

The Relationship Between IKEDA Tatsuo and the Sense of Touch

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It was fourteen years ago, in July 1996, that I had the opportunity to see the cave paintings at Lascaux in France. Next I traveled twice to Altamira in Spain to see the cave paintings there. Human beings had painted these pictures twenty thousand years ago; it aroused my curiosity and I wanted to know what kind of animals we were that we should desire to paint in this way. That is what motivated me to seek out these cave paintings.

I already had a good knowledge of Paleolithic cave paintings from photographs in publications on the subject but when I actually entered a cave and saw the paintings with my own eyes, I was shaken by the power they contained. This was something that I had been unable to experience from the photographs in various books.

It is well known that prehistoric cave paintings depict horses, cows and other animals, and moreover, it is no exaggeration to say they are commonly accepted to be painted with surprising reality. However, what shook me was not their reality, it was the way in which they stimulated and excited my sense of touch.

One reason for this was the way in which the protrusions in the cave's walls had been utilized to depict the animals' bodies in relief. However, it is hard to believe that our ancestors from the Paleolithic period should try to paint animals in a realistic fashion, like the painters of Courbet's Realism movement. If we are to use the adjective 'real' then perhaps it would be true to say that homo sapiens' ancestors placed the greatest importance on the sense of touch.

The fact is that for a long time now, I have been interested in the way that a painted image stimulates all five senses. It is generally accepted that an image is something to be 'read' or 'interpreted', but I feel that this is an extremely literary approach to an image. I believe, that it is for this reason that some people say they cannot understand abstract art; they approach it in a literary way and attempt to 'read' or 'interpret' it.

However, when we are faced a painted image, the first thing to be stimulated are our five senses which, as everybody knows, are sight, hearing, smell, taste, and touch. I will not touch on the argument about these being highly valued in European still-life paintings, but as I mentioned earlier, I believe that of these five senses touch was considered the most important to the prehistoric cave painters.

With regard to a painted image stimulating the sense of hearing, the German, Karin v. Maur, has discussed this at length in her book, *The Sound of Painting*. Works of this kind include paintings

in which the main subject is a musical instrument, and I believe that it is quite possible for paintings of musical instruments to stimulate our sense of hearing.

The above is a prologue to a discourse on the work of IKEDA Tatsuo. IKEDA has been showing work since 1950, starting with oils but eventually using ink as his main medium. I think it was in around 1973 that he first became involved with performance works titled 'Bonten no To' (Tower of Brahma) and traveled around asking people to participate in it.

Prior to this, a lot of people had considered this artist's work to be a form of social criticism or satire; I must admit that, to a certain extent, I felt the same and so the 'Bonten no To' came as something of a shock. I wrote about it as follows: 'To be quite honest, when IKEDA Tatsuo arrived carrying his "Bonten no To", I was amazed. I found it impossible to relate the IKEDA of the "Bakemono no Keifu" (Genealogy of Monsters) to the IKEDA of the "Bonten no To". I moved some of the gold disks on the "Bonten no To", but I could not help but wonder what had happened to this artist.'

I asked him directly about his motive, and he told me that it was a performance work, that he had been produced various performance works since the sixties and this was simply an extension of those. However, I was not interested in it being an extension of his performance works, I wanted to know why he had chosen the 'Bonten no To'. Perhaps IKEDA was not even aware of the answer himself. In 'Bonten no To – "jiba ni sobu"' (Tower of Brahma – Playing in Time and Space) he wrote: 'As an artist, I generally work on a flat surface, in two dimensions, but I find myself strangely attracted to the fourth dimension, that is to say "time", as in space-time continuum.' It is true that the 'Bonten no To' is a struggle against time, but nobody thinks they can succeed in achieving its objective within their own lifetime. This leads me to describe what the 'Bonten no To' is. It consists of three posts and a series of disks, of any material, that have to be moved from one to the other, making it necessary to use the fingers in order to lift up the disks.

From this it is clear that it is a task that cannot be achieved without involving the sense of touch. I personally think that it was because it is based on the sense of touch that this performance attracted IKEDA's attention. The reason why I say so is that according to the parameters I laid out in the beginning of this discourse, from the fifties to the seventies, the work of this artist has been closely involved with 'touch'.

The word, 'déformer' is a French word sometimes used in reference to art, it means 'to distort' and in painting, it refers to the deviation from realism. So where does the artist's desire to distort the subject originate? Prominent distortion has always been one of the hallmarks of IKEDA Tatsuo's

work, and to repeat what I said earlier, this distortion was carried out in order to stimulate the image's sense of touch.

In 1955 IKEDA formed a group named the 'Seisakusha Kondankai' (Artists' Discussion Group). It consisted of painters, photographers, film directors, critics, and people connected with the theatre, including such artists as, KAWARA On, MAEDA Josaku, AKUTAGAWA Saori and IIDA Yoshikuni. I was invited to attend on one occasion to give a talk, and I remember KAWARA On expressing some extremely difficult things.

At that time, KAWARA On was receiving a lot of attention for his 'Bathroom' series. Of the five senses, it can be said that this work belonged to those that concentrate on the sense of sight, and his pictures had to be 'read'. It is easy to understand why his work later developed into his 'Date Paintings' that consisted solely of numbers.

'Paintings appeal to sight', there are those of the opinion that it is strange to suggest that paintings appeal to anything else, but to the contrary, I think that it is difficult for their appeal to be limited to sight. The reason why I say this is that the majority of people who look at a painting will try to read meaning into the image. Mark Rothko was an artist who attempted to deny this, to reject every type of meaning and I feel the same tendency in the work of Lee U-Fan.

Following his work on the 'Bonten no To' project, from 1980s IKEDA Tatsuo devoted himself to mixed-media works, then turned his hand to sculpture. This is not to say that he moved from the flat to the three-dimensional, rather, it can be thought of as representing a development of his attachment to the feeling of touch.

Characteristically, from the 1970s he chose increasingly abstract titles for his work, such as 'Uchu Tamago' (Space Egg), 'Kyutai Fuyu' (Floating Sphere), 'Rasen Ryudo' (Spiral Particle Movement), 'Shoka' (Sublimation), 'Ba no So' (Aspect of Place), 'Ban-yu Inryoku' (Universal Gravity), etc. I get the impression that a lot of these titles are related to physics, but I feel that they are somewhat grandiose. I believe that there is nothing wrong with applying arbitrary titles to art works, it is completely irrelevant to the work. In a certain context, it could be argued that these titles have extremely literary origins but simultaneously, there is a strong possibility that they will have the adverse effect of encouraging people who try to use them as clues to interpret the work.

I believe that Japanese modern art has a history of overemphasizing literature. IKEDA Tatsuo described how he took part in the 'Avangyarudo Geijutsu Kenkyukai' (Avent-Garde Study Group) that was organized by the 'Yoru-no-Kai' (Night Association), founded by HANADA Kiyoteru, etc.,

after the war, but this 'Yoru-no-Kai' was not an artists' group. Shortly after I moved to Tokyo, I was invited to join a group called the 'Genzai-no-Kai' (The Now Association), organized by the writer, ABE Kobo, and although IKEDA was involved in book binding, there were no artists among the members. ABE recommended strongly that I should stop writing critiques on art and write about literature instead.

My main interest in IKEDA Tatsuo's work is, as I have already stated, the tactile quality it presents and although I had not intended to write about it, I think that his attachment to the sense of touch probably stems from his wartime experiences. In 1943 he enlisted in the Imperial Japanese Navy Air Service (as did several of my classmates) and the following year, he gripped the joystick of an aircraft for the first time. I think that it was the feel of this that was to change his life and it was from this that his attachment to the sense of touch derives. I am not saying that this is good or bad, I am simply suggesting that this is one way of considering his attachment.

It is difficult to produce an image that will stimulate the sense of smell or taste. It is attempted regularly in television commercials but I do not think that many artists have made a conscious effort to achieve this. The Italian sculptor, Medardo Rosso, produces work that excites the sense of touch, and more than anything else, it can be said that it is this tactility that draws people to his work.

The art world still overflows with literary descriptions and interpretations of work, regardless of whether they are representational or abstract. For instance, what is there that needs to be interpreted about Renoir's 'Nude'? I would like IKEDA Tatsuo's work to become more thoroughly tactile. The Austrian artist, Friedensreich Hundertwasser, was a member of this tactile movement and he even applied its principles to architecture. When I saw buildings designed by him in Viennam I felt that they succeeded in this aim. However, the pioneer in this field was, of course, Spain's Gaudi.

In order to avoid any misunderstanding, I would just like to add that I do not promote only the sense of touch, however, I would like IKEDA to enlarge the tactile movement further as it is an area that still remains undeveloped.

Please conjure up an image of our ancestor's cave paintings once more.