

He (Duchamp) placed the artist, the author, in the enunciative position of the spectator, of today's spectator who no longer belongs to the crowd in Baudelaire's sense but to the mass in the sense this word takes in the expression "mass media", to the "mediatized" mass.(1)

Thierry de Duve

Probably there is no doubt that visual experiences such as photography and moving images have brought substantial changes to human beings since the twentieth century. As the effect of such experiences is not confined to visual arts, but extended to our society as a whole, it would be hard just to imagine a society without this kind of image technology any longer. It made us realize the fact that the world exists beyond "me", which had long been enshrined on a throne as the "subject" opposite its "object", the world. That is the greatest contribution of visual experiences, and why a large number of philosophers and thinkers have developed ideas and thoughts regarding their effects.

Therefore, it seems natural that both historical avant-garde prominent in the early twentieth century and avant-garde in the 1950s and 60s should have strong references to photography and moving images in the process of destroying the autonomy of arts while intervening in society and daily life.

This essay explores the visual experiences brought to the spectator by actively adopting readymade and other technology of reproduction in the attempt of avant-garde to represent life itself through arts. It will give us effective viewpoints to consider recent visual artwork under the spotlight, which is in fact the very purpose of this study.

How are these works related to the fact that "distance" is transformed into unmediated "closeness" by an information society mediated by electronic media? Why are there so many image-based works and documentation photography installations in recent years? These questions often heard here and there are related to the question raised in this essay. It may not be possible to present a perfect answer to the question. However, rather than analyzing individual

works, by travelling through arts in distanced places and times, this detour is expected to pick up these actual problems.

To begin with, it is necessary to consider the nature of the information society mediated by electronic media, which distinguishes contemporary visual experiences from those in any of the ages in the past. In our daily life, the amount of time we spend with electronic media, such as televisions, telephones, and computers, has been continuously increasing. New media has been developed one after the other so that we can obtain useful information and connect to anyone from anyplace. We can enjoy the spectacles of places we cannot actually visit, and see minute details that are invisible to the naked eye. These developments all stem from the advent of photography and moving images.

I would like to point out two characteristics observed in such developments.

In the information society enabled by these electronic media, a homogeneous space is realized. The development of global capitalism has encouraged "contemporary art" to expand its activities all over the world from its former primary base of activity in Europe and North America. International exhibitions such as biennials and triennials are continuously increasing in number in cities like Sydney, Johannesburg, Havana, Gwangju, and Yokohama, as the building of modern art museums also expands to non-Western countries.

Another point is that we can thus get access to any information, creating a feeling as if unexplored areas have disappeared. Such phenomena as databases organized on web, and mass-produced thick exhibition catalogs and publications that file lists of artists, underlie this point.

However, while the control of community by global capitalism in the former point also controls personal feelings in the latter point, we are lacking a lively sense of reality. We can get access to anything, but what we can actually experience is temporally and physically limited. Although not clearly indicated, the collection of accessible

objects is unilaterally prescribed by someone else. We can do nothing but accept such a feeling while zapping world news. It seems that the events once only seen at a "distance" are increasingly becoming the events that give us an illusion that we can understand without witnessing, since excessive visual experiences bring others into one's self and blur the distinction between inside and outside, making it difficult to take a critical stance.

Readymade of daily life

The points discussed so far reminds me of the following facts: it was various exhibitions organized by leading newspaper companies that conquered the avant-garde artists in the 1950s under "Art Informel", and the "Yomiuri Indépendants" exhibition, the main platform where the post-war avant-garde artists were presented, was also a cultural project by a leading newspaper company. At that time, Japan's GNP reached 43 trillion US dollars, marking the fifth place in the world in 1960, and Tokyo became the world's first city with a population of 10 million in 1962. In 1964, the Tokyo Olympic Games were held, and Japan entered "the world stage" by overcoming post-war reconstruction. It was at this time that Hi Red Center performed short-time activities of less than two years. Its members, Takamatsu Jiro (Taka = High), Akasegawa Gempei (Aka = Red), Nakanishi Natsuyuki (Naka = Center), are of course well known individually for their many interesting works, but here I would like to draw attention to *Shelter Plan*, a performance project conducted by Hi Red Center in January 1964. (2)

First of all, I would like to point out that many of the performances by Japanese avant-garde artists in the 1960s are usually studied from the viewpoints of excessive physicality and a down-to-earth attitude. Nevertheless, I would like to focus on the discussion by deliberately excluding such viewpoints.

Hi Red Center's activities were performed on the street, on the rooftops of buildings, and on

Readymade, Photograph, and Spectator

Sumitomo Fumihiko

television programs, as well as in gallery presentations. In that sense, there is no doubt that they had a strong intention to get out of the exhibition spaces of art galleries. Above all, conceptual work such as *News Flash! Who is using the communications satellites?!* illustrates their conscious use of the power of television broadcast intervening into daily life, and it can be said that they were very strongly aware of the community of electronic media (Fig.1). Furthermore, Akasegawa Gempei, one of the members, was summoned to a voluntary questioning by a police detective due to the seizure of the work *The Model of One Thousand Yen Note* just before the realization of *Shelter Plan*. It surely is not a coincidence that this was the beginning of the incident regarding a dispute over an accurately copied one thousand yen note, that eventually cut across differing evaluation systems such as law and arts, and the symbolic world and the uncanny.

Shelter Plan began with the posting of invitations to artists, critics, and private detectives and those who work for a job center selected from a telephone directory. The invitation read "Dear Sir/Madam, Hi Red Center is in charge of the Shelter Plan, commissioned by the S.P.C. (Shelter Plan Conference)..." The invitation had no description to explain what the *Shelter Plan* was, much less a statement indicating it as art. It asked the recipients to "cooperate" with the plan in an extremely polite and formal manner. A "memorandum" was also enclosed in the invitation, making it a rule to phone in advance and wear a necktie and gloves. Thus, over two days in a suite of the foremost and prestigious Imperial Hotel, the members of Hi Red Center welcomed their visitors. The participants were handed an envelope in the lobby, and again in the envelope, a memo with strange instructions was enclosed. The instructions included a notice not to leave your fingerprints on the doorknob, and an encouragement to breathe in the breath of the person next to you while waiting on a sofa. Once a visitor entered the room, the physical characteristics of the person, such as height, weight, and shoulder length, were promptly measured in order to create a tailored nuclear

shelter (Fig.2). Moisture content and volume were also measured, and visitors were said to be encouraged to conduct seemingly absurd activities one after the other including, drinking water and sinking themselves into a bathtub. They were also photographed from all directions, front/back, left/right, and top/bottom, and finally asked if they wanted to order the shelter (Fig.3). This clearly suggests that the making of a real nuclear shelter was not the original purpose.

A body reproduced into a "medical record" as a random series of numbers, and a photograph shot from a set position like an extended elevation of a box - these are all transformed into powerless bodies exposed to the authoritarian eyes of measurement, even though these bodies belong to those of renowned artists today. It is obvious that they arouse the state power and electronic media that only count people as the subject of measurement. The use of an anonymous group of Hi Red Center as the subject of conduct assures such a fact. The participants experienced making their bodies comply with the eyes through extremely mechanic instructions and recordings. From the surface of the project/work, the originality of the artist and expression is thoroughly regressed, and only the experience of the participation by visitors remains.

Since the instructions and photographing were not conducted as an expression at all, it seems better to regard them as an act of packaging the experiences of visitors. This can be called the readymade of daily life that encloses contemporary society, including the moving crowd and its ruler of state power and mass communication, under the name of art.

Invitation to Re-territorialization

Rirkrit Tiravanija must be one of the most attention-gathering artists since 1990 for his engagement with the life of ordinary people. In a gallery in New York, he served curry, from his grandmother's recipe, to the visitors. In an exhibition held in Tokyo, he made a music studio anyone can use

freely where he also enjoyed a performance. His work is sometimes called Relational Art, and his methods of expression and media are not confined to conventional ones.

Therefore, rather than discussing a specific work, I would like to start with an examination of his thick book, *Supermarket*. (3) This beautiful book includes photographs documenting many of his works produced so far, words of the people with which he worked, and letters and conversations (interviews). All of the images included in his book are scenes we actually encounter in his works with no exception: paper cups and seasonings, beer bottle, paper bags left in a mess that shows the evidence of a meal, people enchanted with a movie or musical performance, a sleeping bag spread on the floor and a woman lying on colorful cushions, a person who is heading for a cashier pushing a shopping cart, a young man who absent-mindedly watches his friend viewing books, and dried squid sold in a market (Fig.4, 5, 6). Exhibition space is not unordinary, while art museums and galleries are often described as such. The work of Tiravanija is the future of the past, nothing but the ordinary that will be repeated forever.

However, when we take a closer look, we notice that the artist sneaks his own individual rules into the process of the reproduction of a casual daily life. For example, a trivial rule such as the studio being free of charge is included. For most of the cases, it is more likely that these rules are secretly operated like an agent rather than governing the exhibition space. As long as we follow these loose rules, the work is realized without the presence of the artist. In this sense, his work is like a copy that is independent of the original, and thus the readymade character of his work emerges. Another point not to miss is that the performance of the artwork frees the audience from the restraint of social power structures while throwing them into a circumstance where unlimited responsibility is imposed, encouraging their involvement and leading them to a change of values in which new gestures are discovered.

What is called art, and the reality of exhibition spaces in museums and galleries, are facts the audience cannot change. That is why he or she finds a chance to recompose the given meanings by travelling back and forth between an original daily life and this readymade daily life.

This repeatedly employed word, readymade, is a concept widely known through Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain* (1917), which brought the greatest change to the avant-garde of the twentieth century. Here I would like to briefly outline the definition of the word. My particular concern lies in the point that readymade is completed with words, that is, the declaration of "This is art". Seeing a urinal does not lead to the judgement of it being art, but defining it as art brings the readymade into existence. The important thing is that the judgement is not made by you, but heard as the voice of the other. After such a judgement is made, there is left a circumstance where "anything can be art", and in which unlimited responsibility is imposed upon the audience, and it is their turn to nervously and slowly make a judgement. A site for re-territorialization is opened in such a circumstance. Both *Shelter Plan* by Hi Red Center and various projects of Rirkrit Tiravanija that involve many people had no profound meaning like the silent smooth surface of Duchamp's urinal. In place of the vanished transcendental depth, we will need to find the body of spectators that reveals individuality, not the spectator as an abstract concept. It can also be said that readymade is the site of nothingness where both the spectator and work as the existence imposed with indetermination can reflect the peculiar contexts they produce.

"Exhibition" of photograph and moving image

"Readymade" discussed here is of course deeply related to the advent of the information age, in which an enormous number of images is exchanged by the technology of reproduction as described in the beginning of this essay. *Fountain*

required an exhibition venue so that the audience could clearly understand "this is art". In this section, I would like to discuss how the artworks are exhibited, and how they try to indicate life itself. The reason I use the word "indicate" is based on the understanding that art in our age should be considered on the premise of an absolute impossibility of representation of life such as atomic bombs and concentration camps, and without such a consideration they are insufficient. Next, I would like to discuss the experiences of viewing photograph and moving image in artwork installations. In *Shelter Plan*, the spectator/participant was first given an opportunity to have a direct experience, and later the experience was viewed in other forms such as photographs. Of course, only a limited number of people could experience this performance, as it required invitations. According to Akasegawa's writing, they produced 56 "medical records" in two days. Later, this project was "exhibited" in the form of 16 mm film recorded by Jonouchi Motoharu on the occasion of the third public trial of the One-Thousand-Yen-Note Trial in 1966 (Fig.7). It was slightly exceptional, but before "exhibiting" the project, *the model of one thousand yen note* was defended with the very declaration that "this is art". The project was also presented in the form of documentation photography in the exhibition of "DADA in Japan - Japanische Avantgarde 1920-1970" held in the Kunstmuseum Düsseldorf in 1983. In the case of Tiravanija, as seen in the example above, his work is compiled as a publication with documentation photographs. Other examples include the presentation of a video recording of the entire process of an act such as a journey or a meal.

Photograph tacitly indicates the past. There exists irreversible time, and the spectator finds a trace on the surface of the image (Fig.8). That is nothing but the function of photography called "index" by Rosalind Krauss, and it is an experience in which people find, through physical traces by light, a place and time that do not exist there. The great advantage of photographs and images is to enable various scenes repeatedly on view anywhere we

want, such as an earthwork that cannot be witnessed by anybody or a one-off performance. Neither film nor photography itself is artwork; they are only devices for documentation that enable reproduction. They are the fragments of incidents. The spectators will not view them from the front as they do in the case of photography work, but they will freely stroll around in the installation, trying to associate contexts with the work.

Good examples that illustrate the effect of such an act by spectators may be *Electric Earth* (1999) and *I am in You* (2000), video installations by Doug Aitken (Fig.9). In his work, various factors are skillfully edited: outside and inside, architecture and body, and image and music. It is important to notice the surface of the image is not variously manipulated, but the filmed images maintain themselves as copies of the outside world. That gives us a feeling as if these images, stripped off their existing meanings by editing, are continuously floating. It is the suspension of reality, allowing the re-reading and the transformation of the order. There is no point where the spectator can view all multiple screens, so he or she can do nothing but move around. This makes one aware that the viewing subject is the first person, and irreplaceable "I" is the subject of conduct, questioning the positioning of the viewer and the things viewed.

From transcendental to translational

The dream attempted by the historical avant-garde artists was to change everything in society with art. Such an attempt seemed intermittent when their work was collected on the walls of art galleries that connote the transition of formalistic styles. However, in fact, it has been more and more prominent recently to compose work by copy, completely opposite to the epistemology that supports art museums with the myth of the original. In addition to those works mentioned so far, another typical example that comes to my mind is Gerhard Richter's *Atlas* in which amateur-like photographs, that is the copies of ordinary scenes caught by a mere mechanical eye, are

accumulated. The spectator walks around the exhibition space, performing the reception "in a state of distraction" as described by Walter Benjamin.

*The readymade's parallel with the photograph is established by its process of production. It is about the physical transposition of an object from the continuum or reality into the fixed condition of the art-image by a moment of isolation, or selection. And in this process, it also recalls the function of the shifter. It is a sign which is inherently "empty", its signification a function of only this one instance, guaranteed by the existential presence, guaranteed by the existential presence of just this object.*⁴

Thus, if we consider that readymade and the "exhibition" of photographs and images are indicating our life as a fragment, an essential epistemological transformation in the visual arts since the twentieth century may emerge. A site for continuous negotiations is produced between the work and the spectator. The information society, which lacks a sense of liveliness and brings excess visual experiences, has transformed "distance" into "closeness", and realized a modern homogenous space. In the space filled with density, readymade appears as a nihilistic bore and makes the stabled order fluid. The exhibition space that enables strolling among photographs and images as a record, allows a completely opposite experience to electronic media in presenting "distance" in distance on view. It enables the re-composition of

values and the recall of those suppressed. By re-drafting the borders, the body as a subject of measurement becomes no longer exchangeable. As illustrated in the work of Tiravanija, we are no longer standard spectators, but acquire arts within each body. If such, say, unevenly distributed arts are realized, can we go out of the institutional exhibition space? Instead of fixing meanings with given values, we interpret them, confirming our own position each time. The visual arts in an age when transcendental meanings no longer exist tries to indicate our uncertain and changing life in a manner that may properly be called translational.

(Translated by Namba Sachiko)

- (1) Thierry de Duve, *Kant after Duchamp*, Cambridge, MIT Press, Mass., 1996, p. 337
- (2) Description on *Shelter Plan* hereafter is based on the chapter 9 of *Tokyo Mixer Plan*, Chikuma Shobo, Tokyo, 1994 written by Akasegawa Gempei himself.
- (3) Rirkrit Tiravanija, *Supermarket*, Migros Museum für gegenwartskunst, Zurich, 1998.
- (4) Rosalind E. Krauss, *The Originality of the avant-garde and other modernist myths*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1985, p.206