

Center-City, Empty Center

Quadrangular, reticulated cities (Los Angeles, for instance) are said to produce a profound uneasiness: they offend our synesthetic sentiment of the City, which requires that any urban space have a center to go to, to return from, a complete site to dream of and in relation to which to advance or retreat; in a word, to invent oneself. For many reasons (historical, economic, religious, military), the West has understood this law only too well: all its cities are concentric; but also, in accord with the very movement of Western metaphysics, for which every center is the site of truth, the center of our cities is always *full*: a marked site, it is here that the values of civilization are gathered and condensed: spirituality (churches), power (offices), money (banks), merchandise (department stores), language (agoras: cafés and promenades): to go downtown or to the center-city is to encounter the social "truth," to participate in the proud plenitude of "reality."

The city I am talking about (Tokyo) offers this precious paradox: it does possess a center, but this center is empty. The entire city turns around a site both forbidden and indifferent, a residence concealed beneath foliage, protected by moats, inhabited by an emperor who is never seen, which is to say, literally, by no one knows who. Daily, in their rapid, ener-



The City is an ideogram:
the Text continues

getic, bullet-like trajectories, the taxis avoid this circle, whose low crest, the visible form of invisibility, hides the sacred "nothing." One of the two most powerful cities of modernity is thereby built around an opaque ring of walls, streams, roofs, and trees whose own center is no more than an evaporated notion, subsisting here, not in order to irradiate power, but to give to the entire urban movement the support of its central emptiness, forcing the traffic to make a perpetual detour. In this manner, we are told, the system of the imaginary is spread circularly, by detours and returns the length of an empty subject.

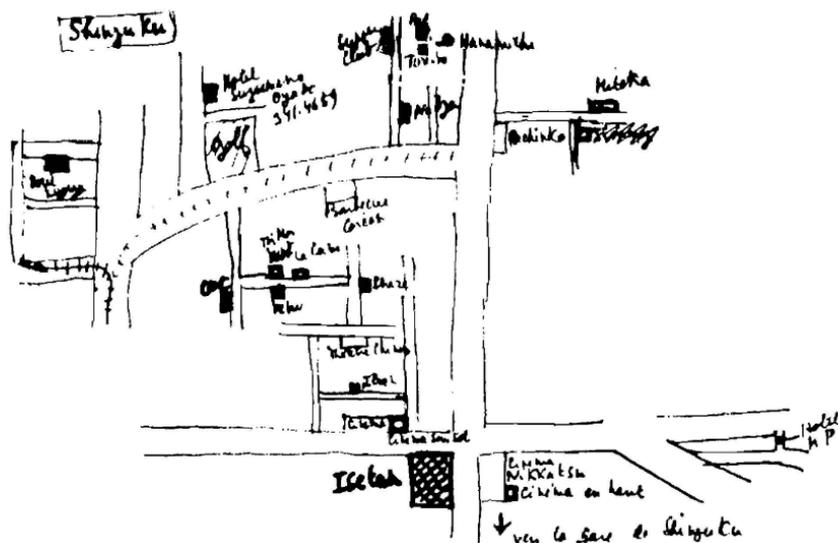
No Address

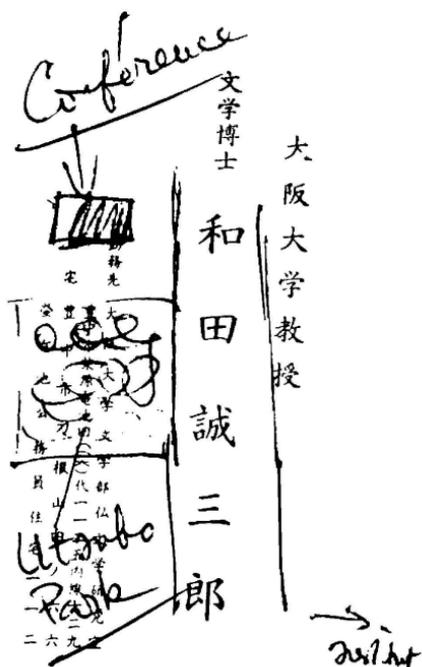
The streets of this city have no names. There is of course a written address, but it has only a postal value, it refers to a plan (by districts and by blocks, in no way geometric), knowledge of which is accessible to the postman, not to the visitor: the largest city in the world is practically unclassified, the spaces which compose it in detail are unnamed. This domiciliary obliteration seems inconvenient to those (like us) who have been used to asserting that the most practical is always the most rational (a principle by virtue of which the best urban toponymy would be that of numbered streets, as in the United States or in Kyoto, a Chinese city). Tokyo meanwhile reminds us that the rational is merely one system among others. For there to be a mastery of the real (in this case, the reality of addresses), it suffices that there be a system, even if this system is apparently illogical, uselessly complicated, curiously disparate: a good *bricolage* can not only *work* for a very long time, as we know; it can also satisfy millions of inhabitants inured, furthermore, to all the perfections of technological civilization.

Anonymity is compensated for by a certain number of expedients (at least this is how they look to us), whose combination forms a system. One can figure out the address by a (written or printed) schema of orientation, a kind of

geographical summary which situates the domicile starting from a known landmark; a train station, for instance. (The inhabitants excel in these impromptu drawings, where we see being sketched, right on the scrap of paper, a street, an apartment house, a canal, a railroad line, a shop sign, making the exchange of addresses into a delicate communication in which a life of the body, an art of the graphic gesture recurs: it is always enjoyable to watch someone write, all the more so to watch someone draw: from each occasion when someone has given me an address in this way, I retain the gesture of my interlocutor reversing his pencil to rub out, with the eraser at its other end, the excessive curve of an avenue, the intersection of a viaduct; though the eraser is an object contrary to the graphic tradition of Japan, this gesture still

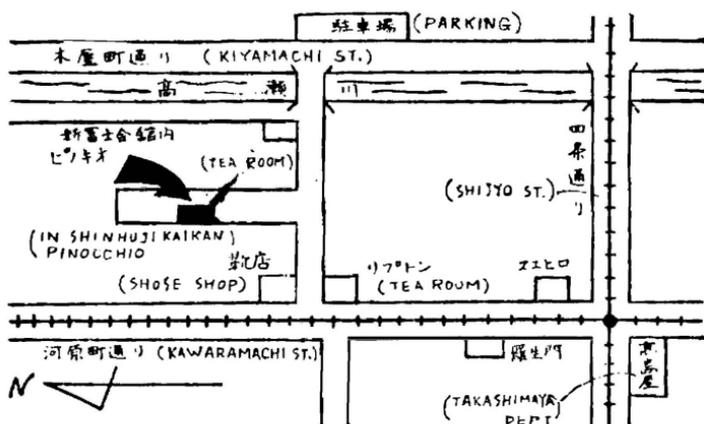
Address book





produced something peaceful, something caressing and certain, as if, even in this trivial action, the body "labored with more reserve than the mind," according to the precept of the actor Zeami; the fabrication of the address greatly prevailed over the address itself, and, fascinated, I could have hoped it would take hours to give me that address.) You can also, provided you already know where you are going, direct your taxi yourself, from street to street. And finally, you can request the driver to let himself be guided by the remote visitor to whose house you are going, by means of one of those huge red telephones installed in front of almost every shop in the street. All this makes the visual experience a

decisive element of your orientation: a banal enough proposition with regard to the jungle or the bush, but one much less so with regard to a major modern city, knowledge of which is usually managed by map, guide, telephone book; in a word, by printed culture and not gestural practice. Here, on the contrary, domiciliation is sustained by no abstraction; except for the land survey, it is only a pure contingency: much more factual than legal, it ceases to assert the conjunction of an



identity and a property. 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; here every discovery is intense and fragile, it can be repeated or recovered only by memory of the trace it has left in you: to visit a place for the first time is thereby to begin to write it: the address not being written, it must establish its own writing.

Le rendez-vous

peut-être
tabun

fatigué
tsukareta

impossible
deki nai

je veux dormir
netai

The rendezvous

maybe
tabun

tired
tsukareta

impossible
deki nai

I want to sleep
netai

The Station

In this enormous city, really an urban territory, the name of each district is distinct, known, placed on the rather empty map (the streets are not named) like a news flash; it assumes that strongly signifying identity which Proust, in his fashion, has explored in his *Place Names*. If the neighborhood is quite limited, dense, contained, terminated beneath its name, it is because it has a center, but this center is spiritually empty: usually it is a station.

The station, a vast organism which houses the big trains, the urban trains, the subway, a department store, and a whole underground commerce—the station gives the district this landmark which, according to certain urbanists, permits the city to signify, to be read. The Japanese station is crossed by a thousand functional trajectories, from the journey to the purchase, from the garment to food: a train can open onto a shoe stall. Dedicated to commerce, to transition, to departure, and yet kept in a unique structure, the station (moreover, is that what this new complex should be called?) is stripped of that sacred character which ordinarily qualifies the major landmarks of our cities: cathedrals, town halls, historical monuments. Here the landmark is entirely prosaic; no doubt the market is also a central site of the Western city; but in Tokyo merchandise is in a sense undone by the station's

instability: an incessant departure thwarts its concentration; one might say that it is only the preparatory substance of the package and that the package itself is only the pass, the ticket which permits departure.

Thus each district is collected in the void of its station, an empty point-of-affluence of all its occupations and its pleasures. This day, I decide to go to one neighborhood or another, without any goal but a kind of prolonged perception of its name. I know that at Ueno I will find a station filled on its ground level with young skiers, but whose underground floors, extensive as a city, lined with foodstalls, with bars, populated with bums, with travelers sleeping, talking, eating on the very floor of these sordid corridors, finally fulfills the novelistic essence of *the lower depths*. Quite close by—but on another day—will be another populous district: in the commercial streets of Asakusa (no cars), arched by paper cherry blossoms, are sold brand-new clothes, comfortable and very cheap: heavy leather jackets (nothing delinquent about them), gloves edged with black fur, very long wool scarves which one throws over one shoulder as would village children coming home from school, leather caps, all the gleaming and woolly gear of the good workman who must dress warmly, corroborated by the comfort of the huge steaming basins in which simmers a noodle soup. And on the other side of the imperial ring (empty, as we recall) is still another populous neighborhood: Ikebukuro, workers and farmers, harsh and friendly as a big mongrel dog. All these districts produce different races, distinct bodies, a familiarity new each time. To cross the city (or to penetrate its depth, for underground there are whole networks of bars, shops to which you sometimes gain access by a simple entryway, so that, once through this narrow door, you discover, dense and sumptuous, the black India of commerce and pleasure) is to travel from the

top of Japan to the bottom, to superimpose on its topography the writing of its faces. Thus each name echoes, evoking the idea of a village, furnished with a population as individual as that of a tribe, whose immense city would be the bush. This sound of the place is that of history; for the signifying name here is not a memory but an anamnesis, as if all Ueno, all Asakusa came to me from this old haiku (written by Basho in the seventeenth century):

*A cloud of blossoming cherry trees:
The bell. —Ueno's?
Asakusa's?*