The Role of Art Projects for the Aging Society of Japan in the Context of Rural Regeneration

Entering a new era of asking why we need “art” projects?

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1. Introduction

Currently, Japan is experiencing a rate of population-aging that is unprecedented in its scale. Moreover, many reports have addressed the problem that the effects of this situation are becoming apparent in rural areas, especially those that suffer from the outmigration of younger people. Elderly people living by themselves in the mountainous regions, for example, have difficulty maintaining their traditional way of life and many villages are in danger of disappearing entirely.

On the other hand, the constant threat posed by this aging society problem has caused a curious phenomenon in these depopulated districts: a boom of contemporary art projects in local villages, acting as a driving force for rural regeneration. Employment, tourism, community empowerment and individual development, for example, are being enhanced by the trend of bringing the arts to these isolated villages. KAJIYA (2009) suggests that this widespread boom of regional art projects in a single country is something which cannot be found in other parts of the world. While there have been various types of art activities in other countries, such as “new genre public art” in the USA and “community art” in the UK, the Japanese art project movement is a unique phenomenon, in which contemporary art involves a deep collaboration with the rural communities themselves.

With regard to the increasing impact of contemporary art projects in rural areas, this paper addresses two specific questions: 1) how have the regional art projects been developing in Japan and 2) what are the specific features of the Japanese movement compared with other international movements. Firstly, the paper begins with a definition of an art project, then it moves on to illustrate the current situation of aging and depopulation in Japan, as well as the boom in popularity of these projects throughout the country. The third section presents a chronological analysis of art projects from the 1950s in order to examine how regional art projects have developed in Japan. In the fourth section, a case study of the Echigo-Tsumari Art Triennale is introduced as an example of how an art project has tackled the issue of aging and depopulation in a rural area by taking into account this project’s economic and social impact. Subsequently, the fifth section explores the second question that concerns specific features and problems of art projects in Japan. Finally, in the conclusion, one of the most controversial issues about the “Instrumental cultural policy” is explored in detail.

1 Suzanne LACY (1995) defines this as socially responsible and ethically sound public art in the 1960s in the USA. It has an intensive engagement with the people of the site, involving direct communication and interaction over an extended period of time (KWON, 2004)

2 A type of art event based on the local community, which began in London in the 1960s. The purpose of the event was basically to find a solution to social problems such as the inclusion of ethnic minorities and people in poverty. For example, ‘The Blackie’ and ‘The Inter-Action’ (Bishop, 2012)

3 The trend that placed great emphasis on the need for arts and cultural policies to demonstrate their contribution to non-arts sectors. It was formulated in the Scandinavian countries in the 1960s and largely activated in British cultural policy in the era of the Blair government in the 1990s (BELLOW, 2002; GRAY, 2007)
2. Definition of art projects in Japan

While the definition of what constitutes an art project has been widely discussed for decades, it is quite difficult to reach a definitive conclusion. Nevertheless, as a result of a number of precise literature reviews, including the most broadly used interpretation suggested by KUMAKURA et. al. (2014), this paper defines an art project as being a “co-creative art activity”, that is a contemporary art exhibition or performance which generally takes place in non-art spaces, such as inner-city public places, shopping centers and agricultural villages, for instance. The activity is a community-based event that tends to create “site-specific art works”\(^4\). To be concrete, according to Kajiya (2010), it was in the 1990s that the term “art project”\(^5\) began to be used generally in Japan. The early cases of this use is evidenced by KAWAMATA Tadashi and YANAGI Yukinori, in the 1980s as the artists began to express their artworks as “projects”, which included the creation process itself. Then, after the “Umbrella Project”\(^6\) by Christo and Jeanne-Claude in Ibaraki prefecture in 1991, the term became commonly accepted.

When it comes to a comparison with different fields of the arts, the definition of an art project in this context mainly deals with contemporary arts. Therefore, this definition excludes theater performance, music and film, as well as profit-making activities such as art fairs and art markets.

3. Background

Before a chronological analysis of art projects can be presented, this chapter illustrates the background of the current situation of Japan, regarding its aging society and depopulation issues, as well as the boom in art projects in rural areas as a means of finding better solutions to these problems.

3. 1 Current situation of the aging society and depopulation

3.1.1 Aging society

Referring to Figure 1, the bar chart represents the Japanese population separated into four age categories; the line chart displayed over the bar chart describes the percentage of the population aged over 65 years old. From these two graphs, we can clearly see the rapid increase of people aged over 65, which is now estimated to be 25.1% of the population in 2013. This means that, currently, one fourth of the Japanese population is more than 65 years old.

The next graph shows the changes in average life expectancy of Japanese people (Fig.2). In 2012, the average life expectancy was the highest in the world, 86.4 years old for women and 79.9 for men. According to the World Health Organization, Japanese women previously had the highest ranked life expectancy for 26 years until 2011 when Hong Kong took over first place (World Health Organization, 2013).

\(^4\) In contrast to the modernism discourse, which assures the autonomy of art and abstracts the notions of site where art works are located, ‘site-specificity’ understands the relation between site and art works as an indivisible entity.

\(^5\) The term of “art project” is an English term used in Japan.

\(^6\) “Umbrella” was a project held by artists Christo and Jeanne-Claude in Ibaraki prefecture in Japan and California in the USA in August 1991, in which 31,000 umbrellas were opened all at once. It had a favourable influence on the key Japanese curators who started “art projects” later.
Figure 1: Tendency of aging from 1950 to 2013
Source: Cabinet Office (2013)

Figure 2: Changes in the life expectancy of the Japanese population from 1950 to 2012.
Source: Cabinet Office (2013)

3.2 Depopulation in rural areas

Figure 3 shows the depopulation trends. This diagram shows the number of cities, towns and villages that contain underpopulated areas. It means that in 2010, there were 1,727 cities, towns and villages in total, and almost half of them had underpopulated areas.

The term "underpopulated area" means an area which meets one of four conditions that were described in the Depopulation Act as follows: 1) the population decrease rate from 1960 to 1995 is more than 30% 2) the population decrease rate from 1960 to 1995 is more than 25% and the percentage of people over 65 is more than 24% 3) the population decrease rate from 1960 to 1995 is more than 25% and the percentage of people between 15 to 30 is less than 15% 4) the population decrease rate from 1970 to 1995 is more than 19%.
The graph below shows the gross area of underpopulated districts (Fig. 4). It shows that more than 57.1% of national land was underpopulated in 2010. As can be seen, almost half of the land in Japan is now facing depopulation.

Next, this pie chart answers the question of where the depopulated areas are located (Fig. 5). As you can see, 32% of the underpopulated districts are concentrated in mountainous areas where more than 80% of the land is covered with forest. Conversely only 8% is in urban areas.
The last graph represents the percentage of people over 65 years old in underpopulated areas (Fig. 6). This is important because in almost 30% of the mountainous areas, more than 50% of the population is over 65 years old.

3.3 Future population estimates and trials by the government

Next, what are the future population estimates and how has the government tried to tackle this issue so far?

According to the recently published and widely influential report by MASUDA (2014), Japan will face a far more severe population decrease in the future than expected. For instance, the report shows that in 100 years from 2010, the population will decline to 40% of that year's total. Furthermore, on the assumption that the demographic shift observed between 2010 and 2015 will continue in mostly the same direction, the number of cities, town and villages in which the percentage of women aged between 20 to 39 (representing reproduction rate in this context) will decrease by half is estimated to be 896 (49.5 % of the total). It means that almost half of the cities in Japan are facing the potentiality of disappearing, in regard to the heavily concentrated population of Tōkyō as well as the low level of the overall fertility rate in Japan.
Facing this reality, the government has tried to make their efforts in tackling this problem a matter of the highest importance. For example, the “Basic Act for Measures to Cope with a Society with a Declining Birthrate” was established in 2003. Moreover, after the first Abe cabinet in 2007, a “Minister of State for Measures for Declining Birthrate” was appointed to cope with the declining population issue in particular.

As is seen in this quantitative analysis, the situation of the rapidly aging society coupled with the world’s highest life expectancy has become problematic in Japan. This tendency cannot be considered separately from the other issues of the population being concentrated in Tōkyō and the declining birth rate, as was proposed in some recent reports. More importantly, severe aging and depopulation issues are particularly prevalent in the mountainous areas of rural districts. In these areas, due to the lack of a sustainable labor force by the younger generation, people have difficulties maintaining their traditional way of living and, as a result, many communities are facing collapse. Finding the key strategy to create a solution has been frequently demanded and has become an immediate necessity.

3.4 Current situation of the boom in the popularity of art projects in Japan

Taking into the account the above issues, one of the key challenges which must be faced is the revitalization of these aging and depopulated communities using an increase in activities which bring contemporary art to depopulated villages, so-called “art projects”. As the map of Japan shows, the main ongoing art projects are sponsored or co-sponsored by a local government or university8 (Fig. 7). For instance, the “Sapporo Art Festival” in Hokkaidō was just launched in 2014 and “Kyōto Parasophia” is now preparing for its opening in 2015. Moreover, some well-known festivals such as “Yokohama Triennale”, “Roppongi Art Week”, “Aichi Triennale” and the “Beppu Project” have been publicly recognized as successful case studies of art projects as well. Furthermore, when it comes to much smaller scale projects, “Asahi Art festival 2014” is coordinating 56 individual, community-based art programs this year (P plus Archive Center website: KOIZUMI, 2010).

Certainly, the art projects introduced here include metropolis-based events such as the ones in Tōkyō, Yokohama or Ōsaka, but many of them are taking place in much smaller cities in rural prefectures as a means of revitalizing these disadvantaged communities. Of course, regeneration strategies using arts have already taken place all over the world: for example, the Creative City scheme in Nantes in France, Bilbao in Spain and the community art movement in East London in the 1960s, and recently in Australia too. Yet, what is very specific to the Japanese situation that should be emphasized in this context are two aspects: one is the current situation in Japan of expanding the popularity of art projects throughout the country, and the other is the combination of contemporary arts with rural areas that are empty, desolate and have not been utilized as a site of contemporary art before.

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8 The projects are selected by literature reviews and data investigation of P plus Archive Centre.
9 Asahi Art Festival was established in 2002 and sponsored by the Asahi Beer company, with the objective of coordinating the community initiative art programs. It has strengthened the role of network-making throughout the country.
4. History of art projects

The third part of this paper summarizes the history of art projects in Japan (Kajiya, 2009a, b; Kumakura et. al., 2014). The principal tendency can be categorized into five points, looking at both the internal and external aspects respectively: 1) a period of experimentation in the 1950s, 2) a period of pioneering in the 1960s to 1970s, 3) a period of development in the 1970s to the 1980s, 4) a period of expansion in the 1990s and 5) a period of booming popularity in the 2000s.
4.1 Period of experimentation in the 1950s

Firstly, before the pioneering of art projects in Japan was actually established, some experimental artists had already started so-called open-air performances in the 1950s and 1960s in an attempt to pursue their independent expression, for instance the Gutai\(^{10}\) and Kyūshū-ha\(^{11}\). Specific examples included an open-air exhibition by Gutai members at Ashiya in Kōbe in 1956 (Fig. 9) and their individual performances as well. Gutai is one of the most internationally famous Japanese artistic groups, which allowed them to disseminate the images of their experimental live performance such as “Challenging Mud” by SHIRAGA Kazuo, “Paint by Hurling the Glasses and Bottles Against the Canvas” by SHIMAMOTO Shōzō. In addition, there were similar movements in Tōkyō in the 1960s by an artists’ group called Hi-Red-Center (HRC). They were carrying out a “Cleaning event in Tōkyō midtown” in 1964. (Fig. 10)

Of course, at the same time as these avant-garde movements were taking place in Japan, the worldwide trend of taking art out of the museum was taking place amongst the young artists and should also be mentioned here. From the beginning of the post-modern period, many artists began to draw attention to a critique of institutionalism which reflected critically on its own place within museums and galleries and on the social function of art itself. The most frequently referenced examples of this experimental artistic expression are “the Happening”\(^{12}\) in the 1950s, followed by “the Land art” (“Earth work”)\(^{13}\) and “the alternative space movement”\(^{14}\) from the 1960s. Following these highly experimental attempts at jumping out from the “white cube”, more and more artists had begun to pay attention to the concept of “site-specificity”. This new concept of “site-specificity” included the history, culture, and politics of a certain site, which made the artists begin to consider the location of their works more critically. In fact, the contemporary art scene in Japan was motivated by these post-modernist artistic movements to a remarkable extent. These artist-run experimental trials concerned with moving out of the museums to the sites in turn greatly influenced the Japanese art scene in initiating more community-based art exhibitions.

Being affected by these unique movements in the underground scene, the basis for appreciating previously unknown forms of expression had gradually come into existence on a large scale in Japan.

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10 An avant-garde artists group in Japan, founded by YOSHIHARA Jirō in 1956. It addresses the various kind of radical expression through performance and theatrical events in open spaces.
11 An avant-garde, post-war artists group in Japan, founded in 1957. As well as Gutai, Kyūshū-ha also boosted the underground movement in the period.
12 An event that combined elements of painting, poetry, music, dance, and theater, and staged them as a live action. The term Happening was coined by the American artist Allan KAPROW in the 1950s. It emphasizes the coincidence of the creation, and sometimes eliminates the border between the artists and audiences.
13 An art form that is created in nature or using natural materials such as rock and soil began in the late 1960s (also known as Earth work). It emphasizes the landscape as a means of their creation, confronting the dead end of Minimalism and criticizing the institutionalized white cube system: for example, Spiral Jetty by Robert SMITHSON and Wrapping coast by Christo.
14 Artist-run places such as an atelier or studio are often opened to the public as the exhibition venue or art event. It was founded by artists seeking more freedom of expression, which was difficult to achieve in museums or galleries with their various limitations. Initially expanded in NY in the 1970s, the alternative art spaces were gradually seen in Japan from the 1980s onwards.
4.2 Period of pioneering in the 1960s to 1970s

Starting in the 1950s, while artist-run experiments were seen under the names of “performances” or “happenings”, which attempted to explore artist’s free expression, more politically-motivated programs were initiated from the 1960s onwards in some regional areas.

The pioneering of art projects was said to have been founded in the 1960s when the government’s public art program began to be introduced. Early examples included the “Ube Open-air Sculpture Exhibition” (Fig. 11) in Yamaguchi in 1965 and the “Suma-rikyu park contemporary sculpture exhibition” in Köbe in 1968. According to TAKEDA (2002), sculpture settlement projects lead initially by the local government were frequently seen as an initiative to transform the negative images of coal-mining towns which were then suffering from problems such as air pollution and the violence of local gang conflicts. This governmental strategy is often called “City planning with sculpture” policy. It played the central role in enhancing the development of public art in Japan, largely influenced by the “Public Art Movement” supported by the law of “Percent for art”15 from the early 1950s onwards (TAKEDA, 2002).

However, the problem here was that there was a contradiction between whether the purpose of the art project was to solve social problems or to support the artist’s freedom of expression. In the case of the Ube Open-air Sculpture Exhibition, some artists officially expressed a clear skepticism about the use of the arts as a tool for tackling social problems. On the other hand, some criticism was directed toward the artists, too. In many cases, the sculptures were simply delivered directly from the artist’s studio, without the creator having any interaction with the unique site or the life of local people there. For this reason, the art projects in the 1960s were rather artist-centered programs rather than socially-engaged activities. While the public art projects at this time secured the autonomy of art and the freedom of expression of creative activities to some extent, the

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15 A law established for the first time in Philadelphia in 1959. It ensured that a fee of one percentage of the project cost is placed on large-scale development projects in order to fund and install public art.
projects themselves could end up resulting in the audience being ignored and left behind (Kajiya, 2009a).

Figure 11: Ube Open-air Sculpture Exhibition in 1965. Source: Ube Biennale official homepage

4.3 Period of development in the 1980s

Thirdly, from the 1980s onwards, the art projects were gradually increased as a form of open-air international art festival. In this context, the festival was changed to an event-based program that was well organized and more conscious of its audience and volunteers. This tendency was notably seen in rural areas such as Okayama and Yamaguchi prefectures. One of the most commonly referenced examples is the “Ushimado International Art Festival” (Fig.12, 13) in small town called Ushimado in Okayama prefecture with a population of only approximately 9,000. It was officially launched in 1984 and many experimental artists including Daniel Buren, Marina Abramovic and Kosugi Takehisa were invited. Sponsored mainly by Nippon Olive Co., Ltd. and Nippon Olive Park Co., Ltd., this exhibition was highly motivated by its primary purpose of highlighting the culture and history of the rural area. The chief producer Hattori Tsuneo says: “The main purpose of the International Biennale Exhibition is to establish a regular event even on a small scale, and through the exhibition to promote culture and art in a provincial town, and to prove that such an undertaking is feasible.” At the same time, it was also one of the first cases to be conscious of the idea of “participation” by the audiences as well, as Hattori mentions: “It is true that some local people are hesitant about such avant-garde events in an old town (…) However, this is because people have been accustomed to receiving art passively, and as a result of the established pecking order of “famous people” or “great artists”. If one understands art as not merely something to be watched but also to be participated in then one can appreciate that modern art offers variety, freedom, and joy.”

16 See * mark in table 3 which represents the small local cities with population of less than 200,000 (defined as “small-sized city” by the Ministry of Statistics).
17 Japan Ushimado International Art Festival Administrative Office, 1986, p. 4
18 Japan Ushimado International Art Festival Administrative Office, 1986, p. 5
In particular, Ushimado International Art Festival provided the opportunity for people between art and society to gain new perspectives on focusing on small community bonds based on the beauty of nature.

Moreover, when it comes to looking at the background of why the number of art projects was drastically increased in this period, the 1980s has two specific features in terms of the international comparison and governmental policy. Firstly, in Europe, there were two experimental exhibitions that influenced the Japanese art project scene the most at that time. One was the “Munster Sculpture Project” in Germany, begun in 1977, and the other was the “Chambre d’Amie” in Gent, Belgium in 1986. Both exhibitions were experiments concerned with jumping out of the white cube, intending to present the open-air installation of art works in public parks and even private houses. Kitagawa Furamu, who is one of the most well-known curators in Japan, often mentions the Munster Sculpture Project as being a leading inspiration.

Secondly, in terms of the regional governmental policy discourse in Japan, the 1980s is one of its most outstanding periods, as focus on “locality” and “culture” as a key strategy of the national agenda begins. One specific case is that of the “Denen-Toshi-Kōsō” (Garden City Plan) proposed by the Ōhira cabinet in the 1980s. It was the first national vision to declare the significance of regional autonomy and individuality in formulating a well-balanced and diverse society. Referring to his first speech, the phrases “era of the local” and “era of culture” became the slogans used to enhance awareness of the clear decentralization and the gradual emphasis placed on culture from the 1980s when Japan was experiencing rapid economic growth. Following some individual funds such as “Furusato-Sōsei-Jigyō” (Home Town Creation Project), the initiatives for rural city planning were handed over to the local governments. This has become one of the specific reasons why the combination of locality and culture became the core term in the context of city planning, and why subsequently the greater number of art projects was gradually focused on rural districts after the 1980s.

Figure 12: Symposium at the Ushimado International Art Festival in 1986
Source: Japan Ushimado International Art Festival Administrative Office, 1986

Under the slogan of “Think by oneself, Do by oneself” from 1989 to 1990, 100 million yen in subsidies for city planning were allocated to the local government without any regulation of use. On the other hand, however, it has become an object of strong criticism for its randomness in the way of distributing such a large amount of public money.
4.4 Period of expansion in the 1990s

Art projects generally gained social cognition in the 1990s. In this period, new types of art projects that emphasized the “process” of the creation of art made their first appearance. This is the most distinctive feature distinguishing these from the previous art projects, which valued the creation of the “works” themselves. Consequently, art projects have become more socially open activities, frequently using key phrases such as “participation” and “collaboration”. Since this time, turning an eye toward the audience rather than the artists has been emphasized. In this period, one well-known example is the “Museum City Tenjin” from 1990 in the Fukuoka prefecture. This is one of the first inner-city-based and long-range art projects, as such projects are known today. In these types of projects, a location map is distributed to the audience and is hung around the town like a treasure hunting game or walking rally program.

Here again, there are two specific backgrounds of the development of art projects in the 1990s with regard to international comparison and governmental policy.

When it comes to looking at the other side of the world, European countries experienced the Creative City movement, which had been explored firstly in England. This Creative City strategy clearly influenced the development of Japanese cultural policy as well. In fact, following this scheme, the concept of city planning was drastically transformed from focusing on regeneration with construction-based ideas into taking advantage of already-existing, even neglected, properties. Not by building something new, but rather by using something that already existed, the city could be revitalized and creativity became the core point in the context of city planning.

In terms of the political background of the 1990s, the government’s strategy of distributing subsidies was gradually changed. While the importance of cultural policy accelerated under the Ohira cabinet in the 1980s, public funding toward the arts and culture were heavily concentrated on the construction of buildings (the so-called “hardware budget”) rather than on the contents of these programs (the so-called “software budget”). In fact, the expenditure of local governments on culture had been increasing until 1993, but approximately 90% of it was allocated to construction funds and the management of cultural institutions (Nakagawa, 2001). This unbalanced budget distribution resulted in severe criticism of the plans. Consequently, the necessity to put an increased emphasis on the “software funds” was often suggested, placing importance on the contents of the program rather than the resulting infrastructure. Therefore, being influenced by this argument, the
governmental subsidies began to be directed towards the unique contents of individual programs, including local art projects. In contrast to the hardware-based city plans of previous times, such as the construction of amusement parks, resort facilities or new towns, for example, more focus was placed on content which valued local voices and the smaller social bonds which formed things like a locale’s history, traditional customs, and even some of the neglected history of the industrial legacy of rural villages.

4.5 Period of booming popularity in the 2000s

Finally in the 2000s, art projects were experiencing a boom in popularity as a leading force in tackling the aging and depopulation of rural areas. This was a result of the success of projects such as the Echigo-Tsumari Art Triennale. Particularly in Art Setouchi, which was initiated in 2010 on seven islands in the Seto Inland Sea, several industrial legacies, such as a copper refinery in Inujima (Fig.16) and a sanatorium for Hansen diseases (Leprosy) in Ōshima, were reconstructed as a venue and opened to the public with their hidden histories. Two features of these projects can be summarized. Firstly, the social impact of the arts has been emphasized including an expansion of its contribution to non-art sectors such as health care, city planning and social inclusion. Secondly, collaboration with a university was a crucial feature of this period. Stepping into a broader definition, art projects have become a more familiar and useful strategy.

Moreover, in the aesthetic discourse of Japanese art projects, the concept of “relational art” is one of the key terms that is often referred to from the 2000s. This is based on French art critic Nicola Bourriaud’s “Relational Aesthetics” (1998). In particular, Bourriaud insists on a new approach to seeing art works and practices through the communication and relationship between artists and the audience. Therefore, socially-engaged art, including the key concepts of “participation”, “intellectual” and “open-ended”, was frequently used in the field of art projects. Furthermore, American aesthetic scholar Hal Foster’s assumption that the artist acts as an “ethnographer” and “nomad” has also presented another way of looking at the role of artists in the region as well. Regarding this discourse, Koizumi (2010) insists that because regional art projects in Japan tend to have a very clear and specific purpose of rural regeneration expressed within the pressing context.
of aging and depopulation issues, the projects are to be carried out with a high level of collaboration between participants and the construction of concrete relationships within the community. This is the chief reason why the regional art project, the so-called “relational art project”, has been widely accepted and expanded rapidly in Japan.

Figure 16: Inujima Seirensho Museum in Art Setouchi 2013.
Source: Inujima Seirensho Museum official homepage

To summarize the interpretation of the developments above, major projects both inside and outside of Japan can be listed chronologically in Table 1. It is significant that we can see a gradual transition from artist-oriented projects toward socially engaged initiation from the 1960s to the 2000s. Besides, there were several internal and external influences ranging from political strategies to aesthetic discourses in each period. Moreover, the point emphasized here is that the key term of “locality” and the awareness of “participation” were seen in Japan in the early stages of the global context. These pioneering exercises in East Asia should also be taken into account in an international discourse as well.

Considering these points, the next section examines one of the most successful examples of tackling the aging issue in a rural area by using the arts to empower the community of a depopulated area.
The role of art projects for the aging society of Japan in the context of rural regeneration

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<th>Year</th>
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<th>Movement/Project</th>
<th>Other Countries</th>
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Table 1: The history of art projects in Japan
Source: edited by author with reference to Kajiyama (2009a,b), Kumakura et al. (2014), Hagiwara and Kumakura (2001)
*the venue of local cities with a population of less than 200,000 in 2014
Green: the important projects in each period.
Yellow: Public Art Movement in the USA
Orange: Community art projects in the UK
Blue: Open-air exhibition in Europe
Pink: Creative City movement in Europe

5. The increasing impact of art projects as a means of rural regeneration

5.1 The case of the Echigo-Tsumari Art Triennale
As seen in the previous section, art projects in Japan have gradually developed since the 1960s, from the early artist-run programs to socially-engaged events. Next, this section introduces one of the most successful cases, the Echigo-Tsumari Art Triennale. This triennale was established in 2000 in six districts of Niigata prefecture, which is one of the areas with the heaviest snowfall in Japan and an aging rate of more than 30%. After a long-term effort to persuade the local residents, the Triennale was finally opened in 2000. The most recent one in 2012 involved 3991 volunteers from all over the country, and extended invitations to 310 artists from 44 countries (Table 2), including noted artists such as Kusama Yayoi and Christian Boltansky. In addition, 63 houses which had been empty and desolate were repurposed by university art students (Tanaka et al., 2009). Many elderly residents were willing to help them and play the role of “grandparents” for them.

5.2 Economic impact
According to some reports from the Echigo-Tsumari Art Triennale, the audience and participants have been constantly increasing from 160,000 to 480,000 people, an increase of 3 times the original participation (Table 2). The economic impact\(^{20}\), including building investment and consumption...
expenditures, peaked in 2003 with the exceptional amount of 14 billion yen (107.9 million euros) (Table 3). The reason why the total economic impact has drastically declined from 2003 is mostly due to two factors. Firstly, the main construction projects such as building the new “Kinare” museum and the “Matsudai Center of Culture about the Snow Country and Agriculture”, were all completed in 2003. Secondly, base-level subsidies from Niigata prefecture were brought to an end in 2009 (HASEGAWA, 2014).

When it comes to revenue, Table 3 clearly shows that, while the Triennale used to heavily rely on its share of governmental expenditure accounting for 85.5% of the total in 2000, revenue from ticket sales and donations have been consistently increasing to 53.2% of the total cost in 2012. It means the Echigo-Tsumari Art Triennale is gradually becoming an independent art project.

To sum up, according to the reports written by the government and committee, the Echigo-Tsumari Art Triennale brought approximately 500,000 visitors and 14-billion yen of economic impact to the regions in the very short period of three months.

<table>
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<tr>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Venue</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Number of art works</strong></td>
<td>146</td>
<td>224</td>
<td>329</td>
<td>365</td>
<td>367</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Number of artists (country)</strong></td>
<td>138 groups (from 32)</td>
<td>157 groups (from 23)</td>
<td>225 groups (from 40)</td>
<td>350 groups (from 40)</td>
<td>310 groups (from 44)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Audience and participants</strong></td>
<td>162,800</td>
<td>205,100</td>
<td>348,997</td>
<td>375,311</td>
<td>488,848</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Volunteer (Registered members)</strong></td>
<td>9,440 (800)</td>
<td>2,000 (771)</td>
<td>2,500 (930)</td>
<td>3,244 (350)</td>
<td>3991 (1,246)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: Changes in the number of audience and participants of the Echigo-Tsumari Art Triennale.


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20 The method of calculating the figures is based on the Industry Relation table of Niigata prefecture and the section regarding consumption expenditure was estimated according to the result of audience questionnaires about transportation fees, accommodation fees and food expenses.
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5.3 Social impact

When it comes to considering the social impact\(^\text{21}\) of the Echigo-Tsumari Art Triennale, several questionnaires have been conducted with the local residents in an attempt to analyze the “social capital”\(^\text{22}\) of these regions (KITAGAWA, 2010; KATSUMURA et. al., 2008; SUMI, 2013). Although these research papers prove that local residents have not really experienced a drastic change in their everyday life yet, it is worth noting that some of the respondents clearly felt the social impact of the Triennale. For example according to the results of SUMI (2013), who carried out a long-term empirical analysis, while 75% of respondents said “there is no clear difference”, 30.2% observed an increase of activities for women, 28.2% felt “a sense of community empowerment” and 21.4% see “a different vision of the future of their villages”. Another positive result is that 55.4% of local residents have agreed to continue the Echigo-Tsumari Art Triennale.

\(^\text{21}\) According to ‘Social Impact of the Arts’ in 1993 by LANDRY, BIANCHINI, MAGUIRE, and WORPOLE: the social impact of arts is defined as ‘those effects that go beyond the artefacts and the event or performance itself and have a continuing influence upon, and directly touch, people’s life’ (p50) and ‘the transformative power of the arts in terms of personal and social development...along a continuum from totally negative to totally positive’ (p9).

\(^\text{22}\) Social capital is defined by the OECD as ‘networks together with shared norms, values and understandings that facilitate co-operation within or among groups’. According to PUTNUM (1993), main component of social capital is as follows: trust, norm and network (OECD, 2007). It is often used in the context of the empirical research such as econometrics.
In order to make an analysis of these local voices, a criteria consisting of six categories of the social impact of the arts that was proposed by Francois MATARASSO can be referred to: 1) individual development, 2) social cohesion, 3) community empowerment and self esteem, 4) local image and identity 5) imagination and vision and 6) health and wellbeing (MATARASSO, 1997). Among the given criteria, the categories emphasized the most in the case of the Echigo-Tsumari Art Triennale can be divided into three. Firstly, "community empowerment and the development of individual self esteem" were clearly triggered. This is the result of the electric atmosphere created by hundreds of audience members and participants visiting the small villages for one day and local shops and restaurants being full of tourists. The second feature of the social impact categories that was observed is "the enhancement of the local image and identity". Through the fresh eye of artists, the advantages of the simple village life are revalued. In the process of creating the art, artists conducted fieldwork by asking about the history of the area and learning about the local traditions in order to receive inspiration for their work. These interactions between the artists and local elderly residents often created a new local image and dug up the area’s hidden identity. The third feature is the change in "imagination and vision". As mentioned in the responses to the questionnaire above, many of the local people are aware of a positive future for their community and have become active in informing people from outside about the benefit of their villages.

These changes were evoked partly because contemporary art always tries to question the existing values and rebuild in a new mode. Moreover, artists in general value things differently from others, which allows the inclusion of outsiders and minorities. Through the fresh eyes of artists, we can rediscover the value of the simple everyday life that the people experience in Echigo-Tsumari, realise the negative impact of industrial modernization, and revitalize the negative image of the leftovers of industry in Inujima. Art as a mediator helps us to articulate the voice of the things we have sacrificed in the process of modernization and the increase in capitalism in the 20th century. These face-to-face interactions between arts and the community or artists and local residents is to some extent the very point of these rural art projects.

As is summarized above, the Echigo-Tsumari Art Triennale has achieved a lot of success and media attention as a result of its positive influences on both the economic and social aspects of society. The use of art projects as a means of rural regeneration has become one of the platforms to be applied to other villages in other regions as well. The next chapter will conclude by addressing the second question on the specific features and problems of Japanese art projects.

6. Analysis

6.1 Main features of art projects in Japan

In short, given the description of the chronological analysis of art projects in Japan and the case studies of the Echigo-Tsumari Art Triennale, the specific features of the Japanese art project can be identified as consisting of six aspects: 1) gradual transition from an artist-oriented project toward a socially-engaged stage, 2) development in the local cities rather than the metropolises, 3) a drastic increase from the 1980s, 4) non-art people as a main target. In particular, the most reiterated point about the specific character of the Japanese art projects nowadays is 5) a strong emphasis on collaboration with a wide range of stake holders and there being social impact as a direct result of their achievements. Furthermore, these trials are the result of 6) consistent resistance to cultural homogenization resulting from increased globalization and capitalistic efficiency from the perspective of small community bonds based on the beauty of nature in Eastern Asia. For example,
HATTORI Tsuneo, the chief director of Ushimado International Art festival, mentioned its theme as being a “great experiment in a small town (...) combining the beauty and richness of nature and culture” (Japan Ushimado International Art Festival Administrative Office, 1986). Moreover, the art director of Echigo-Tsumari Art Triennale, KITAGAWA Furamu stated; “As our civilization reaches a critical juncture, the rich nature of the Satoyama existence in Echigo-Tsumari can impel us to review our attitude to the environment, calling into question the modern paradigm which has caused such environmental destruction. This is the origin of the concept ‘humans are part of nature’, which has become the overarching concept for every program taking place in the Echigo-Tsumari Art Field”. This tendency to be highly conscious of nature and the small community bond of human beings was largely seen in the rapid increase of Triennales and Biennales in Asia especially from the 1990s onwards, as a way to challenge Eurocentric art history as well. These points are quite different from widely known international festivals in Europe such as the Venice Biennale and Dokmenta.

6.2 Problems

Before the conclusion, the rest of this paper proposes a solution to some of the problems that Japanese cultural policy is now facing.

First, considering the life of local residents, there have been a number of complaints from people in the involved districts about the severe congestion of local buses or trains and visitor’s bad manners – for instance, dumping garbage and noise issues (SUMI, 2013). Furthermore, some people still show opposition to the use of public funding for contemporary arts because of the difficulty in discerning its meaning. Others feel neglected by a certain circle of art and festival people or even have an uncomfortable feeling of being forced to participate in the activities. These voices of local people should not be overlooked in order to improve the long-term program.

Secondly, the most significant point is the difficulty of “continuity”. In fact, how to continue these highly interactive and small fund-based projects is a common issue faced by all countries. In terms of human resources, for example, almost all the art projects are facing a lack of professional staff due to insufficient budgets. Therefore, the project is operated by means of heavy reliance on volunteer workers and student internships. This has resulted in harsh criticisms from sociologists in terms of the potential for labor exploitation (YOSHIZAWA, 2011). Moreover, we can see heavy reliance on the “star curator”, too. Indeed, there has been a constant circulation of the same curators in the field of art projects in Japan, KITAGAWA Furamu for instance. This could have resulted in the biased selection of artists and in the contents of the program becoming more standardized and being endlessly reproduced.

The third problem is the dilemma between the “instrumental value of arts” and the “intrinsic value of arts”. For instance, “Instrumental Cultural Policy”, which indicates an emphasis on the role of art as a tool for achieving the goals of other aspects of public policy, has become a target for critics in the Japanese context. So far, many researchers throughout the world have confirmed the social impact of the arts in a variety of areas such as health, active citizenship, cultural diversity, and social inclusion (Angus, 2002; Galloway, 2009). Similarly, Japanese art projects tend to put a strong emphasis on the social contribution by arts, then as a result, the artistic perspective becomes less

23 Echigo-Tsumari Art Triennale official homepage
24 See 3
conscious. Consequently, some artists are very skeptical of these projects. For example, Tanaka Köki\(^{25}\) used to express his strong opposition toward the trend of immoderate emphasis on the “instrumental value of arts”: “Basically, I think there is nothing that arts can do for society. The only thing that art can insist on is that there is an existence in this world which does not make any contribution to society. In other words, arts should strongly present that the world cannot be made up only of actual profit, including utility, effect and purpose. Suffice to say that art is the last stronghold for proving this. Using arts as a means of achieving some purpose is absolutely improper.” (Tokyō source, 2004)

Thanks to the popularity and success of some leading examples such as the Echigo-Tsumari Art Triennale, contemporary art has become less elitist than it used to be. On the other hand, however, some artists and researchers are warning that art works might simply end up as being one of many passing trends similar to a “stamp rally” or “fashion icon” for the tourism industry.

This is partly due to the final problem: a lack of project evaluation. Many of the projects have been left without any questionnaires or interviews with the participants. This lack of a comprehensive artistic review by the professional art critics has resulted in some severe problems. It is important to value the results from a range of different points of view, including economic, social and artistic criteria. What we should work towards is achieving a balance between the “instrumental value of arts” and “intrinsic value of arts” by evaluating the achievements of the art projects.

7. Conclusion

The collapse of small communities in rural regions has been accelerating due to a combination of the world’s highest aging rate and severe depopulation in Japan. The existence of regional art projects offers an insight into a way to revitalize both the people and their society in these villages.

It has been approximately ten years since the economic and social impact of these activities was first widely recognized.

Considering the unique situation in Japan, this paper addresses two questions regarding the history of the art projects and the features and problems that occurred during their development. Concerning the first question, by using a chronological analysis, the timeline from the 1950s can be divided into five sections: 1) a period of experimentation in the 1950s to the 1970s, 2) a period of pioneering in the 1960s to the 1970s, 3) a period of increase in the 1980s, 4) a period of development in the 1990s and 5) a period of booming popularity in the 2000s. In each time period, several governmental policies were connected with these developments: “City planning with sculpture” from the 1960s, “Denen-Toshi-Kōsō” in the 1980s and “Software budget” in the 1990s. In addition, some influences from overseas are also described, for instance the “Munster Sculpture Project” and “Chambre d’Ami” in the 1980s, as well as the aesthetic discourse of Relational Art in the 2000s. As a whole, the chronological analysis of this paper finds several unique art projects from the 1960s which already grasped the essence of key terms known today: “instrumental cultural policy”, “locality” and “participation”, for example. Thus, what is emphasized here is that the awareness can be identified in the early stage of the global context, long before these terms were

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\(^{25}\) For example, Tanaka Kōki, who was nominated to represent the Japan pavilion at the Venice Biennale 2013, criticized the recent tendency of the instrumental use of arts in several interviews (Tokyō Source HP).
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actually defined from the 1990s onwards in Europe. These pioneering experiments and discussions in Japan should also be taken into account in an international discourse as well.

Moreover, in answer to the second question, the specific features of Japanese art projects are categorized into six points: 1) the gradual transition from artist-oriented into a socially-engaged orientation, 2) developed in the local cities rather than the mega cities, 3) a drastic increase from the 1980s, 4) non-art people as a main target, 5) a strong emphasis on collaboration with a wide range of stakeholders and there being a social impact associated with their achievement, and 6) consistent resistance to the homogenization caused by globalization and capitalistic efficiency from the perspective of maintaining small community bonds.

Subsequently, three points concerning the distinctive problems faced by art projects in Japan can also be distinguished: 1) the voice of local people, 2) continuity and 3) the dilemma caused between separating the “instrumental value of arts” and the “intrinsic value of arts”.

To conclude, taking into account the arguments above, two fundamental considerations must be re-emphasized. First of all, even though these art projects in rural districts bring enormous visitors and economic impact to the small villages in a short period, there are severe problems regarding continuity: heavy reliance on unpaid workers and star curators, and difficulties in securing fundraising, for example. However, the very point we should focus on here is not only “how many” people came to the village, but also “who” came to the community as a “driving force”. And the very examples of this can be artists and visitors attracted by the arts. In this context, KOIZUMI (2012) presented very clear explanation about why arts and artists can be the driving force for empowering the ruined community once again; arts and artists can 1) reconstruct the existing value, 2) discover the everyday life in the location, and 3) address differences and conflicts inherent in social bonds. In other words, art as a “mediator” helps us to articulate the inner voice of the things we have dismissed and sacrificed in the process of modernization of the small community bonds. Also, Hal Foster assumes that the artist as an “ethnographer” and “nomad” has also presented another way of looking at the role of artists in the community (FOSTER, 1996). These face-to-face interactions between arts and community or artists and local residents are the very point of rural art projects.

Secondly, it can be stated again that the art projects in Japan are now facing a controversial issue concerning a conflict between the “instrumental value” and the “intrinsic value of arts”. As discussed, some artists participating in the Ube Open-air Sculpture Exhibition in the 1960s tried to tackle the issue and secure art for art’s sake. Despite this, the instrumental use of arts has been gradually prioritized since the 1980s, especially after being subject to various influences such as the urban regeneration movement using the Creative Cities discourse. KUDO (2008) also casts a strong suspicion on the instrumental use of arts, stating that “absorbing by a strategy of education programs and the enhancement of local communities, the originality of arts become standardized and reproduced (...) Using art as a tool of social change can be seen as a low-cost social welfare service used to ease the dissatisfaction felt by the people at the bottom of society.” (p. 282)

However, the excessive attention given to demanding the autonomy of the arts could end up in denying the sense of art as being socially engaged and returning to the discourse of the previous century.

Entering a new era faced with the end of the boom period, we need to ask ourselves why we are carrying out art projects all over again. To this end, what is required is for Japanese art projects to attain a good balance between the instrumental and intrinsic value of arts. In fact, now is the time
to seek a new means of evaluating them, looking at them using economic, social, and artistic
criteria. Regarding the issue of socially engaged art, Claire Bishop often criticizes the lack of an
artistic point of view when it comes to making evaluations: “I would argue that it is also crucial to
discuss, analyse and compare this work critically as art.” (Bishop, 2012, p. 13) In order to guarantee
an artistic point of view to evaluate art projects, more attention has been focused on the necessity
of art review by professional art critique. Additionally, collecting and recording a narrative of what
was happening between artists and locals is of the utmost importance these days in an attempt to
address more sophisticated qualitative evaluation.

Japan’s experience could provide lessons for discovering a better way of rebuilding social bonds
through the “intrinsic value of arts”. Whether the trend will end up being just a short-time boom or
whether it becomes the leading case study for tackling the global problem of having an aging
society could be a pressing issue in the discourse on international cultural policy.

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