PROJECT ARTS CENTRE



**Brian Duggan** 

Curated by Tessa Giblin



Brian Duggan, But they are still almost unimaginable, 2016

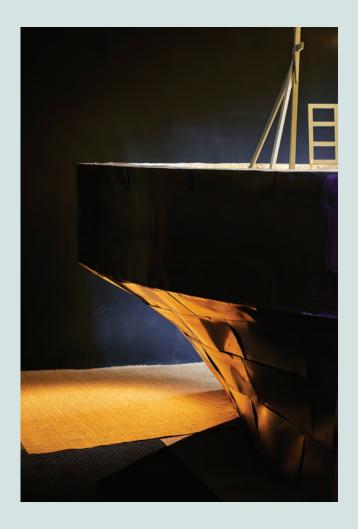
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Introduction	1
Brian Duggan, Ryou-Un Maru	4
Artworks	13
List of Works	18
Riographies	26

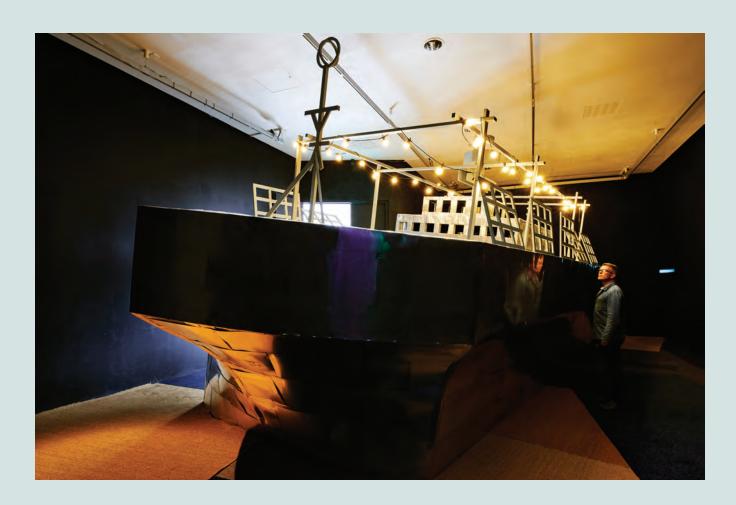
### Introduction

The story of Ryou-Un Maru is the story of tides and currents. This Japanese shipping boat was swept out to sea during the devastating Tōhoku Tsunami that followed the 9.0 magnitude earthquake off the coast of Japan in 2011. In its wake, the vessel floated unmanned and unnoticed through various territories and international waters for 391 days, until it was detected and sunk in American waters off the coast of Alaska. Brian Duggan's sculptural installation takes us to the heart of this story. First-hand accounts of the tsunamis' wrath are present in the installation: its impact, the sound, motion and fear, the huge loss, upheaval, disruption and disorientation. A further animation describes the weather patterns and ocean currents that transported Ryou-Un Maru on its undetected journey through international waters. As Brian Duggan describes, 'Ryou-Un Maru is an idea of what we're not watching, what we're not tracking. It is a way to look again and partially understand the unknown, this huge shrimp trawler managed to float upright and unnoticed for over a year - circling the Pacifc Ocean in the Kuroshio Current, through shipping lines – who knows what it saw, to what it witnessed along its journey.' The hulking sculptural form and the delicacy of the human tragedy recalled in survivors' own words create a pivot that echoes the contradiction in scale between the earth's powerful systems and humankind's delicate attempt to control it. Almost 20,000 people died or went missing during the Tōhoku Tsunami, but it wasn't the only catastrophe to hit Japan following the earthquake. The Fukushima Nuclear Power Plant went into meltdown, unable to supply the fresh water to cool the reactors, and released radioactive material into the atmosphere, environment and waters, with still immeasurable impact on local and global communities and ecologies. The poison seeped into the same ocean currents that bore Ryou-Un Maru on its journey. Although the radioactivity detected in Ireland in the weeks following Fukushima was nothing compared to levels encountered soon after Chernobyl, any kind of presence of something where it should not be - a ghost ship off the coast of Alaska, or trace levels of iodine-131 and elevated levels of caesium-134 and caesium-137 found in Irish milk in the weeks following the event – is a tangible indication of traceable systems. Brian Duggan presents an installation which holds in its aura and representation the memory of disaster, the power of the earth's shifting tectonic plates, the radioactive devastation unleashed in Fukushima and the chilling realisation that nation-states and national borders are of little consequence in the face of the tides, wind and air currents of the earth's interconnected climate system.

Tessa Giblin, Curator of Visual Arts



Brian Duggan, Ryou-Un Maru (right), 2016, Sculpture, metal, wood, lights, occasional audio sampled from videos uploaded in Japan, March 2011, carpets, discarded reclaimed fabrics, recycled materials. 9 x 4.22 x 3.5m



# Brian Duggan, Ryou-Un Maru



The representation of nature through art has gained a new urgency. The realities of climate change, the Anthropocene (the proposal that since the Industrial Revolution, environmental changes have left a global stratigraphic signature distinct from previous phases), and what is now called the Sixth Extinction, raise the question of what art might do to represent these phenomena. The Anthropocene, for example, is an aesthetic or sensorial

phenomenon as much as it is a geological one, as we struggle to visualise climatic or geological processes that occur on a scale that exceeds the normal conditions and parameters of human perception. We are tasked, not least, to comprehend, on the one hand, the world outside, before, and beyond human activity (what French philosopher Quentin Meillasoux calls le Grand Dehors), and on the other hand, the fact that the consequences of human activity now occur at a global scale, the scale of weather patterns, ocean currents, atmospheric conditions, geological sedimentation. Add to this the Great Acceleration, the post-WWII human population growth that biologist E. O. Wilson has described as 'more bacterial than primate', and one gains a sense of why scale is a problem central to the current representation of nature and our relationship with it.

Arguably, it is this problem that Brian Duggan attempts to work through with his staging of the story of the Japanese shrimp trawler Ryou-Un Maru. The ship was unmoored during the March 2011 Tohoku tsunami and drifted east across the North Pacific. A year later, it was spotted by the Royal Canadian Air Force, one hundred and fifty nautical miles off the coast of British Columbia. When it then drifted north into Alaskan waters, the Ryou-Un Maru was scuttled by the US Coast Guard on the 5th of April 2012, three hundred and ninety one days after it had left the coast of Aomori Prefecture.

The central element of Duggan's exhibition at the Project Arts Centre is a bulky, listing model of the Ryou-Un Maru itself, complete with its distinctive masts fore and amidships and its ramshackle, sectioned bulwarks. White outdoor lights are festooned upon a set of smaller masts Brian Duggan, Ryou-Un Maru, 2016



on deck and provide the only illumination of the exhibition space. The model is made from polished plate metal. Complementing it are two videos, projected on the gallery's black walls. The first of these, *Three Hundred and Ninety One Days*, presents a crude diagram of the North Pacific Subtropical Gyre, which carried the Ryou-Un Maru from Japan to Alaska along its Kuroshiro and then North Pacific currents. The second, *A dark colour I had never seen before*, shows excerpts of eyewitness accounts from survivors of the tsunami, accompanied by audio clips of surging water and wailing sirens. Finally, the floor is covered with fragments of fabric and recycled materials.

The problem of scale is, in part, that of how to construct a symbol for immense, at times catastrophic, natural events and processes. A more detailed description of the Tohoku tsunami gives a sense of the difficulties involved. The tsunami was caused by a magnitude 9.0 earthquake whose epicentre was eighty miles east of the city of Sendai, Miyagi prefecture, at a depth of over eighteen miles below the floor of the Pacific Ocean. Deep in the Japan Trench, a section of the earth's crust one hundred and ninety miles long by ninety five miles wide shifted one hundred and sixty four feet southeast and thrust upward about thirty three feet, generating a tsunami of the same height that sped outward from the epicentre at up to five hundred miles an hour. The tsunami caused devastation along the northeast coast of Japan, overwhelming sea defences and, in some places, travelling up to six miles inland. It was so powerful that it stripped the tarmac off roads and lifted boats and cars onto the top of buildings. The official death toll stands at nineteen thousand three hundred. It also destabilised the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear reactor, leading to the most severe nuclear accident since Chernobyl. Its effects were felt across the Pacific. Eighteen hours later, although by then only one foot high, the tsunami reached the Sulzberger Ice Shelf on the coast of Antartica eight thousand miles away, where its momentum was such that it broke off icebergs equalling about fifty square miles in total.

These remarkable facts and figures describe the scale of the event and its consequences, but, for many of those not directly affected, they might seem intangible. There are also films, often harrowing, of the tsunami itself recorded by survivors, news crews, and emergency services. Discovering them on Youtube, however, might make them spectacular but still not concrete. Rather than show these clips, Duggan presents a series of text excerpts taken mostly from Mamoru Onuma's *Surviving the 2011 Tsunami, 100 Testimonies of the Ishinomaki Area Survivors*, published by the local newspaper *Ishinomaki Kahoku* in 2014. These range from matter-of-

fact to desperate and confused. Reference is made time and again to the pitch black colour of the water, which threatens more for not being shown.

Duggan then turns to the fate of the Ryou-Un Maru itself. *Three Hundred and Ninety One Days*, at three hundred and ninety one seconds long, seeks to diagram the North Pacific gyre. Diagrammatic techniques and other modes of information design, often negatively associated with bureaucratic and technocratic procedures by those involved in the visual arts, have become increasingly a means by which artists can engage with real-world events, systems, data sets, and the like. Duggan's diagram lacks informational density and clarity, but attempts nonetheless to show the scale of the Ryou-Un Maru's journey and the natural systems to which it was subject.

Duggan's model of the trawler, which dominates the exhibition, is polished, cleansed, quite at odds with the rusting, filthy hulk with a ruptured fuel tank that was finally sunk by the Alaskan coast guard. When viewing this model, it is important to remember that after the tsunami the Ryou-Un Maru was a ruin and is now a wreck.

The history of Western visual art is rich in ruins and shipwrecks, especially since the sixteenth century when, such was the interest in the contemplative and melancholic state of mind they provoked that new, mock ruins were constructed. With Romanticism especially, the ruin was understood to prompt melancholy and humility by opposing human ambition to the immensities of historical time and natural events. 'Look on my Works, ye Mighty, and despair!' Shelley has the fictional emperor Ozymandias declare in his eponymous poem of 1818.

Nothing beside remains. Round the decay Of that colossal Wreck, boundless and bare The lone and level sands stretch away.

A ruin also tends to blur the distinction between nature and art, as a human artefact collapsed into a state of nature. What is more, a ruin puts time out of joint, being the survival of the past into the present. Similarly, the Ryou-Un Maru lived on beyond its time, after its registration had been cancelled and it was no longer the legal responsibility of its owners.¹ This latter aspect means that the ruin prompts an impulse of imaginative, if not actual, reparation, of contemplating the unity of that which is now fragmented and wrecked.

On the one hand, as a ruin, the Ryou-Un Maru stands for the devastating encounter between human artefacts and the Tohoku

earthquake and tsunami, of course, and arguably prompts many of those sentiments just noted above. This, at least, seems to be Duggan's intention. Such symbols are important given that an event such as the tsunami might be what Timothy Morton has called a hyperobject, something so massively distributed in time and space as to exceed specificity in anthropocentric terms. Examples would be global warming, ecosystems, or the half-life of certain radioactive isotopes, the longest of which, for plutonium-244, is 80.8 million years. Equally, of course, a hyperobject could be a magnitude 9.0 earthquake and a thirty-three-foot tsunami.<sup>2</sup>

However, faced with such hyperobjects, glimpsed through the ruins they sometimes create, we might have to think about ecology and the natural world without having recourse to all-too-human ideas of nature. There seems to be no possibility, of a return to some nature in which we would feel at home, a nature construed of as harmonious, even ethical, rather than weird, devastating, and nonhuman.

On the other hand, as a ghost ship, the Ryou-Un Maru haunts the darker regions of human imagination and corresponds with the dramatic increase in ghosts stories, hauntings, and cases of supernatural possession recorded in the area of the tsunami during the months that followed. In a 2014 article, Richard Lloyd Parry recounted a number of these.

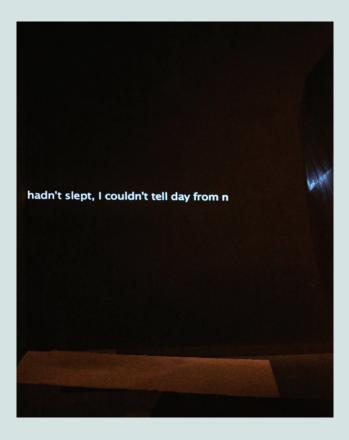
A cab driver in the city of Sendai picked up a sad-faced man who asked to be taken to an address that no longer existed. Halfway through the journey, he looked into his mirror to see that the rear seat was empty. He drove on anyway, stopped in front of the levelled foundations of a destroyed house, and politely opened the door to allow the invisible passenger out at his former home.

At a refugee community in Onagawa, an old neighbour would appear in the living rooms of the temporary houses, and sit down for a cup of tea with their startled occupants. No one had the heart to tell her that she was dead; the cushion on which she had sat was wet with seawater.<sup>3</sup>

Lloyd Parry seeks to explain these supernatural events by the prevalence of ancestor worship and a feeling of almost contractual obligation to honour and care for the dead. The tsunami threatened this custom, destroying many household altars and overwhelming the living in their duty of care.

As tragic as the tsunami was, however, to view the Ryou-Un Maru solely as a memento mori, a symbol of human vulnerability in the face of natural catastrophe, and the reparations that must be made as a result, is to close one's eyes to other, less dramatic but equally human catastrophes in which it was involved. The Ryou-Un Maru was a one hundred and

sixty foot shrimp and squid trawler in service since 1982. Does it not also stand for the catastrophes of overfishing and the production of hypoxic dead zones around the coast of Japan? If nothing else, the Anthropocene names a situation in which our previous ideas of nature as separate from human activity, and therefore an object of fear and wonder, no longer hold. As noted, the Romantic notion of nature as symbol of harmony and a source of lessons on how to live now seems quaint, at best. In its place, there is a growing awareness that we shape the natural world in all that we do. Ideas of wilderness and of regions of the natural world beyond our ken, such as the vast expanses of the North Pacific across which the



Brian Duggan, A dark colour I had never seen before, 2016, Digital film, silent, 12'10". Excerpts from survivors' stories Ryou-Un Maru travelled, are no longer useful. As Jedediah Purdy puts it, 'in a world we can't help shaping, the question is what we will shape' and how we will take responsibility for this shaping. In this case, ruins might be particularly appropriate symbols, but for catastrophes which are, unlike the Tohoku earthquake and tsunami, human artefacts.

The Ryou-Un Maru was at the head of a stream of debris from the tsunami strewn across the Pacific. It joined countless other pieces of flotsam and terrestrial waste as it travelled along the northern edge of what has become known as the Great Pacific Garbage Patch, a massive area of marine debris consisting mostly of micro-plastics and chemical waste, first identified in 1988 by the US National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. As such, the Ryou-Un Maru stands less as an effect of massive natural forces that dwarf human activity and more as an exemplar of the distributed and deleterious effects of human activity. The Great Pacific Garbage Patch, although immense, stretching across nearly twenty degrees both of longitude and latitude, is largely invisible to the naked eye. The Ryou-Un Maru, quite obviously, was a more noticeable piece of litter, considered the responsibility of no-one in particular and too costly to repair. As it sank it returned to a state of invisibility at the margins of the domain of human industry, but for a short time, the North Pacific Garbage Patch became available for scrutiny.

Of course, there is no obligation upon Duggan to treat the Ryou-Un Maru tendentiously and to engage with the politics of ecological catastrophe. I have noted elsewhere that the desire for art to exhibit political purpose often entails a misguided, at times impoverished realism. Artur Zmijewski, for example, artist and curator of the 2012 Berlin Biennale, demanded that art must "substantively direct reality" and consist of "concrete activities leading to visible effects". Failing such "artistic pragmatism", art could have no purpose worthy of the name. Yet it would be a mistake to give up on attempts to find adequate forms of fiction and fantasy in the face of ecological catastrophe and to take up Zmijewski's call for pragmatism and realism. As philosopher Stanley Cavell noted some time ago,

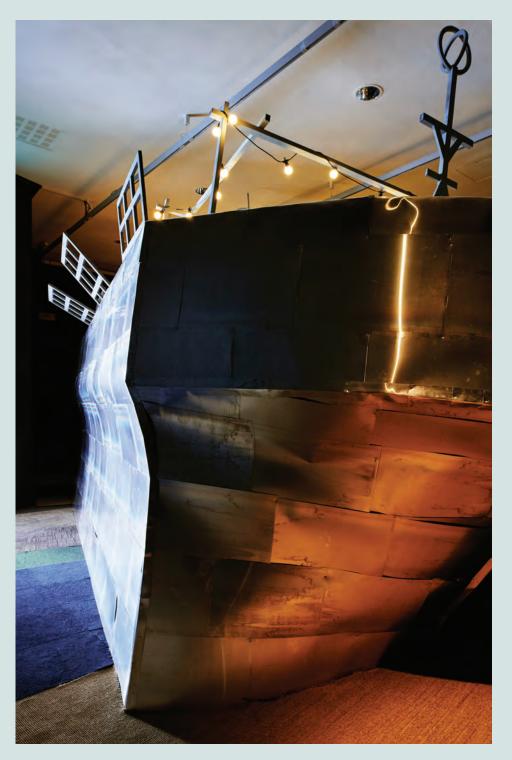
It is a poor idea of fantasy which takes it to be a world apart from reality, a world clearly showing its unreality. Fantasy is precisely what reality can be confused with. It is through fantasy that our conviction of the worth of reality is established: to forego our fantasies would be to forego our touch with the world.<sup>6</sup>

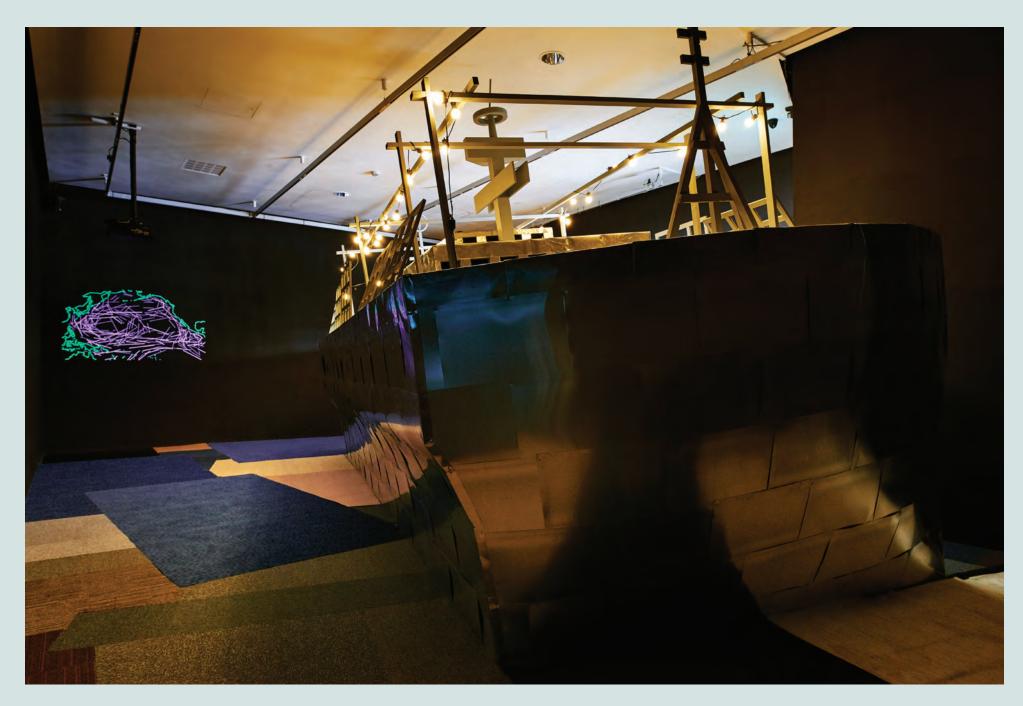
What kinds of fantasy might now encourage our conviction? What fantasy would encompass all those catastrophes for which the Ryou-Un Maru might stand?

There is an idea that we do not notice something until it breaks down or falls apart, until it undergoes its own particular catastrophe. Some catastrophes are readily visible and rich in drama. Others, although often greater in scale, are not. Some catastrophes, like the Tohoku earthquake and tsunami, are beyond human control, even if some of their more dire consequences can be guarded against or lessened. As a ghost ship of the Tohoku tsunami, the Ryou-Un Maru identifies us as inheritors of a catastrophic event, a past that survives into the present. It reminds us that some still have to settle debts to restless ghosts. In such cases, nature is something that happens to humans and, at times, threatens them. But, as I have tried to suggest, the Ryou-Un Maru might be a ghost ship for another catastrophe, a correlate to those so-called 'ghost nets' abandoned by fishing vessels around the world, which continue to deplete already critical fish stocks. In this case, the Ryou-Un Maru is a ghost of the future.

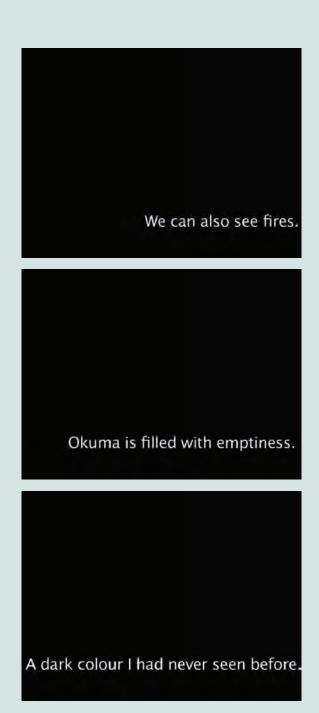
#### Tim Stott

- 1 See Steven Connor, 'Sufficiently Decayed', transcript of 4 Jedediah Purdy, After Nature, A Politics a talk given at the Frieze Art Fair, London, 15 October 2006, available here: http://www.stevenconnor.com/ ruins/ruins.pdf.
- 2 Timothy Morton, Hyperobjects, Philosophy and Ecology After the End of the World (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013).
- 3 Richard Lloyd Parry, 'Ghosts of the Tsunami', London Review of Books 36, no.3, 6 February 2014.
- for the Anthropocene (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2015), 3.
- 5 Foreword to Forget Fear, reader for the 7th Berlin Biennale, edited by Artur Żmijewski and Joanna Warsza, (Berlin: Biennale Foundation, 2012).
- 6 Stanley Cavell, The World Viewed, Reflections on the Ontology of Film (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1971), 85.



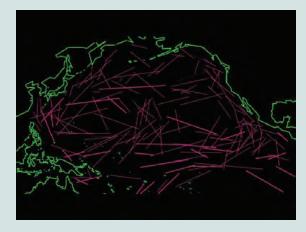


**Brian Duggan**, *Black Tide*, 2016, Black Acrylic. Kuroshio current, Pacific Ocean









#### **List of Works**

#### **Brian Duggan**

- 1. Ryou-Un Maru, 2016, Sculpture, metal, wood, lights, occasional audio sampled from uploaded videos from Japan in March 2011, mixed materials, carpets, discarded reclaimed fabrics, recycled materials.  $9mt \times 4.22mt \times 3.5mt$  (L,H,W) Dimensions variable
- 2. Three hundred and ninety one days, 2016, digital video, no audio, (6.51/391 seconds)
- 3. A dark colour I had never seen before, 2016, digital film, no audio (12:10)

be here, everything is gone
Natsuko Komuro, Excerpted, Strong in the Rain:
Surviving Japan's Earthquake, Tsunami and Fukushima
Nuclear Disaster, by Lucy Birmingham and David
McNeill. Publisher: St. Martin's Griffin; Reprint edition
(April 1, 2014) ISBN-13: 978-1137278944
http://www.scientificamerican.com/article/tales-

from-survivors-of-japan-s-earthquake-tsunami-and-

because there is nothing here, the things that are supposed to

fukushima-nuclear-disaster/ Accessed 04/05/2016

Suddenly there was something I could not make anything out of, somewhat like water vapor or a mist. I remember it was 3:45 p.m.

Mamoru Onuma, P122, Surviving the 2011 Tsunami, Ibid.

We can also see fires. You can see the fires across the bay in the Odaiba area. There is no panic but I am almost seasick from constant rolling of the building.

Jeffrey Balanag, Higashi-Shimbashi, Tokyo http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-pacific-12711152 Accessed 14/04/2016

The buildings before my eyes moved in Billowing motions, and I heard the cracking sounds
Seitaro Omori, Po84, Surviving the 2011 Tsunami, Ibid.

There was a small space between the ceiling and the water, I could breathe there.

Chihiro Kanno, http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-pacific-14853511

Accessed 14/04/2016

It was then that I realised that it had been separated from the ground and was floating in the water

Masayoshi Kotono, Po70, Surviving the 2011 Tsunami, Ibid.

My memories of the time spent there may be muddled. Hideyuki Sugawara, Po82, Surviving the 2011 Tsunami, Ibid.

Okuma is filled with emptiness,
Masahiko Midorikawa, Still hunting shadows three years
after 3/11, JUN HONGO
http://www.japantimes.co.jp/life/2014/03/08/
lifestyle/still-hunting-shadows-three-years-after-311/#.

VzEAamNmaxl

Accessed 21/04/2016

We waited for daybreak in the darkness, daunted by these frightening sounds of the waves

Eiko Matsuno, po64, *Surviving the 2011 Tsunami*, 100 *Testimonies of the Ishinomaki Area Survivors*, my March 11, The Ishinomaki Kahoku, a daily newspaper published by the Sanriku Kahoku Shimpo Co. (c) English translation Published by Junposha Co.Ltd. 2014, printed in Japan, ISBN 978-8451-1351-4

The water had such momentum that I could hardly move at all Masahide Yoshida, Po74, Surviving the 2011 Tsunami, Ibid.

Because of this, perhaps it may well be that the present is an even harder time for me

Hideyuki Sugawara, Po84, Surviving the 2011 Tsunami, Ibid.

Although I do not remember how much time had passed. Tomofumi Abe, P075, Surviving the 2011 Tsunami, Ibid.

I hadn't slept, I couldn't tell day from night Hideyuki Sugawara, Po83, Surviving the 2011 Tsunami, Ibid.

Suddenly the river flowed backwards before my eyes Seitaro Omori, Po85, Surviving the 2011 Tsunami, Ibid.

Water was gradually turning to a dark black, and accompanied with what what smelled like heavy oil, it was increasing its speed

Seitaro Omori, Po85, Surviving the 2011 Tsunami, Ibid.

All the staff members started to to help one another write personal identification information – name, address, date of birth – on our arms with a permanent ink marker. "This is just in case" we said.

Kimie Ito, Po86, Surviving the 2011 Tsunami, Ibid.

Never go back, never go near the place Masahide Yoshida, P074, Surviving the 2011 Tsunami, Ibid.

The smell was from not only wood but other materials such as rubber and metal burning and scorching was filling the air. Yoshikatsu Murakami, Po91, Surviving the 2011 Tsunami, Ibid.

I remember the bottom layer being a mixture of black and green, and the upper layer as pitch black
Hiroaki Tsuda, Po95, Surviving the 2011 Tsunami, Ibid.

All that I had in my mind was that I would do whatever was before me

Takeyuki Kanno, Po97, Surviving the 2011 Tsunami, Ibid.

It went out at an astounding speed, and when it came back, it pushed its way back up

Mamoru Onuma, P122, Surviving the 2011 Tsunami, Ibid.

20/21

Suddenly I heard these great ripping sounds Katsuhiro Suzuki, P126, Surviving the 2011 Tsunami, Ibid.

A dark colour I had never seen before Tadao Takeda, P158, Surviving the 2011 Tsunami, Ibid.

*Is whats happening now for real? I had to disbelieve my eyes* Toru Sasaki, P159, *Surviving the 2011 Tsunami, Ibid.* 

There was nothing I could do and time passed ruthlessly Michio Komaatsu, P173, Surviving the 2011 Tsunami, Ibid.

At first she thought it was a black cloud that was traveling in the sky

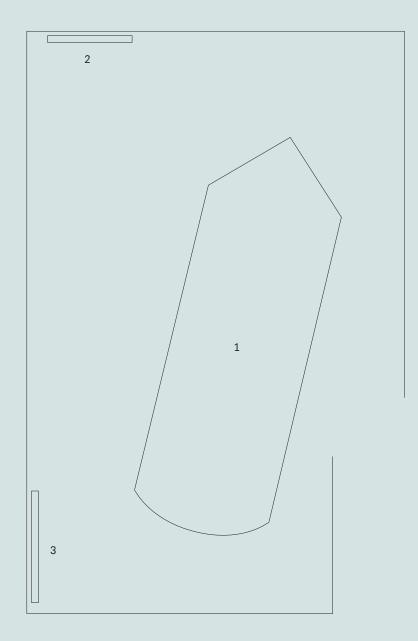
Hiroshi Sasaki, P176, Surviving the 2011 Tsunami, Ibid.

The world is heavy on us sometimes, I have never experienced such silence in my whole life. It was like sound had disappeared from the world

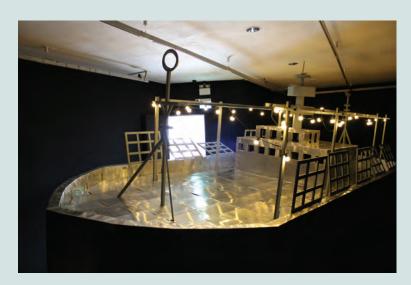
Katsunobu Sakurai, article by HENRY TRICKS | JULY/ AUGUST 2013

https://www.1843magazine.com/content/features/ anonymous/fukushima

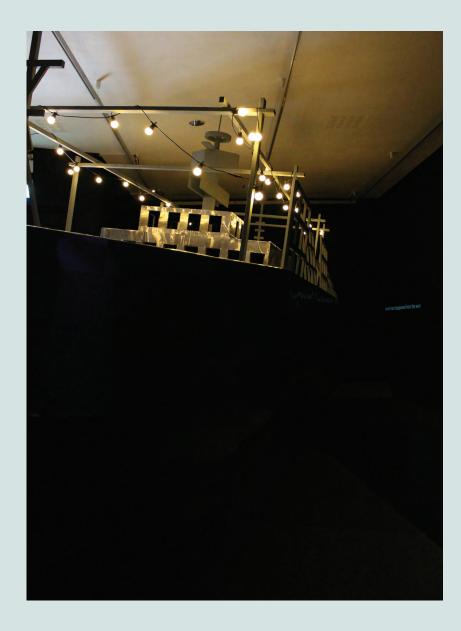
Accessed 05/05/2016.



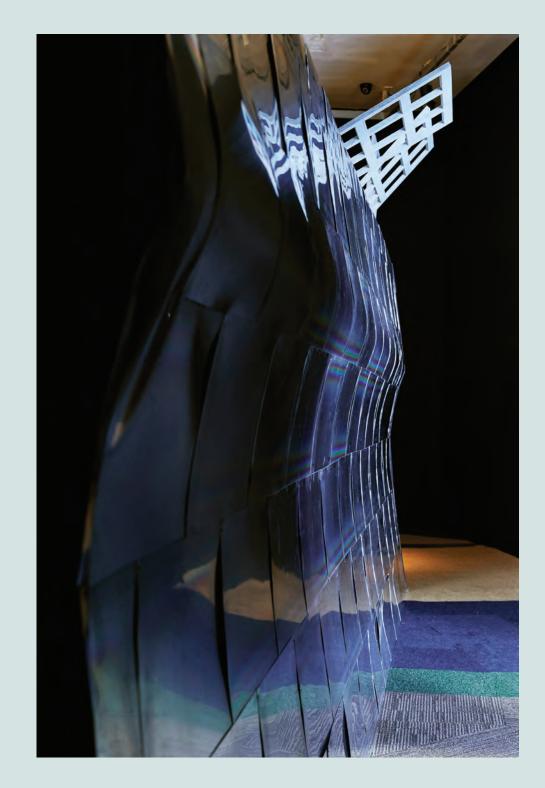




Brian Duggan, Ryou-Un Maru, 2016



Brian Duggan, Ryou-Un Maru, 2016



## **Biographies**

Brian Duggan lives and works in Dublin. His work is included in the permanent collections of Dublin City Gallery, The Hugh Lane, the OPW National Collection, Trinity College Dublin and the Irish Museum of Modern Art. He has undertaken residencies in ISCP New York, IMMA, CCI Paris, Braziers International, Project 304 Bangkok and Chiang Mai Thailand.

Selected recent solo exhibitions include: Ryou-Un Maru, Project Arts Centre, Dublin 2016; A cause for concern but not alarm, balzer projects, Basel, 2016: The Last Day Diary Redux, balzer projects, Basel, 2015; The Last Day Diary, Crawford Art Gallery, Cork 2015; We like it up here, it's windy, really nice, ISCP, New York, 2013; They've tried everything to keep us from riding ... in the end we always win, Limerick City Gallery, 2012; Everything can be done, in principle, Visual, Carlow, 2012; Three Lives, RUARED, Dublin, 2012; It's Too Late Now, Irish Museum of Modern Art, process room, Dublin 2011; O'Machine O'Machine, Fingal Sillouge Water Tower, Dublin, 2009; Step inside now step inside, 'The Golden Bough' The Hugh Lane, Dublin, 2008; His work has been part of numerous group exhibitions including the Crawford open, **EVA International Biennial of Contemporary** Art, Dublin Contemporary, Tulca and in 2016 will exhibit in Activating Pangea with Mart in Los Angeles.

Brian was the co-founder of Pallas Heights/Studios/Projects in Dublin from 1996 to 2009 with artists Mark Cullen and Gavin Murphy. In 2016/2017 he was selected by University College Dublin for a year long residency in the School of Science, UCD, Dublin. He has received several awards from Culture Ireland and the Arts Council of Ireland including a bursary award in 2016. His work is represented by balzer projects, Basel, Switzerland.

balzerprojects.com brianduggan.net

Dr Tim Stott is an art historian and critic of contemporary art, Lecturer in Art History and Theory at Dublin Institute of Technology and Associate Researcher at the Graduate School of Creative Arts and Media. His research interests concern the history and criticism of contemporary art, in particular the organisational turn, systems aesthetics, artistic uses of play and games, and convergences of art and design through ornamentation and information design. His monograph Play and Participation in Contemporary Arts Practice was published by Routledge in 2015. He will be Visiting Research Fellow at Henry Moore Institute in 2016 where he will work on a second book project that investigates ludic modes of artistic production and organisation in the post-war period.

Ryou-Un Maru
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26/27