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Everyone lied! Everyone!
Only I knew, I who love him.

Jun Kaneko and the Aesthetic Dimension of Multiple Dialogue

Words by Alicia Blas Brunel



Perhaps it is not by chance that *Madame Butterfly* was the work with which Jun Kaneko made his stage debut, seeing as the eastern-western conflict even forms an intrinsic part of its plot.

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IMG 01 / 02 / 03
Madama Butterfly,
 Opera Omaha, 2011.
 Photos by Takashi Hatakeyama



The *Tao Te Ching* states in chapter 56, "Those who know do not speak. Those who speak, do not know". The apparent contradictory duality of the oriental proverb disperses before our eyes when trying to apply it to an artist like Jun Kaneko, paradoxically confirming with it one of the principal laws of the Tao: its vagueness and ambiguity. That is to say, its inability to explain itself with words. Because what is speaking and what is knowing? What is doing and what is thinking? Can one accept such closed categories as these? And above all, who is Jun Kaneko?

Jun Kaneko is recognised as a pioneer of ceramic sculpture on a monumental scale and is one of the main representatives of the American Contemporary Ceramic Movement. His work is halfway between industry, art and craft, teaching and cultural production, eastern (Japan where he was born in 1942) and western (where he has developed his artistic career since arriving in the USA in 1963 to continue his art studies). Kaneko has always

tried to blur the lines between all types of borders and produce an egalitarian and public sense of art, based on play and experimentation.

A transcultural I for Madame Butterfly (2006). S. Portico Bowman describes Kaneko as "a magical man who says little." The artistic direction of the Omaha Opera, Nebraska - where he has lived since 1986 with his wife Ree - must have interpreted this differently when in spring 2003, he was entrusted with the production design for *Madame Butterfly* (Puccini), directed by Leslie Swackhamer, including the scenography, costume design and characterisation.

From certain habitual conceptions in western academy, it might be difficult to understand the interest in the contributions that a mature ceramicist, who openly recognises that he has never been too interested in opera, could make to the history of set design. However, it is not uncommon that they are precisely practises



IMG 04

Fidelio, Opera

Philadelphia, 2008.

Photo by Takashi Hatakeyama

that have been developed from the disregard for the traditional language of the medium, which drive many of the major advances. You only need to remember the well-established career of another North American, Robert Wilson, who was strongly influenced by oriental culture; his initial training as an interior architect and his disinterest with traditional sets did not stop him from becoming one of the most relevant figures in theatre in the last part of the 20th century.

Personalities that allow one to appeal to the figure of the *master-novice* of zen origin, who expands the known limits of his surroundings from an apparent infantile ingenuity or intuitive purity, which stops him from accepting and *naturalising* certain conventions. An *idiot* artist, disoriented or *out of place*, but not soulless, which could be a first attempt at translating the Japanese term *manuke* - without *Ma*-, which defends the positive, transgressive and almost revolutionary potential of "do it yourself", typical of the 1970s punk counterculture.

Nor should one lose sight that the majority of the approximations made to oriental art and philosophies by the West adopt most of the time, an almost novice and distanced perspective which, as Ana Crespo says in her book *La Realidad y la Mirada. El Zen en el Arte Contemporáneo* (1997), provides "refreshing ideas and forms for tired knowledge frameworks," and reconsiders new knowledge frameworks that

enable one to question "power relations, the situation of man with regard to nature, and even the very function of art itself."

For this reason, perhaps neither is it by chance that *Madame Butterfly* was the work with which Kaneko made his stage debut, seeing as the eastern-western conflict even forms an intrinsic part of its plot. Luckily, in his case, the ending of the relationship was less unfortunate than that of Cio-Cio San and, after a long period of intensive immersion in the music and analysis of the libretto, the artist presented an original visual proposal which intuitively balanced both worlds. He did not lose any echoes of the stage traditions of his birth place – like, for example, the presence of stagehands (*kuroko*), typical of *kabuki*, the *Nô* plays or the *bunraku* puppets, who make changes to the decoration; substituting their traditional black hoods for strange cube-shaped masks. Colour also took precedence, as well as geometric abstraction and the organic and graphic contours

of the repetitive patterns of bright coloured lines and dots, characteristic of those art works that were most influenced by American Abstract Expressionism and Pop art.

The Ma as a theatre material: Beethoven's Fidelio (2008). From his second opera production, we can delve a little bit deeper into an interesting oriental term, which is fundamental for understanding Kaneko's work: the concept of *Ma*. In his sculptures, there is a great interest with what he calls "the spiritual scale" of the work of art. For example, in the grandeur that compels the viewer to look up and integrate it into a context in which the human being is just one element more in a world in which the relational aspect is the most important, seeing as his approach is unconnected to any figurative or functional character.

That sense of scale can also be observed in *Fidelio*, in which the visual concept is a pattern formed of repetitive lines that divide the scene, both physically and metaphorically. Although, as we said before, these aspects also connect with the western tradition of non-figurative painting. Perhaps, it is here where the links with the culture tradition from which he stems from, the Shintoism, are most obvious, as well as with the intuitive and emotional closeness of the stage.

Both in oriental philosophy and contemporary science, the conception of space cannot be made without that of time. This is also apparent in an art that reunites both planes amongst its work materials. The Japanese term *Ma* combines both concepts which, just as it was for film directors like Tarkowski, can be very useful for analysing the temporal, rhythmic and relational components of a work in which the geometric abstraction of music is proposed as a generating element through which the entire staging is structured.

Ma – space, time, interstice – is, therefore, a complex zen concept without a direct translation in other languages, that is often used to define the idea of continuity in discontinuity and the articulation between time and space, from the spirit of the place. However, due to the erroneous interpretation of the Japanese spatial conception made by Barthes, at times it is translated as *nothingness* or *emptiness*. But its actual meaning is very far from the idea of inexistence, seeing as it appeals to a state beyond that of the duality of existence



IMG 05 / 06
Fidelio, Opera
Philadelphia, 2008.
Photos by Takashi Hatakeyama

or inexistence, typical of the spiritual quality that links things and people both in zen and in Shintoism. According to this tradition, the *kami*, or spirits, also appear in natural phenomena and in objects of the earthly world. For the Japanese, there exists a constant flow and everything is part of that great spiritual unity, as in the pictorial vocabulary of Kaneko, the points and lines have just as much relevance as the interstitial spaces between the different marks.

This idea of the rhythmic temporality of movement and music and, therefore, the ephemeral character of existence as a fundamental part of Japanese aesthetics, takes us to another of the fundamental concepts for understanding the work of Kaneko: the *wabi-sabi*. The aesthetic of impermanence in which the fleeting character of the piece is what makes it special. The tea ceremony, the floral art of *Ikebana*, the *Nô* theatre or the artistic works of Kaneko personify that temporal ancestral art, which

connects so well with western postmodernity. The expression of a cosmic ephemera that crosses the history of the gaze and serves as a theoretical and aesthetic bridge between Asia and the West.

"Nothing exists by itself": Mozart's Magic Flute (2009). "The important thing is the relationship between the different parts and the dialogue." That is how Jun Kaneko summarises his work process in the studio, providing us with a cue to enter into his latest opera incursion, from that perspective which links the rest of his artistic work with the reality expanded by the theatrical.

Kaneko takes on the challenge that designing an opera like this entails, with a totally abstract focus that starts exclusively from the study of music and for which he uses video as part of the creation of a fluid visual style that in no way will interrupt the scene transitions or changes.





The simultaneity of scenes and spaces. Someone arrives, walks, travels, wanders... And the distinct always arrives. The sacred that cannot be found in a place, but rather in the experience of a place. The sacred that has nothing to do with gods, but with oneself. The sacred that means opening one's conscience to multiplicity and it can be associated with metaphysical ideas about the material world and the way in which people relate with it. For this reason, the presence of an adequate amount of empty space to move around is an important element, which not only brings the nothingness but also many other things.

Although both in daily language, as well as in mass media, words like simulation and artifice are frequently used, if we want to define that which differentiates live performing arts from other artistic practices, we will find, from their legendary ritual origins, terms that are attuned to contemporary aesthetics, such as participation, collaboration and dialogue. Concepts that, as a result of repeating them, have become

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IMG 07 / 08
The Magic Flute,
 San Francisco Opera, 2012.
 Photos by Takashi Hatakeyama

topics that are empty of content, but which intimately connect with the primitive idea of the theatrical as a community experience and a communicative event.

In an era like that in which we live, in which urgency and individualistic narcissism are so present, it is interesting to reinstate the power of the inter- and transdisciplinary as something not only inevitable, but also desirable, due to the fact that it helps to question extreme polarisations that delimit human identity as something isolated from its context. The stage event is, above all, relational and in its own specificity, and in a way that is perhaps more evident than in other arts, the necessary link between transmission and reception comes into play. We can start, therefore, remembering that to produce something that we can understand as theatre, there must exist at least one viewer who shares space and time with the representation, and from there, reassessing what can be understood as shared space-time and what materials are characteristic of an ephemeral art.

A brief overview of these three exceptional and prominent contributions to stage design from one of the most important living ceramicists can help us to look at creation from a broader angle. Is the distinction between minor and major arts just a matter of scale? What differentiates great Art from humble craft? What is dialogue in the creative process? Can the public-performance relationship be an intimate and silent act? A simple conversation with oneself. To answer affirmatively, as Kaneko does, one must leave behind certain prejudices and enter his fascinating work. One must explore the thought that sustains his practical work and the traditions and progressions – whether Japanese, abstract expressionism or 1960s pop art – in which he has grounded his work up until now. Now we just have to wait and see how the experience of opera design has modified his way of working in the studio. —



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