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PERFORMANCE PHILOSOPHY SEEN THROUGH NISHIDA'S 'ACTING INTUITION'

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Part I – Mayuko Uehara

Nishida Kitarō (1870–1945) is a particularly important philosopher in the modern history of Japanese thought. He created the intellectual foundations of the so-called “Kyoto School” of philosophy, and indeed, it could be said that his thinking acted as a primary source from which philosophy in Japan developed. At the beginning of the twentieth century, Nishida created a new paradigm of thinking which attempted to go beyond the modern Western dualism of subject and object. His philosophy of the body and action, which he developed at practically the same time as Husserl, and which I shall briefly introduce here, was based upon this paradigm.

The formative and creative character of ‘acting intuition’

I want to begin this examination by first looking at the foundational logic of ‘acting intuition’, since this directly concerns performance philosophy. By ‘acting intuition’, Nishida means a logic which accounts for the formation of the world of historical reality. It is also referred to as a ‘logic of production’, or a ‘logic of creation’. In the real world, the world in which we live, we may find acts of formation, production or creation.

Nishida defines ‘acting intuition’ as “seeing things through action, with the thing determining me, at the same time I determine the thing” (Nishida [1948] 1979, p. 131). At the basis of the logic of ‘acting intuition’ is a perspective on the body, whereby the mental and the physical are taken as constituting two sides of a whole. This outlook does not correspond to a dualistic subject–object schema, whereby “I”, as the privileged subject, stands opposed to the thing, and constitutes it. Rather, according to Nishida, subjects and things reciprocally form and create each other. Furthermore, the creation of things *requires* the action of the body. What Nishida wishes to stress here is the expressive creativity of the body, which moves as an organic element of historical reality.

But what exactly does this ‘action’ mean, for Nishida? We know that it has a close relation to creation, or production, by the body. Yet beyond that, what else can we say? There is a helpful paragraph on this concept in the 1937 text, “Acting Intuition”:

While the world is determined through and through as a historical present, at the same time it also incorporates within itself a self-negation. Where the self transcends itself,

passing from present to present, here we find action taking place. Action is therefore concrete practice, action is production.

(Nishida [1948] 1979, p. 543)

In the 1920s, Nishida had initially understood ‘action’ as a form of conscious subjectivity. However, while in the 1930s the ‘action’ of this quotation, which he locates within the historical world, does maintain some aspect of a function of consciousness, it has also been enlarged. It now includes the so-called ‘external’ actions, such that, as a spectrum, it extends “from the instinctual functions of animals to the actions of human beings” (Nishida [1948] 1979, p. 545). Furthermore, there is clearly a stronger emphasis on that aspect which we would identify in the creative action of the human being.

However, Nishida also writes that: “Our bodies are not only something which works, but also something which sees” (Nishida [1948] 1979, p. 345). With the body functioning as a medium, ‘action’ and ‘intuition’ are shown to be two sides of a whole. This conception is used by Nishida to support his own theory of the “dialectical movement of history” (ibid., p. 546). The interconnected nature of these two features – action and intuition – follows from Nishida’s perspective on the body as being equivocal. From the decade following 1910, Nishida takes the following stance with respect to the body: “The will is the body of the world of spirit, and the body is the will of the physical world” (Nishida [1950] 1978, p. 239). As we can see here, Nishida conceives the body as that which straddles both the intelligible world and the physical world at the same time.

What, then, is the relationship between intuition and action? Nishida states that, put concretely, intuition is “the bodily grasping of things” (Nishida [1948] 1979, p. 549). That is to say, when we take the body as a boundary, and look at the so-called ‘internal’ or ‘external’ worlds, intuition is that which we grasp from the internal side. Conversely, things are what we grasp from the external side. This is the nature of the ‘two sides of the same coin’ relation between ‘action’ and ‘intuition’ when viewed from the perspective of the body in Nishida’s thinking.

To repeat, Nishida’s definition of ‘acting intuition’ is that of “seeing things through action, with the thing determining me, at the same time [as] I determine the thing” (ibid., p. 131). The relation between ‘thing’ and ‘I’ here should not be understood as taking place abstractly, on the level of intellect. Although it appears as though it is the ‘I’ which is in a position to grasp the ‘thing’, in fact the I is also *led* by the thing, and, at the same time, gives the thing its form. This is the thing as created not biologically, but socially and historically. Nishida understands the thing as the ‘historical thing’ (ibid., p. 549). The ‘things’ of the historical world are not only seen within the perceptual world, but rather are seen by way of the body, which, as Nishida puts it, “is formed as the self-determination of the world of sensibility”. When the “perceptual body” becomes the ‘historical body’, it is capable not only of ‘understanding’ and ‘thinking’; it is also the body which ‘wills’ and ‘acts’ (ibid., p. 169, p. 171). Nishida also provides the following explanation of ‘acting intuition’:

To look at things actively-intuitively, means to be able to look at them as that which ought to be negated. The subject主体 [*shutai*] is formed through the self-negation... our body is also that which makes, and also that which is made, at the same time. It is that which looks, and at the same time is that which is seen.

(Ibid., p. 547)

What Nishida means here is that when ‘the made’ – in other words, the thing which has already been given some kind of form – is seen or intuited by the ‘subject’, ‘I’ is negated at

the same time. 'Negation' is a key term in Nishida's writing. According to my interpretation, it means that the simply given is 'determined' or 'articulated'. At the same time, 'the maker' or the 'subject', while negating itself, creates the 'thing' which is to be 'the made'. In other words, the 'maker' is simultaneously determining or articulating itself. Therefore, with both the maker and the made, we see a form of negation occurring: where what is given is not simply kept as it is, but is *created* or turned into something new.

This is why Nishida states that "within the world of historical development, the made is made in order to make the maker". That is, within the world of reality, we have a movement which is the reciprocal workings of the subject 主体 [*shutai*] and the object 客体 [*kyakutai*],¹ the reciprocity of "from the made to the making", and "from the making to the made". We can see historical development as arising out of this reciprocal movement.

Since the body is necessarily drawn into considerations of intersubjectivity, I would now like to examine how we can use this movement of acting intuition to consider the question of expression.

From Nishida's theory of the body toward the problem of bodily expression

According to the logic of acting intuition, "the made" is made "outside the body", as an "extension of bodily movement" (Nishida [1948] 1979, p. 551). And yet, Nishida does not give sufficient consideration to how the body itself is also that which is made. He emphasizes expressiveness in the making of things, but did not examine the question of bodily expression within the purview of acting intuition. Fortunately, we can find just such an account in the theory of corporeality provided by Nishida's disciple, Kimura Motomori (1895–1946). Kimura goes beyond Nishida in explicitly taking up the importance of the material and physical aspects of the body, viewing the body as essentially a "formative-expressive-existence".

"In our daily lives, it is on the basis of the body that we take our internal movements and attitudes, and vitally grasp them, or express them, through concrete clarity. We do this, because, as human beings, we are essentially spiritual and, at the same time, an expressive, physical existence. It is also because, in the physical, the internal appears as its concrete form. Eyes often 'speak as much as mouths', as they say. The whole human body vitally expresses the interior. In this manner, interior life expresses itself directly and bodily by way of the body. Here, we see how the first level of the expressive life appears" (Kimura 2000, pp. 200–201).

To summarize, Kimura divides the 'formative-expressive-existence' of the body into three stages. He recognizes and gives weight to the fact that the interior is directly expressed in each part of the body. Kimura sees it as the first level of expressive life, which he refers to as the "self in itself". There is a second level which is the "self for itself" (*ibid.*, p. 201). This is the phase of the formative nature of the body. This so-called 'formative nature' refers to expressive acts such as winking, which do not simply reveal a mind, but are a form of technique. According to Kimura, this second phase is more important than the first. Furthermore, these phases of expressive life – of the "self in itself" at the same time as the "self for itself" – come together as a formative whole in a third and final stage: a "dialectical exchange of internal and external". Here, we have a higher level "self-aware creative activity" (*ibid.*, p. 202). We can understand this as a different way of describing Nishida's logic of acting intuition: that is, the creative process of historical things.

This formative-expressive theory of Kimura is well suited to explain the expressions of the face. As research into the body frequently points out, there are conscious and unconscious expressions. Kimura's "self in itself" fits with such unconscious, unmediated expressions. Meanwhile, his "self for itself" corresponds to conscious, intended expressions. In



Figure 6.1 Elisabeth L. Belgrano, *Frozen Moment 2* (2019). Elisabeth L. Belgrano

turn, in reality, conscious and unconscious expressions are frequently layered on top of each other, appearing as a single expression. Here, we have Kimura's "expressive life as both in itself at the same time also for itself".

Part II – Elisabeth L. Belgrano

Acting intuitively – a performance (research) meditation

Fingers and eyes keep reading the text on the screen.² Circling words and sentences. Searching for wisdom in the written words, but also in the non-written words that keep appearing while reading. Encountering Mayuko Uehara's interpretation of Nishida's theory of the body and his concept of 'acting intuition'. As a somatic vocal performance philosopher, searching for wisdom involves filtering philosophical theories through one's own lived psycho-physical experiences which incorporate the body/mind as an undivided tool for making sense of the process of living, learning and knowing. The arrival in Japan and in Kyoto is part of an urge to further investigate the concept of Nothingness.³

This research method always begins with a reading of a musical source: a manuscript from the seventeenth century. This was a period in European history when debates on the concept of Nothingness led to an intense discourse between Venetian and Parisian academics. Nothingness was also one of the central keywords behind the productions of the first operatic performances in Venice around 1640 (Belgrano 2011). After years of curious encounters through performance research, Nothingness is now encountered at the Kyoto School of Philosophy, and in dialogue with Uehara.

Reading moves into thinking, recalling the past. As a silent (research) meditation. Remembering. While traveling. By train. Looking through the window. Trying to catch the intuitive meaning of what can be seen outside. Externally. Taking out a phone from a bag. Starting to take pictures without any specific goal, other than catching the moment while in motion. Every photographic moment is blurred. Transformed into abstract horizontal lines tightly knit together. Self-negation is consciously present. Landscape has transformed through the motion of the train. Karen Barad's words emerge along with the blurred

landscape. Contemplating on reciprocal 'acting-intuition', while observing the colors beautifully entangling with one another.

To be entangled is not simply to be intertwined with another, as in joining of separate entities, but to lack an independent, self-contained existence. Existence is not an individual affair. Individuals do not preexist their interactions; rather, individuals emerge through and as part of their entangled intra-relating. Which is not to say that emergence happens once and for all, as an event or as a process that takes place according to external measure of space and time, but rather that time and space, like matter and meaning, come into existence, are iteratively reconfigured through each intra-action, thereby, making it impossible to differentiate in any absolute sense between creation and renewal, beginning and returning, continuity and discontinuity, here and there, past and future.⁴

(Barad 2007, p. ix)

The body/mind mediates a materialized entanglement of Nishida's and Barad's theories. The psycho-physical experience of their theories allows for the body/mind to grow, to expand and to express. Every thought appears internally within the body/mind as a frozen moment. As a black stroke of a brush on a paper. Moving along with the experience of being determined, while reciprocally determining the situation where one finds oneself moving. Voice along with thoughts carefully keeps forming into sound, words, sentences and full texts:

Seeing and acting is a unity of opposites. Forming is seeing, and from seeing comes acting. We see things, acting-reflecting, and we form because we see.

(Nishida [1958] 2015, p. 186)

The issue of dealing with primary or secondary sources becomes irrelevant when consciously entering into 'acting intuition' as a body/mind practice. There is no conscious intention to compare one part with another, but rather to place oneself right in the middle of the 'formative-expressive-existence': to use Kimura's term. Seeing the self within the world of historical development. Within the world of reality.

Performing 'acting intuition': from a (different) bodily perspective

They had spoken about *frozen moments*, herself and Uehara, when they visited the archives of Nishida's calligraphies. The term had become part of daily acts and thinking. *Frozen moments*. She kept saying the words to herself over and over. The calligraphies had also made a significant impression on her way of thinking. Like experiencing the blurred abstract pictures, now part of her camera. Or the dialogue itself with Uehara. Or like the musical score in her bag. A copy of a manuscript, written by hand in seventeenth-century Paris. A *frozen moment* from four hundred years ago. Somehow, all these *frozen moments* had come together through her action, and were now part of her train journey through Japan. They determined her as she determined them. They made her body shiver. Embodying the unity of opposites was a sensation that was somehow easier to perform than to describe.

While thinking through her vocal performance philosophy, more questions kept coming to her: What was this logical 'acting intuitive' production, in her ways of producing vocal sound; in her ways of creating a vocal ornament; in her ways of listening beyond the seventeenth-century handwritten lines in the score; in her ways of tuning into imaginations

that kept feeding her movements while singing? Could the art of imagining be considered part of a logic of ‘acting intuitive’ production? She tried to come to terms with her vocal practice from different perspectives. In practice, sound would never come out of her body if she didn’t allow her body to be filled with air. And since body and mind acted reciprocally as body/mind, mind had no less importance in the way air found space inside her body. She would give herself silent reminders as she had learned in her Alexander Technique lessons: to allow the neck to lengthen, the back to be long and wide, the arms to grow longer in all their joints. Her thinking would produce a psycho-physical transformation internally as well as externally.

She recalled the words of Nishida cited by Uehara: “Seeing things through action, with the thing determining me, at the same time I determine the thing”. She translated seeing to sensing. Any sensuous impression had an impact on her own production of sound. The bird singing outside the window caused her to attune to a unique quality of sound. How it differed in quality from another singing bird. Or the sound of the train moving through the landscape. Voicings of other people around her. She tuned into all these other sounds. They determined her at the same time as she determined them. She was never afraid of listening even further. She was open and curious. Not afraid of taking risks. Anything became a source in her imaginative production of sound. Any encounter created an impression for her body/mind and voice to act back on. Her hands, eyes and face would search to caress her findings: to hold them, to tune into their existence, to search for any unwritten meaning.

And here – in this very intimate moment of tuning into the thing she encountered – she found herself becoming Nothing. She moved through Nishida’s term ‘self-negation’ and thought; when the self moves through a sensation, the self is somehow left behind. Or, the self is so intimately related to the memories imagined internally that she herself as a body/mind becomes part of something new that is born in that very moment. The sound that came out of her body was the result of this self-negating logical process. It had nothing at all to do with comparing or projecting herself into the thing she observed, but instead it was about being diffracted⁵ through the encounter itself. This self-negating experience could only happen if the body/mind was allowed to see without making any direct judgments. Also, the body/mind had to let go of habits and follow the unexpected movements. All together it was a sensuous way of reasoning, including a profound *will* to tune into imagined states of becoming. In this process, judgments were created in the form of negated and expressed meaning-makings. New vocal sounds became *frozen moments* through her performance philosophizing. Voice became a ‘formative-expressive-existence’.

The landscape kept passing her window. She closed her eyes for a moment. Words kept passing her body/mind. Negated words. Negated thoughts.

With closed eyes, she kept thinking of Uehara’s interpretation of Nishida’s and Kimura’s theories on bodily expression. She had to take all these thoughts with her back into her own embodied experiences of producing vocal expression. With eyes closed, she wandered into her memories of vocal encounters. One such encounter still echoed within her whole body/mind. Eyes looking close into hers while they both sang. Eyes following her voice. She remembered. The song surrounded them on all sides. It filled the room, the house, the island, the earth, and the universe. She recalled her own thoughts: eyes gave light and freedom; every joint in her body grew wider and wider. Air filled her lungs and her spine was extending in all directions. Wonder. The only word to be remembered. His memory had left an emptiness in his life. His story was sad. But in the moment their eyes met and she started to sing, he could sing despite his earlier complaints of not having any voice left in his body. He didn’t actually sing very much, but it was not important. Because she could hear his voice in

a way she had never heard it before. Still if he wasn't sounding at all, she could hear him. She smiled and opened her eyes. She was still sitting in her chair – a window seat.

She looked at the score in front of her at the table. Singing, to her, meant *humbly* entangling with both internal and external vocal expressions. If voicing can be understood as 'formative-expressive-existence', then reading another human's facial expression can be translated into the experience of reading a vocal manuscript, while at the same time entangling with the notions of performing 'a non-self-evident body' as the 'Self in itself'; moving 'from the made to the making' or the 'self for the other'; producing vocal sound as a 'dialectical exchange of internal and external'.

The train stopped. She stood up and took her luggage. A text had been written. Vocal performance philosophizing on 'acting-intuitively' through vocal expression- as-a-'formative-expressive-existence' had become a sort of *frozen moment*. A silent vocal performance in words.

She stepped off the train. Waiting for her connection. She put her right hand into the pocket of her coat. Her fingers found a tiny paper. Folded. She took it out. Read the words. It was a citation she had been careful not to forget. She read it again.

In the historical world, there is nothing that is merely 'given'. 'Given' is something 'formed' which, negating itself, forms the forming. The formed has passed away, and has entered Nothingness.

(Nishida [1958] 2015, p. 177)

Notes

- 1 The terms "*shukan*" and the "*kyakkan*" are not used here from the epistemological, but the bodily perspective. The sonogram "*tai*" [体] means "body".
- 2 The author would like to thank the following for their support of this research: Royal Academy of Music, Kungliga Vetenskapsoch Vitterhetssamhället i Göteborg, Sven och Dagmar Saléns Stiftelse, Helge Axson Johnssons Stiftelse, Gertrude och Ivar Philipsons Stiftelse and Japanstiftelsen.
- 3 See Belgrano 2011, 2016. For the past thirteen years, my focus has been to investigate the embodiment of vocal Nothingness. Along the road, philosophers of Nothingness have joined the pilgrimage, such as Luigi Manzini, Dominique Bouhours, Vladimir Jankélévitch, Karen Barad and now Nishida Kitarō.
- 4 The terms entanglement and intra-action are central in Barad's theory. The term intra-action differs from the usual term inter-action which assumes preexistence of an entity, prior to actions made by one upon another. According to Barad's agential-realist ontology "'individuals' do not preexist as such but rather materialize through intra-action" (Kleinman 2012, p. 11). This chapter allows for a very first attempt to start reconfiguring an entangled understanding of Barad's concept of intra-action and her theory of 'agential realism' with Nishida's concept of 'acting intuition', considering both philosophers' attempts to overcome binary perspectives in relation to Nothingness. This discourse will be developed further on another occasion.
- 5 Diffractive methodology is applied in an intra-active encounter. See Barad 2014.

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