

SUKI: The Sense of Multi-Vernacular

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The prime objective of the Japanese pavilion exhibition is not so much to display individual works as to show the philosophical links implicit in their disposition. It is intended to prove that a metaphysical harmony can be created among works from different times and spaces by what is an essentially architectural idea, and that this particular idea emerged from an accumulation of aesthetic sensibilities peculiar to our culture. This idea has consistently determined our contacts with others, as well as the absorption and release of the energy of other cultures within our own.

This idea is not something that possesses a solid structure created from any particular element, but is built on a number of diverse and overlapping ideas linked in a continuum either circumstantially or like constellations. The link itself is the idea. Therefore, the individual works displayed in this exhibition, while symbolic of numerous allegories, have been thrown off of their time-space axes by their mutual interchangeability. Because of the diversity of the constellatory links among these works, judgments based on specific art genres of the Modernist past are not relevant. Visitors will find, in the abstraction-promoting concreteness of the exhibition itself, a *passage* that causes them to embark on spiritual wanderings like the nomads of the plains.

This wandering, as we experience it in our daily life, began at least 400 years ago, with the first encounter of the East and West, and it begins in the "present," 400 years later. For, on the linear time-axis of the *suki* aesthetic, everything coexists in the time unit of the experiential "present." This "present," which is free to roam within an enormous span of time, has stimulated even the minutest particles within that great sweep of time, generating thereby the motion of its continuity. And it continues to demonstrate that this motion functions in the infinite expanse of time even earlier than that.

Around the time Piero della Francesca, painter of the "ideal city," was seeking the truth in the proportions of artificial representation amid the Renaissance of Europe, in Japan, the merchant tea master Sen no Rikyū formalized the act of making and drinking tea into the artistic discipline known as *wabi-cha*. Since then, *chanoyu* (the tea ceremony), and its aesthetic of *suki*, have been engaged in experiments to discover the invisible truth in the ceaseless links of the "critique" implicit in nature. On the supposition that the truth can be found in the state of "nothingness" that assimilates all phenomena, the earliest experiment consisted of transplanting untouched nature into the artificial city. The simple drinking of a bowl of tea without any formal rituals in this architectural environment called *sukiya* was an allegory of as-yet-unseen "truth," a representation of the composition of natural elements in a spatial continuum. Within that space, the collected components—plants, water, earth, architecture, utensils, painting, calligraphy, light, air, etc.—contain fragments of the truth of "nothingness" continuously converging and dispersing in that continuum, in the process of achieving a conceptual representation of the whole. The same is true of the forms of different cultures introduced through utensils. The landscape gardening perfected by Rikyū's predecessor Musō Kokushi (Soseki, 1275-1351), displaying a principle of *passage* in the sense of Walter Benjamin, that was architecturally adopted in the conceptual development of *sukiya* and continues to impinge on our daily lives even now. Nature, which plays the greatest part in this principle, is not there simply to be given a certain concrete form but as a means of seeking the principle of its forms and of maintaining the quality of mutual criticism in the continuum. Nature also permeates the

human-made objects—structures, utensils, ornaments—and in the exchange of critiques, it calls for reappraisal of the metaphysical qualities of those objects.

Sukiya is the structure for examining the multiple directions, as seen in the compound eye, of the abstruse, complex, and intricate labyrinth of fictive nature that we have used over a long period of time as our criteria for forms and their arrangement, indeed, that we have relied upon for the structure of our very thought. It is the conceptual and methodological result of an idea of search for the truth that had drifted across a whole continent, allegorized in the everyday act of drinking tea.

Within the *sukiya* (tearoom), pathways are strictly prescribed and the space (emptiness) so arranged that there are always two points of view in which “tea” is exchanged. Those who arrive by way of the *roji*, which is an metaphor for the passage to *gedatsu* (discarding of the self and attainment of the state of selflessness), and those who have already achieved *gedatsu*—the guests (*kyaku*) and the host (*teishu*), respectively—never view anything from the same direction. In other words, everything (whether it be something natural or something artificial) is always exposed to plural appraisals from different directions. This means that things are perceived in multiple layers of imagery and conception and thereby deprived of their own peculiar and physical value. The resulting crisis of meaning produces value splits in which a real constellation (or relativity) appears. In this constellation, everything—past, present, and future, customs, arts, the whole of space and its parts—loses its borders and becomes merely an element of which the constellation is composed. Thus, the aesthetic of *suki* (which means literally, “gather numbers”) represents a continuum of critique formed by fractal curves and surfaces. The word *suki* itself evokes many other meanings—“to like (something),” “transparency,” even “a spade (which digs up things),” and so on, meaning ultimately, the conceptual whole of various related images.

The continuum of critique (represented by *suki*), however, keeps on changing and taking on new forms as small parts of it change, so that, just as we confront nature, we are compelled to maintain a cybernetic perception of any given situation. This device for producing beauty, or the system of relativity by the nature of its structure, does not reject things created in a different culture. The reason we do not reject them is that the device is a curve of infinitely continuing critique, the very continuation of which shapes our thought. It assimilates new elements, then transforms itself to construct a new constellation, and create new forms and arrangements. In this sense, *suki* represents a composite of the structures of various cultural dialects; in other words, the composite structure itself constitutes our own dialect (vernacular). The system thus penetrates all aspects and phenomena of our daily life and even eschews the realm of “aesthetic” in the pure conceptual sense.

In the 1980s, the emergence of post-modernism and neo-expressionism brought a number of new themes into the fields of art and design, and the one that had the most symbolic and practical impact was the revival of the “vernacular,” the return to particularistic, indigenous themes in reaction to modernism’s universalism. In the course of modernism’s unconditional embrace of all things new and innovative from the eighteenth century onward, the indigenous and vernacular were rejected, producing in the twentieth century a society in which everything is enveloped by industrialization (modernization). As Ivan Illich wrote in his definition of modernization about the dissolution of vernacular values, even *culture*, which derives from the word “cult” (rituals, beliefs) was made the target of change. In other words, in the process of separating and distancing society from the vernacular values that centered around religion that was to be achieved as the liberation from magic (Max Weber), cultures, too, forced into a qualitative shift from value by affiliation to value by achievement (ability). The post-modernist revival of vernacular themes,

occurring against the backdrop of overstandardization propagated by modern distribution systems, the collapse of communism, and the revival of religions, therefore, can be seen as the rise of a kind of “cultural fundamentalism” in reaction to Modern civilization.

At the same time, however, because of the vacuum of history and developments in information distribution, the vernacular is far less clear than before. Even the stereotypical division of East and West, for instance, is no longer valid, because “east” and “west” have been formed or dismantled with regions themselves. These are times when what matters most is not so much that which is solid and discreet, but what embraces or aims for the “multi-vernacular.”

In these circumstances, the semblance of internationalization that has been built up on the basis of an environment that is well equipped informationally, as well as economically and politically, harbors the potential for creating truly global culture for the first time in history. But there is one serious problem: the over-diversification of “beauty” accompanying the acknowledgement of the particularity of individual cultural regions and the expansion of information systems linking ever-wider areas. Moreover, it is not simply a question of recognizing those particularistic systems. Each culture has its own complex structure, with its own dynamics, as has been acknowledged from the 1980s. That complexity is an important issue as far as it concerns the appreciation of beauty, because it is a concept that has always been closely linked to indigenous culture. Standards of what is beautiful, which once enjoyed the status of the absolute for each particular region, now face the imminent threat of extinction in the context of informational relativity. It may even be said, in fact, that visual beauty has already lost its absoluteness. If so, if “beauty” is caught in this swirl of relativity, how should we attempt to perceive it? What sort of mutual relationships should be constructed for aesthetics? Amid the paradigm shifts going on in international society today, this is one of our most serious dilemmas, for “beauty” is the final conceptual property of humankind that can be used to establish perceptual relationships transcending national boundaries.

The *suki* concept of space and its aesthetic setting are for perceiving new metaphysical qualities through the creation of a relativity among various individualities (vernaculars) while maintaining their diversity. This idea could be very useful to us in this time of the chaotic diversification of “beauty.” Indeed, once information starts flowing randomly and freely across the disciplines through multi-media networks, the philosophical value of *suki* will be all the greater.

Jacques Derrida described his idea of *deconstruction* as reexamining traditional values and reinventing them from within the old structures. Rikyū, too, sought to “follow rules and observe norms to perfection, then break or move away from them without forgetting the basics” (the concept of *shu-ha-ri*, literally, “defend, destroy, depart”), although he was more radical because *action* and *form* accompany each other, and even involve matters of daily life.

Fritjof Capra, author of *The Tao of Physics*, saw in the interactions of elemental particles the union of all phenomena as taught in Oriental mysticism. If Capra is right, perhaps Rikyū was a practical applier of universal concepts through the teachings of Zen Buddhism, who persisted in the arrangement (*agencement*) of fragments—utensils—brought from a variety of cultures, but who knew how to create a new, unified tension transcending their individual vernaculars.

It is amazing, considering the huge gap in time, to find Rikyū-esque concepts and aesthetics like *suki* in the ruminations of the contemporary writers now attempting to construct a framework for thought following the breakdown of the Modern ideology. And we might carry the comparison with the lineage of progressive Western thought even further back, to Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, who described what he called “preestablished harmony,” a state when monads (a monad being the ultimate physical and mental unit

of which entities are composed) unrelated to each other and each constituting an independent world, present a state in which they seem to be mutually related. Taking the position of subjective idealism, Leibniz believed the source of harmony among monads was God. Rikyū, meanwhile, described the essence of the relationship among separate entities as “nothingness” or “selflessness.” One might attribute the divergence of their views to the differences between the monotheistic and the polytheistic views, but “nothingness” in *chanoyu* and in Zen is an absolute chaos to be seen beyond an animist state and its metaphysical condition, and this chaos synthesizes all details without denying any. *Chanoyu* was an effort to gain an empirical and therefore universal idea by replacing the totality of these deeds with the *passage* of temporal and spatial processes.

Thus *chanoyu* is a highly condensed ritual for attaining a Zen-like state of mind. It might be described as a device for arousing equal visual, linguistic, and physical stimuli in a context of interactive information exchange through which to conceptualize a utopian condition which does not exist there either visually or representationally but is etched in the memory of the individual’s unconscious. In this sense, all the things “arranged” there, despite differences in the time or space where they were made, represent “beauty” with a “function” and designed for the realization of something magical or metaphysical. It follows that beauty expressed in *form* is incomplete by itself and is conceptually completed only when the display, itself a critical act, is linked with physical perception and imagery. That is why *suki*, though conceived against a premodern historical backdrop, never loses its “contemporaneity.”

The exhibition in the Japanese pavilion this year is presented using the *suki* technique in order to temporally and spatially liberate the perspective of modern art, not so much from sectarianism, evolutionism, dualism, or universalism, as from mono-valued, fixed preconceptions, and to revive the utopian ideas that once sustained avant garde art.

In order to apply *suki*, an aesthetic with a methodology for creating overall relativity without stifling individuality comparable to the constellations in the night sky, to an even more comprehensive environment, we began with the acknowledgment that all areas of creative endeavor in Japan today are realms of art. The basic structural axes in this view are tradition, design (and folkways), and technology, for it is at the intersection of these three axes that the new “beauty” evolving toward the twenty-first century is located. This structure, furthermore, can probably be understood as applying to circumstances that can be found in many other parts of the world. We therefore regard these three as the X, Y, and Z axes in this exhibition, presenting the leading and most creative works on each axis comprehensively, stereoscopically, and in a *suki* fashion, hoping to express thereby how we see the universal situation and identify the direction it is moving in. This endeavor is both our challenge to the territorially-bound Modernist “art” and our proposition on “beauty” for the twenty-first century and after.

The exhibition begins with the installation of Jae Eun Choi, at which the visitor embarks on a path into space with no borders and no weight. The path is made of unvarnished wood that circles the entire pavilion. The viewer is free to choose between the position of “guest” and that of “host.” If the position of “guest” is chosen, the visitor first encounters the presentation on the axis of design (and folkways). Scattered over the expanse of water covering the exhibition site are cardboard placards carrying images identified with the artist. The idea of the work is that it is created on the canvas of the city of Tokyo.

In the Edo period, it is said, the ukiyo-e artists, or those who were in charge of the actual production of prints—the woodcutters, printers, and publishers—would, in the final stage of printing, remove the finest and best-made of the blocks. This drastic step was taken out of consideration for the immensely complex environment of the city in which the finished work was to be appreciated. Deliberately, we tend to favor minimal expressions in art because

the premise for appreciation of them is reality itself, which is not minimal at all. The works of Katsuhiko Hibino, which have won the unconditional support of the younger generations in Tokyo, vividly reflects this tradition. His abbreviated style is what we call *suku*.

Following Hibino's works along the water's edge, the visitor comes upon a huge waterfall. *The Fall*, by Hiroshi Senju, was produced with traditional paints called *iwa-enogu*, several hundred kilograms of it. The cascade, in concert with the water on the floor, transcends the border between real space and fictive space. The images that seem to be false actually possess the realistic materiality of minerals and *washi* (Japanese paper), while the water that seems to be substantial is really false in the images reflected on it. This interactive exchange between the real and the false is the aestheticism we have maintained traditionally, and the dual structure of Benjamin-like criticism can be seen there. In this sense, what is represented in this space by Senju is not a "painting" in the usual concept of an artwork, but nature itself. Only when a work possesses this dimension of nature, can it acquire an infinite sense of time stretching in the direction of both past and future.

The infinite volume of time and space, such as represented in *The Fall*, is then futurologically compressed by Yoichiro Kawaguchi. High-definition images composed through precision computer graphics synthesize time and space according to the principle of *suki*, condensing life generated within a computer. In *Life City*, all forms are expressed in movements, and the substances with which it is made are mysterious and difficult to identify as organic or inorganic, but appeal directly to the senses. Through the experience of realizing it, we are surprised at the perceptions and memories dormant within ourselves. This work is evidence that metaphysical qualities can exist in artificial objects, not only of the age of analog technology but carrying on into the society of digital environments.

Passing by Kawaguchi's city, the viewer comes around to the microcosm of cells by Choi. These clusters of microorganisms collected with the organic material of *washi* from the soil of various parts of the world liberate from mystery the "living body" obsessed by the concept of evolution in the progress of modernism. The images of the cells photographed here firmly express the impulse of all living things for symbiosis as well as the interactive communication of this impulse that fills our environment. The chaos of life exists not for the selection/elimination process but for the expansion of the positive, gathering process. Each individual cell is a metaphor for contemporary society that, at the same time, can signify its ideal state because the development of its free movement corresponds with our subconscious memory. The critique conveyed here is reexamination of the environment as a living entity, which is exactly what Rikyū sought to communicate in the *sukiya* style by bringing nature unadulterated into the midst of the city.

The different forms of expression of the environment as a living entity by Kawaguchi and Choi are linked precisely because of the connection between their critiques. Such a critical and perceptual link is possible because at the core lies an absolute and unappraisable chaos of "nothingness" or "selflessness." The metaphor for this mandala-like perception of the universe is the completely empty space that is invariably found in the center of the *sukiya* (tearoom), as well as in this exhibition site. Precisely because of this "nothingness" void of all worldly values, everything can maintain equal relativity.

Conversely, there ought to be some tension toward the building of relations in each and every detail that symbolizes such relativity. The form depends on this very tension. Kengo Kuma, who is in charge of the space design for the exhibition, insists that the continuous space using water and complex pathways is needed to visually reproduce the intense relativity shared by these forms. That is the meaning of presenting the complex passages of *sukiya*.

The architecture, though it is generally classified in the category of design, is therefore just as important as the artworks exhibited in it. The graphic art direction by Ikko Tanaka and

the lighting direction by Haruki Kaito are integral parts of the whole. *Suki*, after all, involves not only free bonds but equal quality of all the elements.

In the movement repudiating modernism, many attempts have been made to interpret the points of convergence between art and design and their relationship. Most of the debate, however, while carried out under the guise of de-modernization, does not go much beyond the outlining of relationships and definition of differences. That very situation shows the gravity and duration of the modernist schism in the world of form. Within that schism, form was deprived of the cultural dimension and converted for the expression of individual egos and their collisions. Now we cannot even remember for certain what we expected of the art of form. At the end of the last century, William Morris proposed that in order to regain the blessed age of the art of form, we would have to reaffirm not the formulas but the structure of relativity. In this sense, it seems to me, the methodology and the idea of *suki* that was born in our culture has contemporary relevance in its structural allowance for a complex of vernaculars.

Suki arranges all forms and languages, or space and time, in a mandala-like homogeneous universe, and *cha* (the tea ceremony) puts the process into a continuous and complex performance. This was the method employed by Marcel Duchamp, too, in shedding light on the philosophical processes of form. For that reason alone, it is worth examining against the cultural situation today.

Apart from its ritual origins, the development of the tea ceremony was a product of the cultural confrontation between Eastern and Western cultures. By evoking the aesthetic of *suki*, we have achieved the perception of borderless by subsuming all the constituent forms in the arrangement (*agencement*) and the process.

Four hundred years since Sen no Rikyū, the world again facing chaos amid the tide of de-modernism, it behooves us to reevaluate the relativity of forms as well as viewpoint from which cultures can be freely synthesized.

Chaji The act of "preparing tea to entertain guests" was refined and ritualized, adding elements of play, of the arts of performance, and of exacting etiquette to form what we know of today as *chanoyu* (tea ceremony). Its dimension as spiritual discipline was enhanced through close contact with Zen. Through its games of competitive sensibility, it nurtured distinctively Japanese aesthetics that have been maintained in modern times. *Chaji* (serving of tea with a full meal) is the most formal and fundamental performance of *chanoyu* that provides the special stage upon which the host can perform for assembled guests. It is conducted in a variety of modes depending on the time of day and other conditions. *Chaji* generally consists of two parts, the first, *shoiri* (*shoza*; first course), and the second, *goiri* (*goza*; second course). It is a four-hour drama of entertainment in two acts. The season is a very important factor determining the mode of the *chaji*. The setting and decoration of the rooms as well as the menu of the meal that is served vary according to the season, and in all these preparations, the originality, innovativeness, and aesthetic sensibilities of the host are tested.

Sōan chashitsu The *chashitsu* is the architectural setting for performance of *chanoyu*. In the history of architecture, a certain type of building generally grows larger and more

splendid in the course of its development, but the *chashitsu*, by contrast, grew smaller and more austere in the process of its refinement. Its ultimate form is the *sōan chashitsu*. The concept of *wabi* was originally identified and incorporated into *chanoyu* by tea men who were members of the Buddhist priesthood. Sen no Rikyū, who studied under them, systematized their ideas and developed their ultimate spatial expression in the form of the *sōan chashitsu*. That which is small is small, and that which is large is large, and it is a violation of common sense to call the small large. However, the *sōan chashitsu* emerged to demonstrate, in line with the teachings of Zen, that we can be awakened to the infinity of the universe and freedom by breaking out of the shackles of conventional views. Rikyū perfected this idea while fully developing an aesthetic sensibility that was all his own.

Roji The *roji* is the garden through guests move from the *machi* to the *chashitsu*. It is both garden and pathway, but not merely a space to pass through or to appreciate and enjoy. In *wabi-cha*, the *chashitsu* is intended to be a neutral space remote from the mundane world, an infinite universe. In this space, every person is required to be an ordinary person (without title, rank, or status); to be himself. The *roji* is a device through which guests expose themselves and become ordinary before entering the *chashitsu*.