

## Echigo-Tsumari and the Art of the Possible: The Fram Kitagawa Philosophy in Theory and Practice

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There are two Japans. One is the futuristic, fast-moving, high-tech cityscape of urban sprawl—the Tokyo conurbation that seems to stretch for hundreds of miles north and south, as well as the nation's other important urban hubs. The other Japan is the quiet, declining, rural hinterland, with its crumbling small cities and towns, aging populations, young people moving away to the city, no children being born, and all the old traditions disappearing. In some ways, this is a familiar tale of modernization seen worldwide. But the social polarization visible in Japan is arguably the most dramatic case anywhere, in terms of sheer spatial inequality across an urban/rural divide. Most of the population of Japan is now urbanized. The rest of Japan is, socially speaking, a rural wasteland.<sup>1</sup>

International perceptions of contemporary Japan center on an almost exclusively urban imaginary. This is the vision of Japan beloved by manga, street fashion, J-pop, and designer fans worldwide: the “neo-Tokyo” fantasy of an endless, futuristic urban sprawl, full of weird and wonderful subcultures. Fascination with this image of Japan (and now China) has always been driven by the allure of a rising alternate Asian modernity. In many respects, though, it is a screen hiding a more complicated reality. Japan is not what it was during the boom “Bubble” years in the late 1980s. Yet despite ailing economic fortunes, political stagnation, and social decline in the years since, the Japanese government has thought it wise to continue to invest massively in branding the nation in terms of the fantasy, as a kind of futurist cartoon of “Cool Japan.” This peculiar policy got going in the early 2000s, and is still high on the agenda despite the shattering disasters of March 2011.<sup>2</sup> Around the same time, in contemporary art, Japan's two best-known international artists, Takashi Murakami and Yoshitomo Nara, rose to fame with a pop art that transposed the culture of “Cool Japan” into elite museums worldwide. Murakami's “superflat” movement—which packaged the art of the Bubble years and the decadent times just after as a conceptual art representing a unique national culture—is often all that is known of recent Japanese art internationally.<sup>3</sup>

For many years, this vision has been difficult to dislodge. The kind of art—indeed, the form of social movement—represented by the manifold projects at Fram Kitagawa's Echigo-Tsumari Art Triennale has at the same time been almost invisible internationally. Without a realistic context about the social and economic conditions of contemporary Japan, as well as knowledge of the festival's relation to the contemporary Japanese art world, Echigo-Tsumari can be hard to understand or fully appreciate. Yet as it has grown, and particularly as its patented organizational form was adopted by the even bigger Setouchi Art Festival in the Japanese Inland Sea, social and community-centered art projects dedicated to the economic revitalization of marginal regions, which address the social divides of young and old or urban and rural brought on by economic transformation, have risen to become an almost dominant focus of Japanese contemporary art domestically. Indeed, in the wake of the March 2011 disasters, art speaking to the dysfunctions and social tragedies of the nation—opposed to art reflecting fashionable urban youth cultures and high-tech futures—has become almost ubiquitous.

The time is ripe for a full international appreciation of the power and ambition of the artistic movement of which Fram Kitagawa has been the central architect. Not least this is because the same social and spatial polarization effects, stagnating economies, lost generations of youth, and potentially desperate demographic decline are beginning to be a feature of many other highly advanced industrial regions mired in their own long-term economic crises: for instance, the industrial northeast of the United States, eastern Germany, and parts of southern Europe. Through the small but hugely symbolic effects of social interventions enabled by such festivals, Japan offers examples of how these potentially catastrophic and conflicting scenarios of decline might be managed in a rather more gentle, "civilized" fashion—a kind of utopian vision of art and its social relevance for late modernity.

### *Metabolist Japan: Culture, Economy, and Politics in Postwar Japan*

On a clear night in Tokyo, visitors to the \$20 "City View" on the fifty-second floor of Mori Tower in Roppongi Hills are invited to behold the seemingly infinite nighttime sprawl of a spectacular, futuristic city that seems to incarnate everything imagined to be possible of an alternate Asian modernity. Although its exhibitions are often overshadowed by the sublime view outside, the ascent to the fifty-third-floor Mori Art Museum then offers tourists the chance to cap their experience at Tokyo's premier destination for contemporary art: the local equivalent of the pilgrimage

demanding of tourists today when they visit Paris, London, or New York and check off the Pompidou, Tate Modern, and Museum of Modern Art. Around them, the Roppongi Hills site, which was completed in 2001 and heavily influenced by the late Minoru Mori's fascination with Le Corbusier, offers a vision of how a "creative city" redevelopment may work in what was a problematic, poor, and crime-infested neighborhood. A multipurpose "city within a city," it has brought back affluent Tokyoites, as well as legions of national and international visitors, to enjoy its self-contained shopping, entertainment, and residential complexes.<sup>4</sup>

Not far away, in an intense, rather chaotic office that is part of Daikanyama's Hillside Terrace—a landmark 1980s architectural development that Fram Kitagawa joined in 1984—lies the headquarters of his organization, Art Front Gallery. Kitagawa does not criticize the Mori philosophy directly, but Roppongi Hills might be seen to incarnate much of the negative vision of Japanese urbanism that has motivated him to take art away from the city into rural areas, in an effort to "cleanse" what the city has become.<sup>5</sup> For Kitagawa, the twentieth century, he says, was an age of cities that led to a dark, if not self-destructive, art and culture. The unhealthy alliance of art, urbanism, and commercial interests has long been dominant in Japan. Japan's drive to both cooperate and compete with American and European modernity has, in its failure, left a highly urbanized population disconnected and alienated from its origins. For Kitagawa, the spiritual core of Japanese culture has, in its urban incarnation, been replaced by consumerism. "Art should not just sit atop consumerism," he says; a contemporary art museum as a "shrine" atop a shopping mall and office tower block has become a "Parthenon for the modern world."

Fram Kitagawa and the director of the Mori Art Museum, Fumio Nanjo—who has been since the 1980s one of the most familiar Japanese faces in international art and museum circles—have long parallel histories in the brokering of major public art projects over the years. Indeed, their perceived rivalry is sometimes referred to jokingly as the Japanese art "civil war (*namboku senso*) of the north and the south," featuring the Niigata-born Mr. Kitagawa (his name means "northern river") versus Mr. Nanjo (or "southern quarter"), from Nagoya in the south. Nanjo's vision of "art in the city," which elaborates on the public art installations around Roppongi Hills after a long track record of curating public art installations in many prestigious urban locations in Tokyo and elsewhere, fits well with the mainstream cultural policy of the "creative city."<sup>6</sup> Japanese cities, like so many others internationally, have bought heavily into the vision promoted by urban policy gurus such as Charles Landry and Richard Florida since the 1990s and incarnated by landmark projects such as the Guggenheim in

Bilbao or Tate Modern in London. In these projects, investment in high-end cultural facilities is said to lead to economic growth by encouraging the talented and creative to engage back in the city, as well as attracting consumers and tourists with disposable time and energy to lavish on the arts.<sup>7</sup>

In Japan, first Yokohama, then Kanazawa, then any number of other Japanese cities have explicitly adopted a “creative city” justification for high-end cultural funding—particularly the construction of museums and the staging of major cultural events—as a core strategy for attracting tourism, service-industry investment, and new forms of urban consumerism and entrepreneurialism.<sup>8</sup> The Mori Building Company also cited the “creative city” in its plans for Roppongi Hills, and was distinctive in being a private corporate initiative—indeed, one of the significant channels for international investment that started pouring into Tokyo around 2000 after the crisis-provoked deregulation of Japanese banking and financial industries at the end of the 1990s.<sup>9</sup> The city of Tokyo then allowed Mr. Mori to build on an unprecedentedly huge site after his slow and costly acquisition over nearly twenty years of the twelve hectares of housing and commercial lots in working-class Roppongi, which he bought up through both carrot and stick pressure on the former residents, so that he could create his signature architectural legacy.<sup>10</sup>

This growth-oriented creative city ethos stands as the antithesis of the social movement Fram Kitagawa has tried to create through the activities of Echigo-Tsumari. Art, he claims, should not be an index of modern development, but a way of measuring what has been lost: the distance between urban life and the nature, traditions urban populations have left behind. Nowadays, the modern world only values how fast we can absorb new information. This is why Kitagawa conceived Echigo-Tsumari as a deliberately difficult, “inefficient” experience, one that would force the visitor to slow down and think, not just consume everything, and appreciate the process of tracking down art in abandoned village schools, remote old houses, up a hill, or across a deserted field. It would be contemporary art, not packaged as a slick tourist experience, but found in the severest and most unlikely of places.

Minoru Mori’s philosophy focused on cleaning up the city and reeducating urban populations through the sublime experience of art and culture in a futuristic museum. Kitagawa’s concern, on the other hand, is that art has replaced a God that has been lost. Art is in danger of becoming a commercial accessory to urban living, as well as a fig leaf for ever more urban development. It is, he says, a strategy that merely reproduces the Western, U.S.-dominated system. It worked well for Japan to be in this subservient position during the “air pocket” of the Cold War years. It gave them

the financial Bubble, and delusions of world economic power. But this is when the Japanese lost their ethics. Art was then co-opted in the 1990s and 2000s to keep the development logic going.

The inward investment of global capital that followed into Tokyo through Mori and other multinational corporations at the turn of the century was the heralding of a full normalization of Tokyo as an archetypal global city—that is, a megalopolis embedded in global circuits of power and capital, but increasingly disconnected with and distinct from its own national hinterlands.<sup>11</sup> Notably, with the partial exception of Fukuoka and Sapporo, which have different, regionally embedded economies linked with China and Korea, other cities in Japan have only suffered in the shadow of Tokyo’s ongoing growth. The postwar era of modernization has been a long story of rural to urban flight, in which declining rural homelands were romanticized as the *furusato* regional origins of populations going to the city.<sup>12</sup>

Yet the hinterlands were also, in the heyday of the LDP (Liberal Democratic Party), quite well sustained through political subsidies (on farming, construction, landscaping, and industrial production), and then later on the promotion of *shinkansen* package tourism to the regions.<sup>13</sup> This is what political scientists refer to cynically as “pork barrel” politics, feeding all the most important interests and constituencies to keep them politically pliant. But after the Bubble of the 1980s, many of Japan’s formerly industrially rich regional cities as well as environmentally rich agricultural terrains went into decline and shrinkage. As globalization swept in finally at the end of the 1990s, much of this has been impossible to sustain. Meanwhile, the farming hinterlands have declined ever more sharply, with an almost ubiquitous flight of youth to the cities, and the dramatic aging of agricultural populations that will never be replaced. Moreover, from 1995 onward, the birth rate started to decline to one of the lowest in the developed industrial world. By 2005, the population itself had started to shrink, with an unprecedented proportion of very old people as the postwar baby-boomer generations aged. Japan can look forward almost certainly to a population approaching 25 to 30 percent smaller by 2050 (declining from approximately 130 million to 100 million), with anywhere between 30 and 40 percent past retirement age (that is, never again working), and with a current annual loss of about five hundred thousand people a year (in other words, a city the size of Nagasaki).<sup>14</sup>

Tokyo, whose population and wealth has continued to grow, and whose performance almost entirely accounts for the much-trumpeted “growth” spurt of recent Abenomics (named for Prime Minister Shinzō Abe), is thus the exception, not

the rule.<sup>15</sup> The international fixation on the global city of Tokyo as Japan of course masks this, but it fits well with the older, utopian visions of an ever-expanding, almost entirely urbanized Japan that were dreamt of by the famous metabolist architects and planners of the 1950s and 1960s.<sup>16</sup> The brilliant students of Kenzō Tange, himself inspired by the planning dreams of Le Corbusier, in fact invented a distinctively futurist culture for an Asian growth machine that was thought internationally to have no culture but one of imitation. As documented by Rem Koolhaas and Hans Ulrich Obrist, this *Project Japan* of the metabolists for a while wedded modernist utopianism to vast bureaucratic governmental ambition, such that Japan invented almost a new stage in “total urbanization,” akin to the theories of Henri Lefebvre.<sup>17</sup> What the world saw was the organizational wonder of the 1964 Olympics and the cybernetic playground of the 1970 Osaka Expo, registering these then as the image of a future Asian superpower.<sup>18</sup> When all this developed further into the high-tech consumerist wonderland of 1980s Bubble Japan—in which the Japanese economy began even to overtake and surpass America’s—many of these oriental dreams seemed to be coming true. It is not a coincidence that Mori’s most enthusiastic and well-funded shows at the Mori Art Museum have been about architecture and made an explicit link via Le Corbusier between metabolism and the idea of Roppongi Hills.<sup>19</sup>

Orchestrating this metabolist economy at the urban core, the Liberal Democratic Party nevertheless lived off the support of the conservative heartlands, which they bought off via subsidies and regional backhanders. This was the heyday of the infamous “iron triangle” — the tight relationship between government, bureaucratic planners, and business corporations— which drove the unprecedented growth machine of the post-war boom years.<sup>20</sup> But after the Bubble, with Japan’s economic decline, the ongoing urbanization and centralization of wealth and power in Tokyo made the regions politically much less significant. Niigata is a case in point. At the heart of Echigo-Tsumari, the small textile-producing city of Tokamachi and the rice farming areas around it was one of the most archetypal, solid heartlands of conservative LDP power during its long postwar reign. This carefully cultivated constituency was the power base particularly of a local Niigata politician, Kakuei Tanaka, a prime minister in the early 1970s who was long the dominant, charismatic figure in the region. He ensured that the prefecture would always have its huge agricultural subsidies, and he created a flow of lucrative public-works projects for businessmen in the region.

Kitagawa himself comes from Niigata, and this part of the region is very symbolically important for Japan as a noted area of top-quality rice production. Expensively subsidized, with price tariffs on foreign rice as much as seven times above international prices, the prized rice is grown on artificially terraced fields on hillsides. This built schools in villages where children’s numbers were declining, paved rivers and hillsides in case of any natural disaster, and laid out roads and tunnels through mountains that led nowhere. Export industries were also imposed on the region in place of the self-sustaining local economy. Tanaka’s most famous scheme was to persuade the state to finance the Jōetsu northern *shinkansen*, which runs through mountains and over rivers from Tokyo to Niigata city, stopping in many tiny towns and small tourist resorts en route. It was the notorious *shinkansen* that went nowhere. Huge new railway stations were constructed to attract people and development, but all they did was enable the population of Niigata to move out even more quickly to the city. After the 1980s Bubble, when the money ran out, the region was left with empty schools and public buildings, failed businesses, a disappearing population, and grass growing over brand-new highways. Meanwhile, the last generation of farmers was getting too old to manage its subsidized fields.

This is the desolate landscape into which Kitagawa has brought his ideas. It is a Japan largely forgotten in the overwhelming focus of its “modern” arts and high culture in the central cities. In Japan, modernity was urbanization, and funding going to the regions to sustain culture was superfluous. When Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi reached the inevitable conclusion and pursued the downsizing administrative reforms of the “Great Heisei Municipal Mergers” in 2005 as a way of reforming the politics of his own party, costs were cut dramatically by ending subsidies and amalgamating infrastructures.<sup>21</sup> Koizumi set out to dramatically reduce the number of municipalities in Japan. This led to a massive downgrading of local governance and a real abandonment of many isolated areas. The big political game during the 2000s was to focus on deregulation within urban economies to enable Japan to embrace global capitalism and to lose as little as possible of the international investment that was being seriously sapped by the spectacular rise of other Asian cities.

When disaster struck in March 2011, this was a disaster, too, for the nation in terms of potential flight of business and investment. Ironically, though, the tsunami has been the best news in a long time for the “iron triangle” and its growth-obsessed reflex of blinkered modernism: particularly for the old construction industry (think: “concrete futures”), as Tohoku has been reconstructed through state-subsidized, cookie-cutter development. The state and its planners ran roughshod over the protests

of many architects and urbanists who said it was time for new thinking about the form of these cities, especially their overwhelmingly old and isolated populations, and the wisdom of coastal sprawl. In the end, though, it has been (cheap) new homes for all—as opposed to prize architect Toyo Ito's much-fanfared hopes<sup>23</sup>—as well as new, even higher, concrete sea defenses that still would have failed in March 2011. With undignified haste, Abe has sought to switch back on the nuclear reactors that have powered the overlit neon-bright cities of Japanese consumerism—despite the supposed Japanese aversion to the nuclear—and the energy politics that embed Japan most firmly in the emprise of American domination.<sup>23</sup>

And then Tokyo got lucky once more, when it was chosen, partly on a sympathy vote, partly because of the economic and political collapse of rival bidders, to host the Olympics in 2020. All of a sudden “Cool Japan” was back up and running again. It was a new chance to plan an earthquake- and radiation-threatened international development bonanza that might hark back to the now almost innocent-seeming heyday of Japanese futurist development in the 1960s, especially, of course, 1964. Whatever happens in 2020, it is clear that the Tokyo Olympics can only mean the further concentration of capital, culture, and power in the central city at the expense of the declining regions, and doubtless the further proliferation of fantasies of “neo-Tokyo” at the expense of “real” Japan.

### *A Back-to-the-Country Alternative?*

The Echigo-Tsumari Art Triennale has since 2000 sought to offer a response to this apparently one-way drift of culture, economy, and politics. Something different needed to be done to create a civil society that was missing in Japan's relations between the state, its cities, and its consumer populations.<sup>24</sup> From Kitagawa's anti-urban philosophy, now sharply defined by the praxis of the six Echigo-Tsumari Art Triennali (this count includes the one taking place in 2015), is a complicated mix of soft traditionalism and sharp political critique.

Echigo-Tsumari is inextricable from romantic rhetoric about the heartland *satoyama*, which equates the in-between landscape of cultivated arable lands between wild, forested mountains and urbanized “civilization” with the soul of Japan. For Kitagawa, *satoyama* symbolizes the unity of the Japanese with the landscape, as well as a lost sense of rural tradition among the populations who now can only experience an alienated modern urban life. Kitagawa wanted to bring these people back to the countryside, to experience an art festival there that could reconnect them with their

regional roots. He frequently states that the quality of this society has to be measured by the smiles of old people cared for by the festival.

At the same time, his philosophy is partly hard-nosed policy orthodoxy: the festival is justified and promoted with the language of rural revitalization, which seeks salvation through new tourist economics, cultural production, and attracting young people and families to move away from cities. In these terms, it suggests an alternate “creative economy” intervention that encourages the rebuilding of social and community relations that have been severed by post-industrial division: *machizukuri* (town and community building), as it is commonly referred to. Part of this, too, is a consensual concern with putting culture into employment as a form of bottom-up social welfare, particularly for isolated, aging populations. Yet Echigo-Tsumari can also be read as a radical politics: angry about a Japanese modernism that seems to equate Japanese modernity entirely with the inequities of international global capitalism, and which bluntly challenges the mainstream fixations of exclusively “urban” contemporary commercial art in Japan. As the curator Raiji Kuroda has eloquently pointed out in recent writings, part of Asian modernity necessarily is a struggle for emancipation from this (Westernized) hegemony: such that the unfinished drive of modernity in Asian contexts can indeed be expressed in the local, the vernacular, the traditional, and the peripheral.<sup>25</sup>

Kitagawa, born in 1946, is an archetypal postwar baby boomer who passed through the crucible of 1960s radicalism. Arriving in Tokyo for university in 1965, he was swept up into student politics as an activist and radical, while pursuing a course of study at Geidai (now Tokyo University of the Arts). He studied Buddhist art, which set him on a career of gallery dealing and brokering art for corporations and publications, which brought him into partnership with urban developers. The business activities appear to have been mostly a means to an end: a passion for curating and taking high art to the people. His first major touring show, on Antoni Gaudí (1978–79), was followed in 1988–90 by the landmark anti-apartheid art exhibition *Apartheid Non!* International Art Festival, which toured to 194 locations around Japan in a huge articulated truck marked by a red balloon.<sup>26</sup>

Some of Kitagawa's early writings develop novel ideas about the social and community relations involved in curating these shows, breaking with an emphasis on locating Japanese contemporary art in a narrative of high (Western) modern and postmodern art. Kitagawa's art theory ends, he says, with Andy Warhol and Joseph Beuys. Beyond these two figures—who represent, respectively, the ironic embrace of market forces and the antidote of social art by and for everyone—the

theory melts away into a different practical understanding of art as a public good embedded in social and political movements. Kitagawa's interest in the vernacular and the traditional makes him a populist, and he is very insistent on how even elite artists coming to Echigo-Tsumari must immerse themselves in the social and political realities of life and work in the region before they begin their residencies. Crucially, too, he has come to reject the typical elite art reflex in Japan of trying to play the "Western" or "global" game by inserting "Japanness" into a global conceptual or commercial discourse. This was a talent well developed, for example, by On Kawara and, later, Takashi Murakami, to establish themselves internationally.

The struggle of the late 1960s led to a comprehensive disillusionment with left-wing politics, which Kitagawa associates with the internal executions of Rengo Sekigun (United Red Army) members in 1972, at a time when radical politics created a cult-like fanaticism. From this, Kitagawa learned an emphasis on diversity and pluralism in his organizational practices, at least in theory. The second key element, common to others working in the impossible cultural "void" of the 1980s Bubble, was the necessary cultivation of links with an enlightened segment of corporate Japan, in order for any kind of progressive cultural agenda to develop. His involvement in the development of architect Fumihiko Maki's Hillside Terrace in Daikanyama from the early 1980s on provided a base for Art Front Gallery. It was part of the parallel invention, for the first time, of a genuine commercial contemporary art scene in Japan, with initiatives such as the Seibu Sezon Museum, the rise of galleries such as Fuji TV and Touko, and the opening, with commercial sponsorship, of the influential art space Sagachō.<sup>27</sup>

Kitagawa retained his radicalism, however, in terms of his relation to the mainstream art world. Ever since he was young, he explains, he wanted to destroy the existing art system. This is a familiar refrain among nearly all the pioneers of the Japanese contemporary art world in the postwar era. The crucial aspect to note in many of the contemporary art initiatives of the 1980s was the lack of support—indeed, total lack of interest—from the government. Kitagawa's anti-apartheid commitment, however, reflected the liberal and cosmopolitan mood of 1980s internationalism in Japan, which was predominant in the contemporary art of that period, such as in the work of the Kyoto performance group Dumb Type, and emerging pop art figures such as Shinro Ohtake and Yukinori Yanagi.<sup>28</sup> Indeed, Kitagawa and Art Front Gallery was the young Yanagi's first representation, an influence that has been visible in his later large-scale, land- and community-based works.<sup>29</sup> A more typical response to the "void" of the 1980s was the macabre visions

of Arata Isozaki's postmodern turn against metabolism: ruining his own Tsukuba development, or re-ruining Hiroshima.<sup>30</sup> Elements of Isozaki's philosophy of the "incubated cities" underlining the ruins latent in all modern development can be read into Kitagawa's subsequent turn away from the city to embrace the quieter ruins of the Japanese countryside. Isozaki's later Artpolis projects in Kumamoto, commissioning community-oriented architecture as a tool of urban regeneration, were also forerunners of Echigo-Tsumari in certain respects, as Lynne Breslin discusses in this volume.<sup>31</sup>

With his track record of touring shows, as well as the public events at Daikanyama, Kitagawa was selected in the early 1990s to direct the huge and well-funded Faref Tachikawa public art project, which, when it opened in 1994, became a defining step in the development of a new mode of curating public works, as well as in the uses of culture to sustain urban development.<sup>32</sup> The remote western suburb of Tokyo had housed an American military base, which returned large areas of open space to the city when it was closed. A new city complex of offices and shops was constructed on part of the site, but it was deemed to need branding in terms of an innovative cultural image. Kitagawa followed his instincts and insisted on commissioning artists to create work in-situ and working with officials and locals to make sure these artists could use the everyday materials of street furniture and city utilities as part of their work. As Kitagawa notes in the art guide to the site: "Artists discovered urban functions such as exterior walls, parking ramp walls, lighting, bollards, and tree grates, and turned them into artworks, as if birds had looked for places to build a nest."<sup>33</sup> Kitagawa's methods and idealism, here, can be contrasted with the more conventional public art initiatives of Fumio Nanjo, a much more mainstream political and corporate operator with a background in finance, who had worked for the Japan Foundation and had already curated some of the most important international shows of Japanese art of that era.<sup>34</sup>

Faref Tachikawa was still relatively conventional in its selection of international artists and the tendency for some works to simply be monumental sculptures in incongruous sites. It signaled, however, new possibilities for the notion of a public art project, in particular the creation of new urban spaces for art.<sup>35</sup> Kitagawa's innovations here reflected and built upon a wider artistic movement in which he was central. Notably, there are many parallels with Shingo Yamano, the current director of Yokohama's remarkable community art project, the Koganecho Bazaar.<sup>36</sup> From a similar postwar generation, Yamano was a formalist artist who had been involved with the radical art school Bigakko in Tokyo.<sup>37</sup> Frustrated by the conservative commercial

art scene in 1970s Tokyo, he set up base in Fukuoka, where from the early 1980s on he began to organize new forms of public art, carving out radical art spaces in a conservative and skeptical city.<sup>31</sup> This led to the Museum City Project, in which the young Raiji Kuroda was a co-curator: a series of art events which, from 1990 until 2002, established a paradigm for street-based art and commercial funding (in the absence of much government support) before similar initiatives had been attempted in Tokyo, and approximately contemporaneous with the parallel organizational innovations of the Young British Artists' movement in London.<sup>32</sup>

Kitagawa and Yamano became linked up during the 1980s in connection with the early career of Tadashi Kawamata, the artist from Japan most associated with developing the notion of the "art project" outside conventional museum spaces.<sup>33</sup> Yamano also helped stage Kitagawa's Apartheid Non! tour in Fukuoka. Kawamata is renowned internationally today for his outdoor wooden architectural constructions that "grow" on the outsides of public buildings, or which create new public spaces and meeting places out of improvised and often discarded materials, usually with the complicated involvement of local communities and public/private networks.<sup>34</sup> His articulate conceptual reflections on the two possibilities of the art project—of the work being the "live" documentation of work in progress, and the work being the unique product only possible because of the in-situ materials, personnel, and conditions that he happens to find at the site—are hugely influential sources of ideas feeding into the later Echigo-Tsumari projects, in which he has taken a prominent part.<sup>35</sup> In Fukuoka, in 1983, Yamano created for the young Kawamata one of his earliest platforms for an interior installation work (*Otemon, Wada-so*) by negotiating access to an empty apartment in a commercial building that was about to be knocked down in the name of early-Bubble era development. Kitagawa, meanwhile, the next year curated Kawamata's controversial *Under Construction* at Daikanyama Hillside Terrace, a large, open, building site improvisation around the location, which was forced to close after two weeks because of public outrage at the "mess" (like a building site) it created for local businesses and shops.

These connections lay the foundations for the next generation of art organizers, several of whom are key players in the current contemporary art scene in Japan. A somewhat younger art producer, the present director of BankART in Yokohama, Osamu Ikeda, was also involved in the *Under Construction* project as part of the radical architectural group PH Studio, later was involved in remodeling the articulated truck used in the Apartheid Non! touring exhibition, and worked as a curator for Kitagawa's Hillside Gallery at Daikanyama. Ikeda has thus worked

closely with Kitagawa, Yamano, and Kawamata over the years—he cites Kitagawa and Kawamata, along with the architect Hiroshi Hara, as the three "masters" who taught him—and BankART is today one of the most important city-funded public art centers in Japan.<sup>36</sup> BankART also runs an artist residency site in a remote part of Echigo-Tsumari, and Ikeda is often mentioned as a possible successor to Kitagawa at Echigo-Tsumari or Setouchi.

Ikeda has continued to work with Kawamata over the years, and in *Expand BankART* (2012–13) staged an enormous installation work by Kawamata involving the whole waterside building in Yokohama. While they share much of the same conceptual philosophy about art projects and art in the community, there is a distinction between the radical idealism of the older Kitagawa and Yamano, and the rather more pragmatist Kawamata and Ikeda. Kawamata takes pains to note his political distance from the older pair, who are the last (or youngest) of the baby-boomer student radicals who experienced the end of the 1960s and early 1970s as students.<sup>37</sup> Born in 1953, Kawamata is too young to have engaged with those formative moments very directly (notably 1968, and then the year of ANPO in 1970). To this list of interconnected figures, we can add Tokyo University of the Arts professor Toyomi Hoshina, who was an early partner of Kawamata at Geidai, and is the creative force behind many of the Ueno-based public art initiatives of the last couple of decades. And then there is Ikeda's direct counterpart in Tokyo, Masato Nakamura, director of 3331 Arts Chiyoda, who works in Hoshina's Oil Painting department at Geidai. Since his break with his early partner, Takashi Murakami, Nakamura has gone on to become the most influential public art organizer in the city: first with his insurgent street-art events in the early 1990s (Gimburart and Shinjuku Boys Art), then the neighborhood collaborations of Akihabara TV (1999) and Command N (in Kanda), then the enormous art center project 3331 Arts Chiyoda in an abandoned middle school, and most recently the ongoing TransArt projects utilizing unused corporate buildings in the city.<sup>38</sup> With the partnership of Junya Yamaide and Tadashi Serizawa running similar programs in Beppu in the south, Yukinori Yanagi and his projects in Seto, and the activities of two frequent associates of Nakamura's 3331 Arts Chiyoda, Katsuhiko Hibino (whom I discuss below) and Hiroshi Fuji (like Yanagi, a Kyushu-born social artist, now director of the Towada Art Center), this constellation of figures can be viewed as a who's who of social and community art pioneers in Japan, all circling around Kitagawa, who together lie behind most of the innovations seen in the country in the organization of this mode of art event.<sup>39</sup>

As a result of the intense exposure he received with Faret Tachikawa, Kitagawa was invited in 1995 by the Niigata municipality of Tokamachi to consider the possibilities of new kind of revitalization project in this remote, declining region. As he was born in Niigata, the place held certain emotional possibilities but also presented a totally different kind of environment from the urban art projects he had been hitherto involved in, with its run-down towns, declining villages, and the small city facing further infrastructural shrinkage with the Heisei municipal mergers. Kitagawa's practical conversion to the idea of rural art might be dated here, although certainly his interests in regional traditionalism go much further back. Other sources may include one particular feature of post-1960s radical art in Japan: rural theater and performance art communes, such as Tadashi Suzuki's Togamura company in Toyama (from 1976 on), or Min Tanaka's famous *butoh* school (Body Weather Farm) in Yamanashi from the late 1980s on.<sup>47</sup> The latter example also became a site in which artists would be invited to do in-situ work, although it had more the ambience of a remote sect than a rural revitalization project.

An interesting parallel can be drawn between these innovations and the later Echigo-Tsumari, particularly as it has gone on to embrace performance as very central to its mission. Kitagawa, though, has surely gone much further in seeking to win over locals as participants and eventually also co-owners of the art projects sited in their villages. Initially there was zero obvious interest or support among the wider public—which is mostly elderly and very conservative—for the idea of contemporary art as a tool for regional development on their doorsteps. The Heisei mergers, first proposed in 1995, did provide a kind of opportunity, though, in that they enabled the large-scale imagination of a new kind of art festival that, with some central support, might embrace the whole region, with all of its distinct localities and landscapes. The somewhat strangely named "Art Necklace Project"—as Kitagawa called his proposals—can be understood as a way of picturing the ring-like constellation of localities centered on Tokamachi, as well as the small town where Echigo-Tsumari would establish its base, Matsudai, out of which different and distinctive art projects, like jewels, would emerge. And, with poetic resonance, running through the heart of this region was the great northern river itself, the Shinano, which had brought life to the area but had been battered and tamed by public construction works.

In the five hard years it took to get the first edition of Echigo-Tsumari off the ground, Kitagawa faced opposition at every turn from local politicians and the general public. Very few villages were willing to be involved in the initial events planned, and Kitagawa recalls the anguish of many young volunteers who were literally chased

away from houses they were visiting as they tried to persuade the locals of their good intentions. As he also recounts, basic funding for the first event was not approved until the last minute. Kitagawa's work as a tireless advocate and persuader, part radical visionary, part suited CEO, needs to be interpreted and evaluated perhaps in the light of the work of his younger peers in art organization such as Nakamura and Yamaide, or indeed other artists with heavily organizational modes of work, such as Kawamata and Yanagi. In all of these cases, trends in international art theory that now centrally consider the crossover potential of curation-as-art, or art and architecture as convergent forms of organizational and/or spatial practices, would have no trouble recognizing the work of these artistic figures as falling within the current avant-garde of much recent international contemporary art.<sup>48</sup> Nakamura, for example, is still emphatically an artist, even though his artwork consists for the most part in the complex negotiations required to stage his curated public art events: the extraordinary struggles and patient persuasions needed in Japan to get public officials, the police, local association leaders, corporations, business entrepreneurs, residents, and so on, all to assent to and sometimes participate in such events.

Yet, excepting Kawamata, none of the artists or curators listed above has ever received this kind of recognition internationally, essentially because of a wider ignorance about Japanese contemporary art since the 1990s. By the same token, Kitagawa's work is worthy of assessment as a form of spectacular logistical art-as-curation, although he himself is very clear in not wishing to claim the status of artist. But certainly he has pioneered organizational possibilities in Japan that others have followed and elaborated as artists. Echigo-Tsumari, with its three hundred square miles, more than two hundred works, more than two hundred locations, and countless volunteers, participants, and (even) unwilling bystanders, can in these terms count as the pioneering epitome of what is becoming Kitagawa's most important Japanese and international art legacy: a case study in what might be called "the art of the possible." A good indicator of this is the large number of social and relational artists involved regularly at Echigo-Tsumari—for example Tsuyoshi Ozawa, who has provided a series of characteristic works developed out of local amenities—as well as many architects, particularly those whose work has increasingly involved the cultivation of socially embedded "spatial practices," for example, units that respond to public involvement and vernacular forms, such as Atelier Bow-Wow and MIKAN.

The influential Japanese art critic and curator Yusuke Nakahara was one of the first to recognize the paradigm shift in contemporary art heralded by Echigo-Tsumari. In his influential essays for the early triennial catalogues, as well as noting how Echigo-





TOP: Aerial view of 3331 Arts Chiyoda, converted Renzei Junior High School, near Akihabara. Courtesy of 3331 Arts Chiyoda.  
 BOTTOM: Asia Photography and Image Center, former Miyokoyama Primary School, Echigo-Tsumari (2012). Photo by author.

Tsumari opens up new possibilities for a largely unexplored idea of non-urban art (and—hence as Kuroda’s argument suggests—a potentially non-urban modernity), he stresses already the potentials for a “reconsideration of the formats for what we describe as art exhibitions” as well as the potentials for “change not only among the residents of the region but also among the participating artists themselves.”<sup>49</sup> This paradigm change would become even more significant as the emphasis of artworks at the triennale shifted from made-in-situ objects to the re-utilization of empty and abandoned houses, schools, and other sites.<sup>50</sup>

Kitagawa’s sober assessment in his closing essay in this volume describes some of the difficulties in organizing the early editions, particularly the first. The resistance of villagers to cooperating with the sometimes-intrusive plans, and hard challenges about the money spent on works, opened up the organization to criticism that it was all top-down art parachuted in from the city with little respect or sensitivity to the locality. Critics have also pointed out that the environmentally concerned Echigo-Tsumari received funding from a prefecture, Niigata, that had benefited from the opening of the Kashiwazaki-Kariwa nuclear reactor site. This lies only about thirty miles from parts of the triennale site. Kitagawa denies any connection.

In retrospect, some of the monumental-style works have not worn so well. The permanent open-air installations of earlier editions were often the typical plastic or steel works so familiar from global art fashions of the 1990s. These toxic monuments sit incongruously in their beautiful surroundings, and over the years have cost a fortune to maintain. But criticisms of the inefficiency of the event in terms of travel and logistics miss one of the key defining points of Kitagawa’s philosophy: that the art at Echigo-Tsumari can only be consumed slowly, often with difficulty (both physically and practically), and often with many detours and deviations along the route, such as chatting with locals or trying out regional food and resting points. These are the everyday pleasures en route to a new connection with the landscape and its population, even if visitors fail to see all or much of the art. “Slow art” is, he asserts, the antidote to the “sickness” engendered by the fast consumer life of the city.

Already in the first events, as Nakahara has pointed out, there were innovations that have gone on to be signature elements of the triennale as a philosophy and practice. Notably, there are works of land art that take their meaning from their dialogue with the landscape or the locals with whom the work had to be painstakingly negotiated. And, after Kitagawa began to successfully negotiate permission, the opening up of abandoned *akiya* (empty houses) and, in some cases, entire abandoned villages gave a new purpose to the art installations. Artists began to use the houses

less simply as alternate “white cubes” and more as sites in which the artwork itself becomes part of a renovation and rehabilitation of a dormant dwelling—or perhaps an entire community. Empty schools, meanwhile, are hugely emblematic, as Kitagawa says, because they are sites that remain central to communities beyond their use as places to educate children, and because there is no more stark emblem of the waste involved in past public works projects: building plans that showered construction businesses with contracts when there was literally no future for these communities because children were not being born in sufficient numbers.

Echigo-Tsumari faced a funding crisis at the end of the 2006 edition, but by then a new key figure, Soichiro Fukutake, had become involved. Fukutake sees himself also as a pioneer of social and community art because of his long investment in the Naoshima art site, which has become internationally famous and is much better documented in the English-language literature than Echigo-Tsumari.<sup>54</sup> As with all of the statements made by the now-senior art pioneers about the exact sources and lineage of their ideas, Fukutake’s later pronouncements about his own philosophy and engagements benefit from hindsight and a change in the economic mood of the times, something that has enabled observers to recognize them as part of a wider national or even global zeitgeist.<sup>55</sup> As CEO of the huge Benesse corporation, Fukutake (born in 1945) was a multimillionaire and notable art collector. His return at age forty to live in his native region, and the renewed connection this gave him with islands of the Inland Sea, convinced him that he needed to think differently about economy and culture.<sup>56</sup> He felt he should make some kind of investment in the locality. Although a beautiful and legendary part of Japan, the Inland Sea between Kyushu and Kansai has been largely despoiled by industrial development and heavy shipping, with some islands facing a combination of environmental damage and population extinction. His work in Naoshima, the first of the art islands of Setouchi developed by Fukutake, was initially motivated by a fairly straightforward idea of tourism-led revitalization. By the beginning of the 1990s, Fukutake was amassing a serious collection of contemporary art to add to his Claude Monet collection, building a museum on Naoshima to house it. He was particularly inspired by the young Kysuhu artist Yukinori Yanagi, of whom he became a significant patron. The site was later complemented by Tadao Ando’s stunning Chichu Museum, as well as the innovative art house projects in the nearby village of Honmura, in which artists and architects have built a quite extraordinary series of permanent installations. Other sites have been added on the island since.

The experience of Naoshima at times has the feel of a rich man’s playground, like the secret base of a James Bond villain, with its uniformed attendants and immaculately tended privatized spaces. But in the art houses, the involvement of site-specific logic and local participants becomes more apparent. In particular, Fukutake’s eventual support of Yanagi’s vastly ambitious project on Inujima (which dates back to 1994)—to convert the whole despoiled island into a massive art project—engaged Fukutake in an explicitly postindustrial, post-growth mission in Setouchi. Yanagi envisaged Inujima, with its dying *genkai shiraku* (a village with a population below the limit of sustainability) and its massive abandoned copper factory, as a kind of Gesamtkunstwerk that could reflect on the demise of modernization in Japan.<sup>57</sup> With Fukutake’s funding (approved in 2001) and the name Seirenscho (Refinery), he would eventually stage a series of installations of Fukutake’s memorabilia of the extreme nationalist novelist Yukio Mishima in a spectacular, environmentally sustainable museum designed by the young architect Hiroshi Sambuichi, which opened in 2008.

From this point on, much of Fukutake’s activities have been devoted to using art to help restore and protect the Seto Islands and their populations. Here, his mission clearly dovetails with Kitagawa’s investment into Niigata; once Fukutake discovered Echigo-Tsumari in 2003, he became a staunch supporter and eventually co-partner in the event. Inspired by Kitagawa, who was first brought in as Acting Director of the Chichu Museum, there was an expansion of the ideas for the island projects into a full-blown festival: the Setouchi Art Festival, which had its first iteration in 2010.<sup>58</sup> Using the exact same model as Echigo-Tsumari, and sharing its environmental and rural reinvestment ideals, it took place in a much more tourist-friendly location and became a stunning surprise success. Nearly one million visitors crammed local boats and buses during the sweltering summer and fall months to visit the fabled “art islands.”

Kitagawa’s central role in Setouchi ensures that both events effectively share the same philosophy. Its originality can be illustrated briefly by two impressive examples of social and community art from the festivals, one from Setouchi, one from Echigo-Tsumari. The well-established Berlin-based artist Chiharu Shiota, who was selected for the Japanese Pavilion at the Venice Biennale in 2015, has been an important participant in both events. At Setouchi, there is her work *Distant Memory* (2010) on Teshima, a beautiful mid-size island to the east of Naoshima. Teshima was one of the worst examples of poisonous industrial dumping and population decline, and has been a central concern of Fukutake after his initial attempts to clean up the damage



Top: Chiharu Shimizu, *Distant Memory*, house and installation on Teshima Island, Setouchi (2010–ongoing). Photo by author.  
 Bottom: Katsuhiko Hibino and students, *Asatte* (Day After Tomorrow Newspaper Cultural Department),  
 Former Azamihara Primary School, Echigo-Tsumari (2012). Photo by author.

on Naoshima. Shiota, a widely recognized installation artist who has mostly worked in a museum and art-school context, asked Kitagawa how she could ever work on this remote island. He told her that to build her installation she should smile a lot and talk to locals, and ask them what to do and how to do it, something that transformed her own practice and some of the reluctant villagers around her.<sup>36</sup> The resultant work is a converted rice house and former social hall, in which Shiota built a time tunnel made out of collected windows from empty houses around the Seto Island sea, and which connects a rice field at the back to a view (out front with the sea behind) of an old house in which the first child in seventy years was born on the island. It is one remote work in the sometimes impossible “slow art” treasure hunt across the islands at Setouchi, as in the rice fields and mountains of Niigata at Echigo-Tsumari.

Some of the bigger-scale projects, meanwhile, such as Katsuhiko Hibino’s *Asatte* (The Day After Tomorrow) at Echigo-Tsumari, echo the many other school conversions that have become a feature of both events. In the very remote village of Azamihara, the former school and other buildings have become the long-term residency for very young students who make a newspaper daily about the not-so-trivial lives of the old people in the village, articulating Hibino’s ideas about spreading the seeds of the future throughout Japan. Part of Kitagawa’s philosophy thus taps into the resources of what might be called Japan’s “creative surplus”:<sup>37</sup> the masses of redundant art and design school wannabe creatives (*kuriietai*) who come from the city to join the festival as volunteer *kobebi* (little snakes) and in Setouchi as *koebi* (little shrimps). Many projects explicitly connect this “lost generation” with the other “surplus” population of modern Japan they would never normally meet: the aging villagers in remote locations.

For Kitagawa, the success of Setouchi after the more modest (albeit growing) numbers posted by Echigo-Tsumari Triennale over the years might be seen as a double-edged success. Setouchi has been quite well visited and documented by the royalty of global art, and now clearly overshadows the festival that really gave it its central ideas and model. Fukutake has been a sponsor since 2006 of Echigo-Tsumari but he has concentrated more of his legacy on the Inland Sea. It is said that his personal fortune is so large that his endowment could finance Setouchi festivals every three years for the next one hundred.<sup>38</sup> The second Setouchi Art Festival in 2013, which still involved Fram Kitagawa’s organization in a management role, expanded its ambitions, and took place in three installments over one hundred days through the year. Forced to diversify its sponsors since 2006, Echigo-Tsumari has faced a more uncertain future, particularly in 2012 and 2015. And, as so often is the case with large-

scale movements in Japan driven by charismatic individuals, Kitagawa's very personal hand in the festival also means it is hard to imagine how it can continue beyond his own intensely personalized involvement.

### *Post-3.11 Perceptions*

Without a doubt, there has been a remarkable change in mood within Japanese contemporary art as a result of the triple March 2011 disasters (earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear reactor meltdown).<sup>59</sup> Partly to do also with the opening up of arts funding to explicitly put culture to use in the post-disaster period, many artists have shifted their agenda to embrace social and community-related practices that, in some respects, fit with the philosophy that Echigo-Tsumari has always embodied. There is certainly a danger that the ensuing rush of research and publications on this topic will start to frame the art coming out of Japan as if it has gone through this sea change only after 2011.

The reality is, of course, that the lineage of Kitagawa and his associates as pioneers goes back to the origins of social and site-specific art projects of the 1980s. For sure, too, the watershed of the disasters of 1995 was important: the moment at which many NPO-related artistic initiatives got going, largely out of the wider frustration felt in society at the poor governmental responses to the Kobe earthquake. Moreover, the broad social disasters implicit in the trends in social polarization and rapid rural population decline are, in a sense, an even deeper source of artistic concern. Rather than seeing 2011 as a turning point in Japanese art after the vacuity of the "Cool Japan" era, then, it is better to read the current period as a time finally ripe for an understanding of Echigo-Tsumari as a critical expression of the Japanese "post-growth" condition, which effectively dates back to the end of the Bubble, in 1990.

For sure, the international art world was interested in other things during the heyday of Murakami and Nara, and Echigo-Tsumari has not always leveraged very wisely the big-name foreign artists and curators who have been expensively brought in to give the event more international credibility. Other problems dog the idealism of Setouchi and Echigo-Tsumari. One is the obvious tension between social and community goals and the implicit and sometimes explicit gentrification that occurs as visiting tourist populations effectively displace and "repopulate" the disappearing villages and villagers in beautiful remote rural locations.<sup>60</sup> Certainly there have been significant aspects of counter-urbanization visible in some parts of Echigo-Tsumari, but this on the whole appears to be a very sensitive and engaged younger population,

opting to try to make a new life with and among the older residents.<sup>61</sup> Criticisms of heavy-handed management, misunderstandings, and unhappy locals have been reported in some studies about the on-the-ground realities of Echigo-Tsumari.<sup>62</sup> It is also often pointed out that Kitagawa's idealism about his pluralist organization and its inclusive philosophy is belied sometimes by the intense exploitation of the young workers as volunteers and the strict, almost autocratic hierarchy of the organization. Kitagawa certainly expects all of his organization to be as committed and engaged as he is, and orders are dispatched in the conventional Japanese corporate style, from top to bottom. Meanwhile, most of the projects in Echigo-Tsumari need to be judged on a case-by-case basis in terms of their involvement with, and responsiveness to, local populations. The very positive examples here cited by Kitagawa could be contrasted with others. In the end, though, it can hardly be surprising to find that public art management in Japan is a largely macho business. From Kitagawa is a tough political and financial operator, and the contradictions in his philosophy are probably part of the inevitable price of making the vision work.

Perhaps a more substantive issue is the growing critique among art critics of the "sociological turn" in Japanese contemporary art, for which Kitagawa and Echigo-Tsumari certainly are now the dominant paradigm. These issues evoke classical theoretical concerns about any art that may get subsumed in its social or political function, as opposed to locating its value in autonomous aesthetics and art history.<sup>63</sup> In some recent interventions led by the young art critic Futoshi Hoshino, there has been a concerted attempt to attack the overwhelming dominance of social and political criteria in the exhibitions and debates about art and architecture since 3.11, invoking a series of points made by Claire Bishop, initially against proponents of "relational aesthetics" in contemporary global art, notably Nicolas Bourriaud and Grant Kester.<sup>64</sup> There is always a danger that standards of aesthetic quality and independence get sacrificed in artworks that are seen to be involved in engineering some better community. Moreover, there is a distinct whiff of political co-optation about so many of the social and community art projects embraced as part of community rebuilding since the disasters. What is the warm glowing feeling of *kizuna* (community ties) that they are supposed to evoke but a fake nationalist discourse of unity to cover up sharp social divisions and conflicts produced by the same government and its neglect of marginal populations? And does not the social and community return to roots also sound a lot like a new *sakoku* (a national closure to the outside world as before 1853) descending over Japan as it has withdrawn into a post-3.11 defensiveness?

These criticisms echo fairly explicitly those articulated by Bishop in her writings. Drawing on the writings of the French philosopher Jacques Rancière, she has sought to reassert the need for an independent modernist critique in artwork. Squarely rejecting the “sociological” justification for art’s significance, and the illusion of replacing art objects with amorphous social processes that seem like social work, she might well read Kitagawa’s work at Echigo-Tsumari (if she were aware of it) as a bad example of the naïve “community art” she attacks elsewhere: such as in 1970s Britain, for example, when artists did lots of face painting with kids or provided free meals to pensioners. The danger is that artists end up being a kind of replacement welfare state for “neo-liberal” governmental agencies keen to withdraw their support of the most vulnerable sectors of society. This point has also been made specifically in Japan by some critics of the recent “social turn.”<sup>66</sup>

One can certainly question whether many of the elite art-world heroes feted by Bourriaud and further canonized by Kester and other anthologies of global social and relational art really do escape these criticisms. Their almost complete lack of coverage of Japanese artists and art organizers who, as we have seen, have been widely active in this area since the 1980s, is a glaring omission. But in terms of the actual criteria set up by Kester to pinpoint the originality and power of certain types of socially engaged collaborative art practices, the large-scale and rather unique ambition of the Echigo-Tsumari art project does fulfill much of what he emphasizes.<sup>66</sup>

Rejecting the modernist notion of the all-seeing artist who creates art as a form of rupture and critique, Kester argues that such projects prioritize five things: locality and duration; the downplaying of artistic authorship; conciliatory strategies and relationships with specific communities; the process of collaboration as an artistic end in itself; and novel organizational forms similar to NPOs and social movements. Much of what is being done in Echigo-Tsumari and Setouchi clearly fits these criteria.<sup>67</sup> While the art objects seen in rural festivals such as Echigo-Tsumari do vary wildly from the sublime to the kitsch, and from the charmingly vernacular to the incongruously toxic, where projects have become intrinsically engaged and involved local populations integrally, a new kind of social art has emerged. The art effectively lies in the new social relations that are created, not (really) the objects or final products that are ostensibly the occasion of these interactions. What I hope to have illustrated is how well these projects tap into the demographic and social drama of post-growth Japan in decline: the spectacular backdrop of chronically aging populations and masses of redundant, overeducated youth.<sup>68</sup>

To defend Kitagawa against some of the suspicions of the over-sociologization of

art, then, we need to read Echigo-Tsumari against some of his own positions. Clearly the aesthetic quality of the work matters, and, looking through past catalogues, one can sometimes question whether too many of the domestic artists involved were not indeed engaging in the kind of the feel-good art-as-social-work that Bishop criticizes. The weaknesses of some works become less significant, however, when we try to conceive of the “big field” of Echigo-Tsumari as precisely that: a huge regional artwork in itself, in which Kitagawa’s organizational and curatorial practice is the central component. That is, thinking of the triennale as akin to how Yukinori Yanagi apparently conceived the Inujima island project: as a Gesamtkunstwerk involving the villagers, the decaying buildings, and the desolate post-industrial or agrarian landscapes. On this scale, Echigo-Tsumari can be viewed globally as a unique, ongoing experiment in relational and community art, in which the art organization itself takes on a significant social welfare role in “post-political” spaces of society in which government has largely abdicated responsibility.<sup>69</sup> Here, the oft-quoted policy ideal of rural revitalization and community building—*machizukuri* (literally, “making a town”)—may be thought of in a broader, metaphorical sense as the rebuilding of society through the creation of new social relations and public spaces from the distinct populations brought together by the art festival. While much can be said critically in theory about this kind of intervention, the spectacular ambition and achievements of Echigo-Tsumari over the past two decades may also silence such criticism when viewed up close. From Kitagawa’s guide to the most important works of the triennale and the key concepts of his movement can then stand as a legacy of truly global importance.

Echigo-Tsumari’s significance is therefore much more than just a commentary on the fate of Japan. In the near past, Japan’s urbanization represented the future. Art and culture were hitched to this growth-driven development, whether in underwriting the building of big new urban monuments or in aiding inner-city renewal. In post-Bubble, post-growth, post-disaster Japan, that future may be over. Lessons are slowly being learned. But rampant urbanization still rules in many parts of the planet. In America, the dominance of urban life over rural alternatives is absolute. This will go on as long as there are fresh fields and deserts on which to build new housing tracts, and still more oil to put in the tank. In Asia, and China in particular, the frenzy of overdevelopment seems unstoppable.<sup>70</sup> Europe faces many of the same problems that are felt in Japan today. Someday, all these places will sober up. When they do, they may look again at Japan’s recent experiences for inspiration. Even before the disasters of March 2011, with its post-Bubble gloom and shocking urban-rural divides, Japan



faced urgent issues in managing its own decline and the social divisions it heralded. Japan in the 1990s and 2000s may, in other words, be everyone's future tomorrow. It is, for sure, not a happy prospect. The Echigo-Tsumari Art Triennale and its cousin event in Setouchi help visitors think about a different kind of future. It is a future a million miles from the futurist vision Japan gave to the world at the Osaka Expo in 1970. And it is such a long way from the "Cool Japan" experience given to tourists at Roppongi Hills on a clear night in neo-Tokyo.

Top: Aerial view of Inujima Art Project Seirensho (2008). Copper refinery site conversion and museum by Yukioori Yanagi with architect Hiroshi Sambuichi, Inujima Island, Setouchi. Photo by Ryoji Inamiyama. Courtesy of Yukioori Yanagi and Miyake Fine Art.

Bottom: View from roof top of Mori Tower, Roppongi Hills at night. Photo by author.

- 01 This essay extends on the chapter about Fram Kitagawa in my book *Before and After Superflat: A Short History of Japanese Contemporary Art 1990–2017* (Blue Kingfisher / DAP 2022), 174–84. It reflects a substantial body of work conducted in collaboration with the architect and urban theorist Julian Worrall of the University of Adelaide toward a book we are planning on social and relational art and architecture in “post-growth” Japan since 1990. I would like to acknowledge especially the help of Rei Maeda and Miwa Worrall of Art Front Gallery in the research for this article, as well as many discussions with Julian, the artist James Jack, and the independent curator Eiko Honda.
- 02 The policy is usually traced to the inspiration of an American journalist writing about how Japan might replace its reliance on ailing manufacturing and financial sectors by turning to its pop culture and high-tech industries: Douglas McGray, “Japan’s Goes National Cool,” *Foreign Policy* (May–June 2002): 44–54.
- 03 This is the central concept of *Before and After Superflat*. For example, see Takashi Murakami, *Superflat, Los Angeles MOCA* (2001) and *Little Boy: The Art of Japan’s Exploding Sub Culture*, Japan Society, New York, exhibition and catalogue (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003); and Yoshitomo Nara, *Niboshi’s Pool*, exhibition and catalogue, eds. Malissa Chiu and Miwako Teruya, Asia Society Museum (New York: Abrams, 2010).
- 04 Minoru Mori speaks proudly of the “artelligent city” in “Greetings from Roppongi Hills: The Cultural Heart of Tokyo,” in Fumio Nanjo et al., *Art, Design and the City: Public Art Project 2* (Tokyo: Rikuyoshia, 2004), 6–7.
- 05 Interviews with Fram Kitagawa, June 22, 2009, and September 30, 2014.
- 06 Fumio Nanjo, “Urban Strategies, Art Strategies,” in Fumio Nanjo, *Art, Design and the City*, 166–71.
- 07 As elaborated by Charles Landry, *The Creative City: A Toolkit for Urban Innovators* (London: Comedia, 2000) and Richard Florida, *Cities and the Creative Class* (New York: Routledge, 2005).
- 08 See *Creative City Yokohama: From the Past Into the Future* (Yokohama, Japan: BankART 1929: 2009) and Mino Yutaka et al., *Encounters in the 21st Century: Polyphony—Emerging Resonances* (Kanazawa, Japan: 21st Century Museum of Contemporary Art / Tankosha, 2004).
- 09 Paul Waley, “Tokyo-as-World-City: Reassessing the Role of Capital and the State in Urban Restructuring,” *Urban Studies* 44, no. 8 (July 2007): 1467–90 and Julian Worrall and Erez Golani Solomon, *21st Century Tokyo: A Guide to Contemporary Architecture* (Tokyo: Kodansha, 2010).
- 10 Roman Adrian Cybriwsky, *Roppongi Crossing: The Demise of a Tokyo Nightclub District and the Reshaping of a Global City* (Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 2010).
- 11 A typical feature of the “global city”: see for example Saskia Sassen, *The Global City* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991).
- 12 Jennifer Robertson, “It Takes a Village: Internationalization and Nostalgia in Postwar Japan,” in Stephen Vlastos, ed., *Mirror of Modernity: Invented Traditions of Modern Japan* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1998), 110–31.
- 13 Marilyn Ivy, *Discourses of the Vanishing: Modernity’s Phantoms, Japan* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1995).
- 14 Peter Matanle and Anthony Rauschi, with the Shrinking Regions Research Group, *Japan’s Shrinking Regions in the Twenty-First Century* (Amherst, NY: Cambria Press, 2011).
- 15 Asato Saito, “The Politics of ‘Masification’ in Tokyo: The Causes and Consequences of Urban Re-Sealing,” paper presented at International Sociological Association RC21 conference, Berlin, August 29–31, 2013.
- 16 The founder of metabolism, Kenzō Tange, himself produced or oversaw several influential manifestos that mapped out the future of a roally urbanized Japan in the twenty-first century. For example, *A Plan for Tokyo* (1960), *Metabolism 1960: The Proposal for a New urbanism, presented at the World Design Conference* (1960), his “Tokaido Megalopolis” theory (1964), and *Japan of the 21st Century: A Future Vision of the National Land* (1973). These utopian models of society are discussed by Hajime Yatsuka, “The Metabolism Nexus’ Role in Overcoming Modernity,” in *Metabolism: The City of the Future. Dreams and Visions of Reconstruction in Postwar and Present-Day Japan* (Tokyo: Mori Art Museum, 2011). The ideas were influential for the powerful LDP politician (and prime minister) Kakuei Tanaka, discussed later in the text, who published his own plan in *Remodelling the Japanese Archipelago* (1972).
- 17 Rem Koolhaas and Hans Ulrich Obrist, *Project Japan: Metabolism Talks*, ed. Kayoko Ota (Cologne: Taschen, 2011).
- 18 See Midori Yoshimoro, ed., “Expo ’70 and Japanese Art: Distant Voices,” a special edition of *Journal of Japanese Culture and Society* 23 (December 2011).
- 19 For instance *Metabolism: The City of the Future*.
- 20 Chalmers Johnson, *Mitsi and the Japanese Miracle: The Growth of Industrial Policy 1925–1975* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 1982).
- 21 Anthony Rauschi, “The Helix Municipal Mergers: Regional Sustainability or National Inequality?” in Stephanie Assmann, ed., *Sustainability in Post-Growth Rural Japan: Challenges and Opportunities* (London: Routledge, 2015).
- 22 I here refer to Toyo Ito’s Venice Architectural Biennale prizewinning show of 2012 at the Japanese Pavilion, which imagined enlightened spatial and architectural responses to the Fukushima disaster: Toyo Ito, Kazuhiko Inui, Akihisa Hirao, and Narya Hatakeyama, *Architecture. Possible Here? “Home-for-All”* (Tokyo: TOTO Publishing, 2012).
- 23 Shunya Yoshimi, “Radioactive Rain and the American Umbrella,” *Journal of Asian Studies* 71, no. 2 (May 2012): 319–31.
- 24 In recent years there have been growing signs of an emergent civil society in Japan, albeit mostly outside the realm of conventional politics (i.e., “post-political” in many ways). See Jeff Kingston, *Japan’s Quiet Transformation: Social Change and Civil Society in Twenty-First Century Japan* (London: Routledge, 2004).
- 25 Raji Kuzoda, *Owarinaki kindai: Ajia bijutsu no aruku 2009–2014* (Behind the Globalism) (Tokyo: granbooks, 2014).
- 26 A large collection of Fram Kitagawa’s earlier writings in relation to these activities has been published by Art Front Gallery: *Kibou no bijutsu: ayumaku no yume—Kitagawa Fram no 30th jushu nen* (Art of Hope: Dreams of Collaboration—40 Years of Fram Kitagawa) (Tokyo: Kadokawa, 2012).
- 27 Adrian Favell, “The Contemporary Art Market in Galapagos: Japan and the Global Art World,” in Olav Velthuis and Stefano Balo-Carioni, eds., *Commons and Careers in a Cosmopolitan Culture: On the Globalization of Contemporary Art Markets* (Oxford University Press, 2015), 258–63.
- 28 Fran Lloyd, ed., *Consuming Bodies: Sex and Contemporary Japanese Art* (London: Reaktion, 2012).
- 29 Interview with Yanagi’s gallerist and close friend Shinichi Miyake, June 8, 2011.
- 30 Amelia Groom, “The Obsolete in Reverse,” *Big in Japan*, Oct. 22, 2011, <http://biginjapan.com.au/2011/10/the-obsolete-in-reverse-atare-izozuki-part-one/>.
- 31 See Art Sellmann, “Artpolis Legacies: Proliferation of Public Architecture Programs for Urban Regeneration in Turn-of-the-Century Japan,” *Proceedings of the Society of Architectural Historians*, 30th Annual Conference, July 2–5, 2013.
- 32 Elizabeth Norman and John Norman, “Making Decisions About Public Art: The Relevance of Community OR—Examples from Tokyo,” *OR Insights* 10, no. 3 (July–September 1997): 22–26.
- 33 Cited in Nick West, “Public Art #4: Fumi Tachikawa,” *Tokyo Art Beat*, September 27, 2013, <http://www.tokyoartbeat.com/tag/fumi-tachikawa/en/2013/09/public-art-4-fumi-tachikawa.html>
- 34 Elizabeth Norman and John Norman, “Making Decisions About Public Art,” 22–26.
- 35 See Kaitya Kenji, “Art Projects in Japan: Their History and Recent Developments,” *Hiroshima Art Project 2009*, exhibition catalogue (Hiroshima, Japan: Hiroshima City University, 2011), 261–71.
- 36 Interview with Shingo Yamano conducted with Julian Worrall, July 30, 2012.
- 37 On Bigaku, see Yoshiko Shimada, “Gendai Shichou-Sha Bigaku,” in Alice Maude-Roxby, ed., *Art Academy*, exhibition and catalogue (Southampton, England: John Hansard Gallery, 2013), 13–23; interview with Yoshiko Shimada, October 1, 2014.

- 38 Interview with Ralji Kuroda, July 4, 2013. I also owe much of my understanding about this broad history of social art in Japan to the curator Mitsuki Budo (interviews on July 8, 2013, and October 27, 2013).
- 39 On Damaen Hirst's legendary innovations in London with postindustrial spaces and commercial funding and publicity at Freeze (1988) and after, see Julian Stallabrass, *High-Art Lite: The Rise and Fall of Young British Art* (London: Verso, 1999), 30–36.
- 40 Interview with Tadashi Kawamata, July 17, 2013; interview with Kawamata by Makoto Mizuta, Moroi Masaki, and Osamu Ikeda (1987), in *Tadashi Kawamata: Estreitos* (Paris: Editions L'Asiatic, 2013), 3–34.
- 41 Interview with Tadashi Kawamata, July 17, 2013. See, for example, his huge Tagawa Coal Mine Project 1996–2006, developed with Yamano at an abandoned industrial site in Kyushu.
- 42 This formulation by Kawamata is discussed in Kaihya Kenji, "Art Projects in Japan," 136, in reference to a published discussion between Kawamata and Eishi Kasura in 2013.
- 43 Interview with Osamu Ikeda, September 21, 2014.
- 44 Interview with Tadashi Kawamata, July 17, 2013.
- 45 Interview with Toyomi Hoshina, July 23, 2012; interview with Masato Nakamura, April 4, 2010. I make the case for understanding Nakamura as a distinct spatial practices-based artist in *Before and After Superfluous*, "Space for Our Future," 209–20.
- 46 Interview with Ralji Kuroda, July 4, 2013; interview with Masato Nakamura, April 4, 2010. On Beppu, see Tadashi Serizawa et al., *Mixed Bathing World: Magical Property of Place and Art* (Beppu, Japan: NPO Beppu Project, 2010). Interview with Tadashi Serizawa, October 26, 2013.
- 47 With thanks on this point to Peter Eckersall of CUNY, New York (meeting June 14, 2014).
- 48 For example, the criteria set out in Nao Thompson, ed., *Living as Form: Socially Engaged Art from 1991–2012*, exhibition and catalogue (New York: MIT Press, 2012).
- 49 Yuruki Nakahara, "Portents of a Restoration in the Arts," in *Echigo-Tsumari Art Triennial*, exhibition and catalogue (Tokyo: Art Front Gallery 2000), 11–13.
- 50 See the extensive feature on this aspect of the festival in the journal of domestic architecture *Jintaku Kenchiku* 423 (September 2009): 2–39.
- 51 For example, Lara Müller and Akiko Miki, eds., *Isular Insights: Where Art and Architecture Conspire with Nature* (Zurich: Lars Müller Publishers, 2011), which was heavily promoted with international talks, for example, at the Palais de Tokyo, Paris, December 10, 2012.
- 52 Satoshi Fukutake, "On the Closure of the Setouchi Festival 2013," in *Setouchi Triennial 2013*, exhibition and catalogue (Tokyo: Bijutsu Shuppan-sha, 2014), 18–19.
- 53 Julian Worrall, interview with Satoshi Fukutake, published as "In Search of Society's True Affluence," *Japan Times*, August 20, 2010.
- 54 Yukinori Yanagi, Inujima Note (Tokyo: Miyako Fine Arts, 2010); Yukinori Yanagi, "Art at Large: Art Making in the Long View," artist talk, Museum of Modern Art, New York, May 3, 2013.
- 55 Fran Kitagawa, "Objectives, Status Quo and Roles of the Setouchi Festival," in *Setouchi Triennial 2013*, 20–23.
- 56 Talk by Chiharu Shiota, Japan Foundation, London, November 22, 2013.
- 57 Fran Kitagawa, "Objectives, Status Quo and Roles of the Setouchi Festival," 20–21.
- 58 Julian Worrall, "In Search of Society's True Affluence."
- 59 As seen in some of the mostly widely discussed survey shows in Japan since the disaster: for example, *Artists and the Disaster: Documentation in Progress*, exhibition and catalogue (Mito, Japan: Art Tower Mito, 2012); *Out of Doubt*, exhibition and catalogue (Tokyo: Mori Art Museum, 2013–14); *Awakening*, exhibition and catalogue, Aichi Triennale (Nagoya, Japan: TBA? 2013); and *Big Sky Friendship*, exhibition at Towada Arts Centre (April 15 – September 23, 2014).
- 60 Julian Worrall, "Nature, Publicness, Place: Towards a Relational Architecture in Japan," in *Eastern Promises*, exhibition and catalogue (Vienna: MAK, 2013), 93–99.
- 61 Susanne Klien, "Young Urban Migrants in the Countryside: The Quest for Purpose and Subjective Well-Being," in Stephanie Assmann, ed., *Sustainability in Contemporary Rural Japan*.
- 62 Susanne Klien, "Contemporary Art and Regional Revitalization: Selected Artworks in the Echigo-Tsumari Art Triennial 2000–6," *Japan Forum* 22, nos. 3 and (December 2010): 1–30; Susanne Klien, "Collaboration or Confrontation? Local and Non-Local Actors in the Echigo-Tsumari Art Triennial," *Contemporary Japan* 22, nos. 1 and 2 (September 2010): 1–25.
- 63 See Austin Harrington, *Art and Social Theory: Sociological Arguments in Aesthetics* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2004).
- 64 See Claire Bishop, "The Social Turn: Collaboration and Its Discontents," *Artforum* (February 2006): 178–83, which aroused angry debate with Kester. She then worked out her argument in a full length book, *Artificial Hell: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (London: Verso, 2012). A very good guide to this debate is provided in the twin reviews by Eleanor Heartney, "Can Art Change Lives?" *Art in America* 100, no. 6 (June 12, 2012): 67–69.
- 65 This debate has centered particularly on the positions of a leading sociologist of art in Japan, Yoshitaka Mouri, and the art critic Ren Fukusumi, who was formerly Mouri's student.
- 66 Grant Kester, *The One and the Many: Contemporary Collaborative Art in a Global Context* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011). His discussion and the ensuing debate takes place in the slipstream of Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics* (Paris: Les Presses du Réel, 1998).
- 67 Interviews with Fran Kitagawa, June 21, 2009, and September 30, 2014.
- 68 See also Adrian Favell, "Islands for Life: Artistic Responses to Remote Social Polarization and Population Decline in Japan," in Stephanie Assmann, ed., *Sustainability in Post-Growth Rural Japan*.
- 69 A symptom of this has been the emergence of younger figures who have made significant impact on audiences as "post-political" guru-like radicals, articulating a thoroughgoing rejection and withdrawal from mainstream society and politics in Japan. A leading example is the young architect and cult figure Kyobu Sakaguchi, known for his *Zero Yen House* (2006) project, which celebrated the low-cost, sustainable, self-sufficiency with which the homeless manage to build houses for themselves in the margins of the big city. After the 3.11 disaster he created his own alternative "Zero Republic" in Kumamoto for those wishing to reject mainstream economic and political values, "receding" from the mainland and declaring himself "president." A similar figure, Hiroshi Ito, based in Wakayama, has published popular self-help books about how young NEET (not in employment, education, or training) or the working poor can opt out and re-create self-sufficient and fulfilling lives in remote locations far from the city, for example his *Furusato wo tsukuru* (Making a Hometown) (Tokyo: Shosetsu 2014).
- 70 There are, however, the beginnings of debate about "post-Bubble urbanism" in China. See for example the special edition of *Urban China* 68 (January 2013), to which I contributed a piece about post-growth art and architecture in Japan: "Islands for Life: Artistic Responses in Post-Bubble Japan": 90–93.



# Art Place Japan

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The Echigo-Tsumari Art Triennale  
and the Vision to Reconnect Art and Nature

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