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Bringing little things to the surface: intervening into the Japanese post- Bubble impasse on the Yamanote

MARK PENDLETON

Abstract: Between the tragic events of the 1995 subway gassing and the triple disaster of 11 March 2011, Japan was stuck in relative stasis, an impasse marked by mundane violence and an ever-forward perpetual motion designed to break Japan out of its post-Bubble malaise. Some have called this time the Lost Decades. However, throughout this period artists, activists and others intervened into this quiet impasse in a range of creative ways, which drew on historical reference points to bring buried issues of internationalisation, urban belonging and capitalist alienation to the surface. They often did so using everyday terrains such as train carriages, and in particular Tokyo's Yamanote loop line. This article traces three such interventions – the Knit!Tokyo activities of 2002/3; the annual Halloween parties on the Yamanote line and the right-wing reaction against these in 2009; and the 2012 work, *JR Yamanote Line: Dialogue to the Public*, by contemporary artist Tanaka Kōki, to suggest that while these processes are often about the surfacing of the contradictions of everyday life, as they were in earlier times, the nature of these interventions in recent years has shifted as people's understandings of their relationship to national history and the transnational present have also changed.

Keywords: Yamanote line, Tanaka Kōki, Lost Decades, everyday life

On 18 October 1962, artists Nakanishi Natsuyuki, Takamatsu Jirō and others who later joined together to form the radical performance art collective Hi-Red Center, boarded a Yamanote loop line train and proceeded to perplex Tokyo commuters with a series of disruptive actions as they rode counter-clockwise around the loop, in an action dubbed the *Yamanote jiken* (or Yamanote Line Incident). Doryun Chong (2012, p. 27) describes the scene in the following way:

Nakanishi [stood] in the train, his face painted white, seemingly absorbed in a book. Next to him, hanging from a strap-handle by a chain, [was] one of his *Compact Objects* – transparent forms, each about the size and shape of an

ostrich egg, in which sundry items, such as wristwatches, bits of rope, sunglasses, bottle caps and human hair, are encased in resin.

Nakanishi proceeded to lick his objects while Takamatsu stood nonchalantly nearby. Murata Kiichi applied white face paint on the train. Others brought additional objects, including rope, real eggs and a chicken foot. For Chong (2012, p. 27) the incident, alongside the broader emergence of publicly disruptive modes of artistic engagement, was ‘a response to and constituent of the heady, chaotic and altogether exhilarating span of years from 1955 to 1970’. While Chong’s description suggests a period of transformative change, and this is no doubt true in relation to the influence of these actions on the artworld, artists associated with Hi-Red Center recall the time in a different way, as a moment of stultifying boredom that their actions were designed to break out of. William Marotti (2013, p. 18) quotes a conversation between Hi Red Center members Nakanishi and Akasegawa Genpei in which they discuss ‘the greater possibility of examining and uncovering things during quiet times’. For artists such as Nakanishi, Takamatsu and Akasegawa, the years after the large-scale upheaval on the streets of Tokyo in response to the 1960 extension of the US–Japan security treaty (Anpo) were profoundly quiet.

This quietness did not, however, mean an absence of action, but perhaps suggested a different focus on the *scale* of possible action – a move from ‘big’ things (such as the street pitched battles of the early 1960s) to a much smaller series of interventions on the terrain of the everyday, and the individual bodies of the artists themselves. Akasegawa said,

[I]t’s not that symbolic events like [the 1960] Anpo [protests] happen too often, but rather that things are over-tidied away. And so it’s ... much more possible to pull the bark away and look at things during a time like this when there’s nothing going on, I think. Not things beyond politics, but below it, perhaps.

(Quoted in Marotti 2013, p. 219)

For Marotti (2013, p. 218), the significance of the 1962 action on the Yamanote line was that it insisted on the possibility of taking action precisely when ‘big’ things are not taking place. These actions, small as they may be, ‘might have a structure [that was] corrosive to their “container”, that is, everyday life.’

These scaled and spatial descriptions of smallness, suppression and buriedness are not unique to Marotti’s reading of these acts of radical performance art, but have come to be central in discussions of everyday life under capitalist modernity. Ben Highmore (2011, pp. 4, 5), in discussing Leo Charney’s (1998, p. 13) notion of the emptiness or ‘drift’ of contemporary life, argues that this emptiness is ‘the ordinary as it is continually hidden and obfuscated by a number of strong forces ... [such as] the spectacular extravaganzas of industrial culture.’ For Highmore (2011, p. 4), the ordinary is therefore not ‘empty’ but in fact ‘submerged,

hiding in an expanse of shadows'. The everyday is an accumulation of small things that together form a larger thing that may not be obviously constituted as such – the everyday is a 'field of experience' in constant flux (Highmore 2011, p. 1).

The urban train line for many Japanese represents the most everyday of everyday experiences, constituting as it does a large chunk of non-domestic time, structuring patterns of mobility around Japanese cities and existing as an almost unnoticed pattern of small-scale sociality. As Alisa Freedman (2011, p. 5) has argued, trains 'provide a more distilled means of observing the effects of urbanization than other public places afford. Behaviour and interactions not possible elsewhere occur inside passenger carriages and in stations.' For Freedman, these 'small gestures and encounters greatly influence the ways that individuals experience national history and describe the events of their own lives.' In Tokyo, despite the vast number of train and subway lines, the Yamanote line is perhaps the most iconic, functioning as it does as a very regular looping of the downtown that connects the historical heart of old Edo – the *shitamachi* of the East – with the more upscale *yamanote* and the expansion suburbs of the West (see also the introduction to this issue). The train carriage in Japan is an indicative example of how mobile bodies and technologies are inseparable from their cultural representations, as scholars elsewhere have pointed out (see Thrift 2003, Cresswell 2006). It is no surprise then, that the 1962 *Yamanote jiken* was directed at this most everyday manifestation of urban life.

Submergence and shadowing are also found in descriptions of life in the Japanese city, particularly as the boom years of the postwar gave way to the post-Bubble 1990s and a period of decline. Novelist Murakami Haruki (2000), for example, in reflecting on the 1995 Tokyo subway gassings, described a process of looking for 'the violence that must lie hidden in our society, just below our feet' (see also Pendleton 2009, Pendleton 2011). The primary focus of this article is on how creative processes continue to draw up politics from the 'buriedness' of the late capitalist everyday, to borrow from Murakami, and intervene in the container of everyday life, to borrow from Marotti's reading of Akasegawa. I do this through exploring a series of interventions into the contained space of the Yamanote after 1995. This period is understood to be as uneventful as the post-Anpo years, wedged as it is between the national traumas of 1995 – the twin disasters of the Great Hanshin-Awaji earthquake and the Tokyo subway gassing – and the triple disasters of earthquake, tsunami and nuclear meltdown on 11 March 2011, known as 3/11.

As the major above-ground transportation system looping central Tokyo, the Yamanote defines the contours of the city and reflects the postwar history of Japan itself. Recent creative engagements on and with the Yamanote reference the past – in some cases consciously and others not. My primary goal here is to ask how interventions into the everyday take place through calls on history in contemporary Japan and through the bringing to the surface of 'small things'

typically left buried. I argue that while these processes are often about the surfacing of the contradictions of everyday life, as they were in earlier times, the nature of these interventions in recent years has shifted as people's understandings of their relationship to national history and the transnational present have also changed. Creative interventions attest to the continued state of flux found in the field of experience of the everyday, while pushing towards 'a more expansive but hard to register "big thing"' (Highmore 2011, p. 1). This big thing, whatever it may be, is more difficult to register in contemporary Japan, a reflection of a shift in Japanese political life between the radical, if muted, possibilities of the post-Anpo 1960s and the more restricted and restrained horizon of politics in the first decade of the twenty-first century, at least until the events of 3/11 upended politics as usual. I turn now to how we might understand this post-1995 era in Japan.

The postwar, the post-Bubble impasse and the endless everyday

Since the early 1990s, Japan has been in steady economic and demographic decline. Struggles with the repetitive and unresolvable nature of Japan's legacy of war defeat have also taken on new form as Japan's regional neighbours have become more assertive and critical, and internal revisionism has gathered apace. Japan has suffered a now twenty-five-year period of economic stagnation after the Bubble economy of the 1980s, and is experiencing an increasingly fearful isolationism caused by a decline in its citizens' international mobility and the rise of China as a regional and global power. Many have called this period in Japan the Lost Decade, or now the Lost Decades (see Gordon 2015). This idea of loss reflects a shift in historical discourse from the commonly understood narratives of the postwar period.

For Carol Gluck (1993), the Japanese *senjo* (postwar) constituted at least three distinct forms in common parlance – what she terms the *real* postwar, representing the immediate postwar reforms and processes of recovery from militarism and war defeat that had 'so animated progressive hopes' (Gluck 1993, p. 93); the *senjo* of the high growth economy from the late 1950s through the 1970s; and the international *senjo*, which after 1989 led to increasing calls for Japan to be involved on the global stage. Gluck (1993, pp. 94–95) argues that these three factors by the early 1990s led to a particular shift in the relationship between public memory and national history that, alongside its foreclosed model of futurity, explains the re-emergence of nationalism in post-Bubble Japan.

In Japan, the postwar moment applied a kind of torque to history that cast the postwar in terms of discontinuity in the larger context of war and modernity ... In a deeper quandary about the future, the Japanese, like many others, have responded with a greater pride in the national past, the one linked inextricably to the other ... The celebration of a glorious past is, in effect, the avoidance of

a demanding present – a combination that blinds both historical memory and contemporary vision.

Some twenty years after Gluck made this argument, a particular ‘regime of historicity’ (Hartog 2015) continues in contemporary Japan in which the past and future are collapsed into a narrow vision of the now. The Japanese Lost Decades may be best described in terms more akin to what American cultural theorist Lauren Berlant (2011, p. 8) has called an ‘impasse shaped by crisis in which people find themselves developing skills for adjusting to newly proliferating pressures to scramble for modes of living on.’ My suggestion, after Berlant, is that we consider this period not so much as Lost, but as a post-Bubble Impasse. The post-1990s Japanese impasse is not unlike the quiet years after the 1960 Anpo protests that Marotti identified in his quote from Akasegawa. The post-1960 years of declining political radicalism and increasing economic growth (if not success – see Hein 1993) were themselves relatively eventless. By the end of the Bubble period, scholars were pointing to a perpetual presentism, what sociologist Miyadai Shinji (1995) has described as ‘the endless everyday’, which was only broken by the events of 11 March 2011. This term was subsequently picked up by a range of scholars and politicians, including media theorist Azuma Hiroki and the former Tokyo governor Inose Naoki, who argued that

The sense of the everyday that was constructed over the sixty years following the war ... produce[d] what we call the ‘endless everyday.’... Because the [Fukushima] disaster caused many to feel that their everyday had ended, I think that this is a good opportunity.

(Quoted in Looser 2015, p. 115)

Regardless of whether Inose’s post-3/11 optimism is warranted, for Miyadai the endless everyday that developed across the postwar period represented a presentism in which hope was lost and change seemed impossible, a kind of cultural stasis that, in its evocation of stagnation, is captured in Berlant’s idea of the ‘impasse’. Within this stagnant presentism can also be witnessed a form of what Berlant calls ‘cruel optimism’, an attachment to the failed vision of the good life. In the case of post-Bubble Japan, this causes in some nostalgia for postwar Japanese prosperity (and its parallel associations with peace) or, in others, for the period of military and imperial ascendancy. What links these two otherwise highly different longings for a perceived good life of the past is a continued belief in Japanese national greatness based on a mythology of influence – what Gluck (1993, p. 95) terms ‘the celebration of a glorious past’. We can see similarly nostalgic longings occurring in the constant focus by both policymakers and Japan watchers on Japan’s cultural influence, often structured through terms like ‘soft power’. In all of these frameworks, the past becomes enfolded into present political concerns through desires for a return to the good old days (however imagined). These function both to allow for the interminable continuation of life – the

endlessness of Miyadai – while also limiting the opportunities for understanding Japan’s contemporary situation and for developing new strategies to live with and beyond it. We are left with a temporal suspension, an impasse in which people are in perpetual motion but going nowhere, simultaneously struggling for a place to live, while also clinging on to a range of cruelly optimistic visions shaped by nostalgia. This may well have been broken by the events in Tohoku and their aftermath – although a few years on this seems less clear than the optimism that greeted the post-3/11 environment. However, Japan is still left with a recent history of several decades of impasse and stagnation.

In my framing of this period as characterised by impasse and stagnation, I do not mean to downplay the significant changes of the period or the various struggles that took place in this relative ‘quiet’ time. Recent scholarship is increasingly turning to this period, and the ways in which people negotiated the everyday, as a rich, and relatively untapped, vein of source material. Take for example, Adrienne Carey Hurley’s evocative exploration of youth violence as the Bubble burst (Hurley 2011); Anne Allison’s tracing of the various strategies through which people struggle with and against the precarity of contemporary life in Japan (Allison 2013); or Andrew Gordon’s recent work on historicising the period (2015). Gordon (2015, p. 77) in particular highlights that the Lost Decades have been marked by significant change in ‘public mood, socioeconomic practice, and state policy’. We can point here to neoliberal economic reforms, attempts at constitutional revision, and more. However this change has not been unidirectional, instead occurring in a highly differentiated fashion that brings positive changes to some and negative to others, all the while taking place within existing norms and structures. The Lost Decades, rather than being simply lost then, are actually marked by substantial policy and social changes that are felt unevenly – ‘[t]he combination of opposing directions and opposing assessments produces an overall impression of stasis or insufficiency’ (Gordon 2015, p. 77). There have also been a vast number of examples of social movement organising across this period, which should not be ignored, such as movements working against the remilitarisation of Japan; groups organising in solidarity with migrant and ethnic minority communities; or people combatting the growth in HIV/AIDS, just to name three examples with which I have some familiarity (see also Chan 2008). However, these remain largely marginal to the everyday experiences of many Japanese people.

While cognisant, then, of the significant social, political, and cultural changes over the period of the long Post-Bubble Impasse, I remain hesitant about the extent to which these significant changes have shifted the broader political landscape in Japan, particularly when one moves from the policy level to the more non-eventful terrain of the everyday. In this article, I aim to think through the relationship between uneven change, particular ‘regimes of historicity’ and the everyday landscapes of contemporary Japanese cities, through a focus on various creative attempts to disrupt the non-eventfulness of the everyday in a location

that captures the very essence of Berlant's impasse. For what Japanese terrain is more non-eventful and characterised by perpetual motion than the train, that most ubiquitous of mass transportation vehicles in modern Japanese urban experience?

This article discusses three specific interventions into the intimate space of the Yamanote train carriage since the 1990s. Through disrupting the regular functioning of the Yamanote, these interventions address in varied ways the politics of late capitalist isolation, cosmopolitanism and multiculturalism, while addressing broader questions of the positioning of Tokyo subjects within the contemporary city and national history. First, I will discuss the Knit!Yamanote event in 2002–2003, which sought – both literally and figuratively – to knit together a cross-cultural community through the loop. Second, annual Halloween Yamanote parties saw a small number of mostly international Tokyo residents drunkenly ride the loop in costume before coming to the attention of nationalist protestors in 2009 and culminating in a well-publicised confrontation. Finally, I explore a 2012 work by prominent contemporary artist Tanaka Kōki, entitled 'Dialogue to the Public (JR Yamanote Line, Tokyo)', which took place in response to the fiftieth anniversary of the 1962 *Yamanote jiken* and sought to revisit this work in light of contemporary concerns, most notably the changed relationship to the city after the 2011 'triple disaster' of earthquake, tsunami and nuclear incident. These various Yamanote actions represent attempts to manifest particular interventions into the public spaces of the city but also attest to the 'buried' politics of the postwar period and its afterlives. Read together, they reveal that attempts to intervene and shift the everyday dynamics of Tokyo continued in both formal and informal ways even through the long Japanese impasse.

Experiments in urban cosmopolitanism

In the summer of 2002, a small group of people inspired by the British artists Rachael Matthews and Amy Plant's *Cast Off Knitting Club for Girls and Boys*¹ organised an intervention on the Yamanote line, looping yarn as they looped the loop. Students Joe Hankins and Katherine Kuster were central in organising this initial event and the following year expanded activities to a weeklong series of actions designed at using knitting to disrupt public space (Pendleton 2004). The week, dubbed Knit!Tokyo, included events that saw teams of roving knitters wandering the shopping streets of Harajuku and Shibuya; large-scale knitting in the forecourt of Aoyama's United Nations University using needles fashioned from pipes and traffic cones and yarn made from tarpaulins; and an intervention into a dance party, which saw clubbers casting fabric onto their arms as knitting needles to develop a collective fabric through the dancefloor.

Knit!Tokyo's concluding event – Knit!Yamanote – saw about 70 people board the Yamanote to ride the loop and knit collectively as a way of disrupting the uneventfulness of Tokyo life. The participants – a group of Japanese and

international residents – met in Shibuya and rode a single loop counter-clockwise back to Shibuya. Interactions developed on the train between participants and the general public, with older women in particular concerned about the sometimes underskilled attempts at knitting by participants and intervening to create impromptu masterclasses.

Hankins commented at the time,

People walk the streets of Tokyo, they cram themselves into the trains, into the subway – all the while doing their best to ignore the existence of other people. The streets then, despite being filled with millions of people feel dead, and the train becomes as private as your own bathroom as the woman next to you curls her eyelashes and the man to her left picks his nose.

(Pendleton 2004, p. 58)

Kuster continued, ‘We saw the event as a metaphor. The Yamanote is a circle. When you knit, you make circles. And the event itself was about making circles with people’ (Pendleton 2004, p. 58). For Hankins the cumulative weight of a mass of people knitting on the train transforms the environment from a ‘private safe haven ... into a site for community, for interaction, for the realisation that this is a dynamic urban environment’ (Pendleton 2004, p. 58).

Somewhat more controversially has been the annual iteration of the Yamanote Halloween party, which anecdotally began in the 1990s as an impromptu intervention into the public space of the loop, called through anonymous advertisements placed in English language publications for the international community of Tokyo. A similar event has also been occurring for some time on Osaka’s Loop Line. The Tokyo event declined in popularity in the late 1990s before being reborn in a post-internet age through online invitations. A small number of participants met, usually at a station on the western half of the city – Shinjuku, Harajuku or Shibuya – before riding clockwise either a single loop or until the trains stopped or police or security intervened. The annual event, while disruptive to the regular functioning of the rather anonymous Yamanote experience, was often described, at least by participants, in largely positive terms. Daniel Michael Weber, for example, described the scene in 2005 in the following way:

Commuters suddenly found themselves deluged with a motley horde of vampires, power rangers, masked wrestlers, pirates, playboy bunnies, ninjas, one bloody Grim Reaper, and Darth Vader. Many of the commuters must have thought we were a large group heading to a Halloween party. What they soon came to realize was that we *were* the party.

As we got further along the loop, we would start chanting the names of the stations as we arrived ... A few commuters joined in on the chanting of station names while others snapped photos. I have to give credit to the ordinary Japanese passengers. They either ignored us completely, watched in silent

amusement, or joined in and helped themselves to the liquor and food. I saw little in the way of contempt. Very good sports, I would say.

All in all it was a civil and friendly debauchery that bred more good will and cheer, rather than any animosity or even any ‘vomitory.’ We left the train in better condition than drunken spewing salary men on a Friday night bender do. Nor was very much hostility present towards the Yamanote Line as there seems to have been in the past, by some accounts. Most of us were chanting ‘Yamanote!’ like lovesick rock fans. (Weber 2005)

Weber’s rather positive encounter with the event was not replicated in 2009 when the event came to the public attention of the police. Footage of the event (Travel-Now 2015), along with eyewitness accounts (Arudou 2009, Tantei File 2009), reported that over 200 police and JR officials were marshalled at Shinjuku station bearing signs that read:

WARNING

Any actions that interfere with or endanger the safety of passengers, including parties, in stations or on trains, and all forms of violence are strictly prohibited. Violation will be punished.

Alongside this official (and officious) response, right-wing netizens decided that the event was a reflection of the perceived moral decay and debauchery endemic in a Japan overrun by disrespectful foreigners. Groups reportedly affiliated with right-wing nationalist groups such as the *Shuken kaifuku o mezasu kai* (The Society to Seek Restoration of Sovereignty) descended on the train platform to protest the revelry. This group was formed in 2006 with ‘a stated goal of “fighting against the attempts of China and communism to invade and colonise Japan”’ (Sakamoto 2011) and, along with several other groups, has been central in escalating public harassment directed primarily against Korean and Chinese residents of Japan. The Halloween protesters carried placards with slogans including ‘Go to hell, get out of Japan!’ and ‘WARNING! MOTHERFUCK-FOREIGNERS, THIS IS JAPAN. THIS IS NOT A WHITE COUNTRY’ and were reportedly separated from the small number of Halloween partiers by police and JR officials.

In a less sinister response, the events also inspired a parody poster of Yorifuji Bunpei’s iconic ‘Please do it...’ series that ran in the Tokyo Metro for three years from 2008 and were aimed at improving public behaviour on Tokyo’s subway system. These iconic yellow and black posters were designed

as a contrast to most public messages that Yorifuji views as having a top-down or condescending feel. ‘Typical posters say “Don’t do this” or “Don’t do that,”’ says the designer. ‘I am saying, “Let’s do this,” which I think is more positive.’

(Bull 2009)

Typically these posters captured moments of common commuter annoyance, such as a young man loudly listening to music with the caption, 'Please do it at home'. In response to the 2009 Halloween party and response, public relations worker and language advocate Tomo Akiyama created one of many parody images, featuring a sea of drunken revellers with the tagline 'Please do it in America' (Gakuran 2012). This image continued to circulate for several years afterwards through social media, with many erroneously decrying it as an official product of the monocultural Japanese bureaucracy.

Read together, these two events and their responses reflect relatively small interventions that nevertheless speak to the contemporary urban experience in a city struggling with its position as an emerging global city (Sassen 1991); shaped by ongoing issues around isolation caused by late capitalist alienation, for both migrants and non-migrants alike; and dealing with a long-standing unease in Japanese public discourse around national identity, particularly associated with the re-emergence of neo-nationalist models of cultural homogeneity. These discourses have a long history within Japan that extend to the period of pre-Meiji relative isolation through early twentieth century concerns about the empire coming home to roost, such as the vigilantism directed against Korean and Chinese residents after the 1923 Tokyo earthquake (see Bates 2015) and into the postwar Occupation and then the long period of economic growth marked by international trade and cultural exchange, often captured under the term *kokusai kōryū* (international exchange), or later *kokusaika* (internationalisation) and *tabun-ka kyōsei* (multiculturalism). While there has been a shifting understanding of what this international exchange might look like, what remained constant was the idea of exchange itself, or in other words that Japan's engagements with the outside world constituted a bilateral process by which Japan, understood as monolithically homogeneous, interacted with cultures and peoples from outside. As Graburn and Ertl (2008, p. 7) argue, this postwar model of internationalisation encapsulated both 'positive intercultural relations and the reification of ethno-national boundaries'. For Carol Gluck (1993, p. 86) this 'relationship between the internal and the external' is a particularly 'prominent, and perennial, template laid over the past'. This took various forms over the years since the Meiji period, but is primarily characterised by twin axes of East and West, marked on one side by insularity (encapsulated by the *sakoku* period of relative Tokugawa isolation) and tradition and on the other by openness (or the relative *kaikoku* of the Meiji) and its concomitant visions of modernity shaped by international exchange.

Participants in the recent Yamanote exchanges embody this distinction. Key protagonists overwhelmingly occupied a cosmopolitan social position emerging from these particularly twentieth-century Japanese models of internationalisation – international students such as Hankins and Kuster; expatriate workers such as Weber; or highly internationalised Japanese, such as Akiyama, who lived overseas for extended periods of time. These stand in active contrast certainly with the

members of *Shuken kaifuku o mezasu kai*, but also with the elderly women helping knitters on the train, both of whom have a much more distanced positionality to projects of internationalisation. In essence, we can witness here a collision between the material outcomes of this postwar history of internationalisation policy (and the longer history of insularity) – namely a cosmopolitan urban population – and those for whom this policy was a marginal, or actively problematic, approach. What occurs then in these two examples are different processes through which unresolved tensions around urban alienation, cultural homogeneity and international exchange are brought to the surface. There exists simultaneously in post-Bubble Tokyo a desire by some to seek out meaningful interactions with others through organised activity, as witnessed by Hankins and Kuster's comments; an everyday acceptance of a newly multicultural cityscape on a localised level, as can be seen in the impromptu knitting classes taking place between elderly Japanese women and international Knit!Tokyo participants; and a radicalised reactionary politics that seeks to restore a monocultural past that never was. And alongside this was a healthy dose of cynical humour, in the form of Akiyama's all-too-believable parody. Petrice Flowers (2012) documents a similar process of localised acceptance alongside resistance to state and conservative anti-immigrant policies in the Ōkubo area of Tokyo's Shinjuku ward as local authorities shifted from a focus on *kokusaiika* to one of *tabunka kyōsei*. For Flowers (2012, p. 520), decisions by local authorities such as Shinjuku reflected a shift 'away from a combined differential exclusionary and assimilationist model to a multicultural model' which acknowledges the mutual coexistence of cultural difference in the city. This, like the examples above, was not always universally understood as a positive.

The two examples of Knit!Tokyo and the Yamanote Halloween parties, despite the lack of an explicit call on history, are implicated in ongoing historical debates that shape the contemporary urban landscape of Tokyo. The participants would not have necessarily seen their involvement as radical interventions into the city, and yet both in small ways bring to the surface much larger political questions around what twenty-first century Tokyo is and how and for whom it should be organised. They both took place in a city permanently altered by government policy and through interactions between those affected by these policies. The terrains on which these interactions primarily take place are the spaces of commuting and mobility that structure Tokyo residents' everyday experiences of the city. In these cases, the Yamanote was chosen as the site for these interventions because of its 'iconic' status, standing in for its 'lovesick rock fans' as a representative example of the everyday experiences of urban life itself. Other creative interventions are much more conscious about their calls on history while being perhaps more cautious about how this history relates to a contemporary politics.

Tanaka Kōki and the revisiting of radical pasts

Prominent Japanese contemporary artist Tanaka Kōki (b. 1975) is fundamentally interested in exploring the past, saying about his work, ‘I look back at history and then bring it to the present’ (sleek 2015). His model of historical borrowing and reinterpretation is well respected in the international art world; Tanaka was Japan’s representative at the 2013 Venice Biennale, was voted Deutsche Bank’s Artist of the Year for 2015, and regularly features on lists of Japan’s most important contemporary artists (Xuan Mai Ardia 2015).

In 2012, Tanaka produced a series of works as part of a residency at the Museum of Contemporary Art Tokyo, which focused on Tanaka’s renewed interest in the history of Japanese artistic practice. These works emerged from a three-year turn for Tanaka that built on his earlier focus on the potentiality of everyday objects – an almost repetitive focus on the ‘nothing happens’ mundanity of the ‘endless everyday’ – while moving towards more radical possibilities that emerge from the creation of social dynamics and unpredictable public involvement. In the words of art critic Gabriel Ritter (2013), ‘the artist has gone out on a limb to not only illustrate what *could* be, but also put forth his own ideas of what *should* be.’

Conceived in the immediate aftermath of 3/11, Tanaka’s 2012 series sought to intervene in the everyday spaces of the city through explicit references to earlier radical artistic interventions. *Paintings to the People (Open Air)*, in reference to Nakamura Hiroshi’s *Tourist Art Research Center* (1964), took 30-odd participants carrying paintings on a public walk through the streets of Tokyo, beginning from the Meguro Museum of Art, which a year earlier had cancelled its exhibition *Genbaku o miru 1945–1970* (‘Visualizing the Atomic Bomb 1945–1970’) as a result of the Tohoku earthquake and the resulting Fukushima disaster. Tanaka subsequently coordinated a series of similar projects, which he dubbed *Precarious Tasks*, in order to reflect the post-3/11 moment. Like *Paintings to the People*, these projects all took place outside the formal space of the gallery and involved various references to the mundane, but changed, everyday realities of a post-Fukushima Japan – individual works were assigned names such as *Swinging a flashlight while we walk at night*; *Talking about your name while eating emergency food*; and *Sharing dreams with others and then make a collective story*. In his statement for the Japan Pavilion at the Venice Biennale in 2013, Tanaka replicated the common narrative of 3/11 rupture in arguing that in contemporary Japan ‘the most casual of actions have a completely different meaning depending on whether they occurred before or after that day’. As Ritter (2013) suggests, ‘in the uncertain state that Japan finds itself today, everyday decisions have taken on political significance – from drinking bottled versus tap water, or taking the stairs versus riding an elevator’. The endless everyday of the end of the postwar was, for Tanaka, as for Looser and Inose above, ruptured by 3/11.

Despite this rupture, however, Tanaka remained interested in how to connect historical interventions to contemporary concerns. In *Dialogue to the Public: JR Yamanote Line, Tokyo* (2012), Tanaka's historically referential turn is made most explicit. *Dialogue to the Public* was timed to coincide with the fiftieth anniversary of the *Yamanote jiken* of 1962. Thomas Havens (2006, p. 149) has argued that works such as the 1962 *Incident* explicitly sought to move art outside of the conventional spaces of galleries and museums, thereby forcing urban people going about their everyday activities to address theretofore unasked questions. Akasegawa Genpei argued that in these settings, it was possible 'to explore the borders between the everyday and the noneveryday' (Havens 2006, p. 149). The aim of these interventions was to prompt citizens to 'exercise greater agency by taking an active part in politics rather than resigning themselves to the state's penetration of civil society' (Havens 2006, p. 149). In Chong's (2012, p. 64) words, they functioned as 'a brilliant, absurdist parody of the control exerted by the state on the citizenry in an increasingly controlled society'.

In contrast to Hi-Red Center's activities, and particularly their initial outsider status in relation to mainstream art, Tanaka's intervention emerges from his specific insider status and as a result of a commission by one of Tokyo's major art institutions. Tanaka's work also intervenes in a much quieter way. His Yamanote piece did not involve absurdist installations and disruptive actions on the train carriages, nor did it seek to prompt citizen engagement or active political participation. Instead it constituted a simple documented conversation with three others – all also prominent male art-world figures – who joined Tanaka as he rode one loop counter-clockwise around the Yamanote. While all participants were present for the duration of the conversation, the main dialogue took place in sequence with each individual taking turns sitting and talking with Tanaka.

As with the 1962 action, Tanaka's intervention started at Shinagawa, in the southwestern corner of the Yamanote, with art historian Kajiya Kenji who rode with Tanaka to Ueno in the northeastern corner of the city. Kajiya was replaced by curator and writer Hu Fang, who was switched out at Takadanobaba in the northwest, where critic Sugita Atsushi joined Tanaka to continue back to Shinagawa. The language of conversation shifted from Japanese to English and back to Japanese. Unlike in 1962, the participants all completed a full loop of the line, which took about one hour. The event was photographically documented by Saitō Keigō and the conversation published in full and distributed at the Museum of Contemporary Art Tokyo Annual 2012 *Making Situations, Editing Landscapes* exhibition, which ran from 27 October 2012 through 3 February 2013. Tanaka argued that his mode of engagement was about breaking the hold of art institutions: 'While doing the minimum it takes to maintain my status as a participating artist in the exhibition, I want to invert the usual division between "presenting a work in an exhibition" and "exhibition-related events"' (Maerkele and Rachi 2012).

In this, Tanaka is clearly referencing earlier critiques of the role of institutions and attempting to write a new canonical history of Japanese art, about which contemporary Japanese artists are, in his view, largely ignorant. His concern is that this ignorance of history will result in young artists being ‘susceptible to unchecked influence from outside Japan’ (Maerkele and Rachi 2012), a peculiar iteration of a somewhat underdeveloped nationalistic historiography that nevertheless is formed through a particular call on a non-hierarchical model of knowledge production.

If Japan’s critics and art historians are not going to write [the art history of my own country], then we artists might as well propose our own history. There is surely something to be learned from history. And to the extent that I myself am removed from Japan’s art history, I also want to appraise it in my own way [...] Previously in Japan if the similarities between your works and those of an older generation were overly apparent, you ran the risk of being perceived as a derivative artist, and that may have affected me to an extent. But artworks for me are not about expressing something about myself, and are more about experimenting with how to realize different connections and ideas that I discover, so I’ve started to respect history as an essential reference point.

(Maerkele and Rachi 2012)

The conversations featured in his *Dialogue to the Public* are broken up in the published transcript by geographical markers – the stations the participants pass through as they circle the loop. These locations are set out and function to break up the conversation visually on the page. In some cases this editorial intervention is also more explicitly marked, with train announcements puncturing the flow of conversation. Tanaka’s conversation with Kajiya is the most historical in orientation, focusing on the activities of Hi-Red Center and their associates in the 1960s, as well as a series of other artistic works that broke from the urban centrality of the Tokyo art scene and the focus on the museum/gallery as the core location for the production and consumption of art. These include not only Hi-Red Center but also the work of groups such as Video Earth, who in 1975 chose a different train space for their *Shukutaku ressha/Video Picnic*, installing a dining table and hosting a meal on a Tokyo subway carriage (see Hiro 2010). In this Kajiya conversation can be seen Tanaka’s attempt to re-centre the history of radical Japanese art practice in a canonical national history.

The conversation moves from the historical after Hu Fang joins in, when the conversation also switches into English, in a reflection of Tanaka’s own particular positioning as a part-time cosmopolitan resident of contemporary Tokyo. Hu, in contrast to Kajiya, is interested in situating the work within its mundane contemporary contexts. Hu says, ‘Maybe it’s more interesting to think about how this situation has unconventional inputs to re-connect with lots of happenings in our life.’ He continues:

And then also maybe if we think about what happened 50 years ago, not only about the ‘Yamanote Line Incident,’ but rather about a kind of crossing of different dimensions of time and space, and how this gives back the energy of our presence here in this moment - I find this is actually quite amazing – Because it’s very dense, it’s very concentric, meanwhile it also gives us some changes to move out from our daily routine. If we look at what’s happening here now, I think we can discover a lot of changes around us... Somehow, what we are experimenting with is a way to feel the strong connection of time and space under a specific method, which could transform daily life into a moment of creating intensity of perception.

Tanaka later agrees, contrasting the physical performance of the 1962 *Yamanote jiken* with his contemporary revisiting of this history as ‘not only about physicality but ... more like an idea and also about opening our sensibility’. This ideological and sensory process is fundamentally connected to how Tanaka understands the Yamanote as ‘a kind of symbol of Tokyo’. As a ‘circle train,’ he says, ‘...it’s almost like a perpetual motion machine for people living in Tokyo.’ In this we can see connection to the models of sociality described by Hankins and Kuster (see also articles by Jennifer Coates and Keiko Nishimura in this volume). The line also reflects for Tanaka the balance between busyness and calm inherent in urban life: ‘[T]his “busy and calm” cycle reminds me [of the] Yamanote line. This is a very busy train in rush hour but daytime, like now, [it is] still a bit busy but somehow I feel “calm” here.’

Hu describes their journey as a process of ‘circling the void’, in a passing reference to Roland Barthes (1983) famous, if controversial, description of Tokyo’s spatial dynamics as structured around the physical void of the imperial palace at the city’s centre and the metaphorical void of the imperial family as the unspoken centre of Japan’s history and culture. As the participants pass Komagome station, Hu says:

I feel that we are actually doing some kind of test, which probably is not meant to be too visible to people around us. I realized here in Tokyo that basically people are not doing much conversation in the train, I guess people probably reserve their own space for themselves or they just feel tired after work, so it’s more interesting to see this kind of overlapping of situations, which produces its own specific form of circulation of energy, eventually going beyond its physical time, physical space, and it connects with historical events in a non-physical way.

In contrast to the 1962 *Yamanote Line Incident* then, Tanaka’s work is explicitly quiet, passive and non-confrontational. However, it is in discussion of another such train-based piece of ‘performance’ history that the reason for this quietness becomes more apparent. As the participants pass Sugamo in the north, Hu turns the conversation to the 1995 Tokyo subway gassing, in which 13 were killed and

several thousand directly affected. Hu calls this ‘an extreme case of social performance’.

[I]t seems that performances are intended to deliver a strong statement to the public and quite often they become power in people’s hands, whereas my concern is whether there is a new form of action that is not necessar[il]y giving a statement and forcing the others, but rather leaving space for the others, as well as for oneself.

Tanaka’s *Dialogue to the Public* contrasts with the earlier examples I discussed, and the Hi-Red intervention in the 1960s precisely in this quietness (in contrast to more recent and more confrontational acts of performance) and in its attempt at opening space for individualised action that can lead to a greater connection to others. The work takes place in a public environment and ostensibly is directed to the public – at one point Sugita argues that ‘This dialogue is at its basis directed at the members of the public who are riding this train’. This for him suggests it is different to other forms of ‘public art’, which often simply transplant the gallery-based artworld audience to a different context, without transforming relationships between artist and viewer. However, there is little evidence of it being necessarily engaging to the participants’ fellow riders. Tanaka observes, ‘People are wondering why these guys are talking (in the train)’, but this is quickly sidestepped as Tanaka’s conversation with his dialogue partners takes precedence. As they passed Ikebukuro station, the conversation between Tanaka and Hu moves to what the project itself is doing. Hu observes, ‘You see people around here, they don’t care about us, which is a very beautiful thing for me. I was thinking how the communication somehow could stay in its own way without necessarily getting an immediate reaction from people but rather just staying as it is, and flowing...’

Tanaka had also raised this as a potential issue in interviews prior to the works’ realisation, while suggesting that there may however be a broader resonance.

I think it will be difficult for the passengers who end up with us to understand exactly what is taking place, and I doubt there will be anybody who hears the entire discussion. But I don’t think it’s out of the question that those people we encounter who would not usually go to a museum might be able to have some kind of idea about what we are discussing in the train. And I plan to make a sound recording of the discussion that will then be turned into a publication, as an additional measure of the multiplicity of the experience. There will certainly be a big difference between the fragments of the talk experienced by the people who end up on the train, and the talk that is presented in the museum as a publication.

(Maerkele and Rachi 2012)

The conversation with Tanaka’s third interlocutor, Sugita Atsushi, is focused much more on an abstracted discussion around the relationship between politics

and art. As they move from Shinjuku to Ebisu, Tanaka elaborates on this non-confrontational mode of intervention, arguing that the purpose of this dialogue is not to involve people through prompting a reaction but instead to create a space in the train carriage. He says,

What kind of relationship can be born from being in this space together? As we spend time in this same space and over the same period, it is not so much about what kind of impact this may have but instead it is enough on its own terms in my opinion. Rather than going to a public place with the aim of creating visible interaction, we can just be in that place together.

In this final comment, then, can be seen an indication of how Tanaka conceptualises the potential radical sociality of the train carriage. Tanaka's aim is not to disrupt contemporary social relations with the aim of encouraging citizens to 'exercise greater agency by taking an active part in politics' (Havens 2006, p. 149). He instead hopes to draw out a collective sense of common experience from the very mundane realities of the everyday itself. There is no revolutionary agenda of radical transformation, as was the case in 1962, nor an active attempt to bring to the surface postwar tensions, but a much smaller focus on the interactions that may, when brought together, constitute a larger thing. For him, this is the fundamental possibility inherent in the contemporary social relations in the city, and the Yamanote carriage itself.

Everyday possibilities on the Yamanote

In 1961, critical theorist and cultural provocateur Guy Debord argued that 'everyday life is the measure of all things: of the fulfillment or rather the nonfulfillment of human relations; of the use of lived time; of artistic experimentation; of revolutionary politics.' Just one year later in the *Yamanote jiken*, radical artists were in the midst of their various attempts at 'pulling back the bark' on the everyday to reveal the underlying politics below. That this happened at a time of relative non-eventfulness, in a period not marked by spectacular protest, is revealing in itself. The mode of action of these earlier radicals was directly confrontational – the key focus was to actively disrupt the regular functioning of everyday life to bring to the surface little things that reveal the contradictions of their time. The same might be argued about Knit!Tokyo and the Halloween Yamanote parties, which both in more or less conscious ways sought to actively disrupt the everyday. In so doing, they highlighted the alienation and atomisation of lived experience in post-Bubble Japan, yet also brought to the surface the simmering subterranean questions of internationalisation, multiculturalism and whether and how Tokyo could function as a cosmopolitan metropolis.

By contrast, Tanaka's work is small and very quiet, a creative intervention that is much more directly referential of history but at the same time less overt in its disruptive motivations. Tanaka seeks not to disrupt but to whisper difference

and suggest that the train carriage functions as a new mode of sociality in contrast to the alienation of late capitalist urban life. In this there is a distinctive playing with the highly individualised experience of the everyday terrain of the city that is akin to Ben Highmore's (2011, p. 1) 'small things' that constitute a more expansive 'big thing'. What that big thing is for Tanaka is perhaps harder to grasp, but his work is certainly concerned with the ahistorical present in post-Bubble Japan, and a desire for Japanese people to look back to their own cultural histories to seek strategies for living on in the present. Tanaka suggests that his work is concerned fundamentally with the social nature of life in the city, and how this relates to national pasts and collectively-imagined futures.

While these three Yamanote actions over the course of a decade or so are markedly different, when explored together they suggest that the terrain of the everyday remains a fertile place for people – inside and outside of formal art practices – to intervene in the social dynamics of the city in both large and small ways. This is particularly so at moments when the spectacular is subsumed in the mundane. The period between 1995 and 2011 was not marked by significant ruptures in political and social life – the social transformations of the post-bubble period were much more mundane in their violence and in their focus on continued perpetual motion even as the slow-unfolding crisis of post-Bubble Japan unfurled around it. Nevertheless, by disrupting the 'endless everyday' of post-1990s Tokyo, these three events brought to the surface some unresolved issues in post-war Japan – capitalist alienation and atomisation, xenophobia and cross-cultural interaction, privilege and its opposites. They simultaneously opened up a space for talking about these and, potentially, imagining different ways of being in the city. While these are hardly revolutionary or even hugely transformative interventions, they do in small ways shift the field of experience. As Tanaka argues, 'Taking a train is our daily routine; every talk in a train could become something else if we wanted to.' So, these three interventions suggest, can life in Tokyo itself.

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Note

1. See <http://castoff.info/>

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