

# Consuming Eco-Art

*Satoyama* at the Echigo-Tsumari Art Triennale 2012

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## Abstract

Ecological movements commonly view consumer capitalism as the ultimate evil, responsible for global environmental degradation. In this context, the development of an environmental consciousness is usually linked to the emergence of countercultures responding to socio-economic crises. Guided by a pro-ecological ideology related to *satoyama* (lit. 'village mountain'), which emphasizes harmonious relationships between humans and nature, the Echigo-Tsumari Art Field (ETAF) in Niigata Prefecture can be seen as an example of this phenomenon. The relationships between *satoyama*, contemporary environmental art, and the concept of the international biennale are, however, far from straightforward. This chapter explores the exhibiting practices involved in the (re)production of the concept of *satoyama* at the ETAF and the various political, social, and economic agendas they serve.

**Keywords:** eco-art, Echigo-Tsumari Art Triennale, consumption, *satoyama*

*[N]ature is one of the most sophisticated arenas for the production of ideology.*

– Mark Dion<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

Ecological movements commonly view consumer capitalism as the ultimate evil responsible for global environmental degradation. In this context, the development of an environmental consciousness is usually linked to

1 Statement made by Dion in Graziose, Kwon, and Bryson 1997: 9.

the emergence of countercultures responding to socio-economic crises (Weintraub 2012: 3). As such, the bursting of the economic bubble in the 1990s, in the aftermath of the high levels of economic growth in Japan from the 1960s to the 1980s, is seen as the trigger for a chain of socio-political and cultural processes that boosted the development of an environmental consciousness in Japan – from grass-roots environmentalism and political activism to ecological art (Avenell 2013). Guided by a pro-ecological ideology emphasizing harmonious relationships between humans and nature, the Echigo-Tsumari Art Field (Echigo-Tsumari Daichi no Geijutsusai no Sato; hereafter ETAF) has been seen as an example of this phenomenon.

The ETAF is one of the most internationally visible art initiatives in Japan. It was established in 2000 by Kitagawa Fram (b. 1946) and the Art Front Gallery (Āto Furonto Gyārārī) from Tokyo, and since then has hosted the highly popular Echigo-Tsumari Art Triennale (Echigo-Tsumari Āto Toriennāre; hereafter ETAT), which boasts approximately 160 participating artists and draws hundred of thousands of visitors to the remote areas of Niigata Prefecture in the northwestern part of Japan (Kitagawa 2015). In his contribution to the catalogue celebrating the fifth triennale, held in the summer of 2012, Kitagawa Fram (2012: 8) observes: ‘Today, activities in the Echigo-Tsumari Art Field are being linked to various government measures related to education, culture, welfare, tourism, the local economy, employment, agriculture and infrastructure.’

Paradoxically, although it owes its existence to art, the role and operation of the ETAF as an art initiative is played down. This attitude is compatible with the recent ‘ethical turn’ in the humanities, which emphasizes sociological approaches to the arts and culture. One of a wide array of related phenomena is the concept of socially engaged art. This is commonly perceived as a critical response to the passive consumption of art, which is perpetuated by ‘the society of the spectacle’ formed by repressive capitalism (Debord 1994).<sup>2</sup> However, as pointed out by Jacques Rancière (2008: 7), the ‘critique of the spectacle’, which remains the alpha and the omega of the ‘politics of art’, cannot be seen as a privileged political medium, nor can it function as a universal solution for social problems. Building on Rancière’s theory, Claire Bishop (2012) critiques the notion of the social turn in art and advocates the need to return to an analysis of the conceptual and affective complexity of artwork. Following this recommendation this chapter studies the complex relationship between art and the socio-ecological mission of

2 The book first appeared in 1967 in French.

the ETAF based on the concept of satoyama, which evokes a harmonious coexistence between humans and nature.

Since its establishment the ETAF has been guided by a particular philosophy, which is explained in the mission statement on its bilingual website. The statement begins with the telling heading 'Humans are part of nature' (*Ningen wa shizen ni naihō sareru*), and reads:

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.<sup>3</sup>

The statement brings into focus the concept of satoyama (lit. 'village mountain'), or 'liveable mountain', a type of socio-ecological production landscape<sup>4</sup> that has become the new buzzword in environmental activism worldwide (Takeuchi et al. 2003). Since its growth in popularity in the 1980s and 1990s, satoyama has been advocated by publications, conferences, forums, research, and more than 500 active non-profit organizations and governmental policies promoting sustainable agriculture and the protection of the environment and its biodiversity. As stated on the website of the Satoyama Initiative, a non-profit organization that recognizes and supports this type of production landscape worldwide, satoyama is 'a dynamic mosaic of managed socio-ecological systems producing a bundle of ecosystem services for human well-being'.<sup>5</sup> It also encompasses the idea of 'the woods close to the village[,] which was a source of such resources as fuel-wood and edible wild plants, and with which people traditionally had a high level of interaction' (Knight 2010: 422).<sup>6</sup> The notion of 'interaction' is key to understanding satoyama. It refers to social relationships (Klien 2010) as well as links between human and non-human elements. This 'interaction' ensures the harmonious coexistence of humans and nature. Satoyama has become a guiding principle for the artistic practices of the ETAF, where it has been associated with ecological art – art that 'strive[s] to ensure the

3 <http://www.echigo-tsumari.jp/eng/about/>, accessed 28 July 2015.

4 As defined by the International Partnership for the Satoyama Initiative (IPSI); see <http://satoyama-initiative.org/en/about/>, accessed 28 July 2015.

5 <http://satoyama-initiative.org/en/about/>, accessed 28 July 2015.

6 Knight's translation of a quotation by Matsumura Akira; see Matsumura 2002: 1030.

vitality of Earth's ecosystems' as defined by Linda Weintraub (2012: 6) in her recent survey of contemporary eco-art. Consequently, satoyama art has been charged with ensuring the harmonious coexistence of humans and nature.

But the recent catastrophic events of the powerful earthquake, gigantic tsunami, and terrifying nuclear meltdown at the Fukushima power plant brought satoyama art into sharp focus and tested the concept of the event. This chapter charts the fifth ETAT, which followed the triple disaster of March 2011.

### Satoyama and sustainable art

In 2012, the ETAT ran for 51 days, hosting 367 artworks and projects from 44 countries across 760 square kilometres and 200 villages. In the catalogue of the 2012 festival edition, guided by the affirmative motto 'Reconstruction from disaster' (*Saigai fukkyū*), Sekiguchi Yoshifumi, mayor of Tōkamachi City and chairman of the Echigo-Tsumari Executive Committee (Daichi no Geijutsusai Jikkō Iinchō), emphasizes the ETAT's pro-ecological agenda: 'The sense that "human beings are part of nature" has always been the basic concept of the Triennale, but this notion had never reverberated so acutely as at this fifth event, where we felt compelled to reflect especially soberly on these issues' (Sekiguchi 2012: 4). Interestingly, in this context Mr Sekiguchi's contribution also singled out *Australia House*, which was rebuilt after the original facility was destroyed in an aftershock of the March 2011 earthquake (Sekiguchi 2012: 4). The new *Australia House* (Fig. 10.1) was designed by Andrew Burns (b. 1979) and built with the support of several high-profile organizations, including the Tōkamachi City government, the Australia-Japan Foundation, the International Culture Appreciation and Interchange Society, and the Australian Embassy in Tokyo. The official website of the institution proclaims that *Australia House* 'has a steep pointed roof to withstand the heavy snowfall in the Niigata Prefecture and stained cedar cladding'.<sup>7</sup> Its form refers to the mountainous landscape of the area, 'taking into account environmental sustainability and protection from natural disasters'.<sup>8</sup> Clearly, the building 'represents' the Niigata topography and climate.

The website of Andrew Burns Architects emphasizes the same points: 'During winter, the site can experience 1.5 m of snow during one day, and this was a key consideration in the design, with the roof pitching steeply'.<sup>9</sup> The

7 [http://australia.or.jp/\\_projects/echigo2011/en/reconstruction](http://australia.or.jp/_projects/echigo2011/en/reconstruction), accessed 28 July 2015.

8 Ibid.

9 <http://andrewburns.net.au/Australia-House-Japan>, accessed 28 July 2015.

**Figure 10.1** Andrew Burns Architects, *Australia House* (2012)

Photograph by Osamu Nakamura. Photograph courtesy of Echigo-Tsumari Art Triennale Executive Committee. © Andrew Burns Architects

description also explains the function of the building: “The interiors form a large “perception device”, heightening views of the surrounding landscape and creating opportunities for art installation[s].”<sup>10</sup> The notion of ‘perception device’ is especially telling when considered from the perspective of the representation of ‘nature’ on which the modern concept of *fūkei* (landscape) is based. The term *fūkei* became extremely popular in late-nineteenth-century art, when Japan’s visual culture appropriated Euro-American art systems (Matsumoto 1994: 64). Importantly, modern artistic conventions such as linear perspective and realism located the subjective viewer of a landscape *outside* the picture. At the same time, they gave the observer the power to control the landscape from an omnipotent, central position and to observe with ‘scientific’ objectivity. The concept of ‘the gazing eye’ encoded in *fūkei* obviously imposes unequal relationships of power on the human and the non-human realms. *Australia House*, constructed as a ‘perception device’ from which to view the Japanese countryside, subscribes to these concepts. As such, it stands in sharp contrast with the participatory notion of *satoyama* that invites people to interact with ‘nature’ directly and on equal terms.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

Another issue is of a technological nature. *Australia House*'s use of 'natural' materials, including cedar, misses the fact that this fast-growing tree is one of the major threats to forest biodiversity in Japan. The monoculture of cedars endangers the very concept of satoyama that it is supposed to represent. Despite its use of natural materials, *Australia House* does not seem to fully embrace the paradigms of ecological sustainability.

Although the notion of the harmonious coexistence of humans and nature embedded in the concept of satoyama does not seem to be directly relevant to the *Australia House*, this does not mean that the project is not capable of eliciting an aesthetic response in the viewer that could increase environmental consciousness. As *Australia House* acts through its materiality, each encounter with it involves individual, bodily perceptions influenced by multiple internal and external factors that form the aesthetic experience of the viewer. Architect Andrew Burns describes his goals as follows: "Throughout, we have sought to establish a dialogue between the visitor, the building, the artwork and its site, so that each person takes away from it a different experience."<sup>11</sup> Through its clever design, *Australia House* has the potential to dynamically engage the viewer. Its triangular form blurs the lines between sculpture, architecture, artwork, gallery space, and rural dwelling. The building is flexible and can alter the physical experience of the viewer by shifting walls, repositioning artworks, etc. Large windows overlooking the rural landscape offer views of the ever-changing spectacle of the seasons. All these elements result in a piece of art open to multiple reflections and reinterpretations, possibly related, but not necessarily limited, to issues of environmental sustainability. Not surprisingly, since its construction, *Australia House* has been one of the most popular destinations at the ETAF and has also been celebrated in the world of architecture, receiving the 2013 Jørn Utzon Award for International Architecture.

Interestingly, while the present building celebrates new and high-end architecture, the original *Australia House* reused local resources (an abandoned farmhouse) and seemed to subscribe to the eco-friendly agenda of the ETAF. However, one question arises: can the use of pre-existing objects, or *objets trouvés*, be considered synonymous with recycling guided by environmental concerns? Found objects have been used in art since the cubists, long before the birth of modern environmentalism. The 2012 ETAT featured several projects that used abandoned, pre-existing objects or their

11 <http://www.dezeen.com/2012/08/08/australia-house-gallery-and-studio-by-andrew-burns/>, accessed 28 July 2015.

**Figure 10.2** Mikan + Sogabe Lab, *Gejō kayabuki no tō* (Gejō thatch tower) (2012)



Photograph by Osamu Nakamura. Photograph courtesy of Echigo-Tsumari Art Triennale Executive Committee. © Mikan + Sogabe Lab

parts as creative material. But how were the projects linked to the concept of *satoyama*?

One of these projects is the *Gejō kayabuki no tō* (Gejō thatch tower), designed by MIKAN + Sogabe Lab (Mikan + Kanagawa Daigaku Sogabe Kenkyūshitsu), Kanagawa University, and constructed at the Gejō railway station in Tōkamachi (Fig. 10.2). Its significance for the festival is underlined by the fact that its photo decorates the cover of the ETAT's catalogue.

The tower is constructed from organic materials (thatch, wood), and fittings, furniture, and tools found in local farmhouses. According to the catalogue, the work functions as a 'micro-ethnographic museum', emphasizing its role in the memorialization of the local culture (Sekiguchi 2012: 34). Abandoned objects are also used in several other works, two of them located at the Echigo-Tsumari Satoyama Museum of Contemporary Art (Echigo Tsumari Satoyama Gendai Bijutsukan Kināre) in Tōkamachi City. *Lost #6*, by Kuwakubo Ryōta (b. 1971), consists of a model train that runs around a collection of locally found textile-factory parts arranged in a darkened room

**Figure 10.3** Kuwakubo Ryōta, *Lost #6* (2012)



Photograph by Osamu Nakamura. Photograph courtesy of Echigo-Tsumari Art Triennale Executive Committee. © Kuwakubo Ryōta

(Fig. 10.3). The train is equipped with a bright lamp that casts artificial landscape silhouettes onto the gallery walls.

Abandoned objects, best described as rubbish, are also transformed into a material of artistic expression in *GHOST SATELLITES* (Fig. 10.4), created by Gerda Steiner (b. 1967) and Jörg Lenzlinger (b. 1964). This work, consisting of mobiles hanging from a ceiling, also made use of local materials and unwanted objects found in the area, reflecting the idea of ghost satellites that circle the earth long after the people who produced them and sent them into space have vanished. Similar concerns are also evident in the work of Mutō Akiko (b. 1975) titled *Omoide no niwa T+S+U+M+A+R+I* (Garden of memories T+S+U+M+A+R+I), which features a large, colourful textile tree constructed from scraps of clothing collected from the local community and displayed in Tōkamachi City (Fig. 10.5).

All of these works of art seem to function as time machines that, through the reuse of abandoned objects found in the area, are capable of retrieving worlds and people who are no longer there. They bring back 'lost' cultures and the 'ghosts' of those who have left or died, and evoke the idea of 'memory gardens' where these disowned memories are reconstructed and celebrated. Even if on the level of art production and technology the

**Figure 10.4** Gerda Steiner & Jörg Lenzlinger, *GHOST SATELLITES* (2012)



Photograph by Osamu Nakamura. Photograph courtesy of Echigo-Tsumari Art Triennale Executive Committee. © Gerda Steiner & Jörg Lenzlinger

**Figure 10.5** Mutō Akiko, *Omoide no niwa T+S+U+M+A+R+I* (Garden of memories T+S+U+M+A+R+I) (2012)



Photograph by Osamu Nakamura. Photograph courtesy of Echigo-Tsumari Art Triennale Executive Committee. © Mutō Akiko

**Figure 10.6** Christian Boltanski, *No Man's Land* (2012)



Photograph by Osamu Nakamura. Photograph courtesy of Echigo-Tsumari Art Triennale Executive Committee. © Christian Boltanski

artists are 'recycling' ready-made materials, environmental issues related to sustainability and the responsible use of natural resources do not have to be a primary concern here.

Unwanted and abandoned objects also feature in the most powerful work installed at the 2012 ETAT, *No Man's Land* by Christian Boltanski (b. 1944) (Fig. 10.6). The work consisted of a nine-metre high, twenty-tonne mound of used clothing, which was continually picked up, lifted, and dropped by the claws of a mechanical crane. The effects produced were not only visual. The installation was accompanied by the sound of a beating human heart and the smell of damp clothes, intensifying the embodied impact of the work. *No Man's Land*, which was shown previously in Paris and New York, comments on mortality and the loss of human identity, individuality, and memories, symbolized by discarded clothing. Boltanski's oeuvre is notorious for focusing on these concerns. In one of his interviews, following the show in New York in 2010, the artist explained: "The crane is a little like the finger of God, or like destiny. It moves a bit like it's choosing someone, but it really

moves at random. It grabs a handful of clothing, lifts it into the air and drops the clothing back onto the pile."<sup>12</sup>

Boltanski's *No Man's Land* is especially potent in eliciting human responses in the context of both the current critical situation and the human condition in general. Its affective potential is clear, as evidenced by the fact that the installation is capable of triggering different reactions in different exhibition contexts. The work's proximity to the March 2011 events enhanced and expanded Boltanski's commentary. But rather than being a cry for 'reconstruction', the installation evokes 'deconstruction', the lack of connection between agent and object, and the hopeless lack of control of the objects being tossed and manipulated in a random and unpredictable manner.

Importantly, while the work employs rubbish as a medium of artistic expression, it does not feature recycling; rather, it evokes the idea of the utter uselessness of objects. This resonates more directly with the image of post-disaster landscapes – wastelands filled with destroyed and abandoned objects that will never be reused or revived. The concept of satoyama as a model of coexistence between humans and nature does not seem to be directly relevant here, other than as a cry for change.

Significantly, none of the works discussed above directly addresses the issue of the development of 'human-influenced natural environments for the benefit of biodiversity and human well-being', as advocated by the Satoyama Initiative.<sup>13</sup> Only if it was considered as a broad metaphor pertaining to preoccupations with nature that are not necessarily ecological could it be applicable to the diverse range of works presented at the ETAT.

This observation leads to the question of the relationship between the concept of satoyama and sustainable art. The ETAT's appropriation of satoyama seems to facilitate the concept's association with ecological art (Weintraub 2012). The precise nature of this connection still remains unclear, however. One reason for this lack of clarity is the conceptual ambiguity of ecological art itself. Despite its currency in contemporary discourses of both art and environmentalism (or, perhaps, precisely due to this duality), the definition lacks clarity. The term 'ecological art' has been used to refer to distinct phenomena, including earthwork, slow food, recycled art, and bio-art (Kastner and Wallis 2010), or to any art that is concerned with the well-being of ecosystems. As it is even more difficult to explain what

12 <http://www.artinamericamagazine.com/news-features/news/christian-boltanski-no-mans-land/>, accessed 28 July 2015.

13 <http://satoyama-initiative.org>, accessed 28 July 2015.

satoyama art implies, the connection is based on a rather simple, paralogical formula presupposing that if the term 'satoyama' concerns the ecological agenda, then art associated with satoyama must be ecological and its impact would lead to the development of a green society. The problem is that the precise nature of its environmentalism and its impact are still not clear. This does not mean, though, that the works produced at the 2012 ETAT within the framework of satoyama are not aesthetically successful.

Even if satoyama functions as a romantic trope that remains powerless in the face of extreme social and ecological crises, such as those experienced by the northwest of Japan in 2011, the affective potential of the art created for the ETAT remains undiminished.<sup>14</sup> As Suzy Gablik (1998) observed: '[V]ision is not defined by the disembodied eye, as we have been trained to believe. Vision is a social practice that is rooted in the whole of the being.' As the relationship between work and viewer is inherently performative and time- and situation-based, the work is not a static, fixed container of meanings; rather, these meanings are produced in each interaction. Hence, considering the particular temporal and geographical frame of visitors' interactions with these artworks in 2012, they could have successfully operated in the context of the triple disaster. But this does not mean that they are not open to different interpretations based on different bodily perceptions in changing temporal contexts. This only shows the ineffectiveness of the application of sociological approaches to the study of art that deny art's performativity and force it into a framework to 'represent' certain social issues and concepts, such as satoyama. The 2012 ETAT made this perfectly clear.

What, then, is the function of the concept of satoyama at the ETAF? Did the festival adopt the ecological buzzword for the purpose of solving the socio-economic problems of the region? Is satoyama simply 'co-opted' or 'consumed' by the ETAF as a component of the marketing industry that has been engineered to revitalize the region?

### Satoyama art and 'the festivalization of culture'

As an international contemporary art initiative, the ETAF contributes to a fervently debated 'biennial boom' that started in the 1990s and has spread around the globe.<sup>15</sup> Caroline Jones suggests that the 'festivalization' of art

14 For a discussion on affect, please refer to Massumi 2002.

15 There are currently more than sixty biennials and triennials around the world, all building on the archetypical Exposition Universelle in Paris (1889) and the first Venice Biennale (1889).

plays a major role in these developments. A recent book on the festivalization of culture observes that today festivals are no longer merely ritualistic, recurrent short-term events affirming social, religious, ethnic, national, or historical bonds (Bennett, Taylor and Woodward 2014: 1), but also function as sites for the consumption of experiences that involve capitalist markets, sets of social relations, and flows of commodities (Zukin 2010). The accumulation of events not necessarily related to art contributes to the circulation of art through international festivals and transforms it into a spectacle. This corroborates the thesis presented by Guy Debord (1994: 1) in his seminal and heatedly debated book *Society of the Spectacle*: 'The whole life of those societies in which modern conditions of production prevail presents itself as an immense accumulation of spectacles. All that once was directly lived has become mere representation.' There is little doubt that biennales are entangled in the festivalization of art. They also play a vital role in the process of enhancing the cultural capital and economic value of the locations in which they take place.

As an art festival, the ETAF contributes to the economy of the Echigo-Tsumari region on two levels. First, the economic success of the ETAF is the result of a particular set-up of the triennale. The festival differs from other biennales, which are guided by what Edouard Glissant called the 'fly in fly out' mentality, an approach criticized by Hans-Ulrich Obrist, himself a 'transnational' curator (Obrist 2014). Apart from organizing a temporary exhibition every three years, the ETAF also receives works contributed by approximately 160 artists, including such celebrities as Marina Abramovic, Ilya and Emilia Kabakov, Joseph Kosuth, Kusama Yayoi, and Cai Guo Qiang. Over two thirds of the projects are commissioned on a permanent basis. The ETAF also boasts a permanent art museum, the Echigo-Tsumari Satoyama Museum of Contemporary Art, designed by renowned architect Hara Hiroshi (b. 1936) and established in 2003. Instead of deconstructing the objecthood of art (Fried 1998), the objects are vital to the operation and success of the ETAF as they endow the area with an important cultural and economic legacy. Thus, when viewed from this perspective, the ETAF's operations are based on a solid, material-oriented foundation. This legacy contributes to the realization of the socio-economical goals of the project. Sekiguchi says: 'The aim of our festival is to reinvigorate the local community' (Sekiguchi 2012: 5).

Second, this set-up is exploited by different groups: local communities, local governments, and art establishments, as well as by the growing number of tourists who visit the festival. It needs to be noted that tourism is one of the largest sectors in the Japanese economy. It is fast becoming a key

focus of Japan's economic policy and has been growing steadily, despite the international crisis in 2009 and the Fukushima disaster in 2011.<sup>16</sup> According to the *OECD Tourism Trends and Policies 2014*, internal tourism consumption in Japan in 2011 was estimated to be ¥21.5 trillion (approx. €184 billion), including about ¥1 trillion (approx. €8.6 billion) from international visitors (OECD 2014). According to the Tourism Satellite Accounts, the direct and indirect contribution of tourism to Japan's GDP in 2011 was ¥46.4 trillion (approx. €397 billion), or 5 per cent of the total GDP, generating four million jobs (6.2 per cent of total employment). Moreover, the most lucrative and fastest developing segment of the tourism industry today is ecotourism (Kaynak and Herbig 1998). Obviously, the Echigo-Tsumari region, which is mainly known for its agricultural produce (especially rice), cannot offer visitors experiences of unique natural environments and wildlife. Instead, through the concept of *satoyama* it has promoted sustainable relationships between nature and humans, an idea even more relevant in today's world. As a space where the two realms fuse, the ETAF builds on the myth of the Japanese 'love of nature' and the nostalgic concept of *furusato*, meaning 'one's hometown'.

The notion of the Japanese 'love of nature' that pervades common perceptions of culture is rooted in the Shintoist idea of unity between human and non-human elements. Edwin Reischauer and Marius Jansen observe that '[t]he Japanese love of nature and sense of closeness to it also derive strongly from Shinto concepts' (Reischauer and Jansen 1995: 212). Scholars such as Pamela Asquith and Arne Kalland (1996), Julia Adeney Thomas (2002), and Haruo Shirane (2012) have only recently begun to deconstruct the myth of Japan's 'inherent affinity with nature'. Nevertheless, this myth has played a major role in the modern era, serving various agendas ranging from Japanese imperialism, which perceived nature as the home of the national spirit, to ecotourism.<sup>17</sup>

The idea of travelling to nature and discovering the countryside has also been employed in the concept of *furusato*. *Furusato* can be translated as 'hometown', 'birthplace', or 'native place' and encapsulates the idea of the landscape of a mountain village encircled by domesticated nature, where people can experience a sense of belonging or 'insularity'. But, as argued by Jennifer Robertson (1994: 16),

16 The promotion of international tourism is part of the 'Abenomics' policy, which sees the Summer Olympics as an ideal opportunity to boost tourism. The new target is to attract twenty million international visitors by 2030.

17 This trend is exemplified in Shiga's *Nihon fūkeiron*, published in 1894.

with the rapid urbanization of the countryside since the postwar period, the Japanese ‘can’t go home again’ [...] There is no particular place to ‘go home’ to; consequently, there is no particular place to feel nostalgic toward.

Robertson concludes that *furusato* represents a ‘nostalgia for nostalgia’. In the 1970s, the Japanese National Railways (Nihon Kokuyū Tetsudō), before they were privatized and renamed Japan Railways (JR), ran a Discover Japan campaign, which was replaced in the 1980s by the Exotic Japan campaign. This change marked a demographic and cultural shift between those Japanese who had experienced rural life and those for whom visiting the countryside was an entirely unfamiliar, exotic adventure (Ivy 2005). These shifts only intensified after the bursting of the economic bubble in the early 1990s, as this challenged existing socio-cultural models and invited the population to reconsider its values and return to its (imagined) cultural roots.

The links between *furusato* and satoyama are structured on both an internal and an external level. First, the supporters of the ETAF are invited to pay a small contribution called *furusato nōsei*, or ‘hometown tax’, an initiative praised in 2009 by Fukutake Soichirō, the general producer of the ETAF and chairman of Benesse Holdings, which manages the Setouchi Triennale (Fukutake 2009: 7). Second, these links are even more significant when considered from an external perspective, in the context of the ETAF being awarded the Furusato Event Award and the Chiikizukuri Commendation by the Minister for Internal Affairs and Communications (Sōmu daijin) (Matsumoto, Sasajima and Koizumi 2010: 1-7).

Both *furusato* and satoyama idealize village life and the agrarian community. They revolve around a nostalgia for ‘the good old days’, when the Japanese maintained a healthy relationship with nature. Although satoyama focuses more on the ecological dimension than on belonging and identification, unlike *furusato*, it is possible to find the term guilty of the similar offence of sentimentalizing ‘nature’ and emptiness (‘nostalgia for nostalgia’; Robertson 1988: 495). Through its associations with the ideology of *furusato* the concept of satoyama is also entwined with the global politics of identification. Satoyama has been promoted as a ‘unique’ Japanese response to global ecological issues. This furnishes the concept with a particular political agenda related to the narration of national identification.

Building on this conceptual ancestry, the ETAF differentiates itself from mass tourism and offers visitors a complex web of experiences, including participating in a hip, international art festival, reviving the agricultural past of Japan, being close to nature, and travelling slowly. Kitagawa Fram emphasizes the ‘inefficiency’ of travelling involved in visiting the Art Field,

which is spread over a large area of 760 square kilometres: 'Since time immemorial, travelling has entailed taking a trip through time as well as space, and the Art Triennale has reminded the Japanese people of this precious experience' (Kitagawa 2012: 7-8). The ETAF is easily reached from Tokyo by a fast and efficient railway system but visiting the art sites, spread around 200 villages, certainly requires time. In order to enhance the efficiency, in 2012, 58.2 per cent of visitors of the ETAF got there by car (not a very sustainable travel choice).

As specified in the overview of the 2012 ETAT, the number of visitors has been growing steadily since 2000, when the ETAT was visited by 162,800 people. In 2003, the festival was visited by 205,100 people; in 2006, by 348,997 people; in 2009, by 375,311 people; and in 2012, by approximately 488,848 people – a record for the event (Sakai et al. 2012: 135). The growing ecological footprint of this eco/art tourism does not seem to be an issue, however. The festival is especially popular among women (61.5 per cent) in their twenties and thirties (29.2 and 25.9 per cent, respectively) who travel from neighbouring provinces, especially the Kantō region (68.5 per cent), and spend one or two days there (35.2 and 27.4 per cent respectively). The surveys show that the ETAT's primary audience consists of young, female urbanites. Significantly, the same social group can be identified as the advocates/consumers of environmentalism.<sup>18</sup> This fact has considerable socio-economic consequences.

Thus, in a paradoxical tour de force, the ETAF has appropriated the pro-ecological and post-developmental concept of *satoyama*, which has served as an attractive conceptual reference for artists and visitors, keeping the event alive and thriving, and contributing to the economic revitalization of the area.

## Conclusions

The development of an environmental consciousness has frequently been linked to the emergence of countercultures that are responding to critical situations. It is not a coincidence that environmentalism became a mass social movement during the 1960s, a time marked by widespread social tensions that triggered civil-rights and anti-war movements. As such, the bursting of Japan's economic bubble has been seen as the trigger for a chain

18 These connections between women and environmentalism are not limited to ecofeminism. As discussed by Carolyn Merchant (1996), women as scientists and activists are actively involved in green movements.

of socio-political and cultural processes that boosted the development of an environmental consciousness in Japan.

Satoyama emerged as one of the most powerful symbols of green movements in the 1980s and 1990s. Its potential as a driving force of post-bubble countercultures has been employed in a variety of pro-ecological initiatives, including critical art practices such as those displayed at the ETAF, where the concept has been used to frame its operation. In the words of Karp and Lavine (1991: 14): 'If [an exhibition] can aid or impede our understanding of what artists intend and how art means, then its subtle messages can serve masters other than the aesthetic and cultural interests of the producers and appreciators of art.' The power of the displayed objects extends beyond their formal boundaries to the wider world where they were produced.<sup>19</sup> This is especially true in the case of exhibitions representing objects produced by more than one artist. They facilitate generalizations used in the construction of larger narratives.

As a potent symbol representing anti-consumerist attitudes, the concept of satoyama has been appropriated by diverse institutions, ranging from the Japanese state to NPOs serving different political, social, and economic agendas. Kitagawa's triennale is one such institution. The '*tsumari* approach', conceived as the ETAF's philosophical background that links art, people, and 'nature' with environmental protection, implied that community building formed part of the regional revitalization programmes. Sedimentary art practices and growing tourism have played a major role in the increasing cultural capital and economic value of the Echigo-Tsumari region. But does this mean that the ETAF should be perceived as a large satoyama Disneyland, consuming post-developmental countercultures and reinforcing a capitalist ethos?

First, it is not surprising that, although it is often overlooked or looked down upon, ecological art is closely entwined with exchange and consumption. This is grounded in the nature of art itself and its relationships with reality. Culture and art are inseparable from their production context and they are not autonomous but an integral part of society. If capitalism structures certain societies, in a society where 'commodification is dominant, everything that is external to this commodification becomes marginal, liable to be socially irrelevant or merely yet-to-be-commodified'.<sup>20</sup> Thus,

19 Stephen Greenblatt (1991: 42) refers to this power as '[t]he power of the displayed object to reach out beyond its formal boundaries to a larger world, to evoke in the viewer the complex, dynamic forces from which it has emerged and for which it may be taken by a viewer to stand'.  
20 [http://www.academia.edu/11919255/artwork\\_as\\_commodity](http://www.academia.edu/11919255/artwork_as_commodity), accessed 28 July 2015. See also Walker 1987.

consumption cannot tarnish 'pure ecological art', as both are products of the same socio-cultural, political, and economic conditions.

Second, art framed within the discourse on sustainability does not automatically produce anti-consumption attitudes.<sup>21</sup> Just as the relationship between art and society is not based on cause and effect, ecological art does not have a causal relationship with a green society. It may contribute to increasing environmental awareness, but the responses emerging from the embodied interactions with art's materiality cannot be pre-programmed. Importantly, these issues pertain to the ongoing, larger debate on socially engaged art and its operation. Although socially engaged art is not a complete novelty, its importance has been growing since the 1990s, when it became central to art discourse. This repositioning was motivated by the desire to change the way conventional modes of artistic production and consumption operated under capitalism, as they had been identified with the 'society of the spectacle' (Debord 1994). The concept of relational art, which emphasizes the production of social relations rather than objects/artworks to be consumed individually, played an important role in this process (Bourriaud 2002). In effect, some art historians advocated a new way of analysing art that reaches out to methodologies and concepts related to the social sciences, such as community, society, empowerment, and agency (Kester 2004). But, as pointed out by philosopher Jacques Rancière (2002: 150), 'the aesthetic regime of art' is based on tension and conflict between the autonomy and the heteronomy of art, or negotiations between art and non-art. A work of art is not autonomous in the sense that it is removed from life, but because it is mediated through the autonomy of our experience of art. Consequently, Claire Bishop (2012: 8) advocates: 'There is an urgent need to restore attention to the modes of conceptual and affective complexity generated by socially oriented art projects.'

Participatory art is not a privileged political medium and it is not a ready-made solution to the society of the spectacle formed by capitalism (Rancière 2008: 7). The power of works of art lays 'not so much in their ideological effects, but in their ability to create affective resonances independent of content or meaning' (Shouse 2005). As the relationship between art and life is not linear but mediated, the satoyama art at the ETAF does not necessarily need to produce a positive socio-ecological impact.

Third, the ETAF could show how the culture industry's consumption of countercultures is a component of the process of the 'festivalization' of art, which transforms art into a spectacle. But we need to acknowledge

21 The relationships between eco-art and society are discussed in detail in Miles 2014.

the transient character of these spectacles and the endless possibilities of commodity pathway diversion, or an object's ability to move in and out of the 'commodity state' over the course of its social life (Appadurai 1986: 17). This brings into focus the role of subjectivity and human agency. An object can be removed from its commodity pathway and can be replaced on it. This 'aesthetics of decontextualization' (Kopytoff 1986: 64) transforms the ontological status of an object. The operation of the ETAF, guided by a multiplex programme that includes art, ecology, economy, and a social agenda, exposes these intricacies.

Hence, it is clear that the complex conceptual roots and diverse agendas shaping the ETAF cannot produce coherent outcomes that either celebrate its pro-ecological programme or condemn its consumption. Only through an account of the performative properties of art is it possible to understand the co-existence of the various positions that emerge through individual, embodied interactions with satoyama art at the ETAF. As 'commodity' is not an object but the state of an object, art is able to exercise its performative powers freely.

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