Expanding the public realm through curated collaborative action

The Echigo Tsumari abandoned house project

Carol Mancke

If you or I just tried to move into a house in a rural area like this, we would have a lot of trouble becoming part of the place. But, when art or an artist goes into a community, even if they run into difficulties, a lot of people get involved and connections are made. For art as well, this engagement with place brings huge meaning.

Art was an urban thing in the twentieth century, and when cities have problems, art expresses them. Bringing attention to urban problems is not a bad thing, but that kind of art is painful to look at all the time and it’s not all that art can be.... Also, when an artist expresses urban ills he/she becomes a spectator. An artist can’t possibly remain a spectator in Tsumari, and so they start to feel like doing something [about things].

The Echigo Tsumari Art Triennial has taken place in Echigo Tsumari, a 760 km² area in Niigata Prefecture north-west of Tokyo, every three years since 2000. Most of the land is steep forestland, yet the highest quality rice in Japan is produced there. Cut off by terrain and climate, the region has had a reputation for being closed and politically isolated. Snow accumulation of up to five metres has contributed to depopulation since the middle of the twentieth century and many of the 65,000 people remaining are elderly, living in villages of 5–30 houses. All things considered, it seems an unlikely place for an international arts festival.

Co-mingling of urban and rural culture

One of the goals of the Triennial has been to expand the understanding of the public realm within the community and open a space for communication, discourse and cross-fertilisation with mainstream urban culture. Fram Kitagawa, who directs the event with his team of curators at Art Front Gallery, calls this a ‘co-mingling’ of urban and rural culture. The Triennial aims to create places and situations where this co-mingling