

What is the state of the arts today as the twentieth century draws to a close? Where and in what direction will they move with the dawning of the new millennium? These are the questions addressed by the exhibits at the Japan Pavilion at the 48th Venice Biennale, the last to be held in the twentieth century. We hope we will find some answers to these questions in the work of artist Tatsuo Miyajima.

Since the latter half of the 1980s Tatsuo Miyajima has been creating and exhibiting installations composed of digital counters using light-emitting diodes (LEDs) and integrated circuits (ICs). He calls the digital counters, the smallest units that make up the work, "gadgets." The gadgets, set on the walls and floor either at random or in orderly rows, flicker in the dark, the numbers ceaselessly changing from 1 through 99 or from 1 through 9. These works can be considered the product of contemporary Japanese technology, but they also evoke a more profound, philosophical proposition. According to Miyajima, the installation represents the universal concepts of "keep changing", "connect with everything", and "continue forever." His work, which is the embodiment of these themes, is the speculative consideration of all the living things and phenomena that arise within the framework of time.

In Venice, Miyajima will submit a new installation work of about 2,400 blue-light-emitting LED gadgets attached to three walls, arranged at equal intervals in all directions. He usually combines red-, orange-, or green-colored lights, but for this installation only blue lights are used. He used blue LEDs before, but never on such a large scale because of technological difficulties. Blue is the color of the sky and of water, and suggests the eternal. It calms the excessive arousal of the emotions, representing introspective and intellectual dimensions. A serene, mono-colored world emerges in the flickering of the blue lights.

Another feature of Miyajima's installation this time is that it is equipped with separate, large-sized gadgets he has recently begun to use in place of the units consisting of gadgets linked in rows employed previously. This feature accentuates the independence of individual gadgets as opposed to linkage and the relations of changing numbers within the units of gadgets. The orderly, grid-like lines of the LEDs endow the installation as a whole with the impression of extreme formality. Against the blue mono-color light, this quality affirms that Miyajima carries on modernism's

bona fide legacy.

In the realm of the arts the twentieth century has been, needless to say, the century of modernism. We can characterize the evolution of art during the twentieth century as centered around the elimination of external elements in quest of essential autonomy and purity and reduction of elements to their simplest and most concise form. Miyajima's installation in Venice readily reflects the influence of Piet Mondrian and Yves Klein. Modernism had a profound impact upon artists of the East Asia far distant from Europe, and Miyajima is no exception. What underlies the three themes mentioned earlier, however, is the Asian philosophy of time, deriving from the teachings of Buddhism. Miyajima underwent the baptism of modernism, but has since moved critically beyond it. Turning back to his own cultural heritage, he has achieved a unique form of expression. At the close of the twentieth century Miyajima consciously chose a formal style in the attempt to sum up twentieth-century art.

From the viewpoint of sociopolitical history, the twentieth century was an age of mass production and mass consumption led by technological innovation and industrial capitalism; destiny was powerfully affected by financial activity and the information revolution. The anonymous masses were born and were arbitrarily incorporated into these systems. The twentieth century was also an era of revolution and war, and of massive exodus of refugees from war and oppression, and of holocaust. Corpses were interred in heaps at Auschwitz, Hiroshima, the Middle East, the Balkans, and many other parts of the world. It is a period when all things were considered measurable and countable, and individuals was reduced to numbers. Production and consumption, the life and death of human beings, and everything else were reduced to numerical terms. Miyajima's digital counters, coolly ticking away their numbers, seem perfectly suited to this twentieth-century context.

Miyajima calls his installation for this year's Venice Biennale "Mega Death". The 2,400 incessantly flickering gadgets are his attempt to represent the massive slaughters of human beings during the twentieth century. The blue LED numbers, constantly and soundlessly changing, reflect on the polished floor, making the viewer feel as if his or her whole body were enveloped in blue light. Red lights might have seemed more suitable for representing death, which is associated with the flames that enveloped Hiroshima and the color of blood, but

Miyajima chose blue instead. Blue flames, like phosphorescence that coldly incinerate seem fitting to the inorganic, electronic twentieth century. The "mega death" here, moreover, is abstract death thrust at us statistically. Perhaps it should be understood to be death as observed in the vastness of the cosmos.

Miyajima often personifies the movement of the digital counters. The numbers shown on the counter change from 1 to 9, and after a moment of darkness or rest they start from 1 again. The speed of the counter, which can be set freely—sometimes frenetic, sometimes moderately rhythmical or serenely slow—aptly suggests the individuality of the idiosyncracies of how each person talks or behaves. If each gadget is compared to a person, the units that link the gadgets can be likened to families or communities, with the entire installation comparable to the society or state.

In 1990 Miyajima submitted a work entitled "Death of Time" at the Hiroshima City Museum of Contemporary Arts. The red-light-emitting counters were arranged in lines around three walls of a rectangular room. The lines stopped at the center of the far wall, leaving only a space the width of the human body. Only there, in that gap of eternal darkness, did no lights blink. The darkness suggests the moment of detonation of the atomic bomb: the "death of time." Here, the flickering of the gadgets symbolized human activity and its absence represented death. In "Mega Death," on the other hand, the gadgets are set separately, with no inter-linkage. Inevitably then, the changing of the numbers of each gadget is conspicuous, and the way all the gadgets count numbers at various speeds makes it look as if the counting is an activity compelling all toward death. Miyajima does not use the number zero. After 1 through 9 are counted, light goes off and darkness falls. Darkness suggests death. Then the counting from 1 begins again. The cycle of life and death is repeated over and over. With the numerous gadgets and the reflections of their lights on the floor, "life and death" cycles propagate almost infinitely. Moreover, Miyajima has incorporated a sensor into the installation: when a viewer steps into a certain area, the sensor responds and all the gadgets stop. All the lights (the activity of life) go out, followed by a sudden, utter darkness (the realm of death). The darkness seems to last forever. The viewer invariably feels assaulted by extreme uneasiness. Left alone in the vast space of darkness, he or she will no doubt be reminded, even if momentarily, of death.

The new work, "Mega Death," is Miyajima's statement about the tragic destiny of humanity in the twentieth century as well as the transformation of art. The LED installation exhibited at the specific time (1999) and space (Venice) will probably be seen as a countdown to the next millennium. As an artist who has lived the last half of the twentieth century, however, he is more concerned with the meaning of his own existence and of the twentieth century. These questions are also closely related to another project he has been working on over the last five years.

Since 1995 Tatsuo Miyajima has devoted himself to the art movement known as the "Revive Time" Kaki Tree Project. Toward the end of World War II, atomic bombs were dropped on Hiroshima and then Nagasaki, and almost every living thing at the epicenter was annihilated. Time died. In the ruins, a few persimmon trees (kaki) were found that had survived. The damaged trees were revived under the care of Dr. Masayuki Ebinuma, and they soon came to bear fruit once more. Miyajima conceived the "revive time" project when he visited Nagasaki and saw these trees.

The purpose of the project is to plant throughout the world trees grown from the seeds of the kaki trees that survived the bombing, thereby transmitting to coming generations the message to "resurrect time," an endeavor that is given concrete expression in the nurture of the seedlings. This project is supported by Miyajima and the volunteers sympathizing with his idea who make up the "Revive Time" Kaki Tree Project Executive Committee. The actual process of the project begins by finding homes or guardians for seedlings grown from the seeds of the bombed persimmon trees, persons who will accept and take care of the young trees where they live. A planting organization is then formed under the leadership of the guardian. When the seedlings are first planted, various events mainly attended by local children are held, including a reception and a workshop. Performing arts events are held in collaboration with local artists. Stimulated by the planting of the kaki trees, children and artists engage in various kinds of artistic activities. Each such activity and even the act of taking care of the kaki trees are considered here to be "art." The seedlings have actually been planted in elementary schools and pre-school facilities in different parts of Japan, as well as in Switzerland, France, England, and Spain. Miyajima's project is steadily spreading around the world.

The above idea and approach stands in sharp contrast to modernism, in which art is considered strictly the product of the individual artist, subordinate to nothing. The kaki tree project may have been initiated by one artist, but the artist's superiority is by no means guaranteed in the project's series of activities. Miyajima and the young members of the project's executive committee are on an equal footing, aiming at a sort of communality or anonymity among themselves. They seek to involve others in the project through kaki planting and awaken their aspiration for self-expression through this means. This endeavor means re-establishing and expanding networks of relations among individuals that have been severed. It is also an attempt to open to society and restore to people's hands the art that has been isolated from society and separated from the lives of ordinary people in the twentieth century.

The kaki tree planting activities are reminiscent of German artist Josef Beuys's action project, "7,000 Oak Trees" in conjunction with the *Dokumenta 7* launched in Kassel in 1982, to transmit an ecological message through the planting of oak seedlings. That work represented the culmination of Beuys's "social sculpture." Using donations from individuals and organizations sympathetic to his cause throughout the world, Beuys started planting oak seedlings in various parts of the city of Kassel, erecting conical columns of basalt beside them. The 7,000th seedling was planted after the artist died, at *Dokumenta 8* in Kassel in 1987.

The Kaki Tree Project and Beuys's action project resemble each other in that they attempt to convey a certain message through tree planting. The Kaki Tree Project, however, involves neither sculptural monumentality as seen in the basalt columns nor the charismatic authorship deriving from Beuys's personal character. The project rather seeks to dissolve material substance and absorb individuals into a communality. For the Kaki Tree Project the planting is only the beginning. Miyajima and his supporters hope that the planting and growing of trees will awaken the sensibilities of people around the world and encourage them to express those sensibilities in various ways. They particularly stress the importance of participation by children, members of the younger generations who will be the leaders of the coming century. To celebrate the growth of the trees they plan to hold a festival after ten years. Theirs, in other words, is a future-oriented project, the central theme of which is the time the bombed kaki trees have sur-

vived since their resurrection from the threshold of death and the time they and seedlings grown from their seeds will live from now on, as well as the time those people related to the trees will live. Although different in outward appearance, the LED installation works and the Kaki Tree Project share the same underlying concept. As long as the kaki trees and people are living entities within the framework of time, they are not exempt from the three principles of "keep changing", "connect with everything", and "continue forever" that Miyajima has postulated.

This form of expression, involving action projects and participation, did not just suddenly appear; its beginnings can be traced to the performance works of the early phase of Miyajima's career. In the first half of the 1980s, before he began working on LED works, he did a series of performances entitled "Nature and Artificiality," the main features of which were spontaneous actions in the streets or in a room and the responses they evoked among viewers. Especially in a work subtitled "A grain of sand," groups of performers conduct unrelated activities simultaneously within a gallery—some singing with a guitar, others smoking or waving their hands while shouting through the window—which produce a disordered, chaotic, and festive scene. In this unexplainable surge of energy we can identify the earnest desire for symbiosis and for forming relations with others. It is possible to see that desire temporarily suppressed in the LED works but resurfacing in the Kaki Tree Project. Evidence of this is the fact that Miyajima began work with performance art again in the mid-1990s, when the Kaki Tree Project was launched.

The performances are of the kind in which many participants of different nationalities count down from 9 to 1 in their respective languages, suggesting the possibilities of communication capable of transcending the isolation of individuals in the contemporaneous multicultural milieu. In his recent LED installation works in Geneva and on the island of Naoshima (Kagawa prefecture), he experimented with leaving the adjustment of the flicker pace of individual gadgets up to the local citizens. This involved others in the final stages of building the installation. Such approaches challenge the usual prerogatives of the artist and are directly linked to the concept behind the Kaki Tree Project.

In Venice, the exhibit on the Kaki Tree Project is presented in juxtaposition to the aforementioned LED work, "Mega Death." Whereas the

latter is installed in a dark space, the former exhibit is a bright, light-filled space. One potted kaki seedling is placed symbolically in the middle of the space. Accompanying it are posters and text explaining the purpose of the project, a text inviting applications to become guardians of the seedlings, documentary photographs, and videos showing project activities, and works of art produced by project participants, including children. Works by project participants are presented in an archive and visitors who want to examine the works closely can remove them from the cases where they are displayed. Seeing the slender seedling, about one meter tall, with its newly sprouted leaves, and learning about the various activities, viewers may become interested in and sympathetic with the project. If they wish, they can leave a message in the form of drawings or words written on sheets of paper provided. These messages themselves will be successively exhibited, gradually filling the exhibition space with the expanding participation of viewers in the project. A workshop targeted at local children is also planned which is sure to generate expression of various feelings and thoughts inspired by the kaki tree. During the exhibition period, applications for kaki tree guardians to nurture seedlings will be invited in the hope of forming ties with local communities of Venice, and this is one of the important objectives of the project. After the exhibition is over, the seedling will be entrusted to local guardians, ultimately to be planted in a formal ceremony somewhere in the city of Venice in the spring of 2000. Even after the end of the exhibition in November, the project itself will not end within the Biennale site but continue beyond it.

The economies of native peoples who lived along the northwestern coast of North America or in Melanesia were once based on gift giving, not on the barter of commodities of equal value, as discussed by French cultural anthropologist Marcel Mauss in his "Essai sur le don" (1925). One tribe would present extremely lavish gifts to another tribe, but without expectation of any particular gain. The other tribe would give gifts to the former in return. Invisible spirits of giving were believed to dwell within these presents. They circulated among the tribes, enlivening human relations and generating genuine communication. Of this Mauss essay, scholar of religion Shinichi Nakazawa comments insightfully, "Poets write in praise of these 'spirits of giving' that appear in the world in various forms.

They are people who create works of words as presents in return for the abundance of gifts that they receive. The essence of poetry is giving."<sup>(1)</sup>

"Poetry" here could be replaced by art and "poets" by artists, because I think that art, by its nature, is unrelated to the money economy and bestowed as an irreplaceable gift on a community by artists endowed with special talent.

By adopting the concept of "giving", we can obtain a clearer grasp of the meaning of the recent works consciously attempted by many artists throughout the world with special emphasis on art's communication function. The same can be said of the Kaki Tree Project. Spirits of giving undoubtedly dwell in the kaki seedlings, which are given to other people with no exchange of money whatsoever. The seedlings are pure gifts whose value cannot be calculated in monetary terms. Once a fragile seedling strikes root in the soil in early spring, the invisible spirits of giving grow active. They circulate among the children, artists, and others who take part in the planting of the trees, and link all of them through love. A similar power may have been displayed when figures of animals and gods, or ritual sculpture were created and presented to people in such places as Altamira, Lascaux, Chartres, and Assisi. The Kaki Tree Project does not have such figures or sculptures, but has enough power to link people and awaken their sensibilities.

If "Mega Death" represents a high point in the achievements of twentieth-century art, the "Revive Time" Kaki Tree Project can be interpreted as positing a new approach to art for the coming century. Showing simultaneously the two contrasting approaches can help us to see where art is now and where it is heading. Artists are now being urged by society to reassert their function and role. Hoping to meet this demand, we hope this exhibit will sow in Venice the seeds of one direction of potentiality of the future of art.

(1) Shinichi Nakazawa, "Zoyo suru hito" [Man Who Gives Gifts], *Tetsugaku no tohoku* [Northeast in Philosophy], Tokyo: Gentosha, 1998, p.14