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RON TERADA: DESIGNED TO PROVOKE AN  
EMOTIONAL RESPONSE

**RON TERADA**

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You're in a desert, walking along in the sand when all of a sudden you look down and you see a tortoise, it's crawling towards you... you reach down, flip the tortoise over on his back...the tortoise lays on its back, its belly baking in the hot sun beating, its legs trying to turn itself over but it can't, not without your help, but you're not helping...I mean, you're not helping, why is that...?¹

In any city, one is constantly surrounded by the opportunity to read, in the most literal sense, street names, traffic signs, posters, billboards, and the illuminated names of restaurants and shops. Text leans on sandwich boards, moves past on the sides of buses, and lies on the ground in the form of a discarded newspaper. We recognize rather than read the majority of these written words and numbers. The forms they take are merely registered through the style and structure of their delivery. However, every once in a while one's attention gets caught by something such as a spelling mistake, a font that seems incongruent with the words it spells, or the curiousness of what a sign claims. My most favourite recent sighting is the phrase, "Same menu new chef," suggesting that the same bad food is going to continue to be prepared, but this time by someone different.

Throughout his practice, Ron Terada has picked up on these discrepancies of how language and signage

function as formal objects in space. His authorial style is constituted by a conflation of this standardized language that is collectively familiar with personal selections of cultural reference. This procedure allows Terada a level of invisibility in regards to his own relationship to the meaning created by his habit of unlikely pairings; existing visual material is imported and reconfigured to suit the artist's own subjectivity.

For his exhibition at Catriona Jeffries Gallery, Terada presented two new works that wildly contrast one another in the forms they each take; despite this, they both raise similar questions about the position of the artist in relation to his choice of subject matter. *It Is What It Is, It Was What It Was* (2008) refers to the Canadian hockey player Todd Bertuzzi and follows a familiar technique specific to Terada's practice in the form of a text-based neon sign. *Voight Kampff* (2008), a visually lush and seductive video displayed across a bank of monitors and accompanied by a series of large-scale colour photographs, references a fleeting scene from the film *Blade Runner* (1982). *Voight Kampff* is Terada's first moving image work and has a dimension of stunning visual pleasure hitherto unseen in his practice. Both of these works borrow their subject and manner of address from external sources that are restyled through a process of extrapolation. Terada leads their meanings away from clearly identifiable origins and into a charged arena of passive critique and provocation.

Within the complex visual universe of *Blade Runner*, Ridley Scott's dystopic, retro-fitted future prophesy for a Los Angeles of 2019, we encounter within the opening scenes of the film the standardized Voight-Kampff Test, which is used to detect—in the interest of retiring (or, rather, destroying)—highly functioning robots that are developing their own emotions contrary to their original design and use and have thus become a threat to the very integrity

of human genetics. The test is designed to provoke an emotional response that can be measured through the quickening of a heartbeat, the dilation of the pupils, and other uncontrollable bodily responses. Terada's borrowing of the name of this test directly acknowledges his reference to *Blade Runner* and the origin of the Voight-Kampff Test itself. This is not the first time that Terada has acknowledged the film; the cover of his 2003 exhibition catalogue (which was, in fact, the work of the exhibition itself)<sup>2</sup> bears an image of a silver origami unicorn that refers to the recurrence of the mythological creature in a *Blade Runner* dream sequence experienced by Harrison's Ford character as well as a series of carefully placed origami creatures folded by the mysterious police officer who appears fleetingly in the film. The elements appropriated by Terada are relatively ephemeral within the visual narrative of the film. They are incidental moments that one would not necessarily notice without repeated viewing. *Voight Kampff* borrows a similarly transitory image, one that breezes through the periphery of the film. The moving image that Terada is referencing in *Voight Kampff* (in both the video and photographs) first appears in the original film as an advertisement displayed on an electronic billboard attached to the façade of a skyscraper within the backdrop of the city. It later appears in more than one scene on a screen affixed to a roving aircraft-cum-billboard. In the series of advertisements, a geisha, whose alert but coy gaze is directed at the camera, smokes, takes a small pill, and enacts mannered gestures of consumption. Extracting and re-staging this moment outside the context of the film, Terada has re-configured its presentation—which, in the context of the exhibition, was propositional since the work was conceived to be presented outside on an actual electronic billboard—into a form that is at once a familiar monolith of advertisement (a single image gridded across a bank of monitors) and a style of video display first proposed by early video artists (particularly Nam June

Paik) in which the mechanism of display was a conceptually and physically integral part of the work itself. Terada has destabilized the original image by re-casting the role of the geisha with three young Caucasian women who are dressed and made-up as *maikos* (geishas in training). In a series of short takes, the young women perform a series of mimed gestures (in the style of reminiscent of the geisha in *Blade Runner*. As they smoke, ingest pills, and drink, their gazes address the camera and thus the viewer directly. The languid and seductive movements of their eyes and bodies establish them as sites of a pure projection of desire, exaggerated by the fact that the scenes are devoid of any decipherable promotional product. The editing and framing of the scenes suggest that they could be outtakes or screen tests, moments enacted in front of the camera in practice or preparation for an advertisement.

Given his preoccupation with the language of address associated with advertising and signage, it is perhaps unsurprising that the moments Terada selected from *Blade Runner* are those of transitory billboards glimpsed in passing. His focus on minute details such as these also articulates a changed relationship that artists and viewers alike now have with the moving image offered by developments in digital technology. Devices such as home video and DVD players, for instance, provide the opportunity to slow down, speed up, repeat, and pluck single image fragments from filmic narratives. This has significantly shifted and reconstituted the pleasure of viewing to a space outside of the film theatre. As Laura Mulvey suggests in "The Possessive Spectator," an illusion of possession has replaced the original gratification of watching movies, wherein pleasure was previously found in the loss of one's self-consciousness and ego, enveloped in the collective darkness of the cinema where one's desire was projected onto the characters on screen in accordance with a carefully paced linear narrative.<sup>3</sup> What we now have, according

to Mulvey, is “an alert scrutiny and scanning of the screen lying in wait to capture a favourite or hitherto unseen detail.”<sup>4</sup> The moment re-staged in *Voight Kampff* is very much an unseen detail lying outside of any narrative necessity. By way of possessive spectatorship, Terada has “unlock[ed] the film fragment (from linear narrative) and open[ed] it up to new kinds of relations and revelations.”<sup>5</sup> These relations and revelations as opened up by the artist via his appropriation can be defined as wily and provocative. For Terada, glimpsing the moving image of the geisha embedded within the urban backdrop of the city depicted in *Blade Runner* functioned as a symbolic image associated with the future look of a city of 2019. But while the *maikos* in *Voight Kampff* are there to be unabashedly *looked at*, the seductive details of their kimonos, hair, and make-up are amplified by the apparent disaffected pleasure that they take in being watched as they engage in the consumption of substances that indicate a certain recklessness (if we are to assume the pill being taken is a recreational drug and the liquid being sipped is alcohol). To further complicate this re-staging, the young women are not ethnically Japanese. This factor, in addition to their behaviour, suggests that the actors are dressed this way in order to play off of Western clichés of eastern eroticism. Through this extrapolation, the suggestive gestures enacted in *Voight Kampff* are delivered in the heightened style of pure commodity. Isolated moments are truncated from a narrative that, in actuality, never existed. What the artist has given us, *without* revealing any tangible commodity, is the promise without the product.

However, this gesture is less a direct postmodern appropriation of the innumerable images that lie dormant in popular culture and more an extrapolation of reference into the realm of total fantasy. In *It Is What It Is, It Was What It Was*, Terada merges opposing subjects and means of address with a quote taken from Todd Bertuzzi, who is known not only for his skill as a hockey player, but also for an unprovoked

violent blow he dealt to a fellow player in 2004. This act subsequently saw him break down in tears in front of the press and apologize for his actions; the contrast of brute masculinity with genuine teary remorse was stark. In Terada’s work, Bertuzzi’s words take static form in neon, a material with countless associations, including industrially produced outdoor signs and works by artists such as Bruce Nauman, whose neons often contrast emotional or physical states of being with the cold qualities of the medium itself. Terada has intervened in the original quotation by the adding the phrase “it was what it was.” With this supplementary sentence, the present becomes past. Moreover, the change of tense reads like a sigh of resignation. Although the extrapolation employed in *Voight Kampff* operates on an entirely different visual register, it is similar to *It Is What It Is, It Was What It Was* as both works function as a quotation to something collectively known (i.e. the massively popular *Blade Runner* and a notorious Canadian hockey player) and refigured through Terada’s own mode of production that is comprised not of a singular material gesture, but rather particular styles and modes of address adopted from visual culture, be them artistic or popular. His choices are consistent and more often than not contrast an emotional sentiment with a reductive and dry form of address<sup>6</sup> associated with Conceptual Art, which has now become a style in itself in the wake of the first generation of 1960s and 1970s conceptualism and its various “neo” incarnations since then. As Victor Burgin notes, “In the early stages of conceptual art the machine printed photograph and type written text had offered, for a period a ‘zero degree’ of style in which authorial expression could be subsumed to issues of content.”<sup>7</sup> Burgin condemns certain neo-conceptual practices of the 1980s “as nothing but style, nothing but commodity” in the wake of first-generation Conceptual Art failing as an avant-garde. Today, contemporary artists are left with only the symbolic relics of conceptualism reconstituted through a third and

perhaps final act, which plays on the hollow stylistic and commodified remains.

For Terada, the “zero degree” deferral of authorial style achieved through his use of reference and quotation functions not to create space for the political or topical capacity of an artwork (as in first-generation Conceptual Art). Instead, this deferral of a particular authorial style becomes the work itself. In this way, his works do not simply become the sum of their references. Aside from the means of style that Terada employs, what still begets consideration is the subject of the work at hand and the artist’s relationship to it. Terada’s position, therefore, is purposely not determined in relation to those references and the implications of their meaning. The complex matrix of references that are at play in *Voight Kampff* and *It Is What It Is, It Was What It Was* are compelling in that an equation has been proposed and given a trajectory. Yet, a determinable sum of those parts has not been given: they hang quizzically, inciting multiple answers (*Voight Kampff*, for example, feasibly goads a fetishistic scopophila<sup>9</sup> through the mute and consumable nature of the young women’s images as objectified Other), while at the same time

remaining deliberately reticent in their intended meaning. They are potentially *altermodern* (to use Nicolas Bourriaud’s recently coined term), “materializing trajectories rather than destination [to] translate and transcode information from one format to another.”<sup>9</sup> These works, and the artist as well, are provocatively *positionless* and *passive* in relation to the subject that is presented via the conglomeration of references. Similar to the soft institutional critique of *Catalogue*, wherein Terada revealed but did not necessarily critique the origins of funds that were publicly and privately procured for the production of his exhibition catalogue, they become, like the Voight-Kampff Test in *Blade Runner*, designed to provoke a response in the test subject (or, rather, the viewer). Like the anecdote of the turtle flipped on its back, struggling to right itself, one is asked what one would do and how one would react. The works that Terada has paired for his exhibition make propositional equations wherein the variable outcomes provoked by the work are myriad and the artist’s authorial subjectivity as the maker of such works is displaced via a clever but inconspicuous transferral of liability of potential meanings onto the viewer.

## NOTES

1. This is a question posed as part of the Voight-Kampff Test from Ridley Scott's 1982 film *Blade Runner*.

2. For Terada's 2003 solo exhibition at the Contemporary Art Gallery in Vancouver, a sum of approximately \$40,000 CDN was raised via private and corporate funding sources to produce an exhibition catalogue that for the artist, as paraphrased by Reid Shier (the exhibition's curator), would appear to be *inappropriate* for an artist of his reputation and stature. This was accompanied by an exhibition wherein all of the names of the donors were listed on the walls within the gallery as well as the pages of the catalogue.

3. See Laura Mulvey, "The Possessive Spectator," *Death 24x a Second: Stillness and the Moving Image* (London: Reaktion Books, 2006), 163.

4. *Ibid.*, 164.

5. *Ibid.*, 165.

6. Here I am thinking of *Black and White* (2001), *Your Idea* (2001/2003), and *Stop Living in the Past* (2001/2003).

7. Victor Burgin, "Yes, Difference Again...," *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2000), 429.

8. This is a term used by Laura Mulvey in her feminist critique of narrative cinema, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1975), to describe the pleasure obtained in looking at another person as an erotic object.

9. Nicolas Bourriaud, *Altermodern* (London: Tate Publishing, 2009), 12.