

Aichi Triennale 2013

Various venues, Nagoya & Okazaki, Japan



Courtesy: Aernout Mik

The Aichi Triennale 2013 was exceptional for the specificity of its theme. Though its title 'Awakening: Where Are We Standing? Earth, Memory and Resurrection' appeared amorphous, its artistic director, architecture critic and historian Taro Igarashi, made clear in written statements and interviews that the theme was a direct reference to the Great East Japan Earthquake and its aftermath. The Japanese word for 'awakening', *yureru daichi*, literally means 'shaking earth'.

The earthquake, tsunami and the meltdown at the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear complex in March 2011, termed 'the triple disaster', brought devastation to the Tohoku region of Japan and led to nearly 20,000 deaths. The catastrophe has precipitated public anger at corporations, not least the power plant's operators, Tokyo Electric Power Company, whose tanks suffered another radiation leak as recently as October 2013; mistrust of the government, for its perceived incompetence in the face of

the events, as well as blame for building nuclear plants all over the country; and spiritual doubt, in a nation whose Shintoism venerates nature.

How can art respond to such crises? The 4th Yokohama Triennale in 2011 was deemed far too soon after the fact to answer such a question. Igarashi's inferences in interviews that two years had allowed a sufficient time for reflection was seconded by Tokyo's Mori Art Museum, whose triennial 'Roppongi Crossing' is this year titled 'OUT OF DOUBT' and comprises works that reflect the country's sense of uncertainty about its social structures.

The definitive piece of the second edition of the Aichi Triennale was an architectural drawing on a 1:1 scale. In coloured vinyl tape across the floors, walls and ceilings of the multi-storey Aichi Prefectural Museum of Art in Nagoya, Katsuhiko Miyamoto transposed a life-size blueprint of the Fukushima power plant on to the institution. On the floor upon entering the museum, one encountered the representation of the reactor's core, complete with yellow lines that indicated the cylindrical containers of fuel. As well as serving as a physical representation of the massive size of Fukushima for those in Nagoya, a city a long distance from Tohoku, the work had a metaphorical presence across the exhibition spaces. Surely by intention rather than accident, for example, the tape ran across the floor of Stephane Couturier's photographic series 'Melting Point' (2005–11), in which architectural facades are superimposed on one another.

Following a visit to Chernobyl in 1997, the high-profile anime-influenced artist Kenji Yanobe developed a wide body of work based on a bright yellow, Geiger counter-clad suit he designed and wears in post-apocalyptic environments ('Atom Suit Project', 1997–ongoing). In 2011, in response to the disaster in his native Japan, the artist envisaged a new character, 'The Sun Child' – a boy, his protective helmet off, looking up optimistically, holding a star-shaped sun in his hand. At the Prefectural

Museum, he appeared as a large-scale sculpture, while an accompanying installation and performance, *The Wedding of the Sun* (2013), saw a man and a woman married in a Yanobe-made church in the exhibition space. Although positive in spirit, the series seemed partly satirical, with the worship of the sun acting as a parody of the belief in nuclear power.

The Rias Ark Museum of Art, an institution in Kesennuma that has assumed a key role in presenting archive material related to the disaster, displayed in the Prefectural Museum documentary photographs of the destruction in Tohoku taken by both amateurs and professionals. Aernout Mik, whose videos re-create scenes based on found footage and photographs, explained in the show's catalogue that, in responding to the disaster in Japan, he was uncomfortable drawing inspiration from such images of devastation: 'There is an element that the disastrous images in the media are uncannily seducing.' Mik's film, *Cardboard Walls* (2013), instead reconstructs events at an evacuation centre in Koriyama, featuring both actors and actual evacuees. A two-screen projection showed people and their property squeezed into cubicles constructed out of cardboard.

As well as having to engage with remembrance and resurrection, the offsite works around Nagoya and Okazaki had the added challenge of responding to their specific contexts. Open United Studio's *trompe l'oeil* wall and floor drawings in a down-at-heel subterranean shopping street in Nagoya attempted to foster economic regeneration by attracting new customers; similarly, artists Noe Aoki, Takuya Yamashita and Yoshinori Niwa presented site-specific sculptures and installations in derelict shops and residences in an old arcade in Okazaki. Marlon Griffith organized a procession through Nagoya with costumes designed in the image of a phoenix, the bird that rises from the ashes, symbolic of the country's hopes for revival.

In his installation *Umashimenkana* (*We Shall Bring Forth New Life*, 2013)

in the Nagoya City Art Museum, Alfredo Jaar projected the work's title – taken from Sadako Kurihara's 1945 poem about the birth of a baby in the ruins of Hiroshima – on blackboards given to him by schools that closed following the disaster. Other moving pieces included Cornelia Parker's *Perpetual Canon* (2004), a set of suspended, flattened brass instruments, and Janet Cardiff's sound installation *Forty Part Motet* (2011) – 40 separately recorded voices orchestrated across 40 speakers – that was a worthy requiem.

But other works seemed too literal for the show, such as Mitch Epstein's photographs of power stations ('American Power', 2003–09) and Mika Taanila's three-channel video of a nuclear power plant (*The Most Electrified Town in Finland*, 2004–12). And literalness, in the interpretations of the viewer as much as the artists and curator's decisions, is the unfortunate consequence in such a thematically specific exhibition. I could not help but view Tomoko Mukaiyama and Jean Kalman's immersive installation of upended pianos amid a sea of newspapers (*Falling*, 2013), for example, as a distasteful evocation of the post-tsunami landscape.