

Minoru Shimizu - Rigorous Freedom. Three Observations on Takeoka's work

I. Pedestals - exhibiting to reveal the foundations

Let us try to draw a genealogical line from Marcel Duchamp via Gerhard Richter to Yuji Takeoka's pedestals:

Gerhard Richter's series on OIL ON PHOTO is an exemplary work group that develops a Modernist core with great purity and expresses it clearly and simply.

He calls this core simply 'Schein' (Appearance). 'Schein' can be interpreted aesthetically or philosophically, but here its primary meaning is something quite ordinary:

Reflected images, reflected light on shop windows, the reflection from a stretch of water, photographic images and apparent images on screen or canvas.

'Schein' thus refers to a certain image quality, a characteristic of the word 'reflection' in the broadest sense, and that is the quality of a reflected image on a reflecting surface.

We could arrive at a consistent formula for Richter's work as follows: he transforms every possible image into appearance, into 'Schein'. Landscapes, portraits, pictorial subjects like skulls, candles, even newspaper photographs no longer depict something in Richter's work, they are transformed into mere appearance, into a kind of reflection.

But how can any random image be transformed into appearance? His approach is both simple, and a work of genius: all he has to do is make the reflecting surface itself visible, or rather — as in fact it can never be seen — he has to shift it into the viewer's consciousness: a surface that is invisible in itself, but forms a base for everything that is visible — this could be called a zero-surface for the two-dimensionally expressed image. Recognizing this invisible thing as the basic element of the visible, and yet expressing it in the realm of the visible — that was Modernism's adventure, and its very core.

But how can this invisible base be made visible, be made to 'appear'. In Richter's case this is done by montage, using two quite different image qualities. In the OIL ON PHOTO series he takes a landscape, combined with patches of colour. Mounting the blob of material on the surface of the picture transforms the landscape into an apparent image on a transparent (zero-)surface that emerges between the two pictorial elements.

But the key point is neither the transforming nor the transformed pictorial element, but precisely this transparent zero-surface in between, which has so far been invisible, but appears for us as a result of the montage.

Duchamp would call the thin quality of the zero-surface 'infra-mince', in other words 'infra-thin'. We can use this familiar Duchamp term to sum up Richter's procedure as follows: transforming everything into appearance —> this involves making the zero-surface appear; it is invisible as such, but forms the basis for visibility, —> then two different pictorial qualities are mounted one over the other —> and between them an 'infra-thin' surface of transparency is created: that is the zero-surface.

Let us now expand Richter's method into three dimensions. We have to make it possible to perceive something that is 'invisible' as such (in the extended sense of the word), but forms a base for three-dimensional art. And this something, this base for three-dimensional art, we will call the 'zero space' —corresponding with the zero area. And it is this very thing that Takeoka expresses in his 'pedestals'. In the first place it is all too comprehensible, even trivial, that the pedestal forms the basis of the sculpture, even though its function and significance may often have been neglected in art history.

But it is only by 'exhibiting the base' that the zero-space can be recognized. The key to Takeoka's work is that the pedestal itself, which forms the invisible base of the work of art, becomes a work of art. In this way the pedestal's form as a base is referred back to itself, which triggers a self-referential process: the base-forming pedestal is transformed into a work of art with a base, and this base again has to be a pedestal, which... and so on ad infinitum. The base disappears in an infinitely reciprocal process of transformation, we lose the conventional starting point of 'art' and hover between making art and made art, without ever finding any firm ground. We are in an infra-thin intermediate area between art and pedestal.

The formula quoted above can be reworked as follows in the three-dimensional version: transform every possible thing into a work of art, instead of into appearance. It is the function of the pedestal and the zero-space to transform a thing/work of art into a work of art/thing. In other words, it is a zero-space or infra-thin intermediate space that divides art from non-art. In Takeoka's work we are always dealing with the architectonics of this zero-space, which also forms an important core of Modernist space, which Takeoka wishes to illustrate by exhibiting pedestals. In this way we see the social and institutional implications of his pedestal and the specific architectonics of his spatial disposition.

II. The Readymade and its social application

The Readymade. We have known for a long time what a 'Readymade' is. But here I should like to pursue its conceptual implications briefly. The concept of the Readymade implies two important elements: the doing-nothing method, and the problems implied by art's social and aesthetic status.

The first implication may look simple, but it is often misunderstood.

For example, it can be understood as follows: the work simply is 'readymade', nothing more needs to be added to it. The artist does nothing, and allows the object to continue existing in its real condition... in addition, chance is introduced, the object is liberated from the subjective aesthetic of the artist's ego etc

This may sound convincing, but it does not accurately define either Duchamp's method or the meaning of chance. To understand both these, it will help to look to John Cage for a musical parallel to Duchamp.' Both artists drew attention to the element of conscious and unconscious structure, or the system of art, and they were always concerned to identify this system and to withdraw from it.

Besides it is much less easy to trace the internalized system of art - tonality and rhythm - in fine art than in music, where it is relatively commonplace.

When John Cage performed the famous work 4'33" (1952) in the concert hall - a silent work, simply marked 'tacet' — or when he presented the noise of scribbling on paper, recorded by contact microphone and amplified, as a piece of music (CARTRIDGE MUSIC, 1960), the principal point is this: everything we hear in reality or in our heads can be 'music'. But it is more important that we can hear everything as 'music' and that it is difficult to make a tone exist as a 'tone as such', independently of any musical articulation. In silence and even in noise we hear distorted rhythm, bad harmony or an unpleasant sound as a kind of clumsy tone-painting. Our internalized acoustic system, culminating in the tonally structured sense of hearing, accepts everything possible as a fragment of a musical relation, as melody, dissonance, harmony, sound effects etc.

Whenever we hear we assume a relative system that has already been activated so that we can 'hear'.

And so when composers do nothing, they are automatically doing something, whether they are aware of it or not. Consequently, in order to do nothing properly, they have to do something, so that the internalized system is not activated automatically. Thus Cage's art is directed at a pure tone as such that could be entirely relation-free and that would resist any sort of integration into a system. But how? By chance. *MUSIC or CHANGES* (1951) was created by the composer's rigorous pursuit of chance (here in the form of a Chinese fortune-telling book).

In order to do nothing to retain the given reality, in other words to express it as real, i.e. free of any subjective-aesthetic (un)consciousness, then paradoxically one needs the highest possible degree of rigour and precision. The opposite of this, i.e. the greatest lack of freedom, is improvisation, which is supposedly free, but its freedom is merely the free, more or less skilled use of certain musical systems (e.g. harmonic transition, rhythm), which makes it part of this system from the outset. Random, or aleatory, music is different. It is directed precisely at a rule of chance, a stochastic rule, for example, and is thus through-composed, so that it can be free. And artistic freedom, if there is such a thing, will never follow a pre-stabilized system.

In fact it creates a new system, expressed only in and through the work of art.

This is why chance is introduced. Chance as a rigorous technique that produces the unforeseeable — that is the key to the aleatory method. Although *Takeoka* is a long way from pure aleatorics, this rigour is an important element of his art.

Now the second implication of the Readymade is easier to understand. Ever since Duchamp exhibited a signed urinal in a museum and declared it to be a work of art, art has had nominal status. Just as anyone can be called 'Smith', anything can be called 'art'. And the discourse of modern art circles around this untranslatable-indescribable black hole 'art', which remains indefinable and precisely by doing this constitutes the Modernist sphere of discourse. This is what Duchamp taught us with his Readymades. But — of course — not everyone is called Smith, and not everything is art.

Where then is the line that divides everything possible from art?

Here we meet the problems of art as a social phenomenon with an institutional and historical structure, forming an aesthetic background to our consciousness.

It will not now be difficult to find a dividing line: as Duchamp's urinal showed, something that is exhibited in a museum, titled and signed is in some sense art.

But on a more abstract plane one might not need either a museum or an exhibition gallery. Simply an institutional sign that something is 'exhibited' is enough for it to be perceived as a work of art. There are various signs that make us perceive something as art. For *Takeoka* the pedestal is one of these signs, and his series *PUBLIC SCULPTURE* is based on manipulating them - i.e. manipulating the dividing line.

In *Takeoka*'s zero- space of the base and the public sculpture the Readymade's two implications always apply, and are also centrally significant in his spatial disposition.

III. Negative architecture or Japanese garden

Let us introduce a simple conflict: two kinds of architecture, and thus two spatial designs. One we call integral or positive architecture, the other distributive or negative architecture.

The integral architect adds and multiplies. Foundations are laid, brick is placed upon brick, a column is erected, various rooms are planned and added on to each other... in a

word, he builds. The architect as a master builder. What is built and how, that is architecture. The starting-point here is usually a fundamental element from which different variations are derived in the course of the building process. These are developed by addition or multiplication, fitted together and composed through to a conclusion. In this way a harmonious unity can be realized, even with the most diverse building elements. Ultimately this produces architecture that is constructed as a complete and harmonious whole.

The second kind of architecture, and this is Takeoka's, does not follow an integral process. Instead of adding and multiplying the architect subtracts and divides. This is a distributive method. Architects of this kind see the world as a totality of conscious and unconscious streams of human ability and will, i.e. as waves and rivers of mankind, of things, of information, of transport, money etc. This world already exists as architecture, and so you do not need to build, but simply to separate and manipulate the currents. Here architecture means manipulating waves and currents, with the architect as a kind of surfer.

The nature of the currents, the way in which they are divided and manipulated, produces a kind of architecture that is not constructed, but consists only of mobile separators and dividing screens, changing in tune with the density and rapidity of the social currents.

The first architect plans and builds different spaces so that they can be put together as a whole, while the second architect organizes dividing lines that separate other spaces and rooms from each other. Such architecture takes shape between the environment, the dividing line and the spaces generated by that division.

Takeoka's spatial disposition is based on this approach. Although his exhibition spaces often look Minimalist, we should not be deceived by the superficial similarity, for Takeoka — and with him Duchamp as well — and the Minimalists - thinking here mainly of Judd and Flavin - proceed differently in principle.

It is well known that space plays a fundamental role in Minimal Art. It could even be said that a Minimalist work's ability to impress depends to a large extent on the quality of the exhibition space. But if Minimal Art is actually defined by extreme reduction to the minimal element of art, in other words if the Minimalists reduce their art to the most fundamental core of Modern art, in order to express and emphasize purity, then this dependence on something external is very strange. Why do the surroundings still have to be fundamental to a work of art that has been crystallized down to a minimum?

There is only one conceivable reply: because the surrounding space and the reduced minimal work are complementary. The Minimalists draw the surroundings into the work of art. The exhibition room itself, and indeed an institutionalist and Modernist exhibition room, thus becomes a fundamental part of the work of art. As Minimalist reduction aims at the core of Modernism, it is the Modernist art space, (the so-called 'White Cube' of the museum) that has to draw attention to the reduced quality of the work. The individual works show the quintessence of reduction and the surrounding space shows what remains after reduction.

Both of these are essential to Minimal Art, which thus needs a Modernist-institutional space - Michael Fried would call it 'theatre' - and at the same time is also qualified by it. The quality of the space must always be retained in Minimalism so that the art space's institutional problems are suppressed.

But Duchamp and Takeoka want to withdraw from this institutional space and to step on the border that separates this space from others. Not an architecture in the space, nor one of the space, but an exhibition of the space itself, using architecture between the

spaces. It is not a matter of making the entire space part of a work of art nor of designing it as an artistic space, but of creating a space with a certain quality and then bracketing it out.

Takeoka often uses glazing as his medium for this bracketing out. He is not concerned with spatial composition or installation in a space. The artist brackets off a particular space (e.g. the museum, the space around the work of art), and the space is 'exhibited' in a particular condition. He withdraws to the periphery/into the spaces in between, manipulates these and thus always achieves a spatial disposition.

Negative architectonics and Takeoka's approach to spatial disposition by bracketing out and exhibiting can be related to Zen. Zen is not introduced here to give Takeoka some sort of Far Eastern aura, as often happens with Japanese artists in Europe. In fact, as philosophical thinking Zen does not necessarily relate to Japan and can historically - in the 14th century - even be compared with European Scholasticism. "If you have a stick I will give you one. If you don't have a stick, I shall take one away." - This apparently nonsensical 'kō-an' (proposition) is trying to identify the precise border point beyond which there is no sense and on this side of which there is sense: the topos of nonsense. Nonsense, which occupies an infra-thin gap between meaning and meaninglessness, is itself a semiotic system that separates meaning and meaninglessness.

When Nicolaus von Autrecourt wrote "things that contradict each other mean the same", or "the sentences 'God exists' and 'God does not exist' mean almost the same, just in a different way," he was not far away from the topos of Zen.' Even when abstracted philosophically, Zen is nothing more than a phenomenology, and one that is experienced at that. 'Satori' (illumination) is in fact an experienced moment of the epoche.

Both phenomenology and Zen deal with reduction to the indifferent, neutral 'it' ('it' as in 'it is raining, 'it is' and Lichtenberg's famous 'it thinks'), i.e. reduction to an intermediate area in which the transcendental I structures the ego and the world, where nonsense distinguishes between meaning and non-meaning, the zero-area distinguishes between image and blob and the zero-space between work of art and pedestal.

In Takeoka's work there is a Zen garden. It is neither a macrocosm nor a natural garden, nor an art garden.

The garden of Zen, designed as an instructive work, stands only for an indifferent something without feeling, existing between the inorganic world and organic living beings. Just as Cage's work always slides away from 'music' and Duchamp's work always slides away from 'art' by arriving at its outermost limits, so Takeoka's work always intends to explore the border area between art and base, art space and space.

And the Zen garden always withdraws from the 'garden' by rigorously organizing the infra-thin spaces between art and nature, garden and landscape, inside and outside, in other words between different planes of human seeing,

In order to achieve the freedom that is unique to rigour. This freedom is consistently found at the core of Takeoka's work. In conclusion I should like to introduce a 'pedestal' from a well-known Zen garden in Kyoto - near the house where Takeoka was born:

THE PEDESTAL TO MOONLIGHT. Probably for Takeoka the West is on the border of the East, and the boundary is 'infra-thin'...