

Our Present Absence

by Andrew Oberg

The university where I work recently expanded its main campus and our department moved into a section of the new building. Our offices are smaller now, but carpeted, and came equipped with new industrial style bookshelves along with the old desks and tables that appear to have been with the department for many years. Some professors have complained about the reduced personal space, and judging from the amount of things crammed into some of the offices around me I can understand their grievances, but I have the opposite problem. Three of the four walls in my office are lined by those cold steel bookshelves, and well over half of them sit completely empty. Students that come in to see me are usually kind enough to remark that my office is “tidy” but others have been more to the point and told me that I need to buy some more books or at least knickknacks. Were I here for longer I could no doubt find ways to fill up the space that’s been lent to me, but due to a number of pressures universities in Japan have for the past decade or so primarily only offered limited-term contracts to new hires;ⁱ once in a great while you can see a permanent position advertised, but by and large we are given four to five years to work at a place and then politely shown the door. This of course means that we all have to be prepared to move around a lot, which in turn means that it’s probably a good idea to keep one’s office “tidy”. The place does feel barren though, and were I of a different mind I might make more effort to at least decorate. The mind I am of, though, tells me that all this empty space is not such a bad thing, and I don’t think I’m alone in that. In the following I’d like to make the claim that not only is empty space potentially positive but what affects us, what touches and compels us in our surroundings and even in much of our aesthetic pleasures, is that very emptiness — the spaces between.

As you can imagine, space here in Tokyo is at a premium. An old saying has it that if you were to take a ¥10,000 bill (worth about US\$100) and fold it in half, and then in half again, and again and again, making it as small as it will go, it would still not be enough money to pay for the amount of ground that it covers. This has of course led to some creative uses of the land that one can afford, such as the home below (shown here being built in stages):ⁱⁱ



As the building is only about three meters across, the designers of the home used high interior ceilings and white paint to give residents a feeling of having more space than they actually do. I'd still hate to pour millions of yen into a place only to find that I can stretch out and nearly touch both sides of my new family abode, though. In what ways does this lack of space affect us? How are we biologically tuned towards space? Is less more or more less? And what is it about space or its lack that so calms — and at times frightens — us?

In the early 1960s an ecologist called John B. Calhoun conducted a famous experiment in which he put a group of rats into an enclosure that offered them unlimited food, water, breeding opportunities, and was completely free of predation. As could be expected their numbers increased rapidly, but what didn't increase was their space; and as unwanted social contact became more and more common violence flared, cannibalism and infanticide occurred, and the rats' sexuality shifted in all manner of ways. By the end of the experiment only a tiny number of the creatures had survived, individuals that were asexual and totally withdrawn from their peers, spending their time on personal grooming and little else.ⁱⁱⁱ Calhoun's research struck a nerve with many sociologists, psychiatrists, architects, city planners, and others, and over the next few decades a large number of follow-up and similar studies were conducted. It was

largely thought that what Calhoun had seen with his rats we could expect to see in our overcrowded cities, that as our populations grew and grew and grew we could anticipate similar dystopian results. Findings were not consistent, however, and human subjects who were asked to perform tasks in dense environments did not show the behavioral stresses that Calhoun's rats had. Our sense of crowding appears to be a separate factor from that measurable by standards of physical density (e.g. units/m²) and to moreover be based on individual differences in how much privacy we want, what we make of our social roles, and how in control of our environments we feel.^{iv} In short, we are much better at adapting than rats are, and given enough space to ourselves (which, in the rats' defense, they never had) we are generally able to make do without losing the plot. We can still do our own heads in though by keeping far too many things around us in the space that we do have, a practice that may have deeper underlying causes in feelings of guilt or attachment.^v As one professional organizer — an occupation I was surprised to find existed — pointed out, “It is torture if you're living in chaos.”^{vi}

If we don't then need as much space as we might have thought we did, how are we affected when we have too much space, when we find ourselves in a vast open expanse such as those available in certain areas of deep wilderness? The effects can be quite positive. Ralph Waldo Emerson famously advocated sojourns in the wild as a way of repairing one's psyche and as a means of achieving a connection with that which is beyond oneself, an idea that the moral psychologist Jonathan Haidt has expanded in his notion of the “hive switch” — an element of human psychology that evolution has equipped us with at least partially for the purpose of facilitating group bonding.^{vii} When our hive switch is flipped, Haidt writes, we are able to merge with something above and greater than ourselves, losing our individuality into a transcendental Other that is accompanied by feelings of expansiveness and bliss. This can be brought about in a number of ways, not all of which necessitate even being in a group (e.g. meditation is said to be able to achieve the same results), but the effect of feeling oneself dissolve into that which is beyond is common amongst the practices. Haidt gives an example of students at his university encouraging their football team on to gridiron glory by singing and moving in unison to their school song and cheers, any inhibitions to such gregarious acts that they might have had helpfully reduced by alcohol. Supporters of football teams in the British — some would say proper — sense similarly sing, chant, and even deride opponents en masse in ways that could temptingly be described as the behavior of superorganisms, albethey short-lived ones. Of the three example methods Haidt gives of how to achieve this feeling for oneself the first is awe in nature: allowing the grandeur of natural settings to whisk one away from both the limits and the concerns of ordinary

solitary life. (Haidt's other two methods are taking hallucinogenic drugs and participating in raves.) Nature can speak to us in many ways and we need not be in wide-open spaces to have our hive switches activated, but there is certainly something about standing at the top of a mountain and seeing the fullness of the slopes cascading beneath you, or hiking through a dense forest only to emerge onto an open plain where the grasslands stretch out all the way to the horizon. The sheer scale of these spectacles adds a degree of emotional depth and impact that most of us would find hard to deny. What is it about this vastness that speaks to us so? Is it in the details of the soil and vegetation or in the uniformity of the air around us, palpable in its emptiness? We can feel wonderment at the former when we study nature's intricacies, but it is most often the latter that causes us to catch our breath and brings our spinning minds to a pause. Space speaks to us in an undeniable shout at those times, but if we attune our ears we will find its voice to be quite constant.

Walter Benjamin, in his essay "On Language as Such and on the Language of Man" explores the idea that all things — not only creatures with interspecies, or sometimes just intraspecies, audible communicative systems such as dolphins, elephants, chimpanzees, or us — communicate in and not through language, but that humanity with its spoken languages is alone fully able to do so. Although modern research would likely find fault with Benjamin's characterization of humanity as being unique in having a spoken language,^{viii} it does seem at present to be a safe bet that ours is the most expressive and sophisticated of all mammalian languages. Benjamin's point is elsewhere though, as his distinction of *in and not through* indicates: language is not limited to the auditory or symbolically written. The idea is a nuanced one and Benjamin explores it at some length; for our purposes here it can perhaps be best summed up by his, "The language of an entity is the medium in which its mental being is communicated."^{ix} Given current understandings of neurophysiology the space around us cannot of course be said to have mentality or a mental being (nor, indeed, does such seem even remotely possible), yet the presence of space does communicate to us, and it may be that the language of space is found in our reactions to it, that it speaks to us by what it causes in us. As Haidt's theorized hive switch seems to indicate, we need to be able to lose ourselves in something that exceeds our individual limits, and space helps us to achieve that. An excess of space can take us out of our ordinary experiences in negative ways as well; anyone who has crossed a field or other wide-open area alone on a dark night can likely attest to that. Space removes us from who we usually are and reminds us of our fragility; it pulls at our emotions like waves on a rocky shoreline: now smoothing and caressing into a whole, now shattering and jarring apart.

Returning to the space I inhabit — Tokyo — let's finally take a moment to consider space from an aesthetic point of view via two artists exemplifying very different styles and mediums but whose works can nevertheless give us an insight into the fullness of emptiness: Kuniyoshi Utagawa (1797-1861) and Ike no Taiga (1723-1776).^x

Utagawa worked primarily in wood-block prints, though his paintings are also well known, and his works depict everything from landscapes and samurai battles to mythical creatures and tales. His art often has a certain playfulness about it and is marked by a high degree of detail and vivid coloring. The following will consider just two of his prints to see what they can teach us through the artist's use of space.



Octopus Games

I like this work for a number of reasons, not least its whimsy. What is perhaps most striking at first view is the way one's eye is drawn all over the piece in an almost

restless fashion. I find that I need to concentrate to keep my gaze from wandering amongst the many characters represented, though the fellow in the top left does a good job of bringing me back to him. Other than the color there is no background here, but note how the deeper blue at the top gives one an impression of distance stretching away behind, of a horizon that separates the figures into a default foreground with those at the bottom of the piece nearest to the viewer. The incredible balance here is achieved by the spacing between the octopi, where what is really just emptiness takes on an important role in unifying one's experience of the varied and fanciful scene.



Takiyasha the Witch and the Skeleton Specter

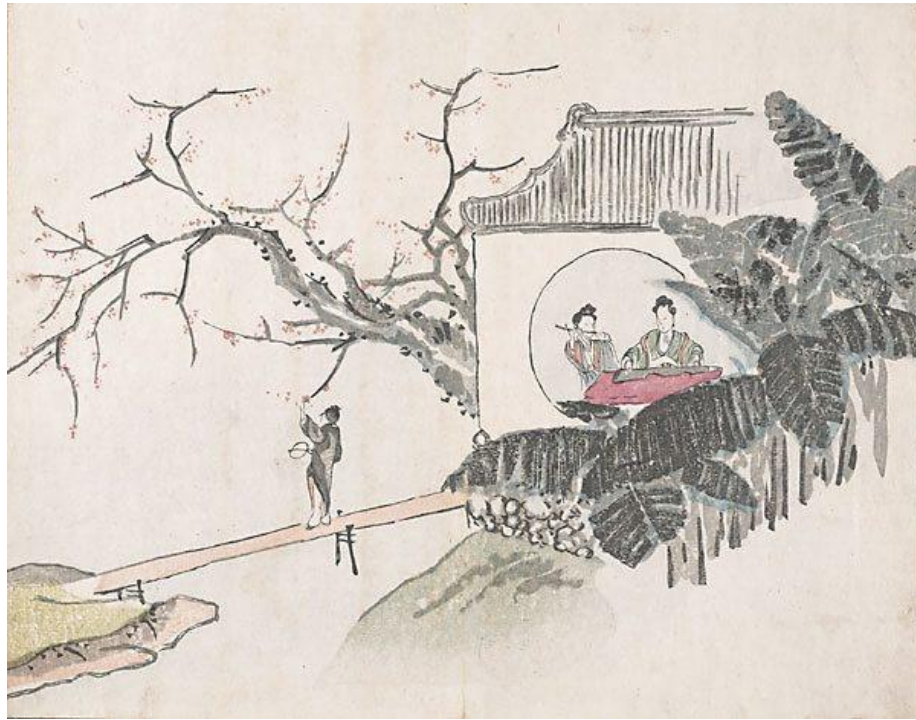
In this triptych, Utagawa again uses background emptiness to give depth to the scene of a warlord's daughter holding a spell scroll that has summoned a specter to menace an official sent by the emperor to investigate what remains of her defeated household (note even the interior depth yielded by the gray wall and bare scaffolding next to the princess on the far left of the print). The background adds a further aspect of terror to the skeleton that would not otherwise have been there had the artist centered it differently and hence reduced the amount of visible black. As with *Octopus Games* the emptiness here plays an active role in our experience of the work, seeming to suggest that the hulking creature has lumbered up out of the night and not been conjured on the spot.

Ike no Taiga was an artist of a very different ilk. Born in Kyoto roughly at the midpoint of the long isolationist period of the Tokugawa shogunate, his works of painting and calligraphy reflected a dedication to traditional Chinese styles though he did also make use of modern techniques. Two of his paintings will likewise be considered below.



Untitled (Mountains)

This piece is a typical landscape in the style with which many of us will have at least a passing familiarity. What is striking about it, though again perhaps not altogether unique, is its vast blank areas, where not even background colors have been laid down. This too helps to balance the work as well as to remove it a few degrees from us as observers; we are reminded that we are seeing a work of art of a landscape and not an actual landscape. This can be contrasted with the more Western approach to landscape painting that fills the canvas with details right up to its edges almost as if one were looking at a photograph or even out a window. By only using roughly half of the area allotted him by his material, Ike no Taiga has managed to express himself as the artist who has given us this representation of a natural scene.



Untitled (Figures Playing Instruments in a Garden)

This second piece by Ike no Taiga also makes much use of emptiness as a means of expression. The spacing here evokes a sense of tranquility, of the figures present being at one with their natural setting, and it may be noted how easy it is for the mind to fill in the emptiness with a river flowing through from a distant green mountain or perhaps the deep blue of a lake's surface seen encompassing the short bridge and stretching away behind the tearoom. What is not represented imparts a feeling of calm and peacefulness within the viewer, the nothing in this work speaking to us out of its difference from the constructed building and path and enhancing the quietude of the tree's almost bare branches that are just beginning to bloom, or wilt. The cycle of nature is in full view here, and humanity as a small part of that cycle is communicated through the understatement employed.

As creatures on the go and with a great many things usually on our minds we are accustomed to seeing space merely as a means of gauging distance, of how-long-will-it-take-from-here-to-there or just-a-little-bit-further-and-I'll-have-it or even don't-you-dare-get-too-close-to-me. However, after our far-reaching and somewhat rambling considerations, from living space to the psychology of crowding, from transcendental to aesthetic experiences, we have seen space from a few more of its angleless angles, as it were, and I hope that in doing so we have also heard its voice and

learned a little of its language. To me, the absence of immediate surroundings is better described as a presence, and as I sit here in my largely empty office I am grateful for the equanimity that brings. If only these bookshelves weren't bolted to the walls.

ⁱ This is particularly, though not exclusively, the case for foreign nationals working at universities and other educational institutions. Different employment sectors may have differing practices.

ⁱⁱ Photo taken from: *Dornob: Design Ideas Daily*.

<<http://dornob.com/10-foot-narrow-tiny-home-built-right-top-of-a-tokyo-alley/>>. The site also contains many interior shots of the home, complete with furniture and appliances. Accessed October 22, 2013.

ⁱⁱⁱ For two brief overviews of Dr. Calhoun's experiment that offer more details than those given here see: Andre Auerbach, "The Effect of Open Space on Your Psychology", *Ezine @rticles*, December 27, 2009.

<<http://ezinearticles.com/?The-Effect-of-Open-Space-on-Your-Psychology&id=3484723>>; and Edmund Ramsden, "The urban animal: population density and social pathology in rodents and humans", *Bulletin of the World Health Organization* 87(2), February 2009.

<<http://www.who.int/bulletin/volumes/87/2/09-062836/en/>>. Both articles accessed October 22, 2013.

^{iv} Ramsden, *ibid*.

^v Heather Grimshaw, "The psychology of clutter", *The Denver Post*, January 24, 2008.

<http://www.denverpost.com/room/ci_8060057>. Accessed October 24, 2013.

^{vi} Regina Leeds in Grimshaw, *ibid*.

^{vii} See especially chapter ten in Jonathan Haidt, *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2012).

^{viii} For an intriguing look at where we might be headed in understanding animal language, see Megan Garber, "Animal Behaviorist: We'll Soon Have Devices That Let Us Talk With Our Pets", *The Atlantic: Tech*, June 04, 2013.

<<http://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2013/06/animal-behaviorist-well-soon-have-devices-that-let-us-talk-with-our-pets/276532/>>. Accessed October 29, 2013. Interested readers may also wish to see the following on the use of names among dolphins and some of the hints that this gives us on the degree of depth that their communication systems may have: Brandon Keim, "Researchers Find More Evidence That Dolphins Use Names", *Wired: Science*, July 23, 2013.

<<http://www.wired.com/wiredscience/2013/07/dolphin-signature-whistles/>>. Accessed November 14, 2013. Related to both these articles, and the topic generally, it should be noted that the issue of there being a difference between an animal *language* and an animal *communication system* is a controversial one. Many researchers will use the terms interchangeably on the grounds that there is no real difference in meaning while others will argue for such a difference and define each of the terms separately.

^{ix} Walter Benjamin, "On Language as Such and on the Language of Man" in *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*, pref. Leon Wieseltier and ed. Peter Demetz (New York; Schocken Books, 2007), pp. 314-332 (p.331).

^x The Wikipedia pages on both artists contain useful bibliographic information and samples of their works. See "Utagawa Kuniyoshi", *Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia*.

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Utagawa_Kuniyoshi> (note that Utagawa is the surname, the order is reversed in Japanese names); and "Ike no Taiga", *Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia*.

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ike_no_Taiga>. Both pages accessed October 31, 2013. The images shown here are in the public domain and may be found through Google Images or similar search engines.