

SEEING THE UNSPEAKABLE

It is said that the quintessence of poetry is a cold, dry, exhausted universe.

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WE ARE TAUGHT TO LOOK AGHAST AT REPRESENTATIONS OF DEATH, WHETHER BECAUSE OF ITS LINK TO THE SACRED, ITS ABJECT NATURE, OR SIMPLY OUT OF SHEER ANXIETY. WE GENERALLY DO WHAT WE CAN TO AVOID THEM, AND ARE OFFENDED BY THEIR AESTHETICIZATION.

YET THE BIRTH OF PHOTOGRAPHY USHERED IN A NEW REALM OF DEPICTION, AND IMAGES OF GETTYSBURG, VERDUN, AUSCHWITZ, HIROSHIMA BROUGHT A NEW MAGNITUDE OF HORROR TO HUMAN CONSCIOUSNESS. SUCH IMAGES ARE OFTEN ALL THE MORE HORRENDOUS BECAUSE OF THEIR CLINICAL STYLE, SUGGESTING A HEIGHTENED LEVEL OF VERACITY, AS IS MADE EVIDENT IN THE RECENT EXHIBITION AT NEW YORK'S INTERNATIONAL CENTER OF PHOTOGRAPHY, "HIROSHIMA: GROUND ZERO 1945," A SELECTION OF PHOTOGRAPHS FROM THE U.S. STRATEGIC BOMBING SURVEY. ONE SHOULD REMEMBER THAT THE TERM "GROUND ZERO" REFERS TO THE SITE DIRECTLY BENEATH THE EXPLOSION—AT HIROSHIMA IT WAS, IN A





choice that added horror upon horror, the Shima hospital—and during the Cold War period, a ground zero was chosen for just about every major city on earth. In Paris it was the cathedral of Notre Dame (the opening section of Chris Marker’s 1962 film *La jetée* gives a sense of what Paris might look like after a nuclear blast), and in Washington the Pentagon, which resulted in a bit of black humor worthy of *Dr. Strangelove*: the hotdog stand in the middle of the plaza, nicknamed the Ground Zero Cafe, was said to be the target of the largest portion of Soviet missiles. Humor aside, thanks to photography, modernity has—alas!—brought a new dimension to the sublime, and thus to the imagination.

I received confirmation of participation in the “Visible Evidence” colloquium on documentary film and media at New York University (August 11-14) two days after the great Tōhoku earthquake and tsunami struck on March 11, 2011. I had been

planning a study of Teshigahara Hiroshi’s film *Rikyū* (1989), a fictional biography of the great tea master. The final scene is an allegorical representation of his death—part Kabuki, part Shakespeare—radically different from the ritual suicide by *seppuku* (disembowelment) that Rikyū was forced to commit. As I have long been concerned with representations of the *danse macabre*, and have produced several myself, I thought that this would be a good occasion to consider the relations between allegorical poetics and documentary evidence. The earthquake, tsunami, and subsequent nuclear disaster made the topic seem untimely, even infelicitous.

“To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric.” The same may be said for Hiroshima and Nagasaki. However, I have always wondered about Adorno’s iconoclastic injunction, and am tempted to explain it partially by the fact that Adorno was fun-

UNITED STATES STRATEGIC BOMBING SURVEY, PHYSICAL DAMAGE DIVISION [DISTORTED STEEL-FRAME STRUCTURE OF ODAMASAS STORE, HIROSHIMA], NOVEMBER 20, 1945, GELATIN SILVER PRINT. COURTESY



damentally more the musician than the poet. The most poignant response was Paul Celan's *Todesfuge* (1948), which suggests that one actually has an obligation to write such poetry.

He shouts play death more sweetly this Death is a master from Deutschland
he shouts scrape your strings darker you'll rise then as smoke to the sky
you'll have a grave then in the clouds there you won't lie too cramped

The image of bodies gone up in smoke is common in Japanese culture, which has long practiced cremation, as witnessed in *The Tale of Genji* at the moment that Genji laments the death of his wife, Aoi:

No, I cannot tell where my eyes should seek aloft the smoke I saw rise,
But now all the skies above move me to sad thoughts of loss.²

However, such immolation is an integral part of a ritualized work of mourning, while in Auschwitz, Hiroshima, or Nagasaki, the ritual was abolished, the mourning violated, the tomb not merely desecrated, but annihilated. Such images must always be presented with the greatest of discretion and trepidation, yet they must be presented, over and over, not only so that we never forget, but also so that we can mourn, sublimate, and plumb the depths of their horror.

In what might appear to be an unlikely segue, consider Teshigahara Hiroshi's earlier film, *Ikebana* (1957), a documentary on his father, Teshigahara Sōfu, the *ikebana* master (*iemoto*) who established the Sōgetsu (literally, "grass-moon") school of flower arrangement and ultimately revolutionized the art form by bringing it in line with the post-WWII avant-garde.³ The film is a somewhat whimsical presentation of this new form of *ikebana*, an art intimately related to the tea ceremony, that paradigm and summit of Japanese aesthetics. The radically new forms Sōfu sought are revealed in the scene where he makes an arrangement centered on dead branches, used not merely for visual emphasis and seasonal symbolism, which would be appropriate in traditional *ikebana*, but rather as the core of the work, proffering a morbidity beyond the bounds of formal exigencies and good taste. At this point, the film suggests little more

than a particularly idiosyncratic, and perhaps somewhat audacious if not contentious, gesture of formal innovation. We might remember in this context that one of the classic statements on Japanese garden design, *Illustrations for Designing Mountain, Water, and Hillside Field Landscapes*, composed by the priest Zōen, who lived before the eleventh century, includes the following injunction: "Bearing in mind the Five Colors of rocks, you must set them with full consideration of the relationships of Mutual Destruction and Mutual Production."⁴ This suggests that the power of nature as active principle, *natura naturans*, is always looming, and that certain forms of destruction are appropriate to the composition and elaboration of the dry Zen garden (*karesansui*, "withered mountain water"). Indeed, many of the great Zen gardens were destroyed by fire, war, earthquakes and floods, and certain aspects of garden design are used to highlight the cyclical processes of the natural world, such as leaving tree stumps to disintegrate, rather than totally uprooting them as would ideally be done in Western gardens. Decay and destruction are an integral aspect of Zen-inspired aesthetics, profoundly related to the temptation of the void. To see Teshigahara Sōfu's arrangement of dead branches in this context would be to focus on the classic sources of a modernist invention.

Emblematic of this new aesthetic trajectory is the project titled *Heaven* that Noguchi Osamu—longtime collaborator and friend of Teshigahara father and son—realized for the entrance to the new Sōgetsu building designed by Tange Kenzo in 1978. It is difficult to say whether this huge multilevel stone structure with streams running through it—used as both performance and exhibition space—is an indoor garden, conceptual playground, or vast sculpture. The very ambiguity of the space is coherent with both Noguchi's lifetime experimentation across art forms and with the complex interdisciplinary Sōgetsu aesthetic. Indeed, one might even see this work as one of the largest *ikebana* in existence, for stemming from the front of the stone structure is a single huge dead tree trunk,



certainly inspired by Teshigahara Sōfu's earlier examples.⁵

Consider the final scene of the film *Ikebana*. Unlike the end of *Rikyū*, an allegory of an individual facing death, *Ikebana*—despite the seemingly innocuous and aestheticized subject matter—depicts one of the most horrendous images of the twentieth century. Here we have symbol, icon, and index of one of the greatest instants of annihilation in history: the eternal symbol of the death's head; the cinematic icon of an atomic explosion and the ruins of Hiroshima framed in the empty orbit; the luminous traces of the explosion itself—“brighter than a thousand suns,” as one book on the subject is called—that constitute the cinematographic index of all that was vaporized, burnt, and irradiated by that nuclear holocaust. It is relevant that the same year Teshigahara Hiroshi created this extraordinarily unsettling, indeed almost unthinkable montage—where the life-giving waves of the eternal ocean fade into the hyperbolic destruction of the instantaneous atomic blast—the great photographer Domon Ken published his book *Hiroshima* (1958), the harsh realism of which reveals the aftermath of the city's catastrophe; and a year later saw the performance that launched Butoh, Hijikata Tatsumi's *Kinjiki* (*Forbidden Colors*, 1959).⁶ One might go so far as to suggest that the nuclear holocaust in Japan signaled a radical rupture in the theatrics of death, between the superlatively aestheticized ghosts made visible in traditional Noh—with their resplendent costumes, entrancing masks, extraordinary choreography, and fabulously convoluted plots—and the invisible radiation whose effects are horrifically symbolized in the ashes and contortions of Butoh, the “dance of darkness.”

A decade later, Hiroshima became the symbol of a revolution in architecture and aesthetics when Isozaki Arata exhibited the *Electric Labyrinth* installation in the Milan Triennale (1968), part of which was the collage *Hiroshima Ruined Again in the Future*. (The collage was originally superimposed on a photograph of Hiroshima just after the atomic bomb had been dropped.) These apocalyptic images of destruction and extinction, witnessed as

the death of all the utopias of the modernist avant-garde, are simultaneously seen as the sign of a new beginning. “Ruins are the style of our future cities,”⁷ proclaims Isozaki, explaining that the city is a process, and that he wishes to depict its traumas. Seeming to echo Zōen's injunction about mutual destruction and production, Isozaki explains: “Bringing the city to be constructed back to the city that had been destroyed emphasized the cycle of becoming and extinction.”⁸ In support of this claim, he refers to the aesthetics of *sabi*, the “dried and emaciated,” citing several classic Japanese sources, most notably the poet Munetada (1421-1502).⁹ This is in reference to the *wabi-sabi* aesthetic, the sensibility at the core of the traditional culture of the tea ceremony. *Wabi* suggests the positive aesthetic values of poverty and its attendant aspects of quietness, tranquility, solitude, astringency, humbleness, frugality, unobtrusiveness, rusticity. *Sabi* signifies rust, wear, and patination by age or use, connoting, as Donald Richie suggests, “the bloom of time” and its corresponding feeling of loneliness and melancholy, as well as a sense of antiquity

1. Yasushi Inoue, *Le Maître de thé* [1991] (Livres de Poche, 2009), 150.
2. Shikibu Murasaki, *The Tale of Genji* [ca. 1008-21], tr. Royall Tyler (Viking, 2000), 178.
3. Hiroshi took over the position of Sōgetsu grandmaster in 1980.
4. Cited in David A. Slawson, *Secret Teachings in the Art of Japanese Gardens: Design Principles, Aesthetic Values* (Kodansha, 1987), 146.
5. Robert Smithson's *Dead Tree* was created in 1969 in Düsseldorf, and may well have inspired Noguchi.
6. Hijikata performed at Sōgetsu several times, beginning in 1961.
7. Isozaki Arata, *Japan-ness in Architecture* (MIT Press, 2006), 87.
8. *Ibid.*, 88.
9. *Ibid.*, 88.
10. Donald Richie, *A Treatise on Japanese Aesthetics* (Stone Bridge Press, 2007), 44-46.
11. *Japan-ness in Architecture*, 88.
12. *Ibid.*, 99-100.



and history.¹⁰ Its extreme instances further denote bleakness, chilliness, desiccation, desolation. However, it is almost unheard of to make the ultimate extrapolation and directly relate the term to morbidity and death—not to mention its hyperbolic association with the atomic blast—as does Isozaki by referring *sabi* to the “frozen landscape of death” at Hiroshima.¹¹ Such ghastrly

imagery would be taken as a provocation, for who could bear the profoundly anti-aesthetic thought of nuclear fallout as the *sabi* of the earth?

Soon after the Great Hanshin-Awaji earthquake that devastated Kobe in 1995, the Japanese Pavilion at the 1996 Venice Biennale was dedicated to “Architects as Seismographers.” In this venue, Aozaki re-exhibited *Hiroshima Ruined Again in the Future*, explaining that, “ruins were a source of the imagination.”¹² Might we suppose that the greater the ruin, the more profound the imagination? Might this not suggest a new or terminal manifestation of the sublime? Yet at times, the smallest is an allegory of the greatest. It is surely no coincidence that another of Domon Ken’s better-known works is *Shigaraki Ōtsubo* (1965), a book that revolutionized the representation of pottery, with its extremely detailed close-ups and high-resolution photographs. Writing in the 1960s of pottery from the town of Shigaraki, literary and art critic Kobayashi Hideo describes the site-specific relationship between earth and pottery: “The time I went to Shigaraki and gazed at the white earth and green forests of red pine, the idle thought drifted quite naturally into my mind that, if there were a forest fire here, it might well produce a gigantic Shigaraki pot.”¹³ Art historian Louise Allison Cort glosses on this fantasy: “Chance, the absence of human will, is the manifestation of natural innocence. Yet nature, according to this aesthetic, possesses a will of its own: the pots emerge as the creation of the ‘combat between the clay and the fire’ within the kiln. Collectively, the features created by this awesome combat are termed the ‘scenery’ of the pot. Certain aspects of natural ‘scenery’ are felt to be embodied, transfigured, in the pot itself.”¹⁴

The mythopoeic dimension of this sensibility is explained by Bert Winther-Tamaki: “The burning and vitrification of the clay in the kiln were imagined as a kind of condensation of the great spans of geological time that produce the rocky formation of the earth’s crust. In this analogy, the ceramic artist travels back to a geological past, mimics the igneous processes of the earth, and then returns to the present to claim the products of ‘superhuman time.’”¹⁵ Thus pottery, in its most profound manifestation, is an allegory of the catastrophes of earth, fire, water. Certain types of unglazed, high-fired stoneware are particularly valued by pottery connoisseurs, and Murata Jukō (1423-1502), one of the originators of the Japanese way of tea, “equates the appreciation of Bizen and Shigaraki wares with profound spiritual attainment.”¹⁶ According to Louise Allison Cort, the appreciation of pottery concords with that of traditional poetry, insofar as, “the beginner was advised to start with a ‘correct and beautiful’ style, progressing only gradually toward expression of images described as ‘cold’ (*hie*) and ‘lean’ (*yase*) or, in the ultimate refinement, as ‘dried out’ (*kare*).”¹⁷ This sensibility corresponds to the “dry” aesthetics of the Zen garden, which we should remember is called *karesansui*: such gardens and pottery are valued precisely for their earthiness, austerity, irregularity,

13. Louise Allison Cort, *Shigaraki: Potters’ Valley* (Orchid Press, 2001), 297.
14. *Ibid.*, 297.
15. Bert Winther-Tamaki, “The Ceramic Art of Isamu Noguchi: A Close Embrace of the Earth,” in *Isamu Noguchi and Modern Ceramics*, eds. Louise Allison Cort & Bert Winther-Tamaki (Arthur M. Sackler Gallery of the Smithsonian Institution, 2003), 63.
16. Shigaraki, 112.
17. *Ibid.*, 112.
18. See *Japanese Death Poems*, ed. & tr. Yoel Hoffman (Tuttle, 1986).
19. See Allen S. Weiss, “The Toilet Bowl and the Tea Bowl,” *artUS* 27 (2009).
20. Yokoya Hideko, “Interview with Koie Ryoji” (2002), published on Robert Yellin’s site <www.e-yakimono.net>; republished on <www.ceramicstoday.com>.
21. Paul Claudel, *L’Oiseau noir dans le soleil levant* [1929] (Gallimard, 1974), 191. The earthquake occurred on September 1, 1923; since Japan traditionally followed a unisolar calendar (until the Gregorian calendar was adapted during the Meiji period in 1873), the moon and its symbolism would be that of nearly mid-autumn.
22. *The Tale of Genji*, 11.



roughness. As signs of the solitude, desolation, and melancholy central to the *wabi-sabi* aesthetic, the starkness of raw, tormented matter and lack of superfluous decorativeness are considered signs of heightened spirituality. Yet, however much the aesthetic of the “dry” or “withered” might suggest mortality, the visual representation of the morbid in tea culture is anathema. Rather, it exists in the most subtle allusions, referred to by *mono no aware*, the melancholy of passing things, famously instantiated by the fall of a leaf or a petal, the melting of snow or the passing of fog—all gently signifying the ephemerality of existence. This refinement has been made familiar through the ages by the

nearly obligatory presence of such references in haiku, poetry that revels in the evanescent without ever touching upon the morbid. However, there exists one notable exception, the death poem (*jisei*) that final work composed as a parting gesture. In a sense, all manifestations of *mono no aware* are asymptotic to morbidity, just as all haiku are asymptotic to the death poem.¹⁸

In 1980 the potter Koie Ryōji created a work in India that consisted of “firing” the ground with a blowtorch, a gesture that can be said to constitute the zero degree of pottery, if one takes into account the fact that while in English the word *pottery* denotes the vessel-like form of the object, in Japanese *yakimono*



(fired thing) stresses the passage of the object through fire.¹⁹ One might well imagine, symbolically of course, that Koie would have been the ideal artist to have set that Shigaraki forest fire imagined by Kobayashi, in a gesture to celebrate the relation between human creativity and nature's agency. Koie sought the extreme limits of pottery by reformulating the question at the center of the tradition: "At what firing temperature does something become ceramic?" This resulted in the production of a provocative monument in Hokkaido, created by filling a long ten-centimeter-wide groove with molten aluminum. When questioned as to whether this is *yakimono*, he responded: "The aluminum was about 700 degrees centigrade, so the ground got burned. Therefore, it is *yakimono*. It is just a standing column, but it left a scorch mark on the ground. That's like 'Scar Art'."²⁰ Koie thus rethought the art of pottery according to the ontological limits of fire, the ultimate extrapolation of which is his series of anti-nuclear, antiwar pieces evoking the most extreme, dead-

ly, horrific effects of fire. These include: *Testimonies* (1973; a trapezoid made of pulverized ceramics into which a watch reading 8:15, the time of the nuclear explosion over Hiroshima, was set before the piece was fired); *Anti-Nuclear Water Container* (1982); *No More Hiroshima, Nagasaki* (1987); *Chernobyl* (1989-90/1992/2008; one work of this series consisted of pulverized Seto tea bowls on a brick base upon which was placed a glass bottle that melted during firing). In 1477, Hannyabo Tessen, then chief priest of Ryōan-ji, made a claim that defined the Zen garden: "Thirty thousand leagues should be compressed into a single foot." Half a millennium later, Koie would symbolically compress a nuclear catastrophe into a pot.

I would like to conclude with the words of one of the French writers most attuned to the Japanese sensibility, Paul Claudel, longtime ambassador to Japan, who writes in *L'Oiseau noir dans le soleil levant* (1929) of the great Kantō earthquake of 1923, which destroyed Tokyo and caused over

UNITED STATES STRATEGIC BOMBING SURVEY, PHYSICAL DAMAGE DIVISION (RUINS OF THE HIROSHIMA PREFECTURAL COMMERCIAL EXHIBITION HALL (A-BOMB DOME)), OCTOBER 24, 1945, GELATIN SILVER PRINT.



140,000 fatalities, approximately the same number as the bombing of Hiroshima. “Over there to the left, the immense redness of Tokyo, to my right the Last Judgment, above me an uninterrupted river of sparks and flashes. But that would not hinder the moon, waning and almost consumed, to rise in a silver archipelago. Soon afterward I see Orion appear in the sky, the great constellation that is the voyager’s friend, the pilgrim of the sky that successively visits the two hemispheres. The moon began its course. Its hands stretch upon the sea, an ineffable consolation.”²¹ That he can evoke at such a tragic moment the autumn moon, among the most reproduced and celebrated images in Japanese culture, is all the more poignant as he traversed the devastated landscape in search of his daughter, whom he believed to have been lost in the catastrophe. This moonlight is the *sabi* of the world, like the spectral ambiance of Noh, connoting the ineffable tragedy of death.

The autumn moon has long been one of melancholy, as in *The*

Tale of Genji, which opens with the Emperor lamenting the loss of his favorite:

When above the clouds tears in a veil of darkness hide the autumn moon, how could there be light below among the humble grasses?²²

Here too the moon would have offered inexpressible solace, but in its stead we are granted another form of “ineffable consolation”: poetry. Claudel could not have known of the nuclear tragedy to come, of the invisible evidence of radiation, of the Butoh that would constitute a new *danse macabre*. But he already sensed that moonbeams could effectively counteract gamma rays. ❧

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