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Between Life and Non-Life: Sachiko Kodama's Black and Bridget Riley's Pink

Abstract: The contemporary world is so technological that humans are located on the verge of life and non-life. Computers, cyborgs, artificial intelligence, and androids permeate human society, and people are even fascinated by such menaces of the non-life. This paper clarifies why contemporary society loves the idea of the rise of artificial beings by analyzing the use of artificial colors – black and pink – by the cutting-edge female artists Sachiko Kodama and Bridget Riley.

Media artist Kodama uses black liquid while the abstract artist Riley uses pink pigments as key materials. According to Asao Komachiya, black is the color of the blind; it appears on the verge of being and non-being. Meanwhile, Barbara Nemitz identifies pink as an artificial color that does not exist in the spectrum of sunlight. Both colors are highly evaluated in technological and consumer society and widely used on many goods. Kodama's and Riley's high reputation signifies that contemporary society likes the precarious artificial beings between life and non-life. Moreover, their original and unique works have realized the field of liberty as their extensive use of artificial colors black and pink indicates ultra-human.

Kodama's and Riley's gender is also key. As Dora Haraway suggests in "Cyborg Manifesto" (1991), contemporary women, historically dealt with as peripheral existences, survive as ultra-human beings rather than the ancient goddesses. By considering significant female artists such as Kodama and Riley, we can understand not only the contemporary aesthetics of visual arts, but also the concurrent yearning of contemporary society for liberty, ultra-humanity, and non-life.

Keywords: black; Bridget Riley; color theory; cyborg; feminism; pink; Sachiko Kodama.

Introduction

Today, the Internet, social media, robots, androids, AI, the Internet of Things, and their programming have become the core of our lives. These mechanical and non-living things have dominated the center of the world. Those who live in technological nations, including Japan – my home country – depend on non-living existences, yet at the same time, we are afraid of the age of 'singularity', when the mechanical ability will surpass our own. Those who depend on cutting-edge technologies feel both fear and power because of the existence of machines.

This paper focuses on two living artists in this difficult age: British abstract artist Bridget Riley (b.1931) and Japanese media artist Sachiko Kodama (b.1970). Influenced by the French Neo-Impressionist painter Georges Seurat, Riley went into the world of abstract art. Although she herself dislikes being called an ‘optical artist’, by the 1970s Riley had painted very minute abstract paintings that incorporated certain optical effects. At that time, her geometrical works skillfully used artificial colors like pink. These works are never stiff but are rather quite vivid and lively. In fact, Riley is a very humane person who dislikes mechanical interventions and prefers direct communications. Kodama, on the other hand, is known for her meditative art, which uses the magnetic liquid called ‘ferrofluid’. The leitmotiv of her art is minimalistic black. Although Kodama calls herself a ‘media artist’, her personality is humane as well, and according to her, the source of her inspiration is located in the nature of her homeland of Shizuoka, Japan.

These two female artists are ingeniously exploring the border between life and non-life in such an age when life is threatened by non-life. Here, I focus on their creativity and charms while simultaneously reading for clues for those of us who have to survive this difficult age.

Black and pink: the colors on the border of our existence

Kodama uses black in her art. She began using ferrofluids, the leitmotiv of her art, in 2000. Her leitmotiv has not changed from the works *Protrude, Flow* (2001) to *Éblouissant* (2017).

Technically speaking, the black liquid – the feature of Kodama’s works – consists of nanoparticles of iron oxide, which are colloiddally melted in oils. It is a smooth and non-stagnated black (that actually includes a little brown as rusted iron) that gleams in the light. According to Kodama, these works produce meditative effects, and comments on her work have included “I feel like I am looking at the ocean waves”, “Your works have certain meditative effects”, and “I can look at these works blankly”.¹

Morpho Tower (2006) has become a representative work of her ferrofluid art since the year 2000. The black flowing liquid and cylindrical tower are the cores of her art. For most of her ferrofluid art, electromagnets are used to generate a magnetic force when wrapped by copper wires or iron. The strength of the electrical currents in copper wires is computationally programmed in advance by Kodama, who tries to get viewers to go deeper into the works psychologically. The works give us a certain rhythm of nature, like ocean waves or trees swaying in the wind.

This is the color ‘black’ that is the core of Kodama’s hybrid art: the combination of meditative art and technological media art. Color theorist Asao Komachiya defines black as the color of non-existence. Komachiya says, “Logically speaking, the color black does not appear even when it exists under the condition of darkness. Our perception does not work when no stimulus exists. Our eyes see things when a certain

¹ Sachiko Kodama, *Myakudō suru jiseiryūtai Art*, Bessatsu Nikkei Science Art suru Kagaku, Nikkei Science, 2016, 9.

light is offered. According to this logic, the eyes never work when the light is not given.”² In other words, the color black appears in the border between working eyes and non-working eyes, or between existence and non-existence. Komachiya points out that black does not appear even though it exists and that black is a paradoxical color of dialectics.³

Komachiya also mentions the “*Purkinje* phenomenon”, in which our eyes perceive black shifting from red in the sunset darkness.⁴ Kodama’s work *Éblouissant* in dim light is reminiscent of the darkness of sunset when red things shift to appear black. In short, black is the color on the border of existence and non-existence. Its ethereal nature is favored by Japanese traditional architectural space which Junichiro Tanizaki expresses in his essays.

Kodama’s black reminds us of Tanizaki’s *In Praise of Shadows* (1933–34). Tanizaki says:

The wonderful feeling that comes from using lacquerware takes place in the moment between removing the lid and soundlessly bringing the bowl to your lips. It is a time to gaze at the contents that have settled silently in the deep, dark recesses of the bottom of the bowl and appreciate how the color of the lacquer matches that of the broth. It is impossible to distinguish what is there in the darkness, but one feels the slow liquid movement of the broth in the bowl, sees the slight beads of moisture at the bowl’s edge, then notices the steam rising as it carries the aroma – offering a faint hint of the taste before the coup even enters the mouth. [...] I think when Westerners speak of the ‘mysteries of the Orient’ they are very likely referring to the uncanny silence of these spaces.⁵

Such esoteric, meditative time on the border of existence and non-existence is brought by technological black of Kodama’s works. Her technologies are connected with the traditional ‘mysteries’ of Japan and other Asian countries.

Meanwhile, Riley began using pink more frequently around 1960, when she shifted from figurative paintings to abstract. For example, we see pink in her *Pink Landscape* (1960) and the murals on the 10th floor in St. Mary’s Hospital in London (1987, 2014). The former work, which draws the scorching heat of Siena, is painted in pointillist style in pink. The work gives us a feeling of warmth as well as a void. The latter is composed of beautifully colored stripes and, true to Riley’s impersonal style, contains no sign of compassions or sappy emotions regarding the patients. The murals emit a strong introspective light in the hospital atmosphere, where life and death intersect and the individual must carry the full weight of their burden. Considering

² Asao Komachiya, *Iro no Fushigi Sekai* (Harashobō, 2011), 293.

³ *Ibid.*, 294.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 301.

⁵ Junichiro Tanizaki, *In Praise of Shadows* (Sora Books, 2017), 38, 47.

these factors, for Riley, pink is the color that can express subtle feelings of figurative and abstract art on the border between life and non-life in scorching heat as well as in the hospital.

In her book, *Pink: The Exposed Color in Contemporary Art and Culture* (2006), Barbara Nemitz points out that the color pink does not exist in the solar spectrum.⁶ In fact, the Munsell color system puts a non-existent color magenta between red (long wavelength) and violet (short wavelength). Goethe's color theory (1810) regards purple (Purpur) as the supreme color. Pink, just like black, is a color on the border; it is fragile and unstable. Pink appears in the dawn, sunset, and cherry blossoms, all of which are transient. To borrow Nemitz's words, "Pink is simply too beautiful to be true."⁷

Pink is not only an artificial and unstable, fictional, and dreamy color but also a color of flesh – that of the actual borders of our body, such as lips and vaginas. In this sense, pink has a profound existential meaning.⁸

While Kodama is trying to surpass the fleeting human existence with black, Riley expresses the subtle ambiguity of the border between life and non-life with pink. The two artists create their works with these two colors on the border of life. Both black and pink have been favored in Japan traditionally as well as contemporarily, as evident in the Japanese dim architectures, lacquerwares, cherry blossoms, and pop-cultural pink and black. Not surprisingly, both Riley and Kodama have many fans in Japan.

On the border between life and non-life: why are we fascinated with non-life existence?

Why are we humans fascinated with non-life existence? To answer this question, I first offer examples from Japan. In the modern and contemporary culture in Japan, we have taken a very positive attitude toward 'machines', which are representatives of non-life existence. The Japanese have a passion for the border between life and non-life, such as the manga characters Atom Boy, Draemon, and Gundam; the virtual character Hatsune Miku; and the recent android development efforts of people such as the scientist Hiroshi Ishiguro.

To borrow the words of one Japanese scholar of aesthetics, Ken-ichi Sasaki, this is something similar to the Japanese affinity with *meguri* (natural cycles). At the beginning of the chapter titles "Ten to Hito no Meguri" [Cycles of the Heavens and People] in his book *Nihon-teki Kansei [Japanese Sensibilities, 2010]*, Sasaki quotes a tenth-century poem by Tachibana Tadamoto. The poem tells its recipient not to forget that, no matter how great a distance may separate us, just as the moon returns its cycles (*meguri*), we too will meet again.⁹ As Sasaki points out, the feelings of reassurance and hope aroused by

⁶ Barbara Nemitz, ed., *Pink: The Exposed Color in Contemporary Art and Culture* (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2006), 27.

⁷ Ibid., 41.

⁸ Ibid., 28.

⁹ Ken-ichi Sasaki, *Nihon-teki Kansei [Japanese Sensibilities, 2010]* (Tokyo: Chuko Sinsyo, 2010), 159.

the cycles of the heavenly bodies and the seasons often underpin our thought processes. He writes that “It is worldview based on the hope that even knowing how unreliable the other person may be, the repetition of good cycles will intervene for the better.”¹⁰

The feeling of reassurance aroused by *meguri*, which started from the veneration of nature, reminds us of the extreme love of regularity and formalism in Japanese culture. Japanese culture in part does not fit with Western homocentrism represented by the Renaissance culture. It might be due to our vulnerability and sensitiveness. Japanese culture, since the modern opening of the country, has expressed veneration for machinery. Such love of machinery runs counter to homocentrism, and we Japanese, without noticing it, avoid human vulnerability. The machine, which semi-permanently cycles, is a target of veneration, as is the moon.

Yet Western culture also cannot go without machines, just like Japanese culture, as we can see in the recent developments of artificial intelligence. The difference is that, in Western culture, ‘loneliness’ is a key, which *cogito* [*cogito, ergo sum* /I think, therefore I am/] since Descartes and pragmatic thought derived from American culture bring about.

It is when people are at the extreme of introspection and isolation that they lose the ability to distinguish between machine and human being. In his treatise *Discourse on the Method* (1637), which lay the foundation for modern Western philosophy, René Descartes compared himself when thinking to a traveler wandering alone in the forest.¹¹ When he dismissed all uncertainties and concentrated solely on his thinking self [*cogito*], he felt that animals were like machines.¹² This idea of “animals are machines” led in 1748 to Julien Offray de La Mettrie’s theory of man as a machine, which links to artificial intelligence and the concept of human substitution in the present day.¹³

Then what happened when machines intervened in the actual world? Charles Babbage (1791–1871), who invented the world’s first calculator, let it calculate the vast amount of data in voyage records. In other words, it was the ‘extension’ of human ability. In 1936, Alan Turing (1912–1954), made the prototype of the modern computer, the Turing Machine, by cryptanalyzing the ‘enigma’ during the Second World War. How Turing thought about machines can be read in his famous paper entitled “On Computing Machinery and Intelligence” (1950),¹⁴ in which he invented the *Imitation Game* that judges whether the counterpart in the conversation is a human being or a machine. In this thesis, Turing claimed that the question “Can machines think?” (essentialism) can be replaced by the question “What will happen when a machine takes the part of A in this game?” (pragmatism).¹⁵ This is a breakthrough of paradigmatic

¹⁰ Ibid., 167.

¹¹ René Descartes, *Discours de la method* (Paris, Librairie philosophique J. Vrin, 1967), 24.

¹² Ibid., 56–60.

¹³ Christoph Asendorf, *Batteries of Life: On the History of Things and Their Perception in Modernity*, trans. Don Reneau (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press), 1993.

¹⁴ Alan M. Turing, “On Computing Machinery and Intelligence,” *Mind* 59 (1950): 433–60, reprinted in Margaret A. Boden, ed., *The Philosophy of Artificial Intelligence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990): 40–66.

¹⁵ Ibid., 40–41.

shifts because one does not ask what machines are, but instead how machines act, which is a radical shift from essentialism to pragmatism.

The 21st century, the age of singularity, when the machine's ability surpasses the human's, is also the age of the extreme pragmatism. If machines are regarded as equivalent to human beings, the meaning of act (how one acts) surpasses the meaning of perception (how one feels). In other words, one does not care how we feel; only how we act. This is the world of extreme pragmatism, where one can only know how people act and not what people feel. The psychologist Jesse Bering says, "We all have our doubts from time to time – I've steered, square in the eyes, my share of somnambulist students who I would swear were cleverly rigged automations."¹⁶

Such extreme loneliness can be found in Japan, where people are very delicate and have a strong sense of doubt. As previously mentioned, Japanese culture has been attracted to machines, robots, and androids. In his novel *For Humans to Become Androids* [*Hito wa androido ni naru tameni*, 2017], Hiroshi Ishiguro writes about a human girl who opens her mind only to an android counselor. The counselor's favorite phrase is "Human beings are born to become androids". The human girl acquires an eternal android body and chooses to live in space.¹⁷ Like this girl, many Japanese dream of a life in which they change to an eternal existence from vulnerable human beings. This might be an admiration for the eternal being because the Japanese live in unstable human and natural conditions.

In developed countries like Japan in the 21st century, a mutual monitoring society has developed in extreme pragmatism. That means one only sees how other people act. In such a society, we cannot tell life from non-life. The arts of Kodama and Riley are appealing in such a hybrid world, where life and non-life are mingled.

Peripheral women: considering Kodama and Riley through gender

Women have long dreamt of the ultra-human existence. Mary Shelley (1797–1851), who wrote *Frankenstein* (1818), dreamt of the border between the human and the ultra-human. In her novel, the scientist Frankenstein invented an ultra-human being, and that being committed a number of murders. In addition, Ada Lovelace (1815–1852) imagined that Babbage's calculator could deal with any information other than numerals.¹⁸

To be a woman has historically been connected to being an ultra-human. Donna Haraway, in her famous book *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (1991), points out that peripheral women, if they have power, have been deified since ancient times. However, what Haraway dreams for women is existence as

¹⁶ Jesse Bering, *The Belief Instinct: The Psychology of Souls, Destiny, and the Meaning of Life* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2011), Chapter 1.

¹⁷ Hiroshi Ishiguro and Ichishi Iida, *Hito wa androido ni naru tameni* [*For Humans to Become Androids*], (Tōkyō: Chikuma Shobo: Chikuma Shobo, 2017), 247f.

¹⁸ Sydney Padua, *The Thrilling Adventures of Lovelace and Babbage* (London: Penguin Books, 2015), 25.

cyborgs, which is the ultra-human position in another sense.¹⁹ It is *cyborg feminism*, which counts how women act in society rather than how they show mercy to it. This is the new way of self-assertion in this pragmatic society.

For women, overcoming life is a dream and one of the few choices in which they can overcome gender issues. By using black and pink, the colors on the border of our existence, Kodama and Riley have gained certain freedom that overcomes life. They never swarm, but rather realize freedom in the history of art.

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¹⁹ Donna J. Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (London, New York: Free Association Books, Routledge, 1991).