth from books, trainees must ensure that they are not foolishly expending their energy.

Kano's speech next turned to address the moral aspect of Judo training. Less concerned with rules, etiquette or fair play, again Kano emphasized the efficient utilization of one's energy. For example, getting angry over small matters was cautioned against as the needless expending of energy. Judo would teach students that such actions were against the principles of maximum-effect in order to help them avoid disappointment and apathy. Kano believed that Judo had the ability to give trainees hope and help lead them to a brighter future. Furthermore, Kano also defined its emotional and aesthetic aspects. Through Judo, practitioners derive pleasure from assuming graceful attitudes and the act of performing graceful movements. Trainees are also derive pleasure from the seeing such actions in their opponents. To answer the question, what is Judo? Kano explains that Judo was a practice dedicated to the cultivation and education of a spirit that respects and upholds the principles of maximum-effect and mutual benefit.

The "spirit of Judo," as contained in the principles laid out by Jigoro Kano and which we can refer to here as "judo-ism," may at first glance seem very far from our present-day image of the practice of Judo. To understand how this gap occurred, we turn again to the

work of Shun Inoue. *Budo*, explains Inoue, while it came into existence during the Meiji period as hybrid culture based on the slogan of the time of "Japanese spirit and Western learning" soon lost its "Western learning" component. Kano's discussion of *budo* as having both continuity and discontinuity to tradition disappeared, and only continuity to tradition was emphasized. *Budo* became quickly identified as a unique ethnic culture embodying the traditional Japanese spirit. It was from this standpoint *budo* was used as part of fascist and militaristic ideology as a remedy against Western culture.²³

As Inoue pointed out, the image created around this "reinvention" of the tradition was to wield a strong influence on our understanding of *budo*. That is to say that the martial arts, which were traditionally viewed as art in Japan, came to be viewed as Other with the arrival of the Western concept of the fine arts. This conflict resulted in the modern creation of *budo* with its images of militarism and Right-Wing philosophy. Although these popular associations in Japan of *budo* with such images took hold mainly in the years after World War II, still even a cursory reading of Jigoro Kano's modern rationalism of Judo would show that the images are only part of the picture.

3. A bridge between the Foreign Cultures

In the pages above, we have examined the way in which the fine arts originated as a product of the Western cultural tradition. We then proceeded to contrast this to the way in which the martial arts were viewed as Other from within the context of the fine arts. Although the martial arts seem wholly unrelated to the fine arts, in fact both originated out of the same historical circumstances in modern Japanese history. If we take the above as true, this understanding can serve as a bridge in the practice of cross-cultural understanding. Though the possibilities are varied²⁴, in the following I want to explore the Feldenkrais method, which has its roots in Judo, as well as Richard Shusterman's philosophy of the art of living.²⁵

In his books *Practicing Philosophy* (1997) and *Pragmatic Aesthetics (2nd Edition; 2000)*²⁶, Shusterman put forth his notion of "somaesthetics." Shusterman divides somaesthetics into three fundamental dimensions: the analytic, pragmatic and practical. Analytic somaesthetics is a theoretical enterprise which encompasses the philosophical, historical and sociological examination of our bodily experience. This is understood as a "theory of body." The aesthetic examination of our cultural practices (employing "body" as a keyword) would fall within this dimension. In addition, Shusterman also outlined the pragmatic and practical dimensions of the discipline. The latter two dimensions of somaesthetics are related to actual practices aimed at somatic self-improvement. This somatic meliorism is based on his own personal experiences as a practitioner of the Feldenkrais Method.

Taking a radical look back on the basic principles of philosophy, Shusterman found a form of philosophy that stood as an "art of living." According to Shusterman, if philosophy is meant to contribute to the human pursuit of happiness and the good life as it was in times past, then somaesthetics' understanding of the body as a place and medium of pleasure ought to be given more attention from the philosophical standpoint. In such a case, our understanding of art would take on a much broader scope than that of the fine arts and would have more in common with the original Japanese understanding of art, *geijutsu*. In such a "philosophy of the art of living," the martial arts would be included under the definition of art.²⁷

Shusterman says:

We might have a habitual reaction of anxiety with respect to ... foreigners of a certain race ..., a reaction that repeatedly emerges against our conscious rational will and that leads us to poor conduct, such as instinctively refusing attention to any foreigner ... But we can do little to reform this habit of bad feeling and the undesired misconduct that it brings by simply urging the rational will to assert itself more strongly, since the habitual bad feeling and conduct rest on habitual somatic reactions that lie beneath ordinary rational awareness and beyond mere rational control. Only by bringing these disturbing somatic sensations into clear focus through heightened somaesthetic awareness can we ever hope to isolate them sufficiently in consciousness so as to control them and prevent them from issuing in misconduct.²⁸

Overcoming such an anxiety toward foreigners as described above is nothing more than an expression of the problem of cross-cultural understanding. In the case of understanding the connection between the fine arts as a product of Western culture and the way in which those products of foreign cultures are viewed as Other from within the context of the fine arts, we first need to garner the imagination necessary for transcending the restrictions of these concepts. Shusterman's project of somaesthetics is a pragmatic approach that aims to focus on the basic form of things and from that standpoint to re-examine the various practical institutional systems associated with it. The imagination that such a project demands as well as cultivates will open up the possibility for dialogue between concepts concerning the fine arts and the martial arts beyond differences of their appearances. The anticipation of such a possibility—as shown in this paper—will serve as a bridge connecting the different cultures of the Western fine arts and the Eastern martial arts.

As an example, the trend we are seeing the contemporary dancers paying particular attention to the martial arts is one indication that the possibility of dialogue is being realized. We hear such comments as, "the martial arts taught me how to transfer my body weight, and taking up martial arts practice has given me a tremendous amount of energy. The training I have received in martial arts has provided me with increased ability for judgment that I gained through sparring practice that has led me to understand why I dance;" or "What is important is to truly feel myself; to begin listening to my body when stretching, and in terms of going into my own world, I find that martial arts are very similar to dancing." Indeed, martial artist Yoshinori Kono's view that he sees the essence of the martial arts as nothing more than an exploration into "the question of human existence" is the key to gaining an insight into the martial arts relationship to dance.²⁹

Concluding Remarks

Much time has passed since cultural exchanges between East and West first began. In the art world of today, Eurocentricism is condemned and the upholding of cultural relativism has become a matter of course. However, the issues that remain surrounding the problem of art versus non-art hint at the way in which Western concepts that underlie the fine arts unconsciously influence—and dominate—the thoughts and work of aestheticians even today. As Wolfgang Iser pointed out, the academic market does not have any real demand for research being done in aesthetics outside the realm of the fine arts, and therefore most philosophers working in this field have little desire to pursue such work.³⁰ Even more revolutionary academics that are sensitive to this European-oriented academic map and who do attempt to bring forth alternative ideas from Asia in their work do not seem conscious of the way in which they too are leaning heavily on the Western concept of the fine arts. It therefore remains the state of affairs that even the boldest aestheticians

rarely go beyond the world of the fine arts. My main aim in this paper has been to suggest a new starting point with which academics themselves can move beyond the constraints of their own understanding. Will there come a day when we can truly see the connections between the fine arts and the martial arts? I believe that indeed aestheticians are being called upon today to use their imaginations to go beyond the boundaries that have dominated our field.

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