

CARLOS RUNCIE TANAKA: OF PARALLELS AND PARADOX

Ricardo Pau-Llosa

It has always been tempting to conceive the natural world as a language. Mystics once pondered the book of nature along with the words of prophets and apostles. Every rumor of God has begun with a gasp before the tragic mysteries of life—that expanse of sky, earth, foliage and beast that preserves its infinite secrets despite the intrusions of Being. After all, the world must conform, in Copernican and Kantian fashion, to the rules of our minds, but what stands disclosed in such reflections is the short reach of those rules and not the splendid expanse of ineffable existence. Nature may be ours for the taking but not for the knowing.

It is with this parox, this precise and delicate futility of our condition before the extensions in which we suddenly find ourselves, that an artist like Carlos Runcie Tanaka begins his journey. From the first step one thing is clear: the journey will resemble a circle but not be one. It will evoke the dialectics of spirals, the order of the square, but evocation is neither substitution nor defining structure. The journey itself falls prey to the limitations of metaphor. An artist finds a truth about the world in the mind, knows it and spends the rest of his or her creative life articulating its boundaries. Its essence, all that matters of it, will be communicated despite

the built-in impossibility of the task. The entire body of work becomes the trope—that literally false utterance that somehow transmits a truth.

What are the choices facing Runcie Tanaka? As a ceramist, sculptor, and visual thinker, he faces the fundamental givens of time and space, as well as the ample range of their representations. As a Peruvian, the lexicon of space consists of desert, mountain and sky. It is a lexicon of expansion; it is centered of purity, reduction, the enshrinement of essence. The lexicon of time is layered—the past enters into being, into the eternal present of awareness, by emerging from the entrails of the earth. Dozens of cultural legacies, long ago buried by the empire of the Inca and unknown to the subsequent colonial and Peruvian cultures that flourished in the region, have come to light through excavation in the last century. Half a millennium has not known what was before and is now again. The past shifts the contents of present knowledge and memory. The past's reemergence from mute burial reconfigures the necessities of heritage, the intricacies of temporal foundation. With every newly cracked tomb, the past changes itself and with it the way the present defines itself.

The fundamental character of change can be expressed visually as a phenomenological "essence" because objective and spatial realities, though in flux, become transformed into a consistent language in art. Language, be it visual, verbal or

in any other form, is the crux of the paradox. A symbolic system of reference must signify the volubility of the word or it too becomes a thing, an obscure idol covered in the dust of reverence and impenetrability.

In Runcie Tanaka, the spell of time has become a personal language of form and texture through a complex process. Everywhere he has left testimony of this first step, especially in works from the late 1980's which are replete with formal and textural echoes of seeds, roots, and other organic images. This web of allusions, both poignant and ironic, does not operate as a launching pad for formal exploration; the allusions function as a system of recognition. A creative process is signalling its parallel journey to (and its inherent compromise with) the natural world that is the first ground of our common experience, what Edmund Husserl calls the life-world (lebenswelt).

The parallel journey of the artist signals the separateness of the aesthetic process from the natural life world. To be disclosed essentially, the natural life-world must obtain a language not of itself. The world must remind in forms it has not created. This is the first truth of how Being leaves its tracks in visual thought, and one evident in Runcie Tanaka from the start. The relationship between sign and referent is not tropological. The relationship between sign and referent is not tropological. The trope has its own manner of reference, aimed at disclosing what cannot be otherwise articulated. The trope

sheds light on ordinary forms of language, visual or verbal, but the language of visual thought begins with a separation between sign and referent that is necessary for understanding what is essential. A look at the relationship between Runcie Tanaka's stelae, his seed-like sculptures, and the segmented installations dominated by vertical or horizontal columns will clarify this concept.

The stelae trigger a series of obvious referents in the natural world—tentacles, fronds, seedlings, petals, tongues, the phallus, stalagmites and others. The stelae also clearly evoke our narrative proclivity implicit in making monuments—stones that tell stories, surfaces that approach the passage of time in terms of a causal sequence of events. Stone becomes an utterance of purpose. Runcie Tanaka's work, however, is not in stone but in fired clays. Stone, then, is another referent here, at par with the organic ones. The process of creating the ceramic work constitutes its epic, its causal narrative. The story is focused on turning the creation of an object into a discovery of the natural world as it exists in awareness—i.e. a voyage into one aspect of being. This is a significant dimension both for understanding the separation between sign and natural referent in Runcie Tanaka's stelae and for grasping the broad scope of his aesthetic. The narrative is ambiguously focused on the world and the creative process because Runcie Tanaka's allusions to stone, fauna and flora are echoes, not appropriations. The dynamics of allusion set the scene for the

actual theme to come forth—process is what binds us to the natural life-world for both that world and the human mind are intimate with time.

Runcie Tanaka's stelae are linked to his installations because both incorporate a monumental sense of space. The stelae are, presented as installations. They emerge from floors covered with grey stones, a juxtaposition which augments the irony of clay evoking yet separating itself from lithic referents. The stela emerges from the leveling expanse of stone as the protagonist, the visual epicenter, even when more than one stela shares the stone-covered space.

But another element binds Runcie Tanaka's stelae to his other installations, and that is their segmented quality. While some stelae are of one piece, others are made up of two or three joined parts. Works realized in sequence of units and either erected vertically or hung from a bar parallel to the floor elaborate on the idea of sequence and pattern. Runcie Tanaka engages the common strategy of preserving continuity while sharpening differences between the units, but the artist goes well beyond this to investigate the notion of unity. Recalling the great expanses of Runcie Tanaka's environment (desert, mountain, and sky), the viewer is struck by the apparent dissonance between the formal containment of each segment and the flowing pattern that is created by their alignment. From this co-presence of seemingly contradictory impulses emerges a

complex and intriguing dual tropological triumph: the forging of unity through metonymy and the grounding of "pattern" in the visual action of the singular element.

Metonymy operates by establishing a substitution between elements that are proximate to each other in space or function. Values associated with one element are transferred to the second element in the trope. Metaphor presents simultaneously in the vivid grasp of the mind two elements which are said to be similar in some way. Metonymy—like metaphor and irony—affirms at a literal level. While in all visual artists the interaction between "literal" and "intuitive" is complex, in Runcie Tanaka (as in many other Latin American artists) this interaction is utterly paradoxical. In many Latin American artists, and Runcie Tanaka is not an exception, the literal carries the allusions and other clear references that link aspect of the art work to things in the world. These allusions operate under the aegis of metaphor, which means that in Runcie Tanaka the "literal" is ruled by a trope. The stela resemble a tongue or a leaf, and this metaphor obtains at an immediate or literal level.

Metonymy functions at a deeper level in visual language than in verbal expression. In the case of Runcie Tanaka's segmented works, metonymy negotiates the transference of values between formally discreet units and the overall structure of the piece. Metonymy in the segmented works rules glazed surface patterns as well as formal patterns that together set up rhythms

and rimes throughout the piece. But metonymy does more than "unify" the segments. It balances the overall unity of the piece against the integrity of each of its elements, and it highlights the formal and textural devices that executes this balance.

Segmentation as an expression of the infinite provides another indication of Runcie Tanaka's topological thinking. The infinite has long been a major concern of the Latin American writers and visual artists, as central to the literature of Jorge Luis Borges and Octavio Paz as to the sculptures and installations of Jesús Rafael Soto and the paintings of Joaquín Torres-García and Enrique Castro-Cid. Any pattern which, conceptually, could be repeated endlessly or any ideation of space whose variability is inexhaustible opens to a pondering of the infinite. And while these patterns and concepts are widespread, the artists' willingness to employ them to explore the infinite and its visual representation is nowhere as abundant or original in Western art as it is in Latin América.

Runcie Tanaka, the infinite plays a role in the way his art parallels the life-world of natural forms. The word parallel triggers its own topological scheme—juxtaposition, metaphor, similarity, substitution. Runcie Tanaka delves into the parallels between the temporality of the natural world and that of the creative process. In the former, time is noema, Husserl's word for the pole of consciousness that corresponds to

The old dualistic conception of "reality" or things in the world. In the creative process, however, time is noesis, the pole that corresponds to the dualistic conception of mind or act of consciousness. In phenomenology, the two are conceived in terms of each other. The world, as Merleau-Ponty affirms, is what we perceive.

For Runcie Tanaka, then, the paralleling of creative and natural processes is a way of disclosing the two distinct yet intertwined faces of temporality—as immanent in the world and as a priori, as essential to the life-world as to the act by which the life-world enters Being. Yet the essences of thought is as variable as the juggling of simultaneous meanings in metaphor. Simultaneity is the emblem of psychic temporality, especially that of the creative process. On the other hand, the immanent temporality of the natural life-world is linear, sequential, metonymic. This temporality presents itself to us as linear because of the way we are positioned in reference to it. We are subjects and, as such, we are the "centers" of the world we apprehend. But we are also objects, and, as such, we suffer the temporality of the world—we experience the world as sequential events, we speak in terms of sequentially placed words, we live by the linearity of cause and effect. And, of course, we grow old and die.

In Runcie Tanaka, processes, not meaning, are the focus.

The process of nature, compromised with a linear if "chaotic" randomness, is both like and unlike the process of dreaming and creating whose "order" is tropologically defined by simultaneity and paradox.

The paralleling of these two processes—the natural and the creative—informs Runcie Tanaka's approach to the space where his sculptures are installed. He conceives of the pieces in their complete theatre of presence this theatrical impulse, also fundamental to Latin American art, emerges from the faith the artist has in the power of art to express transcendent ideas. "Theatre" here has nothing to do with spectacle and everything to do with the capacity of art to dramatize—another way of foregrounding temporality—the life of ideas. "Site" in Runcie Tanaka becomes temenos, a ritual space in which the non-linear temporality of the creative process is confronted simultaneously with the linear nature of the temporality of the life-world. Runcie Tanaka's sense of site discloses the dialogical, theatrical conviction that visual art, far from having to fall upon itself as the ultimate referent (medium-is-the message), can dramatize the exploration of enigmas and not merely codify conclusions derived from such exploration of enigmas and not merely codify conclusions derived from such explorations. The transformation of site into form is Runcie Tanaka's invitation to the viewer to join him and not just to glimpse wisdoms gleaned at the conclusion of his journey.

Runcie Tanaka [R. Pau-Llosa]

This invitation reveals the artist's ultimate faith in the capacity of art to represent transcendent ideas. If art has a social dimension, this kind of invitation is it. This openness is underscored in Runcie Tanaka by his introduction of elements in firing which produce cracks and "imperfections" in the piece. Such cracks bind the two parallel dimensions—noetic and noematic—of Runcie Tanaka's thinking. The work of art is seemingly caught up in the effects of chaos, the randomness of the linear world. The imperfections are also a way of inverting the formalization of space in Runcie Tanaka's approach to site. The imperfections, however, do not break the proscenium of site-as-theatre. These imperfections turn the form itself into a stage where the violent actions of fire and chemistry come to life. They reconnect the creative process with the narrative of life/death cycles, mutation, and evolution. Runcie Tanaka knows that the creative mind, the life-world and their parallel temporalities may not take the form of the circle, but they have assumed its soul.

Ricardo Pau-Llosa is a critic and curator specializing in Latin American art. He is one of the authors of **Fernando de Szyszlo** (Bogotá: Alfred Wild Editions, 1991). His latest book of poems, **Cuba**, is from Carnegie Mellon University press. A former senior editor of Art International magazine, he now writes for various publications. He teaches English at Miami-Dade Community College, Kendall Campus.