

The Artist as Tuning Fork: A Brief, Multi-Source Annotation on Readiness

There are of course a myriad of different ways in which poems, songs, and paintings are created. For the purposes of this project, however, it is not the differences I am concerned with, it is the similarities, particularly as regards process and concept. One particularly profound and applicable similarity, considered as such because it encompasses both process and concept, has to do with the mindset of the creator behind the creation, at, or just before, the moment(s) of creation. To term this idea, I will borrow language from Kenneth Yasuda, writing on haiku in his book, "Japanese Haiku: Its Essential Nature and History":

"...a haiku attitude is a state of readiness for an experience which can be aesthetic...I call it a state of readiness, or receptivity."

A state of readiness. This is the key phrase, and an extremely important concept to my project as a whole, because it is this state of readiness that I hope to both highlight and rely on; I suggest it is the creative root of all the endeavors to be incorporated in this venture: the musical arts, the written arts, the visual arts, and more specifically, haiku & renga, blues & jazz, brush painting & abstract expressionism.

Different artistic disciplines come with their own languages and terms; what to a haiku poet may be aesthetic receptivity to a subject can, to an ethnomusicologist, be seen as the ability to improvise; what to an ekphrastic poet may constitute becoming one with another's work may, to an abstract expressionist painter, mean becoming one with one's own work, and what to a Chinese brush painter may be termed a spontaneous piece, will be described as something "plucked from out of the sky" by a folk-blues singer. To my mind these can all be, in certain very special ways, essentially interchangeable, and

certainly inter-related, terms that at their core strive to identify and classify the same ideas: readiness and receptivity, which are in turn terms that attempt to codify an artist's state of mind, or emotional state, just before and at the moment of creation. It is this emotional state of readiness, receptivity, and openness to the experience of creation, this being-in-the-moment, this becoming-one-with, this improvisational spontaneous spirit, this state of aesthetic resonance, which I am hoping to explore, showcase, and ultimately exploit through the enactment of this project.

To delve into some specific examples of how different fields and participants approach these ideas, consider first the following from David Evans' book "Big Road Blues: Tradition & Creativity in the Folk Blues," in which he discusses defining the blues:

"In any attempt to describe blues, we should first see what blues singers themselves have to say on the subject. If we do this, we find that they rarely define what they regard as the blues' formal characteristics. Instead they concentrate on the blues *as an emotional state*" [my italics]

And a few pages later, specifically addressing the active creation of the blues, Evans writes:

"There is evidence too that blues can be an expression of the singer's feelings at the actual time of performance."

As with Yasuda's words above, what is key to note here is a clear sense that the state of mind of the creator is very nearly, if not totally, inseparable from the creation itself; specifically, the creator is and must be completely *in the moment*, such that the creation

itself becomes an enactment of the creator's state of mind. As Kevin Young writes in the Foreword to his book "Blues Poems":

"The blues, after all, describe a state of being..."

My personal favorite examples of blues artists expressing their state of readiness are from Robert Pete Williams and Bukka White. The former claimed that songs just came to him, that he could "pluck them from out of the air," and the latter, utilizing essentially the same metaphor, used to refer to his compositions as "Sky Songs"; an album by the same name was released on Arhoolie Records. The impetus for the album's making was a desire on the part of Arhoolie's owner Chris Strachwitz to record Bukka's songs the way they *actually* were, rather than how they sounded when he was forced to stop after the required time allotment of, say, three minutes. (This convention appears to first have been driven by technological limitations, and later, the commercial constraints imposed by jukeboxes, radios, etc). The average length of the performances on "Sky Songs" was over eight minutes long, with only seven songs requiring two full LPs for the original release! Reviewing the album for the magazine *Juke Blues*, Mark Harris uses an excellent little colloquialism to detail Bukka's singular achievement:

"Bukka White's music is truly unique. His ability to improvise at the drop of a hat was exploited to the full here..."

To my mind, Bukka White's ability to improvise is of a kind with a haiku poet's readiness and receptivity; both are poised to create at the highest level of emotional and artistic purity.

A key idea that is often expressed in discussions of artistic creation, and creations, is the idea of "becoming one" with the subject of a work, or even with the work itself. In Jennifer Bosveld's book "Elastic Ekphrastic: Poets on Art/Poets on Tour through Galleries," which is about the challenges and experiences of writing poems about works of visual art, the author gives us an example of such when she answers her own rhetorically posed question, "How does one approach the art in hopes of accomplishing an ekphrastic poem in response?":

"Become physically comfortable and committed to a long period of time in front of the art. If possible sit in front of the work and attempt to become one with it."

In other words, be *receptive* to it. What is important is not so much *what* the artist is being receptive to (or even what happens as a result) as that the artist *is* receptive—to the self, to the world, to the muse, to the soul, to the subject, to the object, to art itself.

Presenting another version of this idea of the artist-in-communion is Fritz van Briessen, in his book "The Way of the Brush: Painting Techniques of China and Japan." He analyzes what is called "the spontaneous style" of traditional brush painting (*hsieh yai*, literally, "writing ideas") thusly:

"The spontaneous style does not imitate nature; it simplifies, abstracts, and concentrates. It works by suggestion and by omission....It aims to catch the mood of revelation of the scholar of Ch'an monk in communion with Nature and the Ineffable."

The mention of abstraction above begs reference to Jackson Pollock, arguably the most well-known exponent of American Abstract Expressionism. To my mind, Pollock's theories about his own work, particularly his thoughts on his "drip paintings," his most influential works, are near-perfect expositions regarding the importance of state-of-mind. His works and words created a watershed moment for modernism. He also introduces another dimension to our discussion here; with Pollock, what the artist had to be receptive to, had to be in the right state of mind about, was in fact the artist, and the artist's state of mind. I would even go so far as to say that, in many ways, Pollock's creations were an art that elevated state-of-mind and state-of-readiness to a level above either technique or subject matter. The following is taken from "Art Now: From Abstract Expressionism to Superrealism" by Edward Lucie-Smith, in which Lucie-Smith is in turn quoting from the film *Jackson Pollock*, made in 1951 by Hans Nemuth and Paul Falkenberg.

"My painting is direct. The method of painting is the natural growth out of a need. I want to express my feelings rather than to illustrate them.
Technique is just a means of arriving at a statement."

And consider this, another Pollock quote (reprinted in Lucie-Smith's book, and originally appearing in the Winter 1947-48 issue of *Possibilities I*):

"When I am in a painting (*Author's note: Take notice of Pollock's phrasing here: "When I am IN a painting..."*), I'm not aware of what I'm doing. It is only after a sort of 'get acquainted' period that I see what I have been about. I have no fears about making changes, destroying the image, etc, because the painting has a life of its own. I try to let it come through. It is only when I lose contact with the painting that the result is a mess.

Otherwise there is pure harmony, an easy give and take, and the painting comes out well."

All of which would seem to point right back to Yasuda:

"A haiku moment is a kind of aesthetic moment—a moment in which the words which created the experience and the experience itself can become one."

One of my favorite moments in the early portion of Yasuda's book comes when he offers this strikingly evocative description of an artist in the throes of readiness and creation:

"He is like a tuning fork placed before a vibrating one of the same frequency. When he contemplates the impassionate, living object he immediately realizes its quality just as the sound from the tuning forks will become audible. He is in a state of aesthetic resonance, a harmonized whole of all the meaningful experiences he has had, brought to bear upon the moment of aesthetic contemplation."

In Yasuda's telling, the artist is contemplating something in nature, but taken out of that context, this description could very easily be of Jackson Pollock above his canvas, Bukka White with a guitar beneath an open sky, or even Jennifer Bosveld in front of a Pollock.