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Playful Protests and Contested Urban Space: the 2020 Tokyo Olympics Protest Movement

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Abstract: This paper analyzes playful activities within protests against the 2020 Tokyo Olympics. It examines their relationship with contested urban space and the legacy of Heisei-era social movements in Japan as well as other anti-Olympics activism. It argues that these practices represent a creative, cultural dimension of the opposition to 2020.

This paper examines protests that have taken place against the 2020 Tokyo Olympics, focusing on the activities of one group and analyzing them as a form of "play" and cultural creativity contesting urban spaces. In this way, the paper highlights an aspect of the protests that links to earlier social movements in Japan as well as a style of protest that transcends the negativity often associated with anti-Olympics activism.

The 2020 Olympics have attracted controversy and criticism for a wide range of reasons, not least the way the Games are presented by the organizers as the "recovery Games" for the Tōhoku region (Singler 2019). A lesser-known cause of opposition is the evictions of homeless communities from Meiji Park and Miyashita Park and the redevelopment of those locations (the former for the New National Stadium and surrounding facilities; the latter for a new hotel and commercial complex by Shibuya City). Campaigners from the movement claim the loss of these parks amounts to the privatization of public space in that the land is sold off and the socially vulnerable (such as the park-dwelling homeless or the tenants of the Kasumigaoka Apartments, a public housing complex that was also demolished as part of the redevelopment of the stadium area) are excluded from locations they have a right to use. "Developers and cities started to look at public parks as unused resources and a city parks law was revised in order for private capital to gain easier access to public parks. Among the various excuses used to support the transformation of city parks into private property, the Olympics have frequently provided justification," writes Ogawa Tetsuo (2020), one of the leading activists. "If you are a homeless person living in a potential Olympic city, you are not allowed to exist there any longer."

Hangorin no Kai

These evictions protests are organized by a small yet robust group, Hangorin no Kai (literally, Anti-Olympics Group), and teams of activists within its close network, such as Miyashita Kōen Neru Kaigi (literally, Miyashita Park Kneading Conference; the name plays on the various meanings of *neru* as "sleeping," "kneading," or "thinking something over").[1] Hangorin no Kai, which also uses the English name No Olympics 2020, was formed in 2013 and comprises a dozen or so core members, though its main protests can attract up to around 80 participants. It is a central force in a wider network of left-wing groups and activists opposing the 2020 Olympics (outlined in Sonja Ganseforth's paper in this special issue).

Hangorin no Kai grew out of the Tokyo homeless advocacy movement and a well-known campaign to save Miyashita Park from semi-privatization in the late 2000s and early

2010s (Cassegård 2014, 167–79). Several of its main members are themselves unhoused—that is, they live permanently as rough sleepers in a park—and so the key issues it fights and which initiated its participation in anti-Olympics campaigning are driven by personal passion as well as ideology. Hangorin no Kai's practices include talks, tours, and various kinds of public events, along with street marches and protests, and also guerrilla actions and small acts of civil disobedience. Moreover, it is one of the plaintiffs in a lawsuit launched in 2018 seeking compensation for the evictions from Meiji Park.

While its focus is on the Meiji and Miyashita park issues, Hangorin no Kai is not restricted to these highly local causes.[2] In addition to what it perceives as Olympics-driven gentrification campaigns negatively impacting Tokyo citizens, it also situates its activism within a broader struggle against the Olympics in general; not only opposing the 2020 Games in Tokyo but opposing all Games in any city in the world. Parallel with its very localized character, the group has energetically engaged with the global NOlympics Anywhere (or NOlympians) movement (Boykoff 2020), not least as one of the main organizers of an ambitious series of transnational anti-Olympics activities held in Tokyo during the summer of 2019 (Robertson 2019).

Methodology

This paper is based on fieldwork undertaken since 2016, studying Hangorin no Kai and related anti-2020 activism through participant observation at events and protests. I also conducted interviews with activists and draw on a wide range of primary materials and resources (statements, leaflets, essays and articles, social media posts) produced by the movement.[3]

Creativity, Protest, and the Olympics

A discourse of the "creative city" is well established and advocated as a model for overcoming the challenges faced by the contemporary urban experience and alienation of citizens (Landry and Bianchini 1995). On the other hand, examples also abound of studies of cultural expression among squatting movements and urban occupations, suggesting that such practices of urban protest often coexist with artistry and creativity (Moore and Smart 2015). More generally, studies of cultural and artistic aspects in social movements have verified the significance of these practices (Reed 2005).

In terms of the Olympics, the role of artists or designers as critics and their capacity to resist the Games through their practices is also a well-studied field, including for Tokyo 2020 (Kunimoto 2018). More pertinent for this study is how material practices are appearing in anti-Olympics activism in East Asia, whereby non-designers and "amateurs" are subverting official symbols as a means of opposing locally hosted editions of the Games. Traganou (2018) has already examined "dissent by design" through anti-Olympics protests in East Asia, using Hangorin no Kai's practices as one of her case studies. This paper covers similar terrain, though drawing on more recent fieldwork and contextualizing the practices within Japanese social movement trends.

The following case studies are intended to work as examples of not only artistic activism (or activist art) but also as acts of reterritorialization in the face of encroachment on public space. In this respective, they conjure up "temporary autonomous zones," defined by Bey (2003, 99) as "an uprising which does not engage directly with the State, a guerrilla operation which liberates an area (of land, of time, of imagination) and then dissolves itself to re-form elsewhere/elsewhen, before the State can crush it."

These practices are also examples of resistance through play. The ludic is fundamental to the city as an expression of free will as well as disruption. In his monograph on this subject, Stevens (2007) discusses two Classical concepts of play. *Paidia* is "characterized by diversion, destruction, spontaneity, caprice, turbulence, and exuberance," while *ludus* is "play institutionalized as a game" that "follows rules and routines which are purposely contrived to be tedious and arbitrary" (ibid., 33). Taking this interpretation further, Hangorin no Kai's activities are not only *paidia* but, I suggest, highly subversive pranks, or what the Situationists called *détournement*: turning something on its head by reusing it in a new form or ensemble. The combination of parody and seriousness (or even anger and denunciation) seems in keeping with a Situationist stance (Situationist International 1959, 68).

Case Studies

Two of the main figures involved with Hangorin no Kai activists are Ichimura Misako and Ogawa Tetsuo, both of whom have backgrounds as artists (Cassegård 2014, 144–8). Given the pedigree of these leading members, it is perhaps not surprising that the group pursues creative and artistic tactics as part of its campaigning on issues related to homelessness and public space, especially parks.

In the following examples of Hangorin no Kai playful activities, we can identify several general traits.

The activities and events are staged in very specific physical or geographical spaces in order to highlight particular causes: sometimes the group may use a well-populated area like central Shinjuku for maximum exposure; more often, though, it chooses sites directly associated with the Olympics and the evictions, such as around the New National Stadium (and former Meiji Park) area, Shibuya and Harajuku (for exposure, again, but also their proximity to the location of Miyashita Park), the headquarters of Mitsui Fudosan (which is the redeveloper responsible for the Miyashita Park project), or the Japanese Olympic Committee office.

The goal of activities is also similarly specific or instrumental, typically organized as a counter-version of an official event or to raise awareness of a certain context.

Activities involve an array of ludic props, costumes, and other artistic or visual elements. Significantly, however, there is little attempt to appear sophisticated through these tactics. Far from it, the group embraces a kind of "amateur" spirit and aesthetic with cardboard and homemade props whose DIY and local, grassroots style stands in stark contrast to the clean, international (and thus, neutral-seeming), and expensive design of the IOC and Tokyo 2020 organizers.

The group uses catchy wordplay in the names for events as well as simple yet memorable illustrations in the publicity materials. Activities are designed to be accessible and open to all, welcoming collaboration and participation, most overtly in the form of workshops and the efforts to include stakeholders (namely, evictees) directly in the events. Music also plays a key role, from original songs to the regular presence of instruments at street events.

Hangorin no Kai's activism can be divided, though with some degree of overlap, into three approximate typologies.

Performative Pranks

The first are the performative yet transgressive pranks. These can be considered as a kind of *détournement*, since they generally parody or

"twist" something else, though the Situationist sense of *détournement* encompasses a negation, since the original meaning is lost (Situationist International 1959, 67). That is not the case with these pranks, where the *détournement* retains the original event or elements in order to expose (and denounce) it. Moreover, unlike the archetypal Situationist version of *détournement*, Hangorin no Kai not only uses artistic elements but also aspects of sport and leisure.

On June 23, 2013, Hangorin no Kai staged an "anti-Olympics concert" on the streets outside Tokyo International Forum, timed to start shortly after an official concert ("Olympic Concert 2013 Toward the Dream") had ended at the venue. A handful of activists gathered with a motley selection of random instruments to play original music. Ichimura wore a swimsuit with an anti-Olympics slogan on it, while other members donned an eclectic set of masks. The event concluded with a parody of the famous beach run from the Olympics-themed film *Chariots of Fire*.[4]

The group continued this style of comic and inventive protest action with two fake sports events. Held in July 2013, the first was the "Han-ran" (a pun on *hanran*, meaning rebellion, but also meant as "anti-run," specifically mocking the 2020 organizers' "day runs"), which saw participants in colorful costumes festooned with anti-2020 paraphenalia, running in the pedestrianized zone in Shinjuku as a tongue-in-cheek version of a race. One runner was dressed as Adolf Hitler, in an apparent nod to the 1936 Berlin Games.

"Han-ran" running event in Shinjuku on July 2013. Courtesy of Hangorin no Kai.

The second event, "Han-Orinpikku Ran-ran-ran" (another linguistically and tonally playful name, literally meaning "Anti-Olympics Revolt-Revolt-Revolt"), was held in October 2015 and treated the new stadium site—at a time when its design was still undecided and work had not yet begun—as a giant *harappa*, the kind of vacant lot where children classically play in the city and which retains a nostaglic, romantic image of innocent outdoor play (Jonas and Rahmann 2014, 37). In the streets around the site, wearing elaborate costumes and props (including a cardboard boat and swan) and in a spirit of larking, participants gathered to play games like soccer or badminton, to skip or pretend to fish, and to picnic on the streets. The event was intentionally held on Health and Sports Day, a national holiday in Japan commemorating the 1964 Games, and which normally involves community or school sports festivals. This was Hangorin no Kai's own jaunty, chaotic, and idiosyncratic rendition of such an occasion. The following day, activists made an impromptu protest inside the Tokyo Metropolitan Government Building, complaining that two parts of Meiji Park were shut when they went the previous day. Surrounded by security guards, they managed to call an official down to receive their formal written request demanding that the closed park be reopened. Remaining in their costumes throughout their visit to the bureaucrats, this

action seemed to encapsulate the casual equilibrium of declamatory and ludic.

The "Han-Orinpikku Ran-ran-ran" parodic sports festival around the New National Stadium and Meiji Park area on October 12, 2015. Courtesy of Hangorin no Kai.

In February 2013, Hangorin no Kai held a poster workshop, what the group called the "Design Project for the Anti-Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games," outside the National Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo. The choice of location was very deliberate. Inside the museum, an exhibition was then taking place showcasing design from the 1964 Games (Hangorin no Kai's naming for its event aped the title of the exhibition). The activists posed for photographs while holding up handwritten cardboard signs over the museum billboard, manipulating the signage to take on an anti-Olympics message. The makeshift protest posters that resulted from the workshop were then shared online.[5]

On August 31, 2013, Hangorin no Kai staged two ambitious events in one day. Early on, the group went to Ueno Park to infiltrate a pro-Olympics *mikoshi* (portable shrine) event called "V Colors – Go to 2020," organized by artist Hibino Katsuhiko for the Tokyo Culture Creation Project (now Arts Council Tokyo). On this day, teams carried colorful floats around like a shrine festival. Amidst these celebratory young participants mobilized to boost the spirit of the city ahead of the decision on the 2020 bid, Hangorin no Kai waded in holding up a large, colorful banner spelling out "Anti-Olympics" and called out slogans into a megaphone.

Some of the group's stunts are less visible or provocative, instead veering off into the surreal. On March 27, 2016, Hangorin no Kai's activists transformed into zombies. Starting again as a workshop in the late afternoon, the participants dressed up in DIY ghoulish costumes and makeup to stage an undead protest walk around the site of Meiji Park (by now, partially closed) during the night. It was as if the recently evicted residents were returning from the dead to haunt their former home. The participants mobbed the fenced-off park, banging on the gates like zombies trying to get in. The whole event was filmed and edited into a parody horror film, and uploaded online.[6]

Publicity flyer for the "Zombie Full Bloom" workshop and performance event around the New National Stadium area. Courtesy of Hangorin no Kai.

Reclaiming the Streets

A second type of activity is a reclaiming of the streets. Less performative or like a prank, these activities are closer to occupation or squatting, treating the streets and other spaces (such as fences or hoardings) as interstices, as sites for play and use by citizens regardless of legal boundaries. This is carried out in the face of the privatization and enclosure of public space; namely, the closure of Meiji Park and transfer of the land from the TMG to the Japan Sport Council, and the reconfiguration of Miyashita Park into a rooftop garden inside a commercial facility adjoining a hotel.

By briefly taking back control of the street or other spaces in symbolic yet instrumental ways, the activists are once again expressing their opposition to their exclusion as well as expressing their fundamental right to the city—that is, the "freedom to make and remake ourselves and our cities" (Harvey 2013, 4). The activities create temporary autonomous zones (TAZ), though a key distinction from the original conception of the TAZ is that these zones produced by anti-2020 activists do not aim for a tactic of disappearance and refusal to confront power (Bey 2003, 126). Rather, these tactics are provocative and aim to garner public attention while staking a claim on territory in the city.

At one protest organized by Miyashita Kōen Neru Kaigi in May 2018, activists chose a route for the march that twice took them past the headquarters of Mitsui Fudosan. After the march formally ended, the attendees made a picnic in a nearby park and then took it back to Mitsui Fudosan, outside of which they sat down and ate their meal right there on the sidewalk. Such examples of squatting tactics are intentionally testing loopholes over the use of public space, since the Road Law restrictively defines plazas and sidewalks as places for circulation, not assembly (Dimmer 2012, 80). Though watched carefully by security guards and police officers, participants can get away with such activities as long as they do not block the actual street traffic or cause any damage.

The hoardings around contested redevelopment sites are also exploited for the potential they offer. At the very same time that Korean and Japanese activists demonstrated outside the venue for the opening ceremony of the PyeongChang 2018, for instance, activists back in Tokyo expressed solidarity and also highlighted the local issues for the next Games by temporarily attaching large letters to the hoarding around the Miyashita Park construction site, spelling out "NOlympics Anywhere."

"NOlympics Anywhere" slogan on the hoarding around the Miyashita Park construction site in Shibuya, Tokyo, on the night of the PyeongChang 2018 opening ceremony. Courtesy of Hangorin no Kai.

This hoarding-hijack tactic is particularly significant when we consider how developers often now use such fencing as part of the branding and promotion for the urban vision that the new construction will supposedly engender. Shibuya City has seen some well-publicized examples of this, such as the *AKIRA* anime-themed fencing for the new Parco

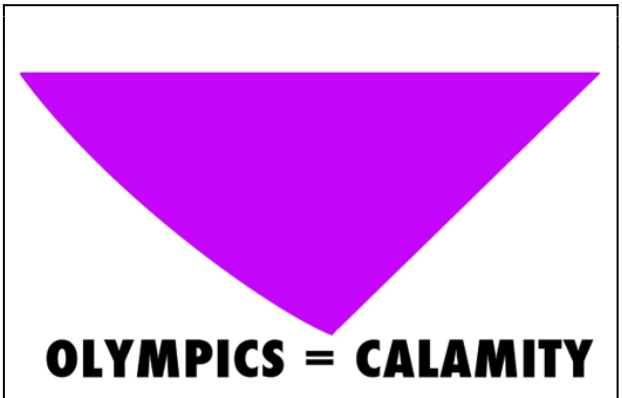
shopping complex. Miyashita Park was another example, at one point its fencing decorated with a mural called "A day in the life [of] Shibuya" that presented Shibuya's image of itself as a diverse and liberal place through a young girl's encounters with the ward's citizens (including a male same-sex couple, people with disabilities, and the elderly). It is a showcase of diversity but a very bourgeois one that has no room for the homeless or certain marginalized groups. In March 2019, activists from Miyashita Kōen Neru Kaigi protested the closure of the park and the coopting of the fencing to legitimize the gentrification in Shibuya by attaching their own cardboard figures decorated with messages. At a glance, these figures seemed to be climbing up the hoarding as if trying to get back inside the park. This tactic of adding cardboard art objects to fencing has been employed regularly by activists to protest park closures at night, not only Miyashita Park.

The Miyashita Park construction site hoarding was again "hijacked" in March 2019 with cardboard figures with anti-Olympics slogans. Courtesy of Miyashita Kōen Neru Kaigi.

Another savvy manipulation of a construction site hoarding was for an event in December 2015, when Hangorin no Kai held a film screening of a documentary that was projected directly onto the fencing for the audience to watch while sitting on the street. The documentary was particularly poignant for the attendees, since it dealt with the communities evicted as part of redevelopments in Seoul for the 1988 Olympics.

Parodic Protests

The third and final type of activity is the overtly parodic. As is clear from the way that the group times and locates its events as deliberate counterpoints to official promotional events, it frequently parodies and pastiches. This is sometimes a straightforward matter of naming and imagery. Ichimura, for instance, issued a call for artists to use their medium as a means of opposing the Olympics. While not a group or specific project, she labeled this the Anti-Olympic Arts Council, in reference to how the Arts Council Tokyo is the main organizer behind the official 2020 cultural programs, and also parodied the Arts Council Tokyo logo by inverting the image.[7] In this way, the activists' literature and publicity is filled with parodic iconography, names, and even songs, from wearing fake medals during protests to a pamphlet called "Shibuya Horrible News" in a design that replicates an official Shibuya publication.[8]



The Anti-Olympic Arts Council logo is a

parody of the Arts Council Tokyo logo, inverting the image and adding a polemical slogan.

Many of these activities are small, decorative touches, but others are more ambitious and sustained. Activists have continued to display at events a "counter map" model and other cardboard displays charting evictions and the ill effects of Olympics-related gentrification. By doing this, the activists are both publicizing their message, mocking the redevelopment projects that are often showcased as models and graphics of how the city will transform, and also staking their fundamental right to these endangered locations in Tokyo that public-private partnerships are forcibly transforming.

Significance of the Protests

The protesters' activities embrace their status as the urban poor and marginalized, most notably through the deliberate use of cardboard (a common material by rough sleepers as bedding or protection against the elements). By remaining true to the identity of the activists and evictees, the activities represent sincere expressions of the movement rather than something imposed by outsiders or emulative of others. This purity, so to speak, is enhanced further by the creative and flexible aspects of the tactics, which are attractive and novel. One activist in Hangorin no Kai noted that the "originality" of such tactics impressed and galvanized them to take part (Hangorin no Kai 2014, 66).

In addition to mobilizing participants, these ludic practices are also more appealing to the general public. While their effectiveness is questionable, given the occasionally eccentric or surreal appearance of some of the activities, they possess an inherently positive quality: turning a negative event like an eviction into an opportunity for creativity. The playfulness can act to offset the harsh and denunciatory tone of the rhetoric that is less accessible to those not directly affected by, for instance, the loss of the parks. Importantly, however, the decision not always to be serious does not impact the sincerity of the activism: the core message of the protests is retained regardless of the abundant pranks, humor, and creativity.

There are similarities with other Heisei-era social movements in Japan, especially those related to precarity, which freely mixed political and cultural elements. This includes homeless communities, as Mōri (2005, 25–6) has previously shown in a study of art in the Shinjuku cardboard village. That iconic movement also similarly contested the boundaries of public and private space in the city through tactics of art and occupation. Such practices are not simply inventive or visually interesting; they also restore agency to the marginalized. As Cassegård (2014, 110–11, 131–2, 181 *passim*) has argued, play and resistance are closely affiliated, empowering disenfranchised victims and allowing them to deal with traumas through therapeutic forms of activism that create alternative spaces that may have "shamanic" properties.

But Hangorin no Kai's creative and playful tactics are not simply a continuation or development of Heisei-era social movements. These practices also tap into similar trends in urban protest worldwide as well as Hangorin no Kai's recent ambitious engagement with transnational activism (Andrews 2020). Indeed, ludic tactics may well be typical of counter-Olympics campaigns, which frequently employ parodic elements and such tactics as "hijacking" the Olympic rings symbol. NOlympics LA, a close partner of Hangorin no Kai and a leading force in protests against the 2028 Games, staged fake mayor "auditions" to express its anger at the city's perceived absentee leadership.[9] As Traganou (2018)

writes, "the 2020 protests echo attitudes of some of the London 2012 protests, such as one by a coalition of artists and urbanists," though, she argues, the Tokyo ones "have a persistence, a regularity, and a backbone organizational infrastructure that was not present in London."[10]

In the end, though, how effective are these tactics? While praising the capacity of certain artistic activism to challenge hegemony and occupy public space, Chantal Mouffe has nonetheless concluded that such practices are not enough in their own right to make a difference (Mouffe 2007). Hangorin no Kai has also admitted its tactics, while playful and provocative as pranks, were ultimately ignored by the mainstream media, such as the *mikoshi* event (Hangorin no Kai 2013). Likewise, for all its potential and verve, the Anti-Olympic Arts Council has not, as of writing, developed into a sustained project with outside collaborators.[11]

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Notes

[1] Somewhat confusingly, there are various smaller "spin-off" groups, or mini project teams, engaged in specific campaigns under, or closely associated with, Hangorin no Kai. For the purposes of this short paper, I will not detail the networked nature of the movement, though it also reflects a trend of confluence in the wider anti-2020 movement, and will for the sake of simplicity designate all activities as part of the Hangorin no Kai movement.
[2] See Hangorin no Kai 2019 for an overview of its arguments against the Olympics.
[3] Hangorin no Kai's website.

[4] The event is viewable here.
[5] Available here.
[6] The video is viewable here.
[7] Kunimoto (2018) suggests that the Anti-Olympic Arts Council is referencing a 1964 group in its naming, but activists told me that this was not the case. She also writes that the theatre artist Takayama Akira is involved, though he told this author that he is not.
[8] While this paper concentrates on Hangorin no Kai and its spin-off teams/projects, the other main anti-2020 protest group, Okotowa Link (No 2020 Olympics Disaster OkotowaLink), also uses parody, such as printing an Olympics "disaster" map flyer and even its name, which is lampooning the IOC as the "International Okotowari Convention" (International No Thank You Convention).
[9] The "auditions" are viewable here.
[10] Going back further, we can find artistic and ludic examples of protests against 1964. See Kunimoto 2018.
[11] The updates from the project are available here.