

When the Seer Becomes the Seen

Keijiro Sato— Seed of the Universal One

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Is there beauty when thought is? The beauty, the love that thought knows is the opposite of ugliness and hate. Beauty has no opposite nor has love.

Seeing without thought, without the word, without the response of memory is wholly different from seeing with thought and feeling. What you see with thought is superficial; then seeing is only partial; this is not seeing at all. Seeing without thought is total seeing. Seeing a cloud over a mountain, without thought and its responses, is the miracle of the new; it's not "beautiful," it's explosive in its immensity; it is something that has never been and never will be. To see, to listen, consciousness in its entirety must be still for the destructive creation to be. It is the totality of life and not the fragment of all thought. There is no beauty but only a cloud over the mountain; it is creation.

Jiddu Krishnamurti¹

Keijiro Sato made art on the premise of motion, so it might be better to call it kinetic art rather than sculpture. In appearance, all unnecessary elements are stripped away, so his works seem very modern and might be described appropriately with the word *seihin* (pure poverty). An example is *Suspension L2B* (Fig. 1). A thin stainless steel pipe hangs vertically against a pure black wall, forming an axis around which two white Styrofoam balls turn slowly. As we watch, we see the two white balls rise and descend slowly, gracefully trailing an afterimage. Sometimes they burst apart, moving away from each other, one up and one down. The work creates a magnetic field that holds the attention of the viewer.

In contrast with much kinetic art, Sato's work does not make use of complicated motion or optical illusions to appeal to people. It does not act to arouse certain thoughts. It is simply a site that draws the viewer into a sense of mystery, creating a momentary state of consciousness in which one awakens to oneself. There is something that affects us directly. What sort of site is this?

Sato said, "The relationship of objects (kinetic art works) to me is a condition that closely resembles what I consider natural existence. Like a stone on the side of

the road. In terms of artistic expression, what is the expressive content of a stone? What is the expressive content of a flower?"² What, indeed, is the expressive content of a stone?

In "Essay on Thought Made into Material," written for the pamphlet accompanying Sato's solo exhibition at Minami Gallery in 1974, poet Shuzo Takiguchi said, "When a 'site' is created by whatever route, people turn quietly in that direction. And a silent conversation begins."³ Did Takiguchi find such a site and sense some sort of wordless communication? Another poet, Shuntaro Tanikawa wrote, in "On the Work of Keijiro Sato,"

When words that we are used to employing every day,
speaking and discarding, become poetry in a certain instant, we catch
a glimpse of infinite depths beyond the words. In the same way, in
this instance, a magnet or current used for everyday applications is
transformed, just as it is, into something equivalent to poetry. The
power that connects all of the parts in this direction is the artist's
power of imagination coupled with a greater power residing in the
universe that can never be known.⁴

What could this great unknown power be? We can find the answer, or the key, to these questions in the poetry of Michio Mado. Sato loved and respected this poet and strongly identified with the world he created.

I reached for a dish
And dropped it. It broke
Inside me
At the moment of my initial surprise
Before it hit the floor.

When the dish hit the floor
It broke once again.
What is the "breaking"
of the dish that breaks inside me,
Shrinking away like the setting sun?

No.
My thoughts race to
A hometown
Where the broken fragments
Will arrive far away
At the end of some time as they go on breaking.⁵

What is the difference in the “breaking” of the dish that breaks inside me and the dish that breaks when it hits the floor? Who is shrinking away shyly “like a sunset,” me or the dish? The difference becomes apparent only at a moment of self-awareness. Etsuko Tani, a scholar specializing in the work of Michio Mado, uses the example of the giraffe that appears in the middle of *THE ANIMALS* in her book *Mado Michio kenkyu to shiryō* (Documentary Study of Michio Mado).⁶

The giraffe, looking down, and
I, looking up,
Shook hands.
A spark passed between our eyes.

Then
The entire world
Grew quiet
And looked at us.

Tani comments,

The depiction of the giraffe is based on the sense of sight, in the meeting of eyes, and the sense of touch, in the handshake (personification). At the moment when the two beings touch, as the whole world watches quietly, the world (cosmos) touches them via the eye. A pregnant quietness (sense of hearing) is captured by the tactile eye (sense of sight). The ‘I’ that sees is also a ‘me’ that is seen, and a dual structure exists, composed of I and the giraffe and I and the cosmos.⁶

Tani makes the excellent point that the moment when the eyes come into

contact is the marvelous point in time when they are also seen by the world. There is, however, no dual structure in the moment when the “I” that sees becomes the “me” that is seen. There is either nothing or everything. This is not just sophistry. When the seer becomes the seen, there is no gap between the individual and everything else (the complete whole) where self-consciousness can enter. A dual structure arises in the process of remembering the experience. Perhaps it cannot even be called experience or memory.

This poem of Mado’s brilliantly reveals this moment and expresses a sense of connection with eternity. Quoting from Yujiro Nakamura’s *The Present of Philosophy*, Tani points out that he was a rare poet “whose imagination was intimately related (had a sense of unity) with the world (other beings) and manifested the appearance and the inherent essence of the object.”⁷ We are invited to experience a moment that can be described as religious, a point in time at which the self and the cosmos look at each other.

The thing and I are oblivious of each other. The thing does
not cause me to move and I do not cause the thing to move. There is
only one world, one landscape.

Kitaro Nishida⁸

Sato had a strong interest in Buddhism and Zen in particular, and he occasionally quoted from Kitaro Nishida. Nishida was a philosopher who constructed an original philosophy based on his own experience of Zen. His characteristic idea is that the opposition between subject and object arises from the desire for thought. He takes the position that there is such a thing as pure experience, a direct experience with no division between subject and object. Also, he believes that there is always something universal (general) behind our experience. All experiences are a dialectical process that causes a thing to divide and develop itself and at the same time limits the self. This is expressed by the words “self-limitation” applied to the general. Eventually, Nishida developed these ideas into a “the logic of the place” and “absolutely contradictory self-identity.” These theories were ultimately based on Nishida’s personal sense of “pure experience.” This concept of a consciousness in which there is no division between self and other suggests a way of entering Sato’s artistic world.

Nishida practiced Zen at Myoshinji temple in Kyoto, the headquarters of the

Myoshinji school of the Rinzai sect of Zen. *The Sayings of Master Linji* (Rinzai), the founder of the sect, include the following passage:

If you want to be right-minded, follow the teaching.

You must not have doubts. If it is expanded, it fills the universe. If condensed, there is not a gap big enough for a hair to stand in.

It is clearly and plainly independent and has never lacked anything.

It cannot be seen with the eyes or heard with the ears. What should we call it?

The ancients said, "If we call it *that*, we have already missed the target." Look with your own eyes. What is there beyond this?

There is no end to theorizing.⁹

That fills the universe. If it is condensed, there is no room to insert a hair in it. This is the universal One spoken of by Nishida. On the other hand, a practitioner of Zen must not depart from the condition of *that*. It is in the nature of pure experience as such not to have definite form. If it is sought with the intellect, it retreats. The more it is sought, the more it moves away.

That is, if *that* is fixed in words, pure experience of it is broken down into subject and object and it ceases to be pure experience. A difference arises between the expression of these two entities. Zen is conducive to paradox. It is fundamentally a world that transcends words. The best that can be done in expressing it in words is to give suggestions in the gap between thesis and antithesis.

Sato's expression is as paradoxical as Zen. His approach, which seems to strip everything away but function, seems to present only the phenomenon that occur in the magnetic field. However, the viewer is led to notice a moment that transcends the phenomena. Sato said that his works were created through play. They seem to have no serious artistic intentions. He was born to a family of kimono merchants and was often asked to help with the family business during his childhood. However, he was a genius at turning work into play. Sato's creative credo of "giving life to things through physical objects" produced the paradox of a full revelation of the mystery of phenomena with an intentionality equivalent to non-intentionality emerging from play. His concept of creation is like a concept of musical composition or a concept of life. The simple but unfamiliar phenomena of his art force the viewer to concentrate but the motion they show is sometimes unpredictable. This is a clever trick on Sato's part. However, the finger pointing at the moon is just a finger. We find what Sato calls "the

expressive content of a stone” at the place where it points. It can only be called *that*. It is what Takiguchi called a “silent conversation” and Tanikawa “a greater unknown power residing in the universe.” There seems to be a mystery in it that makes things and phenomena shine by its mere presence. It is connected with the “universal One” spoken of by Nishida. And Mado, with his childlike heart and words, seems to have been showing us the same moon.

The art critic Jun Miyagawa wrote,

The issue of today’s art can no longer be a return to the empty question of what art is. We need a tougher way of thinking that can bear the ambiguous experience of a work of art. What is most important at this time is to provide a glimpse of the possibility of an art that is capable, by this means, of becoming a philosophy. This is no longer an expression of some sort of idea but “thought” itself. Not artistic thought or a philosophy of art but thought that is itself art, or painting. In any case, we call this nameless thought art and attempt to see it as painting.¹⁰

This text was written with regard to painting but I think it refers to an issue that is relevant to all types of art. In the same article, Miyagawa said that art rejects God and attempts to be faithful to reality, even if it means sacrificing beauty in the process of sanctifying art as such. Art is no longer satisfied with simply being realistic but tries to become reality as such. A modern concept of the work of art emerges from this process, and subsequently the work of art attempts to become a different reality at a higher level than reality itself. However, this sanctification of reality is maintained and enhanced by unending violations of its sacredness. Miyagawa announced that the last veil had been raised and what was seen being it was nothingness. In order to create new art, the artist has to reject conventional values, but in the process of rejection, he loses the things that must be rejected.

There is no trace of the sacred or of beauty in Sato’s art; instead, it shows an intention of revealing motion or phenomena in themselves as much as possible. There is nothing more to strip away. Because of this, it might be described as invulnerable, impossible to violate. As I have discussed, however, this phenomenon paradoxically becomes a trigger that directly connects the viewer and the wider world.

The modernity in Sato’s work is not seen only in its inviolable, stoic mode of

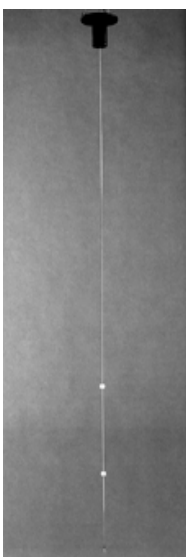
expression. The ambiguous experience that takes place in the time spent in front of his art becomes a catalyst that brings the viewer into contact with the wider world, giving an intimate understanding of the “nameless philosophy” of which Miyakawa speaks. Opinion may be divided over how to interpret this “nameless philosophy,” but Sato did not think of works of art as a special symbols of thought in a certain context, and it is obvious that he did not assemble them from formal elements, like words in a sentence. What sense a possibility of the reality of the work being transformed into a certain idea. Sato’s works of art, in their movement, may be seen as a “nameless philosophy” that could not be replaced with words.

The quotation at the beginning of this essay is from Krishnamurti, the Indian philosopher, whose ideas are very close to Zen. He was writing about the creative potential and strength of consciousness without thought, prior to division into subject and object. This sort of universal consciousness does not belong only to special people like Zen monks. Keijiro Sato showed through his art that this consciousness is something that sleeps like a seed in our hearts and sprouts at appropriate times. Although we have arrived at this conclusion with the guidance of Michio Mado, Kitaro Nishida, Linji Yixuan, and Jiddu Krishnamurti, we should remember that Sato’s art continues to be a nameless philosophy that has nothing to do with any theory.

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Translated by Stan Anderson

Fig. 1



Keijiro Sato
“Suspention L2B”
1980

Photo Kunio Miyagawa

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