

masata takasaka at roppongi crossing

ANDREW MAERKLE

A triennial survey of contemporary art in Japan, *Roppongi Crossing* has served as the flagship exhibition of the Mori Art Museum (MAM) since the series began in early 2004, just months after the museum itself opened. Each edition has taken a different stance toward defining contemporary artistic practice in a country where multiple strains of modernism independently coexist. Subtitled “Out of Doubt!”, *Roppongi Crossing 2013* marks the first time the curatorial team, which traditionally comprises a representative from MAM working with independent partners, has been opened to curators from outside of Japan. Mami Kataoka, Reuben Keehan of Brisbane’s Queensland Art Gallery/Gallery of Modern Art and Gabriel Ritter of the Dallas Museum of Art have pushed the scope of *Roppongi Crossing* further beyond national borders than previous iterations to include numerous artists who are based overseas, at the same time positioning the exhibition within the context of a society dealing with the aftermath of the 11 March disaster of 2011 and the ongoing Fukushima nuclear crisis.

Masato Takasaka is among three artists from Australia invited to participate in *Roppongi Crossing*. Born and raised in Melbourne, Takasaka makes Uroboros-like works that feed upon and update their predecessors. On display in Tokyo, *Another Propositional Model for the Everything Always Already-made Wannabe Studio Masatoteures Museum of Found Refractions 1994-2013 @ eternal return to productopia-almost everything all at once, twice, three times (in four parts... RX2013 remix)* (2013) is the latest in a series of installations with elements ranging from drawings, photographs and sculptural objects to found objects, commercial packaging and ephemera, all arranged and presented together on sheets of perforated board. Evoking Marcel Duchamp’s *Boîte-en-valise* (1935-41), the disparate contents of this work, accumulated over time, are envisioned as a self-curated retrospective constantly travelling in three customised boxes displayed nearby. The reference to Duchamp is not incidental, as Takasaka’s work also functions as an existential meditation on the readymade, and the intersections between the industrial and the autobiographical. In the context of *Roppongi Crossing*, this project also becomes a metaphor for the circulation of goods and people across the world amidst the different economic and societal forces that shape that circulation.

Conducted on the eve of the opening of *Roppongi Crossing*, the following interview developed from several informal conversations with Takasaka over the course of his stay in Tokyo preparing for the exhibition, as well as a talk he gave on his practice to students at Tokyo Zokei University.



ANDREW MAERKLE: In one of our earlier conversations you mentioned the idea of culture as a readymade. Could you talk about how this concept feeds into your work?

MASATO TAKASAKA: My research interest has always been in the readymade and the idea that the artist’s practice is always already made, in that your own work is also a possible readymade or found object. When I was invited to participate in *Roppongi Crossing*, I extended that idea to my own situation of having Japanese heritage, but being born and raised in Australia. The appearance of me being Japanese is a given, and in that respect it’s like the readymade in terms of Duchamp’s objects: they look like what they are, but they’re not what they look like, because the title changes the work or the experience of the viewer. The way other Japanese people perceive me here is obviously different to the way people in Australia perceive me. There, it’s almost the reverse. I have a conversation with someone I’ve met for the first time and they say, “Your English is really good!” They don’t know that English is my first and essentially only language. In some ways you could say it’s my second language, too. It sounds a bit cheesy, but art is probably my first language. It’s a material language of objects and materials that have a history or memory.

For example, we’ve got a memory of this place now because two weeks ago, when I first arrived, we met here and had a similar conversation. We can’t recreate that now, but in a way this action of repetition is like a relational aesthetics version of my practice. That is what interests me, similar to how at the lecture at Tokyo Zokei we talked about the expansion of time between what you knew when you first did something and what you know when you come back and redo it a week later or two or five years later. In my case, my practice is always cyclical. As part of my practice-led PhD research I’ve been looking at certain ways of thinking and philosophy related to eternal return, specifically, the way Deleuze thinks about the idea of repetition as a positive affirmation. That is to say, the idea that what repeats always comes back differently. I’ve been taking that concept quite literally in using the same objects and materials over and over again in my practice, where the act of reassemblage gives the same objects a new representation.

ANDREW MAERKLE: Maybe the readymade is the embodiment of the eternal return?

MASATO TAKASAKA: Yes, that's really good. In terms of the readymade, a good example is the delay in time from when Duchamp first presented *Fountain* in 1917 and then remade his readymades as miniature replicas twenty years later in the *Boîte-en-valise*. There's a bridge between the eternal return of difference – things coming back differently – and the delay in repetition where sometimes things can only be fully understood after a long gap in time. Think of how we describe an artist's work as being "ahead of its time."

So I'm interested in embedding that thinking about time into the structure of the work. For *Roppongi Crossing* I've been collecting objects and materials to add to my installation here, including a digital delay pedal that I bought at a guitar store in Shibuya. I saw in one of my Facebook streams that a new Steve Vai signature model had come out, and liked the idea of the signed digital delay pedal meeting the signature that makes the readymade. There was another pedal that I also had to get, which is an overdrive pedal called "Future Overdrive". Both pedals are sitting together in the *Roppongi Crossing* installation. It's like the philosophy of time and the readymade in the guitar shop for the guitarist, which is what I was looking at in the guitar posters from my *Post-Structural Jam* exhibition at Y3K Gallery in Melbourne in 2009. It was an autobiography through objects and materials. It might sound pretentious, but there was a Proustian sense of going back in time and memory to that project, only instead of the madeleine, for me it was the guitar magazine.

So through the idea of culture as a readymade or found object, I was able to find something I was always looking for where I didn't expect to find it. That's the definition of hoarding as well. Hoarders always collect things because they think they'll save it for later or just in case, and I think that applies equally to the readymade, because you don't know when it will make sense until the proper time comes.

ANDREW MAERKLE: Did you get a chance to talk to the other artists participating in *Roppongi Crossing* from Australia, Akira Akira and Koji Ryui, about how they feel about being in the exhibition and what it means to represent both Australia and Japan at the same time?

MASATO TAKASAKA: I think it's very interesting for the three of us, but also Koji and Akira have different perspectives from me, because they're originally from Japan and independently chose to live and work in Australia. It goes back to the idea of cultural cubism and seeing things from a different perspective from someone who is completely embedded in a culture. I remember Akira telling me that his work is not Japanese, there's literally no reference to Japan in it. Maybe this is what interested the curators: the way that artists outside of Japan can contribute to dialogue here through having an outside perspective and experience of living in another country.

Koji commented that a lot of the installations seem to have an aspect of being readymade in the sense that they could be presented anywhere or in any white cube. One thing that Akira, Koji and I have in common is that we're very aware of how objects and materials are activated in a spatial consideration. Maybe we connect more with the Mono-ha artists like Kishio Suga than the younger artists. I've been joking that my work is *Nisemono-ha* (a pun combining the "School of Things" of Mono-ha with the word *nisemono*, meaning an imitation, a counterfeit object), with the appearance of imitating things. I guess it revisits the idea from "Post-Structural Jam" that to be a really good guitarist you have to imitate your heroes, and so again I was interested in that concept as well.

ANDREW MAERKLE: Previously we discussed the ambiguities of what opening up *Roppongi Crossing* to artists from outside of Japan implies about the commonalities among the artists. Does it reinforce already circulating racist or chauvinistic interpretations of what makes someone Japanese; does it privilege the idea of contemporary art as a discursive commonality? Is the exchange taking place under this rubric different from what would happen in a typical international exhibition?

MASATO TAKASAKA: I guess there are all these things you can't see on the surface that you have to taste or experience. Mami Kataoka was talking the other day about how, even though some of the artists are from different parts of the world, this is an opportunity for all of us to contribute to the discussion of Japanese contemporary art, whether it's from a Japanese or Australian perspective. I personally think it's a really interesting survey in general, only everyone happens to have Japanese heritage. That's why I think of culture or identity as a readymade or found object. Coming back ten years after my last trip to Japan, which was also for an exhibition, I've been able to revisit some of the things I already knew and memories I have of growing up around Japanese food culture and the consumer products you can buy at the *combin*i (convenience store) or supermarket. Whenever I go into a *combin*i, I'm automatically reminded of all the things I grew up around in Melbourne. It's this weird object recognition or misrecognition. All the products are the same but totally different, as though at some molecular level they've been brought into being through completely different relations of space and time.

ANDREW MAERKLE: Despite their sameness they reflect a kind of socio-economic *terroir*?

MASATO TAKASAKA: Yes. It's funny that the objects in my *Roppongi Crossing* installation were actually produced in Japan and brought to Melbourne through my father's importing company, and then reclaimed by me. So now here in Tokyo it's like they are found objects that have been refound. It's like the circularity or the eternal return. A lot of people who see the work might think that I found all the objects locally.

ANDREW MAERKLE: So the return of the found objects to Japan parallels your return to Japan as a presumptive Japanese artist?

MASATO TAKASAKA: It's like going back to where you came from even though you never came from there in the first place. The objects keep coming back through repetition because I keep redisplaying or reconfiguring them, but there's also the mechanism of the socio-economic *terroir*: a reterritorialisation or reconfiguration of that trajectory. The export object was never meant to come back, and it's coming back this time in the form of an art object, which is not for sale, because it's in a museum, so it's on display as this weird object of meaning. But when I go into a *combin*i I feel like it's a people's museum that is direct to the public. Similarly, the vending machine embodies the idea of capitalism providing a selection for everyone. The drink in a vending machine is a drink that everyone can buy, and it's a drink that's of the street, so it relies purely on when you're thirsty, and it's also very convenient.

I was thinking of that idea of convenience, and how in Japanese the word for convenience store is shortened to "*combin*i", which evokes the "combine," the specific word Rauschenberg used for material assemblage: the *combin*i as combine. For me that is perfect. This is the convenience of the readymade and the found object. It's already made so you have the convenience of not having to make it. It's the thought of the object through selection; for the artist, the most direct route to something is simply through presenting it.