

**THE QUESTION  
OF IDENTITY AND  
INSTALLATION IN  
1980S JAPANESE  
CONTEMPORARY ART**

(1999)

Kondō Yukio

FOR MOST JAPANESE ARTISTS TODAY, traditional aspects of Japanese culture could hardly be described as something with which they were well acquainted.<sup>1</sup>

In 1987, Miyajima Tatsuo made a work titled *Nachi Falls* (fig. 1) after rediscovering Japanese art within an encyclopedia of art. At the same exhibition where this work was presented were also pieces such as *Clock for 300 Thousand Years*, a precursor to the digital counter works that would later make him famous, and *It Goes on Changing (Mondrian)* (fig. 2) a work inspired by Piet Mondrian's *Victory Boogie Woogie* (1944). We can take this as an emblematic example that, for Miyajima, traditional Japanese art and Western art are of equal distance in his mind. If we think about it, this is not surprising—young Japanese artists like Miyajima have been trained in the foundations of drawing using Greek, Roman, and Renaissance sculptures as their models, and studied the basics of painting and the perception of space from Cézanne and the like. It is not difficult to imagine that they were more familiar with modernist theories and ways of thinking than with traditional Japanese art. Only after entering university and taking Japanese art history classes would they have been exposed to Japan's historical artworks in a comprehensive manner. For these artists, both the traditions of Japanese art and elements of Western art exist only as knowledge, not as something they can feel or experience tangibly for themselves. In other words, the majority of Japanese artists today are unable to position themselves in either one of these lineages. This prompts an inevitable search for an identity with which to ultimately establish oneself as an artist. For many Japanese artists, this process itself may be the act of producing artworks. In this way, as artists return to the basic elements of painting and sculpture in an attempt to verify them, they at times break even the most fundamental of these frameworks—this is the hypothesis I would like to propose here. At the very least, as is recently often mentioned, the notion of a stereotypical “tradition,” artificially constructed in the establishment of a modern national consciousness, bears no immediate connection to an artist's identity. It is from this perspective that I wish to consider Japanese contemporary art of the early 1980s.

A new movement led by young artists called New Wave or Postmodern appeared in the Japanese contemporary art scene of

**1** [By raising the issue of “traditional aspects of Japanese culture” (伝統的な要素) here, Kondō is responding to the dominant discourse of this period, which, especially in the West, tended still to view the materials and forms of Japanese art in direct connection to traditional elements of Japanese culture based in nature and aesthetic ideals like *wabi-sabi*.]



fig. 1

Miyajima Tatsuo, *Nachi Falls*

1987

280 x 20 x 25 cm

Monitor, TV, flat light, cassette tape,  
cassette machine, photo, electric wire,  
line tape, water, etc.

Photo by: Hirose Tadashi

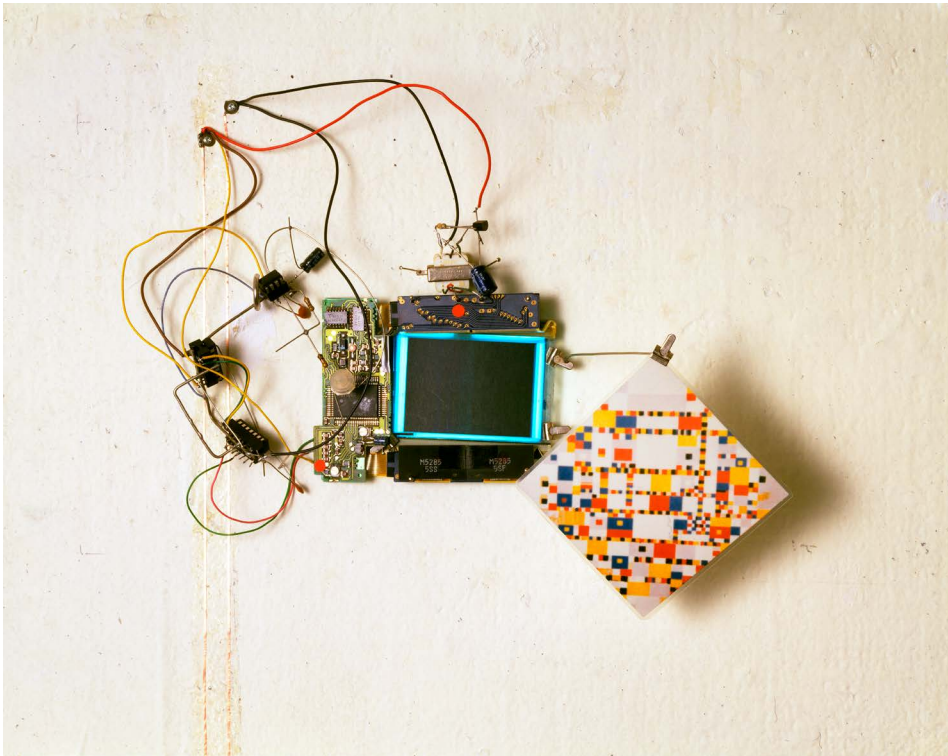


fig. 2

Miyajima Tatsuo, *It Goes on Changing*  
(Mondrian)

1987

20 x 18 x 5 cm

Liquid crystal TV, IC, electric wire,  
a photocopy of Mondrian's work.

Photo by: Hirose Tadashi

the early 1980s. Their works were characterized first by the use of installation as their chosen format of expression. The figuration and unrestrained colors and strokes seen within their installations were also common to the paintings popular in the United States and Europe at the time. These developments suggest a reevaluation of the ascetic and reductionist tendencies that originated in modernism, which had dominated Japanese contemporary art too until this time.

Leading the way in these trends, particularly in the use of installation, was a group of students at Tokyo University of the Arts that included Kawamata Tadashi. It was around 1979 to 1980 that these students began to show their work. Their exhibitions included attempts at installation using wood and paper. They were followed next by a slightly younger generation of artists. This included students and graduates of Tama Art University and B-Semi, a private school for contemporary art located in Yokohama.<sup>2</sup> These artists, who we might call the second generation, made works characterized by their free and open expressions. It is in reference to this second group of artists that the terms New Wave and Postmodern are most often used. These developments served as a counterpoint to the asceticism and conceptual and speculative tendencies that defined the art of the 1970s. Japanese journalists and critics unanimously lauded the emergence of this new type of art and spoke of installation, its defining characteristic, as though it were a new genre on par with painting and sculpture. Installation came to be seen in Japan during these years not simply as a means but as an end.

The format of installation itself precedes this generation, appearing in numerous works by artists who came before 1980. In particular, many precursors to installation art can be found in the works that problematize *ba* [place] by Mono-ha (School of Things) artists, who were active from the late 1960s. Going even further back to artists of the early 1960s, there are examples of temporary works that could also be described as installation. That there are many ephemeral works by Japanese artists can be explained first by the social and economic circumstances surrounding contemporary art in Japan. For Japanese artists, for whom rental galleries were the primary space to exhibit work, and who had no marketplace to sell artwork nor any place to store them, expressions of a transient nature were quite common. Making

<sup>2</sup> [The B-Semi school was a private art school in Yokohama run by Kobayashi Akio, an abstract painter. The school began in 1967 as a collaboration between the artist Saitō Yoshishige and his students at Tama Art University. Until its closing in 2004, it was a focal point of the Japanese contemporary art scene with guest teachers that included the artists Sekine Nobuo and Lee Ufan. For more, see Sekine Nobuo, *B-Zemi "Atarashii hyōgen no gakushū" no rekishi 1967-2004* [A history of B-Semi "A study for new expression" 1967-2004], ed. Kobayashi Haruo (Yokohama: BankART1929, 2005).]

temporary works, then, was not in and of itself particularly notable for the artists who emerged in the 1980s either. However, during this period, artists found themselves in a drastically different economic situation from years prior. The Japanese economy was booming in the midst of what is known as a “bubble economy,” and real estate investment was taking place at a dizzying pace. The result was the creation of many spaces in the city center sitting idle as they awaited resale, where abundant advertising funds were put to the making of temporary bars, discos, and event venues. Installation works by artists were used in these spaces as interior decoration. Artworks also came to be displayed in clothing stores and restaurants. Thus, contemporary art, which had previously lacked marketability, began to have commercial value. This led to an invigoration of artistic activity, much to the praise of mass media. On the other hand, it is also true that this resulted in the depiction of this phenomenon as something fleeting, obscuring the true nature of the situation.

In what kind of internal state, and with what kind of awareness, did artists of this period actually create their work?

Student protests in Japan peaked in the late 1960s to 1970, the years immediately prior to when this generation of artists would enter university themselves. Art schools were no exception—consequently, many contemporary artists and faculty who had been involved in the student movement left these institutions. In the eyes of new students, schools appeared to be shifting towards conservatism under the guise of a return to normalcy. Students who aspired to contemporary art had no choice but to gather information on their own outside of the classroom and from books. The group of students at the Tokyo University of the Arts that included Kawamata and Hoshina Toyomi formed an independent seminar led by Enokura Kōji, then a part-time lecturer at the university, to which they invited people like the photographer Anzai Shigeo,<sup>3</sup> who had just returned from the United States, to learn more about the state of contemporary art. It appears that, at the time, these students were particularly interested in issues of “physicality” [*shintai-sei*]. The idea for installation works into which viewers could physically enter originates somewhere around here.

In 1979, Kawamata created a work titled *By Land* on a sandbank in the Tama River. According to the artist, his aim was to add something to

<sup>3</sup> [Anzai Shigeo (1939-2020) was a photographer and artist whose practice consisted primarily of documenting the works of other artists. Throughout his career, he worked globally to create portraits of artists and document performances, happenings, installations, and other types of temporary artworks. For the students in Enokura Kōji’s seminar, the opportunity to hear Anzai speak would have meant exposure to the many artists and artworks he had photographed.]

the scenery he had grown accustomed to seeing daily through the train window. This suggests that by this time, Kawamata had established his primary method of building temporary architectural structures out of lumber onto existing buildings and spaces. The work was removed after three days under an order by the Ministry of Construction citing issues related to river management. This too indicates that a core concept in Kawamata's work today, namely, making social institutions manifest through the installation of temporary works, was also already in place.

A short while later, Hoshina presented an installation using extremely lightweight and nearly immaterial thin pieces of wood and washi paper that appeared as though lines being drawn onto the space.

While Kawamata used lumber to entwine and transform spaces, with the making of the work itself, including collaborative processes, as his goal, Hoshina's work leans more towards figurative concerns. Though they differed in their initial ideas and aims, the two artists shared the way they treated their materials and the physicality of their works that allowed viewers to step in.

The artists of the mid-1980s onward, whom I have described as the second generation, created installations featuring vivid colors and, at times, figurative forms. These works placed a greater emphasis on visual elements. Works by Maemoto Shōko, Yoshizawa Mika, Kamo Hiroshi, and Hirabayashi Kaoru fall into this category. As mentioned earlier, installation art had become something of a trend in these years, and a great number of installation works were produced.

In 1984, Ōmura Masumi presented a work in which an ordinary steel chair was taken apart and colored. (fig. 3) The colors have the effect of stripping away the material presence of the metal comprising the work, complicating the context of the chair as a motif. Though the image of a chair is fragmentarily retained, there is the sense that the space of the work and the space of its surroundings blend into one another. It bears noting that the colors are vaguely reminiscent of Cézanne. One could say that Ōmura was experimenting with the effect of *valeur* [luminosity] in the style of Cézanne, which he had learned as part of his education, not within the picture plane but out in actual space.

On the other hand, in a work presented by Yamamoto Hiroko that same year, objects made of washi paper that faintly let through light were arranged throughout the gallery as though floating, and placed





fig. 3

Omura Masumi, *KOKUYO (married)*

Mixed media including stainless steel chair,  
wood, cardboard, Liquitex

1984



fig. 4

Yamamoto Hiroko, *Chokkan kara chokkan*

*e no haba o kenzaika suru hōhō e mukete:*  
*Chūkū no gyokuza* [Towards a method for  
manifesting the width from intuition to  
intuition: Throne in midair]

Paper, cloth, brass wire, acrylic, acrylic  
mirror

1984



against the center of the back wall was a slightly curved acrylic mirror (fig. 4). Strokes of color dominated the space, creating the illusion that the viewer had wandered into a world within a painting. That the artist aimed to produce this effect is evident in the fact that the acrylic mirror reflects the entire gallery, presenting it anew to the viewer.

Due to space constraints, I have focused here on just two particularly notable works, but there are many other examples of installation works in Japan from this period that filled the gallery with painterly elements such as color and stroke, transforming an ordinary space into something other than ordinary. Of course, it goes without saying that such developments can be understood in parallel to the illusion and representational figuration that emerged in painting around this time. One could argue that both shared a common goal of revitalizing the genre of painting, which had been impoverished and weakened by the ascetic and reductionist approaches that characterized the 1970s. Yet, why in Japan did painterly elements need to be brought beyond the frame of the painting and verified? Why did some artists venture to tackle the questions of painting through the format of installation, which had, beginning with the works of Kawamata and Hoshina, come to be widely practiced at this time? Perhaps it was by setting the artwork against ordinary, actual space that these artists were able to confirm the dominance of *valeur* and stroke, and thus reassess the power of painting once again. Perhaps they could only find their identity as artists by beginning from this process of reexamining and verifying for themselves the basic premise of their Western art education. In this process, the so-called Japanese tradition could not provide the ground on which they could finally establish their identity. As I have already noted, for them, the question of their identity as artists is not necessarily entwined with tradition.

The examples I have taken up here may not be entirely generalizable. Not all installation works of this period had the tendencies I have described. I should also note that these trends were centered in Tokyo. Still, it seems to me that these works provide an opportunity to consider the complex educational and cultural situation of Japanese artists and the question of their search for an identity.

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