



REVIEW ARTICLES / ARTYKUŁY PRZEGLĄDOWE

Art and the body: The Tatsuno Art Project

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ABSTRACT

The author discusses the relationship between art and the body, as exemplified by the similarities and differences in the works of: two Japanese artists, Matsui Chie (b. 1960) and Higashikage Tomohiro (b. 1978); and the Polish artist, Mirosław Bałka (b. 1958). These examples are referred to in the context of a unique project recently conducted in Japan — the Tatsuno Art Project 2013. Held with the support of the Agency for Cultural Affairs of Japan, the project aims to present contemporary art to people from across Japan and around the globe, and to capitalize on the region's unique cultural heritage, creating opportunities for people to communicate with local residents and making Tatsuno a more dynamic and popular place to visit. This paper considers various connections between art and the body by focusing on a selection of works included in the Tatsuno Art Project 2013: Arts and Memories. Known in past centuries as the 'little Kyoto' of Harima Province, Tatsuno is an atmospheric old castle town. It is mild and relatively warm all year round, with the climate of the nearby Seto Inland Sea region, said to be similar to that of the Mediterranean. Thanks to the support of numerous people, the organizers were able to hold the 2013 event which represented the culmination of their efforts over the past few years, being the largest ever in terms of scale with nine invited artists, eleven other participating artists, and one contemporary musician, for a total of 21 creators contributing works. With new spaces added to create a total of 16 venues, the community-wide project truly achieved its goal of presenting the 'historic castle town as a museum'. The project curators were also able to strengthen Tatsuno's international ties by inviting artists from France and Poland to take part, as well as Japanese artists residing in the UK and Spain.

KEYWORDS

body in art; Japanese art and culture; transcultural aesthetics; contemporary art; town as a museum; community based art project

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INTRODUCTION

The Tatsuno Art Project 2013: Arts and Memories was held with the generous support of the Agency for Cultural Affairs of Japan. This project aimed to present exciting contemporary art to people from across Japan and around the globe, capitalising on the region's unique cultural heritage, and creating opportunities for people to communicate with local residents so as to make Tatsuno a more dynamic and popular place to visit. In this lecture, I would like to consider various connections between art and the body, by focusing on some of the works in the Tatsuno Art Project 2013.¹

Known in centuries past as the 'little Kyoto' of Harima Province (today, the southwestern part of Hyogo Prefecture), Tatsuno is an atmospheric old castle town. The weather is mild and relatively warm all year round, with the climate of the nearby Seto Inland Sea region, which is said to be similar to that of the Mediterranean. The pleasant Ibo River flows through the historic community, and the town is encircled by mountains including Mt. Keiro and Mt. Matoba. It is also the subject of much interest owing to its many historic buildings and well-preserved streets. This year the residence of the Hori family (prominent local farmers) was designated an Important Cultural Property of Japan, and six buildings in the vicinity of the former Higashimaru Soy Sauce Co. offices and plant were registered as Tangible Cultural Properties amid an ongoing historical survey of the district, described in detail in 'The Restoration and Utilisation of Soy Sauce Warehouses'.

Thanks to the support of numerous people, we were able to hold this event for the third time. The community-wide project truly achieved its goal of presenting 'a historic castle town as a museum'. We were also able to further strengthen Tatsuno's international ties, inviting artists from France and Poland to attend, as well as Japanese artists residing in the UK and Spain.

At this point, I would like to discuss the relationship between art and the body, as exemplified by the similarities and differences in works by the Japanese artists Matsui Chie and Higashikage Tomohiro, and the Polish artist Mirosław Bałka.

¹ 'Tatsuno, an old castle town in Hyogo Prefecture, is home to many important historic buildings. These include: soy-sauce warehouses dating back to the Edo Period (1603–1868) when the soy sauce industry flourished in the region; the Shisei-sha school established by town residents to propagate Sekimon-shingaku (a popularised Edo-era blend of Buddhist, Shinto, and Confucian ethical teachings); and the birthplace of the lyricist Miki Rofu, who penned the beloved children's song "Akatombo" (Red Dragonfly). Launched in 2011, the Tatsuno Art Project aims to help preserve these traditional buildings, using them for innovative purposes and making more people aware of their charm, so as to revitalise the region and attract more visitors' (cited from the Project website; for more information see: <http://tatsuno-art-project.com/2013/outline.php#english>).

MATSUI CHIE

Matsui Chie (born in 1960),² an internationally-recognised artist active since the 1980s, presented two video-based installations, *Heidi 53 'echo'* [Photos No. 1, 2] and *Heidi 53 'none'* in the storehouse adjoining the Usukuchi Tatsuno Soy Sauce Museum Annex. A dark curtain at the entrance shrouded a corridor into another world. After passing through the corridor into the storehouse interior, the viewer saw a screen to the right, on which was projected a video filmed by Matsui in the former Higashimaru facility over many visits to Tatsuno starting in May 2013. As one's eyes got used to the dark it became possible (barely) to make out the surroundings from the faint light of the skylight and orange lamps, and from the video itself, where the viewer gradually realised that the setting of the video was itself the storehouse where he or she was now standing.

Matsui has been presenting her *Heidi* video series since 2004. The character of Heidi, originating in Johanna Spyri's book of the same name, is widely known in Japan via its anime adaptation.³ However, the artist says that her work is based on the original novel, with its underlying critique of the unreasonableness of the adult world. While Matsui's series may have strongly reflected the original novel in its early stages, her Heidi has gradually taken on an independent existence over the development of the series and woven her own story. Now grown up, Heidi appears in these videos as a baffling presence, like a migrant that has no place left to wander. She traverses this world and others and freely moves back and forth in space and time, exploring allegories and seeking narrative meaning in the zone between our collective primordial memories and in individual memories, scenes, and landscapes. Her tales beckon the viewer to a place that is no place, which does not yet exist and yet is hauntingly familiar, perhaps like memories of the future.

As Matsui herself said during an Artist's Talk, she began these latest installations in the potent atmospheric confines of the old soy sauce factory, listening carefully to its sounds and communing with the tools and objects that reside there. Once an active factory clanging with noise and bustling with busy workers, it now stands silent, its work finished. In this space the sprite-like Heidi (which, in a Japanese transliteration, can also be read as 'abandoned child'⁴) appears, portrayed by Matsui herself, and the plot develops. There are natural cycles that occur along with the changing seasons of Tatsuno, such as swallows falling from their nests and dying after they have fulfilled their purpose

² See the artist's website: <http://www.chie-matsui.com/home>.

³ *Alps no syojo Heidi (Heidi, Girl of the Alps)* a TV anime consisting of 52 series by Zuiyo Enterprises was released 6 Jan–29 Dec 1974. It is based on *Heidis Lehr- und Wanderjahre* and *Heidi kann brauchen, was es gelernt hat* by Johanna Spyri (1880).

⁴ In Japanese, you can write Heidi as 廃児. 廃 means abandoned and 児 means child.

by raising fledglings, and the works incorporate the themes of unchanging repetition and ceaseless transformations that coexist within the vast flow of time, with the recognition that life and death are constant bedfellows, as the instantaneous intersects with the infinite.

By placing her own body in the old soy-sauce factory, Matsui makes almost-forgotten objects come alive by listening to their voices. In her video works, she presents memories that already exist there, using her body as a medium for their expression. Through her body, the memories of the past become alive, to re-start with another life; and her body is the cue to such a process.

HIGASHIKAGE TOMOHIRO

Near Tatsuno Shrine is Shuentei, formerly the residence of the lord of the Tatsuno domain. This site includes a teahouse built above a pond in the Edo Period (1603–1868), the residence itself, a second house on the property, and the garden. During the Art Project, the teahouse featured a work by Higashikage Tomohiro (born in 1978),⁵ who previously exhibited in a soy sauce storehouse as an invited artist in 2011. Last autumn, he presented the installation *Boundary* combining sculptures and driftwood. Typically, Higashikage fashions animal heads in exquisite detail, down to the texture of the fur, using an epoxy resin, and usually displays the head mounted on pedestals. Here, however, he took a different approach suited to the space of a teahouse in the *sukiya* style, with a low ceiling, where viewers were to be seated. The ‘boundary’ of the title refers to Higashikage’s exploration of the border between a stand-alone sculpture and an installation which incorporates the site where it is exhibited, and to the uniquely ambiguous role of the teahouse as both a part of everyday life and as a rarefied space for tea ceremonies. He also explored the singular ability of traditional Japanese architecture to close off the interior from the exterior, or to connect the two, depending on whether elements such as *shoji* screens and sliding doors are in place or removed.

The teahouse, from across the green lawn in front of it, appeared to float above the surface of the pond. The autumn foliage behind it made a captivating sight, and on clear days when the *shoji* screens were open, viewers were surprised to see the driftwood installation inside, as if it were reaching gnarled fingers up from the pond into the teahouse. Perhaps they were even more surprised and intrigued to discover a lifelike rabbit head seemingly emerging from the driftwood. Upon entering the teahouse and sitting in the waiting room with the enormous piece of driftwood, the rabbit’s eyes were just level with the viewer’s. Its skin seemed to have attached itself to the tree and begun to erode

⁵ See the artist’s website: <http://higashikage.info/index.html>.

the surface like some colonising moss. The work was titled *Erosion* [Photos No. 3, 4], in reference to the way time gradually erodes and transforms our memories. The rabbit's tranquil eyes seemed to penetrate into the depths of the viewer's soul. Beyond the waiting room was the tearoom, where a colossal cow's head welcomed visitors as if it were the host. With a slightly sad expression, it nonetheless exuded stillness and power, and took command of the room. Other herbivorous animals were placed here and there, with similarly gentle yet somehow wounded looks, appearing determined to recover from their wounds, to survive, and to once again thrive.

Higashikage makes animal heads onto which he projects his own body. Here, the borderlines between outside and inside, animal and human, and viewer and viewed dissolve, and the works and their environment blend into one. Differences grow increasingly ambiguous. The viewers are invited to enjoy a process in which their bodies and their surroundings are blended together and changed. In this process, the consciousness of viewers can be transformed and they can feel Higashikage's works as an element of themselves.

MIROŚLAW BAŁKA

Works by Mirosław Bałka (born in 1958)⁶ were displayed in the garden lying beyond the Shuntei teahouse, and in Osuzumisho, where the lord of the Tatsuno domain once lived. Bałka's *Otw.* [Photos No. 5, 6] was displayed on a monitor placed on a *tatami*-mat floor, facing the shady garden. The video, shot at night, featured the artist's family home in Otwock, Poland, which he had transformed into a studio. Because it was filmed with a handheld camera, the image shook and wobbled with the movements of the cameraperson's body, rendering the scene of the dark studio even more ominous. While for Bałka the place was familiar and mundane, and the scene was no doubt ordinary, presented in this way it took on an alien air (probably even to the artist). All of us are prone to the illusion that what we see around us is all there is to reality, but in fact that which we know is merely the tip of the iceberg. *Otw.* reminds us how most of reality lies submerged in unknowable darkness, while sending us spooky signals from time to time. At the same time, there was a synergy of work and venues: the place where the work was exhibited was once the home of a regional lord, but is now open to the public; while the work presented the Otwock studio that was once the artist's home. This acted to bind Japan and Poland in a web of echoes travelling across time and space.

Bałka is highly active on the international art scene. While he began his career in the mid-1980s as a sculptor, he has produced an increasing amount

⁶ See the artist's website: <http://miroslaw-balka.com/pl..>

of video works in recent years, and uses a wide range of media to transform private memories into public ones, and to transmute the mundane world into something fresh and unfamiliar.

In Bałka's works, one can sense the physical traces of the artist through subtle movements and images (recorded with a handheld camera), although his presence is actually invisible. Moreover, one experiences a more vivid and tactile physical reality because the viewer is unable to rely on his or her sight. The borders are clear. Bałka's work reveals things that are concealed in everyday life, and creates a tense relationship between outside and inside by displaying different figures of ordinary objects.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, I have discussed the works of Matsui Chie, Higashikage Tomihiro, and Mirosław Bałka. They each convey a vivid presence that is nonetheless invisible in everyday reality. However, in the works of Matsui and Higashikage, the boundaries between oneself and others are ambiguous. They are fused rather than contrasted; they merge with each other and change their aspects. The body of the artist spreads throughout the entire installation. In Matsui's case, viewers feel as if they are entering a womb. In Higashikage's case, the borders are eroded. The viewer feels as if they are being sucked into the animals' eyes. In contrast, in Bałka's work, his body is implicated and dissimilated. It does not intersect with its surroundings or viewers; it merely looms as a metaphor.

Drawing a conclusion based on the differences between East and West seen in the work of only three artists would be a bit hasty, but one might say that the segmented Western character creates a contrast with the Eastern conciliatory one. Bałka lives and works in a country that once belonged to the Eastern Bloc. While one finds different elements and unique aspects in his works, they also contain a subtlety, symbolism, and simplicity that are similar to those of Japanese artistic qualities. Nevertheless, it is interesting to note that, in the relationship between self and others, a sense of inviolability adds a certain allure to Bałka's works while respecting physical otherness — something that also gradually accumulates in the works of Matsui and Higashikage.⁷

⁷ On the difference of self between East and West, the symposium *Non-western 'I'* was held at Kyoto Bunkyo University on 30 Oct. 2011 where I made my presentation *Non-western I and Poland — focusing visual arts*. The book based on this symposium will be published as one of the *Japanese psychotherapy* series by Shinyo-sya.

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1. Matsui Chie *Heidi 53 'echo'* 2013 © Matsui Chie



2. Matsui Chie *Heidi 53 'echo'* 2013 © Matsui Chie



3. Higashikage Tomohiro *Erosion*, 2013 © Higashikage Tomohiro



4. Higashikage Tomohiro *Erosion* 2013 © Higashikage Tomohiro





6. Miroslaw Batka *Otw.* 2012 © Miroslaw Batka