

**SUBSTANCE
AND
PHENOMENON**



Painting by Kaji Aso

Copies of this book can be purchased at:

Kaji Aso Institute of the Arts
40 St. Stephen Street
Boston, Massachusetts, 02115

SUBSTANCE AND PHENOMENON

PREFACE

In the following pages, Mr. Kaji Aso and member of the Kaji Aso Studio raise the questions “What is Substance?” and “What is Phenomenon?” These are edited versions of lectures and discussions which took place at the studio during 1974 and 1975. Mr. Aso speaks first from his essays and lectures, followed by presentations given by members of the studio and portions of their discussions on the question of substance and phenomenon.

Ms. Lorraine White prepared and arranged the many transcripts from which this document derives. Gary Whited, in consultation with Kaji Aso and members of the studio, prepared the edited version. This most recent version was typeset and digitally reformatted in 2006 by Barry Maloney.

SUBSTANCE

*If we were the monkey
We might peel off the onion
Which is named the truth, and*

*We never get inside seed to eat.
We never get it.*

*We never find it where we are expecting to, because
Onion itself is a seed... but
We don't know because we are the monkey*

Somehow...

*We have onion inside of ourselves
While we are peeling off
Are we not really the monkey...?*

by Kaji Aso
Boston, 1974

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Kaji Aso: An important thing to understand about art is that absolutely you don't need special training or skill for art – just your brain has to be working. If your brain isn't working that is something else. (However, painting can motivate the brain to work.) Everyone has a concept of and experience of flat surface, so they can paint. In fact, such a thing as skill doesn't exist for painting. It is for exercise or physical level of skill. Painting is different from playing a musical instrument but even with an instrument skill is not really substantial. Many people are confused about this.

I told a student today that if she starts a painting from painting she will never get painting. She would have to start somewhere else because painting is a category and human existence is not included in this category or this existence. So always we have to have something which is outside of painting and we have to start from this point; or you can start from painting and then reach to life or general human existence. Then painting comes to belong to human existence or life. If you do reach to general human existence or life then painting becomes painting. If you are able to see painting that means you are outside of painting. I don't know at how high a level, but anyway you are existing as a human being – there is no doubt.

For first project you can start to just paint nothing. To paint nothing means to realize nothingness on the paper. Without having any visual contact, like skin, or a table, or color, can you think about the existence of a painting? Maybe this sounds like nonsense?

Even with abstract usually you are painting things. In one aspect painting definitely has visual reference. You should think about the other side of painting, beyond the painting, that means your side of the painting. To realize or replace your visual experience or other experience on the paper is definition of the painting. Since painting is established based on a visual element then, of course, you have to say this is impossible. However, if you think about the process of establishing a painting you will then be able to think about this principle.

For example: a magician makes a rabbit appear and disappear; that is his job and both are the same thing. The audience's attention is there so it seems like different things, but to the magician to make the rabbit appear or disappear is exactly the same thing. Here we see the most foundational activity of painting.

There are systems of painting. One example of a simple system of painting is here is one line and another line comes close. This system could be used in any way. You could move it and bring more lines and still it is the same painting. I am relating this to what I just said about your own position.

If I used music as an example I would say that musicians wish always to develop from just sound to music. It is the same problem with painting. From a specific visual experience we hope to develop to painting. Maybe we are going completely from the other side but we are trying to come back.

I'm holding up a piece of blank paper. Sometimes I say "here is a painting." The reason I say that is because it depends on you; if you have a painting then here is a painting. This surface itself can already be part of a process of painting. In fact, how many millions of years did we spend to discover and establish this surface? However, at any moment a painting does not exist here if you don't have a painting. Now what we are to do is to see that with this paper there are a lot of things that disturb the painting. You should take off these disturbing things, and when that's done we will see the essential part or essence of the painting which doesn't have any representation. So let's start...

I hope you will understand that by talking I don't expect to get a conclusion, but I do absolutely expect to get a conclusion from your painting. I won't give answers or conclusions in my speaking. I am expecting to see completely unexpected answers in your painting.

With this project to eliminate all sense of material you did not have any truth, any approach – just with your instinct you are trying. Now I hope you will not lose this instinct. I hope you will use this instinct all your life. ~

BEING IS SIMPLE

Suppose you were asked to paint the blue sky without anything else – for example, without a tree, sea, or sun – nothing. What kind of painting would you make? Is it possible? And what meaning and value would it have? Usually the question of value depends on whether it is painted well or not, but in this case, what kind of painting can one expect from such a strange idea? You may well answer that you have never seen such a painting – at least one which is titled “Sky,” and which represents nothing but air. Even if you used the most sophisticated techniques of contemporary painting, I am sure that you would find it difficult to describe the sky without any approach or any point of reference.

But before we give up, we should stop to consider just what is blue sky? What is its identity? For example, the sky above the sea appears vast, or the sky through the branches of a tree appears deep, but if it were not for the sea or the branch, the sky would not exist. The sky which we usually perceive is always related to something but when you look at the sky without relation to anything else, it is simply blue, just deep. It transcends all conceptions of space, and it makes you lose all feeling of time. It is very difficult to grasp and very hard to explain. Here is only the pure unknown or a certain dread – these rather like spiritual entities. It is too misty to even call it a “spiritual existence.”

The sky does not exist in any relation to your existence and you do not exist in terms of the sky. There cannot be an explanation or an understanding through conceptions of subject and object.

I find in such an indefinable thing the original and most basic meaning of existence.

The sky exists not only in the sky. ~

This is a foundation. It is absolutely possible for you to find another foundation. The definition of foundation is “one,” but the activity of inventing foundation is limitless. All the time we discover foundation. Every painting.

So hold this experience, and the next project I want to give you is to generally discover light reflection. For example, you might be walking under a tree and see shimmering light. Observing this light and experiencing light are different. To rationalize this experience through painting will be a new experience for you. A painting, when it is realized on paper, can be physically perceived, like setting a stage, but in nature’s condition you are surrounded by the painting. How can you capture this painting from all directions? The light under the tree might be passing you or coming from behind you. I wish you would forget that you are walking on the ground, but of course I want you to be certain of where you are. Being certain of where you are depends on how you can capture all activities. Definitely you have to set the time, you have to set the stage. All space we see is based on our own small existence. When we have activities we definitely have position – even though all the space we see is just part of another space.

Time also is indefinable. Our definition is just temporal compared to the existence of nature. The history of India has no concept of time – they just understood next, next, next. Maybe this was some intelligence. In some sense this made less confusion and more order. I can see one point but I can’t really conclude. It’s not really important to conclude which is right and which is wrong. It is a difference of level. ~

Last week I gave a project of painting the action of light. You can try to connect this experience of painting the action of light to the question I asked two weeks ago: “Without having visual contact, is it possible to receive the existence of a painting?” This project is one of the best approaches to find out the basic structure of painting. If you have a specific figure or even color or sense of direction, then you easily come to depend on them. But light is even more indefinite and difficult to grasp than the sky. In another sense it is very definite and positive. Even a huge color and sound you can’t reject. Painting comes from these. Another example is if you have an experience of the grass steaming, then from this a painting comes.

Usually we believe that for anything to exist there is a foundation, but there is no foundation which exists. The “light” project is also a good approach for finding out that foundation does not exist. But you do exist and your own existence can be the substitution for foundation. So, I’m saying that generally such a thing as foundation never exists, but foundation is created and in that sense it does exist. For example, think about painting a house. That is absolutely fine and the house is the subject of the painting. To place the house on the paper generally you have to paint the land to hold the house, but what is holding the land? Once you have started that reversing logic you can never get the point. It is just a trap. In fact many professional and skillful philosophers are arguing the trap. They end up doing just analysis and get farther away every moment. Every time they believe they have discovered something they lose something.

So what is foundation then? My definition is: Foundation exists where things start, begin, or are born. As a general condition how do things start? How do you start things? These are two different points. Therefore, where things are started is the place where foundation begins. Be careful to remember what I am saying, “the place where things are starting” is not the foundation, “thing starting” is the foundation. For example, I am here, but “here” is not my foundation. “I am” is my foundation. It is the same with you.

I am talking about this as it directly relates to painting. Even when the space you are in is identified by you it is not the foundation. So you cannot use the paper as a foundation. The foundation is really yourself.

Even the moment when you start, the thing is just phenomenon, and nothing is conceived. Later you can bring it into a concept. Going back to the first statement, light is phenomenon.

Now I hope you will understand the relationship between you and an object of painting. The object is always phenomenon. It is a misunderstanding to believe that an object has concept or individual value. To believe that means you have a preconception and are completely missing foundation. When you start from phenomenon and when you achieve all these phenomena, then you get foundation.

When you start a painting it is just phenomenon. To bring this up to a concept you have to bring identity of the phenomenon. Technically what you can do is to watch this painting every

day and as a natural reaction of being a human being things will start to grow in your head. When we see things they're just phenomena, then the next moment, sometimes very quickly, we react and then we can bring identity. But our first view of nature, accord to my experience, seems to be just stimulation and reminds us of, and brings up our past. So, in another sense, when we see things and are surprised, we are just seeing the past. The next moment we might bring up something. So creation is nature. New nature comes after we get stimulation; after we sacrifice past experience.

Funny thing about human being is that people completely confuse the situation till it is upside down. For instance, the bone is to hold meat, but when we buy it, it is to eat the meat. Do you understand? Bone is perspective and meat is the sight. Boneless meat is more expensive.

Next project is the moon. Simply paint the moon, but think about focus point – perspective. Make certain what you are seeing really. Make sure where is the moon. I don't mean this scientifically. ~

I gave the assignment “moon” last time. My most important intention was to let you first see and then paint the moon with a different approach. Most of the time when you are watching the moon I don’t think you are really trying to perceive, or at least to rationalize, the moon. I wonder if anything new happened to you or not. After you painted I was expecting one project of painting which was to think about perspective.

Of course we have general knowledge of perspective. Of course we see things through perspective and that makes you believe that perspective generally exists before you exist.

The moon is such an indefinable object. It has been defined as a moon and also we can pretend that we can really grasp it, like in Issa’s haiku which says, “My son cries to ‘get the moon for me.’ ” You feel almost that you can reach the moon, however we know that the moon is far away.

Position of moon and focus point are the major points of this project. Again you will see an indefinable object, like “sky.” How far? How large? You have no idea of proportion. To have proportion or to measure it is too hard. However it seems easy, or at least possible to measure it. Why? Because there is reference? Because there is shape? Shape doesn’t actually help. Even this reference, some kind of focal point, doesn’t help either because it is too far. Why then is it possible to paint it? It is because we have perspective.

“Because we have perspective.” This seems like a complete paradox from what I said before, but actually it is not a paradox; it is just common sense. I am saying this statement to give you some approach to think about the question “what is perspective?” again.

“When you pick up a pencil or some object then here is the first rationalization or recognition of the object. After that we try to make sure. On the other hand we vary it by getting another object, like a pear, and that gives emphasis. Also it gives certain idea of relation in which all kinds of structure are included.

Maybe the first time when we discovered two objects they weren’t sitting on a surface. Maybe they were moving around in different directions near one another, giving just an idea of distance. Every time we get more objects, according to mathematical terms, we get more dimension. Then all these kinds of experiences came to establish focus point and perspective.

But to me, even at that time, the Renaissance idea of perspective was a reversal of intelligence rather than a progression, and people seem to have stayed there too long.

It’s about time to recognize that such things as focus points and perspective never exist in nature. It is our dogma. We can’t get out of the chain of dogma. Our only possibility to keep freedom is to keep working and to keep inventing and discovering things. To trust our dogma over nature is the biggest mistake. Focus point and perspective never exist in nature.

My explanation is that I am trying to make a paradox. There is no “X” dimension or “Y” dimension in nature, we just make them up. Therefore, the moon could hang on any branch of

your dimension. Your dimension is signified by “X” and “Y”, but actually your dimension is like a tree with many branches. Do you understand this point?

I hope that moon ray will reach to all parts of the space of your painting. ~

Your next project is to throw a stone in the darkness, hear the sound and paint it.

When you throw a stone in the darkness, first of all what you are experiencing is darkness. My personal experience is that before I throw a stone in the darkness, I really have the experience of unknownness or uncertainty. This is the base of imagination.

This term “base of imagination,” will be very important. The discussion about substance and phenomenon should make more clear the difference between imagination and base of imagination.

Then you have to hear the sound. The sound, of course, is not a visual experience; so can you paint it? In fact, you do paint it and in fact you do express it or rationalize it. Can you express it in some aspects but not in the entire sense? My answer is that you can express more than the entire sense.

What I am trying to say is that it is more than just experience of the stone sound because you have a chance to create environment. An example of this is that when you feel sad your body is not sad, but you have a sad story. Your body is always completely “non,” infinite, completely flexible and things can pass through.

Do you understand that when you transfer or interpret from one medium to another you usually feel you have to cut out something? Actually you don't have to cut out, you can add more. For instance we have heard Ciccolini playing Debussy's moonlight piece. That is a visual experience interpreted through music. That kind of thing has been done in the music field for quite some time but not so much in the painting field. Of course, people used to make up paintings from some story but still the stories were visual stories – it is not transforming sensation.

But in any painting, if it is alive, maybe some transference of sensation has been done unconsciously. Bonnard and Monet didn't say anything about transferring other media experience. They believed they painted exactly, what they saw, but their painting came from somewhere else. This is nothing new. Generally it's going on and it should be. If it isn't going on then something is wrong with that painting, because what you are doing is duplication of rationalization.

The chances are very small that you can do a perfect transforming from visual to visual. The environment has to be exactly the same, you have to be exactly the same. If you miss some condition, then you have to cut out something.

I am saying that you are not painting what you are looking at, like a still-life or landscape. What you are painting is something which came from far away. Therefore, to be diligent in any activity is such an important thing if you wish to do painting. I would say that even making out tax forms well can help painting.

When I was talking about haiku I said that I would talk about environment. This is one occasion when I am doing this. The term environment has such a wide meaning, and to find how

this wide meaning is involved in creation is a very very large subject, so I can't talk about it in any one time.

I said that "you can express more than the entire sense because you have a chance to create environment." The sound of stone could be transferred to piano but what you have experienced by trying to paint it was completely different because you have a different environment, and also your involvement in this environment depends on your individual potentiality if you think only of the sound of the stone – pong, pong, pong; that is a very simple experience, but if you really felt the pressure of darkness, or even the pressure of your past and also the sensation of the future, finding the most unified condition of your being is a different experience. That is supposed to be the meaning of individuality and personal expression. Of course these days the terms "individuality" and "personal expression" are used in a much lower level way, but when you look at a Bonnard or a Monet or Degas and you understand this point then you will clearly see what is personal. In my opinion what is personal is infinite base.

Western philosophy uses human being as a base, then later on they come to eliminate this person. But my method is that I don't use this a priori, I use infinite base.

Student: If something is personal doesn't that mean there is your painting and there is my painting? Last week you worked on someone's painting and when she said it wasn't her painting anymore, you disagreed.

You could think about it on the lowest level which is that physically it was done by me. But substantially that doesn't mean anything. If you understand that painting is painting, the basic concept of painting does not involve any personality or idea of personality. Painting has general existence which holds all human being. If you project any painting on the idea then you will see what part is really creative. If it was creative then it was personal but personal as well as universal. So if you don't understand that "my painting" or "your painting" never exists then you can't find this personal part either. This personal part or personality lets us donate to general human existence.

Scientifically if you analyze the painting you can tell which part is that person's and which is mine, but if you think about true creation then the personal pattern of image will be eliminated in new image. Painting of one apple and painting of two apples is entirely different.

Many years ago, I don't know how many, someone got a large and simple concept of "good" and "bad." Can you say that this is not your concept too? Of course in some sense this is negative.

Trying to relate painting to another medium means really giving more individual value toward painting.

Here is your project for next week. When you threw the stone maybe you heard one sound. If you heard more than one sound, that means here is definitely process of time. In fact what we are doing is defining everything in a time. Here is a very specific process of visual rationalization. ~

I want to let you recognize and define again the terms and relationship of time and space.

Already we have been thinking about throwing a stone. If you throw a stone in the darkness and if you heard one sound you will be defining a space with one accent or without accent, but anyway a space.

And if you heard more than one sound how would you define the space? Still you will define a space. What is the space? What is this “a space”? What does space mean? Usually we are using the term “space” casually and in some sense we are manipulating.

We started to use this term as a physical experience of what is between objects, like the distance between the stone and apple. Actually it is not space, it is value. In which condition does this value come out? People have just started using the term “space” in recent history, and quickly it has become a common word and also quickly it has been producing misunderstanding.

Already for some people to see the space in the painting is commonsense. We have been using these terms for the painting without giving definition. Actually what we have been using is not “space,” but rather it is “unity.” The situation or condition in which we are using the term “space” is not space, put “unity.” You might think some thought is missing, but think again about the question “Can you receive painting without having any visual contact?” and why we say, “Yes, because it’s a system.” If you think about this condition you will understand what I mean when I say “this is not space, but unity.”

Of course for the physical level you can still understand and use the other term which is “value,” but if you really hold these two terms, “value” and “unity,” things will be much clearer. Unity is beyond value. We see the value because there is unity. Maybe later on we will see what is beyond unity. Of course the word will remain the same but at least we will see something I think. Right now we believe this word is absolutely essential but I am quite sure we will discover not per, meaning beyond.

This project is to tell how we can’t use the term “space” by itself unless we understand that this is a borrowing term and just a substitution. It is the same with time. When we have more than one sound we recognize, or there was already recognition of the base of the concept of time. Then you can see that it was time and concept base. When we paint the many sounds of the stone we define a space, a unity, and we define several different times in a moment. How do we explain this situation? Again we have to use the concept “unity.” This is right now the only way to explain this situation.

As far as we know the two terms “moment” and “eternity” constantly build. In one dimension there is no distinction or difference between these two terms. To define the difference we have to be substantial. To put them together we also have to be substantial. We are the base.

I would like to talk about this more next time; phenomenon and unity, moment and constant. We know the condition, but still we have to define Unity as a relationship, but still we have to

think what level of relationship? Parallel is a relationship, unbalance is a relationship, unity is definitely a relationship, but you have to distinguish this. A musical composition that takes ten minutes is also a moment if it has concept.

This is another subject now. Originally we have a surface or a base to receive everything and even sometimes we receive something bad and unconsciously we are fixing it. That is really a trap. Creative activity fixes empty parts and you are seeing yourself really. It is a very sophisticated narcissism. For example, Picasso raised all these questions, but he didn't know these questions. Anyway, later people will look for the answer and will make up an answer. If someone really wanted to insure that their work will last they should not finish their work and make it as stupid as possible. That would take advantage of the creative ability of human being. Human existence is going on that way anyway. Fixing up and filling out empty parts is fine, there is nothing wrong with that, but that is not really intelligent enough. We have to be able to see whether we did it or if the original work had it. So now I can enjoy Picasso's painting, but mainly I am enjoying myself rather than being entertained by Picasso.

You know, of course, morality always works the other way. When you see a bad person then naturally you get more moral and you get angry with them. The next level is to try to help them and morality comes out. If you met a super-good person nothing especially happens but just naturally you are received. I'm not talking about morality, just a general aspect of human being.

How many years have we been missing this point and creating an illusion? I think this illusion is what we have received as a culture, as a legacy. We have been messing around human existence quite enough. If you go back to the Greek period is still simple enough to see the pattern of a mistake which we have exaggerated.

So next time I will talk about unity and moment and eternity. Again you can check your mind by throwing a stone or hitting a piano key several times. Check whether it is a moment or if it is certain time. This concept of time comes from where? And this sense of constant comes from where? Only by making sure of the direction, right now, can we reach to the source. Everyone tries to grab or rationalize and they are trapped by part of rationalism which is analysis. And while they are dividing the object still it is all right, but they begin to divide themselves, which is really a very common thing. So right now my capability to reach to the source or concept is to find the direction – It comes from where?

Substance and phenomenon depends on your place. People are often understanding substance and phenomenon as just "a description," and in another sense, both have been understood as a phenomenon. But from another place you can see that substance is a higher level. However, both are really conditions, not lower or higher levels. Phenomenon, to begin with, has no independent value to express or describe. Substance, to begin with, has the superior level of concept. These two aspects you should see clearly. How you understand substance and phenomenon depends on your position.

Now we can think about substance and phenomenon. We can discover something. ~

Gary Whited:

What is substance? In search of an answer, this question always remains. It leads me on a journey into the world, and always back to myself. In the end there is the question and me.

Where is substance? Is substance something here or over there? Is it near or far?

Is it any place? Is it something, or is it nothing?

When I ask this question I become aware that I am someplace. Always this is true – I am here or there, near or far. I cannot approach this question without asking where I am.

A butterfly is passing by my window. It is yellow and it bounces through the air. What is the butterfly? What is its substance? Where is it? Can I hold the butterfly and find its substance? Quickly the butterfly is gone, or am I gone?

Frederick Frank: Replacing yourself with the object? This is a hazy point to me.

Kathleen Fox: You delineate a physical distance between yourself and the object – and between time and space. What is hazy, Rick?

Frederick Frank: The whole point of identifying with an object in some sense means being objective with one’s self, and that’s confusing.

Robert Reed: Maybe we could place the object to the side, as in Japanese paintings, so the object is also an observer.

Carl Mueller: Maybe you are the object too, setting up space to come around and look back to yourself. That’s a total entity.

Marc Anderson: That’s already given.

Carl Mueller: I think so too, but Rick didn’t seem clear.

Bruce Allen: The self not only captures, but is captured by the object.

Carl Mueller: We are going back to the basic questions; what is it? and where is it?

Kathleen Fox: Substance becomes unity between you and the object. The quality of unity changes as you and the object change. Distance becomes time, and the paper isn’t a limit – the thing should exist beyond the paper.

Carl Mueller: The paper or canvas is just a technical device.

Kathleen Fox: Mr. Aso said, “Look at it here, here, and here” (moving an object around in front of a piece of paper), does substance change?”

Bruce Allen: Does substance change? Or do just the phenomena change?

Polly Brown: Each new position is a new present substance.

Frederick Frank: Polly, your poem about the bird relates to this. Would you read it please.

Polly Brown: *A bird alights on a tree
And we see he is there.*

*Maybe substance is a new space
Created by necessity
Of these phenomena.*

The bird and myself are historically substance and in the present they are phenomena. Recognition of the bird is substance in the present.

Frederick Frank: By historical do we mean past experiences?

Bruce Allen: Substance of that moment can be partially defined by historical position or experience.

Steven Bogart: What is historical substance?

Marc Anderson: What is recognition?

Kathleen Fox: Recognition is knowing again. Historical reality is not of absolute importance, it just helps to understand the present reality.

Frederick Frank: Bruce, you said you do draw on past experiences. Should that be the case ideally however?

Kathleen Fox: You just draw on it to locate it tentatively.

Frederick Frank: At what point does preconception come in?

Kathleen Fox: That's the point of tension.

Steven Bogart: Should that be such a problem? Once when I saw something beautiful outside I couldn't paint it, but two weeks later it came out. I was thinking, is substance only that moment?

Polly Brown: The present is all possible futures.

Kathleen Fox: Substance is all things.

Steven Bogart: Who is, and what is? Mr. Aso said when you see someone doing something, you should accept what they've done as common sense, then try to decide whether it's common sense or not.

Kathleen Fox: I recognize that the apple is there, but if I don't see it, is it there?

Polly Brown: It's in the space, so do you recognize it?

Carl Mueller: You can say it's there for you.

Marc Anderson: You can still accept it.

Polly Brown: You can say that about almost anything.

Steven Bogart: Nature is neutral, not negative or positive. It exists, but it doesn't have any meaning unless we recognize it.

Polly Brown: Think about human beings as part of nature; how does that relate?

Kathleen Fox: We can't disassociate ourselves from nature.

Steven Bogart: We can have proper distance.

Marc Anderson: You said it doesn't have any meaning unless it's recognized. To another object is it recognized?

Steven Bogart: Is it a butterfly because you know it's a butterfly?

Marc Anderson: That's only meaningful to you.

Steven Bogart: If not to me, then to whom?

Marc Anderson: I meant, is it meaningful to another organism?

Frederick Frank: We identify nature, but does it exist by itself?

Marc Anderson: Is there meaning in nature apart from us?

Steven Bogart: That implies God. Why are we human beings?

Carl Mueller: Use the same justification for nature and us.

Kathleen Fox: If there's no separation, then we are god.

Carl Mueller: We've wandered.

Frederick Frank: What is it? and where is it? is the point.

Carl Mueller: Nature still goes on without us.

Kathleen Fox: Where and what? Where is it tells what it is, and that's that.

Carl Mueller: Not totally.

Kathleen Fox: Once those two questions are answered, what more do you need to know?

Marc Anderson: The "what" is always going to be infinite.

Robert Reed: Relate these two foundational questions.

Steven Bogart: What? and Where? and then your position. We're trying to do this now – the next step is our position.

Frederick Frank: When thinking of ourselves as objects, then we are so much phenomena – what's left?

Kathleen Fox: Next discussion on what's left.

Robert Reed: I was going to say we should go paint and draw; that's what's left really.

Gary Whited: When I ask “what is substance?”, what am I searching for and how will I know when I have found it? No preconceived ideas will help to answer this question. Preconceptions limit and confine my search. The question “what is substance?” has no limits or bounds. I cannot stand outside its boundaries and ask it. I cannot hold this question between my fingers to study it. As a question it studies me. I am the question and every time I ask it I am already within it.

Steven Bogart: Painting is a process for us to grow. We experience nature; we see beauty and we try to paint it. Through painting we try to find ourselves. The existence of painting is the same as nature. It doesn't exist until we recognize it. Then painting means more than nature.

I find nature through myself and I recognize it through painting and in this activity I give nature its value.

A person who doesn't paint still can create a painting because painting is always going on inside of us. To find yourself in nature is painting.

When I look up at the stars I try to see the relationships among them and their relationship to myself. When I try to paint the stars I have some imagination related to my experience, and I try to find their position on the surface. In other words, I try to find where I am.

Maybe when we are painting we are being super-logical. But still we have to have complete freedom. Maybe to paint means to rationalize, to understand or to recognize. But I think if we accept this as painting we are limiting ourselves simply to science.

We can paint without thinking anything, or paint nothing or something. Maybe to do this we have to be super-logical. However, we are still rationalizing our experience.

In all our thinking about painting and what we do in our lives there is consequence. I don't mean consequence in terms of results, but more fundamentally, to show substance.

We are always dealing with uncertainty – from the beginning. I think this is why we rationalize – why we paint. And what we find might be from our rationalizing and process of painting. But something more is inside of us, something which comes into the painting that was not recognized before. Here is substance?

Kaji Aso: The last part was very good. Would you repeat it again?

Kathleen Fox: Would you go back to that part about consequence?

Kaji Aso: Consequence – I understand this to be something like fate or promise. Fate is a little too dramatic.

Steven Bogart: From the beginning of the painting, some things are unknown to us, but from the first touch we have to be certain, and then rationalization starts. From the activity of rationalizing and seeing different relationships, some consequence or substance comes into the painting.

Kaji Aso: Yes, at the very end... something comes.

Steven Bogart: Into the painting.

Kathleen Fox: Are you saying that by itself, if it provoked no other thing it would be fruitless? Just to think, to rationalize, can't be helped, but are you saying that another thing grows out of that?, that you may start out rationalizing or trying to rationalize your position, but something else automatically occurs?

Steven Bogart: Something can come into the painting that was never recognized.
Kaji Aso: That is a very interesting point to me.
Steven Bogart: It doesn't mean after, it means wasn't rationalized. Otherwise it's just like building a machine – practical.
Kaji Aso: Like peeing in the snow – after that you see completely unrelated shapes. ~

Carl Mueller: It seems to me that the English language has developed a kind of journalistic haiku of its own. Since poetry seems to be prevalent around here, there's one little piece I'm sure you've all heard that I'd like to recite for you here:

*There was a young lady from Niger,
Who smiled as she rode on a tiger.
They returned from the ride,
The lady inside,
With a smile on the face of the tiger.*

And tigers do smile. They always seem to be smiling when you see them in zoos. That's why I always found it interesting that one particular tiger on that screen in the museum was not smiling. Instead he looks very worried and very suspicious in the direction of that dragon. I somehow get the feeling that may be our point of view. A large number of worried and very suspicious tigers trying to come to grips with a rather unknown dragon.

Sometime ago, I got rather a scare in this class. Someone mentioned that what was going on here was a super-logical approach designed by a super-logical mind. Up to that point I hadn't really considered that; I hadn't really worried about it. I assumed that any argumentative base would be good enough, that it didn't matter.

I'm not super-logical myself, but I know something about logic. And I know that you don't really have to have a good first principle if you're not being logical. But, if you are being logical, then your first principle has to be very very solid because everything you construct is going to be based on that.

So I started going back and thinking about phenomena and substance. First I tried just working with substance and I couldn't get anywhere. It seemed ungraspable. So I started fooling around with phenomena.

After taking things apart, like Mr. Aso's onion, I suddenly realized that I had a whole bunch of disembodied phenomena that I couldn't really account for – like the grin on the Cheshire cat. So I started trying to realize where phenomena were, and that's how I managed to construct this paper.

It seems to me that the basis of the universe is energy. Every thing is some form of energy even if its unified tightly into a material object, or if it's radiant from a light source or some source of power, or any other kind of thing.

It seemed to me that perhaps energy is substance. It exists apart from us. We can't really contact the energy. All we can ever do is receive sensible perceptions or manifestations of this

energy. And these form things in our mind, which I suspect are phenomena. The idea that you see an apple and you say the apple is red is not really true because the apple is absorbing all the other colors except red. It just happens to be red that's coming back to your eye, being reflected off. The energy that's involved in the apple is not the energy that you see. All you see is this thing that's in your mind, the translation of that apple's activity, its existence, creating the image, this perception.

The perception I think is phenomenon. It's never really attached to the substance. It exists outside the substance. It's just the activity that is continuous. The energy itself, the energy system continues whether we look at it at all, whether we experience it or not, whether any sentient being is experiencing it or not. The energy always exists. But the phenomena only come into existence when someone looks at them or sees them. I think the one way of realizing it would be to consider the various ways in which many, many animals see things. For example, most mammals don't see color at all, apparently many of the lower animals aren't even capable of perceiving detail, but only see things that move or are of a certain size. Color-blind people may receive entirely different color phenomena than most other people do. Phenomena aren't really there, it's only the activity and then the perception formed in our mind. Now this perception, of course, is a form of activity in itself. It forms another substance; perhaps a substance linking the two: the energy outside that's there, and the energy in your mind creating the phenomena, creating the perception. The two of them form a new and separate substance combining both.

I think the first step to understanding a system is to realize what it is. I think that's been brought up before. That's the essential uniqueness the parameters of what you are trying to get, the definition of that existence. To carry this process further you come up with "where," which is the integration of the system you're experiencing, into the overall system of the universe.

Energy exists only in the present. It doesn't have a past or a future. This idea of past or future is just a phenomenon that's formed by mental energy. An energy only exists at the given instant. So your mind builds mental constructions that analyze the translations you've received and builds up the phenomena in your mind. These phenomena are attached now to a new substance which is in your mind.

I think at this stage many artists begin to replace phenomena. We translate one form of phenomena into another kind that we still feel reflects or shows that initial energy.

You can of course construct energy just in your mind. It isn't necessary always to have an outside object. You can start from the interior and construct your phenomena from there. The whole process of pure imagination seems to be the mental substance of your mind building its own phenomena and attaching them to its substance, or perceiving them, perhaps, from the substance.

After this you can, by exerting physical and mental energy, create, outside yourself, a new

energy system. To try and communicate what it is you felt in your mind, what it is you perceived in your mind, you create painting. In doing so you've now cluttered up the universe with another energy system. I'm not sure what right we have to do that, but there it is.

Diverging slightly now, at any given instant any energy system is in balance. If it's not true then it's merely a greater or lesser degree of chaos. The balance which supports this system is its unity. The system, of course, can be made up of many subsystems, each one possessing its own individual unity, and the original system can be a subsystem itself of some greater, overall system, and again going back to "what is it?" It's identifying which system you want to deal with that I think is the "what." And the "where" is relating it to all these other systems. Both the subsystems of it and the super system.

I don't think the unity is phenomena. The unity is something underlying the substance. It's the path which the energy of the substance must follow.

In painting a great deal of the input energy, the energy that comes to you, and almost all of the final newly created energy, is visual. You can't paint the solidity of the floor. You can't paint the vaporousness of air. But you can build phenomena that somehow suggest these.

Now the eye cannot focus over a large area, over a given depth. It can only focus on a very small point at a given instant. Color and detail seem to fade toward the outer edges of the eye, because the cones which perceive colors and details are in the middle of the retina. And the ability to notice small and subtle variations of light increases toward the outer edges of vision because that's where the rods are more common. They're the ones that pick up light. On the other hand the eye itself restricts your vision to a slightly rectangular field. I think this has a very strong governing effect on what we paint and on how we interpret phenomena. The eyes move around, of course, and look at different things. They focus and refocus.

But it's only in a given instant, when that energy is existing at a given instant, that unity exists. To try to construct a painting based upon perceptions received over a temporal period, I think, begins to result in disunity. The unity of the vision is the initial vision. It's at the moment when you saw it.

Now, the painting is an energy system in itself, apart from you. It's almost totally visual. The initial vision that we had can come from outside of us, or inside of us, or from the unconscious or the subconscious. But the painting is a translation of the phenomena of the original energy system into a new energy system which has the phenomena of a two dimensional nontransparent surface. These phenomena suggest other substances beyond that which are producing the initial phenomena. I mean the paper and paints are a certain substance and they have a real existence, but somehow by playing with the phenomena that we produce by them we can suggest that other things are going on. They're not, but you can always suggest and try to communicate or create in other people's minds these same energies that we felt.

To be viable though, the painting must be unified. This is a necessity of true vision because belief in the painting as a re-creation of a vision can only be sustained by the unity. You can work visual games on it. You can add perspective, you can formalize your composition. But if these are outside things, they're sort of hothouse unity, they're super-imposed on an initially disunified vision to construct something that's more unified, but it's further away from the initial point at which you started.

Now the idea of a rectangular painting is important because in fact vision is rectangular. and it has to be a size that can be grasped so that you can construct the unity and so that others can see the unity. And when it's done you've created a new energy, a new substance separate from you. As the unity is approached the painting begins to have this existence separate from you – the unity finally achieved, it's done.

Now, all I've just said, despite any dogmatism, is not final. It's the statement at a moment, and I'm no longer at that moment. ~

Gary Whited: Clouds are now passing by outside the window. Many different shapes come and go without repetition. Everywhere the world is like this, an infinite variety of phenomena coming and going. Like clouds, the world is forever changing and never repeating itself, but it is always this world. It remains this world because it hangs together. The world has unity and duration, held by imagination and memory.

Is substance the “hanging together” of the world? If so, substance is not a particular phenomenon, nor is it the sum total of all phenomena. Neither is it a core at the center of the world pulling phenomena together, like a thread holding the beads of a necklace. Such a notion is a merely theoretical idea of unity and duration.

But how does the world hang together? Is there some force or power at work? Is substance like energy, and phenomena like the manifestations of energy as it changes forms?

But substance has something to do with me. The world hangs together for me. I hold it. I touch the earth in many ways and places. I see it, I smell it, hear it, touch it and taste it; now in the valley, now on the mountain. Mountain is above valley because I walk up the mountain from the valley and I stand at its peak looking down into the valley. The earth is high and low as I walk up and down. I am holding high and low together in my walking. Places on the earth are near and far as I go away and return. I go away and return when I walk, also when I think and again when I paint. Walking, thinking and painting, I hold the world together.

And yet the world is always beyond me extending further than I have gone. Mountains are higher than I’ve climbed, canyons are deeper than I have descended. I see the stars but they are further than I can reach with my hand. I try to touch them in other ways, with my eyes and with my heart, and maybe with my brush and paper. Here is imagination.

Imagination holds the world together in the near and far as we walk and think and paint. World also holds together in now and then as we remember. Memory reaches to other times and places we’ve been. Memory holds now and then and here and there together, much like imagination holds near and far together. Memory and imagination are expressed in activities – painting, thinking, walking, etc.

We are painting and thinking, and we are recollecting. We are responsible in these activities which hold together the world. Hence, our substance holds the world together and unity and duration are conditions of our experience in the world. Our experience is manifold. Many phenomena, past and present, near and far, here and there, are held together as our substance embraces and connects the appearances in relation to each other and in relation to our position amidst them.

Alone phenomena merely stand next to each other juxtaposed, more or less isolated and disconnected. Substance connects all things. Memory and imagination work in us as we paint and think and walk, and in these activities we hold together and let go. Yet, there is always more to paint and to think, always further to walk. We do not hold everything together. Memory and imagination are inexhaustible. ~

Kathleen Fox: It seems no conclusion can be reached about these thoughts and that is a good thing, for it leaves us with infinite possibility. The only firm thought I now have about phenomenon and substance is that all things are both phenomenon and substance at the same time, and it is this paradox that guides us to the truth about them. The value of considering phenomenon and substance seems to lie in the process of considering, the process of becoming aware and remaining fluid in consciousness.

Phenomena have definition. Substance always allows for flow, for no conclusions being made, but only for more direction and awareness. The flow is from phenomenon to substance to phenomenon, from microcosm to macrocosm to microcosm. That the phenomenon of one aspect is the substance of another is what is to be seen. Each existence wobbles and flows through phenomenon and substance. It seems that all we can expect from thinking about phenomenon and substance is the recognition of this paradox. It seems too that the process of this wondering is the process of becoming. That process is the substance of being.

And the same is so with painting. Where is the value in painting? The page itself has no value. What does have value is the process of painting and through painting the realization of our vision and position. Painting is a tool, a means to an end of self-discovery – so of course the most important thing to know is that you needn't paint. Vision that motivates painting is of the spirit, and the spirit lives regardless of its manifestations.

If we are seeking our substance then one of the first things we must know is that it is not to be grabbed for and held on to, that to find our substance we must not aim directly at it but rather search out the substances of other things – sometimes existences that we are familiar with and sometimes presences that we can't define: sky or wind or fear or rage or peace. Always we are questing to find the truth about these other entities, to describe them, and to find what and where we could be in relation to them. What is it that makes the wind what it is and makes us this body and not some other thing?

We seek to discover our spirit. We continually engage in a process of inquiry and perception. In the process of searching we will know our substance. In the process we will find our being becoming.

Here is a thought: that the substance we are searching for is the process of our searching. ~

Gary Whited: I was in a very old house with pine floors and fireplaces in several rooms. Rain was falling outside and a fire warmed one of the rooms. Looking at the worn floors I had a sense of many footsteps having passed over them, and smelling the fire evoked a sense of many a chill room having been warmed by a fire. My imagination of the past of this house is filled with footsteps and fires. Many thoughts have come and gone, many things have been known by many people in this house, and I am aware of many possibilities yet unknown. Where so much has been known, the unknown is ever present.

Out every window I can look toward unknown possibilities through the space opened up for imagination. Because humans have lived here for two hundred years I know that, life will continue and that I am not consumed by the need simply to survive. We exist beyond this bare essential if we are human and if we take our place left by those from the past. Their past is present to us because we can remember. Imagination takes us beyond this past and we continue into the future. Death will come, but in its own time. We will sleep and eat and light the fire again before we die. So, we can seek into the unknown again and again before our time comes to settle for what we have known.

We dwell in memory as people dwell in this house, and imagination is like the windows through which we venture into the open. Our life is union of memory and imagination recollecting and leaving behind what we have been. We are always dying and being born again.

Now the fire is going out and the sacrifice of the past is finished. The kitten is playing with the door and cars are passing on the road below the window. Everything is the same and also different. Now the kitten stares curiously into the red coals and its tail moves cautiously from side to side. Rain drops hang heavy from the ends of the leaves outside. The leaves are very big and no shadows appear in late summer light. Summer is making room for fall. Footsteps pass across a room upstairs. My friend reads her book in a yellow light from the clay lamp, and the fire is quieter each moment. ~

Bruce Allen: The question I wish to discuss is one which came to me during and in connection with our discussions of substance and phenomenon. For some time I have been pursuing it with difficulty and a sense of inconclusiveness; feeling unable to put my thoughts into writing. Yet the question remains important to me. Often it has seemed that the question has pursued me as much as I pursued it. If there is value in my writing about it now, I think it lies more in trying to show my process of trying to understand, with the problems and pitfalls it revealed, than in setting down any conclusions.

I have been trying to come to some understanding of the meaning of the terms “real,” “unreal” and “reality.” I must admit that I have continually felt the danger of a kind of academicism in approaching such a question; a danger which has added to my difficulty in asking the question. Yet at the same time I sensed a vital reason, a human reason, for involving myself with the question. For it seemed that the process of coming to know reality should be the very process of establishing one’s own identity, of becoming aware. At the beginning I was struck simply by the vagueness and ambiguity in our common usage of these elusive words. I sought to find some kind of definition as a way to pin down the meaning of the words. Only gradually, however, did I begin to seek a different way of approaching the question; a way in which definition had no part.

I came to sense that the meaning of reality could only be approached intuitively rather than analytically. But I believe that the process through which I changed my attitude toward the question has revealed to me some basic mistakes in my general thinking; mistakes which have caused both unnecessary pain and confusion. For this reason, I will try to relate my experience.

We say that something is real, or that something else is unreal. We assume that there is something called “reality” which is a basis for judging our actions: But what distinguishes the real from the unreal? How do we come to know this reality?

My first, and seemingly natural response was to try to pin down the meaning of these vague terms by seeking some definition. I looked for examples of the real and the unreal, and immediately I ran into problems. For one thing, it seemed very difficult to establish anything as absolutely “unreal.” The very act of considering something seemed to establish at least an aspect of reality. Consider for example the reality or unreality of dreams or fantasy, or that of the “insane” person, or of one using drugs. If there is something which we consider unreal here, there is also at least an aspect in which we must consider such things very real. This raised a rather basic question; are we to say that there are many “kinds” of reality, or many “realities?” Is the real something relative, varying according to one’s culture, or personality, or “frame of mind?” Or is a universal and nonrelativist understanding possible? Certainly the former view has popular acceptance, yet I felt very uncomfortable with such a relativist understanding. The essential meaning seemed to lie elsewhere. Yet it seemed impossible to conceive of a definition other than in relative terms.

Trying to approach the question from another angle, I considered that reality must have some relation to what is true. Should not the discovery of the real contain the discovery of truth? Yet here too, I immediately ran into the problems of the apparent relativism of truth.

Was I to accept the view that there are many “truths,” different but equally valid? Here again, it seemed that if one were looking for definition, they could only be had in relative terms. Nevertheless, I continued to believe that a fundamental approach to understanding reality or truth must have a more universal basis than a collection of relative meanings. Although the experience of reality is no doubt personal and varied, its essential meaning must reach beyond the framework of the individual or group to include all people, embracing past, present and future. Somehow my approach seemed to be taking me farther away from such an understanding. My analysis of the question seemed to be leading me into a trap.

Gradually I began to question my need to understand this problem through definition. I sensed that I had boxed myself in and would only frustrate myself farther by continuing such an approach. Moreover, it occurred to me that not only might it be impossible to define reality, but that there might be something more fundamentally wrong with this approach to the question. I considered the existence of a kind of understanding which would not depend on definition. And in fact it seemed that such an understanding would be destroyed by the attempt to define. I realized that my efforts to define the meaning of reality were based on an unconscious but definite assumption of seeing reality as a thing. But reality is not a thing to be known by exact data and with definable limits. Rather, reality is a concept, and it seems that the very essence of a concept derives from its contact with the unknown, the undefined, the unlimited.

I realized that my attempt to separate the real from the unreal had been stumbling block created by my analysis in terms of things rather than concepts. Instead, one could say that both the real and the unreal are aspects held within the concept “reality.” Perhaps it might be clearer to say that there is that which has been realized and that which is unrealized. But we cannot separate the two as definite states. The meaning of reality must be established by the unfolding of the real from what had been previously unrealized and unknown.

How then are we to approach an understanding of reality as a concept if not by definition? In asking this question I began to realize in my own life how powerful and automatic was this tendency to understand by analysis and definition in areas where they had no place. In contrast to the analytic way of thinking, I began to see the absolute necessity of a different kind of thinking: the intuitive or the creative. Analysis is the necessary process of giving order to known elements. But we cannot analyze or define what is unknown. Our approach to understanding concepts must be intuitive. Yet in an age so guided by a technological foundation which puts such a premium on analytic rational thinking, how little used is the creative-intuitive. Unwillingly and almost automatically we try to analyze what we can not. Our attempts to analyze prevent us from

understanding what is abstract in nature because we impose the preconceptions of the known on what is unknown, unrationalized, and unlimited.

Ultimately I believe the result of this overuse and misuse of analytic thinking is a great deal of unnecessary pain and confusion. Again and again I have become aware of how my over-analysis of what I see as the reality of my life has trapped my thinking and frustrated my possibilities for growth. The reality I am trying to come to know cannot be analyzed, it must be created, approached intuitively from the unknown.

I should point out here, to avoid misunderstanding, that I am not arguing against analytic thinking. Certainly it is the basis for much of our activity, the basis for establishing an efficient order among the already known. But the persistent attempt to rationalize the basic human concepts upon which we establish our direction in life limits these concepts and brings about their deterioration. For example, when the concept “morality” becomes rationalized and defined we end up with a dogmatic system of legalism or religionism. When our efforts and problems to know love become a matter of analysis we are left in a deadlock of perpetual analysis which prevents growth. Only through an unfolding, intuitive understanding can we create the reality of these concepts.

Reality is as the whole ocean around us. We as tiny human beings swim in its waters or perhaps go in boats. We feel this sea; we sense it. Intuitively we come to get glimpses of the essence of the whole ocean though we can never experience it all. We guess what it is. We experience its storms, its currents, its temperatures, its waves. The navigator or meteorologist can record exact data about such phenomena and help us with such information, but knowing the sea is something different. Intuitively and guided by our experiences we realize that we are a part of this ocean. Sensing its existence we bring it to reality. We see our part in it, our own existence. ~

*Chasing existence it escapes to non-existence
Seeking non-existence it becomes existence
Grasping,
Thinking to have it
You put fence around it.
But it fades as a light
Leaving not even a shadow.*

Kaji Aso
Summer
1976

What Is Tradition?
or
What Is Traditional Painting?

Using a word is difficult: even if you used the term “traditional painting,” this has at least two meanings, one of which is a principle of art which really must be continued, and the other is some conception and technique which is continued usually without intellectual recognition, and which we usually call “traditional painting.” These definitions are hazy. The term of “traditional painting” which I am going to use in this lecture is the latter one. I think I should explain this one first and then I would like to explain what must really be continued.

Many people say that if something has been alive a long time, that itself is a reason to trust in it. Just the fact that it exists is reason enough not to doubt it.

But do you feel this is true? I usually disagree with this because it is too religionistic. We could also use the word optimistic instead of religionistic.

But I would not especially reject traditional painting. More than that, I would not reject tradition. It is just that I am worried that if you accept traditional painting with such a simple idea, you will not attain any real progress. There is no progress in any kind of act done without recognition.

Sometimes I hear this kind of statement: “I can build my art on tradition plus my own character.” This may sound beautiful, but actually it is impossible because your new imagination will find no space to occupy in art that has been completed in the past. Thus, if you believe that by mastering traditional art you can become an artist, that is a dangerous idea.

But this is not to say that studying traditional art has no meaning. When you study traditional art you should not simply be taught but should try to understand it from the position of a detached observer. This may sound paradoxical, but it is only then that you will find some other meaning in it. It is an act of understanding or criticism, not of the fundamental meaning of painting. But this way you may find suggestions for the future or an approach to your own creation. More than anything else, the existence of traditional art shows you that there is the world of painting.

Now let me define the fundamental meaning of creative art. Such a definition is usually hazy. For instance someone might say it is to draw on a surface, or that it is a way for man to preserve himself or express himself. But that tells you only a fact – not the substance of painting. So, I would like to select my own words to describe this substance: it is a way of thinking and a space for creation. Of course this idea is not limited to painting. But it comes from the feeling of the painter himself as he is painting. And it comes from the concept of the primary act of human beings, which is being alive.

To express this literally for a painter, painting is life. When you are painting, or thinking about painting, you definitely exist in it, and you are living.

Let me try to define the fundamental meaning of tradition. First, of all. I must point out the nonsensical illusions about traditional art which are generally held. For instance, if Raphael is a traditional painter, who taught him his style? Or who taught Turner? Through history you should know that each new age has a new meaning of art with a new style. What does not change is the fact that there is the idea of painting – that is the real tradition. Thus, the words “traditional painting” do not make sense.

But you must be wondering: when one has new imagination how can one express it? Since one cannot use the preconceptions of traditional painting, one surely has no approach to express it. That is absolutely right. But wherever there is progress it is because of this kind of situation. Your imagination seems to be just floating in the air, but actually it is struggling in the world of painting (art). This world of painting is a definitive base – that is why we can save or build a sort of spiritual legacy from the past. This is the fundamental meaning of tradition.

Kaji Aso
1969

Kaji Aso: Substance and phenomenon is almost becoming the structure of my thought. It will become your structure too. Do you remember that I asked you to recognize a painting without having any visual contact. I have given a project before asking people to paint the wind. In fact, you cannot see the wind, and yet, you are able to paint the wind. Anyway, everyone got a painting. Maybe you are able to paint the wind but in another sense you cannot because you cannot see it. Our position is between painting and the wind. This is substance – this is where painting comes from.

After several conversations were held they realized that without knowing these two extreme concepts, they could not talk. No words have value when there is no position, no reference.

Who are they? We or all of you in terms of million of days that have been and millions of days that will be.

The End