

# BIG

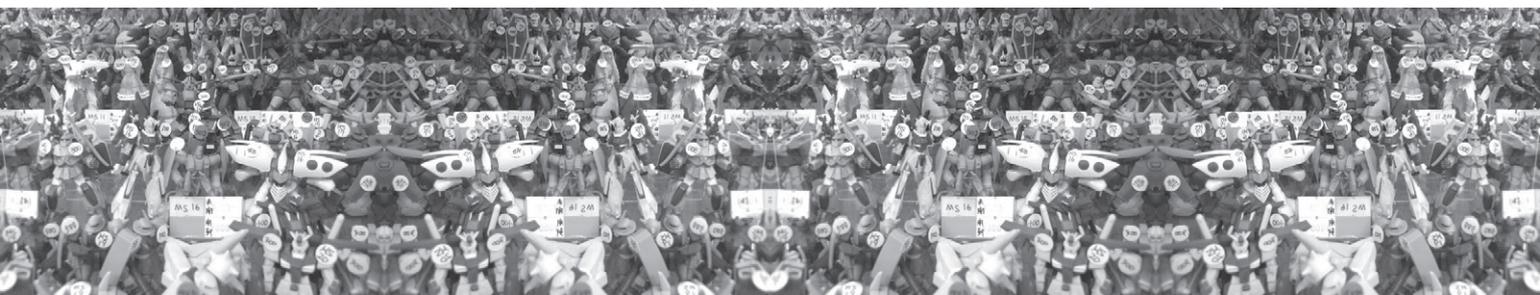
# is beautiful

by Jarrik Ouburg

*Beauty shows itself to us when we don't expect it. It grabs you by the throat. A city where you can expect anything but where you are hardly ever prepared for what will happen next, is **Tokyo**.*

*It is not the city itself but rather its urbanity, its scale and density that make this city an inexhaustible source of beauty. Dealing with the beauty of Tokyo is dealing with the beauty of urban life itself.*

image below: density of japanese dolls in Tokyo's window displays



# Tokyo

Tokyo doesn't immediately bring a slick image to mind like Paris and London do. In a guidebook or on the Internet it is unlikely that you will find a picture of the city trying to persuade you to visit. Instead, you will probably find an image of a Buddha statue, cherry blossom or a bowl of rice.

Tokyo has disguised this absence of a clear image by using Mt. Fuji as a representative, a mountain one hundred kilometers away from the city-center. In recent centuries Mt. Fuji has been the undisputed icon of the city. In many pictures of the city dating from the period that Tokyo was still named Edo (1603-1867) the mountain is always somewhere on the background. Sometimes Mt. Fuji dominated the picture with the city as an extra somewhere on the foreground.

One of the world's largest human settlements was being represented by a natural phenomenon.

The immense industrial development of Japan after WWII has changed that situation. The amount of smog that the city has created since has had a disastrous effect on the visibility of the city. The image of Mt. Fuji has literally gone up in smoke.

On contemporary pictures of the city the mountain is conspicuously absent. The city is now shown in Mangas, the very popular Japanese comic books, the way it really is: an endless urban desert made out concrete, perforated by windows and rivers of asphalt.

The reason why the city is so hard to decipher lies in the fact that public space is hardly designed. Urban interventions à la Haussmann's in Paris are unthinkable for the state because most of the property is privately owned, divided into an innumerable amount of little plots. Expropriation was never part of the vocabulary urban planners because real estate is the most important possession for a family in Tokyo.

From the street level you experience the city like some kind of fog where small detached houses alternate with supermarkets and here and there is a school. You can read on a lamppost in which ward you are, and signs saying 'Welcome to...' or 'Thank you for visiting...' let you know that you have actually entered or left the city, because visually Tokyo never stops and never begins.

Yet in this urban fog, beauty can be found just as frequently and definitely as intense as in a typical postcard-city. Two

urban principles underlie this phenomenon: scale and density. Two simple principles but when driven to the extreme they create beauty.

# Scale

It is a paradox of urbanism that the more inhabitants a city counts, the less contact there is between these inhabitants. One experiences the enormous scale of Tokyo (13.500 km<sup>2</sup>) among other things by the overwhelming amount of people one encounters everyday.

People start to lose their meaning. Man becomes mass. The masses don't address you and you don't address the masses.

This anonymity brings also great freedom to the individual. We seem to be freed from shame and responsibilities.

Freed from responsibilities towards fellow man, because someone else will probably help the old lady cross the street.

Freed from shame because the chance that you will meet someone you know, and for whom you want to keep up a certain appearance, is reduced to zero. Two million people pass Shinjuku-station, one of Tokyo's busiest hubs, per day. Often you see girls shamelessly doing their make up in the subway because the one they are making themselves pretty for is not in the packed wagon anyway.

A big city has another impact on human behavior. It becomes difficult to move through. Mass is slow.

When the traveling time between you and your relatives or friends becomes more than one and a half hours, it has an impact on your social life. However social minded you are, you will spend more time alone, if only in the train to visit your friend.

In this state of isolation one becomes more receptive to one's surroundings.

Beauty only reveals itself to us when we concentrate on what we see. This can only happen in total physical or mental isolation.

Beauty reveals itself to the individual and not to the masses.

It is for example virtually impossible to truly see the beauty of Rembrandt's Night watch because the four meters in front of



the painting are packed with people all pointing at it and talking about it. It is more likely that the true geniality of the painter will strike us when we are eye to eye with a small sketch of the master somewhere in a back alley of the museum. Individualization may be considered as one of the negative effects of a big city but it is also one of its achievements in that that it makes people more receptive to beauty.

# Density

It is not only the size of a city but also its density that has an effect on its observer. It detaches the observer from his normal hasty way of looking and lets him enter into a new relationship between him and his surroundings.

Take for example a train ride in the Yamanote-line, the ring-line of Tokyo. When you are with ten other people in a compartment it is possible to see everybody and to take in every one of them. When all the seats are taken that becomes more difficult, let alone if also all the standing places are taken. During rush hour a train ride between Shinjuku and Shibuya-station, two of the main hubs on the Yamanote-line, has an occupancy rate of 230 percent. There is more than two times the amount of people in the train than what is considered possible.

In this density a person is just overwhelmed with information with the result of only experiencing noise.

Two million people in Shinjuku-station are a lot but what is more important is how you experience this number of people. Los Angeles is a city of 12 million inhabitants but still you experience this city as cozy suburb.

Tokyo itself can feel just as crowded as the train at rush hour, but it can be also just as soothing. It is like the difference between the annoying leaking tap, dripping one drop at a time in the sink, and the tranquilizing effect that a waterfall has upon you.

A district like Kabukicho is simply overgrown in such a high density with advertisement-boards for karaoke-bars, pachinko-parlors, restaurants, cabaret shows etc. that it becomes difficult to distinguish them from one another. One can understand one neon-sign very well, ten also. When within your field of vision more than one hundred signs are all screaming for you attention they start to lose their function, their information.

When objects lose their information, then you can judge them on their beauty. Beauty is actually the only thing left what they can be judged upon.

It is for example not the signs anymore but the spaces in between the signs that become relevant and beautiful in the way they are accidentally composed.

When after a rain shower you look down, but actually look up because of the reflection in a puddle. Ordinary billboards become beautifully unreadable because they are seen upside down and the shape of the puddle reformed their shape.

This state of observation, a trance caused by an overload of information, is one of the conditions that a person has to be in if she wants to experience beauty at all.

The three-dimensional way with which Tokyo deals with its density makes this city very special and a source of beauty. It seems like the program of the city is randomly dispersed over the buildings. Many buildings in Tokyo become some kind of magic box where you never know what you will find.

Like the unexpectedness of the punch line is essential in humor, the unexpectedness of a city is essential for experiencing its beauty.

You are on your way to a swimming pool on the sixth floor and the elevator door opens for another person on the fourth floor and you are at that moment literally in a barbershop. This barbershop becomes the most beautiful one you have ever seen, the one beneath the swimming pool and above the ice-cream parlor.

# Beauty

When 'Beauty lies in the eye of the beholder', then the beholder becomes actually more important than the object of observation. If you want to create beauty, you should focus on the observer and not on the object.

The city of Tokyo is an example of how a city through its scale and density has an effect on people, on its observers. It detaches them from their hasty way of looking. It brings the observer in a state of total surrender to its environment combined with utmost concentration on that same environment. In such a state beauty can be expected around every corner.

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