

Moving Lines engender life / Complicated Forms are generated by Logic : The Jomon Contemporary Exhibition in Funabashi, 2014

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For human beings, the kinetics of walking upright on two legs involves the need to lose balance and then step forward. They cannot walk otherwise. Static equilibrium is not a characteristic of living things. Living creatures are lines that move with continuous slippages or shifts. That is what “living” is all about.

The “Jomon Contemporary Art Exhibition” held at the Funabashi City Historic Park Museum recently changed its name to “Jomon Contemporary Exhibition” at its 14th show in 2014. It is reminiscent of an old custom among the Samurai class in pre-modern Japan which required the adoption of a new adult name on the 15th birthday. In this case, it occurred a year in advance. This name change may seem a trifle modification, but, in fact, it resulted in an impressive leap for the exhibition. Holding an exhibition that bears “Art” in its title at a museum specializing in Jomon archaeology was, and still is, a very progressive endeavor, to say the least. But, the “Contemporary Art” in its title may have played a role in leading artists and audiences in a very specific direction, contrary to the expectation of its organizers.

Omitting the word “Art” and renaming the exhibition the “Jomon Contemporary Exhibition” signifies the adoption of a very long time span, whereby the Jomon era and the present day can be seen as “contemporary.” If the *Jomon Culture* can encompass a wide variety of cultures scattered over the course of ten thousand years, it will be equally plausible to call the Jomon people our contemporaries, since less than ten thousand years have passed since the end of the Jomon period. That does not, of course, mean that present-day people can easily understand the Jomon people's ideas and

the objects made by them. But if you accept the perspective that the Jomon and the present are contemporary, the people from these two distant periods will be able to engage in a casual dialogue as colleagues. In other words, in being freed from the limitations of an “Art exhibition,” we can rethink about *what the art is* by opening up a “dialogue” between the objects made by “Jomon hands” and the objects made by “modern hands.”

Thus, I think that the exhibition celebrated its coming-of-age in 2014 and moved to another step. As in the aforementioned concept of living creatures as *lines*, movement is a clear evidence that something is living. The exhibition, which is continuously moving to become something else, could be considered as living and growing.



The novelty of the 14th show was not restricted to its name. The works exhibited, as a whole, made a leap toward an area that had not been previously explored. That area can be summarized with two phrases: “moving lines that engender life” and “complicated forms that are generated by logic.” Or alternatively combining the two phrases: “Complicated forms made by moving lines that engender life are logical.”

As for the meaning of the Jomon forms and designs that look mysterious to modern eyes, much has been said and written. Various interpretations have been presented as to the reason why no two identical pieces were fabricated in spite of the tremendous volume produced. Adding to those archaeological contributions, I observed that this year's Jomon Contemporary Exhibition presented a very interesting artistic

and scientific viewpoint. Summing up in my own words, that viewpoint is as follows.

The forms and designs of Jomon clay vessels were not the products of a spontaneous explosion of passion, but instead they were logical (in the sense that life is logical) and were something generated by moving lines. As is the case of the forms of living creatures, some sort of logic or principles lie behind the forms of Jomon objects. Those principles are more like simple guidelines than rigorous laws. Once some slippages or shifts are inserted and set in motion, those principles automatically generate limitless variations through self-propagation. I think that this is a viewpoint that was shared by the artists participating in the exhibition this year.

Moving lines generate life, or moving lines themselves are lives. This is a view that a British anthropologist Tim Ingold has propagated extensively. He insists that *meshwork*, such as baskets which come into being through the process of weaving, is the principle of life rather than a *network* that only connects preexisting points. Following his lead I dare say that the most remarkable feature of the Jomon Contemporary Exhibition of 2014 is the view that the forms and designs of Jomon objects are the products of *moving lines that are generated following certain principles*.



This leap had more than one starting point and the development of the final form was far from linear. As far as I could trace the “line,” something new was expected when SAKAI Seiichi, an artist who had served as the director of the Jomon Contemporary Art Exhibition since 2001, was replaced by ISHIHARA Michitomo, a restoration specialist of ancient objects. One of the changes was the aforementioned renaming of the exhibition, which opened space for further innovations. A bold proposal was made by SHIBATA Michiri, who introduced YAMAUCHI Keiji’s “Video-feedback project” and TAKAKI Ryuji’s “Science of form” to the regular artists/participants of the exhibition. What

was introduced was, in a word, a “scientific viewpoint.” As a result there began to circulate in the artists’ emails unfamiliar technical terms such as “fractal” and “Chaos theory.” To sum up those new developments I’d like to borrow a line from Yamauchi that seems apropos: *Mathematical principle generates complicated forms*.

If you film a projected image that was originally filmed by a video camera, and “let the images proliferate themselves through such feedback technique and add appropriate adjustments such as inclining, magnifying, or reducing scope, you can get fractal forms, which may appear as forms intentionally generating their own forms”(Yamauchi). To the astonishment of the artist, the visual images generated through such a self-organizing process are quite similar to the designs of Jomon clay objects. As Yamauchi himself stresses, the video-feedback images “made” by the artist are, in no way, his intentional products but spontaneous outcomes of slight adjustments inserted by him. At the exhibition Yamauchi’s video images are projected on to the spiral design of a replica of a Jomon vessel from the Katsurano archaeological site. The replica made by OHUCHI Hamham was suspended from the ceiling of a restored prehistoric house that was placed in the middle of the museum’s permanent display floor. Yamauchi and Ohuchi’s joint work was part of a daring collaborative installation named “*Forms made with design*”, with Shibata’s work which reproduced the waving silhouette image of the flame-shaped Jomon vessel projected by fire on to the surrounding forest. As the caption of the installation declares, something was happening in and around the restored house. When the moving lines of the video-feedback images were projected on the moving lines, captured as spiral incisions on the surface of the vessel, something was beginning to wriggle that indicated the presence of life.

Lively spirals were found everywhere in the exhibition. HIRANO Akihiro’s dance performance with waving arms appeared to be a spiral movement with oscillations. Hirano’s life-size

plastic figure made by Shibata, in contrast, could not generate any moving lines. Mundo-Novo-Poco-Buyo-dan made a street musical performance with a wide variety of figurines, who came to life in the spiral and winding movement of the procession. MAKIME Jun and White Dice dance group's performance entitled "*Spirals on the grass*," built up a tiny shell-midden through the continuous spiral movement of the dancers, who were throwing shells unearthed from the site. Moving lines generate life. From typhoons to spiral shells, the natural world is full of various kinds of spirals, which take shape not through repeating an identical motion but repeating a similar motion with tiny variations. Just before the performance began, as a huge typhoon was approaching, the audience's eyes were caught by the incessant winding movement of ants that were marching on the grass. Those moving ants were a living line, too. On the same lawn there was another life-generating moving line that careless observers might fail to recognize as artwork. It was SHINOZAWA Masaru's "*Jomon Garden*," in which the oldest Japanese crops, such as Barnyard millet and Foxtail millet, were cultivated. Plants are living and growing as moving lines. They are artworks that grow. Those plants, by transmitting DNA across generations, have been yielding crops every year since the Jomon period. Plants are, in a sense, instances of an ongoing performance. Harvested and threshed cereals were cooked in Jomon replica pots and eaten at the Jomon Harvest Festival, thus turning into human lives. It is in this way that living lines will continue.

Life generating lines were visible also in other artworks that appear motionless to human eyes. An artwork that bridged moving works and still works was TSUJI Kei's "*From Red to Red*," which was composed of two pieces. In its video image version a long cloth of red-tinted silk was floating in a crystal clear water stream, while a similar red line was taking a rest on a framed canvas. In SUTO Arisa's "*Moon Seed*," moving cotton lines were coiled up with paste and made into twenty-one ob-

jects that have tubular or basket forms. Those pasted lines, however, must have been just pretending to be lifeless because the artist writes in the caption that everything is in the process of death and rebirth. On the other hand, in OHKAWA Kazuhiro's work twisted and baked clay pieces were placed on the wall in the shape of spirals. In that work living lines were cut up into dotted lines just the way DNA is cut into short threads by enzyme. Like a prepared specimen for microscopic observation, the dotted lines of baked clay seemed to be no longer living and moving. It was just a lifeless trace left by living things.

Another work by Ohkawa entitled "*Jomonni-omou-tsubo*" was composed of several half-closed colorful ceramic vessels made by coiling (moving line!) technique and displayed outside on the lawn. They looked like pumpkins lying on a field waiting to be harvested. Living lines were, for the moment, bulging out to form those round objects. Those objects echoed when beaten, which gave the impression that something was living inside. Next to them, about ten meters away, there were several terracotta resembling root vegetables growing from the ground. Those objects were fabricated in the shape of water drops as part of SHIMIZU Yuichi's "*Water drop earthenware: memory and circulation*." The theme of the work was the experiences recollected across various extinctions and rebirths, just like the circulation of water since the ancient times. A moving line of water stops its motion, for a moment, to make a water drop, which does not last long before it returns into the circulation of moving water.

Lively moving lines were also the theme of "*Artistic Review*," a work arranged by ISHIHARA Michitomo and HASHIMOTO Tatsuya. Ishihara, who has long been interested in shedding light on unearthed things that are usually hidden away in a dark storage, collaborated with Hashimoto to create an installation in which their interpretation of the designs of several Jomon vessels were displayed side by side with the original pieces. Their artistic interpre-

tations were based on their experience of carefully observing the fragments from all angles in order to grasp the specific vessel's features which would aid in the restoration of the Jomon vessels. In one of their installations, "*Big Waves, Small Waves*," a horizontal movement of waves was visible on the surface of a vessel. In another, "*Dropping water animation*," three designs on the rim of a vessel look like three phases of dripping water. Through this installation the artists presented a dynamic view that interprets Jomon designs as stop-motion pictures rather than as discreet static symbolic elements.

Life-generating moving lines were, for the moment, pausing and expecting to move again in two works: SHOHOJI Takeshi's "*Jomon messages from Funabashi*" and SAKAI Seiichi's "*Arks carrying Jomon shells*." Shohoji's work was a composition of photos that captured partial designs of Jomon vessels from Funabashi, while in Sakai's work small glass bottles that contain tiny shells unearthed from the Tobinodai shell-midden were displayed with white-painted small wooden boats. Both works may be interpreted as a collection of slightly different specimens of the same species or a collection of diverse creatures that show a family resemblance. Identical beings are not born naturally. Absolute uniformity is unnatural. Nature necessarily engenders natural diversity through repetitions with slight slippages and shifts.

In the exhibition we could see other works that seemed to have no direct relation to the argument of this essay but hinted to possible future developments. In JIMBO Kimio's "*Clay vessels featured on the cover page*," three Jomon vessels from the collection of the museum are displayed side by side with their corresponding enlarged photos. These photos taken by the artist were to be used as a cover page for the museum's bulletins. TANGIKU Itsuji and SHINOHARA Chika presented "*Animation of Ainu peoples' legend: Oruspe suwop*" (made by the Foundation for Research and Promotion of Ainu Culture "FRPAC"). A group of ar-

tists named "The Day of Dogu steering committee" displayed "*Dogu's sunny spot*," in which several clay and wood works featuring tiny Jomon dogu-like figurines are assembled. The creative possibilities I observed being alluded to in those works are: scale and dimensions, transformations in the process of transmission, and miniature other-worlds, respectively.

The Jomon Contemporary Exhibition in Funabashi of 2014 was an epoch-making event in various ways. Until last year the artworks were displayed in the same ambient space as Jomon objects and sometimes there seemed to occur interaction between them, but still there was a sort of hesitation in the artists' approach to things Jomon. This year the works made by "modern hands" made a proposal (or flung down a challenge) to invite the works made by "Jomon hands" to participate in a dialogue. Instead of parallel monologues, face-to-face dialogues started. This was also the case among the artists who had always been on friendly relations. Thanks to a mailing list made by one of the artists, Ohuchi, there began to appear an "exchange of commentary" between the exhibited artworks, which even culminated in a collaborative work as mentioned above. I think this is a very good sign for the future of the exhibition. By the way, a performance art, "*Spirals on the grass*" unexpectedly produced its second version. There emerged of course a variation between those two versions. Is that the work of an evolving performance?

I am looking forward to witnessing further growth in future shows of the Jomon Contemporary Exhibition in Funabashi, which is itself a "life-generating moving line." What kind of experiments will be tried? What kind of unforeseeable things will happen? What will be born? How will the exhibition continue to grow?

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