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**Introduction**

The first time I practiced aikido, I started to cry afterwards. It was a Monday evening in February 2016. I stepped up on the tatami in soft cotton clothes, the same ones I wear when I’m relaxing at home - clothes that clearly marked me as a beginner. The rest of the group was dressed in white gi and some had wide, blue trousers. I was horribly aware of the struggles my body underwent as it to mimic the movements shown by the instructor. It was like the first awkward sentences of a new language. It was embarrassing. Not that anyone was giving me a hard time. No, I was met with patience and encouragement – when they sat in a line at the end of the mat waiting for me to finish my rolls over to their side and I repeatedly fell over like a beetle, they politely looked away to spare me humiliation. But the embarrassment and struggle was not the reason for the tears on my way home. I had experienced a profound feeling of relief. This simple, neutral grip of the wrist, held so much of what I needed, yet was previously completely unaware of. I had come to a place where you searched for something, but it was unclear what it was. It was not to learn an efficient self-defence - every martial art practitioner can tell you that effectiveness in a street-fight situation is not aikido’s strong side. Yet it is unquestionably Budo, and with that came a physical awareness of where your body is, where the attack is hitting and how you need to move. And still with this gentleness for the other’s body. Always with care for the other, whoever it is who has launched into an attack towards you.

This mystical search for a perfect encounter between two imperfects beings, that undoes the knot of the attack, is inseparable from my painting practice. Of course I didn’t know all that when I went home that Monday evening, I just had an overwhelming feeling that I was in the right place doing exactly the right thing.

Between 2012 and 2014 I went to Pernbys Paint School with someone that became a close friend of mine. She had practiced aikido for a long time and was a shodan, meaning that she could practice with black belt. During the two years we studied together I was never interested in this somewhat eccentric hobby of hers, yet it came up in conversation a lot. After Pernbys I started Konstfack and she went off to the Royal academy in Copenhagen. We skyped regularly and kept having those long conversations on art which had become a regular thing during our education. When I told her of things I thought about in my painting practice, for example to never meet resistance with force, she quite often said “that’s just like in aikido”. Yet it took until 2016 before I actually tried it. I asked her permission to go to the place she practiced, because I knew that it was very important to her. And after a moments’ hesitation she said yes, you can go to my dojo.
In the Dojo

A translation of the word Aikido from Japanese could be “Way (do) of harmony (ai) with ki.” The founder, Morihei Ueshiba, born 1883 in Tanabe, Japan, developed aikido in the early 1920s. Ueshiba studied various types of martial arts in his youth. He was a student under Takeda Sōkaku, master of Daitō-ryū, a martial art dating 900 years back. He also studied jujutsu and kenjutsu. Ueshiba, a deeply religious man, was involved in the Shinto-derived Omoto Sect. In the synthesis of these different types of budo and religious belief, he created aikido.

Aikido is a martial art, meaning a combat system, that rejects all forms of violence. The place of practice is called dojo, literally meaning place of the way. Aikido only consists of defence techniques, making contests impossible. In aikido you always protect yourself and don’t let anyone trespass into your space, however you never inflict injury to another (although training might hurt if you do it wrong). Aikido has no separations in weight classes or gender since the techniques do not depend on physical power. Teenagers practice with those over seventy without trouble.

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1 The spirit of aikido, Ueshiba Kisshomaru, Kodansha USA, 1984, p.19
2 Budo, Ueshiba, Morihei, Kodansha , 1991, p. 8-14
Tori (or nage) is the attacked, uke is the attacker. Tori does the actual technique, uke is being led and follows as intelligently as possible to hold their own centre and maybe get another shot in. These roles are switched when the technique has been done on the left side twice and on the right side twice.

Kata (meaning form) is what we practice most of the time. It’s is how to perform the techniques in aikido, how to do it. The choreography. There are different attacks, such as punches and grabs, yet they are not the actual aikido but something that is needed for the practice. The techniques end with tori pinning the uke to the ground or throwing them away. The different techniques are then applied differently depending on the attack. A strike will not be handled the same way as a choke, yet the same technique can be used in the end. The kata is a bodily knowledge that must be internalised. Once the steps and the movements come effortlessly, it’s possible to move on to other issues such as correct mae (distance), direction of ki, signals of the hand (such as how one reacts to a stiff arm) to name a few in an infinite row. A quite large part of the training is devoted to falling correctly. It might sound weird and artificial but is a way to take care of yourself and the fastest way to come back into a new position.

I will linger on some of those issues that are of relevance to the general understanding of aikido. The grip to start with, is very important. It’s where the physical contact between uke and tori most often is, a point for giving and receiving signals from your opponent. In aikido we use grips a lot. One could think that the safest is to move away from your opponent, and that is the case if you can move far enough, fast enough. But if you don’t, a contact is safer, as you always feel where your opponent is. The distance, or mae, is another factor to be considered. Can you be reached by the other? Are you too far away, so that you have to reach? When reaching outside your sphere, you lose your centre, balance and strength, making it easy to tip you over. Better then to move your feet.

Finally I would like to touch upon the concept of ki. A translation would be energy, or life force. In aikido, it is something referred to regularly and quite casually considering its mystical character. It is taken for granted that the majority of practitioners have has their own ideas and experiences on this subject. “Ki is directed here”, “have more ki in the arm”, “don’t forget to use your ki” can be heard on the mat, and the notion is, although with variations, accepted. Ki developed as a metaphysical principle in various schools of Chinese thought. Its meaning differed, as it could be both the source of creativity expressed in the form of yin and yang (Lao-tzu) and the divine force that penetrates all things (Kuan-tzu) among many other interpretations. Around 700 bc the principle of ki was introduced to Japan and was combined with indigenous views of nature. To Ueshiba, ki was central in the practice of aikido. According to him, the purpose of aikido was to harmonize the individual ki with the universal ki, through constant training of mind and body. The ki would then be “free and fluid, indestructible and invincible”.

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3 *The spirit of aikido*, Ueshiba Kisshomaru, Kodansha USA, 1984, p. 21-22
4 *The spirit of aikido*, Ueshiba Kisshomaru, Kodansha USA, 1984, p. 15
Ueshiba and also a prominent aikidoka, writes, in a slightly more down to earth way, about ki:

“While the subject of ki may be treated historically and philosophically, our interest is to approach it through personal experience, training and realization in a martial art…Ultimately, the proper understanding of ki must be experimental as well as intellectual, and intellectual as well as experimental.”

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5 The spirit of aikido, Ueshiba Kisshomaru, Kodansha USA, 1984, p. 26
In the Studio

“I don’t want to make the painting, I want the painting to invent itself and surprise me”
Charlene von Heyl

“Always keep the mind as bright and clear as the vast sky, the great ocean, and the highest mountain, empty of all thoughts”
Morhei Ueshiba

I have been interested in process of making a painting since the years at Permbys Paint school. I tried to pin down rules I invented for an outcome that surprised me (I will show those first rules later on). Of course that couldn’t be done as reality is much too complex, and as soon as these rules were on paper, they didn’t apply anymore. But I have some general observations, that have shaped the way I work, my method.

To get somewhere I need to start. That is the first stroke. On rare occasions, on really good days (or more accurate – moments) the first stroke is the right one, one that has what I’m looking for. If not I have to do it again – already here my mood has changed a little. I will undoubtedly be a bit disappointed that the first stroke didn’t work. Then I have to erase that stroke and start over. I can keep my temper up for the first tries but slowly the process wears me down and I get more and more tired and more and more covered in paint. Sometimes I continue until I am like a wet rug begging the painting to become, until it finally does. I can only do this for a few hours and that’s why it is impossible to start a painting later than 1 pm. If I do it later there is a risk that I don’t have the energy to redo it is as many times as needed and I will end up with a gesture that’s not truly good enough.

How do decide what is a good gesture? When doing the big gesture, what I call the nerve of the painting, then I’m searching for a feeling of relief. I have thought a lot about what qualities evoke this feeling and I have ended up with two things. The first one I have already mentioned, and it is the element of surprise. It tells me something new. Amy Sillman describes something similar in her process:

“… every one of my paintings is a kind of animated movie, a series of adjustments and overhauls with scraped-off colors, until a kind of a weight or visual surprise tells me something I didn’t already know and I stop.”

The second quality has to do with energy. I want to see the energy, ki, if you want, of my own hand in the stroke. I want to feel my own movement. The movement must convey the force and speed that created it. And when these two qualities are seen in a gesture, then I’ll let it be. This only happens however when I don’t want or don’t project anything, but just do, with an honest don’t give a fuck approach, combined of course with the utmost love. This is nothing that can be faked, if I want just a little bit, the outcome will be boring, stiff and predicable. And when I start I almost always

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6 Statements of Intent, Godfrey, Mark, Artforum, April 2014, p 299
want too much – that’s why I get disappointed. If I managed to mentally be where I should, there is a chance that I wouldn’t have to do the gesture a second time. But all days aren’t good and if they were – there would be no need for me to practice this by painting. Painting is like a focused lesson. When the stakes are too high, I will choke and movement will be stiff, predicable and cowardly - a safe one, one that I have seen before. It’s not easy getting there, because I cannot fake it. If I paint on the wrong day, the only solution is to paint my way there. This means failure on top of failure until I have completely surrendered, when I have nothing more to give, then it suddenly happens. On good days this is not needed. Then I don’t care as much, my identity isn’t mixed up with the result and I can keep my cool. Then I’m making the right decision by myself.

When the big gesture is done the pace slows down. Then I can wait a long time before moving on. Now I need to paint what this particular painting needs. In this part of the process I’m allowed to use everything I can come up with. Taking a picture on my phone and draw on the image on the screen, searching the web for a pattern, referencing another artist, it’s all allowed. I can casually redo, try something out and then change my mind. I cannot get precious with what I’ve made, I have to risk it. Both the listening and the doing is slower, but not less intense. The movements are small, the brushes are small.

The surfaces of these different ways of working then harbours different tempos, I think of them as the extended time and the compressed time. The compressed time is where a lot of time as been spent on a small surface. The extended time is when really short time has been spent on a large surface - the extended time has the big, fast movements. The hand moves almost as fast in the compressed time, but because the movement is smaller, the surface is dealt with much more slowly. Between these two becomes a tension.

The Lanterns, 125x150 cm, 2020
Taoist Thought Hovering

I have been searching for other descriptions of what the painting practice has shown me. The search started in 2014 at Pernbys paint school. I formulated rules that were quite hard to follow, but when I managed new and interesting things always happened in the studio. So I tried to obey them both when painting, but also in general life. They were pretty harsh, yet to me they were liberating. A translation would be:

*Manifesto of indifference*

You shall be satisfied
You shall not expect anything
You shall not wish for anything specific
You shall not care
You shall work for the sake of working
You shall be in your body
You shall have evenly spread energy
You shall not think ahead
You shall appreciate the little things
You shall take things as they come
You shall follow whims
You shall trust the cosmos

When I showed the manifest to a friend, she said that it was Zen. This was the same friend that introduced me to aikido. Since then I have searched in first Zen and later also Tao, as the first developed close to and partly from the latter. Text from both belief systems keep on being valuable to me as something to see my practice through, systems that help me think. The Taoist philosophy however encircles the impossibility to decide on fixed rules, as a good deed can cause harm if it is not coming from the right place within. And when something is stated true there will always be millions of unseen possibilities where said statement will not be true, although it might be impossible to foresee it. And since setting up a system of rules was exactly what I had been trying to do, in the following years I realised that it cannot be done – although it’s a pretty good try.

And so the texts of Lao-tzu and Chuang-tse have been my companions for some years now, providing me with elusive advise and paradoxes (I must stress however that I'm not considering myself as any kind of authority on the subject, I know much too little). The thoughts of Lao-tzu and Chuang-tse, have also influenced the teachings of aikido directly and indirectly through Zen. Metaphors such as “staying on the way” and concepts of qi and yin and yang are not only recurring frequently in the writings of the founder and his son, but are core principles of aikido. Also “do” in aikido refers to “way".
In Tao Te Ching, negations are used to describe Tao, as nothing that can be said can be Tao. The word Tao literally means “Way”. There are no clear rules about how to live in accordance to this unspoken force, but only riddles and vague metaphors. There are a lot of jokes. The sages of those old stories, often poor as church mice, have the nerve to laugh at it all. They value uselessness and yet also hard work. To do nothing is not valued higher than to do something or vice versa, but it is just a matter of timing on when to do or not to do.

Together the painting, the philosophy and the aikido form a complete circle as the relationship between martial arts and both Zen Buddhism and Taoism is very close. This section can be found in the article on martial arts in Encyclopaedia Britannica:

“The primary unifying aspect of the East Asian martial arts, which sets them apart from other martial arts, is the influence of Daoism and Zen Buddhism. This influence has resulted in a strong emphasis on the mental and spiritual state of the practitioner, a state in which the rationalizing and calculating functions of the mind are suspended so that the mind and body can react immediately as a unit, reflecting the changing situation around the combatant. When this state is perfected, the everyday experience of the dualism of subject and object vanishes. Since this mental and physical state is also central to Daoism and Zen, and must be experienced to be grasped, many of their adherents practice the martial arts as a part of their philosophical and spiritual training.”

To me these text has served as ineffective, confusing advice to know myself. By first investigating the soil from which your impulse originates, and then when you see that clearly – just trust what I call the true gut. To manage that, and to rule out emotions that come from for example fear, as false gut, is something that needs practicing. To keep being sensitive to yourself and yet receptive of the situation. Listening inside, outside, and all the same not want anything with it. Keep on your toes and relax there.

But as I live on I will start drifting if I don’t get to the practice court often enough, just like your clothes get dirty if you don’t continuously wash them. That is why I paint, and that is why I practice aikido.

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Wordlessness

“Ai-ki cannot be exhausted
By word written or spoken
Without dabbling in idle talk,
Understand through practice”

Morihei Ueshiba⁹

The Magnifier, 90x66,5 cm, 2020

I had painted for many years when I started to practice aikido. Suddenly I was bilingual. It was as if I was given a chance to practice the same thing but with different tools. I could work in paint and in kata. In movements that would remain onto a surface or remain only as a memory in mine and the body of another person. They are both languages but none of them are concerned with words.

I think the lack of words is important to reflect upon. Words are strong and defining but leave out much more than they fixate. The lines of association are too strong, they overpower all your other senses. Narratives are seductive. The thinking habit is too strong. In that sense I feel closer to the wordlessness in the music of a Bach cantata than to a fellow painter with a strong narrative. The limitations of the mind are upheld by words, duping us into a false belief of understanding, shaping our minds and our perception of the world.

When we find words to attach to something, we move away from the sensory experience, as an idea has been linked to it and fitted into our inner world of understanding. You cannot experience and think at the same time.

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⁹ The spirit of aikido, Ueshiba Kisshomaru, Kodansha USA, 1984, p.76
Knowledge and Spontaneity

“When stillness culminates, there is spontaneous movement - this is the force of the potential” ¹⁰

John Cage make the distinction between mind and the heart as the difference between one’s ideas of order as opposed to one’s spontaneous actions.¹¹ How is it possible to be spontaneous? Intuition, needed to make the spontaneity meaningful, is built on knowledge. Dreyfus and Dreyfus define in their essay *Five Steps from Novice to Expert* intuition as “the understanding that effortlessly occurs upon seeing similarities with previous experiences”.¹² Both painting and aikido are skills. You have to learn how to paint, how to mix the colour, what composition is, how to make the figure in a croquis stand and not float. And you have to learn the movements of aikido. There are set rules and systems for both. And even though art is about breaking and pushing rules, I am of the opinion that it is proper to at least know the rule you are breaking, as a lot of other artists undoubtedly will. If you don’t know the rules you are breaking, then you don’t know what you are saying. This means you have to know the kata to be spontaneous – it must be in your backbone. Just as with painting. When you know the language you can speak freely, and play with the words. Kata is colour and composition.

Spontaneity is not acting on a thought or idea, because once focused on the idea, you have left the present, your focus is inward not outward and then it’s impossible for you to react with the speed and naturality needed for the situation. To be spontaneous I first have to learn and then when I have the knowledge, let go of it. Then we have intuition. You have decided to do a technique but the distance is all wrong for that particular technique but you do it anyway - it will look and feel wrong, and in a “real” situation, your technique wouldn’t work. I have idea on a painting and I execute it exactly even if the painting is telling me something else - it too will look and feel wrong because it is created in my own mind without consideration for reality. That is not a spontaneous action.

The spontaneous movement is practicing complete trust in your own knowledge, body and intuition. It is a movement without an ulterior motive. It is one with its result. The movement is complete in itself since it doesn’t want any more than it is. If it’s not compared to an expectation, then it is hard to judge it as good or bad. Spontaneity demands consideration, a delicacy for the situation and when not to act. It’s therefore not a blind action. A spontaneous action causes no suffering since there was never anything (an expectation) to compare to. However – the movements in the mark making that are not spontaneous (and therefore are compared to expectations) will cause suffering in the creation process until I have reached the proper state of not giving a fuck and spontaneous movement is achieved.

¹⁰ *The Taoist I Ching*, translation Cleary Thomas, excerpt from *Directions for Blessings* – by Lu Tung-Pin, Shambhala Publications, 1986, p. 15
¹¹ *Silence*, Cage, John, Wesleyan university press, 2013, p. 18
¹² *Mind over machine: the power of human intuition and expertise in the era of the computer* Dreyfus, Hubret and Dreyfus, Stuart, Oxford:Basil Blackwall 1986, p. 28
How is a spontaneous movement generated? The one who has nothing to lose can afford to be spontaneous. Therefore it's important to put myself in a position where I have nothing to lose. It’s possible to because the question of value is floating. A spontaneous movement is doing the only natural thing.

In aikido spontaneity is practiced through randori. Randori is free techniques from one specific or different attacks. This was a scary thing for me for a long time. In my dojo we usually practice in groups of three or four which means that there are always people watching you. In the beginning I often froze. The pressure of coming up with a technique was too much, leaving me paralyzed. People kept saying “just do anything” which didn’t help much. I learnt to avoid the embarrassing freeze by being the opposite to spontaneous – I thought of techniques I knew before I decided which ones to do. I had to do this because I didn’t have enough techniques internalized yet - I didn’t know enough.

The reality is that I can only manage true spontaneity when the stakes are low. When I am under a time pressure for example, I need some support. Then the initial resistance, in the form of an idea for example, has to be more robust. However, when having a safe line, the painting will take a new way anyway, although it might not be a huge step from the original idea, there is always at least one larger element that came from the process and not from my mind. If it didn’t I would consider it a failed painting. It is very similar to the randori. If I am practicing with a close friend and it is just the two of us, I would probably be so relaxed that I could completely trust my own knowledge and just follow the movement. If I was to be put under more pressure, at a grading with an audience for example, then the stakes would be too high and I would have to think of some techniques to do in advance - a safe line. I just don't have enough experience to do completely without yet. I hope to someday lose the safe lines no matter how high the stakes were, both in aikido and in painting.
Meetings and Resistance

One of the key principles in aikido is never to meet force with force. One explanation for this is that if the force would be stopped with force, then the meeting between opponents would become a mere test of strength, and one day you will meet someone stronger. But I would say that the reason is more imbedded in the philosophy of aikido to go with the natural movement. The energy directed at you needn’t be stopped, merely redirected. That is why you always get out of “the line”, to stand slightly on the side in all techniques. You always go with the direction of the energy, that’s why we are taught “when pushed, pull back; when pulled push forward”.

Why does uke follow the signals of tori? Because it’s the smart thing to do. To follow intelligently, as uke this often means to accept the movement of tori as in might lead you to another chance to attack. To resist won’t give you a new opportunity, it will only lock you. But maybe you resist anyway because you don’t dare to see where accepting takes you – because you can’t predict it. Although it might seem like a better idea to fight in a situation you know, the current one, than to risk temporal defeat in a new position – however that position, the change, is loaded with new opportunities. This is true in the dojo as well as in the studio. Accept and see where it takes you. Accepting is not losing face.

Or maybe the reason for the stiffness is that you had decided to move a certain way and it is really hard to change direction in the moment. It is hard to keep up and adjust all the time, but I guess in this lies the real practice, in aikido, painting and in everyday life as well. Maybe it is like the founder Ueshiba says:

“Having accomplished unification of mind and body and being oneness with the universe, the body moves at will offering no resistance to one’s intentions.”

Uke is needed for aikido to happen. If there is no attack, there is no reason for aikido. The attack is a problem, created in the dojo. We need it to practice. An initial resistance is also needed for the painting to happen. It could be a priming that I need to relate to, to make it work. It functions as an impulse, or trap. However, the obstacle can be ever so small. An idea or a thought is also a resistance, it is something coagulated, that needs to be dealt with. An idea is an obstacle on a mental plane, and just as a physical obstacle, it is a precondition for what is about to happen. In the end the solution is always in the mind – to, no matter what, surrender to the painting and follow. The resistance offers something concrete to use as starting point. The coagulated is firm, therefore something to step on, enabling the launch.

Many painters refer to the act of painting as a confrontation. Even though thinking of matter as a living being is a romantic cliché, through the process of applying paint over and over it will take on something that seems like a will of its own. You do something, and the result of that, when looking at it, almost becomes a move by the

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13 The spirit of aikido, Ueshiba Kisshomaru, Kodansha USA, 1984, p. 24
painting. Something I need to respond to. I am thinking about Yoshihara Jiros Gutai Manifesto.

“In Gutai Art, the human spirit and matter shake hands with each other while keeping their distance. Matter never compromises itself with the spirit; the spirit never dominates matter. When matter remains intact and exposes its characteristics, it starts telling a story and even cries out. To make the fullest use of matter is to make use of the spirit. By enhancing the spirit, matter is brought to the height of the spirit.”

Art theorist Isabelle Graw argues that the finished painting could also be interpreted as a quasi-person with a history and agency. She writes that it’s the remains of the artists’ labour that takes a life of its own, and it’s the idea of labour as value that evokes this fetishist reading of the object. After all the turns it takes for me to finish a painting this is not an unfamiliar way of thinking. To me the finished painting acts like a character telling its own story and that changes in the meeting with different people.
Control and Failure

“I think that’s why Unlearning has been a word among artists for such a long time. A somewhat vain attempt to rid ourselves of the ideas and limit our view, and even though they may never go away, the mere knowledge of their exitance helps toward a more open thinking on what the world is and foremost what we don’t know. To be comfortable in the uncertainty must be the achievement to strive for – without striving of course.”

Charlene von Heyl

To me both painting and aikido is about the balance between having control and losing control. Neither constant control or no control would work in either practice. You gain control by developing skill and knowledge, but none of that knowledge will come alive without the courage to lose control. Losing control could be letting someone throw you, losing your balance or just risking a day’s work in the studio. To perform exactly what was imagined is to try to maintain control throughout the creative process. It is the safe way, no risks taken. Ideas are formulated and then made. There is no gap in that – no cracks where the unknown can slip in. What is shaped by your imagination is also limited by it. And you will not be surprised by it.

What is failure? Why can’t I leave a painting, a stroke, that is not good enough? It has to do with the pain of seeing my own cowardice, my fear. And the whole point of even paint, of training, is to get over that fear. To move past it and take the risk. Fear makes my muscles tighten. It makes my body stiff. I can see it in the stroke on the surface, and I know that my aikido partner can feel it in the grip. They can feel my hardness, my unwillingness to let go. I am afraid it will hurt, the aikido movement or the emotional response to not perform well enough. It pains to be inadequate. And that fear will make the fall stiff and clumsy and the gesture predictable and uninteresting. How do I let go of fear of not being good enough, which in reverse is also a want – a desire to be good enough? The answer is always surrendering, it could be a violent surrender, or a tired one, but the expectations and the wants must go. Like Agnes Martin said:

“The way of the artist is an entirely different way. It is a way of surrender. He must surrender to his own mind. When you look in your mind you find it covered with a lot of rubbishy thoughts. You have to penetrate these and hear what your mind is telling you to do. Such work is original work. All other work made from ideas is not inspired and is not artwork.”

Why am I not done then, when I have that gesture? When I have pushed myself over the edge? Because the painting, as painting, can always be more. Now the excavation begins to find the balance between chaos and order. And the gestures start to vibrate when they, uninhibited, meet the restrained, the meticulous. The two paces of painting in the different surfaces becomes symbols of control and no control.

16 Agnes Martin, Haskell, Barbara, Chave, Anna C & Krauss, Rosalind, Whitney Museum of American Art, 1992, p. 10
Unknowability and Trust

"I have to destroy the painting I know to make the one I don't know yet"
    Jaqueline Humpries 17

“I can get beyond (design) only in the unknown…I can force myself into that concentrated mindspace that is just looking and goes beyond thinking.”
    Charlene von Heyl18

Why is it so hard to paint? For me it seems like it has something to do with the intent of honesty. The sincerity that I demand of myself when painting is making the actual making of the work something scary. It is unsettling to be in the unknowable. It is not safe. I never know where I will end up and am always balancing on a thin line. This sense of uncertainty, however disturbing, is telling me that I am taking a risk, which is a good thing. This means both risking work already done, but also risking wellbeing as a failed try always is painful. I had a teacher that said that you’re only as good as your latest painting – a horrifying saying and though it’s obviously not true, it feels true.

Making the right decision can only be done when I listen to the painting, and not pursuing an idea. This means being fluid. To paint is to practice not wanting, not protecting (for example a nice corner, when the rest of the painting is shit), it is to practice trust. To dissolve all those hard coagulated things that actually are just desires and fear for losing control and risking yourself. It feels like risking your essence. This is making in the unknowable.

As times goes by, discoveries, tricks, if you want, that originally are created by a fumbling in the unknowable, becomes a skill. An internalised tool that can be used, but never like a recipe, no, with the utmost consideration for what the particular painting needs. This I have to be very careful with.

Helen Molesworth coins unknowability when writing about the abstract painter Amy Sillman in 2013. She writes that unknowability is something feminism put on the table in art, and that it is a result of the questioning of power (feminism) that led to unknowability emerging as a virtue. Molesworth continues that it is something to be considered rather than feared, a condition cultivated rather than denied.19 This is a view I share. Painting keeps on being the language of the unknowable. And yet to pursue unknowability as a core in art making is something that produces profound knowledge on how to make marks on a surface.

Unknowability is only possible to perform if you let go of ideas and manage to follow the painting. To really do what the paintings needs means taking risks. To take risks is in extension to risk your mental position as a professional artist (yet all silent

17 Statements of Intent, Godfrey, Mark, Artforum, April 2014, p. 299
18 Statements of Intent, Godfrey, Mark, Artforum, April 2014, p. 299
19 One Lump, or Two, Molesworth, Helen, The Insitute of Contemporary Art, Boston 2013, p. 53
knowledge still remains within the body so there is really no need to panic), which in a time when upholding a position is crucial to your personal brand, is a highly dangerous act even performed unwatched in the studio. And for that very reason it is something even more important to practise.

Can you give away the unknowable? It would be the most extraordinary gift, because what is it? It’s about not having fear, just complete trust.

I see paintings as a chance to give the unknowable to the viewer and help destabilise the process of looking. The making of the objects echoes in the perception of them. The first thing the beholder gets is energy, the direct reading of an arm that has moved over a surface with shifting speed and force. This is from one body to another. Then the thought catches up and tries to understand the painting. How is it made? Which layer came first? I want to evoke different paces in the seeing. I want the rhythm of the process to resonate in the experience of the work. I want to give an impulse in the form of energy, in that state is the beholder passive, a receiver, to then be insecure and finally activated to solve the problem. The last part is when the piece is connected to earlier experiences and references, in that phase however, my control as an artist is limited.
Glittering Moments

Now and then, I have training moments close to perfection. I never know when they will occur, and it is of course quite seldom. One of those moments was after a week-long aikido seminar in the Stockholm archipelago some years ago. On the eighth day, a Saturday, the seminar was over. After such an amount of practice, I felt a need for more aikido that almost had an addictive tone to it. Now I know that it’s a feeling that hits every year after this particular seminar. With the return to the city came consequently the abstinence of the five-hours-a-day practice, so, I headed to the dojo that evening. A small group was there, those that hadn’t had enough, and an unofficial class was held. Although you manage to practice with a lot of people during that week, some are inevitably missed, since around 120 aikidokas attend. I was beyond tired, but I cherished that last hour as I knew that a lot of those that had travelled from across Europe and in some cases other continents, would leave the very next day. This was the last chance to practice with them. During the second half of that extra practice I teamed up with an aikidoka I had missed. It was someone in my own age, with a white belt, just as me. Surprise, was what I felt when we started. I saw also surprise in my partner’s eyes. Who was this person so responsive to my every smallest movement, with a grip tight yet yielding? The feeling was wonderful. The line where my hand stopped and my partner’s wrist begun was dissolved. We moved with high speed, yet it felt like time was slowed as I had time to expand movements fully before the inevitable contraction. When it was time to switch technique we bowed as usual and practiced with others. This short aikido meeting was an example of one of those training moments that makes it possible to drag myself to the dojo even a Friday night when all I want is a beer, or an early Tuesday morning when the bed is the only reasonable place to be - as I never know when, or with whom, it could happen. And in the meantime you just keep on practicing.

There is something extraordinary to experience your uke move their entire body in response to small a shift you made in your shoulder blade. That connection, that sort of intent listening with your body, is what makes aikido amazing. Because when you only listen with your body, total presence is needed – in that moment you are just your body. A single thought breaks the connection. It can of course come back in the next grip, the next technique, but a thought breaks it. This means there is an urgency once the movement start to remain in the flow, and what does this flow consist of? A spontaneous action in the unknowable.
Keep on Washing

“The essence of the Art of Peace is to cleanse yourself of maliciousness, to get in tune with your environment, and to clear your path of all obstacles and barriers”

Morihei Ueshiba\(^{20}\)

For me, painting is a spiritual exercise to make the right decision. I practice to make decisions in accordance with the ever-changing presence, \textit{with} the painting, \textit{with} the situation. The studio and the situation of applying paint works as a practice court for everyday life, as I have found the rules to be the same for painting as for navigating through life. The studio is a dojo if you want. One of these rules is keeping on the line of least resistance, just as never meeting force with force is practiced in aikido. Yet this is not always the most convenient line. This is not the line of cowardice and laziness, even though it might seem like it. Sometimes the path of least resistance is doing something boring or hard, as not doing it would bring too much unease.

And what is the right decision? It’s the spontaneous, natural action of that very specific situation. This means that if someone lowers their arm I will follow to keep my grip, and this means that if a gesture on the surface is hard to trace with the eye I will make some contrast clearer. I practice to be in that urgency that arises when the movement has begun, when I have started the stroke on the surface or launched a punch. Because there is no stopping, no reconsidering, the now just pushes forward and forward and the only way not to break it is to allow it and trust yourself. This sensation is identical in aikido and in painting.

When I manage to do the right thing I am always rewarded. If I manage to paint without safety nets I can make paintings that not only surprise me and produce new knowledge, but gives me rushes of energy when I look at them. Is it the ki from my arm that I can trace in the gesture or is it the tension between chaos and order that starts to vibrate? The answer could be neither or both. When I manage to stay in the urgency of the movement in aikido, manage to shut my mind out and just keep on moving, even if it feels like I have no control, I am always rewarded. The harmony of two bodies in perfect rhythm, leading, following and changing roles, gives me pure joy. And the truth is that more often than not, I have control, because my muscles remember what to do, even if the reflective mind doesn’t.

I practice following the situation by fumbling in the unknowable, by trusting my own knowledge enough to be spontaneous - by gaining control and letting it go. I practice it by setting up obstacles to melt or go around. By listening and yielding. I do it by just keep on training. There is no completion to this rehearsal, there is no “end painting”, just as I can't be fully taught in aikido - because there are always new obstacles on every level. Yet, in this way knowledge is produced, accumulated and integrated. The paintings become artefacts from my journey to overcome myself.

\(^{20}\) The Art of Peace, Ueshiba, Morihei, Shambala Publications 2002, p. 58
“Practice action without striving and all will be in order.”

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