

Message to the Environment

Tada Minami

By Iseki Masaaki



'Field,' 1981; 420 x 390 x 190cm; acrylics, black granite and iron; Photo by Sakumoto Kuniharu. From Nagano City Museum, Nagano

For as long as any of us can remember, we have never doubted if what we see—whether we are viewing nature or the city—is really there. But throughout history, we have known that scenes that appear to “really” exist can seem completely different when viewed through a mirror a lens. *Damashi-e* (trick pictures) with optical illusions are a good example of this phenomenon. And we know, as fact if not from experience, that what the eyes of certain animals or insects see is entirely different

from what can be seen with the human eye.

If we create an entirely new visual experience by artificially altering the way we look at things, and if the resulting changes to what we see comprises an artistic experience, it is within the range of possibly that the agent creating the artificial visual alterations itself be seen as a piece of art. For example, if artistic value emanates not from a reflection in a mirror but from the changes in that reflection created by alterations in the mirror's shape, the mirror itself is a work of art. Taking the argument further, the way it is put together or the shape itself, whether of a mirror or a lens, could be considered a sculpture.

Tada Minami is a modern artist who creates wonderful work based on this way of thinking. It is clear that what unifies Toda's work is her use of reflection and permeability. Her aluminum and stainless steel works, for instance, transform whatever is reflected in the skillfully calculated and crafted curves of her mirror-like surfaces. By contrast, her works in acrylic or glass transform the appearance of whatever lies beyond them. In both cases, she creates an unusual visual experience unattainable with the naked human eye, thereby changing the “reality” of what seems to actually be there.

It goes without saying that replacing conventional sculpting materials—bronze, stone, iron—with such materials as aluminum, glass and acrylic imparts a special character to sculpture. It is also, of course, obvious that these

materials are products of mass-production technology, and the production of sculptures in these materials is, even internationally, a phenomenon of the post-World War II era. These materials not only transformed sculpture as it had until then been known, but their greatest attraction was that the physical properties of these materials made molding nearly effortless. During the golden 1970s, when optical art was a global fad, several sculptors emerged in Japan who strove to create the effect of a dialogue between the material they used and the surroundings that were reflected or revealed in that material and, by it, giving a new existence.

Tada Minami's “Space Eye No. 2 (1975),” for instance, is a supreme example of the use of this effect. It is dependent on the optical properties of acrylic (with a critical angle of 42 degrees and 92% translucency) and, while the scene on the other side is visible, it, at the same time, overlaps other aspects of itself as it appears through the border of the cut surface and on a flexible curved surface.

This effect, taken to its extreme, can be incorporated into buildings so that the reflections created construct a new urban space. Tada has incorporated her works into buildings all over the country, from the façade of the Lee building in Tokyo's Ginza to hall ceilings and walls of museums and hotels. These works are not only part of the buildings—they transform the whole structure into a work of art, becoming the epitome of “practical” art. The Lee building is the archetype of this form; it is not only a giant sculpture that reflects the city around it, it also creates a dialogue among the sculpture, the building, and the city scape that enfolds it.

Tada moved from paintings into sculpture in the late 1950s. Her early sculptures were composites of iron and plastic. Her first work that forces the observer into a feel for the environment was her “Work 63,” finished in 1963. The fol-

lowing year, 1964, marked the beginning of her series entitled "Frequency," which established her reputation and marked the direction her work would take from then on. In the 70s and 80s, Tada exhibited works in large outdoor sculpture shows in Japan, and as she strove to define for herself what outdoor art should be she created her own style of sculpture with its particular relationship to its environment.

Her works preserve an intimate relationship with the surrounding space. As the observer participates, static space is transformed into movement, creating a kind of environmental design. In this way, Tada transforms an ordinary scene into the true environment she is seeking. Today, she continues in her pursuit to be an



*Phase,' 1989; 372 x 276 x 165cm; semi-reflecting glass.
Photo by Nishikawa Takeshi*

Right: "Headstream," 1991; 550 x 350 x 240cm; semi-reflecting glass and black granite. From: Tokyo Metropolitan Government.
Below: "Pole," 1979; 300 x 450 x 240cm; stainless steel, iron and crystal glass; From: The Hakone Open-Air Museum, Hakone. Photos by Nishikawa Takeshi



active artist.

When we observe a scene as it is revealed on or through an acrylic or stainless steel surface, we may feel that by creating this new environment by manipulating its physical properties the material itself becomes an empty space. And this space transforms our dialectic relationship with it. The material, in fact, can be said to reveal a limitless sense of existence. In this connection, Tada says, "To create art is not to leave a monument to our own existence to posterity, but instead to pass it on and communicate thought by giving form to concepts that enable humanity to continue its beautiful existence." (*Architecture and Society*, March, 1972).

This is Tada Minami's true message: we must always interact with sculptures and buildings within the natural environment.

Iseki Masaaki, an art critic mainly in the field of history of Japanese and Western modern art, is a professor at Meisei University in Tokyo.