BUNKA-CHO ART PLATFORM JAPAN TRANSLATION SERIES

THE CONDITIONS FOR PARPLUME (2016)

Umetsu Yōichi

THE FRAMEWORK FOR art education in Japan derives from the methods of drawing and painting that Kuroda Seiki[1] and his peers imported from the French academy in the late nineteenth century. This framework is not limited to techniques of drawing and painting, either—it extends across the entirety of our current art and education systems.

We might ask why teaching methods that date back over a century still assume such importance today. Most people might think there would be no trace of this outmoded style left now that we live in the internet age, where we have instant access to information about international art movements. Yet bizarrely enough these teaching methods, which are in some sense an artifact of modernization, are still alive and well.

Consider the following passage from artist Nakamura Masato's essay on the subject of art university entrance exams[2] in the May 1999 issue of *Bijutsu techō*.

> The drawings [*dessins*] by Hayashi Eriko and Gotō Tokiko in the [Shinjuku Art Seminar] advertisements that appeared, respectively, in the July and November 1981 editions of this magazine represent the peak of entrance-exam art. Here we see a mastery of the methodology of boldly "attacking the edges" [*kiwa-zeme*], or efficiently apprehending the essence of the subject in a short space of time to rack up the maximum number of points. Rather than portraying the substance of the *thing*, one instead captures its outline—its edges—using cross-hatching. Cross-hatching is the technique of drawing closely and evenly spaced diagonal lines to generate a gray tone, and to behold the spectacle of someone cross-hatching at speeds liable to induce inflamed tendons is like watching a possessed individual. Since this technique of "attacking the edges" assumed total domination in the world of art-school entrance exams, those who went through the examination system of this period tend, when they attempt a painting, to make one that is nothing but contour, as the technique has become so thoroughly ingrained in them. Critics ignorant of this background will likely claim the influence of formalism in such works, but from where I stand, it's clear to see that a lot

1 [Born in 1866 to a samurai family in Satsuma Domain (present day Kagoshima Prefecture), Kuroda was sent to Paris in 1884 to study law, only to dedicate himself to painting. He was among a number of Japanese artists in the studio of the academic painter Raphaël Collin. Kuroda returned to Japan in 1893. Three years later, in 1896, he was appointed director of the newly established Western painting department at the Tokyo School of Fine Arts (the forerunner of Tokyo University of the Arts). He died in 1924.]

2 [Considerable weight is placed on the entrance exam in the Japanese education system, with universities (including art schools) requiring students to pass centralized examination in a range of stipulated subjects for admittance. The highly competitive nature of the system means that many potential students rely on cram schools, which they attend after regular school has finished for the day, to help them pass their examinations.]

> of artworks are simply suffering the aftereffects of training in "attacking the edges."[3]

This passage remains fascinating even now, sixteen years after its publication. Unfortunately, however, the point that Nakamura identified did not prove to be the peak of "entrance-exam art"; instead, its peak should probably be said to be the mutant form of entrance-exam art that continued evolving through the 1990s. In the above citation we catch glimpses of Nakamura's objective criticism of and *ressentiment* toward the kind of cast drawing in the eighties that resulted from an unquestioning championing of French academic drawing styles. Yet when we look at Nakamura today, we observe him commanding a great deal of success, installed as a professor at Tokyo University of the Arts and presiding over the formidable keep of 3331 Arts Chiyoda. As splendid as his achievements in building this infrastructure may be, it seems he has not deviated at all from the track laid down by the modern age. It's hard to see him as having enacted a real artist initiative—however justified and legitimate his institutional critique from within the institution may be.

A similar point could be made of Ozawa Tsuyoshi. In his recent solo exhibition at Shiseido Gallery, *The Return of Painter F* (held October 23 to December 27, 2015), it was notable how Ozawa included the names of local Indonesian artists beneath the titles of his "war paintings," almost as if to exploit them.[4] Whereas in his early period he had attempted to explore his own origins in a way that was domestic, if pathetic, that had now been ostensibly replaced by a kind of sloppy globalization. Even if it seems that Ozawa, in employing everything from appropriation to simulationism, has succeeded in imprinting himself in the annals of art history by ridiculing that history, he has still ultimately become co-opted in the current system, and is, like Nakamura, a professor at Tokyo University of the Arts. I believe that when an artist is a university professor—and especially one at Tokyo University of the Arts—it is imperative for them to be something other than the existing forms of authority, being as they are simulacra.

I'll bring these petty insinuations to an end here, and list some specific examples of this entrance-exam art approach as it exists within artistic practice. The truth is that these examples are largely

3 [Nakamura Masato, "Bijutsu-kei daigaku juken no sekkō dessan wa dare no tame?" [Who are the cast drawings in art university entrance exams for?], *Bijutsu techō*, no. 770 (May 1999): 38. The article was part of a special feature on the future of art education.]

4 [The exhibition was conceived as a re-counting of the life of a fictional Japanese painter, modeled on Léonard Tsuguharu Foujita, who was stationed in Indonesia with the Japanese army during World War II. Ozawa collaborated with Indonesian artists to produce the works on view.]

impenetrable to outsiders, and thus remain misunderstood by many art critics and curators, even.

We begin with Aida Makoto, who frequently invokes in his paintings the unmistakable entrance-exam method—what could by now be termed the classical style. Next we have Yamaguchi Akira, who fuses with sickening naturalness nihonga Japanese-style painting and the entrance-exam brush technique of *kata-bokashi*—drawing a line with one side neat and the other washed out—and Matsui Fuyuko, whose paintings conceal beneath their surface the rudimentary sketches of an oil painting major. Then Andō Masako, who eschews entrance-exam time constraints to pursue an artisanal approach while working in the same pencil-drawing style as the early 2000s, when graphical, tonal beauty was beginning to be emphasized. Around 2010 come the oil paintings of Fujishiro Uso, which, in spite of their subjects being cartoon characters, offer glimpses of the generous use of paint that comes from attending a suburban prep school. Matsui Erina's drawing style remains unchanged from what she learned in Hosokawa's class at Tachikawa Prep School in the early 2000s. Ohno Satoshi brings together the painting methods he acquired at Shinjuku Art Seminar with the foreign trends of the moment, like two halves of a hamburger bun. Chiba Masaya makes installations on wooden tables using everyday items and his own plaster sculptures, almost like the still lifes he drew back at prep school, and paints them in meticulously rendered colors. Then there is Murai Yūki, who reenacts the slightly antiquated style of making art he learned to create at speed at prep school (which by the 2010s had grown softer and a little more pastoral in response to population decline), but this time using materials such as concrete and excessively thick paint to destroy entrance-exam art from the inside.

We also find cases where the traces of the entrance-exam method aren't foregrounded as much, making them harder to identify. Fragile Modern painting is one such example. Even among those Japanese Fragile Modern painters who superficially appear to be following the lead of the Zombie Formalism artists who are now the mainstream of abstraction in the US and Europe, we detect a faint trace of Tachikawa Prep School's native scent in the work of Satō Katsuhisa. Other examples include Haijima Nobuhiko, Chiba Tetsuya, Murabayashi Motoi, Suzuki Kenji, Suenaga Fuminao, Matsumoto Miwa, Yaegashi Yui, and

Takagi Daichi. Although the works of Toyama Hirofumi, who teaches at a prep school in Nagoya, evoke those of Mary Heilmann, this can also be read similarly to the tenacity of yōga Western-style painters from a century ago who resolved to become Cézanne by studying the reproductions of his work they saw in the *Shirakaba* journal. Something that can be said of all the Fragile Modern painters is that they take the essence of expression derived from their Western predecessors (early Sigmar Polke, Gary Hume, Daan van Golden, Blinky Palermo—once we start, the list is endless) and, by diluting the hardness of its modernism and carrying it off toward whimsy, create a more easily digestible remix. Yet at the same time we could also say that they are regressing from the historical necessity those precedents possessed. Broadly speaking, the most outstanding feature of these artworks is their sense of everyday relatability, which ensues from reigning in the expressionist gestures that bear the mark of individual bodies, and being designed to avoid visually foregrounding the muddy contradictions and blotches still contained in entrance-exam art today. In terms of actual methods employed, we see a lot of such techniques as stenciling, stylish coloration, use of masking tape, flat painting, printing, horizontal lines made with paintbrushes, all-over painting, and so on.

Elements of entrance exam–style composition also appear in the syntax of installations by Kobayashi Kōhei, who still works as a prep school teacher.

Indeed, the art prep school system has continually patched up and renewed this artifact of the modern age—the age, in fact, when the Japanese word for art, *bijutsu*, was first coined.[5] The prep school started out its life in the form of private painting studios set up by yōga painters in the attempt to spread the Western style of painting, before these evolved into businesses: painting studios specializing in entrance exam subjects. Yet these prep schools, once spilling over with students, now find themselves closing their doors one after another thanks to the combined forces of a diminishing birth rate and Japan's economic recession. Even the major schools are struggling. The art education industry can no longer survive in its current form.

Now at last the stage has been set for Parplume to make its entrance. Parplume is the name of an art movement based out of the Parplume Prep School.

5 [During Japan's modernization campaign in the Meiji era (1868–1912), many new words were coined through direct translation of those in English, French, German, and other European languages. Although there are completing claims as to whether it is a translation of the English *fine art* or the German *Kunstgewerbe* and *bildende Kunst*, the word *bijutsu* 美術 first appears around the time of Japan's participation in the Vienna Expo of 1873. For a short overview of the genesis of the word, see Shioya Jun, "From the Opening of Japan and throughout the 1920s; Prologue: Japan's Modern Art History," in Tanaka Tameyoshi, Mikami Yutaka, and Ikegami Chikako, eds., *The 20th Century Art in Japan* (Tokyo: Tokyo Art Club, 2019), 14.]

Parplume emerged at a point when art prep schools found themselves on the verge of extinction, having ceased to be commercially viable, and its intention was to return to the origin of the prep school, namely, the private painting studio. Parplume is attempting to take over the vast database of knowledge built up by the prep schools and put it to effective use.

In 2013, so as to better understand the current situation and get an idea of how to attract students, I became a teacher at a certain prep school where Nakamura and Ozawa had both previously worked. There I attempted both acting as an ordinary teacher and also experimenting with somewhat abnormal kinds of behavior. I tried to change the tendencies of the school by fervently recommending to other teachers artworks done in styles that would never previously have been given top marks, and spoke in crits about the suspicious lineage of art education leading from Okakura Tenshin, one of the founders of the Tokyo School of Fine Arts, through to present-day entrance-exam art.

The following year, in 2014, I quit and began setting up Parplume in earnest.

Among our first group of students, Takashima Shūzō and Andō Yumi were actually preparing for entrance exams. Unlike the existing prep schools, we didn't set proper assignments, and the studio also served as our living quarters. Both Sakamoto Natsuko and I were making work there. Not only that, but there were times when ten or more people were all working in the same space. As our styles infected one other we developed our own Parplume painting logic at amazing speed. It was as though pollen were floating around the studio and falling upon everything, making it bloom. All kinds of artists were coming in and out, often making work together: Nisōgi Hiroyuki, qp, Datsuo, Kishii Daisuke, Takahashi Daisuke, Mondaminakoro, Fukushi Chihiro, Uchida Yurika, Tanpakushitsu, Kazami2, yoi of Magical Shōten, Hirayama Masanao, KOURYOU, and Sukigara Fukumi.

This environment was reconstructed in the form of the Parplume University project (September 13 to October 12, 2014), for which we took over the entirety of Yamashita Bldg., an alternative space in Nagoya. It was an art school on top of an exhibition. Unlike regular exhibitions, it was not just a display but also a school and a studio.

Participating artists were arranged so that they were split between

those with a conventional art school background and those with different roots.

Elsewhere, a free-admittance joint crit session with the artist group Chaos*Lounge saw more artists and audience members than could ever fit inside a prep school assembling in the same place, and generated an enormous amount of excitement.

Maintaining big organizations like those in place at existing art universities requires significant costs and complex administrative procedures. Parplume University is a school that has been deliberately stripped back to the bare bones so as to keep it at the minimum scale necessary.

In addition to the prep school and university, Parplume's activities comprise a variety of interlinked projects and formats, including the website www.parplume.jp, specially built for us by the artist KOURYOU; Parplume Paper (printed matter); the Parplume Gallery (a small-scale traveling gallery which has so far held solo exhibitions by Hirayama Masanao and Harada Yūki); Parplume Cooking; the Parplume Viewing Hut; and more.

Not wanting the function of these projects to be just self-referential—especially bearing in mind the institutional critique or simulationist gestures in the vein of Nakamura and Ozawa that I poked fun at above—Parplume has introduced a complex calculus between action and output that keeps us constantly on our toes.

After seeing the emergence of different "sects" and passing through what we might call a "joint struggle" phase of relations, Parplume Prep School has of late entered an almost familial stage. Despite getting into art school, Takashima and Andō remain enrolled with us as "research students" and visit frequently, while Alan and Ama, who came all the way from Tottori and Shimane, respectively, live and work in the apartment block adjacent to Parplume, which they have named the Parplume Viewing Hut. Alan was a graduate student at Tottori University, but left to move to Sagamihara.[6] A player of Magic: The Gathering, he makes work referencing the world of the game. Ama was at an IT school in Shimane, but was unable to shed a yearning for art, so dropped out and came to Parplume. Driven by unrequited love, he mainly makes art outside in the dead of night.

Not simply making work together but also living alongside one

6 [The city in Kanagawa Prefecture where Parplume Prep School is located, about 50 kilometers from central Tokyo.]

another means that the members of Parplume build deep bonds, and it occurs to me on a daily basis that this no longer has anything to do with entrance-exam preparation—that they are rather creating by themselves a new kind of platform, which could itself be seen as a form of art. While not shying away from the hereditary mark[7] that is an artifact of modernism, this community continues to disperse its pollen and create "things" that, no matter how small, can still measure up to the big institutions. Unlike Ozawa Tsuyoshi's Soy Sauce Art, they look toward the outcasts who seem to have no relation with the art education system, yet without overly priding themselves in their nativism. It is about digesting the "art" that has been created since the rise of modernism to produce works that are not included there.

So we continue to refine our painting logic, which has as its seedbed the feelings of all the art students across history who gave up art because they couldn't swallow the principles of their art schools. That ever-so-arbitrary judgment about whether a picture is good or not is forever shifting with the times, yet by showing how the literacy of each age develops out of its specific educational environment or topology, we will begin to realize just how rich painting is as an informational resource.

The critique of Nakamura and Ozawa I made at the beginning is yet another case of an artist of a succeeding generation criticizing his predecessors. But you might call this the "love bites" of the institution itself. We must eradicate that apprehension through Parplume's activities.

Parplume is not a rock-solid platform—is rather fluid and perpetually precarious. It is not a shrine we seek to build on a solid foundation using tested techniques, but rather a provisional tent-like structure that adapts to constantly morphing situations in an ad hoc way—just like stretching canvas over a wooden frame.

7 [*mōkohan* 蒙古斑, literally, "Mongolian spot," a bluish birthmark that is found on the backs or around the bottoms of newborns and which usually disappears before puberty. The birthmark's nomenclature derives from Erwin Bälz, a German physician and anthropologist based in Japan in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century who erroneously believed the phenomenon to be characteristic of people of Mongolian origin.]

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