

German Institute for Japanese Studies (DIJ)

DIJ Social Science Study Group

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The Art of Living– Disaster Experience and Emotions in Artist`s Biographies in Contemporary Japan



A recent focus of the discourse on the aftermath of the triple catastrophe of March 11, 2011, lies on establishing a new sense of “normality”. A particularly active group in this context are contemporary artists who consider themselves grassroots “agents of change”. By addressing fundamental social and political issues in their oeuvre, artists are able to create greater visibility for such topics. At the same time they intend to empower people from all over Japan to raise their voice and to (re-)engage in public discourse. I argue that by using their own biographical backgrounds and abilities of expression artists serve as informants as well as agents for changing Japan’s present and for forging a better future.

Drawing on narrative interviews with contemporary artists across different artistic genres, I analyze significant biographical factors that influenced their choice to become an artist in the first place. My analysis thus focuses on self-confessed “turning points” in their biographies such as “3.11” which triggered their deep-rooted engagement in Japanese society. In a second step, I illustrate how artists’ actions have become an increasingly visible part in a social effort of raising (political) awareness as well as for initiating a renewed sense for diversified discussion. I find that their art opens up alternative spaces to the government dominated public domain for political discourse on an individual level as well as in a broader social sense.

Thereby, my study provides insights into the deep connection between the self-narrative of contemporary artists and their role in influencing mainstream discourse by taking part in building a social infrastructure which encourages the public to actively partake in the process of shaping society.

Wiebke Grimmig is a PhD candidate at the Georg-August-University of Göttingen and currently a scholarship fellow at the German Institute for Japanese Studies (DIJ). She holds a Master`s degree in Cultural Anthropology, Gender Studies and Social Policy.

The DIJ Social Science Study Group is organized by S. Heinrich, P. Holdgrün and C. Hommerich.
All are welcome to attend, but registration (heinrich@dijtokyo.org) is appreciated.

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