

Contando con Cangrejos (The Language of ‘Crabs’)

The representation of the ‘Crab’ in the work of Carlos Runcie Tanaka (Lima, 1958)

On a Sunday afternoon in late September 1993, the Runcie Tanaka family left Lima and headed south to have lunch in the coastal town of Mala. A diversion on the Panamericana Sur however, would lead them to the seaside resort of *Cerro Azul* (Blue Mountain), a destination none of them knew and one which would have a profound impact on Carlos Runcie Tanaka’s life and work as an artist. Intrigued by the dilapidated remains on this once minor port, the family went for a walk along the coast. Two sites took them by surprise. The first was a stranded monument, half buried in the sand, commemorating the arrival of the first Japanese immigrants to Peru, on the 3rd of April 1899. Guillermo Shinichi Tanaka (1904-1940), Runcie Tanaka’s maternal grandfather, would have been amongst the last group of 226 men aboard the *Sakura Maru* arriving on Peruvian shores to work in fields of the Cañete valley. Yet the second fortuitous discovery would capture the artist’s imagination and remains to this day as an equally memorable site: clinging to the sand at the foot of the monument were the charred carcasses of hundreds of tiny crabs.

This piece will look at the representation of the ‘crab’ in Carlos Runcie Tanaka’s body of work after 1993 as an arbitrary meaning-making unit or sign, which may vary in significance according to the spatial and temporal coordinates established by the artist’s practice. One of the few figurative representations to emerge one year after the *Cerro Azul* excursion in *Desplazamientos*¹ (Displacements, 1994), the ‘crab’ can be seen as a paradigm in the development of a visual language which has established the artist as an eminent potter, installation artist, sculptor, visual thinker and ‘maker of art’ living and working in contemporary Peru.

¹ *Desplazamientos*, Runcie Tanaka’s major solo installation, Museo de Arte, Lima, June 1994.

Desplazamientos was also a poignant response to what the artist described at the time as, ‘*una sensación fuerte de transformación del destino, asociado al cambio de condiciones.*’² (An acute sense of how destiny can be transformed through changing circumstances). These periods of transformation could be seen to correspond to events, which alter the course of both personal and collective circumstances, creating fissures (personal and historical); moments of crisis where such change is precipitated. In this respect, the vision of the crabs in *Cerro Azul*, referred to by Rodrigo Quijano (Lima 1958) as, *un momento de iluminación*³ (a moment of illumination), marked the artist’s awareness of the impact these transits would exert on his practise, particularly in the light of a multifaceted legacy. For if, as a Peruvian artist, the remains of these amphibious creatures could be seen to be emblematic of the scattered fragments of Pre-Hispanic artefacts; as a Nikkei artist, the carcasses of crabs exposed to the elements brought to the artists’ mind the collective endeavours of multiple, at times overlapping migrations, as well as the individual destinies of his own predecessors, both arriving in Peru by sea at different points in time. Although the original transit of the crabs in *Cerro Azul* – moved by the waves to the sand – indicated only one stage of that crossing, their presence captured the essence of a vital experience shared by many Latin American artists during the Twentieth Century in particular: the geographic, intellectual and emotional journey across the sea. Runcie Tanaka’s words are eloquent in this respect.

*encontrarlos ahí, como disecados, reconocer su desplazamiento, su número:
una imagen de flujo masivo, de masa. Seres que se desplazan entre la tierra y
el mar y que pueden vivir en los dos medios.*⁴

‘Beings that can shift between land and sea, and are capable of existing in both mediums.’ For the purposes of this analysis, I will take these words as guides to

² Villacorta, Jorge. *La Marea de la Memoria*, an interview with Runcie Tanaka, *Semanario Oiga*, 1994. Accessed in: <http://www.carlosruncietanaka.com/entrevistas.htm>.

³ Quijano, Rodrigo. ‘Historia Modernidad y Ruina Peruana, Notas sobre la indentidad y espacio en la obra de Carlos Runcie Tanaka’, Lima: Ritual de lo Habitual ediciones, 2004, p. 7.

⁴ Villacorta, Jorge. Extract from *Desplazamientos* (the exhibition’s hand programme), Lima, June 1994.

temporarily refer to ‘migration’ not as one journey from homeland to ‘another land’, but as the fluctuating backwards and forwards movement between opposite shores. ‘Migration’ will therefore be seen as a term that not only simulates such movement, but that refers instead to a process that must be understood beyond its geographical boundaries, embracing a myriad of ongoing relations, exchanges, encounters, intrusions, and intromissions, that are both historical and biographical. The tensions and interconnections implicit in this rhythmic oscillation form the backdrop for the emergence of the ‘crab’ as a mediator between opposites cultural, historical, and biographical poles. In this respect, the artist’s genealogies – Japanese and British on his father’s side – are fundamental to understand the development of Runcie Tanaka’s practice in a territory that continues to be a pivotal point of reference to his work: vast stretches of Peruvian deserts and coastlines.

It is important to briefly point out the artist’s commitment to ‘the act of making art’. The gesturality implicit in this intention was no doubt nurtured by an early interest in archaeology and by his subsequent training as a potter in Brazil, Italy and Japan. From 1979 to 1980, he becomes an assistant to master Tsukimura Masahiko (Ogaya, Japan). It would be during this formative period of his life that a ‘ritual approximation to ceramics ... would enable him to understand ‘objects above and beyond their functionality’⁵. On his return to Peru (1980), his work would begin to reflect a shift of his attention back to two vital references: the pre-Columbian artefact, and its relation to space. Like the amphibious nature of the crab, the fluid territory between land and water (the shore) would become the springboard for the emergence of a distinctive visual grammar which establishes equivalences and parallelisms between natural phenomena and creative practice; where the very processes of moulding and firing clay can be seen to be analogous to the actions of the wind and the sun.

And if, for a moment, we were to think of ‘nature’ as a ‘language’, then the artist’s work, from 1994 in particular, reflects a conscious choice to blur the boundaries between this language and the one he creates. A deliberate crossing of borders was

5 Extract from a interview with Rodrigo Quijano, 03.06.99, in his essay ‘Historia Modernidad y Ruina Peruana, Notas sobre la indentidad y espacio en la obra de Carlos Runcie Tanaka’, Lima: Ritual de lo Habitual ediciones, 2004, p. 15.

particularly striking in *Desplazamientos* (see figures 2-12), where intervened crab shells (see figure 1) and origami crabs existed in syntagmatic relationship with other visual paradigms that would continue to re-emerge in future installations, such as the colour ultramarine blue, disparate glass spheres (*bolitas*), and the use of sound and light. The co-existence of these materials - side by side the artist's non-figurative ceramic pieces placed on surfaces covered by sand, rocks, remnants of bones and marine life – was also reminiscent of an equally familiar landscape: angular rocks resting peacefully in a traditional Japanese garden. In this respect, *Desplazamientos* could be seen as the ‘scenario’ from which to reflect upon the fluid boundaries between cultural and natural phenomena as processes in constant flux and interaction. As Ricardo Pau Llosa's (Cuba, 1954) writes,

*La dinámica de la alusión fija la escena para que surja el tema real – el proceso es lo que une al mundo vital de la naturaleza pues tanto el mundo como la mente humana están en plano íntimo con el tiempo.*⁶

The artist's intention in this dynamic process of equivalences between natural and creative activity is not to ‘reproduce’ a landscape, but to recreate instead an ‘environment’ where the repetition and accumulation of tangible signs in space trigger what Runcie Tanaka has referred to as, (*una*) *experiencia subjetiva* (a subjective experience). When referring to *Desplazamientos*, the artist points out,

*Las coordenadas de los trabajos son ahora más claramente de cantidad, de repetición. Hay una repetición obstinada que es como un ritmo. El único paisaje propiamente dicho está al ingreso y es la fotografía de Cerro Azul.*⁷

The ‘visual’ rhythms created by the recurrence of elements (crabs, spheres, glass boxes), across a variety of mediums (crab shells, painted crab shells, lines of origami crabs suspended on strings), could be seen to recreate the notion of infinity (*lo infinito*), a theme which has been central to many Latin American artists over the course of Twentieth Century. Ricardo Pau Llosa's following commentary is eloquent in this respect,

⁶ Ricardo Pau Llosa, ‘Paralelos y Paradojas’, Lima, 1993. Accessed in: <http://www.carlosruncietanaka.com/textos/PDF/05%20PAU-LIOSA,%20Ricardo.pdf>.

⁷ Villacorta, Jorge. La Marea de la Memoria, an interview with Runcie Tanaka, Semanario Oiga, 1994. Found in: <http://www.carlosruncietanaka.com/entrevistas.htm>.

*Lo infinito siempre ha sido un tema importante para artistas, y escritores Latinoamericanos. Es tan central en la literatura de Jorge Luis Borges y Octavio Paz, como en las esculturas e instalaciones de Jesús Rafael Soto y las pinturas de Joaquín Torres García y Enrique Castro Cid. Cualquier pauta que puede repetirse sin fin, o cualquier concepción del espacio cuya variabilidad es inagotable, nos abre sobre una ponderación sobre lo infinito.*⁸

For Runcie Tanaka's, the notion of infinity created by the various repetitive representation of single elements can also be perceived as the artist's attempt to embody a way of thinking associated with Peruvian pre-Columbian traditions and practices, such as the handling of clay, the art of weaving and the knotting systems of *Quipus*. Luis Rebaza - Soruluz (Lima 1958) defines these systems.

*Los "quipus" son originalmente sistemas de contabilidad incaicos fabricados con cuerdas de colores anudadas y agrupadas en series con el objeto de preservar información.*⁹

These non verbal, three dimensional forms of representation bring to mind a non-linear logic: a textile conception of the universe where the systematic ordering and placing of narrative threads cross and intertwine creating a layered canvas of meaning. As the artist points out at the time of *Desplazamientos*,

*No son escenas que suceden unas a otras en una relación lineal. No hay hilos que conduzcan a una conclusión. Son perspectivas equivalentes. Hay signos que se desplazan por la muestra, como el color azul turquesa, que se vuelve una excusa para hacer sentir el agua.*¹⁰

The intended gestural implicit in the language of 'crabs' is perhaps to shift our attention beyond the hegemony of logo-centric forms of knowledge, attempting

⁸ Ricardo Pau Llosa, 'Paralelos y Paradojas', Lima, 1993. Found in: <http://www.carlosruncietanaka.com/textos/PDF/05%20PAU-LIOSA,%20Ricardo.pdf>

⁹ Rebaza-Soruluz, Luis. 'el paisaje infinito de la costa del Perú: jorge eduardo Eielson', in NU/DO, edited by José Ignacio Padilla, Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú, Fondo Editorial, 2002. p. 275.

¹⁰ Villacorta, Jorge. 'La Marea de la Memoria', an interview with Runcie Tanaka, Semanario Oiga, 1994. Found in: <http://www.carlosruncietanaka.com/entrevistas.htm>.

instead to amplify the narrative potentials of three-dimensional forms as valid systems of communication. In this respect, the presence of a multitude of amphibious creatures in the central hall of *Desplazamientos*, presented a tension between more than one system of thought: one associated with the logic of accumulation and repetition, and the other with the finite linear chronology of events which relate to the course of both individual and collective transits through life, such as the stories of the artist's own predecessors since their arrival in Peru.

*La experiencia del abuelo japonés, artífice del Jardín Tanaka:
parte vivero y paseo miraflores de
los treintas. Del abuelo británico, fotógrafo desde los quince
y camarógrafo documentalista, el primero-junto con Elmer Faucett-
en captar imágenes aéreas del Perú.*¹¹

In this respect, the inclusion in *Desplazamientos* of tools and objects belonging to both grandfathers, such as: an abacus, tools to plough the earth, wooden travelling trunks, cameras, tripods and photographic albums could be seen as an intensely personal way of paying tribute to his grandfathers' professions and a poignant recognition of the impact these would exert on his own artist practice. A tribute of his grandfather's journeys would re-emerge in many installations after 1993, and was particularly striking within the context of the 49th Venice Biennale in, *El Viaje*¹² (The Journey, 2001) and in, *36exp. Piscina de Revelado*¹³ (36exp. Processing Pool, Lima 2002), to mention only a few that will be discussed in the piece.

It was difficult not to perceive the display of 'treasured objects' in the context of *Desplazamientos* as a striking reminder of the way in which pre-Hispanic cultures buried their dead, that is, surrounded by the objects they would perhaps need in their afterlife. In this respect, more than a commentary on the nature of displacement –

¹¹ Villacorta, Jorge. Extract from *Desplazamientos* (the exhibition's hand programme), Lima, June 1994.

¹² *El Viaje*, Runcie Tanaka's installation at the 49th Venice Biennale, 2001.

¹³ *36exp. Piscina de Revelado*, installation in the pool of the residence of the United States' ambassador in Lima, 2002.

geographical, historical, personal – *Desplazamientos* could also be seen as a deliberate re-enactment of the burials the artist could not assist but wished to commemorate: a '*pago*'¹⁴ in memory of Sinichi Tanaka, drowned in the sea of Ancon at the age of 36. This installation was therefore an intensely personal tribute as well as a powerful commentary on the historical fissures referred to above, which have defined Peruvian national life before and after the Spanish Conquest. One such fissure, in the context of the mid- 90's was the civil war that span over the course of two decades (1980-2000) and became the most devastating episode in Peru's contemporary Republican history - a time during which the artist himself would become a victim of violence.

In December 1996, Runcie Tanaka was taken hostage together with over 700 politicians, businessmen and women at the Japanese ambassadors' residency in Lima, as a result of a siege by the MRTA (Movimiento Revolucionario Tupac Amaru), one of the terrorist organisations during Peru's armed conflict (1980-2000). Just as *Desplazamientos* became the equivalent scenario of the *Cerro Azul* excursion, the artist's experience of captivity during the Christmas period of 1996 in an episode better known as *La Crisis de los Rehenes* (The Crisis of the Hostages), resurfaced a year later in the context of *Tiempo Detenido*¹⁵ (Arrested Time, Lima 1997), his most overtly political installation and one which saw the appearance of another figurative ceramic representation, the *hombrecitos* ('little' or minor men) (see figures 35-37), also known as *chuchimilcos* due to their similarity to the anthropomorphic ceramic figures of the Chancay Culture (1100 - 1400 a.d.) (see figures 38-39). Like the 'crabs' in *Desplazamientos*, the presence of large numbers of '*hombrecitos*' huddled together in silence along the halls of Lima's *Escuela de Arte* was seen at the time as an oblique yet powerful protest against the absence of political will to account for the futile loss of life during the armed conflict. It was also a statement of solidarity, the restitution of a Necropolis, which paid tribute to the forgotten tombs of thousands of civilian victims during the war.

¹⁴ A '*pago*' is literally a 'payment' or offering to the earth carried out within the context of ceremonies and traditional festivities, mostly in the Andean regions of Peru.

¹⁵ *Tiempo Detenido*, installation at the Escuela de Arte, Lima 1997

A close observation at the stoic armies of ceramic men would reveal a familiar site: their hollow hands had been moulded into shapes, which echoed the morphology of crabs, (see figure 37). Furthermore, in strike contrast with their mute bodies, the *hombrecitos*' hands appeared to be enacting urgent gestures, an incessant rhythm which echoed of the artist's own experience of captivity and the public's overwhelming sense of bewilderment at a time. Jeremías Gamboa (1974) reflects upon *Tiempo Detenido*,

Como en tantas ocasiones, en Tiempo Detenido nos ubicamos frente a la "escenificación" de un drama colectivo, pero a la vez nos internamos en un "salón de espejos" que reflejan una sola identidad, un magnífico doble conflicto en el cual el cuerpo de todos, pero también el cuerpo del artista "en todos", resultan el receptáculo de la Historia como producto de la violencia. En esa ecuación, ese "tiempo detenido" es la suma del gran tiempo histórico y del silencioso tiempo de lo psíquico, el de las heridas internas y los procesos de reflexión y drama personales.¹⁶

From natural site (*Cerro Azul*) to political site (*La Crisis de los Rehenes*). One could think of the artist himself as the *receptáculo* (receptacle) or 'depository' of knowledge. Like the crabs that dig the surface of the sand to deposit the regurgitation of their food in the shape of little balls, Runcie Tanaka's *poetics* can be seen as a the unearthing of personal histories, a process which is defined by his intention to 'assemble' or bring together multiple legacies and collective experiences into 'one body of work'.¹⁷ In this respect, his approach to artistic practice responds to a preoccupation shared by a generation before him about the role of contemporary art in Peru.

¹⁶ Jeremías Gamboa, 'El Vuelo del Cangrejo', July 7th 2008. Accessed in: <http://artmotiv.com/El-vuelo-del-cangrejo-Carlos>.

¹⁷ The allusion between the crabs' regurgitation in the sand and the artist's own creative process has been referred to by Rodrigo Quijano in his essay: *Historia Modernidad y Ruina Peruana, Notas sobre la indentidad y espacio en la obra de Carlos Runcie Tanaka*, Lima: Ritual de lo Habitual ediciones, 2004.

‘Beings that can shift between land and sea, and are capable of existing in both mediums.’ The oscillating image is equally emblematic of the key theoretical coordinates developed over the second half of the last Century by a handful of contemporary artists in Peru. Their aim was to rethink and re-define artistic practice as a ‘dynamic model of national identity’¹⁸, which challenged previous intellectual trends and the prevailing idea that a single national identity could be representative of a country with such diverse and multiple traditions. Luis Rebaza-Soraluz (Lima 1958) writes about the group in question,

Los artistas y escritores de este grupo entienden la naturaleza del arte como una experiencia de movimiento, de “apropiación” cultural, en un contexto en donde tradiciones múltiples y simultáneas cohabitan en fructífera y, usando una frase acuñada por Sologuren, en “feliz promiscuidad”.¹⁹

Los escritores y artistas de los que me ocupo no fueron ajenos a la exigencia de definir el rol del espacio social y el de sus semejantes y, en este clima, elaboraron maneras, - sus maneras - de entender la naturaleza de un arte que les permitiera interpretar e imaginar un Perú a la medida de su tiempo: más que un espacio geopolítico convencional, un volumen de movimientos humanos donde diversas manifestaciones culturales, históricamente en conflicto, se valorizaran de igual modo y fueran igualmente asequibles.²⁰

Although merely one generation apart from artists like Javier Sologuren (1921-2004), Sebastián Salazar Bondy (1924-1964), Fernando de Szyszlo (1925), Blanca Varela (1926), and Jorge Eduardo Eielson (1926-2006), Runcie Tanaka’s work continues to reflect the legacy of their aesthetic shifts. Among these artists, it seems particularly relevant to briefly compare Runcie Tanaka’s interdisciplinary approach to

¹⁸ In Rebaza-Soraluz, Luis. *La Construcción de un Artista Peruano Contemporáneo*, Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú, Fondo Editorial, 2000. p. 19.

¹⁹ *Ibid.* p.20.

²⁰ *Ibid.* p.19.

Jorge Eduardo Eielson's practice, particularly after 1960, when he (Eielson) begins to investigate the gesturality of pre-Columbian traditions in three-dimensional pieces, such as: *Paisaje Infinito de la Costa del Perú*, and *Quipus*, both initiated in 1963. Luis Rebaza-Soraluz (Lima 1958) coins the term *Anudamientos* (knotting systems) when referring to Eielson's work. He writes,

*Eielson hace del anudar algo análogo ala dinámica del acto creador, en el sentido más vasto. Su producto el nudo, constituye la unidad constructiva por excelencia. Su forma revelaría lo que Eielson ha llamado 'un gesto primordial'. Concebido de esta manera, el nudo es una unidad orden ... cuya tensión concentra espacio de potencia expansiva indeterminable, y es también "cifra" de un ordenamiento que sigue leyes cósmicas estrictas.*²¹

Rebaza-Soraluz' understanding of Eielson's knots is significant to this piece, as it establishes possible coordinates with which to reflect upon the representation of Runcie Tanaka's individual 'crab' as a meaning making unit, which on the one hand is a finite tangible construct (space), and on the other can also be seen as a 'segment' in a process that is infinite (time). (See figure 13-14) Seen as an single expansive poetic unit, the 'crab' like Eielson's 'knot', exists as an independent 'gesture' to build in space: a tangible 'sign' in a non - written language enabling the artist to construct multiple, at time parallel narratives.

Rebaza-Soraluz' analysis also reminds us that Eielson's initial reference point, the knots in a Pre – Columbian *quipu*, were originally conceived as independent three dimensional systems to record and transfer information. Paper pleating, like the tensions used to twist and tie knots on the strings of a *quipu*, is the result of human intention and therefore both a 'receptor' and a 'generator' of meaning.

²¹ Luis Rebaza-Soraluz in his prologue to *Arte Poética*, by Jorge Eduardo Eielson, Ediciones del Rectorado, Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú, edited by Luis Rebaza-Soraluz, 2004, pp. 42-43.

To record and to transmit: at least two of the multiple meanings of the verb *contar* in the Spanish title of this piece (to enumerate, to narrate, to act in the presence of, to exist in complicity with other beings). The potential to communicate in more than one form, simultaneously opens the possibility to think of the visual grammar created by the representation of ‘crabs’ as a form of ‘speech’, a three dimensional ventriloquism which resonates across the many legacies and traditions that originally inform it. The freedom to migrate from one discipline to another, from one material to another, from an ancient to contemporary creative endeavours, lies at the heart of both Runcie Tanaka and Eielson’s respective practices.

A detailed observation of the origami crab’s qualities will bring new light to some of the ideas exposed so far. Due to the relative brevity of this piece, I will focus primarily on three types of representation of the ‘crab’ where the medium is paper: white origami crabs, the digital print of blue origami crab which emerged in *El Viaje* (The Journey, Venice 2001) (see figures 16-22) and digital prints of crabs submerged in water as seen in, *36exp. Piscina de Revelado* (36exp. Processing Pool, Lima 2002) (see figures 25-34).

In contrast with the internal skeletal structure of humans, crabs are characterised by having an exoskeleton, or external skeleton, which gives the animals support; a pleated armour against predators. Paper, as opposed to bone, is malleable: it creases and folds whilst retaining its structural integrity. A white origami crab, like the ‘empty’ carcass of a crab ‘is’ therefore its sole structure. However, unlike the natural shell, which one could say bears more resemblance to a hollow ceramic artefact, a paper crab is made out of a material which, despite it’s Eastern origins, is primarily associated with Western logo-centric forms of communication.

A brief glance at the history of Origami will remind us that when Buddhist monks brought the art of paper folding from China to Japan during the 6th century, it was used almost exclusively for ceremonial purposes. There is not enough evidence to suggest whether origami, as we now it today, eventually reached Europe via the silk

route or whether it was developed independently by Moorish communities before their expulsion from Spain in 15th Century as a way of investigating geometrical shapes in three dimensions. What we do know is that when paper began to be used as a surface to write on, it was very often meticulously pleated and folded to ‘hold’ or safeguard the message it carried within.

In the five days leading to his release as a hostage in 1996, the artist’s only means of communication with the outside world would be through brief messages written on pieces of paper. These would then folded into *esquelas de papel* (paper notes) and distributed to relatives via the Red Cross, the only mediating presence during the siege. It is meaningful to observe how the re-emergence of paper folding ‘migrated’ this time to a dramatic episode of the artist’s life. A year later, the content of these paper notes would resurface as red inscriptions on the walls of *Tiempo Detenido*.

One could therefore say, particularly during a period that concerns this piece (mid to late 90’s), the transfer and amplification of the crabs’ amphibious qualities permeates the artist’s interdisciplinary approach and the materials he chose to work with at the time. The colour and texture of the white origami crab that emerged in 1994 could also be seen to be echoing ‘human qualities’, the substance of bones. Runcie Tanaka comment is relevant in this respect,

*Soy más consciente de que puedo valerme del artificio en busca de ese punto de reflexión sobre la experiencia humana que es lo más importante para mí ahora.*²²

El artificio (the artifice) in this case, is the emergence of an origami crab as a result of pleating paper. The point of departure is the fissure that lies between the transient nature of human experience and the traces it leaves behind, their physical manifestation in the natural world.

²² Villacorta, Jorge. La Marea de la Memoria, an interview with Runcie Tanaka, Semanario Oiga, 1994. Found in: <http://www.carlosruncietanaka.com/entrevistas.htm>.

Paper's photosensitive potential is another significant characteristic, which could be perceived in *36 exp. Piscina de Revelado* (2002) and *El Viaje*, Runcie Tanaka's installation at the 49th Venice Biennale (2001) - one which saw the emergence of the turquoise blue crab: a digital photograph of a crab bearing the image Shinichi Tanaka on its back. Emulating the ancient Japanese legend of the Heiki Crab²³, this image was displayed alongside strings of white origami crabs suspended over a circular glass surface covered with tiny glass spheres: the disaggregated beads of a Japanese grandfather's abacus signalling the suspension of time.

The re-emergence of turquoise blue, this time on the 'crab' itself, highlights paper's potential to 'capture' and 'fix' images and colour in space. The material, like the artist's photosensitive eye, 'arrests' and 'intervenes' in a creative process (a blue origami crab), which will continue to be transformed into something other than what it was when viewed by the artist gaze. Runcie Tanaka's following comment is relevant in this respect.

En una insatación están las piedras del río, sin la corriente.

En ese sentido la fotografía es importante, y

la actitud del que fotografía está en

*el trabajo: estas instalaciones son tomas captadas.*²⁴

A poignant tribute to the impact of photography was particularly striking in *36exp. Piscina de Revelado*. As the artist's notes on this project reminds us, this installation was 'an attempt to bridge the gap between ... two foreigners, one oriental and the other occidental, whose lives would cross without them ever meeting.' The artifice in this case, 36 digital photographs of the blue origami crab submerged in water and lit by fluorescent light, draws our attention to photographic paper's resistance to water. Like Shinichi Tanaka's bones dispersed in a segment of the sea (the pool), the 36 prints of one crab attached to wire cables underwater could be seen as the restitution

²³ The Heiki Crab' is a traditional story dating back to the 12th century, in South Western Japan. After being defeated in battle, the Heiki samurai committed suicide by throwing themselves into the sea. The crabs in that region continue to have a particular characteristic: a human face 'engraved' on the animal's back. The spirit of the ancient samurais is still believed to roam underneath the ocean.

²⁴ Villacorta, Jorge. La Marea de la Memoria, an interview with Runcie Tanaka, Semanario Oiga, 1994. Found in: <http://www.carlosruncietanaka.com/entrevistas.htm>.

of a pre-Columbian *quipu*: a precious three dimensional document which could ‘record’ the duration of a loved one’s life (36 years) as well as ‘transmit’ knowledge about this individual’s resistance to the environment through the tangible traces he left behind.

Finally, paper ‘crabs’, like the ‘knots’ in a *quipu*, are expansive. This quality was particularly present in Runcie Tanaka’s installation, *Cuando Cruzan el Camino*²⁵ (When Roads Cross, Lima 2004). An open book placed on a raised table displayed its folded pages as they extended upwards like the anamorphic vision of a crab’s legs or the beginning of wings. The pages appeared to be pointing to a crumpled paper on the wall directly above the book entitled, *Páginas Dobladas, para Eduardo Eielson* (Folded Pages, for Eduardo Eielson), a tribute to the work of a mentor and friend two years before Eielson’s death, in 2006. On the surface of this document, a faint inscription of *Pequeña música de cámara* (1965), read as follows,

Escribo con los ojos

Con el corazón, con la mano

Pido consejo a mis orejas

Y a mis labios

Cada verso que escribo es de carne y hueso

Sólo mi pensamiento es de papel

‘I write with the eyes, with the heart, with the hand. I ask my ears for counsel, and my lips. Each verse that I write is flesh and blood. Only my thought is made of paper.’²⁶ This poem’s inclusion in the installation in question draws our attention to a pivotal point of reference for both Eielson and Runcie Tanaka’ practices: the dynamic

²⁵ *Cuando Cruzan el Camino*, La Galería, Lima 2004

²⁶ My own translation for the purposes of this piece.

potentials of the human body as process, the ultimate ‘knot’. In this case, the written word is the equivalent scenario. Eielson turns words into physical entities endowing them with ‘human qualities’. ‘Words’ become corporeal, tangible. Like ‘knots’ or the elongated legs of the paper ‘crab’ pointing to the poem on the wall, their very essence is expansive.

The expressive/expansive potential, which ‘migrates’ from words to folded pages and vice versa draws my attention to a final observation. The significance of Runcie Tanaka’s ‘crabs’ as independent signs in a distinctive visual grammar lies most crucially in the intention behind the artist’s dynamic ‘gesture’ at the moment of creation. The kinetic qualities inherent in the act of creasing and folding paper form the basis of the visual language itself. Although what we perceive may be the ‘crab’ placed in a specifically constructed space, the memory of the ‘gesture’ it holds and the ‘space’ it creates in time, *el gesto primordial* (the ‘primordial gesture’) to use Eielson’s words, are as eloquent as the representation of the ‘crab’ itself.

I have seen the artist bow over a square piece of blank paper in a gesture that has as much reverence as it has intention. As his hands begin to crease and fold the material, our attention is drawn to the dexterity of his rapid, meticulous movements, repeated as effortlessly as the crab’s oblique crawling on the sand. It is ‘as if’, for an instant, the boundaries between paper and hand, artist and observer, rhythm and space, collapsed. It is during this transient meltdown of borders, where a myriad of interactions takes place as we watch the artist at work, that we sense and understand the value of artistic practice in a Latin American country like Peru. We are moved because we recognize a quality that speaks to us in critical, cultural, and above all emotional levels. As Jeremías Gamboa suggests,

De pronto, como un polo gravitatorio que condensara las preo-cupaciones de muchas individualidades, el trabajo de un hombre puede absorber sensibilidades dispersas, aglutinarlas de una manera original bajo una

*unidad formal – la obra – e interpelarlas desde la nueva entidad ganada de objeto de arte.*²⁷

The representation of the ‘crab’ across a variety of mediums is only one ‘sign’ in the volume of multiple interactions, which constitutes Runcie Tanaka’s ‘body of work’: a physical shorthand of intentions which reveal the artist’s creative mind and a dynamic commitment to his practice.

Final Note: After a two year pause, Runcie Tanaka’s most recent installation in Lima, *Hacia el blanco* (‘Into white’, ICPNA Miraflores, May 2010), introduced a new material in a familiar shape: the crystal crab.

²⁷ Jeremías Gamboa, ‘El Vuelo del Cangrejo’, July 7th 2008. Accessed in: <http://artmotiv.com/El-vuelo-del-cangrejo-Carlos>.