SIMULACRUM – Custodian of Impermanence

Critical essay by Raffaella Nobili

The Latin term selected by Japanese artist Yuji Mizuta (1976) for the title of his solo exhibition *Simulacrum – Il respiro della foschia* (*The Breath of Haze*) at **Amy.d Arte Spazio, Milan**, does not denote an illusory image, but rather something that endures in a fragmentary form—what remains when the original has already dissipated. Etymologically, *simulacrum* derives from the verb *simulare* ("to make similar," "to represent"), with the suffix *-crum* suggesting an instrument or medium. Over time, the term has shifted in meaning: from faithful likeness to imperfect copy, from double to phantasmal echo, from evocative presence to a mere semblance that renders absence visible. In the 1980s, Jean Baudrillard famously defined the *simulacrum* as a device severed from its origin, generating a *hyperreal*—a reality more real than the real itself. In Mizuta's vision, however, the *simulacrum* is not a hollow shell but a mnemonic mechanism: it marks not a return to wholeness, but the survival of that which transforms through loss, persisting in an altered state.
Within this conceptual framework, the Japanese notion of ***mujō*** (無常)—impermanence or perpetual change—is interwoven, offering a philosophical basis for understanding not only the natural condition of all phenomena but of memory itself.
To remember, then, is not to retrieve a fixed image, but to allow that which is in flux to re-emerge in the form it assumes as it surfaces.
Mizuta perceives the *simulacrum* not as a static replica but as a catalyst—an operative principle through which the observer, engaging with an object or figure, generates new layers of perception. "*It is not a mere copy*," he states, "*but an activating presence: from each gaze, new images emerge. Every superimposition becomes a gentle transformation, yet for me, every form remains an original.*"
He counterbalances the structure of the *simulacrum* with the notion of haze, introducing a perceptual ambiguity. Haze does not reveal—it obfuscates. It veils the gaze, dilutes the contours, renders vision porous and uncertain. In the video installation *Necromancy*, the figure materializes through successive veils, suspended in a state of latency: slow, indistinct, almost spectral.
Just as memory never reveals itself in its entirety, so too does vision remain incomplete. We never remember fully; we never truly see the whole. But it is precisely this partiality that opens up new trajectories—alternate perceptual and emotional grammars. The title of the exhibition reflects this simultaneity: the residual image endures even as the outlines dissolve into indeterminacy.
Mizuta connects this perceptual state to the Japanese aesthetic concept of ***oboroge*** (朧げ)—that which is vague, ephemeral, hovering at the threshold between the real and the unreal. "It is an impressionistic visual experience," he writes, "*sometimes sharp, sometimes blurred, always shifting. It is colour, form—but also emotion, desire, language*."
From a cognitive standpoint, memory is not a dormant archive, but a dynamic and selective system of reconstruction. Each act of remembering is, in essence, a re-narration—an interplay between what was and what is, filtered through the neural frameworks that neuroscience describes as *schemata* and *scripts*. These internal templates shape and reshape experience, selecting fragments, weaving them anew. No image of the past is ever neutral: every recollection is already a transformed fragment, caught in the ongoing process of reconfiguration.
Paul Ricoeur reminds us that memory is a continuous narrative and interpretive act—one that shapes not only individual but also collective identity. It is a culturally situated field of negotiation, where identities fragment and recompose through shared forms of storytelling, linguistic expression, and ritualized gestures.
Yuji Mizuta's artistic research unfolds along this very trajectory. His videos, installations, textile images, collages, and embroidered fabrics form a multilayered tapestry that, while deeply

personal, becomes collective through the transformative potential of perception and the aesthetic logic that shapes it. The exhibition, in this sense, is a shared perceptual space—one in which vision no longer belongs solely to the remembering subject, but is continually redefined through relational encounter.

As Pierre Nora has noted, memory requires a *lieu de mémoire*, a site of memory—not merely a spatial location, but a relational condition in which remembrance becomes possible. In comparative perspective, the Japanese philosopher Nishida Kitarō's concept of *basho* (場所) helps to deepen this notion. *Basho* is not a container, but an ontological threshold—the generative zone where experience takes form, where perceiver and perceived emerge simultaneously within the relational field. *Simulacrum* functions precisely in this way: not as a static exhibition space, but as a site of emergence between memory and perception. **It is not the sum of the artworks that matters**, but the conditions of their manifestation: the spatio-temporal plane in which images do not retrieve the past, but reconfigure themselves in the very moment they surface.

This dynamic becomes particularly evident in the video *Simulacrum_Sensuous*. The net that envelops the figure is not merely a costume, but rather what in Japanese is termed *utsuwa* (器): an empty vessel that holds presence. The body appears, withdraws, returns—yet never stabilises. The surrounding space is not neutral; it is the generative site where presence, image, and gaze arise simultaneously.

If *basho* (場所) is the relational field between the perceiving subject and the image that surfaces, *ma* (間) defines its internal rhythm. A core aesthetic principle in Japanese thought, *ma* can be understood as pause, interval, or temporal aperture—a charged void that does not separate but anticipates, making the yet-to-appear perceptible. It is not a lack, but a condition of manifestation—phenomenological and aesthetic at once.

In Mizuta's work, *ma* manifests as suspended tension: the void between layered fabrics, the creases of unworn garments, the slowed ritual gestures within the videos. **In *HAKAMA*, *HAORI*, and *KOKORO (INSIDE)***, the body is not erased but deferred; what remains is the garment—its shell, its vestige—an echo of past presence that reassembles itself in the viewer's perception.

In Japanese cultural philosophy, form (***kata***) is never autonomous; it is articulated through its relationship with void and fullness. Meaning is not the property of the maker nor of the receiver, but is activated in the transmission between the two. This principle permeates Nō and Kabuki theatre, the ritual movements of Gagaku dance, the tea ceremony's choreographic grammar, and the silent spatiality of Tadao Andō's architecture, as well as the contemplative logic of dry gardens and ikebana floral composition.

Even in the experimental music of John Cage—who drew deeply from Japanese aesthetics—silence is not absence, but an event: a perceptible threshold that renders sound articulate. Likewise, in Mizuta's practice, emptiness is not a void, but a liminal presence: a form of visibility that structures perception itself.

As previously noted, if memory is inherently fluid and mutable (*mujō*), and space is conceived as a relational field (*basho*), then identity itself cannot be fixed—it unfolds as movement, as perpetual becoming. Identity, like memory, is not a given form but a transitional phenomenon, emerging through shifts and transformations.

In this framework, the explicitly *queer* dimension of Mizuta's work does not merely reflect a sociocultural position, but embodies an existential modality: form does not coincide with self, but instead expresses its continuous mutation. This position resonates with the thinking of Judith Butler, who maintains that identity does not precede the gesture that expresses it, but is constituted through that very enactment.

Simultaneously, Mizuta's condition as a Japanese artist working and exhibiting in Italy—outside the geographical and cultural coordinates of origin—brings into focus what Stuart Hall and James Clifford have defined as *diasporic identity*: an identity not anchored in a fixed origin, but articulated through displacement, translation, and the crossing of multiple contexts.

In ***Mie / My Face up to age 48*****,** the artist's face does not function as a self-portrait in the traditional sense, but as a site of metamorphosis: temples are superimposed over facial features, rewriting the image of the self as a palimpsest. The work becomes a visual demonstration that memory does not simply preserve identity, but produces it—precisely through processes of transformation.

In anthropological theory, ritual serves to mark a transformation of status and render it legible to the community (Van Gennep); it is codified through precise temporal and spatial coordinates. Mizuta departs from this formal structure, drawing inspiration from **Shinto purification rites**—such as ***Kaitai / Kiyoharai***—yet reconfigures their sequence, decelerates their rhythm, and shifts their solemnity into the domestic setting of a house marked for demolition. The gestures, though rooted in ceremonial grammar, become intimate, quotidian, and radically personal.

In this form, the ritual no longer confirms the stability of an acquired status—it reveals instead that identity is always in flux. The performative act, initially private, acquires efficacy only through its public reception; in this case, it becomes collective a posteriori through its dissemination via video or social media, shifting from a direct communal enactment to a global gaze, translated across time and space.

In this way, Mizuta activates indigenous tradition from within, not as repetition, but as transformation—much like memory or selfhood. This horizon also includes the recovery of manual know-how and craft as embodied heritage, both material and immaterial. The artist's sewn and woven artefacts stand as tangible testimonies to this process.

In his textile works, Mizuta revisits the tradition of *omamori* (お守り), Japanese protective amulets, while consciously altering their form and function. The stitches are left exposed; edges remain open, and the prayer—usually hidden within—is revealed on the surface: laid bare, exposed, emotionally legible. These talismans no longer serve to ward off misfortune or guarantee health, love, or prosperity; instead, they guard the very possibility of transformation itself.

Alongside these talismans, the framed woven pieces underscore the stratified, composite nature of lived experience: overlapping or torn fabrics, embroidered texts, fragments of paper surfacing as traces, multilingual inscriptions. What emerges is not a fixed repository of memory, but a construction in motion—layer upon layer, gesture after gesture, time after time.

Ultimately, the exhibition itself enacts the very principle it seeks to explore: the **unresolved tension between the desire for recomposition and the impossibility of returning to a primordial unity**. Videos, garments, stitched textiles, and collages coexist without a formal hierarchy; multiplicity here is not a stylistic device, but the mirror of memory's inherently fragmentary nature.

The ritual marks the threshold, craftsmanship preserves the trace, the talisman safeguards the potential for transformation. Identity, like memory, unfolds as a layered, progressive construction. Mizuta deliberately abandons any nostalgia for a unified origin, engaging instead in a dynamic reconfiguration of *simulacra*—vestiges that do not ossify, but remain in flux, constantly reshaped through their own persistence.

This artistic and existential process finds its resolution in what the Japanese term *wā* (和): not static harmony, but a dynamic equilibrium that welcomes and sustains difference.