

**Dr. Yvette Deseyve –**

**Word and Form. Traces of the written word in Yuji Takeoka's concept of space**

The 'void' in Takeoka's works has already been much discussed. Some interpretations focus on the far-eastern tradition of the void, as by Michael Hübl in his essay 'In der Leere den Grund suchen' ('Seeking the reason in the void'), whereas others emphasise the 'productivity' of the void, examples being Reinhard Ermen or Raimund Stecker, who devotes his prefatory thoughts to the 'void between' in Takeoka's works. By consensus, from the representation of the apparently abstract space and the artistic utilisation of the emptiness that consequently develops, it is reasonable to conclude that this is a definite creative strategy in the artistic practice of Yuji Takeoka.

So it seems all the more worthwhile to take a look through the lens of art history at the objects which apparently diverge from this strategy: objects in which the presence or even abundance of used objects from the material world are given prominence. Works that fall into this category are the 'Vitrine Sculpture (Hommage a Michael Asher)' of 1987, 'Specific Rooms' created two years later, 'Art Informer's Head' that Takeoka showed at documenta IX in 1992, the sculptural installations also produced in 1992, 'About Painting No. 1', 'Backup' and the 'International Art Magazines Rack' from the year 1997. Taken together, these can be seen as a distinct group of works in the oeuvre of the artist Yuji Takeoka. Common to these since the late 1980s, and more markedly so in the works of the 1990s, is the use of the 'written word' in the broadest sense - materialised sculpturally in the form of books and magazines, invitation cards or blank placeholders for magazines. Since relatively little attention has been devoted to these written traces — by comparison with the pedestal sculptures — they will be pursued in the following essay as a means of shedding light on the approach to space production that is particular to this group of works. Although Takeoka comes from a family in which books had a ubiquitous presence, thanks to his father's profession as an antiquarian, his biographical roots yield less insight into this aspect than the consciously chosen art-historical references which are demonstrably exemplified by this group of works.

Yuji Takeoka is not a sculptor who draws attention to himself with strident, publicity-seeking installations. His works are concentrated and seem to possess an inner calm. But it would be wide of the mark to cast Takeoka as an artistic loner who progresses with his work in meditative seclusion. Takeoka is a sculptor who plays a full part in contemporary art and who also contributes to the international art scene. The fact that Takeoka, as a Japanese artist, has analysed the European and American art scenes with fruitful results for his own work is by no means a given, either for Japanese or for Western artists today: '[the West] simply lacks a generally valid perspective on Japanese contemporary art, i.e. Japan does not yet have a place in the art world,' as Takeoka summed it up in a 1997 interview. Key impulses for his critical response to contemporary Western art, in particular, were drawn from the '10th Tokyo Biennale' and a show of young German artists curated by Siegfried Salzmann, both in 1970. One of the exhibits was Joseph Beuys' (1921-1986) 'Filzanzug' ('Felt Suit', 1970), which represents the paradox of a suit that functions not as a suit but an object that is characterised by not being worn. The encounter with this work actually motivated Takeoka to embark on another degree at the Düsseldorf Kunstakademie. Düsseldorf, perhaps the most important centre of the young West German art scene, remained the constant reference point of his artistic development. His most important departure point and source of artistic provocation, however, were provided by the

works of Marcel Duchamp (1887-1968). Michael Asher (b. 1943) and Donald Judd (1928-1994). Takeoka engages with their conceptions of art, which will be explained in greater detail below, and adopts a clear position with his own work.

Duchamp's introduction of readymades might well be described as fundamental in this respect. He thereby liberated art from the constraints of artisanal production and, for Takeoka, provided the decisive impulse to address the problem of the social and aesthetic status of art through his invocation of the particular situation of the exhibition room.

Apart from numerous obvious allusions to Duchamp, the catalogue of French sculpture used in Takeoka's 'Vitrine Sculpture (Hommage a Michael Asher)' can also be read as a subtle reference to Duchamp's importance for the development of modern sculpture. In a linear arrangement, to the right of the catalogue Takeoka places a book dedicated to the art of Richard Serra (b. 1939) and a printed invitation to Galerie Konrad Fischer, Düsseldorf for the 1986 exhibition by his colleague Lawrence Weiner (b. 1942). What matters is not that Yuji Takeoka presents these objects in a standard museum vitrine, but that the artist understands both the vitrine and the written documents as a sculptural entity, which he logically names 'vitrine Sculpture'. What can be observed here is a momentous triad in which the actual space (the vitrine) becomes a primary carrier of meaning; the art catalogues are vehicles of a mentally conceived space in which Takeoka relates his works to those of Serra or Weiner; and finally the surrounding space — Takeoka first showed his vitrine sculpture in 1987 at an exhibition in Cologne — becomes a decisive element of the statement.

In order to better grasp this structural triad that runs through the entire group of sculptures in which Takeoka incorporates 'the written word' into his works as a central element, it may be helpful to introduce Henri Lefebvre (1901 -1991) and his theory of space.

It was in 1974 that the French philosopher Henri Lefebvre first published his theory, 'La production de l'espace' ('The Production of Space'), a work aimed at the socio-geographical mapping of space, in which he integrates the categories 'city' and 'space' into an overarching theory of society and puts forward a spatial triad of social activity. The first field, which Lefebvre refers to as perceived space ('espace perçu') describes real spatial practice. Over the three-dimensional space developed in reality, an additional level of mentally conceived space ('espace conçu') can be superimposed. On the third level, these combine to produce the lived space ('espace vécu', which he also calls the 'space of representation'. Lefebvre consciously avoids a theory based on dichotomies but develops a philosophical triad so as to capture the complexity inherent to spatial systems. In this triad of 'perceived', 'conceived' and 'lived', the final step is the most critical: 'This is the dominated — and hence passively experienced — space which the imagination seeks to change and appropriate. It overlays physical space, making symbolic use of its objects.' It is analogous to the museum exhibition context that Takeoka always keeps in mind: 'If an 'object' elevated to an artwork is exhibited in a certain room, it has a psychological and material existence, so that in a certain sense it becomes complex.

If his work 'Art Informer's or his object 'Istanbul Connection', dating from 1996 and rooted in very similar strategies, is considered against this background, the underlying artistic concept in each case can be identified as just such a triad.

In both cases, Takeoka uses a construction built from square section steel supports, which in the case of the 'Istanbul Connection' also show clear signs of previous use. Resting on the constructive framework is a cubic glass cover. Together, the frame and glass cover form the real spatial situation of a museum vitrine.

In contrast to his 'Vitrine Sculpture (Hommage a Michael Asher)', in which Takeoka carefully presents the selected documents in rows, the glass cases are filled, apparently unsystematically, with art magazines, gallery brochures and trade fair catalogues from a great variety of countries. Although it is supposed to suggest a random arrangement, all the magazines are placed with the front cover turned towards the potential viewer. Only the lettering of the relevant title pages succeeds in opening up a conceived space — to use Lefebvre's term — and hence in symbolising Takeoka's questioning attitude towards the art market and exhibition practice. Critical to both cases, in turn, is the 'space of representation' of the respective vitrines. Only in the exhibition context of documenta IX or the cultural centre Atatürk in Istanbul can a glass case filled with art magazines be perceived and read as an artwork.

A large proportion of his so-called 'pedestal sculptures' have either no title or are confined to the descriptive level, such as 'Floated Pedestal', (brass, 1992), 'Wall Pedestal for Dust', (terracotta, 1985/86) or 'Orange Pedestal', (artificial stone, 2000).

The chosen title of the work thus retracts itself entirely or amplifies the first, often dominant visual impression. In this respect, once again, the group of works to be analysed is entirely distinct. Starting with the title 'Specific Rooms', a work made by Takeoka in 1989, the artist consciously makes reference to the space that he conceives in his mind. Takeoka's assumption that his allusion to Donald Judd's 'specific objects' can be deciphered shows, once more, his permanent reflection on the 'space of representation', since this transfer is accomplished by an audience well versed in art scholarship. An essay published by Donald Judd in 1964, which is often referred to as a manifesto of Minimal Art, contrary to his true intention - since Judd stresses in several places that it is not a rhetorical justification of a movement, school or stylistic direction - becomes a reference point to which Takeoka's work responds. Immediately, this conscious allusion raises the question as to Takeoka's artistic rationale. In order to reflect on why the artist invokes this particular foil for his work, it is necessary to ascertain any similarities or - perhaps more importantly - contrasts between Takeoka's artistic stance and that of Minimal Art.

Judd's essay shakes the foundations of art scholarship's established division of art into different genres based on their medium of artistic expression. He proclaims an art that is neither sculpture nor painting, but is nevertheless clearly three-dimensional in intent — without being illusionistic: 'The more anti-illusionistic in the spatial representation, the more the picture becomes a concrete three-dimensional object which, instead of reproducing the space, objectivises the colour and area into an entity and thus takes up real space.' Judd attempts to attain this whole not by bringing the compositional structure of individual components to the forefront but by seeing the artwork in its specific total form. Materiality also has to subordinate itself to this totality of form. Judd favours newly developed materials, or things that have not previously been used in art. Yuji Takeoka's riposte to these demands is a shelf kept in neutral grey. Even if Takeoka's clarity and simplicity of proportions and surfaces are repeatedly emphasised, here once again the minimalist pursuit of elementary forms is counterbalanced by a clear orientation on the content level: 'Minimal Art is conscious of the problem of taking the artwork back to its original standpoint by only making use of elementary forms, which can make my art quite close to Minimal Art. [. . .] they [minimalist

artworks] perfectly fulfil the traditional aesthetic sense [. . .]. Yet this sensory fulfilment is what makes Minimal Art questionable for me. Crucial to the expression of this artistic distance is that Takeoka does not leave the shelf empty but fills it with content once again. Thus Takeoka's stance towards Minimal Art is linked less to a search for reduction of form and much more to Judd's original search for something new. This fundamental scepticism towards new works, as articulated by Judd, is comparable to Takeoka's reflection on the foundations of sculpture. A clear progression within the group of works displayed here - and perhaps even the reaching of an end point - can be noticed in his work 'International Art Magazines Rack' of 1997. Here, Yuji Takeoka investigates a way of using even more fundamental forms to open up spaces conceived in terms of content. The reference values previously invoked in the form of written documents are effectively no longer present. The different colour-sample sheets serve as proxies for the various journals that would normally be displayed on a shelf for art magazines. It is relevant that Takeoka makes use of the Pantone palette for the colour sheets. It is an accepted standard for communication about colours, i.e. it is 'deindividualised', in the same way that Takeoka's use of artificial materials like Corian seems to be liberated from a historical context. In contrast to the works 'Art Informer's Head' or 'Istanbul Connection' already mentioned, Takeoka makes a conscious decision not to use real art magazines in the work 'International Art Magazines Rack', and hence not to avoid ambiguity. As a consequence, two possible reference horizons open up: first, in their proxy function the pages refer time after time to aspects of contemporary art publishing or art market strategies that merit critical questioning; and second, the manner of their presentation also makes reference to Gerhard Richter's (b. 1932) studies on abstract painting using colour charts.

In Takeoka's 1992 work 'About Painting No. 1' the trail of reference to Gerhard Richter is laid even more directly. At that time, Takeoka stood a catalogue of works by Gerhard Richter alongside a monochrome blue panel of colour referring to Yves Klein's (1928-1962) quest for a transcendental, immaterial space through colour. Richter, who had also been teaching at the Düsseldorf Kunstakademie since 1973, was one of the artists whose works Takeoka had got to know before he left Japan and who had stimulated his fascination with the contemporary German art scene. Whereas Richter attempted a rhythmic compositional approach in his earliest colour-chart works, ultimately as they grew larger and larger he left the colour associations entirely to chance striking a clear blow at neo-constructivist abstract Colour Field Painting. Contrary to Richter's principle of chance, Takeoka opted to arrange his colours deliberately. However, he sought an arrangement in which the least possible number of areas of colour — in the sense of colour families, contrasts or a rhythmic distribution — enter into association with each other. This might bluntly be described as an attempt at 'anti-composition' by Takeoka, picking up on Judd's concerns to achieve the greatest possible neutrality and hence iconographic 'non-interpretability' in his works.

If one attempts to sum up the observations made on the group of works presented, it can be said that Yuji Takeoka comes up with a sculptural language in which he uses a reduced language of forms to create real spatial situations that go beyond mere objectness. He accomplishes this decisive step, which also sets his work apart from Minimal Art, by the method of - to echo the words of Lefebvre once again — transporting the three-dimensional spaces that he has created into a spatiality con-

ceived by his mind. Here the traces of the written word become a trail laid by Takeoka towards the decisive conceptual reference points in his work: the readymade, Concept Art, or Minimal Art.

Only within the context thus delineated can he take a conscious position in and through his work. Precisely through this artistic stance, which questions certain parameters, which comments on and perhaps resolves gaps in thinking, Takeoka succeeds in making a contribution to the international art scene.

Takeoka even takes it a step further — as seen in 'International Art Magazines Rack' — by translating the written traces into a yet more categorical mode, that of form and colour. The fact that Takeoka's art can also be deciphered, so that his 'Specific Rooms' must be read as more than an empty shelf, is due substantially to his incorporation of the so-called 'spaces of representation', namely the spaces filled with Yuji Takeoka's reflections on the situation for exhibiting and displaying his art within the museum or gallery building itself.

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