Contemporary Japanese art: between globalization and localization

Eimi Tagore-Erwin
Department of Arts and Cultural Sciences, Lund University, Lund, Sweden

Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to identify and analyze the influence that globalization has had on the development of the contemporary Japanese art production. The study also aims to expand the global narrative of Japanese art by introducing concepts behind festivals for revitalization that have been occurring in Japan in recent years.

Design/methodology/approach – Guided by Culture Theorist Nira Yuval-Davies’ approach to the politics of belonging, the paper is situated within cultural studies and considers the development of contemporary art in Japan in relation to the power structures present within the global art market. This analysis draws heavily from the research of art historians Reiko Tomii, Adrian Favell, and Gennifer Weisenfeld, and is complemented by investigative research into the life of Art Director Kitagawa Fram, as well as observational analyses formed by on-site study of the Setouchi Triennale in 2015 and 2016.

Findings – The paper provides historical insight to the ways that the politics of belonging to the western world has created a limited benchmark for critical discussion about contemporary Japanese art. It suggests that festivals for revitalization in Japan not only are a good source of diversification, but also evidences criticism therein.

Research limitations/implications – Due to the brevity of this text, readers are encouraged to further investigate the source material for more in-depth understanding of the topics.

Practical implications – The paper implies that art historiography should take a multilateral approach to avoid a western hegemony in the field.

Originality/value – This paper fulfills a need to reflect on the limited global reception to Japanese art, while also identifying one movement that art historians and theorists may take into account in the future when considering a Japanese art discourse.

Keywords Globalization, Resistance, Localization, Contemporary Japanese art, Essentialism, Revitalization festivals

Paper type Conceptual paper

Introduction

A succinct definition of globalization as it continues to pertain to the Asian art world is neither isolated nor uniform as the countries that lie within the Asia Pacific are incredibly diverse in geography, culture, and sociopolitical history. Some theorists believe that the phenomenon of globalization in art is actively increasing the visibility of nonwestern perspectives to western audiences, and some believe it may even result in new world atlases of art that include contemporaneous developments formerly separated by regional divisions within the field (Ratnam, 2004; Tomii, 2011). Both theories are fairly optimistic, but there is a critical undercurrent that must be addressed: inclusion only implies that nonwestern perspectives will be added into the preexisting western framework of the globalized, international art market. For ages, the EuroAmerican art elite has largely delegated value and relevance on artwork from around the world, directly influencing the content of contemporary discussion and ultimately the encyclopedic writing of art history as it is imparted on future generations. Merely entering the frame of this western art market does not necessarily equate to belonging.

This text concentrates on identifying certain influences globalization has had on the unique development of the contemporary Japanese art market. I will present my findings in two sections. I will first outline a brief history of Japanese arts development, highlighting some key ways that it has been affected by the politics of belonging to the western art world. In the
second section, I will present and examine Art Director Fram Kitagawa’s contemporary art festivals for revitalization, which capture the essence of a movement toward localization that has come to dominate much of domestic Japanese art\[1\]. Due to the brevity of this text, I am unable to expand on many topics at length, but suggest further reading of my sources.

Methodology

Before proceeding further, it is necessary to define the methodology and specifications of this conceptual paper. This paper was conducted in two sections, both largely situated from within the field of cultural studies, including art history and visual culture studies. The research therein was first conducted with strong consideration of Foucauldian and post-structuralist philosophy that there is no singular universal truth – that knowledge is not objective (Foucault, 1920). Rather it is always produced in relation to and under the influences of hegemonic structures of power; in this case, the existing structure of the EuroAmerican art market. Second, the various contents of both sections of the text were re-evaluated with regards to the literature of Jonathan Schroeder (2005) and Janet Borgerson and Schroeder (2002) regarding marketing strategies within the cultural sector.

The first section of this text presents an analysis of art history that pulls from the texts of art historians Adrian Favell (2011, 2015a, b), Reiko Tomii (2011) and Gennifer Weisenfeld (2011, 2013) who also consider the relationship between Japanese and western-dominated art worlds within their research. This analysis is guided by visual culture studies research that draws heavily from theorists discussing issues of globalization, most notably following the postcolonial work of Edward Said (1979) in which he critically examined and ultimately dismantled the European academic tradition of oriental studies, and Culture Theorist Nira Yuval Davies’ (2011) approach to the politics of belonging.

Yuval-Davies’ (2011) call for discussions regarding contemporary projects of belonging in her book, The Politics of Belonging: Intersectional Contestations, has formed the catalyst of my research into political projects of belonging constructed around issues of “consuming cultures.” More specifically, this paper examines the paradigms of power structures perpetuated in a globalizing art world, specifically with regards to Japan. In this case, the “consuming culture” mentioned by Yuval-Davies (2011) is the hegemony of the EuroAmerican art market, which consumes nonwestern cultures even as “space” is provided for their “inclusion.” Thus, research findings were analyzed with the following questions at the forefront: how have the power structures present in the art world framed the reception of Japanese artists’ practice? And how has Japan’s sociopolitical and economic relationship with the West affected the current state of cultural policy regarding contemporary art discourse?

The second section of this text was conducted by investigating Art Director Fram Kitagawa’s (2015) initiatives as detailed in his 2015 book Art Place Japan: The Echigo-Tsumari Art Triennale and the Vision to Reconnect Art and Nature, as well as art historians’ research into his background. This research was complemented by observational analyses made during a research visit to the Setouchi art islands in 2015, and during the experience of working for the summer cycle of the 2016 Setouchi Triennale as a “Koebi” volunteer. In addition, an informal interview of a manager at the Nonprofit Organization Setouchi Koebi Volunteer Network was conducted via e-mail for this text.

Japanese art in the global art market

The politics of belonging

In a globalized art world, countries peripheral to the existing western framework are faced with the challenge of growing to occupy the same social space as regions that have been at its center for centuries. Despite domestic cultivation, the cultural activities of many countries outside western capital interests have been subject to what Stuart Hall called the multicultural question
to gain acknowledgment from the global art market – often forced to assimilate by becoming “the imitative version of the dominant one” (cited in Yuval-Davies, 2011). Despite having a rich history through the ages, the Japanese art world’s position in the global market has developed in this assimilatory manner, pressured by the requisites of belonging to the western world.

To better understand the state of contemporary art in Japan, it is important to contextualize its development in relation to the sociopolitical climate of its foundation. During the Meiji period (1868-1912), Japan underwent a period of rapid industrialization in an attempt to avoid colonization and reduce economic difference between itself and other western powers (Chiu and Genocchio, 2013). Following years of isolationist maritime prohibitions during the Tokugawa Shogunate (1600-1868), Japanese leaders were forced to contend with a world at the peak of European colonial expansion. They believed that “westernization” through bunmei kaika, civilization and enlightenment, would allow Japan to become a global player and join the ranks of the western powers (Holcombe, 2016).

Yuval-Davies (2011) posits that the politics of belonging is not only limited to the construction of boundaries and identities, but “also the inclusion or exclusion of particular people, social categories and groupings within these boundaries by those that have the power to do this.” Thus, only a hegemonic power relationship can both create and enforce categories of belonging – and the immense pressure upon Japanese society to westernize is a clear paradigm of its imbalanced relationship with the west.

The Meiji government idealized inclusion into the western circles of modern society, associating it with accelerated levels of relevance, privilege, and global power. Following such ideals, Japan began modernizing according to the preexisting framework of the west, an initiative that penetrated all levels of society – not least the national development of the arts. National policy included government initiatives for Japan’s participation in various international expositions and the development of “Western museums,” modeled specifically after British and German national museums (Oki, 2014). Although a culture of collection and display existed within Japan prior to Meiji government, these projects were considered an essential way to mark Japan’s modernization, showcasing the dignity of Japanese industry, knowledge and national wealth in western countries as well as to foreign visitors (Oki, 2014).

To gain further entrance to the western art world, the government founded a French-style salon system, encouraged yōga (western-style painting) as a scientific alternative to nikōnga (traditional Japanese-style painting), and founded art schools to “supplement what [was] lacking in Japanese art and to build up the school to the same level as the best art academies in the West” (Takeba, 2013; Weisenfeld, 2013).

As a result, the early foundation for the arts in present-day Japan was largely imported from Europe. Japan’s history of supervising the arts for the collective benefit of westernizing the nation was – to quote Yuval-Davies (2011) – a project of the politics of belonging. In order to construct a national identity that fit into the boundaries of modern society delineated by the west, the nation took on a project to orient art institutions for western consumption, disrupting and restructuring the development of the arts in accordance to the existing western system. Thus, the historical context by which Japanese art was thrust into the global eye during the late nineteenth century, aided by orientalist practices widespread during the decades following, has culminated in a very unilateral historiography of Japanese modern art that is perpetuated in western education and society. The global art market that has long considered Japanese art only in this light – through the prism of the western art system and the discourse therein.

**Western interests**

Japan’s project of belonging to the western art world may have increased their prominence as a “civilized nation” in the eyes of EuroAmerican superpowers, but it has been ultimately unsuccessful with regards to the art market. Largely the byproduct of a combination of western curatorial interests (or lack thereof) and Japan’s own exported image, Japanese
contemporary art has an offbeat status within the framework of the western art world today. It has been generally reduced to an essentialist pop-culture narrative, otherwise distanced from much of global art theory and internationally overlooked in comparison with its neighbors in Asia, notably China (Favell, 2015a, b).

While the late 1950s mark the beginning of “contemporary art” in the west, concurrent avant-garde movements in Japan went unrecognized for decades, added only retrospectively to art history books. Japan’s contemporary movement has mainly been historicized in western art history as having only begun in the late 1980s with the rise of a few key Japanese stars (Favell, 2015a, b). The extensive research of art historians Adrian Favell, Reiko Tomii, and Gennifer Weisenfeld indicates that Japan’s late inclusion into the western market is founded in orientalism, resistance to foreign curators, and a resulting disconnect from Japanese art theory.

Until the late 1980s, the idea that art in Asia could be “worth serious contemplation” was beyond modern and contemporary curatorial thinking, abetted by exclusion from art history education (Desai, 2011). Before the prevalence of postcolonial studies, western regard for Asia was often cultivated by oriental studies, in which EuroAmericans are the “knowing subjects” and others remain merely “objects of observations and analyses” (Abaza, 2011; Said, 1979). Despite the fact that Japanese artists not only engaged with, but also influenced, the art narratives of modern and postmodern art that flourished throughout Europe and the USA, they were not regarded with the same esteem that surrounded western stylistic shifts[2]. Instead of being perceived as explorative and experimental, most progressions were regarded as un-authentic and devalued in market and theoretical value. For decades, western collectors and curators were interested only in “authentic” Japanese artwork, discounting other styles and mediums as tainted or derivative of western forms (Desai, 2011). “Authentic” artwork was labeled as such that it was distinctly Japanese – of or visually related to traditional methods and mediums, including nihonga, rakugaki (ceramics), shikki (lacquerware), and mokuhanga (woodblock prints). Exhibitions that perpetuated the illusion of Japan being an eternally antiquated country was a way of reinforcing common orientalist fantasies, centered around the juxtaposition of the primitive and mystical East against the progressive and industrialized West.

Even when the fervor of “globalizing the art world” swept through the art scene in the 1990s and 2000s, the dispute over what was deemed “authentic” continued to be detrimental to the global visibility of emerging artists from Japan, as existing opportunities to showcase experimental styles frequently depended on a willingness to adhere to preexisting western narratives (Favell, 2015a). The success of emerging artists in Asia and other nonwestern regions became increasingly about marketability; specific artists and art narratives had to be framed in ways interesting to relevant “tastemakers” in the international market (Preece, 2014). Chloe Preece’s recent research into the branding of Chinese contemporary art has demonstrated that these main tastemakers, or influencers, of the globalized art market are undoubtedly still in the west, concentrated in New York and London. Preece (2014) found that artistic practice is “based on the necessity to be positioned by others,” demonstrating that artworks from regions outside of the West gain traction internationally as a result of being “politicized by Western curators and critics according to their own ideological preferences.”

Similar to recent art practices in the Middle East, curators traveled to different areas of Asia with intentions of showcasing regional artist identities, often greatly impacting visual culture production and molding conceptual and political art into the conceptual and political narratives they were initially searching for (Ramadan, 2016). To foster success in the market, they often framed social and political narratives that resonated strongly with western values, “packaging and marketing [them] for the Western art world” (Preece, 2014). As Nicolas Bourriaud aptly wrote, “contemporary art is above all contemporary with the economy that envelopes it” (cited in Boullata, 2008). Japan’s status as an already industrialized nation in Asia
proved to be problematic. “The West’s universal language over cultures that are valued only insofar as they turn out to be atypical,” left the Japanese system overly tedious to jet-setting curators with grand notions of capitalizing on Asian difference (Bourriaud, 2008).

Since much of art discourse significant to the international art market is authored by westerners, the general lack of non-traditional Japanese artwork in western art history education has also compounded the lack of understanding of artistic conceptual narratives in Japan. In addition to exhibiting work in important venues, a very important way to gain success as an artist is to be written about – featured in publications, catalogues, and reviews that garner international attention (Eubank, 2007). Accessible translation of theoretical concepts has largely proved unsuccessful for the Japanese, in contrast to other countries in Asia. For example, Chinese high art circles encourage westerners to curate large exhibitions in China, and even fly curators and journalists in for exhibitions and fairs to ensure western media coverage (Favell, 2015a, b). Meanwhile, the Japanese art elite frown upon foreign curatorial intervention and are not easily convinced to entrust authority to foreign curators with no local knowledge into the system. Therefore, as the primary facilitators of new artists to the international market, it is largely their own prerogative to promote domestic artists in the international scene and provide the rest of the world with relevant cultural narratives during globalized art’s spread to Asia. “There are no Japanese art critics who speak English and Japanese fluently and write in English about Japanese art for an overseas audience,” said Misa Shin, the Former Executive Director of Tokyo Art Fair in 2007. “If there were a Japanese art critic who could speak very good English, they could build a strong connection between the world and contemporary Japanese art” (Eubank, 2007). In addition, the contemporary art scenes in Tokyo and Kyoto are not based in a commercial gallery system typical of New York or London, making networking arduous for those unaccustomed to navigating Japanese society (Favell, 2015a, b). As such, the language barrier has made it more difficult for artists who remain in Japan to succeed internationally, which also limits international perception of the breadth of Japanese art. Exhibits of artwork curated to confront domestic social issues such as denuclearization, social isolation after the Great East Japan Earthquake, the widening gap between rural and urban locales, and environmental revitalization have predominantly been successful only within Japan, largely invisible to the English-speaking global market.

**Exported image**

Separate from the art world, Japan had a thriving international export economy in the 1980s, aided by globalization and its postwar subordination to the US hegemony. The “national cool” of Japan was exported tirelessly through culturally influential commercial channels such as consumer electronics, fashion, architecture, animation, and cuisine (McGray, 2002). During these years, often referred to as Japan’s Bubble Era, foreign interest and regard for Japan became increasingly limited to the ubiquitous pop-culture the nation disseminated overseas. The longstanding struggle for *sekai-sei*, or global universality, proved that the cultural accuracy of appropriated Japanese culture was less important than the international popularity of Japan with regards to commercial exports (Tomii, 2011). However, as Japan’s international economy boomed, the concurrent isolation of the art market created unrest amongst artists in the Tokyo underground – a select few independently penetrated the western market, taking the global market by commercial storm (Favell 2015a). Critics argue that these “stars” built their careers by broadcasting a specific type of singular “Japanese-ness” to western consumers in the 1990s (Weisenfeld, 2011). These are the artists that have been recorded in western history books as pioneering contemporary art in Japan, and who’s artwork has propagated much of the discourse surrounding it. Two of the most successful Japanese star artists are Takashi Murakami and Nobuyoshi Araki.

**Takashi Murakami** is the Founder of the “Superflat” movement that took the art world by storm in the late 1990s, and arguably the most famous Japanese artist in EuroAmerica. He is
an interdisciplinary artist mainly working in painting and sculpture, combining visual
inspiration from pop culture and traditional *ukiyo-e* (a genre of *mokuhanga*). His work, often
large scale, presents Japanese society as a two dimensional, flattened world devoted to
superficial consumerism and graphic fantasies. Murakami claims that his artwork highlights
the “flatness” of Japanese visual media in much of popular culture, but also explores the
emptiness of a Japanese society that he believes is ruled by rampant consumer culture.

Nobuyoshi Araki is a Photographer and Filmmaker. Although he is one generation older
than Murakami, his photography also became increasingly well-known in the west during
the 1990s. Araki’s work asserts foundations in Edo period *shunga* (erotic prints); his famous
photographs frequently depict sexualized young women with arguably pedophilic and
sadistic undertones. With a career that began in advertising, Araki has become Japan’s most
notorious photographer, an icon well-known for his controversial images (Weisenfeld, 2013).
His photographs explore themes surrounding sex and death, revealing a dark, sexual
underbelly of Japan that shocked and awed western audiences.

Similar to the western art stars Andy Warhol, Cindy Sherman, and Barbara Kruger, both
Murakami and Nobuyoshi have employed branding strategies to become well-known within
western art circles over the courses of their respective careers (Schroeder, 2005).
As discussed by Preece and Kerrigan (2015) in their analysis of the construction of artistic
brands, artists’ perceived identity often becomes an extension of the work they create,
forming the foundation of their brand to consumers. Murakami did not position himself
within the popular western “mythology” of artists rejecting the commercial market; instead,
he has become a beneficiary of the hyper-consumerist world he depicts in his work,
collaborating with global brands such as Louis Vuitton, Vans, and COMME des GARÇONS
(Preece and Kerrigan, 2015). The Murakami brand has become a widespread commodity,
with merchandise ranging from soccer balls to shoes accessible for purchase by his fans.
Araki branded himself to consumers in a very different way than Murakami, appealing
more to the western archetype of the unstable, or perhaps tortured, artist. He is notoriously
erotic, claiming in interviews that his camera was a surrogate penis that allowed him to
“penetrate” his subjects (Weisenfeld, 2011). He has collaborated with international figures
over the course of his career, including Icelandic Artist Björk in 1996, American Artist Lady
Gaga in 2009, and more recently the American youth culture brand Supreme in 2016. Both
Murakami and Araki have conveyed their concepts through essays and publications,
especially the entrepreneurial Murakami, who extensively marketed selective strains of
*otaku* subculture as essential to the Japanese identity. *Otaku* is a term for someone deeply
interested with technology and pop-culture, usually to a point of obsession.

Murakami and Araki are just two examples of Japanese stars who rose to fame in the
West in the 1990s and 2000s; others include Yoshitomo Nara, Mariko Mori, Aida Makoto,
and Chiho Aoshima. These artists’ successes have come to represent the Japanese nation
through their essentialist narratives, in a way similar to the Chinese contemporary art
movements Cynical Realist and Political Pop discussed by Preece (2014). Favell and
Weisenfeld, respectively argue that this small concentration of independent artists framed
the global reception for Japanese contemporary art, “appealing to the salacious Western
fantasies of ‘neo-Tokyo,’ by ‘constructing a critical benchmark for discussions’” formed on
the basis of a singular Japanese contemporary identity founded in consumerism, sex, and
violence (Favell, 2015a, b; Weisenfeld, 2011). Their work appealed to western audiences with
the seductive (and highly marketable) notion that the strict traditional hierarchy and
collective conformity that are often considered trademarks of Japanese culture have
suppressed the masses, leading to a twisted perversion of society following the boom of
Japan’s economy. This interpretation appeals to western values of individualism and
self-expression, while also creating an accessible way to belittle or disregard Japanese
economic success during the Bubble Era. Western curators were especially enamored with
Superflat, believing that it had finally “cracked open the contemporary discourse about Japanese culture and society” (Darling, 2001).

In Janet Borgerson and Schroeder (2002) analysis of cultural representation in visual marketing, they posit that successful, if unethical, marketing tactics employ binaries of representation, such as the aforementioned orientalist juxtaposition of East and West, to create "a recognizable ‘authentic‘ identity" about the unknown – in this case, contemporary Japan. Notions of a depraved hyper-urban society were attractive to western audiences when considering a country so technologically advanced – the work paralleled commodity pop-art narratives in the USA while maintaining a comforting separation of East and West. By framing Japan as both like the western world, but still very different from it, audiences could attempt to understand Japanese society while being comforted by the idea that it somehow remained inferior. A Japanese contemporary identity ruled by violence and sex again played into the grand narratives of orientalism, in which eroticism and brutality is normalized by the oriental other (Said, 1979; Weisenfeld, 2011).

A handful of artists cannot claim to speak for an entire nation, but Japanese curators’ unsuccessful attempts to garner global attention elsewhere have made it increasingly difficult for the art world to grasp much else. The content of many domestic curators’ projects does counter this essentialist discourse, but the government and businesses have only reinforced global notions of Japan’s distinctive superficial culture. The commercial success of Superflat became another export of Japanese “cool,” aligning with other attempts to brand Japan around the spread of pop-culture (Favell, 2015a, b). Global attraction and popularity increases Japan’s soft power over other countries while strengthening its tourism and export economies, lucrative initiatives unlikely to be abandoned with the imminence of the 2020 Tokyo Olympics (Nye, 2004). Some examples include: in 2003, former Prime Minister Koizumi recognized otaku pop subculture as an important and unique cultural export; in 2008, Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism appointed Hello Kitty an official tourism ambassador; and as recently as 2016, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology awarded the 66th Art Encouragement Prize to Takashi Murakami (Weisenfeld, 2011).

A return to the local

Despite Japan’s global pop image, much of the internal Japanese art world counters this theory and aesthetic. Different art narratives are successful in Japan and have started gaining traction in global avenues in recent years. Much of these movements engage with social practice, a phenomenon that has become increasingly popular in Japan as the economic and cultural gap between rural and urban communities has widened throughout the nation. Many Japanese art world tastemakers and artists have become more and more disillusioned by Japan’s image abroad, turning away from patterns of success to instead cultivate projects unrelated to the discourses that are trending on the global market.

This increasing domestic opposition to the global perception of an essentialist narrative in Japanese art has resulted in a resurgence of movements in Japan that engage local communities. New art and culture festivals have been consistently emerging throughout Japan since the late 1990s – roughly around the same time that the Japanese Government began stressing regional revitalization efforts on municipal, prefectural, and national levels. Especially following the devastating Great East Japan Earthquake and subsequent tsunami and nuclear meltdown in 2011, these types of initiatives that engage with social practice have become a significant focus of Japanese contemporary art domestically (Favell, 2015a, b). Art Director Fram Kitagawa is increasingly well-known in Japan as one of the nation’s leading figures in these initiatives. While he has not received much prominence in Euro-American art circles, throughout his career Kitagawa has engaged in large-scale revitalization projects that disrupt the hierarchy of the domestic art world, stressing the importance of art participation outside of urban centers.
Fram Kitagawa

Fram Kitagawa (b.1946) is an influential figure in Japan’s domestic art scene, and has been active since the mid-1970s on activities that cover a wide range of projects related to community development. Kitagawa is an Art Director and Curator, as well as the Chairman of Art Front Gallery in Tokyo, which foregrounds art initiatives centered around community development and regional revitalization. Although Art Front Gallery is based in Tokyo, most of their initiatives work to bring art into areas outside of the city. Kitagawa is known across Japan for his socially engaged art incentives, and has amassed a large following through the optimism behind his art philosophy.

Kitagawa’s motivations can be divided into three main points: democratizing the art world, decentering the hegemony of a single narrative about Japanese contemporary art, and efforts to revitalize the satoyama (village and mountainside) of Japan’s destitute rural regions (Favell, 2011). His drive to challenge the hierarchy of Japan’s existing art system means ignoring global trends; his projects are usually removed from the art narratives that Asian markets, including Japan, often become subject to in the western market. By putting an emphasis on bringing art out of the “big city art world” and into the countryside, Kitagawa tries to dissolve the “unhealthy alliance between art, urbanism, and commercial interest” that has come about as result of Japan’s dramatic urbanization periods in the Meiji years, during postwar reconstruction, and again during the Bubble Era (Favell, 2011). Instead of supporting art that leads to more plans for urban development, he supports what he calls “slow art” – art placed in unlikely places that encourages people to celebrate the landscape and consider the community (Kitagawa, 2015).

Festivals for revitalization

Kitagawa’s main achievements are large-scale festivals that promote regional revitalization. Significant festivals under his direction include FARET Tachikawa (1994), the Echigo-Tsumari Art Triennale (2000), the Niigata Water and Land Art Festival (2009), and the Setouchi International Triennale (2010). These festivals are located in different places around Japan, but have similar characteristics – they are extensive, community-based projects located in areas affected by various forces of globalization, namely Japan’s inner processes of modernization and industrialization that have led to regional depopulation and economic decline. They each embrace collaborative partnerships between a diverse range of players, including local communities and governments, local and non-local artists, and an enormous volunteer support system from within Japan and abroad.

The Echigo-Tsumari Art Triennale, one of Kitagawa’s first and most successful undertakings, can be considered as an example to better understand the context of development behind these festivals. The Echigo-Tsumari Art Triennale takes place in the Echigo-Tsumari region of Kitagawa’s home prefecture of Niigata, a mountainous region that experiences harsh snowfall in the winter and extremely hot and humid summers. Despite agricultural innovations that once yielded a strong export industry centered mainly around rice production, the region has fallen into a state of decline as the younger generations have continuously moved away for better financial prospects in Japan’s cities and metropolitan areas. The Echigo-Tsumari region is larger than the entire Tokyo metropolitan area of 23 wards, but has a population of only 70,000 – less than 0.2 percent of Tokyo’s 37.8 million people (Klien, 2010). As of 2008, 30 percent of Echigo-Tsumari’s population was over 65 years old. In the face of these issues, the Niigata Prefectural Government proposed the “New Niigata Riso Plan” in the 1990s, with the aim of revitalizing the region by attracting short and long term visitors to the region. The plan aimed to foster residents’ attachment to their native region by bolstering the appeal of local attractions focused on nature, culture, and tradition (Klien, 2010). The New Niigata Riso Plan offered Kitagawa a perfect platform for a new art initiative with a positive community impact outside of Tokyo, so he jumped on the opportunity. Kitagawa first
had to convince the prefectural authorities and the municipal leadership that introducing contemporary art to the region would promote continued community development. It was an upward battle — for four years, Kitagawa held over 2,000 meetings about the triennale’s development, community initiatives, and environmental impact before all parties came to an agreement about the triennale (Kitagawa, 2015). The Echigo-Tsumari Art Triennale organized its first 80-day cycle in 2000 and has since recurred every three years, becoming the largest outdoor exhibition of art in the world in 2006 with more than 900 artworks. Preparations are currently underway in anticipation of the festival’s seventh cycle in the summer of 2018.

Another of Kitagawa’s most successful festivals is The Setouchi Triennale. The Setouchi Triennale is a 108-day art festival that spans 12 islands in the Seto Inland Sea. Since it connects three of Japan’s four mainland islands, the Seto Inland Sea was the core of the nation’s transport and trade up until the late nineteenth century. In the century following the Meiji Period’s massive modernization movement, the region has undergone decades of industrial decline and depopulation. Development of factory ships and overground transportation methods rendered the local economy obsolete, and the population decreased significantly as financial viability was shifted to new metropolitan areas. The region’s desolate beauty was recognized by Tokyo billionaire Soichiro Fukutake after he relocated the headquarters of his publishing company, Benesse Corporation, to Okayama in 1987 (Veitch, n.d.). Fukutake is one of Japan’s wealthiest and most visible art collectors. He established a hotel and two art museums on Naoshima Island, initially interested in reversing the decline of the region via tourism. However, upon hiring art producer Fram Kitagawa as his Museum Director, Fukutake became inspired by Kitagawa’s ideology of community revitalization and resistance to the commercialism of the urban art world (Kondo, 2012). The Setouchi Triennale is Fukutake and Kitagawa’s brainchild, originally sponsored by the Benesse Corporation and founded conceptually in Kitagawa’s philosophies of a new direction for contemporary art in Japan. With 2016 as its third cycle, it has only recently begun receiving western media attention after success within the Asia Pacific since it began in 2010. It attracted more than 900,000 visitors in its inaugural season, around the same as Kassel’s Documenta in 2012.

Resistance
Kitagawa’s festivals have three main objectives. First, Kitagawa aims to democratize art by taking it out of Japan’s commercial gallery spaces, usually in the form of public art. Kitagawa discusses his involvement with public art in Art Place Japan, calling it “a focus on making art available to the public instead of shutting it up in museums and galleries” (2015). Many of Tokyo’s premier art spaces are located in financial districts, charge steep entrance fees, and are owned and directed by large corporations; perpetuating the perception of an art society in Japan that is centered around wealth and commercial interests. Often art spaces are valued because of the notion of “elite-ness” that surrounds the art world, or “the qualities and opportunities with which they are associated,” making them seem intimidating and inaccessible for many (Rentschler et al., 2012). By moving art outside of Japan’s urban centers, it shatters this aura and becomes accessible to a range of individuals not necessarily in touch with the high art initiatives of established art circles. Kitagawa’s festivals are often designed to be “deliberately inefficient” — with hundreds of artworks peppered throughout the regions in no specific order, frequently requiring complex navigation and at least a week of time (Favell, 2011). Structures that have been abandoned or fallen into disrepair are repurposed for the festivals and gain new lives as art pieces, cultural centers, and museums. Audiences consider contemporary art in unconventional spaces, and can forge their own way of interacting with and thinking about art. Visitors are encouraged to appreciate the richness of the region through a “slow art” experience: they are encouraged to by relishing the environment, interacting with locals, and gaining an appreciation for artworks after taking the time to find them.
Economic Theorist and Professor Nobuko Kawashima (2006) has identified four types of audience development within cultural policy: extended marketing, taste cultivation, audience education, and outreach. By adopting a “creative form of marketing” that places values on the people involved rather than the artwork, Kitagawa has found a way to effectively combine all four of the methods discussed by Kawashima (Fillis and Rentschler, 2005). Most apparently, Kitagawa engages with outreach: his festivals “[take] the arts from their usual venues to places where those with little or no access to the arts live” (Kawashima, 2006). By extending art to rural communities far away from urban centers, Kitagawa (2015) engages with social issues related to the aging and depopulation of those regions; he hopes to “give the elderly the matsuri (festival) experience once every three years in a community that no longer has enough people to have its own traditional matsuri.” He also appeals to existing audiences through taste cultivation and audience education by broadening their cultural scope through a focus on local Japanese cultures, a new engagement with site-specific and temporal art, and extensive programs of performances and events. With the festivals’ combined lineup of emerging and established artists, the festival becomes a place to view, document, and discover artists in all stages of their careers. There is also a touristic incentive of taking trips to the countryside and experiencing art in new ways, such as sleeping within the renovated art house projects. Also worth noting is the extensive volunteer systems of the festivals that allow anyone to engage with artwork on site and in-progress, which is not possible in conventional museums. At the 2016 Setouchi Triennale, there were 1,184 volunteers from within Japan and overseas – these volunteers, in turn, promote the festivals through word of mouth and by documenting their own experiences. Many volunteers are from urban areas in Japan, who feel they cannot experience face-to-face exchange in crowded cities. Furthermore, Kitagawa engages with extended marketing by tapping into potential audiences that have been deterred for financial or social reasons; since the art is often public, they have informal contexts with explanations provided in layman’s terms by volunteers and locals, and they are often free of charge or have entrance as low as 200 yen. Through employing numerous tactics of audience inclusion, Kitagawa has created a new public art machine – one that both engages existing art world audiences in novel ways, while developing a new audience ranging from local community members to elite art tastemakers.

The second objective of Kitagawa’s festivals is to showcase an array of Japanese and international artists, which he accomplishes without engaging in any singular narrative about Japanese identity. “This is the power of art,” Kitagawa stated in a talk given at the Art Gallery of New South Wales in 2011. “Art is the only genre that values uniqueness […] only in art, you are praised for being different from others” (Art Gallery NSW, 2011). There are open calls for proposals in a format similar to international residency programs; artists are selected by Kitagawa’s committees based on their engagement with the site and community, and ability to convey concepts related to globalization, nature, community building, and more recently, an engagement with Asian Pacific countries. Diverse concepts such as environmental sustainability, peripheralism, collective nostalgia, globalization processes, and local identity are confronted within the many works selected for these festivals.

Since most of the festivals’ financial sponsors do not necessarily depend on the interests of western curators and collectors, they may offer a chance for new perspectives within the field to develop. Instead of drawing financial support mainly from corporations as is typical of the Japanese art world, the festivals can source funding from government agencies in Japan and abroad due to their economic viability for increasing tourism in rural areas. As they have become more popular, there has also been a dramatic increase in sponsorship and donations from private industries that benefit economically from the festival seasons, such as railways, airlines, banks, hotels, and tour operators. In addition, because the festivals have developed a recent focus on cultural exchange within the Asia Pacific, various cultural foundations and universities in the region have also begun providing support. Kitagawa has thus created an alternative platform for art that has the
freedom to showcase a variety of styles, mediums, and concepts. Time will tell if this will bring about changes to Japan's art identity on a global level.

During the 2016 Setouchi Art Triennale, three artists showcased work on Ogijima Island that demonstrate the discursive content included in Kitagawa's festivals. Mayumi Kuri built her installation, Memory Bottles, after interviewing elderly community members and collecting objects and photographs from their childhoods. The Japanese native's delicate installation showcased tangible representations of the community's memories in tiny bottles, illuminated and dangling from the ceiling of an abandoned building originally used for storing rice. The effect was a twinkling net of colorful lights that invited viewers into this once-abandoned space, sharing the island's history and emphasizing nostalgia for lost perspectives. Oskar Oiwa, an established Brazilian Artist, created his installation "The room inside of the room" inside an abandoned home in the residential area of Ogijima. Oiwa constructed a Japanese tatami room complete with table, tea cups, seat cushions, with a tokanoma alcove for ancestral worship—but turned the room on its side entirely, so that viewers feel at odds in the space. As a first-generation Japanese-Brazilian, Oiwa may be presenting viewers with insights into the Japanese diaspora. The tatami room is typical of Japanese traditional homes, closely familiar to Japanese identity, yet his installation displaces it and turns it unfamiliar. Japanese mid-career artist OZ, or Keisuke Yamaguchi, has a permanent sculpture in Ogijima's fishing port, entitled "Walking Ark." Oz re-envisioned Noah's Ark as a humanoid creature, with four sets of human legs that appear to be walking toward the sea. The surreal ark is poised to set off in the direction of Iwaki, a city in Tohoku affected by the 2011 disaster, and was constructed to express solidarity and prayers for future safety. Especially with Japan's long history of overnight devastation, there is a special significance to highlighting and experiencing local narratives that would otherwise be shrouded by Japan's exported mass culture. All three artists utilize a visual language that is contemporary, but the concepts behind their work are unaligned with the pop narrative of sex and play that has long dominated market interests surrounding Japanese art.

The third objective is to renew and strengthen the community ties in regions that have been decimated by economic decline and chronically aging populations. Kitagawa's projects involve the entire community from start to finish—the offseason construction and maintenance of art sites, and the interactions with visitors during the festival season. Therein is a positive cycle of community building: artists discover the richness of the region, interact with local residents, and make art with local methods and materials while adhering to community and environmental guidelines in their artworks (Kitagawa, 2015). Both the selected artists and volunteers live and experience the region for extended periods of time, producing artworks with aims to benefit the communities there. In this way, regional perspectives spread to a diverse array of individuals from Japan and abroad—community ties are created and strengthened as people grow and work together over the years. Permanent businesses such as cafes, shops, and lodgings in the festival regions are also developed as ways for locals to generate revenue and share folk art, cuisine and other traditions with visitors. Kitagawa foregrounds renewed communal resolve as foundational for the gradual process of economic revitalization—the regions become more inviting to youth generations, creating fresh new connections, opportunities, and incentives to return. Often the executive committees of Kitagawa's festival involve local government leadership, which allows homegrown leadership to direct local aspects of the festival's event program, prioritize aspects of the community development specific to that region, and also increase networking abilities for public funding to keep costs low for visitors.

While there are many supporters of Kitagawa's optimistic approaches to art and community, there are also pessimistic reactions to the festivals. Critics feel that Kitagawa's ideology has become hypocritical, and some even argue that his projects are detrimental to preexisting communities. International art stars such as Yayoi Kusama, Marina Abramović, and Olafur Eliasson are included in festival lineups, causing critics to question whether...
Kitagawa truly wants to resist the established hierarchy of the so-called “big city art world.” Along the same lines, his anti-consumerist philosophy is strained as the festivals have evolved into wildly successful tourist destinations. The 2016 Setouchi Triennale Executive Committee (including Kitagawa himself) won the 1st Japan Tourism Grand Prize after attracting more than a million visitors over the course of 108 days (Setouchi Triennale Executive Committee, 2017). During festival seasons, formerly rural areas can be overrun with visitors, something that many community members have opposed from the start. They fear that consequences of urbanization will spread to the countryside in the form of increased regional prices, waste, traffic, and even criminal activities during festival peaks. While forms of “orientalising” the countryside can make economic sense by providing sources of income for communities, critics argue that the festivals are benefitting tourist industries more than locals (Brumann and Cox, 2011). Communities fear that there are too many stakeholders – that equal collaboration of all parties is too difficult to maintain, and that the values and agendas of stakeholders with the most power will be take priority (Klien, 2010). As the festivals become more globally visible, Kitagawa must address these issues, finding ways to limit larger businesses from outside the region taking precedent over preexisting local industries. Otherwise, initiatives to sustain the traditions rendered invisible by modernization may be manipulated to meet the demands of tourism and overwrite the local history completely (Akagawa, 2015). Although these aspects of Kitagawa’s community initiatives have been criticized, his loyal following increases each year in the form of artists, volunteers, new community members, and visitors. The range of visitors interested in seeing contemporary art in the countryside is also expanding as the various festivals’ visibility on the global market gradually increases.

Conclusion

As the art world globalizes, “space” is set aside within global art discourse to include nonwestern countries (Yuval-Davies, 2011). While the Japanese art stars who filled this space cannot be faulted for their success abroad, it must be noted that their presentation of a Japanese identity ruled by desire has ultimately formed a benchmark for critical discussion regarding Japanese art. This discursive space has not been expanded to include much else in the two decades that have followed. As suggested by the research of Janet Borgerson and Schroeder (2002), and Preece (2014), nonwestern cultures become subject to western marketing strategies to increase palatability to western audiences, often regardless of accuracy. Because it frames their reception in global markets, much of subsequent Japanese art developments have been forced to contend with this preexisting discourse. This creates another project of belonging therein: to align with much of the ruling art discourse surrounding Japanese contemporary society, Japanese artists seeking success abroad often must brand themselves in relation to these widely circulated narratives.

Despite some criticism of his idealistic initiatives, Kitagawa’s festivals for revitalization grow with each cycle while managing to disregard art market trends of the globalized market. They have slowly begun garnering international attention through success of his three main objectives: to democratize art, separate it from urban art centers, and bring communities together to highlight regions, traditions, and stories of Japan that might otherwise be forgotten. Although global and local are so often held in opposition, Kitagawa’s initiatives remind us that global processes reach local communities, and on varying scales. Processes of globalization have economically decimated the regions that the festivals are located in: development of new factories, agricultural machineries, transportation methods, and technological industries has rendered countless parts of Japan totally obsolete. Populations are chronically aging because the youth generations have left for Japan’s urban centers in search of better economic prospects and have not returned. Thus, the insular concerns of art initiatives like the Echigo-Tsumari Art Triennale and the Setouchi Triennale are not necessarily exclusive of global concepts (Tomii, 2011). Kitagawa’s aim to return to
the local can be constituted as a site of resistance to the globalized art market, a break with the spread of Japanese “cool.” By largely ignoring the politics of belonging to the market, these festivals counter forces of western homogenization while also promoting local development amid the frenzy of urban development in its neighboring countries.

Indeed, Kitagawa's art festivals provide artists with alternative platforms, but can his initiatives truly forge a new global art discourse separate from the trends of the western art elite (Weisenfeld, 2011)? In the face of globalized contemporary art, will the foregrounding of local ideas do more than orientalize rural regions for profit? When considering Japanese contemporary art and nonwestern art in general, it is important to be critically aware of the antecedent narratives that exist within art history and the international art market. Japan is often falsely considered to have been “discovered” by the West, which has perpetuated an art historiography that falls under the western gaze, especially when considering developments since the Meiji Period. Art history produces knowledge, constructing timelines and classifications of importance in cultural history; this knowledge informs curatorial interests and the marketability of artwork (Karlholm, 2009). While discussing the effects of globalization, it is important to emphasize the “interweaving of art with wider social, economic, and political issues while not reducing any one of these terms to others” (Ratnam, 2004). While postcolonial movements in the art world dutifully increase visibility of nonwestern perspectives, western profit from the commodification of difference is just another regression. Art historians, theorists, curators, and collectors must be wary of underlying orientalist practices, and consider local contexts of art production. Separating or excluding Asian art history from western art history education limits the breadth of discussion therein, further perpetuating the dichotomy of what Edward Said called a circular vision by which the details of oriental life serve merely to reassert the oriental-ness of the subject (Said, 1979).

Despite inclusion in the market, being confined to a category that denotes otherness can result in the erasure of important narratives. The nature of Japan's inclusion into the western discursive framework in the 1980s continues to prolong its regional separation in a global contemporary art world that is becoming largely transnational and transcultural. As they gain popularity worldwide, perhaps new initiatives like Kitagawa's will someday fulfill one small facet of the project of belonging undertaken by Japan years ago and establish a global art presence with the agency to direct its own discursive identity, value, and worth without conforming to the boundaries set by western powers. The localization of contemporary art may be a reaction to the fact that emerging Japanese artists have been pigeonholed in the international market – and perhaps have no desire to resign to their designated place within it.

Notes
1. Please note that for the purposes of this text, the names of all Japanese nationals are listed as follows: given name, surname.
2. Notably; the Dutch and French fascination with Japanese art which had a heavy influence on impressionism; the influence of Japanese aesthetics over design and architecture movements in modern and postmodern western society; and the avant-garde collective Gutai which anticipated later performance and conceptual art of the 1960s and 1970s.

References


Corresponding author
Eimi Tagore-Erwin can be contacted at: eimitagore@gmail.com

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