

Art as an Experience, the Artist as a Guide

by Toshiaki Tomita

···If creativity is a place deep in the forest that consists of open areas as well as areas you cannot enter without special chances or permission, and if it depends on whether you can come across a guide who possesses a wealth of experience and knowledge (as if, for example, you would otherwise be unable to escape danger, or you would miss out on the important sites), and if, most importantly, whether you travel that place by your own volition depends on whether you have a good antenna, there are many paths for experiencing the infinite forest known as creativity...

(From the author's blog, "Heart Mountain," May 2008)

In 2007-08, I received funding from the Japanese Government Overseas Study Programme for Artists and traveled to Europe and Australia to study and research community art. Sometimes I was shown around by the local people, and other times I ventured out on my own to remote sites scarcely visited by anyone at all. The insight set forth in the title came about as a result of my exposure to local ways of life in these various places.

I have done a lot of traveling since my days as a student, so my manner of sensing things and my artwork probably reflect the skies of the various places I've traveled to. While I like to go wherever my feet leads me, I am also prefer that peculiar thrill that comes with surrendering oneself to someone else's lead. *Can you come or not come to see our hometown?* (1999) describes

how wonderful it was to temporarily suspend the innate tendency to face someone and evaluate and judge them, and to instead get close to someone and wander around in a world that I could only peek at over their shoulder.

At Akiyoshidai International Art Village in 2005, I interviewed Akiyama-san, a beekeeper, and while helping with the first honey-gathering operation of the summer, I was struck with wonder at how meticulously he observed and noticed things. Thanks to him, I was able to experience the natural beauty of Yamaguchi prefecture in a special way.

Back before I even learned to read, I often pestered my parents to read me the titles printed on the spines of the complete collections of nonfiction books from around the world in my father's study.

"Slightly out of Focus," "Adventures of a cadaver," "Der Wandernde See," "Trans Himalaya," "Love Gazes into Death (Death of a Man)" ... a combination of unusual words and meanings. A certain moment in a certain life, as described in the pictorial images on the first several pages of each book.

The reason I set out to study the community of people of Japanese heritage in 2001 is that I was powerfully drawn by the autobiographical works of a Hawaiian poet of Japanese heritage. And in doing so, I discovered just how much the world described by the poet differed from real life. It is in the internal, subjective world experienced by and warmed up inside someone that one feels the richness of the world in which that person lives.

It is my hope to participate as one voice, along with my own experiences and stories, in a world that resonates with voices such as these.

This trip, too, was one in which I viewed the world through encounters with fascinating people.

Northern European artists/activists friends of mine who operate via artist collectives and in an open source style; the medieval painters who covered the interior of a monastery I visited in Macedonia with beautiful frescoes; the night I spent at Bollingen, the secluded "tower" or cottage that psychologist Carl Jung built for himself, gazing at the bonfire reflected on the dark black surface of the lake; the site of giant rock paintings drawn over hundreds of thousands of years in the rocky mountains of the Arnhem Land bush; practitioners in the art center and the local media of a remote aborigine community that lives in the present; an old aborigine dancer who supports his fellow tribesmen with the self-help skills he used to overcome a crisis of his own ... Each of them was linked to the world and the people before their eyes and proceeded along a steady path. They gave me a glimpse of the depth and breadth of the tide of art and culture, and of traditions that have now been forgotten.



Going to see a waterfall guided by a boy, Rostuse, a village in deep mountain of Macedonia, 2007.



ROAD CLOSURE NOTICE sign due to sacred ceremony, Arnhemland, NT, Australia, 2008.

Back when I was in school, when I came up against the question of where the source of creativity lies, I looked for the answer in dreams.

Dreams, despite being experienced internally and subjectively, are autonomous and are in a sense out of our own control. I was attracted to that, and as a result I began to attach importance to such images. I then took my art from an exploration of how to share these internally and subjectively experienced images themselves and my mental reality, to a forum for storytelling – in other words, where the storyteller and the listener experience these images together as something that is alive.

If the art experience were to become more internal and subjective, it would probably become more like touring. If there is something that an artist, as someone who has full

knowledge of the forest of creativity, can do, it is to act as a guide, sharing with people the dangers and secrets of the forest of images and showing them the sights.

But of course this is not something that artists have a monopoly on. Telling a story and guiding people into the world of the storyteller's images is something that anyone, even a child, can do.

Over the course of actually doing some storytelling, I came to understand that the story depends not only on the storyteller but also largely on the listener. When the textual variants of both sides increase, it is possible to experience an amazing world without going anywhere at all. Also, storytelling has the power not only to bind together the storyteller and the listener, but also to take items that have been fragmented and lost their association, and to link them into one cosmology and stash them in one's mind.

I recently went to hear a forum about eco-tourism. What struck me was that the instruments for eco-tourism are shifting from just experts into the hands of the general public.

While looking around tourist sites as part of a group is an extroverted and uplifting experience, moving in stride with the local people and travelers within the natural passing of time that's inherent to a particular place quietly promotes self-reflection.

Later, I also had an opportunity to take part in a community arts seminar. The same theme was discussed, and though the field was different, I sensed a common direction. Have advanced theoretical models such as Kazuko Tsurumi's "theory of endogenous development" just now become known and practiced by people?

Perhaps it was a surge to transcend the modern era that's so embedded in our ways of thinking and to recreate from a more fundamental level the relationships between people and nature and between people. At any rate, I sensed that a major trend is gradually changing, and it encouraged me. Yet at the same time, it occurred to me that an increase in such a desire may be proof of how our existence is becoming fragmented and losing its meaning.

The results of this year-long trip should be reflected in the launch of local community arts centers in my birthplace. One place where consumerism and market society, which are making progress in the tide of globalization that we presently face, are most notably apparent is in my birthplace, Sagamihara. The city and developers are continually demolishing and building anew, and consequently there is a variance between our memories and our environment, and for a long time we have been in a state of chronic amnesia.

In "*Izumi no Hanashi (Spring in Desert)*" (2001), my personal image grew into a story by way of my interactions with the local people, and it drew not only myself but also the people of that place into connections that bridged the gaps between us. The nature of the locality renders it

difficult to develop a sense of community, of feeling like the area is one's own, and this piece examines what kind of art or culture will effectively resolve this problem.

Under these circumstances, the arts center project will not consist of the solid completion of brittle, external works. Instead, in order not to be buried by the community's unrelenting changes and the movement and influx of people, it will likely be characterized by continuity, change, wit, flexibility, and openness.

In the case of Akiyoshidai, there is a tradition of tourism, as well as sensitivity to the land's appeal and a sense of belonging that are deeply ingrained. These points make it very different from Sagami-hara. The natural environment is rich, so ecotourism might be effective for sustained development. There are also artists present who can generate creative ideas. The key is what the local people, who are the main actors, want to do. Travelers from overseas are increasing, and Akiyoshidai, too, will probably be exposed to global trends, but it is possible that the arts village will fulfill some sort of role in this aspect as well.

When I asked my friend Finn Thybo Andersen, who heads up the artist collective YNKB in Copenhagen, what he puts an emphasis on his work with others, he answered, "making sure they feel that the project is their own."

Isn't it true that what not only artists, guides, travelers, and local people but all people want is a story that fits each individual person? Within that story, each person is the main character and journeys down his or her own path.

Toshiaki Tomita, Artist