

Tatsuo Miyajima: *Running Time*

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Johnson County Community College • Gallery of Art

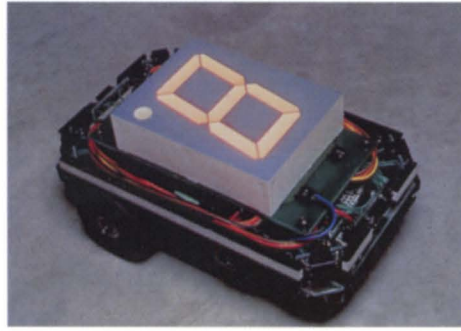
Theater of Time

That Tatsuo Miyajima's stark, conceptually based art often strikes an immediate and personal chord of recognition with so many viewers is not surprising. In many ways, it symbolizes humanity's innate ambition to understand what may be the heart of reality. Time is so fundamental to our psyche, indeed, our very sense of existence, that it eludes us. Its definition remains a mystery, its shape and measurement a scientific and spiritual challenge. In the final paragraph of his popular book *A Brief History of Time*, Stephen Hawking imagines a "complete theory" of time that could be broadly understood by everyone, not simply a few specialists. "Then we shall all," Hawking speculates, "philosophers, scientists, and just ordinary people, be able to take part in the discussion of the question of why it is that we and the universe exist. If we find the answer to that, it would be the ultimate triumph of human reason – for then we would know the mind of God."¹

Like Hawking, Miyajima sees our understanding of time as fundamental to a basic definition of religion and spirituality. The artist, who began studying Buddhist philosophy when he was 23, refers to Buddhism simply as "a religion about time."² Miyajima's continuously changing numerical images address the enormous challenge of visualizing the complexity of a vast universe – as defined by both Buddhist philosophy and modern physics – where the individual is a tiny but significant unit within an immense, incomprehensible whole.

The signature component of many of Miyajima's works is a small, numerical light emitting diode (LED) that counts from one to nine repeatedly. This generic technological device symbolizes for Miyajima the most basic visualization of the passage of time, and it has become one of the fundamental building blocks of his art. The artist describes his counting devices as "simple constructions" manufactured by a local company. Miyajima is not an electrical engineer. Any skills he has acquired have come from working with various electrical components in a trial-and-error manner. This is an artist that engages in the building of a philosophy of time rather than a machine of time.

Over the past decade, Miyajima has arranged his counting devices in

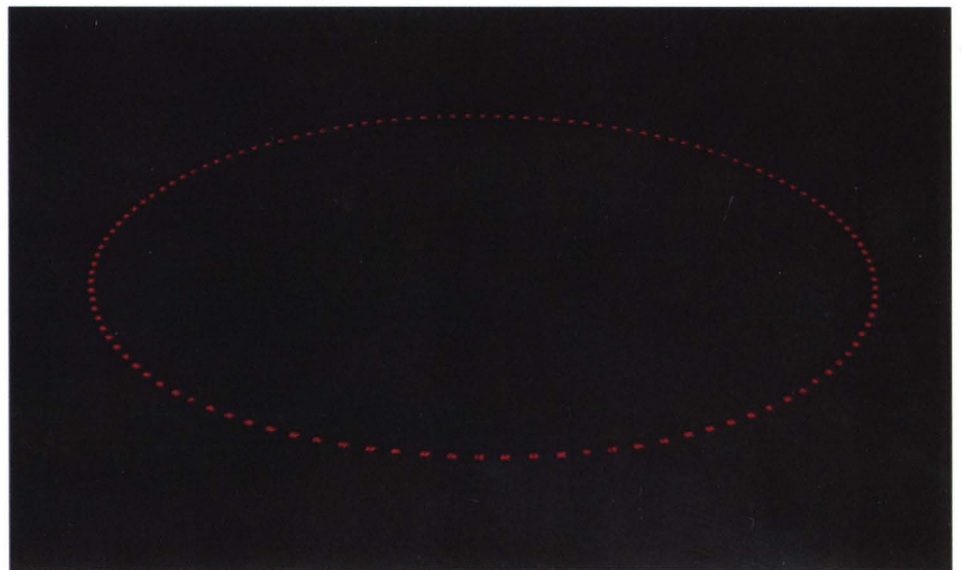


Running Time (detail), 1994-97, individual U-car, courtesy Lubring Augustine Gallery, New York, and Anthony d' Offay Gallery, London

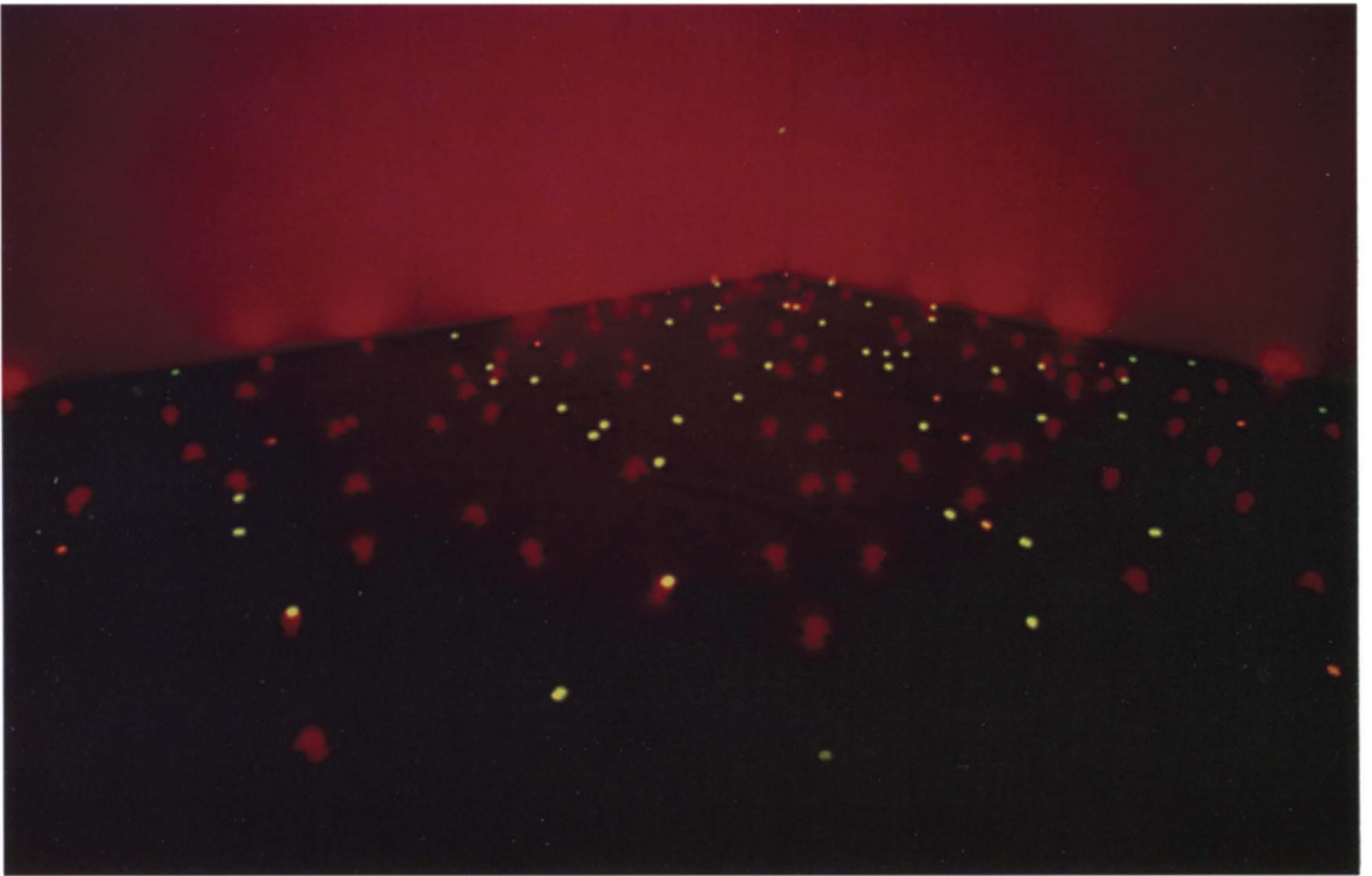
increasingly more complex and ambitious configurations. In the 1988 work *Sea of Time*, the artist strung together 300 separate counting units, operating synchronically but at different speeds. "Each machine," Miyajima explains, "operates in sync with another machine. As the 'time' counted by one mechanism reaches 99, a second machine will count 1; when the next 99 is reached by the first mechanism, the second will count 2, etc." Thus, *Sea of Time* visualizes hundreds of different "times," all counting within the same visual field, which symbolizes no absolute time but rather a network of individual rhythms. For Miyajima, time is comparable to color in that it is unique and personal for everyone. Scattered over the entire floor of a room, *Sea of Time* immerses the viewer in a spatial as well as a temporal experience. Subsequent works such as *Counter Line*, 1989, and *Counter Circle*, 1988, are equally bold in activating the entire space of a room or building. The former consists of a straight line of

LED counters stretching over 15 feet, while the latter coupling of counters forms a large circle. *Lattice*, 1990, takes the form of a series of x-shaped, diagonally positioned counters mounted on a long wall that depicts time as moving in all directions. As before, individual counters operate at different speeds, suggesting a seemingly infinite number of ways of dividing and shaping time.

The expansive installation of *Lattice* belongs to one of Miyajima's most ambitious concepts, the *133651* series, out of which a number of subsequent works have emerged. The artist acknowledges that most people will not grasp the *133651* concept initially, due to its overwhelming vastness, both as an idea and a visualization. "Even myself, the creator, cannot see its entire picture, as it would be an enormous experiment ... an experiment to express the whole universe in relationship to the law of causality and connections." *133651* consists of an immense field of various groupings of 10 counters each and the number of possible connections between these groupings. Basically, the system works in the following way: the *133651* series is composed of many units, each unit containing 10 individual counters arranged next to each other. Each gadget counts at a different speed. The sending and receiving of "count-up" signals occurs within groups of 10. Specifically, communication takes place between a receiver and a sender in pairs. Thus, a maximum of five counters can be connected to five other counters within each unit. This involves many



Counter Circle, 1988, light emitting diode, IC, electric wire, installation 118" x 118" x 1¼", courtesy Lubring Augustine Gallery, New York



Sea of Time, 1988, light emitting diode, IC, electric wire, installation 275½" x 275½" x 2", courtesy Jeffrey Deitch, New York

possible configurations, the total number of possibilities being 133,651, hence the title. Each unit, whose total number of possibilities is a multiple of seven, uses a green light for the individual counters. All other configurations use red. These 10 counter units, no configuration of which is ever the same, are the building blocks, as it were, of Miyajima's art works. The number 10 was chosen for each group for mathematical, as well as spiritual, reasons. The number 10 represents the human being or life force in Buddhist philosophy. It also allows the most complex number of relationships between groupings.

Miyajima resists describing the mathematical aspect of his art for fear of losing his audience in the minutiae of mathematical progressions. He prefers to think of *133651* in terms of the imaginative and metaphoric possibilities of scale. On a metaphoric level, describing *133651* is similar to trying to elucidate how the atom eventually configures the universe. Logistically, the entire *133651* series could not be practically presented, demanding potentially miles of exhibition space. As a result, Miyajima began to construct it as a series of parts. Indeed,

much of the artist's work is conceived in terms of part to whole relationships. If time is the ultimate holistic field, then everything Miyajima makes refers to something larger than itself. In essence, the immense *133651* is a model universe, a huge field that exists in the artist's imagination and as a numerical possibility, but that is practically impossible to conceive as an artwork.

Following these stationary, wall-bound works, Miyajima explored the possibilities of complicating his images of time by creating works that employed the element of movement in space. Foremost among these is the development of his U-cars. Following a year of experimentation and development, Miyajima created a miniature (7½" x 4¾"), battery-powered car, the body of which supports one of the artist's counters. Eventually, he made 30 U-cars and allowed them to move randomly on a black floor. Programmed with sensors at each end, these miniature bumper cars automatically change direction when coming in contact with another car or a wall. The glowing numbers atop each vehicle count from one to nine consecutively and back. The resulting

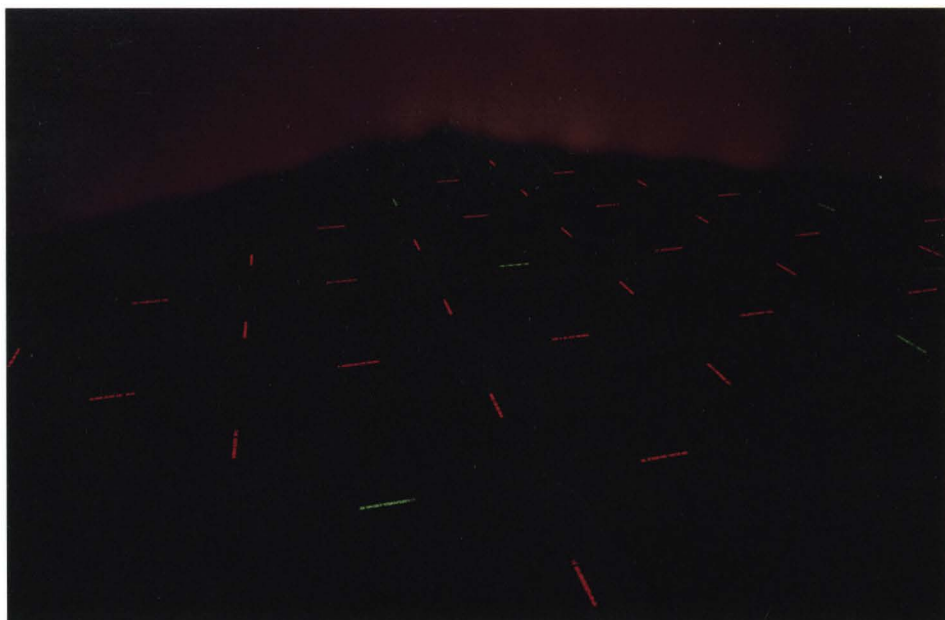
impression is that of a pool of black with changing numbers appearing to float over the floor like numerical fireflies. Ideally, *Running Time* should be seen from above, looking down into a dark void (the floor has been painted black or covered with black photographic paper) at a spectacle of changing numbers moving in all directions, gliding silently through darkness.

Miyajima embraced the car not so much to make a satiric statement in regards to Japan's dominance in the field of small car manufacturing, but because of its versatility and ability to maneuver easily in every direction and thus create a greater sense of randomness and chaos. U-cars refers to "uncertainty cars." Taken at face value, this title is a humorously accurate description of each car's uncertain direction. It is also a reference to the German physicist Werner Heisenberg, the founder of quantum mechanics and the "uncertainty principle," which essentially proposed that any measurement of motion and time involves inaccuracies because of the existence of inevitable variables. Einstein's early "theory of relativity" postulated that time and space

have no universally fixed measurements and that such measurements depend on the relation of the frame of reference to the object measured. Heisenberg complicated Einstein's solution. According to physicist D.R. Murdoch, "Heisenberg believed that the uncertainty is due to the unavoidable disturbance of the object by the process of measurement. All observation involves an interaction between the object and the instrument of observation."³ While Einstein sought precision in his ideas regarding space and time, Heisenberg suggested that the best we could expect was an educated guess. As Miyajima sees it, "Heisenberg could live with chaos. It's interesting that Heisenberg's theory comes out of Einstein's theory but mysteriously ends up being against it. It's an irony. I think the U-cars have this irony built into them. It is an ironic combination of two different theories of time."

Running Time suggests both macro and micro models of reality, from the possibility of atoms and neutrons colliding into each other to a solar system of planets and stars in a constant and restless expansion. The imaginative possibilities of scale consistently intrigue Miyajima as he explores new metaphors for expressing the expansiveness of time and space. In describing his work, the artist seldom refers to its physical qualities but rather its conceptual possibilities. "There are billions of stars in the galaxy, just as each person is made up of billions of cells. So the scale of the person and the universe is similar. We carry around a universe of cells at the same time we fly through a universe of planets. In Buddhism, one person can represent the universe and the universe is not bigger than one person. Both are immense and very mysterious."

Beyond being a hypnotic and frankly entertaining event of flashing numbers, the U-car installations are symbolic of the deeper levels of content that fuel Miyajima's inventions. "I chose the car for two reasons. First, because it moves. Second, because of its relationship to our concept of time, to the idea of time history." Part of Miyajima's investigation involves exploring time from a historical standpoint, and he understands the history of our perception of time as being radically affected by the invention of various transportation devices, specifically the ship, the train, the automobile



133651 (Intersect), 1990, light emitting diode, IC, electric wire, aluminum panel, installation 223" x 270½", Gallery Takagi, Nagoya, courtesy Lubring Augustine Gallery, New York

and the airplane. The various changes in our sense of movement, speed and distance associated with these inventions have obviously had profound effects, initiating the very concept of "time zones." Miyajima has also attached his glowing LED counters to small HO train sets, which move in a specific configuration around a room.

It is often argued that Japan's current avant garde refutes nature-centered aesthetics so long associated with Japanese art in favor of an ironic commentary on the commercial and technological realities of the urban Japanese environment. Nature and technological progress, so the argument goes, are at loggerheads, with nature the ultimate loser. Miyajima's art, however, disputes the idea that technology is necessarily in opposition to nature, although he is fearful of viewing nature as a fixed image of pastoral beauty. In discussing his electronic devices, the artist points out that "electricity is nature," the blood of our electronic world. Typically, the artist describes his intentions in expansively philosophical terms. "It is not about creating a beautiful image or system; it is more about creating an inner spiritual quality in the world. My idea of the future is not a pictorial image but a spiritual concept." Ultimately, Miyajima's art invokes a form of secular humanism. He believes that art is one way of triggering moments of enlightenment and self-fulfillment without recourse to supernaturalism. He particularly acknowledges

the influence of the philosopher Daisaku Ikeda, whose lectures and writings reflect a form of Buddhism embodied in a movement known as Soka Gakkai International. Ikeda stresses the need to integrate technology and spirituality toward creating a "global unity of mankind." Miyajima reflects Ikeda's philosophy when he remarks, "I use numbers and technology because they are a world language. They can be a basis for discussion and thinking." In Miyajima's eyes, the theater of time is an ultimate common denominator.

— Michael Auping, chief curator
Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, Texas

1. Stephen W. Hawking, *A Brief History of Time: From the Big Bang to Black Holes* (New York: Bantam Books, 1988) p. 175.
2. Unless otherwise indicated, all quotes are from interviews between the author and the artist, Sept. 12-14, 1995.
3. D.R. Murdoch, *Dictionary of Modern Culture*, ed. Justin Wintle (London: ARK Paperbacks, 1984), p. 163.

The above is an abbreviated version of an essay of the same title in Tatsuo Miyajima: Big Time, published in 1996 by the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth in conjunction with a survey of Miyajima's art held in Fort Worth that year. The exhibition subsequently traveled to the Heyward Gallery, London.

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Cover: *Running Time*, 1994-97, 85 U-cars mounted with LED counters, individual U-cars 7½" x 4¾" x 3½", courtesy Lubring Augustine Gallery, New York, and Anthony d' Offay Gallery, London