

The Future of Ruins: Reclaiming Abandonment and Toxicity on Hashima Island

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SUMMARY

How to look at the past in the hope of living differently in the future? What new environmental possibilities might archaeology of ruins give rise to? These are the principal research questions driving 'The Future of Ruins: Reclaiming Abandonment and Toxicity on Hashima Island', a cross- disciplinary collaboration that seeks to combine the complementary but as yet un-actualised expertises of geography, East Asian cultural studies, and performance, to explore the 'dark ecological' past of one of the world's strangest and most traumatised sites.

Hashima Island is situated in the East China Sea, roughly 15 or so kilometres from Nagasaki City. In Japanese, the island is referred to colloquially as Gunkanjima - the Gunship Island - on account of its resemblance to a battle ship. An intense period of occupation began on the island in 1890 when the Mitsubishi Company bought the 15-acre site for undersea coal mining. The tunnels and chambers carved out of the rock were matched by the erection of (then) Japan's largest concrete building in 1916, along with apartments, schools, shops, restaurants and an encircling sea wall. This baroque environ became a site of forced labour using Japan's colonial subjects between 1939-1945, as well as a prime means of production for Japan's industrial and political revolution. In 1959, the island reached a peak population of over 5,000. Mitsubishi closed its mines in 1974 and the site quickly became a ruin, the land poisoned and made toxic by industrial pollution.

In 2009 the island became accessible to the public as a tourist destination, and there are plans to transform it into a UNESCO heritage site. The strange, uncanny feel to the island has appealed to photographers, filmmakers and artists, and it features in Ben Rivers' *Slow Action* (2011) as well as in the forthcoming James Bond movie *Skyfall* (2012). In these artworks, however, the aestheticisation of ruins has meant, paradoxically, that the terrible history of Hashima, its exploitation of human labour and the earth's natural resources, has been rendered invisible. The more we look at Hashima, the less we see.