

CULTEX and the work of Gabriella Göransson and Kiyonori Shimada

Working collaboratively is rewarding but it is also hard: negotiating, finding points of connection, tolerating difference, maintaining the sense of self and creating a joint identity – what do you give, what do you gain, what do you lose? How much more difficult it is when the two partners in the collaboration are from different countries, and if those partners also do not speak each others language and have never previously visited each other's country, then the difficulties would seem almost insurmountable.

This is the situation that textile artists Norwegian Gabriella Göransson and Japanese Kiyonori Shimada had to navigate when partnered, by me, for the project Cultex. As they faced the prospect of working together, exchanging ideas, creating final outcomes for the exhibition both were, naturally, intensely worried about communication. As Gabriella Göransson wrote in her online Journal: *"It was really complete madness. Starting work with a person with whom I shared neither a common language nor a common cultural framework. And that the outcome of this cooperation should lead to a joint piece of work, - the idea seemed increasingly more and more absurd."* But in pairing the two I had felt a connection, one that emerged from the ideas underpinning their work, and it was a thread that both could recognize and gently tease and spin into a cobweb of communication that has resulted in a beautiful and monumental installation for the exhibition.

It began with a response. I asked each of the artists in the exhibition to devote their first web journal to describing their response and understanding of the work of their partner. For Göransson and Shimada, this was of the utmost importance. In this first Journal entry, both acknowledged the centrality of texture and memory, archaic memory, to their work. And this became their starting point.

Their first period of working together took place in Norway and was spent gently edging towards each other through the materials they work with and the importance of light and shadow within their works. They also discovered that they both had grown up with 1,000 year old trees in their neighbourhood – for Göransson it was oak and for Shimada it was Ginko. However, as Shimada wrote after the visit *"At the moment we are still a long way from having a clear image of the whole piece"*. Yet even this slow pace seemed to echo the painstaking archaeology required to unearth those primordial memories and forms that are the basis of both their works. When Göransson visited Japan she was able to write at the end of her time there that:

"We have been able to make these thoughts clear through our "spartan" communication. Most of it is still inside our heads, but it is starting to materialize in works in an Oslo studio and in an Okayama studio."

For many years Shimada has been creating very large textile installations for buildings and in collaboration with opera and dance companies. In common with many Japanese textile artists, his work is a response to place and space. In this he is following the Japanese tradition in which architectural space is one that has been given by nature and needs to be physically experienced before a response is made. This spatial and performative approach is one taken also by Göransson, for her it is during the installation period that the component parts finally coalesce into a coherent work of art. And so it was, as they built their work in the gallery space, they finally created their conversation, one that had been verbally impossible, achieved through their responses to their materials – Shimada with white nylon and Göransson with linen pulp.

In the event, their two works are visually rather than physically integrated. The viewer enters through Shimada's textural doorway and is immediately acutely aware of spatial relationships. His installation is constructed in such a way that most visitors have to bend down a little to go through the entrance (echoing the entering of the Japanese Tea House). The passageway is narrow, so that when people encounter each other, they have to stop and carefully make way. As we walk through, his soft, white 'gills' of cloth gently move and whisper in our wake. And, first glimpsed at the end of Shimada's textile passage and through its windows, we see Göransson's black skeletal forms that pattern the walls and cluster in corners. On closer examination we find the pieces are hard, brittle and dry, like so many abandoned skeletons or fossilised shadows. Both works are organic in inspiration and form, together they form a narrative of connection to our earliest memories, the earliest memories of the earth. White and black, light and the shadow, fluid and hard, these are the elements that form what Shimada has described as: "*the 'contrast' which is visible and the 'harmony' which is not visible*" in their installation.

There are two other partnerships within the Cultex exhibition, each with very different starting points. Anniken Amundsen and Machiko Agano had worked together previously – as Mentor and Mentee in my Through the Surface project (2003-05), and were keen to investigate the changing dynamics of their relationship. Eva Schjølberg and Yuka Kawai, had met and admired each other's work many years ago, but had forgotten that this was the case until I suggested Kawai as a partner for Schjølberg. However, it is the partnership of Gabriella Göransson and Kiyonori Shimada that most exemplifies the power of textiles as a tool of communication. Precisely because they had no spoken or written language in common, they used their mutual understanding of textiles in order to cross cultural borders and develop the connections that would enable them to work together. In Shimada's own words: "*these pieces are a collaboration, constructed by artists from different countries who are meeting and working together for the first time, and with the idea that the two artists' pieces share the same space, creating both contact and distance. This is not a simple task, but I believe through understanding each other's work we were able to come up with unforced and natural ideas.*"

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