

Migratory Birds of Art Fly into Small Island

From Tokyo, Paris, Helsinki...

By *Saito Tetsuro*

Art & Human Brain: Present Relationship

There has been a “brain” boom in Japan for the past few years. The latest craze may be traced back to the publication of anatomist Yoro Takeshi’s book *“Baka no Kabe”* (The Wall of Fools) in 2003. The art magazine that I am involved in carried a special feature on a link between the human brain and contemporary art last year and – I shouldn’t perhaps say this – it surprisingly turned into a topic of the town.

To begin with, it has become an established theory that the process of a three-stage sensory perception is exactly the “way in which to enjoy” contemporary art works. A viewer goes through the process of getting a “surprise at first glance” from the art work, taking into consideration what was the “reason for the surprise” and “checking the intent of the artist for creating it and reflecting on it by comparing it with oneself.” In that sense, art and brain science are exceptionally compatible with each other.

And now, it leads me to the subject of the island of Naoshima. The number of visitors to Naoshima has been surging recently. They may not necessarily be trying to train their brains but go there to look for something that they cannot get at art museums in urban areas.

Comfort of Journey by Express Sleeper or Ferryboat

I have visited Naoshima, a sacred place for contemporary art, in Kagawa Prefecture, western Japan, seven times to date. Measuring about 8 square kilometers, it is located in the Seto Inland Sea. One of my trips there was a private journey I made with my wife in February 2004 when *“Baka no Kabe”* appeared in bookstores. It took place after my wife received

maternity leave and also after we talked about visiting somewhere outside Tokyo.

“It will be difficult for us to make a relaxed journey after our child is born,” I said.

She said, “Even though you say so, my stomach has grown quite visible.”

“I wonder if there is a place we can visit in about three hours one way, where we can stay one or two nights to take it easy and do nothing special and yet it’s a place you can’t find anywhere else,” I said. As a result, we decided to go to Naoshima.

We got on the limited express sleeper *Sunrise Seto* that left Tokyo Station at 10 p.m., and arrived in Takamatsu, Kagawa Prefecture, the next morning. Of course, a flight from Haneda airport to Takamatsu airport would have been much quicker and convenient than the train ride. But the journey on the late-night limited express sleeper was delightful as it added spice to the excursion to enliven a romantic dream.

We spent 40 minutes on a ferryboat from the port adjacent to Takamatsu Station to Naoshima, listening to the sound of waves and songs of seagulls. We disembarked at Miyanoura port, which underwent a facelift in 2006 with the completion of a stylish ferry terminal. In 2004 when we went there, however, it had only a rustic, simple waiting room large enough for 10 people to sit down.

You can make a round of the island in 45 minutes by rented bicycle. As you move almost straight to the east from Miyanoura port and cross over a hill, you reach the main community of Hommura. There are rows of wooden houses with their outer walls and fences covered by boards produced from Japanese “sugi” cedar trees burned black. Such a landscape was introduced as a means to prevent fire in winter on the island, which is in a Mediterranean-type dry climate zone. Short, split curtains (*noren*) dyed in a vari-

Photo 1: Aochi Daisuke



You will enjoy a fascinating evening view like this on Naoshima island, with the pumpkin sculpture looming at the tip of the pier.

ety of designs hung in front of the houses. The display of the curtains is a practice sparked in recent years to please tourists coming to the island and is a ripple effect of the “Benesse Art Site Naoshima.”

After proceeding to the south from Hommura and, again, traveling over a mountain, you come to the seashore. A huge object in yellow and black polka dots shaped like a pumpkin sits imposingly at the tip of a pier that extends from the sands (*Photo 1*). It is a sculpture titled “Kabocha” (pumpkin) created by artist Kusama Yayoi. Using it as our guide, we entered the Benesse Art Site.

One Company Helps Unique Culture Take Root

The art site is named after Benesse Corp., which has been active on the island. Benesse publishes education-related books and takes part in service operations throughout Japan. The company’s art activities in Naoshima started in 1986 when it established a camping site on the island, according to Fukutake Soichiro, president of Benesse (then known as Fukutake Shoten). He assembled selected works of famed US and European contemporary artists and lined them up for an exhibition at a resort hotel designed by world-renowned architect Ando Tadao of Japan.

Of course, residents of the island – almost all of them salary earners commuting to cities in Okayama and Kagawa prefectures – initially looked on the art works on display with disapproval. However, just as a popular saying in Japan declares that perseverance certainly brings about success, Benesse’s efforts led it to hold in 1997 a “house project” featuring an exhibition of art works in rented houses in Hommura, the island’s main village. Naoshima’s resi-

dents, who regarded art activities as something that did not concern them until then, began to feel that they, too, could play a part in such an undertaking. Their action resulted in hanging *noren* in front of their homes (Photo 2).

Rumors that something unusual was happening on the small island in the Seto Inland Sea were soon taken up by overseas media. A variety of people, including smartly dressed tourists from the cities, backpackers from Europe and art officials from New York, were frequently seen at Miyanoura port.

In 2004, the Chichu Art Museum, also designed by Ando, made its debut on a cliff that sandwiches a small bay from the opposite side of the Benesse Art Site at the pier. The name Naoshima, which had been known well in some quarters, won the hearts of many travel lovers as a result of the inauguration of the art museum. A big travel boom involving the island followed. Presently, the accommodation facility "Benesse House" is almost fully occupied throughout the year, making it difficult for visitors to make reservations.

Culture Always Accepted from Outside

Folklorist Miyamoto Tsuneichi, who hailed from Suo-Oshima, Yamaguchi Prefecture, at the western tip of the Inland Sea, visited outlying islands and wrote a number of books on islanders' lives, transportation, industry and culture, finding the origin of the natural features of Japan there. However, he did not necessarily praise life on islands. He said it was difficult for

islanders to keep a balance in life on islands limited in space where they found it hard for culture to develop. Rather, they "accepted" culture from the outside world.

This universal rule is applicable to Naoshima as well in our observation. The islanders have accepted contemporary art, the culture originating from Europe and the United States, made an effort to let it take root, and helped attract tourists to the island. Additionally, there has been a new development in the past two years or so in which some people moved in from other places to settle down and work in Naoshima. Cafe "Maruya" owner Otsuka Ruriko is one of them. A former designer in Saitama Prefecture near Tokyo, she was "shocked to find there was no vending machine for hot beverages" on her first visit to Naoshima as a tourist in winter. She decided to open a cafe. She inquired of Benesse and was introduced to a vacant house in the Hommura community, remodeled it and opened the cafe. Now, some prominent artists on visits to the island casually drop by her eatery for lunch. "Maruya" has become a popular establishment among tourists (Photo 3).

Urbanization of country areas in Japan occurred rapidly following the end of World War II. Japan utilized the cream of its construction technology to build the 12.3-kilometer Seto Ohashi Bridge linking Kurashiki, Okayama Prefecture, and Sakaide, Kagawa Prefecture, over the Inland Sea. Many islands now face a serious problem of depopulation. Naoshima, however, is a case that is a very rare exception as young people are taking up residence on the island.

Human Brain Finds Ordinary Things after Encountering Extraordinary Things

Let me go back to the lead-in for this article. There is a structure (art work) named "Minamidera" (South Temple) at the edge of Hommura. It was in complete darkness when we entered the building. We groped our way through to find a bench

Photo 3: Aochi Daisuke



Otsuka Ruriko sits in her cafe "Maruya," now a popular establishment.

and stayed still for about 20 minutes. We finally began to see an electric lamp releasing faint illumination. It was a work of art on visual sensation by James Turrell. To be sure, my brain relaxed as we remained sitting there. Perhaps, our visit may have had some sort of impact on our daughter, who was still in my wife's womb at the time, as she has been born and grown to behave like a tomboy "with the pores of her brain open." You, too, may encounter such an experience anywhere in the Benesse Art Site.

However, adjacent to the site is the fact of life that *salarymen* live there and commute by ferryboat. Nonresidents strongly feel such reality because they are on a trip to other people's places and the places are on the small island. A journey to some place can be compared to a gimmick that reflects the figure of a person and enables him or her to run into another person in another place. Art and travel are on the same wavelength with respect to making an appeal for such awareness. Naoshima has truly proved to be a suitable place as a destination for art detaching itself from urban areas and also as an important location for travelers to reflect on themselves in the light of the climate of Japan.

Contemporary art is beginning to come to fruition without fail through its activities in Naoshima as it has found it could nurture and develop itself in an environment considered unproductive for Japanese culture. Those coming to the island are not confined to visitors from the rest of Japan. They include migratory birds from other countries. Tokyo is a transit spot for them as they fly to Naoshima to take an extended rest. In fact, the number of traveling birds appears to be growing without those who live in Tokyo being aware of it. **JS**

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Photo 2: Aochi Daisuke



Siding walls of cedar boards burned black feature Naoshima houses, with short, split "noren" curtains hanging in front, in the main village of Hommura.