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Out of Site: *Japanese Art After Censorship*

Japanese artist Meiro Koizumi staged a solo exhibition in May 2017, in rented premises above a Harajuku boutique, charging five hundred yen entry to visitors to watch a twenty-five minute, three-screen video installation. Born in 1976, Koizumi is a reasonably established figure within Japanese art, maintaining a busy exhibition schedule around the country and overseas, having exhibited at many of the country's major venues and in numerous international biennials, with representation by a high profile domestic and European galleries. Twenty-five years earlier, it would not have been unusual for an artist active in Tokyo to self-fund an exhibition in a rental space, but the growth of a stable institutional framework and a vibrant commercial sector since that time has made such an endeavour unnecessary. Promoted virally, attendance more than doubled the artist's modest expectations for the exhibition's nine-day run, and in November the project garnered Koizumi the inaugural Japanese Contemporary Art Transparency Prize for facilitating "debate about actual censorship, corruption, nepotism, discrimination or stimulates freedom of curatorial practice in the local art world."[1]

A few months earlier, in October 2016, the artist collective Chim↑Pom converted a four-storey building scheduled for demolition in the Shinjuku red light district of Kabukicho into a giant work of art-cum-exhibition entitled *So see you again tomorrow, too?* The building had been the home of the former neighbourhood promotion association, and its demolition was part of a regeneration initiative ahead of the 2020 Tokyo Olympics, which has seen many of the city's seedier districts, along with Mitsuo Katayama's 1964 Olympic stadium, redeveloped and 'cleaned up'. Chim↑Pom charged a modest entry fee to their exhibition requiring visitors to sign a safety waiver, as the centrepiece of the project was a gaping, unprotected 2.5 metre square hole carved into the floor of the top three levels. The concrete slabs sandwiched into a 'build burger' on the ground floor, while numerous works paying tribute to various aspects of Kabukicho—its host clubs, its sex workers, its ramen shops—were arranged throughout the building. The space was animated by talks, performances and parties, and after a successful two-week run the works were left behind to be demolished along with the building.

Japanese art has a strong history of off-site or post-museum projects, in which artists have located their works outside the normative display structures of museums and galleries. As varied as their contexts may be—from urban to rural, public to private, intimate to expansive—they have all played a substantial role in shaping discussion around the character and function of contemporary art. This variance of context, however, remains significant, for it indicates the relative isolation in which departures from norms of exhibition and production have taken place. The Japanese off-site may be storied, but it is far from a continuous tradition. Throughout its history, the off-site has operated out of specific contingencies, more often than not in relation to institutional structures of a given time.

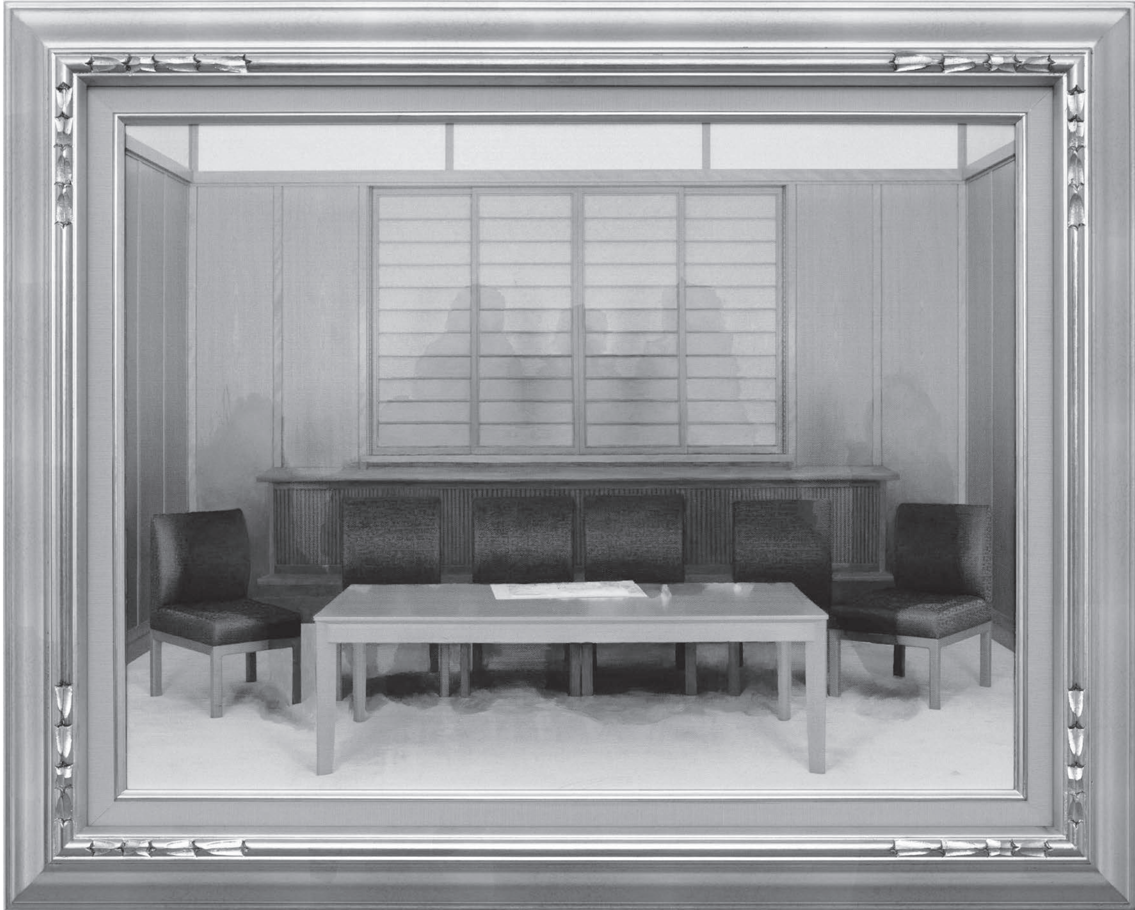
The "descent to the everyday" of the 1960s, for example, occurred when the country's anti-art groups, who had been briefly unified through the annual open-entry *Yomiuri Independent* exhibition at the Tokyo Metropolitan Museum of Art between 1958 and 1962, were effectively prevented from further participation when the host venue expressly forbade the inclusion of "unpleasant" art, among a host of draconian restrictions.[2] Turning to the streets out of sheer necessity, groups like Hi Red Centre and such radical successors as the I Group, Monoha, Provoke, Bikyoto and the "non-art" and "wilderness" artists, drew on their expanded field of operations to collectively formulate critiques of artistic subjectivity and aesthetic autonomy, as well as concepts of authorship, originality and objective truth. On the other hand, the mass guerilla art events that took place in Tokyo in the 1990s, such as Ginburart, Shonen Shinjuku Art and Akihabara TV, were produced out of frustration with the then-dominant rental gallery system, in which the entire financial burden of mounting, publicising and selling contemporary art was shouldered by artists. Drawing inspiration from the DIY ethic of the Kansai-

centred 'new wave' of the 1980s and the Korean 'small groups' movement of the democratisation era, the artists associated with these interventions—among them Masato Nakamura, Takashi Murakami, Tsuyoshi Ozawa and Makoto Aida—developed strategies that would enable them to survive Japan's long recession and eventually build a sustainable market infrastructure for new art, as well as engendering a range of collaborative experiments and ongoing community-oriented projects.

Recent years have seen a return of forms of collectivism within Japanese art, and substantial appetite toward operating outside conventional museum and gallery spaces driven by tactical necessity. Much of this is in keeping with the broad social turn that has gained visibility in Japanese art in the wake of the March 2011 Fukushima disaster, a noticeable politicisation of art after the relatively introspective "zero zero" or "micropop" tendency that dominated the 2000s.[3] Japanese artistic radicalism tends to operate in waves, directly reflecting the appetite for political experiment in society at large—the Mavo, Action and surrealist avant-gardes of the 1920s were closely tied to Marxist and anarchist ideas in vogue during Taisho democracy; the Yomiuri Independents and their successors in the 1960s flourished in a context of widespread student unrest. Following Fukushima, the anti-nuclear movement mobilised demonstrations of a scale not seen since the violent demise of the New Left in the early 1970s. This return of protest as a form of popular expression provided a context in which socially critical, formally experimental art could operate as a locus of creative thinking, and while the intensity of public outrage has since abated, critical artists like Koizumi and Chim↑Pom have maintained their momentum.

As the horizon of artistic politics has shifted from the personal to the public, self-organisation has emerged as an acknowledgment of the limits of institutional authority and an assertion of community control. At one level, this is a direct extension of the social orientation of current practice, recognisable in the ebullient community festivals of *Project FUKUSHIMA!* (2011–) initiated by poet Ryoichi Wago and musicians Michiro Endo and Yoshihide Otomo, or the exemplary *Don't Follow the Wind* project (2015–) organised by Chim↑Pom in collaboration with curator Kubota Kenji and others, an exhibition staged in the radioactive exclusion zone itself, accessible by virtual reality tour. In various ways, groups such as Art Center Ongoing, the Artists' Guild, blanClass, CAMP, Las Barcas and XYZ Collective have created dynamic new contexts for engendering, sharing and analysing critical positions in art and culture, providing frameworks for the creation and circulation of work that may overlap with existing institutional and market structures but do not depend on them for legitimacy.

There is, however, another darker factor in the return to the off-site in Japanese art, and that is the unfortunate atmosphere of censorship, marked by several widely discussed episodes that have occurred over the past four years. In February 2014, Katsuhisa Nakagaki was forced to remove elements of an installation on display in rented space at the Tokyo Metropolitan Museum of Art when museum officials objected to their political content. In July, Tokyo artist Megumi Igarashi, also known as Rokudenashiko, or "good-for-nothing kid" was arrested on obscenity charges—after crowd-funding a two-metre kayak modelled on 3D scans of her own vagina—for distributing the data to donors. The following month police in Nagoya demanded the removal of twelve nude photographic portraits by Ryudai Takano from an exhibition at Aichi Prefectural Museum of Art. And in July 2015, high-profile artist Makoto Aida, participating in *An Exhibition for Children – Whose Place is this?* at the Museum of Contemporary Art Tokyo (MOT), reported that museum staff and prefectural government officials had requested the removal of two works from the exhibition after a complaint from a visitor.



The responses of the individual artists varied, depending on their circumstances. A veteran practitioner better known for his unassuming bronzes, Nakagaki had already been expelled from Shinseisaku, one of the largest and most powerful *dantai* or artist associations, whose juried salons are a conservative quirk of the Japanese art system, for the unconventional and anti-nationalist turn his work had taken. He assented to removing three statements condemning right-wing attacks against Article 9 of the Japanese constitution, which outlaws war as a means of settling state disputes, as the museum had threatened the closure of the entire exhibition which was held in spaces Nakagaki's new association had rented from them. The work was subsequently shown in Germany unaltered. Winning widespread support from art and activist communities and the press, Igarashi has actively fought her charges in court, repeatedly appealing rulings against her and asserting a strong feminist position publicly; in 2016 she relocated to Ireland, but continues to campaign in favour of artistic freedom. For his part, Takano organised an elegant response to police intervention—museum staff had been threatened with arrest—by draping a veil over the offending parts of his images, which appeased authorities but drew attention to the act of censorship in the process. "If the government deviates from its stated purpose to temporarily borrow authority from its citizens," he wrote on his blog, "and instead makes a display of this power, that act is far more grotesque than something like the display of genitalia."[4]

By far the most well-known artist of the four, Makoto Aida is no stranger to controversy. Yet his contributions to MOT's summer 2015 children's exhibition were a far cry from the satirical eroticism and violence that characterises many of his extraordinary painterly explorations of the Japanese psyche. Aida had worked with his wife Hiroko Okada and their school-aged son Torajiro to produce an entertaining cluster of works profiling the family's perspectives on various issues in Japanese society. Aida was asked to remove or alter two works within his display, *A Video of a Man Calling Himself Japan's Prime Minister, Making a Speech at an International Assembly* (2015), a droll idealisation in which the artist, dressed to resemble Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, apologises for Japan's military adventures in Asia; and *Manifesto* (2015), a large, handwritten scroll of the family's proposals to the education ministry, including a desire for more teachers and reform of the competitive examination system. Though the form of the second work recalled the student radicalism of the 1960s, its content was hardly controversial. Nevertheless, they inspired an intervention from the museum administration, which reports directly to the Tokyo Metropolitan Government, and a measured response from Aida, who first suggested visible alterations to the works in the mode of Takano's veil, before publicly detailing his conversations with the museum in his own blog. The complainant was never identified and the works remained unchanged.

These incidents were widely reported in news media—Igarashi's case made international headlines—and triggered substantial public discussion on the limits of freedom of expression provisions, the relevance of existing obscenity legislation, and the susceptibility of public institutions to political pressure. While each case has its own unique characteristics that are worth discussing in detail, the short timeframe over which they occurred and several shared contextual factors, meant that they were not isolated. Though not entirely unfamiliar with instances of censorship, Japan's artistic community was understandably alarmed at the sudden frequency with which it was occurring.

What is undeniable though, is that these incidents have arisen at a time when an increasing confidence among artists in dealing with socially and historically sensitive issues has coincided with a susceptibility among institutions to chilling effects of developments elsewhere in civil society. In 2014, after the *Asahi Shimbun* retracted historical reporting into the issue of "comfort women" based on discredited testimony, Shinzo Abe accused the newspaper of damaging Japan's international reputation.

In an atmosphere of historical revisionism, the incident has provided material for right-wing attacks on all investigations of Japan's wartime transgressions, regardless of verity or quality of reporting, while politicians have openly discussed shutting down media organisations they deem "politically biased".[5] The United Nations and Reporters Without Borders have both expressed concerns over apparently declining press freedoms. It is understandable then, that museums—already vulnerable to governmental pressure courtesy of the public sector reforms undertaken during the Junichiro Koizumi administration of the 2000s—would be wary about perceptions of overt politicisation.

It is important at this point to make a clear distinction about the instances listed above. Megumi Igarashi and Ryudai Takano ran afoul of obscenity laws, archaic ordnances that have been interpreted differently over time—particularly in relation to freedom of expression provisions—but which are generally taken to mean that genitalia must be obscured in publicly distributed imagery. Earlier incidents of this type include the withdrawal of a video by Tadasu Takamine from an exhibition at Yokohama Museum of Art in 2004 after the work was referred to police by the museum's director, and a long-running court case surrounding the publication of a book of photographs by Robert Mapplethorpe, which spanned most of the 2000s.[6] The cases of Nakagaki and Aida, however, elude such a legal framework, as problematic and frustrating as it may be. In these instances, the directive for removal or alteration of the work in question had come about as a contravention of Tokyo Metropolitan Government regulations permitting authorities to refuse display of works judged to serve a political agenda. Furthermore, they are only the most prominent examples—Nakagaki's case revealed the hitherto under-reported removal from the same venue of a comfort woman statue by a Korean artist two years earlier, again after an anonymous visitor complaint.

It was in this context that the Artists' Guild, a group set up by Meiro Koizumi along with Hiroharu Mori and Mami Suda to facilitate the sharing of high-end video production equipment and expertise, sought to create space for discussing the limits of artist freedom and the internalisation of censorship regimes at the very institution that had so recently been at the centre of that debate. MOT invited the Artists' Guild to co-curate its yearly survey of emerging art, the *MOT Annual*, and the theme of the project quickly shifted towards self-censorship. Perhaps predictably, the exhibition, which bore the English title *Loose Lips Save Ships* (2016), was an uneasy one, though not without a certain bravery on the behalf of the curators and museum staff in attempting to resolve the question in the public interest. When the exhibition opened in March 2016, numerous works were absent, and negotiations and adjustments continued throughout the three-month duration. In part, this stemmed from certain gestures exceeding MOT's willingness or capacity to accommodate them, but there were other factors at play.

Artist's Guild member Hikaru Fujii, for example, had sought to present records, documentation and objects collected for the Tokyo Peace Memorial Museum, planned as a commemoration of the March 1945 American firebombing of eastern Tokyo—where MOT is located, and 100,000 of whose residents were killed—but were shelved by conservative councillors in 2002. On refusal of access to these materials by city bureaucrats, Fujii set about constructing the ghost of a display relating to the firebombing, an installation of empty frames, plinths and vitrines accompanied by meticulously detailed captions describing the absent materials. Fujii then invited local residents and survivors of the bombing to contribute testimony in the form of a workshop, documented in video form, animating the otherwise stark space with the incontestable force of collective memory.

While Fujii's elegant response to obstructions in his act of historical retrieval was one that enabled the museum to function, however briefly, as a genuine forum for public discussion, other absences were not as successful in conveying the substance of the works they replaced. Most notable among these was an empty space on a wall around a corner from Fujii's installation, lit by a single spotlight and labelled as a work by Koizumi, titled *Air* (2016). While this may have read as a deliberate provocation, a glib performance of the act of censorship, *Air* instead referred to an existing body of work that Koizumi had assented not to show after failing to obtain the full support of the museum. This was a series of digital prints comprising recent and historical media images featuring Emperor Hirohito from which the regent had been erased, leaving a ghostly void. In addition to poetically describing this evacuated visual space, the title was drawn from the idiom "*kūki wo yomu*" or "reading the air"—the customary practice of understanding the unwritten rules of a situation in order to avoid friction. In relation to Koizumi's work, this refers both to a general reticence to discuss the validity of the post-war imperial order, and to the practice of interpreting the Emperor's gestures and turns of speech, given the strict figurehead status to which the role is restricted under the 1947 constitution.

Air was instead exhibited for a short run in April, 2016 at Mujin-to Production, an adventurous commercial gallery located close to MOT that also represents Chim↑Pom. The need for a more intimate, more specialised context for such a work attests to the weight of the social pressures associated with taboos surrounding its subject matter. These extend beyond institutions' lack of confidence in their own capacity to appropriately contextualise these issues for their audiences and stakeholders. In particular, Koizumi was wary of the threat posed by organised ultra-nationalists in harassing and intimidating gallery staff and viewers. Such was the public menace of far right activism that one month later, Japan was forced to pass hate speech legislation following a wave of regularly scheduled, abusive demonstrations against ethnic Korean and Chinese residents, as well as a rise in malicious public pronouncements and internet chatter.[7] The energy and ferocity of Japan's far-right extends to further issues that they perceive as central to Japanese identity. These include questions of Japan's wartime conduct, the role of the Shinto religion in civil society, and the centrality of national symbols, such as the flag, the anthem and the imperial family.

As a condition of surrender to effect the end of the Second World War, Emperor Hirohito renounced his claim to divinity, forged in the mythical origins of his family in 660 BCE through the Emperor Jimmu, scion of the sun goddess Amaterasu. Hirohito's son Akihito, who succeeded him in 1989, became Japan's first truly secular and democratic regent, the figurehead of a constitutional monarchy. Some conservatives, lamenting the conditions imposed on Japan following the war, have sought to return the imperial family to its pre-war status, actively pursuing initiatives that have come into direct conflict with human rights provisions, such as the short-lived ruling that school teachers be legally compelled to daily face the flag and sing the national anthem. Akihito, as it happens, has frustrated nationalists, even as he is idealised by them, by regularly expressing remorse for Japan's wartime actions against its neighbours, and discouraging forced displays of national fealty. In August 2015, Akihito publicly expressed his desire to abdicate by his eighty-fifth birthday in 2019, aggravating a succession debate that has focused on Crown Prince Naruhito's failure to bear a male heir. It is within this context that any questioning of the imperial system, let alone outright republicanism, has become especially sensitive for institutions, and physically dangerous for individuals. Even a discreet display in a small private space bears an element of risk. The limits placed on public circulation of such work further raise the spectre of the privatisation of critical discourse. How might a space be found which is neither subject to the vulnerability of state supported structures nor limited to the private sphere?

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KEY STATION
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Chim↑Pom's example provided Koizumi with a template for the presentation of his next work, an exploration of the complex symbolic, ideological and psychological space of Emperor-centricity through video documentation of two interventions staged by the artist at the 15 August 2016 anti-Emperor rally, an annual march organised by a coalition of republican groups. It should be stressed that Chim↑Pom's off-site projects are not in themselves direct responses to censorship, but are more closely related to the site-specific nature of their work. Formed in 2005 by a group of young artists who had worked with Makoto Aida in various capacities, Chim↑Pom first came to broader recognition with *Black of Death* (2008), a mischievous intervention through which a large murder of crows was guided between Tokyo landmarks, and *SUPER RAT* (2006), a video and group of sculptures in which enormous, poison-resistant rodents found in downtown Shibuya were taxidermied into the iconic Pokemon character *Pikachu*—both creatures were pet grievances of then Tokyo governor Shintaro Ishihara.

Chim↑Pom provided some of the first examples of post-Fukushima art, with interventions including the addition of a panel depicting a rippled power plant to Taro Okamoto's 1969 anti-nuclear mural *The Myth of Tomorrow* (2011) at Shibuya Station. The incisively comic video *KI-AI 100* (2011) was improvised with a group of locals who the collective met while assisting with clean-up operations in tsunami-hit Soma City, forming a circle and shouting out an infectious series of encouragements, jibes and non-sequiturs in an attempt to string together one hundred cheers. This expanded level of engagement—inflected with a trademark looseness—was consolidated when Chim↑Pom organised *Turning Around*, an exhibition of international activist work at the Watari Museum of Contemporary Art in 2012, a modest though venerable private museum in Tokyo.

Chim↑Pom's practice over the last few years has become increasingly situated. *Don't follow the wind* (2015–) is one example of this; *So see you again tomorrow, too?* (2016) is another. If their Kabukicho intervention was decidedly idiosyncratic, with its all-night party and its highly detailed diorama of the neighbourhood being overrun by Godzilla-sized "super rats", it nevertheless demonstrated a genuine commitment to the locality. Indeed, their engagement with the tsunami-devastated and radiation-poisoned region around the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant has been both ongoing and constructive. Moreover, in a climate in which artistic interventions into social and historical issues are discouraged, the self-organised aspect of their projects, along with the event-like nature of their staging, enables a liberated, anti-authoritarian atmosphere and possibilities for both irreverence and political seriousness unachievable elsewhere.

Harajuku space VACANT, which, in addition to exhibitions, hosts book fairs, flea markets and concerts, became the venue for Koizumi's presentation of *Rite for a dream – Today my empire sings* (2016). The ultra-left *Hantenren* march at which the video was shot is an annual event, regularly greeted with typical anger by right-wing counter protests. In the context of the imperial succession debate, however, passions were extremely high, and marchers were opposed by such ferocity that police outnumbered the protesters they were required to protect, by around ten to one. As with the Emperor in his *Air* series, Koizumi does not feature the marchers in the work, focusing instead on his interventions: a blindfolded chamber orchestra and choir, who intone a hymn; and a handcuffed man, pushed along by riot police at the rear of the march, whose journey is the subject of the central screen for much of the work. The work constructs a narrative based on a disturbing dream Koizumi experienced as a child, in which during a food shortage, his father was taken away to be killed and fed to chickens. The father's gallows march is performed by an actor within the body of the main protest, propelled by police and subject to the abuse of ultra-nationalists. The video is highly cinematic in character, as the soundtrack builds

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from an ominous drone to a climactic whirl of mob noise, megaphone feedback and hymnal singing. Thanks to Koizumi's substantial history of formal experiment and exploration of the dynamics of melodrama, *Rite for a dream – Today my empire sings* is a powerful emotional experience. But there is nothing particularly offensive about it, no direct expression of blasphemy or even republican ideas. Rather, it proposes a situated consideration of the complex of aesthetics and ideology through which forms of social organisation are expressed in the psychology of their subjects. That the artist did not feel secure in presenting the work within an established context is worrying, but the fact the work appeared at all, and that it was discussed widely in artistic and literary journals, does signal that possibilities for artists exist even when conventional frameworks prove less than accommodating. The tactical approach to finding platforms for work serves to expand the scope of their reception. With a few notable exceptions, Japan lacks a substantial network of small to medium-sized institutions for contemporary art, the sort of venues whose proximity to their audience could help mediate the entry of difficult work into the public sphere. The self-organised, off-site approach demonstrated by Chim↑Pom and a number of other collectives and practitioners offers an alternative, and moreover, opens the possibility of new forms of engagement with diverse communities. Hikaru Fujii's consultative, collaborative method further proves that there are also ways to engage communities within the framework of museums, even in the face of bureaucratic obfuscation.

The question of censorship and self-censorship has been widely discussed within contemporary art circles, and public institutions surely have much to consider. Their role as key nodes of the structure of civil society, a popular bulwark to governmental overreach in any democracy, is far too vital to be left to chance. But artistic responses to various social exigencies—from nuclear disaster to restrictions on freedom of expression—have provided additional platforms for general criticality, and models for new modes of engagement.

Notes

[1] Japanese Contemporary Art Transparency Prize; http://jcatp.com

[2] Reiko Tomii, 'How gendai bijutsu stole the "museum": An institutional observation of the vanguard 1960s', J. Thomas Rimer (ed.), *Since Meiji: Perspectives on the Japanese Visual Arts*, 1868-2000, Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, pp. 144-67

[3] Yukie Kamiya first described the "zero zero generation" in her 2002 editorial to a special issue of *Bijutsu Techo* as "mild mannered reformers" pursuing "feasible utopias" embedded in everyday life, who were not afraid to use traditional symbols and techniques. See 'Aiming for a feasible utopia', *Bijutsu Techo*, February 2002. In 2007, Midori Matsui, rebranding the tendency as "micropop" observed that the artists' small gestures and unassuming works "expressed a pent-up anger at the monotony of the everyday and a longing for some kind of violent break in the existing order." See *The Age of Micropop: The New Generation of Japanese Artists*, Tokyo: Parco Publishing, 2007, p. 45

[4] Emily Wakeling, 'With me: an interview with Ryudai Takano', *Tokyo Art Beat*, 9 February 2015; http://www.tokyoartbeat.com/tablog/entries.en/2015/02/with-me-an-interview-with-ryudai-takano.html

[5] Martin Fackler, 'The silencing of Japan's free press', *Foreign Policy*, 27 May 2016; http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/05/27/the-silencing-of-japans-free-press-shinzo-abe-media/

[6] *Mapplethorpe*, Tokyo: Uplink, 1994

[7] Tomohiro Osaki, 'Diet passes Japan's first law to curb hate speech', *The Japan Times*, 24 May 2016