

A rejoinder to Meng Qu's 'Teshima - From Island Art to the Art Island: Art on/for a previously declining Japanese Inland Sea Island'

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This brief rejoinder reflects on a number of points made by Meng Qu (2020) in his account of the relationship between art and community on Teshima and, in particular, on his critique of my work on a similar topic (Suwa, 2020). In my article I was mainly concerned to address the art installations around the island of Teshima. I discussed how the landmarks “are permanently embedded in their surroundings” (2020: 248) to generate assemblages and concluded that the artworks form various assemblages among non-artworks, land features and other significant landscape points. This finding resonates with my other publications (Suwa 2007, 2012a, 2012b, 2017, 2018). Qu makes no reference to the idea of “assemblage”, which is the crucial notion in my paper. By contrast, he approaches local activities on Teshima in terms of community study. His approach is grounded with concepts such as identity, organisation, property and social networking as *a priori* entities and because of this his style of social analysis and epistemological framework is very different to my approach. Throughout his text Qu repeats the word “community” as if Teshima is primarily a social entity and thereby lacks a perspective of space. In my work on the topic I specifically oppose the essentialism of ideas of (local) community in discussing “the space of shima” (Suwa, 2007). He is critical of my paper for committing to what he calls “traditional thinking” (2020: 254) but such “traditional thinking” really belongs to his approach. That is, Qu sees the (local) community (or the actants relating to Teshima) as a singular society, cohort or property. Such an approach has long been interrogated in scholarly discourse and particularly in cultural anthropology, which forms the foundation of my article.

One way of visualising the crucial issue is to refer the reader to the camera angle of the photograph of the artwork ‘Particle in the Air’ provided by Qu, which obstructs the pastoral landscape (2020: 257), whereas mine shows the artwork merging into the bush (2020: 242). This symbolises different points of view between us in which one is no more accurate than the other. Still, Qu’s argument is questionable with regard to his characterisation that:

However, the notion that Teshima’s artworks undergo deterritorialisation into local ways of life (Suwa, 2020) needs deeper understanding with regard to local community perceptions (Qu 2020: 254).

Teshima’s artwork never “undergoes” deterritorialisation “into” or by the local community. De-/territorialisation of artworks on Teshima is interactive depending on the condition of various actants. The passage concerning “Suwa’s approach to the ‘territoriality of the art space’ (2020: 8) on the island” (Qu 2020: 254) shows confusion over the idea of territoriality. Qu appears to take the notion in a mundane sense: of territory as a bordered piece of land. However, I use the term in the sense proposed in Deleuze and Guattari’s 1987 work *A Thousand Plateaus*.

Similarly, Qu’s dichotomy of “top-down elite masterpieces and bottom-up local grassroots forms” (2020: 261) is a notion I find unsettling. My interest is about how folklore, rituals, waterways and other non-art objects generate the space of *shima* by interacting with the artworks. This does not imply the exclusion of “local” interaction but, contrarily, it creates a network of human and non-human assemblages that the visitor senses themselves participating in, and wherein the landscape is permanently moving and generating. In this space, the gardens, traditional architecture and installations resonate with each other in an assemblage through sounds heard in the space. The locals whose opinions Qu reports may not be aware of this resonance because everything has already been there for generations. For example, the episode I recounted of an old lady telling me about her memory of the pilgrimage rituals of O-Daishi-sama, which were coming up, exemplifies the social space co-existing with the space of artworks. The phrase “Suwa’s (2020) consideration of art on Teshima as ‘work’ and ‘objects’” (Qu 2020: 254) is therefore misleading.

Qu’s main research data, semi-structured interviews, is presented in the manner of ethnomethodology. In doing so, he picks up an issue of category: what is art and what is not. He refers to informants by number and property since categorisation is fundamental to his method and deals with the “local community” and “resident” as coded categories alienated from art. For instance, he presents the locally run restaurant Shima Kitchen as a case of what he calls “bottom-up” art. The Kitchen, partly designed by architect Abe Ryo, is represented as a key site and a community centre. The concierge whom I met at *Les Archives du Cœur* was also participating in island activity on her own terms, being an avid fan of Boltanski and being enthusiastic about introducing the sites. But, in a way that I wish to avoid, in Qu’s work he reduces social groups into pros and cons of official art projects, and consequently neglects the whole point of how artworks interact to form what he calls the “art island”.

A further perspective is offered on *Teshima Tourism Navi*, the website of the NPO Teshima Tourist Association, which represents the island from an insider point of view. It gives information not limited to introducing artworks but including the history of the illegal landfill site, nature (including the rice terraces), traditional masonry, agricultural and marine products, modern dairy farming and a rehabilitation institute for mentally impaired. The website is also regularly updated to provide multiple angles of interest.

In his article, Qu concludes:

They believed that art that is not connected with their culture, roots or way of life is more akin to a type of consumerist tourism, no matter how deeply these arts can be argued to connect with the historical, natural and cultural elements of Teshima. (2020: 261-262)

By using the subject “They,” his sentence becomes problematic, since he quotes only a tiny portion of the entire corpus obtained. Even if all of the coded interviews show a negative reaction toward the ‘elite’ artworks, this could be the result of when and how the interviewees were induced to make judgement. Quoting a segment of conversation with the author should have clarified in what context the negative reactions toward the artworks were observed. The assertion of their belief does not necessarily present the only reality in Teshima. It is a generalisation that does not attempt to interpret their culture and voices from multiple angles. His “no matter how” clause does not sufficiently bridge his argument and mine. While Qu has offered a critique of my approach, the reality of Teshima is much more complex than the dichotomy between “top-down” and “bottom-up”, as well as monolithic and essentialist points of view of “community”.

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