

Tōhoku

Rei Masuda

116 This series by the German photographer Hans-Christian Schink is composed of sixty scenes from the Tōhoku area of Japan, taken one year after the region was devastated by the Great Tōhoku earthquake and tsunami on March 11, 2011. The Japanese word *Tōhoku*, which is also the title of this series, is the name of a geographical region, written using the kanji for “east” and “north,” respectively. In the Japanese archipelago, which runs along a roughly north-to-south axis, Tōhoku is at the extreme north-east of the main island of Honshū and contains six prefectures.

The megathrust earthquake was centered off the Pacific Coast of north-eastern Japan and gave rise to a colossal tsunami—a disaster that wreaked extensive damage. More than the earthquake, it was the tsunami that brought immense destruction. Loss of electrical power at the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant, which led to a crisis situation, was also the work of the tsunami.

Facing the Pacific Ocean, the Tōhoku coastline was subjected to the most extensive tsunami damage. The area is prone to earthquakes, and its residents have suffered repeated tsunamis since antiquity. Because of its history, the area had been equipped to withstand earthquakes and tsunamis—to a certain extent. The tsunami of 2011, however, which, owing to local geographical contours, reached heights exceeding thirty meters above sea level, surpassed all scenarios envisioned and obliterated coastal towns, washing away everything in its path and leaving nearly 20,000 victims in its

wake. Schink walked through and photographed the areas hit hardest, approximately one year after the disaster.

The Tōhoku region also has a name that traces its origins back more than a millennium: Michinoku, derived from *michi no oku* (道の奥) or “beyond the road,” was, from the perspective of Kyoto—the center of Japan in those days—well off the beaten path, beyond even the furthest extremity of the road that stretched eastward. The focal point of the recent tsunami’s rage—the Pacific coastal areas of Tōhoku—has since ancient times also been called *mutsu no kuni* (陸奥国), which, although written with different kanji, also derives from the same phrase: “beyond the road.”

I mention the traditional names of the disaster area because Hans-Christian Schink’s journey to photograph the region started in Kyoto. Schink spent the first three months of 2012 in Kyoto, participating in a residency program at Villa Kamogawa via the Goethe Institut. His travels to Tōhoku were conducted during that time. A photographer based in Berlin ventures to the far-off land of Japan and resides in Kyoto. And from there he takes yet another distant trip, “beyond the road.” The *Tōhoku* photographs represent scenes that Schink encountered at the far end of this double trip, at the terminus of what I will call his journey of “double-distance.”

Modern Japan, of course, offers a convenient transportation network, converting that long road into a mere few hours of travel time, making what was once a long distance now easy to bridge. Nonetheless, the time spanning roughly one year after the disaster occurred, as well as the double-

distance of Schink's journey, impart on this assortment of photographs, which have been organized into the *Tōhoku* series, what seems to be a certain character. This character appears to formally stipulate the artist's own approach to the difficult subject matter—the scene of an earthquake and tsunami disaster—while also carrying symbolic significance.

The series opens with a few snow-laden landscapes. Scenery blanketed in snow creates the impression of calmness and tranquility. Looking at the first few photographs, one may even wonder whether or not they were really shot in the disaster area. Snow has obliterated all traces of the wreckage; but even more than that, it is as if the photographer is tentatively contemplating just how to approach a land that has been devastated by a tsunami, and so is taking in these scenes of destruction from afar, also placing distance between himself and his subject.

Paying close attention, traces of destruction are evident in every photograph. If we are not careful, however, even a bus perched motionless atop a building and framed squarely in the center of a picture—an image that vividly conveys the enormity of the energy of the tsunami—may go unnoticed, because it was shot from afar, and we run the risk of proceeding on to the next photograph, oblivious. The reality of the damage caused by the tsunami, its awesome destructive power, becomes evident only after we continue turning the pages.

Starting his series of photographs in this way is, in part, likely the result of two factors that establish the framework for this work—the time in which the photographs were taken and what I am calling the double-distance. Visiting the site of the disaster after a year had elapsed, Hans-Christian Schink was too late for the event of the earthquake itself, was an outsider, and, therefore, as can be seen through his approach, was exercising extreme prudence in his attempt to come face to face with scenes of the stricken areas. What had occurred here on March 11, 2011? What can be discerned through the landscape one year later?

A one-year time lag is not necessarily too late to record the enormity of the damage sustained, the awe of the destruction. Lacerations left by the disaster remain as they were, etched deeply into the landscape that Schink encountered and photographed. Through the series, the viewer is partially reminded of the extent of the damage. It is also true, however, that the landscape of the disaster area had been altered substantially during the year that had gone by. Compared to the immediate aftermath of the quake, when the tsunami had absolutely destroyed everything and towns and villages had been reduced to random mountains of rubble, considerable order has been returned to the scenes shown in this series. The rubble has been cleaned up and most of the completely or semi-destroyed buildings have been taken down and removed, their foundations the only vestige of what once was.

In other words, a one-year time lag enabled the truly incomprehensible power of nature as well as the industriousness of people across the time span of a year to be recorded on film. Further, it is precisely because these are scenes of partially restored order that the extent of what has been lost emerges amid the quiet landscape. Lost are the daily routines of people built up in every corner of the region over the ages, scenes that were born of the interaction between people's daily lives and nature. Schink has not overlooked how the tsunami ravaged not only buildings, breakwaters, and other man-made structures, but also the nature that embraced people's lives—trees knocked flat; a hillside, where people had installed a staircase, entirely gutted. These scenes show how an anomalous act of nature called a tsunami utterly scraped away environments that had taken shape, gradually, over long years of interaction between human beings and their endeavors and nature. That is to say, the one-year time span is not merely the period of time that had transpired since the earthquake took place but is also what makes it possible for these pictures to imply a retroactive vector, taking us back to a time before the disaster occurred. Perhaps this required

a perspective like Hans-Christian Schink's, the perspective of a man who had traversed a double-distance to visit these lands.

I see Schink's work in this light because we can find aspects in his previous works, too, that examine the factor of time. His *Verkehrsprojekte Deutsche Einheit* (Traffic Projects German Unity, 1995–2003), a work that brought him to international prominence, dealt with how the German landscape was transformed by a project promoted by the government to improve the country's transportation network, following unification of East and West Germany. In upgrading the railway and autobahn infrastructure, the German government was also pushing through a large-scale, short-term measure designed to enhance the country's social infrastructure in order to stimulate economic activity in what was previously the GDR, and to economically unify a country that had already been united politically.

Schink's camera matter-of-factly recorded how highways, bridges, and other monumental structures sliced open beautiful hills, grasslands, and forests, rising up with an overwhelming massiveness. What comes to the surface in these photographs about the transformation of the German landscape amid the tumult of national reunification is historical perspective. An enhanced transportation network converts distance into time, a phenomenon that the unification project attempted to use to speed up national integration: to bridge the historical gap between two countries that had for decades walked different paths. The reason that the resultant structures, which combine grandness of scale and beauty of form, seem almost fictitious is because the artist was able to sense and to grasp the contradiction and discord caused by employing a physical means—a transportation network, which converts distance into time—to attempt to speed up the unification process, which in the end was something that could be accomplished in no other way than gradually, over a long period of time.

Another work in which Hans-Christian Schink dealt with time on a grand scale was his *1h* series (2002–10), in which he crisscrossed the globe,

tracing the path of the sun across the sky. Depending on the latitude and the time of year, the sun's path exhibits a variety of changes. By converting the movement of the sun over a one-hour period—a segment of time that one can feel physically—into a line burned into the center of each picture (a pitch-black line created by overexposing the film, thereby creating a negative image), Schink succeeded in introducing into a single image a perspective on the movement of celestial objects that have been moving since time immemorial—something normally far beyond the scale of things human.

Common throughout other of his works as well is Schink's interest in taking everyday scenes and attempting to glean from behind its subjects something big. Among the various things that surface in Schink's photographs, the flow and accumulation of time consistently seem to be important factors, reaching out from somewhere within the images.

National unity, the movement of celestial bodies—these are events that proceed on a scale that is difficult to grasp using our normal, everyday senses. Hans-Christian Schink took these events and, from the perspective of a single human being, turned them into comprehensible images with a sense of reality. The earthquake and tsunami, too, it goes without saying, transcend our everyday senses in the same way. One can even say that these events shook the very foundation of our senses. Severed from the everyday flow of time and caught up in the ensuing whirlwind, we still sense, despite the years that have elapsed since the events of those days, that time remains somehow different, that time—the time in which we live—is not the same thing it was before the earthquake.

I used the subject “we” in the above paragraph, but perhaps I should replace that with “I.” Having experienced the earthquake from Tokyo, where, despite a temporary lapse into pandemonium caused by the tremendous shaking, we sustained relatively minor physical damage, I experienced the situation in the Tōhoku areas primarily in the form of information conveyed

via the media. My wife, however, was born in Tōhoku, and family members living in the disaster zone lost their house, which brought the disaster up close and made it personal.

That was actually the second such experience for me. The Great Hanshin-Awaji earthquake of 1995, also known as the Kōbe earthquake, which claimed the lives of more than 6,000 people, struck my hometown. At that moment, I worried about the safety of my parents from my home in Tokyo. Fortunately, in neither of those disasters did anyone close to me lose their lives. Moreover, in both cases, despite witnessing scenes of the stricken areas in real-time via the television screen, the first time I actually visited those locations in person was months after the events, at which time I was finally able to come into direct contact with, and, for the first time, get a real feel for the damage that had occurred. The reason I mention this is that, just like Schink, in the end I arrived late to both events. Because I did not truly share in experiences that people dear to me were so intimately caught up in, both of these events also brought about a certain kind of pain for me that is hard to explain, as if they had caused a slight fissure to appear in certain close relationships that up until that point had been whole. It is for this reason that I feel strongly drawn to Schink's photographs of the stricken area. His attempt to approach this subject, as he sensitively contemplates just how to do it, resembles mine.

To conclude, I would like to ponder one more time what it means for Hans-Christian Schink to have visited the site a year after the event. As is evident by the snow scenes, it is winter. Spring comes late to Tōhoku. When the earthquake struck in March it was still midwinter and severely cold and snow was falling at many of the disaster sites. Schink photographed the area the following winter, after an entire round of seasons had come and gone. The passage of the seasons occurs of course throughout every year. Scenes of the disaster areas as winter landscapes reflects that, in this sense, nothing has changed and the seasons continue going round and round.

In these scenes from one year after the disaster, the cycles of nature and the industriousness of people attempting to restore order to their lives are once again in the process of meshing. Little by little, they will likely achieve a balance again, and the rhythm of the daily lives of the people, built up over the ages, will be restored. Hans-Christian Schink has inserted into this series a few pictures with people in them, which is quite unusual, considering his works to date. One such photograph shows two surfers on a winter beach. I think that we can discern a certain message that Schink, likely with some hesitation, put into this picture. That message tells us that he, a man who came to Tōhoku after traversing a double-distance, found a ray of hope.