

It seems quite natural to me that something never finished

Conversation between Tadashi Kawamata and Johannes Wieninger

We met for the first time a year ago in Paris. It's a year in which you have realised many projects and meanwhile kept thinking about the MAK project. Can you give us a brief outline of your works in this year?

I've really been very busy this year. I've worked each year for 35 years on around 10 projects: this year these included one in Switzerland in Ittingen (March 2013 – 2015 Scheiterturm /Log Tower), then a project in the Camargue in France (Horizons, Camargue project 2011 – 2013, Water Paths), one in the Parc de la Villette in Paris (Collective Folie), then another at Art Basel (Favela Cafe). After Basel, I moved on to Toronto (Scotiabank Nuit Blanche, Toronto, Canada) then Florence ("Tree Huts" at Palazzo Strozzi as part of the CCC Strozzi), finally the project on Place Vendome (Hors-les-Murs for the FIAC) in Paris. But I also worked a lot in Japan; a three-year project was finalised here; we had a kind of closing party and started dismantling, but two other projects are still underway in Japan. Sometimes my projects have a brief life, but they can also last longer than 3-4 years. And "on the side" I teach at the Beaux-arts (L'École nationale supérieure des beaux-arts in Paris), then there are also lectures, symposiums – yes, it was a heavy schedule. But it's normal for me always to be on the move, I like it.

You don't only work in the studio – you're always at the "building site" as well ...

Yes, I'm always very involved physically. I also like being on my own and undisturbed in my studio, but I do like working with others very much.

How do you plan your work – do any plans exist at all?

Of course I make preparatory sketches and plans; sometime I make models, but nothing is unalterable. Actually it's more like studying. I always make the final decisions on site, because then I can always change everything. I really believe in my ideas, but I can't predict what will happen. Planning is only planning, a sketch remains a sketch, etc. But reality only exists on site, you'll always find me there, on site – and something unexpected always happens. It rains and we can't work, or there's an accident – so much can happen – and this is reality.

When I visited you at your project in La Villette I had the opportunity of hearing you introducing things to the "co-workers". There wasn't a single ruler or measuring stick in the whole site; you only specified the height of each participant as the "measure of all things".

Yes, body measurement is important for me. When someone builds something and bangs his head, he hasn't done his measuring homework. You have to start out from your own body size. Working solely with the ruler isn't a good thing. We stand up, don't we, and in the construction, and if we don't know what it's capable of supporting we shall have to be afraid.

But if we build it ourselves, we gradually put more trust our own work, thus participants learn more every day about how to make such things. This is very important.

At our first meeting in Paris in 2012 you actually agreed to the project straight away, and this was the start of a “work in progress”. What were your first considerations after coming to Vienna in January 2013?

I am myself very interested in the city of Vienna; I’ve already done some projects here and in Austria. I like the cafés, I like the people here; Vienna is also a bit slow; I can always relax when I come here. I feel more at home in this city than in others.

As for this project, I thought “why not?” I knew the MAK after all, and I’ve seen some excellent exhibitions here.

You must be familiar with working with a museum collection that has evolved historically. You nearly always work with or at historical monuments: Versailles, Place Vendome ...

This might be true, but I don’t only deal with historical locations. I don’t actually seek out the locations myself, but when someone suggests a place to me I think about it and its history and look for connections to the singularity of the local environment and surroundings. I’m not only concerned with the monument itself. 80-90% of my projects are suggested to me; my works are real commissions. I’m invited to create a work for a specific place, or for a city; here I can seek out a location for myself: this depends on several factors. There are only very few projects in which I choose a location for myself – but then I commission the project as it were from myself. Even the last project on Place Vendome was commissioned; also the installation in Versailles was a commission.

Like the MAK project. We specified the room and the collection.

Exactly. I need specifications; I find it very difficult without them. Only then can I create things that are new; something new comes out of the commission; this is what makes my work so exciting and such a pleasure.

Unplaned wood has become your trade mark. It’s the simplest conceivable building material.

I’m not an artist who can work with stone or metal, I’ve no idea about them. But I’ve had a close affinity to wood ever since I was a student. I studied painting but couldn’t develop an affinity to it, so I stood in front of the empty canvas – and this gave rise to my first installation – then I dispensed with the canvas as well and only had a wooden easel in front of me. An easel, simply standing in a space, was one of my earliest works. I was still a student. This was the starting point for my further work. Old easels in different sizes that no one wanted any more – I collected them and used them for my installations. So these were my first spatial works in wood. I’ve always used wood since then. It’s so simple, you can find it everywhere, in every place in the world, and everywhere you have the same standardised dimensions. Construction timber is an important industrial product. It’s excellent to work with and easy to procure. It’s not expensive. I travel without material and can start work straight away. Everyone can work with it, every child can hammer a nail in it or saw it, it’s really very easy. This material needs no special technique. Everyone can join in; it’s a material accessible to all (09.44), this is why I use simple, unplaned construction timber.

You studied in Japan, so you have an excellent knowledge of East Asian art history. The MAK installation presents a direct confrontation of your work with traditional decorative arts, which are often executed with great detail and are very precious. Does this lead to a different view of the collection?

For me as Curator of the MAK Asia Collection, there's a great difference between simply placing the collection objects in a showcase or working with Kawamata.

Yes, I don't make showcases; I much more create a space, and I think about how the collection can be displayed. What's important for me is how people view the objects, how they move around in my space. Another thing that interests me about this project is how the visitor sees things differently and discovers them anew.

And visitors will discover something new because they view the collection in a different way.

They are going to have to take another point of view. And this is exactly what I want to persuade them to do, and of course I'm eager to see their reactions.

There are films about your work, also on the Internet, which give the impression that many people are sceptical at first, but after a while your works win them over; they study them intensively, and often get a great deal of enjoyment out of them.

How can I explain this – my works and I are quite acceptable. I like putting lots of ideas into practice, also quite spontaneously. Many people have spontaneous ideas and brainwaves, but they never think they can be put into practice. I do this! If I say, I'm making a hut on the roof, lots of people say "This is much too difficult and complicated and the roof will be damaged." But I do it. Of course I have a great deal of experience; I know how it works. At the start of my career I wasn't able to realise my ideas exactly, but now, after 35 years' experience, I'm utterly secure in project realisation. The hut on Place Vendome was 45 metres above the ground; I knew of course how to construct it and fix it up there. Of course I had all the bother of getting approval from the authorities and also had to consider the safety of the co-workers, and so on, but this is all part of the job.

You once said many people ask where the stairs are that lead up to the huts, but they can only go up in their imagination. Do you build people's dreams?

Not so much dreams, but far more ideas. It's not so much a matter of the imagination as another point of view, another angle.

In Japan it occurred to me that there's a small difference in mindset: the European always wants to run up against a brick wall to get through, the Japanese opens the door. This is very simplified, but: do you open doors?

Well, no, I don't open doors. In Japan we have these thin lengths of fabric instead of doors, *noren*, you can go through quite simply, because it's only cloth. But it produces shadows, just a little piece of cloth; sometimes I lift this cloth up; its flexibility is important for me, thus it isn't a wall.

Films and pictures documenting your work never show you on your own; you're always working together with others. During work on the Tower in La Villette people could even register on the Internet to join in the building. And during the collective preparations in Vienna there were always several people around you, discussing and drawing things the whole time in order to try out new ideas and variants.

I love sharing my ideas and talking about them. Of course I work alone in my studio, but then I also want to know what others think about my projects, therefore I seek collaboration. In the Tower construction in La Villette, ten co-workers were in the immediate team, but as the three months went by, more than a thousand people joined in the workshops. And each weekend we opened up the "building site" and this attracted over ten thousand. I can't know them all, can I? ...

And then they all came to the grand final party and were proud to have worked with Kawamata – like us here at the MAK.

(laughs) yes, yes, more or less ...

You were born in Japan, you live in Europe, so you're a wanderer between the worlds. For me, collections of Asian art in Europe are a kind of chinoiserie or Japonisme. How do you see this yourself – as an intermediary between these worlds, or is it only one single world in which you move and work?

I have been working in Europe and Japan for a very long time, less in other Asian countries. This may seem strange, but now I mainly work in Europe, previously in the USA as well – in the eighties I lived in New York for three years. Normally I go to Japan four or five times a year, but I don't really live there; still, I'm not a European either, nor an American, but neither am I a proper Japanese. I love Japanese culture, but am also critical of it, as I am towards those of other Asian countries. It's only recently that I have worked in other Asian countries; last year I was in Korea, this year in Singapore and Hong Kong – but this is new for me, because no one has ever invited me to work there as yet. Strange, isn't it? Sometimes I was invited to lecture there, but only just now with my works and exhibitions. I don't think they see a Japanese in me, more a European. In Japan itself my art is not seen as "Japanese art", more that of an outsider. So it's very difficult to classify me geographically.

One of the great and famous Japanese fashion designers is supposed to have said you need a flagship store in Paris to be successful in Japan.

Yes, yes, that's correct but this aspect doesn't worry me.

The works of several artists well known in the West, of whom you are one, are "typical Japanese" for Europeans. Is it a problem for you to be seen as "typical"?

As I see it, there are two types of Japanese artists who don't live and work in the home country. One group sees itself as deeply rooted in the Japanese tradition, the other group tries to follow completely new paths, like On Kawara, a concept artist I greatly esteem; he doesn't belong at all to any Japanese tradition; he has forged his own way himself. Personally I feel I belong to the second group, but of course I'm not rootless. There's wood in

Japan, that's obvious, but there's also wood throughout the world. The only thing that matters to me is the project. If someone asks me "Are you Japanese?" I say, "No, no – I come from Tokyo." This is like the USA and New York, there are quite simply certain differences between a country and a big city.

Permanent change, or the potential to change is a principle of the MAK installation. In one or two years the "Kawamata" Gallery might look entirely different. Why is this so important to you?

I don't believe in the permanent, in the everlasting, that everything has to stay as it is. I don't want to make anything final, finished. An exhibition has to stay "in movement"; you have to keep changing the objects. Visitors should react to this in a relaxed way; it has to be refreshing for them. I want openness in every way. We also open up the windows, people should be able to see outside. Weather and light change constantly; this affects the presentation of the collection. It's so important to have more than just one opportunity of seeing and experiencing things. It seems quite natural to me that something never finished.

We shall open the gallery windows; we let daylight in, we'll be able to see Walter Pichler's Gate. You're very happy about this. Why?

I met Walter Pichler for the first time in May 1982 in Venice. The Biennale opened in June, but even two weeks before this there was no sign of an artist there. I asked myself what on earth was going on, because I expected to see a whole crowd of them. It was my first major international exhibition, a huge chance for me to present my work to an international public. So I already arrived in Venice two months before. I worked in the Giardini in the Japanese pavilion, but someone else was there as well – Walter Pichler in the Austrian pavilion. We kept meeting up in the restaurant; unfortunately my English wasn't very good at the time, but my assistant could help out here, and so we came into contact. Hans Hollein was there as well. I didn't know either of them, nor their works, but in time we made friends. We kept in touch; when I came to Austria, I visited them. And he designed the catalogues for my projects in the Remise in Vienna. Walter Pichler was a great artist and also good craftsman in the best sense; he pursued and realised his ideas consistently, which we can see exemplified very well in his MAK Gate. His work has always interested me; this is why the MAK and my work here mean something special to me.

His drawings fascinate me, how he put his ideas down on paper, this was very impressive indeed. And of course how they were realised afterwards. He was a great inspiration for my further work. Obviously I like Klimt and Kokoschka as well, and the Secession. But Walter Pichler gave a great boost to Austrian contemporary art and made me get to know it. Austria is a little bit East Europe to my feeling. Berlin is West Europe, but Vienna, Budapest, Warsaw, they all belong together for me, even if I have to admit that I don't know these cities very well. Here in Vienna I feel this great cultural heritage and history. When I was young, I was fascinated most of all by New York, Paris and London, but now, at 50+, I would sometimes like things to be a little quieter as well, and Vienna doesn't change as quickly as the great centres of the world. People are aware here of the great historical heritage and tend to rest on their laurels somewhat; it's antiquated, but at the same time Austrian contemporary art counter-balances this – this special situation corresponds to my feelings at the moment.