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Phantom writing

Hirschbichler, Michael

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Phantom Writing

Michael Hirschbichler

Delft University of Technology, the Netherlands

Corresponding Author Email

mail@atelier-hirschbichler.com

ORCID

Michael Hirschbichler <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0108-9970>

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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 multi-sensory 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

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 (Midorogaike) 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.

[illegible]

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

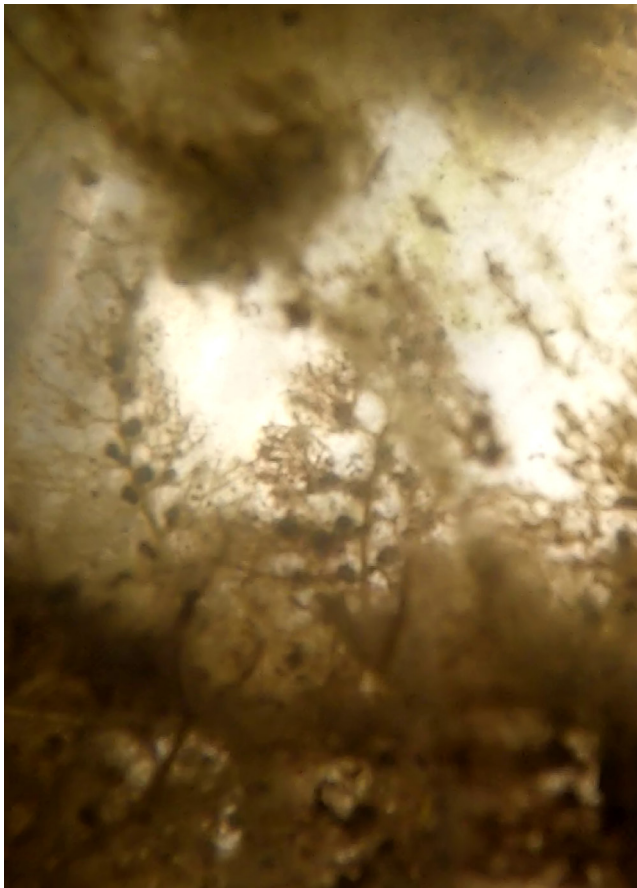
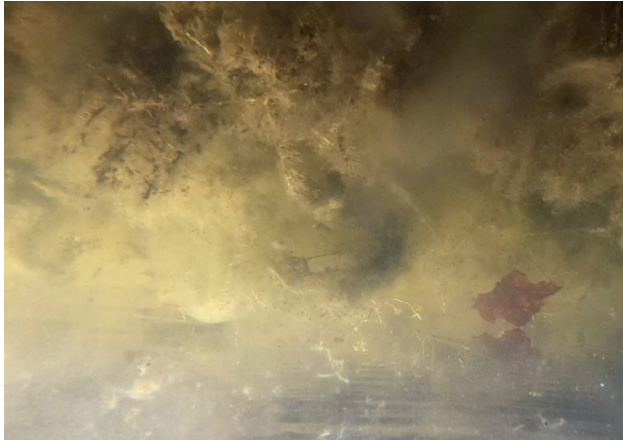
The texts were created as a filtrate from various sources: from popular stories, scholarly articles, magazines, encyclopaedia entries, social media, Google and YouTube posts related to the sites in question. The original texts were translated from Japanese into German with the aid of machine translation 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.

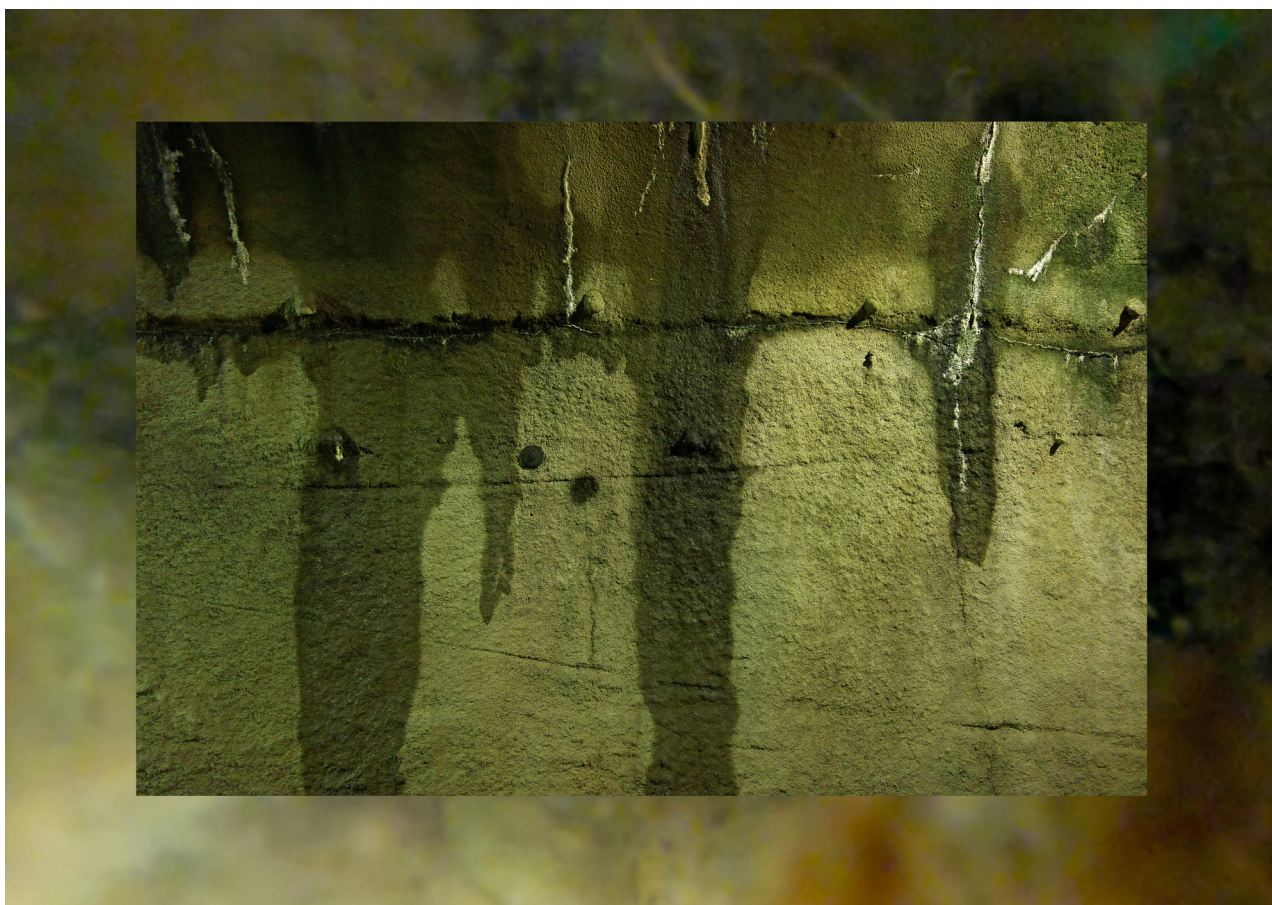
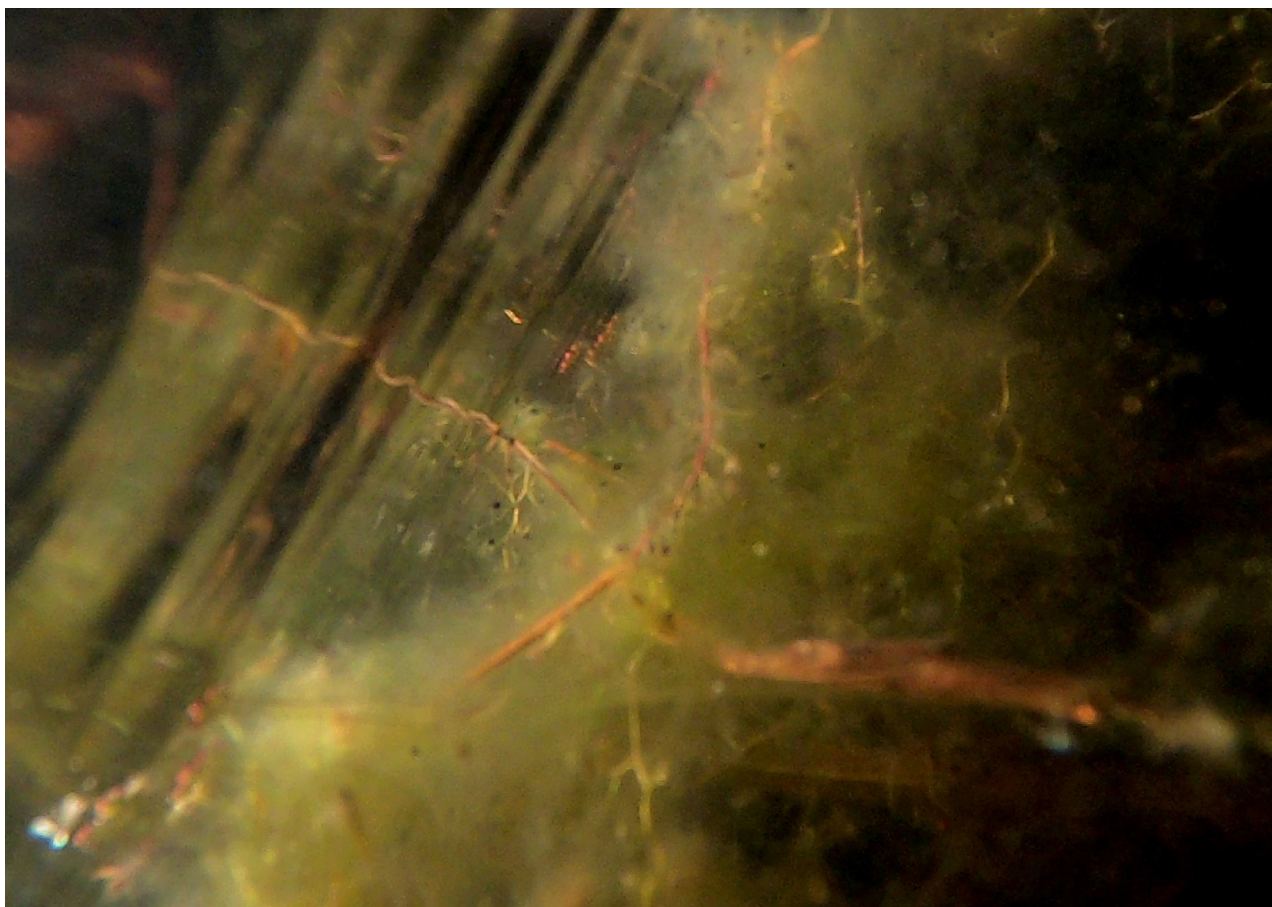
This is continued in the media of photography and film, in which a visual and aural foray through the thick of storied and haunted places unfolds. This begins in the swampy waters of a fabled pond and continues through forests and bamboo groves, across cemeteries and informal garbage dumps, along walls, 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.







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'.

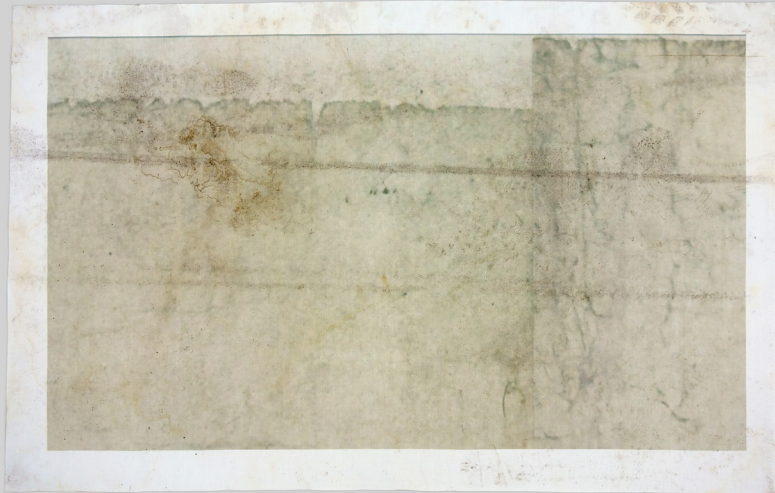
Its principal aims are:

- 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.



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.



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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 / 靈地* (Vienna: Verlag für Moderne Kunst, 2021).
3. Robert Desjarlais, 'Phantasmography,' *American Anthropologist* 118, no. 2 (June 2016): 400.
4. Ibid., 401.
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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.