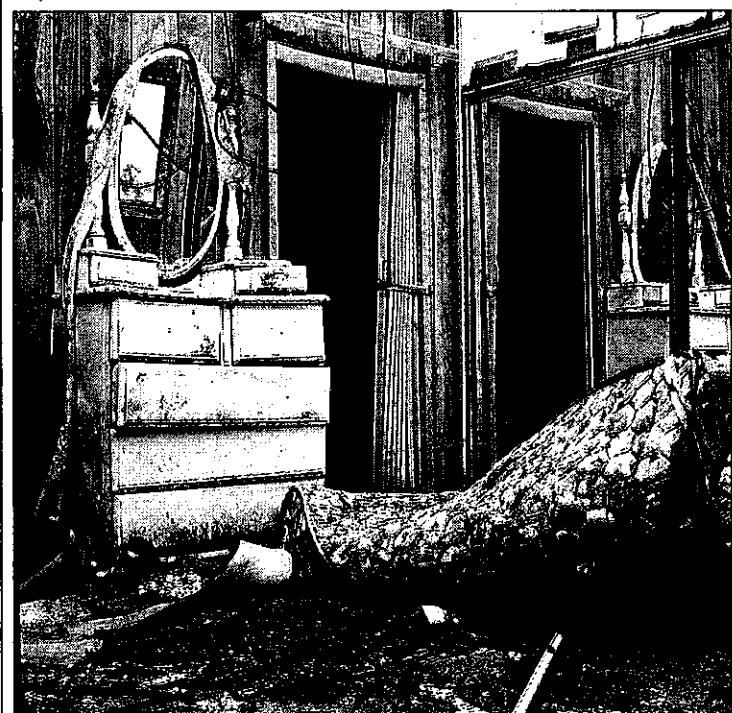


OPEN GALLERY LISSA CHRISTOPHER



**INTERIOR DISASTER**

Francesca Rosa has photographed a far north Queensland home that is decomposing in the wake of Cyclone Larry, approaching the project as if she were recording a crime scene. The resulting images (*Interior Disaster #5*, pictured) are gripping and unexpectedly beautiful. Amid the flayed ceiling fans, buckled walls and mattresses turning to compost, intact domestic items such as a jar of peanut butter and a light globe become poignant reminders of human habitation. Gallery 4, Australian Centre for Photography, 257 Oxford Street, Paddington, 9332 1455. Tue-Fri, noon-7pm; Sat-Sun, 10am-6pm. Until August 22.

**CAPTURED**

David Fairbairn's intriguingly layered multimedia portraits of older Australians are finished in jittery black and white lines. Fairbairn describes his work as "a forensic mapping of an energy field". Stella Downer Fine Art, 2 Danks Street, Waterloo, 9319 1006. Tue-Sat, 11am-6pm; Sun, 11am-4pm. Until August 23.

**COLLECTING PASSIONS**

This rewarding exhibition of 104 modernist creations comes direct from the walls of Justice Roddy Meagher's home. Meagher has been buying art since he was 18 and his private collection includes works by Picasso, Matisse, Rodin, Jean Cocteau, Grace Cossington Smith (*Wardens' Meeting*, pictured), Joy Hester and Margaret Preston. Standouts include Stanislaus Ostoja-Kotkowski's *Two Horizons*, painted in 1966, and a joyously cheeky, untitled Cocteau sketch of a naked man and woman drawn in 1958. University Art Gallery, Science Road, University of Sydney, 9351 6883; Mon-Fri, 10am-4.30pm; Sun, noon-4pm. Until September 27.



**ALSO RECOMMENDED**

Edward Burtynsky at the Australian Centre for Photography, Paddington (until August 22); Lydia Miller at NG Art Gallery, Chippendale (until August 15); Scott Cardamatis and Joseph Saad at Global Gallery, Paddington (ends today).

Send details of exhibitions to [opengallery@smh.com.au](mailto:opengallery@smh.com.au). No attachments larger than 1Mb.

# Back to nature in a creative utopia

A remarkable exhibition featuring hundreds of works has helped struggling communities in Japan reinvent themselves.

**VISUAL ART**  
JOHN McDONALD

**Echigo-Tsumari Triennial**  
Until September 13  
**Niigata Water and Land Art Festival**  
Until December 27

LAST week I sat in a community hall in rural Japan, drinking sake and eating Australian beef. The local school choir sang and toasts were proposed in honour of the friendship that exists between the Urata region and Australia. Around the walls stood local people wearing red aprons emblazoned with the word "Aussie".

Unusually for an art-generated event, this evening was notable for its cheerfulness and total absence of snobbishness. There was no heavy-duty networking, no careerism, no opportunity for reputations to be made or unmade. It was simply an appreciation of Australia's participation in a unique exhibition: the fourth Echigo-Tsumari Triennial.

Spread over 700 square kilometres, incorporating almost 280 artworks, the triennial covers the greatest area of any international exhibition. Visitors can buy a ticket in the shape of a passport for 30,000 yen (\$400) and drive from one display to the next or take one of four bus tours. The truly dedicated can join all four tours, with four itineraries. After two days on buses I had seen no more than a tenth of the show but to see everything would require the best part of a fortnight.

The triennial is remarkable not simply because of the vast area it encompasses but because so many venues feature multiple artists and installations. For instance, an old school - rechristened Fukutake House after the chief sponsor and producer of the triennial, Soichiro Fukutake - is

worth one small stamp on your passport but contains room-sized works by numerous artists or groups of artists. It ultimately becomes hard to calculate the number of participants or their countries of origin. The previous triennial included 330 artists from 47 countries and this year it is bigger.

Another unique feature is that a certain percentage of works will remain as permanent installations, maintained by volunteers in the community. It is almost impossible to imagine this occurring in Australia, where vandalism is a national pastime.

The process begins when a venue, usually an old farmhouse, is purchased by a private or corporate sponsor and donated back to the community in its altered form. These deals are brokered by Art Front, Tokyo, a private gallery and exhibitions agency run by the charismatic entrepreneur Fram Kitagawa. Even allowing for the financial crisis, Art Front has been able to fund this year's show entirely through private and corporate means. Once again this would be virtually inconceivable in Australia.

This may seem wondrous enough but perhaps the most extraordinary feature of the triennial

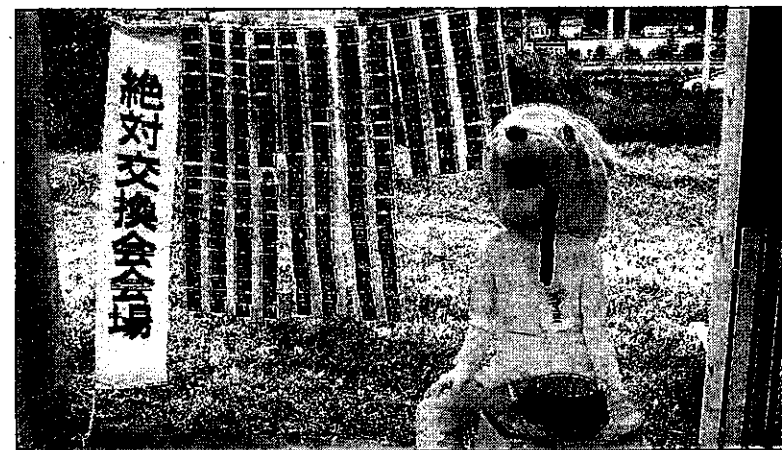
is its utopian ethos, which aims at a revitalisation of the region through art. The first step came in 1996, when Kitagawa was approached by the authorities of Niigata prefecture to do "something creative" that would help facilitate the merger of towns in a rural area of north-western Honshu.

The new Echigo-Tsumari region was created from the union of six smaller towns in Japan's famous "snow country".

In the humid summer months it is a fabulously scenic place: a vision of mountains, streams and winding roads, interspersed with brilliant green rice paddies and traditional farmhouses. During winter it enjoys the highest snowfall of any inhabited area at this latitude. Villages and farms can be cut off for weeks at a time.

This is the setting for Yasunari Kawabata's novel *Snow Country* (1947), which tells the story of the doomed love affair of a city dilettante and a country geisha. The sadness and loneliness that feature so persistently in Kawabata's work reach a kind of perfection in this setting, where people have been battling nature for more than 1500 years.

Nowadays the region is no less beautiful but loneliness and



Time share ... Miho Nakamura - as Tamami the White Dog - at his *Absolute Exchange Gathering*. He swapped visitors' personal items and plans to return them to their rightful owners in three years.

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**The old school house is a fantasy realm of wooden monsters lurking in corridors, passing through walls and dangling from ceilings.**

sadness are the result of economics rather than metaphysics. The world has changed so rapidly that age-old patterns of living have begun to crumble. More than half the local population is over the age of 65, with young people leaving for the cities as soon as they can. The visitor might never suspect - while looking at the immaculately tended houses, roads, fields, vegetable plots and flower beds - but the region is seriously depressed.

The school principal at my dinner table in Urata was in charge of a school in which nine teachers looked after 14 pupils. Within four years she anticipates there will be only eight pupils.

Another school - now converted into a riotous sculptural installation based on the works of story-book artist Seizo Tashima - had only three pupils left when it closed. They are commemorated by coloured wooden effigies on the side of the building.

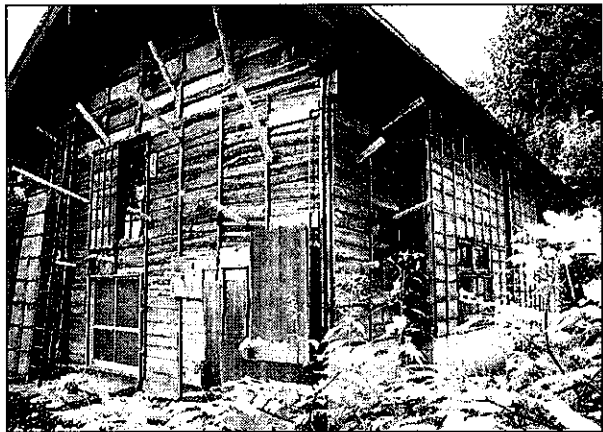
It took Kitagawa four years and more than 2000 meetings to persuade the sceptical locals that salvation lay in the form of an enormous art exhibition. Initially they were distrustful of people from Tokyo, let alone artists, but the curator stuck to his task and the first triennial was held in 2000. Nine years on, the momen-

tum is unstoppable. Although the permanent population continues to dwindle, the triennial has brought a huge influx of visitors and much-needed capital. Furthermore, it has created communities that welcome artists from all over the world and are happy to assist them with their projects.

In his speech at the opening ceremonies, Soichiro Fukutake expressed the hope that the triennial had shown how art could resurrect communities, change Japan and change the world. As the major sponsor he has put his money behind these ideals, as he has done with the island of Naoshima, which represents the world's most refined symbiosis of contemporary art, architecture and nature. Fram Kitagawa is also the director of the Chichu Museum on Naoshima and will combine with Fukutake next year on another art festival, intended to revitalise the Seto Inland Sea area.

The artists participating in the triennial have responded to the aims of the exhibition in diverse, creative ways. They include installations by Antony Gormley and Chiharu Shiota, who have filled old houses with taut networks of string, in a variation of an old Marcel Duchamp idea. In the suburbs, Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller have created

**Sharp end... at the triennial's Australia House (above and right), Richard Thomas has speared large poles through the walls.**



an artificial thunderstorm that can be experienced within one room of a house, complete with thunder and lightning and drips being caught in buckets.

Perhaps the most spectacular pieces are the large school houses transformed by Christian Boltanski and Seizo Tashima into multi-faceted installations: the first being dark and elegiac, the latter a fantasy realm of wooden monsters lurking in corridors, passing through walls and dangling from ceilings. Even more broad-ranging is Katsuhiko Hibino's *Day After Tomorrow* project, in which a colony of young volunteers publish a newspaper, make sculptures, grow

morning glories on a commercial basis and participate in a football match on a muddy field.

One reason the Australians were being toasted so lavishly in Urata was that the Australian embassy, with the Australia-Japan Foundation and Asialink, has rented an old farmhouse in which three artists - Lucy Bleach, Richard Thomas and Alex Rizkalla - with project manager Cass Matthews, have lived and worked for weeks among the community. The newly christened Australia House is set to become a permanent feature.

It has been much appreciated that Australia, alone among all participating countries, has had

such direct embassy involvement. The entire cost of this exercise represents a fraction of the funds lavished on events such as the Venice Biennale and the goodwill generated is incalculable.

One can see how intimate the connections have become when one looks at Bleach's installation, in which she took wax casts of the ears of her neighbours and exhibited them as butterfly forms inside a small household shrine. Thomas passed long poles through the outside walls of the house to converge at a central inner point, while Rizkalla created an installation of Japanese bric-a-brac, mainly from junk shops in Melbourne.

Running concurrently with this year's triennial is another Fram Kitagawa project, the Niigata Water and Land Art Festival, which incorporates a mere 80 artworks spread over the district.

It includes a contribution by another Australian artist, Anne Graham, who has created an installation in an abandoned house in a remote hamlet by the sea, in which visitors are invited to pour a rough powder through a contrivance of metal woks and glass beakers to generate a "singing" sound.

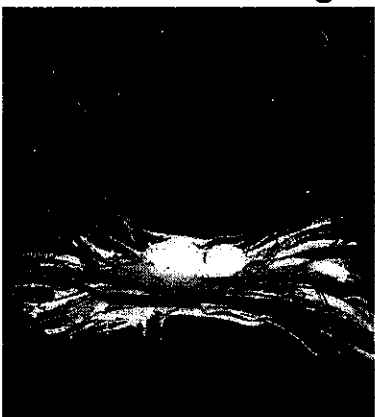
Niigata is a big city but it shares the "revitalising" ambitions of Echigo-Tsumari. Its impressive art festival was organised in little more than three months, on the initiative of an energetic mayor.

With dedication and a vehicle, one might be able to see it all in three or four days. In a more realistic vein, most viewers to Niigata will do what they do in Echigo-Tsumari: link the unpredictable attractions of art with the more reliable pleasures of the Japanese landscape, the cuisine, the spas and the shopping. An added attraction is the knowledge that one is contributing to a greater ecology: the regeneration of the area. In Japan they don't simply say this, they believe it. On that foundation of belief a framework of success is gradually taking shape.

John McDonald's visit to Japan was assisted by the Echigo-Tsumari Triennial.

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