

Art After Disaster: Undoing the Negative Community

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Abstract

This article examines how artistic practices respond to the emergence of a “negative community” after a disaster, where people are bound together by displacement, abandonment, and infrastructural control rather than choice or solidarity. Drawing on fieldwork in coastal Japan following the 2011 earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear accident, this article reflects on how art can resist the reduction of catastrophe to either spectacle or state-managed recovery. Through practices of observation, witnessing, and collective engagement, art creates vital spaces of proximity, care, and dissent. In doing so, it unsettles imposed forms of community and opens possibilities for imagining a new social life beyond the structures of ruin and control.

Keywords

art after disaster; art and emergency; artistic response to catastrophe; community arts; disaster aesthetics; ethics of witnessing; negative commons; negative community; post-disaster art; trauma and representation

1. Introduction

A state of emergency has become the norm, not the exception. We live in a world of never-ending crisis, where the boundaries between natural disasters, wars, technical failures, and economic exploitation collapse into one another. Since the late 1990s, a series of large-scale natural disasters has deeply scarred our collective psyche. The 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami claimed over 230,000 lives across Asia. Hurricane Katrina in 2005 exposed the systemic racial and economic injustices of the US, as New Orleans was left to drown. Japan’s 2011 Tōhoku earthquake and tsunami triggered the Fukushima nuclear disaster. Superstorm Sandy in 2012 submerged parts of New York City. In 2023, a massive earthquake struck Syria and Türkiye, killing hundreds of thousands and displacing millions. These disasters shattered any lingering sense of security, exposing institutional fragility, the politics of abandonment, and the deep failures of the state apparatus.

Amidst these disasters, the constant flow of traumatic imagery from emergency zones shapes our everyday reality. We are overwhelmed with intimate, first-person accounts. Catastrophes are captured candidly on cell phones and spread almost in real-time. 4K drone footage serves destruction with unsettling clarity. Leaving nothing to imagination, this relentless stream of ultra-high-definition pictures overpowers our senses and traps us in a state of perpetual shock.

Media intellectuals, self-appointed disaster experts, and journalists often amplify their authority by abstracting the victim's experience into ideological or moral frameworks—transforming singular suffering (victim in person) into generalized discourses of victimhood (victim in general), thereby turning lived experience into spectacle (Laruelle, 2015).

In response to this saturation of traumatic imagery and disaster discourses, artists have developed strategies that move beyond media spectacle. Rather than reproducing devastation or speaking for the victim, they often turn to practices of collective care, organization, or testimony, seeking ways to process, reframe, or resist the dominant visual economy of crisis. In this regard, while they cannot provide actual social services, artistic practices have the potential to offer alternative representations, counter-narratives, and new modes of sensing and listening to overlooked histories, as well as imagining alternative futures in the aftermath of catastrophe.

Being from Türkiye, natural disasters hold deep personal significance for me; the 1999 Adapazarı earthquake, near Istanbul, was a profound trauma that shaped both me as an artist and the nation's history. It revealed the structural fragility of a society shaped by decades of speculative urban growth and deep economic inequalities. At the time, the Turkish state's inability to provide reliable infrastructure or coordinated relief created a vacuum that religious groups swiftly occupied. They offered food, shelter, and emotional support, thereby gaining legitimacy through their solidarity in the crisis. When the Erdogan government came to power in 2002, rather than rebuilding public capacity, it deepened this dependency. Pseudo-nonprofits and private contractors became the main vehicles of aid and reconstruction, tying survival to loyalty rather than citizenship rights. What emerged was a new model of governance for the world to come: the social state retreating while neoliberal and neoconservative ideologies consolidated power through networks of privatized care and philanthropy.

This encounter with catastrophe has shaped a focus of my artistic practice since the late 1990s—both as an embodied experience and as a critical lens towards what is often referred to as “disaster capitalism.” Through long-term, research-driven projects, I developed responses to devastation with poetic, political, and spatial strategies. Catastrophe remains for me a framework for probing contemporary politics, the entanglement of ecology, infrastructure, labor, gender, and power.

In 2000, in the aftermath of the earthquake, Güven Incirlioğlu and I co-founded xurban_collective, an art collective dedicated to critically engaging with the intersections of urbanism, political geography, and artistic production. One of our early works, as shown in Figure 1, *A Catastrophe/On the Outside, Same as Inside* (xurban_collective, 2000), was presented in a former bank space transformed into a gallery, examining the collapsing boundaries between physical and virtual spaces. Created at a moment when digital communication technologies were rapidly entangling with global capitalism, the project interrogated how catastrophe was not only experienced on the ground but also mediated and consumed across emerging digital networks. Photographs were installed inside a literal bank vault, and a 3D interactive projection

illuminated a space of financial darkness, transforming the traditional pictorial “window” into a confrontation with socio-political ruins. Since then, xurban_collective (2000–2012) advocated for a collaborative and critical discursive practice beyond institutional and commodified art structures. We approached art as a form of alternative militant knowledge production.



Figure 1. A Catastrophe: On the Outside Same as Inside, by xurban_collective, 2000. Note: Installation, photography, interactive VRML 3D projection on limestone powder, silver gelatin prints, wall text, Sabanci University Kasa Gallery, Istanbul.

2. Catastrophes and the Negative Community

The concept of the negative commons was first introduced by Maria Mies, a German ecofeminist theorist, in her critiques of capitalism, patriarchy, and ecological crisis. Mies shows how capitalism generates shared conditions of exploitation and harm: polluted air, toxic water, exhausted land, precarious labor, and displaced communities. These are “commons” not by collective choice but through coerced exposure. Under regimes of extraction, resources and environments are systematically degraded, and their consequences are collectively inherited (Mies & Benholdt-Thomsen, 2001). She argues that neoliberal development policies dismantle subsistence economies and traditional forms of communal care, replacing them with profit-driven systems, waste regimes, and privatized infrastructures. Within this logic, nature’s reproductive capacities—similar to women’s bodies—are enclosed and treated as inexhaustible resources for capital accumulation (Mies & Benholdt-Thomsen, 2001).

These shifts sever the reciprocal bonds between communities and their environments. In this broader sense, the negative commons encompass not only the physical remnants of industrial and post-industrial society but also the neoliberal systems that normalize and perpetuate such ruinification. It is a mode of governance—by-design—that produces landscapes marked by desertion and toxicity, deforested territories, depleted mines, and displaced populations (Monnin, 2021).

Negative commons carve deep wounds into the social fabric, out of which new and often coerced forms of community emerge—what we might call negative communities. Unlike traditional communities, which may have formed through shared purpose, religion, identity, association, or a sense of belonging, these communities are forcibly brought together by exposure to disaster, displacement, or genocide. These communities, comprising disaster survivors, war refugees, unhoused individuals, or residents of environmental sacrifice zones, are provided only the bare necessities of survival under imposed conditions dictated by a state apparatus.

Similar to prisons, refugee camps, or inner-city ghettos, negative communities are the by-product of forced proximity and collective precarity. Yes, it is a form of solidarity. Enduring social bonds are formed by the structural violence that determines—often silently and bureaucratically—who is saved, who is left to survive, and who is allowed to flourish. In other words, the state, in its neoliberal and necropolitical modes, no longer acts as a guarantor of the collective well-being of all citizens, but rather as the manager and police of abandonment.

A critique of the negative community is not a call to restore traditional forms of community. In *The Inoperative Community*, Jean-Luc Nancy (1991) offers a piercing critique of the notion of community, especially those that envision it as a return to a lost origin, an organic unity, or a sacred bond grounded in religious or nationalistic ideals. Such a traditional community demands wholeness and often self-sacrifice, where the highest expression of belonging becomes the willingness to be a martyr for the community. Nancy connects this logic to the political imaginaries of nationalism, fascism, and totalitarianism, which mobilize myths of origin and collective destiny to justify settler colonialism, religious fundamentalisms, extreme violence, and exclusionary politics. Nancy rejects the nostalgic fantasy that a unified community once existed and can be restored through projects of redemption, whether through the nation, religion, or even a modernist revolution. These totalizing ideals, he argues, ultimately reduce community to a sovereign entity that demands submission and erases individual voices of dissent.

In this regard, in its traditional, modernist, or neoliberal forms, we need to approach the idea of “community” as a critical category—one that often conceals operations of power and exclusion beneath the language of cohesion, even resilience, and care. Invocations of “community” as archaic social forms serve as ideological cover for the retrenchment of the welfare state and equal rights of its citizens, the outsourcing of public responsibility, and the privatization of survival. For instance, in the US, this logic is evident in the survivalist or “prepper” movement, which organizes around preparation for natural disasters, civil unrest, or economic collapse—above all, in response to the absence of any functioning social state (Ray & Ray, 2024).

In this context, the notion of a negative community brings a necessary contemporary political dimension to the forefront: it names the (libertarian, fundamentalist, and nativist) social formations that emerge in response to catastrophes. These are social networks assembled by crisis, held together by precarity, and managed through extreme policing. At the same time, the economic and bureaucratic systems naturalize negative communities as the cost of progress and revitalization.

Together, negative commons and negative communities reveal how contemporary forms of social life are being reorganized through manufactured everlasting emergencies. The state of under-construction becomes the norm, not to repair or heal, but to extend control. This is how free markets and financialization can penetrate and subsume every aspect of life.

As an alternative, Jean-Luc Nancy’s notion of the inoperative community offers a way to reimagine the social after disaster: as a community not grounded in unity, identity, or shared essence, but in being-in-common through mutual exposure, irreducible singularity, individual freedoms, and shared mortality. In his recent work, Pascal Gielen extends this line of thought by rethinking the concept of the cultural commons and trust. He shows how collective trust can revive public institutions and sustain social cohesion. Gielen calls for cultural policies that place community and the commons at their center. He argues for a shift away from competitive (neoliberal) individualism toward collaboration, reciprocity, and mutual care (Gielen, 2025).

In this regard, the artist’s role as a “cultural commoner” stands in stark contrast to what François Laruelle critiques as the role of “media intellectuals.” These public figures often claim to “speak for” the victim while in fact reinforcing their marginalization. Rather than listening to the victim in their “radical immanence,” media intellectuals frame them within narratives of redemption, blame, or geopolitics, turning singular lives into generalizable cases for public discourse or political leverage (Laruelle, 2015).

Art resists media spectacles: it affirms singular voices without reducing them to generalized statistics or moral tropes. Against the backdrop of disaster, art offers a counter-space: one that enables personal expression. Art forms its own community through its shared experience. Artistic practice is about commoning in a shared space of experience. Its gestures hinge on the irreducibility of lived encounter; it generates conditions that resist the logics of representation, media cliché, and generalized victimhood. Art affirms radical human specificity. In this way, it forms a fragile yet vital commons that allows for openness to difference and new possibilities.

3. The Sea, the Ruin, and the Silence

Building on the trajectory of artistic research that I began with *xurban_collective* (2000–2012), I have developed a body of work that engages directly with the aftermath of war, environmental destruction, and

natural disasters. My doctoral research focused on Hurricane Katrina (2005), investigating how artists responded to the disaster and how their practices intersected with broader political dynamics in post-Katrina New Orleans. Through this project, I explored how artistic interventions can expose systemic failures, challenge dominant narratives, and contribute to collective processes of mourning, resistance, and repair (Topal, 2016). Similarly, *Uniform Cut* (2015–2017) was developed during my residencies at 3331 Arts Chiyoda (2015) and Tokyo Arts and Space (2017). As part of this work, I traveled to Miyagi Prefecture to observe the slow, uneven recovery in the aftermath of the 2011 Great East Japan Earthquake and tsunami. The project examined how trauma is inscribed, erased, or monumentalized within the landscape of post-disaster Japan. Set against the backdrop of a reconstruction frenzy—intensified by funding tied to the upcoming 2020 Tokyo Olympics—I travelled along the coastlines of Miyagi Prefecture. I observed rebuilding efforts, particularly the construction of seawalls exceeding ten meters high that now overshadow the shoreline.

The project *Uniform Cut* contemplated ruinification—what is left behind and what kinds of communities are then formed. Within the rigid geometries of engineered cuts on the landscape, the towns felt emptied of life. They were not completely abandoned but suspended in a fragile temporality. By day, these temporary construction zones buzzed with the sounds of heavy machinery. Cranes moved in synchronized tempos; seawalls rose in concrete arcs. At night, a deep silence descended. I stayed in hotels filled with construction workers, their voices barely audible in a quietness with grief and exhaustion, a stillness that bore witness.

Walking the flattened margins of these towns, I encountered a terrain of absences. A negative space. A void. Buildings were gone—houses, schools, and clinics—erased not just by water but by the machinery of rebuilding. In their place were concrete foundations (Figure 2). These remnants were imprints of floor plans, resembling diagrams—two-dimensional ghosts of once-inhabited space—drawing a map of loss across the land.

In Minamisanriku, the skeletal steel frame of the former Disaster Prevention Countermeasures Office stood alone, stripped of its walls and function. It was an emergency command center; it had now been transformed into an impromptu shrine, adorned with flowers, photographs, and offerings (Figure 3). A site of warning had become a site of remembering. Behind it, a newly constructed seawall now obstructed any view of the ocean. The sea, both vital and violent, was cut from the town's sightline—buried behind engineered certainty. Ironically, the warning center, the only structure that saved lives during the disaster, now stood dwarfed, its symbolic power eclipsed by the massive wall. Later, part commemoration, part branding, part land-use strategy, the site was repurposed into the Minamisanriku Earthquake Disaster Memorial Park.

In the aftermath of the 2011 “triple disaster,” post-catastrophic landscapes in Japan became fertile ground for neoliberal economic speculation. The state and municipalities were not only competing with one another but also vying for financial resources in the shadow of the upcoming Tokyo 2020 Olympics. Branded as the “recovery Olympics” (*Fukkō Gorin*), the Games served as a national spectacle to reframe trauma as triumph, merging “celebration capitalism” with “disaster capitalism” (Abe, 2024).

400 km long seawalls, rising across the coastline, represented the state's victory over the environment (Urbi, 2021). Fortification reclaimed territory from the sea and manufactured normalcy. A war against nature, fought with victorious narratives and media spectacles, and won. As Abe (2024) points out, this massive redevelopment and its representation were deeply ideological: the state controlled what was visible and

what remained hidden; for instance, the nuclear contamination from Fukushima was systematically downplayed or framed simply as a localized issue.

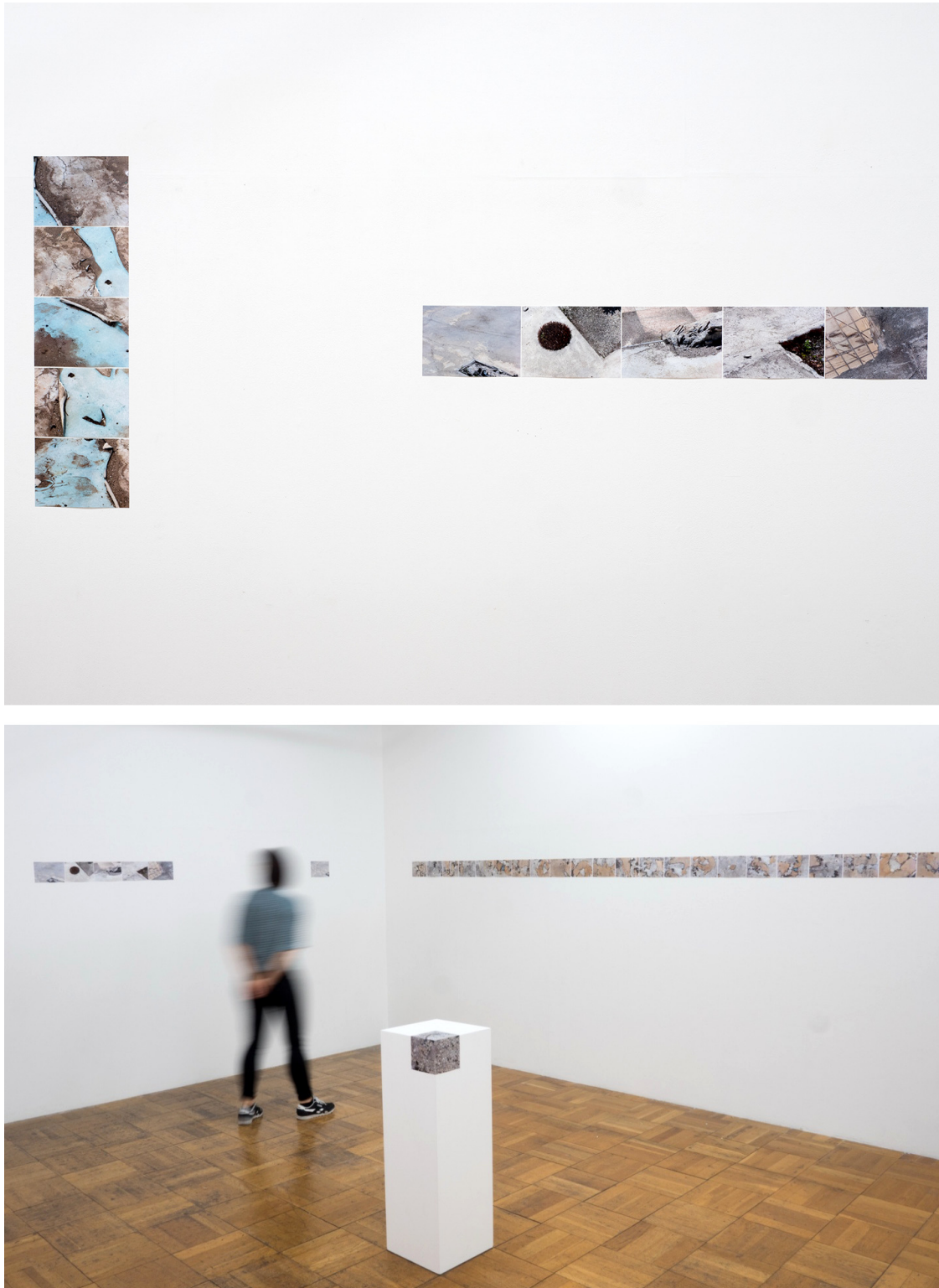


Figure 2. Uniform Cut (2015–2017). Note: Installation shots, C-prints, Multichannel Video, 3331 Arts Chiyoda, Tokyo.



Figure 3. Uniform Cut (2015–2017). Source: Details from 2-channel video.

3.1. Artists on the Disasters

Seascapes have long been a source of inspiration, especially for island communities. For centuries, the sea symbolized the unknown: a realm of myth and mystery, where monsters were said to dwell beyond the edge of navigable maps (Topal & Incirlioglu, 2012). These imagined threats gave form to collective fears and helped knit communities together through shared stories and art. Today, as we sit on the coastline and face the horizon, we are no longer confronting the unknown, but something all too familiar: reinforced concrete. Seawalls stretch for miles, cutting through the ancient coastline. Exclusion zones block access to once-inhabited lands. Radioactive storage fields scar places that have become uninhabitable. These are the new, carefully crafted monsters. Unlike myths, these structures are permanently inscribed. They are barricades to the possibility of any return, as the state has already relocated villages, rice fields, and forests. In their shadow, a different kind of community emerged—a displaced community, a negative community.

In her reflective interview, which I conducted in 2017, Fukushima-based artist Miki Momma articulates a mode of artmaking rooted in survival, resistance, and the persistent re-encounter with a permanently altered landscape (Momma, 2017, interview). The aftermath of the 2011 Tōhoku earthquake and Fukushima nuclear disaster marked a profound rupture in her practice. Having trained in traditional *suibokuga* (ink painting) and calligraphy in Japan and China, Momma initially ceased making art for two years, overwhelmed by the destruction of her art school and the daily recovery efforts led by her family's construction business. She returned to art with an urgent desire to document what was being erased. She began sketching from moving vehicles in restricted zones, rejecting the fixation of photography in favor of the gesture, the trace, and the act of seeing while in motion. Her use of embodied and imprecise painting is almost radioactive—it stands in contrast to the clarity of official narratives:

At night, when you drive into Fukushima from the Kanto region, you can see the sunset, but as you get closer to the nuclear plant, you notice there are almost no humans. Just for a moment, you might catch a glimpse of vehicle headlights—probably from workers commuting to or from the nuclear plant. They're very faint and hard to capture on camera, especially from the expressway. In some areas without train lines, people get off buses, carry their luggage, and walk home. Since trains no longer operate there, buses are the only mode of public transport. This child [pointing to an image] is the son of a friend. He was born shortly after the disaster. I asked him to wear a GoPro and film his surroundings while walking. He chose his favorite frame from the footage, and I turned that scene into a painting. Seeing through his eyes—so low to the ground—completely changes the perspective. That viewpoint felt really important. (Momma, 2017, interview)

Momma painted bags filled with radioactive soil and landscapes where rail lines had quietly disappeared, from views recorded from a child's GoPro at waist height. These works resist monumentalization. They offer an intimate, partial, and ethical form of witnessing (Figures 4, 5, and 6).



Figure 4. Miki Momma: Temporary buildings of JR Yamashita Station and the town hall (2013).



Figure 5. Miki Momma: *Stuff for decontamination on the other side of the wall* (2014).



Figure 6. Miki Momma: *The dose of radioactivity is being displayed* (2015).

In the wake of the unprecedented triple-catastrophe (the 2011 Tōhoku Earthquake, tsunami, and Fukushima nuclear disaster), artists and curators in Japan and abroad mobilized to produce a wide array of exhibitions that confronted the catastrophe's aftermath. Exhibitions such as *Don't Follow the Wind, In the Wake: Japanese Photographers Respond to 3.11*, *A Future for Memory*, *Catastrophe and the Power of Art*, and *Compassionate Grounds* became crucial platforms for reckoning with the magnitude of loss and systemic failure (Havinga,

2015; Mori Art Museum, n.d.; Nakamura, 2021; Takahashi, n.d.; Waite, 2021; Wakeling, 2021). Artists such as Lieko Shiga, Chim↑Pom, Kyun-Chome, and Hikaru Fujii created works that merged documentary impulse with poetic resistance (Gan, 2024; San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 2018). These exhibitions refused closure; they were about healing, holding space for mourning, and documenting and protesting.

A profound ethical tension undergirds these projects: How does one represent mass death and displacement without aestheticizing suffering or instrumentalizing grief (Bohr, 2016)? Artists wrestled with the ethics of visibility—what should be shown, and for whom? *Don't Follow the Wind* brought together 12 commissioned works installed inside the Fukushima exclusion zone. Launched by Chim↑Pom in 2012, the project evolved over three years with guidance from a 14-member committee and curators Kenji Kubota, Eva, Franco Mattes, and Jason H. Waite (Brophy, 2015). *Don't Follow the Wind* did not open until the site was safe again (McCurry, 2015). Its very inaccessibility became a metaphor for displacement. Finally, as the evacuation order has been lifted in August 2022 (based on the government's decision that the air dose rate is less than 3.8 microsievert per hour, infrastructure has been restored, and consultations with local residents have been held), "more than a decade has passed since the earthquake, and the *Don't Follow the Wind* venue opened to the public" (*Don't Follow the Wind*, 2022).

The *Catastrophe and the Power of Art* (2018) exhibition, organized by Mori Museum in Tokyo, similarly, explored how artists respond to large-scale disasters and personal tragedies by transforming grief into powerful acts of remembrance and hope. Highlighting works from Japan and beyond—especially after the 2011 Tōhoku earthquake—the exhibition reflected on art's unique role in healing, exposing hidden truths, and envisioning possibilities for renewal amid ongoing global crises (Mori Art Museum, n.d.).

Other exhibitions, such as *Picturing the Invisible*, curated by geographer Makoto Takahashi, adopted a collaborative, dialogic model, pairing photographic works by Japanese and international artists with essays by scholars, activists, and citizen scientists (Takahashi, n.d.). Takahashi's exhibition—which I contributed to at the Heong Gallery edition at Cambridge University, UK—confronted the representational and ethical challenges of narrating the "triple disaster." As Takahashi notes, the show emerged out of a sense of ethical obligation to honor the voices of those affected and to resist the political narrative of "recovery" championed by the Japanese government and symbolically reinforced through events like the Tokyo 2020 "recovery Olympics" (Takahashi, 2024).

Some of these artistic interventions critiqued the Japanese state's failures, including the initial chaos of governmental response, the lack of transparency around the Fukushima meltdown, and the top-down, industrial-scale reconstruction policies. Projects like *recorder311*, developed by Sendai Mediatheque in 2011, responded to the violent erasure of cultural memory through rapid redevelopment—seawalls that replaced fishing villages, empty grids where towns once stood (The Center for Remembering 3.11, n.d.). Artists highlighted the ecological violence of these measures, questioning who gets to define "recovery." In doing so, they created a space for collective memory, care, and cultural agency.

The disaster, in this sense, did not just capture the imagination of artists—it demanded their intervention. Kyun-Chome is a Tokyo-based artist collective formed in the aftermath of the 2011 Great East Japan Earthquake and Fukushima nuclear disaster (Kyun-Chome, n.d.). Comprised of Eri Honma and Nabuchi, who met at an alternative art school, their practice blends poetic gestures, participatory strategies, and subtle yet

incisive political critique. Working across video, installation, and social engagement, they often collaborate directly with disaster survivors, refugees, and marginalized communities. Kyun-Chome creates quiet interventions that reveal the contradictions of state narratives and the complexities of lived experience in post-disaster Japan, all while maintaining a horizontal, collective ethos that challenges both institutional authority and artistic individualism:

One project involved elderly evacuees living in temporary housing. We took photos of barricades in Fukushima, then taught the residents to use Photoshop to erase them. It was many of their first time using a computer, and they really enjoyed it. Interestingly, some told us they didn't want to return home—they received government stipends and had grown comfortable with urban life. This contrasted with the media narrative of passive victims....We had to frame the project as a technology workshop, not an art activity. Authorities often don't allow artists into those spaces, fearing they'll exploit the residents. There's a general distrust of artists in those contexts. (Kyun-Chome, 2017, interview)

In Japan, according to Kyun-Chome, politically or disaster-related art faces considerable institutional resistance, with public museums and government funding generally avoiding recent or contentious topics such as Fukushima. As Kyun-Chome notes, a pervasive culture of self-censorship further discourages artists from engaging with sensitive political themes. While collectives such as Chim↑Pom and Chaos Lounge exist, Kyun-Chome (2017, interview) distinguishes itself from other collectives through a horizontal, egalitarian structure and a socially engaged approach that contrasts with the more hierarchical models common in Japan's largely individualistic art world.

In the aftermath of large-scale disasters, artists and collectives have often turned away from the dominant individualist model of authorship in the art world. Following the 1999 Adapazarı earthquake in Türkiye—echoing the Japanese experience—numerous new artist groups emerged. Among them, the all-woman collective Oda Projesi developed a neighborhood-based practice grounded in co-producing projects with residents. Collective production is put forward as a way to rebuild trust, mobilize resources, and cultivate bottom-up responsibility across communities. Two major Istanbul biennial exhibitions at the turn of the millennium unfolded under the weight of disasters. The 1999 edition, curated by Paolo Colombo, opened only weeks after the devastating Adapazarı earthquake in Türkiye, while Yuko Hasegawa's 2001 edition began just 10 days after the attacks on the World Trade Center. In both cases, curatorial projects were refracted through the atmosphere of grief and disruption: openings became civic gatherings, and artworks were received as forms of witness and consolation in a time when infrastructures of daily life felt precarious (Kastner, 2003).

In the context of disasters, working across geographies and cultures has become a crucial mode of artistic practice. Artists create networks of exchange, linking experiences of crisis and translating situated knowledge into broader publics, where it can circulate, resonate, and acquire new political meaning. The trajectory of Japanese artist Manika Nagare exemplifies how such practices travel and transform. Although trained as an oil painter known for abstractions of figures and landscapes, her artistic path was reshaped by her early involvement with earthquake survivors in Türkiye. In 2001, she joined a project initiated by Mr. Nakahama, a Kobe-born businessman and earthquake safety advocate, who organized exhibitions to support victims in the aftermath of the 1999 Adapazarı earthquake. Nagare traveled to Türkiye to lead workshops. Her first "sewing" workshop invited participants to bring old fabrics, cut and stitch them

together, and decorate portraits she painted of them. The resulting patchwork collages became acts of collective healing. She later expanded the project into an exchange between Türkiye and Tokyo's Setagaya district, moving fabrics and artworks back and forth to link two communities shaped by seismic oscillations.

This formative experience laid the groundwork for Nagare's response to the 2011 Great East Japan Earthquake. Nagare co-founded Artist for a Day (*Ichigaku*), a nonprofit initiative that organized workshops with displaced children in Tokyo, Yokohama, Miyagi, and Fukushima. These projects favored simple, accessible formats: children painted on tracing paper sheets, which were later woven into translucent patchworks, or produced colorful wallpapers that wrapped the columns and ceilings of temporary and fishermen's Ba houses, designed in collaboration with Miyagi University architects. Such interventions restored color and presence to landscapes otherwise defined by mud, rubble, and displacement, while also offering participants the experience of creating something together (Nagare, 2017, interview).

Her studio work shifted in parallel, informed by the visible line of the tsunami cutting across the land, and Fukushima's "beautiful air you could not breathe." These encounters led her toward immersive landscape installations, such as those at the Sedo Gallery (2015) and the Takamatsu City Museum, where large fabric prints of her paintings were laid across floors and walls, allowing viewers to step into and inhabit the work. For Nagare (2017, interview), these installations carry an ethical force: to remind audiences that we are part of nature and thus bear responsibility for its future. Nagare notes a representational imbalance: while global audiences continue to focus on Fukushima's nuclear disaster, the slower, more embodied struggles of tsunami and earthquake recovery remain harder to translate. It is precisely in these overlooked spaces that collaborative artistic practices reveal their artistic value.

Many of these post-catastrophe processes are shaped by social proximity, trust, dialogue, and shared global conditions of vulnerability. In contrast to the dominant art historical ideals of the isolated, visionary artist, collaboration is advanced as a mode of knowledge production and a form of political engagement. As Kyun-Chome (2017, interview) puts it:

Our work isn't traditional activism, but it's critical. We try to create space for feeling, participation, and imagination—spaces where things are not resolved, but opened up. We don't offer answers, but we invite people to stay with the questions.

4. Conclusion

In the aftermath of 3.11, Japanese artists confronted cultural clichés—particularly the romanticized notion of Japan's harmonious relationship with nature. While mainstream narratives and state discourse frequently evoke the idea of an enduring national "respect for nature," many contemporary artists challenge this essentialist framing by revealing how such ideals obscure the violence of environmental degradation, industrial contamination, and state-led reconstruction policies. Artists like Miki Momma, Kyun-Chome, and Lieko Shiga refuse to depict nature as serene or redemptive. Instead, their works expose the ways nature has been rendered inaccessible through bureaucratic and infrastructural interventions. Rather than reinforcing myths of resilience or spiritual unity with the environment, these artists emphasize rupture, contradiction, and ambivalence. In doing so, they dismantle simplistic cultural tropes and open space for more nuanced, politically attuned representations of post-disaster life.

Japan's full embrace of the neoliberal logic of disaster capitalism—characterized by rapid, large-scale reconstruction projects, technocratic planning, and an almost militarized approach to infrastructure—reveals a deep desire to assert control over nature. This fast and furious recovery process stands in sharp contrast to the romanticized, touristic image of Japan as a land of harmony, subtlety, and finely attuned gardens. The very landscapes once revered for their organic fluidity are now bounded by massive seawalls, practically destroyed coastlines. This contradiction shapes how disaster is remembered, how space is occupied, and whose futures are made possible.

In the aftermath of disaster, when communities are fractured by abandonment and crisis hardens into infrastructure, artistic practice can offer a vital space for rethinking how we relate to one another. In these conditions, art moves beyond the task of representation—it becomes a form of ethical presence, grounded in proximity, care, and a refusal to reduce suffering to spectacle. Rather than aestheticizing ruin or speaking on behalf of others, art can make space for the unfinished, the unspeakable, and the untranslatable aspects of lived experience.

Art invites us to sit with complexity, to listen without mastering. It creates material, emotional, and imaginative conditions where fragmented lives can be witnessed. When conventional language fails to depict the horrors of catastrophes, it allows alternative modes of seeing, sensing, and remembering.

To undo the negative community, artists often take on the paradoxical task of working for the community while also working against it—for the sake of the community itself. This means challenging the norms, silences, and institutional structures that sustain harm or prevent transformation, even when those are deeply embedded in collective life.

Artistic practice, in this sense, perversely engages the community not by affirming it as it is, but by unsettling it, opening space for reflection, dissent, and renewal. This tension between belonging and critique is where art finds its political force and ethical urgency. Artistic practice, especially when grounded in long-term commitment to the subject matter and situated knowledge, reveals not only what has been broken, but what might still be rebuilt differently, and with others.

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