Fukushima Province

Scottish artist Su Grierson posted a series of blogs during her 10 week artist AIR residency at Kitakata in Fukushima Province in Japan from mid January 2013.

This document brings together all of her posts published on ecoartscotland.net

*Her residency was generously funded by the Japan Foundation Tokyo Japan and the IORI Club Fukushima Province Japan.*

*with thanks to Chris Fremantle at Ecoartscotland.*
INTRODUCTION

I am now trying to get myself organised to go to Japan next Thursday. I am doing a 10 week residency based at Kitakata in Fukushima province. It is quite a way from the devastated coastal area but I am told we will be working there and with some of the displaced survivors. The project is funded by the Japan Foundation and local IORI Club but I think the actual programme will be worked out when we get there. I will be working with 2 Norwegians, a sculptor and an architect and one Japanese artist with the overall theme of ‘Spirit of North’.

Making work for an exhibition seems to be the main thing but I have a feeling that the very generous funders might have their own expectations which we will find out about later! Watch this space – well you can literally follow my trip by signing up here to Chris Fremantle’s ecoartscotland network. He has offered to put out occasional reports from me which you will be able to find here or if you join up then they will come directly to your email address.

I think this project is part of a wider plan trying to restore normal life and spirit generally in this area and also to get a different picture of Fukushima out to the wider world. I am well aware of some of the more negative recent press, and of course that name Fukushima will always be synonymous with Earthquake, Tsunami and Nuclear meltdown, but I will hopefully try and find out for myself just what the situation is now.

It has just started snowing in Kitakata so its a question of how many thermals I can get in my case, but at least they make good packing for cameras, laptops and all the other paraphernalia I can’t manage without.

As part of my Survey exhibition and book at Horsecross in Perth next summer (Opening with Sunday Brunch on June 30th – all invited!) I have been commissioned to make a new work for the 22 screen Wave at Perth Concert Hall and I’m hoping to use that as a way of linking Fukushima and Perth. I will also be available to give talks about the experience of being in Northern Japan in winter.
From Fukushima – part 1 (20\textsuperscript{th} January 2013)

Day 1

The journey to Japan was good and easy. Yoshiko Maruyama, the artist/ initiator of this project, was waiting for me at Narita airport.

The Japan Foundation wanted to meet me and receive my flight invoices and this meant an hour bus trip in the wrong direction into central Tokyo, but a smiling Mr Ohnishi met us, gave us lunch and towed my suitcase for me and after the formalities of paperwork he found us the correct train for our 3 hour journey up to Kitakata. He is promising to visit us in 10 days time to give us our generous fees and expenses.

I got a little closer to understanding why this project is being sponsored by the Japan Foundation and just what their hopes for it are. It seems there is a general desire of local and national government to counter the current negative images that accompany the word Fukushima internationally, as well as a desire to re-build the cultural activity of the area. Our impressions of our visit that we give to them and local people and also take home with us are just as important as any artwork we create here. They also talk of us conveying a positive image of the area to what they call the ‘Refugees’, in other words the survivors of the Tsunami who are living in temporary accommodation here that they must vacate after 3 years. I hope to find out more about that later.

I feel they see us as trailblazers initiating an artist’s residency in Fukushima that they hope others will then be willing to come too. It is refreshing that they and the other funders are happy to support a project without any clear idea of how it will proceed, instead just letting things fall into place as it goes along.

Day 2.

Yoshiko and I have now joined the two Norwegians, a sculptor and an architect and the first impression for all of us is the COLD, the second is of amazing scenery and buildings.

This is my seventh visit to Japan and I have never seen it look so stunning nor have I been so cold. We are staying in a traditional farmhouse style building with sliding walls with paper ‘glass’ on the inner side and glass on the outer wall (with a metre wide buffer zone between) none of which are tight fitting. There is absolutely no insulation and there is a general reluctance to use any electricity. This seems to stem partly from cost which is often mentioned – although the adjacent new part of the building does have solar panels on the roof (I haven’t yet had a chance to ask about that) – and also from a general attempt to reduce the use of electricity after their nuclear catastrophe. No one here seems to know how many of their nuclear plants have been re-opened.

As Margretha from Norway is an architect we have had long discussions about the nature of these buildings which seem to have been traditionally so unsuited to this climate, but then again they have also to withstand earthquakes and extremely hot and humid summers for which they seem perfectly adapted. We also don’t yet know the extent to which the Japanese approach to life was, and maybe still is, so different from our own age of ‘comfort’. The winters are cold so you just put on more clothes and don’t think about it. We are trying hard to do the same with varying degrees of success. The paraffin heaters and
heated meal tables are a blessing. (Sitting on the floor with a skirt of blankets pulled over your lap the heat from the paraffin heater is piped under the table) Our hostess has just produced some electric blankets – JOY.

The heated table. Photo and permission Su Grierson

The amount of fantastic food we are plied with also goes a long way to keeping out the cold. Today we have a ‘party’ to which all the funders and local supporters as well as Press will be coming. Tonight apparently we are moving to a mountain farm house for 4 days.

With endless outings being promised, we are wondering when there will be any time to make work for an exhibition in 4 weeks time

Tofu freezing and drying before being deep fried into snacks by our first B&B host. Photo and permission Su Grierson
From Fukushima – Part 2 (25th January 2013)

View from our second accommodation a mountain home looking towards Mt. Eide (Photo and permission Su Grierson)

Slowly, as we move around engaging with the locality and people and negotiate the difficulty of translation, we are gaining more insight into the aftermath of the Tsunami two years ago.

All the displaced and dispossessed people from the coastal disaster area are referred to as Refugees. This term is general and has value in identifying them, but covers many differences that exist within that community. I have had no sense that the term is disparaging, but we were told that the initial intense sympathy that people held for them has been diminished as certain tensions have arisen.

There are Refugee camps in many areas in order to scatter the load on existing communities. The Refugees are housed in temporary purpose-built wooden houses (un-insulated as is common here) which they can occupy for up to 3 years.

This deadline was put in place to discourage permanent ghetto-like clusters simply continuing indefinitely and to put pressure on the dispossessed to try and rebuild their lives. Many previous community groups are actually wanting to be resettled together in the areas they came from but this is mainly not possible as the land is not safe for re-building and there are insufficient large areas of free land to build new houses in any quantity. The issue seems to be unresolved.

We were told a little about the tensions that exist, and predictably money seems to be a major factor both between the Refugees themselves and between them and the rest of the community. As far as I can ascertain there were two types of compensation. Those living within the Nuclear disaster zones were paid compensation directly from the Nuclear industry and it was generally much higher than the Government payout to those who were affected only by the Tsunami. In addition, the nuclear payment was zoned by the proximity to the fallout area. Even though those living further away also lost everything and cannot return to their homes they received less. No one mentions whether exposure to the radiation is a factor or not. Likewise those who lost everything from the tsunami are receiving much less than those in the nuclear payout zone. It is not hard to see how tensions arise.

It seems this has been exacerbated by the fact that some of those receiving large payouts, who have never had so much money before, are not managing it wisely and some are buying fancy cars and living extravagantly and again that does not impress the local people and tests their degree of sympathy and support. It is human nature playing out predictably I think.

I am now on my third experience of Japanese traditional style accommodation – and yes, I can actually see the snow through the cracks in the single plank wooden wall! This is a large traditional house run by the owner as a B&B type accommodation. She and her elderly mother live in the (newer) building built alongside. This seems to be a common arrangement. As well as Yoshiko and myself there are also a Refugee couple staying here. He is very talkative but I am dependent on Yoshiko’s interpretation which she finds quite challenging so I hope to piece together more of the story slowly as the days go by.

So far I have gathered that there has been a problem with the Government payout because the system is extremely bureaucratic and that many of the less educated or able people deal with the form filling. A system has been put in place to give individual interviews to help those with problems.
but some people even then cannot answer the complex questions about their history, income and lifestyle so they simply give up.

As for this couple they have moved 8 times in the 2 years, looking for a place to settle. He says he is looking for good water. When I asked why that was so important, thinking it might be something to do with rice growing or fishing, he explained that it was because good water was the source of life. In order to get good human life, good soil and a full eco-system (my word not his) there must be good life-giving water. The area we are in now Kitakata, he says has lots of bears which is good, but lower down the chain of animal and plant life it is missing many things. So it seems they will be off to location number 9 at some stage. At least he managed to get a job here doing night shift at a compost factory. I think he is 68 and took to farming when he retired as a plasterer and before that he worked in the nuclear plant. It would be good to chat with his wife when her talkative husband is not around but she does seem very shy at the moment. Who knows what effect such uncertainty and constant moving around, on top of the catastrophe itself might have had on her.

It is snowing hard again today and I must tell you about the way in which they clear the main roads. Down the centre of the roads where we might have 'cats eyes' there are little holes through which at appointed times little fountains of warm water (at least I was told they were warm but haven’t tested it) spray out onto the road. It washes away the snow most effectively without any need for the unpleasant salt that we spread with less efficiency. At our first accommodation the same system was used on the outside paths simply using hoses with holes. The country and side roads are partly cleared with snow ploughs and then every car uses winter tyres and everyone just drives on the packed snow base as normal.

Because the houses are largely un-insulated and without central heating, and anyway many people are giving up using electricity, the rooms, including our new studio spaces, are heated with ‘paraffin’ heaters (well I am not sure exactly what form of oil it is but it smells like that). Most of them are also plugged into the power supply for control. They do heat up very quickly but cut out when they reach temperature and then the cold comes back all too rapidly so it is difficult to get a comfortable even temperature.

The artists on the project with me, in addition to Yoshiko Maruyama, who is an installation artist and the originator of this project, are a sculptor, Vigdis Haugtroe, and Margrethe Aas, an architect/landscape architect working on City Planning, both from Norway. You can see more images of the project from our various Facebook pages and about us from our websites:

http://www.facebook.com/facingnorthjapan
http://www.facebook.com/SeishinNoKitae
www.facebook.com/su.grierson.9
http://haugtroe.com/
http://members.jcom.home.ne.jp/maryoshi/index-e.html
www.sugrierson.com

Until next time from snowy Kitakata. Su
Su Grierson has sent the following report of her journey to Minamisouma City, in the heart of the Tsunami zone and near the Fukushima nuclear power plant. Su emphasises, “that all I write has been gleaned through non-professional interpreters and there is often difficulty in putting follow-up questions. However I feel it is worth recording what I hear and see.”

Su’s reports provide us with eyes and ears in a place that has suffered a catastrophic natural event with huge consequences on human technology and society. At this point we are only able to share in Su’s bearing witness, two years later, to the continued impact.

Yesterday we set off in pretty bad conditions for the long journey to Minamisouma City. As always snow that would have brought the UK to a standstill seemed to make no difference here. With winter tyres everyone seems to drive normally. We did see a couple of lorries with issues, but generally people just seem to ignore the weather. Ms Kobyashi, a curator from Izsu Kawamatsu Museum, willingly drove us for 9 hours in dreadful conditions.

The Director of Minamisouma City Museum then acted as our guide to visit the disaster area which is nearest to the nuclear disaster site. We carried radiation monitors in the car (you can buy them in the Home Centre) and although these increased as we went further in to the area, the level was mostly below that of the city Kitakata where we are staying and only once reached the daily level of the city of Oslo in Norway so nothing to worry about for us. Outside it is a different story, miles of empty houses including whole villages with cars, lorries and tractors left abandoned because they are too contaminated to be moved. The ghost towns with their traffic lights still working are an eerie and disturbing sight especially in near blizzard conditions. Houses of all sizes are left abandoned with police patrol cars driving round as protection. These black & white cars with their silent red rotating beacons add an almost holocaust atmosphere as they glide around the empty roads. Apparently the public are not allowed within the 10 km zone, but because we were in an official car it was allowed – I still got the feeling we were being followed with red lights suddenly appearing nearby. Ex residents are allowed back to visit their property in the 10 – 20 km area, but are not allowed to live there. Some are allowed to plant their land and for one year will get paid by the Government for the difference between their previous and current value – hopefully no-one would buy. Presumably this is an attempt to de-contaminate the land but I couldn’t clarify that and I also don’t know if it is only after top soil has been removed. I have to add that all I write has been gleaned through non-professional interpreters and there is often difficulty in putting follow-up questions. However I feel it is worth recording what I hear and see.

There is work already going on to remove the contaminated top soil from the rice fields and we actually drove past the site where they are to dump this stuff. No one wants to have it near them so it is being sited in the conveniently flat and empty land of the Tsunami aftermath – clearly an area which could be flooded again should the worst happen.

We drove to the broken sea wall and saw piled up broken houses and cars still rotting on the now flattened land. We saw houses that survived against all odds sometimes turned completely round and what looked like a bungalow was actually a top story of a larger house just lifted off and deposited elsewhere.
From one refugee at our house we have learned that two days after the earthquake and Tsunami the people in the two villages closest to the reactor were simply told to get out immediately, they were not told why, or where they were to go or how they were to go: just to get out. Of course word quickly spread and others in the area all started to leave as well so that the roads were blocked. There was no petrol and no one knew how far away to go. Quickly centres were set up in schools and gymnasiums but they were soon over full and lacking in food. We were told that the food was sitting in lorries at the edge of the safety zone but no drivers would bring it further. Another problem was apparently that in the interests of equality the food distributors of the centres would only hand out food if there was enough for everyone. Those making the food didn’t know how many to cater for so if they made 1,500 rice balls and there were just 1000 people then the remaining 500 would be thrown away rather than try to find a way to distribute it fairly. Of course it is easy to imagine how such stories could spread but it has been well documented that these people were hungry. They didn’t want to leave before finding out if family were alive or located, which was in turn made very difficult by the fact that there was very little mobile or internet connection.

Again we were told that after a short time the government announced that all refugees could travel without paying the hefty toll charges on the motorways but since they had no identification they had to argue their case at each toll station. They were also given a code to get free cash from ATM machines to help them travel. When I see all the contaminated cars that cannot now be moved I wonder what state the cars were in when the refugees left in them – and that they are still driving round. Our refugee also heard that ferries would be free so he drove north to get the ferry to Hokkaido but the ferry company had not received official instructions so would not let him travel. He spent two nights in the waiting room there, with local people bringing him food, before turning back. He stayed in eight different places before a friend told him about this place – where Yoshoko and I are also now staying.

It is hearing the personal experiences that brings home the enormous difficulty that any country in a similar situation would face. Even after two years some refugees (I don’t know what percentage) do not know what their compensation will be. The paperwork is so complex that even with support some are unable to cope and are walking away without claiming. Others are fighting for a better deal. We are told that charities are making all household goods available free of cost to refugees so that they can furnish a new house when they get it, but the temporary houses are so small they have nowhere to store it.

On the Japanese news last night a programme showed 6 Nuclear reactors that have been found to be straddling actively moving fault lines and I am told that one of these is still in production (but that needs to be verified). Even if these sites are closed presumably they all still contain radioactive core material. With all but two of their reactors shut down, Japan has very high electricity costs and people are extremely cautious about its use. But if they really want to make a difference then they have to insulate their houses and start using renewables which are almost non-existent here at the moment.

It seems to me that there are so many issues it is almost impossible to imagine how any country can cope. The scale of all this is so huge it is only by seeing it that any idea of scale can really be imagined. I was told that in this Province there are 100,000 refugees and 200,000 in the next Province and they are in many other areas besides.

The great thing about Japan, which could help, is that so much seems to happen at a local and community level: small scale village businesses and food production; people who share their expertise with others and a general feeling of willingness and helpfulness – especially towards us as visitors. As everywhere, local Government comes in for a lot of criticism. But I have to say that in this very small village there is a beautiful modern Government-funded community centre, and others villages nearby have the same. They not only allowed me to use their splendid kitchen free of charge to make scones for an event for Refugees, but the staff insisted in coming in to help – interesting as we had no shared language at all!
So tomorrow we artists are giving a presentation at a Refugee camp about Scotland and Norway. We are providing Norwegian fish soup for lunch – with rice balls – and tea and scones and flapjacks for afternoon tea. Goodness knows how that will work out but hopefully they won't know what scones should really look and taste like. Japanese ingredients and helpers have added a little variety to the final outcome.

More images from the Residency can be found on three Facebook pages:

http://www.facebook.com/facingnorthjapan

http://www.facebook.com/SeishinNoKitae (spirit of north)

www.facebook.com/sugrierson

Community Centre kitchen Photo and permission Su Grierson

Staff at the Kumakura village Community centre
Photo and permission Su Grierson

My helpers at the Kumakura village Community centre Photo and permission Su Grierson
From Fukushima – Part 4 (19th February 2013)

Thanks to Aeneas Wilder, a Scottish artist living further North in Japan, Su Grierson has been able to give us a sense of the changes to the landscape further up the coast. Once again she asked me to emphasise that she is only able to report what she is told and sees herself, and cannot verify anything.

One of the most impressive aspects of Japanese society is the degree of tolerance, support and respect that is shown both to foreigners and within their own community. Partly this is a necessity in such a heavily populated country and also because of the practice of sharing their home with many generations of a family – as one person said ‘we don’t have much option, we just have to get along’. But it does go deeper than this with many traditional small actions of respect happening as an expected etiquette in daily life. While these can sometimes seem hierarchical and onerous to us they actually reinforce respect and usually have an inbuilt level of equality.

Decision making likewise tends to happen through group discussions which allow everyone to speak and seeks a consensus view. Again to us with our western linear approach which often allows the strongest voice to become powerful, this consensus approach seems to be very time consuming and often ends without an apparent firm decision: it is circular and ongoing allowing for new opinions to come into play. I can see the benefit of the system even if I find it difficult. However I am hearing from a number of people how it was this system that failed Japan at the time of the disaster in March 2011. Such an unprecedented series of disastrous events need fast firm leadership and decision making especially when the good systems already in place to cope with normal tsunamis were overwhelmed by the scale of that one. And I am told that the Government of the day just didn’t have the mechanisms to cope.

Following on from this I have had several conversations now and on previous visits to Japan about the Japanese approach to Charity. After the disaster the Government initially declined international aid when they actually desperately needed it. In this society accepting charity is seen as diminishing your own status, and giving charity as placing oneself in a superior position and taking on an elevated status. Some people in Japan were questioned and challenged for wanting to help the refugees. “Why are you doing it,” and, “You are only doing it for you own glory”. What this society does do is support those around them socially and in their own family which is seen as a mutual situation offering no advancement or diminishing of status. We could learn much from that. However it does create a certain tightness in society and a worrying distancing from the concerns and issues of the wider world.

He and his wife were actively involved in helping people in these areas and he has kindly said that I can give you the link to the blog he wrote at that time with many images and a video...

http://www.aeneaswilder.co.uk/writings.html
https://vimeo.com/28523111

He was also keen to revisit the area which still holds horror images and a memory of the smell that he was still needing to come to terms with.

This is a beautiful wooded, mountainous area with many small towns and settlements in all the coves and river mouth areas. The section we visited is repeated for many hundred of miles north and south of here. He told me the story of how only one small town survived undamaged. Many years ago the Mayor of this town had insisted on...
building the sea defence wall many meters higher than anywhere else had even considered. He was laughed at and his wall was the subject of jokes throughout his lifetime. After March 11 his town was the only one in the area where not a single person died. The very next day the local people began laying flowers on his grave.

Because there was no nuclear problem here it is possible for re-building to commence and a few people are doing so. However the sea defence walls have not even been mended let alone increased in size and one can hardly imagine that mortgages or insurance are possible. The fishery businesses whose warehouses were outside the sea walls anyway are all re-building at great speed. Building contractors in Japan are going to be over-employed for many years to come. I have never seen so many diggers at work and doubt that private individuals could get a contractor even if they wanted to.

This area has a large number of refugee houses with people staying close to their localities, but it will surely be very many years before they are able to re-settle in their old locations. Also the stories about Government compensation for these non-nuclear refugees suggests that they will have very inadequate funds. I hear the stories but don’t know the facts.

Tsunamis have always been taken very seriously in this whole area with weekly rehearsals and hundreds of well marked high ground shelters designated. But many of these were also inundated this time with others escaping the tide by feet. In one area the tsunami went 8 km up a river valley which no-one had foreseen. There was a 15 minute warning this time and most people reacted correctly. Without that the loss of life would have been catastrophic. Who knows why some people did not leave their houses? Would we leave if we had a bedridden old person in the house? If our house had always been safe in the past? In some cases perhaps 15 minutes was just not enough time. Hospitals certainly did not have enough time to evacuate bed-ridden patients.

There are, as we might imagine, many stories of tragedy – the man who was safe but went to see if his wife was OK and was caught by the unexpected third tide. But also of survival – I am told the story that one lady recounted – when she felt the tremors a few days beforehand she had drilled her children that if the siren sounded, no matter what anyone else was doing, they must run up the hill to their school. As it happened they were at the school anyway when the tsunami came. She, on the other hand, was driving back on the motorway from another area and as she reached her town she and all the other cars were swept off the road and into the raging soup of debris. As her car was sinking the windscreen was hit and broken by a concrete electricity pole. She undid her seat belt and pushed out through the hole. She was instantly swept up into the racing debris, but eventually managed to climb onto a floating wardrobe. As she was swept in towards the hillside she tried to scramble up onto a wall but couldn’t because of the thick mud. Some people saw her and ran back to help and after several attempts managed to grab her and drag her up. In a totally dazed state she ran up the hill where she found her children safe. A few days later she went back to see if her car was still there and was met by security officers who told her that she was mistaken, her car couldn’t possibly be there because everyone in those cars had died, they had just finished removing the bodies. She was the only survivor. She reputedly told this story in a completely un-emotional way.

Near the Temple at Otsuchi after the 2011 Tsunami. Photo and permission Aeneas Wilder

Near the Temple at Otsuchi (February 2013) Photo and permission Su Grierson

There are still huge mounds of debris at the wharf sides. There is no obvious sorting operation so I think they are being slowly loaded onto ships either for dumping or sorting elsewhere. I haven’t found out about that so far.
She understood it was just one story among many.

Food contamination is another issue I have tried to ask about. Generally the first Government caesium testing figures were not trusted as most people seem to consider that Government is too tightly allied to big business who might be exerting pressure to falsify the figures. However there were many independent tests made in Japan and in other countries around the world which have indicated that with a few early exceptions which were dealt with, the levels pose no serious risk. This has produced two kinds of response. There are those who make a point of buying local food to support the beleaguered farmers and those who buy from the furthest away sources as possible, trusting foreign food above Japanese. Generally though I haven’t seen any particular paranoia about radiation anywhere locally. Life just goes on as normal – but without the tourists whom they so desperately need.

Images from a visit to the Ofunata district in Feb 2013.

The red letters on the wall are from the UK search & rescue team indicating that the building had been searched. Photo and permission Su Grierson

Un-repaired sea defences Feb 2013 Photo and permission Su Grierson

Ofunata Feb 2013 Photo and permission Su Grierson
I am sorry for the delay in sending this Blog. We have had an exhibition of the work we have made during the residency, and with lots of entertaining besides, time has just evaporated. Yesterday I gave a talk as part of a series at the exhibition.

I was asked to talk about Scotland and decided to tell the story of the evacuation of the Scottish Islands of St Kilda in 1928. This involved a lot of internet research to get good information, images and video. My feeling is that there are many similarities with the forced evacuations here in Fukushima as a result of the tsunami disaster 3/11. During the research my feelings were re-enforced many times. While the St Kildans chose to evacuate, the reasons were largely outside their control. The encroaching modern world and their awareness of their own precarious and simplistic life eroded their centuries-old community structure. The slow migration of younger people to Canada and America had started the decline.

The subsequent handling of the financial and personal aspects of their re-homing was as complex, inefficient and time consuming, just as the process we are seeing here in Fukushima has been. And one can imagine that the success of the move for the St Kildans was as dependent on personal attitudes towards making a fresh start, as it is here with the Tohukans.

The question my talk posed was basically … is it possible to go back and re create a shattered community? Will it be forever changed? Is a fresh start needed wherever refugees settle? Where is home? Does it lie in the past, or the future, or is it now?

Our exhibition has been short but successful in that we have attracted many local people to come and join us. Some of us have always been on hand to welcome and chat to visitors, even if it was only to smile and use sign language. Part of the brief of this project was to help re-establish a cultural life in this area internationally blighted by the nuclear disaster which happened in an area hundreds of miles away but carrying the same Prefecture name.

The two Norwegian artists and I seem to be the only westerners in town and as we were on TV together with our lead Japanese artist Yoshiko Maruyama early on we seem to be known wherever we go. The fact that we are holding the exhibition in the most historically important Kura has also attracted people who rarely get a chance to see inside this privately owned building. It is preserved but un-restored with no glass in doors or windows and only limited electricity, so a chilly place in sub zero temperatures. It is the largest Kura in town, being three separate Kura buildings linked together. A Kura is a traditional rice storage barn and, with the town being in the centre of a very large and fertile rice growing area, there are huge numbers. The Mayor told us there are estimated to be 20,000 Kuras in and near the city. There was a saying that every man born in Kitakata should build his own Kura, and with a current population of 40,000 the numbers still stack up.
The massively thick doors and windows were a feature designed to protect against fire. Clearly with so much flammable material inside if one Kura went up in flames those adjacent would soon stoke the furnace and the whole city could be ablaze. But with solid doors and windows quickly closed the fire could be contained.

For my part having to decide early on in the residency what form my work would take, and with a requirement to connect with local issues, I decided to take an in-depth look at the snow that deeply covers this area. While snow of this depth was a great surprise to me I soon discovered that all of the local people and the refugees housed here really hated snow. They actually used that word ‘hate’ which is very strong in the Japanese culture who rarely show their feeling, especially negative ones, so easily. Could I make images that might show this element in a different light? Avoiding the obvious ‘touristic’ beautiful shrines in snow – although I couldn’t resist putting a few of those on Facebook – I looked firstly at the power of snow to remove landscape. All the human details of habitation, agriculture and communication and the cultivated land itself are simply removed from the landscape.

The walls are made of rice straw and mud with heavy wooden beam structures. The roofs are today usually covered with shiny ceramic wave shaped tiles which allow the water and snow to run off, in particular snow doesn’t build up. Before that they were thatched with thick rice straw. The style is consistent and they have raised roofs with air space to allow good ventilation. I learned from artist Aeneas Wilder that even today in rural areas rats and the snakes they attract – the snakes eat the baby rats – are still a problem. Today the Kuras continue variously as conversions into housing, shops, offices, fire stations, and cafes. Some of course are in terminal decline and others just surviving. Bringing our art into this culture has been a unique experience.

What still shows are the clues or residues of our occupation and this concept fuelled my initial images made in the foothills of the mountains near the village in which we were staying. Then spending more time in town I was interested in the effects of snow on the light and the way that in turn affected window reflections. The Japanese
have a habit of blocking out light – or maybe just prying eyes – with thin patterned curtains, adhesive patterned plastic sheets, cut glass, or with paint which often carries the scratches of wear and tear causing an interesting effect. The reflection of the snow and snow covered building in these semi-clear windows created many unusual layered views of these locations.

Scratched Window, 2013, Su Grierson with permission

I also began looking at the concepts of Japanese Sumi-e painting. The ancient concepts of essence of place in which information was omitted and selected detail used to stand in for the whole, and of the broken paint technique which simply suggested form and movement through abstract marks seemed to have much resonance with the work I was making. And it began to direct my interest. I named my exhibition ‘link’ after one image in which by using computer rotation I created a long line of trees each linked by a single branch. This very much reflected the many conversations I have had with local people who talk much about the connection with nature and between the forces of nature. Many people live by these concepts in their daily life.

Agricultural calligraphy, 2013, Su Grierson with permission

Yoshiko, who knows my previous work, commented that I seemed to have moved away from my normally more conceptual approach into something more personal and free. She is probably right although I am still not entirely comfortable with that. It is the nature of residencies in another culture, they can break into your established patterns of thought and action if you are willing, like the Refugees, to let it happen.
From Fukushima – Pt.6 (19th March 2013)

I have come for a short weekend break to the port city of Niigata on the West coast of Japan at the mouth of the large Shinano river which also serves the huge areas of rice fields that lie between here and the inland mountains.

My first day here brought two cultural experiences that took me to the extreme ends of cultural life in Japan.

With several major attractions shut for renovation and total re-hangs, I decided to head out of town to the Large Kite Museum. With not so much English being spoken here finding my way on local buses was the first challenge. And with only a very rudimentary tourist map to assist me, knowing where to get off the bus proved an even greater problem. But it was certainly worth the effort.

As the only visitor in the Museum on a Saturday afternoon I was given privileged treatment. I had a private viewing of a 3D film in English outlining the annual Shirone fighting kite festival. It is a year long community effort to construct and paint the massive 7m x 5m, 30kg, bamboo and paper kites. The strength of the handmade grass ropes that are needed to keep these massive constructions airborne is critical to the outcome of the battle. It takes great skill that is passed down through the generations.

With teams on either side of the Nakanokuchi river the aim is to catch the opposition by twisting lines so that both kites come down in the river. This is when the real battle begins as both sides enlist their whole community to tug the kites towards their bank of the river. The winner is the team with the fewest broken ropes. It can take 30 to 40 people on the ropes to get the kites airborne and hundreds of all ages pulling together when the kites are in the water.

The day before the main battle there is a children’s festival with smaller kites and a large street procession. As the film points out, these battles which are always carried out in a sense of
friendly rivalry, are important in keeping old traditions and skills alive in a way that is still embedded in the community as well as promoting a genuine inter-generational unity in their society.

The Museum itself also has examples of kites from around the world, and the curator who came and laid out some kites for me to see, said they had an example of a traditional English kite. I protested that I didn’t think we had any but had to laugh when he showed me the example. It was a cane bent over and tied into an oval shape with newspaper pasted over. It had along string tail with twists of newspaper slotted into the string. I do indeed remember making a kite exactly like this, as a child in the frugal years at the end of 40’s and early 50’s. There were a few other examples of small kites made with leaves and feathers. Such simple and natural toys.

My second cultural experience came late in the afternoon when I set off to visit the Annual Saki festival held in a very large conference venue on the river banks of Niigata City. The hundreds of people walking (or more accurately staggering) towards me as they left the event was a clue to what was to follow.

I had originally intended to buy a ‘tasting ticket’ where you are given a label and small ceramic Sake cup in which to freely sample up to 900 of the varieties on display. But one look down into the main hall quickly decided me otherwise. Thousands of people formed what looked like a monumental scrum gathered around the drinking stalls. It seemed quantity rather than quality was the aim. The palette would be so quickly flattened that I doubt it would be possible to distinguish one variety from another anyway. Going down into the hall as a visitor I was constantly jostled by inebriated drinkers and the smoke and food smells from the surrounding stalls was sticky and oppressive, nothing like the aroma of the interesting and subtle food I have been eating while here.

The Japanese make the most clear and amusing illustrated public signage. You can never doubt that you will drown, crash your bike or walk in dog poo, but the ‘no fighting’ signs at the Sake festival really did give an idea of what might happen as the evening progressed.
Sake is the national drink made from fermented rice. Like wine it ranges from sweet to dry depending on brewing times and water quality. It is also made into rich fruit liqueurs and can be added to many cooking sauces and dishes. Mr Sato owner of our local Yamatogawa brewery and many members of the public have donated so much Sake to our events that we need some extra gatherings just to use it all. In Kitakata generosity and levels of support for our projects are both humbling and inspiring.

Finally after reaching Kitakata again, we are faced with the news that there has been an electricity failure at the crippled Daiichi nuclear plant. It seems they do not know the cause which seems even more worrying. The online Japan News Today says:

“Electricity has been cut to pools used to cool spent fuel at the reactor 1, 3 and 4 units” as well as to the equipment to treat contaminated discharge including radioactive cesium, TEPCO spokesman Kenichi Tanabe said.

However, the incident had not so far affected cooling-water injection to the number 1, 2 and 3 reactors, which suffered core meltdowns soon after the start of the March 2011 nuclear crisis, he said.

The temperature at the pool for spent fuel from reactor number 4 was believed to be the highest and slightly above 25 degrees Celsius (77 degrees Fahrenheit), still well below the safety limit of 65 degrees, he said, adding it was rising by 0.3-0.4 degrees every hour.

If the system is not restored, it will take four more days for that pool to reach the limit, he said.

“We are trying to restore power by then,” he said, adding the deadline would be about 14 days and 26 days for the other two.

This was on breakfast news today (Tuesday 19th) but I have the feeling that the people are almost numbed to disaster now. There are endless TV programmes about potential Tsunamis and personal security, yet I find that most of the people I speak to have no faith in the new Government to handle these situations. They believe they will bend to the industrial companies desire to re-open the nuclear plants, and I have seen for myself that some sea defenses broken two years ago have not even begun to be restored. There are some small anti-Government public protests in Tokyo, but few people seem to believe it will make any difference.

Based purely on the people I talk to here, I find that while they are individually inspiring, the country seems to be still struggling to cope with all that has happened and are a long way from finding a constructive way forward.

I fly home in 3 days time and by then the first cooling deadline will have been reached. Let’s hope there is only good news to report.
I am now at Narita airport heading home with some final thoughts on my 10 week art residency in Fukushima province in Japan.

After my previous blogs Chris Fremantle asked me what is ‘normal’ in Fukushima. Well, that depends on whether you are a displaced person living for the last two years in temporary accommodation without full time work or proper family life, or whether you are a local Fukushima resident.

Fukushima is a very large Province stretching more than halfway across the centre of Honshu, the main island of Japan, most of it being well away from the actual disaster area. For most people here, ‘normal’ is everyday life as it always has been, superficially not affected at all apart from the total downturn in the tourist industry and it’s related earnings issues. But underneath it there is a permanent change in their belief in their own National political and organisational systems and a much greater awareness of the fragility of life and of the value and importance of the environment. As a visitor you don’t access these feeling easily. The Japanese are not given to personal revelations so that when people do speak out you know their thoughts are important and deep.

Recently we four artists were invited to a wine tasting by one of our English speaking supporters who owns a 7/11 convenience store and a wine store – which he admits to being mostly a hobby. Sitting in his warm and beautiful wine Kura and sampling great wines from around the world and a lovely meal produced by his wife, I eventually asked what his views were on the nuclear issue and the business pressure on Government to re-open the nuclear power stations. Surprisingly he said he had studied Nuclear Physics at University and that he had always supported Nuclear because although he understood the dangers he totally believed that his Government and the scientists would have fully evaluated all the important safety issues in implementing the programme. Now he has had to re-evaluate his position and has looked closely at the issues involved in expanding the use of fossil fuels. He now believes the long term danger to the planet is greater from fossil fuels. ‘What about renewables’ I asked and he admitted that in Japan this was hardly on the agenda and would take so long to get started that it seemed an unlikely way to solve their needs. He faces this as a personal dilemma that he like, I imagine, many millions more are wrestling with inside of their ‘normal’ everyday lives. But they feel helpless to influence things one way or the other.

For the ‘refugees’ still without home and jobs, everyday life is filled with making origami, keeping their tiny homes in order, trying to get better compensation, undertaking part-time jobs if they are lucky and volunteering just to engage with their new communities and keep busy. For them I think ‘normal’ is a dream for the future. They have no belief at all in a nuclear future.

In my last blog I mentioned that there was an electricity failure at the damaged Daiichi nuclear
plant with a four day limit before critical heat was reached. The following day we learned that power had been restored. They still didn’t know the cause but suspected the main switchboard. The day after that, in keeping with their new commitment to transparency, they said that although they were still not certain of the cause they had found an electrocuted rat beside the main switchboard. I cannot think of words enough to make a further comment, but, I mean seriously, was it possible that a rat could gnaw through the cable of the electricity supply to a stricken nuclear plant cooling system – honestly?

So what are my personal feelings about Japan on this my most recent visit. As always, I see that the ability of the Japanese to set and run incredibly complex systems with amazing accuracy, like trains and luggage delivery systems is mind blowing.

Fukushima is also an area of beautiful landscape, with forested mountains, small villages and strong local culture, outstanding local produce and food and buildings.

But one thing shines through and that is the people, their kindness, generosity and willingness to help and support each other and we visitors. The small acts of kindness that happen on an everyday level here in Fukushima are what I will carry away from this country: the restaurant owner whose excellent restaurant we had visited several times who turned up un-announced at lunchtime on the final day of our exhibition with his family and a large bowl of hot Japanese soup; the construction company owner who dropped his work to take my friend, visiting from Tokyo, and I up the mountain on a glorious sunny day because she said she wanted to go and he said he loved the place so much that he regarded it as his pleasure to show it to us.
Wakamatsu bus station. We were driven there by the daughter of our host because she had a bigger car for our luggage. And as we sat in the waiting room a lady we recognised came to meet us. She was a Refugee from a local camp who had come to one of our talks and to our exhibition. She heard of our departure and walked to the station to say goodbye. She gave us each a bottle of water for our journey and thanked us for coming and for making a difference. For an artist there can be no greater thanks.

Link to a video in which a Fukushima Town’s Sole Resident speaks out