

火よ、さわれるの

It's fire, you can touch it

Hiroshi Homura and Yoko Ishii [†]

■ About *Tanka*

Tanka, meaning “short song”, is a traditional form of Japanese poetry. It is a short verse of 31 syllables, containing five syllabic units (5-7-5-7-7 syllables, respectively). The history of *tanka* is very long; its style had already been established by the 7th century. To this day, countless *tanka* poems have been composed, expressing the emotions of daily life within the brief format.

■ Projection on the palm

Tanka is written down as a sequence of letters, ordinarily presented on paper to be read. The impression of a *tanka* depends more or less on how the reader perceives and interprets it. Thus, it can be said, that a *tanka* is finalized as a literary work by the reader. Reflecting this idea, we created a new method of reading that can enhance the reader's imagination.

In this work, when the user's hands are held out, a set of images is projected onto the palms: a scrolling *tanka* poem, and a single Chinese character representing each *tanka* (fig.1).

Unlike a flat surface such as paper, a person's palm has volume and texture. When a scrolling *tanka* is projected onto the bumpy surface of the palm, a tactile sensation is evoked, giving a tangible presence to the image, which in reality has no material substantiality.

By giving a tangible presence to the *tanka*, we intend to stimulate the imagination of the reader, and hope to touch deeper into his or her mind.



fig. 1

■ System Configuration

The hardware components for this work include a projector, a video camera, and a PC. The image processing system locates the palm from the image captured by the video camera above the user's head. Then, an image is generated to fit the located palm, and this is projected onto the target by a projector also installed above the user (fig. 2). Under the video camera and projector, there is a table with a diameter of approximately 1100mm. Four or five people surrounding this table can simultaneously experience this work.

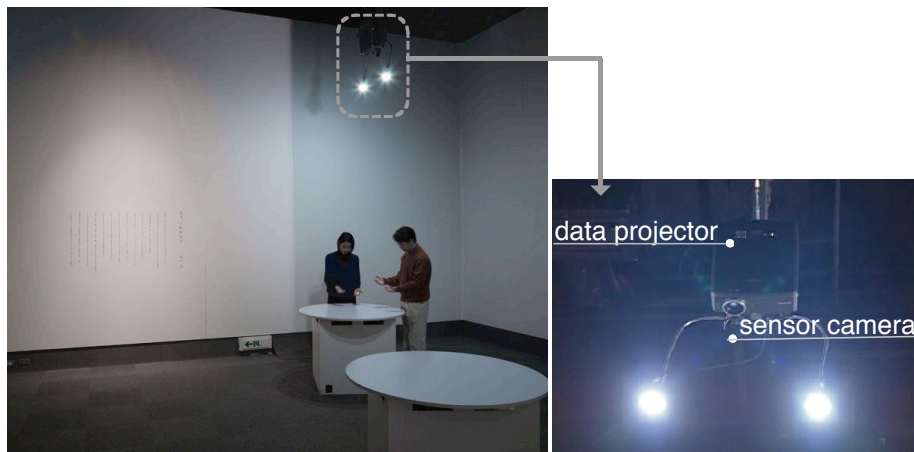


fig. 2

■ Interaction

In this work, interactivity with the user takes place. When the user's hand is held out, either a verse of *tanka* or a single Chinese character is projected onto the palm. Additionally, there is another kind of program built into the system. When the user's hand is withdrawn, the projected image responds; the letters fall to the ground and change their form (fig.3). This sequence prompted by the hand motion has an effect of enhancing the materiality of the letters.

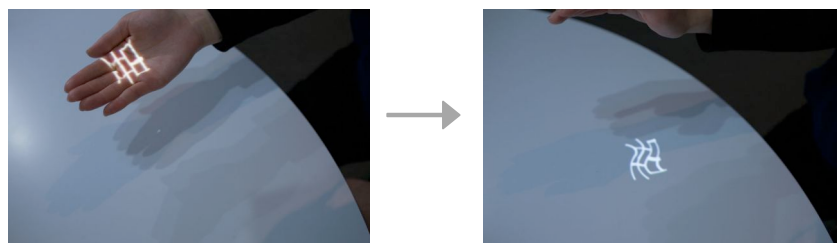


fig. 3

■ The meaning of each *Tanka*

Verses created specially for this work by *tanka* poet Hiroshi Homura are featured in this installation. [In the English translation, the 31-syllable rule is not applied. Since the English language often has fewer syllables in one word, a verse with 31-syllables can hold much more elements than in Japanese. This can overload the poem with images, thus straying from the essence of *tanka*, which is capturing the spirit of the moment. English *tanka* poems are often composed in five brief lines to approximate the feel of the Japanese *tanka* form.]

呼吸する色の不思議を見ていたら「火よ」と貴方は教えてくれる

I am gazing
dazed by
the breathing colors
"it's fire"
you point out to me

There is a magical flickering of colors. Changing from yellow, orange, and then red, the colors seem to be breathing. While gazing into this strange phenomenon occurring in front of the eyes, the mind becomes almost completely absorbed. Then suddenly, a voice is heard. "It's fire", she says, revealing the identity of the strange spectacle. In this verse, there is a yearning for a woman reminiscent of a goddess that brings the world into existence by giving everything its name.

Along with this verse, the Chinese character projected on the palm is "火 *hi* (fire)". This letter originates as a hieroglyph depicting a burning fire. As described in the *tanka*, the letter "火" flickers and changes its colors on the user's palm, as though it is breathing.

「美」が虫にみえるのことをユミちゃんとミナコの前でいつてはだめね

The letter "美, mi"
looks like a
bug!
Can't tell this to
Yumi and Minako

The Chinese character "美 *mi*" means beauty. While staring at this letter, the poet suddenly realizes its shape resembled something. A bug! "美" looks like a bug! However, he can not tell this revelation to his friends Yumi and Minako, both having the letter "美 *mi*" in their names. Yumi and Minako are both common feminine names in Japan. They can be written in various ways, but usually have the letter "美 *mi*". Yumi can be written as follows: 由美, 裕美, 有美, 優美. Here are some examples for Minako: 美奈子, 美菜子, 美名子, all using the letter "美 *mi*".

In the projection, this verse is accompanied by the letter "美 *mi*". The letter moves on the user's palm like an insect with legs and feelers. When it is dropped, it crawls away and disappears. Here, the letter representing beauty is associated with something totally different from its meaning. It is presented as a bug that many consider unpleasant and disgusting.

舌と舌
あまぜあ
うよう
なくち
づけに
うな
されて
いる
夢の
子
ども
よ

Tongue and tongue
mixing together
a kiss
haunting a child
in a dream

Young children think the act of kissing is pressing one's lips lightly to another's, and are not aware there is a different kind of kiss: an intense and sensual kiss where the tongues meet and entwine, as if trying to be one. In the daytime, the children are running about and playing under the sun. However, when they fall asleep at night, their instinct embedded in the unconscious somehow releases an anticipation for this unfamiliar kiss that is yet to be discovered. The premonition develops into a nightmare and haunts them.

The letter projected on the palm with this verse is "舌 *shita* (tongue)". Two letters facing one another upside-down are connected, gradually merging into one.

Collaborator: Minoru Kobayashi [†]

Mutsuhiro Nakashige [†]

[†] NTT Cyber Solutions Laboratories