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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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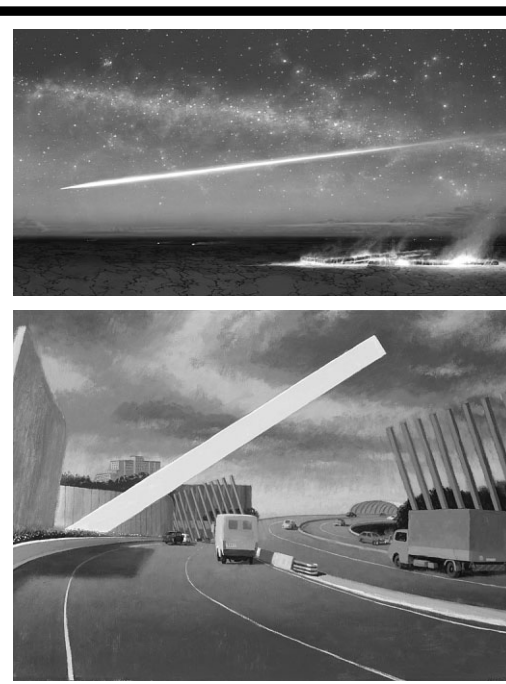
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