

# WHAT ART CAN DO

## Breaking Boundaries

Text of Talk By  
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## **1 Three Historical views: Classical (Leonardo), Modern, Post modern. Where do I fit?**

You have seen the works in the gallery from the series I created in 2012 through 2015, *Lift the Curtain*. What do these works mean? Since the title is “lift the curtain”, are we looking at the closed curtain itself? Often a curtain is hung to hide something: to prevent something from being seen. So behind these curtains is there something to be hidden, something too gruesome, something we cannot stand to see or which is forbidden to us to see? But it seems that these curtains themselves look pretty gruesome already -- they reveal chaos, destruction, extreme sadness, death and violence.

It is a horrible thing to create such images and bring them to a clean wonderful place like this gallery and to show them to good wonderful people like you. So perhaps you are asking yourselves, What on earth is Junko doing?

What is she trying to say to us? And those were my own questions, too.

Those questions would never have been uttered if we lived four hundred years ago, in the sphere of western culture. For the purpose of art was clearly defined in those days. One purpose was to create works for the church for people who could not read the Bible. That art was to explain the Bible and dogma, and to illustrate the glory of God and the church. The second purpose was to serve the aristocracy, to glorify their family portraits and their war heroes -- to show us people whom we should all admire. And in those days, at the end of the 15th Century, art skill was clearly defined and the rules of that skill were clearly obeyed. Leonardo da Vinci gave this instruction to the artists of his day: "Hold up the mirror to nature: the mirror is the teacher. You should compare the image on the painting to the image reflected in the mirror. Make sure

they are exactly identical." That was his idea, his strict command to all artists.

Four hundred twenty years later, in 1918, Paul Klee, one of the many modern art revolutionaries, wrote, "The purpose of art is to make the invisible visible." It was no longer about mirrors: the criterion of truthfulness in art shifted from the outside world to the artist's inner world. And through the work of a great many modern artists this biggest revolution of art history was carried out. And with this transition from outer reality to inner truth, a great many prejudices and pretensions which had been carried in those days were discarded. Just one example: Once Picasso created *Guernica*, war was no longer seen as something glorious. Instead, that painting is true to the inside of the human mind: war is horrible and chaotic. In almost the same period of this modern art revolution,

psychology was born and with it the study of the development of the inner world rose up.

But the shift in criteria from Da Vinci art – painting the world around you like a mirror – to modern art criteria – making the invisible visible, and painting our interior world – was not the end of the story. After World War II, the postmodern movement in art rejected the demands of truth in art, and asserted that neither the inner world nor the outer world has meaning. This movement -- though it did expose many lies which had been concealed in our history, so it has some constructive meaning -- still basically has been a movement of negativity. Perhaps we can say that in 1971 Ben Vautier summed it up by creating a huge work, 184" x 140", a painting with nothing but words on the canvas, in huge letters, in French: "Art is useless: Go home".

So you may be asking yourselves, “Where does Junko fit in this art-historical flow from daVinci to Klee to postmodernism? Are these horrible images Junko's inner world? Is this our inner world too? Where is she standing and where are we standing?”

## **2. Description of works; miserable things / Japan/ war/ fascism**

To start to answer these questions, I want to begin with a discussion of the images you see in these works.

Visitants. You see many kinds of fragmented images in these works: torn up roots and burls, broken engines, monster babies, skeletons, and feathers of dead birds. These images came to me as urgent messages: they struck me and made their demands on me. That urgency became stronger and stronger as I started creating these works.

This is not the first time that these things have appeared in my pictorial spaces. On the contrary they have appeared in many of the other works I have created over the many years I have been working. Because these images appear and reappear in my works, I call them “visitants.”

In my early period, I drew the visitants by hand -- in pen-and-ink, or pencil, or charcoal. I created hundreds of those works in a rather Da Vincian way. I spent a whole year drawing the *Dead Flowers*. I spent a year practicing drawing the root which then became the central figure in my *Root Series*. And I drew broken engine parts in my *Engine Series*. I also had live figure models come to my studio and drew *Figures on Black Background*, a series of 48 works. In 1991, I created *Requiem for an Executed Bird*, a series of 45 works, all of them inside of less than 60 days. That series was my most concentrated work on one single

visitant, a dead bird. You can see some of these early works in the gallery.

But later on these visitants started to appear in new ways. I took photographs of them, manipulated those photos in various ways in Photoshop, and produced computer prints and cut them up and layered them on mylar. And then I drew over parts of those prints with acrylic and charcoal. -- That is the technique I used for the *Lift the Curtain* series.

My visitants are all dysfunctional: the torn-up and dried-out roots which are supposed to pump up water from the deep underground soil to plants to make them alive and grow – but they are not able to pump up the water here. The birds with heavy broken feathers hanging down, executed not because they have done something wrong but because they are who they are, beautiful powerful figures, who are supposed to fly as a symbol of freedom, inspire us

and encourage us – but they are not able to fly here. The engines broken, bleeding with red rust, instead of powerfully working and helping us to function rhythmically and efficiently in this universe – they are broken and static. I let those visitants speak to me, I follow them all the way and I embrace them.

Fascism – The Source. From where do these images come to me? They come from my own personal experience. I was born in Japan at the beginning of World War II in which Japan fought against 48 nations on earth. I grew up in a world of bombing attacks day and night. For me, these broken things, debris in the bombed city, became the symbol of death and destruction. And in those days, Japan was a fascist nation: the government demanded neighbors to spy on each other. We were afraid of our own government and of our neighbors, as well as of the enemy nations. The images of these broken things became

symbols of victims of war and fascism – of the threat of informers and torture.

I have always wanted to pull these things out of the world of war and fascism, and reach down even deeper into the place where the war and fascism stem from. In 2012 when I met my visitants in my studio, they looked much more intense and urgent than ever. I was convinced that they came from the collective unconscious, to use Jung's words, from a place far deeper and far wider than my own personal unconscious.

Organic/Inorganic. But I think those images have another significance. They seem to go back and forth constantly across the boundary between the organic and the inorganic – between the living and the lifeless. The dead burls, the broken engines - they seem at first to be inorganic, lifeless. But to me they are alive in spirit -- and I want to bring them back to life in my work. The boundary

line between the organic and the inorganic is one of the main themes of my art and has been for many years. That boundary is not impermeable: my work wants to be a testimony to the fact that it is not really a boundary at all. The world of the seemingly lifeless is part of the world we live in. This is part of what these works, *Lift the Curtain*, deal with.

Chaos. And one more thing you might see in these works is chaos. Chaos is the unexpected disorder which disrupts the world we expect to live in. I see chaos everywhere. I lived with it in the war, and I am afraid that these days, I start seeing it again. I try to present chaos in my works – but not as a final form. Quite the contrary: I believe that chaos is part of the order of the universe. Similar to the boundary between the organic and the inorganic, I believe that the boundary between chaos and

order is not clearcut. *Lift the Curtain No. 8*, the two-panel work, is saying that the universe is chaotic and yet orderly.

### **3 What can art do? Studio Diary, and what this diary taught me.**

Now all my life long, I have asked myself, What is art? what is the function of art? How is my art created in me, and through me? How is my art related to my own spiritual growth, and to that of society? Those questions were the reasons I majored in the philosophy of art at Waseda University in Tokyo. while I was creating art by myself all through, secretly.

#### **Studio Diary**

In 1973, immediately after my first one-person show in a commercial gallery in Boston, I started keeping a studio diary. And since then I have played three roles all at once: the roles of scientist, artist, and guinea pig. Through my experiments, sketches and fragments of philosophical

notes, documents of the process of working and my analysis of those completed works, not only as an art creator myself but sometimes as a viewer, and sometimes through my communications with viewers of my art -- I discovered practically uncountable precious things about art and I arrived at some answers to my deep and persistent questions about what art can do. Let me share just some of them with you:

1. Herbert Read - Forming consciousness. Art is a primary act of forming consciousness. These words were written by Herbert Read in his book Icon and Idea which I studied myself, outside the school curriculum. Read says that art has been and still is the most essential instrument in the development of human consciousness. This was true not only at the beginning of history but it remains crucial in our contemporary world. Through the tenacious

record of creating my own artworks I found that art does indeed have the ability to raise our consciousness.

I spoke earlier in this talk of fascism as the source of the dark images you see in my works. But we must realize that Fascism is not just one of those bad political systems constructed by evil leaders in some foreign countries. Fascism is a state of mind which comes from the deep terror of being free, terror of being yourself, terror of love and terror of life itself. It is this terror which divides people into us and them, it is this terror which wants to separate us by blood and soil and that wants to thoroughly eradicate “the other.” This Fascistic state of mind can easily be associated with fanatical nationalism, and with industrialized militarism-- elements we can see in our own country today. Fascism is like dark matter (to use the astronomical term) in the universe of the human mind: present everywhere, but impossible to see except through

its effects. To deal with this dark matter, serious consciousness-raising is needed.

2. R.G. Collingwood - No preconceived idea. Another art philosopher, R. G. Collingwood, in his book, Principles of Art, said that art must be created without a preconceived idea. This is how he separated art from craft. He points out that the artist must draw each line only by following the urge which comes from the depth of his inner being. If he approaches the work with a preconceived idea, or directed by some outside rules, the work is already a reflection of a corruption of consciousness.

The process of fighting against the corruption of consciousness is precisely identical to the process which later psychologists call “individuation” or “self-realization.” We must not confuse “individuation” with "individualism" nor should we confuse either of those two with egotism and selfishness: individuation requires cutting the tie you don't

need any more in order to form healthier ties with your community.

3. Erich Fromm - Individuation, Love and Productive Work. The third person I mention over and over in my Studio Diaries is Erich Fromm, a philosopher, sociologist and psychologist, who was himself a refugee from Nazi Germany. He made it astonishingly clear in his many books -- Escape from Freedom and others -- how essential the individuation process is in order for people not to fall into the abyss, the sick state of mind which leads people to fascism. And he also gives us great hope that Art can do something constructive about our sickness.

Fromm affirms that there is a healthy way to pursue individuality: a way involving a spontaneous relationship to man and nature, a relationship that connects the individual with the world, that is rooted in the integration

and strength of the total personality, and the foremost expressions of which are love and productive work.

4. Art helps people to love and be productive. Art has the unique power to help both the artist and the viewer overcome this sick, fascist state of mind because art is the foremost expression of love and productive work. But not only that: by going through the process of creation the artist moves towards individuation. For the viewer, also, it is possible to pursue the journey of individuation through art: appreciating the work of art is itself a strong form of participation in artistic creativity.

Through the enormously intense experiences recorded in my studio diaries, I came out with the solid belief that art is not a trivial field of human activity -- not just a kind of entertainment or diversion or a means of creating propaganda of all kinds. Art can awaken people and make people grow towards more individuality. Through

consciousness-raising, art can be a powerful constructive force in our society.

#### **4. How Art creates a new world. Breaking Boundaries**

Now it is time to go back to the Galleries to hear what the visitants are saying to us. I said in the beginning of this talk, that those visitants suffered death and destruction and the threat of cruel torture. I see them as victims of war and fascism and I wanted to pull them out of that world and also, I added, I want to reach down even deeper into the place where the war and fascism stem from.

I have explained how my works want to break through the boundary between the living and the lifeless. And how they want to break through the boundary between chaos and order.

But there is another boundary they want to break through.

We are coming to realize now that the inner world is the gateway to the universe, and that there is no solid boundary between the inner world and the universe. The distinction between da Vinci's idea and Klee's idea may no longer be relevant. In this way a third boundary, the boundary between the outer world and the inner world, is breaking down and we are coming to realize that there is a form of interaction between these two spheres.

So we no longer need the curtain. In fact, my newest work, *Forbidden Images-Prelude*, does not have a curtain at all -- the curtain from *Lift the Curtain* is all gone, and that new work shows a chaotic universe which is a melding of the inner and outer worlds. Everything there which had seemed dead and lifeless, is alive and full of energy. The art has brought all those things back to life.

## **5. Resonance; Courage and Integrity.**

My experience of the war was frightening and painful. If any of you were moved by these paintings, it is because you really saw the images and resonate with them. The pain which drove me to create these paintings, those dark perceptions and feelings, might have resonated with something inside of you. To see art is a serious experience, the act of seeing requires both courage to confront the truth and integrity - uncompromising integrity. The power of art lies in its capacity to call you to integrity and to resonate with you.

These works are warning messages to all of us, to remind us of the dangers we face in the world today. And yet, they also give us a glimpse of the light which rises up out of the chaos and darkness behind the curtain once we have summoned up the courage to confront them. To

confront darkness is the most powerful way to reach light.  
Are we strong enough to see the light in the darkness?

## **6. Conclusion: responsibilities of the Artist and Viewer. "Can we hear our own voice?"**

Now it is time to ask: "Can we hear our own voice?" - the title of this exhibit. Both the artist and the viewer must hear their own voices. The voice they need to hear is their own true, honest voice. It is not the voice of any irrational authority or of any mob of which they happen to be members: it is the voice of themselves as actualized - individuated.

Gone are the days, I hope, when the viewer was completely passive: the viewer is an active participant in the art. And so another boundary is broken: the boundary between the artist and the viewer. The artist stands behind the work, and the viewer stands in front of it, and we encounter each other in the plane of the work itself. Both

of us have a responsibility to ourselves to seek integrity. In this way the gallery becomes a special place where the viewers and the artist vibrate and resonate together.

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