

The “Two, but Not Two” World: Shigenobu Yoshida’s Works and The Book of Tea

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Prologue

On May 21, 2017, I was able to be present on the closing day of Tadashi Tonoshiki: The Source of a Compelling Reversal, which was held at the Hiroshima City Museum of Contemporary Art. A small monitor at the exit of the venue was screening a DVD with the many installations Tonoshiki had held in various parts of the world. Included in the disk was the production process behind BARRICADE←→IWAKI (1988), which was in the group exhibition The Original Image of Post-War Art, held at the Iwaki City Art Museum. The monitor showed Tonoshiki, Shigenobu Yoshida and me in the rain, accumulating waste materials that measured twenty meters in length and two meters in height. The object was situated as if to divide the front yard of the museum between Henry Moore’s sculpture Reclining Figure: Hand and the entrance of the museum. Tonoshiki’s initial plan was to collect waste materials at a beach in Yamaguchi Prefecture, and then use an open-firing technique to solidify them into an object he referred to as “okonomiyaki” (lit. grilled as you like it/Japanese pancake). And then at the exhibition site, he was planning to entwine that object along with used tires and construction waste materials around the camphor tree that was planted in the front yard of the museum. Upon his first visit to the museum site, Tonoshiki drastically changed that plan on the spot.

In the process of installing the work, we ran out of waste materials. Yoshida hurried back to his family’s automobile repair shop and brought over two scrapped cars. Under Tonoshiki’s directions, Yoshida and I helped arrange the cars sideways, and then made final adjustments before completing the work. Yoshida, who oversaw the entire production process, later said that Tonoshiki’s method of arranging the materials, and the ideas behind how he developed the installation, proceeded mostly as Yoshida had expected.

Through curating that exhibition in the summer of 1988, I was able to witness the various ways of producing contemporary artworks for the first time. Asking Yoshida to assist Tonoshiki that day allowed me to create the first wave of the network I have today. I would like to mention that it was my colleague/curator, the late Hiroshi Minamishima, who recommended Tonoshiki to me for that show. Although Tonoshiki and Minamishima are

both deceased, the waves that they created still continue to be the “actors” in the network of Yoshida’s works that transcends time and space.

The Small, Vacant House Pervaded with “Ki/”Energy

In my view, that day when Yoshida and I assisted Tonoshiki was when we both set foot in the site where “contemporary art” was produced. After that occasion, my thoughts on contemporary art became clearer as Yoshida and I held discussions on his new works that were to be exhibited. His most distinct turning point as an artist was in 1990, when he organized ART LANDSCAPE in Iwaki '90. I was quite surprised by the small acrylic house he created for that open-air exhibition. But at the time, I persuaded myself to think that if the show itself were to be seen as his work, then the acrylic work would be a symbol of that show. For his exhibition KOUKA (Flower of the Rainbow), which will be held at the Tenshin Residence and Rokkakudo Hall (designed by Tenshin Okakura) at the Izura Institute of Art and Culture in Ibaraki, he made a proposal to show that acrylic house. I was once again surprised by the impressive concept behind that work. I should have noticed twenty-seven years ago that the acrylic house was connected to the ideas of the tearoom referred to in Okakura’s *The Book of Tea*. That is, the title of that acrylic work was *Ki ∞ (Energy)*, and the materials mentioned in the catalog were “acrylic plate, earth, atmospheric air, and the nine heavens.” A passage from that book is as follows:

The term, *Abode of Vacancy*, besides conveying the Taoist theory of the all-containing, involves the conception of a continued need of change in decorative motives. The tea-room is absolutely empty, except for what may be placed there temporarily to satisfy some aesthetic mood.

(Kakuzo Okakura [his real name], *The Book of Tea* [written in English], Japanese translation: Hiroshi Muraoka, Iwanami Shoten, 1929. Originally published by New York: Fox, Duffield & Co., 1906.)

Ki ∞ was placed on the handrail of the observation deck of the Iwaki Marine Tower, which was in between the earth and the sea, and facing the heavens. The work was conspicuously small, but then I finally realized that its appearance resembled Rokkakudo Hall, which stands on the tip of a cliff in Ibaraki.

Rokkakudo, which has a sense of openness that is impossible to find in a typical tearoom, shares the same workings as Ki ∞ in that it is also small and has a sense of transparent emptiness. Through that work, Yoshida declared that the “ki/energy” that filled the small, vacant box formed the core of the workings of art, and that the material through which “ki” became functional was the entire universe.

The subtitle of the 1990 exhibition, *From the Cape of Good Hope in the Space Age*, allowed me to perceive the “ki” of the late art critic Akihiko Takami, who was the adviser for the show. “Ki” could also be felt from the “actors” connected to Takami, such as the artists Cai Guo-Qiang and Wang Xinping, who both participated in the show and currently reside beyond the national boundaries. Yoshida’s work had to be vacant so that it could be filled with the “ki” of the participating artists and the others who were involved in the show. It was also important that the physical size be kept small, so that all the unnecessary matters (“the unenlightened”) could be eliminated. Okakura stated:

The size of the orthodox tea-room, which is four mats and a half, or ten feet square, is determined by a passage in the Sutra of Vikramadytia. In that interesting work, Vikramadytia welcomes the Saint Manjushiri and eighty-four thousand disciples of Buddha in a room of this size, –an allegory based on the theory of the non-existence of space to the truly enlightened.

For a period of two years after he collaboratively worked with Tonoshiki in 1988, Yoshida’s expressions became more dynamic than before. His works expressed the physical vestiges of such forms as wrecked vehicles and drip-infusion bottles, based on the theme of “life and death.” Starting from the time *ART LANDSCAPE* in Iwaki ’90 was held, he broke away from the use of physical materials, while also stepping into an artistic arena where artworks were endlessly incomplete. This was similar to the idea Okakura repeatedly emphasized in *The Book of Tea*.

Into the Light

Around the time Yoshida made that significant shift, I remember him posing the question of whether the subject of his work should be the traces of light or the light itself. I will refer to this again later in the essay, but that was the moment when he became determined to

eliminate the boundary between the spirit and the material world of modern times, and the boundary between the subjective and the objective.

However, during the first half of the 1990s, while he was in the process of shifting from a physical expression to depicting the light itself, his works seemed to have been supported by ideas deriving from twentieth-century scientific (Western-based) analyses and methods. The primary reason I felt that way was because his Infinite Light series was based on the spectrum of three primary colors as described by the Young-Helmholtz theory. Another reason was that in his Bio-morph series, Yoshida adopted the solar-lighting system “Himawari,” which utilized optical fiber cables, as his “painting brush.” Such a tendency is of course natural since his works were conveyed through the systems of art and art museums to the viewers who belonged to twentieth-century civilization. I also acknowledge that Bio-morph was an exceptional expression of sunlight that was merged with the atmospheric vapor and the movements of clouds, which disclosed appearances of light that squirmed like living creatures. But looking back on those works today, after I have been exposed to the overwhelming strength of his “rainbow” works that appeared after Bio-morph, I feel that those two series were rather too rational. By rational, I mean that the Self is maintained by both the artist and the viewers—the former while a work is originated and the latter while the viewer is enjoying it. In his “rainbow” works, Yoshida totally abandoned that rational aspect. This shift can also be described as his entry into the inner side of light.

In 1997, Yoshida participated in *Windows to the World Around Us*, which was held at the Utsunomiya Museum of Art. *Gathering Rainbows*, which he exhibited in that show, was an outstanding example of a twenty-first-century artistic expression. Specifically, the combination of his use of space, the tools he employed and his artistic actions opened impressively toward the external world. That is, he thoroughly nullified his subjective existence as an artist via having children create that same piece in his workshop. In his work, Yoshida installed containers with water and mirrors in the forest outside the west side of the museum, and then left the rest up to the movements of the sun. The Japanese exhibition title *Mori ni imasu* (lit. “I’m at the forest”) was like a pun on Kenji Miyazawa’s message “*Shita no hatake ni orimasu*,” (lit. “I’m at the field below”), which the poet wrote on the blackboard at the front entrance of the Rasuchijin (Rasu Farmers) Association in the mid-1920s. The approach of that 1997 show, which aimed to dissolve the boundary

between the museum and the surrounding forest, perfectly resonated with Yoshida's new development.

Although Miyazawa died in 1933, his ideas were already very much of the twenty-first century. This was likely the reason why the curator of that show adopted that Japanese title. The passage below was part of Miyazawa's reply in which he excused himself from meeting a local poet who asked to see him:

After all, I just call myself a mental sketcher, and so I consider my writings to be outside the genre of poetry. I have hardly associated with poets in the past.

He then referred to the difference between a "mental sketch" (the term he used to describe his poems) and poetry in this way: "[The two are] as different as a lantern maker and a painter." This metaphor can be applied to the difference between the art of the twentieth century and that of the twenty-first century.

How was Miyazawa able to surpass that boundary between the two centuries, and how was he able to dissolve the boundary between the self and others?

The answers to those questions could be found from an unexpected direction in the words of poet Kikuo Sugaya. He argues that the focus of Miyazawa's "mental sketch" was not "images" and "metaphors" but "the rhythm of words." He states:

In principle, the unique rhythm of his "mental sketch" adopted the infinite continuation of a walking rhythm created from a single pattern by merging fifteen syllables in an eight-seven structure and sixteen beats to eight measures in a twelve-beat rhythm.

(Kikuo Sugaya, "On Colloquial Rhythm," *Kohon Miyazawa Kenji zenshu, dai ni maki geppo*, Chikumashobo, July 1973)

The archetype of that rhythm was the "military march" of Meiji Japan (1868-1912). During the First Sino-Japanese War (1894-94) and the Russo-Japanese War (1904-05), the seven-and-five syllable meter used before the Meiji period was merged with the duple time signature of Western music. Sugaya indicated that Miyazawa had transformed the "time" of the march rhythm, which solely uplifted the image of the nation, into "a method that could infinitely expand and release 'space.'" Miyazawa's aim was to release "space" from the

modern idea of employing a single passage of time that only headed toward making advancements. In order to realize this, he needed to write as he walked around in the hills and fields. Sugaya stated that this was how “the infinite continuation of ‘a walking rhythm’” had first appeared. I perceive that same sense of infinite continuation in Yoshida’s film work *Passage of Light*. Sugaya states:

His [Miyazawa’s] aspiration should be described as a total synchronization of the internal world and the external world. That is, through the fictional “experience” of synchronizing the acts of “walking” and “writing,” he reached a crisis point where he had to mutually and wholly retrieve the triple process of recognition that shifted categorically, from religion to thought to literature.

In brief, the crisis that Miyazawa faced was one of self-alienation that resulted from the divorce between nature (religion) and modern society (science). Modern people commonly experience that same crisis, which still remains to be solved. While Miyazawa synchronized the inner and outer worlds via walking in the hills and fields, Yoshida realized that synchronization through the speed of a train in his film work *Passage of Light*. Sugaya states:

When he [Miyazawa] released his own religion (nirvana ideology) into the transparent domains of time and space, which was attained through completely merging the cosmology of Lotus Sutra and that of modern natural science, he discovered farmers who were “the warriors...of the atmospheric land of Japan,” instead of following the national polity of Japan.

Miyazawa endeavored to transparently synchronize his social life, religion and creative life through being a farmer. I would like to apply this idea to Yoshida’s artistic passage.

The Energy of Chaos and Nothingness

In 2010, Yoshida’s works surmounted the physical (optical) type of light. His work *The Light of the Presence* revealed a sudden inclination toward expressing a religious state of mind. The word “Presence” in the Japanese title is “Rinzai,” which translates to “the presence of gods.” But Yoshida used this word to express the presence of light. In reality, the human

eye cannot directly see a physical light—we are only looking at things that are exposed to and reflecting light. The *Light of the Presence*, which consisted of a series of paintings and a flower, maintained light in the absence of sunlight. Plainly speaking, this work conveyed that that light is in fact the substance of light to humans. Similar to Goethe's *Theory of Colours*, Yoshida's work *Rainbow of the Soul* allowed the viewer to realize that a rainbow is his/her own inner vision. In contrast to how the deluge of rainbows completely filled the scenes in *Passage of Light*, the seven colors that compose light were nowhere to be found in *Rainbow of the Soul*. It is said that the reason why Newton counted seven colors in a rainbow was so that the number conformed with his belief in the mystical properties of the number seven. Yoshida's attempt to enter into an actual light through surmounting such conceptual ideas is similar to the ascetic practice of freeing oneself from worldly thoughts through Zen meditation. Considering that light is made of wavelengths of energy, the act of jumping into light is equivalent to the act of assimilating with a sea storm, as indicated by Okakura in *The Book of Tea*:

Those of us who know not the secret of properly regulating our own existence on this tumultuous sea of foolish troubles which we call life are constantly in a state of misery while vainly trying to appear happy and contented. We stagger in the attempt to keep our moral equilibrium, and see forerunners of the tempest in every cloud that floats on the horizon. Yet there is joy and beauty in the roll of billows as they sweep outward toward eternity. Why not enter into their spirit, or, like Liehtse, ride upon the hurricane itself?

This passage is a literary expression suggesting that one should first synchronize with the flow of the world of phenomena in order to become enlightened. But it is quite surprising how far removed his description sounds from the image of a calm, quiet atmosphere we typically have of Zen meditation. However, the scholar Toshihiko Izutsu argues that Zen is certainly characterized by that description, and that Zen should be understood as “a dynamic epistemological and ontological process or event.” Izutsu explains:

In such a way, Zen eliminates “essences” from all beings. Through this, all conscious subjects are nullified, chaotifying the entire world of existence. However, Zen ideology does not stop here. The chaotification of the world is merely the first half of the existential

experience of Zen. Zen recovers the order in a world that was once utterly chaotic; however, this time, in a completely new form that is different from before.

(Toshihiko Izutsu, "Consciousness and Essence," Toshihiko Izutsu Complete Works vol. 6: Consciousness and Essence 1980-1981, Keio University Press Publications, 2014)

Izutsu explains the above process through the three stages shown in the accompanying diagram. In "Articulation (I)," the world is seen through one's superficial consciousness. This is the state of being "conscious," in which one understands the "essences" of matters. "Non-Articulation" is the state in which everything becomes chaotic, as a result of the vanishing of the consciousness and the dissolving of the "essences" of things. In "Articulation (II)," the articulation stage is recovered and things are recrystallized, but the "essences" do not return. Things are exactly the same as they were, except the "essences" are lost; thus, the world shows a completely different appearance.

"Articulation (I)→Non-Articulation" is a relatively easy passage to understand, but "Non-Articulation →Articulation (II)" is said to be extremely difficult to experientially understand. Izutsu describes the state of "nothingness" as "a dynamic and creative 'nothingness' through which one ceaselessly continues to self-articulate according to their natural inner disposition." This is the same state as "the Path" that Okakura referred to in *The Book of Tea*:

There is a thing which is all-containing, which was born before the existence of Heaven and Earth. How silent! How solitary! It stands alone and changes not. It revolves without danger to itself and is the mother of the universe. I do not know its name and so call it the Path. With reluctance I call it the Infinite. Infinity is the Fleeting, the Fleeting is the Vanishing, the Vanishing is the Reverting.

Izutsu indicated that the state of "nothingness" in which all existences are articulative but have not yet been separated into anything is pervaded with an enormous amount of energy. He then postulated that the common religious term that expresses that energy of existence is "life" or "light." He also stated that the world reflected in the "consciousness" that has dissolved the Self to that level of nothingness would look completely different even if it is the same as before. Izutsu expressed that difference as the "non-transparent

existence” versus the “transparent existence,” and depicted the world of “Articulation II” as “the expansion of the transparent beings who endlessly interrelate with one another.”

That same description relates to the Chinese story of Peiwoh (Bo Ya), which is also referenced in *The Book of Tea*. In that story, the celestial monarch asks Peiwoh why he was able to play the harp so beautifully in a way that many other players could not.

Peiwoh’s response was:

“Sire,” he replied, “others have failed because they sang but of themselves. I left the harp to choose its theme, and knew not truly whether the harp had been Peiwoh or Peiwoh were the harp.”

Izutsu gave a detailed explanation on the ultimate state of non-articulation, which is arrived at through dissolving the boundary between the subjective and the objective. At the end, he referred to the idea stated in Zen master Dogen’s *Treasury of the True Dharma Eye*, and gave the modern interpretation of that stage as follows:

One should study an absolutely unrestricted view that can see the water of the worlds of the ten directions from the perspective of the worlds of the ten directions, just as they are. This is different from when humans and heavenly beings study the ways to see water from their own respective views. Rather, water itself studies the ways to see water.

Readers who are familiar with the art world probably noticed that Izutsu’s argument regarding the passage “Articulation (I) → Non-Articulation → Articulation (II),” which we have examined, relates to the basic theory of expression in modern painting. For instance, Van Gogh first merged his own feelings with actual sunflowers, and after recognizing the two as one, he once again replaced that image on the canvas in the form of sunflowers. The sunflowers in the painting became transparent in the sense that they transformed into an expression that was unable to be distinguished from Van Gogh’s feelings. If the ego or identifiable “essences” (in this case, an artist’s own character and his/her ideas of things) still remain in the artist’s painting, he/she would end up retouching this and that. Thus, the sunflowers in Van Gogh’s canvas had to create their own unique sunflowers.

In *Rainbow of the Soul*, Yoshida once again used physical objects. But the countless

number of children's shoes he exhibited had already been deprived of their essences. Izutsu explains that same state in this way: "The synchronic manifestation of the 'non-articulation of the absolute' and the 'experiential articulation' of existences are what form the ontological core of Zen." The children's shoes that transformed into spirits existed in the form of "emptiness/nothingness," which could transparently merge with all other existences. The current thinking in physics can probably illuminate that state through quantum theory. In Yoshida's ongoing project *The Birds of Light*, which consists of workshops in which participants write/draw on postcards, exhibit them, and then mail them through the post, the distribution network itself functions to dissolve the boundaries between the participants and the artist. His *Ki Dragon* series, in which he utilizes Japanese lacquer on materials such as fabric, allows one to perceive the expression of the non-articulated energy itself. I presume that the next realm Yoshida is headed toward is a state that has been repeatedly elucidated by Izutsu through adopting Jack Derrida's vision, as is shown in the following passage:

A practitioner of austerities returns to the real world after he/she has nullified all existence, both the subjective and the objective. What comes into his/her eyes in that state is once again the world of brilliance, with a diversity of things. However, none of those things would be substantially fixed; rather, they would constantly be freely floating in a ceaseless sense of motion. In other words, if I were to borrow Jacques Derrida's words, they are "free-floating signifiers."

(*'Sufism and Mysticism,' Izutsu Toshihiko Complete Works vol.8: To the Depth of Meaning 1983-1985, Keio University Press Publications, 2014*)

Yoshida's works will be exhibited in Izura, where Tenshin Okakura had conceived *The Book of Tea*, and from which Yoshida drew inspirations and developed his works. Okakura's feelings, which have become transparent through being dissolved into Izura, will indeed overlap with Yoshida's works. I anticipate that this exhibition will have a festive ambience, while also possessing a sense of serenity.

(T. N.)