Book Review

Fram Kitagawa


Environmental historians may look back someday and find with surprise that the seeds of sustainable human civilization were sown at an art festival in a remote region of rural Japan. Art Place Japan recreates the festival experience for an English readership and simultaneously sketches the region, communities, people, values, and vision behind it. Here, at least, is a ground for hope. The volume stands as a practical handbook for individuals or organizations in any station and circumstances who share the goal of reconciling human culture and nature.

Art Place Japan is the English edition of the introduction to the Echigo-Tsumari Art Triennale written by art organizer Fram Kitagawa, the force behind the festival. Kitagawa conceived the festival, originally, as way of revitalizing a region of Japan suffering from especially pronounced depopulation and an aging population. He has served as the general director – or “mediator,” as he refers to himself and fellow organizers – of the triennale since its inaugural edition in 2000. Every three years since, the festival has, improbably, brought together art, ecology, and communities on 300 square miles of land dotted with over 200 distinct villages in the Echigo-Tsumari region of Niigata Prefecture, the fabled “snow country” of Yasunari Kawabata’s novel.

Remarkably, recent editions of the festival have come to attract half a million visitors to the region. The festival has spawned permanent, real-world enterprises in its host communities. And the triennale has spun off and served as model for a number of similar art festivals and events in Japan and abroad, most prominently the Setouchi Triennale and the Public Art for Lujiazui Harbour City project in Shanghai – both also directed by Kitagawa himself. By any reckoning the project qualifies as a fabulously successful initiative in rural
Art Place Japan introduces a general readership to the content of the festival and, equally importantly, the spirit animating it. Kitagawa conceives of art as a creator of potentially transformative experiences. Art involves individual discovery and learning along with communal exchange and collaboration; the festival is conceived as a “crucial space for dialogue.” (290) Communities which are created and celebrated through the festival include both human and natural nonhuman ones, as well as interfacial relationships between them. Central concepts in the overall vision are distilled in chapter titles: “Human Beings are Part of Nature,” “Art Discovers Local Resources,” “Collaborations That Transcend Regionality, Generations, and Professions,” and “The Art of Daily Life.” Inclusiveness and diversity are viewed as empowering and enriching. “I believe that people ‘on the margin’ create interesting and stimulating art,” (17) Kitagawa writes. With release from limiting cultural hierarchies comes embrace of innovative integrity and artistic standards.

The centerpiece exhibits of Art Place Japan are color photographic plates of more than two hundred notable works of contemporary art, which have been exhibited in the first five editions of the Echigo-Tsumari Art Triennale. The featured works have been selected by Kitagawa himself. They are grouped by descriptive theme or concept and accompanied by discussion and enabling captions. The organization of the volume is modular, flowing, and non-hierarchical – in this sense, as well, a faithful reflection of the festival itself. The works are given the space on the page to come alive and speak for themselves. Titles of installations often provide a sense of their subject, tone, and concerns: Under a Cedar in Snow Country; The Tail of the Dragon, Dream House; To the Dead, to the Living; Every Place Is the Center of the World. Each photo, as well as the overall sequence, rewards extended and repeated looks.

The remoteness and inconvenience of the triennale location are core components in its appeal and significance. Installations by domestic and international artists are deliberately site-specific and culturally and/or naturally contextualized. They are products of dialogue and collaboration among organizers, artists, and community members. The low density in placement of works over a wide area and the attendant slow intake of the art brings visitors, through the process, into close interaction and communication with local people, culture, and nature. Many of the works of art involve physical interaction or participation, and the festival includes dance, drama, puppet and Noh performances, performance art, and sports and games, as well. The triennale stands an anti-thesis to urban-based contemporary lifestyle practices and art curating conventions.