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Often students (and other human beings) do not see that proper creativity (in my humble opinion) must not only be original, but also beneficial or useful in some way.

Some martial artists think that if they get a semi-divine calling from the god Budo-Bosatsu (himself a creative interpretation of an Indian Buddhist enlightened being), that is, if they see a new wrinkle in the rather old art they have been studying, they are now the unrecognized creative genius behind their own system. Shihan Church told me of a short-term student who retreated to California and, after a few months, wrote him asking for recognition as a grandmaster. Evidently, he had meditated by a stream to come to the completely original revelation that techniques flow like water. On this deep insight, he wanted to found his art. Nothing wrong with meditating by a stream or meditating on how budo techniques can be like various states of liquid, but the thought, although beneficial, is not original nor is it especially deep, if you will pardon the reference to shallow streams (and shallow thinking).

When I see a creative *bunkai* of a kata movement, first I ask myself if it looks sufficiently like the solo movement to be identified as the specific technique in question, and second if the self-defense interpretation will function in the context presented. In other words, having recognized the *bunkai* as original (to my knowledge), I am willing to accept it as a creative contribution to budo only if it is also beneficial or useful (within some sort of realistic context). If one does not hold to this standard, anything can be considered a kata interpretation. Halfway through Heian Sandan, for example, the karate-ka puts his/her hands on hips, knees slightly bent, and delays a moment before proceeding to step, shin block, or crescent kick, depending on the version being performed. I was told by a junior instructor of another art, eager to be creative, that when the performer bent his knees and brought his hands up to his hips, he was pulling up his *hakama*. Perhaps ignorant of the fact that Okinawan karate-ka did not usually wear *hakama*, that, if they did, their *hakama* would not have fallen down, and that, if their *hakama* fell down and had to be picked up, including that movement in the kata was neither useful nor beneficial (except perhaps to certain bare-bottomed karate-ka shorn of non-existent *hakama*).

Creativity-for-its-own-sake makes us believe that garbage with a clever title can be creative art. If it is art at all, it fulfills the meanest possible definition of art, that is, something produced by someone who considers himself an artist. For an example, I give you the French “artist” who defecated into a tin and displayed the piece as “La merde d’artiste”. You can argue that he was making a sarcastic statement of course, but imagine if he were serious. Creative? Maybe. Beneficial or useful? I think not.

Would we accept a martial art, filled with garbage-like concepts and techniques no matter how cleverly it was named or how philosophically it was justified? I don't mean that we can't accept methods of practice with which we don't agree—the definition of creativity should not be any more subjective than some atelier-dweller defining himself as an undiscovered gem in the galleries of Paris. Creativity in budo can develop subjectively, but has to be appreciated somewhat more objectively. I suggest “original within its context and beneficial or useful” is a good start.

From an *Aikido Journal* interview with Toby Threadgill,
Kaicho of Takemura-ha Shindo Yoshin Ryu:

“Someday I may discover something that I feel works a little better than the way my teacher taught me. If I institute such a change, it must occur over long stretches of time and intense testing. Such changes cannot be haphazard or taken lightly because they can be detrimental, obscuring the hard-earned wisdom of the past headmasters. Takamura sensei always said haphazard change was *kegare*, a manifestation of corruption caused by one's ego, arrogance or insecurity. To embrace new or conflicting principles risks altering the art's identity, disconnecting it from its technical roots and intellectual wisdom. Classical budo can evolve but it must do so within the framework of its core principles to accurately reflect its genuine heritage.”