

REUBEN KEEHAN

Into the Void: Concealed Histories, Buried Memories



With large-scale contemporary art exhibitions in suspension or incomplete everywhere, the interruption of the 2019 Aichi Triennale now seems a portent of things to come. Though its derailing was political rather than epidemiological, it weirdly anticipated the current vacuum of suddenly truncated, delayed, downscaled, virtualised and abandoned biennials and triennials worldwide. In one of the highlights of that exhibition, Tadasu Takamine's upturned swimming pool in a derelict Toyota City High School, the critic and philosopher Akira Asada observed "a silent epitaph for the coming Olympic Games."¹ That the Tokyo Olympics remain yet to come, and that this coming is hardly guaranteed, gives added weight to arguments of art's uncanny ability to predict the future, as if receptive to emanations from the forces of a different kind of time. "It heralds, for it is *prophetic*," as Jacques Attali noted in his political economy of music: in a society devoid of meaning, background noise holds the key to the meters, rhythms and tones of the social structures of the future.²

Asada's observation came in conversation with the Singaporean artist Ho Tzu Nyen, whose *gesamtkunstwerk*, *Hotel Aporia* (2019) had, along with Takamine's intervention, been roundly declared one of the highlights of the Triennale. For Asada, the noise of Takamine's work was its overwhelming, imposing silence—one might say like a sky bereft of air traffic. Ho's noise was of a different order, a "wind and clattering" passing through "the echoes of various contradicting voices," an apt description for the particular kind of sonic space at which Ho has arrived after nearly two decades of experimentation. His artwork, centring of an historic Toyota City inn, is on its surface explicitly backward looking, the product of one of a number of recent video practices predicated on synthesising historical research. Its most recognisable device, erasing the faces of actors in the films of Yasujiro Ozu, appears at once an act of obfuscation and the creation of a void into which a constellation of obscure and forgotten moments might rush. It is hard not to perceive Ho's hotel having access to the same portentous time as Takamine's pool, and that this time runs in more than one direction, where troubled pasts, vexatious presents and indistinct futures operate in consonance and dissonance.

Ho Tzu Nyen is part of a generation of overseas-educated Singaporean artists, born in the 1970s and coming to prominence in the 2000s, who have remained particularly mobile, and whose careers have grown in parallel with the maturation of the city-state's aspirations to becoming a 'Global City for the Arts'. A graduate of the University of Melbourne's Victorian College of the Arts with a fondness for European cinema, Ho made his breakthrough in 2003 with a solo exhibition at Singapore's longstanding alternative space The Substation, exploring the mythology surrounding the Sumatran prince Utama, credited with founding the Kingdom of Singapura at the turn of the fourteenth century. Ho received further praise for his presentation at the first Singapore Biennale in 2006, with a videoed staging at the former Supreme Court of Queen's *Bohemian Rhapsody* (2006), which for all its theatrical pomp and heavy metal bluster remains a song about the death penalty, a taboo subject in Singapore. Ho proceeded through a series of expansive, philosophical short films, among them *Newton* (2009), *Earth* (2009/10) and *Zarathustra: A Film for Everyone and No-One* (2009/10), characterised by an increasing attention to looming, powerful soundscapes, composed and occasionally revisited with collaborating musicians and sound artists. His attention returned to Singapore with *Ten Thousand Tigers* (2014), an ambitious theatrical piece following the symbolism of the tiger in the construction of Singaporean and Malayan history, which engendered a series of operatic videos focusing on encounters during the European colonial period. In the same period he produced the complementary compilation films *The Nameless* and *The Name* (both 2015), respectively concerning the mysterious Sino-Vietnamese Malayan communist, collaborator and colonial agent known as Lai Teck, and the Area Studies expert Gene Hanrahan, who appears to have been a pseudonym for a number of figures connected with US intelligence; both projects form part of Ho's broader project, *A Critical Dictionary of Southeast Asia*.

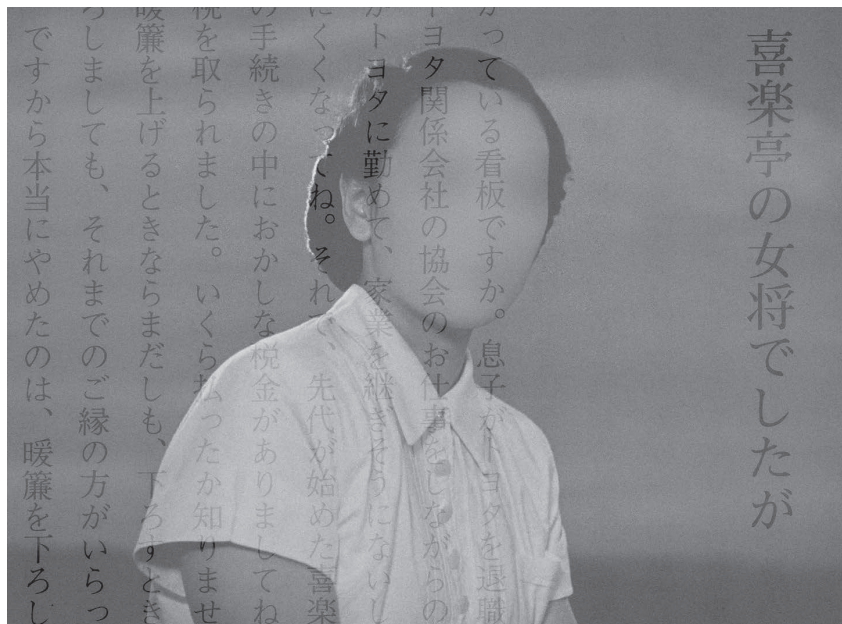
As Asada notes, Ho's current work aligns him with a tendency for artists to direct historical, anthropological and folkloric research into the creation of videos, a mode of working that became pronounced with the advent of affordable production equipment and the proliferation of the biennial form in the 1990s and 2000s. Ho's approach to locality through a regional lens, however, is closer to a specifically Asian trend that explores the construction of nationality along transnational lines, following mercantile patterns of colonial trade and the colonial projects of the Second World War. Artists operating in this vein include multidisciplinary practitioners like Singapore's Shubigi Rao and Malaysia's Ahmad Fuad Osman, filmmakers like Beijing-based Hao Jingban and Tokyo's

REUBEN KEEHAN

Hikaru Fujii, and Taiwanese artist Chia-Wei Hsu, Ho's co-curator for the 2019-20 Asian Art Biennial in Taichung. The relevance to Japan of this kind of work is twofold. In the first instance, it is sympathetic to the emergence within contemporary art of challenges to cultural essentialisms and historical revisionisms that became hegemonic in the public sphere during the Heisei period, expressed widely by the Japanese artists included in the 2019 edition of the Aichi Triennale.³ Secondly, it provides an occasion for an artist like Ho to explore in greater depth the discursive and cultural lines that flow into and out of the Japanese occupation of Singapore and other parts of Southeast Asia during the Second World War.

Housed on the grounds of the Toyota Industrial & Cultural Center, and used primarily for community events such as tea ceremonies and flower arranging, Kirakutei is a fine example of the Taishō era large-scale architecture that once dominated the commercial centres of central Japan. Its history as a restaurant and inn dates back to the late Meiji period, but the current building was constructed in stages in late Taishō and early Shōwa, with the finishing touches applied as late as 1940. Having served as a private residence for some years, it was donated to the Cultural Center by its owner in 1982 and moved to its current location as an example of the architecture of Toyota City prior to the urbanisation of Japan's post-war reconstruction. Toyota is an industrial city in the northern part of Aichi prefecture, where agricultural flatlands merge with the vertiginous terrain of bordering Gifu and Nagano. Under its original name of Koromo, it flourished as a sericulture centre during the Meiji Restoration, when Japan sought to dominate global silk markets and secure valuable foreign currency. As the silk industry declined in the face of trade embargoes and the invention of cheaper synthetic alternatives, the Toyoda Automatic Loom Corporation diversified into automobile manufacture, establishing Toyota Motor Co, Ltd. in 1934. So significant was the company as an employer during Japan's 1950s manufacturing boom that the city of Koromo changed its name accordingly. Kirakutei's well-to-do clientele reflected these broader shifts, drawn from the silk trade in the decades prior to the Second World War, and the auto industry afterwards.

Hotel Aporia is most concerned with Kirakutei's guests in the intervening years, the naval officers of early Shōwa's militarisation, and in particular a *kamikaze* squadron who received their final, ceremonial dinner in the building during the last, desperate months of Japan's Pacific War. From this point the work takes in the periods in which Yasujiro Ozu and the cartoonist and animator Ryūichi Yokoyama served in wartime propaganda units in Southeast Asia, the aesthetic considerations of the novelist and essayist Jun'ichirō Tanizaki, and the ambiguous political thought of the Kyoto School philosophers, with attention to their shifting conception of "absolute nothingness." It takes the form of a series of four video installations staged over the two levels of Kirakutei, which, when presented in-situ, offered an enveloping viewing experience quite distinct from the theatrical devices of gallery-based 'immersive' installation, its piquancy achieved through site-specificity. The convention of removing one's shoes in the *genkan*, negotiating narrow hallways and staircases, and inhaling the scent of tatami and old pine in the sultry Japanese summer were integral to its impact. The Aichi Triennale has presented works in this kind of unconventional, though highly appropriate, venue before – Lieko Shiga's free-standing, atmospheric photographs in the eeriness of a gutted upper level of a once high-end department store down on its luck, or Kohei Nawa's low-lit primordial bubble pool above a former bowling alley – but never with such an alignment of location and content.



REUBEN KEEHAN

Indeed, Ho mentions Tanizaki as a guide for how to treat the inn, from attention to materials used in constructing projection screens to careful concealment of electrical cables in a traditional Japanese setting. At a total running length of eighty-four minutes, with time added for traversing and enjoying the space, *Hotel Aporia* demands as much of the viewer as a short feature film or an intercity flight. The script for each video is based on email correspondence between the artist and two principal interlocutors, Aichi Triennale curator Yoko Nose, based at the excellent Toyota Municipal Museum of Art ('Yoko'), and Tzu's dramaturg and researcher Tomoyuki Arai ('Tomo'). In a small room on the ground floor Ho offered *The Waves*, a kind of overture introducing the principal themes of the project beginning with Nose's proposal that Ho consider Kirakutei – "the Japanese house that I told you about" – as a venue. Nose recounts information gleaned from an interview with a former landlady, including the story of the *kamikaze* squadron, the Kusanagi Unit, named for a sword regarded as a national treasure that is housed in nearby Atsuta Shrine, and of their families, who used the restaurant as a site of mourning after the war.

Immediately in this introduction, Ho's aesthetic strategies, used across the installation, are also made apparent. Like *The Nameless*, which was constructed from films featuring Hong Kong actor Tony Leung, and *The Name*, a montage of cinematic depictions of solitary writers in the West, the videos in *Hotel Aporia* are largely created from pre-existing material. Scenes from Ozu's films feature heavily, with Ho cleverly combining repeated motifs like women switching overhead lamps on and off, and groups of men singing together over meals. The gendering is significant, and largely aligns with subjects mentioned in the text. Most striking, though, is the erasure of the faces, which Ho has explained as a way to "make them anyone and no one at the same time." For Asada, this is a means of removing the specificity of actors well-known to a Japanese audience, so that attention may focus on a closer reading of Ozu's work. There is, however, a haunting aspect to the gesture, as the figures go through everyday activities with either no awareness of or complete comfort with their empty visage. The effect is disconcerting, alienating. This is intensified by the soundtrack, where the affable reading voice is accompanied by a choir of electronically treated whispers and hisses that presents them as multiple – 'legion' for those with a taste for biblical histrionics – as if issuing from some abyss, across dimensions, across time. Wind effects and ominous drones loom in the spaces between words, such that Ozu's warm, sunny exterior shots register as depictions of bleak, nuclear winters.

The Waves also introduces the Ōshima Memos, discovered in 2000 and published the following year, which detailed secret meetings between the Yonai faction of the Imperial Navy, and the philosophers of the Kyoto School. As its name suggests, the Kyoto School was primarily based around Kyoto University, which served as a meeting point for followers of the philosopher Kitarō Nishida. Nishida was a brilliant product of Meiji modernisation, a student of both zen and continental philosophy whose 1911 *An Enquiry into the Good* is credited with being the first original contribution by a Japanese philosopher on terms established by European thought. Central to Nishida's system were the ideas of "absolute nothingness" and "contradictory self-identity", which initially corresponded to transcendent unities of subject and object expressed in German idealist philosophy, and more sympathetically Heidegger's later conception of being, but which by the end of the 1930s had come to stand for the figure of the Japanese Emperor. While made up of a diverse and heterodox array of thinkers operating across a range of philosophical disciplines, riven with critical disputes, multiple generations and even a Marxist left wing, the Kyoto School is principally remembered for its ambiguous relationship to Japan's militarist state, and accordingly for providing moral justification for the country's colonial adventures in Asia. The Ōshima Memos revealed a

verifiable level of political engagement, even if this occurred at the behest of a particular faction of the armed forces, rather than that of the school itself.⁴

The Japanese military was riven with factions. The officers of the Imperial Japanese Navy tended to be less aggressive than their army counterparts, and the navy was itself factionalised. Admiral Mitsumasa Yonai had been a major figure in the pre-war Treaty Faction of the Imperial Navy, arguing that the composition of Japan's navy was not suited to military adventure, functioning primarily as a deterrent to invasion. His brief term as Prime Minister in the first half of 1940 was marked by a pro-British, pro-American stance, distancing Japan from Germany and Italy in order to avoid war. He was forced to resign in July when pro-war factions in the army refused to serve under his leadership; the Tripartite Pact was signed several months later. With the demise of Hideki Tōjō following the fall of Saipan in July 1944, Yonai returned to cabinet, arguing in favour of peace treaties whenever they were presented by the Allies. The meetings detailed in the Ōshima Memos present the role of the Kyoto School as a sort of think-tank for these intrigues, first in ultimately futile attempts to prevent the war, then in plots to overthrow Tōjō – which necessitated the secrecy of the memos – and finally in a transition to a post-war order.

It is also worth noting the participation of Kyoto School philosophers in another forum, the Shōwa Research Association, effectively the 'brains trust' of Fumimaro Konoe, who served as Prime Minister three times between the Marco Polo Bridge Incident of 1931 in China and the end of the war in 1945. Konoe had promoted the dovish Yonai to a prominent role of cabinet in his first term, but it was also Konoe who succeeded Yonai's brief Prime Ministership and ratified the Tripartite Pact, cementing the Axis in 1940. To add to the complexity, the Shōwa Research Association contained at least two Marxists: the first apostate, in the person of Kyoto School member Kiyoshi Miki, who developed the idea of an East Asian Cooperative Community; the second clandestine, in the figure of journalist Hotsumi Ozaki, an agent of the Soviet master spy Richard Sorge.⁵ It was Ozaki who encouraged the evolution of Miki's idea of a Cooperative Community into the Greater East Asian Co-Prosperity Sphere and backed the navy's plan to push south to secure Southeast Asian oil supplies against army agitation to expand the continental war in Russia.⁶

As Arai notes in his correspondence with Ho, the notion of ending the war detailed in the Ōshima Memos only ever extended to the United States and its European allies, and never to Japan's Asian neighbours, members of a Co-Prosperity Sphere under the moral leadership of Japan, furnished by the philosophical positions of Kyoto School. These are explored in depth in *Hotel Aporia's* longest video, *The Void*. In contrast to the other videos that make up the work, the majority of whose imagery is drawn from the films of Ozu and Yokoyama, as well as archival photographs and documents, *The Void* is completely black, with the exception of subtitles along the lower edge of the frame. In Aichi, it was projected onto an enormous fan in a tatami room, producing a continuous blast of air and sound, with the subtitles appearing on a low partition in the centre. Asada reads it as the propeller of a jet aircraft, turning Kirakutei into a fighter plane. The observation is not without irony, for *The Wind*, one of two double-sided videos in the installation, details the grizzly death of the originator of the use of the term "kamikaze" in aviation, the pioneering long-distance pilot and Europhile Masaaki Iinuma, who is said to have been so punch-drunk at the news of the attack on Pearl Harbour that he stepped into the path of an oncoming propeller. *The Void* serves as both a meditation on the malleability of the concept of "absolute nothingness" within Kyoto School philosophy, and as the abyssal centre of *Hotel Aporia*, the source of its hellish winds and echoing voices.

REUBEN KEEHAN



With the suggestion of a push into Southeast Asia, it is also the origin of Ho's own reflections of art drafted into service of the state. His curiosity about Ozu's time in Singapore and Yokoyama's sojourn to Java manifests in the two slightly different readings, presented back-to-back in the two-screen video *The Children*. Ozu had himself served as an infantryman in mainland China, but his Singaporean posting seemed like an idyll: he played tennis and watched hundreds of confiscated American films, including *Citizen Kane*. The biography about the Indian nationalist and Japanese collaborator Subhas Chandra Bose, for which he had been commissioned, was unforthcoming. As Ho notes, Ozu never depicted the war directly, but his works are replete with references to it, both overt and coded: returned soldiers, old songs. Yokoyama, on the other hand, did complete his work. With popular strip *Fuku-chan*, in print from 1936 to 1971, Yokoyama had revolutionised manga storytelling with its simple narrative of a young boy and his family in everyday surroundings. In 1944, however, Fuku-chan went to war. *Fuku-chan's Submarine* is a spritely adventure in which our amiable hero participates in the sinking of an enemy supply ship. There is a chilliness to Ho's representations of Yokoyama's animations that exceeds even the haunted character of Ozu's actors. Without the familiar features of the happy-go-lucky Fuku-chan, the film echoes the anti-individualism expressed across Japanese war propaganda, from painting to cinema, which favoured an inconspicuous commitment to the collective machine – Mayu Tsuruya calls this “the ideology of self-effacement” – over the dramatic depictions of individual heroism typically found in the West.⁷

Ozu, Yokoyama and the Kyoto School are examples of the many artists and intellectuals who found themselves working within the Japanese war machine. The dynamics of collaboration were complex and wide-reaching. For every figure like the avant-garde playwright Tomoyoshi Murayama, who suffered arrest, harassment and exile for his opposition to the war, there are countless others who succumbed to the campaign for *tenkō* – apostasy or conversion – which through coercion and inducement brought leftist intellectuals ‘back into the fold’, or who, like the Marxist economist Kōzō Uno, concealed themselves from public life in the civil service and the *zaibatsu* system.⁸ Artists were by no means immune to these pressures or to the turbulent passions of the era, leaving a complicated legacy to subsequent generations. This is true for any creator who finds themselves at the mercy of state forces, whether through censorship for supposed offences to the

sensibility of the people, through valorisation in the pursuit of regional or global hegemony, or, as was sometimes the case with *tenkō*, through both. This is a tension that pulses through time, from the abyss of the past whose voices haunt *Hotel Aporia*, to the current era in which they were made manifest.

In *The Children*, Ho details a further case of the uncanny prescience of art, a sign of war in the cinema of Yasujiro Ozu that anachronistically predates its advent. The 1932 silent film *I Was Born, But ...* concerns two boys whose bullying by a neighbourhood gang convinces them of the need to grow strong. Perceiving their father as weak in his dealings with his boss, who happens to be the leader of the bullies, they rebel, and declare their intention to become generals. Though it was released in the year following the annexation of Manchuria, it is perhaps too much of a stretch to see this light-hearted comedy as a metaphor for Japan's vexed project of emulating the colonial powers of Europe. But it does point to art's unusual access to the sensibilities of its time, to its tendency to articulate them, consciously or unconsciously, as historical forces. So to the wind and clattering noise that passes through the contradicting voices of *Hotel Aporia*. As it turned out, events to which its ghosts of history might have spoken transpired almost immediately on its presentation, so quickly that very few of those involved had found the time to listen to what they might herald. And that, in turn, prefigured something unimaginable. If the ghosts of the past and present have the power to harrow us with fear and wonder, those of the future are of another order altogether. If art has a role in the struggle to devise forms of resistance that might elude the coercions and inducements of the void, it is in providing a means of understanding what these ghosts have to say, and of speaking back.

Notes

¹ Akira Asada in conversation with Ho Tzu Nyen, 13 October 2019, Small Hall of Toyota Industrial & Cultural Center, Toyota City, Japan, transcribed and translated in *Realkyoto*, 31 March 2020; http://realkyoto.jp/en/article/ho-tzu-nyen_asada02/. All subsequent references and comments by Asada and Ho are drawn from this text

² Jacques Attali, *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*, trans. Brian Massumi, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985, p. 4

³ The periodicities used here are those of the Japanese imperial calendar, whose era names correspond to the reign of the emperor. Meiji (1868-1912) marked the end of self-imposed isolation, rapid modernisation and aspiration to Great Power status. Taishō (1912-1926) is typically regarded as a flourishing of liberalism and democracy, undercut with political uncertainty. Shōwa (1926-1989) encompasses the intensification of Japan's military adventures, defeat, reconstruction and rise as an economic and cultural superpower. Heisei (1989-2019) saw economic stagnation and the beginning of the 'lost decades', accompanied by a rise in previously taboo historical revisionism. The current era, Reiwa, began on 1 May 2019, three months before the opening of the Aichi Triennale

⁴ On the political uses and abuses of Nishida's conception of absolute nothingness, see Kojin Karatani, *History and Repetition*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2012, pp. 182-186. A general introduction to the Kyoto School, including discussion of the Ōshima Memos, can be found in Bret W. Davis, 'The Kyoto School', *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Summer 2019 edition; <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2019/entries/kyoto-school/>

⁵ Karatani, p. 41-42

⁶ Owen Matthews, *An Impeccable Spy: Stalin's Master Agent*, London: Bloomsbury, 2019, p. 205

⁷ Mayu Tsuruya, 'Sensō Sakusen Kirokuga: Seeing Japan's war documentary painting as a public monument' in J. Thomas Rimer (ed.), *Since Meiji: Perspectives on the Japanese Visual Arts, 1968-2000*, Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2012, pp. 114-119

⁸ The most accessible account of *tenkō* can be found in Marius B. Jansen's authoritative *The Making of Modern Japan*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000, pp. 609-613