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8 Islands for life

Artistic responses to remote social polarization and population decline in Japan

Adrian Favell

Beyond “cool Japan”

International art lovers in recent years have come to hear more often of the extraordinary community art projects in Japan taking place on ancient volcanic islands in the Seto (Inland) Sea—centered notably on the art island of Naoshima (Müller and Miki, 2011)—and, somewhat less famously, the hills and villages of upland Niigata—the Echigo-Tsumari Art Triennale (Kitagawa, 2015). There has been a growing awareness of these projects, part of a quiet, socially engaged and mostly rural contemporary art movement in Japan, hugely in contrast to the dominant image of its commercial pop art reflecting mostly the naive “Cool Japan” branding of its urban pop and sub-cultures (Favell, 2012). The rural art movement has a lineage in the not-for-profit (NPO based) societal responses to slow government action after the Kobe earthquake of 1995, as well as experimentations in public art projects developed by a range of pioneers during the Bubble years and after (Kajiya, 2009; Sugita, 2013). Since the triple disasters of 3.11, though, they have become an increasingly ascendant feature of the arts in Japan (see, for example, the focus of recent exhibitions and surveys: Takehisa, 2012; Kataoka et al., 2013). In particular, these projects engage directly with questions of the revitalization and sustainability of remote, ageing populations and their struggling post-industrial or agricultural settlements, situations that represent some of the most dramatic examples of social polarization and decline in “post-growth” Japan since 1990 (Matanle and Rausch, 2011).

As an illustration in this chapter, I will focus on two projects associated with the Kyushu born (b.1959) artist Yanagi Yukinori, one such pioneer. His community art projects on the islands of Inujima and Momoshima in the Seto Sea offer an ideal example of artistic intervention in environmentally damaged locations, whose settlements are *genkai shiraku*, that is, places facing a very likely threat of disappearance, with close to zero children and a large majority of the population in their 60s and 70s (Ono, 2005). I offer an introduction and assessment of these projects based on visits and observer participation on the islands, coupled with evidence from interviews with residents. These were conducted as part of

Yanagi, stung by his involvement with curators and architects in the past, kept the renovation design and exhibition plans to himself, and has created a well equipped base, with smart gallery spaces, high tech connections, excellent cooking facilities (with a café and shop), even a private bar and residential facilities. Parts of the site have also become a permanent home for some of his installation work. The site is part funded by Bunka Cho (Agency for Cultural Affairs), and the public openings of events still suggest a conventional notion of art, tourism and a museum-like experience. But alongside the somewhat monumental style works displayed permanently, a more fundamental and transformative social art is being developed.

100 ideas on tomorrow's island

After a joint exhibition built around a collaboration with the 60s radical and *mono-ha* artist, Haraguchi Noriyuki, as part of the second phase of work on the island, Yanagi engaged a former student, the Berlin-based Furukata Taro, to develop a platform with which the Momoshima project might also generate new ideas about revitalization and sustainability. Formulated as the multi-part exhibition project *100 Ideas on Tomorrow's Island: What Can Art Do For a Better Society?*, in 2013 and 2014 it brought mainly Japanese and German artists to the island on long-term residencies that might tap into the symbolic resources of the island.

100 Ideas offered an original extension of influential art producer Kitagawa Fram's philosophy for Echigo-Tsumari (Kitagawa, 2015), in which the sites of abandoned buildings in remote rural locations become locations for resident artists' projects and interventions. This massive rural triennale set in Niigata since 2000 is also the basic template for the later Setouchi festivals. Kitagawa, who is the most influential pioneer of the public and community art movement of post-Bubble Japan, has been a pivotal, albeit polarizing figure in the Tokyo art scene for well over 25 years. A former 60s student radical, he speaks in the broad rubric of social and economic revitalization, as well as a cultural rediscovery by urban populations of a "lost Japan" (Kerr, 1996) foresaken in what he sees as the "dark age" of linear urban modernization. Kitagawa believes artists are ideally equipped to rediscover, classify and represent neglected resources hidden or forgotten in rural backwaters, as well as working out ways to communicate with locals; that is, build "happy" (sic) relations with them that can aid in the production of site specific works in the country and (especially) in their maintenance over time (Kitagawa, 2014). Such projects require immense patience, and long term organizational and social investment to be realized: artists often have to learn that a flying residency will not get the job done.

Kitagawa was (not coincidentally) Yanagi's first gallerist in the 1980s, and made his name with the development of the Daikanyama site Hillside Terrace, with the architect Maki Fumihiko (Worrall and Golani Solomon, 2010). When Fukutake first discovered Echigo-Tsumari in 2003, he decided to invest deeply in future editions, seeing in them a potential model for expanding his vision of art islands in the Seto Sea (Fukutake, 2014). Kitagawa was then brought in to manage the

planning of the Setouchi Festival, which opened in 2010, as general director. Ironically, the fame of Naoshima has ensured that Setouchi is now better known nationally and internationally than Echigo-Tsumari. Kitagawa meanwhile seems content that the much larger Setouchi festival (in terms of financing and visitors) may become the most effective means of conveying his philosophy (Kitagawa, 2014).

At both events, the signature aspect of this philosophy is to experience the works as part of a sometimes impossible "slow art" treasure hunt across the rice fields, mountains and islands, in which impatient art consumers are forced to slow down, meet residents, eat locally, revise their plans, perhaps not see all or much of the art, but ultimately connect in a new way with the landscape and its population. A central feature is the use of the many abandoned buildings in these remote regions, including empty houses, factories, and public schools (Favell, 2015). On Momoshima, on a much smaller and less well funded basis, Furukata offered artists empty buildings in which they might explicitly address the question posed about art's utility for the future. The emphasis is on the artists adapting to the daily rhythms and social mores of the island. With his partner Fukuda Megumi, also an established Berlin artist, Furukata found that the role of artist and art producer on the island could entail cultivating overgrown gardens, checking on buildings, cooking local dishes or interacting patiently with confused residents, as much as typical art work itself. Sometimes missing their bracketed life in urban Berlin, Furukata and Fukuda could feel the seductive pull of the island without children, explicitly wondering if they or others might ever be able to settle and bring the family life back to the place that it craves and which alone could save it from disappearance.

In order to get anything done on the island, the members of the Art Base have to engage in extraordinarily sensitive daily interactions, maintaining and extending the enthusiastic but poised consensus about their place there. As residents point out, there are no secrets on the island, and after the last boat, no way off and nowhere to hide. The youth and energy of the outsiders could be extremely destructive in this locale if it imported its usual urban habits. A sense of the sheer fragility and balance of the place, can be gained from joining the daily routine late morning at the one shop where fresh produce comes in daily for sale to residents. One by one, spectacularly old ladies come out to see what there is to buy, to sit around in the sun a little, and gossip perhaps. The young have to adapt and fit in to this sensitive eco-system. The personal stories coaxed from these tiny old ladies, who have been widowed for many years, center on memories of the hard life conditions that brought them to the island as young women. Furukata is not sure what it has done for their art, but he and his partner have learned a revised set of priorities for living there.

Working on the island has also had a transformative impact on the practice of a Tokyo-based American artist, James Jack. After taking part in the Setouchi Festival, Jack developed a site-sensitive work for Momoshima. Working nearby the port waterfront across from industrial boat factories on the mainland, he built a boat made from pieces of wood taken from three abandoned houses on the island.



Figure 8.3 Artist James Jack at work on his installation "Boat to Khayalan Island"

As part of the preparation for *100 Ideas*, he sailed with other islanders to search for a disappeared island (note: one of the rare tourist offerings on Momoshima is a "no-man's island" boat tour). Jack recounts how Furukata discovered in the shallow waters off one uninhabited island a light bulb covered in clam shells that became the emblematic "ready-made" symbol of the exhibition. In particular, Jack engaged the enthusiastic participation and advice of one energetic villager around 60 (himself with ageing parents from the island), who could provide the key relations Jack needed in order to obtain the recycled wood, as well as expertise (to build a boat). Other curious villagers could drop by the open site during the day; there were school visits, newspaper coverage, and parties to mark the project's launch and completion during an extended slow summer. In the evenings, the panoramic spot became an open air forum of evening drinks and discussion.

Another invited group, Mouhitori (Ono Tamaki and Mikami Kiyohito), made architectural interventions into the actual building sites. Based as art teachers in Onomichi, the duo first developed their ideas walking around the landscaped, but declining residential hillside of the central city. The wastefulness of its neglected buildings and the tendency for owners or developers to just rip them down and build anew, inspired an artistic reaction against the dominantly destructive philosophy of the Japanese construction business. They felt that the buildings and their spirit might be used in some other way. This led to the establishment in 2005 of the Onomichi Artist-in-Residency (AIR) as a framework for their work.

Mouhitori's practice make them natural allies for the Momoshima project. At the opening exhibition on the island, they made three interventions. In one, they brought signs of cooking activity back to a former soy sauce manufacturers. In a second, they tackled a concrete site eyesore—a building lot that had just been carelessly paved over—by cutting a new "window" in the concrete, from which light could be seen when turned on from a neighboring house; later "healing" plants would grow in the hole.

As well as their blue light windows, their signature is to work with standard builder's blue tarpaulins and striped plastic cladding which they put on to buildings like large "scabs" to help the injured structures "heal." Their third intervention thus brought colour and light to the mosquito infested site of the old hospital, an overgrown and almost entirely ghostly set of collapsing buildings.

On the slightly more prosperous side of the village, not far from a beached container ship and numerous abandoned cars, there is the incongruous sight of a large water basin of floating solar energy panels. A few of the islanders are employed in maintaining this site: the only active source of work apart from ticket collecting at the ferry and the forthcoming opening of an old age residency home. Farming, meanwhile, has almost disappeared, despite the island's rich and abundant past. A former insurance company employee, who became a novelist and a minor celebrity on the island, tells us how in less than ten years trees, jungle and wild boars had repossessed the old potato fields. The irony of the solar energy



Figure 8.4 Mouhitori's installation in the former hospital of Momoshima

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