

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

RR-23 Speculative Diary from a Visit to Japan

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Dear Dick:

After a two year absence, one notices immediately the increase in congestion and a slightly slackened pace in Tokyo. The air is actively corrosive to the lungs and spirit as well. A painter's young son questions the habitual pairing of "blue" and "sky," for him an unreal relationship in suburban Tokyo. It is customary to speak of the tensions generated by the gap between the elegant, hardy transitions of Japan and the more newly embraced Western, industrial values. For decades, the metaphoric potential generated between these two mutually repellent, highly charged planes of existence has been, I think, a primary source of Japan's energy. An intuitive observation hazarded at the moment registers a lessening of this potential field, the descent into a form of normalcy.

From the time that my contact with Japan began in 1966, I was aware of a habit of mind by means of which their artists and intellectuals oriented themselves. Their coordinate system had as its center the current achievements of Western artists and authors working in America and Europe. Among Japanese painters with foreign experience, one finds almost as a matter of course titles bestowed in English. This is true to an even greater extent with composers. Output was geared to a distant, powerful, but incompletely understood intellectual and commercial marketplace. A few years ago, the awareness of what was happening in New York, Paris, Los Angeles, and so on for the artists, and constant discussion of major European and American experimentalists among composers, overshadowed concern with (one grew to think "belief in") the existence of a Japanese scene. An absorption in local, Japanese matters automatically relegated the offender in one's mind to an unseemly parochialism. Concern with activity in the West never seemed to me motivated by such simple factors as acquisitiveness or envy. Rather it suggested the watchfulness of one possessed of a basic self-assurance - learning, biding his time, and carefully keeping track of his position in the wider picture. This would now appear to be borne out.

During my recent visit to Japan I felt a definite shift in mood: a not extreme, yet significant sense of internal awareness within the Japanese context. One is tempted to use the word "comfortable." With few exceptions, the composers and artists I had known previously were in better circumstances, producing more, and seemed far less concerned with their orientation vis a vis the West. This state of affairs is no doubt partially the result of normal professional advancement in a seniority-conscious nation; partially it is the afterglow of income and prestige reaped from the extensive participation

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of Japan's finest and most experimental architects, sculptors, composers, and filmmakers in the National and Industrial Pavilions at Expo '70. Critic Yoshiaki Tono had remarked more caustically than was usual even for him that Expo '70 would destroy Japanese contemporary art through the subversion of money and the distortion of business-originated aims. This has not happened, though it might well have. I would say that the country's energies - viewed from the standpoint of its artist/intellectuals - are probably now at a nodal point, less frenetic than a few years ago, ready either for a healthy growth or a slow, cynical erosion.

The possibility of cynicism appears, I think, because Japan's economic strength places her necessarily in the public, international arena. She has shown no firm indication to this point of an emergent commitment to her Asian neighbors - in contributing to the solution of staggering social, cultural, and economic problems. One cannot help but wonder how a people so accustomed to formal controls in their interpersonal relationships will take to the strains of international involvements, to the now only practical route of self-determination for emergent nations.

Joji Yuasa, a steadily emerging prominence among composers, entitled a recently completed choral commission "Questions." The more I think about this remarkable work, the more apt it seems. A collaboration with poet Tanikawa, it is an elaboration of the interrogative mode. Brief exclamations and delicately balanced, aphoristic queries move gracefully over the range between "You OK?" to "Is Mankind at an end?" Masses of individual, fragmentary exchanges are superseded by the emergence of four external soloists blaring interrogation through electronic bull-horns from outside the performance area. There are no answers. Emotive catchwords like "Vietnam" are interjected. I asked what this word meant to a Japanese intellectual and the answer was unclear. Far less ambivalent and deeply distressing an issue there than it is in the United States, the Vietnam conflict would appear to stand primarily as a symbol of injustice. Its racial implications are not strong. There is some understanding of the irony of America's belief in the possibility of justifying the war beneficently, but little awareness of how such a righteous or pious stance could have arisen. Hellfire and Damnation, the admonishing finger trembling from the pulpit is, of course, totally foreign to the Japanese experience. We need to understand far better what similarly formative ethical, religious, and philosophical currents direct the flow of Japanese action.

Conscience and responsibility are prominent in Japan - not in forms that are familiar to us at least. Social conscience could hardly have flowered without the nourishment of the Western sense of Sin and the cultivation of a broad spectrum of international familial and economic entanglements such as the American's ployglot past provides. Responsibility is deeply engrained but formally restrained, coming into play only in clearly defined, personal situations.

The questions asked in Yuasa's choral work ranged from the deliberately mundane to the philosophical but avoided, significantly, I thought, any reference to a nascent national conscience. If Japan is in fact developing something of a normalcy, strenghtening its grasp upon new values and standards of living, slowing from frantic to merely energetic, it will soon have to face in some way international as well as national priorities.

Kenzaburo Oe, an enormously popular author in his late 30's, has developed consistently over the past two decades a liberal social and political stance. He has operated at great remove from the nationalistic militancy that marked the recently concluded career of Yukio Mishima, who committed a rather luridly classical hara-kiri ("belly-cutting") last Fall. While Mishima (along with Oe and Kobo Abe, the most popular Japanese contemporary authors) was considered patently ridiculous by most Japanese intellectuals, Oe is generally respected. Asked to comment on Mishima's death from his temporary residence in India, he sent a message that referred only in a off-handed way to his late colleague, not bothering even to mention him by name. Oe is now helping to edit a magazine devoted to Okinawa, and is agitating for careful Japanese attention to the long corrupted traditions of Okinawan culture. One would like to see this as a first hint of general Japanese concern with the values and needs of its many less fortunate Asian neighbors.

The prognosis for such a social consciousness, however, would seem rather poor. The Japanese are not particularly worried about an emergent China. They have, after all, been the traditional aggressors. Russia is a more serious matter. On a realistic plane, they have nothing to fear from the rest of Asia. The cliché that the Japanese regards all of lower station with implacable superiority and those in some way more advanced with abject inferiority probably contains a good deal of truth. It is too much to hope that the gradual shrinkage of the latter category will breed a concomitant shift in attitude towards the former. Everyone with whom I talked doubted very much that Japan was likely to develop a genuinely sympathetic posture towards the rest of Asia except to the degree that its need for markets dictates.

Not only the careful observer notes, but cultivated Japanese musicians admit to the tendency toward lavishing attention on the moment, producing series of the most exquisite details but failing to sustain the long phrase. Reflection confirms the relative absence of epic or even largish scale in Japanese art, conceptually as well as physically. This is true of the fine arts, drama, music, and literature. A taste for the miniature is everywhere evident: small morsels of food lend themselves to the attentions of hashi ("chop sticks"), seventeen-syllable haiku poems are still a common pastime, bonsai and ikebana involve the reduction of nature's elegance and complexity to small indoor trays, ukiyo-e woodblock prints are of modest proportions as are the products of almost all the folk crafts. What are the roots of this indifference towards or inability in the production of broad scope and scale?

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The Japanese have individually and as a nation chosen their context - limited it - deliberately throughout most of their history. This includes the unparalleled step of shutting out the rest of the world for two and a half centuries before the Meiji Restoration of 1868. It is not separate from the canons of courtesy that perform so well in controlling social and spatial relationships. Political and militaristic swagger have tended to be localized in Japan, at least to the degree that I understand them. The ability to think in terms of long-range contingencies has been relatively rare, the tendency to follow committee consensus strong.

Until very recently, the paternalism of business has not tolerated the competitive independence of excellence that job mobility supports in the United States. One's horizons - opportunity as well as security - were predetermined by corporation policy and the inevitable imposition of seniority. As I have written in other reports, the question of the relationship between planned goals in Asia and the West would reward attention. It is my belief that the value of a goal while real in Japan is considerably less stable than in the United States. There appears far less hesitation in redirecting one's efforts if unexpected and inconvenient obstacles are encountered. This does not mean going around them, but deflecting one's path towards a new, unimpeded object. In Japan, preparations are made relative to the value of the immediate aim just as elsewhere. In the case of extraordinarily significant goals, the level of preparation is accordingly high. It sometimes seems "unfairly" so to Western observers of the business world. In other cases, acquiescence is common.

Things are often allowed to be themselves. A sense of "thingness" is cultivated. One of the oldest and most important instruments in Japan is the shakuhachi. Made from bamboo root, it has 5 finger holes, but is capable of producing twelve notes through the adaption of mouth and finger position. The striking thing about it to Western ears is the heterogeneity of sound. If one plays an ascending scale, the successive notes are found to vary drastically in timbre and strength. Each pitch is allowed to live naturally, to reflect unashamedly the facts of its acoustic origin. Compare this with Western woodwinds where constant attention has been paid to "improving" key mechanisms so that the instruments might achieve a bel canto homogeneity of sound thought appropriate to musical expression. The Western player devotes years of practice to the elimination of inconsistencies or discontinuities in sound quality. His Japanese counterpart finds acoustical quirks a valuable resource.

The lack of tense structure in the Japanese language (a perfective mode serves for all completed actions or processes, the imperfective for those not yet complete) may also influence subtly the existence of forward perspective. There is no future tense. There is, in fact, no direct way to say "I hope..." All this and the numerous other perhaps incidental instances one could raise may or may not have individual validity. What is to me indisputable is that Japan has achieved what it has by virtue of a capacity for concentration of energies, for single-minded fixation stemming from a remarkably homogeneous population, its island isolation, and its intensely pragmatic philosophico-religious

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Apparatus. Its essentially masculine orientation - borrow and adapt, import and process - is unlikely to develop altruistic inclinations soon. It is depressing, almost grotesque, to read American columnists, and politicians call for "reasonable reciprocation" and so on without, it would appear, very far-reaching information regarding this deeply rooted culture.

One of Japan's most original and important painter/sculptors, Keiji Usami, has been working for some years with schematic outlines of human figures. (They were, incidentally, drawn from photos in Life Magazine chronicling the Watts riots during the late '60's.) Usami has structured these headless bodies into a formal congruence that has dramatic artistic and philosophical implication. The themes of transference and exchange have been prominent in his work (see reproduction of his 1971 silk screen print Exchange No.2) and this too is an eminently contemporary domain.

Deprived of their heads and hence depersonalized, the bodies share through Usami's design, shapes (substance, identities). These shapes, however, have an existence apart from body context and are employed differently within each body configuration. The implication of oneness a configural or functional confusion, the suggestion of action (though arrested) as a determinant of meaning are indeed substantial. The reproduction gives only the barest hint of the subtlety of color and shading (transference and speed), the manner in which temporal factors are introduced.

A thoroughly rounded contemporary artist, Usami's primary work is on a large and even more complex scale, with paired canvases 10 by 20 feet in size. He has also done extensive work involving laser beams, showing a critically important ability to capture the metaphoric power of these slender, almost tactile columns of colored light in a way I have yet to see another artist manage. I asked Usami what interest Japanese traditions held for him. "None" he answered.

Though it is claimed by many Japanese that the educated reader can learn more of Lady Murasaki's classic "The Tale of Genji" by reading Arthur Waley's superb English translation than he can in the original, the philosophical and practical value of their traditional values is inestimable. One still hears frequent reference to the 17th Century itinerant poet, Basho, the ideals of Zeami (the progenitor of Noh) the wondrous restraint of the drama itself. One still lives under the impact of the archipelago's unique architectural vision, its constraints, and perhaps most of all a superb sense of form flowing from the interaction of restriction and a keen sensibility for relationships in all things, animate or inanimate.

Sincerely,



Roger Reynolds

