

# ZOMBIES OF THE AVANT- GARDE: THE PROBLEMS WITH LOCALITY ART

(2014)

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*The zombies of the avant-garde are roaming—though  
their bodies are already in mid-decay.*

## CONTEMPORARY ART “RAISES QUESTIONS”

IN JULY 2014 artist and manga author Rokudenashiko<sup>1</sup> was arrested by police, under suspicion of “recording and distribution of obscene material electronically.” She had been producing works about female genitalia and was in the midst of a crowd-funding campaign to gather funds to make a canoe in the shape of a vulva. For people who contributed over a certain amount, she was sending a 3-D printer-ready scan of her own genitalia. The distribution of this data constituted “recording and distribution of obscene material.”

1 [Literally, “good-for-nothing girl.”]

The incident sparked significant debate, with claims that it was repression, wrongful arrest, discrimination against women. Although I am not one to dispute Rokudenashiko’s work or her theoretical stance and activism, which aim to show that women’s genitalia are not obscene, I also think that if it becomes possible to circulate realistic 3-D printable likenesses of women’s genitalia under the label “art,” then gray-market DVD vendors would also deploy the term art in order to circulate unpixelated pornographic videos.

I am not pursuing an argument about the conflict between art and the law here. For that I invite readers to refer to some of the abundant historical precedents, such as the trials over *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* or the Marquis de Sade, to see how artists and critics reacted at the time. What is important here is the relationship between art and theory. Although art might generate clashes with the law in undertaking radical critique of society, people look to it as something that can change the world’s consciousness and sensibility. But what gets lost

in these discussions is assessment of artistic merit. Or, we might say, a demonstration of aesthetic value.

Looking at the response to the Rokudenashiko case, it seems that the demonstration of artistic merit relies greatly upon ideas such as feminism and upon “raising questions” about the state world. But politics and ideas in and of themselves do not guarantee artistic merit. For anyone who agrees that art acquires a special power and appeal just by being art, the question of where artistic merit or aesthetic value lie must be thought through seriously, no matter how tiresome it may be.

What I want to call attention to is the tendency developing in the world of contemporary art for “raising questions” itself to stand as proof of artistic merit. I believe this is due largely to the structure of contemporary art. Let us look at some more examples.

Chaos\*Lounge, which is headed by Kurose Yōhei, reached out to people who post their artworks online at sites for illustrators like PixiVision and turned them into “artists” by giving them an opportunity to exhibit. Chaos\*Lounge thus interrogated the author/artist as a type of modern subject and raised the institutional question of why works on the internet are not treated as art.

This questioning of “the artist” is timely, in ways both good and bad. It is something driven by the way the internet has destroyed barriers between sender and receiver, but it is also part of a fantasy sown by corporations that have built their business model on profiting off the creativity of their users.

The artist collective Chim↑Pom has captured mass media attention by hiring a plane to skywrite the word “Pika” (Flash!) in the sky above Hiroshima, and by adding a small panel depicting the Fukushima reactor meltdowns to Okamoto Tarō’s public mural in Shibuya Station, *Myth of Tomorrow*. The principle of recognition for artists is like the one for celebrities: win by getting famous, because it leads to greater recognition as an artist and higher prices for one’s works. If one looks carefully, of course, these works critically treat the system of mass media itself as the work, and are intended to critique the game of value creation that contemporary artists play.

To repeat, there is danger in the tendency to misapprehend controversy and issue-raising itself as artistic value. Art risks being

reduced to mere harassment, as seen with a group calling themselves the Society for the Preservation of Butt-Uglies [Dobusu o Mamoru Kai], who claimed it was an “artwork” when they approached women on the street, told them they were putting together an “uglies photography collection,” took photos of the women despite their objections, and then used the photos without their permission. Or when groups like Japonica (one-time recipient of the Taro Okamoto Award for Contemporary Art’s Special Award) make statements like “art blows up!” We should not accept these things uncritically. But aesthetic and artistic sensibilities are undergoing all kinds of dynamic change, and contemporary art seems to appear in situations where those transformations cause friction with mainstream society. That may be the result of artists’ efforts to answer to changes in the value system of society as a whole. And if that is why the public pays attention to contemporary art, analyzing what is occurring in those moments becomes all the more significant.

Below I will discuss something that has come to occupy a large proportion of the current boom in contemporary art: “locality art.”

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## CONTEMPORARY ART BECOMING LOCALITY ART

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FIRST OF ALL, what is contemporary art?

One might think of Marcel Duchamp exhibiting a urinal, Andy Warhol painting rows of cans, Damien Hirst exhibiting sliced cows, Murakami Takashi’s ironic use of Japan’s otaku culture, Aida Makoto critically using the nation as his material, or the coexistence of avant-garde, market savvy, and earnestness in Kusama Yayoi.

Their works are generally referred to as *contemporary art* [*gendai āto*]. But the contemporary art thriving in Japan right now is not by any of these artists. Locality art is what is dominating the mainstream.

*Locality art* refers to regional art festivals such as the Echigo-Tsumari Art Triennale, the Yokohama Triennale, and the Aichi Triennale. Beyond these primary examples, there are countless locality art events held around the country. It may even be that the majority of contemporary artists are exhibiting their works at such events, rather than museums and galleries.

Locality art refers to art festivals set in regional areas, such as the Echigo-Tsumari Art Triennale, the Yokohama Triennale, and the Aichi Triennale. Beyond these more famous examples, there are countless locality art events held around the country. It may even be the case that more contemporary artists are exhibiting their works in this context than in museums and galleries. What is locality art in concrete terms? We can refer to the anthology *Art Projects: A Society That Co-Creates with Art*, edited by Kumakura Sumiko, a professor in the Department of Musical Creativity and the Environment at Tokyo University of the Arts. You can think of what this book refers to as “art projects” as essentially the same as what I am calling “locality art” here.

According to the book:

Art projects are a co-creative form of artistic activity centered around contemporary art, that developed in various locations around Japan beginning in the 1990s. Not limited to the exhibition of artworks, art projects engage deeply with contemporary society, evolving in relation to the social conditions of a particular time and place. They are activities that generate new artistic and social contexts by seeding new contact points and social connections outside of pre-existing ones.<sup>2</sup>

And it goes on to list the following five characteristics:

1. Emphasis on the process of art-making and active disclosure of that process.
2. Site specificity, with reference to the social context of the site.

<sup>2</sup> Kumakura Sumiko, Kikuchi Takuji, and Nagatsu Yūichirō, eds., *Āto purojekuto: Geijutsu to kyōsōsuru shakai* [Art projects: A society that co-creates with art] (Tokyo: Suiyōsha, 2014), 9. [For a highly condensed English language summary, see Kumakura Sumiko and Yūichirō Nagatsu, eds., *An Overview of Art Projects in Japan: A Society That Co-Creates with Art*, trans. Tamura Kanoko, Aiso Nobuko, Ebihara Shuko, and Momiyama Tomoko (Tokyo: Tokyo Arts Council, 2015). The translation here is taken from p. 2 of that publication.]

3. Sustained, long-term, and developing operations, with expectation of diverse ripple effects.
4. Collaboration among people of diverse social backgrounds and emphasis on communication to foster such collaboration.
5. Interest and engagement with social fields outside art.<sup>3</sup>

3 Ibid.

Stated more simply, such art emphasizes the making process over what is produced as the result, creates things to fit the site or social context, hopes to impact the local area or society in various ways, undertakes communication so as to involve a variety of people in the creative process, and includes other aspects of society beyond the art world.

The central question for this essay is how the state and status of aesthetics has been changing as locality art has moved into a position of being a core modality of contemporary art. I have experienced these changes myself, participating in and observing projects both large and small, and talking with artists, NPOs, and volunteers (art festivals are characterized by the blurring of boundaries among these groups and artists).

From that, I got the clear impression that people feel energized by collaborating with others and find joy in the value of connection. It would appear that the enjoyment of this kind of relationality itself, rather than the physical artwork, is what they perceive as having aesthetic value (even though they do not necessarily use the word aesthetic to talk about it). And, without the least apprehension, they sincerely believe this to be a contribution to the local area or society.

They are really accommodating and earnest. And it is for this reason that I realized something fundamental about the structure of the aesthetic may be changing.

As I discuss below, we can assume that the underlying ideas were innovative when they first appeared as a counter movement. But I have misgivings about the current situation, where they have spread everywhere uniformly and without a true understanding of their criticality.

Won't this affirmation of simple naïveté result in art regressing to a premodern state in Japan? Consciously choosing the premodern is something I can respect. The problem is that it is not being done consciously.

## CONTEMPORARY ART AND REGIONAL REVITALIZATION

THE DEVELOPMENT BANK OF JAPAN, a publicly traded company under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Finance, published a report titled “Contemporary art and regional revitalization” in 2010 that opens with the following.

Currently many regional cities are facing the problems of depopulation, low birth rates, and aging, while the changes in demographic and social structure that drive these problems, along with the rise of large suburban shopping centers that have accelerated the hollowing out of city centers, have sapped them of their vitality. . . . It is in this context that contemporary art has attracted attention as a seed for revitalization.<sup>4</sup>

Contemporary art is taken to be necessary for regional revitalization. Regional revitalization is a national policy, supported by taxpayer money. Consequently, young artists driven by the need to make a living end up participating in these art projects.

Why contemporary art? The report offers the following explanation, citing Antony Gormley’s *Angel of the North* (1998) as an example of contemporary art.

Because the work makes use of materials like steel and technical knowledge from shipbuilding that are part of the industrial legacy of the area, it fuses together with the

<sup>4</sup> Development Bank of Japan, *Gendai āto to chiiki kasseika* [Contemporary art and regional revitalization] (Tokyo: Development Bank of Japan, 2010), 1, [http://www.dbj.jp/pdf/investigate/area/kyusyu/pdf\\_all/kyusyu1009\\_01.pdf](http://www.dbj.jp/pdf/investigate/area/kyusyu/pdf_all/kyusyu1009_01.pdf).

historical and industrial resources of the town where it is located, establishing a new appeal capable of attracting 2,000,000 visitors in 2005 by shedding new light on regional resources and reinvigorating them without losing the town's own identity. In this way contemporary art possesses the creativity and potential that can give birth to new attractions simply by giving life to all the local resources of a town including its industry, culture, and history.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 6.

The report emphasizes “fusing” with the locality, revitalizing industry, preserving the town's identity, and attracting tourists, while making almost no mention of the content or aesthetic value of the art.

We can also look at the collection of research articles *Legislation and Research* [Rippō to chōsa], published annually by the House of Councillors Research Office. Over the past ten years the two people who have published articles about art are Tsutsui Takashi from the Intelligence Research Office and Kobayashi Mizue of the Third Special Research Office. Their articles treat art as a tool to be used for regional revitalization and economic impact. Although Kobayashi in particular occasionally touches upon the quality of the art, evaluation itself is viewed as “challenging” and given little role in furthering the argument.

Whether evaluating quality is challenging or objective criteria simply do not exist, we have a situation where contemporary art is being eroded as it gets subsumed in locality art. Who is it that judges artistic merit? At this rate, it is quite possible that contemporary art will come to be defined as “something that revitalizes regional areas.”

Let's look at an example of an actual art project.

In 2011 an art project called *Danchi o horisageru* [Delving into apartment complexes] took place at Toride City's Ino Apartment Complex. It was organized by the artists using studio spaces in Ino Artist Village, which had been created when, according to the project blog, “Tokyo University of the Arts and Toride City worked together to renovate a building (seven storefronts) in the shopping center inside Ino Apartment Complex, with the cooperation of the Urban Renaissance Agency.” This project did in fact literally dig into the grounds of the Ino apartment complex and, while I find the literalism personally amusing, like a joke in a Tsutsui Yasutaka story, I have to withhold judgment on

its quality as a work of art.

I attended a symposium organized by the Toride Art Project, which was running this project. The city official in charge made a presentation that claimed residents participating in planting flowers constituted art, and extolled the project's benefits and usefulness in reducing isolation among foreign residents and raising rates of discovering solitary deaths by fostering communication and community among people in the apartment complex. I got a clear sense that an urgent tug-of-war was playing out with people who hoped to safeguard artistic value in some way amidst pressure to produce something useful because tax-payer money was being used.

In this way art is becoming something to generate communication. Here is where the problem arises. Is it right for art to become so straightforwardly utilitarian? How can we judge its quality? How can we preserve its autonomy? I believe that in this border zone, it is becoming difficult to distinguish art from run-of-the-mill service-sector labor. At times, art plays along with a type of exploitation of participants' passion and becomes a tool to shore up an identity for irregular workers.

Is this not the death of art? Or are we witnessing a moment where art is being reborn into a completely different set of meanings?

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## **RELATIONAL AESTHETICS USED FOR SELF-AFFIRMING CONNECTIONS**

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THESE KINDS OF art projects have a particular historical and theoretical background. An especially important point of reference is Nicolas Bourriaud's concept of relational aesthetics, introduced in the book he published in France in 1998, *Relational Aesthetics*.

Hoshino Futoshi, who has actively written about and translated texts on relational aesthetics and the debates over it, writes the following in his essay “Buriō x Ranshiēru ronsō o yomu” (Reading the Bourriaud–Rancière debate) (in *Kontenporarī āto shiorī/Contemporary Art Theory*, edited by Tsutsui Hiroki, 2013).

6 Hoshino Futoshi, “Buriō x Ranshiēru ronsō o yomu” [Reading the Bourriaud–Rancière debate], in Tsutsui Hiroki, ed., *Kontenporarī āto seorī* [Contemporary art theory] (Tokyo: Eos Art Books, 2014), 37.

The main reason why *Relational Aesthetics* ... received so much attention in subsequent years is that it decisively shifted the orientation of [critical debate] away from the medium-centered art theory of the 20th century toward theory centered on the relationships created among artist, work, and audience. Whether or not one agrees with its claims, the critical framework proposed in Bourriaud’s book is an important reference point in discussing recent works which, like it or not, are increasingly making their presence felt, such as large-scale installations, interactive art that values back-and-forth negotiations with the viewer, and works staged through communicative acts that lack a clear external edge.<sup>6</sup>

Bourriaud suggests that transformations in society’s industrial structure are part of the background against which art came to be located in processes of communication and collaboration, as opposed to material. The idea that art began to shed its focus on medium in the 1990s in response to changes in sensibility brought about by the way third sector industry such as intellectual labor and the service sector became central to industrial structure in developed countries is convincing. (Another aspect of the background may be that medium-centric approaches had plumbed the depths of their potential and were reaching their limits.)

Apprehending this before anyone else and liberating art from being a matter of working material was a revolutionary achievement on Bourriaud’s part. His search for such new possibilities in the form of art can be understood as a sensitive response to his historical circumstances. But we must be skeptical about applying these ideas as-is in the 2010s: they were the result of a discerning critic deriving them from the work of pioneering artists in the 1990s. The circumstances surrounding immaterial production have also changed significantly.

Aestheticizing immaterial relations by making a great fuss over connections made on the internet does not in any way constitute resistance: it amounts to nothing more than a lazy affirmation of an everyday life of connecting and chatting with friends via Line.<sup>7</sup> Given that companies like Twitter and Facebook now monetize such interactions, it also entails an affirmation of the status quo of IT corporate profits. It performs a self-justification and beautification of the irregular labor that the new economic system (sometimes called cognitive capitalism) has given birth to, such as the communicative and emotional labor of convenience store clerks and care workers. Given the circumstances, we have no choice but to rethink relational aesthetics.

Yet people still reference relational aesthetics even now. Why is that?

I posed this question to the artist Fujii Hikaru when we participated in a symposium about an art project in Tsuchiyu, a hot spring town in Fukushima Prefecture.<sup>8</sup> According to him, relational aesthetics is not as dominant in Europe and other places, having already been relativized by things like Claire Bishop's critique in "Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics."

To venture a summary, Bishop's critique argues that relational aesthetics has a micro-utopian tendency—in other words, an exclusionary tendency to become a party of insiders. The relationality is only among people already acclimatized to the art world and excludes relations with people living in underprivileged communities.<sup>9</sup>

My main takeaway from this conversation with Fujii is that relational aesthetics is oriented toward a micro-utopian model: a stable harmonious community. That characteristic is the reason that relational aesthetics tends to be the only concept referenced in today's art project boom.

I am reminded of Okazaki Kenjirō voicing his concern some time ago that architecture students sensitive to contemporary trends were all choosing to design things like senior homes, hospices, and funeral parlors for their graduation projects, and that many of them referenced Miyazawa Kenji as they did. "We can't overlook the fact that when one tries to shoehorn Miyazawa's magical worlds into real-world building, there is the possibility that its very literary charm would be used as a dangerous mechanism to smooth over all of reality's contradictions."<sup>10</sup>

<sup>7</sup> [A popular instant messaging app, comparable to WhatsApp or WeChat.]

<sup>8</sup> "Hyakunengo samitto: Fukushima-ken no chiisana machi de okoritsutsu aru āto" [The 100 years from now summit: Art happening in a small town in Fukushima Prefecture], held August 31, 2013, at Tokyo University's Fukutake Hall.

<sup>9</sup> [See Claire Bishop, "Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics," *October*, no. 110 (Fall 2004): 51–79. Fujita directs his readers to Hoshino Futoshi's translation in *Hyōshō/Hyosho: Journal of the Association for Studies of Culture and Representation*, no. 5 (2011): 75–113.]

<sup>10</sup> Okazaki Kenjirō, "Miyazawa Kenji: *Ginga tetsudō no yoru*" [Miyazawa Kenji: *Night on the Galactic Railroad*], entry in *Hitsudokusho 150* [150 must-read books] (Tokyo: Ota Shuppan, 2002), 170. [The quote is taken somewhat out of context, as Okazaki makes no mention of architecture students in this short commentary.]

In other words, it seems that the desire to make Japan's land and countryside into a utopia, formerly saddled upon Miyazawa Kenji, has switched horses and now fits itself out as relational aesthetics.

Needless to say relational aesthetics itself is an astute intervention. It is also easy to understand the urge in the 1990s to position small utopias against the monumental utopias of 1960s architectural thinking. But the crux of the problem is, as always, that power holders in Japan's regional towns and cities have usurped the idea and are beginning to use it in a self-justifying way, cherry-picking the parts that suit their purposes without any attention to how these artistic theories and traditions developed in a historical context.

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## THE EXCLUSION OF CRITIQUE AND FOREGROUNDING OF THE PARTICIPANT

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PEOPLE OFTEN POINT OUT that art projects have a tendency to exclude the voices of outsiders, such as critics.

Tanaka Kōki, who represented Japan and received a special mention at the 55th Venice Biennale, wrote the following in a published correspondence with art critic Hayashi Takayuki.

What I mean by “literal endlessness” is the open-ended model that forms the basis for the workshops and collaborative-type projects you write critically about. These projects are presented as being forever in progress without any conclusion. Because a number of different people are involved with them, no single person holds a complete picture. It's like a

continuous succession of ongoing experiences. Works that can't be grasped completely appear to be open, but in a certain way they are quite inaccessible insofar as they implicitly close off any single person's critique or analysis. Whatever any of us might say we never arrive at a complete picture. The inability to grasp the work in its entirety prevents interrogating its quality from the start. You could say the situation shuts out the voice of the other.<sup>11</sup>

What Tanaka is saying is that the words and critiques of outsiders and others are no longer functioning in relation to these newly emergent kinds of artwork that have a different kind of edge than that of conventional artworks. The same thing bothered me in my own encounters with these artworks. I frankly found it difficult to employ a critical vocabulary in these conditions, since I was unable to understand without participating and couldn't get a complete picture of the work. I have no idea how long one would have to engage with a project to be able to evaluate it responsibly.

These experiences troubled me, as someone who had been taught that, generally speaking, criticism holds greater power than the artwork in the world of contemporary art. I had thought of critics as players in contemporary art's value creation game.

Sawaragi Noi is the most influential critic in the Japanese contemporary art world. In the epilogue to Sawaragi's book *Simulationism: House Music and Appropriation Art*, literary critic Fukuda Kazuya writes, "Here we see criticism exalting in its victory, from a position of overwhelming superiority."<sup>12</sup> The critic has pushed past the artist to become "the new king."<sup>13</sup>

The critic has become a bit like an advertising agency. Many contemporary artists in fact conspire with critics to brand themselves (which has both its detractors and supporters). In other words, critics work as gilders, as one part of the process of value creation. Although there is something depraved and sick about this, I can appreciate it as an interesting peculiarity of contemporary art.

But today's locality art is different. It is not a world where criticism reigns as a victorious king. The kings today are the participants and the locality itself. Or rather, it may be that kings have been abolished and

<sup>11</sup> Tanaka Kōki, "Shitsumon suru 6-3: Hayashi Takayuki-san e 2" [Correspondences, no. 6-3: To Hayashi Takayuki, no. 2], ART iT, September 12, 2011, [http://www.art-it.asia/u/admin\\_columns/Vo0uTZ8iwrtXSL-h2W5MR/](http://www.art-it.asia/u/admin_columns/Vo0uTZ8iwrtXSL-h2W5MR/).

<sup>12</sup> Fukuda Kazuya, "Kaisetsu" [Epilogue], in Sawaragi Noi, *Zōho Shimyūrēshonizumu: Hausu myūjikkū to tōyō geijutsu* [Simulationism: House Music and Appropriation Art, expanded edition] (Tokyo: Kawade Bunko, 1994), 397.

<sup>13</sup> [ibid.]

(the fantasy of) a democracy of the people has been utopically realized.

The various participants in their physical bodies, the land as a physical place, the many amateurs and volunteers who “participate” in all the local art festivals to get “relational.” If aesthetics are to be found in the enjoyment of these fêtes, then critique has no place.

Art thus fulfills itself in the circle between the macrostructure of the political and economic prosperity of locality art and the naive sentiments of the participants. No opportunity exists for criticism as an outside entity to intervene. The structures of contemporary art are moving toward a situation where it does not matter whether such an opportunity exists.

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## THE THEORETICAL BACKGROUND—WHAT IS OUR REFERENCE FOR THE CONTEMPORARY?

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THERE SEEMS TO be concern over a shortage of theory (language) in contemporary art. Edited by Tsutsui Hiroki, the anthology *Contemporary Art Theory* was compiled to address this situation. The theory included in the volume provides a reverse impression of the editor’s idea of what he thinks people can use to critique contemporary art in Japan.

Most of the theories draw significantly from ideas that first appeared around 1968, theories of power born in a period of radical reexamination, or theories that question art institutions. They call for liberating the artwork from the institution of the museum, for example, or refusing artworks as things with a fixed, completed state, or changing the configuration of relations in society.

Harald Szeemann is often cited in discussions of works that

take the process of creation itself as the artwork rather than the art object. The catalogue essay for the exhibition he organized in 1969, *Live in Your Head. When Attitudes Become Form: Works, Concepts, Processes, Situations, Information*, is included in translation in Tsutsui's anthology:

Works, concepts, process, situations, information (we consciously avoided the expressions object and experiment) are the “forms” through which these artistic positions are expressed. They are “forms” derived not from preformed pictorial opinions but from the experience of the artistic practice itself.<sup>14</sup>

It is important to note that this was in 1969. This thinking emerged out of movements that sought radical revisions not only to art, but to lifestyles and structures of power, and such circumstances gave reality to the redefinition of the artwork as situation, as an idea or concept within the mind rather than an object (a form visible to the eye). Szeemann even states the following about the artists he curated who insisted the process itself was the work.

And yet for some of these artists the desire to create does not spring from purely visual experiences. It was inevitable that hippie philosophy, the rockers, and drug use should eventually affect the position of a younger generation of artists.<sup>15</sup>

I am sympathetic to the movements that peaked in 1968. Akasegawa Genpei's urban “events,” Terayama Shūji's street theater, Fluxus “happenings.” All of them questioned the frame enclosing “art” and attempted to destroy and disrupt it, yet none can be understood without taking into account their relevance within their historical context.

We must recognize that even as art being practiced in Japan today tries to claim those past movements as its grounds for legitimation, it is being co-opted into service to address regional revitalization, which is essentially an area of national policy. It looks to me like '68-style art practices are getting sucked into Japan's countryside. Oozing blood and

<sup>14</sup> [Harald Szeemann, “When Attitude Becomes Form,” trans. Jonathan Blower and Elizabeth Tucker, in *Harald Szeemann Selected Writings*, ed. Doris Chon, Glenn Phillips, and Pietro Rigolo (Los Angeles: The Getty Research Institute, 2018), 31. For the Japanese, see Harald Szeemann, “‘Keitai ga katachi ni naru toki’ ten ni yosete,” trans. Kawada Ayako, in *Kontenporarī āto seorī*, 15.]

<sup>15</sup> [Ibid., 29]

guts, zombies of the avant-garde are falling to pieces in rural rice fields (and, lest I be misunderstood, I am not using the word *zombie* simply to dismiss them).

Ultimately, however impressive the theoretical background is that questions the institutions of art and endorses the project of liberating them, insofar as the logic of the sponsoring national and local governments remains as I described above, today's art projects can only function to legitimate the co-optation of art into the sphere of regional revitalization.

Needless to say there are individual strategies and practices to secure such funding while following one's own creative path, and I don't deny those successes. But looking at the whole system, there is a gravitational pull towards regional revitalization that is difficult to resist, born of the power of bureaucratic regulatory language and the fact that the sponsors are public entities. Even if one were to justify it as a "means," there are many examples across history where the means take on a life of their own.

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## FAILED REBELLION—THE CASE OF KITAGAWA FRAM

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KITAGAWA FRAM IS one example of the '68 spirit of rebellion being coopted by locality art. Kitagawa is the leading figure for Japan's locality art, the founding director of the Echigo-Tsumari Art Triennale, honored with the Prime Minister's Awards 7th All Right! Nippon Grand Prix.

In his collection of interviews *Art's Tectonic Shift: Art, Culture, and Society at Japan's Big Turning Point*, he talks about his father being a regional Communist Party member, and how he himself was a leader in

the Zenkyōto radical student organization, as well as a participant in a Dada research collective, at Tokyo University of the Arts.<sup>16</sup>

The same Kitagawa says, “The departure point for both the Echigo-Tsumari Art Triennale and the Setouchi International Art Festival was the urge to try to do something to raise the spirits of these regions, to raise the spirits of the elderly folk who live in them.” This does of course have an intellectual underpinning of resisting globalization, homogenization, and center-periphery problems, as well as protecting the value of the earth and land. The problem I want to raise is that the particulars of these critical traditions notwithstanding, the result on the ground is terribly folksy.

Take statements like “Interactions with the visitors who come to the festival become a joy for the local people,”<sup>18</sup> or “I think festivals used to be things that expressed the relationship between nature and society, civilization and human, or gave truly great form to the interconnection of human and nature or society.”<sup>19</sup>

The rebellion that was revolutionary and new in 1968 ends up being deployed as state-led regional revitalization. What’s wrong with that? Kitagawa has clearly made his peace with the issue. “Surely we should acknowledge how the elderly folk living in these areas have a fun time when a bunch of young people come visiting. Even if it’s just for a shortwhile, it’s still something to enjoy when you don’t know how much time you have left and when your own children might only make the trip back for your funeral.”<sup>20</sup> If you put it that way, maybe we just have to accept it.

The author Sakaguchi Ango once made the tongue-in-cheek remark that literature only works as a painkiller. If, along similar lines, Kitagawa consciously resolves to redefine art as a painkiller for regions facing their own demise, then his artistic vision is hard to reject.

But it is difficult to embrace the situation that emerges as a result.

<sup>16</sup> Kitagawa Fram, *Āto no chikaku hendō: Daitenkanki Nihon no ‘bijutsu, bunka, shakai’* [Art’s tectonic shift: Art, culture, and society at Japan’s big turning point] (Tokyo: Bijutsu Shuppansha, 2013), 274ff.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 310.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 312.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 313.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 11.

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## THAT WHICH ONLY ART CAN DO—UNDERSTANDING AND SENSIBILITY PRIOR TO POLITICS

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THE ONLY WAY I can answer the question “what’s wrong with that?” is by saying that I still expect art to be more than a painkiller. Although I have been influenced by the mythologization and romanticization of the culture of the late sixties that has developed during the intervening years, I believe it cleared the way for a new understanding of daily life and existence itself. But that premonition, that thrilling revelation of an unknown world or sense of expansion that I get from ’68 culture even in retrospect—none of that is to be found in locality art.

The revolutionary avant-garde of the past lost its spirit when it failed to garner support in a moment of mass rebellion, leaving only its outer form to accumulate in history, so that in a certain sense the art of today is what has just managed to hang on to life amidst the ruins. These “zombies of the avant-garde” are now rampant, perhaps cooking up the painkillers necessary to face death. This being “contemporary,” maybe we should affirm it as such. Maybe it’s best to spin up a rationale for affirming that “this is what it means to be contemporary.”

But that is not enough for me.

The reason people refer to 1968 might be the intuition that the present is also undergoing a complete structural transformation. Perhaps we are looking to 1968 as a role model for surviving our present moment. Surely there is a subconscious premonition that a total reformation of life and power is once again possible.

For that very reason I cannot stomach self-legitimation that is based on simple deference to authority. That is a travesty. We have lost the anti-authoritarian, critical, questioning spirit of rebellion.

Presenting possibilities for a fundamentally different kind of politics by revealing the possibility of new worlds is something art alone can do. Don't we jeopardize art's singular reason for existence when we ask it to turn to established authority to legitimate itself by attending to social trends and political theory?

When art is co-opted too easily into national policy or social movements it ceases to have meaning. Tanaka Kōki points out the following in the piece cited above. "No matter what kind of project it is, being connected with society somehow becomes an advantage in the art world in and of itself. All the more so when the goal is regional revitalization—if the project links up with that it's like anything goes. It doesn't matter what the outcome is, being engaged with society ends up functioning like an indulgence." If that's the case, the aesthetics of contemporary art end up being nothing more than a cudgel for activists. The situation reminds me of the history of critical praise for proletarian literature and critical opposition to it. When principles that are not unique to art, like theory, ideas, and ideology take precedence over aesthetics, the genre will lose its inherent significance. In the end it will lose its special appeal.

I raise these questions to artists who are convinced that they can guarantee artistic value simply by referencing the skeletons of 1968, to those convinced that everything is fine so long as they are engaged with society and politics, and to the critics who go along with it.

Won't this lead to art losing its power to transcend the given world that people have sought in it because it is the special domain of art? Won't it lose its intense power to completely change the world? Won't it then end up losing its very power to change society and politics?

Because the genre of art appears so self-evident and its institutions appear so rigid, people think of it as something natural that would never disappear, which is precisely what enables them to use art for other purposes. But structural change should not be underestimated. The concept of "art" used today was only imported to Japan in the Meiji period. If a big enough change occurred, it could well disappear. If, nevertheless, we are still going to care about art, we must consider seriously what needs to be preserved as its core.

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