

VANCOUVER, January, 2008, Koki Tanaka @ Centre A



Koki Tanaka, Turning the Lights On 2007 installation view at Centre A ©Koki Tanaka, photo by the artist

TURNING THE LIGHTS ON
Koki Tanaka

Makiko Hara, the new curator of Centre A Gallery, inaugurated her debut by inviting Koki Tanaka to do what he does best: take a humble object and surprise us with the unexpected. On November 9th, Tanaka lit up the darkest street corner in Vancouver by plugging together hundreds of everyday light bulbs. The effect was brilliance.

KT “There are a lot of abstract things and moments waiting for us to break through to a new perspective.”

With his quintessential spontaneity, mindfulness, wit and fondness for zeroing in on the ticklish underbelly of any environment, Koki Tanaka specifically sited the central part of his theatrical installation in the middle of Centre A’s cavernous space. It was strewn with 150 wooden pallets, rough and rife with imprints made by time, grime and heavy rain. The pallets appear scattered but are skilfully arranged, echoing the slow swirl of the sea off the docks a few blocks away.



Koki Tanaka, Turning the Lights On 2007 projection view at Centre A ©Koki Tanaka, photo by the artist

Placed on and round the pallets, seemingly at random, are hundreds of used lamp bases lit with 60 and 100-watt bare bulbs. To get some idea of the brightness, close your eyes and visualize every lamp that you remember in every room of every place you’ve ever lived in since you were born. Take off all the lampshades and then snap on the main switch. What you might see when your eyes adjust is incandescent splendour. This is the absurdly individualistic and collective troll of illuminated history that Tanaka presents in his exhibition. Criss-crossing the personal with the universal is Tanaka’s style. He also happens to have an intuitive

awareness of the energy of an everyday object, like an old lamp with its inherent memories, matched with an ability to shift that charge just by noticing its presence. He seduces us to pay attention as well. It's not farfetched to say that some serious exchanges of energetic currency took place for Tanaka himself in his five-week residency as he sleuthed second hand, junk and skid row pawn shops.

KT (Explore the) "infinite possibilities of chance to change our perceptions of the world."



Koki Tanaka, Turning the Lights On 2007 view from the street ©Koki Tanaka, Photo:William Ting

It is a one-of-a-kind collection from kitsch to classic lamps that spans decades: a finely sculpted ginger haired pale-skinned woman whirling in a lemon-coloured gown, a pair of ceramic Canada geese taking off in mid-flight, a stark amphora. (Some of the brass harps attached to the lamp bases appear to be vertical haloes.) One pre-lava lantern has a moving component: it features koi swimming in bright aqua water. A highlight of the assortment of other light fixtures includes a regal and very fun ten-foot tall amusement park star sequentially flashing its rainbow coloured lights. A mirror ball, 5-globe dining room chandeliers, slender floor lamps, mock Tiffanys and naked fluorescent tubes radiate with new life. There are even a few baby Kliegs that ante up the wattage.

Off to the left side, Tanaka set up an intimate Christmas-y display. Almost surrounded by translucent scrims, one has to look sideways through the plate glass window to see the multiple strands of blue / white / orange / red bulbs and one with tiny pumpkins that drape and garland the floor. A pristine wire reindeer, almost life-sized and light studded, calmly faces east.

Between the two sections of the installation lies a cache of spotlights: unlit, unattached, but with potentialities that could revive the instant that a connection is made to a power source. The title testifies that turning the lights on is not an act of

passivity. What we give our attention to activates and animates not only the object, but also something intrinsic within us.

KT "Everything is Everything."



Koki Tanaka, Turning the Lights On 2007 installation view at Centre A ©Koki Tanaka, photo by William Ting

A specialist in ephemerality, Tanaka's first video grace perhaps best encapsulates this. It was part of an exhibition that took place in an about-to-be-demolished school in Tokyo. He filmed in situ a basketball that was bounced on the floor, the hand unseen. The ball is ever released, ever returned. Hypnotic as a mantra, it paid homage to every child and adult (teacher and parent) who had ever set foot on the school's grounds and within the building.

In a recent interview with the artist, Johan Lundh, curator and writer, remarked, "Tanaka's video loops are self-referential ... and not necessarily about progression. It's about creating a narrative, a storyline."

Tanaka latest video made during his residency at Centre A similarly pays homage to individual "portraits" of the lamps displayed at the Gallery, along with footage of countless, priceless moments in many different situations when people turned on lights. The lyrical video production is presented from sundown to midnight as a gigantic scale projection that fills the 40 by 20 foot front window of the Gallery, facing Hastings Street. "It's a magical Lightbox," observed writer, Michael Shandrick.

The exhibition directly references the Centre A as the former BC Electric Building, built in 1912 as its corporate headquarters at the corner of Carrall and Hastings.



Koki Tanaka, *Turning the Lights On* 2007, projection view at Centre A ©Koki Tanaka, photo by William Ting

KT *"For me art is included in society. It is not extra."*

"Tanaka brings a frame of mind. Warmth. He accepted to deal with the conditions," states Makiko Hara. By conditions, she means the ones outlined for the Gallery by Public Art Vancouver's project *Intersection* and by the surrounding neighbourhood itself. The Downtown Eastside draws enough international press coverage on a weekly basis bearing witness to its dire economic and social realities. Yet, it is not Tanaka's style to be political, critical or to become a problem solver. As he said to Lundh: "I'm a visitor, not a citizen ... I keep a distance. A clear concept. Not think about it too much."

His exhibition, however, begs people to wonder and ask questions. While standing outside on a chilly night making notes, three local people came up to talk with me. A toothless, elderly woman gave an unsolicited opinion: "I like this!" "I know Makiko ... can you spare any change for a coffee?" A man who lives nearby in Native Housing lamented, "I'm a roofer. I guess I'm not supposed to understand." When I told him about Koki Tanaka and his work he said, "But why did he make it here? This is a dark area and there's a lot of sadness." I replied simply, "He made it for you." He gazed into the gallery, nodded and then smiled with relief. To round things out, an exuberant man wearing a Hawaiian shirt exclaimed: "Pretty wild! Cool! What class! I've done my lights. Last night, I put them up. Got my whole ceiling lit up! Fifty-two strings!"

Later, waiting for the bus on the black November street, I looked across to the Gallery and saw a glowing oasis.

KT *"In the moment we aren't thinking about it so much. We recall a moment that we can see many times, connecting not to our imagination but to a real event ... If we face the reality of life, I think we can deepen our understanding of the world. I always try to look for that kind of moment in my life."*

Tanaka's installation and video work does not shock like the blinding Klieg room that Vancouver-raised Terence Koh did for the Whitney earlier this year. Instead it poetically electrifies and is most reminiscent of the scale and focal intricacies by Judy Pfaff combined with the more contemplative spaces by light artists like James Turrell.

TURNING THE LIGHTS ON is a most memorable exhibition galvanizing the everyday object and astonishes us through both the momentality and monumentality of light.



Koki Tanaka Turning the Lights On 2007 installation view at Centre A (detail) ©Koki Tanaka, photo by Debra Zhou

Koki Tanaka was born in 1975 in Tochigi, lives and works in Tokyo, Japan. Tanaka is one of the most watched young Japanese artists to emerge on the international art scene today. Tanaka received his MFA from Tokyo National University of Art and Music in 2006 but attracted international attention since early 2000 when he was a student. Tanaka has been invited to many international exhibitions including the Echigo-Tsumari Art Triennale (2003 and 2006), the Taipei Biennale (2006) and public video screenings at MOMA, New York (2003) and Los Angeles MOCA (2007). Tanaka was selected for the prestigious International Artist in Residency program at Palais de Tokyo in France in 2006 followed by a solo exhibition. Tanaka is featured in the new edition of *Ice Cream: Contemporary Art in Culture*, a selection of 100 of the most significant emerging artists today. (PHAIDON Press, 2007)

TURNING THE LIGHTS ON

Artist: Koki Tanaka

Curator: Makiko Hara

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(with appreciation to Makiko Hara, Johan Lundh, Kristina Lee Podesva and Koki Tanaka)

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