

The Martial Art

Bryce Lane Feb 25, 06

When I was in art school many years ago we were mighty big on understanding the environment. Not trees and birds and the like but learning how to work artistically with more than just what we think we are working on. We learned that when you work, you are not only working on some object but working also on what it is with and around. Nothing is free or separate from that which is around and with it. Understand the world with and around you, then life gets a lot more interesting, and in some cases even a lot more likely.

In the martial arts the word "art" is very often left out in practice. They often come down to schools of different "dueling styles", since the environment is removed as much as possible from consideration. I am not down on sportfighting, combat sports are a "hoot and a half", yet there is a much bigger picture here to consider and "art", even martial art is all about considering bigger pictures.

The next time you go out, take a look around you. Look close, look further away, look at what is between you and the doors or around you and any possible opponents. Don't say anything to the people you are with because they will likely think you are some sort of "nut". That is fine because a martial artist who is not "nuts" in some important ways, is a disgrace to his or her chosen art(s).

When you are taking this look consider simple things, like "could I really throw a roundhouse kick anywhere in this place"; "will going to the ground only expose me to every pointy or steel toed boot in the room, while making extricating myself from this mess impossible"; "Is it more likely any of the stuff around me can trip me or my opponent better than either of us could trip or throw each other in the dojo?"

What you will start to see is that no matter what your skills, half or more of them are useless or a detriment already. You will see that your environment can do-you-in likely far quicker than your opponent. Throw a crowd in an area that is already an obstacle course who become "hostile obstacles" if excited and now you likely just can't imagine what to do. Cops hate this sort of situation, but police have something of a solution. They can order up more police, which is a luxury you likely don't have.

When martial arts schools start training in areas set up more like restaurants, crowded parties with furniture and sporting events, then the art is a lot more complete. This is a whole lot more than just "keeping up your SA" (situational awareness). It is learning to use a situation to your advantage with what you have and wherever you happen to be, in fast and fluent detail. If that isn't "art" in every sense of the word, then what is?

Sun Tsu wrote, to paraphrase "Know your enemy, know yourself, know the land, and you will not be defeated in ten thousand battles. This is an exaggeration of course, but when is the last time in your martial arts school you worked with "knowing the land"? When is the last time you went into an area filled with obstacles and worked with using that environment against an opponent(s) in order to attack covertly, defend yourself, or escape. Learning to see quickly and near-instinctively how to attack or defend with what is there. I am not talking about simply finding hand weapons, but using the area as a weapon. What can you push, pull or throw him into or over, what is in your way, what is in the way of help or escape, what are the dangers beside my opponent, how many people might want "in" on this, how is the crowd acting and moving? You have to have this map in your head and get the skill of getting it quickly and instinctively without whipping out the sketchpad, a reference manual, and a pack of markers.

Working intelligence assets learn mostly out of fear to "read an area" especially for something like a dead-drop, where intelligence material is left for someone else to pick up. A failure to have routes of escape, know who belongs in the area and who does not, failure to have a place to get rid of suspicious material fast, or failure to recognize an out of place vehicle can pretty much end a brilliant career of "hardcore office politics". Sorry to use such a dark example, but the "cultivated awareness" is the same, just used for something a little more productive in your own case hopefully.

Musashi spoke of this, Sun Tsu wrote of little else if you read carefully. There are always three of you in every fight, even in an otherwise empty room. There is you, your opponent and your environment. If you have the environment on your side, the fight is now two against one in your favor.

Much is often said in hushed tones about "mental arts", usually about "death touches" and the like; Nonsense that hints at dark secrets and ancient black magic; I would say that if you want a mental art then try this one: Everywhere you go for a week or so, take a good look around, see what and whom is where, understand how people move in the area trafficking naturally, see where they naturally gather and areas of psychological "no mans land" in the place. Look and see what is made of what, what looks hard, what looks durable and isn't, what can be used to augment punches, kicks, trips or escapes, what can get someone off balance what is reflective and can give you warning, where can you herd them into or want to make sure they don't herd you into. You will find far more than you think you will, and practice developing a valuable skill.

Once you develop a feel for this, sneak a partner out of school who is at a similar level to you, find places, practice (safely), exchange what you learn. Art is about discovery, innovation and creativity. If you are not doing these three, wherever and whenever you can, you are not an artist. Any school which discourages these three as well as not helping you moderate the three by developing judgement and reason about your art, you are welcome to; but it is nowhere I want to be.

One other little bit from art school that has lived in my head for a couple of decades now is that "real art lives out in the world". I think we were

talking about photography but if that isn't also incredible martial arts advice then what is? Understanding the environment and how to use to your advantage what it contains is at least as useful a tool as decent oil paint, a fine leica camera or a good right hook. Without developing the understanding of where you are and what to do with where you are, no art of any kind is possible.