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## Let's Forget about Oshima

Michelle Lim

This visual essay looks at the conditions of art-making and exhibition on Oshima, one of Setouchi Triennale's anchor islands. Up until 1996, when Japan's Leprosy Prevention Law that required the lifetime segregation of Hansen's disease patients from society was finally repealed, Oshima had been a leprosarium. Unlike other art islands in the Setouchi region, Oshima is a special place where art does not quite fit in with conventional notions the international contem-

porary. Residents, local volunteers, and artists stay in touch after the Triennale. But what happens to the island, its museum, and its artworks when the last resident has passed away? The collage of text and image visualizes the transience of the Oshima community as a post-crisis alternative to the museum as an institution, understanding place as a moment in time and memory and interrogating the notion of community as counter-point to society.

**Keywords:** community, disease, extinction, islands, slow violence, sustainable ecology



Figure 1. A photograph of doctors and nurses taking a walk after lunch (Oshima, October 2016; courtesy of the author). The bright white line on the road is meant to guide those with low light visibility. Music is broadcast from loudspeakers rigged to lampposts and trees. This prevents those blinded from the disease from accidentally falling off the island. In the past, the blind lepers would wear little bells so they could be found if they got lost.

## I. A Prelude to the Twenty-First Century

For the afflicted who arrived in Oshima from other parts of Japan, it was a sudden and unexpected exile to an island where most of them would live out the rest of their lives without ever seeing their family and friends again. This cruel deception is recounted in the local history museum's panel text:

'Patients were told, "Once treatment is over, you can return to your hometown again." Residents who believed that came to realize that the purpose of the institution was to contain Hansen's disease and provide mainly palliative care. "Hospital" was just a name.'



Figure 2. A photograph of a telephone booth (Oshima, October 2019; courtesy of the author). A short distance away from the residential dormitories, it remains in situ even though there is no longer a working phone inside. From here, one can see the low hills covered with lush greenery that is Aji, a small neighborhood in north-east Takamatsu. This is the nearest point from mainland Japan that is visible from Oshima.

There are many islands named Oshima surrounding mainland Japan. The name simply means 'Big Island' (大島). This particular Oshima is one of about 3,000 islands in Japan's beautiful but remote Seto Inland Sea. It is here that Japan's first national park, the Setonai-kai National Park, was established in 1934. Ōshima Seishōen, a national sanatorium for leprosy patients, was established in 1909. Patients were not allowed to leave the island after being admitted. All their personal belongings were taken away when they 'checked in' to the leprosarium. The island was forbidden to those who were healthy, and some of the patients were only children when they were separated from their families.

In one of the rare documented visits to Oshima by a foreigner in the 1960s, American writer Donald Richie (1986) mused,

'Lepers are often sent to beautiful places, as if in compensation for the ugliness of their disease. Or perhaps, it is just that, being sent to places far away, they naturally live where the hand of man has not yet completely destroyed natural beauty' (p. 78).



Figure 3. A screenshot of Lucille Carra's documentary film, *The Inland Sea* (1991, color, 56 minutes, USA: PBS; courtesy of Lucille Carra). This is rare footage of Oshima when it was still not accessible to the public. A voice-over in Carra's documentary narrates from Richie's writings in his classic travelogue of the same title, *The Inland Sea* (1971), about his visit to Oshima in the 1960s.

While most of the patients were from the same Shikoku region, the leprosarium's existence, since 1909, was not common knowledge among locals (Sasagawa 2019, personal communication<sup>1</sup>). Although leprosy has been curable since the 1940s, many patients were struck off their family register because of the social stigma of such a visible disease (Richie 1986: 81). It was as if they had never existed.



Figure 4. A photograph of a green-roofed columbarium on top of a hill which is visible from the boat as it approaches and leaves the island (Oshima, October 2016; courtesy of the author). It holds the ashes of those who passed away on Oshima, including the babies who were aborted due to the misconception that leprosy could be transmitted through pregnancy (Hirano 2010).<sup>2</sup>

In 1996, the Leprosy Prevention Act that compelled the forced separation of lepers from the rest of Japanese society was finally repealed. Today, there are 13 remaining national sanatoriums for Hansen's disease in Japan. Following the repeal of the law, the government's question to the survivors was basically, 'What next?' (Vanderbilt 2018). But the question of whether it was possible to re-integrate them into a society that had already abandoned them was not easily answered (McCurry 2016).<sup>3</sup> Most of the elderly residents are at least in their 80s; many are disabled and no longer have family to return to. Oshima is the only home where they will live for the rest of their lives.

How does one live in exile within one's own country? When Homi Bhabha (1992) wrote, 'the globe shrinks for those who own it; for the displaced or the dispossessed, the migrant or the refugee, no distance is more awesome than the few feet across borders or frontiers,' he was referring primarily to nation-based, cultural borders. Oshima and the nearest mainland town of Takamatsu are separated by a narrow strait of water, but how do we measure distance for those who are displaced in their own country?

## 2. Contemporary Art and Oshima

The invitation to participate in the first Setouchi Triennale came at the right time, as national leprosariums were considering possible transitions to ease former patients back into society. The Oshima residents agreed to participate right away. Although the people did not really understand what contemporary art or a triennale was, they nevertheless believed—or *'had to believe'*—that this would give them 'a way forward' and connect them to a future that they could not yet imagine (Sasagawa 2019, personal communication).

Since then, Oshima has participated in four triennales (Setouchi Triennale official website: <https://setouchi-artfest.jp>). With each successive festival, visitor numbers go up (Billa 2019). Oshima now has its own museum to document its tragic history, with a 'proper' curator from Tokyo, hired on the residents' insistence.<sup>4</sup> During the 2019 Setouchi Triennale, regular school trips were organized. There is even an annual overnight camp for young children, which the elderly island residents look forward to.

At the same time, however, the island's population has been decreasing. By the end of 2019 Setouchi Triennale, there were 53 residents on the island, down from 104 recorded during the 2010 Setouchi Triennale (Billa 2010). What will happen to Oshima and its museum when the last person is gone?

## 3. Field Notes: First Visit. Impressions. Oshima, October 2016

The music is the first thing I noticed when I arrived on the island by boat during the fall season of the 2016 Setouchi Triennale.<sup>6</sup> Muzak sounds of *A Maiden's Prayer* by Polish composer Tekla Badarzewska-Baranowska stream endlessly

on a loop from loudspeakers planted on trees and lamp posts. I walk on the small roads that had a thick white line painted down the center, expecting traffic both ways. But there are no cars on this island, only the invisible people whose presence is everywhere.



Figure 5. A photograph of an exhibition space included in the 2016 Setouchi Triennale (Yasashii Bijutsu, Tsunagari no Ie [繋がりの家, A Place of Connection], 2010, found objects, partial installation view; courtesy of the author).<sup>2</sup> One of the empty dormitory blocks was converted into an exhibition space called Gallery 15. In the back porch of a residential unit, a telescope holder remains. It belonged to a poet who was fond of star-gazing. Originally a permanent exhibit during the first three triennales, it has since been removed as the building is now structurally unstable. The photo was taken the last time this work was shown, during the 2016 Setouchi Triennale.

The boat from Takamatsu runs three times a day during the festival and only a few people are allowed onboard each time. After the guided tour, there was some time to walk around while waiting for the return boat. The entire time, I did not meet any 'locals.' Visitors were not allowed into the residential areas. It was possible to imagine myself back in time, a place in another's memory, on this lonely island.

As I stood outside the former dormitories in the bright afternoon sun, I heard the impatient ring of a bicycle bell behind me and quickly jumped out of the way. But there was no one there when I turned around. In the silence punctuated by insect sounds, I could hear the occasional gentle roll of marbles inside Seizo Tashima's *Blue Aquarium* (2013) installation nearby—whether by wind or something else, I could not be sure.



Figure 6. A photograph of an installation by Seizo Tashima (*Blue Aquarium*, 2013, mixed media installation; courtesy of the author). Tashima's bright naïve style is very popular with both the Oshima residents and the children who come to visit during the summer.

#### 4. The Artists of Oshima

Given the politics of Oshima's history and current political sensitivities, Setouchi Triennale's artistic director Fram Kitagawa has been especially careful in selecting suitable artists for Oshima. Indeed, the assigned artists seem to develop a special attachment to Oshima and stay in touch with the community even during the non-festival periods. Performance artist Fuyuki Yamagawa had gently teased fellow artist and illustrator Seizo Tashima for being like a monk in his devotion to Oshima (2020, personal communication). Yet Yamagawa himself regularly travels from Tokyo to Oshima in the triennales' off-seasons and refers to the Oshima residents as being like his grandparents (2020, personal communication).



Figure 7. A video still by Fuyuki Yamagawa (Straits Songs, 2016, performance and mixed media installation; courtesy of Fuyuki Yamagawa). Artist looking out to Aji from Oshima before his swim. A number of inmates tried to escape from the sanatorium by swimming to Aji. These attempts were usually fatal, given the patients' weakened state and the pain of seawater on their open lesion wounds. In his video, Yamagawa reenacts the swim with the aim of transforming the sea into a connection instead of a barrier. The video footage of the artist's strong healthy body swimming steadily through the warm waters performs its own implicit critique of the historical circumstances that the unprotected Oshima swimmers suffered through.

The process of deciding and developing the artworks is also different. The Oshima residents are generally reluctant to comment directly during discussions with the curator and artists, usually demurring by saying that they do not know anything about art (Sasagawa 2019, personal communication). In that regard, Shoko Sasakawa, Koebi-Tai volunteer coordinator for Oshima, who has known the islanders since the first triennale, plays an active role as 'interpreter' between the artists and the Oshima community.



Figure 8. A photograph of an installation by Seizo Tashima (*The Life of N: 70 Years on Oshima – A Room with a Wooden Pot*, 2019, mixed media installation; courtesy of the author). A series of dioramas depicting the often harrowing scenes and candid quotes from the life of N., the pseudonym for a resident whom Tashima had first met in 2012. This specific diorama depicts the scene when a doctor and a nurse visits N., wearing full personal protective equipment to prevent possible infection. This installation is sited inside the former residential dormitories.

For the art collective Yasashii Bijutsu ('gentle art'), led by artist Nobuyuki Takahashi, their long-time work on Oshima is an extension of their community-based practice with hospitals in Aichi, Nagoya.

Another artist, Tomoko Konoike, is a very successful contemporary painter who has created works in Oshima that are very different from the Nihonga-style paintings that she is best known for. In Oshima, she has created a number of participatory projects and land-based installations.

While participating in the Setouchi Triennale has been therapeutic and beneficial for the Oshima residents who look forward to the visitors, general opinions on the 'quality' of the art diverge. In his *Setouchi Explorer* blog, French expatriate David Billa (2019) wrote candidly:

'If you haven't been to Oshima yet and come to the Setouchi Triennale because you're a contemporary art amateur, please be aware that a lot of the art on the island is not at the "level" of what you can see on other islands, and that's not the point. The art on Oshima is community-based for the most part, almost always linked to the history and identity of the island, and it's better that way. "High art" would be out of place and—in my opinion—is undesirable on this island for the time being.'





Figure 9. A photograph of a cement autopsy table (courtesy of the author). This cracked and barnacle-covered cement autopsy table had been thrown into the sea by the residents and was 'found' by the Yasashii Bijutsu artists when they came to prepare for the 2010 Setouchi Triennale.<sup>7</sup> After a long and difficult discussion among themselves, the residents agreed to show the found object. Some had objected due to the painful memories of deceased friends who had been subjected to compulsory autopsies. The table is now permanently exhibited outside the former residential dormitories.

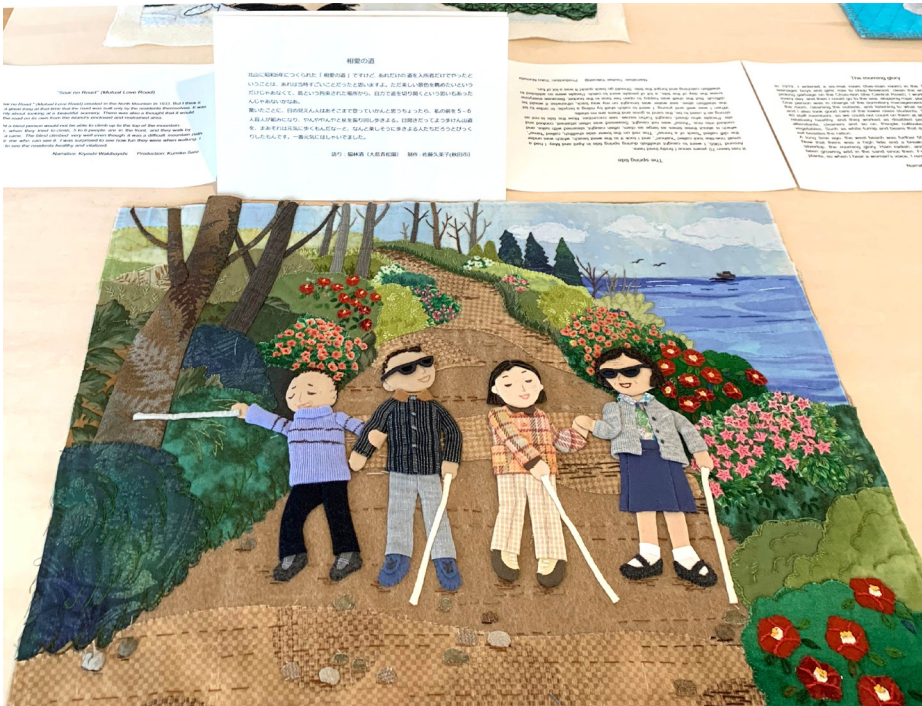


Figure 10. A photograph of artwork by Tomoko Konoike (*Storytelling Table Runner in National Sanatorium Oshima Seishoen*, 2019, partial installation view; courtesy of the author).<sup>8</sup> For this artwork, Konoike collected stories from people on the island, including care givers like nurses and other workers. She then had illustrations of the stories sewn into table mats. These were exhibited across a long table in Café Shiyori, a communal resting area open to the public where the Oshima residents would occasionally put in an appearance.

It is the seemingly naïve and simple artworks that touch Japanese visitors the most.<sup>9</sup> By comparison, the detailed social histories and even the assembled personal artefacts shown in Oshima's official history museum have a distancing effect on audiences who are already 'trained' to expect such

assembled personal artefacts shown in Oshima's official history museum have a distancing effect on audiences who are already 'trained' to expect such historical retellings. In this case, museum aesthetics contribute to the desensitization of audiences to violence and tragedy, in ways not dissimilar to the effect of news media reporting on global disasters. If in search of an art-historical reading, one may well turn to Hal Foster's (2020) theory of brutal aesthetics, born from Walter Benjamin's notes on modernism and 'how to survive civilization if need be,' to consider how these contemporary Japanese artworks trace their legacy through the nuclear disasters of Fukushima and World War Two. The art on Oshima is at its most powerful when pared down to its barest form.



Figure 11. A photograph of schoolchildren on the return boat to Takamatsu after a day excursion to Oshima, October 2019 (courtesy of the author).

## 5. Communities and Audiences

The idea of the audience is often discussed in monolithic terms in academic writings but in truth, that is seldom the case in such art and curatorial projects, whether in terms of demographics or audience response. Oshima's immediate community beyond its residents includes the participating artists, the Koebi-Tai volunteers, and school children who come for day excursions. At the same time, its residents are also a part of the larger social action movement in Japan, an extensive network to lobby for rights and reparations for the historically and politically discriminated, such as these leprosy survivors.

Socially-engaged and participatory art projects often focus on participation from the community and the level of audience engagement where a project is sited. In situations such as Oshima's, it is fair to reflect on artists' and curators' level of personal engagement and whether their festival commitments come with long-term intentions. Questions about ethics and social responsibility are critical, especially when dealing with vulnerable

people from at-risk communities. These conversations need to take place and be ongoing—and not just within the framework of biennales and triennales, to be put aside when the exhibition is over.



Figure 12. A photograph of artist Fuyuki Yamakawa (Shibuya café, Tokyo, January 2020; courtesy of the author). The artist is talking about making and exhibiting works on Oshima.

The long-term sustainability of fledgling art ecologies in the Seto Inland Sea has been an open question, with several ongoing experiments in terms of private museums, participatory and community art projects, or farm-to-table enterprises. With the COVID-19 pandemic, however, tourism has dropped significantly. For islands like Oshima, with small aging populations, the pandemic raises the disturbing possibility of an accelerated extinction. As Billa (2020) noted in his blog update about the COVID-19 situation in the Setouchi islands, 'If the virus were to arrive on one island it could wipe out most of its population.'

It would be hard to imagine being shut away from the world again, yet the Oshima residents know better than anyone what it means to live in isolation with the disease. Rob Nixon (2011: 2) has defined 'slow violence' as 'a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all,' with 'long dyings' that are 'underrepresented in strategic planning as well as in human memory.' Oshima already has few visitors

when the triennale is not taking place. For Oshima's remaining survivors, the real tragedy would be to be forgotten again.



Figure 13. A photograph of the sculpture park *Kaze no Mai* (風の舞 [Dance of the Wind], 1992, stone cairns, pebbles, iron fastenings; courtesy of the author). This sculpture park was built by residents and volunteers in 1992 as a memorial to those who had suffered on the island.<sup>10</sup> They intended the monument as a promise of hope for a brighter future.

1. Sasagawa S (2019, September 26) Personal communication, in-person interview.
2. Marriage was initially forbidden among the patients but later permitted on the condition that the couple were sterilized. According to Sasagawa, during the guided tour of Oshima, not even cats or dogs were allowed on Oshima as the entire island was considered hospital grounds.
3. There are ongoing lawsuits and lobbying efforts to demand for reparation from the national government for the former lepers and their families.
4. Yamagawa F (2020, January 7) Personal communication, in-person interview.
5. This was part of the Yasashii Bijutsu project on Oshima in the first Setouchi Triennale. The project was led by artist Nobuyuki Takahashi who came up with the theme 'Old Things, Things We Couldn't Part With' in response to how the residents were not able to leave anything for anyone after they passed away. As Hirano related, 'No family members came to collect their ashes when they died. Instead, the residents made informal agreements with each other to tie up any loose ends, which generally meant disposing of their belongings. Thus, there are few mementos left from the past. When they learnt about what Takahashi wanted to do, the residents began bringing things they had kept, including the belongings of people who had passed away and things that they themselves treasured, each one with a story.'
6. It is a short 15 minutes' boat ride from the nearest town Takamatsu in Kagawa Prefecture.
7. The residents and the artists had long debates about whether to include this 'found object' in the exhibition. For some residents, it was a painful reminder as many of their friends had been subject to an autopsy. For others, it was an important testimony to what they had suffered through and a reclamation of their personal narratives from Japan's medical history.
8. The scene in this table mat, made by Kumiko Sato, depicts the opening of a new road on Oshima as recollected by Kiyoshi Wakibayashi: *Mutual Love Road (Soai no Road, 相愛の道)* was created in the North Mountain in 1933. But I think it was a great thing at that time that the road was built only by the residents themselves. It was not only about looking at beautiful scenery. There was also a thought that it would open the road on its own from the island's enclosed and restrained area. I thought a blind person would not be able to climb to the top of the mountain. However, when they tried to climb, 5 to 6 people are in the front, and they walk by swinging a cane. The blind climbed very well even though it was a difficult mountain path to walk for me who can see it. I was surprised to see how fun they were when walking. I was happy to see the residents healthy and vitalized.'
9. Based on informal conversations with Japanese visitors to Oshima.
10. Nobue Miyazaki made a documentary film of the same title, *Kaze no Mai* (2003), about the life of Kazuko To (1930-2013), an Oshima resident and a famous woman poet who wrote about the discrimination against leprosy sufferers. To developed leprosy in 1942, was separated from her family when she was 14 years old and lived out her life on Oshima. The National Hansen's Disease Museum held a special screening of the film in 2013 to commemorate

To's passing. Also see museum's official website for history of leprosy in Japan: <http://www.hansen-dis.jp/english/01int/history> (12.01.2020).

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Michelle Lim is a writer and curator based in New York and Singapore. She holds a PhD in art history from Princeton University and was a Curatorial Fellow in the Whitney Independent Study Program 2009-10. Michelle's research interests are varied, from spectacle and audience-related issues to socially-engaged art practices, exhibition histories, sustainable ecologies and performance-based projects. Michelle is a member of the AICA-USA. She is currently co-editing an anthology on American art from Asia (Routledge, 2021) and working on a research project about the Setouchi art islands in Japan, supported by the Japan Foundation and the Sumitomo Foundation.

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