

A TURN TO A NEW NATURE: THE SUBVERSION OF THE ARTIFICIAL IN THE WORK OF KENJI NAKAMA

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ABSTRACT

This paper analyses five periods in the work of Peruvian artist Kenji Nakama: his early stage as a Neo-impressionist painter of noise; his work with electronic devices to capture TV signals; his incursion in collage to create topological systems; his approach to volume by the use of simulations of organisms and ecosystems; and the use of matter as an animated being that must reveal its ontology to the public. All the pieces have conceptual and formal features that grant them consistency, coherency, and logic. On the one hand, the need to raise awareness about the excess of information and the way media influence us; on the other hand, the use of strata and structures as mechanisms to organise said noise/chaos/surplus to turn to a primal state: a new nature.

KEYWORDS

Aesthetics, Art, Collage, Installation art, Media, Nature, Painting, Peru, Visual arts

1. INTRODUCTION

Visual artist Kenji Nakama (1982) studied painting at the Pontifical Catholic University of Peru (PUCP). Among his personal and collective exhibitions, we highlight “Mutación y desborde [Mutation and Overflow],” “Estudios de pliegue [Etudes on Folding],” and “Before the Fire Starts.” In 2010 he won the twenty-third edition of the visual art contest “Pasaporte para un artista [Passport for an Artist],” a joint effort between Alianza Francesa Institute and the French Embassy in Peru, which allowed him to do an art residency in Paris. In 2017 he finished the Master in Fine Arts (MFA) program in the Frank Mohr Institute (The Netherlands.) Presently he lives, works, and exhibits in Lima, Peru.

Nakama enrolled in the Painting program in the former Faculty of Arts (nowadays rebranded as Faculty of Arts and Design) of the PUCP in 1999. The aforementioned program follows a traditional approach and focuses mainly on oil painting. His former pieces were, consequently, produced using that technique and depict abstract representations of static television signals camouflaged as “landscapes.” On them, we can see the influence of his mentors: intentional use of chiaroscuro and a rich colour palette. At the same time, it is during this period he began his interest in the impact of technology on society. It is important to note he did not lose interest in that subject after graduating. On the contrary, freed from the academic constraints he began experimenting with different media to materialise his concerns. It is thus during this period he got the uncanny idea of portraying TV signals using a scanner, something that resulted in the “Zapping” series: unnerving works that reject the classicism of his student days by using digital prints instead of oil. We do not miss the opportunity to say the sole fact he did not use pigments to produce his work would have been unimaginable during his stance at the art school. We can see in hindsight this was a transitional state, for the need to physically “mould” matter never abandoned his mind. His next move was to approach volume by using stripes of surgically cut

paper sheets. In this case, TV guides. The pieces done around these years demonstrate a true commitment to exploring the idea of consumerism, globalisation, and hyperreality. On his next journey, he would continue tackling volume, only this time shifting his attention towards exploring nature. Some of the artworks that belong to this stage, and that were exhibited in “Mutación y desborde,” contain elements that defied the limits imposed by frames: borders were open and Nakamawas comfortable letting matter expand because that is how nature operates. One commonality between this period and the next is he started using white sheets of paper instead of magazines. This turn is relevant, for the printed paper is undeniably charged with meanings, whereas the blank pages are stripped of said concepts. By doing that change, he was able to analyse and ponder the properties of the material and the possibilities it offered to him. Artist and material engaged in a symbiotic relationship: Nakama “listens” to it, but at the same time, applies strict rules to generate compositions that mimic patterns found in minerals, plants, and they even semblance the images taken of our inner organs with an MRI scanner.

As we have outlined in this prologue, far from sticking to a sole material or topic, Nakama has explored many resources and modes of expression. Be it by using digital devices, collage, or mix-media, the artist has developed works that, beyond their particular aesthetics, invite us to reflection. In the following sections, we will be perusing in detail the five differentiated stages that comprise his oeuvre to understand both the technical and conceptual evolution of it.

2. VISUAL AND CONCEPTUAL ANALYSIS

2.1. “New Nature” or a contemporary interpretation of classic landscape painting

Let us start our analysis with this series, for it contains key aspects that will allow us to understand his future work. The inspiration for these oil paintings is the static signal of televisions, something that results in “aerial” or “spatial” landscapes. Landscape painting has a long tradition in the classic arts, in which figures such as Cézanne, Constable, Seurat, and Monet stand out. Under the influence of the later, the artist performs a series of short strokes on the canvas to create a post-impressionist interpretation of the absence of signal. In that regard, Nakama adopts the role of a contemporary landscape painter: a bucolic environment is no longer a place for disconnection and appeasement as well as a source of astonishment, but mass media is what nowadays produce that same kind of drive on the beholders. Works such as “Cielo [Sky]” and “Campo [Field]” (Figure 1) capture and transform noise (absence/surplus of content) into something aesthetic and worth of admiration. These early works are proof of Nakama’s intentions to convert something artificial into nature by using its basic constituents: strata (juxtaposed elements) and structures (containers that serve as containers for said strata).

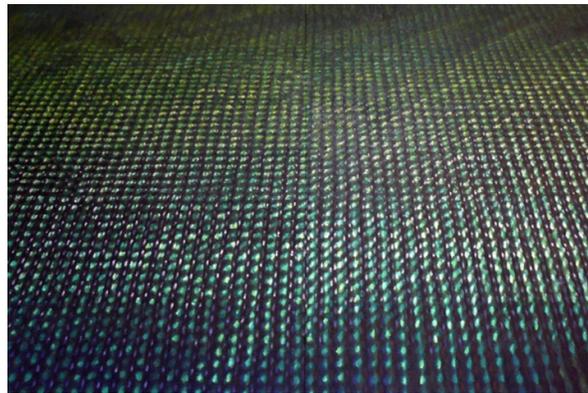


Figure 1. Campo [1]

2.2. “Zapping” o the dialogue between actants

The intensity, both in terms of topic and technique, of the first works required a pause, some distancing. Is in this hiatus that Nakama delegates the very act of creation to electronic devices: by using a scanner his purpose was to capture/portray television signal whilst browsing channels (that is, zapping.) The artist, the TV and the scanner are, in the words of Latour, actants: humans and non-humans that perform and action or that are designated as the source of action [2]. A(n) (inter)relation is thus created between the involved actors inside a net that allow them to reach a determined goal. The action, far from being sequential, is performed simultaneously. The artist modifies the behaviour of the scanner and, by doing so, he becomes a compound agent (artist-scanner) that modifies, in turn, the television. This chain of interactions generates detours in the individual goals of the actants, but as a group, they create sub-programs that allow them to achieve the desired results. In this case, hypnotic works that are aesthetically pleasing, and that, on a conceptual level, make us aware of living in an era in which we are exposed to an excess of information, but also a distortion of said information. That dichotomy gives a particular charm to works like “1'46” o “4'33” (Figure 2). The last work is comprised, from left to right, of tiny juxtaposed layers that, in turn, create vertical stripes/strata that generate a dynamic structure. On a deeper look it is possible to appreciate, in an obscure and disturbing way, the phantasmal distorted remains of the artwork origins (silhouettes, faces, logotypes), generated thanks to the interaction of two gadgets with different rhythms (the calm movements of a sensor trying to capture the ongoing pulse of cathodic rays).



Figure 2. 4'33 [3]

To conclude this section, we consider this series as a (necessary) transition stage between the traditional pictorial work and the collage work that we will analyse next.

2.3. “Pangea” o the seeming return to unity

As part of the 2009 exhibition in Lucía de la Puente Gallery, Nakama shows, additionally to oil on canvas works from his early stage, a series of collages and paper-made compositions. The chosen topic is the influence that television has and how we acknowledge the fact the spatial-temporal borders have been reduced. It is an illusory return to “global unity,” to Pangea, that former continent that, after dividing, generated the current geographic configuration we are familiar with. It is a fantasy because the content that is shown on television is no more than a cumulation of non-sensical data that isolates individuals. Baudrillard analysed much earlier this phenomenon. Far from adhering to the commonly accepted idea that production of information is necessary for socialisation and that its circulation fosters communication and meaning, he asserts exactly the contrary occurs due to two main reasons: firstly, because the same medium that produces that information is determined to “fabricate” layers of contents and meaning that

are attractive, but empty, and those contents end up replacing what is real (hence, a simulation is produced); secondly, because this “phantom” content, devoid of meaning, will conduct us to obscurantism, creating a social destabilization in the process [4].

The element that Nakama chooses to bring awareness of the excessive amount of data produced and consumed is the TV guide: an object conceived to systematically catalogue and organise programs. The artist begins with this block/earth and then makes incisions/diggings on the pages to reveal random parts of its content, resulting in irregular “terrains,” in which “altitudes” are formed based on the depth of the cuts. In other projects such as “Corte transversal de unamontaña de 107280 horas aprox. [Cross section of a mountain of 107280 hours approximately]” (Figure 3) the TV guides were torn longitudinally to create pseudo-topological formations. Akin to his early works, he pursues to recreate nature using an artificial object as a starting point: the torn guides are folded in an organic fashion to intentionally recreate the plateaus that form our Earth, and when those layers thicken, “mountains of information” appear. In summary, it could be said they are a mass of hyperreal content (more seductive than reality itself) that mass media offers to the public after a careful process of selection, edition, and processing.



Figure 3. Corte transversal de una montaña de 107280 horas aprox. [5]

2.4. “Mutación y desborde” or approaching animism

In this period, the artist continues with the same technical approach: he uses cut paper to mould it and organise it inside a container. The difference with past works is these compositions are less akin to inanimate entities (geological formations) and begin adopting features of living creatures (mushrooms, snails, cephalopods.) It is therefore understandable those beings decide to revolt against their containers, expand, and abandon the bidimensional space. An example of this is “Sin título [Untitled]” (Figure 4), an installation comprised of longitudinal stripes of paper that rest/drip over a wooden easel. The type of paper employed, with its raw texture and undetermined colour, is perceived as something of lesser quality and, consequently, refers to the ephemerality of the medium: a newspaper loses relevance and becomes literally rubbish the next day after its initial publishing. By using that kind of paper an indirect critique is posed to a certain type of journalism that, far from informing, use their influence over people to further other interests.



Figure 4. Sin título[6]

In other projects the expansion process causes the material to become a parasitic agent that invades its host. The installation “Sin título [Untitled]” shows, for instance, a bookshelf that was consumed by that to which it gave shelter, that is, books, phone guides, and encyclopaedias. It is important to notice that all objects in the installation come from the same source: trees. We are, therefore, witnesses of a cannibal ritual in which ectoparasites, akin to giant African snails, devour its container until it is destroyed.

2.5. “Estudios de pliegue” or the spirit of matter

This series is a partial comeback to the bidimensional format and it is comprised of medium-sized works, all done entirely with paper. These pieces aim to create abstract nature. Leaving aside for a moment the visual analysis, we acknowledge a turn in the artist’s interests. By using non-printed paper (something that always has a conceptual charge), Nakama can finally focus on the material to reveal its nature. To do that he had to analyse the possibilities/potentialities of paper. Ashby and Johnson [7] state that the materials employed do not possess a character, but they acquire one depending on the role that is assigned when used to manufacture products; for instance, glass can be perceived as a highly precise material (when used in a camera’s lens) or as a simple disposable container (when used to create a bottle of soda.) This definition can be extrapolated to the pieces of this series, for the artist acknowledge and respects, on the one hand, the nature of the material and, on the other hand, adopts agency into its transformation. Within this double articulation, it is understood materials are going to “demand” certain actions that the artist must “listen,” and that he should not lose his autonomy in the process. As we already said, human and non-human have a determining role in the becoming of the “product.” We are talking about an ongoing (and necessary) dialogue to achieve a goal.

The creation process is, on the surface, simple: Nakama comes up with a set of rules to allocate stripes of paper inside a frame, parameters he should adhere to in order to generate different compositions. These formal explorations, despite the rationality of the process, produced fresh and dynamic works. This can be seen in “Estudio #6 [Etude #6]” (Figure 5), a piece in which rhythm is generated both by the zigzag pattern used and the discrepancy between luminosity and tonality. The first aspect was accomplished by agglutination of paper: the denser strata were, the darker it was perceived. The second aspect is a by-product of pairing paper of the same colour; although all sheets were “white,” some had a blueish or yellowish cast depending on the brand used. The physical properties of matter were, therefore, taken into consideration and this was a vital part of the project.



Figure 5. Estudio #6 [8]

This series is a mirror of the nature present in our world: these compositions (re)present structures similar to the ones underlying plants, mineral, and even humans. In the artist's universe, everything has life and energy. These animistic beliefs grant him the required sensibility to mould matter in a way that its nature is revealed to us.

3. CONCLUSIONS

We can trace a technical and thematic evolution in the work of Nakama. In his early paintings, he dealt with technology, but in a distant way, just as a casual observer. The abstract landscapes were based upon electronic signals, but the pieces were done using a traditional approach. By doing so, he detached himself from the observed subject. It makes sense his next step was to embrace technology from start to finish, beginning with the scanning of the television signals and ending with the printing of the resultant pieces. As we mentioned, he became a compound agent and engaged in a symbiotic relationship with technological apparatuses. However, this involvement was transitory, for the need to touch and feel matter made him return to work with his hands again, this time to create volumetric compositions. This happened in two stages: first, through the use of stacked layers of printed sheets that were cut to form structures akin to earth plateaus; second, by "allowing" paper to adopt organic forms, thus replicating the behaviour of animated beings. In these first periods, he rose awareness of topics such as consumerism and the influence of media. He used those topics as a starting point to do a visual translation, generating something we have coined here as "new nature." Progressively, the "voice" of matter seduced him until it became the focus of his work. That is evident in the fifth period perused here, where blank sheets of papers were employed. He took into consideration the physical properties of the material such as colour (shades of whites) and opacity (caused by variation in weights.) When we observe those compositions, we conclude they are no longer a subversion of another phenomenon, as was the case with former works, but they have their own ontology.

We have only covered five stages in the oeuvre of Kenji Nakama in this article. There is, of course, more to explore. One of the topics that are beyond the scope of this paper is the period he spent at the Frank Mohr Institute. During those years, he decided to intentionally drift away from the path he was on. Sculptures, ready-mades and modified mundane objects are some of the results of this fruitful period of exploration. In contrast to the formation received at the Faculty of Arts, in which deviance from the norm was frowned upon, we can perceive, based on the corpus of works produced, that this institution fostered his creativity and gave him space to enjoy and not worry about fitting into a single category. Nevertheless, sooner than later, he felt the need to return to his "obsessions," which is evident in seductive works such as "XOXO" (2017), an installation comprised of hundreds of letter envelopes covering nine big windows,

each of them measuring around three meters high and one and a half meters wide. It is, as we can see, a massive endeavour. In that project, he set rules again and followed them to generate an intricate structure based on the envelopes' design. Natural light coming from the outside was key to the success of that installation.

To conclude, we must say in present years Nakama has, interestingly, returned to painting. And, surprisingly, he is using oil on canvas, as he did in his early years. He is still interested in patterns and structures, but he tackles those topics more organically and less rigidly. In our humble opinion, we view them as etudes for something that is yet to come. Therefore, it is too soon to determine how these projects will fit in his oeuvre. This is something we will like to address in a future investigation.

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