

# 1.24

## Industrial Poisoning, Minamata, 1972

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A sublime image of unconditional maternal love and sacrifice, the iconic 1971 photograph by veteran photojournalist W. Eugene Smith (1918–78) of Minamata disease victim Tomoko Kamimura being bathed by her mother is a visual lamentation.<sup>1</sup> Echoing the tearful lament of victims' families, who wept, "How long will those of us who have been sacrificed have to cry ourselves to sleep?" this photographic pieta evokes the symbolic sacrality and martyrdom of its pictorial referent.<sup>2</sup> Yet the photograph's mournful serenity belies a story of extreme violence against the environment, humanity, and decades of sometimes violent physical and political struggle by the fishing communities and victims' families in their efforts to receive recognition and compensation for unimaginable suffering and loss.

Published in the 2 June 1972 issue of *LIFE* magazine as a double-page spread, the photograph is the emotional denouement of Smith's powerful photoessay titled "Death-Flow from a Pipe" that documents Chisso Corporation's industrial pollution of Minamata Bay and the Shiranui Sea on the southern island of Kyūshū.<sup>3</sup> Starting with a stunning photograph of a massive pipe discharging industrial effluent into a residue-encrusted waterway below, the project instantly brought international attention to the company's dumping of toxic wastewater, containing methyl mercury from acetaldehyde production, into Hyakken Harbor and the Minamata River; this had been poisoning local inhabitants through contaminated seafood from 1932. Initially comprising eleven photographs, including a commanding close-up of Tomoko's twisted hand juxtaposed with the polluted landscape, the photo essay was expanded into book form in Japan in 1973 and in the US in 1975.<sup>4</sup> The Minamata series marks a pivotal moment in the history of activist photojournalism's fight against environmental pollution on a world stage. Smith and his wife Aileen produced the works while they lived in Minamata for three years from 1971 to 1973, when local activists were shifting their political strategy to increasing the visibility of disease victims through direct appearances and mass media.<sup>4</sup> Despite years of grass roots activism regarding this egregious case of industrial pollution, neither labor unions nor victims' families made significant headway in getting legal recognition or fair compensation until 1973.

While Smith's photograph became a national emblem of collective suffering and an icon of the Japanese cultural value of "*gaman*" (stoically enduring the seemingly unbearable with patience and dignity), it also expresses the subjects' extreme social isolation and the unshakable bonds of family in the midst of communal rupture. Minamata is a palimpsest of Japanese modernity. Its history of exploitation reveals the conflicted status of Japan's periphery in the face of the nation's rapid industrialization when

national interests were often privileged at the expense of individuals and local communities—in many ways, it is the story of Fukushima as well.

As Smith states in the Prologue to *Minamata*, “This is not an objective book. The first word I would remove from the folklore of journalism is the word objective.”<sup>5</sup> This aptly describes his immersive and emotive method, and his dedication to pioneering the photoessay, with acclaimed works for *LIFE* such as “Country Doctor” (1948) and “Nurse Midwife” (1951), and his opus on the city of Pittsburgh (1955–8). Smith’s deeply humanistic approach to image-making precluded detached observation; instead, he chose to embed himself within the story to personalize it.<sup>6</sup> Indebted to modernist formalism, Smith’s *Minamata* series is so affecting because it mobilizes the jarring yet alluring aesthetics of deformation—the contortion of the diseased body—to draw the viewer into a relationship with the subjects; to experience their suffering, sorrow, and strength.

Smith ultimately sacrificed his own body for the sins of others when he incurred permanent physical injury from violent clashes with Chisso company strongmen, amplifying his already heroic artistic identity in the American press to near mythic proportions that practically occluded the *Minamata* cause.<sup>7</sup> For him, the photoessay was a medium through which to convey his “passionate” concern for a myriad of environmental threats proliferating on a daily basis.<sup>8</sup> The project reflects a broader trend in awareness of the environment that began in the early 1960s and launched the environmental movement around the world with landmark publications such as Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* in 1962 about the dangerous use of pesticides.<sup>9</sup> Three days after Smith’s photoessay ran in *LIFE* in 1972, the first global environmental conference was held in Stockholm—the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment—and *Minamata* disease patient Sakamoto Shinobu and her mother stunned everyone in the audience into silence by ascending the stage and publicly displaying the girl’s afflictions; like the image of Tomoko, she was a visible embodiment of the woefully incomplete project of social justice.<sup>10</sup> Ironically, even the photograph itself became a source of contention as it grew in national and international currency. Widely reproduced, and selected as the poster image for the major 1996 *Minamata Tokyo Exhibition*, the photograph of Tomoko was plastered across the capital, much to the family’s distress and the consternation of some *Minamata* victims, who had already unfairly accused prominent victims’ families of seeking the limelight and benefiting from the pain of others. Due to these stresses, and the personal toll of seeing Tomoko’s vulnerable, naked body circulated for prying eyes and prurient consumption in the public sphere for decades, Aileen Smith, respecting the family’s wishes, decided in 2001 to stop granting permission to reproduce the image in order to prevent it from “turning to profanity.”<sup>11</sup> Tomoko deserved eternal peace.

## Notes

- 1 Although the Smiths read Tomoko’s family name Uemura, the family pronounces their name Kamimura. Uemura, however, is still most commonly used in descriptive titles of the photograph.
- 2 A statement made by the *Minamata Disease Patients Families Mutual Aid Society* (*Minamatabyōkanja katei gojokai*) in 1959. Quoted in Timothy George, *Minamata: Pollution and the Struggle for Democracy in Postwar Japan*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001; paperback 2002):107.
- 3 The company Japan Nitrogenous Fertilizers, Inc. commonly abbreviated as Nitchitsu, was renamed Chisso Corporation in 1965. On industrial pollution, Brett Walker, *Toxic Archipelago* (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 2010).

- 4 W. Eugene Smith, *Minamata: Life—Sacred and Profane* (Tokyo: Sojūsha, 1973); W. Eugene Smith and Aileen M. Smith, *Minamata* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1975).
- 5 A full partner who produced half of the photographs, Aileen Smith's Japanese heritage and language abilities provided essential skills.
- 6 Smith, *Minamata*, 1975: 7.
- 7 On Smith, see especially, *W. Eugene Smith: Master of the Photographic Essay* (Millerton, NY: Aperture, 1981); and Brett Abbott, *Engaged Observers* (Los Angeles: J. Paul Getty Museum, 2010).
- 8 Martha Rosler, "In, around, and afterthoughts (on documentary photography)," in Richard Bolton, ed. *The Contest of Meaning* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1999 [1992]) 308, 336.
- 9 Rachel Carson *Silent Spring* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1962).
- 10 Smith, *Minamata*, 1975: 7.
- 11 "Declaration of the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment," 1972, <http://www.unep.org/Documents.Multilingual/Default.asp?documentid=97&articleid=1503>
- 12 For Aileen Smith about her decision, see <http://archive.today/e84c> (accessed 22 October 2014).