

When do we need art for the renewal of urban communities? : Notes on the ambivalence of community-oriented art projects

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When do we need art for the renewal of urban communities?

Notes on the ambivalence of community-oriented art projects

Takeshi Ebine

Introduction

In this paper I will discuss the relationship between art and urban community renewal. This topic is related to a trend prevailing in the Japanese art scene in recent years. In Japan, we have been witnessing a significant increase in community-oriented art projects since the mid 1990s.¹ These projects, often conducted in collaboration with local residents, attempt to combine art with community renewal activities and rebuild weakened community bonds by realizing an art project. Two major art festivals that took place last year (2010) in Japan and attracted a huge number of audiences, namely *Setouchi International Art Festival* and *Aichi Triennale* are the culminations of this trend, because despite some differences, both festivals contained community-oriented art projects as core elements and familiarized the general public with this type of art praxis.²

But why does the social agenda of community renewal increasingly come into contact with art today? How does a successful art project create a community in the urban space? Moreover, is this marriage between art and community always without any disturbances? These are the questions I would like to address here.

First of all, I will describe the key characteristics of the *urban* community in contrast with both the community in general and the urban space as a public sphere. Then, I will examine the urban community created by community-oriented art projects. I will also describe a project of the *Semba Art Café* that I participate in as a director. Finally I will close this paper by discussing the basic relationship between art and community and pointing out the ambivalence

inherent in community-oriented art projects.

Characteristics of Urban Communities

To understand the specific features of an urban community properly, we must first illuminate the fundamental characteristics of the community in general and contrast it with the urban space as a public sphere.

Sociologist Zygmunt Bauman pointed out five characteristics of a community.³ The first is a self-evident shared understanding that precedes all agreements achieved by negotiation and compromise. The second is a boundary that “demarcates social membership from non-membership.”⁴ Usually, someone who belongs to one community feels strange in another community. The stronger the sense of belonging is, the clearer the division between ‘us’ and ‘them.’ The third and fourth characteristics relate closely to this boundary between the inside and outside. The third is a proximity that we feel mentally as well as physically to people who belong to the same community. In contrast to it, members of other communities seem distant to us. Furthermore, the community is characterized by durability of its relationships. These relationships are constantly renewed but nonetheless durable, and they are not transient in nature, while a contact with the outside of a community is usually marked by its contingency. Finally, reciprocity, in other words, the principle of giving and sharing is an important characteristic of a community. Baumann called this principle of mutual assistance “fraternal sharing.”⁵

Having summarized the basic characteristics of a community in this way, we can understand how the ongoing process of globalization threatens the existence of communities. An increase in mobility and growth and acceleration of flows of people, goods, and information undermine the boundaries of a community and muddle the attributes of proximity and durability with their opposites. Moreover, a radical destabilization of social relationships makes

“fraternal sharing” even more difficult. However, at this very moment of crisis, the renewal of communities becomes a social agenda, and many NPOs have been formed to address the issue. This seemingly paradoxical development can be explained by the retreatment of the state from the social realm that we are witnessing today in many countries. The modern nation-state that once absorbed the functions of communities, such as mutual assistance or assurance against misadventures into its social security systems, is now dismantling or privatizing social services under the pressure of globalization. Today, we find ourselves increasingly abandoned in an extremely destabilized social environment.⁶ Especially in Japan, this process upsets long-term employment with corporations and the nuclear family, which served as substitutes for communities in the past.⁷ It is in this context that the renewal of communities has become a social agenda in Japan, and since 2000, many community-oriented art projects have been attempted in many regions.

The community as described above is usually contrasted with the urban space as a public sphere. The features of the urban community are also closely related to the specific qualities of the urban space. Here, I would like to refer to the theoretical reflections on the urban space as public sphere by a German philosopher Helmut Plessner. According to Plessner, the urban space is a public sphere that consists of “others” who pass each other on the street or at the train station and have only temporary contacts without durable commitments.⁸ And to manage these transient and extremely complex relationships, the urban space must be based on the functional systems such as information media and transportations.⁹ Furthermore, Plessner pointed out two attitudes specific to city dwellers that correspond to their main activities in the city (business and sociability). The first is “diplomacy,” which consists in achieving a consensus between individuals who pursue different interests from different standpoints.¹⁰ The second attitude is “tact,” a social technique of feeling relaxed among unknown others. Tact is the ability to pay attention

to subtle expressions of others on social occasions and to keep an appropriate distance that is neither too intimate nor too distant.¹¹

From these brief observations on the basic characteristics of a community in general and the urban space as public sphere, we can now outline the features of urban communities that are relevant especially to NPOs or art projects dealing with the renewal of urban communities. First, because an urban community exists only inside the urban space, it cannot be closed to it. Instead, it exists only on the basis of the openness and fluidity of the urban space. Therefore, it is marked by a soft boundary between the inside and outside. Accordingly, the opposition of proximity and distance are rearranged so that strangers, or those who come from the outside, become the basic components of a community. However, there can be no community without durability. In fact, the urban community has always a weak core of durability that does not exclude contingent elements. In addition, we also find the principle of reciprocity at work in the urban community, even if it is not so dominant. Finally, in the urban community, the common that is shared by its members is not self-evident. Instead, it is something that should be found, created or fostered. Therefore, it can be said that the urban community appears to be a type of project. In fact, these features can be found in urban communities created by community-oriented art projects.

Urban communities created by art projects

I will describe two examples to illustrate how art projects can create and foster an urban community. The first example is the *Chōjamachi project* organized by Aichi Triennale. The site of this project, Chōjamachi, is a central district in Nagoya, the third-largest city in Japan. This district flourished as the business center of the textile industry until the 1960s. But now, Chōjamachi is suffering from depopulation, empty offices and shops, and too many parking lots. Aichi Triennale borrowed unused offices from the owners and provided

them to invited artists. The site-specific art works made by the artists in cooperation with local residents often dealt with the history of the district and the memories of the residents.¹² The Chōjamachi project was well received by its audience as well as the critics and can be considered a successful attempt of the community-oriented art project. After the festival the residents group issued a public statement called the “Chōjamachi Art Manifesto” and announced its continued collaborations with artists. This move clearly shows that the urban community found a new identity through the project.¹³

Let us consider the urban community created by the Chōjamachi project. This community was based on the openness and fluidity of the urban space and had only a soft boundary, because it comprised not only local residents and owners of the buildings but also artists, volunteers and audiences who were all strangers and have had no prior relationship with this urban district. The project began when the artists came from the outside, in many cases from abroad, to the district. They were welcomed and taken care of by the residents group, which was passionately committed to the project. It was this coupling of nomadic artists and a few committed local residents that formed a weak core of durability, the originating point of a community. Furthermore, it is also important for the Chōjamachi project to contain a pronounced element of reciprocity, a principle of giving and sharing. Not only did everyone except the artists participate on a voluntary basis, but also the owners of the buildings lent their offices for free, and exceptionally, no admission fee was required for the audience. Note that the reciprocal relationship is an element that is not contained in the urban space. “Diplomacy” and “tact” as attitudes specific to the urban public space are based on the logic of commodity exchange and consumption. Successful community-oriented art projects such as the Chōjamachi project create urban community by suspending the dominant logic of the urban space and introducing the principle of reciprocity into the social relationships.

Now, I will describe a project of the Semba Art Café, which I participate in as director. The Semba Art Café is an organization of the Urban Research Plaza of the Osaka City University. It runs various research programs on community and art in a central district in Osaka.¹⁴ The district called Semba is a former flourishing center of the textile industry that now suffers from problems similar to those of the Chōjamachi district in Nagoya. In 2006, we launched a small festival named the “Semba Architecture Festival” , which consisted of exhibitions of site-specific art works and performances in some significant old and modern buildings in the area. In 2008, we renamed the festival “Commons of the town” and reinforced collaborations with the local residents groups.¹⁵ While in 2008 “Commons of the town” consisted of only eight programs in four days, it evolved into a festival with 25 programs in five days last year. Not only the local residents but also shop owners, office workers, and other visitors participated in the festival. In 2010, the Semba Art Café was awarded by the Kinki Region Development Bureau for the best urban renewal project.

The project of the Semba Art Café also contains all the important elements we found in the Chōjamachi project. But without going into detail, I would like to point out two remarkable changes that occurred during the course of the five years of the project. First, the local residents group is now taking the initiative of organizing the project. It sets up an organizing committee and actively participates in shaping the festival, which creates a sense of community among participants. The second change, closely related to the first, is that in the course of the positive development of the festival, the contribution of artists has gradually diminished. What began as a community-oriented art project has become an urban renewal activity in which art plays only a marginal role. In this development, we can recognize a latent tension between the community-oriented art projects and the renewal of urban communities.

Conclusion

French philosopher Jacques Rancière suggests that the practice of art is closely linked to the question of the common. According to him, art constitutes a specific sphere in which the experience of the common is made. And art introduces into it objects that can be taken as common and subjects that can designate these objects. By suspending the ordinary form of sensory experience, the practice of art creates a specific time and space, where something common that has always been among the people but never seen and heard by them is now made visible and audible. Therefore, art is always concerned with the reconfiguration of the common of the community.¹⁶ At the very moment of crisis, the community might rely on this power of art to redefine the common among the people. However, note that this redefinition always occurs with the suspension of ordinary experience. Therefore, what art produces is not a consensus but a dissensus about the common. Art has the potential to create a community — however, at the same time, art opens it to the outside and destabilizes it. Sometimes, the community may be afraid of this destabilizing power of art. Here lies the specific tension between art and community. As we have observed in case of the Semba Art Café project, community-oriented art projects also cannot avoid this tension. When we talk about the renewal of the urban community by an art project, we must be aware of this ambivalence inherent in the community-oriented art projects.¹⁷

- 1 One of the earliest Examples is “Kiryu Saien Project” which has started in 1994. See Abductive-art Collaboration. *Kiryu Saien_ARCHIVES 1994-2004*. Gunma: Abductive-art Collaboration, 2005. See also, Kajiya, Kenji. “Art Project and Japan: Examining the Architecture of Art,” trans. Yu Nakai, *Hiroshima Art Project 2008*. Hiroshima: Hiroshima Art Project, 2009, 152-161.
- 2 Setouchi International Art Festival took place July 19 through 31 October on the seven islands of the Seto Inland Sea and Takamatsu. It attracted over 939,000 visitors. Aichi

Triennale was held 21 August through 31 October in Nagoya. The number of visitors to the Triennale exceeded 572,000. See the following documents of the festivals: Setouchi International Art Festival Executive Committee. *Final Report*. <http://setouchi-artfest.jp/images/uploads/news/report_20101220.pdf> Aichi Prefectural Government . Department of Community Affairs. *Summary Report of the Triennale*. <<http://aichitriennale.jp/press/pdf/20100113-2.pdf>>

- 3 See Bauman, Zygmunt. *Community: Seeking Safety in an Insecure World*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2001, pp. 9-15.
- 4 "Community." *Collins Dictionary of Sociology*. 1991, p. 99.
- 5 Bauman, *Community*, p. 72.
- 6 See, e.g., Bauman, *Community*, ch. 3.
- 7 See Hiroi, Yoshinori. *Komyunitī wo toinaosu: Tsunagari, toshi, Nihon shakai no mirai*. Tokyo: Chikumashobō, 2010, pp. 9-15.
- 8 See Plessner, Helmuth. *Grenzen der Gemeinschaft: Eine Kritik des sozialen Radikalismus*. 1924. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2002, pp. 53-57.
- 9 See, *ibid.*, pp. 95-97.
- 10 See, *ibid.*, pp. 98-100.
- 11 See, *ibid.* pp. 109-110.
- 12 See Kubota, Kenji. "Kokunai saidaikyū no kokusaiten ga mezashita mono toha." *Bijutsu Techō* October 2010: 116-118.
- 13 See the website of the residents group which is now organizing "Chōjamachi Art Annual," a new community-based art project. <<http://www.effector.co.jp/chojamachi-artannual/>>
- 14 For further Information of the Semba Art Café, see the official website. <<http://art-cafe.ur-plaza.osaka-cu.ac.jp/>>
- 15 See Urban Research Plaza. *URP GCOE DOCUMENT 2 : Semba Art Café January 2006 - March 2008*. Osaka: Osaka City University, 2008.
- 16 See Rancière, Jacques. "Aesthetics as Politics." *Aesthetics and Its Discontents*, trans. Steven Corcoran. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2004, pp. 23-26.

- 17 This paper is based on a lecture delivered at The 9th Urban Culture Research Forum, held at Chulalongkorn University, Thailand, in March 2011.