

Light, Currency, Spectacle, and War: Kobayashi Erika's *She Waited* (2019)

Taro Nettleton

Abstract: In 2020, spectacle reigns virtually unchecked. That the Japanese government would increase the acceptable level of annual radiation exposure from one to 20 mSv to quickly manufacture the semblance of recovery and declare Fukushima safe for the Olympic Games hauntingly corroborates Situationist Guy Debord's argument that spectacle domination is the destruction of history. Against government decisions that count on historical amnesia, and against the spectacle's unlimited capacity to absorb hyperbole, critical art today needs to avoid replicating or attempting to exaggerate the spectacular. An installation by Kobayashi Erika recently featured in the "Narratives in Contemporary Art" exhibition held at the National Art Center, Tokyo, is exemplary in this regard and provides a rare opportunity to think about the 2020 Olympic Games critically and historically.

In girum imus nocte et consumimur igni [we enter the circle at night and are consumed by fire]

"The Olympic Games Tokyo 2020 Torch will start from Fukushima!" exclaims Fukushima Prefectural Culture and Sports Bureau's Tokyo 2020 Information Portal site. More soberly, the Asahi Shimbun reported on January 18, 2020, that the evacuation order, in place since 2011, will be removed from parts of Futaba and Ōkuma, the host towns of TEPCO's Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Powerplant, as well as Tomioka, which suffered the highest level of

radiation in the aftermath of the March 11, 2011 disaster. 50,000 households were displaced from the areas surrounding TEPCO's Daiichi Plant, which Japanese government officials euphemistically labeled "difficult to return to zones" (one's home is "difficult to return to" when one's missed the last train, not when it has been so contaminated with radiation that it's uninhabitable).

Japan Railways will also reopen the Fukushima section of its Joban Line by the same date, nine years to the month since the cataclysmic event. Though what recovery might mean for a town that has been abandoned for nine years is unclear, the Japanese government's will to deploy the Olympic Games for political and spectacular effect, is unequivocal. In an uncanny repetition, the Games, held in Japan in 1964 to symbolize the economic recovery and political benevolence of Japan after World War II, will return to Japan this year to connote the nation's economic relevance and its containment of the Fukushima nuclear disaster. Fukushima has not been decontaminated; high-level radiation hotspots were found at the starting point of the torch relay in December 2019. In 2019, Japan's annual GDP growth was 0.8%; in 1964 it was close to 12%.

The 1960s was a highly productive time, not only for Japan's economy, but also for its artistic avant-garde. In this journal, Kunimoto Namiko has previously written on Nakamura Hiroshi's paintings that criticized the first Tokyo Olympic Games. (Kunimoto, 2018) Elsewhere, I have written about the Japanese collaborative Hi Red Center and its Shelter Plan (1964), in which the group invited guests

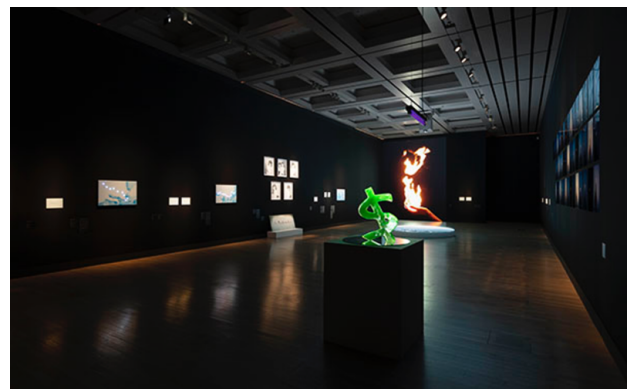
and excessively measured them, in Frank Lloyd Wright’s Imperial Hotel, to ostensibly build personalized bomb shelters. (Nettleton, 2014) In Street Cleaning Event of the same year, Hi Red Center sardonically satirized the messianic fervor with which the state and its citizens not only physically, but also politically, sanitized the city in preparation for the Games. In that work, the group members donned lab coats and masks and scrubbed a Ginza sidewalk clean with brushes and rags. Street Cleaning Event has proved historically resonant and even called the group’s best work in an authoritative tome on Japanese performance art of the 1960s. (Kuroda 2010, 187)

As Akasegawa Genpei, a member of the group recalled, however, cops passed by during the event, unable to do anything but approve of their actions and keep walking. (Akasegawa 1994, 258) Though amusing, the anecdote suggests that the work and its critique failed to register at the time it was performed. Three factors contributed to this failure. One, by bringing art into the quotidian realm and negating too much of the public’s ken of art, Hi Red Center barred their event from being read as artwork. Second, the work was so thoroughly embedded in the present that it allowed no critical distance for common reception. Third, and most detrimentally, by staging an event in public space, they replicated the logic of the spectacle, leaving its ideological structure intact.

In 2020, spectacle reigns virtually unchecked. That the Japanese government would increase the acceptable level of annual radiation exposure from one to 20 mSv to quickly manufacture the semblance of recovery and declare Fukushima safe for the Olympic Games hauntingly corroborates Situationist Guy Debord’s argument that spectacle domination is the destruction of history. In contemporary society, he wrote, the first priority is to “eradicate historical knowledge in general; beginning with just about all rational

information and commentary on the most recent past.” (Debord 1988, 14) Rational information and commentary on the nuclear disaster that began on March 11, 2011, would suggest that the event couldn’t be contained in nine years, exactly timed with the Olympic Games.

Against government decisions that count on historical amnesia, and against the spectacle’s unlimited capacity to absorb hyperbole, critical art today needs to avoid replicating or attempting to exaggerate the spectacular. Instead, it should re-establish historical knowledge. *She Waited* (2019), an installation by Kobayashi Erika recently featured in the “Narratives in Contemporary Art” exhibition held at the National Art Center, Tokyo, is exemplary in this regard and provides a rare opportunity to think about the 2020 Olympic Games critically and historically. Based in Tokyo, Kobayashi has published novels, both text-based and graphic, and short stories addressing nuclear power, weapons, and radiation that combine fictional narratives with historical research in addition to producing exhibition-based works.



Installation View

©Erika Kobayashi

Courtesy of Yutaka Kikutake Gallery

“Image Narratives: Literature in Japanese

Contemporary Art”, 2019

The National Art Center, Tokyo, Installation View, Photo: Shu Nakagawa

Formally, *She Waited* is visually sparse and the pieces in it display Kobayashi’s signature style comprising letters stenciled with blotted ink lines and manga-style figures drawn sketchily in pencil with exaggerated facial features. Textually, it is rich with historical referents that are provided through wall texts and a printed handout. Set in a very dimly lit room, and drawing heavily from her previous research-based books such as *Hikari no kodomo* [child of light]: *Luminous*, volumes 1 and 2, *She Waited* is a genealogical work that threads histories of light, currency, spectacle, and war by bringing together drawing, photography, projected video, sculptural objects, and texts.

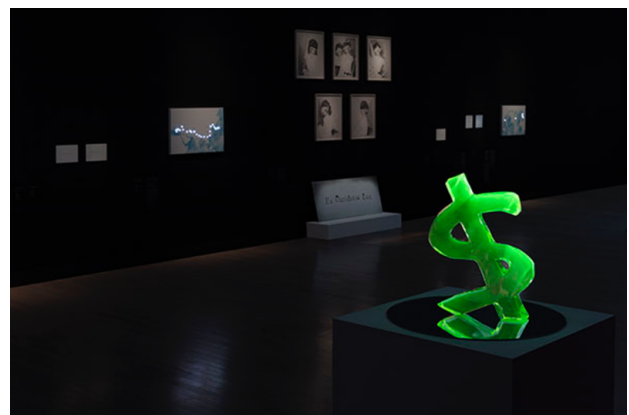
The story begins in Sankt Joachimsthal, Bohemia, where silver was first discovered in the 16th C, then mined and minted into coins called “Joachimsthalers” (New World dollars originated from Bohemian “thalers”). Many men flocked to the town to capitalize on the silver boom. 200 years later, the same town was mined for uranium, which, much to European aristocratic delight, was used to create uranium glass, which fluoresces green under ultraviolet light. Soon after nuclear fission was discovered in 1938, uranium was mined in Sankt Joachimsthal to make nuclear arms.

Kobayashi’s *Dollar* (2017), a uranium glass dollar sign radiates spectrally in the dark room. Beyond the spotlights illuminating individual pieces and two projected videos, *Dollar* is the only source of light. It and accompanying texts underscore the inextricable and original ties between uranium and capital. It also suggests that a fascination with light and an

anthropocentric worldview that demands that energy be extracted from nature, what Martin Heidegger called “technological thinking,” are the basis of human fascination with atomic power. (Heidegger, 1993, 320)

Atomic power was employed to devastating effects at the end of World War II, to which *She Waited* shows, Sankt Joachimsthal is connected not only through uranium, but also the Olympic Games. Across from *Dollar*, a photograph shows a building bearing the five-ring Olympic Games symbol from 1936, when the first Olympic torch relay was performed to symbolize a connection between Ancient Greece and Nazi Germany. Propaganda Minister Joseph Goebbels convinced Adolf Hitler to host the Olympic Games in 1934. The “tradition” of the torch relay was subsequently invented to spectacularize an imaginary Aryan lineage connecting the Deutsche Reich to ancient great empires.

The inaugural torch relay is represented visually in *She Waited* by a map thinly painted in watery blue acrylic paint with LED lights marking key stops. It is the first of *Three Course Maps* (2019) that index uncanny historical repetitions. “*She waited*,” Kobayashi writes, “for the Olympics... to illuminate her little town.” Though the torch traveled through Bohemia, it never came to Sankt Joachimsthal.



Installation View

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Courtesy of Yutaka Kikutake Gallery

“Image Narratives: Literature in Japanese Contemporary Art”, 2019

The National Art Center, Tokyo, Installation
View, Photo: Shu Nakagawa

Illumination, however, arrived by other means manufactured by the same corporation: “The Nazi army invaded the area as if following the sacred fire’s path, their tanks made by Krupp, the same company that manufactured the torch itself.” The next map shows the torch relay planned for the 1940 Tokyo Olympics with a grand plan to bring the sacred flame from Olympia across Eurasia to Tokyo on foot and horseback. This plan, of course, went unrealized, but in 1941, Kobayashi writes, the Japanese Imperial Army “retraced the path of the torch that was never run... attacking America, bombing Pearl Harbor in Hawaii: The Second World War had begun.”

The final map and text show that in 1945 another Eurasian route was planned by the Japanese Imperial Army for a U-boat named U234, a digit short of the isotope U-235, to transport uranium from Sankt Joachimsthal to Tokyo via Portsmouth, New Hampshire. The sacred flame never made it to Tokyo in 1940. Neither did the 47 packages of uranium packed on U234. Kobayashi writes, “The bomb was never completed. [It] ended up dropped on Japan instead—bombs named Little Boy and Fat Man, illuminating everything around them as they burned everyone to ashes.” Japan’s fate, in its anticipation for an Olympic torch and reception instead of thermonuclear attacks uncannily evokes Sankt Joachimsthal’s fate only seven years prior.

Two flames—symbolically, the flame of the

Olympic torch; and literally, the flames of war—illuminate or promise to illuminate the cities in the work. In the installed narrative, men descend into the mines with flame in hand. Men perform the torch relay. Men go to the battlefield. As the final translated text concludes, “Torch in hand, men descended into darkness.” Women, meanwhile, wait. And though the English translation offers “She,” the original Japanese pronoun *kanjotachi* is feminine plural, suggesting a collectivity that the English text fails to do. They wait for the torch and they wait for the uranium. They are not innocent. Their complicity is suggested by a group of five drawings titled *Her* (2019) (*kanojotachi* in Japanese), which is, a wall text explains, based on photographs printed in a newspaper of Japanese women waving the Nazi German swastika flags, the Imperial Japanese flag, and the Olympic symbol flag while giving the Nazi salute in anticipation of the Olympic torch. The young women’s faces are nearly identical, drawn in Kobayashi’s signature comic style comprising roughly laid graphite lines that form big wideset eyes, thick eyebrows, nearly flat but slightly smiling or frowning mouths, and enormous parakeet-like circles under the eyes signifying blushed cheeks. The flags, however, have been cropped out of the drawings, enabling the viewer to draw parallels between past and present.

“The war ended,” Kobayashi writes, “but their (*kanojotachino* in Japanese) lives do not.”



Erika Kobayashi

My Torch, 2019

©Erika Kobayashi

Courtesy of Yutaka Kikutake Gallery

“Image Narratives: Literature in Japanese Contemporary Art”, 2019

The National Art Center, Tokyo, Installation View, Photo: Shu Nakagawa

If, as the installation suggests, women waited historically as “men descended into darkness,” it remains to be seen what their roles will be in the future. Each of the 47 color photographs that constitute *My Torch* (2019) shows a hand from the wrist up, with an extended, manicured (and thus feminized) index fingers aflame, set against the sea and shot at different times of the day. In these images, fire is coterminous with the human body, connoting a very different relation to energy than the Krupp torch or the Fat Man. As a grouping, they suggest two powerful potentials: (1) a female or feminine collective that may do more than wait and (2) a worldview that dehumanizes agency, apprehends human and non-human materiality as coextensive, and restrains fantasies of human mastery, which are manifested in both

the Olympic Games and nuclear power. (Bennett 2010, 122)

She Waited cogently reveals how the histories of uranium and the Olympic torch relay overlap. Its power, however, is produced by what remains unrepresented. The work’s narrative ends in 1945. However, just as the waiting women’s lives do not end, the histories of nuclear power, the Olympic torch relay, and spectacle continue through 1964 and to 2020. After the war, Japan eagerly embraced nuclear power. The first test reactor JPDR (Japan Power Demonstration Reactor) started operation in 1963, a year before the first Tokyo Olympic Games. The final torch runner in 1964 was Sakai Yoshinori, selected for being born August 6, 1945, the day Little Boy was dropped on Hiroshima in proximity to ground zero. (Igarashi 2000, 154) In 1970, JAPC’s Tsuruga Nuclear Power Plant ceremoniously supplied power to the next spectacular tribute to state development, the Osaka Expo. Despite the meltdown of reactors in TEPCO’s Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant in 2011 and the devastating irradiation of surrounding regions, “The Olympic Games Tokyo 2020 Torch will start from Fukushima”.

As Kobayashi’s *She Waited* suggests that our seemingly insatiable appetite for spectacle is paralleled by our desire for illumination and radiance, it is not for nothing that the work is set in a dimly lit room. Both radiance and spectacle are fetishized, allowing us to disavow their costs. In spectacle, as in our dependence on nuclear power, history and truth are compromised. *She Waited* weaves a thick, transnational, genealogical narrative that revives history to intervene in the present. Its effect recalls what Homi Bhabha regarding “the borderline work of culture.” Such work, he wrote, “does not merely recall the past as a social cause or aesthetic precedent; it renews the past, refiguring it as a contingent ‘in-between’ space that innovates and interrupts the performance of the present. The ‘past-

present' becomes part of the necessity, not the nostalgia, of living." (Bhabha 1994, 7) While unlikely to interrupt the 2020 torch relay, *She Waited* is instructive; it challenges us to turn to history rather than nostalgia and turn away from both spectacle and technological thinking.

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