

The sense of emptiness in the installations of Yasuaki Onishi

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Abstract

Generally, when we talk about an empty space, this “empty” is not really physically empty. The empty space is filled with air, invisible matter, but which cannot be seen or captured. So, should we consider differently the empty space and air in the installation? For Yasuaki Onishi (1979-), a Japanese sculptor and installation artist *in situ*, the empty space is an essential place for installation art and inspiration. He is interested in the invisible, as space, air, and negative space. His installations reveal what is invisible, using a lightweight material such as a black liquid adhesive (hot glue), with the support of non-material materials such as light, air or other intangible materials. Through the analysis of the series *Vertical volume*, *Daily distance*, *Gawa* (ring), *Shaping air: A breath of mobility* and *Vertical space* I shall ask what is the meaning of emptiness in Yasuaki Onishi’s installation, and what is at stake in the relationship between empty space and full space, visible space and invisible space, materiality and immateriality. In his work, which does not follow the process of moulding sculpture, I shall propose to find the connection with the meaning of “negative space” and the Korean term *gan* “간 (間, between, interspace)”, the concept of “space-time”, as in the Japanese word “*ma* (間)” which is an aesthetics concept in Japan. I shall track the meaning of invisible air, breath, and their relation to Asian concepts of *qi* (氣, primordial breath), *svi*, the etymology of the Sanskrit *sunyata* (emptiness), the Korean notion of “○” *wonsang* 원상 (圓相) “circle”, and relate them to the meaning of emptiness in Taoism and Buddhism.

Keywords: Laozi; Onishi Yasuaki; Emptiness; *gong*; *ga*; *ma*; Buddhism; *wonsang*, *enso*, negative space; immateriality.

The breath in *Vertical Volume* by Yasuaki Onishi

Onishi Yasuaki¹ (大西康明) was born in 1979 in Osaka, Japan where he currently lives and works. He trained as a sculptor at the School of Art & Design at Tsukuba University in Japan in 2004. For Onishi, as for most installation artists (as shown in the various papers of this book), the empty space is an essential support, a workplace and also a place of inspiration, because he creates his installations according to the place of the exhibition, *in situ*. This space is filled with air, invisible and elusive.

Everything that is invisible does not mean that it is non-existent though. A gust of wind makes us perceive the movement of the air by a quivering of the leaves or the air flow by a displacement of the clouds. We breathe air at all times, from birth, we breathe instinctively to survive, but we don't pay attention to air because of its invisibility. We are used to the way breathing works. We breathe without thinking.

Should we consider the empty space and the air in the installation differently? Onishi is interested in what is invisible, like empty space, air and negative space. He uses the lightness of the material such as thin plastic sheets and hot black glue to express the invisible space made of intangible materials such as light, air or other substances. By observing his works, in particular, the *Vertical Volume* series installed since 2008 in several countries², *Gawa* (ring) made in 2001 for the diploma project at the University of Tsukuba in Japan, *Shaping Air* made in 2013 for a video project with Mercedes-Benz CLA in Stuttgart in Germany, and *Vertical Space* performed at the Newman Club in Australia in 2015, I shall reflect on the breath, the *qi* (氣, primordial breath), the sense of emptiness in relation to *wonsang* 원상 (圓相) "circle" (*ensō* (円相 in Japanese), and the negative space, and also to the word "space" in Korean, *gonggan* 공간 (emptiness-between-inter) or simply *gan* 간 (between-inter). Doing so, I am going to interrogate the relationship between empty and full space, between visible and invisible space, between materiality and immateriality in Onishi's works.

Many Western artists are inspired by elements such as air, breath, a breath of air, smoke or vapour. These intangibles, ephemeral and changing, suggest what is invisible in space. Let us cite the case of Anish Kapoor who shows a mysterious vapour rising towards the mouth of a black (or empty) pipe in *Ascension* (2011). Olafur Eliasson makes us reconsider the lightness of air and vapour in *Vær i vejret* (Be in the air, 2016), or by creating soap bubbles by blowing air in *Happiness* (2011). Guiseppe Penone leaves the imprint of his body and his breath in a bunch of leaves in his work

¹ ONISHI Yasuaki (in Japanese, we first write the name). See his personal site: <<http://onys.net/>>.

² *Vertical volume SMOA*, 2009, h400, w660, d960cm / plastic sheet, fan, other, Exhibition *Against The Sculptural*, Seoul Museum of Art, Seoul, Korea. *Vertical volume ACG*, 2014, h700, w570, d890cm, plastic sheet, fan, timer, other, solo exhibition, Artcourt Gallery, Osaka, Japan. *Vertical volume ZA*, 2015, plastic sheet, fan, timer, other, Exhibition, *Erosion Transfiguration / Zuiun-an*, Kyoto, Japan. *Vertical volume MI*, 2016, plastic sheet, fan, other, solo exhibition, *The Mine*, Dubai, UAE.

entitled, *Soffio di foglie* (Breath of leaves, 1979 and 2009). Oscar Munoz instantly brings up a photograph of the dead as a ghostly image by blowing on seven metal mirrors in the work *Aliento* (Breath, 1995). Breath is an essential element and an essential act for living beings. Moreover, breath is one of the foundations of ten thousand beings in the 42th chapter of *Daodejing* of Laozi 老子:

The *Dao* begets one; One begets two; *Yin* and *Yang*; Two begets three; *Yin*, *Yang* and Breath (冲); Three begets ten thousand (all) things. The ten thousand things leave behind them the *Yin*, and go forward to embrace the *Yang* while they are harmonised by the Breath of Vacancy (冲氣). (Noza [Laozi] 1994, p. 148.)

If “breath” (*chong*, 冲) means in the middle of the emptiness or the “relative emptiness”, by associating it with *qi* (氣, the primordial breath), *chongqi* (冲氣), literally? “breath of Vacancy” by Laozi, can be interpreted as “energy in the middle emptiness”. It is this “energy in the middle emptiness” which is constantly generated in the world through yin and yang encounters creating breath energy or life energy. François Cheng translates the term *chongqi* by “the breath of the median Emptiness (le souffle du Vide médian)”: “The ten thousand beings lean against the Yin and embrace the Yang. Harmony is born with the breath of the median Emptiness” which integrates all the phenomena and harmonizes them (Cheng 1991, p. 59, author’s translation).³



Fig. IV.1-1 Yasuaki Onishi, *Vertical volume ACG*, 2014, h700, w570, d890cm, plastic sheet, fan, timer, other. Artcourt gallery, Osaka Japon, photo: Seiji Toyonaga, Courtesy of Artcourt gallery. © 2017 Yasuaki Onishi

This “breath”, this energy which plays the role of generating ten thousand beings, may be

³ “Le Tao d’origine engendre l’Un. L’Un engendre le Deux/ Le Deux engendre le Trois/ Le Trois produit les dix mille êtres/ Les dix mille êtres s’adossent aux Yin/ Et embrassent le Yang/ L’harmonie naît au souffle du Vide médian.”

compared to the movement of air in Onishi's *Vertical volume* series (fig. 1). *Vertical volume* is made with thin sheets of translucent plastic which create a volume in the form of a vertical pillar as the title indicates. It produces "breath", using empty space, air, a fan, a timer and a light bulb. The ventilator creates the movement of air by bringing it from the outside to the inside and exhausting the air from the inside to the outside as the functioning of our lungs. The movement has an extremely slow speed. The presence of the breath of air in *Vertical volume* is active, but the atoms of the air are invisible. We see the breath of air when the volume is filled and bounces up slightly two or three times like a balloon; similarly, when it shrinks it flattens on the ground as if it had reached his last breath. The movement of *Vertical volume* is maintained by the operation of the timer and the fan which are adjusted to form volumes of different sizes. The movement of these volumes is repeated smoothly and continuously. A dozen translucent plastic volumes gathered in the same space look like a set of buildings or a grouped crowd (the number of these volumes varies depending on the location of the exhibition).

The process of achieving *Daily distance* (fig. 2), which was exhibited in 2008 in Denmark, is the same as *Vertical volume*. The only difference is that a single volume of a large translucent plastic sheet covers a table where plates and white dishes are placed. Onishi makes us reconsider the air and the space which are close to us through this scene from our daily life that we are familiar with. Air and space, these intangibles materials are essential for our life. Our brain forgets most of the things that are present by our side, and our eyes do not see them, as if they did not exist. Moreover, Kim Dae-shik 김대식, brain scientist and artificial intelligence researcher, thus declares: "The brain considers that what does not change does not exist"⁴. It is not just that we are not conscious of air and space, even more, we forget their power in our life; the importance of air to survive and of empty space to our daily life. All their value is essential for living beings. The brain pushes us to escape the value of the intangible invisible things that exist in everyday life like air and empty space.

⁴ Kim, D-s. 2016, p. 105. Cf. Professor Kim Dae-shik 김대식 교수, Platon Academy 플라톤 아카데미, March 17, 2015, *Beautiful Life, Noe, hyeonsil, geurigo ingongjineung* 뇌, 현실, 그리고 인공지능 (Brain, reality and artificial intelligence), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tKLRQs_nOxM, 19m45-21mn. : "뇌는 변화가 없는 것은 존재하지 않는 것으로 인식한다". est-ce bien utile de citer cette conférence en coréen ?



Fig. IV.1-2 Yasuaki Onishi, *Daily distance*, 2008, h244, w743, d370cm, plastic sheet, fan, timer.
Artists in Residence Centre, Jyderup, Denmark. © 2017 Yasuaki Onishi

The interior of the volumes in *Vertical volume* series and *Daily distance* appear empty, but the change in the contraction and the expansion of the volume proves that the air circulates. If the *Vertical volume* series makes us realize the inner breath of our body, *Daily distance* suggests thinking about the invisible air.

The air is called *gongki* 공기 in Korean (in Chinese *kongqi* 空氣). It is made up of two words; *gong* 空 (emptiness) et *ki* 기 (breath, vital energy). Air, empty without energy, cooperates with other invisible elements and transforms into vital energy which circulates invisibly. Like the breath created by all human movements, including the action of the lung, the circulation of air in the empty space creates new energy, *chongqi*. In other words, by the work of the movement of the body, the external air is unified with the internal air of our body, and thus the control of the external and internal air creates vital energy.

In the *qigong* (气功, energy-work), the movement of the body makes energy flow. “The *qi* understood as the animating energy of the universe, a substance which circulates in and through the body” (Palmer 2005, p. 15). That said, air, a form of “empty energy”, turns into vital energy in our bodies through physical training. In the *Vertical volume* series and in *Daily distance*, the bouncing of the volumes when filled with air is similar to the training of *qigong* breath and body. These works thus recall the body breath *qi* (primordial energy) or *chongqi* (energy in the middle of the emptiness). The artist accentuates this empty space where invisible energy is constituted, by installing a light in the

centre at the bottom of the volume like the *dantian* (丹田) which signifies the energy centre of our body. This energy centre grows with the practice of meditation which awakens our senses and helps us feel the air flow in our body.-The correlation between *qi* and this centre is found in the tenth chapter of *Dao de jing* (道德經) when Laozi approaches *zhuan qi* (專氣) which can translate as “concentrated energy at a point”.

Who by unending discipline of the senses embraces unity [專氣] cannot be disintegrated. By concentrating his vitality and inducing tenderness he can become like a little child. By purifying, by cleansing and profound intuition he can be free from faults.

Who loves the people when administering the country will practise non assertion. Opening and closing the gates of heaven, he will be like a mother-bird; bright, and white, and penetrating the four quarters, he will be unsophisticated. He quickens them and feeds them. He quickens but owns not. He acts but claims not. He excels but rules not. This is called profound virtue [玄德]. (Laozi / Susuki and Carus 2013, ch. 10, online)

Breath control brings breath into one place, and concentrated energy becomes the basis of the mysterious virtue of *Dao*. Lee Min-su 이민수, translator of *Dao de jing* into Korean, comments on this *zhuan qi* (專氣) correlated to meditation : “In particular, the allusion to the method of meditation is the term *qi* of *zhuan qi* (專氣) (...)means controlling breathing” (Noza [Laozi] 1994, p. 48). The movement of the air or the breath is constantly flowing. According to the assertion of Lucio Fontana: “The emptiness is not an absence, it is the set of communications and movements of breaths”.⁵ The movement of air in *Vertical volume* series or in *Daily distance*, the air in their volume seems to communicate continuously by circulating and moving constantly between the inside and outside of the volume. That is to say, this movement of the air makes us think of an immaterial form, the breath, *qi* (氣, ou *chi*)⁶, and “Breath of Vacancy” *chongqi* (沖氣). The repetitive movement (controlled by machine) of volumes in *Vertical volume* series and *Daily distance* and in slow motion soothes us like the calm breath during the practice of meditation. Calm in meditation is neither a suspended movement nor dead silence, on the contrary, it is the perpetual movement in silence which reaches purity.

⁵ Lucio Fontana is cited by Elisabeth Rochat de La Vallée and Claude Larre 1995, p. 55 : “Le vide n’est pas une absence, c’est l’ensemble des communications et des mouvements de souffles”.

⁶ The character *qi* (氣) is composed of two characters, *qi* (气, a form of smoke) and *mi* (米, rice). So *qi* describes the shape of the rice vapor and literally means a part of the breath, or rather a vital energy that all the components of the living nature of the universe create and thus diffuse.

Negative space and empty and invisible space

With the breath of air, we can create a swollen volume. When *Vertical Volume* seems empty, it is reminiscent of the Sanscrit word, *svi*, which is the root of the *sunya* or *sunyata* - emptiness. *Svi*, which means what is both swollen and empty inside, can also be seen in the sculpture of (fig. 3) by Onishi. As the title suggests, *Gawa* (ring) forms a metal cylinder similar to a big buoy with small holes everywhere through which we find that the interior is empty. According to the usual process of classical sculpture, the sculptor creates a positive form (visible object) by sculpting or moulding. Moulding is a step to reproduce an original shape in visible material by the casting of a material. By comparison with this process, *Gawa* seems to stop at the mold preparation stage. Likewise, through this empty mold, we imagine the original form of the thing. Onishi explains how he made *Gawa* at Tsukuba University:

I found a pine tree, cut it, and created the shape of a circle. I gradually covered it with small pieces of metal, and finally burnt it until it became empty on the inside. [...] My friends carved in stone or wood, but I was not interested in creating an original form. I wanted to follow the transformation of form. (Onishi 2012, p. 57)



Fig. IV.1-3. Yasuaki Onishi, *Gawa* (ring), 2001, h40, w240, d240cm, wood, nails, iron, etc. Diploma project, Art & Design from Tsukuba University, Japan. © 2017 Yasuaki Onishi

In modern Western tradition, most sculptors have chosen to show their work through visible material. In contemporary art, some have shown what is invisible, such as the air around us, or the space around objects, by materializing them: Guiseppe Penone realized the shape of the air or our breath in *Soffio 6* (breath 1978) in terracotta on a human size, Rachel Whiteread showed the invisible

space around us and materialized the negative space using a variety of everyday objects such as chairs, stairs, shelves, etc., which she moulded. She figured negative space around a house in plaster, polystyrene or concrete, etc., in her work *House* (1993). The invisible, intangible elements were represented in visible matter by a concrete object. What seems empty is figured as matter. The emptiness becomes full.

However, Onishi achieves a negative form without the moulding step. He does not make a copy of the original form (the nature of the thing), but rather seeks the negative form that we can only conceive. He wants us to see what is invisible by the negative, empty form. Contrary to the usual moulding process, in which visible materials are poured inside the mould, Onishi lets the glue (which makes the positive form) drip and form negative space. Therefore, the interior of the negative form is empty or substituted to the immaterial matter. The positive form of wood after it turns to ashes in *Gawa*, leaves the negative-empty form of iron. The full becomes the empty. Indeed, the shape of *Gawa* recalls the circle of Zen Buddhism, *enso* (円相), the symbol of emptiness. In Buddhism, *enso* is an ink drawing on paper, like a calligraphy, a circular shape made the Zen master for the practice of meditation. Its simplicity of this circular shape represents the emptiness of mind. In Zen, *enso*, the infinity circle, symbolizes emptiness.

When we draw we aim more at the perfection of the gesture and the balance between the invisible and the visible. The author can only achieve this balance through a liberation of mind and gesture. It is therefore not the result of a gestural or visual beauty but of a balance between the author's mind, his line and the elements composing his canvas (...) According to Buddhist thinking, emptiness is born form. This notion of emptiness is the key. The nature of all creation, everything and the practice of meditation allows us to seize this void. This while understanding that the form does not oppose it but is one with it. Awakening is then the full realization, the awareness of emptiness and the *enso* is its representation (Lorreyte n.d., online, author's translation).⁷

If the series *Delocazione* by Claudio Parmiggiani also shows the trace of books missing from a library using soot as if the books had been burned, Onishi does not just show the trace of absence. He actually represents this absence itself by the empty space with the incineration of *Gawa* wood. What does this emptiness mean? The disappearance is not a lack. It lets us imagine a concrete form through by this negative, empty space. This negative, empty space of Onishi recalls “the non-being” of Laozi (老子) in the 11th chapter of *Dao de jing*:

⁷ “Lorsque l'on trace on vise davantage la perfection du geste et l'équilibre entre l'invisible et le visible. Son auteur ne peut atteindre cet équilibre qu'au travers d'une libération de l'esprit et du geste. Elle n'est donc pas la résultante d'une beauté gestuelle ou visuelle mais d'un équilibre entre l'esprit de l'auteur, son trait et les éléments composant sa toile.... Comme le pensent les bouddhistes, du vide naît la forme. Cette notion de vacuité est la clef. La nature de toute création, de toute chose et la pratique de la méditation permet de saisir ce vide. Ceci tout en comprenant que la forme ne s'y oppose pas mais ne fait qu'un avec lui. L'éveil est alors la pleine réalisation, la prise de conscience de la vacuité et l'enso en est sa représentation.”

Thirty spokes unite in one nave and on that which is non-existent [on the hole in the nave] depends the wheel's utility. Clay is moulded into a vessel and on that which is non-existent [on its hollowness] depends the vessel's utility. By cutting out doors and windows we build a house and on that which is non-existent [on the empty space within] depends the house's utility. Therefore, existence renders actual but non-existence renders useful. (Laozi / Suzuki and Carus 1913, online)



Fig. IV.1-4 Yasuaki Onishi, *Shaping air*, The Making of *A breath of mobility*, 2013. Video (3:11).
Project with Mercedes-Benz CLA, Stuttgart Germany © 2017 Yasuaki Onishi.

Empty space embodies the value of an object. Non-being thus restores the efficiency of being. In the series *Reverse of volume* (Kim 2017, p. 252) and *A breath of mobility* (fig. 4), Onishi shows a negative shape with the help of a large sheet of translucent plastic which is suspended by hundreds of drops of black glue. By gravity, the flow of liquid glue becomes fine and crosses the empty space vertically, going downwards. When the adhesive touches the plastic sheet, it descends to the ground due to gravitation, despite the glue that pulls the polyethene sheet up. From these two opposing forces, each flow of liquid glue creates a small negative space, an emptiness in space, from which the shape of a small mountain appears. By following the various lengths of flows of liquid glue that form undulations, the whole of this large sheet of translucent polyethene forms a large mountain silhouette. Indeed, hundreds of silhouettes of small mountains already exist in the form of meticulous folds pre-crumpled and previously prepared.

The large sheet of translucent plastic is both swollen and empty inside. The negative space under the plastic sheet is empty, although filled with air. Hundreds of glue drops retain this negative form. Onishi is more interested in the empty form. Through the empty space and the invisible air, he invites us to find the fundamental form. We cannot use the usual process of sculpture to modulate air

and empty space. However, the artist pours black glue into the empty space. In the series *Reverse of volume* and *A breath of mobility*, a shaping of air and empty space, like a floating cloud, pushes us into a state of reverie where imagination reigns. However, the artist spills the black glue into the empty space. The large translucent sheet of visible material thus designates the negative space and what is invisible, the immaterial emptiness. We find again such a concept in Laozi's 40th chapter of the *Dao de jing*: "All things are born of being. Being is born from non-being" (Laozi / Mitchell 1988), ch. 40). Onishi creates negative space, a visible and invisible space by using intangible elements such as empty space, air, but also time and gravity.



Fig. IV.1-5 Yasuaki Onishi, *Vertical space*, 2015,

black glue, other material, Newman Club, Newman Australia, photo: Bo Wong. © 2017 Yasuaki Onishi.

The empty space, the Gan (間, between-inter) and *Vertical Space* by Yasuaki Onishi

In Onishi's installations, the translucent plastic sheet, which looks like mist, is at the border between what is visible and invisible. This translucent sheet is like the skin of the negative, infra-thin space, between the inside and the outside, between the visible and the invisible space. It is placed between the material space and the intangible space. In *Vertical space*, the flow of liquid glue goes down to the ground like a light rain. Without the plastic sheet, no concrete shape appears in *Vertical space* (fig. 5). In *Reverser Volume* series, Onishi uses empty boxes to create a shape similar to a mountain or a cloud, but when he produced *A breath of mobility* for Mercedes, he used a concrete form like the car. Instead

of a car or other concrete shape, Onishi places the spectators in this *Vertical space*. His installation allows us to see the empty space and invisible things. When he explains his use of the black glue, we can understand his main idea: “Basically, we can’t see the glue dots. For example, when the paper is attached on wall. The glue is between the paper and the wall. But I show mostly glue dots in my installation. I think it suggests invisible things”⁸.

Indeed, the part of the glue that is located between the wall and the paper is usually invisible. But in *Vertical space*, Onishi widens this part and makes it visible thanks to hundreds of glue drips flowing from the ceiling to the floor. With this fine flow, Onishi draws the full into the empty space. He opens a path by which the spectator moves through the glue drips that cut the space vertically. Between these parts of black glue, hundreds of small “vertical spaces” are created. They appear as soon as the glue begins to flow thanks to the artist’s gesture.

They recall the Chinese ideogram *jian* 間⁹ which illustrates the two leaves of a door ajar through which the rays of the moon or the sun pass. Between these two leaves, there is a gap. This ideogram 間 is pronounced *gan* 간 and *kan* 칸 in Korean, *kan et ma* in Japanese. In Japan, by putting it together with other words, it is used as a pause between two acts in theatre, as a silence between two musical phrases. Likewise in Korean, the word *gan* represents the interval of place, time, a silence between two sounds or between two words, the open empty space, the space between objects, between inspiration and expiration, etc. For example, 막간 (幕間, screen-between) designates a pause between two parts of a stage (intermission), 시간 (時間, time-between) indicates the time, 인간 (人間, man-between) means human, etc.

More generally the word *gan* is used in various fields such as martial arts, architecture, etc. In Japan, the character 間 in *kanji* is pronounced in *kan et ma*, as I just said. The word *ma* is then used to designate the space between skin and fabric in fashion, a space-time between two adversaries, and a space-time in architecture. Besides, the *ma* became an aesthetic concept during the exhibition *MA, Espace-Temps du Japon* (Space-Time of Japan) in Paris in 1978¹⁰ thanks to the presentation of the architect, Arata Isozaki (磯崎 新) and the composer Tōru Takemitsu (武満 徹), collaborating with artists from different fields such as sculptors, photographers, graphic designers, stylist, musicians, architects, etc., and the members of Isozaki workshop. Isozaki explains this concept “*MA*” (original emphasis) in Japan:

In Japan both time and space were conceptualized with the word *MA*, meaning “natural distance between two or more things that exist in a continuity”, or “space or vacancy between things.” *MA*, came to mean a space surrounded by poles and screens, i.e. “rooms,” and in relation to time it was “the natural pause or

⁸ Email correspondence between Yasuaki Onishi and the author, February 28, 2016.

⁹ The origin of the word is 間 which represents the light of the moon (月) shines between two leaves of a door 門. Nowadays, this character of the moon (月) is simplified and substituted with the word sun (日).

¹⁰ Musée des Arts Décoratifs, Festival d’Automne Paris, from October 11 to December 11, 1978.

interval between two or more phenomena occurring continuously” (Iwanami Dictionary of Ancient Terms). (Isozaki 1978, n. p.; p. 6)

According to Augustin Berque “the *ma* would be inseparably space *and* time, and therefore would not exist in Western culture, which would dissociate time from space.” (Berque and Sauzet 2004, p. 29; author’s translation).¹¹ The notion *ma* shapes the emptiness, the empty space between the walls where the energy of the living being can flow. It is the “art of empty space”. It is thus present in *Vertical space* between the flow of glue and the hundreds of small “vertical spaces”. Between the glue drips and, more specifically, in this interstice of vertical space, air circulation, invisible energy, a flow of light, or other intangible matter, is present. In the middle of these numerous “vertical spaces” between these flows, the presence of the spectator is in this *ma*. In this vertical empty place, in this *ma*, is the visitor. In the middle of hundreds of glue drips, the visitor plays the role of a bridge. Moreover, the sculptor Shirō Kuramata (倉俣 史朗) develops his own idea of *ma*, by associating to it the word *hashi* (橋): “*Hashi* (橋) means both edge and bridge, and in ancient times it meant a ladder” (Kuramata, 1978, n.p. p. 12).

Ma corresponds to a neutral place like all the bridges which join two distant grounds. It is like the number zero, which connects the two opposite sequences while being neutral.

In numbers, this “something” is present between two opposites, Being and Nothingness or Being and non-Being. It is the number zero which lies between the two inverses, the positive numbers and the negative numbers. This zero, in the middle of things, is both a beginning and an end. Lying in the middle, it connects the two opposites as if itself were an indistinguishable thing between Being and Nothingness. The zero, which connects the two opposite sequences, being neutral, does not belong to either of the two sequences, it is neither positive nor negative. It corresponds to a point suspended between these two sides, and it is in the middle of things like the middle way *jungyong* 중용 (*zhongyong* 中庸 in Chinese), the one that is always in the middle of things themselves oscillating, and the one that does not change its value and represents neither good nor bad. Like the value of the middle way which represents neither good nor bad, zero is neutral and does not belong to either of the two opposites. However, it is present by connecting these two inverses. (...) Zero, neutral, which replicates nothingness, is quite curious. Because in India, “the number zero is also called *Śūnya*”, like the word “empty” which comes from the Sanskrit word *Śūnya*. (Kim, H., 2014, p. 29)

Onishi’s *Vertical space* creates this neutral space, this space-time between flows. These flows represent the gravity, the air and the space-time that surround us. The glue connects that which

¹¹ “Le *ma* serait indissociablement espace *et* temps, et de ce fait n’existerait pas dans la culture occidentale, laquelle dissocierait le temps de l’espace.”

stretches between the ceiling and the floor, the top and bottom space, as if to connect heaven and earth. We live in this space. The space around us is linked to space in the sky or the most distant space. The world we live in belongs to the visible world. However, the invisible world (which belongs to the visible world) is near us, here and now.

The word *gan* or *ma* does not separate the two elements, it unites them as “*Et* (and)” this word treated by Gilles Deleuze and Claire Parnet in *Dialogues*: “If there are only two terms, there is a AND between the two, which is neither one nor the other, nor one which becomes the other, but which precisely constitutes multiplicity” (Deleuze, Parnet, 1996, p. 43; author’s translation)¹². It unites them like François Jullien’s insipidness, in *Eloge de la fadeur* (Praise of insipidness): “The insipidness which alone denotes this constant transition: while the flavour opposes and separates, the insipidness links together the various aspects of reality, opens them to each other, makes them communicate” (Jullien 1991, p. 47; author’s translation)¹³. The circulation of air or energy comes from the space between these flows, from man to space, between man and objects in his environment or between men. “From an unknown nowhere something comes. And brings forth the ethereal *chi*... The *chi* comes from heaven approaches, is wed to the earth. Seeking a form for its soul...” (Isozaki 1978, n. p.; p. 2, 4). The “air circulation” (Barthes 2005, p. 63) in traditional Far Eastern painting brings this *ma* notion closer. This circulation appears in the painting as a white-empty space or the median emptiness which sometimes describes a path, the earth, the river, clouds, or the sky, etc. It is the white and empty space, between (*gan* 간) the branches of the pine, or the open sky in contemporary photography by Bae Bien U 배병우. Air circulation also occurs in floral arrangements (*ikebana*), which are related to the surrounding space around flowers and stems (see Moriceau in this volume). The essential characteristic of *ma* according to Augustin Berque clarifies this connection:

It seems that we have here an essential characteristic of the *ma*. This produces by the combination of an emptiness (a blank, a silence, a stop, a pause) and a shift (which would semantically charge this emptiness, not only with the content that a strict regularity would allow to expect, but also with an infinity of possible since the emptiness does not impose anything). (Berque and Sauzet 2004, p. 32; author’s translation)¹⁴

The space of the sky or the empty space are integrated into the installation just as in sculpture or architecture. The Korean architect Hyun-jun Yoo 유현준 thus defines the difference in space perception between Westerners and Far Easterners:

¹² “S’il n’y a que deux termes, il y a un ET entre les deux, qui n’est ni l’un ni l’autre, ni l’un qui devient l’autre, mais qui constitue précisément la multiplicité.”

¹³ “La fadeur qui seule dénote cette constante transition : tandis que la saveur oppose et sépare, la fadeur relie entre eux les divers aspects du réel, les ouvre l’un à l’autre, les fait communiquer.”

¹⁴ “Il semble que nous tenions là une caractéristique essentielle du *MA*. Celui-ci produit par la combinaison d’un vide (un blanc, un silence, un arrêt, une pause) et d’un décalage (lequel chargerait sémantiquement ce vide, non seulement du contenu qu’une stricte régularité laisserait y escompter, mais aussi d’une infinité de possible puisque le vide n’impose rien.”

The space in English is called “space”. The word “space” also means the universe. The word “universe” in English is used interchangeably with three words “universe”, “cosmos”, “space”. (...) In the Far East, the word *gonggan* 공간 is made up of two characters *gong* 공 (empty) and *gan* 간 (between). The word space is made up of two words *bi-um* 비움 (empty) and *gwangye* 관계 (relation). Only by perceiving words in this way, the Far Easterners understand space, which has a relative value between “emptiness” and “relation”, and which is a potentiality more than a simple space. (Yoo, H., 2015, p. 333)

According to his definition, space is relative to emptiness. Moreover, the installation, *in situ*, inevitably creates a relationship with *gonggan* 공간, “emptiness-between”, which is inseparable from space and time: the space is pronounced *kukan* in Japanese (空間), *kōngjiān* in Chinese, *gonggan* in Korean). The latter is made up of two characters; *gong* (空) means empty, and *gan* (間) in between or inter. The “emptiness” (*gong* 空) and “between” (*gan* 間) are also in the space of Onishi’s installation. During the visit of an installation *in situ* the relationship of this *gong* and this *gan* is established between the installation and the one who perceives it. And also, the “emptiness” and the “between” evolve for the visitor during the visit. Indeed, time plays a part during the creation of the work in this space, and also during the walker’s visit. That is to say, just as *Vertical volume* includes a space-time dimension, in *Vertical Space*, space-time is taken up by the spectators. In this unique place, *in situ*, all the connections between the artwork and the observer are made. *Vertical Space*, filled with hot glue, designates the relationship between the empty and the full, the visible and the invisible, the material and the immaterial. Quoting Arata Isozaki, Shir Meller-Yamaguchi develops this notion of space:

In his book *Ma: Space-Time in Japan*, Arata Isozaki discusses the difference between Western and Japanese space-time perceptions. While the West relates to time as an infinite linear sequence, an entity distinguished from space, in Japan space and the events taking place within it are perceived as a single essence. (Meller-Yamaguchi 2012, p. 53)

The word empty evokes the absence of matter as if it were an untouchable object. If emptiness for Westerners signifies nothing, nothingness, the absence of being, it is used in the material empty sense as an empty space. For Asians, emptiness is also relative to empty space, to absence. But emptiness is, above all, an emptiness of the mind and the immaterial emptiness of Buddhism.

The emptiness and what is invisible

We know that when we say “empty” in everyday life, this empty often indicates empty space, an empty container, a blank page, an empty space between words, etc. The empty space, where there is plenty of light, makes people or objects visible. This space helps us to live. And our body and mind breathe in this space.

In general, we don't believe what we have not seen with our eyes. However, our eyes cannot capture all the phenomena of the world, especially the invisible space which belongs to visible space. *Vertical Space* recalls the *Penetrable* series by Jesus-Rafael Soto designed in 1967. And when we move into Soto's installation, thanks to the impression of the wind that makes itself perceptible (according to our pace), we can touch what is in the space. Soto's *Penetrable* awakens our senses with the touch of the hand and the sound of very long tubes. These tubes are solid, unlike thin liquid adhesives which are so fragile in *Vertical space*.

Both these "vertical spaces" where light materials and non-materials such as light and air combine invite us to a moment of meditation. The installation offers the viewer a place to watch and feel the scene *in situ*, but sometimes everything is not immediately visible. Besides, Atta Kim, a Korean photographer, claims that: "What is visible is not everything" (Kim, A., 2014, p. 59). Not everything is visible, but everything is there. If the emptiness conceived by Laozi (ch. 11 of *Dao de jing*), which is similar to non-being, becomes visible through the presence of being, the emptiness (*gong*) of Buddhism, which is invisible and elusive, is comparable to the wind and does not mean that there is nothing. For example, in James Turrell's *Ganzfeld Apani*, the space is completely filled with dazzling light, but we cannot touch or grasp anything by hand; The colour is the untouchable emptiness, the emptiness is the visible colour. The colour of the light cannot be touched, so it is the emptiness. In addition, the empty space is full of visible light, but we do not immediately see the change of colours in the space. This is similar to the famous phrase of the Buddha in the *Prajna Paramita Sutra* (Heart Sutra or Sutra of Supreme Wisdom) of Mahayana Buddhism translated in English as "Form is therefore the emptiness, the emptiness is therefore the form", which, according to the original Chinese version, translates as: "Colour is therefore the emptiness, the emptiness is therefore the colour" [*sejishikong* (色即是空), *kongjishise* (空即是色)] where the character "colour" (色) is used to designate shape because any shape is visible through colour (Gongyeon 1991, p. 63, 64 et 68; author's translation from Korean). Atta Kim quotes this sentence to represent his *Indala* photographic series: "Light exists in all colours. Colour here is the thing and everything that exists" (Kim, A., 2014, p. 162). So do not look for colour in light, because the light of immanent emptiness is found in all places and everything (Kim, H., 2014, p. 33).

In the air, all intangible and invisible things escape us because of our habits and, sometimes make us blind. Our eyes deceive us and sometimes we believe them. Just as we cannot see the nature of the sun, but we only see the light and the effect of the sun. The light indicates the presence of the sun, the entity exists. Likewise, one cannot say that the nature of man (which is physically invisible in everyday life) does not exist, as the historical Buddha says of the emptiness by comparing it to the wind:

The Buddha said that the emptiness is comparable to the wind. The shape of the wind is invisible and elusive, but that does not mean there is nothing. Likewise, we cannot see the shape of the emptiness, but that does not mean that there is nothing. (Maître Seong-cheol 1987, p. 129)

The artworks of Onishi invite to grasp and carefully consider this space, and to perceive what is invisible, by reminding us of our inner space. Through his artworks the artist designates this “invisible” space, as immaterial. Onishi’s negative space can be likened to non-being and the elusive emptiness like? the shadow. His works show us both real space and invisible space to reveal the immanent space that is in us. This immanent space is comparable to the Dao [Tao] of Laozi: “The Tao is like a well: constantly used but never dried up. It is like the eternal void: filled with infinite possibilities. It is hidden but still present” (Laozi/Mitchell 1988, ch. 42).

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