

Only Human

After All

By Mitsuo Aida, poet and calligrapher

## Why Faces?

Portraits, silhouettes, and profiles of people have appeared in Takako Saito's artistic oeuvre from the very beginning (in the first etchings in the early 1950s to the present day), whether they are specific portraits of actual people or abstractions—namely archetypes. In terms of art history, these two paths are core artistic pictorial themes. Both traditional and contemporary art museum exhibits teem with imagery portraying people, the ordinary and the famous, or generally reflecting on human nature. Most of Saito's work has been done in series, and the human face features often in game-like situations: the human face as a chessboard in *Face Chess (Man) and (Woman)*, 1977, as magnetic silhouettes with metal pieces in *Have Fun!* 1982, or wooden heads that turn out to be mysterious marble runs in *Game Heads*, 1985.

These works explore the aesthetic relationship between humans and play; the human who plays emerges in the play, and the play itself becomes human. They reflect Saito's decades of intense preoccupation with what actually makes us human. She shows the inexhaustible potential of this "actual" in a very practical way by working through all conceivable artistic media and genres, including drawing, oil painting, etching, silkscreen, photography, and collage, in addition to object, sculpture, sound piece, interactive floor or wall work, and performance or conceptual art.

Her untitled portrait works (1977)<sup>1</sup> take human contours into view—the paper collages create roughly outlined archetypes via positive and negative spaces, while the needle drawings break through the singularity of the silhouette in a quiet, haptic way. Looking at these works, an aesthetic proximity to Marcel Duchamp's<sup>2</sup> well-known *Self-Portrait in Profile* (1957) can be established.

A similar field of tension can be seen in her photograms (1985), which are partly based on people she encountered on her travels or in her everyday life (then in Düsseldorf, Germany) and associates with feelings of closeness, devotion, and tenderness. These emotionally rooted depictions of real people, found in Saito's work

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<sup>1</sup> A characteristic of Saito's work is that often the works do not have titles—and when they do, the appellations are rarely poetic but simply instructive, such as suggesting an action (as in *Have Fun!*) or a viewpoint (when calling, for example, a piece of tree trunk a book).

<sup>2</sup> Saito's close friend Shigeo Kubota was one of Marcel Duchamp's great admirers (some central works refer directly to Duchamp), as was her close friend Emmett Williams. Through their intense involvement with Duchamp, she gained insights into his thought process and work during her time in New York. Saito remembers a remote encounter in which she and Duchamp saw each other as they sat in different places in the same room, and that in between them were "very, very many people who all wanted something from Duchamp."

up to the 1980s (including etchings and oil paintings from the 1960s currently on display at the Japan Society in New York for the exhibition *Out of Bounds: Japanese Women Artists in Fluxus*), demonstrate her great craftsmanship in portraying real people in such a way that you can recognize them—even if you only see the backs of their heads as in *Portrait Game* (1982). Other photograms are based on abstractions of the human face: These larger compositions are painted by ductus, using a few brushstrokes to show different archetypes of the human face. Saito also used black ink to depict people; the drawings were then covered with found objects and tissue paper and then transferred to photographic paper.

Later, an extensive group of Saito's work features unnamed stamp drawings that are neither real persons nor archetypes but masks. The art historian Hans Belting presents the interplay of mask and face in the cultural history and anthropology *Face and Mask: A Double History* (2017), saying there is no authentic "face" behind the artificial "mask" but that masks and faces embody people and identities in equal measure. For Saito, employing a stamping method facilitates both of these important elements. Her masks are composed of different parts: found objects from her studio with interesting textures such as sawmill scraps from her woodworking, game pieces, old shoe soles, staples, postage stamps. In addition, each mask face was also stamped as a series in itself, so the masks are similar but not the same. While appearing the same at first glance, the masks viewed as a group via individual observation and comparative views between them makes possible the revelation of different embodiments of identities and people.

**Marc Schulz** is a professor of childhood and family sociology at the Technical University Cologne. His research interests encompass questions of culture theories and theories of perception, educational science and sociology relating to the history of childhood, youth and adulthood and relations of community and society as social practice. Takako Saito's community art practice inspired him since the 1990ties, they became close friends for more than 25 years. Marc Schulz is responsible for the audio releases of Takako Saito's sonical oeuvre released at Edition Telemark (Berlin).