

3, 2, 1, Infinity! A Decentered Poiesis of Haiku, Code, and Photography

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Abstract

“3, 2, 1, Infinity!” is an art piece that brings together three genres of media and arts: (1) a “Japanese” poetry form of haiku that was written for a momentary experience of an earthly and unique presence, (2) a digital photograph that was shot at the moment of the experience, and (3) a piece of computer code poetry that was written for the same experience. It was a revelation of the earth during a sea journey, a Zen moment when the horizon line vanished from sight, and the sea and the sky became indistinguishable and one. The artwork attempts to narrate the *poiesis* of this triad of the sea, the horizon and the sky, in the form of another triad in which each piece is flawed, or incomplete, or “not themselves”, or, out-of-center. The haiku is written in Turkish, the photograph is “cropped” to frame the spatial experience as it is, and the code is written in a “made-up” computer language. This paper, with the intent to re-center the experience and drawing on academic and artistic literature, attempts to explore the issues of “time and space”, “use of language”, “objective vs. subjective reality” and “nature/technology dichotomy”, from the point of a Zen ontology. All the dichotomies that are present at the momentary experience, or the artwork, or the paper, are intended to be resolved through a form of triad for the sake of one, or zero, or infinity.

Keywords: haiku, computer art, photography, Zen, ontology, dichotomies

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Introduction

“3, 2, 1, Infinity!”¹ is a mixed-media artwork by the author-artist which represents a unique momentary experience of the artist through a triptych of different media and art genres. The momentary experience that is the subject of the artwork has been realized just at the beginning of a sea journey, when the artist looked at the horizon only to find that it did not exist, but saw instead an almost monotone blue oneness of the sea and the sky intertwined. With an artistic drive to reflect on and recreate the moment, a digital photograph of the scenery was captured as a personal record. Immediately, a haiku was written as a poetic process of contemplation on the moment of experience. The exact date and place of the experience was December 22nd, 2013, and Yalova, Turkey. Three years later, with the addition of a piece of computer code poetry, the experience was presented at the National Fine Arts Gallery of Bursa on February 2017 as a triptych artwork as seen in Figure 1.



Figure 1: The installation of 3, 2, 1, Infinity!

Through ‘the absence’ (or emptiness) of the horizon and the dissolution of the ‘duality’ of the sea and the sky, simultaneously becoming ‘one’ and ‘infinite’, the artistic process and later on the corresponding writing of this essay were based upon three separate trinities of elements and phenomena as given in Figure 2. Despite the linear depiction, it should be noted that all three elements of each trinity are in direct relation with all the elements of other trinities. That is to say, the elements and concepts constitute a distributed network structure consisting of 27 (3x3x3) correlations.

¹“3, 2, 1, Infinity!”, Umut Burcu Yurtsever, art installation with haiku, photograph and code poetry, 2017.

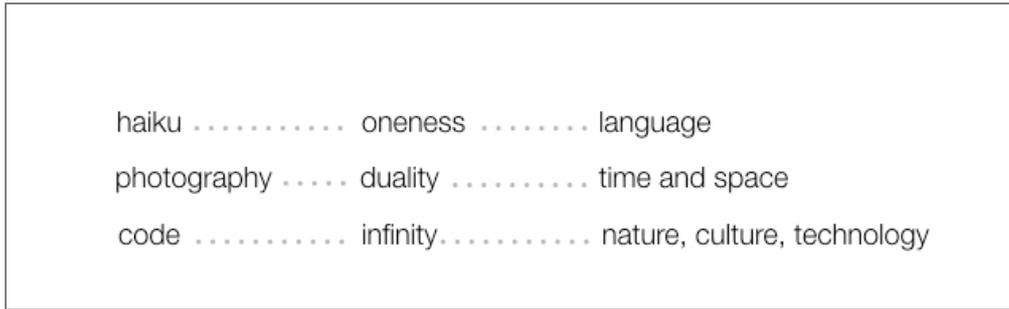


Figure 2: Three Trinities of Elements and Phenomena

The root concept of the creative process has been ‘absence’ (or ‘emptiness’) such that, each piece of the artwork happens to be lacking a core element, they are incomplete or “out-of-center” both formally and conceptually. So the whole work, artistically and academically, has been a journey to complete or re-center the experience once and for all.

In the following sections of this extended abstract, the artwork is briefly presented and interpreted according to the concepts given in Figure 2. The ontological approach of Eastern philosophy particularly specific to Zen Buddhism is drawn upon to discuss these phenomena around the artistic process, all of which are then “re-centered” through the lens of academic research.

The paper is an original contribution both to the artistic and to the academic literature in the sense that, both the artwork and the discussion around it present a unique philosophical approach with completely authentic arguments. It should be noted that the questions that arise in this extended abstract, and the proposed arguments are going to be discussed thoroughly in the final paper. The journey starts from the point of the absence and turns back to it.

One: Haiku / Language

The haiku part of “3, 2, 1, Infinity!”, the original piece that was written in Turkish and its English translation are as shown in Figure 3:

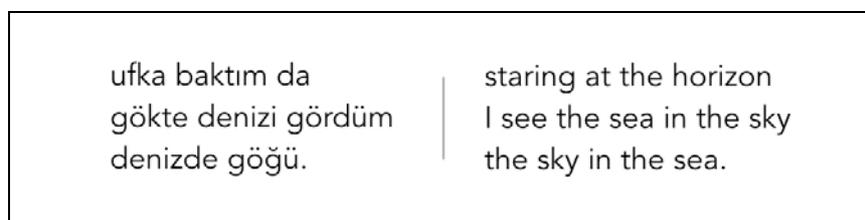


Figure 3: The haiku piece

Haiku is originally a Japanese literary form bound up with a tradition of Zen thought which is inherent in Japanese culture (Suzuki, 2007). It is ideally an ‘image’ that captures a ‘haiku moment’ in its minimalist and objective poetic language just like a photograph captures a moment (Suzuki, 2007; Marshall & Simpson, 2006). Structurally it is a very short poem which is composed of three lines in 5-7-5 syllable format. Besides the syllable structure, traditionally it should incorporate a *kigo*, a

season word to mark the season and a *kireji*, a cutting-word to indicate syntactic breaks.

Turkish language is closer to Japanese than English language, such that it is easier to stay loyal to the 5-7-5-syllable format and to the use of *kireji*. Japanese and Turkish have even a common *kireji* word: “ya”. In the haiku above, “da” is such a Turkish conjunction word which, singularly carrying a meaning similar to “as so”, generates a syntactic break. This conjunction attempts to connect the first line to the next by creating a contradiction in a very subtle manner; such that, the object of the staring activity is the horizon, yet what is seen is completely another phenomenon. The feeling that is hidden in this conjunction is an emulation to the lightness or *non-chalant* (*karumi*) element of haiku. This intended “feeling”, which the artist herself experienced at that time, is somehow missing in the English version, which additionally breaks the 5-7-5 syllable format as its first line carries seven syllables.

Although the ‘absence’ of the horizon is depicted somehow indirectly through the ‘presence’ of the sea and the sky that inhabit each other along the horizon line, this indirection is not a result of subjective self-dramatization. Haiku contrarily requires objectivity as an artistic distance between the poet and their materials (Basho, 1967). This objectivity, however, contrary to a Western scientific notion, does not come from the ‘separation’ of the artist and its materials but instead ‘oneness’ of them. Here the distance is rather to the subjective mind. The objective perception means not to impose your subjectivity on the object, but rather to see its own reality, in its thusness, or *tathata* – the suchness of things in Zen.

Thus ideally, the mind of the *haijin*, the haiku poet, should be a mind of no-mind (*mushin*).

“Go to the pine if you want to learn about the pine, or to the bamboo if you want to learn about the bamboo. And in doing so, you must leave your subjective preoccupation with yourself. Otherwise you impose yourself on the object and do not learn. Your poetry issues of its own accord when you and the object have become one – when you have plunged deep enough into the object to see something like a hidden glimmering there. However well-phrased your poetry may be, if your feeling is not natural – if the object and yourself are separate – then your poetry is not true poetry but merely your subjective counterfeit.” (Basho, 1967, pg 33)

If haiku is a way to see and transfer a reality of a phenomenon in their suchness, in a state of no-mind, then it should get beyond language. The language of haiku should be that of no-language, almost, as if it is a transparent medium through which we see the reality. This is the reason why haiku language is so minimalist, bare, and concrete. It avoids any overt statement or claims that can be pinned down, so as not to interpose itself between us and the world (Marshall & Simpson, 2006).

However, the mind of the artist cannot be removed from the haiku, completely. Haiku always incorporates at least one secondary meaning of how the objective observation of an external phenomenon reflects internally in the author’s mind (Basho, 1967). *Wabi-Sabi*, the element of loneliness, is one such subjectivity deeply buried in the objective element of haiku poem. Yet the loneliness of *sabi* is different from a

Western depiction of loneliness as it also carries appreciation and *karumi*. There is something both lonely and light about vanishing of something that is already an illusion. Horizon, which is an optic phenomenon, is already absent in physical reality even when it is present; it is empty.

Kigo, season word, is another element that expands the meaning of haiku. It doubles the language by connecting the particular observation of a specific moment to the general cycles and systems (Marshall & Simpson, 2006). Each season has a specific feeling to it and has its known marker words. While traditionally it is ‘the’ season of the haiku moment that is referred in haiku, in modern approaches to haiku, it not unusual to find the season word as conflictory or even completely absent. As for the haiku of the artist, while we come across with natural words such as ‘sea’, ‘sky’ and ‘horizon’, none of them specifically refers to an explicit season by themselves. Although the artist usually prefers to follow traditional haiku writing, in this very specific moment, as the ‘seasonal feeling’ is already inherent in the depicted moment as it is.

This “doubling” of the meaning of the haiku via the *kigo* or the *wabi-sabi* elements, points to haiku’s quality technique of “being composed of two parts to allow for internal comparison” (Zheng, 2011). There are many other ways of incorporating this technique. One is juxtaposing two unrelated yet simultaneous observations, which might open up a meaning that implies a connection between otherwise two independent phenomena (Marshall & Simpson, 2006). Another example is when the two lines of haiku constitute a particular meaning on their own, and when this is reversed with the addition of a subtle surprise by the third line. While haiku has those dualities of juxtaposition and contrast, revelation and insight, they are in a form of balanced oppositions. All the dualities, layered meanings, and any symbolism, if they ever exist, are to be achieved without pretending in the least to be symbolic or double-coded (Basho, 1967).

Best haiku are aware of the difficulty or impossibility of using words to achieve *mushin*, no-mind, (Marshall & Simpson, 2006). Yet, although use of words (which come from mind) means stepping out of no-mind, the no-mind comes before, and it is that which uses the words, not vice versa. That is to say, the *haijin* does not use words to achieve no-mind; but in an a priori state-of-no-mind, ideally, uses haiku words to reach and depict a reality.

Traditionally haiku is an experience in and of the nature, when the separation of the self and the external world is to be dissolved through the sensory perception of ‘here and now’, in the special haiku moment of intense awareness (Marshall & Simpson, 2006). Thus all dualities, oppositions in haiku, exist in the unity of this dissolution.

Eihei Dogen’s late Chinese teacher-painter Nyojo Tendo said:

“Spring in plum blossoms enters into a painting.
When you paint spring, do not paint willows, plums, peaches, or apricots
— just paint spring.”

Dogen describes his Tendo as “ himself a sharp-pointed brush that painted spring” (Wirth, 2017). Such an artistic process, be it painterly or poetic, does not reproduce

the forms of nature as ‘representations’ any more. By becoming a sharp-pointed brush himself, the artist forgets the self and the spring, as either a subject or an object, and experiences himself no longer separate from spring’s ‘self-presentation’. With either word or ink, he does not paint the spring, he just lets the spring to enter into the painting or the poem (Wirth, 2017).

In this view of the artistic process, not as a representation but a ‘channeling’ for the self-presentation of the nature, ‘realization’ occurs in its double meaning. First is the realization in the sense that, the reality of the natural phenomena come into ‘actualization’ in our art making. Second is ‘our’ realization, that is to say, our ‘understanding’ of this actualization (Wirth, 2017). Expressing this actualization, the realization of spring through art, is artist’s way of understanding that reality of spring, a way seeing spring in its suchness.

Mushin, no-mind, is the realm of ‘no oppositions’, the emptying of consciousness and of self that Zen practice idealizes and haiku strives to enact (Marshall & Simpson, 2006). Oppositions that are born out of a mind of no-oppositions, are naturally in balance. This is true even for the presence of an internal subjective mind, as long as it is in accord with the ‘big mind’ that is everything (Suzuki, 2006).

As for the haiku piece of the artwork, the dissolution of the sea and the sky as separate entities, through vanishing of the cutting line in-between, which in the first place ‘creates’ the division yet is also already an illusion, might exemplify this oneness of dualities in haiku and the concept of duality being already an illusion in Zen. It is true that there is no rational process of constructing the haiku neither with its 5-7-5 syllable structure and nor the elements of *kireji*, *kigo* or *karumi*. The haiku was born out of that momentary experience immediately in an intense state of consciousness. All the commentaries above are constructed afterwards. Haiku, in this sense, is more of an experience rather than a construct. That is why a phenomenological approach to haiku, rather than a deconstructive one, might be a better way to understand it. Because haiku’s intend is not to provoke but to suspend the language, Western ways of interpretation, which intend to pierce meaning by getting into the poem, fails the haiku (Barthes, 1983).

Yet, it is also difficult for the artist-author to claim that the haiku above is “a good haiku” that is product of such an ideal *mushin* experience. On the contrary, the haiku is “flawed” and out-of-center from so many aspects that the experience could not be re-presented as a standalone literary work.

First of all, the haiku is in Turkish. DT Suzuki (2007) argues that haiku is a poetic form “only possible within the Japanese mind and language”. All the concepts, elements and ways of haiku are integral to how Japanese language and mind relates to and experiences the world. Language is the basic constructor of consciousness. What differentiates the Eastern/Japanese mind dominantly is that, the pure image that haiku relies on is not subject to the patterns of binary thinking that is central to Western thought and epistemology (Marshall & Simpson, 2006). How then could haiku become one of the most popular poetic forms around the world? It is not unexpected that the haiku that most Western poets write are not authentic haiku but rather short Western poems (Zheng, 2011). So it is a relevant question to ask if haiku is still Eastern when practiced and translated by Westerners. Yet, there are many good haiku

(poets) that have come out of Western mind and have also been acknowledged by Japanese. Besides, Turkish language and mind, despite the modernization project that has taken place since the beginning of 20th century, is an Eastern language. From Asian roots to Islamic period, the evolution of language has not deprived it of the collective consciousness of the East.

Aru argues:

“Haiku is a child of the mind and language is nothing more than a house, an *oikos* that the mind moves in. This house of the mind, the language in its essence, is free of boundaries just like the Earth that is a house to our bodies. It is up to ourselves to remove the boundaries of the mind so that haiku could speak itself up in any language.”²

Despite this realization that haiku *can* be written in any language, provided that the mind that moves around it is free, *this* haiku moment could not be ‘realized’ in both senses, until the haiku was united with a photograph and a piece of computer code poetry.

Two: Photography / Time and Space

The experience that is re-presented in “3, 2, 1, Infinity!” has actually began with a visual perception, an image. Chronologically, the photograph as seen in Figure 4 is the first piece of the artwork.

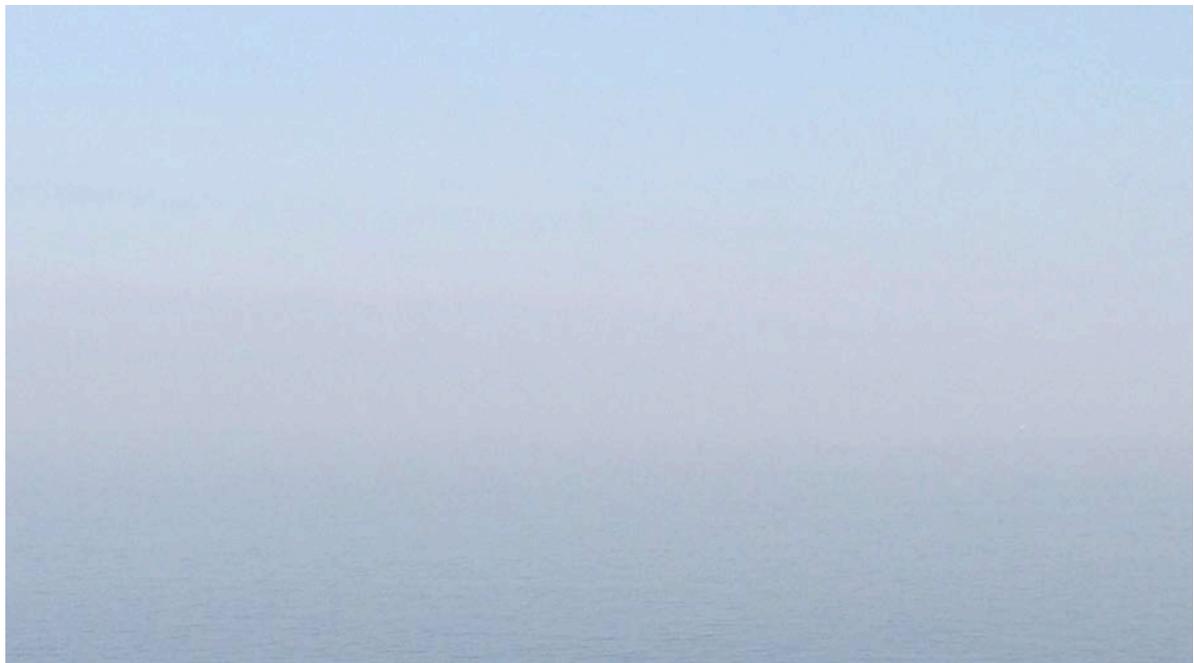


Figure 4: The photograph piece

Similar to how haiku captures the ‘image’ of a moment via use of language, a photograph is a ‘linguistic’ structure that *tells* the same moment in visual grammar.

² İnan Mayıs Aru, 2017. Excerpt from personal and unpublished discussions with the scholar.

Moreover, the objectivity/subjectivity dichotomy takes place very contrarily in two traditions. Haiku, in opposition to other poetry and textual narration forms where the subjectivity of the poet/author is central, seeks to re-present the momentary 'objective' reality of phenomena. Whereas photography, a medium which was initially conceived as hard evidence of objective reality and yet in later stages was found to be infused with the subjective stance of the photographer, has turned out to be the focus of a hot debate on capturing reality versus constructing it (Sontag, 2005). Consequently, while haiku seeks to reveal what is real by surprising its reader, photography seeks to construct the reality by assuming a false pretense of subjectivity (Sontag, 2005).

Although the argument that "haiku captures a moment just like photography" might point to an oxymoron when two media come together to 'tell' the same moment of experience, this interchangeable structure between the text and the image on how they approach the issue of objectivity/subjectivity, complements each other.

In Buddhist teaching, all beings in the universe appear and disappear in a moment (Katagiri, 2008). In Diamond Sutra, Buddha speaks of all conditioned existence as a dream, a phantom, a drop of dew, or a lightning flash. According to the *uji*, the being-time concept of Dogen Zenji, the source of being is time and the source of time is being, and both depend on space (Dogen, 1975). Katagiri (2008, 74) summarizes the being-time understanding as follows:

"If everything exists together simultaneously in a moment, then everything can't occupy a portion of space, everything must occupy the whole of space. When we say "being", it means all sentient beings exist in space and occupy the whole of space. Being occupying the whole of space is called timelessness. [...] No-being means being disappears into the arising moment and becomes one with time. When being is time, being manifests as the particular forms of phenomenal world, and time occupies the whole of space as the present moment. When time is being, present moment returns to timelessness and becomes one with being. [...] When time is being, time is nothingness [emptiness]."

Understanding the objective reality, *tathata* or the thusness of things is to understand beings as being-time; in their oneness with their time and space. Both the haiku and the philosophy behind it, suggest the inseparability and oneness of here and now, of time and space. In this sense, the photograph might be more loyal to the 'temporality' of the experience. The photograph lends time a space to inhabit. And in that space, be it analog or digital, time takes place with "its own place". Moreover, the immediate visual perception of the photograph, i.e., the 'time' (duration) of reception, is closer to that time of experience, provided that it is a "haiku moment".

The photographic piece of the artwork was shot in a mindset that is very close to that of the haiku. It was shot immediately, just from where the artist stands, without any technical adjustments whatsoever, and as a bare and momentary 'reaction' before any rational and intellectual process could take place. Furthermore, the result was not digitally filtered, but just cropped to lead the focus to the vanishing horizon, which might be considered as the *kireji* of the image: the subjectivity in the re-presented objective reality.

Three: Code Poetry / Nature, Culture & Technology

The code left in Figure 5 is the third piece of the artwork, a computer code poetry that is written in a generic programming language³. On the right is an English ‘interpretation’ of the code.

<pre>#include <> void main { int sky = earth = 1; do { while (sky && earth) { sail(); } } } void sail () { }</pre>	<pre>include nothing. main body is void. sky and earth are the same and one. sail in this void, as long as sky and earth are one.</pre>
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Figure 5: The code poetry piece

What the code ‘pretends’ to do in programming language syntax, is as follows: The first line, `#include <>` is where a necessary library of specific functions, by being declared within ‘<’ and ‘>’, are included in the program. In the first line of the code above, however, no library is included. While then one would expect this line to be completely absent, instead, ‘an empty library’ is included, which is actually impossible in code syntax.

Main is the main body of the algorithm that is executed. *Void* in the beginning declares that after the execution of the main body, no value is returned. Within the *main* body, two integer variables, *sky* and *earth* are defined and both are set to 1. What happens next is this; the program checks the variables of *earth* and *sky*; and as long as both are not NULL, call the function *sail*. The function *sail* is defined after the main body; and it is empty. In code syntax, this function does not get any parameter; it does not do anything; it does not return back any value. And as the variables *earth* and *sky* are never changed in any place, they are always 1 and so the *sail* function is called to execute nothing but stays in an infinite loop, i.e., in a *deadlock* as defined in programming jargon.

This is an algorithm of an endless emptiness, and with its addition in the form of a code poem, the artwork is completed.

³ The syntax is based on a basic C programming language.

Conclusion

“Ten thousand images reclaiming past, staking out future,
Totally exert every incompleteness.
All one in the splendor of Being;
This Magic Moment.”

~Taigen Dan Leighton

This paper discusses the artistic creation process behind the artwork “3, 2, 1, Infinity!” with the ontological approach of Zen Buddhism to the issues of being and reality.

The completion of the artwork takes place first at the layers that haiku and photograph had opened up: language, the dichotomies of time and place, and objective vs. subjective reality. Code poem, bringing new questions to these arguments and opening up the layer of nature, culture and technology, challenges to ‘nullify’ what the predecessors realized so far.

Like haiku and photography, code poetry is also a linguistic structure, a product of language. Yet a computer language is the sole product of rational thinking and is deprived of many linguistic facts like ‘metaphors’, which are thought to be elemental to the human consciousness. What about the code poetry, which utilizes neither an authentic programming language, nor English; which is neither a product of binary-mind, nor no-mind; then which language, and which mind, is it a product of?

A haiku that captures the moment like a photograph, and a photograph that captures the moment like a haiku, both incorporates an existential understanding of being, time and space. In this understanding, phenomena cannot be comprehended separate from their temporality and spatiality, and time and place do not exist as abstract entities out of existence of things (Dogen, 1975). An executing computer code, on the other hand, inhabits the abstract cyberspace and moves in its discrete digital computer time. What about the code poem then, which can never truly be compiled and implemented in anywhere other than the mind, where and when does it dwell?

The determinant role of the analytical mind, as in the case of computer language and its time/space entities, is also manifest in the process of writing the code poem. Contrary to the other two pieces of the artwork, i.e., the haiku and the photograph, the code piece is not created immediately, but constructed through a longer intellectual process of rational thinking. Although the rational mind might be failing the reality by attempting to construct it, it is elemental and cannot be ignored in how we, as human beings, relate to and experience the world and reality. This piece does not attempt to praise, but to acknowledge it and give ‘its place’ to it.

Finally, the computer code opens up another trinity: “nature, culture and technology”. “Language is a web of relationships and interactions, an ecosystem of words” (Marshall & Simpson, 2006) and the elemental constructor of “culture”. Haiku, through the momentary observations of natural entities and phenomena, and language use, inhabits the *ecotone*, i.e., the transition region between two ecosystems of nature and culture (Marshall & Simpson, 2006). Photography as a medium, which inhabits

the same *ecotone*, is already a product of technology, yet the technology “behind” it may still remain hidden. Code poetry brings it forth, and makes technology visible. How three ecosystems of nature, culture and technology relate to each other and the network structure in between them is the defining foundation of how we “be”. So that we could manipulate, transform and make culture out of nature via technology, the system dictates how we define, how we relate, how we represent and distinguish between them. Who is the subject, what is the object, and where is reality?

Does the code poetry inhabit in an *ecotone* where these three distinct ecosystems of nature, culture and technology meet? “*Ecotones* are the most perilous and yet the most productive places” (Marshall & Simpson, 2006). Flourishing from ‘this’ place, the code piece might be a call to remind us that, technology is not only ‘the tools’ to objectify nature and break from the oneness of reality, but also to remember back the *poiesis* in technology (Heidegger, 1977). A watermill rolling that reveals the hidden energy of the river, gives away the same revelation of a poem being written, or a seed sprouting, all of which reveal a hidden truth. As long as the rivers flow as rivers and seeds sprout, technology might sustain us with other tools to dissolve the object/subject dichotomy in order to reach the reality of oneness in emptiness. The code poetry can never truly be implemented and compiled in anywhere other than the mind, it resides in neither physical space nor true cyberspace, neither analog nor digital time, and calling from these in-between spaces, belonging to no-where and thus everywhere, the code intends to bring this inner conflict to balance.

With the addition of code poetry to haiku and photography, the two has become three. In ancient geometry, three is when two becomes one again, and when the plurality begins its journey to grow till infinity. One/Monad is depicted as a circle, in its perfection, and is oneness of being. Two/Diad is a line, which breaks the oneness, creating oppositions, dualities, and the tension in between. This is the horizon line that breaks the earth/sea from the sky. Triad/Three is depicted as a triangle, which closes the form once again, and turns dualities into unity. The horizon, the illusion of duality vanishes, and all three becomes one again, in emptiness and in infinity (Schimmel, 1998). In Buddhist scriptures vast analogies like numbers beyond counting are used in an attempt to describe *emptiness of the mind*. So the journey from plurality to infinity leads to emptiness. Thus “from true emptiness, the wondrous being appears” (Suzuki, 2006).

The circle, which represents oneness in ancient geometry, in Zen context brings to mind *Ensō*. While the *Ensō* is argued to represent a variety of concepts such the moon, the rice cake, the enlightenment, emptiness, infinity, the all, the visible and the invisible, *tathata*, or the totality of great void, the essence of it is not what it represents. It is the experience, the drawing of it. A circle painted with one brushstroke, in a single breath, which can only be painted truly, by a person who is complete himself. Drawing the *Ensō* is the essence of all artistic process, and of Zen. The ontological understanding of Zen is very clear on how Zen Buddhism takes art. “The painting is already there before you paint it. When you dip your brush into the ink you already know the result of your drawing, or else you cannot paint” (Suzuki, 2006). As all existence flashes like a lightning on the summer sky in one brushstroke, in one breath, the artist and external world, the subject and the object, the visible and the invisible, emptiness and fullness, all dichotomies becomes one in the totality of the great void. And this is what the artist seeks to realize.

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