

Art as Anti-Nuclear Activism: Takeda Shinpei's Hibakusha Voiceprints in *Alpha Decay*

Takeda Shinpei

Introduction and translation by Megu Itoh

Abstract: *Takeda Shinpei was invited to create an art installation at Centro Nacional de las Artes, located in Mexico City. This chapter is a vivid telling of Takeda's process working on this piece, part of his Alpha Decay series which foregrounds voice vibrations of survivors of the U.S. atomic bombings. Takeda details the ways in which he drew from his own memories of adolescence, reckoned with voices of the "hibakusha," and channeled these complex and haunting intersections through his body into his art. Takeda thus weaves a powerful yet honest and vulnerable narrative that shares reflections on method and ethical praxis.*

Keywords: *Nuclear radiation, memory, voiceprints, art, Hiroshima, Nagasaki*

Introduction

By Megu Itoh

Shinpei Takeda is an exceptional and productively provocative visual artist, filmmaker, and activist whose works involve themes of memory and history. He has created

a broad spectrum of multimedia installations, sound interventions, documentary films, large-scale photography installations, and collaborative community projects across a variety of contexts. His international experience—growing up in Europe, the US, and Japan—informs his edgy cosmopolitanism. Takeda is particularly guided by efforts to reckon with the violence of the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki specifically and of nuclear radiation more broadly. Part of this work culminated in *Hiroshima Nagasaki Download* (2011), a road trip documentary film that depicts Takeda's mission to recover the voices of *hibakusha* who had migrated to North and South America.

While a considerable number of *hibakusha* testimonies are currently compiled in the archives of museums and libraries, as well as in films and news media, there is increasing concern over the dwindling number of *hibakusha*. Activists are asking how survivors' stories and messages will be preserved for future generations. Furthermore, the act of collecting testimonies poses challenges for both survivors and those who listen to their experiences. This work begs the question of how to be sensitive about the ethical and moral considerations within the process. Finally, the records themselves are not free of various constraints, forcing those dedicated to preserving this history to consciously engage

with how power is negotiated within the practices of collecting and maintaining these singular materials. Takeda takes such questions to heart as he grapples with the tensions within his own artistic endeavors.

In editing *hibakusha* testimonials for his film *Hiroshima Nagasaki Download*, Takeda found himself becoming unsettled. Despite his intentions to weave marginalized voices into the collection of survivor testimonies, he was still responsible for selectively choosing, and thereby excluding, specific narratives. Confronted with this conundrum, Takeda channeled his complicated reflections into a seven-part multimedia series titled *Alpha Decay*. These exhibits—held in Mexico, Japan, and China—focus on visual representations of the voiceprints that Takeda took when interviewing *hibakusha*. Although Takeda worked with different materials for each exhibit, he continuously focused on producing and reproducing the voiceprints—these virtual markers of oral history—copying them by hand. By participating in this time-consuming and labor-intensive process, Takeda was able to make sense of his own embodied residues of trauma. The waves of these voiceprints traveled into his body, where they physically resonated. Takeda's body thus became a tool, a channel through which viewers connect with memories of the *hibakusha*.

Takeda's book, *Alpha Decay: How Can Contemporary Art Express the Memory of the A-Bomb* (2014), interrogates how art relates to the *hibakusha*'s voices and can cultivate alternate frames of understanding. Takeda answers these questions by detailing the methods and approaches to creating and installing his various art exhibitions of the *hibakusha* voice prints. The third chapter, entitled "Voiceprints of Uranium 238 and Plutonium 239," delves into Takeda's process of creating *Alpha Decay III Fonologia de U238 y Pu239* for an exhibit at Centro Nacional de las Artes, Mexico City. Herein, Takeda details his

own emotional experiences as he wrestles with his personal memories of being othered while simultaneously making space for the memories of others as he immerses himself within *hibakusha* voiceprints to portray their narratives. Furthermore, Takeda's candidly rugged yet reflexively piercing discussion of his process challenges expectations about what an artist should think, do, and feel. Takeda recounts the grueling mental and physical labor that was poured into the project, explicitly sharing the raw emotions that both drained and fueled his work. Takeda also nests this installation within a complex web of solitude and support. Although isolation was an unnegotiable part of the immersion process, Takeda notes that the exhibition was made possible by his relationships with others — the *hibakusha* whose voices he engages and the collaborators who shared and invested in his vision. Takeda's casual yet impassioned reflections reveal alternate ways in which the processes of art and activism feed into one another. In this way, Takeda's works serves as vital counter-narratives that disrupt dominant assumptions undergirded by national myths.

For more information about Takeda Shinpei and his range of artistic projects, visit his [website](#).

Voiceprints of Uranium 238 and Plutonium 239

By Takeda Shinpei

Translated by Megu Itoh

La onda expansiva me hizo volar, 15 metros hasta que un muro de piedra me detuvo.

I was blown 15 meters away by the explosion until I was stopped by a stone wall.

– Excerpt from video-interview with Kaoru Itō, who was 8 years old at the time of the atomic bombing of Nagasaki. Interview conducted on June 15, 2006 in Sao Paulo, Brasil.

I return to the hypocenter of my memories. To their origins, to their nucleus. Yet, the process of heading to the hypocenter requires moving beyond the realm of romanticism. It requires something more troublesome, something more real. When returning to Tijuana after a summer in Tokyo, I was not even close to the hypocenter of my memories. It was quite the opposite: I was at the 19.9-mile radius that the Japanese government announced after the Fukushima nuclear disaster. No, I wanted to hide myself even beyond the 49.7-mile radius that the American government had recommended. I did not want to be informed, and I did not have anything else to share with others. In that moment, the studio in Tijuana was like a bunker for me. Put differently, Tijuana was the last wall that could catch my body as it flew, launched by an explosion of my own doing.

In any case, here, Tijuana, is the hypocenter of my memories. When I returned to the studio, I was greeted by a project: to record the noise music group which I lead, Ghost Magnet Roach Motel. I guess you could call us a group of human cockroaches, a cockroach orchestra. Anything goes—two American musicians, who are alcoholics and heroin addicts, two Mexican artists, and me. I had come to lead this group as if I was as crazy as them.

I was returning to Tijuana after soaking in the energy emitted post-*Alpha Decay*.¹ And this version of me yearned to become a cockroach just like them. Cockroaches do not die even

when microwaved. Whether an atomic bomb is dropped, a tsunami comes, or radiation escapes its containment, those cockroaches will continue to survive. Through the repetition of *Alpha Decay*, I understood the need for humans to have the cockroach essence within themselves—no, within myself. Radiation revealed its nature in Hiroshima and Nagasaki; it cannot be seen, it cannot be smelled, and it causes different consequences for each person. In a world where radiation is abundant, how can humans continue to survive? I think the answer lies within cockroaches.

The dissonant sounds evoked by the band originated from the screams of each player as they faced their bitter struggles. Of course, this is not easy listening music. Some may listen and feel like throwing up. Others almost faint. But why am I in pursuit of this sound? Because in Otsuchi, Iwate, after the earthquake and tsunami of 2011, I saw the visions of my imagination become aligned with the scenery of reality. Because that feeling of alignment is the same as what I feel listening to the band. The sound of my heart is like the discordant sounds of the band. Not just the *hibakusha*,² but the sound of everyone I ever met overlapping on one another, being played in reverse, being drawn out in voiceprints, numerous layers of sound coming together to constantly play messy music in my heart.

However, if one listens carefully—to the depths of the chaos that combines sounds which might ordinarily be called “noise” with the sounds that are playing in my heart—one can identify a beautiful harmony. This is what I am always searching for. Taking all the sounds in my heart, putting them outside of myself, and then listening to them over again is what is interesting about the medium called music. The sound vibrations emitted from my internal organs are processed through the guitar and pushed out of the amp. When these sounds enter my ears, something shakes. What is this? Is it anger within my body? Is it an earthquake

within my body? Or is it confidence?

Afortunadamente mi tío tenía un tatuaje con su nombre en su hombro izquierdo, y así es como identifiqué sus restos.

Fortunately, my uncle had a tattoo of his name on his left shoulder, and that is how I identified his remains.

My invitation to Mexico City was extended by Marcela Guerrero, who collaborated with me on *Alpha Decay*, and her husband Gabriel Martinez, an architect. There was going to be a book fair at Centro Nacional de las Artes, the art center run by the government. We were to set up a large temporary outdoor pavilion and curate an art exhibit. The other three artists were young, skilled artists from Mexico. During my time in Tijuana, Marcela had moved to Mexico City and continued to follow my work. She cried when she viewed the video that I had collaborated on with Butoh artist Yumi, part of the second series of *Alpha Decay*. Marcela's own reverberations aligned with a scraping-scratching sound. Across the ocean, there are people who understand my work. This fact became a source of motivation and security; there are others who will fully understand *Alpha Decay*.

Once one steps off the path of *Alpha Decay*, it becomes difficult to return. This is the same when speaking of the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombings. These are not topics to discuss over tea, over dinner, or even over drinks. Thus, it is crucial to create a safe space and time for such conversations. Because these memories exceed the emotional range that we use in our everyday lives, a need to expand this emotional range arises. A good example is this memory still stained on my mind.

It is the story of Kaoru Ito who lives in Brazil

and was eight years old at the time of the bombings. His uncle had tattoos on one arm, and it was because of those tattoos that Kaoru was able to recover his uncle's burnt and melted flesh and bring it home. That scene, like something out of a movie, is etched into my heart. This was the real experience of an eight-year-old boy. And this happened only 60-some years ago. This experience remains a memory within the minds of individuals who are still alive, and I received a piece of this memory. Thus, it becomes integral to expand one's emotional range. And to do this, one needs a safe space and place.

Perhaps this is why a type of ceremony is needed to achieve the momentum of *Alpha Decay*. The foundation of this ceremony is to physically move my body. There is a type of stretch or warm-up prior to the actual ceremony. The first piece of *Alpha Decay*, created over two and a half months in Tijuana, was part of this process. The second piece had me travel to Europe, drive 3,000 kilometers, visit Germany where I had previously lived, and reckon with my own memories. The third piece had me unexpectedly experience a similar process. This time, I returned to the central region of the United States, where I had lived for one year in middle school due to my parents' work, to give lectures at universities.

Y me pregunté quién había comenzado esta guerra y la causa de todo esto.

And I questioned who started this war and the causes of all this.

I crossed the border at Tijuana, left my car with a friend in the United States, and took a flight to Chicago, Illinois. From there I rented a car, since I was to give lectures at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign and Michigan State University, East Lansing. The night I arrived in

Chicago, I had some extra time and ended up driving around in a black Pontiac shaped like a tank to revisit Mount Prospect where I had lived twenty-some years ago. I stopped in front of the public middle school that I had attended when I was 13, an eighth-grader barely able to speak a word of English.

I only lived there for one year, but it had a serious impact. In Germany, I had gone to a Japanese school, so I did not stand out much. However, I was at a sensitive age, just beginning to develop my own worldview when I attended this American public school as a 13-year-old who could barely speak English. At the time, there were not yet many immigrants there. The majority of students were white, but there were a few Mexicans and Indians, some South Koreans. I remember the first day when I arrived at homeroom without knowing anything. As the bell rang, the teacher came in and everyone collectively stood up. Then, they all looked toward the American flag hung up on the upper left side of the classroom, placed their right hand on their heart, and started saying something. A few months later, I was able to say it too: "I pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States of America, and to the Republic for which it stands, one nation under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all." This is the Pledge of Allegiance. I had desperately rehearsed these lines over and over at home.

The teacher could not pronounce my name and called me "Shimpai Takeeda." I desperately did not want to give up. I learned English. I practiced basketball. It was there that I first learned a strong concept of "I." If I didn't express my "self," nobody would listen. And this concept of "self" emerged as "difference" from others.

When I was in Germany, it was taboo to raise the national flag. After the fall of the Berlin Wall, there were only glimpses of the national flag. When I returned to Japan from Germany,

the teacher said we do not need to sing the national anthem.³ My sixth-grade-self did not understand. But in the United States, we were expected to pledge allegiance to the flag, and I was so happy to be able to say this pledge in English. The nation that won the war, the nation that dropped the atomic bombs and created all of that destruction, death, and sadness. It was in this nation that my 13-year-old-self placed his hand upon his heart and boldly declared allegiance to the red, white, and blue and sang the Star-Spangled Banner.

I escaped after that trip, crossing the border from the United States into Tijuana. I was living in a place where the sound of a huge 82-by-130-foot flag flapping in the wind could be heard. There, I began to delve deep into the memories of the atomic bomb. But now that I think about it, I had been in the nation that birthed this trauma, unwittingly experiencing a type of brainwashing education. Ms. Sue, whom I met in San Diego, had also been 13 years old—the same age I was when pledging allegiance to the flag of the nation that dropped the atomic bomb—when she witnessed her older sister cough up blood and die after suffering serious physical injuries and internal radiation poisoning. And 65 years after Ms. Sue's experience, and 20 years after I pledged daily allegiance to the flag, I listened to her memories and cried.

This contradiction was entangled across time and space. Before that, I felt something like giving up. And I felt that that was okay, ironically, because of my experience at my American middle school. It was there that I learned the concept of "self," and having learned how to think of the "self," I believed in my "self," asserted my "self," and expressed my "self." I, as an extension of these experiences, was now working in a field that grapples with the "self," "freedom," and "justice."

My middle school, located in the suburbs, was quiet, but as I peered through the windows, I

could see the locker I had used. I walked to the neighborhood a few minutes away from the school, and my house was still there. The only thing that was different was the car parked in the front and the color of the garage. As the memories came rushing back, I overlayed myself twenty years ago onto myself twenty years from then: the 13-year-old “Shimpai Takeeda” and 33-year-old “Takeda Shinpei.” To connect these two, I needed to clear the dust from my mind.

En ese tiempo, los ciudadanos ordinarios no conocían qué estaba ocurriendo ni por qué estaba ocurriendo

Back then, ordinary citizens did not know what was happening or why it was happening

By physically visiting a place holding my memories, a pathway of connection slowly became clearer. Half of your memories are always retained in the place from which they are born. When one half of your memories—those embedded within your body—are combined with the other half of your memories—those left behind—these resulting memories gain clear individuality and the pathways of connection operate and become categorized as part of your existing system. Here in the suburbs of Chicago, I located an old memory buried within the pitch-black depths of my mind, and it brought home new revelations.

If your memories are not clear, then you cannot be involved in work that directly relates to other people’s memories. Let us assume that memories can travel between people. You listen to another person’s “memories.” In doing so, from the moment you finish the process of listening, those memories become your “memories.” Henceforth, these memories are “your” memories. To receive another person’s

memories—no, not regular memories, but hyperreal memories such as the experiences of the atomic bombings, which can never be recreated in the virtual world—you must ensure that your own memories are sturdily centered.

In other words, your “memories” must be grounded, otherwise, you cannot properly receive another person’s memories. This applies to my interviews with *hibakusha*. If I am not grounded, or rather, if I am not rooted to the ground, then I will be blown away. Just like when alpha waves infiltrate the body, DNA is ripped apart. So, I must go deeper and deeper within my own memories to find their origin in order to resist the force of an alpha wave or tsunami. The task of creating a sturdy axis around which to ground my own memories was thus critical in my engagement with the process of developing *Alpha Decay*.

For some reason, after overlaying myself of twenty years ago with myself now, I felt lighter. Since my time in Tokyo, themes regarding identity such as “as a Japanese person...” or “what a Japanese person is...” had been prevalent in my thoughts. But now, I was able to confirm that a clear axis based on “individual” memory exists within me beyond categories of enemy versus ally. So, I drove the black Pontiac and watched the skyscrapers lining the city of Chicago, pushing 70 mph until I reached Michigan.

Michigan State University is located in Lansing, which is adjacent to Detroit and serves as the state’s capital. Detroit’s automobile industry, after having supported the power of the red-white-and-blue United States, crashed alongside the Lehman Brothers investment banking company. I could not believe that this was the state capital. Stores had their shutters pulled down, and the city was filled with destruction and sadness. The scene before me seemed to indicate the fall of the American empire.

My reason for coming to this university was

partly to screen my film and to give a lecture, but also to discuss donating my interview data. I had interviewed over 60 individuals across northern and southern America and had scheduled a meeting to discuss archiving the testimonies. Within the Michigan State Library, there is the G. Robert Vincent Voice Library, which houses important historical audio records of American presidents. I planned on gifting the audio files I had collected as an archive and had come to discuss the details, such as copyrights.

One month earlier, my Tijuana studio had been robbed, and my computer and camera were stolen. Luckily, the 100 or so tapes which contained recorded data of *hibakusha* interviews were not stolen. Living in South America and having something stolen is like a rite of passage because it is something that can happen to anyone. But if these tapes had been stolen...for the first time, I thought of myself as being part of a long line of history.

If this data disappeared, it probably would never be recreated. There is not likely to be another person—at least for a number of decades—who would dedicate this much time to interviewing this many people in so many places. Also, over the next decade, many of my interviewees will pass from this world onto the next. These memories that I hold must be thought of as a heritage of humanity.

porque creo que la guerra había convertido los humanos en basura.

because I believe that the war had reduced humans to trash.

My trip to collect my personal memories and to leave the world's memories in the central United States was successful. The warm-up to the next step of *Alpha Decay* was complete.

This was a process that reminded me that I cannot forget what I cannot forget. I established roots in my own memories and tasked external agencies with maintaining the *hibakusha*'s memories. In doing so, I was freely able to combine my memories with those of the *hibakusha*'s and express something that was not only internal nor only external, but was universal. Physically, it felt like a burden from my shoulders had been lifted. At the same time, because the depth of my memories grew, my hard drive expanded. Furthermore, in asking another person to carry some of these memories, there was suddenly empty space in my hard drive. This process was necessary for my next large exhibit, which awaited me in Tijuana.

It is a three-hour flight and a two-hour time difference from Tijuana to Mexico City. Despite being within the same country, it feels like a great distance. From the window of the plane, I can see the aqua blue of the Sea of Cortes contrasting with the yellow desert unique to the northern region. No matter how many times I see this view, it always moves me. If Tijuana is like Fukuoka, then Mexico City is like Tokyo. I have been going once a year for film screenings and such, but it has been a while since my last visit. I am shaken by the sheer size of this huge city located 3.7 miles above sea level. During my first few days there, the oxygen feels thinner in my head and the old stone buildings, which have turned black over time, look almost like some sort of film set. As you go further south, the indigenous cultures become increasingly more visible. Mexico City contains a mix between two polar-opposite cultures—one that is strangely European and one that is rooted in vibrant nature. Thus, in ways that are completely different from Tijuana, Mexico City is a surreal place.

This time, my canvas is 23 by 72 feet—it is a large “ceiling.” First, I place a large frame on the floor, stretch the canvas over it, and create a large white sheet. The process was for me to

work here for ten days and, after finishing, to hang this work from the ceiling. For my first *Alpha Decay* series, I created exterior walls, interior walls, floors, and a ceiling, but I was not satisfied with the ceiling. When I am installing my pieces, I want to fill everything, and so, I wanted to fill the ceiling. For some reason, this process of “filling” has become a valued element. I want to do everything that I can. I want to express as much scale as possible. I want to use as much time as possible. I want to distribute as much labor as possible. These impulses were reflected into making my piece bigger and to fill as much space as possible. The “Myth of Tomorrow”—created by Okamoto Taro in Mexico City half a century ago—is 180 by 98 feet. In Mexico, this painting is embedded within the flow of modern art, and this scale has become part of my DNA as an artist.

For a large canvas, one should use materials that they are already familiar with, but instead I seek to use new materials. Sometimes I wonder why I always resist using the same materials, putting myself in situations where I must challenge something new each time. The reasoning is quite clear. It is because I do not enjoy the pursuit of efficiency. In pursuing efficiency, the Nazis murdered millions of people in gas chambers and the United States invested time and money into creating the atomic bomb. If we trace the a-bomb’s origins, it starts with the gun, which becomes the canon, which becomes the bomb, which, building on nuclear technology, becomes a nuclear bomb, which becomes a hydrogen bomb, and now we can efficiently bomb far-away targets with drones. All of this began with the goal of killing humans efficiently. Such technical improvements required money, and the military industry took form, killing humans under the guise of war simply to prove its efficiency. Within such a system, humans became guinea pigs—or even less than that. I want to scream, “stop making fools out of us humans!” But then again, these same people

are abandoning creativity, marching like soldiers in the direction of improvement all for the sake of pursuing efficiency.

Therefore, every time I create pieces for *Alpha Decay*, I always use new materials and take care to preserve the joy of new discoveries. In repeating these same tasks, I singlehandedly engage in “mass production.” Throughout the process of repetition, I use my creativity to form a system that increases productivity, and to carry out all these processes, I require a large canvas. When this system is completed, the piece is finished. While I could simply use the same media for my next piece, I am not interested in a premade system. I do not care for the system itself. I care about the creativity needed to produce this system, and the process of finding this system is the source of my art. This is why I have always stubbornly rejected the pursuit of efficiency—a pursuit of improvements on improvements similar to the unique mentality of Japanese corporations.

I appreciate the looseness of Mexico. Generally speaking, Mexico is not very efficient. I think this is why Mexico has not become an economic superpower despite the abundance of land and resources. I do not want to lump 120 million Mexicans together, but I do think they understand that efficiency is not everything. Regardless of how efficient one is, regardless of how many people one can kill, regardless of how much money one can make, people are always prioritized. Efficiency means nothing if people cannot cry, laugh, be sad, and suffer through life. They seem to understand this notion—perhaps it is wisdom passed down from indigenous people or the abundant nature that has rendered any pursuit of efficiency moot.

Upon arriving in Mexico City from Tijuana, I immediately made my way to the pavilion located within the outside garden of Centro Nacional de las Artes. The canvas—23 by 72 feet—was truly large. Gabriel had carefully designed this pavilion starting a few months

ago, and it was because he understood my creative process that he prepared this large canvas for me. Still, it was in typical Mexican fashion that the third series of *Alpha Decay* began. What I mean to say is that the process had been delayed. While the canvas was meant to be done by the time I arrived, they had only begun to create part of this large canvas. Even while they worked at an increasingly higher pace, the construction was not done efficiently. There were five, sometimes even 10 workers, but they were ineffectual. Although I am accustomed to the easy-goingness of Mexicans and they said everything would work out, I was still very nervous.

According to our original schedule, the canvas should have been done already. Time was being carved out of my 10-day working period. So, I assisted the construction staff and built trust. I learned Spanish in northern Tijuana, in the more vulgar part of Mexico, so I fired off bawdy jokes that were related to construction work. Since coming here, my Osaka-style sexual confidence has come in handy for the first time. At first, they looked at me like “who is this Asian guy?” But soon everyone opened up. A kind of collective spirit emerged, in which we believed that if we combined our efforts, everything would work out. I understood that creating something of this scale requires strong teamwork. The foundation of the team must be established, and everyone must provide 1.5 times their standard output. From previous experience, I knew that a good piece could not be created if these conditions were not met. *Alpha Decay* requires horizontal connections—this applies across national borders.

*Nunca podrá olvidar este triste incidente
que ocurrió*

*I could never forget this sad incident that
took place*

I had not forgotten. The reverberations after completing *Alpha Decay* in Tokyo a few months prior were etched onto my skin. If I really think about it, there was no way that I would forget, nor was it something that could be forgotten. With these echoes in my mind, I asked what I wanted from this white canvas; what I didn't want; what I wanted to say; what I didn't want to say. Everything laid in my hands. As I gazed upon the large pavilion, I quieted my anxious heart. I wanted to move my hands. I had prepared for this, and the composition was ready. When I opened the “lid” within myself, the chain reactions of *Alpha Decay* would be set in motion, constantly, quietly, and continuously proceeding.

It's a lid I wouldn't dare open if my goal were not clear. If there were no clear goal or foundation, there would be danger of a second disaster when I opened this lid. I might become exposed to radiation myself. On top of that, if a chain reaction that I am unable to stop occurs, then, just as was the case in the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear disaster, I would have to vent to the outside world. But if I can hang on a little more. If I can hold myself together for a bit longer, then I can decisively generate an impact. Until then, I am desperate not to cause an internal meltdown. Once this huge canvas is created, even if it contains only 0.1 sieverts of radioactive material, a huge explosion could occur. No, this kind of process has become necessary. In 10 days—at this pace six or seven days—I cannot create a piece that is worthy of the level of *Alpha Decay*.

I started to hear the voiceprints inside my head. Their tremors pushed themselves into my heart once again. In my previous work, the second series of *Alpha Decay*, I revealed the voiceprints by methodically intersecting them. Now—eight months later, and nothing changed since the Fukushima nuclear power plant incident—the meaning of these voiceprints has

shifted. The people I interviewed were exposed to radiation in Hiroshima. But this same term—“*hibakusha*”—is presently being used to criticize people experiencing circumstances similar to those of my interviewees, escaping radiation and the stigma that accompanies it by moving to different prefectures.

The waves of the voiceprints no longer represent only the voices of the victims of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. They now reflect individual concerns over how victims in Fukushima can confront radiation and the realities of needing to survive. Furthermore, these voiceprints are placed in chronological order, and, in this exhibit, eight feet equates approximately one minute of recording. Yes, radiation is also expressed as sieverts per hour. I need to connect it to Fukushima in the present through units reflective of events which occurred over 60 years ago in Hiroshima and Nagasaki. From 1945 to 2011. I placed the voiceprints on a map of Japan and reveal the geographical connection between Hiroshima, Nagasaki, and Fukushima. At the same time, I reveal that the waves of both the voiceprints and radiation are measured in units of time, and that Hiroshima, Nagasaki, and Fukushima did not occur on separate timelines. Rather, these events took place within the same units of time that we currently use. My composition seeks to reveal these truths.

Around this time, the assistant that I requested, Guz, was dispatched from La Esmeralda, an art school located within the grounds of Centro Nacional de las Artes. This young student from this prestigious art school, established by Diego Rivera, listened to my plans with interest. Guz seemed willing to immerse himself in this project. He was still young, around 19-years-old, but his eyes indicated that he understood pain. The source of his energy was a combination of pain and conflict and his strange personality that dictated he always be immersed in some task.

*Me llevé el brazo de mi tío, y después
reunimos leña y lo incineramos*

*I took the arm of my uncle, and then we
gathered firewood and cremated it*

The progress of construction was not good. I started to become anxious, but had no choice but to believe that everything would work out. More precious time passed, and several days were dedicated to simply preparing materials. I barely moved my hands. A hotel was prepared for me so I was able to sleep at night, but, perhaps because I am nervous, strange dreams keep entering my head. The chain reactions of *Alpha Decay* continue without regard for whether I am asleep. I have to do something, quickly. I have to begin something.

First, I need to fully prepare the materials. The key to new materials lies within the previous project. For my previous exhibit in Tokyo, I drew voiceprints on the wall with pencil. Because the walls were so rough, the powder from the pencil lead fell on the floor and illuminated the *hibakusha*'s words with silver sparkles. It was beautiful. So, I decided to use charcoal, which was the source of this powder.

I chose to turn rope, which I had picked up in Otsuchi over the summer, into charcoal.

Some fishermen were cutting tangled rope, with a radius of about five centimeters, into 1-meter pieces. The rope could not be disposed of as garbage unless they cut it up like this. It was a strange scene. The fishermen were destroying their own tools of the trade. Rope is originally meant to connect things. This rope was probably for tying their boats to the harbor, but they were cutting it into pieces. Similarly, the atomic bomb cut into families, friends, and society. The tsunami and nuclear disaster destroyed connections between

people. It was like how alpha waves rip apart chains of DNA and how the hearts of *hibakusha* were ripped apart.

These cut pieces of rope represented the connection between outside and inside being ripped apart. And by burning this rope and turning it into charcoal, I deconstructed this bond and gave it a second life as voiceprints revealing the original memories of radiation. Thus, I bound the past with the present. And I felt that this could stand in as a kind of memorial service.

I took the rope and some scraps of wood from the construction site and burned them with a kind of barbecue set. Eventually, these objects became clumps of charcoal and then beautiful charcoal powder, which were a mixture of gray and black hues. I crushed these pieces of charcoal while they were still hot and scattered them about. They were a little hot, but I needed a large amount of charcoal, so I could not afford to wait. My emotions also became heightened, equal to the heat in my hand.

The next day, the large white canvas had been completed, but now I only had six days. It wasn't enough time. Starting from the bottom of the 7-meter-high side, I drew 24 red lines evenly spread across 22 meters. These red lines represented time. I had purchased a particular pump that is carried on one's back to spray insecticide in Tijuana. This served as a kind of brush as I used liquid glue to carefully paint the voiceprints over the red lines. Then, before this glue dries, I sprinkled on the charcoal powder. After a while, the glue became transparent and then dried, and the charcoal became part of this glue. When the excess charcoal was vacuumed away, the voiceprints drawn out of black charcoal were revealed.



***Alpha Decay*, p. 109, provided by author**

I needed to continuously move my hands to calm my anxious heart. I placed the liquid glue into the machine, carried it on my back, and carefully copied the voiceprints which I had printed for the first series of *Alpha Decay*. One year had passed since this exhibit. These voiceprints emerged from the voices of over 60 *hibakusha* interviewees, which I had edited repeatedly to reveal these voiceprints. In this way, memories are edited, and history is created. If one interview was approximately two hours on average, then there were 120 hours of data. These 120 hours were edited down to approximately 10 minutes. And from this pool, I chose 12 voiceprints.

I continue to adjust the voiceprints that have already been edited and draw them in white glue. I hold the original voiceprint in my left hand and use my right hand to control the nozzle like a long brush to map out the undulations of the voiceprints over the red lines. I moved my hand in the belief that what I am drawing is a condensed version of the 120 hours. Unlike last time, there is no sound of the pencil scratching against a rough wall. For this reason, I needed a different kind of concentration to feel the reverberations emanating from myself.

Sometimes the pressure of the glue from the

nozzle becomes so weak that I use my left hand to manually push the pump a few times. Air is then injected into the machine and the glue is pushed out at a good speed. If the pressure is too strong, the voiceprints become messy. If the pressure is too weak, the voiceprints become lackluster. I slowly master this technique.

Once I finish drawing a certain number of the voiceprints, I use my hand to scatter charcoal on top of the glue. When scattered evenly, the voiceprints drawn in glue reveal themselves through the deep black of the charcoal. After a while, the glue hardens and changes from white to clear. Then, I can see the charcoal and the red line, which represents time, running through these undulations. The black and red contrasting atop the white base begin to reveal series three of *Alpha Decay*. After one day, I wonder if I have even finished about a tenth of the piece. This pace is not fast enough. I need to fill this large canvas with the voiceprints in three days. This is because after finishing the canvas, I still need to flip it over to lift it up onto the ceiling.

En ese tiempo, yo tenía pesadillas todos los días.

Back then, I had nightmares every day.

From that night onward, my body begins to experience pain. My mind is clear, but for some reason, from inside my skin, this prickly feeling shakes my body. I sleep each night, but I am still exhausted. In fact, every time I sleep, the prickly feeling sinks deeper into my muscles and when I wake, the shaking has moved into each my tendons. The process of creating *Alpha Decay* is always accompanied by bodily transformations. The hotel breakfast was the one thing that gave me energy. Mexican breakfasts are full of fruit. Red watermelon,

deep orange papayas, melon, pineapple, cucumber, and white crunchy jicama, which I cover in lemon, chili powder, and salt. From the early morning hours, this mixture of sweetness and spiciness sends vitamins to my tired muscles.

The driver comes to pick me up, and we avoid the traffic of Mexico City. The canvas is exactly as I left it yesterday. Today, the large pavilion is covered by a white vinyl sheet. Everything inside is white, and I can work without any disturbances. Gabriel, the architect, came to watch my process only yesterday, but he already seems to understand how I work best. This act of setting up the vinyl sheet was one of care and consideration.

I repeat the process of filling this large canvas. It is like walking the grounds of a shrine, moving up and down in an endless repetition. When engaging in this repetition, sometimes my mind goes blank. I cannot remember which part of the voiceprint I am transcribing. This process requires a lot of concentration, but there were always interruptions, such as people coming to watch me work and phone calls which I have to attend to. Although I want to quickly complete this piece without any disturbances, I am prevented from doing so. To transcribe these voiceprints, I need to listen to the vibrations of my own emotions. When the vibrations from the voices I am transcribing align with the vibrations within me, a strong voiceprint emerges. And in no time, the sun has gone down and it is night.

Guz's hand is black with charcoal, but he continues to work. He is overwhelmed by the large size of this piece yet is energized by it at the same time. I feel I cannot lose to him; I too am young. As the more senior artist, I need to clearly express that *this* is art. To do so, I decide to show him the mentality of perseverance.

We ate dinner—four tacos at a nearby restaurant—and drank cola and fought off the

urge to sleep. While I do not normally drink cola, I enjoyed drinking this bright-black sweet liquid, dirtying my body in the same way that I dirty my hands with charcoal. And when the construction around us had quieted down at 9:00 p.m., we used the outdoor electric generator to continue our work. “Even at this pace, we may not be able to go home tomorrow. Are you prepared for that?” I asked Guz. “Of course,” he replied. “I am used to staying up late.” Guz was as serious as I was.

I needed a specific ceremony to increase our focus. To protect myself from the surrounding air, I decided to wear anti-contamination protective clothing (used to prevent radiation exposure) and paint my face white. By painting my face white, I was fully offering myself to this piece. Please use my body for this large piece—no, for the larger goal that this piece represents. Here, I become part of this piece. I am no longer my individual self; I become a version of myself that is thousands of times bigger and floats down onto the piece. When I painted myself white, the Mexicans became strangely afraid of me and did not attempt to engage in conversation. They did not even come near me. Only Guz was following instructions to film and document my process with photographs. Nor did I utter a single word. I only continued to copy the voiceprints. I gradually felt myself becoming thinner, and I felt myself drift down into my gut. I was somehow fully myself and fully not myself.

I endlessly walked across this white canvas. If I ran out of glue, I replenished it. If the pressure became too weak, I added pressure through the manual pump. Only the red strings representing time were my signposts. This place had turned into a sacred space that merged radiation and memories. Sometimes the security guard would walk by and would be unable to contain his surprise. But I did not care what people thought, what people said, or how people might have looked at me. This me, who paints my face white, is also me. I am now

in this white sacred space offering a part of my life as a sacrifice for *Alpha Decay*. Like the voiceprints, I move my heart, I become part of the voiceprint, and the voiceprint becomes part of me. Guz follows the voiceprints I draw with charcoal, taking photographs and taking videos when he has the chance.



***Alpha Decay*, p. 118-119, provided by author**

I did not realize it had become morning. I had been working for about 26 hours, starting the morning before. There was also another pavilion being built. The construction staff came and saw me exhausted, half black with charcoal and painted white, and avoided me as if they had seen something they were not expecting. Guz explained the situation to them, and they looked over at me from afar. Perhaps they were influenced by my seriousness, but they started to work even harder. The chief of construction staff looked at my exhausted expression and told me to go home. That it was dangerous for me to continue.

Here, I was not Takeda Shinpei. I was 33-year-old “Chinpei,” which was how they pronounced my name. I was tormenting myself in some romantic way that even I would call stupid. I was exerting a kind of strength that I was

surprised could be contained within the human body. If I keep pushing my limits, then I can overcome the hurdles every time. The fact that I was able to go there is because I constantly believe that limits can be overcome. And every time I overcome a new limit, the range of myself as a human is expanded. The threshold of these limits is expanded as well. My range of emotions are also expanded. Thus, *Alpha Decay* contains elements which constantly keep pushing the limits of my body and emotions.

The piece is not yet complete. But I need to finish it today. Starting tomorrow, I must vacuum the charcoal, clean the canvas from excess charcoal, separate the large canvas into eight parts, flip it over, and then hang it from the ceiling. Otherwise, the other three artists cannot bring in their pieces. I have no time. With adrenaline coming from sleep-deprivation pulsing through my veins, I returned to the hotel, took a shower, and laid in bed for 30 minutes.

Gente que nunca he visto antes aparece en medio de una intensa bola de luz

People I'd never seen before would appear in the middle of the intense ball of light

When sleeping during a time of extreme exhaustion, I only experience shallow rest. It still feels like my body is with the canvas. Is this me or is it someone else? I lose track of where I begin and end when the outside and inside are transformed this much. My body remembers this feeling. During high school in Kyoto, I was the quarterback of my football team. As such, I was often unexpectedly tackled. I would see stars in my head. I'd lose consciousness, and I wouldn't know where my body was for a moment. I didn't think too much of it at the time because it was a sport, but I suddenly remembered the feeling of my body

being electrified with adrenaline. My physical body also carried this memory, and this was etched into each bone. Perhaps this is why I am not satisfied unless I am pushing my body to its limit during the process of creating *Alpha Decay*. But the truth is that it has been 17 years since I played football. I am twice the age that I was back then, and this aging is evident in my pain in my joints.

And still unsure of whether this was my body or not, I returned to the pavilion. Marcela, the curator, was there. She saw how worn out I was and worriedly rushed over. Marcela knows that I need to push my body and to experience pain to create this piece; because the theme of this project is to research the physicality of art and memories. She thanked me for pouring my all into the piece, into an exhibit that she was curating. Her pain, the *hibakusha's* pain, and the pain created by radiation—releasing all of this is one of the goals of *Alpha Decay*.

I wear the anti-contamination gear and return to my work. I mindlessly draw voiceprints. Only the red lines keep my sense of space and time from drifting away. The charcoal runs out, so I have to make charcoal out of random pieces of wood laying around. Before the glue dries, I crush the still-warm charcoal and scatter it. This is the last of it, the limit of my concentration and my sanity. I need to bring this piece to a close and this requires more than average willpower. Although I have no energy left, the one thing I do have is confidence. My confidence expresses itself alongside my vibrating emotions.

The red string, which represents time without voiceprints is filled, and time itself moves forward. I wonder how many times I have walked back and forth across this canvas. Just a few days ago, this canvas was white, but now it is dyed black from the charcoal. And suddenly it was night again. I had finished drawing the voiceprints but now I needed to remove the excess charcoal that had not stuck to the glue.

This process was more troublesome than expected. The very fine particles of charcoal were stuck to the canvas and could not be easily vacuumed. I decided to reverse the air flow of the industrial vacuum and blow away these bits. Everyone wore masks as they did this, but the space became a storm of charcoal. To stay awake, I drank and consumed anything that was legal. I took a pill that would energize me. I had consumed too much cola, so I mixed coffee with espresso and continued my work. I did not care what I ingested. I needed to continue this work.

Little by little, the excess charcoal was removed, and the charcoal that stuck to the glue revealed solid voiceprints. This huge canvas, 22 meters long, was filled with 24 voice prints of the same length. When we finished our work, it was already 5:00 a.m. I had been awake for almost 45 hours, only sleeping for 30 minutes when I returned to the hotel yesterday. I was impressed with the way my body persevered. Now that the piece was finished, my body—which had been offered to this *Alpha Decay* piece—returned to me. I was only able to remain standing because of the sheer joy I felt that this piece was such a wonderful one. I did what I could in the time that I had, my body was physically pushed to its limit, and “Chinpei” completed series three of *Alpha Decay*. Now, I only had to lift this canvas up to the ceiling and include sound.

This process of “labor” vibrates people from their core. I have heard that Che Guevara actively took on labor in South America and that this was the reason people followed him. Yes, to move society, one must begin the act of labor. Even when people are ordered to do something, or, say, paid a salary, they wouldn’t work this hard. So, what is it about physical labor that moves people? All of this is to say that Guz and the other staff helped me complete this piece.

In Mexico, the concept of “getting serious

about something” does not have deep roots.⁴ The real “sword” (although, in Mexico’s case, it would be a “gun”) has been used for corruption and evil. At any rate, the others pick up on my “seriousness,” and listen to and work hard for me. And, as if they have been exposed to the energy of Alpha Decay, they work diligently, sticking to the insane schedule until the end. Guz as well missed all his classes and poured everything into this piece. Since I was pushing forward on the frontline one step at a time, I did not need to turn back—there were always people following me. This is my mission.

I later learned that Marcela knew this about me, and to create solidarity in preparation for the exhibit, she intentionally prepared a space in which I would be able to work at the pavilion. As she expected, a special kind of solidarity between staff and assistants emerged that was not often observed at the other exhibits. This is the epitome of *Alpha Decay*. It is not an abstract concept-like art, but an expression of how society can be.

When I returned to the hotel, it was already morning. The hotel staff were visibly shaken by this Asian man with black hands, wearing a T-shirt encrusted with charcoal and glue. Because I was so hungry, the first thing I did was eat breakfast. I ate Huevos Rancheros—eggs with black beans and cheese, packed with protein—as a reward for my body. And then, without even taking a shower, I fell into my bed.

Entonces cuando respondo, parece que ellos me entienden

Then when I respond, they seem to understand what I am saying.

For the first time in a long time, I slept for over 5 hours. I regained some strength and returned

to the pavilion. Marcela, the curator, and Gabriel were there. I thanked them once again for preparing a canvas that was required for a project of this scale. Since my first series of *Alpha Decay* in Tijuana, I had wanted them to see my improved work. I was incredibly happy to have fulfilled this goal.

Today, I take the canvas in its eight parts and flip them to hang the piece from the ceiling. One section is 23 feet wide and 8.2 feet tall, and all together it weighs no less than 4,409 pounds. To individually flip them and hang them from the ceiling requires five, no, ten people.

Nothing was progressing. Even I became irritated with Mexican-time, but, finally, the preparations were completed and the first canvas was successfully moved around 7:00 p.m. It took 15 people to move the canvas, flip it over, secure it with wire, and slowly begin lifting it up. The staff, who were accustomed to such construction, all wore gloves so as to not damage my artwork. But hanging just one panel took two hours. There was no way that this process would be finished by the end of the day.

The chief of staff saw my exhaustion and worried about me. They said not to stress about the rest of the process and that I should go back to the hotel. The kind of work that moves this many people is accompanied by a strong sense of responsibility. Of course, it was my duty to stay and finish this alongside everyone, to be responsible until the very end. But maybe leaving my art with someone I trust is also important—it was the first time that I thought this way. Yes, now that the voiceprints had been drawn, this piece had left my hands. My only choice was to believe in the power of this piece and my energy embedded within it.

That night, for the first time in a long time, I returned to the hotel before midnight. The next morning, when I returned to the pavilion, the staff were still in the process of hanging up the

eight canvas. There were five or six staff members who were sleeping on the floor. There were about 15 staff members wearing gloves, their eyes red with exhaustion, working to complete the installation. I was so moved that tears almost spilled out of my eyes. They had all likely seen me working over the past two days and were pouring an equal amount of labor into installing this large canvas onto the ceiling. Horacio, mentioned in the first chapter, had also been like this. Once Mexicans get engrossed in something, they really move. When the last panel was raised, the large canvas boldly hung from the ceiling. The pressure of this piece even got to me.

Quiero que la gente conserve esto en su corazón, y cuando se queda en su corazón, eso se queda en su memoria

I want people to conserve this in their heart, and when it stays in their hearts, it stays in their memories

The pavilion was meant to open at the same time as the book fair, but from early this morning, the sound staff are having trouble sending one signal to 24 headphones. However, the other artists' pieces are on display, and all the preparations are complete. A decision is made to delay the exhibition until 2:00 p.m., after the "Artist Talks" session.

The "Artist Talks" took place in a separate venue. In my presentation, I chose twenty photographs that Guz had taken for me and explained the process of my work. Eleven days had passed since coming to Mexico City, but it was as if time had vanished into thin air. When the other three artists finished speaking, many questions were asked. But the last question Marcela offered was, "what does the word *"dar"* [to offer, give, donate] mean?" She referred to a quote regarding reciprocity by the

philosopher Jacques Derrida and posed the question to each of us. Derrida claimed that something offered with the expectation of any return or merit, that is to say, something offered as a kind of trade, cannot be called a “gift.” It is then an impossible paradox that a true gift is that which cannot be called a gift. Moreover, a gift whose receiver knows the sender cannot be called a gift.

Other artists seemed to be taken aback by this oddly religious question. There were some who coolly said, “no comment,” and the modern Mexicans, who have strange relationships with religion, especially Christianity, seemed to have had difficulty answering the question. But I did not see this as a question regarding religion or morality. Instead, I talked about “time.” These voiceprints and the red strings represent time. Hiroshima, Nagasaki, and Fukushima all occurred within the same flow of time. What connects these voiceprints is the unit of time. The same applies to memories and the units of time of radiation. This time that was given to me, this time that was given to my body—to offer time is to offer your body, to offer your soul, to offer your emotions. A large axis of time and its connections were revealed—not just Shinpei Takeda as an individual, but through the medium of Shinpei Takeda adorning white paint. This resonated with Guz, Marcela, and the construction staff, so they also poured their time into this piece: not for themselves or for money. And people who see this piece will similarly resonate with it, and they themselves may offer something. This chain of resonance is what *dar* represents for me.

After the “Artist Talks,” the exhibition successfully opened, and many people looked up at the ceiling with curiosity. This is as it should be. My understanding of *dar* is packed

in there. The chain reactions of *Alpha Decay* will probably continue. It may never end. I can sense this. In this short period, I was able to move many people and create a large art piece. With this sense of possibility within my chest, I left the pavilion.

I had some time before my flight, so I used the subway to get to a place called Culiacán in the south of Mexico City. At the house of Frida Kahlo, which is famous among tourists, there were young students who were full of life. There, I drank some coffee, ate a churro, and rested. I had not been by myself—thinking of nothing, my mind completely empty—for a long time. The light of an orange lamp was reflected on the cobblestone streets, and, for a moment, I felt like I had returned to a previous century. I can sense that a particular flow of time has been preserved here. Time and something spiritual—no, some sacred laws of nature—co-exist. And this time does not stop; it continues to stream on. This dramatic year, 2011, is almost at its end. I wonder where this chemical chain reaction of *Alpha Decay* will go. I have no fear. All memories will merge alongside time’s sacred laws.

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This translation was supervised and edited by Michele M. Mason.

Takeda Shinpei is a Japanese multi-media visual artist and filmmaker with a global

reach. His works—exhibited around the world—treat a wide range of themes regarding memories and history in multi-media installations, sound interventions, documentary films, large-scale photography installations, and collaborative community projects in various public contexts. *Hiroshima Nagasaki Download*, one of Takeda's film projects, documents a road trip from Canada to Mexico during which he interviews survivors of Hiroshima and Nagasaki living in North America. After the Fukushima nuclear disaster in 2011, Takeda has devoted himself to several powerful projects that seek to depict the intangibility of radiation and memories. For more information, see shinpeitakeda.com.

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Notes

¹ [Translator/Editor] *Alpha Decay* refers to a seven-part multimedia series that includes voice vibrations of survivors of the U.S. atomic bombings, installations, film/video, and music. Takeda's work is commonly not static, changing as it travels from one venue to another as he continues to add and edit.

² Akiko Naono traces the definition of the term "*hibakusha*," locating the first uses of the term within surveys of wartime damage and medical research. The term has been translated in popular vocabulary as "atomic bomb survivors" but the meaning continues to evolve. See "The Origins of '*Hibakusha*' as a Scientific and Political Classification of the Survivor," *Japanese Studies*, 39, no. 3 (2019): 333-334.

³ [Translator/Editor] In the postwar era, there has been considerable controversy regarding the song "Kimigayo," which was not officially declared Japan's national anthem until 1999. A song, which celebrates the imperial lineage and was used in the wartime era to foster allegiance to the state, was particularly resisted by teachers in the public school system.

⁴ The word for "serious," *shinken*, is made up of two characters that mean "real" and "sword."