

Disaster, traces of displacement, and mizuaoi seeds

Conversations surrounding A Future for Memory: Art and Life After the Great Japan Earthquake

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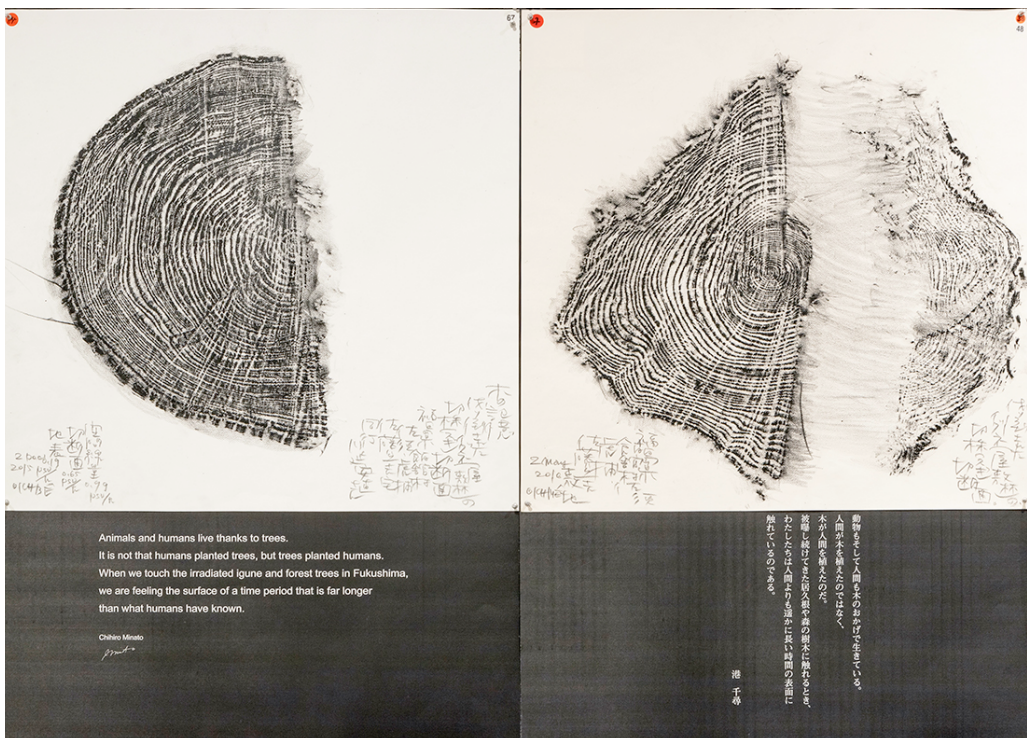


Fig. 1. Frottages of the cut sections of igune trees from the home of Kōichi Satō in Iitate Village, Fukushima Prefecture, from Masao Okabe's *The Irradiated Tree Series: From Hiroshima to Fukushima* (2008–2017) with an excerpt by Chihiro Minato, "The Teachings of Trees". Photo Alina Ilyasova. Courtesy of the Museum of Anthropology, University of British Columbia.

Abstract: *Curated by socio-cultural anthropologist Fuyubi Nakamura,¹ the exhibition entitled A Future for Memory: Art and Life after the Great Japan Earthquake at the Museum of Anthropology at UBC in British Columbia addresses the sociocultural role of art produced in situ in the aftermath of the triple disaster which occurred in the Tōhoku region of northeast Japan in 2011. The exhibition's curatorial project was born in the affected regions through anthropological research, and the selections of works brought to British Columbia are by The center for remembering 3.11; Lost & Found Project; Lost Homes Scale Model Restoration Project; Chihiro Minato; Atsunobu Katagiri; Masao Okabe; Rias Ark Museum of Art; Tsunami Ladies film project team. This article engages with the conversations that the curator, artists, and collaborators wove through the exhibition. The construction of social memory building on the experiences of a drastically changing environment is its main theme.*

Keywords: Japan Earthquake, art, disaster, public scholarship, community projects, social memory, photography, Museum of Anthropology, University of British Columbia.

For those watching from afar, The Great Japan Earthquake – or 3.11² – is associated with frightening images, life-defining turning points, and the brutality of displacement and erasure. On 11 March 2011 at 14.46 JST, a magnitude 9.0 earthquake hit Japan with an epicenter 130 km off the Oshika peninsula in Miyagi Prefecture. The earthquake provoked a massive tsunami which flooded extensive areas, up to 10 km in from the Tōhoku coastline and all the way up to southern Hokkaidō. Waves hit the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear plant reactor cooling systems (1–3) whose accumulated heat spread radioactive steam. In the days that followed, several distinct explosions spread even more radioactivity into the atmosphere, leading the government to deny access to a large 20 km radius zone. In total, the Great Japan Earthquake led to 470,000 evacuees. In total, 15,899 people died directly in the disaster and another 2,559 are still missing. In the following months, the number of deceased people increased to

19,747, many due to stress-induced deaths caused by the evacuation.

The ecological impact of 3.11 is vast and long-lasting.³ The cooling system in the nuclear plant has been contaminated, meaning that more than one million tons of polluted water remains inside. Many trees were felled as they absorbed radiation and would slowly release it into the atmosphere. Soil in several zones also became highly radioactive and had to be removed, still stored today in so-called “flecon” (flexible container) bags piled in mounds, awaiting disposal. Dairy production, fisheries and air were contaminated. Domestic animals suffered sickness and death. Fukushima is considered to be the most catastrophic manmade accident in nuclear history,⁴ and the ongoing decommissioning of the plant and reparation of damages is calculated to last between 20 and 30 years.⁵ As Rots recently wrote:

The extent and consequences of the nuclear contamination on marine and land environments (including



Fig. 2. On April 5, 2011, situation at Nainowaki, Kesennuma City. The water-channel at the center is actually a road. To search for bodies and to remove debris, embankments were made along the main streets, so they began to look like roads. However, once we entered small alleys, most of them were water channels that look like this. This street was the route to and from the work that I used to do. The residential houses I used to see every day were all gone and there was no way to trace back my memory [...]. Photo and text by Hiroyasu Yamauchi.

animals, plants, and crops) in Fukushima and beyond remain largely unknown, and it is hard to come by reliable information on this topic that is neither a government-sanctioned denial of the problem nor sensationalist apocalyptic rhetoric (Rots 2021:3).

These and many other facts, along with the figures, percentages, details and a vast collection of images of destruction and desolation, are pervasive and have composed the master narrative of 3.11. And yet, this information still does not convey the full experiences of individuals and the undertakings of the affected communities (Gill & Slater 2013).

In the aftermath of 3.11, funerary rituals could not be arranged due to the emergency; thousands of deceased bodies required prompt burial. Japan Self-Defense Forces dug temporary mass graves and authorities promised that due ceremonies would be held at a later date. For the thousands of inhabitants of the regions experiencing collective shock, it became difficult to put forward their private experiences of the tragedy. Japanese society at large is expected to subscribe to values like social discipline, unconditional response, abnegation of individual needs. Such ideas are also clichéd national traits, however, 3.11

8 showed a great diversity of reactions towards that stereotypical way of defining how Japanese society reacts to disasters.

In the face of such widespread destruction of both built and natural environments – agricultural fields inundated by the tsunami, living beings and vegetation, soil and atmosphere polluted by radioactivity, the massive number of loved ones who had disappeared – many experienced acute anguish or panic, hallucinations, asthenia, or the impossibility of articulating their pain in words. It is important to note that using these terms risks pathologizing individual responses, as these idioms belong to the disciplines of psychology and psychiatry, as does the concept of trauma, which can be too easily applied every time brutal events occur (Losi 2020). Several people were said to have been visited by ghosts, possessed by the deceased whose sudden death was haunting them. Many couldn't believe what they had lived through; others doubted what others might have experienced. Japanese social somatics (Lock 1984) suggest that such disorders must be first dealt with in the family, for individuals are not solely responsible for them, and they should handle these phenomena with the help of the close community they belong to.

Families contacted priests, healers, monks and counsellors, who became invested with the task of releasing affected people's reactions and helping survivors re-establish some sense of a sharable reality (Lloyd Parry 2014). Dealing with such a loss was an immense societal undertaking. Support and rehabilitation projects were vital. Volunteers and artists came from outside the affected area, Tōhoku, which even before the disaster had been defined by many Japanese as marginal, rural, even backwards, and largely deprived of "high" culture. Artistic interventions seemed,

at the beginning, to be merely another form of consolation. Their role, however, set in motion some transformative praxis for the hundreds of individuals who became involved in the process. It turned out to be equally inspirational for the artists as well as for many locals, reaffirming the necessity for artistic intervention in making community cohesive, and in envisioning a sharable environment, emerging, not yet stabilized. *A Future for Memory*, an exhibition shown at the Museum of Anthropology, the University of British Columbia (MOA), presents several of these artistic and community projects in conversation with each other. This article sets up to look at some of the background behind the works created in Tōhoku, and then later exhibited at the MOA in 2021.

THE EXHIBITION

A Future for Memory unfolds at MOA through several large spaces obtained through dividers, immersed in a homogenous light. It profiles several artworks and community projects ten years after 3.11. Some of these projects have continued long after the crisis, demonstrating long-lasting involvement from the artists and curators, and highlighting the ongoing transformations emerging in the aftermath, not only through the reconstruction process but also thanks to prolonged exposure to landscapes of debris. The exhibition is not so focused on factual documentation – this already abounds elsewhere. Instead, it brings the visitor into an agora where one can still hear echoes of the voices of those participating in these projects. Knowledge of these events that took place is not mediated, nor is it used as an authoritative truth guiding the collective engagement of the artists and individuals in the aftermath of 3.11. Rather, it is used as the

primary interrogation: “How do we deal with memory when our physical surroundings are drastically altered?” This is one of the core questions presented by Fuyubi Nakamura. She has involved herself as a socio-cultural anthropologist in the aftermath of the disaster for the past ten years. She took a leave from work in 2011 and returned to her homeland, originally participating in relief and recovery activities in Miyagi Prefecture as a volunteer for the RQ Citizens Disaster Relief Network Japan following 3.11. Since then, she has returned to the disaster region every year but the last due to the pandemic.

A Future for Memory focuses on the changing physical and psychological landscapes in the

aftermath of 3.11 and shows that regional disasters have global relevance. Events such as 3.11 force us to rethink our ways of life in relation to nature. Even in the midst of disasters, people have the desire to create and to express themselves – as does nature. (Nakamura 2021a:8)

A multitude of perceptions and praxes have emerged since the triple disaster. Many have not yet been recounted, collected, rendered visible. Some will never be. This was one of the main challenges that formed the analytical and experiential basis for the project *A Future for Memory*.

A Future for Memory builds on “critical museology”, an area in which MOA has been a pioneer for more than two decades (Shelton

Fig. 3. The scale model of Ōfunato City, Iwate Prefecture by Lost Homes Scale Model Restoration Project at A Future for Memory, 2021. Courtesy of General Incorporated Association Tonarino. Photo by Alina Ilyasova. Courtesy of the Museum of Anthropology, University of British Columbia.





Fig. 4. “Town of Memory” workshop in Ōfunato City, Iwate Prefecture, August 2013. Photo by Tatsuya Fujii. Courtesy of the Lost Homes Scale Model Representation Project.

2013). In fact, as heritage, with its transformed materiality of debris and intangible patrimony of multiple unexplored narratives, 3.11 is a complex social field; it requires a systemic approach to its complexity. Since it opened, *A Future for Memory* has elicited great interest not only within North America and Japan, but internationally. Because the Covid-19 pandemic made it difficult to run the exhibition in the usual way, a series of virtual programs made possible for hundreds of visitors to fully participate in the exhibition online, interacting and learning through their screen. Thanks to regular webinars and guided virtual tours, people in North America, Australia, Europe and Asia have also attended the events curated by Nakamura, marking the realization of an arena for transnational museology. The conversations

Fig. 5. Selected videos from *The Center for Remembering 3.11*, on view at *A Future for Memory* at MOA, 2021. Photo by Fuyubi Nakamura. Courtesy of the Museum of Anthropology, University of British Columbia.





Fig. 6. Masao Okabe making a frottage of an irradiated tree, Ōkuma Town, Fukushima Prefecture, 2015.
Photo by Chihiro Minato.

put into motion through the exhibition and the museum's dissemination are therefore relevant in an intercultural frame, as well as in a global perspective. Nakamura has facilitated digital conversations in connection with the exhibition with the artists, collaborators and guest commentators, while also presenting lectures for students and communities of interest in the physical exhibition space.

Of the hundreds of vessels that were lost from the coast of Iwate Prefecture during the tsunami, one small fishing boat was washed ashore in Klemtu, British Columbia. The owner of the boat was identified and invited to British Columbia to reunite with his vessel on the traditional territory of the Xai'xais First Nation. Similar to this unlikely micro-event, *A Future for Memory* presents not only pieces of art (undeniably relevant and touching, all of

them), but trajectories. These trajectories are made of processes, encounters, stories, materiality.

AN ALTERNATIVE MEMORIAL OR A SPACE FOR MEMORY MAKING?

"What would you look for, if your town was swept away? How can memory be traced in material form?" reads the rich publication in Japanese and English which accompanies the exhibition (Nakamura 2021a:6). *A Future for Memory* was first conceived of in "first person", as Nakamura was involved in relief efforts on the ground visiting the affected region of Tōhoku, doing research and working as a volunteer, "[...] rescuing and cleaning photographs found among the debris, an experience that led me to reconsider the relationship between

12 memory and objects” (Nakamura 2021a:8). Thanks to her expertise in the relationship between art and anthropology, Nakamura was able to weave connections between the inhabitants of Tōhoku, local institutions and the artists that she has collaborated with, in a milieu of people who came to the region as resilience facilitators, attracted by projects of artistic intervention within communities or associations. Here, the curatorial stance is also conceived of as public scholarship. Though built upon Nakamura’s involvement and research (Nakamura 2012), however, the project shifted to a multivocal “we” involving an extended network of collaborators: artists, curators, academics, activists, students, museums, cultural institutions, and more. This “we” was not conceived of as a homogenous memorialist for the Japanese survivors. Rather, this plurality inhabits a space for memory-making in the present. It is an exhibition in which “[t]he agency of patrimony and museums can be redirected into projects of reconciliation and cultural healing” (Shelton 2013:13).

“Contemporary art is part of culture. I am interested in the people that make artworks. This is the anthropological perspective. Not only art as art, but to showcase the process,” states Nakamura (2021b). Traces of the disaster, both breathtaking and extremely personal, cohabit the exhibition. In the aftermath, it appears as if a sense of intimacy with the destroyed, the soiled, the contorted, the erased, screams for compensation, for reconnection with those who once lived in the now-ravaged territory – those who recognize the traces, and those who once owned what these traces stand for. To call these materials “debris” can be demoralizing, as some have stated, expressing that these objects and sites are part of their life, that they belong to them and exist still,



Fig. 7. Masao Okabe making a frottage of a monument with an inscription of the phrase “Suteishizuka”, the Abukuma mountains, Fukushima Prefecture, 2015. Photo by Chihiro Minato.

even if they are now unrecognizable. “Debris” suggests the harshness of discarded materiality which can no longer be recomposed, but for many, these materials are still imbued with affection.

These affective perceptions of a landscape of “debris” were slowly shared with the helpers – there are always helpers in the aftermath of catastrophes. They were newcomers, allowed to touch, console, help reconstruct, plant again, organize together, remove rubble, listen to stories, look for missing items. By acting to console and restore, they also held testimony; new forms of cultural intimacy emerged (Herzfeld 2016). The newcomers, who previously would never have imagined discovering a new place through a catastrophe



Fig. 8. A photo rescued and cleaned by the Omoide Salvage Project in Yamamoto-chō, Watari District, Miyagi Prefecture. He found his photo taken by his father when he was one year old. When he found this photo, he said, “This photo was taken 71 years ago, and today is my birthday.” Photo and text by Yuji Mizoguchi. Courtesy of the Omoide Salvage Project.

of these proportions, now had the privilege of highlighting beauty, resilience, aspiration, sometimes together, sometimes simply on behalf of others. At its heart, the exhibition shows the relational aspects generated between locals and outsiders, whose testimonies are found in the exhibit publication and in videos included in the exhibition and on the MOA website.

To reconstruct a pre-3.11 environment is a restorative project, and for many this would be a memorial of 3.11, which recognizes the sacrifices made by the victims, one which stresses the nation’s cohesion through a key Japanese trait: the ability to reconstruct not only quickly, but also technologically safer than before. However, *A Future for Memory*

does not situate itself in the conventional memorial genre. Rather, it positions itself in a critical space, a multifaceted choir of practices, initiatives, ideas and attempts to rethink the relationship between and cohesion of nature and culture, keeping open the possibility to articulate both individual and community moments, visions and actions. In other words, in *A Future for Memory*, memory-making resides first and foremost in exploring the transitory, unfinished, debris-like state of the world – the one inside and around oneself as well as the one beyond national borders – envisioning a different future where bridges are created to share and understand human and non-human frailty and the ethical responsibility it involves.

14 **COMMUNITY PROJECTS**

The *Lost Homes Scale Model Restoration Project* profiles large-scale model reconstructions of more than 40 municipalities. Members of each local community could add flags to the models, sharing notes about memories and personal expressions of affection for particular events, souvenirs and rituals which occurred in these specific places.

The installation reverberates with the aspiration to assign sharable memories and values, to reconnect past and future through an act of presence. It visualizes an aspiration of ownership of the territory-cum-society. A community member can even put colours onto the scale model itself, transforming it from a white artefact into a festive tapestry of signposts. It is a project interested not so much in the result as in the process of investing the model with sentiments and remembrances, eliciting conversations and feedback during gatherings.

The project established a sense of conviviality, revitalizing the way one looks at one's well-known territory, even when initially abstract as a white model. It seems easily invested with playfulness, eliciting memories from those interacting physically around it. Individuals, couples, families find new ways to look at their well-known sites, not simply as an effort to rebuild as before, but to prospect in retrospect, creating continuity with what is, by now, an imagined community's history (Connerton 2011). This process is reminiscent of what White has explored in the more typical memorializing context of grand narratives of catastrophe and war, where:

[...] Survivors' stories are simultaneously personal recollections and constitutive of larger narratives of nation. It is this ambiguity, in this context,

that is significant. Survivors re-create 'historic' events in the idiom of personal experience, giving collective history meaning through the recitation of individual life stories. In this context, personal stories become allegories of national agency (White 2000:505).

Just as people desire to express themselves, so too does the environment in which we are immersed. What is cared for together returns in a different form as it is timidly celebrated. Choices, quests, archiving, remaking: these are the rituals of remembrance.

How can communities reinvent themselves, not only through the acceptance of impermanence but also through virtuous actions that respect the needs and desires of the present moment? The present is threatened by climate change and over-exploitation of agriculture, mining, fast transportation, nuclear infrastructure, animal mistreatment, deforestation, wrong reforestation, concreting, and many other human-initiated abuses. In parallel to creating exhibitions where topics such as these are addressed critically, awareness of these threats encourages individuals to voice their discontent with world leaders for not doing more, not doing differently. Is it right to reconstruct an environment like the one that existed prior to 3.11? As things are, most of the catastrophes that are taking place today are the result of a cumulative backlash of human error. This must be acknowledged as an ethical imperative, something that *A Future for Memory* addresses, albeit indirectly.

FROTTAGE⁶ AND TESTIMONY

Artist Okabe Masao and photographer, curator and writer Chihiro Minato are two who came to the Tōhoku area. They already had a collaborative history of many years together,

and this was an opportunity for them to reunite once more. Through the act of frottage, Okabe's large sheets of paper adhere to the surface of the environment, reacting to traces of the disappeared habitat, an archaeology of sorts. The medium is simple, one needs only ink and paper. With this practice as his starting point, he has carried out several international projects and collaborations. Okabe realized that in frottage, the plate is already there, available: it has already been created by the world. This idea that the world is one big plate is quite "crazy", he has commented (Okabe 2021b). Ideally, one could produce a frottage of the entire world's surface, 1:1!

Minato, meanwhile, has developed a responsive witnessing to Okabe's act of taking reliefs, capturing the meticulous process through photography and video. In this exploration of the nearness, one medium amplifies the other: the graphic emerges slowly through rubbing, as the maker is included in the frame. By the act of filming, this process is vividly revealed as the frottage elicits words and emotions as one witnesses the appearance of lines, traces, patterns. Minato explains how photography and frottage are similar but also different: in frottage there is no distance with the object: it is a direct contact, a print of the surface of matter. In photography, only distance makes it possible to frame an image. Size in this way varies, while in frottage size is 1:1. Indeed, it is not even an optical reproduction. In this way, photography and frottage are radically different.

Minato's writings about the process also accompany his photos and videos of Okabe's frottages. This cooperation has a poetic quality, not only as a dialogue between two artists but also as a complementary reflexivity of what art does and how it impacts both the makers and the viewers in synchronicity. The testimonial

act of Minato is inscribed in the outcomes of Okabe's process of revelation.

Okabe's "The Irradiated Tree Series: From Hiroshima and Fukushima", accompanied by Minato's "In the Ōkuma Forest", is presented in *A Future for Memory*. It is a frottage series made in several locations throughout Fukushima Prefecture, including Ōkuma town and Iitate village. Okabe has had a long history working in Hiroshima, making frottages of traces of the atomic bomb. The project in Fukushima references the one in Hiroshima in many ways. On some of the frottage sheets from Fukushima, Okabe has written down the radiation levels measured in the air, the date, the location and the names of people who accompanied him. "When you rub, you see slowly appearing shadows behind the paper. That moment is a very crucial one. It elicits your feelings. Absence and presence [...]" (Minato 2021b). "Frottage gives a chance for your heart to let words emerge and then you can listen to them by rubbing. These shadows appear like in the developing photographic process. Attuning oneself to the material and feeling their presence," states Minato, adding that, "Frottage is always a part of something, not the whole landscape. Hard to see the reconstruction of the whole, as one does in photography." (Minato 2021b).

The frottage works presented in the MOA exhibition were created between 2008 and 2017 out of both the affected nuclear disaster areas, creating a parallel between Hiroshima and Fukushima with a focus on decontamination efforts. "[...] Each tree has its own appearance. [...] Humans and trees have much in common. Everyone has some relation to trees!" states Minato (Minato 2021b). He recalls that "cedar trees that sprouted in the year of the Great Japan Earthquake are now about the height of second stories windows" (Minato 2021a:52). Minato

16 took many photos soon after 3.11 in the Chiba Prefecture. Road signs, asphalt, meadows, all were entangled due to the tsunami's force. He continued to take photos of this region and the other affected regions over the following 10 years. Though intended as documentation, some of Minato's photos also became iconic. Through his series photographs, an unreal quietness of the aftermath is depicted in which nature reclaims and is reborn. This is often the shifting nature of art, that the artefact may ultimately transcend its primary intended function. Photos might document events, moments found only through wandering and spontaneously seizing images for the future – but we do not know when or how they will become meaningful.

After 3.11, so many artists went to record the disaster. For Minato, however, it was important to take pictures there regularly – not just once – and, most importantly, over time.

The reconstruction went so fast, that in ten years one cannot recognize anymore the landscape as it was after the disaster. We cannot see anymore what was there before the event, we can only see what is here now. Radioactivity is invisible. However, we are still in the midst of the disaster (Minato 2021b).

TO CURATE IS TO TAKE CARE OF

A catastrophe is a social experience. Any material trace of damage becomes enhanced in its poignancy and seems to cry to be shared for its multiple meanings. New questions about the value of living together and how to do so emerge from the rubble. Even the most anonymous, unidentifiable objects become imbued not only with face-value, but with a quality of agency. The invisible links of one's connection to the past and a community's continuity with a discarded time-space become densely intertwined.

The Omoide⁷ Salvage Project involved large teams of volunteers – including scholars of information studies, photographers and other experts – that involved themselves in an immense undertaking with little means: rescuing and cleaning 800,000 photographs in Yamamoto-chō, Miyagi Prefecture, which had been swept away by the water and mud with the hope of reuniting these precious items with their owners or heirs.⁸ Photographer Munemasa Takahashi and volunteers looked after pictures containing little to track owners by, images with no identifiable people. As Takahashi explains, they did not have the heart to throw them away:

We found a high variability in the level of damage as we cleaned the photographs. Some were almost completely unaffected, others had been so damaged that it was impossible to discern what or who had been photographed. To work so closely with each and every photograph meant that we came to feel that each was somehow important; so even if the image had been compromised we still felt the presence of the people there, we felt the weight of their lives (Takahashi 2021).

They decided to exhibit them as gallery installations. The project became *Lost & Found*, toured first to Tokyo, then to the Aperture Gallery in New York and onwards to California, Italy, Australia and many other countries. This helped them raise funds to continue their salvage activities. The MOA exhibit displays around 5,000 heavily damaged photos from the archive on a huge wall. By creating a space for contemplation and closeness, each visitor is invited to experience these photos not only as images, but as items with a sense of agency and affect, suggesting – even today in a museum context and far from their place of origin – that photographs are more than mere images.

These partially-erased photographic images represent not only the images they once were. They are pieces of a mosaic to be completed by the viewer's imagination, but what's missing is gone forever, offering little to fill the gaps. *Lost & Found Project* invites the visitor to enter a space which allows a careful approach towards these fragments. It explores the art of spacing without dispersing, of clustering without items losing their sense of isolation and individuality. The installation is transformative, an experience which grows the longer one spends with it, punctuated with signs of something or somebody almost recognizable, but not quite. Although the photographic paper – which has been subject to water, mud, humidity and bacteria – is now cleaned, it is nevertheless no longer whole. The monumental size of the installation invokes respect; slowly, the multitude of traces of the everyday, presented in fragments, becomes noisier and noisier, a sort of calligraphy tracing the remains of unattainable memories.

There is a difference between a collapsed built environment and decaying debris, a detail which is addressed here. An installation of upwards of 5,000 pictures where the images are almost unintelligible speaks of memory, but also of the body. The first site of a catastrophe is the body. The ruination of bodies is not shown nor visible in these images – those who were torn away by the tsunami. For the many who survive those lost, the trauma lingers over time. Moreover, the tradition of displaying photographs of the deceased ones on the home altar – *butsudan* – is still very common in Japan. From many *butsudan* are still missing portraits of dear ones.

From the curatorial point of view, Nakamura's choice to show so many photographic images in the exhibition could have risked aestheticizing the image of the catastrophe,

so dangerously "photogenic". However, *Lost & Found* is not only about intangibility. Radiation, soil, damaged surfaces, all of these are signs of turmoil. The bereavement of the survivors is not directly visible in these objects, but rather elicited through traces, being allowed to revisit once-familiar places, sites which earlier were imbued with aspirations, labor, rites, contemplation, love, history, pain, harshness. And people. Persons, beloved, relatives, ancestors. The places and people, when photographed, are always charged with something, never indifferent.

All the projects profiled in the exhibition demonstrate certain qualities: involvement, restitution, mutuality and, not least, long-lasting involvement in the affected communities.

Nakamura addresses these themes and the ensuing artistic choices: "I do not have an answer. Maybe for photographers, they needed to capture 'the' moment, they had to be there quickly. But not the other artists" (Nakamura 2021b). All different forms of expression – some quick and impulsive, others meditated and slow, some from ordinary people and others from well-established artists – have a place in the aftermath of disaster. Because time is not only linear. Millions of internal times coexist, united by the experience of destruction, amplified by the enigma of survival and aspirations which require channels other than emergency rescues. But as with emergency rescues, these other actions and reactions also contribute to the relief effort, alongside the officially, traditionally-recognized practical help. As Brown and Mackie have highlighted, "In the wake of a disaster with such immense social implications, all of the diverse ways of attempting to communicate about the disaster – whether documentary or artistic – have political dimensions" (2015:3).

Artists from outside the region became



Fig. 9. Rescued, damaged photos found in Yamamoto-chō in Watari District, Miyagi Prefecture at *A Future for Memory* at MOA, 2021. Courtesy of Lost & Found Project. Photo by Alina Ilyasova. Courtesy of the Museum of Anthropology, University of British Columbia.

guests invited to take part in something that would have taken place with or without them. Popular expressivity was elicited by the extreme situation, but also through temporary arrangements protracted over years. Creativity became a mode of critical response to governmental measures that often overlooked needs of survivors.

REGENERATION

Another artistic response to the disaster is demonstrated through *Sacrifice*, a photo series through which Atsunobu Katagiri, an *ikebana*⁹ master and artist, documented his solitary praxis. His conceptual art style combines traditional and modern

approaches. During his time in the destroyed area of Minamisōma City, he arranged flowers among the ruins using vessels he found in the area, documenting his flower arrangements through photography.

I used to make works of *ikebana* by translating the movement of my emotions into flowers. Perhaps those were flowers of my ego. From then on, I was to empty my body and mind so that I could filter the disgrace, the grief, the sorrow, and the modest joy that shines through their cracks, and turn them into flowers. Was I capable of such a thing? (Katagiri 2015:7)

For some of his *ikebana*, he uses archaeological items from the Minamisōma city museum, vases from the Jōmon period.¹⁰ For Katagiri,



Fig. 10. Atsunobu Katagiri, *Sacrifice series* (2013–2014) at *A Future for Memory* at MOA, 2021. Photo by Alina Ilyasova. Courtesy of the Museum of Anthropology, University of British Columbia.

these ancient regional inhabitants were well-aware of the forces of regeneration implied through the gathering of wild food and preparation of it using clay pots. His use of these items today can be read as a suggested reconnection with the values and praxis of an ancient ecological balance between humans and environment, an ability to “bind” – further exemplified by the ropes imprinted on the clay pots. The artist’s *ikebana* enlivens these archaeological artefacts. Flowers and stems burst with renewed energy leaning on the edges of the archaic vases.

The *ikebana* set and photographed in the current landscape are also a meditation on the fact that the nuclear disaster is continuing, and that it will take decades for the environment

to recover. The time it takes to realize these installations among the rubble is also a counter-response to the sense of emergency. *Ikebana*, in its phenomenological essence, captures the time during which cut flowers bloom and wither, encapsulating a surge of life in the imminence of death. It also addresses an ecological time and its cycles: proliferation, disappearance, adaptation. In the case of the area near Minamisōma, some of the plants destroyed on the ground’s surface went into hibernation beneath the soil during the current state of destruction and pollution, a condition of a vegetative pause, that one day germinate again.

Katagiri arrived in the region in 2013¹¹ and was invited to Minamisōma to begin his work,

where traces of the disaster were still very visible. He was invited because of a mizuaoi (*Monochoria korsakowii*) resurgence. This is a type of water hyacinth found only in wetlands and considered an endangered species in the region long before 3.11 as a result of agricultural over-exploitation. The flooding had reintroduced the long-gone swamps, and after some years, once the sea salt had been reabsorbed, these rare flowers began to reappear. Katagiri thinks that the seeds had been dormant in the soil for years. Despite the tragic losses caused by the tsunami, rare vegetation was regaining its place, space and strength as another outcome of 3.11. This led Katagiri to witness the return of the mizuaoi (also called “heartleaf”) which stood as a symbol of rebirth. As Nakamura noted during a pre-recorded conversation with Katagiri, his work made a difference in the perception of the destruction that had occurred. The mizuaoi “[...] was lost due to human activity, but was revived by the power of nature. By bringing attention to this shift, Katagiri made our perspective shift as well” (Katagiri 2021).

But how do we tackle such delicate themes while showing respect for the survivors? Flowers are not only symbols of rebirth, but also of bereavement; they preside over graves, embellish funerary ceremonies, stand delicately by coffins. In their offering, they accompany the deceased in their final journey from the threshold of our visible world. *Ikebana* is a work of extreme tact. It expresses cautiousness in handling the fragile material (i.e., freshly cut flowers or branches) which have an ephemeral life but still hold great energy. It brings together numerous plant species in a variety of vessels – for Katagiri, clay pots, but also other sorts of other vessels which can hold water: bags, boots, car parts, items found in the ruined landscape. *Ikebana* surges in unexpected places, asking

the onlooker to rekindle one’s acceptance of the ordinary and the derelict.

SENSE OF FUTURE

Fumihiko Futakami, curator at the Minamisōma City Museum, was involved in early conversations with Nakamura and Karagiri about the development of what would become *A Future for Memory*, already hosting several creative projects. He recalls how inspired he was watching Okabe rub the bark of ancient trees for the first time. He realized how powerful frottage could be, where traces captured on paper could be all that remains of something as it fades away. Futakami, a cultural historian who had never practiced art himself, realized that he wanted artists to come and reconstitute art made in situ through their ongoing involvement. Such a project could help make sense of something that was otherwise incomprehensible, the legacy of 3.11. Moreover, he realized the potential power of empathy released by art as visitors experienced artworks. One woman, after experiencing Katagiri’s exhibition at the Minamisōma City Museum in 2015, had tears running down her face as she contemplated the images of *ikebana* taken in a place she had known so well. Her response was shocking yet simple – “How beautiful!” – almost surprised that it could be so, amidst the pain and loss she was still experiencing. It was, again, a shift in the perception of destruction, one more step towards addressing memory as awareness, releasing the unexpected, a sign of beauty presenting itself through the ruins. Indeed, one could say the moment was one of propulsive remembrance, befitting of the title of the MOA exhibition: *A Future for Memory*.

Futakami had been afraid that local visitors to his museum would be upset seeing photos



Fig. 11. Atsunobu Katagiri's *Sacrifice series* (2013–2014) at *A Future for Memory* at MOA, 2021. Flower: Mizuaoi (*Monochoria korsakowii*). Collected at the estuary of Mano River, Kashima, Minamisōma City. Vase: Jōmon pottery, mid-Jōmon period, from Urajiri Shell Mound, Odaka Ward, Minamisōma City, Collection of Minamisōma City Museum. Photo by Fuyubi Nakamura. Courtesy of the Museum of Anthropology, University of British Columbia.

of those familiar places that had once been their home, portrayed as rubble with *ikebana* arrangements placed upon them just four years after 3.11. However, the art intrigued many of these visitors. It created for them a sense of reconnection with the reality of the present; moreover, it created a sense of regeneration, which the artistic gesture had been anticipating. Parallel and in dialogue with the *ikebana*, Okabe's imprints of the environment hung on the walls of his museum. Speaking of Okabe's work, Futakami commented: "[it] exposed reality more than what was actually visible. [...] It brought tears to the eyes of the disaster victims – his work felt that 'real'" (Futakami 2021:48).

The objects that are the subjects of Okabe's

frottage have since been removed due to reconstruction work. Still, their forms survive, and the two-dimensional pages host traces of memory as signs migrated to a different supporting medium. However, as Minato states:

In the process of modernization, we have taken it for granted that humans are at the top of a pyramid with plants at the bottom and animals below us. I wonder if the order should actually be the other way around. Animals and humans live thanks to trees. It is not that humans planted trees, but trees planted humans. When we touch the irradiated igune¹² and forest trees in Fukushima, we are feeling the surface of a time period that is far longer than what humans have known (Minato 2021a:54).

22 PRESENT REACHED

The frottages of cut sections of contaminated trees evoke also an interrogation: how is it possible that Japan, the only nation to be bombarded by A-bomb, would continue to develop nuclear infrastructure today? One decade on, hundreds of people are still missing, and the psychological scars are still visible. In one of her live events, Nakamura states that,

The disaster is not over. This is the most difficult exhibition I've curated. It's not about the past: it's about now. Therefore, the artists I chose are so important, because they stayed there for a long time and came back several times to work with people. [...] Artists who have long engagement and relationships (Nakamura 2021b).

Katagiri also emphasizes that the nuclear accident is still in progress. The disaster is not over. But that also means the disaster is not the end. "I learned from the people of Fukushima, who have allowed me to do *ikebana* there, for all those years... I have learned that flowers grow strong even in the most horrible places; I have learned the fragility of human activity..." (Katagiri 2021).

At the exhibition's welcoming address, Debra Sparrow, acclaimed Musqueam artist and knowledge keeper echoed Katagiri's thoughts:

We are in a very fragile time, and so, we must really stop and value who we are, and that was the words that my grandfather left with me, when he left this world. He always said, 'Know who you are and know where you come from, because if you don't know that, then you feel like nothing.' [...] You can have the best of everything, and then She¹³ shakes us up again, and we're back to nothing (Sparrow 2021).

Even before anyone entered the exhibition,

Sparrow had set the tone by invoking Indigenous values. The transcultural quality of *A Future for Memory*, with its educational, artistic and societal relevance, grows each day through the feedback it generates. It is not only a call about being more ecologically aware but also, importantly, an alternative vision that encompasses collective agency towards a conscious interconnectedness among communities, across oceans. The exhibition portrayed some of the synergies born in the aftermath of 3.11 and the prolific exchanges between local communities, artists and outsiders, creating opportunities for resilience, interpretation of the past and imagination of the future.

A decade after the disaster, on 17 February 2021, the remains of long lost Natsuko Okuyama were discovered in Miyagi Prefecture and given a ritual burial. Emergence and disappearance are still significant for the survivors, as well as for those who were young in 2011, growing up in the aftermath of such tragedy. Some of the interventions chosen for the current exhibition, have contributed to the process of bereavement, transformation and awareness through the creation of new images which affirm that memory is not only a matter of the past. MOA and curator Nakamura have offered something very needed, making these and future conversations possible by creating a space for honest but also difficult stories, a place to listen to each other attentively with the necessary respect. And, with the tact of the purple mizuoai flower, a space to bloom unexpectedly, an opportunity to return.

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NOTES

1. Fuyubi Nakamura holds a joint position of Curator for Asia at the Museum of Anthropology and Assistant Professor of Visual and Material Cultures of Asia in the Department of Asian Studies at the University of British Columbia. She studied in the U.K. and has worked in Argentina, Australia, and Japan. She specializes in contemporary Japanese calligraphy and in the relation between art and anthropology.
2. Commonly used as abbreviation, 3.11 marks when the Great Japan Earthquake occurred: March (3) 11th (11). Many refer to it as ano hi in Japanese, which means “that day”.
3. For further details, see the Reconstruction Agency report here: https://www.reconstruction.go.jp/english/topics/Progress_to_date/index.html
4. Large protests followed the incident. In Japan the civil society still takes to streets regularly with counter-cultural symbols and discontent towards the government for omissions and concealment of information.
5. The Japanese government wants to lead a “green” turn, having Japan become carbon neutral with zero emissions by 2050. It has taken 10 years for this vision to be born out of the ashes of the 2011 disaster. Today, the question of nuclear energy remains delicate, and the difficulties in decommissioning nuclear plants is a sharp reminder of the global consequences of over-industrialization.
6. Frottage in modern art was utilized in a systematic way by Max Ernst (1891–1976). The technique consists of placing a thin paper over a surface which is then rubbed with charcoal or pencils, revealing traits often invisible to the eye. It is also used in forensic investigations and archeology.
7. Omoide means “memory” in Japanese.
8. The process of restitution demanded strong commitment and endurance from volunteers, initiators, leaders and local networks. Without the involvement of locals, it would have been impossible to find so many recipients for the salvaged photographs. About 500,000 were restituted. The project is ongoing but slowed by the Covid-19 pandemic.
9. Ikebana is one of the seven primary Japanese art forms, consisting of arranging flowers in vessels and imbuing them with a delicate posture unlike their original one when first cut from gardens or their natural environment.
10. Jōmon is the name given to the diverse Paleolithic and Neolithic populations who inhabited the islands of Japan.
11. The arrival of many artists including Katagiri and Okabe was in response to a call for artists from the Fukushima Museum for the Hama-Naka-Aizu Cultural Collaborative Project.
12. Igune is a homestead woodland.
13. “She” refers possibly to “Mother Earth”.

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