

# Art as a Mechanism for Enhancing Social Accessibility<sup>++</sup>

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## Abstract

“Art Access and Advocacy,” the theme of Urban Research Plaza’s 11th international forum, implies the development of access channels through the arts, which enable the participation of socially disadvantaged persons in social activities and ultimately result in the making of a highly communal society. In this article, I will discuss the social context from which this theme emerged. In addition, I will consider the importance of arts management in a few concrete examples.

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### Ethics for Overcoming the Invisible Wall

Public space is “space in which a ‘seat’ or ‘place’ is prepared for every person” (Saito 2000). It is a space that is open to anyone, accessible to everyone, and may become anyone’s territory. While public space is easy to discuss in principal, it is difficult to guarantee in practice. The depth of the problem lies primarily in the fact that “the tacit power of public space to exclude is constantly internalized by persons living in situations of social exclusion.” Namely, the excluded bear the full brunt of the exclusionary power of public space. What is more, they do so alone, without any means of appealing their exclusion. The strain of exclusion, of course, is more than an individual can bear alone. Exclusion manifests itself somewhere in the collapse of the individual’s life and brutalizes and strains the individual. The most critical and distressing issue in all of this is the problem of segregation. As a society, we force individuals to live in situations of isolation, while at the same time failing to recognize it. It is not that we ignore the problem. Rather, it is that we overlook or forget it because persons living in isolation or segregation are unable to transmit messages to the outside world.

The problem of exclusion frequently appears in desolate rural villages, institutions for persons with disabilities, districts with large concentrations of elderly residents, hospitals, sparsely populated regions, disaster-afflicted areas, massacre sites, conflict zones, slums, and outcast communities. It often affects the members of socially marginally groups, such as transgendered persons, prisoners, immigrants, alcoholics, drug addicts, shut-ins, NEETs ((Not currently engaged in Employment, Education, or Training), and individuals struggling to secure stable employment. The fundamental purpose of this forum is to consider how art can be used to help the aforementioned communities and individuals overcome their exclusion. The issue of exclusion manifests itself in a particularly realistic and urgent manner in the various countries of Asia, which suffer frequent natural disasters, are rife with political instability, and were directly affected by the financial collapse resulting from the 2008 Lehman Shock. I firmly believe that this exclusion is an issue that must be resolved. However, can art really function as a medium for addressing the issue of social exclusion or isolation?

Above, I described the internal issues confronting excluded persons. These issues function as an invisible wall isolating the excluded from the rest. However, there is also an invisible wall inside most of those who attempt to assist the socially excluded, too. Namely, we unconsciously bracket ourselves off from those that we are attempting to assist and approach them from positions of safety and security. For example, consider the term “minority.” While the majority/minority dualism prompts us to consider the existence of minority groups, it holds the potential danger of rendering the relationship between the majority and minority fixed or immobile. Furthermore, members of majority groups have an unconscious tendency to view minorities from a position of perceived superiority. This perceived superiority leads to the production of an endless series of unequal relationships between those providing assistance and those receiving it. It manifests itself in the arrogance of individuals who feel as though they are “charitably aiding” the less fortunate. We need to transform this currently asymmetrical relationship between

assistance provider and assistance recipient into one of parity. In addition, we need to move away from dualistic stereotypes. We need to assume a more egalitarian posture that recognizes we are not the majority and that every person can become a minority. Discriminatory, disadvantageous, irrational, and asymmetrical relationships, which we cannot see, are being left to fester all around us. A failure to address those relationships will ultimately give rise to a range of unconscious and unrecognized moral hazards. Therefore, it is important to possess an ethical disposition, which recognizes the inequalities that exist in society. As it happens, art is truly a media, which can help to illuminate the inequalities and asymmetries in society.

### Art as Media

Public space must be guaranteed in order to foster a democratic society. As I stated at the outset, public space is space to which everyone has access. We believe that art effectively aids in the establishment of channels of access to public space. Below, I will discuss the reasons why art has the potential to aid in the construction of such channels. When I use the term art, I am referring here not only to fine art, but also to music, theatre, and the various forms of cultural and, in some cases, sub-cultural expression.

When an individual or organization commits to an art project, it is essential that both the artists and the local community see merit in the project. Otherwise, the project will be difficult to sustain. First, I would like to think about this issue from the perspective of the local community.

Do individuals and societies confronting complex problems really need art? To put it bluntly, art can be considered useless when people are simply struggling to obtain the foodstuffs they need to survive. For example, after the 1995 Great Hanshin Earthquake, a groups of performers who attempted to hold an acting workshop at an emergency shelter were met with angry jeers from the audience. As that example vividly illustrates, art is not something that people will accept unconditionally. Rather, it is much the opposite. In the case of disasters, it is particular important to pay attention to the progression of events. When during the three post-disaster stages of relief, recovery, and reconstruction is it appropriate for art to intervene? In my opinion, it is during the recovery stage. Furthermore, the intervention should not be temporary. It needs to be sustained over an extended period of time. In such cases, what are the roles art can play?

In my understanding, art can play two primary roles. First, art enables individuals to reclaim themselves and develop new relationships with others. In other words, it is an extremely effective tool for encouraging communication. Second, art broadens the realm of possibilities. Specifically, it increases the number of choices or alternatives while guaranteeing diversity.

I would like now to turn to an example that I mentioned at a previous forum. In the city of Osaka, there is a “dangerous” area where day laborers gather known as Nishinari Ward. Nishinari is commonly known as “Osaka’s ghetto.” The area is

home to approximately 20,000 laborers. However, demand for labor is weak and employment is scarce for Nishinari's laborers. Conditions are particularly dire for the thousands of unmarried, elderly men that live there. Nishinari is currently confronting a range of intractable social problems, including alcoholism and solitary death. However, several years ago, a group of NPOs operating in Nishinari established an illustrated storytelling collective for the elderly. The collective is comprised primarily of former homeless persons. Its membership currently includes seven previously unacquainted male members. The members' average age is 78. The collective now puts on frequent performances and the members have come to live such vibrant and energetic lives that they would no longer be recognized. Formerly self-centered, self-destructive, and out of control these seven members after joining the collective, came to consider the feelings of others and now occupy stable positions in their community. In their case art has played an important role. It helped the men regain feelings self-respect by instilling in them a sense of pride. At the same time, it helped teach them an expressive skill, which they now use to communicate with others.

Let us look at another example from elsewhere in Asia. This is an extremely interesting case I encountered while conducting fieldwork in Indonesia on the eastern coast of the island of Seram. There was a coastal village with a population of approximately 2,000 that during the 1980s had fallen into a state of extreme desolation as a result of the population's drug and alcohol abuse. The newly appointed headman of this dilapidated village began working to revitalize it. Previous headmen had attempted to restore the village through welfare initiatives and economic policies. However, all previous attempts had failed to restore the village. The new headman, who happened to be a choreographer, formed a village dance troupe. The headman hoped that the dance troupe would serve as the focal point of the revitalization effort. Initially, villagers resisted attempts to provide them with lessons. However, the headman's enthusiasm gradually penetrated the village and a number of young villagers began eagerly attending his lessons. Eventually, many residents began to participate. A decade after the troupe's founding, the village was completely cleaned up and transformed into a place where the residents' smiles rarely faded. As this example demonstrates, the ability of art to connect people to one another can function as a powerful engine of social revitalization. By the time I visited Seram in 1997, the revitalization process was already complete and a truly beautiful atmosphere permeated the village. During my visit, I had the opportunity to attend a performance by the village dance troupe and it was magnificent. By that time, the troupe had already won a national competition at the Indonesian National Performing Arts Festival and completed a tour of Holland. In this case, art served not only to revitalize the village and heal its residents, but also to enliven village life and generate new employment opportunities.

Next, I would like to examine the second characteristic of art: the role that it can play in increasing the realm of possibilities and encouraging diversity. The assistant director of the Japanese not-for-profit foundation AIT (Arts Initiative Tokyo), Roger McDonald, is half-Japanese and half-English. He offered the following statement about art and identity. "I vacillate constantly between multiple identities and

feel very strongly that art is a place that accepts such vacillation. There are no absolutes in art and art is always accompanied by questions. Therefore, it is a place that accepts my multiple selves as they are. That in and of itself is the strength of art and is probably the reason that I am involved with art” (Sumitomo 2010).

Art is a world without definite answers or, to put it bluntly, a world in which “anything goes.” For that reason, an extremely high level of accessibility is guaranteed. Importantly, because art is so accessible, it helps to make other things more accessible too. It can play an important role in creating open spaces into which anyone can enter. The highly public spaces that art helps to create are “pleasant spaces.” Yes, highly public spaces are pleasant spaces for everyone.

So, then, how does all of this benefit art? We need to refrain from viewing art simply as a tool or mechanism for solving problems. Namely, art should not be used or exploited only as we see fit. Rather, by bringing art into contact with socially disadvantaged communities, we can provide art with access to new themes and modes of expression. The places into which art will be introduced are located at the very center of a range of serious social problems. The urgent conditions and desperation of the people in such places will likely force artists to adopt new themes and methods. When confronting the problems found in socially disadvantaged places, artists must be strong and intense. The art that is born from feelings of urgency and desperation is neither a reproduction of an existing form of expression nor a reaction against it. Rather, it is art that is born out of the search for an unknown or heretofore non-existent form of expression. Therein lies the primary benefit for art. Namely, the opportunity to develop new methods of artistic expression and encounter new artistic themes provides the artist with the motivation to participate in attempts to bring art into socially disadvantaged and isolated places.

### For the Purpose of Sustaining NPO-Directed Art Projects

No matter how many times we extol the virtues of art as a media, if we fail to provide art with a sustainable fiscal foundation, it will be of no use at all.

For that reason, we need to create an environment in which artists can pursue their work easily and without obstruction. This is primarily an issue of management. Simply put, we need to create a system in which artists are provided with adequate funding. However, that is easier said than done. Unlike in the United Kingdom, where a systematic effort has been undertaken to introduce art into the nation’s healthcare facilities, Japan has no available funding for art in hospitals. Moreover, it would be difficult to obtain such funding from the current national budget for arts and cultural programs. So if one is unable to seek funding via the conventional channels, one would have to fabricate some type of grand story in order to secure money for health and welfare programs. At the same time, it is currently difficult to secure funding from private donors, corporate sponsors, and other types of non-governmental organizations since the concept of “Art as Means for Formulating Solutions to Social Problems” is fairly new. Although NPOs are fre-

quently involved in the implementation of arts programs, it is also true that many continue to struggle to secure sufficient funding.

Yet, despite these constraints, NPOs continue to vigorously engage in a range of artistic efforts. While their attempts should be applauded in overcoming tremendous fiscal constraints, it is possible that NPOs inadvertently help conceal defects in the higher levels of the existing social system. By doing so, they render those defects invisible, making them impossible to address and ultimately resolve. Currently, there are many cases in which the individuals involved in the implementation of arts programs for the socially disadvantaged fail to receive proper compensation and actually pay for program costs out of their own pockets. As a society, we are excessively dependent on the activities and resources of such individuals. When one NPO moved its headquarters, each of the more than ten staff members, excluding the director, resigned their positions. This is likely due to exhaustion. When I heard the news about this NPO, I was deeply shocked. It is not easy for art NPOs to exist without external assistance in contemporary society.

The phenomenon of the weary and unfortunate assisting the weary and unfortunate is truly tragic. We need to recognize that NPO staffers do vital work, which is deserving of just compensation. Moreover, as a community, we need to provide such individuals with mental and fiscal support. However, even when external support is forthcoming, there are limitations. When an NPO seeks broader funding, the local arts council, which provides funding for the arts and makes policies decisions regarding art and culture, has to be mobilized. However, arts councils, which were founded in England, are still not fully operational in today's Japan. Arts councils serve as a commons. They are places we can express our belief that funding for NPOs that serve our local community is a favorable undertaking. As a society we need this form of a default setting. Therefore, proactive lobbying will become increasingly important as we move forward.

About four years ago, Professor Channarong Pornrungrroj, the former Dean of Chulalongkorn University's Faculty for the Fine and Applied Arts, took me to a prison in Bangkok. At the prison, an art workshop was being held for prisoners facing life sentences and those on death row. None of the prisoners participating in the workshop will ever set foot outside the walls of the prison. Observing their paintings, I was surprised at the detail as they were clearly working very hard to produce quality paintings. I sat in as Professor Channarong interviewed one of the prisoners. During the interview, the prisoner stated, "If I had encountered art earlier in life, I probably never would have committed murder." Upon hearing this, I was astonished and, at the same time, deeply impressed by the power of art. I want us all to believe in the power of art and artistic expression.

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