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POINTING THROUGH THE SCREEN

Archiving, surveillance, and atomization in the wake of Japan's 2011 triple disasters

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In a gesture toward increasing transparency following the nuclear accidents caused by the Great East Japan Earthquake of March 11, 2011 (commonly referred to as "311"), the Tokyo Electric Power Company (Tepco) installed a live internet video feed surveilling the nuclear waste clean-up process at the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant where the multiple meltdowns had occurred. Nearly six months after the quake, a figure in radiation protection gear walked into view of the stationary camera, extended their right arm, and pointed toward the lens. After holding this position for 20 minutes, the figure disappeared. This mysterious act was recorded and circulated online without explanation until an anonymous email to a Tepco official began to tease at the identity of the finger-pointing worker and the intent to bring attention to the situation of temporary nuclear workers. This study is written in response to the formal procedures and social circumstances of the anonymous pointing figure's protest/performance—subsequently revealed in a Tokyo gallery exhibition—and those of other artists, archivists, and activists working through the aesthetic and political potentials of the post-311 image and its circulation. Surveying the visual culture of post-311 Japan through cultural workers' interventions, this chapter argues for a transmedia approach to understanding social crisis amid environmental collapse, analyzing a diverse selection of projects in photography, film and video, performance, archiving, and community media. These practitioners repeatedly point to the insufficiency of their mode of representation to render the scale of unthinkable catastrophe, re-contextualizing vernacular photography, appropriating surveillance technologies, and embracing non-representational documentary images to place or displace the self in reference to media in circulation. A comparison of these works not only reveals these practitioners' common interrogation of a disaster's construction through media, it also identifies disaster management as a paradigmatic model of the mediation of environment and self through the particular context of contemporary Japanese documentary.

The Great East Japan Earthquake, popularly known as 311 (3.11 or 3/11 in international contexts), was a magnitude 9.0 earthquake that struck off the coast of the Tōhoku region of Northeastern Japan, causing a massive tsunami that killed over 18,000 people and precipitating multiple nuclear meltdowns at the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant. The immediate effects of the natural disaster and forced evacuation of land deemed uninhabitable because of

radioactivity displaced nearly 500,000 people to temporary housing in the surrounding areas. In addition to the devastation of the region's coastline, destroying homes and livelihoods, communities were torn apart by an arbitrary no-go zone imposed by the government within a 20-kilometer radius of the plant.

With numerous feature-length titles produced in the immediate aftermath of 311, documentary emerged as a popular object of analysis among scholars of cinema and media (DiNitto 2014; Hirano 2014; Domenach 2015). This large body of work exhibits several key tensions: between a cinema exploiting images of devastation and ruin, and one made useful for the purposes of recovery and reconstruction, with filmmakers deepening analysis for public understanding or participating as volunteers. This moment also reveals a cinema in a process of transformation itself, drawing on salvaged archives of family photographs and amateur digital video capturing the rising waves. These documentary films circulate within a media ecosystem along with dramatic features addressing 311, constituting vital local and transnational film cultures, and sketching the contours of political imaginations. However, the urgency of documentary in post-disaster environments—and this instability of its form—necessitates the broader scope of documentary adopted in this chapter, mediating traces of history through environment and subjectivity.[1]

The mysterious pointing figure's relocation of conceptual art into a nuclear clean-up site intersects with the activities of Photohoku, a group of professional photographers and volunteers who work "to help restart family photo albums for those in Japan affected by the events of March 11" (Photohoku 2019a). These activities are central to this chapter's investigation. While media attention to the region has waned as the country's third prime minister since the disaster promotes a nationalist agenda that includes a successful bid for the 2020 Olympics in Tokyo, and attempts to reverse Japan's pacifist constitution, this group of largely amateur photographers continues traveling from the capital to Tōhoku for the purpose of *giving* rather than simply *taking* photographs.

Situating Photohoku's practice and the "finger-pointing worker" within the broader circulation of images following 311, I address the political implications of ethnographic and philanthropic enterprises alongside activist and fine art projects that similarly implicate domestic portraiture under the assault of natural and human-produced disasters, and their subsequent management by states and corporations. Mediating anxiety over the image as a site of political contestation, each of these forms of media practice emphasize collaboration while revealing processes of the image's transmission; they deny objectification of the "victim" or triumphant individual while advancing a model of collectivity resistant to nationalism, or the maintenance of a uniform collective. As Kyoko Hirano has observed, after the quake, the phrases and words *Ganbatte Nippon!* (Hold on, Japan!), *fukkō* (reconstruction), and *kizuna* (connecting) took hold in Japanese popular culture—including feature-length documentary films—associated with striving for recovery, economic renewal projects, and maintaining connections to survivors (Hirano 2014: 2). As Hirano argues, however, such sentiments limit the imperative to work collectively toward reparations, personal accountability, and structural reform (Hirano 2014: 11–12). Photohoku's practice does not emerge from the traditions of socially engaged art but is a community media project in productive tension with its online instantiation. The opacity of the gesture of "giving a picture," and the material and formal operations Photohoku maintains, are productively placed in juxtaposition with the finger-pointing worker and the traditions of conceptual art and video performance. Each project negotiates representation of the self in the context of disaster management, complicating discourses around the control over one's own image, as the ethics of circulating survivors' images blends with neoliberal governmentality, or the prerogative of controlling the self and its representation taking precedence over social bonds and democratic structures. The intersection of these critical media practices in the post-311 environment

constitute a mode of resistance that makes the hegemonic structuring of everyday life visible, encouraging us to look through screens of representation and imagine life beyond their boundaries.

Missing archives

Photohoku is far from the only group exploring the gaps left by the loss of life in Tōhoku and its missing visual archive. The medium of photography has a long history in Japan, and the personal photographic archives of the aging population in the rural countryside range across various analog and digital formats. That being the case, each of the homes destroyed, damaged, or abandoned under duress represented a small tragedy in terms of lost elements of personal and collective histories kept within family photo albums. While Photohoku sought to rebuild them, other organizations were active in restoring and archiving them.

The Salvage Memory Project was initiated two months after the earthquake, when research students in the Japan Society for Socio-Information Studies traveled to Yamamoto and collected photos and albums that had been discovered during the clean-up process. The project attracted the participation of archivists and photographers who volunteered their assistance. The 750,000 photographs that the Salvage Memory Project discovered were entered into Google's Picasa online image storage service. By using that platform's facial recognition and tagging features, project members were able to create a searchable database. Through this process, it was possible to return 19,200 photographs to their owners (Ono 2012). Many of the photos rescued by the group were nearly unrecognizable as having once been indexical representations, resembling abstract paintings instead. The processes of water damage, mold, and decomposition create visual effects that ominously encroach upon their photographic subjects. Looking at these pictures inevitably raises questions about the mortality of the people appearing in these injured images, with physical damage to the photographic medium standing in for more gruesome visions of bloated corpses in swallowed up towns. Two people involved with the Salvage Memory Project, Takahashi Munemasa, who had been with the project since May 2013, and Hoshi Kazuto, a resident of Yamamoto decided to put together an exhibition of these severely damaged photographs, which otherwise would have been discarded.

The resulting exhibition, "Lost & Found Project: Family Photos Swept Away by 3.11 East Japan Tsunami," first ran from January through February 2012 at Tokyo's AKAAKA Gallery. It then traveled to the Hiroshi Watanabe Studio (Los Angeles), Aperture Foundation (New York), Photo Gallery International (Tokyo), the Centre for Contemporary Photography (CCP) and Wallflower Photomedia Gallery (Australia), Intersection for the Arts (San Francisco), and finally, the Fotografia Festival (Rome). Each show arranged the photographs differently according to the specifics of each gallery area, as well as different conceptual references to and recreations of domestic space. In most locations, The Lost & Found Project was mounted so that entire walls were patterned with unframed photos, their dimensions varying wildly. When seen from afar, the arrangement produced painterly associations of blurred acidic colors, pushing the viewer to consider the incomprehensibility of the massive number of lives lost. Walking closer, one could recognize small details of human countenances, although most images were rendered abstract: a face here, a standing figure's silhouette there, still recognizable records of birthday parties, special events, or gatherings. As such specifics elude gallery visitors, the images' chemical distortions evoke the ultimate unknowability of anyone who had perished in time's unsparing disaster. With its grotesque and beautiful mixture of colors, its effect is different from an exhibition of perfectly preserved images of people likely taken in the same wave, pointing instead to a general instability of representation and its social bonds.

Instead of massive walls of images, Italy's Fotografia Festival used the photos to entirely cover the cramped festival space, even plastering them on the ceiling. Unlike a typical gallery with a high ceiling, these physical dimensions more closely resembled those of domestic living spaces. The Aperture Foundation in New York took a similar approach toward recreating a sense of domestic space through the use of old photo frames accenting the spread of images on the wall, and decorating the space of the gallery with framed photos set on surfaces as if it were a typical living room. This had the effect of mixing together the ambience of a gallery, home, and mausoleum. The total effect was as if some gas had swept through the rooms of a house and accelerated the natural aging processes of the photographs. In Geoffrey Batchen's reading of the exhibition, he imagines an attack on a broader scale:

> One can't help but feel that the flesh of photography itself is under attack here, as though these few damaged remnants are all that survive of a mode of representation that once bestrode the world like a behemoth. Kodak's recent decision to declare itself bankrupt only adds to the sense that photography as we once knew it is no more, swept away by a digital, rather than an oceanic, tsunami.
>
> *(Batchen 2012)*

This mourning for the analog is different from Photohoku's efforts to reconstitute family photo albums. In this central project, the photochemical film medium functions to revivify photographic practices through an interdependent relationship with the digital medium.

In addition to these archival and curatorial efforts, the purposeful destruction of photographic material to express risk or anxiety was also part of the visual response to 311 from the very beginning. In a series of photographs captured on (or close to) the day of the disaster, the photographer Nobuyoshi Araki slashes his own prints, suggesting sheets of "black rain" that recalls memories of deadly nuclear fallout. While Araki links the precarity caused by nuclear energy to the nuclear risk of warfare through the absence of scratched-off photographic material, others have attempted to make creative connections by registering the presence of radiation on the photochemical film material itself. This is the case in (New York-based 2002–2014) artist Shimpei Takeda's "Trace" series (*Trace—cameraless records of radioactive contamination*), which he created by exposing film to soil collected from sites across Fukushima, as well as Chiba, Ibaraki, Iwate, and Tochigi prefectures. This camera-less photographic process reveals the unpredictability of the effects of radiation, and produces cosmic imagery resembling a dark night sky or galaxy of stars otherwise achievable only through a long-range, lens-based process. Similar natural imagery is evoked by another camera-less work, a short two-minute film by Tomonari Nishikawa (another artist working in the USA as well as Japan) called *sound of a million insects, light of a thousand stars* (2014). This film was produced by burying 35 mm negative motion picture film, from one sunset to sunrise, under a bed of fallen leaves fifteen miles from the site of the meltdown at the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant. Scratches remained on the surface of the film, as well as curious artifacts that suggest exposure to radiation and tempt us to read them as such a record. Just as no image is captured through a lens, the film has no recorded soundtrack. Nevertheless, audio is important because artifacts remaining on the film can be picked up by the film projector's optical sound reader: they are reminiscent of a quiet night's chorus of insects, or the clicking of a Geiger counter. A final title card states that the site of the film's production had been previously decontaminated through the removal of surface soil, and the Japanese government subsequently announced that it was safe for people to return to their homes in the area. The film's playful title—*sound of a million insects, light of a thousand stars*—literalizes the dissolution of boundaries between nature and technology, celebrating a natural

scene while suggesting its potential loss under nuclear regimes. In removing the portal of subjectivity afforded by a lens, Nishikawa's camera-less film provokes us to contend with the precarious logics of representation. The accusation it nevertheless levies on viewers forces them to consider the dissolution of the singular subject as a coherent point of subjectivity: the potential for nuclear technology to atomize literally as well as figuratively in social organization.

Humans of Fukushima

According to Naomi Klein's model of disaster capitalism, the "shock doctrine" refers to "orchestrated raids on the public sphere in the wake of catastrophic events, combined with the treatment of disasters as exciting market opportunities" (Klein 2007: 6). Derived from the orthodoxies of post-Keynesian neoliberal economics, and developed through case studies in post-Katrina New Orleans, post-invasion Iraq, Pinochet's Chile, as well as post-revolution China and apartheid South Africa, Klein's work examines how natural, human-made, and perceived threats of disaster are used to assert a blank plane on which to impose oppressive policies. She points out, however, that,

> Most people who survive a devastating disaster want the opposite of a clean slate: they want to salvage what they can and begin repairing what was not destroyed; they want to reaffirm their relatedness to the places that formed them.
>
> *(Klein 2007: 9)*

Photohoku (a multilingual portmanteau of "photo" and "Tōhoku") takes portraits of people living in temporary housing in Northern Japan using peel-apart instant film, giving the instantaneously developed photographs to their subjects along with blank photo albums for them to fill. They then dispose of the original negative peeled-off side (unlike conventional instant Polaroids, peel-apart instant film produces a negative sheet). What remains are playful documents of an encounter, digital *mise en abyme* images of framed photos, or subjects holding an image captured (and released) only moments before. These digital images document the initial encounter between photographer and subject, and are primarily used to promote the group's project. They function as evidence to raise funds for future trips by the group to restart more albums, to "give" more pictures.

The Photohoku project began on September 11, 2011, half a year after the disaster. The cofounders were Yoshikawa Yuko, the owner/manager of Tokyo Kids Photo, a family photography studio, and one of her photographers, Brian Scott Peterson. Driving North in a van with roughly fifteen other photographers, they visited the many barracks-like temporary housing units, offering to take pictures of people displaced by the disaster. Using a Konica Instant Press and other camera models, as well as film donated by Fujifilm (in 3×4 and 4×5 dimensions), they interacted with local people, composed quick portraits, and gave the results directly to their subjects. In addition, they gave away photo albums donated to the project by Nakabayashi Co. Ltd. An additional component of their mission was to distribute functional digital cameras with chargers and memory cards (also donated), and later, to return to select areas with a digital printer and photo paper to support past participants' growing albums. Within less than two years, they had completed over twenty trips to more than a dozen communities, begun over 300 new photo albums, and captured (and given away) more than 4,000 photos (Yoshikawa and Peterson 2013).

These images circulated by Photohoku on their blog and social media channels (Facebook, Twitter, YouTube) show people standing, either outside or within their temporary housing

Figure 16.1 Photohoku snapshot from the second trip to Ishinomaki.
Source: Photograph courtesy of Yuko Yoshikawa, Photohoku.

units, while holding the instant photograph of themselves. In these original "inner" photographs, these people smile, look pensive, or perform some action that is playfully timed to the moment of exposure. Showing its subjects jumping in mid-air, or flashing the peace sign, these inner images suggest a performative, presentational conceit characteristic of typical domestic photography produced by and for members of a social unit. At the same time, these qualities suggest a bond between the subject and the photographer, and trust in that photographer's skill to produce moments that feel casual and informal. In the "framing" double-image digital photo, these same subjects hold their instantaneously self-developing photographs, tightly framed with just their fingers seen at the edges, or framed more widely (from the waist up, or capturing their entire figures from head to foot) to create a new portrait in which the subjects hold their own image. In these double-image portraits, the subjects often hold their photograph or open album pages to their chest, frequently fixing their gaze directly at the photographer. (Because image crediting and notation of time and place in the group's postings is inconsistent—their trips involve mostly volunteers and its organizers make their livelihood in different jobs—in most cases it is not noted whether the same photographer took both pictures. The group's practice varies considerably in this respect, with photographers digitally documenting analog photographs they have just taken, as well as others taking care of this documentation.)

These double-image portraits allow viewers to compare details of clothing, hairstyle, setting, and weather to confirm that both images were likely to have been captured in successive

moments. The multiple, visible facial expressions of the subjects create a narrative that suggests their initial encounter with the photographer has somehow changed them. An image of a happy person holding a photograph in which they appear melancholic suggests something different than an image of a melancholic person holding a photograph in which they look happy. Both attest to the great emotional power held in the device of the still camera: the potential to shift a social situation by the apparatus's very presence, and the power to create a narrative of transformation in presenting "before and after" images, no matter what the difference between the two moments captured mean in reality. In Photohoku's case, this difference pertains to the relative conditions generated by analog and digital means of photographic image production. The circulation of Photohoku's work online bears necessary comparison to the "Humans of New York" (HONY) photography blog and social media channels, founded in 2010, which pairs portraits of average pedestrians with interview excerpts as captions. The project's success launched international excursions as well as a photo book, and led to additional branches founded independently worldwide (including "Humans of Tokyo" in 2014). HONY's reduction of visual and textual storytelling from the traditions of Jacob Riis, Erskine Caldwell, and Margaret Bourke-White to short, revelatory statements fit for scrolling a social media feed misses, for critics such as Vinson Cunningham, that "the truest thing about a person, that person's real story, is just as often the thing withheld—the silent thing—as the thing offered" (Cunningham 2015). Photohoku operates on a similar level and is designed for encounter in the same media ecosystem; however, because the images do not rely on captions, the textual element is replaced by the alternative address of the doubled image within, both offered and withheld.

Photohoku's use of photochemical film (highlighted or literally framed by another—digital—image) might seem to fetishize the analog, but it has a practical purpose in developing trust with the photographic subject. In the tsunami's aftermath, as well as during the immediate reconstruction period and the initial stages of the nuclear crisis, an influx of domestic and international media mined people in the Tōhoku region for images of despair and grief, and then largely abandoned them. Photohoku's use of photochemical film ensures that the images their members capture will not be taken away (many, but not all of them, are foreign nationals), that they can remain as foundational components of new personal archives. These photographs can become memories with which to create a potential future. The group's organizers expand on this notion of the value of domestic photography in their mission statement: "Photos are the true treasures of our lives. We collect them over the years and assemble them into photo albums which in turn become our own autobiographies" (Photohoku 2019b). However, it is only through the digital images that Photohoku circulates capturing their process (documenting subjects presumably more comfortable with the group and having given their consent), that we can view the original portraits, creating new autobiographies not of the subjects but of the objects themselves, as images in circulation. The two photographic technologies' shared presence in these images not only invites a commentary on the distinct practice of each photographic medium, but also on the intersection of domestic and public spheres in visual culture, of post-disaster environments, and their spectacularization and subsequent erasure under capital.

These digital remainders—not unlike scraps from Photohoku's peel-apart instant film, it would seem—what work do they do? Once the place-based interaction of this community media project is complete, their purpose is unclear. Posed as antidotes to the commodification of images of post-disaster victims as news material, they suggest a hierarchy of value inherent in the relationship between the analog and the digital. In one course of analysis, the "rich" analog domestic portrait remains in the possession of its subject, while the digital becomes the "poor" image and is given up to massive circulation (a drop in the tastelessly deployed metaphor of a tsunami of images described to follow contemporary media events). As artist and theorist Hito

Steyerl writes, the poor image is a "copy in motion," passed on as a "reminder of its former visual self" (Steyerl 2009). Photohoku, in their simultaneous generation of personal domestic archives in the analog format, and emotionally compelling documentary artifact for promotional circulation in the digital format, participates in this phenomenon. Despite the copyright claims that Photohoku presents on their website, these double-image digital photographs can be re-shared, downloaded, added to slideshows, animated in online videos, compressed, and cropped; like the poor image of Steyerl's formulation, Photohoku's picture of a picture is "thrust into digital uncertainty, at the expense of its own substance" (Steyerl 2009).

Photohoku, in their zealous reconstitution of domestic photo albums in Northern Japan, and in promoting the joy of personal photo documentation abroad, would seem to sidestep the pitfalls of many humanitarian photography projects that depend on the circulation of their primary photographic spoils. Instead, Photohoku's operation might be described as a kind of surrogate auto-ethnography: an attempt to jump-start the personal documentation of a community that had become increasingly marginalized under neoliberalism, with the scaling back of local agriculture and the tactical colonization of the region by the "nuclear village" (*genshiryoku mura*, the network of public and private bodies, experts, and politicians that compose the nuclear power industry) for the economic benefit of Southern metropolises. The group's members open up the possibility for a means of internal image production within an oppressed subculture, changing peoples' relationship to the self and community through reinvestment in the image as physical object. They also stand to make it possible for a digital instantiation of that image to be witnessed, copied, and remixed by the broader public, lending visibility to a group of people that mainstream media seems bent on dismissing as a reminder of national failure and embarrassment. By creating these opportunities, however, they conscript people in the acts of creating and distributing images; as Steyerl observes regarding the economy of poor images, Photohoku drafts their subjects into production.

One might consider the danger of perpetuating the immediate domestic unit as the primary means of regenerating community and documenting personal history. One could imagine a similar photography project in which the inhabitants of Tōhoku's temporary housing complexes—often glorified trailers lined in orderly rows—are recomposed to form similarly tidy nuclear units of family members, smiling at the camera and demonstrating various conveniences during an inconvenient but ultimately bearable stage of life. Although such photographs do exist among Photohoku's output, images of an elderly couple, individual elders, a lone person in their twenties and thirties, and many, many children are far more common. Looking at the digitally reframed photographs without knowledge of each person's story, the spectator is left to fill in the blanks, wondering who has been left out; yet the picture's double framing is never without a narrative component. There is the sense that the act of rebuilding and reconstituting is one of open possibility that is not limited to the reproduction of conservative domestic relations. However intimate the relationship between the subject(s) and photographer is in the initial analog portrait, there is always a composed quality to its reframing within the secondary digital image. The impression that this is a community requiring the intervention of outsiders to encourage its self-documentation is never far from the images the group circulates, whether or not that implication is true, challenging a normative account of the Japanese nuclear family as less open to outside assistance or modes of philanthropy or charity.

The new owners of the analog instant photos would have an entirely different set of associations based on relationships to loved ones appearing in (or missing from) the images. The sense of loss at the particulars of who is not there, as well as the experiential knowledge of life in the temporary housing units when looking back on that period of time in the future (or imagining a time when one might be able to do so), is distinct from the discourse of the victim, the poor

image, or the reinforced conservative collective summarized above. Photohoku's two interdependent technologies of production effect images with substantially different agencies. But can it be said that one format is more or less politically efficacious than the other? As Steyerl suggests, intervening in the circulation of contemporary digital imagery necessitates confronting the screen (television or any other screen-based media) itself. As she puts it, if we perceive the world as built of pixelated images, then we can try to adapt to it. Understanding this logic is key to political agency and contemporary photography, so that when images cross screens into reality, they are transformed, and:

> If reality is post-produced, then it also means that we can change it by post-production. We can sort of "reverse-Photoshop" it, if you like, no? We can intervene into reality, with imaging techniques. So this shifts the question, I think. So the question may no longer be "what is represented in images?" or "how do we read images?" These remain important, no? Absolutely. But additional questions are "which images do we want to become real?," no? As makers and producers, and co-producers of images. "How do we change reality by means of post-production?" "How can it be Photoshopped?" so to speak? "How can it be edited?"
>
> *(Steyerl 2013)*

The suggestion of Photohoku's operations giving analog photos is not simply that some people would rather not be seen, but that if they are, they would prefer to control their own image within its own circulation. Who wants to be seen, and to do so cross through the screen itself?

Surveillance culture

On August 28, 2011, over five months after the initial earthquake, the mysterious figure first known as the "pointing man" appeared on the live internet video feed that Tepco (Tokyo Electric Power Company) installed for the nuclear waste clean-up process's publicly crowdsourced overseers at the damaged Fukushima Daiichi plant. The figure had removed the typical identification markings from his white, ghost-like uniform. These markings were standard for the many temporary workers who were hired by the plant at low wages, and released once they had reached their radiation exposure quota. In the low-quality color recording, which includes Tepco's watermark, copyright information, and timecode, piping juts out across the plant grounds and through some light foliage, toward the structures in the background. The man walks toward the camera from a distance and steps on top of a platform. He stops short once he is framed in the center of the image. The small object he had been holding in front of him is now clearly visible as a mobile phone, which he raises up to his face with his left hand. He slowly and deliberately raises his right arm and points a finger at the camera, holding it in place as if in accusation. After maintaining this position for 20 minutes, the figure moves closer to the camera. Standing on a structure just below the camera's immediate vantage point, he raises his yellow glove to point directly at the lens. He remains unidentifiable, his goggles and breathing mask obscuring the details of his face, which we catch glimpses of behind his outstretched finger. In the pixelated surveillance video, his arm wavers in exhaustion for another 40 seconds before he steps down and disappears. The pointing man's video appearance went viral on YouTube, edited into clips of various lengths documenting the figure's appearance. As these clips circulated on social media, his actions became valorized as an act of protest against a company that failed to provide the plant with properly regulated safety inspections, endangering a formerly agricultural community whose role had been transformed into that of a service

provider, sending power South to the Tokyo metropolis. While Steyerl writes that, "The circulation of poor images feeds into both capitalist media assembly lines and alternative audio-visual economies," the appearance of the finger-pointing worker has served to support formation of the latter (Steyerl 2009). While its target remained open to interpretation, this accusatory image served to represent a large section of the populace frustrated by an industry that had responded to the shock of natural and human-made disaster by following a long-term protocol of public relations damage control, suppressing figures and internal studies attesting to the severity of the nuclear emergency by staggering their release in bits and pieces in an attempt to elude public attention, outcry, and demands for meaningful structural change.

Early in the following month of September, an unnamed man identifying himself as the person in the video feed emailed a Tepco official, posting photos from the plant, as well as a sketch of the surrounding architecture of the site opposite the surveillance camera's view, to an anonymous blog. The crude rendering shows the same piping seen in the recording (only from the opposite direction), and the pointing man seen from behind, directing his finger toward the surveillance camera affixed to a railing. The man explained that he used the smart phone in his hand to orient himself for the camera, and that he was not only acutely aware of, but also strategically dependent upon, this circuit of media transmission. In other words, he used this relayed image of himself to frame his own portrait, and it was not a camera he was pointing at, or any one individual, but the screens displaying his transmitted image. Yes, his outstretched finger pointed in accusation toward the Tepco authorities, but this action also effectively attributed

Figure 16.2 The "finger-pointing worker" in the Tepco livestream.

Source: Image captured from archived segments of the Tepco livestream found on YouTube.

blame to the multitude of silent witnesses, revealing the structure of the media ecologies that they participate in and reproduce without protest. In addition, he gave some context to his own political aims, writing that he desired to bring attention to the plight of temporary nuclear workers in the post-311 environment. Historically, temporary workers in Japan's nuclear power industry have been drawn from marginalized communities of transient individuals located in day laborer pick-up hubs, as well as the *burakumin*, members of Japan's centuries old "untouchable" class, who were for generations conscripted to socially stigmatized livelihoods such as leather working, butchery, and undertaking. Japanese discussion of the pointing man has thus been colored by class, and it is important to highlight that the title, *yubisashi sagyōin*, or "Finger-Pointing Worker," given to him by the artist that would later claim to represent him as an agent has connotations of blue-collar labor.

Illustrating his claims in a blog post, the man supposedly appearing in the video also digitally rendered a diagram explicating the media flow involved in his protest/performance (Finger-Pointing Worker 2011). In it, a cartoon-like pointing man holding a mobile device stands as one node, accompanied by an adjacent camera, a box labeled as Tepco's server, and another representing his cell phone service provider, forming a loop from the figure's performance to his self-observation on the cell phone screen. In between, rest floating sets of eyeballs, representing spectators of the event. Cognizant of this audience, the pointing figure splits his gaze between his mediated reflection on the mobile device and the surveillance camera, his pupils rolling in opposite directions. A unidirectional arrow points from the man's finger toward the camera, and another from the camera toward the man's eyes. A bidirectional arrow extends from the camera to the server, then past the eyeballs to the cell phone provider, returning full circle to the finger-pointing worker, and entering into his phone. Only the arrows in the initial encounter between the camera and its subject (the finger-pointing worker) are unidirectional. The arrow extending from the figure's finger is directed exclusively toward the camera, and the arrow extending from the camera beams toward the man's eyes. This is the space of contestation as seen by the eyes that represent the public sphere, an undefined mass subjectivity breaking the direct flow of gazes, laying bare the flow of media and perspectives. The finger-pointing worker's split gaze (one googly eye rolled toward the camera and one directed toward the phone screen) is significant: not only fixated on his own reflection, but looking through the screen where the accused and the spectators merge.

Although the finger-pointing worker's performance is broken by interruption and repositioning, the act was in part an homage to Vito Acconci's influential video work *Centers* (1971). As is well known, Acconci's piece shows the artist raise his arm to an early video camera. Using a connected video monitor as a mirror, he centers his finger on the screen and holds this pose for over 22 minutes in what appears to be an excruciatingly uncomfortable performance before the camera. Seen in crackling black and white analog video, his arm tires and his finger curls inward as the stationary camera faithfully returns his gaze. Acconci's focus on his own finger, directed toward an image of himself in the moment of production and at the spectator during the moment of exhibition, intensifies to the point of exhaustion for both himself and his viewers. This is perhaps Acconci's most well-known piece. As he describes it, "The result (the TV image) turns the activity around: a pointing away from myself, at an outside viewer. I end up widening my focus onto passing viewers (I'm looking straight *out* by looking straight *in*)" (Zippay 1991: 12, *emphasis mine*). Here, the duration of Acconci's exercise is key, creating an initial fascination that develops into a sustained intersubjective stare. But this locked gaze is importantly lopsided due to the fixity of Acconci's pointed look—what is he pointing at? Its subject and object become the nature of gesture in mediation, due for constant renegotiation through technological change and shifts in the social uses of media.

Resistant self-fashioning

The episode of the "finger-pointing worker" in Fukushima appropriates Acconci's exercise from its context of the conceptual rigor of video and performance art in the 1970s best considered in combination with the radical possibilities of alternative television. The work inserts *Centers* into the simultaneity of internet broadcasting, specifically the performative information transparency of corporate-state self-surveillance, met with the culture jamming of post-disaster management. The natural and human-made disasters of 311 not only resulted in a proliferation of images documenting the catastrophe from professional and amateur sources, but also instigated a widespread investigation of the formal and social capacities of still and moving pictures to respond to such a crisis, *pointing through the screen* of representation to address structures of social control and subjectivity. As Jean-Luc Nancy has commented, not all catastrophes are equivalent; they are "not all of the same gravity, but they all connect with the totality of interdependencies that make up the general equivalence" (Nancy 2015: 6). That is, they intersect with the interchangeability of forces in the realm of financial markets and warfare, and are subject to the "general equivalent" of capital that Karl Marx identified. In Nancy's formulation, in view of this connection between capitalism and technological development, the measurement of disasters' impact today is always based on the threatening paradigm of nuclear risk, and the duration of nuclear time. The historical traumas of Hiroshima and Nagasaki—which had their seventy year anniversaries this decade—introduced the prospect of the world as potential target throughout the Cold War period, where, as Nancy writes,

> Human lives taken en masse are annihilated in the name of an aim that goes well beyond combat (the victims, after all, are not combatants) to assert a mastery that bends under its power not only lives in great number but the very configuration of peoples, not only lives but "life" in its forms, relationships, generations, and representations.
>
> *(Nancy 2015: 11)*

If the historical task of capitalism for Marx was to lead to its transcendence and produce a state of true humanity, as Fukushima proves, natural catastrophes are always already technological, social, economic, and political disasters: situations in which the boundary between nature and technology dissolves (Nancy 2015: 33–34). For Nancy, this calls for an assertion of a common incommensurability, rejecting the atomization of "subjects," and their catastrophic equivalence (Nancy 2015: 40–41). Nancy's formulation is nicely illustrated by Han Ishu's "Life Scan Fukushima," a mosaic representing the now iconically familiar structural components of the Fukushima Daiichi power plant that were damaged in a meltdown and explosion famously broadcast live on television news. Upon closer inspection, however, the mosaic image is revealed to be composed entirely of Japanese currency, one-yen coins repeated in a digital pattern of light and dark shades. Such a gesture upends the appearance of transparency adopted by Tepco in its disaster management tactics and redirects attention to the opacity of the non-representational global currency whose equal is its repetition through exchange. Han's work points toward the economic interests that put the Tōhoku region at risk. At the same time, it foregrounds a crisis of visuality representing a widely depicted site of trauma.

The finger-pointing worker's accusatory address over the Tepco video stream represents a coordinated operation of counter-surveillance that serves to lay bare hidden structures, and does so by relocating an axiomatic circuit of self-observation. At the time of the exhibition of Acconci's *Centers*, Rosalind Krauss wrote influentially of the video medium, noting its "simultaneous reception and projection of an image" as a defining characteristic, in which Acconci's action of

pointing at an image of himself demonstrates the basic social relations allowed by the video medium (Krauss 1976: 52).

As Krauss writes, the place of the human in such instantaneous representations is important, for the

> body is therefore as it were centered between two machines that are the opening and closing of a parenthesis. The first of these is the camera; the second is the monitor, which re-projects the performer's image with the immediacy of a mirror.
>
> *(Krauss 1976: 52)*

Anne Wagner suggests, however, that "these 'parentheses' only *apparently* enforce a closure: the technology of the monitor opens outward, as well as in. Not only does it register a process of surveillance, it itself asks for monitoring" (Wagner 2000: 68, *emphasis mine*). Tracing Krauss and Wagner's critical debate on video and performance art in the context of this mysterious solitary act before a camera in Fukushima allows us to consider the content of this parenthetical, and how personal subjectivity may enter a public sphere through media circulation.

Pointing through the screen

The small mystery of the finger-pointing worker continued until the artist Takeuchi Kota, in the announcement for his solo gallery show at Tokyo's SNOW Contemporary titled OPEN SECRET (held March–April, 2012), declared that he would be exhibiting the pointing video, as well as a performance in which he would personally talk to visitors one-on-one (SNOW Contemporary 2012). The gallery installation of the captured Tepco video stream is exhibited under the title of "Pointing at Fukuichi Live Cam" (2011), and credited to Finger-Pointing Worker ("Fukuichi" is shorthand for the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant, for the first of sister plants, followed by the second, Fukushima Daini). His own personal blog also documented his experience as a low-wage temporary plant clean-up worker in Fukushima, and while he simply claimed to have had a relationship with the finger-pointing worker, and was working to explore the issues this acquaintance had brought up, these dramatic revelations expanded the scope of the performance and deepened its critique, blurring the boundary between the identity of Takeuchi the artist and the worker in the suit. In this orchestrated plan, withholding resolution of the question of whether or not the artist and the laboring activist were one and the same, Takeuchi forced spectators to consider their relationship to the image of this pointing man, stating in an interview,

> How can you identify a person? How can you verify what people say? That is the theme for me. So, by turning this person into a motif, I will be able to see just how much people are willing to believe. The question is the point.
>
> *(Corkill 2012)*

Takeuchi had a history of similarly politicized performance projects. In his 2008 "Portable Mind, Yokohama," for example, he painted the portraits of faces depicted in the fugitive criminals poster tacked up at the Kanagawa prefecture police station in Yokohama (his artwork circulated as the painted portraits, as well as photographs of the process of painting them in public). This most-wanted poster is widely reproduced and distributed in public places, often including outdated images of people from decades into the past. As Takeuchi himself explains of the project:

> The portraits of wanted fugitives are omnipresent in various places around the town such as stations, public baths and police boxes or on the internet. They have been burnt into our mind as an image of death and fear such as murder, robbery and terrorism. Burying such images in the cityscape has paralyzed our sense of fear though it strikes a note of warning. I think that, by building such an environment, we make our lives full of both anxiety and safety.
>
> *(SNOW Contemporary 2012)*

Resembling the aestheticized noise of the United States' color-coded terror alert system, the most-wanted posters function to structure daily life in a rhythm of uneasy reassurance, vaguely identifying a threat while assuring its management by authorities. In a case that seemed to prove Takeuchi's point in "Portable Mind, Yokohama," one of the top names on the most wanted list, Hirata Makoto, a former Aum Shinrikyo chief who had been a fugitive from the law for sixteen years, attempted to turn himself in on the evening of December 31, 2011. The ordeal took hours as Hirata had to walk to several police stations before finding an officer who didn't think he was joking by impersonating the actual criminal whose likeness had been abstracted as a quotidian icon on most-wanted posters visible throughout the country. For Takeuchi, the incorporation of these images in the urban environment means, "we are raising the alarm but at the same time we are deadening our own sensibility to the danger" (Corkill 2012). At the time of this writing, a similar view to the one captured in the finger-pointing worker video (while now significantly elevated above strolling interaction) is still available via the electric utility holding company as the clean-up proceeds (Tepco n.d.).

Both of these works by Takeuchi—"Portable Mind, Yokohama" and "Pointing at Fukuichi Live Cam"—refigure the act of pointing, either by fully aestheticizing the accusation of the wanted poster ("Portable Mind"), or by creating a networked circuit of surveillance distributing the finger-pointing worker's gesture ("Pointing at Fukuichi Live Cam"). The juxtaposition of these two works by Takeuchi reveals their shared operation: that of conscription. Think of the US army recruitment poster's straightforward statement and pointing gesture from "Uncle Sam," "I want you."[2] The army recruitment poster makes it clear that this threat of war solicits a similarly militaristic response. Takeuchi pierces a similar state of suspended risk and social response in each of these works, media environments that solicit the vigilance of potential victims protecting themselves against a criminal attack (wanted posters) or nuclear catastrophe (surveillance video). In the aftermath of 311's earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear catastrophe, those working with documentary media have highlighted the crisis of visuality posed by the total threat of the nuclear and its specific character in the instance of Fukushima. In the case of Photohoku, the medium of photography can be seen as the non-site of a community art project, and the political potential of its negotiation of the analog and digital media circulation directly relevant to these stakes of representation. If one were to create a hypothetical diagram for Yoshikawa, Peterson, and their Photohoku collaborators modeled after that of Takeuchi's finger-pointing worker, it might look somewhat similar. But the arrow pointing back through the screen would be initiated by Photohoku's capture of their secondary digital image: it would originate from the eyes of the subject with their analog image held to their chest, or from their fingers gripping the edges of their analog image. Like the interruption of Tepco's self-surveillance, the Photohoku project instigates a similar line of inquiry about access and the photographic archive. Together, the interruption of Tepco's self-surveillance and the Photohoku project demonstrate the tensions between opacity and transparency in post-311 visual culture, and broader concerns of collectivity and atomization under neoliberalism, the threat of nuclear catastrophe, and environmental collapse.

Notes

1 I have addressed the ways in which documentary films produced immediately following 311 approach the scale of the disaster and efforts toward reconstruction, as well as how this natural and human-made event inform our understanding of contemporary documentary in Anderson (2015).
2 I am indebted to Soyoung Yoon for this connection, as well as for hosting Takeuchi and me during a visit to her New School class in April 2018 with Fumiko Miyamoto of Japan Society, New York.

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