

## Echigo-Tsumari Art Triennale

The Echigo-Tsumari Art Triennale is an outdoor art festival held every three years in and around Tokamachi and Tsunan—an area totaling 760 square kilometers. Since its launch in 2000, it has become one of the world's largest outdoor art festivals and has made Niigata's snow country a dynamic center for contemporary art.

The festival was originally conceived as a revitalization effort. Since the 1950s, countrywide urbanization has led to the shrinking and aging of populations in rural areas like Tokamachi. The Triennale was created to forge a new regional identity by exploring the intersection of art, ecology, and community; it was also an effort to bring art outside of the museum and into public spaces. The festival was intended to remind residents and visitors alike of the charm and dignity of life in *yamazato*, traditional villages that co-exist with the natural world.

In keeping with a theme of harmony with nature, site-specific art installations are created to be part of the landscape itself. They appear in rice fields and alleyways, outside homes and vacant buildings, and winding through parks and gardens to become a seamless part of the local tapestry. Some of the works are functional, serving as benches, playgrounds, or storage sheds. Others highlight nature, agriculture, or cultural traditions.

Contemporary art and traditional village lifestyles may seem at odds, but both benefit from a spirit of collaboration. This is exemplified by one of the festival's first works: *The Rice Field* (2000) by Russian artists Ilya and Emilia Kabakov. Thin figures shaped like traditional paper cutouts stand in terraced rice fields, engaged in the difficult work of rice cultivation: tilling, seeding, planting, mowing, and harvesting. The elderly owner of the land was initially hesitant to lend it to the project, seeing the long and laboriously cultivated paddies as a symbol of his ancestors' perseverance. However, in discussion with the artists, he realized the ongoing cultivation of the paddies was part of the concept. The land would continue to be farmed with the assistance of festival volunteers, even after his retirement. In addition, the art installation communicates how central shared labor has been to human survival in snow country. Today, residents often greet visitors to the site with tea and rice balls, and the work continues to foster communication and mutual understanding between residents and visitors.

Since its inception, some 1,000 preeminent artists and architects from around the world have taken part in the Triennale, including noted names such as Christian Boltanski, Marina Abramović, Cai Guo-Qiang, James Turrell, and many others. More than 200 permanent installations now dot the countryside, attracting visitors year-round. During the festival, additional temporary works are installed, and half a million visitors make their way to the mountains of Niigata to see them.