

# Performance Art and The Way of the Warrior

Gwen Armstrong

**B**oth the martial arts and the visual arts are thoughtful practices that help us to live with composure and confidence during unsettling times. If the art you are familiar with hangs on a wall or sits on a pedestal, then it might be difficult to see the connection. But just as the martial arts can often carry a strong spiritual element, contemporary art is engaged, participatory and heartily concerned with the well being of our universe. Both disciplines recognize the body as a fluid system capable of going through astonishing and liberating transformations towards positivity, clarity and repose.

Sharon Alward is a modern artist-warrior living the concepts of bushido. Bushido or "The Way of the Warrior" explores ideas such as rectitude, courage, benevolence, politeness, sincerity, honour, loyalty and self-control. As well, she is an internationally known performance artist and full Professor at the University of Manitoba's School of Art. Her visionary art practice has long been concerned with ritual as a bodily route to knowledge. As a teacher and mentor, like a traditional sensei, Professor Alward is both feared and revered, accepting nothing less than authenticity from her students.

Her practice of physical rituals includes mastery of the sword.



Alward is a student of Muso Jikiden Eishin-ryu Iai-do, the traditional Japanese martial art of drawing and cutting with the samurai sword (katana). Iaido is a unique and ancient traditional art that develops body, mind and spirit. It instills awareness, centeredness and genuineness, along with calmness and harmony, both mental and physiological.

Sharon Alward also holds a Nidan, second degree black belt in Goju-Ryu Karate and is schooled in the traditional art of Okinawa Meibukan Goju-ryu karate-do, "a way of life" as well as a method of self-defense. Meibukan Goju is a traditional system that is non-sport and non-competitive. This "hard"

(go) and "soft" (ju) style of karate emphasizes the spiritual aspects of martial arts. The roots of Meibukan Goju Karate and the principles of Goju Ryu derive from traditional Chinese Kempo. The fluidity of Chinese White Crane Kempo, the basics of the southern Shorin-ji of China, the northern Chinese smooth Hakke Sho palm techniques and Tai Chi Chaun have all contributed to Goju Ryu practice and philosophy.

Sharon Alward's interdisciplinary art practice involves exploring traditional and innovative ways that our bodies can teach our minds and souls. Alward received her BA from the University of Winnipeg, a BFA from the University of

## profile

Manitoba, and an MFA from UCLA and a prestigious fellowship to Yale University. Her performances and video installations have been exhibited in locations worldwide. Amongst innumerable awards and grants, including recognition by the American Film Institute in Los Angeles and the Canadian National Screen Institute, Alward was recently cited by *MacLean's* magazine as one of the 100 most influential and innovative Canadians for her work in the visual arts. In the art world, she's a heavyweight.

Often controversial, Alward's investigation into art and religious thought is concentrated upon the body and ritual, much like the focus of the martial arts student. In performance art, the artist uses time, space, her body and her relationship with her audience to convey concepts that transcend materiality. The endurance she explores through her work has much in common with the endurance required training the body in the martial arts. The strengthening and conditioning regimes of Goju Ryu and other martial art practices carry strong similarities to the hardcore genre of performance art called endurance or "vow" art (Thomas McEvilley). The artist seeks to overcome personal pain (both physical and psychological) in order to explore a concept.

In her Winnipeg Art Gallery performance, "Loves You So Much It Hurts", Alward locked herself in a pillory for nine days, mobilizing tremendous inner resources in overcoming extreme physical and

mental discomfort. Throughout, she interacted with her audience in a manner that broke down traditional barriers between art and audience. "Totentanz", a commissioned piece for "Art Over AIDS", was a ritual of mourning and healing. Dressed in a white satin gown, Alward poured five gallons of bovine blood and semen onto the gallery floor, humbly going down on her hands and knees to



cleanse the room over a period of seven hours. For her act of compassion and humility, Alward suffered condemnation from political figures both locally and nationally.

"Life-sized" neon angel wings (sometimes worn astride her Harley Davidson motorcycle) have figured prominently in Alward's videos and performances. Her work as a visionary artist compels her to lead past post-modernity into a world rich with ritual sym-

bolism. Alward's body of work amply demonstrates how art has shifted away in the past four decades from the purely aesthetic. Her focus is on the process of creating, building relationships instead of objects. "We live in a culture that has little appreciation for meaningful ritual", noted art critic Suzi Gablik in her seminal book "The Reenchantment of Art" (1991, Thames and Hudson Ltd., London). She presents a compelling case for avant-garde art that leads toward "a more integrated value system that brings head and heart together in an ethic of care, as part of the healing of the world". As the first precept of Chinese Kempo in article 13: The Eight Precepts of Quanfa states in the *Bubishi*, "The mind is one with heaven and earth". Both martial and contemporary visual arts seek to restore our connection with the divine, with imagination, inner vision and myth.

In the Western world, emphasis has been placed on rationality, on dividing the world into orderly components. Knowledge of the continuity between a healthy body and a healthy mind has come only recently. Martial artists are way ahead of the game, having long known the benefits of regimes that build flexibility, vibrancy and solid connections to the environment. Likewise, conceptual artists broke out of the frame and the flat plane of the conventional museum, using real-life materials and issues to monumentally broaden what was deemed worthy of being called art. Artist Yoko Ono (yes, the same one who "broke up the Beatles") displayed the martial arts qualities of

forbearance, tolerance and patience in her "Cut Piece". She sat passively while audience members methodically cut off pieces of her clothing (you can watch it on Youtube).

While non-Western traditions have long used the body as an access point to alternative levels of consciousness, performance artists in the 70's went to extreme measures in testing the boundaries of pain and endurance. The desire to make socially visible the undeniable reality of human suffering was a strong motivating element in such masochistic works. Chris Burden, a notorious artist with whom Alward studied at UCLA in the early 1980's, had himself shot by a .22 caliber rifle at a range of fifteen feet before a live audience in the 1971 performance "Shoot". Though the actual act of a performance may seem simple, the artist had diligently considered all aspects of a piece beforehand, editing the material down to exactly what needs to be presented in order to convey the concept(s). Though real blood and pain were involved, Burden carefully staged this act of self-inflicted violence. Performance art and martial arts share a dedicated and disciplined passion for testing the limits of the human body.

Alward's practice uses the body to investigate the relationship between materiality and spirituality. In many martial arts, a sense of spirituality bridges the gap between our culture and its lost respect for ritual and myth. Historically, the martial arts offered training towards self-

enlightenment. While the spiritual dimension of martial arts may not always be at the forefront, the deepest fight is always within oneself. Discipline, dedication and perseverance enable martial artists (and performance artists) to focus their physical, mental and spiritual energy toward creative expression and universal healing. In *Liminal Acts*, commissioned by Vancouver's prestigious Western Front Gallery, Alward used her artist fee to serve a gourmet banquet to all comers in an area severely disadvantaged by rampant social problems. Last summer, amidst the Winnipeg Exchange District's hectic Fringe Festival, tucked upstairs at the always avant-garde Adhere and Deny Theatre, Alward performed "Pneuma". In a contemplative multi-media installation of love, mercy and healing, the artist used her presence, prayer and meditation to allow for free co-creation between artist and audience.

Alward's current work-in-progress, "Satori" (The Garden Project), employs Zen principles, seeking mystical transformation through allying ritual with technology in a projected nature-based video environment. Her interest in Satori, the acquiring of a new viewpoint or enlightenment, was awakened on an Okinawa beach early one morning in conversation with Sensei Hidemi Tamayose, Kyoshi, 9th Dan, President of the Ryukyu Kobudo Teshinkan and one of the finest weapons masters teaching the art of traditional kobudo in the world today. Alward found that her own artistic and theological investigations into

Western notions of peace, grace and mysticism related closely to Eastern ideas about Satori. Alward's work involves the retrieval of the widest possible range of rich cultural resources, past and present that grapple with beauty, meaning and value in the contemporary world.

The martial arts have a remarkable history of respect for both function and aesthetics. Though the need for self-defense has been crucial throughout humankind's history, martial arts' concern with the beauty of graceful and melodic movement has always been equally valued. Inspired by the Japanese aesthetic of harmony (instead of narrow Eurocentric constructs of beauty), Alward celebrates the elegance of restraint. As a martial artist and as a visual artist Sharon Alward uses her body as a self-revealed site of meaning, reclaiming reverence for the sacred.



**ABOUT THE AUTHOR:** Gwen Armstrong is an artist/writer/mother in perpetual pursuit of her own enlightenment. She is the 2007 recipient of the University Gold Medal for highest standing graduate from the School of Art, University of Manitoba.