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Visibility, Invisibility and Metaphors in post-3.11 Landscape Photography

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Naturally, “disaster” can be understood according to its etymology – of which many fragments here bear the trace. But the etymology of “disaster” does not operate in these fragments as preferred, or more original insight, ensuring mastery of what is no longer, then, anything but a word. On the contrary, the indeterminateness of what is written when this word is written, exceeds etymology and draws it into the disaster.¹

Maurice Blanchot - *The Writing of the Disaster*

Introduction

In this chapter I wish to trace the role that landscape photography has played in the aftermath of the Tohoku earthquake and tsunami that rocked Japan in March 2011. For my analysis I use the disaster, commonly referred to as 3.11 in Japan, as the temporal as well as conceptual starting point though what will become clear in my chapter is that landscape photography underwent a transformation that far exceeds the boundaries of the disaster itself. The aim of my chapter is to unpack the profound impact the disaster has had, and is having, and how this can be observed in the type of photographic practices that emerged in Japan since 3.11. My focus is on landscape photography in the broadest sense of the term, though as will become clear in my chapter, the very definition of what constitutes a landscape, too, underwent a profound change. In my chapter I specifically focus on art photography, or, in other words, photographs that were made in the pursuit of making an artwork. This type of photography

1 Blanchot, Maurice ([1980] 1995), *The writing of the Disaster*, translated by Ann Smock. London: University of Nebraska Press, pp. 116-117.

differs to other photographic practices such as photojournalism or press photography where photography is mainly used as a recording device or a type of visual evidence: this photograph proves that this happened, on this day, with these people present. Photojournalism acts like a visual fact checker and that what is depicted is truthful. Art photography, on the other hand, does not purport to tell an all-encompassing truth, but rather, it tends to unearth precisely the type of narratives and idiosyncrasies that photojournalism cannot or is not able to tell. It is not my intention to create an artificial divide between photojournalism and art photography because of course the two genres have much in common, though specifically in relation to landscape photography, there are clear divergences that need to be considered when we talk about 3.11. The aim of this chapter is to provide a foundation to deconstruct and critically analyse some of the most dominant photographic trends that emerged since 3.11. Central to my analysis is the belief that art photography is not merely documenting or representing changes in the landscapes, but that art photography is a reflection of culture. Raymond Williams describes culture as a constant negotiation between the dominant, residual and emergent. It is my contention that much of the art photography in the post 3.11 era is, to use Williams' definition, is an emergent form of cultural expression that is continuously evolving.²

The Visible

The first part of my chapter focuses on what I would like to call the 'visible' – that is a type of photography that is concerned with the visible changes that occurred in the areas that were affected by 3.11. As I have written elsewhere, a number of art photographers have travelled to the Tohoku region to capture the unimaginable scale of the disaster.³ Out of the many bodies of work that emerged in the aftermath of 3.11, Naoya Hatakeyama's work stands out as being a comprehensive investigation of a landscape that is changed almost beyond recognition. Hatakeyama's family ties and childhood upbringing in Rikuzentakata, one of the worst hit towns on the Tohoku coast, brings a very personal dimension to this body of work which appears to be a step change compared to past projects which tended to photograph subjects from a conceptual distance. In Rikuzentakata, Hatakeyama photographs a landscape that is scared, bruised, scratched and ripped open. The ability of photography to make these changes to the landscape visible, is one of the key aspects in this work as Hatakeyama's trains

2 Williams, Raymond ([1958] 2017), *Culture and Society*. London: Penguin Classics.

3 Bohr, Marco (2016), Naoya Hatakeyama and the Photographic Representation of Post-Tsunami Landscapes in Japan, *Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art*, Vol. 3, No. 3, pp. 355-365.

his lens on some rather unusual aspect that the tsunami revealed: an apparently unharmed tree that somehow withstood the force of nature, large pieces of wood that have piled up like a bunch of matchsticks or the mist that is hovering over a town almost completely destroyed. In these images Hatakeyama is careful not to aestheticize the effects of the tsunami, but rather, he depicts a new type of reality where the rules of physics and nature seem to be temporarily be suspended.

One of the key aspects in this body of work is that Hatakeyama's photographs of the region are also a depiction of a place he once called home. The fact that Hatakeyama is based in Tokyo with connections to this, more rural part of Japan evokes the notion of *urusato*, which literally translates as 'old village' though more specifically refers to the notion of home in the popular imagination. In her classic book on Japanese modernity *Discourses of the Vanishing*, Marilyn Ivy argues that the nostalgia for *urusato* is essentially a modern concept, provoked by the abundance of change that has occurred in modern Japan.⁴ Ivy writes: 'Concern with the *urusato* indicates a fundamental alienation, a severance from "home".'⁵ Following Ivy's line of thought, *urusato* is not just referencing home in the topographical sense, but perhaps more importantly, it references home in the temporal sense – one that has existed in the past and one from which the subject is now removed. In other words, *urusato* encapsulates the nostalgic drive to reconnect to a place. In an often cited paper on *urusato*, Jennifer Robertson describes *urusato-zukuri* as a process, signified by the term *zukuri* which translates to 'home/native-place making'.⁶ Robertson writes: 'Ultimately, *urusato-zukuri* is a political process by which culture, as a collectively constructed and shared system of symbols, customs and beliefs, is socially reproduced'.⁷ The relationship between photography and *urusato-zukuri* should not be underestimated: one of the ways with which 'home' is produced is through memory, the making of memories and the elicitation of memories through photographs. But what if home the home is destroyed or damaged beyond recognition? Hatakeyama's photographs of Rikuzentakata allude to a rupture in the making of the home – not just in the sense of his own home but home in the national imagination. This is one of the reasons why Hatakeyama's landscape images have gained so much attention in Japan because they speak to a larger discourse whereby people feel a certain attachment to the countryside –

4 Ivy, Marilyn (1995), *Discourses of the Vanishing: Modernity, Phantasm, Japan*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, p. 105.

5 Ibid.

6 Robertson, Jennifer (1988). *Furusato Japan: The Culture and Politics of Nostalgia*, *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society*, Vol. 1, No. 4, pp. 494-518

7 Robertson, p. 494.

a shared belief that this is where they are from. The destruction of Rikuzentakata becomes a symbol for the injuries inflicted on *furusato* in the popular imagination. Hatakeyama's work alludes to the crucial role that photography plays in the making of this psychological and nostalgic space.

The torn and fragmented surfaces in Hatakeyama's work not only represent a larger shift in representational modes amongst Japanese photographers in the aftermath of 3.11, they also put into question the very notion of what constitutes a landscape. In his 2014 essay *The Animal of Light*, the photography critic Chihiro Minato writes that the English word 'landscape' or the French word 'paysage' show that the landscape is an entity that is surrounded by and 'is observed by a subject, which is intrinsically a human being.'⁸ In the European tradition of representation, therefore, what the term landscape describes is not actually the land itself, but that the land is being seen from a distance through human eyes. In other words, the noun landscape thus assumes a human gaze outside of itself. Minato contrasts this Cartesian notion with the Japanese word for landscape, *fukei* (also spelled *fuukei*), which literally translates as 'a scenery of wind' evoking 'the universal flow and movement of all things, which serves as the basis for *feng-shui*' as well as signifying the Wind God according to Minato.⁹ Minato writes that *fukei* 'is therefore not simply a landscape that human beings observe; it is the idea of connection between all things such as the earth and the heavens, existence and absence, that are tied to the aether by the wind'.¹⁰ I am trying to use Minato's etymological analysis in a way that is not overly deterministic because it is only natural that words mean different things in different languages. Aside from the linguistic specificities in the word 'landscape', Minato's argument is also a philosophical one that suggests that land and landscapes are treated in fundamentally different ways depending on which culture it is situated in. Minato concludes his analysis by suggesting that in the Japanese tradition, landscape is viewed as a holistic entity that connects past, present and future with death functioning as the ultimate signifier for the cycle of life. Following this line of thought, Hatakeyama's work potentially alludes the fragility and vulnerability that the term *fukei* is alluding to. In that vein, Hatakeyama's work also references a sense of renewal that can be found off the Tohoku coast – that in amongst this tragedy is a sense that people are rebuilding their lives in the best possible way.

8 Minato, Chihiro and Goto, Shigeo (2014). *Anima on Photo: Hidden Sense of Japanese Photography*. Tokyo: Art Beat Publisher, p. 18. I would like to thank Dominika Mackiewicz for alerting me to this essay.

9 Ibid, pp. 18-19.

10 Ibid, p. 19.

The Invisible

The second part of my chapter is concerned with the ‘invisible’ – aspects of the post 3.11 discourse that cannot be seen through the naked eye. Invisibility and photography are two words that don’t appear to work well together as taking photographs is conventionally perceived as a method of highlighting the visibility of a subject. However photography is also about not seeing things: every photograph taken is also a decision about aspects to exclude from the frame. I see something because the photograph urges me to look at it but by doing so, my attention is diverted from the things not depicted in the frame. One of the elemental ‘truths’ about photography is therefore also about the selectiveness of photographic framing. This level of subjectivity afforded to photography is one of the key ethical dilemmas of this medium. Tasked with taking pictures of the disaster, photojournalists are given instructions to include and also exclude certain elements. The photography critic Michio Hayashi has remarked that in the aftermath of 3.11 photojournalists have tended to focus on the representation of a particular type of disaster victim - “normal” people - that suited the prevailing media narratives at the time.¹¹ Hayashi writes: ‘It was as if people who are out of the ordinary had never lived in the area: there was no coverage of, say, members of [the] gay [community] or otherwise different couples who lost their partners, or loners who had severed their ties to society before the disaster’.¹² The focus on particular type of victims has meant that other types - those that did not conform to the media narrative of a homogenous and harmonious rural population - were very rare or simply excluded. Hayashi critically argues that this type of visual erasure compares to the ‘structural blindness and propaganda during the fascist period in Japan, with its lack of objective logistical analysis and its promotion of *kokutai* (the unified character of the state) and *yamato* (Japanese) spirit.’¹³ In this heightened ethical context, where the media effectively used the victims, categorized them into types that either suited or did not suit the narrative in order to convey stories about comfort and bond (*kizuna*), the very act of photographing is a highly politicized act. Art photographers operating in the post 3.11 context were well aware of these ethical pitfalls and it is therefore that the representation of ‘victims’ as visual types is quite rare in their works.

In his project ‘Mushrooms from the Forest’ Homma appears to play with these ethical considerations about victimhood, essentially using the mushroom as a signifier for those

11 Hayashi, Michio (2015), Reframing the Tragedy: Lessons from Post-3/11 Japan. In: *In the Wake: Japanese Photographers Respond to 3/11*. Boston: Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

12 Ibid, p. 167.

13 Ibid, p. 177.

uprooted and dislocated by the disaster. Torn out of the ground, lined up against a white backdrop, mostly photographed as individual mushrooms and subsequently archived, Homma's typology functions as a visual metaphor for people who lost their homes and are now being processed for rehousing by the state. It is, in spite of the chaos caused by the disaster, a bureaucratic exercise further emphasized by the relative coldness of the pure white quasi-studio background. Yet the main subject matter in this body of work is the invisibility of radiation caused by the nuclear meltdown in Fukushima. These mushrooms, picked in a forest near the power plant, stand as symbols for the invisible threat caused by radiation. The white background thus also references the white suits of government workers attempting to clear the exclusion zone around the power plant.

Another artist whose work is concerned with invisibility and the threat of nuclear radiation is Takashi Arai whose photographic series 'Here and There' focuses on communities that are struggling to cope with the fallout of the nuclear disaster in Fukushima.¹⁴ By using a plate camera and developing the images with the daguerreotype process, at first sight the photographs appear to represent scenes from a bygone era – perhaps to a time when Japan began to open its closed borders to the West in the mid-19th century. Yet the beauty and nostalgia evoked by the daguerreotypes is quickly overshadowed by the realization that Arai's work also alludes to an uncertain and perhaps even hostile future as the land he photographed is poisoned for many more decades to come. Arai's work focuses less on the visible signifiers of destruction, but rather, it attempts to represent something altogether more invisible – nuclear radiation.

In his work Arai appears to focus on subjects that are directly affected by radiation: persimmon trees whose fruits have now become highly toxic or local residents going through the painstaking process of removing soil that has become nuclear waste. The image of a bunch of sunflowers creates a dichotomy that is replicated in the series as a whole: an object once tactile and beautiful has now, quite literally, become untouchable. In the context of 3.11, Arai's image of a cherry blossom tree – a bitter-sweet symbol for the fragility of life in Japanese visual culture however also a symbol of nationalism – now alludes to the destructiveness of the disaster. One of the characteristics of the daguerreotype is that it requires mercury vapours to process the image. It is a highly toxic process that has cost the lives of a number

14 An earlier version of my text on Takashi Arai's work has been published in the photography magazine Source: Bohr, Marco (2014), Takashi Arai, 'Here and There': too far, too close to Fukushima. *Source: Photographic Review*, Issue 80.

of photographers in the early history of photography. Arai thus depicts the dangers of nuclear radiation with the very method of representation chosen for this project. In this context, the daguerreotypes emphasize the term 'exposure' as a double entendre: photographic exposure as well as a state of having no protection from something harmful. The chemical imperfections in Arai's daguerreotypes visually support the narrative of nuclear contamination. Like the landscape that is forever scarred and affected by the fallout from the nuclear disaster, Arai's images are full with imperfections, scratches and dust specks. Marks appearing on the surface of the daguerreotypes are akin to dark cancerous growths on an x-ray image. In this work it quickly becomes clear that Arai is not just dealing with a destroyed landscape, but he is representing deep anxieties embodied by those he photographed.

Arai's photographs feed into a larger discourse of nuclear anxieties that dates back to the atomic bombs of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. In spite of strong concerns for health and safety amongst the wider population, Japan's political elite embraced nuclear technology culminating in the first power plant being commissioned in 1966. The subsequent rise in nuclear technology as a cheap source of energy for Japan's booming economy was underpinned by a media campaign that sought to boost public confidence in the technology. The historical experience of the atomic bomb on one hand, and media propaganda on the other hand created a deeply ambiguous attitude towards nuclear technology in Japan. While politicians and corporations seek to promote nuclear energy, a growing minority has become increasingly sceptical about the true safety record of Japan's 54 nuclear power plants. A series of scandals, nearly catastrophic accidents as well as cover-ups in the 1990s compounded concerns about the true state of the nuclear industry. The on-going disaster at Fukushima has now turned those concerns that existed ever since the introduction of nuclear technology into a reality.

Takashi Arai's photographs from Fukushima allude to the notion that ever-increasing economic expansion comes at a cost. In the most abstract terms, in our late capitalist system this cost usually comes with an increased exposure to risk. In the case of Fukushima, the risk of building a nuclear plant in one of the most active earthquake areas in the world was outweighed by the pursuit of energy and security. As long as neoliberal ideology promotes economic growth at all cost, such risks will continue to be taken. Perhaps Arai's daguerreotypes allude to the desire to return to a more simple past, or perhaps they function as a warning for the future, that risk is not just an abstract concept, but that it can turn into a reality affecting our globe.

The Metaphorical

In addition to the visible and the invisible, a third form of representation in the aftermath of 3.11 is discernable, particularly in the works of a younger generation of artists whose works deal with visual metaphors and allegories. This is perhaps a logical trajectory, away from the quasi-documentary and realistic approach by artists such as Naoya Hatakeyama, towards images that not only make no claim towards a photographic truth, but actively subvert any preconceptions about truthfulness. Lieko Shiga's ground-breaking photography book titled *Rasen Kaigan* published by Akaaka in 2013 stands out as one of the most ambitious, playful and surreal bodies of work published since 3.11. Similar to Hatakeyama, Shiga's connection to the affected region is rather personal: since 2008 she declared the small village Kitagama (also spelled Kitakama) in Miyagi Prefecture as her adopted hometown. This is a small village with 372 people living in 107 houses and as is typical for this type of rural community, the majority of citizens would be elderly people as the younger generation tends to move to the larger cities for jobs.¹⁵ Away from the busy streets and neon lights of the main cities in Japan, places like Kitagama can appear almost otherworldly in terms of their size, the age of the population and a general sense of decline. The arrival of a young female photographer in 2008 must have been a major event in Kitagama's collective memory.

Whilst based in Kitagama, Shiga embarked on a major body of work which was essentially produced in close collaboration with the villagers. In utterly surreal photographs, Shiga depicts these villagers as they pose, contort and act for the camera. What the viewer is looking at is not simply a photograph depicting a subject in front of the camera, but it is a type of public performance that is evolving between Shiga and the villagers. One of the most striking images from that series depicts an elderly woman attempting to ride a bicycle at the bottom of a large crack in the ground. In the context of Japan's rapidly aging population, the image might signify the difficulties these villagers have to sustain themselves as their support network is increasingly eroding. The image might also reference the lack of mobility not only by the community, but more specifically experienced by the individual trapped in an ageing body. However in the context of 3.11, the large crack in the ground eerily references the earthquake whose epicentre was a mere 70km off from the Miyagi coast line. Due to its geographic location on the Ring of Fire, Japan is one of the most earthquake active regions

15 The information about the size of the town is from Lieko Shiga's personal website: <http://www.liekoshiga.com/works/rasen-kaigan/>

in the world. Earthquakes are a common phenomenon and the population is generally well prepared for a major disaster. Though as Shiga's photograph of the crack in the ground might suggest, no level of preparedness can ultimately overcome the sheer force of nature.

When the tsunami devastated Kitagama in 2011, Shiga's belongings and part of her photographic archive was destroyed as well. Shiga was instrumental in starting a community effort to search for, archive and re-distribute personal family photographs scattered after the tsunami. Out of this sense of chaos and personal bond to the village, the highly manipulated, theatrical and surreal images for *Rasen Kaigan* clearly reference the challenges experienced by the villagers in overcoming the trauma of the disaster. Some of the most haunting images apparently show different visual layers, superimposed on top of each other thus disorienting the viewer. This sense of dislocation and disorientation evoked by Shiga's photographs can be seen to function as a metaphor for 3.11 itself. Here, Shiga is not only referencing this dislocation of the subject before, during and after the disaster, but she is referring to a larger discourse where the very notion of what constitutes the disaster is interrogated and questioned.

What actually is 3.11? When did it happen? In light of the nuclear meltdown at the Fukushima power plant, it cannot be accurate to speak of a single day that this disaster occurred. Likewise, the trauma that has been caused by 3.11 is not one that is lying in the past, but it is one that is continuously experienced in the present and the future. Likewise, when did the disaster actually begin? Did it begin when the tsunami reached the shores of the Sanriku Coast or did it begin when the Fukushima power plant was built with little to no regard for the great likelihood that earthquakes and tsunamis are a frequent occurrence in that region? The media tends to speak about a single day that the disaster occurred – as the term 3.11 would suggest – however in the public consciousness this term and the temporality associated with it signifies something much larger: the failure of the state and the nuclear industry to put adequate safeguards into place to prevent the nuclear meltdown. These concerns also evoke important questions about the presumed binaries between natural and manmade disaster: where does the boundary between the two lie?

In spite of the seriousness of the subject matter, there is a level of playfulness in Shiga's work that can also be seen in the way that she manipulates the images and engages with her subjects. In *Rasen Kaigan* Shiga appears to have embarked on a photographic intervention with the villagers as they obligingly pose and contort themselves for the camera – sometimes to a comic effect. This playfulness and what I would like to call photographic interventionism

also relates to the way that Shiga engages with the surrounding landscape: unusual framing, extreme contrasts or grainy images are a common feature. Indeed, Shiga's work bears some similarities with the 'are, bure, boke' (or blurry, grainy, out-of-focus) style of photography promoted by the Provoke Era photographers such as Daido Moriyama in the late 1960s and early 1970s. This form of subversion of photographic realism can also be seen as a political act: the photograph not as a document of the real but as a counter-narrative to the prevailing status quo promoted by the government and the media at the time.

One striking aspect of the book is that it contains very little accompanying text other than a short poem at the beginning of the book. For a body of work of this size and with such a complex visual narrative, this is perhaps rather unusual – even subversive - and further feeds into the impression that the artist seeks to undermine prevailing conventions. The viewer, it appears, is left to his or her own devices trying to decipher the complexities of this work. Furthermore, the work does not actually reference 3.11 anywhere specifically. It is only through press releases, artist interviews and the occasional snippet of information that the location and the timeframe of the images is revealed. As a consequence of this lack of textual information, the title of the book, *Rasen Kaigan*, which can be translated as 'Spiral Coast', is the only written context for the images. This term is neatly referenced on the cover of the book which depicts circular tyre tracks in the sand on a beach. This is not an idyllic depiction of a beach, but rather, it shows man's effect in distorting and shaping the natural landscape. This is of course another powerful visual allegory in relation to 3.11 discourses however it is also a smart reference to one of the greatest piece of land art ever produced: Robert Smithson's earthwork sculpture 'Spiral Jetty' from 1970. Unlike Smithson's carefully placed pieces of rock, mud and earth which shaped a counter-clockwise spiral protruding into water, Shiga's spiral is disorderly, on the coast rather than in the water and signified by the absence of elements (e.g. tracks pushing away the sand). Smithson's work was produced a year after the first moon landing and invited visitors to the site to contemplate cosmology – or the future of space travel - but also suggested a passage back through time as signified by the anti-clockwise formation of the spiral. This allusion to time, and the unfixed nature between past, present and future manifests itself in *Rasen Kaigan* by purposefully excluding any clear historical reference points in the images. Following Shiga's allegorical spiral, the viewer continues to experience a sense of dislocation not just in terms of space, but also in terms of time.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have used three key words - the visible, the invisible and the metaphorical

- to deconstruct some of the emerging forms of visual expression in post 3.11 landscape photography. I am aware that there are art photographers whose work does not fit into either category, and I am also aware that each category has its limitations. Nevertheless, by looking at the bodies of work that emerged since 3.11, I believe these key words provide a solid foundation for further analysis in relation to the ethics of photography as well as a discussion on what exactly constitute a landscape in the post 3.11 context. It is not my intention that either of these key words forms a distinct visual trend comparable to the Provoke Era for instance. Perhaps one of the defining aspects of post 3.11 photography is that there is, in fact, no single definable trend as each artist responds to the new set of conditions provoked by the disaster through very individual and highly subjective means. What all of the works have in common is that they provide new perspectives on the disaster, even if this perspective is difficult to reach or address.

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