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Introduction to the special issue: Art and regional revitalization - case studies from Japan

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Introduction

Since the beginning of the new millennium, regional arts projects and festivals have sprung up in many places in rural Japan, including the Triennials in Echigo-Tsumari and Setouchi as well as theatre festivals in Shizuoka and Toyooka. Visual and performing artists have moved to the Japanese hinterlands in search of new grounds for socio-cultural experiments, and many local communities have welcomed new forms of interaction between local citizens, artists, and visitors. These regions anticipate a cultural boost in the form of art or theatre festivals to create new types of social, cultural and economic capital in the area. Some rural communities also engage with art projects to promote countryside lifestyles and environmental awareness.

Following Woods' concept of a "global countryside" as "a hypothetical space, corresponding to a condition of the global interconnectivity and interdependency of rural localities" (Woods 2007, 492), this special issue scrutinizes the interrelatedness of local, national and global flows as represented by recent developments in visual and performing arts. Articles investigate cultural production in the Japanese regions as a lab for socio-cultural experiment. Topics include but are not limited to questions such as: How are rural places remade under the influence of the global art scene of visual and performing arts? What is the role of cultural agents in the dynamics of socio-spatial depolarization between urban and rural areas? How can creative arts provide impulses to tackle central issues in Japanese society such as aging and depopulation and contribute to community building and reflecting on our relation to the environment?

We look into the potential of the arts to develop creative responses to the multiple challenges and opportunities of the Japanese regions, thereby addressing issues that are relevant for Japanese society as a whole and well beyond. The four articles discuss and contextualize the questions raised above in an interdisciplinary perspective including scholars of Visual and Performing Arts, Japanese Studies, Tourism Studies as well as Social Anthropology and Human Geography. This is a suitable approach, since the Visual and Performing Arts in particular are increasingly merging with other disciplinary spheres.

The perception of the Japanese countryside has changed dramatically. If the rural localities of Japan have previously been associated with socio-cultural decline and out-dated ways of living, these perceptions are undergoing a change. While there is a growing body of socio-anthropological studies on the Japanese regions in the context of regional revitalization (*chiiki saisei*), research in arts and theatre in particular has rather focused on urban centres and has therefore widely neglected cultural production in the periphery. This special issue aims to be a first step to fill this gap. Articles re-evaluate existing notions of a dichotomy between “metropolitan centres” and “rural peripheries” and investigate the growing hybridity between local, national and global entities as represented in and driven by artistic production. In addition, we look into socio-cultural discourse and innovation triggered by the arts in the Japanese regions, thereby addressing issues that are relevant for Japanese society as a whole and well beyond.

The articles of this special issue have first been presented as part of the three-day international symposium “Art in the Countryside: Art and Regional Revitalization through Case Studies from Japan”, held at the German Institute for Japanese Studies Tokyo in August 2021. The event was co-organized by Gunhild Borggreen, Associate Professor at the Department of Arts and Cultural Studies at the University of Copenhagen and myself, at the time a principal researcher at the German Institute for Japanese Studies Tokyo. We would like to express our gratitude to the Toshiba International Foundation, the Scandinavia-Japan Sasakawa Foundation, The Friedrich Ebert Foundation Japan Office and the German Institute for Japanese Studies Tokyo for their generous support, which was indispensable to realize the symposium.

The symposium offered a broad variety of perspectives on Art in the Countryside, featuring 17 academic presentations and two artist talks. Topics ranged from issues of cultural policy and the merging links between culture and tourism in Japan’s national and regional policy-making, to the various challenges faced by the cultural industry and rural communities due to COVID-19 restrictions. Participants hailed from Japan, the U.S.A., Denmark and Canada. Presentations included art projects and artworks within broader theoretical frameworks as well as academic papers on case studies and empirical field-work related to visual and performing artists working within local communities. The artist-group 目(mé) (see <https://mouthplustwo.me/>) and theatre director Hirata Oriza elaborated on their practical and conceptual collaborations with rural communities in their practise. Kōjin Haruka and Minamigawa Kenji (mé) scrutinized the specifics of their Utsunomiya artwork *The face of a man floating in the sky* and reflected on the productive collaboration as well as the tensions that developed during the two-year production process with the local community. Hirata Oriza focused on the establishment of the Kinohara International Arts Center (see <http://kiac.jp/en/>) and the Toyooka Theatre Festival in Hyōgo Prefecture (see <https://toyooka-theaterfestival.jp/en/>), one of the first “fringe” theatre festivals in Japan. He also shared insights on the newly established Professional College of Arts and Tourism (see <https://www.at-hyogo.jp/english/campus.html>), which is the first to combine theatre practice with tourism studies. These new initiatives mentioned above reflect the general trend within cultural tourism in which adventurous and experience-based activities in the scenic rural areas have taken over the place-oriented tourism strategies. Combining theoretical perspectives and case studies, the symposium provided both an overview of the field and specific concepts. Overall, the contribution from practicing artists as well as the variety of theoretical and methodological

positions of the speakers provided rich and stimulating viewpoints on the complex issues of art tourism, cultural policy, rural revitalization, and the status and role of visual and performing arts in contemporary Japan. For further details on the contents of the conference please refer to <https://www.dijtokyo.org/event/art-in-the-countrysidesymposium-on-art-and-regional-revitalization-through-case-studies-from-japan/>.

The four articles of this special issue are selected to provide insights into central aspects of the symposium. Eimi Tagore's "Art Festivals in Japan: Fueling Revitalization, Tourism, and Self-Censorship" sets the background with a discussion of contemporary art festivals as a significant factor of art tourism in Japan. The text situates festivals within their shifting genealogy from socially conscious endeavours to government-sponsored revitalization initiatives and growing pressure from the tourism industry. Tagore critically looks into the instrumentalization of artists and their artworks as well as the precarious position of local residents. Arguing that "investing in art festivals has become a way for government agencies to absolve themselves of the complex sociopolitical issues that have contributed to the disparity of rural and post-disaster regions", she reflects on crucial challenges for cultural production in a hyper-touristic environment. At the same time, her article delves into an analysis of Shitamichi Motoyuki's art, which critically engages with these issues.

Carolyn Funck and Meng Qu zoom in to investigate paradigm shifts in regional development policies and the role of art tourism already touched upon by Tagore from a different perspective. Focusing on case studies from four islands in the Seto Inland Sea, they identify two main paradigm shifts in national development plans for rural areas: While the first phase is characterized by state-sponsored grand-scale development, the latter shows a "stronger variety of integrated art tourism policies, depending on the engagement of private sector actors and residents." Investigating art tourism as an integral part of a general development concept, "Art Tourism and Paradigms of Island Revitalization in Japan" sheds light on its main actors, the kind of involvement of the private sector and the role of local residents, and argues for the importance of reflecting on the interplay of global, national and local perspectives.

With the third article the special issue shifts its focus to the analysis of specific works from Visual and Performing Arts in the framework of rural revitalization. Annemone Platz's study investigates the prominent phenomenon of *akiya*, vacant houses in depopulated and ageing areas, as sites of arts projects and mediators of recent social developments and cultural trends in Japan. Previously perceived as threatening local communities, recently there has been an increasing reappraisal of their distinguished character and a growing interest in their potential use for cultural events. "From Social Issue to Art Site and Beyond – Reassessing Rural *Akiya Kominka*" looks into this development in more detail and explores the implications of the trends mentioned above for rural communities. Focussing on three selected art installations, the article analyses artworks as spaces for interactions between residents, artists, and visitors, influencing insider and outsider perceptions of the local community. In addition, Platz sheds lights on three other crucial dimensions of the maintenance of *akiya* beyond their value as "regionally varied and socio-culturally valuable Japanese-style houses."

The final essay by Peter Eckersall and Tom Looser explores selected works by Takayama Akira, who is known for creating heterotopic spaces and tour performances. The authors show that "Takayama invites reflections on questions of

borders, zones, regions, and the passages between them.” They situate his work in the context of place-making and shed light on the ramifications of Takayama’s spatial dramaturgy for Woods’ concept of the “global countryside”. Looking more deeply into concepts of the “rural” and the “city”, “Performance Enacting Mobility and Shifting Borders” argues for their re-evaluation as hybrid and liminal in contrast to opposing ideas.

In conclusion, I hope that the special issue will expand the global discourse on contemporary Japanese visual and performing arts by scrutinizing the concepts behind arts production for regional revitalization and social innovation. Upon studying Japan as an especially relevant case, this collection of research articles stemming from a wide spectrum of academic fields also sets out to contribute to the developing field of regional studies in general.

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Notes on contributor

Barbara Geilhorn is a professor of Cultural Resource Studies at the University of Tokyo and an adjunct researcher at the Tsubouchi Memorial Theatre Museum, Waseda University. Her research interests focus on negotiations of gender and power in classical Japanese culture, cultural representations of the Fukushima disaster, stagings of contemporary society in Japanese performance, and regional theatre and arts festivals. Before joining the Graduate School of Humanities and Sociology, Barbara was a principal researcher at the German Institute for Japanese Studies Tokyo and held positions at universities in Germany and the UK.

Publications include *Literature After Fukushima. From Marginalized Voices to Nuclear Futurity* (with Linda Flores, eds, Routledge 2023 and *Okada Toshiki & Japanese Theatre* (with Peter Eckersall et al., eds, Performance Research Books, 2021).

Reference

Woods, Michael. 2007. “Engaging the Global Countryside: Globalization, Hybridity and the Reconstitution of Rural Place.” *Progress in Human Geography* 31 (4): 485–507. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0309132507079503>.