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Sensations Recalibrated

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SENSATIONS RECALIBRATED

A Thesis
Presented to
the Graduate School of
Clemson University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Fine Arts
Visual Art

by
Ayako Abe-Miller
May 2015

Accepted by:
Professor David Detrich, Committee Chair
Professor Kathleen Thum
Dr. Andrea Feeser

ABSTRACT

In my art, I work within a Taoist and Shinto-based context to provide opportunities for the individual to discover aspects of her/his pre-socialized self. The notion of the pre-socialized self, referred to as the innocent self in both Taoism and Shinto, is expressed through a vital force generated from one's total being. The vital force that emits from one's entire body and soul is called *Tamashii* in Japanese.

I am interested in evoking my audience's pure *Tamashii* that is hidden or dormant in their current lifestyle by providing an opportunity for the audience to become more aware of their mind, body, and *Tamashii* relationship.

I have utilized interactive installation, performance, and sculpture to prompt viewers to recognize their pure *Tamashii*. My goal of creating artwork is to facilitate an opportunity for the participants to feel and recognize their existence in this time through their actions.

My concepts are inspired by the current situation of contemporary life coexisting with digital society. Our digital society provides unrestricted knowledge and information for people to enhance their lifestyles, making them more prosperous, convenient, and efficient. Simultaneously, such abundant information and knowledge conceals one's pure *Tamashii*, because this information is easier to access than listen to one's own deeper and sincere heart. I believe that people in contemporary society need to explore the pure *Tamashii* even while they live in a digital society. Balance is an essential factor to feel achievement, power, and energy in one's life. In relation to the mind, body, and *Tamashii* relationship, an information-driven society more consistently activates the mind part.

Therefore, I make art that strides toward equalizing the balance among these three. Through my installation sculpture, I would like people to experience their pre-socialized self.

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my husband, George Miller, with love. My time in graduate school would not be successful without your great support.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

In my art, I work within a Taoist and Shinto-based context to provide opportunities for the individual to discover aspects of her/his pre-socialized self. The notion of the pre-socialized self, referred to as the innocent self in both Taoism and Shinto, is expressed through a vital force generated from one's total being. The vital force that emits from one's entire body and soul is called *Tamashii* in Japanese.

Imagine how the scene of a dog rushing toward his owner moves the viewers' hearts, because they witness the dog's pureness and sincerity toward his owner. However, the dog's pureness and sincerity are not the only reasons that the viewers' hearts are moved. What the viewers sense and empathize with is the dog's *Tamashii*. Because the viewers are also equipped with *Tamashii* within themselves, their *Tamashii* vibrates with the dog's *Tamashii* and allows them to empathize.

Tamashii is not recognizable in everyday life, but it exists everywhere including, nature, people, and animals to harmonize the universe without hierarchal condition, so each *Tamashii* is equally precious and pure. Because *Tamashii* is a part of creating balance and harmonious universe, human beings, who are also equipped with *Tamashii*, are also precious and pure. This is a core of Shinto ideology, which is a Japanese belief system and way of life. Shinto believes that people are born pure and that one's pureness continues to exist even though it seems to hide somewhere underneath one's mind as one grows up. The idea of *Tamashii* perpetual remaining within oneself gives people ease and motivation to live positively as a member of society and the universe. *Tamashii* also creates an

appreciation for the meaning of an individual's precious life that exist in this time in this world as a role of harmonizing the universe.

Because I was born and grew up in Japan, the way of life, the meaning of human beings and how to think about myself, and my place in relation with the environment are naturally rooted in Shinto ideology. Occasional discovery of my own *Tamashii* and encountering other's *Tamashii* gives me a meaning of my existence in relation with others and an appreciation of my place in this world as a part of harmonizing elements.

CHAPTER TWO

HOW TO RECALIBRATE SENSATIONS

I am interested in evoking my audience's pure *Tamashii* that is hidden or dormant in their current lifestyle by providing an opportunity for the audience to become more aware of their mind, body, and *Tamashii* relationship. The idea of evoking one's pure *Tamashii* from everyday life stems from my curiosity about whether people in contemporary society understand the balance between mind, body, and *Tamashii*. Contemporary lifestyles coexist within an information society, and the information society provides unrestricted knowledge and information for people through mass media and the networking system to enhance their lifestyles, making them more prosperous, convenient, and efficient. Simultaneously, such abundant information and knowledge diminishes one's pure *Tamashii*, because this information is easier to access than listening to one's own deeper and sincere heart.

I utilize interactive installations, performances, and sculpture to prompt viewers to recognize their pure *Tamashii*. My goal of creating artwork is to facilitate an opportunity for the participants to feel and recognize their existence in this time through their actions.

In order to evoke one's *Tamashii*, I capitalize on fundamental human senses like vision and touch to activate my artwork, because these senses can directly connect to the mind and body. Therefore, participants must use both visual and tactile sensation to fully understand the situation.

The way of setting up the gallery space almost acts like children's museums or playgrounds. I activate the space this way because the children's playground is the ultimate

place where one can witness children's creative activities, which often seem pure in that they appear pre-socialized. From Taoist or Shinto perspective such expression exudes *Tamashii*.

CHAPTER THREE

CAPTURING YOUR BREATH

Capturing Your Breath is an audience-interactive installation that gives an opportunity for the audience to recognize anew the significance of the fundamental physiological activity of breathing. By providing a space for the audience to touch or blow various-sized translucent cubes, which metaphorically represents one's breathe, I created a situation for them to consciously actualize their breath in the present space.

I believe that keeping the balance between mind and body is an essential condition to maintaining one's wellbeing, but knowledge of any imbalance is hard to detect until one gets symptoms of physical or mental illness. Responding to the contemporary stressful lifestyle that generates physical or mental disorders like a strained back or functional dysphasia, I have been exploring fundamental and indispensable physiological activity that need to be recognized and their power applied to people's stressful lives.

Breathing is an essential and the simplest device to identify one's actual existence. Yet a breathing condition like shortness of breath or the act of taking a deep breath hugely reflects one's emotional and physical state. I created *Capturing Your Breath* to emphasize the power of breathing through a playful presentation.

For this installation, various-sized cubes of stitched organza are scattered over the floor, and some are hung from the ceiling. The cubes are translucent blue and white, so the audience can see through the threads as an evidence of capturing breathing. By containing threads within skin-like translucent organza, I attempted to produce the ephemerality of breath.

The idea of interaction through touching and blowing the cubes stemmed from the Tibetan Buddhist monastery practice of making mandala drawings. They create mandalas using precise color choices and sand drawings. Because there are no textbooks to learn how to make mandala drawings, monks learn by observing the senior monk's work and through repetitive practice that brings them into a meditative state. Thus, the mandala becomes a reflection of self-awareness. Although *Capturing Your Breath* is not a meditative practice, touching the texture of the cube and thread, blowing, and observing the ephemerality of the cubes are similar to the Tibetan monks' mandala drawing practices by using a bodily experience to learn something about recognizing oneself.



Figure 1.1 *Capturing Your Breath*, Installation View



Figure 1.2 *Capturing Your Breath*, Audience Interaction View



Figure 1.3 *Capturing Your Breath*. Detailed View

CHAPTER FOUR

POP-UP LIVE PERFORMANCE: CONNECTIVITY

This pop-up live performance is a theatrical display of connectivity in which people can physically and emotionally connect to others through humorous yet odd actions. By producing a live performance with audience interaction, I attempted to create the opportunity for people to share common emotions in the same space in real time. During and after the performance, I would like the audience to feel awkwardness, humor, confusion, and shyness through their actions, but simultaneously I would like them to think of the necessity of sharing physical actions and emotions with others to feel their existence. Furthermore, this performance's primary goal is to experience a crossed boundary between the audience and the stage to witness how people used to connect them to a new environment to become part of a community. In addition to this primary goal, examining human psychology (how people behave when they encounter an unexpected situation) is another goal for this performance. By experiencing unexpected situations, the audience has an opportunity to see the truthfulness of the mind-action relationship. Therefore, throughout all the actions, I provided layered goals for the audience to become conscious about their physical connectivity to other places, people, and situations.

The idea of a physical connectivity project stemmed from my musings about the false sense of connection to others that the social networking community gives. In today's contemporary society, the phrase, "Connect with us!" almost acts like a trendy symbol of becoming an active member of society. Because one's mind is powerful, people seem to connect to one another in a virtual world, but this type of connection only works in one's

mind in a virtual community and is likely only on the surface level of connection and relationship. I believe that there is always something in the core of a message that people cannot convey through a virtual connection—sharing common emotion in the same space. In real space, people can feel each other's breathing and tension directly. Therefore, my live performance was created to allow people to share emotion and physical activity together in real time and in real space.

I designed the stage with two doctor-like actors in a small white space. In this space, people are supposed to share the task and emotions, which prior to the digital age was a normal way of knowing or connecting to others in a real community. The performing action on the stage represents the idea of a task and cooperation in a community as a member of society. The actions of the two doctor-like actors, sniffing people and sticking their tongues out at the audience, indicates an examination of people's mind and body condition by using fundamental human senses like smell and taste, both of which cannot be shared through social networking.

As materials for the stage and the actors, I used felt and fake fur. Both fabrics have the soft texture of stuffed animals, so the audience feels invited and comfortable participating in the performance. Also, thread is an important material for emphasizing the meaning of connectivity, so thread was used in all of the items for the performance. The two actors wear a humorous scrub-like uniform, which represents examining people and healing their emotional conditions and lack of physical activity, ultimately helping them keep a balanced mind and body as a member of the community.

Proceeding with this artwork, I researched the Fluxus group's artwork, and my live performance was inspired by Fluxes' two characteristics: the do-it-yourself aesthetics of hand-assembled materials and the style of a happening (blurred boundary between viewers and artists). Like Fluxus, I made the entire stage setting and costumes by hand, and for the performance, I attempted to create a space for the audience to be active and participate in the performance as a unique and irreproducible part of the artwork.



Figure 2.1 *Pop-Up Live Performance: Connectivity, Performance view*



Figure 2.2 *Pop-Up Live Performance: Connectivity, Performance View*



Figure 2.3 *Pop-Up Live Performance: Connectivity*, Stage View



Figure 2.4 *Pop-Up Live Performance: Connectivity*, Stage View

CHAPTER FIVE

FRANK AND FREE

Frank and Free is an experiential installation that gives participants an opportunity to explore one's playful and child-like *Tamashii* in a gallery space. The goal of this interactive installation is to create the situation for participants to reexamine their social expectations of good manners or behavior. In this space, I would like the participants to be frank with themselves like they used be when they were young. By interacting with the provided space, participants may gradually become attuned to this freedom.

Hundreds of complexly folding papers are randomly piled or scattered on the floor, so participants can pick them up for examination and contemplation. The folded paper appears to have an essence of scales or animal skin, yet alludes to the rigid quality of a robot. The surface texture of the paper prompts the participants' curiosity. The complex way of folding the paper allows it to become flexible like spandex, so each piece is able to extend or shorten depending on one's handling. The participants can interact with them such as wearing them like a hat, piling them to construct a building, or rolling them to make a telescope. In this space, the participants are encouraged to be as absurd as possible as they reconsider their behavior.

The action of picking up an unknown object from the piles is an important behavior to examine one's degree of curiosity, and that action also leads to the playful action of how the person handles or manipulates folded paper to discover their creativity and imagination. This action is similar to children's play behavior when they dig toys out of a cabinet. Their

curiosity prompts their digging action until they find something that sparks their imagination.

As a material, I chose poster board, which is heavy and stiff in a flat plane condition. However, it can be transformed to be more flexible depending on how it is folded. This folded paper flexibility represents one's playful and flexible *Tamashii* that has become dormant due to adult social expectations.

The idea of this project stemmed from my wonder about social conditions in childhood and adulthood. Adults tend to live with social expectations, and it is sometimes necessary to respond to these expectations to maintain the flow of society, but the accumulation of responding to social expectations may make adults suffer. I think that even adults sometimes need to act like the children they used to be so they can have moments of pureness and pleasure. *Frank and Free* is a place where adults can feel free like children.

During this project, I researched the Gutai group's installation, performance, experimenting, environments, and actions. While many Gutai artists create profound and expressive art, my installation *Frank and Free* was influenced by Jiro Yoshihara's experimental art *Please draw freely* (1956). He extended his installation to the outside and created a space for children and adults to draw in a public space. His intention was to bring people's energetic soul up to the real space. On the white paper that Yoshihara provided in the public space, people could doodle or make chaotic marks or lines, which are the embodiment of one's vital energy. My approach to art making is very similar to the Gutai group's; I also would like the audience to freely express themselves and recognize their inner power through my artwork.



Figure 3.1 *Frank and Free*, Installation View



Figure 3.2 *Frank and Free*, Detailed View



Figure 3.3 *Frank and Free*, Audience Interaction View

CHAPTER SIX

PRESERVING YOUR ESSENCE

Preserving Your Essence is an audience-interactive sculpture in a social gathering space where one can examine their subconscious likeness as they choose a combination of colors. The sculpture consists of one hundred nucleus-like forms contained within a translucent fabric bag resembling a cell membrane. Each nucleus-like sphere is coiled with two different threads. A series of various-colored, nucleus-like forms in translucent bags is placed on the table. The work is intentionally created for the audience to examine color psychology and how one reacts to a particular color from the series, so one's choice of color indicates one's current emotion, physical condition, and influential or inspirational matter and experience. The goal of this work is to give the audience an opportunity to choose, touch, and hold the most attractive piece to have a moment of intimate relationship with the nucleus-like form. I would like the audience to sense that this process of action projects one's truthfulness by the act of choosing something attractive to oneself. This experience is similar to social psychology's theory of interpersonal attractiveness, which examines how people draw close to each other through relationships to balance out their essence.

This interactive sculpture space consists of a white rug, white cushions, and a white table with a hundred cell-like forms. The space is surrounded by a white wall, so it appears like a cozy room to play a game. In the room, four cushions are placed on the space so four people can sit and interact with the sculpture at once. Although this is the place for an individual person to concentrate on one's chosen color and contemplate the reason for the

color choice, this cozy space simultaneously acts like a silent social gathering place. Participants may feel a connection by doing a similar activity in the intimate space, even though the individual participants in the space do not know each other and are not necessarily having a conversation together.

One's choice of attractive color responds to various mind and body conditions. If they are energetic at that moment, they may pick the form that includes a red color thread to project their current energetic feeling, or a blue color to calm down their uncontrollable vital energy. Not only does the choice of color respond to one's current emotional condition, but it also indicates one's desired aura in order to complete one's missing or needed energy. Furthermore, one's color choice may be affected by the next person's characteristic or trait like hair-color, outfit, or behavior. After choosing the colored piece casually, I would like participants to carefully think or feel about why they chose this particular piece, which will give them an opportunity to think about their own instincts.

The idea of choosing attractive colors from the series in a social gathering space was inspired by the contemporary ability to choose anything by oneself. Today, one can choose his or her mate easily through the Internet using a matchmaking website. One can choose the ideal mate using information like income, background, and profile images, which is a great advantage of contemporary lifestyle. However, I believe that one's initial instinct of actual vision and touching in real space also helps in choosing by feeling the aura or energy of the ideal mate, so my interactive sculpture in a social gathering place is an opportunity for the audience to activate one's instinct by choosing colors from many similar cell-like forms and touching a chosen one to feel and contemplate why this

particular one is special among the many. Additionally, this silent social gathering place may give one an opportunity to feel some connection to a stranger sitting nearby by sensing the stranger's aura.



Figure 4.1 *Preserving Your Essence*, Installation View



Figure 4.2 *Preserving Your Essence*, Detailed View



Figure 4.3 *Preserving Your Essence*, Audience Interaction View

CHAPTER SEVEN

AWAKENING YOUR PSYCHE

The most common fundamental sense that people use every day is vision; we rely heavily on the visual sense to recognize things and matter. If the color or form of an object strikes a viewer's ocular sense, their psyche may be heavily influenced, so that the next time they perceive a similar-looking object, the previous visual memory and experience will instantly inform the current situation. Although people tend to rely on their vision to perceive things and matter, I believe that the visual sense only gives partial information of truthfulness, and the rest of the information will be provided by other fundamental senses plus one's own judgment (instinct). Being skeptical about how much contemporary life relies on the visual sense, especially since the advent of a digital society, I created artwork that examines one's perception of how participants generate truthfulness from an irrational situation.

Awakening Your Psyche is an illusionistic installation, where its appearance represents the manifestation of one's changing perception. The installation gives an opportunity for participants to examine if one's perception is true to what really exists in the space. The installation was made to look irrational, so participants experience a mesmerized sensation as if they are entering the space of one's own mind.

The illusionistic installation consists of various-sized steel hexagons, where the hexagons are suspended or connected with primary-colored elastic cords. Unlike the expected form of regular hexagonal forms that look like a honeycomb, the steel hexagons in this installation are three-dimensional slanted hexagons, which appear like isometric

perspective-like shapes. Besides the steel hexagonal forms, vinyl perspective hexagons are also drawn on the wall and floor surfaces. The combination of the slanted hexagonal forms in the space and isometric perspective hexagons on the two-dimensional surfaces creates a confused sensation for the participants.

The slanted hexagonal form is used to challenge one's perception by examining how much one can perceive truthfulness. The form of the hexagons in this installation represents one's psyche and how it is transformed or altered depending on one's perception and perspective. The installation is made so participants can interact with it as they walk throughout the work to examine its tricks or truthfulness. Immersing themselves in the installation space, the participants experience the blur between two-dimensional and three-dimensional expectations.

Proceeding with this artwork, I researched sacred geometry to understand how geometric shapes can be incorporated with intangible matter like emotion, spirituality, or instinct. The use of geometric forms in *Awakening Your Psyche* is essentially an expression of intangible matter. Gothic cathedrals and Islamic architecture are conventional examples of sacred geometry. Rather than focusing on a single geometric item, forms can imbue intangible matter like emotion or spirituality by being arranged in harmonious ratio (the golden mean). Because Gothic cathedrals and Islamic architecture are built using the golden mean, it is believed that they produce a spiritual atmosphere that is harmonious and transcendent, going beyond just a manifestation of a large-scale structure.

My installation consists of geometry, but my focus is using the characteristics of geometry that apply to the intangible matter of the psyche. Rather than focusing on an exact

number of harmonious sensations by using the golden mean, my work focused on geometry's transformation and how these characteristics apply to exploring one's psyche.

I used geometric forms to represent one's psyche, because in modern society the impression of geometry is very realistic. The academic approach of studying geometry, for example, is the embodiment of rationalism, which means people tend to think about it using the left-brain. Especially now that people are living in a digital society, it is customary to see geometric shapes quite often and automatically associate them with material, numeric, or rational matter.



Figure 5.1 *Awakening Your Psyche*, Installation View



Figure 5.2 *Awakening Your Psyche*, Audience Interaction View

CHAPTER EIGHT

OUR MUSUBI

In the private performance project *Our Musubi*, I created an alternative way of conveying one's sincere message to others through the human body. Rather than using language and voice, I attempted to use hands and their movement as a mediator to convey one's genuine message, and I also brought the human back into play to receive and absorb the sender's message.

In the performance, participants combined salt, sugar, and various colors of water, and then applied the mixed liquid onto an actor's back. The participant's touch and movements on the actor's back express each participant's genuine message. What the actors and the participants gain from this action are absolute trust and truthfulness. In addition to creating the situation for the viewer to share and create genuine wordless message by touch, I also want to ask the viewer, "Can you trust people? Can you show your back to others? How can you give your genuine wordless message to others?" when watching this documentation of this private performance.

As essences of creating a sincere and ritualistic space, the human back, human touch, salt, sugar, colored water, and translucent fabric were orchestrated to communicate energy. The whole performance consists of three phases. The first phase is the presence of the main performer as she reveals her back, and second phase is participants' touching action to convey their messages, and the final phase is covering the main performer's back with stained fabric, which shows the evidence of messages.

Salt and sugar are necessary nutrients for the human body, so I used them as an aid to contact the human body. Translucent organza fabric acts as a second skin. By showing the action of tying and untying the knots of organza fabric, the idea is represented of revealing one's soul. White faux fur was used for the stage to create an inviting atmosphere.

While so many human body parts could be expressive by action or movement, I chose the human back specifically as a message receiver. The back is the most vulnerable, yet most reliable, part of the body. Because of its inability to be seen from the front, it is the part that people are most careless about, yet it is the most targetable place to be attacked by others. Because the human back is in such a vulnerable place, it could also be transformed into a place that creates trust, especially when someone else is facing one's back.

The word, *Musubi*, is a contemporary Japanese term meaning to tie or connect the situation of an object or event. According to the oldest Japanese history book, *Kojiki*, from 712 AC, the word actually originated from a Shinto idea representing the vital energy that established and helped develop the entire creation of the earth and universe. Although very few Japanese recognize its original meaning, the idea of tying something to connect has been absorbed into contemporary life in Japan. So many words and actions relate to *Musubi* in ordinary life, some being transformed into tangible forms like knots that it exists as a symbol of a ritualistic event or personal identification. My performance, *Our Musubi*, is inspired by the original and current meanings of this word, so the performance includes classic ritualistic action, yet simultaneously includes contemporary body marks (tattoos) to show contemporary ways of expressing identity.

Proceeding with this project, I researched Yoko Ono's live performance, *Cut Pieces*, which is an audience-interactive performance. The audience approaches Ono and cuts her clothing with scissors. By creating the situation for the audience to manipulate Ono's uncontrollable position, she shows her vulnerability, generosity, peace, and trust. The performance itself acts as a mirror that reflects the human mind and behavior and shows how to deal with society. My performance, *Our Musubi*, takes a similar approach to Ono's. In the performance, I wanted to generate one's truthfulness of trust and use the sending and receiving of wordless messages and human temperature to genuinely connect with others through trust.



Figure 6.1 *Our Musubi*, Performance view



Figure 6.2 *Our Musubi*, Performance View



Figure 6.3 *Our Musubi*, Installation View

CHAPTER NINE

CONCLUSION

For this thesis, I have explored the mind, body, and *Tamashii* relationship and have created artwork that provides an opportunity for participants to examine their pre-socialized selves and their place in contemporary life. My entire thesis exhibition is meant to activate human body action in the gallery space through the use of fundamental senses like vision and touch, because these senses prompt the awakening of people's dormant sensations and *Tamashii*.

The idea for my work stemmed from the notion that contemporary people live within a digital society, which focuses primarily on the mind. Because I believe that human beings are made to harmonize mind, body, and *Tamashii* to have the best conditions for living, I made my artwork to afford an opportunity for participants to equalize their mind, body, and *Tamashii* relationship and to recognize anew their existence in this time.

As installation material, I used fabric, paper, thread, elastic cords, and metal, all of which are ordinary and familiar materials in contemporary life. Rather than focusing on their conventional uses or functions, I focused on their characteristics that might be suitable to the function of the mind, body, and *Tamashii* condition. For instance, I used organza fabric's translucency to represent human skin or the physiological activity of breathing. Metal (pliable or rigid), elastic cords, and paper represent the various receptivity levels of one's mind.

As for form representation, I often used basic geometric forms to express the projection of the one's internal condition. Although geometry's general impression may be

solid and dry with a materialistic function, geometry *is* the foundational form of any creation of the universe, including the human body and its related energy movement, flow, growth, and transformation. Therefore, I focused on using geometry as a manifestation of human emotion and of the inner condition. By installing multiple geometric forms in the gallery space, I attempted to imbue visceral sensation into the space and thus engage the audience to evoke their *Tamashii*.

The installation of my artwork in a gallery space rather than in a public recreational area is an indispensable part of distinguishing myself as a contemporary artist. If my works are installed in public spaces like a park, the audience tends to be only children, due to the playful and action-oriented nature of my artwork. By installing my artwork in an art gallery space, every visitor to the gallery automatically joins the audience who is allowed to touch and interact with the installation and sculpture. My concepts are inspired by the current situation of contemporary life coexisting with digital society. The physical action of touch required by my sculpture and installation work is one of its distinguishing characteristics. The goal of my artwork is to provide a situation for the participants to discover their innocent self, and desire for them to feel precious about a precious moment in space and time.

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