

A Study on the “Zone Experience” of Leading Artists Through *Kansei* Analysis

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Abstract

The present study first examined two leading artists who participated in interviews addressing the *kansei* during a great performance. The results of these interviews were classified and compared against the “zone” experiences of athletes. The results of the present study show that the *kansei* characteristics that produce an awe-inspiring work of art have points of commonality with the zone properties in sports and demonstrate that the concept of “the zone” should be adapted to the arts as well. They also suggest that daily, nonverbal communication with nature and a sense of gratitude may possibly contribute to producing a great performance in the arts.

Introduction

The concept of “the zone experience,” which is a *kansei* experience (Shiki 2008), has been previously used in sports (Cooper 1998), but it has long been said that *mushin* and *muga* (absence of thought and absence of self), psychological states that are seen in the zone, are also involved in the arts in producing works that inspire emotion (Umewaka and Koizumi 2008; Shiki 2012a); it is believed that a zone similar to that in sports may exist in aspects of culture other than sports. However, the zone has not been studied in fields other than sports.

The present study therefore aims to focus on the *kansei* of two leading artists, investigating the *kansei* that allows an artist to create a best performance and elucidating the “zone” as it exists in the arts.

Research Methods

By referring to the properties of “the zone” according to Murphy and White as well as the constituent elements of the “flow experience” according to Csikszentmihalyi (Murphy and White 1978; Jackson and Csikszentmihalyi 1999), the present study organizes items for “zone properties” in prior research by Shiki and classifies their characteristics.

Two artists living in Okinawa (the printmaker Bokunen NAKA (presently 59 years old) and the textile artist

Michiko UEHARA (presently 63 years old)) were interviewed, and the results were compared against the subject matter of the zone experience in sports. The period of investigation was September and October 2012, and the site of investigation was Okinawa Island. Both artists are natives of Okinawa, and their works are in the possession of the Okinawa Prefectural Museum & Art Museum; both are leading award-winning artists from Japan who have held exhibits domestically and abroad. Mr. Naka is active in printmaking as well as in lyrical and musical composition and stage and theater performance; Ms. Uehara does everything herself, from stringing to weaving. The main subject of investigation was the circumstances of *kansei* when a great work is produced.

Results

The results of organizing the properties and characteristics of the zone in sports were used to make 29 classifications of properties and 122 characteristics. Tables 1~4 show the results of referring to these classifications to list the properties of some experiences during each interviewee’s best performances for the purpose of cross-checking them against the properties of the zone experience in sports, top athletes’ daily habits and thoughts, and the circumstances before and after their best performances, from prior research.

Tables 1 and 2 present the various aspects of great performances of printmaking and textile production summarized on the basis of classifications of zone properties in prior research. In printmaking, 20 properties and 41 characteristics (15 properties and 28 characteristics were zone-only) were identified, whereas 23 properties and 47 characteristics (17 properties and 35 characteristics were zone-only) were identified in textile production. Also noted were the artists’ daily habits and thoughts, and the circumstances immediately preceding and immediately following the performance that were believed to be related thereto. As can be seen in Tables 3 and 4, immediately preceding behaviors considered to affect performance were noted with a “B,” subsequent states with an “A,” performance-related circumstances with an “S,” and daily habits as well as perceptions and thoughts of habitual things with a “C.”

	Properties	Characteristics	Specific Aspects of the Printmaking Experience
1	Positive feelings and emotions	Enjoyment	Light-hearted fun.
2	Positive feelings and emotions	Gratitude	Printmaking feels like a gift. I feel like I am receiving something that already exists.
3	Flow	High concentration	There is a high level of concentration involved.
4	Flow	Immersion	I'm probably absorbed in carving prints.
5	Flow	Natural flow	I feel like I have scooped up water from a flowing river rather than having made the drawing myself. I feel like I have received something that was already there.
6	Intuition	Inspiration	I am moved by the theme suggested by the staff and am urged to draw a picture. Sometimes, I derive inspiration from the theme.
7	Intuition	Imagination	There is no conviction that I will remember, but it seems to me as though the picture flows straight from the tip of a knife.
8	Clarity	Clarity of self	Things become clear to me. It no longer seems like I am cast in doubt as though I am looking through frosted glass.
9	Transformation of perception	Holistic sense	I find that I can see my pictures from all directions and draw them.
10	Changing sense of space-time	Changing sense of space-time	After carving prints, I feel as if I did it in a very short span of time.
11	Changing sense of space-time	Sense of another dimension	There is a subconscious feeling that I have gone into a different zone.
12	Awareness of the past	◆ Recognition of past objects	The type, shape, and coloring of an imagined fish are consistent with the real thing.
13	Awareness of the past	◆ Playback of memory	Memory arises from the tip of a knife.
14	Detachment	◆ The lack of prejudice	I lack fixed conceptualizations or biases.
15	State of nothingness	Unconsciousness	The feeling is equivalent to there being no memory.
16	State of nothingness	Absence of thought	I experience a state of nothingness, in which I say that there is nothing. There is no hesitation and no trepidation.
17	State of nothingness	Self-renunciation	I lose a sense of self. It is not up to me what direction I draw from.
18	State of nothingness	Absence of desire	A picture is born when I work as if my life is not at stake. There is no strange desire.
19	Enlightenment	◇ Awareness	It feels like all of space-time is a picture. I feel like space is always filled with something.
20	Enlightenment	◇ Infinity	The creation of every picture feels to me like a big bang.
21	Enlightenment	◆◇ Resignation	I create my work by taking a little of it from somewhere. I thus feel a sense of surrender from the beginning.
22	◆ Superhumanity	◆ Superhuman simplicity	I can create prints very easily and quickly.
23	◆ Superhumanity	◆ Superhuman memory	I feel my prints are produced from memories of my childhood and my ancestors or something even more ancient.
24	Mystique	◇ Reverence	I think some enormous force like "God" makes me do the performance.
25	Other forces	Forces other than oneself	When I make a product that exceeds my own expectations, I feel that a force other than myself was at work.
26	Sense of unity	◆ Sense of unity with other people	When creating prints live, I sometimes feel like I have become one with the audience.
27	Sense of unity	◆◇ Sense of interconnectedness	The fact that the audience feels the same way as I do makes me feel like our hearts are deeply connected by the same vein.
28	Influence on others	Positive influence	The audience had a sense of accomplishment. The audience was impressed.

Table 1. Performance properties in printmaking*

*Note: For all tables, properties that were the first to be observed in these interviews are marked with white diamonds; characteristics that were identified in one person only are marked with black diamonds.

	Properties	Characteristics	Specific Aspects of the Textile Production Experience
1	Positive feelings and emotions	Enjoyment	It is fun.
2	Positive feelings and emotions	Gratitude	I feel like I have permission to use it, since the materials and colors are gifts from nature.
3	Positive feelings and emotions	◆Elation	Feels like a runner's high.
4	Positive feelings and emotions	Feeling of euphoria/A sense of ecstasy	Supreme sense that cannot be replaced with money, status, or honor.
5	Positive feelings and emotions	◆Lightness of heart	Consciousness is light.
6	Positive feelings and emotions	◆Sense of a dream come true	I weave while thinking, "Oh, yes, this is what I wanted to weave"
7	Flow	High concentration	There is a high level of concentration involved.
8	Flow	◆Self-purpose	Feeling that I want to weave forever.
9	Flow	Natural flow	Everything goes smoothly.
10	Flow	Immersion	I do not find myself thinking, "the yarn has gotten cut" or "this is a lot of hard work."
11	◆Serenity	◆Stillness	It is like feeling my way through a calm haze.
12	Clarity	◆Clarity of the surroundings	It becomes a kind of a purified space.
13	Clarity	Clarity of self	I am like vapor. I feel like purified elements arising from chaos.
14	Transformation of perception	Holistic sense	It feels like although I behold the yarn with my eyes, my mind assembles the whole as though from above, and a sense of touch is linked together in my brain.
15	Transformation of perception	◆Tactile acuity	I react by the touch of my hands.
16	Changing sense of space-time	Changing sense of space-time	I feel like I sense the same as a person meeting the silkworm for the first time, beyond time and space.
17	Changing sense of space-time	Sense of another dimension	It feels like I've seen a different world. I feel like I am tasting something rare and different.
18	Detachment	◆Detachment from result	I feel that having a sense of ego is troublesome.
19	◆Feeling of floating	◆Feeling of floating	I feel like my body might be floating by 1 cm.
20	State of nothingness	Unconsciousness	I didn't try to get "zero sense"; it just came down for a moment. I feel that my consciousness is free.
21	State of nothingness	Self-renunciation	I do not engage in self-expression from the start. To me, it feels more like "the fabric is being born" rather than being "made."
22	State of nothingness	Absence of thought	The senses of ego and consciousness fly away. I experienced "zero sense."
23	State of nothingness	Absence of desire	Things like assessing my surroundings, tradition, or art no longer have any relation to myself.
24	Enlightenment	◇Awareness	I find that all objects exist 360° around me, like a circle, and when I feel like that and take it all in, I feel like something is falling down toward me.
25	Enlightenment	◇Infinity	When I open up myself entirely, I feel I receive infinity.
26	Other Force	Forces other than oneself	There is no "my hand"; rather, I want to do the work with "this hand," so that I can pull on the material without killing its sense of life.
27	Sense of unity	◆Sense of unity of body	It feels as though the eyes and hands become one.
28	Sense of unity	Sense of unity with nature	I become one with the yarn. The yarn and I breathe together as if, once the silkworm spits it out, I handle it, and once I breathe out, the silkworm breathes in.
29	Sense of unity	◇Sense of equivalence	The yarn and I seem to have equivalent value.
30	Sense of unity	◆Sense of unity with tools and equipment	It's a relationship of taking it in, breathing together. For me, the yarn is greater than being a thing.
31	Influence on others	Positive influence	The audience is impressed.
32	Feeling of rhythm	◆◇Rhythm of nature	I weave riding a physiological rhythm, like lapping waves.
33	◆Love	◆◇Love of playing	I weave while thinking, "This is really nice, really quite nice."
34	◇Purity	◇Innocence	I feel like a child, running, running.
35	◆◇Sense of exploring the unexplored	◆◇Resolution	I go deep-sea diving alone, and I feel like I might possibly not come back.

Table 2. Performance properties in textile production*

*Note: For all tables, properties that were the first to be observed in these interviews are marked with white diamonds; characteristics that were identified in one person only are marked with black diamonds.

	Properties	Characteristics	Specific Aspects of the Printmaking Experience
B1	◇Prayer	◆◇Wish	Before carving, I pray "Please receive a picture by me" with folded hands.
B2	Positive feelings and emotions	Feeling of euphoria/A sense of ecstasy	Before creating prints, by walking in nature, I reconfirm that I belong to it, and I feel a little ecstasy.
A1	Positive feelings and emotions	Sense of achievement	I find it to be similar to attaining a certain sense of accomplishment.
A2	Positive feelings and emotions	Impression	I had the impression the audience had a sense of accomplishment.
A3	◇Purity	◇Innocence	I feel as though I have caught a very large fish and wish to show it to other people.
S1	Trapped circumstances	Extreme circumstances	When the date of an exhibition is approaching, I have no time to think, with the circumstances forcing me to carve about 30 sheets of plywood in about two months' time.
S2	Trapped circumstances	Strict environment	In a live format, I have to respect everyone's time and have no time to rest.
C1	Sense of unity	◇Sense of equivalence	I think all existence, including us, are all made of the same thing in the molecular sense.
C2	Sense of unity	Sense of unity with nature	I feel that humans are a part of nature.
C3	◇Interaction with nature	◇Communication with nature	I speak to the flora and fauna or walk by the mountains and sea while having a dialogue. I am able to understand the speech and signals of the animals.
C4	◇Interaction with nature	◇Absorbing nature	While walking by the sea or on a mountain, I sometimes eat fish or fruit.
C5	◇Love	◇Love of nature	I'm an animal and a nature lover and take great interest in them.
C6	◇Prayer	◆◇Wish	Before entering the sea, I gently fold my hands and say, "Please let today be a gentle swim, with no accidents."

Table 3. Performance properties in printmaking*[§]

	Properties	Characteristics	Specific Aspects of the Textile Production Experience
B1	◇Prayer	◆◇Gratitude	Before boiling the cocoon, I pray with the feeling of saying "thank you."
A1	◆◇Sense of effort	◆◇Sense of energy consumption	It was like being completely empty when I wove.
A2	Positive feelings and emotions	Impression	The beauty of the cloth is impressive.
S1	Trapped circumstances	Extreme circumstances	When limited in weaving very fine yarn, like 3-dernier (about 1 mm per 50) yarn.
S2	Trapped circumstances	Strict environment	To shoot a TV show so that the black cloth stretches around to show the fine hairline threads requires handling 50 pieces of 1-mm yarn in intense lighting.
C1	Positive feelings and emotions	Impression	The wind, sunset, bird feathers, and beauty of the fish are impressive. I am moved by the beauty of the yarns spit up by the silkworms.
C2	Intuition	Inspiration	Inspiration comes from nature.
C3	Intuition	Imagination	For the drawing of the exhibition space, I imagine a space where each work is exhibited, without drawing.
C4	Mystique	◇Reverence	It is an incomparable thought, that people cannot make even a single feather.
C5	◇Interaction with nature	◇Communication with nature	Inspiration often comes from nature, either by watching the sunset or watching buds sprout.
C6	◇Interaction with nature	◇Absorbing nature	I essentially eat natural things as much as possible, like vegetables, tofu, and fish. And sometimes I plant celery or tomatoes.
C7	◇Love	◇Love of nature	This material that is a blessing from nature is used entirely without waste. I like handling the yarn.

Table 4. Performance properties in textile production*[§]

[§] "B" represents "before performance"; "A," "after performance"; "S," "performance-related circumstances"; and "C," "daily customs."

*Note: For all tables, properties that were the first to be observed in these interviews are marked with white diamonds; characteristics that were identified in one person only are marked with black diamonds.

Regarding the properties during printmaking, "Positive feelings and emotions" had 5 characteristics, "State of nothingness" and "Sense of unity" had 4 characteristics, and "Enlightenment" and "Flow" had 3 characteristics. "Intuition," "Changing sense of space-time," "Awareness of the past," "Superhumanity," "Trapped circumstances," "Interaction with nature," and "Prayer" had 2 characteristics each, and "Clarity," "Transformation of perception," "Detachment," "Mystique," "Other forces," "Influence on others," "Purity," and "Love" each had 1 characteristic.

As regards textile production, "Positive feelings and emotions" had 8 characteristics; "Flow," "State of nothingness," and "Sense of unity" had 4 characteristics; and "Clarity," "Enlightenment," "Transformation of perception," "Changing sense of space-time," "Trapped circumstances," "Intuition," "Interaction with nature," and "Love" had 2 characteristics each. "Serenity," "Detachment," "Feeling of floating," "Other forces," "Influence on others," "Feeling of rhythm," "Purity," "Sense of exploring the unexplored," "Prayer," "Sense of effort," and "Mystique" each had 1 characteristic.

Common points between the results of the two artists and those of the zone in sports (hereinafter referred to as "sports zone") were the 14 properties and 24 characteristics of "Positive feelings and emotions," "Flow," "Intuition," "Clarity," "Transformation of perception," "Changing sense of space-time," "Detachment," "State of nothingness," "Other forces," "Sense of unity," "Influence on others," "Trapped circumstances," "Interaction with nature," and "Love."

Common points between the two artists were the 18 properties and 34 characteristics of "Positive feelings and emotions," "Flow," "Intuition," "Clarity," "Transformation of perception," "Changing sense of space-time," "Detachment," "State of nothingness," "Enlightenment," "Mystique," "Other forces," "Sense of unity," "Prayer," "Purity," "Trapped circumstances," "Influence on others," "Interaction with nature," and "Love." The two had different characteristics and frequencies as regards "Prayer" before production, however. Mr. Naka understood the pictures he would print as being already extant in the universe that is within the mind, even before he drew them, and thus expressed them as having been "received"; before printmaking, he would hold his hands together in front of the woodblock and chant, "Umarachikimisōri, fukachikimisōri," which, in Okinawan dialect, means "please be born, please hatch for me." Ms. Uehara, on the other hand, would face the silkworms that offer the beautiful silk whenever she would obtain yarn directly from the cocoon, and she would fold her hands in gratitude, saying, "Thank you for giving me your life."

Points of difference between the two artists and the sports zone included the 9 characteristics of "Awareness," "Infinity," "Reverence," "Innocence," "Sense of

equivalence," "Communication with nature," "Absorbing nature," "Love of nature," and "Wish."

Points of difference between the two were, for printmaking, "Recognition of past objects," "Playback of memory," "The lack of prejudice," "Resignation," "Superhuman simplicity," "Superhuman memory," "Sense of unity with other people," "Sense of interconnectedness," and "Wish"; and for textile production, "Elation," "Lightness of heart," "Sense of a dream come true," "Self-purpose," "Stillness," "Clarity of the surroundings," "Tactile acuity," "Detachment from result," "Feeling of floating," "Sense of unity of body," "Sense of unity with tools and equipment," "Rhythm of nature," "Love of playing," "Resolution," and "Sense of energy consumption."

Both entered "Extreme circumstances" during performances and immediately thereafter had "Positive feelings and emotions." Habits for both included "Communication with nature," "Absorbing nature," and "Love of nature."



Figure 1 "Chain of the universe 72 'Finger Tips'"
Produced by Bokunen Naka, ©BOKUNEN'S ART

Newly recognized performance characteristics in the present study were the 15 characteristics of "Awareness," "Infinity," "Resignation," "Reverence," "Sense of interconnectedness," "Sense of equivalence," "Rhythm of nature," "Love of playing," "Innocence," "Resolution," "Sense of energy consumption," "Wish," "Communication with nature," "Absorbing nature," and "Love of nature."

Discussion

Comparison of the Arts and Sports

The two artists' results matched the sports zone in 13 properties and 24 characteristics, which suggests the possibility that artists, too, have mastery of the "zone experience."

Additionally, two properties seen in printmaking, "Awareness of the past" and "Superhumanity," are also consistent with properties of the sports zone. This seems to contribute to conjuring up the image that an artist's ability to demonstrate an astounding memory is essential to printmaking. It also suggests that Jung's "individual unconsciousness" and "collective unconsciousness" are also reflected in printmaking because the artist himself mentioned "a memory of ancient times (Jung 1959)," felt the presence of infinite pictures that cannot be drawn even despite his continual drawing (as symbolized by his "Resignation"), had many mythical images even in his works themselves, and had mastery also of a "Sense of unity" with the audience.



Figure 2 "White plain fabric, warp, and weft 3 deniers 2006"
Produced by Michiko Uehara, ©UEHARAMICHIKO

The two properties of "Serenity" and "Feeling of floating" seen in textile production were also the same properties as in the sports zone. This "Sense of floating" may be a state of being freed from the physical weight of the body by becoming one with the yarn or may be the same state as the "levitation" seen in yoga (Naruse 1992; Murphy and White 1978). The possibility that the artist was aware of a dimensional world different from the material world was suggested as well in her statement that she "has seen a different world." The "Tactile acuity" seen in textile production was because 0.02-mm yarn is difficult to recognize with the naked eye. The manner of riding the wave of rhythm in unison with breathing in a single strand of thread is presumably that she melts into and is in phase with the universe as a part of nature.

As above, this is limited to two arts, printing and textiles, which have many properties in common with the sports zone, which suggests that the arts, too, may have an area that should be called "the zone."

Next, characteristics that were different between the arts and sports were investigated. Of the characteristics that were not included in the sports zone, "Reverence," "Absorbing nature," and "Love of nature" seemed to yield products where both artists dealt with "nature" in addition to the influence of the features and climate of Okinawa. What both artists had in common was their close relationship with nature, and it appears possible that nonverbal communication in interactions with nature and the taking of nature into the body may bring out a *kansei* that makes it easier to become one with the universe.

"Awareness" and "Infinity" evoke the notion that a "collective unconsciousness" was sensed, so it seems that artists also practice *kansei* in a mechanism similar to that in the sports zone, but artists have less strength and intensity in their bodily activities than athletes do, so presumably the state of the inner world is more likely to be stored in the memory even upon entering the same area as the sports zone.

This means that even though they differed somewhat in their content, the characteristics relating to a great performance in the arts are consistent in many respects with the sports zone, and artists, too, practice *kansei* similar to that of athletes and enter an area similar to that of the sports zone when they are producing a great performance.

Examination from the Perspectives of Eastern Thought and Brain Science

The notion of "Vijnapti-matrat" (consciousness only) holds that "the selfish latent mind, interested only in itself, opens its eyes wide to everything in *kukyōi* (the supreme class of being), and becomes an immaculate true wisdom that sees no distinction between oneself and others" (Tagawa 2010). The "Enlightenment" and "Sense of togetherness" seen in Ms. Uehara's performances and Mr. Naka's habitual thoughts appear to be properties showing attainment of *kukyōi*. They also seem to be equivalent to the Bodhi of *byodoshōichi* (wisdom of equality) in Vijnapti-matrat (Kobayashi and Tsutsui 2000).

The "pictures" whose "beings" were "received" by Mr. Naka's and Ms. Uehara's "infinity, entered upon when in an empty mind," may be expressions of the state in which internal information present in the internal world enters automatically into the internal space that becomes empty when the two artists lose their senses of self.

The gratitude felt by both artists for "receiving" is a positive feeling that athletes also embrace before a great performance, and it may presumably contribute to producing a great performance in culture (Shiki 2012b).

According to Newburgh, Buddhist meditation and the act of prayer were found to inhibit activities of the areas of

the brain dealing with directional localization that were equivalent to the areas that recognize the boundary between self and other (Newberg et al. 1997/2000; Newberg and d'Aquili 2000). This suggests that although the frequencies were different, both artists underwent "Prayer" before a great performance and "Self-renunciation" during a performance, and both had mastery of the "Sense of unity" with nature, entering a state of "absence of self" that thus also inhibits areas dealing with directional localization when artists produce great products.

The fact that the "absence of self" was also recognized in printmaking and textile production may suggest that, like the "stage of absence of self" among Noh actors (Umewaka and Koizumi 2008), activity of the frontal lobe is suppressed in "the zone"; however, this requires further investigation of the brain during artistic activities.

Conclusion

Interviewing two artists from different fields and studying their *kansei* yielded results suggesting that the individual unconsciousness and collective unconsciousness contribute to the production of works of art in printmaking and in textile production. The mechanism of *kansei* that enables production of a great performance in art is highly likely to be similar to the mechanism present in "the zone" in sports, and the concept of the zone should also be applied in the arts.

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