

## OBSERVE, ASK, SUPPOSE

**R**olls of pink toilet paper, a crate of oranges, red plastic lawn chairs, tin basins: these are some of the objects—materials—that have appeared in the work of Koki Tanaka.

Collect, pile, throw, tie, scatter: these are some of the verbs that describe how Tanaka uses the materials to make his works of art. In a sense, what is art-making after all if not aggregating and arranging disparate elements into a coherent whole? There are, of course, subtractive processes in art-making—for instance, carving a block of wood or stone to make a sculpture, as has been done by artists for centuries, from Michelangelo to Rodin to countless artists working today. Instead, Tanaka has released the toilet papers, the basins and the oranges from states of equilibrium to free arrangements on the floor by the force of gravity, and roughly tied the banal plastic chairs into a mound for him to climb on, rather than to sit on. Tanaka records these seemingly random or mischievous gestures and resulting designs as short videos or simple photographs, or present them as objects per se in the physical space of exhibition.

An important aspect of Tanaka's work is about the relationship between the world of innumerable objects we all live in and the possibilities of some of those objects used, linked and redefined in unexpected, ingenious and even ludicrous ways. In that sense, we need to make an imperative addition to the list of verbs



**IMAGES** courtesy of Koki Tanaka

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**YBCA PRESENTS** contemporary visual art, performance, film/video and public programs that celebrate the artistic and cultural diversity of the Bay Area as well as innovation and experimentation by national and international artists.

above: “observe.” Take for examples: a photograph Tanaka took at his parents’ house of the dish with a mound of used bars of soap (*Soaps in Their Hands*, 2008); another photograph of the artist’s own hand, taken at the moment when he realized that he has the unusual ability to hold his thumb parallel to the rest of his fingers when closing them into a half-fist (*Monster in My Hand*, 2008); and a beautiful swirling double helix created by attaching colorful ribbons at the ends of the wings of a ceiling fan, inspired by the contraption used by street meat vendors in China (*The Fly Never Gets Inside*, 2009). These become the artist’s own sculptures precisely because he suddenly recognized the prosaic yet inventive and heeded attention to what normally does not warrant a note. Tanaka has stated, “Even things and movements that have hardly any significance seem to contain something never seen before when they are singled out and looked at,”<sup>1</sup> and it is this attitude that enables him to go on the search for “the possibility of infinite number of worlds” in what we customarily think of as a singular material world. The worlds Tanaka has created thus far are not quite infinite but already many. Add to the list of descriptions above an umbrella dancing in mid-air and milk cartons placed in a single file on the road and then squashed by a car in an instant. Are these mere visual gags?

All art—to be more precise, all serious art—needs to “ask” and “suppose”—two more critical verbs. Besides his quest for the “infinite number of worlds,” then, what is the question Tanaka asks and what are the ways in which he supposes in his art? Despite the simplicity of his gestures, I have the feeling that the artist’s questions are not of a fundamental kind but are rather spontaneous, responsive to situations and contingent on contexts. Accordingly, in the group of works—or better, the web of propositions—he presents at YBCA (ranging from a haircut performed by a team of hairdressers to placing his artworks in a thrift shop to showing his sculptures to a dog), then Tanaka does not expect, I imagine, his viewers to engage in every proposition. More exactly, I believe he hopes that his viewers will be stimulated by the various—some of the infinite—possibilities to think again (or for the first time perhaps) about the world of things and the attendant, mostly automated, behaviors that govern our lives each and every day.

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### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> *Koki Tanaka Works 1997–2007* (Tokyo: Akio Nagasawa Publishing Office, 2007) 63.