Relay to Tokyo: Inheriting and Gathering

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On March 12, 2020, at the ruins of the Temple of Hera, Olympia, the birthplace of the ancient Olympics, a woman dressed in the garb of a maiden will light a torch with a parabolic mirror reflecting the rays of the sun. After being carried around Greece, on March 19, at the Panathenaic Stadium in Athens, the flame will be passed on to hosts from Japan, the host country of the upcoming games. After that it will be carried throughout Japan by 10,000 torchbearers, and after a journey of four months it will reach the New National Stadium in Tokyo. This is the Olympic torch relay, which heralds the coming of the quadrennial Olympic Games.

As exemplified by the 1936 Berlin Olympics, which marked its beginning, the ritual of the torch relay has often betrayed the danger inherent in the relationship between the modern games and politics, but nevertheless, the reason the practice has been continued and has resonated with people is that the notion of *the ancient and modern worlds being linked by a flame*, which is what the relay purports to symbolize, has a certain universality to it. People inherit and pass down culture through the ages. They take each other's hands and connect the world—in part because of the innate sacredness of fire, the Olympic torch relay has brilliantly illuminated Olympic ideals like peace, solidarity, and friendship.

It was because of the 2020 Tokyo Olympic and Paralympic Games and the Olympic Flame Handover Ceremony to be held ahead of them in Athens that the current exhibition was planned.

The Olympics and the metropolis that is Tokyo—both have continued to develop from the late 19th century to today, and both are symbolic products of *modernity* that have grown in scope and function, but they both have origins that are actually far older, such that they are the present forms of human actions that have been relayed across generations. They share the quality of a magnetic field in that they attract people and things, and by gathering them generate tremendous amounts of energy.

It was from this perspective that we decided to have this exhibition with the themes of "inheriting" and "gathering" and to introduce the six artists and an architect in the vanguard of their fields in Japan. They each work with a different medium of expression—painting, photography, video, installations, and architecture—and their styles are just as diverse. Yet in their works we can clearly discern various forms of inheritance or continuation, for example in creations that incorporate cultural products and techniques old and new, creations that take up the succession of historical and cultural heritage as their subject matter, and creations that repeatedly explore personal themes. At the same time, at the fundamental level their works share certain features, such as the repetition of actions, and the connecting, linking, and gathering of elements, and these features impart intensity to each of their expressions.

At this time when the Olympic flame connects Greece and Japan and is carried by relay towards Tokyo, we hope that through this small exhibition visitors can gain a sense of the diversity and allure of modern Japanese art.

In the following I will talk about the artists and their works on exhibit, particularly in relation to the aims of the exhibition.

The Byzantine and Christian Museum, which will serve as the exhibition venue, has a cozy and inviting courtyard. In the center of that courtyard, exposed to soft light and breeze, a small pavilion by Kengo Kuma will be

installed.

Kuma is the designer of the Japan's New National Stadium, which will function as the main stadium for the upcoming Olympics. The inside of the stadium was unveiled recently, and one of the things talked about by the reporters who saw it was the spectator seats colored in five different tones in a seemingly random fashion. The aesthetic canon achieved by the gathering and continuation of uniform particles is reminiscent of the tesserae of Byzantine mosaic. Kuma's buildings highlight the aggregate quality of the constituent elements, or as the architect often describes them, their "particulate nature," rather than the whole structure. The pavilion will be a cocoon-like tea house composed of nearly 100 sheets of plywood as well as the dowels joining them. In complete contrast to the National Stadium that will host 60,000 excited spectators, it will be a modest structure that will fit several people at most, but the aggregate or "gathering" aesthetic of Kuma will be alive in this pavilion as well. Kuma says that this "particulate nature" projects the texture of the land. The organic form and the elements, or "particles," that constitute it just might change the flow of the wavering sunlight and breeze as they acclimate to the placid atmosphere.

Among Roland Barthes' (1915—1980) is a particularly light and endearing essay collection called *Mythologies*. It contains a short essay titled "Toys." In it, Barthes makes stipulates that toys are models of adult society. His point is that most toys are mere tools to condition children to the adult world, from which children can create nothing. Barthes also reveals his special hatred for plastic toys. Of them he says, "the plastic material of which they are made has an appearance at once gross and hygienic, it destroys all the pleasure, the sweetness, the humanity of touch."

The creations of Paramodel Hayashi Yasuhiko, who cover walls, floors, and ceilings in Plarails, which are an extremely popular series of railroad toys in Japan, could serve as a thorough rebuttal of Barthes' argument. This is because Hayashi takes these Plarails—which most certainly engrossed him when he was a child—and from just 10 or so types of plastic rails, generates infinite creative variations by carrying the task of extending the toys to its logical conclusion, and in doing so opens up the potential of creation itself.

Hayashi notes that *para* in the artistic collective's name has all sorts of connotations such as *parallel* and *paradox*. Here I would like to mention *parergon*, a term in aesthetics. The word is formed from the Greek εργον (ergon), meaning *work*, and the prefix παρ (para-), or *beside*. More specifically, parerga refer to things like the frame of a picture. Parerga were viewed by Immanuel Kant (1724—1804) and other premodern aesthetic philosophers as things accompanying a work, or accessories, but separate from the work's essence. In contrast, Jacques Derrida (1930—2004) attempted to deconstruct the subordinate/superior hierarchy by interpreting parerga not as outside the work but literally *beside* it, and one of the bases for its existence.

Through the task of joining the Plarails together, Hayashi integrates all of the *para* (beside) things into the work, connects mutually foreign things, and erases the boundaries between them. A structure's walls, floor, and ceiling. Pictures and three-dimensional objects. Toys (play) and art (creation). Inorganic industrial products and organic forms generated by them. Materials that have the specific meaning of *rails* and the abstract patterns woven with them. Hayashi's installation at the exhibition will be at the exit of the permanent exhibition hall and in the *boundary* space that leads to this exhibition. I wonder what kind of organic connection Hayashi's creation will have to the visual arts of Byzantine culture.

Aside from the picture frame, other concrete examples of parerga given by Kant are the clothing on statues and the pillars of buildings. In the video piece by Yu Araki at the exhibition, the author is seen running continuously around the pillars of the Parthenon. Actually, it is not the Parthenon in the Acropolis, but two Parthenon *replicas*, one in Nashville (U.S.) and one in Edinburgh (Scotland). The subject of Araki's work, namely the relationship between an *original* and a *copy*, has been discussed at length by Gilles Deleuze (1925—1995) and Jean Baudrillard (1929—2007), among others, but it can also be connected to the parergon and ergon argument as an examination of *essence* vis-à-vis *accessory*.

It is fascinating that there are replicas of a majestic Doric structure in countries that have very little connection to ancient Greece. Incidentally, the one in Edinburgh was never completed; construction was discontinued due to financial difficulties once the façade columns were built. In that sense, it remains as near perfect manifestation of a parergon. If we examine this dichotomy further, however, the Parthenon that is now considered to be the original is actually a *replica*, as it was rebuilt in the 17th century. In fact, it was only a pure temple for a relatively short period after its construction, since which it has undergone changes in its functions and roles over several millennia. Furthermore, the structure is thought to have been decorated in dazzling colors. The chalky white temple that we normally picture is just a "bleached" image we harbor of the ancient world, which is far from the original.

The replica in Nashville, where Araki spent his adolescence, is a place of lasting memories for him; the gallery in the basement is where he first exhibited his own work. In that sense, the Parthenon capable of being a *monument* for Araki personally is not the one in Athens but the replica in Nashville. All cultural products take on manifold meanings and attributes through exposure to various ideologies or through ties with individuals with the passage of time. Araki's continuous "solo relay" around two replicated temples is also a representation of the artist thinking round and round about how difficult it is to define things.

As the exhibition is being hosted in Athens, we included two works that have connections with Athenian history and culture. One is Araki's aforementioned video installation, and the other is an oil painting by Kei Imazu, the only female artist in the exhibition. The two share a point of contact in that they both deal with the changes in significance and position of elements of cultural heritage that accompany movement through time or place.

The motifs that Imazu has rendered on the massive, nearly five-meter wide canvas are cultural assets that, due to strife between nations, ethnic or religious problems, etc., have been taken away from where they belonged, such as the Elgin Marbles, which were taken from the Acropolis to Great Britain in the 19th century. Imazu does not intend for this work to have the message that cultural resources should be returned to where they originally were. What motivates this creation is an interest in the circumstances in which such cultural artifacts become subject to all manner of external factors that have caused them to lose where they belong and drift about. (As a side note, this painting is slated to return to the possession of well-known individual collector in Japan.) Imazu's interest in the "fluid nature" of the subjects of her works mirrors the current state of the world in that, with development of networks, it is now possible to obtain any image, i.e. replica, anywhere in the world, from all times and all places. (Or conversely, we could say that they now belong nowhere.) Cultural properties are changing form, like a scene in a surrealist painting, melting and losing their original shape. They reflect the state of today's world in that not just the things themselves but images of them are wandering aimlessly through time and space.

In terms of creative style, the leading current in Japanese art in recent years—particularly among artists born in

or after the 1970s—is occupied by artists who tie historical motifs and social phenomenon to their own experiences and interests, and explore those in depth, much like the styles of Araki and Imazu, Nobuaki Takekawa's series of works titled *Cat Olympics*, were prompted by two events in the artists life: the selection of Tokyo to host the 2020 Olympics, and the subsequent loss of his beloved cat to a traffic accident.

Takekawa's creations often incorporate animal motifs, but *Cat Olympics — Opening Ceremony*, is bustling with a myriad of ceramic cats that must have taken a phenomenal amount of time to create. The 10 posters depicting a variety of cats acting as they please, cats competing as athletes, as well as the witty cat remarks added to each, are sure to warm visitors' hearts. At the same time, visitors will notice that the individual cats that make up this great clowder, all have thoughts and opinions of their own. Through the gaps in its humorous expressions, the work betrays slight suspicions about a society that tends to neglect the presence and feelings of individuals for the sake of "great tales" or "the group," as symbolized by the Olympics or Tokyo.

The main motif of Naoki Honjo, a photographer of urban landscapes, is Tokyo. In his early photographs, he transformed real-world scenes into sights that looked like dioramas by carefully manipulating the depth of field and blurring the upper and lower parts of the view. The *Tokyo* series employs similar techniques, but the diorama effect is much slighter. One of the reasons is that the scale of his subject is so enormous and the constituent elements are so numerous that they exceed the sense of scale that a diorama would have. Another reason, however, is perhaps that he is struggling in this series to actively incorporate in his representations such major natural elements as the air and sunlight that cover the city. In the *Tokyo* series, he seems to have taken a step back from the dioramic device in his photography and is looking onto the metropolis with a more neutral gaze.

As Barthes wrote in *Empire of Signs* (1970), Tokyo is a unique city in that it lacks a center (or more precisely, he concedes that it does have a center, by which he means the closed and forbidden space of the imperial palace, but that its center is empty). Honjo's photographs, which are of places around Tokyo taken in bird's-eye view-like sections, lay bare not only the enormity of the city, but the dissipated diffuseness of it as well. Simultaneously, while he abstractly captures the endless continuum of box-like buildings, he draws the viewer's gaze towards concrete objects focused around its center line. It is in such features that one can glimpse his point of view that attempts to pick out anonymous "small tales" from among these bewilderingly large gatherings.

The Western tradition of art gave rise to the notion of a *canon* as a fixed system of norms, with ancient myths, and later the Christian Bible, as its motifs. Then a new mythology called *modernism*, which sought to free art from that canon, emerged. In contrast, the definitions of what might be called canonical were not clear-cut in Japanese art, so it is thought that the very existence of modernism would not have been possible. This is why contemporary Japanese art is considered wholly post-modern. Japanese artists set out without a shared mythology, and they continue to create today as they individually discover from past and present phenomena the themes and tales they should shoulder and confront.

In this kind of environment, Motoi Yamamoto persists in creative activities grounded in thoroughly personal experiences and thoughts. Motoi Yamamoto arrived at salt as a medium upon the death of his younger sister when he was a student. He was drawn to it because salt is the root of life and a symbol of purification. He has been drawing pictures in salt at venues around the world for 20 years. (And in that period, in 2016, he lost his wife to illness.) His stunning, artisan-like skills, and the designs of iconography he draws certainly impart a remarkable industrial art-like quality to his installations, but for Yamamoto, the very repetition of the act of creation is a form

of prayer that he dedicates to life lost.

At the upcoming exhibition, Yamamoto will draw out geometrical patterns in which lines of salt crisscross vertically and horizontally in labyrinths. And the lines extending seemingly endlessly from those will form swirls. Labyrinth motifs can be traced back to ancient world, including Greece, Mesopotamia, etc., while swirls developed in Celtic and Asian cultures. This “prayer painting,” which draws upon two streams of iconography passed down from ancient to present times around the world in different eras and places, will be given shape in a museum to medieval Byzantine and Christian art, which fuses the cultures of the East and West.

Once the artist has drawn the work and the exhibition is over, visitors will tear it up and return the salt to the sea. Yamamoto thinks of his creations as compassing this entire process as a single cycle. This view has a sanctity and universality that is not unlike the torch relay. Even if the work itself is lost—or precisely because it is lost, people link it to the memories and thoughts of the life and death of people close to them, which everyone has experienced at least once or twice, and pass them on in each of their hearts, where they live on.