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NATIONAL GALLERY OF CANADA

MIYAJIMA

THOUSAND ROAD

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Early in his career, Tatsuo Miyajima condensed his working principles to three humanist concepts borrowed from Buddhist philosophy: *Keep Changing – Connect with Everything – Continue Forever*. That same year, 1987, he first used a medium that proved ideal for expressing these ideas concretely: the light-emitting diode (LED) counter.


The basic building block in Miyajima's work is the two-digit LED counter, which counts upwards repeatedly from nothing to 99. This cyclical counting embodies two of his guiding principles, continuity and change. Pairs of individual counters can be wired together so that the first operates continuously, triggering the second to count up by 1 each time it reaches 99. Several counters, some invisibly coupled in this way, are mounted together to form a unit, which is in turn grouped with other units to form "regions"¹ and, overall, a kind of symbolic "universe." The linkages express the third guiding principle, interconnectedness.

Since 1990, all Miyajima's arrangements of composite LED units have been part of his 133651 series, a body of works that range from modest groupings on a wall to complex installations that occupy full rooms. In these works, each unit consists of a row of ten two-digit counters. Within a unit, up to five counters may be each wired to any of the remaining ones, allowing a total of 133,651 possible combinations. The artist has assigned a serial number to each possible wiring configuration, each of which he will use only once. From this large finite set, he selects the units for a particular work based on relationships between their connection patterns, on numerical relationships between their serial numbers, or on chance. Every configuration whose serial number is divisible by seven is made with green rather than red diodes.

Several apparently innocuous details carry unexpected significance. Firstly, in all his counters, Miyajima substitutes a blank space for the numeral zero, to acknowledge the Buddhist concept of emptiness as well as to provide a more visually dynamic image. Secondly, each counter's speed is adjustable, so that, not only might adjacent counters within a unit proceed at different paces, but if any one is connected to another, the dependent counter runs 100 times slower than the first, amplifying its already idiosyncratic original rate. Thirdly, the counters use arabic numerals, which Miyajima believes to be least bound to particular cultures and thus best suited to universal communication. At first seemingly trivial, these details prove to be important indications of the artist's concerns.

Generated within the quirky guidelines of the 133651 series, the austere elements of *Thousand Road* bear rich associations. In a dark room, 100 units – arranged consecutively by serial number and comprising a total of 1000 counters – are laid down on the floor in two parallel rows, like a luminous road. While leading nowhere in particular, the road itself seems to be in perpetual motion,

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animated by various rhythms: of the lights pulsing within each unit, of the regular distribution of green lights among the red, and of the slight shift in the alignment of the green lights between the two paths (an apparent topographical fault line that is actually a consequence of seven dividing unevenly into the 50 units that make up each side). Despite the evident directionality of the arrangement — the LEDs are physically oriented in a single direction, and the counting, though cyclical, seems to progress forward through time — the effect is disorienting. The viewer has a feeling of disembodiment, based in the sensory deprivation of the darkened room and the immateriality of the flickering numerals. Liberated by darkness from any physical structure that might explain its logic or purpose, the counting advances instead into a realm of sensuous conceptual contemplation.

In *Thousand Road*, Miyajima's principles are conveyed both through the aspects of the "gadgetry" that are common to all his work, and through the evocative characteristics of this particular arrangement. In its spare repetition of parts and continuous flow of numerals we soon recognize an inexhaustibility. This simple form could *continue indefinitely*, opening onto a sublime boundlessness. The road's *constantly changing* parameters span past, present, and future. Miyajima's concern with surpassing borders — *connecting with everything* — finds further expression in the image of two parallel paths that together suggest a third "road of harmony."

The fusion of separate trails into a unified way is not only a resonant metaphorical image but also a function of the mathematical figure upon which the arrangement is based. Because it is generated exponentially (its parts are multiplied or divided by a factor of 10 to produce the next level of intricacy), we can imagine that it could be magnified or subdivided many times over without losing the relationship between its parts. As we realize that each part can be perceived equally well as an individual entity, a composite community, or a minute piece of a larger organism, any bearings provided by the mathematical structure dissolve into a disorienting ambiguity of scale. We might even speculate that the number 1000 crystallized in the installation merely represents the first stage within this exponential series at which the unique and individual begin perceptually to give way to infinity, and thence unity. The process of synthesis is central to Miyajima's vision of an emerging globalism, and *Thousand Road* "is the symbol of its possibility."

Although his devices enable precision, Miyajima's work is not tied to measurement. Just as he calls on the speculations of modern physics to support his Buddhist principles, he employs electronics in the service of poetry, for symbolic rather than systematic ends, and borrows from mathematics to render the ungraspable. As with his use of arabic numerals, Miyajima adopts contemporary technology because he believes it is common enough both to bridge cultural differences and to reinforce the immediacy and accessibility of the viewing situation. His interest is not in the gadgetry itself, which could be replaced without altering the conceptual principles of the piece, but

CONNECT WITH EVERYTHING . . .

in its potential for surpassing material bounds. The physical medium is simply a vehicle conveying us towards "perfectly nonmaterial concepts."

In tandem with his use of the material to point to the immaterial, Miyajima applies numerical systems in favour of the unsystematic. In some cases, he pierces standard formulae with quixotic detail, as in his preference for the void or blank over the more stable presence of a zero — possible only by using custom-made counters that might at first look prefabricated. Elsewhere, he upsets our expectation of order: the regularity evoked by strands of digital counters placed in serial formation is denied by the use of idiosyncratic counting rates and connections. Even the familiar decimal system seems beside the point in a scheme without beginning or end. The absence of any fixed reference point or definitive system is confirmed by the multiple versions of time represented in the installation. These are expressed sensually in the individual pulses of the counters, and theoretically by a structure that suggests simultaneously that time is linear, cyclical, infinite, and relative. The implication is that reality is wider and more intangible than standard measures, personal knowledge, or even collective memory.

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Together, the shifting characteristics of *Thousand Road* point to an overall vision of a greater whole that can encompass opposing tendencies. It is a message we might recognize: each individual holds different beliefs and operates according to a unique internal rhythm, though our commonalities outweigh our differences. Applying this notion to his work, Miyajima has stated: "It is important that each gadget has its own rhythm. If it doesn't, then dialogue, harmony, and structure become monotonous and meaningless." This "movement within stasis"² is what makes Miyajima's syntheses poetic, dynamic and, ultimately, moral.

Expressed in concrete terms that open onto intangible ideas, the operations in Miyajima's work at once represent and exceed human activity, much in the way that his Buddhist principles, phrased as vague exhortations, urge us outside of ourselves and into a wider environment of which we are inextricably part. There is a gentle but certain moral directive in his art. The precepts of continuity, change, and interconnectedness, which often accompany Miyajima's installations in written form, refer to a kind of eternity; at the same time, they have the ring of modern corporate imperatives to remain current and connected — earthly commandments summoning abstract principles, underscored by an electronic insistence on the present. His work is resolutely of the here-and-now. In the impossibility of either fixing the fugitive implications of his structures or personally knowing the eternal, his viewers are, like the cycling counters, turned back upon a contingent and changing present. These modest gadgets, models of the "borderless world of the 21st century" envisioned by Miyajima, ask us to recognize ourselves as travellers on a broader path.

CONTINUE FOREVER . . .


TATSUO MIYAJIMA

Tatsuo Miyajima was born in Tokyo in 1957 and continues to live in that city. His work first came to international prominence at the 1988 *Venice Biennale*, and has since appeared in *Magiciens de la terre* in Paris in 1989, the *Biennale of Sydney* in 1990, and the *Carnegie International* in Pittsburgh in 1991. While continuing to exhibit extensively in Japan and to participate in touring exhibitions of contemporary Japanese art, Miyajima has mounted solo exhibitions at the National Gallery of Canada in 1991, at the Kunsthalle Zürich in 1993, and in Fort Worth, Texas, in 1996.

1 QUOTES FROM MIYAJIMA ARE TRANSLATED FROM HIS LECTURE AT THE NATIONAL GALLERY OF CANADA, 12 SEPTEMBER 1991.
2 "BERNHARD BÜRGI IN CONVERSATION WITH TATSUO MIYAJIMA," *TATSUO MIYAJIMA* (MUNICH AND STUTTGART: KUNSTHALLE ZÜRICH AND OKTAGON VERLAG, 1993), PP. 23, 26.

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 National Gallery of Canada Musée des beaux-arts du Canada

380 Sussex Drive, Ottawa (613) 990-1985
Internet: <http://national.gallery.ca>

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COVER AND INTERIOR DETAIL
THOUSAND ROAD 1991
Light-emitting diodes, integrated circuit,
electrical wiring, aluminum panels, wooden panels
9 x 72 x 1089 cm

