

The Big One: Tokyo

Tokyo, Ginza, Komatsu art space, 1995

A two-part installation; eleven outdoor triptychs, flowers placed in front of them, and a tower made of photo transparencies by Daniel Bräg, exhibited at the Komatsu Art Space from May 16 to June 15

“How horrible!

This is beyond imagination.”

State President Tomiichi Murayama, commenting on the destructive earthquake in Kobe

On December 23, 1994, I arrived at Narita Airport. On January 17, 1995, more than 6400 people died in a strong earthquake. From that day onward, we were accompanied by silent fear: “at night I lay awake, listening to the tiniest noises. My fear is quiet. I hear the children breathing. How quickly can bulldozers crush a house?”

I started my first conversation-based work.

I asked people in my immediate surroundings if they were worried about a big earthquake in Tokyo. Out of many personal conversations, I filtered out eleven quotes that formulated the feelings that were secreted away as much as possible. I laid out fresh flowers in front of my objects in eight different public squares.

Excerpt from "Memento Mori" by Werner Meyer, from "Ich bin zufrieden hier",
exh. cat. 1997

In Japan the omnipresent fear of earthquakes and the actual catastrophe in Kobe formed the background that also confronted the artist while she was living there. In the images on display, photos taken from various media are mounted and overlap each other on transparencies; the pictures deal with the catastrophic earthquake in Kobe and the notion of a possible earthquake in Tokyo.

The form of these overlapping images corresponds to a multi-layered consciousness of danger and fear, as well as to possible ways of dealing with them through so-called precautionary measures; there is also the aspect of public sympathy with memorializing and mourning the victims. The Japanese writing refers to old nuggets of worldly wisdom and statements expressing the fear and helplessness of the people living there. Here we find the intriguing relationship between public ritual and individual sensibilities. It corresponds to the openly provisory character of the works, which are themselves at the mercy of temporality, representing as they do a moment in which to pause in the midst of a fast-moving society dominated by high-technology that represses its fear of catastrophes and death by cherishing the ideology that the world can be controlled.

In its familiar form, the memento mori is a sign of individual sorrow, but closer inspection proves it to be an image whose content is not the narrative, but the complexity, the contradictions, and the structures of thoughts and feelings that can only be expressed through images.