

The Will to Universality

For Transcomplex—Painting in the Age of Information Technology

Toshiaki Hicosaka and Goro Murayama

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"Painting in the Age of Information Technology." How may this title, which echoes Walter Benjamin's *Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, be understood today? Painting has, without doubt, changed over time, and the changes have largely been influenced by the dominant technology of each era. Painting since the late 19th Century cannot be considered without its relationship to photography as mechanical reproduction. In that case, in this era where digital information technology has a decisive influence, what form and role is and should painting take? This title may first be understood as addressing such issues.

On the other hand, however, not only is "painting" a specific genre within the Arts, but also "a way of seeing." Painting is an important method mode, or a way, for us to understand the world. Our perception itself, that painting is as such, is an historical by-product. In other words, paintings do not transcend eras or cultures, but is a recognition device that is "invented" only in its specific time and culture. Nevertheless, we accept paintings naturally—in other words, in establishing paintings as a recognition device, we have forgotten that we have done so—to us, paintings have become a universal existence. Now let us consider the following question in order to understand this.

Should icons that were drawn in caves and walls in the prehistoric era be deemed as "paintings"? What is definite is that it is possible for us to consider them as paintings, and thus art works. Many western art history books begin with the cave paintings of Lascaux. This is so, despite the fact that the people of the late Paleolithic Age who had painted the walls, and had (or we imagine them to have) performed magical rituals, had no inkling of the concept of "art," "self-expression" nor "artwork." Thus, the notion that

"painting is universal" is, that we are capable of considering any type of iconography as "painting." This general notion of painting itself was borne under a specific historic condition. In almost every era and civilization, there exists iconographic expression that we could consider as being "painting," but the notion of painting itself which guarantees that possibility, is clearly a product of modern western civilization.

With this in mind, let us consider again "painting in the age of information technology." If we are to take on the point of view that assumes the universality of painting, in other words that in any era, there is painting that is particular to that era, this title brings to mind contemporary painting that focuses on the aspect of information technology and the idea of "cutting edge pictorial expression." Needless to say, information technology has seeped into every crevice of our modern life. Painting, which is in essence a manual procedure of applying paint on a flat surface, should also not avert its eyes from the present-day conditions, but rather, come face-to-face with it: such words are more persuasive in the context of mass media. However, in the instance of painting, I do not find the motive to "adapt to the new era" to be of essential importance. The general motive to adapt to the era does not pertain only to paintings and art but can be applied to almost about anything. Such adaptation can perhaps be realized through employing computers as a method of pictorial production, but employing such method will not, in essence, qualify painting as having faced up to the new era.

This is not to say, that the approach of these two artists is the exploration of painting that has adapted to the age of information technology. This is my understanding. Toshiaki Hicosaka does, in the usual sense, "employ" computers to create, but in this case the computer is not just a method of production but the

transformative potential of the image through the use of computers is the main content of the work. However this transformative potential is not "new self-expression made possible by technology." Rather, one can sense a strong will to make painterly expression possible

Through iteratively applying self-laid rules, and tracing over regulations. In the case for Goro Murayama, it can be said that he quietly schemes for "painting" to take form through the continuous process of applying paint over the surface made by tying strings, or the process of drawing a specific pattern on the walls. Certainly, it can be understood that they are incorporating the rules and logic that is at the foundation of information technology to the methodology of their painterly process. However, I have a slightly different understanding. To me, that both of them consider the experience that is theoretically impossible in pictorial creation to be at the starting point of their artistic activity, and this is essentially important.

But what I want to state, is that through their artistic activity, it appears they are attempting to view further that the common-sense notion of "painting" but the broad picture that extends to the other side. By referring to their own acts as "painting," they attempt to update the question of "what is painting?." Within the modernist thinking, "painting" is, ultimately, a medium. This is to say that as the accidental facets of historical and cultural elements of "painting" are eliminated, "painting" as a pure medium can be extracted. This attempt at purification reached its peak, by the Abstract Expressionism in the 1950s. And thereafter, dismantling of the medium progressed. It was said that "painting [was] dead" (these words were first declared by the 19th Century French Academy painter Paul Delaroché (1797-1856), at the introduction of photography), but it did not quite happen so. The painting took a resurgence in the 1980s as Neo-expressionism; the large-scale exhibition *The Triumph of Painting*, organized by the Saatchi Gallery in 2005, made its mark.

When left unattended, contemporary art becomes an unstable system with just the strength of the conceptual aspect getting ahead of itself. Within this context, painting plays a vital role as the momentum that allows for the restoration of the significance of direct visual experience. However today in this artistic context, the role of painting

Cannot be understood as the act of pursuing the purity of the artistic medium in the Modernistic sense. This modern situation, that through being retroactive to the uniqueness—not just of painting but—of medium, we have lost the purpose in defining art, can be understood through Rosalind E. Krauss's (1941-) concept of "post-medium." Under these circumstances, "painting" can be perceived as nothing more than an old label that adheres to the traditional system of classification. Every work is potentially being mediated by information technology, and thus multiples of mediums (thus media) coexist. It can be said that in a sense, all art is "media art."

Of course the common meaning of "media art" is not so, but refers to the genre of art that employs information technology as a means of artistic expression. In that sense, Hicosaka and Murayama's activities logically refer to information technology, but does not adhere to "media art." To them, it is essentially important that their works are "paintings." And this is not a return to the pure medium in the Modernistic sense, nor "painting" as a safety for the restoration of direct visual expression. Then what is the meaning to their insistence in claiming their works to be "painting"?

Let us return again to the late Paleolithic Age. Image has given man a device that allows for new understanding of the world. And with the advent of the written language, we gave order to the world through linear logic, and come to deem pre-text thinking as being magical. In a manner of speaking, "painting" is a name given to visual thinking, in a world controlled by written language. In this era in which we live, information technology is weakening the control of the written language in the context of worldly perception. Information technology codifies all visual sensory experience and traditional written language through the same logic. If we

are to consider painting in this era, we must penetrate modern understanding of painting, and thus take this universally to an anthropological scale. Regarding the new visual understanding made possible by information technology, media philosopher Vilém Flusser (1920-1991) referred this as "techno-images" in differentiating the traditional image from cave paintings to modern painting.

What the TRANS COMPLEX artists are concerned about is not information technology itself, but the process of creating unpredictable, complex patterns through the reiteration of simple rules, such as "cellular automata." I think, however, that this is not just simply a new idea in art production. It is through this process that they attempt to transcend and extend the modern definition and of painting, which is, in essence, to universalize the concept of "painting" towards this anthropological expansion.

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