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POLITICS, ARTS AND POP CULTURE OF JAPAN IN
LOCAL AND GLOBAL CONTEXTS

MUTUAL IMAGES

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MUTUAL IMAGES

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FOUNDED BY

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POLITICS, ARTS AND POP CULTURE OF JAPAN IN
LOCAL AND GLOBAL CONTEXTS

EDITED BY
MARCO PELLITTERI & HERB L. FONDEVILLA

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A TRANSCULTURAL RESEARCH JOURNAL

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The Geopolitics of Ecological Art: Contemporary art projects in Japan and South Korea

Ewa MACHOTKA | Stockholm University, Sweden

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ABSTRACT

The notion of 'affinity with nature' functions as a powerful political concept employed in the national identification of different cultural regions of East Asia including Japan and South Korea. Both countries have much in common. They share the myths of a 'love of nature' and a comparable history of post-war economic miracles followed by an ecological crisis and the subsequent development of environmentalism. They also host highly recognised contemporary art events guided by an environmentalist agenda: the Echigo-Tsumari Art Triennale (ETAT), established in the depopulated countryside of Niigata Prefecture in 2000 by the Art Front Gallery, a commercial gallery from Tōkyō; and the Geumgang Nature Art Biennale, initiated by the Korean Nature Art Association (Yatoo), sponsored by the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism, and first held in 2004 in Gongju, South Chungcheong Province.

Guided by ecological thought, both art events aim to induce harmonious interaction between human and non-human realms, while questioning established modes of artistic interaction with 'nature' related to modern Western art discourses. Satoyama (lit. village mountain), an agricultural site based on harmonious human-nature interactions, the foundational concept of the ETAT, challenges the notion of gaze that defines the modern Western notion of landscape and its relationships with power. The 'nature art' practiced in Gongju, which involves simple interventions in the environment that are spontaneous and impermanent, questions the paradigms of Land Art. While responding to concrete environmental issues pertinent to the operation of social-ecological systems, the Echigo-Tsumari Art Triennale and the Geumgang Nature Art Biennale both attempt to create localised alternatives to dominant epistemologies associated with global (Western) art discourses. But the question is if these practices are capable of challenging the established geopolitics of ecological art and conventional hierarchies of power between the local and the global embodied by the institutional framework of the eco-art biennale.

KEYWORDS

Ecological art; Japan; South Korea; *Satoyama*; Nature art; Biennial culture; Socially engaged art; Ethno-commodity; Boutique multiculturalism.

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Ecoaesthetics

In recent years, the human impact on the environment has led scientists to label the current geological period 'the Anthropocene' or 'the Age of Man'. The gravity, urgency and magnitude of the problem has prompted calls for integration of knowledge coming from both the sustainability sciences (Gunderson and Holling 2002) and the humanities (Latour 2017). It is not surprising that sustainability has also become the staple of the

global art discourse. However, the definition of ecological art or eco-art remains extremely elusive, especially given that art historical discourse on eco-art is still nascent. The field of ecocriticism, which studies the arts' engagement with environmental concerns and the relationship between humans and the environment, so far has expressed little interest in visual arts (Zapf 2016). Suzaan Boettger observes: "(...) those writing about such work under the banner of 'ecocriticism' are a micro-minority" (2016, 665). The pioneering study of eco-art, which surveyed rather than interrogated the field, was only recently published by Linda Weintraub in 2012. The issue is further complicated by the confusion between eco-art and land art (also known as Earth art or environmental art) that emerged in the 1960s and the 1970s. However, land art was not primarily guided by ecological concerns (Boettger 2003), but rather expanded the boundaries of art through its material engagement with the environment. On the other hand, ecological art (eco-art) is generally understood as an artistic practice that aims to "ensure the well-being of future generations of the diversity of life forms inhabiting the planet" (Wallen 2012, 242). Rasheed Araeen (2009, 684), in his article "Ecoaesthetics: A Manifesto for the Twenty-First Century" published in 2008, in *Third Text* observes: "The world today is facing enormous violence and this will increase in the twenty-first century as the Earth's resources shrink due to the stupidity of the life humans have been pursuing. Art can and should strive for an alternative that is not only aesthetically affirmative and productive but also beneficial to all forms of life on our planet". Araeen also urges artists to "abandon their studios and stop making objects" (2009, 684). He calls: "What the world needs is rivers and lakes of clean water, collective farms and the planting of trees all over the world. An artistic imagination can in fact help achieve all these objectives; and it should (...) lay the foundation for a radical manifesto of art for the twenty-first century" (Araeen 2009, 683).

Many artists and critics share Araeen's sense of urgency and believe that art is one of the methods to save the world from the ecological and social apocalypse (Weintraub 2012). Others challenge the assumption about the functionality of artistic, political, and ecological imperatives encoded in the concept of environmentally and socially engaged art (Bishop 2012). But the goal of this study is not to debate the general functions of art but rather look at ecological art from the perspective of the geopolitics of contemporary art and the tensions between the local and the global.

The discourse on globalisation and the notions of the local and the global has intensified in recent years, transforming into a large, multidisciplinary field guided by different approaches and cultural perspectives (Minisalle 2007). These debates have also resurfaced in art studies, which among others advance the concepts of world art history (Onians 1996; Zijlmans and van Damme 2012). The richness and diversity of this discourse calls for critical attention. As comprehensive perspective is not only impossible but also counterproductive, this study takes a specific limited scope, which will address larger questions about the geopolitics of contemporary art. It will focus on the art biennale as a particular institutional setting guided by geopolitical ambition. Hou Hanru argues that biennials “seek to be nationally and even internationally significant, by putting forward particular and supposedly incomparable local characteristics, what we might call ‘locality’” (2005, 57). The challenging part of these negotiations between the global and the local is to transcend the established power relationships between locales and related epistemologies. The goal is to avoid the trap of conformist regionalism and instead produce new ‘localities’ (Appadurai 1996).

Hence, this study is located at a cross-section of art history and sustainability studies and will investigate the concept of the eco-art biennale/triennale, a particular institutional format associated with the politics of globalisation, where the global is supposed to meet the local. As the tensions between the two positions are intensified by the event’s environmentalist agenda prioritising local focus, which in turn is crucial to achieve global sustainability (Sandhu et al 2014), the eco-art biennale/triennale provides a promising topic for the inquiry.

An interesting entry point for these explorations may be provided by the study of two recurrent art events held in Japan and South Korea. Both countries share similar myths of a pre-modern ‘love of nature’ and a comparable history of post-war economic miracles followed by an ecological crisis and the subsequent development of environmentalism. They also host highly recognised contemporary art events guided by an environmentalist agenda: the Echigo-Tsumari Art Triennale (ETAT), established in the depopulated countryside of Niigata Prefecture in 2000 in Japan and the Geumgang Nature Art Biennale, initiated in 2004 by the Korean Nature Art Association, in Gongju, South Chungcheong Province in South Korea. Likewise guided by ecological thought, both art events aim to induce harmonious interaction between human and non-human realms, while questioning Eurocentric modes of artistic interaction ‘with nature’ and decolonising the

imaginary. Interestingly, although they both execute this in strikingly different ways, they both face the same pressures of the geopolitics of the contemporary art world.

The *tsumari* approach

The Echigo-Tsumari Art Field (ETAF) was established in 2000 by Kitagawa Fram (b. 1946) and the Art Front Gallery, a commercial gallery from Tōkyō.¹ Since then it has hosted a highly popular Triennale which boasts approximately 160 participating artists and draws hundreds of thousands of visitors to the remote areas of Niigata Prefecture (pre-modern Echigo Province) in the northwestern region of Japan. The success of this art project has recently been confirmed by the selection of the ETAF as one of the 2018 'Good Design Best 100'. In 2018 the project was granted the prestigious G Mark², an award established by the Japan Institute of Design Promotion in 1957, in recognition of the ETAF's role as "a pioneer of the project which has discovered an alternative value of the region beyond conventional set of measurements such as size or efficiency".³ An important role in generating this success was due to a particular philosophy, the so-called *tsumari* approach, which guided the festival. It is explained in the mission statement on the ETAF's website. The statement begins with the heading 'Humans are part of nature' (*ningen wa shizen ni naihō sareru*), and reads: "As our civilisation 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".⁴ This statement brings into focus the concept of *satoyama* (lit. village-mountain) or 'livable mountain', a type of socio-ecological production landscape that has become the new buzzword in environmental activism worldwide.⁵ Since its growth in popularity in the 1980s and 1990s, *satoyama* has been advocated by publications, conferences, forums, research, and more than five hundred active non-profit organisations and governmental policies promoting sustainable agriculture and the protection of the environment and its biodiversity.

¹ <http://www.echigo-tsumari.jp/eng/> [Accessed 12 October 2018].

² <http://www.g-mark.org/award/describe/48282>.

³ http://www.echigo-tsumari.jp/eng/news/2018/10/news_20181005_E [Accessed 12 October 2018].

⁴ <http://www.echigo-tsumari.jp/eng/about/> [Accessed 12 October 2018].

⁵ <http://satoyama-initiative.org/en/about/> [Accessed 12 October 2018].

Satoyama encompasses the pre-modern notion 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). The idea of ‘interaction’ between human and non-human elements is the key to its understanding. This agenda is clearly observable in Takeda Naoki’s (b.1961) project “SATOYAMA renaissance Enterprise – part I and part II” produced in 2009.



Fig. 1. SATOYAMA renaissance enterprise – Part I and part II [mixed media]. © The Echigo-Tsumari Art Field [online]. Available from: http://www.echigo-tsumari.jp/eng/artwork/satoyama_renaissance_enterprise_parti_and_partii [Accessed 12 October 2018]

The project featured cultivation of plants from the Matsunoyama area. The entire process of seed collection and cultivation was carried out with the help of local villagers. Each plant was numbered, signed by the artist and was offered for sale. The money was returned to the village. Takeda’s engagement with the agricultural cycle puts an emphasis on the human-nature interactions encoded in the concept of *satoyama*. It is possible to say that the artist followed the brief and created a successful work that builds on the *tsumari* approach.



Fig. 2. Utsumi Akiko (2006). For lots of lost windows [metal, textile].

© The Echigo-Tsumari Art Field [Online]. Available from: http://www.echigo-tsumari.jp/eng/artwork/for_lots_of_lost_windows [Accessed 12 October 2018]

On the other hand, Utsumi Akiko (b. 1979) approached *satoyama* differently. Her work “For lots of lost windows”, installed in Kikyōbara village in 2006, featured a metal window-like frame with curtains through which the viewer is supposed to appreciate the beauty of *satoyama*. The artist explains: “The view seen from a window of a room becomes ‘my view’ [*watashi no fūkei*], a window for rediscovering the scenery of Echigo-Tsumari spreading outside”.⁶ However, rather than *satoyama*, Utsumi’s work refers to modern Western art discourse and its paradigmatic concept of landscape or *fūkei*. Importantly, modern artistic conventions such as linear perspective and realism located the subjective viewer of a landscape outside of 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. It seems that Utsumi’s work relies on the romantic ideal of picturesque beauty rather than the harmonious coexistence of humans and nature based on mutual respect and the sustainable use of resources represented by *satoyama*.

⁶ http://www.echigo-tsumari.jp/eng/artwork/for_lots_of_lost_windows [Accessed 12.10.2018].

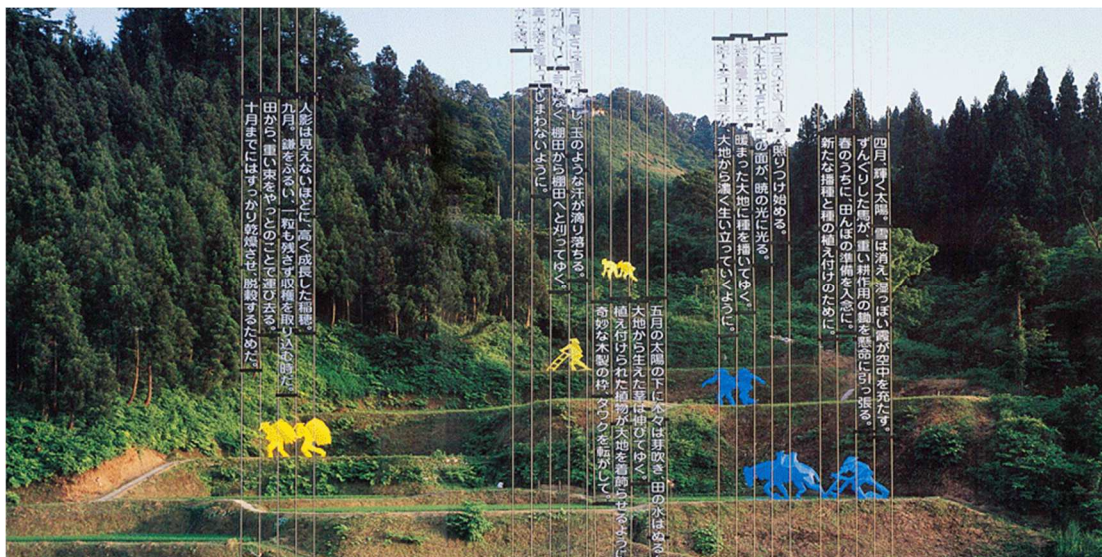


Fig. 3. Illia & Emilia Kabakov (2000). The rice field [mixed media].

© The Echigo-Tsumari Art Field [Online]. Available from: http://www.echigo-tsumari.jp/eng/artwork/the_rice_field [Accessed 12 October 2018]

Similar problems are also observable in Illia (b.1933) & Emilia Kabakov's (b.1945) "The rice field", installed in 2000 in Matsudai village. This work involves poetry on Japanese agriculture, rice paddies and sculpture depicting rice farmers. But, as already pointed out by Susanne Klein (2010), the sculptures represent European, not local agriculture and the work failed to engage with the local community. What is more, the project's description states, "Seen from the viewing platform in NO BUTAI text and sculpture seem to form a single painting".⁷ In the context of *satoyama* this 'painterly' aspect of the project is at least problematic. The installation emphasises the act of observation from a distance and as such perpetuates the concept of *fūkei*. There is also a question of whether the Kabakovs' installation can be successful outside this context. But the work is one of the most popular objects installed at the ETAF given its picturesque qualities as well as the iconic status of the Kabakovs in the history of post-war art. In fact, the Kabakovs are only two of many celebrities that contributed their works to ETAF, among others: Marina Abramovic, James Turrell, Joseph Kosuth, Yayoi Kusama and Cai Guo Qiang. Also, 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 (Kinare), designed by renowned architect

⁷ http://www.echigo-tsumari.jp/eng/artwork/the_rice_field [Accessed 12 October 2018].

Hiroshi Hara (b. 1936) and established in 2003. So, instead of deconstructing the objecthood of art as advocated by Araeen, it is clear that the objects are vital to the operation of the ETAF and they endow the area with an important cultural and economic legacy. In his contribution to the catalogue celebrating the 5th Triennale, held in the summer of 2012, Kitagawa Fram 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” (2013, 8). Also, Sekiguchi Yoshifumi, the mayor of Tokamachi City and chairman of the Echigo-Tsumari Executive Committee, stated, “The aim of our festival is to reinvigorate the local community” (2013, 4). Paradoxically, although it owes its existence to art, the role and operation of the ETAF as an art event is consciously played down in these statements. Instead, they recognise its positive social impact. The event has been hugely successful in monetary terms due to the development of cultural capital as well as heritage- and eco-tourism that is currently booming. 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. This strategy has been hugely successful. For example, in 2012 half a million of visitors came to see it (Sakai *et al.* 2012). However, the interactions with *satoyama* seem to rely largely on ‘visiting’ the festival and ‘gazing’ at *satoyama* and as such they resemble the operation of the concept of landscape in the institutional framework of an art gallery, even if this gallery is not necessarily a standard ‘white cube’.

It is noteworthy that the contemporary pro-ecological and post-developmental concept of *satoyama*, developed through the reference to the idea of pre-modern idyllic Japanese rural life, has successfully served as a conceptual reference for artists and visitors from Japan and abroad. But the ETAT has responded to a number of different and often contradictory agendas of various groups including, among others, local communities, local governments, art establishments, and the growing number of urbanites who visit the festival. In effect, the so-called *tsumari* approach based on the pre-modern native notion of *satoyama* has been distorted in the process of its adaptation to a wide array of these demands, not least contemporary global art discourse and the institutional framework of the international biennial.

“Thrown into the Field”

The Geumgang Nature Art Biennale was initiated more than 30 years ago (precisely in 1981) by Yattoo, a group of artists active in Gongju located 150 km South-west of Seoul. *Yattoo*, translated as “thrown into the field”, describes their artistic practices, which involve spontaneously created ephemeral installations emerging through their bodily interactions with nature. In time, these activities came to be known as ‘Nature Art’ and the group was renamed as the Korean Nature Art Association (KNAA). The Association organises a number of activities including the YATOO International Residence Program and a web-based project Yattoo-I, the YATOO International Project, and the Global Nomadic Art Project.⁸

The Yattoo-I website defines the concept of ‘Nature Art’ as follows: “Nature is not just utilised as a place or used as mere materials for erecting and making artworks, but Nature plays an active participation in becoming an active component of an artwork. Nature itself becomes the artwork. YATOO’s works are expressed by simple installations or performances interacting with Nature and doesn’t leave artworks behind”.⁹ Ko Seung-hyun, one of the founders and the spokesmen of the Yattoo, confesses: “Nature is my mother, my teacher and my friend [...]”.¹⁰ The Yattoo differentiates between ‘nature art’ and Land Art, commonly associated with Richard Long (1945-) or Robert Smithson’s (1938-) monumental landscape projects of the 1960s and 1970s, which have been criticised for its irresponsible interventions in nature and misuse of resources.

In contrast to this, South Korean artists describe their methodology and goals: “Simple actions such as piling, connecting, drawing, inserting, and throwing, are often the norm. As such, these works are often visually humble in nature, and reveal a stark contrast from overtly materialistic work. [...] This methodology shows the possibility of an artistic practice devoid of political and capitalistic elements which so easily become infused with other artistic movements.”¹¹ When located in the historical context, these endeavours can be seen as a critical response to the socio-political situation in South Korea in the 1980s, marked by industrialisation and internal political tensions. Through their actions, initially not considered ‘ecological art’, Yattoo artists intended to distance themselves from the mainstream art trends and institutions. Needless to say, the concept of nature used by

⁸ <http://www.natureartbiennale.org/en/> [Accessed 12 October 2018].

⁹ <http://www.yattoo.com/yattoo?ckattempt=1> [Accessed 12 October 2018].

¹⁰ http://www.natureartbiennale.org/en/bbs/board.php?bo_table=exhibition&wr_id=864&sca=2015&page=2 [Accessed 12 October 2018].

¹¹ <http://www.yattoo.com/yattoo?ckattempt=1> [Accessed 12 October 2018].

Yatoo artists is different from the Euro-American modern understanding of the term as explained by Lee Sang-don on the Biennale website: “[...] the nature as discussed in the East, especially in Taoism, never refers to the natural world. Neither are all human actions denied. Nature can be defined as the maintenance of the natural development and evolvment of things and the denial of all external coercions and violent interventions.” As such, nature includes, but is not limited to, the natural world. It rather refers to a certain state of everything in the world.



Fig. 4. Kang Hee-joon (2011). Rope marks [mixed media]. © Geumgang Nature Art Biennale [Online]. Available from: <http://yatooi.com/1269?ckattempt=1>

For example, Kang Hee-joon (b. 1958), born in Gongju and a 2018 participant in the ETAT, has been a central member of the ‘Nature Art’ scene since the 1980s. His humorous conceptual art often relies on the unexpected forms generated by his own body as he interacts with the landscape. He ‘hides’ in tall grass, drags collaborators across beaches or hillsides, leaving marks in the earth, and hangs brushes outdoors in the wind to generate drawings. “Rope marks”, a work created in 2011, is a good example of this artistic

practice.¹² Kang Hee-joon confesses, “I am strongly interested in small delicate objects from nature which are not recognised by people normally. I find a divine poetry in it. By observing the order of natural objects I adapt the microscopic changes and follow these structures. Substances of nature becomes the motive of my work”.¹³

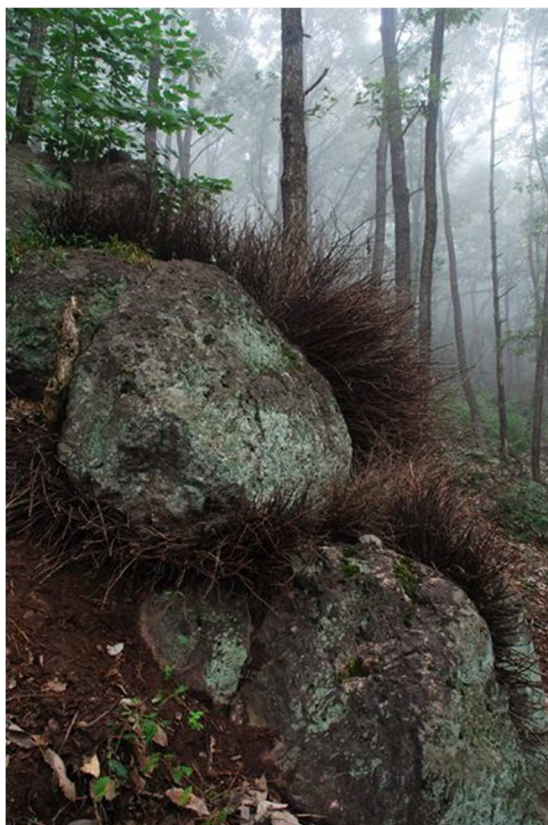


Fig. 5. Ko Hyun-hie (2010). Between [mixed media]. © Geumgang Nature Art Biennale [Online].
Available from:
http://www.natureartbiennale.org/bbs/board.php?bo_table=exhibition&wr_id=553&sca=2010

A similar concern also guides the work by Ko Hyun-hie, one of the few female artists in the group, who has been part of the Yattoo since the 1980s. In her work “Between”, created in 2010, she filled the gaps between large boulders. An important aspect of her work is the contrast between the old boulders and the young twigs. In effect, her intervention is hardly visible and stresses nonviolent interactions between humans and nature.

¹² http://greenmuseum.org/content/artist_content/ct_id-291_artist_id-143.html [Accessed 12 October 2018].

¹³ http://greenmuseum.org/content/artist_content/ct_id-291_artist_id-143.html [Accessed 12 October 2018].



Fig. 6. Donald Buglass (2010). Cell [mixed media]. © Geumgang Nature Art Biennale [Online]. Available from: http://www.natureartbiennale.org/bbs/board.php?bo_table=exhibition&wr_id=554&sca=2010

The Geumgang Nature Art Biennale also features foreign artists as seen in “Cell”, a work by a New Zealand artist Donald Buglass (b. 1962), executed in 2010. Cut sections of tree trunk support each other and create a wooden hemisphere. They may demonstrate a link between the constructive tendencies of humans and the environment. “Cell” may also display the beauty and balance of nature as the structure holds itself.

All these works demonstrate that the Geumgang Nature Art Biennale favours art that involves very simple actions, limited intervention in nature and sees the world as social-ecological systems. However, this profile may have to change very soon. In 2011, Koh Seunghyun, one of the fathers of ‘Nature Art’, comments on its recent transformations: “As we [KNAA] have worked like an organisation of the Geumgang Biennale, it was inevitable for us to be institutionalised like mainstream art is. It has become a little bit stiff. ... We see that some ecological artists’ works are not visually attractive enough to exhibit their works in the Biennale. I understand that their works are valuable and meaningful, but from the standpoint of a coordinator for the biennale, we [KNAA] need to consider the perspectives of audiences. Those kinds of artworks are too difficult for the public to understand as an artwork. So we consider the artworks’ visual attractiveness when we organise the biennale. It is inevitable” (2013, 115-16). 2016 saw the change of method of selecting artists for the Geumgang Nature Art Biennale. The open public application was replaced by nominations by the GNAB’s Planning Committee.

The Geumgang Nature Art Biennale has been growing quickly both when it comes to infrastructure and the number and status of participating artists and visitors. For example, the Geumgang International Nature Art Centre at the Yeonmisan Nature Art Park opened in 2009. In 2010, the 4th Biennale attracted more than 40,000 visitors. The Korean Nature Art Association also started to diversify its activities. For example, it began a joint research effort with the Ulsan National Institute of Science and Technology

(UNIST). This project combines scientific research designed to reflect the ecological cycles of living ecosystems with artistic visions of nature. An obvious sign of recognition is the fact that the materials related to Yatoo's activities will be permanently stored in the National Archives of Korea. A vital role in these developments was played by the support of the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism, the South Chungcheong Province and Gongju City that began sponsoring it in 2004. The Association tries to maintain its original conceptual foundations, although it is clear that sooner or later the event may undergo significant conceptual transformations as the authorities and public demand more spectacular works that are more capable of attracting tourists and also boosting the international visibility of Korean culture.

Boutique multiculturalism

There is little doubt that the Echigo-Tsumari Art Triennale and the Geumgang Nature Art Biennale demonstrate a clearly discernible interest in 'delinking' from the Eurocentric art and knowledge systems. The respective conceptual frameworks of *satoyama* and *yatoo* challenge Eurocentric practices and concepts of art involving the environment as related to the notion of the picturesque, landscape or Land Art. Instead they advance different artistic approaches to environment and human-nature relationships. These approaches are presented as indigenous to their respective national/cultural context but remain open to the processes of global artistic flows. However, it is clear that it is very difficult to maintain a conceptual profile structured around cultural difference within the institutional structure of the international art biennial, which attracts artists generally operating on the global art scene. Significantly, the Biennial Foundation lists approximately 200 biennials and triennials held currently around the world that in a variety of ways revive the blueprint of the Venice Biennale established in 1895 with all its political and economic agendas.¹⁴

In 2012, in relation to these tendencies, David Joselit (2012, n.p.) recommended that "the scale of our response to globalisation should be more targeted, more socially engaged, even more intimate". The biennial or triennial is usually considered a unique platform of cross-cultural artistic exchange where transnational standards are imposed on local art scenes while the local culture can insert its own discourses into the transnational

¹⁴ <http://www.biennialfoundation.org/home/biennial-map/> [Accessed 12 October 2018].

conversation. In fact, rather than fostering understanding between the local and the foreign it frequently produces a 'biennial culture' (Jones 2010) created by 'global curators', 'global artists' and 'global audiences'. Biennials are a driving force behind cities' political positionings and their gentrification as they contribute to the cultural capital of the city. The 'biennial boom' began in the 1990s, and coincided with the decentralisation of the art world and the 'discovery' of non-Euroamerican contemporary art. These developments gave momentum to the global art history debate between assimilating or connecting non-Euro-American art exclusively to its cultural background on the one hand; and assimilating or integrating it into the existing Western knowledge systems and its subsequent homogenisation on the other hand (Zijlmans 2013). But Joselit observes: "I find that in the large Biennials, on the other hand, cultural difference is generally expressed as a relatively simplistic sound-bite" (2013, n.p.). And he advocates that a "global project could focus on a very specific place, by emphasizing its connectivity to a wider world". When seen from this perspective, it seems that both Japanese and Korean events successfully realised this goal as they combined the local knowledge systems (the concepts of *satoyama* and *yatoo*) with the frameworks of the international art world (biennale/triennale). Nevertheless, it seems that framing contemporary art objects within the local knowledge systems is not entirely successful. The emphasis on cultural difference may result in transforming art objects into 'ethno-commodities' that facilitate 'consumption of authentic otherness' (Comaroff & Comaroff 2009). Importantly, the pro-ecological agenda legitimises the conventional hierarchies of power between the local and the global. Sandwiched between the pressures of assimilation and alienation, *satoyama* and *yatoo* art seem to transform into ethno-commodities produced and consumed within the global 'biennial culture', which serves local social-economical and political agendas. These agendas respond to current social issues such as the depopulation of the countryside, the ageing population, and unsustainable development. Hence, *satoyama* and *yatoo* art can be seen as socially engaged art practices.

Araeen's manifesto of ecoaesthetics resonates with the recent 'ethical turn' in the humanities that 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). However, as pointed out by Jacques Rancière (2008, 7), participatory art is not a privileged political medium. This kind of 'pedagogy' fails in the face of the inherent performativity of art that is fluid and cannot function as a fixed

container of meanings. Consequently, in her critique of the social turn in art, Claire Bishop advocates the need to return to an analysis of the conceptual and affective complexity of artwork. Clearly, ecological art cannot be perceived as a ready-made solution to the environmental catastrophe (2012, 8). The institutionalisation of the non-Eurocentric discourses does not guarantee their successful de-provincialisation either.

But does this mean that nothing can change the established geopolitics of contemporary art? It is important to note that even if cultural objects can transform into 'ethno-commodities', this state is not permanent. Appadurai observes that due to the endless possibilities of commodity pathway diversion an object may move in and out of the 'commodity state' over the course of its social life (1986, 17). An object can be removed from its commodity pathway and can be replaced on it. This 'aesthetics of decontextualisation' transforms the ontological status of an object (Kopytoff 1986, 64). The operation of the Echigo-Tsumari Art Triennale and the Geumgang Nature Art Biennale, guided by a multiplex programme that includes art, ecology, economy and social agenda, exposes these intricacies.

It is also necessary to take into account the role of subjectivity and human agency in these processes. In this context, art is political in the sense that it is an agent in the shaping of the public imaginary. And it is clear that the complex conceptual roots, frameworks, and diverse agendas shaping the Echigo-Tsumari Art Triennale and the Geumgang Nature Art Biennale do not produce an entirely new alternative epistemology capable of challenging Eurocentric art discourse, but rather indicate the operation of 'boutique multiculturalism' as characterised by its superficial and cosmetic relationship to the objects of its affection (Fish 1997). Paradoxically, it remains an open question which cultural values and concepts are considered as 'other' and which ones are defined as the 'self' in the geopolitics of ecological art.

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