

Michiko Oki, *Fabulous Yonder* (the group exhibition *Making Poetry with Solid Objects* @Komagome Soko, Tokyo, 21 Jan. - 13 Feb. 2022)

Appreciating works of art is supposed to be a pleasurable activity. But this pleasure is reserved for what we call 'contemporary' art. It involves an incessant, sometimes tedious, thinking under the pressure of judgement: Do I like this work or not? Do I value it or not? Should I tell others that this work is great or not? We restlessly feel, look, listen, observe, question, analyse, and judge works of art, in the light of our experiences, knowledge and emotions, and in reference to the opinions of others. This obsession with judgement is particularly evident in modern and contemporary art, the quality of which is based on the invention of 'new' meanings and stories through individual effort. Art in contemporary time has moved away from the predominantly religious art of the past, where meanings and stories were given collectively. The act of appreciating art in our time no longer takes place in the comfort of faith or sensual pleasure, but rather serves us as a diorama of judgement, demonstrating how a certain opinion is formulated, exercised and contributes to the creation of value systems in the cultural, intellectual and economic spheres. Especially since poststructuralism and deconstruction have taken over the Western intellectual and artistic climate, we like to claim that judgement is not a gift of human perception unique to each individual, but an amalgam of perceptual cannons, stereotypes and discourses that are culturally, socially and politically manipulated. There is not much left for a subjective agency in our feelings and tastes. How we think and how we feel largely depends on the cultural and social contexts. Art is increasingly being dispersed in the discourse of power relations, and the idea of aesthetic experience is dismantled into an exercise of critical thinking.

The recent trend in critical thinking (which in contemporary art owes much to French poststructuralist and deconstructivist philosophers) is essentially designed to assert that the personal is the social, and vice versa. The idea is to show how power intervenes in every nook and cranny of our lives, thinking and behaviour, and how the nature of power has transformed into a ubiquitous exercise in everyday life. Artists, curators, art critics, and art historians, all strive to give art an activist face, exploring its

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virtue in an application of discourses of political correctness and identity politics – colonialism, racism, immigration, indigenous rights, animal rights, eco-justice, anti-sexism, LGBTQ+ and so on (which seems to be a return of a collective belief). Art increasingly appears as a practice of representing/performing and provoking social issues. Especially since the 1960s, when Conceptual Art and Performance/Body Art began to conquer the Western art world, followed by Relational Art in the 1980s, political correctness has become one of the essential aesthetic categories, whose mission is to cultivate tolerance and understanding of the vulnerable 'I' and the 'other'. Art is responsible for a society: Artists appear as social scientists/activists, materialising and theorising their emotional, aesthetic and ideological/non-ideological response to what is happening in the societies in which they live.

In this climate, the experience of looking at works of art is like a moral test to see if we have the emotional/aesthetic tolerance to embrace something incomprehensible or unpleasant. The criterion is whether we can sublimate an intolerance into a sociological, let us say, 'anthropological' curiosity, in the hope of building a bridge between aesthetic pleasure and moral appeal. It would be an intellectual, and almost a moral failure if we could not extract some social significance from any work of art, however rubbish it may seem. If you were ever to show a sense of hatred, disgust or negation, you would be stigmatised as an aesthetic fascist. In this machinery of cultural/aesthetic relativism, and in the binary thinking exacerbated by the emergence of Conceptual Art (concept/material-technique, language/object, theory/practice and so on), the voice of 'Hey, the emperor is really naked' is destined to be suppressed. Objects have faded into concepts and events, and language has replaced technique. Art becomes a logo-centric battleground for the self-justifying defence of a concept as against the art of object/image-making. The play between the socio-critical quality of concepts and the craft quality of objects/images is a criterion for the credibility of a work of art in a contemporary context.

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On another front, in the face of works of art, we are still (and secretly) longing for the absolute moment that can nullify these intellectual hustles. In the appreciation of works of art, we can't hold our horses, we can't contain our expectations until the moment of the absolute 'yes', abandoning all these disgusting labours of judgement. Transcendence through an aesthetic experience is our perennial desire, in which we await the moment when we go beyond who we are and how we think, beyond our cultural and social constraints. There we wish to leave behind a thick-skinned shell of 'self' made up of layers and layers of personal/collective judgements and norms. When it comes to art, we are still stuck between two desires; a moralising desire to tolerate and understand any work of art as a social statement, and an aesthetic 'purity' that can liberate us from worldly concerns. In a sense, we are still crawling along with Theodor Adorno's perverted lament for cultural degradation and his desperate search for a reconciliation between social concern and aesthetic transcendence. When it comes to art and literature in the aftermath of the Second World War (after humanity had witnessed an unprecedented scale of violence), as Adorno aptly put it, we are still bound up by a moral obligation to understand the pain and suffering of others in an act of representation. We are obliged to see the world primarily through the eye of humanity's inherent violence. But while we remind ourselves that the idea of autonomy of art is no longer tenable and that art has to include social dimensions, we can't stop looking for something fantastic in art, some miraculous space of liberation that can free us from mundane concerns. Social criticism and aesthetic transcendence, this horrendous duality that art imposes on us, is what lies behind our act of looking at works of art.

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Good works of art can challenge cultural, social and perceptual canons; good works of art can remove us from worldly concerns and bring an untainted comfort to our noisy minds.

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These two conflicting expectations of aesthetic experience invite us to reflect on the nature of our desire for transcendence, which has a long history going back to antiquity. In the West, since ancient Greece, transcendence has been associated with an idea of truth, beauty and goodness. Most prominently in Plato's philosophy, these three elements were seen as targets for intellectual exercises to reach the higher scheme of the world, what they called the *idea*. The essence of human existence lies in the ability to think, feel and care (these were later formulated as logic, aesthetics and ethics, or more broadly as science, art and religion). We constantly raise our expectations towards these three elements, through which the higher world would be revealed, where the quality of the three would coincide with each other. In the Christian world, transcendental experience is in the hands of God, the only truth and goodness of the universe. It was the Enlightenment of the 18th century that reintroduced aesthetics as a philosophical study of the judgement of sense and taste, with the aim of distinguishing scientific reason from other human psychological/perceptual faculties. As aesthetics was being established as an independent field of study within philosophy, it became increasingly detached from science (the search for truth) and religion (the search for goodness), seeking an autonomous quality of beauty. The higher scheme of the world, such as the *idea* or God, to which transcendence was supposed to be oriented, began to disappear. Instead, new concepts such as 'the sublime' - an idea of beauty redefined as a sense of awe, especially driven by the force of nature - emerged as the goal of transcendental experience in aesthetics. This concept doesn't presuppose the higher world, but retains its relationship to an expectation of it in the form of a 'disinterest' in worldly matters.

Since then, the idea of beauty has been deconstructed into various aesthetic categories that contain neither truth nor goodness, neither *idea* nor God. Most decisively, the avant-garde movements introduced the new idea of the 'anti-aesthetic' into the aesthetic categories, which determined the entire history of art in the 20th century. This idea refers to anything that goes against the conventional idea of beauty; shock, ugliness,

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violence, disgust, anxiety, fear, the uncanny - anything that makes us feel unsettled and uncomfortable. The lower scheme of the world, as opposed to the higher, becomes a central concern. As the world of the unconscious was revealed (or, rather invented) by the rise of psychoanalysis, avant-garde artists, especially the Surrealists, began to delve into the deepest of this unknown universe of the human psyche for their creations. The higher scheme, formerly occupied by the ascetic *idea* or God, finds its place in the lower corner of the unconscious, buried beneath everyday life, where the Surrealists searched for a sublime beauty. With this newly invented dark sphere, aesthetic experience is redefined to include subversive, convulsive, disturbing, anxious feelings and emotions. The Surrealists explored these feelings omnipresent in everyday life, as an amalgam of the conscious and the unconscious, and recognised them as a sign of transformation/transcendence. They believed that giving representation to the world of the unconscious could liberate and transform our inner lives, ultimately leading to a change in social structures. They totalised life in the name of aesthetics, searching for 'the supreme point' where the unconscious and the conscious, art and life, coincide, dreaming of a social revolution through the liberation of the individual psyche. Life becomes the material for artistic creation, and politics becomes its practice. Although the Surrealists' attempt to unite art and politics suffered from ideological complications among themselves, we can see here the beginning of our time when art is expected to satisfy social concerns as well as individual needs. The efforts of the avant-garde artists led to the reintroduction of the good in beauty, to the invention of a new direction of transcendence, i.e. society.

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Society is not metaphysical like the *idea* or God, yet it is a rather abstract phenomenon, difficult to grasp. It is an individual human being who constitutes a society, but once a

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group of individuals is formulated into a society, it acquires a nature of its own that transcends a specific human agency. Society is both human and inhuman; we are simultaneously individual and social/collective beings. The 'I', an individual, is constantly transcending/transforming into a social being that doesn't coincide with one's subjectivity. In this obvious yet mysterious nature of our lives, in the Mobius-like movement between individuation and socialisation, we are inescapably transcendental. In fact, there is no need to assume a higher scheme of the world, since our society itself, our very being, is a system unknown to our mind. Society is metaphysical and physical, sacred and profane. The driving force behind what constitutes the organic activities of our society is quite opaque and mysterious. As in Kafka's stories, where society appears as an unknown complex system generated by the uncanny nature of our lives, transcendence takes place in the very complexity of relationships between people, creatures and all other entities in the world.

The second half of the 20th century witnessed the great shift in thinking that radically challenged anthropocentrism, i.e. the idea of the human (especially the white male) as a superior mind positioned above the world. With the rise of structuralism/poststructuralism and posthumanism, we began to explore an idea of subjectivity beyond the human agency or species, in a chain of power relations between different systems in a wider cultural, economic, political and environmental context. Our concern now is to unfold the human figure that has been constructed as a consistent, seamless entity, and then to dissolve it into a chain of relations and reactions to other people, creatures, environments or phenomena that participate in the dynamics of molecular activity. The question is: how can we think about life in a way that does not distinguish human beings from all other phenomena in the world? In this line of thought, new concepts have been introduced into aesthetic categories - hybridity, monstrosity, chimera, zombie, that which incorporates multiple elements to represent a threshold between different entities or ways of living. This new aesthetic advocates an idea of

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impurity, artificiality, multiplicity or complexity, as opposed to the standardised idea of beauty based on an idea of purity, singularity or harmony. The introduction of this aesthetic reflects the compelling reality of contemporary society, in which a question of boundaries is at stake, be they social, cultural, political, geographical, or biological. It inevitably implies a challenge to any form of ideological mechanism that promotes social discrimination and exclusion.

Here the duality in the appreciation of works of art returns - social criticism and aesthetic transcendence - but in a different way. Aesthetic transcendence illuminates the complexity of the world in which multiple systems intersect, influence, and transform each other, revealing layers of narratives that can't be reduced to a single meaning or story, throwing us into an ever-receding quest for truth, beauty and goodness...

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In his later years, Edward Allington used to tell me about a book he was working on. It was going to explore the concept of wonder and miracle in relation to a sculptural presence. Looking back on his unpublished book, I remember how fascinated he was by the existence of 'zettai hibutsu' in the world of Buddhist art. The main image of Zenko-ji Temple (Nagano, Japan) is something called 'zettai hibutsu' (absolute hidden Buddhist statue), which has never been revealed to the public, even to the monks of the temple. The statue is said to be Amithaba in the form of ikko-sanzon (the three icons with a large halo). It is said that no one has ever seen it and never will. Once every seven years, maedachi honzon (a replica of the original statue) is unveiled to the public, and only by catching a glimpse of this copy are people allowed to see 'zettai hibutsu'. The original is said to be the oldest Buddha statue in Japan, having been given to the Zenko-ji Temple from the Baekje in the mid-6th century, when Buddhism was first introduced to Japan. Within a few hundred years of its arrival, it became mystified as 'zettai hibutsu'. There are

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many theories as to why a particular statue becomes 'zettai hibutsu'. It is said that it has been mystified over the years by a complex combination of religious ideals, oracles and miraculous anecdotes, as well as practical reasons such as preservation, storage and theft prevention. There is also a wide range of historical, geographical and political circumstances that contribute to the mystification of the statues. The truth remains unknown.

For someone like me, who has no religious beliefs whatsoever, 'zettai hibutsu' is a puzzling phenomenon that seems to have come out of nowhere, arousing in me a curiosity filled with suspicion and dark humour rather than a sense of awe and veneration. What on earth does it mean that no one has ever seen it and no one ever will? An object that may or may not actually exist, of whose existence we are somehow convinced of without seeing it, has a value and significance far beyond the object itself. The significance of the object is both apparent and hidden. The fact that it is hidden and inaccessible is itself a sign of its divinity. It is a kind of iconoclasm. The meanings and values that transcend physicality reside in the realm of faith, or belief, which is a manifestation of a norm agreed upon by a particular group of people or community. When you step out of that realm, its magic (of meanings and values) evaporates. The magic of the thin veil, like the anecdote of the naked king, disappears in the blink of an eye with a single voice shouted from the outside. There are countless objects in the world that are as mystified as zettai hibutsu, that we cannot see with our own eyes, yet we are somehow certain of their existence. In the Western context, the Christian relics of the veil of Veronica or the shroud of Turin are probably such objects, although their mystification is the opposite of the iconoclastic process of zettai hibutsu.

Humanity has always found divinity in the invisible or inaccessible. Perhaps we can even say that a certain degree of mystification is a prerequisite for what makes communication possible - the intricate relationship between objects, images, words and concepts. There is a varying degree of mystification in our ability to communicate with

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others. It is a certain agreement about what coordinates what we perceive, what we see and what we know, something intangible and opaque that hovers in the air, emanating from words, images, objects, concepts and all other things in the world. What is it that makes an object 'something' more than an object? What is the secret, the mechanism that makes something miraculous? Perhaps we are still (and always will be) beholden to our exuberant desire for the fabulous yonder, for an aesthetic transcendence in which we are blessed with a momentary glimpse of what makes this world intelligible.