EMERGING FROM A CHRYSALIS, THE BUTTERFLY SPREADS ITS WINGS (1992)

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I

THE WORK OF creative expression is truly diverse.

To the great extent that the genes of each and every individual differ, methods of creative expression should also vary. The reality, however, is that they most often remain within conventions, tracing upon the "forms" of the beginning of the twentieth century.

As I accumulated experience working with public and private museums, as well as galleries and exhibition halls within commercial complexes that emerged at the end of the 1970s and rapidly increased in number during the 1980s, I gradually came to think that we needed spaces "of our own" where we could handle programming and operational management as a whole.

These thoughts were formulating parallel to a time when I found myself strongly attracted to works of art or "things suggesting art" that were being made in the present but without a definitive value or reputation yet—"ongoing forms of expression," as I call them. Before I had even come to realize it, I was feeling a sharp, intriguing uniqueness, an intense poison, within an uncertainty that yielded questions such as "What is this?" and "Is this art?" This is the allure of contemporary art, or the artistic creations that living artists of a generation make for people of the same time. Or, to add further, the allure pervading the realm of works by emerging artists.[1]

Webster's Dictionary defines the word *emerge* as "to rise into view" or "to come into being through evolution" or "to become manifest." The same can be said about a chrysalis metamorphizing into a butterfly.

1 [In the Japanese original, the phrase "emerging artist" is denoted in katakana, the form of Japanese syllabic writing used for many words of foreign origin, just as "contemporary art" is.]

If we refer to well-known artists like Andy Warhol, Jasper Johns, and Christo as "contemporary artists," those that are young, yet to be heard of, and still have few opportunities to show their work are "emerging artists." The artists that I mentioned above, as well as artists such as Rembrandt, Klimt, and Hirayama Ikuo, were all once emerging artists. That is to say, they were at one point at the "chrysalis stage" of being an artist.

Those "chrysalises" who decide to pursue making a living as an artist do not have a rose garden waiting for them to flourish in from the start. Rather, they must face and undertake a rigorous and competitive period of training on their own until they grow wings.

This is true for all artists, regardless of age or nationality. However, as I observed the conditions of the art world in other countries and in other cities, I began to think that the situation for emerging artists in Japan was especially dismal. In making work, showing work, and participating in solo and group exhibitions, artists faced challenges unlike those in other countries.

Galleries set rent prices for their exhibition spaces. Museums did not host exhibitions of new talent. Collectors did not buy the work of young, unknown artists.

This state of affairs in Japan, holding true in almost every case, served as an example of what was *not* ideal and, in the early 1980s, spurred me to conceptualize a space for expression that would be a collaboration with artists and exhibition organizers.

There were several precedents for the idea. The active efforts of PS1 Contemporary Art Center, the New Museum, and Artists Space, all in New York, were successful in promoting the work of emerging artists. These nonprofit organizations were supported by public funds (such as from the City of New York and the federal government) and the business sphere, as well as private donations from individual citizens.

One example is PS1, the acronym for "Public School One." When debate arose on whether to renovate or tear down the derelict but beautiful Public School One building, once a public elementary school, the idea of using it as a space for ever-evolving contemporary art gained traction among people in the New York arts and cultural scene, environmental experts, educators, curators, and artists alike, who together convinced the city council to repurpose the former

schoolhouse in this way. Under the leadership of Alanna Heiss, the project committee included Robert Rauschenberg and Woody Allen among its members.

In former classrooms, foreign cultural exchange organizations were set up to support artists from their respective countries. Systems such as artist-residency programs took shape, complete with studio spaces for production.

Other organizations served as platforms for emerging artists, such as the New Museum, Artists Space, and Franklin Furnace, to name a few. These types of groups, many of which were spearheaded by women, represented instead "another kind" of place to support and promote art—outside the categories of "gallery" or "museum"—that became known as "alternative spaces." In German-speaking countries, these kinds of spaces are referred to as *kunsthalle*, and in France, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, and other countries across Europe, national and regional governments have established support systems for emerging artists.

Continuing with my metaphor of artists in the "chrysalis" stage, these initiatives provide the necessary water and greenery for growing wings and becoming butterflies. In other words, there were already substructures crucial for emerging artists either in place or in their formative stages in countries outside Japan.

I find myself wondering how to follow a similar path in Japan. My entry into the field of art was through design projects, and although I must admit that it was slightly brazen of me, I chose to ignore the methodology of experts within the art field. That was also an expression of frustration that had been building up over many years.

When looking at art museums in Japan, at least of the twentieth century, there were practically no institutions that I felt to be worthy of reverence. From time to time, major newspapers would hold exhibitions of artworks on loan from abroad, and when the choice of artists interested me, I would go see them. However, the quality of the selection of works on display, the exhibition design, and other elements were often times poor, leaving me with feelings of disillusionment and resulting in a much different experience from being at a museum where such works would normally be in a collection. Art galleries, meanwhile, were typically small boutiques in Ginza and, in my opinion, displayed

art like it was jewelry.

Emerging artists fail from time to time. They might not be mature enough. They might simply call existing systems into question or criticize society, never seeing their visions to fruition. Providing support to emerging artists meant taking a risk, which commercial galleries and curators were frankly unwilling to do. That support would hinge on funding that wouldn't require any return or compensation, whether from public institutions or private corporations. To do that meant obtaining the status of a public service corporation.

In this kind of situation, what typically happens overseas is that if the authorities approve an aim consistent with a long-term plan and program and the structure of the host and supporters is clear, they grant the organization's status as a non-profit organization, after which fundraising activities commence. In Japan, however, becoming a public service corporation takes millions of yen in funding to begin with and entails a long approval process (although political sway can speed up the process).

I decided to start by doing what I could do, which was putting my time and energy directly into creating a "different kind" of museum as opposed to building an organizational structure and raising funds. By expressing my intentions in a visible form, I hoped to pave the way forward.

Fortunately, for me, several women who worked with me in my company were willing to help and support the plan. They agreed to collaborate on the new project and were supportive of using the small profits we had saved up until then to fund it. Even long afterwards, the new company, "Kitchen," continued its support for alternative art activities.

I decided that I would express my intentions in a "visible form" by means of establishing a "space." I also envisioned using urban resources, in other words, utilizing what already existed within the city and the urban environment, based on the idea of revitalization.

In a place of experimentation for emerging artists, the activities themselves obviously yield no profits, so costs must be kept minimal. Therefore, rather than search for a place in the center of the city, I decided to seek out a location that would be like a magnetic field in the peripheries of the city—an area with a once-thriving neighborhood,

for example, or one with potential for growth in the future. From the perspective of making use of urban resources, it was necessary to find an old but still usable building, develop a proposal to use it for activities other than its original purpose, and reconstruct it into a suitable space. My colleagues and I at Kitchen set off on our search.

"Loft" was already a popular word at the time. We, too, were looking for a loft-like space but were surprised to find that warehouse companies were setting rent prices for such spaces at the equivalent of high-tech buildings in the city center. Loft-like spaces had high ceilings and sturdy floors and walls. This enabled the space to transform with varying subjects of artistic expression and accommodate activities across both the performing and visual arts. Works of art that blurred the lines between these categorizations had also come into existence.

A little over a year had passed since we first started the search for a space, and just as I was beginning to think that it would be impossible to find somewhere in Tokyo that satisfied all the conditions we were looking for, one of my colleagues, Koyanagi Atsuko, learned of a vacant auditorium in an old food-storage building. When I went to see the site with her for the first time, it was in the early afternoon of a hot summer day. We had already been to visit a warehouse company in the morning before that and had toured various old, spacious places, including a warehouse and a former factory, but not much more than that. Disappointed by the acute realization that these would not suffice for an exhibition space, we trudged our way from Eitaibashi to the food-storage building afterward.

The building had a rectangular shape and a façade consisting of a line of connecting arches, which, I was surprised to discover, continued into the inner courtyard. As I climbed the stairs, my anticipation to see the auditorium on the third floor intensified.

I peered into the space as I stood outside the closed door. I stared silently for about three minutes and felt a wave of gratitude come over me, thankful that we had finally found this incredible space that had been sleeping here all along.

The building was owned by the Association of Koto Ward Food Wholesalers. I first approached them by saying that I wanted to use the space to host a workshop on decorative arts. A part of me was worried that if I truthfully stated my intent to use the space for avant-garde art,

it would raise red flags. Moreover, we were still figuring out which artists and what kinds of works we would be presenting. What was clear, however, was that the space was on its way to being revived.

II

IN THE SAGA DISTRICT (Sagacho) of Fukagawa Ward in the old Tokyo City (1889–1943), the Tokyo Rice Trade Wholesalers Market, more commonly known as the Fukagawa Building, was constructed in September 1927.

Becoming tenants of the building, which now went by the name of the "Shokuryo Building" ("Food Building"), we immersed ourselves in developing the program for our art activities and, at the same time, researching the history of the area and the building.

We managed to find many records, even some from the Edo Period. One account described the wholesale market, which supplied citizens with rice as their main food source:

DURING THE TIME of the Edo shogunate, rice brokers (*fudasashi*) who handled the rice for the shogunate and the spare rice (*haraigome*) that had been sent from each clan and stored in warehouses in Edo, along with various private wholesalers (with categories such as *kudarikome tonya* and *jimawaraibei tonya*), would gather rice and provide polished, white rice to consumers through rice retailers (*tsukigomeya*).

After the Meiji Restoration, it became difficult for merchants in regional areas to communicate with those in Tokyo, so the concerned

Japanese government asked Shibusawa Eiichi and Shibusawa Kisaku to open a business for trading rice between the capital and remote areas. Rice from Sendai was transported by steam ships owned by the Mitsubishi Group and stored in Fukagawa-area warehouses that belonged to the various former clans. This served as the origin of trade around the Sagacho area. In 1886, an open market for rice opened, and the site flourished as a place for buying and selling rice on the spot. However, with the outbreak of World War II, regulations on staple-food provisions during the war put an end to the practice in 1944.

RECORDS FROM THE ARCHIVES of the Architectural Institute of Japan also state:

Characteristics of the architecture: Market exchange takes place in the inner courtyard. Hence, the lifeline of the building is in the courtyard. This is a distinguishing feature due to the fact that, for other similarly structured buildings, the function of such a space is simply to allow natural light in and air to pass through. Thus, in regard to planning, the architecture makes effective use of both the front and rear, which is also distinctive relative to other buildings.

Building area: 1277.68 m^2

Total floor area: 2857.85 m^2

The original architectural plans were found in the building's old vault, shedding light on the history of the third-floor space. There was once a billiard table as well as a Japanese room with tatami, and one could imagine wealthy merchants socializing and gathering for business talks there during the early Showa Era. Geishas from Fukugawa would be invited to the banquet hall, and there was an area and an entire floor for cultural events like billiard tournaments and lectures.

Even if the architectural design lacked particularly distinguishing features, the layout of the individual rooms and common areas such as the hallways, stairs, and patio provided ample space as well as a pleasant overall feel and appearance, characteristic of old buildings. Being in the space also made me increasingly skeptical about the growing number of new construction projects that entailed the demolition of old buildings and the development of new, more cost-

efficient ones. I would never go as far as saying that all old buildings should be preserved. In Tokyo, though, there are still many that have years to live and that *should* be left to live, but they were rapidly vanishing, and the landscapes of neighborhoods with those landmark buildings from the past were disappearing one after another.

Following the name changes of districts after the end of World War II, the former Sagacho became present-day Saga, Koto Ward. In the spirit of reviving the space, I wanted to include "Sagacho" in its name. For the inaugural exhibition, *Magritte and Advertising* (subtitled "This is not Magritte"), I invited a guest curator from Belgium, George Locke, and together, we decided on using the phrase "exhibit space" to signify a neutral space. This was how the name "Sagacho Exhibit Space" was born.

The main task in reviving the space was restoring the auditorium to its original state. Until three years ago, it had served as a research facility for studies on grains; the users had raised the floor by 80 centimeters and covered it with vinyl tiles, perhaps as there was no need for a high ceiling. When we removed the flooring, a concrete floor appeared underneath. "This is it!" I thought, since the floor is a crucial determining factor for a gallery space. Flooring material, whether it be carpet, wood, stone, or anything else, embodies the intent of the owner. The same goes for walls, doors, ceiling material, and lighting equipment, but the floor is especially important. It cannot have too much of a presence, be too robust and heavy, or be too light, either. A concrete floor, one that had absorbed the imprints of over half a century of time and labor—this seemed, to me, the perfect floor.

I turned to Sugimoto Takashi, an expert on architectural space design, to supervise the restoration and reconstruction of the space. The floor, which had not been exposed to sunlight for quite a while, showed a dusty and worn-out appearance, but when Sugimoto's team of staff hand-polished the floor with wax, it emerged with a new sheen and presence. The sound of shoe heels reverberated in the expansive space.

There were also series of narrow windows with semi-circles forming their upper parts. Since natural light could enter, the space provided a beautiful environment for certain sculptural works—but the lighting was not always ideal for two-dimensional works that needed to be hung

on the wall. Within the first two years after opening, we found ourselves creating three different spaces to show works: a white cube space with installed walls; a space that retained the original interior of the building, with natural light; and a combination of the two.

In addition to creating the space, we also took on the responsibility of planning and executing the exhibition program from the very beginning. There were so many forms of creative activities that excited my interest: from those related to design, such as in fine art, architecture, and fashion, to other genres like primitive art, performance, and music. As the director, I made proposals, developed ideas, and exchanged information and requests together with Takeshita Miyako and Koyanagi Atsuko, who were also founding members of the space. Fortunately, these relationships that I had forged over the years through work had provided me with invaluable advice and support.

Excellent team members have an eye for excellent work and people. This seems to be a general principle in the field of creative work. The advice of someone with an exceptional eye is always significant, even if slight discrepancies in personal sensibilities and opinions emerge later.

I think this applies on many levels, but the experience of fostering exchange with a new artist leads to encounters with different kinds of talent. The magic of these encounters, a kind of chain reaction, is probably the thing that makes curators and organizers, critics, and those working on the peripheries of making art want to carry on in their roles.

In running the Sagacho space, I realized that two things had been shown to be possible. The first was something like an observatory platform. Events held at museums or commercial spaces tend to remain records of only that moment in time. I believed that it was necessary to support the aspects of both investigating and presenting work while adopting a perspective of presentness. From an observatory platform at a fixed point, one could see the growth of talented artists in their work every year or every other year. The platform could also foster exchange between artists from different countries, of the same generation, or from the next generation, all competing against each other or sharing similar ideas. This type of thing was also possible in a public museum of contemporary art, but in Tokyo, there was no such place. For a capital city in a developed country, it was a shocking reality. Like the privately

run Hara Museum and several other contemporary art galleries, we wanted to be able to support a constant program of activities at a specific point.

The second thing that proved possible was providing exhibition and programming information in languages other than Japanese. We began with English, because of its prevalence, to provide bilingual materials, send out press releases to domestic and international journalists, and reach out to people overseas in the art world in as prompt and timely a fashion as possible.

What made these two things possible was not the standpoint of an academic nor a commercial dealer but rather my instincts as a producer. Together with the efforts to build the exhibition space, the results were far more successful than I had anticipated.

The reason for this had to do with the murky opacity surrounding Japanese arts and culture until then. In other countries, when art professionals noticed a growing motivation to make something happen, it would typically arouse their curiosity and get them asking creators questions like “What are you starting here?” or “Is there some way that we might be able to work together?” Social interactions would grow out of answering these questions, but in relation to emerging artists, the situation in Japan was especially unclear. In other countries, the state, local governments, museums, and corporations were making serious efforts to think about what role they should be playing in helping emerging artists. History has shown that when a country’s economy is thriving, culture also flourishes, so surely there was a deep interest in Japan’s cultural situation like no other.

What kinds of emerging artists were there? What were they producing? What were their social interests? Their skills? The questions and requests, some of them quick and impatient at times, were all part of the warm, dynamic exchanges stemming from the Sagacho Exhibit Space.

What had traditionally been individual curators, individual critics, and individual artists participating mutually in cultural activities from their respective positions, like a flow through a thin capillary, had expanded into a small river, which we happily cast ourselves into.

International exchange—a big river, to be sure—has also most likely produced a palpable current somewhere or other. However,

when major organizations such as newspaper companies brought ready-made exhibitions from abroad into Japanese public and private museums on the notion that well-known names would mobilize the masses, there were in fact people on the Japan side who had never even taken an interest in a single painting. Upon discovering this about their Japanese counterparts, quite a number of art professionals from overseas experienced feelings of doubt.

Those who quickly took notice of grassroots movements like ours, were people from outside Japan, more so than Japanese people in positions of authority. In this way, an emerging space that aimed to create a vessel for emerging artists gradually expanded its circle of supporters.

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