

*The Art of Exchange and the Exchange of Knowledge:
Rethinking the Creative Arts and Information Capitalism in Japan and Beyond*

Tessa Morris-Suzuki
Australian National University

I begin this presentation with some images from an event which first took place in the city of Maebashi, Japan, in 2011, and has since been repeated several times. Entitled the “Wooden Horse Dadada Festival”, this event was an intriguing mixture of a seemingly quintessential piece of Japanese tradition with some unsettlingly non-traditional elements. The kimonos and hapi jackets, the shrine, and the beating of drums and chanting all convey an air of tradition, but the wooden horses which form the centrepiece of the festival add a distinctly surreal feel to the proceedings, as does the burst of static with which the video ends. The chant of “dadada” which accompanied the dancing and procession was, amongst other things, a tribute to the Japanese branch of the Dada art movement, on which the festival’s master of ceremonies, artist Shirakawa Yoshio, is a noted expert. The Maebashi festival is, in fact, constructed around a simulacrum: an entirely fictitious “local legend” invented for the occasion. But if the traditions it celebrates are invented, the problems it aims to address are very real. They are problems of economic decline and social disintegration which face many regional Japanese cities like Maebashi – problems symbolised by the peeling paint and shuttered shop fronts which we glimpse at the beginning of the video.

In this paper I focus on the work of two contemporary Japanese arts practitioners, Maebashi-based Shirakawa Yoshio and Sapporo-based Horita Makiko, both of whose work is, above all, a critical reflection on the nature of the art market and the exchange of ideas between artist and audience. I need to preface my remarks with several provisos. I am not writing as an art expert, but rather as someone with an interest in the ideas which Shirakawa and Horita explore. This interest is relatively new, and I have not yet had a chance to interview either Shirakawa or Horita, though I hope to do so later this year. This paper is therefore based on their published writings and recorded talks and interviews. It is also important to say that I am not writing about Shirakawa and Horita because their work is particularly well-known or influential. Shirakawa is the better known of the two, but even he emphatically describes himself as a “minor artist”. This is not an expression of modesty. Rather, he is consciously making a point about the social value and importance of “minor art” as opposed to “major

art”, and this point in turn is central to his critique of the commercial art market and his attempt to establish different forms of artistic exchange (Shirakawa 2001, 40-41). Shirakawa is a significant figure in Maebashi, which he has made his home, and a quite well-known artist who has exhibited internationally, but he is not a household name. Horita is a curator and art theorist based in Hokkaido, and the ideas she explores in her curatorial practice are in many ways close to those that Shirakawa expresses in his art.

To me, their ideas are fascinating because they not only challenge artists to think about the networks of exchange in which they are engaged, but also challenge all of us engaged in cultural and knowledge work - university academics included - to reflect on our positions in the knowledge market. So in this paper I shall begin by talking about Shirakawa's and Horita's art practices, and then go on to extrapolate some questions about knowledge exchange in the world of global information capitalism. If the work of Shirakawa and Horita proposes new ways of exchanging the act of artistic “seeing”, I shall suggest that community knowledge exchange, exemplified on a small scale by phenomena like Japan’s recent proliferation of “constitution cafes”, can offer a space for rethinking the nature of knowledge exchange in the information capitalism age.

Shirakawa Yoshio and the Open Circle

Shirakawa Yoshio's approach to art production has been shaped by the distinctive course of his artistic career. Born in Kita Kyushu in 1948, he went to study in Europe in 1970, receiving a degree in philosophy from the University of Strasbourg, before going on to study art in Paris and Düsseldorf. In 1983 he returned to Japan and chose to settle in the regional city of Maebashi and immerse himself in community arts. Shirakawa's intellectual heroes include utopian socialist and anarchist thinkers like Charles Fourier, Pierre-Joseph Proudhon and William Morris, and German theorist of money and exchange Silvio Gesell (whose ideas form a foundation stone of the worldwide alternative currency movement) (Shirakawa 2001). His critique of the social and economic role of art also derives ideas from the work of the German artist and art theorist Joseph Beuys, whom Shirakawa met during his stay in Germany, and who sought to replace “the traditional middle class concept of art, as it currently exists” with a vision of “art as the science of freedom... or as the original underlying production for everything else” (Beuys and Harlan 2004, 10-11). Another source of inspiration for Shirakawa is the work of contemporary Japanese philosopher Karatani Kojin, who has attempted to map out a philosophy of "Associationism" as an alternative to the existing global capitalist system.

Drawing on these ideas, Shirakawa’s critique of the artistic economy deplores the way in which the capitalist system separates art from life, turning workers into cogs in the industrial machine while corralling artists into a self-referential elite serving the needs of the well-to-do (Shirakawa 2001, 173-187). Like William Morris and others, Shirakawa harks back to the age of the mediaeval artists/artisans - people like the masons and stone carvers who created

the great cathedrals of Europe. These artists, he points out, were itinerant, traveling from place to place and from one commission to another. But the nature of their work meant that they spent extended periods of time in each place, immersing themselves in the life of the community during their stay.

By contrast, in the modern art market, which Shirakawa analyses in some detail, a distinctive triangular relationship links artists, galleries and art collectors, while separating all from life of the wider community. The consumers of "major art" are, almost inevitably, very wealthy individual or corporate collectors. Galleries (themselves increasingly funded by corporations) collaborate with artists in setting prices, with high price being a vital mechanism for establishing the exclusive and therefore "major" nature of the art being exhibited. Shirakawa's art responds to this system by experimenting with other ways to create an exchange between artist, gallery and the viewers/buyers of art. A key part of his practice, indeed, focuses on making the exchange visible: reminding us that a work of art can only exist as part of an exchange between artist and others.

In his 1999 "Open Circle" exhibition held in Tokyo's Morris Gallery, for example, Shirakawa played with the structures of the art market in various ways. First, with the consent of the gallery, he sold the works he exhibited at unusually low prices. Part of the "deal", though, was that artist, gallery and art-buyer were required to enter into an ongoing relationship, symbolized by a contract which they would all sign when each work was sold. One condition written into the contract was that the contract of sale itself was always to be exhibited alongside the art work, forever reminding viewers of the social network within which the artwork was produced. The buyer was also expected to maintain the relationship by agreeing in future to collaborate with the artist and the gallery in finding new ways to display the art work to the public.

In 2001 Shirakawa followed this with a second exhibition at the same gallery, which he entitled "Art – Local Currency" (*Bijutsu - Chiiki Tsuka*). Here he exhibited specially designed postcards, which could be bought either for 500 yen (about \$5) or for 5 watt - the watt being an alternative currency created by Japanese economist Morino Eiichi, who heads Japan's Gesell Research Institute [*Gesell Kenkyūkai*], dedicated to exploring and disseminating the ideas of currency theorist Silvio Gesell (see <http://www.watsystems.net/watsystems-translation/english.html>; <http://grsj.org/>). Each postcard was made up of two sections which were joined together with a popper, so part of the design could be removed, making it possible for the purchasers to exchange sections of the artwork they had bought and reshape its images. The exhibition also featured displays of alternative and local currency notes collected from all over the world.

Shirakawa's "Art – Local Currency" exhibition coincided with the peak of enthusiasm for the local currency movement in Japan. This local currency boom was largely a response to ongoing and deep-seated problems assailing rural and regional communities in Japan, but it was also inspired by a slightly earlier local currency boom in Europe, and most directly by the broadcast of a very influential TV documentary centred on the social ideas of the German fantasy writer and alternative currency enthusiast Michael Ende and of the thinkers and activists (including Silvio Gesell) from whom Ende drew inspiration (NHK 1999). According to one study, the number of community currencies [*chiiki tsūka*] in Japan rose from eleven in 1999 a peak of 306 in 2005, but then fell, as some of those established in the boom years failed to thrive. By 2008 the number was down to 259. (Izumi 2013, 237), and it has almost certainly continued to decline since, though some very interesting experiments have survived and flourished, and we will hear more about one of them tomorrow. Interestingly, the local currency boom in Japan was almost exactly paralleled by trends in South Korea, where the 1997 financial crisis led to a proliferation of local currency schemes of which one of the most successful was Daejeon's Hanbat LETS scheme (Chun 2013; see also <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SggqtHBEHmU>)

Shirakawa himself took advantage of a visit to Europe to explore the experience of local currency schemes in Frankfurt and elsewhere, and went on to participate in the creation of a Maebashi local currency, the Ma (間) whose aim was to provide a link between local artists, designers, musicians, exhibition spaces, bars and cafes etc (Shirakawa 2001, 210). In practice, though, the scheme encountered a range of difficulties. While the exchange of artistic skills - for example, teaching painting or music - fits reasonably easily into alternative currency schemes, the exchange of art works themselves proved more difficult, in part for the very reasons that make art works awkward to fit into conventional economic models of market exchange: it is particularly difficult to work out an exchange price for a work of art, in which the value lies in its creativity and imagination. How do you assess and value imagination? (Shirakawa and Washida 2010).

As a result, in recent years Shirakawa has focused on exploring other, less tangible and measurable, aspects of art as exchange. A number of his recent projects aim to bring the community into his art works, making the works of art themselves expressions of an exchange of ideas. One example of this is a project which focuses on the culture of snowboarding – a sport particularly popular with young people in and around Maebashi. Shirakawa joins groups of snowboarders on their trips to the mountains, filming them and interviewing them about their dreams and experiences, and also producing lavishly decorated snowboards which he incorporates into larger artworks. The underlying motif of this work, and of other projects which Shirakawa has undertaken in Maebashi, is a shift from the vision of the artist as solitary creator, to a sense of artistic work as coming out of a continuing exchange of ideas and experiences between many members of society, of whom the artist is only one. A key element in these projects is the role of the artist in encouraging those around him to become conscious

of, and rethink, their own everyday life in new ways, while the artist in turn is also made to see the community in which he lives in a new light.

Horita Makiko: Art as Re-Seeing

In this sense, Shirakawa's work intersects with the work of Sapporo-based art critic Horita Makiko. Horita points out that there is a basic paradox in most projects that try to link art to community. These projects tend to make art serve social goals such as improving welfare or community cohesion. But in doing so, they incorporate art into existing social values. Horita argues that, on the contrary, the function of the arts is to "make us, at a certain moment, feel doubt about the presuppositions we have had about the things that we take for granted, or to shed new light on their hidden facets, thus giving them new meaning, or to discover and create new values entirely different from such taken-for-granted things" (Horita 2013, 56). Horita's work draws on sources of inspiration overlap with Shirakawa's - she too quotes Fourier, Morris and others - but is also strongly influenced by "small is beautiful" environmental and counter-cultural ideas of writers like San Francisco historian and "outlaw cyclist" Chris Carlsson (see Carlsson 2008; Carlsson 2015; Horita 2015)

Trying to find a way in which art could fulfil this function of enabling members of a community to "see" the world with new eyes, Horita experiments with a variety of local-currency-like schemes. One experiment, carried out with a group of people connected to the small Sapporo Artists Gallery, was to hold exhibitions at which people were issued with a "gift passbook", similar to a bank passbook. Visitors to the exhibition were encouraged to use these to enter into an exchange of "seeing" [*nagame*]. On the "incomings" side of the ledger, they would write the key inspiration that they had received from seeing the artworks in the exhibition, and on the "ougoings" side they would record the way in which they had put this inspiration to use: for example, how it had affected the way they design their own life or work.

Ideally, this would then become part of a wider circle of exchange, in which the objects or acts inspired by the exhibition would in turn inspire creative acts by others, who might also record them in the balance sheet of their "gift passbook". Horita presents this as an element in an art utopia (or "artopia"), which would also include a more formal local currency as a medium of exchange between community members. The key feature of the artopia is that it dissolves the divide between producers and consumers of art by engaging all kinds of people in the process of creating new ways of seeing and inhabiting the space in which they live (Horita 2013).

As I mentioned earlier, what interests me about these artistic ideas and practices is not so much their immediate impact – there is little sign that they are actually transforming the art market in Japan. Rather, I am interested in the way in which they challenge us – academics,

researchers and others as well as artists – to think about our place in the world and nature of the social exchanges in which we are engaged. As Shirakawa suggests, art can only exist in the context of exchange, and has become inextricably imbedded in the complex nexuses of the corporate capitalist economy; but then, so too have academic knowledge and university education. The work of arts practitioners like Shirakawa and Horita suggest ways to become more conscious of and to re-envision the market in which we are embedded and the ways in which we exchange knowledge.

If the rise of the corporate market has tended to create a realm of “major art” produced by a specialised group of elite artists and bought by super-wealthy individuals or corporations, what has it done to education and research? The answer, of course, is very complex, but to simplify greatly, we can approach the issue by considering the social deepening of the market. This is the process by which the ever expanding corporate market economy opens up new realms for profit making activities by expanding, not outwards into new territories, but inward into every corner of human life, so that more and more areas of life come to be produced and sold as commodities (Morris-Suzuki 2004). One of these areas is the realm of knowledge creation.

Commodifying Knowledge

The past thirty years or so have witnessed a steady retreat from social/state funding of areas like welfare and education, which are increasingly opened to the profit making activities of the corporate sector, and increasingly required to operate according to market (or quasi-market) principles. Yet in fact, as many economists have observed, the exchange of knowledge can never take place according to strictly market principles, because knowledge has very unusual properties which mean that it can only become a “commodity” if it is enclosed by specially constructed legal or social “fences” such as copyright and patent laws. In this, knowledge resembles art, which also famously defies the conventional laws of supply and demand economics (Lamberton 1971; Morris-Suzuki 1986).

The corporatisation of education and research therefore does not actually lead to the creation of a “free market” exchange of knowledge, but rather to a system where states increasingly impose rules which force research and education institutions to serve the needs of the profit making corporate sector, for example, by requiring universities to fund themselves largely through the fees paid by students. This radically changes the content of education. Universities, by and large, are able to demand high fees from students only if the students believe that they will be able to recoup their costs by selling the knowledge they acquire at university on the market. Individual consumer demand comes to drive the content of education, and that consumer demand is in turn driven by the pattern of individual social competition in the corporate economy.

What is lost in this process is the generation of knowledge that may not be readily commodifiable – which will not necessarily offer individuals a pathway to high paid careers – but which is nonetheless vital to provide the *social basis* which supports the entire economic system, and which makes change and improvement of the system possible. To give one example (and there are many), courses and research that help citizens to question the economic and political systems in which they live could be seen as providing a vital part of the social knowledge needed for democracy. Education, like art, should be about encouraging “doubt about the presuppositions we have had about the things that we take for granted”, and thus about opening windows to new ways of seeing and questioning the world we live in, including its economic and political systems. But such courses that encourage doubt about the political, social and economic systems that we take for granted are not necessarily going to give students the sort of qualifications that can instantly be turned into high paid employment, and may not appeal to prospective corporate employers. It may therefore be a great deal more difficult to sell these courses for high fees than it is to sell courses in advanced business management, engineering or architecture.

For the arts practitioners we have discussed, the question is how to recreate the social nature of art and how to find new ways to exchange the process of “seeing” with other members of society. For academics, I would argue, the question is how to ensure that the knowledge we produce is not simply geared to enhancing the income-earning capacity of individuals, but also meets the social needs which are not reflected in the price structures of the market in which we are increasingly embedded. How do we create knowledge that continues to perform the crucial task of encouraging ourselves and others to “see things in new ways”.

Community Knowledge Exchange and the Constitution Cafe

Small glimmers of possibility lie in the fact that education and research, though increasingly colonised by the logic of the commercial market, are still not wholly colonised. Governments and others continue to provide some funding, and continue to exert influence over the directions of knowledge creation by, for example, identifying “priority areas” for support. These priority areas themselves tend more and more to converge with areas which are considered likely to generate corporate profits, but there are still terrains which may be contested and reinterpreted to serve social ends.

One of these contestable terrains is the contentious area of “impact”. State and other funding bodies increasingly demand “impact” from research and teaching. This is often interpreted in very narrow and economistic ways which are inimical to the humanities and social sciences, but some researchers and universities have recently been exploring ways to give “impact” new meaning through schemes which focus on *community knowledge exchange*. One example of this are the range of programs developed by the University of Brighton in the UK,

which “bring together the knowledge of local communities, voluntary organisations, practitioners and university academics to share their different understandings and perspectives on issues of common interest” (University of Brighton 2011). A variant of the community knowledge exchange model is “post-normal science” or “service science”, in which scientific (or social scientific) knowledge is not created by the expert and then sold or disseminated to the public, but is created by a knowledge exchange between “all those people with a stake in the issue, who will participate in assuring the quality of the scientific input” (D’Alisa and Kallis 2015, 185; see also Nakayama 1981/2009). We’re going to hear more about an example of that type of knowledge exchange in the next presentation.

Central to the idea of community knowledge exchange is the creation of a *space of communication* between knowledge creating organisations (like universities) and the communities in which they are embedded. In other words (like the art projects discussed earlier) community knowledge exchange can help to break down the divide between “producers” and “consumers” of knowledge, instead creating conversations where knowledge is produced, consumed and exchanged all at the same time. Although these “communities” are often conceived of in conventional, territorially bounded terms, in they may also be territorially un-grounded networks which cross regional and national boundaries.

A small and simple example of such emerging spaces of communication is provided by an interesting but relatively little studied Japanese phenomenon: the constitution cafe (*kenpō kafe*). Japan’s postwar constitution, which came into force in 1947, contains strong statements on individual rights and liberties and, most unusually, contains a “peace clause” renouncing the use of military force as a way of settling disputes. For many years, but particularly for the past decade, the constitution has been the focus of intense political debate in Japan, with the political right (including the current Abe administration) seeking avenues to achieve a radical revision of the constitution, and particularly of the peace clause.

The term *kenpō cafe*, now a readily recognised part of the Japanese language, seems to have come into use around 2005. The first media reference to the phenomenon that I have found comes from July 2005, when the *Asahi* newspaper published a small report about a gathering in a Catholic church hall in Hakodate to discuss the Japanese constitution, focusing on plans by the ruling party to scrap the constitution’s peace clause. The gathering was open to all, but included lawyers and teachers, and was to be conducted over cups of coffee (although the organisers apologised in advance for the fact that the coffee would be instant) (*Asahi Shinbun*, morning edition, 30 July 2015).

After the advent of the first Abe administration of 2006-2007, debate on the constitution heated up, and in 2007 the major national and local newspapers carried eight reports of “constitution cafes” popping up in various parts of the country. The emphasis in all of these was on the creation of open, convivial spaces for a gathering, which may meet once a month

(but in some cases more, or less) to discuss serious political and social topics in a relaxed atmosphere over coffee. The constitution itself is the major topic of discussion but not the only one – other topics of public interest like the presence of US bases, the use of nuclear power, health and welfare issues etc may also be on the table. The meetings often feature the presence of an “expert” – lawyer, university academic or other – but the structure is one of conversation rather than lecture. Reports often emphasise the presence of you people, “mums” and other “non-experts”, and take delight in contrasting the “cool, stylish” (*oshareshita*) environment of the cafe with the politically charged content of the discussions (see, for example, *Kanagawa Shinbun*, 2 May 2014; also Nakano n.d.).

Between Abe’s loss of power in 2007 and his return to the prime ministership in 2012 there were no reports of constitution cafes in the mainstream media, but in 2013 there were two, in 2014 there were 107 and in 2015, 279. By now this was a nationwide phenomenon, and one that has intriguing historical echoes, harking back to 18th century Europe where the coffee shop was a core locus for the exchange of political ideas. The constitution cafe, I would suggest, is a nice example of a small utopian space where a creative exchange of knowledge between “experts” and “non-experts” of various sorts and can occur in ways that have “impact” and meet an important social need, but operate according to rules quite different from those that govern the formal structures of higher education today.

Towards New Spaces of Knowledge Exchange

The journey through some small experiments in the art of exchange and the exchange of knowledge aims, as much as anything else, to encourage us, right here in this room, to reflect on the markets and exchanges of which we are part. My hope is that this conference will be a chance to explore many such small examples, and in so doing extend our imaginations about the ways in which we can create and exchange ideas both here and now and in the future. Can we, like Shirakawa and Horita, find new ways to make the processes of exchange in which we are engaged more visible, break down the imagined divide between “producers” and “consumers” of knowledge, so open up new spaces of knowledge exchange and new ways of seeing the world?

REFERENCES

- Arrow, Kenneth J. “Economic Welfare and the Allocation of Resources for Invention”. In D. M. Lambertson ed.
- Beuys, Joseph and Harlan, Volker. 2004. *What is Art? Conversations with Joseph Beuys*. Forest Row: Clairview Books.
- Carlsson, Chris. 2008. *Nowtopia: How Pirate Programmers, Outlaw Bicyclists, and Vacant-lot Gardeners are Inventing the Future Today*. Oakland: AK Press.
- Carlsson, Chris. 2015. “Nowtopians”. In Giacomo D’Alisa, Frederico Demaria and Giorgos Kallis eds. *Degrowth: A Vocabulary for a New Era*. London: Routledge. 182-184.
- Chun, Kyunghee, “Kankoku Kyōdōtai Tsūhei Undō no Genjō”, in Nishibe Makoto ed. *Chiiki Tsūka*. Tokyo: Mineruba Shobō. 167-177.
- D’Alisa, Giacomo and Kallis, Giorgos. 2015. “Post-Normal Science”. In Giacomo D’Alisa, Frederico Demaria and Giorgos Kallis eds. *Degrowth: A Vocabulary for a New Era*. London: Routledge. 185-188

Horita Makiko. 2013. "Geijutsu to Chiiki Tsūka". In Nishibe Makoto ed. *Chiiki Tsūka*. Tokyo: Mineruba Shobō. 56-66.

Horita Makiko. 2015. *Nautopia: San Francisco no Chokusetsu Kōdō*. Tokyo: Inpakuto Shuppan.

Izumi Rui. 2013. Nihon ni okeru Chiiki Tsūka Seido: Sono Tenkai to Shōrai". In Nishibe Makoto ed. *Chiiki Tsūka*. Tokyo: Mineruba Shobō. 234-243.

Lamberton, Donald M. ed., 1971. *Economics of Information and Knowledge*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.

Morris-Suzuki, Tessa. 1986. "Capitalism in the Computer Age". *New Left Review*. 160(Nov-Dec). 81-91.

Morris-Suzuki, Tessa. 2004. *Jiyū o Taeshinobu*. Tokyo: Iwanami.

Nakano, Mamiko. n.d. "Constitution Cafe: Discussing Rights in a Cafe Atmosphere". *Ignition*. 107. <http://ignition.co/107>.

Nakayama, Shigeru. 1981/2009. "The Future of Research: A Call for 'Service Science'". Republished in Shigeru Nakayama, *The Orientation of Science and Technology: A View from Japan*. Folkestone: Global Oriental. 194-306. (Originally published in 1981).

Shirakawa Yoshio. 2001. *Bijutsu, Shijo, Chiiki Tsūka o Megutte*. Tokyo: Suiseisha.

Shirakawa Yoshio and Washida Kiyokazu. 2010. "Shirakawa Yoshio Ōraru Hisutorī" (Oral History Interview with Shirakawa Yoshio). *Nihon Bijutsu Ōraru Hisutorī Ākaibu*. http://www.oralarthistory.org/archives/shirakawa_yoshio/interview_03.php

University of Brighton Community University Partnership Programme. 2011. *Community Knowledge Exchange*. http://about.brighton.ac.uk/cupp/images/stories/Static/materials_and_resources/cupp_briefing_CKE_web.pdf

