

Reconfiguring Materiality in Contemporary Japanese Photography after 3.11

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Abstract

In this essay I analyze landscape photography produced in the aftermath of the tsunami and earthquake that hit Japan in March 2011. The aim of the essay 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 since emerged in Japan. As I will argue, one of the greatest transformations can be seen in the way artists and photographers subvert the material integrity of the image itself.

Key Words

Japan, Photography, Materiality, Disaster, Ethics

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 essay I wish to analyse a particular type of photography that emerged in the aftermath of the Tohoku earthquake, tsunami and nuclear fallout that rocked Japan in March 2011. For my analysis I use this triple disaster, commonly referred to as 3.11 in Japan, as the temporal as well as conceptual starting point. In the first instance I am concerned with photographs that were produced in response to or as a direct result of 3.11. This may include photographs that depict the aftermath of the tsunami or that are concerned with the nuclear fallout in Fukushima that happened as a consequence of the tsunami. Though as will become clear in my essay, how and whether at all photographs can be seen to relate to the disaster is an increasingly ambiguous territory that is challenging to define. A close reading of the type of photographs that emerged in Japan since 2011 reveals that the photograph, as a tangible, material and by all means also fragile object underwent a transformation that far exceeds the boundaries of the disaster itself. In other words, I am investigating a shift in the material integrity of the photograph itself. The aim of my essay 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.

In my essay I focus on art photography, or, in other words, photographs that were made in the pursuit of making an artwork. Relative to other forms of visual and textual expression, art photography in the aftermath of 3.11 is still a relatively

¹ Blanchot, *The writing of the Disaster*, pp. 116-117.

understudied field with only a few English language publications on this topic.² However I also need to acknowledge that art photography, particularly as it relates to 3.11, is also challenging genre to define: the assumption that it significantly differs to other forms of photographic practices such as documentary photography, photojournalism or press photography, where photography is mainly used as a recording device or a type of visual evidence, is not necessarily correct. In fact, in some of the works analysed there appears to be a significant overlap with documentary methods. Another dimension that needs to be borne in mind in this discussion is the temporal, geographic and human scale of 3.11 which affected millions of people all over Japan – not just those living near the coast or near the power plant in Fukushima. So even though 3.11 was the most photographed disaster in human history at the time it unfolded, there is, as such, no singular iconic press image that could represent 3.11 as a whole. This significantly differs to 9/11 where the collective memory of the terrorist attack in New York City was, in part, produced through iconic works such as Stand Honda's haunting photograph 'Dust Lady'. With regards to 3.11, on the other hand, it is very difficult to think of singular images that could similarly represent the disaster in spite of the fact that there are so many images to choose from. This might explain why, in this type of image vacuum, art photography has reached an unusually elevated position in post-3.11 discourses.

The aim of this essay is to provide a foundation to deconstruct and critically analyse some of the most dominant, and may I also say dynamic photographic trends that emerged since 3.11. Central to my analysis is the belief that photography is not merely documenting or representing changes in the landscapes, but that photography itself is a participant in cultural formations. Raymond Williams describes culture as a constant negotiation between the dominant, residual and emergent. It is my contention that much of the photography in the post 3.11 era is, to use Williams' definition, an

² See for instance:

Figuerola, "Subversion and nostalgia in art photography of the Fukushima nuclear disaster", p. 58-73.

Davre, "Revealing the Radioactive Contamination after Fukushima in Japanese Photography", np.

Hayashi, "Reframing the Tragedy: Lessons from Post-3/11 Japan", np.

emergent form of cultural expression that is continuously evolving.³ This “evolving” nature of culture, I argue in this essay, is centred on an act of questioning, subverting and ultimately also rejecting the material integrity of the photographic image itself.

The Visible and the Invisible in Post-3.11 Photography

To unpack the cultural dynamics that I am referring to above, please allow me to draw out a trajectory of the type of photography we should consider in this context. In the first instance there might be a figure like Naoya Hatakeyama, one of Japan’s most renown contemporary photographers, whose personal connection to the Tohoku region has prompted him to conduct a type of photographic survey of the scarred landscape. It is very difficult to not draw a connection between his personal trauma and the impact on the land that he is photographing. The fact that Hatakeyama is based in Tokyo with connections to this, more rural part of Japan evokes the notion of *furusato*, 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 *furusato* is essentially a modern concept, provoked by the abundance of change that has occurred in modern Japan.⁴ Ivy writes: ‘Concern with the *furusato* indicates a fundamental alienation, a severance from “home”.’⁵ Notwithstanding the political process that ‘home making’, or *furusato-zukuri*, can imply, Hatakeyama’s approach focuses on what can be described as the ‘visible’ effects of the disaster.⁶ In this context it is important to stress that Hatakeyama was very much at the forefront of a moral and ethical debate in Japan with regards to photographing and depicting the aftermath of 3.11.⁷ Additionally, Hatakeyama’s post-3.11 work feeds into a debate taking place in Japan whether Western constructs about ‘landscape’ (which assumes a

³ Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, pp. 121-7.

⁴ Ivy, *Discourses of the Vanishing*, p. 105.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Robertson, “Furusato Japan: The Culture and Politics of Nostalgia.” pp. 494-518.

⁷ Bohr, “Naoya Hatakeyama and the Photographic Representation of Post Tsunami Landscapes in Japan”, pp. 355-365.

Cartesian subject) can be applied to the Japanese notion *fukei* which views the land in more philosophical terms as being part of a wider system of beliefs.⁸



Figure 1: Naoya Hatakeyama, *Yonesakisho-Donomae*, 2011, Copyright Naoya Hatakeyama, courtesy of the artist

Other photographers moved from the ‘visible’ to the ‘invisible’: in his project ‘Mushrooms from the Forest’ Takashi Homma appears to use the mushroom as a signifier for those 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. 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

⁸ Minato and Goto. *Anima on Photo: Hidden Sense of Japanese Photography*

Fukushima power plant, stand as symbols for the invisible threat caused by radiation. In both Hatakeyama's and Homma's approach, however, the material integrity of the image is not questioned.



Figure 2: Takashi Homma, from the series 'Mushrooms from the Forest', 2011, Copyright Takashi Homma, courtesy of the artist.

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.⁹ 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

⁹ Bohr, "Takashi Arai, 'Here and There'".

contaminated for many more decades to come. Arai's work focuses less on the visible signifiers of destruction, but rather, it attempts to represent the timelessness of the nuclear fallout.



Figure 3: Takashi Arai, *Persimmon Trees with Those Skins Stripped Away for Trial Decontamination, Tsukidate, Fukushima*, from the series “*Here and There – Tomorrow’s Islands*,” 2012, 19,3 x 25,2 cm, daguerreotype, Copyright Takashi Arai, courtesy of the artist.

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 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’: 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 work is important for this essay because the very process he is using emphasizes the photograph as a material – and indeed also as quite a fragile – object. This focus on the photograph as object can also be seen in Arai’s captions for his work where the size of the images is meticulously noted. By returning to the daguerreotype process, Arai sets up a number of very well placed conceptual parallels for the cultural dynamics at the time. The fragility and the imperfections of the daguerreotype process itself signify that the established orthodoxies of the past – namely that technology can tame nature – must not be taken for granted.

Pushing the Boundaries of Post-3.11 Photography

A third form of representation in the aftermath of 3.11 is discernible, 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, and Takashi Homma towards images that not only make no claim towards a photographic truth, but actively subvert any preconceptions about truthfulness. Lieko Shiga’s groundbreaking 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

3.11.¹⁰ 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.¹¹ 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.



Figure 4: Lieko Shiga, from the series *Rasen Kaigan*, 2013, copyright Lieko Shiga, courtesy of the artist.

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

¹⁰ Shiga, *Rasen Kaigan*.

¹¹ The information about the size of the town is from Lieko Shiga's personal website: <http://www.liekoshiga.com/works/rasen-kaigan/>

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 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.



Figure 5: Lieko Shiga, from the series *Rasen Kaigan*, 2013, copyright Lieko Shiga, courtesy of the artist.

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. However, they also reference the fragility of the photographic

object. Some of the most haunting images 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 trauma. 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 chronology of the disaster must be interrogated.

In Shiga's work the boundaries between reality and performance, document and fiction as well as past and present overlap, challenge and subvert each other. In doing so, her work provokes a number of highly loaded questions in relation to the disaster. 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. 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 one could 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.



Figure 6: Lieko Shiga, from the series *Rasen Kaigan*, 2013, copyright Lieko Shiga, courtesy of the artist.

One striking aspect of the book *Rasen Kaigan* 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 snippets 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 essay I sought to highlight how contemporary Japanese photographers and artists interrogated the photograph as a material object in light of the disaster that struck Japan in 2011. I drew a trajectory from photographers like Naoya Hatakeyama, perhaps best known for a type of 'straight' image which is presented in an unaltered way, to artists like Lieko Shiga, who view the photograph as a malleable object that can be shaped and distorted and who, in doing so, stretch the very boundaries of the photographic medium. By drawing this trajectory I highlighted the transition of the photograph from a precious object that is to be protected and collected in a frame, to an object that can be scratched, bent and manipulated. This transition eerily reflects the journey some of the family photographs that Lieko Shiga has helped to rescue while she was based in Kitagama: the treasured family photographs that were once kept in a safe place inside the house have been torn, discoloured and scattered by the tsunami. In this context the changing materiality of the photographs that I outlined in this essay is not only a matter of visual appearance, but rather, it goes to the very core of how the disaster has shaped perceptions about nature and the self in Japan. The reconfiguration of materiality of the photograph ultimately questions the assumed

primacy that man has over nature. The reach of the disaster exceeds the material boundary of the image, and puts to question not only the equation between the photograph and reality, but also the photograph and memory. Shiga's work highlights the possibility that both reality and memory are notions that can be altered and perhaps even constructed

More recently, the artist Takashi Kawashima has taken this approach to the next level by creating intricate sculptures, using photographs essentially as building blocks to create his large-scale works. This shift in practice is not just transforming the materiality of the photograph, but the photograph itself *becomes* the material. There are, of course, precedents for this type of approach though I would argue that the rupture caused by 3.11, and the political and cultural turmoil that has followed it, has created a new set of conditions where experimentation with photography has become a dominant strategy to come to terms with questions about ecology, memory and identity. Here, photography is not used to depict, document or capture, but rather, the reconfiguration of the photographic object questions any notion about a single truth, or indeed a single chronology.

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