

Transitions after Destruction

The Artistic Response to the 2011 Triple Catastrophe in Japan

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The speed of transitions in this world has rapidly increased. One of the most striking examples and at the same time one of the most significant challenges to human society is climate change.¹ It already causes dramatic geophysical, individual, and societal transitions. Most geophysical transitions will happen at an exponential speed and the major question is whether or not societies and individuals can keep up with this speed.

After the already pessimistic evaluation in its 2014 Assessment Report, the most renowned international research body on global warming, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), now even expects that achieving the 2°C target² is almost impossible and significant anthropogenic climate change is unavoidable.³ As a consequence, the atmosphere and the oceans will continue to warm up, the snow and ice cover will further diminish, and the sea level will rise. Natural disasters like droughts, floods, and storms will become more

1. IPCC 2014.

2. The “2°C target” refers to the target agreement of keeping the increase in global average temperature to well below 2°C above pre-industrial levels as proposed in the Paris Agreement.

3. IPCC 2018.

frequent and impacts on society more severe. Extreme weather events like the ones Japan experienced in summer and fall 2018 with heavy rain and flooding, heat waves, and a sequence of severe typhoons, or the more than three months drought period in Europe that also occurred in 2018 could become the rule.⁴

Societies and individuals have to endure and cope with already predicted transition processes. Hence, ambitious mitigation efforts urgently have to be complemented by adaptation strategies.⁵ According to the European Environment Agency (EEA), European countries have already conducted national climate change vulnerability and risk assessments.⁶ The findings will contribute to adaptations in key vulnerable sectors, such as agriculture, fishery, biodiversity protection, spatial planning and infrastructure development. As emphasized by the IPCC, any adaptation significantly benefits from taking sociocultural contexts and social values into consideration.⁷ Reaction patterns to extreme events and natural catastrophes are amongst these contexts.

Japan has a long history of coping with natural disasters, such as earthquakes, volcanic eruptions or typhoons. Societal reactions to life threatening events with traceable influence on art creation can already be found in the Heian period (794–1185), when deities were called upon to protect from calamities,⁸ and one of the main respective festivals in Kyoto, the Hollyhock Festival, *Aoi Matsuri* (葵祭), came into being in order to appease the gods of the Kamo River after a series of heavy rainfalls and damages to the harvest. Much later, in the Momoyama period (1573–1615), constant warfare and abrupt power shifts caused widespread destruction and also resulted in a change in art creation from showing the world as a place of constant suffering

4. WMO 2018.

5. IPCC 2014, 17. See also IPCC 2012, “Special report on adaptation”.

6. EEA 2018.

7. IPCC 2014, 19.

8. TSUJI 2018, 125.

towards depicting it as a place for fleeting lives to be enjoyed.⁹ In art and architecture, many indications of humans coping with disasters and the unpredictable character of nature are recognizable in these times. One obvious example is the light construction of traditional Japanese houses, using paper sliding doors and thatched roofs which reduce the danger of getting trapped inside the house or being hit by falling debris in the case of natural disasters.

Also, the small format of artworks, for example the pillar pictures, *hashira-e* (柱絵), and the typical mode of storage of paper-scrolls indicate precautionary measures for different cases of disasters.¹⁰ This format allows one to quickly roll up the artwork, stow it safely, and move it from one place to another. Moreover, some typical Japanese art-forms like Ikebana constantly refer to the transience of life. Very direct indications for disasters can be found in illustrations of the Buddhist Arhats, e.g. when Kanō Kazunobu relates them to threatening situations such as fires, earthquakes, and famine. In contrast to Murakami's Arhats, which will be examined in detail below, however, they have a more religious appearance.¹¹

Just as extreme weather events resulting from climate change, the so called "triple catastrophe" of March 2011, which originated from a natural disaster in the first place, had dramatic impacts on Japanese society. The creation of artworks and the expression of sentiments through art is one way of coping with traumatic experiences like this. By analyzing two selected artworks, I will discuss the following research questions: How have Japanese artists reacted to the 2011 triple catastrophe, how has the experience changed their artistic path, and what kind of additional transition processes can be identified? How do the respective artworks address and reach society, and can they help

9. TSUJI 2018, 296.

10. HILLIER 1955, 7–8.

11. See also the conversation between TSUJI/MURAKAMI 2015, 55.

in coping with the consequences of disasters? How do these artworks relate to the ethics of human-induced transitions in nature?

In order to answer these questions, I will analyze selected examples of Japanese artworks related to the triple catastrophe. Following the iconographic approach, I will describe the mode of artistic representation and the media used in the creation of art. I will then interpret the artworks by expanding the perspective to an iconological view and by taking a closer look at how these pieces of art are deeply rooted in Japanese culture and society. In doing so, I will use artworks and aesthetic methodological approaches and apply them to Cultural Studies.¹²

TWO ARTISTIC REACTIONS TO THE 2011 TRIPLE CATASTROPHE

With greatly differing artworks, the two contemporary artists Murakami Takashi and Katagiri Atsunobu reacted to the 2011 triple catastrophe. Murakami created the large-scale, quasi mural¹³ *The 500 Arhats* while Katagiri arranged flowers for *Sacrifice: The Ikebana of Regeneration, Offered to the Future*.

Murakami Takashi: The 500 Arhats

With its large-scale size, *The 500 Arhats* can be considered a rather big painting in art history. The painting measures three meters in height and 100 meters in length. Due to its gigantic size, more than 200 people had to work on Murakami's acrylic painting day and night for about a year.¹⁴ The mural is broken down into four parts, each 25 meters long. It shows a detailed depiction of the 500 Arhats, some of them in small scale at the bottom of the mural, others in supernatu-

12. SCHNEIDER 2013, 21–5. For further respective readings see the concept of “Ästhetische Praxis als Gegenstand und Methode kulturwissenschaftlicher Forschung” developed by ELBERFELD/KRANKENHAGEN 2017.

13. In western art, this style is mainly represented in murals, in the Japanese tradition, however it strongly refers to scroll paintings.

14. MIKI 2016, 39.

ral size across the entire height of the artwork. The biggest figures can be identified as the sixteen central Arhats, *jūroku rakan* (十六羅漢), a group of legendary Arhats in Buddhism. The grotesque-looking 500 Arhat figures are interspersed with depictions of sacred beasts and mythical creatures.

At first sight, the painting seems to be cluttered with an overwhelming amount of figures, lines and colors, but the background color gives a first orientation for structuring the artwork as a whole. It subdivides the artwork into four panels, which can be distinguished by their respective coloring in light ochre-yellowish, red, blue and black. The background is conducted in a dot-like pattern, well-known from screen printings. The four panels are attributed to the four deities that govern the four cardinal directions in Chinese mythology. These four figures are the Azure Dragon of the East, the Vermillion Bird of the South, the White Tiger of the West and the Black Turtle of the North.

The light ochre-yellowish panel of the Azure Dragon is associated with colorful abstract swirling wind and wave motives, as well as a big white whale with its mouth agape. The dragon appears to the left of the center with its muzzle lying flat on the ground. The panel of the White Tiger has the largest number of Arhats, around 220 in total, most of them standing upright and facing forward. The red background is interspersed with flames, in between which appears the divine creature of Baku, which is said to devour nightmares.

The White Tiger is enshrined on top of a boulder on the right side of the panel. The rather dark Vermillion Bird panel, depicted in black and blue, is associated with the universe. The Arhats on this panel sit in meditation on the surface of water or flying around the universe in postures associated with the Chinese martial art of Kung Fu. In massive scale, the Vermillion Bird appears in the center of the panel in a phoenix design. On the Black Turtle panel, most of the Arhats fold their hands in prayer. The turtle is represented by the sacred mountain, which is crowned by a Shrine. The mountain is situated in the center of the panel and is guarded by open-mouthed red and blue demons.

Clouds and a Shen—a type of dragon—appear on the other light ochre-yellowish panel.

Katagiri Atsunobu: Sacrifice: The Ikebana of Regeneration, Offered to the Future

With his flower arrangements at the place of devastation in Fukushima, Katagiri intended to express the contrasting sentiments of the area at the very site of the catastrophe. Invited by the curator of the Fukushima Museum, Katagiri went to the closed-off zone to witness destruction and transformation. First, he lived there every now and then, before he finally moved to Minamisōma for seven months from December 28, 2013 until July 31, 2014 in order to realize his project idea. Katagiri only worked with objects and flowers he could find in this area and did not bring in any external material. He also intended to witness the changes of the four seasons with his flower arrangements. As soon as he had found some flowers, he made an arrangement and took a picture of the scene. Along with these pictures he collected stories of the few people who resisted resettlement and wrote down some accompanying thoughts.

The photographs of his artworks can roughly be divided into three different categories: Some pictures show poetic scenes of the landscape. Other photographs were taken inside destroyed buildings and are related more strongly to the remains of vanished lives and dwellings. The third category of pictures was taken inside the City Museum of Minamisōma, by using a plain white or black background. As containers for the flower arrangements, Katagiri used earthenware from the Jōmon period (14,000–300 BC) which he had found in the museum, or other objects like a partly destroyed doll, wooden vessels, and bamboo baskets. Katagiri felt that all these partly destroyed objects tell stories of distant times.¹⁵

15. AKASAKA 2015, 103.

FROM INDIVIDUAL TRANSITIONS OF THE ARTISTS ...

Independently from each other, both Murakami Takashi and Katagiri Atsunobu admitted that the 2011 triple catastrophe had changed their attitudes towards the creation of art fundamentally and initiated individual transition processes.

Murakami Takashi

I think I was able to gain some understanding of what I had previously wondered—the reason why people desire storytelling and religion—after the experience of the 2011 quake.¹⁶

Today, curators already identify two different phases in Murakami's art-creation.¹⁷ In each case, comparable incidents altered his approach toward the creation of art and transformed him into a person with a different understanding for his fellow countrymen.

Born in 1962 in post-war Japan, in his first phase, Takashi Murakami's artworks mainly broached the issue of critical thinking about his generation, its relation to war, the alliance between Japan and the US and the resulting effect on culture and society.¹⁸ Murakami is most well-known for his colorful large sized paintings and sculptures, which are reminiscent of Pop Art. His motives originated from everyday culture, mass media, and the world of consumption and advertisement. As an artist mainly working and living in the US, he saw one of his tasks in presenting Japanese culture to a Western audience through his artworks.¹⁹ He himself called the style of his artworks "Superflat," a title that refers to the two-dimensional optical perspective of the artworks on the one hand, but also to the lack of reflection on society within his generation on the other. He was occupied with questions concerning

16. TRAN/MURAKAMI 2015, 262.

17. MIKI 2016, 39.

18. PILLING 2015, 246–9.

19. TRAN/MURAKAMI 2015, 260.

a rather numb and lethargic, but also quite childish Japanese society of his generation, which he expressed through his rather flamboyant artwork. He mainly worked ironically, intentionally blurring the line between “high art” and commercialism.

The March 2011 triple catastrophe, however, transformed Murakami’s worldview instantly. In his second artistic phase, Murakami understood that the sudden convulsion of the catastrophe called for an explanation, but also created an urgent need for hope, societal support and reorientation. As an immediate consequence of this insight, in a very short time he created the colorful quasi mural *The 500 Arhats*. At a point of time when the whole world stood still because of the tremendous shock, Murakami could find a rather optimistic way to look forward by changing his perspective on art creation. From this new perspective, he saw the potential of destruction to lead to intensified creation,²⁰ and concerning his process of creating art, he said that painting a picture is like praying a Buddhist prayer.²¹ Quite different from his first phase, in the period beginning with his reaction to the triple catastrophe, Murakami has been trying to reach people not only in a critical-sarcastic manner, but in fact intended to offer help and give hope by referring to tradition.

Katagiri Atsunobu

I even sensed beauty in the raging nature, in a presence that was beyond human reason. The power of nature was so overwhelming that I even forgot that many human lives were being lost in its midst.²²

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

20. TRAN/MURAKAMI 2015, 262.

21. MIKI 2016, 39.

22. KATAGIRI 2015, 98.

through their cracks, and turn them into flowers. Was I capable of such a thing?²³

The introductory quote provides Katagiri's first thoughts in reaction to seeing the horrifying pictures of the muddy water of the tsunami moving forward, engulfing everything it touched.

In his earlier phase before the 2011 triple catastrophe, however, Katagiri's intention was to express his very own and personal emotions throughout his flower arrangements. Born in 1973 in Osaka, Katagiri became head of the Misasagi Ikebana School in 1997. He was mainly known for his combination of tradition with modern art and for his collaborations with artists of different media. He had specialized in large scale flower arrangements, often working with cherry blossoms, but was just as skilled at small-scale compositions.

When Katagiri arrived at the place of destruction in the Fukushima region, however, the thoughts cited in the second quote above popped up. The direct confrontation with the place of disaster caused him to change his way of art creation and from then on, he has been working differently. At the place of disaster, he had the urgent need to express the sentiment of the area at the very site of the catastrophe with its sense of devastation, grief and loss, but also with its commencing and vague need for transition to something new. With his flower arrangements at Minamisōma, he intended to reproduce and intensify the distinct aura of the place of devastation.

In summary, both cases show an individual transition in the respective artists' way of creating art from pre-disaster to post-disaster. While Murakami became less cynical and wanted to provide some kind of help, Katagiri changed from a rather personal and private intention to one that emphasized the sentiments of a public region and its inhabitants.

23. KATAGIRI 2015, 99.

TOWARDS SOCIETAL TRANSITIONS

After the 2011 triple catastrophe, both artists tried to give hope to society. However, the support provided by their respective artworks in order to facilitate this social transition seems to have different roots and directions.

The Arhats as providers of moral guidance, hope, and motivation to engage

Although expressing his ideas through classical Japanese symbols, Murakami did not use traditional Japanese coloring and image media such as hanging scrolls or folding screens, and his style is rather unconventional, which is why he is only partially accepted in Japan as an important modern artist.²⁴ With *The 500 Arhats*, first unveiled in Doha in 2012, Murakami held his first solo exhibition in Japan after 14 years of absence.²⁵ The size and coloring of the acrylic painting give a firsthand impression of mightiness and are reminiscent of Pop Art. With its black contours the quasi mural hints at the world of comics, manga and anime and therefore also evokes a light and playful atmosphere.

A second, closer look, however, reveals the severity of the painting. Murakami's use of the color red seems to refer to something serious and heavy. The raging flames and roaring winds in the background underline this seriousness. Life, death and the impermanence of the secular world come together. With the help of the art historian Tsuji Nobuo, who had introduced Murakami to the topic of the 500 Arhats in the *Nippon E'awase* (the Japan Picture Contest),²⁶ after years of distance, Murakami could draw closer to Japanese society and tradition

24. MIKI 2016, 36 and NAKANO 2016, 233–7.

25. The exhibition was held from October 31st 2015 to March 6th 2016, Mori Art Museum, Tokyo.

26. MIKI 2016, 37 and TAKAHASHI 2017.

again. For Murakami, the 500 Arhats gave some interpretation of the catastrophe but also provided relief for people affected by it.²⁷

The Arhats stand in close relation to Buddhism, particularly Zen. Images of the Arhats can be found in Buddhist temples all across Japan. They are figures of belief and faith, although some Zen-depictions are also full of irony and playfulness (see below). Different from Buddha(s), Arhats are still directly connected to and interact with this world and its human inhabitants. They are active disciples of Buddha, though, which—following an important Buddhist idea—have refused greed, hate and infatuation completely. Arhats strive for enlightenment only through self-power, without relying on the transfer of merit common e.g. in Mahayana Buddhism. Arhats were originally instructed by the historic Buddha Siddhartha Gautama to “stay in the human world, propagate the Dharma,” the Buddhist cosmic law and a code for ethical behavior, and “uphold correct Buddhist teachings” until the future Buddha enters the world.²⁸ The Arhats act as role models for good behavior and thus both spread good karma themselves and enable humans to also produce good karma. So, it is up to the willingness of the Arhat himself to help other beings, but it is no precondition to accomplish the status of an Arhat. Because of their connection to Buddha and their closeness to holiness, Arhats are able to act as symbols for narratives about humankind, by raising issues related to religion and art, as well as human morality and limitations. Therefore, the Arhats play an important role in Japanese history and culture and are often treated as examples of good behavior. The number 500 originates from Mahayana Buddhism, in which the number of the original 16 central Arhats grew to 500.²⁹

Their unkempt and eccentric appearance emphasizes that the Arhats live their lives as beggars and vagabonds, a sign for having left

27. MIKI et al. 2016, 112.

28. TSUJI 2017, 278.

29. TSUJI 2017, 279.

all worldly desires behind. Despite their rather emaciated look and their worn-out robes, the Arhats emanate tremendous power and life experience. Each of the Arhats has his supernatural power. The ninth of the Sixteen Arhats, for example, carries a fan. This fan can reduce the affliction of ignorance. The ninth Arhat usually appears in profile and is called Jīvaka. The twelfth of the Sixteen Arhats, Nāgasena, is holding a fly-whisk, which expels human desire and passion. Nāgasena is known for his loud laughter. Nothing can bother him. But despite of their supernatural powers and their ability to bring relief, the Arhats usually stay secluded in the mountains and only appear after a disaster, like a fire, earthquake, or a tsunami.³⁰

Knowing the history and the potency of the Arhats, Murakami drew on them after the 2011 triple catastrophe. He thought them to give relief in times of destruction and despair. The large scale of the mural can be interpreted to immediately refer to the supernatural forces of the Arhats. This impression is particularly powerful in Japan, where things usually tend to be rather small.

The oversized production with a large number of individual elements might also act as a reminder of the numerous human sins, particularly because the background story of the first Arhat goes back to him destroying a precious human life and thus committing one of the worst human sins.³¹ The Buddhist human sins are said to arise from sensual craving and the adherence to the objects and phenomena of this world. They inflict greed, hate and selfishness. Not only resulting deeds but also the impact of respective thoughts eventually backfire on the protagonist him- or herself. This produces bad karma. For centuries, people have appealed to the Arhats for help and redemption from the 108 sins, represented e.g. by the 108 times bells are rung in Japanese temples on New Year's Day. By reminding the viewer of the 108 human sins, Murakami could also have hinted at the partial anthropogenic

30. TSUJI/MURAKAMI 2015, 54 and 55.

31. TSUJI 2017, 279.

causes of at least the third catastrophe: The nuclear meltdown at the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant.

But right next to the seriousness of the topic there is also a fresh and encouraging, even playful way in which the Arhats deal with suffering. Flying through the air and doing Kung Fu is a particularly prominent example for this attempt to take things lightly, an impression that has been made popular in modern culture e.g. by Bruce Lee or Jackie Chan Kung Fu movies from the 70s, 80s, and 90s. However, even though these Arhat figures evoke a light and playful impression, originally Kung Fu is a most serious Chinese martial art, and the word “Kung Fu” (功夫 jap. *kufū*) can also refer to any study, learning, and practice that requires patience, energy, and much time to achieve mastery. Moreover, it even includes any achievement in life that can be realized through hard work and patience. On the other hand, some of Murakami’s Arhats are indeed playing and organizing joyful festivals.³² Hence, the Arhats are not only sending out signs of despair or act as reminders of modesty and peaceful coexistence, but they also encourage people to lightly move ahead while keeping up the fight in order to overcome hardship. With Murakami’s depiction in a dreamlike, dynamic manner, his Arhats convey safety, humor and calmness, and they seem to have answers to the hardships of life. Murakami fuses Japanese tradition with contemporary art, seriousness with playfulness, warning with hope and standstill with transition, and by doing so shows “that despair and hope exist side by side in the world we live in.”³³

Another aspect of mythical creatures acting as guardians can be identified in the partition of the mural into four panels based on the four guardian animals from Chinese mythology mentioned above. Each creature represents a cardinal direction and a season, and each has its own individual characteristics and origins. The Azure Dragon, *seiryū* (青龍), protects the east, the Vermillion Bird, *suzaku* (朱雀), the

32. MIKI 2016, 40.

33. MURAKAMI 2014, cited after MIKI 2016, 40.

south, the White Tiger, *byakko* (白虎), the west, and the Black Turtle, *genbu* (玄武), literally the “dark or mysterious warrior,” protects the north. Usually it is depicted as a turtle entwined with a snake, and refers to the Taoist god Xuanwu, which is known for being accompanied by a turtle and a snake. In Chinese belief, the center is guarded by the Yellow Dragon. The colors of these creatures, in fact, match the colors of the soil in the corresponding regions of China. In Japan, this mythological setting finds its representation for example in the cultural capital of Kyoto, where major Buddhist temples and Shinto shrines are dedicated to the respective creatures and act as guardians to the city.

Murakami himself, however, appears to be uncertain concerning the question whether his mural of *The 500 Arhats* contains any explicit epic story.³⁴ Instead, the four plates are supposed to encourage the observer to contemplate about the state of the world and to create his or her own respective narrative, an approach strongly advocated in Cultural Studies and in the extended pictorial approach proposed in Belting’s “Bild-Anthropologie.”³⁵ In this regard, the audience is stimulated to overcome the static shock moment and transit to a state in which it engages in action against the miseries of the world. In order to provoke this, technically, Murakami uses disruptions. One of these disruptions is the ostentatious contradiction between the background colors, the motifs and the cardinal directions with their representative creatures. The Azure Dragon is arranged on a light ochre-yellowish panel, the White Tiger is shown against a background interspersed with reddish flames, the Vermillion Bird resides on a black and blue panel, whereas the Black Turtle sets itself apart from an again light ochre-yellowish background that we could already find at the beginning with the Azure Dragon. This makes it appear like a circle, possibly the circle of life. The Azure Dragon looks very confused, fallen, with his muzzle lying flat on the ground, incapable of any further

34. TSUJI/MURAKAMI 2015, 55.

35. BELTING 2006.

action. What it could not achieve, has to be done by the Black Turtle, the symbol of the dark, mysterious warrior. In Murakami's mural the Black Turtle is represented by a sacred mountain with a shrine atop, surrounded by Arhats in prayer and doing Kung Fu. The snake is represented by Shen, a type of dragon. Colors and cardinal directions, which usually serve as orientation, are in complete disorder, the world seems to be in shambles. This impression is intensified by raging flames and roaring winds. However, this disorder is balanced with the rather comforting 500 Arhats, which seem to endure the chaos without much worrying, even providing hope by praying, enduring, fighting, and moving forward.

Hope in the form of the natural circle of life

With the medium of flower arrangement, Katagiri—unlike Murakami—uses a well-accepted form of art in Japan. One of his first pictures is a poetic still-life with a buoy and silver grass at Migita beach, Kashima ward, Minamisōma. Shortly after New Year's Eve, he found an expansive wilderness with withered silver grass. He fixed the silver grass to a buoy, which he had found in a mountain of debris, and then took the picture. The partition of the picture into three parts is particularly revealing. The lower third is covered by a tall concrete protective barrier, which is supposed to protect the land from the water. Above the wall is a slim stripe of the yet calm and peaceful ocean. The upper two thirds are covered by a romantic sky with an atmospheric sunset. At first sight, the buoy on the wall looks like a valuable pottery, interspersed with marks from a drying process. The picture evokes calmness, almost romantic peacefulness. A second inspection, however, reveals the inherent tension of the picture created by the confrontation of the protective concrete dam and the buoy with the yet peaceful but—in bad weather conditions or in the event of a tsunami—also possibly life-threatening ocean. With respect to his particular picture, Katagiri mentions that “the first flower I used was not a flower, but

instead a withered plant.”³⁶ This clearly hints at transience. So, in both the picture as a whole and the plant itself we find references to transitions—from beauty to danger, from life to death. Beauty and life can only last for a brief moment, thereupon they have to fade, and death might follow. By contemplating the picture, these opposing impressions between two transitional phases appear alternately, even reciprocally, an effect comparable with that of a picture puzzle or *Vexierbild*. The plant with its graceful appearance virtually stands for transience. It is withered, dried up, and will disappear pretty soon.

Other pictures in this series also evoke this alternating or reciprocal effect: Katagiri writes about his second picture that he was thankful for the snowfall at winter that covered the debris for a while and put the painful landscape into some resting peace.³⁷ Still, he could find narcissi blooming in spite of the adverse conditions. He arranged the narcissi in the split of a wooden pole in front of the ocean. On the right-hand side, the remains of a concrete protective barrier are visible, the rest of the scenery is covered with snow. Sea gulls are flying over the rough sea, thick snowflakes are falling from a grey sky. Narcissi are known for their use as a symbol of joy and luck at Chinese New Year. In Christian belief they are a symbol for the resurrection of Christ. Believed to be lost due to harsh winter conditions, every year, just in time for Easter celebration, however, they resurrect and start to bloom again. In Katagiri’s picture they serve as an expression of hope or the “modest joy that shines through”³⁸ in the gentle transition from devastation to new life.

Among all the grief, death, and loss, Katagiri could still find “modest joy” in the regeneration of nature. This came to his mind when he was thinking about the lives that had disappeared while flowers blossomed again. Two years after the disaster, the endangered lagoon-

36. KATAGIRI 2015, 99.

37. Ibid.

38. Ibid..

flower *mizuaoi*, the Water Hyacinth, started to bloom again. Once displaced by large land reclamations for agriculture, the swamps and lagoons around Minamisōma had disappeared. With it the aquatic plants also vanished, and instead human population grew. On March 11, 2011, the sea engulfed everything and pulled the claimed land back into the ocean. After the ocean had calmed down, the lagoons reappeared and with them the flowers came back. This story told to Katagiri by the curator of the Fukushima Museum was the inspiration for Katagiri's flower arrangement. It reveals Katagiri's admiration for the regeneration of nature and its self-development.

In the Japanese language, this can be described by the term *shizen* (自然), which has a variety of meanings. The character *shi* (自) can be translated as “on its own terms; by itself” and the character *zen* (然) as “like that; in that way.” Combined they could be translated as “like that by itself.” In Japan, nature is often treated as a “subject,” as an independent self or agent, or as a sphere in which “subject” and “object” form one common reality. As a consequence, human beings are not seen as being superior to nature. As this understanding was more widely acknowledged in olden times, Katagiri referred to these times particularly by using ancient earthenware for some of his arrangements.

Katagiri found the Jōmon earthenware in the Minamisōma City Museum. While he was preparing his Ikebana, he was thinking about grafting a current lifeform to a lifeform of the past.³⁹ By doing flower arrangements the artist always thinks about death. He cuts the flower, but does not want to waste it, so he has to create the most beautiful arrangement possible out of it and keep it alive as long as possible. This is also implicit in the term “Ikebana,” which consists of the two terms *ikeru* (生ける) “being alive, living” and *hana* (花) “flower.”⁴⁰ Katagiri thought that flowers arranged in five thousand year old Jōmon pottery vessels form a microcosm of the scheme of nature, whereby life is born

39. KATAGIRI 2015, 101.

40. AKASAKA 2015, 102 and ŌHASHI 2014, 69–70.

out of death. Therefore, “flowers must intensify their colors and luster—that is what I call Ikebana,” he says.⁴¹

Katagiri explored the countryside and collected flowers and stories of the few people who resisted against their relocation, and he arranged them into significant pictures. One of the photographs in the picture series taken in the Minamisōma City Museum shows the skull of a two-year-old cow that had died of starvation. He decorated the skull with blooming camelia sasanqua, the red petal color of which Katagiri associated with the blood shed by the young cow.⁴² The farmer who had given him the skull had told him the tragedy that had happened after the explosion at the nuclear power plant. He was supposed to kill his cows and leave the contaminated area instantly. But he resisted and stayed with his cows in order to show Tokyo Electric Power Company (TEPCO), the operator of the plant, and the government what they had done to the country and its people. Around this time, Katagiri came up with the title for his work: “*Sacrifice...*” Plants sacrifice their life to nourish animals and human beings, so that they can live. We all owe our lives to them, but we hardly appreciate this, on the contrary—we destroy nature.

Another piece in the series of pictures taken inside of destroyed buildings is a photograph of the Marine Park Movie Theater in Namie town. The picture conveys a rather dark atmosphere. Only the dark shapes of the cinema seats can be seen, some still neatly decorated with a white knitted head cover. The same seats reveal traces of the flooding; remains of straw and dirt can be seen. Katagiri decorated the headrest of the cinema seats with the cymes of hydrangea, consisting of rounded flowering heads of small florets. One might think they serve as a replacement for the lost lives. But in fact, they themselves are lost lives. Since they were cut and thus condemned to death, they will eventually turn to soil, and then act as the basis for new life.

41. KATAGIRI 2015, 101.

42. KATAGIRI 2015, 100.

None of Katagiri's pictures include human beings, except for the last one. In the summer, some surfers appeared at the beaches of Minamisōma. Katagiri spoke with them and one of them said:

I learned how to surf on this beach and I always used to come here to ride the waves. I came here one year after the disaster and got into the sea. I was afraid at first. People told me it's contaminated. But then a big wave came and I swallowed a lot of water. That's when I knew I was prepared to live with the sea. I live here after all.⁴³

This picture again hints at human beings as just being a part of nature, a part of the natural circle of life.

In sum, contrary to Murakami, Katagiri emphasizes the natural cycle of life, the coming and going, the living and dying, the transition from beauty to decay, but also resurrection and recreation from death and devastation. The acceptance of being a part of the natural cycle of life is supposed to give people peace of mind in a dreadful situation.

CONCLUSION

This essay has analyzed two selected artworks (or series thereof) created by two Japanese artists after the triple 2011 catastrophe by applying a combination of iconographic and iconological methods and thus referring to artistic-aesthetic practices both as an object of and method for Cultural Studies. In conclusion, at least three forms of transition can be identified:

First, one motivation for this study on transition processes was the increasing speed of the geophysical transformation caused by anthropogenic climate change and the resulting need not only for mitigation, but also for adaptation methods. As considerable global warming is now unavoidable, extreme weather events will become more frequent and more violent. Humanity will be faced with more "natural"

43. KATAGIRI 2015, 101.

catastrophes, which, at least in their consequences, could be similar to the 3/11 triple disaster in Japan. Adaptation is hence inevitable and with it the transitioning from a pre- to a post-global-warming world.

This first geophysical transition motivated me to analyze artworks related to disasters. The hypothesis was that the creation of art is one important way of coping with extreme events such as natural disasters. By examining two selected contemporary artists and their artworks, additional forms of transition could be identified: the individual transition of the artists and their ways of creating art as well the societal change implicit in their work, both triggered by the 2011 triple disaster. In the case of Takashi Murakami's *500 Arhats*, the artist has transitioned from working in a rather critical-sarcastic manner to a way of art-creation that is supposed to provide help and hope. To achieve the latter, he particularly referred to tradition and religion as a provider of peace of mind. Katagiri, instead, has transitioned from a strongly self-referential mode of expression to one that focusses on the sentiments of others, in this case the people and the land affected by the triple catastrophe. He did so by focusing on the atmosphere of the destroyed region and by highlighting the specific quality of *shizen* and the beauty of the natural circle of life. Even the artists themselves agree that the disaster has significantly modified their approach to art production.

The third mode of transition can be identified if we move our focus from the individual to the level of society. While both artists wanted to provide hope and relief to the people affected by the triple catastrophe, the emphasis on how to help society transition from a pre-disaster to a post-disaster state differs. Basically, two different philosophical worldviews shine through.⁴⁴ In Murakami's artwork, hope originates from a rather anthropocentric perspective. Human beings are more focused upon than nature, but they need moral guidance in order to provide non-human nature with more space and even actively prevent the deterioration of the environment. This guidance is provided by

44. PFORDTEN 1994.

the Arhats and their virtues, which in our modern society have been largely replaced by an exclusively economic rationale. In times when people lose their trust in continuous (technological) progress and eternal economic growth, the Arhats give support and orientation. They can act as role models for a modest but also playful live style that would allow the peaceful co-existence of humankind and nature even in an anthropocentric world.

In Katagiri's artwork, on the other hand, people are supposed to gain hope from a more ecocentric worldview. Human beings are just a part of nature, just as every other species is. No matter what humans do, nature will always recover and produce beauty again. While in an extreme case, this could lead to the extinction of the human race, nature as a whole will survive. Katagiri's artwork generates hope out of the destruction process itself. After destruction, something new and beautiful will arise and even a form of ecological justice or equilibrium is generated. Nature will restore what has been taken away from her. This perspective implies that for humankind to survive, we have to accept the natural circle of life and death and treat other species on equal terms. Particularly it is necessary to acknowledge that plants and animals sacrifice their lives in order to nourish us. It is a natural circle of life and death, in which we are to humbly play our role and not overestimate our capabilities.

Both artists, however, contrast massive destruction and devastation with beauty, and they also both refer to tradition and religion. Contrasting devastation with beauty and referring to tradition can therefore be identified as major tendency in Japanese art and its culture of coping with destructive events, a view that is also supported by examples from the past. Referring to beauty even in the face of devastation provides hope, so that people can endure hardship and move on without getting stuck in frustration and standstill.

For future research in the realm of the intersection of arts and nature, the relation between Japanese aesthetics, (ecological) ethics, and Japanese syncretism seems to be a particularly rewarding field of study.

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