

# Toward a Social Art and an Artistic Society

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## Successful Exhibitions of Able Art

For about a month starting in mid-February, the Able Art '99 exhibition was held at the Tokyo Metropolitan Art Museum. Sponsored by the museum, the *Asahi Shimbun*, and the Association of Art, Culture, and People with Disabilities, Japan, this was the largest ever exhibition in Japan of artwork by disabled people.

Some 450 works created by 45 artists were displayed under the theme "Cheering Up with Art" The show attracted much public attention, and the *Asahi Evening News* art column praised it highly, while *News 23*, a Tokyo Broadcasting System television program, did a special feature on it.

Osaka and Tokyo had hosted three Able Art exhibitions prior to this year's event. The series first came to be widely noticed in 1997, when the exhibition was held for the first time at the Tokyo Metropolitan Art Museum. This exhibit, with the theme "Dialogue of the Spirit," was a collection of paintings by artists of the Mizunoki Workshop, a facility in Kyoto for intellectually disabled people, and clay figures by children of the Chiba School for the Blind created over many years. The show was put together with the hope of imparting to visitors the pleasure of "engaging in dialogue" with the artwork and the joy that arises when people's spirits come together.

I believe that in the 1997 show we were able to display what might be considered the very opposite of what has been conceptualized as art up to now—works that transcend conventional views of art through their modes of expression. The exhibition demonstrated that art by the disabled seeks a different kind of existence from what is known as modern art and, furthermore, that it necessitates a reappraisal of art's role in and impact on society. This revelation sparked a strong public response, and the art world came to focus attention on these works as well. It was from around this time that the term *able art* began to be used in various contexts.

## Birth of New Art

This year, with the strong encouragement of the Tokyo Metropolitan Art Museum, we displayed twice as many works as last time and expanded the exhibition from two to five weeks. But what gave me the greatest joy was that over 17,000 visitors came despite having to pay an admission fee to see an exhibition that had in the past been free of charge. We also find great significance in the fact that we have been able to hold the exhibition twice in a row at such a venue. For many years, art by the disabled had been shut out from institutionalized facilities like public museums.

Japanese society has been plagued with a sense of helplessness ever since the collapse of the bubble economy, and there has been a string of disturbing incidents that have caused people to feel wary toward others. Modern society's neglect of its humanistic elements is now taking its toll in the form of various pathological phenomena. We felt a need for an art movement that

would counter this situation and infuse society with renewed vitality. For this reason we rejected the “outsider” label usually applied to these works in favor of the more humanistic name of “able art” We began advocating the able art movement four years ago, calling for a reappraisal of art by the disabled from a fresh perspective.

The movement was initiated to enhance the abilities of people who have been socially devalued and improve the way in which the public views them, all through art. Efforts like these—to restore the dignity of social minorities through cultural means—are most important for disabled people, because the societal exclusion of and discrimination against minorities are problems rooted not only in the social structure but also in the cultural milieu.

Four years later, the movement has succeeded in discovering an aesthetic value in able art apart from that of conceptual art and has evolved into a movement that pursues the issue of what role able art can play in liberating the human soul.

### **The Start of the Movement and Its Spreading Support**

Art activities involving disabled people started gaining force in Japan in the 1980s, centered around welfare facilities. Documentary sources indicate that pioneering efforts began in the 1950s; among them the Mizunoki Workshop is particularly worthy of notice. Drawing classes were started at Mizunoki Dormitory in the late 1960s by Japanese-style artist Chuichi Nishigaki. Today the artwork created here is internationally acclaimed.

Art classes were first introduced at Mizunoki Dormitory as rehabilitation for those with severe disabilities. But thanks to Nishigaki’s efficient guidance and keenness in discovering each person’s latent abilities—pinpointing whether an artist has greater potential in a representational or abstract approach, for example—together with the dormitory’s support in the face of insufficient financial resources, the doors were opened to the possibility of engaging in art education in earnest.

Soon after the workshop began considering ways of heightening the artistic value of its activities, it was able to obtain grants from the Toyota Foundation three times between 1980 and 1986. The works created as a result of these grants, some of which have been housed at the Collection de l’Art Brut museum in Switzerland, led to the international reputation that the Mizunoki Workshop enjoys today.

We did not see Mizunoki’s legacy from these years as a product of chance, or a development to be dismissed as a sort of nonreproducible miracle. We moved instead to initiate a cultural strategy to broaden this kind of effort. This was one of the factors that led to the able art movement. These people are able, yet the social system is disabling them—to deliver this message to the public, we felt that a new movement would be most effective.

Various enterprises have offered their support, financial and otherwise, for this cause. Toyota Motor Corp., in particular, has labeled its backing of able art as one of the pillars of its activities contributing to society. It has been sponsoring the Toyota Able Art Forum since 1996, in which symposiums and workshops are held throughout Japan.

### **Able Art in the Twenty-first Century**

Able art contains expressions of the human being’s fundamental *sei* (which can variously mean *life*, *eros*, and *sanctity*). These elements have the power to cheer, soothe, or provoke new revelations in people who come into contact with the artwork. This “art of the soul” has been able to grow into a dynamic movement in only five years because societal values are undergoing

a shift. It can be said that a new art form is discovered with every new age.

The next issue facing able art is how to organize, exhibit, and preserve the massive amount of artwork that has been accumulated across Japan in facilities like Mizunoki Dormitory. The groups that have been engaging in able art activities the longest tend to be lagging in their organization and preservation of the works created, which are consequently in greater danger of becoming damaged or lost. We are therefore preparing to kick off a new project to archive these works digitally as a “legacy of humanity for the twenty-first century.” As this will be an extensive project to record the workings of the human soul, we hope for broad support.













