



The beginning of this work is an aftermath. Or at least, this is its grounding. Unfixed and unsettled.

Alex Kershaw created *Fantasticology Tokyo: faults, flesh and flowers* during a residency in Tokyo in 2011, the year a massive earthquake and tsunami devastated the east coast of Japan. Prior to his stay, Kershaw had decided to collaborate with ikebana sensei (masters of Japanese flower arrangement) on a film project. The result was six videos that bring the distinct actions of each sensei together in another space and time through a multi-channel installation. Each video foregrounds the human body's relation to the process and materiality of ikebana rather than the finished floral arrangements themselves. Our attention is drawn to the compositional choices of the sensei and the emergence of the arrangement beside (and also upon) the bodies of its maker and assistants. To emphasise the bodily and the physical, Kershaw also engaged two performers with different relationships to present stereotypes of physical beauty: a bodybuilder and an actor with dwarfism.

The anchor point of the installation at the Art Gallery of New South Wales is a ceramic object made by Barbara Campbell-Allen, a distinguished Australian ceramic and installation artist. It is a vase the size of a small child that reflects in three-dimensional form the actions of the potters in Kershaw's videos, where vases are made and then deliberately crushed or squashed out of shape to form a part of the ikebana. Clay modelling is one of the most direct (and possibly earliest) forms of human intervention into the substance of the earth for use or ornament. The other ikebana materials featured in the videos – flowers, foliage, bamboo and driftwood – are also of the earth and sun.

They are natural and come easily to hand in natural contexts, and yet the identity of Tokyo as a futuristic cosmopolis is far-distanced from nature, both physically and metaphorically. So the persistence and continuation of this practice would seem to require some devotion.

Ikebana is a craft that draws some of its lineage from centuries-old religious ceremonies, in the form of floral offerings left at Shinto shrines. It is a practice that is materially and spiritually connected to the threshold of life and death; cut flowers in any case, always present this duality. Kershaw introduces this theme in the *Hospital prelude* video. Over the course of a three-day time-lapse, an arrangement of parrot tulips in a hospital unfurls to stretch and greet the morning sun and wilts to rest at night like a slow-breathing meditation. It is presented as a continuum rather than a scene, beginning with a vibrant picture of life and ending in death. It is balanced by the video *Nengemishō* (the Japanese title for Buddha's 'Flower sermon'), in which a man with a single flower wanders through darkened, uninhabited streets, seemingly never finding a destination.

'Classical' dimensions of proportion, balance and symmetry applied in Western art are not observed in ikebana. Rather ikebana brings natural forms together in their material uniqueness to elevate them just beyond the natural. In *Muscles and pears*, a bodybuilder poses artfully in a traditional tea room, and reshapes unfired clay vases while sensei Haruko Hiratsuka assembles a small arrangement for a table. In *Arrangement for peonies*, a studio is transformed by Osen Endo from a dull storeroom space sheathed in newspaper, to a curtained theatrical setting for a large ikebana of driftwood and peonies.

The final shots of this work show the sensei gently encouraging the flowers to loosen their petals into a tray of water – an almost-natural gesture of artifice.

In *Borrowed form* an arrangement is made by Naohiro Kasuya directly on the body of a man lying in the middle of a gymnasium. The man's body is shrouded in leaves and flowers while his stomach is left revealed, making his living, breathing movements become more distinct. In this way, the act of honouring the body with a form of embalment is strangely at odds with its obvious vitality. Like *Borrowed form*, *Yorishiro for Tokyo* also involves ideas of in-between, liminal and liminoid states. The construction of this ikebana by the same sensei is the most ambitious of the works videoed as it is constructed on top of a high-rise, where it competes with a skyline of tall, grey buildings like a green antenna. A *yorishiro* is an object made to attract spirits, and in this context it is presented as a nexus between the world of the living and that of the dead.

As an artist working in video and photography, concerned with the specificity and meanings of place, Alex Kershaw rarely represents the environment or the broader social framework of the sites in which he stages his performative video works. There are no sweeping 'establishing shots' that suggest a context. Place is represented by individuals, who in turn represent themselves in ways and behaviours that are only just marginally altered from their everyday lives. It is as if their performance of ordinariness is amplified, defamiliarised within Kershaw's *mise-en-scène*, to become subtly fictitious.

Tokyo was a long way from the epicentre of the catastrophic earthquake of March 2011, but the social and cultural aftermath of the disaster was raw

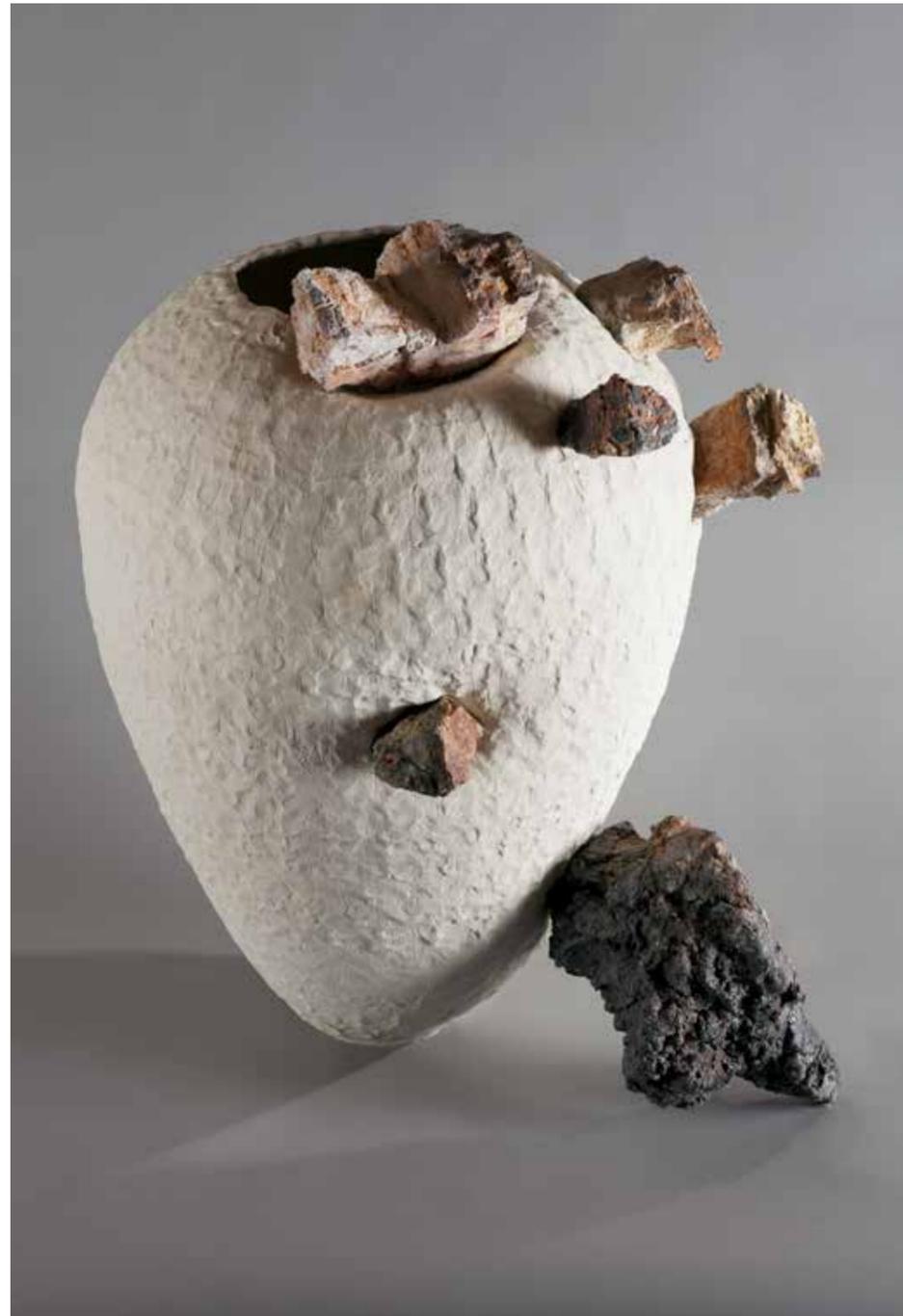
when these works were filmed (both at the time of the earthquake and beyond), such that Kershaw trod a sensitive line around representing its resonance, without specifying the devastation it caused. From hand-modelled clay and single-cut flowers to skyscrapers and abandoned spaces, *Fantasticology Tokyo: faults, flesh and flowers* is a collaborative project that considers our impact on nature and its reversal – from major to minor. Kershaw presents Tokyo through individuals who commit to a practice that honours the coexistence of life with death, of nature with artifice, of reality with fiction; and who also acknowledge that the ground beneath their feet is unfixed.

Bec Dean
Curator and writer and currently co-director
of Performance Space, Sydney

All ikebana references for this text were gleaned in conversation with the artist on 10 August 2013

video stills, left to right: *Muscles and pears*; *Arrangement for peonies*; *Hospital prelude*; *Nengemishō* [pick up flower subtle smile]; *Yorishiro for Tokyo*

All videos from *Fantasticology Tokyo: faults, flesh and flowers* 2011–13



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BIOGRAPHY

Alex Kershaw was born in Sydney, Australia. He currently lives and works in San Diego. Selected solo exhibitions include *One of several centres*, Performance Space at Carriageworks, Sydney (2010); *3 films made between 2005 and 2009 – FlatScreen Alex Kershaw*, Beaconsfield, London (2009); *The Phi Ta Khon project*, Grantpirrie, Sydney (2009); *A lake without water*, Artspace, Sydney (2006). Selected group exhibitions include *Boo Australia*, Matucana 100, Santiago (2012); *Tokyo story*, Tokyo Wonder Site, Tokyo (2011); *Fabrications: the theatre of everyday life*, Jeu de Paume, Paris (2010); 55th International Short Film Festival Oberhausen, Oberhausen (2009); *Perfect for every occasion: photography today*, Heide Museum of Modern Art, Melbourne, (2007).

READING.VIEWING.LISTENING LIST

by Alex Kershaw

- Mikhail Bakhtin, *Art and answerability: early philosophical essays*, University of Texas Press Slavic Series, No. 9, Austin, 1990
- Greg Denning, *Performances*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1996
- Johannes Fabian, *Anthropology with an attitude*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 2001
- Lesley Stern, *Dead and alive: the body as cinematic thing*, Caboose, Montreal, 2012
- Victor Turner, *From ritual to theatre: the human seriousness of play*, PAJ Publications, New York, 2001

LIST OF WORKS

Alex Kershaw
Hospital prelude
Muscles and pears
Nengemishō (pick up flower subtle smile)
Arrangement for peonies
Borrowed form
Yorishiro for Tokyo
All videos from *Fantasticology Tokyo: faults, flesh and flowers* 2011–13
HD video and sound, 21:26 min; 25:06 min; 14:50 min; 20:10 min; 18:15 min; 23:44 min
Barbara Campbell-Allen and Alex Kershaw
Aftermath, from *Fantasticology Tokyo: faults, flesh and flowers* 2011–13
stoneware, paper clay and wood-fired unprocessed clay and rock
dimensions variable

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IKEBANA SENSEI COLLABORATORS

Osen Endo, Sogetsu School of Ikebana; Keishun (Haruko) Hiratsuka, Sogetsu School of Ikebana; Naohiro Kasuya, Ichiyo School of Ikebana; Itoh Teika, Ohara School of Ikebana

PRODUCTION TEAM

Producer: Utako Shindo
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Tokyo Wonder Site assistants: Miwa Takamura and Ayako Oshima
Sound recording: Kohei Hashimoto and Jigen Higashi
General assistants: Manabu Kanai, Nicholas Landreth, and Kohei Hashimoto
Translators: Utako Shindo and Shima Ozawa
Props: Makoto Fukushima and Kōji Kitano from Hanamo Florists
Sound design: Gail Priest

ACTORS

Muscles and pears
Keishun (Haruko) Hiratsuka and Ryuhji Kajita
Nengemishō (pick up flower subtle smile)
Teruhiko Uragami
Arrangement for peonies
Osen Endo, Jusai Watanabe and Suiiri Ushikubo
Borrowed form
Naohiro Kasuya and Takahiro Ono
Yorishiro for Tokyo
Naohiro Kasuya, Yoko Suzuki, Yowa Koyano, Yuko Nakagawa, and Yūsetsu Yoshida

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ALEX KERSHAW

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12 SEPTEMBER – 10 NOVEMBER 2013

AGNSW CONTEMPORARY PROJECTS

#3.13



cover: *Borrowed form* 2011
[video still, detail]
opposite & above:
Aftermath 2011–13
All work from
Fantasticology Tokyo: faults, flesh and flowers
2011–13