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Art Outside Life and Art as Life

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The theme of this essay is the institution of art in Japan. It is true that the Western institution of art has spread the world over as a "global standard", but today we realise that it is no more than one of many possible institutions of art. We now need a comparative institutional analysis of art worlds. To do this, we must examine the historical background of each institution, because each has acquired its own *raison d'être* through its history. Especially in modern Japan, which has possessed its own unique institutions of art for more than 1,000 years, the Western institution and the traditional one have coexisted, influenced each other, mingled together, and varied in their own ways. The institutional analysis of this complicated situation did not start until quite recently.

At the beginning of the 21st century, we are encountering a serious problem called "the end of art", an idea which was raised in Western nations at the end of the last century. Likewise, the institution of art is also surely changing in Japan. The concept of "Art" has become ambiguous: people are abandoning their status as mere appreciators of artworks and beginning to participate in the process of making Art Worlds.

The aim of this essay is to draw attention to this new form of culture emerging in Japan, in order to make a sketch of a possible form of art

in the 21st century. Looking back upon the traditional institution of art in Japanese culture will illuminate the phenomenon.

1. The Japanese Institution of Art: *Geidō*, *Yugei*, and *Asobi*

Modern Western culture developed the institution of "Art", which installed the "work of art" at the heart of the institution of art. The work of art stood, like a saint, outside vulgar life because it was supposed to be the result of a process of creation made possible only by a genius. The role of ordinary people was to appreciate the work, to be an audience or spectator. But, in Japanese traditional institutions, what mattered was not the appreciation of an artist's works, but the practice of producing or performing artworks as a part of one's own life.

Before the importation of the Western institution of Art, a unique institution of art was developed in Japan, based upon the notions of *geidō* (芸道, the way of art) and *yugei* (遊芸, art for play). To be sure, we might say that *geidō* is for artists who devote their lives to art, while *yugei* is for amateurs who enjoy art just for fun. *Geidō*, which aims towards the sacred horizon, is to be distinguished from *yugei*, the participants of which tend to remain in secular society. Furthermore, these two art worlds and their institutional systems overlap, and the boundary between the artist and amateur is sometimes quite vague in Japan.

These two forms of institutions were not created *ex nihilo*; they have their embryonic form in the long tradition of *asobi*. *Asobi*, a word used today to translate European words such as "play", *jeu* or *spiel*, can be understood for the time being as the counterpart of those Western notions Johan Huizinga described in *Homo Ludens*. *Asobi* can also denote "to have a picnic", "to have a party", "to play a sport", "to have a love affair", and other useless actions or states. But, the idea expressed by *asobi* may mean something different from the Western notion of "play". In order to examine the idea of *asobi*, we will first look into its festive character.

2. *Asobi* and *Yūen* as Private Festival

Every culture has invented instruments for forgetting daily practical life in the name of gods or similar beings. These are festivals, which offer us ecstatic experiences by means of music, dance, alcohol, sex, drugs, thrilling initiations, or the excitement of mob psychology, and/or absorption into a mythical story of ancestors. These experiences lead us to lose our

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ordinary ego and alter our consciousness. In other words, the festival is a systematised way of losing one's ego in the name of the gods. Of course this ego-losing has purposes, namely the realisation of the sacred and the unification of the community.

The characteristics of *asobi* are similar to those of festival. First, thanks to *asobi*, we can enjoy the thrill of crisis. Most games include certain moments of potential defeat, either by other opponents or by chance. In some cases, players even give up making an effort to win, and just leave everything to the dice or Lady Luck. Gambling is not the only artefact invented to satisfy the human desire for crisis. For example, in a wild rollercoaster, confined and helpless, people enjoy unconditional surrender to a tyrannical machine. The only reward obtained is the experience of losing control of oneself in panic.

Second, *asobi* enables us to share excitement with other people. While watching a football game, the spectator is easily made as excited as if he, himself were playing. Especially in a stadium, mob psychology swells the excitement of spectators, so that they feel themselves unified. If the team represents a group to which they belong, a nation for example, the excitement tends to become frenzy, as we find at the World Cup or the Olympic Games.

Third, ecstasy in an altered state of consciousness is brought about through *asobi*. *Asobi* includes playing music or dancing in ensemble. The collective playing of music or dancing with others tunes the feelings of participants into unison. Of course alcohol helps this tuning. Intoxication with drugs may tune people's minds into an altered state, and sex is said to sometimes have a similar effect. The fact that people dare to use such dangerous means to achieve ecstasy suggests that people are driven by a desire to melt down their ego in ecstasy.

The fourth and final characteristic of *asobi* consists in absorption into a fictive world. While reading fiction, or watching drama or film, one normally identifies oneself with the main character in the story. This is an imaginary transmigration, which gives the reader/viewer another life. Here, too, is the drive for an alternative ego. One dies in this world and is reborn in another. The transmigration of one's own identity is a favourite way to satisfy the drive to escape from one's present ego.

Seen in these ways, we can confirm that *asobi*, which causes one's own ego to be lost and then unified with a community, has a similar effect to festivals. Needless to say, the traditional Japanese festival echoes the notion of *asobi*. The traditional Japanese festival has two phases:

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play for gods (*kami-asobi*, 神遊び) and banquet with gods (*naorai*, 直会). Music, dance, and every sort of entertainment was undertaken to entertain the gods. Of course, both these entertainments and the banquet were enjoyable for the participants. From this point of view, secular *asobi* can be regarded as a private festival without gods. *Yūen* (遊宴), which means "play and party", was the favourite event of nobles from the Heian period onwards. At an *uta-awase* (歌合) or poetry match 1,000 years ago, for example, in a beautifully decorated space, nobles wearing gorgeous costumes sat in a row, composed poems, and presented them in competition. Losers were obliged to drink *sake*. After the game came dinner, music, and dance. This could be called a game, a ceremony, a play, a party, or even an arts performance. *Yūen* was all of these. It was a private festival just for fun.

We can find three principles in the tradition of *yūen*. First, being active is more enjoyable than being passive. Participants are encouraged to be players rather than to remain the audience. Second, being in a group is more enjoyable than being alone. *Asobi* tends to be performances or improvisations, such as *renga* and the tea ceremony. Third, aesthetic sophistication and theatrical stylisation is important for greater satisfaction. Just as dance is stylised walking, and song is stylised talking, stylised *yūen* would be a kind of performing art: for example, the tea ceremony or *kōdō* (香道, the way of incense). These principles make the experience of *yūen* deep and impressive in the way that only a great work of art can be.

3. *Asobi* and Buddhism

While *asobi* makes us lose our ego in some altered state of joyful consciousness, Buddhists seek for the awakening of a hidden ego, wherein they are supposed to see the true state of the world and find out the true self. It is said that in the moment of spiritual awakening, one experiences a supreme ecstasy. Of course, it is not usual to achieve such a mystical experience, but everybody has had a similar experience at some time or another, such as in the aesthetic experience of viewing nature or fine art. In front of a beautiful thing, we step out of the ordinary practical ego and just see it with detachment. It brings a kind of ecstasy outside of practical life.

This may suggest that to see the beauty of nature and art has something to do with spiritual awakening. Actually, in the Japanese Middle

Ages, some poets argued that the training in poetry is similar to that of Buddhism, so that the former is useful for the latter. Poetics in the Middle Ages regarded *kadō* (歌道, the way of poetry), as an easy byway of *butsudō* (仏道, the way of Buddha).

How can *asobi* be related to spiritual awakening? Zen Buddhism, which was introduced to Japan in the Middle Ages, formed the basis of this relation. An awakened Zen priest was supposed to be completely free from any standard or regulation, so that he did everything as play (遊戯, *yuge*). This idea influenced artists in the Middle Ages, and they thought that in the last stages of *geidō* (芸道, the way of art), the true master would produce or perform art as play, in complete freedom from any standard or regulation. In this way, Zen connected *asobi*, awakening, and art.

4. The Genesis of *Geidō* in the Japanese Middle Ages

In the Heian period, about 1,000 years ago, Japanese nobles — who preferred performing or producing arts by themselves as *asobi*, to contemplating and appreciating them — regarded professionals in art more as teachers than artists.

It was in the Middle Ages, from the 13th to the 16th century, that professionals, teachers of the arts for *yūen*, and performers at rituals found a way to become respectable figures in society. They became masters of *geidō*, supposedly aware of some sacred horizon, just like Buddhist masters. The institution of *geidō* was established, taking *butsudō* (仏道) as its model both in theory and in system. The essentials of the *geidō* institution are well illustrated by comparing them with Buddhism.

First, just as a sect of Buddhism is a world of priests outside secular society who are led by a master priest, each school of *geidō* is a hierarchical society under a master artist who is supposed to inherit the secret of the art.

Second, a member of a sect can obtain the mystic truth of *butsudō* only by apprenticing himself to the master, because what is at stake is not theoretical knowledge about the world, but obtaining eyes to see the world rightly. Disciples have to apprentice themselves to a master who already possessed such eyes, in order that the master might pass these eyes to them by means of *ishin-denshin* (以心伝心, heart-to-heart transmission). In *geidō*, too, a disciple must cast himself into a sort of “clone” of his master by means of body-to-body imitation of, not only technique, but also every stylistic aspect of art and life.

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Third, to have the same eyes as Buddha does not mean, however, to have the same personality or character as Buddha; it means, rather, to be completely free, as Buddha is. In *geidō*, in the last stage of the learning process, an artist is expected to be free from everything that he has learnt. He may do whatever he happens to like, some of which can be accidentally regarded as innovation or creation, though for traditional Japanese artists, such is only the outcome of *mushin* (無心, mindlessness) and *yuge* (遊戯, capricious play), as they were named, borrowing terms from Zen.

In short, the core of the *geidō* (the way of art) institution is not the “work of art”, but the “way” itself in which the artist lives.

5. The Birth of *Yugei* in the 18th century

In the 18th century, Japan had already developed a kind of bourgeois culture, even before importing Western civilisation. Many citizens indulged themselves in *yugei* such as music, dance, poetry, painting, calligraphy, the tea ceremony, or flower arrangement. They, too, preferred to play or produce by themselves rather than to appreciate some artist's exquisite works. They played or produced not for the public, but to entertain one another in private. While being a part of secular society, the community of *yugei* did not belong to the official political-economic society. It was an alternative community outside of it. Each member had another name, like a pen name or stage name for this community, and lived an alternative life *besides* his or her official one.

It is important to notice that here was a sort of fusion of *yugei* and *geidō* institutions. Each community of *yugei* had a teacher, who, as a professional, was at the same time a member of a certain *geidō* school. A teacher in *yugei*, in turn, had his *geidō* master, or was sometimes a master himself. The *geidō* system and *yugei* community thus overlap. The person who stands at the top of a *geidō* system stands at the same time at the top of a *yugei* system. Amateurs of *yugei* at the bottom of the art community pyramid financially support the whole art society, while *geidō* professionals administer *yugei* systems in the name of the authority of *geidō*.

Geidō offers easy access to an alternative world for amateur participants of *yugei*. The *yugei* world is not a miniature of the *geidō* world, but is as large as the world of genuine artists. In *yugei*, you need not be creative; all you need is to walk the path the old masters walked. If you succeed in arriving at the place the old master reached, you are a “clone” of him, which means that you are already another master. We can see

the difference between *geidō* and *yugei* in that, while a member of *geidō* lives in a special world of art outside official/practical society, just like a Buddhist priest, participants in *yugei* usually live in official/practical society and only temporarily live in another world through *asobi*.

The *yugei* world, a well-organised alternative world, welcomes a newcomer as a peripheral member and offers him a life process to become one of the central members of *geidō*. This person might not be an artist in the Western sense, but he was known as a respectable figure in Japanese culture, one who was supposed to know something extraordinary in his life.

6. *Asobi* as Real Life

On the one hand, *yugei* is certainly an extension of *geidō*, but on the other hand, it is still *asobi*. In order to see the importance of *yugei* in Japanese society at that time, it is necessary to see that *asobi* is not just a pastime. An old book on *chadō* (茶道, the way of tea) tells the following story of how Ashikaga Yoshimasa, a Shogun in the 15th century, came to enjoy the tea ceremony.

After retirement from the shogunate, Yoshimasa tried all kinds of *asobi*, such as reading the *Tale of Genji*, composing *tanka* (短歌, short poems) or *renga* (連歌, chained *tanka*), viewing the moon or blossoms, playing football, practising archery, and playing indoor games, but became tired of them all. One day in winter, he asked his secretary, "I am too old to hunt with a falcon in the snowy mountains. Do you know any new play?" The secretary introduced him to Juko, the founder of *chadō* or the tea ceremony. It was after this encounter that the tea ceremony became popular among Japanese people.

This anecdote shows that *asobi* includes anything that is enjoyable, and the entire life of a retired person consisted exclusively of *asobi*. It means that *asobi* constituted more than a pastime; it was the completion of one's life itself. Ihara Saikaku, a 17-century novelist, wrote that the desirable life for a man is to work hard to be rich and then retire at the age of 45 to enjoy *asobi*. In this philosophy, the end of working hard is to be rich, and the end of being rich is *asobi*.

But, *asobi*, just like play in the European sense, is not a means for a certain end; play is played just for play's sake. Saikaku suggests that the first half of one's life is an alienated life and the second half is real life. But how can we consistently understand both the meaninglessness of *asobi*

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and the alleged real life enabled by *asobi*? To see this, we must examine an aspect of Japanese philosophy.

In old Japanese, a life can be divided into two parts: *mame-goto* or practical things, and *ada-goto* or useless things such as play or love. The former is necessary to survive physically and to live in the formal system of society, while the latter will give a person nothing except the private, emotional experience of sorrow or joy. To be sure, Confucianism, as the official ideology of the Edo period, provided each social position (分, *bun*) with the right thing to do, because any society needs some standard of good and evil to maintain itself. But, according to Fujitani Mitsue, a classical scholar in the Edo period, ethics is only one half of an entire person. He argued that an ego is surely not indivisible, but consists of two sides: one is *hito* (人, human or official position in the social system), while the other is *kami* (神, spirit or private emotion). According to Mitsue, law and ethics are very important for *hito*, in order to maintain society, but have nothing to do with the satisfaction of *kami*, which is the key to a happy life. From this point of view, an official ego is just a product of one's role and status in the social system, and its life is a form of role-play like an actor on stage. One's real life will be left outside official society, namely in the unofficial, useless, emotional, *asobi* sphere, such as *yugei*.

This is not just an old story. A recent survey reports that 69 per cent of Japanese working women sometimes think of themselves as not real. 63 per cent feel real while doing something they are fond of, 30 per cent feel real when with their lovers, and only 9 per cent feel real while working. In another survey about life goals, 61 per cent of Japanese high school students chose "to enjoy their own life" — an option that was chosen by only 4 per cent of American students. 40 per cent of American high school students chose "to obtain high social status or honour" as their goal, which was chosen by only 2 per cent of the Japanese students. In these figures, we can see part of the reason why many Japanese people today still wish to be members of a *yugei* community.

7. The Arrival of the Institution of Art

In fact, the institutions of *geidō* and *yugei* were deeply modified after the importation of Western institutional Art in the second half of the 19th century, but the tradition of *asobi* remains in a deep stratum of Japanese culture.

According to the Western institution of Art, the artist is separated from the audience, and artists are thought of as sacred people by virtue of their creativity. While the Japanese master of *geidō* is regarded as sacred because he has reached the sacred horizon that is universal, a Western artist should be unique and original. Modern Japanese artists who accepted these Western standards began struggling towards the creation of original works of their own. Judged by Western standards, the tradition of *geidō*, which values creation less than attainment as the same level of the master, appears to be old-fashioned, and, as a result, some lovers of *yugei* left their old-fashioned masters of *geidō* and took Westernised modern artists as their new teachers. However, some *yugei* teachers reorganised their system to suit modernised people who had no interest in the sacred horizon. *Yugei*, a secular institution, survived by sticking to this new institution of Art.

During the 20th century, *yugei* developed its system and territory. Many new schools have emerged as *yugei* in various genres. Big schools have multiplied their branches like fastfood restaurant chains. Many Japanese are training their skills in poetry, music, dance, tea ceremony, etc., within the traditional system of *yugei*. It is said that one million people compose *tanka* or *haiku* today as members of poetry groups, in order to share their pleasure in composing poetry. The tradition of *yugei* is still alive.

8. Art Towards the 21st Century

At the end of the last century, the concept of "Art" expanded and the boundary of Art became ambiguous. The discrimination of high art from low art is now almost meaningless. *Manga* (comics), for example, which had been condemned as low culture or kids' culture, was eventually recognised as a genre of art when the Museum of Contemporary Art in Tokyo held an exhibition of Japanese comics. We see here a phenomenon of what might be called the inflation of "creation", which used to be the business of a god or genius. Japanese youth see comics, animation, fashion design, commercial art, and computer games as being just as creative as contemporary art. Even in *yugei*, amateurs are encouraged to be creative. Boys and girls in composition class in primary school have to write their own impressions of scenery or events, not imitate a professional writer. In such a situation, the slightest difference will be appreciated as original and creative. In other words, everybody can be creative.

While Western aesthetics focuses on the audience's passive "aesthetic" experience (contemplation) in front of the artist's work, art experience for *yugei* lovers is not aesthetic but active, just like game playing. As explained earlier, the traditional *yugei* institution has been an enduring part of Japanese culture, but its hierarchical system often frustrated its junior members. Now, more "democratic" movements are emerging besides *yugei* to offer people as much joy as *yugei*, though these new movements are neither so clearly established as institutions, nor so well organised as systems. We may consider them examples of "underground culture" or "sub-culture", which young people have always invented as a reaction against the mainstream. Even the avant-garde art of the 1960s belonged to underground culture.

A new scene is emerging from this situation. A lot of amateurs are organising informal communities outside official society just for fun. Amateur *manga* (comics), for instance, have already developed a big market outside the capitalist market system. You can find 35,000 titles of amateur comics and 400,000 people attending an amateur *manga* fair that is run by volunteer staff. Yosakoi-Soran Festival in Sapporo, which was started by university students in 1992 with 1,000 dancers, attracted 40,000 amateur dancers in 400 teams in 2001, with original choreography, and two million spectators. These two are especially remarkable cases because of their large scale, but there are also innumerable invisible groups for making or "playing" arts for fun. Even in the theatre, where professional actors previously took no amateur disciples, as is seen in the traditional Kabuki theatre, amateurs have begun to play for themselves. Hirata Oriza, the most influential dramatist and theatre director of the younger generation, says that the ordinary audience will soon think of a play as something to perform by themselves rather than something a professional performs for them to watch. All these communities are situated outside of official society, just like those of *yugei*. But, in contrast to *yugei* communities, these communities are not stratified, and offer no systematised training, and, of course, no way to the sacred horizon. They play arts just for fun, and they know that active participation in a community is much more enjoyable than being passive and alone.

The development of new technology is accelerating this movement. Computer technology has brought to the art world the notion of the "interactive", which will fuse arts and games. Broadband internet systems will make each individual the owner of a worldwide broadcast station and a publisher. The next generation will share in the process of making

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art through the Internet, just as once Japanese people shared in making *renga*. Note again that for *renga* poets, what is valuable is the cooperative process of making chained *tanka*, not its result.

Even the boundary between Art and play will disappear in the 21st century, as members of the audience become players. Such a situation may appear to be the corruption or even the collapse of Art itself when seen from viewpoint of the European notion of Art appreciation, but seen from the historical context of Japan, it is only a new variation on the traditional way of, maybe not seeing, but at least doing Art.

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