

Hoarding and Disposal in Tokyo

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My project is concerned with accumulation of things, attachment to things and with what psychiatrists call 'hoarding'. My initial interest was whether by reformulating a psychiatric concern with deviance in terms of material culture, a broader understanding of the relationships people entertain with their possessions could be gained. Hoarding seemed to be an appropriate subject, because a) it required understanding of seemingly irrational behavior (feeling attached to things others consider as 'rubbish') and b) because recent anthropological concepts of ownership, possession and attachment and their influence on how we think about things, minds and selves could be put to the test (and put to the test they are...).

While hoarders in psychiatric literature are often described as 'cannot throw things away', my fieldwork among inhabitants of gomiyashiki in Tokyo (lit. garbage house, a Japanese topos comparable to the word 'hoarding' without however implying a certain category of person) shows that my informants perceive themselves 'not to want to throw things away'. Instead of translating the figurative disorder of the 'hoarder's lair' into a mental disorder and to read the accumulated things as a pathological symptom of an inner defect, the accumulated things can be conceived of as part of the extended self and thus as inalienable possessions in a sense.

Interestingly, the anthropologists and fellow PhD students I talked to about these issues usually took one of two quite contrary positions. One is that these persons must surely cling to an old ideal of human-object relations embedded in Japanese culture, the other more sociologically inspired position was that these hoarders are the very avant-garde of human-object relations and ambassadors of a new 'sociality with things'. One cannot help but hear the echo of a nostalgic romanticising anthropology confronted with the avant-garde futurism of a certain type of sociology. The field however, stubbornly resists the temptation of theory and interrupts any shots at prophethood. My informants cannot be said to conform to either of these expectations. They are neither materialists clinging to every possessable thing, nor do they agree to be labelled as suffering from obsessions or even claim to be interested in their things. In fact, by working with them, it increasingly dawned on me that we are the ones obsessed with giving meaning to every detail, to every last snippet of information. It is perhaps a typical anthropological *déformation professionnelle* to be only able to see what can be conceived of as meaningful. But as one of my informants told me about his stuff: 'It is just there. I don't have to think about it. Because it's there.' Horror Vacui! Maybe we must seriously look at the possibility of things without meaning, without relationships, without function, use or material value. Matter that does not matter. A thing of no-thing. A touch of Zen, if you like.