

# Exploring a Japanese Fishing Village Through Art



**Lead Investigator: John Williams** (Ext. 4155 / [h-willia@sophia.ac.jp](mailto:h-willia@sophia.ac.jp))

## ICC Members:

- **John Williams** (DES/ICC) – Arts Practice, Theater, Film
- **Takeshi Ito** (FLA/ICC) – Farming, Ecology
- **James Farrer** (FLA/ICC) – Food, Sustainability

## External Participants:

- **Hazel Barron-Cooper** – Artist, Newcastle University
- **Yasuhiro Yotsumoto** – Poet
- **Yu Iwasaki** – Filmmaker
- **Atsuko Nakamura** – Visual Artist
- **Dr. Elisabeth Brun** – Researcher / Artist, Kristiania University, Oslo
- **Mike Collier** – Artist, Sunderland University.

(Numerous other artists and academics from different fields have contributed to this project. The full list is below.)

## **Theoretical Framework:**

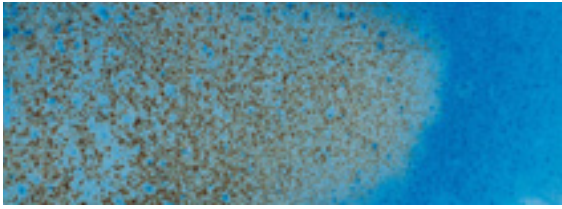
Within the social sciences rural depopulation, remote villages, aging communities, and regional economic decline are often seen as problems to be solved through gathering data, formulating theories or creating policies. Artists don't necessarily see things in the same way. Instead of seeing problems they may see beauty, mystery, and the potential for new forms of existence. They may also see things in a "more than human way." Working with the findings of hard science (neuro- science and sciences of the soil and the sea, cognition and even physics), and the methodologies of artists, we aim to map and explore this unique community (the village of Kitaushima on Sado Island) and place in a more multi-faceted way. As artists and researchers, we aim to work with the local community to explore different forms of knowing that are specific to this place and investigate different ways of knowing the world.



## **Specific Objectives of the Research:**

1. To explore alternative research practices around rural depopulation.
2. To compile and preserve local knowledge and to present this to a broader audience through art works.
3. To explore alternative and more sustainable futures for depopulating villages through the "findings" of artists.
4. To rebuild and reinvigorate local communities through collaborative art activities and the rediscovery of the importance of local culture and ecology.
5. To build a global network of artists and researchers in similar communities in other parts of the world.





## Activities in 2024:

### APRIL

I visited Kitaushima with the poet Yasuhiro Yotsumoto and film researcher Stefano Baschiera (Queen's University, Belfast). Yasuhiro took many photographs of Sado and Kitaushima for the final book that we will compile at the end of the research project. He also began work on a cycle of poems about Kitaushima and translated one of my poems about a local legend, which was then incorporated into the play that we performed in November and became the basis for a contemporary Butoh dance by Yubusha. (see below). Stefano Baschiera is interested in the study of "sustainability" in low-budget genre filmmaking in Italy in the 60's and 70's, when many props and other production elements were recycled. We began to talk about the possibility of setting up a low-budget film studio and workshops for young filmmakers in the village.



### MAY

I began working with the Sado Galaxy Arts Festival to plan joint events between the festival and this research project and also with the class that I am teaching with Takeshi Ito, in which we take students to Kitaushima. I interviewed and filmed Hiroshi Saito, a Kyoto-based dye artist who performs large scale outdoor dying events with natural dyes, in Kyoto. In 2025 he will come to Kitaushima to create a large dyed fabric piece with the participation of local residents.



### JUNE/JULY

Two artists were invited by the Sado Galaxy Art Festival to make works in Kitaushima and Masaragawa (the nearby village) to display during the festival.

Anna Genioli from Brazil made a series of ink paintings on Washi to hang in a temple on Sado. The pieces were all created in the Community Hall (Kominkan) in Masaragawa. The residents of Masaragawa reported they enjoyed the experience of having an "artist in residence" in their village. Meanwhile, Atsuko Nakamura was also commissioned by the festival to create a large sculpture in the village of Kitaushima. She explored various local materials but finally decided to make a





bamboo sculpture based on the traditional wind-breaks (magaki) found on the Noto Peninsula and on Sado. Atsuko works by first dancing (butoh) outside and tracing various elements (wind, waves, trees, rocks) with her body. She then creates drawings based on these dances, then builds a model of the sculpture (she is a trained architect) and constructs the large scale pieces with local people. When the residents of both villages mobilised to help her they remembered that bamboo had once been very important to the economy and infrastructure of the village. All of the older residents were very skilled at working with bamboo as they had done this when they were young, making tools and goods from bamboo that these days are made from plastic.

Atsuko Nakamura's sculpture still stands in the village of Kitaushima and will remain there till the elements undo it. It survived huge storms and major snowfalls. It endures and is "strong in the rain."

<https://vimeo.com/1059416310/fdb93c1848>



**'Farmer-filmmakers, fieldwork, and growth'**  
Becca Voelcker

18:30-20:00,  
July 25, 2024

Room L-621, 8F,  
Library,  
Sophia University

In person only  
No registration  
required

Becca Voelcker is a filmmaker and writer who has been working in Japan for over a decade. Her work focuses on the intersection of agriculture and film, exploring the lives of farmers and the impact of technology on rural communities. She has directed several short films and is currently working on a feature-length documentary. Her work has been shown at various international film festivals and has received critical acclaim. She is also a frequent speaker at conferences and workshops related to film and agriculture.

This talk is organized by the Sophia University Film and Video Center, which is a part of the Sophia University Film and Video Center. The center is dedicated to promoting the use of film and video in education and research, and to providing a platform for filmmakers and scholars to share their work. The center also offers a variety of programs and services, including film screenings, workshops, and seminars. For more information, please visit the center's website at <http://www.sophia.ac.jp/film/>.

In July Hannah Holtzman and myself hosted Becca Voelcker for a talk about a chapter in her forthcoming book. Becca deals with earlier attempts in Japan (and elsewhere in the world) by artists and filmmakers to set up arts practices in rural communities.

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During the whole period of Atusko's preparation and completion of her sculpture we (Yu Iwasaki and myself) filmed Atsuko's work in progress and the whole relationship with the village and the villagers. We also filmed Anna. We shot over 26 hours of footage of Atsuko and will edit this into a short documentary about Atsuko's work. Some of the footage may become part of a longer documentary about art in villages all around the globe.



## AUGUST



Takeshi Ito and I took a group of students to Kitaushima and Masaragawa to create art works and explore the local ecology. These works were displayed as part of the Galaxy Arts Festival in an abandoned temple in Kitaushima. A group "installation" of student work consisted of different media and responses to their time in the villages. On the final day we screened my film, Tabi (Another Time) to the villagers in the area. The film was entirely shot in 2022 Kitaushima but only completed in 2024.







For the Sado Galaxy Arts Festival I also created an Art Treasure Hunt Map with Emmy Kangas (Illustrator), which allowed visitors to explore various found objects in the village. The idea was suggested by Yasuhiro Yotsumoto and we hope to develop it into an interactive game in the future. (One that can both be experienced physically, but also virtually.)



In early August I visited VARC (Visual Arts in Rural Communities), a longstanding artist in residency program in Northumberland. "The Middle of Nowhere?" What does this mean?

Later in August Yasuhiro and I presented his poetry at the Literary and Philosophical Society in Newcastle. We also had presentations from Mike Collier and Hazel Barron-Cooper. Mike has not yet visited Kitaushima, but will visit in 2025. Hazel visited in 2023 and created a series of large water colour works which now hang in the temple in Kitaushima.



# Carrying Souls to Newcastle

## An Evening with Japanese Poetry

At the Literary and Philosophical Society, Newcastle

Tuesday, August 27th, 6 p.m to 8 p.m.  
Lecture Room, Doors Open at 5.30, Free Admission

Photo by Yasuhiro Yotsumoto



**Yasuhiro Yotsumoto** is one of Japan's leading contemporary poets, but he has spent most of his life outside his own country, first in the US and then in Germany. He returned to Japan just before the pandemic and reconnected with the classical Japanese poetic tradition and with rural Japan. Inspired by the writings of Newcastle University philosopher, Mary Midgley, his work explores poetry as a form of resistance to technocratic society and the inhumanity of capitalism. He also mentors young poets in Japan, with a focus on performance and anti-establishment voices. Yasuhiro will read from his own work and the work of other poets, in English translation, taking us on a pilgrimage with wandering poets across the ages. He will talk about Sado Island, in the Japan sea, where Zeami, the founder of Noh theatre, was exiled. Zeami's art, merged the ethereal with the corporeal and his poetic Noh plays are inspired by timeless stories of gods and ghosts. Yasuhiro is involved in a project to build an arts residency in a remote village on Sado, working with other Japanese and international artists. Yasuhiro will be joined by Elmacher, John Williams and Newcastle-based artists, Mike Collier and Hamel Barrow-Cooper, for a talk about art and poetry in rural communities in Japan and the UK, art and the environment, poetry and politics and beyond. We hope to be joined by local poets for more readings.

This event is hosted by John Williams, Sophia University, Tokyo. John Williams is a Welsh/Japanese filmmaker, who has made three feature films on Sado Island. More information about his art-practice research in rural communities and work with artists in Japan and the north of England can be found on the HP below with biographies of the participants in the project.

Visit the web page of Sophia University Institute of Comparative Culture Collaborative Research Unit "Exploring a Japanese Fishing Village through Art" <https://www.icc-sophia.com/en/exploring-a-japanese-fishing-village-through-art>

Our event was called "Carrying Souls to Newcastle" and we met many artists and researchers interested in creating links between the north-east (a traditional center of community-based art and landscape art) and also Yasuhiro was able to meet up with his collaborators on a project centered around Newcastle-based philosopher, Mary Midgely, whose work is one of the inspirations for this whole research project.

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## SEPTEMBER

In September we visited Nyksund in Norway. A grant from the Nordisk Culture Fund and a JSPS (Kaken Grant) meant I could travel with Yu Iwasaki to film the village of Nyksund. Yasuhiro also joined us out of curiosity. We shot for five days and participated in the bi-annual Storytelling Festival. We screened our documentary, North Cormorant Island twice during the festival.





## NOVEMBER

In November we rehearsed and performed a theatre piece, involving puppetry, Rakugo, Butoh dance and Jazz, in the village of Masaragawa. The piece is largely inspired by the people of Kitaushima, by local legend and also by the play, Under Milk Wood. The play was also part of the Galaxy Arts Festival and was attended by over one hundred local people and residents of Sado. We plan to try to hold similar events in the village every year in November. We called our event, The Tanuki Matsuri. The play is titled “The Blue Tanuki dreams of a Two-Mooned Night.”

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## DECEMBER

In December we screened North Cormorant Island at the Tokyo Documentary Film Festival. The film won the Audience Award. We also screened Tabi (Another Time) at Sophia University on Dec. 14.

[https://www.icc-sophia.com/files/ugd/2edff9\\_e3a-b9815937a4965bd3414f3fd15b14f.pdf](https://www.icc-sophia.com/files/ugd/2edff9_e3a-b9815937a4965bd3414f3fd15b14f.pdf)



## Festival Screenings of Two Kitaushima Films and Awards:

### Tabi (Another Time)

- ◇ Sado Galaxy Arts Festival (Opening and Closing Screenings)
- ◇ The Galactic Imaginarium Film Festival, Romania,  
AWARDED: Best Fantasy Feature film
- ◇ Girona International Film Festival Spain (Semi-Finalist, Online Screenings)
- ◇ Pumpkin Fantasy Film Festival, China, In Competition.
- ◇ International Folklore Film Festival, Kerala,  
AWARDED: Special Jury Mention
- ◇ Helios Sun Poetry Film Festival, Mexico, Several Screenings in different cities.
- ◇ Descubierto Film Festival, Peru  
AWARDED: Best Screenplay

### North Cormorant Island

- ◇ Tokyo Documentary Film Festival  
AUDIENCE AWARD
- ◇ Mannheim Arts and Film Festival  
BEST DOCUMENTARY FILM AWARD
- ◇ Spotlight Documentary Festival  
PLATINUM AWARD
- ◇ Documentaries without Borders, LA  
EXCEPTIONAL MERIT AWARD
- ◇ Anatolia International Documentary Film Festival  
BEST NARRATION IN A DOCUMENTARY AWARD

## External Funding:

- ◇ [Nordisk Arts Fund](#)
- ◇ [Sasakawa Scandinavia](#)
- ◇ [JSPS](#)
- ◇ [Emergency Arts Grant \(USA\)](#)

## Collaborators: (THANK YOU!) :

Yasuhiro Yotsumoto, Satoshi Takeishi, Shoko Nagai, Naohiro Ishihara, Yorie Aki-  
ba, Satomi Akutsu, Mana Short, Yubusha (Keiko and Yuko Tokuyasu), Hiroshi  
Saitou, Ana Genioli, Atsuko Nakamura, Chris Greiner, Becca Voelcker, Mike Col-  
lier, Hazel Barron-Cooper, Kazue Ogawa, Aiko Maeda, Jasmine Black, Keisuke  
Sekino, Yu Iwasaki, Genji Dohi (Genji Maru), Yukie Suzuki, Kitamura Saichi,  
Ken, Ryo and Taseko Fujisawa, Morito Yoshida, Izumi Takeda, Uchikaifu Chuga-  
kko, all the residents of Kitaushima and Masaragawa (including the Tanukis and  
other living beings).

