

Unexpected Things Happening As If Only Natural

Jun Aoki, architect

Koki Tanaka appeared to me to be a non-fetishistic artist. An example of what I mean was the work he did for “SAP Arting Tokyo 2001, Space, Time, and Body Lived” in 2001. Presented in the former Ushigome Hara-machi Elementary School of Shinjuku-Ward, this work treats a number of ordinary objects, basketball, toilet paper, and a waste basket. Each of them was (or probably was) just a thing. They were filmed with a video camera. Then a television set was placed where the objects were taped and their images were displayed on the screen. In the projected image, the basketball continues bouncing forever, the toilet paper continues to dance in space without falling on the floor, and the waste basket turns around by itself at intervals. The bouncing basketball reminds us that children once played in this place, and causes us to feel a kind of nostalgia, but it is difficult to react emotionally to the dancing toilet paper or the revolving waste basket. This caused me to think about the objects in a new way. I decided that for Tanaka, the bouncing basketball was just one more object that happened to be there.

These objects were not things that emerged in the artist’s mind or that he developed a preference for. Like me, he was interested in what could be done with the things that were accidentally given to him. The things in themselves were not important.

I watched these objects absent-mindedly for a long time but did not get bored. I did not have an urge to look at what might exist behind the events that were occurring there. However, could I say that I was just looking at something that had really happened? The images projected there could hardly be expected to occur in reality. Still, after looking at them for a little while, it seemed that these events were really happening, that they were not impossible. Of course, somewhere in the back of my mind I was aware that they could not happen. However, the images were repeated in a seamless loop. Therefore, a certain strange situation seemed to have its own isolated existence, where no progress was made. It couldn’t happen, but it was happening. No, it couldn’t be happening. Such thoughts went around and around in an endless circle, and completely contradictory conditions were made to co-exist. Eventually, I was overcome by a relaxed, peaceful feeling, a sensation that seemed suddenly familiar.

It was just like the feeling I have when working as an architect designing buildings. It is the feeling I completely depend on to decide whether the thing I am designing is all right or not. An example is the Aomori Museum of Art, in which the outside wall is made of bricks. After the bricks were laid, they were painted white. In spite of the white paint, since they were laid by human hands, they are slightly uneven and irregular. Unconsciously, viewers are caused to realize that the bricks were physically laid. However, the soffit, the surface under the eaves, is also finished in brick. If it were really constructed with laid-up bricks, they would fall out, but they do not. This seems to indicate that there is only a brick pattern on the surface and that the wall is not constructed of real bricks. It seems odd. There are openings here and there in the brick wall. The sides of the opening are cut at a 45-degree angle, and the edges are at the rear. Because of this, one cannot see the width of the brick, and the wall looks thin and insubstantial. It seems that the bricks are a pattern and not really laid. Are the bricks laid or not? Most likely, they are. One’s mind keeps going around and around between these opposite positions. And as it goes around and around, one enters a state of liberation. I asked myself, What if I got this feeling while determining the design of each part of the outside wall? The sense that the bricks are laid must not be too strong. It must be just right in order to counteract the feeling that they are not laid. The outside wall of the Aomori Museum of Art was constructed with a view to maintaining this balance.

This is why I became intrigued with Koki Tanaka. I felt that we had something in common.

Looking at bricks, we think of Western architecture. We feel nostalgia for an age when Japan was trying to catch up with the West as it attempted to modernize. There is a sense of exoticism connected with brick. When looking at a basketball, we think of the game of basketball – the squeaking of the shoes, the crisp rhythm of dribbling, and the sound of the ball hitting the backboard reverberating in the gymnasium. We think of sweat. These are childhood memories. Any object can act as a signifier. It conveys some sort of meaning and produces associations with some sort of scene. However, I am not interested in what an object signifies. The basketball in the video bounces in a matter-of-fact way that is unlike dribbling. The bricks are painted white.

At the same time, however, I am not especially interested in showing things as things in themselves. Bricks are made of clay formed in a mold and fired in a kiln. They are pieces of shaped earth, lumps of earth marked by the effects of firing, such as scorching and cracks. Looking at a basketball as a thing, we see that it is covered with artificial leather with a brown color close to orange and measures 24.5 cm in diameter. Just the same, Tanaka does not intend to remove the meaning from things, making them into unknowable objects with an absurd and meaningless existence.

When using physical objects, he does not try to reconfirm their specific or common-sense meanings. Neither does he reduce them to things with zero-level signification. He both strengthens and erases signification. At first, it seems that we can see both extremes. Both of these stances show a strong interest in meaning, so they are two sides of the same coin. Neither affirmation nor denial can exist without sharing the same subject matter. Seen from this point of view, if we examine all aspects of the matter, Tanaka does not seem to be interested in meaning. He is completely nonchalant. It is natural for things to have meaning, but this meaning does not hide their substance as things. Substance does not actually exist. It is not the case that substance simply exists, and meaning has an existence separate from it. These two things have a complementary relationship. For this reason, Tanaka's purpose is not to present a kind of critical explanation of the condition described as a "play of signifiers."

If this question is limited to things, it is not very urgent. It becomes urgent if it goes beyond things and is taken to include our inner life. We seek a definite identity, but the self is always fragile. Our idea of our self today comes from what we read in a book we read yesterday or the words of a friend we had drinks with last night. That is all the self amounts to. It is a very fragile thing. We do not know how or where it will break down. Selves are nothing more than chains of accidental occurrences. Our field of vision is never open. We are always overcome by fear that our rudder is being turned in the wrong direction. Even so, the rudder of the heart and mind must be grasped now, in the present moment. The non-visible world is filled with a vague, oppressive sense of anxiety.

People seek a solid inner life in external things when they cannot bear this anxiety any longer. They do not have it in themselves. They seek outside of themselves for things that come from the depths of the heart or an individuality that can be put into form only by the methods unique to a particular individual. However, this is just a myth, an illusion. Different people may have different individual inclinations that cannot be replaced by those of others, and these propensities may guide their judgments and actions. If some of these tendencies are quite different from those of others (and everyone has tendencies that are), there will be differences in the results they lead to. We are aware of these differences. However, these differences are not associated with all of a person's inclinations. Since they are slightly different from the average of all inclinations, the differences only involved apply to part of the inclinations that we are aware of. Broadly speaking, there are no special differences between individuals. What we are most conscious of is our differences from others. In this sense, the inner life is not autonomous but heteronomous. In spite of this, we sometimes believe that there is an autonomous individuality

belonging only to our selves. Objectively speaking, this is nothing but an auto-suggestion aroused by the desire shared by many people to have a definite internality whether they actually do or not. We tend to think that a difference from other people is a solid fact. And we encourage ourselves to think that we have attributes that make us stand out from others. When we do this, we raise the expectations of people around us more and more. Unconsciously, we personally act out the myth. This is another easy method of escape that we tend to pursue when we cannot bear the absence of a definite internality.

What is most important for us, however, is to confront the lack of a solid internality, not to escape by seeking the illusion of one. To repeat, our inner life is nothing but a chain of accidental occurrences (the condition of the chain is also accidental). Looking back, accidents that could never occur twice occur over and over in a miraculous way. In ordinary life, we take this to be inevitable, but because we know that inevitability is not inevitable, we are assaulted by vague feelings of anxiety and pressure.

The video works of Koki Tanaka record a condition that could only happen once in thousands of tries. For example, one of the images show in the "Cause Is Effect" exhibition (2005, Nadiff), is a clear plastic umbrella dancing in the wind but sticking to a country path and moving down it far away from us. This is impossible. Or it is a very unlikely, accidental event. This accident occurs as if it were inevitable, but the image seems incredibly silly. Our response to it is similar to the feeling we have when realizing that the condition of our inner life is not inevitable but is a chain of innumerable accidents, itself an accident. If we think about it, we know that none of these events could ever occur more than once. This realization makes us suddenly feel much lighter. We experience a sense of liberation, as if we had been released from ourselves. According to a famous line in a play by Keralino Sandorovich, "Life is just a big joke." In Tanaka's works, it seems to me, this mantra of liberation while accepting the chaos of one's inner life is directly expressed by things rather than words.

What Tanaka calls humor is the thing that gives us this feeling that everything is suddenly lighter. The person who made this statement about humor, however, is not the artist Koki Tanaka but the art critic using the pen name of Nobi Chijimi. Nobi Chijimi, who won the Third Critic's Prize of Musashi Art University Press (2000), quotes from Sigmund Freud in an article entitled "Transformation of the World and the Speed."

This person (the person with humor) takes an attitude toward the other like one might take toward a child. And this person laughs at the concerns and sufferings that are so important to the child as actually being trivial.

Humor is a "grin or a smile from a broad and infinitely distant point of view." This smile is a rare flash of something that can be experienced from the depths of one's heart. We "suddenly become lighter."

This article by Nobi Chijimi specifically analyzes *Untitled (Perfect Lovers)* (1987-1990) by Felix Gonzales-Torres, in which two different times are kept by a pair of clocks. Lovers can exist separately because they are never perfectly united, but the two clocks are perfectly synchronized. Something impossible is proposed and then suddenly made possible. There is co-existence between these two different states. Here too, the mind goes around and around between the image seen with the eyes and the title. This circularity gives rise to "liberation as an infinite point," that is, humor. In a way, this analysis anticipates the work of the artist Koki Tanaka, still to come.

The interest of Tanaka's video works, however, lies not in the relationship between what is seen and the title but is entirely contained in the images. The image of the toilet paper dancing in space is given a brilliant title, *Fly Me to the Moon* (2001). It sounds like words spoken

that might be spoken by the toilet paper, dancing with great vitality, but it reflects what is happening in the image. Such a thing could not happen in reality, but it is happening. Impossibility coexists with the impossible becoming reality. The title is replicated in the content of the images, and the images are completely self-sufficient. In most cases, Tanaka exhibits his video works in the place where they were taped. When the basketball video was shown in the Toyota Municipal Museum of Art, the work was remade at the site. The content of the images was repeated. Of course, this repetition (or tautology) strengthened the work, but it is just an image of a certain condition, not a narrative. It is created by achieving co-existence between something impossible and something occurring in reality. I find this achievement amazing.

Of course, Tanaka always defies our expectations. In “Roppongi Crossing – New Visions in Contemporary Japanese Art 2004” at Mori Art Museum, a trunk full of a red liquid resembling blood is repeatedly struck against the wall. “Animal Paradise,” shown at void+ in 2005, has shots of animals inserted sporadically in a condition of flickering light. In the new work shown in Paris in May 2005, we see nothing but oranges thrown on a stairway. Tanaka also makes three-dimensional as well as video works. Most of Tanaka’s works deal directly with accidents that have an infinite breadth. As a matter of fact, his works are very expansive. They remind us that the accidents we meet in life cannot always be foreseen. There is a whole sea of accidents that just happen and have no interconnection. These accidents are displayed without order. This is the sort of scene I suddenly see in my imagination.

(Translated by Stan Anderson)

Koki Tanaka Works 1997-2007, Akio Nagasawa Publishing Office, Tokyo, 2007, pp.142-146