

Rethinking Nature in Post-Fukushima Japan

Facing the Crisis

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and Silvia Vesco

Exhibiting the Return to *terroir*

Art and the Politics of Nature in Post-Bubble Japan

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Abstract In his seminal work on landscape David Cosgrove observed that ‘nature’ as a socio-cultural construct has always functioned as one of the favorite focuses of cultures when humanity is in crisis. Taking this thesis as a theoretical point of departure, this study explores a contemporary art exhibition *Sensing Nature: Yoshioka Tokujin, Shinoda Tarō, Kuribayashi Takashi. Rethinking the Japanese Perception of Nature*, staged in 2010 at the Mori Art Museum in Tokyo. The study investigates the strategies used in contemporary exhibiting practices to establish alternative sources of collective identification, and the role of the notion of ‘nature’ in these processes. It explores the recent shift from the perception of the world as the globe into the national *terroir* as discussed by Bruno Latour and exposed in the conceptual design of *Sensing Nature*, which returns to the nation-specific notion of “the Japanese perception of nature”. This maneuver demonstrates both the role of art in building social and ecological resilience; and the ambivalent potential of culture in the politics of nature.

Summary 1 Introduction. – 2 Approaches to Nature: Yoshioka, Shinoda and Kuribayashi. – 3 Conceptual Design of *Sensing Nature*. – 4 The Paradigm Shift: from the Globe to the *terroir*. – 5 Conclusions.

Keywords Art. Exhibition. Nature. Resilience. Post-bubble. Japan.

“A landscape is a cultural image”
(Cosgrove, Daniels 1989, 1)

1 Introduction

In 2010 the Mori Art Museum in Tokyo displayed *Waterfall* (2005-06), a sculptural installation designed by Yoshioka Tokujin¹ (b. 1967) (Fig. 1).

1 The transcription of Japanese names follows the format selected by the curators of the exhibition *Sensing Nature: Yoshioka Tokujin, Shinoda Tarō, Kuribayashi Takashi. Rethinking the Japanese Perception of Nature*, which this paper interrogates: surname is followed by the given name.



Figure 1. Yoshioka Tokujin (b. 1967), *Waterfall*, 2010, optical glass, metal, 75 × 480 × 70 cm. Courtesy of the Tokujin Yoshioka Design (<http://www.tokujin.com/en/>)

A 4.5-meter bench, the world's largest optical glass, brings to mind water crashing into the surface of a flat pool. The light-penetrating structure of the glass creates an effect of rippling water. Although facilitated by the use of advanced space technologies, *Waterfall* refers to a motif that belongs to an ages-old repertoire of Japanese visual culture pervaded by religious associations. The purificatory symbolism of water based on the belief that waterfalls are dwelling-places of *kami* spirits, combined with the notion of sacred mountains, transform waterfalls into one of the most spiritually poignant symbols in Japanese religious history, often featured in its visual culture (Reader 1991, 122-3). However, Yoshioka does not seem to be interested in representing water, but rather offers the viewer the opportunity to reflect upon the materiality and her or his own emotional responses to the natural phenomenon. The high tech artificiality of *Waterfall* forces the viewer to abandon the position of viewing subject and actively engage with the object, which invites reconsideration of the relationships between subject and object, visibility and materiality, humans and nature.

This particular approach to the natural phenomenon emphasising spiritual and sensory perception rather than intellectual cognition of the world reverberates with the frame of the exhibition where *Waterfall* was dis-

played in 2010.² *Sensing Nature: Yoshioka Tokujin, Shinoda Tarō, Kuribayashi Takashi. Rethinking the Japanese Perception of Nature* fits well within the environmentalist discourses trending globally in the recent years. The rising profile of eco-art initiatives across the world noted by Linda Weintraub (2012) are a good example of this phenomenon related to the burgeoning debate on the Anthropocene, the Era of Man, and its catastrophic ecological consequences. These conceptual links are clearly exposed in the exhibition's press release, which opens with the following environmentalist caution: "Faced with the crisis of global warming and environmental degradation, we have reached an age when we must think about ecology and sustainability on a global scale".³

However, what singles out the *Sensing Nature* exhibition is the association between the global environmentalist discourse and local politics of national identification argued by Nanjo Fumio (2010), the Mori Art Museum's director in his foreword to the exhibit catalogue: "Nature has always been a major pillar of Japanese culture [...] In Japan, nature has always been seen as coexisting rather than at odds with mankind [...] This sense of nature can be called unique, something related to an ancient religious sensibility". This approach is not new, and neither is it limited to Japan; what is particularly interesting is its entanglement with the recent environmentalist debates. On the one hand, in the last few decades sustainability has started to be addressed on a planetary level, for example during UN conferences such as the groundbreaking Earth Summit in Rio in 1992, which led to the Kyoto Protocol in 1997. And since the 1980s, scholars of different disciplinary provenance, among others Denis Cosgrove, W.J.T. Mitchell, Henry Lefebvre and Bruno Latour, have begun to reveal the constructed character of the notion of 'nature' and its implication with power. But the *Sensing Nature* exhibition seems to take an opposite direction as it returns to the nation-specific notion of "the Japanese perception of nature".

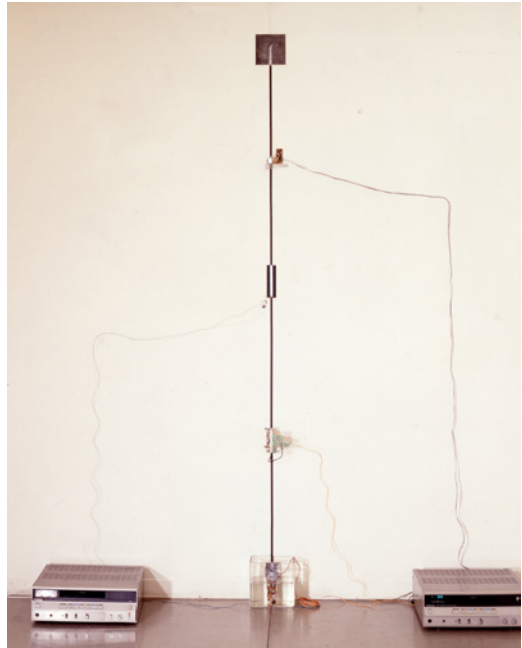
This return becomes clear when the show is compared to earlier exhibitions revolving around the issue of nature and its role in the processes of national identification. *Against Nature: Japanese Art in the Eighties*, developed two decades earlier, serves as an excellent comparison, as it rejected nature as a source of Japanese unique national identity. Developed by a team of American and Japanese curators including Kathy Halbreich, Kobata Kazue, Kohmoto Shinji, Nanjo Fumio and Thomas Sokolowski, *Against Nature* premiered at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art in 1989 and toured the US for three years.⁴ The curators explained the

2 The first version of the *Waterfall* was executed in 2005-06.

3 <https://www.mori.co.jp/en/img/article/091028.pdf> (2015-12-04)

4 The exhibition travelled to Akron Art Museum, Akron, Ohio; MIT List Visual Arts Center, Cambridge, Massachusetts; Bank of Boston Art Gallery, Boston, Massachusetts; Seattle Art

Figure 2. Miyajima Tatsuo (b. 1957), *Nachi Falls*, 1987, mixed media, 280 × 20 × 25 cm. Installation view at Lunami Gallery, Tokyo. Photo by Tadashi Hirose. Courtesy of Tatsuo Miyajima Studio



concept of the exhibition through a reference to a confession by one of represented artists, Tsubaki Noboru (b. 1953): “‘This idea of Japanese people being at one with nature, with the purity and wholeness of nature, is nothing I understand. I am very much against that.’ Hence the exhibition title ‘Against Nature’” (Osaka, Kline 1989, 15). The show featured works by nine individual artists and one collaborative group⁵ who “gnaw at dated colonialist views, both foreign and domestic, of a Japan and an indigenous Japanese art form that is rooted to a traditional agrarian view of the land and man’s responsibility to it” (8). A good example of this approach is a work by Miyajima Tatsuo’s (b. 1957) that presents a strikingly different take on the theme of waterfall than Yoshioka, whose work was discussed earlier. The installation created in 1987 was titled *Nachi Falls* (Fig. 2).

Museum, Seattle, Washington; The Contemporary Arts Center, Cincinnati, Ohio; Grey Art Gallery, New York University and Contemporary Arts Museum Houston, Texas.

5 The artists represented at the exhibition included: Dumb Type, Funakoshi Katsura, Hirabayashi Kaoru, Memoto Shoko, Miyajima Tatsuo, Morimura Yasumasa, Ogino Yusei, Ohtake Shinro, Tsubaki Noboru and Yamamoto Tomioki.

The title refers to one of the most sacred waterfalls in Japan, celebrated in a medieval painting kept at the Nezu Institute of Fine Arts in Tokyo. *Nachi Waterfall*, officially recognised as a National Treasure, belongs to the genre of *suijaku-ga*, or images representing 'traces' (*suijaku*), the Shinto manifestation of a Buddhist deity that represents natural phenomena such as mountains and forests.⁶ Miyajima, one of Japan's foremost sculpture and installation artists, reconstructed the famous view using a small monitor and a long blue neon strip leading to a water tank on the floor beneath it. The video showed the actual Nachi Waterfall and the neon represented the cascade. The wires powering the machine framed the view. Miyajima's interpretation of the old-time icon is deviously heretic. His take on the theme seems to be indifferent (if not hostile) to the 'sacred' or the 'beautiful' culturally encoded in the motif.

A quick comparison of Yoshioka's and Miyajima's works reveals that although both artists share interests in high tech media, the subject and a particular approach that translates the natural thorough the artificial, their perceptions of the motif are inherently different. Yoshioka's non-specific *Waterfall* focuses on exploring human responses to nature and is guided by a clearly discernible aesthetic concern. In contrast, Miyajima's industrialised take on a natural and cultural treasure brings to mind the artificiality of the concept of nature as a cultural text that contributes to the iconisation and beautification of certain natural locations (e.g. Nachi Falls). Although not all of the works presented at the exhibition address the issue as straightforwardly as Miyajima's, *Against Nature* evokes a vision of Japanese society effectively divorced from nature on both a practical and an ideological level. When seen in the context of the discussion of the identity of Japanese contemporary art transcribed and published in the bilingual exhibition catalogue, *Against Nature* creates an intriguing backdrop for the *Sensing Nature* show installed two decades later. The return to 'native' nature is poignant and invites consideration of the role of the notion of nature in contemporary art and exhibiting practices as well as in today's Japanese environmentalism.

A useful perspective to consider these issues is provided by Bruno Latour's post-environmentalist concept of the 'politics of nature', which entails that political ecology is paralysed by established categories of thought and the old dichotomy between nature and society (Latour 2004). In its place Latour proposes a collective, a community incorporating humans and non-humans. Building on the ideas developed by James Lovelock, he proposes the notion of Gaia that offers a venue to reconsider different models of relationships between the human and non-human actors. The Gaia, a complex system of interactions between organic and inorganic elements that maintains life

6 *Nachi Waterfall*: hanging scroll; ink and colour on silk, 160.7 × 58.8 cm, <http://www.nezu-muse.or.jp/en/collection/detail.php?id=10001> (2015-12-04)

on the planet erases earlier divisions between humans and non-humans (nature). Importantly, the Gaia theory also exposes the entanglement of notions of nature with global and national politics. So far two concepts: the *terroir* and the globe, have played major roles in structuring relationships between humans and their surroundings either through promoting particularism/national identities or universalism/globalism. The Gaia theory offers a possibility to create a 'New Climatic Regime' that avoids the traps of particularism and globalism. These insights can shed light on the transformation of perceptions of nature and environmental consciousness in contemporary Japan exposed by the *Sensing Nature* exhibition.

2 Approaches to Nature: Yoshioka, Shinoda and Kuribayashi

Sensing Nature featured several large-scale installations by three conceptual artists: Yoshioka Tokujin, Shinoda Tarō and Kuribayashi Takashi. The exhibition's website states that "[The artists'] ideas of nature suggest that it is not something that is to be contrasted with the human world, but that it is something that incorporates all life-forms, including human-beings. Their works hint that we have inherited this all-encompassing cosmology deep in our memories and in our DNA".⁷ In order to understand whether and how these ideas have been implemented, this paper focuses on several key works designed or reworked especially for the exhibition. As this study is primarily interested in ideologies that utilise notions of nature for different agendas, be they political, economic, environmental, or others, the material aspects of the show are not the main concern. The aim is rather to interrogate selected works from the perspective of the conceptual design of the show, sketched in the exhibition catalogue and related publicity materials; and locate this perspective within the current discourse on sustainability.

The artist chosen to open the show was Yoshioka Tokujin, an industrial designer recognised for his explorations of "the potential of design to incorporate natural principles and effects and to integrate natural science technologies", as stated on the exhibition's website.⁸ At the Mori Art Museum Yoshioka presented several works, including the above-mentioned *Waterfall* and *Snow* (Fig. 3). This installation, a smaller version of which was designed for Issey Miyake in 1997, was a fourteen-meter-long tank filled with hundreds of kilograms of light feathers that were occasionally blown about by a large fan, mimicking snowfall. Yoshioka's work

7 http://www.mori.art.museum/english/contents/sensing_nature/exhibition/index.html (2015-12-04).

8 http://www.mori.art.museum/english/contents/sensing_nature/exhibition/index.html (2015-12-04).



Figure 3. Yoshioka Tokujin, *Snow*, 2010, glass tank, feathers, fan, 600 × 1400 × 500 cm. Courtesy of the Tokujin Yoshioka Design (<http://www.tokujin.com/en/>)

did not represent nature but rather activated the viewer's memories and emotional responses triggered by the material characteristics of falling snow - first of all, its extraordinary lightness. The interest in human emotions triggered by the materiality of things can be considered a leitmotif of Yoshioka's artistic practices. In an interview recorded by the Mori Art Museum he laments the current digital culture that diminishes the range of our material interactions with objects. In his works Yoshioka tries to recover these sensory experiences.

In the interview published in 2011 on the website of the Sherman Contemporary Art Foundation Yoshioka explains:

Nature never gives us the same face twice and the beauty of nature comes from that aspect. Many of my works adopt this principle of nature. [...] When I design installations I don't just use nature as a motif but I investigate the spiritual uplifting and the mechanism of it. [...] I'm not trying to recreate those elements but I am trying to recreate the feelings that people experience when they perceive nature and therefore am trying to adopt those elements into my design.⁹

⁹ http://sherman-scaf.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2011/10/TokujinYoshioka_Waterfall.pdf (2015-12-04).



Figure 4. Shinoda Tarō (b. 1964), *GINGA (Milky Way)*, 2010, mixed media, dimensions variable. Photo by Takayama Kozo. Courtesy of Mori Art Museum



Figure 5. Kuribayashi Takashi (b. 1968), *Wald aus Wald (Forest from Forest)*, 2011, mixed media, dimensions variable. Installation view at the Beyond Museum, Seoul. Courtesy of Kuribayashi Takashi

Clearly, Yoshioka is not interested in representation of nature but through emphasising the tangibility of objects he tries to recreate the invisible, the human emotions triggered by natural phenomena: water, snow, storm, light, and so on. This approach questions the established relationships between viewer and work, subject and object, nature and humans, and opens a path to consider nature as an individual experience within human beings rather than the world external to us.

The interest in questioning established notions of nature is shared by Shinoda Tarō (b. 1964). He is interested in the “process by which our lives, society, and culture tend to turn nature into an entirely abstract concept”, as stated in the artist’s biographical note published on the exhibition’s website.¹⁰ His sculptural installation *GINGA (Milky Way)* (2010) and video trilogy *Reverberation* (2009-10) serve as good examples of this observation. *GINGA* is an installation consisting of a pool of a white liquid with approximately fifty PET bottles suspended above it (Fig. 4).

The bottles discharge drops of the same liquid that hit the pool and create temporary patterns on its surface. These patterns recreate the autumn constellations of the Big Dipper and Orion. They last only momentarily before dissolving into ripples. The work challenges the common perception of constellations as a permanent element of the solar system and envisions them as short-lived performances enacted by humans, in this context an artificial installation made of disposable plastic bottles. Shinoda’s work points to the transient and staged character of human perception of natural phenomena. In this context nature is hardly more than an artifice.

Similar issues are also observable in *Reverberation*, three simultaneously screened video installations showing three distinctive areas of contemporary Tokyo. The first film explores the artist’s neighbourhood in the capital’s Western suburbs and juxtaposes a parking lot and a garbage disposal plant with images of a tapir in a zoo.¹¹ Shinoda’s tapir brings into focus the artificiality of contemporary concepts of nature, which is likened to a wild animal kept in cage. The second film was shot from a boat cruising the underground waterways in central Tokyo. Following Japan’s economic success and the capital’s growth, these canals were covered over to create space for the city’s transportation arteries. Today they are hardly visible but they still define people’s movements. The third movie shows the lakes near Tokyo that provide drinking water for the capital. Although important for the survival of humans, they also

¹⁰ http://www.mori.art.museum/english/contents/sensing_nature/exhibition/index.html (2015-12-04).

¹¹ “Reverberation”: video, each ca.10 min. <http://www.takaishiigallery.com/en/archives/5993/> (2015-12-04).

are largely ignored. Shinoda's works presented at the Mori show offer an interesting commentary on the artificiality of the concepts of nature and the near total invisibility and virtual irrelevance of 'real nature' in today's human urban experience.

The third and last participant in the exhibition, Kuribayashi Takashi (b. 1968) is mainly interested in the divisions separating humans and nature. One of his works exhibited at the Mori Art Museum is the large-scale installation *Wald aus Wald (Forest from Forest)* (2010) (Fig. 5).¹² Real larch trees from Yamagata were used to create the moulds to construct an artificial floating forest made of *Awa washi* (handmade paper). The paper trees and the ground were suspended from the ceiling above the gallery floor. The visitors entered from below and viewed the 'natural' world by putting their heads up through holes and experienced the borderline between the visible and the invisible worlds.

At the Mori Art Museum Kuribayashi also presented *Inseln (Islands)* (2001-10), a large mountain range made of black soil and pumice stone.¹³ A round transparent plastic platform symbolising the surface of water divides the peaks from the large mass beneath. This manipulation brings into focus the boundary between two different worlds. It also reveals the artificiality of the division itself, as the borderline transforms in accordance to changing life of the planet, geological circumstances, tides, and so on. The notion of borderlines is a frequent theme in Kuribayashi's artistic practice. As stated in the interview given in 2010 for the Mori Art Museum, his preoccupation with liminality enables him to reflect on the borderline defining human identities, relationships between people, and divisions between humans and nature. Shimizu Minoru (2010, 187) comments on his works in his essay in the exhibition catalogue: "Kuribayashi's installations shatter the illusion of 'natural versus artificial' - human nature - and expose its fictionality".

The installations at the *Sensing Nature* exhibition generally did not 'represent' nature as such. Instead they addressed a wide range of questions related to the issue of relationships between nature and humans, from exploring the emotions triggered by natural phenomena (Yoshioka) to reconsidering the artificiality of the concepts of nature itself (Shinoda) and examining the boundaries between the human and the non-human realms (Kuribayashi). But how are these works positioned within the conceptual design of the exhibition and its goals? In the Foreword to the bilingual catalogue accompanying the show, Nanjo Fumio (2010, 9), the

12 Due to copyright restrictions it was not possible to reproduce the photo of the work taken at the Mori Art Museum.

13 *Inseln*, 2001-10, mixed media, ca. 400 × 750 × 1000 cm. <https://www.takashikuribayashi.com/works> (2015-12-04).

Mori Art Museum's director, writes: "'Sensing Nature' considers the relationships between the traditional sense of nature and the sensibilities and cultural memory of Japanese living today". But what exactly did this "traditional sense of nature" mean for the creators of the exhibition? And how was it considered relevant for 'sensibilities and cultural memory' of today's Japanese?

3 Conceptual Design of *Sensing Nature*

In her catalogue essay *Sensing Nature: Nature as Presence*, exhibition curator Kataoka Mami (Kataoka et al. 2010, 196) suggests that the Japanese perception of nature is characterised by the notion of unity between humans and nature: "Underlying the Japanese view of nature is a kind of presence, or a set of vibrations that spatially link objects, and within the culture that senses this presence, people and nature are linked irrevocably". She grounds the particular notion of unity of nature and humans in Japanese spirituality: "The Japanese view of nature is one in which various religious outlooks, from nature worship to shamanism, ritualism, the I Ching, folk religion, Shinto and Buddhism have merged over the ages while being influenced by the unique climate and topography of Japan" (196). Kataoka draws a clear distinction between the two meanings of the world 'nature': one is *shizen*, which "refers to the objectified natural world" (207), and the second is *shinrabanshō* (the whole of creation) or *tenchibanbutsu* (all things in the universe), which describe a unified world of nature and humans. This division is supposedly attributable to religious and climatic differences between the modern concept of *shizen*, which was imported from the West and the pre-modern notions of *shinrabanshō* and *tenchibanbutsu* considered native to Japan. The native concepts are thought to be the most relevant for Japan's approaches to nature in general.

However, even a glimpse at the variety of pre-modern art terms related to natural phenomena demonstrates the conceptual and functional diversity of notions of nature that are not necessarily exclusively guided by the idea of the holistic unity of humans and nature. This vocabulary included a large number of terms such as *sansui-ga* (images of 'mountain and water'); poetry-based *meisho-e* (pictures of famous places); *keibutsuga* (pictures of seasonal imagery) with its sub-genre of pictures of the four seasons (*shiki-e*) and pictures of annual observances of the twelve months (*tsukinami-e*); religiously motivated *sankei madara* (symbolic pictures of pilgrimage sites) and *shaji engi-e* (illustrations of legends of shrines and temples); and more practically used *ezu* (maps). Investigation of these concepts is beyond the scope of this study, but it is necessary to note that rendering natural phenomena had different functions depending on changing context of production and consumption of pre-modern visual culture. Essentially, they should not be

perceived as landscapes, a modern Western concept related to representation of places and guided by the principles of picturesque. The topography or even locality of particular views was not necessarily relevant in the most important concepts such as *meisho-e*, today generally perceived as landscape. For example, the concept of *meisho* derives from *utamakura* (lit. 'poem pillow'), rhetorical figures that tie seasonal images with particular places. Initially, the places described in the poems were anonymous: there were no explicit references to actual locations, and often place-names were mere wordplays. However, certain sites and locations gradually came to be linked to particular poetic imagery represented in the visual format of *meisho-e* (images of famous places). This resulted, for example, in a conceptual connection between cherry blossoms, the Yoshino area, and spring or red maple leaves, or the Tatsuta River and autumn (Chino 2003, 41). The relationship between *utamakura* and *meisho* is a well-known phenomenon of Japan's pre-modern textual and visual culture (Kamens 1997), and points to the culturality of pre-modern notions of nature and the redundancy of realistic rendering of the world.

Only the pressures of the modern Western 'scientific' vision of the world changed the perception of nature as well as the meaning and function of landscape as its representation. The modern concept of nature as *shizen* emerged in literature and arts around the 1880s. This marked a break with nature perceived as "synonymous with the anti-modern, the past, the oppressive, or the Orient" (Thomas 2001, 25) and linked by Maruyama Masao (1974) to the birth of modernity. This event also marked the birth of landscape or *fūkei*. Although the word *fūkei* had already appeared in the *Man'yōshū* (Collection of Ten Thousand Leaves) poetry anthology in the eighth century, it was not extensively used in pre-modern art (Matsumoto 1994). This changed drastically in the modern era. Karatani Kōjin (1993) defined this phenomenon as the modern 'discovery of landscape' (*fūkei no hakken*). He identified the discovery of landscape as the apex of the cultural appropriation of Western modernity, as *fūkei* transformed the way of viewing and understanding the world. Modern artistic conventions applied to 'represent' *fūkei* such as linear perspective and realism located the subjective viewer of landscape outside the picture. At the same time they gave the observer the power to control the landscape via an omnipotent central position and scientific objectivity. While pre-modern *sansui-ga* was not concerned with the relationship between viewer and object, but presented a transcendental metaphysical model of place, *fūkei* was mainly concerned with actuality. The concept of 'the gazing eye' encoded in *fūkei* introduced unequal power relationships between humans and the non-human realms now defined as *shizen*. It also facilitated interpretation of space in national terms, as it was controlled by the modern viewing subject. It is no surprise that *Nihon fūkeiron* (Japanese Landscape), published in 1894 by Shiga Shigetaka (1863-1927), which used landscape in the production

of national identification, was a best seller. Japanese imperial expansion was supported by another highly popular book, the controversial *Fudō* (Climate and Culture) by Watsuji Tetsurō (1889-1960), issued in 1931. Watsuji argued for an essential relationship between climate and other environmental factors and cultures that merges the narration of uniqueness of Japanese nature with environmental determinism (Mayeda 2006).

These modern perceptions of relationships between humans and non-human actors that merged with the Orientalist interpretation of Japanese culture as a primordial paradise unspoiled by modern Western civilisation contributed to the myth of 'Japanese love of nature'. In his discussion of the concepts of nature, Toshio Watanabe (2010, 185) quotes Josiah Conder (1852-1920), a founding father of Japanese modern architecture, who said that the Japanese "are unrivalled in their genuine love of nature" (2002, 2). Edwin Reischauer and Marius Jansen's perception that "The Japanese love of nature and sense of closeness to it also derive strongly from Shinto concepts" rooted in the notion of unity between human and non-human elements has been particularly influential (1995, 212). Only recently have scholars begun to deconstruct the myth of Japan's 'inherent affinity with nature'. In 1996, Arne Kalland and Pamela Asquith (1996, 4) observed that while cultural products such as poems, paintings, sculptures gardens and so on were taken as a proof of alleged love of nature, the validity of the claim itself was never tested. They conclude that the Japanese have a rather ambivalent approach to nature. Veneration is only one aspect and aestheticisation has little to do with general behaviours toward nature as a whole (Kalland, Asquith 1996, 29-31). The analysis of pre-modern poetry and modern historiography conducted respectively by Haruo Shirane (2013) and Julia Adeney Thomas (2001) confirms these observations. In her recent study of East Asian textual cultures, Karen Thornber (2012) argues that the relationships between the human and the natural world are best described as characterised by ambiguity, ambivalence, paradox, tension, and uncertainty. But since the Meiji Restoration in 1868, the myth of 'Japanese love of nature' has played a vital role in the narration of the concept of national identity in Japan. Although it has been questioned in the last two decades it has never disappeared completely, as can be seen in the conceptual framework of the *Sensing Nature* exhibition, which reaches to the environmental determinism proposed in 1931 in Watsuji's *Fūdō*. The show rejects the modern notion of *shizen* and returns to the rhetorics of holistic perception of nature identified with pre-modern tradition as the source of Japanese national identification. Although this 'tradition' was invented in the modern period (Vlastos 1998) it is nonetheless interesting to explore its recent revival. It is helpful in this endeavor to locate *Sensing Nature* within the Mori Art Museum's yearly exhibition program and consider it from the perspective of Bruno Latour's recent post-environmentalist thoughts on 'politics of nature'.

4 The Paradigm Shift: from the Globe to the *terroir*

Sensing Nature was part of the Mori Art Museum's yearly exhibition program that extended throughout the whole 2010 and aimed at "Redefining Japan".

As the world undergoes massive changes on both political and economic fronts, the Mori Art Museum is engaged in a reexamination of the culture that forms the foundation of Japanese society. (Nanjo 2010, 9)

The Museum press release links these concerns to socio-political crisis on the global and domestic levels: "In many ways, 2010 will be a watershed year for Japan. The financial crisis that has enveloped the world since late 2008 has demonstrated how closely interconnected the country's economy is with those of other nations. Meanwhile, it goes without saying that after Japan's change of national government in 2009, the coming year will see significant changes at home".¹⁴

To rectify the critical situation, *Sensing Nature* proposes a return to a pre-modern holistic view of the world based on the idea of the coexistence of humans and nature.

Kataoka Mami (Kataoka et al. 2010, 196) concludes her catalogue entry: "This essay does little more than scratch the surface of this topic, but in a country where political leadership lacks stability, I believe that this view of nature will play an important role in helping people recall their own cultural DNA and seek out Japan's cultural identity". It is axiomatic that political crisis prompts the search for alternative avenues of security and stability. As I have argued elsewhere, visual references to domestic territory were essential for the development of collective identities in the critical 1830s, which were marked by political turmoil and natural catastrophe (Machotka 2009).¹⁵ Usually, communal identities are formed around the person of a leader, religious institutions, the nation-state, and so on, but crisis causes diversification of these sources. Thus, the 'return to nature' can be interpreted as a search for an alternative source of security at the time of crisis, be it economic, political or environmental. The *Sensing Nature* press release states: "Faced with the crisis of global warming and environmental degradation, we have reached an age when we must think about ecology and sustainability on a global scale [...]. Most recently, the concept of *satoyama*, the Edo Period [1600-1868] idea

14 <https://www.mori.co.jp/en/img/article/091028.pdf> (2015-12-04).

15 My earlier research, published e.g. in the book *Visual Genesis of Japanese National Identity: Hokusai's Hyakunin isshu*, explored the intersemiotic and intercultural translation of medieval court poetry into the popular culture of 19th woodblock prints. It argued that the images of nature created in this process were used as a means to remedy current socio-political crisis.

of a zone existing between the natural and urban environments, is again attracting interest".¹⁶

This statement refers to the recent domestic and international recognition of the concept of *satoyama* (lit. 'village-mountain') or 'liveable mountain', a type of socio-ecological production landscape (SEPLS¹⁷) that in the last decade provided inspiration for different domestic projects, including art events like the Echigo Tsumari Art Field.¹⁸ *Satoyama* as SELPS is not unique to Japan, but recently the term has been adopted by the mainstream environmental studies. A series of Global Workshops on the Satoyama Initiative held in 2009 resulted in the establishment of the International Partnership for the Satoyama Initiative in 2010, an international forum that promotes collaboration in the conservation and restoration of sustainable human-influenced natural environments.¹⁹ Interestingly, the project was initiated by the Ministry of the Environment of Japan in collaboration with the United Nations University Institute for the Advanced Study of Sustainability (UNU-IAS). It is also difficult to ignore the official promotion of the 2020 Tokyo Olympics as a sustainable event, the "Green Games" and the role of arts (architecture, urban planning, design etc.) in relation to this claim.²⁰ These developments are understandable when considered from the perspective of the transformation of the role of Japan within the international community. For the last several decades the Japanese government has pursued environmental diplomacy in order to assume environmental leadership in the region (Graham 2004). These efforts intensified from the 1990s, when the bursting of the financial bubble shook the belief in Japan's post-war economic miracle. Although some scholars who examine both domestic and foreign environmental policy (Takao 2012) suggest that Japan's actual environmental leadership has declined in the past decade, this does not necessarily mean that public rhetoric has changed, despite the controversies related to the Fukushima ecological disaster of 2011. On the contrary, recent environmental marketing suggests that Japan has not given up its aspirations to environmental leadership, and *Sensing Nature* could be seen as the reflection of this general agenda. As exhibitions are themselves fora (mediums and settings) for re-presentation as much as they serve as a vehicle for the display of objects, they also function as

16 http://mori.art.museum/contents/press/2010_20091028_e.pdf (2015-12-04).

17 As defined by the International Partnership for the Satoyama Initiative (IPSI); see <http://satoyama-initiative.org/en/about/> (2015-12-04).

18 I have discussed this issue in the article Machotka 2018.

19 For more information on this project please refer to <http://satoyama-initiative.org> (2015-12-04).

20 For more information please refer to <https://tokyo2020.jp/en/games/sustainability/> (2017-14-07).

elements of discourse implicated with power. As pointed out by Ivan Karp (1991, 14): "If [an exhibition] can aid or impede our understanding of what artists intend and how art means, then its subtle messages can serve masters other than the aesthetic and cultural interests of the producers and appreciators of art". The power of the displayed objects reaches out beyond their formal boundaries to a larger world that produced them (Greenblatt 1991). This is especially true in the case of exhibitions re-presenting objects produced by more than one artist. They facilitate generalisations used in the construction of larger narratives.

This connection between economic, political and environmental crisis felt in Japan in the late 2000s fused with the search for national redefinition becomes better understandable when viewed from the perspective of post-environmentalist theory proposed recently by Bruno Latour. Latour argues for the development of 'political ecology' defined as the progressive constitution of the collective of humans and non-humans in a 'good common world' that "has nothing at all to do with 'nature' - that blend of Greek politics, French Cartesianism, and American parks" (Latour 2004, 5). He argues that given its ideological function it is imperative to do away with the concept of nature altogether. Only then it will be possible to truly embrace egalitarian environmentalism. And it is necessary to look for new ways of conceptualising the life of the planet. One of them is the concept of Gaia.²¹

The Gaia, a complex system through which living phenomena modify the Earth, offers a new way to disentangle the ethical, political, theological, and scientific aspects of the now obsolete notion of nature.²² The Gaia Theory also exposes the entanglement of the notion of nature with global and national politics as it offers an alternative to two already discredited concepts: the *terroir* and the globe. These concepts have been playing major role in structuring relationships between humans and their surroundings respectively promoting particularism/national identities or universalism/globalism. The recent disappointment with globalisation felt across the world brought to the fore the notions of national identification encoded in the multidisciplinary concept of *terroir* originally used to regulate and narrate wine-place relationships (van Leeuwen, Seguin 2006). The notion of *terroir* as a form of environmental determinism draws causal relationships between soils, climate and their product (e.g. wine) and its distinctive sensory qualities. This notion also entered the social sciences

21 These ideas were presented at the Gifford Lectures given by Bruno Latour in Edinburgh February 2013 (Latour 2017).

22 The Gaia Theory, developed by James Lovelock and Lynn Margulis in the 1970s, proposes that organisms and surroundings form a synergistic and self regulating system that helps to maintain and perpetuate the conditions for life on the planet. Although criticised, the theory has served as a useful metaphor reinterpreted by scholars in different disciplines including, most recently, Bruno Latour.

and humanities, where it came to be entangled with the ideas of origin and specificity. Although the idea of *terroir* is as utopian as the concept of the globe, and the community structured around it is as imaginary as the global village, the recent decade saw the sudden rise of *terroir* rhetorics caused by economic and political crisis. Latour warns that if these narratives are not balanced by the 'New Climatic Regime' based on the Gaia Theory, humanity will soon be confronted by a war of national identities. When looked from this perspective, the recent transformation of perceptions of nature in contemporary Japan is conspicuous.

At first, it seems that the creators of *Sensing Nature* embraced a holistic vision of the Earth and rejected the modern concept of nature as separate for humans which also underlines Latour's thoughts on Gaia. However, its entanglement with the notions of national identification remains precarious. In the context of global economic, political and environmental crises pervading late 2000s, which exposed failure of the modernisation project and the dangers of global connectivity, it is not surprising that *Sensing Nature* returned to pre-modern notions of nature perceived as native. This return facilitated the imagining of the national *terroir*. It is also hardly a coincidence that this exhibition narrated a strikingly different vision of Japanese perception of nature from the *Against Nature* show, which presented art produced in the 1980s. Developed two decades earlier, at the time of Japanese unprecedented economic growth and global economic expansion, *Against Nature* rejected the concept of nature as the source of Japanese national identity. As argued by Hayashi Michio (2018) this period in Japanese history, marked by high economic growth and the maturation of the consumer society, resulted in 'the death of landscape'. This phenomenon, understood as the 'Tokyo-isation' of space, wiped out local cultural traditions in favour of a flat network of characterless landscapes. In this sense, it is not surprising that nature as homogenised simulacrum (simulated reality) was rejected as the source of national identification in favour of universalism related to globalisation. And it is only 'natural' that in the changed economic climate of the global financial crisis of 2007-08 *Sensing Nature* returned to environmental determinism and concepts of nature - but not landscape, which was still considered dead - seen as national *terroir*. However, as mentioned above, Latour warns that the exclusive *terroir*-focused thinking is not capable to resolve global ecological crisis that needs to be addressed on a planetary level in a fully democratic and egalitarian way, incorporating both human and non-human actors. Nonetheless, the artistic return to 'nature' advocated by the *Sensing Nature* exhibition could be seen as the buffer against recent social and environmental disturbance.

5 Conclusions

In his seminal work on landscape Cosgrove (1988, 222) observes that 'nature' as a socio-cultural construct has always functioned as one of the favorite focuses of cultures when humanity is in crisis. It is therefore not surprising that the *Sensing Nature* exhibition that was organised in the midst of the turbulent late 2000s framed works by Yoshioka, Shinoda and Kuribayashi in relation to the idea of 'return to nature' understood as national *terroir*, which perceives a holistic vision of relationships between human and non-human actors as a part of a unique Japanese 'cultural tradition'. This paradigm shift can be explained in the context of the general disappointment with globalisation felt after the bursting of the financial bubble in the 1990s, further boosted by the global financial crisis of 2008-09 that put a heavy pressure on the society and environment. To absorb the disturbances and adapt to changes the discredited notion of nature as the globe was substituted by the attractive (but also precarious) idea of the *terroir*, embedded in the 'cultural DNA' of the Japanese. This maneuver demonstrates both the role of art in building social and ecological resilience; and the ambivalent potential of culture in the politics of nature.

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