

Essay on the (nonexistent) *décollage* in Japan

By Christoph Bodmer

I often notice that collectors and viewers experience an almost childlike joy of discovery in *décollages*. For example, they may recognize fragments from advertising, classify them in their memory and link them to emotions. At the same time, there is a fascination about the properties of paper, what meteorological and environmental influences and transformation processes can do.

Their own amazement at these effects also lies in the fact that they become aware at that moment they are looking at a relic, at something that will be lost or has already been lost. They look at the remnants of the idea that public space is for the public - and that every citizen can use public space as a forum.

If you look, for example, at Scandinavian cities today there are no more posters in the public space – but screens and rotating city light posters. The transformation process (here the elimination of paper-based advertising while replacing it with electronic advertising media) is also affecting cities such as Lisbon, Milan and Hamburg.

Public space is shrinking as it becomes more and more privatized. The discourse is then no longer determined by the residents, but by those who pay, usually advertising corporations.

The basic idea of such art movements as Nouveau Réalisme or Gutai is artistic creation outside the art academic world, from what surrounds the artists, where chance sets the direction and where everything can be art, e.g. cracked paper walls, scrap cubes, sawn-up string instruments, plastic tubes, rubble, performances or even torn posters.

This concept enables the artist to realize many ideas, simply by doing it. This world of ideas reveals to the attentive observer. Many people move unconsciously through the streets, but it is only through the impetus of an artist that the fog of subjective experience lifts. The ever-present beauty of an object becomes visible, an idea manifests itself and becomes a statement.

If we now take the principle of *décollage* - as an expression of the world of ideas of Nouveau Réalisme - the almost complete absence of precisely this art movement in Asia is surprising. And even more precisely: Why is *décollage* (as a material and as a work of art) hardly represented in Japan? One explanation: the lack of *décollage* material, i.e. glued posters or poster layers in Japan.

When posters are hung, side-mounted adhesive dots are used or posters are even wrapped in transparent plastic film. In the Indo-Pacific region, important sites for *décollages* are only in cities such as Melbourne, Sydney, Dhaka or Chittagong.

Another attempt at explanation: Despite great devotion to the medium of paper, and despite a high affinity to the principle of *Kintsugi*, *décollage* appears as something foreign, dirty and so unfamiliar that, despite the country's enthusiasm for the materiality of paper and for french art movements as well as for its proximity to Gutai theory, it has never found its way into the art canon of Japan.

To some extent, Japanese artists have pursued the principle of *décollage*: Genichiro Inokuma in his photo book "Walls in N.Y.C.". Although he himself – as far as is known – did not tear down any posters, he already photographed *décollages* and billboards in the 50s and 60s. Shinro Ohtake has used poster abrasions in his scrapbooks. He probably ripped them off during his time in London. With his stylized paper waste, Kimiyo Mishima has given many artworks the impression of a *décollage*. Saeki Yuzo's views of poster-covered wooden fences and walls in Paris in the 1920s are exciting because they function as the central motif in these paintings – and not passers-by or individuals.

Let's look at Kintsugi and the concept of repair. I see strong connections here to the essence of *décollage* and to dealing with things as such and what value is attached to them. The European view of a damaged thing almost automatically triggers a short-term drama that can also last longer. Broken and damaged here means that proper use no longer seems possible. If possible, you try to repair the broken thing in such a way that damage is no longer visible. One tries to erase what happened. It is the undoing of an alleged misfortune - and thus a negation of history, even a shameful concealment of the incident.

How different is the approach in Japan, as I experienced and felt it. The principle of kintsugi is mostly aimed at objects made of ceramics and porcelain. For example, if a tea bowl breaks, it almost goes without saying that it will be repaired. This in the sense of producing the intended usability. The fracture lines, refined with gold putty according to the Kintsugi principle, give the thing an extended history, an appreciation and a new life, the value of which increases precisely because it is allowed to spend further decades, based on love and craftsmanship. Often, tea bowls and ceramics have been in the family for centuries and thus receive an invisible patina. Things were created to make the past and its values visible to the present. Nobody here thought about planned obsolescence.

In Europe, on the other hand, the thing is just a thing, without a voice and often without appreciation. Sometimes, however, everyday objects make it into a painting or are art themselves, I'm thinking here of Norbert Schwontkowski and his BOSCH refrigerator or the *nouveaux réalistes*. In everyday use, however, everyday objects must function perfectly. Perfection, however, thwarts life, because this is by no means perfect. If it were, it would probably be very boring.

Giving the broken a value and a voice has something deeply democratic - in the sense of a sense of community and an inclusive thought - and where the individual sometimes takes a step back in favor of the community. In relation to people, this means a feeling of togetherness, which is the basis for supporting old people in everyday life - starting with public transport, in public space and within families or neighborhood communities.

Weathering conditions are omnipresent in the streetscape of Japanese cities, especially on the numerous old houses, which stand their ground against the business buildings in Tokyo or other cities. In this quarters there's an almost idyllic village atmosphere, and the streets, full of flower pots, are owned by people and cyclists. This homely shabby look is often the result of the fact that rusted metal, weathered wood and scraped plastic parts form an aesthetic unity in their juxtaposition and togetherness. These weathered materials have their own inherent magic.

Dealing with public space seems to be primarily characterized by pragmatism for the people in Japan. Elevated highways, three stacked bridges, train routing along the kitchen window seem to pose less of a problem (neither aesthetically nor as a disruptive factor) than would be the case in Europe. Even if a person suffers from it, they benefit equally from the reliability of the infrastructure (as an important backbone of social cohesion) and accept compromises for this.

The public space is characterized by an architectural eclecticism paired with a functional infrastructure and an infinite number of - and subjectively viewed - sometimes charming and loving details. This is why I am astonished that billboards, which are not uncommon in Asia, are completely unknown in Japan - likewise advertising pillars or even wild posters. I explain it like this: It goes against the Japanese sense of order. Or: It is simply not necessary, as information is disseminated either via (electronic) media or on notice boards in the districts. Or: Something on a billboard contradicts a convention or a certain aesthetic orientation that I am not aware of. If there is no *décollage* material visible from the outside, I have assumed that in museums and private collections there are works, if not by *affichistes*,

then at least by the Nouveaux Réalistes. The survey of a number of galleries, auction houses and museums did not bring any results in this regard.

But why can décollage still not establish itself in the art world today – to take up this idea again – although it fulfils conditions typical of the art market, namely rarity of the material, testimony to the history of epochs and ideas, anchored in art history, successful secondary market, and an enthusiastic (small) circle of collectors.

- Thought 1: Something you don't know can't be understood and certainly not marketed.
- Thought 2: The secondary market with the affichists is too lucrative to be "diluted" by the next generation of décollage artists.
- Thought 3: The art market is not yet ready for décollage.
- Thought 4: If you want to use categories, you can assign décollage to street art today, since it comes from public space. Street art is hardly represented in public space in Japan apart from occasional tags, spray paints or stickers.
- Thought 5: Curators are familiar with décollage, but categorize it as inferior pop art and/or street art (this type of pop art usually shows famous people, who are then garnished with scraps of décollage and spray paint.)

The above factors actually suggest that now the time has come to establish décollage as an art form that has developed a lot - even 70 years after its first appearance. It's never too early to be avant-garde! Maybe then not only a small group of collectors and décollage enthusiasts, but also the art world will share my enthusiasm for the idea and the beauty of décollage, combined with the sensitization for the dangerous disappearance of public space.

P.S.

Some curators say that it is difficult to expect an audience to appreciate dirt and torn papers. But the audience refutes this fear, because the brain finally has a challenge. Only beautiful and pleasing art is boring and the wrong claim to art. Décollage can show beauty even where you don't expect it.

"... that this fear of erring is error itself." (german philosopher G.F.W. Hegel)

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Related Links:

<https://www.mimoca.org/en/>

<https://nakka-art.jp/en/collection/top-en/saekiyuzou>

Accompanying images

Saburo Murakami, Muttsu no ana, ©Zero Foundation, Düsseldorf



Genichiro Inokuma, "Walls in N.Y.C."



Shinro Ohtake, Scrapbook



Shinro Ohtake, in front of a fence with posters

(Source:
https://www.takeninagawa.com/en/shinro_ohtake/9634/#gallery-10)



Saeki Yuzo, Gas Lamp and Advertisements, 1927



Kimiyo Mishima, Sculpture in décollage-style, Kobe, 2018



“Shibuya”, décollage with sticker, paper on plastic foil with spraypaint, 40 x 40 cm, from Meji-dori, Shibuya, Tokyo, 2022.



velvety/fluffy paper



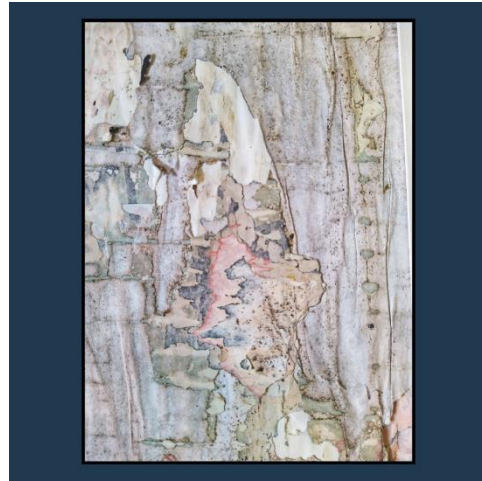
tree bark paper



breaking/brittle paper



retro d'affiche (backside of a ripped poster)



crusty paper



sand paper

