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# Rubbish, Animism and Post-Fukushima Japan

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***Abstract:*** *Artist Tetsu Takeda left Japan for America in 1986 and returned to Japan in 2011. Shortly after the Fukushima nuclear disaster, Takeda started identifying himself as a "professional artist" and only doing "high art" by rethinking life and our role as human beings interfering with nature. Takeda is an eccentric collector of ocean rubbish flushed ashore by waves. In his tiny home studio, he creates various big-eyed rubbish creatures in diverse forms, shapes, dimensions, and colors in his unorthodox way reminiscent of Victor Frankenstein in this lab. For him, doing new artistic endeavors is a ritual of giving life—to "vitalize" rubbish—and inhabiting a reformulated society of nature, whether privately (in his home) or publicly (in galleries).*

***Keywords****: Tetsu Takeda, Avant-Garde, Rubbish, Animism, Post-Fukushima*

**A table in the corner of the common area of Tetsu Takeda's current home in Zushi, Kanagawa, Japan. Photo by Sia X. Yang in September 2024, used with permission.**

I met Tetsu Takeda in the summer of 2018 when we were both international residential artists in a migrants' urban village in Shenzhen,[1] near a famous beach surrounded by mountains holding the mansions of the super-rich. Although Takeda and I were enthusiastic about residing there for a couple of months, exploring and engaging with the locals, talking and playing with migrants' children unattended by their parents and teaching them something about "weird" contemporary art, we were also aware that we were being used by the organization that funded us (with minimum compensation). It is owned by a former avant-garde photographer turned regional cultural entrepreneur, and so our presence was also intended to please the local officials so that he could obtain further funding to grow his business, including an "art taste restaurant" fully decorated with so-called "artworks." When everyone hid inside while Typhoon Mangkhu hit southern China, we began to exchange views and learn more about each other.

Born in 1961, the only child of his middle-class parents, Takeda started to travel outside Japan and encountered Western culture and English-speaking foreigners at a very young age, thanks to his father's

1 Shenzhen is a special economic zone that links Hong Kong to China's mainland. Its first global art and design success was *shanzhai*, the quick-copy counterfeiting for which China later became famous. For instance, Winnie Won Yin Wong, in her *Van Gogh on Demand: China and the Ready-made* (Wong 2014), recounts life and work in Shenzhen's Dafeng village, which accommodates thousands of migrant workers who paint van Goghs, Da Vincis, Warhols, and other Western masterpieces for the world market, producing an astonishing five million paintings a year. In 2002, the Chinese government included the concept of "cultural industry" in the policy scheme, which boosted the appearance of various private and public museums and art spaces in China to, politically, whitewash huge real estate projects behind them. Shenzhen attracts artists and art professionals across China because of its rising economic and political status and premature art ecology. It has a more flexible structure that provides more opportunities than Beijing and Shanghai, let alone its affinity to Hong Kong. When I was in Shenzhen, I found that although the organization owner was someone provincial, all staff and residential artists were from Hong Kong, overseas or had a Western educational background.

international business affairs. His grandmother—whom he once showed me an old photograph of on his phone, in which an elegant lady in a modern dress and hat was accompanied by her four children with four different fathers—was one of the most sought-after geishas in Kyoto in the 1920s. Thus, his father is suspected of being of royal blood, though illegitimate. Takeda spent most of his childhood with his grandmother. Yet, she never allowed her grandson to play with her *shamisen*, a three-stringed traditional Japanese "guitar" (derived from Chinese *sanxian*) she used to perform with as a geisha. This reflected her relationship with her past; in Takeda's words, "She hates her history." Takeda himself was determined to be an artist from a young age, when he found himself obsessed with bubble gum cartoons and local gangsters' tattoos while working for pocket money by rubbing their naked backs in the *sento* (public bathhouse). This was the context of his childhood and coming of age, and the environment that influenced him.

Takeda left Japan for America in 1986, two years after graduating from the prestigious Musashino Art University (originally named Teikoku Bijutsu Gakkō, or Imperial Art School). He had lived in Tokyo and worked as a "corporate slave" until making the international move. Like many Asian migrants, his first stop in the U.S. was a relative's Japanese restaurant in California, where he worked and learned English. Then, he moved to New York and studied printmaking at the School of Visual Arts. Next, there was his difficult and unlawful overstay that only came to an end when he got a Green Card by lottery. Differing from the many Asian diaspora artists inclined to participate in their community in order to work within a realm of lingual and cultural familiarity, Takeda was a loner, a "tough guy" who was open-minded and flexible—as he described himself and encouraged me to be. Or, in another negative turn-of-phrase, he practiced what many Asians called "self-colonization," which if taken positively urges us to learn, think, change, grow, and fit into the new context we have relocated to.

**Tatsu Takeda, *Tracing Nature*, Gallery Shell 102, Tokyo, 2024. Image courtesy of the artist.**

One of Takeda's roommates in New York was a black DJ and rapper. Through him Takeda made friends with musicians across genres like hip-hop, punk, jazz, and electronic music. He sincerely appreciated their "weapons" against discrimination and racism, as well as their subversive remarks. He was fascinated by street art and graffiti, so he surrounded himself with those like-minded people while developing his own artistic style. However, he didn't see himself as a "professional artist" in New York, as he had to do many other things for bread and rent. He worked as a lobby boy, waiter, security guard, builder, postman, and so on. The role of his I envied most was as a tester and censor for the bookstore Kinokuniya, which is Japan's largest bookstore chain with global branches. His entire job was to read its exported manga (thus, he seriously suggested I quit reading manga as the stories will never be ended for the purpose of commercial profit). Meanwhile, he was a cartoonist for magazines like *The New Yorker*

and for children's books, and he undertook commissioned interior mural projects for nightclubs and the wealthy. Reflecting on his exposure to so many different people across classes, he sighed, saying "There are only two kinds of people in the world: the super-rich, and those who are always concerned about their finances."

John Clark (2014) classifies modern Asian artists into eight types based on their "siting"—both domestically and internationally. Those considered "domestic" are artists who never go abroad, but have contact with foreign discourses via local exemplars designated by a patron, resident expatriate foreigners and, most frequently, resident foreign teachers (1, 2, 3). Those termed "international" are:

- Artists who only go abroad to sojourn and temporarily reside in a foreign country.
- Temporary sojourners who become long-term residents due to circumstances, such as the Cultural Revolution in China, which prevented them from returning.
- Artists who intermittently return to their home countries. They may temporarily return but become long-term foreign residents by choice of artistic affiliation.
- Artists who have left home for political reasons or artistic exile, such as Ai Weiwei. The circumstance may become one of intermittent return if the situation that forced them to go abroad is resolved.
- Artists who are transhumant cosmopolitans. They have stopping-off points or bases for studios and families, but are basically globalized. These artists may thus be relatively unattached to cultural specificities. This type is a kind of artistic transhumance, which depends on local mediation and acceptance, as well as access to art markets or sites of primary cultural appraisal (Clark 2014).

Twenty-five years passed, and Takeda returned to Japan in 2011 to look after his mother after his father passed away. Since then, he, his work, and his style have been swallowed up by domestic art discourses and judged—through Takeda's mouth—as "comparatively unacceptable" and "aesthetically too avant-garde."[2] He has never considered himself a conceptual artist who may risk being treated as an opportunist; instead, he insists on an intellectual stance—he is indeed knowledgeable and reads widely in both Japanese and English. He also remains dedicated to craftsmanship, inhabiting a very Japanese character towards traditional art-making. He refutes decisive judgements of his work by calling them "narrow-minded" and "provincial" and retreats to being an art world "outsider" or "observer."

Becoming a type 8 artist is Takeda's goal. It's already been realized by some of his fellow Japanese contemporary artists, such as Yayoi Kusama, Takashi Murakami, Yoritomo Nara, Yoko Ono, Hiroshi Sugimoto, and Chiharu Shiota. What makes Takeda distinct from those big names is his mundane everyday routine, which professionalizes him as an eccentric collector of ocean rubbish flushed ashore by waves. Next, he dives into his tiny home studio, like Victor Frankenstein (his home Wi-fi password), creating various big-eyed rubbish creatures in diverse forms, shapes, dimensions, and colors in his unorthodox and even childish way. His artistic expression is a ritual of giving life—to "vitalize" rubbish—and those new lives are placed both privately (in his home) and publicly (in galleries), "in their secret society of nature," says Takeda. He now resides in the small town of Zushi, which faces Sagami Bay on the Pacific Ocean and is surrounded by steep hills.[3] He

2 It is not unusual to see that Takeda is unwelcome in the Japanese art world (which he struggled to get into) due to its factions or cliques. Over twenty years of total detachment from the local ecology undoubtedly makes him and his work too alien to be accepted. Takashi Murakami earned his fame first in the Western context. However, his "superflat" works embrace commercialism by blending it with Nihonga (a style of paintings that have been produced in Japan following traditional artistic conventions, techniques and materials) and "low" culture manga and animation elements, were harshly criticised by the domestic art world for his "plagiarism." Yet Takeda considers Murakami a very able, intelligent, and hardworking person (though sometimes Murakami performs more like a celebrity) as he knows how tough it is for an Asian artist to achieve such success in the West. Takeda prefers Yoshitoma Nara, as Nara still paints by himself and lives a low-key life.

3 Zhushi is about one hour from Tokyo by train. The Japanese government has implemented intense policies to rebuild the post-COVID economy, including decreasing the Yen to a decade-low to boost international tourism. This remote, tranquil place has become ideal for many residents, including Takeda.

**Tetsu Takeda, *Recover*, Solo Exhibition, Art Experience Gallery, Hong Kong, 2018 (Image courtesy of the artist).**

**Tetsu Takeda, *In the Moment*, 57W57ARTS, New York, 2023 (Image courtesy of the artist).**

can walk or ride every day along the coast—a meditative routine—observing and collecting rubbish to make his creations.[4]

Initially, Takeda collected trash that washed up on the beach shortly after the Fukushima nuclear accident. He assembled them to formulate dark, despairing sculptures and called them "Chemical Bastard." Yet, the audience and collectors acclaimed "Kawaii!" (Takeda recalls). Finally, in 2011, at age fifty, Takeda started identifying himself as a "professional artist" and only doing "high art." He is dedicated to maintaining his style, medium, material, and decorative function. His minimalist way of living allows him to be economically self-sufficient. And some of his works have attracted the markets' attention, especially among private collectors in Hong Kong.[5]

The Oxford English Dictionary defines animism as "belief in the existence of a spiritual world, and of soul or spirit apart from matter; spiritualism as opposed to materialism"; "the attribution of life and personality (and sometimes soul) to inanimate objects and natural phenomena"; and "any of various theories postulating that an animating principle, as distinct from physical processes (chemical, mechanical, etc.), directs energy that moves living beings and governs their growth and evolution = vitalism." Vitalism, on the other hand, is explained as "the doctrine or theory that the origin and phenomena of life are due to or produced by a vital principle, as distinct from a purely chemical or physical force" (Yoneyama 2019). John Clammer writes that animism is a term that "has almost entirely dropped out of anthropological discourse in the West," whereas in Japan and "possibly only in Japan… (it) is still

4 As a method, using rubbish as a material for creating is not novel. For instance, for over three decades, Richard Wentworth has lived on Caledonian Road in North London, affectionately nicknamed "Cally," and took thousands of photographs of the area. He frames his home territory through second-hand shops and the arrangements of discarded objects he comes across during his day-to-day journeying around the neighborhood. See Harriet Hawkins's article on Wentworth's geographical imagination (Hawkins 2010), Julian Stallabrass's street conversation with Wentworth in South London (Stallabrass 2015), and Gillian Whiteley's *Junk: Art and the Politics of Trash* (Whiteley 2010).

5 Usually, artists are inclined to keep their private collectors private. One of Takeda's collectors in Hong Kong, whom Takeda usually mentions, though vaguely, has a position in the Hong Kong prison system. Thus, this collector might well appreciate the dark side and unorthodoxy aesthetics Takeda's works convey. Takeda has not yet signed any contract with any gallery; all seem to depend on flexible, temporary and verbal agreements. He is hyper-cautious as he considers the hierarchy and exclusivity of the commercial galleries, as well as how much the gallerists will take from the artists and when they will pay.

**Forest spirits in Hayao Miyazaki's *Princess Mononoke*, 1997 (Screenshot by author).**

widely used to explain the distinctiveness of the national culture and as a vehicle for constructing a model of Japanese society" (Yoneyama 2019).

I am from post-Communist China, which is, in fact, operating under "disaster capitalism," a form of extreme capitalism that advocates privatization and deregulation in the wake of natural catastrophes, wars, and other terrors and tortures.[6] On the surface, hegemonic "materialism" has officially expelled all superstitions; the only "god" in the propaganda is the state's paramount leader. However, ancient feudalistic legacies, usually treated as foolishness by some modern citizens, are fundamentally interwoven into people's everyday lives. Thus, my persistent curiosity about animism or anything "unreal" is unquenchable. When I shared this, Takeda smiled amiably and said, "We are born to believe that everything in nature, trees, flowers, grass, rocks, water, animals, even sounds, carries the spirit of gods." By implicitly engaging with phenomena such as post-Fukushima protest and activism, including nationwide precariat rallies for "No More Nukes," Takeda's rubbish creatures tell sad stories of how the realm of gods has been invaded and how man-made disasters have corrupted their pure souls and distorted their natural forms.

**Tetsu Takeda, *Yellow Cake Series*, Installation, 2017 (Image courtesy of the artist)**

Here, my thoughts go to Hayao Miyazaki, the most distinctive animator. In his 1997 film *Princess Mononoke*, there is a secret society formed by infinite numbers of ghost-like forest spirits. Sickened by Japan's bubble period materialism, Miyazaki felt that he "lived in a nation traumatized and confused by its relationship with nature and a creeping sense of spiritual emptiness"[7] (Kelly 2023). He thus launched the project *Princess Mononoke*. A departure from his previous work, *Princess Mononoke* is dark and angry, picturing a war between humans

6 A term coined by Naomi Klein in her *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism* (Klein 2007). "Although 'disaster capitalism with Chinese characteristics' might be more apt term given the state's still-stated commitment to socialism," Margaret Hillenbrand remarks in her *On the Edge: Feeling Precarious in China* (Hillenbrand 2023).

7 Although Miyazaki is ranked among the greatest animators in the world, it is worth noticing that he graduated from Gakushuin University in 1963 with degrees in political science and economics. He used to be what he called "leftist in sympathy," a "believer in people power," but for obvious reasons (the collapse of the Soviet Union and the escalation in ethnic conflicts across Europe), his political beliefs were "completely shaken in the early 1990s", says Shiro Yoshioka, lecturer in Japanese Studies at Newcastle University, when interviewed by the *BBC* (Kelly 2022). Japan itself was also going through an existential crisis or nihilism since the economic bubble burst in 1992, stranding the country in a seemingly endless recession (especially in comparison to the "rise" of China). Frequent natural disasters (earthquakes and typhoons) and anti-social violence (terrorist cults and public attacks) are cruel tests of people's sense of security and resilience. (Kelly 2022)

and nature. It is full of bizarre spectacles and scenes of startling violence: hands are severed, heads are cut off, blood gushes from humans, animals, and demons alike. The imagery of the cursed boar god, whose fury bursts out of its broken body like a writhing nest of oily worms, is also startling (Kelly 2023). A children's animation should never burden such heavy melancholy and radicalness.

In Takeda's artistry, the anguished ingredients of his creation seem to have peacefully dissolved into his bright-coloured works. His paintings and recent collages also present an organised formulation of stones or organic objects growing from the bottom, illustrating an abstract, oriental landscape of vitality. His free-flowing expression results in a rather radical contrast with the Japanese Zen poetic values of "emptiness" and "tranquility" (such as exhibited in Hiroshi Sugimoto's *Seascapes* photographs), as well as his own reserved personality. Yet, in some of his previous works, imagery of a scraping black cloud—or shadow—may easily remind viewers of that atomic bomb photograph.

Takeda read Ruth Benedict's *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword* two decades ago, which made him highly critical of Japan's ultra-nationalism during the Second World War. He told me his family history: when the U.S. Air Force was attacking Tokyo, civilians were running anywhere for cover. His mother suddenly looked up and saw a fighter pilot laughing at her through the window; his grandfather abandoned his family, turned to pick up a fallen national flag on the ground and waved it frantically. Takeda recalled that, after returning to Japan, one day in a store, a sudden mild earthquake occurred. While the shoppers all swiftly sought the nearest cover, the checkout staff remained at his post, though shivering, because he couldn't leave the counter during working hours. He remained there no matter how adamantly Takeda asked him to move or get down. Such standard social codes of behavior concern him.[8]

Takeda doesn't place himself within a specific political spectrum. Still, his political attitude resembles an anarchist in the context of a strictly structured and formalized Japanese society, which usually isolates him from his neighbors. I consider him an anarchist based on Noam Chomsky's citation of historian Rudolf Rocker's remark:

*For the anarchist, freedom is not an abstract philosophical concept, but the vital concrete possibility for every human being to bring to full development all the powers, capacities, and talents with which nature has endowed him, and turn them to social account. The less this natural development of man is influenced by ecclesiastical or political guardianship, the more efficient and harmonious will human personality become, the more will it become the measure of the intellectual culture of the society in which it has grown (Pateman 2005).*

There may be an interesting question for Takeda: if there was no Fukushima disaster, would he have become a "professional artist"? He was once drowned by existential anxiety after the 9/11 attack in New York, where his wife, May, was one of the survivors who escaped from the Twin Towers. Takeda once recalled that some of his friends tried to alleviate their trauma by having children and bringing forth new life. Takeda didn't have children; he says he was unconfident about his economic condition in New York. Takeda doesn't see life as a certainty; he often says, "We all have been exposed to nuclear radiation. Maybe I already have one leg step into my tomb." Still, his perfectly healthy lifestyle (work, exercise, diet, etc.) is indicative of intense self-discipline, which is essential for his physical, spiritual, and career development, as well as maintaining a subtle balance between introspectiveness and self-harmony.

8 I was also curious about Japan's unique pornography industry. Takeda mentioned that he was once shocked by a general social survey that demonstrated young people today intend not to have sex; they would rather stay in their tiny rooms watching pornography. It could more or less result in Japan's demographic crisis. As far as I know, China shares a similar "social crisis" in terms of the state's strategy that scrapped its notorious "single child policy" to boost the birth rate (first, two children allowed; then, three is better). A silent movement against societal pressures is to "*tang ping*", maintaining a position of "laying flat" to resist a culture of desperate hard-work and a conventional lifestyle of forming and raising a family. Many young people thus choose to stay single.

He has been residing in Japan for over a decade now, though he has mentioned to me from time to time that he doesn't belong there. Our casual conversations are mainly about art, the Asian market, his encounters with the art world in New York, and politics. His personal experience and information he's shared constitute an unusual part of my knowledge that can be labelled "underground" or even "conspiracy theory," especially relating to the fate of working-class people in the U.S. and the fall of the middle class in Japan, as well as Japan as America's colony, with its manipulated politics and puppet politicians. Like many artists, including Miyazaki, Takeda is a bundle of contradictions: easily caught between idealism and nihilism, optimism and pessimism, inner-peace and die-hard rebellion, West-modern and East-tradition, "self-colonization" and "convention" or "anti-Americanism." Junichiro Tanizaki writes in his book *In Praise of Shadow*, "The Westerner has been able to move forward in ordered steps, while we have met superior civilization and have had to surrender to it, and we have had to leave a road we have followed for thousands of years" (Tanizaki 1977). Takeda may be in absolute agreement with Tanizaki. However, Zhang Peili, the "father of Chinese video art" and the first Chinese artist whose work was acquired by MoMA in New York, in his *At War with the West*, remarks, "the most conservative and the most avant-garde usually stand together in the same trench" (Huang 2008).

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