After the Storm, One Voice Remains

"Osoresan (Mount of Fear)" (2018) by Natacha Nisic
Courtesy of the artist

Artist and filmmaker Natacha Nisic carefully deciphers the meaning of the multiple layers of "blindness" in a country that is highly industrialized but also endangered by threats from the earth and the actions of its inhabitants. She visits the last surviving itako in search of answers to the question of what humans can do to make sense of the immense power of catastrophe.

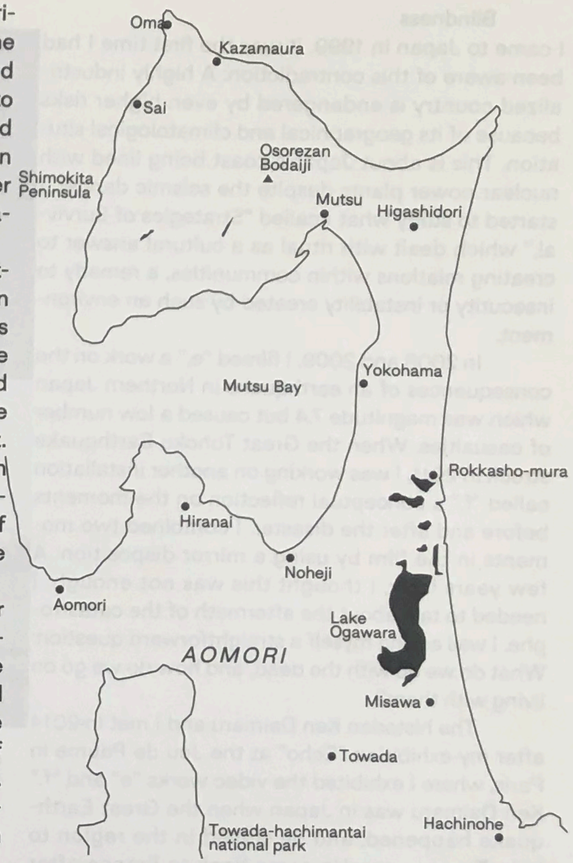
By Natacha Nisic

Portrait by Anne-Sophie Soudoplatoff

The notion of "catastrophe" has been one of my primary research areas during the last ten years. The word "catastrophe" comes from ancient Greek and includes the word "cata," which means "from up to down" or "totality." Over time, it has been extended to the notion of disaster, or large-scale destruction and death. I am drawing on the French philosopher Frédéric Worms in thinking about the topic of "catastrophe" within our contemporary period.

Catastrophe, for the ancients, was assimilated into natural phenomena against which human beings had no power. Humans were mere victims and had to accept the natural and unpredictable forces controlled by gods. Catastrophe was related to resignation, and man's only power was to cure and reconstruct without being able to prevent it. Only praying was linked to prevention. In modern philosophy, catastrophe has been related to the notion of revolution and progress. The progression of both justice and science has granted men the weapons to tear other men apart.

But, unlike the ancients, we can no longer believe in progress and science as a remedy for catastrophe. Progress and science have been the strongest tools in causing catastrophe — illustrated by the genocide of the Jews in the Shoah and the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The value of progress has never been as ambiguous as it is now. Global political uncertainty and climate change appear to converge and draw a dark, blinded horizon of catastrophe.



Shimokita Peninsula, Aomori Prefecture

The Shimokita Peninsula is the northernmost peninsula of Honshu, the largest of Japan's four main islands, located in northeastern Aomori Prefecture, facing Hokkaido across the Tsugaru Straits. The entire peninsula is designated a national park and home to Osorezan Mountain, one of Japan's three most sacred places. Rokkasho Village, with a population of 10,000, is home to a concentration of energy-related facilities, including nuclear fuel cycle facilities, a national oil storage depot and a wind power generation base.

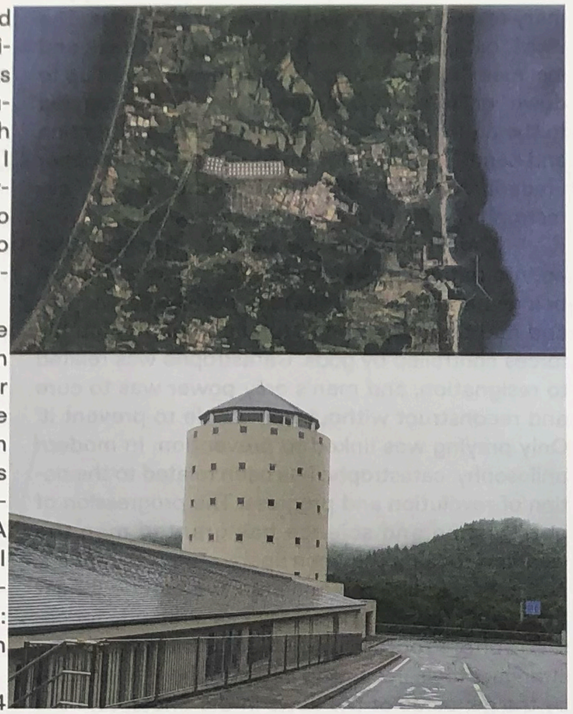
Blindness

I came to Japan in 1999. It was the first time I had been aware of this contradiction: A highly industrialized country is endangered by even higher risks because of its geographical and climatological situation. This is about Japan's coast being lined with nuclear power plants despite the seismic danger. I started to study what I called "Strategies of Survival," which dealt with ritual as a cultural answer to creating relations within communities, a remedy to insecurity or instability created by such an environment.

In 2008 and 2009, I filmed "e," a work on the consequences of an earthquake in Northern Japan which was magnitude 7.4 but caused a low number of casualties. When the Great Tohoku Earthquake struck in 2011, I was working on another installation called "f," a conceptual reflection on the moments before and after the disaster. I combined two moments in the film by using a mirror disposition. A few years later, I thought this was not enough; I needed to talk about the aftermath of the catastrophe. I was asking myself a straightforward question: What do we do with the dead, and how do we go on living with them?

The historian Ken Daimaru and I met in 2014 after my exhibition "Echo" at the Jeu de Paume in Paris, where I exhibited the video works "e" and "f." Ken Daimaru was in Japan when the Great Earthquake happened, and he stayed in the region to help for one year. He came back to France after that extraordinarily intense and challenging time. We felt we had to work together, to share our personal and cultural experiences and artistic and scientific approaches.

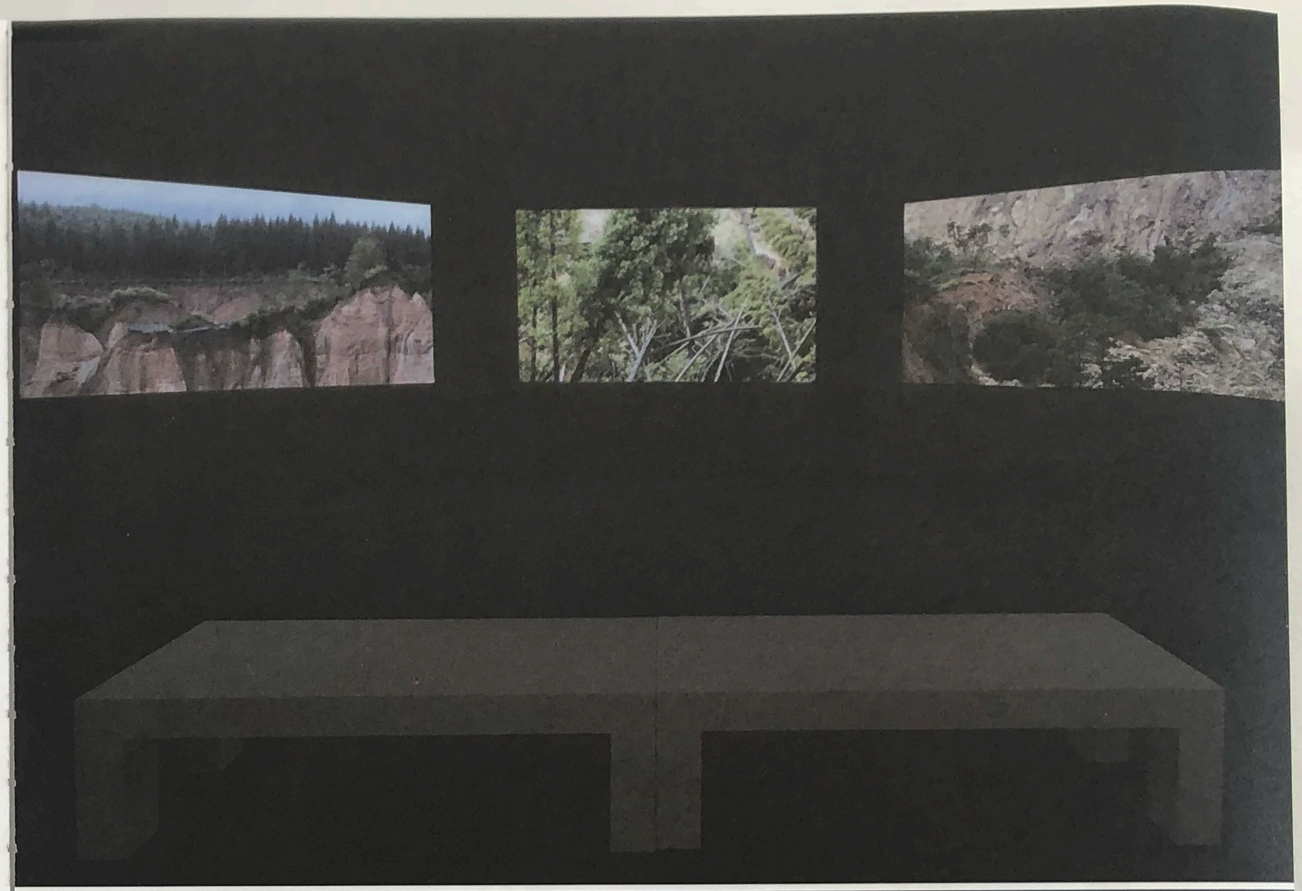
We wanted to create a piece that was more of a global reflection on catastrophe and the abstract concept of blindness: blindness to the invisibility of natural disasters and primarily political blindness because we continue to pursue nuclear energy programs where we cannot control the danger. There is also a language paradox: The itakos "see" what is not visible, as we should "see" the invisible thread of nuclear power. We sought to develop those various representational and conceptual levels through metaphorical, illustrative and documentary ways. The piece "Osoresan" doesn't aim to explain but allows those elements to play together and create different levels of representation.



Aerial view of Rokkasho Village and Rokkasho Visitors Center from "Osoresan (Mount of Fear)"
Courtesy of the artist

We went to the village of Rokkasho-mura to film footage for "Osoresan" at the Nuclear Fuel Reprocessing Facility. There is a series of nuclear reprocessing plants and an international research center in Rokkasho-mura, where French researchers are based. It sits on a strip of land leading to a small peninsula where the biggest city is Hachinohe. On the upper left of the map, you can see a place called Osorezan. It's a former volcano now surrounded by an ashen landscape and a black lake. A Buddhist temple was built there in the 15th century.

This piece of land is a nowhere land — far from any big city — and the very last gate to the sea. This land features a high concentration of humans with contradicting relationships to the environment and nature. On the one hand, there are itakos, farmers and sailors who have accumulated powerful traditions and seasonal festivals in their villages. Those traditions attempt to confront danger from the sea, the weather and accidents. Yet they are still alive. On the other hand, you have high technological development incarnated in nuclear plant structures, surrounded and enclosed by natural reserves.



Installation views of "e" (2009) and "f" (2013) at the exhibition "Echo" (2014) at Jeu de Paume, Paris.
Courtesy of the artist

Landscape

Since the 1960s, a group of itakos has gathered at Osorezan for a festival in July. For one week, they pitch their tents and receive clients. Itakos are blind women in Aomori prefecture who have received specialized, three-year-long training from a master by ear. Itakos know an enormous number of prayers, tales and songs to accompany the souls of the dead. This tradition still exists in Northern Japan, but young itakos are not blind anymore. There is still one woman, Take Nakamura, who is the last blind heiress of this practice.

On our first trip in 2015, we met with six itakos and interviewed them to understand more about their practice and personalities. We conducted historical research in the archives of Hachinohe. Professor Nakayama Ichiro from the University of Osaka played a vital role in our research. He published an extensive and essential library, an anthology of traditional songs and texts of Take Nakamura, and this is how we learned about the founding legend of itako. The tale is from "Folk Legends from Tono" by Kunio Yanagita and tells the story of a farmer's daughter who falls in love with a horse. The daughter visits the horse every night, and they become a couple. When the girl's father finds out, he becomes furious and kills the horse. The girl is so sad that she follows the horse and quits the human — the living — world. This legend depicts a young woman prepared to cross the border between the worlds of the living and the dead. By falling in love with the forbidden and stepping into the reign of animals and the dead, she crosses the line separating the living from the dead and between rationality and reason. This tale is the basis of the creation of Oshirasama, a household deity worshiped in the Tohoku region.

Osorezan and its landscape of ashes draw the map of the entrance to the Buddhist hell and paradise entrance. Itakos have been trained to know which prayers and songs to perform to reach the territories where dead souls live. They are in a landscape that one can draw like a map where souls are in different places, depending on the activities each person performed during their lifetime. For example, Take says she could meet with a carpenter or a sake brewer's soul; they are both reachable differently or in another place. During the prayer, she travels in this abstract landscape, which seems visible only in her mind and because of her spiritual education. As an artistic approach, we thought this mental map could be related to another mental map: the map of feelings — like suffering and sadness — in all the areas around the Fukushima region. When you travel in this region, you can still see the consequences of the catastrophe in the landscape: ruins, measures to erase the radioactivity in the fields and reconstructions. But this is a narrow window of reality — seeing is not knowing. The invisibility of the nuclear threat draws its borders of it.

There are lessons in these landscapes. For instance, the lights at night on the seafront in Minamisoma, a city about 25 kilometers from the Fukushima nuclear plant, should warn the driver of construction works but look like scary faces. This "scary" reading is possible because we are in fear, and they deliver an unclear message because of a global sensitive, post-traumatic perception. Landscape is a mental representation, and it is the intersection point between the subjectivity of the spectator and permanently changing territory. Reading a landscape uses personal and collective memory to see, understand and feel invisible traces of the past and what is right in front of us. We mix the obvious and the hidden in our relations, primarily affective, with our landscapes. With catastrophic events which have already happened, these relations are emphasized: What will be visible from the drama? What traces will show how time and society preserve or erase what is left in the constant construction of this internal landscape of inhabitants and visitors of a territory?

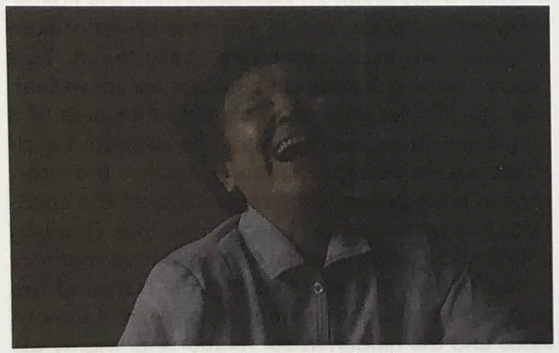
Oshirasama from "Osoresan (Mount of Fear)" (2018)
Courtesy of the artist

Silence

Suppose I come back to tragedy, not as a drama on stage but as the core of the notion of catastrophe. In that case, I will again quote Frédéric Worms: "It is impossible to imagine a catastrophe, and when it happens, it is so out of proportion that we are blind to see it."

In Worms' point of view, there are two sides to blindness: the capacity to see when things are not here, which is the definition of imagination, but with catastrophe, the loss is so intense and out of proportion that imagination makes no sense or has no right to occur. The second side of this blindness is that you cannot see the things that are there, and this is because the destruction is too massive, and seeing would accept this loss, which appeals to our reason and not our sense of sight.

When the earthquake occurred in 2011, various events impacted our vision. The earthquake's motion, the enormous wave it produced, and its final result, the nuclear disaster — which is, in theory, invisible — come first. The presence and power of the disaster are mainly invisible, contributing to the mental contamination of fear. We use the metaphor of blindness in our work.



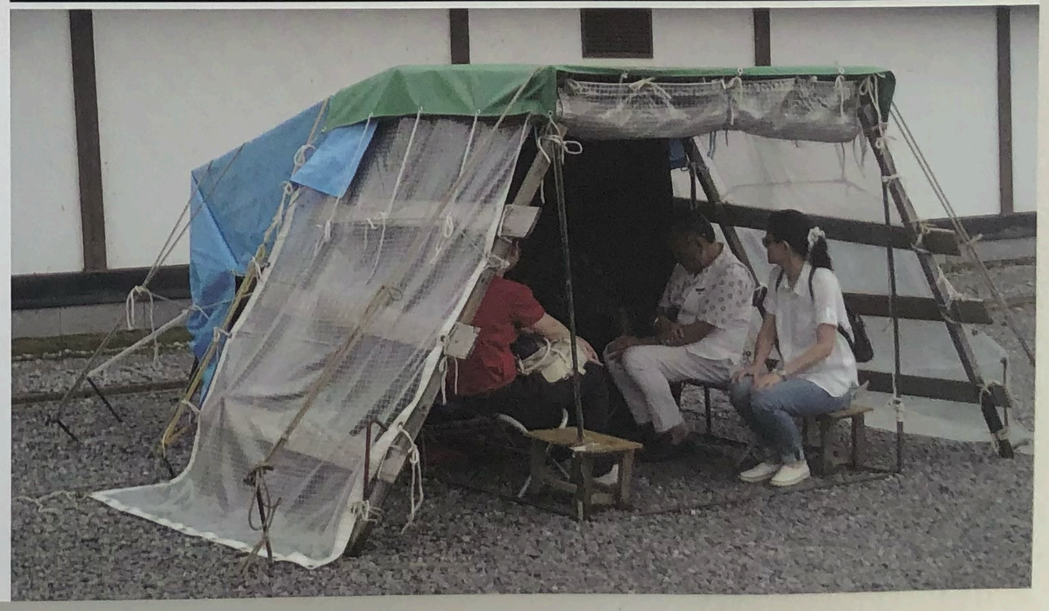
Take Nakamura from "Osoresan (Mount of Fear)" (2018)
Courtesy of the artist

During our numerous interviews with Take, we asked her if many people were visiting her after the events of 2011. She was always highly vague, nearly silent — a silence of modesty. We didn't know precisely how to interpret it: Is the catastrophe too big, too significant to talk about? Therefore, her voice has no place; is silence best? Or maybe she wants to keep the work she did for the clients after March 2011 silent, maintaining their secret relationships with the dead hidden?

Take is introducing intimacy, a genuinely intimate relationship to loss. We can understand this if we go to her home or even if we go to Osorezan during the summer festival — those little shanties are a way to isolate the itako and her client. There is a crucial difference between the itako tradition and any religion: The relationship with the dead isn't public; it is a personal dialogue.

This intimate and touching way of caring for the other is an answer to the vast, unreachable power of catastrophe. Take's presence is like one voice remaining alive after the storm. It is one way to think about a catastrophe on its microscale. Her silence, smile and body language are all answers to the media tumult.

Natacha Nisic is an artist and filmmaker who lives and works in Paris.



Top and bottom: "Osoresan (Mount of Fear)" (2018)
Middle: installation view of "e" (2009) at the exhibition "Echo" (2014) at Jeu de Paume, Paris.
Courtesy of the artist

Installation view of "Andrea" (2013) at the exhibition "Echo" (2014) at Jeu de Paume, Paris.
Courtesy of the artist