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Arriving at Infrastructure

Originally written for A/fixed Journal (<https://afixed.in/>) in 2018

I think that Japanese people like photography as a whole. But compared to other art forms [...] photography is still not well accepted. People tend, therefore, to have a narrow understanding of how to look at photographs. So, I would love for people to understand a side of photography they are not used to and to be fascinated by it. Photography is not just for sharing cute pictures on the internet, [...] some people are working on photography as a form of serious and artistic expression. Through my space, I hope to engage with them and to convey another side of photography.

– Masato Seto

About 3.7 million people pass through Shinjuku Station daily. That's about equal to the population of Detroit. As a commuter, you learn to deal with its intensity by tuning out most of it, paying only enough attention to physically navigate the space and avoid falling down the escalator.

This internal retreat is a frequent component of life in Tokyo. Isolating oneself is a survival mechanism, though a flawed one. While it protects, it also precludes meaningful human interaction. Strategically opening up, then, is as much of a survival mechanism as closing off, and in Tokyo these needs constantly vie with one another. This is particularly taxing for artists, for whom the role of community is second only to that of oxygen.

People need other people, but artists need more than just company. Society tends not to provide for its artists, so they must provide for themselves. Where societal infrastructure is lacking, community arises in direct response to need. Communities appear organically, as well as through deliberate action. Most often, it's somewhere in between.

Communities are fugitive things, there in one shape in one moment and changed into something else in the next, like a fist that reverts to a hand with the uncurling of the fingers, revealing its nature as being more of an event than an object. They are fluid and changeable, the slippery bones that support the flesh of the creative world in places where the support artists need exists only if they make it for themselves.

In Tokyo, there is an unusual prevalence of artist-run galleries. I visited three, all in a small area not far from Shinjuku Station—Place M, Totem Pole Photo Gallery, and Photographers' Gallery. Regardless of any original intended purpose, they have converged in function: to provide social and creative support to their members.

Place M is the oldest of the three, established in 1987 by Masato Seto, followed by Keizo Kitajima's Photographers' Gallery in 2001. At Place M, the aim was to bring people together, to enable artists to sustain and motivate one another.

Photographers' Gallery came out of Kitajima's desire to support students after graduation. He noticed that many students found it difficult to continue their practice after graduation. The solution was to provide a new support structure. Though originally intended to be a short-term project, seventeen years later it's still a thriving entity.

Totem Pole Photo Gallery is a bit different. It was first a place for photographer and founder Shinya Arimoto to show his work. He had grown frustrated with the limitations of exhibiting through camera clubs and salons, often the only options photographers have. He couldn't show the work he wanted to show, and the clubs seemed more concerned with cameras than with photographs. "There is an expression that Japanese photography culture is synonymous with camera culture. It is not easy to find people who appreciate photographs for artistic expression." It's more than just that, though. He went on:

There is a discrepancy in the understanding of photography between people like me and people who come to galleries run by manufacturers. Also, the guidelines for these manufacturer galleries tend to be very conservative. Photographers would have a hard time being accepted if they want to show photographs of nudity or, in my case, photographs of homeless people, even with artistic merit.

Totem Pole began as an attempt by Arimoto to synthesize his own independence and expressive freedom. Over time, more people became involved, and it grew into an active group of artists with the gallery at its center.

Even when community is not a stated goal, it has a way of happening anyway, arising in direct response to real need. This is why we wind up with so many parallels between different artists' groups. They naturally move in the direction of specific functions. Just as authors might find their characters gaining a sort of autonomy as they're being written, artistic communities can take on an unexpected spark, driving themselves forward, with or without a conscious purpose. This seems to be what happened for Kitajima at Photographers' Gallery.

We made the unexpected happen. We cannot stop. It isn't that we had a specific community in mind in the first place. At best, personally, I just wanted to create a "space" in a broad sense. A space that has magnetic energy, attracting new people all the time. Not only members but also people who come here altogether create a larger network. I wanted to keep this energy going.

He also emphasized that his was not a fixed community and never was.

We are still here after seventeen years. Out of seventeen or eighteen members now, there are only three original members, including myself. Maybe there have been fifty members who were involved in running this space over the time. So, it has not been the same group of people, thus not the same "entity."

Among everyone I spoke with, there was agreement on the importance of these being groups that operate in real life, in physical space, in actual galleries, and with actual prints. Much of our daily activities have turned digital, but communities that operate face-to-face and deal with tangible artwork still have an inherent value which cannot be reproduced digitally. Whether started before or after the internet changed everything, all of these groups bring the benefits of being firmly rooted offline. The merits are there and are apparent, going beyond the traditional role of galleries (as they function in the West) to support creative community, with exhibition being more an outgrowth of the community than the point of the community itself.

The most important conversations that artists need to have often deal with abstract ideas, and in-person conversation helps with the process of giving detail and dimension to the ineffable. Much of the communication in conversation comes through nonverbal means. Body language helps us convey what words alone cannot readily be wrapped around. Tone of voice, too, carries huge communicative weight. Words remain critically important, but when speaking face-to-face these other dimensions bloom and make an irreplaceable contribution of depth and finesse.

Other community roles are also facilitated by real-life groups in ways not effectively addressed online. Arimoto made note of accountability in particular. If a member of a group states an intention to complete a certain work, the rest of the group is there to hold the artist accountable and can help ensure the artist is keeping on task. When things get difficult, the group is there to assist with problem-solving and morale. Being part of a community is hugely generative, in that it yields a surge in both the volume and quality of finished work produced by everyone involved.

When participating in groups, individuals are also more apt to make finished, physical work. There is something about the *thingness* of physical artwork that is fundamentally different in experience and impact, even from the same work's potential form. When images transition from pieces of film or digital files into objects you can hold in your hand, some value is gained, especially when those things are passed from hand to hand with others.

Finally, when engaged in these groups, artists have better means to give audience to their work. Many would argue that if work is never shown, it isn't really complete. Showing in traditional galleries is one way to bring finality to work, but participating in an artists' group is another way to do so.

While there are photographers' groups everywhere in the world, in visiting these galleries I saw things in a form I haven't seen elsewhere. It could partly be a matter of Japanese social norms and patterns, but it's more than that. It has everything to do with place. Not just Tokyo, but Shinjuku, and not just for the historical reasons of access to camera shops and lower rent. Shinjuku is a particularly potent place for the growth of such communities because of its overwhelming density of people and stimuli.

In this place where people are especially prone to shutting down in response to that intensity, these groups give artists the internal leverage to open up and mainline that intensity instead, channeling it into their activities. It's visible in the work and in the way that these groups emerge to support their members. It's visible in the evolution of post-war Japanese photography. This vibrating, simultaneously toxic and nourishing center of activity gives rise to communities out of necessity, like new life forms crawling out of the ooze because there is an evolutionary niche waiting to be filled.

At Home in the Bath

Originally written for Metropolis Japan in early 2020 ([link](#))

The first time I went to the public bath in my old neighborhood, I felt distinctly out of place. I was an outsider, a newcomer, a conspicuous new addition to the scenery, not unlike a golf ball in a carton of eggs. But the awkwardness quickly passed, and I soon became a regular there.

Over the next couple of years, I went back again many, many times, right up until its doors closed for the last time. In this way, what started on a whim turned into one of the most valuable experiences I've had in Japan.

Six months before, I had arrived in Tokyo from Shanghai to start over. It was my fifth international move in about six years, and in addition to the usual challenges of getting settled, I also had to address my mangled personal affairs. My life had recently exploded with great vigor. So much so that my ears were still ringing. My life was a mess, and so was I.

I tried to put myself back together again but did so poorly. Nothing was working. And so, on the night before that first trip to the sento, after half a year of ping-ponging between Nerima and Roppongi for work, sleeping far too little and generally trying to ignore my problems, I desperately needed to relax. But how? After some consideration, I thought, *A bath? Yeah, I'll take a bath. So I tried, and I failed.*

The bath itself happened, but the relaxing did not. My attempt took place in my one-piece plastic unit bath, the extra-small sort with everything crammed into it. My leaky toilet was running quietly but continuously the entire time, and the washing machine I shared with my neighbor was throbbing and splashing noisily on the opposite side of the wall. Not exactly peaceful. There was also the persistent, back-of-the-mind awareness that just outside that thin plastic door were my unwashed dishes, the bills I'd forgotten to pay, and my abject loneliness. It was not the experience I had sought. I needed a change of scenery.

So the next night, it was off to the bath. I fumbled my way through the entrance, paid my fee, and entered the locker room. Others were there, but only a few. After my fleeting embarrassment disrobing, I bathed. I shaved my face and scrubbed myself clean, then spent the next hour cycling between the hot bath, the very hot bath, and the cold bath — heat, cool, repeat.

By the time I left that first night, I felt transformed. I hadn't felt that relaxed at any time in the previous five years, and it wasn't merely physical. My mind was at ease, too, and I felt for once as if maybe everything might *actually* work out. That night, I fell asleep at 10pm and slept until the next afternoon. From then on, I was at the sento two or three nights a week. I had found something good.

It pains me that the regular old neighborhood public bath never gets the recognition it deserves, being perpetually overshadowed by its fancy hot spring cousin. I get it: a sento is unlikely to impress you. It will not be lavish, and its amenities are apt to be spare. Most are old and well worn, bearing a time-shadow patina of decades of activity absorbed into every surface.

Even so, the very mundanity of the typical local bath is part of what makes it so special. It puts on no airs and demands nothing of its patrons. It fits the definition of a third place perfectly: it is neither home nor work. It is a neutral ground and a leveling place. It has its regulars and can feel like a home away from home, thoroughly lacking any pretense or extravagance.

And for me, it wasn't even just the sento — there was a whole evening ritual around it. There was the route I would walk through a tiny park and down a narrow footpath contained by mossy garden walls. The neighborhood cats I would pet along the way. The small, family-run convenience store where I would stop on my way home for a big onigiri and a cold can of beer.

And everything changing with the seasons. Walking in the rain or snow, under plum blossoms or autumn leaves and the stars, with the sound of the breeze whispering by. In the midsummer, cicadas emerging ghostly white in the streetlight glow. Every walk there and every walk home was an exercise in mindfulness, noticing what had or hadn't changed along the way over the previous handful of days.

It became a special place in the landscape of my daily life, not in spite of its ordinariness, but because of it. And that regular ritual of going to the bath helped me feel at home both in my neighborhood and in my very skin. This, in turn, helped build a foundation upon which I could better reconstruct my blown-up life.

Just before its demolition, when I had not yet realized the bath had closed for good, I arrived one evening at the entrance as another regular was departing. The windows were dark, the shutters closed, and the sad shake of the man's head said it all. I would never bathe there again. And just a few weeks later, all that was left of the place was a single bank of shoe lockers standing strangely at the edge of a large plot of torn-up ground where the sento had once stood.

There's an apartment building on the site now, and I've since moved elsewhere, but I will always remember that old sento fondly, and I must always give it credit for the good it did me.

Dispatch № 74: Loud as Flowers

Originally written for my Japan Blog at <https://somerwherein.jp/no-74/>

The highway is quiet, and small sounds seem loud. The traffic on National Route 298, elevated over my right shoulder, is only faintly audible, reduced to a relative whisper by its height and enclosing barriers.

Louder than the highway are my narrow bicycle tires rolling on the wet asphalt, the road turned jet black and sparkling by the rain. Vibrations reverberate and sing through the wheels as the rubber leaves fleeting tracks on the vitreous pavement.

Louder are the sounds emanating from the long string of parks under the highway. The footfalls of a jogger, cinders crunching rhythmically underfoot. Someone clattering a chain-link fence with a soccer ball. Two friends talking and laughing, happy and tired, sitting at the edge of a poorly lit basketball court.

Louder are the commuter trains passing at a distance and the door chime of a nearby convenience store. Louder is the tomcat in the auto shop's parking lot.

Loudest of all, though, are the osmanthus blossoms, projecting their redolence into the night with such thunderous aromatic intensity as to overwhelm conventional sensory borders and flood territories inaccessible to lesser scents.

Their heady aroma gives the moist air a palpable thickness and heft, such that you feel you are swimming in a saturated, soporific concoction of apricot, honey, and hypnagogia, with undercurrents of the autumn sun's penetrating warmth.

Deep lungfuls bring it through your nose and mouth simultaneously, forming flavors that recall adolescent arousal and the heart-pounding memory of holding someone close for the very first time, the residual tatters of lust and limerence from an earlier life mostly forgotten.

It invades and invigorates every sense. It textures the world and tingles the skin. It sparkles the vision, echoes the soundscape, and floods the mouth with nectar.

The mind licks its teeth and thirsts to drink this overwhelming atmosphere of tiny golden flowers wafting their siren song on the breeze. And on nights like this, with a light rain amplifying every olfactory perception, you can easily lose yourself in it for long moments.

But the moments, however long they feel, remain just moments all the same, no matter how much all of our senses conspire, straining and writhing in unison to prolong the sweet intoxication. And eventually, inevitably, the wind shifts, the blossoms fall, and their brief season of salacious jubilation concludes.

Untethered

A personal essay from 2016, originally published on my blog.

There is a large park near my apartment of which I am particularly fond. From the day I first discovered it, within weeks of moving to Tokyo, it was a place where I was automatically comfortable. It's a place where I

can go to be surrounded by big trees, hear some sounds of nature, and occasionally meet a friendly stray cat. There's a murder of crows that hangs out in the forest canopy above the fenced-off area where Shakujii castle once stood, some eight hundred years ago, adjacent to Shakujii Hikawa Shrine. A beautiful place given a spooky edge by the history of the place set against the eerie calls of the crows. There are ample cherry blossoms in the spring and big toads in the underbrush on warm summer nights. When it rains, alien-looking flatworms emerge from the topsoil, bright yellow and strange.

If you look up Shakujii Koen on Google Maps, you will see that it is in two large sections, divided by a road through the middle. Just south of the eastern end of the lake in the eastern half of the park is an open area with a few picnic tables, some benches, a public toilet, and a payphone. Two of the three picnic tables would form a line running east-west were you to connect them, with the third table forming a triangle, the long leg of which points roughly southwest. Crickets are the predominant sound there on a cool October evening like this, with trains on the Seibu Ikebukuro Line ghosting by five hundred meters away, not seen from the tables but heard quietly. Were you listening to the scene through headphones, it would make a nice stereo effect.

I'm hearing it in person and in real time, as I'm sitting at that third, more southerly table with my laptop. It's a quarter to midnight and the trains will run a little while longer, maybe another hour or so, but then they'll cease for the night. If I'm still sitting here writing then, I probably won't notice that they stopped until some time later, when I realize I haven't heard one in a while. That's how it was with the cicadas this year. It seemed like they took their time to show up this summer, and were glorious in their intensity for a while, but then one day I realized that only a few were left calling, and within a week those last few were gone as well.

I lost track of the cicadas in a span of weeks during which I was trying to put my head back together and in a general state of tunnel-vision. My sleep had been bad. As in really bad. As in bad enough for long enough that I'd had a couple blackouts and hypnopompic hallucinations, which are essentially what happens when you momentarily doze off, but not all of your brain wakes up again, so you're served up sensory hallucinations as if in waking dreams, but while doing something like teaching or

waiting for the train. When the train platform feels like a floating boat dock under your feet and amorphous dark blobs are bouncing around in your peripheral vision, you don't feel especially well-connected to reality. Nor do you feel especially connected to the passage of time in any normative sense when bad sleep is bookended by panic attacks and the patterns of everyday life become intuitively navigable through the use of relative stress levels as familiar features of an internal map.

I went to the doctor, who gave me something for the anxiety and something else to help me sleep. It was enough to break the stress/insomnia feedback loop, but as I regained more of a hold on general awareness of life beyond the basic requirements of employment and sustenance, I realized I had all but completely missed the departure of the cicadas. When had it even happened? What else had I missed in that time? My apartment had imploded again, but that was no surprise (though there were some surprises as I dealt with the snowdrift-like concentration of laundry that had accumulated at the foot of the bed - no longer was the whereabouts of my other work pants a mystery, for example). In that time, dates with the amazing woman I had met had ceased and she had made an exit. I'd continued to make photos as usual throughout those weeks, as doing so is pretty much as automatic a part of my existence as breathing. A thousand or so frames of obscure shadows and interstitial fragments of the urban environment: spaces in which float inexpressible things, just out of reach of exposition but always within range of feeling.

In the last week or so, my apartment has become more orderly, seemingly of its own accord, like the sky clearing after a summer storm. I washed clothes, hung them to dry, and folded them dutifully when the wind had done its work. Dishes were washed. All of them. When I took out the recycling, I had a large bag bulging with the simple plastic containers in which one buys ready-to-eat foods at grocery stores in Japan. Black plastic tray, clear plastic lid, and between the two would have been something like pasta salad or a boxed lunch complete with rice, fish, and a couple tiny side dishes. When had I last cooked? It had to have been a month before, or at least close to it. The grocery store meals taste pretty good and are reasonably-priced. Their greatest advantage, however, is that the only thing they require of you is the simple physical action of transporting the food from container to mouth.

Most of the containers came from the same supermarket, the one on the ground floor of my train station. Finishing work a little after 9:00 PM many nights and then embarking on my an hour-plus commute, it's usually about 10:30 when I get off the train. By this time, the remaining ready-to-eat food options in the display case are getting sparse and there's competition from other zombie commuters. There's typically a worker with a barcode scanner and label printer working her way down the refrigerator case, too, marking down items as it gets closer to closing time. Behind her trails a small, bleary-eyed crowd that decides what to eat based primarily on what's cheap, not for economic reasons so much as because it's easier to be motivated by a number than on the vague sense of what one supposedly wants to eat when the drudgery of the salaryman lifestyle dictates that one *must* still eat, but doesn't afford enough energy for enthusiasm. If nothing catches the shopper's eye, he or she might settle for instant ramen or embark on a listless perambulation around the periphery of the store, hoping for something to stand out (things rarely do) before drifting out the front door into the night, having given up on the supermarket and shuffling toward the 7-Eleven.

There is so much of this spiritless drifting here at the ends of the day. A bone-aching fatigue that keeps one from sleep and an overfullness of the day-after-day that trends the heart toward empty. On packed commuter trains and winding down dark residential streets as we disperse into our neighborhoods from the station, rarely are we by ourselves (but often are we alone). Some of those around me in transit are heading back to homes shared with people they love. They have concrete points of reference and purpose by which to navigate. Many of us lack those ties, however. We are untethered and drifting. Free, yes, and in ways that can be wonderful. But we are also free to drift into strange waters with neither map in hand nor wind in our sails. We get into trouble there sometimes, bobbing in the murk below unfamiliar stars.

On Friday, I walked home from an errand instead of taking the train because the train wasn't running. Someone had jumped in front of it. This isn't uncommon - there are nearly 70 suicides a day in Japan. These are people who have drifted too far and can't find their way back home. In time, some find themselves instead at the edge of the world, hanging there for a long moment before falling off into the void. Not all, though. Some continue to drift until currents push them back into familiar

waters. Others wake from their stupor, either with a start or a slow, heavy-lidded blinking recognition, either way choosing a direction and paddling, knowing the dark place the drift might take them.

If this untethered state is the world in which one lives daily, then the unlit, entropic topography may seem desolate. Still, there is freedom in it. *What is the point of freedom amidst desolation?* you might ask. The fundamental plasticity of existence, that's what. Just as considering the total and complete insignificance of human affairs in the context of the unknowably-immense physical universe and the laughable brevity of human existence against the scale of geologic time can actually inspire a greater sense of personal agency and joy, the terrifying perceived helplessness of the unmoored drift can become a peaceful float on a friendly sea when we realize that, even though we may often feel alone, rarely are we truly by ourselves.

Untethered is not untetherable, and no drift is unending.

On Not Riding

Originally written for Urban Velo magazine in 2011.

At 6:20 AM on a Saturday at a public hospital in Changwon, South Korea, the nurses came around to check my vitals, as well as the vitals of everyone else in the room. There were five other patients, all of them middle-aged Korean men. I was the only one under 40 as well as the only foreigner. They evaluated my heart rate and blood pressure, I pantomimed that I was sore but otherwise feeling fine, and they gave me a dose of some kind of pain reliever via a hypodermic injection to the left buttock. At 8:00 AM breakfast arrived. Three meals a day of rice, kimchi, and some manner of soup. I was bored out of my mind.

The first time I got hit by a taxi was in Chicago in 2004. Then, everything seemed to move in slow motion as I rolled up and over the car and was thrown into the intersection. A stretch of bullet time before finding myself lying on the pavement adjacent to my bike with people yelling and calling 911 on their cell phones.

This time the impact was more like a three thousand

pound exclamation point—a physical interjection that came screaming out of the intersection to my left as the taxi ran the red after missing his left turn signal. I had looked, verified it was clear to go, and accelerated hard because it felt good to do so. I got about one hundred feet and then boom. Seemingly in one instantaneous move I was struck and left awkwardly rolling around on the pavement trying to recover my breath, followed in

turn by the labored move to a standing position. The taxi driver and a few other individuals stood there and looked at me, expressionless. They did nothing, said nothing. I looked at the shattered windshield (impressed), inspected my crushed helmet (relieved), and picked some flecks of safety glass out of my left forearm and right knee. My bike was thirty feet away and looked the way a dead starling looks on the sidewalk after flying full speed into the side of an office building.

The problem with having an accident on a Friday night and being taken to a public hospital in Korea is that there are no doctors there during the weekend. In practical terms, what that means is that you can't leave until Monday, at least not if you want to be able to get your insurance claim. For about 72 hours I was in hospital limbo. Lots of reading, lots of Nintendo DS, lots of staring at the ceiling, and lots of wishing I were with my girlfriend instead of waiting for Monday to arrive at record slow speed. It gave me plenty of time to think about riding, to think about what came next, and to consider the reality of not being able to ride for an undetermined period of time.

The last time I saw my bike it was in the road while I was being loaded into the ambulance. I suppose the police still have it in Korea, but I was never able to get it back. I got a settlement for the accident, but that went to the new camera I needed for working and a new bike was put on hold. It remains on hold.

For about eight years now, riding has been such an immense part of my life that my friends have practically come to view a bicycle as a part of my anatomy. It's an activity that's as much a part of any given day for me as eating meals, feeling groggy when I wake up in the morning, or sneezing twice after breakfast. The first time my bike got totaled six

years ago, I had my mountain bike as backup. I threw some slicks on it and went gonzo around Chicago, jumping off things and trying to wheelie (still can't do it) until I built up a new fixed gear. This time, however, I had no backup. Until cash flow is sufficient to float a new build, I am without a bike.

I am a cyclist without a cycle, whose feet miss the pedals, whose scars miss the speed that led to impact and abrasion, whose brain stem misses the helmet that saved it. I am a cyclist that doesn't ride. Every day I have the urge to get on two wheels and just go somewhere. Every day I have to remind myself that my bike no longer exists.

I miss having a bike, but I also miss that particular bike. It started as a keirin frame that a friend in Japan found and shipped to me. I initially built it up with the parts that I had on hand, and over the course of four years ended up changing just about everything except the frame itself. It was precisely as I wanted it. For the last year that I had it, it was basically perfect in the sense that the upgrade lust, the striving for tweaking had evaporated entirely. I didn't want to change it, I only wanted to ride it as hard as I could, to use it as a vehicle to go places and to push myself into unexplored territories of physical exertion. It was a tool of personal empowerment, a device for explorations in space and time.

I presently explore space and time on foot. I've worn out two sets of sneakers already.

When the presence of riding suddenly becomes an absence, it throws one off. It was bewildering at first. I began taking the bus across town, and it felt like I was cheating. Not cheating in the sense of trying to gain special advantage in a dishonest manner, but cheating as in I felt I was cheating on the pursuit of cycling. It was a matter of infidelity. It felt like I was betraying it by way of an illicit affair with public transit. That feeling has since passed and patience has set in. I will return to riding, I know, but for now I just need to wait.

That's the tricky part. When all you want to do is ride, waiting sucks.