

REUBEN KEEHAN

The 2019 Aichi Triennale: *Notes on ‘After “Freedom of Expression?”’*



The conflagration that erupted during the opening days of the 2019 Aichi Triennale undermined a good exhibition, and intensified a debate several years in the making concerning freedom of expression. In the process it exposed new dynamics of censorship and intimidation, while at the same time prompting innovations in artist organisation and advocacy. Subsequent developments suggest distressing trends, but the artists involved and Japan's artistic community at large have demonstrated remarkable solidarity and resilience, offering new models of collective action and community engagement that might find relevance elsewhere, especially across Asia as blossoming artistic activity meets varying modes of official and unofficial censorship.

The transition of July to August can be a punishing time to visit Nagoya, even for those familiar with summers in the megalopolises of Asia's Pacific coasts. With daytime temperatures in the high thirties, and relentless humidity, it seems an odd time to stage a sprawling international art exhibition in the industrialised flatlands of central Japan. For tourists who have not mastered the maze of air-conditioned underground shopping streets that traverse Nagoya's central business district, negotiating the city can be a test of endurance and hydration. But for all the dilemmas associated with the alignment of tourism and cultural policy—and in 2019 these would become profound—the Aichi Triennale was launched in the middle of the school holidays, an indication of who might be its primary audience. A reminder, too, of the civic function of events like these, and, in a crowded calendar of Japanese art festivals, of the Aichi Triennale in particular, with its unique mandate to represent the whole of Aichi Prefecture.

The 2019 edition will unhappily be remembered for the inclusion and almost immediate closure of the exhibition within the Triennale, *Hyogen no Fujiyu Ten: Sonogo* (literally, "The Unfreedom of Expression Show: Afterwards"), styled more poetically and prophetically as *After "Freedom of Expression?"* This is a shame on many levels, not least for how unnecessary the affair turned out to be, but also because it overshadowed and distorted what was arguably the strongest and most engaging Aichi Triennale to date, at a time when the event, already in its fourth iteration, needs to distinguish itself from a host of regional competitors. It is frustrating to know that so many of the questions tied up in the sudden interdiction were already addressed with far greater subtlety in the body of the exhibition itself, but also gratifying that it was precisely the artists involved who sought to untangle the hideous knot that political cynicism and viral outrage had tied.

If nothing else, this incident brought into full public view the complex forms of censorship that have dogged the production and presentation of art in Japan for some time, intensifying over the past half-decade. *After "Freedom of Expression?"* was intended to be a circuit-breaker, to utilise the resources and profile of the Triennale and its star artistic director, journalist and media critic Daisuke Tsuda, to present a selection of previously censored works for appraisal by a consenting and discerning audience. A response from reactionaries was of course anticipated, with organisers having coordinated with local police, and this section of the exhibition clearly sign-posted and confined to a discreet corner of the Aichi Arts Center. The overall mood, particularly among artists involved, was one of confidence and criticisms limited the typical minutiae of curatorial practice: the space was crowded, some of the works didn't seem to have been censored as such, there were none of the high-profile cases that involved sexuality. It did seem something of a distraction—questions of the topic seemed to dominate the press conference, for instance—but from an audience perspective at least, these matters sat within the realm of 'biennial criticism'.

Biennials, or more properly large-scale, regular international art exhibitions have been a fixture of Japan's cultural landscape in recent decades, with some noticeable antecedents. Established in 1952 as the Japan International Art Exhibition, the Tokyo Biennale ran until 1990. It is best-known for its 1970 edition, *Man and Matter*, for which critic Yusuke Nakahara asserted full curatorial control, eschewing the Biennale's genre-based selection, the privileging of formal artist associations, and clearly distinguished 'foreign' and 'domestic' sections in favour of an integrated display of Japanese and international artists based on aesthetic and conceptual sympathies. In 1979, Fukuoka Prefectural Art Museum initiated the *Asian Art Show* with a survey of modern art from Japan, China and India, and a far broader panorama of contemporary practices in 1980 that was reprised every five years from 1984, eventually evolving into the Fukuoka Asian Art Triennale in 1999. The international open-air sculpture exhibitions that proliferated during the 1980s provided the framework for the rural-based, community-engaged Echigo-Tsumari Art Triennial, whose first edition opened in 2000, while a more cosmopolitan, urban counterpart was created in the Yokohama Triennale the following year. Between them, these three examples, with their differing models, initiated the current era of Japanese biennials and triennials.

Initiated in 2010, the Aichi Triennale—along with the Setouchi Triennale, then establishing itself as the Setouchi International Art Festival—launched something of a second wave. Aichi was a novel creation, an exhibition based across an entire Prefecture rather than just a single city. While the 2010 exhibition focused on venues in Nagoya, subsequent outings expanded this reach to other smaller cities, including Okazaki and Toyohashi. A further hallmark of the project has been its embrace of the intricacies of urban geography, situating work in less visited sites—such as a historic textile district, a defunct bowling alley, department stores that have seen better days—that reveal economic and cultural complexities of their context. In its first three outings, the Triennale seemed subject to a tension about what kind of event it wanted to be, a regional development exercise like Echigo-Tsumari or another stop in the international biennial circuit.

By the 2019 edition, this tension had been resolved. Tsuda's Aichi Triennale was installed across two of its regular venues in Nagoya, the Aichi Arts Center and Nagoya City Museum, and customarily included a number of offsite projects, this time clustered around Shikemichi and Endoji, an ageing but lively downtown shopping district. Refreshingly, several sites at the city of Toyota were included for the first time, including an elegant chapter at the enviable Toyota Municipal Art Museum. That museum's curator Yoko Nose joined Meruro Washida from Kanazawa 21st Century Museum of Contemporary Art and Mexican artist Pedro Reyes in a curatorial team led by Shihoko Iida, previously a curator on the second edition. Specialist curators for film, music and performing arts programs were also invited. Somewhat unusually for these kind of events, the artistic director was not involved curatorially. Rather, this curatorium set the theme of the *Triennale*, determining a framework for the curatorial team to follow.

Tsuda's proposition was complex and poetic, with an untranslated Japanese title, *Jo no jidai* (roughly, "*The Age of Empathy*", but with nuances relating to truth and desire that Tsuda outlined in his concept statement), and an orthographically challenging English subtitle, *Taming Y/Our Passion*. It was essentially an attempt at retrieving Bismarck's definition of politics as "the art of the possible" by placing current definitions of art at its centre, in the face of the populist nationalisms emerging globally.¹ The curatorial team responded by organising a highly socially-engaged coterie of artists. Major international figures such as Tania Bruguera, Dora García and Candice Breitz headlined a selection that noticeably favoured representatives of the recent political turn in Japanese art.

The resulting exhibition was neither dry nor didactic, instead privileging inventive and experimental practices, with numerous moments of poetry and play. Leung Chi Wo and Sarah Wong's *Endoji Meeting Room* (2019) was an affectionate tribute to the outmodedness of its site, balancing humour and insight in its combination of the photographic and archival, narrating real and imagined histories. Nearby in an Edo-period residence, Michiko Tsuda took the shifting planes and fluid delineation of inside and outside in Japanese housing as the point of departure for an engaging combination of mirror reflection, prerecorded video and CCTV that effectively choreographed the movement of viewers around the room. Tadasu Takamine, one of Japan's most socially sensitive artists, was in mischievous mode, slicing an enormous slab of concrete from the bottom of a disused swimming pool and standing it on its end. Such interventions leavened the overall tone, successfully foregrounding artistic innovation as a framework for whatever potential politics the Triennale as a whole might propose.

The inclusion of *After "Freedom of Expression?"* was the most literal manifestation of Tsuda's theme of "the art of the possible". In some respects this was entirely appropriate to the rest of the Triennale, given the various resonances across the exhibition and many shared themes. At the same time it felt somewhat removed. It had after all not been organised by Triennale's curatorial team; it was a captain's pick, assembled by a separate committee which had been responsible for the project on which it was based, *Hyogen no Fujiyu Ten (The Unfreedom of Expression Show)*, that had gathered previously censored works at a small private gallery in 2015. The Aichi version, updated to include works removed from public display in the interim, did not have the spaciousness or finish of the rest of Triennale. Instead, it was tightly packed into a single gallery space and one narrow hallway. Its accompanying wall texts, which patiently explained the circumstances of each prohibition, read in a voice altogether different from the remainder of the overall exhibition.

As an exhibition in itself it was nonetheless a rewarding experience, containing a number of works whose interdictions had provoked discussion and consternation in contemporary art. These included Meiro Koizumi's *Air* (2016), Katsuhisa Nakagaki's *Portrait of the Period-Endangered Species Idiot JAPONICA-Round Burial Mound* (2014), and the version of Kim Seo-kyung and Kim Eun-sung's *Statue of Peace* (2011) that had been removed from the Tokyo Metropolitan Museum of Art in 2012 for referring to the issue of "comfort women", of forced sexual slavery during the Second World War.² Other notable works were a redacted version of Chim↑Pom's *100 Cheers* (2011); Nobuyuki Oura's *Holding Perspective Part II* (2019), referring to a 1986 incident when a museum in Toyama was forced to sell a series of collages of Emperor Hirohito he had made and destroy catalogues featuring the work; and a cenotaph by Masao Shirakawa, based on a monument to Koreans forced into wartime labour in Gunma, that stood for ten years before a prefectural government demanded it be taken down, with Shirakawa's work itself forbidden exhibition because of the ongoing controversy. The absence of several well-known works that had fallen victim to obscenity laws was notable – although the committee explained their principally legal rationale for this.³ Overall *After "Freedom of Expression?"* was interesting and coherent, largely due to the high standard of many of the artists and the tendency of the subject matter to centre a related set of issues: war crimes, the imperial system and Article 9, the peace clause in Japan's constitution.

Phonocalls started coming into the Aichi Triennale offices on 31 July before the exhibition had even opened to the public, following a mention in *The Asahi Shimbun*, a respectable, editorially liberal national daily, that *Statue of Peace* would be appearing in the exhibition. This much had been expected, and though having the switchboard jammed was vexing, organisers were adamant



that the exhibition would continue. Moods would darken the following day. As the temperature nudged forty degrees and the press tour moved to Toyota in far smaller numbers than had swarmed *After "Freedom of Expression?"* the day before, information started to circulate that staff and volunteers at the Aichi Art Center had taken hundreds of calls, many of them abusive, threatening and outright racist, with particular enmity toward Korea. A Facebook post had circulated and an army of trolls moved into action. With aggressive denial of the "comfort women" system—a favoured talking point on the ultra-right—complaints initially focused on *Statue of Peace*, but soon expanded to include Oura's work, when press coverage mentioned that it featured a scene of a burning photograph of Hirohito. As civil servants, staff were required to listen to the complainants in full, with many of them taking over an hour and as callers read from pre-distributed scripts—the sound of pages turning could be heard in the background.⁴ Staff also had to give their names if requested, leading to threats against them and their families. The volume was so great that extra personnel, including the Triennale's curators had to be rostered on, and calls shut down government departments Prefecture-wide, even reaching shopkeepers in the area around Endoji. Some protestors even entered the gallery, abusing staff and other visitors.

At the same time, Nagoya's outspoken Mayor Takashi Kawamura, who had attended the opening celebration, went to see the work for himself, and immediately demanded that it be removed for "trampling on the feelings of the Japanese people."⁵ His political rival, Aichi Governor and Triennale Chair Hideaki Omura retorted that this would violate constitutional provisions on freedom of expression. But the damage was done and the calls intensified. Even Ichiro Matsui, Mayor of Osaka 180 kilometres away, who among other provocations had once created sister city ties with San Francisco when a comfort woman statue was installed there, felt compelled to comment. In a

press conference on the morning of 2 August, Yoshihide Suga, Shinzo Abe's Chief Cabinet Secretary, ominously suggested that a major exhibition grant through the Agency of Cultural Affairs could be withdrawn on the basis that the contents of the Triennale had not been described in the application. That same morning, a truck driver in Inazawa City used a convenience store fax machine to declare that a network of people would "bring gasoline cans to the building," a direct terrorist threat.⁶

The timing could not have been worse, for two reasons. One month earlier, the Abe administration had suspended the sale of chemicals vital to South Korea's semiconductor industry. While it claimed that some of the materials were being exported to third parties, including North Korea, there was widespread speculation that controls had been tightened in response to the Supreme Court of South Korea's decision that Japanese companies were liable for compensation claims for victims of forced labour during the Second World War. The ban sparked a trade war and led to boycotts against Japanese businesses in Korea, while Korean airlines suspended flights on major routes between the two countries. Public sentiment was at its worst, and inflammatory and discriminatory comments proliferated in mass and social media. Then, on 18 July, an arson attack on the studios of Kyoto Animation killed thirty-six people and injured an additional thirty-three. The perpetrator had used forty litres of gasoline as an accelerant.

At a press conference on the evening of 3 August, Omura and Tsuda announced the closure of *After "Freedom of Expression?"* citing public-safety concerns and their duty of care to stressed staff and volunteers. It was effectively an emergency measure, but it directly contradicted the exhibition's intentions. Streamed online, the announcement was watched intently by artists around the country. Three hours later, the organising committee of *After "Freedom of Expression?"* held their own press conference denouncing the curtailment and, as an expression of solidarity, Korean artists Minouk Lim and Park Chan-Kyong requested the withdrawal of their works in the Triennale until the mini-exhibition could be re-opened. Even before the announcement, as closure seemed certain, participating Japanese artists, with Koki Tanaka, Hikaru Fujii, Meiro Koizumi, Akira Takayama and art producer Natsuko Odate coordinated a response. Tanaka drafted a statement which was edited by the five, then distributed to other Japanese artists by Takayama and to overseas artists by Koizumi.

The statement made three requests: the restoration of the Aichi Triennale's "autonomy from political pressure and intimidation"; the re-opening of the exhibition in full while ensuring safety of staff and visitors; and the creation of "a platform for free and open discussion that is open to all." "We participate in art not to suppress or divide people," it declared, "but to find different ways of creating solidarity among them, and to pursue the possibilities for free thinking beyond political beliefs."⁷ It was issued on 6 August with an initial seventy-two signatories, accumulating a further fifteen over the next four days. Significantly, artists Tsubasa Kato, Bontaro Dokuyama, Nodoko Odawara and Goro Murayama did not sign the statement. Kato asserted that while he agreed with ninety-nine percent of the statement, thorough public consultation and the creation of popular support should precede the re-opening of the exhibition.⁸ Odawara, meanwhile, requested the closure of her work, which included a stunning recreation in neon of the arrow-shaped pillar that originally marked ground zero of the Nagasaki atomic bombing. The four dissenting artists, along with Tanaka and Tania Bruguera, who had stayed on in Japan, participated in an artist meeting on 10 August, where Bruguera proposed that a more public colloquium be organised. Two days later, Tsuda and participating artists met for four hours at the Aichi Arts Center, with the last two hours open to the public. On 13 and 14 August, having allowed Triennale authorities a week to consider the proposals of the 6 August statement, a group of international artists including Bruguera,

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Monica Meyer and Ugo Rondinone, along with Triennale curator Pedro Reyes, signed an open letter requesting the withdrawal or alteration of their works until such time as the exhibition could be seen in full.⁹ Tanaka joined them on 3 September, requesting that his space be roped off so that audiences could see his installation but not enter it.

There were now three major tendencies among the Triennale artists: the largest group, requesting that the exhibition be re-opened; a boycott group, predominantly consisting of Spanish-speaking and Korean artists; and a smaller group of Japanese artists in favour of greater public engagement. What was extraordinary about this situation was that the three groups maintained a consensus, allowing differing tactics in pursuit of the same goal. Bruguera, a veteran of artist organisations and contesting state censorship, was particularly influential, offering support and advice that everyone should pursue in their own direction. Communication between artists, and between artists and the media was managed smoothly and adroitly, in marked contrast to that of officials who were hindered by internal processes and outpaced by the speed of events. That many of the artworks in the Triennale remained on display was significant. Artists acknowledged and respected the necessity felt by others to withdraw or alter their works, while those joining the boycott were mindful of rationales for maintaining participation, whether because of threats from the ultra-right, a commitment to visiting publics, or a fear of the Triennale unravelling completely.

Moreover, there was much in the Triennale itself that elaborated upon issues raised in *After "Freedom of Expression?"* Tanaka's installation was produced through collaborations with Zainichi Korean and *haafu* (half-Japanese) communities revealing realities of discrimination, at the same time celebrating an internal ethnic diversity that is typically unacknowledged in national discourse. In a complimentary way, Fujii continued his exploration of imperial-era 'Japanisation' exercises, re-enacting assimilation training in occupied Taiwan. Dokuyama too dealt with legacies of Japanese colonialism in Taiwan, interviewing older, Japanese-speaking Taiwanese citizens in a video shown alongside an enchanting cherry blossom tree whose flowers were made entirely from *uiro*, a sweet identified with Nagoya. Kato's work also explored national identity with a video of three musicians tethered together in such a way as to make playing the national anthem almost impossible. These contributions found dramatic accompaniment in Ho Tzu Nyen's *Hotel Aporia* (2019), an ambitious four-part installation in a historic former restaurant and inn in Toyota, taking inspiration from a Second World War kamikaze unit that once enjoyed its final meals at the venue, weaving a complex narrative reaching from Kyoto School philosophy to signs of war in the films of Yasujiro Ozu. It was a stunning work, whose visual device of blurring the faces of Ozu's actors functioned as a powerful metaphor for ideological obfuscation and historical lucanae.

The engagement extended to a greater public than just the Triennale audiences. As some artists withdrew, Takayama set up a call centre, staffed by artists, handling the complaints still flooding Triennale and Aichi government phone lines.¹⁰ Then Kato and Dokuyama announced the creation of two artist-run spaces in rented premises in Endoji. The first, Sanitorium, drawing its name from a comment by Australian Triennale-participant Stuart Ringholt, was conceived as a space for open discussion, organised by Kato and other artists. At its first public meeting, a local right wing group attended to attempt to stifle discussion, but the artists present decided to press forward forming broader coalitions. Dokuyama, meanwhile, created TAGA-GU, an exhibition space that would also host talks, aimed at connecting directly with residents of the Endoji area. Protests and assemblies were occurring elsewhere as well, as local citizens campaigned independently for the exhibition to be re-opened. Statements of concern were issued by the International Committee

for Museums and Collections of Modern Art, the Japanese chapter of International Association of Art Critics, and a number of other civil society and professional organisations, all taking place in the context of intense media attention and belligerent commentary from Mayor Kawamura, Cabinet Secretary Suga, and Kanagawa Governor Yuji Kuroiwa, the latter stating he would never permit such an exhibition to take place in his Prefecture, whose capital city, Yokohama, is home to one of Japan's leading triennials.

In the first week of September, Yui Usui and Ai Ohashi, two young female artists exhibiting at the Nagoya City Art Museum and *After "Freedom of Expression?"* respectively, circulated a petition framing the attack on *Statue of Peace* as a gender issue, part of a system of denial of histories of sexual violence and pervasive discrimination at all levels of society.¹¹ This was allied by a statement from the Artist's Guild, whose members included a number of the participating artists, inclusive of Koizumi and Fujii, drawing attention to the wider significance of the closure within a pattern of censorship and self-censorship in Japan.¹²

On 10 September, Usui, Ohashi, Takayama, Koizumi and Chim↑Pom member Ryuta Ushiro held a press conference at the Foreign Correspondent's Club in Tokyo, announcing the foundation of the collective ReFreedom Aichi. Funded through the sale of artworks, its role would be to negotiate with relevant authorities to secure conditions appropriate to re-opening *After "Freedom of Expression?"* They also announced a project with the hashtag #YOurFreedom, mimicking Tsuda's orthography, through which they would collaborate with a broader public. Their first initiative, launched a few days later, was directly inspired by Monica Mayer's shuttered work *The Clothesline* (2019), in which visitors could anonymously share instances of sexual abuse on pink-shaded slips of paper attached to a clothesline in the installation. #YOurFreedom's version was devised by the collective Kyunchome, whose work in the Triennale gave voice to people undergoing gender transition. They invited the public to similarly share on pink-shaded post-it notes instances when they felt their freedom was being restricted, which were fixed to a window near the *After "Freedom of Expression?"* exhibition space, and ultimately to its door.

As the weeks extended, and negotiations and court cases continued both in public and behind closed doors, artists sought to increase the pressure, with Fujii and then Candice Breitz signalling their intention to withdraw their projects. On 23 September, Governor Omura held a press conference to offer some optimism that discussions between the *After "Freedom of Expression?"* organising committee and the Aichi Triennale secretariat might find agreement on conditions for the exhibition to be re-opened.

Three days later, Japanese government cultural minister Koichi Hageuda made a shocking announcement. The Agency for Cultural Affairs (or Bunkacho) was rescinding a promised grant on the basis that the Triennale had not disclosed "pertinent facts" in its application for public money. The amount withheld was staggering: ¥78 million (US\$700,000). Understandably, this decision provoked outrage. Omura promised to take the matter to court. PEN Japan released a statement to the effect that the decision "could be considered an endorsement of the cowardly acts that led to the suspension (of the event) due to threats."¹³ The opposition Constitutional Democratic Party intimated that the Prime Minister's office must have influenced Bunkacho's considerations, while the leader of the Japanese Communist Party decried it as outright state censorship (*ken'etsu*), a serious charge in Japan, where the word has a strict constitutional definition.¹⁴ ReFreedom Aichi responded vigorously with an online petition that would eventually amass over 100,000 signatures, demanding the reinstatement of funding.

Remarkably, it was at this point that during a hearing at the Nagoya District Court, the organising committees of *After "Freedom of Expression?"* and the Aichi Triennale reached an agreement on terms for the exhibition's re-opening. There were four conditions: both sides needed to cooperate to ensure there would be no disruption, entry would be limited to holders of pre-booked tickets, the exhibition would be presented in its entirety, and visitors would be presented with careful explanations of the content and informed of the findings of a review commissioned by the Prefecture into the events that led to its initial suspension. On 8 October, the exhibition re-opened.

On its first day, entry was limited to two groups of thirty people chosen by lottery. This was expanded to six groups of thirty-five the following day. Kim Seo-kyung and Nobuyuki Oura visited to speak about their artworks, and a talk event was organised specifically on the topic of *Statue of Peace*. Kawamura blustered in the media and promised to stage a sit-in. The phonecalls continued — two hundred on 8 October — but the Triennale organised a quick turnover of shifts to limit pressure on staff. Akira Takayama re-opened his artist-staffed call centre, taking four hundred and eighty-two calls in the first three days. Then, at 5pm on 14 October, the shutters came down. The fourth Aichi Triennale had been seen in its integrity for a total of ten days in its seventy-five day run.

With the question of Agency for Cultural Affairs funding not resolved by early November, ReFreedom Aichi intensified efforts to keep the issue in the news. In an instance of public theatre conceived by Takayama, they attempted to present the first 100,000 signatures to their demand for the grant to be restored at the Agency's offices in Tokyo, only to be rebuffed and eluded in the most Kafkaesque manner, just as they had expected after one month of trying to set a meeting with Bunkacho's Secretary.¹⁵ Meanwhile, artists were coming under increased scrutiny, particularly on social media. Edited clips of Chim↑Pom's *100 Cheers* were circulated to heavily distort the work's intent, casting an endearingly boisterous, irreverent and ultimately humanising response to the 2011 Tōhoku earthquake and tsunami as a sarcastic humiliation of its victims, and triggering sustained troll attacks on the group's Twitter accounts. Makoto Aida's droll *Video of a man calling himself Japan's Prime Minister making a speech at an international assembly* (2014), which had been playing without any problems at the privately funded Mori Art Museum in Tokyo throughout the Triennale attracted international attention when it was cited as one of the reasons for the withdrawal of Japanese Embassy support for the group exhibition *Japan Unlimited* at MuseumsQuartier in Vienna, at the instruction of Foreign Minister Toshimitsu Motegi.

Clearly, this dilemma remains affective, but general observations can be drawn. The Aichi Triennale was not just the biggest story in Japanese art in 2019, it was one of the biggest media events in the country. As Tokyo-based art critic Andrew Maerke presented in a salutary report early in the event, it was and remains an absolute crisis for art and freedom of speech in Japan.¹⁶ It was an extraordinary moment, but one that fitted a pattern that has emerged over previous years, where any public proposition contrary to revisionist narratives that seemed extreme even a decade ago is met with popular outrage and institutional pressure. The question of historical sexual slavery, which was officially acknowledged by the Japanese government in the 1990s, has become taboo, while visual representations of the country's wartime Emperor and now — remarkably — its current Prime Minister, are considered sacrosanct. As elsewhere, the use of public resources to platform anything that runs counter to the dominant agenda, which includes government support for cultural activities, is a regular target of the far right, and a proximity between state agencies and ministerial control impedes transparent and independent decision-making. Even more disturbingly, this operates in concert with a violent, outwardly xenophobic and misogynist subculture that uses relentless



intimidation to achieve its dubious ends. For a country rightly celebrated for its soft power, this encumbrance on cultural production and presentation is worrying. Social media played a significant role in these dynamics, determining the sheer magnitude of the initial reaction to *After “Freedom of Expression?”*, which far outstripped anything the Aichi Triennale team, for all their preparation, could have anticipated. But social media does not operate in a vacuum. As with the firestorm of protest that shut down three artworks in the Guggenheim Museum’s 2018 survey of Chinese art on the basis of a salacious and misleading article in *The New York Times*, the social media blitz on the Aichi Triennale was closely tied to reporting from far more conventional media outlets, albeit in their digitised form. How these narratives are handled will continue to be challenging for artistic communities – not only in Japan – but this situation needs to be accepted as a concrete configuration of the public sphere at this juncture in the twenty-first century. Political interventions of the kind staged by Nagoya’s Mayor, which effectively legitimised the ultra-nationalist reaction, also play a role, and are becoming increasingly prevalent as opportunism affects politics globally, but also as insufficiently briefed public

figures are pressed for media comment on nuanced cultural matters. This too is a feature of current public discourse, and artists and institutions will need to find ways to protect themselves. As issues of publicness, they have implications that far exceed the fluid borders of the art world, and require society-wide solutions. As an example in this specifically Japanese context, hate speech legislation introduced in 2016 does not actually penalise transgressions; tighter laws would criminalise the openly discriminatory abuse levelled at *After "Freedom of Expression?"* while de-normalising the ideological framework from which it emerged.

These events have also confirmed the vulnerability of publicly funded organisations to political pressure, as the trouble-free showing of Aida's work at the Mori Art Museum demonstrates. Exhibitions operating within the framework of cultural diplomacy have been particularly susceptible, although not usually from the Japanese aspect. High profile incidents of official censure occurred in 2017 when Tiffany Chung's contribution to the Japan Foundation's ASEAN anniversary exhibition *Sunshower: Contemporary Art from Southeast Asia 1980s to Now* was altered at the insistence of the Vietnamese Embassy, and a work by Pangrok Sulap was removed from a Japan Foundation project in Kuala Lumpur after a complaint by a local businessman. *Japan Unlimited*, which was part of a program of events organised to celebrate 150 years of diplomatic relations between Austria and Japan, was the first widely reported instance of direct intervention of Cabinet in an international presentation. Nevertheless, that project, organised externally, went ahead without alteration. The total suspension of a significant sum of funding through the Agency of Cultural Affairs is of an altogether different order of magnitude, with significant implications for the long term sustainability of art institutions seeking to maintain curatorial autonomy. The principle of transparent, arms-length decision-making for cultural resources, protected from the arbitrary intervention of sitting politicians, remains necessary to the long term health not just of the arts, but of an open and active public sphere.

More encouragingly, these events also confirmed the maturation of new modes of action and engagement being pursued by artists. Taken as a whole, the responses of the artists involved in the Aichi Triennale to the closure of *After "Freedom of Expression?"* and the circumstances surrounding it suggested the emergence of a new level of agency for artists in Japan, where a boycott is one of a number of tools that also include intimate engagement with diverse communities. It was in some sense no coincidence that a number of the Japanese artists in the exhibition had also been involved in some way with either the Artists' Guild collective or its unsuccessful attempt to confront the issue of self-censorship with the Museum of Contemporary Art Tokyo's exhibition *Loose Lips Save Ships* in 2016.¹⁷ Their commitment to working through art to explore possibilities for new political configurations fitted neatly with Tsuda's theme for the 2019 Aichi Triennale. The experience of *Loose Lips Save Ships* gave them a toolkit to deal with the situation as it arose, maintaining communication, solidarity and comradeship across a comparatively vast polity of over ninety geographically dispersed artists, as well as sympathetic cultural workers, as they experimented with a range of tactics and modes of address.

It is tempting to see the blurred faces of Ho Tzu Nyen's excellent *Hotel Aporia* as an unwitting illustration of the way the Aichi Triennale must have appeared to viewers for sixty-five days between 4 August and 7 October, with its roped off rooms and empty projection screens. Tempting too to see Tsuda's theme of taming passions as wholly ironic, given the way events concluded. But it was not passion that was the enemy of freedom of expression during the Aichi Triennale so much as cynicism. For all the problems of their mode of address, large-scale exhibitions remain spaces in which new solidarities can be created, knowledge can be shared in common, and passion can thrive in the

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face of indifference. It is reassuring to know that even as the Aichi Triennale's capacity to perform these functions was reduced, its artists stepped in to do just that, with the goal of finding pathways back to some form of normality where, as Minouk Lim asserted in her statement of withdrawal, art institutions can "protect the dissonance of difference in every aspect."¹⁸

Notes

¹ Daisuke Tsuda, 'Concept', Aichi Triennale 2019, *Taming Y/Our Passion*, 27 March 2019; <https://aichitriennale.jp/en/about/concept.html>

² On these incidents, see Reuben Keehan, 'Out of site: Japanese art after censorship', *di'van | A Journal of Accounts* 3, 2017; pp. 40-51

³ Daisuke Tsuda, 'Aichi Torienaare 2019 "Hyogen no Fujiyu Ten: Sono Go" ni kansuru owabi to hoohoku' (Japanese), *Medium*, 15 August 2019; <http://medium.com/@tsuda>

⁴ David McNeill, 'Freedom fighting: Nagoya's censored art exhibition and the "comfort women" controversy', *The Asia-Pacific Journal Japan Focus*, 15 October 2019; <https://apjft.org/2019/20/McNeill.html>

⁵ Motoko Rich, 'The exhibit lauded freedom of expression. It was silenced', *The New York Times*, 5 August 2019; <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/05/world/asia/japan-aichi-triennale.html>

⁶ 'Truck driver used fax to threaten Aichi Triennale over "comfort women" exhibit', *Tokyo Reporter*, 8 August 2019; <https://www.tokyoreporter.com/crime/truck-driver-used-fax-to-threaten-aichi-triennale-over-comfort-women-exhibit>

⁷ 'Statement by the artists of Aichi Triennale 2019 on the closure of "After Freedom of Expression?"', *ART-iT*, 6 August 2019; https://www.art-it.asia/en/top_e/admin_ed_news_e/201937

⁸ Tsubasa Kato, Facebook post, 6 August 2019

⁹ 'In defense of freedom of expression', 13 August 2019, reproduced in 'Artists decry censorship of Aichi Triennale, demand removal of their works', *Artforum*, 13 August 2019; <https://www.artforum.com/news/artists-decrying-censorship-of-aichi-triennale-demand-removal-of-their-works-80480>

¹⁰ 'Call centre will handle protests after closed art exhibit restarts', *The Asahi Shimbun*, 7 October 2019; <http://www.asahi.com/ajw/articles/AJ201910070031.html>

¹¹ 'Artists and cultural workers' statement on gender equality and "After Freedom of Expression"', *ART-iT*, 4 September 2019; https://www.art-it.asia/en/top_e/admin_ed_news_e/203165

¹² 'Statement from the Artists' Guild on the wider significance of Aichi Triennale censorship', *e-flux*, 5 September 2019; <https://conversations.e-flux.com/t/statement-from-the-artists-guild-on-the-wider-significance-of-aichi-triennale-censorship/9400>

¹³ 'Critics lambaste withdrawal of festival subsidy as "censorship"', *The Asahi Shimbun*, 27 September 2019; <http://www.asahi.com/ajw/articles/AJ201909270026.html>

¹⁴ *ibid.*

¹⁵ The intervention was covered in detail in Kota Hatachi, 'Seijika ga kenryoku o kooshi shite...' aaitso ga bunkachoo ni "ikari" no koe o ageta riyuu' (Japanese), *Buzzfeed News*, 8 November 2019; <https://www.buzzfeed.com/jp/kotahatachi/artist-appeal>

¹⁶ Andrew Maerke, 'The threat to freedom of expression in Japan', *Frieze*, 15 August 2019; <https://frieze.com/article/threat-freedom-expression-japan>

¹⁷ Keehan, *op. cit.*

¹⁸ Minouk Lim, statement addressed to visitors of the Aichi Triennale, 6 August 2019; https://www.art-it.asia/en/top_e/admin_ed_news_e/202494