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Crack and Fold – Site and Time. The Hecomi Objects of Ken'ichiro Taniguchi

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In the frame of a cultural exchange programme between the towns of Sapporo and Hamburg in 1999, the Japanese artist Satoshi Hata acted as a curator of several group shows with works of over 40 artists from Northern Japan. Together with the Hamburg-based art agent and gallery owner Mikiko Sato, Hata staged two remarkable shows providing an overview of the young art scene in Japan, one in the alternative art space “Fundbureau” in the district of Altona, the other in the “Ausstellungsraum Taubenstraße 13”, an exhibition room on the Reeperbahn in Hamburg. The works of the Japanese artists, mainly from the island Hokkaido and for the most part still involved in studies, were contrasted with works of colleagues from Hamburg who were also in the initial phase of their careers as freelance artists.

Among the exhibiting artists was Ken'ichiro Taniguchi, who was born 1976 in Sapporo, and, in 1999, was still enrolled as a student at the Art and Sculpture Department of Education of Hokkaido. In the “Fundbureau” and the “Taubenstraße”, Ken, as he is called, showed several flat, drawing-like objects of wood veneer and paper that were fixed to the wall by hinges and protruded into the room. This first participation in an exhibition abroad has been followed, until today, by numerous long-term working stays with shows in Hamburg and other large European cities like Berlin, Bremen, Amsterdam, Rotterdam, St. Petersburg and Budapest. In view of his studies far away from the main artistic and cultural centres, the concept of combining travels through Europe and artistic work appears to have emerged as a consequence of Ken'ichiro Taniguchi's interest.

A colour photograph of Ken's living room wall in Sapporo of the year 1998 conveys the impression of a carefully arranged visualisation of a cultural programme, made up of posters, art books, and other objects. It expresses Japan's affinity to European art since the 19th century and embraces a widening perspective onto the world far beyond the borders of the islands of Nippon: Alongside representative illustrated books of the artists Rembrandt, Cézanne, Matisse, Kandinsky and Klee, one is bound to notice the title *Odyssey* positioned in the central axis of the wall. Two handy globes are situated nearby. A large colour reproduction of Vincent van Gogh's “Sunflowers” from 1888 from the Neue Pinakothek in Munich forms the centre of the composition. Besides this, one discovers a replica of a late self-portrait of van Gogh, small-sized replicas of paintings by Paul Gauguin and Henri Matisse, and a life mask of Ludwig van Beethoven. Van Gogh's central role concerning the reception of European art in Japan manifested itself in 1987 through the spectacular

purchase of one of the versions of the sunflower motive by the Japanese insurance company Yasuda for 22.5 million British pound (equals approx. 33 million euro). This virtually allowed Japan to regain its share in modern art; for the European vanguard at the end of the 19th century had oriented itself on the aesthetics of Japanese coloured woodcuts, which, adapted in paintings by artists like Edouard Manet and van Gogh, were conveyed by assembling private collections and exhibiting them.

Early works by Ken from his years of study in Sapporo are marked by a tendency of developing flat forms of painted canvas or paper with irregular, dentil-angular elements resulting in the impression of a confined island or a map. The cut-out shapes with their emblematic effect are affixed to the wall or placed on the ground as self-contained objects. Wall, floor and work visually enter a positive-negative relation, which in the subsequent works is created in real terms with the spatial components. Now, it is the cracks, notches, grooves and damage marks at the exhibition space that serve Ken's small, not immediately noticeable cut-outs as anchor points. When placing the objects, he follows the coincidentally predetermined course of breakage lines and seams – place and work form a symbiosis. Thus, the key was found for a working model which Ken has captured with the term “Hecomi”. Since 2000, the titles for individual objects, work groups, and projects all include this term which attains the dimension of a genre description and relates the tiny local fissure to a world principle: “The Illustrated Hecomi Map of the World” was the title Ken gave two of his shows in Tokyo and Hamburg in 2001/2002, the “World Hecomi Pictural Book” was published in Japan in 2002, the “Hecomi Research Project”, conceived for the long term, is currently being implemented in 36 countries in the world, and for Hamburg Ken published a “Hecomi Map” in 2006.

What stands out in the works of the Hecomi programme (“Hecomi Studies”) is the bonding with the place chosen by the artist for his stay and work. After examining the immediate and larger urban topography, Ken concretely searches for cracks and breaks in the surfaces of streets, footpaths and courts; in the walls of buildings, wall sidings and stairs; and also for surface damage in traffic signs, waste containers, and park benches. In a second step, the outlines of selected spot-like and reticular spallings, notches, holes in mortar and cracks in asphalt are traced onto a transparent film. The drawing in original dimensions is then transmitted onto a plastic sheet and cut out. The material of these cut-outs is available in Japan's garden centres in the form of 1x1 meter plates in yellow colouring. Ken processes the material by hand through repeated grinding with sandpaper of various gradations, creating a specific surface of supple and matt appearance. The artist often cuts the flat shapes apart at narrow points and pieces them together again by means of small, filigree

brass hinges produced in Japan. This technique results in a variably foldable object, permeable to the view, which may be fixed to the wall, optionally unfolded or placed on the ground. The work's title denominates the exact position of the form cast with street name, house number, floor, wall or setting – at times adding the name of one of Ken's friends: “Altonaer Poststraße. On the bench”, “Schumacherstraße 90. On the wall. Ayako Yamamoto”, “Neue Große Bergstraße in front of Budnikowski on the pavement”, “Brunnenstraße 10. Berlin. Germany”.

The exact conformity of the cut-out with the original crack is checked on site. For this purpose Ken fits the yellow plastic webs into the corresponding indentations. A photograph of this situation documents both the fitting accuracy and the coloured accentuation of the fissure's path on the surface. If, as in some cases, the cracks have been repaired in the meantime, Ken's cut-out becomes the last trace of a past condition of erosion, ageing, material fatigue or dislocated forces in urban spaces. The term Hecomi in Japanese literally relates to the meaning of crack, recess, indentation, exfoliation, but aside from this, Hecomi also describes mental conditions like exhaustion, sagging or decline, feeling wrecked, having no power.

Not only the procedure of appropriating cities via their signs of ageing and giving them a manageable shape and form, but also the proximity to cartography, with the aesthetical criteria of aerial perspectives onto rivers and traffic nets, bring the Hecomi works near the realm of artistic preservation of evidence and mapping. Folding the objects enhances the idea of geological layers or reminds of folding techniques for maps and plans. Ken's method of appropriating the great variety of shapes in everyday life can be historically traced all the way back to Leonardo da Vinci. Again and again since he commended his colleagues to “look at walls that are smutted with different stains or at stone of varying compound,” “in order to arouse the spirit for diverse inventions,” artists up until the “Art Informel” and “Tachisme” of the 20th century utilize unspectacular, negligible and coincidental structures as a source of inspiration for their aesthetical products. The scientific examination of forms non-conform to mathematical geometrical base models was already taken up systematically by the rationalist Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz in the baroque era – a topic which, in 1988, Gilles Deleuze picks up in his essay on the fold in the Baroque. The French philosopher and media theorist draws a bow from the baroque ideas of an endlessly folded universe, a concept that bears its analogy both in matter and the human soul, all the way to the “Art Informel” and to the Japanese art of paper folding “Origami”, which in exemplary configuration contains the “science of matter”. (Gilles Deleuze. *Die Falte*. Frankfurt a. M. 2000 / engl. trans.: *The Fold*.)

Pursuing the allusion made by Deleuze of interlinking the cultures of Europe and Japan, the Hecomi objects with their foldable parts are also related to the folding principle of Origami, even if Ken does not attach importance to this aspect but rather stresses his fascination for the folding mechanism of the “Swiss Army Knife”. The orientation on the quality and precision of this internationally renowned cutting utensil in turn refers to Ken's interest, well-grounded in Japanese tradition, in highly suitable material properties, as found, for example, in the specifically handcrafted steel for the “katana” (Japanese Samurai Sword), which demands several procedures of folding in extremely thin layers, forging, grinding and polishing.

A simultaneous appreciation of perfection and deterioration is reflected aesthetically in Ken's Hecomi works; the visualisation of the imprints of ageing is also found in the Japanese culture. In the flyer for the show “Hecomi Study #14” in Hamburg in 2008, Hajo Schiff made reference to a practice existing since the Shogun period, by which in porcelain repairs cracks are filled with gold and are thus particularly accentuated: “The aim of this practice is not a high degree of reinstatement, but demonstrated history.” Formulating topics of time and transience undoubtedly constitutes an emphasis in contemporary Japanese art. Just to cite a few examples: On Kawara's conceptual “date paintings”, Nobuyoshi Araki's allusion to vanitas, the expression of eternity and finitude in the photographs of Hiroshi Sugimoto through meditative views onto sea horizons and those of Ryuji Miyamoto documenting the destruction in the Japanese city of Kobe by the earthquake in 1995.

While Ken'ichiro Taniguchi's Hecomi objects unite historical and contemporary debates on art between Japanese traditions and Modern Art, including the aesthetical production under the prognostic symptoms of globalisation – through reference in equal terms to the radiant yellow and the withering, bent sunflowers of van Gogh; to Jackson Pollock's stained and reticular structures of the Tachisme, preconceived by Leonardo; all the way to the interlaced wall relief of Frank Stella – thus the Mapping approach not only has brought forth a fixation on specific places, but equally a playful availability through its variable modes of creation and presentation. Recalled forms of the past become the structure for new and fascinating shapes and fabrics which incorporate world notion and master craftsmanship.