

Signs and Sensibility

Some thoughts on the “urban iconography” of Yuya Suzuki

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Man creates worlds. Some of these are material like the buildings of a city, others are mental like systems of thought. And some are somewhere in-between: the works of Yuya Suzuki fall into this third category. His piece *Grammatalogy #2* (2022) is a good example. The video shows white shapes on a blue screen. The round forms move slowly from one part of the screen to another, expanding and contracting in a loop that defies time. The original inspiration for this work was a dustbin that caught Suzuki’s attention while he was walking through a Chinese town. He took a photo and then produced a drawing, not knowing where the work would ultimately lead, he scanned the sketch and digitized it, and then transformed it into a moving image. These forms reminded Suzuki of a Chinese character, neither being a symbol nor a picture, but both simultaneously.

“This is a sign of some sort” is presumably the first thought of many viewers who interact with Suzuki’s work. The paintings of the series *archegraph* (2022), as well as the smaller colour-pencil-drawings *archegraph study* (2021), have certain features in common with signs, that show their observers how to move safely through the urban jungle. Suzuki’s paintings and drawings have clear shapes; they are reduced to simple forms and colour is utilized in a neutral way, far from individual expression. But if we look closer at these works, doubts arise as to whether they are signs in the way we conventionally understand the concept. A sign is a representation pointing to some other reality. But what do Suzuki’s pictures represent?

They are certainly not iconographic. The American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce (1839-1914), one of the fathers of modern semiotics, introduced this term to characterize signs which show a certain verisimilitude to the objects they represent. A portrait in classical realistic painting would be a perfect example for an iconographic sign. But the things that inspire Yuya Suzuki have almost nothing in common with his works of art. The things that catch his attention while he strolls through the streets are often objects which people no longer use and leave on the sidewalk, old furniture with faded colours and with no specific features, objects for which the French art theorist Nicolas Bourriaud coined the concept “exform”.

Peirce thinks that there are two other functions of signs: they can be indices and symbols. One aspect of indices which might be of interest here, is that for Peirce types of schematic representations like diagrams fall in this category. There seem to be at least two works in Suzuki’s exhibition which look a bit like architectural blueprints, namely the first drawing in the series *archegraph studies* (color pencil, paper, 30 cm x 20 cm, 2022) as well as the first painting in *archegraph* (acrylic, paper, 60 cm x 50 cm, 2022). The drawing could be interpreted as a primitive floor plan of a medieval castle with four towers. And the painting has a certain resemblance to a very reduced form of a house.

But the key point is that both works of art deny the function of orientation that is demanded of indices. And we don’t readily recognize any conventional symbols in them, such as a flag on the

border representing a state. This result can be frustrating for someone who seeks fixed meanings. But this result can also be liberating if one is curious to take a new path in an unknown terrain where no maps can show us the way. The artist writes stories about cities and buildings in his own language. It is a language, an idiolect, with signs and meanings which evolve in the making, sometimes in directions that no one can predict, not even the artist himself. It is a creative process that is like the ever-changing, "ephemeral" (Henri Lefebvre) city itself where the way people make use of the streets and places that lead all the intentions of urban planners ad absurdum.

There have been many attempts to decipher the code of a city, starting from Umberto Eco (1932-2016) in 1968 who dedicated a whole chapter of "The Open Work", his introduction into semiotics, to architecture. But if we are honest, we must admit that we cannot recognize or read the city as a whole. We are, as Yuya Suzuki is when he walks through the cities of Asia and Europe, attentive observers, yet without a privileged position of knowledge. As French philosophers Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908-1961) and Michel de Certeau (1925-1986) have pointed out, in our perception we are bound to our body moving in space. We do not face the world "objectively" from an external, godlike point of view but are deeply embedded in the world we live in.

Cities have changed considerably over the past decades. If we look at the affluent west we see urban centers as places for conspicuous consumption and less as sites of production. People sit in cafés, their fingers gliding over the touchscreens of iPhones and tablets. "The smooth is the signature of the present time", writes Korean philosopher Byung-Chul Han. We can catch a glimpse of this sociocultural phenomenon in the three-dimensional objects of Yuya Suzuki in the same way in which we are able to smell the aroma of industrial production in Donald Judd's factory-made sculptures of iron and steel that he created in the late 1960s and 1970s when the wealth of a nation was measured by its production of cars and machines. All this heavy matter disappeared from our daily life. No wonder that Suzuki's sculptures have a smooth surface, round shapes and vivid colours. They look so weightless that they seem to float in space. The white cube of a gallery seems to put too much pressure on them. Suzuki tries to reduce the contrast by painting a mural with round shapes on a wall of the gallery or by installing projectors that flood the rooms with coloured light.

Greek filmmaker Theo Angelopoulos, one of the finest observers of the behaviour of creatures in their environment, gave one of his films the title "The Suspended Step of the Stork". This description fits Suzuki's work: through our bodies, we are still attached to the ground but our mind is dynamic to follow the artist's hints and traces into higher spheres Yuya's wonderland.