

"Super-vision" capturing the detail of the universe Review for BT6/2002.7

The fact that we can perceive the world as is, or live and think in this world is nothing but "re-playing" the experienced world by modifying and editing the minute elements constructing this world. This "re-playing of the world" has continuously been done in the art world, but was rare to cut into the "re-playing of the world" itself. It is true that there was once a quite radical attempt by a number of artists who used their bodies to cut into this dimension of the world. Here you see the existence of a gap between the so-called "avant-garde" artists and Takahiro Tanaka.

The reason why the world needs to be continuously re-played will best be explained if you see it from another view point, that the world is seamlessly changing itself. If you can perceive the idea, there would be no need of superficial radicalism. One can see in Tanaka's photography and installations that if you can awaken your "sense" towards the details of the world on a neuropsychiatric level, the world in front of your eyes will change its existence.

I am not trying to categorize his attempt on conceiving this world as Minimalism. It could rather be said that this artist seems to be conceiving the world as a mechanical arrangement of numerous parameters, and fine tuning it according to the occasions.

It is somehow like the Audioists who perceive not only the sound source, but the voltage, connection, and even the humidity, temperature, and the material of the wall as the prime source of "listening to music". Within their hands, the fairly common sounds, even though it is the same common sound, revives as a totally new sound that we wonder if our organs have been altered.

There, to "listen" doesn't always have to be perceived by the ear. Without understanding the metaphor "listening with one's eyes" or "skin" in a strict way, it is hard to explain this experience.

"Seeing" Takahiro Tanaka's works gives the same feeling. It is not a coincident that when admiring his work, there is a point when one can't be sure if he is looking at the subject, or listening to it. Tanaka is extracting the world as an audio system to its limit. Experiencing his work creates a climax of our transient and intangible life.

Noi Sawaragi (art critic)

Day Tripping, and Awakening James TURRELL and TANAKA Takahiro at Art Tower Mito

Review for InterCommunication No.16 1996

The James TURRELL exhibition held at Art Tower Mito was an intriguing one, particularly in comparison with the TANAKA Takahiro exhibition held at the same time.

As the subtitle "Toward Unknown Light" suggests, light is everything in TURRELL's work. Born in 1943, TURRELL has been producing works that take light itself as their medium ever since his "Projection Piece" in 1966. Light in general is one thing, but to speak of a light that summons the viewer to "another world" sounds all too esoteric. It seems, however, that the light in question is the twilight of the deserts where sixties hippies slumbered, and the luminosity of those psychedelic visions at the height of their trips. This artist is now mobilizing advanced technology to reproduce that light in the museum.

The centerpiece of the exhibit was surely the "Atlan" (95) which emitted, from an aperture in the front, a subtly modulating quiet light that seemed to envelope the viewer in an eternal twilight. In terms of the depth and breadth of light, there have been several other works in this "Space Division Construction" series begun in 1976 which were more effective. TURRELL's contribution to "The Day After Tomorrow," a group show which I saw in Lisbon in 1994 comes to mind, although there was no variation in the light. But as I wrote in the eleventh issue of this journal, there was no competing with the "eternal twilight" to be found in reality on this westernmost seacoast in Portugal. Whether you think of "Atlan" or "Zona Rosa" (95) which bathes the room in red and blue light, TURRELL's works seem best suited to lounges where tired club kids chill out after a long night dancing. Or would that be too ironic?

Also included in this exhibit was a piece called "Soft Cell" (92), part of the "Perception Cell" series begun in the early nineties. Alone, the visitor entered an anechoic chamber in order to experience total darkness and quiet. (Unfortunately, however, nothing was done to cut out olfactory stimuli). Then there was the "Gasworks" (93) in which one was to lie down in a tank, also alone, to be wrapped in a flood of light. (The paramedical white suits worn by the assistants were a little too campy--but then again they weren't as bad as the Aum sect's meditation robes). These two exhibits were extremely popular and reservations were hard to make. There was also a sample on display of an enormous cosmological project to create eleven rooms which sense the light of the sun and the moon from the inside of the Roden crater on an extinct volcano in Arizona. Unfortunately, however, the massive, rough-hewn models of the crater which were placed right at the entrance to the exhibition detracted from the flow of an exhibition otherwise dedicated to light, which has no mass at all. But nonetheless, as a whole the exhibition succeeded in providing a sufficiently multidimensional sense of the many aspects of light that TURRELL has been pursuing over almost thirty years.

If this James TURRELL exhibition was replete with a vaguely trippy sensibility, its perfect compliment was to be found in the wakeful clarity of the TANAKA Takahiro exhibition held at the same time. Born in 1962 TANAKA was chosen as the eighteenth young artist to be included in the "Criterium" series. TANAKA took the small room given him and transformed it into a minimalist space in the strictest sense of the term, without even the slightest compromise. The white room was entirely packed with seven thousand burned-out fluorescent tubes stacked on end and flooded from above in white light and a high-frequency audio signal. Aside from these objects no extraneous items were included. From what I have seen, most of the works in the "Criterium" series have been garbage--but this work was a welcome exception to the rule. In fact, I doubt Japan has ever seen such a pure example of minimalism. There were, of course, the works of the so-called Mono-ha. But most of the "things" (mono) used in those works were fetishized into mushy subjective lyricism. TANAKA's fluorescent cylinders, each held in place by two thin terminals, stood as if they had no weight of their own. And yet they were sturdy enough to prevent any lyricism from slipping in between the cracks. (Burned-out fluorescent tubes were used for no other reason than that new ones would have made the piece look like something out of a tacky science fiction movie). There was only an impassive white and silver surface, deflecting facile emotional identifications. This uncompromising character gave this modest exhibition an impact which exceeded that of TURRELL's elaborate work. If TURRELL's playful explorations of trippy feelings actually belonged in the club scene where the sixties is currently in revival, TANAKA's work, by refusing to cater to such naive dreaming, undoubtedly deserves pride of place

in the center of today's art scene as an elaboration of the best of minimal art. Of course Japan's pseudo-art scene lacks such a basic understanding and so this work was almost entirely ignored, and I hear it's already been scrapped as industrial waste. But there's nothing to be sad about. Because even now, in the world of pseudo-art, where most people have yet to extract themselves from the noisome eighties and produce nothing but insider parodies and bad jokes, we have found at least one real artist who has not sold out and keeps doing his own thing.

Akira Asada

"James TURRELL: Toward Unknown Light" was held
from November 3, 1995 to January 28, 1996,
and "Criterium 18: TANAKA Takahiro" from November 3 to December 10, 1995,
both in the Contemporary Art Center of Art Tower Mito.

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If art is considered as an "expression of the artists' innerself", you can't see anything deriving from Takahiro Tanaka's works.

First of all, his work can't be described as a "work" in a literal sense. No one can tell what his work is when he/she sees the space he created. One might say there "is" art, yet another might say there "isn't". It can be said that everything you see is his art, or the experience itself is art.

His art doesn't have a body as neither perceptions nor experiences are tangible, and as those does not come from the artist's innerself, it cannot be said it's the "artists' expression". And as those perceptions and experiences are intangible, it's not even the artists' possession.

Tanaka uses various materials, from photographs to cement powders, panels to projectors. As most of the audiences fall into the same misconception, once it's defined as "work", what you see in front of you becomes a mere photographs or cement powders. It is as viewing his work as one sees paintings or sculptures.

In that sense, unless one changes its perception towards the "world" could s/he view the real Tanaka world.

Seeing what you can't see. It seems like seeing the poltergeist, but it is on the contrary. What poltergeists "does" is purely tangible. Fearing there might be something scary is perceiving the world in a normal and mediocre way. Not in a new and a different way. (Tanaka's way)

His art is not a consequence of creation. It is the introduction to perception.

Nothing special occurs from the space he creates, just the remains of some materials could be seen. There's nothing more, nothing less. No awakening sounds, no flashy objects, nor any social contexts could be found. Yet it is this space, and this only space could one experience the ballance conjuring from those minimal materials. Although it doesn't have a body, just a minute move could break the perfect ballance.

As his style, Tanaka won't comment on his work.

This might give the feeling that his works are hard to understand. But once you see his works, you notice that there would be no mystifications existing there.

Compared to the "Contemporary Art" as in over-praising intelligence and knowledge, his WORK comprises of common and tangible elements opening up his art to a wide range of people. But at the same time, the simpleness of his art gives people a challenge of knowing whether they have the ability to perceive.*¹

His art has relations with the observers' ability to see the world.

As a matter of course, the ability to see doesn't owe to the object but the way the person him/herself. He/she has the power to alter the way how the world looks like no matter what the object is.

If changing just a minor part of an object alters the whole image, that is what we call a maximum alteration. It must not be just a coincidence that every time I experience his art, I get this same impression of alteration.

Scrutinizing the work would not change anything, yet by seeing it over and over again puts me right in the middle of the alteration.*²

Noi Sawaragi (art critic)

*1 Even though his art doesn't require deep artistic knowledge, it doesn't mean everyone can understand his works. His art requires the true meaning of "Seeing". A seeing based on training, basic ability and experience. In this sense, perceiving his art might have a higher wall in front of it.

*2 His art completes within the viewer. Therefore, even when it seems there are no physical changes externally, a dynamic alteration is occurring within the person perceiving his works

0 degree aura-The white room of Takahiro Tanaka / Akira Asada's art editorial

Review for ESQUIRE 16/2002.2

A simple room except for its blinding brightness. Within this white room, on the white wall are two small pictures of a door knob. A simple door knob, it is. What makes the difference is that the door knob is captured with such rigidity, and steel framed with such perfection in a perfect balance. The object escapes its concept as an ordinary object and, oblivious of human existences, seems to be radiating beams from within. I was standing totally stunned, in front of the door knobs, in that white room, motionless.

Takahiro Tanaka's work is hard to describe. It doesn't have a significant theme, nor does it describe itself eloquently. Tanaka observes the minute particles of the indifferent world with his eyes as a refined machine, records it, and makes it a piece of work. As all these are conducted upon strict processes, one can see the 0 degree aura rising up from his works. On the wall to the left of the door knob is a white photo paper, one can say is a "0-degree photo". There in the center of the photo is a barely visible cut. And on the wall to the right, as if to correspond to the "0 degree photo", yet another two white photo papers. This almost shockingly vivid power could never be conveyed through writing. Neither could it be conveyed through photo books. One has to stand in this white room to really feel and experience it. And this explains that these pieces of work are in the true sense, an orthodox art.

Together with these photos, a series of lithographs of the road are displayed. The same could be said to these photos as I have been explaining above. Creating superb works just by looking into this world with his vivid eyes and recording it, I will declare Takahiro Tanaka is one of the most prominent contemporary artists.

Akira Asada

"ROOM 01" Catalogue Text for Contemporary Art Gallery, Art Tower Mito 1995

The new work by Takahiro Tanaka for the Criterium is entitled "ROOM 01." He had formerly created "ROOM 00 " of which the new piece is a further development. "ROOM 00" included fragments of images from Polaroid photos giving a kind of déjà-vu feeling of out-of-focus vagueness, yet fortified with visual impact. Tension was present in the space because a noise at a frequency of 12.5 kilohertz (extremely high frequency) was audible.

Tanaka's new "ROOM 01" consists of materials including about 6,075 fluorescent tubes, 16 kilohertz high frequency sounds, and the 6,500 Kelvin white light of high lax lamps. A noise was programmed at an even higher frequency than that of "ROOM 00," and it came close to the limit of what human beings can perceive. Actually, as far as I know, about half of the audience claimed that they did not hear anything. Of course more than a few people perceived a noise similar to a buzzing in the ears and a resonating of the skull. 6,500 Kelvin is the highest possible color temperature among man-made light and can recreate the ray of daylight. If one pays attention, anyone could perceive a feeling similar to something bubbling on the eardrum and on the retina. The object of a massive amount of fluorescent lights might remind a viewer of a memory or a vision of bubbles being smashed. It may not make him think of the "madness of daylight," but it presents an illusion that there is a threat of possibly damaging one's sight.

ROOM here means an installment of pure perception. It shows a border of human perceptions such as hearing and sight. What human senses can perceive is only a part of the whole world.

In the words of an 18th century theologian Jonathan Edwards quoted in the foreword of "Art and Objecthood" by Michael Fried: "The world is born anew at every moment. In other words, things give up their existence every instant and renew it every second." It points out that the world, existing beyond what can be perceived by human senses, is constantly moving. It presents an unstable but rich image.

Man's perception is not constructed only by a sense of sight and hearing, but by experience and learning. Thus for example, as for sight, "There is a reciprocity between seeing and knowing. In other words, one has to see to know, and also has to know to see." (Mikel Dufrenne, "L'œil et L'oreille")

It is true that cognition by sight is not structured only through its relation to an acquisition of knowledge which can be put into words. There is certainly an area of ambiguous images which cannot be captured by language. Our retinas sometimes consciously perceive images with underlying understanding of their meanings, but sometimes unconsciously accumulate images without dealing with codes of meaning. Thus deposited "fragments of view" may suddenly be revived and construct a cognition of sight.

"Fragments of view" is the title of Tanaka's installation shown at NW House in 1995. One hundred of the 2,500 photographs, ('fragments') recorded by Tanaka over the past 10 years were displayed. A vast number of fragments were collected by Tanaka's camera as he experienced everyday living--a view that has earned the artist a reputation for being a stern and persistent critic on perception.

Tanaka searches in the world of seemingly-unstable but abundant images rather than that of superficially-clear meanings. His creations seem to be based on an idea of challenging the limit of perceptions, awake and revise them.

His Criterium piece was shown while James Turrell's solo exhibition was on at the Art Tower Mito. Although Turrell also deals with perceptions, the world he creates has to do with prayer and healing. Tanaka's work is the opposite challenging aggressively the issue of perceptions.

Tanaka rejects codes of meaning, but I cannot help being reminded of Maurice Blanchot's "La folie du jour" standing in

front of "ROOM 01." The antagonist of this abstruse story has his eyes injured by glass, and is placed in the madness of bright daylight for seven days to cure them. Aren't these seven days the days of Genesis? This ROOM filled with transparent bright light is a place where creation and madness are secretly unfolded.

Seiichi Watanabe

Drawings Catalogue Text for Gallery alphaM 1996

Takahiro Tanaka exhibits work in various forms using various materials. Sometimes it is a painting or a drawing in the usual sense using oil paint or gouache, sometimes it is a series of some photographs, and sometimes a three-dimensional work combining existing objects. In many cases, he mobilizes different materials relating to all the human senses and a sense of space such as sound and light, or sometimes temperature. However, what he tells in his work is basically only one thing. In this sense, we can say he is an artist who keeps a most stoical attitude.

What is this "basic thing", then? It is a matter of "perception"; how a man receives the phenomena of the outside world into his senses. Tanaka's work is, so to speak, a device to inform us, in what way perceptivity is organized in a human mind. Therefore, Tanaka's action is never an "expression." This is the very reason why he firmly refuses to talk about meaning in his work or the origin of his creative impulse. That Tanaka's work is accepted means that each of the viewers estimates and queries how his perception changes and what takes place in his senses under the stimulus of the work. Therefore, there is no significance which is usually thought to exist behind art work, and there is no "producer" either. As far as I can understand, Tanaka's work embodies such a peculiarity.

The "Perspective," a form of vision was an epoch-making discovery of European art in the time of the Renaissance, which is not medieval visual angle from God's viewpoint, but from the human viewpoint to rationally grasp the world. Figures in the world are centered upon the eye as a bundle of visual grasps the images gathered there, however, caused a drastic disunion between subjectivity and objectivity, and resulted in producing a complete separation between idealism and realism. In other words, this form of vision where one grasps a figure as an image creates the doubt whether the figure is really equal to the image or not, or whether the image is no more than an arbitrary product of the human brains or not. In this way, matter and mind become two remote existences without any points of contact between them. Idealism and realism are nothing but an expression of the separation viewed from matter as well as from the mind.

From the end of the 19th century to the beginning of this century, there appeared many thinkers who tried to control the separation between idealism and realism and to make a united cognition. H. Bergson was one of them. According to his words, human brains cannot be such a superior thing as to undertake to produce all phenomena of the world by itself, and our perception does not occur on the side of our brains, but absolutely on the side of materials. All phenomena of the world are connected with one another, from which our senses pick up just the ones attracting our interest, and make our own perceptions of them. Therefore, perception does not only undertake to recognize an object in a wait-and-see attitude, but also works actively. Such criticism of visual epistemology, which also appears in the phenomenology by Merleau Ponty where man tries to consider "to see" in the relationship between his own senses and the outside world, seems not only to connect with the matter of perception, but also to hold an important moment to review the organization of the "modern times."

Though it is not essential for the understanding of Tanaka's work to follow the history of Western thoughts above mentioned, it is sure to show us a good model of the way of thinking when we view his work. Our perception can not be established till it comes across a phenomenon of the outside world or a stimulus from it. There are no transcendental forms of cognition as Kant said, but perception is occurrences which are continuously produced and renewed at all times.

To talk about one work exhibited this time; "Drawing", it consists merely of scratches which were made on the surface of the tiles used as a display table for a bundle of thousands of fluorescent light tubes at the preceding oneman exhibition at Mito Art Museum. This is, however, a suitable device to examine our perception. The device produced by Tanaka certainly exists here as an exquisite "work" filled with a strange force, which breaks down our accepted ideas of recognition and distinctly shows the moment of perception of the world.

Yasushi Kurabayashi (Art Critic)

The Origins Perception "curator's eye '95" gallery NW house, 1995

What kind of visual experience do we have when we look at a picture? We tend to think that we grasp the whole picture at once, but is this really so? Even when we apprehend the whole structure, our eyes are drawn to certain details and our focus shifts from place to place. We thus gradually grasp the picture as if we are reading it. When we attempt to see the whole, we miss the details. The whole is built up in our minds as an accumulation of impressions of its parts. The same thing happens in our visual experience of the things around us. We think that our visual sensation is intellectual cognition, but in fact we are reconstructing in our consciousness the fragments of what we see. The range of the human eye's focus is not very wide; when we read a book we are only aware of a few words on the page at any given moment. In our field of vision, there is the part we are focusing on and the blurred image of the parts outside this range of focus. Our eyes wander between them, shifting from place to place as the whole image is constructed in our conscious mind.

At the moment of perception, is a subject-object relationship established between us, the viewer, and the thing we are viewing? The answer is yes, and no. This is because, rather than being brought about through the initial existence of a subject and an object, the act of seeing should perhaps be thought of as itself bringing the subject and object into being. If, as I have stated, an image is constructed in the conscious mind through the accumulation of fragments of what we sense visually, then memories and thoughts are created through the accumulation of sensations. One may think of this as the formation of a central point, the "subject", and the construction of the whole, the "object". This is the kind of thing Takahiro Tanaka was trying to say in his installation *Fragments of Eyes*. If I tried to explain it in terms of Berkeley's theory of perception or the phenomenology of Husserl or Merleau-Ponty, it might be more acceptable to certain people. But the point I want to emphasize is that Tanaka's works are not the kind of inconsequential, limited conceptual art that merely follows the logic of philosophy. Indeed, what Tanaka is trying to do is reveal the origins of the elements purely related to sensation and perception, that vague realm which phenomenology cannot translate into words or logic. Viewers of Tanaka's works, therefore, are in no way being asked to put the various impressions they sense into simplified words or theories. On the contrary, they are required to observe earnestly what is going on in their own sensations or perceptions without attempting to translate this into words. They must surrender themselves completely to the experience of their senses, constantly suppressing the urge to express this in words or logic. In so doing, they will come to realize the richness of the experience of seeing within Tanaka's works, which at first sight seem stoical.

For the last ten years, Tanaka has been recording "fragments of memories" such as construction sites, quarries, elevated expressways, interiors of buildings and the bustle and movement of the city. These fragments are represented in over 2,500 photographs. This is part of his daily round, and this particular installation just happens to be exhibited as one of these records. By bringing the image into or out of focus, or blurring it, Tanaka aims to capture the reality of the visual sensation rather than achieve photographic completeness. Then, through a sort of surface processing, each photograph is given even greater intensity. As we gaze at them one by one, an indescribably strong resonance finally occurs in our sensations and we come to realize that this power is being charged within us. In his writing about his art, Tanaka has advocated "perception, not interpretation." This applies to every aspect of his work. Tanaka has created a wide variety of works, including pure paintings and drawings, images obtained by photographing drawings, exhibitions of his work file as installations, and sound installations. However, they all have the same underlying aim, namely to make the viewer aware of the functioning of human perception itself. When I first saw a Tanaka tableau, my visual sense was stimulated as if it had been whipped up and I felt the powerful impact of the whole structure bearing down centripetally upon me. To the creation of this intensity of sensual response Tanaka devotes an almost perfectionist single-mindedness, completely controlling the whole of the space in which his art is placed. In this exhibition, the space was dimly lit so that the works could only just be seen and the images rose up within the viewer's own sensations. In Tanaka's exhibitions, the whole space imposes its presence on the viewer as an integrated, sensation-forming apparatus. The work Takahiro Tanaka is doing is of the most fundamental nature, both with respect to plane surfaces and human perception. He is therefore undertaking the most contemporary of tasks. In an age of casual, facile concepts and superficial statements on society, I believe the art works of Tanaka will have a strong impact on our culture by revealing the true meaning of human perception.

Yasushi Kurabayashi (Art Critic)

Terrain vague -On the margin of Takahiro Tanaka's Lithography

Traverse the city. Look at the forsaken <terrain vague>, not imbued with life, or meaning. Without the romanticism of ruin. Affix the sight of this no man's land onto film with this mechanical eye, the camera. Accumulate countless such photographs, until there is no more room for humanist interpretation or narrative potential. Select samples at random from this mass. But to print? Burning them onto the printing paper would only serve to invest the image with a "photographic" gloss. Select the non photographic medium of lithography -- though only on the condition that the medium-specific fetishism for "lithographic" softness has first been excluded for a maximum neutrality in two-dimensional expression. Here the bastard subject (terrain vague), expressed in the bastard medium (neither "photographic" photography nor "lithographic" lithography), brings about a heretofore unknown purity of visual experience. The viewer is forced to observe the overlooked aspects of the otherwise familiar city with extreme rigor as though it were the landscape of another planet, seen for the first time -- even without knowing whether it is a photograph or not. His/her gaze meets the pure surface of a thing stripped of meaning and fetishism. This, then, is a dimension discovered by the uncompromising eye of Takahiro Tanaka : ground zero of optical perception.

Akira Asada

The intensity of Sense and Existence Japanese art artist encyclopedia of the 21st century

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Takahiro Tanaka is a prominent artist who has an objective eye and a solid sense towards his work Japanese art world can hardly obtain today. His work varies from paintings to drawings, photography to installations. He also utilizes sounds, lights, and even temperatures in his works. In the "CRITERIUM" series at Art Tower Mito, he showed an almost violent display of materials by tying thousands of fluorescent bulbs and lightening it.

At Gallery alphaM, he presented the remains of the base of Mito installation, scratched tiles, as a "drawing". He is striving to reveal human "sense", and that could only be possible when he can exhibit his work as a solid presence.

Tanaka's work is a device to assess the observer's sense on how his piece of work stimulated them. This device demolishes our common sense and opens it up vividly to the perception of the real world. It is a fully loaded "work". This artist must become more valued.

Yasushi Kurabayashi (Art Critic)