

## For a Gentler Future

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The world is in a state of rapid change. The values once thought to be most universal are disappearing and new ways of thinking and new conditions are emerging. The unified world view of modernism, which has been connected to the countries, cities, philosophies, and peoples considered at the center of the world, is dissolving. Taking on new importance are more diverse ideas, criteria, and visions including peripheral cultures and areas.

Technology has refined transportation and our ability to acquire information, making it possible to travel easily and safely and to gain access to large quantities of information. Art reflects this situation, quoting the cultural legacy of the various countries of the world while incorporating virtual reality and other new sensibilities and visions brought about by new technology.

In the midst of this flux, however, Rei Naito has gone within herself to uncover a unique vision, managing to avoid the influence of those around her. She has discovered an expansive inner world, a universe spreading out inside her own tiny body. While the art world and the art market anxiously respond to every whim of fashion and taste, Naito sticks to her own profound vision and allows it to blossom.

In 1989, at Sagacho Exhibit Space in Tokyo, Naito first presented her small ephemeral sculptures, delicate and fragile, on a bed of soft flannel, creating an installation with the appearance of an unprecedented city of the future. The title was *Under the Distance, the Root of the Light is Flat*. The mysterious miniature scene, resembling a model of a city, seemed quite large in overview in spite of its small size. This was due to the artist's attention to detail and the macro point of view that informed the work.

Miniature forms and delicate sensitivity are part of the Japanese esthetic tradition. Since ancient times, the Japanese have often found beauty and invested emotion in smaller rather than larger things. Besides being seen as cute or pretty, small things are fragile and impermanent. And, in the Japanese esthetic of *hakanasa* (the transitory and ephemeral), fragile and fleeting things, because they are soon to disappear, are to be enjoyed to the fullest while they still exist. The beauty emerging from this "weakness," which consistently resides in Naito's work, was evident from the time of this first installation at Sagacho.

In 1991, Naito showed *Une place sur la terre (One Place on the Earth)*, again at Sagacho. From this point on her work was filled with a flowing sense of the sublime. It was created with marvelous mental concentration and intuitive vision that made it stand apart from the materialism and vulgarity of ordinary society and the commercialized merry-go-round of the art worlds of Paris, New York, and Tokyo. Her art became space as such, the space expanding in a huge white tent, the interior of which was filled with "light," "richness," and "dreams."

This work evokes a nostalgic past which is shared by all human beings as well as an image of a future city. It contains

lyrical, delicate pieces of sculpture but also has a large-scale, well-defined, geometric structure. It proudly proclaims the preeminence of the spirit but also sings the praises of the entirely physical senses of touch, vision, and perception. It gently enfolds the viewer but, at the same time, asks us hard questions about the way we conduct our lives and forces us to reexamine our approach to art. At times, it even chooses or rejects viewers.

There is no intermediate scale between the huge white space of the tent and the small groups of sculptures placed inside it. The viewer may be disoriented by the great discrepancy between large and small and experience an odd floating sensation. What seems to be a city reminds us of an oblique angle bird's-eye view of a landscape of a city in a different age or even on a different planet. And this landscape in miniature is the result of the belief or the spiritual feeling that the accumulation of details leads to the truth of life.

The minimal quality of the interior of the tent is reminiscent of Japanese shrine architecture. Form and material are treated very simply in Shinto shrines; for example, the wood boards, though cut, are usually left in their natural state. For over a thousand years, the Grand Shrine of Ise has been rebuilt every twenty years in the same form, always using new supplies of the same materials. The shrine treasures are also reconstructed at the same intervals, again using new supplies of the same materials as before.

The Ise Shrine example shows a fundamental Japanese concept of the formal beauty of the spirit and the materials which embody it. The age of the materials is not a criterion of value. The continuous use of new materials is considered best. This practice shows respect for the gods as value is seen as residing in the beautiful forms. Techniques and established standards of beauty have been passed down from generation to generation, preserving the time-honored tradition.

After the showing at Sagacho Exhibit Space, Naito's *One Place on the Earth* was presented at The New Museum of Contemporary Art in New York in 1992, at Galerie du Rond-Point in Paris and at the Oriel Mostyn in Wales in 1993, and at the Nagoya City Art Museum in Japan in 1995. It will be revived once again in Venice. The large tent is rebuilt for each exhibition and the tiny treasures inside are also remade in the same form. Like the rebuilding of the Ise Shrine, this approach demonstrates the strong desire of the artist to preserve a form of spiritual beauty, which has previously made itself manifest, in a pristine state.

In addition, Naito believes it is necessary for her to be present for the entire course of the exhibition, staying in the city where the work is on view so that she can check the condition of the work every hour. This requirement necessitates a strong commitment on the part of the sponsoring institution.

Naito believes that the work is a new form of life which appeared of itself and that the installation as it was originally conceived should not be changed by anyone. She strongly feels that it should be maintained in this condition throughout

the exhibition. This is an expression of her endless respect for her work, a demonstration of a deeply loving involvement no less intense than that of a mother with the child to whom she has given birth and taken the pains to raise.

From the plan of the work it is clear that the overall form of the tent symbolizes the female genitalia and serves as a metaphor for the inside of a woman's body. Even so, while there may be a comment on the female body incorporated in the form it is an unintended result. Any feminine qualities are given conditions which appear of themselves without being a conscious part of the artist's creative intentions. In the creation of art such conditions are unavoidable elements of the artist's identity which must be overcome in order to achieve universality.

For the viewer, the work is a stage, a springboard, for a leap in thought and creativity. Through the space surrounded by the white tent, one can see infinity: time extending into infinity, space expanding into infinity, and the self spreading out into infinity. This infinite space is not the scientific or material universe but an inner universe which has been part of people's dreams and visions since ancient times.

Before entering the tent and experiencing Naito's work, the viewer is made to wait. This waiting period is like the time required to unify the mind before participating in a religious ritual and it should be spent solemnly and quietly. The viewers are then asked to make their pilgrimage to the entrance of the tent one-by-one. Although this is a short journey, it seems long. This journey is made longer still as a condition for seeing this work is that each viewer must do so alone. Experiencing the work alone, one is made to realize afresh what art once was. When viewers relate to this work on a one-to-one basis, they become aware of the things they had not been seeing while looking at art—things that transcend art while being part of it, things they had truly hoped to find—lying quietly there before them.

These viewing conditions Naito has set, in addition to presenting the work in its most favorable aspect, imply a radical criticism of the art audience, including most art professionals who generally take little time face-to-face with a particular work of art and seldom observe it in a deep way. Naito has said that there is no need for anyone to see this work unless they are willing to wait and enter the tent alone to hold a personal dialog with it.

Considering her other condition, that she be present with the work at all times, it is clear that this work lives with the artist. It is an installation but at the same time an act. It is art but also an ephemeral phenomenon which cannot be owned. Because of this, the people who have the opportunity to see it are quite fortunate. However, their number remains small. Just like the meetings and separations which occur between people, an encounter with this work is accidental, fleeting, a matter of fate.

Because of its unique character, Naito's art work provides a vision of life in the twenty-first century which is gentler, more human, and more sensitive. It directly implies the end of twentieth-century modernism, which has been supported by

heavy industry and capitalism. At the end of a century of hardship and strife, her work speaks of the beginning of a new civilization based on information and ideas.

Naito's art inherits Japanese tradition, sublates it, and leads us to the heights of universal spirit. At these heights, one feels as if one has been healed. There our existence is affirmed, accepted, and permitted. This kind of moment is rare in the reality of a world still discolored by unhappiness and hatred. Naito's art tells us that, with all its problems, our existence has meaning. It leads to a belief in the future, a universal hope for humankind that goes beyond distance and time.

We need to realize that art still has meaning, that it can radiate light and that this light is merciful and can save people's souls.

(translated by Stanley N. Anderson and Anne Longnecker Dodds)