

TSUNAMI LISTENING

The stories we humans tell ourselves about how the planet is being propelled to an unknowable future resonate with Timothy Morton's thoughts on causality. In their book *Realist Magic: Objects, Ontology, Causality*, they write:

[...] causality is wholly an aesthetic phenomenon. Aesthetic events are not limited to interactions between humans or between humans and painted canvases or between humans and sentences in dramas. They happen when a saw bites into a fresh piece of plywood. They happen when a worm oozes out of some wet soil. They happen when a mass object emits gravity waves...*The aesthetic dimension is the causal dimension.*¹

In Japan, one could argue that the aesthetic-causal dimension of the Anthropocene exploded with the atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Indeed, the implementation of radiation – lethal illumination that is also the science of x-rays – problematized the classical philosophies of causation that overlook or underestimate human enmeshment within the world. As Achille Mbembe notes, '[t]he age of brutalism – that is, of forced entry – is an age in which dream machines and catastrophic forces will become increasingly visible actors of history.'²

In the decades following the Second World War, Japanese authors and filmmakers began telling allegorical disaster stories to make sense of what has become this new geological epoch that is full of 'dark ecologies'. *Godzilla* is, of course, a prime example, as is the novel and subsequent 1973 film *Japan Sinks*. For Dominic Pettman and Eugene Thacker, '[w]hat is highlighted in both the novel and the film [...] is a mood that is difficult to capture, a brooding sense of the inexorability of the event of humanity, in spite of the best efforts of human beings to prevent, evade, or escape their own footprint on the planet.'³ Now twenty-five years into the twenty-first century, we might ask how this mood has been extended and what kinds of stories are being told – or *sounded* – to address the planet as an active agent with whom we might commune or collaborate, so that new 'confederations' might form and

¹ Morton, *Realist Magic*, 19-20.

² Mbembe, 'Meditation on the Second Creation', n.p.

³ Pettman and Thacker, *Sad Planets*, 253.

speak out through what Jane Bennett has called a ‘vital materialism’.⁴ In other words, what new monsters might be unleashed to teach us about a world for which we have lost the right to custodianship? As Anna Tsing and others have argued, ‘[m]onsters are useful figures with which to think the Anthropocene, this time of massive human transformations of multispecies life and their uneven effects. Monsters are the wonders of symbiosis *and* the threats of ecological disruption.’⁵ Thus, it is with the aftermath of the Great East Japan Earthquake of 2011 that we begin our story. Following Fukushima, many philosophers and cultural practitioners were compelled to consider the event and, importantly, the nation’s reaction and response to the event as a microcosm for vital materialist awareness.

In his book *Radiation and Revolution*, Sabu Kohso considers the uniqueness of this territory for wider planetary thinking:

A geo-philosophical reading of Japanese history suggests that, even when it is topographically suppressed, this archipelagic relationality as deterritorialization continues to find expression in our bodies, minds, and social relations as collective memory. Thus, it generates new relations along with the decomposition of the nation and the World while developing our new relationship with the Earth.⁶

Following Kohso, I am thinking story-sounding as a kind of generativity that is also a reclamation of animism for ecological contemporaneity. Sociologist Shoko Yoneyama puts it very clearly when she explains,

[t]he search for survival in [...] post-Fukushima Japan suggests that achieving a sustainable future may demand an epistemological change in social sciences, so that we can revise concepts such as animism, as well as the concepts of soul, life, and nature, in a new light. This means including the unseen in the realm of social sciences.⁷

⁴ Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 111.

⁵ Tsing et al., *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet*, M2.

⁶ Kohso, *Radiation and Revolution*, 162-163.

⁷ Yoneyama, ‘Animism: A Grassroots Response to Socioenvironmental Crisis in Japan’, 130.

I would add that this could be even more achievable by integrating the arts and humanities in the name of interdisciplinarity, wherein the praxes of ‘eco-poetics’ and ‘geo-phonics’ might deliver new and urgent perspectives. Such is the case, I find, with *Cosmo-Eggs*, Japan’s contribution to the 58th Venice Biennale in 2019, when a visual artist, a composer, an anthropologist, and an architect worked together to experiment with the human capacity to coexist symbiotically with the more-than-human world after Fukushima.

1: Pavilion

For curator Hiroyuki Hattori, the exhibition was conceived as a response to Félix Guattari’s seminal framework for ‘three ecologies’: the environmental, the social, and the mental beneath Integrated World Capitalism. In this way, each component answered to a need for animating ‘co-existence’ between humans and non-humans, different cultures, civilizations, and historical perceptions, to bring about different perspectives for the lived environment in Japan.⁸ The pavilion’s layout was designed by Fuminori Nousaku, whose aim was to achieve an aesthetic unification of the artworks and architecture in a similar way to the unification of Guattari’s three ecologies. The objective can also be understood as what Isabelle Stengers has identified as the ‘reclaiming’ of animism, in the sense that contemporary animism calls for *animation*. She writes,

[r]eclaiming means recovering, and, in this case, recovering the capacity to honour experience, any experience we care for, as “not ours” but rather as “animating” us, making us witness to what is not us. While such a recovery cannot be reduced to the entertaining of an idea, certain ideas can further the process – and can protect it from being “demystified” as some fetishistic illusion. Such an idea is the Deleuzo-Guattarian concept of “assemblage”.⁹

By providing a space in which audio-visual relations emerge, the scale effects of tsunami listening are assembled, as are the ‘weird attunements’ required for thinking, in Morton’s terms, a ‘dark ecology’ of interconnectedness. To put it another way, as found in the thought of philosopher Tetsuro Watsuji, ‘[c]limate is at once phenomena and epiphenomena,

⁸ *Cosmo-Eggs*, exh. cat., n.p.

⁹ Stengers, ‘Reclaiming Animism’, n.p.

foundation and that beneath which foundations crumble,' an observation that points to moments of resonance and dissonance within the pavilion, as well as to Kohso's argument for cohabitations with Earth through the traumatic pathways of Nation and World.¹⁰

2: Mythologies

In the months leading up to the exhibition, anthropologist Toshiaki Ishikura visited Taiwan as well as East Asian island chains to research and compare mythological tsunami and origin stories; this resulted in a concept for an amalgamated and bespoke myth that was engraved into the walls of the space, employing a 'co-diversity' of world-views that, together, demonstrate the human drive to recognise (if not comprehend) the vitality of materiality:

A long time ago, sun and moon descended to earth and laid a single egg. A snake came and swallowed the egg, and so sun and moon visited earth once more to leave behind three eggs that they hid: one inside earth, one inside stone, and one inside bamboo. The eggs soon hatched and born were the ancestors of three islands. Once grown up, they each built a small boat and travelled to different islands: one in the East, one in the West, and one in the North. The tribes of these islands visited each other by boat, and despite occasional fights, they overcame pestilence and poor harvests to live in peace for a long time. Each island passed down its own language, its own music, its own traditions, its own festivals. They each possessed the power to speak with the animals: the earth tribe spoke with the worms and the insects, the stone tribe with the snakes, and the bamboo tribe with the birds.' [engraved wall text]

The story 'of three different tribes on three different islands accommodates countless references to a plurality of existing creation myths.'¹¹ In thinking animism as the hope of returning an active voice to Nature, eco-feminist Val Plumwood calls for 'new origin stories that can disrupt the commodity regimes that produce anonymity by erasing narratives of material origins and labour, and replacing them by narcissistic dreams of consumer desire and endless, consequenceless consumption and growth.'¹² Such storytelling (or story-sounding) might then perform a necessary unknowability or exciting uncertainty that displaces

¹⁰ Pettman and Thacker, *Sad Planets*, 344.

¹¹ *Cosmo-Eggs*, exh. cat., n.p.

¹² Plumwood, 'Nature in the Active Voice', 449-450.

taxonomic anthropocentrism (and androcentrism) and therefore imbalanced major narratives of extraction and control. Ishikura's post-Fukushima mythology at the very least suggests this possibility, as it surrounds and activates the remaining elements in the pavilion.

3: Boulders

Visual artist Motoyuki Shitamichi conducted fieldwork around the Okinawan Island chains of Miyako and Yaeyama to scout out unique bodies of evidence for 'humanity's co-existence with natural disasters.' On a nautical chart, a series of 'tsunami boulders' were identified by their specific locations, to which Shitamichi travelled to record, in photography and video, encounters between the deep space-time of the Earth and the shallower space-time of *Anthropos*. Of these seemingly otherworldly beings that have been 'carried ashore from the bottom of the ocean by great waves', Hattori explains:

The tsunami boulders on these islands lead an existence in close relation to human life, either as objects of religious worship or as landmarks with distinct names. At the same time, they present individual ecologies in which plants grow and flourish and migrating birds build nesting places.¹³

They are places in which a variety of different existences form mutual connections, each in its own distinct form, likened by Shitamichi to a kind of meeting place.' In the artist's own words, 'some of them act as story-tellers relaying lessons about tsunamis; others came to be worshipped as go-shintai, as sacred object-gods; others again serve as breeding grounds for nesting migratory bird colonies.'¹⁴ I would argue that the scale effect that the boulders reveal in situ and through their repositioning as moving image works on wheeled screens in the pavilion, is one of eco-poetic agency. Their collective presence performs a more-than human monumentality that confirms planetary cohabitations and tsunami listening as a mode of reverence and respect.

In a wonderful book entitled *Veer Ecology: A Companion for Environmental Thinking*, authors were invited to select one verb from the English language with which to formulate a

¹³ *Cosmo-Eggs*, exh. cat., n.p.

¹⁴ *Cosmo-Eggs*, exh. cat., n.p.

thesis for the theme of ‘ecology’. Stephanie LeMenager chose ‘to sediment’, an action that conveys the awe inspiring juxtaposition of deep, geological time and the growing inadequacies of everyday clock time. She writes:

What better example of sediment as the making of time, storied time, lithic *and* aqueous, solid yet interpretable, than our contemporary discussion of the Anthropocene, when the culture-making gesture of epochal naming collides with the empiricist desire to hitch culture to the stratigraphic record?¹⁵

Considering humanity’s drive to archive and classify – to make sense and to world-make – one could say that Shitamichi’s meticulous installation problematizes this condition through an Anthropocenic aesthetics that wants to guard against a drowned world. Thinking through J.G. Ballard’s novel of the same title and the historical co-existence of humanity with the unpredictable Earth, Pettman and Thacker suggest that, in the drowning,

[t]he deluge is human loss at a scale difficult to comprehend, in part because it happens at the level of the planet itself – tectonic shifts, continents of melting ice, oceanic currents that span a third of the globe. What is engulfed is not just a human world but a more primordial terrain, the point where the distinction between geology and oceanography collapses.¹⁶

4: Sounds

Nousaku’s spatial design for *Cosmo-Eggs* made full use of the pavilion by extending the central balloon component below the structure. This orange balloon not only unified the space, but also supplied the air required to stimulate composer Taro Yasuno’s *Singing Bird Generator* (part of his ongoing *Zombie Music* series). The sounds one heard in the exhibition were not pre-written pieces, but were created by recorders programmed through a set of rules and concepts. ‘Yasuno’s composition is premised on the anthropomorphization of the twelve recorders – to [him], each of the recorders is an individual, distinctive performer.’ The

¹⁵ Lemanager, ‘Sediment’, 169.

¹⁶ Pettman and Thacker, *Sad Planets*, 252.

instruments were arranged in the space to complement Shitamichi's tsunami boulders by introducing the 'twittering and chirping of [migratory] birdsong.'¹⁷

In this way, the recorders and the videos, along with the wall-engraved comparative mythology, engage in a dialogue that arguably *performs* co-existence and co-diversity without falling into the trap of mere representation; that is, a performing environment for tsunami listening is produced. Importantly, that 'environment' can perhaps be better understood as an 'event', one that transports us from the Anthropocene to what Donna Haraway has proposed as the Cthulucene.

By way of conclusion, and to perhaps arrive at a clearer definition of what 'tsunami listening' might involve, it serves to invoke the art writing of Yve Lomax. In her book, *Sounding the Event: Escapades in Dialogue and Matters of Art, Nature, and Time*, there is a chapter entitled 'a twittering noise' in which she responds to the environmental philosopher Michel Serres's thought on 'genesis' or becoming. Lomax is worth quoting at length to better approach the chthonic or geophonic in an era of climate crisis. Focusing on the act of listening as a receptive state rather than a state of presupposition (*Anthropos*), she writes:

And still no one can predict in which direction things will go. It is chaos, and it is not solid. Yes, we are in a sea of fluctuations where everything can go in every which direction. Yes, this noisy restless sea is pure multiplicity: it is mixture, it is contingency and it is turbulent. What happens here are so many attempted beginnings, so many difficult beginnings that sigh and then die. But beginning there is, here and there. Perhaps the fluctuation at the tip of the crest will fade away and dissolve into the breathing breeze of background noise; or, perhaps it is inclined to turn and get bigger. And now it is getting bigger, roaringly bigger. And now the whirling motion is under way and exuberance is in the air. And now there comes the sounds of a swirling turning turbulence that produces a coherence that composes and elaborates a process of forming that becomes a morphogenesis that heralds the birthing of a phenomenon that can stand as Venus stands as she emerges from the chaotic noisy nauseous waters. Here then are phenomena at their birth, at the moment of their birth, in and through

¹⁷ *Cosmo-Eggs*, exh. cat., n.p.

turbulence. Nature is emerging, living, moving, and inert. What is more, the process never stops.¹⁸

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¹⁸ Lomax, *Sounding the Event*, 17-18.

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