

**ISLANDS FOR LIFE:  
ARTISTIC RESPONSES TO SOCIAL POLARISATION  
AND POPULATION DECLINE IN “POST-BUBBLE” JAPAN**

**Adrian Favell,**

**Professor of Sociology, Sciences Po, Paris**

[www.adrianfavell.com](http://www.adrianfavell.com)



**Interview with Li Ni, *Urban China* magazine**

**Interview Transcript (with [Prof. Adrian Favell](http://www.adrianfavell.com))**

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Q: Can you talk about your research with Prof. Julian Worrall (University of Adelaide, Australia)?

A: In my work, I contrast the emergence of “post-Bubble” movements focused on social and community art, with the dominant image of “Cool Japan”, most associated with Japan’s most famous contemporary artists, Murakami Takashi and Nara Yoshitomo. With Julian, we are working on a book about art and architecture after 1990 in Japan. His research angle is from architecture and mine is from contemporary art, combining some of our recent writings. For me, it’s the continuation of the last chapters of my book, *Before and After Superflat*, in which I already wrote about Echigo-Tsumari (a huge rural festival in Niigata which runs every three years since 2000) and other alternative movements in Japan since 1990, and also what has happened in art after the disasters of 2011.

Q: Is this book mainly focused on Japan?

A: You saw my essay online, [‘Japan as the model of a “post-bubble” society’](#). I want to focus on the lessons we can draw from Japan internationally. The recent situation in Japan has connections with post-industrial situations in the North-East of the USA, like Detroit or Youngstown, and there are also similar phenomenon in East Germany in Europe, such as Leipzig. And also countries in the South of Europe like Spain and Italy now face similar situations to Japan, economically and demographically. So I think there are lots of general issues that make Japan relevant internationally, and also the possibility of a similar future elsewhere East Asia, where maybe South Korea and China will face similar questions after the boom years. I’m interested in what happens to culture and society in these places after the boom years.

The particularity with Japan is its demographic problem: the ageing society and the dramatic loss of population. You can see that the Japanese population might fall to 100 million people by 2050. And the current profile of population is ageing dramatically. The baby boom generation of the post war years is now reaching 60s to 70s, coupled with low childbirth and low immigration. You can see population decline in some cities and very dramatically in the countryside, in rural Japan and peripheral cities, and also some of its islands.

Q: Can you elaborate more about your concept of the “creative surplus”?

A: This is a very important concept in *Before and After Superflat*, which I introduce to talk about young people in the post-growth society. It’s also associated with the concept of “lost generation” or “lost generations” in Japan after the Bubble. With everybody growing up in 1980s and 1990s, there was a new ideology of individuality and creativity. Lots of people were going into creative education like arts school and design school, and everybody had his/her own creative individual ambition. But when they left school they confronted the situation that they didn’t want to work for the big corporations as typical salary men or office ladies. They wanted to be creative, but the opportunity was very restricted by the difficult economic situation after (especially) 1995. This problem is the “creative surplus,” where there is a huge surplus of young creative people.

In this situation, young people have have two choices. One is to leave, and many of them travel internationally to follow their dreams and self-discovery (*jibun sagashi*). So we could see lots of young Japanese people in London, New York, Los Angeles, Berlin, and also in Hong Kong, and so on.

It's also connected to the gender problem in Japan. Women in particular don't want to stay working in a male dominated environment. Then for those that choose to stay, they have to find a way with an alternative lifestyle. Often this involves casual, low skilled work (as a *freeter*, or "free arbeiter") to finance their creative ambitions. In Japan you have a huge number of young artists and designers living like this, who don't really know what to do. I think partly a lot of creativity in popular culture is caused by the creative surplus. All the home made *manga*-type culture in Japan, and also some of the decadent aspects of youth culture like *hikkikomori*, withdrawing from society and obsessing about strange sub-cultures, can be linked to this.

But also lots of young people need to find something more constructive to do. People like the art producer Kitagawa Fram with Echigo-Tsumari and artist and producer Nakamura Masato's 3331 Arts Chiyoda try to use these populations by creating opportunities for large groups of young people to participate in art projects. Also, as I said in my book, many of these young artists become the followers of other artists like Murakami Takashi and Nara Yoshitomo. For example, Murakami's GEISAI movement draws on the creative surplus because he creates a kind of talent competition for young people. So the artists become kind of leaders of young followers. But there are so many art and design students with a kind of frustrated possibility. That's the creative surplus. The problem is politically, politicians and corporations are very slow to realize the potential of these young individuals or change their conservative expectations about work. So the power of the creativity of these young people is wasted in Japan. It's a waste of creative talent.

Q: Can we interpret art practices like Yanagi Yukinori and Kitagawa Fram as a new way to absorb such kind of creative surplus?

A: Yes, I think so. Yanagi Yukinori is another pioneer in social and community art. First of all there is the post-industrial example of Inujima, which is an earlier project he started conceiving in the mid 1990s. This is an island in the Inland Seto Sea, where Yanagi lived with old people and imagined an immense conversion of the island into an art project, centred on the conversion of a massive, ruined copper factory that was abandoned there. The island was polluted and there was a tiny population of old people in a disappearing village. In the end, with support from the millionaire benefactor Fukutake Soichiro, and the collaboration with an architect, Sambuichi Hiroshi, the factory was converted into a huge museum which includes installations of memorabilia of the nationalist writer Mishima Yukio. It's a kind of complex reflection on the failed modernity of Japan, as well as a hopeful message about the environmental conversion of the island. I write more about Yanagi's work in the Inland Sea [here](#).

His recent project on the island of Momoshima is like the 3331 Arts Chiyoda center of Nakamura Masato in Akihabara, Tokyo. It is called Art Base Momoshima. Momoshima is typical example of these remote locations in post-Bubble Japan, which are full of abandoned houses and empty schools and other public buildings. During the boom years, the Japanese government built so many schools due to construction booms, as well as too many hospitals, too many roads and railways everywhere, etc. After the Bubble burst, of course, in the rural areas there was a sharply declining population with very few children, and so many schools closed. We have empty spaces like this everywhere in Japan. In Momoshima, like in Echigo-Tsumari, Yanagi and his associates are using these empty spaces as sites for art practices. And Momoshima is a good example, as a new kind of art project that tries to bring young artists from the Hiroshima City University art department, and other invited artists, to the island where they go into long term residency living and working with

the residents—the local old people, but also contributing to bringing back life to the village. Because the village is ageing and will disappear in the future when these old people have passed away. So it's a way of using the creative surplus. There is about 550 people living on this island, but it used to have a population of 3000. About 70% are over 60 years old, so you wonder about the future there.

Do you know the concept of *genkai shuraku* (limit settlement)? This is a sociological concept in Japanese for when the population in a town is so old, and the percentage of old people is so high, that there is no way that the village will survive when the old people pass away. This is the situation on the island of Momoshima. It creates the possibility that they might bring back population to the island, to re-settle the empty houses.

Q: What's the relationship between the young artists and the local residents?

A: The problem with many social and community art projects is that the urban populations who have high education and are not used to rural life, have an idea about arts that could be very elitist, as you said. So it all depends on the sensitivity of the project to working with local residents in particular ways. You have to build a very slow consensus and cooperation with the villagers and important people in the village. I mean local leaders or representatives of the village for example, not necessarily politicians. The Art Base Momoshima project has been a very sensitive one, because the problem with many social and community art projects is that artists just come in for a few days, they make an installation and they leave again. That kind of model does not really change anything. So it really depends on the long-term residency and devising art projects in which you work with villagers. A good example on Momoshima is an American artist called James Jack. He built a sculpture boat out of wood. In doing this, he had to collect wood from the island. So he has to recruit people to help him by building up relationships everyday. People come to talk to him because he's working in a public place. He built up a relation with the villagers and they would go around and advice him and collect pieces of wood for him from empty houses and talk to him about ideas for the project. Also there would be school children visiting and special explorations by boat around the island. And it's a kind of slow piece developed in a number of months, in which the particular kind relationships he builds with the locals is perhaps as important as the end product, the object or sculpture itself. This is the kind of project that I think works very well and gets past the problem of strangeness and elitism.

I think at the Echigo-Tsumari festival, it is a complicated situation regarding this question. Echigo-Tsumari is a very ambitious festival in that there are all kinds of ongoing projects in different villages and different places about this remote mountainous part of Niigata. The politics of organizing arts in these locations is very difficult, as is the financing. Certainly it has succeeded in many places, although there are also controversies about the work of Kitagawa Fram. There are very good examples of art projects that really integrate to the villages. In my essay online [‘Islands for life: artistic responses to remote social polarization and social decline in “post-growth” Japan’](#), I talk about Hibino Katsuhiko's work in an old school in a very remote village, a project called *Asatte*. His students live there for all the summer and they collect everyday stories from the residents, and make a daily newspaper of the stories. The project is trying to generate “seeds for the future”. *Asatte* means ‘the day after tomorrow’ in Japanese. It takes inspiration from life stories from old people who won't be there in future. And it's again a way of connecting the surplus population of young people, with another surplus population, the forgotten old people of the village.

As a sociologist, it is easy to be critical of some of these projects, for their naivety or the social inequalities involved. But I like to point to some of the good aspects of these social and community art projects, and the fact that when they create these new social relations, the art is not so much in the objects they make, but the way they create new relations between two populations (the old and the young; the urban and the rural).

Q: It's a new kind of way that they build up social relations between population. Is it consensus? Do they consider themselves as part of the villages?

A: The younger artists are still finding their way, connecting their lives and experiences, with those of the countryside population that they would not know otherwise. If you also read my blog [alternate futures](#), I write about two young artists, Komori and Seo, and their project in Tohoku after the disaster. This is a good example of two young artists who have lived their, got involved with local families touched by the disaster, and trying to find a meaningful way to connect with the population and their experiences. It's a different way of working compared to some of the rapid intervention of some artists. Many artists went to make art in Tohoku after the disaster. But there's a difference in the quality of relations they build when it's a long-term engagement. I don't think any of these artists think they're becoming villagers. It's perhaps more important that they have certain experiences and communication that they bring back to the city where they come from.

I want to mention one other important dimension. Of course the reason these projects are important is partly because there is a lack of focus of national politics on these issues. National politicians in Japan are still behaving as if they were still in the boom period, creating opportunities for corporations to engage in construction again, and building roads and towns, rebuilding Tohoku and creating investments in places as if nothing has changed. It has been a huge boom for the concrete industry in Japan. I think there is very little recognition of the local problems of these declining regions. Regional politicians, of course, are much more involved. They try to support some of these art projects. In fact, these art projects become a kind of welfare for these local populations. It's an alternative form of social welfare. In some ways, this is a problem because this is something for the society to deal with politically. But instead it's dealing with it through financing cultural projects, and trying to create new social relations. But in some way, it's positive that Japan is dealing with its crisis in a quite soft way. There's very deep social polarization in Japan between the cities and rural areas. But it's not like the dramatic inequality in America, for example, when you see what a disaster Detroit is. This place is not disastrous, they are still livable, human places. And there is still a re-creation of social relations going on. But it is a fact that there is an absence of political focus nationally on these questions, mainly because of the economic policies of the government.

Q: What's the attitude of the governments? How do they evaluate these social and community art practices?

A: This is a movement with a long history if you look at the work of Kitagawa Fram and others like him. It goes a long way back to the early 1990s, even the late 1980s, with public art projects and new thinking about involving communities in art projects. In many ways, it was the year of 1995 that was the turning point, Japan's "zero year" of disaster Kobe, with the Kobe earthquake and the Aum Shinryoko cult terrorist attack in Tokyo. After the Kobe disaster, the government was criticized for the lack of rapid intervention in the situation. Lots of people volunteered and there was a creation of a new kind of NPO type of culture in Japan, doing the work of government instead. And it also

involved cultural organizations. And I think building on this, and on the public art movement in which Kitagawa was one of the pioneers, in the late 1990s and 2000s, you see the developing of this kind of social and community art practices with many art producers and artists. But it's really taken a long time for governments and politicians to recognize the importance of these projects. It was also overshadowed by the focus on re-branding an imaginary version of Japan in the 2000s as "Cool Japan", for international consumption. Slowly, starting with some cities like Yokohama, which is a good example of more progressive thinking, there has been a recognition of the potential of using art and culture as a kind of social intervention into the city.

But all of these projects have to start without government support or with less direct government support. It took many years for Kitagawa to convince people in Niigata to support him in his local projects. But slowly, the examples of these projects have led to more political recognition. And now after the 2011 disaster, there has been a shift in government recognition for these projects. And in fact it has become a fashionable thing I think with politicians try to engage with these projects, although mostly its local politicians, not the LDP national government. The LDP government is still focused on marketing Japan internationally, which is "the Cool Japan" idea. It's a very silly idea that politicians have had for a long time that makes Japan into a kind of cartoon which they sell to tourists like *anime* (cartoon) or *manga* characters. Everything is branded with *Pokemon* and *Hello Kitty*. And they're focused on the Olympics as a big chance of reinvestment and redevelopment of Tokyo. The Olympics would be a huge benefit for Tokyo but maybe very little benefit for these rural areas. And then they're focusing on the construction industry in Tohoku because the disaster is a big opportunity for economic redevelopment. But they're not listening to artists or architects who ask for a more sustainable development in Tohoku, or new thinking about how people live in these remote places. They just build a same old concrete city as it used to be.

I think in many cities around Japan, though, you have now a recognition of the positive potential of cultural investment in art projects. In the area near Momoshima, this is supported by the city of Onomichi. Onomichi has a very progressive politics. It's a very old post-industrial city, but in various ways they're trying to use culture to improve the city in small ways. I think you can look at various cities that follow the path like this. Yokohama is one of them. There is also a very interesting project by Nakamura Masato in Akita (his hometown) in the north of Japan, which is a very big declining city, bringing young creative people back to the city.

Q: Is it a new kind of way of creative industry development?

A: I think it's an alternative conception of the creative city idea. The concept of the creative city is really a philosophy of the boom years. It's the idea that you can use culture or art to create economic development. You know, as in the promotion of Charles Landry or Richard Florida... Their ideas went around to cities everywhere on the planet. In Japan, they also invested in these ideas. It was also the philosophy of the Mori Building Corporation, who built Roppongi Hills and many other similar sites in Japan and East Asia. But in Yokohama, you have both ideas. You have the idea of culture as economic development, but also you have the idea of culture as social policy and welfare. I think it's there you can see that creativity can be in a way decoupled from economic development and re-linked to social welfare and new social relations. Then sometimes in between these is the concept of tourism which is a feedback of the economic development.

I think the ambiguity of the revitalization projects in Echigo-Tsumari or the Setouchi (Inland Sea) art islands is that they also sell these ideas about revitalisation to politicians and the public in terms

of tourism, which of course is a form economic development. Tourism is not the solution because you can't replace real populations with tourists. This is what is happening in some of these projects: the old population is replaced by kind of tourist population. I think it's a bit different trying to think of what a sustainable project would be, involving younger people living and working with the islands.

Q: Tourism development often conflicts with artists. Artists' studios are gentrified for commercial uses. Did similar things happen in Japan?

A: Yes, as everywhere in the world, artists reinvesting in rundown old neighborhoods or locations can lead to the direct consequence of real estate investment in gentrification. Also tourism has become a problem in the Inujima project, the older copper factory project of Yanagi Yukinori. I think it's an interesting story in terms of the way in which the initial idea of an artist having a long term engagement with the place and coming out with the project involving in an architect, created a quite spectacular museum and new art sites around the island. It was through building local relations and connections that make it possible, but it has changed over time to a kind of tourist site. Now the only future for this place is as a site of tourism. Effectively it became an elite art playground, to which international curators and visitors now come. The real village is disappearing. Yanagi has walked away from the project now. I think it is one problem of Fukutake's Setouchi art project on Naoshima and around Setouchi. And in some of the cities, including some of the Yokohama projects, it has also led to certain kind of gentrification of neighborhoods.

But I do think the example in Yokohama is interesting for other reasons. In the Koganecho area, a project which is directed by a particular art producer called Yamano Shingo (Koganecho Bazaar) who is also an old associate with Kitagawa, the same generation (born around 1950), and shares some of the same radical ideas. In the urban context, it is actually an area with crime problems like the sex industry and mafia (*yakuza*). So they use the art project as a way of cooperating with the local community in order to basically push out the criminal aspects from the neighborhood. It has been very successful, and it creates a certain dynamic through city investment. The old sex parlours have been converted into artist studios and alternative shops. I think it's a kind of positive type of gentrification. And also close to this, there is an area called Kotobukicho in Yokohama, known for its homeless population, which has very high poverty and many destitute middle aged men. There, they are also using art trying to improve the neighborhood: for example, the conversion of a hostel as an art project, which is effectively housing homeless people very cheaply, but also has special artist decorated rooms which visitors can rent. So tourists may stay there, and it really brings the area back to life, because nobody would go there otherwise. Again, there are negatives of gentrification, but you have to see that there are also positive aspects of social policies leading to better social conditions and improved relationships in the community.

Q: Do they have some kind of any blueprint? Do they have some plans about what kind of villages they want to have in future?

A: I don't think anybody has the big solution to population decline. The only alternative the government think would work is to re-populate Japan with robots, that's their current idea!

Kitagawa's philosophy, if you look into it, is an interesting mix of 1980s corporate entrepreneur and a kind of Maoism from the 1960s. He used to be a 60s radical and a big troublemaker in the protests at the end of the 1960s. In a way he's got an anti-urban philosophy, which emphasises the

darkside of Japanese modernisation as urbanisation, and a traditional element to it with nationalist tones, which is about going back to the country and connecting with Japanese spiritual traditions and particularly food. The key concept is *satoyama*, which is a term which refers to the in-between space of country life between the wilderness of the mountains and the civilisation of the flatlands. Emblematically, it's the ricefields and their village settlements you find in the sculpted terraces of Niigata, which is particularly famous for its rice production. It's an encompassing vision trying to use art and culture in ways to make a difference to the social change that is going on, and to make use also of the damaged legacy of the Bubble years. Because during the Bubble years, the ruling LDP government invested huge money in transforming the countryside, almost urbanizing the countryside with concrete effectively. They built tunnels, roads, *shinkansen* (high speed) railways, and paved all the rivers and all the mountains with concrete. And they built schools and hospitals and invested in local industrial production. But it was all a kind of development for nothing in the long run. For a while, it created rich local business constituencies who were dependent on and loyal to the LDP. In Niigata, there was a famous politician connected to the story, Prime Minister Tanaka Kakuei (田中角栄) in the 1970s, who made all kinds of deals with his homeland Niigata to bring development and lock in political support. But it left behind a landscape that in some ways resembles a disaster area in that all of these developments went to waste as soon as the population started declining. You have tunnels and roads and railways going nowhere, and empty buildings everywhere. So the art and the cultural projects are responding to this landscape, and bringing something good to the situation.

Japan has to go into the future somehow. It is declining in a quiet and soft way instead of declining in a spectacular and disastrous way. And I think artists are making some difference to this in small ways. And maybe they're offering some inspiration about how we might approach the future internationally. The problem in the West and maybe China, certainly in America, for example, is that nobody ever think about what happens *after* growth, when the growth ends, when there's no more deserts and no more open space to build, maybe no more oil in the tank. What happens then? And of course this is a future that will never arrive as long as you have enough oil and free land to keep building on, and as long as there is a real estate bubble. But it's not sustainable and there will be a time when growth ends. It's happening already for the middle class in America, they're declining in their relative position in society. Wealth is declining. Their population is still growing due to immigration. However, all of the demographics in European societies are moving towards low childbirth, stagnant economies, and anti-immigration politics. Under these conditions, if the economy starts to flatline like it did in Japan from the 1990s onwards, then their future starts to resemble the Japanese present. And if they don't find a way to dealing with situations in socially responsible and sensitive ways, there will be a political disaster in many places with radical politics and so on. The inequalities that are growing in Europe are much more violent. So the Japanese scenario is a kind of soft version. We need to worry about future in Europe and America where nobody thinks about what's after the growth. Maybe China and South Korea too. That's really the message here.

Japan does have a problem though, with the question of *sakoku* (closing inwards against the outside world, as in pre-Meiji Japan) which is unfortunately linked to these back-to-country movements. There is a sense, especially after the disasters of 2011, that Japan is withdrawing from the world and trying to deal with its own problem internally. So it has a rather aggressive nationalist government who's not really facing up to the reality internally, nor changes in politics. It is very



important that movements such as Echigo-Tsumari communicate better to the outside world, and do not get lost in introspection.

Have you ever heard of Sakaguchi Kyohei (坂口恭平)? He's a young radical architect/artist, in his 30s, from a younger generation, different from older generations like Kitagawa or Yanagi. He's like a leader of young people. Basically he rejects mainstream Japanese politics and Japanese society, and has become a spokesperson for a kind of idealistic, utopian alternative vision. He's famous particularly for his *Zero Yen House* works. He has made a lot of studies about how homeless people survive in Japan, and how they creatively find solutions in living in their homemade boxes they can move around. He discovered that if you live in a house which has wheels, you can actually build a house in a place and live in a particular position without permission. So he has developed a whole self-help philosophy around this kind of cheap, self-sufficient living: *Zero Yen House*. More recently, since the disaster of 2011, he returned to his native Kumamoto (in Kyushu), to create a drop-out "New Republic", like an alternative Japan that has seceded from the mainland. He invites people to join him and develop an independent state based on ideas of self-sufficiency and a low cost sustainable life, what he calls his "practice for a revolution".

You might want to mention another characteristic element of the post-Bubble society: young people who cannot afford to live in the city, so they start living together. Many young people are doing this, as a sociologist Furuichi Noritoshi has documented. One particular group called is called Shibuhouse, a group of young artists and creators, all of them part of the "creative surplus", living in Tokyo. Their reaction to the impossibility of living in Tokyo is to live together. But as a creative response to this situation, they decided that it has to be a public statement in the *most* expensive place in the city, in its symbolic commercial heartland (and heart of "Cool Japan", Shibuya (the Chinese letters for Shibuya spells "Shibuhouse" in Japanese). They live in one expensive house together with 30 to 40 people dividing everything. They all sleep in the same room. Basically it's a 24-hour creative house where anything can happen. They have parties all the time, and they collaborate in all kinds of art projects. There is an artist called Saito Keita, who is kind of spokesperson. He founded the house because he was a *hikkikomori*, he couldn't bear to go outside into the real world. So he thought he could just live in a house with all his friends. The whole thing, as he sees it is a collective art project. They're living there 5 years. The "artwork" is the house itself and all the people inside it. As a kind of stunt, they even tried to sell the house and all the young people in it as an artwork.

Q: What's the meaning of these art practices for China, since there have already been some similar social art projects in China like Ou Ning and his *Bishan* Community Project? These art projects in China are often criticized for their elitism.

A: Since these critiques do not come from the government, but from the intellectuals, I think maybe in the context of a more socialistic idea in China, you can understand these critiques of such art projects. I think you can only evaluate these cases one by one. You have to look at the details how well they're engaging with the local residents, how they're building meaningful relations, not just romanticizing the countryside. It depends on how it engages with the locality and becomes a local social movement.

I would say that the lack of a socialistic context in Japan makes it a bit different. Of course you can have criticism from intellectuals in Japan about these projects. There's a debate in Japan about whether these social community art initiatives are really problematic, as you say, especially as they

have become so popular since the disaster. You can look into these debates. But what I think is important in Japan is that to be a young artist in Japan has always been a difficult thing in relation to the mainstream society, it's a very marginal choice, unlike in the West where almost all artists come from an elite background or have had long and privileged educations. There's still a big space for them, although under the present conditions of austerity artists are become marginalised. But in Japan it's always a very minority thing to be an artist, because it is life choice to leave the mainstream. So many young artists are rejecting the conservative lifestyle. As I said, it's also about rejecting mainstream corporate norms and gender conventions, the pressure of norms and social expectations of both women and young people. I often feel that there's quite a power in these young people who so boldly opt out of the mainstream and for their alternate lifestyle, and who are trying to do something different. I think that's why these projects are interesting. It's not just about economic success and it questions the life of employment and consumer culture.

All these alternative choices are trying to articulate important ideas about what is wrong with Japan today, and criticizing unsustainable ideas of the growth and the bubble society. That to me is the very important message. I think you have the same polarization in China between cities and rural areas. We have social polarization and spatial polarization, including the danger of aging society and other marginal populations. The example of Japan is going to become more and more relevant for all of us.