

Into the Break: Kyunchome in the Philippines

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In the wake of the Great East Japan Earthquake of March 11, 2011, the subsequent tsunami, and the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Station triple nuclear meltdown, Japanese society was confronted with profound questions that challenged deeply entrenched socio-political systems and traditional institutional frameworks. These events acted as pivotal catalysts, inspiring a younger generation of artists, among them the artist duo Kyunchome—comprised of Homma Eri and Nabuchi—to critically examine and reimagine societal structures and cultural narratives. The Fukushima catastrophe has profoundly influenced Kyunchome's artistic trajectory, leading them to seek alternative modes of engagement, both domestically and internationally.

Kyunchome emerged in response to a landscape dramatically reshaped by disaster. Having abandoned conventional careers in the wake of the 2011 tragedy, their artistic practice has consistently addressed themes at the intersection of politics, ecology, and social structures. The work *Do Not Enter* (2013), for instance, poignantly captured the futility and symbolic urgency of human attempts to control natural disasters, as the duo stretched warning tape across the shoreline, mimicking barriers against an unstoppable tsunami. Such powerful symbolism illustrates their critical engagement with the systems—both tangible and metaphorical—that failed or were rendered obsolete in the aftermath of the disaster.

In a subsequent project, *The Story of Re-creating Walls* (2017), Kyunchome engaged directly with tsunami-affected communities, inviting local residents to digitally erase massive seawalls erected as preventative measures. Here, their work foregrounds community dialogues, emphasising local narratives and questioning state-sponsored responses that often overlooked community voices. By inviting participation, Kyunchome encourages critical reflection on who possesses the authority to shape disaster recovery and how environmental trauma reshapes communal identities.

However, it was Kyunchome's year-long residency from 2022-2023 in the Philippines through Japan's Ministry of Culture "Program of Overseas Study for Upcoming Artists" that marked a profound shift in their practice. Unlike previous generations of artists from Japan who choose to undertake this program in New York or Europe, Kyunchome's decided to immerse themselves in Southeast Asia underscoring a shift towards regional interconnectedness and away from traditional Western-centric paradigms. This residency allowed them to physically and psychologically distance themselves from Tokyo's intense and precarious urban environment.

Immersed in the slower rhythms and expansive ecological diversity of the Philippines, Kyunchome reoriented their relationship with nature, particularly the ocean. Previous projects like *Time of the Sea* (2014) situated the ocean as a threatening, contaminated entity linked to the Fukushima nuclear disaster. Nabuchi's poignant actions of harvesting and preserving seaweed near Fukushima's contaminated waters highlighted an urgent narrative of environmental trauma. Conversely, in the Philippines, Kyunchome experienced the ocean as a space of coexistence, reflection, and cyclical renewal. They began to understand the ocean not simply as a destructive force but as a fundamental element of planetary connectivity and sustainability.

This new perspective culminated in their moving image work, *Prayers Dissolved in the Sea* (2022-2023). Here, Eri's descent into the oceanic abyss, prayers rising as bubbles, symbolises a deeply contemplative engagement with more-than-human ecosystems. Drawing parallels with theorist Melody Jue's book of oceanic thought *Wild Blue Media* where she posits diving as a methodology. For Jue the experience of scuba diving has challenged her terrestrial perspective. floating in the water that provides a more horizontal orientation toward the planet instead of a mainly vertical one, or the slow descent from the surface and the similarly slow ascent needed from the depths. As such she speaks of how living subaquatically can produce a “cognitive estrangement.”¹ A helpful shift in our perspectives that allows unlearn our terrestrial preconceptions in order to imagine how we can live differently on this planet. This experience of the sea for Jue asks for a “fundamental reexamination of the underlying environmental poetics and metaphoric of our concepts and theoretical positions.”² Through their oceanic meditations, Kyunchome prompts viewers toward a fundamental reassessment of how we orient ourselves on this planet.

The time spent in the Philippines also significantly transformed Kyunchome's practice by offering respite from Tokyo's relentless artistic precarity. This pause, or "breathing time," was not mere leisure; rather, it allowed a deeper engagement with socio-environmental concerns and marginalised local narratives. By stepping outside the Japanese contemporary art scene's institutional boundaries, Kyunchome fostered new rhythms of artistic practice—rhythms sensitive to local-global connections and ecological ethics. Their work now not only bridges Asian coastlines but also actively challenges cultural, geographic, and environmental boundaries.

Indeed, Kyunchome's evolution beyond Japan's domestic scene has accelerated their international recognition. Their exhibition at Fort Dunree in Ireland (2025)—curated by Keith Whittle—promises to further these dialogues, presenting underwater imagery that juxtaposes and redefines human-nature interactions. The transnational nature of Kyunchome's recent projects highlights their growing momentum in the global art sphere. Their ability to engage with complex environmental and social narratives has positioned them as significant voices within global conversations concerning sustainability, marginalisation, and alternative modes of engagement with our planet's ecosystems.

Through critical engagement with the socio-cultural aftermath of the Fukushima disaster, Kyunchome exemplifies how younger Japanese artists have challenged the institutionalised art systems that previously limited them. By moving beyond domestic constraints and Western-centric art circuits, they have created expansive narratives that foster a renewed ecological consciousness and social engagement. Their practice, rooted in the local yet increasingly global in its impact, exemplifies how art can serve as both critique and constructive dialogue—questioning existing paradigms and proposing alternative, sustainable futures. Kyunchome's practice therefore not only represents a powerful artistic response to environmental trauma but also articulates a hopeful, resonant vision for an interconnected and ecologically mindful world.

¹ Melody Jue, *Wild Blue Media: Thinking Through Seawater* (Durham, Duke University: 2020):163.

² Ibid.