

Symposium: “Landscape Representation of the 21st Century Art — Recognition of Nature and Construction of Landscapes”

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The symposium, supported by Grant-in-Aid for a Scientific Research by Japanese Ministry: MEXT) was held on October 1, 2011 at Ritsumeikan University, Kyoto. The objective of this international symposium was to discuss the art of landscape in connection with the issue of globalization of nature in our century, recognizing the diversity of our history, culture, and identity.

As a preface to the symposium, *The Journal of Asian Arts and Aesthetics* (vol.4, 2010, chief-editor, Yuko Nakama) featured the theme of “Nature and Landscape”. All the panelists of the symposium contributed to this journal, which enabled us to identify our themes: environmental problems, political intervention, cultural differences in West and East on theories of nature and ecology, and expansion of nature as artifacts, etc.

The panelists of the symposium in the order of presentations were: Gail Levin, City University of New York; Hans Dickel, Friedrich-Alexander University; Chengji Liu, Beijing Normal University; Krystyna Wilkoszewska, Jagiellonian University. Prof. Levin is one of the leading researchers on the 20th century American art, especially on Edward Hopper, Yasuo Kuniyoshi and abstract expressionism. Prof. Dickel’s recent researches are focused on arts, architecture, photography, and public art, providing invaluable opinions to analyze contemporary era. His *Kunst als zweite Natur* (Berlin, 2006) served as one of the main literature on our theme. Prof. Liu is well known for his comparative researches of western and eastern aesthetics articulated in the international field. He has published books and contributed many papers to leading Chinese journals on both classic Chinese and modern European aesthetics. Prof. Wilkoszewska covers a broad field of researches on aesthetics which includes American pragmatism, ecological and environmental aesthetics, and her recent research is on Japanese aesthetics. She successfully organized the first Polish-Japanese conference of aesthetics and culture in Krakow in 2011. On behalf of Prof. Raffaele Milani, University of Bologna, Prof. Masue Kato of Rikkyo University has introduced the synopsis of his paper for the symposium. Prof. Milani’s primary book, *The Art of Landscape*, a profound study of historical and aesthetical thoughts on landscape, will be translated into Japanese by Prof. Kato and published shortly.

My short keynote speech was on contemporary art exhibitions on landscape and nature held recently in Germany and Japan, introducing the exhibitions in light of the theme of the symposium. ¹⁾

To begin with, the exhibition of *Landscapes without Horizon* (2010, Schloss Moyland Museum,

Germany) ²⁾ was highly suggestive, demonstrating today's approach to nature and landscapes. It is remarkable to note, that contemporary landscapes tend to avoid horizon or precise control of perspectives, and rather favor a viewpoint of sights that are too near or too far, due to the uncertainty of nature-human relationship. For example, German artist, Thomas Struth's *Paradise* [Fig.1] stands too near to viewers for them to observe. Struth suggests ironically, that our paradise is not found in a cultivated nature as we are accustomed to; as seen in the background of *Adoration of the Lamb* (1432) [Fig.2] by Van Eyck, – the first evolved landscape of earthly paradise according to art historian, Kenneth Clark ³⁾. If there is a remaining possibility of a paradise, it is only found in the wilderness, where men have no control. Sight too near or too far is seen also in German artist Boris Becker's close-up landscape view, in which we feel like we are absorbed deep into the field, or English artist Adam Thompson's river [Fig.3] in the total darkness. The force of water is even more ominous. And Matsue Taiji of Japan shows a bird-eye sight of landscapes, totally deprived of geographical viewpoint. The organizer of the exhibition proposes: "Central perspective (···) posits our physical as well as inner distance in the sense of our not being a part of nature. (···)When, however, the horizon as an aid to orientation is no longer visible or altogether absent, rendering it impossible to make out the picture's vanishing point and leaving the proportional ratios among the objects in the space depicted undefined, the assumed standing point of the viewer begins to vacillate", "a landscape without a horizon must, on the one hand, be unlimited, and must, on the other, lead to 'unbounding' of the represented landscape as well as to an expansion, literally, of mankind's horizon." ⁴⁾ So our current landscape vision is indeed based on the insecurity of our existence in nature, but it does not exclude the positive possibility in constructing a new relationship between man and nature.

Even before the ecological crisis emerged, Theodor Adorno criticized satisfaction through 'reconciliation', attained symbolically by artworks. Adorno argues against anthropocentric attitudes toward nature, criticizing as follows: "Art remains loyal to appearing nature only where it conjures up natural sceneries in the artistic expression of their negativity", "the function of art as a restorer of historically repressed nature becomes important." ⁵⁾ To this theme, Martin Seel proposed: "It is the mission of aesthetics of nature to protest against the illusion of nature, whether it is appropriation or integration or not." ⁶⁾

In this point of view, western aesthetics that tend to face nature as 'otherness' seems as an antipode to the perspective of nature in Japan or East Asia, where intimacy is the basic concept. However, it may be intrinsically valuable to express the contemporary phenomena and the environment of nature.

One of the most relevant artist regarding this view of 'otherness' or 'illusion' might be a German contemporary artist, Gerhard Richter. Richter's images are drawn mostly from the artist's snapshots, but are intentionally out-focused and blurred with brushes. Richter considers photos to be essential, as we mostly see the world through the camera lenses nowadays. The vagueness of his 'Photopainting' does not only render the motif, the atmosphere of spiritual 'aura', but shows

artist's critical stand against the camera eyes prevalent in our society. The green field in mild sun light, *Landscape near Koblenz* [Fig.4] is yet a beautiful rural scene in Germany, however, with such vagueness, the painting discloses the illusionism of nature. Beautiful nature abundant with green, seen in TV or in landscape posters of paradise in our everyday life, is only 'illusion' of economical and political strategy, which Richter's paintings seem to expose.

Taking such a distance from nature is also seen in *Forest Piece (Chile)* (1969) where an exotic tropical forest is transformed into a monstrous existence. And in *Mountains* (1968), rough and irregular aspects of the mountain surface are emphasized like cells seen under a microscope; the ugliness of nature, not idealized nature, but nature as a rigid object – is regarded as a way of approaching the reality of nature. So we should confirm that nature is indeed the theme of Richter's artworks, so far as he tries to destroy our beautiful illusions of nature. Richter himself said, "My landscapes are not just beautiful, or seemingly nostalgic, romantic and as classical as lost paradise; they are above all 'mendacious' and when I say 'mendacious' I mean the ecstasy with which we look at nature; but nature that is against us in all its forms because it knows neither sense nor mercy nor sympathy, because it knows nothing, is absolutely without mind or spirit, is the total opposite to ourselves, is absolutely inhuman".⁷⁾

Turning our eyes now to Japan, the exhibition *Sensing Nature: Rethinking Japanese Perception of Nature* was held in Tokyo at the same time with the above-mentioned German exhibition. It is remarkable as it showed the characteristics of Japanese view on nature: Climate, topography, the polytheistic religious view of myriads of gods and deities, and the thought of Shinrabansho, the whole of creation in entire universe, that made our ancestors to wonder about nature.

Snow [Fig.5] by Yoshioka Tokujin is introduced in this exhibition as the main artwork symbolizing the Japanese tradition of sensual perception. Snow dancing in the wind, indispensable to Japan's traditional winter landscape is articulated here with heterogeneous material of feathers. Not only the color of absolute white, but the tactile perception of feathers also is associated with the softness of snow.

Gernot Böhme, a German philosopher, has also attached importance mostly to the perception of physical presence and space in his 'aesthetics of atmosphere'. Böhme insists that the atmospheric environment is hardly recognized in German literature and gives Haiku of Matsuo Basho as an example to verbalize this atmosphere.⁸⁾

Temple bells die out.
The fragrant blossoms remain.
A perfect evening!

Not only in Haiku, but we also find atmospheric spaces in traditional paintings. For example, *Green Maple and Waterfall* (1787) [Fig.6], a hanging scroll painted by Maruyama Okyo articulates the dynamism of water falling directly on a pool, splashing as it hits the stone. The atmosphere of

light and mist, dispersed in the space, and a sense of coolness are delivered to the viewers beyond the frame.

As we have seen so far, the cultural differences of west and Japan still seems unchanged, however there is another trend of art, notable in Kuribayashi Takashi's installation work, *Manatee*, in the exhibition in Tokyo mentioned previously. A wild marine creature, Manatee, unexpectedly supports Karesansui, traditional Japanese stone garden from under the ground. Stimulated by the work, we suddenly realize that under the stone garden, symbolic of our traditional culture, could also be water connected to the seas of the world. However, as Manatee, a legendary model of mermaid, stands unstably between human and nature, the boundary of garden and water beneath it is obscure. Our presence in nature is increasingly vague. Kuribayashi's installation also suggests uncertainty of our presence in nature-man relations as in Struth's paradise.

Japan has experienced the disaster of Tsunami and ensuing nuclear accident, and people are still suffering from their aftermath. It seems that after the catastrophe, the theme of nature and landscape is drawing more attention. Artworks as Abe Noriko's, *A Piece of Flat Globe 2011 Nippon* [Fig.7] in *Ecosophia: Art and Architecture* exhibition in Osaka is such an example. Here, using the concept of Ecosophy of French philosopher Félix Guattari, artworks were politically and ethically interconnected.⁹⁾ A frightening image of eroding lands built by piles of Japanese and international newspapers reporting the catastrophe of Tsunami worldwide. The sharp strips of the newspapers are on the one hand, rhythmical, and one even finds some beauty in its plastic form, but on the other, it brings back the horror of victims to the viewer. Thus artworks as media, unlike mass media, urge us to face the force of nature with our subjectivity and senses.

Being in the century of destruction of nature, we need to address nature more intensively. Art that has been historically challenging the preconceived ideas, is all the more essential. This symposium was based on such expectations we have on art – that it could reveal to us the features of nature as well as the possibilities for both nature and man.

The symposium will be reflected in the bilingual book on our final research results, to be published in 2014 from Sangensha Publishers, Inc., Tokyo.

Notes

- 1) The keynote speech was based on following presentations: Yuko Nakama, "Near and Far Landscape", Aesthetics and cultures, the 1st Polish-Japanese Meeting, Exchanging Experiences, Jagiellonian University, Krakow, May 24, 2011; Yuko Nakama, "Nature and Landscape in Contemporary Representation: A Comparative View on Japanese and Western Art", International Symposium on Theories of Art/Design and Aesthetics, Antalya University, Antalya, October, 19, 2011 (trans. in Chinese by Xu Sheng, in: *Academic Fine Arts*, Hubei Institute of Fine Arts Journal, vol. 57, 2012, pp.82-87).
- 2) The exhibition *Ferne Nähe, 'Natur' in der Kunst der Gegenwart* in Kunstmuseum Bonn in 2009 was similar in concept.
- 3) Kenneth Clark, *Civilisation*, London, 1986, p.113.

- 4) *Landschaft ohne Horizont: Nah und Fern in der zeitgenössischen Fotografie*, exh.cat., Museum Schloss Moyland, 2010, p.11, 13.
- 5) Theodor W. Adorno, *Ästhetische Theorie*, Gesammelte Schriften, Bd.7, Frankfurt am Main, 1970. p.106, 198. (English translation of Adorno's theory was mostly referred to: T.W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. C. Lenhardt, London, 1984.)
- 6) Martin Seel, *Eine Ästhetik der Natur*. Frankfurt am Main, 1991, p.31.
- 7) Sean Rainbird, Judith Severne, ed., *Gerhard Richter*. London, 1991, p.117.
- 8) Gernot Böhme, *Ätmosphäre*, Frankfurt am Main, 1995, pp.66-68.
- 9) Félix Guattari, *Les trios écologies*, Paris, 1989.

