

THE LAND OF BLUE UMBRELLAS or LOST IN TRANSLATION WITHOUT TRANSLATION

How does this Eurocentric, first generation American get hooked on Japan after only two weeks? Read on, for in this tome, you will find why travel is discovery, revelation, adventure, surprise and utter joy. You will discover that being on the road for almost 50 years makes experience the best tool one can use in being in a country without the language. You will also discover that Asia has much to offer the inveterate and the novice traveler.

Approaching my 70th birthday, and knowing that I had never been in Asia, I pursued a project whereby I could celebrate my birthday and also visit Japan. Luckily, I had friends in Japan and my timing was perfect, since Jesse Glass had curated an exhibition of Visual Poetry, which was opening just about the time of my birthday. This made it much easier to participate in some way in this exhibition and also see a small part of Japan for two weeks. The result is that Japan is in the very pores of my skin, the freeze frames of my internal films, the taste buds in my mouth, and the pictures in my mind. If you leave yourself open, the culture comes in. And although the premise upon which I planned my trip was the Oculus Visual Poetry Biennial International for 2004 in Tokyo, co-curated by Hasakura Takako and Jesse Glass, both visual poets, the trip also coincided with the birth of my grand-niece in Honolulu, and so the three week-trip was a joyful one.

The plans were generated quickly, with a lucky (because of frequent flyer miles) first-class Air Singapore outgoing flight to Narita. There was little time to study itineraries, etc. before I left, but I did buy reference books and a guidebook to prepare me for a bit of what I was to experience. Of course, the lines at Los Angeles International Airport were so long that it seemed endless to go to screening. Metal in my shoes set off the alarm, so I was wanded after taking them off and all was well. After snacks and drinks in the first class lounge, I arrived at the plane, up a flight of stairs to a purple heaven. Supplied with eyeshades and slippers, a purple blanket, personal TV and free complete audio and remote, I felt I was in paradise. The banquet lasted well over 90 minutes. Having fallen asleep, I awoke just as we were crossing the International Dateline, and I knew that was a good omen. Yet I kept asking myself, "How come I am flying West to go the East? Well, Galileo must have been right!" The trip was so relaxing that I arrived well-rested, well-fed, and delighted to begin my adventure with no jet lag, fatigue or distress.

My hostess, Maya Glass, met me with her daughter Tennessee at the airport, and because we had missed our bus home until the next scheduled departure, because of slow immigration lines at Narita (due to lack of personnel), we sat down in a café for a bite or drink. This dynamic young woman spoke English like an American, but was thoroughly Japanese by birth and training. On the television set were four blue umbrellas in a grid, announcing a rainy day for the next day's weather. I knew I was in the right place—blue umbrellas, no more, no less! I was on my way. This symbol appears in the newspapers as well as on the weather reports on TV to indicate rain, but good weather is indicated by a good day to do laundry, so if you see a logo-like drawing of a t-shirt, hanging by clothespins, chances are good it will be sunny and warm.

The trip to Chiba was a bus-ride through the dark night of Tokyo, interspersed with lots of neon and a ferris wheel going oh, so slowly, and then Disneyland, and then home in an apartment complex matching anything in any large city of the U.S. About 25 years ago when Disneyland was planning its complex, man-made land was used to do real-estate development. Those who first occupied these apartments have grown old and with few younger people now and an aging society with low birthrate, this society in Japan is quite changed. But it also is served by a large railroad station, post office, shopping mall, bookstore, food shops, and many commercial shops as well. Everything at your fingertips! The next day I was to take the bullet-train to Kyoto almost as orientation to a Japan I really wanted to see: gardens, shrines and temples and a small-scaled historical city that would eventually make me yearn to stay much more time. It was spring, after cherry blossom time, but green and wet and full of umbrellas. Friends of mine primed me with maps, guidebooks, lists of places to see, so that although the fear of non-communication because of the language barrier dominated my every thought, I knew I was in for an amazing aesthetic experience.

Reservations had been made for me at an inexpensive hotel in Kyoto, the bullet train ticket was purchased, and I was off with Jesse to Tokyo to get used to the train tickets to Tokyo proper, and then on to the bullet train. How fortunate to have a guide, someone who really could prime me right away for what was to be my commuter experience back to Chiba when I returned from Kyoto. The bullet train is fast, efficient, and comfortable. Next to me was a woman with four-inch stilettos, a miniskirt, and a book to read. It was raining and yet it was not cold. I could see the countryside, and there are many small towns and villages along the way to Kyoto. At the hotel, I found my monk-like room with

complete facilities—and according to the hotel, a room which was to be vacated from 11 a.m. - 4 p.m. which was fine since I would be touring each day. My “arrigato” got me a certain courtesy, but I certainly needed more vocabulary than “thank you”.

KYOTO

I ventured forth with umbrella in Kyoto and found how close I was to “combi” or convenient stores opened 24 hours a day such as 7/11, Lawson’s and Family Mart, and one could use a telephone, buy an English-language Japan Times, and dinner and beer, as well. I also found the wonderful “Gion” or shopping center of old Kyoto with shops dedicated to hand-made wooden combs, or umbrellas, or sweets in the Kyoto manner (meaning hand-made and remarkably delicious and not too sweet). Being a coffee drinker and hearing about prices for a cup of coffee, I budgeted to allow myself the pleasure of individually-brewed strong coffee for \$3.50 to \$4.00 a cup. I met two Englishmen, one who lived outside of Kyoto, who were photographing the making of food in an open stand on the Gion and had fun watching them balance their umbrellas and camera. Everyone in Japan uses umbrellas, and so I was in umbrella heaven. Some umbrellas were so elegant, others more mundane, but everyone uses umbrellas with relish—to keep dry. After getting my bearings and seeing the woman in the umbrella shop opening up several of the most beautiful hand-made umbrellas, I was so happy. I bought rice cakes and beer for dinner and retired to see Japanese TV—women’s volleyball championships (U.S. vs. Japan) and Japan won.

The next day was an adventure, because although I had all good intentions of a specific itinerary, one also explores and I found a wonderful coffee shop, called Good Coffee, where the son in the family seemed to be a master coffee brewer and each cup was amazing. I had toast and coffee and not rice and miso soup and fish, as the Japanese do. I took my map in hand and although I had good navigational skills, I found myself going down instead of up and yet visiting a small Buddhist shrine as the Buddhist priest was doing his morning prayers, saw children going to school, businesses opening up such as flower shops, a family making baskets as I peaked through the window of a shop, a beautiful geisha shop with umbrellas and kimono to match, up and up and up to Yasakau Pagoda. For the next days I would find myself following large groups of private schoolchildren in uniform going to the same shrines and temples as I. It was humid and very warm, and climbing up was the beginning of my Kyoto experience, up and up to the Kiyomiza Temple up high above the tree-covered hills. It was not a tourist route, but a pilgrimage, I have surmised. Along the way, there

were samples being given out of barley tea, green tea, sweets, so one could refresh oneself as one climbed up to the shrine. At the time, it was an amazing view. Small holy water drinking fountains were everywhere and I could follow lines of umbrellas back and forth through the woods surrounding the shrine. I yearned to be alone in these shrines, but May is the month of field trips for students, and so I learned my fate and rolled with the waves of umbrellas and children. All tourists seemed to have camcorders or digital cameras, and yet I had a wonderful time with a Japanese couple from the States who were resting while taking a break from the visit to the shrine. It was good to exchange a conversation in English, even this early in the trip. After visiting the shrine, I headed down the hill (much easier than climbing up) and noticed that the students were being taken down in taxis, elegant taxis mostly Mercedes Benz.

At the bank, I met a University of California Professor of Asian Studies, who was doing research in Japan and changing money. He too was pleased with the convenience stores. Then, I discovered a wonderful service in Japan, for there is a “Koban” in each community and sometimes more than one. It is a small building in which a policeman in plainclothes is there to help you with maps, directions, advice in your language, i.e. English or Japanese. Seeing an SUV stop in front of this small building and someone rushing out of the car to get a map, I realized that perhaps this man could help me too. I was delighted to get another map, which I needed and directions for other shrines. I took the bus to see the Sanjusangendo, the popular name for Rengeo-in, a temple in eastern Kyoto which is famous for its 1001 statues of Kannon, the goddess of mercy. The temple was founded in 1164 and its present structures date from 1266. The main hall, which houses the statues, is well over 100 meters and Japan’s longest wooden structure. In its center sits one large Kannon, flanked on each side by 500 smaller statues, standing in neat rows side by side, each as tall as a human being. It was one of the most outstanding shrines I have ever visited, even with the myriad of busloads of students inside. It was stunning.

After making a reservation at the Imperial Villa Agency in another section of town to visit Katsura on the morning of my birthday, I went back to the Gion to visit the shops, visit the Crafts Center which had a marvelous array of handcrafted creations by those who have been doing ceramics, woodwork, silkweaving, etc. over the centuries. This is a great outlet for those who are seeking gifts to bring home. I also was seeking a woodblock printmaker, whom a friend of mine had met during Cherry Blossom time, who advertises the “World’s Smallest Museum”. Going in the

wrong direction, I met a wonderful older couple from Kobe, who decided to show me the way to the shrine near the printmaker's studio, and they took me to the gate. He was 82 and spry and had learned English at an earlier age. His wife smiled politely and followed us. I could hardly keep up with his quick steps. I visited Kenninji Temple, a grouping of many shrines and temples and then found my printmaker on the other side, with thanks to some policemen who directed me. (Word to the wise: Be sure to have a map that has both English and Japanese place names on it, so that you can point to where you want to go and usually someone can help you.) Arriving at his studio, I entered and found two prints of women with umbrellas that I wanted to buy. This cheery middle-aged artist, Ichimura Mamoru, met me and I told him the story of looking for him and he was literally down the street where my hotel was situated, but I did have to walk in a circuitous route until I got my bearings (knowing full well I cannot read Japanese). He invited me to sit down for tea, where the water was boiling in a kettle on an ancient ceramic brazier. I sat down with him for a wonderful cup of barley tea and we talked about his work, his meeting people from 30 different countries of the world, and his long-tradition of making woodblock prints in the old method. The two small prints now are framed and on my wall and I take pride in noting that this was my birthday present to myself. I was so pleased with myself for having found him, having been greeted with such joy by him (and he introduced me to his wife too), and for sharing tea with him that I readily bought two of his works. I really wanted a big print, but it was beyond my budget.

The next day I went to visit the Silver Pavilion, Ginkakuji, a Zen temple at the foot of Kyoto's Higashiyama (eastern mountains). In 1482, shogun Ashikaga Yoshimasa built his retirement village on the grounds of today's temple. A few years later, the Silver Pavilion was constructed. I imagined that Lady Murasaki, author of the *Tale of Genji*, could have sat in an intimate building such as this and written her novel in feminine script. Plans to cover the temple in silver were never realized. The villa was converted into a Zen temple after Yoshimasa's death in 1490. I took a walk through the woods leading to a spectacular view and noted samples of green moss that were available to see how moss grows. I was enchanted by this intimate temple and its beautiful grounds, simulating all kinds of environments such as sand or lush green.

The sun came out and sunglasses came out. There were more samples of sweets and different kinds of tea at the Golden Pavilion, actually covered with gold, in a setting of lotus ponds with swans and extensive gardens. The Golden

Pavilion functions as *shariden*, housing sacred relics of the Buddha, but the present building dates from 1955 as the pavilion was burnt by a fanatic monk in 1950. Taking the bus to the next shrine, I noticed Geisha women waiting for the bus with umbrellas and purses that match their kimonos. There is a large section of Kyoto which still maintains the houses of geishas, some open to viewing at the front doors, but most closed off.

The next stop was world-famous Rioangi Temple, a Zen temple whose rock garden is its main attraction. The garden consists of nothing but rocks, moss and neatly raked gravel. Its meaning is open to anyone who views it and experiences it. Alas, it was crowded with people, and I so wanted to be alone there, but that was not to be. I did speak to an American couple, students from Purdue, who happened to be touring. We noticed the stains of moisture and pollution on the walls which made a landscape of time as a backdrop for the rocks. I felt so many people had been disappointed with an over-photographed, over-hyped experience which is intimate, individual and is almost always experienced in spring, summer and autumn by tourists in groups. Upon coming down the hills to my area of Kyoto via bus, I noticed a very long Matsuri procession with historical costumes, red umbrellas, and many hand-borne mikoshi (palanquins) carried through the streets by people in those costumes. There were also decorated floats upon which people were playing drums, flutes and other traditional Japanese instruments, but I was on my way back to my neighborhood, alas.

[One of the good things about the convenient stores is that they sell bus passes, which allows you to slide it through like the Metrocard in New York and use it until it requires you to buy another. You don't have to carry correct change and it is a convenience. The other thing is to buy telephone cards to also alleviate problems with the right change or not understanding the Japanese message on the phone when you've dialed and it is not correct.]

In the Gion in Kyoto, there is a four-block long shopping mall with inexpensive clothes, shoes, a rubberstamp shop which I enjoyed, an antiquarian bookshop with antique woodblock prints on sale, and so much more. In the midst of these long blocks, there are shrines where Buddhist worshipers can enter and ring the bell, or light incense, or just clap their hands. Buddhism seems to be a very loose, casual religion among so many. Accessible, available, and open to all who will enter and leave their shoes at the door. There is always a small garden, holy water, and a shrine.

In the midst of all this small-scaled shopping at the other end are large department stores which should be explored just for the way things are aesthetically displayed, the quantity of goods, and the food services downstairs where you can buy a bowl of soba noodles in miso for \$2.50 or so, or a bit more if you add some things. Food services downstairs around the central city seem to be a tradition, and they are quiet, neat and oftentimes the bowls and dishes are handmade by someone in the family that runs the operation...and you can even buy bowls and dishes as well. My small café had Mancini music playing in the background as well!

My next addiction on Japanese TV were the Sumo wrestling championships. Now that Sumo wrestling has become international with Russians, Hawaiians, and so many others from all over the Eastern European world entering into this "sport", it has become fascinating. This year, two Mongolians were contesting the final championship, and now that I understand that Sumo wrestling is not like American wrestling but part of the ancient Shinto ceremony, whereby the referee in priestly robes and the altar now truncated to a canopy over the wrestlers are the remnants of the Shinto rites, I find it ceremonial and not brutal at all. It was a fascinating match and the best Mongolian won.

USE OF ENGLISH WORDS

When I walked along the Gion, I saw young people with such diverse English words on their T-shirts—most of which they did not understand and I held back my laughter. We are now beyond UCLA and University of Michigan—this is serious stuff!

In my Good Coffee shop where I ate breakfast, the seat pillows had "Healthy Living" embossed on them. A woman passed me by with "Guardianship" on the camouflage-designed T-shirt. You can pass a street where there are no street signs except in Japanese, except for "Fire Hydrant" on one sign and "Post Office" on another. "Eternal Winter" on another t-shirt for a surfing tour, I guess. There are t-shirts with philosophical and social awareness or advice printed on them, such as "Let's not be blind to our 2' 6" 15 differences but let us also direct attention to our Common..." And some that titillate such as "Think—Testicles"—honest! But many of the T-shirts and even mission statements on a package of tissues seem to be surrealist in tone, as if Surrealist poets had taken over the advertising agencies of Japan.

Some love hotels were called Hotel Carrot, Easy Space Motel, Harm Off Auto Service. We were told that the young people have changed the Japanese language, using shortcuts, so that their parents and the older generation do not know

what they are saying. And I remember a loan firm called "No Loan".

BIRTHDAY

The morning brought a surprise of a dinner invitation by Robin Price and her husband, Seiji, who were going to make me dinner at home. Seiji was teaching at a university in Kyoto, and Robin and he were experiencing Japan anew in a special way. Robin is the famed letterpress printer who used to live in Los Angeles but now lives in Middletown, Connecticut at Wesleyan University where Seiji teaches printmaking and painting. Although rain threatened, it held off as I took the train to Katsura, the Imperial Villa. I started to walk toward the villa but it seemed endless, and picked up a taxi that left me off outside the gate. A group was forming to be let in with reservation slips to be presented. We were led to lockers and asked to put our possessions there that we did not wish to carry around. We waited and saw an orientation film which allowed us to see some of the history of the villa. At least the film was in English, for the guided tour was only in Japanese. Luckily, I picked up an American couple who had an English-speaking Japanese guide and I picked up some information about the gardens and villa as we walked through the grounds. The beauty was of a tranquility and silence never experienced by me before. As we were touring, the gardeners were pruning, fixing, repairing so it was hard to get good pictures. I noticed how many people had digital cameras. There was one tree planted at the end of a promontory in the lake in the middle of the garden just so the imperial family could not see the whole garden on one view alone. The Shokin-tei, the most important tea pavilion at the villa, has an interior that reflects Rudolph Schindler's architectural style in his own home on Kings Rd. in Los Angeles. The first room has a blue and white checked pattern on the slide door and alcove. Although it was novel in its own day, it seems so contemporary today. In addition, there are many flat stones packed onto the shoreline, which juts out into the pond. The main house has a moon-viewing veranda, facing the pond.

After the extensive visit to Katsura, I took the taxi back to the railroad station and took the train to my next stop, which is the outstanding stop in Kyoto for me. Saihoji is the Moss Temple, in the western side of Kyoto. In 1338, the distinguished Zen priest Muso Kokushi presided over Saijohi. He reconstructed the garden after his own design, putting his heart into the work. A totally all-green moss garden in the wetness of May created for me an extraordinary experience. Arriving a bit early after a mile walk up to the Temple and gardens (closed until just before

1 p.m. when the tour would begin), I passed the Temple and walked by a forest of silver bamboo trees, an extraordinary chiaroscuro experience in the midst of a very wet day. Then I found a tree stump which had been placed under the eaves of a roof opposite the Temple gate, so I was protected and watched the other people who had reserved entrance for the afternoon to arrive with lots of umbrellas, of course. We were invited into the shrine where writing tables and pillows had been spread out under the shrine's veranda. There we were given ink, brush and a large sheet with Japanese text, the prayer which we were to copy with tracing paper given to us. We all became quiet calligraphers, except for an Israeli woman who kept complaining and I finally turned to her and told her that there is no right or wrong way to trace *kangi*—just do it with your heart and the prayer will be heard. But she kept talking. Alas. As we pursued this exercise, the man next to me (Japanese) appeared to understand what he was writing, and the young lady on my right wrote such a beautiful hand. I did not finish nor did many of us, but the exercise was extraordinary and wonderful. This is a UNESCO heritage landmark and the money we pay goes to the maintenance of this shrine. The Buddhist priest then recited the Heart Chakra prayer we had attempted to copy, and we were told that if we put our name and country on the sheet, we could leave it on the altar, which many of us did. Then the tour of the garden, which is built on two levels, was open to us in whatever way we wished. The upper garden is in the *Karesansui* style with 6 moss-grown rocks, and the lower is in the more classical style with paths around a pond shaped like the Chinese character “*Shin*” (heart). The garden is entirely covered with beautiful moss of over 120 kinds, usually at its best in May and June. Digital cameras were used heavily by the Americans, while the Japanese older people climbed the hills and steps around and about the upper garden. It was an all-green experience unmatched by any other place I had visited, and I was at peace and tranquil even with umbrella and lots of rain. The light was so unusual with this all-green garden.

Back to the train station and to Kyoto, where I went through the food halls and noticed that all the big department stores as well as artisan shops are featuring artisan bread. Bakeries abound with French-style breads. I proceeded to Robin and Seiji's area of Kyoto, near the Convention Center, where MRI specialists from all over the world were meeting that day. The convention center and the central city center with railroad station are totally concrete in bombastic, dynamic contemporary design, in keeping with the architectural taste of large cities. I arrived at Robin and Seiji's for an elegant, delicious, taste-tempting Japanese dinner for my birthday. We talked for hours about

everything, and it truly was a remarkable birthday. Returning to the center of the Gion in Kyoto by train, I saw hundreds of taxicabs waiting to take the inebriated businessmen back to their homes. Seems the laws are so stringent about drinking and driving that the taxi business does a landslide business late at night after the men have gone to dinner and imbibed at great length.

The next morning I called Tokyo because there was a message and it was an invitation to spend 29 May on Mt. Fuji to celebrate Ben Patterson's birthday. The set-up would be a bus ride from Gallery 360 with a busload of young performance artists, artists who are interested in Fluxus, and others to be accompanied by Ayo, the Fluxus artist and to perform countless performances before meeting Ben Patterson and his party after his climbing Mt. Fuji for his birthday. Patterson is a Fluxus artist (American) who lives in Wiesbaden, Germany. When he found out that George Maciunas, one of the leading catalysts of the Fluxus movement, had always wanted to climb Mt. Fuji on his 70th birthday and did not live to do so, Ben decided to leave Germany on the Orient Express, do performances in Russia and China and then arrive in Tokyo before climbing Mt. Fuji. Ayo got wind of this and organized this bus tour to meet Ben, and luckily I would be in Tokyo for this event before leaving Japan the next day. What luck!

This day I went to the Tokyo National Museum and although my Press Card was up to date, etc., when they asked me how old I was and if I were 70, I said “yes” for the first time in my life and got in free, since everyone over 70 gets free admission into museums in Japan. They were showing their collection of visual catalogs of the Imperial collections—all handpainted sketchbooks or inventory of everything the Emperor possessed, and they were artist books! There was also an exhibition of children's clothing over the centuries.

I checked out of my hotel, went to the railroad station, which does not have a waiting room, but found a small sitting area in front of a water clock, designed by the outstanding Anime artist who designed the clock and the water organ music and the black marble benches (the only seats available for travelers in the whole bombastic railroad station! I watched people, families saying goodbye to each other, businessmen reading their phones (most people read their phones every two minutes—they have to be connected at all times—young and old alike!) Then I watched a man and woman in yellow and blue uniforms with ASC Crew embossed on the back) clean the escalator sidewalls—she soaped and she went down with a squeegee to clean the soap

off—it was systematic, logical and hilarious at the same time—a great “Lost in Translation” frame for the next movie.

TOKYO

After a swift ride back to Tokyo, I got the train to Chiba and found myself home that evening. I was back to 21st century civilization and apartment living. The next day was sunny, bright, blue skies and white clouds and clean air. Just amazing. I was given a grand tour of the shopping mall, the 100 yen shop (like our 99 cent stores), the Okinawa stand, the Korean food stand, foods of all kinds for a very nice price; apples, each one wrapped, cost \$2.00 each; the green tea stand with the new organic crop just in and samples. Then I prepared for my lecture which was to be given the next day with two translators. My friends, the Glasses, rented an auditorium in the shopping/community center so that I would have an audience for the lecture about visual poetry which would accompany the opening of the exhibition on Friday night. Maya accompanied me to the opening of the Visual Poetry Biennial at Gallery Oculus where I met Josef Linschinger of Austria, Takako Hasakura, co-curator and visual poet of Japan, Jun Kubota who is a paper artist and visual poet, Akira Matsumoto, Keiichi Nakamura, Prof. Shutaro Mukai, and saw the work of several of my American and Italian friends. It was a dense and wonderful exhibition...and the food and drink were good too. This warm evening was even warmer thanks to the contact with performance artists, interior designers, artists, and art historians. The illustrated catalog is very good with essays by both curators, Glass and Hasakura. The trains were full even at 9 and 10 p.m., largely because the “salariman” Japanese are men who literally are overworked, for these men leave early in the morning with often a long commute, returning perhaps about 11 or midnight, working Saturdays and sometimes Sundays. The pressure to go drinking with your boss and co-workers after work is very usual. People do not complain, because they are afraid of losing their jobs. With high unemployment now (more so than ever in Japan) and a fragile economy, those who love their jobs have great difficulty finding another, especially if you are over 40. So many children do not see their fathers except on an occasional weekend. The woman in the household takes care of the management not only of the household, but of children, of food, of clothing, of cleaning and so much more.

My lecture went well with a very good and varied audience—from mail artists to visual poets, from friends of Jesse to people from the Visual Poetry exhibition. With two translators alternating, the slides spoke for themselves, and

I was pleased to introduce visual poets like Ruth Laxson and Richard Tipping of Australia to their attention. There were many questions and a wonderful reception afterwards that allowed us to talk, discuss and get to know each other. The mail artists are wonderful, even though they are artists in their own right and have other kinds of jobs as well. A gentleman asked some very pertinent questions and then visited with me, showing me four volumes of haiku poetry accompanied by watercolors he does. An architect and poet, now retired from his firm which took him around the world, Matsumoto-san now has a life of culture, singing in a chorus that travels, painting and writing poetry. He gave me a beautiful framed painting of the Disney Sea, a part of the Disneyland complex, to remind me of where I stayed in Japan. I also met Hiroyuki Fujiwara of my book service, Inc., friend of Brad Freeman’s, who made it a point to come to my lecture. We ended the lecture with sound poetry by Jesse Glass and Rod Summers from Maastricht, and it sounded like Buddhist chant to me.

The next day we went to a section of Tokyo around Tokyo Bay called Odaiba, which is a huge amusement zone where there is a miniature Statue of Liberty, an American-styled shopping mall, the Rainbow Bridge as well as the Fuji TV Headquarters which contains a Titanium ball weighing 27,000 tons in which studios, camera rooms, etc. are exhibited for tourists who wish to see how TV is made. The titanium ball in windswept conditions rocks a bit, but otherwise, it’s quite exciting to be in a round ball. While having a bite to eat in a very American-styled coffeeshop, we saw amazing dogs with beautiful silky coats having just probably been indulged in hot spas for dogs. Many of the Japanese owners of dogs we saw had two of the same species. Saw a Yoko Ono backpack on a young man “War is Over” since her traveling retrospective was being shown at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Tokyo when I was there. Women wore from sneakers to stilettos (around 4 inch stilettos). We traveled on the public train which was a monorail, computerized, which made ease of travel in that industrial park. The Panasonic building had a huge screen showing the latest TV, that wrapped around one end of the building as well. I felt I had left the 20th century and moved into the 21st century as far as architecture goes. That night (Sunday) we could see Buraku puppets on TV for two hours. Just amazing! It was a little better than the Disney Channel which Tennessee loves (especially Mickey Mouse) usually in the English Language which offers an English camp in California as a tourist event for Japanese families. Mickey rules Japan and makes a lot of money for Disney!

24 May:

This last week of my stay we went to the Ginza to meet Gianni Simone, the editor and publisher of *Kairan*, the Mail Art zine from Japan. Gianni has lived in Japan for 12 years, speaks wonderful Japanese as well as Italian and English (don't know what other languages he speaks). Jesse and I met him for lunch, and then Gianni and I went to Asakusa to visit the Asakusajinja Shrine as well as the Nakamise, or long shopping area that dates back to the Edo Period. There I bought a wonderful collapsible parasol (the handle screws off and allows you to take the parasol back with you in your suitcase), and then we walked around talking about what makes Japan run. Not Toyota, not Sony, not Honda or Mitsubishi. In fact, what keeps Japan going (the biggest industry) is Pachinko, the game salons that are full and buzzing day and night and that are run by the Korean Mafia. It's amazing but true that I have seen the doors open and women going in for hours at a time in Kyoto too! The Asahi Breweries are located here, with a building pretending to be a beer glass and another huge golden (phallic) object next to it. It was great to talk about mail art, Japanese culture, Italian culture and what's doing in the world too.

I then went back to the Ginza and walked down the street, seeing how each major firm (global and international) built a tall, narrow building for its firm. The shopping was done in quiet, since traffic on the Ginza is minimal. Then I finally went to an Internet Café where I ordered a coffee for \$3.50 in order to use the computer and finally started reading my 500+ messages. I guess I became guilty for not reading my mail—it was such a pleasure—but so it goes. I erased all the Spam and virus-laden forbidden messages and then got news from some friends.

The next day we had a party in the apartment for Maya's women friends who were getting free conversational lessons from her in English. They came with their children, and I have never seen children so well behaved ever in my life. They played well together, the mothers were good friends of Maya and they all cooperate with their kids in school or out of school. Beautiful women with the heavy burden of managing households.

"We need to honor women in all their complexity. It's time that we acknowledge the wisdom women have acquired by managing the chaos of daily life. Women are realists, the glue that holds society together. They bring a reverence to life that's instinctual, not just intellectual." [Teresa Heinz Kerry]

We then went to Meikai University where Jerry Rothenberg, famed performance poet and translator from San Diego, was given a reading. It was translated by Hasekura-san and she did a wonderful reading of the translation too.

TIME

All during my stay in Japan, the clock seemed to slow down. There seemed to be more time to do things, even to get lost. The pressure of "being on time" or "keeping an appointment" seemed to disappear in Japan. Was it me—or the culture? I cannot say even as I write this. But I felt I had more time and was so pleased, since the dread of losing time by getting lost was in my head before I left. Perhaps it is the way Japanese work hard, but also relax and know how to do so.

URAWA ART MUSEUM

A visit to Urawa Art Museum with a group of visual poets and book artists, namely Veronika Schäpers and Ryoko Adachi, was a real treat. The museum is in the city center of Saitama, about a half-hour from Tokyo by train. This museum in a tall office building emphasizes collections of works by local artists and the other collection is Art of Books. We were greeted by Mami Yoshimoto, the assistant curator at the museum in charge of artist books. We were guided through the new acquisitions book exhibition involving some amazing work of Noriko Ambe, amazing books by Onchi, influenced by El Lissitzky, and many more. The director of the Museum joined us, since he seems to be quite an extraordinary Japanese museum director, nattily dressed, English-speaking, warm and friendly, and very knowledgeable about artist books. We sat in the conference room after visiting the vaults and seeing some treasures from the collection, some of which were taken out and given to us for perusal. The museum is planning a Fluxus show in September 2004. We were elated to see some of their treasures, especially by Japanese artists whom I had never known before. We then did a wonderful visit to Nadiff, an amazing art book shop with videos, CDs, artist books, Fluxus, multiples, and a café. In those wonderful short streets off the Ginza are hidden restaurants and bars, and with the soft evening air, one can sit outside and enjoy a meal or a drink with relative quiet. I also felt at home seeing See's Chocolates, Gold's Gym, a kind of home away from home!

EDO-STYLE HOT SPRINGS

Maya and I and Tennessee (1 year, 8 months old) went to the hot springs which featured Edo-period styled kimonos, a Edo-Period style eating hall with Edo storytelling and Edo musical events. The baths were of various temperatures indoors, there was a Sauna as well, and outdoors there were rock baths and hot tubs including jacuzzi and California-type hot rubs. We succumbed under the spell of the hot waters and the wonderful atmosphere. Bodies of most of the young women showed long torsos, no bums, flat abs and

reminiscent of the Edo-period pornographic woodblock prints.

Lunch was typically Japanese in an Edo-period hall. I found an umbrella tea towel in the shop. But we had a schedule, and alas, we had to leave paradise for the likes of home until we got the kids and turned around and took a boat ride on Tokyo Bay from Asakusa to near Odaiba. It allowed us to see the homeless under blue tarps or tents along the Bay, see the amazing bridges (nine), and see the architecture along the banks of the Bay. They are big, monumental and concrete with exceptional examples along the way.

TSUKUJI FISH MARKET

One doesn't have to wake up before dawn to go to this amazing fish market—the world's largest. Since the auctioning of huge slabs of fish begins around 4 a.m., one can easily get there at 8 or so and take the subway to the fish market, where the only smell you will find is in the subway station, but not at the fish market. Going to see this market is a treat, because you cannot believe how beautiful fish can look when displayed. Some of the time I thought I was looking at beautiful abstract paintings. The fish (some very large) were amazing, but the way the fishermen display their hauls are stunning. There was a great deal of hustle and bustle, carts and trucks and small vehicles transporting fish hither and thither. It also allows you to have a typical Japanese breakfast with the freshest of fish in one of the little restaurants in the side streets near the market. I had maguro or fresh tuna so delicate and velvety that I would not have believed how tender fish could be—and it was accompanied by tofu, steamed rice, tea and so much more. Or you can have grilled fish, miso soup, tiny sardines, salad, homemade oshinko and so much more. There are stalls selling kitchen supplies, tea, and even Japanese accessories, so I bought a Kabuki cotton scarf with umbrellas all over it in bold design. Unfortunately, I could not attend Kabuki theater because they had finished their run for the month of May by that day.

I decided to go to the Ueno area, where a large outdoor shopping mall told me a lot about what the young people are wearing and buying—seems that Gothic is in—especially silver Gothic jewelry and pop t-shirts. In addition, there were people eating slices of watermelon (selling for \$1.00 each) and much, much more. After that, I went up the hill to the many museum buildings scattered throughout the Ueno Forest. I visited the Tokyo National Museum where just the Shogun costumes, the amazing knives, bows and arrows, and the national treasures of this country are displayed. There are gardens and a pond. In another

building, the 8th century collection given to them is exhibited in this separate building. There are temples, shrines and cemeteries as well in this area. It was wonderful to see how many people were on this hill, even going to the zoo, I suppose, but people of all ages. There is also a Natural History museum.

After this, I went back to the Internet Café where I found out that I was now the aunt of a grandniece born on 25 May in Honolulu where I would be in a couple of days.

ADVERTISING

There is so much advertising everywhere—in so many scripts—banners of adverts all through the trains hanging from the ceiling of each car—so much hawking of wares on the streets with microphones, as well as in the malls—and there are malls, ladies and gentlemen, big ones! The tasting, however, is quite adventuresome, and it taught me about “sweets” and artisan breads, etc.

YOUNG PEOPLE

Stilettoes and fashion. Talk about wearing the latest labels—Prada, Fendi, Gucci, but not much Isse Miyake. I only saw one woman with Miyake on. Love couples show their attraction and it's sex in the city to get a pair of shoes, or a Fendi dress, or a Prada something. Young women are selling their bodies for the latest fashionable item they crave. People told me that it's not rare now to see couples holding hands and even eating a meal together. It was rare before this period.

Changes in diet are bringing obesity to Japan. I saw a few examples in young people but very few. Just walking and running and high protein diets keep people lean. Bodies of women at the spa: no bums, flat stomachs, long torsos—amazingly like those wonderful pornographic prints from the Edo period.

“Be Japanese” is one of the courses small children must endure, learning how to really be subdued, no eye contact, showing no emotion, not talking in trains, etc. Good discipline and good advice in how to survive in your own homogeneous society.

FLUXUS BUS/BIRTHDAY

We arrived at Gallery 360° which is famous for its Fluxus-oriented exhibitions, as well as emphasis on artist publications. They had a show of Yoko Ono there, a small show simultaneous with her big retrospective at the Museum. The bus was going to be full of young Japanese artists and performers and Ayo was planning a series of 30 performances from artists such as Alison Knowles, Phil Corner, Dick Higgins, Ayo, Robert Filliou, Eric Andersen and many more. It took about a month to organize the bus

tour to celebrate Ben Patterson's 70th birthday on Mt. Fuji. When we finally got organized, we stopped at our first performance stop, a Buddhist shrine, but it was to perform a Phil Corner piece which required one bell, and alas, the shrine did not have a bell. In fact, they were preparing for a wedding. So that was the only performance that did not work. But we did Alison Knowles' 'Shuffle' at the shore of the lake, as well as Shiomi Mieko's Mirror piece which required an artist to walk backwards into the lake with his clothes on—holding a mirror to his face—he luckily threw out his cell phone and his wallet just before he went under the water—and stayed wet for a while until he finally got dressed in dry clothes. Our Bento box for lunch was equipped with a Fluxus-wrapped toothpick, among other things.

Japan is known for its love hotels, places where couples who are married to other partners meet for an assignation. You can tell love hotels by the barriers in front of the doors and/or windows so people cannot be seen going in and out. There is a famous woods where lovers who cannot endure their illicit assignations anymore commit suicide. One of our performances required us to follow a red string which Ayo walked with to a spot in the woods. We felt the bad karma in those woods, and then several people including my host, Jesse Glass, took out soap bubbles and wands and blew soap bubbles and some of us tried to hit the bubbles and beat them away. Mt. Fuji appeared on and off, in and out, with very little snow on its peak, but it became cloudy. Finally as we drove up the mountain, the sun came out and the winds abounded. We spotted Ben who had come down with his entourage who had climbed up the mountain starting at a very early hour. It was indeed his birthday that very day. He made it all the way up until 400 meters were left; he just couldn't withstand the winds. So he is saving the last 400 meters for his 80th birthday. The organizers passed out glasses (each a different kind and design for each person) as well as a choice of whiskey, sake, wine, juice, water for whoever wanted to participate in Kompai, Ben Patterson, a toast to Ben Patterson on his 70th birthday. Ben and I hugged each other, congratulating each other for making it in the month of May 2004. The performance of "In Memory of Adriano Olivetti" was performed by Ayo, Ben Patterson and some members of his entourage with each wearing a different hat, and then we drove down the mountain. Sound poetry was recited by Jesse Glass and another poet. We then had a wonderful supper afterwards (a small group of us) and then home to finish packing.

The next day was difficult—I had gained a new family in Japan—and they were feeling as sad as I was. I know I will try to come back—there is so much I did not see or experience. But it was a thrilling trip. The bus that took me to Narita went through Disneyland and I saw Mickey until

it came out of my ears. But Japan is a country that decided to turn to the West and they have outdone the West, outdone popular culture, outdone appropriation. I to this day cannot go see Buddhist art in a museum, because I have seen it where it belongs—and the spirit goes out of the objects and images in this new artificial atmosphere. The spirit is in the trees, the hills, the lakes and ponds, the flowers—the spirit is in the silences. I remember in Italy when I thought I would write a book, "I seek the silent places"—especially whenever I got cloister fever. Now I wouldn't mind living quietly the Buddhist life in meditation and contemplation in its natural environment. Japan has two faces, the old and the new. It has chosen the Western new, alas, and it is the old that I crave and appreciate. Quiet energy seems to be so much more inviting than the dynamic energy of tomorrow. Perhaps the clash of both energies creates the dynamic which is Japan today, but the heritage of the country is to be emulated and appreciated for its quiet beauty, its inner energies and its ability to give the citizens of Japan a foundation unlike any other. How to Wrap Five Eggs? permeates all of the culture, from the beautiful facades of buildings, to wrapping paper of exquisite beauty, to the small touches that make even the smallest item a part of the aesthetic fiber of the culture. Just go into the food halls and see how food is displayed. Give me the quiet places and I will return again and again.

Epilogue: Pico Iyer, an amazing travel writer, has said this with which I completely agree: "Traveling is like going through a transparent door, where you leave your pre-conceived notions behind - part of yourself - to become either the person you may want to be or wish you were. Your pre-conceived ideas wither, and you take on ideas more suited to the world around you and your immediate environment."

—Judith A. Hoffberg, *older & wiser*

Resources

1. **Biennale de Poesie Visuelle (France-Japon) 2002**, Galerie Oculus, Tokyo.
2. **Oculus Visual Poetry Bienial International 2004**, Gallery Oculus, Tokyo. Curated by Jesse Glass, Takako Hasekura, Marianne Simon-Oikawa and Noboru Izumi. Included are works by Japanese visual poets, as well as Dmitry Bulatov, Alan Halsey, Geraldine Monk, Michael Basinski, John Bennett, John Byrum, K.S. Ernst, Jesse Glass, Arleen Hartman, Scott Helmes, and Karl Young.
3. **Shigaku** (May 2004, no. 645), visual poetry journal in Japan.

4. **Japanische Visuelle Poesie** (Gmundner Symposion) published on the occasion of exhibitions at the Art University in Linz, Austria (Vienna, Ritter Verlag, 2002), ed. by Josef Linschinger, a visual poet.

5. <http://www.uam.urawa.saitama.jp> Website for Urawa Art Museum

6. **Zen Gardens.** Those of us who haven't been lucky enough to visit Japan can still explore some of its most

coveted treasures., courtesy of this cool Bowdoin College website. Take a virtual tour of the legendary Zen gardens, most of which are located in the historical region of Kyoto and its surrounding areas. In addition to the visual "tours", you will also learn a lot about the historical origins and symbolic elements of these beautiful Japanese gardens.<http://academic.bowdoin.edu/zen/>

