

Artistic Recycling in Japan Today

A Curator's Perspective

Kasuya Akiko

Cwiertka, Katarzyna J. & Ewa Machotka (eds), *Consuming Life in Post-Bubble Japan: A Transdisciplinary Perspective*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2018

DOI: 10.5117/9789462980631/CH11

Abstract

Recently, many artists have produced works that transcend the boundaries of art and infiltrate every aspect of daily life by recycling everyday items. Such works have found a home in an increasing number of venues and an appreciative audience. Often, these works are not confined to galleries and museums, but unfold in public spaces and interact with everyday life. They react to current events and attempt to blur the boundaries between art and non-art, artist and non-artist. Discussing this phenomenon in relation to the Tatsuno Art Project and two exhibitions, I argue that these new approaches can be seen as unique interventions into contemporary social life and commentaries on its troublesome relationships with objects and their consumption and recycling.

Keywords: contemporary art, art projects, installations, everyday life, memory, displacement

Introduction

Since 2011, with support from the Agency for Cultural Affairs of Japan (Bunkachō), the Tatsuno Art Project: Arts and Memories (Tatsuno Āto Purojekuto: Toki no Kioku) has taken place annually in Tatsuno, a town that was known in centuries past as the 'little Kyoto' of Harima Province (now the south-western part of Hyogo Prefecture). The project aims to present exciting, contemporary art to people from across Japan and around the globe; capitalize on the region's unique cultural heritage; and create opportunities for people across the nation and the world to communicate

with local residents in order to make Tatsuno a more dynamic and popular place to visit.

Recently, a number of artists have aimed to engage directly with society, producing works that transcend the boundaries of art and infiltrate every aspect of daily life by way of recycling everyday items. Such works have found a home in an increasing number of venues and an appreciative audience. In this chapter, I would like to discuss this phenomenon and explore the role and potential of contemporary art. I will do so mainly through the examples provided by the Tatsuno Art Project, as well as by looking at two art exhibitions, titled *Sonzai e no apurōchi – kurayami, eien, nichijō* (An approach to being – Darkness, infinity, everyday life; hereafter *An Approach to Being*) and *Tenchi* (Displacement; hereafter *Displacement*).

As examples of Japanese artists who recycle rubbish from everyday life one could cite Yodogawa Technique, a group that collects rubbish from the Yodo River and turns it into art; Ōtake Shinrō, who also collects material from everyday life and recycles it into art, and who exhibited at the 13th Documenta in 2012 and the 55th Venice Biennale in 2013; and Tanaka Kōki, who represented Japan at the 55th Venice Biennale. These artists are internationally active and widely recognized. They try to express clear social messages through their everyday actions in order to construct a variety of narratives, also related to consumption and human relationships with objects. In this chapter, however, I would like to discuss a number of more modest artworks that are slowly changing our way of thinking in a radical and profound way by infiltrating our minds and memories.

‘Arts and Memories’: Imamura Ryōsuke and Kotani Shinsuke

Imamura Ryōsuke (b. 1982), who lives and works in Kyoto, was invited to join the 2013 Tatsuno Art Project¹ and exhibited his works in the European-style building that formerly housed the Hyogo Shinkin Bank (Hyōgo Shinyō Kinko). He is highly skilled at making small interventions in ordinary situations in order to generate a subtle difference that prompts the viewer to see the world from a new perspective. His work plays on memories that all people share yet are rarely consciously aware of – unobtrusive sensations, such as the sound of rain beginning to fall outside one’s house, or of someone singing far away – and scoops up fragments of the extraordinary from the flow of mundane interactions with the world. For the project, Imamura

1 <http://www.tatsuno-art-project.com/>, accessed 30 September 2015.

Figure 11.1 Imamura Ryōsuke, *Amaoto to heya* (*Rain and Room*) (2013)



Photograph by Kasuya Akiko. © Imamura Ryōsuke

created the installation *Amaoto to heya* (English title: *Rain and Room*) in a Japanese-style room on the second floor of the former bank, which included a plethora of everyday objects from an old house in Tatsuno, such as a kettle, a medicine chest, a sofa, a grandfather clock, and a rotary telephone (Fig. 11.1).

A small hammer was mounted on each object, and the hammers rose and fell in cycles of varying duration, each time triggering a ‘plunk’ sound. The hammers were also mounted on architectural elements, such as the windows, floor, and transoms overhead, linking the work on display with the backdrop against which it was exhibited, and adeptly expressing those moments when our everyday surroundings and our own relationship with them are suddenly transformed in a fresh and revelatory fashion. If one listened carefully, the ‘plunk, plunk, plunk’ sounds came from all around, and began to sound just like the pitter-patter of raindrops when rain is starting to fall or tapering off. The realization that these sounds were emanating from the nostalgic utensils, evocative of mid-twentieth-century Japan, made it seem to the viewer as if time was flowing backwards, and suggested that perhaps the rain in one’s memory and the rain that fell when these objects were in their prime were one and the same. Imamura’s *Kairō to tōdai* (Hallway and beacons) was exhibited on the second floor of the same building. A mezzanine level runs around the second floor, encircling the wide space that was once a working

bank, and the artist attached small beacons to the handrails and light fixtures suspended from the ceiling, effecting a subtle transformation of the areas around the beacons and altering the perception of the space as a whole.

Imamura was also invited to take part in the 2012 Tatsuno Art Project and exhibited in the former factory of the Higashimaru Soy Sauce Company (Higashimaru Shōyu Kabushikigaisha), where soy sauce was once brewed. Here, he installed small LED lights and hammers at random, which respectively lit up or punched the barrels from time to time. Imamura also showed two video pieces in the annex of the Tatsuno Soy Sauce Museum (Usukuchi Tatsuno Shōyu Shiryōkan). One of the videos showed a cup containing soda water, a clock, and a blind. The wind blew and the blind flapped, the clock moved, and the soda water bubbled. Each movement had its own rhythm, stopping and starting separately. In everyday life we experience such ordinary things and remember them without knowing why. Imamura often uses these feelings as the key to his works. They do not contain a special meaning in themselves, but provide a comforting feeling. Imamura participated in another group exhibition last year, at the Mizunoki Museum (Mizunoki Bijutsukan) in the town of Kameoka, in Kyoto Prefecture. For this installation he placed a flowerpot containing a daphne plant in the basement when the museum was closed; during the day, he moved it into the storeroom and left only a few petals on the floor of the basement and stairs, and in front of the storeroom. The visitors could smell the daphne but they could not see it, because it was behind the door of the storeroom.

The second artist who was invited to participate in the 2013 Tatsuno Art Project was Kotani Shinsuke (b. 1980), who was born in the town of Himeji, near Tatsuno, and lives and works in Tatsuno. He produced an installation titled *Haiburiddo sāfin* (Hybrid surfing) in the salt-dissolving facility (Fig. 11.2). This installation employed contrasts of light and shade, forming an overall spatial composition from diverse materials that created a singular world of its own. As well as producing multimedia pieces incorporating video, objects, drawings, and other media, Kotani also paints. Many of his paintings feature intense, almost fluorescent colouration, and the seemingly jarring or threatening air of his work is balanced by a lightness of touch. In recent years, he has effectively deployed multiple media, making active use of light and sound effects, and creating highly lauded installations that expand the bizarre, proliferating microcosms of his paintings into three dimensions. Kotani applies his keen and unique linguistic sense to the creation of strange and evocative titles for his pieces and exhibitions, and draws the viewer irresistibly towards the realm of the unconscious. Brimming with Kotani's peculiar imagery, this latest installation was festooned with numerous LED tube lights and featured linear

Figure 11.2 Kotani Shinsuke, *Haiburiddo sāfin* (Hybrid surfing) (2013), detail



Photograph by Tanabe Mari. Photograph courtesy of Tatsuno Art Project. © Kotani Shinsuke

shadow pictures made with monochromatic projections. Meanwhile, objects made of chenille crossed regularly in front of the projector, casting additional shadows. Screens were made by sewing together pieces of fabric originally used in the process of making soy sauce, which bore stains and repairs from that time. In this environment, with its many constituent elements, viewers felt as if they were floating in an unearthly landscape reminiscent of a day-dream. This garden-like wonderland continually generated vivid, new images that contrasted with the sombre and imposing historic venue it inhabited.

The installations shown in Tatsuno can be interpreted in various ways and give us the opportunity to experience the charm of the place, which exists in quiet harmony with its old architecture. It could be said that these installations are not only recycling rubbish, but also the places, architecture, and memories that have been abandoned and almost forgotten there. In a way, they also provide a unique commentary on the rapid changes in Japanese society that have been prompted by the accelerating consumption of objects.

Eternal flow: Mirosław Bałka and Kamoji Kōji

The third artist invited to join the 2013 Tatsuno Art Project was Mirosław Bałka (b. 1958), who lives and works in Warsaw and Otwock, Poland. In the

Figure 11.3 Miroslaw Bałka, *The Fall* (2001)



Photograph by Kasuya Akiko. © Miroslaw Bałka

back of a raw-materials storehouse (in the north wing), Bałka's *The Fall* was exhibited (Fig. 11.3). The video, projected directly onto an exposed earthen wall, created the striking illusion that earth was crumbling away from the wall itself. This work was originally a dynamic video reminiscent of a Creation myth, in which the heavens fall down and form the earth below, evoking the aphorism 'everything flows' that is attributed to the pre-Socratic philosopher Heraclitus. Displayed in this environment, this dynamism seemed to relate to the renewal and restoration of the old soy sauce factory and the revitalization of the community of Tatsuno, which is, of course, one of the goals of the Tatsuno Art Project itself. In the silent, black-and-white film fine particles flowed down to the ground and created a new, ever-shifting landscape in a process that promised to stretch on for all eternity. Standing in the stillness and gloom of the former soy sauce factory, which was once full of noise and activity, viewers were invited to sense the vast flow of time and enter a meditative state.

Bałka's *Otw.* was displayed on a monitor placed on a *tatami* mat floor facing the shady garden at Shūentei, formerly the residence of the lord of the Tatsuno estate. It was a video, shot at night, of the artist's family house in Otwock, Poland, which he has transformed into a studio. Because it was filmed with

Figure 11.4 Kamoji Kōji, *Seibutsu (Still life)* (2013)

Photograph by Kasuya Akiko. © Kamoji Kōji

a handheld camera, the image shakes and wobbles with the movements of the cameraperson's body, rendering the scene of the dark studio even more ominous. While, for Bałka, the place is familiar and mundane, and the scene no doubt ordinary, presented in this way it probably takes on an alien air, even for 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, what we know is merely the tip of the iceberg. *Otw.* reminds us of how most of reality lies submerged in unknowable darkness, sending us spooky signals from time to time. At the same time, the place where the piece was exhibited was once the home of a regional lord, but is now open to the public, while the piece itself presented the *Otwock* studio that was once the artist's home. This synergy of work and venue bound Japan and Poland in a web of echoes across time and space. The space started to become alive once again thanks to the impact of the artwork.

The exhibition *An Approach to Being*² encapsulated the essence of Polish art following the Second World War, and offered an insight into its unique contribution to the international art world through the work of

2 The exhibition was held from 7 to 23 December 2013 at the Kyoto City University of Arts Art Gallery (Kyoto Shiritsu Geijutsu Daigaku Gallery) @KCUA; see <http://contemporarylynx.co.uk/archives/2218>, accessed 30 September 2015.

thirteen artists. Mirosław Bałka was among these artists, and the work of Kamoji Kōji, a Japanese artist who has lived and worked in Poland since 1959, was also introduced at it – for virtually the first time in Japan. Kamoji continues the international avant-garde movement that began at the start of the twentieth century in Łódź or Warsaw, and connects East and West by combining constructive and intellectual elements with philosophical concepts. His work is simple in style and uses accessible materials, such as Japanese paper, stones, water, and aluminium (Fig. 11.4). By arranging the stones or water in a particular way, he creates a dialogue between time and space, as if he is forming a connection to an eternal existence. This approach is reminiscent of Bałka and Imamura's work with glass.

Bałka exhibited *GPS Free* at this exhibition. In this video piece, one sees a rotating white sheet of paper accompanied by the irregular sound of a wind-up mechanism. The object moves in reverse, its mantra-like repetition intended to induce a cosmic dimension related to the 'search for the absolute'. That which is absent, is present. One senses the eternal flow of time in this very simple structure with its white, rotating paper. The title *GPS Free*, derived from the term 'global positioning system', might also mean no navigation, no travelling, and 'no Gypsies' – the eternal wanderers.

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 of video work in recent years, and uses a wide range of media to transform private memory into public memory and to transmute the mundane world into something fresh and unfamiliar. This invites reflection on human relationships with the world and the role everyday objects play in it.

***Displacement* – Chaos and reorder: Morisue Yumiko, Terada Shūko, and Nohara Kenji**

Featuring artists who have recently graduated from, or completed their studies at, the Kyoto City University of Arts (Kyōto Shiritsu Geijutsu Daigaku), I curated the show *Displacement*³ as the second part of the *Transmit Program* group exhibition.⁴ The title of this exhibition suggests the altering of a

3 The *Displacement* exhibition ran from 9 April to 22 March 2011 at the Kyoto City University of Arts Art Gallery @KCUA; see http://gallery.kcua.ac.jp/exhibitions/20110409_id=871#en, accessed 30 September 2015.

4 The *Transmit Program* exhibition began with an event called 'Kyō-sei', which was held to commemorate the opening of @KCUA in 2010.

position (transposition) or the replacement of something (substitution). In addition to connoting the reordering of materials or matters to bring about change in the present, in psychoanalysis 'displacement' was originally used to describe the mental act of eliminating dissatisfaction and anxiety by changing one's attitude or emotions regarding a certain thing and re-focusing them on something else. The word also indicates the transplanted state of a person who is not originally from a particular area. Such shifts in position disturb one's sensibilities, simultaneously creating the feeling that something is familiar and foreign, chaotic and reordered. You could say that these feelings are the very basis for the act of 'recycling'.

One of the participating artists, Morisue Yumiko, studied in the Print Department of the Kyoto City University of Arts. She initially made silk-screen pieces, but after developing an interest in the height of overlapping layers of ink, moved from planar to three-dimensional expression by repeatedly printing over objects, such as plasters. In the past, she has meticulously altered familiar items such as books, toothbrushes, salt cellars, strainers, and tea whisks, and turned them into works of art. In some of her pieces, one part of an object has been lengthened; for example, the bristles of a toothbrush or the bumps that prevent slipping on the palms of a pair of work gloves. In other works, Morisue rubs out parts of books and creates contour lines through the stratum-like edges of the overlapping pages. In another example, she perfectly reproduced paperback book covers as sand paintings on a sheet of glass. In all of her work, she very slightly alters an everyday item in a meticulous operation. With a winning sense of humour, this odd divergence from reality quickly captures the viewer's heart. Morisue says that instead of 'depicting something directly with the hand based on [her] own will', she opted for an 'indirect method' of working based on the rules and special characteristics of each individual thing. She manages to maintain this indirectness by using ready-made objects. In this exhibition, Morisue displayed a series of pieces based on the printed word, and another group in which she partially altered common, everyday objects, such as work gloves and deck brushes, to convey the essence of each thing (Fig. 11.5). Among the former are the reproduction of a receipt made out of beads; a certificate of merit recreated as a sand painting; a nameplate with leaves sprouting out of the letters; letters and notes created in coloured salt within a salt cellar; and a book whose contents have been partially rubbed out. By rubbing out the text of a book and emphasizing its contours, the outline of the book changes, but the viewer is still able to identify the object as a book; by exploring this extremely narrow boundary, the original meaning is stripped from the object. To what degree is it possible to remove the contents

Figure 11.5 Morisue Yumiko, *Dekki burashi* (Deck brush) (2011)



Photograph by Kasuya Akiko. © Morisue Yumiko

of a book and still identify words as words? The viewer cannot clearly make out the writing, but they can still sense the presence of the words – it is the limit of our recognition that Morisue sets out to test. By aiming to rid an object of its ‘meaning’, the artist does her best to eliminate any kind of preconceptions, and by closely observing things, she gives all of the elements equal value. The pieces that result from Morisue’s tenacious efforts extract the object’s ultimate essence (becoming, for example, the prototypical book or work gloves). The slight disparity creates a sense of surprise, and the work also charms the viewer with its quiet humour and unique wit.

Another participant, Terada Shūko, was also a student in the Print Department, and although she usually makes copperplate prints, she selected sculpture as her main focus. Terada says that coming into contact with a variety of materials has provided her with a wide range of options.⁵ Even when exhibiting her copperplate prints, she creates a heavy steel frame for the pieces. At times, she also displays the corroded copperplate rather than the print itself, or places it in a Petri dish. Terada is particularly

5 Interview with the artist, conducted at the artist’s studio in Hirakata on 8 March 2011.

attached to transparent materials and by making use of unremarkable, small objects such as mirrors, pieces of glass, clear-coloured buttons, and marbles she integrates the pieces on display into their surroundings to produce a tension-filled space. The floating sensation that the transparent objects create has a way of liberating the viewer from gravity, and the slight fluctuations escort us to another world. For the exhibition, Terada created an installation that incorporates a material that faintly glows with sections of fluorescent colour. The installation was inspired by a children's book that she read as a child, which centred on a little girl from a poor family who discovers a shop that sells lights. The girl buys a small orange light that she takes home and enjoys with her mother.⁶ In the piece, the drawer of an old desk is open and is lined with a particular type of beads. The space is somewhat dark and the lamp that hangs from the ceiling illuminates the desk and the viewer. When peering into the drawer, one's shadow falls across the beads, and one is surprised to discover a rainbow around it. It is as if the shadow is glowing. Though the change is so subtle that it would go unnoticed unless the viewer stared intently at the piece, once one discovers it, the world truly seems to have changed. Around the work, with its quiet transparency, the air seems to solidify and time passes in a different way. Terada's work is inspired by day-to-day life. For example, as she is walking, she might look up at the sky and notice a faint rainbow around the edge of a cloud (but the rainbow is so small that other people probably do not notice it). Though Terada's works at first seem tranquil, upon careful observation they provide the viewer with a variety of discoveries that stem from an accumulation of the artist's experiences, such as her interest in a scene or the light reflected in a puddle on the street. Her work addresses the viewer in intimate ways (Fig. 11.6).

Nohara Kenji, who also participated in the *Displacement* exhibition, majored in oil painting and studied at Marseille's School of Fine Arts (École supérieure des beaux-arts de Marseille). He carries a digital camera around with him every day and takes pictures of things that catch his eye. Nohara also keeps a notebook to sketch his ideas and practise drawing; he cuts out pictures that he likes and pastes them inside, and fills the pages with sketches. When something interests him in a familiar landscape, he extracts

6 When Terada was in about the second grade, she became interested in reading the complete version of Ogawa Mimei's *Akai rōsoku to ningyō* (The red candle and the mermaid), a section of which was included in one of her school textbooks. After asking her mother for the story, her mother bought her an anthology of children's literature. This story was also in the book, but Terada cannot remember its title or author.

Figure 11.6 Terada Shūko, *Orenji ni tomoru kage* (Shadow in orange colour) (2011), detail



Photograph by Kasuya Akiko. © Terada Shūko

that section and depicts it in a wonderful way, eventually assembling a series of these elements. For *Displacement* Nohara reproduced one of these scenes based on an accumulation of images; his imagination expands outward from the piece. Modifying the landscapes that he had gathered by cutting out each element and shifting these elements around, the artist arrived at a poetic vision of displacement. According to Nohara, his work is a 'progressive stage set that emerges out of the gaps'.⁷ The fantastic scene, consisting of a canopy with one section cut out of it – the last vestige of a now closed shop – and the surprising presence of an exterior wall and small windows, was something that actually existed in Nohara's neighbourhood. Was the hole in the disused canopy cut out to allow light in, or for some other reason? And what form did the rear of the structure take? Whatever the answers, the 'mysterious small room that appeared in this gap of ordinary space' was created in the gallery. While continuing to imagine the mysterious room and an old computer shop that had gone out of business, Nohara says he

7 Personal communication via email, 1 February 2011.

Figure 11.7 Nohara Kenji, *Nakkuri: Nukeana to nari daibingu* (KnuckLie – Dive into the loophole) (2011), detail



Photograph by Kasuya Akiko. © Nohara Kenji

decided to use the canopy design in his drawing. Along with this, his latest sketchbook (the eleventh, in which he still regularly sketches) was displayed at the back of the exhibition area. He also set up two monitors in the small room, with video games on their screens (each showed a motorcycle speeding away from the viewer) (Fig. 11.7). The flickering light of the monitors was visible outside the room through a worn window pane. The flow of time, dislocated meanings, and absence of an owner of these useless things with vague applications (a sun-bleached canopy, a clothes airer, old video games, weathered glass, a broken traffic cone, and a gas meter lined with mirrors) conversely allowed the viewer to catch sight of human forms and fragments of memory, which strengthened the presence of the objects in the faint light that flickered between the gaps in our awareness. By viewing this piece, time and space became dissimilated, and though viewers were in the here and now, they gained a sense of being nowhere at all, and continually moved back and forth as they experienced a definite reaction to the moment. In other words, the piece created ‘a strange open space in the middle of a town’, and as viewers enjoyed looking at this disparate landscape, they

took in the scene of a particular story that seems to be familiar and normal, but was actually entirely suggested by a series of fragments with no clear application.⁸

Among the similarities shared by these three artists is the restoration of the narrative in the wake of postmodernism – or perhaps this is another, entirely different world, one with the qualities of a displaced realm, which was summoned at the end of the modern world and in which new stories can be told. The code used for the stories previously told is no longer valid, and now, as the foundations of every genre are being shaken, artists are free to make use of a variety of elements, artificial and natural, often found in everyday life, such as physicality and memory. By creating new meanings after the old ones have been stripped away, the artists have in effect returned to ground zero, and in their modest yet confident endeavours to construct a new world, one could say they are ‘displaced’. In this way, they have returned to the origins of the creative act, and are now able to reassess the radical, interactive relationship between individuals, society, objects, and artistic creation.

Conclusion

By focusing on the ordinary things that we can find in everyday life and by recycling objects, memories, and places which seem to be abandoned and forgotten, the artists discussed in this chapter are trying to show us the meaning of existence through their artistic practices. They take items from everyday life and alter their meanings. To do this, they use a simple, visual language, taken from their surroundings; instead of using heroic elements, they utilize things that are small and trivial. These pieces utilize memories and can profoundly change our way of thinking. In doing so, they challenge the definition and the role of art, which is no longer a static object to be viewed, but something active that invites us to create a connection to the world in a dynamic way and helps us to understand and redesign our lives. These artists try to change the meaning of everyday life through their recycling of everyday items. In this way these artists might be able to open the door to a completely new understanding of consumption in the post-bubble (and post-Fukushima) era.

After the (spiritual and economic) confusion of the 1980s had passed, Japan entered the post-bubble era, during which people started to re-examine

8 Interview with the artist, conducted at the artist's studio in Neyagawa on 16 March 2011.

their lives and seemingly tried to reform their values and find order in chaos. In these circumstances, while attention was redirected to everyday things and familiar and simple events, art changed as well, responding to an increasing momentum to reuse things. Interestingly, this tendency was not limited to younger people, but could be observed across the generations. In other words, a common approach to creation in the post-bubble era was achieving the psychological goal of finding the eternal in the familiar. However, rather than this being a newly developed trend, this tendency had existed previously – but as social conditions changed, it was reaffirmed and its value came to be rediscovered.

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