

# Art on Water: Art that Revitalizes Insular Communities Facing Depopulation and Economic Decline

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## ABSTRACT

 The Inland Sea of Japan, once a flourishing cultural and economic artery, is now struggling with depopulation and economic decline. Traditionally, this area has been popular for public and private art projects. Recent large-scale art projects and exhibitions on Naoshima Island and Inujima Island explored the possibilities of art in a public context. Site-specific artworks in collaboration with the local community have attracted visitors and brought about a favorable impact. Along with the rich historic and natural resources of the Inland Sea area, emerging art projects in various islands have started to revitalize the insular communities within.

**Keywords:** *Public Art, Insular Community, the Inland Sea, Revitalization, Cultural Exchange*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

As a developed country, Japan is facing a seriously low birthrate and is challenged by its aging society. Furthermore, rural communities, including the islands in the Inland Sea of Japan, are losing their populations, and rarely do they maintain communal activities.

The Inland Sea, located between Mainland Honshu and Shikoku Island, was once an economically and politically important artery. However, as land transportation dominated distribution systems in modern times, the importance of Inland Sea transport gradually diminished. Major industries and workers moved away from the islands, and these insular communities began to suffer from depopulation and economic decline.

The major and common concern among these communities is how to manage depopulation and revitalize the community. Since the 1990s, several art projects have emerged around the Inland Sea that seemingly provide effective solutions for such problems. This paper explores the art projects around the Inland Sea and their influence on the communities where they occur.

## 2. GEOGRAPHICAL LOCATION OF THE INLAND SEA

Although the official area of the Inland Sea of Japan has been defined by several different international and domestic organizations, the Inland Sea is basically recognized as the area surrounded by three major Japanese islands: Kyushu, Shikoku, and Honshu. (Figure 1)



Figure 1:  
Location of the Inland Sea of Japan

Inland Sea National Park, one of the first Japanese national parks, was established in 1931; it has a total area of about 22,000 km<sup>2</sup> and 6,760 km of coastline. There are more than 700 islands within the park. It is known for its beautiful natural and agricultural landscape, and it traditionally provides natural resorts and tourist destinations for urban visitors.

Many of the islands in this area are geographically close to major mainland cities—a condition that previously attracted many industries and their employees. Major industries of this area included shipbuilding, refining, salt and other chemical industries. However, many enterprises in these islands were discontinued, and very few shipbuilding companies and refinery plants remain on some major islands. The declining economy has forced local communities to accept industrial waste from nearby urban areas, creating critical environmental issues and controversies.

Three vehicular routes, one of which is shared with the railroad, bridged Honshu and Shikoku by 2000, connecting some of the major islands within the Inland Sea. These connecting traffic routes had been expected to revitalize the regional economy; however, it seemed only to accelerate the exodus of local industries and population.

### 3. ART IN A PUBLIC CONTEXT IN JAPAN

Before exploring the art of the Inland Sea area, we must briefly review art in a public context in Japan. Since public art in Japan has a unique background, it is essential to understand art in terms of Japanese culture, society, and administration.

#### 3.1 The Origin and Character of Japanese Public Art

In terms of its beginnings, Japan has a history of art in public places that is similar to that in the United States and many European and Asian countries. It began with the erection of religious monuments shared by the local community. Art in public spaces, in a modern sense, dates back to 1961, when Ube city, located near the west end of the Inland Sea, initiated its Sculpture in Public Places program (Figure 2). Ube city's program even predates two famous U.S. public art programs: the Fine Arts Program of the U.S. General Services Administration (GSA), initiated in 1962 (later renamed in 1977 as the more popular Art-in-Architecture Program), and the Art in Public Places program of the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA), initiated in 1967.

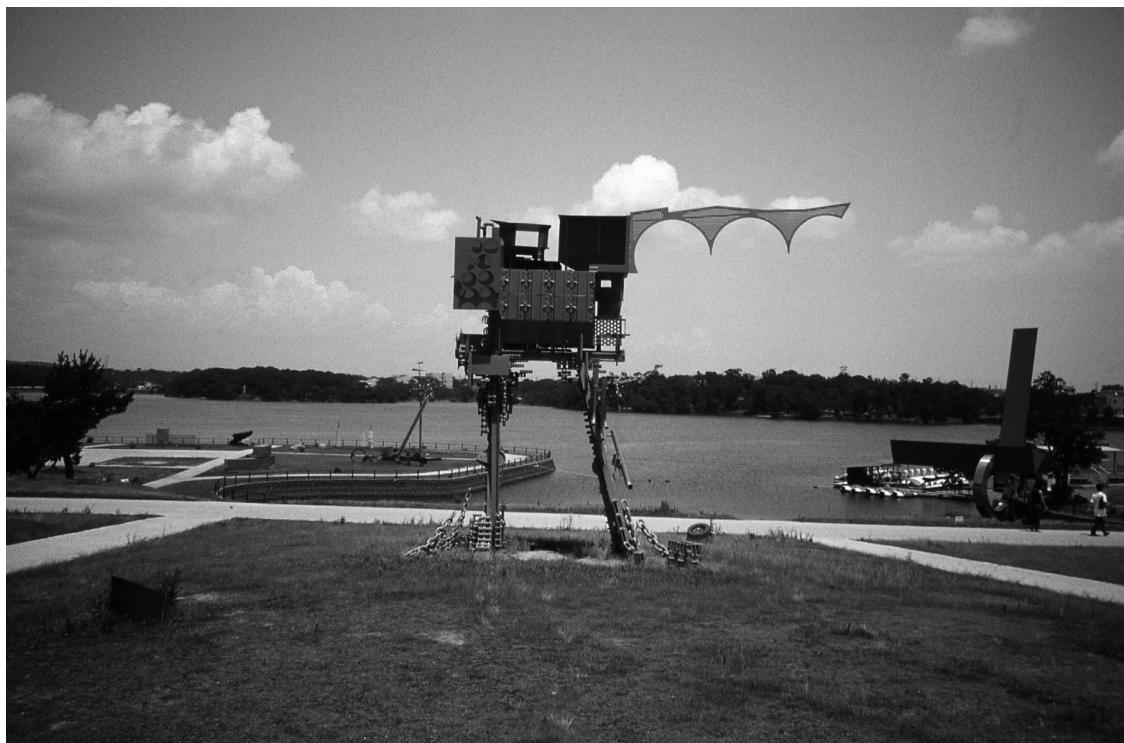


Figure 2:  
Sculpture at Ube city, installed in the Tokiwa Park and facing the Inland Sea

Following Ube city's successful experiment, Japanese administration realized the potential of public sculptures to help improve public amenities. Thereafter, the Sculptures in Public Places program proliferated to other Japanese municipalities; it integrated with outdoor sculpture competitions and/or exhibitions, typically on a biennial basis, to acquire artworks, thus following the model of Ube city's pioneering program. Although Japanese art in public places may appear to be similar to American counterparts, it has a unique background and administrative intention.

While the U.S. GSA's public art program was clearly expected to "serve as a symbol of American democracy, creativity, and freedom" (Heartney, 2008, p.9) during the Cold War period, Japanese public art rarely expressed political intentions. Most of the programs in Japan during this period focused more on the educational aspects of sculptures exhibited in public spaces.

Typically placed on a pedestal—as seen in museums and galleries—the majority of these sculptures were categorized as "site dominant"; such a piece

artist Robert Irwin would define as an "art-object [that] either rises out of, or is the occasion for, its 'ordinary' circumstances" (Irwin, 1985, p.26). Since the administrators responsible for these programs were rarely trained in art or related fields of study, they tended to consider artwork as minor additions to public spaces, rather than as cultural substances to be integrated to public spaces. As a result, in addition to abstract sculptures, quite a few representational sculptures, mostly of female nudes, have been installed in public places throughout Japan. This is extraordinary for Japanese public art, and it has sometimes triggered controversy.

These public art programs initiated by municipal governments had a huge impact on public spaces in Japan. Although they were not always adequate for the communities concerned, major modifications to public art programs did not appear until the 1980s, when successful privately initiated public art projects emerged.

## 3.2 Variations in Public Art

Although Japan's municipal public art program was initiated as part of an educational program, it delivered public art images similar to those in the United States or Europe. However, the lack of consideration for context and public involvement raised controversy *vis-à-vis* the appropriateness of the number and nature of the permanently installed sculptures that were funded with public monies. By the mid-1990s, more than 20,000 sculptures had been installed throughout Japan; some citizens, including feminist activists, started to criticize what they considered excessive public sculptures, especially of female nude figures. Even the term "sculpture pollution" began to appear. The collapse of the Japanese asset price bubble and emerging criticism against art in public spaces brought a sudden cessation in the public art craze among Japanese municipalities, and the private sector came to play an important role.

Following the successful Battery Park City development in New York, the Housing and Urban Development Corporation (HUD) started introducing artworks into their urban development projects to increase property values. Pioneering projects included *Shinjuku i-Land* and *Faret Tachikawa*, completed in 1995. Although the budgets for artworks were in line with the scale of these developments, the directors of these art projects took different approaches to integrating art and urban development. *Shinjuku i-Land* commissioned 13 artworks from prominent artists and integrated them in a unified fashion into the architecture, while *Faret Tachikawa* introduced over 100 artworks of various styles to mirror public diversity. The community, developers, and critics appreciated both of these projects and this integration of art with urban development became very common among large-scale private urban developers in Japan.

Art festivals were another category of art in public places, as initiated by the private sector, as well as temporary art installations, and sometimes also performance art, were offered for fixed periods of time. Although these art festivals share some similarities with Ube city's biennial competition/exhibition, artworks exhibited during festivals are usually withdrawn upon the festival's completion. All of the early festivals initiated in the 1980s preferred rural areas, away from the limitations and restrictions of an urban context; in 1990, however, *Museum City Tenjin* in Fukuoka finally pioneered the Japanese urban art festival. Although art festivals—such as

the Venice Biennale—have a long history in Europe, they were not as popular in Japan until the 1990s.

Following the success of private art festivals around Japan, the public sector sought to support such art festivals once again. Administrators preferred art festivals to permanent installations, to preclude criticisms of the exhibited artworks; thus, publicly funded art festivals quickly became popular after 2000. One such festival is the Echigo-Tsumari Art Triennial, first held in 2000; hugely successful, it was directed by Fram Kitagawa, who had also directed the *Faret Tachikawa* art project. The Triennial attracts hundreds of thousand paying visitors, despite being held in the mountains, far from visitors' metropolitan locales.

## 4. ART AROUND THE INLAND SEA

Along with tourists, the landscape of the Inland Sea has attracted many artists and art patrons. Japanese-American sculptor Isamu Noguchi, for example, established his studio in 1969 in Takamatsu city, overlooking the Inland Sea; it currently serves as the Isamu Noguchi Garden Museum Japan. Although this is a private enterprise and is therefore rarely described in the context of public art, Noguchi's experiment implies that art has a very important role when integrated with the beauty of the Inland Sea landscape. Most importantly, the Garden Museum attracts many visitors from all over the world.

Some municipalities in Japan initiated public art programs in the 1980s; Setoda town, Hiroshima (in Ikuchishima, which is now connected to mainland by bridges and is part of Onomichi city) was among them. In 1989, as part of the Hiroshima Exposition of Sea and Island, four public sculptures were dedicated at Sunset Beach. Two years later, town administrators decided to continue to install public sculptures under the name of Setoda Biennale; 17 public sculptures were installed around the island before the Biennale was terminated in 1999. The typical variety followed after Ube city's pioneering program was that commissioned sculptors were first invited to select the site of their work, and so most of the artworks seem to "mesh" well with their surrounding landscape.

Ushimado town (now part of Setouchi city) in Okayama hosted another variety of art project. A local art patron, who owns olive fields overlooking the Inland Sea funded the Ushimado International Art Festival, initiated in 1984 and held every year until

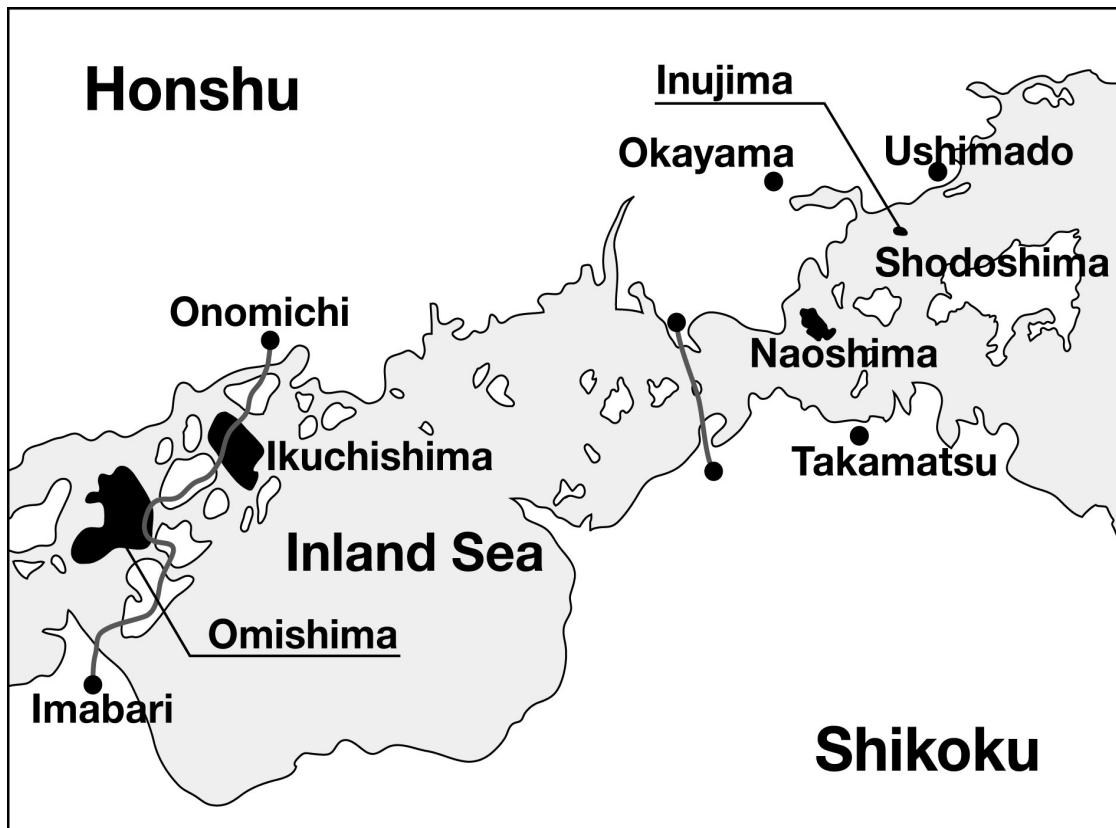


Figure 3:  
Locations of notable islands and municipalities around the Inland Sea

1991. Although the festival itself was not very popular in its time, many renowned artists were invited to exhibit their work, and the festival is now considered a groundbreaking experiment. Administration of this festival by private patronage predates that of the Benesse Corporation and the Naoshima Fukutake Art Museum Foundation's activities in the following decade, in Naoshima.

## 5. NAOSHIMA

### 5.1 Geography

Naoshima is a relatively large Inland Sea island, 15 km north of Takamatsu city. Naoshima comprises about 14 km<sup>2</sup> and has a population of 45,000. There are two regular surface service routes to Naoshima: 20 min from Uno port near Okayama city, or 60 min from Takamatsu.

Naoshima was once an important node of maritime transportation, and it flourished because of its salt manufacturing. A current notable industry there is the copper refinery of Mitsubishi Materials Corporation. Naoshima is home to the disposal plant that handles large volumes of illegal industrial waste from nearby Teshima.

### 5.2 Naoshima Contemporary Art Museum and Other Institutions

In 1989, Fukutake Publishing Co. Ltd. (now the Benesse Corporation, which offers educational materials for children and students) opened the Naoshima International Camp Site as a gathering place for children.

Three years later, the Benesse House Museum—or, the Naoshima Contemporary Art Museum—designed by architect Tadao Ando opened in the southern part



Figure 4:  
Benesse House Museum, which exhibits Hiroshi Sugimoto's photography

of Naoshima. The Museum has offered various educational programs and exhibitions. Starting in 1994 with the exhibition *Out of Bounds*, the Museum started to prefer site-specific installations outside its walls. Benesse House is not only a Museum institution, but also the centerpiece of Benesse Corporation's community involvement activities. The Museum's distinguished contemporary art collections and special exhibitions, along with the Museum building itself, attract many visitors (Figure 4).

In Addition, the Chichu Art Museum opened in 2004, administered by the Naoshima Fukutake Art Museum Foundation. The Museum houses three permanent art-in-situ collections: Claude Monet, Walter De Maria, and James Turrell. Most of the building is buried underground, and thus is hardly noticeable from the outside (Figure 5). The Chichu Museum represents a combination of successful site-specific art exhibitions and the institutional gallery exhibitions of the Benesse House Museum.

The Chichu Museum's distinguished collections, prominent exhibitions, and art projects have attracted more and more visitors to the island, leading to the 2006 addition of the "Park" and "Beach" buildings by Tadao Ando.



Figure 5:  
The Chichu Museum, almost completely buried underground

### 5.3 Art House Project

Following successful site-specific art projects held outside its walls, the Benesse House Museum took another step towards involving the community. Similar to other insular communities, Naoshima was suffering from depopulation and there were many vacant houses around the island.

The Art House Project aimed both to attract commissioned artists and contribute to the local community. The Museum rented or purchased vacant houses and lots in the Honmura district and turned them into permanent site-specific art exhibition spaces. Tatsuo Miyajima's *Kadoya* was the first Art House Project, dedicated in 1998, followed by James Turrell and Tadao Ando's *Minamidera*, Rei Naito's *Kinza*, Hiroshi Sugimoto's *Go'o Shrine*, Hiroshi Senju's *Ishibashi*, Yoshihiro Suda's *Gokaisho*, and Shinro Otake's *Haisha* (Figure 6). There are currently seven Art Houses. Although called "Art Houses," Turrell and Ando's *Minamidera* is a reinterpretation of a former temple, and Sugimoto's *Go'o Shrine* is actually a reconstruction of a historic shrine in the Honmura district. The Art House Project is not only a physical contribution that addresses housing vacancies around the island; it also supports the local community by providing a foundation for spiritual relief.

The Art House Project is a privately funded project, but it does address the public issues of the community. As such, it is a great step forward with respect to private art patronage in Japan.



Figure 6:  
Tatsuo Miyajima's Kadoya, the first Art House Project in Naoshima

#### 5.4 Naoshima Standard Exhibition

To celebrate its 10th anniversary, the Benesse House Museum hosted the Naoshima *Standard* exhibition in 2001. This was the first project to feature temporary art installations in the residential district. Although the *Standard* exhibition looked somewhat similar to past art festivals, the Museum did not simply follow a preexisting scheme; it merged its experience with site-specific experiments and the Art House Project, and was careful to involve the local community. Administrators secured exhibition spaces, not only in vacant houses and buildings, but also in streets, alleys, in-use houses, and shops of business (Figure 7). “The exhibition spaces were selected for their special character rather than being regarded as empty spaces” (Akimoto, 2002, p.221), and visitors enjoyed artworks in someone’s living room or behind shop counters. As a result, both artists and visitors became necessarily engaged with local residents. Such lines of communication had not been seen in former Benesse House Museum projects. The

curator of this exhibition said that the relationship between the Museum and the community had been a “one-sided love affair that [had] been going on for ten years” (Akimoto, 2002, p.221), in that although it had established institutions on the island, they had not been community members prior to the exhibition.

The *Standard* exhibition itself was a great success; Naoshima achieved popularity not only in the art world but also with the general public. It was definitely a turning point for the Benesse Corporation in Naoshima: after a decade, they were finally recognized as a community member.

In 2006 and 2007, they held a second exhibition, *Standard 2*. This exhibition took yet another step forward. This exhibition featured the dedication of the third phase of the Art House Project; more importantly, the exhibition was integrated with infrastructure improvements that had been funded by the municipal government. A new ferry terminal building was dedicated just prior to the opening



Figure 7:  
The Ochiai General Store installation by Shinro Otake,  
at a shop of business

of *Standard 2*; architects SANAA, the Pritzker Architecture Prize Laureate of 2010, had designed the building. The exhibition provided an opportunity for private enterprise and local government to cooperate and improve the community.

Having accumulated knowledge and experience, the Naoshima Fukutake Art Museum Foundation started planning for another ambitious project—this time, in Inujima.

## 6. INUJIMA

### 6.1 Geography and Industrial History

Inujima is a small island located 5 km south of Hoden Port, on the southeast fringe of Okayama city.

Inujima comprises a 0.54-km<sup>2</sup> area and a population of about 60.

The island flourished in the prewar era because of its copper refinery and quarry, and it had up to 5,000 residents. After the local enterprise discontinued, the community started to decline. There are ruins of copper refineries, several brick chimneys, a power plant, and the retaining walls. These picturesque ruins have attracted many movie and television directors as location sites.

Although there used to be regular travel services from downtown Okayama, the only regular services connect the town to Hoden Port. There is also a reservation-based service from Naoshima. As the only inhabited island in Okayama city, there is a publicly run hotel and beach that attracts visitors during the summer season, but it does not garner enough business to maintain regular services from downtown.

## 6.2 Artists and Patronage

Art projects in Inujima were first initiated because of artist Yukinori Yanagi's encounter with the industrial heritage of the island. It had once flourished, and gigantic brick-structure ruins near the shore suggest the impressive landscape of that time. Yanagi imagined reviving the environment and community, and named this, his private project, the Inujima Art Project.

Initially, the artist was unsure of when and how the Inujima Art Project would be realized, but he believed he would see it within his lifetime. Things began to change after the artist gave a presentation of his vision for Inujima to Soichiro Fukutake, a long-time supporter of his art and president of the Naoshima Fukutake Art Museum Foundation. The artist and his project team gave presentations concerning the potential reuse of industrial ruins; later, Fukutake decided to purchase the Inujima property, including the industrial heritage site. This was a turning point for the Inujima Art Project in several ways. It is true that this move was a great step toward fulfilling the project, but at the same time, it meant that a project initiated by an artist's dream and vision was now under the direction of Fukutake, the owner and general producer of the project, who sought to integrate the Inujima Art Project with other art projects in nearby islands.

After long discussions, the producer brought Hiroshima-based architect Hiroshi Sambuichi into the project, and the new artist–architect team started to collaborate and create a new vision for Inujima. Under Fukutake's direction, the push to renovate the copper refinery finally started to take shape.

Although the artist had envisioned the island project as an integration of his "artwork" with architecture and landscape, the director and administrators rather saw this project as an "architectural renovation" that would house site-specific art installations, similar to the Chichu Museum of Naoshima.

This project was fully funded through private patronage; since completion, it has been managed and administered by the Fukutake Naoshima Art Museum Foundation.

## 6.3 Seirensho: Copper Refinery

Following the long artist–architect collaborative process, the Inujima Art Project officially opened in 2008 with *Seirensho*, a copper-refinery renovation.

*Seirensho* consists of four elements: 1) Industrial Heritage, 2) Architecture, 3) Environment System, and 4) Artwork. "Industrial Heritage" is the narrative site itself, with its historic structures remaining untouched. "Architecture," designed by Hiroshi Sambuichi, is part of the former refinery structures renovated to house "Artwork." The "Environment System" is a wastewater purification system that uses biological and geological filters. "Artwork" here indicates new series of permanent installations of site-specific work by Yukinori Yanagi, entitled *Hero Dry-Cell*. The "Artwork" here is more tightly integrated with the architectural structure than is the case at the Chichu Museum. The architect respected and carefully integrated the artist's concepts and visions into the architectural renovations; thus, not only the artworks installed in the refinery, but also the whole of the architectural renovation—and, furthermore, the Inujima Art Project itself—is an artwork derived from Yanagi's artistic representation of the site and environment (Figure 8).

Although the respective visions of the director, artist, and architect might have slightly differed, *Seirensho* is quite a successful artist–architect collaboration—a rarity in Japan. Following the project's opening, the Inujima community gradually started to become revitalized. New cafés and shops, for example, have opened to meet the needs of rapidly increasing visitor volumes.

## 6.4 Art House Project

For the second phase of the Inujima Art Project, the director introduced an Art House Project that followed the Naoshima model. The artist was asked to collaborate with architect Kazuyo Sejima, and the project was to be dedicated at the Setouchi International Art Festival 2010.

The second phase introduced a totally different approach. A curator joined the artist–architect team, making close communication more difficult and complicated. In addition, the commissioned architect showed much less interest in artwork and the history and environment of the site, compared to Sambuichi. As a result, the Art House Project in Inujima is more of an autonomous architectural project, independent from the context, environment, community, and artwork.

Doubtless, the Project itself has attracted huge interest from both the art and architecture worlds. However, the Art House Project in Inujima would play a completely different role than the projects in Naoshima.



Figure 8:  
Seirensu greenhouse for passive solar air-conditioning and artwork installation  
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## 7. SETOUCHI INTERNATIONAL ART FESTIVAL 2010

The Setouchi International Art Festival was held in the summer of 2010, under the main theme of “Restoration of the Sea,” focusing on the eastern part of the Inland Sea; it was organized by Soichiro Fukutake as general producer, and Fram Kitagawa, director of *Faret Tachikawa* and the Echigo-Tsumari Art Triennial, as general director.

This festival is a compilation of all the existing art enterprises of the Naoshima Fukutake Art Museum Foundation and local administrations, introducing new art and architectural projects on seven islands: Teshima, Oshima, Ogijima, Megijima, and Shodoshima, along with Naoshima and Inujima

(Figure 9). Each island has a different historic background and character. New Art Projects include the collaborative work of artists and architects, as follows: artist Rei Naito and architect Ryue Nishizawa, artist Lee Ufan and architect Tadao Ando, artist Shinro Otake and design studio Graf, along with other art installations and events in the performing arts. All of the projects are meant to reflect the distinct characteristics of the local insular culture, community, and landscape.

As the Setouchi International Art Festival is the first comprehensive art festival held in the Inland Sea area, it represents Fukutake's long-time vision of revitalizing Inland Sea culture and economy by means of art. At the same time, this is a public art festival in a maritime community, following the huge

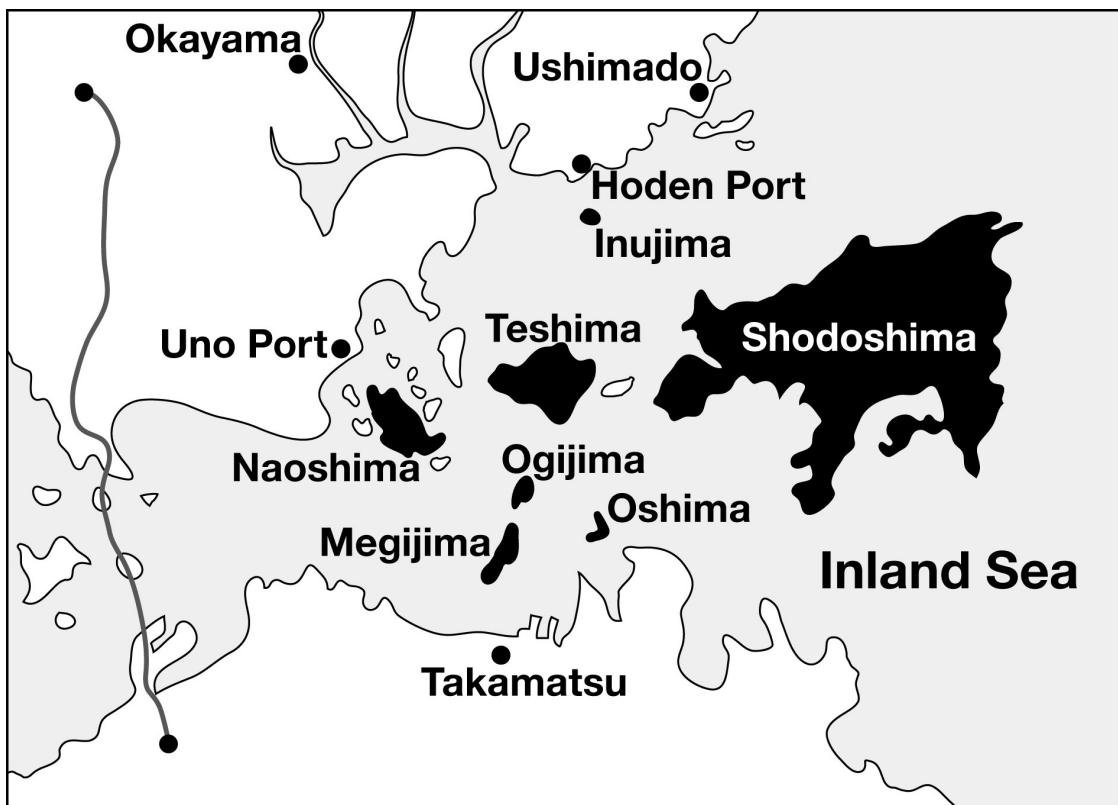


Figure 9:  
Locations of seven islands hosting Setouchi International Art Festival 2010

success of the Echigo-Tsumari Art Triennial held in the mountains.

Even before the festival opened, its importance could already be seen in adjacent regions. For example, the former committee of the Ushimado International Art Festival decided to unpack the remaining artworks for the first time in 20 years, and exhibit them to the public during the festival. Such interaction is in line with the very character of the Inland Sea, as an artery of cultural exchange.

## 8. CONCLUSION

Historically, the Inland Sea of Japan has been rich in natural resources, has beautiful landscapes, and above all, hosted a number of art projects under the patronage of both private and public administrations. The recent accumulation of art projects has attracted more and more visitors and artists throughout the region, and art projects have connected insular communities with urban residents.

Even when well intended, art projects in small, insular communities of the Inland Sea can lead to a one-sided love for the community that is not always beneficial; indeed, it sometimes becomes self-centered. Although they are private enterprises, projects like Benesse House or the Inujima Art Projects could have wrought huge impacts on local economies, wreaking havoc on their host communities. In Naoshima, fortunately, Benesse House and the Naoshima Fukutake Art Museums Foundation have sought to carefully coordinate their relationships with the local community and keep projects within residential districts relatively small. We should also remember that even in that case, it took 10 years for them to become a part of the community; the story of the “10-year one-sided love” of Benesse House indicates the difficulties inherent in large-scale private enterprises that operate community-oriented art projects in insular communities.

As for *Seirensō* in Inujima, the artist and architect shared an attitude toward the history, community,

and environment of the area, guaranteeing respect for the local island characteristics. From this point of view, the Art House Project in Inujima—which took the opposite approach—will be an interesting experiment. Will the community accept the project? Or will they simply deny or ignore it? Only time will tell.

The Art House Project and the *Standard* exhibition in Naoshima, along with *Seirensho* in Inujima, were unique landmarks of new genre public art in Japan. Although the projects were bankrolled by private funds, all the stakeholders—artists, curators, architects, and patrons—are interested in the public issues of the local community. They changed the community and local economy by attracting urban residents to the insular communities.

Most of the art projects described in this paper are located in eastern parts of the Inland Sea; however, several projects are also emerging in western areas. Architect Toyo Ito is planning an architecture museum in Omishima, and artist Yukinori Yanagi has initiated another project on a nearby small island. By accumulating art and architectural institutions in this area, more and more artists, designers, and patrons will be attracted to the culture and landscape of the Inland Sea. Many metropolitan art fans follow and visit insular communities; the Setouchi International Art Festival has definitely accelerated this trend.

The Inland Sea of Japan, once known as a major artery of cultural and economic exchange, is being revived through art. Based on its relatively long historic background of arts support in the region—both private and public—existing public art, individual art practices, and emerging art and architectural projects around the Inland Sea are attracting visitors and local industry. Ultimately, they will improve those insular communities and return the area to its former glory as an artery of dynamic cultural exchange, of urban and insular life alike.

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