

Andrea Jahn

## **Chiharu Shiota's Way into Silence: An Eternal Triangle in Art**

Chiharu Shiota was born in Osaka in 1972 and belongs to a generation of young artists who have gained international attention in recent years for body-related art. The concentration on the process-oriented aspects of the physical is the special focus. And yet Shiota's works should also be understood as being on the edge of contemporary movements in recent Japanese art,<sup>1</sup> which enthusiastically embraced electronic media during the economic boom of the 1980s and reflected on the schismatic character of a culture that is based on an imaginative connection between tradition and adaptation to a hypermodern world.

Therefore Shiota's performative works can only be categorized with recent Japanese art to a limited extent. They are closer to a much broader tradition that began to form in the late 1960s in Japan, the United States, and above all in South America and Europe. Her education at German art schools with Marina Abramovic from 1996 provides a key to her pictorial language that is unmistakably oriented around the artistic solutions of the performance and installation art of the 1970s.

### **I. Roots and Models**

In the performance "Try and Go Home" that Shiota presented in France in 1998, her own body became part of the landscape and thus part of the elemental phenomena of nature (fig. 00). The artist had fasted for four days, before she stayed naked and silent in a hollow, surrounded by leaves and roots and smeared with mud. The title of the performance alludes to the soil as the origin of life--should the performance "Try and Go Home" then be the expression of an impulse to return to the place from which we come?<sup>2</sup>

Within this framework it may be supposed that Shiota, as a Japanese artist, would relate her work directly to the philosophy of Butoh, which revolutionized dance in Japan in the 1960s. It is central to an understanding of Shiota's performance work, however, that Butoh be seen as an important precursor to the developments of Western performance art to which the young artist had access while studying in Australia and Europe, which thus presented her with a kind of "filtered" form of Butoh. It is also relevant to a consideration of her work that Butoh not only transformed our awareness of the body and its movements but also reflected its fleshy aspects: nakedness, sexuality, ephemerality, and independence from and connection with nature. The performances of Min Tanaka (fig. 00) and Anzu Furukawa (fig. 00) in particular reveal elements that Shiota cites in her own performances: the naked body appears "as a phenomenon connected with the micro- and macroscopic structures of life."<sup>3</sup> Tatsumi Hijikata, the true founder of Butoh and the center of this important avant-garde movement, describes his dance as "born of mud." This image stands for the liberation of the body from the constraints of social conventions and rigid formulas in favor of a directness of physical expression.<sup>4</sup> Shiota saw Hijikata perform.<sup>5</sup> It is important to emphasize, however, that Shiota's orientation around the

body language of Butoh does not relate directly to concrete examples she might have seen but to the philosophy of Butoh, which over the course of the development of international performance art was interpreted in new ways and transferred to a wide variety of forms of expression, alongside other non-Western influences.<sup>6</sup>

Women artists of the 1970s also staged their performances with provocative directness, especially when concerned with presenting the naked female body in its capacity as an object and image. Against this backdrop the Cuban artist Ana Mendieta (1948-85) conceived images that are frequently read as a confirmation of the unification of woman and nature but are actually far more complicated than that. In her famously infamous work "Rape Piece" (1972) it was precisely in the linking of natural idyll and the raped, bleeding female body (fig. 00) that she discovered the mechanisms of violence that sexualize and manipulate the female body. She counters this (self-)perception, which is shaped by the patriarchal system of representation, with perspectives derived from her series "Silueta" of 1973 that localize the female body in an elementary context that appears to be primarily "nature" and yet reveals it to be a staged artistic environment (fig. 00).

Chiharu Shiota's connection to these work is obvious,<sup>7</sup> even if "Try and Go Home" concedes already in its title the futility of an unbroken unity between female body and nature. We are made aware of this by the helpless, uncomfortable position of her own body on the roots and leaves--just as if she were a stranger here herself. In this way Shiota circumvents the cliché, sexually burdened "female" physicality without exposing herself to a reproach that could be perhaps made of Mendieta: that the work encourages the attribution of "the female" to nature.

The connection to the elements earth, mud, water, and fire plays a center role in her oeuvre right up to present. Her artistic transformation of this relationship, however, shows that it is certainly a tension-filled relationship that does not proceed from the illusion of the self as a totally integrated entity. Moreover, her performance practice always differentiates between the dramatization of herself as an artistic subject/object and the all too seductive assumption that the artist is confronting us here in an authentic life situation. What Shiota creates are artistic spatial dramatizations in which she is constantly reformulating her role as an artistic subject.

For example, the photographs of her performance "No Title" (Island/Iceland, 2001); [fig. 00] show fragments or details of her body in the context of a desolate coastal landscape. The decisive formal element consists of red wool strands that seem to grow out of the naked body, thread around it, and get caught in the grass. But even when the body seems to become one with its surroundings in these photographs, the red threads thwart the feeling that body and landscape fuse. It is no coincidence that Shiota chooses a color that stands out in the natural surroundings and is a complementary color of the green of the grass. The red thread is both a connecting element and a bewildering one that the artist introduces in order to create out of the interweaving of body and landscape images that explore sculptural and performative qualities and relate them to one another.

In addition to the performances of Ana Mendieta these reflections invariably recall the sculptural work of Eva Hesse (1936-70), which should be seen as an important precursor for the spatial presence of Shiota's installations (fig. 00). The parallels

regarding the choice of materials and the broadened concept of sculpture overlap in a correspondence between the artist's body and formal concerns that stand out in the work of both artists. There are wonderful photographs by Eva Hesse in which she surrounds herself with the organic forms of her sculptural work or installations (fig. 00). One example that is particularly striking in relation to Shiota's work is a photograph of Hesse's studio that shows her lying on a divan, covered by a tangle of strings of the sort she also used in her hanging installations (fig. 00). The parallel is evident: for Hesse as well as Shiota the body is directly connected to the sculptural work. The artistic material stands in direct connection to the artist's body, grows out of it, as it were.

This is nothing other than an insistence on questioning the meaning of the autonomous artwork and the identity of the artistic subject. The extension of the traditional concept of art was the starting point for the various artistic goals that came together to in the installation and performance art of the 1970s. Eva Hesse is--along with Ana Mendieta, Janine Antoni, Louise Bourgeois, Carolee Schneemann, Rebecca Horn, and Marina Abramovic--one of the forerunners of the performative installation art on which Shiota's pictorial language builds. Her artistic intentions are not at all far from the radical ambitions of this generation of artists with a feminist stamp, especially when it is concerned with dissolving the boundaries between audience and the artistic subject, with questioning and opening up definitions of gender or other oppositional categories like inside and outside, body and mind, or nature and culture. The focus of this effort is a confrontation with various concepts of subjectivity and identity, under the sign of deconstruction.

If we start from the standpoint of deconstructionist theory that identity as such does not exist and must be treated wherever it appears as an assertion and construction--particularly when dealing with the highly problematic definition of "female" identity—Shiota's artistic practice reveals itself as a new, critical approach.

## II. The Body as Artwork

In her early performance "Becoming Painting" (1994) Shiota already manifested a central interest in addressing questions of authorship and subjectivity. That she did not separate from this her own position as a female subject is just as important as her critical perspective on her own situation as a Japanese artist living in Germany.

"Becoming Painting" is the title of a performance in which Shiota turns her own body into a painting surface by wrapping it in white sheets that spread out like a kind of canvas (fig. 00). She used red enamel paint to paint her covered body, the wall in the background, and the sheets on the ground before her. Inside and outside become interchangeable; the color evokes red body fluids. This suggests the paint should be seen as identical with the artist's blood, as part of her circulation and at the same time a means for the artistic creative process whose fallout is found on the strips of white cloth. It is also crucial, however, that Shiota uses red paint and not blood. The artist's body becomes a painted canvas, becomes the object of an artistic action. It is also notable that she looks self-consciously directly at the public, into the camera, and thus affirms her position as the subject of this process (fig. 00).

The performance artists of the first generation--such as Marina Abramovic, Hannah Wilke, Gina Pane, or Valie Export--appeared naked in their performances, injured their own bodies, or presented their bodies to the manipulations of the audience in order to expose the power of the patriarchal gaze and their own split in the conflict between feminine authorship and the traditional status of the woman's body as object. Chiharu Shiota has her own strategies for focusing awareness on this set of problems. She introduces her body as an artistic object by smearing it with mud, extending it by means of wool threads, or covering it with canvas and paint. In this way she thwarts sexualizing projections from outside, since she herself describes the surface of her body by covering, muddying, or painting at and thereby altering it so that conventional projections are rendered futile.

This makes it clear that Shiota does not simply borrow approaches from the 1970s but manages to include tendencies primarily from the West (conceptual art, body art, performance, and earth art) in her confrontation with the influences of Butoh and other non-Western body languages in order to merge them in her own pictorial language.

### III. The Extension and Expansion of the Body in Space

If we proceed from these observations, the later development of her performances not only reveal a growing interest in employing her own body as an artistic means but also find new formal solutions for combining space and body. This awareness is expressed in Shiota's work, on the one hand, in the extension of the body in space (fig. 00) and, on the other, in the actual absence of the body, when organic objects appear in lieu of the body and yet maintain a connection to it.

The series of performance-based bed installations combines these two approaches in an interesting way: "Breathing from Earth" (2000; fig. 00), "Ein Ort" ("A place"; 2001; fig. 00), "During Sleep" (2000-2001; fig. 00). But before I discuss that series I would like to say something about "My Existence as a Physical Extension" (1995), one of Shiota's earliest installations in which the idea of the web of strands is already present. The unusual feature here is that Shiota uses her own umbilical cord to connect it by yarn to an installation of knots that floats above a field of ashes (fig. 00). Her own body is thus reduced to the point where, like a cord, it integrated into the installation and thus inextricably intertwined with it. The umbilical cord stands not only for the body of the artist, who thus consciously dispenses with the creation of a concrete body image, but also for the interconnectedness of bodies (of mother and child).<sup>8</sup> Shiota takes as her theme not the division of identity but rather the dependence of the subject on its roots, which questions the Western conception of individuality to the absurd.

This point of view finds its artistic transformation in her spatial installations with thread that takes all of the surrounding objects and bodies and combines them into a single context and relates them to one another.

The series began in 1996 in Japan with the work "Return to Consciousness" (fig. 00), in which Shiota first created one of her webs of black wool thread that dominate the entire exhibition space and that give viewers visual but not physical access to the space. As if they were spider webs that have spread unchecked, the artist has carefully crossed and knotted her threads from floor to ceiling and wall to wall by untiring manual labor. In the center of this tangle of threads a tiny vial can be seen that contains a red fluid: the artist's blood. As if standing in her body's stead this ampoule hangs in the net--like an insect caught in a spider's web or rather like the spider in its own web. The thread installation seems, on the one hand, to be the artist's extended body and, on the other, its artistic object.

In her work "During Sleep", presented at the Haus der Kulturen der Welt in Berlin in 2000, Shiota added four hospital beds to the installation, which are surrounded by the threads as if in a cocoon and thus also closed off from the public. The artist slept in one of the beds at predetermined times, wrapped in white feather bed, apparently totally asleep, immersed in her dreams. In a slightly different performance installation the artist sat for hours naked and motionless on the edge of one of the beds surrounded by threads--with her back to the public.

What does the physical presence of the artist mean in this case, where she neither interacts with the public nor makes the (female) body the theme, as she did earlier in "Try and Go Home" or "Becoming Painting"? All we see of Shiota is her head, perhaps a hand, the contours of her body beneath the sheets, or her unclothed body from behind.

Compared with other performances this is not about the contact between the artist and the viewing public but about refusing such communication. The performer is present, is part of her installation, and yet only perceivable as an image--to say nothing of Snow White in her glass coffin. Nevertheless, it is a spatial perceivable image which presumes a conscious decision for this form of self-display. The artist is passive; she does not appear as an actor in the frame of her installation but becomes an element, an object of her presentation.

If performance may be said to aim at eliminating the distance between the audience and the artistic subject, Shiota reverses that situation and makes us aware by her very passivity that every representation of the body is a blank space that cannot be occupied by projections that imply authenticity or identity. The distance between the viewer and the artist cannot be overcome; the artistic subject itself becomes the image and as such remains inaccessible. By equating artwork and artists, the futility becomes evident: each position remains separate from the other in time. Or, as the art historian Peggy Phelan emphasizes, "Performance uses the performer's body to pose a question about the inability to secure the relation between subjectivity and the body per se; performance uses the body to frame the lack of Being promised by and through the body--that which cannot appear without a supplement [. . .] Performance marks the body itself as loss [. . .]. For the spectator the performance spectacle is itself a projection of the scenario in which her own desire takes place."<sup>9</sup>

#### IV. The Absence of the Body

Shiota's artistic concept cannot, of course, be reduced to this one aspect, and yet the presence and absence of her own body is the thread running through her work, and ultimately it what makes it possible to understand her confrontation with the question of defining the artwork, the artistic subject, and the public. It is only logical then that Shiota dispenses entirely with the presence of her body in other works developed in parallel with these. In the body's place stand other objects that, unlike the umbilical cord or blood, do not originate from the body.

"After That", in its first version (Weimar 1999; fig. 00) is an early installation that already treats these aspects. It consists of a self-made girl's dress, seven meters long and covered with mud; it is installed in front of a wall underneath a showerhead from which water constantly flows. The physicality of the dress is emphasized by its water-soaked, skinlike surface and its brownish color. The visible traces of mud and dirt on this "fabric skin" give the dress an organic quality. In a later, multipart version of this installation called "Memory of Skin" (2001; fig. 00) Shiota makes these associations even more explicit.

That the physical presence of the dress stands in for the body is also clear from an comparison with her video performance "Bathroom", in which the artist subjects herself to the same process, by simultaneously dirtying and cleansing herself (fig. 00). In essence here too the issue is the futility of achieving an identity by conforming to a social role that is closely connected to (purification) rituals and regulations.

In the installation "In Silence" (2000; fig. 00) the human body is replaced for the first time by an object that neither recalls the human form nor suggests its presence: a piano. More precisely, "A piano and a piano stool, both covered in burn marks, in their own space, defined by a network made of black wool threads. The alien objects, the piano and the stool, Chiharu Shiota first appropriated for herself. In a performance at the Haus am Waldsee, she set both objects on fire and allowed the flames to burn the surface until the inside became visible."<sup>11</sup>By removing the outer skin, an inside becomes apparent, one can see that it is constructed, that it can be injured, and it is ephemeral. Such a reflection does not suggest a description of a musical instrument as utilitarian object but as the experience of a living thing. As Margit Brehm rightly notes, Shiota's process of burning the objects is "not an aggressive act of destruction but rather a ritual act of transformation."<sup>12</sup> Shiota uses fire to liberate the piano from its everyday appearance--and hence from its functionality. It becomes a body in space that find its extension in the web of threads of an exhibition. The instrument robbed of its voice, of its sound, is thus interesting not as an isolated artistic object but as part of a process of transformation in which the object--the piano--as once defined loses its meaning in order to represent something that cannot really be represented: the memory of the sound in a silent room. The instrument alone would not be in a position to do that. It is the web of threads that makes visible a sensory experience that is not limited to the sense of hearing but can be felt as a physical experience by the audience in the room. The artist remarks on this:

But the silence remains.  
The more I think about it,  
the stronger it is.  
The piano loses its sound;  
the painter no longer paints;  
the musician ceases to make music.  
They lose their function,  
but not their beauty--they become even more beautiful.<sup>13</sup>

In these lines Shiota speaks explicitly of the relation of the artist and the artwork. She questions the position of the artist itself ("the painter no longer paints; the musician ceases to make music") as well as the significance of the artistic means or instrument ("the piano loses its sound")--and both are freed of their roles.

Shiota's discovery is that art in the true sense only exists for her when the artist and the instrument have lost their respective function--or, as it pertains to the installation "In Silence"--that both only achieve their true artistic expressiveness when woven together with the surrounding space. Shiota emphasizes this view herself when she says that the piano stands for the artwork and the bench for the artist. Both belong together, but they would have to stand apart to function together in the traditional sense. The same is superficially true of her public as well: it is excluded from the actual even by the net that is tightly spanned between "artwork" and "artist". In fact, however, Shiota's web of thread reestablishes the connection in the triangle of perception in art that was thought lost in that the seemingly autonomous categories of "artwork," "artist," and "viewer," which were explicitly criticized by performance art, are dissolved in favor of a web that constantly displaces the subject/object positions in this triangle.

## V. Epilogue

The constellation of the performance installation "In Silence" is found in expanded form in the center of Chiharu Shiota's most recent installation as well, one she developed for the Württembergischer Kunstverein in Stuttgart. The artist has set up a dreary, narrow path that must be taken to enter the space at all, and at first it does not seem especially inviting. It leads into uncertainty across creaking boards; it is too narrow and crooked to become oriented, and it is lit only in a few places by bare light bulbs. After passing through few bends, one sees an old sink on a dirty wall; water runs constantly from a copper tap--it is the only sound to be heard, apart from the creaking steps of the visitors. The labyrinthine path seems to have no end, until finally its narrowest point offers an opening: a view onto a scene that immediately recalls "In Silence": a burned piano and bench, surrounded by eighty or so burned wooden chairs, on which an imaginary audience might sit, were it not for the web of black wool threads that prevent access to the scene. In the dark the silence is even more powerful; on the wall on the opposite side of the seemingly infinite space a video is projected: scenes from an arrival hall at an airport with familiar scenes of meeting again, ritual greetings, tears of joy, encounters. To the left in the tangle of threads there is a hypothetical way out: an old door that invites us to pass through it, but it is

locked. Our gazes alone can enter the space that may lie behind it, but they become lost in the dark, only to return to where its uncertainty is counterbalanced by the calming images of arrival and meeting again.

We find ourselves in a psychic space, confronted by our own unconscious, which takes form in this installation as if in a dream become real. The artist herself remains invisible here--she has freed herself of her role and places it at our disposal. The "painter no longer paints," and the performance artist has stepped off the stage. Those who know her work will understand that her physical absence in the course of this performance installation is programmatic. Shiota's ambition to question the identity of the artistic subject and the meaning of the autonomous artwork is taken to its logical conclusion. If every representation of the body represents a blank space that cannot be filled with authenticity or identity, the presence of the performer too always functions only as an image. In "The Way into Silence" Shiota has a piano and bench occupy the artist's position in her stead, and set so far apart that the production of sound--that is, of art--is impossible. In Shiota's philosophy the true artwork is created only when the expectations for familiar artistic forms of expression (like music or painting) are abandoned in favor of a perception of things that gets by without any attributions of meaning. In an installation like "The Way into Silence" this kind of perception makes it possible to see the relationships between the artistic subject and the artwork, between viewer and performer, between inside and outside are in constant motion and to see that every element of her installation--even the viewers themselves--can only participate in the artistic expression and the perception thereof by admitting it is dependent: interwoven into the space the artist has created.

## Notes

1. Other artists whose forms of expression are emphatically performative include Takehito Koganezawa in Berlin and the artists' group Dumb Type.
2. Shiota does not understand Heimat (homeland) literally, as our place of origin, but instead uses the term in a metaphorical sense when she declares, "My own Heimat, that's inside, a personal thing. Art is a Heimat. And looking for it is what my art is about." (ai)interview--Chiharu Shiota," ai (summer 2001): unpaginated.
3. Min Tanaka, "Mein Tanz will Fragen stellen," in Michael Haerdter and Sumie Kawai, eds., *Butoh: Die Rebellion des Körpers* (Berlin: Alexander, 1998), 84
4. "The choice of the term Butoh for the new dance of the 1960s was supposed to indicate the difference. It means 'stamping dance' and alludes to its improvisation and lack of rules. The abandonment of the rational concept of the world leads [. . .] to the creation of an alternative view of the human being. [. . .] [T]here the Butoh dancers rejected the mechanistic rules of modern dance and replaced it with the Japanese body as the bearer of a new formal language. [. . .] Butoh is in fact the most direct and simplest answer to the question of a new identity. It presents the Japanese body in its "darkness" and (very often) in its nakedness"; see Haerdter and Kawai 1998 (note 3), 24.

5. Conversation with the author in March 2003.
6. Similarly, the work of Marina Abramovic would be inconceivable without reference to Asian techniques of meditation, as would Ana Mendieta's outdoor performances without reference to the rituals of Santeria (a religion of Afro-Cuban origin).
7. Shiota remarks on this: "Ana Mendieta is a big influence on me. [. . .] In her work, she played with death all the time. and that interests me, too. How she wanted to unify her body with the universe"; see "(ai)interview--Chiharu Shiota" (note 2).
8. "In Japan it is traditional to store a child's umbilical cord in a box made of hinoki wood. Shiota's umbilical cord is in Japan in the same box as her mother's umbilical cord. Symbolically, it establishes a connection between grandmother, mother, and daughter" see Jaana Prüss, Chiharu Shiota: Dialogue from DNA, exh. cat. (Berlin: Asian Fine Arts, 1999), 9.
9. Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 150-51.
10. Margit Brehm, "Die Stille in der Musik," in Chiharu Shiota: *Under the Skin, 2000-2001*, exh. cat. Berlin, Prüss & Ochs Gallery (Berlin: Asian Fine Arts, 2001), 31.
11. See Brehm 2001 (note 10), 30.
12. *ibid*
13. See Shiota's Internet page: [www.chiharu-shiota.com](http://www.chiharu-shiota.com).