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There Is No Conclusion to This Assembly: A Conversation about Koki Tanaka by Becca Voelcker and Julian Ross

Kyoto-based artist Koki Tanaka works with video and installation to examine social order and collectivity through playful disruption, collaborative actions, and conversation. His early videos establish new relationships with objects by removing them from their usual context through deliberate misuse. In later works, he shifted his attention towards group dynamics and social behaviour by assigning collective tasks, such as asking five pianists to create a composition by playing together on the same piano. Forms of relationality emerge through such ‘collective acts’, as he calls them. His most recent works foreground political discussion to recognise the importance of communication and disagreement. The titles of Tanaka’s works are often literal, but their simplicity is deceptive. They describe actions that trigger modes of exchange between people premised on collaboration, (dis)agreement, and social responsibility. Each walk, workshop, study, shared meal, or group exercise interrogates what it means to take part in a community.

The following conversation is an amalgamation of thoughts concerning Koki Tanaka’s practice, exchanged over a month via WhatsApp voice notes, emails and in two longer discussions on Zoom. We invited Koki Tanaka to join our final discussion. Our invitation was an attempt to mirror his recent practice of appearing on screen—often in the epilogue of his films—to participate in the discussion.

Becca Voelcker: Maybe we could start at the beginning and the end, by discussing Koki’s practice as being open-ended. He often revisits older projects, and reconfigured his installation for Aichi Triennale (2019) into *Abstracted / Family*, a feature film released in early 2020. As a format, his video installations exhibited in galleries also refuse clear demarcations of beginning and end. I remember walking into *Provisional Studies: Workshop #7 How to Live Together and Sharing the Unknown* (2017) at Skulptur Projekte Münster and not knowing where to begin amongst so many pieces of footage and text. It was like entering a conversation midway. But I think that is Koki’s interest. Doesn’t life feel like that? We stumble into situations without framing, without introductions. But what do you think about Koki’s recent feature films, *Vulnerable Histories (A Road Movie)* (2019) and *Abstracted / Family*? Screened from start to finish in festival contexts, they seem different.

Julian Ross: Yes, his recent work seems more edited, more precise. I don’t know if that’s a good thing or not. So much of Koki’s work has to do with chance. Anything that happens during filming becomes part of the work. The hesitations when people are talking. The sentences that trail off. There’s still some of that in *Vulnerable Histories*, but the overall effect is like a series of clearly defined scenes; it’s more cinematic.

BV: Precisely because of such orchestration, those hesitations or non-sequiturs or awkward moments, function as deliberate moments that Koki’s edit foregrounds. We no longer have the feeling of witnessing them by chance amongst hours of footage and several video monitors or screens in a gallery. They are presented within the film’s narrative arc. I was watching Koki’s early films from the mid-2000s this week, and they operate very differently. They remind me of the playful, gestural, formally rigorous yet disarmingly simple filmed actions of Roman Signer, Fischli & Weiss, Bruce Nauman. *Beer* (2004), for example, lasts 39 seconds. We see Koki’s hands open a bottle of beer that foams so much it overflows across the tabletop. That’s it. Once the beer is wasted, the film is done. There’s a satisfying sense of conclusion in these little films. Koki’s group activity films—a pottery produced by 5 potters at once (*silent attempt*) (2013), *A Piano Played by 5 Pianists at Once (First Attempt)* (2012), *A Haircut by 9 Hairdressers at Once (Second Attempt)* (2010)—function in a similar way in that they finish when the group’s task is completed. The pot is thrown, the piano has been played, the hair is cut.

JR: I agree. But there’s also a thread linking these early pieces with the recent projects and features: they all explore collaboration.

BV: I’m thinking about the Japanese word *taiken*, which means physical experience, *tai* being a character for ‘body.’ It seems to me that Koki’s films of physical collaborations—the making of a poem, pot, piano piece—offer entry points to wider considerations of community, collaboration, relationality. And they do this through the body. Compared with the haircut and other films from around 2010, *Vulnerable Histories* and *Abstracted / Family* are less gestural, more verbal. Koki poses questions in them—we see or hear him ask the participants ‘how can we understand each other?’ ‘what is identity?’ ‘can we understand another’s experience?’

JR: He may have wanted to address topics of identity and nation more directly by verbalising them. In *Discussing Unknown (His Future Work)* (2012), Koki is not present at all, but has given a group of artists and curators the task of deciding what his next piece of art should be. Their conversation becomes the piece. One curator explains that she wants Koki to work on ‘something bigger.’ It’s unclear what she means, but in a way, Koki did end up going ‘bigger’ by explicitly taking national identity as his subject matter.

BV: He also shifted scale by making single screen feature films for festivals. What I find generative is the way he tackles these weighty topics and institutional platforms with purposeful naivety. In many of the films, he enters the frame—maybe only once or twice—very politely, and proceeds to ask participants a huge, staggeringly complex, question (‘what is community?’) And he gets away with it! Because of this deliberate naivety.

Koki Tanaka, re: collaboration:

I don't see my shifting scale in that way. My earlier pieces (*A Piano Played by 5 Pianists*, for example) were shown in the Japan Pavilion at the 2013 Venice Biennale, and refer to the 2011 earthquake, tsunami and nuclear disaster (3/11). They reference a post-disaster situation and depict a utopian moment of collaboration. When I was making these videos, I was addressing these 'bigger' themes. In my project for Münster in 2017, on the other hand, I focused on individuals and their life stories. *Vulnerable Histories* (*A Road Movie*) narrows its scope to two individuals. Even though my production values have increased and the screen has become bigger, the focus has become smaller.

JR: I'm sure Koki is aware of the potential explosiveness of the situations he facilitates. In *Vulnerable Histories*, for example, he brings a person of Swiss and Japanese heritage together with a Zainichi Korean, to share their experiences of hybrid, multicultural identity. The historical complications are huge. Yes, there's a sense of shared experience but at the same time, the historical contexts are so different.

BV: In *Provisional Studies*, Koki gathered eight participants to spend nine days living together in a former bomb shelter. The shelter was built on the former site of a monastery and military barracks. These spaces interested Koki because they had housed temporary (spiritual, military, or civilian) communities. In the provisional community Koki established there, he asked participants to discuss, amongst other things, topics of empathy and experience. One was a Syrian refugee, another descended from slaves. Their discussion explores precisely the tension I think you experienced in *Vulnerable Histories*. How saying 'I understand your experience' can be a gesture of solidarity, or diminish another's experience.

JR: Yes because to say you understand somebody's experience risks reducing it to something digestible, comprehensible. Koki is intentionally inviting disagreement in these discussions. He understands the potential of politically generative disagreement. I'm thinking now of the role discussion and disagreement played in his contribution to Aichi Triennale.

BV: The triennale whose exhibition about censorship was censored?

JR: Yes, the triennial included an exhibition on historically censored artwork, called *After 'Freedom of Expression.'* It included work addressing the issue of comfort women, and the organisers shut down this part of the triennial. On discovering this, many artists involved in the triennial's contemporary exhibitions demanded the withdrawal of their works in an open letter—Tania Bruguera, Minouk Lim, Dora García, for example. Koki's response was interesting. While he also co-signed this letter and was the only Japanese artist to do so, he wanted to find a way to create discussion around what had happened—to work with discussion rather than simply remove artwork or withdraw. He organised weekly discussions, as well as partially blocking the entrance to his installation space.

BV: So the visual effect was an implication that the work was not complete, and the ongoing discussions further emphasised this.

JR: Right. His response is interesting in relation to his larger practice of ongoing conversations, and incompleteness. At first, I wondered whether his partial removal of work and partial participation was indecisive, but then I came to realise that it was a form of boycott. Is that the right word?

BV: Or strike?

JR: It's interesting to compare the two modes of demonstration. A boycott might be deciding not to buy something—it's enacting a political gesture through consumer choice. And a strike is a refusal of labour. So what happened at Aichi?



Vulnerable Histories (A Road Movie) (2019)

BV: This distinction raises a question about labour and commodity. Are the artists striking as a withdrawal of their ongoing labour? Or boycotting by removing their artworks (as a way to prevent objects from circulating in a possible market)? Audiences are capable of boycotting by not visiting an exhibition. Artists can strike. Because Koki's contribution requires his ongoing labour in facilitating workshops, he could strike.

JR: Strikes are visible—often there's a picket line, like that outside Tate Modern now. Koki's strike was visible too, and the discussions were forms of protest.

BV: And being present. Whereas boycotts function through withdrawal, absence

JR: With protest and presence, there's more opportunity in creating dialogue.

BV: I'm reminded of Jacques Rancière's idea of dissensus here. He defines politics as discussion, and discussion must include disagreement. I think Koki understands this. Withdrawal to silence would not be political for Koki; debate would.

JR: Do you see this approach in his earlier works with the piano, for example, and the haircut?

BV: I do. Again, in a naïve, quite charming way, Koki plays the troublemaker. By asking five adults to play one piano simultaneously, or ten people to cut one head of hair, he is creating conditions for disagreement and negotiation. It's not as explicit or verbalised as recent works, but is still grounded in a political interest in dissensus. He also plays troublemaker with objects in his early films—for example, *Everything is Everything* (2006), *Approach to an Old House* (2008) and *Walk Through, test no.2* (2009) comprise short vignettes in which Koki sets up and disrupts utilitarian objects and situations. He constructs a flatpack cardboard box, steps on it, crushes it. He unspools toilet roll. He crushes plastic cups under his feet. The domestic order 'please follow instructions carefully' is thrown into chaos. Koki abandons instructive, societal order and lets orders of gravity, entropy, randomness preside. This is a dissensus of objects and spaces.

JR: I found myself thinking of Jean-Luc Nancy's book, *The Inoperative Community*, and its argument that community is prefaced on presence—on people being somewhere together—not working on anything specific but coming together for the sake of being together. Nancy emphasises the human capacity and desire for sharing.

BV: Koki moves back and forth between giving participants tasks (to cut hair, to throw a pot) and placing them together for the sake of being together and sharing discussions.

JR: In the features, sometimes discussions are led by Koki's prompts or set readings, and other times they seem to occur spontaneously, casually, amidst another activity.

BV: Remember Seamus Heaney's poem, 'When all the others were away at Mass'. It's a beautiful memory of a moment of intimacy Heaney shared with his mother as they stooped over a bucket of potatoes. Peeling them was an activity to share. 'They broke the silence,' he writes, and we were 'never closer the whole rest of our lives.' I think Koki recognises this need of activity for intimacy. But he also plays with it. *Abstracted / Family* includes sequences shot in a blackbox theatre under spotlights. Participants sit around a table with written notes. Some look distinctly uncomfortable. It's as if Koki wants to see how they act and react under different conditions.

I wonder how Koki's finding the current communication issues we're all facing in online meetings during the pandemic. The delays, the interruptions, the multiple screens, and absence of physically shared space. It can be awkward. So much of his practice is about facilitating in-person meetings and shared activities. What now, I wonder.

KT:

One thought I've had during the combined experience of the pandemic and fatherhood is how a vocabulary for life is becoming increasingly standardised and abstracted, in terms like 'social distance' and 'new normal.' It's got me thinking about states of exception versus social regulation. For example, if you have a dying parent who longs to see cherry blossoms one last time, but there's self-isolation in place, what do you do? I'm considering individual life stories now more than ever.

BV: You're reminding me of the phrase 'the personal is political.' That phrase encapsulates for me the complexity of social responsibility.

KT: I'm troubled by the current mindset in Japan. People are encroaching on human rights. It feels like the pre-war period where people conducted mutual surveillance. The social pressure is scary.

BV: I'm speaking from London where the situation is different, but scary in its own way. I wonder whether the pandemic is amplifying certain social patterns. People are refusing to wear masks here because they feel it curbs certain 'freedoms.'

Koki's way of returning to earlier works or ideas, and reformulating them, reminds me of Godard in *Ici et Ailleurs* (1976): that film expresses a feeling of no longer knowing what he was sure of before. It's a chronicle of political doubt and reappraisal.

JR: Nancy did something similar, reconfiguring ideas expressed in *The Inoperative Community* (1986) in *The Disavowed Community* (2014.) I think the possibility of editing and reconfiguring is what excites Koki about cinema. *Discussing Unknown*, by the way, is also reformulated from a very early piece Koki made at art school. Throughout his career, Koki has consistently invited critique and feedback. When I think about his recent work especially, there's an openness that becomes an invitation for ongoing discussion. It seems like he considers himself a participant of a critical community.

KT:

I find inspiration from this open-ended approach in relational aesthetics. I try to involve people in the discussion I sparked. I remember Doryun Chong criticising participants of the 2011 Yokohama Triennale for not adequately responding to 3/11 and its social aftermath. Two years later, for the Japanese Pavilion in Venice, I was able to respond to his critique.

BV: Navigating the installation in Venice was a chaotic experience that required audiences to actively choose— where to step, where to pay attention. The installation combined your earlier filmed works, texts, objects from workshops, and even remnants of Toyo Ito's architecture exhibition that remained in the pavilion from the previous year. It felt like a ruin and a shelter; a site for ongoing excavation and critical examination of Japan's past, present, future.

JR: I think Koki's interest in showing films at festivals partly concerns the possibility of critical reflection in Q&A discussions afterwards. Conversations begun on screen can extend into the Q&A session. At the Berlinale's Forum Expanded screening this February, his Q&A lasted an hour. He invited the audience to discuss *Abstracted / Family* in groups as one might in a seminar. I don't think you get this kind of opportunity in an art context, where visitors come and go.

BV: Did he film the Q&A to become the basis for an epilogue or future work?

JR: I don't think so.

BV: I was wondering because he's interested in the epilogue as a formal device. The epilogue in *Vulnerable Histories* reminds me of *Chronicle of a Summer* (Rouch & Morin, 1961) which ends in an auditorium where participants of the film have just watched themselves, and react to their own representations. In *Vulnerable Histories*, Koki joins his two participants in a café to reflect on their experiences making the film.

JR: Thinking of the Q&A as a kind of live epilogue, I remember the situation in Berlin was quite heated. People found it easier to express criticisms in the small groups; relaying responses to the wider audience, they were more guarded.

BV: That's the difficulty with Q&As. Audiences can feel exposed, or obliged to perform.

JR: And as a moderator, maintaining a balance between criticality and support isn't always easy. I think Koki's decision to facilitate group work was a way to avoid these issues.

BV: He plays with this within the films too. Sometimes we can infer that Koki is not present because participants speak about him. Other times, he steps into the frame to pose a question.

JR: Occasionally we catch sight of him in a window reflection, or see a mic boom or second camera. Because he sits people in circles or squares, it becomes inevitable that we see him or the crew in some of the shots.

BV: In the history of documentary film, it's common for filmmakers to take a stance, one way or the other—to either be present and participate (or sometimes provoke, as in the case of Hara Kazuo), or to efface oneself, as in a fly-on-the-wall documentary. But Koki is interestingly ambivalent—as in, he tries both modes.

JR: He works in a fluid way which suits his wider commitment to letting conversations unfold.

KT:

Some friends criticised my observational distance in *A Piano*. Even if I wanted to intervene, I wouldn't have been able to, as I didn't have an understanding of the musical terms the pianists were using. For *Abstracted / Family*, I participated more, discussing my own life experiences with the subjects of my work, the protagonists, before the shoot. I didn't intend to include this scene in the film. But then, excluding it felt dishonest.

JR: In *A Piano*, there's a lot of discussion and a final result. You don't end with such conclusiveness in *Abstracted / Family*. If anything, things have only become more complicated. Again, there's little possibility for the closure of an ending.

BV: What was that line near the end of the film?

JR: "There's no conclusion to this assembly."