

# Experiencing art from a field of rice: How farmers relate to rural revitalisation and art at Japan's Echigo-Tsumari Art Festival

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## Abstract

Focusing on the Echigo-Tsumari Art Festival (ETAF) in Niigata, Japan, we propose a novel conceptualisation of the role of art in rural revitalisation, focused on how local farmers experience art as a catalyst for social, cultural and natural change. Scholarship on the role of art in rural revitalisation has often focussed on arts' problem-solving affordances (e.g., economic, demographic) or on how rural engagements matter to art development. Instead, we turn our attention to the middle-ground: how art intervenes in the everyday life and practices of farmers in the festival area. Based on interviews and ethnographic fieldwork, our analysis draws on the theories of Tsurumi Shunsuke and John Dewey to offer a broad and inclusive notion of 'art' and 'aesthetic experience'. With this framework, we explore how farmers relate to different artworks presented at ETAF and how art can spur farmers to reflect on their lives, their farming and the environments they inhabit.

## KEYWORDS

art, Echigo Tsumari Art Festival, farming, Japan, rural revitalisation

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## INTRODUCTION

Since the early 2000s, arts-led initiatives have taken a leading role in revitalising rural communities across the world via art festivals, biennials and triennials. Scholars have approached this phenomenon from different disciplinary vantage points: Social science research has ranged from studying the economic gains derived from these art initiatives (Gkartzios et al., 2019; Mahon et al., 2018; Woods, 2012) to recognising their social benefits (e.g., Anwar McHenry, 2009, 2011; Anwar-McHenry et al., 2018; Balfour et al., 2018; Gibson & Gordon, 2018; Koizumi, 2016) and facilitation of sustainable community development (e.g., Black, 2016; Hjalager & Kwiatkowski, 2018; Qu & Cheers, 2021). Meanwhile, arts and cultural studies scholars have examined how art is mobilised for rural revitalisation and community building and what this means for arts' social potential, autonomy or political-corporate bridge-building capacities (e.g., Borggreen & Platz, 2019; Klien, 2010a, 2010b).

More recent works have called for an endogenous lens based on rural development theory,<sup>1</sup> a popular analytical model among some European social scientists, to examine art in the specific social, political and cultural context of rural communities (see Gkartzios et al., 2019; Woods, 2012). For example, Mahon and Hyryläinen (2019) applied the endogenous perspective to compare the effects of two rural art festivals in Ireland and Finland on local development. Other researchers have examined rural art practices that demonstrate endogenous quality, defining these as practices 'that [emerge] within the rural social, cultural and political context' (Gkartzios et al., 2019, p. 586); this includes local craft traditions (Fois et al., 2019) and small-scale, community-led art festivals (Qu & Cheers, 2021). Finally, some research grapples with whether and how art could support a neoendogenous approach to community development. This approach focuses on how a local area and its actors interact with their wider environments (Gkartzios & Lowe, 2019); in the case of art-led initiatives, it recognises how art facilitates interactions of local and non-local actors and their reflexivity, for example, community relationships (Crawshaw & Gkartzios, 2016).

However, most of this research focuses either on outcomes of art in solving rural problems (Gkartzios et al., 2019; Woods, 2012) in the form of resources or capital or on the benefits for or sociopolitical obligations of the 'art world'. While an art practice being endogenous does not automatically guarantee artful experiences to local residents, there is little work that explores how art, through its aesthetic properties and quality, achieves affect or meaning in the everyday lives of rural residents, especially those who are relatively powerless to participate in the decision-making process in rural art initiatives (but see, e.g., Crawshaw, 2019; Crawshaw & Gkartzios, 2016).

In this article, we use the case study of the Echigo-Tsumari Art Field (ETAF) in Japan, a rural art festival that addresses rural revitalisation alongside questions of human relations to nature. We focus on agro-ecological farmers in the ETAF area, exploring how they perceive and relate to the presence of art in their rural communities and whether and how it triggers reflections on their own daily practices. Starting with the farmers, their everyday lives, and their attachments to Echigo-Tsumari landscapes, we ask: How do the merits of artworks emerge as they meet up with local agro-ecological farming?

Initiated in 2000, ETAF<sup>2</sup> is the major international art event that takes place every third year in the countryside of the northeastern Niigata Prefecture. The Echigo-Tsumari area spans 760 km<sup>2</sup> and is famous for its rice production and terraced agricultural landscapes. Before the ETAF, the area was not particularly well known for in situ cultural productions, and today, most of the art events taking place are linked to the ETAF in one way or another. Like many rural areas in Japan, its population is dwindling and ageing, and the area has many abandoned houses and

fields (Ivy, 1995; Kitagawa, 2015). A majority of artworks at ETAF are installed in these landscapes and take form with them to draw attention to human-nature connections amidst traditional and contemporary agricultural practices. ETAF is thus an attempt to merge local landscapes, cultural norms and practices to create site-specific art or art forms that are made for and refer directly to the spaces and places in which they are created (see, e.g., Kwon, 2003; Lacy, 1995). In the case of ETAF, most artworks are made specifically for a given village, house, rice field and so on and only make sense within that context. Many (but not all) are permanent installations and can be visited year-round, year after year. ETAF encourages artists to engage local communities and to learn about their traditions, histories and practices so that their artwork can relate to them (Kitagawa, 2015, p. 46). Spreading across a large area, including mountains, countryside dwellings, villages and small cities, farmers are a key part of these local communities. Farming spans the entirety of the Echigo-Tsumari area, and farmlands play an important role in the festival's integration of art with the landscape. For these reasons (amongst others that we address below), farmers constitute a core group of actors for analysing the promises and perils of ETAF.

Connecting social sciences with art scholarship, our methodologies and theoretical framework in this article are interdisciplinary. Kei Yan Leung (with a background in sociology) conducted interviews and focus groups with farmers in the Echigo-Tsumari area and focused on their responses to high-profile ETAF artworks. Line Thorsen (with a background in art history and anthropology) conducted ethnographic research with farmers, artists, art publics and other locals at ETAF, adding important perspectives to the interactions between different forms of artwork and farmers at ETAF.

We take up the emerging approach of using art as a mode of inquiry (e.g., Crawshaw & Gkartzios, 2016; Gkartzios et al., 2019; Hawkins, 2010; Ingold, 2013; Thorsen, 2017). That is, by exploring how agro-ecological farmers relate to artworks in agricultural landscapes, this article is not a study of art or farmers but rather a way of researching *with* art to grapple with the exchanges that unfold between art and farmers and how these exchanges might prompt the farmers to (re)consider their landscapes, farming practices and daily lives. In this way, art is not an object of analysis but a catalyst and a key component for refiguring rural human-environmental relations. While the research focused on aesthetic outcomes of art-led rural revitalisation has been criticised for neglecting social impacts (Qu, 2020, see, e.g., Favell, 2015, 2016), we suggest that aesthetic and social impacts are not necessarily mutually exclusive. To inform our analysis, we draw on the aesthetic philosophy of John Dewey and the art analysis of Japanese sociologist and cultural theorist Tsurumi Shunsuke.<sup>3</sup> We propose that a broader notion of arts and aesthetics based on Dewey and Tsurumi can provide insight into how art might inspire farmer reflections on their practices, lifestyle and surrounding environment. A more inclusive notion that goes beyond the boundaries set by the 'art world' (Danto, 1964) and highlights the links between art and aesthetics and farmers' everyday experiences has the potential to unlock broader possibilities for the role of art in rural revitalisation.

In doing so, we seek to understand whether and how the artworks at ETAF intervene in the lives of selected agro-ecological farmers and potentially catalyse new ways for the farmers to relate to their environments and everyday practices. Hereby, we also seek to add new perspectives to the field of social science and cultural studies research examining art-led initiatives and rural revitalisation across the world. Specifically, we suggest that the way ETAF presents and blends modes of artistic creation by professionals and amateurs on equal footing offers important insights into processes of interaction between art and everyday life.

The case of ETAF may also offer insights into whether and how various art forms align with the endogenous model in different ways. In concept and practice, ETAF emphasises artistic

processes involving close interactions between local people and environments and extralocal artists and aims to raise questions and spur reflections among locals and visitors about lives in local communities and their surrounding environments (Badtke-Berkow, 2006, cited in Klien, 2010a). The case of ETAF may thus add to the growing literature on art and rural revitalisation while potentially offering a model for other art festivals with similar aims.

The article is organised as follows: We first explore how art can be understood as an experience and a process of inquiry through the conceptual frameworks offered by Dewey and Tsurumi, respectively. We then discuss our methodologies and present our major findings of how farmers relate to the artworks presented to them. Finally, we close by unfolding our suggestion that a broad notion of art and aesthetic experience offers an important lens for appreciating how farmers at ETAF see themselves, their work and their everyday lives in connection to the festival. This lens provides a new perspective on art as it is experienced and given meaning from life on a farm.

## EXPERIENCING ART IN EVERYDAY LIFE

In 2019, Leung went to the Echigo-Tsumari area to interview agro-ecological farmers about their farming practices and the presence of artwork in the landscape. Talking to one farmer after another, a pattern emerged: Whenever Leung would ask about direct engagements with the art, the farmer would immediately relate to an artwork from a practical or everyday perspective. For example, when asked about the ‘Scarecrow Project’ by Oscar Oiwa (see the photo in Ask\_yas, 2012), one farmer responded by referring to the farmland surrounding the art installation rather than the installation itself: ‘[t]here is no water in the rice field, it is like dying’. When asked which artworks he wanted to talk about during the interview, farmer Abe’s<sup>4</sup> first response was, ‘hmm... I never think about it that way’, indicating that the art is not part of his intentional reflections. Most farmers would subsequently turn to longer contemplations on the artworks, but these immediate reactions are worth dwelling on. The farmers did not begin by reflecting on the properties of the art in and of itself but by relating to it as part of their life-worlds and the local environment.

As we ask how farmers experience ETAF artworks in and next to their fields and what these mean to their daily lives, these reactions lead us to an important point: Art, as revitalisation taking place *in* and *for* a specific place, should be approached with generous definitions of arts and aesthetics that consider contextual and situated modes of reception. In other words, if art is for the revitalisation of a community, then that community’s way of relating to the artwork is important but underdetermined; how art comes to matter, to whom, and under which circumstances is not given in advance. When analysing the merits of art, it is often assumed that the meeting between art and its given public occurs in a direct and intended encounter: a willing public seeking out the art and relating to it on the premises extended by the artwork, artist, museum or gallery. Such an analysis assumes that the premise for engaging art is everywhere the same and unchanging. For example, if an artwork offers an anti-capitalist critique of consumer society, this vein of the art analysis will assume that this critique is, first, what a public will experience and relate to, and second, that the public will join the artwork’s premise in denouncing capitalism. This is often how the success of artwork is evaluated.<sup>5</sup>

Our theoretical starting point for this article is the opposite. When asking how farmers experience and relate to art at ETAF—their valuation, appreciation or despising of the artworks—we understand that these experiences may not primarily come from direct engagement with the artworks, knowledge of or interest in the artists’ intentions, or from intentional or benevolent encounters. As the short empirical vignettes above hint, many farmers may not have considered

direct engagement with the artworks at all. Or, more importantly, they consider them only so far as they unfold within and make sense to the farming environments and their everyday lives. Of course, this does not mean that farmers do not care or feel anything about the presence of art in their daily lives. Rather, it means that the farmers are much better than most art analyses at taking art and the art festivals' situated affects seriously. The farmers hint at the observation that art, like life more broadly, unfolds in a particular environment and to most people only makes sense within those situated premises.

This may seem like a banal point, yet the notion of art as something that can only be properly evaluated by an 'art world' (Becker, 1982; Danto, 1964) is still quite influential. In these terms, art is endowed with value separate from how it intersects with other spheres of life, and the aesthetic experience of art is thought to be separate from 'ordinary'—non-art—experiences (McCarthy et al., 2001). According to Danto, an influential philosopher of art and aesthetics, 'To see something as art requires something the eye cannot decry—an atmosphere of artistic theory, a knowledge of the history of art: an art world' (Danto, 1964, p. 580). Similarly, Danto defines art as something designed for viewers to grasp the (singular) intended meaning (p. 38). Ideas of art like Danto's, however, are essentialist and universalist, making them ill-equipped to help us grapple with farmers' experiences of art at ETAF: The farmers do not necessarily see the installations as worthwhile art because of the abstract theory or knowledge of art history but because they enter their farming worlds in ways that matter and make sense to those specific worlds.

Since Danto, many other theories of art and how it matters to various members of the public have been developed (e.g., Bishop, 2012; Bourriaud, 2009; Kwon, 2003; Lacy, 1995). For our analysis, we turn to the work of Dewey and Tsurumi as prefaced in the introduction. First, we draw on Dewey's book *Art as Experience*, in which he presents an aesthetic philosophy of art and its fundamental entanglement with everyday life and its environments. As Dewey writes, there is and should be a 'continuity of esthetic experience with normal processes of living' (Dewey, 2005, p. 9). Much like what was expressed by farmers in Leung's interviews, Dewey allows for an analysis of art and aesthetic experiences as something that comes in many forms and that is partially independent of art world doctrines. Dewey laments that our conception of art has been cut short by a too-limited notion of aesthetic experiences and of the situations and events that conjure them. In his analysis, aesthetic experience can arise from a great variety of situations, including but not limited to those prompted by artworks (Dewey, 1934). Although written in 1934, this point is still relevant—not least when exploring art as rural revitalisation and what it means to locals.

To unfold the varieties of aesthetic experience, Dewey separates what he calls 'an experience' from 'aesthetic experience'. For 'an experience' to happen at all, it must possess aesthetic qualities. This kind of experience can and does occur in ordinary, everyday situations. Dewey provides the example of an astonishing meal (Dewey, 2005, p. 36): Not all meals are 'an experience', as they do not have an aesthetic quality. But a meal that makes us say 'that was an experience' for the way it stands out from routine meals is exceptional because of its aesthetic quality. 'Aesthetic experience', on the other hand, happens when experiences are cultivated purposefully for their ability to intervene in the flux of life. The aesthetic quality arises from the same kind of experiential awakening, but the method through which it is brought into being differs. Cultivation of aesthetic experiences is not limited to art, but art is especially apt at doing so.

For Dewey, this adds a specific dimension to some art, which makes it work on aesthetic premises: Art, humans, and other beings exist in an environment '[...] not merely *in* it but because of it, through interaction with it' (Dewey, 2005, p. 12). Echoing the intuitive reactions of the interviewed farmers, this seemingly simple insight means that art, when cultivated for moments of aesthetic experience, does so with an awareness of and integration with its environment. For this

reason, Dewey proposes that the product of art is not actually the work of art itself: ‘The work takes place when a human cooperates with the product so that the outcome is an experience [...]’ (Dewey, 2005, p. 222). This framing implies that art and aesthetic moments only happen in connection to the world and everyday practices. Hence, the value of art lies in its dynamic interaction with environments and humans.

Sociologist and cultural theorist Tsurumi (1967) extends Dewey’s philosophy in his ‘marginal art theory’ by rooting it in East Asian and Japanese histories of art in continuity with life. Tsurumi holds on to Dewey’s notion of aesthetic experience but, building on Japan’s history of folk and peasant art, argues that if art and the aesthetic experience of it exist in relation to human activity, social processes and environments, then we must be willing to accept a much broader range of activities as art. Tsurumi’s analysis identifies three modes of art-making of equal importance (Tsurumi, 1967, pp. 14–16), although only one of them refers to the mode sanctioned by the art world. Tsurumi calls this first mode ‘pure art’; pure art is art made by professional artists and requires other professionals’ appraisal. This does not mean that non-professionals cannot appreciate pure art but rather that a work’s worth as art is established according to professionalised parameters. The second kind of art Tsurumi identifies is ‘popular art’ (not to be confused with ‘pop art’ in the vein of Andy Warhol or Murakami Takashi). Popular art is art (or products) made by professional artists for mass public and consumption, like design, posters and radio entertainment.

The third kind of art—and the one that concerns us most—is ‘marginal art’. This is the mode Tsurumi’s theory is named for and refers to art made by non-professionals for (primarily) other non-professionals. Its worth as art comes from the way it makes sense and unfolds within everyday life. Taking a cue from folklorist Yanagita Kunio and agricultural scientist and poet Miyazawa Kenji, amongst others, Tsurumi writes that ‘marginal art’ has always existed in the borderlands of art and everyday life. Flower arrangements, family photo albums, meal preparation, and, indeed, farming tools and practices hold the potential for and actualisation of artful and aesthetic experiences (Tsurumi, 1967, pp. 50–89)—not accidentally but as purposefully cultivated art from the everyday (Tsurumi, 1967, p. 51). Tsurumi unfolds Dewey’s notion of ‘aesthetic experience’ to identify and specify marginal art and its worth and meaning in day-to-day life.

For this article, we are especially interested in how pure and marginal art intersect with and overflow the boundaries between art and life at ETAF. There are a great variety of artworks at ETAF, from paintings and sculptures in galleries, total installations, community and socially engaged art, to the performance and presentation of local customs (e.g., dance, music, farming and food). All are presented as ‘art’ and thus connote ‘pure art’ in the terms of Tsurumi. Yet, we suggest that in reality, much of this is closely related to ‘marginal art’ and that pure and marginal art is constantly blended at the festival and always given meaning and value based on how they speak to and unfold in the everyday life of locals, including farmers. As we discuss in the next section, this double character of the artworks at ETAF (as both pure and marginal) is no coincidence. In fact, it is part of the festival’s concept for engaging and revitalising the rural communities of Echigo-Tsumari.

### ‘Marginal art’ at ETAF

Funded by the regional government and private corporations, ETAF is a top-down initiative to drive endogenous rural development (Klien, 2010b). ETAF is formulated around two overall ambitions: revitalising the depopulated countryside and reminding people who ‘human beings are a part of nature’. Connecting this double ambition, Kitagawa Fram, director of the festival, writes

how the increasing depopulation of the countryside led to a host of community-building initiatives in the 1990s (called *machizukuri* in Japanese; Kitagawa, 2015). Money was channelled to rural areas through various initiatives, mostly based on business support, renewal and modernisation projects. Yet, Kitagawa believes that this strategy was misguided: It alienated the remaining rural public, who consisted primarily of elderly farmers. Instead, he wanted to create an initiative grounded in the particularities of the countryside to magnify, strengthen and promote these places.

ETAF is a meeting place between Tsurumi's 'pure' and 'marginal' art, leaning mostly towards the latter: the art of the local public (Kitagawa, 2015, p. 240).<sup>6</sup> Ideas about 'art' and the inclusion of 'pure art' attractions, like works by Ilya and Emilia Kabakov or James Turrell, signpost the festival and draw art publics (and the art world) from across the country and world. But, once there, these audiences will not only encounter a great variety of artworks, including from local citizens and in the style of cultural art traditions, they will also find that the 'pure art' works are made and installed in a way that highlights the specificity of local cultures, natures and their entwinement.

For these reasons, ETAF engages the local public as much as art tourists and encourages visitors (at least at an ideal level) to travel slowly through the area, noticing landscapes as much as artworks (Kitagawa, 2015). The entirety of ETAF then is shaped along lines reminiscent of Tsurumi's and Dewey's sensibilities of art and aesthetic experience. The environment of ETAF is not just a 'setting' in any simple sense, it is part and parcel of the experience of the artworks.

However, some have criticised the gap between Kitagawa's ambition and the reality of what ETAF has achieved. Klien (2010a, cited in Qu & Cheers, 2021, p. 14) characterises ETAF as 'urban/global/elitism and cultural colonisation' because of its strategy to use 'pure art' attractions, catering mainly to the needs of tourists and imposing outside influences on disadvantaged communities (Klien, 2010b; Qu & Cheers, 2021). Klien (2010b) further considers the art at ETAF as an attempted panacea used to create local autonomy to solve structural problems in local communities. While these studies offer important examinations of rural art initiatives in this non-Western context, they only evaluate ETAF based on its 'pure art' artworks, omitting the festival's intentional bridging with 'marginal art'.

There is certainly a need for critical analyses of such 'top-down' art-revitalisation initiatives, but these have missed key aspects of how ETAF unfolds in practice and has developed over the past two decades. Instead, we take a generous approach, believing Kitagawa when he emphasises that ETAF does not aim to answer but rather raises questions among both locals and tourists (Badtke-Berkow, 2006, cited in Klien, 2010a). Following this, we explore the affectual responses of farmers at ETAF, asking whether and how art raise questions or spurs reflections among them.

## METHODOLOGY

A substantial part of our data derives from Leung's qualitative interviews and focus groups, while Thorsen's ethnographic observations offer supporting data that complicate and add nuance to our discussion. Leung conducted semistructured interviews with 25 farmers in the Echigo-Tsumari area in winter 2019 and three focus group discussions in winter 2020 with 18 of the 25 interviewed farmers. Thorsen engaged with ETAF between 2015 and 2020 through both long-term and periodic field research amongst artists and farmers in the Echigo-Tsumari area, described below.

Farmers were selected for interviews with Leung based on their engagement with agro-ecological farming practices, as opposed to mainstream or industrial farming. Agro-ecological farming is broadly defined by the substitution of environmentally sustainable practices for

industrial ones and connects with traditional practices that are well-suited to local agro-ecosystems (Gliessman, 2017). In 2018, Leung worked at ETAF with an art-farming programme, 'Gift from land'. Part of ETAF since 2015, the programme brings together young farmers, scholars and creative practitioners and involves interactions with Echigo-Tsumari agro-ecological farmers to combine farming, education and art by practising permaculture. Twenty of the interviewed farmers were identified through Leung's participation in 'Gift from land'; the other five were recruited through referrals from these 20. According to respondents, these 25 farmers represent most of the agro-ecological farmers in the area. Five of the 25 work for ETAF on a part-time basis, taking care of fields that host artworks; the rest are not involved in the management of the art and are not directly involved with ETAF.

The intentional sampling of agro-ecological farmers was to identify 'information-rich' (Patton, 2002, p. 401) cases for in-depth understanding of whether and how ETAF's artworks inspire farmers to reflect on their inhabited environments, their work and everyday lives. Agro-ecological farming practices resonate with the focus of ETAF and with rethinking rural life in depopulated areas through environmentally sustainable practices; this similarity in aims and ideals suggested that the 25 farmers might relate to and be willing to reflect on ETAF artworks. However, we are aware that this delimitation can constitute a bias in our results because these farmers might be more aware of their natural and cultural environments, to begin with. Nevertheless, as we reflect on in the final part of this article, mainstream and industrial farmers are not necessarily less attuned to their direct environment or cultural practices than agro-ecological farmers. They are rather attuned with other ideals and practices to follow. Hence, Leung's findings are limited in their empirical generalisability to represent the views of farmers in Echigo-Tsumari towards the artworks of ETAF, but we still believe they offer key insights into the way art becomes significant in the lives of farmers.

The interviews ranged from 40 to 90 min, while focus group discussions lasted for around 90 minutes. All interviews and group discussions were recorded and transcribed in full. Most of the interviews and discussions, except for three with farmers fluent in English, were conducted with the help of a Japanese–English translator. The interviews used photo elicitation, drawing on nine photos of seven artworks selected for their relevance to the theme of agriculture. The works were also chosen based on their high publicity and visibility at ETAF and their location in or close to farming fields. In other words, farmers were presented with artworks leaning towards 'pure art' placed in central agricultural locations. In interviews, farmers were first asked to share their farming stories, including how they started farming and their motivations, approaches and values. They were then invited to pick the artwork(s) that impressed them and share how these related to her/his farming. In the focus groups, Leung shared preliminary findings and invited farmers to discuss why some of them do not feel connected to the ETAF artworks and which qualities they find lacking in the art. Leung's data were analysed through inductive thematic analysis (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006) and coded by At.Lasti. After initial coding and subsequent focus coding (Thornberg & Charmaz, 2014), three major conceptual categories (themes) regarding how respondents perceive the artworks emerged: projection of farming life, direct encounters and interactions and disconnections with everyday life. Finally, theoretical coding was conducted to analyse these themes based on the conceptual framework from Dewey and Tsurumi.

Thorsen's ethnographic field research also included formal and informal interviews with relevant stakeholders, which were captured in ethnographic field notes, and some were also audio recorded. In 2015 and 2018, Thorsen stayed in the Echigo-Tsumari area during festival periods in the summer, following activities in Matsudai and Tokamachi, two (out of 10) of the festival's central areas. Between festivals, Thorsen followed the work of selected ETAF artists (spring 2016)





FIGURE 1 ‘Human re-entering nature’ by Thomas Eller (*photo source*: Kei Yan Leung)

and stayed in Matsudai (autumn 2017). These stays were conducted as ethnographic participant observation at ETAF; with the art and farming initiative ‘Gift from Land’; and with local residents primarily in the towns of Matsudai and Tokamachi. In 2019 and 2020, Thorsen conducted follow-up interviews with selected artists and locals via online platforms like Skype. Thorsen understands and reads Japanese at an intermediate level, and conversations were conducted in both English and Japanese, sometimes with the aid of a translator.

## EXPERIENCING ART AT ETAF

### Experiencing connection: ‘Human re-entering nature’

‘Human re-entering nature’ (Figure 1) by Thomas Eller is a four-meter-high human figure modelled after the artist’s own bodily composition. It is situated in a field next to a tree, amid grasses and climbing vines. Over the years, the vines have climbed the artwork itself, so it is now enveloped in plants. This growth and the adjacent tree literally immerse the figure in the landscape and make it change with the landscape along with the four seasons (Echigo-Tsumari Art Field, 2021b). As with most of the farmers, Shibata does not think much about the artworks as art, but when asked to consider Eller’s installation actively by Leung, he saw himself reflected in the human figure. Specifically, he noted how he is also immersed in the cycles of seasons in his farming process and life in general. To Shibata, the artwork conveys and synthesises his ordinary, lived experience of being part of and subjected to an environment.

Shibata moved from Tokyo to the Echigo-Tsumari area in 2012 because he wanted to live in the mountains. In 2014, he started growing holy basil without using fertilisers. An important aspect of his farming is to engage people with nature, so he regularly organises planting and harvesting

activities that connect people with soil and his holy basil plants. Echoing the vignettes that opened our theoretical discussion, Shibata associated 'Human re-entering nature' with aspects of his farming life:

Shibata: I like 'Human re-entering nature'; I like that it changes as the seasons change, that's my favourite part. And the people and the tree are connected. That's the image I like.

Leung: Why do you like the image?

Shibata: I can't explain it explicitly, I like it without reason... I like that the human is connected to the tree. I mean, connected to nature, and that [we are part of] the circle [of life]. In the natural cycle, it just exists... [This artwork] probably would decay [in the future]. Trees would probably change as time passes, the tree next to it just gets old, it doesn't remain in the same condition, it is ageing every year, changing every year.

At first, Shibata could not explain why he likes the artwork; he simply liked how it conveys the connection between nature and humans. After contemplating further, he shared how the artwork connects to his farming life:

Shibata: The artwork is not specifically [connected] to farming, but [to my] life here. Especially [my] lifestyle in this snow country [the Echigo-Tsumari area]. As we have [a] very clear distinction between spring, summer, autumn and winter, you do things that are suitable for each season. I like the rhythm of the cycle of seasons. And I feel it [the rhythm] from this artwork. In this snow country, four seasons are typical, each season is different from one another, so people have to fit in the seasons and live according to the seasons, that's how we survive... and what makes our life the 'snow country life' [life in Echigo-Tsumari], it is different from the city and other parts of Japan, that's what I like and feel from this artwork and from my life. It is changing every season, I like the changes, I feel them in this art and my life.

Leung: Are the changes important to your farming?

Shibata: Yes. In winter, ... most cultivated soil is covered by snow so the land can rest; farmers can also rest... Winter here is tough. When spring comes, it is such a joy... It is about the ups and downs, living and changing, that's why we are grateful for spring.

The artwork stands out to Shibata; it becomes an aesthetic experience, as defined by Dewey, because his encounter with 'Human re-entering nature' is contextualised by the climatic and environmental conditions of his daily 'snow country life'. Regardless of the artist's original intended message, the artwork matters to him in a way that is specific to his farming practices, the environment and his life in Echigo-Tsumari.

The human-nature connection in 'Human re-entering nature' also conveys Crawshaw and Gkartzios's (2016, p. 142) suggestion that art can perform "a diagnostic" reading" of human and



FIGURE 2 'Rice field' by Ilya and Emilia Kabakov (photo source: Kei Yan Leung)

non-human relations' (Crawshaw, 2019, p. 307). In Shibata's case, the artwork is diagnostic of how his everyday life and farming practices adapt to the cycles of nature and seasonal changes, and more importantly, how these changes and adaptations are important to the health of his soil and his wellbeing. By conceptualising art and aesthetics based on their relevance to everyday life, we can uncover the links between the aesthetic qualities of art and its social impact, which in this case is the validation of sustainable agricultural practices and lifestyles through a reminder of the connection with nature in his practices. This also facilitates more diverse perspectives from which to appreciate art in the context of rural revitalisation.

### Experiencing art as a process

The artwork 'Rice field' (Figure 2) by Ilya and Emilia Kabakov portrays scenes of traditional, unmechanised rice farming in Echigo-Tsumari through silhouettes of farmers and horses. Together with a display of Japanese poetry describing manual rice farming in different seasons, 'Rice field' aims to remind people of past agricultural practices (Echigo-Tsumari Art Field, 2021c). Shuji, one of the interviewed farmers, has been taking care of the land that hosts 'Rice field' for 10 years. He is impressed by the artwork because he witnessed how the social interactions and conversations it facilitated made the landowner feel more positive about his rice field:

Shuji: I knew the owner of this land, he has already passed away, but the elderly had taken good care of me and taught me how to do rice farming. The [owner] at first did not like having the artwork on his own land, but he gradually accepted it. By having the artwork on his field, he was able to relate to other people who are connected to the art piece. [To] people coming to see the artworks, or like me who just came to

take care of the rice terraces, the artwork [created] connections... relationships... From what I have learned from the [owner, in farming], how he changed his attitude towards the artwork, and by spending time with him [on his rice field], I am most impressed by this artwork.

Leung: How did you know that the owner became accepting of the artwork?

Shuji: The artwork attracted many visitors. The field is in bad condition because it is north-facing and there is not much sunshine. The rice field itself is small, and there is no path. These are all bad conditions for a rice terrace; there is nothing good physically about this rice terrace. But people just came to see the artwork and kept telling him it is such a good place and a fantastic rice terrace, so he gradually understood the worth of his rice terrace.

Connecting the land to the broader history, traditions, and rebuilding of community, the artwork spurred moments of aesthetic experience consistent with the philosophy of Dewey. Slowly, the landowner and Shuji came to see—or experience—the rice field from a new perspective, where it could be appreciated and valued for qualities other than rice production. The aesthetic experiences of Shuji and the landowner did not occur as a sudden moment of realisation; instead, they were cultivated gradually through encounters and interactions with both local and non-local visitors that the artwork drew to the site.

This positive take is rather unusual in the history of ETAF art analyses. For instance, Klien (2010b) argued that the silhouettes hindered the landowner's practical farm work, concluding that this work of art mostly served as 'exoticisation and romanticisation' (2010b, p. 525) of traditional Japan and the area. Klien draws this conclusion based on close attention to the artwork and whether it succeeded in conveying the artists' intentions to the locals and the landowner. However, there are farmers with less direct connection to the 'Rice field' field who share Klien's sentiments towards the artwork. In the next subsection, we grapple more substantially with such differences in reception amongst the agro-ecological farmers. Shuji's experience offers a different way of understanding the merits of 'Rice field'. Shuji also recounted how the artwork impedes farm tasks. But, as the following quote indicates, the meaningful interactions and conversations facilitated by the 'Rice field' also constitute a key part of Shuji's experience with the artwork:

Honestly, it is just so annoying; practically, it is super annoying. I know the difference between the ideal and the reality, I understand it well, but still, it is super annoying. [But still], I have no choice because this artwork and the rice terrace do mean something.

Shuji's mixed feelings towards the 'Rice field' illustrate that experiences of the artworks are more diverse and complex when we consider their connections with everyday life and the surrounding environment in which the artworks take form. Meanwhile, using a broader perspective to appreciate arts and aesthetic experience shows how 'Rice field' also empowered the landowner and Shuji to maintain the rice terrace and validated their farming efforts through novel landscape appraisals. Thus, there are more experiential dimensions to the artwork than recognised by Klien (2010b); it acts as a catalyst, gradually inspiring the landowner to see his rice

field anew and motivating Shuji to continue maintaining the field and using farming as a way to engage with local villagers.

## Detachment from the art

Thus far, we have focused on farmers who had positive or, at least, some form of elevating experiences from interacting with ETAF artwork. However, not all the interviewed farmers were so positively inclined. A few of them expressed that the artworks are out of place because they impose imbalances on the landscape. For example, Seto, a local farmer who grew up in the area, feels unsafe and uncomfortable with 'Rice field':

It ['Rice field'] makes me feel uncomfortable, it is not in harmony, it is outstanding in a negative way. I know the original scene of the rice terrace [that hosts 'Rice field']; the artwork is not compatible. I feel scared and anxious from this artwork, I don't feel safe. It is not just from this artwork. When I see electric towers in mountains, it is an inharmonious feeling. People in the countryside do not like to see unordinary things. The artworks [of the ETAF] are something the locals and elders are not used to, that's why they feel anxious.

Instead of evoking positive memories of nostalgic, traditional farming scenes, the artworks conjure a sense of unfamiliarity and imposed exogeny for Seto and, according to him, for some of the area's elders as well. He continued:

We like to refer to the past as the 'good old days', when we think of nostalgic things we feel safe, familiar, and stable. But for the future, we feel anxious and uncertain; these artworks are unordinary and unstable in our everyday life... When I am talking to you [Leung] right now, I realise that doing the traditional things that my father was doing, I feel relieved and good, safe and comfortable.

Seto's reflections importantly highlight a partial incongruence between the way ETAF frames the festival to urban and international tourists (those they want to attract to the countryside) and how it is perceived by some of the people already living there. Ironically, to Seto, 'Rice field' neither draws him into the landscapes nor reminds him of traditional agricultural practices. It contradicts them. His experience echoes the findings of scholars who mention the risk of inauthentic representations of local culture causing confusion and even negative experiences for locals (See Black, 2016; Klien, 2010b; Qu, 2020). Instead of representations of local culture in the form of art, Seto prefers engaging directly in traditional practices such as rice straw weaving and farming. However, as we know from Shuji and Shibata, Seto does not speak on behalf of all locals or farmers in the area, even though he wields the language of collective experience. In terms of our analysis, the sheer diversity in experiences evoked by the artwork is worth noting.

Like Seto, Kikuchi, an organic farmer and builder of traditional straw roofs, feels that ETAF's art is out of place and disconnected from the natural cycles and lives of the area. He uses the example of 'Tsumari in bloom' by Kusama Yayoi (Figure 3; Echigo-Tsumari Art Field, 2021d) to illustrate this. The work is supposed to show the artist's praise of local environments through a blooming flower under the sunshine in Echigo-Tsumari, but Kikuchi sees otherwise:



FIGURE 3 ‘Tsumari in bloom’ by Kusama Yayoi (photo source: Kei Yan Leung)

I am not interested in these artworks and the art festival. I am more interested in life in this area. Life here is in the [natural] cycle, everything is reasonable, but the artworks are out of the cycle. Like the artwork of Kusama Yayoi [‘Tsumari in bloom’] in front of Matsudai station, it was incredible when I saw it in a museum. It was very lively; I could feel what she wanted to express. I would feel the same if the artwork is in Tokyo or in a city. But, in front of Matsudai station, even though it is made by the same artist, it is just so miserable. It is detached from the actual life here.

More so than the artworks, Kikuchi views the actual life, practices and traditions of the area—like the preserved rice terraces and Japanese traditional houses—as the actual art:

When you draw a picture on a canvas, you communicate something. Living in this village... the village itself is a canvas for me. Living is like art to me, and the village is my canvas; living my life here communicates what I think to other people.

The artworks do constitute an experience to Seto and Kikuchi, in Dewey’s sense, just one that they enjoy less than other interviewed farmers. They are still an experience because they stand out from the farmers’ everyday life, just in a negative way. These farmers’ reactions also show that ETAF’s artwork is open to diverse interpretations for people with different life experiences and sensibilities about artful qualities.

Without doing so explicitly, Seto and Kikuchi reiterate Tsurumi’s diagnosis of pure, popular and marginal art. In Tsurumi’s terms, these farmers express preferences for marginal art practices: the kind of art that is the most longstanding and prolific in most places but that was relegated to the margins with the entrance of ‘pure art’. As we suggest, and based on the stated intentions of Kitagawa Fram, ETAF is indeed a place for mixing, bridging and intentionally blurring the

boundaries between ‘pure’ and ‘marginal art’. Seto and Kikuchi express a clear preference for the latter, while Shuji seems to find quality in the way ‘pure art’ can spur new experiences of the marginal artforms endogenous to the area.

So far, we have only focused on how farmers relate to the works of ‘pure art’ at ETAF. The chosen artworks are all by acclaimed international artists made to stand out and draw publicity and crowds. However, as mentioned previously, Kitagawa and ETAF are also invested in marginal art forms. We now turn to the way marginal and ‘lifeway arts’ (Kitagawa, 2015) may be even more significant to ETAF, with a short discussion of the sensibilities evoked in farmers by a broader spectrum of artful creations.

## ENCOUNTERS WITH MARGINAL ART

ETAF can be (and has been) criticised for many things in its quest to get national, regional and international art publics to visit the Niigata countryside. This includes ignoring local public and their wishes, imposing unwanted and out-of-place artworks on them, and making their lives difficult with the many people now visiting the festival. But once you visit Echigo-Tsumari, it quickly becomes clear that ETAF is much more than high-profile artworks and top-down artworld gestures. While this is a highly visible overcurrent—indeed, this approach plays a significant part in the festival’s commercial success (Echigo-Tsumari Art Field, 2021a)—there are more artworks at ETAF that range closer to what Tsurumi calls ‘marginal art’ than the ‘pure art’ drawcards. These include artworks that farmers like Seto and Kikuchi might be more favourably inclined towards, even though they might not even recognise them as art.

For every piece of art by big names like Ilya and Emilia Kabakov, Thomas Eller or Kusama Yayoi, you will find a range of artistic explorations by farmers, villagers, tinkers and thinkers. For every installation by internationally acclaimed artists, you will find even grander installations by local farmers and homemakers, who have turned dwellings into displays of traditional farming tools, cooking practices, locally grown vegetables and song and dance (e.g., ‘Ubusuna house’, ‘Museum of picture book art’ and ‘Green room project’). All are given catalogue numbers and features in the guidebooks, yet as non-professionals they range much closer to the definition of marginal art than pure art. In these installations, the intentional blurring and mixing of pure and marginal art are overt. Modes of artmaking by amateurs and professionals, locals and internationals, stand side by side and without much hierarchy. In addition, this is very much intended.

In the book *Art Place Japan* (2015) by ETAF director Kitagawa Fram, two things stand out about his characterisation of the festival and his wishes and ideals for the place. First, he explicitly rejects the primacy of Western art history and the art world that comes along with it, stating that ‘it was important to emphasise a pluralistic and global perspective on art that would not privilege Western perspectives’ and that he was ‘inspired by ... art in the margin ...’ (Kitagawa, 2015, p. 17). Second, while rejecting the Western art world and its hierarchies, he consequently emphasises that, to him and ETAF, everything made by human beings is potentially art (Kitagawa, 2015, p. 240). In making this claim, he references Tsurumi amongst others and draws inspiration from ‘marginal art’<sup>7</sup> to encircle a key merit and ambition of the festival, one that lies at the base of his ideal for artistic interventions: ‘The desire and skill to engage with the local people around the natural environment that they contend with daily [...]’ (Kitagawa, 2015, p. 240).

This key feature of ETAF becomes important for proper analysis. The interviews described in the previous section were based solely on reflections about high-profile artworks, a selection

that no doubt greatly affected the farmers' reactions. Here, we turn to the insights of Thorsen's ethnographic research, which focused on how ETAF aims to merge with daily life in the many villages across Echigo-Tsumari and how artists and locals, including but not limited to farmers, recalibrate their environmental sensibilities in exchanges with the art festival. During this research, it became clear that many locals simply do not care that much about the high-profile artworks and are mostly indifferent to them. Others find them irrelevant, alienating or annoying. These sentiments are reflected in the way Seto and Kikuchi related to the artworks presented to them by Leung.

Yet completely different responses occurred in relation to the 'marginal art' of ETAF. In 2017, Thorsen was staying in the town of Matsudai. Helping a farmer, Nakamura, in his rice field, Thorsen asked about all the activities in the area that came along with ETAF. Nakamura responded that he did not care much for the art or the tourists; they were just there but not something he paid much attention to. He then started talking about one of the fields neighbouring his own; a group of Hong Kongers had taken up permaculture farming since 2015, and he enjoyed following along with their farming experiments, seeing how it went, and the fact that he could draw inspiration from them. They were great young people, he emphasised, bringing cheer and life to the town. Finally, he exclaimed, 'I far prefer them to the artworks'.

However, what he was talking about—the Hongkongers and their permaculture field—was in fact part of ETAF. It happens to be the initiative that Leung was also involved with in 2018, 'Gift from land', run by the Hong Kong Farmers and Sense Art Studio (2015–2018). Several of the Hong Kong farmers involved throughout the years have also been artists (though not all). Except for this particularity, 'Gift from land' was exactly what Nakamura described it to be: a bunch of Hong Kongers experimenting with sustainable farming methods.

Yet, we argue that 'Gift from land' is an example of another mode of artmaking at ETAF, where its creation as 'marginal art' means that many locals experience a much greater affinity with it than with the 'pure art' works. 'Gift from land' thus aligns well with Kitagawa's ambitions for marginal art at ETAF. It performs a desire to engage locals and their environments and in doing so elicits aesthetic experiences cultivated purposefully in the interactions between practitioners (the Hong Kongers) and local public (Nakamura and others). This is especially clear in the way Nakamura reflected on the inspiration he finds in their farming experiments.

Relatedly, in 2016, one of the Hong Kong farmers told Thorsen about a series of conversations he had with a conventional Matsudai rice farmer. At first, the conventional farmer thought their permaculture farming seemed ridiculous, but after watching it develop over one-and-a-half years, he began noticing that his agriculture magazines were also focused more and more on organic and other sustainable farming practices. He noticed how the Hong Kongers managed to grow both rice and soybeans alongside various other vegetables until he finally proclaimed that what they were doing at 'Gift from land' was important to the future of farming (see also Thorsen, 2019, pp. 213–238).

Following the marginal agricultural art practice of 'Gift from land', the conventional farmer experienced something that stood out from his other experiences of farming, relating to the landscape and local environment, and, not least, his daily life. Similar sentiments might have been evoked from Seto and Kikuchi had they been presented in the interviews with other kinds of art practices at ETAF. Like Nakamura, they might not even recognise it as art, but that would not matter, compared to the quality of the aesthetic experiences offered by marginal art encounters.



## CONCLUSION

In this article, we have shown how a more inclusive notion of art and aesthetic experience can aid in appreciating how agro-ecological farmers in the Japanese countryside make sense of, enjoy or dislike different forms of art as experienced in their everyday life. Our study of ETAF provides insights into how agro-ecological farmers experience the presence of various forms of art in their daily routines and landscapes and how these can trigger reflections on their farming. With an interdisciplinary approach that draws on the works of Dewey and Tsurumi, we propose an expanded conceptualisation of art and aesthetics that takes the relevance of art to farmers' day-to-day activities into consideration.

While our case study is set against rural Japan, we also suggest that it may add more broadly to social science and cultural studies research on art-led rural revitalisation, including endogenous analyses of such initiatives. The art at ETAF is intentionally facilitated in interactions among local farmers and extralocal tourists and artists, and these interactions have spurred farmers' reflections on their practices in relation to their environment. These reflections are important, as they convey a capacity-building process that is valuable in promoting changes and transformations in rural communities (Shucksmith, 2010).

Alongside the theories of Dewey and Tsurumi, this broad conceptualisation helps to uncover more possibilities for the role of art in rural revitalisation than merely as a tool to generate economic and social impacts. Attuned to the ambitions of ETAF, we see art as aesthetic entities that inspire farmers and rural residents to reflect on their daily lives and environments.

While these processes of reflexivity are only visible when we consider a more inclusive conceptualisation of art and aesthetics, the case of ETAF is useful to showcase these processes. With its explicit and conscious focus on the intersections of pure and marginal art, ETAF mobilises the already blurry boundaries between modes of artmaking to establish a continuity between pure and marginal art forms, offering art publics as well as farmers and ordinary Echigo-Tsumari citizens a much richer pallet of aesthetic experiences in tune with their lives. As our findings indicate, as long as art unfolds in the everyday lives of farmers and others, marginal as well as pure art can facilitate aesthetic experiences for people who do not necessarily possess art-world knowledge (cf. Danto, 2013). Art can and does take many forms, and whether it is identified by the person who experiences it as 'art' is not as important as the aesthetic experience it engenders. Such experiences may come from an encounter with a brightly coloured sculptural flower, but they may also come from everyday activities like farming experienced anew from encountering artful ways of tending to a field—be these sculptural renderings of traditional farming or newly introduced permaculture practices. As such, a broader conceptualisation of art can explain and serve as a mitigation of the problem of rural residents being 'put off' by 'art' in research or community development practices (see, e.g., Crawshaw & Gkartzios, 2016). We finally suggest that a generous notion of art, which broadens our appreciation for the richness of aesthetic experience, can and should also be explored in places beyond Japan that mobilise art for revitalisation and community-building.

Focusing mainly on the experience of agro-ecological farmers, whose farming values align well with ETAF's aims of promoting human-nature connections, it is limited in its representation of the experience of other rural residents. Yet, our research leads us to believe that ETAF and its ambitions of forming meaningful local interactions between rural residents, diverse art forms and aesthetic experiences, artists (professionals and amateurs alike) and visiting the public serve

as a reference for art-led community projects in other places to engage and promote art forms that are aligned with the everyday practices and values of residents. Our research is of course not exhaustive of the potentials of ETAF in neither rural revitalisation nor in how farmers relate to art as part of this process. More research is needed that explores the artful and aesthetic experience of a more diverse groups of rural residents including mainstream and industrial farmers. Here, the role of marginal art vis-à-vis pure and other art forms may prove to be even more significant when grappling with the potential of art in rural revitalisation.

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## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data of the first author presented in this study are openly available in Zenodo at [10.5281/zenodo.4609738](https://zenodo.org/record/4609738).

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

## ETHICS STATEMENT

All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the General Data Protection Regulation of the European Parliament and International Sociological Association.

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## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>In rural development theory, the endogenous model highlights the use of local resources within a territory, offering contextualisation focused on the needs and capacities of local people through their active participation (Gkartziou & Lowe, 2019; Ray, 2000).

<sup>2</sup>Past ETAF lasted for around 5 weeks from late-July to early-September. In 2019, ETAF exhibited 379 pieces of artwork contributed from 363 international artists, in which 210 pieces of the artworks have been commissioned on a permanent basis (Echigo-Tsumari Art Field, 2022).

<sup>3</sup>When referencing Japanese names in this article we follow the East Asian convention of family name followed by given name. In the case of Tsurumi Shunsuke, this means that his family name is Tsurumi and his given name is Shunsuke.

<sup>4</sup>All farmer names in this text are pseudonyms.

<sup>5</sup>This is, of course, very generalised and a caricature of an analytical model, which is nonetheless real and prevalent. See Hallam (2008) and Thorsen (2019, pp. 60–67) for in-depth analyses and discussion.

<sup>6</sup>In the book *Art Place Japan* (2015), Kitagawa translates 'marginal art' into his own notion of 'lifeway art'. However, we use 'marginal art' throughout this text to avoid too many competing concepts and potential confusion.

<sup>7</sup>We will not go into details about Kitagawa's argument here, but in brief, while drawing on Tsurumi's art analysis, he also criticises it for being too caught up with Western art history hierarchies. Instead, Kitagawa suggests the

notion of 'lifeway arts'. However, the nuances of difference between 'marginal art' and 'lifeway art' is underdeveloped by Kitagawa. See also note 6.

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