POP ZEN MANIFESTO

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By
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ABSTRACT

I am an artist, do not forget it. My interests in mathematical sciences and being bilingual have made me question the function of language. Even though recorded words or written texts do not change their physical appearances; their meanings always contain certain amount of ambiguity, uncertainty, and undecidability. Those fuzzy boundaries of words depends on each individual's experiences, as such each word has brought me images and concepts which are uniquely my own.

Zen Buddhism focuses on irrationality and illogicality to achieve integrity of existence and experience of reality. However, even though one can achieve enlightenment, there is no vocabulary to describe it. So, no one can tell if he or she really did it, but guess and belief...

I, a Pop Zen monk, stick to rationality and logic to the bone. In other word, I focus on humor, sarcasm, and irony, all of which reveal a huge gap between letter and spirit. Thus, we have been experiencing the limitation of human knowledge every day. Interestingly enough, this kind of dilemma (ambiguity, uncertainty, and undecidability) can be found in the history of modern physics and mathematics. Then, my work, as visual analogy and punning, can be my own accelerator, in which I observe the effects of collision of different things, concepts, and images.

(This thesis is available in the translation to Code 128 Bar Code. Please contact me at killthebuddha2@hotmail)
Dedicated to the Buddha(s) I have killed
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HISTORY OF KEIKICHI HONNA AS OF TODAY

I have always been interested in making things. My childhood story? It is just as boring as any other artist's. Instead, let me tell you that I really hated mathematics. (Well, just the same as other artists, anyway.) Because my father happened to be the last smallpox patient in Japan, my entire family was hospitalized by force for two weeks. When I returned to school, math was a whole other world to me. Three months later I was in a junior high school with serious math difficulties, yet I had to get rid of mid term. I knew how to solve math equations, but I did not know how to make one from textbook problems. After staying up a night or two, I concluded that this was matter of translation from Japanese to mathematical notations. To every one's surprise, I got the highest score, and I found I liked math. Since then, it has never bothered me again to memorize formulas. I realized that the process to reach the formulas requires deeper thinking than simply memorizing, and if I have it, I can solve any problem.

This was my first awareness of relationships between language, pattern, and reality.

Even though art making attracted me as a way for self-expression, I have never thought I could be an artist. I thought (and I still do) I did not have special talent.

Instead, I have admired traditional Japanese craftsmen of any kinds and their simple, yet exquisite life-style.

As an undergraduate student, I majored in optical engineering because of my interest in mathematical science. This was one of the few high-tech industries that still demanded
skillful craftsmen. After I graduated, I started working at an optical equipment manufacturer, where a few legendary lens makers were still working. However, the company was beginning to leave “craftsmanship” behind in exchange for “cost effectiveness.”

I seriously needed to satisfy my hands’ desire. Then I found an art magazine article on glass art. I had never heard of it, yet glass was a familiar material, and its physicality - ambiguous nature - attracted me. Thus, I ended up in the United States to learn about glass art.

I quickly learned that the best thing I could do to be a better glass blower was to watch advanced students. Glass studios are noisy. Not only could I not hear what the instructor were saying, but also I could never quite understand them. Moreover, I was on the edge, since I quit my job to come to the U.S. So I had to watch seriously. From eight am to midnight, five days a week, I spent most of my time in the glass studio besides taking other classes. In three years, I was known as the best assistant, or was I simply the only person available all the time?

I started working at a glass production studio where my boss was infamous for his short temper and high demand. Every assistant either quit or was fired within two weeks to six months. I had survived there for four years only because I did not talk back. More precisely speaking I could not, since I did not have enough vocabulary to do so. Whenever I would try to comment on something, I would search for the word in English, test them against the word in Japanese, decide on the right words in English, doubt if they were right words, perhaps go get a cigarette, and thus the time for communication using words was long past. It was easier just to be mute, and I felt like this must be what it is like to be a monk.
However, in the next year I was the one and only assistant, and I became my boss's basic necessity. I had to be more and more absorbed in glassblowing because being a better glass blower was the way to acquire trust and respect without spending many words.

In classes other than glasswork, my situation was not better at all. In each class, there were more than thirty students who had mouths quicker than hands, and instructors could keep talking for more than five minutes without taking a breath. How dare I wait for thirty minutes or so to ask questions, which would take only thirty seconds? I decided not to bother myself to ask, and kept working on my work. If I did something wrong, someone would correct me. Then, when I made something interesting, they would pay attention to me. Otherwise, silence would be in the middle of busy classroom.

Even though I knew mutual understanding was possible only through dialogue, my incapability of English made it difficult to communicate my thoughts and to understand others in conversation. It has been, for me, synonymous to giving up. Thus, living in a foreign country for ten years has been a painful experience that makes me frustrated and confused. To say “atari” or “cuck” is more than just a matter of preference.

My interest in language has grown out of my experiences of being bilingual. Making comparisons between Japanese and English constantly amuses me. This led me to finding humor as a survival strategy. Humor can disarm people, and through humor, I can discern who is my fellow or enemy. Moreover, it can be surprise attack, criticism, and most importantly, an attention-grabber. As a consequence, I started using humor as an integral part of my work when I realized the ambiguity in such familiar words like vessel or craft.

I have not been confident about my artistic imagination. Meanwhile, intuition provides clues and motives for my creation. They never occur in sequence of any form; in short, they are unpredictable. Therefore, there is no coherent style among my work.
because I can not control them. In confusion and frustration, I got the urge to search my own style. (Formalism? Well, I just needed the sense of security in my art making to keep myself stable between excitement and depression.) Instead of looking for common formal qualities among my work, I had to analyze common conceptual ground. What is that? Since all my works have been the materialization of intuitive impulses = curiosity, I had to autopsy the structure of my curiosity.
THE ART WORK

To decide the form of my thesis exhibition, I was aware of the linearity of the gallery space and my work. Recognition of linearity undividedly relates to the dimension of the time; thus this concerns language, text, and narration. To visualize this, I used the concept of Japanese Shinto shrine. Most of the shrines have a relatively long approach between a Torii gate and the shrine. The Torii gate divides the territory of gods and men, and walking through the approach is the preparation to encounter the sacred, and the dramaturgy of it.

In between a Torii gate at the entrance of the gallery and an altar on the other end, I scattered white painted consumer products in the manner of a Japanese rock garden, which mimics the nature by placing natural rock. Since humans have reached every corner on the earth, surrounded by manmade products has become a natural state. I painted them in white as a metaphor of the fact that we can no more prove our identity without being registered in the computer network, and only the UPC codes on the folding screen on the altar can prove it. To place the talismans of commercialism – UPC codes – in the position of the sacred is sarcasm and irony.

The Torii gate symbolically divides the territory of gods and men. However, the whole shrine itself is always opened to the external world. My shrine is an expression of myself suspended between tradition and hi-tech, Japan and USA.
In the eleven foot high, twelve foot wide, and fifty foot long gallery space, I created my personal shrine for my MFA thesis exhibition. Everything inside of my shrine expresses my thought about the relationship between objects, reality, and language, contains contradiction and/or ambiguity. My work casts doubt about the objectivity of one's perception of reality and exactitude of language.

I covered all walls with wallpaper, which is filled with UPC codes of three inches by five inches. All UPC codes are the same format, but each of them slightly differs in size and the thickness of line. Chinese characters replace all numerals. Thus these UPC codes show their origin; they were photocopied from the handwritten original.

About ten feet from the entrance of the gallery there is a ten foot high wooden Torii gate. It consists of two nine and half feet high columns, six inches in diameter, and two beams, one on the top of the columns and the other about one feet below it, connecting the columns. Both columns and beams expose their skeletal structure, so that the Torii gate looks not only lightweight but also temporary.

On the left hand wall are four three foot by four foot paintings. One of them is placed before passing the Torii gate. It has three lines of Bar codes and three lines of English text run parallel to them. Since its title is “Roseta Stone,” it is easy to guess that the English text be the translation of the Bar codes.

After passing the Torii gate are three paintings of blown-up UPC codes. Each painted in different color: from the nearest, yellow, red, then blue. However their titles are, “Blue Painting”, “Yellow Painting”, “Red Painting” respectively, so that titles do not correspond to the color of paintings. Painted wooden gem forms are placed on the floor near by each painting. As if they indicate the title of paintings, they are painted in blue, yellow, and red from the nearest.
Each of them is matte finished and sanded so that around edges white under coat shows up partially.

On the right hand wall are two panels of identical size with paintings, hanging in a position so that they do not face to the paintings. These panels are covered with the same wallpaper UPC codes are printed on. They look like left over of paintings, at the same time they look they are growing and about to materialize from within the wall.

At the end of the gallery is the altar of the shine. There is an eight feet wide wooden staircase with three steps. On the top, a folding screen with four panels is standing. Each panel has wooden frame, and is bordered by gold leaves and strips of black paper. The picture plane of each panel is covered with UPC codes of identical size to the ones on the wallpaper. However it is easy to identify them as sumi ink on rice paper, not photocopied.

From the top of the staircase toward the entrance of the gallery, there are white painted consumer products (or their container) scattered randomly on the floor.
ANALYSIS

Believing in tangible thing as reality, I can not trust computers or virtual reality. Nevertheless, I have to pay attention to UPC codes as symbols of consumer and computer society, since every product has UPC code printed on it, and computers have become interface between reality and us. I write (I prefer “write” over “draw”) UPC codes on rice paper with ink and a brush, because both UPC codes and (Japanese) calligraphic art are black lines on white background. This is, at the same time; visual punning that combines totally different concepts; the Western rationality, that is modern science results in computers, and the eastern esthetic. (Zen, maybe?)

As an individual born and raised yet having felt a sense of congruity in Japan, I bear ambivalent feelings for using Japanese calligraphic technique; adoration to the tradition and criticism on contemporary Japanese society.

I see a parallelism between my work and Jasper Jones’ work that is said to criticize modernism by combining its methods and the very subjects it objected to.

From the beginning I saw parallelism with pop art in many aspects, and I considered it as pop art with Japanese twists. For example, Masami Teraoka is a contemporary ukiyoe painter who includes “McDonald”, “31 Ice cream”, “cam corder”, and such, in his perfect rendering of Edo period genre paintings. I feel commonality between my work and his, in terms of irony in the East-West relationship in our work. (He also lives in United States.)
The more I hand copied UPC codes, the more I felt like I became a machine, because the results were acquiring uniform appearance in exchange for losing uniqueness they once had at the beginning. In short, I was establishing a style and this was “art as a discipline” of a kind. This reminds me of Andy Warhol who employed mechanical means to deny originality, yet his unique style became more obvious by being impersonal. I made a folding screen of “hand written UPC codes” as a Japanese response to his multiple “Campbell soup” and “Coca-Cola.”

Although every UPC code looks the same, it functions as the name, because each product has its own code different from the other. Therefore UPC codes have aspects of a language that represents reality even though it is primitive. To make this point clear, I addressed issues common in languages. For example, nouns represent subjects, but their relation is not necessity, but arbitrary. Magritte’s paintings cast doubts on this relation. I made a painting of a blue colored UPC code, which was originally printed on a tube of red paint, and call it “Red Painting.” Thus, I visualized the arbitrary relationship among products and codes; the same as subjects and nouns. I applied this to the other two primary colors cyclically, to make a closed loop. This is an endless feedback loop; that is a visualization of Epimenides’ Paradox. I painted UPC codes on canvases. Because, first, to omit calligraphic qualities, I could direct viewers’ attention limited to the relationship between pattern and color. However, I did not use print making technique, though it was possible solution, because I could not see any rationale to use a mechanical process to replace another mechanical process. Thus, my paintings share certain characteristic with Lichtenstein’s since both mimic mechanical appearances. Second, because I had never tried “paint on canvas,” and my familiarity to pop art interested me in this format. (Well, last but not least, this looks like “Art.”)
PHILOSOPHICAL COMMENT

For me making art has been the verification of physical reality through dialogue with material, and sensation, which I feel while I am making my work, is reality. Then, my work, the conclusion of the dialogue, has come to existence, as the addition to physical reality. This is a visual model of my perception of reality, and functions as interface of dialogue with others. To reflect my situation in my work, every object contains a certain degree of contradiction and/or ambiguity. I took those aspects from the observation and the use of language. This contradictory – paradoxical aspect remind me of history of modern physics and mathematics, in which these aspects brought crisis and opened ways to new paradigm. Regardless in sciences or language, this contradictory – paradoxical, or ambiguous nature is unavoidable, and sets a certain limitation on human knowledge. This conclusion is strikingly close to oriental philosophy; such as Ying Yang or Zen Buddhism.

Since every life form has the capability to recognize pattern as a surviving strategy, my interest is in pattern as an instinct for human beings. Language, science, music, and art, all concern discovery and creation of pattern. The importance of language resides in the fact that thought processes, an attempt to better respond to complicate, ever changing reality would be impossible without it. Being transformed into words, arbitrary strands of sounds or symbols, reality becomes abstract entities that can be stored and transferred. Besides them, we can simulate reality through the manipulation of terms in
order to take better choice. (I still do not know why people, including me, of course, take the worst choice so often.)

Reality can be described by an infinite length of words, but this sacrifices simplicity for fidelity's sake. On the other hand, over simplification results in a description being applicable to any situation; it tells us no specific, thus tells us nothing about reality (mathematical logic, for example). Acquired information about the external world through sensory faculties would, then, be translated into and reconstructed by language. What we know to be reality has been molded by words – words that fall somewhere between holism (generalization) and reductionism (distinction). They complement one another; being specific so one causes uncertainty in the other. Therefore, perfect perception of reality, and reaching agreement with others about reality, is impossible.

Instead of holism-reductionism duality of our perception of reality, Zen is a practice in achieving total perception of reality beyond the boundary of the duality. Since our perception is necessarily imperfect, this practice has to take an anti-rational style. That is, beginning with the suspension of rational thought, then, it becomes at last possible to reach total perception. Therefore, questioning and answering in Zen does not make any sense at all for any reasonable person. However, the problem is that even if one can achieve total perception, or enlightenment, there is no vocabulary to describe it. Thus, the core of the religion is always told implicitly or metaphorically.

When we see a forest from a distance, we can not recognize each individual tree. Likewise, when we see an individual tree from within the forest, we can not recognize the forest. To relate these different experiences, we can finally understand the whole. This is the imperfection or limitation of our perception. Our perception necessarily relies on the
dimension of time. Without an understanding of time, regardless conscious or not, language and pattern recognition is impossible for us.

Thus we fix our experiences in the form of language to remember, to think about, or to communicate with others. However, language itself contains uncertainty and ambiguity, which is far from perfection and precision.

A word is a label given to a whole set that consists of a piece of reality (subject which the word represents) and concepts and images about it. The size of this "set" varies among individuals according to their memories and changing in time. Meaning and definition of a word in a dictionary is merely a greatest common denominator. Thus, sense of a word at a given moment heavily relies on context. (Humor, sarcasm, irony, misunderstanding, etc.)

Meaning of an isolated word is open-ended. To make sense in a given moment, human (sub)conscious tends to relate the isolated word in context: association - the same as free atoms' inclination to chemical bond. The frequency of occurrences of any particular relation/association depends on the size of the common set, which is shared by the involved words.

For example, the word "red" most likely makes association with such words like fire extinguisher, roses, a Ferrari, and so on. (Actually there is no necessary relationship between "red" and roses, or a Ferrari, but this offers really stable and strong visual image that is hard to resist.)

Association between red and Catholic Church is less obvious, and there are words which we are most unlikely associate with "red," such as anchovy or chalkboard. (Where do these examples come from, anyway?) Sometimes, I happen to come up with phrases such as "green stop sign." This is vividly imaginable, yet makes some sense of
contradiction, unless one is colorblind. I can not predict all these “associations”
happening, because they are a statistical phenomenon, which depends on the size of the
common set shared by the words/concepts involved. However, I can increase the number
of occurrence by enlarging the size of “whole set” to increase the size of the “common
set.”

All in all, my work is a visualization of these phenomena, and I have created my
work from my observation of tangible reality, which is resuted from my curiosity. Only
when I find a relationship and/or connection between one of my experiences and the
other, I can start making art. This is, for me, the evidence of my lack of “artistic
imagination,” and I need “rational observation” to counter balance the lack.
CONCLUSION

Formal elements and their relationship in perception, such as visual analogy and/or linguistic association, have always been the clues and motives in my art making. I express them with humor of a tongue-in-cheek variety. This is my formalism that concerns the way I excuse my work, and the way I excuse my ill behavior as an artist. Art making is a basic need for me since this functions as releasing my mind’s safety valve. However, art making also is shameless exposure of innermost privacy, which I should have kept away from the public eyes if possible. I guess all the artists are, more or less, exhibitionists, and if I am aware of this shameful situation, I have to learn etiquette. Humor is, for me, to excuse or to ask pardon, and sarcasm is to cover my embarrassment for the situation.

In my understanding of modernism, artists became aware of that they were naked, and attempted to tailor dresses, or at least they pretended to wear them. Postmodernism declared that we really are naked. Humans have been expelled from the paradise after learning to dress, and I do not think that we can go back there again by simply undressing. In my version of art making, Pop Zen, language allows the naked and dressed to exist at the same time.
PLATE V  RED PAINTING