Exhibitions as Practical Scholarship

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Introduction

First of all, I approve of the concept of "practical scholarship" proposed by this conference. This concept seems to be proposed in relation to the activities of the Manga Museum, but here I would like to talk about it based on the practical activities I have carried out thus far. I cannot state with certainty whether my speech is suitable for this occasion or not. I was kindly invited by Professor Jaqueline Berndt to present today, probably because I am a theoretical researcher in the field of aesthetics and arts, and because I have conducted several contemporary art and media art projects and exhibitions while being personally engaged in the production of some media artworks as well. Hence, I felt that my experience might prove useful, at least to some extent, in considering exhibitions as practical scholarship, and I agreed to participate in this conference today.

I believe that among Japanese researchers of aesthetics and arts, those doing research on arts while also engaging in practical activities of artwork production or project exhibition are few in number, even in comparison to those in foreign countries. The main reason for this is an institutional issue. In the world of academic research in Japan, practical activities are not evaluated as academic achievements, for the most part. As an aesthetics and arts researcher, I personally have not even once received a fair assessment of academic achievement for practical activities related to artwork productions, project exhibitions, publications, and others that I have undertaken. Items assessed for academic achievement are limited to academic books, articles, conference papers, etc., and no alternative category exists that allows other introductions in assessment reports.

Most of my colleagues as well, aesthetics and arts researchers like myself, show hardly any concern for the practical activities I carry out. At best, I receive compliments like "you're doing all kinds of things, you are so talented." The viewpoint of such people who study art as an academic field is implied here: that any art-related practice is like a "hobby" or a "pastime activity," so to speak, and that it has no relationship with their real "work," which is research. This division between "work" and "play," the division between researching art and practicing art, did not exist before the modern age. Since modernization, academic knowledge of the arts has been institutionally separated from practice of the arts. The decisive factor here is that the state has intervened in the arts.

Disciplines such as aesthetics and arts were established by the Japanese state along with the academic organization of Imperial Universities, as a part of a policy to increase national power by importing studies advanced in the West. In other words, these studies were not born as a manifestation

of the spontaneous intellectual curiosity of the people to know what aesthetics or arts are. They were introduced in order to position various artistic activities and their results as cultural property of the nation, and to relate these activities and their results to the outstanding cultural tradition of the West. That is to say, academic studies of aesthetics and arts came "from above." Because they came from above to begin with, their viewpoint on observing the phenomenon of "art" was "looking down on" it. Therefore, personally engaging in "practices" that are on the same level as artistic activities is not only considered unimportant, but it is also cautioned against.

Compared to sociology, cultural anthropology, clinical psychology and others, it seems even weird that the academic study of arts disregards and avoids engaging with the practice of arts to this extent. In the field of aesthetics and arts there is no "field work" or "clinical research."
The sense that experience changes knowledge and forms new concepts, an important aspect of intellectual activity, is extremely poor in this field. I believe that such an attitude has lost its historical validity ages ago. This is off the record, but to be honest, attending the conferences of The Japanese Society for Aesthetics and such, one wonders if we are still living at the beginning of the 19th century.

Now, you might ask me why I picked up such an outmoded discipline. When I entered graduate school in 1980, the studies of aesthetics and arts that center around research on modern European thought had completely lost actuality. That is to say, they were incapable of grasping and explaining the artistic and cultural phenomena happening in reality. However, it was this utter anachronism that seemed interesting to me. As I have written somewhere else before, specializing in aesthetics in 1980s Japan was just like "walking with the cape of one's grandfather," as they say. Actually, this was not only a metaphor in my case; one winter I went to the university wearing my grandfather's cape that I had found at home. Although this behavior was curious and in a way cynical, looking back at it now, it may also seem somehow appropriate. This is because, I believe, we are living the end of a nation called modern Japan, which has been shaped since the end of the 19th century.

Be that as it may, in this presentation I'd like to talk about the following two topics. First, concerning the concept of "practical scholarship," I will try to critically and briefly reflect on what "scholarship" is to begin with, which is sometimes practical and sometimes not. Then, according to my experience with "practical" activities that I have carried out personally so far, including the two exhibitions Kyoto Biennale 2003 and Gifu Ogaki Biennale 2006, I would like to consider the meaning of "practical scholarship," if the examples I refer to could possibly be taken as such.

Practical Scholarship

Scholarship is one type of ideology. However, to break free from it is not easy; for the time being we have to operate inside of it. Scholarship is not a world formed naturally by people who pursue knowledge in general. In order to become scholarship, knowledge has to be authorized as such. Moreover, this authorization cannot be implemented by only the community of those who pursue knowledge. That authorization, which defines what scholarship is, is ultimately put into place by the state. Concretely, for example, the departments or majors of universities are materialized in the form of the establishment of research facilities.

For example, at one time researching ukiyoe or researching manga was not considered scholarship. This is because the object of their knowledge was not a meaningful cultural property from the perspective of the state. Now, of course, the circumstances have changed; both ukiyoe research and manga research are established as "scholarship." Yet, this change does not mean that the intellectual content and the artistic value inherent in mass culture (that were unacknowledged in the past due to people's prejudices against mass culture) are widely acknowledged now thanks to researchers' efforts. Those kinds of tales of enlightenment are produced afterwards. The state selects the sort of intellectual

activities that preserve and strengthen its own existence and authorizes them as "scholarship." In other words, when a new intellectual research begins to take hold with a power that is socially impossible to ignore, there is no choice but to acknowledge it as "scholarship." After being acknowledged in this way, the scholarship is granted independence and freedom. Scholarship is ideology, because of the fact that after it is established, intellectual independence and freedom seem like its essential qualities.

I will be digressing from the topic a little bit here, but I would like to mention the following issue. As you know, currently Japan's Ministry of Education (Culture, Sports, Science and Technology) seeks to "revise" the humanities and social sciences organizations of national and public universities. Humanities fields that seem to be represented by the faculty of literature are especially targeted. In this way they are attempting to take the status of "scholarship" away from intellectual activity, so to speak. Seen from the perspective of a state like today's Japan, this is a natural procedure in a sense. It is a decision to leave research fields such as philosophy, literature and history to the market, for they are no longer indispensable to Japan as scholarship in the way they were during the Meiji period, when it was necessary to create the appearance of a modern state in line with the West. From this standpoint, personally, as a faculty member of one of these national universities, it seems that I should resist. However, I think that it is basically useless to resist. The reason is that although "scholarship" seems to be centered on today's universities, it is no more than something handed down from above by the state a century ago to begin with. Despite my words, I am not feeling hopeless at all, because there is actually a solidarity among people who seek knowledge related to humanity, unconnected to institutions like universities. Rather than maintaining institutions, I believe that it is more important to strengthen this solidarity.

Now, when a new cultural area is taken as the object of "scholarship," interesting things happen. First of all, there is an attempt to describe the new cultural object according to existing standards of "scholarship." No matter how new the object, it is not impossible to describe it according to the old standards. It is of course possible to describe ukiyoe as a type of painting, film as theatre, manga as literature, media art as fine art. To an extent, this might be an unavoidable phase, because first of all, there is a necessity to recognize the new object as an object of scholarly understanding. However, the significant peculiarity of the new object slips away in the meantime. One might say that this kind of research is, in short, uninteresting. Research becomes interesting when the inherently unique logic of the new object resists the scholarly logic that attempts to conceptualize it, and it requires an alteration. This is a critical, introspective opportunity. I think that the freedom of scholarship resides in this point. That is to say, I think that scholarly freedom is not to be able to research anything there is, but rather the condition that the object of understanding can raise an objection to the subject of understanding, and possibly change the framework of understanding itself.

Based on such considerations, I believe that it is possible to think of what "practical scholarship" is. Regarding the practical state of scholarship, there are two prominent ways of thinking that can be distinguished from each other. One is comparatively moderate, while the other is radical. The moderate one is a type of thinking that softly alters scholarly methods of analysis and conceptual frameworks through deeply engaging in practical activities. In this case, the final output can still be evaluated as an achievement such as an academic paper. In this sense, there is nothing approaching the destruction of modern standards of scholarship. In contrast, the radical type of thinking acknowledges practical activity itself as a new medium of expression for scholarly knowledge. Workshops, artist talks, exhibitions, archives and so on are cited as "practical scholarship" in this conference. The radical way of thinking is considering such activities themselves as scholarly activities, an equal of conference presentations and academic writings.

If we leave aside modern common sense, such thoughts are not so strange. Common sense suggests that the scholarly type of narration is basically monologue, exactly like my speech now. If

somebody tries to write a doctoral dissertation completely in dialogue format, most universities will reject it. Even if the content is excellent, there is a high possibility that it will be called a "work" rather than a thesis. However, although any thesis on Plato's philosophy has to be written in monologue format, the majority of Plato's writings themselves are in dialogue format. Moreover, rather than advocating some established opinion, using the dynamism of the dialogue format allows one to delve deeper into discussion—the process itself holds significance. In today's terminology, this is something close to a workshop. Such examples of dialogue and fiction were functioning more or less as important formats for conveying scholarly content, in the West from ancient times until the 18th century, and in Japan until the second half of the 1880s.

The greatest historical factor that led scholarship to take such a rigid form is the development of the natural sciences after the 19th century. Sciences became the standard for systematized intellectual activities useful to the state, and humanities were adjusted according to their model. As a result, observing and analyzing cultural objects in objective and neutral ways—as if they also were natural objects—came to be considered "scholarly." To put it differently, what came to be considered "scholarly" was eliminating the practical commitment to the object of research. However, such norms are essentially unsuitable for dealing with cultural objects, and of course researchers of culture are aware of this fact by experience. Nevertheless, receiving acknowledgement as scholarship requires the appearance of having been adjusted according to the scientific model. In short, in the scholarship system of the modern state, researchers of humanities are basically forced to do the impossible and thus put at a disadvantage compared to scientists. This is the ultimate reason for the humanities' inability to effectively rebut criticism from the sciences, which led to the "Sokal affair."

Therefore, I would personally give my full support to the concept of "practical scholarship," if it means regaining the practical, interactive, or playful sides of scholarly knowledge, which came to be eliminated by "scholarship" in modernity. In order to consider practical scholarship in this sense, in the next chapter I would like to briefly introduce as references some of the exhibitions that I personally conducted.

Exhibitions as Practical Scholarship—Kyoto Biennale 2003, Gifu Ogaki Biennale 2006, and others—

The first art exhibition that I organized was SKIN DIVE: Open the Circuit to the Senses held in 1999. It took place here in this building of the Kyoto Manga Museum, which was previously Tatsuike Elementary School. In those days, I was also involved in the committee handling the preparations for the opening of Kyoto Art Center, which was finally opened in 2000 in the renovated building of Meirin Elementary School. At the time of the opening, I was in charge of the preparation of the critical journal issued by Kyoto Art Center. The result was the quarterly journal entitled Diatxt, and I stayed as its editor-in-chief from 2000 to 2003. In the meantime, the Kyoto Biennale project had started with Kyoto Art Center at its core. In 2002, I was made the director there.

Large-scale international art exhibitions had been dormant in Japan for approximately 30 years since Yusuke Nakahara's Human and Materials exhibition held in 1970. With the Fukuoka Asian Arts Triennial starting in 1999, followed by Niigata's Echigo-Tsumari Art Field Triennial in 2000 and Yokohoma Triennial in 2001, international art exhibitions started to take place one after the other like a chain reaction. Among these, Yokohoma Triennial was one of extremely large scale, reaching a total project cost of 700 million yen, with four directors bringing together 113 pieces of art under the theme "Mega Wave." Compared to these projects, Kyoto Biennale was rather small scale and more like an art festival of eclectic nature, in that it included works of theatre and traditional performance arts along with

contemporary arts. Therefore, I had to think of a general project plan fit for such circumstances.

First of all, I avoided abstract, conceptual themes commonly associated with contemporary art exhibitions. At the same time, I looked for a theme that would stimulate coolheaded thinking about the circumstances of the time, namely about the rapid change of the world rushing towards the Iraq War after 9/11. The world demanded everything to be smart and fast, and I felt that I wanted a silly word that resisted this demand. As a result, I came up with the word "slowness." It was the exact title of a book that I was reading at the time—a novel by Milan Kundera. The novel was written in French and was published in 1995 with the French title Lenteur, and the title of the English version was Slowness. While the Czech-born author is a kind of fan of speed and writes that "speed is the form of ecstasy the technical revolution has bestowed on man," I thought the fact that he gave such a title as "lenteur," meaning "slowness" or "dullness," to his book was interesting.

The theme of "slowness" received a good deal of reaction from the artists invited to participate in the Kyoto Biennale (you can find more on this in the catalogue The Slowness of Light). There were negative reactions too, but I thought it not a bad thing if artists participated in the conference even though they looked at its theme critically. As there is not much time, I will introduce just one work from the exhibition. It is a performance entitled "NSK State in Time" that took place on the day of opening. It was a work of the Slovenian art collective IRWIN, a performance originally using real soldiers from various countries and having them uphold the flag of the imaginary country the collective envisioned. In other words, actual people representing real authority carry the symbol of a virtual state. At first, the collective's plan was to use Self-Defence Force personnel to adapt the performance to Japan, but this plan did not go well. Then IRWIN members said that because Japan tried to rebuild itself via economic power rather than military power after its defeat in the war, an employee of a big company might count as the counterpart of a soldier. That is indeed the case; businessmen are often compared to "soldiers" or "samurai." Thus, instead of soldiers, the collective requested for four young "salarymen," or office workers in suits, and staged the performance in front of Kyoto City Hall.

The other exhibition that I would like to give as an example here is the Gifu Ogaki Biennale that took place in 2006. Because the exhibition's main base was IAMAS (Institute of Advanced Media Arts and Sciences) where I was working at the time, works of media art and technology art were going to be displayed. There, I thought, it was taken for granted that media art exhibitions would display "cutting-edge" experiments of technologically advanced countries like Japan, Korea, or Western countries. Because of that, I wanted to organize a media art exhibition in a somewhat different direction. Hence, I considered the media arts of Asia. Many Asian media artists are not able to use the latest technologies. They are using pieces of junk and technology from generations ago. However, I thought that exactly because of this, they might be able to exhibit the relationship between technology and human beings, which is obscured by the "cutting-edge." For this reason I created the concept "Janken: The Power of Chance." My intention was, firstly, to express a different worldview in contrast to the dualistic worldview of "victory or defeat," a worldview consisting of three elements in between which victory and defeat kept being circulated, just like in a game of "rock paper scissors." Secondly, my intention was to contemplate on "chance," in contrast to the tendency of the modern society to relentlessly pursue the "cause" or the "reason" of each and every event.

At that time, I received a complaint from the Gifu Prefecture (our initial sponsor) asking "How is it possible that the exhibition you're organizing has the theme of 'chance,' while the role of educational institutions is to teach that study and effort are what lead to success?" Yet in the end, the prefecture could not provide the budget that was promised to me in the first place, and I was compensated for the lacking amount through a grant from a certain foundation. Since this foundation was financially supporting

cultural activities with the revenue from what is called a “lottery,” Gifu Prefecture ended up in a position where it could no longer make any complaints about the theme of “chance.”

Conclusion

In terms of language use, calling activities like exhibition planning “scholarship” feels a little out of place. Personally, I do not particularly want them to be acknowledged as such either. However, I believe that an exhibition cannot be deemed successful just by appearing in media and attracting many visitors—planning an exhibition has different sides to it. Exhibitions are not held just for business or management purposes. An exhibition is a thought process, and it is a medium for leading people to think through that process. Exhibitions can be educational activities, but they do not convey any top-down message like “you should see this.” They are activities through which the organizers and the visitors can think together.

Lately, there have been many discussions about exhibitions. Last year, photographer Ryudai Takano’s works, which were displayed at the special exhibition Photography Will Be held at the Aichi Prefectural Museum of Art, caused problems because they proved “offensive” to some visitors. This year, in the special exhibition held at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Tokyo, Makoto Aida’s politically critical works caused problems. More recently, the Eisei-Bunko Museum in Tokyo opened a shunga exhibition that had become a topic of conversation when it was held in London two years ago, but it was cancelled because public museums could not accept an exhibition of shunga. I believe that it is good that such incidents are discussed. Exhibitions should not be entertainment for everyone to enjoy in peace. Therefore, I think that the planning and operating of exhibitions should not be considered as mere management. Exhibitions are questions asked to society and opportunities to share problems and continue to discuss them. In this sense, I believe that exhibitions are intellectual activities that share a commonality with scholarship.