

A place to Perceive Shifting

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As I stepped into the exhibition space of “Presence/Absence- introduction” I was wonder struck by the beauty of the light dimly and softly coming in through the three frosted glass windows. From the center of the exhibition room to the back window, four translucent columns molded with white synthetic gauzy fiber were placed at the top of a square on the ceiling about six meters high on each side. These columns stood straight about ten centimeters above the floor, reflecting the light. Slowly walking around them, I gazed back at the center space of the room, also at windows, curtains, the colors of the floor, walls, and ceiling.

The philosopher Kitaro Nishida, in his preface to “From that which acts to that which sees,” a collection of essays entitled “*Place*,” in which he explored the principles of perception and the existence of things, wrote the following words that are suggestive of interest of Shoko Aso, the artist.

It goes without saying that there are many things to respect and learn from the glorious development of Western culture, which regards form as existence and formation as good. At the root of Eastern culture, which has nurtured our ancestors for thousands of years, lies something like seeing the form of the formless and hearing the voice of the voiceless. Our minds could not stop searching for those. I would like to give a philosophical basis to such a demand.¹

Shoko Aso, the artist continued to ask questions about “existence” for a long time. She has used her body as the axis for sensing and thinking and has expressed what her body sensed through the medium of materials such as cloth and foam, by replacing them into space or the environment. Her method of visualizing and making aware of things that change, things that are uncertain, things that are invisible but can certainly be felt, is extremely delicate, ephemeral, instantaneous, and shifting. Her works were

wrapped with the wind, light, and other signs of the world around them.

In this paper, I would like to consider Shoko Aso's works from the perspective of a place where we perceive change. The elements of “change” and “place” can already be found in her first work “for sky” (2003). In order to gaze at the sky, she set up a space of blue cloth in the forest and created a place to spend time while feeling the surrounding, leading the viewer's attention to the shifting landscape of the sky. In “foam” (2007-2008), the bubbles created by a pump slowly change their shape due to the effect of gravity and fall to the floor, where they disappear, becoming liquid and circulating again. Since that time, Aso has been interested in “seeing what exists in between what is and what is not.”²

The uncertain existence of the bubbles was presented as the moment when the air in the bubbles popped and changed into liquid and the constant movement of the bubbles continued. This theme was developed in her next work, “still lifes in my home” (2012). Here, the perspective that “things” are “shifting” is expressed more vividly. Shoes, bags, lampshades, and other objects made of white synthetic gauzy fiber are shown floating in the space. These objects were used by Aso's mother and grandmother in the past. They were light, pale, empty objects that traced only the surface layers of things, which were replaced by

“the amount of air that the actual objects occupied in the space.”³

When the installation work was first shown at the Art Space Niji in Kyoto, the floor with a rectangular depression beneath those items was covered with bubbles that rose and fell slowly as they expanded with air. These frequent shifts remind us of the fluidity of air flowing back and forth between the inside and outside of the object made of cloth, visualizing the memories and signs that remain even after losing the main body, and questioning the true meaning of “what is there” and “what is not there.”

From there, the method of modeling with cloth was further developed by cohabiting with what exists in a specific space. The “~rowing out into the

calm sea~/Embarkation” (2013), presented at Setouchi Triennale 2013 on Awashima Island in Kagawa Prefecture, is a seminal work that references the history of the Awashima School for Seamen’s Training, which was established to train sailors for ocean-going vessels. Several small boats are hung from the ceiling to form a single large ship. The quiet movement of the boats, which sway softly even when passing nearby, and the way they row out into the sea just outside the building, make us imagine the heartbeat of the sailors who left with the passage of time. Similarly, another installation work, “sign of the white heron” (2016) was presented in a gallery space that has an adjoining bar and coffee stand. In the dark space, light bulbs are floating in the air, and several cups are placed in a row. At the back, a chain is dangling quietly from the ceiling as if it is hidden. Various elements are cut down and consciousness is condensed. The presence of empty objects wrapped in cloth and the presence of people spending time in the space here and now seem to overlap and become one. Focusing on the energy of the metropolis of Chengdu, China, and on various people who live there, the spirit of Chengdu is concentrated in “Water Texture” (2019) with the motif of glasses of water, which is typical and familiar to everyone in China. The repetition of the changing landscape due to development and the path to the future can be felt in the series of cups arranged in a row. These cups are illuminated by LED lights from below, and various images of massless water emerge, possessing the danger and beauty of uncertain substance. Another work, “one ocean all persons” (2016), presented at Setouchi Triennale 2016, is a vivid development that reflected something about the place in both material and phenomena by corresponding between natural phenomena and a cloth material and adding an action to the space. It is an installation work that uses the building of the sea cadet school on Awashima Island in Japan, as mentioned above. This building has several glass windows that face the sea on one side. This work shows blue cloth stretched out horizontally above the floor of the room. The breeze comfortably blows through the cloth and the viewers to the sea. The wave

motion transmitted through the cloth stimulates perception and imagination while responding to the history and environment of the building. Similarly, there is a work that expresses the climate and time at Hoenji, a Zen temple in Kanazawa. The title “Listen to the Songs of Winds” (2017), derived from the fact that Kanazawa was once said to be a town where “Aria (Noh chanting) fell from the sky”, was inspired by the circular phase, which is said to represent enlightenment and the entire universe in Zen Buddhism. Large and small flat circles are formed of synthetic gauzy fiber by using bamboo and acrylic as a frame, which was generously distributed horizontally in between the floor and the ceiling. The frames were swaying in the refreshing breeze, letting the tranquil light pass through them. It invites you to listen to the chanting of winds, to open up your senses, and to simply surrender your body to what is there. The experience is cleverly guided by the artist's emotional relationship with the beautiful place, where she becomes one with that which is beyond the individual, even though it remains in the midst of everyday life.

Something in the time and space of the artist's surroundings, buildings, cities, and climates, as well as natural phenomena such as light, wind, and air that pass through them, has been projected by meeting the material forms. The perspective on things in transition that runs through all of her works is also in line with the idea of “form is emptiness, emptiness is form”⁴ in the Heart Sutra. It teaches us that “things” temporarily appear due to fate and change again, that the world is made up of things that seem to exist but they do not really exist, and that “existence” and “nonexistence” are never dualistic. There is “occurrence” first, and in “occurrence” we can vividly see “object,” and by reflecting “occurrence” in “object,” we can see “what occurs.” In all her works, occurrence and object resonated beautifully and left something inexpressible like a lingering aftertaste.

“Shoes”, “mug”, “bag”, “dress”, “chair”, and “lampshade” extracted and reconstructed from “still lifes in my home” were floating lightly near the

entrance of this exhibition room. In the large space in the center of the room, “Presence/Absence- introduction” (2020), which is a new work, featuring four pillars made of cloth, stood dignified in the space. Beyond it, in a dark space about one meter square, “Constraints” (2015), in which chains made of cloth are suspended, was quietly installed. So far, we have sensed a gradual development from works that make us aware of phenomena to those that reflect and present something in the space onto the material, to those that create a poetic effect by bringing the material and the environment together. We can visualize part of a stream of her thoughts in her two earlier works, and the current work “Presence/Absence- introduction” is an extension of them.

The pillars are placed at the apex of a square, evoking an architectural space. Depending on the reflection of light and shadow, parts of the pillars appear to float and disappear, showing a kind of space between substance and phenomenon. The shifting forms blended with the exhibition space were very beautiful. The relative relationship between “occurrence” and “object” is perceived just like two sides of the same coin. The materiality of the cloth was made visually blurred and vague, and at the same time, another space was created, which seemed to take the expression to a new level.

Since ancient times, the erection of a pillar has played a key role in religious beliefs such as the ascension and descent of gods and has been considered important in different situations such as mythology, Shintoism, Buddhism, Shugendo, and other folk rituals, encompassing a variety of meanings. In this exhibition, the artist was inspired by the space called “Shiro,”

the basis of Yashiro(shed) of the shrine.

It is a spatial structure consisting of four pillars connected at the top by a shimenawa rope and is based on the Shinto belief that a drifting deity called “Marebito” may come flying and dwell in the empty space.⁵

The austere atmosphere of the exhibition space made me imagine the

sanctity of a Noh stage and its invisible boundaries. The pillars reflected the passage of time through the light and the sequence of light coming into the space at the present moment. On the other hand, they also seemed to hold the concept of “change” itself, which transcends time and space. By noticing the ambiguous inside and outside created in this way, and the creation of the concept of "place" that is visible and hidden there, it appears as something that still touches the origin of “existence.”

It is well known that the question of “existence” has been debated for a long time. The aforementioned space “Shiro” was a sacred “place” to accept a deity in Japan. Meanwhile, the concept of "place" was used as an essential foundation for existence in Greek philosophy in ancient times.

Although this concept disappeared from the forefront of knowledge after the renaissance, it was rediscovered in the development of the natural sciences in the 19th century, especially in quantum theory in the 20th century, and gave notable suggestions to various fields.⁶

According to Hideki Kono, electromagnetic and quantum fields revealed “the fact that the essence of phenomena and the existence of things that occur in nature can exist not in the matter as explicit existence, but in the 'field' of action or 'field' as a potentiality that acts in the implicit space behind it.”⁷

This theme overlaps much of the thinking of the philosopher Kitaro Nishida, who pursued the principle of existence from a system of cognition called the

“Logic of Place.”⁸

Yujiro Nakamura explains that the concept of “place,” which Nishida defined as "nothingness," is “not a place of nothingness as a lack of something, but as a rich world that actively generates all kinds of something.”⁹

Among the theories of place in various fields,¹⁰ the awareness of the invisible and the relative relationships of propagation and action that occur in a place are closely related to Aso's interests and

works. Through these speculations, I was again impressed by the depth and universality of this seminal work.

In “Presence/Absence- introduction” (2020), we are led to the root by accepting a “place” where what is there and what is not there are vaguely wrapped up.

Nishida's “nothingness” has a predicative nature that cannot be limited to existence or non-existence, in other words, it has all possibilities behind the subject, and he referred to it as “place.”¹¹

The words “Presence/Absence- introduction” also portray an image of a fundamental place of beginning that is neither there nor not yet limited.

The idea of the space created by the pillars was derived from the extension of the artist's earlier speculations. This abstracted “place” is wrapped in existence and absence, or creation and disappearance at the same time. And in this shifting “place,” a “place” that generates possibilities and imagination, the artist herself “exists.”

(Chikako Shakudo, Kurobe City Museum of Art)

¹ Kitaro Nishida, “From What Works to What Sees” in “The Complete Works of Kitaro Nishida, Vol.3,” Iwanami Shoten Co., Ltd., 2003 (first published in 1927,) p.255

² http://shokoaso.com/shokoaso/works/peji/foam_02.html [February 1, 2021], from Shoko Aso's website.

³ http://shokoaso.com/shokoaso/works/peji/still_lives_in_my_home.html [February 1, 2021], same as above.

⁴ Sutra book “Heart Sutra,” Nagata Bunchodo Limited Company, 1939

⁵ Kenya Hara, “White,” Chuokoron-Shinsha, Inc., 2008, pp.41-45. In addition, I asked the artist about the literature she referred to when conceiving her work.

⁶ Yujiro Nakamura, “Place [Topos],” Kobundo Co., Ltd., 1989, referred much in “Chapter1, ‘Place’ in Natural Philosophy and Rhetoric,” and “Chapter 2, ‘Place’ in Physics”

⁷ Hideki Kono, “Ba: An Interdisciplinary Discussion of Major Theories and Related Concepts” in “Mejiro University Journal of Humanities, No.6,” 2010, p.55 [available at the Mejiro University Repository.]

⁸ According to Shizuteru Ueda, Nishida turned from “pure experience,” which refers to a state of undivided subject and object, to “self-awareness,” a standpoint that is an internal combination of intuition and reflection. He proceeded to the problem of “place” where self-awareness becomes possible afterwards. (Referred Shizuteru Ueda, “Commentary” in “Kitaro Nishida's Essays in Philosophy I,” edited by Shizuteru Ueda, Iwanami Shoten Co., Ltd., 1987, pp.361-365.) Ueda theorized by thinking from what had been subject-centered in conventional philosophical thinking to predicate-centered according to the judgment format in formal logic, which known as the “Logic of Predicates.”

⁹ Same as note 6, p.181

¹⁰ Same as note 7, pp.45-56

¹¹ Kitaro Nishida, “Reply to Dr. Souda” in “Kitaro Nishida's Essays in Philosophy I,” edited by Shizuteru Ueda, Iwanami Shoten Co., Ltd., 1987 [first published in 1927,] pp.185-187, and Hisafumi Tanaka, “Kitaro Nishida,” Sakuhinsha, Inc., 2020, pp.190-191