



# NAOSHIMA NEWS SUPPLEMENT

## Comments from the Members of the International Associations of Art Critics

From September 27 until October 1, the Japan Congress of the International Association of Art Critics was held in Tokyo. After the official program ended, of the approximately 100 members who attended from abroad, 35 then went on to visit Naoshima, and we would like to present their comments about the Naoshima Contemporary Art Museum.

### Naoshima Dream

It began more than a decade ago with the idea of "an island of dreams for children." Visiting the utopic Naoshima project recently, the island seems also an artist's dream: a post-industrial dreamworld in which idyllic nature (having survived the tainted modern past) sprouts gorgeous cutting-edge architecture and art. Tadao Ando's ultramodern structures elegantly emerge from their hill. Transplanted Mongolian "paos" take root at the shore. International artworks are chosen and sited with care. Benesse Corporation President Soichiro Fukutake's enthusiasm and intense devotion to art, and his concepts about its role in society have resulted in something rare: a collection with personal character in which each work, carefully nurtured and displayed, plays a special role. Best of all, I like the idea of the Naoshima Village art

houses, and the reality of the first finished house, in which Tatsuo Miyajima's shapeshifting submerged digits and liquid crystal window have found a perfect home—not only because they exist here within a balance of water, wood, fire, and air, but also because they create a seamless fusion of past and future in which high-technology combines with pure magic. The Naoshima dream is still in progress. Having entered into it for a brief moment, I look forward to what will happen next.

#### Kim Levin

*President, International Association of Art Critics and regular contributor to The Village Voice*

### Visit of Art Critics to Naoshima Contemporary Art Museum, Benesse Island

The atmosphere for heightened sensitivity at the Naoshima Contemporary Art Museum made a lasting impact on a group of 35 art critics from all over the globe who visited recently for a two-day symposium. During the previous week they had attended the annual congress of the International Associations of Art Critics, which was held this year in Tokyo.

There were thoughts about the enhanced perception generated when the setting becomes part of the experience, and there were thoughts about the rhythm and harmony one senses between the art and its installation here. Kan Yasuda's marble sculptures, for example, link sky and gallery, while Hiroshi Sugimoto's photo sequence documenting ocean horizons under specific conditions link viewers to the actual horizon line they are simultaneously observing in front of the museum building. Even the regular clicking sounds of Jonathan Borofsky's "Three Chattering Men" seem to parallel the repetitive motion of the adjacent sea.

Many in the group felt it was a special pleasure to be able to study, in the new permanent home, major works of considerable fame which they had seen in international exhibitions, including Yukinori Yanagi's "The World Flag Ant Farm" and Tatsuo Miyajima's "Sea of Time" and they

appreciated the opportunity for discussion with Mr. Yanagi during the symposium sessions.

They also responded strongly to the way the large, two-level gallery established a dialogue between aggression and observers of aggression, using Mr. Yanagi's "The Forbidden Box," Robert Wilson's chair sculpture and Bruce Nauman's neon work, "100 Live and Die."

Impressive, too, was the direct, yet subtle awareness of past time suggested by three very different pieces sited in separate areas of Benesse Island: Tadashi Kawamata's documentation of his sculptural interaction with the old, abandoned Roosevelt Island hospitals (New York): Mr. Miyajima's time and light piece, "Naoshima's Counter Window," and Cai Guo-Qiang's blending of fanciful ancient stratifications with suggestions of modern mutations in the vertical limestone boulders for "Cultural Melting Bath." These three installations mix, as does the Benesse Island project itself, concepts of nature, architecture and humanity.

#### Phyllis Braff

*Art Critic, The New York Times*

### From a Norwegian Visitor

It was an extraordinary experience to visit the Naoshima Contemporary Art Museum, as I did during the post-tour of the AICA critics' congress in Japan this fall. The building by Ando, in particular, and even its adjacent Annex, are constructions of exquisite refinement. During a visit to the Annex, I enjoyed all the paths leading to nowhere really, except for stunning views and visual experiences of architecture and nature. The view from the grass roof along the running water

through a kind of gate to the sea is among the most memorable of these. I cannot really go into all the nice details of these buildings. In the museum itself, I was very fond of the mounting of the seascapes by Hiroshi Sugimoto on the outer concrete walls, confronting seascapes of art with those of reality. On the inside of the building, I guess that an architecture as beautiful in itself as that of Ando is not altogether easy to treat as a possible neutral background for demanding works of



✓ visual art. However, what I distinguished — maybe only because of my preconceived notions of art and culture — was that the works on display, most of them made by very established Western artist, received a certain light, delicate "Japanese" touch by the choice of particular works (for instance those by George Segal and Donald Judd) and by the spacious arrangement in the museum. The Naoshima Contemporary Art Museum is certainly a rare flower in the museum world, and I can think of none resembling it other than the Louisiana museum near

Copenhagen. It was interesting to note that there were some Japanese influences in the process that led to the constellation of art, architecture and nature in the Danish museum as well.

**Audun Eckhoff**

*President of the Norwegian AICA section*

*Curator, The National Museum of Contemporary Art, Oslo*

## An Aesthetic Experience at Naoshima Island

As our boat approached Naoshima Island, glistening in the sun, reflecting in the water, I felt a special beauty emanating from the environment. The setting prepared me for a contemplative, yet informative and exciting experience. Tadao Ando's architectural design of Naoshima Contemporary Art Museum, with its clean lines and exposed granite, sensitively does not intrude on the site, but adds to its beauty.

In addition to the architecture and the well placed outdoor sculptures, I was particularly impressed with how the curator/director displayed the art so that each piece could breathe in its own space and enhance the architectural design. The whole became a complete aesthetic experience. As an art critic, I am, of course, familiar with the works of David Hockney, Jennifer Bartlett, Frank Stella, Jonathan Borofsky, Jasper Johns, Bruce Nauman, George Segal and the many other Western artists' work that graced the walls. But I have not seen them exhibited as well as they are in the Naoshima Museum.

Bruce Nauman's piece entitled "100 Live and Die," for example, takes on a necessary importance as it stands solitary in its own room. The ironic and meaningful messages that flash on and off have clarity and strength when they do not have to contend with any other visual stimulus. Like Nauman, Jannis Kounellis' wall construction has its own room. When viewed from a distance, it fits into the wall and becomes an architectural element. But as the spectator approaches, the lead wrapped found objects whimsically resemble wrapped sandwiches, and as one investigates the composition and materials closer, the formal aspects emerge so that it can be appreciated as an abstract painting. Donald Judd's untitled copper and blue plexiglass sculpture reaches out into a wide hall next to the entry to the dining area and also adds to the architectural design.

The curatorial expertise continues. One of the most outstanding aspects is the placement of Richard Long's installation both inside and outside on the upper level. Included is a huge drawing on the wall executed by Long. Each separate piece echoes the other which reinforces the impact of Long's sensitivity to nature.

Since there are so many high level art pieces in the collection, it is impossible to comment on each one. The Basquiat in the dining area, for example, is perhaps one of his best. Jonathan Borofsky's "Three Chattering Men," facing two of Frank Stella's wall constructions, seem to be commenting on the artwork. Louise Nevelson's black wall construction commands attention on one side of a wall as does Jasper Johns' white painting on the other. All in all, the Ando architecture coupled with the well placed art is a viewing experience I will long remember.

Since the Japanese artists are more contemporary than modern, I feel impelled to comment on them separately. Their work speaks more to current issues of ecology, process and politics. Of the artists whom I viewed, the ones who most interested me are Gen Okabe, Ota Saburo, Yukinori Yanagi, and Tatsuo Miyajima. Each produces art that communicates their individual aesthetic clearly yet subtly, and each has many poetic levels of meaning reinforced by the materials they

choose.

Tatsuo Miyajima's "Sea of Time '98" hypnotizes the viewer as she gazes at flickering numbers floating on a dark pond of water in the living room of a traditional Japanese house. The numbers flash on and off like those on a digital watch. One immediately becomes aware of how the past affects the present. Thoughts of time passing abound. As I stood quietly watching seconds tick away, I considered the minutes, hours, days, and even years that slip away. I was humbled as I recognized how limited we are and how our days are numbered.

Ota Saburo's art deals with process and the evolution that occurs with repetition. His work changes almost imperceptibly as he investigates materials that have to do with transporting information and life. His images on stamps and repeated dates pull the viewer in to search for meaning in whimsical images of soy sauce containers and serious renditions of seeds and pods that contain life as they are disbursed. By choosing the form of stamps, Saburo reinforces his content, for it is stamps that enable man to send messages that connect and perpetuate ideas.

Gen Okabe's large sculptures, using materials found in nature such as branches, reeds, and grasses, communicate the often ignored presence of nature that can invade our space and, at the same time, provides necessary shelter. The inside installations reach into the living space intrusively, while the outside sculptures become shelters or nests which make the viewer aware of the connection of man's home to the nests and structures created by bird and beast. The form of the materials stimulate the viewer's imagination so that the smallest creature and every bit of vegetation on which we are dependent becomes more important.

Yukinori Yanagi addresses contemporary political issues of identity. His ant farm flags, titled "The World Flag Ant Farm," cleverly show how nationalism and identity with symbols is futile. The symbol changes by the chosen activity of the small insect. The artist thus demonstrates how the individual affects his environment and his political affiliation by simply existing. Yanagi also, paradoxically, shows how the individual needs to work in concert with his community in order to bring about meaningful change because the ant alone is vulnerable and can accomplish little without cooperating with its community.

Yanagi's "Banzai Corner," a flag of toy soldiers, is also a powerful piece. It addresses the folly of nationalism as well the absurdity of militarism. Children play with toy soldiers. Their games of destruction seem innocuous and innocent. But those same children grow up and form armies and symbols. The war games of those children who parade as mature adults become the source of destruction of civilizations.

These four artists gave this reviewer food for thought as well as visual pleasure. Each artist's work has form that follows content, and each artist expresses his aesthetic on more than one level. This is discovered in good poetry and truly fine art.

**Margie Bulmer**

*Art Critic*