

Artistic Expression in the Time of Cruelty

Photographer Naoya Hatakeyama and theatre director Akira Takayama in conversation

Text: TOKYO/SCENE
Photo: Mika Kitamura

The Sensation of Standing Motionless Before a Subject

Takayama: Since the catastrophe [of the Great East Japan Earthquake and Tsunami] I have had many opportunities to see press photographs, but I always feel full of regret somehow. The landscape reflected there has absolutely no connection with me and yet there is a sense that it has become part of me. There is no way that I have ever entered the Fukushima exclusion zone but after one and a half years, the landscape of that place has woven itself up inside me.

Hatakeyama's photography, as opposed to the press photography appearing online, on TV and in the newspapers, cannot construct a kind of landscape inside you; it has this forte like where you just stand there in a daze. What I want to ask you is this: When you take a photograph, do you embrace a feeling of that "something that is not part of you" turns into "your" own thing?

Hatakeyama: Yes, what is it...? For example, take portrait photography and landscape photography – the attitude when you take the photograph is definitively different. Portrait photography is like shooting the subject with a gun. But landscape photography does not attempt to seize the picture you want – it feels like it holds it patiently, fixed. It's like the difference between hunting and fishing. When I take a photograph, I don't know if I will catch anything; I feel like someone who is fishing by dangling a fishing line.

For example, when I look at Daido Moriyama's photography somehow I always think of Buyoh [traditional Japanese dance]. In some way the photographs themselves seem to be dancing this spectacular dance. They seem like that at first glance but I also feel that perhaps it is more accurate to say "dance" [i.e. western dance, rather than Buyoh]. My photography isn't like this, is it? It always possesses this sensation of disconnection between the surface and something like a physicality.

Takayama: How can we say this? In a word, is it the feeling that a photograph stands motionless there in front of us? A sense of transparency, not so much a fever or frenzy, but like when it is cooling down. And I also feel that I want to seize hold of this sensation and make theatre. I got started in the theatre thanks to Peter Brook's "L'Homme Qui..." (The Man Who). There were five performers on the stage and they were sort of playing this game of doing things one after the other after the other. One of them would shave his beard while looking in a mirror, but would then give up after shaving only around half off. This is because he has sensation in only half his body. This kind of peculiar stage business continued to unfold in a very detached way, laying bare child-like surprises but without the presence of "drama". In a certain sense it was boring, yet I was shocked by the directing that seemed not to pull you in and make you forget yourself, but make you even perceive your own stunned awakened perspectives there.

Prolonging the Cruel Distance, the Cruel Time

Hatakeyama: I see. Listening to that, what I remember is this time I was playing with four or five people at a river in front of my house when I was about seven years old. The



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smallest child who was playing with us fell into the river. He was drowning but we could not do anything. It was like we were watching a spectacle, gazing in a daze at this desperate suffering. In the end, an older boy swimming in the water swam out and saved the child, and naturally we were all soundly told off. "If you weren't close enough then you should at least have called out," we were told. The feeling from that time is always there when I am taking photographs.

Saving children is really important for society. Not admiring them. My photography is probably not helping children, is it? I feel greatly ashamed about that. But when a photographer goes over to the side of saving and to extending out his hands, just what kind of earth can they even do? This is the dilemma.

Takayama: I really understand what you mean. After the catastrophe, I genuinely felt that I would become an activist. "Referendum Project" [2011, Festival/Tokyo 2011] swings between both an activist-esque mantra and the feeling of yourself becoming transparent, like someone who is just watching. The project re-constructed a national referendum, a political decision-making event that has never been held in Japan, using the language of junior high school students, who don't even had the vote. Here I was inquiring into what is the future of Japan and asking if we can uncover a vision.

I toured the project in Tohoku and though on the one hand there was expectation for a strong vision from the politicians, I also felt a methodology was required that would unify residents' own voices into one. But I have no vision, and I cannot propose a system for building consensus that extracts residents' opinions. It's like I've devoted myself to the work of listening just to voices, and the more I think about it the more it seems that I'm not heading towards activism. As you say, it's like I'm standing there in a stupor.

Living in the Low-Res Here and Now

Takayama: For my new project ["Kein Licht II", Festival/Tokyo 2012] I will take the "Fukushima" represented by media photographs and place it into the familiar landscape of Tokyo for a tour performance that inquires into the imagery of Fukushima. The audience will walk around a certain place in Tokyo and, by touring the "Fukushima" internalized into their daily lives in spite of its geographical distance, they will likely re-examine both Fukushima and Tokyo. I will also employ radios this time. With a radio you have to tune it to the station, right? I like this gesture of "catching" radio waves, these signals that you cannot see. It's like "catching" radiation with a Geiger counter. But radio waves are much better than radiation!

Hatakeyama: Radiation and radio waves are kin. As is light. Your approach is interesting. It's like a stance where you imagine many difference examples and then meticulously take in the results of this. In your work it's not the case you are provoking people but, beholding them, there's a feeling like you are waiting on them.

Takayama: What I felt in Tohoku was that no strong visions or motifs useful for regional reconstruction were being suggested at the municipal or political levels. We just have to live here in this reality, in this state of limbo. But for this, I feel that the work I would like to do is laying down some sort of indirect route, as opposed to showing a vision, with the resolution of the image down low, preserving it as much as possible.

Hatakeyama: I think it takes time to increase the "resolution". Rikuzentakata lost its buildings; the land was really flat. Why did that flatland come about? Because there's a river. The Kesengawa River made all the towns. The fundamental



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question is the question about why is it “now”? We have memory and from that the continuation of consciousness, and criteria for being able to measure our “now”. The Bubble Era, the Lost Decade, or even longer, the “post-war” years... This kind of “now” has in one stroke been stretched out to a century, a millennium.

Takayama: Right, and that kind of span is so long that one human cannot present a vision for it. And yet, in the landscapes of Rikuzentakata reflected in your photography, it seems we can feel that epic sense of time.

Hatakeyama: When I struggle with finding the answer to the role the arts can assume towards the present situation of the catastrophe, I think that to a certain extent it is necessary to assert expediently that it is “the arts”. After March 11th, 2011, there has been a climate of expectation on artists for work that is like emergency medicine – a sharp blade that cuts right down to the heart of the matter. But the work I like doing is more enigmatic, at times fiendish, with this personality that seems to be denying living itself. It’s work that is so-called ineffective, yet at times dissolves into the mind and body. Even though it is called fiendish, even though I could not save even one other human being, I’ll be happy if just a few people can see spiritual liberty in my work. That isn’t such a bad thing, you might say. In that way, if my work has something in it that can aid our situation, it’s that it is not emergency medicine.

That moment where I stood gazing absently right before the boy who was drowning in the river, all the conflict that flows through with that moment – can I pluck that out and show it? Probably in that instant there is something really deep. That time, it’s a chilling time shared by many people - can we somehow cut that out and prolong it? Rehabilitation won’t become possible by this. And yet I feel that this is also necessary.

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Naoya Hatakeyama (photographer)

Born 1958 in Rikuzentakata, Iwate. He graduated from the University of Tsukuba. He received the 22nd Kimura Ihei Memorial Photography Award in 1997 for his collection “Lime Works”. He represented Japan at the Venice Biennale in 2001 and in the same year he won the 42nd Mainichi Award of Art for his collection “Underground”. His exhibition “Natural Stories” was shown at the Tokyo Metropolitan Museum of Photography in 2011 and 2012, winning the Agency of Cultural Affairs’ Art Encouragement Prize for Photography in 2012. It toured to the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art from July to November, 2012.

Akira Takayama (theatre director)

Born in 1969. Born in 1969. In 2002, he founded Port B, a unit collaborating with artists who exhibit forms of expression outside the theatre medium. His work includes “Referendum Project” (F/T11), a truck installation with DVD interviews with 440 middle school students, and which toured fourteen locations in Tokyo and Fukushima; “The Complete Manual of Evacuation – Tokyo” (F/T10). “Compartment City Tokyo” (F/T09 Autumn) was invited to the Wiener Festwochen in May and June 2011. He has drawn attention domestically and from overseas festivals for his methodologies using the memories, landscapes and media of urban spaces and contemporary society.

