

Beauty and Chaos:
Slices and Morsels of Tokyo Life

By Michael Pronko

Raked Gravel Press 2014

Beauty and Chaos: Slices and Morsels of Tokyo Life

By Michael Pronko

First paperback edition, 2014

Typesetting by FormattingExperts.com

Copyright © 2014 Michael Pronko

First English Edition, Raked Gravel Press

First Japanese Edition, Media Factory publishers, 2006

All rights reserved worldwide. This book may not be reproduced in any form, in whole or in part, without written permission from the author.

Cover Design © 2014 Marco Mancini

ISBN 978-1-942410-00-3

Table of Contents

Part One: Fastidious Refinement, A Meticulous Love of Life

No Space Left Unmapped	11
Automatic Tea Ceremony	17
Floods of Advertising—On Sale Now!	23
What’s Your Bag?	27
Life Delivered to the Door	31
Half Empty or Half Full? Walls of Bottles	35
Waiting to Blossom—Cherry Tree Maps	41
How I Ended Up Here	45

Part Two: A Beautiful Confusion

Frames of Emptiness	53
-------------------------------	----

Clothing That Shouts—T-shirt Words	59
Standing Libraries	65
Reading the Signs	71
The Point of Point Cards	77
The Noisiest Time of Year	81
Ordered Around—Public Rules	85
The Delicate Ritual of Small Change	89
A Big Bowl of Japan	93

Part Three: Scenes from the Train

The Paperback-Cellphone hypothesis	101
The Pumpkin Train—Late Night Commuting	107
Hanging On the Meaning	113
The Ebb and Flow of Human Motion	119
All the World's a Stage-Train Platforms	125
Slideshow Lives, Glimpses Inside	131
Both Directions at Once, Change in the City	137

Tokyo's Million Marathons 141

No Time to Spare—Schedules 147

Part Four: Beauty and Chaos, Slices and Morsels of Tokyo Life

Souvenirs from the Land of Impulse—Don Quixote . 153

Elegant Eating—the Art of Chopsticks 159

What Goes Around Comes Around—Pachinko . . . 163

The Tradition of Banners 169

The Summer Whispers and Calls 175

Bathing in *Kanji*—Hanging Menus 179

Pink Power 185

Floating in a Sea of Words 189

Singing in the Rainy Season 193

Part Five: A Maze of the Mind

Up and Down and Down and Up—City of Stairs . . 199

A-maze-ing Tokyo 205

The Shiny and the Rough	211
Escalators to Heaven	215
The Love of Small Places	219
Around and Around—Going in Circles	223
Bonsai Buildings	227

Part Six: After Words

Seeing the City, Reading the City	235
The City Provokes Me—Why I Write These	241
Japan and Me	247
After Words and Thanks	255
Glossary	263
Dedication	271
About the author	273

It was like a metaphor.

Cees Nooteboom

You must stay drunk on writing so reality cannot destroy you.

Ray Bradbury

Tokyo is an empire of signs.

Roland Barthes

Tokyo is an empire of relations.

Saiichi Maruyama

Confusion is a virtue.

Chinese saying

Part One

**Fastidious Refinement,
A Meticulous Love of Life**

No Space Left Unmapped

Maps are an essential part of life in Tokyo. Every bookstore carries a wide selection of city maps, tourist maps, graphic atlases for driving, walking, or train-ing, and map-laden guidebooks for everything from historical walks to shopping streets to bar hopping. Department stores post floor-by-floor layouts, restaurants hand out enticingly mapped flyers, and office building lobbies post diagrams as often as office numbers. Cell phones access on-screen maps, websites magnify and customize maps, while computerized navigation maps in cars and taxis even talk!

Then there are the train maps—of all the different lines, of the station interiors, of the station exits, of the train car doors most convenient to transfer at different stations down the line, and of the areas surrounding the exits. Racks offer glossy paper maps of the nearest *chome*. Then, once outside the station, there are those quaint, half-rusty metal maps clamped onto fences that show every small slice of nearby territory in hand-painted detail.

What kind of a city would spawn so many maps? I am not sure which amazes me more—the level of detail or their omnipresence. This peculiarly Tokyoite obsession is more

Beauty and Chaos

than just practicality, I think. Of course, even the most experienced commuter or hardened shopper needs a map from time to time, but something more is at work with all these maps.

I notice this affection/obsession most often at the wide banks of ticket machines at stations. Plastered above the machines are huge megalopolis-wide train maps. The colors, ovals, balloons, varying marks, differing versions, brief annotations, and highly simplified lines all struggle to clarify the complexities of the train systems. These are not easy to use, of course, but people stand and stare longer than they really need to verify their direction. They seem to take pleasure in just following the flow of lines, considering alternative routes, mulling over the journey, and pondering how the immense sprawl of the city can be condensed into three white panels.

On the train, I always stand where I can see the diagram of train lines stretched over the door. They hang there not just for ease, but majestically, like a cryptic Buddhist saying over a wooden temple door. I notice other commuters also staring at these maps or gazing at the single-line list-map of station names. Rather than just whiling away a boring commute, they seem to be enjoying the accumulating passage of each station as they ride along. The map at times seems better than the city itself passing outside, or at least more comprehensible.

On Tokyo's streets, I often see perplexed people searching for places. They surreptitiously check the map in hand against the concrete confusion of actual cityscape. Even normally reserved Tokyoites chuckle when at last they find the right place, sometimes even pointing with glee at the actual place that has appeared, finally, almost magically, right in front of them. When that happens, the map has worked its navigational trick, so that one feels like a world-class adventurer. Though Tokyo's territory is perhaps the most thoroughly gone over cartographically of any in the world, from an individual standpoint, it very often feels unexplored.

Part of that constant newness of Tokyo comes from its visual plane of surfaces, outsides, windows, side streets and odd cut-ups of space that make it hard to process. To get anywhere, the mind has to exclude the unnecessary and focus on the relevant. Maps reflect this mental process perfectly. They offer a kind of self-locating comfort—a reassurance through artistic simplification. The *Yamanote* line, which in fact coils around awkwardly like a dead snake, becomes a prim, perfect oval with colored lines spinning out in all directions like sunrays. The style is smoothed and rounded, almost cute. Some harried days, without that near-comic compactness, the city would just be too overwhelming.

After all, Tokyo is NOT a comforting city of straight,

Beauty and Chaos

easy-to-follow lines. Its logic, if there is one, is hidden deep. Yet, on maps, the city seems to make perfect sense. The jangled, frazzling chaos of the city appears neat and ordered. All is connected; all is positioned. The gargantuan proportions of the city can be taken in at a glance. Maps allow us to step back from time to time with a welcome two-dimensional abstraction.

Maps then are something like X-rays. They strip down the city to its essence and reveal its inner structure. They remove the bewildering surface distractions of Tokyo and let us see the city very differently. Maps trim away the extras to reveal the inner connections, and, more importantly, its intangible beauty. Maps offer an aesthetic sense of permanence amid the constant, at times aggravating, flow of trains, people, bikes, cars and construction. Maps remind us that the city, despite its ongoing self-renewal, has continuance, like a plant that grows back in the same way, no matter how often you cut it.

But perhaps the most intriguing part of Tokyo's maps is the smallest—the little red marker that says, “You are here.” That point helps locate oneself in the middle of the hustle-bustle of the city with startling reality. No one ever really sees the city as a map does; even the tallest skyscraper offers only half-angled views and the street allows only baffling, too-human-sized perspectives. So whenever I look at a map of Tokyo, (and fortunately, I get

No Space Left Unmapped

to look rather often), I relish first the grand, impossible, top-down perspective, and then I search for that little red marker, that lets me think to myself, yes, I really am here.

Automatic Tea Ceremony

Whenever you need a drink in Tokyo, you need not walk far. Vending machines sprout up like metal mushrooms in every once-empty stretch of urban space. A lone vending machine poking up in the middle of a park, breaking up a block-long temporary construction wall, or set into the fence of a soon-to-be-developed plot of land would surprise no Tokyoite. The surprise is when you can't find one.

My first reaction to all these machines was how many, how ugly and how tacky-cheap they were. Cigarettes, condoms, alcohol, flowers, tickets and even rice can all be had at the drop of a coin and the poke of a button. Buying any of these from a machine seemed to be a symbol of the cold, distancing forces of technology and so-called convenience. These white boxes of wasted energy stood as a testament to the dehumanizing forced-feeding style of Japanese consumerism, just another way to con another 100 yen from my pocket and avoid wages for employees.

Gradually, though, I realized the genius of these brief, little pleasure centers. To stop and have a cold something at any of the white behemoths bolted into concrete corners and onto underused walls is anything but alienating.

Beauty and Chaos

Rather, in the midst of the mad flow of Tokyo, a slim syringe of cold tea is highly restorative. Stopping to suckle a canful of fluid helps to insert into the jabbering, adult conversation of commuting a pause, a breath, the open silence of a Japanese sentence that speaks volumes. In Tokyo, slowing the flow by stopping to take a moment for re-hydration or sugar loading is very needed at times.

What you really get for 100 yen, or 110 or 120 yen, is a cold, wet shiver of stationary comfort, or a warm-up in the cold when the machines switch to hot drinks, and a moment of quietude before charging back into the fray. If you were to completely stop in a café, say, it would be harder to re-start the engines and get going again. Drink vending machines are like the little cups of water handed to marathon runners as they pass by. They are comfort stations in the *ekiden* rush of Tokyo life. Grab one and run on.

Of course, you could do that at any of the *kissaten* coffee shops or small shops everywhere and anywhere in Tokyo, but that's different. Entering into the interior of another space, public as it is, means entering into a whole realm of conventions and obligations. The mere task of ordering an ice coffee sometimes just seems too much. Vending machines remain entirely outside of all social engagement. They are neater, quicker, smoother, and less trouble. Simple and satisfying, they sanction anonymity. They re-

quire no polite language exchanges.

That doesn't mean cold, distant and inhuman, however. The very simplicity is transformative; the clinking drop of the coin becomes a gurgling drop of liquid, the primal human intake, individual desire, pure self-centeredness. It is very human indeed, like a fantasy where one can stand and drink and relish the illusion of the importance of one's own personal inner narrative of need.

After all, the machine is only the outward symbolic front of human input. An entire network of social, psychological, economic, and technological complexity is contained behind the cheerful, bulbous front of drink machines. One night, I saw six men hefting a pristine new machine up a flight of stairs in a station. It took them about five minutes per stair, even with the special stair-climbing handcart they used. The vending machine was like a miniature pre-fab building, only more complex.

Caretakers of the machines come around during off hours, wheeling heavy stacks of boxed cans. It is also always a little shocking to see them open the machine for re-stocking or repair. Seeing the revealed innards, the sharply poised sprockets, the punched steel dividers and wild springy wires is almost obscene. We relish the normal covering up, the unexposed magic of the machine, the colorful membrane of functionality. Once the cover's shut,

Beauty and Chaos

the machines have a cuteness and compactness that appeals to the heart of most Tokyoites.

Yet, the vending machine purchase is not really a loss of traditional, social interaction. It might seem the crude negation of the elaborate rituals of shared eating and drinking ceremonies or the chatty stopover along the ancient *Tokaido* highway, but the root is the same. What seems a little tacky, cold and impulsive is also very practical, comforting and spiritual. The blend of human and mechanical, ritual and relaxed, aesthetic and practical are as different as watching a historical drama on TV is from going to see kabuki at a theater. But at heart, vending machines are a kind of rough, commonplace reincarnation of the refined delicacy of that most Japanese of cultural expressions—the tea ceremony.

To me, this feels curiously spiritual, offering a hint of animism and the resignation of re-established ritual. Out of respect, and a kind of awe, for this mysterious production of pleasure, drinkers, coin droppers, lots and lots of them all over Tokyo, bow deferentially to the modern shrine to technology. To pick up the can from the black receptacle at the bottom of the machine, a respectful bow of the entire body is unavoidable. With the slim metal slot substituting for the wooden collection box of a temple, and the button and buzz substituting for a rope and bell, the machine seems to waken the hiding gods to hear our petty

Automatic Tea Ceremony

little silent prayers, as shrine goers do all over the country, and come down and out to enjoy with us a moment of fleeting delight.

Floods of Advertising—On Sale Now!

Every so often in Tokyo, I step completely into an advertisement. At least it feels that way when an entire train is engulfed in an all-over promotional campaign. When every single spot inside a train features one new product's image over and over, I know that once again, I have been swallowed up by the Japanese concept of *shinhatsubai*.

Shinhatsubai is a potent concept. A kind of advertising madness that springs from the world of commercial consumerism, *shinhatsubai* campaigns blanket the visual space of Tokyo with a peculiar kind of energy. In Tokyo's high-energy market, *shinhatsubai* stands as one of the most characteristic expressions of Tokyo's consumer mindset. In Europe and America, too, newness appeals, and sells, but in Tokyo, newness seems an obsession.

What amazes me most is how any new item of any sort can be put on sale? Where would it fit? Every shelf in every store in Tokyo is so jammed to rush-hour-like capacity with products and more products. There isn't even any room for more shelves, nor more stores either. So when I see the *shinhatsubai*, I wonder where anything could possibly fit.

Beauty and Chaos

Of course, old products have to be taken away. Retired or out-of-date products disappear quietly into obscurity, while advertising directs everyone's attention to newness. An entire product cycle of birth and death recurs over and over again, with each *shinhatsubai* advertising sounding like the over-enthusiastic pride of a new baby announcement.

Many products appear regularly or seasonally. A new style of beer is concocted at least every season, like some quarterly report on beer factories, despite beer being perhaps the oldest product in the history of civilization. Gum, lipstick, and video games, all constantly have the necessity of *shinhatsubai*. Every week or so bright new flavors, splashy new colors, and clever new ways to video-kill new characters appear in these ads.

Something about *shinhatsubai*, though, seems very different from stereotypical Japanese character. Normal people would never jump out and thrust their *meishi* name cards at you or shout wildly at you on first meeting. Just the opposite, Japanese are usually calm, quiet and reserved—exactly opposite to how *shinhatsubai* slaps you in the face with attention grabbing techniques.

The techniques of *shinhatsubai* advertising, too, seem unlike Japanese aesthetics. The lettering feels loose, wild and extravagant. The *kanji* seem to burst from the page, shooting up to the right or across the top with breathless

excitement. For me, that electric kind of lettering feels so different from the graceful curves and elegant *kanji* usually respected in Japanese culture.

The smiles on the faces and the pose of the bodies, too, feel fake and contrived. Like with beer, there is simply nothing new in human bodies, but the nubile young women posed with enticing voluptuousness try hard to create the illusion of newness. The body language of *shinhatsubai* models conveys over-enthusiastic messages that lack the appeal of natural looks.

Then, there are the little give-aways. Key rings, folders, jackets, small boxes, and plastic containers, all sent for “free.” Those little brand products further the advertising into other areas where the average advertisement could never reach—into homes, out on picnics, into cars, and deep in purses. The feeling of “*shin*” must disappear in all those places pretty quickly.

There is a backlash in Japan, though, too. Non-advertised goods have their own appeal and sense of elegance. Whether these goods are high-class or *fureeta* fashion, they refuse advertising to gain a kind of non-advertised notice. Their appeal lies outside of or beyond the predictable confines of *shinhatsubai* presentation. “I don’t know that” becomes the alternative to *shinhatsubai*, and can be just as appealing.

All this newness seems the harmless diversion of

Beauty and Chaos

a commercial fantasy. The impression one gets from all the *shinhatsubai* campaigns is that products are constantly being created with tremendous novelty, yet, in reality, most products have only the slightest of developments. They just loudly label themselves “new.” The emphasis of *shinhatsubai* is really not on the first *kanji*, *shin*, for “new” but on the last, *bai* for “sale.” It just takes a lot of advertising energy to pretend otherwise.