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**“Nature” and “Aesthetic Experience” in
Contemporary Japanese Aesthetics and
Art**

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Summary

After suffering for a long time from strong critiques in continental and analytical philosophies, and becoming almost defunct after minimalist and conceptualist currents in art, in recent decades the concept of aesthetic experience has been commanding a revival of interest both in philosophy of art and in artistic practices.

Although 20th Century Japanese art followed parallel developments with its Western counterpart, Japanese aestheticians have never lost their interests in the concept of aesthetic experience. This paper will take this significant difference of interest in the concept of aesthetic experience in its course in 20th Century Western and Japanese aesthetics as its starting point; and it will focus on Japanese aestheticians' constant recourse to "nature" in defining the nature of aesthetic experience, and in finding a characterization of the difference between Japanese and Western aesthetics and art.

As the discussions of "nature" constitute a huge body in Japanese aesthetics, this paper will concentrate only on a certain definition of "nature" in relation to the traditional Japanese art as it appears in some recent philosophical works. And it will try to illustrate how several examples from contemporary Japanese art seem to confirm the claims of this definition.

I

The modern Japanese word *shizen* (自然) corresponds to the European term *nature*. Like several other translation words, the word *shizen* has been introduced as the translation of *nature* during the Meiji period. Before that time Japanese were lacking a single generic term to express the totality of mountains, rivers, plants, and trees. This does not mean, of course, that they were lacking any concept of what after that time they started to call *shizen*. Rather, they were using different expressions such as; *tenchibanbutsu* (天地万物) (all the things in the universe, literally: ten thousand things in Heaven and Earth); *shinrabanshō* (森羅万象) (the universe, the sum of all things, literally: the infinite procession of ten thousand phenomena); and *zōka* (造化) (the whole universe and all of the creatures). In classical Japanese there was, however, no use of the word *shizen* as a substantive. It was generally being used with suffixes in its adjectival and adverbial form

such as *shizen-na*, or *shizen-ni*, in the meaning of *onozukara-na*, or *onozukara-ni*. The Japanese word *onozukara* (自ずから) corresponds to "of/from itself" and when not written with the phonetic *kana* alphabets, it is written with the first of the two characters for *shizen*.¹

The question is, then, how it could be possible to translate *nature* with the word *shizen* that is traditionally used in the meaning of *onozukara* "of/from itself?" Several commentators point out that the taking root of *shizen* as the translation of *nature* could not be possible, if there were no appropriate cultural climate that allows the establishment of *shizen*, in the meaning of *onozukara*, as the generic term for the totality of mountains, rivers, plants, and trees, or the infinite procession of the ten thousand phenomena. In an article entitled "Nature as *onozukara*", exploring different characteristics of Japanese comprehension of nature, contemporary Japanese thinker Tōru Sagara suggests that the emergence and the establishment of the translation word *shizen* displays the character of the traditional Japanese sense of mountains, rivers, plants, and trees, or the so-called "traditional Japanese love of nature."²

Following Sagara's analyses, we can extract four basic features of the conception of nature as *onozukara* as follows: First, nature as *onozukara* refers to a spontaneous becoming, an appearance, or coming into being of itself. Second, it refers to a state that is usually described by Japanese expression *jinen*, i.e., to be originally so, to be in a natural state, or without human intervention. Third, it refers to a kind of identity between nature and human being. Fourth, it refers to an identity, or a harmonious relation between nature and art. In the following part, I will try to discuss briefly these four features, and then to investigate how they appear in different ways as the basic elements in defining aesthetic experience in the works of certain contemporary Japanese aestheticians.

(1) Firstly, nature as *onozukara* refers to a spontaneous becoming, a coming forth of itself. Tōru Sagara contrasts Japanese *onozukara* with European *natura* and *physis*, and Chinese understanding of nature. He argues that, whereas both European and Chinese comprehensions of nature suggest a kind of underlying essence, or order, Japanese *onozukara* completely lacks such a kind of an underlying essence, or order.³ This is also connected to the so-called phenomenism, or the affirmation of this world in Japanese intellectual/spiritual tradition. The ten thousands phenomena are conceived as a spontaneous becoming beyond which there is the universal operation called *onozukara*. But this beyond as a higher reality is not separated from the phenomenal world. In other words, there is only the reality of phenomena, and "the background" is only given in this phenomenal world. To further describe the Japanese comprehension of nature as *onozukara* as a coming forth of itself, we may remember the conception of *kami* in indigenous Shintō religion. Accordingly, eighty thousands *kami* appear one after another. Similarly, in Japanese syncretism, Buddha is first comprehended as a *kami* that appears spontaneously out of itself. Tōru Sagara refers to the Buddhist doctrine of the identity of the phenomenal and the real. He compares Chinese Buddhist understanding of "principles and things" with Japanese Buddhist understanding of "principles *qua* things" (*ri soku koto* 理即事). Sagara points out that while in Chinese understanding principles come out in things, in Japanese thought "principles are things" (with *soku* copula) and they are not separated from them. In other words, in Japanese Buddhism phenomena of the world are the "true reality," or the Buddha itself.⁴

(2) Second feature of nature as *onozukara* refers to a state that is described in Japanese by the concept *jinen* 自然. *Jinen* is another reading of the Chinese characters for *shizen*, or nature. When the word is pronounced as *jinen*, especially in Buddhist texts, it has two interrelated meanings; (1) to be originally so; or, of itself so; (2) without human intervention. Here we can think that the concept of *jinen* seems to approach in meaning to the European understanding of nature as outside, or as that which exists without human intervention, but *jinen* does not signify an opposition between nature and human subject.⁵ The easiest way to catch an understanding of the concept of *jinen* is to refer to the thirteenth century Buddhist thinker Shinran (1173-1263), the founder of Shin Buddhism. According to his famous doctrine called *jinenhōni* 自然法爾, things come into being spontaneously of themselves without any cause or intention. Similarly, what will bring us to salvation is not our own power, calculations, or intention. There is nothing to be done by man but being embraced and caused to rely on nature as *jinen*. Nature as *jinen* in Shinran's thought is the context, or process within which we live and which gives us life. When we subjectively become aware of nature as *jinen*, we find emancipation from the anxieties of finitude in a non-alienated nature whose being is our own being. Here we find the third feature attributed to nature as *onozukara*.

(3) Nature as *onozukara* refers to a kind of identity between nature and man. As we mentioned, Japanese word *onozukara* is written with the first of the two Chinese characters for *shizen*. The same character, however, also stands for another Japanese term, namely, *mizukara*, 自 己 which means, self, oneself, itself, or in person. In expressing both of them by the same character, Japanese people seem to conceive them as originating from the same common source. In other words, nature is never outside, but rather it designates an encounter in which something is experienced as appearing so of itself without any intention or plan. This brings us to the fourth feature of nature as *onozukara*, namely, the harmonious relation between nature and manmade.

(4) Traditional Japanese art is often said to follow nature respectfully and in humility. If we refer, one more time, to Tōru Sagara's analysis, as the Japanese comprehension of nature as *onozukara* lacks underlying principles or reason, in the relation of man toward nature, an attitude of following, or searching out these principles, or in reverse dominating nature through reason do not evolve. From the perspective of artistic production this corresponds to what is described in Japanese as *mushi* 無私, i.e., selfless participation to the creative act. Sagara points out that, in a spiritual/intellectual climate in which inquiry into the underlying principles or order does not exist, the concepts of imitation and model emerge as the fundamental issues. There are some basic aspects of the importance given to the concept of imitation of nature, and model in traditional Japanese arts. First of these aspects is the respect for natural qualities of objects and incorporation of those qualities and also natural processes as a part of the work. Similarly, there is the attempt to capture the quintessential qualities of particular objects, colors, sounds, rather than their expressive power, total unity or harmony. Here, the importance given to model evolves into the importance given to *kata*. What is called *kata* in Japanese artistic practices designates those highly stylized patterns in which essential features are articulated through a minimization to the extreme. We see that nature descriptions in classical Japanese waka poetry or painting, imitation techniques in performance arts such as Nō, and Kabuki, or rules in Japanese art ways and martial arts, generally follow those stylistic patterns.

II

Let us proceed now with the first of the texts in which aesthetic experience is defined with recourse to nature, namely, Ken-ichi Sasaki's *Aesthetics on non-Western Principles*.⁶ The major part of the book is dedicated to a description of the aesthetic experience of nature based on a fundamental opposition between Western and Japanese conceptions. We see that the features of nature mentioned above emerge as the basic elements that distinguish Japanese conception from the Western one, and that define the nature of aesthetic experience. First of all, Sasaki suggests that the "urban spirit" which is characterized by exclusion of nature, and calculations and precise determinations of an authoritarian reason is the basic element of Western culture. In contrast to this, the basic element of Japanese culture is the "anti-urban spirit" which is characterized by the lack of a "total order;" a preference for "the indeterminate;" the blurring of the border that separates city, or art, from nature; and the humility with respect to nature. According to Sasaki, these features are connected at root with the Japanese comprehension of nature. In his view the aesthetics implied in the traditional life of Japan suggests an overcoming of the arrogance of Western formative reason. And in his words "this wisdom is a lesson given in and by nature." According to this lesson human beings are fundamentally "co-substantial with nature," and there is "no separation between subject and object." From there, Sasaki goes on to explain how this spirit of humility with regard to nature is also identified in defining aesthetic experience. From the point of view of the appreciator this corresponds to an attitude of abandoning egoism and clearing the mind, i.e., "letting things be, not ruling nature to our own self-centered ideas," which is, in fact, provided by this very experience of nature. In this experience of nature, in Sasaki's words, "[I] am reduced to an insignificant point within the greatness of nature. I am 'almost nothing.' Despite this, I am happy, because the nature which melts me into it is not an 'other' to me. I am forced to notice how small the self is by comparison, but this is not alienating; it constitutes a return to and an awakening of my own nature. This awakening gives me profound consolation."⁷ From the point of view of the creative act, this corresponds to a specific understanding of "imitation of nature," which "allows the human being to come back to nature." According to this notion, the imitation of nature consists in taking the nature as one's "model." Sasaki argues, however, that this notion of "imitation of nature" is different from realism, or naturalism. To explain this difference he refers to Adorno's notion of the "natural beauty as such" according to which "art imitates neither nature nor individual natural beauty, but beauty as such." In Sasaki's view, the natural beauty as such means "the natural in nature," or "what is perceived directly as appearing nature."⁸ Here, Nature constitutes a "model" because "it is beyond any of our capacities to reach or surpass it." So, what is left for the artist, or the craftsman is to follow this model in humility, "by blanking the mind" to overcome the distance that separates him from his model.

III

Yuriko Saito also refers to traditional Japanese appreciation of nature when she discusses several questions raised in environmental aesthetics. In her works on traditional Japanese aesthetics, Saito argues that the traditional Japanese love of nature is based on the conceived identity between nature and human being and this conception of nature

constitutes an important basis for aesthetic experience.⁹ She designates two fundamental ways in which the Japanese have traditionally identified with nature as emotional identification and the identification based upon the transience of both man and nature. According to this second, Japanese people aestheticize ephemeral aspects of nature, such as cherry blossoms, the sounds of cicadas, passing showers, and seasonal changes itself, and appreciate them as providing an analogy to human transience. And that analogy, in turn, gives solace to the temporality of human life. The emphasis on the transience also implies the uniqueness of every passing phenomenon. According to Saito, the attentiveness to the passing phenomena constitutes another fundamental characteristic of Japanese appreciation of nature, namely, respect for nature's inherent and quintessential features. In Saito's view, one of the reflections of this respect for nature emerges as what she calls "aesthetic egalitarianism." According to "aesthetic egalitarianism," both in appreciating and producing, aesthetic concerns is not limited to arts, but affects every area of people's lives from nature appreciation, to cooking, bathing, packaging, or physical exercises like archery and swordsmanship.

Saito sees another reflection of the respect for nature, what she describes as the "submission to and grateful acceptance of each natural object with its individual characteristics." This corresponds; first, to the use of natural materials in crafts, utensils, architecture, and cooking; second, to the great attention to "capture the defining characteristics of the subject matter, by distilling the essential features of the object through eliminating adventitious, non essential elements" in depicting nature; and finally to "a deemphasis of the artist's unique contribution to the creative process." In Saito's words "[t]he highest stage of 'no intent' or 'no self,' which is attained through rigorous training, facilitates an approach to the subject matter or material with a humble, open attitude, allowing the object to evoke its inner essence to which the artists listen and submit themselves. All of this will in turn be reflected in the 'effortless,' 'spontaneous,' 'natural' or 'unconstrained' appearance of the resultant object or phenomenon."¹⁰

IV

We find a similar approach to aesthetic experience through traditional Japanese love of nature in the works of Ryōsuke Ōhashi, who is known as the living representative of Kyoto School of Philosophy. In his recently published lecture notes entitled *Whereabouts of Beauty*, Ōhashi inquires into what he calls "the climatologic possibility of Japanese Aesthetics."¹¹ Accordingly, the concept of aesthetics emerged in Europe, and from its emergence in the 18th century, it has taken as its background the restrictions connected with the intellectual/spiritual tradition of Europe. So, aesthetic does not exist in Japan in the strict sense of the word. Therefore, to apply the category of aesthetics directly to the considerations about Japanese life would be to see Japan through the lenses of Europe. Ōhashi suggests, however, that a possible grounding of Japanese aesthetics can be searched out in terms of nature. Yet, the realization of this possibility demands a suspension, or a demolition of the restrictions of the traditional concept of aesthetics. Similarly, there is also the need to broaden the scope of aesthetics to include not only nature, but also every aspects of human life.

Ōhashi asserts that, although this approach and contemporary environmental aesthetics converges in several points, there are important differences between them. First of all, according to Ōhashi, in environmental aesthetics, although the relationship between man

and nature called into question, nature is still understood as a material environment. Similarly, in environmental aesthetics an approach which sees nature as the "inner moment," or basis, and dynamic of human existence has not evolved yet.

In Ōhashi's view, such an approach has been already developed in traditional Japanese attitude toward nature and distilled in traditional Japanese art. And, he suggests that here nature differs fundamentally from European *natura* and turns out to be what is described in Japanese intellectual/spiritual tradition as *jinen*. In such an understanding of nature, Ōhashi suggests, art emerges as something in which 'beauty in nature' and 'beauty in art' become one.

In his classical book on Japanese aesthetics *Kire no Kōzō* (The Structure of *Kire*), Ōhashi provides us with several examples of how this understanding of nature evolves into a particular theory of mimesis. *Kire*, which means cut in Japanese, refers to the cut between art and nature. The immediate naturalness of nature, as yet untouched by human hand, is cut off through art. But this human intervention is not a simple cutting off, but rather a cutting out in which the inner naturalness of nature that is concealed in everyday consciousness, revived in this very act of artistic cutting. So, *kire* is complemented by *tsuzuki* which means continuity: Nature and art do not constitute an opposition; rather they are continuous with each other. The cut is realized through such artistic means as *kata* 型. *Kata*, which imposes an artistic form on nature, or on everyday naturalness, constitutes the model that has to be followed in a strict manner. Ōhashi argues, however, that rather than being a restriction *kata* is the "shortest way" to freedom. Freedom provided by *kata* is first of all a freedom from ego-consciousness. It is achieved after a long and arduous training period and when ego-consciousness is eliminated and when *kata* turns out to be a play. In Ōhashi's words "at this point human action disappears totally and becomes fully nature as *jinen*. In other words, the beauty of *kata* as play is the beauty of nature as *jinen*."¹²

V

At the end of this paper I will mention briefly a couple of examples which display how this particular understanding of nature emerges as a guiding principle in contemporary Japanese art also. My first example comes from a Japanese art movement of the late 60s and 70s called *Mono-ha*, which means literally the "School of Things". The works of *Mono-ha*, seem to share many affinities with Western currents of minimalism and Arte Povera. However, there are some significant differences. First of all, *Mono-ha* starts from a motivation which may be described as a "reclaim of Japaneseness" by reassessing "special quality of Japanese culture". Accordingly, *Mono-ha* artists emphasize artist's passive attitude toward the act of creation and attempt to reveal "the world as it is". For example, one of the leading figures of *Mono-ha* Kishio Suga states that "I do not create the limits of a thing, but rather they are created by the circumstances which determine its optimum position when existing in its most natural way."¹³ Similarly, Nobuo Sekine, who is known to be the originator of the movement, declares that "The world exists as the world is, so how are we supposed to create? All I can do is to be as I am, in the world as it is, and to show that state clearly."¹⁴ In order to reveal the world as it is through a passive participation *Mono-ha* artists use natural substances such as stone, wood, trunks of charcoal, clay, or water and let them fall, hang, float, break, or pile according to principles of gravity and time, in an impermanent "site" to produce indeterminate

“situations” or what they call as a “one time encounter with being” vividly real and free of subject-object opposition. On the other hand, as one critic puts it, works of *Mono-ha* do not suggest “the absence of artifice, but artifice in order to strip away all extraneous imagination surrounding the thing itself; or to state it another way, artificially to render it of the same value as nature.”¹⁵

The works of the famous Japanese architect Tadao Andō constitute another example. Andō defines the traditional Japanese view of nature which he assimilated as follows: “From ancient times, the Japanese have thought of ‘self’ as being equivalent to ‘nature’. What this involves...is the attempt to empty the ‘self’ and to draw that ‘self’ closer to nature.”¹⁶ He describes his goal as an architect not “to commune with nature as-it-is, but rather to try to change the meaning of nature through architecture”.¹⁷ According to Andō, by rendering nature abstract through architecture, man will discover a new relationship with nature. In his view, nature is the primary condition to which man relates and “through human intervention an opportunity can be created for questioning the why of human existence”. One of Andō’s mottos summarizes this attitude as “architecture reduces nature to its original elements-light, wind, water, and air, and, conversely, sublimates it as an abstraction through a dynamic resonance with geometry”.¹⁸ Similarly in another motto Andō says that “architecture draws nature into its interior, sometimes embracing it gently, sometimes rigorously. In the process nature opens itself while always closing itself to architecture.”¹⁹ In Andō’s view, when man maintains such a relationship with nature he achieves a state of mind through which he “listens to the voices of objects as such, ‘interpreting’ the aspirations they emit in their ‘breath’.”²⁰ By this way nature manifests itself through objects.

VI

To sum up, these characteristics attributed to nature, and the use of nature as a category that distinguishes Japanese aesthetics and art from their Western counterparts, remind of the so-called “Theories of Japaneseness” or *Nihonjinron*, a widespread genre in modern Japan seeking after the essence of Japanese culture. Several commentators discussed extensively how the concept of nature played an important role in the discourses on the national identity of Japan in the first half of twentieth century.²¹ I think, however, what distinguishes, among other things, the works I have discussed today, from the standard theories of Japaneseness, is that their approaches are offered not only as a tool for understanding of Japanese culture, but also for multicultural exploration of aesthetic issues. Their approaches to aesthetic experience through nature challenge several assumptions about the concept, which are criticized and reevaluated also in contemporary Western aesthetics: Firstly, in all of them the distinction between art, nature, and everyday life is blurred, and the aesthetic significance of everything, as well as art, is emphasized. Secondly, they redefine the role of the artist in the act of creation, and offer alternative evaluative criteria such as spontaneity, or naturalness. Thirdly, they describe aesthetic experience as an encounter, or a moment of appearance rather than detection of formal and expressive qualities of a harmonious totality.

As well as offering these alternative ideas about aesthetic experience, they also remind us the importance of carefully considering and comparing the meanings attached to such terms as nature, or aesthetics to bring different cultures together in a dialogue.

¹ For the meanings attributed to *shizen* and the discussions concerning the introduction of it as the translation word for nature see Ryūfu, Akira. *Honyaku no Shisō: Shizen to nature*. Tokyo: Chikumakugaku Geibunsho, 1995; Sagara, Tōru. "Onozukara toshite no Shizen," *Nihon no Bigaku*. Vol. 3, No. 10, 1987. 20-35. Tellenbach, Hubertus and Kimura, Bin. "'The Japanese Concept of Nature,'" *Nature in Asian Traditions of Thought: Essays in Environmental Philosophy*. Ed. J. Baird Callicott and Roger T. Ames. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989. 153-162; Thomas, Julia Adeney. *Reconfiguring Modernity: Concept of Nature in Japanese Political Ideology*. Ewing, NJ, USA: University of California Press, 2002; Berque, Augustin. *Le Sauvage et l'artifice*. Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1986.

² Sagara, Tōru. "Onozukara toshite no Shizen." 20-21.

³ Ibid. 23-26.

⁴ Ibid. 25-26.

⁵ Tellenbach and Kimura, *ibid.* 157-158.

⁶ Sasaki, Ken-ichi. *Aesthetics on Non-Western Principles. Version 0.5*. Maastrich: Jan Van Eyck Akademie, 1998.

⁷ Ibid. 26.

⁸ Ibid. 20.

⁹ Saito, Yuriko. "The Japanese Appreciation of Nature," *British Journal of Aesthetics*. 25:3 (1985: Summer). 239-251; "The Japanese esthetics of Imperfection and Insufficiency," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*. Vol. 55, No. 4 (Autumn, 1987). 377-385; "The Japanese Aesthetics of Packaging," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*. Vol. 57, No. 2 (Spring, 1999). 257-265; "Japanese Gardens: The Art of Improving Nature," *Chanoyu Quarterly*. 83 (1996). 40-61; "Japanese Aesthetics: Historical Overview," *Encyclopedia of Aesthetics*. Oxford University Press, 1998. 545-552.

¹⁰ Saito. "Japanese Aesthetics: Historical Overview." 551.

¹¹ Ōhashi, Ryōsuke. *Bi no Yukue*. Kyoto: Toeisha, 2007. 265-288.

¹² Ōhashi, Ryōsuke. *Kire no Kōzō: Nihonbi to Gendai Sekai*. Tokyo: Chūō Kōronsha, 1986. 143.

¹³ Munroe, Alexandra. *Japanese Art After 1945: Scream Against the Sky*. New York: Henry N. Albany, 1994. 261.

¹⁴ Ibid. 261.

¹⁵ Quoted in Munroe, 265.

¹⁶ Tadao Ando: 1981-1989. Japan: Kajima Institute Publishing, 1990. 35.

¹⁷ Ibid. 35.

¹⁸ Ibid. 41.

¹⁹ Ibid. 73.

²⁰ Ibid. 110.

²¹ Nishi, Kinya. "Poieshisuteki Tenkai: Kyotogakuhani yoru 'Geijutsu' to 'Shizen' no Gensetsu Hensei," *Geijutsu/Kattō no Genba: Kindai Nihon Geijutsu Shisō no Kontekusuto*. Ed. Ken-ichi Iwaki, Tokyo: Kōyō Shobō, 2002. 241-256; Thomas, Julia Adeney. *Reconfiguring Modernity: Concept of Nature in Japanese Political Ideology*. Junko, Saeki. "'Bi' no Akogare," *Nihon no Bigaku* 21 (1994). 178-190; This article has been translated into English by Michael F. Marra, "Longing for 'Beauty'" in *A History of Modern Japanese Aesthetics*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2001. 25-42. See also Junko, Saeki. "Shizen to Shinjitsu," *Nihon no Bigaku* 19 (December 1992). 142-158;