

アートと政治の境界をめぐる交渉：日独比較

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Negotiations of Boundary between Art and Politics:

A Germany-Japan Comparison

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Abstract

This paper compares the controversies surrounding the 2019 Aichi Triennale in Japan and documenta fifteen in Germany, focusing on how artists and curators navigated the boundary between art and politics. While both exhibitions engaged with progressive politics, their reception was shaped by distinct historical and sociopolitical contexts. This study challenges the binary of Germany as a model of reflection and Japan as its counterexample, advocating for a more nuanced perspective.

1. Introduction

In 2019, an exhibit named *After "Freedom of Expression?"* was curated as a section in the 2019 Aichi Triennale. It featured sixteen artworks previously rejected or removed from public institutions, among which, *Statue of Peace*, depicting wartime "comfort women" victims, and *Holding Perspective Part II*, including a burning portrait of Emperor Hirohito, sparked intense backlash. Parallel incidents happened three years later. At documenta fifteen, one of the globally most prominent contemporary art festivals, held in Kassel, Germany, the mural *People's Justice* by the Indonesian collective Taring Padi was condemned for its antisemitic imagery, particularly a caricatured Jewish figure. Though the controversies stemmed from different political contexts, both exhibits faced suspension and threats of public funding withdrawal, reigniting debates on artistic freedom and its limits.

This study examines how the controversies unfolded amid global and local ideological conflicts and how the subjects involved struggled to navigate the political tensions and negotiate the politics-art boundaries, in similar or different ways in the two countries. The comparison is based on the premise that both festivals are part of a transnational biennial/triennial circuit that has emerged since the 1990s, alongside the expansion of the global art market and contemporary art discourse. As the 2019 Aichi Triennale's artistic director, Tsuda Daisuke, noted, the event was directly modeled on several European art festivals, including documenta (Tsuda 2020). Within this circuit, progressive political discourses—such as multiculturalism, postcolonialism, and feminism—not only reinforce contemporary art's avant-garde status but also create spaces for critical expression. However, in biennials and triennials, global ideological currents sometimes clash with local political dynamics—

particularly growing anti-globalization and nationalist sentiments—which paradoxically help facilitate these events (Belting 2009). Moreover, both Japan and Germany continue to grapple with complex issues of wartime memory. In this contested landscape, non-art actors—including politicians and social media users—played a crucial role in turning these exhibitions into sites of intense ideological struggle.

Rather than focusing on scuffles on social media or in political arenas, this study centers on the ways artists, curators, critics, and intellectuals respond to the predicaments, with an emphasis on their discursive strategies. With Critical Discourse Analysis as methodology, we first construct an archive of key discursive agents and essential texts related to both events, then examine the framing, agenda-setting, effects, and intertextual relationships in these discourse-as-practices.

2. The 2019 Aichi Triennale Controversy

The exhibit *After “Freedom of Expression?”* was curated by a five-member organizing committee which joined the 2019 Aichi Triennale as a collective. Working alongside Triennale artistic director Tsuda, they further selected sixteen artworks that addressed a wide range of political taboos, from wartime violence, the Japan-U.S. alliance, to the Fukushima nuclear disaster. Among them, two caught the most attention from the public. The initial controversy centered on the “comfort woman” themed *Statue of Peace*, which, according to the artists, symbolizes the “fight for memory” against war and sexual violence (Tsuda 2019). Later, protests escalated over *Holding Perspective II*, a film addressing the 1986 censorship of the artist’s collage work incorporating images of Emperor Hirohito, which, according to the artist, explores his self-identity as Japanese. Although neither work was intended to be “anti-Japanese,” both were condemned as such by alt-right protesters.

The controversy unfolded in three stages. First, a wave of harassment, especially by phone call, including arson threats, targeted the Triennale. Nagoya’s right-wing mayor, Kawamura Takashi, further inflamed the tension by calling *Statue of Peace* an “insult to the Japanese people’s heart.” Under mounting pressure, the exhibit was suspended on its third day for “security concerns (Bijutsu Techo 2019a).” In the second stage, artists pushed for resumption of the exhibit. Seventy-two artists issued a joint statement, over ten withdrew in protest, and several initiated the *Refreedom_Aichi* project to advocate the reopening. However, the Agency for Cultural Affairs further announced on September 26 that it would withdraw the Triennale’s financial subsidy, which led the controversy to its third stage. The decision expedited the exhibition’s reopening on October 8 and shifted the movement’s focus to protesting the government interference.

In the early stages, the debates revolved around whether the suspension of the exhibit constituted an act of censorship, thereby contradicting the exhibit’s concept itself. Tsuda Daisuke, a journalist, media critic, and the Triennale’s artistic director, was the one who initially approached the *After “Freedom of Expression?”* organizing committee and facilitated the exhibit. However, after making the difficult decision to shut it down, he repeatedly defended himself, insisting that it was not a problem of censorship but of terrorism against culture and art (Tsuda 2019). In response, the *After “Freedom of Expression?”* organizing committee asserted that the shutdown itself was “the largest censorship incident in postwar Japan” imposed by the Triennale (Bijutsu Techo 2019b), establishing a clear line of contention.

Meanwhile, based on their different understandings of the incident, overseas artists and domestic artists responded differently. Overseas artists—particularly Spanish- and Korean-speaking artists—tended to denounce the shutdown as censorship, and more than ten artists withdrew their works in solidarity. On the other hand, the call for a boycott received little support among Japanese artists. Many felt uncomfortable with such confrontational tactics, viewing them as little more than a performance aimed at international art circles (Tanaka 2020). Instead, some Japanese artists pursued more locally grounded approaches. In the opening statement of TAGA-GU, a space opened by Dokuyama Bontaro to bolster broader dialogues between artists, local residents, and even right-wing protesters, he wrote, “Beyond the confrontations between art and society, artists and the artistic director, the state and the prefecture, those who oppose the exhibition and those who support it, I feel the need for a space to show the artworks and engage in discussion (Dokuyama 2019).”

One of the frameworks often-times adopted by artists and intellectuals is the autonomy of art vis-à-vis politics. In this framework, politics is seen as rigid and ideological, whereas art is ambiguous and open-ended. For instance, artist Fujii Hikaru stated in an interview, “Art has the power to make us reflect on issues that are politically difficult to resolve (Fujii et. al. 2020).” Ideally, art’s potential to nurture empathy and its free expression without political interference should mutually reinforce each other. However, while emphasizing the autonomy of art may be pragmatically significant when it was under threats, this discourse overlooks the fact that the controversy stemmed from the deep conflicts in historical memory struggles and was geared up by the public suspicion of contemporary art. During a public discussion, a right-wing participant dismissed “comfort woman” as a political lie. Rather than countering with facts, artists responded by emphasizing the humanity and individual interiority implicated by *Statue of Peace* (ReFreedom_Aichi ed. 2020: 15). This exchange underscores the gap between artists, who insist on artistic discourse, and alt-right protesters, who act from a political stance. This belief in artistic value is shared by curators as well. According to Tanaka Koki, when he was considering boycotting the Triennale, curator Soma Chiaki met him and questioned “his responsibilities as an artist”, or in other words, his responsibilities toward the audience and the sponsors (Tanaka 2020). The reliance on the discourse of art may stem from artists’ familiarity with their craft and relative detachment from political issues. Multiple artists were eager to criticize the curatorial missteps in *After “Freedom of Expression?”*, pointing to disorganized layouts and overcrowded spaces as reasons for audience misinterpretations (Murayama 2019; Odawara 2019). However, the same critique was later echoed by a conservative-leaning investigative committee composed mainly of cultural bureaucrats. Their report also attributed the exhibition’s suspension to curatorial failures rather than external intimidation and threats (Aichi Triennale Organizational Review Committee 2019).

The next section examines the agenda-setting of *ReFreedom_Aichi*, a project launched by nine Japanese artists over a month after the exhibit’s shutdown. According to their statement, the initiative aimed to resume all closed exhibits and fully restore freedom of expression (ReFreedom_Aichi ed. 2020). While maintaining contact with boycotting artists, *ReFreedom_Aichi* adopted a dialogue-oriented approach, negotiating for the exhibits’ reopening. The project was widely praised for demonstrating Japanese artists’ solidarity and resilience (Keehan 2019). Through

creative interventions, it kept the agenda of resumption in the media spotlight and sought to provide positive narrative such as “turning Aichi Triennale from a symbol of ‘censorship’ to one of ‘freedom of expression,’ which is also favored by the Aichi government.

Nonetheless, this paper argues that by framing resumption as the sole objective and equating it with the full recovery of free expression, *ReFreedom_Aichi*’s agenda exemplified an ideological compromise. In the passive construction of “freedom of expression under threat should be restored,” “freedom of expression” becomes the anchor of value, while the agents responsible for the threat are effectively obscured. For example, in their project *#YourFreedom*, visitors were invited to share personal experiences of “freedom being deprived” or “episodes of discrimination, prejudice, or being forced to endure or give up” by posting notes on the doors of the closed exhibits. While visually striking, this approach issued a commonplace blame while downplaying conflicts over historical memory and targeted attacks rooted in racist ideologies. Efforts to build broader consensus also marginalized alternative voices. In a statement initiated by artists Ohashi Ai and Usui Yui, they adopted an explicit gender perspective, arguing that the core issue was not politics or anti-Japanese propaganda but the violation of women’s human rights—specifically, those of Japan’s wartime sexual slavery victims (“Gender Free” 2019). Although initially included in *ReFreedom_Aichi*, their perspective was largely rendered “invisible” within a project ostensibly aimed at increasing visibility.

In summary, in our examination, we find that the Aichi Triennale, as a still-maturing “international art festival,” significantly lacked engagement from international and Japanese critical circles, which could have provided a broader, more critical lens on the controversy. Meanwhile, Japanese artists, driven by their belief in “freedom of artistic expression” and a desire to bridge social divides, organized creative responses. However, in pursuing a broader consensus, these efforts lost their critical edge on gender, race, and colonialism, ultimately framing the issue as a domestic matter while overlooking its global context.

3. The documenta 15 Controversy

Documenta, one of the world’s leading contemporary art exhibitions, was founded in 1955 in Kassel as a response to Germany’s Nazi past. Its founder, Arnold Bode, sought to counter the suppression of so-called “degenerate art” by promoting open, international artistic exchange. In 2022, the Indonesian collective ruangrupa became the first non-individual curator of Documenta, marking a significant shift toward Global South perspectives.

Even prior to the exhibition’s opening, concerns emerged regarding the potential inclusion of antisemitic content, as ruangrupa and several participating artists from the Global South were perceived to have affiliations with the anti-Israel BDS (Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions) movement. The curatorial team invited fifteen Palestinian artists but did not extend invitations to any Jewish artists from Israel, a decision that provoked considerable public criticism. German President Frank-Walter Steinmeier openly addressed this issue in his remarks at the exhibition’s opening, expressing concern over the absence of Israeli Jewish representation. In a further act of political dissent, then-Chancellor Olaf Scholz declined to attend the event altogether.

After the exhibition opened, two artworks were swiftly subjected to public criticism for alleged antisemitic elements. One of these was *Guernica Gaza* by Palestinian artist Mohammed al-Hawajri. While this work employed symbolic and metaphorical imagery, and therefore elicited a comparatively muted response, a much sharper controversy arose around *People's Justice*, created by the Indonesian art collective Taring Padi. This piece became the center of public and political debate due to its overtly antisemitic iconography and its highly visible placement in Kassel's city center. *People's Justice* was widely criticized for containing antisemitic imagery, including a vampire-like figure with sidelocks and a pig-like character bearing a Star of David. Prior to its removal, the banner occupied a prominent position within the exhibition space, rendering it one of the most visible and publicly scrutinized works at Documenta. Although the mural was initially covered and subsequently taken down in its entirety, the controversy surrounding it continued to escalate. Both ruangrupa and Taring Padi issued public apologies, stating that they had not been aware of the antisemitic connotations embedded in the visual motifs.

The core of this analysis lies in tracing the diverse perspectives articulated by curators, artists, and intellectuals throughout the course of the controversy, which can be broadly categorized into five main groups. At the heart of the controversy lies a contested terrain of definitions: the distinctions and overlaps among antisemitism, anti-Zionism, and anti-Israel sentiment. Following the backlash against *People's Justice* for its allegedly antisemitic imagery, ruangrupa issued a public apology, stating that they had not recognized the offensive depictions and that the ensuing debate had contributed to their understanding of both the historical and contemporary dimensions of antisemitism. Nonetheless, the apology was met with skepticism, particularly from those who had already accused ruangrupa of affiliating with the BDS movement. From this perspective, the exclusion of Israeli and Jewish artists was seen as indicative of a form of structural antisemitism.

A crucial context for understanding the debates surrounding Documenta is the series of similar controversies that had already unfolded in Germany in the years preceding the exhibition. In 2020, South African postcolonial theorist and historian Achille Mbembe came under public scrutiny for allegedly relativizing the Holocaust and promoting antisemitic views (deutschlandfunk.de 2020). Shortly thereafter, in early 2021, American genocide scholar Dirk Moses published a widely discussed article titled *Der Katechismus der Deutschen* (Moses 2021), in which he argued that Germany's culture of remembrance had become rigidly dogmatic and resistant to engaging with alternative historical narratives. Against this backdrop, the controversy surrounding Documenta expanded along two discursive trajectories. One emphasized that the scandal was exacerbated by Germany's unique memorial culture, exposing what some critics perceived as its performative or superficial dimensions. Postcolonial scholar Jürgen Zimmerer, based in Hamburg, further denounced what he described as a prevailing double standard: while the Humboldt Forum was deeply implicated in colonial legacies and racialized violence, it had faced comparatively limited critique from within German postcolonial academic circles (Zimmerer 2022).

The second trajectory of the debate arose from the longstanding tension between antisemitism and postcolonialism, particularly within the intersecting fields of Holocaust and genocide studies. As historian Minh Nguyen has observed, these perspectives largely due to the friction between the

pluralistic, decolonial ethos of contemporary exhibitions and Germany's enduring Eurocentrism, coupled with its cautious and often sacralized engagement with its own past (Nguyen 2022). Michael Wildt has similarly argued that Germany's self-understanding as a nation with a "criminal past" is widely regarded within the country as a normative foundation and a universal moral premise for global dialogue (Wildt 2023). This perceived moral exceptionalism can contribute to frictions when confronted with alternative historical experiences or competing narratives of violence and memory.

Beyond theoretical discourse, a significant portion of the debate also centered on questions of artistic form and the very nature of art. Jörg Sperling, then chairman of the Documenta Forum, staunchly defended the principle that a free society must tolerate controversial subjects. He argued that any form of pre-emptive censorship—including the removal or covering of *People's Justice*—amounted to a violation of artistic freedom (dpa 2022). His refusal to compromise on this position ultimately led to his resignation. In contrast, German art critic Bazon Brock adopted a more critical stance. He contended that "people are settling scores in the name of artistic freedom," suggesting that the controversy surrounding Documenta marked a victory for authoritarian and fundamentalist tendencies within the art world. In his view, both defenders and detractors of the exhibition had reduced culture to questions of collective identity and internalized a form of political correctness, thereby undermining the Western art tradition grounded in individual expression and aesthetic autonomy (Brock 2022).

Finally, although less prominent within the broader debate, critiques were also directed at the organizational structure and funding mechanisms of Documenta. Renowned German contemporary artist Hito Steyerl, who withdrew from the exhibition, publicly voiced concerns regarding the management and governance of the event. However, these criticisms were neither systematically investigated nor fully addressed in subsequent discussions.

Following this systematic examination of the German debate, one quickly observes that, despite its ostensibly greater sense of righteousness and moral clarity, the discussion often felt like a discursive theater: structurally elaborate, yet based on performative consensus and ultimately devoid of substantive, constructive exchange or genuine communication. This points to a set of deeper, interrelated problems: On the one hand, political discourse overshadows artistic expression. From the early involvement of political parties to the mid-stage entry of institutions like the Anne Frank Foundation, and finally the intervention of a university-appointed review committee, the debate saw a steadily expanding range of participants across Germany's political, educational, and academic spheres. While this broad engagement may appear inclusive, curators, and particularly the affected artists, issued comparatively few statements. Nor did many participants show interest in understanding their individual perspectives beyond assumed political alignments. While this dynamic may not constitute, as Bazon Brock suggested, a triumph of (Eastern) collectivist authoritarianism over Western traditions of individualism, it is clear that artistic perspectives were relegated to the margins of the conversation.

On the other hand, a contradictory phenomenon emerged: the hyper-scandalization of antisemitism risked obfuscating its actual manifestations. The trend toward de-thematization and the

removal of discursive taboos effectively transformed the debate into a closed circuit rather than a space for open and plural dialogue. This dynamic must be understood within the specific historical context of the Federal Republic: radically distinct from the practice of Japan, Germany's political discourse is tightly bound to its history, whereby antisemitism is often conceptualized almost exclusively through the lens of National Socialist ideology and the Holocaust. As a result, contemporary debates become confined within a narrow national-historical framework, leaving them ill-equipped to engage with the complexities of antisemitism as it emerges in global, transnational contexts. The recurring emphasis on German exceptionalism in these discussions reflects, in many ways, the limitations of this framework.

This, in turn, challenges the widely held idealization of Germany as a model for historical self-reflection. Despite having pursued a path that appears fundamentally different from Japan's, Germany too demonstrates a striking similarity in its tendency to avoid direct confrontation with controversies on a global level. When faced with the challenges of transnational, multidirectional dialogue, both nations reveal a comparable inclination toward closed discourse and discursive containment.

4. Conclusion

The controversies surrounding the 2019 Aichi Triennale and documenta fifteen reflect broader tensions between globalization and locally situated political contexts. While both exhibitions sought to engage with progressive political discourses, their reception was deeply shaped by the specific historical and sociopolitical conditions of Japan and Germany. This study argues against the simplistic binary that casts Germany as a model of historical reflection and Japan as a counterexample. Instead, it calls for a more nuanced understanding of each country's historically embedded responses.

When it comes to the relationship between artistic value and political positioning, discussions in Japan tended to avoid direct confrontation with contentious topics such as colonialism and wartime sexual slavery system. In contrast, in Germany, these issues have sparked sharp conflicts between postcolonial perspectives and anti-antisemitism discourses. Interestingly, in Japan, artists struggled to defend freedom of expression by asserting the autonomy of art. However, due to the lack of intervention from critical perspectives, this strategy has instead led to the downplaying of political issues. In contrast, in Germany, an overly suffocating political discourse suppresses artistic expression, resulting in the marginalization of individual voices. From another perspective, whereas in Germany, despite the high degree of polarization, the possibility to confront critical issues is preserved, in Japan, such issues were to a large extent marginalized, although the discussions have also nurtured more politically engaged artworks and activist practices in the following years.

Another persistent challenge lies in the difficulty of sustaining dialogue itself. Initiatives intended to foster open discussion often rely on conciliatory or depoliticized language, which can dilute the force of critical engagement. This is evident in *ReFreedom_Aichi* in Japan, and similarly in Germany, where efforts such as those led by the Anne Frank Foundation failed to bring together Jewish representatives and members of *ruangrupa* or figures associated with the BDS movement—

one side would often withdraw if the other was present.

Ultimately, the two case studies demonstrate how the politics of memory and contemporary art interact within both national and transnational frameworks. While Japan and Germany differ significantly in their historical narratives and in the ways political discourse is negotiated within the art world, both cases expose the profound difficulties involved in navigating the boundaries between art and politics in an increasingly polarized global context. These comparative insights not only deepen our understanding of the entanglements between art, memory, and politics, but also underscore the value of cross-cultural analysis in navigating the increasingly complex landscape of global cultural discourse.

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