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Re-Reading the Cityscape. How Saihate Tahi's Poetry Installation *Shi no kasoku* Opens Up New Urban Imaginaries

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Abstract In recent years, contemporary Japanese poet Saihate Tahi has expanded poetry beyond the page, creating immersive poetic spaces. One such work, *Shi no kasoku*, is a one-line poetry installation in a back alley, where text and urban space merge. This paper examines how a site-specific poetry installation has the potential to transform reading into an embodied experience, reshaping perceptions of urban space. Drawing on Miryam Sas' notion of encounter (*deai*) and spatial theorists like Lefebvre and Massey, I argue that *Shi no kasoku* serves as both a site of encounter and resistance, prompting readers to reimagine the everyday space of the city.

Keywords Japanese literature. Contemporary poetry. Site-specific art. Urban space. Urban art. Avant-garde. Encounter.

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1 Introduction

In early 2020, Saihate Tahi (1986-) was commissioned to create a piece for the Saitama Triennale of that year. After experimenting with exhibiting poetry in three-dimensional space in her first solo exhibition simply called *Shi no tenji* 詩の展示 (Poetry Exhibition) the previous year, she planned to transfer this experience to the city, where people would encounter her poetry unexpectedly.[1] She composed two short poems consisting of a single line each, asked designers Sasaki Shun and Nakanishi Yoko to come up with a design for them and eventually painted both poems in big white unmissable characters on the ground in early March 2020: *Shi no kasoku* 詩の加速 (The Acceleration of Poetry) in a small back alley in the nightlife district Minami Ginza and *Shi no teishi* 詩の停止 (The Suspension of Poetry) at the Daimon Underpass. Both locations are close to Ōmiya Station – the busiest station in Saitama Prefecture – which serves as a major commuter hub for travel into Tokyo and as an intercity terminal connected to destinations across Japan via the Shinkansen network.[2] Then, just ten days before the art festival was scheduled to open on 28 March 2020, the opening was postponed indefinitely due to the spread of the COVID-19 virus. However, the poems were already painted, so Saihate decided to leave the installation as it was. There was no prior announcement or info text accompanying her installation, so people in Ōmiya encountered Saihate's words of poetry *truly* unexpectedly. Only a few months later in June, Saihate Tahi revealed the origin of the installation in a tweet, stating, "There was all this talk about mysterious back-alley poems in spring… it was me … sorry for the trouble!".[3] The postponed Saitama Triennale finally took place from 17 October to 15 November of that year and Saihate's poems were removed on 6 January 2021, ten months after their initial appearance.

1 *Shi no tenji* was exhibited at the Yokohama Museum of Art from 23 February to 24 March 2019.

2 According to statistics published by JR East, Ōmiya Station was the busiest station in Saitama in terms of daily commuter traffic with 244,393 passengers in 2023. It ranks seventh overall, surpassed only by stations located within Tokyo – Shinjuku (650,602), Ikebukuro (489,933), Tokyo (403,831), Shibuya (314,059), and Shinagawa (274,221) – as well as Yokohama Station (362,348). In terms of Shinkansen passengers, Ōmiya Station ranked second within the JR East network with 30,291 daily passengers. The highest number was recorded at Tokyo Station with 65,056. Passenger statistics by year are available at the East Japan Railway Company website: `https://www.jreast.co.jp/passenger/`).

3 Tweet by Saihate dated 25 June 2020, available at `https://twitter.com/tt_ss/status/1275950260381028352`. Unless otherwise stated, all translations are by the Author.

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Exhibiting art in an urban space, compared to presenting an art object in a gallery, a studio or a museum, comes with its own set of aesthetic categories and critical discourses, as the ongoing discussion on art's relationship and engagement with site in form of phenomena such as site-specific installations has shown (Kaye 2000; Suderburg 2000; Kwon 2002; Hawkins 2013). Adding now poetry as an element into the mix, untangling the individual components as well as the dynamics and interplays between them seems to become even more complicated. How can we productively analyze the construct of a site-specific poetry installation in urban space as presented by *Shi no kasoku* to find out in what ways encountering a poetic space in the landscape of a city can transform our ways of reading the poem and reading our surroundings? What happens when we encounter poetry unexpectedly in urban space and which political or aesthetic implications might come with this encounter?

To make sense of the sometimes more or less subtle effects of poetic spaces in the cityscape, I aim to use Saihate Tahi's *Shi no kasoku* as an example and examine her poetry installation by combining a close reading of the poem with an imaginary walk through the installation. This approach seeks to honor the embodied reading experience that a poetry installation such as *Shi no kasoku* requires. Since Japan's border measures to prevent the spread of COVID-19 made it impossible for me to experience *Shi no kasoku* in person, my analysis relies on photos, videos, blog posts, tweets, and a virtual exploration of the relevant site using Google Street View. Following this analysis, I use the notion of encounter in postwar Japanese art, as assessed by Miryam Sas in her book *Experimental Arts in Postwar Japan: Moments of Encounter, Engagement, and Imagined Return* (2011), to argue that *Shi no kasoku* can be read as a site of encounter. Drawing on essays written by Mono-ha painter Lee Ufan (1936-) and avant-garde writer and director Terayama Shūji (1935-1983), Sas states the idea of *deai* 出会い (encounter) was the driving force behind many works of postwar artists, as they aimed to create sites of encounter between the subject, the art object, and the surrounding space through their art, which hold the potential to bring about transformation for all involved parties, while also breaking down the boundaries between them. Using the idea of *deai* and combining this with a discussion on the political potential of art when exhibited in urban space postulated by Cecilie Sachs Olsen, Henri Lefebvre, Doreen Massey, and Herbert Marcuse, I will also argue that *Shi no kasoku* can be perceived as a site of resistance to established spatial orderings and clear categorizations. I will conclude my paper by suggesting that Saihate Tahi's *Shi no kasoku* crafts an aesthetic experience that prompts readers to *re-read* their surroundings and embrace a more open-minded perspective towards alternative urban imaginaries in their everyday spaces. However,

I plan to begin this chapter by defining what we talk about when we talk about urban space and urban imaginaries to clarify the terminology I intend to use.

2 Defining Urban Space and Urban Imaginaries

Urban space is usually characterized as a space of change and dynamism (Olsen 2019; Rácz 2018; Oshima 2016). This holds true for space in general, as Doreen Massey states in the first of her three propositions for space, "we recognise space as always under construction. […] it is always in the process of being made. It is never finished; never closed" (Massey 2005, 32). However, this dynamism can be said to get accelerated in an urban environment where "something is always pulled down, and something is always constructed" (Rácz 2018, 214).

In post-war Japan, there was a significant emphasis on rational urban planning to quickly rebuild cities devastated by the war from the mid-1950s to the mid-1970s. As awareness grew regarding the increasing urban issues and limitations associated with functional city planning, left-leaning, capitalism-critical groups like the *Toshi dezain kenkyūtai*, which included architect Isozaki Arata (1931-2022) among others, emerged in Tokyo in 1956 as "a movement to critique contemporary architecture and cities" and to advocate for the preservation of traditional structures within urban environments (Oshima 2016, 624). In 1961, the group published a special issue of the magazine *Kenchiku bunka* 建築文化 (The Architectural Culture) focused on urban design. Drawing inspiration from sources such as Le Corbusier's *Plan Voisin de Paris*, they present the city as "physical, social, dynamic, symbolic, and visionary" (626). In the same issue, they argued that 'Western' urban planning typologies – such as the grid, linear, cluster, ring, satellite models – are not adequate to analyze Japanese urban space, developing their own typologies for the spatial principles and types particular to Japan, including the *Go* pattern, which is based on the layouts of many Japanese castle plans that resemble the character for the number five (626). These principles were based on the idea that the Japanese city is "never fixed; it is always in a state of transition" (Isozaki 2009, 203), mirroring Massey's proposition that space is always in the process of becoming. However, given the backdrop of recurrent natural disasters, such as the Great Kantō earthquake in 1923 or the 2011 Tōhoku earthquake and tsunami, as well as the destruction caused during WWII, including the Tokyo Air Raid in March 1945 and the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagaski that August, Japanese cities have gone through cycles of devastation and reconstruction. In

this context, the conceptualization of the city as a dynamic process "has particular relevance" in Japan (Oshima 2016, 631).

The other two propositions by Massey – namely, recognizing "space as the product of interrelations", and understanding space as "the sphere […] of coexisting heterogeneity" (Massey 2005, 31) – also seem to gain another quality in an urban environment which is usually marked by a dense population residing in close proximity. In their edited volume *Urban Imaginaries* Alev Cinar and Thomas Bender claim that it is precisely our combined individual imaginations in combination with our daily urban practices and interactions that produce the city as an "at once indefinite and a singular space" (Bender, Cinar 2007, xi). By using the term "urban imaginaries", they emphasize that the city is not a "unified and contained thing" but must always be seen in context of its networks, boundaries, and the many and diverse subjective experiences of a city (xvii). Looking at the production process of urban space and the city from a Neo-Marxist point of view, Cecilie Sachs Olsen also claims that the city is not merely a passive setting in which social actions unfold, but rather it is shaped by these actions. However, she notes that simultaneously, the city – or how we perceive it – shapes our actions, normalizing particular behaviors and spatial practices within it (Olsen 2019, 986). Put differently, the city's process of becoming can be seen as a two-way-street, as it is not only the people who shape the space of the city but they are also shaped by the space itself, as it is precisely "[t]he happenstance, liveliness and risk of these encounters […] what make the urban a site in which the boundaries of the 'givens' and what is normal are constantly negotiated" (989).

Olsen grounds her theoretical framework in Henri Lefebvre's influential concept of the "triad of space", which posits that urban space – like any other form of space – is shaped through a three-part dialectic: the conceived space (*conçu*), defined by city authorities and urban planners, and the perceived space (*perçu*), which reflects society's collective understanding of the city and its spatial norms. The third spatial mode that Lefebvre introduces directs attention to the individual sphere and the daily subjective choices made while inhabiting and navigating through urban space (*vécu*) (Lefebvre 1991, 38-9). This third mode, also referred to as spaces as lived, underscores a shift towards the individual, asserting that through subjective urban imaginaries, to use Çinar and Bender's term, these spatial practices and norms can be perpetuated or contested.

In his writings, Lefebvre expresses a strong critique of capitalism, the driving force behind what dictates spatial practices in modern society. This is especially true for urban space, as "cities have increasingly become part of the machinery of commodified dreams and desires" (Olsen 2019, 992). Moving through a city is scarcely feasible without allowing one's gaze to wander across posters,

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billboards, screens displaying advertisements, or other promotional materials. In his work *Le Droit à la Ville* (1968), Lefebvre asked who has the right to the city, examining the social and anthropological needs that human beings aspire to fulfil within their spatial surroundings. In his view, these needs include creativity and play, interaction, and exchange, and they cannot be addressed within the structures of consumption (Lefebvre 1968 quoted in Hologa 2018, 201).

This brief discussion on urban space and urban imaginaries highlighted three key points that are crucial for the subsequent analysis of poetic spaces in the city in general and Saihate Tahi's works in particular, namely (1) the city is a dynamic space that is constantly evolving and (2) urban space is not a singular, universal entity but is composed of various coexisting urban imaginaries; (3) while these imaginaries are influenced by modern day capitalist structures, they also possess the potential to contest them.

3 *Shi no kasoku*: The Poem and the Location

As described in the beginning of this paper, *Shi no kasoku* was part of Saihate Tahi's artwork for the Saitama Triennale 2020. However, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the art festival was postponed, and the installation lost its institutional context, transforming from a commissioned piece into a new entity, resembling urban art forms such as a happening or street art.[4] The installation was painted on the ground in a back alley (*roji* 路地) that is located south of the East Exit of Ōmiya station in a district called Minami Ginza, which is renowned for its vibrant nightlife scene. The work was completed under the supervision of designer Sasaki Shun, just a few days before the first of two postponement announcements, issued on 6 March 2020.[5] This district is home to various establishments, including restaurants,

4 The Saitama Triennale is a major cultural event in the city of Saitama that receives extensive promotion and attracts a substantial number of visitors. In 2023, the festival recorded 490,820 visitors – an impressive figure when considered against the city's population of approximately 1.3 million. The 2020 edition, which was ultimately held in a hybrid format due to the COVID-19 pandemic, drew 403,641 attendees, including online participants. Detailed figures are available at `https://www.saitama-np.co.jp/index.php/articles/79667`. Even in the absence of a plate or explanatory text at the site of *Shi no kasoku*, it is reasonable to assume that many visitors would have recognized the installation as part of the festival, had the event unfolded as originally planned. When the Saitama Triennale 2020 eventually opened in October 2020, the installation was listed on the festival's official website, along with detailed information about its location, available at `https://art-sightama.jp/project/uFoQn`.

5 The Saitama Triennale was initially scheduled to open on 14 March 2020. On 6 March, the opening was postponed to 28 March, but by 19 March, the event was officially postponed indefinitely. The revised schedule was announced on 23 September 2020, stating that the online program would run from 3 October to 15 November and

izakaya, karaoke bars, pachinko parlors, and what are commonly known as *gāruzubā* ガールズバー (girls bars) and snack bars. The latter are typically staffed by female bartenders and primarily cater to male white-collar workers seeking companionship and relaxation after their workday.

The typical Japanese *roji* holds a significant place in every Japanese city, serving as a favored subject for poets and researchers alike. In his poetry collection *Shinkokyū no hitsuyō* 深呼吸の必要 (The Need for Deep Breathing, 1991), Osada Hiroshi describes the *roji* as "a pathway that winds through the spaces between houses in the heart of the city", highlighting especially the sight of flowerpots placed along the walls that are hinting at the presence of other people, even if no one else is in sight, making "you suddenly feel as though the thoughts of your daily life have been refreshed" (Osada 2015, 162). In his article "The Space-Time Compression of Tokyo Street Drinking", James Farrer emphasizes the social importance of the *roji* within Japan's nightlife and drinking culture, using the term "spaces of play" among others to describe them (Farrer 2021, 50). He argues that the narrow *roji*, defined by closely positioned small-scale shops, leads to a compression of space, mirroring the atmosphere of Asian night markets. This spatial compression facilitates a sense of intimacy and familiarity among the people frequenting these places (49). However, he also highlights the gendering and male-centric nature of these urban nightlife spaces, a trend he suggests is gradually waning. He attributes this shift to the targeting of working women by these establishments, a change prompted by the demographic transformation in the workforce following the burst of the Japanese economic bubble in the 90s (51). Heide Imai describes the *roji* as a multisensory environment, where the boundaries between private and public are blurred (Imai 2008, 335), leading to the impression of a "visual chaos" consisting of alleys "cluttered with bicycles, flowerpots and little knick-knacks" (336). Osada, Farrer, and Imai all highlight the distinctive character inherent in each back alley within a Japanese city. Whether located in a vibrant nightlife district with small-scale bars and *izakaya* or situated within a tranquil residential area adorned with flowerpots, each *roji* possesses a unique charm. Their narrowness and confined space compel people to slow down, barely accommodating a motorbike, let alone a car. At the same time, these alleys cultivate an intimate atmosphere that blurs the lines between inhabitants and customers.

The small *roji* of *Shi no kasoku* leads away from the main road of Minami Ginza and is roughly 70 meters long and only one and a

the on-site program from 17 October to 15 November 2020. See the news section of the official website for a full timeline of events: `https://art-sightama.jp/en/news`.

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half meter wide. Interestingly, the ground in this specific *roji* has a distinct appearance compared to the other alleys and roads in that district. It features irregularly shaped yellow-brown street tiles, bordered on each side by white rectangular tiles, lending an almost frame-like quality to the poem presented in the installation. The poem of *Shi no kasoku* starts in said back alley at the opposite end from Minami Ginza's main road and concludes where the back alley meets the main road. It consists of one single line written in a vertical reading direction, with the words saying:

> 私の加速に一番ふさわしい季節。春って。あなたとあなたとあなたのことを忘れたぶんだけ愛しているとうそぶく春は乱視です。今日だけは、あなたが信じたものが真実かもね。
>
> *Watashi no kasoku ni ichiban fusawashii kisetsu. Harutte. Anata to anata to anata no koto wo wasureta bundake aishiteiru to usobuku haru wa ranshi desu. Kyō dake wa, anata ga shinjita mono ga shinjitsu kamo ne.*
>
> The season that suits my acceleration the best – that's spring. Spring is an astigmatism, forgetting you and you and you as much as it pretends to love. Only for today, what you believed in might be true.

Each character of the poem is roughly 60 cm tall, 40 cm wide and painted in white on the ground. Its dimension is a crucial element of the installation, as due to the length of the poem and the size of the characters, it cannot be viewed in its entirety at a single glance. Viewers must move along the characters and walk through the whole back alley to read the full poem. As the alley is hardly visible from the side facing away from Minami Ginza, most people would discover the installation from the main road and initially see or read the last words of the poem. To view the beginning of the poem, readers would technically need to first walk through the entire alley, and to read it, they would have to move backward along the line of poetry while facing the opposite direction.

As it is typical for poems by Saihate Tahi, *Shi no kasoku* follows a free verse structure with no rhyme pattern. It consists of four short sentences, written in one vertical line. The poem starts with the kanji for *watashi* 私 (I), introducing a personal tone and potentially identifying its speaker as female.[6] This sense is heightened by

6 The word "potentially" is used here because *watashi* can technically be used by both men and women. However, as noted, the poem has a conversational, personal tone. While women often use *watashi* in such contexts, men typically prefer other first-person

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incorporating an unnamed *anata* あなた (you), evoking the atmosphere of an inner monologue or an intimate conversation between two people, and further intensified by a syntax reminiscent of spoken Japanese, with sentences left incomplete or shifting between different levels of politeness. Following *watashi* and the possessive particle *no* の, the second noun is *kasoku* 加速 (acceleration), the same word as in the installation's title, this time describing the speaker's acceleration. The use of *kasoku* conveys a sense of movement – a movement which becomes faster and faster, creating a restless, rushed, and agitated atmosphere to which, as the speaker claims, the season spring fits the best.

Highlighting a season prominently in a poem, particularly by a poet like Saihate Tahi, who is well-versed in traditional Japanese *waka* as evidenced by her translation of the famous classical Japanese anthology *Hyakunin isshu* 百人一首 (One Hundred People, One Poem Each) into modern Japanese, seems to be more than a coincidence. The use of seasons to establish a poem's atmosphere and scenery is a central tenet of Japanese traditional poetry, dating back to the late seventh century (Shirane 2012, 27). In classical Japanese poetry, spring is associated with many things, among them the growth of plants and flowers, symbolizing new life (34). The dawn of a new day is also intricately tied to the spring season, echoing the famous exclamation from Sei Shōnagon's *Makura no Sōshi* 枕草子 (The Pillow Book, ca. 1002), "*Haru wa akebono*" 春はあけぼの (Spring is dawn) (Kubota, Baba 1999, 719). Within the context of *Shi no kasoku*, the term "spring" may encapsulate a similar concept of new beginnings, aligning with the restlessness and agitation implied by the term *kasoku*.

In the original Japanese, it remains unclear in the second sentence whether the subject is again "I" (*watashi*) or if it is spring itself that forgets the addressee while equally loving them. Spring could also be personified as a stand-in for the lyrical subject, especially since a connection between spring and the speaker is established in the first sentence. The grammatical structure of that sentence places emphasis on the final noun: *ranshi* 乱視 (astigmatism). Referring to a visual condition in which an irregular curvature of the cornea causes distorted or blurred vision, *ranshi* resonates with the poem on multiple levels.

For one, blurred vision is often associated with movement, as an object that moves fast usually appears blurred in our vision, relating to the word *kasoku* (acceleration) at the beginning of the poem. Blurred or distorted vision could also be connected to feelings of

pronouns like *boku* 僕 or *ore* 俺 in informal situations. That said, the use of first-person pronouns in Japanese is flexible, which contributes to the poem's overall ambiguity.

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fatigue and tiredness. A famous example of this appears in Miyazawa Kenji's (1896-1933) poem *Higashi iwate kazan* 東岩手火山, where he uses the expression *ranshi* to describe his mental exhaustion, writing:

> 月はいま二つに見える
> やつぱり疲れからの乱視なのだ
>
> *Tsuki wa ima futatsu ni mieru*
> *yatsupari tsukarekara no ranshi na no da*
>
> The moon now appears as two
> indeed astigmatism caused by exhaustion (Miyazawa 1924)

Similar to Miyazawa suddenly seeing more than one moon, the speaker in Saihate's poem also seems to perceive more than one "you", repeating the word *anata* three times.

Additionally, astigmatism, with its resulting double vision, can be linked to the poem's juxtaposition of forgetting and pretending to love – two actions that would normally be mutually exclusive but are presented as being carried out with equal intensity through the grammatical construction *bun dake* ぶんだけ. Both of these images, double vision and emotional contradiction, can be associated with a distorted perception, one visual and the other emotional. Just as double vision prevents the observer from distinguishing a single, true image, the juxtaposition of forgetting and pretending to love suggests an emotional state in which the boundaries between these contradictory emotional actions blur, hinting at the unreliable nature of human emotions – especially considering the speaker only *pretends* to love.

Whether due to exhaustion and fatigue or the speaker's prior establishment of emotions as unreliable, in the final sentence, the speaker allows what *anata* believes in – the love the speaker pretends to offer – to be perceived as genuine, if only for today.

Despite its shortness, the poem includes all the typical elements for Saihate Tahi's poetry, consisting of a free verse structure, writing the poem from the perspective of a non-descriptive "I", addressed to a nameless "you" as well as dealing with "themes of isolation, depression, and downright bewilderment about love of all kinds" (Smith 2017, 109). As mentioned before, it creates the intimate atmosphere of reading someone's inner monologue – which is why it is even more striking that Saihate Tahi chose to write this particular poem on the ground of a back alley in Ōmiya's nightlife district in big, unmissable characters for her installation.

4 Text, Space and Movement: Reading *Shi no kasoku*

Through its spatial dimensions, *Shi no kasoku* enables the readers to *be* in the poetic work, standing right in the middle of its words while reading them. As a site-specific installation, it also establishes a relationship between the art object, in this case the poem painted on the ground, and the location where it was placed, namely the back alley in Minami Ginza, Ōmiya.

Presenting poetry in the form of a site-specific installation turns reading *Shi no kasoku* into a simultaneously cognitive and corporeal act that presupposes "the literal presence of the viewer" (Bishop 2005, 6). As Claire Bishop writes in her monograph *Installation Art: A Critical History* (2005),

> [r]ather than imagining the viewer as a pair of disembodied eyes that survey the work from a distance, installation art presupposes an embodied viewer whose senses of touch, smell and sound are as heightened as their sense of vision. (6)

This means that the experience of being in that specific location *Shi no kasoku* is presented in is as much part of the poetic work as the written characters themselves. Readers not only physically engage their entire bodies to read the poem, but they also find themselves immersed in a multitude of stimuli, ranging from other written words like shop signs or commercial posters to the typical bustling sounds of a city and the scents of flowerpots, restaurants and perhaps garbage cans. Readers become fully aware of their own physicality with all their senses during the reading process, merging the ambiance of the back alley with the words of the poem.

In the following section, I intend to use an imaginary stroll through *Shi no kasoku* as a tool to weave the poem with its surrounding space, conducting an analysis of the interplay between these elements. The notion of an imaginary stroll, as introduced by Karen van den Berg in her article *The Unconditional Museum: The Fragile Logic of the Ensemble* (2008), serves as a methodological inspiration. In her analysis, she employs this imaginative walk through an exhibition to blend her subjective impressions as a viewer with a conceptual examination of the "aesthetic space of experience" (van den Berg 2008, 11).

It is sometime in the afternoon, and the nightlife district of Minami Ginza has not yet fully come to life. The doors to the small upstairs bars remain closed, while the restaurants and pachinko parlors are already bustling. Seen from the main street of Minami Ginza, the entrance to the alleyway *Shi no kasoku* is presented in is framed by a ramen restaurant and a Chinese restaurant specializing in Tanmen. Both signs are in a vibrant red, signaling, through their

advertisements, that affordable, quickly prepared food is available there. A typical street bollard on the left side of the entrance is covered in brightly designed advertising stickers and tags from various street art groups. Gazing down the alley, one encounters the characteristic "visual chaos" of a *roji*, as described by Heide Imai. The scene unfolds with long cables spanning the passage, ventilation ducts, vending machines, garbage bags, bicycles, potted plants – and most notably, overlapping brightly colored signs that are affixed to the outer walls of various restaurants and bars. On the ground, there is the poem spreading from the other end towards the readers. They encounter the poem in reverse, reading its last words "*shinjitsu kamo ne*" (maybe it is true) first. In a blog post discussing Saihate's installation, blogger Ribu described their encounter with reading the poem in reverse, stating "I was overwhelmed by the power of the words that emerged when reading it in reverse". When they read "*shinjitsu kamo ne*", they wondered, "what might possibly be true?" and then continued walking through the alley, while reading.[7] When reaching the second to last sentence of the poem, "*Anata to anata to anata no koto wo wasureta bundake aishiteiru to usobuku haru wa ranshi desu*" (Spring is an astigmatism, forgetting you and you and you as much as it pretends to love), the landscape of the alleyway has slightly changed. The further away from the main street of Minami Ginza, the more the signs of Chinese restaurants, soba restaurants or yakitori bars get replaced by signs of the local snack bars and girls bars with names like Silk, Major AAA, Big Sister, Members Lucia, or Clown. As mentioned before, these markers designate the alley as a gendered space – one intended for male customers and female service providers. At the same time, the signs hint at a business that, to some extent, specializes in simulating affection for their customers. Could the middle sequence of the poem, where the speaker pretends to love "you and you and you", be read as a reference to these establishments? And if that is the case, could the *ranshi* caused by fatigue and the emotional exhaustion potentially belong to one of the women employed in one of the bars – tired from feigning affection for a multitude of male customers, as emphasized by the enumeration? In this sense, *Shi no kasoku* could also be read as a testament to a loveless yet love-craving city, where feigning affection has evolved into a lucrative business.

As the readers progress along the alley, they eventually encounter the first two sentences of the poem, situating it temporally in spring – the season originally intended for the Saitama Triennale 2020. This temporal alignment has the potential to deepen the

7 See the full blog article at the following link: `https://note.com/rib3/n/n3625f165991f`.

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readers' immersion into the poetic space, asking them to be attentive to the distinct array of sights, scents, and sounds associated with spring. Furthermore, the conciseness of these two elliptical sentences imparts a sense of speed, mirrored in the term *kasoku*, as well as in the movement of the readers themselves. The poem commences where the alley concludes – and as the readers step beyond the poetry installation, they find themselves at a small T-shaped junction, with a narrow back alley to both their left and right. Here, they decide whether to embark on a re-read of *Shi no kasoku*, this time from start to finish, or to follow one of the other alleys. However, in the afternoon, this tiny *roji* is almost empty. How would the experience of reading the poem change if it were nighttime, with groups of people gathered in front of the bars, obstructing one's path and line of sight? What if the poem were read from a second-floor window, offering a vantage point over the entire scene – remaining still while watching others move below? And considering that the installation appeared during the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic, when public life had already slowed down, how might the contrast between a once-bustling pre-pandemic nightlife and the present moment reshape the perception and interpretation of the poetry installation? How does the reading experience change across different seasons?

Reading *Shi no kasoku* as a poetic space means directing one's senses outward while reading, incorporating all sensory experiences as well as one's own perception of and associations with that specific space into the poem. A space is never just its physical dimensions. In his *The Poetics of Space* (1958), Gaston Bachelard says "[i]nhabited space transcends geometrical space" (Bachelard 2014, 67), meaning, when we *are* in a space our memories, associations, and imaginations overlay it, infusing the space with a poetic quality. As previously mentioned, the space in which *Shi no kasoku* is situated is far from a neutral backdrop for its words; rather, it adds layers of meaning that unfold differently depending on the individual reader, as well as the time and surrounding conditions. Imagining a walk through the poetry installation illustrates this dynamic interplay among space, movement, and text, highlighting the potential meanings that can emerge. However, this represents only one example among countless possible ways of perceiving and reading *Shi no kasoku*.

5 Conceptualizing *Shi no kasoku* as a Site of Encounter – and Resistance

Employing *Shi no kasoku* as an example, this section delves into the examination of the question what happens when poetry is embedded within urban space, going beyond the impact on the content and potential readings of it as illustrated above, and, more generally,

examine the intrinsic socio-cultural implications of integrating poetry into the urban environment. This section draws parallels with other instances of incorporating art in experimental forms within urban spaces, particularly examining postwar avant-garde movements in 1960s and 70s Tokyo and Paris, such as Hi-Red Center, the Situationists, or the Mono-ha. Employing Japanese avant-garde concepts of encounter (*deai*), alongside Henri Lefebvre's notion of lived space as a theoretical foundation, I posit that Saihate Tahi's *Shi no kasoku* can be interpreted as a site of *deai*, presenting an encounter where the subject, object, and space intricately shape and are shaped by one another. Moreover, I contend that it can also be construed as a site of resistance by negotiating established spatial practices and by blurring dichotomies such as public and private, familiarity and unfamiliarity.

5.1 Encountering *Shi no kasoku* Unexpectedly

The idea of an "unexpected encounter" (*fui na deai* 不意な出会い) with poetry in an everyday urban space was the driving force behind Saihate Tahi's site-specific installation *Shi no kasoku*, as she revealed in a tweet:

> I think that when we suddenly see a poem in the city or in an everyday scene, these words that we encounter unexpectedly flow more vividly into the reader's mind. We read words in books and magazines with the awareness that we are reading, but I believe that words that catch us off guard can transcend this awareness. This work was born from that thought.[8]

Encountering a work of art in a public space by chance – whether it is an installation, a performance, or a happening – comes with an element of unpredictability and surprise. It encapsulates a disruption from the everyday, challenging the overly familiar sights of the urban spaces people encounter in their daily routines. Avant-garde art collectives like Hi-Red Center sought to use this moment of surprise in their artistic practice during 1960s Japan. They orchestrated events like the *Yamanotesen jiken* 山手線事件 (Yamanote Line Incident), where members, faces painted in white, boarded a Yamanote line train, each holding portable egg-shaped objects crafted from everyday items like wristwatches, bottle tops, and human hair. This direct engagement with the public aimed to

8 Tweet by Saihate dated 25 June 2020, available at `https://twitter.com/tt_ss/status/1275950260381028352`.

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defamiliarize "the everyday, communal, enclosed spaces of train cars" and "awaken their consciousness" (Mitsuda 2023, 111).

Many of these practices revolve around the concept of encounter (*deai*), a key term for Japanese postwar artists that envisions the direct interaction between a subject and an object or another subject, such as between audience and performer, viewer and painting, or reader and poetry (Sas 2011, 97). One of the artists to draw on theories of encounter or *deai* is Lee Ufan, member of the artist group Mono-ha that was active from the late sixties to early seventies. Critical of an artistic approach that relies on mimesis and the idea of representing the world, the Mono-ha's aim was to create an encounter between the viewer and the world "as it is" (*ari no mama* ありのまま) or the object "left alone" (*mono o hōtteoku* 物を放っておく), rather than expressing their own subjectivity or intention through the object (105). According to Lee, the Mono-ha regarded their artwork as a beginning or provocation, rather than a representation or completed work, which leads to an encounter that they themselves cannot foresee (108).

In writer and director Terayama Shūji's dramatic theories, *deai* is conceptualized as an artistic practice in which the stage and audience seats are eliminated to reject the hierarchical distinction between audience and actor, building a collaborative connection instead (109). At the same time, *deai* marks an interruption of the everyday and "the entrance into another world, another space" – a space which is always already there but concealed beneath social norms and conventional thinking (111). In other words, the notion of *deai* encompasses mediations on one side and interruptions and distortions on the other, representing an interaction between two or more unstable and unfixed terms, each ideally undergoing irreversible change through the encounter (126).

While the conceptualization of *deai* as described above is tied to the artistic practices of postwar Japanese artists, particularly the Mono-ha and Terayama Shūji, I argue that Saihate Tahi's *Shi no kasoku* employs similar mechanisms to evoke a response from its readers. As evident from Saihate's tweet, the unexpected encounter with poetry in an urban setting aims to "transcend the awareness that we are reading", echoing the avant-garde ideal of a direct encounter between the subject and the object that is unmediated by being aware of the author or artist behind that work.

One way of transcending this "awareness of reading" lies in the font design of *Shi no kasoku*, which strikingly resembles the typical *tomare* 止まれ (stop) writing on streets throughout Japan, serving the same function as a stop sign. The installation uses a common placement and design of text in Japanese urban space but alters it to a degree that renders the familiar as unfamiliar. This ambivalent realm between familiarity and unfamiliarity is the element that

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captures the reader's initial attention. By blending this well-known style and font with the unexpected presence of poetry, individuals encountering *Shi no kasoku* instinctively begin reading the words, if only to discern what is written there instead of the usual *tomare* – and start to read poetry without even initially realizing it.

The placement of the poem also echoes Terayama's idea of breaking down the distinction between stage and audience, or object and subject, as there is no barrier between the two in *Shi no kasoku*. The painted characters are neither behind glass nor placed within a setting where the spatial norm is to refrain from touching the artwork like a museum or gallery. Instead, readers have no choice but walk over it to read the poem. The consequences from this placement are evident in photographs captured by viewers at various points during the installation's runtime, revealing the visible impact of hundreds of footsteps on the paint.

Another facet of *Shi no kasoku* that appears to resonate to some extent with the notion of *deai* is the uncertain authorship during the initial months when the installation appeared in Minami Ginza. As previously discussed, according to Lee, the optimal encounter between a subject and an object can only be realized when the art object exists in a state of "left alone" (*mono o hōtteoku*). In the context of Mono-ha, this entails unveiling the world as it is through using materials with "minimal artistic interference" in their works (Mitsuda 2023, 144). Saihate's approach does not center around materiality in the same manner as the Mono-ha's work did. However, adopting a more expansive interpretation of an object in a "left alone" state to mean concentrating on the object itself and its perception rather than interpreting it solely as an expression representing the artist, it can also be applied to *Shi no kasoku*.

Saihate Tahi is very vocal about having no desire to be the authoritative voice when it comes to her own poetic work, as she has stated in an interview with *Asahi Shimbun*, calling her poems "*yomite no mono*" 読み手のもの (possessions of the reader).[9] By withholding the contextual details of *Shi no kasoku* for the initial months, residents of Ōmiya experienced the poetic space Saihate had crafted in a literal "left alone" state, prompting speculation about the origin and purpose of the "mysterious back-alley poem".[10] This absence of context also enhanced the element of surprise during this unexpected encounter, transforming *Shi no kasoku* into a

9 The full interview is available at `https://digital.asahi.com/articles/ASP6R01ZVP50UCVL01L.html`.

10 See the discussion below Saihate Tahi's tweet on 25 June 2020, where she disclosed her authorship of the installation at `https://twitter.com/tt_ss/status/1275950260381028352`.

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puzzle-like entity that motivated viewers to share photographs of their findings online and engage in discussions about their theories. This contextless publishing approach bears a striking resemblance to graffiti or what Marie Hologa defines as "contemporary practices of urban do-it-yourself inscription" (Hologa 2018, 200). Many street artists opt for anonymity and adopt pseudonyms due to the illicit nature of unauthorized street art. While applying terms like street art or graffiti to *Shi no kasoku* may seem a stretch, given its official authorization by the local government and Saihate identifying herself as the author a few months later, its legal status remained somewhat ambiguous to outsiders.

However, conceptualizing *Shi no kasoku* as a graffiti-like entity, an inscription in urban space, can prove productive in more than one way. The installation shares a characteristic with graffiti, that was pointed out by István Rácz: the creation of palimpsests in the form of "texts written on top of another text" (Rácz 2018, 214). Much like a graffito engages in a continual interaction with the surface it is written on, altering the meaning of the wall while simultaneously being influenced by the wall's impact on its interpretation, *Shi no kasoku* shapes its surrounding space – and in turn, the installation's surroundings exert their influence on the way we perceive and read *Shi no kasoku*. Returning to the concept of *deai*, Lee asserts that the encounter he envisions is not just between the subject and the object. It also extends to the world beyond it, establishing a "resonance space" that transcends the confines of the artwork (Sas 2011, 107-8). As Lee describes it, "what is painted may 'breathe life into' what is not painted, and what is not painted penetrates and reveals, and thus becomes part of, what is painted" (108).

The essence of *deai* lies in this interplay – an encounter not confined to the subject and object alone, but also extending to the space surrounding the other two terms. In *Shi no kasoku*, these three inherently unstable and non-fixed components – subject, object, and space – converge, mutually influencing and being influenced by one another, resulting in a transformative process that leaves none of the components in its pre-encounter state. This is the reason, in accordance with Terayama's perspective, why an encounter or *deai* in this sense is "full of mediations, reiterations, interruptions; it enacts various kinds of distortions, slippages, divergences (*zure*), and leaps" (124). These very elements also happen to be what qualifies *Shi no kasoku* not only as a site of encounter but also as a site of resistance – a concept that will be discussed in more detail in the following section.

5.2 *Shi no kasoku* as a Site of Resistance and New Emerging Urban Imaginaries

The notion of *deai* as conceptualized by Lee and Terayama, viewed as a transformative force capable of dissolving boundaries and binaries, has a similar potential as what Henri Lefebvre calls spaces as lived. Drawing on this third term from Lefebvre's triad of space, the geographer and urban theorist Edward Soja formulates his concept of Thirdspace, which he describes as a transgressive concept, functioning as "a third term that disrupts, disorders, and begins to reconstitute" (Soja 1996, 31). And in its otherness and difference, it is also "the terrain for the generation of 'counterspaces', spaces of resistance to the dominant order" (67). Both Lefebvre and Soja consider lived spaces or Thirdspace to function as a "strategic location" (68), from which alternative urban imaginaries can emerge. Influenced by his friend, Guy Debord, a prominent figure in the Situationist art movement in 1950s- and 1960s-Paris, Lefebvre specifically associates art with the concept of lived spaces. Within this framework, he considers art as a crucial instrument for negotiating normative spatial practices while simultaneously generating and broadening the scope of possible urban imaginaries (Dünne 2006, 298-9; Olsen 2019, 986).

Written from a Neo-Marxist standpoint and influenced by the tumultuous events of the 1968 uprisings in Paris, the political dimension is crucial for Lefebvre's spatial imagination (Soja 1996, 68), mirroring the Situationists' belief in the inseparability of art and politics (Trier 2019, 227). He views the city as a realm of limitless possibilities, a "virtual object", where "the past, the present, the possible" are intricately intertwined (Lefebvre 1996, 148, 156).

Lefebvre's ideas continue to resonate in discussions surrounding contemporary art in urban spaces such as street art (Hologa 2018) or socially engaged art (Olsen 2019). However, as Marie Hologa points out, while Lefebvre perceived the transformation of urban space from below within the context of class conflict, street art around the turn of the millennium tends to be viewed more as a conflict between generations or a cultural issue, originating from "urban, creative twenty-somethings: art students or designers, bloggers, skaters and photographers", who, through artistic expression, try to appropriate the city space and advocate for the right to visually shape their surroundings (Hologa 2018, 202). Furthermore, she asserts that street art has taken on a novel commercialist facet, as more and more successful street artists started selling their aesthetic style, engaging in collaborations with advertisers or fashion designers (203). However, even if an expression of street art may not inherently convey an explicit political message, the "performative act of creating

a city within a city" itself can nevertheless be regarded as a political act, according to Hologa (202).

Based on the discussion above, in what ways does *Shi no kasoku* create a poetic space within an urban environment that can be considered political to some extent, serving as a site of resistance? To further address this question, it is also essential to contemplate the connotations embedded within the term "resistance" and identify the specific elements against which *Shi no kasoku* offers resistance.

In the 1960s in Paris as well as Tokyo, the target or entity contested by avant-garde artworks such as the *Yamanotesen jiken* appears to be easily identifiable, as they are intertwined with (Neo-)Marxist ideologies advocating for an uprising against a capitalist, exploitative system. In contrast, contemporary street art, also thriving as a vibrant scene in Japan, as evidenced by numerous publications on street art in Tokyo and other Japanese cities (Camerota 2011; Pan 2015; Sanada 2007), may exhibit less explicit political motivations or association with a specific movement. Nevertheless, given the quasi-illegal nature of street art, it inherently embodies a political impetus which can be labelled as a "valid territorial claim", aiming to "transform urban space through acts of individual creativity in one way or the other" – and as a form of resistance against an "increasingly bland, commodified, and homogenized urban realm" (Hologa 2018, 201-2). However, simply using this framework to apply the label "resistance" to *Shi no kasoku* seems hardly justifiable, despite its almost guerrilla-style existence for outsiders, as, after all, it was still a commissioned piece for one of Japan's major art festivals.

This is why I believe it is helpful to reassess the implications associated with the resistance, using Doreen Massey's critique of a binary thinking of resistance versus power, where the central power is separated from the everyday, framing the streets as "the margins", "the interstitial space", and a "site of deviance" (Massey 2005, 103-5). This conceptualization, which she calls a form of "spatial fetishism", rejects any acknowledgement of implication in power and any responsibility for it (215). Building on Massey's framework, Cecilie Sachs Olsen points out a flaw in viewing art as originating from an outside that is inherently liberating or communal, as she emphasizes the necessity of avoiding a simple binary between a homogenized and controlled urban space versus an open and liberatory urban space. Instead, she advocates for a closer examination of "the often-suppressed contradictions within artistic as well as urban processes" and proposes analyzing artworks in urban space in a dialectic manner (Olsen 2019, 990-1). This contradiction appears to find a perfect embodiment in *Shi no kasoku*. It fluctuates between being contextless street art and a commissioned work for the Saitama Triennale. It takes the form of a dematerialized, site-specific installation, devoid of direct resale value, yet intricately woven into

an institutional context which aims at the promotion of Saitama as a city of contemporary art. While it proves to be difficult to see *Shi no kasoku* through the same lens of resistance Lefebvre or Soja applied to the Situationists' work, the label "resistance" still applies in a more subtle form that, in accordance with Massey and Olsen, also acknowledges the contradictions of artistic expression in a capitalist system.

Rather than conceiving art as resistance through a Marxist lens that accentuates the class character of artistic expression, philosopher and Frankfurt School member Herbert Marcuse suggests that art's political potential lies inherently within the art itself, embedded in its aesthetic form (Marcuse 1979). Furthermore, Marcuse argues that the autonomy derived from its aesthetic form enables art to challenge and transcend existing social relations, thereby "subvert[ing] the dominant consciousness, the ordinary experience" (ix). This perspective implies that art has the potential to distance individuals from their "functional existence and societal roles", while simultaneously emancipating "sensibility, imagination, and reason across all spheres of subjectivity and objectivity" (9).

Applied to *Shi no kasoku*, one way the installation challenges and transcends existing social relations and orderings is through its placement within a back alley or *roji* in a dense nightlife area combined with the act of reading poetry. When people stop to read the poem, moving slowly along its line of poetry or even moving backwards in order to read it from the beginning, this potentially creates a disturbance for other people within the narrow confines of a back alley, therefore estranging the people passing by or through the back alley from their ordinary experience within this urban space. In doing so, the poetry installation temporarily removes individuals from their daily routines and offers an aesthetic encounter, that prompts to stimulate their sensibility and imagination, perceiving the back alley in a new light. One of these new re-readings of the space emerges from the tension between the presumably female speaker of the poem juxtaposed with the bars that typically cater to male workers – making it a subtle territorial claim not unsimilar to that of graffiti, negotiating the nightlife back alley's taken-for-granted gendered dimension.

Another way *Shi no kasoku* negotiates established categorizations and orderings involves the deliberate blurring of the private and public spheres. Similar to the *roji*, which oscillates between these realms, this blurring of lines is evident in the combination of an intimate poem delving into a personal monologue or conversation about love with the public street serving as its canvas, presenting a tension between content and form. By transplanting the act of reading into the public sphere, the installation also prompts an awareness of the numerous texts and writings encountered in urban spaces – such

as shop signs, billboards, and the like – which hold the potential to become integral components of the poetic space embodied by *Shi no kasoku*, alongside the poem itself.

Shi no kasoku's potential as a site of resistance does not hinge on delivering a clear-cut political message or statement against capitalism. Rather, its resistance manifests in the creation of an aesthetic experience woven into the fabric of daily life, yet subtly deviating from it, transforming the familiar into the ever-so-slightly unfamiliar. This aesthetic moment, or encounter, distances readers from their societal roles and functional existence, to echo Marcuse's words. It gives rise to a moment of disruption and playfulness, prompting individuals to adopt a more receptive stance towards alternative urban imaginaries and re-readings of their everyday surroundings.

6 Conclusion

This paper began by asking in what ways encountering a poetic space in the landscape of a city can transform our ways of reading a poem and perceiving our surroundings. The ensuing discussion has unveiled the intricate layers comprising a poetry installation like *Shi no kasoku* within an urban environment, perceiving it not as self-contained art piece, but an open, multi-layered network of interactions, intertwining readers, poetry, and space, as well as movement, temporality, and embodiment. By integrating poetry into real, tangible urban spaces, *Shi no kasoku* not only enables unexpected encounters with its poem but also transforms reading into a cognitive *and* physical act involving movement and the senses, opening up the poem and its words to endless potential interpretations.

Furthermore, conceptualizing *Shi no kasoku* as both a site of encounter and resistance helped to understand its socio-cultural potential within the dynamic cityscape. As stated above, the city is not a stable, neutral backdrop to *Shi no kasoku*, it is a dynamic space that shapes its inhabitants while it is also shaped by them and their individual urban imaginaries – which means that the spatial practices and the boundaries of the givens within it are not fixed but negotiable. Although *Shi no kasoku* refrains from giving a clear political statement, by providing an aesthetic moment of disruption that detaches individuals from their usual routines and functional roles within society, it prompts a new awareness for this flexibility and room for negotiation within the city, challenging its seemingly stable ordering.

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