

Chiharu Shiota: *The Key in the Hand*
A Place Where Memories Return

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The breezes of love are all-pervasive
By Shijimi River, where love-drowned guests
Like empty shells, bereft of their senses,
Wander the dark ways of love
Lit each night by burning lanterns,
Fireflies that glow in the four seasons,
Stars that shine on rainy nights.
By Plum Bridge, blossoms show even in summer.

—Chikamatsu Monzaemon, “Scene Two: Inside the Tenma House,”
Sonezaki Shinju (The Love Suicides at Sonezaki; trans. by Donald
Keene)

This passage from *Sonezaki Shinju* (The Love Suicides at Sonezaki) led to my first meeting with Chiharu Shiota. The first time we actually met was in 2004, and at the time, I was trying to create theatre pieces by combining contemporary art, contemporary music, and Japanese traditional performing arts at a concert hall and searching for people to work as staff and cast members in these productions. As the title *Sonezaki Shinju* suggests, the plot concerns a double suicide and addresses questions of life and death. This inspired me to commission Shiota, who had already started making works based on the themes of “life” and “death,” to create a stage design, one of the most important elements in a theatre piece. In 2001, Shiota had made a stunning debut in Japan with *Memory of Skin*, a work consisting of a number of gigantic dresses caked with mud, at the Yokohama International Triennale of Contemporary Art. And since she also happened to be from Osaka, the

birthplace of *bunraku* puppet theatre, this served as another bond between us.

Though I assembled a staff, including a scriptwriter and *bunraku* director, for my experiment based on *Sonezaki Shinju*, the production ultimately never came to fruition for a variety of reasons. It did, however, lead to *From in Silence*, Shiota's largest exhibition until that point, at the Kanagawa Prefectural Gallery in 2007. This opportunity to meet Shiota again provided me with very thrilling experiences via works such as *In Silence* (2007) and *From the Light* (2007). This text is in effect an attempt to verbalize the experiences I have had with Shiota's works in as much detail as possible on the occasion of *The Key in the Hand*, her exhibition at the Venice Biennale.

Chiharu Shiota perceives the entire aspect of an exhibition space with a vibrant, radical, and warm viewpoint, selecting a variety of materials to completely transform the space into a work. In the past, she has incorporated materials such as dresses, beds, shoes, and suitcases, which are imbued with traces and memories their use in everyday life. Constructing and completing a space, transcend linguistic, cultural, and historical contexts and socio-political conditions, Shiota's works have made a deep impression on viewers all around the world. Thus far, they have been presented in approximately 200 exhibitions - including the one at the Kanagawa Prefectural Gallery - in Japan, Europe, the U.S., Middle East, Oceania, and Asia. When we experience her works, we are stunned to see how deeply they permeate our inner world. The beauty, freshness, vibrance, and power of her works quietly but strongly infiltrates our hearts and bodies. Shiota uses the term "philosophy of the instant" to explain the expressive power of the installation we experience when we enter the exhibition spaces that she constructs.

Though the large-scale installation is a format that has long since lost its novelty at the Venice Biennale, Shiota's works still seem so fresh because of the questions she raises about life and death with this philosophy of the instant.

At the 56th International Art Exhibition of the Venice Biennale, Shiota presents a new installation titled *The Key in the Hand* in the Japan Pavilion.

The Key in the Hand is a single work consisting of two elements made up of different materials and methods that are being presented in the second-floor gallery and the piloti-lined space located directly underneath outside on the first floor. The gallery houses an installation made up of a massive number of keys, which were actually used by people in the past, red yarn, and two old wooden boats. Meanwhile, on the first floor, there are videos in which children talk about memories from before and immediately after their birth, and a display of a photograph of a child holding a key in the palms of her hands.

The instant we step into the gallery we come face-to-face with an old boat with a raised bow pointed toward the entrance and a profusion of red yarn so great that it completely fills the space, measuring about 15 meters across and five meters high. On the ends of each piece of yarn, suspended from the ceiling, are a wide range of keys. The sight is like a red storm with a heavy rain of keys pouring down from the sky. As we move further into the room, we find that behind the first boat is another one, which is also covered and enshrined with red yarn. Unlike the boat near the entrance, this one is parallel to the floor, but the positions of both boats recall a scene in which they are sailing through the open sea as they are tossed by the waves in a storm of red rain. From the boats alone, we imagine an old person who has retired after a long life and is trying to make the most out of the time that they have left. But from the

boat with the raised bow, we feel the strength to steadily move forward through the blustery red storm and are overwhelmed by its awesome power.

Next, we go downstairs to the outdoor pilotis on the first floor. There, we find a rectangular box measuring 3.5 meters high, four meters long, and three meters deep, and gaze at the works that are displayed on its sides. On one side is a photograph of a child's palm holding a key. On the opposite side there are monitors showing videos of the interviews Shiota did with children at several kindergartens in Berlin. The children talk about their memories from before and immediately after they were born. These primal memories of the world, conveyed by children who have at last reached the age where they can speak, are at times filled with lucid details and other times fanciful impressions.

As we listen to the children relating their memories with such freshness, we cannot help but be reminded of human memory as a whole, eternally carved into history and handed down to each new generation. It was Shiota's questions that opened the door to human memory. And through these questions, the children must have recognized the keys of memory that they had been handed. They hold the keys in the palms of their little hands. The keys might open memories to a grandfather, grandmother, or parent or memories of a forebear that were handed down to them. But their palms, a receptacle formed by placing their hands together, are a bit small to receive such a huge number of memories from their ancestors. All their little hands can really handle is a single key. Having been entrusted with the key, what awaits them now is the world on the second floor where a strong red storm blows, a world in which, a huge number of keys, or memories, pours down, urging us to delve further into it. The children are equipped with words, functioning like boats to help them navigate through the world, but the rules of speech that they have at last acquired are an unreliable means

of steer through the sea. Though battered and no longer serviceable, the boats were crafted and handed down by countless forebears and they have endured countless storms. They are a gift, given to the children by our forebears in the hope that our memories will help us overcome numerous hardships and make the voyage smoother. While helping them dodge the blast of keys (memories) that pours down from the sky and the torrent of memories (countless red pieces of yarn), the two boats slowly, silently, powerfully escort the children across the sea of memories.

At the end of the journey, are the children's words, emanating from human memory, the words of the living or of the dead? Before realizing it, I find myself confronting the border between life and death.

By referring to a variety of works dealing with keys from every era and region, we come to understand that holding a key signifies a kind of authority, proprietorial right, power, and wealth, as well as urging the holder to make an active choice in using it. This is evident from the depiction of St. Peter's keys in Michelangelo's *The Last Judgment*, a fresco on the wall of the Sistine Chapel in St. Peter's Basilica, and Dante's *Divine Comedy*, as well as the key in Kukai's Buddhist text *Hizohoyaku* (The Precious Key to the Sacred Treasury). As in these two examples, it is up to the children to decide whether to use or refuse the key they are given in *The Key in the Hand*, and this is the question they are faced with when they receive the key.

But we also realize that as viewers we are also being confronted with the same question. Accepting the choice that they have been given, the children's words, describing primal memories in the video, invite us to the border between life and death, and they also require that we make a choice. The choice is whether to accept their words without knowing whether they are the words of the living or the words of the dead. By

coming into contact with the children's words, driven to discuss life and death, we are also unwittingly driven to the threshold of life and death. It is not only the children who dive into the storm-like exhibition space filled with red yarn and keys, but also the viewers.

Urged by the children to make a choice, what do we confront in the middle of the storm? Our own nature. In the midst of this storm of keys or primal memories, how should we navigate and where should we head? The choice is a question of identity, a question of what it means to be ourselves.

We often use words related to keys, including password, key man, and keyword. And the concept of a key is also linked to a variety of scenes, including everything from watchwords to spells and codes. We also make regular use of things called "keys" that have a variety of forms, such as pieces of metal, cards, and fingerprints, when we open the doors to our homes and offices. Though they are so familiar that we do not notice, all of these keys are somehow related to crossing a threshold. A threshold not only demarcates the inside and outside of a gate, it is a singular place which, as borne out by various legends from around the world, is seen as a spirit world. A key is an important tool that helps create this place and at the same time plays an essential part in of the ritual opening and crossing of the threshold. In Shiota's works, we constantly catch sight of the realm that lies between life and death.

As I mentioned, Shiota's main theme has long been life and death. In recent years, prompted by the deaths of important people in her life, Shiota has once again come face-to-face with life and death, which, though universal, each of us is destined to experience on our own. Yet without averting her eyes from the pain, Shiota has purified and

sublimated her experiences and emotions in her work. The keys that she chose as a material for this exhibition are both tools that we commonly use in daily life and things that can be used to pursue the inevitable replacement of life with death. While on the one hand, keys are commonly used to protect valuable things like our houses, assets, and families, they accumulate a great number of memories through our dealings with important things and by embracing them in the warmth of our hands. At some point, we also entrust them to important people. On the other hand, while a key might seem to contain a sense of warmth, to the children who receive them, there is also a deeply disquieting aspect linked to the sense of unknowing that accompanies age.

In *The Key in the Hand*, what do children who are first exposed to the existence of keys by Shiota think when they use them to open the door of human memory? Do the first words they utter directly convey what they have seen and felt? A key is something that would not seem to exist within them. Though the words, which serve as “proof of life” after everything else has been nullified, are unmistakably those of the children, the eerie quality of their voices causes us to lose track of who is speaking and whose life the words refer to. Coming into contact with the uncanny in this way also leads us to a conflict between our origins and our identity. By experiencing the work, this confrontation with the fluctuating quality of life also provides us with a view of life and death – things that Shiota constantly faces.

Finally, when we further consider *The Key in the Hand*, it is important to think about how we should behave when, or after, we come into contact with Shiota’s work. Because our eyes are normally closed in daily life, it is necessary to consider our nature and identity, and moreover, life and death. We should pay especially close attention to the act of choosing. If we are not careful, we might lose sight of ourselves and of the border between life and death. It all depends on what has shaped our

identities. In other words, our identities, which we have a habit of referring to as unique and provided to us beforehand, are actually continually being shaped by our responses to various questions. It follows that this also shapes our views of life and death. What we see in *The Key in the Hand* is exactly the process in which children's identities are gradually formed by the words they use. The more true to life the question is, the more true to life the answer will be. Shiota's questions seem true to the children, which explains why the keys drive them to make a choice, and why they also seem like questions to us. But if the person faced with the choice does not consider the question carefully, they will merely be pushed forward by the authority of the key they hold and receive an empty opportunity to enter the space without the ability to judge the true value of the choice they have been given. The words we are asked to judge are not the sweet expressions of children. They are the words they desperately need to steer and navigate an unfamiliar boat through the bright red storm as the vessels of primal memory move forward.

Do you realize that in *The Key in the Hand*, you are being asked how children come to be entrusted with a key, what questions the key poses, and why we are asked such things? It is essential that we actively question, pursue the process in detail, and put it into words. To us, the real key is not the bright and enjoyable things the children say in their halting way but what they lead to. Instead of the seemingly gentle scenes of parents entrusting keys to children, we should pay close attention to the way the children firmly grasp them in their hands.