

Elisa Caldana and Aki Nagasaka

in conversation with Giulia Pezzoli

GP

You are both artists with a well-developed and clearly defined individual production. When and how have you begun to collaborate for the first time? In what aspects does your work as an artistic duo complement and enhance your personal artistic paths?

AN

The seed of our collaboration was sowed a long time ago when we both studied under the artist Simon Starling at Städelschule. We talked about a possible collaboration but it didn't happen then. When we met again in London in 2016 we talked about our life situations in Europe and Japan and we shared a similar feeling of precariousness. We kept sharing our thoughts about it and, from that dialogue, we decided to work together to investigate the precariousness we are feeling and the causes of this feeling.

EC

It began with a fascination towards each other's practice, as we both employ storytelling within our work, but in different ways. I like to think that we took each other as a (rearview) mirror, a place of reflection to expand from our individual or sometimes fixed positions. Speaking as in a double voice, we moved from our personal stance to a larger perspective: on the ongoing precariousness that can affect a collectivity or a generation to the point of becoming a constitutive part of its identity. Our dialogue finally catalyzed toward addressing and deconstructing precariousness, seen as the condition of several ongoing, simultaneous crises. Some crises happen, others are provoked. And it is fascinating and frightening how "crisis" is a vague, fuzzy concept, like an abstraction that can refer to diverse, multiple, albeit concrete realities, but also a device and system of control that can shape society and individual lives or reiterate injustices and inequalities.

GP

Do your different cultural origins influence your work as individual artists? If so, how do they combine when you work together?

AN

I grew up in a newtown in the suburb of Osaka, Japan in the 1980s-90s and left for the United States when I was in high school. I received all my art education in the West but as I continue my art practice I recognize more clearly that my worldview and the way I think and position myself have largely been shaped by Japanese culture and Asian philosophies. When Elisa and I work together, we constantly communicate about how we see things and I gain a different perspective from it. However, I try not to forcefully combine our perspectives or gestures because I believe that

coexistence of multiple perspectives and expressions and tension created from it are part of the vital elements in our work.

EC

We frequently talk about how we share a similar position or pull toward the figure of the outsider. It is in this position or gaze of the outsider that our interests meet. Similarly to Aki, I grew up at the periphery of a city. In a small town on the outskirts of Pordenone, a province in Northern Italy. Our places of origin share the trait of not being at the centre. And this point of view, that of the outsider, stands as a recurring presence within our works.

GP

How would you define each other's artistic practice and what fascinates you most about each other's practice?

EC

What fascinates me most about Aki's work is her attention toward the points of view of the more-than-human. In this sense, I feel she approaches the role of the outsider in a more radical sense by including other species. I would say that her practice is multi-layered, precise, ephemeral. I am also intrigued by the part of her work that remains unseen, as it does not get frozen into straightforward documentation. That includes the research processes that she engages in, allowing her to enter into the viewpoints of other beings to include their perspective and narrative into the work. I enjoy how she makes worlds and constructs stories, mapping and weaving singular, complex ecosystems.

AN

Elisa is insightful, playful and open to explore unknowns, which is why I enjoy working with her. But what I find most fascinating about her practice are the tensions created from different impulses; conceptual/elegant and punk/anarchistic, theoretical/dramatic, robust/light, and etc. The way these tensions balance and are manifested give energy to her work and it changes every time, but I see this unique quality as the signature of her practice. Her boldness to engage and express dramatic elements in life is also an aspect I admire in her work.

GP

The project you are presenting on the occasion of ROSE_05, *Times of Crisis*, began in 2018 with the Tokyo Arts and Space, the international residency program of the Tokyo Museum of Contemporary Art. That of Bologna therefore constitutes a second phase of reflection. How was *Times of Crisis* born and how do the researches developed for Tokyo and Bologna relate to each other? Can we talk about a "European variation" of the project?

EC

At the very beginning, we were attracted to general notions designed to address different groups of people, like that of the Lost Generation. We wanted to look for these notions in the concrete and visible fabric of a city, in which the other person would play the role of a counter-voice, for example, by being in a situation in which I was the visitor, and she (Aki) was the local, and vice versa. In Tokyo, we spent a significant amount of time walking in the city and talking with local people, with the deliberate intention of going back to the basics of a first-person encounter and direct experience of being in a specific city at a particular time. Personally, the more I attempted to engage with and live in the place, the more I was entering into a void: most of the idea of the place remained fictional and generated through mediations, translations, stories, filters, etc. After the experience in Tokyo, there was a long time of incubation. Bologna became a place for catalyzing this incubation that happened separately and in dialogue remotely, in a timeframe stretched by the pandemic. In this time frame, the word crisis was mentioned more and more in relation to so many aspects of life and assumed a global dimension, taking in the climate, the pandemic, the availability of resources, to name but a few. Bologna is a European continuation of the project because we inhabited and unfolded its second chapter right in conjunction with the city's layered scenarios. At the same time, the previous chapter got unrooted from Tokyo and became the lens through which we entered the new city. In a sense, *Times of Crisis* reflects a colliding of multi-localities.

AN

The Tokyo part gave us intense and overflowing experiences of closely looking at different issues and situations manifested in particular areas of Tokyo or particular Tokyoite individuals. It challenged us to understand the crisis from multiple perspectives; economically, politically, ethically, and ecologically. Personally, it also challenged me to think how art and artists can be useful for others and society beyond the frames of exhibitions and art communities. All these issues and questions are universal in their roots. After almost three years of internal reflections, our ongoing conversation and individual practices, we are trying to present the essence of Tokyo and the life of Tokyoites in Bologna through storytelling. As Elisa says, an imaginary city emerges from the intersection of our stories and incidents and situations taking place in this imaginary city have universality and resonance to audiences from all localities.

GP

Given the complexity and the relevance of the issues covered and the duration of the creative process of the entire *Times of Crisis* project, how did you choose the development and implementation of the works presented on this occasion?

EC

On one side, we let time work with our impressions of the city of Tokyo. We had gathered these impressions while in Tokyo and, afterwards, we individually allowed time for the unprocessed materials to come to the surface. With distance, a vision and memories of Tokyo emerged that had more to do with the imaginary than with something traceable. This movement toward vagueness and uncertainty interests me. It opens a space for turning concrete and ephemeral situations into settings devoid of specificity, empty grounds waiting to be inhabited by alternative narratives. With this in mind, we employed storytelling and fiction as devices for testing and speculating on some situations of crisis, for testing approaches or alternative positions - counternarratives. Each of us started from different points to develop various trajectories while reporting on connection points. The works in the exhibitions are access points, doors or windows, to these worlds that were generated in the process. I was, and still am, haunted by the thought that it is in the means, and strategies, in which you try to escape a crisis that you risk repeating the same systems of oppression that generate the crisis in the first place.



For example, the work *Shutterstreet* and its different configurations originated from walking and observing the shopping streets in Tokyo, from the noises and overcrowding in Kabukichō, and in the shopping arcades of Nakano and Koenji. I was attracted by the plurality and multitude of an ever-growing accumulation of shop-signs, all competing to catch and hold the attention of the passersby. In contrast with their noisy appearance, there was the nighttime silence of the shops with their closed shutters. Their presence felt immobile, in standstill, fixed in time. There I discovered

that the type of streets that are generated when all shops are closed have a name in Japan: シャッター通り (Shattā-dōri, literally “shutterstreet”). During the pandemic this image of the closed shops became global. While in lockdown myself, I started recording the voicemails of closed businesses all over the world, as a way to find and give back a voice to the stillness. It resulted in an accumulation of voices and messages in different languages that are similar in content and give the impression of a shared collective experience. In Bologna too, I have been observing the closed shutters of the shops under the arcades, with their hand-written messages, their drawings and stickers. They are like boards and halfway spaces, in between the private and the public, and they embody the changing spirit of a city.

GP

In this second step you have chosen to use comics and the traditional illustration technique of Manga to bring a selection of stories set in Tokyo to Bologna. The realization will take place through the involvement of professional Manga illustrators who will give form to the social stories that you have created. Why did you chose Manga to illustrate these themes? What are the social aspects that you wanted to deal with in your narratives?

AN

Even in our individual practices, Elisa and I fuse real and fictional elements in our storytelling, but especially for this occasion of transplanting our Tokyo stories in Bologna for Italian and European audiences, we knew that the level of abstraction would be the key variable. We thought that some kind of illustration would be adequate to achieve the level we were looking for and by using Manga illustrations audiences would immediately associate the work with Japan. When Elisa mentioned that Bologna has been a capital of Fumetto illustrations and picture books, it felt inevitable for us to work with Manga illustrators to create images that would accompany our stories.

The points I try to illuminate in my stories are: power inequalities and muted violence manifested in different situations in society, the wisdom individual people and creatures make use of to live through these situations, and inclusion of perspectives from other creatures and entities into society. For example, in one of my stories no humans appear, only jellyfish. When we were in Tokyo, we started seeing jellyfish in the canal close to our residence at certain times of the day. They commuted back and forth from Tokyo Bay to the canal via the Sumida River with sea tides. Their presence taught me that the force of nature is still at work despite the city being highly developed and controlled. I was also intrigued by their

adaptability and passivity: while their bodies are almost all constituted by water, they adapt to live in diverse qualities of water including warm waste water from factories and the relatively dirty water of the Sumida River. And they have to keep moving to stay alive; they don't swim themselves but make use of the tides and waves. When I was observing all the office workers commuting everyday in packed trains I thought that there was a great deal of wisdom we could learn from those jellyfish. It made me think about a future in which there were no humans but only jellyfish living in Tokyo.



GP

In fact, on this occasion, you went out of the exhibition venue to disseminate your stories in the urban context of Bologna through the printing and posting of large format posters, equipped with a QR code in such a way as to allow the public to listen to the narratives connected to the series of images. How does this part of the project integrate with the works exhibited in the Villa?

AN

The combination of our inclination to expand our work outside the art context and various obstacles caused by the pandemic gave us an idea to not only use the villa but also the city of Bologna as a space to show our work. This turn of events has surely given the project more energy and it would help us reach a wider audience that we might not reach otherwise. While posters in the city would offer audiences and passers-by a fragmented image and story of Tokyo or an imaginary place embedded in Bologna, the work at the villa would offer audiences a full immersion into the imaginary city of Tokyo and the individual stories.

GP

How constitutive is the relationship with the audience in *Times of Crisis*?

EC

In *Times of Crisis*, we gave up on having complete control of the visitors' experience when encountering the works. We did not stage a fixed way of experiencing them. Our intention is that their stories address an expanded, extended audience. Anyone will access their stories in a fragmented way, by chance at a bus stop, or they can listen to the narrations from their bedroom. To us, the existence of the works is not limited to the walls of a building. The stories and the experience of them are thus fluid, unfixed, and can be mixed, rearranged, and eventually rewritten, adding to the different contexts. We considered this to give it a form that could spread and provide the possibility of encounters in other settings, not totally under our control, outside of our control, outside of the frame.