

Reexamination: Infinite Light

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Introduction

Shigenobu Yoshida's solo exhibition *Infinite Light*, which was held at the Iwaki City Art Museum in 1991, was the first occasion in which he exhibited a work that incorporated sunlight.

In my personal view, that was when he found the course he should follow as an artist, as well as the first step leading to his current artistic activities. In other words, that show marked his vital breakthrough as an artist. Based on this perspective, I would like to reexamine his 1991 work that adopted the sunlight, while also adding my thoughts on the development of his subsequent works.

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As a prerequisite to discussing Yoshida's 1991 work, I would like to begin by referencing his works produced prior to that year.

In 1985, Yoshida began to exhibit works in solo and group exhibitions. At that time, he was a member of the art group "Circle Nii-emu" (1), which was led by the late painter, Matsuo Matsuda. Through Yoshida's involvement in the group's activities, he continued to study different theories and put them into practice. In addition, one of the main missions of the Iwaki City Art Museum (which opened in 1984) was to collect contemporary artworks. Therefore, an environment was created for him to appreciate a post-war, avant-garde art collection in his own city, which must have strongly inspired his creative desire. Starting with his first solo exhibition in 1985, he began to energetically develop his activities through successively holding not only solos, but also by participating in group and open-call shows, as well as open-air exhibitions.

Although the works he exhibited in that period on the whole had a high level of completion with few flaws, I could not help but feel that they lacked a sense of existence. Frankly speaking, I could not perceive the necessity for "those works to be there." In addition, the way his expressions were influenced by Modernism also made me feel a certain stereotypical sense of restriction.

I would like to take this opportunity to reflect on the reasons behind why I felt that way,

through examining Yoshida's assemblage relief *Crack*, which utilized the disassembled waste materials from a vehicle destroyed in an accident. This piece has often been referenced as his most typical work from that period.

Given the fact that he was working as an automotive technician at a car repair shop, one can easily imagine the reason he chose such waste objects, which he struggled with on a daily basis, for his artwork. Needless to say, his circumstance would not have been an inevitable reason for him to use such wrecked vehicles. In addition, even if the subject of his work was a crashed vehicle itself, it is an undeniable fact that such a car is a symbolic material that reveals unsettling images, such as death and destruction, and also that it is a thing/object that came to be through the accumulating and the passing of time. What was likely lacking in the relief was the artist's fixed gaze (2) on those facts, and the relationship that occurs between a thing and the artist through that gaze. The necessity to utilize a vehicle destroyed in an accident/thing in a work should essentially be founded on that relationship.

In addition, Yoshida's production method of assemblage cannot be deciphered through clarifying the comparisons with or the influences of similar preceding examples of Modernist works. What we should focus on is that forging assemblages composed of industrial waste (discarded, crashed car debris being a typical example) is a stereotypical method in contemporary art, especially when seen as a category close to Yoshida's daily life. Thus, such a method should not be adopted spontaneously, unless it has some sort of a critical perspective. In other words, what should be questioned is whether the necessity existed for the artist to select the method of assemblage (and, if I may add, for his work to be shown on a wall) and to utilize the parts of a crashed car, seen as "things." That necessity can only be arrived at via the artist's physical senses that transcend any logical thinking. In conclusion, Yoshida continued to produce works without clarifying the necessities for selecting those two elements, which were critical to the realization of his works. As a result, without any critical perspective, he assembled fragments that convey stereotyped, negative images that are superficially attached to destroyed vehicles. Hence, those fragments were simply assembled into a square form, and created into a two-dimensional work/painting.

Yoshida's assemblage reliefs were created at the time when he had just begun studying

contemporary art. One can surmise that he was spellbound by the idea that one of the necessities for an artistic production is the act of expression that is performed within the non-visible, conventional framework of contemporary art. Incidentally, quite a few artists continue to be shackled by that arbitrarily categorized field, never becoming aware that they are under that same spell. It was that spell he was bound by that led me to identify that stereotypical sense of restriction emanating from the state of his expression.

In 1990, I asked Yoshida to hold a solo exhibition at the museum a year later. That show was titled Infinite Light, which I mentioned at the beginning of this essay. But Yoshida's response at that time was that he could not do a solo show that could meet the expectations of the museum, for he was feeling the limits of his work and art. It was true that he had not held a solo show in 1990, despite having energetically continued to hold solos up until that year. Because of the indeterminate perspective of his gaze on things/objects, he likely became perplexed by the various aspects that are inherent in things/objects that respectively possess their own accumulation of time. Thus, he felt the limits in his acts of expression, through which he produced works with the use of things/objects. In other words, that was when he likely began to awaken from the state of being under his own spell.

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Incidentally, although Yoshida temporarily stopped creating works in 1990, he did not cease his activity as an artist. In that year that he was struggling with his own work, he drew up a plan (3) for Art Landscape in Iwaki '90, which was to be the first open-air exhibition in Iwaki City. He then embarked on the project as a producer, making full use of his experiences and the network that he had established through his activities as an artist. Throughout the preparations for the open-air exhibition, he continued to exchange ideas with a variety of artists and art critics (such as the late Akihiko Takami and Professor Shinya Koizumi of Ibaraki University). It can be surmised that during those exchanges, he was also undergoing a solitary process of reexamining the depths of his innermost self, which was in the above-described spellbound state. As an outcome, he created a unique work for the exhibition, which was removed from his line of works created up until that time. However, that work would not actually be exhibited in the show. That is, the work was rather like a photo documentation of the exhibition, and was only in the documented

catalog that was published after the show closed. Specifically, Yoshida went up to the observation deck of the Iwaki Marine Tower where he could have a bird's-eye view of the entire exhibition venue. He then placed a small, transparent, acrylic box/house on the handrail of the deck, so that the background showed the entire venue of the show and the Pacific Ocean that spread below. The photo of that sight became his work. The photographing process was performed in stealth, and aside from that individual photo work, only the title *Ki* (Energy) and basic descriptive data were mentioned in the catalog, with no additional commentary. The data described the size as "∞" (infinite), and the materials as "acrylic plate, earth, atmospheric air, and the nine heavens." If one were to interpret that such information fully described the work, then there might not have been a need for him to add any commentary.

During the exhibition, his work *Ki* was probably not viewed by anyone, and only made a modest appearance in the catalog. Through the viewpoint of the exhibition director, Yoshida captured the entirety of the exhibition (the notable point being that he encompassed the "atmospheric air" and "earth") as a spiritual entity. Based on his will to escape objects and the act of expression that he was spellbound by, Yoshida created *Ki* with the dematerialized medium of photography. Thus, the work should be noted as a precursor to his breakthrough as an artist that occurred in 1991, which I will refer to later in the essay.

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Yoshida's 1991 solo exhibition *Infinite Light*, which was held in the first-floor lobby of the Iwaki City Art Museum, was the first in the series *New Art Scene in Iwaki* that was launched by the museum. After repeatedly asking Yoshida to hold a solo exhibition, he finally gave us his consent. That was when he was still struggling with his production, despite the fact that he had created the photo work for the 1990 open-air exhibition, which foretold his departure from his previous line of work.

The reason why Yoshida gave us his consent and then earnestly requested to use the lobby for his show was because the lobby was where he could install a device that could transform the space via incorporating the surrounding environment: that is, inside a museum that is often considered a closed space from many different aspects. The device he adopted was the light of the sun. It was the first occasion for Yoshida to shift his artistic

course to installation, with the aim of transforming the lobby space into an artwork through adopting the sunlight.

Yoshida focused on the skylight in the lobby to bring in the sunlight. He attached colored vinyl tapes—red, blue and yellow—to its windows. The sunlight that penetrated the tapes turned into the spectrum of three primary colors and poured into the lobby via the skylight. On sunny days the colors of light clearly manifested their appearances on the stairs and floor, but when the clouds approached, the light suddenly vanished. On cloudy days, one could see the faint colors of light, and when it rained, there was not a sign of light. In addition, he installed five mirrors, each twenty-five centimeters in diameter. He adjusted the angles of the mirrors so that they reflected the sunlight, which came in through the skylight in a specific time zone, toward the lobby wall thirty meters away.

In his 1990 work *Ki*, Yoshida already sought a production purpose on a spiritual level that was unapproachable through an intentional act of expression. His attempt was to create a work using dematerialized existences that transcended things/objects—that is, the earth, atmospheric air, and the nine heavens. That stage he approached should be regarded as the time when he was nearly prepared to make an artistic breakthrough.

Yoshida interpreted the sunlight he adopted in the 1991 work as the existence that condensed the earth, atmospheric air, and the nine heavens. He also determined that installation would be the framework for his production, seen as a method that could transform an exhibition space into a work of art via sunlight. With the 1991 work seen as the starting point, Yoshida began to develop his installations from that time onward.

The term “infinite light” used in the title of his 1991 solo exhibition further clarified his idea of “spiritual existence” (which was first discovered in the 1990 work), showing it to be of a more fundamental and universal existence. Therefore, if I were to borrow Mircea Eliade’s notion, “infinite light” was brought into his exhibition space as the symbol of hierophany (manifestation of the sacred). (4)

Incidentally, I cannot deny that the level of completion of his 1991 installation *Infinite Light* was relatively low. This was caused by the trial-and-error process he undertook during the installation process. Nonetheless, at that point Yoshida already clearly demonstrated the significant characteristics he would inherit in the subsequent development of his works. I would like to indicate four of those characteristics as follows:

1. The Exclusion of Intentionality

The “infinite light” that was derived from the sunlight is impossible to artificially express. Nor did Yoshida act upon the sunlight with the aim of creating an intentional expression. He was well aware that manipulating the sunlight would only distance the essential manifestation of light.

Following his use of mirrors and colored vinyl tapes, Yoshida began to adopt the solar-lighting system “Himawari” in 1994, which he saw as nothing more than a functional entity that could bring in the sunlight. He, as an artist, also tried to act as a functional existence who could install and operate the equipment components of Himawari. Therefore, he completely avoided performing any intentional act upon the sunlight in the process of transforming the space into a work of art. That exclusion—more precisely, the exclusion of any intentional act of expression—distinctly revealed the difference between his work and many other artists’ works that have utilized light.

2. A System Built to Receive Light—The “Passage” to Bring in Light

His installation that adopted the sunlight was an act of expression devoid of any intentional act of expression. One can say that Yoshida in a sense made a Copernican shift to not create a work, so that he could escape the state of not being able to create a work.

Therefore, Yoshida’s installation should be seen as a system built to receive the sunlight, as well as a “passage” (5) to bring in the “infinite light” that is impossible to artificially depict. In addition, the functional (6) and diverse elements that were inherent in the system of receiving the sunlight later opened up new possibilities for his public artworks.

3. The Restoration of Light

The three primary colors of light that appeared through the colored vinyl tapes were not the product of his act of expressing the sunlight. Rather, they were the spectrum of light that emerged through the restoration of light. Yoshida referred to that sight as “infinite light.” If I may add, his installation encompassed the entire volume of the space, from the skylight to the floor, where the spectrum of primary colors poured in, as well as the structures that formed the lobby space, such as the stone walls and floor. These elements were all considered as indispensable to bringing in the “infinite light.” And the “infinite light” manifested itself through those elements in their entirety.

“Restoration” in this case is a methodology that is guided by one’s consciousness that reflects upon the origin of matters. Through restoration, light can manifest its primordial appearance. Therefore, Yoshida’s installation that brings in the “infinite light” can be described as a system that not only receives but also restores light. From the perspective of interpreting the spectrum of light as the restoration of light, Yoshida’s rainbow workshops (which began in 1995) and his film works that created a spectrum using a prism (which first appeared in 1999) can be understood as deriving from the spectrum of light that was first created with colored vinyl tapes.

4. The Wavering Light

The five mirrors, which were arranged on the inclined plane of a pile of soil on the floor of the museum’s lobby, received the light that penetrated the skylight when the sun reached its zenith, and then projected five circular forms of light on the stone wall approximately thirty meters away. Those five circular lights slowly decreased in number as the position of the sun shifted; in time, they all disappeared. On the other hand, the projected position and form of the spectrum, which was created by the light that penetrated the colored vinyl tapes, changed in accordance with the shifting angles of the sunlight, which streamed in through the skylight. Moreover, the appearance of the spectrum transformed in response to invisible fluctuations in the atmosphere.

The light that was brought in via Yoshida’s installation constantly wavered. It flickered according to the atmospheric fluctuations and the shifting of the sun, thus transforming the appearance of the exhibition space moment by moment. This expression can also be seen as a creation that derived from the order and chaos endowed by the laws of nature.

However, Yoshida’s 1991 installation that conveyed a spiritual type of space was somewhat too simplified. For the two-person show *Gazing into the Light: Sato Tokihiro + Shigenobu Yoshida*, held at the Iwaki City Art Museum in 1996, he created a light installation inside the secluded, dark space of the Exhibition Room I. In contrast to his 1991 work, the 1996 installation of light that utilized optical fiber cables showed a significant improvement. In the exhibit, the light forms synchronized with the atmospheric flow outside the museum, while also disclosing their changing appearances as if they were living creatures. The viewer who stood before those light forms must have sensed the existence

of the non-visible radiance of the sun, and the clouds that at times blocked the sun. On unfortunate rainy days, the exhibition room transformed into a silent space that was similar to being in the dark, though in fact, that room was pervaded with the non-visible light of the sun.

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Yoshida's installations that incorporated sunlight beginning in 1991 were unique in that the exhibition spaces created by utilizing the system that received and restored light were not a virtual world of the artist's creation. Rather, they were the manifestation of "another real world." In such a space, the light forms emitted soundless voices and fell into silence in accordance with the laws of nature. The wavering light forms created a rich festive atmosphere and moments of tranquility, while at the same time existing as "another reality" that exposed the actual substance of light. In that space, the viewers must have intuitively perceived the actual existence of the wavering behaviors of light, and the necessity for light to be in that place. For that same light has manifested the sight of a primordial light that has been ingrained within people's memories since ancient times.

To intuitively feel the real existence of light—this is not something captured through one's perceptions, but can occur when one's bodily sensation can connect with the wavering light. For that connection can open up the pathway for one to instantly capture/recall the primordial sight of light that had been lost in one's memory. In other words, the system that receives and restores light performs an effect quite directly through the body to reconnect the relationship between the wavering light (its origin deriving from "mother nature," seen as a spiritual existence) and the viewer. Needless to say, that direct and physical effect is connected with the essence of art, which questions the state of the relationship between nature and people.

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Yoshida, who created assemblage reliefs utilizing the components from a wrecked vehicle and drip-infusion bottles in the last half of the 1980s, embarked on his installations that adopted the sunlight in 1991. And Yoshida achieved his breakthrough through that shift of mediums, allowing him to break the spell he had been under. That is, he was able to break away from the act of expressing his work through the use of things/objects, and from contemporary art, which he saw as an arbitrary category. His breakthrough overturned the

state of his artistic production from its foundation.

Based on the 1991 installation, Yoshida began to develop a system with the aim of bringing in the “infinite light,” which he considered the symbol of hierophany. As an outcome, in his solo exhibition *Criterion 10:Bio-Morph I*, held at the Art Tower Mito in 1994, he showed the Bio-Morph series, which utilized the solar-lighting system Himawari. (7)

Through his encounter with Himawari, the accuracy of his installations drastically improved. As I have mentioned, the merit of adopting sunlight via optical fiber cables meant that the exhibition room could be transformed into a silent space that was similar to being in the dark. Particularly significant is that Himawari made it possible for him to show that darkness as a part of the essence of light.

In his essay for this catalog, Yasuaki Okamoto will elaborate on the details of Yoshida’s rainbow workshops, including the *Gathering Rainbows* series that Yoshida has continuously held since 1995. Okamoto’s perspective regarding those workshops will likely be based on how Yoshida deepened and diversified the spectrum of light, which originated from the 1991 installation.

A notable development in his light works after the Bio-Morph series was a film series that he created with a prism mounted on a video camera lens. The earliest work in that series, *April 30, 1999, Bordeaux*, was shot during Yoshida’s six-hour ride on the train from Bordeaux to Lyon, France. In that film, he captured the “infinite light” that equally shone on a myriad of landscapes seen through the window, while also incorporating the speed, the distance and the time that he experienced while he was on the train. The prism attached to the camera lens took on the role of creating spectra, which was initially created via colored vinyl tapes. Those spectrum sights (that is, the landscapes pervaded with the spectrum of seven colors) were captured by the camera. Thus, any intentional documentation was excluded from the film. This system he devised was simple as well as functional.

We should not forget that Yoshida continued to hold the camera in his hands during the entire time he was filming. Thus, the faintly wavering images of light found in the film reflected the changes in the atmosphere and the sun, as well as the bodily motions of the artist himself. This means that the universal “infinite light” was on the other hand the light of an individual person that emerged via the artist’s body. By developing his work through excluding intentional aspects, Yoshida had entered a new level through the involvement of

his own body.

His work *Passage of Light: April 30, 2004* (2004) optically captured the transforming appearances generated by the sea surface and the sunlight that wavered in accordance with the rhythm of nature. In the film, a common view of the sparkling sea was manifested as “another sight” that shimmered in the light that was restored via a prism and video camera. In that respect, this work is along the line of his 1991 installation.

And finally if I may add, Yoshida aimed to reveal the light that brings in such a rich radiance upon the world through the use of a prism and video camera and showing the results on a LCD TV/projector screen, just as Monet tried to express that same radiance with paint on a canvas. That is, Yoshida likely attempted to create a painting via his film. (8) That is why the images in the film that captured “another sight” evoke the perceptive system through the viewers’ eyes and visual sensations that are familiar with a painterly surface.

Notes:

1. Circle Nii-emu was an art group established in 1976 by artists who studied drawing and other mediums under the late painter Matsuo Matsuda at the Iwaki Cultural Center. In the group’s annual exhibitions that were held at the center, the members displayed experimental expressions. It dissolved in 1995. Yoshida joined the group during the period he was teaching himself art, while also exploring a way of expression that was free from preconceived ideas of art.
2. In this case, the word signifies a gaze that goes through the artist’s body; that is, a gaze which not only refers to a visual perception but which is accompanied by a physical sensation.
3. The exhibition period was from July 20 to 29, 1990. It was the first open-air exhibition held in Iwaki City and took place at two venues: Misaki Park in Onahama and Gallery Musashino. The forty-one artists who participated mostly lived in Iwaki and the Kanto area. Cai Guo-Qiang initially planned to participate but could not. A symposium was also held at the museum with three panelists: artist Kenji Kobayashi, art critic Akihiko Takami, and me. The organizer of the exhibition took the form of an executive committee, with Yoshida as

the central figure who led the entire project, including the preparations. After the show closed, a documented report (exhibition catalog) was published, also under his direction.

4. The term “hierophany” was coined by the religious scholar Mircea Eliade, and is defined as the sacred that manifests itself, which cannot be directly perceived.

5. From the time the French word “passage” appeared in Walter Benjamin’s posthumous work *Arcades Project*, philosophical meanings have often been added to the word. However, in this essay, this word signifies a passage/circuit that can connect different spaces.

6. He realized this installation through installing materials and equipment in various parts of the building’s structure, which he saw as functional existences indispensable to incorporating the sunlight.

7. The solar-lighting system Himawari was developed as a device to automatically track the movements of the sun, in order to transmit the sunlight through optical fiber cables. The original purpose of this device was to transmit the light of the sun to unreachable areas, such as the interiors of a skyscraper or underground spaces. Because Yoshida used the type of Himawari with six optical fiber cables, six circular light forms emerged from their tips, which were enlarged with lenses. Thus, the size and form of the lights could be adjusted by changing the type of lens and the focus distance in accordance with the exhibition space.

8. The assemblage relief *Crack* that utilized the remnants of a wrecked vehicle, and which is introduced at the beginning of this essay, is another example that was aimed at creating a painting via that method. His inclination toward painting continued on to the exhibit of his light installation in 1991 and beyond. *Passage of Light*, April 30, 2004 is one example in which that inclination surfaced.

Reference Plates:

1. *Infinite Light*, exhibition view at the Iwaki City Art Museum
2. *Crack*

3. Ki (Energy)

4. Gazing into the Light: Sato Tokihiro + Shigenobu Yoshida

5. Criterium 10:Bio-Morph 1

6. April 30, 1999, Bordeaux

7. Passage of Light, April 30, 2004