

### *Disturbed Ecologies*

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The idea of ecology as a balanced equilibrium striving for harmony is currently being questioned (Seth R. Reice 2003, Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing 2015). Non-anthropogenic ecological disturbances such as periodic wild fires, volcanic eruptions, droughts and floods are considered to be productive for natural environments because they often reduce the influence of dominant species and thus leave the conditions for more diverse growth. However, people try to control these diffractive nonhuman entanglements on a landscape scale by building embankments and extinguishing periodic wild fires. At the same time, almost everything human beings do or produce has a violent effect on nonhuman communities and the planet. Humans have initiated a deep ecological crisis that has resulted in the loss of biodiversity, climate change, intensive scale wild fires and new infectious diseases.

This film-driven artistic research aims to study vernacular environmental practices that can be considered anthropogenic disturbances as well. In the past, these practices (such as wood charcoal production, swidden farming and coppicing) have been suppressed, nearly to the point of extinction, based on the perception that these damage nature's original state. This perspective is not entirely false—such practices do alter environmental conditions and can reshape entire landscapes. However, fresh views on ecology propose positive insights into these patchwork disturbances as a vital stimulation for dynamic growth and the maintenance and enhancement of biodiversity. Hence, the study aims to answer the question of how these anthropogenic disturbances contribute to a sustainable ecology. One proposition is that these anthropogenic practices often provided space to more-than-human others, simply because they exist prior to us and entirely independent from our contributions. Nonhuman activities are recognized and conceived as matter(ing).

### The Fields

In times of an ecological emergency precipitated by humans, the shift towards post-humanist approaches seems more urgent than ever. Being concerned with the interactions and interconnections between humans and nonhumans on a landscape scale, the research brought me to Japan and, in particular, to a specific environment that is referred to as *satoyama*—a type of landscape that can be found in many parts of Asia and elsewhere in the world, but that is especially well-researched in Japan. *Satoyama* describes a passage area, a zone of transition and encounters between village and mountain, between arable land and forest, between humans and nonhumans. It is an area formed, transformed and sustained by the rhythms of interspecies exchange. Recent research on the landscape has praised *satoyama* for its outstanding biodiversity. It is shown that diversity can be sustained and even enhanced by proportional and integrated human interventions and activities. This outlook on ecology suggests that human activities are not *a priori* dominating, but can be comparable with the activities and practices of other-than-humans. In 2015, a three-week research journey to Japan brought me and my collaborator Mikhail Lylov to Katsue Fukamachi, an environmental scientist and historian at the Kyoto University Graduate School of Global Environment Studies. Fukamachi's work focuses on the alteration of *satoyama* over time (1997, 2001). It includes not only rural but also urban forms of *satoyama* (2002), engages in comparative studies of *satoyama* in Japan and England (2003) and draws attention to the importance of orally transmitted knowledge deriving from vernacular practices (1997, 2009). In her research, Fukamachi emphasizes the role of human

practices and knowledge for the production and sustainment of high biodiversity. Fukamachi and her colleagues' expertise and the methodologies of satoyama research and rural planning are outstanding. Further important literature in this field has been published by Makoto Yokohari (2002, 2008), Kazuhiko Takeuchi (2003, 2011), Noboru Kuramoto and Youichi Sonoda (2003), Kaoru Ichikawa (2006), Morimoto Yukihuro (2011) and Shigetoshi Nakagaw (2003).

The debate on the Anthropocene (Paul Crutzen 2002, Donna Haraway 2015, 2016, Jason Moore 2016, Tsing 2015) provides presuppositions for further discussions on ecology in terms of disturbances when suggesting that the entire planet is disturbed by the development of human technologies. We are thus, as Claire Colebrook puts it, all thrown into a situation of urgent interconnectedness (Colebrook 2013). However, if one takes a closer look at the images that conjure up and dramatize the Anthropocene, the representations turn out to be surprisingly limited. Typical examples are animated data-images of illuminated logistical networks seen from outer space or high resolution aerial views of expanding cities in the southern hemisphere suffocating in streams of garbage. These images insinuate the conclusion that overpopulation and scarcity of resources call for global governance and control. The visual regime of the Anthropocene is not one of fragments and frictions, but suggests the totality and continuity of data. The human subject is not decentered but busy mapping the world from a classical transcendent perspective. It is fair to say that the understanding of interconnectedness, sparked by the Anthropocene discussion, is accompanied by a peculiar crisis of visual representation, causing cartography to become the dominant mode of visual representation. In order to adequately portray the distributed and diffused relationships of knowledge and power that cause global ecological disturbances, we need cartographies of multiple and simultaneous scales. Such multi-perspectivism (Eduardo Viveiros de Castro 2012) corresponds to active ways of seeing that enable us to understand how ecology is distinguished in concrete relations.

In this respect and regarding the method and subject of vernacular practices, the most relevant reference is the work of the Japanese film collective Ogawa Film Production. This group of filmmakers moved to the Japanese countryside to document local peasant knowledge. Meticulously showing and explaining the details of everyday life, the films are almost anthropological. The main goal was to document how rural landscapes were transformed by post-war modernization and the introduction of new technologies. The most critical films are: *Sanrizuka: Heta buraku* (Heta Village, 1973), *Nipponkoku Furuyashikimura* (A Japanese Village - Furuyashikimura, 1982), *1000-nen kizami no hidokei: Maginomura monogatari* (Magino Village: A Tale, 1987) and *Manzan Benigaki* (Red Persimons, 2001). These films are audiovisual archives of vernacular knowledge, demonstrating the multiplicity and sustainability of the local social ecologies. While this research learns a lot from the approach of Ogawa Film Production, it also recognizes a certain failure in some of their methods. By trying to objectify their own method, mimicking a scientific agenda, they also objectified and reduced the very practices they had actually attempted to foster. Thus, the challenge for the film-based research project is to compliment their perspective with new methods that better correspond to the layered and diverse practices it encounters.

For a detailed inquiry into local or vernacular knowledge and practices that maintain environments, the work of Isabelle Stengers, a philosopher of science, is especially relevant. Her work examines how these practices have been "destroyed, poisoned, and enslaved in our own history" (Stengers 2011). To decolonize the evaluation of practices (scientific or vernacular), Stengers proposes the concept of "ecology of practices" (Stengers 2010). This conceptual framework provides a toolbox to build interconnections between various practices without recourse to a transcendent(al) perspective. The further importance of Stengers's work for the inquiry lies in the notion of knowledge as being an environmental exercise that persistently requires new methods of tentative entanglement with the surrounding.

Another important influence for the research comes from Donna Haraway's understanding of ecology presupposing an interspecies ontogeny. She conceptualizes the various ways of species

to co-evolve and build long-term connections as “relational” (Haraway 1988). The term does not refer to Nicolas Bourriaud’s genre of *Relational Aesthetics* (Bourriaud 1998), but signifies a non-hierarchical understanding of ecology, so important for our post-colonial ecological conditions. The introduction of non-local species into specific locations sparked debates on genetic pollution and ecological governance. Haraway’s concept of “becoming worldly” and “becoming with” (Haraway 2008) shifts this view from governance towards an ecology of knotty assemblages, where each organism disturbs and changes the other.

Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, a feminist anthropologist heading the Anthropocene lab at Aarhus University, is known for her research on ecologies shaped by multispecies interferences and disturbances (Tsing 1993, 2005). Tsing, in her recent research project on Japanese *matsutake* mushrooms, highlights the urgency for sciences to learn “from different local knowledges, rather than knowing the object in advance” (Tsing 2015). Her research has taken her to satoyama landscapes too. In accordance with the Japanese researchers mentioned above, she explains how over time human communities have elaborated suites of practices of minor disturbances, or “diplomatic games” with the landscape. Knowing and acting on the capacity of a forest, for example, allows the forest to act in response. The variety of minor human disturbances creates beneficial conditions for multiple species to settle in.

Visualizing and mediating ecological technologies and communal practices in far away places, in this case Japan, is not without risk, even if these practices are endangered. Epistemological mappings, anthropological, biological or otherwise, like the current representation of the Anthropocene, are closely related to Western colonialism, which caused major ecological disturbances. Donna Haraway, when she refers to lens-based mappings pursued by the “Western-eye” (Haraway 1988), points out that different and extended methodologies are needed and proposes a relational, partial and situated mode of inquiry. Partial in the sense that real objectivity can only be reached within a limited location; relational, as it attempts to do so in dialogue with the other; and situated, as it does not disappear from view.

The challenge for the film-based research project is to create an appropriate method. That is, a decolonizing method, which not only observes ‘the field,’ but also supports one practice through the other. The mode of production I would like to put forward is based on conceptual and affective, as well as corporal and performative, modes of operation. It explores the properties of the 16mm film camera in order to intensify a situated vision and focuses on moments when matter gets disturbed and changes its form. It tests overlapping perspectives of both the environment and the human vision in order to create a diversity of sensations and temporalities, and to activate relational modes of perceptions. Finally, it accepts its own partial perspective in order to highlight the practices that make the diversity of a landscape possible. This approach differs significantly from conventional and academic procedures as it attempts to create new knowledge through entanglements, neither detached nor externalized from what is observed. To appropriate knowledge and even methodologies from the inquired field comes with certain gravity, as it means to create a bonding and belonging with the investigated processes—while still preserving differences. Yet it is a joyful procedure, since the practices in question and their methods sustain ecologies and create diversities. The works of Stengers, Haraway and Tsing provide a dynamic conceptual and methodological framework for the ecological mode of inquiry I am pursuing, as they share a particular way of engaging with other-than-human beings, local complexities and the conditions of post-colonial interconnectedness.

Working with analog 16mm – a residual practice in itself – is a vital element of my artistic mode of production. It is particularly crucial for this research as it expands the notion of practices towards their aesthetic dimensions. 16mm has a very specific set of affordances and rhythms. The limitations of material resources (film stock), the constant need of light measurement, the restricted time available for every single shot, but also the photochemical and mechanical constitution of the camera as well as the film material structures modes of attention and production. This complicated procedure fosters a close collaboration with both the environment and the apparatus. It affords the creation of a differentiated and nuanced

spatiotemporal environment, which makes the complexity of relations between ecological practices and their visual representations perceptible. Environments become assemblages of communication. Film grain, similarly to aerosols, dust and pollen, forms a continuous atmospheric and dynamic flow. Light rays biting into lumen sensitive silver halide crystals together with an opening and closing camera lens function like a chemical-mechanical photosynthesis. Working with film allows the documentation of the geological, climatic and soil specifications that influence environments and both human and nonhuman practices.

Research outcomes:

*Who does the Earth Think It Is? (Becoming Fire)*

16mm, 55 min, Japan 2020

*Who does the Earth Think It Is? (Becoming Fire)*

Text, 2020

*Too Close Too Far*

16mm, 20 min, Japan 2020

*Natural Farming School*

Akame, Japan 2018

*Itching Dog*

Ceramic Series, Japan 2018

*Nuptial 8*

Video, 15min., Japan 2018

*Nuptial 7*

Photographs, Japan 2018

*Nuptial 6*

Video, 1min., Japan 2018

*Soils\_Habit\_Plants*

16mm, 10 min, Japan 2017 (with Mikhail Lylov)