

Self-Organized Initiatives and Collective Practices in Japanese Contemporary Art Community

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I. Introduction

The Concept of Self-Organization

In recent years, there is an explosive wave of “self-organization” concept and practice, both in sociopolitical environs and in the arts and cultural community around the world. With the emergence of postindustrial production, globalization, the Internet, and contemporary warfare; self-organized entity has become a concurrent mode of timely response to the global sociopolitical climate that has encountered various upheavals and disruptions since the turn of the 21st century.

Self-organization is originally a specific term in natural sciences illustrating “systems whose internal organization tends to increase in complexity without being guided by an outside source.”¹ When adopted into social sciences context, self-organization generally indicates autonomous groups or collective practices independent from institutions and corporations. They usually are non-hierarchical and participatory in nature, and functioning as a radical alternative to neoliberal and capitalist institutions, and their unequalled and exploitative operation, that have dominated contemporary socioeconomic landscape.

Since the decade of 1960s, artistic practice has been visibly and acceptably involved with social and political causes. Artists united in deviating from art and cultural institutions and engaging in communal, anarchistic, and solidarity practices; the resulted self-organized communes and squats were artistic, as well as socioeconomic experiments in trying to resist authority and corporation’s imposing hierarchical system and production structure. By creating their own “alternatives,” artists attempted to imagine a new approach to community and society; their practice was seen as powerful micro-gestures and tools for affecting change in society.²

In contemporary art context, self-organized practice coincides with an Educational Turn in the art (in which education, research, knowledge production and learning have become central to contemporary practice), and the dominance of Participatory Art and New Institutionalism (in which art establishment adopts social responsibility stance in an attempt to eliminate boundary between institution and non-institution). Therefore, this new collective practice of self-organization has developed a new framework in questioning

¹ Bradley, Hannula, Ricupero, Superflex, eds. *Self-Organisation / Counter-Economic Strategies*. Sternberg Press, 2006.

² Borgen, Maibritt. “The Inner and Outer Form of Self-Organisation,” in Hebert & Szefer, eds. *Self-Organised*. Open Editions, 2013.

and countering the system - one that focuses on education, research, participation, theoretical/critical thinking, transmission of knowledge and network - which renders it slightly distinctive to earlier radical collectives and direct activism of the postwar years.

Collectivism in Japan

Japan is a country known for its group mentality and behavior, which is the type of 'collectivism' that affirms authoritarian structure and verticle society. Although feudal family system no longer exists, emphasis tends to be placed on groups that binds people together, namely, families, companies, schools, religious sects, more than individual. Strong sense of belonging in groups is considered necessary for keeping the peace and survival. Many believe that this value could be traced back to the very early Constitutional law of 604, with an Article that urges all people to "make harmony the highest ideal." In many circumstances, however, it signifies a 'forced conformity,' an unspoken pressure that demands compliance with the views of the majority.³

Consequently, frustration with political, socioeconomic, and cultural system as a whole had led to the proliferations of antagonistic self-organized collectives and activities in the arts and culture since the late 19th century, early 20th century, but it became a particularly pervasive phenomenon during the tumultuous Postwar period of 1950s and 1960s. Artist groups united in protest, and worked together in a cross-disciplinary, anarchistic, non-hierarchical manner. These Postwar artist collectives not only existed in big cities, but it was a phenomenon that scattered and spread all over the country and those groups in each geographical locale had their own specificity and distinctive features according to their regional geopolitical and socioeconomic conditions. However, subsequent decades offered relative peace and prosperity, the rise of middle class and mass culture, and the stability of government and corporate power, which brought about pop, interactive, and introspective art.

But the Great East Japan Earthquake and the Fukushima nuclear incident, that caused 18,000 deaths and 240,000 dislocated evacuees, have greatly shaken and transformed Japanese society and created a profound impact on artists and artistic practices. The 3.11 incident and the inapt practices that the authority and media handled its aftermath have generated the overall sentiment of skepticism and distrust in a great number of Japanese people's mind. Artists and art producers also started to question their role in this catastrophic time - some participated directly in social movement and political activism, some produced works that are socially and politically critical, and others produced collaborative projects that center on community and reconstruction. In short, artists began to self-organize and "reconsider the relationships between art, society and politics, and to re-situate their practice in a wider social, economic and political context... the categories of art and culture, society and politics were dissolving, overlapping and reorganizing

³ Ozaki, Tetsuya. "Contemporary Japanese Art in the Heisei Era," in *Bye Bye Kitty!!! Between Heaven and Hell in Contemporary Japanese Art*. Japan Society, 2011.

themselves.”⁴

II. Artist Collective

Art collectivism is given a definition as “strategic alliances (primarily) of artists motivated to seek and create alternatives to the existing options, be they artistic/expressive or social/operational or both.”⁵ Historically speaking, collectivism has been a crucial art practice since late 19th century during and after the height of Modernism. Artists usually got together and envision a radically new society through ideated singular avant-garde model of social and cultural grand design, or react against negative consequences of mass culture and new technologies that saw the loss of collective human bond through collective artistic expressions.⁶

Japan is considered “a land of collectivism”⁷ since it has been populated with hundreds of artist collectives since late 19th century through its peak during the decade of 1960s until the present day resurgence. Arguably Japan’s first pivotal artist collective was Mavo, a group of young artists-activists in active operation during 1920s. Mavo was encouraged and influenced by global avant-garde movements in modern art – from Dadaism, Constructivism, Futurism, and Expressionism – with tendency towards Marxism and Anarchism, by aiming for reintegrating art into the praxis of daily life through revolutionizing artistic form, function, and intent, as a response to the rapidly changing conditions of modern Japanese society. Their activities included exhibitions, magazine publications, poster designs, dance and theatrical performances, and architectural projects. They also staged first art-related protest demonstration in Japan against established art association in 1923, and launched disruptive campaigns against authority and establishment, thus taking collective practice from the realm of art and aesthetic to the world of social and radical politics – for Mavo members, “destructive acts were a form of constructive criticism.”⁸

The period immediately after World War II saw the proliferations of the so-called exhibition-based collectives or associations. These were young artists who sought alternative opportunity in exhibiting their works outside of traditional established and exclusive salons and came together as groups to study, research, network and exhibit their works. Many

⁴ Mori, Yoshitaka. “New Collectivism, Participation and Politics after the East Japan Great Earthquake.” *World Art*, vol. 5, no. 1, 2015, pp. 167-186.

⁵ Tomii, Reiko. “Collectivism in Twentieth-Century Japanese Art with a Focus on Operational Aspects of *Dantai*.” *Positions*, vol. 21, no. 12, 2013.

⁶ Stimson & Sholette, ed. *Collectivism after Modernism: The Art of Social Imagination After 1945*. University of Minnesota Press, 2007.

⁷ Tomii, Reiko. “Collectivism in Twentieth-Century Japanese Art with a Focus on Operational Aspects of *Dantai*.” *Positions*, vol. 21, no. 12, 2013.

⁸ Weisenfeld, Jennifer. *Mavo: Japanese Artists and the Avant-Garde, 1905-1931*. University of California Press, 2002.

groups brought about transgenre activities in an attempt to comprehend and explore a new challenge of political and socioeconomic contention in occupied Japan.⁹ These collectives usually had brief but intense lives, prominent trailblazing groups included The Century Association, formed in 1947 to study and tackle theories and possibilities of dissolving boundaries of various creative genres; and The Evening Society, initiated in 1948 as a discussion salon for avant-garde art and cultural figures, with participants from art, film, and theater. The main reason their brevity was that despite their desire to be open and dynamic, most groups eventually became insular and/or hierarchical, which consequently caused internal dispute and falling-out among members.

Second generation collectives emerged during the decade of 1950s, meanwhile, had fared better in terms of longevity and versatility, particularly The Experimental Workshop (1951-57), one of the first artist groups in Japan that include composers and writers as well as artists to explore new ways of collaborative musical and artistic development; Gutai Art Association (1954-72), a group of artists whose works took form of experimental outdoor performance and kinetic art and one of the first artist collectives to regularly organize group exhibitions and projects in unconventional places; and Metabolism (1959-70), a group of architects and designers who collectively proposed new ideas about the future of Japanese urban design and public spaces in the period of city reconstruction with the beliefs that buildings and cities should be emulating cells of living beings, thus, its namesake.¹⁰

Even though majority of these artist collectives were based in Tokyo, others surfaced elsewhere, particularly Gutai in Ashiya (in Kansai area), or Kyushu-ha in Kyushu. Art historian Reiko Tomii articulated an interesting observation that in fact, the ubiquity of local government-sponsored regional art salons and competitions that spread nationwide during postwar Japan was one of the main reasons propelled the counteracted emergence of regional self-organized avant-garde artist collectives. Despite the intention of giving opportunity for various local artists a stage for showing their works, many of these local city and prefecture exhibitions gradually became “territories dominated by bosses of the local art scenes and laden with factionalism and cronyism.”¹¹ Therefore, local artist groups sprang into action in unison against this type of depotic control, for example, Rozo Group publicly denounced Ibaraki salon and exhibition for being anachronistic; and the legendary group Kyushu-ha rebelled against Fukuoka salon and exhibition and attempted to organize their own Kyushu Independent Exhibition in 1959, which was a springboard for other groups all around the country in subsequent years and decades, including Hokkaido, Himeji, and Kyoto.

⁹ Havens, Thomas R. H. *Radicals and Realists in the Japanese Nonverbal Arts: The Avant-Garde Rejection of Modernism*. University of Hawaii Press, 2006.

¹⁰ Chong, et al, eds. *From Postwar to Postmodern: Art in Japan 1945-1989: Primary Documents*. Duke University Press, 2012.

¹¹ Tomii, Reiko. “Collectivism in Twentieth-Century Japanese Art with a Focus on Operational Aspects of *Dantai*.” *Positions*, vol. 21, no. 12, 2013.

Also another factor for the burgeoning of local avant-garde group was their geographical locality: even though the fact that they were further away from the established values in the center, had led to these regional group not being readily recognized by the art world in Tokyo, but at the same time, these hindrance could also serve as intriguing advantage because freedom from accepted values and systems also allowed them to practice avant-gardism more radically than those in the center. Interestingly, origins, spirits and conditions of these early regional avant-garde collectives are relevant to radical local groups today who are still encountering similar sets of issues and using self-organization as an instrument against authority and injustice in their local environments.¹²

The overall global and local sociopolitical discontent of the 1960s, along with the international development of counter-culture movement, brought about a new kind of artist collectives, with radically anarchic energy and activities, using the streets as stage for their guerrilla actions. This new wave of artist groups was the epitome of collectiveness in the art because togetherness became the ultimate goal – each activity was creating as a collective action, and not as a separate work by individual member of the group, and whose towering influence still prevails to this day in contemporary artist-activist community. The avant-garde collectives in Japan include Neo Dada (1960-62), a short-lived but influential anti-art collective, which staged various events of mayhem on the street of Tokyo; Hi Red Center (1963-64), another important anti-art group created series of radical and absurd, yet critical, street happenings intended to challenge the postwar condition of urban Tokyo as sterile, nondescript, and corporated; Zero Dimension, founded in 1962 in Nagoya also staged their vulgar, avant-garde performances fusing premodern eroticism with obscene terrorism on busy streets against government control of citizens' body; The Play, founded in Osaka in 1967 devised their version of provocative “happenings” to liberate restrictions imposed upon human beings. Other artist collectives include Group Ultra Niigata, Black Flag, Vitamin Art, Kokuin, Group Spider, Dadakan among others.

The artist collective explosion in Japan subsided after 1970s, as the local and global economy had soared and the art world got increasingly professionalized. One of the notable exceptions was Dumb Type, a multimedia performance collective established in 1984 in Kyoto. The group performed widely, nationally and globally, and later engaged in art activism through performance on the issue of HIV/AIDS; it stopped performing after one of the founding members died of AIDS in 1995.¹³

Fast forward to present day global collectivism of 21st Century, artists' desire to self-organize has resumed while also adapted to the changing world in which art is not isolated or confined in its own realm. These new collectivism broke away from the restriction of modern art concepts and practices of envisioning a radical ideal of new society or representing the loss of a premodern human bond and condition caused by mass culture and technology; and the ingenuous ideal of the postmodern world of hybridity and

¹² Nakazawa, Hideki. *Art History: Japan, 1945-2014*. Art Diver, 2015.

¹³ Mori, Yoshitaka. “New Collectivism, Participation and Politics after the East Japan Great Earthquake.” *World Art*, vol. 5, no. 1, 2015, pp. 167-186.

counterhegemonic cultural exchanges.¹⁴ Collectivism of now principally focuses on communal forms and community work, engaging with social life both as means of expression and production. They advocate for “decentralized collective action that propagates itself via every means: word-of-mouth and rumor, communication between political groups, meetings of social movements, and broadcasts over specialized and mass media...” and as “a multitude consisting of creative workers, community and environmental activists, radical labor, and NGO administrators but also urban garden builders, houseworkers, and mothers.”¹⁵

In Japan, these new types of collectivism that aim to transcend the limit of contemporary art also prevail and blossom, especially in the decade of 2010s, after the Great Earthquake and nuclear disaster of 2011. Contemporary artist collectives in Japan undertake an effort to fuse strong urgent contemporaneous sociopolitical message with historical street performance, protest and social intervention with various degree of success. Inarguably, the most famous (or infamous) artist collective in Japan nowadays is Chim↑Pom, formed in 2005 in Tokyo with six members; their works take on different forms including video, installations, performances, public intervention, and guerilla act. Chim↑Pom's projects usually are a direct response to sociopolitical condition of Japan, particularly those most sensitive, taboo and censor-prone – from atomic bomb in Hiroshima, Nuclear incident in Fukushima, to living condition in urban Tokyo. The group has gained fame and notoriety over the years locally and internationally because of their direct style of encountering these severe issues head-on while emanating simultaneously serious, satirical and nonsensical nuances.

Other art collectives include Kyun-Chome, a young artist duo formed in 2011, with obvious influence from Chim↑Pom (one of whose members was a teacher to Kyun-Chome). Their works usually take forms of intervention and participation, via works that are poetic and humorous and touch on complex social and political issues, especially 3.11 and its impact on everyday life. Olta, a group of seven artists, whose works combine video, installation, drawing and street performances. Tomorrow Girls Troop, a rare collective that consists of members from various East Asian countries: Japan, Korea, and China, the group focuses on feminist issues in society through different artistic channels including images, videos, installation, digital and online media. In Kyoto, Antenna, founded in 2002 is a collective that produces and shows art works and projects that express and critique the symptom of contemporary and materialistic life, with diverse members from artist and curator to editor and architect, in order to create ideas and projects that are flexible and can offer improvement upon daily life through art and design. While in Sendai, Nook Collective, is a loose collective of artists and curators who carries out a long-term “Library of Folktale Voices” project by interviewing local citizens about local folktales in order to create folktale archives and Tohoku Craft collective is a group of art and creative people in Tohoku area

¹⁴ Stimson & Sholette, ed. *Collectivism after Modernism: The Art of Social Imagination After 1945*. University of Minnesota Press, 2007.

¹⁵ Stimson & Sholette, ed. *Collectivism after Modernism: The Art of Social Imagination After 1945*. University of Minnesota Press, 2007.

utilizing their skills producing craft workshops and creating craft products to help communities and people who are affected by 3.11 disaster. In Okinawa, Raco, an art research collective formed in 2004 aimed at researching, interviewing, and documenting art activities in Okinawa by identifying main events in contemporary art history of Okinawa prefecture, including Atopic Site project in 1996, Maejima Art Center in 2000s, Okinawa Prefectural Museum in 2007, they also incorporate their research and archive activities with talk, workshop, etc.

In recent years, there has also been increasing numbers of artists and creative people getting together to form a group or network of art professionals in order to make an effort in improving their professional conditions through collective act. Collectivism is used as leverage for these art professionals to negotiate with the system and authority, express dissenting opinions and wrestle with issues of inequality and censorship. Artist Guild is a collective of artists founded in 2009 to support artists and their art-making. Artist Guild initiates equipments and studio sharing system among members, with the aim of reducing financial burden for individual artists to make artworks and exhibitions, and in doing so, they succeed in bypassing the all-powerful commercial and market sector of the contemporary art world. The members meet every week and organize annual event of symposium, exhibition, or publication. They aim to establish the group as an art association and recruit more members as a necessary leverage for artist's benefit and welfare, such as, free entry for museums, other artistic services and rights. In similar vein, Arts Translator Collective was established as a way to create a fair and standard rate payment for translators in the fields of the arts as many translators have regularly been underpaid. While Arts Commons Tokyo is a collective working to create model for art and theater work that also addresses contemporary issues in society, through research, exhibition, theatrical production, and other activities. Art Autonomy Network, founded in 2005, aiming to create autonomy through networking between individuals and groups who are in areas outside of cultural institutions and commercial world through program such as exhibition, workshop, symposium, education, art archive, activities including portfolio meetings, food correspondence, group discussion about art in English. In short, the group focuses on network, education, exchange, and archive, both locally and internationally for alternative art activities.

III. Artist-Activist Community

The self-organized community in this segment not only blurs the line between art and activism, but also propels artistic practice and community into the realm of social and political activism. Art is employed as an instrument to disrupt and intervene unjust system or oppressive authority in hope to ultimately create change in their own community and/or in broader society. This type of group usually attracts practitioners from diverse fields who gather together in solidarity; some are short-lived and loosely assembled, while others can be settled and long-lasting. In Japan, the student movement in late 1960s against the United States and Japan Security Treaty or ANPO, also brought about various artistic groups and coalitions among artists and activists. The most important alliance was

Bikyoto, or Artist Joint Struggle Council, founded in Tokyo in 1969 by students of Tama Art University in response to student movement across Japan in late 1960s to early 1970s and engaged in anti-establishment activism to give art students and art professionals a channel to express their opinion. This multifaceted artist group was a coalition of members of various artist collectives, student activists, and other creative professionals, who wished to support the student fight against authority and in the same vein, themselves protesting against art establishments. Bikyoto was considered one of the very first groups to politicize art and bring art into political realm, and an important contributor to institutional critique narrative and practice in Japan contemporary art community.

After the collapse of the student movement in the 1970s, only recently did the movement enter its revival phase – starting from early 2000s when the precarious situations in both international and Japanese society brought new generation to the new awareness of Neo-liberal and capitalistic issues, which resulted in a certain development of reorganization and collectivity of young people. But not until after the event of the Great Earthquake and its aftermath in 2011 that the atmosphere of widespread distrust in the government and the established system has gathered pace and momentum, which has been manifested especially through Anti-Nuclear movement that are very diverse and extensive. It is also important to perceive students' and young people's movement in Japan as part of the global social movements during the decade of 2010s – from Arab Spring in the Middle East in 2010-12, Occupy Wall Street in the United States in 2011, the Umbrella Revolution in Hong Kong in 2014, and the Sunflower Movement in Taiwan in 2014.¹⁶ The catalyst for the new student movement in Japan occurred when in 2015 the government attempted to pass the State Secrecy Acts, a part of Article 9 of the Constitutions and the Security Bills, which would amend the law and allow Japan's Self-Defense Forces to actively participate in military activities home and abroad. Many individuals and groups had taken to the street to protest against this reinterpretation of the bill, no other group had attracted more interest and participants than SEALDs, or Students Emergency Action for Liberal Democracy.

SEALDs were the first college-based social movement in 50 years to have attracted such large amount of supporters and media attention. Their weekly anti-government demonstrations could draw up to 130,000 participants of all professions and backgrounds. SEALDs' tactical embrace of social media and mass media, and their self-portrayal as "regular" college students who resisted the despotism and autocracy of the conservative government had particular appeal to young people and led to unprecedented level of protest mobilization, which was quite different from the way radical student movement of the 1960s and 70s operated – with anarchistic tactical strategy, strong ideologically informed crowd and clear leadership unit.¹⁷ SEALDs also focused in building alliances with other groups and organizations and had garnered supporters from all across age groups; they also inspired proliferations of initiatives all over the country from Hokkaido to Okinawa.

¹⁶ Mori, Yoshitaka. "Mobility and Place: The Multiplying of Alternative Spaces in Asia." 5: *Designing Media Ecology Magazine*. vol. 5, 2016.

¹⁷ Cassegård, Carl. *Youth Movements, Trauma and Alternative Space in Contemporary Japan*. Global Oriental, 2014.

However, their youthful media savvy style and compromising ways in negotiating with the existing system including the press and the government brought about some criticisms. But it is undeniable that SEALDs and their “politics of inclusion”¹⁸ within a civil society was a new and relevant phenomena, evident not only in political scene, but also in the realm of the art, in the form of “community project,” “participation art” and “art project” (the topic will be further illustrated in Section V).

One of the most interesting and important groups of artist-activist self-organization in Japan is Shiroto no ran, located in Koenji area in the West of Tokyo. Shiroto no ran or Amateur’s Riot is a collective of activists who moved to Koenji in 2005 and opened various small shops in a declining shopping area – from a recycled-goods shop, a secondhand clothes store, to a bar, a small hostel, and an internet radio station – in order to embed themselves in the neighborhood and create a self-organized and self-sustained community, as independent from the capitalistic, hierarchical, and repressive sociopolitical system as possible. Shiroto no ran consider their action in the tradition of ‘reclaim the street’ movement, which is a direct action movement in 1980s against capitalism of the urban environment. So the group has reclaimed the street and the neighborhood of Koenji by gradually taking over and running various shops in a socially and communally responsible way and fostering a sense of community that are missing in most urban area overwhelmed by capitalization and gentrification. Moreover, Shiroto no ran have taken a rather anarchistic approach to work and labor, their refusal of hierarchical system of management and openness to local residents to share ownership of their spaces help creating a sense of autonomy over their own community. They also took a more literal and direct approach by using art and activist tactics in taking to the streets and reclaiming their rights to the neighborhood through rallies, interventions, performances, festivals and other creative actions in public and communal spaces.

The 3.11 incident and the government’s subsequent favorable stance on nuclear power plants prompted numerous protests against nuclear power all over the country, Shiroto no ran also began organizing anti-nuclear rallies in their neighborhood which proved so successful that they became the largest anti-nuclear demonstrations in Japan since 1970s. Their protests were distinctly different from ordinary protests, which rely on labor unions or certain NGOs to lead and organize, but Shiroto no ran’s role in the rallies were not as leader but as instigator who call out for action both in their local community and online community so there was no partisan political agenda or patronizing approach which in the end attracted very diverse group of people, from activists, workers, students, artists, and local people. Additionally, Shiroto no ran’s demonstrations had no agenda and even concrete demands, their gatherings resulted from dissatisfaction and distrust of the government, the media, and the overall system which prompted them to self-organize and voice their disagreements as citizens. They do not aim for their own cultural or political influence, instead, the group desires to create ‘autonomy’ in the sphere of daily life that is

¹⁸ Slater, et al, eds. “SEALDs (Students Emergency Action for Liberal Democracy): Research Note on Contemporary Youth Politics in Japan.” *The Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus*, vol. 13, no. 37, 2015.

free from division of labor, market economy, and regulated social policy. Shiroto no ran ultimate intention is rethinking and reworking the idea of 'politics' in hope of creating "a real democracy... where people present themselves into a body of distinct but collective beings who are constantly exchanging their feelings, affection, thoughts, ideas, and voices" regardless of their class, job, gender, race, and nationality.¹⁹

There are other alternative communities scattered around Japan, but unlike Shiroto no ran, they are not located in an urban area. After the Great Earthquake and Fukushima Nuclear incident, numbers of people emigrated to new area further away from the disaster zone in the Northeast coast of Japan. Many self-organized communities have gradually emerged since, particularly in the Western part of the country; they wish to live as independently from the government and capitalistic system as possible in order to take back control of their own lives. An example of this is in Itoshima, a small city in Kyushu, not far from Fukuoka, which is a place where many young people relocated and aimed to build a self-sustained life and community; numbers of these people would get together and form groups or collectives in order to make themselves heard and also to stand up for their own ways of living. There are many collective living arrangements especially shared houses in which young members share basic living necessities and work independently to support themselves and the collectives, like Itoshima Share House, which advocates for a completely sustainable and organic living, and whose members would hunt, do agriculture, practice crafts, etc, in order to avoid engaging in capitalistic system as much as possible. Other independent collectives of self-sustained, self-initiated groups in Itoshima include Itoshima Arts Farm, a cross between artistic and agricultural focus; the group develops art project that has its roots in the earth and everyday lives, producing activities and products that respond and reflect the region; and Itonami collective, which focuses on education and community building.

Similarly, Tottori is another town where young people relocated to after 3.11 disaster; it is also located in the least populated prefecture in Japan. The self-organized community in this town is very particular in its focus on arts and culture and DIY spirits. Numerous creative spaces and projects have been created in order to engage with the local community and also as an attempt to bring in young people to the area, both to visit and to settle. Most initiatives create hybrid programs in multifunctional spaces; for example, Tami Guesthouse is a guesthouse, a shared house, a café, and an activity space, which organizes regular workshops and events. Kisuikuko Bookstore is the epitome of DIY culture, the owner built the bookstore from scratch and runs it as info shop and activity platform, as well as being a bookstore; it hopes to appeal to more local community who are mostly the elders and also intends to bring people in from other adjacent prefectures in order to build a more active community in Tottori through diverse program, including readings, discussions, music events, etc. These self-organized independent communities have been multiplying in the post-3-11 period; there are hundreds of them scattering all over Japan, including those in Kumamoto, Okayama, Yamaguchi, Chiba, Miyazaki, Kanagawa, etc. among others.

¹⁹ Egami, Kenichiro. "Reclaim the Street in Japan: Shiroto-no-ran (Amateur's Riot) and Tenjo-Sajiki." <http://www.kenichiro-egami.com/english>.

Another interesting self-organized type of space for artist-activist community is a type of 'free spaces' called info-shops, which simultaneously hold certain recognizable functions like bookstores, café, or recycle shops, and also offer important role as meeting points or protective, "shelter places for developing alternative discourses" which aim to challenge mainstream opinion and public sphere.²⁰ They are called info-shops because various DIY goods are exchanged and activities are organized so that they can create circulation of information and knowledge and shared experiences. These info-shops are also notable in their strong local and international network, in order to create collaborations and participate in large social mobilizations. One of the most prominent spaces of this kind is IRA (Irregular Rhythm Asylum) Bookshop/Infoshop in Tokyo. The bookstore holds collections of leftwing and anarchist books and other merchandises; it also organizes events and workshops, and participates in sociopolitical activism. Their network and events are very international and wide-ranging. It is well-known as a hub of global activist network and a place of intersection for people from different fields of practice, different area of interest, and different point of origin to meet and converse.

IRA info-shop also initiates and incorporates a woodblock print collective, A3BC (shortened from Anti-war, Anti-nuclear, Art of Blockprint Collective) into its practice, and conducts series of weekly woodblock printing workshops on location, and also at protest sites all across the country, including in the Anti-Nuclear protest in front of the Diet, and at Henoko protest site in Okinawa. A3BC exerts itself as translocal network in Japan and in Asia after 3.11 by using woodblock printing as a medium to engrave messages for peace and express social issues in Japan especially anti-war and anti-nuclear campaigns. Woodblock printing is a transnational medium used in anarcho-punk culture started in the West but made a significant impact in East and Southeast Asia – from Indonesia to Malaysia to Japan. Producing woodblock prints is a collaborative practice and a pedagogical project where professionals and amateurs can share an understanding of social, economic and political problems through art.²¹ Other info-shops in Japan include Café Lavanderia and Kirysha in Tokyo, Cry in Public in Shizuoka, Kisuikuko Bookstore in Tottori, etc.

A slightly different type of artist-activist self-organized initiative is an independent project by artist-activists, especially those whose works directly address the issue of urban environment and sociopolitical situation in the city. An important example is Misako Ichimura, an artist-activist who has been living in Yoyogi Park in Harajuku with the homeless community for 13 years. The first settlement of homeless community in Yoyogi Park began forming after the 1964 Tokyo Olympics, which using the park as athlete's village, so the homeless started to gather in the park and gradually created a homeless village. The settlement reached its peak around 30 years ago, with more than 300 homeless people living in the park. These homeless populations not only built their own tents as living

²⁰ Cassegård, Carl. "What's Alternative about Alternative Space?" *5: Designing Media Ecology Magazine*. vol. 5, 2016.

²¹ Mori, Yoshitaka. "New Collectivism, Participation and Politics after the East Japan Great Earthquake." *World Art*, vol. 5, no. 1, 2015, pp. 167-186.

quarters, but also developed a functioning common area in which members of the community could come together and exchange services and objects. Misako Ichimura learned about this homeless community and was inspired by this particular way of life, namely, life that is not dependent on money and possession, that is autonomous and as further from capitalistic system and hierarchical society as possible. Therefore, she decided to abandon most of her belongings and possessions, along with the security of having a home and joining the homeless community in Yoyogi Park more than a decade ago.

Misako Ichimura has been actively working on issues concerning homelessness both within and outside of the community. She has organized monthly meetings with homeless women in order to share information and solve gender-based problems together; and she has also run a weekend café called Enoraru Café and published a monthly newspaper since 2003 to communicate with members of the village. As for her campaigning work to the outside world, Misako has been very vocal against gentrification in the city, as the Yoyogi homeless community has been constantly evicted by authority from 300 to around 20 members nowadays, not to mention the raids in other parks and public areas inhabited by homeless population. As the 2020 Tokyo Olympics approaches, the issue of eviction and gentrification in the city of Tokyo intensifies; many public spaces including parks have been leased out to private commercial and big corporation to accommodate the Olympics activities, while city people are losing public spaces and homeless population are rid of their community. So she has been organizing a series of protests and occupations of these construction sites, and coordinating with both local and international groups and agencies working on issues of gentrification, in order to raise awareness and in hope to effect change in the community. She has also been invited to speak and participate in panel discussions and workshops locally and internationally as an example of artist who works from within the community and whose work cannot be separated from life.

The issue of gentrification is also the main concern of artist/theater director Akira Takayama, founder of Port B art/theater collective. Port B was founded in 2002 and has been producing theatrical projects that take theater outside of its existing sites and conventions by working collaboratively with other media; their works are especially concerning the idea of expanded theater, which suggests reaching out to the audience in society and the urban space. Akira Takayama's and Port B's works are audience-centered and serve as social platform to cultivate new possibilities across variety of media and genre, including tourism, urban planning, art, literature, photography. Akira often uses theatrical projects to excavate various troubled and hidden history in urban settings in order to reveal these invisible issues unavailable to experience in formal or official version, touching upon sensitive and problematic issues such as 3.11, immigrants, cultural diversity, etc. In "Yokohama Commune," the project took the form of Japanese classroom for immigrants, recruiting teachers from local residents, which results in a platform for encounter between Indochina immigrants and local day laborers; "Tokyo Heterotopia" took shapes of self-guided texts and audio tour throughout selected locations in Tokyo that bore connections with history of other Asian communities, revealing hidden history and 'heterotopia' within the capital city; "Referendum Project" was a mobile theater that sought

participations by high school students too young to vote asking for their response to 3.11 and giving them a chance to voice their opinions.

Other instance of artist-activist work is a long-term project of artist Kyohei Sakaguchi, in which he has integrated art, architecture, and issues of homelessness, public space and ownership of space into his work. He had built a prototype of DIY vehicle and shelter for homeless people from scratch and called it Zero Yen House. After the Great Earthquake and Nuclear disaster of 2011, Kyohei Sakaguchi moved back to his hometown of Kumamoto and founded a “New Government” and inaugurated himself as its prime minister, indicating distrust of the Japanese government and authority. His independent nation has now more than 48,000 constituencies and individuals signed up to fill different government’s positions. He has written a best-selling book about his experience of “founding a new government” as a guide to survive the autocracy of the government and capitalist system. He also publicly released his phone number as a suicide prevention hotline, in an attempt to assist those who need help, and opens his house in Kumamoto as a community space called Zero Center.

IV. Alternative Art Space

Alternative implies another possibility so alternative space suggests a possible option against a more dominant form of space, namely those under control of the power of state and capital that demands conformity to mainstream norms.²² In the current era of mass mobility and digital presence, places do not lose its significance and continue to have crucial role in many aspects of our lives, including in the arts and cultural field. In fact, the recent surge of alternative art spaces around the world seems to suggest that physical space and face-to-face communication is more relevant than ever, and alternative space can serve this function as a vital hub for local and international cultural practices.²³

Alternative art spaces usually emerge from the lack of exhibition spaces to show radical art works and young artists’ works since museums and art galleries tend to prefer established and/or traditional artists. In Japan, the predecessor of today’s alternative space was the Sogetsu Art Center, established in 1958; it played a very important role in “exploring potential of experimental expressions that transcended conventional artistic framework”²⁴ by providing space for cross-disciplinary activities from art, performance, design, to music and film. It also invited and shown works by leading avant-garde foreign artists including John Cage, Merce Cunningham, Robert Rauschenberg, etc., which had not otherwise been appreciated in any other art spaces whether museums or art galleries. The exposure of audience to both local and international progressive artists and artworks was very

²² Cassegård, Carl. “What’s Alternative about Alternative Space?” *5: Designing Media Ecology Magazine*. vol. 5, 2016.

²³ Mori, Yoshitaka. “Mobility and Place: The Multiplying of Alternative Spaces in Asia.” *5: Designing Media Ecology Magazine*. vol. 5, 2016.

²⁴ Chong, et al, eds. *From Postwar to Postmodern: Art in Japan 1945-1989: Primary Documents*. Duke University Press, 2012.

important for the development of the art community, not to mention the direct exchange and network it helped create between Japanese and foreign artists.

In the decade of 1980s and 1990s, alternative spaces were on the rise, principally because of Japan's economic growth that edged numbers of rental galleries out of Ginza area. Rental galleries, mostly located in Ginza and Kanda, had always been offering rental exhibition space for all artists since 1930s. It had long predated the commercial gallery system so when the rent skyrocketed and the art world began to professionalize around the same time, rental gallery started to be on the decline. Consequently, it contributed to the rise of the off-market and off-museum 'alternative' spaces, which would succeed in immensely reshaping cultural landscape of Tokyo by the mid-1990s in "providing spaces for new artistic expression and better chance for domestic and international recognition."²⁵ A pioneering alternative space around that time was the Sagacho Exhibit Space (1986-2000), which gave freedom to various young and radical artists; and P3 Art and Environment, opened in 1989, an exhibition and event space in the basement of a Zen temple. Another pioneer in self-organized alternative space was an independent group "Tokyo Art Speak" founded in 1993 and lasted for four years. Realizing the lack of critical discourse in Japanese art scene, a group of artists, critics, and curators began organizing monthly informal, sometimes bilingual, roundtable discussions on critical and cross-disciplinary issues. Influenced by the Situationist International in 1960s, and the Art Sociologique (post-Situationist movement in Switzerland and France in 1970s)²⁶, Tokyo Art Speak aimed to create a more practical conversation about contemporary society and not only on theoretical, aesthetic or abstract level. They also organized art events, public forums, screenings, live performances, etc.

Recently, alternative art spaces have been proliferated since 2000s as a global movement, Japan included, particularly in the post-3.11 community, in which there is a strong need for young people to gather, express themselves, and voice their opinions. These spaces are not only located in large art-centric cities and areas like Tokyo or Kansai, but they spread out all across the geographical area in Japan. In Tokyo, an evident example of alternative art space is Art Center Ongoing, an independent space started around 10 years ago and has been running a very active program mainly to help young artists get more exposure and also making critical connections with other independent spaces and people internationally through its residency program. Interestingly, it is in a transitional period and concerns itself with the issue of survival through self-organization, trying to figure out the fitting model to run an alternative space in the most effective way. The resolution seems to be to create a more democratic model via membership system in order to foster a sense of co-ownership of the space and also to diversify the audience and program. The owner credits this communal model to his trip to Southeast Asia, which he witnessed and experienced many art spaces operate with strong sense of co-ownership and belonging. Other spaces include

²⁵ Izumi, Nakajima. "From Rental Galleries to Alternative Spaces." in Chong, et al, eds. *From Postwar to Postmodern: Art in Japan 1945-1989: Primary Documents*. Duke University Press, 2012.

²⁶ Khonsary & Podesva, eds. *Institutions by Artists: Volume One*. Fillip Editions, 2012.

numbers of long-standing ones like CAMP, which focuses on creating critical discussions on contemporary cultural and sociopolitical issues, and building relations among people from diverse disciplines; Youkobo Art Space, a nonprofit art space with emphasis on residency program for young/emerging artists and spearheaded international artist-residency program through "Micro-Residencies," a micro-scale residency program among small- to medium-size art spaces around the world; Genron Café, an event space run by a well-known writer, providing space for cultural and critical discourses via discussions and lectures from writers and members of arts and cultural community.

More recent alternative spaces in Tokyo include Roji to Hito, an alternative space that aims for offering a neutral space for diverse and collaborative events and projects focusing on subcultures and decentralized collective thinking and practices; XYZ, an artist-run exhibition space, artist studio, record shop and residency space, which can possibly be summed up as a hub for young artists and creatives who work outside of the mainstream commercial scene; Tochka, a newly opened art space that provides active critical sociopolitical-bent program, particularly lectures and discussions, with impressive international participants; and Asakusa Gallery, another recently opened exhibition space with a strong focus on criticality, historiography, and theoreticality, expressed through very well-curated shows by mainly international artists.

In Kansai area, one prominent space in Kyoto is Social Kitchen, founded in 2006 by Hanare, a collective of artist and creative. Initially, the initiative began as a share studio and café, but gradually incorporated other functions as event space and community platform. Social Kitchen has, over the years, developed into a multifunctional space that additionally connects with contemporary sociopolitical topic, and regularly organized activities including talks, reading groups, screenings, etc. and also introduces local farmers and their produce in the café space. Additionally, a city with rich history of student movement and social conscious art, Kyoto still maintains some of the spirits from decades back primarily in university campuses and their immediate neighborhoods, particularly in small alternative spaces and café/bar hybrid spaces, for example, Bar hachimonjiya, Art space Momurag, Cafe Kazenone, Scoop Fork, etc., where students, young artists, underground activists gather to meet, communicate, and discuss among themselves.

While in Osaka, the past few years had seen closures of many long-termed staple, and beloved alternative art spaces in the city that offered mixture of experimental art, music, performance, including Bikado, Konohana-medias, and Float, these spaces were terminated under unfortunate and unforeseeable circumstances. Currently, a few independent spaces stand out, namely Port and Figya, and most of them are in Konohana area, which is a rundown area where rents are cheap and many young artists and creative people loosely gather and share housing and work studio. Kobe has one of the most established and longest running non-governmental art spaces, CAP House (CAP stands for Conference on Art and Art Projects), which was founded in 1994 by eleven artists to provide alternative exhibition space for young artists. The Kobe earthquake in 1996 gave them the opportunities to embed themselves in the community and to help rebuild society through

art, and also, via various contributions (financial and other donations) from artistic communities in other countries, CAP has formed a good relationship with international art spaces, which lasts until present day. Now CAP is located in a historic building, an Emigration Center for Brazilians in Japan, with 40 members consist of various creative professions from artists, architects, designers, to students and art enthusiasts; and it continues to explore possibilities of independent artist projects, through providing exhibition space, studio space, workshop program, and other artistic activities.

In Kanazawa, CAAK (Center for Art and Architecture, Kanazawa) was an alternative space emerged directly out of the 21st Century Museum of Contemporary Art. The space was opened in 2007 after Atelier Bow-Wow, an architectural team was invited by the 21st Century Museum of Contemporary Art to create a project, the Atelier Bow-Wow, then stayed at a traditional Japanese house and organized a weekly gathering that attracted diverse visitors from local and international art and creative community. Even after their project ended, the space proved such a success that it remained open and evolved into the Center for Art and Architecture, Kanazawa, a project that traverses genres of art and architecture, providing work space, residency, and project space for artists and visitors; and organizing regular lectures and other events. Kanazawa now witnesses many new contemporary art spaces, including Toiyamachi Art Studio, a repurposed print shop functioning as shared art studio; Kanazawa Art Port or KAPO, an exhibition space, community studio, creative platform; Sanki Bunko Art Space, an exhibition space, with residency program and small library; Ge-Shuku, a small exhibition, and shared studio space for young artists and art students located near Kanazawa Art College.

In Nagoya, during the 1990s, when the city was the center of art market and encompassed several leading art galleries, N-Mark Gallery and Dot Gallery were established by young artists to open up the landscape and to exhibit their own and their peers' experimental works. Dot Gallery stopped operating after several years, but N-Mark has stayed on to become one of the mainstay spaces and developed as leading nonprofit organization in the city. Over the years, N-Mark has created many community-oriented projects in several areas in Nagoya city; and in the decade of 2000s, it initiated a program called "Meeting Caravan" and traveled across Japan to meet up and connect with other nonprofit organizations and independent spaces. N-Mark has been reenergized by the arrival of Aichi Triennale and now initiated several community projects in Nagoya area. The city has many new and hybrid shared spaces in the arts but they tend to be short-lived and quite isolated from other communities. The longest running independent space in Nagoya is Pawlr, which has also been in a transitional period and tried to change its way of organization after 3/11 to be more democratic and transparent.

In Kyushu, even though Fukuoka is the biggest and most art-centric city, with the colossal presence of the Fukuoka Asian Art Museum and its great research facility, and the pivotal citywide Museum City public art project in recent past; the city's contemporary art scene has not fully developed as a vital or visible essence of the city. Consequently, alternative art spaces have not prospered as expected, prominent spaces include IAF Shop, which is a

long-standing gallery, event space, and bar opened since 2001 and have gone through several reincarnations over the years; and Art Space Tetra, started in 2004 and also have undergone changes – now in its third regenerational effort, the space tries to balance between its own program, with heavy emphasis on contemporary sociopolitical content, and art/music events that are open for rental. Perhaps the most recognized alternative space in Kyushu is Gallery Soap in Kitakyushu, an industrial city North of Fukuoka. The space was founded in 1997 and has been actively organizing various exhibitions, performance, music events, with participating artists from local and international art community. Gallery Soap's network is cultivated among relatively small alternative spaces across the world, especially in Europe and Asia, which resulted ultimately in an ironically named art festival, Kitakyushu Biennial – a self-proclaimed world's smallest biennial. The festival launched in 2007, created as a collaborative project with other art spaces around the relevant sociopolitical theme, and traveled to different cities that the collaborated spaces located. Another independent space in Kitakyushu is Operation Table, which focuses more on providing space for local artists, both established and upcoming.

Up in the North, Sapporo has a relatively young contemporary art community, even though the recent Sapporo International Art Festival started in 2014 has helped regenerating the art community tremendously, bringing in people from all over Japan and also international audience to the region. Sapporo has seen several interesting small independent spaces, such as Oyoyo, founded in 2008 offering diverse programs including lectures, exhibitions, workshops, on issues range from art to subculture activities; Art Center Dosha, a small music/craft shop and event space focusing on music and cultural events; CAI02, a gallery that exhibited both established and young artists, with various programs including discussions and curatorial classes. As a region most heavily impacted by the Tsunami during March 2011 incident, Tohoku area has seen more site-specific and itinerant community art projects than typical alternative spaces. Several independent art spaces still in operation include Gallery Turnaround in Sendai, an exhibition space and café showing works by established and young artists locally and nationally; Survivart, a semi-public space set up in a guesthouse functioning as meeting and discussion space for artists and curators in Sendai; while in Shiogama, a small city near Sendai, Birdo frugas is an art space focused on providing space for local artists and some international artists, and also engages in community and regional project, for example, Tsunagaru Wan Project, an art project focusing on research and document craft, music, folktales, natural harvests, etc. on various islands near Matsushima and Shiogama coast.

Down in Okinawa, possibly the most important and influential contemporary art organization in the area was Maejima Art Center in Naha, founded in 2001 by artist Jun Miyagi and closed in 2011. The space was an attempt of grassroots movement of a group of young artists to create “street museum” by working closely with local community through art aiming for neighborhood regeneration, with their most successful project being Wanakio Art Festival, an art festival organized every two years in urban area of Naha city. The festival received a positive response both from the local community and from local and international artists. Additionally, there are numbers of alternative spaces and initiatives in Okinawa; since government and commercial funding is largely unavailable for contemporary

art, artists and curators have to create their own space independently. These spaces include Barracks, a DIY shared work space started in 2014, utilized by students of Okinawa Prefecture University of the Arts together with artists and activists, the space sometimes organizes exhibition, talk, screening, etc.; Tomari, an alternative space regularly organizing talks, lectures, and other contemporary art events; Camp Talganie Artistic Farm, an exhibition space that is an extension of artist Ota Kazuhito's house, exhibiting works of emerging artists; Studio Kaihouku, a collaborative studio founded in 2003 by artist Ryoji Hayashi in Koza, focusing on producing art projects that engage with the public in urban setting.

Another distinct category of alternative space is alternative art school, as a more progressive and inclusive option to art schools and universities. These alternative art schools are concerned about the lack of openness and diversity in art education program, namely, the lack of critical thinking and contemporary art courses. Also the proliferations of arts management program mainly supported by the government agencies, whose focus is on professional and career building courses and not on establishing background knowledge, critical thinking, and cross-disciplinary learning in contemporary art. The forerunner of alternative art schools today was Bigakko, started in 1969 in Tokyo by a radical art critic, editor, and activist, Kyoji Ishii. It emerged right after the unsettling time of student movement in 1968, led by Zenkyoto or All Campus Joint Struggle League, a non-sectarian radical students' group protesting about concrete issues namely tuition hikes, misuse of funds, and developing into struggle against existing social structure. While in the art faction, Tama Art University student organization, Bikyoto or Artists' Joing Struggle Council also called for deconstruction of authorities and establishment in the art world. However, all student movement groups were removed and arrested in the following year and consequently the movement slowly withered away. Among the waning of political activism, Kyoji Ishii introduced Bigakko as an attempt to utilize art as "a tool for quiet reflection on the internal and for changes from within," which would be a platform where "political and artistic activism, thoughts, and philosophy were discussed, practiced and realized."²⁷ Bigakko had an impressively visionary goal, it aimed to extend branches of the art school throughout Japan where each teachers lived, in order to organically connected autonomous teachers-students 'cells' of Bigakko all across the country and decentralized Tokyo as the center for art and art school.²⁸ However, this vision was too radical for the time and remained unfulfilled after opening only one branch in Nagano but the school proof too progressive for the population.

Another art school, with a slightly different direction emerged around the same time, "B-Semi Learning System" founded in Yokohama in 1967 by artist Yoshishige Saito. B-Semi was abbreviated from Basic Seminar, the school was set up to educate students about contemporary art in a full time, two-years program, when art school was still lacking in contemporary art courses. The school offered no certificate but many young artists converged to study here, and numbers of successful artists credited this school as part of

²⁷ Maude-Roxby, Alice. *Anti-Academy*. John Hansard Gallery, 2013.

²⁸ Maude-Roxby, Alice. *Anti-Academy*. John Hansard Gallery, 2013.

their essential learning experience. Compared to Bigakko, B-Semi offered a more structured and conventional curricula in learning about contemporary, both practical and in theoretical education. Therefore, when the founder passed away in 2004 and the school realized that art colleges have presently taught more contemporary art in their program, B-Semi closed down and interestingly transformed itself into Blanclass, a more flexible, multifunctional space. Blanclass now functions as a platform for experimental performances and art events, and also offers weekend short-term art education classes. Short-term so-called nano school has also been explored successfully by another alternative art school, AIT (Arts Initiative Tokyo). AIT was founded in 2002 by six curators and art managers as a curatorial school mainly because regular art education in Japan did not offer courses on curatorial, theoretical, philosophy of art and also background in contemporary art context. So the art school program called MAD (Making Art Different) is initiated, offering its first curating course in Japan, together with organizing lectures by local and international artists and curators. The launch of Yokohama Triennale in the decade of 2000s had admittedly helped increase interest, enthusiasm, and demand in curator courses and over the years, other large-scale art festivals also propel the necessity to produce more professionals into the contemporary art community, resulting in nano art schools and curatorial courses all over Japan, for example, Think School in Sapporo, Tottori Curatorial School in Tottori, Takayama Architecture Seminar School in Gifu, etc; together with many other short-term art and curator courses offered by small to medium sized art spaces in all region.

V. Art Project

Art Project has been a ubiquitous term in contemporary art in Japan. From its inception in the 1990s, the practice of so-called 'art project' has become a nationwide phenomenon in the past decade. Art project usually signifies a community-based activity initiated outside of traditional spaces of art museums and galleries, through which artists "pursue collaborations with other artists or even non-artists, typically local residents."²⁹ Artists function as 'project leaders' conceiving projects that can range from community art project in small village with local amateurs, to sizable international art festival participated by established artists from all over the world. The rise of art project is perhaps a good indication of how relationship between art and society in Japan has been transformed over the years – from the avant-garde counterculture youth movement in the 1960s and 1970s, to the consumerist and capitalist tendency that served mass culture in the 1980s and early 1990s, to a community-based, social engaged, and participatory art of today. The shift from 1990s to present days was quite dramatic and telling; the nationwide affluence during late 1980s to early 1990s actually contributed more wealth into the art market and art establishment and left young and nonestablished artists out of the art economic ecosystem. However, when the economy collapsed during 1990s, government agencies and corporations started to reduce their budgets on art; with the establishment of the

²⁹ Tomii, Reiko. "Collectivism in Twentieth-Century Japanese Art with a Focus on Operational Aspects of *Dantai*." *Positions*, vol. 21, no. 12, 2013.

Japan Arts Council to give small grants to individual artists who were not previously eligible for government funding (before this, only institutions were eligible), and the Association for Corporate Support of the Arts to provide small-scale budget in support of young artists (which included primary art sponsors like Shiseido and Asahi).³⁰ Economy decline also left both urban and provincial areas with underused and abandoned spaces, like deserted office buildings or desolate shopping streets, which young artists started to occupy and operate in. Pioneer initiatives in the vein of community art projects include Art Camp Hakushu by contemporary dancer Min Tanaka, who relocated his dance group from city to agricultural village in Yamanashi prefecture and launched art and dance festival in 1988 in which participants would involve in creating both art and agricultural works; and Museum City Tenjin in Fukuoka started in 1990 bringing local and international artists and their works into various locations in the city.

The Great Hanshin Earthquake in Kobe in 1995 had great impact in the way art is perceived in relations to society especially during disastrous time, and also contributed to the development of art projects in Japan. During the immediate aftermath of the earthquake, all artistic activities in Kobe and in greater Kansai area were suspended or canceled because art was regarded as inappropriate and insensitive acts that served no purpose in catastrophic time. Society's general perception of the unbridgeable separation between art and society and the doubt about the inadequacy of art led to artists and art producers questioning and gradually adjusting their roles in society, which many have done through involvement in community art projects. Therefore, when the Great East Japan Earthquake hit the country in 2011, great numbers of artists rushed to the affected areas and volunteered, and some took actions through different charity projects, while the Commissioner for Cultural Affairs called for cultural activities not to be canceled. Moreover, the Earthquake of 2011 and the subsequent Fukushima nuclear plant incident had also yielded great impact on artists and art producers, primarily because of the political nature of the nuclear radiation incident. Artists, together with multitude of Japanese people started to grow intensely skeptical over "the premise of modernization, civilization and globalization that the authorities had guaranteed."³¹ It was a pivotal moment in which the gap between art, society, and politics was dissolving and overlapping; many artists started to become directly involved with social and political movement, while others produced art works with explicit social and political contents.

Another factor contributing to the prevalent art project was the dominant mode of global contemporary art during the mid-1990s to the present, the so-called "relational aesthetics," and "social-engaged art," which emphasizes on similar relationships to art project developing between artists, and communities and produce creative collaborations

³⁰ Kumakura, Rumiko & The Art Project Research Group. *An Overview of Art Projects in Japan: A Society That Co-Creates with Art*. Arts Council Tokyo, 2015.

³¹ Mori, Yoshitaka. "New Collectivism, Participation and Politics after the East Japan Great Earthquake." *World Art*, vol. 5, no. 1, 2015, pp. 167-186.

that resulted in works that respond to the specific needs and agendas of communities.³² Art project, nevertheless, differs from social-engaged art sharply in many ways, while social-engaged art foregrounds criticality in social issues, political activism and community collaborations through art process and practice; art project does not encompass such direct social and political aim, instead it situates itself in a more neutral position and in between overlapping sociocultural fields, from art to education, social welfare, urban planning, vernacular culture, etc. with greater focus on generating new channels of communication for people in the community ideally through social and historical contexts.³³ The departure of art project from social-engaged art reflects the way the more critical and direct oppositional role contemporary art holds in the West as opposed to a nonconfrontational and inclusive position in Japan.

The most popular type of art project is the art festival, both large-scale international festival and smaller-scale local festival, organized by cities or prefectures to promote art tourism and/or neighborhood regeneration. Major international art festivals that have been successful and made significant impact on cultural and economic landscape of the region include those in urban settings like Yokohama Triennale, Aichi Triennale, and Sapporo International Art Festival; and also others in rural areas, including Echigo-Tsumari Triennale, Setouchi Triennale, and Beppu Project. The art festivals held in urban settings are mostly exhibited in museums and art centers, while some also include long-term community projects in other parts of the city in order to engage to the audience in a non-art environment. One of the first large international art festivals in Japan, Yokohama Triennale, initiated in 2001, had made a visible impact to the regional and national art community, particularly in attracting international artists and visitors, and creating opportunities for art professionals to operate in, which served as an example for many other cities to launch their own international art festivals in following years.

Subsequent festival includes Aichi Triennale, whose first installment appeared in 2010 had injected a new energy into the art scene in Nagoya and nearby cities. Nagoya was the but after the financial crash in the 1990s, it had never gained its importance on similar level again. There were many attempts by young artists to rebuild the scene but not until the launching of Aichi Triennale in 2010 that the city started to attract artists, curators, art managers from all over Japan and international art scene to exhibit and work in the city again. The reinvigorating scene also contributes to long-running art spaces becoming more active (such as N-Mark, a two decades old organization working with communities and other nonprofit organization all over Japan), and new spaces being initiated (notably MAT Nagoya, recently opened in 2015, with public and private funds, aims to create a more diverse and international program, from exhibitions, education, residency, etc.). Also, a more active community benefits smaller scale, independent and experimental art spaces to burgeon as well. On one hand, international art festival aims to bring in national and

³² Kwon, Miwon. "One Place after Another: Notes on Site Specificity." *October*, vol. 80, 1997, pp. 85-110.

³³ Kumakura, Rumiko & The Art Project Research Group. *An Overview of Art Projects in Japan: A Society That Co-Creates with Art*. Arts Council Tokyo, 2015.

international practitioners and audience; but on the other hand, it also aspires to connect with local audience and community. As the curator of Aichi Triennale explained that since Japan is rather monoculture as a country, it is the task of Biennales and Triennales to bring in new experiences and materials to local community, and to expose them to other cultures that are viewed as foreign to them, in order to familiarize and integrate “the other” into society more easily in the future. Example of this kind of art project includes Chojamachi Project in a historical textile wholesaling district, Chojamachi, which was half empty due to sharp decline in textile industry, the project occupied one vacant building and produced various activities by local and international artists that employed art and education to connect with the community and its history.

Another example is Sapporo International Art Festival as Sapporo has had a relatively young contemporary art community; it has been emerging for around 30 years. Many issues in the art community reflect on this condition of a still developing scene including the lack of infrastructure, art education, diverse institutions, shared studios, artist collectives, and art professionals. However, the recent introduction of Sapporo International Art Festival in 2014 has unmistakably helped generating both interests and resources in Sapporo and Hokkaido contemporary cultural scene, locally and internationally. Most Sapporo-based artists, curators, and art administrators have indicated the importance of Sapporo International Art Festival particularly in the ways that it has brought in art professionals from many parts of Japan, and brought back those originally from Hokkaido. Additionally, many new art institutions, art spaces and art projects have emerged as a result of a more invigorated art scene after 2014. In the long run, in order for the large international art festival to flourish in urban environs, many factors have to be considered: longevity and appropriate vision from the authority are very important for the scene to incubate and thrive.

As for large-scale international art festival in rural areas that spread over extended areas of depopulated region, artworks and art projects are usually created in site-specific locations and engaged in historical and social context of specific areas. Echigo-Tsumari Art Triennale is an archetype of this model; launched in 2000 in a rural depopulated area with no notable historical sites, it has over times become an exceptionally successful case of large-scale art festival that can both connect deeply with the local community and bring in streams of art and mainstream tourists to the otherwise forgotten region. After the favorable outcome of Echigo-Tsumari Triennale, Setouchi Triennale situated in dozens of islands in Seto Sea followed suit, and also proved very successful. These large international festival in distant areas and organized by prominent curators, for better or worse, has become one of the few go-to models for local governments and communities to revitalize local economy and community and to ease the vital issue of depopulation. However, even though most regions have tried their hands on launching their own art festivals, the ones that create significant impact on the regions are not numerous, since there are many factors to its success, including longevity of the festival, investment in community building, assembling good personnels, etc.

Some urban renewal projects are initiated and run by local governments or big corporations such as Koganecho Bazaar in Yokohama, which is an attempt to clean up and revitalize previous red-light district by setting up various short- and long-term art programs on site – art project is therefore used as a government’s tool to revive problematic neighborhood and the project remains a work-in-progress. As for corporate example, Chishima Foundation in Osaka is an apparent case in point, initiated by a real estate company, the Chishima Foundation converts underused assets to art facilities and young artists’ hub in order to increase area visibility and enhance real estate values while young artists can rent and use the spaces for affordable price.

On the other hand, smaller scale art projects in both urban and rural areas are innumerable and easier to achieve positive outcome because they do not aim to make substantial economic impact, but instead focus on creating “new channels for communication within a locality, rediscovering hidden value of the area, and contributing to community-building.”³⁴ This type of art projects is usually self-organized by local nonprofit organizations, alternative spaces, or individuals in the community. In Tokyo, an independent initiative Dislocate started in 2005 as an exhibition and workshop space for media art, but over time, it has developed into a community-based and art activism platform. In recent years, Dislocate has focused on the issue of immigration and tried to create an environment that are friendly to immigrants, and build relations between immigrants and local community in their area of Nishi-Oguibo. Last year, Dislocate started a space called Kosaten in order to build a closer bridge with the local community (Kosaten means crossing or space in which people come to gather together) and organize regular program to create a “safe zone” where members of the community can join in and discuss any kinds of topics without fear of being judged. Kosaten also encompasses various programs including language classes, discussion lab, film screening, and a monthly radio program, inviting diverse guest speakers from various communities, both in Japan and other countries. Dislocate and Kosaten aims to create a new notion of ‘public space’ in Japan that reaffirm collective and individual agency as public, as opposed to the official notion of authority-regulated public space, and also to create a network of sociopolitical conscious groups and spaces, in order to gradually bring about a civil movement that strives for better and more equal society.

In Yokohama, Art Lab Ova, an artist-run initiative also works closely with the diverse and difficult immigrant communities in the city. Established in 1996, Art Lab Ova is located in Wakabacho area, a multicultural district of Yokohama whose residents includes many immigrants and sex workers from Philippines, Korea, China, and Thailand. The space operates as a multifunctional second-hand shop/information center which also creates art projects in the forms of public intervention, with political and social engagement in various urban settings like cinemas, pubs, shopping malls, zoos, welfare facilities and schools. Art Lab Ova takes a different, disagreeing stance against what they see as government-forced gentrification, in which local government uses art project to rid the area of problematic

³⁴ Kumakura, Rumiko & The Art Project Research Group. *An Overview of Art Projects in Japan: A Society That Co-Creates with Art*. Arts Council Tokyo, 2015.

areas and replaces them with spaces for artists, galleries and art projects; they also openly question artists and art managers working for this project for their complicit position in their service for authority, inspection, and censorship. Art Lab Ova does not seek to transform the area through gentrification, but wish to be embedded in the communities and create better understanding between Japanese residents and immigrants. Their projects include opening a cafe and flea market for local residents especially focusing on immigrant population who could not speak Japanese very well in order to create conversation and learn about their everyday issues; an informal after school and summer school care for Southeast Asian kids who have trouble in learning Japanese language and adjusting to life in Japanese society; and an exchange program that brought in artists from China, Korea, and Thailand to interact with foreign residents in the neighborhood and schools, talking about issues in daily life and working upon sets of solutions for channels of communication between local Japanese residents and foreign residents, which would result in creating a better community, and also for immigrant population to understand the concept and practice of self-organization in countering with strict and unyielding local residents and authority.

Osaka holds two main community art initiatives that are long-standing and have survived the local government's art fund significant decreases since the decade of 2000s, which saw the closing of Festival Gate, an important cultural complex that housed many arts and cultural NPOs and supported their many programs and projects. Both surviving organizations emphasize on working with surrounding community, which was an aging and/or unemployed population through various art projects. The first one is Cocoroom, started in 2003 and stayed in Festival Gate until its closure in 2008, since then it moves to Kamagasaki area where aging and homeless population gathered. Cocoroom offers café and community space for the neighborhood and also focuses on working together with other nonprofit organizations with similar aim to help this community, for example, with Hitohana Center, a retirement center, which Cocoroom provides personnel support for art workshop for retirees. Since 2013, it has participated in an association of 5 organizations and working to support the aging community on medical, social welfare, job creation, and community revitalization through various means including the arts. They also created annual 'Kamagasaki University,' a free university for local community, with classes ranging from arts, poetry, traditional performance, to astronomy and philosophy.

Another initiative is Breaker Project, which started as an offshoot of a nonprofit organization that also had occupied a space in Festival Gate. Breaker Project was established to bridge the gap between art and community by producing art in public space each year. They were one of the first batches of art producers who engaged themselves with so-called Art Project. Apart from annual art in public place, Breaker Project also took similar approach to Cocoroom in connecting with the aging population in their immediate local community by founding Tansu Center for old women and encouraging them to engage in art, craft, and music workshops. Breaker Project has also partnered with children community center and created music program for kids in the community.

Art projects in smaller cities include Beppu Project, founded in 2005 in Beppu to take on declining rural areas and serve as intermediary among existing social groups in the community and facilitate formation of new relationships among local population. Beppu Project situates in a renovated vacant buildings turned community center with various functions and collaborations, including a community café providing employment for disabled, and managed by local university's Department of Social Welfare; and a hub for local traditional craft operated by nonprofit organization promoting bamboo craft. Beppu Project also runs other art projects including art festival and artist in residency program, and supporting young generation to open small retail shops to help revitalizing the otherwise unoccupied spaces in the city.

The Great East Japan Earthquake and the subsequent Fukushima nuclear plant incident in 2011 had great impact on art projects – both in content and approach from artists and art producers, especially those art projects in the affected areas of Tohoku region. Not only artists started to work more directly within the social and political movement, they began questioning the role of art and artists in catastrophic time and resituating their practice in a wider social, economic and political context. As many crucial and fundamental issues facing the community and the nation are at stake, the event of 3.11 has brought a renewed sense of personal agency and the skepticism towards systems enforced by authorities, which led to people creating a small scale but expanding network from the bottom up.³⁵ Additionally, the role of art projects and artists as project leaders have been evolved into a more experiential and crucial, since for each community, recovering from the earthquake does not simply mean restoring normal life pre-disaster, but to also redesign various aspects of lives in certain society as well; therefore art project can be used as channels for communion and resolutions.

Tohoku area was the most affected area during the recent earthquake and tsunami in 2011 so art spaces and artists in this area have been largely working on projects concerning 3.11 and its aftermath, especially on the aspects of the role of art in rebuilding the communities, physically, historically, and psychologically. Sendai is the largest city in this area, and its most established art organization is Sendai Mediatheque. Established in 2001 aiming for lifelong learning of its citizens, Sendai Mediatheque provides library space, together with image and sound library, and also exhibition and theater spaces, with studio space that encourages the use of digital media, e.g. computer, camera, video camera among citizens of Sendai. After 3.11 disaster, the Mediatheque initiated Center for Remembering 3.11, a so-called “Citizen’s Collaboration Archive” platform, in which citizens, experts and staff collaborate to independently disseminate information and record the restoration and recovery process. They not only collect document and archive, but also encourage people to independently pursue these acts, by supplying citizens with cameras and video cameras and let them use the studio to edit photo and video and write article and

³⁵ Ota, Emma. “Roji to Hito: Tokyo’s Artist Run Spaces Part 2: Lessons in democracy from a small space which resonates with the politics of the everyday.” *Tokyo Art Beat*, <http://www.tokyoartbeat.com/tablog/entries.en/2015/06/roji-to-hito.html>.

upload them online. Center for Remembering 3.11 serves as a platform that allows art to become a tool to help gathering and thus remembering what the community had lost in the disaster so that not only it will not be forgotten but also that it might be recreated and restored; in short Sendai Mediatheque has done an exceptional job in advocating and nurturing archiving as an important cultural activity in time of crisis.

Other artists, art collectives and art projects also take on similar approach to Sendai Mediatheque, including Nook Collective, a loose collective of artists and curators who carries out a long-term “Library of Folktale Voices” project by interviewing local citizens about local folktales in order to create folktale archives; RE: Project, a series of research and interviews with local people in 12 coastal villages of Sendai that were much affected by the Great East Japan Earthquake, and encouraging them to rediscover, reacknowledge, and rethink their local resources; Tohoku Craft collective, a group of art and creative people in Tohoku area utilizing their skills producing craft workshops and creating craft products to help communities and people who are affected by 3.11; Art Inclusion, a project that works with handicapped people and children from the affected area of Sendai and surrounding areas and holds art project every October, they also open Oshiruko cafe at temporary housing from 2012. Additionally, in Rikuzentakata, artist duo Haruka Komori & Natsume Seo have been archiving and documenting myriad aspects of this town and its people since the disaster.

Ishinomaki is the second largest city in the area after Sendai and it was the area most affected and most devastated by the earthquake and tsunami in 2011. The city was also the largest city that was accessible by roads during 3.11, Ishinomaki was the gateway to other worse hitting areas and served as the hub of countless NGOs and volunteer groups. So the urban rebuilding after the disaster has been quite different from other cities because the numbers of people dislocated, relocated, and newly settled have been drastic; there are of course many locals who return to the area, but there are also huge numbers of young volunteers who chose to stay in the city after the immediate rescue period. The most prominent project and community in the city is Ishinomaki 2.0, established in 2011 consists of members from diverse creative backgrounds, architecture, creative producer, web director, NPO manager, etc. They aimed to renew the city, but instead of rebuilding it back to the way it was before the disaster, the organization focused on creating new model of an improved version of the city, thus the name Ishinomaki 2.0. The collective has rebuilt the center of the city occupying vacant properties as open shared office, facilities for visitors, creating a bar, hostel, IT lab, etc, in DIY creative style, and organizing various art projects in the city including the upcoming Reborn art festival in 2017, in which artists and musicians from other cities and countries will participate. Ishinomaki 2.0 has admittedly been very effective in its effort to recruit members and resources to renovate the city, however, there are some criticisms from local community primarily on the fact that the project borders on gentrification (with many designer art and craft stores, food trucks, coworking spaces, etc.), and the fact that the group consists mainly of people from Tokyo, further alienates some of the locals and older generation in the city.

Iwaki city in Fukushima is the nearest so-called 'safe zone' city to the nuclear disaster zone during the Great Earthquake in 2011. Since it is also the largest city in the area, it was a hub for volunteer activities during the evacuation and rebuilding days. Similar to the situation in Ishinomaki, young people from all over the country moved to Iwaki to volunteer and many of them stayed on after the initial rebuilding period. Moreover, numbers of young people originally from Iwaki, who had left the area to live and work elsewhere returned and resettled themselves in the city after 3.11. Iwaki already had a relatively active contemporary art community before the Earthquake; the city had held Iwaki Triennale twice in 2007 and 2010 but stopped operating after the disaster. A new annual art festival, Gengenten, effectively emerged as a response to 3.11 and its impact on local communities, with a clear mission of reconnecting and reconstructing broken communities through art. Members of Gengenten were mostly young art and creative people in their 20s and 30s, who were native to Iwaki and recently returned after the 3.11 incident; they also worked collaboratively with older generation local art managers and curators in order to integrate art into local community seamlessly and effectively. The festival brought artists from Iwaki and other cities to create site-specific works and projects in everyday places – exhibition spaces include shopping mall, shopping arcade, paper shop, café, music hall, etc. The reception from the local has been positive; Gengenten has become a recognizable part of Iwaki city, not only as a regenerating effort but also as a commemorating function and critical platform.

Another interesting grass-root initiative formed by young local people to help the recovery of Iwaki city is Future Meeting, established in 2013. Future Meeting initially began as information sharing group on the specific topic of the law about children in nuclear-affected zones and then organically developed into a larger discussion platform on various topics about life after 3.11 disaster by gathering local people to share their thoughts and experiences to one another. The group convened several times a year for large meeting, in the manner of town hall meeting, with more than 100 people from all over Fukushima prefecture and from all spectrum of life in attendance, to discuss their lives in this precarious condition. Interestingly, the leading member of Future Meeting is a young monk, so the main site of the group is in a Buddhist temple, which adds to its notion of openness since temple functions as a hub of the community. It also connects and collaborates with other cities affected by disasters, for example, creating discussion with people in Kobe and comparing and sharing similarities and differences in consequences and solutions of the Earthquake in each city. Future Meeting proves altogether quite successful it has already inspired discussion platform in other town, which is Futaba Future Meeting; and its activity was also made into a documentary, Fukushima Voice in 2013. Other groups working in and around Fukushima include Mama café, a space for mother in Fukushima to gather and share information; Hama-Naka-Aizu Collaborative Culture Project, researching on how culture and art support reconstruction in Fukushima; Tohoku Gaku, a cross disciplinary study of Tohoku, encompassing culture, geography, history, and economics; NOddIN, a group of artists creating films and video works about the earthquake and nuclear disaster.

Individual artist's project has also taken on a more direct practice and engagement in sociopolitical context of 3.11 issues. One of the most momentous artists' projects in this vein is Project Fukushima!, organized by experimental musician Yoshihide Otomo who brought together numbers of musicians to play in a one-day free music festival in Fukushima. The purpose of this project was to provide a platform for discussion on the controversial issue of radiation in the city of Fukushima, through critical conversations with medical professionals and local residents. Project Fukushima! attracted 13,000 audience in their first edition and successfully raising awareness of people inside and outside of Japan to this cause and the project has been organized every summer since. Through music events, poetry workshop, webcasting, study group on radiation, etc., Project Fukushima! illustrated an attempt to physically draw people to the real site of the incident to witness direct experience and encounter local people, instead of receiving indirect and potentially distorted information from the media or government agencies. Other artists' projects include a more direct protest project especially anti-nuclear protests and rallies; one such project was initiated by artists and activist Masanori Oda, who led a percussion band to rally against nuclear power plant. Likewise, artist Kimura Toshiro Jinjin organized a Nodate ceramic workshop in Otsuchi, in Iwate that focused on process and preparation of the activity, documenting conflict between survivors and outside volunteers, temporary housing and surviving residential home, etc. and the attempt to overcome these issues through communications via art and discussion.

Another artist whose work has been significantly transformed through the event of 3-11 is Koki Tanaka, who represented Japan at the 55th Venice Biennale in 2013, with series of collaborative projects illustrating experience of individual and community affected by the Earthquake and Nuclear incident in 2011. Tanaka's works explore shared experiences and collective gestures in various cases of social experiments that implicate human and group behaviors in post-disaster situations and conditions. Additionally, his latest series of work are rather more explicitly related to post-3.11 world, in which he explores provisional communities and communal living that were the direct results of the earthquake and nuclear radiation, reflecting further issues of emigration, discrimination, and wellbeing in a presently divided and forgetful society. It has been suggested that in this present social, political and cultural conditions of being "transitional, flexible, liquid, fragmented and mobile," artistic collaboration that encourages dialogical, cross-disciplinary and open-ended practices may be the only way for the arts and culture to become a critical gesture in time of crisis.³⁶

Ultimately, the function of art in this difficult, transformative time is probably to help us remembering what should be remembered, and forgetting what should be forgotten. As Jean-Luc Nancy stated in "After Fukushima: The Equivalence of Catastrophe" that the integral part of the process of catastrophe-reconstruction is the process of forgetting, that in order to restore normal, everyday nature of life, one has to learn to forget – but only

³⁶ Mori, Yoshitaka. "New Collectivism, Participation and Politics after the East Japan Great Earthquake." *World Art*, vol. 5, no. 1, 2015, pp. 167-186.

forgetting catastrophe itself, its unhappiness, its suffering, and remembering its causes and consequences.³⁷ Or as a more poetic and poignant analogy offered by Yoshitaka Mori, who saw artist's role in the aftermath of 3.11 as the 'angel of history' in Walter Benjamin's Theses on the Philosophy of History, who moves towards the future but keeps looking back at the past and sees only befallen debris of history. Similarly, artist's role is to "observes pile of wreckage while being pushed ahead by strong winds, and asserts that new artistic approaches lie in how they can re-problematize all the issues pertaining to the nuclear meltdown, which existing media and art institutions have failed to fully capture."³⁸

VI. Conclusion

As already demonstrated above, self-organized practice in contemporary arts and culture in Japan is diverse, flexible, and timely; it is a channel through which artistic ideas and energies circulated and converged in response to various sociopolitical conditions and restrictions. In establishing one's own autonomy through these self-organized practices in order to counter, negate and subvert the system and authority; collection of individualities and singularities is formed. This is a way to "move tactically in the world," and see "everyday life as a site for subversive practices" for critical action³⁹, whether it be contested spaces, artist collectives, alternative communities, protest groups, nano schools, etc. The crucial factor to these autonomous initiatives is that they create a horizontal network of self-organized initiatives as an alternative transnational network of social and cultural movements in hope to transmit information, knowledge, and solidarity across the nation and the world.

³⁷ Nancy, Jean-Luc. *After Fukushima: The Equivalence of Catastrophe*. Fordham University Press, 2015.

³⁸ quoted in Kumakura, Rumiko & The Art Project Research Group. *An Overview of Art Projects in Japan: A Society That Co-Creates with Art*. Arts Council Tokyo, 2015.

³⁹ Borgen, Maibritt. "The Inner and Outer Form of Self-Organisation," in Hebert & Szefer, eds. *Self-Organised*. Open Editions, 2013.

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