

Role of Art in Tohoku After the Earthquake and Tsunami

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On March 11, 2011, a major earthquake and tsunami occurred in Japan, mainly affecting the Tohoku region and causing a meltdown at the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant. This disaster not only caused great damage to the affected areas but also had a serious impact on Japanese politics, economy, and society in general. The art field was no exception; Japanese artists began to consider “What art can do?” after the disaster and this question began to be a new theme of Japanese contemporary art. Artists began to find ways to engage with the affected communities, dealing directly with social problems and political issues.

Keywords: Japanese contemporary art, Fukushima, socially engaged art, aftermath of the 2011 Tohoku earthquake and tsunami

Japan is located in a geographical area where four tectonic plates meet. Since 1995, the movement of these plates has become increasingly active, causing numerous natural disasters, many of which have captured international attention. On March 11, 2011, a major earthquake mainly affecting the Tohoku region of Japan occurred. Its magnitude reached nine on the Richter scale, making it the largest earthquake observed in Japan’s history.

This earthquake caused a tsunami with waves reaching 21 meters in height. This then caused an accident and meltdown of the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear plant. The tsunami and earthquake resulted in over 18,000 deaths and missing people, and more than 400,000 individuals needed to evacuate their homes to escape the nuclear accident. These events had a serious impact on Japan’s politics, economy, and society, and even the art industry.

The 2011 earthquake prompted many Japanese to reflect on the quality of life in their own society. It forced many to question the Japanese way of life, and it created an opportunity for change.

Because society was crippled during the disaster, Japanese people needed to come together and help one another.

Many living outside of the disaster area thought about what they could do to help, with many volunteering, raising funds, and finding necessary supplies. Various specialists, such as doctors and carpenters, also went on-site to volunteer and help the locals.

Many museums were damaged, and many exhibitions were canceled or postponed.

Under such circumstances, artists and those within the industry faced great distress.

They had complex questions that had to be addressed separately from their individual problems.

The disaster brought up the fundamental question of the meaning of art because many began to think that art and art culture are useless for those who have encountered a major disaster like this one—people who are not only deprived of their daily necessities, but who are dying.

Once humans have the bare necessities, such as food, clothing, and housing, we may need music and art to enrich our lives and minds. But at what stage is it needed? If an artist goes to the disaster afflicted area, he or she may only be a nuisance. Is art only self-satisfaction? These various worries plagued those in the art community.

As a response, Tokyo artists organized an open meeting on March 16th called “What We Can Do Now?” in order to discuss a plan of action as artists and individuals (*At the Art Space [3331 Arts Chiyoda]¹ led by Masato Nakamura²).

Artist Volunteers

Many artists were lost and struggled, but they also took action. They started engaging in many activities to help.

Some artists rushed to the site, and joined existing volunteer efforts, such as repairing houses, cooking for the victims, removing garbage from the ocean (the artist Tano Taiga³ brought volunteers from Tokyo to help remove debris), and even raising funds through an exhibition held in the city center to help the victims.

Initially, artists were volunteering individually, but the movement grew as friends and acquaintances, and even strangers, got involved. With the cooperation of Sendai Mediatheque⁴, artist volunteers leveraged the Internet to invite a wide range of participants, and prepared a bus tour and created a system that would allow those in Tokyo to participate.

Previously divided, residents from Tokyo and from the disaster area became connected, and their relationships deepened. Removed mud was packed in bags and stacked into a beautiful pyramid shapes.

In the bus tour, they all sang newly created songs. Tano Taiga brought together people who had been estranged and created a level of interaction.

Tano Taiga himself does not say this activity was art, but it is clear that there was an element of art in these volunteer activities. Immediately after the earthquake, assistance came quickly and forcefully. However, as rebuilding took shape, and people’s lives started to assemble normalcy, artists continued to organize various activities with even more vigor. The question of “What art can do?”—a question that came about because of the earthquake—became a major theme in contemporary Japanese art.

Many artists visited the disaster areas. Some went to take pictures and record the event, some organized art workshops for children, some produced works together with the victims, and so on.

Of course, these volunteer activities were not always welcomed by the locals. Artists had to be sensitive that they did not take advantage of the victims’ suffering, and try to ensure that they had a positive influence on the local community and recovery efforts.

Within the art world, many voices also declared that art is not useful in such a situation, claiming that the artists’ actions at the site actually interfere with the recovery process.

Some victims were angry about the artists’ behaviors, and there was much confusion about how to continue. Some artist volunteers defended their actions, stating the experience of visiting and volunteering, then

¹ 3331 Arts Chiyoda (Arts Chiyoda 3331) is culture art facilities based in Chiyoda-ku, Tokyo.

² Masato Nakamura 中村政人 (1963-), Japanese artist, professor, Faculty of Fine Arts, Department of Painting, Tokyo University of the Arts, Supervising Director of 3331 Arts Chiyoda.

³ Taiga Tano タノタイガ, Japanese artist.

⁴ Sendai Mediatheque せんだいメディアテーク, library in Sendai, Miyagi Prefecture, Japan.

there is a greater possibility that “art can lead society in the process of moving from an unprecedented experience to an unknown next step”.

Fukushima and Art

The disaster at Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant⁵ remains the worst nuclear accident in Japan, and it forced Japan into a new reality.

To prevent public confusion, the Japanese government hid the details of the accident, and suppressed freedom of press. In 2010, Japanese freedom of press⁶ ranked 11th; by 2015, it had fallen to 61st.

TEPCO⁷, the company that owns the Fukushima power plant, is a very powerful and wields strong influence over media. Increased radiation levels around the Fukushima nuclear plant after the accident generated not just physical health problems in the communities of decontamination workers, but also mental issues, such as increased rates of depression and suicide, as well as community instability, such as homelessness and unemployment. These were stories that the media left out.

Free expression is also an issue in the field of art. In particular, there is a growing dearth of free expressing in large museums that have multiple sponsors, and more museums are moving towards self-imposed restrictions.

Nuclear Plants and Artists

Meanwhile, a rebellion against such regulations by artists who deal directly with political themes and art activists was on the rise.

The artist Akira Tsuboi⁸ expressed through painting the tragedy of individuals affected by nuclear power plant accidents not covered by the mass media. Tsuboi started painting after the nuclear accident and talking with the local people of Fukushima in order to get to know many of their stories, meeting a child who had been treated for thyroid cancer, and a bride who committed suicide by being abandoned because of her Fukushima origin. Tsuboi is a self-taught painter, with no connection with the art circle. He exhibited his work on the street or in front of the TEPCO Company building, and joined the activists that encountered and participated in the anti-nuclear movement.

Bontaro Dokuyama⁹ exchanged banners which activists had used at the anti-nuclear tent which was installed in front of the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry. Dokuyama made the banners himself, and exhibited them in a gallery.

After the disaster, Chim↑Pom¹⁰ was the earliest to release related work. They set up Taro Okamoto's¹¹ “Myth of Tomorrow”¹², painting in a public space at Shibuya Station, as a reminder of Fukushima's accident. The segment was installed in a guerilla manner, which allowed it to be removed, so the original work was not damaged.

⁵ The Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant 福島第一原子力発電所 disabled nuclear power plant in the towns of Ōkuma and Futaba in the Fukushima Prefecture, Japan.

⁶ Press Freedom Index Published by Reporters Without Borders <https://rsf.org/en/ranking>.

⁷ TEPCO—Tokyo Electric Power Company Holdings, Inc., Japanese electric utility holding company servicing Japan's Kanto region.

⁸ Akira Tsuboi 壺井明 (1976-), Japanese artist.

⁹ Bontaro Dokuyama 毒山凡太郎 (1984-), Japanese artist.

¹⁰ Chim↑Pom (2005-), Japanese art group.

¹¹ Taro Okamoto 岡本太郎 (1911-1996), Japanese artist.

¹² “Myth of Tomorrow” 明日の神話 (1969), painted by Taro Okamoto.

“Myth of Tomorrow” is a painting about the history of atomic energy and life energy in Japan, such as the atomic bombs thrown in Hiroshima & Nagasaki and the radiation accident of the fishing boat Daigo Fukuryu Maru.

Increase of Art Festivals

Immediately after the earthquake in March 2011, Governor Shintaro Ishihara¹³ said that the cherry blossom viewing party at this time should be refrained because it is disrespectful. It meant to refrain from parties and celebrations, in the face of the tragedy of the earthquake. This is a feeling that many people have fallen into since the earthquake. It is Tatsuya Mori¹⁴ called “Survivors Guilt”. They feel guilty because many Tohoku families, houses, and lives were destroyed, but they still have a normal life and this brings many people to follow the slogan “Japan as one” and “Bond”, referring to the bonds that link all Japanese people. In other words, as pointed out in Mr. Tatsuya Mori’s book *Peer Pressure Media*¹⁵, there is an impulse to group together, and to not forget the situation of the victims, as evident in the traditional Japanese saying “Cherish the harmony among people”¹⁶. As Tatsuya pointed out, Japanese society tends to focus more on harmony of groups than individuals. He defined “Peer Pressure” as bashing people who do not share the same atmosphere with everyone. The effect was so strong that many people avoided celebrations, parties, and shopping.

As a result, there was a situation in which the economy had lost its vitality and reconstruction was delayed. The lesson was learned, and festivals and art projects actively invited local people, attempting to revitalize the economy and link it to reconstruction of Tohoku.

In 2017, several years after the earthquake, the “Reborn Art Festival” was held. The Festival’s theme was the revitalization of the Tohoku region, located in Ishinomaki City, Miyagi Prefecture, an area heavily damaged by the tsunami.

Fifty-one artists from Japan and abroad participated in the Festival, holding events and featuring locally produced works. The Festival directly raised 13.44 billion Japanese yen, but including all ripple effects, the actual final economic input was 21.75 billion Japanese yen¹⁷.

Regional revival art projects, such as the “Reborn Art Festival”, “Wawa Project”, and “Project FUKUSIMA!”, also all located in the Tohoku region, are still continue to this day.

Such art projects continue even to this day.

Connecting Those Who Were Separated

After the disaster, slogans such as “Japan as one” and “Bond” on TV media, expressed the instinct of human beings in times of anxiety to find an answer through collective efforts. At the same time, these slogans manifest how the life of the Japanese people before the disaster was divided. The division that existed between families and communities that were weakened by the progress of urbanization and the depopulation of rural areas became clear. And above all, the earthquake divided the Japanese people as victims or non-victims.

¹³ Shintaro Ishihara 石原 慎太郎 (1932-), Japanese politician and author, Governor of Tokyo from 1999 to 2012.

¹⁴ Tatsuya Mori 森 達也 (1956-), Japanese journalist, documentary filmmaker, TV director and author.

¹⁵ Tatsuya Mori, *Peer Pressure Media*, 同調圧力メディア, Tsukuru Publishing Co., Ltd., 創出版, 2017.

¹⁶ “Cherish the harmony among people” from Seventeen-Article Constitution (十七条憲法), *Nihon Shoki*, the second-oldest book of classical Japanese history authored by Prince Shōtoku.

¹⁷ 宮城県石巻エリアを舞台とした, Reborn-Art Festival, リボーンアートフェスティバル開催がもたらした地域への影響, https://www.dbj.jp/ja/topics/region/area/files/0000030340_file2.pdf#search=%27.

In this context, artists' activities played a role connecting people who were divided.

Artist Kato Tsubasa¹⁸ is a good example. Before the earthquake, Tsubasa was working on a project in which he went to different areas around the world and created building-shaped structures using local materials, only to then pull them down and destroy them, with the help of local people. After going to the afflicted area of Tohoku and volunteering, he came up with a new project in which he reversed his own idea, connecting volunteers and victims to work together and reconstruct buildings that were damaged during the earthquake.

Another example is Katsuhiko Hibino¹⁹, who carried out a workshop called "Heart Mark Viewing" in which volunteers made Heart mark tapestries for the victims and sent them to the affected areas.

New Vision of Society

On the other hand, some artists provided a new vision of society.

Koki Tanaka²⁰, who won the prize at the Venetian Biennale in 2016, developed projects like "a haircut by nine hairdressers at once" and "A piano played by five pianists at once", depicting the cooperation of people that had to live in emergency centers and deal together with all the specific problems that come with living in those conditions.

Before the disaster, Japanese contemporary art movements, such as Super Flat and Micro Pop, were dealing with issues of individuals and Japanese culture in a more metaphorical way. However, as a result of the earthquake, artists began to find ways to work against this disaster, increasingly dealing directly with social problems and political issues.

Compared with the time of the Hanshin-Awaji Earthquake in 1995, artists' post-disaster activities have become much more active following a Social Engaged Art approach. Although this may be seen as a temporary movement, the fact remains that reconstruction and the concern over nuclear energy have not ceased, and there is still much to do. Seven years have passed since the disaster in 2011, but these art projects that aim to improve regulation of nuclear energy and to creatively assist in the reconstruction, continue today.

Conclusions

After the Tohoku earthquake in 2011, the response of Japanese artists was very active compared with the response to other disasters in past years. For example, in the big earthquake in Kobe in 1995, artists were making works and holding activities related, but in a much smaller scale.

The huge proportions of the 2011 Tohoku earthquake motivated an increment in art activities that involved social practices, but this would not be possible if socially engaged art and hospital art have not become popular in Europe and the United States permeating Japan between 1995 and 2011.

This situation was not just about art seeking a connection to society, but about Japanese society needing art.

As a philosopher, Arthur Danto proposed in his thesis "After the End of Art" that we are in a post-historical era in which art seeks its meaning of existence beyond Art theory constraints.

The role of contemporary art after the Tohoku earthquake exemplifies how contemporary art can actively take part in rebuilding society.

¹⁸ Tsubasa Kato 加藤翼 (1984-), Japanese artist.

¹⁹ Kazuhiko Hibino 日比野克彦 (1958-), Japanese artist professor, Faculty of Fine Arts, Department of Intermedia Art, Dean of The Faculty of Fine Arts, Tokyo University of the Arts.

²⁰ Koki Tanaka 田中功起 (1975-), Japanese artist.

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