

Protest Debate

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I found a note in my then mess-of-a-sketch-book, which I had taken down in the library of the University of Kitakyushu.

"It is recourse to the rational and reasonable for the ideal of universal communion that characterizes the age-long endeavor of all philosophies in their aspiration for a city of man in which violence may progressively give way to wisdom."
Chaim Perelman, *The Idea of Justice and the Problem of Argumentation* (1963).

I had remembered reading this passage, and found the sketchbook in the boxes I was meant to sort through in my mother's front room back in Nova Scotia. Violence giving way to wisdom. There is a special place in my memory for that point; like some as yet unexploited deposit.

Pursuing my interests in decision making processes, I had been researching formal debate in Japan while on a residency in Southern Japan. Through the residency's office, I had found an extra-curricular parliamentary debate club of the University of Kitakyushu and began to attend their meetings. Looking into the history of formal debate in Japan, I had discovered that these associations had been introduced as a competitive and organized practice only following the Second World War, and with the influx of Americans and their culture, including the mandatory new constitution and new electoral democratic system. Certain sources claimed that

Japanese culture doesn't inherently have a tendency toward displays of argumentation and reasoning that the Western (European) world holds high as the language of publicness. This view is aligned with the claims that in general confrontations are avoided, meanings are intuited from subtle signs, judgments received from an authoritative hierarchy structure toward collective accommodation.

Though I wasn't sure about these generalizations of Japanese culture, I observed when taking part in the university debate club that their practice had a lot to do with learning English, and that the arguments and topics that the students came up with were sometimes strange and quaint, matters of make-believe and principle, issues they could never really decide about in any effective way. These impressions fed into the performance piece "The Appearance Debate" (2004), in which members of the debate club argued over the following resolution:

"This House would cut Michael Eddy's hair, beard and nails in order for him to be welcome as an artist in Japan."

While still in the research phases of that particular project, I came across some Japanese debate club websites, one of which had a list of all national debate tournaments held since records had begun to be compiled in the 1950s (<http://japan-debate-association.org/propo/p-list.htm>). I had observed that on this list only one of the tournaments had been cancelled, a disruption due to the students' movements sweeping across Japan in the late 1960s, which suspended many school activities and operations.

1968 Fall
"Resolved: that the U.S. should withdraw all direct and indirect economic and military resistance from Far East. (the tournament was not held due to the students movement on campus)"



Research photograph of RKU ESS Debate Club meeting, 2004.



I imagined the arguments that would have framed the 1968 tournament topic and how they would differ or resemble those performed nearly four decades later, at a time when the United States still exerted its influence and military presence in Japan, but in which the scale of the demonstrations and clashes seemed to be only a half-forgotten dream from a wild, underpoliced era.



But rather than only trying to re-create an event that never happened, I wondered if these incompatible forms of signification, the debate itself and the public demonstration, could be brought together. My idea was to organize a march in Tokyo that would be a moving debate, with the first half of the route being the presentation of arguments and counter-arguments; then

a judgment would be made at the mid-point (in a historically specific park for instance), which would subsequently form a protocol for what the rest of the march would be about: the resolved message to unite behind in the demonstration.

There was also the idea to dress in period, with those thick student politician glasses, the suit jackets and straight haircuts that denote the era, but thinking about this part today, this seems like an equivocal point; and maybe, even better than leaving the whole wardrobe question to the side, it would be more interesting to have it as an option,

thus allowing people to address their relationship with that iconic time on their own terms, ironically or not. They could also initially either carry empty signs on pickets and banners as if staging a protest without meaning, or be carrying the materials to be assembled after the judgement—a distinction between the formal traits of debate and crowd gathering, and the outward signs, the sign of someone signifying.

It comes to mind rather excitingly as an image.

But who was this they, the subjects forming the crowd? I was asking various parties about the possibility of realizing this action, for which I hoped to recruit a large group, including a now defunct community-engaged art space in Tokyo called RICE+ and various debate clubs. In March of 2005 Emiko Kato, the director of RICE+, answered my queries:

Dear Michael
I have received your message and your idea which you mentioned. I have been considering whether we could help you to realize your project.
However I will not be able help you at this moment.
The reasons why;
1. I am not sure what you need to me on your project
2. There is no budget and staff at RICE+
3. Debate as speaking English is not common in Japan, you shall find people who are interested in proceeding your project.
4. I am very busy at the moment.
If you would like to discuss it further, you please contact me. I may advise you some ways, you would be welcome to see me when you come in Tokyo.
All the best,



Instead of pushing the proposal through, the idea became frozen in a state of potentiality, suspended with the question of "who is this for?" At the time it didn't seem too much to ask people to be involved based on their own willingness to participate, but then again I didn't live in Tokyo, knew nobody who had directly participated in the movement, and my Japanese was not very good. Despite recognizing this, I neglected to keep much documentation (aside from some digital pictures of June 1968 editions of Nikkei Newspaper, found in the local Kokura archives), and allowed a yahoo account to expire with most of the correspondence relating to the project. This is the trivia of trivia.

I could equally recount the apricot fragrance of the osmanthus that haunted the aging steel town; the large beetle I saw crawling on the floor of the Kokura courtroom one afternoon; the impassivity on the face of a friend whose name I no longer recall, a student in the debate club, when he told me of the pressure he felt to enter a corporate job after graduation, as we played ping pong in the gymnasium. An unformed history, a proposal based on memory, convinces whom to do what? The oblivious youth to embark on a protest that can only circulate in virtuality?



Somehow this shred of trivia illustrated how these forms of discourse and participation were seemingly at odds with each other; the very formalistic parliamentary debate protocols and the student revolts, which in themselves had a variety of appearances, approaches and reasons. Surely Japan's student movement is a favored topic of foreigners on a stay in Japan (as the loss of radicalism is to artists and academics everywhere). The particularity of Japanese protest styles even fascinated Roland Barthes, who wrote of the significations involved in the group actions.



"... it is sometimes acknowledged that the slogans chanted by the combatants should utter not the Cause, the Subject of the action (what one is fighting for or against)—this would once again make language the expression of a reason, the assurance of a good cause—but only this action itself (The Zengakuren are going to fight), which is thereby no longer covered, directed, justified, made innocent by language—that external divinity superior to the combat, like a Marseillaise in her Phrygian bonnet—but doubled by a pure vocal exercise which simply adds to the volume of violence, a gesture, one muscle more."
Roland Barthes, *Empire of Signs*, 1970.

