BOOK REVIEW: 
*Don’t Follow the Wind*, edited by Nikolaus Hirsch and Jason Waite

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How do you represent a disaster whose ruins are inaccessible? How do you breach the deafening silence of institutions whose myopic greed extends beyond generational time? How can solidarity and collaboration counter mechanisms of violence that disrupt entire ecosystems? ‘What can art do in an ongoing catastrophe, when destruction and contamination have made living impossible?’ Nikolaus Hirsch and Jason Waite, in *Don’t Follow the Wind*, an edited companion volume, published in 2021, to the ongoing and inaccessible exhibition ‘Don’t Follow the Wind’, examine these questions in order to both present the disaster in context and the answers proposed by the subsequent exhibition.

The publication of *Don’t Follow the Wind* marks the ten-year anniversary of the disaster that took place in the Fukushima prefecture of the Tōhoku region in Japan’s main island of Honshu on 11 March 2011. The ‘disaster’ refers to the nuclear catastrophe that followed the Tōhoku earthquake and tsunami and the subsequent nuclear meltdown of the Fukushima Daiichi (or Fukushima Dai’ichi or Dai-ichi) power plant, run by the Tokyo Electric Power Company (TEPCO). The book is the twelfth volume of Sternberg Press’s ‘Critical Spatial Practice’ series and is dedicated to the collaborative and ongoing ‘Don’t Follow the Wind’ exhibition. The artworks that make up the exhibition are located within the Fukushima exclusion zone, a thirty kilometre radius around the disaster site and a closed off area delineated by the Japanese authorities around the power plant that initially displaced over 150,000 inhabitants. ‘Don’t Follow the Wind’, while inaccessible to the public, opened on 11 March 2015, for the four-year anniversary of the Fukushima disaster, but does not, as yet, have an end date. The exhibition project was initiated

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2. To avoid confusion, when the exhibition itself is mentioned, it is signalled here by quotation marks (*‘Don’t Follow the Wind’*), while when referring to the book it is done so with italics (*Don’t Follow the Wind*).
by the Japanese art collective Chim↑Pom with curators Kenji Kubota, Eva and Franco Mattes, and Jason Waite, and in collaboration with the displaced inhabitants of the exclusion zone – who provided, among other things, the spaces for the exhibition.4

This initial collaborative ethos is mirrored in the book in images and collated texts authored by ‘Don’t Follow the Wind’ artists and curators, and assisted by critical participations from scholarly associates, the art historians Noi Sawaragi and Sven Lüticken and political theorists Silvia Federici and Jodi Dean. It is through this collaborative grounding that the exhibition is (re)located in material form in a book, even if only reflexively and critically. The book’s fragmented structure, with artists’ reflections and images punctuating a critical contextualisation, mirrors the dispersed nature of ‘Don’t Follow the Wind’ while offering a critical, if non-exhaustive, frame to the inaccessible show. Rather than an exhibition catalogue, Don’t Follow the Wind, then, is an extended wall text or curator’s cut, making present the exhibition and its artworks, ‘carry[ing] them] forward’,5 if not in their actual location then through critical and imaginative reflections. The book’s collaborators, like gallery attendants, act as the readers’ absent guides, accompanying us as impossible visitors inside the inaccessible exhibition, describing for us what we cannot encounter but are able to see reproduced on the pages between each essay.

The book, in the hand of its reader, participates in the ‘ongoing record’ of the exhibition;6 it is both an immediate capture of the project and a reflection on the temporal unknowability of Fukushima’s leaked radiation. The durational quality intimated – both immediate and deep – makes present the events of Fukushima, the silence of official narratives following the disaster against the inaccessible yet mediated markings of ‘Don’t Follow the Wind’; the book itself becoming a record, officialised by its publication and distribution, of the exhibition, and, in its metonymical property, of the disaster. Each essay is enclosed by reproductions of artworks and wall text-like description or reflection, allowing the reader to exhale between each critical speculation. These illustrated short sections ground the theoretical work onto the aesthetic potential of the artworks and the lived experience of the creators who are choosing to return to that liminal time before the exhibition and confront it in their present. Aiko Miyanaga, for example, reflects on her < tome-ishi > boundary (2015–ongoing), glass stones marking the boundaries between invisible and moving borders: ‘The boundary lines demarcating the inside and outside of the zone – who drew them, and for whom? Just what is a boundary line to begin with? There are countless boundary lines drawn around the world. Rather than standing on either side of a boundary line, I thought to confront myself while standing directly on the line.’7 These intermissions stand on the boundary between absence and presence, whereas the artwork are made present while remaining absent from view and from experience.

4 The exhibition ‘showcases’ artworks by artists invited by the curatorial collective to create new original work for the Fukushima exclusion zone; the artists are Ai Weiwei, Aiko Miyanaga, Chim↑Pom, Grand Guignol Mirai, Nikolaus Hirsch and Jorge Otero-Pailos, Kota Takeuchi, Eva and Franco Mattes, Meiro Koizumi, Nobuaki Takekawa, Ahmet Ögüt, Trevor Paglen and Taryn Simon
5 Hirsch and Waite, Don’t Follow the Wind, p 34
6 Ibid, p 37
7 Aiko Miyanaga, ‘< tome-ishi > boundary’, in Don’t Follow the Wind, p 118
On the whole, the edited volume, with its critical essays and artist interventions, contributes to the living commemoration of the exhibition and its associated disaster. The book is a witness, actor and beacon to the exhibition, and if ‘Don’t Follow the Wind’ is of the past – as it was held partially in temporary non-visitor centres – it now operates as an extension of itself in book form. The chapter ‘Non-Visitor Centers’, especially, exposes this archival praxis; each non-visitor centre, as it is framed in the book, extending the original Fukushima site in an interim location with its particular environmental, financial and political context. The centres become situated hauntings between two localities, extending borders into rhizomatic pockets, not unlike radiation. The book in that sense extends and records these patterns across the page and transnationally (albeit to an anglophone readership).

But beyond this archival experiment, emerging from the chapters’ critical reflection are the hegemonic underpinnings of the event itself, its national and international resonance and deep-time potential. In the chapter ‘Difficult-to-return Zone: A conversation among the curatorial collective Don’t Follow the Wind’, the Fukushima disaster is put in parallel with its Ukrainian precursor, Chernobyl. The collective discusses different methods of silencing, containment and reconstruction as corresponding to specific economic ideologies. From this juxtaposition arises one of the main themes of the critical discussion: the tension between forced forgetting and counter-mnemonic practices as mirroring the elusiveness and the instability of radiation both effecting and affecting entities and landscapes in rhizomatic patterns. The book itself operates on an analytical basis by not only describing the artworks marking the land of the exclusion zone (or difficult to return zone) but also by transcribing live debates around nuclear cultures.

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In that sense, the range of perspectives shared throughout the chapters – from personal reflections to scholarly essays – compose a yet-to-be unfolded multilayered account of the exhibition and its disaster, embedding it within the cultural and political history of Japan, the specificity of Fukushima, its (former) residents and its workers. Adapted from an essay from Ele Carpenter’s *Nuclear Source Book* (2016), Noi Sawaragi, in his chapter, contextualises the exhibition from the *inside*. He tells of his travel to the inaccessible exhibition from Tokyo to then draw from the political circumstances of the disaster and the artistic precursors to ‘Don’t Follow the Wind’. He expands on the peculiar non-locality of radiation and the off-limitedness of the exhibition to localise ‘Don’t Follow the Wind’ in a tradition of boundary-breaking art practice, bringing up Robert Smithson’s conceptual structure/non-structure of land art. Smithson is also referenced in Lütticken’s essay, although in order to mark the difference between his ‘site and non-site’ framework and the Fukushima exhibition, embodying the non-site par excellence as standing inaccessible for the displaced inhabitants. Lütticken’s essay situates the technopolitical context of the disaster by reflecting on the aesthetic and ideological lineage of ‘Don’t Follow the Wind’. The discourse is taken away from considerations of ‘natural’ disaster, which disconnect a reality of capitalist extractivism to reterritorialise a lived reality of violence.

What is of interest in these discussions of the site-specificity of ‘Don’t Follow the Wind’ as an exhibition integrated and engaging with the zone’s particular history and properties are the ways in which it is extended in non-visitor centres and mediated in book form, bringing into experience – even if mediated – the generative constraints presented by the original artworks. Much like the artworks as curated ruins slowly decaying in the exclusion zone and yet frozen in time, the words and images on the page are records of the unseen and unwitnessed artworks: ‘until then, the long silence continues’. By building from the technopolitical context as well as from the artworks as case studies, the different chapters of the book thus reterritorialise a town that has been deteritorialised by violent mechanisms of displacement. In her ‘Letter to the Don’t Follow the Wind collective’, Jodi Dean, for example, reflects on the constant repetition of planetary disasters, taking its more recent shape in the coronavirus pandemic, ‘because capitalism has to keep moving’. The volume, then, acts as a critical and reflexive guide to an inaccessible exhibition, providing a record for the displaced inhabitants, but also, in extended terms, a framework to think the peculiarity of art during the COVID-19 crisis, where the possibility of being present with the artworks is denied. As Lütticken observes, it might be ‘[b]etter to just read a book’. So in the meantime, ‘Don’t Follow the Wind’ is brought to the page, into a restricted view but mediated as to archive the critical praxis set out by its curatorial collective.

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11 Noi Sawaragi, ‘Don’t Follow the Wind’, in *Don’t Follow the Wind*, p 84
12 Jodi Dean, ‘A Letter to the Don’t Follow the Wind Collective’, in *Don’t Follow the Wind*, p 233
13 Sven Lütticken, ‘Radio-Activity’, in *Don’t Follow the Wind*, p 103
In reading the different essays composing Don’t Follow the Wind, I understand the exhibition as a ‘counter-memorial’14 project utilising alternative forms of knowledge and collaboration against the monumentality of the disaster, the silence of the authorities and the invisible toxicity of radiation. Hirsch and Waite thus introduce the exhibition’s collaborative origin and future, composed of curators, artists, (former) residents, clean-up workers, but also of wind, radiation, tides, waves and shifting tectonic plates. While the exhibition remains inaccessible, it lives through its community because ‘the project has developed its own collective and broader social entanglements’.15 The exhibition itself, albeit unreachable, performs a community of affect and care against the myopic apathy of the financial infrastructures of the nuclear-industrial complex, a community that itself is represented and honoured – or memorialised – through the eponymous volume. What is affirmed is the importance of ‘network of knowledge sharing’16 and ‘informal care infrastructures’,17 themselves extended in book form.

In his essay ‘The entropic silence of Fukushima’, Jason Waite, co-editor of the volume and part of the ‘Don’t Follow the Wind’ curatorial collective, reflects on the curatorial work of the exhibition in relation to its situated context. Unlike the restrained official guide that accompanied the collective’s initial visit to the site, Waite frames ‘Don’t Follow the Wind’ for the reader as challenging the myopic governance of TEPCO. As already mentioned in Lütticken’s essay, Fukushima was not a natural disaster: ‘the fault was a result of human error and the failure of imagination – a lack of contingency for contingency’.18 This is the book’s central argument: the inner workings of power (political, financial and technological) have failed and while official narratives have attempted to force a silence around the disaster, ‘Don’t Follow the Wind’ persists in containing and displaying – even if only in its mediation – the failures and violence of a system guilty of poisoning anything it touches. The history of the 3/11 catastrophe as the history of ‘Don’t Follow the Wind’ is extended in deep and historical pasts, with the authors mentioning the destruction of the Fukushima region’s original sedimentary composition as correlated to its colonial and extractivist past. Through this political and temporal grounding, the book lays the epistemological foundation for thinking through both the so-called disaster and its exhibition. This would then provide readers with clues to extend that reflection to other potential anthropocenic catastrophes, some already present, like the coronavirus pandemic, and some in the future, unavoidable if and when infrastructures of power are confronted by the entropic forces of the planet, themselves relentless because of human activity.

The book’s central argument takes a turn to explore alternative modalities countering the silence and the lack of care of industrial infrastructures, which are causing disasters of their own. In that sense, Don’t Follow the Wind is not an exhibition catalogue but a short and focused nuclear

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15 Hirsch and Waite, Don’t Follow the Wind, p 18
16 Ibid, p 19
17 Jason Waite, ‘The Entropic Silence of Fukushima’, in Don’t Follow the Wind, p 186
18 Ibid, p 176
culture reader that periodically refers to Three Mile Island, the Manhattan Project and, of course, Chernobyl – with all these references pointing to a future that repeats its past. The book’s analytical deployment ends with the case study of the 2008 waste crisis in Naples/Napoli, leading the reader to wider reflections on the collectiveness of toxicity. In her conversation with Waite, Silvia Federici discusses the idea of ‘negative commons’ as an alternative modality of community-based care and solidarity in the aftermath of a breakdown of political, technological or financial infrastructures. By leading from disenfranchisement to solidarity, the argument successfully anchors the particular context of Fukushima to an exploration of anthropocenic planetary conditions.

I understand the critical and reflexive interventions of Don’t Follow the Wind as functioning against the ‘slow violence’ of local and international technocapitalism. With the exhibition performing a blaringly silent never again warning against the ‘many potential future Fukushimas’, the book as a material placeholder memorialises this ominous message. But, and in the words of Saidiya Hartman, ‘[h]ow might we understand mourning when the event has yet to end? When the injuries not only per endure, but are inflicted anew? Can one mourn what has yet ceased happening?’ What of the effectivity of this book and its exhibition faced with the monumentality of radioactive pollution? I would maybe nuance the book’s final critical note that asserts the potential of collective solidarity, of ‘negative commons’, against apathetic government and corporations.

If the exhibition’s artworks act against state-enforced forgetting as placeholders for the displaced community, its presence in its absence, and as much as they reflect the conditions of the zone by providing ‘critical value’ they remain materially bound to the space they occupy, unattainable. As possible agents of political change, their potential is thus limited. What remains are the boundaries, with the site itself, its individual, generational and collective history accessible only through a literary substitute. Don’t Follow the Wind does not offer a tightly tied conclusion of sustainable alternatives, there are questions that linger: can collective solidarity effectively sustain radical action or replace societal structures when established institutions have failed? And if we resign to ‘stay with the trouble’, what becomes of accountability?

However, as readers we are not left with such open interrogations. What is explored and what ‘stays’ with us is the archival impetus at the centre of the ‘Don’t Follow the Wind’ project. This is made evident in Eva and Franco Mattes’s scrapbook, the book’s last chapter, documenting with humour and tenderness the curious curatorial process of putting up an exhibition at the end of the

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19 As noted by Federici, the concept of negative commons was initially framed by Maria Mies in 2001; see Maria Mies and Veronika Bennholdt-Thomsen, ‘Defending, Reclaiming and Reinventing the Commons’, Canadian Journal of Development Studies, Vol 22, No 4, January 2001, pp 997–1023
21 Jason Waite, in ‘Difficult-to-Return Zone: A conversation among the curatorial collective Don’t Follow the Wind’, in Don’t Follow the Wind, p 34
23 Kenji Kubota, in ‘Difficult-to-Return Zone: A conversation among the curatorial collective Don’t Follow the Wind’, in Don’t Follow the Wind, p 44
world. These few pages, which bring into view not only the artworks making the exhibition but the people, curators, artists, local workers and residents, are the most endearing of Don’t Follow the Wind. This reflexive and personal commemoration as an open conclusion bridges the distance between the inaccessible exhibition and its impossible visitors by exposing both the intimacy of curatorial work and the forced intimacy of waste when our supposedly unswerving institutions fail us.


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