

# Is There a Future for Our Past ?

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I think it was the spring of 1977. One day, an artist spread a piece of paper on the street in front of his house and made his first frottage. It was spring, a season that comes late to Hokkaido, and traces of snow tire spike patterns remained on the street where the snow had melted. The artist recorded the traces of the unique lifestyle of Hokkaido by stroking a pencil over a white sheet of paper. Since that day, Masao Okabe has used the frottage technique to create works in farflung places, both in and out of Japan; his life work is a project consisting of the creation of several thousand sheets of frottage in Hiroshima.

Some of these frottage works are displayed in the Japanese Pavilion at the 52nd Venice Biennale (International Art Exhibition – La Biennale di Venezia). When I look back at Okabe's 30 years of frottage creation, I get the sense that several of the important issues shared by our age and society run through the very fabric of those works created in this contemporary art form. As we review these representative works, learning the artist's gestures, I would like to focus my attention on the various issues of their day that emerge from those surfaces, particularly those related to material quality, memory and history.

## I

### A vestigial technique

The art form known as frottage is a contemporary technique born in the 20th century. This technique gained fame through Max Ernst's renowned group of works, and it basically is a technique whereby the surface pattern of some object is traced or rubbed onto another surface. The origins of this technique far precede art per se, and can be found deep in the historical past. A look at the tools used for both rubbings and frottage reveals the "printing plate," long used in methods for replicating images, and ink and paper. The basic technique probably dates back to the invention of ink and paper.

For example, the culture surrounding Chinese characters, which centers on China, has a long history of rubbings. Rubbing technique uses ink and paper to transfer characters carved in a stone surface onto paper, which is the simplest form of printing technique. This was the main form of reproduction available before the advent of moveable type. The Chinese reverently created rubbings of the famous calligraphy inscribed on stones, and then these paper rubbings were carried long distances, to far off lands where they became the calligraphy models for new audiences. Rubbings are revered not only for the meaning of the words included in their calligraphy, but also for the brushstrokes and brush handling visible in their characters. These strokes convey the gestures of the calligrapher.

Unlike a hand drawn copy, the rubbing has a specific value in that the paper is applied directly to the original stone surface. The contact between paper and stone is important. Traces of the specific shapes on the paper surface which touched the original plate places the rubbing in a broader technical tradition.

The history of printing traces back from ancient Rome to Mesopotamia, and the medium for Mesopotamian printing was the coins and seals of the day. Coins and seals form a reproductive technique in their ability to leave the same shape and forms on numerous surfaces. These techniques can be referred to as vestigial techniques. [Fig. 1]

Vestigial techniques originate from the most universal phenomena conveyed by nature, and can actually be observed in the natural world. Animal paw prints left on a snowy surface were considered an important sign by the earliest humans. The shape of the snow remaining on spring mountains indicated weather conditions for the coming year. Fish fossils found at the peaks of mountains several thousand meters tall remind us that oceans abounded in the area in the past. Craters left from volcanic action that formed mountains are filled with traces of phenomena that each tell us something about the physical realm. Reading the cause and effect relationships visible in such vestiges can be seen as the first steps towards scientific thought. Indeed, background knowledge is required for someone to be able to determine the source of the traces.

Vestiges are signs of stages in transformational processes. When a cigarette is smoked it turns into ashes. A bathing suit leaves tan lines after a day out in the midsummer sun. A physical form passes through some type of shape transformation, and leaves remains in a different state than the original form. This means there is a process that occurs between the two different physical forms. In the case of fossils and footprints, one surface causes a material change of form in another surface, and after a certain period of time, that transformed form is set and remains. With fossils and footprints, there is a difference in the hardness of



the two surfaces, or in some cases, additional force by one surface on the other brings about the changed shape. Though it may be very short, some predetermined amount of time is required for transformation. It is not necessarily true that from the resulting shape one can determine the different shape that was the source. Another difficulty is that it is necessary to know what caused the force that brought about the change in shape. In these two points, the tracing back of time and the knowledge of what force brought about the change in shape, the vestiges are an important part of the process that we generally call "memory." [Fig. 2]

If Max Ernst's frottages were a visualization of the transformed forms that occur unconsciously, then Masao Okabe's frottage works are more directly related to the process of memory. For Ernst, what was important was the form that appeared as a result of the frottage, while for Okabe, the process is important. In other words, the frottage for Okabe is not just the paper that remains as a result, but rather a complete action, from going to the spot where the frottage would be made, all that occurred or was produced at the site, and then the work that remains from the action, its display, and the reaction the works engender. Thus it is a set of actions that include individuals and society. What happens with these frottages is thus not simply individual physical memory, but rather a broad process of actions that include interactions with others, cooperative processes with citizens and the discussions that occur in a shared space. In this regard, frottage is not simply an artistic technique, it is a single formalization of action that includes art.

## Informatization and Memory

The fact that the action itself is important is nothing other than one facet of the remarkable developments in art during the latter half of the 20th century. Richard Long has made the process of walking into an art work, sometimes at the end of walks that covered more than 10 years. Christo and Jean Claude's "wrapping" involved massive installation projects. For such artists the process joins the result in becoming the artwork. For Joseph Beuys such process is pregnant with a social quality, and his movement works have been given the name "social sculptures." During this period the concept of art work has been greatly enlarged, with process and display given the same value. Against such a background, art work is not simply placed in a state, rather it reveals the changes that occur in society itself. One such change is informatization.

Okabe's art works from the 1960s through the beginning of the 1970s reflect the social background of their time, namely the Vietnam War and the campaign against the Japan-US Security Treaty. The media that conveyed information during that era features as an important motif in his work. In his work *7 O'clock News*, he depicts a news scene reporting on the bombing of North Vietnam during the Vietnam War. Similarly, *Page 16, Morning Edition, August 12, 1971*, is a serigraph print reproducing the television and radio schedule from a newspaper. This is a fascinating work that uses as its material the lithofilm used to produce newspapers, and the plates that are used to print a newspaper edition. This plate is part of the technology that supports the information age. During this same period, the artist began the process of creating "everyday records," by taking rubbings from a section of his living space, whether lithograph stones, the floor, or hangers. All of these "everyday records" works are on the broad theme of "memory," and in all of them the concept of "printing plate or edition" goes beyond that found in art, a fact not unrelated to the "information society" that is frequently discussed these days.

It has been previously noted that humans use vestigial techniques in the externalization of memory. Such techniques trace back to the Neolithic Age, as seen in the birth of writing by incising on stone or bones. Then followed the development of printing techniques, and then discovery of movable type, up through the development of mass media. Thus vestigial techniques employed a variety of physical forms to make it possible to convey human memory across generations. Needless to say the computer is the tool of the information age, and its digital technology and new storage media brought about a revolution in the externalization of memory. The greatest characteristic of the externalization of memory that developed at blinding speed during the second half of the 20th century is the transformation of those memories into digital code. The vestigial traces that humans have fostered over the long history of mankind have been transferred to a nonmaterial stage, and this has freed memory from the strictures of physical matter and allowed them to flow through information space. The massive amount of information experienced by people today, amounts that far outstrip any earlier amounts, can be fully accessed in an extremely short period of time. On the other hand, such technology offers the conundrum of losing or destroying such memory, at the same time contributing to the loss or destruction of memory.

The question, "Is there a future for our past?" is based on just such a situation. Civilization in the 20th century saw the use of "new media" to record much



more than ever recorded in preceding ages, and yet it is not clear exactly how long those records will be preserved in the future. No one is willing to say with confidence that the records of the information age will be live on much longer than the stone tablets of early history. It was just as these "printing plates" that formed the technology to take traces of human memories entered an age fraught with extreme uncertainty that Masao Okabe began to create his frottage works. Of course, this kind of positioning within cultural history is not necessary for the appreciation of his works, but it does somehow aid in our understanding of his later development as an artist.

### The City as Printing Plate

"There are painters who draw on the walls of Paris, but there were no painters who printed directly from those walls." Like recording unmusical music, Okabe turned to the street surfaces and ground that not been considered before and took rubbings directly from them. This meant that Okabe's works were by necessity large. Frottage is a practical process, and at the same time, it requires a size equal to that of its object."<sup>1</sup>

Okabe spent six months in Ivry-sur-Seine in Paris in 1979. During that time he walked the streets each day, taking rubbings of what he encountered, with some 169 frottages created during that time. Hirosada Kotani, Okabe's honored friend, used the term "audio recording" in reference to the group of works displayed after Okabe's return to Japan, while also indicating that frottage made art works larger, given the reality that the rubbing is the same size as its object. An early critique of Okabe's first actual frottage works emerges from the letters exchanged

between Sapporo and Paris, and while brief, it does at the very least contain the essence of the art works.

"From his thoughts on the act of frottage, a form of printing that Okabe knew about before going to France, I realized that a work is not finished as a result of the movements of the painter's hand, but rather the work is a reality that records something begun by the movements of the painter's hand. The reality of 'painting' does not vanish, but rather the emphasis is placed on the strokes, the movements of the hand. Thus Okabe completely separates himself from any preparation of the printing plate for the frottage, efforts that might calculate the image of the work. And the reality can only be revealed by the rubbing process, it is the stroke that dominates."

From this text we get a sense of proximity that could have only come from someone there at the place of artistic creation. Kotani states that the hand movements involved in frottage are like an action painting effort, and the first audience of the work when it is completed is the artist himself. Like Ernst Okabe felt that the artist was the first viewer of his own works, and the following expresses this sentiment and Okabe's freedom from Ernst's works.

"Frottage was a means, revealing his own world was the goal."

As can be immediately understood by this comment, the essential elements have already been touched on. The artist went out on the street, and as if recording the ambient noise around him, he took a rubbing from the surface of the road in front of him. This act, that seems simple at first glance, is actually a fascinating process that cannot be understood just by looking at the finished product. First, when he takes a rubbing from the street surface, he must crawl along the road. If the work is to be large in scale, then he must keep his face to the ground for that length of time, thus looking at the street surface from a close perspective. It is not only seeing the surface, his hands and knees come into contact with its hard surface, he can hear all the sounds reflected off the surface. Thus he senses the town through the senses of touch and other faculties. Thus frottage is a form of action art, one born from knowledge different from what is acquired just by walking upright down a road. [Fig. 3]

Second, frottage is born from the repetitive strokes of the arm holding the pencil. This action reminds one of the harsh shaking of the needle on a seismograph, and yet, unlike that mechanical needle, the arm's movements are not regular in length or duration or speed, rather they change subtly in reaction to the hardness and unevenness of the road surface beneath them. "Rubbing" thus differs as an action from "drawing" in this regard. The fabric or paper laid on the subject bit of road surface interrupts our line of sight, like a type of screen. The subject is thus revealed to sight by the strokes of the arm. Not the reverse. Depending on the direction of the stroke, the degree of force put into the stroke, there are myriad differences in the image that emerges from the strokes. A different person wielding the pencil in the same spot will come up with a different impression, and even if the same person makes repeated rubbings from the same spot, they too will be subtly different. Frottage is thus both the recording of the subject surface, and it is the record of the action of stroking, and Okabe puts special emphasis on this point in his works.



Third, by its very nature, frottage works are large in scale. This is 1:1 reproduction, so for display purposes, the same size space is needed. While this might be self-evident, when considering frottage in the history of images, frottage is different from projected images. Photographs, movies and videos, all forms of projected images shot through the medium of a lens use the fundamental mechanism of optics of either enlarging or reducing an image. Like rubbings or prints, frottage is a type of non-optical image. Unlike optical images, one essential condition of its creation is the reduction of the distance between the object and the image to zero. Thus a different action or stance is required than that used to grasp the world via optical images.

These special characteristics of frottage are thus accumulated in the artist's body as he takes rubbings from the city, and they are revealed as his own personal world. Undoubtedly it is a dynamic act from the beginning, one that stands at the cross-section of memory and discovery. Okabe himself has written the following:

"While scraping at the membrane of the city, it is as if the traces of my everyday actions are being etched at the same time I am in the process of living. The road surfaces or morning market richly imbued with everyday life, the countless cracks and gravel that litter the street surface, the manholes, the plates imbedded in the walls of houses or factories, the graffiti, and traces of soccer ball skids. These facts all evoke the lives of the people who have lived there, their histories. It is as if the city is exuding an exalted feeling, as if seeking to have a rubbing taken."<sup>2</sup>

Through frottage, it is as if the city has shed a skin like that of a shedding snake, leaving behind the traces of itself in life-size form. The person taking the rubbing from the city may also be shedding their own personal skin. Through this process in Ivry-sur-Seine Okabe attained his unique perspective:

"The city is a gigantic printing plate."

There is no need to prepare a printing plate, it is already there. The city is there to be used as a frottage plate. Setting aside the city one gazes out at, this is the city that can only be experienced through touch. A gigantic printing plate, or in other words, it can be called a gigantic latency. The city has its entirety, its existence as a printing plate. Down to the finest small details, it has value as a printing plate. "The city is a gigantic printing plate." Behind such a statement we might be able to read the artist's radical thoughts that all parts of that city have equal value.

## II

### Archaeology of the Modern Age

The works created in Ivry-sur-Seine, made the artist aware of the special parts of the city inside the memories buried in a city. Those parts are the texts that appear on a commemorative stele. For a Japanese person, a European city is like a book filled with historical writing. Each square, each road is named. The giving of names to these many different spaces is a mind-boggling job, and most of those



names refer to historically important people, events or dates. Here the vestigial techniques become a commemorative or memorial technique that covers the urban space.

Thinking of each link between space and event is part of the tradition of mnemonic arts since ancient Greece. The plates etched by the city today, however, do not necessarily have a direct link with the myth of Simonides. Rather, in order to arrange our own history as a modern nation, we must establish our own public archives, erect our own commemorative stele. These frottages can be made as one element of the "systems of memory."

The artist who continues to take rubbings from the earth's surface once noticed a commemorative text incised with the names of the citizens who passed away in the residence. This too is a special commemorative aspect of European towns. While looking out everyday over the gravestones and commemorative steles that abound like flowers, the artist came to realize that the road marked with the traces of a soccer ball today was once a place drenched in blood.

"The road has absorbed the sweat and voices of the people, their blood, and today lies silent. People have passed by, carved their history on the spot, the countless stains and vestiges washed away over time, all remain there silently. The smells etched into the stone are human smells. The streets of Paris taught me these things. For the first time I had the major realization that the "city is a gigantic printing plate."<sup>3</sup>

From that time on, for the artist who took the stance that the city was a printing plate, the central theme that is indivisible from that viewpoint is the modern age. Just stating the term modern age is enough, but in detail, the material whole formed by the modern nation appears with the latent ability to become a printing plate. The questions of memory we have are nothing other than the questions of the modern age, and this urgent reality can be said to have made it so.

By nature these are not questions that evoke easy answers. In 1986, the preparatory office of the Hiroshima City Museum of Contemporary Art asked Okabe to create a group of works on the theme of "Hiroshima." It took one year for Okabe to decide. As a person who had not experienced the Hiroshima bomb, could he express the theme of "Hiroshima"? As if to carefully grasp the anguish, the artist retraced his own memories. What he encountered in that search through his own memories was the memory of the fact that Nemuro, the town in Hokkaido where he was born and raised, was subject to air raid bombing during World War II. The image was burned into the vision of the artist, then a three-year old child. Eighty percent of the town was burned down in the Nemuro air raids, which occurred just three weeks before the atom bomb was dropped on Hiroshima. Dredging up this fundamental experience, he came closer to Hiroshima as he created the work "Stroke on the Road in Hiroshima, August 1987/1988."

Okabe wrote:

"All of the streets of Hiroshima are deeply dyed with people, with life and death. The blistering heat of August, crouching down on the hot street surface, I continued to move my hands. Digging down just 50 cm, there was life and time turned into dirt. Going through how many layers of membrane, the image that arose from that space was an innumerable accumulation of traces



of many layers of time and life. The image that was traced from that space, the act of tracing it was a thick membrane shut inside the band of time that extends from the past to now."<sup>4</sup>

When he started the Hiroshima project, the artist did not choose ground zero, rather he selected a district called Minami-danbara, quite far from ground zero itself. Miraculously this district in the shadow of Mt. Hiji escaped most of the damage of the atom bomb. At the time of the project, the area was swept up in the issue of redevelopment, and this may have been one of the reasons Okabe chose the area. Okabe took rubbings from seven places in Hiroshima city, working in from the outskirts to the center of the city. Combined, the seven works are 4.5 meters tall and 10 meters wide, with black stripes left by the pencil used in the rubbing, drunkenly hanging like skin. Indeed it is as if the black snakes of August had shed their skins.

The thin scab that covered the ruins is the membrane that supports our daily existence. Blackened by absorbing the summer sun, that black is the black that absorbed time as one person looked at the ground and repeatedly stroked over it. This artist repeating what can be called a cruel process, is actually the archaeologist excavating that bit of the earth's surface. Indeed, this work has an aspect of modern archeology about it.

### Ujina: The Place of Questioning

It was around the end of the summer in 2002. Opening the morning mail, I found a letter folded in thirds with the address written on it. The cancellation mark said Ujina, Hiroshima. Carefully removing the red tape that held the ends shut, I found the traces of black pencil rubbing on a white paper surface, with the following written in English words beneath:

THE PLATFORM OF THE OLD UJINA STATION, HIROSHIMA  
1894/1945/2002

As noted in those English words, that "letter" was a frottage taken from the platform of the old Japan National Railways Ujina station on the harbor at Hiroshima. The three dates at the end of the title indicate three important years in the history of that place.

The first is 1894, the year that the railway line connecting Hiroshima with the old Ujina Harbor was opened. This railway line was used to carry military materiel and soldiers, and along with the station, was built in a mere two weeks immediately before the start of the Sino-Japanese War. The soldiers who gathered from in Hiroshima from all parts of Japan would ride that train to Ujina, and then set off from Ujina Harbor to Asia and the Pacific. Indeed, in other words Ujina was the international departure lounge for modern Japan. The exceptionally long, 560-meter platform might invoke the long shape of Japan itself. As a military harbor, Ujina supported a number of wars and then awaited the end of World War II. That was the second date listed, 1945, the year that they dropped the atom bomb on Hiroshima. As indicated by these two years, Ujina bears the history of being both a contributor to war and a victim of war, a fact that applies to Japan's modern era in general. The final date on the list, 2002, is the date the frottage was made.

Okabe's encounter with Ujina dates back to 1996. During the 51st summer



after the dropping of the bomb, Okabe held a frottage workshop entitled "Hiroshima Memoire" in Peace Park, Hiroshima. Okabe was joined by about 100 citizens as they experimented with frottages on the path leading towards the memorial to the bomb victims. Ujina was another site used during this workshop. With the knowledge that the site had been chosen for the workshop, the people who went to old Ujina Station for the first time were overwhelmed by its long platform. At the time of the workshop, more than half of the platform's original 560 meters remained, and above it rose the tiled building that served as the storehouse for the old Hiroshima army outpost. By that time it had already been decided that the platform would be torn down, and it was literally the last chance to take frottage from this site. Approximately 90 people participated in the Ujina workshop, and the frottages created there and at the Hiroshima Peace Park were displayed that same year at the Hiroshima City Museum of Contemporary Art.

I first saw the Ujina frottage at a one-man show held by Okabe in 2002 at the Maison Franco-Japonaise in Ebisu, Tokyo. After the workshop was completed, Okabe stayed on in Hiroshima, and with other citizens, continued to take rubbings from the stones at Ujina. The decision to knock down the structures meant that they were in a battle to beat the sands of time, and during that time they took several thousand frottages of the area. The one-man show displayed those frottages, bound and arranged in steel binders. There were about 100 binders in total.

Traces of black pencil marks, stored in black files, arranged on top of a black table. All of the frottages were taken from the stones originally from Ujina Station. Those stones were then reused over a wide area, as building materials or pavement for the city rail lines. They were made of granite from Kurahashi Island. Okabe placed his frottage papers so that the middle of the paper lay on the connection between the stones, and this meant that the rough surfaces of the granite clearly were reflected in his rubbing. But even so, nothing shows up in that space between the stones. The strokes of the hand holding the pencil moved in an almost arching fan shape, reminding me of the ultrasound readings of a child in the womb. The hand wielding the pencil moved so that it could discern the inner workings of history that was about to be buried in the modern city's redevelopment plans. As if something wriggled in the depths of the rock, his hand continued to move as if making an ultrasound reading of history. The black traces that go on and on, enough to make a thick book, in spite of the fact that they were undoubtedly being rubbed across the surface of stones, somehow it seems that the black traces have given us a book from the depths of the earth.

After his installation, that could have been called "library of vestiges or traces," I had a conversation with Okabe. We talked about the pencil, the main material substance used in frottage, and ended up talking about lead from the standpoint of a photographer. For a photographer, the element lead is an important tool that acts like a type of shield. For example, in order to protect important film from the x-ray machines at the luggage inspection stations at the airport, we use lead lined bags. If we trace back over the history of x-rays and lead, we see that they go back to about the time that Ujina Station was built.

As is well-known, Wilhelm Roentgen (1845-1923) discovered the x-ray in 1895. The first film was shown in Paris at the end of that year, marking the beginning of film technology. That year was thus an important turning point in the history of images. It wasn't until later that they discovered that x-rays were



harmful to the human body, and at first they used x-ray techniques without any form of shields. They even shot x-ray photographs on circus arcades as souvenirs. The birth of Ujina Station and the discovery of the x-ray. These two distant events intersect in a gigantic frottage work made with a pencil. Laying the paper down on the stones which had survived the atom bomb, using black lead to take a rubbing, is almost like making a shield with the lead traces as coating. Thus the image recalls the history of the x-ray. Our technical civilization is an accumulation of human wisdom symbolized by the discovery and use of the x-ray, and at the same time, it led to irreversible damage. The black writing is at once the shield of the technical civilization with its myriad swords, and at the same time it is the curriculum vitae of the humans who continue to invent and discover within that civilization. Ujina evoked by that black writing was thus a place where questions continue to arise about such civilization.

### The Creative Force of Destruction

The about 1,200 frottages taken in Ujina which cover the entire walls of the Japan Pavilion at this year's 52nd Venice Biennale are part of the more than 4,000 sheets made over a nine-year period starting in 1996. The flower specimens displayed alongside the frottages are the various weeds and wildflowers growing around the platform. After the atom blast and its resulting fires and radiation, the city is said to have been a wasteland after the war, where plants and grasses wouldn't grow. But nature has a regenerative power that humans can't always predict, and today we can see this around the platform. The repeating cycle of destruction and rebirth meant that the roots brought forth sprouts that led to wildflowers. Indeed, isn't this power of life the very power of the city?

The plans for the redevelopment of the Old Ujina Station platform area continued and the platform was knocked down in 2004. The artist continued taking frottage images from the platform, right up to the very end. At the time, Okabe wrote:

"Spanning two centuries, tracing a history of 110 years, this giant stone building withstood even the atom bomb. It will be forgotten amid the glittering plans for the city's redevelopment. Ujina Station, linked to the former military harbor of Ujina (present-day Hiroshima harbor), was the dispatch point for four great wars, sending a total of 6 million soldiers and their countless amounts of materiel to Asia. An effort that ended in the tragedy of Hiroshima. This 560 meter long axis is thus both assailant and the assaulted, it stands as a monument symbolizing the boundary line between the military city of Hiroshima and the Hiroshima that endured the atom bomb. It is the site that strongly evokes the message of 'the other Hiroshimas'." <sup>5</sup>

This "boundary line" has been made invisible in this place that is now empty. However, those sheets of paper that the artist rubbed, the monument has been transferred to them, there it shines forth. In the ancient Japanese tradition of punning on the homonyms in the Japanese language, the sound of the term in Japanese, utsusu, literally to copy, somehow reverberates with the many layers on the other side of the image, as it also conjures a sense of other "utsu" words in Japanese, from nothingness to transfer and finally to copy. In these pages, the "archaeology of the modern world" has been given new meaning as the archaeology of now.



Okabe has written repeatedly about Hiroshima. For example,

“Life and death are buried 50 centimeters beneath the earth’s surface.”

Just 50 centimeters. You can’t understand this just by walking on the surface. It is the distance you can’t imagine without spending time on your knees, with your hands on the earth. The workshop pamphlets included long message that were chalked on the paths on the paths in the Peace Park in red oil chalk, and they said:

“The white granite paths of the paths, the green grass on either side, if you stand in front of the cenotaph, the A-Bomb Dome (Genbaku Dome) rises before your gaze. In the heart of the city, this place is somehow a quiet space. The paths of this park bear the traces of the footsteps of those who have come to this park, each with their own thoughts and feelings. And beneath these paths lie the downtown streets that existed before the bomb, the barracks that were lined up here right before the end of the war. In that earth today sleep huge amounts of the everyday things that surrounded the people and their lives in this space. When work began on this park in 1950, each strike of the pickax, each shovel full, came up with white bones.”<sup>6</sup>

Beneath these paths that have been trod on by those who survived the bomb and the relatives of those lost in the bomb there is buried an entirety of a neighborhood, one that could never be contained in a memorial hall or museum. A single blast at 8:15 am on the morning of August 6, 1945, was not a single second long, some 580 meters above the ground. And yet it scorched the earth to some 3000 degrees Celsius. The granite which had been fired millennia ago in volcanic action was fired by the atomic power, and yet it remained. The shadows of the people who walked on those stones remained, and then vanished in an instant. Indeed, almost all that was alive, their shadows did not remain. The power of the extremely tiny atom brought about the Revelations in which the entire material world vanishes.

In such an age, what is the meaning of a technique of vestigial traces? Or to put it in other words, for people who had the ability to make the material world vanish in an instant, can the culture supported by physical traces convey our memories to the future as they have in the past. Haven’t the techniques of vestigial traces arrived at an age in which they must take on as their partners the “emptiness” that is without material trace or vestige? The lines on a frottage encounter no subject in those blank spaces between the stones. There it is simply a record of the movement of the artist’s hand. In the same sense, in a world where there is no subject for rubbing, what will humans use to record their own lives?

Fortunately, we have not yet reached the point where we must answer this question. However, at the very least, the culture that discovers, analyzes and preserves so much of the past, is in the very midst of quarrels and destruction. The threat of nuclear war has by no means disappeared. Asia has entered yet a new age of danger. Including the previously mentioned issues related to the information age, it goes without saying that the balance between the loss of the past and the preservation of the past is currently unstable. Destruction of the past can be considered an extremely real issue. If we plumb the depths at the



time of destruction and learn the wisdom of the past, that can be called archaeology. Then doesn't our age call for archaeological wisdom combined with archaeological creativity? Not only can we learn the wisdom of the past when something is about to be destroyed, we must also seek out a creativity within that time of destruction.

### III

#### Shared Membrane

When we consider what these frottages have brought to the history of art, we find the previously mentioned awareness of the "city as printing plate," in other words, an enlargement of the concept of "printing plate." The style of "taking a rubbing from a place" is a shared production stance in a workshop setting. This links Okabe's works to one other characteristic. In addition to the Hiroshima workshops, Okabe has also conducted joint production events in other locations, such as Noosa in Australia, and Fukuoka, Obihiro, Yubari, Yokohama and Niigata in Japan. In all of these locations the people who worked with the artist were primarily local citizens. They all worked together, from the very beginning of the program through production and the final display stages, and thus of special note is the fact that these works were created from this connection between people. The aim was not simply a fully matured product, rather emphasis was placed on the production process while also giving special credence to that which the "place" produced.

Nemuro, Okabe's birthplace, is home to the old Makinouchi naval airfield. During one of the breaks that occurred in the long years of creating frottages at the Old Ujina Station, Okabe held new workshops at the air station site in Nemuro. The subject of that effort was the runways inside the air station grounds and his participants were the students of Nemuro Municipal Habomai Junior High School. The theme was "Why is the runway here?" Behind this deceptively simple question lies the history of the construction of the airfield, unknown even to the citizens of Nemuro. While Okabe's project in Nemuro was a direct result of his having been sent there by the Agency for Cultural Affairs on an "artists in the schools" project, it was the artist's own style and decision to take the project out of the classroom and directly onsite. Okabe commented,

"Art is not simply a technical element of the curriculum, rather it is a thoughtful act directly involved with time and society, the history of a region and the lives of its people. Those factors are linked to each individual bit of expression, and if such art can be fostered in the midst of a region, then it can be the foundation for splendid education and cultural activities, a structure of practical experience and development."<sup>7</sup>

This site is in the middle of Nemuro Peninsula, the northernmost point of the annual progress of cherry blossoms across the Japanese archipelago. There is a 1,000-meter long runway in such a location. This is one of the runways constructed in the various regions of Hokkaido during World War II. The question is, why did the war extend that far, and who built this runway? It was forced labor from Korea that built that runway. It was unimaginably hard labor and many people were killed by a typhoid epidemic. The fields around there still



conceal this not yet fully understood history, with pillboxes and trenches remaining to be found.

In a place like that, with its buried history, frottage, with its touch of the earth's surface, brings joy, allows us to engage with that place. In their reports, the students wrote innocently of the joy of discovery and its satisfaction. One of the middle school third year students wrote the following:

"I made frottages in several places, but the one that left the biggest impression was the place with footprints. Those footprints were from around 60 years ago. I was the one who discovered those footprints. This made me happy. At first we only found the first right footprint, but then finally Mr. Okabe found the left foot print and took a rubbing. It was the first time I had been to Makinouchi. I had a different image of runways. However, I did get a sense of how hard the work must have been for the laborers who built that runway in the middle of that huge place."<sup>8</sup>

The direct meaning of the words indicate that this was a "new experience" for this student. The runway was bombed by the American army after the end of the war and closed, and today it remains in a fragmented, destroyed state. What remains deeply imprinted on that concrete is foot prints made by workmen's reinforced-sole tabi socks. Okabe, who along with the students took rubbings from those footprints, wrote the following:

"The shape of their feet, seen amidst the desolate scene of that runway, evoked in a sense of crowded humanity. It was a strong, striking impression. Natsumi Morisaki was the first to find these footprints, and she said 'a present where the recent past is brought close.' At the runway at Makinouchi these students who came into contact with historical reality, they sensed a hard-to-forget powerful reality. For these students, it was the traces of the lives of people etched into the ground at Makinouchi, their first encounter with this aspect of Nemuro."<sup>9</sup>

Construction at Makinouchi began in 1943, amidst the rush to build airfields and pillboxes during the war. Even though it wasn't clear that there would be any planes to use the site when it was done, the difficult work of its construction continued. While it is not known who walked on the surface of the concrete while it was still drying, with the thought that many of the Korean laborers on the project died in the process, the direction in which the right and left footsteps are walking is cloaked in shadows. Okabe commented,

"The participating students formed a bond with the history of this ground, and a link with those who lived here in the past. They now hold a vision of creating art in connection with many other people. This viewpoint also coexisted with the viewpoint of excavation of a bit of history through group action, the copying in the present of history you can touch, the direct re-reading of history through the records taken in these rubbings,"<sup>10</sup>

In this context the frottage have a sense of palpability along with their functional role of communication. There is a huge difference in the sensations that remain in the body after seeing a place and after touching it. The membrane-



deep memory that remains without the intermedium of words has the potential to move onto a "sympathetic" level. While making the city a printing plate, the frottage also peels away a layer of the city's membrane, thus giving people a chance to link through the senses.

That experience, as can be seen in the notes written about the Nemuro workshop, was different for each person. Of the 135 participants, only one of them discovered the footprints and that fact ably revealed the singular nature of each person's discovery. The interesting feature of frottage is that the exact same image never appears twice. It all depends on the amount of effort applied, the direction of the tracing, the particular habits and features of the person doing the rubbing. Even the interests and point of view of the same person can be similarly diverse, meaning that even if the same people go over and over again to the same place, their knowledge and sentiments are still different to a degree. When a group of people do rubbings, there are a million different vestigial traces remaining. In that difference can be found the creativity of reminiscences.

A memory or reminiscence is a construction of a past event that occurred in a specific time, in a specific environment, both within the person's body and in the world around them. In a word, a memory or reminiscence is an action that occurs in time. To the degree that it is an action occurring between the world and the body that is continuing to change every moment it is alive, each individual memory or reminiscence is different. In that sense, frottage is "an unrepeatable experience" that bears a singularity of that space. The 4,000 frottages taken in Ujina are each subtly different because of this singularity of action within time, and thus each is a creative action.

### The Correspondence of a Printing Plate

This art form, which began from the unique idea of using the city as a printing plate, has developed not only in cities; it also appears amidst nature. Frottage has also been created against the background of the fact that cities are enveloped by nature, and thus Okabe's frottage has a vitality that could be called "making the world a printing plate." For example, in 2001 it was a case not of frottage from destruction, but rather frottage taken from living tree trunks that formed the monument made for the Sapporo Dome "Touching the Wind."

Sapporo Dome is built on a site called Hitsujigaoka, and it was formerly a verdant forest. When the artist received the commission for the project, he selected 26 types of trees that had been part of the former forest and made rubbings from their bark. The monument was made by etching those frottages onto copper plates. The area is said to have been a former hunting site for the Ainu people, and the artist included the names of each of the trees in three languages, their Latin scientific name, Japanese name, and Ainu name.

In tandem with this monument project, Okabe made serigraph prints from those frottages. They used the same negatives to then print black ink on black ground works. What is fascinating about those works is the fact that while frottages were their basis, they each reveal quite distinctive images.

"When you look at these prints, you see a matte black image of tree bark against a lustrous black background. At first glance it looks like the image is simply printed on the background. But that is not the case. Rather a lustrous black ink negative image was printed on a matte black background. Thus the tree bark image floats out of the layers of black. This rendering is an even



stronger evocation of the sensation evoked when the frottage was made."<sup>11</sup>

When I came face to face with these works in the storeroom of the art museum where they are housed, I was struck by a very strange sensation. When the black on black is viewed from the front, it is hard to read, but when you look at them from an angle, then the tree bark image starts to appear. Indeed, it evoked memories of seeing a daguerreotype print for the first time.

The first daguerreotype photographs look like images printed on mirrors. A negative image can be seen when light is reflected directly off the picture surface. When a black cloth is used as a background for the daguerreotype, and they are viewed from a slight angle, then you can see the positive image in the work. Thus both the negative and positive images are contained within the one plate. This is the special characteristic of daguerreotypes. It is as if you held a small mirror in your hand, then turned it slowly to the side, and there appears suddenly an image of a person. When we hold those small metallic plates in our hands, it is as if an image from the past was recalled.

Tomoyoshi Sato provided the text for *Touching the Wind*, and that text links the Sapporo works with the frottages taken in Hiroshima, as follows:

"[Amidst the various projects in Hiroshima], I noticed the explanatory panel about the atom bomb damage printed on a copper panel. That inscription panel was etched with a negative image of a photograph from the time. The artist took many frottages of that explanatory panel and its image, and this meant that a positive image of that panel emerged. Masao Okabe's works up to now have been based on this fundamental concept of the act of reviving images through such a corresponding or exchange between positive and negative images. In that correspondence or exchange the artist continues to make visual the history of that place."<sup>12</sup>

The "revival of images through such a correspondence between positive and negative images" — this is an extremely important suggestion from a person who had looked deeply at Okabe's works from his earliest period. The positive and negative images are nothing other than the material factors of vestigial traces. Determining which of two surfaces is the positive image, which is the residual image is a concern. When only one of the two surfaces remains from the basic material principle of two surfaces, then that remaining surface is the vestigial trace. The footprint is a vestigial trace because the foot is no longer there. A wound is a phenomena that is created by the absence of the object. When we consider such things, then what we call the "correspondence or exchange" here can be interpreted as one of the gestures of the person who is faced with that image. If the vestigial image anticipates a correspondence in the person who is seeing it, then mustn't that rely on the premise that the past will return to this place? Sato states,

"This serigraph is the correspondence of the printing plates related to this ground, and in it we can see that history. Further it is the correspondence or exchange of time begun by the direct contact with that place. ...These images seal that breath of the correspondence along with the wind that used to pass through this Hitsujigaoka in the past."<sup>13</sup>



## The Path of Time

The path of time can be called one of the actions or gestures we can take towards history. This is the act of considering the single thing that occurred in the past, not viewing it from a distance as if everything has stopped, but rather viewing it as being received through a correspondence or exchange. If memory is taken from that place, and helped to be in a place that is far distant, then we can take the stance of anticipating the echo that returns finally from that place. In 1996 Okabe created a series entitled *N'Oubliez Pas*, literally don't forget, between two cities. Frottages were taken from memorial panels in the Marais district, 3rd arrondissement in Paris. These panels were inscribed with the historical facts related to the Jewish people taken captive by the Nazis in this district. Rubbings were taken on aerograms from these plates, and the aerograms were sent to Hiroshima. That same year, Okabe took frottage images on aerograms recording the explanatory plates about the atom bomb damage from ground zero in Hiroshima, and those positive images of the negative etched plate were then sent to Paris. The pamphlet for the exhibition of these works that followed mentioned that Marguerite Duras died in Paris that same year.

Thus making the city into a printing plate is not simple rhetoric. Our cities are clearly made up of countless such printing plates. Amongst them, like the inscription plates in Paris and Hiroshima, some were made with clear determination and installed as such. An artist who accompanied Okabe when he was making frottages in Paris announced the following:

*"Amidst the freezing cold of February, we walked along the backstreets of the Marais, as workers set off to their factories bearing ladders and tool boxes. Catching a glimpse of a memorial plaque on an outer wall, [Okabe] laid a scrap of paper on it and recorded its tragic history, one word at a time, through strong strokes across the paper. The people walking along the street stopped and asked us about it."*<sup>14</sup>

The people passing by stopped and asked us about it. This is important. That place of art creation became a place of communication as questions were asked about the past, the silent memorial plaques were given words that spoke. The aerogram frottages taken from those walls were folded and put in the mailbox to be sent to unknown people. The vestigial traces thus traveled through a different circuit than the usual information networks, when the traces of strokes were received as clear marks on the paper, then something was received from that place.

These vestigial traces that were taken as rubbings from the printing plates of the city thus traveled as letters around the world. When we look at Okabe's works, we see that the citizens of a place tried their own experimental frottages and sent them away, from Barcelona to Amsterdam. To the degree that each of these cities has their own "n'oubliez pas" historical facts that must not be forgotten, to the degree that such historical facts are rediscovered numerous times, then the correspondence of memory must continue.

\*

One day when I was looking over the works from Ujina again, I noticed that my eyes were constantly drawn to that space between two stones. One time I came



to see that central space as a road. It may have been caused by the strokes. They seemed to appear as if rendered with some sort of perspective. They looked as if a passageway was opening up, from the bottom of the sheet to the top.

There is emptiness between the two stones.  
There is eternity. There is darkness.  
The thin bridge, cast over eternity, borne by those two stones  
A pencil lead resounds, back and forth  
sometimes slowly, sometimes fast History is by no means even  
Colliding, bouncing back, colliding again, a momentary pause  
Starting up again, an image of sorts spreads forth from the pencil tip.  
At last an image appears, fainter than the surrounding area  
A single band  
An equator of no man's land.  
A single tree born from the strokes  
A single passageway  
Is it the pathway to our pasts?  
To our futures?

(Translated by Martha J. McClintock)

#### Notes

- 1 Hirosada Kotani, "Furotta-ju to Okabe Masao saku hin" [Frottage and Masao Okabe's Works], *Sapporo Otani Tanki Daigaku Kiyo* [Journal of the Sapporo Otani Junior College], No.16, Sapporo Otani Tanki Daigaku, 1982.
- 2 Masao Okabe, "Pari no M-0 e—Kotani Hirosada no 9tsu no shokan—1979" [To Paris M-0—Nine letters from Hirosada Kotani—1979], *Sapporo Otani Tanki Daigaku Kiyo* [Journal of the Sapporo Otani Junior College], No.34, Sapporo Otani Tanki Daigaku, 2003.
- 3 Masao Okabe, "Toshi ni furete—rojo no sutoro-ku 2" [Touching the city— strokes on the road 2], *The Hokkaido Shimbun Press*, December 9, 1991 issue.
- 4 Masao Okabe, "Stroke on the Road in Hiroshima, August 1987/1988" [Comment on works, 1988].
- 5 Masao Okabe, "Toi no katachi no soshitsu" [Disappearance <The Form for Testimony>], *Sapporo Otani Tanki Daigaku Kiyo* [Journal of the Sapporo Otani Junior College], No.36, Sapporo Otani Tanki Daigaku, 2005.
- 6 Yoshie Okamoto, "Hiroshima wo kosuru Hiroshima wo utsusu" [Taking rubbings of Hiroshima, copying Hiroshima], *Hiroshima Memoire '96*, Hiroshima City Museum of Contemporary Art, 1997.
- 7 Masao Okabe, "Naze, koko ni kassoro ga" [Why Is the Runway Here?], *Sapporo Otani Tanki Daigaku Kiyo* [Journal of the Sapporo Otani Junior College], No.35, Sapporo Otani Tanki Daigaku, 2004.
- 8 *Ibid.*, with the written description of impression by Natsumi Morisaki.
- 9 *Ibid.*
- 10 *Ibid.*
- 11 Tomoyoshi Sato, "Hitsujigaoka o megure han no okan" [The correspondence of a printing plate at Hitsujigaoka], *Kaze ni Fureru rera-kamuy-kerpa* [Touching the Wind], Sakiyama Works +on, 2001.
- 12 *Ibid.*
- 13 *Ibid.*
- 14 Nidra Poller, "N'oubliez Pas," *MASAO OKABE*, Temporary Space #035, Gallery Bazarez, 1996.