Does contemporary printmaking possess the capability to answer Zen Koan?

How can a visual artist impress a well-informed response in the spirit of Zen Buddhism?

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Abstract

This paper explores the development of a contemporary fine art practice by responding to Zen literature. This body of artwork engages with thematic elements found in Zen Buddhist Koan through the medium of printmaking, which complements this paper. The paper examines how Zen philosophy has been integrated into the practices of visual artists, specifically abstract expressionist painters. The printmaking practice explored in parallel with this paper carries the influence of Zen literature. Therefore, the author conducted an earnest survey of Zen aesthetics and philosophy. Ekphrasis is utilised as a method to recontextualise Zen Koan. The body of artwork will delve into ekphrastic relationships in response to eminent Koan texts such as *The Gateless Gate, The Blue Cliff Record, and Dogen's The True Dharma Eye.* Traditionally, it was uncommon to create Zen paintings that illustrate Koan as a means to grasp their essence. By broadening the traditional exercise of responding to Zen Koan verbally, this body of artwork will investigate the essence of Zen Koan narratives, encouraging visual art to express what spoken language cannot convey. The outcomes of these works on paper represent the application of the Zen Koan knowledge systems within a contemporary setting. The fixed nature of producing images through printmaking presents challenges for communicating fluid themes in Zen philosophy. Calculated methods had to be adapted to foster moments of chance and intuition, thus reflecting the paradoxical nature of Koan study.

Zen Philosophy

This paper focuses on the influence of Zen Buddhism on artists during the mid-20th century and how these communities connected to the unconventional philosophies of Zen. The primary focus will be on how to interpret Zen Koan and utilise Zen aesthetics within the application of contemporary fine art and printmaking. The paradoxical nature of a Koan operates as “a psycho-linguistic puzzle that leads to the exhaustion of the ego and fosters a dynamic and dramatic insight based on the unity of self and reality, humans and nature, subject and object” (Heine, 1990, p. 360). Levine (2007) described how American artists encountered Zen ideas through the lectures of D.T. Suzuki, many of these artists adopted and applied these principles to their artistic practice. Subsequently, definitions of zen aesthetics, as they have come to be understood within the visual arts were solidified during this period of experimentation.

Visual artists and those seeking alternative paths to spiritual fulfilment found the rigidity of Western systems of knowledge inadequate. Chang (1959) describes the unusual characteristics that may provide insight into how the introduction of Zen ideas appealed to Western audiences:

> The first difficulty is the apparent ungraspability and the indefinite nature of Zen. There seems to be no organized system to follow, nor any definite philosophy to learn. Contradictions and inconsistencies abound everywhere. Although these may be explained away by the so-called illogical logic of Zen, the “slippery indefiniteness,” so frequently encountered remains to confound and puzzle one. (p. 14)

Zen in Action Through Abstract Expressionism

American painters and printmakers from the abstract expressionism and minimalist schools found elements of their practices that resonated with Zen aesthetics and philosophy. Bailey et al. (n.d.) described the influence of D.T. Suzuki bringing Zen ideas to New York artists through lectures at Columbia University. These lectures were attended by many prominent American artists such as John Cage, Ad Reinhardt, and Mark Tobey. I will focus

on how abstraction can be implemented to best represent subjects and themes in Koan literature.

Though Suzuki was not the first to bring these ideas to the West, he made an immeasurable impact through his lectures and books. Attendees of his lectures began to explore these new ideas through their art practices and professional fields.

Zen Master-Student Relationship

Monastic environments stress the importance of guidance under an experienced Zen master. Hierarchy exists in the structure of the roles in service to the development of the novice. Discourses of key Zen masters over centuries are invaluable to those wishing to pursue the path of Koan towards enlightenment (Chang, 1959, pp. 62-63). Many teachers warn of the futility of digesting book after book without a robust, sustained Zen practice. Zen in action is of the highest value. There is a particular rationale for the methodologies employed by Zen Masters. The following excerpt is found in the commentary of many Koan under different iterations. “What is the meaning of Bodhidharma's coming from the West?” (That is to say, “What is the Truth?”) The Master answered, “The cypress tree in the courtyard” (Chang, 1959, p. 12). Chang expands on the communication dynamic of the relationship between Zen master and student and how dialogues are commonly answered in a peculiar non-sequitur fashion:

> One may go even further and say that the Zen Master had no intention of answering the question; he was merely making a plain and straightforward statement of what he saw and felt at the moment the question was put. In this down-to-earth “plain feeling” in its primordial, genuine, and natural state lies the whole secret of Zen. Plain, yet marvelous, this feeling is the most cherished keystone of Zen - sometimes described as the *tang hsia i nien,* or *instantaneous thoughts* Because it *is* instantaneous, no artificiality, conceptualization, or dualistic idea could ever arise from it. In it there is no room for such things. It is only through the realization of this “instantaneous mind” that one is freed from all bondage and suffering. (Chang, 1959, p. 13)

John Cage and Zen

American composer and visual artist John Cage had a history of relying on unconventional methodologies within his practice. Cage (1978) embraced his naivety in the realm of printmaking by experimenting with new techniques for the first time under the guidance of master printmakers at Crown Point Press in San Francisco. He allowed his experience gained as a musician to inform his decision-making in creating visual art, mainly the facilitating of the element of chance. The influence of Zen Buddhism may have guided him to appreciate the privileged perspective of inexperience in new media. Cage accepted his lack of understanding in the field and embraced new techniques and resources. As shown in Figure 1, *Seven Day Diary (Not Knowing), Day One* authentically reflected his position and experience as a visual artist at that unique moment through surrendering (Cage, 1978). Additionally, there are examples of an understanding of Zen Aesthetics present in this etching. The asymmetrical focus and austere application to the scale of the plate within this composition further communicates that the subject of this work is undetermined. The composition is dominated by an empty field of paper with only a small etching plate operating as a window to Cage's naive mark-making explorations.

The Role of Beauty and Spiritual Experience

Merton (1968) spent his life as a Trappist monk and theologian who wrote about comparative religion and was influenced by Eastern philosophies and travels. Given his understanding of Western theology, he was in a unique position to interpret and experience Zen philosophies. Merton expands on the obligation of the practitioner, as well as the function of beauty through the embodiment of Zen. Merton (1968) recognised the profound role that these revelatory experiences play for the artist, and how the artist acted as a conduit for connecting with a greater world outside of themselves.

> In particular, it is the function of the beautiful to be, so to speak, an epiphany of the Absolute and formless Void which is God. It is an embodiment of the Absolute mediated through the personality of the artist, or perhaps better his "spirit" and his contemplative experience. (p. 90)

Zen Aesthetics

Western scholars have been challenged by encapsulating the philosophy of Zen to uninitiated audiences. The difficulty of defining such a complex philosophy may be due to the cross-disciplinary nature of Zen transcending aesthetics, practice, and literary style. Brinker (1987) observes how images of nature can provide rich metaphors for Zen philosophy and Buddhist doctrines. Waterways, moonlight, and seasonal transitions can become representatives of the greatest teachings:

> The first thing one notices about works of art imbued with the spirit of Zen, and about artistic skills which have blossomed into 'ways' {do) — especially the 'tea-way' (chadd) — is an elemental sense of unadorned simplicity, artlessness, objectiveness and purity; a feeling for unforced naturalness, forceful directness and a deep respect for nature. (Brinker, 1987, p. 11)

Beginning with hermeneutical considerations about the nature of where Zen art is cultivated, we find a range of environments where Zen influences creative fields. It is worth considering who was creating the works and where the finished work will be displayed. Whether the creation of Zen art was created in a secular or nonsecular environment may not be relevant. The possession of distinct qualities is what invited such a definition. There is an exchange of ideas and styles, and it is difficult to pin a linear source of the zen aesthetic:

> Thus, it came about that artists, who were by no means members of the Buddhist clergy, painted typical Zen pictures; while, on the other hand, painter-monks appropriated for their own use the artistic concepts, themes and styles of the literati and produced typical literati pictures, elegant representations of orchids, bamboos and rocks. Questions arise in our minds as we contemplate these pictures. Is this a Zen painting? Are these works in the spirit of Zen? Is this a form of Buddhist art, or are these pictures the spontaneous productions of artistically committed clerics? (Brinker, 1987, p. 11)

Key Aesthetic Principles of Zen Art

This section examines how the influence of Zen Aesthetics can be used to assist in the interpretation of visual art, but also how these principles can be implemented in the

creation of visual art forms. Hasumi (1962) outlines distinct aesthetic characteristics that make a work of art a Zen representation. Understanding visual cues can be helpful when exploring foreign ideas. Hasumi observed these key aesthetic principles inherent in Zen painting, “asymmetry {*fukinsei*), simplicity (*kanso*), austere sublimity or lofty dryness (*koko*), naturalness {*shizen*), subtle profundity or deep reserve (*yugen*), freedom from attachment {*datsuzoku*), tranquillity {*seijaku*)” (Hasumi, 1962, p. 18). Hasumi addresses the scope to which these aesthetic principles can be applied.

Levine (2017) considered this oversimplification problematic, highlighting the limitations of reducing such complex ideas to bullet points. Contemporary art historians like Gregory Levine identify important shortcomings of packaging Zen concepts during the Zen boom in the mid-20th century. Nevertheless, it is helpful to have key principles that can be used to describe a particular school of philosophy for introductory purposes. Zen artwork often refuses to present qualities that Western students can conveniently classify by using their usual methods. However, I suspect this unconventional nature of Zen is what students may find so alluring during the initial encounters. Hasumi outlines a key distinction in the school of Zen art from its predecessor, Mahayana Buddhism:

> This list of properties gives us a good idea of what goes to make a Zen work of art. Some of these transcend purely aesthetic values and point to lofty moral and religious ideals, while at the same time adumbrating the basic concepts of that attitude to art which differentiates Zen in principle from the orthodox schools of Mahayana Buddhism. (Hasumi, 1962)

The Reductive Approach in Zen Thinking

There is a tendency within Zen philosophy to remove extraneous elements such as the ego in the pursuit of self-actualisation. This subtractive process of constructing meaning may be familiar territory for visual artists such as carvers or sculptors. The reductive approach has also been applied as an aesthetic principle. Scholars have observed reductive qualities of image development implemented by Japanese artist Sesshū Tōyō (1420–1506).

> Sesshū does not circumscribe forms but offers the impression of poetic immediacy by breaking them down. Extreme abbreviation and abstraction are employed such

> that any form, if even discernible, is pushed as far as possible from objectivity without disappearing completely into formlessness. (Parkes, Graham, & Loughnane, 2022)

Zen and Koan Literature

Investigating the functions of these principles is essential to composing an authentic visual response to Zen Koan. Traditionally, it was not regular practice to create Zen paintings specifically illustrating Koan as a method to achieve understanding of their essence. There are examples of practitioners painting subjects and themes from Koan literature. As shown in Figure 2, the ink painting by prominent monk Hakuin illustrates a Koan with a direct representation of the subject and theme. The Haiku inscription reads “Circling the grindstone, an ant—this world’s whisper” (Seo et al., 2008, p. 149). Bailey (2023) examined how Hakuin Ekaku utilised painting and calligraphy to promote Buddhist teachings to the general population. Hakuin explores notable figures from the teachings of Buddhism while also exploring more mundane subjects of everyday life.

Zen Koan in Practice

This section outlines the nature of Koan practice between a student and teacher. I also deconstruct components within a Koan and explore their functions. Chang (1959) describes that in monastic life, *Zazen* or seated meditation is performed daily by students under the guidance of a master. A novice undertakes highly structured activities that exemplify Zen in action. *Dokusan,* is an intimate interview between a master and a student, often revolving around the student’s practice and progress. *Teisho*, might be best described as a lecture to a group of students where the lecturer responds to a Zen story. One of the most intriguing activities is the practice of Koan study. Koan's study was undertaken over many years, with instances of students pondering a single koan for years at a time. Heine (1990) described the intricate role of understanding how language functions in a student's understanding:

> Koan are not seen as either merely compatible with or replacing sutras but as the essential nature of the symbol-making process encompassing parable and paradox,

> tautology and metaphor, syntactical meaning and non-semantic wordplay (puns, homophones, onomatopoeia, etc. (p. 380)

I will explore the relationship between the function of language and constructing symbolic meaning within Koan study. The symbol-making processes Heine discusses above would likely have been internalised in the practitioner's mind or additionally in dialogue with a master. I propose that this experience be investigated externally through fine art practices. One of the opportunities for the diverse use of language presented in Koan is the invitation to expansive interpretations.

Symbolic Language and Components of Koan Text

Heine describes the components of a Koan as they are typically presented in examples of Zen literature, *"*pointer, main case, prose commentary, verse commentary, capping phrases, notes, and discussion. Outside of the Main Case, the other Koan components aim to provide contextual assistance around authorship and lineage" (Heine, 2002, p380). The capping phrase serves an intriguing function in the components and can assist the reader in understanding from a unique angle:

> This is one of the most innovative styles of commentary that epitomizes the Zen approach to hermeneutics. Used throughout the Pi-yen ul and Isung-jung ul collections and further perfected by Japanese Rinzai master Daito, "a Zen *capping phrase* is something of a cross between a koan and a footnote.... It is supposed to be able to make a comment, resolve a specific conundrum, convey a Zen insight, transform another's awareness, resonate like a line of poetry, or perform several of these functions simultaneously(Kraft, 1992, p. 02)" (Heine, 2002, p. 31).

It is worth noting the experience of reading modern publications of Koan literature would differ greatly from Koan practice as verbal exchanges during one one-on-one encounters between student and teacher. The poetic nature of the capping phrase may be useful as a jumping-off point for visual artists to investigate while assembling meaning from these perplexing verses. The capping phrase allows the author to insert a touch of their style and understanding of the main verse. Suppose a novice lacks a comprehensive understanding of Buddhist sutras and the key figures involved. In that case, these contextual

aids can be integral in illuminating the understanding of the essence of the text. Let us look at the Main Case, Comment, and Capping Phrase from case 8. Keichu's Wheel, from Gateless Gate.

Main Case:

*"*Gettan asked a monk, If Keichu (the ancient mythological wheel maker) made one hundred carts, and if we took off the wheels and removed the hub uniting the spokes, what would then become apparent?"

Mumon's Comment:

"If anyone can answer this question instantly, his eyes will be like a meteor and his mind like a flash of lightning."

Capping Phrase:

"When the hubless wheel turns,

Even the master would be at a loss what to do,

It turns above heaven and beneath earth,

South, north, east, and west." (Yamada, 2004, p. 44)

In the case of Keichu's wheel, Mumon relies on the approach of substituting ordinary objects to represent greater teachings of Zen. The indirect methodology and utilisation of substitutes are frequently performed in this text. Following the koan commentary, there is a swift implementation of dramatic language, likening the potential ability to answer the koan with a sort of profound celestial intervention. The author may oscillate between familiar and dramatic references for the function of not permitting the student to become completely orientated to the text.

Hori (2003) compares the difference in style and response of two individuals to Zoan case 23 of the *Hekigan-roku*. *Jakugo* is the Japanese term for a capping phrase. The performative nature of responding to a previous capping phrase exemplifies an example of competitive spirit in these dialogues, as well as the subsequent commentary responding to them:

One day while walking with Chõkei, Hofuku pointed with his hand and said, "This right here is Mystic Peak," to which Chõkei said, "That may be so but it's a pity (that you had to say it)."

> Engo's *jakugo*: He's made a pile of bones where there's level ground. Swear off talking about it. Dig up the earth and bury it deep. (p. 36)

In Engo's capping phrase, he critiques the foolish endeavour of speaking what doesn't need to be said. Engo does so with rich poetic imagery that depicts a dramatic landscape where the encounter could be resolved. Another idea this example showcases is that the dialogues and discussions of their essence have a nature that attracts a continuing dialogue. There is a certain irony in this example that Koan figures produce commentary by eloquently talking about not talking.

Pitfalls of Koan Study

Levine (2017) acknowledges that the critical assessment of Zen seems to have been investigated from every possible angle (p. 54). How not to approach Koan study is a subject that has been explored by scholars as well. Studying pitfalls may feel like cheating, and would most likely be frowned upon in the environment of traditional practice. Nevertheless, robust modern criticisms exist and could aid in the approach to foster a greater understanding of a Koan's essence. After reading this exhaustive list of ways not to approach a Koan, one might arrive at a state of greater confusion and helplessness. That of course may be the intended purpose. Lachs (2012) Even outlines a list of common pitfalls a student should avoid while undergoing study:

> The ten defects originally suggested by Ta-hui and elaborated upon by Korean Zen master Chinul are (to paraphrase):
>
> 1) thinking of Mu in terms of yes and no
>
> 2) relating it to doctrine
>
> 3) pondering it logically
>
> 4) considering it as a wordless gesture
>
> 5) evaluating the meaning of the word
>
> 6) approaching it through silent illumination
>
> 7) viewing it as a product of meditation
>
> 8) examining it through literary analysis
>
> 9) taking it to be true nonexistence

10) relating it to the original, inherent potentiality for awakening

The ten defects outline that practice cannot be approached with intellectual abilities and requires different knowledge. These pitfalls can also be applied to the visual response of koan in the accompanying printmaking body of work. For implementing considerations on the third defect, I might avoid rendering literal depictions of the subjects or environments within a text. Relying on tools of abstraction could be of assistance to circumvent some of the 10 defects.

By responding to Koan text through abstraction, visual art may possess the ability to acknowledge the ethereal qualities of Zen teachings. The poetic nature of these texts can be replied to through a complimentary medium in a proportionate measure of visual Metaphor with printmaking. Visual art could be an individual's best voice of transmission, so why not employ that faculty as a response?

Ekphrastic Relationships

This section introduces ekphrasis as a method to analyse the relationship between visual art and Zen Koan. Ekphrasis is most simply defined as “the verbal representation of visual representation” (Baugher, 2009). The process of ekphrasis is most commonly implemented in this direction. In a general understanding, it reflects a response between mediums. Baugher cleverly defines ekphrasis by highlighting some of its limitations by delineating “Interpretation is the antithesis of ekphrasis. While ekphrasis is a type of experiment, anchored in visual imagery, it is not forensics.” (Baugher, 2009) I am interested in understanding what a visual work can achieve or communicate that written text cannot. What are the limitations of the original work, and does the visual translation conform to those limitations or break free of them? By reverse engineering the process, perhaps we can utilise methodologies developed by poets to explore nuanced relationships between the two artistic representations.

Ekphrasis Dynamics

The challenge of creating a rich ekphrastic space is to transcend illustration and illuminate the essence of the text. While Zen Koan have specific teaching functions in a

traditional atmosphere, I will investigate what the possibilities of visual works illuminating these texts may reveal to the viewer. The intention is not to present a comprehensive distillation of the response to a Koan. To produce such a literal and accurate solution would possibly go against the nature of Koan practice and responding in the spirit of Zen. It is a challenging exercise to fabricate a suitable response to satisfy a Zen master that is not over-engineered. Wagner expands on the paradoxical qualities of ekphrasis noting, “has a Janus face: as a form of mimesis, it stages a paradoxical performance, promising to give voice to the allegedly silent image even while attempting to overcome the power of the image by transforming and inscribing it” (Wagner, 1996, p. 13).

Wagner’s description of this quality is befitting for such an imperfect endeavour. Acknowledging that an ekphrastic poem operates under the understanding of a paradoxical quality, one could liberate it from the restrictions of performing solely as figurative art. When Wagner suggests the allegedly silent image, I believe he is referring to the idea that the poet is taking a considerable amount of creative license in their approach. Was this something that the painting had solicited? Overcoming the power of the image suggests a degree of hierarchy between the poet and the visual artist, which should be considered. If the painting presents itself as a catalyst for further creation, was it entirely complete in its function as creative work? Was the function of the catalyst inherent in the responsibilities of the original work? The complexities of the balance of power in the relationship between the two works of art are part of the paradox to which Wagner refers. I propose that both artworks provide a reciprocal capacity to enhance the understanding of one another.

Jungian Ideas of Ekphrasis

Ekphrasists may be drawn to the vast opportunities within relating themselves to another artwork or object. Artist can focus their intention within their practice as a potential vehicle for self-actualisation:

> According to Jung, introverted art is motivated by the poet’s conscious intent, which thereby suffocates the demands of the object. (In the case of ekphrasis, the object can be a painting, print, installation, etc.) Yet, in the spirit of extraverted art, the poet

> abandons intention by wholly submitting to the object's demands. In this way, ekphrasists subvert their own conscious agendas for the myriad of possibilities insisted on by an object. This Jungian method of allowing the creative instinct ultimate reign can enable the poet to leap from an object to the universe. (Baugher, 2009)

When using ekphrasis and creating a piece of art in response to another, it is worth considering whether an introverted or extraverted approach is suitable. The extroverted approach suggests the artist quiets their voice as much as possible when responding to the work of another, allowing the work of inspiration to lead the process. The potential that detachment of the self leads to a truer kind of artmaking reflects the essence of the intended function of Koan study for the practitioner. In the spirit of extraverted art and the style of Koan practice, wholly submitting to the object's demands may also present the most expedient path towards resolving the Koan. The concept of the authentic true self may reflect the Jungian idea of creative instinct described here. It resembles the nature of the following Koan from Wumen Guan, The Gateless Gate*. "*Without thinking of good or evil, show me your original face before your mother and father were born." (Yamada, 2004) The invitation presented in this koan is to transcend dualistic thinking and relinquish the influence of the ego.

Perception Around Ekphrastic Relationships

Subjects within the ekphrastic relationship are counter-dependent on many elements to facilitate interpretation. Not only the environment of their creation but also how that is juxtaposed with the environment of the subject of reflection. Assuming contextual factors like historical and cultural identities that are inherent in producing artwork, Baugher continues to include physiological variables in the creator's experience:

> That is, the viewer's own proclivity for a skewed seeing is fed by his cerebral and anatomical uniqueness. For example, artists born with abnormal depth perception (called stereopsis) such as Rembrandt and Picasso compensated for their compromised vision by excelling in shading and other techniques, which ultimately

> rendered them incomparably deft at creating perspective. When an ekphrasist looks at an object, both real- and imagined-visions are at play. In other words, the poet's work involves making creative use of both accidental and essential errors. (Baugher, 2009)

By observing the limitations of perception, the artists can reflect on their transformation, as well as the essence of the text itself. Part of observing perceptions could be acknowledging that ambiguity is an inherent component at play in assembling meaning from koan.

Implications of Inspiration

One important consideration is what are the qualities of the relationship between the visual work and literature. To what degree does that inspiration need to be acknowledged? What are the implications of withholding the source of inspiration? Considering Koan from the perspective of the inverted Ekphrasis approach, one might explore the following questions. What is the nature of the relationship between the visual artists and the author of the Koan text? What is the intended environment of the visual art and the intended audience for the Koan text? What sensations does the visual artist wish to evoke that the text may not be able to communicate? Would this work be recognised as based on Koan literature, and is it important? It is likely in a contemporary fine art setting that this information would be submitted through supplemental material in the form of an exhibition booklet, artist talk, or wall text. Atherton and Hetherington describe some of the complexities of these *ekphrastic spaces*:

> Such encounters do not represent a seamless interart suturing; rather, they are typically characterised by various uncertainties and undecidable issues connected to their failure to fully mesh. In this way, ekphrastic poetry opens what we call ekphrastic spaces – in-between places of contemplation and questioning. Such ekphrastic spaces foreground the fact that all art is shifting and that art transfigures, quizzes (and sometimes misrepresents rather than represents) the 'real'. (Atherton & Hetherington, 2022, p. 83-98)

Atherton & Hetherington develop their own poetic imagery by describing the space between two representations as *ekphrastic spaces*. Elucidating the boundaries of ekphrastic

spaces may be a job best left to poets. Koan literature lives in a realm of uncertainties, questioning, and rich metaphors. Misrepresentation by a beginner may need to be fully exhausted before arriving at a destination of truth. The nexus of contemplation and questioning is representative of Koan study. The effectiveness of this relational art form may reside in how well it acknowledges what they are incapable of offering. Responding to Koan literature through visual art may prove a worthwhile exercise in developing a sensitivity to Zen methodologies.

Dedalus Foundation (n.d.) discusses the collaborations of poet Octavio Paz and painter Robert Motherwell and how they had a history of producing works for one another. In 1981, Motherwell painted *Face of the Night (for Octavio Paz)*. The large expressive work is dominated by a black field and borrowed its title from a poem by Paz. This was before the publication of the illustrated *Three Poems* book of poetry. Represented in Figure 4, the final poem in the *Three Poems* book explores Motherwell's paintings through poetry. Paz used language in his poetry to refer to the figures in Motherwell's paintings:

> Thick drops
> black whites
> ruin of seed
> The semantic tree
> passion plant
> seminal mind. (Paz, 1988)

Motherwell was attracted to the collaboration because "Octavio Paz's poetry, in its richness, humanism, explosiveness, and liberation, owes something to the surrealists' effort to reach the preconscious and the unconscious, where most of our being lives" (Terenzio, 1992, p. 281). Although many of these artworks were in direct response to one another, there was an ongoing reciprocal nature to the collaboration of the two artists, represented in Figure 4. Cultivating ekphrastic spaces promotes a deeper understanding of the subjects involved for both artists, as well as the person viewing the responding work. Metaphysical explorations of artistic practices and the role of collaboration will be explored in the next section.

Motherwell's Zen-Inspired Automatism

The Surrealists implemented "psychic automatism" to explore the unconscious mind (Rosand, 1997, p.40). American abstract expressionist Robert Motherwell is known to have been greatly influenced by Zen Buddhism in his philosophical approach to creating art and the application of aesthetic principles within his practice (Rosand, 1997, p.59). I propose that an authentic response to a koan exists within the phenomenon of *Automatism*. Motherwell extended this approach by supplementing his paintings with what he described as the creative principle. Rosand (1997) connects the lineage of this phenomenon through surrealism to modernism and highlights the early manifestations in the context of visual art or painting:

> The creative principle - what we might call "The Method of Rightly Conducting the Brush" —was of course what the Surrealists called "psychic automatism," which, "in the case of painting... usually begins as 'doodling' or scribbling." (p. 40)

If we follow the lineage of this practice from the surrealists to modernists, we find they were each pointing to a similar pursuit. Each school had its way of making the approach relative to their respective time. Motherwell specifically focused on how to omit the influence of modernism in painting. Motherwell outlined a guide for modernist art that could lack a derivative quality, an issue that he believed afflicted the American Modernists of his time (Rosand, 1997, p. 45).

Proficiency in automatism, or a flow-like state, can be accessed with greater ease once there is a precedent for having experienced the sensation. Proficiency is something that can be established over time through repetition and practice. Engaging in this phenomenon requires setting a practice in motion by beginning with premeditative intention. I suspect that automatic actions can alternatively occur without the intention of conscious action, in other words naturally, spontaneously occurring. Perhaps in this manner, one might find themselves humming the harmony to a song. Rosand (1997) outlines automatic actions as:

> Actions are considered "automatic" when they take place without their agents being conscious—or fully conscious—of their taking place. The term "action" excludes mere reflex motor responses, in the sense that a great many automatic actions begin as conscious actions to which the agent become habituated through repetition, whereas reflex responses have no history of explanation through consciousness at all, so that their causes are entirely mechanical or physical. (p. 41)

The Authentic Self in Expression through Art

The unconscious mind is a stepping stone to an ethereal quality connected to creative force. Disengaging with the part of self and regulating logic may be the key to finding the authentic self who can respond appropriately to Koan's paradoxical qualities. Discovering the true self is frequently described as the primary pursuit of contemplating Koan. Rosand (1997) proceeds to suggest something metaphysical is occurring:

> Psychic automatism was an almost magical device for enabling each person to be at once artistically authentic to his or her true self, and at the same time to be modern. (p. 45)

This is where these influences converge and resemble what Motherwell has developed and decoded for his practice. Psychic automatism in the development of a visual art practice is something which, by description, functions timelessly as an approach. The emergence of art through automatism, in its most pure form, may prove challenging for many artists to achieve. In a more practical sense, it may be something that an artist strives towards as an ideal. Whether or not it is attained is less important than holding it as a focus of an ideal. There may be reductive elements experiencing this phenomenon, such as actively eliminating the influence of aesthetics and philosophies of the artist's respective time.

Michaux's Automatism and Launguage

Belgian poet and artist Henri Michaux made fascinating explorations into blurring the boundaries between drawing, graphic forms, and written language. Associations with Chinese calligraphy have been suggested by critics of Michaux, as well as likening Michaux's practice to techniques of surrealist automatism (Parish, 2007, p. 177). Michaux

resisted being affiliated with a particular school of art and their methodologies, specifically the surrealists (Parish, 2007, p. 218). Upon first reading, the forms present as indecipherable language, but it appears obvious that there is a system at work. Dissected letterforms blend into graphic signs. *Alphabet* and the drawings of Michaux require a special kind of engagement with the viewer that I feel would be fitting for creating works that respond to Zen Koan. Interpretation and the act of assembling meaning from foreign objects is an integral experience.

As seen in Figure 5, *Alphabet* presents a unique case study for considering the nature of the ekphrastic relationship, as Michaux is the author of both graphic and linguistic representations. Reading *Alphabet* leaves me wondering what he was transcribing and whether the intended readership was anyone but himself. The work has an unmistakable cryptic nature but invites the viewer to formulate meanings of what the graphic forms might signify in the sequence in which they're presented.

The kinesthetic element of Michaux's practice can't be overlooked. The physical expression of drawing provides Michaux with a vehicle to detach from conscious decision-making while writing. When exploring the functions of symbols "Michaux realises there is no way of actually capturing thought. He instead aims to render the spontaneous nature of the 'pré-geste' or gesture in the making, in progress." (Parish, 2007, p. 218) These graphic symbols look to be rendered swiftly and, in that process, show a rhythmic quality as the gestures pour from Michaux.

Alphabet (1927) presents Michaux's early experiments in combining graphic signs juxtaposed poetry and prose that he would pursue through 4 books in total over his career (Parish, 2007, p. 25). Michaux determined these inquiries were best residing within the walls of a book jacket:

> "The fact that he chose to situate some of these interdisciplinary works in a literary rather than visual setting, namely, the space of the book rather than that of the art gallery, is of utmost importance as it highlights his adherence to the world of books despite his misgivings about the linguistic sign." (p. 27)

Alternating within interdisciplinary practices such as visual art and language grants access to a meaningful type of engagement. Implications of Michaux's decision to house

these written artworks within book form will be investigated further in the next chapter, and look at the impact of how that linear format would function for the intended audience.

Hermeneutics, Visual Cycles

Hermeneutics was developed as a means to interpret biblical texts but was later expanded to include a diverse application of understanding. For modern purposes, Hermeneutics can be applied to the interpretation and understanding of all things. Mambrol (2017), outlines that during the 20th century, Gadamer's theory of knowledge explored the interpretative process as well as the field of interpreting written texts. Hermeneutics provides us with a critical lens through which we can observe how something is being investigated. Reflecting on Gadamer's contributions in the field of philosophical hermeneutics, Szeto observes "his invitation to broaden our perspective or "horizon" of our conception of works of art. Instead of focusing all of our attention on the piece of art as an isolated object, we look at our experience of it" (Szeto, 2021, p. 164). This is worthwhile to consider when analysing Zen Koan's texts. Investigating the experience of reading a koan would be the best starting point for responding appropriately.

Traditionally, the practice of hermeneutics focused on methodologies regarding how to interpret biblical texts. It is my opinion that Koan belong more to the realm of poetry than religious sacred texts because of their paradoxical qualities. By examining the approach by which I respond to Koan and Zen literature, I can form a more holistic response to its essential themes and subjects. The artistic hermeneutic cycle is the vehicle by which I move into an understanding of the artistic practice by responding to a koan.

Paradox and the Hermeneutical Circle

Mambrol (2017) introduces key figures in Hermeneutics, such as Gadamer, Wilhelm Dilthey, and Friedrich Schleiermacher. Mambrol (2017) highlights that, from Gadamer's perspective, although the cyclical nature of the visual cycle guide may repeat itself indefinitely, the process is contingent on the role of the reader or artist as an interpreter, as well as their past experiences and contextual elements of the present:

> Wilhelm Dilthey (1833- 1911), the German philosopher, developed Friedrich Schleiermacher‘s idea of the “hermeneutic circle” – the paradox which emerges from the fact that the reader cannot understand any part of the text until the whole is understood, while the whole cannot be understood until the parts are understood (para. 4).

Gadamer observed the paradoxical quality of how interpretation is bound by time and sequence. The present and past are co-dependent on one another for arriving at interpretations. An artist's life experience and influences will have significant determining factors in the development of their practice, as well as how they actively engage with what inspires them to create artwork. He highlights the significant role of the reader in assembling meaning as a response:

> Gadamer argues that an interpretation of past literature arises from argument between past and present. Our present perspective is definitely associated with our past; simultaneously, the past can only be grasped through the limited perspective of the present. So, the reader’s involvement in the creation of meaning also becomes significant (Mambrol, 2017, para. 4).

The Artistic Hermeneutic Circle

As seen in Figure 5, Connors et al. (2020) expanded on the concept of the hermeneutical circle and filled in some of the gaps to make it more penetrable for artists. This was specifically developed in response to a piece of chamber music but could be applied to various artistic mediums. They have articulated phases from inception through implementation, though they note the stages of the circle may complete its journey in a single revolution, or perpetually depending on the nature of the artist’s practice and investigation.

I found this helpful in comprehending both parts of the whole of Wilhelm Dilthey’s hermeneutic circle paradox in greater detail. This brought the idea from an abstract concept into an approachable model that could be applied to an artistic practice. This can relate to the exegetical approach of my practice as operating in the background when considering visual interpretations of Koan readings. When reading a Koan, a holistic understanding and

comprehension of the text is required to respond sufficiently.

*A*n artist can transform abstract concepts into visual representations by observing The Artistic Hermeneutic Cycle as a guide. An artist would begin with the inception of the creative process within the circle through a moment of understanding. I wish to understand the potential learnings from taking an approach to assembling meaning through visual art. Connors et al. (2020) defined these moments that unfold serially and are described as understanding, questioning, articulation, engagement, analysis, and implementation.

When applying this method to creating visual art in response to Koan text, one can gain an understanding of the demarcation of the influence of the new visual creation. Connors et al. (2020) highlights a critical moment in the cycle as it relates to the implementation of action by an artist:

> This moment of 'understanding' in which we grasp the ephemeral idea in its purest sense erupting from the unconscious through to consciousness via the cerebellum, marks its abstract birth, from which we must bring it forth into manifestation, that is, if we wish to be artists, otherwise it is not necessary (Ephemeral idea section, para. 2).

Application to Zen Koan

Reading of the Koan text acts as a catalyst for setting the questioning and articulation stages into motion. If this cycle is overlaid as a guide for responding to Koan text, the questioned phase should be kept as brief as possible to develop a response authentically. Additionally, embracing a kinesthetic response is necessary because “That which resides in the abstract must cross the threshold into materiality through action, speech, or writing” (Connors et al., 2020).

The Visual hermeneutical approach acts as a framework for engaging in critical observations of the life cycle of an idea. It may assist when reviewing an approach to see whether it is balanced and whether emphasis has been distributed evenly through the framework. Whether or not the cycle is observed once or indefinitely is a decision the artist will need to make for applying critique of these actions and exploring new iterations. This cyclical process can help facilitate an artist's practice, as well as their path towards self-

discovery. Hermeneutics reminds an artist that there is a continuous reflection between the past and present, and also between the interpreter and a text.

Conclusion

One of the initial observations of the practice of responding to Koan through the medium of printmaking is that it may not be the most expedient method to capturing the essence of the moment. If there is the utmost value placed on immediacy and the absence of rational thinking, then such a labour-intensive and process-orientated medium may be better suited for rational investigations. Amendments can be made to the process of creating these prints to reflect a more accurate depiction of the moment during which that text was read, interpreted, and answered. I found that by printing a single image from multiple blocks, you can arrange unlimited compositions, allowing for a more fluid approach to forming relationships between subjects.

In traditional realms of printmaking where great reverence is often placed on adhering to formalities of less experimental practices. Mechanistic production of print editions where differences in each print work are indistinguishable from the next. The production of the final image may be fixed in place through each stage of production, from original drawing to carving and finally printing, thus Leaving little space for deviation. One can see why Motherwell and Michaux were attracted to the immediacy of drawing and painting as a means of tapping into the unconscious.

In the spirit of Zen, it is important to remember this exercise is an ongoing practice without a destination. Visual representations from Koan may misrepresent, illuminate, interrogate, or imitate. It is worth celebrating the elements within the ekphrastic space as true reflections of that moment in time. What was learned in the action of digesting a text and creating a print will inform understanding for all the subsequent works in the artist's practice.

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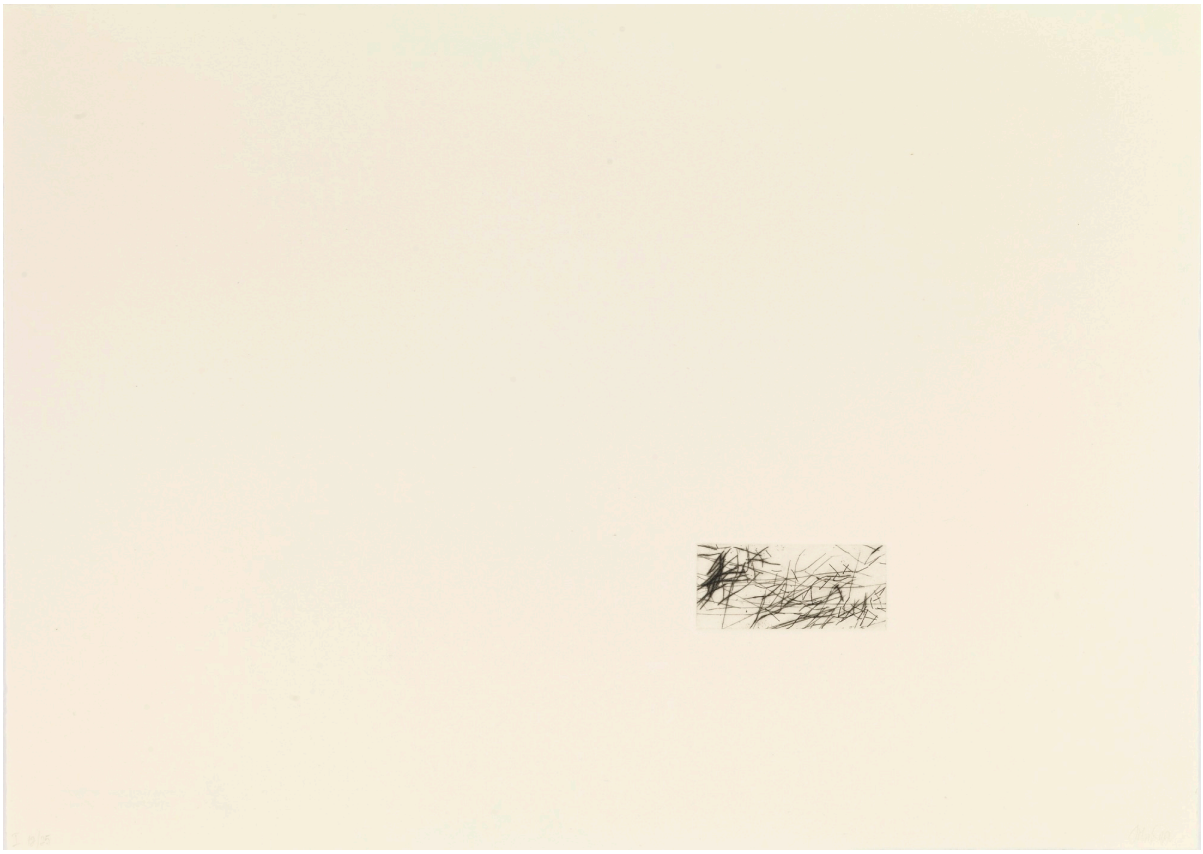
Figures

Figure 1

Seven Day Diary (Not Knowing), Day One



Cage, J. (1978)

https://americanart.si.edu/artwork/seven-day-diary-not-knowing-day-one-74460

Figure 2

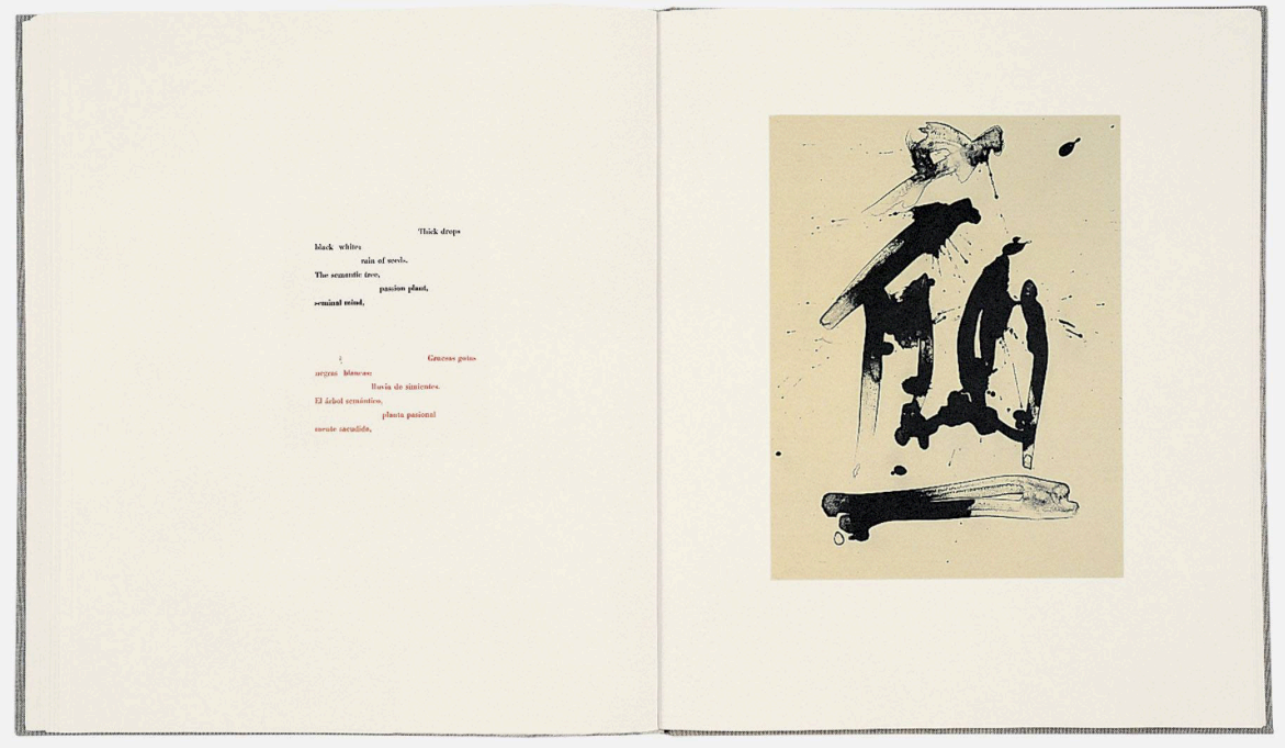
Ant on a Stone Mill

Hakuin Ekaku (c. 18th Century)

Note. From The Sound of One Hand: Paintings and Calligraphy by Zen Master Hakuin. A. Seo, & S. Addiss, (2008). Shambhala Publications. https://www.manyoancollection.org/wp-content/uploads/NW-Zen-Paintings-from-the-GY-Collection-.pdf

Figure 3

Three Poems

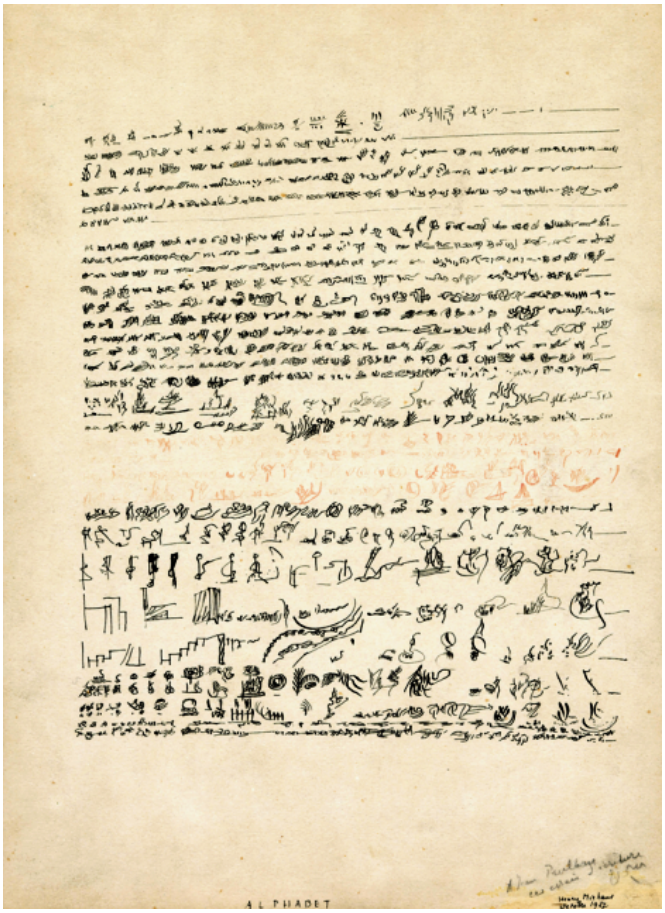


Motherwell, R. (1988)

Note. From Dedalus Foundation. (n.d.). Three Poems 1988. *Dedalus Foundation.* https://dedalusfoundation.org/robert-motherwell/catalogues-raisonne/prints-editioned-works/view/three-poems-17/

Figure 4

Alphabet

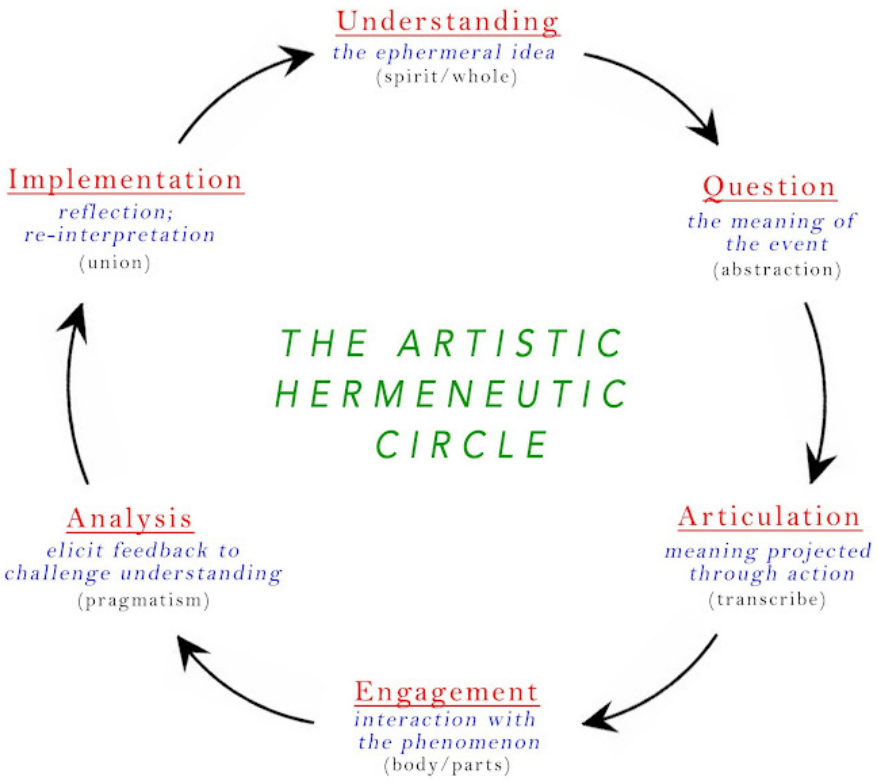


Michaux, H. (1927)

Note. This drawing was produced by Michaux in 1927. From Henry Michaux: Experimentation With Signs (p. 26), by N. Parish, 2007, Rodopi. Copyright 2007 Editions Rodopi. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/261737465_Henri_Michaux_Experimentation_with_Signs_by_Nina_Parish

Figure 5

The Artistic Hermeneutic Loop



Note. Diagram for the six steps of the Artistic Hermeutical Cycle model.

From *The Artistic Hermeneutic Loop* by Rube Goldberg Machine of Semiotics and Symbols, 2020 (https://www.r-g-m-s.com/p/the-artistic-hermeneutic-loop.html).