

Hanayo's theory of the evolution of happiness in the twenty-first century

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The British anthropologist Mary Douglas refers to marginal elements that lie outside classificatory systems as pollution. If we leave aside the fact that pollution has a negative ring and tends to create misunderstanding if used referring to an artist, Hanayo cannot help springing to mind when we think about this meaning of the word.

Hanayo continues to transform herself at a dizzying pace as she freely traverses the demimonde and the fields of fashion, mass media, theatre, music, dance, and art while moving from Tokyo to London, Hanover, and Berlin. Such multidisciplinary activity is not particularly new in art history. Indeed the trend is once more becoming conspicuous, especially in the recent activities of young artists. To a certain extent however it is possible to identify the core field to which the activities of most of the predecessors and colleagues belong, even when the activities straddle various realms, whereas definitions are completely out of the question in Hanayo's case because everything is equally and inextricably interconnected. In that sense, her art can only be described as something marginal that lies outside classificatory systems.

How, then, can we understand and explain her unique aesthetics, which seem to defy any kind of categorization? This question formed the starting point for the exhibition at the Palais de Tokyo, which marks the first time that her solo show has been presented by a public institution. To put the question another way, how can we interpret and evaluate her existence and creativity in the form of an exhibition without being shackled by the framework and institutions and the context of art in the narrow sense of the work? In addition to promoting an understanding of diverse approaches to the visual arts and encouraging a reexamination of existing classificatory systems and paradigms, what new openings does this experiment provide for interpreting the age in which we live?

“Touché a tout“ aesthetics and a life in performance

Since childhood, Hanayo has resided in different countries and became familiar with a variety of accomplishments the way in which she expresses herself probably derives from her geisha training, which lasted for seven years. The shock of seeing the collapse of the Berlin Wall before her eyes convinced her to return to Japan, where she jumped headlong into the geisha world in search of a new arena for expressing herself. In that world, she learned physical forms of artistic expression that created intimate interaction with the surrounding space through singing, dancing, and her own gestures and behavior.

During that period, Hanayo also seems to have acquired the mythology that later grew into her unique “touché a tout“ (touching everything) aesthetics, namely, a willingness to undertake anything on a wide level while letting diverse activities coexist and interconnect without contradiction. If we ignore the danger and boldly define the roots of her wide-ranging activities, she is first and foremost a performer. Her singularity lies in the fact that, consciously or not, the element of performance always exists, regardless of whether music, photography, or her own life is involved. Her “media-ized“ body creates a myth of the hypermodern geisha who has returned from abroad, while simultaneously destroying the myth of the photographer and the artist. What appears candid, defenseless, and seemingly graspable as a fixed image slips away, resolutely refusing to show its true form. Moreover, the object of her curiosity always expands and nimbly catches hold of other talent around her. By

collaborating with those other people, she absorbs different skills exactly like a sponge, enlarging the elusive Hanayo even more.

The place where snapshot photos and girlie art intersect

Work dubbed “girls’ photographs” began to be turned out by young woman artists during a new boom in snapshot photos and “girlie art”, genre that have drawn the attention of the art world since the mid-1990s. At times, Hanayo’s photographs, too, are discussed in conjunction with “girls’ photographs”, which consist of snapshots of daily life that are remarkable for their fresh images and personal touch but show little technical skill and lack distinction with regard to composition, color, and subject matter. Most of these photographers appeared on the art scene in an age when simple cameras that anybody can operate became available. For nearly two decades, on the contrary, Hanayo has continued to use an old camera that was a keepsake from her grandfather, and no significant stylistic changes can be seen in her photographs. Whereas the photographic techniques of most of these women artists have improved over time, thus reducing the tension generated by the amateurism of the photographs, there has been no technical improvement at all in Hanayo’s case – far from it. She manifests virtually no interest in acquiring skill; for instance, she takes pleasure in preserving the accidental effect produced by the traces of mildew on old film that was shot more than a dozen years ago, in what might be called Japanese naturalism. Even the reason for taking the photographs is unclear, and underexposures, overexposures, and blurring caused by the movement of the camera have increased in recent years.

Hanayo’s photographs do not simply inscribe on paper the fleeting sensibilities of adolescence; nor do they form a documentary of family album. They are a strange collection of fragmentary images that differ from both art photos and “mere” amateur photos, yet they possess a certain underlying continuity and narrativity. However, they do not form an installation that edits space like the pages of an opened book, as Wolfgang Tillman’s display does. The way in which they are displayed initially has the look of pin-ups devoid of any order or serquentiality. Nevertheless, there exists a flow of time and space that is unique to her. The exhibition of Hanayo’s work concurrently with displays of the work of Tillmans, Erwin Wurm, and Laurent Moriceau at the Palais de Tokyo provided an unexpected opportunity to examine in a comprehensive way the diverse uses of photography as a medium in contemporary art. In particular, an interesting contrast is formed by the displays of Tillmans’ and Hanayo’s work, both of which at first seem to depict everyday moments yet are fundamentally different. Whereas the former creates »constructed photos« in which the overall composition is carefully thought out, the latter appears to deconstruct the world by completely eliminating the element of artistic intent. Also, Tillmans’s photographs in recent years have come to resemble abstract paintings as a result of his practice of producing prints in the darkroom without the use of a camera and creating images that attain a high level of perfection. Hanayo’s images too are acquiring a beauty suggestive of abstract paintings through extreme underexposure and overexposure and increased blurriness, in other words, by retreating from photographic perfection.

An Eternal »Enfant Terrible«

Described as »Lolita- like« and »infantile« the world of Hanayo’s photographs is also mentioned in recent discussions about innocence in art. To be sure, girlish sensibilities pervade Hanayo’s work, and the subject of her photographs in the past few years has shifted mainly to a world that centers on her daughter Tenko, so this interpretation is not completely off the mark. However, she in no way treats children

as the principal focus. She does not depict a world that is viewed with fresh childlike sensibilities, nor does she present a view of children as creatures who fundamentally possess both innocence and guilt, in which sweetness and devilishness coexist.

Rather, what determines her work is her particular way of life itself, behind these appearances. In a magazine interview, Hanayo remarked that she feels the most affinity for the ideas expressed in Ashley Montagu's book *Time, Morphology, and Neoteny in the Evolution of Man*. »Neoteny,« that is to say, the attainment of adulthood while retaining special fetal and infantile characteristics, refers to the act of becoming an adult without losing the curiosity and adventurous spirit that children possess. To put it another way, it is the act of developing without relinquishing a variety of skills. As we grow older, we are usually forced to choose a specific path to follow. Adulthood brings with it the fate of specializing. I recall Gaston Bachelard's remark that the happiest lives are ones that are able to escape this fate. "In that sense, the existence led by Hanayo in which she expands her range of interests free of categorical constraints surely represents the happiest way to grow and develop.

Hanayo does not try to directly depict the times; nor is she probably even conscious of being an artist. Nevertheless, she is clearly a product of her times and still very much an artist in the sense that her activities are open-ended and constantly reject definitions. The way of life that she leads, distancing herself from fixed social categories, conventional wisdom, any rules and adult values, and relying on her own principles, has a persuasive, untamed power that emanates from her work and activities as a whole. That is why Hanayo appeals to, and also inspires a bit of fear in, people today who tend to lose sight of the direction in which their own lives are headed.

To go back to the beginning of this essay, Mary Douglas states that pollution holds both danger and the latent power to renew and regenerate order. If so, from a positive perspective, Hanayo may indeed embody pollution in the world we live in today.

[Translated from Japanese to English by Janet Goff]