

## EXCAVATING MODERNISM, UNEARTHING HISTORY: IDENTITY AND SPACE IN THE WORK OF CARLOS RUNCIE TANAKA

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In late 1996, during a party in the Japanese embassy in Lima, Peru, Carlos Runcie Tanaka and almost 400 other people were taken hostage by an armed unit of the Tupac Amaru Revolutionary Movement (MRTA) terrorist group. Although Runcie Tanaka was among those liberated after only a few days, the events had a lasting effect on his artistic development. It was not that he suddenly abandoned the formal evolution he had been undergoing, pursuing other avenues. Instead, and not by mere symbolic accident, the violent incident of the Japanese embassy consolidated a vein that—although seemingly unexpected—was already latent in his work. Some months later, many of the tendencies triggered by the Japanese Embassy episode were successfully consolidated in *Tiempo detenido* (Arrested time), the installation presented by Runcie Tanaka in the Ibero-American Biennial of Lima.

Perhaps because unexpected events often trigger, precisely, the unexpected—things that are occult or buried—there is a particular sense of “unearthing” associated with Runcie Tanaka’s work. This is due in part to his early interest in archeology, developed during his school years thanks to his upbringing in the British tradition of youth clubs. But there is also a gradual approximation in Runcie to his eastern heritage, whose recuperation implied, among many other things—and not in an exclusively metaphorical sense—a history of exile and unearthing.

In various ways, and from its very early stages, Runcie Tanaka’s work reflects and ambience of exploration into an unstable territory: an identity that is, at once, both national and subjectively uncertain. In excavating his own identity, as an inhabitant of the arid Peruvian coast, his points of departure are both biographical and historical. This creates a rare tension between two cultural extremes (British

on the paternal side and Japanese on the maternal) that constitute his heritage and within whose traditions his evolution has taken place. One could paraphrase Bernard Leach (one of the two well-known potters with whom Runcie Tanaka strongly identifies—the other is Shoji Hamada): “Both of the two opposed cultures that I had to draw from caused me to return to Japan, where the synthesis of East and West was more advanced.”<sup>1</sup> No doubt this spirit of synthesis, within a very particular personal framework, has inspired Runcie Tanaka’s work. And this particular personal framework is none other than Peru’s complex cultural heterogeneity—more precisely, that of the vast historical and geographical territory of its coastal desert.

Since pre-Hispanic times, the Peruvian coast, a length of desert that is interrupted only intermittently by valleys that descend from the high mountains of the Andes, has been a place of encounter and multicultural exchange. It is a territory inhabited by numerous and overlapping migratory populations that have left their indelible mark on its history, as well as on its present-day reality. The footprints of these populations are so widely scattered over the surface of this territory that archeological remains—bones and ceramic shards—constitute an almost *natural* fragmentary landscape that virtually coexists, side-by-side with the dwellers of more contemporary settlements. The extremes overlap creating a fascinating geography that gives testimony to a complex historical patchwork.

Since the time of his early travels and artistic endeavors, a similar process—constituting a dense synthesis of many of these elements—was germinating in Runcie Tanaka’s work. A prolonged stay in Japan, as assistant to the master Tsukimura Masahiko, sufficed to establish in him a ritual approximation to ceramics and, as a consequence, a reverence for the object as transcendent evidence of this vocation. At the same time, as he himself affirms, this activity offered him a means of understanding “objects above and beyond their functionality.”<sup>2</sup> The artist himself refers to the gradual development of an interest in the utilization of space

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1. Cited by John Houston, “The life behind the pots”, in: *An exhibition of the Art of Bernard Leach* (exhibit catalog), The Ohara Museum of Art Asahi Shimbun: Tokyo, 1980, p. 25. Bernard Leach was born in Hong Kong and spent much of his childhood in Japan, where he returned as assistant to the ceramist Kenzan Ogata in 1911. Runcie Tanaka would himself undertake a similar return to Japan in 1979-81, working with Tsumikura Masahiko in Ogaya and with a disciple of Hamada, the ceramist Shimaoka Tatsuzo, in Mashiko.

during this phase. Through the reinterpretation of space, his work transforms the object from a mere formal, autonomous creation to a more complex *mise-en-scène*.

*Mise-en-scène* or setting in motion; both involve utilizing space as an extension of the artist's creation in the same way that, in the Japanese tradition, the natural environment functions as an extension of culture and culture, in turn, acts as a virtual metaphor of natural experience.<sup>3</sup> It is important to note that in Runcie Tanaka's work, the process of gradually transforming pottery into more of a means than an end begins to require a landscape and a setting, a new cultural context representing the creation of a unique environment, a space not yet claimed by history.

This can perhaps be seen as a restitution or reintegration into the environment. But then, where does the *natural* environment of the contemporary Peruvian landscape begin and where does it end? One of the themes most profoundly and profusely utilized by recent Peruvian visual and literary artists is the desert as a metaphor of complex social, historical, personal, and familiar conditions, and it is not surprising to find these elements in the language of many artists in the second half of the 20th century.<sup>4</sup> No is it not by chance that the transformations of Peruvian national life in this period have taken place almost in their entirety in the arid strip of the territory that overlooks the Pacific. A contemporary image of precariousness, this coastal desert is a clear testimony to the disintegration of a country whose territory was, historically, essentially agrarian. But the other feature of interest here is that, in Runcie Tanaka's work, the use of the desert as visual content evidences, without doubt, a determined delving into the most critical areas of natural space, interpreted as cultural space, and at the same time a criticism of contemporary uses of archeological finds and of their most commonly cited parts: remains of pre-Hispanic ceramics.

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2. Interview with the artist 3/6/99.

3. See Agustín Berque, *Le sauvage et l'artificie. Les japonais devant la nature*. Paris: Gallimard, 1986.

4. We can mention, among others, Jorge Eduardo Eielson, Ricardo Wiese, Esther Vainstein and Mario Montalbetti. For all of these artists, the archeology and landscape of the Peruvian coast are allegories of another type of historical and subjective process.

In this respect, the use of pre-Hispanic references in Runcie's work represents an attempt to rescue the esthetics of the archeological find, and beyond this, to rescue these vestiges from their spatial context through the imitation of the excavation itself, of the ruins and cultural centers that one encounters throughout the entire national territory. It would be difficult to find in Peruvian cultural life—be it official or popular—a more ambiguous statement than the one that underlies the pre-Hispanic archeological vestiges. It is well known that in many countries (Mexico, Israel, Egypt, some countries of southeast Asia), archeological arguments have been used to underpin the construction of a national identity.<sup>5</sup> Although in the case of Peru this buttressing has been more voluntary in nature, it has been less successful. Despite the fact that in this rich territory pre-Hispanic vestiges surface virtually wherever one sinks one's hand, the relationship between archeological arguments concerning national roots and their concrete application is, at best, poor. Numerous monuments and archeological remains are under permanent threat because of urban speculation and the informal invasion of their territories.<sup>6</sup> Officially and unofficially abandoned, many of these vestiges and pre-Hispanic sites have fallen victim to multiple lootings in response to the growth in demand from local and international collectors; or they have been literally demolished by the tractors of urban speculation; or, as has been the case many times already, they have been reused and re-inhabited by populations of contemporary Andean migrants in a gesture that could well be seen as the symbolic restitution of lost goods.<sup>7</sup>

Perhaps Carlos Runcie Tanaka's creations can be attributed to a similar, though unique, restitution. At the end of the 1980s, strongly influenced by pre-Columbian ceramics and sculpture, his pieces begin an almost random process of integration with the landscape. On the one hand, they intervene in it; on the other, Runcie gives new meaning to pieces originally conceived as individual entities by creating a new *mise-en-scène* for them. The initial direct confrontations between

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5. In the case of southeast Asia, for example, see Benedict Anderson, *Imagined communities*, London: Verso, 1991, pp. 163-185.

6. It is estimated that far less than half of the archeological sites in Peru are duly registered in the National Institute of Culture.

the landscape and the ceramic objects occur during photo sessions to illustrate catalogs and articles in the press, rather than as explicit artistic propositions. Photographed on the dunes of the desert or against the mud walls of a pre-Hispanic temple, the pieces embark on a journey in search of their own context. A para-artistic experience, if you like, but one that, with time, would begin to define Runcie Tanaka's creative process and would eventually modify his use and understanding of space.

In this space, the ceramic pieces—and their possible reminiscences of a pre-Hispanic past—acquire a shared density, producing a re-integration of what has been disintegrated by Peruvian colonial history. In this respect, *invention*—the creation of the parts and their ad hoc context—permits the transformation of this simulation into a metaphor of “Peruvianness.” The exposure of these elements of a fragmented nationality propitiates a virtual unearthing, an authentic encounter with a modernism that is desired and recognized, although discursively and historically concealed, repressed and buried. In the words of the late art critic Roberto Miro Quesada in reference to one of Runcie Tanaka's exhibitions in the former Trilce Gallery, it is the “unearthing of something age-old, which in no way is perceived by us as past. To the contrary, there is a modernism in these objects, very much in line with our actual sensibility, that comes from afar.”<sup>8</sup> An age-old past and, at the same time, a feasible modern present whose elements seem, equally, to come from *afar*. This is the expression of a distance that is not alien to us; rather, it appears to reconstitute an inconclusive project of modernism. The attempt to express the key elements of this modernism, both politically and culturally, would continue throughout a vast part of 20th century Peruvian history.<sup>9</sup>

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7. I refer to the frequent “invasions” of the Moche citadel of Chan Chan and its environs by massive populations of migrants, leading to frequent run-ins with the authorities.

8. Roberto Miró Quesada “*La propuesta artística de Runcie Tanaka*”, in *La República*, 18/11/87, commentary on an exhibition in the Trilce Gallery, November 12-30, 1987.

9. More space would be needed to expand upon this digression. Because of the ancient desire for redemption, which has been one of the driving forces in modern Peruvian culture and politics, the recuperation of the marginated Andean culture of the majority has always implied a national project of social transformation. Many instances and projects of alliance have been founded on this basic idea, permeating Peruvian thinking at least since Mariategui. The reasons for their continuous and diverse downfalls deserve attention far beyond the confines of the present study. For the record, at least since the second post-world war, these movements of transformation became massive, acquiring genuine possibilities of success, in particular between the 70s and the late 80s. This period, by the way, covers the intellectual and militant period of Miró Quesada (+1990), when

It is a project of local modernism: a ghost that has permeated the history of a great number of cultures of colonial origin, characterized by the longing to impart a *unique* character on the technological developments of the western world.

Junichiro Tanizaki (1886-1965), for example, raised the question with regard to Japan with reference to a debate over the western predilection for light in the arts, versus the eastern one for shade. Speculating on how scientific civilizations would have developed if they were to have done so independently of the West, Tanizaki reflects on the differences and specificity of what is considered modern Japanese, autonomous of the West. "If the Japanese process had followed its original directions," he proposes, "the implications for our way of dressing, eating and living would have been, without a doubt, considerable, and this is logical; but this would also have been true in the political, religious, artistic, and economic spheres."<sup>10</sup> In other words, the *representation* of what is intrinsically Japanese would have had its own modern formalization, so to speak. Such a proposal, in the Peruvian case, is no more than a desire, but it reconstitutes the utopian dimension of an ancient collectivity and the esthetics of the possible.

So far and so near, tradition and modernism, implicit and problematic; are these not, also, the unique extremes explored by Runcie's work? Just as the paradoxical nearness/distance elicits the longing for a modern national project founded on bases that differ from those that have nourished the official version of republican *Peruvianness*<sup>11</sup>, Runcie's approximation, be it cultural or subjective, is based on a national identity that, to a certain extent, is also ruptured. As a Peruvian artist, Runcie's fissure is seen as historical; as a *nikkei* artist, it is seen as national. How is it, then, that these elements interact and come together in his work?

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this became one of the key elements of national creativity and thought, of which Runcie's work is very much a part.

10. See Junichiro Tanizaki, *El elogio de la sombra* [1933], Madrid: Ediciones Siruela, 1994, pp. 21-22. In this essay the author explores the western desire for light, and its relationship with the desire for order and proximity to reality that occidental expression has historically pursued, differentiating it from the eastern cult of darkness. Tanizaki sees this western predilection as correlative with progress (p. 72) and arrives at an intense challenging of this condition, posing the question: "What would be the forms of our society and to what point would they be different from what they are?" if there had been an authentic Japanese modernism.

11. There are other contemporary Peruvian artists who also explore this national fissure. See Rodrigo Quijano on the work of Fernando Bryce, *El Museo Hawai: una naturaleza muerta de la cultura. Notas a la serie The Progress of Peru*, en: *Hueso Húmero* # 33, Lima, December 1998, also published independently by RitualdeloHabitual ediciones, December 2000.

Various critics and commentators have noted an evident relationship in Runcie's ceramic production both with pre-Hispanic objects, and, *at the same time*, with Japanese objects. This ambivalence demonstrates his interest in joining these tendencies, in equal measures, formally. Inspired by patterns from the concentric ornamentation of the sculptures of Chavin (1000-300 AC), Runcie's work of the late 1980s contains motifs in bas relief that, although no longer concentric, directly allude to carvings in stone whose material analogy can be found in the darkening of the piece in the oven. Another series of pieces, however, demonstrates a formal relationship to the pre-Hispanic vessel (the *huaco*) rather than the chavinoide stone block, although the unexpected turn of the spout or of the closed gullet (a "non-pitcher," in the words of the artist) gives it a new intention, producing curious figures that resemble buds, mummies, shellfish, or hybrids of some imaginary botany. Imaginary but not unimaginable. This is the reason why many critics immediately recognized traits associated with the ceramics of Chancay (900 AC to 1475 DC) in these syntheses, something that even the artist had not yet perceived.<sup>12</sup>

Arranged in the space of the Trilce Gallery, these pieces elicited an imaginary pre-Hispanic and metaphorically natural context, resembling the desert or the beaches of the Peruvian coast.<sup>13</sup> At the same time, they distilled a balance between the natural and the cultural spheres, blurring the outlines and boundaries that separate them. What's more, because the unstable form of the base of the pre-Columbian-type vessels made it impossible for them to stand alone, in the gallery it became necessary to support the pieces on a malleable surface, such as gravel, much in the same way that they had been fixed in sand to facilitate the photographic coverage of the show for the catalog and the press. This was a gesture that initially responded more to the practicality of devising a means of support than to the imaginary contextualization that would later evolve out of it, but this duality, in turn, redoubled the metaphorical content, or the illusion of it.

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12. Personal interview with the artist, 3/6/99.

13. "(The pieces) are at our feet, with no barrier whatsoever to impede our touching them or tripping over them, just as we encounter—on any beach on the Peruvian coast—seashells or starfish that we can take home with us." Miro Quesada. *op. cit*

Both because of their uses and of the commentary surrounding them, however, there is an impression that in contemporary Peruvian history, pre-Columbian ceramics have found at least two contextual niches: the museum and the natural environment. As if the profiles of the *huaquero* (the tomb raider who searches for *huacos*, as these ceramics are known) and that of the collector had oscillated silently, in flux between the natural and the cultural realms. Somehow, Runcie Tanaka's work presupposes an apparent blurring of the limits between these contexts, within the confines of the landscape he proposes. In the process, a question arises: where does the *natural* environment of the contemporary Peruvian landscape begin, and where does it end?

Perhaps it is not accidental that the majority of commentaries on this period of Runcie's work readily assume (not without eliciting the skepticism of the artist)<sup>14</sup> a relationship between his work and the ceramic production of the Chancay culture, historically the least valued by collectors of pre-Columbian ceramics because of the almost industrial production in series of these pieces.<sup>15</sup> For this reason, these vestiges—like the seashells and starfish that Miro Quesada referred to, ready for one to take home from any beach—can be found scattered throughout the northern environs of Lima.<sup>16</sup> In a similar fashion, on any beach along the Peruvian coast the divisions between the vestiges of Chancay—and those of many other pre-Hispanic cultures—and the natural landscape that surrounds them have also been blurred. Hence, in these landscapes, ceramics are fused and confused with the sandy stretches of the surrounding desert.

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14. A skepticism about this critical evaluation, but not about Chancay itself. Runcie is an avid collector and connoisseur of Chancay ceramics. His activity as a collector took place primarily during the period between 1986 and 1990. Nonetheless, the artist himself has clarified that his emotional connection to Chancay is more directly related to the spatial aspect (the desert) than to the ceramics.

15. This generalized vision of Chancay has only recently been modified. A biennial art exhibition organized by the Museo de Arte de Lima and private businesses, entitled "*Arte y empresa*" ("Art and Enterprise"), dedicated a special exhibit to "Contemporary Chancay", with invited artists including Carlos Runcie. See the catalog of the exhibit, *Chancay contemporáneo*, Lima: Museo de Arte de Lima / Cosapi Organización Empresarial, 1998.

16. In fact, many of the most famous ceramic remains of this culture, such as the *chinas* and *cuchimilcos*, have for some time been used to decorate the salons of elite middle class homes, as well as their exteriors and gardens, leaving these articles of "scarce value" to the intemperie. "Chancay is Lima's huaco supermarket": an illustrative phrase attributed to the architect Fernando Belaúnde Terry, twice president of the country (1963-68 / 1980-85) and a virtual representative of the professional middle class and the industrial bourgeoisie: an alliance that dates back, perhaps, to the second presidency of Prado (1965-62) and its cultural modernism, which consisted, among other things, in the aesthetic (and social) acceptance of prehispanic Andean culture—but not necessarily of the contemporary one.

Runcie Tanaka's proposal not only reminds us that the blurring of those boundaries implies the blurring of the history of other cultures as well; at the same time, it is the materialization of a condition that is virtually wild, closer to still life than to living nature.<sup>17</sup> But the analogy would lose force if Runcie's work, in itself, did not simultaneously afford the possibility of redemption of that diluted landscape. By granting a transcendental dimension to the contemplative environment of his pieces, he somehow restores to them the original ritual character that at one time they must have had.

This is an intuitive process whose origin is none other than the *mise-en-scène* of the Japanese garden and its miniature representation, the *bonsai*. This decorative ritual draws on traditional Japanese culture, in which nature and culture and intertwined—in contrast to the absolute separation that takes place in the West. For the Japanese, the relationship between nature and culture involves a constant and cyclic interchange between them, founded on the continuous movement of the divinities between these two realms and the resulting cult surrounding each. Thus, any ritual penetration into the territories of nature constitutes a penetration into the sacred, insofar that sacredness increases in the measure that this incursion removes itself from the cultural realm through the search for its sacred origin in topographical detail, rather than in a human construction.<sup>18</sup> But just as the landscapes of traditional Japanese gardens seek to imitate the sacredness of the natural and contemplative environment on a human scale, Runcie Tanaka's installations reconstruct the sacred space of a possible territory that is historical and, at the same, time subjective.

During this stage of his creative development, Runcie Tanaka decided to explore space on almost every possible occasion. Thus, in the Mendoza gallery of Caracas (1988), in Praxis in Buenos Aires (1989), in the Biennial exhibition of Havana (1991), and in the Tonalli Gallery in Mexico (1991), he adapted the versatility of his experimentation to the material characteristics of each space. In

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17. Nonetheless, Allen Ginsberg—in his travels through Peru—sensed the latent life below the surface, as evidenced by the continuing growth of the nails and hair of the mummies buried in Chancay. He manifested this in his poem dedicated to the aging Martin Adán, *To an old poet in Peru*, in his book *Reality Sandwiches*, City Light Books, San Francisco, 1963.

18. Berque, op. cit. pp 56-74.

Mexico, for example, stone replaced the Peruvian coastal sands as context and support. For that particular exhibition, the discovery of *tezontle*, a volcanic gravel of dark reddish hues, allowed him to establish the chromatic platform for the exhibition. This had both chromatic and emblematic significance because of the similarity between the colors of this stone and those of the *huayruro*, a red and black seed from the Peruvian Amazon that is popularly associated with good fortune. (Runcie would later include the *huayruro* seed as a formal ingredient in many other exhibitions.) Arranged on the red and black *tezontle* gravel, many of the pieces resembled huge buds of topographical textures in whose hybrid botanical nature another turgescence, latent history seemed to be contained—as if they were reminders of some possible future, or seeds of a fossilized resurrection.

But at what moment did the archeological vestige cease to be the point of reference, and at what point did archeology begin to describe a subjective search? With *Desplazamientos* (Displacements), an important exhibition organized by the *Museo de la Nación* (Lima) in 1994, Runcie seemed to maximize the use of space and its metaphorical supports, heightening the presence of the ocean. The exhibition's origin traces back to a fortuitous finding. On a family outing along the Panamerican Highway, the Runcie Tanaka's arrived at the small fishing village of Cerro Azul, 130 kilometers to the south of Lima. Cerro Azul, today transformed into a beach resort, was a minor port that gained importance during a brief economic boom of the agricultural valley of Cañete at the beginning of the 20th century. Today, all that remains of the magical reverberations of its topography is precisely that: the topography. The long, corroded pier that stretches into the sea and the lighthouse that at one time must have guided ships to safe port are in a perfect state of abandon. This is all very Peruvian. But it was precisely one of the ships that the extinguished lighthouse must have guided that would provide a new impulse for Runcie Tanaka's artistic exploration. In the words of Runcie: "On the beach, I was surprised to find that there was a monument commemorating the landing of the first Japanese immigrants in 1889 [...]; this immediately took on an emotional charge for me."<sup>19</sup> At the foot of the monument, the artist also found

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19. Jorge Villacorta, "*La marea de la memoria*", interview with the artist, in *Oiga*, June 1994.

hundreds of crabs baked by the sun, as if they were an additional element of the monument. Runcie continues: “It’s not that I associate the crabs with the immigrants, but the effect [the place] had on me was a very intense image of displacement in large quantities.”<sup>20</sup>

*Desplazamientos*, the exhibition that arose from this discovery, was constructed on that moment of awakening. It represented a diverse and sensually ambitious proposal, converting the crab into a theme with new significance, symbolically reproduced and present throughout the various rooms of the museum. Surrounded by sensory input that included videotapes and recorded sounds of the sea, the crabs collected on the beach and then manipulated in diverse ways redoubled their amphibious biological content, becoming the boundaries of an uncertain frontier that was in perpetual movement. The result was a suggestive borderline with myriad variations in shape and hue; the marked chiaroscuros of the installations and the liquefied sounds and visuals of the audio and videotapes converted the watermark into a territorial commentary (the shore), at the same time permitting a reading that defied any linear interpretation. Eloquent shadows took their place among the objects of this manifold composition, illustrating a narrative memory more closely associated with certain intimate Eastern registries—with their mix of various sensory pleasures—than with a Western-type progression.<sup>21</sup> The exhibition included a variant on personal installations, including a trunk, an abacus, and other belongings of his two genealogies: his British grandfather, photographer and historian; and his Japanese grandfather, landscape gardener and horticulturalist. Both were victims of movement, of clear displacement, and both were inhabitants of uncertain spaces within peculiar circumstances—self-sustaining and ruminant spaces, such as the amphibian space where the coast and the sea meet.

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20. Op. Cit.

21. See Tanizaki, op. cit. His description of the sensations of physical pleasure motivated by the classic Japanese WC are truly extraordinary (pp. 15-17). Tanizaki associates this pleasure with darkness and the natural environment. The natural environment and darkness would, furthermore, become almost automatically associated with traditional Japanese aesthetics. Tanizaki sees the evolution of light in Western society as a consequence of the linear idea of progress. “(Westerners) are in a constant state of agitation, seeking a condition superior to the present one. They continually seek more light, and they have managed to convert candlelight into petroleum lamps [...], gas into electric lights, eventually doing away with the tiniest, most remote refuge of darkness”. (p. 72)

Aside from offering a commentary on displacement—or on masses and their origins—in this installation the ever-present image of the crab evokes a virtually *armor-plated* subject: the armor-plated shellfish, of course, but also, and in particular, an isolated and impenetrable being. Runcie Tanaka's interest in and observation of the crab led to the emergence of a later theme: the tunnel the crab digs in the sand, where it deposits a little ball, the product of the regurgitation of its food. This is a perfect analogy of the excavator who buries his digested experience. In the same way that the pre-Hispanic cemetery offered a return to the land, the crab digs a tunnel into which it deposits its virtual offering. Excavation, offering and tunnel, analogy of a grave that houses a *huaco* in its interior: all of these are themes of someone who digs within his own being and displays the fragments of his findings.

Other critics have interpreted this armor-plated subject as an almost autistic character, the allegory of a politically and culturally suffocated language.<sup>22</sup> The pieces that made up the small contingent of ceramic personages—each of which seemed to carry something in its hands, as if sustaining some vague guiltiness—initially arose as a consequence of this language. They were later recycled to provide a commentary on the events that the artist was subjected to when he was taken hostage in the residence of the ambassador of Japan at the end of 1996.<sup>23</sup> After being held for several days—taken hostage in the siege organized by the MRTA—Runcie Tanaka and another hundred people were liberated on Christmas Eve, this time as symbolic hostages. During the days and hours of his captivity, his only communication with the outside world consisted in an exchange of brief letters, notes and papers containing questions, more than answers, in the broken language of uncertainty. *Tiempo detenido*, the installation that he prepared for the First Ibero-American Biennial of Lima a few months later, was a consequence of that experience and as such, it revealed the symptoms of the transformation it provoked. Many of the pieces, which had been prepared previously for another exhibition, were reused and redesigned, undergoing the transformative action of

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22. See Gustavo Buntinx's essay accompanying the exhibition *Tiempo detenido* in the *I Bienal de Lima: "La tentación autista: notas a una instalación imaginaria"*, Lima, October 1997.

fire through a second baking in the ceramic oven. In this way, the inexpressive, monk-like personages, united by their gesture of contrition—which at the same was a progressive (or regressive) countdown to the end of confinement, a rudimentary language of deaf-mutes—underwent, once more, the test of fire. It would not be difficult to make a formal association between the short arms of these *cuchimilcos*, held close to their bodies, and the tweezers of the crab. In the closed and suffocating confines of the exhibit space—the basement of the library of the School of Fine Arts' cultural center of—their massive distribution, their grouping and their alignment seemed to confirm the idea of an analogy. Unlike the small crabs baked by the sun and imprisoned between the sea and the sand that the artist had found on the beach of Cerro Azul, the personages here took on their own fossilized presence thanks to the virtual collective burial to which they were submitted.<sup>24</sup>

In the context of the violent political urgency of the moment, this installation, which is both cemetery and labyrinth, this army, which is motionless yet capable of detaining all temporality, alluded, perhaps, to other graves of collective anonymity. Many of the phrases from the pieces of paper the artist exchanged with his family during his captivity were legible on the walls, under the omnipresent redness of the lighting. Evocative of the graffiti scratched by convicts on the walls of their cells, or of a victim's final message, this element was chromatically strengthened by the use of thousands of small, red, translucent marbles as supporting elements. The marbles seemed to evoke a sense of both passion and urgent emotiveness; the abacus, ancestral yet decomposed, was incapable of marking the passage of disintegrated time. An image of decomposed time?

In the context of the virtual silence of an artistic context (self)-silenced by the violent breakdown of daily reality, in which a polarized military atmosphere denied every possibility of disagreeing or communicating,<sup>25</sup> Runcie Tanaka's proposal signified a process in which the superficial perplexity arising from personal

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23. Many observers found a formal relationship between these grouped figures and the most well known personages of the Chancay culture, the *cuchimilcos*.

24. This arrangement has been compared to the burial of the army of the Chinese emperor of the III century BC, Shih Huang Ti. See Buntinx, op. cit.

25. I am referring, obviously, to the period of armed conflict between the Peruvian government and *Sendero Luminoso* (Shining Path), between 1980 and 1992, and to the period of the dictatorship initiated by the government of Fujimori with the coup of 1992.

experience (a form of knowledge) resulted in a questioning of the very foundations of an entire community (a form of recognition).

It is important to recall that the incidents related to the siege of the Japanese embassy and their tragic, fatal finale shook not only local consciences, but also, thanks to the broadcast media, those of the inhabitants of many countries. From the moment the residence was taken until the end of the episode, almost the entirety of the related events was immediately transmitted to the entire country, and simultaneously to the rest of the world. Representing a sort of canned violence, the television screen set boundaries that could not be symbolically transgressed; at the same time, it provided the primary frame of the multiple views on the abduction, its consequences, and international political opinion surrounding the events. In this theater of operations, Runcie Tanaka proposes a halt in the programming with a vivid gesture that destroys the endorsed simulation characteristic of the television screen; he creates, instead, a virtual space—a promenade below the surface of that *mise-en-scène*. The fact that the bloody rescue operation—carried out in tunnels underlying what was visible on the television screen—was officially christened “Operation Chavin de Huantar” cannot be seen as a mere coincidence. The reference to Chavin’s important vestiges is a sign not only of the pleasure the official Peruvian state takes in creating its own version of history and of archeology; it also alludes to a pre-Hispanic society that was characteristically a military and theocratic state, as eminently expressed in the dark tunnels of its temple, which served as the architectural and formal inspiration for the military operation.

*Tiempo detenido* can be seen as the registry of a subjectivity in which the artist is not only the *huaquero* of his own identity, but also the profanator of the pantheons of consensus imposed by the dictatorship. He creates a space in which he is able to deposit the regurgitation of his own experience, which is, thanks to the wonders of the media, the other face of the experience of an entire community. It is as if there were an agitated territory, marked by another history, immediately below the very thin skin explored by Runcie Tanaka. As if Peru—the nation—and its territory, its geography, had not evolved necessarily on the same side of things. In

the context of this disintegrated history and territory, the silent observation embodied by Runcie Tanaka's work seems to suggest a need for restitution, for the uncovering of hidden longings. As if beneath the illuminated and yet darkened tunnels in which the emptied ceramic bodies silently rest, engrossed and confused, this disturbed community were lying in latent anticipation, like truth awaiting its turn, its content, and its era—awaiting its unearthing and its redemption.

### **Untimely epilogue**

In 1999 I was requested by Carlos Runcie Tanaka himself to prepare this text on his work. I also intended to use it as one of a series of texts—dealing with selected themes that permeate local culture, history, and art—that I was working on at the time. The text was set aside and misplaced on more than one occasion, as often happens with studies that are considered uncomfortable and incomplete. Runcie and I exchanged different and conflicting versions of the original proposal several times. Its current unearthing demonstrates the fact that many of the elements and interpretations in the text were the product of an urgency that I now see as irremediable but which, at the moment, seemed necessary and fitting. Meanwhile, Runcie's work has continued to evolve; he has traveled and participated in exhibitions and biennials thanks to diverse invitations. There were two options: that of falsely updating the text, or that of bringing it to light as the vestige that it undoubtedly is. This last option is the one that has been chosen. Without a doubt, this quality is characteristic of vestiges and of things unfinished, existing in reality or in ones memory. Coincidentally, or by pure objective chance, during the past few weeks the old issue of responsibilities and crimes—which the dictatorship had covered with a cloak of authoritarianism—has just been unearthed. Silenced testimonies regarding the details of the Operation Chavin de Huantar have also begun to appear. It is difficult to enable a community to perceive the wrinkles in things that they were forced to see, at the time they occurred, as smooth. The gallantries and triumphs of a dictatorship specially conceived under the protection of the technology of the media, of simulation and threats, are rarely what they

seem to be; they resemble, rather, the televised fiction that audiences expect. Did this text set out to make a displaced statement concerning the facts of daily life at that moment? Without a doubt. More than a temptation, this was the result of a conviction that there was a need to see the work of a contemporary artist in the light of the concrete facts to which it not only bears a relation, but which somehow represent its obscure origins. This in turn results from a conviction that artistic creation is not only fueled by the vacuum of the blank page, of the virgin canvas, of the empty screen, or of any other decontaminated or pure platform; nor does it enter into dialogue solely with the historical construction that we know as tradition. It is, rather, a network of relationships formed within the subjectivity of an artist and his or her time. To split that dense framework in two, using a blade that is none other than the treatise of canon or tradition, was not the conceptual or theoretical intent of this appraisal of the artist and his creation.