



New Art and Culture in the Age of *Freeter* in Japan On Young Part Time Workers and the Ideology of Creativity

The article discusses recent developments in the Japanese art scene with special attention to the changing relation between art and society in post-Lehman shock Japan. The main actors in this contemporary art scene are artists belonging to the so-called freeter generation born in the 1970s, the special characteristics of their art work often based on the development of kyara or character, as well as its politicization and creativity. Note: The Japanese names in this article are written in the order surname – first name.

By Yoshitaka Mōri

The climate around Japanese contemporary art has dramatically changed since the last global financial crisis, initiated by the bankruptcy of Lehman Brothers in September 2008. It is important to recognize this specific economic, social and cultural conjunction to understand the current situation of Japanese contemporary art.

Leading up to the Lehman shock, the Japanese contemporary art business, along with that in China and throughout Asia, had enjoyed a new golden age thanks to the globalizing, neo-liberalist art market, which was looking for new talent in the non-western world. Artists coined Japanese Neo Pop (JNP), Nara Yoshitomo, Murakami Takashi, Yanobe Kenji, Aida Makoto, were the most successful examples.¹

Among these, Murakami was particularly important because he was a symbolic figure of the new economy of contemporary art in the 2000s. He explicitly stated 'art is business' in his bestselling book, *Geijutsu kigyō ron* (*Art Entrepreneurship Theory*) (Murakami 2006). This was well-accepted thanks to the media coverage that his art work, 'My Lonesome Cowboy' was sold for 15 million US dollars at Sotheby's auction in 2008. Murakami proposed a new art business model and demonstrated how young artists could succeed in the international art market. He was a champion of Japanese contemporary art until 2008.

The economic crisis radically changed the euphoric atmosphere of the market-driven art scene. However, this does not only mean that the art market has collapsed or that sales of art works declined, but, more

importantly, that the art world has started to realize how deeply it had been caught by neo-liberal ideology. This is the time to reconsider the relation between art and society.

We are now facing a new stage of Japanese contemporary art. This may be a period of anxiety, but at the same time, this may be a period of excitement, because something new is definitely emerging too. In this paper, I would like to discuss today's anxiety as well as hope in Japanese art and culture. The discussion is not limited only to fine art during the period after economic crisis in 2008, but also includes the change of society's relation to contemporary art since the mid-2000s. Analysis of the relations between society, culture and art will shed light on an alternative, often invisible character of Japanese contemporary art.

Art and artists in the age of *freeter*

As I have discussed (Mōri 2005, 2009), the 2000s can be characterized as the age of *freeter*. I would like to examine Japanese contemporary art within this context of the emergence of *freeter* generation. Before starting my argument, I would like to clarify the meaning of the term *freeter*, because this Japanese English word is often used in different ways by different people in different periods.

The term *freeter* was coined at the end of the 1980s at the peak of the so-called bubble economy by a job-hunting journal, *From A*. The term '*freeter*' was made by mixing an English word 'free' or 'freedom', and a German word '*arbeiter*' (worker). It originally had a



positive connotation. Being *freeter* did not mean being merely a part-time worker. It contained a particular ideological message: You do not have to get a full-time job. You can be free and you can be yourself, as long as you survive even with a part time job. This message was welcomed both by young people who did not want to enter the old Japanese job seniority system, and by new industries, particularly in the fields of service, information and culture, which needed more flexible and cheaper labour forces.

The number of *freeter* increased under this ideological consensus since the end of the bubble economy in the early 1990s and peaked at about 4 million in 2001. Because industry made the labour market as flexible as possible in order to recover from the collapse of the bubble economy, young people could not find full-time jobs easily even after their graduation from universities between 1991 and 2001. They are called *shūshoku hyōgaki sedai* (the generation of the ice age of job hunting).

Throughout 1990s, the term increasingly lost its positive connotation. *Freeter* came to be seen as a social problem, because it became clear that those who worked as a freeter in their 20s remained a freeter even when they reached their 30s and 40s. It was increasingly difficult for them to get out of their poor condition. Looking back to this period from today's viewpoint, it is called the 'lost decade' in economic terms and those who graduated from university in the period are sometime seen as a 'lost generation'.

Artists in the freeter generation

In the following, I will introduce some artists of the *freeter* generation and examine the characteristic features of their artworks. By the term *freeter* generation, I refer to those who were born in the 1970s. The bubble economy had already ended by the time they graduated from art university. In the Japanese art world, they could be seen as the Post JNP (Japanese Neo Pop) generation: Nara was born in 1959, Murakami in 1962 and Aida in 1965.

For the analysis, I would like to point to three words that represent the key for Japanese artists in the *freeter's* generation. These are *kyara* (character), politics and creativity. These are different categories but sometimes interrelate with each other. Some of these artists follow the strategy of Murakami and JNP, while the others are critical of it. Some artists are already successful, while the others are still invisible in the art world. Most of them work on the border between the inside and the

outside of the traditional fine art context.

Rise of character or *kyara*

The term *kyara* is difficult to explain. It was originally used in *anime*/comic communities, but now is applied in everyday conversation. In a comic or animation every character is artificially invented by artists. To fans the character is often more important than the story. Fans love the characters even though they understand that they are not real. Even in the real world, people often create their own character, by simplifying their way of thinking or by producing their public images. Now young people often appreciate anyone's character by saying 'he or she made an outstanding character (*kyara ga tatteiru*)'.

The idea of 'character' is increasingly important in Japanese contemporary art, too. The artists' characters are often more important than their art works. Simply put, who makes the art work is more significant than what is made. I would introduce two examples, the artists Ishida Tetsuya and Matsui Fuyuko.ⁱⁱ

Ishida, born in 1973, started his career in the design industry when he was 22 years old. He won a couple of prizes and was expected to be a successful artist, but was killed by a train accident when he was 31 years old in 2005. After his death, he became a pop icon or even *aidoru* (idol) in the art world, as he is seen as a symbolic figure of the young generation. He depicted lonely, isolated and alienated boys in a sentimental way in his paintings. The characters he created seemed to represent the anxiety of the age of *freeter*. Although he always said that the characters in his paintings do not represent himself, most people identify the characters with him, in particular after the tragedy. Some even believe that he committed suicide, though there is no evidence for this. Here we can see a particular relationship between the character and the artist in his success.

Matsui Fuyuko is also an interesting example. Matsui, born in 1974, is a Japanese painter of *nihon-ga* (traditional Japanese style paintings) who deals with *yūrei-ga* (ghost paintings) with themes of eroticism, violence and death. Her paintings were seen as a reinvention of traditional Japanese painting.

Interestingly she became famous not only because she is a good artist, but also because she herself is beautiful. Fashion magazines feature her images as if she were a fashion model. I am not suggesting that she is



successful as an artist only because she looks beautiful, but would argue that we can see the new relationship between her own character produced in the media and her gothic style paintings. The audience consumed this particular set of aesthetics.

Both examples show an interesting relation between artists and artworks. Of course, historically speaking, the character of artists has been always important and attracted by audience in modernist art history from Baudelaire, Manet and Picasso to recent art celebrities like Warhol and Beuys. However, while the depth of their characters and the hidden secret psyches behind the appearances have attracted attention to these modernist artists, these recent Japanese artists' characters strangely lack in depth, as if they were characters from a comic or anime.

Politicization of art

One of the effects of the Lehman shock was that the media started to pay attention to the politics of the *freeter* generation. Until very recently, the mainstream media, including art journalism, supposed that young people was merely passive consumers and less interested in politics, but this was not always the case. Even in art practices, there have been many interesting artistic projects which are involved with real politics since the mid-1990s.

I would like to introduce a particular artistic political project: 246 Artist Meeting (246 *Hyogensha Kaigi*). This project started in 2007 when Shibuya Art Gallery 246 launched a wall painting project near down town Tokyo Shibuya railway station, under the overhead railway bridge along route 246 as a part of a beautification project of the cityⁱⁱⁱ.

This caused a problem particularly to homeless people who stayed there. The Shibuya Art Gallery 246 project asked the homeless to leave in order to make the outdoor wall gallery. Some artists started to organize the anti-Shibuya Art Gallery 246 campaign under the name 246 Artist Meeting. One of the central figures is the painter Take Jun'ichirō. He has been known as a political painter since producing paintings on the cardboard houses of homeless people in Shinjuku (Tokyo) during the mid-1990s. There was a village of cardboard houses in Shinjuku where about 200 people lived until the Tokyo government kicked them out in 1998. When Take heard the news of the Shibuya Art Gallery 246, he was shocked to know that art was being used as a means of kicking out the homeless people,

and he started to organize meetings. Now more than 30 people participate in the project.

The interesting thing is that it is not a merely political demonstration, but is organized as a part of artist practice too. For example, the female artist Ichimura Misako stayed with the homeless people in the streets for six months and created a piece of artwork there, by decorating her cardboard house with silver stars made of paper.



R246 Stars and a Rocket (2007-2008), © Ichimura Misako

This is an interesting example of the *freeter* generation showing their solidarity with old homeless people. It is not merely a supporting project but also a project in which young artists and old homeless people shared their anger with the current situation and anxiety for the future.

In 2008, the main members of the 246 Artist Meeting, including Ichimura, joined a political project 'Save the Miyashita Park'. Miyashita Park, located near Shibuya station, is a public park where political demonstrations and meetings are often held and many homeless people live. The local authorities are planning to sell its naming rights to a sports brand, the multi-national corporation NIKE, and to change it to a pay-park called NIKE park, by building a skate boarding facility. This means that the local authority will ban political meetings at the center of Shibuya and force the homeless people to leave. The artists and the activists started the campaign against the plan and organized Artists in Resistance (A.I.R.) with an open-air exhibition to protect the park.

The 246 Artist Meeting and A.I.R. are one of the best examples of artist-oriented political movements in the 2000s. There are many social and cultural movements led by artists and activists in Tokyo. Through the use of



the artistic expression, design and music, they are creating a new type of political and cultural activity.

Chim ↑ Pom: character and politics

Finally, I would like to focus on some works of a controversial artist group called Chim ↑ Pom, in Japan, to discuss both character and politics and eventually to reconsider the idea of creativity.



Chim ↑ Pom

Chim ↑ Pom consists of six members. Eri is the only female member, and is the spokesperson. It is more like a music band in terms of collaborative production. They became notorious in 2008 when their exhibition at Hiroshima City Museum of Contemporary Art was cancelled due to its politically scandalous content (Chim ↑ Pom and Abe 2009). While filming their work, they wrote the term *Pika*, which represents an explosion or blast of an atomic bomb and also refers to Pikachu, a famous Japanese anime character, in the sky above Hiroshima City. They were severely criticized for their immorality, which might have upset atomic bomb victims and their families.

This scandal was unfortunate, but also interesting to me because this seems a symptom of Japanese contemporary art in the age of *freeter*. First of all, this backlash is definitely related to the *kyara* of the artists.



Making the Sky of Hiroshima "PIKA!" (2009)

They do not present themselves as serious artists. The central figure, Eri, looks like a nasty and 'stupid' girl, who cares only for herself. The male members look like bad-boy street gangsters. If they were seen as serious artists, they would not have been attacked so severely. But their characters, or *kyara*, worked in a negative way in this case.

Chim ↑ Pom made their debut with a video work entitled *EriGero*, which films Eri continuously vomiting pink milk while smiling. She can vomit on demand. This disturbing film confused people very much as it was too difficult to categorize within a contemporary art context.



SUPER RAT [diorama] (2008)

Their first exhibition, *Super Rat*, was rather successful. "Super rat" is the name of a giant rat which has antibodies against any poison so that it is very difficult to kill. They caught super rats in Shibuya, stuffed them and made them into Pikachu by coloring them yellow. This is actually a homage to the super rat: they identify themselves with the super rats, which were both produced by and hated by human beings.



It seems to me that they are typical *freeter* generation artists. Most of the members, apart from Eri, do not have proper art educations: they are seemingly ordinary young men and women. Their sensibility is based on street culture under the long term recession. They are always dealing with political issues, including participating in 246 Artist Meeting, but on the surface lack any seriousness. For this very reason, they are criticized by the older generation. However, it seems to me that their lack of seriousness and sense of humour is definitely their way of engaging in politics too.

Creativity and counter-creativity

The age of *freeter* can be described as the age of creativity. As I have already mentioned, the term *freeter* used to have a positive connotation. It represented a new life style in which people could escape from the existing job system, including the seniority system and life time employment, and choose jobs and their own life style freely. More importantly, the way of being *freeter* made it paradoxically possible for independent amateur artists or would-be artists to live their own lives.

We may be able to call this the ideology of creativity, because the concept of creativity played an important role in re-organizing the labour force of *freeters*. Creativity is the keyword to understand contemporary culture in relation to labour. It is different from talent, which only a genius is gifted with (de Duve 1994): everybody can be creative. However:

(J)ust because everyone (more or less) can cook an egg, sew on a button, and think, it does not follow that everyone is a chef, a tailor, or intellectual. The same applies to creativity. Everyone got it, but only some function socially – by means of their employment, vocation or calling – to create economic or cultural values (Hartley 2005: 28).

Creativity is important because it often has affinity with the creative industries which emerged in the mid-1980s. Murakami Takashi may be one of the examples. He says that he is not Matisse, but Picasso, meaning he is not genius but creative (Murakami 2006).

However, the idea of creativity has another positive aspect. It is at least a very democratic and egalitarian idea. Anyone can be creative. What a great idea! The problem is not the idea of creativity but the capital and

market which constantly exploit the creativity of the people. What we have to do is to reclaim the idea of creativity to ourselves.

Once we reclaim creativity, then anyone can be an artist, as Joseph Beuys claimed a long time ago. This does not mean that anyone can produce art work in the same framework as traditional modern art. Instead it means that the nature of art is radically transformed and melded with everyday life and then politics.

Under post-Fordist economic conditions, where immaterial production, in particular that of the cultural and creative industries, is dominant, artists can not enjoy their privileged position which heavily relied on their genius talent. Artists become workers and an integral part of labour forces, often as a *freeter*. But this does not mean that they are merely slaves subject to the capitalist world, because capitalism itself is sustained by laborers. I end the paper with a great hope for the creativity of the *freeter* generation.

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Captions

Image by Ichimura Misako by courtesy of the artist, and images by Chim ↑ Pom by courtesy of the artists and Mujin-To Productions, Tokyo.

SUPER RAT [diorama]

2008

photo: Yoshimitsu Umekawa

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Making the Sky of Hiroshima "PIKA!"

2009

Photo: Cactus Nakao

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ⁱ The term Japanese Neo Pop is taken from the Japanese art journal, *BT (Bijutsu Techō)*'s special issue on pop/Neo Pop in 1992. In this issue, Nakahara Kodai, Murakami Takashi and Yanobe Kenji discuss the possibility of pop art in relation to Japanese subculture.

ⁱⁱ The idea of the artist as an idol comes from 'The Theory on Idols (*aidorus*) in the Art World' by Fukuzumi (2008).

ⁱⁱⁱ See the website of the 246 Artist Meeting: <http://kaigi246.exblog.jp/>