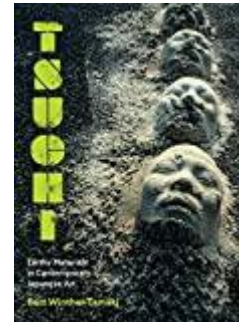


**Bert Winther-Tamaki.** *Tsuchi: Earthy Materials in Contemporary Japanese Art.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2022. 306 pp. \$34.95, paper, ISBN 978-1-5179-1191-1.



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In recent years, scholars in various realms of Japanese studies have examined issues of the environment: from understanding the politics of postwar pollution, to sociological issues surrounding post-triple disaster environmental contamination, to historical studies looking at colonial forestry. Likewise, art historians have analyzed the significant body of late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century earth and environmental art, both in Japan and in a transnational context. In *Tsuchi: Earthy Materials in Contemporary Japanese Art*, Bert Winther-Tamaki builds on this body of literature addressing visual culture and the environment, using a new, distinct, and innovative approach to the topic that provides readers with a fascinating take on earth itself as a material of artistic attention. Taking *tsuchi*, defined broadly as earth, clay, and soil, as the point of departure, Winther-Tamaki provides a new theoretical model for the art historical study of these materials.

Scholarship on earth art typically examines the varied media, artists, and approaches in a siloed fashion, or as part of temporally organized

study.[1] For example, many of the artists covered in chapter 3, “Avant-Garde Actions: Wrestling and Digging Earthy Materials,” were part of the Gutai group, a subject that has received extensive attention in museum exhibitions and academic publications in recent decades. What is distinctive about Winther-Tamaki’s text is his cross-media approach combined with a topical analysis: in the first section of the book, he looks at the media of ceramics, photography, and avant-garde actions as related to *tsuchi*, and in the second section, he looks at artistic responses to different environmental disasters since the 1980s.

In the introduction, Winther-Tamaki lays out this theoretical approach, defining *tsuchi* and considering past approaches to *tsuchi* aesthetics as well as the various ways that late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century humans have engaged with or experienced separation from soil. Chapter 1 delves into Japanese ceramics of the 1950s-70s, including aesthetics, foreign markets and taste, and references to historical ceramic traditions. The chapter is full of engaging stories and visual

examples and, like the remaining chapters, clearly lays out the methodological questions asked. Chapter 2 identifies three types of photography that document “earth actions,” including those representing interactions of the human body with soil, those showing the larger forces of nature and industry on the environment, and those chronicling the burning and transformation of soil. In this chapter, as he does again in chapters 3 and 5, Winther-Tamaki points out the sexist and sexualized perspectives of some of the artists he discusses. The hyper-masculine approaches to earth and soil by such artists as Hijikata Tatsumi, Hosoe Eikō, and Moriyama Daidō and their conflation of soil with femininity are uncomfortably gendered for audiences in 2023. Winther-Tamaki states this without too heavy-handed of a critique, yet perhaps his criticism does not go far enough in this chapter; for example, readers may question the incorporation of Moriyama’s photograph *Yokosuka*, which has a tangential connection to *tsuchi* at best and can easily be read as exploitative. Chapter 3 takes on avant-garde actions by examining five specific episodes, none of which survive, but all of which are documented in photographs and texts. Here again the artists used concepts of gender and sexuality in their interactions with earthy substances, but in this chapter, Winther-Tamaki challenges their misogyny, specifically when he critiques the language of artist Sekine Nobuo.

Chapters 4 and 5 comprise the second section of the book and turn to a different approach, as earth artists began to use mixed media just before 1990. Chapter 4 incorporates women artists and museum exhibitions related to *tsuchi* and skillfully takes on the problematic incorporation of soil into *Nihonjinron*, an ideology of cultural nationalism. Chapter 5 moves to the twenty-first century, specifically the era after the Fukushima triple disaster of 2011. This final chapter is highly engaging, examining diverse works in three categories, “ancestral distillate, soil incarnate, and medium of disaster” (p. 208). Issues covered throughout the book, such as gender and sexuality, environmental

disaster, and soil as holding memory, are brought together in a savvy fashion in this last chapter. The epilogue continues this analysis, contemplating eco-anxiety, transnational practices, and the rewinding of Japan in the present day and into the future.

The scope of artists and artworks examined in *Tsuchi* is commendable, and certainly the numerous examples provide readers with a broad understanding of the diverse ways that Japanese artists have engaged with soil, earth, and clay in the last seventy years. From a reader perspective, however, it would have been helpful to have a chart of artists, or even a list of illustrations, for at times the numerous examples are difficult to keep track of, even when they are adeptly described and analyzed.

For readers from a variety of disciplines, *Tsuchi* provides an innovative way to examine artworks related to soil, clay, and earth. The combination of ceramics and photography is particularly notable, and the inclusions of post-triple disaster artworks is important for understanding contemporary art and culture in Japan. Winther-Tamaki presents a compelling case for his framework with myriad examples. As we contemplate our warming planet and read about continuing environmental disasters, *Tsuchi* provides an ingenious structure for understanding the visual culture surrounding the very ground that we stand on.

#### Note

[1]. For example, the 2021 panel event, “Interrogating Ecology: 1970s Media and Art in Japan,” held at the Mary Griggs Burke Center for Japanese Art at Columbia University, <https://www.collabjapan.org/events/2021/4/22/ccj-ecology-project>.

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