



This Attentive Place

*Ideas prompted by Caoimhe Kilfeather's installation*

There are days when every thought or sensation seems to evoke another from a different time or place; hard boundaries between now and then are eroded. They are sensed and rooted in the present but are transformed, without volition, into memories that are almost as immediate. This experience, it would appear, only happens when we are relaxed, unworried, and detached; it comes upon us spontaneously and can take place any time and anywhere, but perhaps most often on warm and sunny days, when the sky is pure blue - or, if not, in the transitional hours of dusk or dawn, when the hard outlines of things are already softened.

Something comparable, but utterly different, happens in the Japanese tea ceremony, where everything is ritualized, slowed down, attention is brought to bear on the present moment, and we become more intensely aware of the singularity of our surroundings. Experience becomes more focused and light; boundaries may blur, but edges remain crisp. In the *chashitsu*, or tea house, light is often dim, but through the sliding windows or doors, usually covered in translucent paper, there may be a view onto a small garden, sometimes a little unruly, but usually carefully maintained. The interior, however, is always calm and subdued; it may contain a small stove, a kettle, a few beautiful objects, a scroll, and a flower arrangement.

In his classic book on Japanese aesthetics, *In Praise of Shadows*, Junichiro Tanizaki develops some expressive thoughts about darkness and light. 'The quality that we call beauty,' he writes, must always grow from the realities of life, and our ancestors, forced to live in dark rooms,

presently came to guide shadows towards beauty's ends. And so it has come to be that the beauty of a Japanese room depends on variations of shadows – heavy shadows against light shadows – it has nothing else.' And in the temples of Kyoto, he remarks, there are often treasures in deeply recessed alcoves, whose outlines can only barely be discerned.

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In a western cultural context, it is probably Gaston Bachelard who has most astutely explored the experience of intimate places. In the celebrated *The Poetics of Space* he reflects on the resonance and ambivalence of rooms and enclosures; he considers, for instance, the porous nature of 'outside' and 'inside', and suggests that what we experience in and of the world is not just 'objective' but is also embedded in our feelings and states of mind. 'Poetic space' takes us beyond what we experience with our senses; it is expansive, effusive, and always in movement. It is real, it rings true, but we are not sure how. Roland Barthes, a little more dryly, made a related point when he wrote about the 'third meaning' of things, a category of meaning that is usually obtuse or puzzling, but nonetheless potent. Certain objects, he thought, pick up density and texture as they move through consciousness.

These days there is much interest in 'affect' theory, in the varied and unpredictable consequences of relations and contingencies. Our lives, whether we are conscious of this process or not, are deeply influenced by unforeseen impulses, sensations, expectations, memories, and daydreams; and also, in contrast, by those moments when we are distracted or detached. It is easier to become aware of the subtleties of our inner lives when we slow down,

when we are in calm environments and our anxieties are reduced, when our mood is not sharp, angular, or restless – perhaps, as Tanizaki might have suggested, when, literally or metaphorically, we are in a shadowy environment.

And then there is Walter Benjamin who, in his lengthy and impenetrable book, *The Arcades Project*, set himself the task of tracing some of the possible worlds that are captured in material things. His thought, someone has said, pressed close to his subjects in order to be affected by them; it was then articulated in proposals, suggestions, and short observations - fragments held together densely and without resolution.

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The young writer Anik See's *Saudade – Possibilities of Place* is a series of psychogeographic essays in which she reflects on what might be accomplished if we were to abandon our contemporary sense of entitlement and tried, instead, to understand our fellow man. In a capitalist society that encourages us to believe that we can have almost anything and that our desires are limitless, how much is enough? Her answers to these questions remain open.

The places I like, she writes, that I keep going back to or that I seek out for some reason, are places that remind me of a kind of innocence, or more specifically of simplicity, of an innocence of complication. I've always believed, she observes, that there is more to be learned from the reduction than the amplification of sensory experience. This means that we can get to the essence or cut to the quick, which is especially important for those who easily get lost in the intensity of things.

*Saudade*, a Portuguese term, but one that is perhaps more commonly associated with Brazil, is a feeling of longing or yearning for some place, person, or thing; it is the wistful recollection of an experience that has passed and that may be impossible to regain precisely because it never really existed in the first place. *Saudade* is a form of idealization, a desire to go back, for instance, to somewhere that once was home, where we belonged, even if it wasn't and we didn't. My *saudade*, writes Anik See, involves invisibility, which is a complicated desire that contains elements of both humility and selfishness. I spend my whole life trying not to be seen, which has the effect of turning me inwards into myself. It also involves time and space for contemplation, although this may be something that is a natural product of silence and invisibility.

*John Hutchinson*

