

FROM DUALISM TO ONENESS: A Thought on the Potential of Asian Art

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I have been involved in this project for three years now. Such a long time, and yet such a short time too. Embarrassingly, my heartfelt sentiments read just like hackneyed platitudes, but all the same, I must say that these three years have been an emotional journey for me. As I write, the Tokyo exhibition draws near, and one of my dearest personal goals is close to attainment. It seems a suitable juncture to reflect on what the last three years have meant to me.

I have made my share of mistakes, but I have made just as many discoveries. The earliest was made at the initial Working Seminar, where I met curators from different parts of Asia for the very first time. Their individual presentations were of great interest, but the atmosphere intimidated me and made me acutely nervous. Meetings had never been my element, and to make things more difficult, this was my first experience of being surrounded by such an assortment of skin tones and faces that were both familiar, yet different. All around me, interspersed with simultaneous interpreters, there was lively debate conducted in English, the seminar's lingua franca. I remember feeling like a fish out of water. Waiting for my own turn to deliver a presentation, I felt like a condemned prisoner approaching the scaffold, and privately wished I had never, ever set foot in that building.

My presentation proved to be utterly out of place. Even now, my face burns at the memory. I recall trudging wearily home afterwards, feeling as if I had the words "complete fool" stamped on my forehead.

What I should have done in that situation was to stick to what I knew well, or in other words, to focus on introducing the artists of the Kansai region, and to give a presentation on the methodology used in jointly-planned exhibitions. I knew this well enough at the time, and would have been perfectly capable of doing it, if I had wanted to. However, it did not feel right to simply follow the invisible rails laid out in front of me. I'm naturally timid, though, and I sort of regretted my perverse approach, but as a result I almost deliberately maneuvered myself into giving an inappropriate presentation. The subject I had chosen was children's art.

I remember that after my talk, someone commented that it had been "more of a credo than a presentation." I remembered having heard the word "credo" before in a mass, or something of that nature, but I am sorry to say that I did not know exactly what it meant. When I got home, I looked it up in the dictionary. I was pleased to have learned such a useful term, even if the occasion had been someone using it to cover for my off-the-wall speech. Looking back now, I realize that for the last three years, I have been driven by a shadowy impulse to find out whether my own "credo" is really no more than a self-indulgent hobby-horse, or whether it contains some universal truth.

At the time of the incident I have described, I was engrossed in studying particular artworks created by children, and the insight I garnered then has stayed in the back of my mind to this day, niggling like a tiny fishbone lodged in the throat. To cut a long story short, let me tell you that I have no interest in the general run of children's art. To make myself perfectly clear, I would go so far as to say that ninety-nine percent of it is outside the scope of esthetic discussion and criticism. What interests me is that under certain conditions, or in certain circumstances, in a tiny minority of extreme cases, there is something like a nuclear reaction. Words are rendered meaningless by its overwhelming power, and value judgments informed by conventional human feeling are robbed of all power. This astonishment is at the root of my "credo." [1]

The basic problem of esthetics is the disconnect between ideas and actual experience. In certain examples of children's art, I discovered an important function: an almost sacrilegious, iconoclastic mechanism which makes the latent problem manifest. Of course, I do not simply dismiss sensibilities and value systems different from my own. However, individual reactions to actual works of art vary too excessively, and most of the discrepancies originate in the special nature of the authorship. To put it in slightly more prosaic terms, in most children's art, the child's identity is not very significant. All that matters is that the child is provided with an environment conducive to uninhibited self-expression. To appreciate works of art, one does not need a database listing artists' names, styles and so forth. Perhaps this is a bit of an overstatement, but appreciating an outstanding work of art by a

① This phenomenon is extremely difficult to convey, no matter how detailed a description I might attempt. Any interested reader is referred to the following catalog: *Biiku - Sozo to Keicho* (Esthetic Culture: Creation and Inheritance), December 11, 1999 to February 13, 2000, Ashiya City Museum of Art & History.



child means throwing away all one's preconceptions and confronting its existence with an open mind.

My credo values amazement and questioning over awareness and understanding. My contact with the works I see around me, as well as with children's art, has taught me that amazement and questioning lies at the very roots of art. I am not simply arguing that actual experience is good and ideas are bad, or that confronting existence is good and cultivating awareness is bad. However, in the artistic environment of the Kansai, where I live, there seems to be a well-established trend towards amazement and questioning. This is where I would like to start.

There is no need for me to remind you that this project is a mutual exchange rather than a one-way street, and embraces a variety of factors in the form of subjective statements from within Asia, since this has been explained several times elsewhere in this volume. "Under Construction" is indeed pregnant with all sorts of undifferentiated possibilities. Kansai-based artists producing high-quality work still tend to be overlooked when there is a Tokyo-centric viewpoint, so the task of selecting such artists and helping them onto the international circuit is definitely an important and worthwhile undertaking. I am constantly aware that such selection and assistance should not be sidelined into being just the "editing" of information. Personally, I see it as a truly creative process. I select works of art informed by their creator's perception of reality, and when those manifestations of art become the input to "Under Construction," I do not know what output this will produce. Rather than editing what already exists, this is making something new happen. I think it is important not to lose sight of this fact.

Maybe the issue of Asian identity has a bearing on this. At first, this question puzzled me considerably. I must admit that, before I encountered this project, I did not personally have much awareness of myself as belonging to Asia. I may have understood it intellectually, but I did not feel it viscerally. (This is another classic example of focusing on abstract ideas instead of actual experience.) Like most Japanese people, I had always thought of "Asia" as a slightly exotic place located somewhere else. Indeed, I had barely thought of it at all, other than from a consumer's perspective. At any rate, after starting to work on the project, I began to feel self-conscious about suddenly exploiting the word "Asia" to my advantage. Meanwhile, I began to wonder about Japan's strange lack of awareness of her own Asianness.

If I were to be allowed a little self-justification, perhaps every art exhibition could be seen as a sort of inquiry. Is there no other valid approach than to focus exclusively on what one knows well and completely grasps, aiming, in effect, to eliminate the unknown and the unexpected? If the scope of every exhibition had to be restricted by the scope of the curator's knowledge, this would be impossibly limiting. It can sometimes be a good thing to put together an exhibition, precisely because one does not understand what is to be expected them. There is a big gray zone between these two poles, too. I am certainly not saying that a curator should throw together a negligently incomplete exhibition, or abrogate responsibility for its content, but an exhibition should be a voyage of discovery for its curator as well as its visitors. When this happens, the space will be electrified by the excitement that occurred at the initial stage of creating the exhibition.

Having thus redefined my position, I focused on the concepts of "de-centering" and "transcending borders." This is not an especially radical approach, but I feel it highlights the fact that our Asian world-view is essentially and fundamentally different from the Western-European's which premises on the individual in relation to the pivotal concept of God. In the Western mind, the individual is defined by his or her differences from others, and "differences" sometimes manifest themselves as "walls" or "boxes" for compartmentalizing the world. We Asians, however, naturally perceive the world in all its unmediated chaos.

Of course, in the information society we live in, a certain amount of homogenization is under way, in urban areas at least, and it is definitely becoming harder to define clear-cut conceptual differences between East and West. On the other hand, thanks to the computer networks that are arguably a symbol of the current era, the "walls" and "boxes" are undergoing if not dissolution, then at least a transmutation. The walls have now become semi-permeable, allowing information to seep through and penetrate in both directions. Maybe we should positively embrace a new perspective in today's networked society — symbolized by the internet — as a metaphor of the Asian viewpoint.

To help catalyze this reaction, "flora" was selected as a keyword for the local exhibition. However, preconceptions about this word will be deliberately challenged. Because it provides the ideal surroundings for relaxation, nature tends to be depicted in a facile way. As everyone knows, plants are often chosen as subjects for fine arts, and artworks depicting them run the risk of degenerating into cliché. In real life, plants are tough, fierce, and also extremely (even surprisingly) dynamic. When I heard about the way plant populations have been cross-penetrating with particularly intense vigor between our neighbor countries in Southeast Asia, it occurred to me that this was yet another metaphor for our computerized and networked society. [2]

② With regard to the current situation in connection with flora in Southeast Asia, I am indebted to Futana Yoshihi for some valuable suggestions.

But what if border-transcending dynamism ended up in a dualistic deadlock with static places like art galleries and museums? Dualism is intimately related to the aforementioned structuralism of the Western-European world view. We Orientals, however, have developed a philosophy that neatly sidesteps it. In expressions such as "All in One and One in All," and "śūnyatā (emptiness) is tathatā (suchness), and tathatā is śūnyatā," the meanings of "in" and "is" have a different nuance from the mathematical expression "equals." The Asian world-view is premised on the fact that duality exists, and on the desire to see it as it is. The fact that the duality is a single entirety is grasped instinctively, before understanding has time to take place.

The concept of the "HUB" can provide a useful metaphor for that which reconciles both parts of a duality. In a computer network, a hub is a kind of node. People, products and information converge towards the hub, pass through it and are thus distributed to new networks beyond. A hub does not exert any global control. Instead, it acts as a conduit, functioning as a lubricant in the network.

However, we must not interpret this metaphor too mechanistically, lest we fall again into the trap of awareness. A point does not even have a physical existence. In the future, it will become ever more necessary for art to swim freely through the open seas of the global network. By its very nature, art will try to avoid being collected in a static physical location. One way of allowing artworks to be accessed efficiently by large numbers of viewers would be to set up a hub, and have an access lamp flash each time information passes through the hub as a user views the artwork. This raises a number of interesting questions. What is the significance of the light? Is it more than just a trace? At which physical location can the artwork be said to be art? These issues would need to be addressed on a case-by-case basis. Of course, the creator of the artwork could easily settle the issue by deciding on the answers.

Personally, I think the value of the experience thus provided would depend on whether the image managed to convey a real aura redolent of actual experience, as opposed to being a mere unit of information in the form of a virtual image. This could be dismissed as mere spiritualism. However, perhaps this is the very thing that will open up fertile ground with regard to the possibilities of Asian or Oriental art.

Some readers may have noticed that in this essay, I have made several allusions to Zen. Like "flora," this term needs careful attention. I hardly need to point out the danger of associating this word with simplistic orientalism, or using it carelessly as a blanket term for difficult-to-pigeonhole concepts. In order to avoid the risk of committing the latter error, which is particularly repugnant, I am quite prepared to allow Zen to be self-contradictory. In these matters, willingness to peel away the outer coverings and get right to the essence of a concept is a *sine qua non*. Zen is not something to be dismissed as a piece of spiritual baggage from the past. It remains wonderfully useful and applicable to modern realities.

In Western Europe, the preoccupation is with tracking one's own position and orienting oneself on one's own mental map. In contrast, our own preoccupation is with, as it were, keeping moving as an end in itself. Maybe we would be more Asian if we stopped trying so hard to align ourselves with Asia, and simply stopped making any us-them distinction. Maybe we should stop telling ourselves that East is East and West is West, and contemplate the statement that "East is West." That would certainly rescue the word "globalism" from its current status as a tedious cliché. The circuit is always open. If spending so much time in close contact with local art in Japan has taught me anything, it is that our local art springs from the core of our Asian identity. Moreover, it has the potential to surmount such an identity our national identity crisis.

So, have we spent the last three years traveling in a circle, only to end where we began? I prefer to think of our trajectory as a spiral. We may go round and round, but we are slowly rising.

