
Art practice as an integral part of everyday life

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Haji Oh has conducted a series of ongoing workshops called “Unraveling / untying knitted items” with local residents over a period of two years. Oh has been engaged with the act of ‘unraveling’ for a long time. The time-consuming process is also an important factor in revealing ‘silent memories’ that the artist has been exploring¹, as well as creating a dialogue with the material and re-creating shapes. The starting point of her primal concept was to think about unspoken memories of her grandmother who immigrated from Cheju island of Korea to Osaka.

In this case, the materials gathered by local residents were knitted items such as sweaters and scarfs buried deep in closets; a departure from the materials Oh used in the past. This was the first attempt of the artist to open the process and share it with others, who gathered with different motivations. The workshop, which she began as research, turned into a place of conversation as participants moved their hands. “When we unraveled sweaters, our conversation was on events from past to the present, and sometimes linked to the future. I felt the workshop became a place for time travel. That was when I realised the workshop itself has become an art piece.”, as Oh looks back, the space where they worked together gradually shifted to the place for their stories, and turned into a “place where the imagination is unleashed”². Her aim to let unspoken memories surface has been realised through the workshop. The setting up of her workshop “Kioku Shugei-kan ‘Tansu’” functioned to open up this experience more. Workshops were held twice a week for a period of one year. Participants consisted of a neighbouring lady who showed up consistently every time, people who heard via the neighborhood, and passers-by. Through its continuation, the “Unraveling / untying knitted items” project merged into the participants’ daily scenery.

Ko Yamada, who conducted the “Nishinari Naruheso Newspaper” project, is concerned with individual’s

memories from different perspectives. “Naruheso Newspaper” projects include other editions in the past such as Nagoya in 2009 and Berlin in 2011, both held as workshops. Starting out as a photographer, Yamada has expanded his practice to paper mediums such as books and newspapers, which he reconstructs from a critical and unique point of view. His previous projects include “The Other Day Workers Times”³, a performance and newspaper consisting of memories of the first work or jobs done by visitors at a museum, and “Oven Baked Old News”⁴, where he focused on the economic value of a newspaper, which is lost in a day.

The “Nishinari Naruheso Newspaper” has evolved since initial editions in a number of aspects; it was issued every three weeks for a duration of ten months. A local resident-turned writer who applied through the open call had a serial column. The paper did not stay inside the workshop, but was distributed in the town which was a target area for the writers. Editorial staff of the paper consisted of the locals from different generations and professions, although notably the majority was male and over the age of 50, being contemporaries of the artist. Furthermore, the continuous activity of the paper constantly generated a new circuit of connections in town, which appeared in subsequent editions, such as an interviewee who, in turn, interviewed other locals, or locals calling in potential news tips. According to Yamada, the paper has become a ‘playground of adults in the community’.

After working in the deserted apartment location Shin Fukuju-so for the exhibition “Small things that seem big”, Tetsuya Umeda moved on to the streets of Sanno and staged his new work “Age 0”, inspired by the town’s unique aspects. He inserted trivial (poisonous) tricks in the townscape, connecting past to future, to let the ‘abstract world with no beginning nor end’ surface. Umeda has been working with this method of no beginning and no end, which has no linear structure nor climax. In addition, as this project was executed in town, where unforeseen happenings occurred, it became increasingly challenging for viewers to know what was actually meant to be watched. What to watch was up to the viewer, while at the same time viewers who wondered about this abstract territory became part of ‘the world without the centre’ that Umeda intended to create. It is no longer important what was constructed and what was not. What stood out was the way in which art intermingled with the surrounding reality. Additionally, the project revealed the singularity

of the location, which gave depth back to the project, whose co-relation invited unpredictables to happen, for example a local resident suddenly starting his own tour, or another resident coming to listen to the old music from the gramophone that the artist installed - as if another reality continues on forever.

“Nishinari Children’s Orchestra” by the first musician the Breaker Project invited, Yoshihide Otomo, stems from our encounter with his project “Orchestra FUKUSHIMA!”, which was an improvisational orchestra played at the opening of the music festival held in Fukushima in the summer of 2011, organised by the “Project FUKUSHIMA!”⁵, a reaction to the nuclear plant incident after the disaster in March of the same year. The overwhelming performance by a massive group of some 260 members comprised of professional musicians and amateurs gathered by an open call, gave off an energy which felt as if it contained the lofty determination to face both harsh reality and the contradiction of society under circumstances that seemed impossible to restore. Our response was the “Children’s Orchestra” in Osaka. The issues caused by the nuclear plant in Fukushima are connected at a fundamental level to what is happening in Nishinari.

What should be mentioned regarding the workshops in Nishinari was the support by the local coordinators⁶; the teaching staff of our collaborator Imaike Kodomo-no-le Children Community Centre, who could bridge children and the project. The project owes much to their attentive work, whose aim is to rescue children from the negative spiral of the poverty in this district. There were times when we made discoveries due to this crucial collaboration, such as observing positive changes in children who participated, and looking for a solution to problems together.

In addition, the teaching staff highly valued ‘the art and music professionals who could draw children’s potential more than they could possibly do’. I think the success was due to their open-mindedness toward the possibility of art to children’s issues, which was the key to our collaboration. Otomo’s distinguished improvisation skills awakened children’s personalities and let them shine. Above all, his thoughts must have connected with children’s spirits.

As I mentioned in the introduction, the various projects intermingled with the daily life of the community to create a new reality, and involved many people as they continued for three years. Looking back at what was happening on individual projects sites, combined with the motivations, I feel that a seed has come into bud and taken root, as a

result of the years we invested. We could of course say that the soil was ready since the Breaker Project has a longer history in this neighbourhood, however I never felt the same sense of achievement with our previous one-year projects. Newly set up places, including our base camp Shin Fukuju-so, and “Kioku Shugei-kan ‘Tansu’” continue to exist, as well as the relationship with the local coordinators, which will lead to our next step.

We are based in this part of the city because many problematic issues in contemporary society have been present here in a condensed forms, dating back to the modernisation period after the Meiji era, through to the post-war period of high economic growth, and to the recent years of accelerated globalisation. Nevertheless, the controversy this town faces is ubiquitous, and similar to the contradictions that every economy-driven society inevitably holds. Entangled with global politics and economics, these issues do not seem likely to be solved any time soon. And this situation is in fact closely connected to our daily life. That is exactly why we want to start small steps here; in these places, in our daily life. Without making change here, we cannot go forward.

1. Haji Oh “Text-tile as a Metaphor: Centering on the ‘Memories of Silence’” 2011, p.82
2. Ibid., p.85
3. One-day performance involving audience participation, in collaboration with a poet Jin Murata, held in the Rodochenko Room at the Gifu Contemporary Ceramic Museum, Tajimishi, Gifu, at the occasion of the exhibition “Russian Avant-Garde Ceramic Art”.
4. Two-day performance based on the concept that the old newspaper still has some value. The one-day old paper was sold at 100 yen, which comes with a baked sweet potato, when the artist performed in the classical paper reporter style in a suit and a bow tie. On the second day, the paper’s information value dropped so he sold the baked potato wrapped by the paper, and he was dressed as a usual baked potato vendor in town.
5. A long term project to think about the future of Fukushima and Japan, set up by Yoshihide Otomo, Michiro Endo and Ryoichi Wago, after the disaster in Fukushima where people still suffer from the nuclear plant incident. A number of musicians, poets, scientists, etc. who are originally from Fukushima or based there, get together and send a message to the world through music/art projects regarding what the future of Fukushima could be.
6. The collaboration with the local coordinators was one of our new attempts since 2011. We chose the most supportive local residents among the ones who we had met through the previous projects and made a structure to collaborate with them so that they could bridge the projects and the communities.