

CUE

ART FOUNDATION

Julia Schlosser **Minding the Gap: The Artwork of Haruko Tanaka**

(An essay on Haruko Tanaka's solo exhibition curated by Cindy Bernard on view February 1 – March 10, 2007
With performance of *NARUHODO! Za Wahrudo / OH I SEE! The World*, Saturday, February 3, 2007)

In what ways can we understand cultures different from our own? What have we inherited from other cultures? Can we express our social and political outrage and still be at peace with our mundane, daily existences? Haruko Tanaka confronts these issues in her multimedia artworks and alternately finds answers and more questions for her efforts. The questions she explores often reveal cultural gaps, and her work revels in the gaps she discovers. In her photographic series (*SOME OF*) *My Inheritance*, she obligingly provides a way for the viewer to bridge the gap. However, in other works, such as *NARUHODO! Za Wahrudo / OH I SEE! The World*, an interactive video screening/performance piece that is part of this show, she denies viewers comfortable cultural isolation by pushing them over the edge of the cultural divide. In two of the video works that accompany the show, *California Telephone* (2003), and *From Ahmeh to Zushi Station* (2004), Tanaka exposes normally invisible cultural fissures by juxtaposing two sides of an issue.

A Los Angeles-based artist, born in the United States and reared in England and Japan, Tanaka uses a variety of mediums in her artwork: film/video, performance, sculpture and photography. Along with her role as an artist, she adopts a range of different cultural stances: activist, feminist and poet. She becomes involved with issues that concern her: the death penalty, immigration and the battle to save the now-defunct South Central Farm, once the largest community garden in the United States, situated in an impoverished area of Los Angeles.

Tanaka is especially influenced by the life and work of the African-American poet and activist June Jordan, and used lines of Jordan's poetry in her film *California Telephone*. Like early feminist artists, she concerns herself with the representation of women and people of color. Like the Fluxus artists from the 1960's, Tanaka mines the everyday actions of our lives as the basis for her artmaking, an aspect, for her, of "keep-it-realism."¹ Her collaborative performances and community workshops are ephemeral happenings, and she uses commonplace materials, such as plastic shopping bags, to construct the sculptural work for this show, *1000 triangles for some peace*.

Tanaka says that she is comfortable with her sense of spirituality.² Because of her Japanese heritage, it is tempting to invoke the tenets of Zen Buddhism when considering her work, however, her secular spirituality is not limited to one philosophical or religious point of view. Instead

¹ www.kissoftheworld.net, website for Haruko Tanaka.

² *In Conversation: Cindy Bernard & Haruko Tanaka*, October 2006.

it is more wide-ranging and embraces all of her daily actions, from “driving to dancing,” as opportunities for the expression of her values as an artist, an activist and a feminist.³ She explains her belief that “everything is everything,” by espousing “the hope that such a belief empowers us with the knowledge that there is meaning in who we already are, and that we do not ever have to wait for meaning to be given to us.”⁴ Her performances and workshops, along with her film and video works, explore the disparities between our expectations of the world and the realities we encounter daily, and contrast our personal identities with the way we see ourselves reflected in popular culture.

For this exhibition, Tanaka will present *NARUHODO! Za Wahrudo / OH I SEE! The World*, an interactive performance/video based on a 1980’s Japanese quiz show. In the 40-minute piece, the audience plays the roles of Japanese celebrity guests on the show, aided by three translators, including the artist herself. In the original show, the reporters traveled to various countries and interviewed people about a particularly obscure aspect of their culture. The guests were then asked an equally obscure question about that same subject.

Tanaka has edited together 10 of these segments. The rub, of course, is that the show is in Japanese, and most participants are unable to understand either the interview or the questions they must answer. Tanaka tries to solve this by providing two translators who, along with her, stand at the front of the audience and translate the video program.

Depending, however, on their degrees of experience, the translators sometimes “freeze,” unable to keep time with the video. This leaves the audience to fend for itself as the video rolls along. The result is a humorous melee as the audience, attempting to listen to both the original soundtrack *and* the translators at the same time, randomly shouts out answers. The overall humor of the performance is amplified by the intentionally obscure choices that the producers made to keep their original audience entertained, and by the ‘80’s era dress in the video.

As Tanaka points out, if content is accompanied by visual information, the audience is often able to understand (or think it understands) a great deal simply from the context and does not need the translator’s point of view at all.⁵ Examining the performance on a more serious level, however, reveals one of the central concepts that underlies and unites Tanaka’s diverse oeuvre: How do viewers bridge the gap that separates them from those they see as different? Perhaps in the end, as this performance makes clear, they are not always able to do so. Translators, translations, subtitles, didactic photographs: Tanaka uses these devices to ask viewers to examine the ways in which they understand “the other.”

Sometimes, our ability to understand each other is severely restricted by the limitations of the tools we have available. In the case of *NARUHODO! Za Wahrudo / OH I SEE! The World*, the gap ends up being the abilities of the translators themselves, which along with the audience’s lack of knowledge about other cultures, generates the humor in the performance. It does not take much of a leap to see how often the consequences for *mis*-understanding the point of view or words of another can be much more serious.

The visual centerpiece for the show is a large sculptural work called *1000 triangles for some peace*. This piece is based on the Japanese tradition of origami called *Senbazuru*, in which the participants fold 1,000 paper cranes in the hope of achieving a tangible goal in the world. While the goal may be as simple as the desire to win a child’s baseball tournament, or earn a

³ Artist interview with the author, 12/22/2006, Los Angeles, CA.

⁴ www.kissoftheworld.net, website for Haruko Tanaka.

⁵ Artist interview with the author, 12/22/2006, Los Angeles, CA.

promotion at work, one of the best-known contemporary uses is as a prayer for world peace. For example, many school children fold cranes and send them to be displayed at the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum. The cranes act as a prayer for peace and a plea that the devastating events that took place in Japan at the end of World War II will never be repeated.

Instead of folding decorative origami paper into cranes, Tanaka folds plastic shopping bags into triangles, using an “efficiency technique” that her mother learned from a Japanese television show. This conserves space and promotes tidiness as bulky shopping bags shrink into neat triangles. After she folds the triangles, Tanaka strings them together and suspends the resulting sculpture from the ceiling of a gallery. Rather than the impossibly large goal of “world peace,” Tanaka chooses instead the more achievable goal of “some peace.”

“When I was folding the triangles, I thought about taking time to be creative about living, and not just creative about artmaking,” Tanaka says. “World peace is such an abstract idea. First, we have to connect with personal peace, whatever that might mean to anybody—peace within your day or peace within your family. Some peace...whatever peace refers to in your own life.”⁶

In conjunction with *One thousand triangles for some peace*, Tanaka shows three large photographic works from the *(SOME OF) My Inheritance* series. These images deal with the increasingly diverse cultural inheritances we find ourselves receiving, not just from our families, but from anyone we might encounter in our daily lives. They are influenced by Japanese cookbooks, which unlike Western cookbooks, include exhaustive photographic documentation showing the various steps necessary to complete each recipe.⁷ In one of the photographs, Tanaka passes on to the viewer the step-by-step instructions for folding plastic shopping bags that she received from her mother. In the other two, she pushes the idea further by giving instructions for folding fitted sheets and large squares of fabric. Here, rather than challenging the viewer with the task of understanding the jumbled onslaught of cultural diversity of everyday life, Tanaka confronts the cultural gap directly by allowing viewers to integrate rather than reject aspects of cultures different from their own.

Haruko Tanaka's artwork draws on the rich history of performance and installation art from the 1960's and 70's. Like the Fluxus artists, she insists on the fusion of acts of everyday life with her artmaking practice. Influenced by early Feminist performance artists such as Yoko Ono, whose work addresses both the personal and the political, Tanaka skillfully embeds relevant social and political issues into her performances and videos, producing works that challenge the often-invisible cultural assumptions abounding in the popular media. Her egalitarian performance, video, photographic and sculptural pieces use social customs, ritual and the inherent slipperiness of language to point to the cultural gaps that are so prevalent now as we move toward an increasingly multicultural society. Rather than authoritatively seeking a universal resolution to the issues she confronts, her work instead provides the viewer with a multiplicity of opportunities to find resolution for themselves.

Julia Schlosser
Los Angeles, January 2007

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ *In Conversation: Cindy Bernard & Haruko Tanaka*, October 2006.

This essay was written as part of the **Young Art Critics Mentoring Program**, a partnership between AICA USA (US section of International Association of Art Critics) and CUE Art Foundation, which pairs emerging writers with AICA mentors to produce original essays for loose-leaf insertion into CUE Art Foundation exhibition catalogues. The writer, **Julia Schlosser**, is an artist and art historian who received her M.F.A. in creative photography from California State University, Fullerton. She is currently completing her M.A. in art history at California State University, Northridge, with an analysis of images of pets in contemporary photography and video. Schlosser teaches at C.S.U. Northridge, C.S.U. Los Angeles, and other Southern California institutions. **Hunter Drohojowska-Philp** was the mentor. Hunter Drohojowska-Philp is a Los Angeles-based writer who specializes in the topics of art, design and architecture. She regularly contributes to *Artnews*, *Artnet* and the *Los Angeles Times*. In 2004, her first book, *Full Bloom: The Art and Life of Georgia O'Keefe*, was published by W.W. Norton. It is considered to be the most definitive biography of the artist. She recently completed the texts for a book of architecture photographs by Julius Shulman titled *Modernism Rediscovered, Volume II*, to be published by Taschen in 2007. At present, she is writing a book about the Los Angeles art scene in the 1960s.

AICA (International Association of Art Critics) was formed in order to revive the critical discourse that had suffered under Fascism and the war, and which was under pressure in nations around the world. It was founded in 1948/1949 in Paris and originally affiliated with UNESCO as an NGO ("non-governmental organization"). At present there are 72 member nations representing more than 4,000 art critics. **AICA USA**, headquartered in New York, is the largest national section, with a membership of over 400 distinguished critics, curators, scholars, and art historians around the country. Please visit www.aicausa.org for further information.

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