

# A Genealogy of Nonsense

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*Utter nonsense may have more power to change social reality than seriousness. What we call the serious joke may be the foundation of art.*

- Okamoto Taro, 1951

Within the Japanese vernacular, the word "nonsense" has assumed various meanings throughout modern history, often being associated with radical expression that presented a challenge to the dominant discourse of the moment. In the early 1930s, "nonsense" was incorporated into the catch-all phrase *ero guro nansensu*, which the Japanese mass media used to label decadent and salacious popular culture (literature, film, theater) that was viewed as a threat to traditional family values. Then in the 1960s, "nonsense" became the rally cry for the disaffected youth of Japan's student protest movement to express their frustration with the current political and social situation at home and abroad. The rebellious and anti-establishment spirit evoked by the word "nonsense" from Japan's past lives on today, reincarnated and rearticulated by a diverse group of young Japanese artists featured in the exhibition *Roppongi Crossing 2013: OUT OF DOUBT*. Their work simultaneously reflects the precedent set by the "nonsense" of the 1930s— mislabeled as absurd and meaningless by the dominant discourse—while dismissing the dominant discourse itself as pure "nonsense," reminiscent of the protest tactics of the 1960s. Using these historical precedents as its starting point, this essay proposes the idea of "nonsense" as a critical framework linking Japan's postwar avant-garde with contemporary art practices in Japan. This narrative aims at foregrounding socially engaged, politically conscious work that openly questions the status quo and the power structures that shape daily life in Japan.

Nonsense as defined here is deeply indebted to the art historical vanguards of Dada and Surrealism, and its influences can be traced from Surrealist Reportage painting of the 1950s, to Anti-Art of the Yomiuri Indépendant, through Neo Pop of the early 1990s, and on to the present day. For the purposes of this exhibition, this essay will focus primarily on artists included in *Roppongi Crossing 2013* to connect past and present avant-garde production in Japanese art.

## - Towards a Definition of Nonsense

According to the Oxford Dictionary of English, nonsense is defined as "spoken or written words that have no meaning or make no sense" or "foolish or unacceptable behavior." In Japanese, the word "nonsense" is directly transliterated into katakana as the foreign loan word, *nansensu*, and carries roughly the same meaning. However, if we trace the term *nansensu* back to its usage in the early 1930s as part of the media catchphrase *ero guro nansensu* ("erotic grotesque nonsense") we are presented with a rich set of cultural connotations which greatly expand the meaning of nonsense. The early 1930s in Japan were a transitional period between the more liberal Taisho era democracy and the impending militarism of the Showa era. These were fast-paced times where signs of a newly modern Japan, influenced by the dress and social mores of the West, were on full public display. The cafes of Ginza and theaters of Asakusa were packed with *mobo* and *moga*, modern boys and girls, sporting the latest in Western fashions and hairstyles. Along with the trappings of modernity came imported cultural forms, such as jazz, stage dancing, and slapstick comedy à la Charlie Chaplin. The cafes, bars, and nightclubs that sprang up throughout Tokyo catered to this so-called decadent modern culture that posed a challenge to traditional Japanese family roles and values.

The term *ero guro nansensu* was used by the mass media to describe these social and cultural developments of the time, designating forms of popular culture such as literature, film, and theater as erotic (i.e., pornographic), grotesque (i.e., malformed or amoral), or nonsensical (i.e., meaningless and silly). However, as historian Miriam Silverberg points out, these given definitions only touched the surface of this new cultural production, overlooking the critical nature of this particular modern Japanese demimonde. Commenting on her own definition of 1930s nonsense, Silverberg states, "Rather than simply treating it as a reflection of the appeal of slapstick comedy, as did the few sources that bothered to define the term at the time, I associate it with a political, ironic humor that took on such themes as the transformations wrought by a modernity dominated by Euro-American mores"<sup>1</sup>. This viewpoint is further bolstered by Itami Mansaku, the preeminent director of nonsense films of the period who commented that "nonsense was 'fine, dangerous thought' because of its refusal to offer respect to power"<sup>2</sup>. In their humorous inversion of social hierarchies and silly slapstick parody of figures of power, the nonsense films and plays of 1930s Japan doubled as an absurd form of social satire, one that voiced opposition to the status quo, and resistance as well. It is this definition of nonsense and its critical set of tools—humor, parody, satire, and the absurd—that set the basis for future iterations and subsequent interpretations of the term and its radical potential.

In the 1960s, "nonsense" reappears across multiple cultural registers including art criticism, student protests, and a genre of comic books known as *nansensu gyagu manga* ("nonsense gag manga"). The word's meaning and usage varied widely depending on the context, from imagining a world beyond conventional value judgments, to expressing cynicism toward authority figures. The art critic Nakahara Yusuke's treatise, *The Aesthetics of Nonsense* (1962), explored nonsense as a conceptual framework for examining both high art and popular illustration from the United States, Europe and Japan. In particular, his concluding essay, "The Nonsense of Meaning" articulated a complex argument based on the ideas of Robert Benayoun and Stéphane Lupasco that established nonsense as a third term/value "born out of the contradictions of the dualistic opposition between the rational 'sense' of classical logic and the irrational 'sense'"<sup>3</sup>. According to Nakahara, nonsense was not meaningless, but in fact transcended value judgments, thus destabilizing the existing order of things.

Nonsense represented another world outside of reality that was fueled by the power of imagination, and was a means to objectify reality in order to distance oneself from it and ultimately, to reject it. In describing nonsense's critical relationship with reality he argued, "To create something that is absurd and meaningless requires limitless insight into reality"<sup>4</sup>.

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1 Miriam Silverberg, *Erotic Grotesque Nonsense: The Mass Culture of Japanese Modern Times*, University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA, USA, 2006, p.30.  
2 Itami Mansaku quoted in Miriam Silverberg, pp.231–232. The original reference can be found in: Itami Mansaku, "Shin Jidai Eiga ni Kansuru Kosatsu," Itami Mansaku Zenshu I, Chikuma Shobo, 1961, pp.5–16.  
3 Nakahara Yusuke, *Nansensu no Bigaku (The Aesthetics of Nonsense)*, Gendai Shichosha, Tokyo, 1962, p.212.  
4 Ibid, p.237.

Ultimately, for Nakahara, it is nonsense that provides the greatest critical distance for questioning reality.

Nonsense also functioned as a more flippant, dismissive term during the student protest movement of the late 1960s. Following the 1960 renewal of the US-Japan Mutual Security Treaty (Anpo in Japanese), the conflict between the New Left (primarily student groups) and the Japanese government continued. Among other offenses, the Security Treaty allowed US military bases on Japanese soil, nuclear weapons to be stockpiled in Okinawa, and the deployment of American combat troops to Vietnam from bases in Japan. As the conflict in Vietnam escalated, the anti-war movement in Japan gained momentum through national organizations such as Beheiren (Citizen's League for Peace in Vietnam) and Zenkyoto (All-Campus Joint Struggle Committee). Together Beheiren and the New Left student groups mobilized protests against what was collectively perceived as state-sanctioned oppression and social injustices. These groups organized public demonstrations, staged sit-ins, barricaded university campuses, and in some instances urged violence to protest the Anpo treaty and the Japanese government's assistance for the US-led war in Vietnam. In this political and social turmoil, "nansensu!" became a common interjection used by students to challenge official / institutional speech as untruthful or disingenuous, voicing their distrust and disapproval of those in power.<sup>5</sup> While a complete etymology of nonsense in the Japanese language is outside the scope of this paper, it is clear that "nonsense" has always signaled a healthy skepticism toward power and authority. For our purposes, nonsense refers to a critical questioning and rejection of existing conditions which found its voice in the socio-political upheaval of 1930s and 1960s Japan, and continues to resonate through the present day.

### - Postwar Surrealism and Reportage Painting

The terms of the mutual security treaty between the United States and Japan were set in the closing days of the Allied Occupation following WWII, and the treaty's ramifications were hotly contested by the Japanese citizenry. Japan's initial postwar recovery was couched in the burgeoning Cold War politics of the region, and, with the escalating war in Vietnam, the US government pursued an increased military presence throughout Asia with the Japanese archipelago as its staging ground. During the early 1950s, the genre of Reportage painting gained prominence, as left-wing, socially-conscious artists documented the growing outrage of the Japanese people aimed at their government and its acquiescence to US military demands. Reportage painters such as Nakamura Hiroshi, Ikeda Tatsuo, Yamashita Kikuji, and Ishii Shigeo adopted a surrealist approach to convey these pressing issues of the day. Their work often functioned as art activism, focusing on the social injustice of military and political current events. The artist Nakamura Hiroshi's painting *The Base* (1957) together with a related work titled *Shooting, Aching* from the same year, both respond to the 1957 killing of a Japanese housewife by a US soldier while she was scavenging for shell casings at a US military base shooting range. Known as the Girard Incident, named after the perpetrator, American soldier William Girard, Nakamura depicts the moment in which Girard aims his rifle at a kneeling figure in the distance. Girard's ghostly visage and hollow black eyes are juxtaposed against the desolate, alien terrain of the shooting range. The incident, and its ensuing trial highlighted the harsh economic conditions of post-occupation Japan as well as the real and perceived injustices resulting from the ongoing US military presence.

Reportage paintings critiqued the status quo by shedding light on social injustice, and denouncing official policy as unreasonable and unjust. However, Reportage was steeped in a realism driven by the artist's own moral compass and was often overtly didactic in nature. The following generation of artists, seeing Reportage painting as heavy-handed and outdated, would take up radical, experimental forms of expression, shifting away from a direct critique of governmental politics to the politics of everyday life. It is around this time that senior artist and surrealist painter Okamoto Taro, called on young artists to overthrow the authority of the past and "destroy everything with monstrous energy... in order to reconstruct the Japanese art world"<sup>6</sup>. Sensing the need for change, Okamoto famously stated, "It is possible that seriousness is not serious and a joke is not merely a joke. Utter nonsense may have more power to change social reality than seriousness. What we call the serious joke may be the foundation of art"<sup>7</sup>. This subsequent form of nonsense was deemed "anti-art" by art critics of the 1960s for its anarchic spirit and rejection of inherited forms of art, and was incubated under the auspices of the Yomiuri Indépendant exhibition.

### - Anti-Art as Nonsense

First opened in 1949, the Yomiuri Indépendant was an art exhibition created as an alternative to the conservative Nitten exhibition, the long-running juried exhibition of the Japan Art Academy (formerly the Imperial Art Academy), and it was overseen by Kaido Hideo from the Yomiuri newspaper company's Cultural Bureau. According to the Yomiuri Indépendant's manifesto, the exhibition was billed as an "art revolution" to advance postwar democracy through its unjuried entry format open to all participants. The manifesto made clear the exhibition's progressive goals, stating how "disregarding expertise or lack thereof, fame or anonymity, [the Yomiuri Indépendant] liberates the world of art to everyone, without restriction, making it possible for works and aesthetic sensibility to attain freedom"<sup>8</sup>. In this open atmosphere younger artists were free to experiment with increasingly radical forms, and, beginning in the late 1950s, critics began commenting on a new energy that infused the Indépendant, largely driven by the increasingly complex and unruly sculptural objects and installations that incorporated junk and waste materials.

This newly developing vanguard amongst the younger Yomiuri Indépendant participants came into its own in 1960, which coincided with mass protests against the scheduled renewal of the US-Japan mutual security treaty.

It was at this turbulent crossroads of social, political, and artistic upheaval that critic Tono Yoshiaki first used the term "anti-art" (han-geijutsu) to describe this growing tendency, specifically referring to the work of artist Kudo Tetsumi exhibited at the Yomiuri Indépendant. In form, Anti-Art was generally defined as a rejection or inversion of inherited art forms and an experimentation with materials drawn from daily life. In spirit, Anti-Art was nothing short of a brazen resistance to the status quo. Described by critics as a "descent to the everyday" (Miyakawa Atsushi)<sup>9</sup> or a "war on the everyday" (Tono)<sup>10</sup>, Anti-Art was destructive and unruly in nature with close ties to the anarchic and nonsensical sensibilities of Dada. Nowhere was this more evident than in the activities of the group Neo Dadaism Organizers (later simply Neo Dada).

5 Presentation by Ryan Holmberg, *Nansensu: The Practice of a Word Circa 1970* (Meowl), 2007.

6 Okamoto Taro quoted in Alexandra Munroe, *Japanese Art after 1945: Scream against the Sky*, Harry N. Abrams, New York, 1994, p. 154.

7 Okamoto Taro quoted in Kaido Kazu, "Reconstruction: The Role of the Avant-Garde in Post-War Japan" in *Reconstructions: Avant-Garde Art in Japan 1945-1965*, ed. David Elliot and Kaido Kazu, Museum of Modern Art Oxford, 1985, p. 20.

8 William Marotti, *Money, Trains, and Guillotines: Art and Revolution in 1960s Japan*, Duke University Press, Durham and London, 2013, p. 140.

9 Miyakawa Atsushi, "Anti-Art: The Descent to the Everyday," *From Postwar to Postmodern: Art in Japan 1945-1989*, ed. Doryun Chong et al., The Museum of Modern Art, New York, 2012, pp. 127-132.

10 Tono Yoshiaki, "Notes on the 'Young Seven,'" *From Postwar to Postmodern: Art in Japan 1945-1989*, ed. Doryun Chong et al., The Museum of Modern Art, New York, 2012, p. 120.

The Neo Dada group, which only lasted for roughly a year (1960– 1961), consisted of some twenty members loosely organized around the artist Yoshimura Masunobu and his Shinjuku atelier known as the White House. Members including Akasegawa Genpei, Arakawa Shusaku, Kazakura Sho, Shinohara Ushio and others would convene for raucous, drunken events that involved “violent performances of creative destruction”<sup>11</sup>. These ranged from Shinohara’s spirited Boxing Paintings in which the artist attacked the canvas with boxing gloves dipped in ink, to Yoshino Tatsumi’s Danger where the artist set his work aflame, and Masuzawa Kinpei’s Imperial Hotel, in which the artist infamously urinated onto his work. These irreverent acts of destruction were set against the backdrop of the 1960s Anpo renewal protests, in which many of the Neo Dada members were actively engaged. Just as the artists of Neo Dada took to the streets in protest, so too did the increasingly unruly objets, installations, and performances of the Yomiuri Indépendant begin to spill out onto the streets of Tokyo.

In particular, the artists Nakanishi Natsuyuki and Takamatsu Jiro intentionally blurred the lines between art and everyday life by exploring the political dimensions of direct action within the public sphere. In 1962, both Nakanishi and Takamatsu staged a bizarre performance event on Tokyo’s Yamanote rail line. Painted in white face, Nakanishi boarded a train and began interacting with his egg-shaped Portable Objet to the befuddlement of his captive commuter audience. The artists envisioned this strange intervention into public space as a transgressive act that had the potential to radically transform the space of everyday life. The following year, which coincided with the fifteenth and final Yomiuri Indépendant, Akasegawa Genpei, together with Takamatsu and Nakanishi, formed the group Hi Red Center (an acronym formed from the first syllable of each member’s last name). The group continued their aggressive interrogation of daily life, moving their activities outside the sanctioned spaces of the gallery and museum by organizing events known as “mixer plans” in and around the city of Tokyo. These included the 1964 Cleaning Event, in which the members of Hi Red Center scrubbed the streets of Tokyo’s posh Ginza district dressed in lab coats. Intended as a critical statement against the beautification plans for the 1964 Tokyo Olympics, Hi Red Center aimed at subversive acts of “agitation” by openly questioning the power structures of contemporary Japanese society.

### - Neo Pop Nonsense

In the early 1990s, nonsense was revisited by a generation of up-and-coming artists including Murakami Takashi, Ozawa Tsuyoshi, Nakahara Kodai, and Aida Makoto, whose work was collectively referred to as either Simulationism, Neo Pop or Post-Hobby Art. Neo Pop, as articulated by critic Sawaragi Noi, its leading proponent, involves a critical appropriation of anime, manga and otaku subculture as the viable basis for high-art production. This leveling of high and low culture is seen as being deeply rooted in war trauma resulting from Japan’s defeat in World War II that has been filtered and distorted through the lens of otaku subculture. In its own way, Neo Pop is predicated on a renewal of *ero guro nansensu* consisting of erotic hentai manga (pornographic comics), grotesque otaku distortions, and nonsense gag manga. However, unlike the critical nonsense of past art which was highly politicized, the agenda of Neo Pop nonsense was ambiguous in its self-referential focus on the minutiae of otaku subculture and critique of the contemporary art gallery system in Japan. Neo Pop nonsense, what artist Nakazawa Hideki calls the “Japanese Dada movement of the 1990s” can very generally be divided into two stages, the first coinciding with the early work of Murakami Takashi, and the second referring to the work of Ozawa Tsuyoshi.<sup>12</sup> The earliest of these works, Murakami Takashi’s Bakabon Project (1991) are a series of paintings depicting appropriated imagery from Akatsuka Fujio’s 1960s– 1970s gag manga, Tensai Bakabon. In Murakami’s monochrome paintings, the various characters from Akatsuka’s comic book are isolated and devoid of any context. While their mouths are open, there are no speech bubbles, rendering them each mute and meaningless. These characters are empty shells awaiting meaningful content to be inserted from outside their frame.

Most notably, Murakami’s appropriation of nonsense from Japan’s art historical past includes the 1992 Osaka Mixer Project, a re-staging of Hi Red Center’s 1964 Cleaning Event. Collaborating with fellow artists Ozawa Tsuyoshi, Nakamura Masato, and Nakazawa Hideki under the group name Small Village Center (an acronym formed from the first syllable of each member’s name, similar to Hi Red Center), Murakami and his cohorts reenacted the 1964 happening by cleaning the area around Osaka’s Umeda station. As art historian Yoshitake Mika points out, through this humorous appropriation Murakami consciously linked himself with the avant-garde lineage of 1960s Anti-Art, embracing “the absurdity of the [original] acts while simultaneously forcing the re-experience of a destructive aesthetics that could no longer contain a viable form of urgency in early 1990s Japanese culture.”<sup>13</sup> Murakami’s tongue-in-cheek reclaiming of Hi Red Center’s subversive performance is representative of the artist’s early attempts to find meaning in nonsense, but the futility of this project highlights Murakami’s ultimately ambiguous relationship to the postwar avant-garde.

In addition to Murakami, artist Ozawa Tsuyoshi was also actively involved in his own humorous yet critical interventions into the public sphere in the early 1990s. In particular, Ozawa’s creation of the portable gallery space known as Nasubi Gallery (1993–2003) deserves mention. Nasubi Gallery was actually a Meiji-brand milk delivery box that had been repurposed as a miniature, portable exhibition space. Normally blue in color, Ozawa painted the interior walls of the box white, thus creating “the smallest gallery in the world.” The Nasubi Gallery was first exhibited as part of the 1993 exhibition, The Ginburart, curated by Nakamura Masato, in which eight artists were each assigned areas of Tokyo’s posh Ginza district in which to stage artistic interventions.

The exhibition was intended as a critique of the high-class galleries that line the Ginza and according to critic Matsui Midori, collectively represented “a protest against the restrictive conditions of the Japanese art system”<sup>14</sup>. Artist Nakazawa Hideki labeled the project as an “anti-art portable gallery,” and Ozawa himself later explained that he was influenced by the street performances of Neo Dada and Hi Red Center when conceptualizing the Nasubi Gallery. The gallery, while small, housed exhibitions of the most important figures of 1990s contemporary Japanese art, including Aida Makoto, Nakamura Masato, Murakami Takashi, UJINO, and Ozawa himself, among others. The project gave an outlet for these young artists to exhibit publically, allowing them to circumvent the pay-to-play rental gallery system which was the norm at the time. Summing up the radical potential of Nasubi Gallery, Ozawa himself comes closest to defining the project in terms of nonsense by simply stating “I was expressing my critical spirit wrapped in humor”<sup>15</sup>. While Murakami and Ozawa were the most visible artists experimenting with nonsense in the early 1990s, the contributions of other figures of the Neo Pop movement, particularly Nakahara Kodai and Aida Makoto are significant, especially for their role as mentors to subsequent generations of artists.

11 Op.cit., Marotti, p.174.

12 Nakazawa Hideki, “Before it’s all forgotten!,” Ozawa Tsuyoshi: Answer with Yes and No!, ed. Kataoka Mami, Mori Art Museum, Tokyo, 2004, p.54.

13 Yoshitake Mika, “The Meaning of the Nonsense of Excess,” © MURAKAMI, ed. Paul Schimmel, The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, 2007, p.120.

14 Matsui Midori, “Holes in a Landscape, the Expansion of Art: Ozawa Tsuyoshi’s Crossing of Boundaries,” Ozawa Tsuyoshi: Answer with Yes and No!, ed. Kataoka Mami, Mori Art Museum, Tokyo, 2004, p.37.

15 Ozawa Tsuyoshi, A Guidebook to Tsuyoshi Ozawa’s World, Isshi Press, Tokyo, 2001, p.124.

## - Contemporary Nonsense

Shifting forward to the present day, many of the artists included in Roppongi Crossing 2013 grew up during the heyday of Japan's bubble economy of the 1980s, only to be faced with the devastating economic crash of the early 1990s and the ongoing economic recession that has followed. This reversal of fortune, combined with limited opportunities, has been blamed for a pervasive sense of loss among this generation, resulting in what art critic Matsui Midori, has deemed "a culture of reduced expectations"<sup>16</sup>. It is in this stymied atmosphere that many artists have adopted a critical skepticism towards popular culture and instead have immersed themselves in the minutiae of everyday life, voicing a growing frustration with the status quo and the perceived inequities of contemporary Japanese society. The artists of Roppongi Crossing 2013 discussed below have inherited the rebellious, anti-establishment spirit of the 1960s historical avant-garde, and community organizing—is always oriented toward the future. For Endo, the future is not some utopian ideal to be sought after but a natural inevitability, and as such, it is of the utmost importance and demands our attention. The artist captures his audiences' attention by boldly exclaiming phrases like "GO FOR FUTURE," or "WE ARE ALIVE" at the top of his lungs. Putting these words into action, the artist has embarked on a series of campaigns beginning in 2006 to encourage togetherness and positive thinking amongst the people of Japan, and by extension the world. These include his "Mirai-e-go" (Go For Future Car) which the artist uses to ferry people's wishes across the country and the Future Dragon Big Sky Kite project in which he lets messages of hope take flight in the form of hundreds of kites the artist releases into the air. Following the Great East Japan Earthquake in 2011, Endo's practice has taken on a new sense of purpose, organizing events in tsunami stricken areas to lift the spirits of those displaced by the disaster. These include the ambitious Yappeshi Festival (2011) in which the artist organized a local festival for the residents of Ofunato in Iwate Prefecture just two months after the tsunami. This event provided food, massages, and haircuts along with performances and arts and crafts activities, giving displaced residents a much-needed respite from their recent hardships.

## - Post 3.11 Nonsense

More than two years after the March 11, 2011 Great East Japan Earthquake, many coastal communities in the Tohoku area still remain completely decimated. While clean-up efforts have removed the vast amounts of debris, and rebuilding has begun in earnest, many cities remain abandoned, with nearly 300,000 people displaced nationwide. However, it is the ongoing crisis at the crippled Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant that poses the biggest challenge to Japan going forward. With a persistent 20km evacuation zone, constant news reports of radioactive leaks, and monitoring food for radioactive contamination now commonplace, the realities of post 3.11 Japan are quite sobering. With the nuclear plant's effects likely to last for decades to come, artists have taken it upon themselves to address the complex socioeconomic and political issues surrounding the disaster, the chaos of its immediate aftermath, and the uncertain future that awaits the nation. For many of the artists included in *Roppongi Crossing 2013*, the nuclear disaster weighs heavily on their minds, finding its way into their work in provocative ways.

The work of performance artist Niwa Yoshinori exposes the systems of exchange that drive contemporary society, and openly questions received notions of history and engagement with the political process. As with many artists discussed thus far, Niwa inverts social and political values by creating absurd scenarios that challenge common sense and/or practices. For example, in the series *Purchasing My Own Belonging Again in the Downtown* (2011) the artist takes household items, such as tangerines or magazines, that he has previously purchased and then intentionally reintroduces them into the marketplace so that he can repurchase them repeatedly, questioning ideas of ownership, circulation, and commodity value. In the video work *Walk in the Opposite Direction of a Demonstration Parade* (2011) the artist walks against the flow of an anti-nuclear demonstration on the streets of Tokyo. The artist's motivation in staging this "anti-demonstration" is ambiguous—is he pro-nuclear power, or is he protesting against the act of protest? Is Niwa making light of the situation, or is there a message buried in his act of seemingly pointless rebellion? Halfway through the performance, as the artist dodges and weaves through the crowd, we hear two men in mid-conversation say, "So, it's nonsense then..." ("dakara imiganai kara"), most likely referring to the current state of affairs. Niwa's actions here are in and of themselves a form of nonsense, an inversion of the status quo, which is itself another form of nonsense. Ultimately, in order to make sense of nonsense (i.e., post Fukushima Japan) the artist must respond in-kind with an equally nonsensical statement (i.e., an anti-protest).

Kazama Sachiko is best known for her black-and-white woodblock prints that satirize Japanese history, politics, and social issues with a healthy sense of irony and sarcasm. The artist's bold, graphic style is reminiscent of Soviet-era propaganda posters in their direct, socialist realist approach to communicating content. Beginning in 2012, Kazama embarked on a series of works that addresses the meltdown at the Fukushima nuclear plant within the larger context of Japan's wartime past and postwar nuclear policy.

The "flagship" work of this series, *Alas! Heisoku-kan* (Raging Battle-ship the Dead-End) (2012) depicts a raging sea battle with massive warships tossed around by tsunami-like waves. The central ship, with a TEPCO insignia on the bow, carries a superstructure that resembles the crippled Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant. Off in the distance are three mushroom-cloud explosions, representing Japan's nuclear past—Hiroshima, Nagasaki, and Bikini Atoll—and off to the right is another ship with hazmat crews feebly measuring the extent of the radioactive contamination. According to the artist, the scene is based on the naval blockade of Port Arthur in 1904 during the Russo-Japanese War. Here the artist likens the so-called "heroism" of going down with one's ship with Japan's postwar myth of safe nuclear energy, satirizing both historical episodes as examples of negligence played out on an epic scale.

In his latest series, *Great Nature* (2012–), the painter Chiba Masaya attempts to represent the unseeable—namely radiation itself. In particular, he is preoccupied with the ongoing leaks at the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant resulting from the vast quantities of water needed to keep the reactor cores from constantly overheating. In this series the artist has created an intricate tabletop network of jerry-rigged funnels and tubing that transport unnaturally fluorescent liquids from one pool to another, often overflowing into stagnant puddles. Reoccurring motifs in the great nature series include bananas (which naturally contain low-levels of radioactive potassium), pictures of fish or seafood, and volcano-like structures, all of which allude to radiation, contamination, and containment. When taken together, this volatile mix of liquids and hastily assembled containers yields a highly unstable microcosm—a fitting metaphor for present day Japan.

Just as radiation contaminates everything it comes in contact with, some works created both before and after 3.11 have now taken on new layers of meaning—meaning that the artist may have never intended— simply through association with the disaster. One such example is the *Hakuchizu* series by artist Kaneuji Tepei. Begun in 2001, a decade prior to the Fukushima disaster, this ongoing series of installation work consists of disparate elements—colorful everyday items from supermarkets, toy stores, 100 yen shops, and hardware stores—arranged into piles on tabletops and covered with a thick layer of white powder.

16 Matsui Midori, "Tokyo," *Artforum*, Artforum International Magazine, New York, December 2005, p.239.

For the artist, white “simultaneously signifies presence and absence”<sup>17</sup> blurring the lines between inside and outside, liquid and solid, void and substance, meaning and nonsense. Kaneuji’s *Hakuchizu* now reads as an attempt to give form to the invisible layer of radiation that covers the area surrounding the Fukushima nuclear plant and other hotspots throughout northern Japan. What once conjured up images of eerie snow-covered landscapes now reads as a series of modern ruins—ghost towns covered in a layer of radioactive sediment. This ambiguity of form and meaning is essential to Kaneuji’s practice, which has opened itself up to new and unforeseen interpretation in the aftermath of 3.11.

Today, Japan faces a multitude of challenges—economic stagnation, an aging population, rebuilding of the tsunami-ravaged Tohoku region, and the ongoing crisis at the Fukushima nuclear plant. As in the past, artists have taken it upon themselves to wrestle with these difficult sociopolitical issues in an attempt to make sense of the world around them. However, when the current situation appears meaningless, senseless, or utterly absurd, to critique reality and expose its inadequacies may require an equal amount of nonsense or absurdity in order to make sense of the nonsense that surrounds us. For socially conscious artists working today, nonsense provides a critical lens for challenging the status quo and rejecting reality as it is given in order to realize its alternative. Ultimately, nonsense in postwar Japanese art can be understood as a revolt—against the existing state of affairs, and inherited forms—a means of voicing dissent amidst the chaos of everyday life.