

In an uncertain world, opening up the future with imagination

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Mai Yamashita + Naoto Kobayashi (hereafter: Yamashita + Kobayashi) have been working mainly on video installations mediated by their own actions. By creating situations and presenting their images, they question the meanings and values of the world. Also, by inserting their actions into a scene or landscape, they shake up the way we see and think, and make latent things visible. I suppose that there are some fundamental attitudes involved in their work: presenting imagination and its possibilities, reconstructing our relationship with nature and the world, questioning existing systems and values, and offering alternatives with a variety of ideas. The resulting works are both sincere and absurd at the same time, shaking viewers' thoughts to both extremes in ambivalent situations such as useful or useless, which also encourages an expansion of inspirations and perspectives. They provide important insights towards the social system and connection to the world, relating to how we live.

I would like to mention *Major League Birdwatching* (2011), a work that is not part of the exhibition, but which gives us an insight to the exhibition. This work is about an attempt at birdwatching at Yankee Stadium in New York. Through the artists' observation of the birds, we can see how birds come and go freely, looking for food, without being involved in the excitement of the game or the boundaries between the audience seats and the baseball ground. The world of humans and the world of birds share the same space, yet their respective consciousnesses, which do not overlap, emerge in the work.



[fig.1] Major League Birdwatching, 2011, single channel video projected on a baseball cap, stereo sound, tripod, dimensions variable, 9'30", C-print, 40x30cm

In his book *A Stroll Through the Worlds of Animals and Men*, Jakob von Uexküll referred to the various worlds that are combined by the perceptual field and motor field of each living thing as a "Umwelt"^{*1}. Although the world seems to be one, it is

composed of various organisms with their own perceptions. However, we seem to have few opportunities to be reminded of this in our daily life, or to imagine the worldview of other organisms.

According to the artists, *Major League Birdwatching* was an attempt to connect, or at least to look at, the 2 worlds of human and bird^{*2}. Hanae Nakao, referring to this and other works in which animals appear, pointed out that the artists' view of the world is "linked to the *zen* master Dogen's teaching, called *issuishiken*, which indicates that the same thing can be perceived differently depending on who sees it"^{*3}. In their other works too, Yamashita + Kobayashi have been giving consideration to the relationship with the non-human natural environment through making connections to it in various approaches. There has always been an attitude of suspicion towards dualism and of looking at the world from a perspective that is not human-centric.

In this exhibition, the artists presented a continuous series of works which invite the viewers including the artists themselves to consider the fluctuating boundaries between human and nature.

In a world of uncertainty

The title of this exhibition, *A mirage.*, comes from a short story *Mirage* (in *Fujin Koron* magazine, March 1927) written by Ryunosuke Akutagawa in his final days. It is the words of a friend of the main character, murmured on the way back from seeing a mirage on Kugenuma beach. This story was composed in the form of a so-called "I-novel", a genre of auto-biographical fiction in Japanese literature. It is known that Akutagawa reflected the worldview of "a story without a significant story" in his own work, which is how Akutagawa praised the I-novel of Naoya Shiga, *Night Fires* (in *Kaizo* magazine, April 1920). In the course of describing familiar everyday events, the author interjects incidents that sound meaningful such as a mirage, a light of a match, a mixed-race child, and so on, but in the end, the story leaves a curious impression, as if it does not know where to focus. Yamashita + Kobayashi also say in the text that the words "A mirage."^{*4} perfectly expresses the "uncertainty" and holds the same impression of the atmosphere in their exhibition^{*5}. Indeed, the rather hazy worldview of the short story of Akutagawa envelops the entire exhibition. In particular, it seems to have something in common with the unceasingness of *infinity-mirage* (2021), in which the m-shaped sign installed on the embankment, the wavering landscape of the sea, and the mirage that occurs there are shown endlessly through a live streaming video. The mirage is a natural phenomenon, as Masaki Sato, the Cura-

tor of Uozu Buried Forest Museum, makes clear in his contribution to this catalogue. However, as Yamashita + Kobayashi say, natural phenomena are ambiguous and elusive in the first place.

In the process of making this work, we have learned that the landscape from the coast of Uozu, where a camera is set up, to the coast of Ikuji, 8 kilometres away from Uozu coast, where the sign is set up, is an "apparent landscape" that should normally be invisible due to the roundness of the earth. Our days were tossed around by the changing atmosphere and the unstable wavering of the image on the opposite bank, which made us realise that we cannot control natural phenomena. Though in this work, the artists were thinking deeply about "uncertainty". In *Mirage*, the protagonist mutters "I feel that there are many things outside the threshold of my consciousness,"^{*6} In the closing remarks of his above-mentioned book, Uexküll also points out that the role of nature as an object is full of contradictions and chaos, and then says: "And yet all these diverse *Umwelten* are harbored and borne by the One that remains forever barred to all *Umwelten*. Behind all the worlds created by Him, there lies concealed, eternally beyond the reach of knowledge, the subject—*Nature*."^{*7}.

The uncertainty shown in *infinity-mirage* is the essence of nature or the world, and it makes us realise that we are living in such a condition in the first place. At times, mirages or heat hazes shake the ordinary and overwrite it with the extraordinary, drawing out as images of the infinite variety of phenomena that change from day to day. The device of the live camera proves that it is a phenomenon of the present and confirms its curiosity. It then expands our thoughts to both the micro and the macro world: life that keeps emerging and disappearing within a phenomenon in flux; the constant combination and separation of living and all other non-living matter; or the repetition of objects and subjects.

Pascal's words, which the artists wrote as part of their work, enquire "What is a man in *Infinity*?"^{*8} The vastness of this question is open to the imagination of each viewer.

Thoughts towards Human () Nature

1000WAVES (2007), in which Yamashita + Kobayashi counted up to 1000 ocean waves that are ambiguous to count; *Release of mineral water* (2004), in which the artists travelled to return mineral water to its source in Germany; *A Spoon Made From The Land* (2009), in which the artists collected iron sand from a beach to make a spoon; *Letting the Mountains Hear the Voice of the Ocean* (2017), in which the artists recorded sounds of the sea and released it in the mountains; *Anne and Anne's Sculp-*

ture (2012), in which they made a sculpture with their beloved dog Anne; among others.

In Yamashita + Kobayashi's consideration of nature, we can identify 3 attitudes: to observe, to act towards nature such as animals and plants, and to collaborate with this nature. Each of these attitudes is often represented in their work in an intersectional way, but not all of them hold the same type of thoughts. The artists once told me that, when devising *Thinking Reed / Unthinking Reed* (2021), they were reading *An Introduction to the Integral Philosophy of Humanity* by Takeshi Umehara, and they felt more sympathy with the Japanese idea of "*somoku-kokudoshikkajobutsu*" (all things, even plants, trees and the land, have the nature of Buddha)^{*9} written in the book than with the modern Western ideas^{*10}. Such a view of nature, based on circulation, was well expressed in *I Am Everything, Everything Is Me* (2015), in which various "things" are projected as images, over which different sounds of "me" are dubbed, while being switched from one to another.

As soon as you enter the exhibition room, a large screen shows *Human () Nature* (2021), made in the mountains of Asahi-machi. 2 works were presented in 2019 from this series, which uses a bicycle. In each work, the landscape flowing in the background and the meaning of the act of continually riding on a bicycle, together with the words appearing on the tyres due to the after-image effect of light, are concentrated in an image to form artwork. In *Human () Nature*, the artists' direct question emerges in the way the meaning shifts dramatically when the 8 postpositional particles in the position of parentheses are changed. In addition, the question forms an important keynote for the whole exhibition. The landscape in the background of the video moves from the upper reaches of the Sakai River, through a small village rich in nature where the relationship between human and nature is being reversed, and carries on further down the mountain path. The information drawn out by the artists' actions inserted into the landscape reveals traces of the region's history and the ongoing relationship between human and nature. The complex interplay of what these elements show stimulates our multifaceted thinking.

On the other hand, a rather primitive relationship can be found in *infinity* (2006), which is exhibited at the rear of *Human () Nature*. The work demonstrates whether the saying "Paths are made by walking" is true by running on the grass for 5 days in one summer. The beautiful "∞" path, created with time and effort, had apparently disappeared by winter as the grass regrew. While influencing each other with the view of nature shown in *Human () Nature* to the rear, *infinity* also finds a connection

with *infinity-mirage* installed across in the exhibition space. The actions of the human changes the relationship with nature as well as the meaning and effect of the resulting phenomena.

In *How to make a mountain sculpture — Japanese Mountains “Mt.Tsurugi”* (2013), Yamashita + Kobayashi present their gaze on nature. This is part of a series of works they have been making since 2006 in places including Switzerland. Their shock towards the events of the Tohoku Earthquake and Tsunami, which showed how the earth could change its shape, has given further meaning to the use of the traditional technique of observing and recording nature. The artists’ direct act of sculpting in the midst of nature becomes absurd through its sincerity, and the contrast between the scale of human and nature leads to thinking about the fundamental structure of the world.

Exhibited in the next small room with natural light is *Thinking Reed / Unthinking Reed*, questioning also the very act of thinking by the viewers. Against the background of the reed landscape outside the window, there are 2 reeds swaying in the monitor. The sounds of insects, a river and cars driving nearby are blended together to create something pleasant to the ears. The title of this work also makes reference to the idea of man as a thinking reed*12 in *Pensées*. Pascal points out that a human is as weak as a reed, and yet their dignity lies in their thinking. But Pascal also indicates how foolish these thoughts are, at the same time*13. Throughout history, there have been great ideas that have been referred to repeatedly, but there have also been great regrets even though they have been the result of hard thinking. Here, a meta-perspective is introduced on thinking about human and nature.

This work is viewed by replacing the reed with a person, but it is not necessarily the only way to look at the work. For instance, what does it mean for a plant to “think”? In *How Forests Think*, Eduardo Kohn, a scholar in anthropology, extends thought, from a semiotic point of view, not only to humans but to all sorts of life. He says that, the same as human, animals and plants are also involved in the process of creating new semiotics in response to the meaning and effect of semiotics, and that this is where thoughts lie*14. Perhaps the image of the 2 reeds is underpinned by such ambivalent and common thoughts of humans and non-humans.

In addition, the importance of this engagement being mediated by “representational” relations beyond language is stressed*15. The effort to exchange images through actions, both with non-human beings and with the viewers, has been also practiced in the work of Yamashita + Kobayashi.

Anthropologist Katsumi Okuno explains that in the Anthro-

pocene, the dichotomy of natural sciences and humanities has become meaningless to today’s academia, and that the anthropocentrism latent in Western thinking is being decentred, with ideas that acknowledge both human and non-human activity at their heart*16. This bird’s-eye view of the trends in academic disciplines also illuminates the standpoint of Yamashita + Kobayashi. In the same way that anthropology has been transformed into a discipline that speaks of human beings from a place beyond the human, what underpins Yamashita + Kobayashi’s efforts to relate as much as possible to certain objects in the natural world, such as in *infinity-mirage*, is very much in line with the idea of wanting to stand on the contours of “human”, shaped by memory, experience and practice through their work*17. Thinking about the fluctuating boundaries between human and nature and questioning the nature of the human contour line may have the same meaning.

Imagination towards the future

The early works of Yamashita + Kobayashi, such as *infinity* and *1000WAVES*, show the influence of Karl Marx’s *Das Kapital**18 and still provide meaningful thoughts today.

Release of mineral water is a work in which the artists travel to Germany to return the commercial German mineral water sold in Japan. The work was triggered by feeling discomfort about the fact that water is being sold. This simple sense of discomfort is something that should be shared more and more in the future.

In *“Das Kapital” in Anthropocene*, Kohei Saito explains, referring to Marx’s ideas, how the capitalist system has turned the common good, the wealth that was free and abundant for everyone to use, into a scarce “value”. He pointed out the harms and dangers of the way in which water, once a free common good, has been managed and has itself become capital*19. He argues that the wealth that is privatised through the dismantling of common goods increases in value as a commodity due to its increasing scarcity, and that people lose the opportunity to access the wealth they need to live and become impoverished, which, as a result, makes them even poorer*20.

According to a report by the Japanese Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry, the global water business was predicted to be worth 110 trillion Japanese *yen* by 2030*21. In the face of mineral water, the modest question of whether water is something to be bought is likely to be drowned out by this momentum.

However, at a time when we are under pressure to change everything from our social systems to our individual ways of

thinking, this work may help us to regain a meaningful perspective. *Release of mineral water* was the work that inspired the artists to think about human and nature. In addition to questioning the system of capitalist society, it also suggests an awareness of ecology and de-growth, and encourages the imagination to think towards alternative ways. It seems to be a good example of the trend of Yamashita + Kobayashi’s work that can still be seen today.

In Richard Dawkins’ *The Selfish Gene*, the book I was introduced to by Yamashita + Kobayashi, Dawkins says: (...) *even if we look on the dark side and assume that individual man is fundamentally selfish, our conscious foresight — our capacity to simulate the future in imagination — could save us from the worst selfish excesses of the blind replicators**22. Various organisms are actually selfish, even when their actions appear to be altruistic. Humans are no exception. However, one possibility has been suggested. The way to resist the selfish gene is imagination.

Now let us go back to *infinity-mirage*. This work was not only exhibited in the museum, but the concept was also presented through a flyer. On a special website, there is a live video

stream and a section called “everyone’s ∞” where anyone can share photos taken from different places. Even if “∞” appeared, it is not difficult to imagine that only a few people would be able to see it through a pair of binoculars from the opposite shore. The format of this work — a work of art that can be equally enjoyed through a live streaming video by people, including those who are unable to travel due to the pandemic situation as well as those who live in the neighbouring areas of Kurobe — made a counterpart to the exhibition in the Museum and outdoor m-shaped sign, which are site-specific spaces of “here and now”. It was a very thoughtful work that allowed us to care and share each other’s “here and now” under the pandemic.

I must admit that the fact that “∞” has appeared, something which everyone had been half in doubt about since the beginning of the plan, still makes us believe in infinite possibilities in this uncertain world. And yet, we must not forget that it is an image given to us in collaboration with nature. The realisation of “∞” in *infinity-mirage* is a relative one, the result of the efforts of humans to go to the edge of the relationship, half of which is brought by natural phenomena. It is necessary to have the attitude of looking back at it carefully.

- * 1 | Jakob von Uexküll “A Stroll Through the Worlds of Animals and Men: A Picture Book of Invisible Worlds,” in *Instinctive Behavior: The Development of a Modern Concept*, trans. and ed. by Claire H. Schiller (New York: International Universities Press, Inc., 1957) .
- * 2 | From *Mai Yamashita + Naoto Kobayashi website*, accessed 1 October 2021. <http://www.yamashita-kobayashi.com/ja/works/major-league-birdwatching.html>
- * 3 | Hanae Nakao “Mai Yamashita + Naoto Kobayashi: Facing to art as one of the pair living on earth,” in *Mai Yamashita + Naoto Kobayashi: Notebooks and from the Notebooks* exhibition catalogue (Tochigi: Kurumaya Museum of Art, Oyama City, 2015) p.65.
- * 4 | Ryunosuke Akutagawa “Mirage,” in *Konan no Ogi* (A Fan from Hunan) (Tokyo: Bungeishunju, 1939) p.228.
- * 5 | Mai Yamashita + Naoto Kobayashi, interview by Ikuko Yoshimoto and the author, 24 September 2021. <http://mirage.yamashita-kobayashi.com/interview/>
- * 6 | Ref. 4, p.233.
- * 7 | Ref. 1, p.80.
- * 8 | Blaise Pascal, *A Selection from Pascal’s Thoughts*, trans. by H. L. Sidney Lear (London: Rivingtons, 1878) p.126.
- * 9 | Takeshi Umehara, *An Introduction to the Integral Philosophy of Humanity* (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 2013) . In this book, Umehara identifies the origin of Japanese culture in a Buddhist thought called “*tendaihongakushiso*”, which is based on the idea “*somokukokudoshikkajijobutsu*” (all things, even plants, trees and the land, have the nature of Buddha) . Umehara also considers this idea to be common to all primitive cultures of the world, and advocates it as something that overcomes modern Western ideas.

- * 10 | Mai Yamashita + Naoto Kobayashi, from email correspondence with the author, 9 August 2021.
- * 11 | Every 20 seconds the words change in the order of: “Human and nature”, “Human among nature”, “Human or nature”, “Human is nature”, “Nature for human”, “Human as nature”, “Human’s nature” and “Human versus nature”.
- * 12 | Ref. 8, p.143.
- * 13 | Ref. 8, pp.142–144.
- * 14 | Eduardo Kohn, *How Forests Think: Toward an Anthropology Beyond the Human* (Berkeley/Los Angeles/London: University of California Press, 2013) chap.1 and 2, pp.27–100.
- * 15 | Ibid.
- * 16 | Katsumi Okuno “Bright Anthropocene, Dark Anthropocene: Viewing from Multi-Species Ethnography (1) ,” in *Gendai Shiso* magazine, December issue, vol.45–221, 2017, p.78.
- * 17 | Ref. 5.
- * 18 | Ref. 5.
- * 19 | Kohei Saito “*Das Kapital*” in *Anthropocene* (Tokyo: Shueisha, 2020) p.248-249.
- * 20 | Ibid, chap. 6, pp.234–276.
- * 21 | “Review of 10 years of overseas water business policy and research report on the direction of future development,” in *Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry website*, March 2021, accessed 1 October 2021. https://www.meti.go.jp/policy/mono_info_service/mono/waterbiz/kenkyukai/kaigai_infra/003_business.html
- * 22 | Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene*, 30th anniversary edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006) p.200.