

**The Project Continues:  
From Venice to Burano and Casciago  
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1.  
Northern Italy is particularly beautiful in the early spring. Gentle sunlight filters through the crisp, cool air and blossoming trees give color to the hills and fields. Pear and apricot blossoms, like clouds of white smoke tinged with pink, are juxtaposed with new leaves, tender and light green, and bright yellow mimosa. The abundant colors of nature, brought back to life after a long gray winter, gladden people's hearts and make the traveler feel the joy of budding life.

In this lovely spring landscape, kaki (persimmon) seedlings arrived from faraway Japan. These seedlings represent the second generation of kaki trees that survived the atomic bomb at the end of World War II. The "Revive Time" Kaki Tree Project Executive Committee brought the trees to Italy and planted them in March of the year 2000 in an orchard on the small island of Burano in Venice and in the small mountain village of Casciago in the Lombardy region northwest of Milan. Many of the citizens of these communities, both old and young, were on hand to celebrate the arrival of new life represented by these somewhat scrawny progeny of trees that had been bombed in Nagasaki 55 years ago.

On a clear Sunday morning, children and their teachers from elementary schools all over Venice gathered on Burano. Scattering out over a large orchard, they painted pictures and wrote poems about the kaki trees and also made kites and paper pigeons. After the children had finished these varied activities and eaten an excellent lunch, the tree planting ceremony began. The seedling was planted in a corner of the orchard amid the children's shouts. The delicate bare roots were covered with dirt and water was sprinkled around them. Thus the tiny seedling became a link in the chain of life, rescued from the abyss of death and given an opportunity to put down its roots in a foreign soil.

In Casciago as well the local people gave a warm reception to the new tree. A dignified welcoming ceremony was held in a renaissance-style palazzo with the mayor and a cardinal in attendance. The ceremonies continued in a different location, where I could hear the excited voices of children as I looked down over a lake with sunlight glinting off the surface. Then the planting took place in front of the cathedral with many citizens and their children participating. As soon as the mayor had planted the tree, a mass of colored balloons was let loose to float up into the sky. There was an exhibition of children's art inspired by the Kaki Tree Project, a group exhibition of the work of local artists, and the presentation of an installation work on the theme of the atomic bomb. There were also workshops where children created art with found objects – pine cones, leaves, and bottle caps – and constructed kaki trees out of paper, wrote poetry, made paintings about stories they had heard, and drew pictures on the pavement of an inclined road. The plentiful variety of activities were designed to make it easy for children to participate, and in fact large numbers of children came and had a wonderful time together with their parents. On this spring day, Casciago was literally transformed by the Kaki Tree Project. The people enthusiastically accepted and sympathized with the message of the project, and the town and its citizens became actively involved in the planting of the trees. This was exactly how the planners of the project hoped that it would turn out.

2.  
The tree-planting project carried out in Burano and Casciago had its origin in Venice Biennale in 1999. The "Revive Time" Kaki Tree Project Executive Committee was organized by Tatsuo Miyajima, whose work was featured as the main exhibition in the Japanese Pavilion, and exhibitions and workshops presented by the members of this committee were also part of the Japanese contribution to the Biennale.

Miyajima showed the largest work of his career, Megadeath, made up of 2400 light-emitting diode "gadgets." Three walls of the exhibition space were covered with blue LEDs, displaying numbers that were slowly counted down to create a cosmic, expansive, and tranquil beauty. As visitors entered the gallery and moved farther in along the wall on the left, a sensor was tripped that turned out all the lights, leaving them in complete darkness. After a minute and a half of this darkness, which seemed like forever, the LEDs began to light up again one after the other, the numbers proliferating until the three walls of the room were glowing as before-like civilization spreading in a wasteland. This work identifies the twentieth century as a century of mass death, so the sudden darkness and relighting symbolize death and resurrection, destruction and recovery, resulting in an unsurpassed moment of sublime beauty.

If Megadeath sums up the twentieth century, the "Revive Time" Kaki Tree Project suggests new approaches for art in the 21st century. While Megadeath takes place in a dark space, the kaki seedling is placed in the center of brightly lighted site. The newly-planted tree is surrounded by four displays, one that introduces the main concept of the project, another that is a kind of archive, presenting documentation on the tree planting, another where visitors can write messages to the trees and post them on a wall, and another where people can file requests to have the tree planting done in their own areas. This is an unusual way of presenting a work of art. The seedling becomes a focal point for carrying on and expanding communication between the project committee and the visitors and among the visitors themselves. The Kaki Tree Project started but did not end with the exhibition in the Japanese Pavilion at Venice; these tree plantings were the ultimate goal. The project was designed, right from the beginning to expand beyond the time-space of the exhibition galleries.

Four days before the Biennale opened, the Kaki Tree Project Executive Committee created the "Kaki Tree Cafe" in front of the Japanese Pavilion, setting up tables and chairs where they served Japanese tea during the afternoon. This was a place where artists and curators from the various countries could come to rest after working on their exhibitions, a site where small groups of people could come together and communication could take place naturally. It provided a good opportunity to tell people about the Kaki Tree Project and have them fill out message cards. These message cards were used in the exhibition to encourage visitor participation.

The Kaki Tree Project exhibition changed continually as new things were added, such as the message cards. In addition, workshops for children were held a few days after the opening day and on a number of other occasions during the exhibition, giving extra energy and vitality to the exhibition at the Japanese Pavilion. The Venice Biennale had previously been mainly of interest to art professionals and connoisseurs, but the activities of the Kaki Tree Project made it more accessible to the general public.

3.  
This was the first time that workshops of this kind had been held in the Japanese Pavilion at the Venice Biennale. Children's workshops had been organized by local artists in conjunction with previous tree plantings of the Kaki Tree Project, so the committee proposed similar workshops in Venice. It was necessary to obtain permission from the Biennale commission and there were a number of problems to be considered, including management, finances, and recruitment of the children. In the end, six workshops were held at the Japanese Pavilion, three in June, one in July, and two in October. The committee wanted to hold more, but

there were limits on the number of people who could be accommodated in the pavilion, so the official workshops were limited to those mentioned above although several others were held in other locations.

I had the opportunity to attend the workshop directed by HANADA + k. blumfeld on the first Sunday after the opening of the Biennale. To start with, the children gathered around the seedling and were given a presentation about the atomic bomb dropped on Nagasaki, the kaki tree that survived the bomb, and the water problems faced by the slowly sinking city of Venice. Then Heike Hanada the instructor, appeared carrying a wooden vessel shaped like a boat and filled with water. A large number of paper boats filled with pigment had been hung from the ceiling of the gallery and a piece of white cloth had been stretched horizontally below them. The children dipped water from the wooden vessel and poured it into the paper boats. The pigment in the paper boats dissolved in the water and gradually began to drip down. The children caught the paint made of pigment mixed with water on their brushes and spread it all over the cloth. Paint flew about wildly and, before long, an abstract-expressionist-style painting emerged out of the bedlam. The children's energy had been harnessed into the creation of works of art without particular instructions. Through the experience of seeing and hearing about the kaki trees, the children were stimulated to express themselves in art. This was the aim of the Kaki Tree Project.

There were two more workshops in June, instruction in origami (paper folding) by Ritsue Mishima and an exercise in drawing lines that followed the moving lines of an animated film directed by Atsushi Shimizu. A painting workshop on the theme of "Memory" and "The Future" was presented by Anken Kidani in July. All of these instructors were members or supporters of the Kaki Tree Project Executive Committee. The two workshops held in October were especially noteworthy because they were taught by local artists with an interest in the Kaki Tree Project. Interested artists were recruited during the exhibition, and two, Michele Drascek and Matteo Bertelli, were chosen from the group of applicants. The former was an artist from Gorizia in northern Italy who worked in a facility for handicapped children and applied to participate in the Kaki Tree Project because of this experience. In his workshop, the children made cardboard cutouts which they placed on the floor ultimately assembling them into a large persimmon tree with fruit hanging from it. The latter was an art student from Venice. Together with him the children painted kaki trees as they appeared in each of the four seasons on four canvas panels.

Katsuhiko Hibino held an unofficial workshop on opening day using furoshikis (carrying cloths) decorated with a persimmon pattern he had designed himself and, in July, Yumiko Furukawa created a café in the corner of a park outside of the Biennale site to communicate with local people.

The workshops were planned by individual artists who responded to and were inspired by the Kaki Tree Project, and children participated in response to the example set by the artists, expressing themselves in diverse ways. Thus the kaki seedlings set off a chain reaction of proliferating relationships. Through their experiences in the workshops, the children undoubtedly learned more about the Second World War and the atomic bomb, the historical background of the kaki trees, and gained a new appreciation of the preciousness of life. There were also many children who did not participate directly in the workshops but learned about the exhibition and visited it with their school. This sort of thing was unprecedented at the Venice Biennale.

As a result, more than 150 requests were made by different localities for the tree-planting project during the five months of the Biennale. More

than eighty requests were received from locations in Italy and many others from places in Europe and the United States. Therefore, the Kaki Tree Project Executive Committee can be said to have achieved its initial goal. Ultimately, 24 places in Japan and other countries were selected as planting sites for the spring of 2000. Of these, Burano and Casciago were chosen as the sites in Italy where the Biennale exhibition could be brought to a fitting conclusion.

#### 4.

Why was the Kaki Tree Project welcomed by so many people all over the world and why was there such a passionate interest in planting the trees? This enthusiastic response was probably due to the universality of the theme of life, death, and rebirth, an archetypal theme with deep roots in myth and human memory.

Spring is the season of rebirth when living things that seem to have died during the winter come back to life. Since ancient times in all parts of the world, the human imagination has responded to the movements of the sun and the resulting changes in the seasons, associating the cycle of nature with the stages of human life-birth, growth, old age, death, and resurrection – and this has been expressed in various forms of custom and ritual. In the popular customs of pre-Christian Europe, spring was the season of rebirth, abundant fruitfulness and fertility. The trees that put out buds and tender green leaves in spring were worshipped as symbols of rebirth and new life. The customs of the May tree and the May pole that were practiced everywhere among European peasants are typical examples of this worship of trees.

In the anthropological classic, *The Golden Bough*, Sir James G. Frazer wrote, "In spring or early summer or even on Midsummer Day, it was and still is in many parts of Europe the custom to go out to the woods, cut down a tree and bring it back to the village, where it is set up amid general rejoicings; or the people cut branches in the woods and fasten them on every house. The intention of these customs is to bring the blessings which the tree-spirit has in its power to bestow. Hence the custom of planting a May-tree before every house, or of carrying the village May-tree from door to door, that every household may receive its share of the blessing."<sup>1</sup>

For the people of Europe, the May tree was a symbol of the joyous resurrection of life seen in the budding trees of spring, but the glory of trees suddenly coming into bloom in the spring is sufficient to evoke feelings of joy and exhilaration even in people without specific religious ideas about trees, as exemplified by the custom of the May tree. The planting of delicate kaki seedlings on a spring day elicits a natural response from the deepest strata of people's minds. Also, since the kaki is an Oriental tree, not a species native to Europe, transplanting it suggests the possibility of inter-cultural understanding and communication. Kaki trees have appeared in Japanese stories since early, so they have certain culturally and ethnically specific meanings; this cultural background is carried by the newly planted seedlings. And beyond this, these particular trees bear the historical weight of the bombing of Nagasaki. Therefore, this tree-planting project contains multiple levels of meaning, anthropological, cultural, and historical, making it possible to approach the kaki trees in many different ways, transcending cultural differences. They are a testimony to the primal force of life and thus engage the sympathy of people all over the world.

Tatsuo Miyajima's LED art is based on three basic themes: "Keep changing, connect with everything, and continue forever." The Kaki Tree Project embodies these three ideas in an easily understandable form.

The kaki trees are planted in places far from Nagasaki where they will grow, bear fruit, and give their gifts to many people year after year. In other words, the trees keep changing, connect with everything, and continue, if not forever, as long as they live.

The basic concepts of Miyajima's art firmly connect his LED work and the Kaki Tree Project, which at first seem so disparate. The blue glow of the LEDs and the Kaki Tree Project keep changing, connect with everything, and continue forever. At Burano, at Casciago, and at many different places throughout the world. From the past to the present and on and on.

Note:

1. James George Frazer, *The Golden Bough, A New Abridgement*, Oxford World's Classics paperback edition, 1998, p. 90 (original unabridged text published in 1890).