

Noting the self :Theoretic Challenges in Autobiographical Performance from the perspectives of Postmodernism and Buddhism

*PhD Research Project 'noting the self: Buddhist Vipassana meditation
as tools for developing autobiographical performance'*

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Abstract

Vipassana or insight meditation is a practice that truly transformed Buddhist philosophy into practice (George, 1999; Sujiva, 2000). The notion of this meditation practice, interestingly, shares a similar structure to that of an autobiographical performer in western contemporary modes. In Vipassana, the meditating individual is essentially divided into being a spectator of his/her own performance or experiencing (Carlson, 2004; George, 1999). In autobiographical performance, the performer experiences his/her performance of self-representation, through the workings of a dual consciousness (Heddon, 2008).

The research study intends to explore the Buddhist philosophical concept of the three universal characteristics, Impermanence, Suffering, and Non-Self (or Emptiness) in the realm of contemporary devised performance practice, applying the framework of Buddhist Vipassana meditation practice into the practice of Thai devised autobiographical performance. Discussion will focus on the issues of self, identity and the idea of self-renunciation (self-restraint) in contemporary performance. The study's aim is to indicate how the embodiment of three universal characteristic concepts of Buddhism might occur in contemporary autobiographical performance.

Key words : *Autobiographical Performance, Non-self, Postmodernism, Self, Theravada Buddhism*

Noting the Self Project : Project description

This PhD Research project aims to devise a series of short autobiographical performances that embody the concept of the three universal characteristics of Buddhism: suffering, impermanence and non-self, as a means of exploring each performer's experiences of self (or natural phenomena according to Buddhism). Its aim is to achieve 7 short autobiographical

performances from 7 Thai contemporary performers that represent performances of self-renunciation (self-restraint) and the sense of presence.

This research study principally is practice-led research. Within the context of this research study as well as its philosophy, it is a clear that only practical components can lead to the formation of research answers. The devised performances and their practical processes will enable a greater possibility of exploring the performer's bodily responses and perceptions as well as delivering creative performance outcomes.

The following questions present the main foci of this research project;

- What is potential relationship of Buddhist mindfulness state and contemporary performance of autobiography in both creative/practical process and performance?
- How can the practice of noting be expressed in performance narratives based on the idea of self-renunciation and postmodern theory which rejects grand-narratives?
- How might the practice of noting empower the performer to engage in presence and self-renunciation in the performance?

1. Introduction

This article is derived from my current journey undertaken of PhD in performing arts research project called 'Noting the self'. This project is under the supervision of Western Australian Academy of Performing Arts, Edith Cowan University, Perth, Western Australia. The research study has just taken its first step in collecting data on and about the understanding of 'self' through the perspective of Theravada Buddhism as well as through modern Western concepts in the realm of performance. Three interviews have been conducted with Thai monks and Thai nun who are recognized as experts in Buddhist philosophy, meditation practitioners and as meditation teachers. The process has also included my personal practice of 10 days of intensive Vipassana meditation over at Panditarama meditation centre at Yangon, Myanmar. Therefore, I will take this opportunity to discuss my current information gained in exploring the challenges that this practice-led research is facing with its objective of embodying the difficult philosophical issues of self and self-renunciation within the practice of contemporary performance.

In this specific article, postmodern concepts of self, autobiographical performance and feminism, and the non-self concept from Theravada Buddhism will be analysed and synthesized to clarify those challenges and indicate where the practice of this project might contribute in the near future.

Noting the self in theories: Postmodernism, Autobiographical performance (Feminism) and Buddhism

The important point of this project is to clarify and define the word 'self'. The definition of self is obviously one of the most controversial issues discussed throughout history of

humankind. Many theories on and about the self have been developed through a multitude of perspectives. The modern western concepts of the self have had a long historical development from Cartesian ego⁵⁶, defining self as a rational independently thinking thing to Hobbes and Lock who introduced conditions and states of nature to define the self from social perspectives (Allen, 1997, p. 7).

Noting the Postmodernism

Postmodern theories seek "the unrepresentable in presentation itself, by going beyond all pre-established rational rules" (Lyotard 1984:72-3,81 cited in Shusterman, 2005, p. 776).

Postmodernism, as Lyotard stated above, is the philosophical movement that engages with critical attitudes towards the objective reality and rationalism. Likewise, Nietzsche, one of the first philosophical postmodernists, states that "knowledge is a construct of imagination as there are no known truths" (Novitz, 2005, p. 216). Rationality is, therefore, only a fragment of imagination according to postmodernism. Thus, the rational thinking thing describing the self in Cartesian epistemology can only be considered as illusion or imagination according to Lyotard and Nietzsche's views.

Shusterman (2005) states that "the aesthetics of postmodernism is to celebrate the experience from all structures of the art world" (p.781) as the boundaries between life and art are indistinct in postmodernism (Novitz, 2005, p. 222). Thus, it is impossible to underestimate the value of individual experience, perception or even imagination in a postmodern context. Hence, postmodern philosophy concerns the idea of how individual approaching and experiencing knowledge might be considered 'the truth as the product of a historical process' (Novitz, 2005, p. 215).

The truth as the product of a historical process in postmodernism therefore yields the plural characteristics of realities, multiplicities, pluralities and relativities in arts experiences. According to Novitz (2005), the characteristics of postmodern art are;

- there cannot be a true interpretation in arts;
- a function of contingent historical and cultural circumstance is acted as artistic valuation;
- there are no intrinsic features in any arts as arts depend on an acquaintance of history and culture;
- the function of arts should not be limited by its narrative which will make it impossible to reach beyond its own convention (p. 217-128).

⁵⁶ Cartesian Approach to self :

- 1) The real is the rational, self as thinking thing
- 2) Thinking thing of which I can be certain is a separate and individual self, rather than a social and relational self.
- 3) This thinking thing can be more certain of its own existence than of the existence of anything else; thus established knowledge of my own separate self as the starting point and foundation of my philosophy.
- 4) Since I can be certain of my own existence only and even then only when I am doubting or thinking, I am threatened by a pervasive scepticism and the prospect of a self-imprisoned solipsism.
- 5) Knowledge of the self as separate, autonomous, thinking thing is not historically and culturally constituted. The essential self is something one has, observes and analyzes-not something one creates.' (Allen, 1997)

Hence, it is clearly seen that postmodern concepts of relativism resist ideas about an absolute reality, instead embracing the quality of changes and differences. The words 'narratives, texts, vocabularies, discourses, and paradigm' (Novitz, 2005:218) for postmodernists suggest conventional structures which need to be contested in order to challenge the universal truth promoted in the arts of modernism⁵⁷ (Allain & Harvie, 2006).

In performing arts, contemporary performance practitioners who value the idea of postmodernism, thus, seek different approaches by replacing traditional structure, and ideas of meta-narrative as well as meta-representation, instead, 'emphasizing the contingency of meanings' (Allain & Harvie, 2006). Therefore, the postmodern or contemporary performance involves the quality of self-consciousness towards its own contexts (Allain and Harvie, 2006) which leads many contemporary performance practitioners of this century, who may well consider themselves as postmodernists, to grasp questions of self and identity in their arts (Allain & Harvie, 2006).

Postmodern senses of self or concepts of identity are based on the understanding that self or identity is constructed by its cultural context and its qualities are contingent on implicit and explicit cultural values (Schmidt, 2005). Therefore, the sense of self in postmodernism is grounded in the open space of imagination, interpretation and transformation. Postmodern drama seems to stress the significance of transformation, representation, and semiotics, whereas contemporary performance is concerned with contingency, self-representation, and context. Hence, defining self, as single objective in postmodernism might be contradictory to its own philosophy. It is also difficult to define postmodern self without acknowledging its specific context of social and cultural history.

Noting the Autobiographical performance (Feminism)

Autobiographical performance is one of the contemporary performance practices which obviously involves the performance of personal experiences, reality, and identity (Govan, Nicholson, & Normington, 2007). According to Govan et al. (2007), "the autobiographical performance is a representation of subjectivity that involves personal identities, personal experiences of everyday life, although, when it is performed, imagination may apply to narrative style in representation, which is often presenting that self in heightened version" (pp. 55-72).

⁵⁷ "The perennial themes of modern philosophy: truth, rationality, the possibility of natural sources of knowledge, the capacity of individuals to understand, to decipher, to invent, to discover, discern, and so judge independently of authority. The enlightenment emphasized the rational powers of the individual: the capacity of all people to reason, in the process to discover the truth and so to determine autonomously what was or was not morally required of them. The emphasis on the important of the rational capacities of the individual and on natural ways of coming to know and understanding"(Novitz, 2005:214).

The autobiographical performance directly involves the issue of self from every angle and explores, for instance, self-consciousness, self-definition, self-adjustment and self-presentation. It employs both the contemporary approaches of postmodernism and feminism as its ground.

According to Allen (1997), "feminism has raised the issue of 'the others' as believing that the existing theories are based on masculine-self and masculine-world view[s]" (p.14). The concept of self in feminism, therefore, is clearly overlapping with the idea of postmodernism as that self is situated as specific historical and cultural creations.

Certainly, the postmodern attitude of self-critical investigation is also present in this performance of autobiography as well as the issue of self related to inequality, towards social-consciousness, and cultural constructs as main foci of feminism, which attentively leaves a strong influence on the movement of autobiographical performance in late 20th century.

During the past few decades, autobiographical performance has been quite firmly based on feminist views to instigate a social consciousness on the current situation of cultural and social constructs that affecting the individual. The development of feminism in autobiographical performance has also raised in-depth questioning about the perspectives of woman-self, woman-identity as 'the other', in order to argue for fairness in the society (Carlson, 2004).

According to Heddon (2008), autobiographical performance later divides into two clearly distinct paths; one of raising the female (or 'the other') identity in the arts itself and, on the other hand, of raising the issues of identity which have been affected by social constructs. Hence, many have seen this autobiographical performance as directly concerning a political stance in its primary theme of the self- presentation.

Surely, the concepts of identity and self examined in autobiographical performance which are based on feminist views are totally different from Buddhism in the way this performance mode participates in social matters. However, the background of feminism seems to overlap with postmodern perspectives of self-construction that is shaped by cultural, historical and relationships.

Noting the non-self concept of Theravada Buddhism

The notion of nature in Buddhist belief shares the three universal characteristics of impermanence, suffering, and non-self. Buddhist philosophy, especially in the Theravada school, significantly stresses the idea of non-self into practice. Interestingly, there is hardly a clear definition on what the concept of self might be from Buddhist philosophy. However, the definition of non-self is irrevocably described through the character of impermanence. Because of all elements are always changing or express the nature of impermanence according to Buddhism, there is only emptiness which cannot be considered as self. Also, the formation of self which, from the three interviews with monks and nun I

have conducted, has clearly yielded the notion that self is the result of attachment, thus, the word attachment also describes 'self' from a Buddhist's point of view. In essence, Buddha has not defined what is self, but rather showed this understanding as the result of attachment.

Nevertheless, Buddhist Theravada could also describe the thought of 'self' as phenomena or natural occurrence. Therefore, self in this context is empty (non-self) as it is an attachment to impermanence and suffering. Vipassana meditation is the practice which allows the meditator to see this natural occurrence, and understand through process of noting of self, and to reduce or remove the attachment and let go of this self from all activities.

Noting the self in practice

Noting the self in Vipassana meditation

Vipassana Meditation is the practice of embodied Buddhist philosophy. The practice of Vipassana meditation is known as not only developing the state of mindfulness and concentration but also a practice to achieve insightful knowledge that allows the meditator to understand all natural occurrences and its three universal characteristics, which leads to self-renunciation (George, 1999; Sujiva, 2000).

The most popular exercise/method adopted in Vipassana meditation is 'noting'. Noting is 'to perceive all phenomena of natural occurrences in the state of mindfulness' (Sujiva, 2000). The objects of noting are, for example, the movement of body, feelings or mental objects. It is also divided into primary and secondary objects in common Vipassana meditation practice. For the beginners, the noting is commonly done in form of language either speaking out loud or within oneself, to help the mind concentrate on objects, but in advanced practice the noting becomes a clear sensation of mindfulness. Thus, the practice of noting can be done in various ways, however its notion is to always mindfully observe that object. Ultimately, all these objects are sharing the character of impermanence.

The purpose of noting, according to Buddhist Philosophy, is to note that there is no such a thing as self and nothing is worth holding on to.

Noting the Self in devising

The concept of self in contemporary performance approaches, especially in the performance process of devising, is usually referred to as ego-self (Hancock, 2002). According to Hancock (2002), this ego-self tends to decrease the quality of intuitive presence in performers especially in improvisation. Any practices that reduce the ego-operation, Hancock as well as

many improvisers such as Spolin and Johnstone contend are the most likely ways to achieve successful skills of improvisation.

Therefore, it is not important against which theoretical or philosophical paradigm the ego-self is defined, rather, in the practice of contemporary performance, the existence of this ego-self impedes the pursuit of a successful sense of presence. The result of holding onto this ego-self clearly yields negative affects towards this particular practice especially the skill of staying in presence.

Nevertheless, contemporary devised performance which has its roots in rejecting the grand narratives and texts, likewise proposes the challenge of creators to reject the self or self-renunciation. Holding on to self or selves, identity or identities, thus constructs a rationale, conventional as well as social-related environment. Hence, the practice of improvisation or devising process, which is used by many contemporary performance practitioners to construct their performances, firmly supports the reduction of this ego-self or the sense of self in performers and/or devisors.

Noting the philosophical position of the project

The philosophical stance of this project, therefore, can be concluded as;

- A theory of self only exists in Buddhist philosophy, through the non-self concept. Thus, this project will define self according to its cause and characters based on Buddhist philosophy. The cause of self is the feeling, sensation or acting of clinging onto or being attached to something. The characteristics of self are impermanence and suffering.
- The insightful knowledge which Vipassana meditation proposes to achieve could not be considered as the same kind of knowledge discovered from rationale thinking especially from Cartesian-ego nor from Nietzsche's view on knowledge as imagination. This project has no objective to achieve what is beyond the imagination, however, it is situated in this belief that there is an intangible area beyond knowledge or imagination, in which insight knowledge is situated.
- As this project takes a contemporary practice approach under the postmodern movement, therefore, the way to blend both philosophies; Buddhism and Postmodernism in defining self in devised processes, is going to be synthesized only when the actual practice begins. At such time, hopefully, I shall see the emergence of answers. The project determines to balance both philosophies in the practical approaches in performers.
- The self-renunciation process will focus on performers/devisors in creating the presentation of self as the main issue of the performance.

*Noting the challenges: The embodiment of Non-Self in Performance practice***1. Challenging the contradictory of philosophies**

Certainly, self-renunciation contradicts the essence of autobiographical performance in theoretical terms. Autobiographical performance is based on the idea of holding on to something that expresses the quality of individual identity as a social and cultural construct for a purpose. Self-representation in autobiographical performance, thus, is clearly situated in opposition to the concepts of non-self in Buddhism. However, the convergence of these two is the challenge for this research.

Moreover, the idea of self that is based on feminism as seen in current trends concerns political inequality, and cultural context. The idea of self-renunciation, therefore, relatively reduces the importance of these contexts as only parts of natural phenomenon, though, self-renunciation in context of Buddhism has stated the necessity of morality (Right speech, Right action, Right views). Thus, the issue of context is still primary, though located in different oppositions of individual and social stances.

Another contradictory issue is the purpose or function of this performance. The purpose of autobiographical performance is clearly identified as raising the issues of individual-self affected by social constructs, such as equality. However, the purpose of self-renunciation from a Buddhist perspective brings into scrutiny practices which may not be able to be identified in the rationale context of study. The self-renunciation and postmodern arts' and contemporary performance practice, therefore, suggest the messy boundaries of life and arts, intangible and tangible, imagination and beyond, from individual experiences. Hence, it is impossible to blend these different objectives from these existing theories into one performance practice. However, what lies between these purposes may or may not suggest a clear position through these multiple attitudes, though, the actual practice may.

2. Challenging the embodiment of unsolved philosophical puzzle

The quality of self-renunciation to this project is not about the representation of total non-self on stage, or what is beyond the imagination, though the project is seeking ways in which performers create and explore the sense of self-renunciation by applying the practice of Vipassana meditation and Buddhist philosophy to reduce or decrease that attachment to sensation, feeling, and movement in their performance by their own interpretation of noting.

Inevitably, this involves the intrinsic features of individual experiences that may not be able to be authenticated into a form of writing or report. The embodiment into a form of performance may also be various, dependent on each individual performer's performing

experiences (personal skills), understanding of self and non-self (theme) as well as understanding of meditation or noting (practice).

The presentation of self-renunciation may or may not be simple. The practice in studio and the performance might be in different contexts. However, it is often said that performers are already facing the presentation of self in a way either they are on stage or even creating their own performance. The issue of acting and non-acting to performing and non-performing, thus, lies again as a challenge. However, the issues of space and senses of performing in this project are to be studied analogously with the sense of presence and self-renunciation.

3. Challenging what beyond narrative

Many believe that the narrative style is one of the important elements of self-representation in autobiographical performance, and largely involves the space for "the exploration of description and prescription, hypothesis and factuality" (Nicholson, 2005).

A contemporary approach involves multiplicities of interpretation which are encouraged are significant of contexts in performance. According to Govan (2007), the content of self narrative is not always the focus of autobiographical performance: the "being engaged in the moment" is an essence of all autobiographical works (p.66). The issue of presence on stage still demands more concrete explanations. Goodall (2008) has described being present on stage for a performer as always being associated with here and now, which unsurprisingly shares a similar emphasis with being mindful and the exercise of noting in Buddhist Vipassana Meditation.

Postmodernism [...] is interested not only in what meaning it is making, but also in how it is making [...] process over product' (Allain & Harvie, 2006)

Thus, what is beyond narrative in this contemporary approach to devise an autobiographical performance? The theory of postmodernism and Buddhism suggests a possible path in designing a practical approach inspired by the exercise of noting to create performance which does not only settle on grand narratives.

This research aims to answer one question: how might the practice of noting be expressed in performance and how could we achieve a state beyond conventional narrative or embracing multiplicities of meanings in performance? The actual practice will only answer this.

4. Challenging the perception

According to John Cage, "art is not an object but an experience, an event, including observer" (Schmitt, 1982, p. 21). Certainly, a scrutiny of the philosophy of arts or aesthetics would raise many other big issues, but specifically to perceptions.

John Cage suggests that art refers to a phenomenon based on human perceptions. If, human perceptions are what art is about, contemporary performers should, perhaps, pay attention to their own perceptions rather than audience's? If there is no specific message to be delivered to the audience, performers' perceptions of being alive might be considered as experiences? How to experience without grasping/being attached to it? These are the questions that I must acknowledge.

In practice of noting when performers are developing their state of mindfulness as well as in the process of performing activities, and which qualities of that experience could influence or intrigue the audience to perceive and explore what in front of them? Of course, the audience must be prepared to attentively decode what they perceive and actively define their own interpretations or understandings. However, I must admit that the audience's perceptions are not the central focus of this research project.

Contradictions occur when the reduction of the sensations is encouraged by the practice of noting. For instance, one of the interesting issues I would like to raise under the perception is of the sense of space. This issue, I must admit, I have not foreseen during my research proposal stage. After the personal practice of meditation, I find that being mindful is also rejecting the sense of specific space and location, only noticing a physical beingness. This may cause an issue for performers who are trained to explore the imagination just as the concept of self may not allow performing when involved with the exercise of noting.

5. Challenging the research notion

Certainly, defining the self is not the simplest task especially when it involves the creation of individual through education and learning.

It is quite hard for a researcher such as myself, who is trying to create, explore and understand from my own point of view, to actually applying the theory of self-renunciation and embody it into my own research construction.

Ironically, research methodology is still firmly based on the Cartesian ego and moving toward an idea of absolute truth and rationalism. Thus, to dismiss the "I" as subject in pursuing new knowledge and understanding according to this academic rationale is certainly not the way. However, the situation of academic research and arts practice is changing with the embrace of practice-led research.

I, therefore, must admit that the use of 'I', 'my experiences', 'my opinion', and 'my sensations' are valid in this research project.

To future note

In this article, I have explored concepts related to self in postmodernism, Buddhism and feminism especially in the performing arts and autobiographical performance. The challenges derived from theoretical study and personal practice in Vipassana meditation has suggested that these difficult unsolved issues are intangible. However, noting the self raises the interesting issues that I, as a researcher, wish to study through practical application in performance practice. I believe that the way we learn or approach knowledge, no matter if it is considered as illusion or truth, is valuable both in learning all about it and also in being ready to let go of it.

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