

**Beautiful Dance: A Conversation with Eve Luckring
About Video Art and Haiku**

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I first “met” Eve Luckring in the pages of *A New Resonance* 6, where her haiku were presented as “thumbnail sketches for short stories,” alive with introspection and self-discovery.¹ Bumping into her again, in the pages of haiku journals, in an online kukai, I found myself relearning her lineaments, for her poetry, it seemed to me, headed rapidly for the frontiers of haiku territory. Because Eve is also an artist at work in video, sound, photography and installation, the trajectory intrigued but did not surprise me. Polymaths, individuals with strong interest and activity in more than one field of endeavor, dominate the annals of creative achievement. Challenged and compelled by her art, I jumped at the chance to get to know her in person. This is an edited, compressed version of our face-to-face conversation in Los Angeles, June 18, 2014.

Michele: Eve, what fascinates me about your work, both in video and haiku, is the fusion of visual and verbal arts. Which is the chicken and which the egg?

Eve: Both? I can’t make neat categories. Depending on what I’m attending to, different ways of thinking kick in. With writing poetry there’s a very visual thing that happens. If I’m in the words, I’m seeing. And then with the visual work, it’s a language to me. There’s a syntax I’m always working with. So the visual and the verbal are very fused; I don’t know really how to break them apart.

M: Some of your haiku that I consider my favorites would attest to that, for instance

A country road. A tree.

for lack of a bit of
crow

Tell me, have you always been interested in language and visual art, both?

E: Yes. But the first formal training I had in anything was music lessons, like a lot of middle-class kids. And they were very, very impactful for me. I'm as attuned to sound fabrics as much as anything. Sound is key for me. It's almost like the bridge between the visual and verbal.

M: Can we talk about the connections between all three in your video installation, *Chicken*? I watched it several times on your website,² and was taken with how much like haiku the visual-aural piece is. Can you describe it for us and what you were trying to accomplish?

E: I used a large warehouse space to create a virtual chicken coop. Human-size chickens scurry across a 36 foot by 9 foot screen made of six vellum panels. Three different video projections intersect side by side to create a frenetic effect. The space is filled with squawking coming from behind the screen, behind the audience, and from both sides of the room. There is a strong physical relationship between the chickens and the viewer's body because of the scale and how that activates peripheral vision. Some people came in and saw these big chickens and bright colors and movement and were just satisfied with that on that level. I remember a colleague of mine who said, "So it's just bright colors and chickens running around," and I thought, No. Okay, for you it is, but that's just one level.

M: I agree. For me, *Chicken* looked like what you might see through a kaleidoscope. And the fracturing was happening at two different levels, at least. The visual fracturing was gorgeous, but it wasn't until I was "in there" for a while that the sound of chickens clucking started getting fractured, too. Towards the end, especially, the clucking seems syncopated, compressed—like music to this particular chicken dance. It all added up to something, even before I could say what.

E: Yes. I was thinking about the gestures and the movement and the sound and the installation of the fractured screens as reflecting our contemporary lifestyles: this constant "look here, look there" running around; this anxious rush through things and no focus. And there's this anti-climax, when one of the chickens

makes this feeble attempt to fly. Nothing culminates in the end and then the video loops back round to the beginning. What I attempted to do is bring the visual experience to a visceral level for viewers, so that in the gut, affected by sight and sound, they are feeling something that may be difficult to articulate, but will take them to this other place.

M: It did me. Aside from the sensual immersion, *Chicken* had me thinking of artists who have worked with permutations—Sol LeWitt, for example, where there’s only one thing different as you move through a series of cubes.³ Then I was thinking, a haiku poet might also move through iterations of a ku with slight slight slight changes, weighing what each one feels like. Additionally, there are certain themes that haijin write about, for instance, the moon. Take all the moon haiku and you have umpteen iterations of how we humans experience the moon.

E: I think the second way you frame it was on my mind. I was trying to integrate what I was doing with haiku into the visual work. I was thinking, this piece is about chicken-ness, in the same way so many haiku are about moon-ness. In fact, to me *Chicken* is a haiku—a visceral haiku.

M: A haiku without words? I love it!

E: That was the first time I tried to take the words out. It’s a long story, but when I went back to haiku, I was interested in its experiential, fragmentary, minimal nature. I was writing, but I had no intention of writing to write. I was writing for my studio work.

M: You said you “went back to haiku.” What’s your history with the form?

E: Very little. I had read it and had one class in college, a creative writing class, where I was writing poetry to go with my visual work. And my professor said, “Look, you’re a photographer, why don’t you write haiku?” And I’ll never forget that was the hardest thing I ever did. It took me a week to write one poem. And I didn’t continue it, then. But years later during a

crucial transition time—moving out of a ten-year public art practice back into the studio—I began reading haiku again, and then I began trying to write it. I realized I'd got bitten by haiku. I couldn't stop. I was studying it and finding out as much as I could about it. I wasn't thinking about writing haiku to write haiku, I was thinking of it to help me move my visual work into a new place. I began writing a series of poems—they weren't really haiku, right?—to embroider them on butterfly nets. I tried all these things in the studio and they weren't working, but then I stripped them down to a series of words and actually used them in the piece that became *Wet Moon*.

M: Another video piece on your website. How would you describe it?

E: This is one installation I don't have good documentation of. *Wet Moon* is a concrete poem animated with motion graphics and rear-projected through four undulating screens, one in front of the other, suspended like sails. You walk into this vibrant blue cove-like space and the words float up from the back of the room changing shape through the screens, expanding and rocking, washing through your body, creating a strong sensation—many people felt they were on a boat.

M: Oh, wow! Was there an audio component?

E: Just the sound of chimes tracing the breeze.

M: Haiku ambience, too!

E: I think the actual installation became much more of a haiku than I could achieve in writing at that time. But I know now the piece isn't as condensed and consolidated as haiku. The floating words move you through something, but there's way more movement through time than in haiku. I'm not a purist about what a moment is, but *Wet Moon* is too long even for me to call it a haiku.

M: Haiku deconstructed, perhaps? The piece seems to play with certain elements of the genre—and can we change course a bit

here?—it raises certain questions, at least for me. Like, what is the optimal number of message channels in a work of art and what is the optimal relationship between message sets? I mean, ever since I heard Robert Irwin talk about the Getty Garden⁴ he designed, ever since I walked its one path—(this was years ago, just after it opened)—I’ve wondered about over-control in art. When has too much been said and done by the artist? I want to choose my own path, my own point of view, my own vista through a garden. Ditto video art. Ditto haiku.

E: I agree with you about that garden, because I like it and I don’t like it at the same time. And this is the constant question. I mean, in critique with students that’s always what comes up. How much is enough to guide your viewer, your audience, and when are you smothering them? There’s a difference between control and getting the parts to cohere well enough so people can have access, yet, ~~to~~ their own experience.

M: Actually, we have the same discussions with haiku all the time, don’t we? How much is too much information? Are fragment and phrase too close together, too far apart? How obvious is the link? How unexpected the shift? Which brings me to “Junicho Video-Renku #5,” also available for viewing on your website, and explicitly based on Japanese linked poetry.

E: Yes, it is. In fact, I’ll be presenting the finished series of twelve video-renku as a “book” at a film forum held by the Museum of Contemporary Art/MOCA in Los Angeles in September of 2014.⁵

M: What gave you the idea to model your video art on renku?

E: Well, when I started reading and writing renku, I was blown away by how similar the linking techniques were to film editing techniques. Then I learned that Eisenstein, the Russian filmmaker who actually was one of the early theorists of montage editing, was inspired by Kabuki Theater in Moscow and his own reading of haiku and tanka.

M: Was he!

E: Yes. If you look at Eisenstein's techniques, they are very analogous to linking techniques in renku. What renku does with link and shift, a video does with cutting. You bump two images up against one another and it's what happens between the two that creates meaning. I had been struggling to figure out how to put together a video without a three-dimensional context and, I thought, Ah, I'm going to use link and shift. And I did it very, very loosely in a piece called *Small Wonder* and then I got super-excited—Hey, Eisenstein was doing something like this, I wonder what would happen if I do it really rigorously and try to create video-renku!

M: What kinds of technical adjustments did you have to make to transfer renku form to video art?

E: The first thing I grappled with was, okay, long / short / long / short line lengths—how do I do that in video? If duration in video is the analogous element, then how to create a system of duration? I tried several things. At first I tried working with fixed durations or ranges of duration, for example, long equals greater than x seconds and short is less than y seconds, but what happens in a video, it just makes it clunky and stilted. You need an arc and a pace, and each clip carries its own rhythm, so that's where I was tweaking. I really was as rigorous as I possibly could be, long / short / long / short, but sometimes the difference in duration from one clip to the next is only by frames. Standard video format is 29.9 frames per second, so sometimes the difference is merely ten frames.

M: Fascinating! Did you get surprised in any way or otherwise end up constructing something visually that you would otherwise not have conceived or achieved?

E: Yes. In some ways I was making something I wouldn't otherwise have made. The first efforts I tried to do collaboratively, but that was a disaster. So I did it solo. And honestly, the amazing thing was I often didn't know what was going to come next. I actually often felt I was writing with other people. I really did. Because I'd get excited; I'd put this with this; and then I'm the new person, going, "Oh my god, what am I going to

do with that?” And sometimes I’d be stumped for weeks; I couldn’t figure out what to do. I didn’t plan, I just worked one verse at a time, just as you would if you were working collaboratively.

M: Can I ask why the Junicho?

E: I picked the Junicho because it’s the loosest structure.⁶ There’s no designated *jo-ha-kyu* movement; there’s a lot of freedom—which makes it quite challenging in a different way. The form was invented in the 1980s by the Shunjin and Seijho Okamoto. They named it Junicho, meaning “twelve-tone” and to me that’s a nod to the composer Arnold Schoenberg . . .

M: And his atonal music.

E: Yeah, his twelve-tone serialism produces this discordant result. I thought, Oh, that’s really interesting. This contemporary form of renku is looking at its relationship to other fields of modern artistic composition outside of literature. Yet, as the form requires, I used traditional *kigo* for the seasons. Did you pick up on them?

M: Well, you’ve got your doves in the flowering tree . . . and close-ups of the moon’s surface.

E: Yes, it has a blossom link, and a moon link, the four seasons—starting with centipede for summer—and then the back-to-back love links. I had to stop making video-renku because I couldn’t write any more love links!

M: The ones in #5 are funny, clever—two guys shouting at each other on walkie-talkies, “but . . . but . . . I . . . I I love you!”

E: That’s where I broke some rules. They’re not at all what love links should be in a traditional renku—I couldn’t do it. Anyway, in answer to your question, why video-renku, the two forms seem so closely related that there was a natural merger. Almost more than with *Chicken* or *Wet Moon*.

M: Do videos and haiku start in the same place, and then at some point you make a decision that this will be video and that haiku? Or does something else happen?

E: For some reason it's very clear from the start which is which. When I work in video and photography, I'm out in the world. And the writing comes from the same place. In both situations, I feel like I'm responding. And I'm responding with my whole body. Camerawork for me is a very physical thing. And likewise, when I sense something in words, it also involves many different modalities, like sound, smell, texture, color—it's not usually just one sense. Maybe one sense gets highlighted or foregrounded; maybe it's almost like the words become a frame, the same way if I'm out photographing or video-taping, there's a frame. There's all this stuff happening out there and somehow I'm selecting—not the right word—I am recognizing something through that frame.

M: How does that work with haiku?

E: Something happens and I respond. Other times, it's from a memory of something—a lot of times. I'm re-experiencing it. Barthes said about haiku something like, an object becomes an event.⁷ So whatever it is, whether it's directly experienced in the moment of this time, this world, or if it's generated from memory, a whole event is unfolding and I'm framing that.

M: So the words that come to you become a frame?

E: Yes. Though really I have no one set way of writing haiku. The magical ones are the ones that come all at once, don't need anything. Sometimes I hear a phrase and it really sticks with me and often—I have trouble articulating this—it creates a physical sensation.

M: And yet many of your haiku might be considered overly conceptual or intellectual, dealing as they do in abstractions—for instance:

bleeding under my skin the American dream

or

half moon in broad daylight the placebo effect

E: The idea of abstraction—that it’s too intellectual—I’m honestly confused by that sometimes. I think we all have a different relationship to the body-mind connection. In some of my poems, which are considered abstract, I don’t experience them as abstract.

M: Well, there’s certainly an emotional value to the words, “American dream.”

E: Very much an emotional one. Emotion in the sense that it’s derived from a feeling, a sensation. There’s a physical-ness to it. To me the American dream is something that’s manifested in physical, hard work. It’s very connected to bleeding under my skin, bruising. And it’s very related to people trying to achieve the American dream and being beat back down. I could analyze it, but I don’t want to. That’s why I write a poem.

M: I’m not asking you to explain the poem, because I agree with you. I’m trying to ask around it—

E: And “half moon.” This is one of those haiku that is “an object as an event” for me. There’s a moon in the sky and it becomes the placebo effect. It acts. I see a very specific moon in the sky with a certain set of clouds. It’s not just any half moon in broad daylight, but a very specific moon with a certain translucency and a certain number of clouds and their translucency . . .

M: So, what you’re saying is your haiku are really based in concrete image even when you are using words that might seem conceptual or abstract—and not just a visual, but a felt image.

E: Yes, a felt image. That’s a really nice way to put it. There’s a strong visual part, but I think what people call abstract about my poetry is coming from what is felt.

M: Well, there's got to be a connection, right? My understanding of abstract is based on what Pablo Picasso and others have had to say: you start with something real and then, as you seek its essence, you eliminate more and more irrelevant particulars.⁸ The abstract is always tied to the concrete. Maybe the process of attenuation has gone so far that you get to a point when others might not easily see the connection. But it's there.

E: That is how I would relate to abstraction completely. And maybe then I'm confusing two words as we speak—abstract and intellectual, because they are often used interchangeably.

M: Yeah. People sometimes say abstract when they should be saying non-representational . . .

E: Or representational of something other. I remember vividly Eisenstein talking about this, when he was developing his editing techniques: you put together this material thing with this material thing and you come up with a representation of something completely new, and he would say, psychological. If you really think about it, an image or a word is a pointer to something else. They represent something else. But for some reason with anything psychological or emotional or intellectual, we do not understand them as “real” in the same way we understand a physical object, like a table leg, to be real. And so we can ask, what's the difference between the representational quality of a word like “perjury” and a word like “table”? What's a fact? What's real? How or where do we draw the limits around reality? I think there's a strong relationship between haiku and indexical mediums like photography and video in how they deal with that.

M: What do you mean by indexical?

E: An “index” is a term in semiotics that classifies the way a “sign” refers to its referent. An index has an actual association, a physical relationship to its referent—the way photography/video traces light to record.⁹ The magic of photographic mediums is that they describe so well, there's an illusion that you are seeing the actual thing. I'm probably the most skeptical person out there, still my very first reaction to a photograph is to believe it. But it's

absolutely not the same as reality and it's always communicating on a symbolic level. That's what's moving a person when they look at a photograph of a sunset. The colors, the light, the memory of the experience, and how that made them feel. Similarly, we could say "a sunset." And there's a whole set of associations and emotions that come with that.

M: Haiku really thrive on that associational baggage.

E: Exactly. In some ways haiku are abstractions in and of themselves, the scaffolding of something that allows someone to flesh the rest out.

M: This has me thinking that the attenuation of the concrete and the shifts in context that this allows might help explain a lot in contemporary or, should we say, experimental haiku. In his study of disjunction in haiku, Richard Gilbert includes your "bleeding under my skin" as an exemplar of the "impossibly true."¹⁰

E: That's the beauty of haiku. It works in that interesting space of playing with our preconceptions of what real is, what is true.

M: It seems to me that your work in video art has perfectly positioned you as one of the poets pushing exploration in English-language haiku.

E: I don't feel like I'm pushing the edge. I'm just doing what I experience. I think that I'm lucky enough that there's this history of haiku—it's like when you meet an old friend, Oh, you match how I think. When video editing went from A/B-roll to non-linear on the computer, I was like, Thank god, this is the way I think, this other way was hell. It feels like that with haiku for me. I love words, I love poetry, but I never thought I'd be writing it.

M: A lucky find, then, you and haiku.

E: Yeah. I think it has to do with the compositional process. Right now the best word I can come up with to describe it is

that I experience a “recognition” of something. The way I photograph and make videos, I’m out in the world, I put myself into a situation, and I have no idea what’s going to happen. When I’m in sync there’s a beautiful dance between me and the camera and knowing where to point it and when to move it, when to zoom in and when to pan.

M: I suppose, with writing, you’re opening yourself up to images and ideas and words coming to you and sometimes it all works out.

E: And when I’m out of sync . . . with writing, the joy is, it’s not over, I didn’t miss it. I can write down the phrase in my notebook and go back to it. And when I go back to it, it’s a re-experiencing. I can do that over and over and over, until I’m in sync.

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Notes

1. Jim Kacian and Dee Evetts, eds., *A New Resonance 6, Emerging Voices in English-Language Haiku* (Winchester, VA: Red Moon Press, 2009), 87.
2. All videos discussed in this interview can be viewed at www.eveluckring.com.
3. Sol LeWitt, 1928–2007, was an American artist linked to Conceptual Art and Minimalism. See his “Incomplete Cubes” at <http://www.formmag.net/student-correspondents/2010/10/19/laiad-project-one-sol-lewitt-permutations.html>.
4. See some images of the Getty Garden at <http://www.getty.edu/visit/center/gardens.html>.

5. For program and program notes, see <http://sites.moca.org/the-curve/2014/09/02/los-angeles-filmforum-at-moca-presents-eve-luckring-with-what-tongue/>.
6. See John Carley's discussion of Junicho form at <http://www.darlingtonrichards.com/index.php/updates/renku-reckoner-by-john-carley/>.
7. In *Empire of Signs* (trans. Richard Howard, New York: Hill and Wang, 1982), Roland Barthes argues that haiku is an "apprehension of the thing as event and not as substance" (pp. 75, 78). See also, Chen-ou Liu, "The Breach of Meaning? Roland's View of Haiku," *haijinx* (April 2010), retrieved December 11, 2014 from <http://www.haijinx.org/columns/haiku-a-looking-bird/the-breach-of-meaning-roland-barthess-view-of-haiku/>.
8. See Michele Root-Bernstein, "Haiku as Emblem of Creative Discovery: Another Path to Craft," *Modern Haiku* 41.3 (autumn 2010), 20.
9. Readers interested in further explanation of the sign as index may refer to "Peirce's Theory of Signs," Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/peirce-semiotics/>. As explained there, a photograph is like a finger pointing to the "scene" out there described within its frame.
10. Richard Gilbert, *The Disjunctive Dragonfly, A New Approach to English-Language Haiku* (Winchester, VA: Red Moon Press, 2008), 60–64.



Eve Luckring works primarily in video, photography, poetry, and installation. Her work questions the assumptions—and experiments with the boundaries—that define place, body, and habit. Currently, she has been translating traditional Japanese poetic forms into the visual realm to renegotiate the binaries of nature/culture, subject/object, and self/world. Luckring's videos and installations have been exhibited internationally in both traditional art venues and public spaces. Her poetry has been published in numerous journals and anthologies.

Michele Root-Bernstein has one foot in the humanities and social sciences, another in the arts. Co-author of Sparks of Genius, The 13 Thinking Tools of the World's Most Creative People with her husband and colleague, Robert, she studies creative imagination across the life cycle. She also writes haiku, appearing in a number of North American journals, A New Resonance 6, and Haiku 2014. Currently, she serves as associate editor of Frogpond.