

STOCKHOLM TO TOKYO

Six years ago, Swedish art director Johan Prag relocated to Tokyo, where he has worked on numerous projects in just about every field that can be hyphenated with 'design', be it 'graphic', 'product', or 'packaging'...and Prag also works in the kindred areas of branding, advertising, direction, photography, computer and motion graphics; in the process, raking in the Tokyo Art Directors Club award for his television commercials for Kewpie Defe. In November of 2010, months before a profoundly shaken Japan appeared on every television screen across the world, we visited Prag in the ergonomic, white minimalist Tokyo home and workspace that he shares with his wife. We talked then about Prag's status as a transplant in Tokyo, and his one-foot-in, one-foot-out view of the city and its design world. As Prag told me, 'Tokyo changes faster than any other place I have been to...it forces you to reinvent yourself constantly.' Months later, I talk again with Prag, to see whether our conversation is in need of reinvention, in wake of the seismic changes that have taken shape since March 11, 2011. Opposite is the combined before-and-after of our conversation; a verbal homage to a super-futuristic city that is dense with the past.

Kohimi Karie 'Speculothers', CD album cover photo, Victor Entertainment, Inc.



Viewing

— *Why did you first come to Tokyo?* A lot of good work was coming out of Japan at the time and I was curious about working in a totally foreign culture. I was also interested in why the work coming out of Japan seemed so different.

— *Compared to Sweden, what is the design world like in Tokyo?* First of all, there are not as many design agencies in Tokyo. A lot of design is done internally at the bigger companies, as well as by just a couple of huge advertising agencies. Even smaller projects often pass through the big agencies, which in turn pass them on to smaller agencies or individual freelancers. When actually working on a project, there is less talk of why something looks a certain way; the most important thing is that it looks good.

— *Do you feel like you are part of any artistic community in Japan?* The scene in Tokyo is not as well-defined as it is in a smaller city like Stockholm.

— *Would you ever call yourself a 'Tokyo designer'?* I think my design sensibility is a mix of Scandinavian and Japanese influences, but thinking of yourself as Swedish, Japanese, or as a 'Tokyo designer' seems limiting.

— *But do you think there is any way to describe a 'Tokyo style' in design?* There is a tendency here to approach design from the point of view of illustration. Also, the Internet is not as widely used and maybe because of that, Japanese designers seem less influenced by global trends.

— *Have you noticed any change in the years you've lived in Tokyo?* Tokyo changes faster than any other place I have been to. At the moment, people seem less interested in what is going on outside Japan than when I first came here, but I am sure this too will change.

— *Interestingly, I notice that 'design' and 'art' are considered two very different fields in Tokyo. Is this something you have noticed, as well?* Many Japanese designers do present their work in a gallery context, as art. I have been asked to do that as well, but I don't think of my commissioned work as art. In my mind they are completely different things, but that doesn't stop someone from doing both.

— *Does Tokyo influence your work, visually?* It is easy to get comfortable with a certain way of working, based on past successes. Tokyo forces you to reinvent yourself constantly.

— *Where is your favourite spot in Tokyo to work?* I like to get up very early so I can work for a couple of hours in a cafe before going in to the office. There are more distractions at the office, so a lot of the best ideas happen early mornings in Doutour Coffee.

— *Do you have a favourite neighbourhood?* That keeps changing. At the moment, I prefer staying away from the centre of the city, and exploring local areas. Tokyo is so big that after six years here there are still many areas of the city I have yet to visit. Tokyo never gets boring.

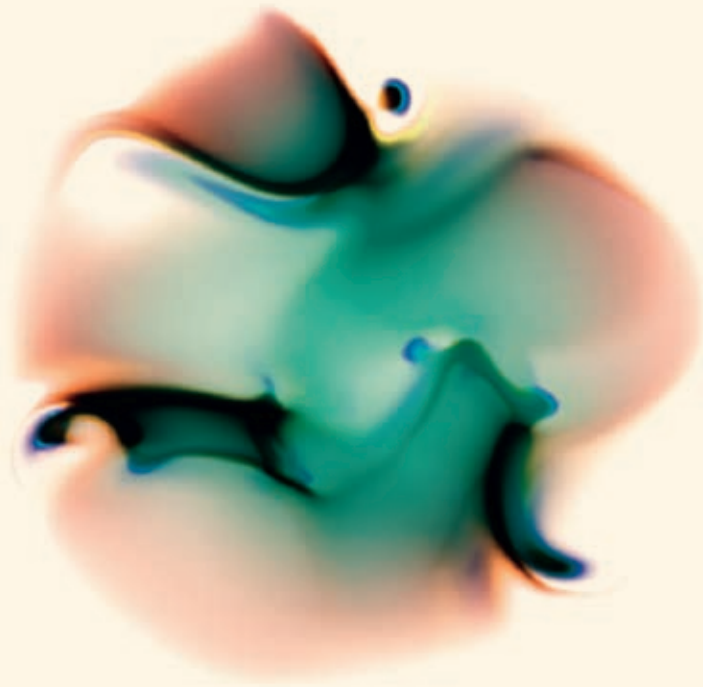
— *Has the mood in the city changed since the earthquake?* Oddly enough Tokyo does not feel so much different than it did before the earthquake. There are still aftershocks almost every day, but I think people are eager to get back to living.

Because of the abysmal reporting done by mainstream media in the West, I think many people don't understand that the worst destruction happened far from Tokyo. The people up north were hit the hardest and still need a lot of help; it is hard to fathom what things have been like there.

An event like this does put things in perspective. If anything good were to come of it, it would be the questioning of how we use energy and what risks we are willing to expose ourselves and our children to in order to maintain a style of life that we know is unsustainable.

CLUB 8 'The boy who couldn't stop dreaming' CD album cover, Victor Entertainment, Inc.





Kahimi Karie 'It's here', CD album cover photo Victor Entertainment, Inc.



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The Back Horn 'Pulse', CD album cover image (alternate version), Victor Entertainment, Inc.