

ENGLISH

Death Taboo and Fascination

Solo Exhibition " before the beginning - after the end " by Gallery Voss / 10.02 - 018.03.2006
for " #2 " - return to the source - video and sound installation of Mihoko Ogaki

introduction by Marianne Hoffmann / artpublicist, Bonn

Friedrich Nietzsche once said: "Death forces us to enjoy life to the full."

In our time, we feel that we are merely engaged in enjoying life while repressing any thoughts of death. Nevertheless, death is omnipresent, whether in the daily news, in the newspaper, in books, on the radio or in films.

Fascinated, we attend exhibitions like "Body Worlds", watch, in a thriller, the pathologist with his circular saw and do not even bat an eyelid.

As long as the dead are far away and our lives go without serious setbacks, our little world will be in order. Thoughts of premature and even cruel death will not come to our minds, we rule out that death might mess up our healthy, sport-driven, nicotine- and alcohol-free life. Completely, that is. It is true, the death of a friend's cohabitee, who fell from a scaffold and died in agony, will tear us away from the lethargy of life but, in spite of that, we remain convinced that such a thing cannot happen to us.

The curtain on the taboo zone of death will not rise until we are directly concerned and suddenly find ourselves confronted with the question of what kind of funeral the deceased should have. Then, traditions will be examined and, if possible, we will try to handle the affair so that neighbours and friends cannot but finally say, "That was a fine funeral".

Any country, any federation, any region, any religion, any religious persuasion has its own different funeral rituals. While cremation is becoming more and more popular in this country, with funerals at sea coming into fashion, too, cremation is still a tradition in Japan, the artist's native country. This is why the coffin is of greater significance in western countries than in Japan. The kind of coffin selected shows how the deceased is valued by his or her relatives. These pecuniary aspects can be gathered from the wood. How much is the deceased worth to his or her relatives? And what about Japan? There, the mortal remains were piously carried to the cemetery in a portable wooden shrine, the Mikoshi. Traditionally, the Mikoshi was regarded as a temple in which the deceased would rest until the funeral. Due to urbanization accompanied by an increase in population density, the distance to the crematorium and the cemetery became longer and longer. Therefore, it was necessary to introduce a motor vehicle for the transport. Yet the Miyagata Reikyusha, after which Mihoko Ogaki conceived her funeral carriage project, is hardly used any longer in modern Japan. To Ogaki it was important that the design of the funeral carriage would intensify and objectify the memory of the funeral carriage as a magnificent parade. Transporting a corpse in a vehicle for merely practical reasons ran counter to the traditional public feeling. The Miyagata Reikyusha, a funeral carriage with a shrine-like structure, was built as a compromise between the traditional ritual and modern demands.

In this way, traditional as well as modern demands were satisfied. The Miyagata Reikyusha was in use for only 150 years.

The importance of the Miyagata Reikyusha decreased for several reasons. On the one hand, there were external factors like the reduction of the respective trade guild and the heavy weight of the carriage. On the other, there were internal ones, e.g. a revulsion towards any hypocritical display in the course of the rise of the living standard in post-war Japan. Another essential reason is the concealment of death: the most conspicuous design of the carriage

is too exaggerated to bring home credibly that it contains a dead body on its way to the crematorium.

Mihoko Ogaki, from her Japanese tradition, tries to draw our attention to the transitoriness of human life. In the artist's version, the traditional funeral carriage has a Mercedes chassis: an homage to Germany, the country where she has been living since 1994; the lavishly made shrine replica, with white rainbow pearls glued to it over and over by hand, establishes the connection with Japan. The innocence of pearls, a symbol of tears, was used by Mihoko Ogaki with a previous project, "A Vision of the Embryo". A perambulator, with pearls glued to it and a feather bed inside, music replenishing the installation. "Before the Beginning - After the End #1" and "Before the Beginning - After the End #2" are meant as interactive installations. The installations can be taken separately, since they both make man's beginning and end a subject for discussion. From the artist's view, man is composed of cells, comparable to atoms, just as the world is made of atoms. These atoms - which, too, are embodied by the pearls - are as fragile as our life. Scientists discovered that, despite medical support, any aging body is subject to an unstoppable cellular deterioration. Vital body cells receive too little or even no oxygen and die. The organs gradually lose their efficiency. Man's death proceeds step by step. The brain is followed by the heart and the liver, the lungs live a little longer, the muscles will not give up so easily and the gastrointestinal tract will not cease to work until after 24 hours. Dying step by step, man retires cautiously from the world, into which he was born and in which he was allowed to stay for a shorter or longer time. How men experience their own death will, to a large extent, remain a secret. In the Tibetan Book of the Dead one finds stirring descriptions to this. Buddhist teachers on their deathbeds dictated their perceptions to their disciples.

They described the process like a birth in reverse order. Instead of discovering the world with our senses, we take our leave of it by losing one sensory perception after the other. In order to sharpen our senses for the death theme, Mihoko Ogaki will in the Japanese-German funeral carriage provide a facility of virtually experiencing the transport while lying on a coffin-like stretcher: a special animation video can thus be watched from a reclining posture, accompanied by music which was composed and recorded for this special occasion. Only one person will fit in the pearl-trimmed shrine. The door will shut and for a couple of long minutes you will be on your way to the realm of the dead. The flickering video will be the only source of light during this certainly claustrophobic experience.

Mihoko Ogaki studies sculpture and becomes a master student with Klaus Rinke. Sculpture proves her métier. In this field she develops her concept, which is that all things and appearances consist of particles. Water, stones, air and also human emotions - love, anger, joy, sorrow - are to her building stones of which the world is made.

In a text referring to her project she writes: "We will survive the modern society that hides real death. I would feel myself honoured if this project gave grounds for facing death with the aim to live life more profoundly."

The project has been given its chance; now it is up to us to walk on our last path curiously.