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Contested Constellation

Japan's growing number of art festivals tread a precarious path between state-sponsored leisure-culture and soft-power machinery

BY ANDREW MAERKLE

Over the past three decades, the proliferation of biennial and triennial exhibitions around the world has been a key subtext to debates concerning the globalization of contemporary art. The positions are now familiar: either there are too many biennials, devaluing the credibility of the concept, or that criticism is just sour grapes from people who can't accept no longer being in the centre.

Japan offers a fascinating microcosm of this situation. Suffering from problems of depopulation and post-industrial obsolescence, municipalities, prefectural governments and chambers of commerce around the country have pinned their hopes for urban revitalization on cultural tourism, with new art events launching seemingly every year. In 2017 alone Japan is host to at least six art festivals of varying sizes and scopes. These span the length and breadth of the archipelago: from the second **Sapporo International Art Festival** <<http://siaf.jp/en/>> in Hokkaido in the north to the first Space Art Tanegashima festival on the island off Kyushu in the south; from the inaugural **Reborn-Art Festival** <<http://www.reborn-art-fes.jp/en/>> in Miyagi Prefecture on the east coast of the main island to the inaugural **Japan Alps Art Festival** <<http://shinano-omachi.jp>> in mountainous Nagano Prefecture in the centre and the inaugural **Oku-Noto Triennale** <<http://oku-noto.jp/en/>> in the town of

Suzu on the tip of the Noto Peninsula, which juts out from the west coast into the Sea of Japan. On top of these, the **Yokohama Triennale** <<http://www.yokohamatriennale.jp/2017/>> is holding its sixth edition in the eponymous port city about 45-minutes south of Tokyo.



Ai Weiwei, *Safe Passage*, 2016, and *Reframe*, 2016, installation view, Yokohama Museum of Art, Yokohama Triennale 2017. Courtesy: © Ai Weiwei Studio; photograph: KATO Ken / Organizing Committee for Yokohama Triennale

Given the distances, time and expenses involved, it's hard to imagine even the most dedicated art lover completing a circuit of this not-so-miniature grand tour. In fact, each of the festivals seems to target divergent audiences. Launched in 2001 with aspirations of becoming an international mega-exhibition, Yokohama has gradually scaled back since its high-water mark of 2008, when the curatorial team included recognized stars such as Hans Ulrich Obrist and Beatrix Ruf. Now more or less operated out of the Yokohama Museum of Art it still retains a degree of critical cachet and is one of the summer's main draws. This year's edition, which opened 4 August under the theme 'Islands, Constellations & Galapagos,' brings together around 40 artists and groups headlined by Ai Weiwei, whose installation of red rubber boats with cross-hatches cut out of their bottoms has given the museum façade a festively macabre makeover. But there are relatively few discoveries to be made inside: the prominent placement at the entrance to the main galleries of work by the Lolita-complex painter Mr. – part of Takashi Murakami's Superflat stable of manga- and anime-inspired artists from more than a decade ago – comes across as irredeemably out of touch with current art in Japan, while the next room over, the exquisite-corpse-style collaborative prints by Carsten Höller, Tobias Rehberger, Anri Sala and Rirkrit Tiravanija, seem equally out of sync with global currents.



The Sapporo Collective Orchestra, included in the Sapporo International Art Festival 2017

If Yokohama is stuck in old paradigms of exhibition making, Sapporo has quickly built a reputation for cross-disciplinary experimentation in sound and multimedia art. After Ryuichi Sakamoto's inaugural edition in 2014, this year's follow-up is entrusted to another musician, Otomo Yoshihide, who moves between the experimental music and art scenes. Otomo is exploring the themes 'How Do We Define 'Art Festival'?' and 'When bits and pieces become asterisms.' The exhibition makes use of distinctive venues like the Isamu Noguchi-designed Moerenuma Park and the Sapporo Artpark complex, while participants from Nam June Paik and Yasunao Tone to Christian Marclay, EYΞ (Yamatoka Eye of the Boredoms) and Yuko Mohri chart a multi-generational progression of interactions between music, sound and contemporary art. Centred in the city of Ishinomaki, which was devastated by the 11 March earthquake and tsunami of 2011, the Reborn-Art Festival is pushing the association between art and music even further, as the organizers are marketing their event as part art exhibition, part music festival, and part gourmet food fair. In fact, the sponsors of Reborn-Art, the non-profit ap bank, founded by music industry leaders including Sakamoto and the musician and producer Takeshi Kobayashi to support environment-friendly business ventures, have experience running their own music festival, the ap bank fes, which was held annually from 2005 to 2012. While the music lineup in Ishinomaki has an overwhelmingly domestic appeal, the greatest-hits-style artist list chosen by Etsuko and Koichi Watari of Tokyo's Watari Museum of Contemporary Art bounces from Joseph Beuys, David Hammons and Bruce Nauman to Tatsuo Miyajima, Chim↑Pom and Contact Gonzo.



Reborn-Art Festival, 2017. Courtesy: the festival

Reborn-Art reads as an attempt at combining two proven archetypes – that of the Fuji Rock Festival and of the Echigo-Tsumari Art Triennial respectively – with Japan's national obsession with food and invocations to quasi-patriotic sentiment in support of the post-11 March recovery process. Directed by the art producer Fram Kitagawa, Echigo-Tsumari has been an undeniable success since it launched in 2000, attracting over 500,000 visitors to its 2015 edition. Indeed, Kitagawa is an advisor to the Reborn-Art project, and although this is an off year for the Echigo-Tsumari Triennial, he still looms large as the director of both the Japan Alps Art Festival, which ran from 4 June to 30 July, and of the Oku-Noto Triennale, which runs from 3 September to 22 October. If that isn't enough, he is also the director of the Setouchi Triennale, last held in 2016. Kitagawa has essentially franchised the Echigo-Tsumari approach of working with different levels of community and government to invite local and international artists to make site-specific projects in disused spaces ranging from homes to schools, fields and factories, while turning contemporary art into a value-added device for rebranding indigenous customs, cuisine and history for new consumption and circulation.

Supporters of these local art festivals say they expose contemporary art to audiences who are ordinarily unable to see it firsthand, create opportunities for young artists to work with resources they do not enjoy in their everyday practices and spur local economies. Considering the relative weakness of the art market and lack of funding for museums and art institutions in the country, the proliferation of the Echigo-Tsumari model can be viewed as a proposal for a radically dispersed, 'archipelagic' art scene driven by bands of itinerant artists. But at a time when the government is exerting control over political and expressive freedoms, it also indicates a worrying convergence between socially engaged art and state sponsored art, and between state sponsored art and state sanctioned leisure. Reminiscent of Japan Rail's 'Discover Japan' campaign from the 1970s, the opposition between countryside and metropolis, community and institution, tradition and modernity implicit in the notion of the 'local' art festival runs the danger of deflecting critical reflection, among artists and visitors alike, away from the ideological agendas at play in these endeavours.

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Jompet Kuswidananto, *Words and Possible Movement*, 2013, motorbikes and fabric flags, installation view: 'Sunshower: Contemporary Art from Southeast Asia 1980s to Now,' Mori Art Museum, Tokyo, 2017. Courtesy: Mori Art Museum, Tokyo; photograph: Kioku Keizo

The state's role at the forefront of culture is also evident in the year's biggest exhibition in Tokyo, **'Sunshower: Contemporary Art from Southeast Asia 1980s to Now'** <<http://sunshower2017.jp/en/>> , which is split across the private Mori Art Museum and the public National Art Center (NACT), both within walking distance of each other in Roppongi. The exhibition was organized in collaboration with the Japan Foundation Asia Center, run by the non-governmental agency responsible for promoting Japanese language and culture abroad, and is being held in commemoration of the 50th anniversary of ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) – prominently noted in wall texts at the entrances to both venues. Assembling 86 participating artists and groups from the 10 ASEAN member states, 'Sunshower' in fact offers some pleasant surprises, mixing presentations of historical figures like Thai conceptual artist Montien Boonma with large-scale installations by younger artists including Indonesia's Jompet Kuswidananto and Malaysia's Shooshie Sulaiman. But the Japanese government's push to deepen ties with Southeast Asia, where Japanese corporations are already heavily invested, is also part of a strategic counter to Chinese hegemony in the region. Concurrently, the ancient capital, Kyoto, is mounting the exhibition **'Asia Corridor'** <<http://asiacorridor.org/en/>> later in August as part of its duties as Culture City of East Asia 2017. Installed at the UNESCO World Heritage Site Nijo Castle and the Kyoto Art Center, and overseen by veteran curator Akira Tatehata, 'Asia Corridor' will feature a selection of international stars such as Yayoi Kusama, Kimsooja and Cai Guo-Qiang, combined with representatives of the local art scene like Zon Ito, Kodai Nakahara and Miwa Yanagi. Such top-down initiatives will become all the more frequent in the run-up to the 2020 Tokyo Olympics. The question is whether artists and art professionals can take the money and do something challenging with it, or whether they will be subsumed into a celebratory propaganda machine.



The curatorial team of 'Don't Follow the Wind' visiting the Fukushima Exclusion Zone, 2015. Courtesy: Don't Follow the Wind



Against this backdrop the **'Don't Follow the Wind'** <<http://chimpom.jp/project/dfw.html>> project installed in abandoned homes inside the exclusion zone around the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant is all the more remarkable. Full of flaws and contradictions, it nevertheless suggests itself as the anti-local art festival, and a *detournement* of the state's aggrandizement of leisure-culture in Japan. Visitors, of course, cannot view the works until the exclusion zone is lifted, and this missing audience is in turn an indictment of the state's responsibility for the nuclear disaster, along with that of the plant's operators, the Tokyo Electric Power Company (TEPCO).



Chim↑Pom, *PAVILION*, 2012/17. Part of 'Sukurappu ando Birudo Project: Paving the Street', 2017. Courtesy: © the artists and MUJIN-TO Production, Tokyo; photograph: Kenji Morita

Since 'Don't Follow the Wind' opened in March 2015, the project's instigators, the guerilla art group Chim↑Pom, have made a series of provocative interventions into urban space, from temporarily occupying a building scheduled for 'scrap-and-build' redevelopment in the Kabukicho nightlife district of Tokyo to building a tree house overlooking the border fence dividing Mexico and the United States in Tijuana. For their latest project, **'Sukurappu ando Birudo Project: Paving the Street'** <http://chimpomparty.com/exhibition-english/>, they have collaborated with the architect Takashi Suo to 'excavate' a street that formerly ran through the middle of the Kitakore Building – a ramshackle postwar-era building the group rents in the western Tokyo neighbourhood of Koenji. Celebrating the opening with a block party, Chim↑Pom have proclaimed this street, which is open 24 hours daily during the exhibition period, to be public space recovered from within private property. They show that instead of 'revitalizing' disused infrastructure through social technologies, there may be more to be gained in contesting already occupied territories from the ground up.

Main image: Moerenuma Park, Sapporo, designed by artist Isamu Noguchi, one of the main venues for the Sapporo International Art Festival 2017. Courtesy: Sapporo International Art Festival 2017

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