

Recalling the Days of Expo Art (?) (2001)

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Translated by Machida Gen

The incident took place on April 27, 1970 at Senrikyūryō, Osaka. The Japan World Exposition, the “event of the century,” was in full swing under the spring sky. The day before, the symbolic centerpiece of the expo, the Tower of the Sun, had been seized by a masked man in a red helmet who claimed to be a Red Army activist. Now, directly below him at the base of the Tower, was a naked man in sunglasses who—after running fifteen meters with his genitals bared—was arrested by the riot police in a hurry (Sawaragi Noi, 1998).¹

After providing this account of the happening involving the legendary performance artist Itoi Kanji, otherwise known as Dada-Kan,² Sawaragi goes on to describe the day that brought together the “Eyeball Man” (the alleged Red Army member),³ the “Explosion Man” (Okamoto Tarō),⁴ and the “Naked Man” (Dada-Kan), as “a date to be commemorated in postwar history.”⁵

That site of Expo '70 witnessed everything. Anything could have happened there. Anything at all, for it was visited by half of the entire Japanese population. Even the emperor was present amidst the shower of blossoms at the opening ceremony. Had it taken place in the forecourt of the Imperial Shishinden Hall,⁶ it would have commenced with a court music performance and an appearance by masked dancers. But seated below Tarō's Tower of the Sun, beneath the Grand Roof designed by the Tange Kenzō team, the spectators were instead surrounded by hideous products of technology. The giant Deme-Deku robots rolled forth while blowing steam.⁷ Perhaps they could be considered substitutes for the “*a-un*” guardian warriors, which themselves were derived from the figure of Hercules.⁸ The only thing missing was Godzilla—who seemed to have been disguised as the enormous Tower of the Sun.

During the ceremony, I was to ride inside the Deku robot that served as the control station for the stage performances. My role was to provide assistance if the event was stalled by technical troubles. I could not back out, as I was the one credited for proposing and designing the Festival Plaza and its mechanical equipment.

A space-frame structure of an urban scale was levitated thirty meters above the Festival Plaza. Ideas for enlarging architecture to fit the scale of the city had been presented time and again for over a decade, yet none had been realized anywhere in the world. There, at the expo, this could be done for the first time. It was only with such an incentive that I was able to put aside the various criticisms of the expo and had convinced myself that it was worth participating in it. The word “experiment” had enticed me. It was pointed out on many occasions that the expo was a celebration of the establishment that aimed to boost national prestige. I was well aware of this, and if anything, I was in agreement with the critics. Even so, the lure of the possibility that I could finally realize something that I had dreamt about for years was irresistible. Looking back on the situation, had I stood outside of the expo’s planning and execution, I, too, would probably have developed a rational argument for objecting to take part in the project. I became absorbed in it as if seized by a fever, however, and emotion overruled reason. And thus I gave in. The tone of my account of the experience, written retrospectively after my fever subsided, is ambivalent. For a long while, I would particularly be ridiculed for writing that “I felt as though I had participated in executing a war.”

I had been running around the Festival Plaza the night before the opening ceremony, checking to ensure that all of the equipment would function properly at the event the next day. It was mid-March, but a cold spell had hit and it was snowing. There was, of course, no heating in the semi-outdoor space. Although I was bundled up in a piece of oddly odorous sheepskin that I had bought five winters earlier in Skopje,⁹ having been accustomed to the south, I was susceptible to the cold and was chilled to the bone. It was already morning when I returned to my hotel in Osaka—where I then strained my back. Back pain was an occupational ailment in those days when architects worked hunched over drawing boards. I had experienced these symptoms before, yet the pain was so severe on that occasion that I could not even move from my bed. As such, I lost my opportunity to view the opening ceremony from the window of the Deku. I watched the live television broadcast instead, although listening to the announcer’s commentary irritated me to no end. Then they aired the Expo ’70 theme song, *Hello from the Countries of the World*. It was only at that moment when I finally awoke from my fever.

I drew parallels between the expo and the political mechanism that had driven the scientists to build the atomic bomb, after reading books on Robert Oppenheimer’s life and the stories behind the creation of the weapon. In contrast to how pure scientific research had given birth to a weapon capable of destroying humanity, the expo brought no casualties. It was just a simple festival. Frivolous merrymaking. Technology was merely converted into toys for entertainment—the robots were what Pokémon are

today. Yet, however unrelated the expo and the atomic bomb may seem, I believe that the scientists, engineers, and artists who were pulled into both projects shared the same feeling after all. Perhaps a similar experience would be that of being caught up in the current genetic engineering race. For an architect, participating in refugee relief work is no different from taking part in inventing gadgets for the luxury mansion of an internet entrepreneur, in the sense that both are challenges in unfamiliar territories. There exists no value standard for judging whether one's work is good or bad in such a realm. There is only the difference of aesthetic and moral value. An architect is someone who has a latent interest in rolling in either direction. The same can be said of the scientist. Some of the scientists who worked on the atomic bomb refused to participate in the development of the hydrogen bomb. Others became spies and leaked information with the aim of achieving nuclear deterrence by establishing an oppositional balance. In any case, they were startled by the devil that they themselves had unleashed. Like that of the youngster who opens any closed lid that he comes across, they had acted with a childish mentality. But such is the ruffian.

Accusations are made whenever a polluting spill occurs or there is an accident at a nuclear reactor, or whenever technology runs wild and causes harm to humans. Until then, everybody keeps silent. The ones who have the worldly wisdom to keep quiet and let problems pass are the ones who survive. At other times you are tested on how quickly you can get back on your feet.

The speculation thirty years ago that robots would someday enter our daily lives has become common expectation today. It is even talked about on popular TV. To imagine robots as a part of everyday life in the sixties was akin to imagining the lunar voyages depicted in early Méliès films. While it can be said that fantasies give rise to invention, there is only anxiety in the mind of the person who takes those initial steps into the unknown. In the case of robots, however, the idea was already being written about as a real social phenomenon by Karel Capek in the 1930s, and they were being employed in automated production lines by the sixties. The ideas that architects proposed regarding robots were limited to the small realm of how they could be domesticated. Then, science fiction writers such as Isaac Asimov began writing the future history of robots. I happened to acquire the bad habit of indiscriminate reading in the sixties and was into science fiction at the time. As reading the original texts was too much of a hassle, I read any translation available through publishers such as Hayakawa Noboru. It was my personal goal to see how many books I could go through on the Shinkansen trains that I rode back and forth between Tokyo and Osaka for expo site visits and project meetings. To top this, I even visited NASA at Houston to collect as much promotional material and video as I could, after which I wasted more time by making a trip to Cape Kennedy just to observe a rocket launch from a distance. After experiencing a shock when viewing Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), however, I decided that Arthur Clarke's writings alone would suffice for my science fiction collection and I packed all of my other books into a box.

I eventually came to think that Clarke's idea of the Overmind, or a cosmic intelligence freed of the Earth, was a visualization of the Omega point—a moment one million years in the future where the spirits of all terrestrial life will converge and coalesce—as illustrated in *The Phenomenon of Man* by Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (1955), the Catholic priest, archeologist, and researcher of the Peking Man.¹⁰ In the years leading up to 1960, *The Phenomenon of Man* and D'Arcy Thompson's *On Growth and Form* (1917) were my two bibles. In retrospect, both of these texts that I had found to be so fascinating can be positioned within the theoretical framework of Darwinistic evolution. Thompson sees growth and evolution as one and the same, and he describes the continuity of form through topology (perhaps this is just my far-fetched interpretation—I always seem to be trying to merge unrelated things into hybrids—but if mechanical philosophy is brought into this evolutionary process, it can be extended to describe robots). Chardin, by comparison, understands the spirit/consciousness as floating in a common cosmic ocean. He can thus easily be related to the Jungians. The spirit/consciousness has presumably been shared commonly among all civilizations since ancient times, although it is referred to variously as “life” or “genetic encoding.” The thinkers that express ideas about a common sense or a shared consciousness are all speaking of this same ocean of consciousness (life); what remains to be established is a means for physically approaching it. Chardin represents this as a tree of evolution, whereas Clarke illustrates it as a sophisticated cosmic being. Clarke has this being visit the Earth. The plot is simple. He introduces a transcendental being because the narrative has to be clear for the media to buy into the story. The transcendental being that functioned as a God-figure had been removed once, but its resurrection was planned. In *2001: A Space Odyssey*, it takes the form of a primary structure—a cuboid resembling the Seagram Building.¹¹ It could, perhaps, be called a *go-shintai* (divine body).¹² The spacecraft that embarks on a quest to Jupiter in search of this in *2001* is a metaphor for DNA. Onboard the spacecraft is HAL, the computer. It is clear that HAL is a simulation model of the Overmind that repeatedly appears in Clarke's stories. The scenario in *2001* is such that the man-made creation betrays its human masters. Another feature that is visualized in the film is the extra-vehicular pod. It is a small, one-man maintenance vehicle equipped with robotic arms. Today, astronauts work manually by space-walking, but such a vehicle will surely become necessary if large-scale spacecraft are someday to be assembled in space. It truly seemed like a pioneering vision.

Skipping ahead in time for a moment, when I worked on the Palladium project (1985), I implemented two ideas in creating the mechanism for the dance floor of the old theater that was being converted into a discotheque. One was the use of Vari-Lite, which had finally just been developed at that time. Although similar products can be found at any concert performance today, only a few of those lights were available then. Rock musicians scrambled to lay their hands on them. By installing these, the lighting could be synchronized with the rhythm of the music. The second idea was to suspend

movable multi-screens in the air. Giant screens were created by combining twenty-four big-screen TV monitors, which were fixed to enormous arms that swung around above the dance floor. There were two of these. The arms were just like those of the extra-vehicular space pods. In fact, they were the same as the Deme robot of the Festival Plaza.

It was very difficult to find a manufacturer that would construct the Palladium installations. But there are some peculiar people in America. We were told that the small workshop that agreed to build them had also made the robot arms for NASA's space shuttle. A venture business by today's standards, the workshop was run by a strange man who was something of an inventor. He had an interest in making kinetic machines and, before he knew it, he had a machine shop the size of a small factory. Or at least that seemed to be his story. I have met many artists of his kind. Everything is more clear-cut in Japan for some reason, but this man's work could be seen as both practical and artistic, depending on the context within which it is described. The same can be said of industrial products, or crafts, but in Japan, there is a tea culture tradition in which, oddly, even a dog bowl can be given a ridiculous price tag if artistic value is ascribed to it; and because the modern institution of the museum has incorporated this tradition, a value system has been established in which artists are appreciated for assuming the demeanor of a living national treasure. Being the product of such a climate, I developed the belief that the builder of the robot arms, who appeared to be just a crazy inventor, was actually a new type of craftsman. Certainly, however, I felt this way only because of the long backstory behind the making of the Deme and Deku.

Archigram tried to convert buildings into moving machines, as represented in Ron Herron's idea of the "The Walking City" (1964).¹³ Buildings were to transform like insects metamorphose. The concept of a mobile house is simple: it is a building integrated into an automobile. I thought this idea was conceived in Japan first—as the funeral car. I told the Archigram members so and showed them pictures, yet they showed no sign of being surprised. Well of course, there were already airships, or Montgolfière, that could transport living spaces with more ease. The concept of the "house as machine" had already been consumed. To compose a house from machines means nothing more than creating a static object; the form of the house is insignificant. It was the problem of how machines would enter into everyday life that became the issue of greater concern. This should be called the "domestication of moving machines," as machines are inherently in operation, unlike building blocks. From the "minimal house" that was the main concern before the 1930s, there was a shift of interest thereafter toward labor-saving in the household and then to labor automation. Essentially, the dwelling revolution of the twentieth century was driven by the domestication of labor-saving machines, and the idea of the domestic robot arose as an extension of this theme. What began as the mechanization of a single room in turn led to the mechanization of the entire building, and in a departure from the "machines for living" of the twenties, the "domestication of machines" became the new theme of the sixties. The robot evolved in the natural course of these events.

It goes without saying that a technology base for assembling robots was available in Japan, where rapid growth was taking place and the automation of production lines had been considered well in advance. Or so I thought. After proposing various installations for the Festival Plaza, I ran aground when it came time to manufacture them because nobody would take the orders. Manufacturers that supplied automobile plants were bound to production line schedules, and they did not seem to have any idle time for taking part in our trivial amusements. Then we met an eccentric character at a train car factory. Train cars are not mass-produced. They are all custom-made and production is begun from scratch each time. It was in such a factory that the one-of-a-kind, useless robots of the Festival Plaza were built. The fact that flatcars were available there was of key importance, as the robots were much too unsteady to walk on two feet. They had to ride in wheelchairs. It was decided that the robot that housed projector rooms inside two plastic spheres would be named the “Deme” (pop-eyed), while the one serving as the control station was named the “Deku,” derived from “*deku-no-bō*” (good-for-nothing),” for its inability to do anything but move from side to side.

There was one other problem: the power supply. Batteries could not power the enormous machines. Electricity ultimately had to be supplied by cable. Unable to move without cords, the robots were like performing monkeys on leashes. The movable lighting installation suspended from the Grand Roof was named the “hanging robot.” It resembled the long-armed monkeys in Hasegawa Tōhaku’s paintings.¹⁴ Alas, they were all monkeys.

We needed to find things to joke about in this manner, as we would otherwise have suffocated working with the lifeless mechanical devices. Of course, nobody would trust us if we fooled around too much. Money figuring in the billions had gone into the production orders after all, so it was better that we designers project a stern countenance. Then again, robots did not seem to be such a serious matter. Moreover, considering their complete lack of anthropomorphic qualities, it made little difference that we used monkey metaphors in our self-ridicule. Nor could we ignore the fact that planted in the middle of the plaza was a huge *kokeshi* doll,¹⁵ the Tower of the Sun. Although it was still before Tarō had become known as the Explosion Man, having spent time in his atelier after graduating from university, I could sense that many people involved in the expo project were disconcerted by the presence of the inexplicable tower. I was thus well aware that the matter of monkeys would be no more significant than cockroaches running around at its feet. Notwithstanding, the show monkeys proudly rolled forth, blowing mist. They even stood up at one point to let elementary school children burst forth from their bodies. It was all extremely immature, but the production (whoever designed it) created a festival atmosphere comparable to that of the New Year’s greeting ceremony that is held at the imperial palace each year.

I was unable to rise from bed even on the day of the encounter between the Eyeball Man, Explosion Man, and Naked Man. I read about the incident in a small article in the newspaper. Throughout the sixties, helmets had served as a substitute for combat

uniform. Demonstrators wore school caps in the days of the 1952 Bloody May Day and were beaten one-sidedly. Helmets appeared in street demonstrations for the first time during the 1960 campaigns against the Japan-U.S. Security Treaty, when architecture students of the University of Tokyo donned helmets delivered from a construction site. During the street campaigns of the sixties, the color of one's helmet signified the unit to which one belonged. I suspect that the idea to unify the colors of each battalion according to their war banner in Kurosawa Akira's *Kagemusha* (1980) has its origins in those street demonstrations. It would not be entertaining to watch armies march if both allies and foes wore the same attire. Records remain that describe the many spectators who watched the battle of Uji when the clans of the Genji and Heike clashed with their red and white banners.¹⁶ Having only been taught about modern wars, as a child, I could not imagine a battle with spectators. It was only when I observed the demonstrations in the late sixties, when demonstrators wore red, blue, black, and white helmets, that I realized that the records were indeed faithful and that there really must have been spectators at the Battle of Uji (for some reason there were no yellow helmets—the most important color, according to Chinese tradition, was missing). The armies that Kurosawa depicted are therefore just demonstrators. The battle scene is not that interesting. Files of troops parade down a hill like a procession of helmeted demonstrators. Incidentally, the Red Army activists were also born at the University of Tokyo, from the Department of Urban Engineering that split off from the Department of Architecture (I heard that the world's first hijack plot was also planned there). Kurosawa's film *Ran* (1985) is too obviously based on *King Lear*, and until this day, I still believe that *Kagemusha* would have been a masterpiece to go down in film history alongside *The Battleship Potemkin* (1925) and *Citizen Kane* (1941), if only Katsu Shintarō had not fought and played the leading role, and Takemitsu Tōru had written the music. Nonetheless, the film can still be seen as a spectacular record of the helmeted ranks of the late sixties.

The appearance of the Naked Man came as no surprise. I had witnessed such incidents throughout the sixties. It is only regrettable that I missed the earliest of them. Around the time that helmets emerged in the streets, a photographer by the name of William Klein came to photograph *TOKYO* (1964).¹⁷ Recorded in this work are scenes of Shinohara Ushio engaged in boxing-painting sporting a mohawk.¹⁸ The series also contains the scene where Hijikata Tatsumi ran naked through the wickets at the Ginza Yon-chōme subway station.¹⁹ That was well before streaking—the act of running naked through the streets—was popularized around the world. I heard about the incident one week after it was photographed. Had I known about it earlier, I would have been a spectator. Two years later, Hijikata and Shinohara, also known as Gyū-chan,²⁰ climbed onto the roof of my house, fully naked. Police cars arrived at the scene and I was taken to the police station the next morning. I floundered through my appeal, but how is one to defend somebody for exposing their nudity in public? After having had such an experience, though, it seemed only natural to me that Dada-Kan had made his naked

run at the expo site. If there was one big difference, it was that he did not simply expose himself in public; he did so on the same ground that the emperor had walked upon only a month earlier.

It has been said that Osaka's Expo '70 was a celebration that emblematically announced to the world the full recovery of the Japanese nation a quarter of a century after its war defeat. The reason why both the terms "*seiji*" (political affairs, 政事) and "*saiji*" (festivals, 祭事) are read as "*matsuri-goto* (政事・祭事)," is because politics are visualized through festivals. Plazas were prepared as the site for such festivals. This happened at Moscow and Beijing, and Munich and Nuremburg, before moving onto Berlin. The existence of the Festival Plaza at Expo '70 thus made sense, and its naming by the architect Nishiyama Uzō proved to be fitting.²¹ Adjacent to the Festival Plaza was the Tower of the Sun, which was assailed by—to describe it in current terms—“hackers.” The despondent mood of the “hackers” was precisely that of the Neo-Dada and Ankoku-Butō anti-artists of the early sixties. In the Tarō Okamoto Museum of Art's opening catalogue I described the anti-artists as Tarō's demon children. At the expo, the demon children attempted to violate the Tower by Tarō, the avant-gardist who continued to fight his solitary struggle. It is common knowledge in cultural anthropology that the king is killed by his demon children. Tarō knew this better than anybody else—it is why his work laughs scornfully in the darkness. However, the meaning of the Festival Plaza design and its performances, which had previously been talked about in the context of the avant-garde and anti-art, were upturned by the presence of the emperor and crown prince at the site. Even the corpulent *kokeshi* and the cockroach robots were recognized as symbolizing “Japan.” It was after this that the Red Helmet and Naked Man made their appearance. *Intrude! Disrupt!* At most, they only created more work for the security personnel. The festival continued as a success. Perhaps those “hackers” were made out to be fools when it was said that they had created a “date to be commemorated.” But take a look at *King Lear*. It is the protagonist who is overpowered by the fool.

Notes

Originally published as “Banpaku āto (?) no koro o omoidashite mita,” Chapter 8 of *Hankaisō* [Counter Recollection] (Tokyo: A.D.A. Edita, 2001), 204-16.

1. Sawaragi Noi, *Nihon/Gendai/Bijutsu* [Japan(ese)/Contemporary/Art] (Tokyo: Shinchōsha, 1998), 174.

2. [Translator's Note] Itoi earned his nickname for his activities as an artist

who was once loosely associated with Neo Dada (active in Tokyo in 1960).

3. [Translator's Note] The helmeted man was referred to as the “Eyeball Man” because he had occupied the eye on the face of the Tower of the Sun.

4. [Translator's Note] Okamoto, the creator of the Tower of the Sun, is described as the “Explosion Man” in reference to his quote, “Art is Explosion,” which Okamoto popu-

larized by appearing regularly on a television program in the 1970s. The word “explosion” originally appeared in the exhibition *Tarō Explodes* at Matsuya Department Store, Tokyo in 1968. See Takashi Murakami, ed., *Little Boy: The Arts of Japan's Exploding Subculture* (New York: Japan Society and Yale University Press, 2005), 1b.

5. [Translator's Note] Sawaragi, *Nihon/Gendai/Bijutsu*, 174.

6.

[Translator's Note] The Shishinden Hall, located in the Kyoto Imperial Palace, shelters a throne from which the emperor can observe important state ceremonies.

7.

[Translator's Note] The Deme and Deku mobile robotic machines were designed by Isozaki to contain control mechanisms for the multimedia equipment installed at the Festival Plaza.

8.

[Translator's Note] Statues of the *a-un* or Niō guardians are found commonly at the entrance gates of Buddhist temples in Japan. Their appearance resembles the figure of Hercules and they are thus thought to have been modeled on the Greek demigod.

9.

[Translator's Note] Isozaki spent time in Skopje when he worked on a large-scale redevelopment project as a staff member of Tange's team.

10.

[Translator's Note] "Peking Man" is the name commonly used to refer to an ancient human species of which many fossilized remains have been

discovered in China since the mid-1900s.

11.

[Translator's Note] Stanley Kubrick's film, *2001: A Space Odyssey*, is based on Clarke's science fiction novel under the same title published in 1968.

12.

[Translator's Note] A *go-shintai* (divine body) is an object of worship within which the spirit of a deity is believed to reside.

13.

[Translator's Note] "Walking City" was an idea proposed by architect Ron Herron of the Archigram group to create large-scale mobile buildings.

14.

[Translator's Note] Monkeys are a common motif in the ink paintings of Hasegawa Tōhaku (1539-1610).

15.

[Translator's Note] *Kokeshi* are painted Japanese wooden dolls characterized by their limbless bodies and enlarged heads.

16.

[Translator's Note] The Battle of Uji took place between the Genji (Minamoto clan) and Heike (Taira clan) and opened the Genpei War (1180-85).

17.

[Translator's Note] Klein produced a series of works photographed in various cities beginning with "NEW YORK" (1956), "ROME" (1956), and "MOSCOW" (1961), before making "TOKYO."

18.

[Translator's Note] Shinohara, a Japanese Neo-Dada artist known for his characteristic mohawk, created "boxing paintings" which were made by punching the canvas with boxing gloves dipped in paint.

19.

[Translator's Note] Hijikata was a choreographer known as the founder of the Butō (Ankoku-Butō) dance genre.

20.

[Translator's Note] "Gyū-chan" literally means "Mr. Cow" because his first name Ushio can also be spelled in Chinese characters as "cow-man."

21.

[Translator's Note] Nishiyama was appointed to design the master plan of Expo '70 in conjunction with Tange Kenzō. Nishiyama is credited for naming the central open space the "Festival Plaza."