

DREAM HARDER

High in the remote and usually snow-covered mountains of Japan's Niigata Prefecture cluster works by some of the art world's biggest stars. Ahead of this year's **ECHIGO-TSUMARI Art Triennale**, **KATYA TYLEVICH** visits the region to sleep in a Marina Abramović coffin and dream about the ways artists can help to keep the countryside alive.

By the time the first visitors arrive for this year's edition of the Echigo-Tsumari Art Triennale on 26 July, the snow will have melted, all five dense metres of it, if not more—enough to paralyse the narrow roads and cave in hundred-year-old thatched roofs, but not enough to shut the doors of the museums here, which remain open year-round. In the mountains of Japan's Niigata Prefecture, some 220 kilometres north-west of Tokyo, winters bring some of the heaviest snowfalls in the country. All other seasons, however brief, reveal sweeping green forests dotted with rice fields, small villages, abandoned homes, and more than 160 artworks completed in the last 15 years by an international roster of artists including Marina Abramović, Ilya & Emilia Kabakov, Yayoi Kusama and James Turrell.

These artworks are on permanent display outdoors, as well as in formerly vacant homes and buildings, and in modern museums and cultural centres designed by architects such as MVRDV and Hiroshi Hara. Every three years, during the Echigo-Tsumari Art Triennale, the artworks and museums get the kinds of audiences they deserve—big ones, that is. In 2012, the Triennale drew an estimated 500,000 international visitors, to an area with a population of about 70,000 and falling as the younger generation continues to move steadily from rural to urban settings. Even if this year's Triennale brings twice as many visitors, it is doubtful that they will be able to puncture the stillness of the region, the silence, where manmade noises (cars, machines, voices) fade as darkness falls, and stars shine brighter than searchlights at a Los Angeles crime scene.

Every third year, in time for the event, the region sees a baby boom of newly realized site-specific artworks. The only requirement made of artists is that they take nature and place into account, and consider how their work can promote connections between different people. The Art Field is thus a way for this quiet region to communicate with the rest of the world.

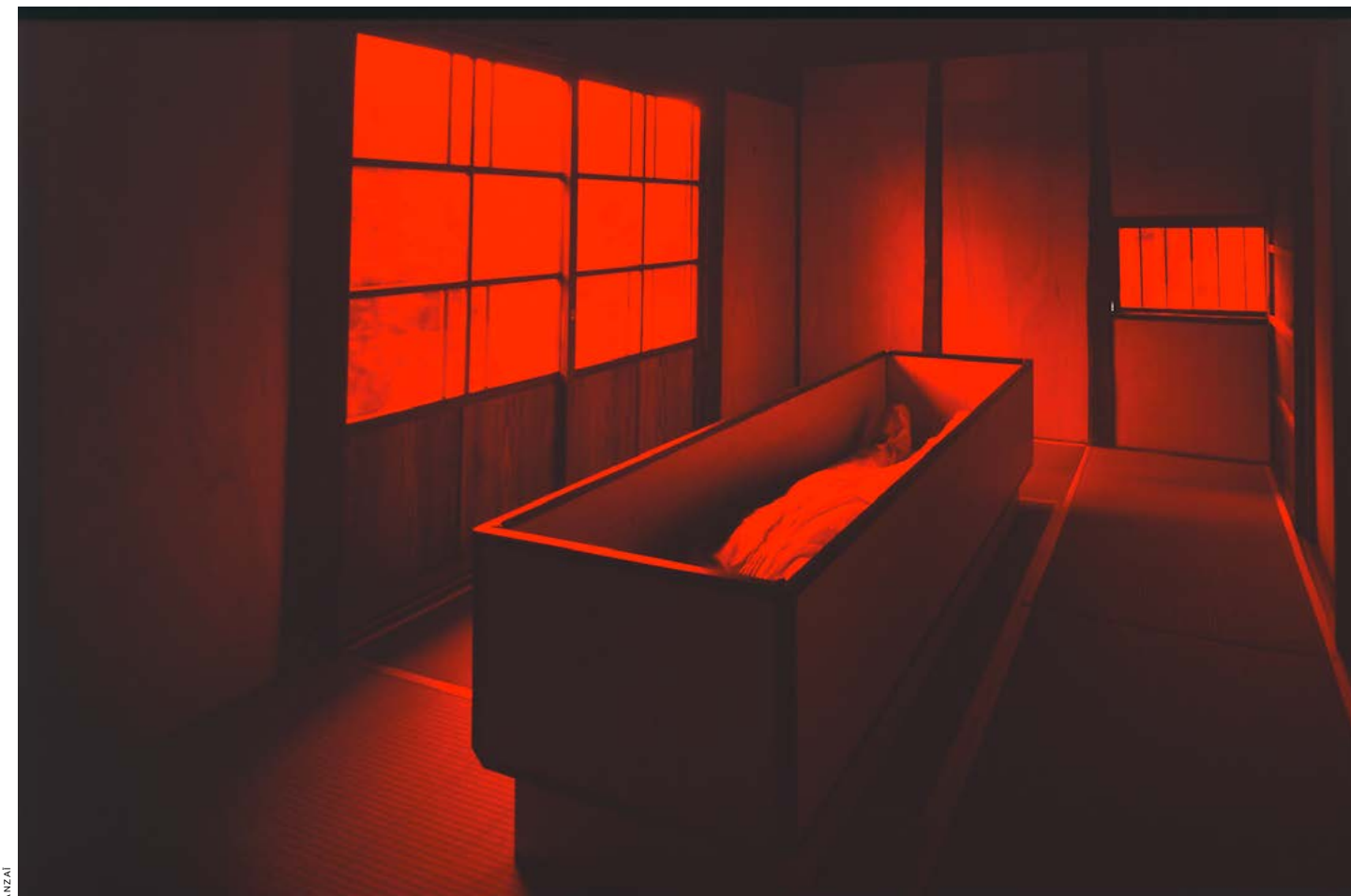
This year, the Triennale will begin on a Sunday and last for 50 days, until 13 September, representing a comparatively ephemeral moment in an area so visibly composed of tradition and history. As always, the event will take place across 760 square kilometres in the Tokamachi City and Tsuman Town regions, where artworks, separated by large swathes of wilderness, are long and steep drives apart. To see the works as an entire composition requires several days, a car—and a therapist for those with a fear of heights or solitude. Many of the works in the Art Field are made of local materials, and created or sustained with the help of local residents. However conspicuous or bold, however bright in colour or big in scale, they all feel inseparable from their surroundings.

Outside the art-festival period, the Echigo-Tsumari region is not a major tourist destination. Nearby Echigo-Yuzawa, 20 minutes by train, provides additional accommodation, but the actual Art Field remains commercially humble. Traditional Japanese inns (*ryokans*) and hotels connected to hot springs in the area fill to capacity quickly during high season, and there are no chain boutiques to pacify patrons with a sweet tooth for impersonal check-ins. The other option, limited by availability, is to stay overnight in one of several conceptual artworks that serve the double purpose of housing visitors and 'being' art. Most of these overnight artworks are repurposed abandoned homes, among them Marina Abramović's *Dream House*, an unusual performance work that relies on visitors to follow a set of rituals for a night. A notable exception is James Turrell's project *House of Light*, a new construction built in traditional Japanese design, with a retractable roof that allows visitors to watch the sky while lying on their backs on the tatami floors. Like *Dream House*, *House of Light* is also intended for several guests, preferably strangers, to stay in together overnight. Unlike *Dream House*, *House of Light* is fully heated, has toilets with bidets and a large shared hot tub that doubles as a Turrell light installation.

I visited the more hardcore of these two living artworks—*Dream House*—out of season in a non-Triennale year. I stayed overnight as part of my research for a book, experiencing some of the quietest and sometimes bizarrest moments of my life. Although this is information unfit for one sentence, the ostensible climax of *Dream House* is for each guest to sleep in—essentially—a coffin, sited in a room flooded with the colour red, blue, purple or green.

Like many of the abandoned-house artworks in the region, *Dream House* is not easily distinguished from neighbouring traditional Japanese homes (*Minka* houses), likewise made of wood and thatch, and dating back a hundred years or more. Only the otherworldly glow of *Dream House*'s tinted windows give it away as a piece of art, especially in the dark. The home's original owners were rice farmers—still the occupation of many of the people living in the region today; their photograph hangs in the house as a reminder. Today, the question of ownership has grown poetically complex for *Dream House*. Abramović has given up ownership of the artwork 'to the public', she told me. On some level, I suppose that all participating artists in Echigo-Tsumari must do the same. After all, these are not the manicured grounds of an ambitious collector, but an organic, unscripted stretch of nature and life.

I have had a hard time shaking off my experience in Echigo-Tsumari since arriving back in Los Angeles, where quiet is what I call a morning



Above
Marina Abramović
Dream House

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when they rope off nearby roads for a five-kilometre marathon or hold a film shoot that doesn't involve controlled explosions. I stay in touch with my hosts from the region, who tell me they hope for more international visitors to the Art Field—the lives of the artworks depend on visitors, yes, but even more so do the lives of the villages. I tell them I hope for the same, and that I will do my best to encourage as many people as I can to visit this remarkable place.

The Echigo-Tsumari Art Field, and its Triennale, is not a secret by any means, but it can feel like one. In the best sense of the word, it is whispered, private and significant. In a more negative sense, however, Echigo-Tsumari isn't on a first-name basis with art pilgrims, the way, say, Venice or Basel are. It should be. The stillness and seclusion of this area are strong enough to withstand as many people as want in on the secret. Echigo-Tsumari will feel like a discovery to every one of them.

More information and tickets for the Echigo-Tsumari Art Triennale are available at www.echigo-tsumari.jp.