Infants' aesthetics for *eudaimonia* *

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In 1998, On Kawara was invited to participate in the 11th Biennale of Sydney. Instead of exhibiting pieces from his well-known *Date Paintings* in an ordinary gallery space for the Biennale, he chose a playschool (kindergarten). Since then, this project has been traveling to similar preschool settings worldwide.[1] Friða Björk Ingvarsdottir, a coordinator of the program in Iceland wrote,

> The exhibit's title *Pure Consciousness* reflects the children and their understanding of the vast amounts of disparate phenomena which they encounter at this age. The sole function of the works is to merge with the space around and they are not to be used with any educational purpose in mind, but blend into the children's everyday existence.[2]

This project thus seems to be intriguingly dedicated to "childlikeness," or the time and space of children before they start formal elementary education, i.e., according to the author of another catalogue essay published for showing the exhibit in Avignon, before they become initiated into civilization and become distracted from their essential nature.[3]

Needless to say, the project can be counted among quite a few of those by modern and contemporary artists who have confessed that children are their teachers (in some cases they incorporate children's drawings into their work, and in others long for the state of "childlikeness" itself, say, Jackson Pollock's "amazingly childlike, Zen quality," if we accept Allan Kaprow's interpretation[4]). Those cases, I am aware, can be easily criticized as exploiting the heritage of the Others' culture—the culture of the primitive, the outsider, or the socially oppressed or marginalized. Romanticizing and mythologizing childhood might be only reactionary, and yet, I would like to take a chance here and propose a so-called infants' aesthetics as one small segment of a transformative aesthetics (or an alternative aesthetics as the art of living), through which one is expected to change oneself and live "better," by both learning from children and protecting them, as well as protecting "childlikeness" in ourselves.

1) Rooted in nature, connected with the body

What, then, can we possibly learn from small children, when we say "children are our teachers," and why do we need to protect them?

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From what? And how?

Let me start with a couple of points that Kyoshi Hayakawa makes in his analysis of Abbas Kiarostami's movie *And Life Goes On* (1992). The movie was filmed right after the big earthquake in the northwest region of Iran in June 1990, and as is often the case in Kiarostami's works, children play a critical role. Hayakawa points out that their "closeness to nature, and their liveliness, the strength as nature beings" lies at the core of this movie, which draws an analogy between the boy (the filmmaker's son) and a grasshopper that he catches in the field (a natural environment) and puts into the car (an artificial environment), and then eventually lets go, as his father tells him to do. Not unlike this insect, which has its own power to survive if left alone in nature, children show more affinity for the natural world than the human world. They can be strong and flexible, and recover quickly so long as they stay close to nature, although nature here is not simply regarded as the opposite of civilization but rather it includes local cultural customs (what one eats and drinks, for example) based on the specific conditions of a region, especially if it is one's "homeland":

> Blamed and bullied, scolded by adults and harmed in the artificial world, they are always afraid of those daily mishaps; living in such a situation, children may feel in fact closer to the ferocity of nature in comparison with grown-ups. They resemble grasshoppers in the sense that danger from humans could be more threatening than that from nature, which can be avoided if protected by adults.[5]

In the middle of, or more precisely, right alongside disasters such as a large earthquake, or a "tragedy" such as the death of a family member, children find a way out of their plight and live each moment in the here and now. Kiarostami, amazed by his own son's such capacity, shows great respect for him. The boy was quite sad when his beloved grandmother passed away, and yet, at her funeral, he was delighted to enjoy a play forbidden in any other circumstances! Kiarostami takes it as a lesson from his son, that is, "you can look at a 'tragedy' from a different angle, a different manner. Life can go on right next to the tragedy."[6]

This type of quick shift in mood, a protean multiplicity of the subject, which we can observe on various occasions with little children, may sometimes strike us as selfishness on their part, or a lack of depth and prudence. They do not behave properly and decently because they do not care how they are supposed to behave. However, such behavior can be regarded as a display of freedom from social norms and responsibilities. Children are not alienated from the flux that is called life, not imprisoned within the frame of one single narrative. A narrative, a story, however dominant it may appear, always remains just one of an infinite number of possible interpretations/representations/abstractions of an ever-elusive, constantly changing reality. In this sense, children's attitude is a reminder of the teaching of Zen Buddhism, "Every day, good day." According to Sokyu Genyu, in each person's mind cohabit three thousand pupils (namely, infinite aspects of "me"), who pop up in turn in response to

ever-changing situations, a different one surfing by at each moment; there is neither unity nor self-identical consistency that one can assume for one's own mind, nor any privileged point of view from which one can tell and cling to a story = one's personal history that covers the whole experience, even for a relatively short term.[7] Therefore, we should taste each moment as it is, and as it comes, "as a group of *concrete facts* seen for the first time."[8]

Children thus seem to exemplify a model alternative to the modern subject. If the modern subject, as an autonomous, fair-minded, and integrated subject, presumes the right to access the truth, which is universally valid and independent of any specific local condition, then in early childhood (as well as in old age), the subject is more likely to stick to his/her specific, concrete, local environment in order to remain connected to and confined within the home ground. In the very beginning, a baby is conceived and rooted in the body of the mother, without whom the baby cannot survive even a day, and even after this oneness is broken, the child remains closely tied to his/her immediate nature through his/her own body, which is exposed to and touched by the oceanic flow of the world.

2) Marginal beings, mediumistic beings

The state of being embedded in concrete reality must have something to do with the sense of time, or rather, of timeless time. Speculating on the similarity between old people and infants, Toji Kamata, a religious studies scholar, points out,

> … old people and children, neither of them have even sense of time as that regulated by a clock. Since the mode of modern linear thinking has been closely connected with this clock time, old people and children who do not belong to it are antiquity in modern society. Further, senescence and childhood are the antiquity of one's life. Within the bodies of old age and of infancy, one could see well a mythological time, or a circulatory timeless time, uncontaminated by usefulness, use values, and efficiency.[9]

Because old people and children are situated not in the center but at the margins, i.e., they are not yet or no longer expected to be productive and reproductive, and they are not affected to a great extent by the logic of technology and the compulsive, goal-oriented movement of our culture, they live day to day, moment to moment, projecting no goals, no perspective for the future, but rather sealed within the present.

In relation to this, another common aspect shared by those at this stage of "antiquity," infants and seniors, is their liminality, so to speak, because both stand between life and death, this world and another one, although they are in opposite directions. "In myths, old folklores, and traditional rituals," Kamata says, "gods and spiritual beings appear as old men and children, or they do so by using old men and children as their 'channels = mediums'."[10] As old people and children belong to this ambiguous field in which life and death are inextricably linked, they can often enter into an altered state of consciousness, such as half dreaming and half awake, possessed and spirited away by

supernatural beings.

This naturally can be associated with the pre-Oedipal stage, in which the subject/object, or the "I" and the others are not yet divided, in which the world is not yet thoroughly articulated, nor structured linguistically into the symbolic. Infants seem to remain, up to a certain point, specific bodily subjects, or rather, presubjects, interacting with their own immediate environments via the senses and changing accordingly. They possess a highly unstable, receptive, sympathetic body, one that is easily synchronized with those around them, and thus they can go beyond the boundary that exists between themselves and others, mirroring and echoing the subconscious desires of others, as if "possessed" by them—and as if they are consequently offering themselves as a vehicle, as mediumistic beings.

The issue of "possession," of course, is not easy to grasp because most of us have lost touch with the ancient traditions of shamanism and animism, although these practices seem to have survived in some modest manner among artists, musicians, dancers, and poets even today. In discussing different layers of memories, Hisao Nakai, a psychiatrist, elaborates on Harry Stack Sullivan's hypothesus of the "self system," according to which the "self" as present to one's consciousness maintains itself via "dissociation"; it is a system that controls the range of one's consciousness and maintains its unity by dissociating itself from whatever falls outside the frame, so as to avoid collapsing with a flood of representations that are too contradictory, too ambiguous and unmanageable.[11] In addition, Nakai argues, this process should control the number of memories that are allowed to appear at once on the screen of our conscious self: "if everything that is inside of me emerges to be present simultaneously, my consciousness will collapse due to this over flooding."[12]

When the self is regarded as a system that "ignores," it puts away whatever cannot comfortably fit within it; thus, it is not fixed but rather mutable, expanding and shrinking, so to speak, depending on its own capacity as well as the situation outside it. In the case of integration dysfunction syndrome (schizophrenia), the dissociation process works too weakly, whereas in traumatic incidents, one might dissociate more than usual to bear and survive what is happening, to the extent that one feels detached from that event, although the pain may recur later on. In this scheme, therefore, "possession" seemingly belongs to the former; the unintegrated parts, normally left out and left dissociated, rush in and feel as if they are coming from outside the conscious self, if not from other psychic beings within and outside this world.

It should be noted here that the sympathetic, synchronic body can be found not solely in the domain of children and in "mediumistic" occupations, but can occur for anyone when the "self system" fails. There is always a danger in this, i.e., in identifying with others and stepping outside the boundaries of the self. One may become too willing to conform, be mobilized and oriented toward a certain direction,

and may thereby make oneself vulnerable to social contamination, including totalitarian enthusiasm. Or, one may become immobilized each time one runs into suffering people or suffering animals, to the extent that one cannot function effectively, which is considered destructive (inefficient, irresponsible, and lazy) in our modern society (therefore, we switch off, "dissociate" too much, in our daily trauma)!

If the self as a controlling, dissociating system mediates between the subject and the world around it, thus protecting and distancing at the same time this potentially fragile subject from a flood of excessive chunks of raw materials, perhaps in the case of small children such a system is not yet full-fledged, as it works only weakly or unevenly. The subject of a child is still under construction—"soft," "broken," "mad"—in any case largely "dysfunctional" if judged in comparison to a fully developed system. The danger and shortcoming of being sympathetic and receptive, which are qualities that are criticized when found in adults, tend to be tolerated among children, for they exist on the margins and are allowed to stay close to the "Every day, good day" wisdom. They remain at peace on the side of nature, or life, and exist in a flux that is constantly inconstant, shifting beyond any attempt to frame and fix it.

3) Unruly body versus the process of socialization = domestication

In the "antiquity" of one's life—a premodern, antimodern dimension that is exemplified by marginal and mediumistic beings—one may have an affinity for dancing bodies of a certain type. Dancer Kazuo Ono (1906–2010), who came to be known worldwide at the age of 76 and danced until he died at 103, would make reference to his mother every time he was asked to talk about his dancing. "Butoh occurs in the mother's womb. In the womb, in that of the universe—that's where my dance is."[13] According to another Butoh dancer, Maro Akaji, "Dancers are linked to the world directly through the skin sensation. We are allowed to remain babies until we die; that's our privilege. In exchange for that, we serve as sacrifices, offering dance to the invisible beings."[14] In Japanese kabuki theater as well, the mind of a small child is most valued in an actor who is playing the part of a young ruffian in a bold style. Therefore, a question may be raised, is this a "privilege" given only to those exceptional, committed few, and not to most of us, who outgrow such a stage of antiquity and lose our unruly energy, which was once considered akin to the violent nature of deities and spirits, gods that did not submit to the emperor? The bliss of childhood gets lost much too soon, and especially these days.

With the transformation of the everyday landscape via the media and the information industry, we are becoming increasingly overloaded with excessive sensory stimulation and the accelerating fragments of images that circulate at a high speed over the surface of this planet. We then become cut off from our sensuous somatic existence within a concrete, specific reality. As Susan Sontag wrote half a century ago, in 1964,

Ours is a culture based on excess, on

> overproduction; the result is a steady loss of sharpness in our sensory experience. All the conditions of modern life – its material plenitude, its sheer crowdedness – conjoin to dull our sensory faculties.[15]

Under such circumstances, Sontag argued, "What is important now is to recover our senses. We must learn to *see* more, to *hear* more, to *feel* more," to get to "the pure, untranslatable, sensuous immediacy," instead of "interpretation." "To interpret is to impoverish, to deplete the world – in order to set up a shadow world of 'meaning'," she continued. "The world, our world, is depleted, impoverished enough. Away with all duplicates of it, until we again experience more immediately what we have."[16]

Let us suppose it is still valid to claim the necessity of an "erotics" in place of a "hermeneutics,"[17] and then we may wonder whether and how it is possible to recover our aesthesis—when, with a thick layer of duplicates of the world standing in the way, our bodily "censor" becomes spoiled so easily, and we seem inclined to see less, hear less, feel less, as if in the midst of our daily environment we are in a state of shock, if not of trauma, so that we have to protect ourselves by blocking our senses. Even little children cannot afford to remain sympathetic, mediumistic, today. It would be a much too risky business to be that way! The cultural environment for children and adults alike, therefore, does not seem favorable at all for us to "recover our senses."

Finally, another problem I would like to bring up is an almost institutional, biopolitical one: infants (at least in Japan) become tamed and disciplined too prematurely by the public education system, which works as a confining force together with other pressures from society. Kamata is aware of this, and therefore he says,

> …in modern times, old people and children are sent to those social control system [school, hospital, an institution for the aged]; therefore, their mythical powers have been largely suppressed. While they should not be subject to the clock time, they are now fenced in by it, even during the summer holidays.[18]

This socialization = domestication process, however, might not be simply a modern phenomenon. As Minoru Oda discerned this process in a classical text by Pseudo-Longinus, *On the Sublime*, we "seem to have learnt in our childhood the lessons of a benignant despotism, to have been cradled in her habits and customs from the time when our minds were still tender, and never to have tasted the fairest and most fruitful fountain of eloquence, I mean liberty."[19]

> As, then (if what I have heard is credible), the cages in which those pigmies commonly called dwarfs are reared not only stop the growth of the imprisoned creature, but absolutely make him smaller by compressing every part of his body, so all despotism, however equitable, may be defined as a cage of the soul and a general prison.[20]

Are we perhaps too accustomed to a life of slavery to see our body deformed, our soul chained? Wataru Tsutumi expresses himself clearly on this. Applying Michel Foucault's most

influential studies to his own personal experience in Japan, he candidly insists that "we live in prison."[21] In his detailed description of how school and prison are similar, i.e., how much their cultures resemble that of the army (and other institutions in modern industrialized society), he sees the educational system of discipline and training, which he calls "drills," as nothing but a mechanism to implant in the individual a subtle, controlling power and turn him/her into a docile, obedient being:

> It's not at all a metaphor when I say that we live in a prison-like situation. That's why we sometimes find it so painful and difficult just to live.
>
> That's also a reason why we don't look at nature any more [by the time we are in college]. People distance themselves from nature in the order of men, women, and eventually children and seniors, as they get stuck in the "drills" in the same order. All we have is the pleasure from brains, no room left for that to be felt physically.[22]

Dance can offer a way to reclaim one's own body (and one's connectedness with nature), Tsurumi continues. Changing the whole modern system may not be realistic, but changing (or "hacking") one's own body through somatic methods such as dancing can work better and more easily. The title of his book, *Dance in Prison*, therefore indicates a rather practical methodology for the erotics, or its messy version that I call "infants' aesthetics." The unruly body, if once lost, should be recovered. There seem to be slight signs of change, in fact, suggesting that young people are dancing quite fiercely everywhere, these days, as if they were striving to revive some aspects of premodern society, in which dancing bodies, both in festivity and in revolt, constituted an integral part.

Although I do agree with Tsurumi that paying more attention to one's own body, and its link to nature, is certainly a remedy, I suspect that such an approach can be eventually brought over to *their* side, as the system for domestication and standardization, which has been refined more and more, is still so overwhelming. In Japan, dance has become part of the newly determined requirements in physical education for junior high school students, while the *Law Regulating the Adult Entertainment Business* forbids anyone to dance in certain places after midnight! (And, of course, dance is always an ambiguous affair; it obtains its power from that ambiguity, liberating the body sometimes and being utilized to colonize it at other times.) I wonder, therefore, whether we should be satisfied at seeing "flash mobs" so frequently these days on the Internet, when what we might actually need is a real mob.

Concluding (and yet not so concluding) remarks

Decades have passed since aesthetics, as a product of the Enlightenment and of secularization, lost its credibility, revealing its methodological ambiguity and ideological impurity, among other vices. However, given that it was born in an age of crisis (the epitome of which might have been the Lisbon Earthquake in 1755), aesthetics does seem to have a chance to be revived today in *our* age of crisis, as a nondualistic perception of the mental and

the physical, and particularly so if it ventures to take up a long tradition of the arts of living, for which the *epimeleia heautou* (care of the self) is a precondition to seeking a conversion or a transformation of the subject.[23] Would it be, then, a reckless anachronism to insist that aesthetics should reshape itself after the fashion of this ancient tradition? If the study of philosophy was once a "medicine"—"a therapeutic enterprise"—and its role was "to cure the diseases of the soul,"[24] we can hope for nothing more, nothing less. We need the truth that can save the subject, even though it requires a steady, long process of the transformation of the subject. As the lesson of Plato's erotics teaches us, an encounter with beauty is, after all, something like that, both involving the changed subject *and* changing the subject. The subject is destabilized, endangered, and renewed when the process is completed.

Confronted with the defects in the governmental, bureaucratic, and academic systems (which suddenly proved enormous in Japan after March 11, 2011, and yet were still guarded and covered up through certain acrobatic rhetorical operations), people's reactions seem to have been polarized, roughly speaking, between a "Don't panic, let's stay cool, we as well-disciplined Japanese will manage if we remain self-possessed and behave" attitude and a "No way, get angry now!" attitude. From the latter some began to insist on the crucial importance of the "de-colonization of the soul,"[25] which, via various strategic approaches, deals with issues related to our "imprisoned, chained" status that are discussed partially in this paper.

One way to generate this process of "decolonization" is to reevaluate one's somatic and aesthetic receptivity, which is a capacity to *feel* rather than to *think*. Although this receptivity tends to be badly damaged as we lose our childhood voice and body in the process of socialization as well as a wrongheaded education, there still remains a lot to learn from the state of children – those mediumistic beings strongly tied to Nature as well as to the Other world. My attempt to find in this infancy model a renewed aesthetics that is germinating in the complexity of social systems/problems mentioned above is thus restricted, since it largely favors the angry (over the calm). I am hopeful, however, that it will lead up to the first step, if both unruly gods and peaceful/blessed gods are needed, as was believed in ancient practices, in order to clear a path for prayers.

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1. Jonathan Watkins, "Where 'I Don't Know' Is the Right Answer," *On Kawara* (London and New York: Phaidon Press, 2002), pp.104–105.
2. Friða Björk Ingvarsdottir, "The Art and the 'I'," in a booklet published in association with Pure Consciousness/Tær vitund, The Reykjavik School of Art, Reykjavik, Iceland, 1999.
3. From a text published with permission of Osho (the International Foundation, www/osho.com) in a booklet titled "On Kawara/Pure Consciousness/École maternelle Jean-Henri Fabre," Avignon, 2002, published in Paris in

2003.

4. Allan Kaprow, "The Legacy of Jackson Pollock," *Art News* (October 1958), anthologized in Kaprow, *Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life*, ed. Jeff Kelly, expanded edition (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), p.9.
5. Kyoshi Hayakawa, "Kyokou to Genjitsu no Yukai: Abbassu Kiarosutami no *Soshite Jinsen wa Tsuzuku* nitsuite [Fusion of fiction and reality: on *And Life Goes On* by Abbas Kiarostami]," *Bigaku* [Aesthetics], Vol. 63, No.2, Winter 2012, p.100. Translation is mine (this also applies to the quotes below in no. 9, 10, 12, 13, 14, 18, and 22).
6. Hayakawa, p.101.
7. Sokyu Genyu and Masanori Kabashima, *Jissenn! 'Genki Zen' no Susume* [Practice! an exhortation toward 'lively Zen'] (Tokyo: Takarajima, 2004), pp.8–15, 26–31.
8. Kaprow, *op.cit*.
9. Toji Kamata, *Ou-dou-ron: Kodomo to Roujin no Seishin-shi* [Writing on old men and little ones: a spiritual ethnography] (Tokyo: Shinyou-sya, 1988), p.71.
10. *Ibid.*, p.23. See also pp.28, 30, 173–175.
11. Hisao Nakai, *Choukou/Kioku/Gaisyou* [Symptom/memory /trauma] (Tokyo: Misuzu Shobou, 2004), p.51. Nakai here refers to H.S. Sullivan, *Conceptions of Modern Psychiatry* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1953) and others, making a comparison between various types of memory, including infant memory and traumatic memory.
12. *Ibid.*
13. Kazuo Ohno, *Keiko no Kotoba* [Words of workshop] (Tokyo: Film-Art-sha, 1977), p.20.
14. From an interview with Akaji Maro, *Asahi Shinbun* [Asahi newspaper], April 23, 2011.
15. Susan Sontag, *Against Interpretation* (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1967), p.13.
16. *Ibid*., pp.14, 9, 7.
17. *Ibid*., p.14.
18. Kamata, p.71.
19. See Minoru Oda, *Suukou ni tsuite 'ronginosu'* [On the sublime 'Longinus'] (Tokyo: Kawai Syuppann, 1999), pp.44–51. Translation in English is taken from the Project Gutenberg EBook of *On the Sublime*, by Longinus, trans. H.L. Havell

(http://www.gutenberg.org/files/17957/17957-h/17957-h.htm).

20. *Ibid.*
21. Wataru Tsurumi, *Ori no Naka no Dansu* [Dance in prison] (Tokyo: Oota Shuppan, 1998), p.51.
22. *Ibid.*, pp.52–53.
23. See Michel Foucault's formulation of "spirituality" in his *The Hermeneutics of the Subject* (New York: Picador, 2005), trans. Graham Burchell, p.19.
24. *Ibid*., p.336.
25. I came to learn about the concept from Ayumu Yasutomi's numerous books including *Genpatu Kiki to 'Todai Wahou'* [Fukushima crisis and 'parlance of the University of Tokyo'] (Tokyo: Akashi Shoten, 2012) and Youko Fukao, *Tamashii no Datsu-shokuminti-ka towa Nanika* [What is decolonization of the soul?] (Tokyo: Seitou-sya, 2012), to name only a few.