

Date : 2023.9.24 15:30~14:30

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Arts in Nice, France.

## Emptiness



**Lao:** Today, I would like to present my work that is currently part of my solo exhibition at the Asian Arts Museum in Nice, France. The museum was designed by the famous Kenzō Tange and includes a glass-formed space, like a traditional Japanese veranda called an engawa, connected to the main building. In this unique space, I created an installation titled “KYOSHITSU SHOHAKU – An Empty Room Turns White for Enlightenment.” The work features stumps from trees that have been cut down by natural forces. These blend into the surrounding landscape visible through glass walls. An anonymous figure is seated on the stump, and fog is generated from the space. In this series, my works seek to dissolve the boundary between subject and object, re-exploring the relationship of the nature of humanity and the external world.

**Yamamoto:** In the space of the installation, you do not distinguish between Western and Eastern elements, but I feel that your idea of putting the emphasis on the empty space rather than filling it is very Eastern.

**Lao:** Emptiness (余白), from the perspective on Eastern thought which keeps an eye on emptiness, is connected to a boundless, infinite world. In the West, emptiness (余白) is translated as ‘negative space’.

**Yamamoto:** I think the translation of emptiness as ‘negative space’ is very revealing. I was educated in the U.K. for many years and thus have some idea about the difference between negative and positive space in the West. Positive, or ‘being’ is seen as dominate, while negative (余白) space is lower in the hierarchy, which I do not think is right.

**Lao:** Today, our perception of the natural world is the product of European natural science. Natural science, which is based on empirical observation and experimentation, refers to a kind of ‘positivism,’ meaning that it talks about facts. This ‘positivism’ stands in opposition to nothingness or the emptiness (余白) which results in nothingness having a negative or passive connotation. However, such ‘positivism’ is not the only way for humans to understand the world.

**Yamamoto:** In your case then, it seems like you try to work without creating hierarchy. This is also an important concept for me when thinking about ecology.



KYOSHITSU SHOHAKU – An Empty Room Turns White For Enlightenment Season Lao exhibition – The Asian Art Museum in Nice

(Une pièce vide devient blanche pour l'illumination par Season Lao. Musée des Arts Asiatiques de Nice, France) 13.5 ~ 26.11 2023

## Dependent Co-Arising

**Yamamoto:** Lao, your current work seems to be at the abstract level, which is not seen as good or bad. Also, we mentioned earlier the concept of ‘infinity,’ is that connected to your work?

**Lao:** I think the world is a representational world constituted by representational actions. Immanuel Kant called this the “Phenomenal World.” Representational action corresponds, for example, to things such as the structure of modern consciousness. A work of art can also be understood as being a conceptual object under representational action.

I believe that 'infinity' is beyond the representational world and true art is available to give us a glimpse of the 'external' world. My work is not simply passively capturing the experience, but actively working to make 'infinity' at least a little bit tangible.

Let's look at my two-dimensional work. The source of the work is encounters with natural phenomena, which I call 'engi' or 'dependent co-arising.' In the moment one is surrounded by mist, the opposing concepts of here and there disappear. The place where one is becomes emptiness, or one becomes part of the scene itself. In this moment the interdependence of emptiness and reality is realized via natural phenomena like fog and snow, and one reflects on the 'infinite' spanning from one's heart into the distance.

**Yamamoto:** This is very interesting. It seems like opening oneself to things like dependent co-arising (縁起) and coincidence without a set plan is an important part of your production process.



Iwakuni, Yamaguchi, Japan 2023 | SEASON LAO | Photography on Kozo Paper 200×64 cm

## Ecology

**Yamamoto:** I was thinking a lot about ecology during the Covid-19 pandemic.

East Asia as a geographic region can be defined to some extent, but in reality there is no such thing. I was thinking about the ecological potential if ideas developed in the East that do not establish a dualism or clear distinctions between subject and object.

In the West, natural science, by making nature the object of scientific investigation, has experimented with nature; exploiting it more and more as something to be modified for our needs. For example, Francis Bacon described experimentation as "torturing nature to make it tell the truth."

In the past, nature seemed to be so large that human exploitation of nature could go on indefinitely. As a result, many problems started to arise. When I was thinking about this, I felt that paintings and

other two-dimensional works of art that expressed non-binary ideas could provide new opportunities for a revolution in ecological thought.



Mt. Asama, Nagano, Japan 2024 | SEASON LAO | Photography on Kozo Paper 180 × 72 cm

**Lao:** The Covid-19 pandemic dealt a great blow to human activities on a global scale perhaps unseen in human history. Paradoxically, I believe it was an opportunity to rethink the relationship between humans and nature.

At that time, I was based in Kyoto and conducted an experiment at a cultural property designated temple inspired by natural phenomenon. It was an installation in which white mist was used to completely cover a garden symbolizing the Buddhist concept of 'Pure Land.' It was an attempt to explore a phase between human beings and natural phenomena that cross the boundary between subject/object and interior/exterior.

I think it is proper to call such an undivided nature of subject and object "the law of included middle." This installation was a kind of prototype for the 'KYOSHITSU SHOHAKU' installation that you mentioned before as having an Eastern feel. Instead of the law of excluded middle, in Eastern thought there is the concept of "天人合一," which is the unification of man with nature. This means that humans and nature are included in one another.

**Yamamoto:** This just reminded me that Nishida Kitaro said that experiencing nature is an example of his original concept of 'pure experience' (純粹経験), in which there is also no clear distinction between subject and object. I think we can think of what you experienced in the fog or snow as being a kind of 'pure experience' (純粹経験).

From your comments, I think it is clear that deconstructing opposing dichotomies and expressing ideas without such dichotomies are important elements in your work. This concept of the viewer as

not only as a subject anymore, that is he/she becomes a part of the artwork, is also an important part of contributing to ecology.

**山本浩貴(やまもと・ひろき)** 文化研究者。1986 年千葉県生まれ。実践女子大学文学部美学美術史学科准教授。一橋大学社会学部卒業後、ロンドン芸術大学にて修士号・博士号取得。2013～2018 年、ロンドン芸術大学トランスナショナルアート研究センター博士研究員。韓国・光州のアジアカルチャーセンター研究員、香港理工大学ポストドクトラルフェロー、東京藝術大学大学院国際芸術創造研究科助教、金沢美術工芸大学美術工芸学部美術科芸術学専攻講師を経て、2024 年より現職。著書に『現代美術史 欧米、日本、トランスナショナル』(中央公論新社、2019)、『レイシズムを考える』(共著、共和国、2021)、『ポスト人新世の芸術』(美術出版社、2022)、『この国(近代日本)の芸術——〈日本美術史〉を脱帝国主義化する』(小田原のどかとの共編著、月曜社、2023) など。



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