

Facing Secrets with Earnestness

Exhibition Review: *Diego Tonus – Professional Secrets*

Mizuki Endo

Curator Endō Mizuki reviews an exhibition in which Diego Tonus presented his sculptural series *Professional Secrets*, held at the Goethe-Institut Villa Kamogawa (Library). From this sculptural series that incorporates the notion of *secrets*, what kind of role for the artist can be drawn out?

Self-Responsibility, Systems, Ethics

Let's try speaking while taking the side of secrets, just a little.

I step into the library where Diego Tonus's exhibition *Professional Secrets* is being held. An unfamiliar sight. Every book on the shelves is arranged backwards. Instead of spines, the fore-edges—densely packed with paper—face outward, rendering titles and authors invisible. Everything is white. A blank library. I first understand this as a deliberate intervention by the artist (which it in fact is). The library as a place that enables access to knowledge is starkly estranged. The books are there, yet cannot be chosen. This points directly to the exhibition's central themes: invisibility, secrecy, and the preservation of what is *hidden* while keeping it *hidden*.

The works displayed within this inverted, overturned library at first glance resemble wooden panels adorned with abstract designs. In fact, however, they

contain *secret contracts*. Tonus listens to *professional secrets* from various people—friends, someone he happened to meet at an izakaya, a residency program coordinator (he was in Kyoto through a residency)—and creates contracts that both include those contents and stipulate that they must not be disclosed, that they are to remain secret. Certainly, a secret is a pledge based on mutual trust, and can also take the form of a contract. These contracts are then transformed according to several methods of encoding and encryption. Contracts in which the placement of words has been datafied. From this, geometric patterns emerge. Tonus embeds these visual data patterns inside the works through inlay using thin pieces of wood (an extremely craft-intensive process), producing layered, materially complex works. This is how *Professional Secrets* comes into being.



Installation view of Diego Tonus, *Professional Secrets* series ©Diego Tonus Studio

Up to now, the artist has collected secrets, materialized them as wooden patterns, and archived them. Private secrets are becoming semi-public while remaining

strictly hidden. Secrets persist as material objects. Moreover, the contents of the secrets no longer even reach the people who originally shared them. The institutionalization of secrets. And it is geometrically beautiful.



Installation view of Diego Tonus, *Professional Secrets* series ©Diego Tonus Studio

The Soundness of the Stated Non-Secret

Incidentally, as someone who had the opportunity to view this work in Japan, I must say that it felt somewhat exaggerated, excessive. Perhaps this impression arises because contract culture in Japan is relatively weak. Implicit trust still maintains a certain priority over written clauses. Or perhaps because somewhere, someone's decision to casually invalidate official documents continues to prevail.

Let us consider Tonus's *Professional Secrets* series within the context of Japan's contemporary cultural industries. In recent years, heightened awareness of artists' unstable social and economic positions has brought issues such as unpaid labor, unclear scopes of work, and exploitation arising from asymmetric power relations with organizers into focus. Such examples are by no means limited to the entertainment industry; the art world is no exception. In response, institutions such as the Agency for Cultural Affairs have recommended that artists and organizers conclude formal contracts. There is a movement to make visible the conditions of artistic labor that long remained implicit.

The promotion of contracts for artists is, indeed, necessary in certain respects. It protects artists as vulnerable freelancers and asserts that creative activity deserves the same respect and remuneration as any other form of specialized labor.



Installation view of Diego Tonus, *Professional Secrets* series ©Diego Tonus Studio

Now that *contemporary art* has gained broader recognition and a wide range of organizers have emerged, there are ways—through contracts and law—to resist all the *tricks* that push artists into weak positions. I want to emphasize once more that this path must be firmly advanced. What follows in this text is written with that premise in mind, and concerns a faint anxiety and a prospect beyond it.

One criticism that might first be raised is this: through contracts, all labor is articulated in language, and creative processes come to be treated like quantifiable productivity. The “appearance” of a work in the world is limited to what can be anticipated in advance. Furthermore, the conclusion of work-for-hire contracts, grant applications detailing what will be done, how, and for how much, statements that clearly articulate a work’s intent, portfolios outlining an artist’s profile, publicity through websites and social media, minute-by-minute storified proofs of existence—all of these are contiguous. What Foucault once described as the human being as an “animal that confesses,” the subjectivation-as-subjugation produced by continuously exposing one’s interiority to society, has become microscopic and generalized. Neoliberal discourses of self-responsibility are spreading everywhere...

And yet, what is actually happening has a somewhat different texture. Flat, transparent confessions are being carried out everywhere—lightly, without flourish, straightforwardly. The subjectivation through confession that Foucault theorized was a subjectivation of desire, thought particularly around sexual desire, and it is hard to deny that it was a male-centered line of thinking. Humanization through secrets of carnal desire. If we paraphrase this within the context of art, it might describe an art system that continually produces “artists” imbued with existential weight and “works” with an ineffable depth, generated around the secret of beauty. What is now becoming a thing of the past—or being actively made into one—is this mystified concept of art. Mystification, in other words, the deification of secrets, must be stopped.

Such mystification has been monopolized by men, grasped by those in power, and

ultimately is something creepy—better not to exist at all. Claims like “it’s good because it’s deep” or “it’s interesting because it’s mysterious” are precisely the breeding ground of power. What can be explained should be explained. A condition in which everything is graspable and understandable is fundamentally more democratic. The principle of autonomy expressed through the disclosure of materials and production processes has expanded, via conceptual art, to include the disclosure of an artist’s ideas, the grounds for their emergence, and their resources. The influx of sociology and anthropology into art is also synchronized with this demand for disclosure. The rules of beauty, invisible structures and their components, are in fact explainable. I realize, even as I write this, that I am painting with a broad brush, but nevertheless—this tendency. Perhaps we might call it the soundness of the stated non-secret.

Works situated within this flow are, in principle, things that are “not shameful to put in front of people.” They must be. After all, work-for-hire contracts are signed, grants are awarded, they become topics on social media, public funds are invested, collectors purchase them at high prices—there is no reason they should be shameful. (In an information society where it is impossible not to appear in public, not to be exposed, there seems to be an underlying urgency of “at least be proper.”)

Do not keep mysteries within. Do not “hide in embarrassment.” Fulfill accountability. Assert the will to be understood openly. Not confessional art, but professional art.

So then, what is Tonus’s *Professional Secrets* aiming at?

Earnestly, Seriously Foolish Works

Before that, I want to try writing something that may reach only a very small portion of the readers who have made it this far.

Isn't that proud, upright, respectable art kind of exhausting to do? Don't you think, "I can't do that—and the fact that I can't probably makes me shameful"? I always think so. That kind of thing is what gets recognized as art, and I'm a shameful person who can't make things that explicit. I'm bad at grant applications. My work doesn't sell. It doesn't look good. Fundamentally, I myself—and my work itself—are more deeply shameful. If that's you, then what follows is written for that small fraction of you.

That shame is a kind of secret. But we must take a different path from making the mere existence of a secret secretive, from mystifying it. To state the conclusion first: secrets can be a source for escaping suffocating society. Shame can become a touchstone for resisting liberalism and capitalism. And because we work in art, we know how to materialize humiliation. We are adept at turning secrets into materialism. Or at least, we should be.

Let us return to *Professional Secrets*.

In contemporary neoliberal discourse, individuals are required to make all aspects of their labor visible and to bear responsibility for explaining them. Artists who cannot precisely identify their own value, who cannot quantify their creative processes, are seen as unprofessional and as refusing to follow the rules of the contemporary labor market. Tonus's encrypted contracts, however, suggest another possibility: that professionalism can include a right to secrecy; that legitimate labor can include dimensions that should not be made transparent; that artists do not need to bear sole responsibility for explaining the value of their labor. More than that, the work itself always comes to operate performatively, and its "scope of work" is essentially unknowable to anyone—even to the artist who produced it.

The encrypted contracts Tonus creates—formalized yet undecipherable materials—function less as a warning against contemporary contract culture than

as a prompt for reflective reconsideration of the artist's institutional role. Tonus does not merely record agreements; he himself functions as an archive, as a guarantor of professional secrets preserved according to his own methodology. This self-institutionalization moves in the opposite direction from valuing, commodifying, and "exposing" one's creativity to society. Rather than becoming a player dependent on institutions, he becomes, quite simply, an institution himself. What matters is that this self-institutionalization is directed toward protecting "values that are hard to understand." I don't know if it's appropriate to put it this way, but this work is earnestly, seriously foolish. Exaggeration and excess are, in reality, inseparable from foolishness. Do you really go this far for the secret of a man you happened to meet at an izakaya?



Installation view of Diego Tonus, *Professional Secrets* series ©Diego Tonus Studio

Encrypted secrets are incomprehensible to everyone. It is also unclear whether they have any value. Precisely because they are unclear, they are treated with such seriousness. To put it another way, this work is driven by a desperate attempt to

assign maximum value to the minimal human act of people meeting and trusting one another. What is materialized as the artwork is this minimal ethical relationship itself, and the proof that such a small ethics can exist as art.

Now, let me return to you. Your shame, your sense of being unable to bear things—whatever form they take—are firmly lodged in your work. At that moment, the work finally begins to assert its legitimacy according to its own logic. A legitimacy of labor that endures. The work begins to operate, powered by shame, by its secret. A secret employment contract with the world. You cannot know its contents. Think of this as a transference. The work itself is, in fact, not shameful at all. There are no secrets there. It stands complexly and confidently. The one who becomes ashamed is the world. One day, your shame will transfer—through your work—into the recognition that the world itself is fundamentally shamefully constituted. Your work's way of functioning is what is truly sound, and the day will surely come when the world blushes before its blinding legitimacy. That is what art is for. That, I believe, is the secret a professional artist can embed in a work. Surely explaining everything plainly, or presenting works in a fully comprehensible form, is not what professionalism means. Diego Tonus's works, all of On Kawara's works, Alighiero Boetti, Vito Acconci, Yoko Ono, Yosuke Amemiya—they have all worked this way. Earnestly, foolishly, excessively, grandiosely, ethically, materializing secrets.