

## **“I went to see Aki Kondo’s project at Jikka”**

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On May 16th, I went to see a work-in-progress show by Aki Kondo at the alternative space Jikka in Suehirocho.

Her current project is not exactly an exhibition. It is more of an improvisational theatrical performance that shows the process of her painting. In a gallery space whose front entrance is completely open to the street, Kondo stacks up cardboard boxes of various sizes, and paints on their sides, sometimes rearranging the boxes to form a kind of barricade against the viewer who peeks in from the entrance. All the while, she is dressed as a cosplay animal, drawing a comparison to a creature in a zoo.

Above all else, the idea of Kondo – who has the ability to bring her tableaux to a rather high degree of finish – painting in this impromptu manner without predetermining the outcome and showing the process to an audience was interesting. Cardboard boxes, being three-dimensional objects, are a medium with conditions that differ greatly from those of a canvas. Instead of the artist dividing up one flat surface according to how he or she envisions the outcome, in this case the artist has to grapple with the bulkiness of the object, determine then and there what can now be done within the new boundary created by obstructed fields of vision as she addresses one surface after the next. A picture painted on one surface of one of the boxes creates various relationships depending on how it abuts the other boxes and inspires new patterns and images. At the same time, because whether a picture on a part of a box that you cannot see from where you are standing has some kind of relationship with a picture drawn on another box is affected by such things as the position from which you view the box or the rearrangement of the boxes, the artist is obliged therefore to open the whole thing up to the experience of the audience, instead of trying to control the entire outcome. This domain of movable vision intentionally left in the exhibition space welcomes the audience in, creating an environment that facilitates an audience reaction.

In Kondo’s installation, the random coupling and accumulation of images of plants, animals and parts of the human body painted on the boxes that have been stacked up in the narrow space is reminiscent of a place in which miscellaneous things from the city or the jungle are jumbled together. Among that she has created an environment that is like a hiding place or a fort in which the animals she is impersonating can appear or disappear. The situation in which everything is only seen in fragments, contrary to expectation, stimulates the imagination of the audience and invites a kind of thought-based game of tag.

I had various discussions with Aki Kondo and curator Ichiro Fukano about this exhibit. Kondo spoke of wanting to distance herself for once from painting as an

individual object that has a fixed degree of completeness and is displayed by hanging it on a wall facing the audience; of this time, wanting to suppress the psychological effect that compels both the artist and the audience to take a high stance in a “white cube” gallery space, the sacred domain of art; and of wanting to place herself within the kind of theatrical environment in which she has been interested for a while and creating some sort of “stage set.” In contrast to the autonomy of a painting that prompts the “reverent behavior” of appreciating the picture by “tracing” the beauty of an already completed work, Kondo, by exposing the fiction of such a ritualistic relationship, wants the audience to savor the “reality” that they themselves can experience. In other words, even if the format is different, what she aims to do is to make the audience perceive—through their relationship to the object—the space and their own body from a new perspective, much like the theatrical environment (Michael Fried’s criticism of the term “theatrical” notwithstanding) that minimalist sculpture aimed to produce.

Moreover, the “theatre” Kondo is thinking of is not the usual kind of theatre where stage and audience are completely separated from each other. It is instead something proximate to the idea of theatre as an instrument of impromptu acts and exchanges, attracting short skits and happenings that unfold on the street much like what Shuji Terayama aspired to. And it struck me that the Jikka space functions ideally for such a purpose. This district in which the streets and alleys—lined with miscellaneous computer shops and figurine shops spilling over from Akihabara, fast food outlets, ramen shops, old-fashioned soba shops and Japanese-style inns—that intersect north to south as they continue in an unbroken line, have a wonderful vibrancy, like a succession of food stalls. Even though there is gallery there, it feels open as if it is capable of merging seamlessly as one within a relationship of things that are different in nature. Moreover, Jikka is located next to a park at the back of an alley a short distance away from the main road but is still in tune with the bustle of the city and has that the kind of relaxed ambience where people can peek into the place from the outside or sometimes even come inside. Although inside a building, you can feel the atmosphere outside. It has the quality of an interstice-like space that connects the inside of the gallery with the whole district. And these are conditions that make it a marvelous place to realize the impromptu theatre conceived by Kondo. In fact, the young women who come to this place on a daily basis bring a small item for Kondo each time and return home having received a different item from Kondo—a “happening” that involves exchanging things.

I thought that by documenting such small events, the process of public production of art would gradually become a type of artistic performance of relationships.

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