

# On BankART1929

## **BankART1929: Then and Now**

BankART1929 is a Yokohama City project designed to revitalize the heart of the city by utilizing refurbished historical city buildings for the development of contemporary culture and the arts. The Yokohama City Government covers the utilities and provides rent-free use of the renovated properties that now form the two wings of BankART1929. The central space, informally known as BankART 1929 Yokohama, occupies the former Daiichi Bank building, while the other, BankART Studio NYK, is housed in a defunct warehouse of the Japanese shipping company, Nippon Yusen Kaisha(NYK). Together these spaces comprise 3,000m<sup>2</sup>. The City of Yokohama also underwrites the approximate ¥80,000,000 in annual expenditures for facility operations, janitorial services, security and staffing. BankART at least matches this sum through its own revenues and co-administers the two spaces in conjunction with Yokohama City. Between BankART's two spaces there are ten permanent staff and approximately another ten people who serve as interim and part-time staff. With the initial two-year experimental program now behind us, BankART has expanded into full-scale projects. I would like to document what has been accomplished thus far and where BankART is headed.

## **The Concepts Behind BankART1929**

### **i. origin of the BankART name**

Bank + ART. A neologism for a former bank building transformed for cultural and arts activities. 1929 refers to the year in which the Daiichi Bank building was completed in Yokohama, as well as, the year in which New York's Museum of Modern Art was founded. The year 1929 is also symbolic in that it mark the year in which world panic struck after the stock market crashed and the presence of art became all the more critical in these grim economic times.

### **ii. new possibilities for public-private partnerships**

Because BankART is a public institution in some measure, it strives to ensure access to all citizens. At the same time, its for-profit sector allows it the independence to advance its own groundbreaking projects. In this way, BankART seeks to establish a new model of public and private partnership. Most significant to this model is the active exchange among members on our promotional board. Composed of independent advisors, the committee meets once a month onsite at BankART. It also convenes periodically for more informal meetings at outside venues with representatives both from BankART and the City of Yokohama.

### **iii. instrument for city building**

BankART's investment in culture and the arts is not intended as art for art's sake, but rather culture and the arts for the purpose of city building. It is, in other words, an instrument for city building. The City of Yokohama has offered BankART the freedom to use this instrument well.

### **iv. high degree of freedom**

BankART1929 maintains independence within the private sector from its revenues drawn from the rental of various arts spaces, tuition fees from BankART's school, sales at its pub and café and other ventures. Recently, we have been actively engaged in coordination work as a for-profit enterprise outside of BankART.

### **v. work in progress**

Our management decision to open the entire BankART space within 45 days meant that both its hard and soft sides were still in process. Opening for business with few facilities in place, the pub, shop and school have developed into smooth operations through the input of various individuals and specialists. It is common knowledge that the human infant is born the most immature of all mammals, and indeed like an infant, BankART was born immature and has been instilled with a diversity of knowledge and power along the way.

### **vi. catcher not the pitcher**

While BankART naturally highlights its own projects, it is extremely important to BankART's civic role to take into account proposals from citizens, artists and others, and to the extent possible, assist in their coordination. No proposal that is pitched to BankART is rejected outright and no proposal is returned, providing it is feasible. We maintain an open-door policy and make sure that the exit door is a narrow one.

### **vii. flex space**

Given that the historic Daiichi Bank building was not expressly designed for the arts, from the start the BankART space had almost no capacity for events and exhibitions. We modified the structure by installing a reception desk, a wall structure measuring 2.8 x 3.6 x 0.7 meters, theater lighting and a sound system, all of which are mobile, for the various space requirements of art, dance and other forms of artistic expression.

### **viii. flex time**

In practice, the BankART space is open round the clock year round. This flexibility allows for all-night events as well as opens the space for commercial use, such as for magazine shoots, which helps to circumvent overlapping with BankART's normal hours of operation. Like the Japanese convenience store that utilizes expensive real estate in the heart of the city for its vigorous business, BankART too has naturally evolved toward high-density usage of its space.

### **BankART's Business Framework**

Viewed from the outside, it might appear that BankART1929 is a rather unconventional operation. But given that it manages a reception desk, shop, pub, café, artist studios, lifelong learning courses, and an event planning and coordination business, essentially it is no different than the structure of existing cultural institutions. Why then has BankART attracted so much attention from other cities and from abroad? What makes BankART unique?

BankART's reception desk is one example. At BankART we recognize that the space we occupy is in an historic building that offers a scenic view, making it a community asset for the citizens of Yokohama. Whether or not public events are held here, the space remains open for those who come to take in the architecture or the view. In this way, we are creating an environment that cultivates patrons from among ordinary people. Perhaps the most significant part of this effort is the work of the reception staff engaged in sharing data about BankART's visitors. Through a steady process of soliciting e-mail addresses and feedback from each visitor to the space, such as contacts whom might have introduced a new visitor to BankART, we have taken steps beyond fielding simple inquiries at the desk. We continue to compile e-mail, home and business

addresses into a database that has already approached 35,000 entries. In practice, it is difficult for an institution of BankART's scale to run a reception desk like that of private galleries, thus making it distinct.

The reception desk doubles as the BankART Shop, a bookstore specializing in arts related books. We appointed a specialist in museum shop operations for our purchasing, and while we recognized that doing so meant that we would operate without a profit, we have persevered as the scale of operations has gradually increased. We currently stock some 3,000 items and sales to teachers, arts consultants, curators and other similar parties have similarly increased. Indeed, while these examples of the desk and shop may seem insignificant, they characterize the linkage between BankART's pace of evolution and awareness of economic realities.

Opening for business on the same day as BankART's grand opening, the BankART Pub operates until 11:00 PM year round. As an entrée to events in progress, for studio artists or for before or after school lectures, as well as, for ordinary people with little knowledge of the arts, the pub serves as a crossroad for all of BankART's ventures. In the BankART space, there is the café. In the NYK space, the pub. The pub, like BankART's reception desk, is a one-person operation that doubles as the reception and information desk for the NYK space. The pub offers a menu of unpretentious, moderately priced drinks in the ¥350 range. Monthly sales started at ¥450,000 and currently are in the neighborhood of ¥1,000,000 per month.

The unique aspect of BankART's school is not simply the course offerings so much as its status as an accredited educational institution, albeit a small one. Eight units accumulated over a two-month period earn one credit. Classes meet daily Monday thru Saturday in small groups of no more than twenty people. Featuring more advanced classes at the lifelong learning and graduate levels, the school aspires to serve as a modern-day "temple school," or *terakoya*, a Buddhist educational facility popular in the Edo period (1603-1868) that encouraged high standards and diverse learning. To date, BankART has offered 80 courses to over 1,000 students taught by 241 instructors and guest lecturers. Collaboration among students and between teachers and students is a vital dimension of the program. In a seminar on art criticism, for example, students produce independent works of criticism, and in a photography course, they hold a group exhibition. The classes foster teamwork, and even after these classes come to an end, relationships and artistic exchange continue.

BankART's content business is not limited to circulating catalogues for our exhibitions, but has extended into other publishing activities. If there is an interesting proposal that falls outside our sponsored projects, as stated before, we will endeavor to take it on. We are also active in digital production services. To date, we have completed approximately fifteen discrete projects. Supported by Yokohama city employee volunteers, for instance, we held a contest to name and design the label for a Yokohama brewery's new wheat beer brewed from the legendary pure water of the nearby mountain village of Dōshi in Yamanashi Prefecture that supplies Yokohama with much of its drinking water.

In the BankART NYK space, there are nine 20-80m<sup>2</sup> studios that artists involved in our artist-in-studio project can use in exchange

for two months of course credit. The project invites artists to Yokohama who are willing to participate actively in opening receptions and are available for open studio nights and similar events with the idea that this interaction is nurturing. Because we can now guarantee accommodations, we have also initiated a resident artists program.

Coordination projects represent BankART's greatest asset. Through our space rental business, aid to the press, feedback on publicity materials and input on potentially infeasible projects, we put forth our best efforts to improve the quality of the events themselves. If the content of a proposal is solid, in many cases we offer to provide funding and participate in the planning. Of the 1,000 or so coordination offers BankART receives annually, about one third of them are brought to fruition.

BankART's basic concept is simple—we seek to take Yokohama's cultural assets and make them contemporary. Our mission is to determine how best to tap and expand the existing potential of each asset, be it an historic building, the city, local food, old photographs, or even *butoh* dancer Kazuo Ohno.

#### **BankART1929 and Total Openness**

Now I would like to touch on the concept "Openness = Sharing," which underlies BankART's distinctive concepts and framework that I have just introduced. Borrowing a passage from *Station and Trade* (*Eki to eki, 駅と易*) that documents the opening of BankART:

#### **I would like to think of BankART1929 as a train station.**

(In fact, both of BankART's structures are along the edge of and on the upper portion of Yokohama's Bashamichi Station on the Minato Mirai Subway Line.) I envision BankART as an open space for casually passing time as in a bustling European train station: where people come and go; sip a cup of coffee or down a glass of beer; nap on a bench; where people occasionally get into a fight; where they choose to perform music out in the open. Indeed, Yokohama is still a city of commerce. It is a place of exchange where people come together, where artists are nurtured, goods move in and out, information flows in and out and the economy is vigorous. I would like to transform the economic structure of the city to enable both the doers and the supporters to make a living, and I believe BankART is an experimental site where this can happen.

We would like BankART to be a thoroughly open space. Our objective is to figure out how to develop the operating system of existing museums from the inside out by determining how this institution can be understood and perform. In response to the exhibition "BankART Life: 24 Hours of Hospitality" that ran continuously for 50 days when BankART partnered with the 2005 Yokohama Triennial, a museum curator sent the following message:

Promotional copy at the exhibition reading "Can you stay overnight in the exhibition space?" noted that official Triennial volunteers and artists' assistants could do so, and some actually did stay there at night. Creating a space for relaxation conveyed a particular impression of the Triennial's second exhibition hall, indeed turning it into a relaxed (or perhaps I should say "laid-back") space. In part, of course, this can be attributed to the subject matter of the exhibition, but at the same time, doesn't it also grow out of the distinctive space of the meeting room within an NPO operation? Engagement

with a subject matter in a recreational space conveys an impression to the creators—be they architects, designers or artists however different they are from one another— that tends to loosen the entire structure in which their different elements mix. That is, myriad elements combine contributing to the attainment of relaxation.

Meanwhile, the question “Can you stay overnight in the exhibition space?” also realigns the relationship between art and exhibitions. Because the radicalism seen here is the sort of activity that BankART has engaged in from the beginning, I think it indicates the restiveness as well as the theoretical possibilities of this organization. “BankART Life/Life in BankART” is another example of promotional copy that frequently appeared in the exhibition. I believe this is a cumulative expression of the activities in this space...Partnering with a big event like the Triennial, reworking it and adapting it to BankART’s concepts and the globalizing of BankART’s activities themselves should emerge as something of great meaning.

Yusuke Minami  
Senior Curator, The National Art Center, Tokyo

Regardless of the appropriateness of the word radicalism, it is clear that BankART pushes the boundaries of a public institution by working toward being a fully open space.

#### **BankART1929’s Future Course**

BankART’s experimental projects have been assessed in a variety of ways and have evolved through the stages as described below. During this evolutionary process, we have received guidance from an assessment panel (advancement panel), submitted a three-year plan and have been approved for continuing operations. The following three points outline the evolving goals of our experimental projects to date:

- Spreading awareness the pioneering existence of a creative community project.
- Building a network with other Japanese cities as well as a global one.
- Increasing fiscal independence.

Several projects already have come to fruition along this trajectory. The creators of the Kitanaka Project in the Yokohama neighborhood of the same name, for example, have realized their plans for securing a site for the project’s activities. Last year Mikangumi and other design groups primarily composed of architects, moved their operations to the Honmachi Building across from BankART1929. Planning has also begun for a project that is not limited to a single building but one that connects buildings throughout an entire zone. Other projects also underway include BankART’s involvement in the planning stages of “EIZON,” an imaging exhibition that connects the city to historical structures and “BankART Sakura Villa,” an art and crime-prevention project in cooperation with local residents, government, and police in a former red light district.

In addition, we have started to engage in working actively with other Japanese cities as well as in global networking. Such networking projects include: “BankART Tsumari,” inaugurated to take advantage of opportunities to participate in environmental-related art festivals; lectures by the French architect Dominique Perrault and artist Christian Boltanski; and participation in the San Jose

(USA) global art and technology festival ZERO1 in collaboration with the city of Yokohama and Tokyo University of the Arts.

Recently, the City of Yokohama has started to phase out its funding of BankART annually in 10% increments, and we are seeking ways to make managerial adjustments to increase self-supported earnings while also expanding basic programming and coordination projects outside of BankART.

#### **Conclusion: From Top Down to Bottom Up**

I see BankART1929 as a place of inexhaustible goodwill. From the budgetary and institutional perspectives, I cannot say that on the subject of compensation, it is comparable with other public institutions. But our administrative people are always hard working, our experimental projects enjoy great latitude, and overall, our work is quite thrilling.

Art played a leading role in the formation of the cities of New York and Berlin. Working in concert with their respective private sectors, local and national governments, New York and Berlin increased cultural engagement in even their roughest neighborhoods. But this approach cannot speak for contemporary Japan. We started with the assistance of the Yokohama city government, partnered with the private sector, and then shifted control in that direction—we must take this approach. The problem now is what comes next. Misunderstandings notwithstanding, because of the very concept that is BankART, I believe that disengaging from the public sector is a critical step. Collaborative work with the government will continue hereafter and it is evident that we are working toward maintaining substantial support. But as BankART, it is important that we find the role that best fits BankART, cultivate this role and proceed to make BankART financially viable.

A participant at a symposium addressing Japan’s shift toward a designated manager system in its public institutions remarked, “Art museums created without requisite motivation will disappear from a lack of motivation.” These words challenge BankART’s own existence. BankART1929 has shifted into the second phase of its development. Meanwhile, I have become rather deeply engaged the city, have thought about it, even had my own body somewhat transformed by it, and also have steered clear of animosity, accumulated some experience in the city, and now am moving toward total openness. Simply put, I desire that this work continues.