



Reflection on "Mindscapes Tokyo," a project Exploring the Interplay between Mental Health and Arts

Interview and text by SUGIHARA Tamaki

"MINDSCAPES TOKYO," which began its initiatives in 2022, has engaged people from various backgrounds in two projects: the "Urban Investigation Project" and "Convening." Through these projects, participants have been engaging in dialogues and deepening discussions about mental health. As a culmination of these efforts, an event titled "MINDSCAPES TOKYO WEEK" was held in February 2023. What does mental health mean from a cultural and artistic perspective? KIKUCHI, the artist leading inVisible, shares insights into the project's progress and the emerging themes and challenges for the future.

Table of Contents

- Considering the state of the mind from the perspective of "culture"
- "The Urban Investigation Project" fostered a horizontal collaboration with youth participants
- Creating a space of self-governance where we bring our own ideas to life

- Dialogue gathering 'Convening', exploring the possibility of artistic setting as a mental health clinic
- Acquiring resilience through narrative experiences in disaster-affected areas
- Exploring the possibilities beyond "art" through events
- The more tolerant art can be, the more it could help prevent mental health problems

Considering the state of the mind from the perspective of "culture"

-“MINDSCAPES” is an international program initiated by the Wellcome Trust, a medical research foundation in the UK, in 2020, to explore the connection between mental health, culture, arts, and society. To begin with, could you please tell us about the underlying concerns that led to the inception of this program?

Currently, it is said that one in four people worldwide faces mental health challenges. When it comes to addressing and coping with mental health issues, the first thing that comes to mind is "treatment."

However, recently, it has become increasingly recognized that cultural and artistic elements play a significant role in maintaining a positive state of mind, in addition to medical and scientific approaches. In response to this situation, MINDSCAPES was initiated to engage people worldwide in considering these connections.

The program is being implemented in four cities around the world, and our team, inVisible, is responsible for Tokyo ("MINDSCAPES TOKYO"). Personally, what intrigued me the most about this project was the tone of its proposition. Instead of simply urging us to "think about issues of mental health," it conveyed a fundamental call to reassess the very concept of "mental health" through the lens of culture and art.

In Japan, the term "mental health (mentaru herusu)" is often associated with psychological issues, but originally it refers to the state of one's mind, without necessarily being classified as "good" or "bad." So, what exactly is the "state of mind"? I felt that Mindscapes delves deeply into this discussion.

In reality, it is not so easy to measure the quality of one's mental state. For instance, for individuals involved in art, it is not always necessary to be in a constant state of "happiness." On the contrary, creative ideas can emerge during times of struggle or solitude, and the assessment of their quality cannot be generalized. Additionally, there are differences among countries and regions. For example, in Japan, offering prayers at shrines and temples can bring a sense of inner peace, but it may hold no significance for people in other places. The perception of "happiness" also varies depending on social

structures: whether it follows a Western individualistic approach or a society like Japan that emphasizes harmonious coexistence with others.

Rather than reducing the issues of mental health to individuals, I want to explore what perspectives emerge when considering them in relation to "culture." This is what I would like to contemplate through Mindscapes' projects.

-What specific projects are there in Mindscapes?

There are two main projects. One is the "Convening," a dialogue gathering where people from various positions engage in multidimensional discussions on mental health. The other is the "Urban Investigation Project," which investigates the relationship between culture and mental health in each city. The emphasis and interpretation of these projects are left to the co-organizers in each city.

The initial Convening was a place of "mutual learning" in which many participants took part. In Tokyo, a diverse group of professionals with a keen interest in this issue who deal with the minds of others on a regular basis came together, such as artists, curators, informatics researchers, nurses, adolescent and family counselors, mental health workers and others, have engaged in ongoing dialogues over the course of approximately one year.

On the other hand, having been extensively involved in socially engaged practices as an artist in both the United States and Japan for many years, I also wanted to initiate projects where art could serve as a trigger for the next stage of social communication. As a practical implementation of this idea, we embarked on another project called the "Urban Investigation Project" (hereinafter referred to as UI Project). In this project, artists from various disciplines collaborated on a research project with young people who were enrolled at N High School and S High School of the Kadokawa Dwango Educational Institute, which primarily focuses on online education as the main focus.

"The Urban Investigation Project" fostered a horizontal collaboration with youth participants



A Documentation team and NISHINO Masanobu (on the right)

-The significant involvement of youth is a distinctive feature of "Mindscapes Tokyo" in comparison to other hosting cities, isn't it?

I consider the mental health issues among young people to be a highly prioritized social problem that we need to address. Just recently, the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare announced that the number of suicides among elementary, junior high, and high school students in 2022 reached the highest on record. With the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, it has become an urgent task to consider and find ways to address the mental well-being of the younger generation.

Through the process of closely working with the young people, it became evident that they are seeking places where they can feel at ease interacting with others. It is what we might refer to as a "third place," which is neither school nor home, and I felt that they desire a place where they can be present without being judged or evaluated, and where they can be entrusted with responsibilities with trust. Particularly, one common sentiment consistently expressed by many was the increased ease of connecting online but the lack of opportunities to build long-term relationships with others.

I also heard some of the youth mention that participating in Mindscapes helped them maintain emotional stability.

-I understand that you have worked with high school students in the United States, Kikuchi san?

In the US, I have devoted considerable effort into discovering ways to foster engagement and collaboration between art institutions, like museums, and local communities, including schools, without imposing barriers. Throughout this process, I have consistently pondered the importance of establishing a cycle, rather, symbiotic relationship, where the younger generation learns through art and culture, leading to cultivating an increased interest in art and culture within society.

-The UI Project brought together youths under four themes: "Food," "Japanese Architecture," "Film," plus 'Documentation,' and approximately 20 members were divided into four teams. Each team had a 'Lead Investigator:' yoyo. (cook) in the 'Food' team, HAYASHI Takatsune (architect and carpenter) in the 'Japanese Architecture' team, UENO Senzo (cinematographer and filmmaker) in the 'Film' team and NISHINO Masanobu (artist and film director) in the 'Documentation' team. Could you please share what considerations you kept in mind as you proceeded with the projects?

As for the lead investigators, first and foremost, I have needed to work with artists whom I could trust. It is also worth noting that some of them come from fields that are not typically associated with art, such as cooks or carpenters, but I highly value the concept of "social sculpture," which recognizes that every individual can contribute to the creation of society. In my view, anyone who actively engages with society and works closely with it is an artist. I wanted the youth to see these individuals as role models, recognizing that artists can come from diverse fields and actively contribute to society.

Another consideration I had was that I didn't want the projects to follow the traditional model where artists tend to take center stage and youth merely assist them to realize ideas. In this sense, it was also important that artists we approached were accustomed to listening to the clients' voices and creating something together.

-It was probably a bit of trial and error for artists to collaborate with youth, wasn't it?

Yes, that is correct. I asked them to engage in activities that would create tools to facilitate further communication; however, at times, they were facing difficulties. It must have been challenging to interact with youth whom they don't usually have much involvement with, and I bet that the communication costs would have been high. However, when I referred to them as "Lead Investigators," it was to establish a horizontal relationship rather than a one-sided dynamic where they would teach the youth something. That's why I requested, "Let's first tackle the challenges together."

I intentionally left certain aspects open-ended and didn't place a strong emphasis on tangible "results" in a conventional sense, relying instead on the professional mindset of the artists to contribute something meaningful. Moreover, I didn't expect clear-cut "results" to emerge either. I knew that they

were flexible and creative individuals, so once they developed a rapport with the Lead Investigators to the extent of exchanging jokes, I believed they would freely explore and pursue something within the project's themes.

In reality, the UI Project became more active and vibrant than expected and continued for approximately six months from September 2022 until the culmination event, "MINDSCAPES TOKYO WEEK," held at the end of February 2023. Initially, we had planned for a maximum duration of three months to accommodate academic commitments, and I had anticipated that by November, the lead investigators would compile their findings into artworks, and the project would come to an end. However, through numerous team discussions, the project expanded as new ideas emerged, and the youth expressed their eagerness for further participation opportunities. As a result, the project extended far beyond what we initially anticipated.

Creating a space of self-governance where we bring our own ideas to life



A scene at Yurakucho Art Urbanism where youth exchange ideas.

-At the MINDSCAPES TOKYO WEEK held at the Yurakucho Art Urbanism (YAU) (*1 hereafter YAU STUDIO), there were booths set up under the three themes of 'Food,' 'Japanese Architecture,' and 'Film,' and it was impressive to see the youth actively guiding the visitors.

Initially, we wanted to create a platform to present the outcomes of the project in some way, but the decision to hold such an extensive event was largely due to the fact that the youths voiced their desire to do so. Furthermore, we asked if anyone was interested in participating in the event's organization and quite a few hands went up. That's when and how the 'Youth Executive Committee' was formed.

We repeatedly emphasized to the youth that if they were going to do it, it would come with responsibility. We also told them they could come up with ideas for the event, but they had to execute them themselves.

- It must have been valuable for the youth to have the experience of conceptualizing their own ideas and implementing them.

Yes, absolutely. When we ask them, they all unanimously say, "It was just so much fun." When asked what was fun about it, for example, in school workshops, they might be told to come up with ideas, but they rarely get to see them actually being implemented. They are very much aware of the predetermined nature of those activities. But this time, they were really able to turn their ideas into reality. Many of them experienced this for the first time, and it seems they really enjoyed it.

On the other hand, I also felt the distortions in traditional school education. Although the COVID-19 pandemic is in the backdrop, many of the things considered proactive learning are ultimately placed under control by adults. It made me wonder what genuine learning really means?

- Amidst the prevalence of predetermined "experiences" within a set framework, it's fascinating how the event's organization and program evolved based on the enthusiasm and requests of the youth.

That's a crucial aspect of art projects. Once they got involved in the organization, everyone became incredibly proactive. They even created a website specifically targeting their peers to promote the event, which turned out to be more user-friendly than our own website... (laughs). Other projects include a project to cherish the time to do nothing, a consultation project set up to talk about the effects of 'love' on the mind or think about unanswerable questions, a project to introduce Yurakucho to visitors through photos, a project using illustrations, and a quiz project that could be done online, all of which enacted in response to 'culture'.

There were many other well-thought-out projects that incorporated "culture," such as initiatives to cherish the time of doing nothing and a consultation room to discuss the effects on the heart when it comes to "love" or contemplating unanswered questions. There was also a project showcasing and introducing Yurakucho through photographs to visitors, a project utilizing illustrations by a talented father, and an online quiz. These were just a few examples among many, and all of which were enacted in response to 'culture'.

Dialogue gathering 'Convening', exploring the possibility of artistic setting as a mental health clinic



Convening at the Mori Art Museum

-Please tell us about another project "Convening." As part of "MINDSCAPES TOKYO WEEK," there have been four sessions of this dialogue gathering, taking place online, at the Mori Art Museum, in Fukushima's Tomioka Town, and at YAU STUDIO in Yurakucho, between May 2022 and February 2023.

Convening is a project jointly organized by inVisible and the Mori Art Museum.

Wellcome Trust, the organizer of MINDSCAPES, provided a grant to artist IYAMA Yuki for her work on domestic violence (DV) exhibited at the Mori Art Museum's exhibition 'Listening to the Sound of the Earth Turning: Well-being after the Pandemic' (June 29- November 6, 2022). Through this connection, we explored the possibility of creating a joint opportunity between inVisible and the Mori Art Museum. Amidst such discussions, the decision was made to hold Convening together, with the overarching question of Can museums and art projects become mental health clinics? Then, IYAMA also expressed interest and asked, "Can I participate (in Convening) as well?"

-What are the thoughts behind framing the art domain as a "mental health clinic"?

Currently, art museums offer various learning programs and initiatives to engage with the local community. However, I still sense that many of these programs view art through the lens of capitalism and business-oriented values, or follow a model where someone unilaterally imparts knowledge to others. We wanted to move away from these consumable values of art being 'useful' or 'beneficial' and instead think about what we would discover if we reimagined museums and art projects as 'mental health clinics' that empathize with people's hearts and encourage introspection. By doing so, we aimed to explore what becomes visible and imagine the functions and connections with the local community through this lens, and we wanted everyone to think about these aspects together.

We held the initial online meeting, "Convening #0," as a preliminary introduction on May 13, 2022. Then, on July 8, we organized the first in-person session, "Convening #1," at the Mori Art Museum.

The theme of "#1" was "Violence in the Corona Pandemic" using IYAMA's artwork as a point of entry. However, during our previous conversations with her, encompassing her perspectives as an artist, a mother, and a survivor of domestic violence, we decided that instead of hastily drawing conclusions, we wanted to have open-ended discussions. We chose to share "雑感" (Zattkan), meaning "miscellaneous thoughts and/or impressions," resonated well in the context of the conversations on mental health and became a keyword for our subsequent activities.

On the day of the event, first, each participant shared their initial impressions of mental health. Then, IYAMA shared her work and thoughts, which served as a starting point for free-flowing conversations among the diverse group of participants. The participants included professionals from various occupations mentioned earlier, as well as KATAOKA Mami, the director of the Mori Art Museum, and staff members, along with lead investigators from the UI Project. We ensured an environment where everyone could freely express their thoughts without concern for correctness or mistakes.

-What were some of the opinions expressed during the dialogue?

There were various opinions exchanged during the dialogue. Some opinions revolved around different perspectives on how art museums should be opened, while others questioned the necessity of art museums opening up to such an extent. There were contrasting views expressed during the initial session, perhaps due to the participants being somewhat distant from each other. We also realized that even when creating a relaxed atmosphere in an art museum space, it was still challenging for everyone to completely open up and speak freely.

However, the fact that we were finally able to talk face-to-face was a significant achievement. In truth, the Wellcome Trust had proposed an earlier schedule, but we believed that it was crucial to have

in-person discussions when addressing mental health topics in Japan. We requested to wait until we could meet directly. Additionally, one absolute requirement for us as organizers was to have discussions conducted in the participants' native language, which in this case was Japanese. The Wellcome Trust graciously accepted these conditions.

Conversely, the Wellcome Trust expressed a desire to respect individuals' "Lived Experience" and to foster dialogue and a learning environment that harnesses and values those personal experiences, rather than focusing solely on abstract experiences. In this context, the concept of "learning" is similar to the earlier mentioned "Zattkan" or "miscellaneous thoughts" and involves contemplating over an extended period rather than achieving immediate results. This type of learning aligns well with culture and art, and I believe what we did at the Mori Art Museum laid the foundation for sharing such "miscellaneous thoughts."

Acquiring resilience through narrative experiences in disaster-affected areas



Participants of Convening visiting Tomioka-town, Fukushima Prefecture September 3 and 4 2022

-In Convening #2, which took place from September 3rd to 4th, participants visited Tomioka-town, Fukushima Prefecture, where inVisible is also based to conduct other projects.

The theme of "#2" was "Resilience from Disasters." It was important for us to physically distance ourselves from Tokyo and visit a place like Tomioka, which has experienced the aftermath of the Great East Japan Earthquake and the nuclear accident, where both the residents and the place itself bear traumas and mental health challenges.

The local people who guided us there didn't directly talk about their experiences of the disaster but instead shared stories and culture that reflected their positive activities in present-day Tomioka. Through listening to their stories, we aimed to explore the power to overcome difficulties, namely "resilience," and to consider the approach to mental health from a different perspective.

Specifically, we participated in a tour performance organized by the theater unit "humunus" (KOYAMA Kaoruko + Kiyosuyonesuku). The tour was led by AKIMOTO Nanami, who experienced the disaster during her junior high school years, temporarily left her hometown, and then returned. She has been using theater to pass on the stories of the earthquake in Tomioka. During this tour, she shared how storytelling allows her to express and articulate her experiences more vividly.

We visited various places and listened to the stories of people associated with those locations through headphones. The emphasis was on the experience itself rather than simply sharing stories. We distributed sketchbooks to encourage participants to write down their thoughts and feelings, valuing each individual's experience as much as possible.

On the second day, we were guided by KASAI Yuka, a researcher at the "Great East Japan Earthquake and Nuclear Disaster Memorial Museum" in Futaba Town. We visited places such as the Namie Town's Ukedo Elementary School, located 300 meters from the coast, which miraculously saw all the students and staff survive despite being hit by a tsunami 40 minutes after the earthquake occurred. At this school, while they were in the midst of preparing for the graduation ceremony, the earthquake struck. However, as soon as the tsunami arrived, they ran towards the nearby mountains and managed to escape the damage. The school, now serving as a memorial site for the disaster, impressed upon us the power to overcome adversity, and we could feel the strength emanating from this place.

-How did the participants react to the experience?

Everyone said that they were glad they had visited Tomioka. It was significant to directly witness the current state of a place that had faced immense challenges like 11 years later (*at the time of the visit) and observe the people living there. Some participants had never been to Fukushima before, so it was an opportunity for them to understand the current situation and experience something that

deeply touched their hearts. Also, during the two-day trip, we shared meals together, which helped to bring us closer in terms of interpersonal relationships.

- AKIMOTO mentioned that "theater is the place where I can speak about my experience of the disaster." Did you sense that theater and artistic expression have the potential to generate resilience?

I definitely felt that power. What we particularly valued this time was the power of storytelling. Rather than just presenting objective facts, narrating individual experiences can contribute to the mental health improvement of the storyteller. From a psychological perspective, the importance of confession-like storytelling is often emphasized, and I believe that art and culture have a similar aspect. And I think one's narrative affects the listener to bring out their own stories. In fact, during the process of listening to the stories of local people, there were moments when our members shared their own experiences. Such spaces, where we can share the inner workings rather than just the surface, felt very healthy to me.

Exploring the possibilities beyond "art" through events



Youth members at the "MINDSCAPES TOKYO WEEK"

-And on February 18th-19th, 2023, at YAU STUDIO, the final installment of "Convening #3" took place as a culmination of one year. In response to the question "Can museums and art projects become mental health clinics?" six teams proposed and presented concrete plans and presented their ideas. In addition to the regular members, the presence of youths was also observed.

As I mentioned earlier, the decision to hold the event at the YAU STUDIO was made midway through, but being able to speak at that venue located in the business district of the metropolis required a different mentality from that of art museums and Fukushima, and ultimately, it turned out to be very beneficial. We set out to realistically contemplate what a mental health clinic could be like for ourselves. Each team appointed one chief facilitator, who proposed keywords for discussion. After conducting surveys among other participants, the teams were formed, and presentations were conducted through workshops, exploring practical possibilities.

For example, the team led by IYAMA and yoyo. conceptualized a mobile mental health clinic in the form of a caravan. They had the belief that rather than adhering to the common perception of art as something that comes "from above," art itself could initiate change by approaching and moving towards people. The team focusing on Tomioka proposed placing points on a map related to the narrative and archiving them in actual locations, similar to "Convening #2." By archiving personal memories such as "this is a pleasant place with a nice breeze," they aimed to contribute something poetic and positive to the mental health of the town.

On the other hand, the youth came up with an idea and plan called "Conbiju." It is a place to visit during sleepless nights, and the naming came from a combination of the words "convenience store" and "bijutsukan (art museum)." The youth are currently discussing how to realize this plan. We don't want to just come up with ideas and leave it at that, so we want to continue to think and work together with Convening members to figure out how to make it happen.

By the way, when we asked the youth if they would like to be involved in another project in the future, around 10 of them raised their hands and have started participating as interns. They have developed an interest in social activities and seem to enjoy engaging with adults. I was delighted to receive such positive responses.

-Looking back on one year of Convening, what insights did you gain?

One significant achievement was the realization that art and culture can be a means to contemplate mental health issues. However, when taking a step back and looking at the bigger picture, I also felt that mental health problems should not be confined solely within the narrow realm of "art."

For example, during MINDSCAPES TOKYO WEEK, if something is exhibited under the banner of "art," it can be perceived as an artistic endeavor. But is that appropriate? But is that appropriate? It led the organizing team to have discussions about the fundamental question of "Who is this project for?" While it's certainly gratifying to have art enthusiasts appreciate our work, we began to question whether there are more important considerations than evaluations based on existing labels.

In the first place, this project encompasses individuals who are not typically referred to as artists, adding to its elusive nature. Until now, we have had a feeling of being halfway involved in the art industry, but we are now thinking that it might make more sense considering the possibility of boldly venturing into completely different domains. By doing so, we will be able to connect with people from diverse fields and effectively reach those whom we truly wish to reach, as in the case of the youth involved in this project. Above all, we trust in the profound openness of art to embrace such breadth... and we have started discussions on that note.

The more tolerant art can be, the more it could help prevent mental health problems



KIKUCHI Hiroko speaking at Convening#3

-When discussing art, I've recently been concerned about the excessive focus on "exhibitions." For example, there are undoubtedly art-related elements in workshops and projects conducted in various welfare facilities and communities, but they are often difficult to articulate. I also recognize the importance of adopting a perspective and using language that allows us to perceive "art" in things that don't have the appearance of an exhibition.

I truly agree with that. It also relates to the structure of the organization, and one could perceive Mindscape as an artist's project by KIKUCHI Hiroko. But I didn't want that, so this time I consciously allowed the organic nature of the members to take the lead. I thought it was particularly important for this theme to function as an amoeba-like organizational body. However, it's challenging to convey the significance of process driven and organic activities to the outside world, so we ended up fitting it into the mold of an "exhibition."

Nevertheless, I feel that the essence of this project lies not in the exhibition itself, but rather in the process of the projects and the earnest dedication of the youth committee members at the venue. Those who experienced that scene during the Mindscapes Tokyo Week probably felt the relationship between mental health and art and culture in a context that is unrelated to the narrow definition of "art."

-So, it means that rather than a contrived situation like an exhibition, it's about witnessing how art and culture are wedded to individuals' hearts in a more everyday context.

Art encompasses more diverse forms than what is commonly perceived in society. I feel that such contexts, manifestations and approaches are not easily visible in Japan. Although we use the term "art project," it's also difficult to grasp, and there are quite a few established "patterns." Through my interaction with the youth, I felt in my own skin that "these kids are nothing but possibilities," but at the same time, I keenly felt the earnestness of their lack of direction.

From there, I contemplated the inherently more inclusive nature that art should have and what is alienating young people from art. The art industry still often demands right or wrong answers, but in reality, the absence of such demands should be what's beautiful, and we need the kind of approach that allows young people to take interest in it.

-Finally, may I ask about future developments?

Since the Mindscapes as a project will come to an end, we would like to compile a summary, including the archive, by around June. However, there are still many things we want to continue, and one of

them is engaging with the youth. Additionally, I felt the openness of YAU STUDIO during this event, so I would like to explore possibilities for further collaboration.

Regarding the use of the term "mental health," I'm not sure, but I believe that mental health and well-being will remain a crucial theme in the future. Now that we have achieved some tangible results and built a track record, we are ready to consider collaborating with mental health experts/specialists more next time and, if it's possible to explore specific treatment methods, I would like to try that. Additionally, I want to contemplate what art and culture can do as preventive measures for mental issues. While it's difficult when one falls ill, I think there is a potential for art and culture to prevent such hardships from occurring, and I strongly felt that I want to play a role in that aspect.

Things that I had been contemplating in my mind gradually settled into my being and core through collaborations and dialogues with many people, including the youth. That's how I perceive this past year.