

[Paper]

Augmenting Small-Island Heritage through Site-Specific Art: A View from Naoshima

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Abstract

In an effort to draw tourists and revitalize communities, a growing number of peripheral islands in Japan have utilized contemporary art to augment local traditions and heritage forms. Such “site-specific” artwork recontextualizes these forms for an outside, typically affluent gaze. The purported benefit for communities is an influx of fresh faces and new tourist revenue streams. However, the presence of contemporary art in rural or peripheral contexts can have an alienating effect, particularly if it is developed with some level of input from community members only for that engagement to cease when the work is complete, the resulting (static) product intended purely for tourist consumption. In this ethnographic study, which examines the well-known “art island” of Naoshima, various forms of artwork are discussed in relation to their socio-cultural settings, with a hyper-controlled and development-focused institutional regime proving disadvantageous to sustainable social outcomes. The study culminates in an action-research derived set of findings that uncover new, more socially relevant forms of artistic creation on the island, which illustrate the challenge up until now while also suggesting a positive path forward.

Keywords

Site-specific art, socially engaged art, island heritage, art institutions, Japan

Introduction

For visitors to peripheral locales, local heritage is an important quality of the rural idyll. In most cases, the commodification of rural heritage for tourists is fairly direct, with “authentic” experiences offered to visitors that preserve the image of traditional practices (Mitchell 2013). But among a group of islands in Japan, heritage forms have become the subject of artistic interventions, with new projects seeking to attract outsiders by reinterpreting or reflecting upon island traditions through a contemporary-art lens. This augmen-

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tation of the traditional adds novelty to the experience of visiting islands and also has the potential to attract a more affluent, urban visitor type, both domestically and from abroad.

In this paper, I draw together discussions of socially engaged art and rural revitalization to interrogate the social purpose and significance of “site-specific” contemporary art in island peripheries. I take as a case the island of Naoshima in western Japan, which has been the subject of intensive and evolving artistic interventions since the early 1990s. The first in a growing constellation of “art islands” in the Seto Inland Sea, Naoshima offers lessons in the local efficacy of various art typologies, the challenge of mission creep and evolving priorities in ostensibly socially oriented projects, and a comparative view of heritage-interpretive art created *for* versus *with* islanders.

Recently, the very idea of “socially engaged” art has been the subject of intense debate. On the one hand, authors such as Bishop (2006; 2012) and Bourriaud (1998) prioritize the aesthetic experience of the artwork and elevate works that invite the audience to participate (respectively, the authors favor the terms “participatory” or “relational” art) but not to share authorship. For Bishop, the notion that artwork and artists be evaluated according to social outcomes is antithetical to the purpose of artists in society, as an artist’s work may be considered successful even if it elicits a divided or shocked response.

On the other hand, writers like Finkelpearl (2013) have emphasized the role of artists as instigators of cooperative artistic activities that define and confront local issues. Here, I consider the relationship between site-specificity and social engagement, following Kwon (2002), who traced public artwork in the United States, which gradually shifted from so-called “plop art” to projects that embodied the cooperative framework championed by Finkelpearl. I then use the Naoshima case to examine how site specificity is often conflated with social embeddedness—or whether art is integrated with, versus indifferent to, its social setting—and the extent to which embeddedness can be achieved when it was not the original goal.

Linking this study to previous ones in the region that revealed contested relationships and tensions between art institutions/arts organizers, the artists they commission, and the local community stakeholders who are on the receiving end, I consider how the evolving nature of the art itself traces the emergence of a social “turn” for art on Naoshima (Bishop 2006; Jesty 2017). Through action research in a latter phase, I both participated in and documented a project initiated by the artist Motoyuki Shitamichi that featured genuine shared authorship with community members, likely a first on the island. This nascent and potentially indefinite activity reveals a path beyond stagnation and toward sociocultural sustainability for a long-term arts investment regime that, despite prolific spending and an initially positive local reception, has become disconnected from the communities it originally sought to benefit.

Literature and Context

Site-Specific Art and Social Engagement

Site-specific artwork is artwork that is so thematically connected to where it is displayed that moving it would diminish or destroy it (Kwon 2002). Unlike non-site-specific works of art that can be viewed in traveling exhibitions or purchased for one's home, viewers of site-specific artwork must travel to wherever it is installed. Similarly, *socially engaged* artwork is conceived in relation to its audience, which variously participates in or even helps create the work, which could not exist without these actors (Finkelpearl 2013). In contrast, a painting found decades after an artist made it would nonetheless have been a work of art for the entire period it spent unviewed.

While site-specific artwork appeals to travelers who visit to appreciate the meaning in art being wherever it is, and socially engaged artwork in contrast usually targets members of a particular *local* social group, both forms have the potential to reach both audiences. Kwon (2002) traced the evolution of the former into the latter in American cities, with civic investment in the arts gradually steered away from pop-art plaza sculptures and toward artworks more rooted in their (physical and, eventually, social) environs. Public art leveraged public funds to deliver a potentially multifaceted public good: the enlivening of public spaces, the engagement of locals, even the revival of neglected plazas and—contentiously—neighborhoods.

However, Kwon (2002) writes, site-specific art can also take on more insidious dimensions if it simply “extract[s] the social and historical dimensions of these places in order to variously serve the thematic drive of an artist, satisfy institutional demographic profiles, or fulfill the fiscal needs of a city” (97). In the United States, these thorny issues grew even more so as art moved from engagement with physical to social contexts. Daylight emerged between institutional/governmental and local priorities, and questions of authorship arose: Were locals mere accessories within the artistic spectacle, or could they become “politically empowered social subjects with opportunity . . . and capacity . . . for artistic self-representation?” (Kwon 2002, 97).

Considering this issue, Finkelpearl (2013) divided socially engaged art into two categories: *participatory* or *relational* projects, where non-authors are invited to engage more or less trivially with the project but have no role in its creation, versus *socially cooperative* projects co-constructed by artist and community, which “[blur] issues of authorship, [cross] social boundaries, and [engage] participants for durations that stretch from days to months to years” (6). The former category, which is championed most notably by Bishop (2006; 2012) and Bourriaud (1998), includes work such as that by Rirkrit Tiravanija, who prepared meals for museum visitors as a performative artwork. As an example of socially cooperative artwork, Bolek Greczynski orchestrated a “Living Museum” during his multi-year residency at a psychiatric hospital in New York, where the patients themselves took on the role of artists, while Greczynski himself supported the patient-artists and promoted their work (Finkelpearl 2013).

Socially Engaged Art in Japan

Socially engaged art emerged in Japan in the early postwar period (Jesty 2018) and was profoundly antithetical to the established institutions of art in urban centers (Favell 2011). Art and engagement blossomed out of social inequities, with artists highlighting the struggles they either shared with non-artist comrades or witnessed during their time among the downtrodden, often in non-urban locales. Such engagement was “a promise, a commitment, but one that [was] not coerced, . . . affirm[ing] the viability of shared but uncertain futures” (Jesty 2018, 38). Critically, while no institution sponsored this work, artists benefited from existing networks (such as unions and political parties), which “[supported] truly eclectic cultural production and could be activated in a nonsystematic manner by entrepreneurial actors” (Jesty 2018, 45).

This activity, alongside a wave of avant-garde artistic interventions in the rural “wilderness” (Tomii 2016), was decidedly outside the artistic mainstream, in defiance of rather than sanctioned by Japan’s art institutions. However, at the close of the millennium, this began to change. Triggered by a neoliberal concentration of resources that accelerated the marginalization and decline of rural municipalities, a wave of “art projects” (*ātopurojekuto* in Japanese) emerged, initiatives that sought to fuse artistic production and social welfare priorities (Kumakura and The Art Project Research Group 2015). For example, in rural settings, the problem of shrinking, aging communities was addressed through so-called creative depopulation (Yoshimoto 2017), with arts programs coupled with incentives to satellite businesses conceived as a means of achieving lower but stable and vibrant populations of creative workers. Such activity often incorporated creative placemaking (Markusen and Gadwa 2010) or place branding strategies: the latter increasingly utilized by islands (Baldacchino and Khamis 2018), while both have received criticism for repackaging communities for outsider consumption at the expense of traditional local priorities (Klien 2010; Markusen and Gadwa Nicodemus 2019).

Art projects in Japan that sought to address social problems became increasingly championed by local and regional governments that lacked (human and financial) resources for welfare programs; this had the perverse consequence of casting artists as social workers (Favell 2016). This in turn reflected a global pattern where arts programs became co-opted by state welfare agendas (Edensor, Leslie, and Millington 2009). Simply evaluating such projects became therefore highly delicate, with art critics like Claire Bishop (2006; 2012) as well as some sociologists (Suwa 2019) emphasizing aesthetic or experiential criteria, while other observers (notably Qu 2019) insisted on foregrounding the opinions of and impact upon non-artist community stakeholders as well as quantifiable metrics like small-business development outcomes. Most recently, Kumakura (2020) set out a process for peer-reviewing Japan’s “art projects,” putting evaluation in the hands of fellow practitioners and essentially demarcating the new “art projects” as a fundamentally third category, neither art nor social work.

Augmenting Heritage through Art in Peripheries

Grassroots creative enterprise has been highlighted as an effective mode of sustainable rural development (Duxbury and Campbell 2011). However, a new generation of “museum islands” in Japan has more in common with peripheral economies run by outside administrators (Fullerton 2015), with externally controlled art tourism replacing externally controlled manufacturing or aquaculture as the primary source of income for inhabitants. Beginning on Naoshima in the late twentieth century, a cluster of museums and other “art sites” were built across several islands in the Seto Inland Sea in western Japan.

These projects are marketed as *site-specific* arts interventions, intended to boost tourism and improve the fortunes of economically depressed peripheral communities (Qu, McCormick, and Funck 2020). This process recalls Mitchell’s (2013) concept of creative destruction (or creative enhancement) as a “commodification of the rural idyll” (376) where declining rural primary economies are either supplanted or complemented by heritage tourism. The augmenting of heritage described in this paper aligns in many respects with situations of creative destruction/enhancement, where heritage attributes are packaged for the tourist consumer. But with augmented heritage, the spatial change gains additional nuance: it is not the heritage forms themselves that are offered as a commodity for tourists but rather new artworks that interpret local heritage.

The connection between community and arts development has been stressed by the museum entity (Benesse Art Site Naoshima) since at least the 1990s (Qu, McCormick, and Funck 2020) as a means of both justifying the site and setting for the arts activities as well as attracting visitors interested in this novel juxtaposition. Frequently, the language used for this activity has veered toward the propagandistic, with leaders of the project describing how they wished to return “smiles” to the faces of elderly residents (Favell 2016). Beginning in 2010, the debut of the Setouchi Triennale expanded contemporary arts to even more islands, bringing the total to twelve, with regular tourism to the original islands now supplemented by triennial waves of festival visitors.

Regarding the trend toward site-specificity in artwork in America, Kwon (2002) wrote that, “under the pretext of their articulation or resuscitation, site-specific art can be mobilized to expedite the erasure of differences via the commodification and serialization of places” (55). In studying the museum islands of Japan, Qu (2019) likewise described a theme park effect, with locals themselves attesting to the seemingly one-size-fits-all approach to island arts development in the region. Absent a more tailored approach, community development outcomes were mixed, with some islands experiencing notable improvements, while others seemed to languish (Qu, McCormick, and Funck 2020).

The focus of the present study, Naoshima, has been described as a mostly positive case, with authors tracing an arts development regime that “led first to reterritorialization and then to creative enhancement” (Prince, Qu, and Zollet 2021, 2), with a particularly sizable influx of creative in-migrants forming networks that both leverage and are strengthened by community resourcefulness (McCormick and Qu 2021; Prince, Qu, and

Zollet 2021; Qu, McCormick, and Funck 2020). However, these as well as earlier studies indicated tensions between the community and the island's arts administrators, with the former considering the latter preoccupied with tourism development to such an extent that they excluded local priorities (Funck and Chang 2018; Kanaya 2014).

On Prince Edward Island in Canada, Fürst (2015) described how the island's newcomers, more so than its long-term locals, regarded themselves as champions of local heritage. Visitors and migrants are captivated by archetypal island attributes (Baldacchino 2015), but when these attributes are leveraged in development programs for the benefit of the outsider gaze, it risks a process of commodification that can alienate locals (Mitchell 2013). With this in mind, the present study examines site-specific art on Naoshima and how it intersects with local heritage and local identity.

Methods

This ethnographic study incorporated long-term participant observation from April 2019 through the summer of 2021, which spanned the busy 2019 Setouchi Triennale period, the near-total loss of tourists for much of 2020, and the subsequent halting tourism recovery. As a resident of Naoshima, I met and communicated with several dozen island stakeholders, several of whom became significant respondents for this research. (I am also the director of a small art center on the island, which is unaffiliated with the institutions described in this paper.)

Key respondents included long-term island residents, recent in-migrants, one commuter, local government staff, small-business owners, museum officials, and artists. Unstructured interviews spanned anywhere from twenty minutes to several hours, often while we engaged in activities on the island including visiting art sites, with multiple sessions for most respondents. Interviews were in Japanese and English, with all respondents made aware of my function as a researcher studying the intersection of art and community on Naoshima. I also incorporated extensive photographic documentation of respondents as well as the art and landscape of the island, considering a landscape-as-text approach to be fundamental to the research question. The results include descriptions of many sites on Naoshima that were derived from my observations, including contextual and historical details not previously published.

In the latter phase of the study, after I was invited to participate in a portion of a local artist's project, I adopted an action research framework. This activity, creating a map to document the distribution of cast metallurgical slag on Naoshima, offered a fundamentally novel perspective on a new type of artistic activity not previously evident on the island. While engaged in the project, I communicated at length with the project leader, Motoyuki Shitamichi, including an interview conducted over email that supplemented our in-person conversations. Shitamichi's Japanese responses were translated into English for use in this study.

Most respondents were anonymized, with the exception of Motoyuki Shitamichi, who

is a public figure and has been the subject of extensive press coverage during his time on the island. Shitamichi granted me permission to characterize his responses with attribution.

Alongside this fieldwork, I also reviewed local publications, including tourism brochures, maps, guidebooks, town newsletters, and selected historical materials from the town's archive. I also gathered published interviews with and self-produced materials by artists involved in the creation of art on Naoshima. All of these elements were woven into the narrative of art's emergence, evolution, and effect on Naoshima.

Site-Specific Art on Naoshima

Origins

Naoshima has been a factory island for more than a century. Its copper smelter, which has been operated by Mitsubishi Materials since the early 1900s, once employed thousands of islanders, bringing affluence to an island set amid poorer, fishing-reliant neighbors. Before the factory, Naoshima had already distinguished itself with its bunraku puppets. An all-women puppeteer troupe, strikingly novel in a male-dominated tradition, put on performances that drew attendees from around the region, and they continue to perform in contemporary times. The puppeteers are sprinkled throughout island lore, such as the time in 1873 when five puppeteers traveled to neighboring Awa to purchase new puppets; on the way back, two were killed when their boat was caught in a storm.

Before the puppeteers, there were pirates. Naoshima was one of many islands in the Seto Inland Sea (Setouchi) to host pirate communities; pirates occupied many roles, from fishermen to navigators as well as raiders. To this day, many old houses on the island have nicknames (*yago*, literally "house name") that refer to former pirates, puppeteers, and other echoes of the past.

In 1992, the Naoshima Contemporary Art Museum opened on the island. Set within a verdant green, mountainous area south of the villages, the museum was the product of a collaboration between Japanese businessman Soichiro Fukutake and long-time Naoshima mayor Chikatsugu Miyake. From the start, its objective was to draw tourists from afar to appreciate a novel mixture of contemporary art and architecture and the Setouchi landscape. Over the ensuing decades, Benesse Art Site Naoshima (an aggregate entity representing properties controlled by Benesse Holdings, Inc., the Fukutake Foundation, and Naoshima Cultural Village) developed several museums on Naoshima and neighboring islands.

The first iteration of the project, Naoshima Contemporary Art Museum (now called Benesse House Museum) featured a collection of works by well-known postmodern artists. Early commissioned pieces, such as Yayoi Kusama's iconic 1994 installation *Pumpkin* (fig. 1), which adorns an old pier on the museum grounds, were at best conceived in *relation* to their environs but bore no intrinsic connection to them.



FIGURE 1. *Pumpkin* by Yayoi Kusama on Naoshima. Photo taken by the author in 2020.

Art House Project

In the mid-to-late 1990s, the focus of artwork on Naoshima began to shift to site-specificity, with notable installations at the museums by Jannis Kounellis and Richard Long incorporating local materials. The most profound change occurred when the artwork left the museums entirely, with the 1998 debut of the first “art house,” an installation in an old house in the village of Honmura created by Tatsuo Miyajima. Miyajima submerged 125 LED counters in a pool of water built inside the house’s dark interior, with 125 islanders having each set the rate at which one of the counter’s numbers progressed.

This mode of engagement, fitting squarely in Finkelpearl’s (2013) “participatory/relational” category, was novel not only in Japan but also more broadly, at a time when “relational” artwork was only just becoming mainstream in the art world (Bourriaud 1998). In 2018, the artwork’s twentieth anniversary, the timers were reprogrammed by a new group of 125 islanders. One participant described this as a detached experience, where the islanders filled out forms indicating their preferred counter settings, with no contact with the actual artwork.

The first art house remains known by its *yago*, Kadoya, or “Corner House,” while the artwork inside it is called *Sea of Time*. It was followed by six other art houses, collectively known as the Art House Project. All of the art houses, which were either formerly vacant old buildings or were built atop sites of former religious structures, are likewise doubly

named. Haisha, or “Dentist’s Office,” once housed the town’s dentist before its conversion (titled *Dreaming Tongue/Bokkon-Nozoki*) by Shinro Ohtake into a loud collision of left-over shop signs, boat hulls, photographs, painted areas, and copious black lacquer (fig. 2).



FIGURE 2. A view of the Naoshima Art House Project “Haisha,” featuring Shinro Ohtake’s artwork *Dreaming Tongue/Bokkon-Nozoki*, with Statue of Liberty replica visible through the second story window. Photo taken by the author in 2021.

As with Ohtake’s other Naoshima installations, the project is a mix of inside jokes, seemingly random assemblage, and periodic local references. A maritime motif is particularly prevalent in the two main rooms downstairs (ship hulls also feature in other artworks by Ohtake on the island). Teeth embedded in a pink wall outside creepily reference the site’s former function. But efforts at rooting the project quickly give way to the absurd, such as the two-story Statue of Liberty, seemingly injection-molded from white plastic, that I was told had to be craned in from the roof.

Ohtake describes the project as a half-remembered dream manifested in the physical, and the experience of dreams is certainly there. The installation offers an amused wink to locals perplexed by contemporary art, who might see in Haisha an invitation not to take any of it too seriously. But perhaps the bigger wink is reserved for the arts-initiated outsider, who is reminded that any connection to local histories is simply background mate-

rial for the true artwork. One local elder whom I accompanied into Haisha described some of the visual puns present in the work, which she knew of only because she had become friends with Ohtake during the work's construction over a decade prior.

While the museums are tucked away in a corner of the island that locals have to go out of their way to visit—and typically don't—the Art House Project is embedded in the village, for better or worse. On crowded days, the town bus has to thread its way past packs of tourists who trek down the narrow lane between the art houses. Bicycle parking is a perennial issue, with shop owners putting no-parking signs in front of their businesses. But the art houses are also local landmarks; in a village with no street names, people often describe where their home or shop is located by its proximity to an art house.

The art houses resurrected aging structures that in some cases had fallen into decline. Many locals are fond of them and are happy to tell visitors which is their favorite. While individual art houses are at best tangentially related to the heritage sites upon which they were created, the collected group is carefully and successfully situated within its site. However, notwithstanding occasional participatory elements, such as in Kadoya, no collective authorship was present. Furthermore, the art houses, once created, continued to exist in static form indefinitely with little if any change. In the early days of arts development, artists frequently walked the streets of Honmura, communicating with locals as they conceived and created their site-specific works. Elderly residents spoke fondly of these days, when they would spot James Turrell or Rei Naito in the village. Naito later even entered into a longstanding, though infrequent, correspondence with one local, who showed me letters the artist had written to him in neat, tiny handwriting. But by 2020, the artists had mostly stopped coming, and the art houses were of dwindling relevance to anyone but the steady procession of new tourists who hadn't seen them before.

Bunraku

At Naoshima's main port in the village of Miyanoura, a sculpture titled *Bunraku Puppet* (fig. 3) greets visitors disembarking from the ferry. The work is by Portuguese pop artist José de Guimarães and is an interpretation of the movement of the island's bunraku puppets, with sweeping curves mimicking the sweeping of their miniature kimono. Threaded with neon rods that blink in the evening and painted bright blue to contrast with the green grass below it in daylight, the sculpture was commissioned by Benesse Art Site Naoshima and installed in 2006. Unlike earlier brightly colored outdoor artworks by Niki de Saint Phalle and Yayoi Kusama that are sprinkled across the museum grounds to the south, *Bunraku Puppet* strives to connect to Naoshima's heritage and is placed intentionally at the main gateway to the island, suggesting at the outset a mixing of art with historical forms. Yet without such background, a visitor would be hard pressed to discern any of this. The metal-and-neon abstracted shape is neither materially nor formally rooted to the place, harkening instead to the abstract public art by Alexander Calder and others that dominated public plazas in the 1960s in the United States, standing in defiance of their surroundings or, if in harmony, then coincidentally so (Kwon 2002).



FIGURE 3. *Bunraku Puppet* by José de Guimarães at night on Naoshima. Photo taken by the author in 2021.

In 2016, for her residency during that year’s Setouchi Triennale, Japanese artist Mari Katayama created a body of work inspired by the island’s bunraku puppet tradition. Katayama’s highly personal work references her own body and identity, incorporating photography and soft sculpture to create stylized and often exaggerated or multiplied prostheses, referencing the actual prostheses she has worn since childhood. On Naoshima, beginning with research visits in 2015, Katayama sought to create both a thematic and a personal bridge with the island’s puppeteers.

In her own words, Katayama wanted “to avoid becoming an artist who just comes into a particular local culture, creates disturbance, and leaves” (Mabon 2021). Katayama’s early ideas were met coolly by the puppeteers, who were concerned that the artist would misinterpret or misrepresent their traditions. Over time, the artist was able to work out an agreeable plan, ultimately photographing the puppeteers’ hands and incorporating the resulting images into her soft sculptures. According to Katayama, she and the puppeteers grew close over the course of the project and continue to exchange emails (Mabon 2021). However, the project remained firmly within the artist’s existing aesthetic, with threads

connecting it to the community almost completely overshadowed by Katayama's striking body-identity meta narrative. Locals I spoke with who remembered the project did not consider it particularly representative of local heritage; rather, the artist employed local motifs to her own ends.

Projects like Katayama's seemed destined to reach such a conclusion, due in large part to the prevailing institutional mindset on the island, where artists are given enormous deference and communities are offered as resources to draw inspiration from instead of sites of agency—let alone authorship. In interviews, I found museum officials to be highly protective of artists' works and vision. For example, a no-photography policy, long universal in all Naoshima museums, was only partly lifted in 2021 and remains in place for some of the museums—a policy intended to control the way artworks are depicted in social media.

The issue of photographs is so fraught that the Naoshima town office is required to ask Benesse for permission to use images of the island's artwork, even if the photographs in question are taken by town office staff of outdoor works. In earlier studies, the hyper-controlled implementation of the Setouchi Triennale resulted in grassroots projects that were seemingly in line with the festival's stated mission being sidelined in favor of officially sponsored artworks (Qu, McCormick, and Funck 2020). On Naoshima, this same attitude created an environment where commissioned artists were in a perpetually elevated position that discouraged meaningful exchange. Despite the presence of artists such as Katayama who sought from the beginning to collaborate without “creating disturbance,” there seemed to be little institutional will or capacity to facilitate truly equitable creative partnerships with islanders.

Setouchi “ ” Archive

In 2019, artist Motoyuki Shitamichi installed the Setouchi Yoichi Midorikawa Museum in Miyanoura Gallery 6 on Naoshima. The exhibition highlighted the work of Yoichi Midorikawa, a photographer whose images of Setouchi and other landscapes across Japan were ubiquitous in magazines and books for much of the twentieth century. Items on display included original prints of scenes on Naoshima, several of Midorikawa's copious workbooks with pasted-in contact prints and notes, as well as a collection of books either by Midorikawa or otherwise featuring his work. As a standalone exhibition, the Setouchi Yoichi Midorikawa Museum was interesting but not particularly groundbreaking. It appeared to be another short-lived project in the same gallery that had displayed Katayama's work in 2016, along with a few others, before going dormant for two years. But unlike the other artist's short residency, the Midorikawa “museum” was merely a first phase in Shitamichi's much more ambitious project.

The following spring, in 2020, Shitamichi moved to Naoshima with his wife and young daughter. He had been commissioned by Benesse Art Site Naoshima not for one exhibition but for a long-term project. Initially titled Setouchi “ ” Museum before the artist adjusted the English translation to Setouchi “ ” *Archive* (the quotes being filled

with the current theme), the project staged a series of thematic exhibitions in Gallery 6 that formed the basis of a growing archival collection. Beginning with the second iteration, the Setouchi 100 Years of Tourism Museum, Shitamichi solicited information and material from Naoshima locals. Even after the material was selected and mounted for display, the artist encouraged corrections and new contributions, with expensively printed wall text unceremoniously modified with handwritten additions based on feedback from the community.

In between and even during these exhibits, Shitamichi sought ways to maximize the utility of the laboratory space he had created. A local ceramist was given use of the space to teach pottery classes, her kiln installed in a spare closet. A layer of clay dust soon coated the floor, which was fine. A back room behind the gallery was later converted to house the ceramic studio indefinitely. In 2020, during the coronavirus pandemic, Shitamichi scrapped a planned series of talk events in the gallery, opting instead to host a series of four classic film screenings, each set in Setouchi. The shows were free and limited to small groups of locals who sat safely distanced from one another, surrounded by the tourism brochures and maps that made up the larger exhibit. Shitamichi also began using the space to lead workshops on art and expression with a group of island children. Each of these “side projects” laid additional threads between and among the artist, the gallery, and the greater community.

With the third iteration of his main project, the Setouchi Slag Landscape Archive, Shitamichi further ceded authorship by recruiting residents from the outset. Along with a native islander, I joined Shitamichi in a months-long project mapping metallurgical-slag blocks, roof tiles, and other material on Naoshima. Produced for a short period in the 1950s, these objects were cast from the slag produced by the copper smelter on the island; the heavy black material, made mostly of iron and silica, was shaped into objects that were useful in the rapid construction of company housing for Mitsubishi’s then-booming workforce. As new technologies made it more profitable to granulate slag for use in concrete, production of these cast shapes stopped, and eventually many of the buildings made from slag were dismantled. But the material persists in the landscape, in hillside staircases and the foundations of buildings, even incorporated into some of the newer art projects, like a public bath designed by Shinro Ohtake. Our three-person team recorded every piece of slag we could find on the island, ultimately producing a printed map that debuted as part of the third exhibition at Gallery 6 (fig. 4) and was available for sale to tourists as an alternate mode of exploring Naoshima.



FIGURE 4. Motoyuki Shitamichi points at a slag block at a press event for the opening of Setouchi Slag Landscape Archive in 2021 on Naoshima. The slag landscape map is mounted on the wall to the left, surrounded by photos. Photo taken by the author in 2021.

Over the course of the map project, we discovered the wealth of knowledge held by certain locals on this unique material and architectural heritage form, as well as the stark lack of knowledge on the subject by nearly everyone else. People who had lived on the island for years had never noticed the black bricks incorporated into retaining walls or lining culverted streams, nor the slag roof tiles that remained on a handful of old houses. Our project led to many conversations with islanders, who were eager to point out new spots we hadn't seen. Some who had pieces of slag on their property were happy to donate them to us for use in the project. In meetings (fig. 5), our team discussed the ways in which slag had been used and repurposed, its status as a finite resource, its potential toxicity, its connections to other industrial sites in Japan, and a wide range of other issues, with our research frequently supplemented by new insights gleaned from encounters on the island. Older locals who were initially hesitant to focus on a material they'd long viewed as simply a waste product were surprised and ultimately pleased with our team's enthusiasm, particularly after an outside researcher sent us examples of heritage slag-block

architecture in Europe, and we exhibited those impressive images (a church, a castle) alongside the local scenes. Ultimately, the project grew into something more than anyone expected, while still fitting comfortably within the larger Setouchi “ ” Archive project.



FIGURE 5. Motoyuki Shitamichi during a meeting with the slag landscape map team, with documentation gathered by team members. Photo taken by the author in 2021.

Shitamichi is very unlike most of the commissioned artists who preceded him on Naoshima. His practice has long embraced collaboration and engagement over sole authorship. Though he’s often described as a photographer, his work is research oriented and process driven to such an extent that he is uncomfortable with being characterized exclusively as an artist. Half-jokingly, he told me that “my work itself is a few steps away from being purely art and is often only halfway received in the ‘artistic industry’ while, conversely, it tends to get over-associated with the ‘academic industry.’ And ignored altogether by the photographic industry.” In our conversations, he described his love of anthropology and of the early ethnologists in Japan, who would venture out into the countryside, depositing their collected findings in a modest local museum/archive (*shiryōkan* in Japanese) for the community to hold on to and for later travelers to discover. In this

way, his work resembles that of Mark Dion, another artist deploying scientific processes and presentations, and who also has engaged in long-term social collaborative projects (Kwon 2002).

Shitamichi's commitment to *being in* the community, to enrolling his daughter in the local school for an undetermined period while he wanders and speaks to locals (fig. 6), sussing out threads for new projects (and noting potential future collaborators)—this method might appear almost career-destroying for many artists in Japan and elsewhere. But Shitamichi's method also reflects a growing unease among people of his generation with the neoliberal ideal, resulting in many choosing instead to avoid the major cities and find personal fulfillment in quieter places (Klien 2020). Shitamichi's work displays an earnestness and directness that sits at odds with the riotous eclecticism of Ohtake or the hyper-personal work of Katayama. As Shitamichi told me, "One could argue that a work that the artist takes pains to make comprehensible by the locals may suffer as 'an art-work,' but I think it is necessary to give some consideration and respect to the local history and life. In my case, I don't really deal with fiction. My method is closer to documentation, so as to remember to consider the local people and history."



FIGURE 6. Motoyuki Shitamichi (left) speaking with an elderly resident on Naoshima. Photo taken by the author in 2020.

Shitamichi has not set an end date for his project on Naoshima. Having given Shitamichi the means and opportunity to engage freely with the community, Benesse Art Site Naoshima for now seems content to let him do so. This institutional flexibility, if it continues, could mark the turn of a new page for Naoshima's museum entity—a return to experimentation and the ceding of a degree of control for the sake of both artistic and social good.

Discussion and Conclusions

Naoshima's decades-long encounter with contemporary art positions it as an experienced veteran amid the dozens of nascent arts projects that have sprouted up across rural Japan. But in many respects, Naoshima's art project is still getting its footing. The monopoly created and fastidiously managed by Benesse Art Site Naoshima has profited from a high volume of tourism, but its high-caliber collection has already begun to show signs of stagnation, particularly for the people who have lived on the island since the original Naoshima Contemporary Art Museum first opened its doors 30 years ago.

The response to this in years past was to build yet another museum; indeed, a new Tadao Ando-designed gallery was recently built on Naoshima, and further projects have been mooted. However, the entry of Motoyuki Shitamichi suggests a new direction, an approach both softer and more confident, foregrounding investment in capable artist-instigators over still more architecture: human capital over physical infrastructure. By converting its disused gallery into a laboratory space and giving Shitamichi leeway to use it as he wishes, Benesse Art Site Naoshima added an educational and research component it long lacked. Whether this new socially focused activity continues to leverage community agency and authorship remains to be seen.

This study revealed the institution's role in the success of encounters between commissioned artists and the communities within which they are asked to work. As Kwon wrote: "Even after a good working relationship has been established between the artist and a partner group, the [institution] continues to function as the conduit between them, helping balance the wishes and needs of the artist and the capacities and desires of the community partner" (2002, 136).

Placing the artists and community members on unequal footing leads to feelings of alienation by locals, which are exacerbated when the artists leave and their static work becomes the domain of tourists, however specific it may be to its site. Granted, the social turn in art (Bishop 2006; Jesty 2017) has reached Naoshima relatively recently, and earlier projects were not intended to engage communities as authors. But the insistence since at least the late 1990s on artwork being *in* and *for* Naoshima communities, but not produced *with* them, was unsustainable. Ultimately, in the case of Shitamichi, having committed to his project, the institution merely had to get out of the way and let the artist do his work.

Heritage forms subject to artistic augmentation are transformed in ways for which they were never intended, with mixed results. Some heritage elements on Naoshima—

maritime history, bunraku puppets, traditional homes—received augmentative treatments that were interesting to visitors and that in some cases briefly engaged locals. But these engagements were often brief, and repeated encounters with artists who were soon whisked away caused many respondents to become disappointed with their experiences with contemporary art. Unlike the traditions they drew from, many of the permanent artworks created on Naoshima did not *live* with the community in a lasting way but seemed to exist solely for the tourist gaze.

In the case of the metallurgical slag blocks, the project both repackaged and foregrounded what was only ever intended to be a banal, functional material produced from waste. Indeed, for Naoshima locals who were familiar with the slag, the idea of it being a heritage form was a distant consideration at best. But the project revealed a new side to this local history that was interesting to visitors and locals alike. Though it was part of Shitamichi's meta-project, the map was also a work of genuine shared authorship. Crucially, for Shitamichi, it was always important that this be the case.

Islanders in declining peripheral regions face a host of challenges including aging, isolation, lack of services, decaying infrastructure, and fraying of social ties and cultural traditions. Artistic approaches are far from a panacea, and though grassroots creative efforts have shown great potential (Duxbury and Campbell 2011), they are only effective so long as the locals implementing them are engaged. Previous research has shown how community resourcefulness leverages agency and capacity to effect revitalization on Japan's "art islands" (Qu, McCormick, and Funck 2020). This same research has illuminated highly disparate outcomes between island communities that actively rallied around local creative enterprise versus those that did not.

While the present study did not tie particular artworks to revitalization outcomes (nor does it suggest this is possible), it did validate the potential for art that is rooted in community landscapes, and particularly art that engages with community members, to do more with less while reaching local stakeholders in ways that static art installations cannot. The Art House Project is viewed positively by many locals, but the wistful comments about years gone by when artists used to walk the streets of Honmura attest to the *artists themselves* bringing at least as much to the local experience as whatever they leave behind. With confident steps toward social creation, art institutions working within islands and other peripheral locales can elevate the authorship and agency of local stakeholders without sacrificing tourism.

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