Paper prepared for

The Fourth Euroacademia International Conference

Identities and Identifications: Politicized Uses of Collective Identities

Venice, Italy

4 – 5 March 2016

This paper is a draft

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Contemporary Japanese Arts: National Identity Making Within the Representations of Nature

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Abstract

The intense and extraordinary relationship to nature is held as one crucial cultural value of the Japanese. This picture is constructed and maintained diligently not only by foreigners, but especially by Japanese themselves. Japanese like to speak about themselves as nature-loving people and for foreigners this picture of the nature-bound Japanese serves their expectations well. Notably in the field of representations of nature in contemporary Japanese arts this picture is reproduced and maintained continuously. Today, contemporary Japanese art is undergoing radical change. While artists like Murakami Takashi and Nara Yoshitomo dominated the scene from the late 1990s up to 2010 by blurring the borders between popular culture[i] and so-called high art, after the triple-disaster of Fukushima, 2011, the wind has changed. In arts, no longer the cool and the cute construct the pillars of national identity, but representations of nature. This paper will analyze and explain, how artists through representations of nature construct the Japanese national identity. Upon that, it will give an outlook about the relevance of reproducing these pictures of a Japanese national identity for marketing Japanese arts nationally and internationally today.

Key words

Contemporary Japanese Arts, National Identity, Nature, Fukushima, Superflat

1 Introduction

How could something so marginal as contemporary arts serve ends of the formation of a whole nation's identity? This question might appear to be adequate only if the meaning and the influence of arts today were dramatically underestimated. But contemporary arts do have an enormous influence on various levels of not only cultural, but also social and political life, today. In the case of Japan, this implication is of utmost importance and the role that arts have been playing for Japan for decades already is extraordinary. Finally, when Japan had to endure the triple disaster in 2011, arts got another new meaning for the nation.

This paper argues that contemporary Japanese art is essentially involved in the making of a Japanese national identity, and that it has undergone a major change since 2011. In chapter two it will describe the way, Japanese arts have developed during the last two decades and how a Japanese national identity might be concerned by this. In chapter three it will describe the role of the triple disaster of March 2011 for major changes within contemporary Japanese arts. In chapter four three artists and artist collaborations will be introduced who deal with representations of nature in their arts. In chapter five the paper will describe how nature has long time been a strong tool for the making of a Japanese national identity and what this means for Japanese arts today.

The analysis is based on a literature review, exhibition catalogues, interview material of the artists mentioned and finally their art itself.

2 The Cute, the Cool and the Superflat: Japanese arts in the 1990s and 2000s

Talking about the question "What is art?", there is one magic certitude which in Western art discourses just cannot be questioned: There is a strong borderline between High Culture and Popular/Pop Culture; between High Art and Low Art. We do not know where exactly it is, no one knows where exactly it is but for sure it is there. Fortunately, we have our curators, gallerists and art critics who take over the work for us and make sure that what we see in museums and what we read about in the feuilletons of the leading media is nothing but High Art.

Dealing with Japanese contemporary arts, we need to get rid of this exceptionally rough tool to filter those arts, making the way into our consciousness beforehand. The reason for this can be illustrated best by Murakami Takashi's

contribution to the Japanese Pavilion at the Venice Biennale in 2009. “My Lonesome Cowboy” (1998) could be found in a large white room not far away from the center of the exhibition. This sculpture made of fiberglass, acryl and steel measures 288x117x90 cm and is impressive on various levels: We see a teenage boy, naked, with large eyes as one of the central characteristics of Japanese manga and anime characters. His mouth, too, is wide open and grinning enthusiastically. His hair, reminding of popular culture representations again, is yellow and standing up crazily. Standing on a plain white base with his legs apart, he is holding his erection in the left hand, masturbating, and guiding the outpouring sperm with his right arm back around his head so that it flies through the room around his yellow hair – like milk from a glass that has fallen to the ground. What we see is the typical sujets and methods of illustration of Japanese popular culture at one of the most prestigious exhibition spaces of today. This piece of art has been sold for more than $15 million (cf. Sotheby’s 2008) and is only one of the many works made during these years by Murakami as well as his followers and related Japanese artists.

Murakami is one central flagship for Japanese arts during the last two decades. What distinguishes him from many other Japanese artists of that time is the way he made himself successful. Instead of hiding within his ateliers and working things out in the black box, he started taking things into his own hands. Not only as an artist, but also as a curator he participates in exhibitions of contemporary Japanese arts nationally and internationally. Upon that, he worked out his own theories about “the Japanese” and the basic characteristics of his own nation. These activities coincided for the first time in the exhibition “Superflat” in 2001 in the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art which he curated and where he exhibited, too. After the exhibition had started out in Tokyo it soon went global. Crucial is the title: the term “Superflat” is an invention by Murakami, referring to the popular culture in Japan and the way it influences all spheres of life today. In “A Theory of Super Flat Japanese Art”, an essay in his manifesto “Superflat”, he creates a “Superflat” image of Japan out of a box filled with certain pictures he associates with Japan and which he states are the most essential aspects of all Japanese culture. He lists “Japan’s eccentric, secular, grotesque ‘sub-culture’”, “media frenzies”, “eroticism”, “otaku”, “manga”, “anime”, “pop” and many more (Murakami 2000: 23). With the exhibition “Little Boy: The Arts of Japan’s Exploding Subculture”, Japan Society, New York (2005), another one of Murakami’s curated exhibitions went global. “Little Boy” is the code name for the atomic bomb on Hiroshima on August 6, 1945. In the exhibition catalogue he describes in several essays why he chose this title for the exhibition of contemporary Japanese arts. He describes the Japanese as a nation of pampered babies who are still helpless and need to be told what to do as a consequence of the atomic bombs on Japan and the following occupation in WWII. The consequence, Murakami says, is the total attraction of the Superflat popular culture issues in all spheres of Japanese life:

> “Postwar Japan was given life and nurtured by America. We were shown that the true meaning of life is meaninglessness, and we were taught to live without thought. Our society and hierarchies were dismantled. We were forced into a system that does not produce ‘adults’. The collapse of the bubble economy was the predetermined outcome of a poker game that only America could win. Father America is now beginning to withdraw, and its child, Japan, is beginning to develop on its own. The growing Japan is burdened with a childish, irresponsible society; a system guaranteed to thwart the formation of super wealth; and a pervasive anti-professionalism.” (Murakami 2005: 152.)

Truly, these explanations are intentionally provoking and way too shortsighted. Yet, Murakami was successful with his project – nationally as well as internationally. The way he distorted his own nation to a bunch of helpless, infantile babies, exoticizing Japan once again, pleased the Japanese as well as the non-Japanese recipients. Soon, more and more Japanese artists jumped on the bandwagon, contributing to the public distortion of Japanese culture and participating in the success. Murakami gathered those young and foremost female artists around him, resulting in the artist collective called “Kaikai Kiki”. Founded in 2001 as a predecessor of a former group, this collective could rather be seen as a factory. Murakami started producing tiny figures and miniatures of the characters deriving from his works and sold them in the museum shops in Japan and all over the world. He made handbags for Louis Vuitton and set up the cover for a record by Kayne West. It appeared that Superflat was everywhere. In the works of his Kaikai Kiki colleagues Superflat was evident, too. The genuine Japanese Cute and the Cool, as they were globally known by the followers of Japanese popular culture, was obviously in charge for the success of these works. One of these artists is Aoshima Chiho, whose wide dreamscapes are hung with half-naked and not-too-innocent skinny girls. Immersing into her arts meant to completely fall into this Japanese dream world of huge-eyed manga-girls and fantastic landscapes full of entities that cannot decide whether to be amongst the living or amongst the inanimate.

Even the Japanese government realized in 2009 that there is money to make, participating in the whole thing about Superflat, Cool Japan and kawaii[ii]-culture. After serious economic downward trends, switching from hard power over to soft power has just been too tempting. In the end, three “cute ambassadors”, “kawaii taishi” were announced to now represent Japan as the “Trend Communicators of Japanese Pop Culture”. They were sent to engage in events related to Japanese pop culture all over the world (cf. Borggreen 2011: 39). Finally, Japanese popular culture had found its safe spot within Japanese contemporary arts and gained more and more significance, the less the economy recovered. Starting in the 1990s and reaching the peak in the 2000s, the pillars for the Japanese National identity throughout all spheres were made of the Cute, the Cool and the Superflat.

Yet, it appeared in the late 2000s that Murakami might have overdone with his exotization of the Japanese and his propagation of Japanese popular culture. And while Superflat had already started to crumble, Japan had to endure one of the worst catastrophes in the history of the country, which came out of nothing but changed everything.

3 The triple-disaster of 2011: a turning point in Japanese arts

On March 11 in the year 2011, a magnitude 9.0 earthquake hit the area of Tohoku on the Northern part of the Japanese main island Honshu. The earthquake was followed by a tsunami, which hit the same area. Finally, by the waves of the tsunami several meltdowns were caused in the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant. Up to 20,000 people died or are still missing (cf. USGS). The Triple Disaster of 2011 was a horrendous catastrophe that seemed to stop the march of time. A whole nation, under international bewilderment and dismay, was set into a state of emergency. The same applies to Japanese artists of whom only few experienced the disaster from abroad while most of them were in Japan when it happened. Although not all artists changed their work due to the catastrophe right away, most of them were distracted from their projects, not being able to concentrate anymore or engaged in the disaster relief. Matsui Fuyuko says in an interview for CNN:

> "When the quake struck I was in my studio painting and the panel fell down and hit me, (…) I quickly escaped outside, but I was so shocked by what happened in the Tohoku area that I couldn't paint for two months. My mind was distraught." (Matsui 2012.)

The catastrophe was a sharp cut into the lives and works of all Japanese artists but how they dealt with it differed greatly. Matsui Fuyuko, for example, interrupted her work but she did not change anything about her way of working. Yet, she created works specifically to donate for a charity auction related to the disaster relief (cf. Matsui 2012).

Not all artists just went back to their usual projects after the catastrophe. Aoshima Chiho, who has been introduced in the second chapter already, now started working on the recent ongoings in Japan in her arts. That she makes up wide landscapes with fantastic characters has not been new for her. She illustrated catastrophes of all kinds to show how helpless and lost human beings were towards the powers of nature. Her works before 3/11 showed that the hierarchy between humankind and nature was clear and therefore that humankind was in a sort of passive role, just reacting to what happened in the world around. But after 3/11, her works changed. Surprisingly, Aoshima did not just intense her illustrations and stay on the mission of showing the passivity of humankind. Though the illustrations of catastrophes remained and indeed were created much in line with the incidents of 3/11, she shifted her focus point. One expressive example for this is the central work "Akaamanohara" of her solo show called "Chiho Aoshima: Rebirth of the World" in the Seattle Art Museum in 2015. In this animation, she illustrates the eruption of a volcano and how the city around gets swept away by a tsunami right after. But this is only the introduction to the main plot: the regeneration of the people and the city. The animation is run in a loop and repeats itself over and over again. In a short film documenting the creation of the exhibition, Aoshima explains:

> "This time, I was greatly moved by the robust power of how, in the four years since the great earthquake and tsunami disasters in Japan, when everyone was shocked and beaten, both people and nature steadily recovered. So the animation for this show is not just about an earthquake and destruction but its theme is regeneration." (Aoshima 2015: min 6.)

While Aoshima had her main sujets remained and only shifted the perspective on humankind struck by natural disasters in her arts, other artists clearly changed the way of working. Starting in the same year of the disaster, several Japanese artists became somewhat popular with their arts around the topic 3/11. Chim-Pom for example, is a Japanese artist collective, founded in Tokyo in the year 2005. Traditionally, they deal in their arts with issues of the Japanese society, which they treat critically in their installations, performances, paintings etc. With their project "KI-AI 100" (100 cheers) they were one of the first, responding to the disaster by means of arts. In their videos we can see a group of young people standing in midst the ruins, holding each other, forming a circle of interwoven people, shouting motivating phrases like "Let's keep on going!" and encouraging each another alternately. We see them passing through devastated landscapes, finally standing on a cliff close to the reactor 4 which is visibly fuming in the background, putting up a radiation flag. From now on, environmental issues and, moreover, nature were in the center of contemporary Japanese arts and immensely branded the Japanese arts throughout all spheres.

While those 3/11-related works by Japanese artists became known and popular instantly as soon as they emerged in the year 2011, it took years until these activities were overlooked and evaluated in broader contexts. This is, when in the last years more and more websites and group exhibitions emerged in Japan and on international level. The website "Art Radar"[iii] is only one example for the many websites gathering and reproducing Japanese 3/11-artists. Here, ten artists and artistic groups are introduced, including pictures of their works. Short introductions to every artist explain the backgrounds of the artists and their works. As for some artists their personal relation with 3/11 is indicated like in the case of the photographer Naoya Hatekeyama, who "lost his mother when the tsunami destroyed his hometown" (Art Radar: 2015). The exhibition "Japanese Art After Fukushima: Return of Godzilla" in Melbourne, 2015, is one example of those group exhibitions gathering several Japanese (and also international) artists, who had

worked on 3/11 in their arts. Here, analogous to Aoshima Chiho, those artists have been exhibited who had been working on environmental and nature-related issues before already. One of them is Ikeda Manabu, who is known for his dense works with incredible detail, illustrating conflicts between humankind and nature on various levels. For his work "Foretoken" from 2008 Ikeda obviously found inspiration by "The Great Wave off Kanagawa", printed by Hokusai in 1830/31. Ikeda's version shows a huge wave, not made up from water, but from all kinds of natural elements and cultural products. At the bottom of the wave we can see trains, falling off the torn away streets, little tents that get washed away and traces of ice, seemingly bursting out from the inside of the wave. At the top of the wave we find a whole forest that is somersaulted and a ship upside down as it would probably soon fall into the temples and gardens underneath it. Obviously, this work as well as his other works broaches the issue of human exploitation of the earth. In an interview for his participation in the exhibition "Ikeda Manabu and Tenmyouya Hisashi" at the Chazen Museum of Art in Madison/USA, 2013/14 he explains:

> "When I was living in Japan, I could not help but feel conflicted between material society based on construction and consumption, and the resulting environmental situation of excessive energy use and waste that was a byproduct of an overcrowded population" (Ikeda 2014: 47).

Ikeda's work "Meltdown", 2013, follows its predecessors in many manners. Again, the work is impressively detailed and illustrates the scene of a natural disaster. While the title implies that scenes of 3/11 would be reconstructed, it is rather a holistic narrative of a human and natural world that relies on atomic energy. The picture shows an accumulation of technological and industrial infrastructure embedded in a mountain cube. Elements of nuclear reactors are included, too. The whole cube is placed on an icy tip of a glacier as it is sliding down the surface of the green and healthy, innocent earth. Again, it is the conflict between civilization and nature, which is depicted here. While Ikeda did not change his work much, today it is seen in a different context. This context is the triple-disaster of 3/11. He is one of the artists who has been acknowledged before but now receives uplift in the national and international art spheres due to the fact that the central issues of his work have become highly topical. The same applies for Aoshima Chiho, who only very slightly changed her focus towards the triple disaster. Yet, both artists exhibit internationally and receive high recognition for tackling this serious topic. Finally, many Japanese artists became visible who have not been recognized before that much, by working on 3/11.

This short description of Japanese art after 3/11 shows that major changes have happened to the art scene due to the triple disaster. Before, the Cute, the Cool and the Superflat made up the pillows for a Japanese cultural identity, not only within arts, but beyond all borders, for almost two decades. Even the Japanese government realized that it would be clever to participate in that trend in order to increase Japan's soft power and in second instance boost the slackened economy through this means (cf. Borggreen 2011: 41). But after 3/11, all this cute stuff, the colorful characters and grinning smiles seemed no longer appropriate (cf. Favell 2011: 223.) In contrast, arts concerned with nature-related and environmental issues flooded the scene and indicated a crucial change. Finally, what had been used before to construct and reproduce a cute and cool Japanese national identity had died and was replaced by a new core element.

4 Representations of nature in contemporary Japanese arts

Since 3/11 representations of nature in contemporary Japanese arts have received a major upswift. As has already been indicated in the chapters before, this does not only root in the changing works of the artists. Namely, the changing focus of the art scene, media and other public players in that game seems to play a role in promoting these works that might be just as significant as the artists themselves – if they don't even have more influence on what is seen and what not of contemporary Japanese arts. In that it needs to be stressed that not only arts related to 3/11 have become more popular. It is the topic of nature and environment as a whole that gained importance and today is of undeniable significance within contemporary Japanese arts. In this chapter three contemporary Japanese artists/ artist collaborations will be introduced who have gained increasing recognition with their representations of nature especially during the last five years. These are teamLab, Kuribayashi Takashi and Kobayashi Nobuyuki.

TeamLab is a Japanese artistic collaborative, founded in 2001. It is a network of artists of all different professional backgrounds, e.g. artists, programmers, engineers, and graphic designers, with just a couple of shared motivations for their arts in mind. Looking at the long list of their exhibitions and works, carving out these motivations and the core of the work is as easy as it is to find access to their art. Namely, teamLab creates wide room installations for public grounds as well as museums, enabling the visitors to fully immerse in a hyperreal technological representation of nature. One recent work is called "Black Waves in Infinity". The exhibition at Pace Art + Technology in California, USA, has started in February 2016. It is a wide, three-dimensional, passable installation simulating the movement of water, forming waves. Accompanied by piano-guided smooth lounge music the visitors can walk through the projected waves and merge with their surroundings. This experienced fusion of the visitors with the represented nature is exactly what teamLab aims at. The artists claim a view of the natural world as inseparable from the human world:

> "If we regard ourselves as a part of nature, and that nature is not something just to be observed, as people of old perceived rivers and oceans as a living entity of which they were a part of, then it is a way of seeing the world that lures us in and allows us to feel that there is no boundary between ourselves and nature, removing the boundary between us and nature." (teamLab 2016.)

This experience of feeling one with nature through means of technology is the artists' main intention and makes up the common theme throughout their arts. TeamLab exhibitions usually follow this scheme obviously. While the collaborative worked out things differently yet in the 2000s and varied in their forms of presentation, from 2011 on today's style more and more took root. Then, from 2012 on, almost all exhibitions circled around the relationship between humankind and nature and the experience of a unity of both of these through the means of arts and technology. In that, the number of exhibitions, in Japan as well as internationally, exploded in the last years. Almost uncountable, teamLab carries out exhibitions simultaneously all over the world, today.

Kuribayashi Takashi, an artist born in Japan in the year 1968, has gained increasing national and international recognition since 2011, too. Nine years after he had finished his studies of Fine Arts in 2002, the number of exhibitions increased significantly. His art went international and he had solo exhibitions in Japan, Germany, Korea, Indonesia, the UK and China. Kuribayashi has been known as an artists dealing with nature in his arts before. His large room installations included forests, plants, mountains and many more items as real natural elements. Moreover, he used material like paper to make artificial forests from it – of course alluding in this way that paper itself is made from trees, yet an artificial product, as it is manmade. Then, just a couple of weeks after 3/11, he produced a video that referred to the restricted area around the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant. Published in 2012, the short film "Tornado" has been shown in several exhibitions in different countries, e.g. throughout Kuribayashi's first solo exhibition in China, 2014. This video shows a man in a wet suit as he is carrying his surfboard to the beach, where he traverses the water over to an uninhabited piece of earth. Several black screens that are interwoven into the video include texts, indicating that this video illustrates the changing structure of the Japanese land due to 3/11. 20 km around the power plant had been declared restricted and therefore became a sort of no man's land where no human beings would be seen. The borders of Japan had been shifted. The video ends with a black screen, showing the words (sic!):

> "From April 16, 2012 to the present
> A part of "evacuation zone" restriction has been lifted
> Yet in this country
> Here still is the new boundary that none of us can step into" (Kuribayashi 2012).

Kuribayashi, as indicated before, has always been interested in the topic of boundaries. This includes the boundaries between the natural and the artificial as well as boundaries in geographical dimensions. Now, after 3/11, this topic has become of highest relevance in Japanese contemporary arts and therefore, Kuribayashi's images of nature are well visible throughout the international art scene.

Kobayashi Nobuyuki is a Japanese photographer, born in Japan in the year 1970. In contrast to Kuribayashi Takashi, environmental and nature-related works were not in his focus until he discovered this issue for himself just recently. After he has been working as a photographer mainly for magazines and print advertisements for many years, he started using a full format camera to take pictures of nature. In his work we cannot find any reference to 3/11, neither does he in interviews refer to the disaster. Yet, his shift to nature photography is what made him popular and brought him opportunities for exhibiting his pictures internationally as part of group shows but also in solo exhibitions. The name of his one huge show is "Portrait of Nature – Myriads of Gods on Platinum Palladium". This title does not only refer to the content of the pictures shown but also to the way they were printed. Namely, Kobayashi does not make conventional photo prints, but uses those materials that he worked out as the best available and even more, as the most sustainable material in the world. To achieve the widest tonal range for monochrome printing he uses washi, a special Japanese paper, and platinum/palladium for printing. He claims that this way of printing makes the pictures last longest – he would even want them to last for eternity (cf. Kobayashi 2014: min 24:17). Looking at his pictures it becomes evident that it is not the wide landscapes that Kobayashi is after. He is rather interested in the details of nature. His pictures do not have titles, yet they show certain motifs, many of these repeatedly. The key motifs are stones, water and plants, which he seems to arrange diligently. This means that his shots of the scenes in nature seem to be composed – for the perfect picture he would circle a certain motif until he finds the perfect angle. In the end, the pictures gain a certain aura of a magic place. The other side of that medal is, that the viewer feels to be excluded from the whole picture. He might be reminded of standing at a Zen garden, where signs tell him that he may only watch, but not enter.

TeamLab, Kuribayashi Takashi and Kobayashi Nobuyuki all are Japanese artists working on nature in their arts, who have experienced a major increase of recognition nationally and internationally during the last years. As has been argued up to this point, this has roughly two reasons. First of all, the top dogs in contemporary Japanese arts, namely Cool Japan, Kawaii Culture and Superflat started to leave the stage as Murakami and his followers had overdone and there was no more fresh and new about these arts. Second, the triple disaster came about Japan in the

year 2011, right when the former leading themes were on their way down anyways, and the disaster intruded on the live in Japan on all levels. Therefore, what had been held as pillars for the Japanese national identity throughout manifold spheres and especially in contemporary arts was gone. Now, the incidents of 2011 brought another long-lasting candidate for various efforts to the formation of a Japanese national identity back on stage. This is the concept of nature and the supposed intense relationship that all Japanese would have to it.

5 Marketing identity: marketing images of nature

Traditionally, the extraordinarily strong relationship towards nature is held as a cultural constant of the Japanese by Japanese themselves as well as non-Japanese in Japan and abroad. Likewise traditionally, the reasons for this supposed bond are being searched within the religions of Asia and Japan in particular. In various literatures is described, to which extent religion in Asia is based on a completely different human-nature-relationship than ours in Western cultures (cf. Brechner 2000: 46). Namely, Western religions root in a nature-human-duality. Here, both entities are distracted from one another and constitute different worlds which are just overlapping or touching at some points. In contrast, Japanese religions, especially Shintoism, are described as holistic (cf. Brechner 2000: 45). This means, that the human world and the natural world do not exist as separated spaces, but that they are part of one and the same space. Finally, Brechner sums this worldview regarding the Japanese relationship towards nature up into: "To think of Japanese religion is to think of nature" (Brechner 2000: 59). It is not surprising, that the Japanese language offers certain notions and phrases, which promote the special Japanese empowerment regarding the contact to nature. Just one example is the phrase "mono no aware", which describes the competence to be sensitive towards the transience of all things, especially pointing at the contact to nature (cf. Hijiya-Kirschnereit 1988: 135). To sum it up, religions have long since served to verify the strong Japanese relationship towards nature and still are used to foster this long-lasting element of a constructed Japanese national identity around the topic of nature.

That nature plays a crucial role within the Japanese national identity construction also apart from the reference to religion has been shown convincingly by Shirane Haruo in his book "Japan and the Culture of the Four Seasons: Nature, Literature and the Arts", 2012:

> "This book argues that the oft-mentioned Japanese 'harmony' with nature is not an inherent closeness to primary nature due to topography and climate, but a result of close ties to secondary nature, which was constructed from as early the seventh century and based in the major cities. This secondary nature took many forms and appeared in such diverse genres as poetry, screen paintings, gardens, flower arrangement, and the tea ceremony." (Shirane 2012: 18.)

He claims, that this notion of nature as in the harmonious Japanese relationship to nature is not exactly that – primary - rough nature as we can see it and feel it when we just walk right through a forest or go to the sea. It is rather a conglomeration of pictures, stories and reconstructions of nature as those have been constructed and maintained foremost in the cities and therefore has to be named "secondary nature" (cf. Shirane 2012: 16). But exactly this secondary nature has over the centuries served to foster the Japanese national identity formation on the basis of representations of nature. As a result, representations of nature in Japan traditionally are engaged in a close relationship to national identity making processes.

But what is the implication of this contiguity for the situation of contemporary Japanese arts? It is primarily that this branch finds itself embraced by two very strong aspects about the concept and reality of nature in Japan today. The first one is constituted by the dating far back and continually maintained references to nature and the supposed intense Japanese relationship towards nature due to literature, arts and religion. Traditionally, the image of the nature-loving Japanese is well maintained by Japanese and non-Japanese and is productively used for the construction of a certain image of the Japanese and further a certain picture of Japanese national identity. The second aspect is the triple-disaster of 3/11. This day is important in basically two ways for contemporary Japanese arts. Namely, it retrieved a sort of tabula rasa by washing away the former dominant paradigms of Cool Japan, Kawaii and Superflat. Upon that, it brought the issues of environment and nature back on the table and showed everyone in Japan, whether interested in arts or not, the topicality of these issues quite plainly. In combination, these two aspects lead to the telling landscape of Japanese arts today, showing that representations of nature are as popular and widespread as they have not been for many decades, if not even centuries. For producing, promoting, exhibiting and selling Japanese arts containing representations of nature there could be no better timing as those years since 3/11. Yet, the observation of the boom of this genre arouses several questions which are not easy to answer and remind of the old chicken and egg problem: in which way exactly do artists related to arts around the topic of nature become visible nationally and internationally? Is it, that much more artists than in the years before started working on that topic, because of 3/11? Or is it that the work of many artists remained the same, but due to medial selection and influence, in relation to the target group, especially those artists get promoted, who work on that recently again becoming popular topic? And finally, might it be that the most influential reason would be the emerging gap after the downfall of Cool Japan etc. that simply needed to be filled? For sure, the truth lies within all of these explanations. The hardest question is to find out, which players within this construction are more of the influencing factors and which ones are rather the following

factors. What is for sure, too, is that this whole constellation can be judged a win-win situation for all involved players. While Japanese arts gain increasing influence on national and international level the artists earn more money from selling media entanglement. Upon that, the Japanese government may profit from a new image that is spread over the world: again it is the image of the nature-loving Japanese. The Cute, the Cool and the Superflat are finally replaced by a more taken seriously symbol of the Japanese national identity, as it repeats itself again due to perfect conditions during the last years. We can be curious to see, what all these involved players will make of it.

6 Conclusion

This paper has argued that contemporary Japanese art is essentially involved in the making of a Japanese national identity, and that it has undergone a major change since 2011. In chapter two it has been described how the making of a Japanese identity has taken place within arts and how it was utilized before 2011. In chapter three the triple disaster of March 2011 has been demonstrated as turning point in the predominant topics of contemporary Japanese arts. In chapter four three artists and artist collaborations have been introduced who deal in their arts with representations of nature. In chapter five the paper has described how nature has long time been a strong tool for the making of a Japanese national identity and how it today serves for a resurrection in Japanese arts.

In the end, it needs to be stressed, that such a complex concept like national identity can be explained and understood not singularly by an analysis of contemporary arts. The process of forming and maintaining a certain national identity takes place throughout all spheres of politics, society, economics and so forth. Tendencies, like in arts, that first appeal to be very self-contained and tangible, again are entangled with strings of the same rope, leading to many more other aspects, connecting them in manifold ways. Still, researching on the many different ends of that rope, like arts, is necessary and promising to gain further insight into the most complex issues like the formation of a national identity. Right because the latter cannot be analyzed wholly simply by the constrained tools of one academic discipline, it is essential to research the different shapings of national identity within the various spheres of private and public life diligently. With this paper, this step has been made for the field of contemporary arts regarding the formation of a Japanese national identity.

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8 About the author

Jutta Teuwsen, born in 1984, studied Philosophy, Arts and Contemporary East Asian Studies in Dortmund, Duisburg-Essen, Reykjavík, Beijing and Osaka. She works as a research associate at the University of Düsseldorf at the Department of Modern Japanese Studies where she gives classes on Japanese culture. She is writing her PhD dissertation about the representations of nature in contemporary Japanese arts. During her studies and PhD she was awarded with several scholarships, e.g. by the DAAD in Germany and the DIJ in Tokyo. In 2015, she contributed papers and presentations to six German and international conferences in the fields of Japanese studies, Anthropology and Arts. In 2016, several papers about contemporary Japanese arts and the Japanese in Hawaii will be published.

[i] Especially manga, anime, kawaii-culture ("cute-culture") and "Cool Japan"
[ii] kawaii = cute
[iii] http://artradarjournal.com/2015/05/15/japan-after-fukushima-10-artists-making-art-about-the-disaster/