

## **Essay: The World of Shigenobu Yoshida—Centered on Gathering Rainbows and Light Traces—Rainbow**

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In the spring of 1994, I visited the Art Tower Mito in Ibaraki Prefecture to view Art Annual Mito '94: Open System. I traveled all the way from the Kansai area to the Kanto region, attracted by the appealing title. But the exhibition was not what I had expected, for every work on exhibit seemed to steer my mind toward a closed view. Hence, I exited the venue with a heavy heart. Just before leaving the museum, I decided to enter the exhibition room Criterium, which introduced new works by young artists. The room was so pitch black that I could not see anything. Just as I was hastily passing through the room, someone said to me, "You'll be able to see it in a little while. The clouds are in the way right now." The owner of that voice was Shigenobu Yoshida, the artist who created that work. After I waited a while, a faint, white, circular light abruptly appeared from within the darkness, but the next moment, it faded and disappeared. The circular light repeatedly appeared and disappeared, without any certain rules or regularity; thus, the time it lasted and the clarity of its appearance differed every time. The pale, circular light, which could be mistaken as an afterimage effect, turned up in the space, and after briefly showing its expression, it melted into the darkness. As I gazed upon the light that transiently repeated its own generation and extinction, my body began to relax, and the gloomy feeling began to lift. As I was feeling my five senses open while witnessing the mystical phenomena, Yoshida gave me a short explanation: "That circular light is projecting the sunlight. The one that just appeared is due to the sun peeping out after the thick clouds covering the sky were blown away by the wind." This work entitled Bio-Morph brought natural light into the room through the use of optical fiber cables. At a glance, the work was similar to a film, but in fact, it was devised so that the weather condition at each moment would be projected in real-time on the wall. That day I first encountered the work was cloudy, with the sun appearing from time to time; hence, I was lucky enough to be able to appreciate the various appearances of the circular light. Around the staircase of the museum that descended from the second-floor exhibition rooms to the entrance downstairs, colored vinyl tapes in red, blue and yellow were pasted on the glass roof/ceiling. Depending on the brightness of the sunlight, the colored tapes

turned into bands of light that spread as if they had seeped out from the white wall. I later found out that this work, *Infinite Light*, was another one of Yoshida's.

On that same day, I had another opportunity to see Yoshida in the grass garden of the museum. He told me about his works as we sat under the blue sky. Even though we had just met, our conversation was lively. At the time, I was an art teacher at a high school in Osaka, while also creating and exhibiting installation works. Yoshida became the last artist I encountered during that period when I was still on the creative side of the art world. That is to say, I had not imagined at the time I met him that I would move to the northern Kanto region a year later to work as a curator for the Utsunomiya Museum of Art in Tochigi Prefecture. In 1995, I was appointed to the preparatory office of the museum that was to open inside a forest/satoyama, and was busily planning and preparing for an exhibition and educational programs. It was perhaps around the season of fresh greenery that I received an invitation card for Yoshida's exhibition and headed to Iwaki, Fukushima. On that occasion, Yoshida told me that he had to show me something. He then hastily slipped out of the gallery space of his show. We drove to a river that was a short distance outside the city center. When we went down to the riverside, he took out a plastic container and a mirror from his car. He scooped water from the river with the container, dipped the mirror into it, and began working with it. Then the light that irregularly reflected on the water surface emerged in the form of a white light on the trunk of a tree on the other side of the river. And just then, a shimmering rainbow showed its appearance. As the seven-color light projected on the tree surface gradually grew clearer, it felt like the rainbow was drawing closer to me, to the point that I could feel a sense of materiality. I felt my body taking in the wind that swayed the leaves; the murmuring sound of the river; and the chirping of birds that were heard from the thicket of trees. A rustling forest, the sunlight, water, a mirror and trees—these images suddenly led me to the idea of holding a “rainbow workshop” at the museum. So I decided to propose my idea to Yoshida on the spot. In retrospect, at that point Yoshida might have been like a kid who just wanted to show someone the rainbow that was projected on the tree on the other side of the river, rather than conducting an experiment with the aim of incorporating a rainbow into his work. It could have also been that he just needed someone to witness the moment that captured his interest, and to have him/her see the origins of something with only a slight indication of becoming a process

towards a new creative expression. But that rather naive experiment at the river led him to embark on the “rainbow workshop” project, which was also later connected to his works. I had not viewed Yoshida’s actual works prior to the Bio-Morph series and the Infinite Light series. In his earlier works, he utilized materials such as the components of a wrecked vehicle, which were assembled into a two-dimensional form, and drip-infusion bottles that were arranged at regular intervals. Viewing the plates from those works at a glance, the respective materials he used seemed to strongly connote certain social messages. Despite that tendency, those expressions also allowed me to feel something emotional, more so than images of death and reproduction. Those methods of expressions were not merely compositions created through using objects with a sense of strength. Rather, they could also be understood as expressions that were finally materialized through Yoshida’s reliance on something that had existed in his innermost mind.

After that period, he removed himself from using objects with a sense of materiality. Instead, he shifted the subject of his interest to the non-materialistic world, based on the theme of “light.” At that period, Yoshida was keenly interested in James Turrell, known for his light installations, and also took interest in the works and production processes of Tatsuo Miyajima, whose themes are the universe and time. In addition, when I heard that Yoshida had repeatedly seen *The Sacrifice*, a film by director Andrei Tarkovsky, I felt that the way that film questioned the soul corresponded with Yoshida’s artistic aim. In addition, he seems to have directly encountered many artists, and has continued to converse with a lot of them. I feel that he has created a strong, mutually-attracted type of relationship with those artists. For instance, he voluntarily participated in the installation process for Miyajima’s exhibition, which was held at the Iwaki City Art Museum. He also organized and directed the open-air exhibition *Art Landscape in Iwaki '90*. It can be surmised that the interactions and relationships he accumulated via his straightforward actions, and those he gathered within the series of activities involved in his actions, later helped generate the new developments in his artistic endeavors. In a sense, the actions Yoshida has taken in such a manner are similar to the ideas behind a workshop.

In the latter half of the 1980s, the construction boom to build art museums began in Japan. Coupled with this was the introduction of the newest ideas in art museum education from Germany and America into Japan. As a result, educational activities became popular, and

quite a few appealing workshops appeared. The conventional type of practical-skill program, typically taught by a painter or a print artist, is based on the “teach and be taught” relationship. But within that new trend in art education, there have been an increasing number of opportunities to hold the type of a workshop seen as an activity (production) where both the artist and the participants can become proactively involved. I also had my focus on that new direction of workshop. Namely, I did not think that the primary purpose of a workshop had to necessarily be the completion of an artwork. Rather, what I thought was important in a workshop were the conversations held between the artist and the participants, and the sharing of creative experiences through the production of the participants’ own works, at the same time and in the same place. The reason I arrived at those ideas might have been largely due to the location of the museum where I worked, which was blessed with an abundance of nature, despite being situated in the central part of the city. In that forest dwelled goshawks, which were designated as a rare species in Japan (this species was later removed from the list). With that forest serving as the field of activity, artists proposed their respective workshops using the same concepts as their creative activities. When a workshop began, the participants often faced the surrounding nature by focusing on the five senses. They then carefully listened to an artist comment on his/her own work, while also looking closely at the manners in which the work was created. But as time passed, friendly conversations began to be heard as the participants went through a trial-and-error process toward the subject of that day’s workshop. At times, the subject of a workshop was to create individual works, while at other times a single work was created together. There were also workshops that did not result in the creation of works in tangible forms. In any case, such a workshop fostered a one-time, close-knit relationship, which had a certain sense of tension and affinity that could have only been created at the site of a collaborative production, via being inside the forest.

In Yoshida’s case, the “rainbow” that he sought after was realized as both a workshop and artwork. His workshops have been held not only at art museums, but also at children’s centers and libraries throughout Japan up until the present day. But the artist might not feel the need to divide his endeavors into categories, such as workshop and artwork. Yoshida considers a workshop to be a site where he can broaden his vision toward the realm of his own works. That is, a workshop allows him to find some sort of a clue, via crossing the

boundary between the self and the other, and then by intercrossing that boundary. In other words, although an artistic expression generally takes the form of an individual work, when Yoshida faces the world through his expressions, the format of a workshop exists as simply another indispensable act of expression.

In the summer of 1997, the Utsunomiya Museum of Art held the exhibition *Windows to the World Around Us*, which consisted of works by four contemporary artists, based on the key concept of “forest.” Yoshida exhibited a new series of works *Light Traces—Rainbow* inside and outside the museum, along with his series *Bio-Morph* and *Infinite Light*. In addition, he held the workshop *Gathering Rainbows* as one of the show’s related events. For several months during that spring, Yoshida commuted between Iwaki where he resided to Utsunomiya, which was a three-hour drive each way. In the forest outside the museum, he photographed over 500 rainbows that he projected on the trees. Out of those, 170 slides were arranged inside a light box so that the visitors could look into the box with a magnifier and perceive the highly realistic sense of presence of being inside the forest. In addition, outside the corridor facing the west side of the museum, he arranged over fifty devices around the trees. Each of those prism devices created by the artist consisted of a transparent container filled with water, and a mirror inside it. The rainbows were projected on the trees and leaves in real-time, depending on the shifting of the sun and the changes in the clouds. In such a way, the *Light Traces—Rainbow* series came into existence. For those who visited that site, the rainbows that appeared on the trees before their eyes were close enough to take into their hands. Thus, they were able to experience a feeling of being connected with the trees and the mysteries of the forest that continued beyond their sight. Through a method uniquely his own, Yoshida showed the visitors the various phenomena that take place in the natural world. They were surprised by the unexpected sense of being so close to nature, while also perceiving a sense of intimacy as if they had reunited with their own past memories that had lain dormant deep in their minds. In his workshop *Gathering Rainbows*, the participants each created a handmade prism by fixing a mirror inside a container filled with water. Both adults and children became engrossed in the projecting of rainbows on the white exterior wall of the museum and on the tree trunks, as well as on the other participants’ cheeks and white T-shirts. Creating rainbows at close range, which they occasionally also saw beyond in the distant sky, and spending time

playing with them allowed the participants to recall the childhood feelings they had when they were one with nature.

In the autumn of 1997, the developed form of his rainbow workshop Observing a Rainbow was held at the O Art Museum, in which he utilized a triangular prism to observe ordinary landscapes. In 2002, at the Art Gallery C Square in Chukyo University, Yoshida further developed that workshop to one in which the participants used a triangular prism to observe scenes through the windows of a bus they were on. Thus, the external landscapes that they saw through the prism were visualized in the form of a streaming rainbow-scape. In 1999, prior to that workshop, he utilized a prism in the film work April 30, 1999, Bordeaux, which he created for the Saison Art Program ART-ING TOKYO (held at Gallery Gen). That film was shot with a prism directly attached on a video camera lens. Hence, the documented landscapes projected on a screen took the form of a rainbow-color motion painting that had a sense of speed.

In his own artistic expressions, Yoshida is hardly concerned with the boundary that exists between a workshop and an individual work. In fact, it is apt to say that Yoshida's rare character as an artist lies in the tendency to originate works and to deepen their expressions via casually intercrossing those two disciplines. Yoshida converts the strength he receives from the sites of his workshops and from his encounters with people he had never previously met into his new creative energy. He also gives back what he has received to the sites and the participants in the forms of his individual works. Therefore, the artistic realm that Yoshida aspires towards is manifested through these processes of circulation.

(T. N.)