
Three Essays toward the Inter-Disciplinary Nexus between Art and Sport

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IS SPORT ART?

When a sports person is fouled, he is really in pain and there are consequences according to the rules of the game. He is usually not acting and the consequences are pre-ordained, such as in the case of soccer, a free-kick or a penalty. Is there a parallel in the traditional fine arts? An actor is acting. He is not stabbed in actuality but merely following a script and imaginatively projecting fantasy into a believable drama. The painter may feel certain emotions while painting, but there is no necessary consequence to these feelings, no standard rules as such. A musician too may feel the piece and follows a pre-arranged script or improvises. Is there any parallel or convergence with sport here?

While a full description of game-theory is not my area of expertise, I intuit that doing philosophy or engaging with art theory and practice are kinds of game. If this is the case, then one might make the following observations: When the practice of art results in new and different orientations, given the institutional nature of art, a series of judgments within the framework that is the game of art ensues. The work may be accepted or rejected. Thus, the following scenario results: the painter/musician/actor feels the processes that is required of him in making the art. Now, when placed in the cultural and public domain, it is judged. If it is rejected, causing shock and consternation with the emphatic “this is not art” quip which is tantamount to decrying its artistic and aesthetic value, so to say that it is not beautiful, then there is a kind of foul, and a kind of free kick as critics and public alike feel they have been wronged.

So, art and sport share a similar emotive and institutional element. Of course, this convergence is not seamless. It is metaphorical. There are no actual goals, fouls, penalties and the like in art. Yet, there is somehow a kind of goal, foul, penalty and so on and the like in art.

The game-changers in art and the new art movements that become canonised art history and theory are sorts of goals, perhaps initially in there not been accepted, they were kinds of fouls resulting in critique – a kind of free-kick and so on. While such a speculation offers imaginative agility, if one is to concede that art is indeed a game given its institutional, cultural reality, then such a link is conceivable.

Let’s explore a few other such possible overlaps. Think of a sports game at the elite level, the epitome of the game well played and imagine the fanfare. Two teams, each clad in distinct uniforms. Opposing fans, also generally clad in team regalia symbolising their allegiance to their team. Music, national anthems, the beautiful playing field, the immense stadium and soon and so forth. Then the game itself – the coordination of the team, the skill of the individual sportsman, the weaving of patterns and the unpredictability of how the game unfolds according to clearly defined rules, yet allowing for intense drama, even forming strong ties to history, politics and commerce. However, perhaps there is an even more powerful tie and this is of its eminently aesthetic character, it’s artistic content. It is perhaps here, drawing from Nietzsche’s re-joiner to view life itself as an aesthetic act, that sport weaves its magic on a mass scale, because players and fans alike are lulled into aesthetic bliss, a reprieve from daily living, just as art has often been described as a second order remove from the grind of life.

Philosophically, one may analyse this as a sharing of form and content. Formally, both reveal an empirical dimension that can be described as beautiful: beauty in athletic form, in the actual play, in the context in which this all takes place. In terms of content, while one would insist that art is deep, that art is reflective, and sport merely physical entertainment, such an estimation is too simple and hierarchical. In fact, both are simply forms of play. Both are

superficial, far removed from the realities of life even if they form a part of life. Both may be profound – indicators of health or ill-health; masking a dark social reality or forging a better one.

To say that art may be found in or as sport, is to argue for the ubiquity of aesthetic experience. This is not far-fetched. Even one not interested in art and/or sport may well find an eye and ear and mind attuned to aesthetic predilection. Builders are concerned with making things look right; surgeons with the physical appeal concerning the area that they are working on; cleaners with cleanliness; mathematicians with finding a quantitative simplicity describing empirical reality, lawyers and judges with the metering out of the exactitude of law; politicians with a favourable public opinion; businessman with a good brand image and so on and so forth within particular arenas of play: courthouses and hospitals, buildings and commercial spheres and academic institutions, each revealing a particular aesthetic for optimum functional value but also as ends in themselves for order and rightness, neatness and precision, creativity and harmony so as to optimise performance and results.

One might also find an interesting convergence between art and sport in the idea that looking at art (or listening etc) actually creates a certain kind of movement, whether the image is still or moving, in that the looking eye empathises with the object of appreciation and physiologically and psychologically finds, whether conscious or simply intuitive, a sense of movement, a kind of projection into the art work that allows one to sense weight, proportion, energy and balance. Such properties belong to the sporting body and the appreciation of athletic performance. The artist himself in making the work of art requires dextrous skill, often involving energetic movement, but even in less energetic works he creates the illusion of potential movement through line, colour and image. This then is felt by the viewer. But more than this, the sensitive viewer senses lines of force and the warmth and coolness of colours which in turn create space, shifting illusions of depth and motion. The eye and mind is actually complicit in producing images, whether realist or abstract. The artist allows the material to speak even as he manipulates it towards particular ends. Now, this sense of movement lies at the heart of sports play, where vigorous, skilled action in relation to other bodies within the parameters of the play (read: material surface) is enacted through time

and space (and this need not be real or physical as in the current obsession with video gaming, the body itself becoming digital and illusionary). Perhaps that is why the Ancient Greeks initiated the use of sport as a subject of art.

The point of the above is to recognise that different aspects of expression and knowledge are not specialised, self-enclosed and hierarchical. I derive such sentiments from post structural musings on language where, as Derrida argues there is no present terms, only absence or traces as the web of language, of meanings is interconnected. Therefore, within art is the potential connection with all that is not art and vice versa. One word unleashes all words.

One image may come to mean anything, depending on context. Such a theoretical construct therefore creates a vacuum wherein it is conceivable that seemingly disparate concepts maybe inter-included. Combining art and sport is one application of such a theory. While obviously one can specialise, abstract, reduce, analyse, kill one term in favour of another so that only a liver operation and nothing else is performed or only that long jump or only that artwork and nothing else, there is another set of all sets where all these branches of knowledge come together connecting, equalising and inter-weaving. In that chaotic messiness, as it were, is the potential for the epistemological unity of knowledge. It has no name. It is not a philosophy. But we might apply it in small doses such as the application where in we find converging points between, say art and sport.

OVERLAPS BETWEEN THE ARTIST AND ATHLETE

When an artwork is made and in order for it to proceed successfully, in order for there to be optimal performance, one needs to:

- Bring self into the work
- Become conscious of the materials used
- A guiding 'idea' is present or latent in actual execution or a process of articulating 'idea' takes shape as one engages with the work
- One's senses are heightened – the aesthetic sense of the visual in particular as well as possible attentiveness to sound, movement or gesture, even smell and a sense of touch.
- The link between mind and body, between conscious and sub-conscious thought and action are the emotions wherein one is

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moved, excited or depressed by the mark-making etc

- One works toward an end, a completion and that ‘game’ is complete when ones performance is complete.
- Reflection on ‘ideas’ take place during the process – one stands back to admire the work for example leading perhaps to further performances, satiation and analysis on how to proceed and improve on subsequent marks. One constantly shifts between looking and doing. Learns from examples.
- Both theory and practice (of art) dialectically work in tandem. Learns from examples. But instinct is also key (does an artist need to know about aesthetics?)

Now is sporting performance comparable?

- An athlete must forget past and future and be ‘in the zone’, that is fully aware of the now.
- An athlete must be in his/her body, one with the equipment he/she may use and work with within the prescribed arena of his/her chosen sport
- The athlete needs to visualize or know what it is that is required to express the essential excellence of that sport. This requires imagination and an aesthetic and intellectual grasp of sorts.
- The athletes’ senses are definitely more heightened to the point where, giving into the moment and shutting out (possibly left brained operations) and is subsequently one with his/her senses.
- The athlete cannot afford to be either top or bottom heavy, but energised in such a way that mind motivates feelings and feelings optimise bodily excellence.
- The sportsperson wants to achieve an aesthetic ideal and/or a score that constitutes winning – he/she works toward the best conclusion possible.
- An athlete trains, tests, practices (perhaps using video analysis) and tries to continuously better performance. Learns from examples.
- In conversation with the coach and other members of the team, the athlete trains in bettering technique, in learning about his sport and actual works on

application, constantly seeking a to and fro movement from mind to body in a dialectical relationship. One needs to oscillate between conscious awareness of what is present in the moment of practical ‘doing’ and then when the time is right, revert to a more ‘bland’ mindful consideration of what one is doing. In some respects instinct must kick in (does an athlete need to know about philosophy of sport?)

Essentially then an aesthete is an athlete and vice-versa. The artist and sportsperson share commonalities both in terms of practice – and I would surmise – also in terms of intensity of feeling, perseverance and attitude in general. There is also the matter of appreciating art or sport, which I would suggest includes aesthetics, social, possibly philosophical, historic and psychological dimensions that may be similar.

JUDO AS A WORK OF ART

In this essay, I shall analyse how one may take the basic principles of art or the first principles that inhere in the construction and making of say a painting (dance, music, performance are other possible avenues other than the visual arts, but that would be for another discussion and one equipped with the requisite training in these arts) and show that such an understanding may be applied to the sport of judo. If this is the case, then one might make a similar claim for sports in general. That is, they form a parallel and even overlapping ways of knowing with art, both in terms of the participation thereof and viewing, analysis and critical understanding.

Line

Works of visual arts (and for the discussion I take painting as the paradigm example) necessarily use line. Lines may enclose a form, recognisable or not. Lines define boundaries. They construct shapes and lead the eye in a particular way. Lines are two dimensional, but may evoke the three dimensional. They are of a designated width and length, executed at a particular rate with a sense of force, urgency or slowness as the case may be. They express by virtue of the sensitive onlooker an emotive quality and one might say an artist has a signature kind of line, whether it is say a lyrical Matisse, a strong Picasso, a nervous Ben Shan, the urgency of Van Gogh, the precision of Stella and so on and so forth. Lines ordered in a particular way form patterns and designs.

In fact, the use of a particular line, say the profiles of Egyptian figuration, the flatness of the Middle Ages, the soft, highly representational line post Renaissance Europe and so on, define the very institutional and ideological context in which the visual arts are made.

How then does line have relevance in a sport such as judo? To do judo and to teach judo, requires an intuitive grasp of what I call “lines of force”. When am I off-balance or my opponent for that matter? How can that student be better aligned and in position? Why did that throw look beautiful? I believe that the answer to these questions is not simply anatomical and reduced to scientific-speak.

The “other” solution is that one is responding aesthetically. That is, when one times a throw, one as it were, sees a particular line running through self and opponent at a certain angle; one intuits where a line ought to go like a soccer player that runs into a good space or a pass that bisects two defenders and reaches his colleague in an on-side position in an ideal region of the field. One can imagine this like seeing the options on a chess board, visually illustrated with lines of possibility. When one sees an *ippon* – a perfect demonstration of a throw – one responds aesthetically precisely because these lines of force are perfectly symmetrical, poised and in tune. When one demonstrates to a student what movement is required one draws with the student's body the direction, movement and force that is akin to lines being created, shifted and mobilised to best effect within the constraints of the game.

Colour

If the above is somewhat convincing, then surely colour is an exception. What on earth can colour have to do with excellence in a sport such as judo? This is hypothetical, but I propose that if one took the gear of say a soccer team and created a kind of fractal generated program whereby the colours of that team kit somehow visually overran their opponents' colours or kit, then this would positively effect performance. It is a kind of visualisation for success on the sports field. Granted such indulgence, how would that apply to judo. The athlete simply wears either a white or blue *gi* with a belt (usually black at a high level of the sport). The answer? I am going to make what may appear a rather absurd statement: The successful judo player actually (consciously or not) likes (loves) the colour of her *gi*, the colour of the mat and

the order of the surrounds. If she does not feel that way disposed, performance will be adversely affected.

This may not be that preposterous if one considers visual culture and here I include not only the visual arts, but all manner of society: courthouses and hospitals, political rallies and schools, gardens and dress code, dinners and parties and so on and so forth. In order for one to be disposed favourable in any manner of context an attunement and enjoyment of colour must somehow be included. Sometimes this takes training or just plain familiarity, like a new art form that is at first disliked. Today, we do not bat an eyelid at a Fauvist painting when initially it was shocking. The strong gold and blue of a painting from the Middle Ages would have ignited a sense of royalty and mystery. The pageantry of the Olympics gives it significance and a heightened atmosphere.

Colour effects us. Thus, if one were to consciously ingratiate ourselves with a certain colour code, then that might have a dramatically positive effect on how one performs. Therefore, in judo one must feel something positive to blue and white and the general context – it ought to be *attractive*.

Composition

Composition could be defined as the holistic organisation of lines, planes, spaces and colours towards an overall unity. In art, we speak of the eye being led in a certain way given a certain compositional order. We speak of the “unseen” yet tacit geometric construction of a say a painting, in terms of triangles and rectangles, circular motion, S – shapes and so on.

Given the discussion thus far, one may apply this to judo with the following considerations: A non-verbal bodily understanding of self and opponent in terms of balance, weight, force, direction etc is the sum total of the co-ordination of lines. When one tacitly understands as such, one creates harmony or a compositional unity when executing a particular throw, unhinging ones opponent, destabilizing him and skilfully demonstrating a judo move. This can be analysed mechanically and physiologically, but the key claim of this essay is that this is also an aesthetic impulse and in particular similar to what occurs when one creates a work of art with what is called compositional harmony and the like.

This does not discount the craft of art and the craft of plying a particular sport such as judo.

Only that the physical ability is skilful precisely when there is an aesthetic experience. That is, inertia is overcome when there is mobility of line like a harmonised set of sounds or a uplifting display of colour. Or a well-timed skilfully generated judo sequence.

Scale

A sense of scale contributes to the success of an artwork. Whether a painting is say large or small, the artist must attend to the details within the picture surface with due consideration for the overall size of the surface and the relationship between the elements within it. One often uses the expression: “To size up one’s opponent”. One needs to have a sense of one’s own scale in real terms vis a vis one’s opponent. One might even successfully imagine oneself larger or at any rate not dwarfed by the context and certainly not diminished by one’s opponent.

Scale is thus both physical and psychological. The sense of power one has as an artist is gained from really feeling and been in touch tangibly with the surface and the relative sizes of things within it. In judo, one must have a sense of proportion – neither too large or too small – and at the same time not believe one’s composition is beyond one’s ability to feel, that the size is too great. One must, as it were, think through the body of self and opponent, and in a similar sense, articulate within the scale of the surface various forms of various sizes, in order to both be in control and allow things to be within the painting arena (mat) and activity (performance, fight).

Format

Related to scale is a feeling, a physical sense of the dimensions and visceral quality of the surface on which one paints or fights. The format ought to invigorate one. In judo, stepping beyond the mat may result in a penalty. In art, one’s expression is to be focused within the painting format (canvas, board or whatever), excluding what happens around it. Therefore, a clear sense of a) the dimensions of the arena and b) the actual quality of the arena – how soft is the mat/the surface on which one paints; what is its’ texture; do the colours appeal and from this a sense of what one can do on it, that is to say how can one relate to - and act - most successfully within it. To achieve optimal performance, I conjecture that an appealing surface and context is significant.

Texture

A famous soccer player once remarked that before he enters the playing field of an

important professional match, he takes a bit of the grass on which the play is about to commence and feels it and then smells it, especially when it comes to home matches. In an analogous manner, the judoka needs to feel comfortable in his gi (judo apparel) and feel that the mat will always cushion and feels comforting beneath his feet (now all this need not be overtly conscious, simply intuited and felt). In the similar way that the judoka (judo player) feels happy with his equipment, so the artist thinks through the viscosity of paint, canvas and other extraneous materials, so that he thinks though them just as the judoka player plays via his gi on the fighting arena. The artist (aesthete/athlete) also creates within the surface not simply a flat form but either implies a textured surface regarding his objects painted and/or actually allows the very quality of the paint and other materials to be revealed. So the judoka is one with his apparel and expresses himself through it: in both cases the equipment, however limited is a kind of extension of his body, the very textural reality of material.

Tone

A sense of light. A sense of darkness. Here the artist uses tone to articulate form and to express the play of light, either realistically or imagined, and in the process is connected to the nuanced effect of natural or imagined light. The athlete too is subconsciously aware – or so I hypothesize – of the light that radiates in the hall arena, that toys with the gi, that attends himself and his opponent. For in that awareness lies a sense of energy, for light is energy – and in the awareness of the shadow, of darker hues, even of black – is a portal to another kind of fighting energy. In the interface between light and dark lies the capacity to initiate, to be active or passive as the situation warrants and to move decisively.

Form

One might see a judoka hitting his chest or legs or hips just as she is about to enter the fighting arena. Is that a kind of making conscious that one is physically alert as a three-dimensional form and to awaken a sense of one’s weight? This three-dimensional form or mass now feels energised for the task at hand and gives a certain dimension so that one may act optimally. The artist often creates a sense of the three-dimensional on a two-dimensional surface and this act of illusion gives such forms weight and what is often termed realism. But form can also be two-dimensional – a shape that as Rothko

once said is a type of living organism. The connection to judo? It may be significant that the athlete senses herself and her surrounds with depth – time, three spatial dimensions and the inner world. Insofar as form is perceived, a sense of the palpably real and beautiful may emerge. The seeming flatness of the mat is rather a cushion; one's opponent is not simply a video game and one's own self is alive within the realm of length, breadth and depth. Similarly, in the arts painting (for example Stella) is as much a form, an object as is sculpture, over and above the centuries old tradition of realism and representational art or the distortions of form in expressionism, pre-abstract, fauvism, cubism and so on.

A Work of Judo or Performance

One could claim that in art the extrinsic aim to a create a work, a particular body, as it were whereas in sport this is not the explicit aim. Furthermore, that art is not agonistic and pragmatic as in the case of sport, where it is not the work or performance perse that is the intrinsic aim, but the tallying of points in a very defined way toward victory.

Now, these assertions may be countered. Is art not also an institution where there is competition, victory being the canonisation within the history and theory of art and honour, not to mention financial gain? As to the first point, a judo player is trying to secure victory in whatever way possible within the rules and is not overly concerned with creating a beautiful form or performance, but simply trying to win within her means. This is not necessarily true for the latter can only be accomplished by a well-co-ordinated manoeuvre, by producing a beautiful act of skill, by performing well.

Gesture

Jackson Pollock may have undone the tradition of painting with his swirls and drippings or in another sense, he made it patently clear that the act of mark-making is an active, highly gestural activity. It requires movement. Here it is not simply the hand and wrist that is in motion, but the whole body. This is significant when it is obvious that judo requires the full exercise of the body in specific kinds of movements. Both are creative, responding to inner and outer cues and innervations.

One might even parallel particular kinds of motions in both acts. The hand and wrist is crucial in both cases, but in the more expansive and expressive kinds of painting, one involves

the whole body. The hip is crucial in judo supported by the base that is the legs. The back needs to be strong and supply, the arms relaxed and tensed at just the right moments and the neck and head need to lead and propel one in a certain motion. One can imagine Pollock, who said of his large scale works and methods that he felt within the painting, to be a clue that he felt the need to almost dance in and around the painting and I would surmise we may even find a very particular kind of judo movement there. It is interesting that painting as a Fine Art led in some ways to happenings and performance, that is, live action, rather than the intermediary that is the external work of art. The act of painting leading to real live gestures. In the more conservative act of painting (sculpture would probably form an even more robust parallel and convergence), one might still note a certain dexterity of hand and wrist that is somewhat athletic.

Training

In order to hone an art or a sport requires training in one's craft. Music may aid one's judo to find rhythm. Dance is a mid-point between art and sport. Could it be that cross-training, that is, doing art for the purposes of improving judo performance is viable and may in fact work? My hypothesis is that this is the case and given the aesthetic overlaps in theoretical space, as it were, the dialectic may also operate on a practical level.

The Game

Both art and sport are games. Institutional, bound by rules (although less explicit and ironclad in art) and played in various ways and to different degrees with roles assigned, whether participant, spectator, commentator, historian, academic, professional, amateur, theoretician, critic, coach/teacher and so on and so forth. Do they overlap or are they simply exclusive, distinct games? Since games is an umbrella term for both they are within the same set. As I have been arguing there is indeed a connection. Historically, Ancient Greek is an example of reciprocal influence. There is also the extra-aesthetic dimension of art and sport, where politically and ideologically the seeming innocent games of art and sport are used for political, commercial and ideological ends or tools.

In conclusion, one may reasonably make the case that judo is a kind of art and by extension, one may claim that sport and art inter-relate.

Three Essays toward the Inter-Disciplinary Nexus between Art and Sport

This argument is based on the idea that they share an aesthetic dimension. I have argued as such by demonstrating that basic principles of art-making may be applied to an understanding

of the sport of judo. Accent to such ideas, I believe may have many profitable outcomes, both theoretical and practical.

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