

Koki Tanaka: On Collectives, Art & Disasters

by Lilly Wei

Walking into the cluttered Japan Pavilion of the 55th Venice Biennale is like walking into a makeshift, D.I.Y. loft, workshop or community center. While not mayhem, the installation “Abstract speaking—sharing uncertainty and collective acts” by Koki Tanaka and curated by Mika Kuraya of Tokyo’s National Museum of Modern Art is decidedly not minimalist. Instead, the space, roughly columned, partitioned into the semblance of rooms, feels hospitable, disposable, furnished with a couch, benches, pillows piled against a corner, countless stacks of cardboard boxes and blocks of wood used as bases for improvised tables and stands. Among all this, videos, photographs, explanatory texts and objects are casually, if cannily, dispersed; it is an installation, after all. Some of the materials were already on site, recycled from Japan’s entry in last year’s Venice Architectural Biennale. Called *Architecture. Possible Here?*, it presented a housing plan for a town ravaged by the country’s disastrous 2011 earthquake, tsunami and nuclear meltdown. Tanaka’s incorporation of the previous installation is a gesture of conservation and collaboration that buttresses his own less direct references to the catastrophe, emphasizing his essential theme of community in the aftermath of extreme calamity. For New Yorkers, it recalls the compassionate communal endeavors of post 9/11 days and more recently, the collective efforts after Hurricane Sandy. Tanaka strongly believes that any current exhibition from Japan is inevitably framed by the “post-quake” trauma and should address it, although it is not exactly “post,” since much remains alarmingly unresolved.

Tanaka (born 1975 in Japan, lives in Los Angeles), a multidisciplinary artist, is known for a practice that explores the ramifications of art into life, a utopian genre with deep roots in the history of modernism, from the Russian Constructivists to today's burst of socially inspired productions. His videos of group tasks he initiates include artists and artisans, such as five pianists playing the piano at the same time, a wonderful sequence; five potters making one ceramic piece; five poets writing a poem together; and nine hairdressers cutting one person's hair, usually engaged in a discussion of their collective enterprise. In a *behavioral statement (or unconscious protest)*, 2013, Tanaka films a large number of people climbing up and down a fire escape, possibly evacuating the building or demonstrating the urgent need to save energy. His more open-ended activities he calls "precarious tasks." One is *precarious tasks #0 communal tea drinking*, 2012, in which he photographed a number of people drinking tea together. Tanaka suggested that they focus on the custom of tea drinking, the various countries from where tea originates, its Asian, its Japanese roots, its rituals and connections to other cultures, associations spiraling to eventually arrive at the deeply troubling irradiation and contamination of food, water and land in the wake of the Fukushima debacle. There is also an informal display of objects featured in the actions that include a vitrine of emergency foods and flashlights, drawings, ceramics, books, poems and so on, every item of equivalent, if unfixed value, the divide between what is art and what is not ambiguous, even moot. Staffers working on their computers have also been co-opted into the installation, as have the viewers wandering in and out, their presence vital and another instance of communal participation, fluidly merging with the multiple activities being viewed.

At the heart of Tanaka's quirky, engrossing, multi-layered venture are the relationships and interactions between participants, the obliquity of his approach immensely appealing, as were the participants. For him, ordinary communal action can be extraordinarily powerful, something we have all witnessed lately. The lengthy texts and even lengthier videos require patience but also reward it. Given how unassuming some of the activities are, they are also surprisingly poetic, the balancing of the banal, the naïve and the subtle

part of their strength. They are apt responses, inconclusive and therefore more truthful, to his question: what can art do in the face of devastation?

A neon sign at the entrance to the pavilion that states 9478.57 records the kilometers, it turns out, between the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear plant and the Japan Pavilion in Venice. Is that near or far? Tanaka, of course, understands that community today is a global phenomenon, national boundaries are porous, distances relative and constantly shrinking. No one, no nation can isolate disaster, the repercussions will eventually affect us all.

*The review was originally written in English and translated into Japanese for the magazine *Bijutsu-techo*. Lilly Wei is a New York-based critic and independent curator.

