



Ma And The Four Dimensional Concept Of Reality In Today's Tokyo

By Ninia Sverdrup

During the last few years, I have in my art been working with the understanding of time in different ways. When I spent a few months in NYC in 2002 it became apparent to me that I often understood time as a part of space. I saw time as a variable of space, and I found it difficult to separate that which has already happened from what is happening in the present. This made me question my linear perception of time. During this period I also started to think about how I perceived my everyday life. I saw it as extremely rational, with days structured in order to fit everything in. I did feel an increasing emptiness in this "ticking things off" throughout the days. In my efforts to try to understand where this linear perception of time and this rational way of thinking came from, as well as what it means to me and to the society that I live in, I came in touch with the Japanese concept of Ma. I understood that Ma meant a way of perceiving time that was different from the linear perception. I looked for all kinds of literature on the subject, which turned out to be a not so easy thing. I therefore decided to go to Tokyo. With me on this trip was Daniel Segerberg, who is also an artist. In Tokyo, we had a wide range of contacts that kept increasing when we asked for people to help us understand the concept of Ma.

The text that follows is written in collaboration with Daniel Segerberg as a means for us to try to understand Ma and the Japanese space/time. Lacking literature and Internet sources, it is our own interpretation based on the conversations, the art and film we experienced and gathered before and during our stay in Tokyo in October of 2005.

A brief explanation of the concept of Ma.

Ma; the empty space, the in between, the silence, the pause, the emptiness, the interval, the distance, the timing etc, is something that is present throughout the entire Japanese society, but it's predominantly in the traditional arts that you usually refer to the concept of Ma. In old ink painting for example, you would say that the focus should lie within in the absence of the brush and the ink. The blank paper is a state of limitlessness where anything is possible. It symbolizes the source of all shapes, beyond time and space.

In the literature we were able to get a hold of, written in English or Swedish, Ma was often explained as a four dimensional concept of time and space. This is something that we later found out to be incorrect, and therefore realized that we really did not know what this "Ma" actually stood for. We had to start from the beginning and randomly ask Japanese people that we came in touch with, "What is Ma?"

"In New York people are scared of the silent parts of a conversation. Ma means a unity within the silence", said a musician who had lived in NYC for ten years. Or, "Good Ma is the timing in a joke," a dancer explained. A Karate champion described Ma as "the distance between yourself and your opponent". He explained that the right Ma is everything in Karate. The distance should put you of reach of your opponent. If you step into your opponents Ma you give him an opportunity to attack. One move should get him down. Kendo has the same principles; one strike with the sword should be enough, the rest is Ma. Ma is also the timing in sumo wrestling. The wrestlers stand in front of each other, look in to each other's eyes and let their feeling decide when to open up the fight. There is no judge to let them know when to start. Should the timing fail, you start over. "Ma can be the distance to your lover, the right timing for a kiss etc. When you get to know each other you can decrease the distance to your lover", the karate champion explains. Every bow in the Japanese everyday life should be magaii (good Ma); it should come at the right time, simultaneously. A Buddhist priest defines Ma as "silence between movements" and an artist explains Ma as "an interval without movements; silence" Or "why not the laundry room in Swedish apartment buildings" as Jun, a physicist from Tokyo who had lived in Sweden four years suggests, when he attempts to give an example of a Swedish Ma.



- A four dimensional concept of reality.

We slowly started to realize that, in order to understand Ma, as a space/time interval, we had to begin by trying to understand how time and space is traditionally viewed in Japan. But firstly, a short reminder of the western perception of time and space.

In the west, we have ever since the antiquity perceived space as three-dimensional (length, height, depth). It is a static perception of space; a homogenous space. It derives from a linear perspective where you place yourself, the subject, outside the space to observe the space as an object. The conception of a room becomes a visual abstraction. The time dimension is removed and accordingly the static room is isolated to facilitate for scientific calculation. In this sense "time" has always been detached from space. The west considers time as absolute and linear.

Reality tends to be perceived as that which can be proved scientifically, as seen from without. Time follows the absolute and linear timeline. It is often a struggle against time. The traditional Japanese perception is however built on an inside perspective that derives from the way we as humans experience our surroundings and ourselves. Japanese people see themselves as parts of a certain situation. To the Japanese, reality tends to be more of a movement in and out of space/time related situations. They perceive space as a physical experience rather than a visual abstraction.

To understand this perception you have to go back to the 7th century when Shintoism (Japanese nature religion) affected the Japanese way of thinking.

- How space/time is created

The Shinto religion is still of importance in today's Japan. Kami is God, but not a God that the religion attempts to personify. Kami is an abstract atmosphere. It can have its temporary dwelling in a tree or inside a mountain for ex, but it's never permanent. It is temporarily animated. To create a dwelling for Kami you can circle a specific area with four poles and a rope. These areas are, when empty, Ma. If the spirits choose to descend into this empty space and take place within it, the place comes alive, it becomes a situation, a space/time.

- Ma, a space for potential occurrences.

The English word "spacing" i.e. the ongoing form of "space" might give a better reference to the space, or space/time, that the Japanese traditionally experience. It indicates that reality is a constant flow. In order for a movement to take place there has to be a vacuity, or it will remain static – everything stays in its place. This time wise and space wise vacuity or interval is Ma. The space is empty, but filled with an expectant stillness that holds the possibility of change. Ma can therefore be the silence in a conversation, the distance to your opponent or your lover, a pause in a piece of music, timing in a joke or in sumo wrestling. It can also be the classical architectural lower level space in a Japanese home where you are meant to take your shoes off before entering the living areas. This sunken space becomes sort of a pause where you kneel down to take your shoes off, put them in their place and put your slippers on. In this case, Ma is something that provides space, both physically and mentally, space wise and time wise and makes for a pause in the on going.

Ma and experiencing space in today's Tokyo.

The feeling of moving around Tokyo is different to any of the Western cities in more ways than one. The hesitant attitude to each other, the cautious looks, the reverent approach to physical objects that you hold on to with both hands (including money and stamp sized receipts) the flower pots and plants outside every building, the fashion with its incredible sense of detailing and combination, the irregular shapes of the Japanese china, the small tapestry that hangs on the outside of the intimate restaurants and indicates that we are not supposed to stare at the people eating etc. Once we found some literature on the Japanese philosophy of aesthetics Wabi-Sabi, we felt that it gave us words to describe the feelings of Tokyo that we had tried to define. (Wabi is philosophy of spatiality, direction or path; Sabi is an aesthetic of objects and their possession of time. Together they make a combination of space and time.) These are some key terms of



the Wabi-Sabi principles and its Western counterparts (according to Leonard Koren):

Modernism	Wabi-Sabi
public	private
logical, rational	intuitive
absolute	relative
prototypical	idiosyncratic
modular	variable
progressive	cyclical
control of nature	harmony with nature
technology	nature
adaptation to machines	adaptation to nature
symmetrical	organic
rectangular	curved
man-made	natural
slick, polished, smooth	crude, rough, tactile
maintenance	degradability
reduction/subjugation of senses	expansion of senses
clarity	ambiguity
functionality, utility	naturalness
materiality	non-materiality
all-weather	seasonal
light, bright	dark, dim
cool	warm

Generally, one can say that that the western modernistic ideals are based upon the Hellenistic conception that underlines the permanent, the grand, symmetry and perfection. These ideals are based on the western philosophical perceptions of power, authority, dominance and control, of others or of nature. Wabi-Sabi however, is based on principles such as circumstances, asymmetry, and the non-perfect and finds a certain melancholic beauty in the perishable, everything that is fading away and of death. According to Wabi-Sabi, the static (permanent, symmetrical, perfect) is already dead; and is therefore not subjects of change or continuation. (During the last ten years western philosophy has begun to adapt ideals that are similar to those of Wabi-Sabi. Still, I would like to argue that western philosophy and aesthetics are nevertheless based on modernistic ideals.)

The feelings that we experienced during our walks around Tokyo and that could be defined by the Wabi-Sabi principles were not only referring to our personal questions, but for the general aspect of the city. Most of the streets in Tokyo are too narrow and winding for a vehicle to pass through. If you turn round the corner of one of the main streets, it's easy to get lost in a confusing labyrinth of miniature streets, until you are back on a main street again. Trying to make sense of a map is bound to fail. If at all there are any correct maps of these labyrinth streets.

It is said that there is not one single building in Tokyo that is older than 20 years. Tokyo is constantly changing, gradually. The city develops along the guidelines of Japanese philosophy, based on principles of the perishable, humane, non-symmetrical and non-perfect without planning, hierarchy or form. Some say that the static and almost museum-like European capitals will have difficulty adapting to the needs and wants of the future society. During the 1850-60s vast areas of Paris, Rome and Vienna had to be torn down to make room for new ideals such as wide straight avenues. The western concept of control and need for surveillance does not allow this almost amoeba like change and adaptation of the city according to the needs of its inhabitants.

One of the most obvious indications of the difference between the western cities and Tokyo is that the streets



in Tokyo don't have any names. French philosopher Roland Barthes writes about this in his book "Empire of Signs": "This domiciliary obliteration seems inconvenient to those (like us) who have been used to asserting that the most practical is always the most rational [...] Tokyo meanwhile reminds us that the rational is merely one system among others."

There is however a mail delivery system in Tokyo. The first classification of Tokyo is 23 different "ku's", or districts e.g. Minato-ku, Shibuya-ku, Thereafter each district is divided into areas of approx. 20 blocks that are given a certain number. Within this area each block gets a number. Consequently, the address could be: Shinjuku-ku 4-6-2. It may sound rational in its own way, but what makes it complicated is the fact that on every block the oldest building gets number 1, the second oldest gets number 2 etc. The blocks are, in our opinion, not organized in any logical sense.

Finding your way through Tokyo requires an inside perspective. The focal point is "how do I stand in relation to my surroundings?" You familiarize yourself bit by bit; "I know that when I reach the corner where I once saw that old woman trip I have to turn right to get to the station". The principle of an inside perspective become even more clear when talking about Japanese gardens. To experience a Japanese garden the correct way, you have to move through it. You enter a world, an experience, a feeling, a situation; you pass through and move on to the next. The experience evolves through time. Moving around the city is a similar thing. The Japanese garden can be compared to the traditional French gardens that are based on the principle of symmetry and are to be experienced from a certain point, outside of the garden; the throne. You are to be able to have a general view of the garden, to have control. The French gardens are based on a linear perspective.

Barthes on Tokyo: "This city can be known only by an activity of an ethnographic kind: you must orient yourself in it not by book, by address, but by walking, by sight, by habit, by experience..." You will not understand Tokyo through rational, printed information (maps, guidebooks, telephone books) instead you get to know this city through using gestures. The two different ways of orientating oneself, from the outside or the inside, can also be viewed as two different ways of looking at your everyday life. Either place yourself outside of the situation, take control, make plans for the future and "tick off" things on the to-do list, or picture yourself as a small part of a much bigger situation, unknowing and without control of what is to happen, and look at what this specific situation has to offer.

- Three opinions on Ma, from the contemporary art scene in Tokyo

"In Tokyo today, being increasingly influenced by the western market economy, there is not much room for Ma", says Ega a Japanese DJ and art/music writer. The subway crowd at peak hour illustrates the difficulty in moving around, where any space form is completely made impossible by body's pressed together. The time in between occurrences becomes shorter. It's a constant rush to get to the next appointment. There is hardly any room for reflection.

The artist Saki Satom carried out a project where she brought a lump of clay in a bag with her on the subway every day. The clay formed into different shapes between her and the other passengers' body's and created a sense of meaning to the gaps in between.

Masato Nakamura (who represented Japan at the Venice biennale 2005) told us that he was influenced by Saki Satoms project when putting together his piece "the Sukima project", 2001. Sukima is related to Ma but more specifically means "opening" or "crack". Nakamura invited artists to work with the very narrow spaces that run in between the buildings of Tokyo. Nakamura draws parallels between the city planning of Tokyo and the game Tetris, a game where the purpose is to fit blocks as tightly together as possible, in the shortest amount of time. He wonders where there is room for artists in today's Tokyo, and reasons that -the artists could take place and act in the spaces in between buildings, just like a hacker who floats around the margins of the computer systems.

These voices illustrate ways of thinking in Japan. Even though they feel that there is not much room for Ma in the light of western market economy, the space/gaps are still in their consciousness. You see them, not



just as spaces, but also as the potential for something. The major difference might be that today there might not be enough time to leave the negative space/time (what would a negative time be?) empty: you fill it with stress, a lump of clay, or with art.

References:

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