Creating Shared Experience
Bauhaus-Universität Weimar
Who Does the Earth Think It Is? *Becoming Fire*

Elke Marhöfer

16mm transferred to HD, color/sound, 55 minutes, Japanese with English subtitles, Japan 2019

a film dedicated to the keepers of flames by the center for short-lived phenomena aka Elke Marhöfer

From my childhood I remember my father discussing with other farmers the best time to burn the fields after harvest. They waited for the right humidity and a good wind, careful not to let the fire pass over to other fields. However, suddenly fire was banned. By the end of the 1980s burning practice used by farmers on a landscape scale had disappeared completely from the West German countryside. Today human burning practices are nearly extinguished and natural fires aren't allowed to burn in many parts of the world.

In Japan fire is still employed in diverse practices. Maybe because the Earth is still young, and volcanoes continue to erupt. New mountains and islands appear habitually. Lava, ash and gases continue to develop. Nearly all soils are saturated with volcanic matter. However, in Japan too, the excessive use of fossil carbon sources for energy consumption, for heating and cooking and for agriculture has replaced diverse fire practices. A development promoted by our current extractive economic system that has tremendously intensified CO2 pollution, leading to a deep ecological crisis.

To mitigate the effects of climate change it appears natural to focus on sources that have been sustaining in the past. Wood charcoal making and swidden farming are examples of fire practices holding ancient knowledge that can tell a lot about present-day environmental problems.

To better understand what planting gardens by burning forests might have been I joined a swidden farming experiment in Nakanokawachi in the region of Yogo. A project initiated by a group of ecologists and farmers. To make swidden fields, or yakihata, plots of mountainous forests are cut and burned to release inorganic minerals beneficial for plant growth. Neither irrigated nor fertilized, hardly tilled nor weeded the fields are cultivated for a few years, and then left resting and undisturbed again for long periods. Stumps of trees and scrubs regrow and new species move in. By creating a patchwork of minor ecological disturbances, yakihata stimulates species diversity. It sets back dominant species, and allows weaker ones to move into the newly vacant spots. For years swidden farming was considered inferior compared to capital-intensive farming based on agrichemicals. Recently this viewpoint is shifting, and it is becoming evident that yakihata is a sophisticated and rich farming practice that supports the environment *and* healthy food.

Once blossoming, now dwindling, Japan looks back on the well-admired practice of making wood charcoal. The ease of production, the extraordinary quality and long-term preservation of energy made wood charcoal attractive in the past, and might turn it into a beneficial novelty for the future—supporting low-impact living and the protection of

environments. But if wood charcoal is an option for a low-energy world, the effort has to begin with a radical care for forests and their nonhuman inhabitants. To learn more about the process of coppicing, making wood charcoal, the carbon cycle and care for the environment, I visited Yoshioka Tokuo and Yano Takechi two charcoal makers from Kamisea, a mountain village in the Kyotango Prefecture. In Japan bamboo, oak and beech are often used for making charcoal. Oak and beech are well-liked because they burn evenly, and more important they don't die when felled but sprout back from the stump. Oak and beech, unlike cedar and pine, when cut in a specific manner, regrow rapidly, producing many shoots instead of one stem. The shoots grow much fast than the stem. The sprout are left for a couple of years and then harvested again. Coppiced woodlands, if performed in rotation, ensure a range of various plants, and vegetation on which animals can feed—supporting a collective survival together with the nonhuman.