

TACTILE RENGA - A PROCESS OF REDISCOVERY OF COLOR

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Tactile RENGA is an ongoing project of three Japanese artists, Takayuki Mitsushima, Rieko Nakamura and Toshihiro Anzai. The first series of Tactile Renga was carried from January 1998 to October 1998 producing 14 images by three artists. Tactile Renga 2 has started in September 1999, and is continuing with the same members. In this paper I will analyze the project and discuss what the process meant for the artists. Works can be seen at <http://www.renga.com/>

- outline of the Project

Tactile RENGA is an experimental art project carried by three artists including one who is visually impaired. Applying RENGA method which will be described later, two artists Anzai and Nakamura who digitally paint, exchange images with Mitsushima who paints using tactile sense.

In RENGA method, an image produced by an artist is sent to another artist to be modified into another image. By repeating the process a series of digital paintings are created. Each painting is the result of interaction between an artist's imagination and those of others who preceded.

Digital technology is indispensable in RENGA. Telecommunication and digital image manipulation make possible to extend the limit of traditional art making, as well as extending the limit of the visionary world of an artist. Issues such as the changing notion of originality and identity in art has been raised through the RENGA project.

While there have been a series of RENGA experiments carried with different technique and different guests, a session that involved with tactile paintings was the first case.

Through the session which continued for 10 months, 14 images were produced. Each artist discovered the difference between seeing and touching, and started exploring the limit. At first black and white images were mainly used. Consequently they developed a conversation, literally, on the meanings of color - both via images and email they exchanged.

The session, which was both a collaboration and a challenge between professional artists to bring up images one would not otherwise conceive, eventually became a process of re-discovering the meanings of color. Color started to play important roles in visualizing and communicating one's imagination. Color also became a key for retrieving a lost memory and developing it into an image. (Fig. 1)

In fact, discovery is the essence of RENGA method.

Fig. 1 Memories from the Age of Seven by Mitsushima

2. The method and technology used for Tactile RENGA

Tactile RENGA started with two images sent from Mitsushima to Anzai and Nakamura respectively. This project was conceived as two parallel sessions; one between Anzai and Mitsushima, the other between Nakamura and Mitsushima. Actually the two lines started to mingle later.

Mitsushima made drawings in his style. He cut figures out of adhesive thin sheets of plastic with a knife, and attached them on a piece of paper according to the composition the artist had in his mind. Thin plastic tapes, also adhesive and vary in color and width, would be added to "draw" lines. (fig.2-3) Mitsushima also uses colors according to the concept. These tactile drawings were physically sent to the other artists via normal mail delivery service. Using flat bed scanners these images were digitized. Anzai and Nakamura respectively worked on these images on their computers, inspired by the original drawings and sought for their own imagination that arose from them. In the process Mitsushima's drawings were decomposed and used in different contexts, or certain part of his image developed into something else.

When digital images were finished, they were translated to tactile forms. Two systems were used for this purpose.

A handy computer-controlled plotter/cutter for design use cuts the same kind of plastic sheets that Mitsushima uses. The hi-tech machine precisely cut the line that separated figures from background, without cutting the lining sheet. A very low-tech work for a human being (namely Anzai) to peel the background off the lining followed. The resulting sheet with figures attached to the lining allowed Mitsushima to "see" the image as well as to use the figures for his work, by peeling them off from the lining.

Fig.2

Fig.3

Figure 4 Tactile RENGA between Mitsushima and Nakamura

The other was a thermal copier which produces black and white embossed prints. A compact low-cost model was used both by Anzai and Mitsushima. As a plotter/cutter output would be destroyed as Mitsushima takes the figures from it, the embossed copy plays the role of a reference copy. Nakamura did not have any of these machines. Her images were sent to Anzai via internet to be processed.

The adhesive plastic sheet and its embossed copy were sent to Mitsushima. Email explaining about the image followed. Usually the conversation was based on telecommunication since they live in different cities.

This process was repeated. As one can see from the images produced, the session which started hesitatingly gradually became more dynamic. Colors and textures started to appear. Mitsushima answered in blue images of brailles to Nakamura's mistaken brailles. Blue is the color Mitsushima knows. Encouraged by the use of color by him Nakamura started to follow her instinct on the use of color.

Fig. 5 Tactile RENGA between Mitsushima and Anzai

3. What happend during Tactile RENGA

Modifying another professional artist's work is psychologically hard for any artist. However, such conflict between respect and challenge makes RENGA interesting. Digital technology allows artists to play - and think - at the border of original and copy.

In this project, the translation from visual form to tactile form was essential. Nakamura felt like the image she made on her computer was the original piece, while the plastic or embossed outputs were just tactile copies for Mitsushima. That was one reason why she started using colors and texture more freely, while Anzai was aware of the final output and remained cautious in using colors. (fig.5-6)

However, when she used colors for the pair of socks because she did not want to compromise after all, she had to explain the colors and their meanings.(fig.7)She even painted some texture on the heart in the same picture which came from the peach skin, of the peach she ate on the train.

Fig.6 by Anzai

Fig.7 by Nakamura

Fig.8 by Anzai

As she tried to explain she discovered that what she meant with these colors were not merely colors. The pair of socks with vivid colors her grandmother knitted for her, or the soft skin of sweet peach she ate on the train - they are memories accompanied with excitement and warm feelings, also with tactile sense as well as visual or other senses. It was a new way of seeing colors for her. Also, after this experience, the issue of original and copy in different forms (visual and tactile) came back to her. It is also about the relationship between the creator and the appreciator in art.

After Nakamura "violated" the rule, Mitsushima totally surprised Anzai by applying color in a manner that cannot be represented on the 2D screen of a computer (fig.1). Plastic cut-outs are attached to a transparent sheet instead of a piece of paper. The moon is in three layers. A white full moon and a waned moon in his memory before he completely lost sight, are on the different sides of the transparency. Between them is the blue moon, which he knows from stories.

Drawing or seeing a picture by touching is a time-based process, Mitsushima says. It is something he realized through this project by working with other artists, and what now seems important to him. It is a different process from seeing an image.

The three moons in layers in Mitsushima's drawing realize the time-based moon in his memory. The layers have different meanings when seen, touched, and understood as a story.

One can see that images become more and more free with rich contents. Mitsushima also starts using his medical tool to give additional texture. The conversation between visual images and tactile sense went further to liberate one's imagination, triggered by colors.

4. Seeing colors and imaging colors

After this experience, Mitsushima feels his horizon as an artist has expanded. His recent personal works reflect his new approach to memories, and especially to colors.

Perception of color is primarily a physical and physiological phenomenon. But color is also personal, since there is no way of seeing a color in the way another person does. It

is personal from another point of view as well. What a color triggers in one's mind depends on one's memory and the social code. In that sense, color is also a social phenomenon. Tactile RENGA revealed such roles of color in the artists' unconscious way of using it. Furthermore, by re-discovering color in one's mindscape, artists found new expressions of their imagination.