

ArtReview

Koki Tanaka: The Impossible Project

Japanese artist Koki Tanaka talks about his text-based project, which runs throughout the pages of the Spring/Summer 2014 issue of ArtReview Asia and also on the header of artreview.com

By Aimee Lin

ARTREVIEW ASIA *Your Impossible Project features in this issue of ArtReview Asia, running on the spine and across all the pages of the features section. When did you start to develop this project?*

KOKI TANAKA I started to write the first instructions in 2008, but I don't really remember why I started this text-based project. One thing that I remember is thinking that if I only plan 'realistic' or 'realisable' projects, then I might also be placing a limit on my imagination. I mean, we are surrounded by conditions that constrain us – economic or political situations, but also the laws of physics. Instead of allowing ourselves to be constrained by such things, we might be able to free ourselves through imaginative ideas. They could perhaps be unspecific, ridiculous, idealistic, wildly optimistic, but at the same time spoken without fear.

ARA *When I first heard about the Impossible Project, I thought it would be something very conceptual, but actually some of the instructions are quite practical (albeit impossible to complete). Why do you want to initiate (even if only in your audience's imagination) these actions?*

KT It all reflects my personal experience – everyday awareness, conversations with my friends and my wife, reading – and it is based on the present social situation. It's an archive of the random directions my thoughts follow, in a way. And I turn that into a more abstract sentence to make it more accessible, and I guess in that way, some people may recognise similar ideas that they might have in their minds in daily life but never have a chance to focus on. I try to connect my reality to another's.

ARA *Some of the instructions are completely impossible, such as 'replace one colour with another' or 'exchange waters from different oceans'. But perhaps they are more suggestive of a change of perspective. What interests you about this? Does it reflect your own desires – perhaps to change your social identity (Japanese, male, artist) or physical features?*

KT We have a tendency to categorise, label or name things in the world. We are all labelled, as you said. But is it permanent? I claim it's temporary, because names, categories and labels change over time. Several hundred years ago what we now call Japan was not 'Japan', and the structure of the country was different. We stick the label that we have now onto things in the past to create history and tradition, but it's only a projected image of what we want to see. I am interested in examining this. It leads us to question why we interpret the world in a particular way, and suggests that there may be alternatives.

ARA *Some of the instructions seem more possible than impossible. Like to eat the food from a particular region to support the democratic movement that is happening there (instruction no 42). Perhaps this kind of action belongs to a different level of 'impossible': not 'impossible', but more like 'we don't do it because it is weird'. Some of your old works are begun from this point too. For example when you asked a group of people to perform actions, as in Precarious Task #2: Talking About Your Name While Eating Emergency Food (2012), or when you asked five people to play one piano at the same time (A Piano Played by Five Pianists at Once, 2012). How do you look at 'the normal' (or 'the regular'), and 'the abnormal' (or 'the irregular')?*

KT I think I'd like to present possibility – a possibility that we overlook even if it's in our hands. We are somehow lazy to realise or think it's weird to do certain things. However, if we are given an example (even if



it's only in the text), we might be able to explore that potential. I want my project to be a sort of experiment in possibility. I would say I have been influenced by someone who opened a door before me. What I am doing since then is to keep the door open and try to open another door for someone else. In this sense, I am neither a creator of artwork nor an inventor of new things. But that is the way that a chain of actions happens – one after another, so then later we could be far from where we started, at a place that we never thought we could be. It's only at the end that we realise that we have opened so many doors to reach somewhere unknown.

ARA *Back to the instructions in the Impossible Project: have you ever followed any of these instructions and practised them? Could this project also become what you call a 'collective act'? (And by the way, what is a 'collective act'?)*

KT Yes, I tried 'Love a friend who has betrayed you many times'. But actually it is quite difficult, I still couldn't meet him. So this is a very personal instruction for myself. And of course, '46. Wear black clothes to support the Sunflower Movement in Taiwan' and '47. Wear yellow clothes to support the antinuclear movement' are both related to recent social movements in Taiwan and Japan, and as you see, that is what people do now. But I see these instructions existing for a longer period of time; ideally an artwork should exist for a long time. So if it lasts 100 years or so, people might not understand the context. However, they could join the anti - nuclear movement, for example, in the distant future. The project could be remembered and keep going in the relevant time and place. As for a 'collective act', I define it as people doing things collectively together. Like voting in an election, joining open-source software groups, having a drink together, protesters demonstrating and so on. I didn't consider before that the *Impossible Project* could read as a 'collective act', but yes, instructions are basically open to anyone, so it could be collective. Maybe not at the same time, but accumulating a sense of collectivity over a longer duration.

ARA It's interesting that you use the word 'instruction' to refer to the entries in this project. I think 'instruction' is part of your methodology – we could take your past works as examples, in which you gave instructions to an audience or to participants in your work to 'act', and the whole process as well as the result becomes the artwork. What is the role that you are playing in this? Why do you need to be the 'instructor'?

KT I am interested in creating a framework. Even though I use the word 'instruction', I couldn't instruct all the detail. That is why the end result of acting on the instructions can be various. And I don't think the end result is my work. If you look at the previous project you mentioned, *A Piano Played by Five Pianists at Once*, is the end result of the music my work? It is their contribution, their work. I gave them the simple instruction 'to play a piano together' and a theme for the music – 'soundtrack for collective engagement'. It affects the entire process. Usually the 'instructor' has a certain skill and knowledge of what they instruct – they teach – but I couldn't. I could say I am an ignorant instructor. My instruction requires total dependence on participants and their skills and thoughts. And this forces all of us (including me) to be able to come to terms with a sense of uncertainty, because no one knows how to realise the work. I am curious about how people react at such moments.

ARA *Text plays a special role in your art, but it can be difficult to present in the context of an artworld (at least the commercial part of it) that favours the spectacular. Here it's presented throughout the magazine, but how else do you like to present the Impossible Project?*

KT It's a good question. I have presented this project as printed text a few times, but I am currently rethinking how to present it in line with the way my practice has evolved. I am curious about open-ended discussion with the participants, and I want to develop that. So in my current thinking, the work needs several rooms, in each of which there is an instructor who has in his or her mind one of the instructions. Once an audience enters the room, the instructor reveals that instruction and starts to discuss how it might be realised. There is very little distinction between the 'instructors' and the audience, since the former have not been briefed on how to make it happen (because, of course, the realisation of the instruction is often impossible). Both parties face difficulty and potential failure. But everyone rethinks their conceptions of possibility and impossibility, and travels to a place they (and me) can't envisage in advance. That outcome might be beautiful or humorous or a total failure.

[Koki Tanaka is taking part in Journal, 25 June – 7 September 2014, ICA, London](#)

