

SUMBALLEIN:

THE BROKEN RETROSPECTIVE OF CARLOS RUNCIE TANAKA  
(1978 – 2006)\*

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*"If I took up ceramics it was because I needed to do things with my hands so I would stop reading Hegel, Heidegger and Kant. I realized that my thought coordinates couldn't be precise enough for me to keep raising questions to myself. Now I have no other intellectual perspective than my hands."*

Carlos Runcie Tanaka  
1997

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\* This is reworked and re-edited from the essay I wrote for the exhibition of the same name that was under my curatorship at the Art Museum of the San Marcos University's Cultural Center, March - July 2006. The section titled "La tentación autista" (The Autistic Temptation) is a very condensed version of the original paper that accompanied the exhibition "Tiempo Detenido", (Standstill) of Carlos Runcie Tanaka, during the Ibero-American Biennial held in Lima in 1997. For the complete version of this article see: Gustavo Buntinx, "La tentación autista: notas a una instalación de Carlos Runcie Tanaka", in: Marta Cisneros, Johanna Hamann and Miguel Mora (eds.), *Homenaje a Anna Maccagno. I Simposio sobre la escultura peruana del siglo XX*, Lima, Fondo Editorial y Facultad de Arte de la Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú, 2003, pp. [203]-[223]. (Revised and expanded version of the same title, handprinted in 1997).

## I. SUMBALLEIN:

It is the Greek root behind the etymology of the word SYMBOL. Used by ancient peoples when alluding to the identity that surged from the act of JOINING or PUTTING TOGETHER the fragments of a previously FRACTURED object, to make it mutually recognizable to those who guarded its parts. The concept is linked to the RITUALS of sects and secret societies, even acquiring a RELIGIOUS connotation as it prolongs on subsequent uses of the term. As it also extends in the work of those who make out of the BREAKING and RECOMPOSITION of their works a spiritual and philosophical MISE-EN-ABÎME for art making.

CARLOS RUNCIE TANAKA (Lima, 1958) is probably the Peruvian artist that has most rigorously and insistently sensed the possibilities and CHALLENGES of that particular PRAXIS. To the point that today it is possible to articulate from that perspective a CRITICAL vision of his diverse production. It is not a complete compilation but a “BROKEN ANTHOLOGY,” as announced by the subtitle of this also fragmented text originally conceived for the exhibition of the same name I curated in mid 2006, at the Art Museum of the San Marcos Cultural Center. The wide horizon of this show encompasses precise moments of twenty-eight years of one of the most complex and significant trajectories in our scene. As a result of this selection this paper attempts a different interpretation of works primarily identified with the production of ceramics, whose senses are interwoven here from the repeated experience of DISMEMBERMENT and RECONFIGURATION of his ceramic pieces: more than a metaphor it is the materialization itself –both literally and figuratively- of a personal and social INTENSITY in the simultaneous lives of the artist and of the country.

A production that is often appreciated for its more anthropologically ABSTRACT cultural qualities is actually traversed by HISTORICAL and even POLITICAL connotations. Interferences whose painful contemporaneity,

however, does not cancel but RADICALIZES the first referential issues. Works where the more ARCHAIC representations are interwoven with the more starkly CURRENT sensations. Without losing the connotations given by the very MATERIALITY of clay, that PRIMORDIAL raw material whose ORGANIC immediacy goes back to our great ceramic tradition, from its pre-Hispanic origins to its actual currency in craft.

DISRUPTED temporalities that Runcie Tanaka puts in conflict though ceremoniously on the scene by means of systematically recovering SHATTERED or broken pieces, punished by fire or by objective chance—but immediately revalued by the artist in its FISSURED presence, exalting the WOUND in the very gesture that repairs it.

By articulating an ARTISTIC significance, this resource also contributes to the deep understanding of the DENSITY of more ample processes in the course of a quarter of a century marked by decisive transformations and unprecedented VIOLENCE in our country. Few works put into such subtle but ACUTE evidence the tension and intensity of our cultural and HISTORICAL EXTREMITY as the ones of Carlos Runcie Tanaka.

TRUNCATED modernities, BROKEN traditions, SHATTERED communities, yet recomposed in the mournful UTOPIAN dimension of these pieces. *Sumballein*.

## II. APPRENTICESHIP

The artistic quality of Carlos Runcie Tanaka's work is often pondered on disregarding its origins and enduring links with utilitarian and artisan production. However, these works are not only a baseline, but also a constant source of

decisive tensions for the complex plastic definition of his work, particularly in its shifts and torsions.

In his reconfigurations: it is possible to get a different reading of the artist's trajectory from his ambivalent relationship - passionate and reflective - with the pure art of the ceramist. With the skill of the craft and its multiple extensions, from commercial manufacture to the great ancestral traditions of sacred connotations. Through its complex entanglement in Andean and Japanese pottery and the Arts and Crafts Movement promoted by William Morris in late 19<sup>th</sup> century England. And all that is derived from this in the preaching and almost esoteric practices of authors such as Bernard Leach and Shoji Hamada.

Crossings perhaps fostered in the artist by his double ancestry –British and Asian –registered in his last names, and stirred by his personal experience of this extreme country of ours. Also because of Runcie Tanaka's early inclination towards archaeology, anthropology, philosophy and music. It is the need to subsidize this last concern that leads him to favor his vocation for utilitarian pottery, joining El Pingüino workshop in 1978 and the Centro Piloto Artesanal de Miraflores a year later.

There is something touching about the diplomas and other documents certifying Runcie Tanaka's officially belonging to the guild of technical artisans. The objective was not art, and the result of those searches could be purchased in a street market or in the Feria del Hogar, signed by a combination of Asian ideograms that phonetically made out his mother's last name: "within a rice paddy."

It was the announcement of this youthful search for roots that takes him to Japan between 1979 and 1980, to become the apprentice of master potters such as Tsukimura Masahiko and Shimaoka Tatsuzo. Here he finally understands that

ceramics is not a hobby or a trade, but a ritual. As when searching for vessels that were broken by fire and thrown into the river by potters of the Momoyama period, but now recovered as precious fragments of a new inspiration about to be (re)built.

None of this spirit is lost in the second journey of apprenticeship that keeps Runcie Tanaka in Italy between 1982 and early 1985. Despite the more “sculpture-like” appearance of the works produced there, the ceramist persists in his commitment to the utilitarian, even if he somewhat resents the indiscriminate use of that term. As he himself says: “It’s about making something sacred out of the ordinary.” It’s a matter of understanding objects “beyond their functionality.”

It is extremely significant that from his first firings Runcie Tanaka saved the wares that were deformed or cracked by the fire. But undoubtedly the most outstanding work thus obtained was in 1981, consisting of the refractory plates of the kiln itself, involuntarily welded by three pieces melted by over-firing. The result is a suggestive composition whose evident *punctum* appears to be the beautiful ceremonial sake cup adhered almost intact to the uniform mass thus obtained.

In the apparent randomness of this result there is an unusual artistic commentary to certain ideologies of progress embodied in works of Classic Modernism, such as the *Development of a Bottle in Space*, created in bronze in 1912 by the Italian futurist Umberto Boccioni. Unlike the latter, Runcie Tanaka does not attempt to simultaneously reveal the solid internal volume and the external appearance of pure forms, but rather its contained density of fragile matter and meaning. Not the “lines of force” but its point of fission, mass melted and remade. An intuitive collapsing of the avant-gardes.

And its transubstantiation: although never exhibited, it is revealing that Runcie Tanaka has preserved this impressive volume, lavishing cleaning and

care as a vintage photograph shows. From one end, the small altar that combines another ritual cup and his bottle of *hagi yaki* on a wooden Amazonian tray can be seen: the syncretic tools for the offerings of wine and salt that the artist offers to the *kami sama*, the “lord of fire,” during each firing.

### III. LANDSCAPES AND EROS

In 1985 Runcie Tanaka settles permanently in Peru, deepening the process of taking roots locally that commits him to the geology and archaeology of the country as well as with its wider cultural processes.

By getting involved in technical support projects for handicraft production, the artist becomes familiar with the raw clay deposits of the highlands. Mixing alluvial clays of low firing temperatures with industrial earths at high temperatures produces sharper results, with rough surfaces. Thus begins the research that will show his best results in 1987, in two much-celebrated exhibitions in Trilce Gallery and in the III Trujillo Biennial. This is the first clear moment of artistic achievement in the contemporary art scene for a labor that had previously been ignored for its misunderstood utilitarian derivations.

While the latter would always be part of the artist’s praxis, from then on his work takes on a new breath and a spatial sense and puts him in the pioneering line of installation art in Peru. Taking the landscape to the gallery, as it was said at the time, allowed for the artistic rehabilitation of craftsmanship, now identified with the refinement of an ancient nature and culture.

Given the risk of aesthetization it implied, Runcie Tanaka established from the outset a variant of roughness and rupture in exceptional islands, furrows and

spirals that ruggedly display their protuberances and breaks. Violence thus vindicated over beautiful matter also projects an erotic impulse, still present in the insinuating silver amalgam that years later the artist spills like semen over the genital wound of a suggestive cocoon-like volume burst by the kiln. Or in the more immediate “organic progressions” of corrugated structures that grow and interpenetrate. Erect trunks confronted by the flaccidity of other modules, arising from an involuntary deformation of an initial firing that Runcie Tanaka later repeats by submitting the other pieces to higher temperatures to achieve what he himself calls “the scaling of fire.”

The igneous metaphor accompanies a progressive shift towards pure materiality that in 1991 leads him to fill a gallery in Mexico with twelve tons of *tezontle*, that expressive volcanic rock. And by late 1990, it is literally written in the invitation to another show that exhibits an amorphous broken pottery fragment inscribed with the artist’s seal.

#### IV. ALLEGORY AND SYMBOL

By making the accidental rupture of his pieces productive, Runcie Tanaka achieves an expressive objectuality of radical ambivalence. Following the symbolic will of repairing what was broken: (*sumballein*: joining, putting back together) appears that concept of allegory (*allos agoreuin*: to speak the other) that sprouts from the radiant display of the fracture.

Opposing drives that various pieces of the artist turn complementary by restoring the lost unity through seams and sutures dramatically enhanced by the visible roughness of the mortar. Highly textured materic scars, which Runcie Tanaka refers to with the symptomatic name of *veins*. *Reincorporating* here is

also *evidencing* the fissure. Irritating it as in the act of healing by rubbing salt to the wound.

Others have already pointed out the importance of the link thus established with pre-Hispanic pieces, such as those found in the Gallery of Chavín Offerings, or the Andean ceremonial vessels exhibited in the Cultural Center of San Marcos, exactly below the galleries occupied by *Sumballein* (chance does not exist). Sometimes these objects show dramatic bonds that remind us of others used by Runcie Tanaka –such as that powerful curtain of fifty great pieces that insinuate ocean waves and at the same time breastplates. A sonorous and levitating ceramic, elevated to art’s musical skies by the robust network of steel cables that tenses the structure while suspending it in mid air with deceptive lightness.

That which behind the archaic or actual recovery of the fragment would seem to express itself, is a sense of ritual and religious reparation that is also expressed in the repeated interest of the artist for building *apachetas*: those mounds of stones erected by travelers at the side of the road as a form of “pago-pagapu” The effect achieved impresses both for the resulting unity as for the expressive variety of its fragments. Allegory and symbol at the same time.

In the same register one can read the frequent phallic stele that Runcie Tanaka configures as assemblages of dissimilar pieces. And most important among them, “Cerro Azul,” with its free association to the Chavín Tello obelisk, interwoven with the references of another obelisk that commemorates, in that same port, the arrival in 1899 of the first Japanese immigrants to Peru. A reference enhanced by waves of crabs that the artist finds stranded around this monument. “The tide of memory,” as he would say in an interview.



## V. THE CRAB'S ACCOUNT

Behind the obsessive repetition of the crab image in Runcie Tanaka's work, a totemic identification appears. At times even a self-portrait, conceptually formalized from a cross of Andean and Asian traditions. This sideways-moving amphibian crustacean could well serve as a metaphor of the artist's ambivalent sensibility, of his projections and survivals.

Of his multiple—and precarious—possessions: the identity that the sea brought and abandoned to its fate. Like his maternal grandfather who emigrated from Asia only to drown in the sea of Ancón at the age of thirty-six. The same age and almost the same beach—Pasamayo—where Runcie Tanaka was swept by the waves until he woke up on the shore, surrounded by hundreds of crabs. Weeks later—in June 1994—he makes an immense and poignant exhibition for the National Museum, appropriately titled “Desplazamientos” (Displacements). Dedicated to the memory of his two grandfathers—one Japanese, one British—that drift of images and objects dramatically displayed operates a new artistic culmination for the craftsman who becomes an installation artist.

And a collector. Like in the video that records, during that same year—between the sand and the waves—, the artist's hands calmly collecting sun-desiccated crabs. Existences symbolically repaired and returned in the form of ceramics released to the sea and its tides. Or directly integrated into the landscape: reintegrated to its first materiality, by means of environments and photographs that show us the clay of his pieces half buried in the dunes. “Payments” or offerings whose counterpart is the incorporation of those crabs to artistic work, after being burnt once again, this time in the potter's kiln.

The fossilization of a living body. Its earthly perpetuation. And celestial too. Like when the artist incorporates a portrait of grandfather Tanaka to the cerulean paper crustaceans, delicately made using the Japanese technique of

origami. Or when he places on the chest of the dead ancestor—exhumed and buried again in 1997—a crab painted on a plate of fired clay. “Cocida. Cosida.” (Fired. Sewn).

## VI. THE AUTISTIC TEMPTATION

A disturbing mark of the times appears in an abrupt turn of events that in early 1997 redefined Runcie Tanaka’s work, following the irruption of a certain conflicting historical variable in a work previously associated to the category of the timeless. Irruption explicitly linked to the command of the Movimiento Revolucionario Túpac Amaru (MRTA) in a placid banquet hosted by the Japanese Embassy in Lima as a tribute to the figure of the Emperor. It was in late 1996, and the beginning of a new Peruvian tragedy in which the artist saw himself implicated as one among the almost five hundred other people initially held hostage, although not exactly among the most relevant for negotiations.

“We artists are cards of little value,” commented Runcie Tanaka after being released a hundred and thirty hours later—almost five and a half days. An experience that would drastically change the meaning of the series of silent, anthropomorphous figures that he had been working on with a sense of premonition. An army of uniform resemblances, without a defined identity beyond variable gestures of their arms and hands. Or the diverse intensity of their firing, enhanced since then by the semi-fortuitous traces of new and sometimes too violent firings. And by the deliberate signs of pictorial interventions, allusive to cosmic cycles of death and life, of redemption and torture.

Pain and its resigned waiting, sacrifice and its rituals, are thus incorporated to the surface or skin of these presences, to their rigorous and static alignment in the various installations the artist makes with them in 1997. An impressive sequence that in mid October culminates in the Ibero-American Biennial of Lima

with the intervention of the basements (the basements) of the Cultural Center of the National School of Fine Arts. An elaborate installation in various underground spaces, the most important occupied by a grid of these characters standing on small glass and metal pedestals from which an uncertain, almost votive red light shines: a guard of honor—but also a presentation of victims—for the sacrificial figure of the Fallen One which lies at the end of the gallery, thus converted into a burial chamber.

It is in fact another one of the same pieces, but with its belly swollen and burst in the firing –almost the displaced echo of the deformed and broken Chancay figure that years before the artist hung in his studio to preside over the firings. But from the burning fissure of the Fallen One red glass beads sprout like fertilized ova that form a vitreous bed in their glass urn while an enigmatic crowd surrounds them, repeating cryptic signals.

The air is suspended in awe and in shock, it begins to insinuate itself in the severed ceramic hands aligned by the artist at the entrance of the installation. In their own way they also participate in the almost ritual-like arrangement of the figures in other galleries. Isolated and hieratical beings in their own grouping, in the collective but self-absorbed suffering that binds them and simultaneously segregates and separates them.

The autistic temptation that arises before the silenced affects and effects of a denied civil war, where all dialogue fails and the exchange of horrors is the main communicative action.

## **VII. HOUSE / GARDEN / CLOAK**

An essential aspect of the inner force that drives Runcie Tanaka's vital project is the constant tension between the "artisanal" and "artistic," between the

"aesthetic" and the "ornamental" and the "utilitarian." A certain sense of spirituality seems to emerge from that tension and between those interstices, revealing the constructed and quoted condition of each of those categories.

Hence the radical redefinition of domesticity that is insinuated in the deliberate overlap of life and work, of creation and exhibition in Runcie Tanaka's everyday life. The family home is his studio, his garden and his gallery. Continuous rearrangements visualized in the overflowing of public areas of the house by hundreds of artworks—his and of others—displayed in iron and glass urns also designed by the artist. An outpour of pieces literally displayed to stage the crisis of the segmented dimensions of our existences.

Like the strange glazed garden arranged by Runcie Tanaka next to the colonial gardens of the San Marcos Cultural Center that give access to the imposing staircase leading to his exhibition. An enormous transparent box, and arranged inside beautiful dark spheres with ominous spikes contrasting over a reddish stoneware floor. The aggressive sensuality of these earthy surfaces rhymes with the profusion of real but dry cactuses, with their spines intact and erect.

All of them come from the home of the artist, who tends to them and keeps the dead ones as well as the broken remains of his ceramic production – maybe as an evocation of the maternal grandfather, creator of the Tanaka garden, a famous promenade in Miraflores in the 1940s. Also in that sense there is an incisive parallel with the deployment of dead crabs in other of his works. And with the promises of an archaic life that is renewed.

Nature / Culture. The ambivalences of a faded green that simultaneously is a field of latencies. Or the other way round: a garden of hope that is also a minefield. Or a cloak of illusions and threats. Of melancholy beauties. Shattered and recomposed. As the almost philosophical preciousness of that beautiful

weave of ceramic fragments, chosen by the artist deliberately and exclusively among the remains of his artisan and utilitarian works: tableware, flower vases, jars, useless for daily life because of daily life accidents. Or because of the rigors of fire. And in that trance returned to the blaze of their matter all the more radiant by the retinal blow of their fractures. Which are also historical.

Undoubtedly the decisive gesture of such incisive work is its mounting in the great archaeological display case where the dazzling White Cloak of Paracas was previously exhibited, with its unique repertoire of beautifully embroidered mythological characters. A textile weft of meanings that some believe are inexorably lost. But here recomposed, in a utopian manner, from the most mundane ceramic remnants.

The Lord moves among pots and pans (Saint Teresa of Jesus).

### **VIII. HUAYCO / KAWA / RIVER**

Even in the articulated fracture of its names, the trilingual title of Runcie Tanaka's culminating installation puts in allegorical scene the symbolic disruption that traverses the totality of his oeuvre. Fourteen solid ceramic spheres covered with shattered pieces of the artist's crockery, with the radiance of its sharp edges insinuating a new aesthetic glow from within the ominous ruptures of the utilitarian. As if embedding handicraft into art.

Or in nature: this river of our laments is also the ancestral Japanese stream (*kawa*) into which the ancients threw the discarded ceramic remnants of their firings. And the Quechua flood (*Huayco*) that now drags the hangover of everything experienced in the last traumatic decades.

Perhaps it is redundant to confess how the unashamed vision of one of the first pieces of this series woke up in me the curatorial craving for a broken anthology of Carlos Runcie Tanaka, conceived since that moment and that perspective as a tribute to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. In addition, under the title “Sumballein”, whose connotations of rupture and reintegration accompanied prior writerly tensions until finding their factual materialization also in the mise-en-abîme of these masses.

It is not merely an artistic density that appears to flash between the gleaming broken bits of these spheres. In the sidereal weight and earthly gravity of their impossible orbits. Of their implosive history.

Who foots the bill of the broken dishes?

(THE END)