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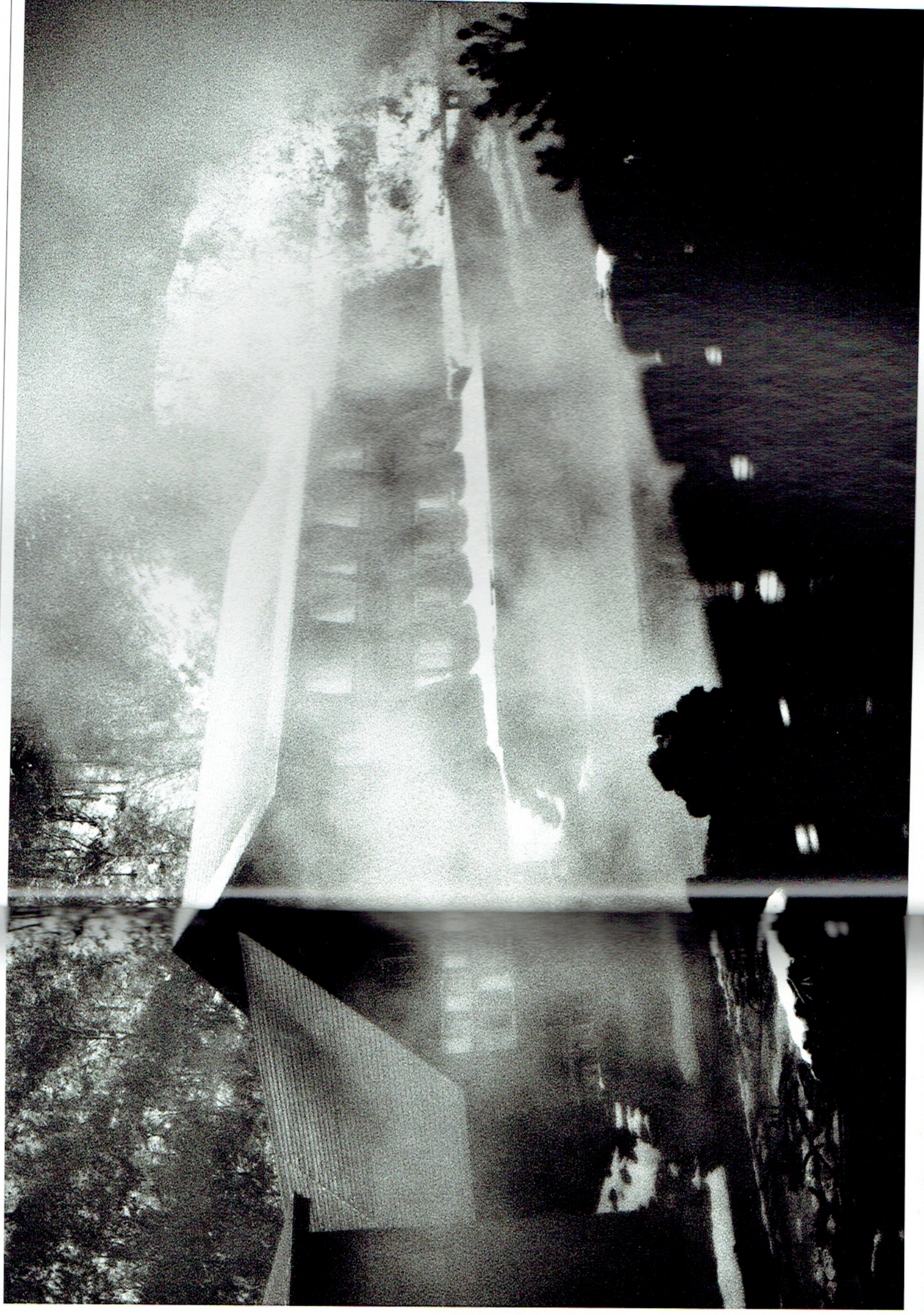
Ménage à trois: Film,
photography and the art
of remembering



Ten Disciples

FEATURE | TSUTOMU YAMAGATA

Hope and fear, life and death – the Japanese photographer Tsutomu Yamagata made his way to Tama-gawa Valley, where cancer sufferers go in hope of finding relief. With his Leica M6 he captured images full of empathy and timeless serenity.



PHOTOGRAPHY: TSUTOMU YAMAGATA



"When I saw this valley for the first time, the scenery reminded me of Nehan-zu paintings which depict the deceased Buddha with ten of his disciples. In this last stage all bonno (earthly desires) have disappeared.



My grandmother told me about this scene and about life after death. I chose *Ten Disciples* as the title for my series, because I am referring to people who are already close to passing over." TSUTOMU YAMAGATA



Japan brings to mind images of robots, speed and efficiency. We admire the fact that in this country, where the emperor is considered a deity and artists working in such disciplines as calligraphy and ceramics are celebrated as national treasures, there are young people who appear to emerge from the pages of a manga comic bent on disrupting the perceived order.

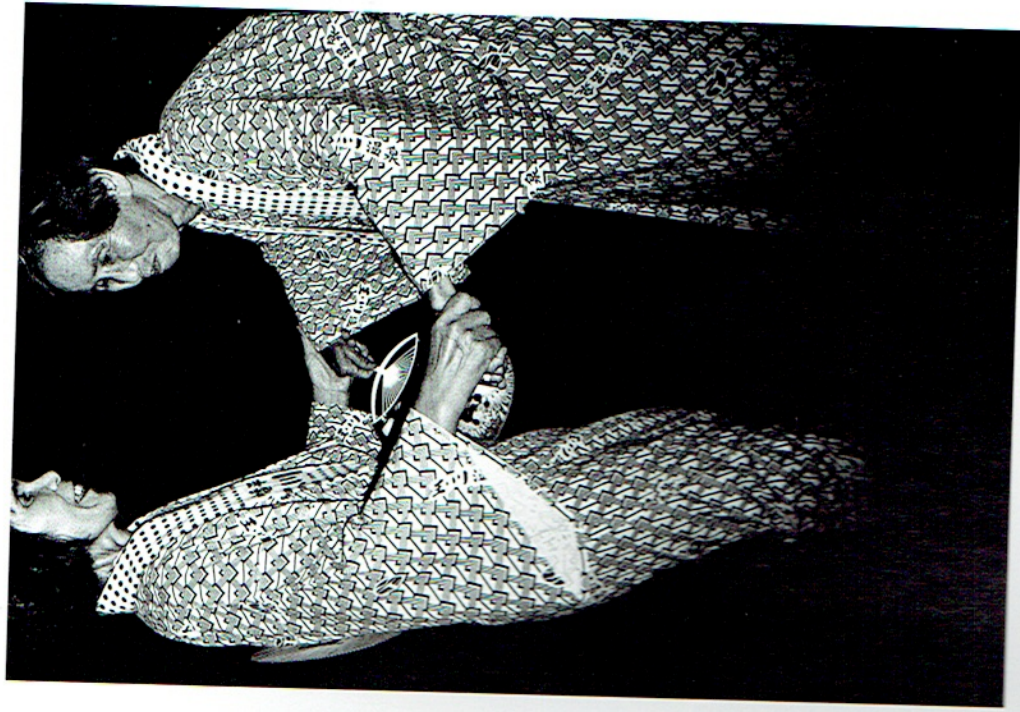
Tsutomu Yamagata's photography distances us from our idea of Japan – which is not false but rather limited – and offers a troubling alternative. He takes us to Tamagawa Valley, located in Akita Prefecture in northern Japan. Even before the Meiji Era, the volcanic region was known for its radioactive rocks, high ground temperatures and dry air, where for centuries the sick have visited its sulphur-rich atmosphere. The valley offers plenty of material for reportage describing its striking contrast to our impressions of 21st century Japan. With his unique style, the photographer does not however, consider the place a 'subject'. He admits that he does not know if, "I knew of the existence

of the place before preparing myself for my father's passing after he'd been diagnosed with terminal cancer".

His approach is defined by his personal and intimate experience, which explains why the pictures, although firmly anchored in the location, are never descriptive but rather emotive. The choice of black and white suggests a desire to disavow reality, to distance oneself from the superficiality of things, to construct with vibrant touches an ensemble that is never a recital but a combination of impressions: when it snows, when the vapours envelop the scene, or following the sick as they let their pilgrimage. Staying close as they let go with abandon, support each other, play together – Yamagata extracts the small moments in life often captured in a flash instant. He is equally content documenting plants, rocks and fumaroles – a surreal universe that is still deeply linked ▶



The journey is often seen as a pilgrimage: devoid of any modern technology, here people hope the ancient earth energies will cure them. Yamagata's quiet black and white pictures capture the otherworldliness of the place





TSUTOMU YAMAGATA

Born in Tokyo in 1966, he first studied law and worked in industry. He was interested in photography early on and finally turned professional. Reportage trips through Europe and Asia followed. After workshops with Issei Suda came the first exhibitions. In 2012 *Thirteen Orphans* was published. Yamagata is represented by the Zen Photo Gallery and is a member of the Japan Professional Photographers Society.

In 2013, selected in Santa Fe for the Photolucida Critical Mass Top 50; in 2014 Lensculture Portrait Prize; in 2015 first winner of the Enahof Foundation's Emerging Asian Photography Grant. tsutomuyamagata.com

CHRISTIAN CAUJOLLE

Initially an art critic, Caujolle became photo editor at the newspaper *Libération* in 1981.

In 1986 he founded the VU Agency, and in 1996 the VU gallery in Paris. In 2007 he left VU, to work as a lecturer, author and curator. In 2015 he was a member of the Leica Oskar Barnack Award jury and the Enahof Foundation jury.

to nature. Tsutomu says, "I didn't feel any distress, rather a simple determination to prepare oneself for eternal peace. The river running through the valley is reminiscent of the Styx that separates our world from the world of the dead. The women working in the spa remind us of the Buddhist deity Amitabha, the infinite light that accompanies the dead to the netherworld. The *bondori*, a dance in memory of the deceased, is performed incessantly during summer. Caught between anguish and hope, I was convinced that the valley was showing me a representation of the Japanese perception of life and death. I have returned to places like this many times and will continue to do so."

Leaving anecdotes aside, transferring the particular to the universal, Yamagata allows what he perceives to take the place of what he sees, encouraging us to discover a vision rather than a situation. He abandons all narrative words to use subjective ones that continuously bring us back to reality. His capacity to remove the typical as well as any pathos, to document

everything while avoiding explanations, is resolved by his aesthetic choices. We could compare Yamagata's work to that of certain contemporary photographers who demand the affirmation of their sole point of view and who, at the risk of placing the beautification of the world ahead of all other points of view, have set a trend for which black and white, graininess, blur, and the affirmation of the self are paramount. In the end, too many of these works prove to be formalistic and only touch the surface. Yamagata's approach is quite the opposite: the mere fact that he confronts a cultural, secular situation, actually turns it into a modern one. In the end, what touches us is that his images are images about today. Their commitment, the deep emotional need born of the situation, does not speak to us about a Japanese 'tradition' but about our contemporaries – and about ourselves. CHRISTIAN CAUJOLLE

