Art after COVID-19: An Ecological Perspective

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This article discusses the subject “art after COVID-19” from an ecological perspective. First, it examines an appropriate way to construct the discourses that address the theme “after COVID-19,” outlining the criticism directed at postcolonialism over the prefix “post.” Then, the article demonstrates that the historical problems of “nation” and “capitalism” are deeply rooted in the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and contends that, in order to deal with these problems, it is imperative to reconsider the whole relationship between humans and nature. Finally, it proposes that “ecology” will be key to reassessing “the whole relationship between humans and nature” in the context of art and analyzes diverse artistic practices that might enable us to alternatively reconceptualize “human” and “nation.”

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Introduction

As of July 31, 2020, many universities across Japan, including the Tokyo University of the Arts where I work as an assistant professor, have been holding classes online to prevent the further spread of the novel coronavirus infection (COVID-19). A great silence, therefore, has reigned over the university's Ueno Campus, in which I am currently writing this article, for a long time. Needless to say, the COVID-19 pandemic is an ongoing global issue that became conspicuous at the beginning of this year. This infectious disease is caused by a pathogen called SARS-CoV-2. It is the successor to SARS-CoV-1, which caused the 2002–2004 SARS outbreak that was particularly serious in Hong Kong and Mainland China (the acronym SARS stands for severe acute respiratory syndrome). The first patient of COVID-19, according to several news reports, was identified in Wuhan, the capital city of Hubei Province in China, at the end of 2019. Strong evidence shows, as Takayuki Miyazawa and many other virologists argue, that the virus originated from bats (Miyazawa 2020: 65). Although the loss of the senses of smell and taste is a characteristic feature of COVID-19, the signs and symptoms of this disease seem to show almost no idiosyncrasies. They range from subclinical to severe: some of those infected with the virus may only show mild symptoms of a cold, such as fever and cough, whereas others may contract acute viral pneumonia, which, in its worst case, may result in death.

At the early stage of the infection spread, the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben insisted that this infectious disease is "a normal flu, not much different from those that affect us every year" and was immediately subjected to relentless criticism (Agamben 2020). Agamben's true intention was to sound the alarm on the arbitrary extension of the state of exception and the unlimited enlargement of the power of government, which might be developed under the cover of the coronavirus crisis. For Agamben, who has elaborated his notion of homo sacer ("in our age all citizens can be said, in a specific but extremely real sense, to appear virtually as homines sacri [the plural of homo sacer]") on the ground of the German jurist Carl Schmitt's well-known definition of the sovereign as "he who decides on the exception," what governments in many countries attempt to do in this "exceptional" crisis might appear to be willful stratagems for strengthening their control over the populace (Agamben 1998: 66, emphasis in original). In a similar vein, the Canadian journalist Naomi Klein also warns about the current situation in which "[t]he Trump administration and other governments around the world are busily exploiting the crisis to push for no-strings-attached corporate bailouts and regulatory rollbacks," thus employing her newly coined term "coronavirus capitalism" (Klein 2020). Klein regards this concept as a variety of what she called "disaster capitalism" in her 2007 The Shock Doctrine—the "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). Both Agamben and Klein seem to be highly cautious of the normalization of the tendency for governments to utilize crisis conditions as a justification for exerting extraordinary powers for themselves.

We cannot help but say, however, that Agamben's view that COVID-19 is "a normal flu" is largely wrong. According to an article in the August 11, 2020 issue of The Nikkei Asian Review ("Coronavirus Latest: Global Cases Surpass 20 Million"), 733,897 people had died of coronavirus-related illnesses all over the globe. In addition, the data published by Japan's Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare (as of August 10, 2020) estimated that the number of persons infected with COVID-19 in the country reached 47,990 and the death toll climbed to 1,047. In response to such unprecedented circumstances, academics and intellectuals around the world have incessantly reacted in singular and diverse ways. In his article, which analyzes the methods to "fight" against the coronavirus, the Israeli historian Yuval Noah Harari emphasized that the need for transnational solidarity has never been more urgent than it is now (Harari 2020). This proposal is inextricably linked with Harari's consistent allegation of the utter imperativeness "to transcend national differences and find a global solution to the threats of nuclear war, ecological collapse and technological disruption" (Harari 2018: 137–138). In an online conversation with Harari, the video of which is available on YouTube, the young Taiwan's Minister of IT Audrey Tang insisted that technology is playing an extremely effectual role in dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tRVEY95cI0o). In the same dialogue, however, Tang clearly disclaims the idea that technology might bring about a suffocating surveillance society where almost no privacy is left. Despite or given a rapidly increasing number of discourses produced by well-informed people day by day, we still really do not know how to handle the difficult COVID-19 situation. In this regard, it can be argued, humankind has gone astray in the chaos of the coronavirus.

Since the outbreak of the pandemic, artists have also considered how they can make their own responses to this vexing status quo through art. Although few artworks have directly addressed the issue of COVID-19 so far, let me introduce here an example that I think astutely portrays our bewilderment in confronting the crisis stemming from the tiny microorganism. Sen Takahashi's Plasticity Mind (2020) is an installation piece displayed in the "In a Grove" exhibition at LEESAYA, an emerging contemporary art gallery in Shimomeguro (Figure 1). For this exhibition, gallery owner Saya Lee asked three artists—Kento Nito, Takahiro Miyahara, and Sen Takahashi—to submit works that may offer insight into the current situation concerning COVID-19. Takahashi, born in 1992, is a young artist who has also worked as a conservator. His work, Plasticity Mind, consists of a performance and an installation created as a result of the performance. In the performance, he continuously blew a whistle made of sugar and maltose syrup. The sound of the whistle, while performing, became smaller and smaller as

the musical instrument itself gradually melted. In the gallery, the sound recorded in the performance was then displayed as an installation together with the same candy-like whistle reproduced by the artist. The whistle symbolizes an ultimate compass, reminding the audience of, say, a teacher who uses a whistle to give directions to his or her students. The image of the whistle also reminds me of what Michel Foucault termed “pastoral power”—a form of power exercised by “knowing the inside of people's minds” and “exploring their souls” (Foucault 1982: 783). In a quite poetic manner, Takahashi seems to imply that no single voice can be more reliable or legitimate than another following the occurrence of the pandemic, foregrounding the precariousness of the post-COVID-19 society in which we are currently living.

Figure 1. Sen Takahashi, Plasticity Mind, 2020. ©Sen Takahashi. Photo by Ichiro Mishima. Courtesy of LEESAYA.

The Post-COVID-19 Discourse

Although we are evidently in the midst of the COVID-19 crisis, a plethora of visions have already attempted to foresee the world after the coronavirus. Numerous types of new normal theories, which intend to teach us new ways of living and working in the post-COVID-19 era, can be added to the list. Some theorists argue against such tendencies. In a

newspaper interview, for example, the Japanese social critic Eiji Ōtsuka declares that he does not trust those who attempt to discuss the world after COVID-19, referring to the overflow of post-3.11 discourse in Japan less than a decade ago (https://www.asahi.com/articles/ASN6N54S3N6HUPQJ006.html). “3.11” stands for the Great East Japan earthquake that occurred on 11 March, 2011. The Japanese archipelago, which belongs to the zone of mountain ranges circling the Pacific, has historically been visited by numerous earthquakes. However, a nuclear power station accident immediately following the 3.11 earthquake was distinctively catastrophic. This accident was a devastating failure at TEPCO’s Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant on the same day as the earthquake, which resulted in the meltdown of three of the plant’s six nuclear reactors. The failure occurred when the plant was struck by a tsunami that accompanied the quake. This event caused the plant to emit a substantial amount of radioactivity, thus becoming one of the largest nuclear incidents in human history. The tragic accident was intimately tied to an asymmetrical power relationship between Japan’s metropolitan areas, such as Tokyo, and provincial cities, including Fukushima, which has been facilitated throughout the postwar history of the country. The Japanese philosopher Tetsuya Takahashi explains this uneven relationship by using his own terminology—the “system of sacrifice” (Takahashi 2012: 178–180). However, the historical linkage between the 3.11 catastrophe and the unjust social structure of postwar Japan has often been neglected in the arguments made in the wake of the earthquake. Ōtsuka’s frustration in the aforementioned interview was, in my view, directed at this kind of outstanding disconnection from the past observed in some discourses produced after 3.11 in Japan.

The criticism of the post-3.11 discourse is comparable with the denunciation of “postcolonialism,” a critical theory that has dominated the academic world since the 1990s. This theory, which aims to contemplate the world “after” colonialism, has been a source of heated debates, especially over the use of the term “post.” The Indian literary scholar Ania Loomba pointed out that the prefix “post” has an implication of an aftermath “as in supplanting” in an ideological sense and asserts that because “the inequities of colonial rule have not been erased, proclaiming the demise of colonialism is perhaps premature” (Loomba 2005: 12). However, postcolonialism does not intend to detach the history of colonial reign from the present. This relatively new discipline, whose ultimate goal is to push forward the process of decolonization, must entail harsh self-criticism about the colonial past, as Taiwanese cultural studies scholar Kuan-Hsing Chen notes (Chen 2010: 3). At the same time, it should also take a vital role in contemporary society. As Toshiya Ueno and Yoshitaka Mōri stress in their co-authored book, the role of postcolonialism is to generate the very current political culture in which we are living today (Ueno and Mōri 2000: 165). Tetsuya Motohashi, who has translated several important works in postcolonial theory into Japanese, claims that to

understand the ethos of postcolonialism, we must consider the discipline from a perspective that penetrates the past, present, and future (Motohashi 2005: v). In other words, the theory exists for critically interrogating the past, unveiling injustice in the present, and building a more reconciled future. Why is this interconnectedness of the three periods—past, present, and future—important for us? Tessa Morris-Suzuki, an Australian historian of modern Japan, provides a possible answer to this question by exploring the concept "implication." Given that "[w]e live enmeshed in structures, institutions and webs of ideas which are the product of history, formed by acts of imagination, courage, generosity, greed and brutality performed by previous generations," Morris-Suzuki foregrounds our implication in the past (Morris-Suzuki 2005: 26). People are always already embedded in the structures that past events have constructed, that is, an individual completely separated from history does not exist. We, therefore, have to look back on our past constantly and scrutinize how present social problems are interrelated with ourselves: the task constituting a responsibility for the future.

Likewise, debates over the world after COVID-19 should contain the viewpoints that run through the past, present, and future. From this perspective, some agendas need to be reexamined. One of them is the idea that the virus has completely changed the world. The reality is that the pathogen has created dramatic and substantial change in our lives. "Stay home" is widely disseminated as a shared slogan for all of humanity. While a curriculum centered on online lessons has been designed in schools, remote work via email and video call has been adopted in offices. These changes, however, are just changes in lifestyle. The world per se has not been metamorphosed into an entity that has nothing to do with what it was prior to the pandemic. What we should truly strain our eyes on is the phenomena that has become more visible inside the profound stratum of these superficial changes. As Shū Hirata, an urban studies scholar in Japan, pointed out, for instance, not everyone can equally practice self-restraint, home quarantine, and social distancing (Hirata 2020: 129). Apart from medical professionals, those who cannot "practice self-restraint, home quarantine, and social distancing" are mostly temporary workers in unstable forms of employment, including Japanese-Brazilian immigrants and migrant workers from Southeast Asia. Within the discourses regarding COVID-19 in Japan, in short, people with ethnicities, languages, and cultures different from the nation's majority have been largely underrecognized. Simultaneously, a homogenized, monolithic mass of people has emerged in the discussion instead. The Italian novelist Paolo Giordano writes: "I don't want to forget how the emergency made us ignore the fact that we are a composite multitude, with different needs, different issues. When we claimed we were speaking to everyone, we were actually speaking to everyone who has a good knowledge of Italian, owns a computer and knows how to use it" (Giordano 2020, emphasis in original). Although a number of exceptions exist, the information on

COVID-19 has basically been distributed in Japanese in Japan, as if its creators are under the assumption that no person who does not know Japanese resides in this country.

This remarkable invisiblization is the other side of the same coin of xenophobia prevalent during the coronavirus crisis. Since the outbreak of COVID-19, reports of racial attacks against Asians and people of Asian descent have been issued in quick succession in the United States and many European countries. This sort of racist brutality frequently diffuses through the uncontrollable spread of misinformation called “infodemic.” As the Japanese neurologist Masaaki Konagaya writes, a rumor that the Jewish people had thrown poison that caused the epidemic into wells became widespread when the plague—also known as the Black Death—prevailed in the West in the 14th century (Konagaya 2020: 31). According to Konagaya, many Jews were killed in various parts of Europe on the basis of this groundless rumor. The notorious mass killing of the Jewish population of Strasbourg in 1349 has been vividly documented in a number of paintings, such as Eugene Beyer’s The Massacre of the Jews (1857) (Miyazaki 2015: 76). The composition in which discriminative sentiments toward a specific ethnic group erupts into ghastly violence in the time of crisis is analogous to the massacre of Koreans in Japan committed by the Japanese just after the Great Kanto Earthquake of 1923—the event that the social anthropologist Sonia Ryang expresses as “the logical and ordinary outcome of the way Japan emerged as a modern nation, in the form exclusively of the nation of the Japanese, where sovereignty is indissolubly connected with nationality” (Ryang 2003: 745).

Such phenomena were by no means created by any prevailing virus during these events. However, the pathological states that have lain latent in Japanese society and other countries and regions around the globe have become tangible in the coronavirus crisis. The coronavirus undoubtedly exists. In fact, many people have tragically lost their lives due to the virus. Nevertheless, most matters that are said to stem from the COVID-19 pandemic are not new. They are deeply rooted in the challenges that the human race has faced historically. Therefore, we can argue that the present pandemic sheds fresh light on those long-standing problems. Similarly, various issues, which have been rendered invisible, have appeared distinctly in the art world in the midst of the COVID-19 crisis. One of these issues is a form of exhibition called “blockbuster.” The term denotes exhibitions co-organized by the mass media and museums. Blockbuster exhibitions expect to have large numbers of visitors from within the country and abroad. This system, in which newspaper companies and television stations initiatively organize an art exhibition, is almost unique to Japan, and particular historical contexts lie behind it. Although I do not say that exhibitions of this kind are all similarly harmful, they certainly have considerable problematic effects. As a salient example, profit-centered shows that entirely aim to appeal to a mass audience tend to be held in museums, and the specialized knowledge of curators who belong to such institutions is

hardly utilized. Given the current situation caused by the virus, however, blockbuster-style exhibitions cannot take place temporarily. To attract as many visitors as possible, famous pieces of art, which can be the highlight of such events, must be borrowed from museums in other countries. However, air transport has also stopped because of the coronavirus turbulence. Moreover, the current circumstances have prevented people called “couliers,” who accompany the transportation of artworks from overseas, from coming to Japan. According to Futoshi Koga, who has gained experience in exhibition planning when he worked for the Asahi Shimbun Company, the expense of inviting couliers, as well as high storage and transport costs, is primarily borne by mass media (Koga 2020: 68). Taking these factors into consideration, Mika Kuraya, who assumed the position of the new director of the Yokohama Museum of Art in April, 2020, stated in a recent interview that the time has come to reevaluate the blockbuster system partially (Kuraya 2020).

Capitalism and Nation

Artists, from a historical standpoint, have been skilled in creating pieces out of limitations and restrictions. One instance among many is what curator and art historian Ming Tiampo has theorized as the “interpoetics of distance” in the activities of the Gutai Art Association (1954–1972), an internationally renowned avant-garde art group in postwar Japan. Following the Second World War, artists in Japan had to struggle with their cultural and geographical distance from Western centers of contemporary art, such as New York and Paris. The interpoetics of distance in the artistic practices of Gutai in the 1950s and the 1960s was a strategy used to take advantage of the constraint of its marginality and transform it into “a creative inspiration for the group” (Tiampo 2011: 2). Contemporary artists all over the world, at the present moment, are attempting to overcome varying obstacles brought about by the coronavirus in creative ways. Tracing back the history of infectious diseases, the plague that was rampant in 14th-century Europe exerted a tremendous impact on the Western view of life and death. Hisako Koike, an art historian who specializes in Western medieval art, identifies this shift in a series of paintings called the “Dance of Death.” This artistic genre, which appeared in the late Middle Ages, foregrounds the ubiquitousness of death that the people of that time realized in confrontation with the rage of pestilence. From these paintings, Koike argues, people learned that no one could avoid death regardless of age, gender, and socioeconomic status (Koike 2020). The Japanese art critic Noi Sawaragi asserts that the changes in the view of life and death instigated by the epidemic led people to have suspicions against God and awakened the ego, thus resulting in the advent of the human-centered Renaissance (Sawaragi 2020: 75). Will the current COVID-19 crisis also bring new transformative changes in art? Offering a definite

answer to this question at the present moment seems to be extremely difficult.

From a long-term historical perspective, however, I believe that "capitalism" and "nation" would be the two most important keywords in considering art after COVID-19. The plague—or the Black Death—deprived European people in the Middle Ages of "God" as the absolute existence. In the contemporary period, in my view, the above two concepts are equivalent to God in the medieval period. To requote a well-known phrase cited by the British cultural theorist Mark Fisher in his 2009 Capitalist Realism, "it's easier to imagine an end to the world than an end to capitalism" (this statement is said to be the American literary critic Fredric Jameson's remark) (Fisher 2009: 2). Meanwhile, Benedict Anderson proposed an oft-cited notion: "imagined community." Anderson, in his Imagined Communities, which was first published in 1983, asserts that the idea of "nation state" based on national awareness is a modern product that appeared in tandem with the birth of the capitalist economy and the development of printing and publishing technology. For him, a nation is a political unity that is "imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign" (Anderson 2006: 6). The significance of Anderson's argument, however, lies not only in that it illuminated the arbitrariness of modern nation states. A crucial question raised in Imagined Communities is why "so many millions of people" willingly died "for such limited imaginings" (Anderson 2006: 7). The explosive expansion of COVID-19, however, may cause changes in the absolute hegemony of capitalism and nation. Nowadays, in reality, the greater body of the systems that sustain them has been compelled to suspend operations since the global pandemic.

The historical relationship between humankind and infection is, as many scholars point out, closely intertwined with the emergence of capitalism and nation. The fundamental reason for the "invasion" of the pathogens that provoke infectious diseases into the realm where humans inhabit is that the environmental destruction caused by human activities has reduced the habitats of the virus. Evidently, as the Japanese economic thinker Kōhei Saitō notes, capitalism has proceeded environmental destruction at an irremediable pace (Saitō 2019: 4.). Through the insatiable inflation of commerce and investment, which characterizes global capitalism, the economic ties among various nations has strengthened. Consequently, as medical scientist Tatsuya Mima argues, the background to the quick global distributions of the severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS)—a viral respiratory disease, which has been argued to have originated from China's Yunnan—and COVID-19 is that China has been consolidated into the global economy since the adoption of the nation's reform and open-door policies in the 1980s, thus increasing the interchange of people and goods (Mima 2020: 20–21). The American historian William H. McNeill points out that many pestilences, including smallpox and cholera, originated in close connection with the growing opportunity for contact between humans and animals. The enhancement of "human capabilities for changing

natural balances" through hunting and farming has enormously increased the number of diseases with the possibility of human infection (McNeill 1998: 16). Furthermore, in his 2010 work, Un Monde Grippé (The Paralyzed World), Frédéric Keck, a French scholar who conducted research on the recurring influenza pandemics since the 2000s, concluded that the increase in the number of animals bred for food over the past 30 years, has led to the proliferation of the transfer of viruses (Keck 2010).

These scenarios related to viral infections are inseparably linked to the formation of nation and civilization. The American political scientist James C. Scott counts epidemics as one of "the worst losses that arise from concentrated sedentism under state rule" (Scott 2017: 206). Nations have invented "large-scale societies based systematically on coerced, captive human labor," thus enabling viruses to circulate widely and evolve expeditiously in a matter of seconds (Scott 2017: 180). As analyzed by the Indian cultural anthropologist Arjun Appadurai, moreover, the burden of nation has powerfully dominated us both physically and mentally even in the contemporary world where global connectivity has become tenacious. The violence of ethnocentric, exclusive nationalism against various types of minorities, which goes hand in hand with globalization, has become rather intensified and extreme in several parts of the world. Appadurai attempted to expound the intricate relationship between our precarious status in a globalized social setting and the striking growth of violence against minorities in the following manner: "As a broad fact about the world of the 1990s, the forces of globalization produced conditions for an increase in large-scale social uncertainty and also in the friction of incompleteness, both of which emerged in the traffic between the categories of majority and minority. The anxiety of incompleteness (always latent in the project of complete national purity) and the sense of social uncertainty about large-scale ethnoracial categories can produce a runway form of mutual stimulation, which is the road to genocide" (Appadurai 2006: 9).
The Japanese sociologist Masachi Ōsawa strongly suggests that we think about the coronavirus crisis by situating it in the totality of the relationship between humans and nature (Ōsawa 2020: 11).
Additionally, the Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek expresses the present situation using his unique phrasings: "Maybe, this is the most disturbing thing we can learn from the ongoing viral epidemic: when nature is attacking us with viruses, it is in a way sending our own message back to us. The message is: what you did to me, I am now doing to you" (Žižek 2020). For such reasons, I contend the meaningfulness of reassessing the history of art with its focus on the relationship between human and nature. At the core of this attempt lies the following queries. How have artists perceived nature in their creation? Or, in what ways do artworks of the past demonstrate (the shift in) the recognition of nature? Such discussion is, to put it differently, an attempt to reposition the history of art in "the totality of the relationship between human and nature." The attempt, in my view, will help us gain a foothold in

decentering the human-centered views in art history. In the domain of the humanities, art and the notion of beauty have been treated as if they were peculiar to human beings. Yet, the aesthetic sense as the experience of feeling in response to seeing or hearing, as biological and botanical studies have disclosed, belongs not only to humans but also to animals and plants (Watanabe 2016: iii–iv). From a philosophical perspective, the Australian philosopher Elizabeth Grosz writes, “All art begins with animal,” underscoring that “[a]rt is not the accomplishment of ‘higher’ existence, whether conceived mentally or spiritually, but is an elaboration of the most primitive and elementary fragments of an ancient animal prehistory” (Grosz 2008: 35). In fact, some contemporary artists, including Tomás Saraceno, an Argentinian contemporary artist, have created installation pieces through the process of learning from the structures of the “buildings” designed by other species. If we were successful in deconstructing the intransient human-centric perspectives predominant in art history and cultural studies and in recapturing the history of art from a viewpoint that relativizes humankind as one of many species, an entirely new horizon to reconsider the relationship between humans and nature would be opened up in front of us.

Ecology in the Context of Art

“Ecology” is, in my view, one of the keys to rethinking the human-nature relationship in the context of art. In a narrow sense, the term “ecology” refers to the discipline that deals with the interaction between organism and environment. Beyond the limited framework of the academic world, however, it has been broadly used as a concept, which embodies an idea that aims to achieve harmony between humanity and nature, or a lifestyle itself guided by the idea. Moreover, the scope of the concept encompasses cultural, social, political, and economic studies and thoughts informed by ecological knowledge. As a matter of fact, the thoughts of ecology have been deepened especially with critical insight into the contradictions and evils of capitalism, which arguably began with the Industrial Revolution. The progress of industrialization and the advent of consumer society, associated with the economic ideology, have also influenced the development of ecological thinking. The French philosopher André Gorz, who took the initiative in developing the thought of political ecology, pointed out in the early 1970s that “human activity finds in the natural world its external limits” (Gorz 1980: 13). Thus, he claimed that “an inversion of the logic of capitalism itself” is indispensable for us because this logic attempts to create “the greatest possible number of needs” and seek “to satisfy them with the largest possible amount of marketable goods and services in order to derive the greatest possible profit from the greatest possible flow of energy and resources” (Gorz 1980: 27).

Meanwhile, the French psychoanalyst and social activist Félix Guattari criticized that the object of traditional ecological thoughts has often been limited to only the “natural” environment and suggested that “social” and “mental” environments should be equally accommodated.

Thus, Guattari proposed a model that articulates the three ecologies of nature, society, and mind (that is, "the environment, social relations and human subjectivity") "transversally" and in an "ethico-aesthetic" manner—a comprehensive concept that he called "ecosophy" (a portmanteau word made by combining "ecology" and "philosophy") (Guattari 2000: 28). The Japanese cultural studies scholar Toshiya Ueno points out that in a deep portion of Guattari's thought, his extraordinary insight perceived that the phenomenon happening in family relations and, by extension, in society was substantially akin to the ongoing environmental crisis taking place in the natural ecosystem (Ueno 2016: 21–22). Hence, the whole idea of ecology possesses far-reaching implications for reconsidering the relationship between humans and nature not only in terms of the debate on environmental protection and sustainable development but also for forging an alternative understanding about the physical and mental world that surrounds us and shapes our body and consciousness. Therefore, we must describe the trajectory of ecological art practices in tight connection with varying social, economic, and historical contexts behind them.

One of the earliest examples in art, which illustrate a shift in human perception of nature, is perhaps the birth of landscape painting. In 1620, philosopher Francis Bacon, known as the father of British Empiricism, published Novum Organum, which means "new organon." In the book, he attempted to renew the organon, a form of logic systematized by the ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle. Bacon thought that knowledge based on experiment and observation was requisite to having control over nature, famously insisting that "the empire of man over things depends wholly on the arts and sciences" (Bacon 1999: 147). Here, nature is reckoned as a possible subject of objective knowledge. The view that objectifies nature had an effect on the development of landscape painting in the modern West. Focusing on the fact that the high Renaissance painter Albrecht Dürer, who invented the "interior window" (a painterly expression "that frames a view of the distant landscape"), which is regarded as the origin of landscape painting, was "the first painter in the Germanic world to master the mathematical bases of linear perspective that Alberti had codified fifty years earlier," the French anthropologist Philippe Descola concludes that "[t]he emergence of landscape painting as an autonomous genre stemmed from its being organized in accordance with the new rules of perspectiva artificialis" (Descola 2013: 57–59, emphasis in original).

The modern view of nature promoted a marked accumulation of scientific knowledge, which led to the first Industrial Revolution in England in the latter half of the 18th century. Urban life became more convenient and comfortable through, for instance, the improvement of transportation and the mass production of clothing. At the same time, the hierarchicalization of society, symbolized by the growth of wealth disparity and the rampancy of child labor, was rapidly progressing. In his 2014 Filosofia del Paesaggio (The Philosophy of Landscape), Paolo D'Angelo, who is one of the leading aestheticians in contemporary Italy,

points out that landscape painting was born in urban areas, not rural districts, and became a predominant genre in the 19th century, that is, in the age of industry. D'Angelo explains the reason for this development by asserting that urban and industrial society aroused nostalgia for natural beauty and the people of the time sought to find shelter in the representation of nature (D'Angelo 2014). Additionally, the Industrial Revolution is one of the major origins of numerous environmental problems, such as air and water pollution, which became particularly conspicuous after the war. As early as in 1891, the Japanese politician Shōzō Tanaka raised questions about the copper-mine poisoning in the Ashio Copper Mine at the National Diet session.

The Arts and Crafts movement, an artistic movement that began in England in the mid-19th century, emerged against the backdrop of the progress of the Industrial Revolution. Following the interpretation suggested by the Japanese scholar of English literature Yasuo Kawabata, this movement can be understood as a revolutionary movement of crafts with certain purposes, such as reviving traditional handiworks, returning to a simpler lifestyle, and improving the design of household items (Kawabata 2016: 8). The English art critic John Ruskin, who was one of two leaders of the movement, heavily impeached the trend of division and mechanization of labor as a form of dehumanization: "It is not, truly speaking, the labour that is divided; but the men:—Divided into mere segments of men—broken into small fragments and crumbs of life" (Ruskin 1998: 180). William Morris, who is now called the father of modern design, was the other leader of the Arts and Crafts movement. The Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings, founded by Morris in 1877, opposed the destruction of historical buildings that frequently occurred under the pretext of restoration. This activity has recently been reevaluated as a pioneering case of environmental campaigns, led by designers, in the field of culture. In the novel News from Nowhere, which Morris authored in his later years in 1890, a society achieving the harmony between humans and nature was depicted as a utopia where "the beautiful works of art of the past" are "mingled with the lovely nature of the present" (Morris 1892: 157).

Henry David Thoreau, born in Massachusetts on July 14, 1817, is a contemporary of John Ruskin and William Morris. Thoreau is a figure who had an extremely significant impact on the thought of ecology, which has been continuously developed until today. He left behind many poems and writings on the relationship between humans and nature. What substantially formed the basis of his activity was the perspective that always "regard[s] man as an inhabitant, or a part and parcel of Nature, rather than a member of society." Thoreau lived a self-sufficient life in a small shack built at a lakeside and walked around in the forest for many hours every day. As the Japanese cultural anthropologist Ryūta Imafuku notes, his sketches of various plants and animals, which were made in the process of thinking in the forest, have stimulated the creative intuition of their viewers and become a source of inspiration that generates sensitive artworks (Imafuku 2016: 61). As a noteworthy

example, Imafuku mentions a photoetching piece titled 17 Drawings by Thoreau, created by John Cage, who is considered the father of contemporary music, in 1978. Besides this work, Cage produced a number of musical pieces and drawings whose inspirational sources were Thoreau's myriad activities.

Ecological Art after WWII

The exploitation of nature by humans continued even after the two World Wars, which brought unparalleled catastrophe to humankind. The speed and degree of exploitation, far from abating, increased in fury. The underlying cause of the First World War was evidently an international conflict that stemmed from the competition among countries for the acquisition of colonies as potential markets. This need for further markets outside their own territories was produced by the excessive growth of industries, which inevitably entailed the disruption of nature. However, only little reflection has been made from such an ecological viewpoint during the postwar period. Of course, some scholars had warned against this tendency. Biologist Rachel Carson, for example, discussed the dangers of chemical agents, which destroy the ecosystem, in her Silent Spring published in 1962. In this best-selling book on ecology, she claimed that "the 'control of nature' is a phrase conceived in arrogance, born of the Neanderthal age of biology and philosophy, when it was supposed that nature exists for the convenience of man" (Carson 2002: 297).

In 1970, eight years after the publication of Silent Spring, the American artist Robert Smithson created Spiral Jetty in the Great Salt Lake in Utah. This artwork was a gigantic jetty, shaped like a spiral, whose length reached as long as 460 meters and was made of natural materials, such as stones and rocks. Aesthetician Kei Hirakura identifies a mixture between object and diagram, which emerges from an interaction among multiple human and nonhuman actors, in the intricate process of producing Spiral Jetty (Hirakura 2019: 154). This work is considered one of the masterpieces of land art. Understood as a trend of art that is installed outside museums and galleries and created by using materials chiefly existing in nature, land art emerged in Euro-America in the late 1960s (Yamamoto 2019: 44). In addition to Smithson, representative land artists include Nancy Holt, Michael Heizer, Walter De Maria, and James Turrell. The majority of the works of these artists, who were working mainly in America, were large-scale, site-specific pieces realized by mobilizing large machines, such as cranes. The American art critic Lucy Lippard, in her book on the subject, criticized land art as "a kind of colonization in itself" directed at nature by humans (Lippard 2014: 88). Lippard thought that most works of land art are, in substance, forcible interventions by humans into nature without considering sustainability.

However, land art has developed differently in Britain. The American journalist Rebecca Solnit—who is also an old friend of Lippard—refers to the artistic practices of the British sculptor Richard Long in her publication that focuses on the act of walking (actually, Solnit notes that she started writing the book by following the recommendation given by Lippard). Solnit interprets the significance of walking in the modern era as follows: “In many ways, walking culture was a reaction against the speed and alienation of the industrial revolution. It may be countercultures and subcultures that will continue to walk in resistance to the postindustrial, postmodern loss of space, time, and embodiment” (Solnit 2000: 267). Since the mid-1960s, Long has explored “walking as art” (Solnit 2000: 267). One of the earliest outcomes of this exploration was, as is well known, A Line Made by Walking (1967). In this work, he walked through the grass and recorded his trail in a series of photographs. The British artist Hamish Fulton, who is in the same generation as Long, has moved around the globe on foot and made artworks from the very process of his journey. The Pilgrim’s Way, which is a combination of photographs and texts and was shown in 1971 for the first time, is one of Fulton’s well-known early works. Similarly, Andy Goldsworthy, a British sculptor considered as a successor of Long and Fulton, is known for his extremely delicate works created by slightly processing natural materials, such as snow and ice. His sculptures retain the original forms only for a short period of time. As their works indicate, British land art can be characterized by its smallest possible intervention into nature.

At the same time in Japan, artist Yutaka Matsuzawa, known as a forerunner of Japanese conceptual art, developed his unique ecological art practice from the 1960s to the early 1970s. The “On-e” event, which was held in 1971 at Matsuzawa’s house deep in the mountains of Suwa, and the “Yama-shiki” event, which took place in the next year, can be interpreted, to follow William Marrotti who studies post-war Japanese art, as an “anticivilization uprising” against modern rationality, which is the basis of the subjugation of nature through knowledge (Marrotti 2017: 18). The purpose of “On-e,” according to Matsuzawa, was simply to make sounds in nature and to listen to these sounds, thus evincing his concern in the return to nature. In the same period, the German artist Joseph Beuys, one of the most influential social artists after the war, was deeply involved in the birth of the Green Party—a political party whose principal purpose was to propel green politics—throughout the 1970s (it was finally realized in 1980). For the Documenta 7 in 1982, Beuys proposed a plan for the art project titled 7000 oaks and planted 7000 oaks throughout the city of Kassel in cooperation with local residents. At the root of these seemingly dispersed activities was his profound sense of crisis that our relationship with nature has completely been disordered (Harlan et al. 1986: 130).

In the 2000s, the word Anthropocene appeared. It originated from the remark by Paul Crutzen, a Dutch atmospheric chemist who is an authority in the studies on the ozone hole. Crutzen included an

implication that human activities have an impact at a geological level in this neologism (Yoshikawa 2018: 167). The concept of Anthropocene has quickly come to dominate the academic world, and the idea has been integrated into various academic fields. On the one hand, the American environmental historians J. R. McNeill and Peter Engelke claim that the opening of the Anthropocene was in 1945. The reason, according to McNeill, is that "the human impact on the Earth and the biosphere, measured and judged in several different ways, has escalated" since that year (McNeill and Engelke 2016: 4). He named this statistical fact "The Great Acceleration." The cause of such escalation is argued to be the multiple elements that are tied to human activities especially after the Industrial Revolution, including population growth, rapid globalization, industrialization/urbanization, and nuclear development.

Art historian T. J. Demos, on the other hand, "ultimately disputes the adoption of the Anthropocene as a legitimate term," referring to two major reasons (Demos 2017: 9). First, Demos points out that "many humans would certainly resist identifying with the collective 'we' of the implied Anthropocene subject, with its proposed universality distributed responsibility for the causes of the climate change" (Demos 2017: 12). Second, he also points out that "the 'activities' that are shown in the imagery that commonly depict said epoch [the Anthropocene] are hardly 'human,' at least in the generalizing, species-being sense, but are in fact mostly the 'activities' of corporate industry, an area generally occluded in Anthropocene discourse" (Demos 2017: 18). Demos, instead, proposes using the word "Capitalocene" to elucidate how capitalism has wielded influence over the global environment.

Timothy Morton is an important figure who has deepened the concept of Anthropocene in the region of philosophy. It is telling that, in contrast with Harari who scrutinizes how to "fight" against the coronavirus, Morton suggests that we should "thank [the] virus for symbiosis," emphasizing that "[l]ife is not a fascist bundle where everything is integrated into the one true community" but "a loose collective of uneasy alliances" (Morton 2020). When Morton notes that "the very idea of 'nature' which so many hold dear will have to wither away in an 'ecological' state of human society. Strange as it may sound, the idea of nature is getting in the way of properly ecological forms of culture, philosophy, politics, and art," he denies the notion of nature as a whole (Morton 2007: 1). Rather than the binary between humans and nature, Morton instead foregrounds the interpenetration between humans and nature.

As an excellent example that embodies the view of nature in the Anthropocene, I would like to introduce the paintings of the Japanese artist Takeshi Honda. He has lived in the mountain of Tōno, Iwate for more than 30 years and has continued to paint. He was influenced by Richard Long and Hamish Fulton, the British land artists I discussed above, and walks in the mountain for several hours a day for the creation of his artworks. In this lifestyle, a series of drawings, titled "Walking in the Mountains," started in the 1990s (Figure 2). Honda does

not draw pictures in the mountain by looking at actual wood and grass. Instead, he always reproduces scenery precisely by looking at the photographs he takes in the mountain. Therefore, what is depicted in his works is not nature per se as an entity, but the imagery of scenery reproduced by the artist. To use Honda's own expression, such an activity is a "walking of consciousness." When I interviewed him in 2019, he told me that, to him, nature enters into his consciousness in his art-making process. He also told me that he often feels comfortable when this experience happens. This process is a good example of the interpenetration between humans and nature.

[Figure 2]
Figure 2. Takeshi Honda, Walking in the Mountains – June, 290×400cm, charcoal pencil on paper, 2013. © Takeshi Honda. Courtesy of MEM.

The symbiosis between humans and animals is another notable subject that constitutes recent artistic practices. Donna Haraway is a thinker who has explored the human-animal relationship from a feminist perspective. Her unique concepts, such as "companion species," which was elaborated in the process of considering the "relating in significant otherness" with nonhuman entities, have exerted considerable influence on a large number of contemporary artists (Haraway 2003: 25). One of them is AKI INOMATA, an artist who has questioned and challenged the heretofore taken-for-granted boundary between humans and animals.

In her video piece I Wear the Dog's Hair, and the Dog Wears My Hair (2014), the artist wears a coat made out of a dog's hair, and the dog wears a coat out of the artist's hair (Figure 3). Significantly, INOMATA herself states that "[t]he coats made out of each other's hair had kept us both warm, and further resulted in mixing together our smell" (INOMATA 2020: 91). The American anthropologist Anna Tsing advocates her own multispecies anthropology. Paying attention to "many world-making projects, [by] human and not human," Tsing intends to renew the discipline anthropology (Tsing 2015: 22). Both INOMATA and Tsing, albeit in different ways in different fields, attempt to relativize the presence of humans in the world through exploring the exchange and interaction between human and nonhuman entities.

[Figure 3]
Figure 3. AKI INOMATA, *I Wear the Dog's Hair, and the Dog Wears My Hair*, 2014. ©AKI INOMATA.

Another aspect that should be pointed out is that the theme of coexistence between humans and other organisms inevitably accompanies a vexing problem. For instance, Chihiro Hamano's 2019 reportage The Holy Zoo on zoophilia—in her definition, those who have "an emotional attachment to animals and sometimes a sexual desire for them"—gave rise to heated discussions (Hamano 2018: 15). In this regard, the recent video pieces produced by the Chinese artist Zheng Bo, such as Pteridophilia (2016) and its sequel Pteridophilia II (2018), which explicitly deal with sexual love between humans and plants, raise a very

critical question. A man who appears to “have sex” with a pteridophyte shaping a bird’s nest and eventually eats it is depicted in these works. As we have seen so far, the artistic practices concerning the idea of ecology, which allow us to reconceptualize the relationship between humans and nature, are tremendously diverse. Considering the recent manifestation of freakish weather and the incessant recurrence of natural disasters, I must say that the outlook for the future of global environment, where we live, is quite depressing. Indeed, almost everyone has been aware of this circumstance. However, the outbreak of the COVID-19 global pandemic, has forced us to acknowledge that the present status of the global environment is by far worse than we have imagined. Therefore, now is the time to start thinking about the role art can take in the reconsideration of the human-nature relationship much more seriously.

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