

## Noi Sawaragi Don't Follow the Wind

The road North out of Tokyo on the Joban expressway is straight and flat until we leave Ibaraki. As we gradually rise up on an elevated girder bridge and enter the Abukuma Mountains of Fukushima, it's hard to believe, looking out the windows at the sweeping views, that we are now in the second most contaminated place on Earth. In Japanese it's called the "difficult-to-return-to" evacuation zone,<sup>1</sup> or what might more easily be understood as a legal 'point of no return': an area with so much radioactive fallout from the three meltdowns at the TEPCO Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Reactors (an International Nuclear and Radiological Event Scale level 7 disaster, on a scale of 1~7), that there is no viable framework for re-inhabitation. We are here to visit *Don't Follow the Wind*, an art exhibition installed in a landscape which is off-limits to the public, as it is still considered unsafe to be here. I am struck by the invisible character of this danger, radioactivity, and the radioactive particles which have made this area off-limits, and how radiation serves to establish the essential conflict between the visible and the invisible, and forms the criteria for discussing this project.

First, let's clarify terms. What do "radioactivity", "radiation", and "radioactive substances" mean?<sup>2</sup> Most of us didn't differentiate between these before the meltdown. They were interchangeable synonyms for "radioactivity". Now after the disaster, of course, through learning to deal with our new severe and extraordinary circumstances, we've come to use each with precision.

We've learned, for example, that the phrases "radioactivity is invisible", "radioactivity is odourless", "radioactivity is tasteless", "radioactivity is inaudible", and "radioactive contamination is undetectable even if it is affixed to us" are, in fact, mistaken. Radioactivity is an abstract concept, and therefore invisible. Radiation, on the other hand, isn't an abstract concept but rather a concrete force with substantial effects, so just like music is something that we can discern even though we can't see its sound waves, radiation too is invisible but manifests depending on how its particles or waves affect their surroundings. What about radioactive substances then? One certainly can't immediately visually identify microscopic traces of radioactive caesium, strontium-90, or plutonium with the naked eye. But these unstable and unbalanced substances immediately act upon their surroundings when released into the actual world. Scattered skyward in plumes by the meltdown explosions, radioactive substances eventually fell to Earth and immediately began effecting the physical world they encountered. Moved by rain, snow and wind, they gathered in drains and sewage points, and in this pooling and aggregating their movements became evident. These invisible traces, through engaging actual world processes, were made visible.

As you approach the highway interchange, the nearest access point from Tokyo for *Don't Follow the Wind*, you first notice the mounds of black or green plastic bags filled with contaminated soil, dead wood, dead leaves, and such, gathered regularly by the decontamination crews. This constant harvest becomes evident here and there throughout this green and pleasant land of former rice paddies and fields. It's an extraordinary motif which, once established returns time and again through the car window, a refrain of "toxic piles" of black and green plastic, all packed up but with no place to go. It adds to the sense of dis-reality, as if you are looking at a science fiction film set, but of course it's not fiction. Here you have the invisible radioactive substances made visible.

When people think of "art" they imagine the visual arts, but like radioactivity, art too is invisible. When we encounter art, what we tend to see is merely the artwork-as-substance. And while the

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<sup>1</sup> Zones set by the nation to constraint inhabitation, to avoid danger for residence by the radioactive substances scattered by the nuclear disaster of the Tokyo Electric Power Company's Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Station in March 2011.

<sup>2</sup> Radioactivity is the process by which a nucleus of an unstable atom loses energy by emitting radiation. Radiation is the emission or transmission of energy in the form of waves or particles through space or through a material medium. Radioactive substances are unstable —because the strong nuclear force that holds the nucleus of their atom together is not balanced with the electric force that wants to push it apart—and it therefore they produce kinds of radiation which are destabilizing to other things in their periphery.

artwork-as-material is visible, we still might fail to appreciate the experience or meaning of the material that makes it art. We expect to experience an abstract power of art, something emanating, invisibly, one might say, almost like radiation. Because the *Don't Follow the Wind* exhibition is staged in this very peculiar zone-of-no-return, this place polluted by radioactive contamination, new metaphors which might not ordinarily occur to us are revealed: the relationship between radioactivity and art; the power of radiation and art; the affinity of radioactive substances and artworks.

*Don't Follow the Wind* proposes, through this juncture of art and radioactivity, an issue of 'here', the place where we are now, versus 'elsewhere', the places where we are not, places we may even be forbidden access to, and it proposes them in ways that bind and mutate, and having mutated, refuse to disengage. Just because *Don't Follow the Wind* takes place in a contaminated 'elsewhere', and is off-limits, doesn't mean that it is happening in some 'elsewhere' unrelated to 'here'. On the contrary, through *Don't Follow the Wind*, a whirlwind of encounters and exchanges between 'heres (= non-sites) and 'elsewheres' (= sites) are established, de-stabilising all meanings of 'location,' 'place' and 'site', and the significance of boundaries. In this way *Don't Follow the Wind* re-reconfigures site-specific art as a distributed and networked concept in the same way that radiation doesn't recognise borders.

This intermediary exchange between *Don't Follow the Wind*'s 'here' and 'elsewhere' is from the lineage of Robert Smithson, who first proposed the conceptual framework for what came to be known as Earthworks (Land art) in the US back in the 1960s. Smithson expanded the territory of art by working in the environment, to explore what art might become if it were not contained within the walls of museums and galleries. By creating art in the landscape he released it from the social-political system of museums and galleries, densely packed man-made urbanity and, in contrast, unleashed art into desert plains, abandoned houses, and post-industrial landscapes.

Although 'artworks', Earthworks are unlike art experienced in museums. Obviously they cannot avail themselves of clear horizontal or vertical planes, reliable consistent lighting, or protection. Open 'environments' naturally become inundated with dirt, rain, water, stone, rocks, and such, exposed to the elements, intrinsic with and inseparable from their surroundings. Smithson called this condition, where environments become artworks 'sites', to distinguish them from the conventional conditions of classically installed art. A 'site' in this case means an artwork which is integral to its location, incapable of being transported like paintings or sculptures. Synonymous with 'particularity of place', within a set of specific conditions, the artworks attempt to exist outside of any system of exchange value.

Unlike museums, artworks installed at 'sites' don't limit visiting hours; once created the exhibition theoretically never ends. The artworks are surrendered to the passing of time, moderate or brutal, they exist outside of the idea of limited space or time. Each individual artwork featured in *Don't Follow the Wind* has its own close relationship with its permanent 'site' in the "difficult-to-return-to" evacuation zone. By becoming integrated with the radioactive substances which are now an intrinsic part of the area, the artworks are embedded in the unknowable passing of time, where the sites remain off-limits until some day after the half-life of radioactive decay.

The *Don't Follow the Wind* exhibition is at once both typical, and an extreme example of art that exists in Smithson's usage of the term "site".<sup>3</sup> Extreme because the twelve works, placed in this zone-of-no-return by the artists, are exposed to conditions even more severe than Smithson could have anticipated. These works, constantly bombarded by radiation from the contamination, could experience accelerated deterioration along with that of their environment. Furthermore, the 'sites' which are acted upon by *Don't Follow the Wind* are strictly controlled to exclude human entry, so

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<sup>3</sup> Smithson, Robert, "A Provisional Theory of Non-Sites", from *Unpublished Writings in Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings*, Jack Flam, ed, Berkeley, California: California University Press, 1996. Available at: <http://www.robertsmithson.com/essays/provisional.htm>

the audience is forbidden from freely visiting or experiencing the work. In Smithson's 'site' artworks, the act of approaching the work was intentionally difficult, but not impossible. Smithson's 'sites' were mostly installed in areas without reasonable transportation or other infrastructures. But Smithson also provided another important reference for *Don't Follow the Wind*, a model of 'non-site' artworks acting as an extension of his 'sites': an alternative practice of using art spaces to present what is not present.

As the artworks installed at 'sites' are hard to visit, for the work to reach interested viewers, alternative 'non-sites' have to be established. However, if we see the relation between 'site' / 'non-site' as the former being the primary 'real body' versus the latter being just a 'record' to communicate the former, a hierarchical relationship is created regarding the authentic whereabouts of the artworks, and an inauthentic record; no matter how the two forms of the artwork bisect each other, there is no equal basis to be found in the end. In this respect, what was important about Smithson's Land Art proposition, wasn't that setting the 'site' expanded the exhibition space to the world outside museums, but rather that by discovering the meaning of 'site' in art, he tried to reform the fundamental meaning of how art, until then, had been limited to the museum and exhibition formats. The *Don't Follow the Wind Non-Visitor Centre* exhibition, held at the Watarium Museum of Contemporary Art in Tokyo, 2015, was the latter of the two natures, the 'site' / 'non-site'—that which 'can be visited'. No longer simply the record of a 'site', it was an experiment to transpose the art which 'cannot be visited', like radioactivity, into the 'can be visited' exhibition, like a radioactive substance, turning it to a bound state in alternative form, by adapting the artworks which belong to 'site' = 'elsewhere' into 'here'.

This 'non-site' presentation of *Don't Follow the Wind* at the Watarium Museum of Contemporary Art in Tokyo, in the autumn of 2015 was called the *Don't Follow the Wind Non-Visitor Center*. It was neither off-limits nor difficult to return to. So how did the artefacts of the 'sites' and artworks presented at the non-site *Non-Visitor Center* work in terms of the contaminated 'elsewhere' of the Fukushima exclusion zone? One characteristic of *Don't Follow the Wind* is the complete asymmetry between the locations where the individual artworks physically exist, and the location where their art functions. This misalignment is intrinsic to the fact that the 'sites' where the artworks are installed are heavily contaminated point-of-no-return zones, and that the works will presumably become contaminated by radioactive substances over time, and become radioactive substances themselves some day.

The *Don't Follow the Wind* exhibition began on 11 March 2015, and although it cannot be visited that doesn't mean it's closed. The works are there, installed as a matter of principle, on view every afternoon, night and morning, come torrential rain or tempest wind. Being unprotected in the elements, we can expect unpredictable deformation and deterioration, damage, and in some cases even theft or loss. Of course such unforeseen circumstances are inherent in the decision to place artwork in this 'site'. What should never happen at 'non-site' art spaces is precisely what should happen at 'sites', and we can even anticipate, in some cases, that this asymmetry is capable of causing reversals in each poles' value.

One reason we enjoy the experience of appreciating the *Don't Follow the Wind* artworks is that these two poles correspond in time and in space, such that we can successfully superimpose them inside the 'non-site' *Non-Visitor Center* art space. To put it another way, their 'site' / 'non-site' disconnection creates a stability. Even though the artworks as physical objects are 'elsewhere', distant from 'here', by bringing artefacts and documentation about them to the 'non-site' art space, viewers can sense the power of work they cannot visit, mediated by the reliably visible. The photographs and data have only secondary meanings compared to the actual work, yet because they construct a primal opportunity to experience and appreciate, they can relativise and mediate the physical distance between 'here' and 'elsewhere'. 'Here' becomes 'elsewhere', and 'elsewhere' is 'here'. 'Site' becomes unspecified 'non-site', and 'non-site' becomes a specific 'site'. The invisible

become visible, and the visible become invisible.

This is how each visitor to the *Don't Follow the Wind Non-Visitor Centre* exhibition-as-‘non-site’ converts the ‘non-site’ provided into the ‘site’ of their own perspective, reassembled in their imagination. Divisions of mere physical distance, toxic levels of radioactive contamination, and legal restrictions: which of these can bar the mind's eye? Or perhaps I should ask "Doesn't the invisible power of art mean the ability to overcome such borders in the first place?" In that sense, *Don't Follow the Wind* rather casually reveals the fact that in art exhibitions the power of art (radioactivity) and artworks (radioactive substances) are only presumed to be adjoined, before proceeding to visualise their misalignment. What emerges through *Don't Follow the Wind* is the extraction of how originally invisible art is: not reliant on particular locations or materials, but rather worked out purely through the power of art.

The reason that this catastrophic accident occurred at the Fukushima Dai'ichi Nuclear Reactor is because we Japanese built approximately 54 nuclear power plants throughout the Japanese archipelago, one of the most tectonically volatile places on Earth; where massive and destabilising earthquakes and tsunamis are commonplace. Therefore *Don't Follow the Wind*, can be considered an exhibition unique to the ‘site’ of the Japanese archipelago, a by-product of relentless tectonic plate activity. Just like so many museums and other cultural facilities which experienced the impact of the Great East Japan Earthquake of 11 March 2011, there are no such things as unconditional places or ‘non-sites’. Each must know that it can be forced to become a ‘site’, when its artworks can be directly exposed to tremors, rains, winds, earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, and surging tidal waves at any moment.

*Don't Follow the Wind* is nothing if not an exhibition largely attributable to the natural conditions of the Japanese archipelago. Blue flags, flying in the wind, indicate both the exhibiting ‘sites’ and the implication of the merciless and savage nature of the geology of the region; simultaneously indicating how this must be the first and also the last opportunity to test how art is possible in a land so "befouled" (Chuya Nakahara).<sup>4</sup>

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タイトル = 「Don't Follow the Wind」の旗が立つ場所（サイト） / 非・場所（ノン-サイト）  
For the "site / non-site" where the Don't Follow the Wind flags fly.

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<sup>4</sup> From poetry "Sadness that's been befouled", by Japanese poet Chuya Nakahara's anthologies *Yagi no Uta* ("Goat Songs"), 1934