Matter: From Carrier to Emanator

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A critique on the exhibition:

<The Memory of Materiality: The Aesthetics of Time and Transformation>

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Prologue

The extraordinary charm of this path-breaking exhibition organized by Tang Contemporary Art lies in its ability to bring together previously dispersed artists, whose works, we now realize, converge to create a unified message with exponentially amplified power. Zhu Jinshi, Shim Moon-Seup, Tadashi Kawamata, and Shin Mee-Kyung—four distinguished artists from China, South Korea, Japan, and South Korea respectively—represent a rare convocation of creative minds from the Far East, the distant reaches of the Orient. Each artist has long been celebrated for their special contributions to the world of contemporary art, yet this exhibition marks the first time their works have been presented in dialogue with one another.

Before this gathering, it was scarcely conceivable that their art could align thematically, given the diversity of forms and materials they deal with. What we knew was that, for decades, each artist has devoted their practice to the profound study and handling of material, achieving richly nuanced works with unique and independently gained wisdom. Now, when they are brought together in this exhibition, their collective statement offers a rare opportunity to reexamine our relationship with material.

Nature has been treated as an externality. She is an object, an outside that surrounds us, the subject. She is often perceived as a unity, but as a monotonous one. She is a thing, that is, matter. Humans have been positioned in opposition to her. We are free. We can think and will. We come with ideas. We express passions. We can confer colors that the monotonous mass would lack. We create history and build civilization. This dichotomy has a long history. For Aristotle, neither form nor matter alone can be a substance. The two must be combined to become a reality. A bronze statue, for instance, becomes a substance only when the sculptor morphs raw material into a shape. We know that his teacher Plato was a great proponent of the Idea, or form, *eidos*, as the supreme reality, or even the true reality. So, the position of Aristotle was like a concession to matter, a resignation from the domination of form. For Plato, matter was corruption or even falsity. Aristotle salvaged matter from such a disgrace. At the same time, however, Aristotle held onto the prestige of form, effectively arguing that form was the organizing principle for matter. Aristotle equated form to the soul. Form was the mind, an intention enforcing itself against the other. The cause and the finality of matter must lie outside

it. Matter, or Nature, could be enlivened only by the grace of the form. *Eidos* was to be ‘imprinted’ onto matter, and only in this way, the reality would come into being.

It is striking, then, to see how the artists in this exhibition boldly confront this age-old hierarchy. With artistic gallantry, they challenge the ideological supremacy of form, demanding that it pass through the world to become both signifier and signified to us. In their hands, the domination of form is denied, and the dignity of matter is resurrected. Meaning is no longer imposed from the mind but emerges from the traces within matter itself. In the end, it is Nature—matter—that expresses itself through their work.

Yet, a pervasive assumption in the art world persists, that artists devoted to matière sacrifice content, and, as a result, their arts become abstract. This notion, reinforced since the days of Clement Greenberg and Abstract Expressionism, often leads to the categorization of many modern Asian artists under movements like Art Informel or similar trends. The implicit premise here is that form and matter are locked in competition. More precisely, it is a kind of sense of crisis that form is under the threat of matter, and when matter gains ascendancy, form is destroyed and lost.

But, is this a choice of one side? Are we facing a question of alternatives here? This exhibition, by bringing together the brilliance of these four artists, offers a compelling opportunity to explore this question. Through their diverse yet interconnected practices, we are invited to reconsider our place within the natural world.

Zhu Jin-Shi

Zhu Jin-Shi is a legend in China’s contemporary art. Zhu's works have been exhibited internationally, with solo exhibitions at venues such as Tang Contemporary Art in Seoul (2022) and Hong Kong (2020), and the Yuan Art Museum in Beijing (2016), just to name a few recent. His <Du Fu Tower>, also known as “Xuan Paper Tower," now on this exhibition, was featured in the China Pavilion at the 60th Venice Biennale in 2024, showcasing his innovative use of traditional materials to explore contemporary themes. Born in 1954, he joined the Star Art Exhibition in 1979 which all the later history books remember as the inaugural moment of China’s modern art. He moved to Berlin in 1986 and actively absorbed and internalized the momentum of conceptual and performance arts. This period marked a pivotal shift in his artistic exploration. In a decisive move around 1988, Zhu began experimenting with Xuan paper, a traditional Chinese material, in his installations, and this practice continued after he came back to China in 1994, adding both dimension and depth.

Because of the scale of the artistic spectrum of this outstanding figure, we should have a strategy to address his aesthetics within the limited space of this article. Let us directly look into Zhu’s <Du Fu Tower>, a central objet of this exhibition, and unfold our insight into his art from there.

The Xuan papers are the traditional Chinese papers that have been used for two millennia as the ubiquitous space for all types of inscriptions. This seminal invention of the Chinese civilization, which spread to other parts of the world to catalyze their own, achieved its most refined degree during the Tang era. The implication of this material in China's history of ideas, literature, art, technology, and virtually all facets of her civilization is immense. Nevertheless, in the Chinese cultural context, this material has been regarded as the neutral container of ideas and other 'essences', while it itself should remain indifferent and without voice. Zhu disagrees with such conventional contemplation of this material. In a striking installation in 1996, titled <Impermanence (無常)>, he placed many stacks of blank Xuan papers side by side in the formation that looked like an excavation of an ancient architecture in ruin. A water-filled Song dynasty bowl placed in the center gives us a clue that this excavation was a place of burial and prayer. Who were those souls for whom this site was a memorial? One way to view this work is that this site is dedicated to the old literati who devoted their lives to the letters. They would have thought that, by the grace of their writings, their papers would be redeemed from the permanent oblivion. In a powerful irony, however, we see that it is the empty papers that are left to testify which one lasts and whose meanings persist, thus the title "Impermanence."

Zhu's <Du Fu Tower> is obviously dedicated to Du Fu, the saint of poetry of China. He lived through many glories and upheavals of Tang Dynasty. He once took a residence in Chang'an, the capital of Tang, which was also the end point of the Silk Road that linked East and West as far as Constantinople. Through this romantic route of the antiquity, Xuanzang came back from his lionized travel to India and constructed the Great Wild Goose Pagoda (大雁塔) in Chang'an to store and preserve the Buddhist scriptures and relics he brought back. This architecture represents the maturing of another Chinese cultural heritage—pagoda—during Tang. A century later, Du Fu would have seen it and marveled at the spectacle. Now, in <Du Fu Tower>, the Xuan papers constitute the outer walls of the tower, and they would be the equivalent to the bricks and clays that were used to build the pagoda. We have already seen that Zhu used Xuan papers as the medium that intimates impermanence, that is, the abyss of nothingness. However, in <Du Fu Tower>, the signification of Xuan papers is the opposite. They are to *shelter* the texts of Du Fu inside their walls. They preserve now, if, on the previous occasion, they dispersed and erased.

Through Xuan papers, Zhu reveals the fundamental anxiety of our existence. The empty papers reveal the futility of letters that try to prevail against the jarring reality of impermanence. At the same time, this same material is also what preserves the *logos* of our life. The old literati mistook logos for the 'law.' Man as the knower of the law was given a special position, to put his will through over against the world by the absolute power of their black letters. But, *logos* as the ancient Greek word is not about any rigidified principles. It means 'gathering.' It is about shoring up of our existence by organizing life around us. Logos as such means discourse, but only to directly face up to life itself. Heidegger who emphasized the original aspect of logos considered that logos as the genuine discourse can only be poetic, because only poem can rise up to make contact with our existential ground. Heidegger declares, all art "is in its essence poetry,".[1] Zhu would agree. Thus, if Xuanzang's tower shelters Buddhist dharma inside the brick rampart, Zhu's <Du Fu Tower> havens the logos of the great Tang poetry

inside Xuan paper enclosure. Here, the dialectical interplay of preservation and erasure, mediated through our matter Xuan papers, always puts the logos of poetry, and the dharma for that matter, at existential angst.

We realize that Zhu Jin-Shi's hero Du Fu, renowned for his deep sense of the tragedy of human existence, is echoed in the works of the German poet Hölderlin, who was Heidegger's hero. As Du Fu in <Quatrain (绝句)> hymns the evanescence of spring in passing of time, Hölderlin in <Half of Life> laments, amidst of the springtime landscape, "But oh, where shall I find / When winter comes, the flowers, and where / The sunshine / And shade of the earth?" We are forever at our ontological frontier, where winter and spring, impermanence and constancy, change hands. Meaning is neither in linearity nor in dichotomy. It is in cycle. Du Fu sings, "Good rain knows its season, / Coming in spring to nourish life," <春夜喜雨>. Every year spring returns, but with a fresh allure. It circles, but dialectically. Zhu Jin-Shi's Xuan papers, after denial of letters, come to uphold certain letters, Du Fu's letters so to speak, the letters that know impermanence of letters themselves. These new letters, sheltered in <Du Fu Tower>, present meaning not as something pre-ordained, but as the real pulses in the happenings of our world.

The aesthetics of Zhu Jin-Shi we have examined above extends to his paintings. Zhu began to create his famous "thick painting" since 2000. "Thick paintings" are characterized by dense, expressive layers of oil paint applied with tools such as shovels, brooms, and palettes, which results in a sculptural presence on the canvas. Paying shrewd attention to the significance of material, Zhu's painting maintains the flesh, the volume, and the living content of meaning. It is the artist's conscious effort to prevent the thickness of actuality from being devitalized into the shriveled thinness of form. Zhu seeks meaning within the fullness of substantiality. No wonder that Zhu Jin-Shi says, "I don't believe in abstraction."[2]

A mind cannot calculate the amalgamation of movements by his hands, the tools, and the lumps and bumps of enormous paints that work themselves out. The paints would take as long as twenty years to completely dry up. This is not a technique known as "automatism." Every work of Zhu has his conscious desire to express his unmediated perception, even as complex as an exquisite Chinese poem, which drives morphing of the material. But, the morphing itself is not a work of his mind, nor is his body at large. His full presence is the will in this interaction, but his will is to make sure that the meaning *grows* from matter through its coupling with him. He understands that the work is not always the outcome of his willful command, because there is no way to define the deliverance to come. His language stands for the ontological anguish. Meaning emerges organically, like a plant rising from the soil, by virtue of the subject and the object in tandem. The mind alone does not dictate this process, and more fundamentally, this wisdom would rather say that it cannot.

Shim Moon-Seup

Shim Moon-Seup is an artist of profound significance, whose work powerfully asserts that we did not start in a vacuum but are deeply rooted in Nature. Born in 1943 in Tongyeong, South

Korea, Shim is a towering figure in contemporary art, celebrated for his lifelong engagement with Nature, temporality, and the intrinsic properties of natural materials. A graduate of Seoul National University's Department of Sculpture in 1965, Shim has dedicated his career to exploring the essence of materials such as earth, stone, wood, and metal, integrating them into his sculptures, paintings, and installations with remarkable sensitivity and insight.

In the late 1960s, Shim co-founded the Third Formative Association and became a pivotal figure in Korea's avant-garde movement of the 1970s. He challenged traditional sculptural conventions by employing unconventional materials like iron, acrylic, cement, and soil—materials that were rarely used in art at the time. This radical approach led to his practice of "anti-sculpture," a term that reflects his desire to transcend formal constraints and engage directly with the raw, unmediated essence of matter. Shim asserts that "sculpture is the art of matter; it exists only by virtue of matter as its medium."[3] This philosophy underscores his commitment to preserving the natural state of materials, fostering a dialogue between the artist and the material in intimate and revelatory ways.

Shim's international acclaim began with his participation in the Paris Biennale in 1971, 1973, and 1975, followed by the São Paulo Biennial in 1975 and the Biennale of Sydney in 1976. In 1981, he was awarded the Excellence Award at the 2nd Henry Moore Grand Prize Exhibition in Japan. In 2007, he became the first Korean artist invited to exhibit at the Palais Royal in Paris. More recently, his exhibition <A Scenery of Time> at Perrotin Hong Kong in late 2022 showcased his latest paintings, which evoke the maritime landscapes of his hometown with impassioned poignancy. Throughout his career, Shim has developed several seminal series, including <Relation>, <Opening Up>, <Thoughts on Clay>, <Wood Deity>, <Metaphor>, <The Presentation>, and <Represent>. These works delve into the relationships between disparate materials and the symbolism inherent in their interactions. Shim positions himself as "a mediator who weaves these relationships," allowing the materials to speak for themselves with minimal intervention. His art is a testament to the unaltered presentation of natural elements, revealing their inherent characteristics and latent meanings.

Shim Moon-Seup's work offers a deeply contemplative experience, inviting viewers to reflect on the cyclical Nature of existence and the profound connections between humanity and the natural world. His art resonates with the philosophies of Taoism and Zen Buddhism, embodying a strong existentialist undertone. Shim's works explore themes of letting objects speak for themselves and the relationships we form with them. As he explains, "The material is not a medium for expression; the material itself expresses and is expressed. Through minimal intervention, I extract and visualize the inherent physical properties of materials I frequently use, such as wood, soil, fire, water, stone, and iron plates, and establish new relationships between heterogeneous objects. The unknown uncertainty that arises at this time even transforms the surrounding environmental structure anew." This approach imbues his art with a profound sense of fateful encounter – a meeting of subject and object characterized by riddle, uncertainty, and eventual revelation.

Shim's naturalistic philosophy extends seamlessly from his sculptures to his paintings. Born and raised in Tongyeong, a small fishing village on Korea's southern coast, Shim spent his childhood immersed in the breathtaking beauty of the sea. The town, often called the "Napoli of Korea," is renowned for its luminous light and vibrant colors, where gentle waves caress the

shores, revealing the region's innocent splendor. Shim's artistic journey has been a pilgrimage to rekindle these sensations and translate them into his art. As he notes, "Every painting is autobiographical to an extent." While his paintings consistently depict the sea, this sea is neither a literal representation nor an idealized abstraction. We are conditioned to pick between the two obvious alternatives, but Shim's art shows there is a third way: a synthesis of memory, sensation, and transformation.

Shim's paintings begin with the recognition that his mind is irrevocably imprinted by Nature. They actually give back what came in and has been fermented therein for his life time. His works capture the alluring flickers of lights in the ceaseless motions of blue waves. They do not represent an idea; they actually describe. The sea is real but it is no longer an objective fact. Nature would have etched her dazzling lights and colors into his mind. The sensations would have been accumulated, and the innumerable layers of his neurons were soaked in blue. They then would have been condensed into certain quintessence. The saturated mind began to ooze its secretion onto the canvas. The paintings thus created re-present the sea that has transformed into a new reality, as the result of mutual transposition between the artist and the matter.

For Shim, form is always a creation born from the history of engagement and entwining, a principle that runs through his sculptures and paintings. "My work seeks forms that are awakening over the passage of time, forms that exist before they take shape," he says. This temporal dimension is palpable in his art. In his sculptures, such as <Wood Deity>, the material whispers of birth, growth, death, and the eternal repetition of life's cycles. It sings of meanings born from time, residing within the matter itself. As we look upon Shim's painting of the sea, we hear William Wordsworth sing of his childhood memory in <Immorality Ode>: "Our Souls have sight of that immortal sea / Which brought us hither, / Can in a moment travel thither, / And see the Children sport upon the shore, / And hear the mighty waters rolling evermore." Drawing from the sea's lasting engraving in his memory, Shim evokes the vast surging flow that ebbs and rises and the ceaseless cycle of creation and dissolution of the immortal sea, within which our lives unfold. Shim emphasizes that "the cyclical circulation of nature is not a mere repetition but a cycle in which newness is constantly created." For him, the eternal return is the affirmation of life for the future. "Returning is indeed the source of creation," he adds.

Shim Moon-Seup's art is a meditation on the interconnectedness of all things, a celebration of the cycles of Nature, and a profound exploration of the relationship between humanity and the material world. His work invites us to see the world under a new light, to recognize the beauty in impermanence, and to embrace the endless possibilities of creation and renewal.

Tadashi Kawamata

Tadashi Kawamata's installation art has garnered international acclaim for its innovative exploration of the interplay between art and the environment. By transforming familiar spaces into immersive, thought-provoking experiences, Kawamata often employs reclaimed wood and other everyday materials to challenge conventional perceptions of art and its role in society.

Born in 1953 in Hokkaido, Japan, Kawamata's extensive career reflects his belief that art is not a static object but a dynamic process of construction, destruction, and reconstruction—an experience that evolves over time. Deeply attuned to the physicality of space and fascinated by the clandestine and anonymous ways art can interact with people outside formal institutional boundaries, Kawamata rejects the notion of a fixed idea as a blueprint to be mechanically translated into material form. For him, the final appearance of an installation remains unknown until its completion, as construction itself is a live, evolving process. Observers often note that his works undergo a kind of "metamorphosis," a testimony that his art embodies a kind of fluidity that defies rigid expectations.

To fully appreciate Kawamata's art, it is essential to grasp his naturalistic worldview. As a student in 1970s Tokyo, he recalls watching from his apartment as a building was systematically dismantled, only to be replaced by a new structure within months. He describes this experience as witnessing an operation of "urban metabolism," which was a digestion and regurgitation of materials connected to the "city's life cycle." This perspective reveals Kawamata's profound understanding of the constant rise and fall of forms and the cyclical recycling of matter. As he famously states, "I construct, I deconstruct, I construct, I deconstruct, I construct... It's like a flower. The flower grows, blooms, and wilts, and the next year it blooms again. It's a continuous ensemble…."[4]

Guided by this philosophy, Kawamata has created major installations in cities such as The Hague (1986), Kassel (1987), Grenoble (1987), Toronto (1989), and São Paulo for the 19th São Paulo International Biennale (1987). His <Field Work>, scattered across metropolitan cities worldwide, are more numerous and smaller in scale, often constructed from cardboard and plywood loosely assembled with nails or tape. These structures are designed to deteriorate over time and collapse on their own, embodying the naturalistic cycles of spontaneous construction and deconstruction. Similarly, Kawamata's favela projects, inspired by his visit to Brazil, reflect his fascination with the resilience of informal settlements. He recalls the shock of seeing favelas destroyed by police, only to be rebuilt by residents shortly afterward. For him, it was like a "natural cycle" of destroying, throwing away, and rebuilding.

Kawamata's <Under the Water> (2011), inspired by the devastating 2011 earthquake and tsunami in eastern Japan, creates a haunting scene of a 'sea of debris,' as if viewing floating wreckage from beneath the surface. This work explores the formation of landscapes by natural disasters and human's interaction with such events. His renowned <Tree Huts> series, on the other hand, evokes a symbolic moment in human history when humans were barely distinguishable from their natural environment. Kawamata's <Nest> installations further highlight the parallels between birds' nesting behaviors and human architectural endeavors. As he explains, "The scale may be different, the material... It's a continuous project, which follows the same idea, the same concept, but the place is different, different people come to help me, the organization is different, each time the experience is different. But at the same time, it's always the same thing."[5]

In this exhibition, Kawamata's <Destruction> series depicts scenes of wreckage and debris. While the word "destruction" carries a negative connotation, Kawamata invites viewers to shed

sentimental associations and observe the scene with detachment. His depiction is strikingly calm, even orderly, suggesting that destruction, while the antithesis of construction, is not inherently 'nothing.' Instead, it appears as a state of "primordial soup" from which new construction can emerge—a metaphor for regeneration, akin to life arising from a prebiotic sea. The cycle is ongoing: from construction to destruction, and from destruction back to construction.

Upon closer inspection, the debris in Kawamata's works is not mere refuse. The wooden poles and planks, though disorganized, retain their utility and potential for reuse. Kawamata, who has employed such materials in his <Field Works>, understands their inherent value. What appears as wreckage is not trash but a reserve of possibilities, awaiting reassembly in another time and at another place. In a paradoxical twist, "destruction" becomes a condition for renewal. The metabolism of human civilization. This cycle of birth, growth, death, construction, and destruction reflects a recurring natural order.

Freud identified two conflicting drives in human civilization: Eros, the impulse toward creation, preservation, and life, and Thanatos, the urge toward dissolution, unraveling, and a return to equilibrium or non-existence. Freud was afraid by his vision of the struggle between these "two Heavenly Powers," and lamented, "Who can foresee with what success and with what result?"[6] While Kawamata's aesthetics share this insight, they are marked by a cooler, more detached perspective. His work embodies an ecological understanding of construction, acknowledging that destruction is an inescapable phase of the cycle. Kawamata is conscious of the fact that construction needs a site. Deleuze called for a nomadic life. It sounds good when the site is replaceable at our choice. But, what if the site has become a constant and is no longer a variable? How can a nomadic life be accomplished with a constant site? Dishes must be emptied to be filled again; shelves cleared to receive new volumes. A site, for transformation, requires a change from the ground up. Just as Nature continuously digests and regurgitates matter, so too does human activity, including art, participate in this endless process. Kawamata's <Destruction> series speaks for a phase within this continuum. Destruction is not disorder; it is part of the order – a necessary prelude to rebirth and renewal.

Shin Mee-Kyung

Another notable Korean participant, Shin Mee-Kyung, a graduate of Seoul National University College of Fine Arts, further honed her craft by studying sculpture at the Slade School of Fine Arts in London. Renowned for her innovative use of soap as a medium, Shin has been actively showcasing her work in numerous solo and group exhibitions across Seoul, Beijing, London, Paris, New York, Venice, and other global art hubs. In 2024, she was honored with the prestigious Ha In-Doo Art Award in Korea.

Since the early 2000s, Shin has embraced soap as her primary material, imbuing it with extraordinary artistic conviction. Her sculptures range from Greco-Roman busts and standing statues to medieval mythological figures, Gandhara-style Buddhist icons, ancient Chinese

vases, and framed paintings, all meticulously crafted with intricate detail and sincerity. At first glance, these works appear as though they are carved from durable materials like bronze or marble. However, as soon as we discover the counterintuitive meaning of these works, our common sense is left bewildered. Water, the universal solvent of this planet, renders soap one of the most vulnerable materials imaginable—fragile, erodible, and prone to dissolution. These properties starkly contrast with our conventional understanding of sculpture as enduring and permanent. It is precisely this paradoxical choice of material that compels viewers to reconsider the meaning behind the familiar forms before them.

Shin creates her sculptures fully aware that they will inevitably wear away, weather, and eventually melt into nothingness, often within a remarkably short span of time. The term "historical" would be an overstatement for the lifespan of her works, as they may begin to disintegrate within the timeframe of everyday activities—even as briefly as the duration of a handwashing. Shin herself reflects on this process: "If 49% of my work is the process created through my hands, the other 51% comes from what happens on site, such as getting rained on or wearing out from use. After going through both of these processes, when it is displayed in an exhibition, it moves to another stage."[7] In this way, her art embodies an unusual dynamic: no sooner does she imprint her form onto the material than she relinquishes control, allowing the work to decay, transform, and blur with the passage of time. Here, the artist's intention is never meant to remain 'pure'; it is instead subject to the inevitable forces of change and reinterpretation.

Shin's work shares a profound affinity with performance art, particularly in its celebration of transience. Her soap sculptures simulate the natural weathering process that traditional sculptures undergo over decades or centuries, compressing it into a matter of weeks or months. Shin observes that the meaning of her work evolves as it transitions from her studio to everyday settings—such as a soap object placed in a restroom—and finally to the gallery, where it takes on the aura of a relic. This accelerated archaeological process, wherein a durable object is reduced to dilapidation in real time, is both dramatic and thought-provoking. The timeless form of a Greco-Roman bust, for instance, is dismantled in real time before our eyes, challenging our perceptions of permanence and impermanence. It is also in this respect that her works have significance in the discourse on art as mystification, as her choice of soap serves as a metaphor for the impermanence of historically revered forms—Greco-Roman busts, medieval icons, and other cultural symbols. From a material that erodes and vanishes, she subverts the traditional association of sculpture with permanence and durability. The inevitable decay of her pieces mirrors the fragility of mystification surrounding the original art works.

In this way, Shin's art also highlights the tension between the original and the copy. Historically, copies have been disparaged as mere imitations, far removed from the ideality of the original. However, movements like photography and pop art have rehabilitated the copy, endowing it with a significance entirely independent of the original. Andy Warhol's delightful "Campbell's Soup Cans" and "Brillo Boxes" are celebrated for their being the copies. Shin's soap sculptures give a new light to the meaning of the copy. As the image of the original is reproduced and erodes within the copy, it acquires fresh layers of meaning. The sanctity of the original is absorbed into the semantics of our living environment, allowing the surroundings to permeate and transform the image. The original, once revered as a sacrosanct form transcending its material base, is stripped of its divinity and recontextualized within the space it

occupies. The uniqueness of the original was once tied to the uniqueness of its location, but the copy disrupts this fixity, fragmenting and diversifying its meaning.

As John Berger notes, the artwork as a copy "now travels to the spectator rather than the spectator to the [original]."[8] Its meaning is no longer self-contained but is instead exposed to the possibilities of evolution over time. With the copy, we are invited to appreciate not only the object itself but also the environmental context in which it appears—what lies beside it, what surrounds it, and how it interacts with its milieu. Shin Mee-Kyung's soap sculptures, in their exquisite impermanence, invite us to reflect on the fluidity of meaning, the passage of time, and the ever-shifting relationship between art, material, and audience.

Summation

We began this article by posing a problem—one that this exhibition invites us to confront and, perhaps, to resolve. At its core, this problem revolves around the opposition between humans and Nature, two entirely separate and irreconcilable realms. This dichotomy extends further into the one between form and matter, a philosophical quandary that has been persisting to today. It is not merely an artistic problem but one that permeates our society, industry, economy, politics, and global diplomacy. In essence, it is an enduring challenge within human culture, shaping our mindset and influencing our way of life, whether in the East or the West. This mindset habitually positions us as the subject and Nature as the object, with an impassable chasm between them. It assigns total domination to one side and total servitude to the other, leaving no room for dialogue between humans and Nature. The distinction has been categorical and conceptual, with no middle ground to bridge the divide.

The artists featured in this exhibition—Zhu Jinshi, Shim Moon-Seup, Tadashi Kawamata, and Shin Mee-Kyung—have demonstrated, with remarkable creativity and devotion, the possibility of dismantling this formidable barrier. Through their works, they reveal a middle ground where subject and object are are indeed in communication, where meaning is not imposed but emerges through interaction. Their art shows us that the mind is already shaped by the objects it encounters before it seeks to direct them, that we are not isolated beings but part of a vast, interconnected cycle. In the hands of our artists, matter is not a neutral carrier of human ideas, nor is it indifferent. It is alive with meaning, imbued with its own "codes." These codes transform over time, depositing deeper layers of significance into the material. Through this process of sedimentation, the codes become fragmented. It is necessarily so, for they have traveled through time, and time itself is the agent of deposition.

Here, we are confronted with profound questions: Do we not have only matter to reflect ourselves? A mirror shows us back, but is it not because we can see ourselves through something outside of us? Could it be that the fragmented meanings within matter ultimately point back to us? Perhaps is it we who are fragmented? If so, should we not consider that transcendence might come through matter? For it is matter that holds us together, that connects us to the world and to each other.

The most enduring impression left by this exceptionally curated exhibition is perhaps this: a new awareness of our environment, not as a hostile trench to be conquered but as an expansive horizon of cohabitation. The works of Zhu Jinshi, Shim Moon-Seup, Tadashi Kawamata, and Shin Mee-Kyung challenge us to rethink our relationship with the natural world and the materials that compose it. They invite us to see ourselves not as rulers of Nature but as participants in a greater cycle, where meaning is not imposed but discovered, where form and matter are not adversaries but partners. In this vision, the boundaries between subject and object blur, the impossible chasm between humans and Nature becomes passable, and the possibility of a deeper, more harmonious relationship with the world emerges.

As we leave this exhibition, we are left with questions that linger and resonate: What if the key to understanding ourselves lies not in dominating matter but in listening to it? What if the fragmented meanings within the materials around us are fragments of our own story, waiting to be deciphered? And what if, in embracing matter as a partner rather than a servant, we might find a path to transcendence—not beyond the world, but within it?

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[1] Martin Heidegger, <The Origin of the Work of Art> (Harper Perennial 2013), p.70.
[2] Interview with Stefano Pirovano (2012) at https://www.conceptualfinearts.com/cfa/2016/02/19/this-is-my-truth-about-chinese-art-an-interview-with-zhu-jinshi-with-a-three-years-delay/.
[3] All quotations of Shim's words in this article are from Shim Moon-Seup, <Time on paper & …> (Duson Gallery).
[4] Manon Lutanie, Cerise Fontaine, Raphaëlle Brin (ed.), Tadashi Kawamata. Entretiens, Paris, Lutanie Éditions, 2013, p.95-122, reproduced at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tadashi_Kawamata.
[5] *Ibid.*
[6] Sigmund Freud, <Civilization and Its Discontents> (W W Norton 1989), p.112.
[7] Interview with Art Chosun (2024) at https://art.chosun.com/site/data/html_dir/2024/06/05/2024060501280.html.
[8] John Berger, <Ways of Seeing> (Penguin Books 1990), p.19.