

What happens when space is overturned? When the rooms we inhabit are no longer there to inhabit, when familiar space is turned strange? In Japan, space has been overturned a number of times. In 1923, the Great Kanto Earthquake shook Tokyo off its feet. In Hiroshima and Nagasaki, two atom bombs were dropped in August 1945. The same month, in 1974, two homemade bombs were placed at the Mitsubishi headquarters. In 2011, the coast of Japan was irreversibly transformed by a magnitude 9 earthquake followed by giant tsunamis.

Georges Perec tried to invent new ways of describing the world around us. The environments in which we move each day – how can we catch sight of them? "The daily newspapers speak of everything except the daily", Perec said, "the papers bore me, they teach me nothing".¹ He asked if time had come to form our own anthropology, the one which would speak about us? We drive on Route 6 towards the "forbidden zone" around the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant. The weather is warm and sunny, everything is in bloom. It is contradictory to imagine this place highly contaminated with radiation.

We pass through all the ghost towns with their wrecked and crumbling houses, approaching a school by the seaside where the clock on the façade stopped when the tsunami came. In fact, everything stopped – no children came back to school the next day. Did life move on and start over somewhere else? In Yokohama, I visit an area for day laborers. Some of them used to work at the plants. Wishing to remain anonymous to the world, I turn my camera to the buildings. Concrete, cracks, walls, fences speak for themselves.

Machines digging, trucks driving, soil being scooped up and put down again. Radiated soil packed in black bags, piled up in endless pyramidal shapes. Where will these bags be taken? We look at the construction of a new sea wall. Its 7.2 metres won't stop a tsunami of 43 metres - like the one that hit the island outside Onagawa - but building it might serve its purposes. Pink flags mark the sites of reconstruction. I'm struck by the void making up the former village center. A new cemetery has been built on the hillside, the rest is nothing but a huge construction site.

"Impermanence is our natural state and transience is the primary quality of life" writes Donald Richie in 1992.² In 1970, Roland Barthes wrote: "In every site of this country, there occurs a special organization of space: traveling (in the street, in trains through suburbs, over the mountains), I perceive the conjunction of a distance and a division, the juxtaposition of fields (in the rural and visual sense) simultaneously discontinuous and open".³ A sun beam hits the façade of a tower in the Marunouchi business district. Here, in 1974, a radical leftist group⁴ bombed the Mitsubishi headquarters. 8 people died and nearly 400 were wounded, many by falling glass.

A broken bridge inside the zone makes me think of Tarkovsky's *Stalker*. Nature has taken back the territory, roads and houses begin to be overgrown. It is a very silent place, devoid of humans. Only birds and insects, the distant sound of waves, can be heard. In Tomioka Town, a closed-down museum built by TEPCO to demonstrate the safety of nuclear power stands empty and deserted. The buildings - resembling those in fairytales, with clock towers and trees - seem to stare back at us ironically. Is this how safe nuclear power is?

100, 101, 102... Sometimes numbers are needed to convey a fact or situation. Before entering the restricted area, I try to learn about radiation. In my notebook I have written "Fukushima, May 2016. According to the American Nuclear Society, we can spend 8 hours in a radiation level of 17 microsieverts per hour, without reaching the risk level. With 8 hours in 30 microsieverts, we would cross that limit. No short term danger, but an augmented long-term cancer risk." We spend four hours, and the highest level of radiation is measured at this cemetery - 13 microsieverts.

Like Perec, I want to describe life in this Japanese park. The cherry blossom period is about to end, along the Kanda River pink leaves are falling into the water. A mirror effect occurs between the water and the trees under which people keep walking. In August 1974, one could read in the Japan Times: "An increasing number of Japanese workers are being given the benefit of a week-long summer vacation, but it is questionable that they are all enjoying it. A leisure problem study group under the Ministry of International Trade has warned that by 1980 the present standard of recreation facilities will satisfy the needs of only 20 % of the people".⁵

Everywhere heaps of junk and debris pile up, visible traces of the natural disaster. As Kristina Iwata-Weickgenannt points out in her text *Precarity beyond 3/11 or 'Living Fukushima'*, the invisibility and uncertainty following the man-made nuclear disaster "opened up space not only for debate but also for denial. While the tsunami caused instant death, 'Fukushima' unfolds over time", she writes, "and the nuclear catastrophe exposed deep fault lines running through Japanese society".⁶

At an overgrown playground you try out the red slide, wearing your disposable suit. I avoid touching things, as I've heard that inhaling radioactive particles would be far more dangerous than exposure to radiation. In Tanizaki, *In Praise of Shadows*, I read: "The quality that we call beauty must always grow from the realities of life, and our ancestors, forced to live in dark rooms, presently came to discover beauty in shadows. If light is scarce then light is scarce; we will immerse ourselves in darkness and there discover its own particular beauty".⁷

Radiation is everywhere, but invisible to the eye. On my way from Ogikubo station to the library in Yotsuya, I see three different men with bandages over one eye (the kind you get after an eye operation). In *Techniques of the Observer*, Jonathan Crary writes: "Unlike 'spectare', the Latin root for 'spectator', the root for 'observe' does not literally mean 'to look at'. Spectator also carries specific connotations that I prefer to avoid – namely, of one who is a passive onlooker at a spectacle. More pertinent to my study, 'observare' means 'to conform one's action, to comply with', as in observing rules, codes, regulations, and practices".⁸

The Japanese concept of *amae* does not literally mean "to love", but it signifies the interdependence that exist between people, in all social groups, from childhood and throughout life. In Kotobuki I visit a *doya* hotel, where the rooms vary from one to three tatami mats (three tatami equals five square meters). The floor space is enough for a grown man to stretch his body. Except for the futon, an air conditioner and a television set, sometimes a minimal shelf for personal belongings, are included among the furnishing.

In October 1974, two months after the Mitsubishi bombings, one could read in the Japan Times: "In most other types of crime, the offender is on the scene at the time of its commission. When a time bomb is the principal implement, however, the criminal has the safe haven of both time and distance away from the scene of crime. This makes it extremely difficult for police to obtain an adequate amount of eyewitness accounts".⁹ Again, the eye. Again, various forms of violence, distance, transparency and crime.

In March 1974, an underground manual¹⁰ on how to make bombs had been released by the same radical group. It was called *Hara Hara Tokei* – *tokei* after "clock", and *hara hara* carrying the double meaning of a pounding heart or explosive device, and a command form used in Korean language for written instructions. In March 2016, I have written in my notebook "What I'm looking for throughout this trip are visual representations of the unknown. Images that are abstract, non-figurative and dark, depictions of absence and concentration."

A field with a broken building. A parking lot with temporary houses. A deserted playground. A façade resembling a painting. Another façade, made of glass. Trains crossing the city at night. Barthes has described Tokyo as "a city that can be known only by an activity of ethnographic kind: you must orient yourself in it not by book, by address, but by walking, by sight, by habit, by experience; here every discovery is intense and fragile, it can be repeated or recovered only by memory of the trace it has left in you: to visit a place for the first time is thereby to begin to write it".¹¹

Notes

1. *l'Infra-ordinaire*, Georges Perec, Éditions du Seuil, Paris, 1989, p. 10 (translation: Malin Pettersson Öberg)
2. *A Lateral View: Essays on Culture and Style in Contemporary Japan*, Donald Richie, Stone Bridge Press, Berkeley, 1992, p. 39
3. *Empire of Signs*, Roland Barthes, Hill and Wang, New York, 1982, (orig. *L'Empire des signes*, Switzerland, 1970), p. 107
4. The radical leftist group behind the Mitsubishi bombings of August 30th 1974 was called *The East-Asia Anti-Japan Armed Front*
5. "Vacation Time - Where to Go?", Japan Times, 4th August 1974, *Review of 1974 through Japan Times Editorials*, The Japan Times Ltd., 1975, p. 164
6. "Precarity beyond 3/11 or 'Living Fukushima'" Kristina Iwata-Weickgenannt, 2015, from *Visions of Precarity in Japanese Popular Culture and Literature*, 2015
7. *In Praise of Shadows*, Jun'ichiro Tanizaki, Leete's Island Books, Sedgewick, 1977 (orig. published in Tokyo in 1933), p. 18, 31
8. *Techniques of the Observer*, Jonathan Crary, October Books/MIT Press, London, 1992, p. 5
9. "Eradicate Terror Bombers", Japan Times, 17th October 1974, *Review of 1974 through Japan Times Editorials*, The Japan Times Ltd., 1975, p. 142
10. *Hara Hara Tokei*, wikipedia article, for more information see: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hara_Hara_Tokei
11. *Empire of Signs*, Roland Barthes, Hill and Wang, New York, 1982 (orig. *L'Empire des signes*, Switzerland, 1970), p.36

Precarious Spaces, Radiant Days is a six channel HD video installation filmed in the Fukushima region and around Tokyo/Yokohama, Japan, in 2016. The piece has been made possible through research residencies at Youkobo Art Space, Tokyo (April-May 2016) and the Swedish Institute in Paris (February 2016), as well as through a research trip to Japan in January 2016. Produced with support from: Helge Ax:son Johnsons stiftelse, Association Georges Perec, Paris, IASPIS The Swedish Arts Grants Committee's International Programme for Visual Artists, Konstnärnämnden, Uppsala konstmuseum and the artists behind *Rummets rymder 1974*: Kristina Bength and Cecilia Darle.

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