

Shigeru Matsui

Pure Poems

The “Methodist Manifesto” (not to be confused with one of John Wesley’s eighteenth-century tracts), drafted in early 2000 by the Japanese visual artist Hideki Nakazawa and undersigned by the musician Tomomi Adachi and the poet Shigeru Matsui, reads as follows:

A large number of tautologies seen in every art and every science of the twentieth century, which democratic systems have given rise to, should now be talked about again as a single principle, by being reduced to method, not to form. Meaninglessness, which is what tautologies mean, does not excuse sensualism nor the mob, and it rather requests stoicism and discipline for its authorization.

Method painting is a colored plane which is overlaid on method itself, prohibiting chance and improvisation. However, real colors which cause pleasure will sometimes be replaced scrupulously with other materials.

Method poem is a row of letters which comes to method itself, prohibiting personalization and absorption. However, real letters which epicize lyric will sometimes be alternated scrupulously with other signs.

Method music is a vibrating time which embodies method itself, prohibiting expression and tempo. However, real vibrations which vary eros will sometimes be exchanged scrupulously for other events.

These method arts, on the one hand, return to the tradition which each form depends on, and on the other hand, sing in chorus a single principle in the same age. We, methodicists, doubt liberty and equality which have produced license and indolence in arts and sciences, and reinstate logics as ethics.

Or, in short, as Matsui has written his series of “poetics,” poetry is less the expression of personal emotional messages and instead simply the permutation of basic elements in a formal distribution (his “Poetics No. 011,” by way of illustration, reads: “15, 09, 14, 28, 04, 10, 03, 08, 22, 16, 30, 18, 11, 13, 26, 25, 17, 01, 31, 07, 20, 06, 23, 24, 29, 02, 27, 19, 12, 05, 21”).

Matsui's series "Pure Poems" are compositions of similarly austere and minimal means but with broad potential for decoding and performance. Begun in early 2001 and currently numbering in the hundreds (and counting), the "pure poems" constitute something like On Karawa's daily date paintings: an index of viability. Both an assertion of poetic viability in general—proof that the most archaic elements of poetry can still be written in meaningful forms today—and a reassertion that Matsui, with each writing, is still a poet, they are also blunt evidence, like that photograph of a hostage with the day's newspaper, that the poet himself is still, at least as of the last poem, living.

Like John Cage's *Music for Piano*, composed by marking the imperfections in staff paper and reading those marks as pitch notations, the poems in "Pure Poems" derive their form from the material scene of their inscription. Based on the twenty-by-twenty grid of standard Japanese writing paper, every poem consists of four hundred characters, each of which is a number from one to three. Although Matsui originally wrote the poems in Chinese script, which represents the numbers 1, 2, and 3 with a single, a double, and a triple dash, respectively, he wrote later poems with roman numerals, rotating the Chinese characters ninety degrees from horizontal to vertical and moving the texts from a regional Asian alphabet to a European format more readily translated across the Internet. In both cases, moreover, the characters are iconic (in the sense defined by Charles Pierce): signs, like onomatopoeic words, that resemble their objects.

With each figure pointing back to itself in this way, conflating content with form, the poems are insistent in their refusal of a subject matter beyond a basic form. Reduced to the fundamental poetic elements of rhyme, rhythm, and lyric lineation, they gesture to the myth of poetry's origins in the divinatory casting of counters. Similarly, they relate to the traditional fixed form of the *tanka*, with its thirty-one mora triplets providing a mathematical skeleton for structuring poems.

With their dense forest of vertical lines creating a dizzyingly sublime fillet, the pure poems can be read as visual poetry or recited to a similarly maddening hypnotic effect as sound poetry, but they can also be read as musical scores or choreography and realized in other ways. Matsui's performance of "Pure Poem Walking," for example (enacted at the Toyota Municipal Museum of Art, on September 14, 2003), translates the written units of composition into the number of steps made in a rhythmic tattoo locomotion. Indeed, with three insistent beats incessantly counted out against the sturdy square grid of the twenty-unit page, the poems are always little warped waltzes danced against death.

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