Alleviating Isolation Through Art Projects

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Abstract

This paper discusses how the local NPO works together with excluded people in Osaka, Japan. A target of the NPO is to support to alleviate people's isolation from the society by using arts. The NPO is Cocoroom, which gives many art workshops and events in Osaka City. Their activities are especially focused on the area called "Kamagasaki," which is famous for lots of social problems. Many day-laborers were gathering and working there. However they've lost their jobs because of their aging and economic recession. And now, they get public assistance. Most of them live alone and tend to be isolated. Cocoroom tries to contact and invite them to join their activities. In this course, Cocoroom started new project, called "Kamagasaki Geijutsu-Daigaku (Art University) = Kamagei)." Kamagei provides lectures and workshops by specialists on various subjects. Cocoroom aims to make the space where people can meet and communicate through this project.

Keywords: *Art Management, Cocoroom, Socially Inclusive-style Art Management, Art Workshops, Isolation, Loneliness.*

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Introduction

The goal of this paper is to report on to what extent social problems are being addressed in Japan through socially inclusive-style arts management, based on fieldwork at a site where this kind of arts management is being practiced. Socially inclusive-style arts management in Japan has developed as a supplement to the existing welfare and economic policies in the areas that have been hardest hit by the huge disparities brought about by the results of neo-liberalist economic policies that have appeared especially since the beginning of the 21st century, such as the Nishinari District of Osaka, Kotobuki-cho in Yokohama, and Tokyo's San'ya District. Additionally, arts management projects are being developed not only in these areas of poverty and high unemployment but also in other areas where the channels for social participation are weak, such as in facilities for the handicapped, hospitals, disaster areas, etc. The way in which this kind of socially-inclusive arts management differs greatly from previously existing arts management is that it does not target the middle class, nor does it rely upon already existing arts spaces (such as museums, concert halls, or theaters), but characteristically has been developed in site-specific ways that target people and communities who tend to be excluded from the larger society in the places where they live. In this paper, from among these examples, I will focus my discussion on the Not-for-profit Organization 'Cocoroom' that is active in Osaka's Nishinari District. This presentation is based on a survey conducted from November 2014 to February 2015.

1. About the "Cocoroom"

'Cocoroom,' whose official name is the 'Room of Voices (koe), Words (kotoba), and Heart (kokoro),' is an organization that was set up in 2003 by the poetess Ueda Kanayo. At the time it was first established it was a purely volunteer group but in 2004 it became a legally registered not-for-profit corporation. Cocoroom is an 'info-shop café' that serves coffee and drinks (including alcohol) and food, and it is visited by large numbers of people daily. The concept behind Cocoroom was to try to make it into 'a point of connection between the arts and society, a place that would create bonds between people.' Based on this concept, while developing a program somewhat different from the usual so-called 'art workshop,' they aimed to create a place where people could encounter each other and share the space, with workshops that were like surrounding a cooking pot and eating together with the participants. Most of the workshops that they conduct are targeted at the Kamagasaki District that they are adjacent to and the people who live there. Why then are they conducting their activities at this location? That is deeply related to the history and the character of the Kamagasaki District.

2. About Kamagasaki

Kamagasaki is located in one corner of the Nishinari Ward of Osaka City. Nishinari Ward is one of the 24 wards that make up Osaka City, and it is an area with many homeless people and welfare recipients, and it is rife with the problems of isolation that those people face. Even within Nishinari, this trend is especially conspicuous in Kamagasaki. Kamagasaki is an area that thrived as a labor market for day laborers (called a 'yoseba' in Japan) during the period of high economic growth in Japan after the end of the Second World War, and it is a place that was formed

into a neighborhood of single men as a matter of policy by the government. Even at present the male ratio of the population is extremely high. From about 1990 onwards, the face of the neighborhood has gradually changed. One of the major factors in that change has been the decline in the demand for day laborers due to Japan's ongoing recession. Along with the decline in the demand for laborers, another major problem has arisen in Kamagasaki. That is the aging of the laborers who are trying to support themselves. Most of the laborers are ones who came to Kamagasaki through the form of mass hirings in the period of high economic growth half a century ago, and today because of aging and physical problems it has become difficult for them to work.
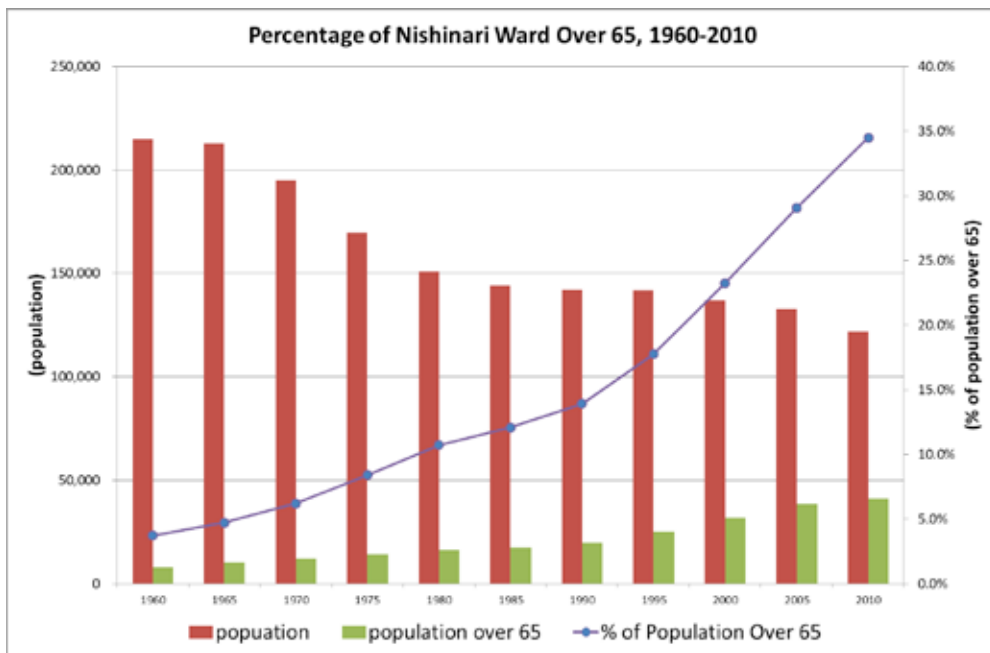

Figure 1. The transition of percentage of Nishinari Ward over 65, 1960-2010 (Created based upon data from Osaka City).

A portion of the laborers who have lost their jobs have come to living on the street and sleeping rough. As a result, Kamagasaki has come to be known as the 'neighborhood of the homeless. ' Since the year 2000, the character of the neighborhood has changed even more. The number of men living on the street has declined, but in inverse proportion to that the number living on welfare support payments has increased. Some reasons that can be given for this are that through the process of aging many have become eligible to receive welfare payments, and in recent years it has been becoming easier to receive benefits through the welfare system.

3. Isolation as a Social Problem
In this way, Kamagasaki has been moving from being a 'laborers' neighborhood' to becoming a 'welfare neighborhood' and the issues that need to be addressed have also been changing. One of these issues is the problem of 'isolation.' According to the research of Nishizawa Akihiko, in yoseba labor markets like Kamagasaki, there is a characteristic form of human association that is called the 'norm

of non-participation.' In a yoseba labor market, because of the peculiar circumstances in the backgrounds of individual day laborers who work there (things hard to talk about with other people like experiences of being discriminated against, problems of debt, experiences of having been fired, etc.) it has fomented an atmosphere in which it is a taboo to ask about somebody's personal circumstances or background. Based on this tacit understanding, a norm has been created in which the laborers put emphasis on transitory associations and do not build the kind of close relationships in which they would positively try to get to know each other more deeply. The research of Ishikawa Midori indicates that this norm of non-participation, in combination with the increase of welfare recipients among former laborers, is a factor in giving rise to their isolation. When they start receiving welfare payments and end up living alone in apartments, the few tenuous bonds that they did have with other people are severed. They haven't built up the kinds of friendships that would motivate someone to deliberately come to visit their apartment, and they have even lost the places where they would encounter the other people left behind from their days living on the street. That is the deep sense of isolation expressed in their voices when they say, "If there's nothing going on, I just sit all day in my room," or "All I do is eat, drink some sake, and then sleep." In this paper I will attempt to extract from the activities of an arts-related NPO how they address and deal with the problems of isolation. Those activities are the project run by Cocoroom that is called the 'Kamagasaki College of the Arts.'
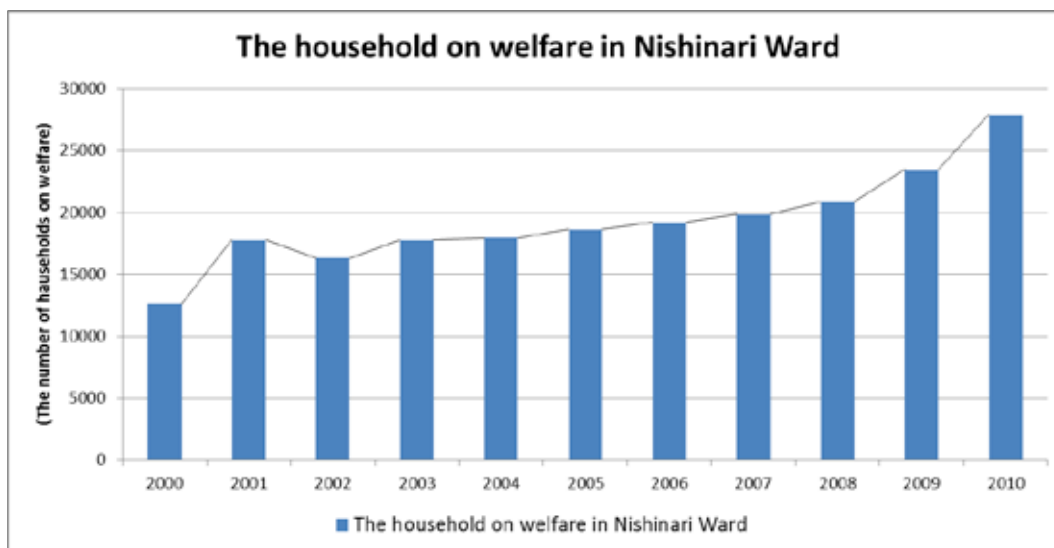

Figure 2. The transition of the household on welfare in Nishinari Ward (Created based upon data from Osaka City University Urban Research Plaza).

4. "Kamagasaki Geijutsu Daigaku" (The Kamagasaki College of the Arts)

The Kamagasaki Geijutsu Daigaku (Kamagei) a project that began in November 2012 and is ongoing, and has become a program that bundles together a large number of workshops. All the different workshops are modeled on college courses, and each theme is called a 'subject.' Among the subjects there is a wide range from workshops in the arts such as 'poetry,' 'choral singing,' and 'dance,' but also

including such subjects as 'astronomy,' 'brain science,' and 'philosophy,' that at first glance are workshops that aren't related to the arts. The target for the workshops is said to be 'anyone and everyone' but in actuality it is largely people who live in Kamagasaki and the surrounding area who participate. In the first year (November 2012 to February 2013) there were about 40 workshops that were conducted by 12 instructors, but the scale has gradually expanded, and in the second year there were about 60 workshops led by 17 instructors, and in the third year, this year, more than 70 workshops are being conducted by 22 instructors. On top of that, people from Cocoroom received an invitation to the international event of the Yokohama Triennale 2014 from the director Morimura Yasumasa, participated as artists, and were taken up by all kinds of media such as newspapers and websites. According to the projects planner Ueda Yuko, the core concept of the Kamagei was that, "We wanted to create a space where the people of Kamagasaki and people from outside the area could encounter each other." For that purpose, it was necessary to have projects that people from both inside and outside Kamagasaki could participate in and not simply workshops in the arts. To that end, the workshops that had been conducted up till now were brought together under the title of 'courses' and we gave it the all-embracing name of 'Kamagei' and had high expectations that many people would participate.

Figure 3. An image of the "Expression" class taken by the author.

5. The Course in "Expression"

Next let us describe one example of an actual course at the 'Kamagei' and try to verify the way in which it addresses the problem of isolation. The course (workshop) that I will introduce today is the one called 'Expression.'

The workshop in 'Expression' is conducted by Iwahashi Yuri, a practitioner of education that utilizes drama. When it is time for the workshop to begin, the participants including the instructor, Ms. Iwahashi, sit in chairs that are arranged in a circle. She announces the beginning of the workshop, and the rules are explained: "For the next two hours, everyone can talk if they want to, or if they just want to be quiet and listen to other people talking, that is all right, or if they want to

leave, they can do that." After those rules are explained, she doesn't say anything more. From that point on, how the time is spent is left up to the inclinations of the participants. After a while someone or a few people begin to talk little by little. One person may go on talking for a long time, or a back-and-forth chat between participants may begin. During that time the instructor doesn't by any means try to control the situation by acting as a kind of moderator, but rather she herself listens to people talking and sometimes speaks just like the other participants. At times arguments may arise between participants with opposing views, but she doesn't actively try to suppress them. However, there are occasions when she will halt the proceedings and give some direction, and even at times inject words of caution in a severe tone of voice. That happens when one participant interrupts another participant's speaking, or tries to enforce their own views by tripping someone else up, in other words in situations where someone is not really listening to the words of the other person.

This workshop goes on for two hours including a short break. Among the participants there are people who get up and leave in the middle, and there are participants who just sit and don't say a single word. As an arts-related workshop this one is a rarity in that it is not trying to do or make anything in particular, but simply spends the time in talking. That is a brief outline of the Expression course run by Iwahashi Yuri, but I think we should try to analyze the content of this workshop which at first glance appears simply to be an occasion for conversation.

The source materials for that are Ms. Iwahashi's statements. She relates that the goal of the workshop "…is for each and every person to be able to be just as they are in this venue. That's the space we're creating." The problem she is trying to make people aware of is that, "For people to really listen to other people is really difficult." Even while people are listening to someone else talking, they are unconsciously hearing and absorbing it altered by their own views and likes and dislikes. Addressing that, by "letting each and every person be just as they are, and making a space for that," the workshop is not simply chatting but is trying to create an atmosphere which can elicit from each and every person just what it is that they want to say. In other words, this workshop is not simply practice in 'expressing' oneself well, but provides lessons in the behavior and demeanor necessary to sincerely listen to what another has to say, and moreover build a framework for relationships. Seen from the perspective of counseling, this becomes a kind of counseling through unstructured encounters. As a result, it can also be said to be a lesson in how the people who live in Kamagasaki can lessen their isolation. They are conducting a workshop that is different from the usual arts workshop, one that can be said to be creating a space in which people can encounter each other.

Conclusion

The first characteristic of the workshops at the Kamagei, as exemplified by the workshop in 'Expression,' is the manner in which they are conducted. They are not set up so that the number one goal is creating a particular work of art or completing a predetermined program. Cocoroom's representative Ueda Kanayo says, "The arts at Cocoroom are about encounters with people and relating with them."

In the workshop on 'Expression' for example, the goal is studying how to express oneself to other people, how to listen to and absorb the expressions of others, and how to relate with each other. The second characteristic of the workshops is the position occupied by the instructors. In the workshops of the Kamagei, the instructors mostly work as facilitators, and not much as leaders who are trying to force some agenda. Instead, what is aimed at is creating a venue in which the instructors also encounter the participants and all of them learn something together. In other words, from the standpoint of socially inclusive-style arts management methodology, from the characteristic that the arts have for 'expressing something,' the participants are learning how to express themselves, and by creating a venue in which to share that expression with other people, they are attempting to solve the social problems of isolation. Also, another important point about this project is that they are encouraging the participation of both people from within Kamagasaki and people from the outside. By doing this, they are trying to create channels of interaction and exchange that connect with the larger society outside, and not attempting to solve problems only within the local community.

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