

On a soft paw, with occasional rocks

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I was selected by the Japan-Finnish artist exchange program co-organized by Youkobo Art Space and The Finnish Artists' Studio Foundation, and I had the opportunity to stay and work in Finland for two months from May to June 2019. Based on my own experience that I gained from the physical actions of photography, including travelling, I have been exploring forms of life through exploratory activities constructed from such multiple facets as cultural history, philosophy and aesthetics. The purpose of this stay was to explore how life should be lived in relation not only to nature and people but also to technology.

I arrived at Tapiola at noon on Monday, May 6, 2019. Tapiola is located in the city of Espoo 10km west of Helsinki, and since construction began in 1952, during the post-war reconstruction period, it has been an experimental garden city where nature comes first and houses are secondary. I would take the bus or walk from the studio to the station, then transfer and take the subway to Helsinki. There are no ticket gates or staff in the newly built Tapiola subway station, and everything moves in a cashless and seamless flow. Because gardens and parks have no boundaries or thresholds and are all one with the ground, as you walk you find yourself crossing these spaces without realizing it, and it could all be described as a camouflage pattern consisting of the forests and everything else. The feel of the ground is very soft, like being on the palm of a large hand or the pad of a soft paw. When you want to ride on a city bus, you need to indicate by raising your hand at the bus stop. Otherwise, the bus will not stop at the bus stop unless there are people getting off. I felt a real affinity with such lack of wastefulness. Technology plays a role in connecting humans and nature, and a living environment has been created that is surprisingly free of wastefulness. Finland has a population of about 5.5 million, just half the size of Tokyo, and that of Espoo is 220,000. The population is small and no one speaks loudly on the subway or the bus, so it's noticeably quiet. It's interesting to note that, regardless of age, people keep in touch by telephone rather than emails or text messages. The reason is that it is the fastest and most reliable way. It seemed to me that these things form the basic structure of all aspects of life in Finland.

My neighbor in the Tapiola studio, which is surrounded by forest, was a painter by the name of Anne, who lives with a large German shepherd and a husky named Tiuku and Leon. Originally from Lapland, she told me that she moved here seven years ago. One morning, I got into Anne's car, which smelled about ten times as bad as a regular dog, and we went to a forest 30km east of Helsinki. Dogs are allowed to run free in this forest, and we let the dogs loose for about two hours, while we humans hiked and followed them. As Anne taught me how to identify wild blueberries and mushrooms and I listened to her stories of the island and how the dogs had pulled her in a sleigh and protected her from wolves and bears in Lapland, the two animals running around in the mountains, jumping into ponds and covered in mud seemed even more reliable than ever. Dogs, who have lived with people here since the Stone Age, and longer than horses have, co-exist with people rather than living as their pets.

We wanted to stop at the shopping center on the way back, and drove for a while until we saw IKEA. Although the store was just beyond us, we had difficulty getting to the other side and went around the same road several times. When we found ourselves on the road where the IKEA signboard was visible for the third time, we both burst out laughing. Anne has no problem climbing up a mountain, but got lost on the same stretch of highway time after time. She laughed as she talked about how every time she would end up driving around for 2 hours. I'm not sure, but I think we finally got to the studio at around 5 o'clock in the evening.

Over our long history, humanity has overcome the danger of extinction and many types of death and we have adapted to our environment in order to survive. Finland, which has had it even less easy in terms of its geographical environment and history, has been a place where people have lived without a choice between working or dying. Finland's ideas about equality are not some beautiful thing born out of a higher culture, but come from the harsh reality that anyone who can move, regardless of their gender, works. The people's ethnicity

and behavior, formed from the cold and harshness of a land that is 70% forest, are minimalist and without wastefulness. Their low-key communication can also be said to be attributable to these conditions. If I unravel the rationality that I encountered in all aspects of life during my stay, all I am left with is that they are just the minimum necessary to sustain life, and those that are not needed are pruned away. And a land where all the excess parts have been pruned away can perhaps be symbolized by silence. We who are alive now have to live using just the functions with which our bodies are endowed. And so, we must reexamine what our priorities should be. For people in Finland, silence is something connected to the forests that is carved into their DNA, and perhaps rationality is the information passed down from their ancestors for their survival. By experiencing every kind of simplicity, they can only imagine the ambiguity of the world and reaffirm that it is poisoned by complexity. This time, without an open studio or similar opportunities, I went to events such as talk events, exhibitions, openings, open studios of several residency programs, artist studio visits and university visits. Perhaps the greatest benefits were that, through such exchanges and daily communication, I became convinced that Finns are trustworthy people and we were able to build relationships and learn from each other.

Finally, thanks to the cooperation of Riikka Suomi-Chande of FAFS, the artists of Tapiola Studio and people from the university, I was able to meet a lot of local people, and I am very grateful to everyone at Youkobo Art Space, The Finnish Artists' Studio Foundation and The Finnish Institute in Japan for providing me with such a great opportunity.