“281_Anti Nuke’s Graffiti and Japanese Political Subjectivity”

Victoria Lupascu

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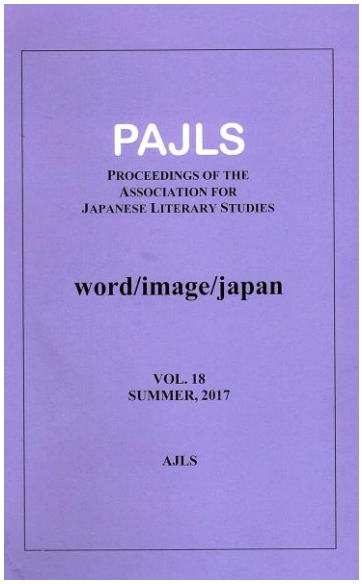

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281_ANTI NUKE'S GRAFFITI AND JAPANESE POLITICAL SUBJECTIVITY

Victoria Oana Lupascu
Pennsylvania State University

I want to talk about breathing. About the process of inhaling not air, but radioactive nuclear particles that travel through your nostrils, into your trachea and end up in your lungs where they join all the other radioactive nuclear particles you have inhaled on your way to work or home. The particles become heavier with rain and color the rain drops black, just as black as your lungs will become within a few months of breathing this air.

Does this make you uncomfortable? Then, one of 281_Anti Nuke's goals has been achieved right from the outset of this presentation: to make all of us think about the air we breathe every few seconds; we've been made to think about its invisibility and about its effects on us. We have been made to remember these uncomfortable facts in the face of cultural amnesia, even when the government sponsors campaigns of collective amnesia in relation to nuclear disasters and their aftermath on the Japanese archipelago. 281_Anti Nuke has made me, and therefore you in this instance, remember that the very air we breathe contradicts the blinders of 'never again' rhetoric[1].

Today, my presentation in its capacity of a small part taken of my dissertation, takes graffiti art as an example of affective dissent that fuels the 281_Anti_Nuke's challenges toward state sponsored amnesia regarding the extent of the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Plant meltdown and its aftermath. As a few scholars have shown, graffiti facilitates a critical assessment of the relationship between affective dissent and resilience, two concepts that help define what Judith Butler calls the "speakable and the unspeakable" disposable

[1] Although the "never again" rhetoric emerged in the aftermath of the Holocaust and underlines the international community's pledge for preventing or stopping genocides or any other mass atrocities, the functioning of this rhetoric in the neoliberal international paradigm indicates that its ties to reality have been cut. For further reading please see A. Gallagher, *Genocide and its Threat to Contemporary International Order* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

subjects in the context of Japan[2]. I conceptualize 281_Anti Nuke's refusal to forget 3.11 as an act of affective dissent manifested through graffiti, which, in turn becomes a catalyst for resilience (in other words, the capacity to recover from major disasters and its corollary practices). My presentation will engage with two interconnected layers of analysis, both of which hinge on the employment of graffiti art and its political and affective implications. First, I examine the figure of the dissenting artist, the rhetorically disposable subject, moving from this initial portrait into my second layer of analysis, that of the non-rhetorical disposable population – the unspeakable. While focusing on graffiti stickers by the Japanese artist 281_Anti Nuke, I draw on, in the background, Michel Foucault's concept of biopolitics to discuss the importance of affective dissent and resilience in negotiating agency and subjectivity inside the paradigm of "letting live and making die" in Japan[3].

Graffiti, the art of the unspeakable (understood here as representing both a population, a group of people, as well as the more abstract unsayable ideas, things), lives, breathes, and proliferates in the geographic space of Japanese cities, leaving a trace that invites interpretation, and in 281_Anti Nuke's case, giving dissent a visible embodiment. There is a productive tension between affective dissent on an everyday level manifested inside the individual mind and the dissent of graffiti art, which is visible on state-owned buildings, traffic signs or means of transportation. I argue that this tension, embodied in the performative aspects of 281_Anti Nuke's graffiti-like stickers, transforms his work into a form of guerilla warfare: they not only challenge state sponsored media sovereignty over post-Fukushima Japan, but 281_Anti Nuke's inscriptions also turn smooth, supposedly orderly city surfaces into zones of political indeterminacy, where a passersby engagement with graffiti harbors the potential of shifting one's political subjectivity.

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[2] Lloyd Moya and Judith Butler, From Norms to Politics, Cambridge: Polity, 2007.

[3] For further reading on Michel Foucault's biopolitics, please see Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the College de France, 1978-1979*, Trans. Graham Burchell (New York: Picador, 2008).

281_Anti Nuke's work consists of graffiti like stickers that directly challenge the state's position in relation to the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear plant meltdown in the immediate aftermath of the powerful earthquake from March 2011. In his own words, taken from an interview with Jon Mitchel for the Asia Pacific Journal, the artist argues that he chose to use graffiti-like stickers, as opposed to the more traditional graffiti spraying method, due to the dangerous nature of altering the surface of public spaces. Stickers can be applied faster than spraying one's message and contain a more impactful image that will directly contrast with the other graffiti on the walls, assuming a greater visibility and engagement with the passersby. In the same interview, he claims that he was shocked by the very secretive way in which the government handled the nuclear meltdown, which further led to anger and dissent, feelings which have become the driving force behind his work. 281_Anti Nuke continues by saying: "I thought street art was the best way of getting in people's faces, of making them think", thus materializing individual agency against the state's biopolitical mechanisms that aim to maintain the façade of peaceful, disciplined daily life while holding over them the umbrella of the secrecy law[4]. As a result, 281_Anti Nuke has created more 200 themed stickers bearing different messages, but all revolving around and trying to expose the state's secrecy in handling Japanese people's health after the meltdown, its collaboration and cover up of TEPCO's work at Fukushima which directly impacts the population in an invisible way. Just like breathing in the invisible radioactive nuclear particles.

From the approximately 200 stickers that constitute the artist's body of work, for today's presentation I will focus on the *I Hate Radioactive Rain*[5] series and the *Remember 3.11*[6] series. The

[4] For the interview in its entirety, please see John Mitchell, "281_Anti_Nuke: The Japanese Street Artist Taking on Tokyo, TEPCO and the Nation's Right-Wing Extremists," *Asia Pacific Journal*, 11.24 no. 5. (June 16, 2013).

[5] Ryal Julian, Second picture in the slideshow, *I hate Radioactive Rain*, as part of the article "The Artful Dodger: Japanese Street artist 281_Anti_Nuke Is Risking His freedom to Be Heard," *South China Morning Post*, 15 Feb, 2014, Available at <http://www.scmp.com/magazines/post-magazine/article/ 1427027/ artful-dodger-japanese-street-artist-281-anti-nuke-risking>.

stickers from the *I Hate Radioactive Rain* series reveal the image of a little girl who wears a rain coat/poncho and looks down towards the ground. At her feet, there is a pool of black liquid, which we could assume is black, radioactive rainwater. The colors in this series are very vivid, apart from the pool of black water, thus easily noticeable in the urban landscape, although the stickers' visibility depends on their size and placement in relation to pedestrian set routes such as the exit from the Shibuya Metro Station or different street crossing points.

281_Anti Nuke creates a pattern of visibility that is specifically attached to nuclear energy issues, namely around the government's silence vis-a-vis the existence of radioactive nuclear particles in the atmosphere in Tokyo after the explosion at Fukushima Daiichi Plant[7]. By repeating patterns and themes, the artist is bringing into the daily life, against government-sanitized official discourse, the existence of the invisible threat- the nuclear particles that dust all surfaces and saturate the atmosphere. Thus, 281_Anti Nuke attempts to thwart the implementation of the paradigm of collective forgetting by nurturing ties with the recent past. In doing so, the stickers enter a very tight competition with commercials and other graffiti that imbue the public space, or the personal smart phones that bring commercials and more graphic elements into the personal space, all seeking the passerby's attention. The stickers engage in the attention economy defined inside the neoliberal economic setting of exacerbated consumerism and reclaim the right to look, as well as the right to the real, in Nicholas Mirzoeff's words, and the subsequent right to know for the passersby[8]. The message on the stickers rests at the bottom. This strategy of imbalance between words and image

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[6] For the sticker I am analyzing here please visit 281_Anti _Nuke's personal website available at: http://www.281antinuke.com/gallery/ For the entire series please visit http://www.281antinuke.com/gallery/I_hate_rain/.

[7] Reiji Yoshida, and Kazuaki Nagata, "Government Silent on Report, Fukushima No. 1 Workers Fled During Crisis," *The Japan Times*, May 20, 2014, <http://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2014/05/20/national/government-silent-report-fukushima-1-workers-fled-crisis/#.WI64x_L1-js>.

[8] For an extensive exposition of the concept consult Nicholas Mirzoeff, *The Right to Look: A Counterhistory of Visuality* (Durham: Duke UP, 2011).

creates a more impactful composite structure whose meaning unfolds gradually for the passersby, during their urban activities and after they settle at home. Thus, the complex of image and words is designed to assume what anthropologist Alfred Gell calls "secondary agency,"[9] separated from 281_Anti Nuke's agency, and facilitate the production of affect, positive or oppositional, that will further catalyze the change in political subjectivity.

The sticker's goal is to produce an affective response in relation to the government's actions and the environment. The affective mood the girl creates is sadness. Though the artist claims to feel angry, his stickers suggest sadness. As opposed to anger, sadness is more likely to stir empathy. Sadness is a response that implies an elongated temporality of energy disposal which directly contrasts with anger's shorter, but more powerful, mobilization of stamina. But, in tandem with the stickers' secondary agency, the artist aims to create a more lasting mood, an affective response that will wrap itself around the passerby, disrupt her daily routine and position her in a state of inquiry meant to challenge her own political subjectivity.

The girl on the sticker has protective gear against the rain, but, as we find out from the caption underneath, *I Hate Radioactive Rain*, the rain is radioactive, its damage cannot be staved off by a simple raincoat. The sticker's texture and tonal contrast contribute to its distinctiveness from the other graffiti. Its compact structure gives it visual depth and makes the contrast between the 2D and 3D perspectives more apparent. Corroborating the two perspectives with the continuous aspect of the verb in the present tense *to hate*, the fourth dimension, temporality, is implied. Consequently, this seems to raise the possibility of the 4D as the dimension of resistance and dissent, the attestation that the human body (more specifically, the children's bodies) cannot be made invisible despite any attempt. By analogy, although invisible, the radioactive particles assert their presence belatedly, when the human body becomes ill. Depending on the illness' gravity, people know how long they have been exposed to radiation, thus retroactively transforming and synthetizing the invisible into an

[9] Alfred Gell, *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998).

undeniable presence. Furthermore, there are no additional visual elements that could position the child in a specific environment. Rather, the sticker positions her directly on the street, inhabiting the same space as the pedestrians. Every time it rains, the radioactive rain will gather around the passersby creating black puddles that mirror the one she is stepping into, in a parallel move to each passerby's steps, but also in contrast to them - the child feet's position indicates a continuous standing in the black water, while the passersby are defined by movement. Also, in this particular photo, the child's face is damaged by a splash of color that could be indicative of the harmful effects radioactive water has on skin. Thus, to sum up, for this particular sticker, the negotiation between the visible rain and invisible particles becomes substantiated, the body is maimed by radioactivity and the origins of sadness are related to the visible scar. The scaring, the inhaling of particles and getting into contact with the black rain, all happen on the street, in the public sphere regulated by laws and by the secrecy law reinforced by Shinzo Abe's government.[10]

On the other hand, the sign for radioactivity is placed at the bottom of the image, and it risks not being seen by the passersby, hence undermining most of 281_Anti Nuke's thrust and losing the battle on the attention economy front. Moreover, if the stickers are not big enough, their impact might be minimal or inexistent. Ironically, the damage done by rain, radioactive rain, or other graffiti, or even when 281_Anti Nuke accidentally damages or tears the sticker when attaching it, damages the artwork's original message. However, if the stickers are not damaged, but too small to be noticed, or if the sign for radioactivity does not resonate with the passersby, the affectively charged act of breaking the law to express dissent on 281_Anti Nuke's part still remains valid, albeit unilateral. He manifests his anger and disagreement with the secrecy law by changing the texture of the urban landscape without being caught and creates his own developmental media to

[10] Jeff Kingston, "Abe's Secret Laws Undermine Japan's Democracy," *The Japan Times*, December 13, 2014 <http://www.japantimes.co.jp/opinion/2014/12/13/commentary/japan-commentary/abes-secrets-law-undermines-japans-democracy/#.WI6nofL1-js>.

oppose state's visual sovereignty.[11] In this scenario, the artist exercises his political agency of distrust and suspicion toward the government, while using graffiti as a means of building resilience-making himself seen and countering his own disposable status. Also, he uses graffiti as a direct enterprise in changing the status of his fellow citizens, from disposable population who does not need to know what they are inhaling to knowledgeable people who can reclaim the right to see.

Taking a step back to see the big picture, these stickers' compactness and distinctiveness allow them to deny the silent claim of propriety the other stickers and graffiti lay over the walls, light posts and energy boxes, 281_Anti Nuke's stickers directly intervene into the extant visual flows and form a type of counter-visuality in relation to both the state and the existing graffiti. They do so by overwriting the existing graffiti and creating thus a hierarchy of importance inside the graffiti defined spaces (it is worth mentioning here that the stickers are written over as well). Nonetheless, through this palimpsestic overwriting, 281_ Anti Nuke parallels his fellow artists in interrupting what Martin Irvine calls "the totalizing sense of the space produced in modern cities with a local, place bound gesture, an act that says 'we're here with this message now'".[12] It has been argued that graffiti writing and different types of commercials saturate the public surfaces and, thus, "achieve the status of totalizing spectacles, walled enclaves of manufactured and regulated visuality".[13] As a result, performing a forceful move in creating the hierarchy of writing and overwriting (sticking) in the public space, the affectively charged gesture intended to make the invisible visible immediately opens up a heated conversation between this particular artist, the state and the other artists. The state, through its representatives, emphasizes the illegality of 281_Anti Nuke's endeavors. Other

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[11] Vijay Devadas, "Governing Indigenous Sovereignty," *Fourth Eye: Maori Media in Aotearoa New Zealand*, Ed. Brendan Hokowhitu and Vijay Devadas (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2013).

[12] Martin Irvine, "The Work on the Street: Street Art and Visual Culture," *The Handbook of Visual Culture*, Ed. Barry Sandywell and Ian Heywood (Oxford: Berg, 2012) 235-278.

[13] Ibid.

artists alongside the "right wing" (*uyoku*) nationalist supporters have sent 281_Anti Nuke death threats and have questioned his nationality assuming that only a Korean could doubt the government's actions, as deleterious as they might be.[14] Insults are thrown at him, others wish he would be sodomized with a spray can, but it all boils down to the question about the mechanics through which the distribution of visuality leads to the distribution of power and the unsettling of the visible-invisible binary.

The stickers intervene in the way people experience public spaces. The passersby are no longer only the subjects of advertisements, but in the moment of decoding 281_Anti Nuke's stickers' messages they become active participants in his type of contervisuality. Even more, the sticker series destabilizes de Certeau's claim that "the commercial imagery (…) conceals the buildings in which labor is confined; it covers over the closed universe of the everyday life; it sets in place artificial forms that follow the path of labor in order to juxtapose their passageways to the successive moments of pleasure."[15] In the first place, 281_Anti Nuke seeks to dissect those passageways and to replace the moment of pleasure with a moment of shock, of discomfort that will jolt into visibility the precarious condition of the Japanese people who breathe radioactive particles without even knowing it. Secondly, by positioning his stickers in a competition for attention against the commercial imagery, 281_Anti Nuke brings back into sight the buildings and tries to intervene into the "closed universe of the everyday life". In this way, by taking into consideration de Certeau's observations, as well as by analyzing 281_Anti Nuke's efforts in a biopolitical framework with the help of visual theories of visuality and countervisuality, my presentation today complicates the discourse around graffiti in Japan while taking into consideration the importance of affective dissent and resilience as driving forces. It also attempts to further some graffiti artists', such as Oyama Isamu, claims that graffiti should not be

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[14] John Mitchell, "281_Anti_Nuke: The Japanese Street Artist Taking on Tokyo, TEPCO and the Nation's Right-Wing Extremists," *Asia Pacific Journal*, 11.24 no. 5. (June 16, 2013).

[15] Michel de Certeau, "The Imaginary of the City," *Culture in the Plural* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1997) 17-27.

involved in consumerism, but should have a connection with the society. This claim resonates with Swoon's position from 2003, more specifically "Street art and graffiti are a form of active citizenship that resists attempts at containment…. I think that the persistence of graffiti and street art in cities all over the world is evidence of a common need for citizens to take a role in their environments."[16]

With that being said, I want to draw our attention to my second example today from the *Remember 3.11* series. This sticker, just as the ones in the *I Hate Radioactive Rain* series, revolves around the figure of a little girl. She holds in her hand the symbol for radioactivity and her dress bears the inscription "311 is not over". Her entire body is red, which, judging from the appearance of other stickers, is a direct reference to Japan's national flag, which interconnects the national discourse, memory building processes and radioactivity. The girl's demeanor similarly expresses sadness and the only causative visual cue is the message she brings: 311 is not over. This contradicts the official discourse promoted by the government, and later acknowledged as untrue, that claims to have put a stop to the nuclear pollution and to have assumed complete control over the situation at the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear plant.[17] The choice of colors, in addition to the political implications, also serves as a means of creating visibility: red is more likely to attract attention and engage the passersby. There is no sign of punctuation after the message, but there is an open invitation for the people who gaze at the sticker to raise questions. Even more, it creates immediate puzzlement, drawing attention to the ways in which 311 is *not* over and the reasons for which it continues to matter, even in the absence of materially visible traces or subsequent 'newsworthy' developments. 281_Anti_Nuke is using a specific temporal reference to gesture to a broader sequence of events and reference the lasting effects of the nuclear meltdown. He is extending the temporal limits of this

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[16] Swoon, "Toyshop Collective: Indivisible Cities," 2003, Available at http://www.toyshopcollective.org/indivisible.html.

[17] "Fukushima 'not under control'- TEPCO official refutes PM's assurances," *RT*, September 13, 2013. Available at https://www.rt.com/ news/fukushima-under-control-tepco-819/

specific event to which the date refers, underlining the indeterminacy of its duration. Additionally, he clearly opposes the collective amnesia about 311 as well as the state's intention to transform it into a memory of a past that is over and done. In this way, the graffiti like sticker begs questions such as: How is it going to stop? Should we do something about it? How will we know it stopped if we can't see it unravel?

The questions imply an affective response in tandem with a call to action, to non-violent disobedience to the visual sovereignty imposed by the media in collaboration with the state, which in turn will lead to a change in political subjectivity. Understanding the stickers implies a type of slowing down of people's daily life. It implies spending time with the image in order to overcome the initial shock it creates and to consciously process the meaning of the invisible that will belatedly become visible in people's lungs and thyroids, at least. The girl holds the sign for radioactivity in her hands and, apart from her dress, that is the only additional object she has. There are no shoes, no toys, no hear bands, nothing else but white blotches that make her head, her legs and lower left part of the dress look foggy. There is something that will make her disappear, that will make all the children disappear, and because if the sign for radioactivity in her hands we can assume that it is the radioactive particles that eat her away or gradually produce disability through overexposure. Thus, this sticker is negotiating the temporality involved in the invisible-becoming-visible dynamic in order to attract the passerby's attention and jeopardize their hopes for a better future for children.

As we have seen from the first example from the *I Hate Rain Series*, the girl's image stands alone and interacts with the environment once stuck on the public walls or energy boxes. Because of graffiti's nature of drawing human figures on public surfaces, the passersby are not surprised anymore to see the image of a girl on a light pole, for example. Graffiti's popularity goes against it and makes it less shocking and less noticeable. But the bright red color, the sadness and the clue given by the radioactivity sign challenges the mind and the puzzle can only be solved if thought through later on, if the passerby allows the sticker's secondary agency to oppose the internalized official discourse.

The journalist Vincent Morgan, in an article about 281_Anti Nuke for the website *Fatcap*, describes his first interactions with the stickers: "When I've seen his work on the streets, I've always been drawn into some childlike image, without any thought of an ulterior message. Then when you look a little closer or just think about it, you understand the message like a slap in the face. It's very quick, very sudden and it's not something you want to repeat." [18] Here, Morgan is adeptly describing one potential interaction between passersby and the stickers and confirms their impact and agency independently from 281_Anti Nuke. Morgan is also pointing out the layered experience people can have when gazing at the sticker which can help them remember the moment of seeing and sudden understanding of their own biopolitical disposability when the figure of the outlaw graffiti artist is rhetorically portrayed in the media as an element the society should dispose of by putting him in jail.

By way of conclusion, I want to emphasize the importance 281_Anti Nuke's graffiti stickers hold in delineating citizens' transition from passive consumers and subjects of commercials to active participants in a type of counter-visuality. The stickers act as reminders of an adversarial relationship with the state's secrecy practices, relationship that since it can only be affective in what Hidetsugu Yamakoshi and Yasumasa Sekine call a "control society"[19], remains otherwise, invisible just as radioactive particles. However, 281_Anti Nuke's graffiti like stickers put pressure the visible-invisible binary and transform the city into a heuristic laboratory that uses affective responses to his stickers as generative practices for an active, non-violent disobedient political subjectivity. Moreover, by asking unsettling questions about memory and the invisible radioactive particles, both 281_Anti Nuke and the passersby renegotiate their status of disposable population in relation to the state's discourse. Finally, the stickers

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[18] Vincent Morgan, "Meet '281 Anti Nuke' The Controversial Japanese Street Artist. Art and Politics. People versus Nuclear," *Fatcap*, December 23, 2012. Available at <http://www.fatcap.com/article/281-anti-nuke.html>.

[19] Yamakoshi Hidetsugu and Sekine Yasumasa, "Graffiti/Street Art in Tokyo and Surrounding Districts," *Routledge Handbook of Graffiti and Street Art*. Ed. Ian Jeffrey Ross (London: Routledge, 2016).

engage with the society at large not only by proposing modes of active citizenship, but also by affectively jolting into action people's right to *see* and *breath.*

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