

Thirty Years Ago

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Contemporary visual art in present day Peru is a contentious area of cultural work even if the main actors are diffident in their admission of the issues at stake. Peruvian artists have always been dogged by the short history of local institutions legitimizing modern art practices, on the one hand, and by the ambiguous feeling –the shadowy knowledge-, on the other, that, culturally speaking, the history of art in Peru has meant the substitution by force, 500 years ago, of one set of paradigms for another. The absence of industrial development in Peru, in the face of several efforts at different stages of our national life has made our modernity, if measured by international standards, a shaky thing at best. In this context, the Fine Arts do not make the cut if measured by the yardstick of a history of progress in all spheres, a narrative popularized by modernity in the West that has helped shape the panorama of the visual arts in the world today.

The National School of Fine Arts, founded in 1919, is entirely an achievement of twentieth century initiatives, and there is as yet no Modern or Contemporary Art Museum of Peruvian and Latin American Art, although for almost 50 years now the Institute of Contemporary Art has fought for one. No enlightened elites have been forthcoming. All reputations have to be built up from scratch every time, for every generation.

While brought up on images of pre-Hispanic grandeur, people regard the cultural production of ancient times as a thing of a far too distant past, long before Western colonization. This can help to understand why in spite of an avowed wonder and appreciation inspired by pre-Columbian, non-Western ceramic objects, textiles and metalwork, a rift has set in and there is no sense of a living culture spanning the breach that the Spanish Conquest installed.

And yet, Andean culture has gone on transforming and enriching itself –also deforming and transmogrifying itself at times, too-; it has gone on absorbing different cultural heritages and forging a new kind of modernity in our cities, especially in Lima, the capital of the country. But this is as yet another story, that of an unofficial culture.

When Carlos Runcie-Tanaka started to produce ceramic objects in the late seventies, he was one of the few who held the belief that one could make art in Lima, Peru, using clay as medium. Then again, at age 19, he was far from conventional in his outlook on life. By 1975 he had graduated from a British private school in Lima, well known for producing first rate physicians, lawyers and entrepreneurial cadres. But he chose to read Philosophy at University, instead. When just about everyone in his circle had adjusted to his decision, he left the academic world at Pontificia Universidad Católica for what was thought to be at the time the most menial production of artifacts. As a former Philosophy student, particularly touched by Ethics and Aesthetics, he saw it all very differently. Under the guidance and example of two young Lima rebels, Mariano Llosa and Pedro Mongrut, who had taken up studio pottery, he rapidly took to the technical aspects of making pots and became familiarized with key international figures such as Bernard Leach and Hamada Shoji, who had propounded with their lifetime work the image of the potter as artist craftsman who embraced a way of life with the making of ceramic objects.

It was all in the air of the late 1970s. Hamada had passed away early in 1978 and Leach, in 1979, and their stance had achieved a countercultural dimension, both with their trenchant defense of traditional crafts (Hamada had virtually co-founded the Mingei movement in Japan) and their conception of the artist-craftsman's way as steeped in joy as a result of an honest pursuit of beauty in humble, time-tried, honest earthenware forms.

But something quite extraordinary had also taken place in Peru in 1975, while under the rule of the only military junta with an apparently socialist bent in Latin America at the time (*a rara avis* by any standard). The Lima art world had been shocked and scandalized beyond measure when Master

Andean craftsman Joaquín López-Antay was awarded the National Culture Prize in the field of Plastic Arts over Carlos Quispez-Asín, a fine artist who had studied at the Real Academia de San Fernando in Madrid in the 1920s and who adhered to post-cubist painting. A colossal split was produced in the cultural scene with most major artists decrying the choice while some influential major figures and predominantly young artists took up the cause of the recognition of López-Antay as an artist in XXth century Peru and applauded the award. Evidently Painting and Sculpture were High Culture, while the creativity of López-Antay's production of traditional objects, to the design of which he had brought innovation in some cases, fell into Low.

All this cohered in Runcie-Tanaka's 1980-1981 travels to and sojourn at Izcuchaca, in the Central-Southern Peruvian Andes. There he undertook the supervision of firings and solved technical problems involving the kilns, as well as evaluating the quality of studio production momentarily as a substitute for New Zealander Harry Davis, a disciple of Bernard Leach, who had started and run the project for several years, and had recently left for good.

But all this, only after his experience as a *deshi* –a Master Potter's apprentice--, in Japan, in 1979-1980.

The momentous character of Runcie-Tanaka's decision to be apprenticed to a master potter in Japan was the turning point in his life. It meant acknowledging frontally his ancestry and, in 1978, inspired by the readings of Leach and Hamada, it meant constructing his identity far beyond the mere biological fact of his Japanese blood: he became a *deshi* to Tsukimura Masahiko, a master in Mashiko; he emerged a year later with something akin to a mystical understanding of the true pursuit in a potter's life. And it didn't exactly fit in with reasonable Japanese expectations of everything a *deshi* ought to be and learn. He had followed his heart when going to Japan and once there, he soon realized that living as a potter for him was going to be engaging in a process of constantly claiming a territory of the heart, with both old and newly-created personal rituals that kept a pact with himself in the face of a changing outside scenery. He began to see what it would mean to be certain of having arrived at the hardest-earned, because most immaterial of all perceptual projections: a mindscape of a tenuous, elusive dimension and yet reliable in its emotional depth, one that at times appeared as if it could be summoned by him out of thin air, almost at will, but that allowed no respite from having to deal with the inertia of matter. The promise of something unfathomable, vision of beauty to come, maybe, coalesced for the first time.

One can say that in many ways it is from here that the groundwork of his installation art arises, at least in part: a ritual method of seeking an order that harks back to patterns of arrangement –or of disarray--, of humble, commonplace things on a plane where artifice and nature are brought to an equivalent presence; the whole alluding to a core of deep-set emotion, yet materially revealing itself at the threshold of playfulness. One cannot but help being reminded of Peruvian poet Raul Deustua's re-writing of John Keats' verse, 'A thing of beauty is a joy forever', as "A thing of beauty is a *toy* forever".

The vision of life that arose from attempting to make his that ancient understanding of clay as medium in Japan had everything to do with an understanding of how to keep faith with himself in the future. He discovered it involved an ever-present element of play, alongside earnest, soul-searching questionings of choices that needed to be made in life. The image of firing the clay object in the kiln as necessary for an absolute transformation of the properties of matter, provided him with a personal metaphor, by token of which everything is put to test by fire, and it is fire that has the last word in everything that concerns the existence of symbolically permanent ceramic objects in the impermanent, floating world. Likewise, the action of throwing clay on the potter's wheel to produce a vessel, introduced him into the realm of the coincidence, in an instant of time, between the image of the thing in the grasp of memory, the regularity of breathing and the upward pull of the hands in unity of intention. The image of mind, heart and hand in unison is one of the strongest language constructions by which he has often chosen to express his artistic intention. He lives by it as a given in space and time.

While in the potters' world inserted in the surrounding rural community at Mashiko, he began to immerse himself in local culture through encounters with remarkable individualities, on a very concrete human basis. He befriended Master Potters Yoshida Yoshihiko -National Living Treasure Serizawa Keisuke's son-in-law and a friend of Hamada's- and Shimaoka Tatsuzo -who had also been an apprentice to the great late Master-, who told him that he had to follow his own way. After that, it did not matter to him if in native eyes he was *gaijin* or 'foreigner' or, in a literal translation, an 'outside-person'. That helped to release him from any high-minded initial desire to adhere to Japanese traditional cultural values, so in the end he took with him what he could as he passed through. Tension with the Master Tsukimura eventually meant that he was left free to travel in the country as much as he wished. The Temple at Ryoanji with its stone meditation garden-as-landscape would be a privileged moment in his travels, and a memory that would prove to be inexhaustible in its repercussions. His meeting with his Tanaka grandfather's brother in the rural surroundings of Takamatsu, city located in the northern part of Shikoku, one of the islands of Japan, as well as with assorted living relatives, was another. He came full circle there and then, his initial far-flung bid for acquiring a discipline for living and producing as a potter having been surpassed by the unexpected scope of his time in Japan. His tryst with his ancestors had become an appointment with his destiny, a surprising glimpse of the shape of things to come. He was already keeping faith.

Still, his ideal while at Izcuchaca, Peru, a year later, was to become a studio potter in the mould of Leach and Davis. Soon he discovered that no buying public from Lima would sustain the cost of running a potter's studio through the purchase of its production of ceramic objects -in the case of Izcuchaca's product, of a very particular design related to European stoneware-, because the aesthetic appreciation of the good, honest pot was something very few knew about, let alone cared for. Discernment was lacking, basically, and there was an absence of educated sensibility. The knowledge of the art of pottery he had come across in Japan, was simply a sophistication that did not exist in Lima, the value accorded to functional ceramic objects being simply regulated by demand. The costs of production of pottery ran high and one thing was certain: porcelain being always cheaper than earthenware, the demand for the latter was far too small at the time for the project to prosper.

It was also while at Izcuchaca that Runcie-Tanaka became aware of different ideological positions being taken in the Central Southern Andes, outside of mainstream politics and antagonistic to the 1980 elections which Fernando Belaúnde had won (twelve years after having been ousted by the Armed Forces). Political discourse at the studio was radical and amply justified a budding subversion as a response to the democratically elected government. These were signs of the influence that the armed group of seditionaries, Sendero Luminoso (Shining Path), was achieving in the region at the time. He came across their particular Marxist-Leninist-Maoist political line in the potter's studio, but his contribution to work there earned the respect of those who ran the studio: he was at Izcuchaca to help sort things out and ensure continuity in the production of functional ceramic objects that were sold in Lima and helped the townspeople make a living. When he left town in 1981 little did he know that Sendero Luminoso would violently shape the course of events in Peru for the next twelve years in their bid for power. It would not be the last time he would meet face to face with armed subversion in the country.

Constant travelling to and from the Central Southern Andes in those years meant harsh rides on dirt roads practically all the way. It was a hard thing for anyone from Lima to get acquainted with the Sierra, especially bad in the rainy season from December to March, when mud and stone landslides known as *huaycos*, that were sometimes of great proportions and uprooted trees and dislodged boulders, interrupted the transport on the roads. In general though, buses often broke down and when the driver couldn't repair the defect, long hours -days even-, were passed in the spot waiting for technical help.

The sudden change when the narrow coastal strip -at most 60 kilometers wide-, was left behind and the bus began the long, steep climb, also left a mark in the imagination. Perhaps an image of

geographically fractured Peru came to mind and brought home too the notion of an ethnically divided country. One could feel there were reasons to doubt the reality of Peru as a nation when faced with naked evidence that the State had virtually turned its back on anything outside Lima, capital city of Peru where all political power had become centralized.

This silence in which the lives of different peoples in most of rural Peru were shrouded at that point in the late XXth century could be associated with the silence of the Peruvian landscape, a mute witness to the historical destiny of the country. And yet, the need to arrive at an equilibrium with both the harsh climate and the mainly poor soils of the highlands had underlied the flourishing of civilization along the Pacific coast of South America. Contrary to all appearances, the landscape bore signs of the action of civilized men at the most unsuspected and inexplicable locations.

Carlos Runcie-Tanaka had had a glimpse of this while in his teens at the British School, where he had been an active member of the Archaeology Club (and was also once a member of a short-lived Pottery Club in 1970-71), profiting widely from the trips organized by the Peruvian History teacher who was its instigator. There were frequent club weekend trips to pre-Hispanic sites near Lima, such as Paracas, about 240 kilometers to the South, and longer trips to far away places such as Huanuco, Ayacucho or Cusco. Collecting objects was incentivated by the teacher who pointed out prices were dirt cheap and bought things for himself. Later he would see very fine ceramic pieces in private homes in Lima, all obtained through illegal extraction activities from supposedly protected archaeological places.

But the very first objects he bought were peddled by people who lived in the area of the different sites, quite often on the sites as new occupants of “empty” land, and he perceived there was a precarious link -unspoken of- between their survival economy in the present and the much vaunted past grandeur of the people who had been the builders of what were now the ruins he was told to admire.

When in the mid eighties, he turned in part for inspiration towards the pre-Columbian ceramic vessel, the link between landscape and culture had become for him inescapable. The knowledge he had acquired of pre-Inca civilization had led him to understand that fine ceramic objects had never been intended for use: they had been prepared especially -and specifically, too-, to accompany the dead sovereign or dignitary on his journey from this life into the underworld. Funerary contexts as unearthed by archaeologists, painstakingly avoiding to disrupt the positions in which different objects -some containing dry foodstuffs-, were found in a tomb, were correctly read by him as the result of burial rites in which everything had to be done right for the accomplishing of a safe passage into the afterlife. These rites involved actions in which a certain order in the placing of objects had to be fulfilled. The cartography of the burial chamber was a microcosm, a symbolical world image in synthesis, enabling the dead to find his bearings and to be accompanied by familiar things. Found along the coast, and sometimes preserved within cities like Lima and Trujillo, the truncated mud-brick pyramids that contained burial chambers, were seen by him to resemble sand-covered mounds, easily lost to the eye as features of the natural landscape.

He had tried a hand at ceramic sculpture in the mid-eighties, modelling what appeared to be hermetic or almost closed ceramic hollow forms, probably under the influence of the abstract ceramic sculpture he had seen in Italy, where he had spent three and a half years until 1985. By 1987, however, he had daringly but remarkably begun to make installation art in Lima in his own way. He transformed a modern gallery space into a desertscape, where his ceramic vessels -fired at very high temperature and using glazes and textures from the Japanese tradition, but harking back at the same time to colours and volumetric forms from pre-Columbian times-, were placed for the viewer to encounter as he made his way: they could freely be imagined as strange fruit or crustacean carapaces left abandoned on the coastal sand, to paraphrase Peruvian art critic Alfonso Castrillón who wrote about his exhibit then.

In 1987, the backbone of his artistic practice was, strictly speaking, ceramics. And yet, he made his mark in the Lima art scene for the first time with an installation, in his own terms. His bid for recognition as a ceramic artist had led him to the spatial transformation of a gallery: he had

radically altered it, for the first time, in order to create an environment that could satisfactorily encompass his objects. This involved a paradox and, thus, set a pattern for Carlos Runcie-Tanaka's creative process from then on, in more than one way: it was both a very mental solution and, at the same time, implied the unravelling of sensuous affects. Intuition led him to grasp how to satisfy his desire of constructing a fiction in the form of a tri-dimensional image-synthesis of geographical territory elevated to the dimension of mythical landscape at-a-glimpse. This was his response at the time to the challenge of having to construct his own self-image as a Peruvian artist, but also, in major terms, of building his identity as a Latin American artist.

There were others who acted locally as his models to some extent. Upon his return to Lima in 1980 he had met and befriended painter Fernando De la Jara (1948-), whose views on art as a personal calling influenced him considerably while the stillness of his drawings and paintings made a lasting impression on him. In the mid eighties he would meet in Lima the great Peruvian poet and visual artist Jorge Eduardo Eielson (1924-2006) -self-exiled in Italy since the 1950s-, with whom he shared a love for the coastal desert and its hidden pre-Columbian presences, Peruvian painter and sculptor Emilio Rodríguez-Larraín (1928-), who had returned to the country in 1980, greatly influenced his understanding of how to sustain a creative process while disregarding generally perceived divisions that separated sculpture from installation, while probing the landscape of the coast and highlands. Peruvian installation artist and draughtsman Esther Vainstein (1947-) was also exploring the desert as natural environment that had been witness to the rise and fall of different peoples throughout time.

The mythical dimension his proposal was imbued with became a complex one. It played upon aspects of late twentieth century ethos by his choice of avoiding ideological content in its typical, expected usage and meaning among creators active in the region at that time (it ought to be remembered at this point that the Berlin Wall had been torn down by the Berliners in self-recognition as Germans, with worldwide repercussion in late 1989). He kept his distance from both the magical realism that appeared endorsed by late surrealism and from the commitment implied by Left-wing non-objecthood practices.

In his unorthodox view, American-Japanese artist Isamu Noguchi's intercultural synthesis between Western and Oriental aesthetics was an obligatory reference. James Turrell's light environments had impressed him in Mexico, and he had the chance to meet the American artist personally in Flagstaff, Arizona, in 1993, and was invited to visit Roden crater (Turrell's sharp comments on the significance of space between objects had a great impact on him). British sculptor Richard Long's gallery installations and site-specific interventions were an inspiration both for the use of materials and the partly ritual actions involved in their creation. American visual artist Ann Hamilton's installations and video pieces revealed to him a very different and particular feel for space as well as an untapped source of sensuousness in the choice of materials.

Carlos Runcie-Tanaka's thought in the 1980s did not contemplate History from a Western viewpoint as a touchstone, but it did not favor the a-historical either. His interest in and approach to non-Western thought –including religion-, set him at a distance from linearity and uncovered the poetic possibilities of the circular, the notion of cycle. Coupled with it, his fondness of Biology – especially- and Geology meant a consistent development of vessel forms frequently possessing biomorphic character, sometimes with an evident sense of the mineral, with a feel for the possibility of latent life as if geological rock formations 'breathed' at a bizarre temporal rate, alive as it were on an unheard of time-scale. This, of course, partly harked back to Pre-Columbian clay objects found in funerary context and placed in obedience to strict ritual, something he had come to understand in Japan, and by doing so defined possibly the main aesthetic axis of his self-awareness as Peruvian artist.

It has been pointed out by Dr. Herbert Sanders, one of the world's leading authorities on ceramic techniques that "For centuries the Oriental has been educated to appreciate subtle differences: in the clay body itself, in body and glaze texture, in the color of the body and the glaze of his ceramic wares. He has also learned to admire and hold in reverence accidental results especially those that

occur during firing”. The realization that in Lima no discerning public or art collector would approach him made him decide to overemphasize the appearance of a ceramic vessel in all aspects, thus abandoning traditional Japanese subtlety or *wabi*. Not only appearance but also size and weight were taken to extremes in his efforts to give tentative visibility to pottery. The challenge was daunting, but he found a way of rising to the occasion.

As a Peruvian creator of clay forms, he acutely felt the need to provide these with a basal ground to which he could tell himself they belonged. Yet, to situate them on this ground –to find a place for each one-, became equivalent to understanding them in a perspective of a construction of history; it meant creating a fictional dimension for each and everyone of them. The biomorphic and / or mineral aspect of many of his vessels suggested forms evolved on a time-scale that defeats human understanding: a never-ending process leading to a total metamorphosis for some and extinction for others. In the study of Natural History, a time-scale has been scientifically determined as true, and yet, since it eludes the mind’s grasp of things, everything seems to recede easily into the mythical. It could be said, however, that myth entered into the artistic proposal in the process by which the basal ground significantly “became” hallowed ground. Initially, his awareness of and absorption in the desert as landscape fed directly his sense of awe and, at least in part, inspired his effort to provoke a sense of wonder generated by his installations. The image-synthesis referred to before implied that the vision of desert as incommensurate expanse (Shelley’s “...boundless and bare / The lone and level sands stretch far away”), was paradoxically condensed together with the perception of secrecy and mystery of unearthing and revealing what has been hidden for religious reasons, from the eyes of the living. The ceramic vessels proved to be agents that catalyzed the bizarre fusion of the energy of the sublime and the ritual reverence in the face of death into one potent experience. The latter could veer towards a reverential approach towards materials found in nature and the artist was known to transport them in bulk to the gallery, to be there interspersed with ceramic objects fashioned by him, as happened in Mexico, D.F., in 1991, when he used *tezontle*, a volcanic rock, to fill the gallery-space before setting his larvae-like ceramic objects.

A major change took place in 1994, with his large one-man show “Desplazamientos” (Displacements) at the Museo de la Nación, in Lima. The issue at hand first and foremost was memory, both collective and personal, seen against the horizon of history as a process arising from the actions and will of communities, concertedly or as spontaneous manifestation.

The autobiographical element made its first appearance in his creative process. He had begun to unearth his roots and had discovered by chance the monument on the beach in Cerro Azul (a semi-active small port 130 km to the south of Lima) commemorating the arrival of Japanese immigrants in Peru in 1890. As he has mentioned before, at the foot of the monument there were hundreds of dead crabs of a coastal species: the body-husks strewn around it made him think of destiny.

Reflection upon the migratory movement of the Japanese people became uppermost in his mind and inevitably involved seeing his own family history on his mother’s side in a new light.

The first time he presented installation work related to this experience was at the Fifth Havana Biennale, in Cuba, in 1994, in which his piece was like a sketch of what was to come. This was his second time in Havana since he had been invited and had participated in the Fourth Biennale, too, in 1991. In Havana, in 1994, he met U.S. curator Jim Harithas, visual artist Mel Chin and ceramic artist Irv Tepper, whom he befriended. Mel Chin would impress him with the equilibrium of Oriental precision and subtlety and radical conceptual thinking in his work.

“Desplazamientos” could be taken as a whole and read as a mindscape, with memory as the fabric into which all installations had been woven together. The sense of place now had a concrete name corresponding to a geographical location in relation to an actual event that had occurred over a century before. Still, except for two very specific pieces -one presenting a selection of personal possessions belonging to his Runcie and Tanaka grandfathers, as well as documents concerning their activities, and the other, a photographic image of the Cerro Azul dock and a glass case containing preserved crab specimens-, all other installations were an exploration of a landscape of the mind, springing from a reinterpretation of seashore environments both sensuous and

symbolically. Memory was posited as the ground of a search for meaning that embraced a territory, with one particularly striking inhabitant that attained the status of icon: the crab. To begin with the reference was directly to a species of small, tidal zone crab, but in the poetic and cryptic narrative of the exhibition it became an abstraction, as the artist put ceramics aside and subjected the natural to a cultural commentary or scrutiny, for example, through handmade elements such as origami crabs made of thick white paper, then placed in relation to industrially produced lighting devices. Apart from the identification of the crab as a creature from the organic world that could be made to play the quirky role of liaison and messenger between the two cultural worlds, Oriental and Latin American, the artist also discovered he could pare down the actual physical making of his installations. Two works would have significance in this respect: the “River of stones”, in which a sinuous alignment of them directly on the museum floor strongly suggested their position mid-stream (each stone supported a small number of ceramic elements vaguely resembling barnacles or other crustaceans in a sparse distribution); and an installation-accumulation on a disk-like patch on the floor of a large number of diverse ceramic objects, most of them coated in bright turquoise glaze (used on different objects throughout the show, it could be read as a sign of an aquatic environment). Alignment or accumulation of elements sufficed to project the work sparingly, omitting the full materic support that previously, in his work, had been the synthetic embodiment of landscape.

“Desplazamientos” was a genuine breakthrough for the artist. By 1996, however, he had been accumulating in his studio a vast number of objects he had been producing with no exhibition in view. Among them a series of human-like clay figures, two feet tall. Highly stylized, these figures gestured with their hands, which were the only expressive part of their whole anatomy. Over one hundred of them were occupying the studio tables before the end of the year. On 17th December he attended a cocktail party at the Japanese Ambassador’s Residence in Lima, to celebrate the Emperor’s birthday, together with another eight hundred guests. Halfway through the evening, at 8:15 pm, sixteen armed members of the Movimiento Revolucionario Tupac Amaru (MRTA), blew up a wall with explosives and stormed into the Residence; then proceeded to round up everyone present and closed all access to the outside world. The eight hundred hostages were reduced to half the number when, later that evening, children, women and the elderly were set free; but the fate of the rest was uncertain and speculation ran high. Since the capture in September 1992 of Abimael Guzman, Shining Path’s leader and his imprisonment, Peruvian population in general had wanted to believe that subversive action had died away. MRTA’s violent action created a national commotion. The subversives called up a press conference and announced their demands: they wanted President Alberto Fujimori to appear on the spot, and called for the immediate release of all MRTA members who were in prison. Those kept as hostages were allowed to communicate with their families through a two-way traffic of messages mediated by the International Red Cross. After over five days, Carlos Runcie-Tanaka was set free as part of a group of two hundred and twenty five hostages liberated by the subversives, who gave no sign of weakened resolve but, rather, resorted to a stricter control of the remaining seventy two, among which were two members of Fujimori’s cabinet. The last group of hostages was liberated four months later through a military strategic operation in which one hostage was killed, and all subversives were assassinated by the Peruvian army. Even before the end of the hostage crisis, Carlos Runcie-Tanaka had clearly understood that the figures in his studio could be made to starkly embody a commentary on the situation he had lived through. This conscious decision to identify the over one hundred figures that had been waiting for him to decide what to do with them, with the experience of the hostages, was taken very much on the spur of the moment. For somebody who was normally known to take his time in the development of a project, this meant that on the strength of his experience, he almost found that this reading was unequivocal: there could be no other.

Fifteen of the figures were shown in ARCO 97, the Madrid art fair, as “La Espera” (The Wait), a compact installation group, hieratic yet very potent in its obliqueness, on show in the booth of Forum, a Peruvian gallery invited for the event. The most complete presentation of this body of

work was later on in 1997. The artist was chosen by the local critics and gallerists to be one of five representatives of Peru in the First Iberoamerican Biennale of Lima. He took over the entire basement of the Cultural Center of the National School of Fine Arts, in three rooms of which the Library of the School was functioning at the time.

“Tiempo Detenido” (Standstill), in 1997, was a sprawling installation of an almost labyrinthine nature. The distribution of the ceramic objects throughout most of the interconnected rooms of the underground Library with no books, gave the work as a whole a character akin to that of a complex of chambers in succession, frequent in ancient burial sites. The fact that it all ended in a chamber where the disconcerted visitor was presented with a scene suggesting ceremonial entombment of a slain monarch or leader, enhanced the effect. But it wasn’t only the underground nature of the installation that created its impact, it was also the use of red lighting in the rooms and the written text along the walls, as well as functioning old-fashioned fan-ventilators and assorted metal machinery. Glass panels covered the wall behind the large group of clay-figure-mourners with hands frozen in particular gestures, in the final chamber. There was an oppressive feeling verging on the claustrophobic as one made one’s way to the end, and the atmosphere generated by the red lighting was crucial in this. Psychological and cultural associations of red with heat and the glow of embers but also in signs of warning and emergency certainly impinged on the visitor’s conscience. The accumulation of objects produced a vivid experience of close to fully-occupied space: rooms crowded with ceramic elements were perceived as symbolic representations that were given an equally symbolic use. The sense that one had entered a territory of the unspeakable, or unutterable, even, grew upon one. The mystery of the mise-en-scene encompassed both the mostly undecipherable contents of tombs from pre-Columbian times, and the human use of art at a deep level, as an intimate and yet shared, collective experience endowed with the spiritual power to appease anxiety and conquer fear in the face of death. There was widespread recognition that a special kind of artistic mastery had been achieved, and it was associated with his own practice of installation art. His mastery as ceramic artist was acknowledged from before but he was now being praised for his artistry in the transformation of space into a dimension from where art was felt to address the present and the country’s history. He had managed to build a fiction whereby a city that hardly ever acknowledges its pre-Columbian inhabitants, had to face an underground burial site in the proximity of the Cathedral. He had also conjured up violence and death through poetic narrative and subjected them to transformation through the evocation of a ritual for the burial of the dead.

Four years later, in 2001, he found himself a hostage once again, in a different setting altogether. In fact, it was his artwork as well as that of other Latin American artists that was hidden from view by a dire manoeuvre of an international art event’s authorities. He had been selected to represent Peru at the 49th Venice Biennale and, together with other artists from Latin American countries that do not possess a pavillion in the Biennale Gardens, his work would be presented in a location near Venice through the good offices of the Italian-Latin American Institute (ILAI) of Rome. He had been informed that the proposed location was a villa in Treviso, in the outskirts of Venice. But when he arrived he discovered that Treviso, as far as the Biennale was concerned, was a far flung different locality, the villa was a most unsuitable location, there was no professional curatorial team to deal with the task of mounting an exhibit. The distance was a big issue. All in all, for a visitor to the venues in the city, just to get to the villa meant a three hour journey by vaporetto, train, bus and walking. It was obvious something had brought this decision about, but it only became evident once the Biennale had officially opened: the hidden motive had been to do away with the participation of Latin American artists through the action of the ILAI, which was judged by the Biennale organization to promote very low-quality art in the context of the international event. Carlos Runcie-Tanaka was one of the instigators of a very necessary protest demonstration by a group of the artists who had been confined to the villa in Treviso. Using black balloons filled with helium, that had the word “Existimos” (Spanish for “We exist”) and white balloons with red “No” printed on them, and which constituted the artwork that had been brought to Venice by artist Adriana González Brun, from Paraguay, one of the countries under the ILAI’s auspices, the small band of

artists read a manifesto at the Treviso opening and the following day engaged members of the public to take a balloon with them on their way to the official opening at the Biennale Gardens in Venice, and just before Harald Szeeman spoke, the balloons were freed and ascended to form a black cloud under the marquee, over the audience. Apologies were publicly offered on the spot by Szeeman and the authorities of the Biennale and this was actually the beginning of a new period in the participation of Latin American artists under the Institute's wing, in better venues, right in the heart of Venice. This performance-demonstration has been the only explicitly political action the artist has been known to take part in and remains one of the most eloquent artistic agit-prop statements against discrimination in the art-sphere internationally.

Soon after this international episode there would be a renewal of his commitment to the Peruvian landscape and its past and present inhabitants in his work. It would be accompanied by the use of a variety of different media, ceramics as well as other. One in particular caught his attention; it was a medium he had become aware of in 1994, and had gradually developed an approach to, as one more possibility in his creation process. During the preparation of "Desplazamientos" he had seen the potential of video as medium for the first time: a portrait of him at work in the studio had been recorded and edited, and had been presented as a video projection in the show. Experiments had ensued and he had proceeded to try a hand himself in the recording of video material, while the show was still on; a professional cameraman had recorded for him the behaviour of crabs on the beach at Cerro Azul. The video experiments he would continue doing, featuring crabs on the beach, gradually made their way into installations such as those in the IV Barro de América Biennale in Caracas Venezuela; but he showed a video of his hands folding an origami crab in Columbus, Cincinnati and Philadelphia, in one-man shows held in the context of his time as guest lecturer at educational institutions there.

In 2003 he was invited to do a one-man show in Arequipa, a city on the Western slopes of the Andes to the South of Peru: "Arequipa/Dos entre el cielo y la tierra". He decided he would use as material for the exhibit the white, pumice-like volcanic stone from the region, called *sillar*. *Sillar* is soft to carve and is used for making bricks and most buildings in the city centre of Arequipa have been constructed with it since the XVIth century. Stone masons obtain it from quarries near the city and Runcie-Tanaka decided to visit a quarry where he met stonemason Nicolás Ramos Ccoa. He took his video camera with him and recorded Ramos Ccoa while at work, climbing up the quarry to dislodge blocks of *sillar* stone, which he later cut and processed in order to sell as large bricks directly for use in construction. The artist's show in Arequipa included a very basically-edited video of what he saw in the quarry and recorded with hand-held camera; and another video which showed his hands at work folding paper, making an origami crab, alternated with the stonemason's hands as he extracted the strange spherical and naturally-formed stones trapped and hidden in the *sillar*. During 2004 the video work he had produced for his Arequipa show was given international exposure in two very different art biennials in South America: the 8th Cuenca Biennial in Ecuador, a very fresh and stimulating event; and the 26th Sao Paulo Biennale, the second oldest in the world after Venice. For the 8th Cuenca Biennial he chose the hands video in a new revised version, and he was awarded an honorary mention for an installation that incorporated it. For the 26th Sao Paulo Biennale he chose to do a completely new edition of the video showing Nicolás Ramos Ccoa at work in the quarry, which he accompanied with the hands video as part of a two-screen projection. The video showing the stonemason at work, was edited to focus upon a dialogue that highlighted his extraction of the spherical stones formed during the cooling process of the volcanic stone, as internal inclusions. The avid collecting of the naturally-formed spheres was shown as an activity the stonemason conducted in the quarry apart from his daily labour, to stress an aspect that had particularly impressed Runcie-Tanaka: the visibility of the aesthetic choice of the artisan, who possessed, as it were, the secret of the existence of stones within stone. His hands breaking a small *sillar* stone-block to extract the sphere also dealt with the theme of memory and this was reinforced when shown in alternation with the artist's hands folding an origami crab; it became entwined with

issues of cultural transmission, as evidenced in learning and conditioning, in the form of actions leaving a “product” behind.

Aesthetic choice was prominent in his own reading of his art throughout time for the one-man show “Sumballein – Antología Rota de Carlos Runcie-Tanaka (1978-2006)”, curated by Gustavo Buntinx, then Director of the Cultural Center of the Universidad Nacional Mayor de San Marcos, in the city center of Lima. “Sumballein” (name chosen by Buntinx from the Greek term that is at the origin of the word “symbol”) was the most potent exhibition of his ceramic pieces in a decade. The curatorial process involved an intense dialogue between artist and curator when selecting a large number of works that were physically marked by the very visible clay additions to the ceramic body, used by Runcie-Tanaka to bind together the fragments into which the fire of the kiln had originally broken the objects (hence “Rota” in the title, which is the Spanish for broken). In order for the added clay to bind, all of the objects chosen had undergone more firings, in an insistent manner. The insistence was materially evident in Runcie-Tanaka’s intent to mend by renewed action of fire, to heal the broken vessels. Also in his making of new, different objects –sculptures-, from the ceramic cups, saucers, plates, jugs and other pieces, ruptured during firings. This in Buntinx’s curatorial view, became a telling action in the artist’s work. It also represented Runcie-Tanaka’s most radical deviation from the traditional Japanese ceramic aesthetics in which he had been educated. The result of the artist’s action was the introduction of a very eloquent roughness or rawness, an almost unwanted, undesirable addition –a clay suture- in an otherwise highly-sophisticated, technically-achieved high temperature ceramic ruptured surface or fragmented body. In “Sumballein” the object thus treated could be seen as a metaphor for the processes the nation had been undergoing since violence had erupted and sundered peoples apart.

There are no clear answers for the trenchant questions that assail and distress our conscience as we find ourselves daily at a crossroads, in the quandary of our lapsed-belief in a national promise that still awaits to be redeemed. In his art, Carlos Runcie-Tanaka has pursued a way towards defining a clear, life-enhancing dimension, made of poetry and trust in the seemingly boundless potential of matter. For the last thirty years, the artist’s self-awareness has developed hand in hand with an understanding of the Peruvian imaginary, and this has expressed itself as a rare and acute perception of the psychology that underlies the construction of aesthetic paradigms that can be artistically and socially relevant for the present. At times he seems to have worked in synchronicity with fresh, nascent sensibilities pointing to the opening of new cultural horizons. At others, his work has uncannily appeared to have crystallized thought-processes aiming to provide responses to critically urgent questions concerning identity and history. By conjuring deeply reflexive and striking visions, he presents those who approach his work with an invitation to openly share in the calm and the stillness, and gain an insight of a hard-earned peace of heart and mind.