From Endless to Everyday: The Video Work of Koki Tanaka

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For Koki Tanaka's recent installation Everything is Everything (2006) at the Taipei Biennial, the artist scattered eight monitors among hundreds of everyday objects throughout a large hall in the Taipei Fine Arts Museum. Each monitor features a short but distinct video loop comprising a series of brief scenes in which the artist and two assistants perform with the items on display. By experimenting with ordinary objects in unexpected ways, the artist transforms the ordinary into the extraordinary. This project in Taipei, ambitious both in its conception and realization, comes only five years after Tanaka's earliest video works that addressed the everyday in a simplified, but more repetitive, manner. The artist's work has evolved from single-channel looped videos to multi-channel, multi-dimensional installations—a development that reflects his own changing perceptions of time and space, as evinced by his incorporation of installation techniques that bridge the gap between the art-viewing experience and that of the everyday.

The video work Grace (2001) is one of several works which Tanaka described as an "endless" video loop. Grace features a short, single-channel video loop of a basketball that bounces continuously on the hardwood floor of an empty classroom. Each time the ball strikes the floor, it makes a pronounced sound at a regular interval, similar to the ticking of a metronome. The beat of the bouncing basketball continues without end, marking out time for the viewer at a steady and incessant pace. For Tanaka, there is no difference between the first and second loops in a work such as Grace. However, when one is instructed to think of this work as being "endless," a shift in the viewer's perception is required—from a sense of repetition to one of infinite change. As Tanaka explains, when conceived in this manner, each moment of the loop is changing endlessly—no two moments are ever the same. This shift in perception can be likened to the effects Einstein's theory of relativity is said to have on parallel lines that are extended infinitely. According to the parallel postulate of Euclidian geometry, two lines are parallel and will remain so indefinitely when the sum of the two interior angles created when a line segment intersects two straight lines equals 180°. In other words, in the two-dimensional plane of Euclidian geometry, these two lines will never intersect, no matter how long they continue. However, when one considers this axiom in the real world, governed by the laws of physics, Einstein's theory dictates that these same two lines will eventually curve and may even intersect each other based on gravity's ability to bend both space and time. With this in mind, the transformation of Tanaka's bouncing basketball in Grace, from an act of simple repetition to a moment of "endless" change, is plausible when conceived of on an infinite scale, just as parallel lines realized in the physical world may in fact intersect at some infinitely distant point. Although this analogy simplifies, one can say that Tanaka's concept of the "endless" transforms the repetition of ordinary events. In this way, the artist takes into account the variable nature of things as they exist in the everyday.

Extending the exploration of time that Grace undertakes, for its installation at the "SAP Art-ing Tokyo 2001: Space, Time, and Body Lived" exhibition in 2001, the video was shown on a large monitor placed on the floor in the corner of an empty classroom where the basketball loop was originally recorded. Replacing the basketball with the video monitor, Tanaka superimposed the "endless" moment of the video loop onto the real world with the aim of fusing these two separate realities—that of the videotaped basketball and that of the actual classroom—for the viewer. Visual cues within the work suggest the basketball is physically present, bouncing endlessly inside the classroom. However, without the assurance that the ball exists in reality (i.e., the

exhibition space) it becomes difficult to accept the ball's transformation from ordinary into extraordinary as an everyday possibility. Instead, here the artist substitutes the video monitor for the basketball to create an oversimplified, one-to-one relationship in space that does not correspond to the work's dynamic concept of time. Thus, the installation technique results in an isolated video experience that is disconnected from the viewer's everyday experience.

The next milestone in the evolution of Tanaka's video installation practice occurred with the installation of the work Trunk, Blood and Light (2004) in the group exhibition, "Roppongi Crossing: New Visions in Contemporary Japanese Art 2004." For this unique installation, the artist constructed a 13 x 26 x 15 foot enclosure that fenced off his work from the rest of the museum space with a perimeter wall fabricated of unfinished plywood. Upon entering the enclosure, the viewer passed through a short disorienting hallway that zigzagged its way into a large angular space with green carpeting on the floor and an open ceiling. Once inside, the viewer was immediately faced with a huge, off-kilter video projection of a Samsonite suitcase grotesquely bleeding onto the floor of a dark empty warehouse. This haunting image was accompanied by an unnerving soundtrack of trickling fluids and the ominous hum of a generator. Despite its lurid inspiration from horror films, the video portion of Trunk, Blood and Light acts as an unexpected showcase of Tanaka's deft editing of image and sound and highlights his keen sense of timing and visual composition. Throughout the work the viewer is faced with the unsettling presence of the trunk alternating between being thrown across a blood soaked warehouse floor, dropping onto the pavement outside, or spinning around in complete darkness. In between these startling moments are brief pauses in the form of audio silence coupled with a blank black screen, which build up suspense only to be followed by a frightening crash and copious amounts of simulated blood filling the screen. Tanaka heightens the jarring nature of this work by creating a disorienting enclosure to house this video projection. The formal qualities of the video are magnified, again, through the physical dimensions of the space as the projected image intentionally "spills" over the projection wall onto the adjoining walls and floor.

This transitional work is a sort of detour on the path from the "endless" to the "everyday." Although not the first non-looping video, Trunk, Blood and Light, represents a concerted effort on the part of the artist to break away from the repeating loops that featured heavily in his previous works. By breaking away from the loop as a structuring device, Tanaka denies himself the transformative properties of the "endless" loop, and instead forces the issue of transforming an ordinary trunk into something wholly other by delving into a surreal nightmare. As such, Trunk, Blood and Light represents not only an ambitious departure from the artist's looped works grounded in the realm of the everyday, but more importantly, a cohesive installation in which his conception of the exhibition space amplifies the effects of his video work.

The 2005 installation of Buckets and Balls at the artist's studio at the Tokyo National University of Fine Arts and Music marks an equally significant moment in the artist's growth—the inclusion of everyday objects within a site-specific exhibition space. In Buckets and Balls, the artist arranges items readily available in his studio, including ladders, chairs, and wood planks, into a series of increasingly more complicated exercises through which a yellow ball must make its way into a blue bucket. The video has been edited so that more often than not, the ball effortlessly reaches its target regardless of the complexity of the exercise. Once the ball reaches the bucket, the exercise is deemed "complete" and is immediately followed by a new set of obstacles to overcome. Tanaka hints at the hours of trial and error required to piece the work together by intermittently including outtakes before a given stage can be "cleared." This process of editing, along with the careful timing between cuts, infuses the work with a playfulness that is perfected here.

Another important aspect of Buckets and Balls is the inclusion of the items used in the video—namely the bucket, ball, ladders, and chairs—purposefully placed within the installation.

Although a seemingly minor adjustment to Tanaka's previous installation techniques, there is an amplification process that occurs when the viewer simultaneously experiences the video and is also confronted with the physical presence of the objects. This process can be understood as the result of a feedback loop in which the object itself acts as the initial input. The object is then transformed through the video process and projected into space as the output. It is the reintroduction of the object back into the exhibition space and the resulting multiplicity of both physical and simulated presences that forms a reverberating feedback effect. According to the media theorist Paul Virilio, video occupies a unique tele-presence that is isolated from the here and now and is consequently without any concrete presence in the world. Tanaka recognizes this dichotomy between the reality of the moving image and that of the real object and strategically places the viewer between the two extremes. In this way, the viewer's perception fluctuates between the material and immaterial while attempting to reconcile these two distinct realities. Tanaka has continued to utilize this technique of site-specific multi-dimensional installations in projects throughout the world, adapting it to various locales from group exhibitions at the FRAC Champagne-Ardenne in France, to his most recent installation at the Taipei Biennial. The artist comes full circle with Everything is Everything to create a cohesive, multi-channel multi-dimensional installation on the subject of the everyday. For this work, the artist and two assistants spent a total of eight days recording their interactions and interventions with mundane objects, including hangers, cups, towels, an air mattress, and toilet paper, found around Taipei. Their physical properties were tested (e.g., a metal hanger is stretched to its breaking point) or their uses were expanded (e.g., a level placed on two table legs becomes an impromptu hurdle). Tanaka and his assistants experimented with these objects multiple times both indoors and in public, and their actions were compiled into eight distinct video loops ranging in length from 1:19 – 1:50 minutes. Tanaka's video footage focuses the viewer's attention entirely on the objects through the use of tightly cropped shots that either show the performers from the neck down or remove them from the shot altogether. This focus on the objects was reiterated in the installation space by placing the video monitors directly on the floor alongside the very same items featured in the continuously looping videos. The resulting installation was a jumble of video monitors, blue extension cords, and hundreds of common household items strewn across the length of the room. As the title Everything is Everything suggests, there is a sense of interconnectivity that permeates all aspects of this installation: the video images relate to the objects on the floor; each monitor is connected to the same blue extension cord, the number of monitors corresponds to the number of days spent recording the video footage; and an image on one video monitor relates directly or indirectly to the video image on another monitor. As one walks through the space watching video after video, maneuvering around one familiar object after another, linkages become clear. In this way, Tanaka encapsulates the experience of the everyday, in which one continually experiences sameness in an ever-changing world. Although the objects within the installation are quite familiar, Tanaka's experimentations locate them outside the usual frame of reference, just enough to encourage a rethinking of one's worldview.

With Everything is Everything, Tanaka moved beyond the original aims of works such as Grace and other early single-channel "endless" looped videos. No longer content transforming the ordinary into the extraordinary, Tanaka has embarked on a fundamental transformation of both time and space through his increasingly complicated modeling of the everyday world. With each subsequent installation, the artist's conception of time and space has expanded to accommodate more variables of the real world within the limited scope of the exhibition space. As Tanaka's work addresses the everyday, his art becomes indiscernible from the experience of daily life. Tanaka achieves his goal of "changing our view of the world"—by blurring the line between art and life, time and space, the viewer cannot help but experience reality anew.

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1. Koki Tanaka, email correspondence with the author, 25 December 2006.
2. Stephen Hawking, A Brief History of Time (New York: Bantam Books, 1996), 30-32.
3. Tanaka, email correspondence with author.
4. Paul Virilio, Open Sky, trans. Julie Rose (New York: New Left Books, 1997), 10-11. I was first introduced to Virilio's concept in Barbara Fischer's essay "Speed Still or Still Speed" in Euan Macdonald, Everythinghappensatonce, (Germany: Verlag für Modern Kust Nürnberg, 2005),

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