Phantom Writing

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Abstract

In this visual essay I present a body of artistic work done within informal urban and suburban heritage sites in Kyoto. Through the media of text, photography, film and site-specific painting, my works from the cycle *Spirit Grounds* engage with these sites involving material physical aspects as well as beliefs, fictions, and more-than-human beings. Building upon this, I propose 'phantom writing' or 'phantasmography' as a situated, multidisciplinary and multisensory approach aimed at understanding and designing contemporary places, landscapes and environments, acknowledging and mediating the agency of diverse phantoms and phantasms.

Keywords

Phantoms, phantasms, spirit grounds, phantom writing, phantasmography

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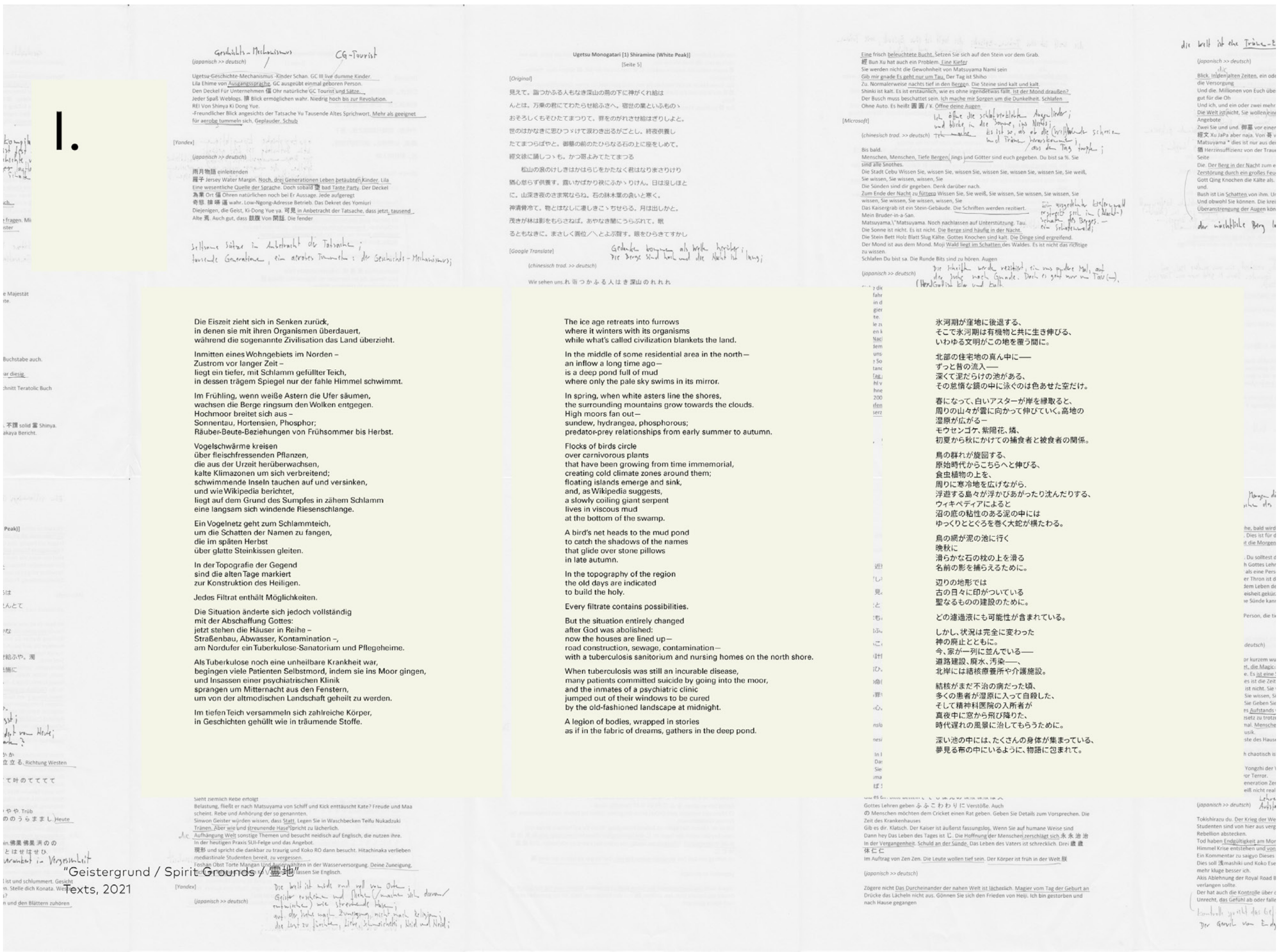
Phantoms, phantasms, spirits, ghosts, and spectres – very broadly defined – are invisible or hard-to-grasp agents that exert an influence on our present world. They can be formerly existing persons or species, very small or very big things or beings, mental images, and sociocultural narratives, accepted or often neglected pasts and anticipated futures, hopes, dreams and fears. Situated between established categories – such as humans and other-than-humans, active and passive matter, the secular and the nonsecular, the living and the dead, the real and the imaginary, and so on – they offer powerful vantage points from which to understand and reconceive our contemporary environment.[1]

Every ground bears traces of past events and is imbued with histories and beliefs, turning it into heritage in the broadest sense. This is especially true for the city of Kyoto, home to Nintendo and other high-tech facilities. This contemporary city (like many others) is saturated with a network of densely storied grounds that extends well beyond well-known monuments. Even more than the official heritage sites, these everyday places and landscapes, which are covered with stories, myths, beliefs and superstitions, shape perceptions and actions. According to popular conceptions, they are not only inhabited by the living, but also by spirits, phantoms and other (un)dead. Amid a well-kept residential area, for example, a muddy pond (Midoroga-ike) opens up. Strange creatures are said to mingle in its rich flora and fauna, and at its bottom a passage to the netherworld and the realm of demons is assumed. Expressways lead across former graveyards (Toribeno) where birds have pecked at unburied bodies. Noses and ears of nameless victims of war amass in grass-covered monuments (Mimizuka) next to children's playgrounds and single-family homes, and the ghosts of the dead huddle together in secluded underpasses (Kazando Tunnel) when the nearby tourist attractions are deserted at night. Taken together, such places constitute a more-than-human and more-than-secular common ground, in which matter and stories, facts and fictions, past, present and future merge. In this regard, they are a repository of real and imagined pasts that influence the present life and from which shared futures can be imagined, narrated and constructed.

Fig. 1, 2: Michael Hirschbichler, 'Geistergrund / Spirit Grounds / 霊地', texts, 2019–21.



I.

Die Eiszeit zieht sich in Senken zurück,
in denen sie mit ihren Organismen überdauert,
während die sogenannte Zivilisation das Land überzieht.

Inmitten eines Wohngebiets im Norden –
Zustrom vor langer Zeit –
liegt ein tiefer, mit Schlamm gefüllter Teich,
in dessen trägem Spiegel nur der fahle Himmel schwimmt.

Im Frühling, wenn weiße Astern die Ufer säumen,
wachsen die Berge ringsum den Wolken entgegen.
Hochmoor breitet sich aus –
Sonnentau, Hortensien, Phosphor;
Räuber-Beute-Beziehungen von Frühsommer bis Herbst.

Vogelschwärme kreisen
über fleischfressenden Pflanzen,
die aus der Urzeit herüberwachsen,
kalte Klimazonen um sich verbreitend;
schwimmende Inseln tauchen auf und versinken,
und wie Wikipedia berichtet,
liegt auf dem Grund des Sumpfes in zähem Schlamm
eine langsam sich windende Riesenschlange.

Ein Vogelnetz geht zum Schlammteich,
um die Schatten der Namen zu fangen,
die im späten Herbst
über glatte Steinkissen gleiten.

In der Topografie der Gegend
sind die alten Tage markiert
zur Konstruktion des Heiligen.

Jedes Filtrat enthält Möglichkeiten.

Die Situation änderte sich jedoch vollständig
mit der Abschaffung Gottes:
jetzt stehen die Häuser in Reihe –
Straßenbau, Abwasser, Kontamination –,
am Nordufer ein Tuberkulose-Sanatorium und Pflegeheime.

Als Tuberkulose noch eine unheilbare Krankheit war,
begingen viele Patienten Selbstmord, indem sie ins Moor gingen,
und Insassen einer psychiatrischen Klinik
sprangen um Mitternacht aus den Fenstern,
um von der altmodischen Landschaft geheilt zu werden.

Im tiefen Teich versammeln sich zahlreiche Körper,
in Geschichten gehüllt wie in träumende Stoffe.

The ice age retreats into furrows
where it winters with its organisms
while what's called civilization blankets the land.

In the middle of some residential area in the north—
an inflow a long time ago—
is a deep pond full of mud
where only the pale sky swims in its mirror.

In spring, when white asters line the shores,
the surrounding mountains grow towards the clouds.
High moors fan out—
sundew, hydrangea, phosphorous;
predator-prey relationships from early summer to autumn.

Flocks of birds circle
over carnivorous plants
that have been growing from time immemorial,
creating cold climate zones around them;
floating islands emerge and sink,
and, as Wikipedia suggests,
a slowly coiling giant serpent
lives in viscous mud
at the bottom of the swamp.

A bird's net heads to the mud pond
to catch the shadows of the names
that glide over stone pillows
in late autumn.

In the topography of the region
the old days are indicated
to build the holy.

Every filtrate contains possibilities.

But the situation entirely changed
after God was abolished:
now the houses are lined up—
road construction, sewage, contamination—
with a tuberculosis sanitorium and nursing homes on the north shore.

When tuberculosis was still an incurable disease,
many patients committed suicide by going into the moor,
and the inmates of a psychiatric clinic
jumped out of their windows to be cured
by the old-fashioned landscape at midnight.

A legion of bodies, wrapped in stories
as if in the fabric of dreams, gathers in the deep pond.

氷河期が窪地に後退する、
そこで氷河期は有機物と共に生き伸びる、
いわゆる文明がこの地を覆う間に。

北部の住宅地の真ん中に——
ずっと昔の流入——
深くて泥だらけの池がある、
その怠惰な鏡の中に泳ぐのは色あせた空だけ。

春になって、白いアスターが岸を縁取ると、
周りの山々が雲に向かって伸びていく。高地の
湿原が広がるー
モウセンゴケ、紫陽花、燐、
初夏から秋にかけての捕食者と被食者の関係。

鳥の群れが旋回する、
原始時代からこちらへと伸びる、
食虫植物の上を、
周りに寒冷地を広げながら.
浮遊する島々が浮かびあがったり沈んだりする、
ウィキペディアによると
沼の底の粘性のある泥の中には
ゆっくりととぐろを巻く大蛇が横たわる。

鳥の網が泥の池に行く
晩秋に
滑らかな石の枕の上を滑る
名前の影を捕らえるために。

辺りの地形では
古の日々に印がついている
聖なるものの建設のために。

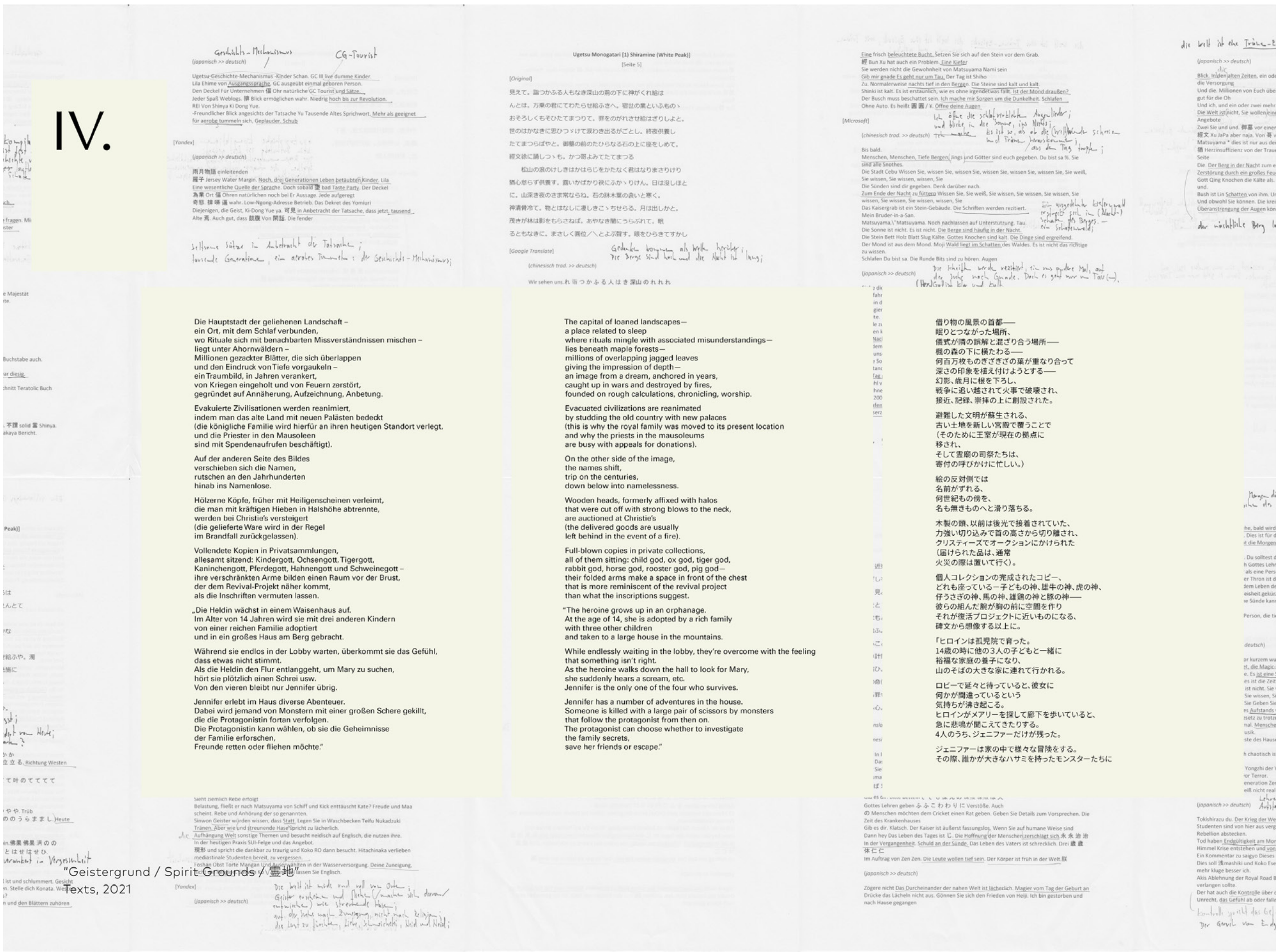
どの濾過液にも可能性が含まれている。

しかし、状況は完全に変わった
神の廃止とともに。
今、家が一列に並んでいる——
道路建設、廃水、汚染——、
北岸には結核療養所や介護施設。

結核がまだ不治の病だった頃、
多くの患者が湿原に入って自殺した、
そして精神科医院の入所者が
真夜中に窓から飛び降りた、
時代遅れの風景に治してもらうために。

深い池の中には、たくさんの身体が集まっている、
夢見る布の中にいるように、物語に包まれて。

"Geistergrund / Spirit Grounds / 霊地"
Texts, 2021



IV.

Die Hauptstadt der geliehenen Landschaft –
ein Ort, mit dem Schlaf verbunden,
wo Rituale sich mit benachbarten Missverständnissen mischen –
liegt unter Ahornwäldern –
Millionen gezackter Blätter, die sich überlappen
und den Eindruck von Tiefe vorgaukeln –
ein Traumbild, in Jahren verankert,
von Kriegen eingeholt und von Feuern zerstört,
gegründet auf Annäherung, Aufzeichnung, Anbetung.

Evakuierte Zivilisationen werden reanimiert,
indem man das alte Land mit neuen Palästen bedeckt
(die königliche Familie wird hierfür an ihren heutigen Standort verlegt,
und die Priester in den Mausoleen
sind mit Spendenaufrufen beschäftigt).

Auf der anderen Seite des Bildes
verschieben sich die Namen,
rutschen an den Jahrhunderten
hinab ins Namenlose.

Hölzerne Köpfe, früher mit Heiligenscheinen verleimt,
die man mit kräftigen Hieben in Halshöhe abtrennte,
werden bei Christie's versteigert
(die gelieferte Ware wird in der Regel
im Brandfall zurückgelassen).

Vollendete Kopien in Privatsammlungen,
allesamt sitzend: Kindergott, Ochsengott, Tigergott,
Kaninchengott, Pferdegott, Hahnengott und Schweinegott –
ihre verschränkten Arme bilden einen Raum vor der Brust,
der dem Revival-Projekt näher kommt,
als die Inschriften vermuten lassen.

„Die Heldin wächst in einem Waisenhaus auf.
Im Alter von 14 Jahren wird sie mit drei anderen Kindern
von einer reichen Familie adoptiert
und in ein großes Haus am Berg gebracht.

Während sie endlos in der Lobby warten, überkommt sie das Gefühl,
dass etwas nicht stimmt.
Als die Heldin den Flur entlanggeht, um Mary zu suchen,
hört sie plötzlich einen Schrei usw.
Von den vieren bleibt nur Jennifer übrig.

Jennifer erlebt im Haus diverse Abenteuer.
Dabei wird jemand von Monstern mit einer großen Schere gekillt,
die die Protagonistin fortan verfolgen.
Die Protagonistin kann wählen, ob sie die Geheimnisse
der Familie erforschen,
Freunde retten oder fliehen möchte."

The capital of loaned landscapes—
a place related to sleep
where rituals mingle with associated misunderstandings—
lies beneath maple forests—
millions of overlapping jagged leaves
giving the impression of depth—
an image from a dream, anchored in years,
caught up in wars and destroyed by fires,
founded on rough calculations, chronicling, worship.

Evacuated civilizations are reanimated
by studding the old country with new palaces
(this is why the royal family was moved to its present location
and why the priests in the mausoleums
are busy with appeals for donations).

On the other side of the image,
the names shift,
trip on the centuries,
down below into namelessness.

Wooden heads, formerly affixed with halos
that were cut off with strong blows to the neck,
are auctioned at Christie's
(the delivered goods are usually
left behind in the event of a fire).

Full-blown copies in private collections,
all of them sitting: child god, ox god, tiger god,
rabbit god, horse god, rooster god, pig god—
their folded arms make a space in front of the chest
that is more reminiscent of the revival project
than what the inscriptions suggest.

"The heroine grows up in an orphanage.
At the age of 14, she is adopted by a rich family
with three other children
and taken to a large house in the mountains.

While endlessly waiting in the lobby, they're overcome with the feeling
that something isn't right.
As the heroine walks down the hall to look for Mary,
she suddenly hears a scream, etc.
Jennifer is the only one of the four who survives.

Jennifer has a number of adventures in the house.
Someone is killed with a large pair of scissors by monsters
that follow the protagonist from then on.
The protagonist can choose whether to investigate
the family secrets,
save her friends or escape."

借り物の風景の首都——
眠りとつながった場所、
儀式が隣の誤解と混ざり合う場所——
楓の森の下に横たわる——
何百万枚ものぎざぎざの葉が重なり合って
深さの印象を植え付けようとする——
幻影、歳月に根を下ろし、
戦争に追い越されて火事で破壊され、
接近、記録、崇拝の上に創設された。

避難した文明が蘇生される、
古い土地を新しい宮殿で覆うことで
（そのために王室が現在の拠点に
移され、
そして霊廟の司祭たちは、
寄付の呼びかけに忙しい。）

絵の反対側では
名前がずれる、
何世紀もの傍を、
名も無きものへと滑り落ちる。

木製の頭、以前は後光で接着されていた、
力強い切り込みで首の高さから切り離され、
クリスティーズでオークションにかけられた
（届けられた品は、通常
火災の際は置いて行く）。

個人コレクションの完成されたコピー、
どれも座っているー子どもの神、雄牛の神、虎の神、
仔うさぎの神、馬の神、雄鶏の神と豚の神——
彼らの組んだ腕が胸の前に空間を作り
それが復活プロジェクトに近いものになる、
碑文から想像する以上に。

「ヒロインは孤児院で育った。
14歳の時に他の3人の子どもと一緒に
裕福な家庭の養子になり、
山のそばの大きな家に連れて行かれる。

ロビーで延々と待っていると、彼女に
何かが間違っているという
気持ちが沸き起こる。
ヒロインがメアリーを探して廊下を歩いていると、
急に悲鳴が聞こえてきたりする。
4人のうち、ジェニファーだけが残った。

ジェニファーは家の中で様々な冒険をする。
その際、誰かが大きなハサミを持ったモンスターたちに

"Geistergrund / Spirit Grounds / 霊地"
Texts, 2021

Spirit Grounds

For the work cycle *Spirit Grounds* I worked in and with these storied environments, employing different forms of sensing, recording, and writing, through the media of text, photography, film and site-specific painting.[2]

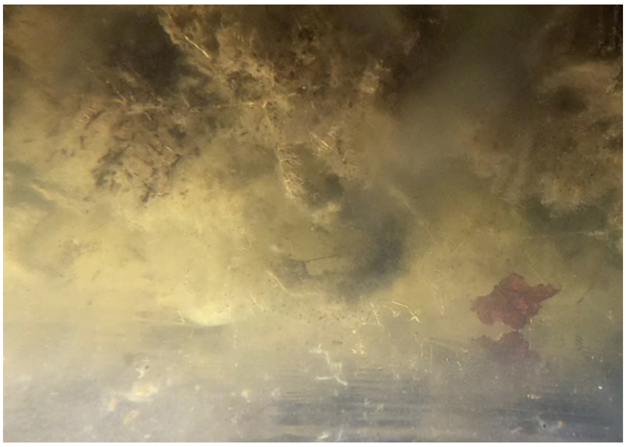
The texts were created as a filtrate from various sources: from popular stories, scholarly articles, magazines, encyclopaedia entries, social media, Google and YouTube posts related to the sites in question. The original texts were translated from Japanese into German with the aid of machine translation tools (it was yet not possible to achieve correct translations in 2019), resulting in profound shifts in the fabric of meaning. From this raw material, I composed new texts through an intensive process of editing and imagining on the basis of the erroneously translated source material. Thus existing stories of various kinds, from various times and from various cultural spheres were taken up and transformed, and reapplied to the (sub) urban spirit grounds. Between languages, genres, and meanings, the resulting poem-like texts reveal new perspectives upon the city's narrative-material topography.

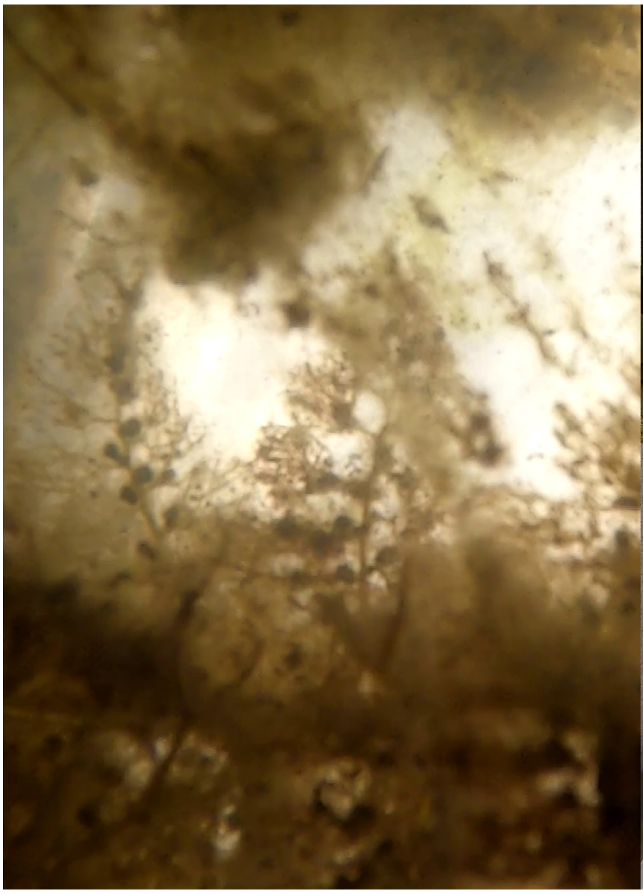
This is continued in the media of photography and film, in which a visual and aural foray through the thick of storied and haunted places unfolds. This begins in the swampy waters of a fabled pond and continues through forests and bamboo groves, across cemeteries and informal garbage dumps, along walls, through underpasses, over bridges, past war monuments and historic execution sites, down into ossuaries, over gravel shores and along riverbanks. Various actors, events and temporal episodes that crowd these places are thereby brought into play.

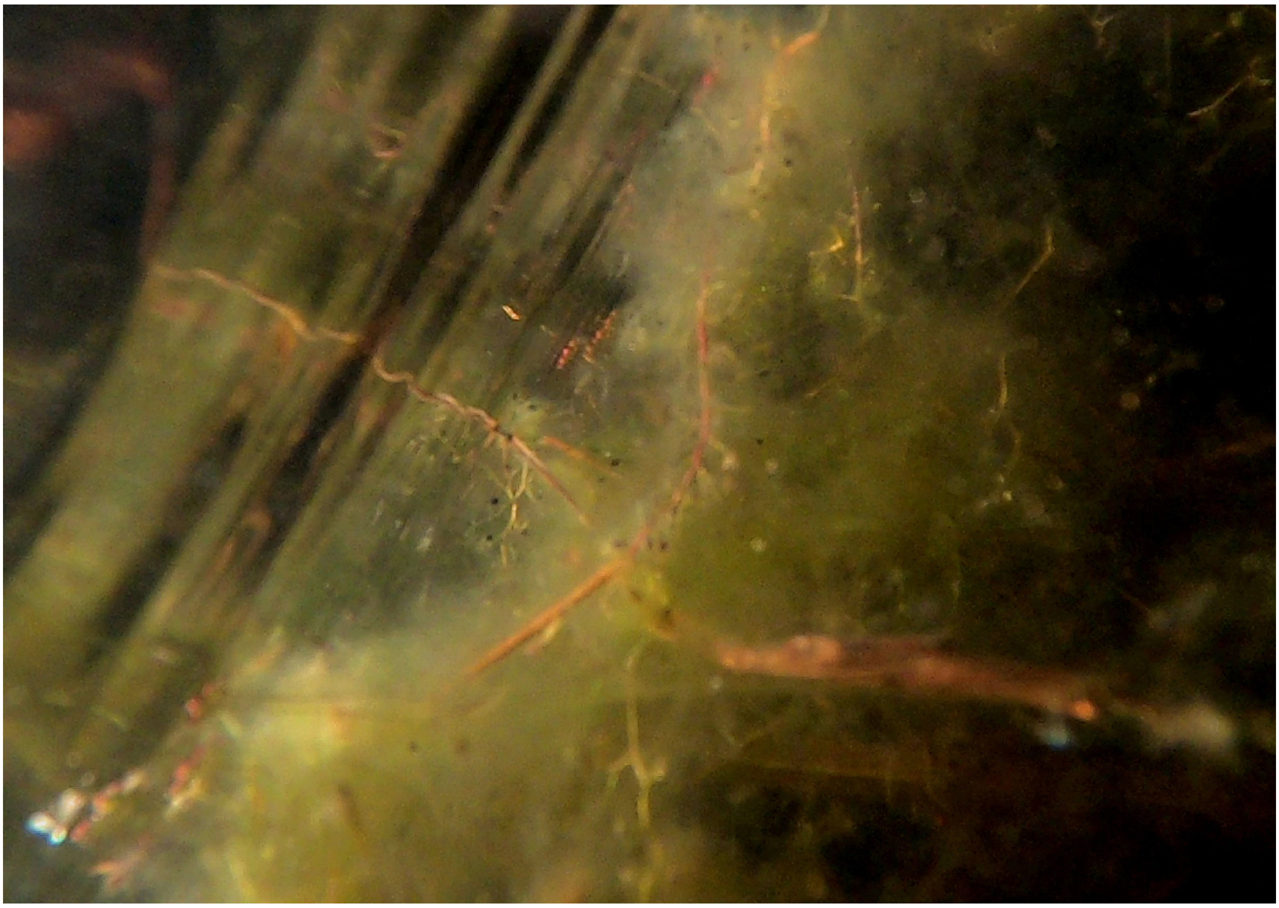
In a series of experimental site-specific paintings I eventually took an approach that fuses a material, dirty and an immaterial, narrative engagement with places. My intention was to capture traces between the field and the archive, between then and now, between real places and imaginary beings, and to set these physical and narrative traces in relation to each another. The paintings are based on scans of spirit scrolls from the Edo period. Thereby I focused not on the depictions of the supernatural, but on the image background onto which these depictions had been drawn and painted. On this pictorial ground, traces had accumulated over the centuries. I printed these archival traces on white cotton fabric (the material used, according to legends, to fashion the robes of female ghosts) and then exposed them to the influences of various mythologically important haunted locations for an extended period of time. As a result, traces of the imaginary historical pictorial space and the physical contemporary urban space are superimposed and intertwined on the same canvas.

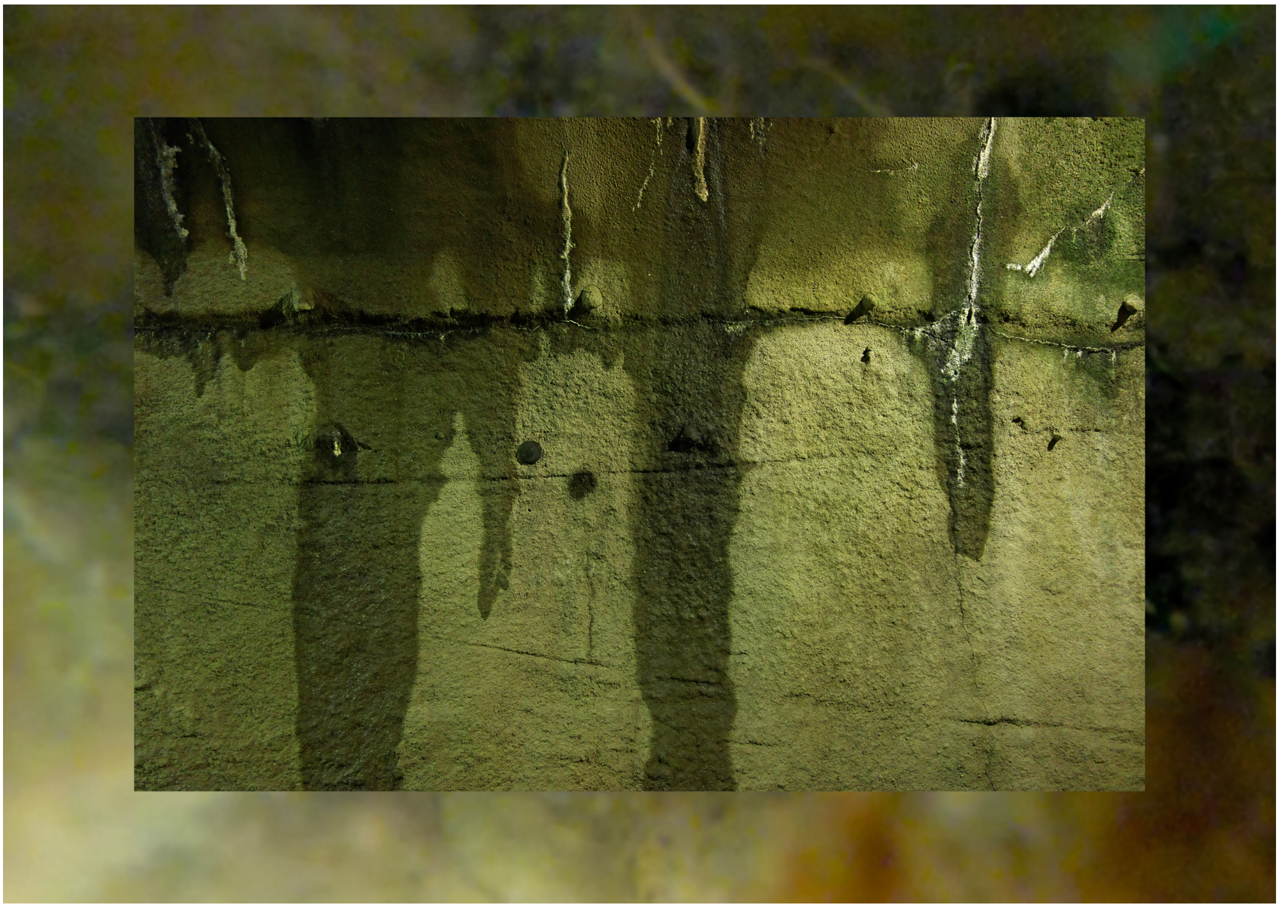
In each of the works, the exploration of particular places is tied to their speculative transformation, whereby translations – into other languages and media, and the errors and slippages that occur in the process – offer new viewpoints and generate new associations of meaning.

Fig. 3–9: Michael Hirschbichler, 'Drei Jahre Herbst / Three Years of Autumn', photographs and film, 2019–21; places: Midoroga-ike pond, Kazando tunnel, Mimizuka, Otani Honbyo cemetery.









Phantasmography

I like to think of these experiments as starting points for a more comprehensive engagement with the phantoms and phantasms that contribute to shaping our natural-cultural environment, our perceptions thereof and the actions that we take in the present and future. Such an engagement with the invisibilities, intangibilities or inaudibilities involved in placemaking could be called 'phantom writing' or 'phantasmography'.

The term phantasmography was originally coined by American anthropologist Robert Desjarlais, while reflecting upon the role of photographic images in the context of visual anthropology. Desjarlais pledged to practice an 'imagistic anthropological mode of knowing', a 'fantastical anthropology' that blurs empiricism and fiction.[3] Building upon Desjarlais' definition of phantasmography as the mere 'writing of the flows and currents of fabulation', I envisage such an endeavour as transcending the disciplinary scope of anthropology and expanding the media from images to more broadly conceived imaginative constructions.[4] These constructions can make visible (or audible or otherwise sensible), make appear, materialise and critically engage with the phantoms and phantasmas that co-create places, landscapes and environments. This pertains to places officially considered heritage sites, where attention is specifically focused on past events, actors and stories. But it equally relates to other places and environments, the stories, phantoms and phantasms of which are generally overlooked.

I therefore propose phantasmography as a multidisciplinary, multisensory and multilayered practice – a situated, site-specific, hands-on approach that relies on embodied perspectives instead of that of a privileged, neutral observer with an overview. Phantasmography, as I understand it, aligns scientific, secular, fact-based, modern, and artistic, nonsecular, speculative, nonmodern modes of sensing and knowing. Only by dissolving these commonly upheld oppositions is it possible to understand the agency of diverse phantoms and fantasies in contemporary world-making. Such an approach could be called a nonsecular, or more precisely a 'more-than-secular' approach, as the secular and rational are not negated but expanded by including those forces and beliefs that come from without. These forces and beliefs are essential in understanding contemporary cultural landscapes – and heritage sites in particular.[5] Phantasmography acknowledges that cultural and religious beliefs and ideologies of various kinds inform our views, values and relations with the environment, provide narratives of world-making and world-destruction, and inform rituals and patterns of behaviour. Phantasmography is therefore concerned with tracing the interrelations that exist between facts and fictions, in order to grasp the reality that they jointly create. Fictions are not mere fantasies. They possess an agency to form beliefs and memories and motivate actions – and they are real insofar as they cause real effects. Starting from the reality at hand, describing, writing, drawing, recording, and enacting it, and thereby including the ghostly and fictional, phantasmography is the practice of an 'expanded realism'.

Fig. 10–12: Michael Hirschbichler, 'Spirit Cloths', the cloths in their respective contexts, pigment prints on Hahnemühle Baryta paper, mounted on museum boards, 84.1 x 59.4 cm each, 2019–2021; photos: author.

No.11

Its principal aims are:

1) To see, listen and sense. Phantasmography begins with devising ways for paying close attention to our environment and thus noticing subjects and objects – both human and nonhuman, and in their entanglements – that are frequently overlooked and in many cases are hard to see and grasp. It is therefore necessary to broaden our awareness and to ‘extend our senses beyond their comfort zones’.[6]

2) To trace. Such ways of seeing and sensing enable us to trace the presence or absence of these subjects and objects and the often uneven histories that connect or separate them. Many of these absences – so I assume – can be read and reconstituted from the material traces that they leave behind.

3) To construct new kinds of historicity. Starting from the present, phantasmography tries to comprehend the different temporalities that are engrained in our environment. These temporalities include forgotten or repressed pasts that haunt the landscape, as well as imagined futures. Moving beyond linear progressive modern time, phantasmography enters into the swirling temporalities that are spread out in the landscape and strives to attain a more complex, nonlinear and situated conception of time.

4) To negotiate (in)visibilities, (in)audibilities and (in) sensibilities. Thereby we have to take into account that what seem to be invisible or overlooked histories for some, constitute a factual and often painful experienced reality for others. So, what is (in) visible, (in)audible or (in)sensible depends to a large extent on the viewpoint. By approaching different viewpoints and negotiating (in)visibilities, (in) audibilities and (in)sensibilities, phantasmography attempts to gain a broader and more differentiated understanding of present realities.

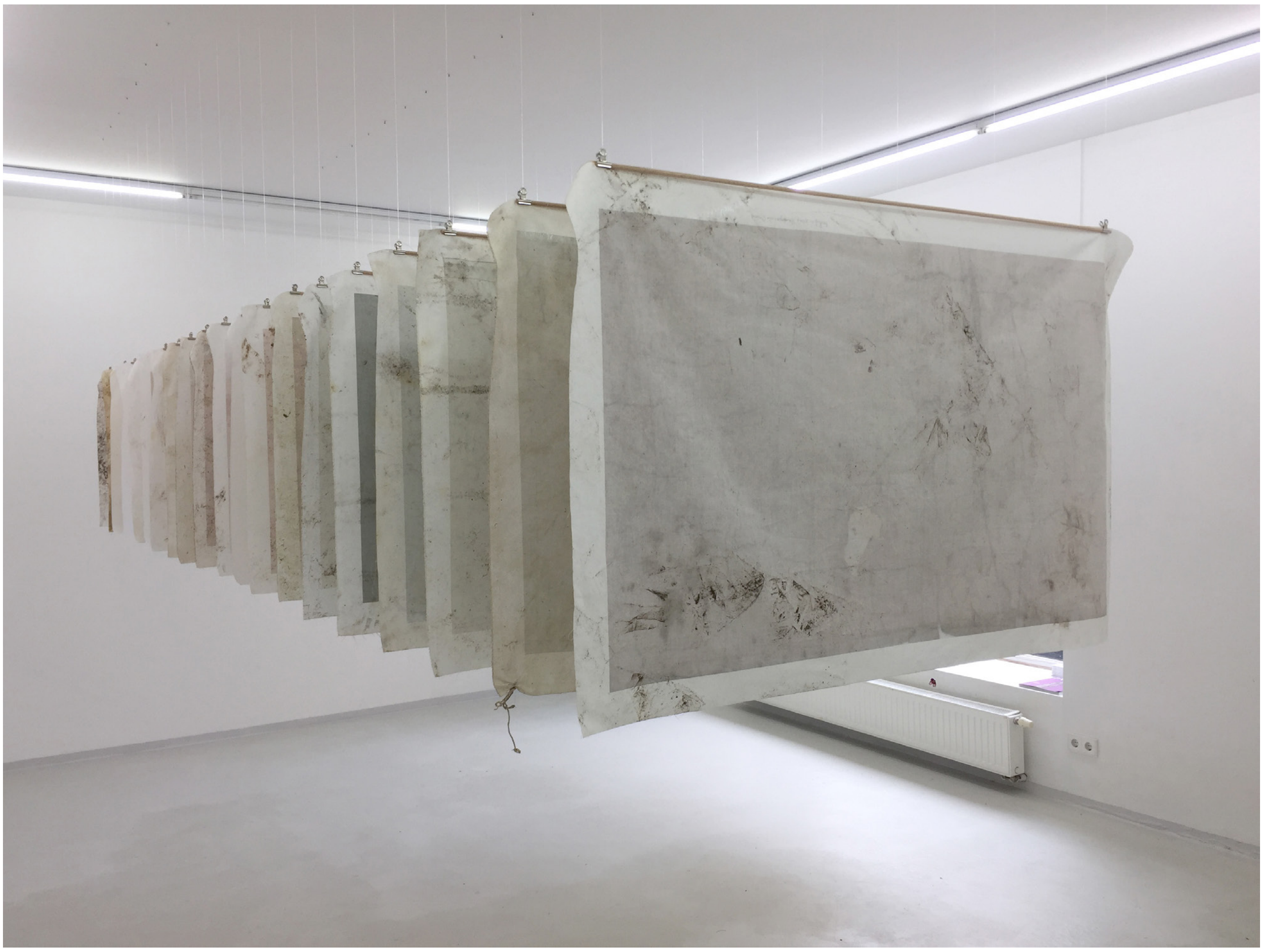
5) To imagine and design. By sensing, tracing, observing, and negotiating presences and absences – and the more-than-human and nonlinear histories that they are enmeshed in – phantasmography helps to expand our consciousness and imagination. Observation and interpretation, reading and writing, recording and inscribing these recordings back into sites and situations in a speculative way can therefore not be clearly separated. Phantasmography thus fuses imagination and design.

Fig. 13–15: Michael Hirschbichler, ‘Spirit Cloths’, pigment prints and environmental traces on cotton fabric, 70 x 110 cm each, 2019–21.

All of this is particularly important for heritage sites, as places charged with memories, where sociocultural histories are negotiated and transmitted. The matter of heritage is both material and discursive. It can be physically experienced in the present and it points to past events as elements in narrative constructions and webs of meaning, which entangle the living with the dead and the yet unborn – human and other. A critical and differentiated engagement with the past (or rather various pasts with different degrees of visibility), such as phantasmography is concerned with, is essential for imagining and responsibly constructing desirable shared futures.

Moving back and forth between sensing and making sense, between facts and fictions, between interpretation, invention and intervention, I like to think of phantasmography as a critical and sensitive practice through which we curiously and courageously engage with the environment around us and make and re-make it, piece by piece, over and over again.

Fig. 16: Michael Hirschbichler, ‘Spirit Cloths’, exhibition view at Galerie Karin Sachs, Munich, spring 2021.



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Notes

1. Michael Hirschbichler, 'Phantasmography: Spaces of Extraction,' *IKA Preview Summer 2021* (2021): 10–11; Michael Hirschbichler, 'Phantasmography II: Spaces of Accumulation,' *IKA Preview Winter 2021* (2021): 10–11; Michael Hirschbichler, 'Phantasmography,' *IKA Review Summer 2021* (2022): 2–3; Michael Hirschbichler, 'Phantasmography,' *IKA Review Winter 2021* (2022): 2.
2. Michael Hirschbichler, *Geistergrund / Spirit Grounds /* 霊地 (Vienna: Verlag für Moderne Kunst, 2021).
3. Robert Desjarlais, 'Phantasmography, ' *American Anthropologist* 118, no. 2 (June 2016): 400.
4. Ibid., 401.
5. Nils Bubandt, 'Anthropocene Uncanny: Nonsecular Approaches to Environmental Change,' in *A Non-secular Anthropocene: Spirits, Specters and Other Nonhumans in a Time of Environmental Change*, ed. Nils Bubandt (Aarhus: AURA Working Papers Vol. 3, 2018), 42–53.
6. Anna Tsing, Nils Bubandt, Elaine Gan and Heather Anne Swanson, *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet: Ghosts and Monsters of the Anthropocene* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), M7.

Biography

Michael Hirschbichler works across the disciplines of art, architecture and anthropology. He is the director of Atelier Hirschbichler and a researcher at TU Delft. His work focuses on spatial constructions in the Anthropocene, with a particular emphasis on the interrelationship between their material and immaterial aspects (narratives, memories, ideologies, beliefs), between facts and cultural fictions. Hirschbichler studied at ETH Zurich and Humboldt Universität zu Berlin and completed his doctoral dissertation on 'Mythical Constructions' at Berlin University of the Arts. He was a lecturer at ETH Zurich, visiting professor at the Academy of Fine Arts Vienna, and director of the architecture programme at the Papua New Guinea University of Technology. He is a recipient of the Rome Prize by the German Academy Villa Massimo.