

A Way of Knowing: Nishiki Sugawara-Beda

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Nishiki Sugawara-Beda: Zero at Home

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I HAVE ALWAYS FELT THAT ART IS AN EPISTEMOLOGY, a way of knowing the world. Art is a form of knowledge even as it is an object of knowledge, highlighting not so much what we know but how we come to know it. In terms of knowledge, contemporary artists tend to take facts as given, as ground zero from their aesthetic point of view. Certitude, then, becomes less important than the array of emotive reactions the art object can engender. If this conception of art is viable, then we might ask what does Nishiki Sugawara-Beda want us to know with her “Zero at Home” exhibition? And how does she want us to know it?

The artist would like viewers “to explore their own spiritual worlds through both physical and imaginative space,” and leave the exhibition “with visual and mental frames for their spiritual world to linger, form, and exist.”¹ While we can take the professor of art at her word, the words of the influential Dadaist Marcel Duchamp also come to mind. A seventy-year-old Duchamp once famously claimed the existence of an “art coefficient” at work in the creative act: the difference between what the artist intended to create and what was ultimately created, “like an arithmetical relation between the unexpressed but intended and the unintentionally expressed.”² Indeed, the simplicity

1 Nishiki Sugawara-Beda, “Zero at Home” exhibition statement. Provided by the artist.

2 Marcel Duchamp, “The Creative Act,” in Salt Seller: *The Writings of Marcel Duchamp*. Marchand du Sel, ed. Michel Sanouillet and Elmer Peterson (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), 139.

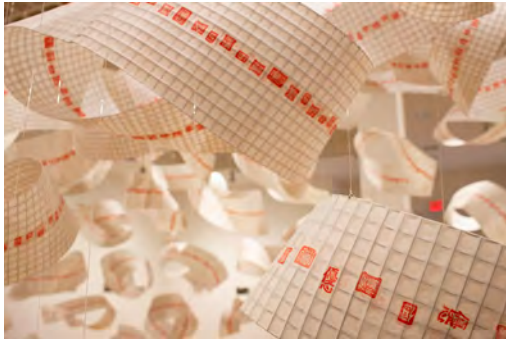
of the exhibition is deceptive, and one gets the impression that there is more going on in the gallery space than is readily apparent, perhaps even more than the artist is aware of. Also like Duchamp (and the Minimalists), Sugawara-Beda wants the spectator's mind and presence to complete the artwork. This open-ended invitation inspires me to investigate some of the deep underlying themes in her work.

Human Knowledge - Words

Kotodama Converse (Figure 1) dominates the gallery in which it is located. An industrial sensibility permeates its abstraction, with grids of metallic wire embedded in the hovering circlets of rice paper that twist and fold upon themselves (Figure 2). The sculpture is steeped in the humanistic, communicative function of art: the red *kanji* seals that bisect the rice paper in slightly irregular lines display the characters for "heart and friend" and "communicate and heart" grouped together. As the title indicates, the work is Japanese in inspiration. *Kotodama* means "word-spirit," while "Converse" (as in conversation) places these sentimental couplets in an interlocutory position with respect to the viewer. The artwork acts as an aesthetic invitation that asks the spectator to engage its composite being with an energy of positivity, warmth, language, and closeness.

At the same time, however, there is a paradox at play with *Kotodama Converse*, that speaks to the complex way that we, as subjective beings, come to know the external world. The object is eminently accessible. During the exhibition, attendees walk freely in and around its low-hanging canopy. But for all of its humanistic aspirations, the artwork actually floats like a distant singularity. It seems not to point to anything in particular, a hallmark of the abstract. The language of abstraction is international. Abstraction's syntax is relative, non-objective, ostensibly open to all humanity. Ironically, this also makes it universally foreign, indigenous to no one, which might help explain the disconnection between the artwork's call of humanistic engagement and its seeming detachment from the normal manner with which we communicate.

One wonders if in fact the artist is less concerned with abstraction, than with monumental representation. In the aesthetic environment "Zero at Home" presents, the mind wanders and synapses trigger as constellations of ideas and imaginary images collide in a miasma of possible indexicals. There are external references at work here, in the West Gallery space. Classicity emanates from the white pillars that frame the sculpture. In some sense its effect is that of a natural history museum, recalling the remains of a dangling Cretaceous skeletal *Torvosaurus* or *Triceratops*. Seen from some angles, *Kotodama Converse* looks very much like the globular mass of the



human brain free from its encapsulating exoskeleton (Figure 3). This is probably the artwork's most appropriate visual synonym. For communication is ultimately a way to transfer the contents of one's mind/brain into another's. The *only* way to do this is through symbolic means, whether verbal or written, sonic or visual. Art is therefore perfectly placed to illustrate this telepathic, uniquely human phenomenon.

Do scientific descriptions tell us more about the world, or do aesthetic ones? Of course, in the end both ways of knowing obtain. Duchamp's simile describing the artistic act as an "arithmetic relation" hints at this bivalent condition. Sugawara-Beda's artwork speaks to this dynamic as well. The rectilinear pillars and grids within and above it have a hard scientific association, while the curvilinear bands take on a softer humanistic tone. Indeed, the exhibition title "Zero at Home" contains both numerical and sentimental allusions. However, to the extent that communication is the key, one must insist that the world of art appears more fundamental. Words communicate the inner content and meaning of a mind to the outside world. *Kotodama Converse* does this both literally with linguistic seals and symbolically via its sculptural forms. Each circular ribbon is an individuated phonetic fragment in the totality of the artist's creative speech act. In a way its ambient mass is a surrogate for the human presence that the artwork

Figure 1 Nishiki Sugawara-Beda, *Kotodama Converse*, 2012-2020. Rice paper, mesh wire, calligraphy ink, rice glue, and fishing wire. 12 x 10 x 16 feet, dimensions variable. Photo: Michael Modecki. Copyright © Nishiki Sugawara-Beda.

Figure 2 Nishiki Sugawara-Beda, *Kotodama Converse*, 2012-2020 (detail). Photo: Nishiki Sugawara-Beda. Copyright © Nishiki Sugawara-Beda.

Figure 3 Nishiki Sugawara-Beda, *Kotodama Converse*, 2012-2020. Rice paper, mesh wire, calligraphy ink, rice glue, and fishing wire. 12 x 10 x 16 feet, dimensions variable. Photo: Nishiki Sugawara-Beda. Copyright © Nishiki Sugawara-Beda.

Figure 4 Nishiki Sugawara-Beda: *Zero At Home*, installation view showing *Kotodama Converse* (left) and *KuroKuroShiro* series (right). West Gallery, Texas Woman's University, Jan. 13 to Feb. 7, 2020. Photo: Nishiki Sugawara-Beda. Copyright © Nishiki Sugawara-Beda.

entreats to complete it. As the cognitive scientist George Lakoff argues in *Philosophy in the Flesh* (1999), “The mind is inherently embodied. Thought is mostly unconscious. Abstract concepts are largely metaphorical.”³ The psychoanalytic overtones of this statement—both Freudian and Jungian—hit the mark. We know the world with both our subjective and objective faculties, both aesthetically and scientifically, and we are usually not even aware of this. Sugawara-Beda brings this abstract reality to the viewer, whom she sees as “contributing psychological and emotional content as they enter and interact” with a symbolic artwork that engages these dualisms directly.⁴

Sacred Space - Spirit

“Word-Spirit” (*kotodama*) refers to the Japanese belief in “the mystical or magical...power inherent in words”; that “words can make things happen.”⁵ So, what is happening in the gallery?

Perhaps the best way to make sense of “Zero at Home” is to understand it as an instance of humanistic geography: as a space that centers human experience as the fulcrum of meaning vis-à-vis environment, and a place where feelings and sentiments can find corporeal existence and privilege. In the long history of art, religious spaces have primarily provided the context for such expression. Indeed, the exhibition statement makes clear that the artist understands the gallery space in spiritual terms, as a sort of sacred space with which to engage, one created collectively between artist and art-goer. But how might this be achieved?

The spatial arrangement of parts in the gallery retains an asymmetrical quality consistent with certain Zen paintings, such as Muqi Fashang’s *Six Persimmons* (c. 13th century) or even prehistoric Jomon pottery from Japan (c. 3000-2000 B.C.). The seventeen small-scale abstract paintings on the wall (*KuroKuroShiro*) are arranged in strict

3 George Lakoff, *Philosophy in the Flesh: The Embodied Mind and Its Challenge to Western Thought* (New York: Basic Books, 1999), 3.

4 Sugawara-Beda, exhibition statement.

5 Michael F. Marra, *Japan's Frames of Meaning: A Hermeneutics Reader* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2011), 28.



Figure 5 Nishiki Sugawara-Beda, *KuroKuroShiro XXIII*, 2020. Sumi on wood, 6 x 12 inches. Photo: Nishiki Sugawara-Beda. Copyright © Nishiki Sugawara-Beda.

rectilinear sequence on one side of the gallery, conversely set against the curvilinear *Kotodama Converse* on the other (Figures 4 and 5). This asymmetry is duplicated with the sculpture, which is also hung off-center with respect to the vertical pillars that frame it (Figure 3). The effect of this configuration is subtle but important. Viewers in the room instinctively or unconsciously adjust to this imbalance, and in so doing thereby open the door to intuition, as the innate desire to systematically analyze things becomes somewhat thwarted. Installations such as these are not problems to be solved, but knowledge to be gained. Artists tend to use the emptiness of an installation as an intentional element of the imaginative experience they envision. Scale—measured in the difference between what is present and what is not—becomes the metaphysical force at work with how physical spaces can address the immaterial soul. In this case, such spatiality is in accord with conventional sacred spaces, such as large-scale churches and basilicas.

The contemporary abstraction of the exhibition should not disrupt this analysis. Modernist critics such as Michael Fried have found transcendence in unlikely places such as these. Fried would take issue with Sugawara-Beda's call for audience interaction, deriding it as unnecessarily "theatrical." Nevertheless, for Fried traditional representation in any sphere is not an automatic guarantee of artistic preeminence. The key is to be in the moment, present with the "presentness" of the art object, and with the instantaneous insight one can find in an aesthetic space designed to facilitate it. "Zero at Home" arguably succeeds in that appeal. To take him out of context but still to his point, a place can be sacred even if it is not literally so, for "we are all literalists most or all of our lives." As he famously claimed with spiritual flourish: "Presentness is grace."⁶

Although Zen teachings and Kyoto temples arise in personal discussions with the artist about the installation space, one need not think in such specific terms. Lokesh Chandra, one of the most venerable and imaginative scholars of religious space at work today, sees structural spirituality as "...the eternal absolute in a flux of appearances." According to Chandra, "Life is well-being. Well-being becomes Being. The body needs embodied space."⁷ The humanistic sentiment that he expresses is ultimately the manifest sensibility that Sugawara-Beda hopes to evoke with the installation. Kindness, amity, and benevolence are the motivating factors. These aspirations are embedded in the central artwork linguistically with the prominently utilized kanji seals for "heart" and "friend."

Of all the terms and ideas used thus far to describe "Zero at Home," the most salient would have to be "heart." The artist, I am sure, would agree. The word has a special place in the nomenclature of cultural humanity. Its *kotodama* is palpable as an intrinsic concept. Its connotation of center or core is not inconsistent with its other sense of emotion and compassion. The heart is the internal organ upon which all other organs rely, and without "heart" in the metaphoric sense it would be impossible for us to be human in the sense of recognizing the common humanity at the core of culture. The artwork and exhibition exist as an opportunity to reflect upon that reality. Is it possible to suggest then,—in light of the above— or is it just me, that in fact *Kotodama Converse* also resembles the shape of the human heart...?

It was claimed above that art is an epistemology, a way of knowing the world. What does Nishiki Sugawara-Beda ultimately want us to know about the world with "Zero at Home?" Her heart; our shared spirit. ㍤

6 Michael Fried, *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 168.

7 Lokesh Chandra, "Life, Space and Structures," in *Concepts of Space, Ancient and Modern*, ed. Kapila Vatsyayan (New Delhi: Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts, 1991), 211.