

# Meaning and work: Lives and livelihood of young artists in Osaka<sup>1</sup>

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In the Japanese context, in which art is highly valued, there has been a long-standing interest in researching traditional arts, including the social context of its production and the relationship between teacher and apprentice (e.g. Moeran 1987), but relatively little ethnographic research on contemporary art production. The anthropology of art has long argued for a shift of focus beyond aesthetic appreciation (Gell 1998, Pinney and Thomas 2001) and towards an understanding of art as a process (Svašek 2007). In this paper I aim to approach art as work and explore ‘what is it like to be an artist’, in terms of personal experiences and ideas of meaningful work. I focus on narratives of the creative process and the meaning artists themselves attach to their work. In this sense I am also interested in the conditions of creativity, particularly in relation to the artists’ interpretations of the way they get, mould and fabricate their ideas, how they resolve creative stoppages and where they see the role of other people in their own creative process.

## **An Osakan avant-garde art world**

The group in question is a network of young people, mostly in their twenties and thirties, engaged in a variety of contemporary art projects and creative activities ranging from contemporary dance and music performances, multimedia installations to painting and sculpture. The research was conducted through participant observation of artists during their daily routines, attendance of contemporary art events, and in-depth interviews with selected participants. It was supplemented by semi-structured interviews with others belonging to the same social circle of event attendees and organizers, including art producers, event organizers and art promoters, as well as some gallerists.

What kind of place is Osaka, when it comes to making art? Despite being the second largest city in Japan, Osaka was invariably described by my interlocutors as a place where the art market is not developed and there is not much attention to art, neither from the media and local governments, nor from the audience – Osaka being described as a mercantile centre, in which people and companies do not part with money easily for something of uncertain practical value. While typical Osakans enjoy going to the museums, it seems they rarely frequent small galleries, especially rental ones, as these are perceived as difficult places to enter

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and most of the people attending the art events and exhibitions are themselves somehow involved with arts or are close associates or acquaintances of the artists.

If one wants to embark on the path of becoming well known, selling one's work and being able to eventually make one's living that way, as a young female painter M-san told me, one has to go to Tokyo and exhibit there. According to C san, a gallery owner, an exhibition abroad, regardless of the quality of the gallery space and the popularity, greatly increases one's chances of success. Another artist, H-san, specializing in live video performances, explained to me:

-In general terms, Osaka is not great for doing arts. (...) In Osaka, there isn't much of a media presence, all of it is concentrated in Tokyo. That means you don't get large audiences that hear about the events through media coverage.

But, he also points out that it is not all bad:

-That means one can do things here unnoticed (*ki wo tsukanai*), we can do what we like here. Without large audiences, in smaller places, people make friends (*nakayoku ni naru*).

Out of the limelight, there is more freedom, to switch between styles, or try something new, since the media and collectors, according to M-san:

-[they] don't have an eye for art, do not themselves always know what they like or what they think has value. They prefer safe pieces (*anzen na sakuhin*)... So all the people who embark on the career path go to Tokyo, all those who are willing to stick to their own well defined style, decided with their gallerist who makes a file for them, and those who stay in Osaka, well they, are the one who are not interested in this way of doing things. So people who stay are all a bit different (*kawatta*) and easygoing (*kiraku*). There are many kind, interesting people. So Osaka is good, if [getting famous] is not what you are interested in'.

Not everyone I spoke to was as disinterested in making a living from their artwork as M-san, but most were not interested in pursuing a 'set path' of patronage by becoming affiliated with one particular commercial gallery, for instance.

## **Work and living**

One of the central questions of this research then, was how do the people I spoke to make a living and how do they balance their work with their creative endeavours. Three main models of relationship between art and work emerged

out of my conversations: (a) art as a career (b) art related work and teaching, (c) art after hours. (a) Very few of my interlocutors decided to dedicate their time primarily to art, for example a young female painter who decided to give up her clerical job as it was taking up too much of her time and dedicate herself to painting, whilst teaching art part-time in a private art school. (b) Almost all, then, had various kinds of jobs, with varying time demands. Some had jobs related to art, such as design, and some were involved in teaching which was seen as a stable job which offered sufficient time to work on one's own projects. Interestingly, while some enjoyed art related jobs, others found jobs that were too similar to their work to be negatively influencing their own work and looked for other kinds of part-time jobs. (c) Several of the people I spoke to were working full-time yet managed to find time to dedicate to their artistic pursuits, and within artistic circles often what they did for living was not even known or noted. Some of my interlocutors in this group mentioned they were making an effort to make time for their art as they could not imagine themselves without it. This compulsion to keep creating was echoed by many of my interlocutors. Many said, when speaking of their other artist friends, that one big challenge facing them all was not to give up their artwork. Many of their friends thought the challenges were too hard and stopped creating. But then, pausing for thought, they said that they feel unhappy and stressed, anxious or angry when they cannot work on their art projects. Having realized that, many decided to change their jobs and adjust to this new realization – they will have to make time and space for their creative pursuits. This story was in various forms told to me by six unconnected people who now thought that they had managed to find some kind of balance for their work and survival.

It is now becoming clear that these models not only do not have clearly defined lines, but within each one of the types I outlined there are numerous sub-types, an entire scale. It is therefore possible to think of the art-paid employment balances and interactions as forming a full spectrum, from full time art to art as an after-work activity.

### **Art as an activity – art and identity**

At least for those then, who described their creative pursuits as something important for them, something without which they become irritable and anxious or unhappy, one could infer that they identify as artists. This identification, though, does not take a form of an integrated and homogenous, unified identity. When speaking about themselves my interlocutors almost never said 'I am a painter', 'a musician', 'a dancer', 'a saxophone-player'... instead they described what they do 'I do painting, 'I do improvised dance', or referred to their works and events they participate in.

This has some real consequences, since it means that rather than thinking of their creative forms or outputs in very set ways, many of these artists worked in a variety of media. Take J-san, who I met when he was playing saxophone, but he also used a variety of other instruments and even ready-made objects to create sound, but also engaged in ceramics and printmaking. Or D-san, who now not only paints but directs photo-shoots and effectively co-creates photographic work. Sometimes these creative people would be invited by their friends or acquaintances from their creative circles to take part in a collaborative project or an art event, effectively crossing over into fields they have not explored previously. The mutual trust between these people who know each other and are familiar with each other's work made the transitions seem more natural and not uncomfortable, often leading to very unusual and original uses of various media, something that would warrant an exploration of its own. But for the purposes of the current presentation, let me return to the issue of identity.

The reason why identities were not defined in these set and unified ways, based on one coherent medium, style and art form practiced, is probably twofold. On the one hand, as M-san, whose opinions I elaborated on in the beginning in relation to 'art as a career', told me, by not focusing on their work as something that needs to be presented to a target audience, which expects a clearly defined style and a coherent portfolio, these artists are free to do what they feel like. Or as R-san, who makes visual installations and teaches English, told me: in Osaka, there are many people who do art for art's sake, so they can make it freely and explore different things, work 'across disciplines'. It also means they do not always get to feel very serious about each particular project, and I would argue that there is a certain playful, ludic quality widely present in this art world.

On the other hand, in Japan personal identities have been described as less unified than we assume them to be in the West. What one does and what one is not necessarily fully integrated and overlapping, nor is the work identity closely related to the family one, or leisure one, for instance, as these spheres coexist separate in time and space in the Japanese context. A similar point has been made by scholars of Japan in relation to sexual identities, where different spheres allow for different kinds of behaviour (separating private from public, for example), and sexual practices do not necessarily define one's identity (Robertson 1998[2001]:174). These scholars point out that the academic discussion of sexualities has to be aware that the identity politics 'presuming a singular and whole self and (...) "individual oneness" is a peculiar Western construct (Frühstück 2008 [2005]:176; Lunsing 2001:17). Arguably then, identity can more fruitfully be seen as fragmented or compartmentalized than as a unified whole, where what one *does* and what one *is* are not so closely tied as implied by the

Western notion of an individual with an inner core, an essence that defines all that one does.

The absence of essentialized identity in the Japanese context was also noted in discussions of the Japanese legal system, which reflects the separation of being and doing, action and identity. The Japanese legal system, according to Wagatsuma and Rosset (1996), is based on the idea that every person is essentially good. In analysing the importance of apologies in the Japanese legal context, they argue that as long as someone admits that their behaviour was wrong, or inappropriate, the damage has been addressed. For all but the most heinous transgressions, which are barely human, it is the behaviour that is considered bad, while the people themselves are good. This separate consideration of action and the person is a basis for an identity which is not as unified or essentialized as the Western individual, of course as an abstract construct, as described for instance by Lukes (2006), whose every action is considered to reflect or express an inner essence.

Returning to the case of the artists, the absence of a clear and strict identification in terms of a particular activity or a medium leads to a number of fertile and interesting crossovers and blurred boundaries between the genres. In other words, it gives artists a kind of freedom. Nevertheless, while this is outside the scope of this paper, it bears emphasizing that the freedom we all desire so much can also have negative consequences and can be felt as a burden. The lack of constraint in some ways makes creative activity more difficult – when one can make anything at all, what does one make? While some of my interlocutors faced this issue in one way or another, they all found ways to deal with it constructively.

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