Ecological artistic experimentations in Japan: the pitfall of heritagization and pioneering new frontiers

Mulder, Matilda

Universiteit Leiden
The Netherlands

MA Thesis

Ecological artistic experimentations in Japan: the pitfall of heritagization and pioneering new frontiers

Author:
Matilda MULDER

Thesis Supervisor:
Dr. Doreen MÜLLER

Faculty of Humanities
Master of Arts in Asian Studies (60 EC)
Specialisation in Critical Heritage Studies
2021-2022

Ecological artistic experimentations in Japan: the pitfall of heritagization and pioneering new frontiers

Summary

Introduction

In the last twenty years new forms of socially engaged art have globally emerged aiming to address the impellent ecological perils. “Ecological art” is the term used to define an innovative environmentally concerned art genre, that is now offering exiting answers to face our future, often resulting from the convergence of several disciplines such as art, philosophy, biology, and engineering. By creating new perceptual experiences, eco-art seeks to facilitate re-connection and expand human imagination in the name of an eco-centric philosophy. Ecological art may be called a socially engaged art form in its willingness to move beyond art and tackle today's political and social concerns.

In this research, after discussing general statements about the nature of eco-art, I will compare those with specific eco-art initiatives taking place in Japan that I want to discuss as my case studies. I decided to center my study on the Japanese context because here the belief in an ancient harmonious cohesion with nature offers an intriguing starting point from which to develop my research on the emergence of ecologically committed art forms. I will first focus on the analysis of the Echigo-tsumari Art Field initiative (ETAF) for then subsequently comparing this latter to the Tokyo-based teamLab artistic venture. Both projects are responsive to the contemporary environmental issues, but as I will illustrate, they do so by adopting very different approaches. How have the two initiatives attempted to sensitize the public to sounder relational and “ecosystemic” ways of living? What are the proposals they have set forth? The comparison and contrast of the two case studies will allow me to move towards the central hypothesis of this paper, that is, that self-consciously labelling certain artistic practices as “eco”, can sometimes be a pretext for a variety of economic, social and cultural purposes rather than just an artistic concern.

Following an explanation of what is typically understood by eco-art and the historical backdrop that led to the affirmation of the artistic genre (Chapter 1), I will present the framework within which I intend to situate my study, that is contemporary Japan, where the myth of a peaceful human-nature communion is presented as an authentic Japanese heritage. The notion of *satoyama*, the traditional rural landscape, will thus be introduced as the ultimate embodiment of the unique Japanese symbiotic relationship to “nature”[1] turned in the 1980s and 1990s into a powerful symbol of green post-bubble movements.

The second and third chapter will be dedicated to the illustration of my case studies. Since its founding, the Echigo-tsumari Art Field has been concerned in the conservation of the *satoyama*, viewing it as a storehouse of pro-ecological ideologies. Rural settlements in the ETAF provide the stage for a variety of eco-art expressions aimed at strengthening the ecological mission. The *tsumari*-approach will be explored, shedding light on how eco-art has been and continues to be employed, as well as on its inherent problematics. I shall argue that the ETAF is a self-conscious effort to utilize art for practical purposes, notably pertinent to heritagization strategies, and I will discuss the implications of this. Subsequently, teamLab artistic production will be discussed as an alternative approach to nature that invites for a complete abandonment of boundaries. Contrasting the two case studies will allow me to demonstrate how eco-art may serve many

[1] It is important to note that the term "nature" is used throughout this thesis for the purpose of enhancing clarity. The author acknowledges that this term can be problematic as it can perpetuate the fallacy of binary thinking, reinforcing the partition nature-culture. "Nature" is a culturally loaded and ambiguous term which implies a separate real to which humans do not belong.

functions. I will argue that, while both projects are concerned with environmental issues, the fact that teamLab is not bound by the rigid schemes of the Triennale as well as to programs of heritage revitalization, allows it to explore the concept of ecocentrism with far more freedom, avoiding contradiction.

Wrapping up, the Japanese conception of nature (*shizenkan*), which inspires both ETAF and teamLab, will be proposed as a double-edged sword; on the one hand, it can be exploited to market and sell a static, fictionalized idea of nature, but it also has the potential to become a valuable representational idea from which to depart to develop something new.

CHAPTER 1. What is Eco-art?

Developing from ecology and post-humanistic theory, eco-art is an emerging discipline in the arts that is steadily gaining ground and acknowledgment by art organizations and institutions throughout the world in its commitment to discover solutions to cope with a climate-changed world. In this chapter, I attempt to synthesize the vocabulary, patterns, and general vision of ecological art in order to establish a shared "ecological literacy" that will facilitate the critical examination of my case studies.

It should be noted that eco-art is not a style, but rather an approach, frequently a non-uniform one. Indeed, it can take many distinct forms, making it difficult to provide a clear and comprehensive definition of what it is and how it is created. However, I believe that a major feature shared by all eco-art is the active representation of the notion of ecosystem and, by extension, the dynamics of interdependence that underlie it. By bringing a profound grasp of the notion of ecosystem into public awareness, eco-art produces a paradigmatic shift in which reality is perceived as dominated by ecocentric tenets. The focus on ecocentric principles rather than anthropocentric ones, makes of ecological art an ideal answer to the environmental disasters at hand.

Emergence of Environmentalism and Eco-art

Ecological art is a specific form of socially engaged artistic expression that tries to give an answer to the impellent demands opened up by environmentalism. In this sense, it encapsulates the hopes of artists aiming to contribute to social change. However, before eco-art could be developed at its fullest, a decisive recognition of the magnitude of the ecological problem was needed. A strong and shared acknowledgment was sparked only in concomitance with the occurrence of major environmental disasters, but also of significant events including the Apollo moon landing in 1969 and the publication of groundbreaking books such as *Silent Spring* (1962) by Rachel Carson. This latter, by presenting direct evidence of the human disastrous impact on Planet Earth, unveiling the direct relationship between catastrophic events and human-led activities, awakened an entire generation, becoming a true catalyst for the emergence of a new environmental consciousness.

In Japan, the word "pollution" became widespread in concomitance with the opening of the Tōkaidō bullet train line in 1964 and the release of an important book titled *Awful Industrial Pollution* (*Osoru beki kōgai*) published that same year by Shōji and Minamoto (Hasegawa 2004, 42). Furthermore, a heightened interest in environmental issues arose in Japan as a direct result of four major industrial-pollution disasters, each of which first occurred in the 1950s but lasted for many years due to the government's inability to intervene, promptly denying any accusation of

plant mismanagement[2]. These ecological disasters spurred societal dissatisfaction and a strong hostility to any new large-scale development, culminating in the formation of the first Japanese environmentalist groups, which rapidly spread throughout the country, incrementing public awareness. It is interesting to note that those latter were primarily residents' movements, communities fearing that pollution would have destroyed their means of subsistence (Hasegawa 2004, 37). The pressure exerted on government and corporations by anti-pollution campaigns prompted the introduction of new laws and regulations. Nonetheless, until the 1990s, environmental concerns in Japan were generally regarded as local matters, a prevalent perception that would shift substantially only with the 1992 Earth Summit, which succeeded in bringing the topic to worldwide notice.

The modern environmental movement was officially launched in the United States in April 1970 with the declaration of the first Earth Day and the subsequent introduction of the Environmental Protection Agency. Concurrently, the increased knowledge in ecological problems resulted in new forms of socially engaged art, whose aim was to expose environmental injustices and suggest sustainable alternatives. In the West, environmental art initially developed in the 1960s as land art. Characterized by remoteness and ephemerality, land art originated as some artists effort to challenge established art world patterns by removing artworks from their institutionalized galleries and collocating them outdoor; traditional art materials also changed, becoming transient and subject to atmospheric forces. Yet, despite dealing with natural settings and organic materials, some contend that the major focus of land art was not necessarily environmentalism (Boettger 2002). Land artists primary concern was rather the creation of something that could not be sold. Whether they have been successful is however debatable, given how quickly their aesthetic statements were reassimilated back into the art institution. Rasheed Araeen has pointed out how eventually most of the works re-entered the museum as photographs, becoming "mere objects of gaze", a form of "frozen, reified art" (Araeen 2009, 682). In any case, it must be noted that land art marked a significant shift in thinking about art as something that may have been fluid and susceptible to continuing modification, mediated by both human and non-human actors. According to Sacha Kagan, the critique of some un-ecological aspects of land art may be regarded a watershed moment in the formation and subsequent consolidation of a more consciously aware ecological art practice (Kagan 2014, 274). Indeed, land artists frequently worked as "sculptors" shaping the environment at their will, and therefore exerting some type of control, often harmful, over it. Land art has been blamed of remaining faithful to anthropocentric ideals and to avoid addressing sustainability issues. It was then left to eco-artists the responsibility to hint towards solutions and vent dissent. Still, even if the first ecological artistic experimentations can be recorded as early as the 1970s and 1980s, the term "ecological art" did not come into use before the 1990's, generally assimilating any art form concerned with the "natural" environment in the broader "land art" category.

Principles of Eco-art

Giving a definition of what eco-art exactly is proves to be a rather insidious task, in virtue of the fact that this kind of production can take multiple shapes and express itself in a huge variety of

[2] They are: the Minamata mercury poisoning, Niigata mercury poisoning, Ouch-ouch (Itai-itai) cadmium poisoning and Yokkaichi asthma. (Hasegawa 2004, 6)

ways. The aesthetic of sustainability is complex, nevertheless, every ecological artistic expression shares a vision, a specific purpose. If we linger on the term "eco-art," we can get a first indication. The prefix “eco-”, comes from the term “ecology”, in Greek “*oikos*”, and means “dwelling”. An ecological art will then be an art that conceives the world as a single “house” shared by all beings on Earth. Moreover, instead of trying to answer the question “what is eco art”, it might be much more useful to ask another kind of question, that is, “what does eco art do?”. It could then be said that eco-art seeks to address the environmental crisis and, through creative imagination, provides long-term and life-improving strategies. Eco-artists endorse sustainability by creating novel experiences, facilitating interconnection and expanding mental activity. Ecological art operates the destruction of any kind of anthropocentric perspective and instead paves the way for *ecocentrism* by suggesting a new kind of relationality that goes beyond human-to-human exchanges and that could be synthetized as *interconnectedness*. Ecocentrism recognizes that humans are in no way superior, but equal to any other entity on Earth. When humans are conceived just as one of the many species inserted into the terrestrial ecosystem, an *ego-deconstruction*[3] is performed and the rethinking of the meaning of *human* is made possible.

Through challenge and surprise, eco-art can make us see what we can no longer see, and experience realities beyond our possibilities. We could then envision eco-art as a tool capable of repairing the human imagination; when this latter is rendered sensitive to its surrounding, a re-enchantment of life takes place.

The human world, the plant world and the animal world are ultimately a single whole, by making the deep connection between them manifest, the longstanding and illusionary partition “culture-nature” dissolves, together with any ego-centric perception[4]. On planet Earth, we are then no longer demiurges, but simply cocreators; we affect our surrounding just like our surrounding affects us. Therefore, the concept of ecosystem is of central importance in ecological art, and consequently ecocentric principles must be present in order to describe an ecological art form as such. Ecological art embraces post-humanist theory and recognizes that unsustainable practices have a deeply ingrained cultural dimension against which novel healing visions are counterposed. The main idea is that to cope with the uncertainty of our times, there is the need for a new world view, that will go beyond cartesian binary modes of thinking. More specifically, an ecological gaze is developed, one that understands any isolated occurrence as the result of the complex interaction of several agents and conditions. In the artistic field this means that works of art are conceived not as the exclusive outcome of the author’s individual actions, but made possible by the intervention of multiple eco-coauthors. These ideas expand and multiply traditional understandings of creativity and authorship. Additionally, ecological art regularly resorts to transdisciplinarity as a tool to push further the boundaries of art, allowing new discoveries. Science, engineering and art are thus merged to generate never-before-seen artworks with the potential to change people's lives and affect communities for the better by enabling them to see the world and experience reality in sounder ways.

[3] Ego is actually not something bad in itself; every living/non-living being has an ego that helps it survive; it is, as defined by Kagan in *Art and Sustainability*, an “ecological imperative”. However, the human ego, supported by technological advancement, has transformed into the capacity to decide which other life/non-life form should be used and how for its own sake.

[4] Bruno Latour has written extensively about the futility of the culture-nature dichotomy (Latour 2012).

In the challenging times that await us, art has a major role to play and it should not be exempted from taking a stand. Eco-artists are now called to lead the revolution towards a sustainable future by questioning old beliefs, no matter how solid they may be. In fact, in order to escape the threatening Anthropocene and safely enter the post-human era, technological and political advancements are simply not enough; those need to be accompanied by another fundamental development, that of a new kind of imagination, one that would have fully replaced any kind of anthropocentric instance with a deeply internalized eco-centric one.

In *The Reenchantment of Art* (1991), art historian Suzi Gablik calls for a new type of art suited to meet the needs of a post-modern society; she writes: "*There is a need for new forms emphasizing our essential interconnectedness rather than our separateness, forms evoking the feeling of belonging to a larger whole rather than expressing the isolated, alienated self*" (Gablik 1991, 500:5–6). Gablik thus moves a critique against the concept of "art for art's sake", stating that while such art was once liberating and capable of resisting utilitarian logics, it is now hazardous since it alienates people; adding that: "*in the name of radical autonomy, it is the pure and disinterested art work that can be most readily harnessed into the social process, and lends itself to easy cooptation by the economic apparatus*" (Gablik 1991, 500:142).

Aesthetics of sustainability

Ecological artists have used and developed the term "ecological aesthetics" in an attempt to provide a clearer image of this genre of creative outputs. After elucidating the principles on which eco-art rests, we may now wonder what an actual eco-artwork would look like, as well as what its qualities and meaning would be. Hereunder, I have identified four key aspects that I believe may be explanatory of the eco-aesthetics.

- *Transformation*: fundamental for the ecological aesthetics is the concept of continuous transformation through time and space to which every single entity is subjected. Eco-artworks are dynamic, they exhibit movement and perpetual change. Emphasis is placed on natural phenomena and processes as they are made manifest.

- *Relationality*: in ecological aesthetics everything is inseparably connected in an infinite and multi-layered system of relationships. Eco-aesthetics has been cleverly referred to as the "sensibility to the patterns that connect" (Kagan 2014, 232). In this sense, the concept of *system(s)* becomes fundamental. Eco artists hint towards the concept of inter-connectedness by making use of different strategies, such as producing living systems and envisioning processes of shared creation where humans, natural phenomena, plants and animals cooperate in the making of the final art piece. When interconnections are experienced and visualized, a deeper sensibleness is unlocked.

- *Complexity*: eco-aesthetic also expresses itself as a particular sensibility to complexity that reaches its full potential by acknowledging the importance of implementing trans-disciplinary approaches to open new paths towards a future regulated by sustainability.

- *Biomimicry*: in eco-aesthetics, the environment becomes a gigantic inventory from which to draw in the production of art pieces. Eco-aesthetics explores nature's design efficiencies, and how certain inherent patterns are constructed and interweave to form systems that carry out specific functions. Eco-artists meticulously analyze ecosystems to understand and then transpose nature's artworks into their own creations. The design of systems that emulate ecosystems' well-organized structures is a practice generally referred to as *biomimicry*.

In eco-art, not only do we encounter new patterns, but also mediums of artistic expression undergo a decisive alteration. More traditional materials are replaced by what is generally disregarded since considered too trivial. Common for eco-artists is the use of plant and animal parts, mineral elements or even microbes.

According to the sustainability ethic, which still encounters several limits to infiltrate the contemporary art world, art should not be exempted from environmental responsibility. Indeed, creating art, as any other human-led activity, can have a not insignificant impact. For art to be truly ecological the resources employed in its creation, eventual by-products and consequences of use must be sustainable. Attention is thus also given to the selection of materials that may not adversely affect ecosystems, often perishable and therefore easily re-absorbable in the environment after some time.

To better understand eco-art, I believe it is now fundamental to introduce the concept of "New Materialism", a philosophy originated approximately in the second half of the 1990s that is gaining foothold as one of the most important trends in the humanities and social sciences. New Materialism advocates against the neglect of matter and stresses the necessity of building new "conscious relationships with all forms of matter" (Weintraub 2019, 5). What is being promoted is a shift in human consciousness that goes through a re-evaluation of matter rejecting the idea of a "passive substance intrinsically devoid of meaning" (Gamble, Hanan, and Nail 2019, 111). According to Weintraub, credit for its emergence must be attributed to Manuel DeLanda and Rosi Braidotti, which were the first to problematize anthropocentric binaries such as "nature-culture", "natural-artificial", "living-inert", and "mind-matter" (Weintraub 2019, 9). Weintraub adds that New Materialism helped move past three social and cultural values predominant in the 20th century: the disposable abundance and the disregard of the environment typical of Consumer Materialism, Anthropocentrism and the belief that material reality depends upon human cognition (Weintraub 2019, 16).

The "materialist turn" envisions matter as something alive, vibrant, and agentive; in this way, new materialists counter the preconception that agency and relationality are unique to the human species. At the same time, they oppose the human-centric view that meaning is immaterial. New Materialism acknowledges all forms of matter and by teaching how to read beyond surfaces, recovers wonder and reunifies human and non-human physicality. The smallest entity becomes therefore extraordinary when the complexity that lies behind it, all the interactions or evolutionary efforts that brought it to be, are ultimately perceived.

If we consider New Materialism as a conceptual framework, it can be applied to multiple disciplines among which ecology. Eco Materialism, by conceiving matter as relational, could then help developing respectful interactions with the Earth ecosystem. Artists producing artworks in

accordance with Eco Materialism, use their creative imagination to explore physicality and by so doing, they offer interesting solutions to reconcile and restore relationalities.

The deployment of mechanical and automated processes has offered us the tempting possibility to access all of a set of manufactured goods in a relatively convenient and inexpensive way; at the same time though, the cessation of direct contact with the tangible world and its forms, has resulted in the ultimate alienation from it. Once blind, we have started to give every-day materiality for granted and to look for meaning somewhere else. This wrong way to perceive matter has ultimately meant the landing in the Anthropocene. Hence, Eco Materialism seeks to eradicate the illusion that people can survive without establishing connections. A human body is not segregated from the rest of the planet; it is in itself a living system, inhabited by a great amount of bacterial and fungal communities.

This chapter has sought to provide a comprehensive understanding of the concept of eco-art and to highlight its significance in contemporary art and environmental discourse. The readers should now be equipped with the necessary analytical tools to scrutinize the case studies presented in the upcoming chapters through an eco-centric perspective.

CHAPTER 2. The Echigo-tsumari Art Field

The purpose of this chapter is to explore the ETAF festival, an event that promises to restore the bond between human beings and the natural world. Building upon the foundation established in Chapter 1, where the principles of an ecological art practice were elucidated, I will conduct a thorough analysis of the festival through an eco-critical lens. Specifically, I aim to investigate the extent to which ecological principles are able to resist the consumption-driven mentality of the Triennale, and to what degree the event serves as a vehicle for promoting a commercialized vision of nature as a commodity. By delving into the ETAF initiative, I hope to shed light on the complex relationships that are often established between art, ecology, and heritage in the Japanese panorama.

Fram Kitagawa and the longing for reconnection(s)

The Echigo-Tsumari Art Field (ETAF) is the world's largest outdoor art exhibition, taking place every three years in Niigata Prefecture, North Central Japan. The artistic initiative has been originally launched in 2000 as core project of the “New Niigata Risou Plan”, aimed at the revitalization of the Echigo-tsumari rural region through art (‘Echigo-Tsumari Art Field’ n.d.). In a land of nearly three hundred square miles, hundreds of artists have installed their artworks with the intent to “rediscover relationships among, nature, art, and humanity” and to “connect people to each other and the land” (Kitagawa, Breslin, and Favell 2015).

The ETAF perfectly illustrates what is generally called an "*āto purojekuto*" (art project) a singular Japanese artistic form that developed in the late 1990s, on the wave of what Claire Bishop has named the “social turn” in the arts. The Japanese art project overlaps and intersects to a certain degree with new genre public art and socially engaged art, although not deriving directly from them. The term is generally used to refer to a huge variety of initiatives, comprising fairs, urban and rural festivals, outdoor exhibitions, workshops and performances, re-qualification of abandoned buildings, community-based activities that address social issues, etc. The scale of the projects can also vary, with large-scale events produced by local governments, medium-sized

projects coordinated by non-profit groups, and small-scale artist enterprises (Kajiya 2017). Two distinctive features of art projects are the foreseeing of an active artistic collaboration among different stakeholders and the attention paid more to the process of creation rather than to the artistic object *per se* (Kawashima 2017).

Historically in Japan very little has been invested in the domestic contemporary art market. Until the late 1990s, the majority of public spending on arts and culture was intended for the preservation of cultural heritage and for the construction of new facilities (Jesty, n.d.). Conversely, Japanese emerging artists were poorly supported and if they wished to make a career in the arts they necessarily had to travel abroad. It is only thanks to new fundings opportunities directed toward emerging artists, that the first art projects were able to emerge. Young artists took advantage of the unprecedented governmental subsides and started to explore new sites of artistic expression, outside the traditional ones provided by galleries and museums. Their activities commonly tried to respond to the consequences of the end of the economic growth by pursuing new levels of public engagement that would have assisted in the co-construction of mending visions. Many of those projects notably emerged as an effort to use art to rejuvenate the countryside, which lied in a concerning state of decay after the small rural villages had been abandoned *en masse*, leaving behind elderly residents who no longer disposed of the necessary means to manage the family's lands.

Kusama Yayoi, *Tsumari in bloom,* 2003 (*photo source*: Nakamura Osamu)

Today, art projects enjoy great popularity in Japan. One of the reasons behind their incredible diffusion can undoubtedly be attributed to the fact that they are deemed both easier and cheaper to organize, allowing artists and curators to avoid entering the often overly complex world of

galleries and museum institutions, while at the same time offering far more opportunities for young Japanese artists to get ahead in their careers and make a name in the international artsy panorama. Furthermore, art projects' potential to be invested with multiple social tasks strongly contributes to make them attractive for the agendas of local governments and institutions.

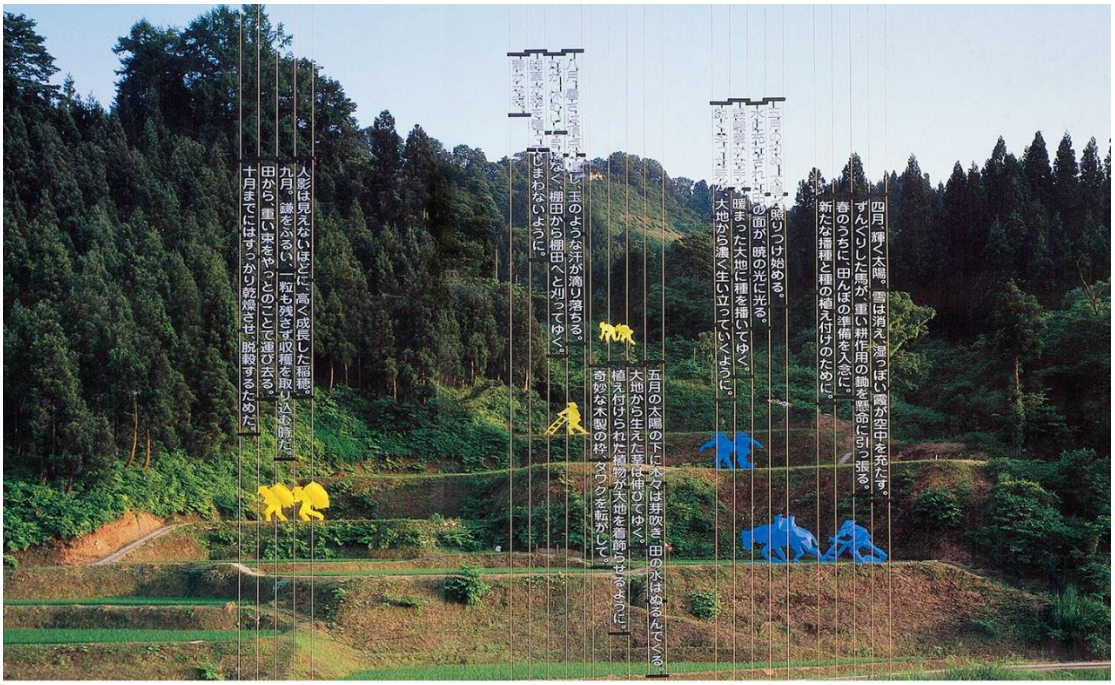
Art director Fram Kitagawa, has repeatedly stressed how the concept "humans are part of nature" lies at the base of his Triennale. People living in the region, have coexisted with nature through over 1000 years by continuously adapting to the environment changing circumstances, always finding new ways to adjust to a pretty much mountainous and hilly territory with very little flat arable land. Locals have in a sense been molded by the natural surroundings. The respectful human-nature co-habitation is embodied in "satoyama", another central concept in the ETAF narrative. The term satoyama, which literally means "village mountain", has been typically employed to denote the physical space between the forested mountains foothills and the arable flat land ('*Satoyama*' 2022), which has for centuries served as a farming space as well as a rich source of forest products, used as fuel or compost supplies.

The general abandonment and subsequent decadence faced by satoyama landscapes since the 1950s sparked a renovated interest in their protection. In the ETAF context, the intention to revitalize the region is justified by the lofty mission to rescue a valuable "model for how people can relate to nature" ('Echigo-Tsumari Art Field' n.d.).

Fram Kitagawa imagined to structure the Triennale as if it were a journey. The artworks are not grouped together in the same place, but rather spread over the entire rural landscape. As there in no marked path to follow, the acts of wandering and getting lost become central in the festival experience. Works of art are installed among rice fields and wide plains, as well as inside abandoned farmhouses and schools. Visitors may come across the villages' elderly inhabitants while roaming around the abandoned countryside, strike up a conversation with them, and learn about century-old customs and traditional ways of living. The example set by local communities and the immersion in the natural environment are supposed to reawaken a long-lost connection to the earth and demonstrate how it is still possible to live in harmony with it today.

Since the inception of the artistic initiative, great importance was attached to community engagement. Kitagawa worked hard to establish a dialogue with the locals, who at first were wary, worried that outsiders might get access to areas that had been passed down from generation to generation and were thus nearly sacred to them. Furthermore, the farmers, described by Fram as "conservative and nationalist" (Kitagawa, Breslin, and Favell 2015, 20), were also skeptical about the introduction of contemporary forms of art, holding them unsuited to incorporation into the Japanese countryside. In order to convince the locals of the validity of the project, Fram eventually had the intuition to stop acting alone and to put young people on the front lines of his endeavors; he thus set up Kohebi Volunteers' group, who helped interfacing with the local community, making communication more effective and ultimately successful.

A quick scan of the articles produced to promote the ETAF or a simple Google image search indicates which artworks are and have been most frequently used to advertise the ETAF. Between those it is impossible not to find Yayoi Kusama's colorful sculpture *Tsumari in Bloom* (2003), representing a gigantic flower as it blossoms exposing its large petals to the Echigo-tsumari sunlight. Kusama's work is supposed to glorify the land in which it has been installed, celebrating its nobility and serenity ('Tsumari in Bloom - Artworks | Echigo-Tsumari Art Field' n.d.).



Ilya & Emilia Kabakov, *The Rice Fields,* 2000 (*photo source:* Nakamura Osamu)


MAD Architects, *Tunnel of Light,* 2018 (*photo source:* Nakamura Osamu)

Another important work of which Fram has proved himself very proud of is *The Rice Field* (2000) by Ilya and Emilia Kabakov. The work seeks to combine poetry, landscape and sculpture and by so doing telling the story of the farmers and the hardships they faced in the cultivation of rice ('The Rice Fields - Artworks | Echigo-Tsumari Art Field' n.d.). An observation deck was subsequently incorporated to the Matsudai Nohbutai structure to allow a panorama-view of the rice fields. According to Fram, *The Rice Field* celebrates the region agricultural history while at the same time being a symbol of the future of agriculture in Japan (Kitagawa, Breslin, and Favell 2015, 47).

Tunnel of Light by the Beijing studio MAD Architects has been inaugurated with the opening of the Echigo-Tsumari 2018 Triennale. The artistic installation transformed the 750-meter long historic Kiyotsu Gorge Tunnel into an exhibition space that cuts through lava rocks formations offering panoramic views over the valley ('Tunnel of Light - Artworks | Echigo-Tsumari Art Field' n.d.). The architectural project should foster a reconnection between visitors and the surrounding environment. MAD Architects have attempted to capture the relationship with nature through the Taoist worldview summarized by the concept of *shanshui*. The gallery therefore presents five distinct installations representative of the traditional Chinese elements of wood, fire, earth, metal, and water. In the installation dedicated to wood, "Periscope", we find a wooden hut which houses a café, a souvenir shop and a wellness center; "The Drop" symbolizes fire through a series of drop-shaped mirrors with red backlighting; "Expression of Color", the entrance to the tunnel representing the earth, is illuminated by multiple-colored lights combined with mysterious music, while the metal is introduced with "Invisible Bubble" by a capsule structure covered in metal film. Finally, in the most iconic "Light Cave", a reflective water surface projects the breathtaking view of the canyon back into the tunnel.

Could we define these examples as ecological artworks, reflective of a harmonious co-existence between human and nature? What do they precisely tell us? As stressed by Dr. Ewa Machotka, for an art associated with the satoyama, it is important to be ecological and that to have an impact that can possibly lead to the development of a green society (Machotka 2018a, 226). This is the only way to prevent those installations to become mere eye-catchers or landmarks.

The ETAF has consistently emphasized its aim to contribute to the assertion of two sorts of connections, which may be synthetized by the binomials *nature-art* and *nature-human*. With regard to the first set of couples, we should investigate to what extent the ETAF has been successful in fostering a dialogue between artistic expressions and the environment in which they have been placed. It must be noted that permanent open-air installations have usually featured big artificial plastic or steel works, that have been then left there, toxically resting among the fields, costing a fortune to maintain. Yayoi Kusama has often been commissioned flower-shaped outdoor sculptures like *Tsumari in Bloom* by both public and private institutions around the world. In order to prevent her works from being damaged by natural agents, she employs highly durable plastic reinforced with fiberglass which then she paints over with urethane ('Yayoi Kusama's Most Outstanding Sculptures – Pumpkins & Flowers – Public Delivery' n.d.). As astonishing as her work may be, the connection between nature and art is made complicated by the very same materiality of her creations, whose closed and impenetrable forms contribute to an estrangement and at the same time exclusion from nature, that hampers the production of new relationalities based on ecological principles.

Nature-human connection and cultural essentialism

When we consider the second set of couples, the *nature-human* connection, it is pretty clear that ETAF experience is building on Japanese traditional views of nature (*shizenkan*), namely the belief that, due to the unpredictability of the Japanese landscape, people there have been compelled to devise strategies to live in agreement with their surroundings, adopting modes to respond to recurring disasters such as typhoons or earthquakes. As fruit of these convictions, for ages Japan has been claiming its close, intimate relationship with nature, presenting it as a century-old, well-rooted tradition. It should be noted, however, that this method of perceiving nature is a relatively recent product, developed by Japan during the Meiji period in an attempt to forge its own modern collective national identity. By that time, critics and writers began to describe the Japanese relationship with the natural world in terms of opposition with the West. Thus, if on the one hand the Japanese were historically agricultural people, devoted to carefully farm their lands in accordance to the rhythm of the seasons, the West was on the contrary painted as lacking empathy towards Mother Earth, perpetually striving to conquer and dominate it. Following an initial infatuation, the Japanese realized how alienating and dangerous it could have been to take the West as a model and emulate every single one of its customs; instead, they began to work on the construction of a national identity capable of uniting the country and without which the modern nation-state would not have been possible to consolidate. Many publications were released in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century in an attempt to retrace the distinctive and unique qualities of the Japanese people. Those texts, formed the main corpus of what is today known as the *nihonjiron* ("theories about the Japanese"), an essentialist genre that at the time enjoyed great popularity. In *Ten Essays on National Character* (1907), Haga Yaichi asserts that one of the essential attributes of the Japanese people is to live in communion with nature, cheerfully and wholeheartedly (Meshscheryakov 2020). In another text dating 1935, Terada Torahiko confirms the psychological differences of the Japanese, explaining that in a place like Japan, where nature is so diverse, "the same environmental variety in climate and milieu which gave birth to the great variety in differentiation of plants must also have brought some variety of psychological differentiation to the Japanese people, working through their physiology" (**關西大學文學論集** 2018, 100).

The concepts exposed by the *nihonjiron* also had a strong reverberation in the West, contaminating several Western studies on Japan and still retain roots in both Japanese and foreign common thought. Nature has therefore become a real national trait that helped shape and still continues to sustain the country's identity. However, when we look at celebrated Japanese practices like the waka tradition, screen painting, the tea ceremony or ikebana, it is difficult to dismiss the existence of a distinct Japanese sensitivity to the changing seasons and the elements that make up the natural world. In truth, upon closer scrutiny, it will be possible to comprehend how, in the Japanese context, nature was never valued *per se*, but rather in terms of what it symbolized, that is, the *idea of nature*, according to which nature was supposed to be harmonious. Because Heian nobility placed a high importance on balance, grace, and elegance, nature too had to reflect these aesthetic standards (Shirane 2012, 8).

The ETAF is reflective of these essentialist beliefs and can pretty much be described as the glorification of what professor Haruo Shirane calls *secondary* forms of nature, which denote not what nature is, but what it should ideally represent (Shirane 2012). The *waka* tradition provided a tremendous impulse in the assertion of idealized forms of nature by contributing to the

codification of natural elements, strengthening their association with certain images, emotions, and psychological states. The Edo period's *haikai* (popular linked verse) further supported the popularization and internalization of the secondary nature among commoners, which resulted in the expansion of the natural imaginary with those flowers, animals, and plants familiar to their cultural milieu.

The nature to which the Japanese felt connected was precisely the aestheticized and culturally codified product of a capital-centered world, exemplified by the magnificient and sophisticated courtly gardens. On the other hand, wild and pristine nature was shunned, almost feared.

The Japanese innate love for nature should therefore be considered a historical construction stemming from easily mistaking "the pervasiveness of secondary nature in Japanese culture […] for a closeness to or a belief in Japanese harmony with primary nature" (Shirane 2012, 219). Despite academic consensus that the country's connection to nature is a modern myth, Japanese closeness to nature, as contrasted to Westerners' detachment from it, is a deeply ingrained stereotype that is still portrayed as one of the major features of Japanese culture. Scholars have accused such identity-based claims of perpetrating orientalist discourses, emphasizing how self-orientalization may also be employed as a nation building tool and as a soft power strategy.

In a time of environmental threats, Japanese way of perceiving nature has been regularly promoted as a beneficial model to be exported overseas. According to the Ministry of the Environment of Japan (MOEJ), satoyama, the Japanese characteristic rural landscape where men and nature are harmoniously knit together, perfectly encapsulates the notions of positive relationship with the environment and sustainability. Through the 2009 Satoyama Initiative, the satoyama landscape has been globally launched as a good model for envisioning future societies. In accordance with these discourses, Fram Kitawawa has made of satoyama's alleged ecological properties the bulwark of his artistic project. Nevertheless, iconic installations such as the Kabakovs', eventually reveal one-sided narratives, in which it is the story of the farmers who resolutely adapted to the harsh environment that is being told. Nature, on the other hand, does not have its own voice, it is muffled and often reduced to a striking scenery to be gazed at and rejoiced of. The number of times the word "nature" was paired with the word "beauty" in an online event called "A Voyage to Ma Yansong / MAD's Tunnel of Light" (MAD Architects 2022) jointly presented by Fram Kitagawa and MAD Architects struck me. *Tunnel of Light* seems appears to be aiming for a reconnection to nature through beauty. While not wanting to take anything away from the fact that works like this may have the potential to elicit aesthetic responses in visitors, it is also true that similar approaches in depicting nature risk contributing to the ultimate commodification of this latter.

Nature becomes a beautiful panorama in *Tunnel of Light,* what in Japanese would be called *fūkei.* As a reproduction similar to traditional landscape paintings, emphasis is therefore mainly placed on nature's visual aspects and the visual imaginary it conjures. Furthermore, the presence of reflecting stainless-steel panels, activates a game of mirrors that multiplies and extends the landscape. This, as other notorious installations such as *For Lots of Lost Windows* (2006) by Akiko Utsumi, exalt and romanticize the landscape, suggesting more of a control over nature operated by the human-eye, rather than an actual re-envisioning of ecological relationships. Several of the artworks on show at the ETAF contribute to the beautification of nature by expanding it, drawing attention to it, mirroring it. The end result of these activities is again the formation of an artificial form of secondary nature.

What MAD Architects tried to achieve was something akin to traditional Chinese landscape paintings. Indeed, *Tunnel of Light* has been described as repository of "classical heritage" in that the emphasis on the theory on the five elements, sought to reproduce "the relationship with nature that originally existed in China" (MAD Architects 2022). Fram Kitagawa has himself declared its intention to bring Chinese philosophy in the Triennale, stating that "such traditional understanding [of nature] has never changed […] for thousands of years, and everyone feels this sense of connection at a genetic level". In the face of these statements, we cannot help but being reminded of the aforementioned orientalist rhetoric, which has converted certain aesthetic sensitivities into national traits. Chinese landscape paintings were eventually fictious compositions based on specific instructions. In an effort to retrieve this latter tradition, *Tunnel of Light* draws inspiration from nature but ultimately moves away from it by reproducing an imaginary space that does not actually exist.

Yet, if linkages between *nature-art* and *nature-human* appear to be loose, what about the connection *art-human*? How do people relate to the artworks and what responses are aroused?

Also in this case, there is a certain degree of uncertainty regarding the effectiveness of the tsumari-approach. In a recent interview published on *Sociologia Ruralis*, when asked about the meaning attributed to ETAF's art, a local farmer reported: "I am not interested in these artworks and the art festival […] the artworks are out of the cycle. Like the artwork of Kusama Yayoi in front of Matsudai station, […] it is just so miserable. It is detached from the actual life here" (Leung and Thorsen 2022, 624). Another one replied: "['Rice field'] makes me feel uncomfortable, it is not in harmony, it is outstanding in a negative way. […] I feel scared and anxious from this artwork, I don't feel safe […] When I see electric towers in mountains, it is an inharmonious feeling. People in the countryside do not like to see unordinary things. The artworks [of the ETAF] are something the locals and elders are not used to, that's why they feel anxious" (Leung and Thorsen 2022, 623). The locals' pronouncements are undoubtedly remarkable and reveal how, if not wisely planned, art risks slipping out of place and far removed from the community's day-to-day life.

In Japan, the investment in art projects such as the ETAF has become an increasingly diffuse practice, owing primarily to their low expenditures and to the local governments' pursuit for an efficient way to encourage economic and community regeneration.

A common criticism leveled at these initiatives is their lack of socio-critical views when compared to examples of socially engaged art. Undeniably, art projects seem to be characterized by a "tendency to head off controversy rather than to welcome it publicly"(Jesty 2017); even when exposing social issues, they do so bashfully. Critics and art historians have expressed themselves on several occasions in the attempt to uncover the reasons for this absence of defiant and contentious tones. Professor Kumakura Sumiko blames the scarcity of societal consciousness on the political climate, speaking of an overall "aversion to discussing politics in Japan and a desire to maintain an equivocal attitude toward political and civic movements" (Kumakura 2015). More exactly, as art historian Kenji Kajiya has also pointed out, Japanese art projects' weakness in addressing social issues is not so much the result of the timid predisposition of Japanese people, but it is closely related to the fact that since their inception, art projects have "intersected with the policy of local governments" and have consequently "tended to avoid controversial works that could stir public disapproval"(Kajiya 2017). We might then say that the dependency of these projects on their donors, prevents them to some extent to make too radical statements and instead pushes them to deal with social issues "for the purposes of inclusion and well-

being"(Kawashima 2017). In this regard, Fujita Naoya goes as far as to define art projects "zombies of the avant-garde", condemning the domestication of the Japanese art scene and stressing how artists and curators have by now set aside their avant-garde spirit in order to participate in controlled regional revitalization plans supported by local authorities' fundings (Naoya, 2014). Art projects are referred to as "locality art" by Naoya. According to the critic, such initiatives have proliferated consistently; without a real understanding of their criticality, they have quickly come to dominate the mainstream Japanese contemporary art scene. Naoya claims that the locality art movement fails to challenge the status quo and instead reinforces conservative values through the romanticization of cultural landscapes. Indeed, locality art is often used to promote a particular place's identity and culture, which often results in a nostalgia-driven image of the past that is devoid of any critical analysis.

Another common criticism is the absence of a clear objective for the individual artworks featured in an art project. Indeed, quite often it is the context in which they are located, which is socially-engaged, that imparts an engaged character, and not the other way around. This is also true of the ETAF, where the accent is mainly put on the concept of satoyama, rather than on the art itself, as repository of a pro-ecological ideology.

Heritagization processes and art as tourism

The fact that ETAF has been formulated since its inception around two separate aspirations: revitalizing the forsaken countryside and reminding people that they are part of nature, makes the success of the project somewhat difficult to attain. In truth, there is a significant imbalance that by leaning much more towards revitalization, strengthens rather than resolves the conventional culture-nature distinction.

A cursory examination of the above stated examples and other recent artworks, reveals that environmental issues and sustainability are not always the primary concern. Despite the triennial's title *Daichi no Geijutsusai* (Art Festival of Earth) the festival is nevertheless very focused on the portrayal of those historical and cultural aspects that make of the region a unique land of ancient knowledge. What often pushes people to visit the Echigo-tsumari region is the wish to be transported back to the *furusato*, the "hometown", land of their ancestors. Along with the artists' installations, the vast plain hosts talks, workshops, and food tasting events with the intention of reconnecting people to the harsh but highly rewarding ways their predecessors used to live.

The promotion of *satoyama* and *shizenkan* proves to be an optimal ally in the attraction of eco-tourism and in fostering the image of a rural Japan that has always been profoundly linked to the land and strived to live in balance with it.

The ETAF is first and foremost a community building project (*machizukuri*) aimed at the consolidation and preservation of its cultural heritage. Only secondarily, do environmental motives enter the picture, almost as if it were by virtue of these that it is worth intervening to rescue rural Japan.

ETAF installations must continuously extricate themselves between the myth of the allegedly Japanese "love of nature" and the aestheticization of the countryside linked to the concept of *furusato*. The multiple and frequently conflicting agendas that must be met at the same time in the ETAF experience, undoubtedly make it particularly difficult for the artworks to express their full potential. Indeed, balancing the different artistic, ecological, economic and social imperatives on which the Triennale rests proves to be not an easy task, too often depriving the works of art of

the possibility to be truly socially engaged. The outcome of such negotiations is frequently the transformation of artworks into tools to support romanticized notions of cultural heritage rather than effectively suggesting valid alternatives for an improved and sustainable future.

In the ETAF there is a general lack of critical examination of the social system and its underlying problems. The engagement with the land does not directly seek to encourage the public to embrace more environmentally conscious behaviors, nor does it aim for a deeper reflection on the causes of climate change. In the ETAF, art does not seem to be expected to address social and political matters, artists' involvement is supported as far as it benefits the region's prosperity by drawing tourists and, ideally, new future citizens. Citing Kajiya, "the creative power of art works is not—or is not permitted to be—utilized to examine critically the current social system, only to be incorporated into it"(Kajiya 2017).

ETAF installations have been referred to as "eco-art"; yet, I would advise against such loose application of the term. As specified in the first chapter, ecological art must inevitably reflect on the idea of ecosystem to be regarded as such, and as we have seen, this does not seem to be always the case for several of the works exhibited at ETAF. It does not suffice for art to look "green" or to be displayed outdoor to be ecological and reflective of the environment; this has already been proven by land artists' experimentations. Furthermore, even in the case of a genuinely ecological creative expression, labeling it as "eco" risks inhibiting the work's socially engaged scope. The art institution can easily become a depoliticizing and domesticating vehicle; Although institutionalization may guarantee that a certain work will circulate under a specific label (i.e "eco-art") averting confusion with other types of practices, at the same time it brings about a lack of autonomy and the risk of being dissolved in the culture industry and society of spectacle.

Art becomes a reviving instrument in the ETAF and fails to attain its ecological mission in the effort to perform too many tasks. The great emphasis placed on revitalization leads us to wonder why it is so important for the ETAF, and likewise for Japan, to preserve the satoyama.

The word satoyama only entered general usage in the 1960s, when it was adopted by forest ecologist Shidei. As the term gained popularity, people suddenly became aware of the latter's state of decay and looming depopulation. The combined effect of an increased reliance on food and energy sources from overseas, the housing shortage of the post-war era and the general abandonment of the countryside with the consequent aging of the population, had resulted in the progressive deterioration of the country's satoyama landscapes (Takeuchi, Ichikawa, and Elmqvist 2016, 34). Consequently, conservation groups, primarily established by urban residents advocating for the rehabilitation of satoyama, steadily began to emerge between the 1980s and 1990s. The renovated sensitivity towards traditional agricultural landscapes and the accent placed on satoyama ecosystemic functions rapidly transformed it into a powerful symbol of green post-bubble movements.

Speaking of satoyama today, means to refer to the traditional Japanese agricultural landscape, characterized by the positive interaction and harmonious co-existence of people and nature. On a tourist site sponsoring guided tours in the Japanese countryside, we read: "Living in Satoyama, Japanese people have become part of the ecosystem, realizing what is now called a sustainable lifestyle" ('About SATOYAMA EXPERIENCE | SATOYAMA EXPERIENCE' 2014).

In a time where the effects of the environmental crisis manifest themselves overbearingly, the emphasis placed on the efficiency of satoyama as a human-nature integrated system, has resulted in its international popularization, making of the term satoyama the "new buzzword in

environmental activism worldwide" (Machotka 2018a, 217). On October 2010, during the 10th Conference of the Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity, the International Partnership for the Satoyama Initiative (IPSI) was established, jointly initiated by the Ministry of the Environment of Japan (MOEJ) and the United Nations University Institute for the Advanced Study of Sustainability (UNU-IAS). According to the IPSI's official website, the Partnership intends to "realize societies in harmony with nature, […] built on positive human-nature relationships" ('ABOUT IPSI | International Partnership for the Satoyama Initiative' n.d.). In conjunction with the launch of the Initiative, the term "Social-Ecological Production Landscape and Seascape (SEPLS)" was coined, to identify all those areas around the globe where, similarly to the Japanese countryside, people and nature interact (Natori et al. 2018). The term satoyama has become so powerful in its association with sustainability that it has lately resulted in the popularization of a ''sister term'': *satoumi*, or ''village sea'' (Knight 2010, 427).

Professor Takeuchi Kazuhiko has been and still is one of the biggest advocates for the promotion of satoyama as a valuable blueprint to envision future societies based on the respectful coexistence of man and nature. Kazuhiko added to the discussion by emphasizing the significance of satoyama for its biodiversity; he has described such traditional landscapes as "mosaic landscapes" made up of different habitats such as rice fields, dry fields, forests, meadows, irrigation channels, storage ponds, and human communities. In virtue of this mosaic-like structure, made possible by human intervention, a great range of flora and fauna is allowed to thrive, making of satoyama an essential asset in the preservation of biodiversity (Takeuchi, Ichikawa, and Elmqvist 2016, 32). To summarize, from an ecological standpoint, it is worth preserving Japanese agricultural landscapes firstly because they are a reservoir of ecological visions and sustainable ways of living, and secondly, because of their abundant biodiversity. In any case, it has also been noted that satoyama's biodiversity value has frequently just been assumed, and that its management has mostly focused on productive services, with little emphasis on biodiversity protection (Indrawan et al. 2014). Additionally, it is still ethically debatable whether humans should act to restore neglected satoyama, since reestablishment also paradoxically requires killing of species that have started to inhabit the abandoned land (Duraiappah et al. 2010, 5–6).

It is essential to remember, however, that the significance ascribed to satoyama is not solely ecological, but stems from the fact that it is first and foremost "culturally significant". In Japan satoyama has been granted the status of national heritage; more specifically, according to the UNESCO terminology, satoyama is an example of *cultural landscape* formed by the interactions between humans and the natural environment (UNESCO World Heritage Centre n.d.). Satoyama is also an example of rural heritage. Citing Indrawan et al. "a rural heritage space emerges when a government claims or invents landscapes, people, and culture as iconic symbols to gain a nation identity in the minds of people" (Indrawan et al. 2014, 129). It follows that two important features of rural heritage are its performed character and its connection to nation imaginings.

Plenty of studies have already shed light on how heritage is created, handled, politicized, and consumed. Researchers have claimed that heritage is the product of a continuous process of negotiation and rewriting that tries to make it as suitable as possible to the demands of the present[5]. In the process, what is deemed compatible with contemporary needs is preserved, while what is not gets lost. On an article published on FIELD Journal, we read that Kawamata Tadashi,

[5] This has been widely discussed in: (Smith 2006; Harrison 2010; Lowenthal 2015)

supporter and participant of the Triennale, has been "critical of the *Echigo-Tsumari Art Field* for excluding the less assimilable experiences of its aging hosts—something particularly troubling when we realize they are among the stars of the show" (Jesty 2017). In rural heritage spaces certain aspects of culture are performed in order to elicit public recognition and, as a result, reinforce identities, attract visitors, and capital expenditure.

Religion and nostalgia also play a key role in the formation of rural heritage. By fostering attachment and devotion, these latter contribute to shaping an appealing and sentimentalized version of the countryside. Against this backdrop, also the residents' experiences get to a certain degree fictionalized often confined to an audience-oriented cyclical reproductivity. Murti has underlined the important role played by locals in the construction of a specific landscape as a heritage space. Locals, who collaborate with regional governments by sharing revenues, aid to propagate the national vision through the performance of heritage (Murti 2020, 144).

In the 1990s, the Japanese government launched a series of initiatives aimed at the regeneration of rural communities. In the process of what has been named the village revitalization movement (*muraokoshi undō*), nature has been appropriated and "sold" as a commodity in the effort to entice people to return to the abandoned territories. The objectification of nature proved to be a successful solution, attested by the increased popularity of nature-tourism. It was simply a matter of selling people what they needed. Indeed, since the 1970s, urbanities have been experiencing a profound feeling of nostalgia for the past, a sign of the abrupt and unsettling mass displacement in urban centers of the postwar period (Knight 2010, 436). The longing for the past occasioned the romanticization of Japanese heritage. In our instance, the physical space identified by the term satoyama was matched with the aesthetic concept of *furusato*. This latter, literally meaning "old village", refers to the ancient agrarian landscape inhabited by the ancestors and is thus considered a place of spiritual belonging and peaceful reconnection (Knight 2010, 436).

What is truly sought for in the name of nature is thus not always nature in its purest form, but the captivating, pastoralized world popularized by Japanese medieval anecdotal tales (*setsuwa*), legends, myths, and animistic cults. The satoyama nature has consequently become a commodity to be marketed and safeguarded as some sort of 'limited good' (Moon 1997, 233). In this context, there is the danger that preservation and environmentalism will themselves be turned into commodities. In the end, satoyama is just another version of secondary nature, still "controlled" by the human subject in some respects, and should not be confused for an attachment to primary nature. It is therefore more accurate to state that satoyama describes a socio-ecological system rather than an ecosystem.

In conclusion, the ETAF can be considered a self-conscious effort to utilize art for practical purposes, located within the realm of heritagization processes. The term *heritagization* (or *patrimonialization*) refers to those processes in which certain "cultural or natural elements (from the past) are selected and reworked for new social uses" (Roigé 2010, 12). As a result, what frequently occurs is that the history of a place is ignored, while those portions to which heritage status is attributed, will assist the development of a superficial and highly attractive image of place (Walsh 2002, 139). Indeed, these places often become tourist attractions, regulated by the craving to consume the spectacle they provide.

Ultimately the satoyama landscape, portrayed as an authentic Japanese legacy, has been subjected to a process of reworking aimed at making it as relevant to the needs of the present as

possible; in this case, what is seen to be worth preserving is the ecological aspect of it. It may then be possible to speculate that if in the past, during its striving for modernization, Japan presented itself as an advanced high-tech innovator through its "Cool Japan" face, now, in a time of climate crisis the country has decided to put together a new face, the one of a *Green Japan,* which is rural, traditional, harmonious and hopeful.

The promotion of Shinto as a "green religion" has further contributed to the spread of the "closeness-to-nature" myth, especially after the 1997 Harvard University conference titled "Shinto and Ecology". In line with the previous discussion, Rots has demonstrated how the association of Shinto with nature and environmentalism is of rather recent date. Shinto has been recast into an ancient environmentalist religion that, by sacralizing nature, encourages its protection. "Grounded in an awareness of the interdependence of humans, nature and deities (Rots 2017, 79)" and opposed to the selfish and destructive "'Western', 'monotheistic' anthropocentrism (Rots 2017, 65–66)", Japanese view of nature, embodied by Shinto, is presented as the proper way to relate to the world, capable to repair to the alienation from it at the origin of its destruction. Despite this new dress, it is worth remembering that back in the Meiji period, Shinto had been profoundly infused by the imperial-nationalistic mythology, wisely used to legitimize the emperor's rule by conferring him divine origins as direct descendant of the Sun Goddess Amaterasu. Shinto strong political associations are nowadays completely lost, substituted by a new ecological-friendly face. In light of these reflections, it may seem legitimate to wonder to what extent have Japanese politicians instrumentalized the climate crisis to popularize Shinto internationally. Sure thing is that conservatives' interests and activists' ones have by now intertwined so ambiguously that it is no longer possible to understand whether promoting Shinto as a mean of environmental justice is a conscious and well-thought move or rather an ideological choice aimed at international popularization.

Beyond any of these speculations, it is true that Japan currently shares the same environmental issues as other industrialized countries, regardless of its self-proclaimed love of nature. Quite on the opposite, the country's actions towards nature protection have been frequently described as "slow" (Asquith and Kalland 1997, 183), "particularistic and situational" (Rots 2017, 133). Satoyama, intended as "unique" Japanese answer to the environmental crisis, at least partly, responds to nation branding political agendas. Ultimately, recovery is carried out to safeguard a major cultural heritage site, and hence for cultural rather than environmental purposes.

To conclude, the analysis of the ETAF festival through eco-lenses has revealed a complex reality. On the one hand, the festival foregrounds ecological principles and seeks to offer opportunities for meaningful engagement with nature. However, on the other hand, the festival also displays a certain degree of "marketing" nature to sell consumer-oriented visions of cultural heritage. As such, while the ETAF may represent a step in the right direction, it also raises important questions about the role of art and culture in relation to environmental advocacy and sustainability. Only by continuing to critically engage with these questions can we hope to build a truly ecological art practice that prioritizes the health of our planet and its inhabitants.

CHAPTER 3. The teamLab project: an alternative approach

The concept of a harmonious relationship between humans and nature is a widely accepted view in describing Japanese culture. The *shizenkan* myth, entails the assumption of a close link between

a cultural group's collective identity and their affection for nature. As demonstrated in the previous chapter, this idea can be appropriated for various cultural and political motives, rather than serving as a means of promoting sustainable and innovative solutions. The present chapter aims to explore a distinct approach to the Asian understanding of nature. The digital art collective teamLab has adopted an interesting approach towards the natural environment. Through innovative and unorthodox methods, the collective aims to recast conventional beliefs in a more conscious and engaged manner. I contend that teamLab's creations, despite typically not involving the use of organic, living matter, espouse a fundamental ecological value that is both reflective and meaningful.

Recasting "nature" and "tradition" for brighter horizons

Founded in 2001, teamLab is an artistic collective working at the intersection between science, art and technology developing intriguing participatory experiences aimed at exploring new forms of relationalities between the self and the world. The group is composed by more than 400 individuals, specialized in engineering, programming, visual arts, animations, mathematics and architecture. teamLab has achieved worldwide acclaim for its captivating works that blur the lines between art gallery, public space, and popular amusement.

The collective creates immersive environments in which nature in all of its manifestations is the main character. However, rather than being nurtured and then incorporated into the creative installation, this latter is digitized, transformed and augmented, made pervasive and vividly colored, in a nutshell: surprising.

In *Valley of Flowers and People: Lost, Immersed and Reborn* (2020) an almost overwhelming abundance of different types of flowers pervades the visitor's visual and sensory field. People are invited to roam freely through the exhibition spaces without there being a pre-designated path to follow, nor a time limit to their permanence. In the meantime, the installation space gradually evolves, according to the changing seasons. The flowers cyclically grow, bloom and slowly decay.

The installation, like many of teamLab's other works, responds to touch and movement; when a person remains still, the flowers around them expand and blossom more abundantly. Touching or stepping on the flowers causes them to lose their petals, wither, and die all at once[6]. The visitor is encouraged to interact with the surfaces so as to connect to the virtual environs. Each individual, with its actions, can make his own personal contribution to the landscape, determining from time to time its multiple, unrepeatable, manifestations.

TeamLab hopes that by digitizing nature, certain of its components will become more comprehensible and graspable to the human mind. Installations like *Valley of Flowers and People* are aimed at reacquaint with complex natural shapes and textures, given that such intimate encounters are becoming increasingly rare in contemporary society. Furthermore, the works attempt to make visible the time of nature, whose rhythms are well beyond our ability to comprehend; in fact, these are changes that go often unnoticed, simply because of the fact that their pace is just too slow for human beings to clearly observe. TeamLab thinks that by integrating

[6] 'Valley of Flowers and People: Lost, Immersed and Reborn | TeamLab', Valley of Flowers and People: Lost, Immersed and Reborn | teamLab, accessed 24 January 2023, https://www.teamLab.art/w/flowermountain/.

and simplifying such aspects, artworks have the capacity to provide individuals with fresh cognitive insights into reality that they would not have achieved on their own[7].

The concept of *borderlessness* is crucial for the creative team in the development of their visions. TeamLab suggests that because reality is so complicated to understand, people have begun to divide it into simpler distinct units with perceived boundaries between them. As outlined earlier in the discussion, these boundaries are dangerous and harmful. Indeed, those are to credit for our society's deficits, where man's disproportionate gain over everything else has long been accepted. TeamLab thus wishes to break through the rigid perceptual barriers we have constructed, in order to enable the reintegration of the self in the world; " everything exists in a long, fragile yet miraculous, borderless continuity," [8] they claim. The digitalized nature experience invites the visitors to a complete immersion into the artistic medium, allowing for the full abandonment of boundaries. Conventional partitions such as viewer/image, human/nature, self/strangers are suspended.

teamLab, *Valley of Flowers and People: Lost, Immersed and Reborn*, 2020 © teamLab

[7] 'Digitized Nature | TeamLab', Digitized Nature | teamLab, accessed 24 January 2023, https://www.teamLab.art/concept/digitizednature/.

[8] 'BIOGRAPHY | TeamLab', BIOGRAPHY | teamLab, accessed 24 January 2023, https://www.teamLab.art/about/.

teamLab, *Life is Continuous Light -Azalea Valley,* 2017 © teamLab

The immersive and interactive character of the installations calls into question the visitor's status as a mere distant watcher, a prevalent dynamic in the art world. There is no passive observation, conversely new agency is given to the audience, who has the power of changing the artwork. Drawing from traditional Japanese scroll paintings, teamLab seeks to create what it has defined as "ultrasubjective space" in which the boundary between the real and artistic worlds is dissolved. More precisely, the viewer's imagination is stimulated to perceive itself *ultra-subjectively*, that is, as part of the space rather than merely as a bystander.

TeamLab employs the same spatial depiction strategy as premodern Japanese art, where oblique parallel projection resulted in no fixed-angle vanishing point ('Making Magic from Light and Pixels' 2019). The impression is that the moving digital canvases are alive and all-encompassing, instead of solely existing behind a screen.

The digital artworks are created in 3D and then flattened to become two-dimensional. The combination of both flatness and depth, generates a dynamic immersive experience without a single defined vantage viewpoint. The technique employed to depict space is thus in stark contrast to the Western art tradition, where the use of linear perspective assumes a limited, fixed, monocular point of view (Lee 2022, 43). The suspension of the traditional Western viewpoint enables teamLab to situate the viewer right in the artwork, eliminating any sort of division between viewer and image. In an ultrasubjective space then, there is no hierarchical point of view, and the viewer can be moved. Multiple viewers can assume multiple positions, shift perspectives, and interact with distinct areas. A fixed point of view, on the other hand, would force the spectator to remain in the same position, looking at the picture always at the same distance and in the same

way. The viewer's freedom to move their body is restored through ultrasubjective space; and as they explore the environment, visitors can gain different perceptions[9].

It is significant that there is no focal point of view in teamLab's creations. Indeed, the group believes that how people view the world has a huge influence on how they behave towards it. We grew accustomed to perceiving reality as if we were gazing at the "outside" world through lenses, similarly to how we would watch television.; however, this is an illusion. This way of looking at things produces a separation between our bodies and the spaces we inhabit, causing us to feel disconnected from everything surrounding us. Truth is that there is always something that eludes us, we cannot grasp everything because there is no vantage point, no commanding position from which to look at the world. The barrier body/world vanishes when new modes to comprehend space, in this case *ultrasubjectively*, are imagined, and reality may finally be grasped in its unbounded continuity ('Ultrasubjective Space | TeamLab' n.d.).

The eradication of any form of human-eye control over nature recalls once again the issue linked to the concept of *fūkei*, which in this case teamLab brilliantly manages to solve. Because an ultrasubjective immersion helps reintegrating the human in its environment, equivalenting movement into the digital image to movement in the natural world, also the dichotomy nature/human is fixed. Demonstrating the transformative power we exert over the interactive installations, teamLab artistic ventures make us aware of the impact our actions have on our actual environs. Furthermore, by allowing space for new encounters, teamLab suggests how, if more attention is paid to our real-life surroundings, novel and surprising things may be noticed.

Adding to this, deeper connection is not encouraged only between individuals and the digitized nature but also between visitors. People's perceptions of their interpersonal interactions are also altered when they are driven to see the other guests as neither strangers nor obstacles in each other's way; on the contrary, with their individual actions affecting the space, they are cocreators in the marvelous artwork that unfolds around them. In other words, because everyone is inside the work, everyone is an essential active component in it.

In *Life is Continuous Light - Azalea Valley* (2017) visitors walk, almost hidden, among azaleas bushes beneath the cliffs of Mount Mifuneyama. The azaleas are softly illuminated, but when a visitor approaches them, they shine more brightly for than slowly fading again. The brightness also propagates to the surrounding bushes, giving the impression that the valley is gently breathing. The participants in the artwork experience a sense of solidarity and communion, bonded even over substantial distances by the radiating lights and sounds.

Azalea Valley also shows how nature may be transformed into living art without necessarily harming it. Indeed, light and sound are typical creative elements deployed by the collective, and since they are characterized by non-materiality and ephemerality, they present advantageous nondestructive properties.

[9] 'Ultrasubjective Space | TeamLab', Ultrasubjective Space | teamLab, accessed 23 January 2023, https://www.teamLab.art/concept/ultrasubjective-space/.

teamLab, *The World of Irreversible Change,* 2022 © teamLab

The work of teamLab frequently makes considerable use of tradition-based iconography, which could make us think of the umpteenth example of self-orientalization operated on the part of the digital artists. Nevertheless, I argue, such integration is done in an intelligent way that seeks to leverage the positive potential of "traditions" instead of resorting to their mere objectification.

Foxwell has defined contemporary Japanese artworks featuring or referencing Japanese art history and culture as "tradition-based contemporary art"(Foxwell 2019, 57). The author posits that tradition continues to hold an important position in contemporary exhibitions of Japanese art, increasingly growing over time. Foxwell argues that the development and expansion of tradition-based art is worthy of renewed attention and seeks to address the criticisms leveled against this style. Although some may view tradition-based contemporary art as "overly precious, uncritical, or self-Orientalizing," Foxwell highlights the "self-conscious critical stance" of notable tradition-based Japanese art which rejects "cynicism and self-conscious criticality"(Foxwell 2019, 70). One such example of this style is teamLab, which creates a connection with its audience by incorporating "sentimental, idealized, and sensorily familiar immersive environment(s)"(Foxwell 2019, 69). In other words, by precisely adopting well-known cultural elements, teamLab creates a space that is both engaging and recognizable for its viewers, thus forging a deeper connection between the artwork and the audience.

Contemporary Japanese artists that choose to include tradition into their works demonstrate a strong determination to engage with and reflect on this latter. What does tradition mean? What is it exactly? What are the underlying dynamics that continuously *re*-shape Japanese cultural heritage? If compared with more hypercritical examples such as Takashi Murakami or Makoto Aida, who employ tradition to make strong and impactful critical statements, the teamLab case is undoubtedly less confrontational in tone, presenting, in Foxwell's words, a "suspension of criticality". This, however, does not make it any less reflective. In this regard, the artistic collective

can be positioned within a current rising "anti-critical critical turn", which attempts to alter the tone of reception surrounding tradition-based art through the adoption of more measured tactics and the creation of absorptive transcendental environments.

The approach adopted by teamLab is profoundly ecological, in the non-dualistic relationship it conceives between humans and non-human worlds. The suspension of boundaries and the accent placed on interdependency and interconnection gives origins to what Wendi Haslem has named "simulated ecologies"[10]. Laura Lee likewise has recently highlighted the ecological aspect of teamLab inventions, stating that they may be regarded as an example of "techno-ecology". According to Lee, techno-ecology originates when the interdependency produced with the support of technology, reproduces and is united with that in nature (Lee 2022, 196). This means that the digital environment is conceptualized as an environmental system, to which art helps to relate, acting like a sort of mediator. The technological is hence expressed as the biological and ecological awareness is raised via "heightened awareness of mutual responsibility and shared transformation in both art and the natural order" (Lee 2022, 191).

In any case, because teamLab's depictions of nature are centered on beauty and awe, it is reasonable to question whether this is sufficient to alert people to the environmental emergency, or whether beauty, once again can perform a counterproductive anesthetic action. Haslem points out how teamLab installations do not limit themselves to glorify an illusionary beauty, but are also marked by an underlying feeling of loss[11]. Furthermore, placing us at the center of a simulated ecology and providing us with the means to construct it raises awareness of our part and accountability for the current ecological precarity (Haslem 2020, 261). Undeniably, such beautiful borderless worlds, are an illusion, a wonderful utopia. Yet, the sensorial engagement shows that other realities are possible, and that beauty can also assist in the face of an unappealing world by providing a clear vision to hold on to, without which changing it would be an impossible venture. Of course, it would be interesting to consider whether using mobile phones to capture the thrilling creations could be somehow detrimental to the overall affective experience, but I am afraid this would go beyond the scope of this study for the time being.

Concluding, if we consider teamLab's production and we confront it with the artistic output of the ETAF we can say that the former, supposedly because it is free from having to fulfill multiple agendas at the same time, certainly presents more freedom of movement and explorative power, and therefore may offer more fascinating possibilities in rethinking humans' relationship with nature. This conclusion may seem paradoxical at first, considering that in the ETAF experience, one envisages a genuine contact with the Japanese countryside, whereas in the case of teamLab, the encounter between human and nature occurs solely on a virtually impermanent level.

Today, contemporary artistic practices such as the one exemplified by teamLab, by devising innovative ways to produce alternative interrelated contemporaneities, are hinting towards the possibility for a sounder mode to live on and collaborate with Planet Earth. The other-than-human world is little by little gaining back its voice and inherent meaning; this, undeniably, is a faithful hope for the future, to which we can cling to.

[10] Wendy Haslem, 'TeamLab Borderless: Bridging Borders in Simulated Ecologies', *MAST: The Journal of Media Arts Study and Theory* 1, no. 2 (2020): 242–63.
[11] Haslem, 'TeamLab Borderless', 260.

Conclusion

In an increasingly threatened ecosystem, characterized by over-exploitation and the fast running out of ecological resources, the power of art and its intrinsic ecological value lies in its capacity for building a different kind of imagination. Extensively has already been written about the importance to address ecological issues not only through policy but also culturally; indeed, as reported by political geographer David Harvey, a failure of the imagination is behind the ecological crisis (Harvey 2006). Ecological art would therefore be an important ally in the recalibration of our senses and imaginative power, especially when it comes to repair to the fracture between human and nature that has ultimately resulted in the overarching affirmation of the climate crisis. Eco-art draws its images from the natural world, but instead of limiting itself to a passive appreciation of the beauty of creation encourages us to plunge into it and to engage in conversation with insects, stones, fungi and flowers, all entities who have commonly been silenced or forgotten; it advocates for contact, fusion, it brings together what is often perceived as distant or opposite; in doing so, ecological art practices produce new meaning and trace alternative interconnected horizons. In sum, for an ecological art to be described as such, this must have no detrimental environmental impact, and most importantly, ecocentric philosophies must be present so to dissolve margins and break through hierarchies. If declined in these terms, ecological art forms can assist the construction of a new sustainable and post-anthropocentric relational reality.

My case studies have allowed me to present two different approaches to nature. In the ETAF case, the entanglement between art and satoyama, intended as vibrant part of Japanese national heritage, makes the concept of ecosystemic coexistence sensorially more difficult to grasp, as emphasis is placed more on revitalization. The heritagization process going on in the ETAF experience reinforces the partition nature/culture; here, nature could be a "teacher" and inspire human-led activities, yet what ultimately counts are the human cultural outputs set *in* nature, rather than nature itself. Nature appears to be tightly controlled, its agency has no room to unfold. Kitagawa's project centers on the alleged Japanese "love of nature" and the melancholic notion of *furusato*, thereby transforming the country's countryside into a commodity. However, any attempt to market nature will inevitably result in its demise and alteration. On the other hand, teamLab experimentations, even if generally focused on fictitious nature, show a much more revolutionary impulse in their conscious attempt to reshape inter-relational patterns and willingness to contribute to different understandings of what it means to be human. In this respect, teamLab appears to be much more reflective of the eco-art imperatives I attempted to outline at the outset of this study.

Throughout Japan's history, there have been countless instances of severe environmental destruction and regardless of its self-proclaimed love for nature the country did not manage to escape the global trend towards the alienation from nature. In any case, the Japanese *shizenkan*, generally also referred to as the Asian conception of nature, is employed by both artistic ventures; what's different is that, while ETAF uses this last to market nature, teamLab positively leverages it as an appealing representational ideal that aids connections' reshaping.

The Echigo-tsumari Art Field frames crystallized notions of nature based on tradition. Although Fram Kitagawa has repeatedly stressed the festival purpose to "re-connect humans to nature" by envisioning new relationalities based on ecosystem principles, art has been used here more often as part of a campaign to revitalize the region, which has been gradually abandoned over the years as young people migrated to larger urban centers seeking after safer sources of livelihood. It is

hard for artworks located within the ETAF to easily escape the consumption mechanism of the Triennale, to effectively promote environmental awareness and propose alternative modes of living. Eventually, everything comes down to a tourist experience that looks nostalgically back to a fictional aestheticized past.

The teamLab collective also relates to *shizenkan* philosophies and aesthetic ideals, but does so with a direct look into the future. The point of departure is always tradition but this one is used to create something completely new. In other words, teamLab advances the development of a novel ecological gaze, one which "perceives any autonomous phenomenon [...] in its relationship with its environment" (Kagan 2014, 193) and that acknowledges the existence of numerous eco-authors in a singular piece of art. TeamLab is powerfully hinting towards the imagining of a new world, more than the ETAF experience, at its current state, can possibly do. Indeed, by relentlessly questioning the relationship between human and the environment, there is a distinctive awareness that humans are not the rulers of the world, but on the contrary, they share sovereignty with other creatures and entities. If we are to truly cope with our times, we must undergo a cultural change that entails the construction of a sustainable imagination that would move beyond biodiversity preservation as a simply utilitarian rationale. Ecological art forms can help us achieve this goal, exemplifying how redefining ourselves can possibly revolutionize our world. This is a step that has yet to be taken in Niigata prefecture, which has been excessively focused on the cultural significance of the agricultural environment. There is the need to define a clearer goal for the individual artworks featured in the ETAF, one that would effectively transform them into environmentally conscious installations.

References

'ABOUT IPSI | International Partnership for the Satoyama Initiative'. n.d. Accessed 30 August 2022. https://satoyama-initiative.org/about/.

'About SATOYAMA EXPERIENCE | SATOYAMA EXPERIENCE'. 2014. 21 March 2014. https://satoyama-experience.com/about/.

Araeen, Rasheed. 2009. 'Ecoaesthetics: A Manifesto for the Twenty-First Century'. *Third Text* 23 (5): 679–84. https://doi.org/10.1080/09528820903189327.

Asquith, Pamela J., and Arne Kalland. 1997. *Japanese Images of Nature: Cultural Perspectives*. Taylor & Francis.

'BIOGRAPHY | TeamLab'. n.d. BIOGRAPHY | TeamLab. Accessed 24 January 2023. https://www.teamlab.art/about/.

Boettger, Suzaan. 2002. *Earthworks: Art and the Landscape of the Sixties*. Univ of California Press.

Centre, UNESCO World Heritage. n.d. 'Cultural Landscapes'. UNESCO World Heritage Centre. Accessed 8 September 2022. https://whc.unesco.org/en/culturallandscape/.

'Digitized Nature | TeamLab'. n.d. Digitized Nature | TeamLab. Accessed 24 January 2023. https://www.teamlab.art/concept/digitizednature/.

Duraiappah, Anantha Kumar, Koji Nakamura, Kazuhiko Takeuchi, Masataka Watanabe, and Maiko Nishi. 2010. 'Satoyama–Satoumi Ecosystems and Human Well-Being: Assessing Trends to Rethink a Sustainable Future'.

'Echigo-Tsumari Art Field'. n.d. Echigo-Tsumari Art Field. Accessed 9 January 2022. https://www.echigo-tsumari.jp/en/.
Foxwell, Chelsea. 2019. 'The Currency of "Tradition" in Recent Exhibitions of Contemporary Japanese Art'.
Gablik, Suzi. 1991. *The Reenchantment of Art*. Vol. 500. Thames and Hudson New York.
Gamble, Christopher N., Joshua S. Hanan, and Thomas Nail. 2019. 'What Is New Materialism?' *Angelaki* 24 (6): 111–34. https://doi.org/10.1080/0969725X.2019.1684704.
Harrison, Rodney. 2010. 'The Politics of Heritage'. *Understanding the Politics of Heritage* 5: 154–96.
Harvey, David. 2006. 'The Sociological and Geographical Imaginations'. *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society* 18 (3): 211. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10767-006-9009-6.
Hasegawa, Koichi. 2004. *Constructing Civil Society in Japan: Voices of Environmental Movements*. Stratification and Inequality Series 310173345. Melbourne: Trans Pacific Press.
Haslem, Wendy. 2020. 'Teamlab Borderless: Bridging Borders in Simulated Ecologies'. *MAST: The Journal of Media Arts Study and Theory* 1 (2): 242–63.
Indrawan, Mochamad, Mitsuyasu Yabe, Hisako Nomura, and Rhett Harrison. 2014. 'Deconstructing Satoyama–The Socio-Ecological Landscape in Japan'. *Ecological Engineering* 64: 77–84.
Jesty, Justin. 2017. 'Japan's Social Turn: An Introductory Companion'. *FIELD: A Journal of Socially-Engaged Art Criticism* 7.
———. n.d. 'Japan's Social Turn: Introduction to Part II'.
Kagan, Sacha. 2014. *Art and Sustainability: Connecting Patterns for a Culture of Complexity*. 2nd ed. Image 25. Bielefeld: transcript Verlag.
Kajiya, Kenji. 2017. 'Japanese Art Projects in History'. *FIELD: A Journal of Socially-Engaged Art Criticism* 7.
Kawashima, Nobuko. 2017. 'The Development of Art Projects in Japan: Policy and Economic Perspectives'. *FIELD: A Journal of Socially-Engaged Art Criticism*, no. 8.
Kitagawa, Fram, Lynne Breslin, and Adrian Favell. 2015. *Art Place Japan: The Echigo-Tsumari Art Triennale and the Vision to Reconnect Art and Nature*. Princeton Architectural Press New York, NY, USA:
Knight, Catherine. 2010. 'The Discourse of "Encultured Nature" in Japan: The Concept of Satoyama and Its Role in 21st-Century Nature Conservation'. *Asian Studies Review* 34 (4): 421–41.
Kumakura, S. 2015. 'An Overview of Art Projects in Japan: A Society That Co-Creates with Art (Art Translators Collective, Trans.). Tokyo: Tokyo Art Research Lab. Retrieved April 24, 2017'.
Latour, Bruno. 2012. *We Have Never Been Modern*. Harvard university press.
Lee, Laura. 2022. *Worlds Unbound: The Art of TeamLab*. Bristol: Intellect Books Ltd.
Leung, Kei Yan, and Line Marie Thorsen. 2022. 'Experiencing Art from a Field of Rice: How Farmers Relate to Rural Revitalisation and Art at Japan's Echigo-Tsumari Art Festival'. *Sociologia Ruralis* 62 (3): 611–31.
Lowenthal, David. 2015. *The Past Is a Foreign Country-Revisited*. Cambridge University Press.
Machotka, Ewa. 2018. 'Consuming Eco-Art: Satoyama at the Echigo-Tsumari Art Triennale 2012'. In *Consuming Life in Post-Bubble Japan*, 215–36. Amsterdam University Press.

MAD Architects, dir. 2022. *A Voyage to MAD's Tunnel of Light*. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pOjxwFXeXAE.

'Making Magic from Light and Pixels'. 2019. ABC Radio National. 8 October 2019. https://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/the-art-show/toshiyuki-inoko/11586070.

Meshscheryakov, Aleksander Nikolayevich. 2020. 'Ten Essays on National Character by Haga Yaichi'. *Russian Japanology Review* 3 (1): 77–96.

Moon, Okpyo. 1997. 'Marketing Nature in Rural Japan'. *Japanese Images of Nature: Cultural Perspectives*, 221–35.

Murti, Desideria Cempaka Wijaya. 2020. 'Performing Rural Heritage for Nation Branding: A Comparative Study of Japan and Indonesia'. *Journal of Heritage Tourism* 15 (2): 127–48. https://doi.org/10.1080/1743873X.2019.1617720.

Naoya, Fujita. n.d. 'Zen'ei No Zonbitachi: Chiiki Āto No Shomondai'[Zombies of the Avant-Garde: The Problems with Regional Art]'. *Chiiki ā to: Bigaku/Seido/Nihon*, 11–44.

Natori, Yoji, Devon Dublin, Yasuo Takahashi, and Federico Lopez-Casero. 2018. 'SEPLS: Socio-Ecological Production Landscapes and Seascapes -Experiences Overcoming Barriers from around the World'. *Https://Www.Iges.or.Jp/En/Pub/Sepls-Socio-Ecological-Production-Landscapes/En*, 8. https://doi.org/10.57405/iges-6699.

Roigé, Xavier. 2010. 'Constructing Cultural and Natural Heritage : Parks, Museums and Rural Heritage'. *Constructing Cultural and Natural Heritage*, 1–233.

Rots, Aike P. 2017. *Shinto, Nature and Ideology in Contemporary Japan: Making Sacred Forests*. Bloomsbury Publishing.

'*Satoyama*'. 2022. In *Wikipedia*. https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Satoyama&oldid=1090899046.

Shirane, Haruo. 2012. *Japan and the Culture of the Four Seasons: Nature, Literature, and the Arts*. New York: Columbia University Press. https://doi.org/10.7312/shir15280.

Smith, Laurajane. 2006. *Uses of Heritage*. Routledge.

Takeuchi, Kazuhiko, Kaoru Ichikawa, and Thomas Elmqvist. 2016. 'Satoyama Landscape as Social–Ecological System: Historical Changes and Future Perspective'. *Current Opinion in Environmental Sustainability* 19: 30–39.

'The Rice Fields - Artworks | Echigo-Tsumari Art Field'. n.d. Echigo-Tsumari Art Field. Accessed 5 September 2022. https://www.echigo-tsumari.jp/en/art/artwork/the_rice_field/.

'Tsumari in Bloom - Artworks | Echigo-Tsumari Art Field'. n.d. Echigo-Tsumari Art Field. Accessed 5 September 2022. https://www.echigo-tsumari.jp/en/art/artwork/tsumari_in_bloom/.

'Tunnel of Light - Artworks | Echigo-Tsumari Art Field'. n.d. Echigo-Tsumari Art Field. Accessed 6 September 2022. https://www.echigo-tsumari.jp/en/art/artwork/periscopelight_cave/.

'Ultrasubjective Space | TeamLab'. n.d. Ultrasubjective Space | TeamLab. Accessed 23 January 2023. https://www.teamlab.art/concept/ultrasubjective-space/.

'Valley of Flowers and People: Lost, Immersed and Reborn | TeamLab'. n.d. Valley of Flowers and People: Lost, Immersed and Reborn | TeamLab. Accessed 24 January 2023. https://www.teamlab.art/w/flowermountain/.

Walsh, Kevin. 2002. *The Representation of the Past: Museums and Heritage in the Post-Modern World*. Routledge.

Weintraub, Linda. 2019. *What's next: Eco Materialism and Contemporary Art*. Bristol, UK ; Chicago, IL: Intellect.

'Yayoi Kusama's Most Outstanding Sculptures – Pumpkins & Flowers – Public Delivery'. n.d. Accessed 5 September 2022. https://publicdelivery.org/yayoi-kusama-outdoor-sculptures/.

關西大學文學論集. 2018. 'Terada Torahiko's" The View of Nature of the Japanese:" Translation with Critical Essay (Part 2 of 2)'.