

Marking the 3.11 Triple Disaster in Japan

Introduction

From the first moments after the March 11, 2011 Tohoku earthquake left indelible marks on the physical landscape, artists began to add their own marks to examine and reflect on the entanglement of human and nonhuman, material and spiritual, living and nonliving. The 9.1 magnitude quake and the *tsunami* that followed killed 20,000 people and caused the meltdown of the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear reactor. Radioactive contamination displaced 340,000 survivors from their homes. In the context of this *envirotechnical*¹ triple disaster, cataclysmic yet continuing to unfold, artists helped reveal and interpret deep interconnections between nature, culture, and technology.

Big Questions

- How do artists and writers participate in creating work that addresses envirotechnical disaster?
- What are the felt consequences of cataclysm and/or the slow violence of its aftermath within our own communities (local or global)? How do artists participate in advocacy, environmental justice, and civic engagement?

Unit Objectives

- Cultivate empathy for humans and non-humans experiencing the consequences of envirotechnical disasters.
- Examine artists' awareness of the interconnections between nature and humans, technology, and culture within the context of environmental justice.
- Articulate connections between 3.11 and other forms of cataclysmic and slow violence such as climate change and urban toxicity seen in diverse ecological art.

¹ Deichert, Theresa (2021): Contested Sites, Contested Bodies: Post-3.11 Collaborations, Agency, and Metabolic Ecologies in Japanese Art. In *Journal of Transcultural Studies* 11 (2), 77–112. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.17885/heiup.jts.2020.2.24246>.

- Use modes of storytelling and art to express emotional experiences (climate grief/ecoanxiety), raise awareness about post-disaster social and political issues, and/or participate in advocacy and civic engagement.

To Begin:

1. **Generate** a list of your ideas and initial thoughts when you think about the topic of humans and nature. Then, complete this [reading assignment in Artforum](#) that describes how the Triple Disaster of 3.11 in Japan reveals questions about humans and nature in the context of rapidly evolving dangers of climate change and rising sea levels. Art and design seek to reimagine risks through mediating between statistics and cultural effects. **Add** more ideas to your list.
2. **Organize** your ideas in a **Concept Map**. Put the key ideas near the center of a page and more tangential ideas toward the outside.
3. **Connect** the ideas on your concept map by drawing overlapping circles or by connecting lines between ideas that have something in common. Explain in short sentences how the ideas are connected.
4. **Elaborate** on any of the ideas/thoughts you have written by adding new ideas that expand, extend your initial ideas. Continue to elaborate your **Concept Map** throughout your exploration of this entire module/unit. (See sample at the end of this document)

PART I

Socially Engaged Art (SEA) and Radioactive Contamination

Reading Assignment: Deichert, Theresa (2021): “Contested Sites, Contested Bodies: Post-3.11 Collaborations, Agency, and Metabolic Ecologies in Japanese Art.” In *Journal of Transcultural Studies* 11 (2), 77–112. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.17885/heiup.jts.2020.2.24246>.

Theresa Deichert’s essay describes Japanese artistic responses to the 3.11 tsunami that swept over the sea wall of the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear plant that led to its meltdown, sending radioactive dust into the atmosphere. These particulates were transported by wind and rain, contaminating the environment widely.

Artists responded with collaborative practices to what Deichert calls, “*environtechical* disaster.” She calls attention to “artistic collaborations beyond humans, such as with the environment, geological forces, radioactivity, animals, or inanimate objects such as foodstuffs” (79).

Two of Diechert’s examples center non-human agency: *Flow in Red* (2014) by Kyun-Chome and *Does This Soup Taste Ambivalent?* (2014) by United Brothers, explore radioactivity or objects affected by it and collaborate with non-human elements:

- Kyun-Chome, *Flow in Red* (2014)



- United Brothers, *Does This Soup Taste Ambivalent?* (2014)



Learning Activity:

Compare and contrast two artists of your choice (from the list and links below). These works are categorized with brief descriptions. Create a Venn Diagram of the selected works and write a short paragraph for your analysis:

Site Specific Work

- [Trevor Paglen's, The Trinity Cube \(2015-\):](#)



Reconstructive Work

- Memories and the [Lost & Found Project](#)



Art festivals and reconstructive artistic practices in disaster-stricken areas that aspire to revive affected localities.

- [ETAT](#) Echigo-Tsumari Art Triennale, 2012
- [Christian Boltanski's, "No Man's Land"](#)

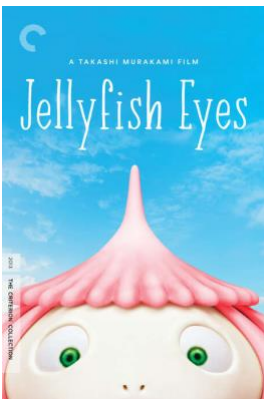


Films related to themes about nuclear disasters and the imagined aftermath

- Akira Kurosawa's [Dreams](#)



- Murakami Takashi's [Jellyfish Eyes](#)



Creative non-fiction writing

- Marie Mutsuki Mockett, [THIRTEEN TO ONE New Stories for an Age of Disaster \(Written essay or audio recording\)](#)



Part II

Artists Responding to Environmental Factors and Local Ecologies

Introduction

[Atsunobu Katagiri](#), Master Ikebana artist of the Misasagi School, lived in Haramachi in the city of Minamisoma in Fukushima for nearly a year after the disaster. Katagiri created a series of ikebana installations using the materials left behind by the residents of the evacuation zone. Katagiri featured the endangered *Mizuaoi* species that bloomed in the summer of 2013. *Mizuaoi* had been in decline with the agricultural eradication of the wetlands and sea lagoon along the Minamisoma coast, but the seeds were awakened and bloomed when the lagoon reemerged after the *tsunami*.



Learning Activity: Ghost Poem

A ghost line is an inspiring line, or in this case an image, that *becomes* the unseen aspects of a poem.

We will create a ghost poem using Katagiri Atsunobu's, *Hana/Mizuki*, and introduce this activity with the theme of 'Marking the Triple Disaster' to create a ghost poem collectively using Padlet. This is an opportunity for you to make metaphorical connections to dreams/memories, nuclear disasters, slow violence, or environmental justice. The 'Ghost poem' is an allusion to what is not seen.



花／水葵 採取地／南相馬市鹿島区真野川河口域 器／縄文土器（深鉢） 小高区浦尻
貝塚 縄文時代中期 大木9式

Ghost Poem Steps

1. First, use this [link](#) to look at the artwork.
2. Write down a line or two in response to the artwork. I encourage you to use metaphors as you reflect on what the image leads you toward.
3. Share out the collective ghost poem along with your responses to the questions based on the idea of ‘Slow Violence’:

Slow Violence

Writer Rob Nixon coins the term “slow violence,”² which he describes as the environmental impact, usually incurred by the poor, that “occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all” (3).

Communities experience the relative invisibility of such incremental, long-term and cumulative violence through delayed, exponential effects.

Nixon writes,

“Climate change, the thawing cryosphere, toxic drift, biomagnification, deforestation, the radioactive aftermaths of wars, acidifying oceans, and a host of other slowly unfolding environmental catastrophes present formidable representational obstacles that can hinder our efforts to mobilize and act decisively.

² Nixon, Rob. *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2011.

The long dyings— the staggered and staggeringly discounted casualties, both human and ecological that result from war’s toxic aftermaths or climate change— are underrepresented in strategic planning as well as in human memory” (2).

Artists have attempted to respond to the challenges of representing slow violence, even though stories that unfold over many years, decades, and even centuries do not hold the mainstream media’s momentary attention in the same way that catastrophic and sensationally violent stories do. Nixon urges artists and writers to capture arresting stories, testimonial protest, images and symbols to help expose and dismantle the silence to build counter-histories in the face of formidable odds.

Discussion Questions:

1. How are the ideas and information about slow violence visible in these artists’ works CONNECTED to what you already know?
2. What ideas did you get that EXTENDED or pushed your thinking in a new direction?
3. What is still CHALLENGING or confusing for you? What questions do you have?
4. Can you SHARE something about your own understanding and possible experience of slow violence? How does 3.11 relate to our time and place?

Post your responses to the following questions based on the notion of ‘Slow Violence’, along with your ghost poem.

Part III

Environmental Factors and the Human Body

Radioactive elements, water, air, and human bodies are critical to understanding how the events at Fukushima unfolded:

- [Trailer for A2-B-C---Documentary by Ian Thomas Ash](#) about life in Fukushima Prefecture and children afflicted with post 3.11 pre-cancerous thyroid cysts, radiation detectors that children wear on backpacks, and radiation hotspots in the school yard.

Notice how the documentary represents the key terms in Nixon’s definition of slow violence: gradual, out of sight, delayed, dispersed, attritional.

Next Step:

Let’s try to bridge the time and distance between 3.11 and your own knowledge, lives, and experiences of climate change, urban toxicity, pollution of streams, deforestation, dammed rivers, and slow but catastrophic changes to Puget Sound ecologies.

Signature Assignment

References and Inspiration

The following works by artists Mel Chin and LaToya Ruby Frazier respond to local examples of slow violence:

- [Revival Field](#), an iconic project by artist Mel Chin, uses hyperaccumulator plants to “sculpt the ecology” of a Superfund site by uptaking heavy metals from contaminated soils. The initial work in 1991 is located at Pig’s Eye Landfill, a State Superfund site in St. Paul, Minnesota.



- [LaToya Ruby Frazier Takes on Levi’s | Art21](#)

In this film, artist and activist LaToya Ruby Frazier discusses the economic and environmental decline of her hometown—Braddock, Pennsylvania—the city that the clothing company Levi’s used as inspiration and backdrop for a major advertising campaign in 2010.



Examine local connections

Possible topics:

- Superfires in western United States
- Indigenous health and land impacts from LNG plant in Tacoma, expanded gas pipeline in Snohomish. Chemical, biological, and health impacts of natural gas. This activity encourages students to engage with cultural diversity and Indigenous/Traditional knowledge
- Duwamish River
- Yehow.org and Ancestral Waters:
 - <https://vimeo.com/328217817>

Refine and complete your concept map described in the introduction of this module by adding your local connection. Use the concept map and information from this module/unit to contribute to develop your own contribution to community knowledge about environmental, health or other issues affecting us---to cultivate empathy through visceral experiences. We will center the creative expression around civic engagement (i.e. Create art as protest, to educate your community, online gallery exhibition to share with friends and family etc.).

For this project, you will submit your concept map and your own creative response.

OPTIONS:

Refined concept map for the module+

- [Artist as Storyteller](#) reflection---Attend the live event on March 8th with artists [Ken and Julia Yonetani](#). Prepare a question to ask them. Write a short reflection on how the artists address the 'big questions' from this module.
- Sketchnotes of the entire module/unit
- Site specific installation
- Digital poster
- Collaborative Wellspring Mural Project
- Creative nonfiction writing/ video

Sample Concept Map:

