



Text as Narration: Exhibition Texts and Regimes of Art in Contemporary Japan

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Keywords:

Exhibition texts; Jacques Rancière; Regimes of art; Japanese art museums

ABSTRACT:

This paper examines exhibition texts in contemporary Japanese museums as narrative devices that organize conditions of viewing. Drawing on Jacques Rancière's distribution of the sensible and his three regimes of art (ethical, representative/poetic, aesthetic), it analyzes how curatorial language positions viewers and structures relations to artworks. Situating exhibition texts within Japan's Meiji-era reception and translation of Western art institutions and the concept of *bijutsu*, it presents five case studies of major exhibitions (2019–2025). The analyses show that exhibition texts function not as neutral supplements but as apparatuses that alternately frame works normatively, stabilize art-historical orders, or open indeterminate spaces of perception, often overlapping within a single exhibition.

L'articolo esamina i testi espositivi nei musei giapponesi contemporanei come dispositivi narrativi che organizzano le condizioni della visione. Facendo riferimento alla teoria di Jacques Rancière della distribuzione del sensibile e ai suoi tre regimi dell'arte (etico, rappresentativo/poetico, estetico), si analizza il modo in cui il linguaggio curatoriale posiziona i visitatori e struttura le loro relazioni con le opere. Collocando i testi espositivi nel contesto della ricezione e della traduzione, in epoca Meiji, delle istituzioni artistiche occidentali e del concetto di *bijutsu*, l'articolo presenta cinque casi di studio relativi a importanti mostre (2019–2025). Le analisi rilevano che i testi espositivi non funzionano come semplici supplementi neutrali, bensì come dispositivi che, di volta in volta, inquadrano normativamente le opere, stabilizzano gli ordini storico-artistici, oppure aprono spazi indeterminati della percezione, spesso sovrapponendosi all'interno di una stessa mostra.

Opening Picture:

Exhibition room of "Kenjiro Okazaki". (Museum of Contemporary Art Tokyo). Photograph by the author.

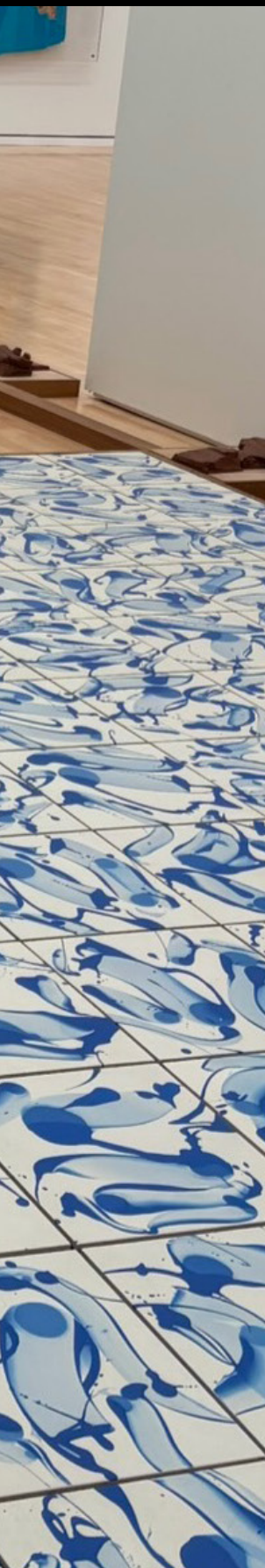
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I. Introduction – Text as “Narration” in the Exhibition Space

Museums have often been regarded as places that privilege the “direct encounter” between viewers and artworks. Accordingly, the question of whether explanatory texts should accompany exhibitions—whether such texts deepen the viewing experience or instead interfere with it—has long been a subject of debate.¹ This paper examines the role of “exhibition texts,” including explanatory panels, wall texts, and captions, in art exhibitions from the perspectives of aesthetics and art theory.

Exhibition texts can function as narrative devices that construct relationships between artworks and viewers and influence the direction and depth of viewing. They are not merely auxiliary explanations or matters of display technique, but provide a framework through which artworks come to appear as “worthy of being seen.” Analyzing exhibition texts therefore makes it possible to reconsider the conditions under which viewing experiences are formed within exhibition spaces.

This paper employs the theory of art proposed by the French philosopher Jacques Rancière—particularly his framework of the three regimes of art—as an analytical tool for examining exhibition texts in contemporary Japanese museums. Rancière distinguishes three regimes: the ethical regime of images, the representative or poetic regime, and the aesthetic regime. These concepts indicate different sensible orders through which objects and experiences may come to be recognized as art.

In this paper, these distinctions are used as an analytical framework for reading how exhibition texts position viewers and structure their relationships to artworks. The theoretical discussion is not an end in itself, but is introduced only insofar as it prepares for the analysis of concrete exhibition practices.

The aim of this paper is to analyze exhibition texts in contemporary Japanese museums from this perspective and to clarify what kinds of conceptions of art and forms of viewing they embody. By focusing on exhibition texts, the paper examines how relationships between artworks and viewers are constructed and what kinds of sensible and institutional arrangements are produced in exhibition spaces.

Previous studies of exhibitions and display practices – exemplified by institutional and cultural analyses such as *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display* – have examined how curatorial strategies and exhibition frameworks reflect power relations, ideologies, and cultural representations.² In addition, with regard to the question of how artworks are described and from what attitude, Georges Didi-Huberman’s art-historical studies – most notably *Devant l’image* – are particularly instructive.³ His analysis of different modes of art-historical writing suggests that the ways in which artworks are described reflect underlying conceptions of what “art” is taken to be, revealing the intellectual and social premises of the writer. Building on these discussions, this paper shifts the analytical focus to a more micro-level element: the exhibition text as it appears within the gallery space.

By doing so, it addresses exhibition texts as sensorial and linguistic apparatuses that mediate aesthetic experience on site.

The five exhibitions examined in this paper were selected with comparability in mind and include national, public, and private museums as well as an international art festival. They encompass a range of exhibition types, including historical art, modern art, and contemporary art, as well as academic exhibitions, exhibitions involving political controversy, and artist-led exhibitions. Through these case studies, the paper aims to examine from multiple angles how exhibition texts can represent different regimes of art.

This paper is structured as follows. Chapter II outlines Rancière's three regimes of art as a minimal theoretical framework. Chapter III examines the historical formation of exhibition texts in Japan. Chapter IV analyzes individual exhibitions as case studies, and Chapter V presents the conclusion.

II. The Three Regimes of Art and the Sensible Order – The Framework of Rancière's Theory

This chapter does not aim to reexamine Jacques Rancière's aesthetic theory in its entirety. Its purpose is instead to clarify a minimal theoretical framework necessary for the analysis of exhibition texts in the following chapters. Accordingly, rather than providing a comprehensive overview of Rancière's arguments, the discussion below is limited to those concepts that are particularly useful for examining the relationship between texts and

viewing experience in exhibition spaces.

Rancière's distinction among the three regimes of art—the ethical regime of images, the poetic or representative regime, and the aesthetic regime—offers a framework for understanding how artworks are rendered visible and how certain objects or experiences come to be perceived as “art.” In this chapter, these regimes are employed as analytical tools for examining how exhibition texts assign positions to viewers and structure their relationships to artworks.

II.1. The Ethical Regime – The Moral Function of Images

In the “ethical regime of images” (*régime éthique des images*), art does not yet exist as an autonomous domain.⁴ Images are understood in terms of their effects on individual and collective conduct, and their value is assessed according to their social, moral, or educational consequences. Rancière identifies Plato's suspicion toward poetry and mimetic images—on the grounds that they might disrupt the moral order of the city—as a paradigmatic example of this regime.

Within the ethical regime, images are evaluated by both the truth they convey and the uses to which they are put. For instance, poetic images may be judged according to how they educate children or citizens and how they are incorporated into the distribution of social roles within the city-state. In this sense, images are inseparable from judgments concerning their origin, purpose, and effects.

From this perspective, exhibition texts function as normative discourse. They assign moral, social, or educational meanings to artworks and guide viewers toward specific interpretations. In the ethical regime, exhibition texts do not simply accompany works but actively shape the viewer's attitude and understanding by situating artworks within a framework of ethical evaluation.

II.2. The Representative (Poetic) Regime – The Order and Hierarchy of Mimesis

The “representative” or “poetic” regime (*régime représentatif ou poétique*), which Rancière traces back to Aristotelian theories of mimesis, was consolidated during the classical age.⁵ In this regime, the arts are distinguished from other forms of activity as systems of techniques organized around imitation (*mimesis*) and production (*poiesis*). Within this system, artworks are further ordered according to hierarchies of genre, subject matter, and style.

These internal hierarchies—such as the distinction between elevated historical subjects and everyday themes—correspond analogically to social and political hierarchies, and thus tend to reaffirm existing forms of domination. Art is organized according to rules that prescribe what may be represented, how it should be represented, and for whom.

Within this regime, exhibition texts appear as discourses that situate artworks within an art-historical order. To place a work within a historical or stylistic context is itself a political operation in Rancière's sense, insofar as it produces specific rela-

tions of visibility and invisibility. Explanatory texts that emphasize authorship, date, school, or stylistic classification genealogize artworks and assign viewers a “proper” position from which to see. Academic and ostensibly objective descriptions commonly used in museum exhibitions belong to this representative regime. Here, exhibition texts fix meaning and reproduce hierarchical order within the exhibition space.

II.3. The Aesthetic Regime – The Emergence of Sensory Equality and Freedom

According to Rancière, the “aesthetic regime of art” (*régime esthétique de l'art*), which emerges in the late eighteenth century, characterizes modern art in opposition to the representative regime.⁶ With the rise of aesthetics as a discourse, the plurality of the beaux-arts is replaced by the singular concept of art (*l'art*). In this regime, art is no longer identified by the nobility of its subject matter or the correctness of imitation, but by its belonging to a specific sensible order.

In the aesthetic regime, the sensible is detached from ordinary functional relations and is instead associated with a suspension or displacement of habitual modes of perception. Artistic experience is constituted at the intersection between the disquiet or indeterminacy produced by the work and the free and equal sensibility of the viewer. Art is thus defined not by rules of representation, but by a reconfiguration of sensible experience.

This structure is exemplified by Friedrich Schiller's concept of the “aesthetic state,” which Rancière re-

peatedly invokes as a key reference for understanding the aesthetic regime.⁷ In *On the Aesthetic Education of Man* (1795), Schiller describes aesthetic experience as a suspension of determination, a state of “free play”.⁸

Referring to this formulation, Rancière writes that the same statue may or may not be art—or may be art differently—depending on the regime of identification through which it is apprehended.⁹ In the aesthetic regime, the work is identified as art not by a difference in manner of making, but by a difference in manner of being.

In this sense, Schiller’s aesthetic education provides an important conceptual background for Rancière’s account of the aesthetic regime as a sensible configuration that anticipates freedom and equality.

In the context of exhibition texts, the aesthetic regime appears when language does not guide interpretation or fix meaning, but instead opens a space for perception and thought. Words may be restrained or presented in fragmentary, poetic form, functioning not as explanations but as prompts that activate the viewer’s sensibility.

II.4. Correspondence Between Regimes of Art and Exhibition Texts

On the basis of this framework, exhibition texts can be understood as assuming different functions corresponding to each regime of art:

Ethical regime of images: normative or educational narration (e.g., the presentation of moral or social values)

Representative regime of the arts:

scholarly and hierarchical narration (e.g., the fixation of art-historical contexts)

Aesthetic regime of art: poetic or restrained narration (e.g., fragmentary texts that suspend meaning)

Seen in this way, exhibition texts are not merely explanations attached to artworks, but sites of narration that represent regimes of art. In actual exhibition spaces, these regimes do not necessarily appear in pure or isolated form. Rather, exhibition texts may combine elements from multiple regimes, giving rise to overlaps or tensions and potentially affecting the viewer’s position.

Based on this theoretical framework, the following chapter examines the historical formation of exhibition texts in Japan and considers how translation has shaped their distinctive characteristics.

III. The Translational Character of Exhibition Texts in Japan

This chapter applies the theoretical framework outlined in the previous chapter to the historical formation of exhibition texts in Japan. In particular, it examines how exhibition texts in Japanese museums have configured the relationship between artworks and viewers through the process of receiving Western modern art institutions.

The specificity of exhibition texts in Japan is closely connected to the process by which the Western concept of “art” was introduced. In other words, the institutions of art and museums in Japan took shape during the Meiji period through the reception and translation of Western systems.



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Here, “translation” does not refer simply to linguistic substitution or institutional imitation. Rather, it denotes a cultural practice that mediates between different sensible orders. Exhibition spaces can therefore be understood as sites where institutions, language, and sensibility intersect. Words placed within exhibition spaces visualize the friction between the cultural contexts to which artworks belong and the frameworks through which viewers encounter them. In early Meiji exhibitions, for example, there were cases in which texts explicitly instructed viewers how to look at displayed objects.¹⁰ Exhibition texts thus functioned as sites of sensory negotiation shaped through translation.

The Japanese term *bijutsu* (美術, “art”) was introduced as a translation of the German terms *Kunstgewerbe*, *Bildende Kunst* during the process of classifying exhibits for Japan’s participation in the Vien-

na World Exposition of 1873.¹¹ This does not imply that artistic practices or cultures of appreciation were absent in premodern Japan.¹² Rather, *bijutsu* emerged through an adjustment between institutional distinctions based on Western academism—particularly the separation between fine art and craft—and existing Japanese conceptions of artistic production and appreciation. Building on Kitazawa’s historical analysis, this paper understands *bijutsu* itself as having emerged through a process that can be described as cultural translation.

Exhibition texts were likewise formed upon this translated institutional foundation.

Even prior to modernity, forms of textual mediation comparable to exhibition texts existed in Japanese viewing culture. One such example is *gasan* (画讚), inscriptions written directly on paintings to praise or comment on the work. In many

Fig. 1: Exhibition panel for “From Where Do We View Western Painting? — From the Renaissance to Impressionism: The San Diego Museum of Art vs. The National Museum of Western Art”, “Early Netherlandish Painting and Spain”. Image © Norihiro Ueno. Courtesy of the National Museum of Western Art.

cases, these inscriptions were not authored solely by the painter but were added by multiple individuals, opening a dialogic mode of viewing through text itself. Against the background of learned culture at the time, *gasan* constituted a space distinct from both the representative regime and the aesthetic regime as theorized by Rancière.

Following Japan's participation in the Vienna Exposition, however, text and image gradually became separated.¹³ From the Meiji period onward, exhibition texts were fundamentally organized in accordance with Western art institutions. Photographs of early Meiji exhibition halls suggest that exhibition texts were limited to minimal information.¹⁴ In this sense, viewers were required to engage in a relatively self-directed mode of viewing, less mediated by textual information. Over time, however, viewers increasingly came to be positioned as spectators guided by external texts.

In recent years, with the spread of dialogic viewing practices and participatory exhibitions, exhibition texts have shifted toward modes of narration that appear to grant viewers a greater degree of agency. Nevertheless, insofar as these texts maintain an objective stance toward artworks, their basic structure remains continuous with the translated exhibition culture established during the Meiji period.

In sum, the specificity of exhibition texts in Japan lies in the fact that they are themselves a translated cultural form. The textual configuration through which artworks and viewers were brought into relation was introduced together with institutional frameworks in the Meiji

period and can be said to have remained, in its basic structure, largely unchanged to the present.

IV. Case Studies: Exhibition Narratives and Regimes of Art

This chapter examines exhibition texts in five exhibitions held in contemporary Japan, using Jacques Rancière's three regimes of art—the ethical, the representative, and the aesthetic—as analytical reference points. Each of the exhibitions analyzed here was organized on a relatively large scale and attracted a broad public audience, making them suitable for comparative analysis.

The exhibitions selected are: *Where Do We Look in Western Painting?* (2025) at the National Museum of Western Art; *After "Freedom of Expression?"* (2019) at the Aichi Triennale; *Van Gogh Impact* (2025) at the Pola Museum of Art; *Kenjiro Okazaki: Jikon Jigo* (2025) at the Museum of Contemporary Art Tokyo; and *Opening Documents, Weaving Memories* (2025), a collection-based exhibition at the National Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo.

By comparing how exhibition texts are positioned within each display and how they guide or suspend the viewer's gaze, this chapter clarifies how exhibition texts give form to particular regimes of art. Rather than treating exhibition texts as neutral explanations, the analysis focuses on how their narrative structures participate in organizing the relationship between artworks and viewers within the exhibition space.

IV.1. National Museum of Western Art, *Where Do We Look in Western Painting?* – Scholarly Narration in the Representative Regime

Held at the National Museum of Western Art, *Where Do We Look in Western Painting? — From the Renaissance to Impressionism: The San Diego Museum of Art vs. The National Museum of Western Art* (2025) exemplifies the representative regime in that it foregrounds an academic mode of narration.¹⁵ Drawing on works from both collections, the exhibition sought to present historically grounded perspectives on Western painting and to outline the development of art history. The galleries were organized by period and region, and each section was introduced by large explanatory panels placed at the entrances (fig. 1).

What is notable in this exhibition is that the texts consistently functioned to situate artworks within an established art-historical order. Standing before a work, the viewer was already instructed by the text in how to look, and that act of looking was framed within the bounds of historical knowledge. In Rancière's representative regime, art is systematized according to the logic of mimesis and poesis, and works are positioned within hierarchies that correspond analogically to social and political orders. The exhibition texts extended this logic: meaning was stabilized through references to technique, chronology, and stylistic development, and the viewer's sensible experience was structured as a process of learning the "proper" way to see.

In this sense, the texts operated as mechanisms that managed the

viewer's gaze and redistributed it within an institutional framework. The explanatory panels did not merely supplement the artworks but actively organized their visibility, reproducing the representative regime's emphasis on order, classification, and historical continuity. The exhibition thus provides a clear example of scholarly narration functioning within the representative regime.

At the same time, however, the exhibition did not simply reproduce academic art history in a closed manner. Throughout the galleries, the texts repeatedly posed questions concerning "where" and "how" one looks at Western painting (fig. 2).

By explicitly addressing the viewer's standpoint, the exhibition subtly encouraged reflection on the act of viewing itself. Within the representative order, this reflexive gesture introduced an element associated with the aesthetic regime: an awareness that one's position as a viewer is not fixed but could be otherwise.

The texts therefore sustained the historical and scholarly framework while simultaneously opening a space for critical self-reflection. Rather than overturning the representative regime, they operated within it while exposing its conditions. In this way, the exhibition texts functioned not only as instruments of art-historical instruction but also as sites where the limits and presuppositions of that instruction became perceptible.



IV.2. Aichi Triennale, *After “Freedom of Expression?”* — The Ethical Regime and its Fissures

The exhibition *After “Freedom of Expression?”* (2019), presented within the framework of the Aichi Triennale, foregrounded the ethical dimensions of exhibition texts by situating artworks within explicit social and political controversies.¹⁶

The exhibition addressed issues of censorship, historical memory, and freedom of expression, and in doing so made the normative function of exhibition texts particularly visible.

The works included in this exhibition were ones whose display had previously been suspended or canceled due to censorship. The exhibition texts did not primarily function to situate the works within an art-historical genealogy. Rather, they functioned as mediating devices that framed the works in relation to social values, public responsibility, and institutional accountability.

Wall texts and explanatory panels clarified the circumstances surrounding the suspension of the display, explained the positions of the organizers, and outlined the ethical stakes involved. In this sense, the texts operated within the ethical regime of images, where the value of images is assessed according to their effects on collective conduct and social order (fig. 3).

At the same time, the exhibition space also revealed tensions between ethical narration and aesthetic experience. While the texts sought to provide contextual explanation and moral justification, they also risked constraining the viewer’s engagement by predefining the terms under which the works were to be understood. The viewer was positioned less as a free interpreter of artworks than as a subject invited to recognize the legitimacy of a particular ethical framework.

Fig.2: Exhibition panel for “*From Where Do We View Western Painting? — From the Renaissance to Impressionism: The San Diego Museum of Art vs. The National Museum of Western Art*”, “*Why Are These Painting Not Square?*”. Image © Norihiro Ueno. Courtesy of the National Museum of Western Art.



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However, this ethical framing did not entirely suppress aesthetic ambiguity. In several cases, the coexistence of strongly directive texts and materially heterogeneous works generated moments of friction. These moments exposed the limits of ethical narration and suggested the possibility of slippage toward the aesthetic regime, where meaning is not fully determined in advance. The exhibition thus made perceptible the instability of ethical discourse when confronted with the irreducibility of sensory experience.

In this respect, *After “Freedom of Expression?”* demonstrates how exhibition texts can become sites of conflict between regimes of art. While predominantly structured by ethical narration, the exhibition also revealed how such narration is continually challenged by the sensorial presence of artworks and by the diversity of viewers’ responses.

The exhibition space functioned not as a harmonious field of consensus but as a place where the ethical and aesthetic dimensions of art remain in unresolved tension.

IV.3. Pola Museum of Art, *Van Gogh Impact* – Art-Historical Narration and Structures of Reception

This section examines *Van Gogh Impact: The Genesis of Passion* (2025), held at the Pola Museum of Art, in order to analyze how exhibition texts mediate historical contexts and thereby configure the relationship between artworks and viewers.¹⁷ Rather than simply presenting the life and works of Vincent van Gogh, the exhibition focused on how the image of Van Gogh has been formed and received, visualizing his reception history through a combination of artworks and documentary materials.

Fig.3: Explanatory panel displayed at the entrance of the exhibition room for *Aichi Triennale: “After ‘Freedom of Expression?’”*, titled “New Developments Concerning Censorship.” Photograph by the author.

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Fig.4:
Words of Van
Gogh inscribed
on the exhibition
wall. (Pola Muse-
um of Art)
Photograph by
the author.

In particular, the section addressing the prewar “Van Gogh boom” in Japan presented quotations from artists and critics, including figures associated with the *Shirakaba* group. Through these texts and archival materials, the exhibition showed how Van Gogh’s life and personality came to be interpreted as symbols of individuality and passion within specific historical and cultural contexts.

In this configuration, exhibition texts did not mythologize Van Gogh but presented him as an artist whose significance had been produced through historically situated discourses. Viewers were positioned not only as subjects who directly encounter artworks, but also as subjects who retrace the narratives through which the image of Van Gogh had been constructed. By situating works within art-historical and cultural-historical frameworks, the explanatory texts organized

viewing as a process of contextual understanding.

At the same time, the exhibition incorporated a different mode of language. In addition to explanatory panels and captions, Van Gogh’s own words were displayed in large stenciled lettering on the gallery walls. These wall texts emphasized visual aspects such as scale and placement, presenting language not primarily as information to be read, but as an element of spatial composition (fig. 4).

Perceived fragmentarily through viewers’ bodily movement and shifting lines of sight, these texts offered an experience distinct from that of explanatory reading. While the panels guided historical understanding, the wall texts evoked traces of Van Gogh’s thoughts and emotions, functioning less to fix meaning than to prompt sensory and imaginative engagement.

Through the juxtaposition of explanatory texts and sensorial language, the exhibition structured viewing experience in a dual manner. Viewers were organized both as subjects who interpret artworks through historical narratives and as sensorial subjects encountering fragments of language whose meanings were not fully determined. This configuration allowed viewers to move between contextual understanding and immediate perception.

Furthermore, works by contemporary artists engaging with Van Gogh reinforced this structure. Van Gogh appeared not as a fixed figure, but as an image continually reconfigured through acts of quotation and reinterpretation. In this sense, the exhibition texts operated within the representative regime by organizing reception history, while simultaneously introducing a degree of indeterminacy associated with the aesthetic regime. Rather than determining meaning in a univocal way, the texts functioned as devices that drew attention to the narrative conditions through which understanding itself is formed.

IV.4. Museum of Contemporary Art Tokyo, Kenjiro Okazaki: 而今而後 *Time Unfolding Here - Poetic Captions in the Aesthetic Regime*

This section examines *Kenjiro Okazaki: 而今而後* (Jikon Jigo “Hereafter”) *Time Unfolding Here* (2025), held at the Museum of Contemporary Art Tokyo, focusing on how exhibition texts intervene in viewers’ sensorial experience and orient processes of meaning formation.¹⁸ Active across painting, sculpture, architecture, criticism, and design, Okazaki’s practice is characterized

by the intersection of philosophical reflection and perceptual experience, a quality that was reflected in the exhibition’s textual strategies.

Notably, the captions in this exhibition were written by the artist himself. As a result, while explanatory captions remained present, the exhibition texts exceeded the conventional explanatory function typically associated with museum captions and instead participated in the formation of a poetic field that depended on the viewer’s engagement. In several cases, abstract paintings were accompanied by unusually long titles composed as narrative fragments.¹⁹ These texts incorporated descriptive imagery and temporal shifts, unfolding like prose poems rather than offering information directly related to the visual properties of the works.

Encountering these texts, viewers were drawn into a narrative illusion without being instructed how to relate the text to the artwork. As seen in the example above, Okazaki’s titles themselves operate as language that actively invites such interpretive engagement. Captions neither explained the works nor stabilized interpretation; in some cases, their placement—deliberately offset from the viewer’s primary line of sight—introduced a slight disjunction that prompted viewers to discover the resonance between text and image on their own terms (fig. 5).

In this configuration, exhibition texts functioned not to fix meaning but to invite interpretive movement, encouraging viewers to negotiate the relation between text and image without prescribed resolution.

Through these strategies, the exhibition texts departed from the tra-

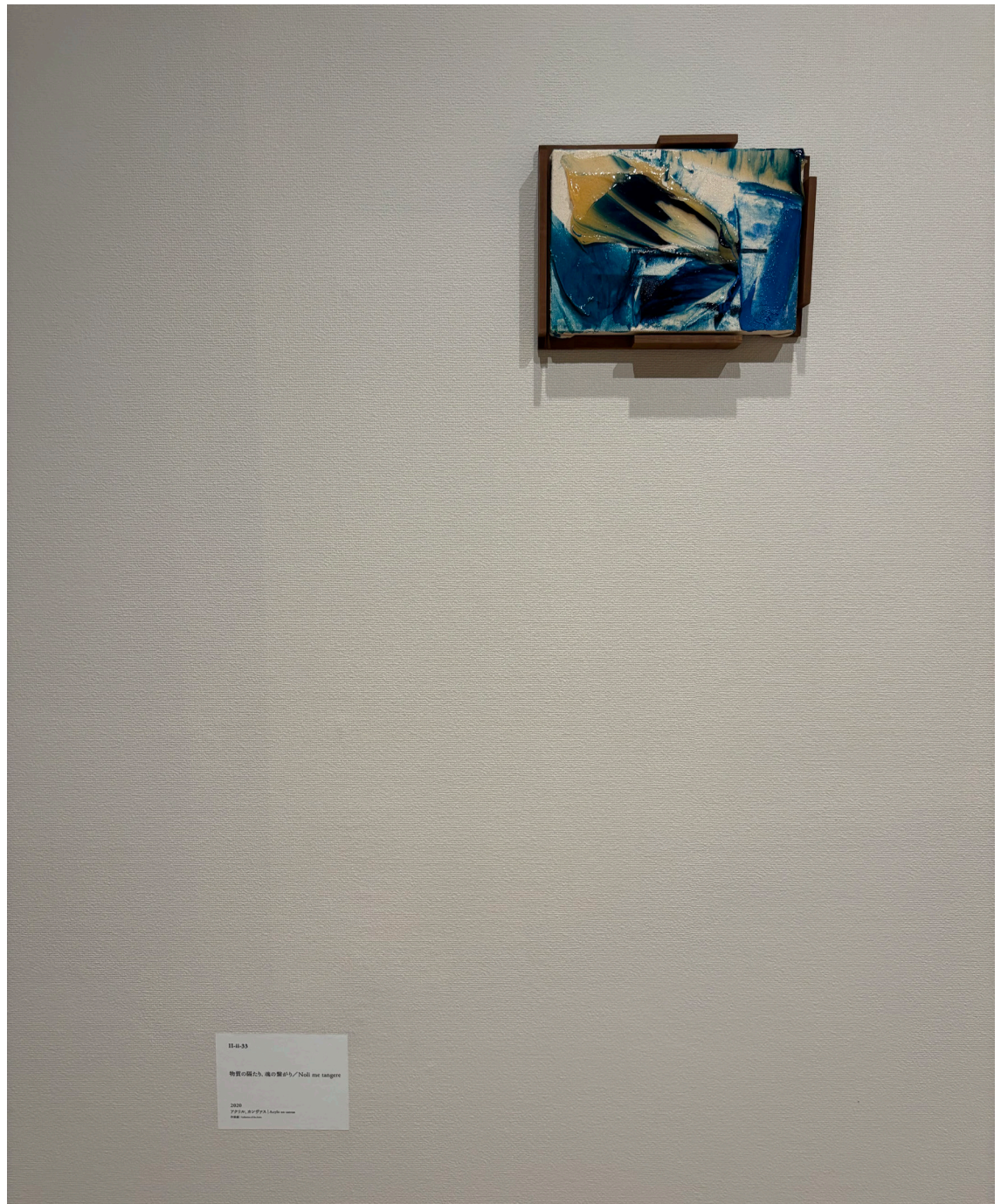


Fig. 5: Exhibition room of “Kenjiro Okazaki”. (Museum of Contemporary Art Tokyo) A small caption is placed at the lower left of the artwork. Photograph by the author.

ditional museum functions of education and explanation, stimulating viewers’ thought and sensibility through uncertainty and temporal suspension. Rather than organizing viewing through predefined knowledge, they oriented experience without determining it, allowing attention to oscillate between language and visual form.

In this sense, the texts functioned not as authoritative commentary but as catalysts for interpretation, structuring viewing as an open-ended process. Viewers were thus positioned not as “stultified” beings in need of instruction, but as “emancipated spectators” invited to interpret actively for themselves.²⁰

IV.5. National Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo, *Opening Documents, Weaving Memories* – Overlapping Regimes

This section examines *Opening Documents, Weaving Memories: A Special Exhibition Featuring Works from the Museum Collection* (2025), held at the National Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo, focusing on how exhibition texts situate artworks and structure the relationship demanded of viewers. The exhibition reconsidered the relationship between Japanese society and art from the prewar through the postwar period through the perspectives of “documents” and “memories.”²¹ By juxtaposing paintings, photographs, films, and documentary materials, it articulated a position that understands artworks not as autonomous expressions but as media that mediate historically situated gazes and values—a stance made explicit by an opening wall text stating that paintings themselves function as media.

A representative example appears in the captions accompanying a landscape painting of Manchuria from the 1930s. The work was positioned within an art-historical genealogy through references to Millet, while simultaneously being reread as an image that rendered Japan’s continental expansion visible. The exhibition texts thus relativized a purely aesthetic mode of viewing and indicated the work’s entanglement with contemporary social and political desires, thereby allowing the image to appear as both an art-historical object and a record of ideology.

This operation continued in the



display of Ichiro Fukuzawa’s *Cow* (1936), where the accompanying text proposed a reading that foregrounded the discrepancy between colonial ideals and historical realities. Here, exhibition texts shifted viewing away from a self-contained aesthetic experience toward a narration that placed the viewer’s ethical position in question.

A similar structure can be observed in the exhibition’s engagement with war record paintings. Exhibition texts situated these works within Japanese art history while also rendering visible the social functions they performed under the wartime regime. For example, *Night Attack on Tulagi* (1943) was linked through caption text to representations of

Fig. 6: Exhibition room of “*Opening Documents, Weaving Memories*” (The National Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo). A copy of a 1943 *Asahi Shimbun* article introducing Tsuguharu Fujita’s *The Battle of Attu* is posted on the wall. Photograph by the author.

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fire in the twelfth-century *Ban Dainagon Emaki*, requiring viewers to read the image simultaneously as expression and record. In another instance, near the wall where *Gyokusai at Attu Island* (1943) was displayed, copies of contemporary newspaper articles were posted, making visible the divergence between the work's reception at the time of its exhibition and contemporary ways of viewing war paintings (fig. 6).

Through these configurations, the exhibition texts employed narration grounded in the representative regime while opening viewers toward an understanding of artworks as images situated within the ethical regime of their time. The exhibition space thus made visible the inseparability of aesthetic judgment and ethical questioning concerning the social effects of images. Exhibition texts articulated tensions between reading records, tracing memory, and aesthetic viewing, repositioning the viewer as a subject who participates in the narrative by reading images.

Across these five case studies, exhibition texts have been shown to function not as auxiliary information but as linguistic practices that organize the conditions of viewing in different ways. Rather than fixing meaning, they orient viewers' positions, attitudes, and interpretive possibilities within exhibition spaces. These cases also demonstrate that exhibition texts do not belong exclusively to a single regime of art; instead, multiple regimes intersect in practice, shaping how viewers emerge as subjects of perception and judgment. The following chap-

ter takes up these observations to consider how exhibition texts relate to the three regimes of art in a more systematic manner.

V. Conclusion

Through the analyses undertaken in Chapters III and IV, this paper has shown that texts in museum exhibitions are not merely language that supplements or explains the meaning of artworks, but practices that shape the conditions of viewing experience. These analyses indicate that approaching exhibition texts as apparatuses that organize what is seen and how it is seen offers a productive perspective for understanding museum exhibitions.

On this basis, this chapter reconsiders how exhibition texts relate to the three regimes of art and clarifies the modes of transition and overlap that emerge between them, thereby drawing the conclusion of this paper.

V.1 Japanese Exhibition Contexts and the Problem of Translation

When the functions of exhibition texts discussed in this study are considered within the context of exhibition culture in Japan, the issue of "translation" acquires renewed significance. Modern museum exhibitions in Japan were established through the reception of Western art institutions; however, this process did not consist of a simple transfer of institutional forms. Rather, it constituted a translational practice that mediated and reconfigured different sensible orders. Exhibition texts were a key apparatus in this

process: by naming and classifying objects and by addressing visitors in an institutionally sanctioned mode of viewing, they organized both what could appear as art and who could appear as its spectator.

From the outset of modern exhibition culture in Japan, operations associated with the representative regime were introduced through translation. Yet this regime did not take hold as a single, stable order. Instead, it was formed through tensions with existing cultures of viewing and sensibility. Within this process, exhibition texts functioned both as language that objectively describes works and as normative discourse that assigns a position to the viewer.

V.2 Closing Remarks

This paper has reconsidered exhibition texts not as auxiliary explanations attached to artworks, but as forms of narration that organize sensible relations within the exhibition space. Using the framework of Jacques Rancière's three regimes of art, it has examined how exhibition texts may operate in different ways depending on the regime with which they are aligned.

The discussion may be organized by distinguishing three functions that exhibition texts can assume in relation to Rancière's regimes of art. Under the ethical regime, exhibition texts may anchor artworks within social or moral frameworks. Under the representative regime, they may situate artworks within historical orders and guide the spectator's gaze. Within the aesthetic regime, they may depart from explanatory narration and appear as fragments

that suspend the determination of meaning and open a space of sensory equality.

Rancière characterizes these regimes as distinct paradigms with different logics of visibility. At the same time, the case studies examined in this paper suggest that exhibition spaces may present configurations in which operations associated with different regimes intersect or overlap in practice. Rather than yielding a single model of exhibition text, the analyses have demonstrated variations shaped by institutional, historical, and curatorial contexts.

Within the public space of the museum, exhibition texts participate in organizing what appears as visible and how viewers are positioned in relation to artworks. In this sense, exhibition practices may be understood as engaging with the distribution of the sensible, insofar as they shape relations between visibility, discourse, and spectatorship. Exhibition is therefore not merely the act of displaying works, but a practice concerned with the configuration of these relations.

Today, museums are increasingly discussed as public spaces in which diverse languages and sensibilities intersect.²² In this context, the task of exhibition texts does not lie in a binary choice between speaking and remaining silent, but in the structures of narration through which viewing experience is organized. When exhibition texts participate in reconfiguring sensible relations, the exhibition space can become a site in which society reflects on its own modes of perception through art.

Endnotes:

- 1 See the following reference for a discussion of art and museums from political and social perspectives: Duncan 1995.
- 2 Karp, Lavine 1991. This volume represents a foundational body of scholarship that examines exhibitions as institutional and cultural practices, focusing on how display strategies participate in the construction of power relations and cultural meanings.
- 3 Didi-Huberman 1990. Didi-Huberman's work is particularly relevant for its attention to the problem of description and narrative stance in art-historical writing, highlighting how modes of textual articulation reflect specific assumptions about what constitutes "art."
- 4 Rancière 2000, p. 28.
- 5 Rancière 2000, p. 30.
- 6 In *Le partage du sensible* (Rancière 2000, p. 31), Rancière refers to the system as *esthétique des arts* ("the aesthetics of the arts," plural). However, in *Malaise dans l'esthétique* (2004, p. 17), where he classifies the three regimes of art, he employs the singular form *régime esthétique de l'art* ("the aesthetic regime of art"). The latter—using *l'art* in the singular—more accurately expresses the conceptual scope of Rancière's theory.
- 7 Rancière 2000, p. 32.
- 8 Rancière 2000, p. 39. See Schiller [1795] 1982..
- 9 Rancière 2004, p. 43.
- 10 Furuta 1996, pp. 42–43.
- 11 Kitazawa 2010, pp. 147-150. For detailed studies on the negotiation between Western and Japanese modernities through the notion of "art," see Kitazawa 2010; Kinoshita 1993; Sato 1996.
- 12 According to Furuta, exhibitions that assemble works in a single location and present them to the public can be traced back to the Muromachi period as a proto-form of display. In the Edo period, practices such as *kaichō* (public showings of temple treasures), product exhibitions (*bussankai*), and gatherings and displays of calligraphy and painting (*shogakai* and *shoga tenkan*) developed as exhibitionary forms that would later lead to the modern exhibition. See Furuta 2014, pp. 31-33.
- 13 As the Japanese government held several iterations of the National Industrial Exhibition—an event that could be regarded as a domestic counterpart to the World Expositions—the initially unified categories of painting and calligraphy gradually became separated over time. See: Yanagida 2023.
- 14 See Tokyo National Museum 1992.
- 15 The Japanese title of this exhibition has been translated by the author because its meaning does not exactly match the official English title; the same applies to *Van Gogh Impact*. This reflects the view that titles, too, are a form of text. For official English titles, see *Emulation and Admiration ... 2025*; *A renewal of Passion... 2025*.
- 16 For installation views, see Bijutsu Techo, "Aichi Triennale 2019's After 'Freedom of Expression?': Nagoya Mayor Requests Removal of Statue of a Girl of Peace," August 2, 2019, <https://bijutsutecho.com/magazine/news/headline/20275>. (accessed October 14, 2025)
- 17 *A Renewal of Passion... 2025*.
- 18 *Kenjiro Okazaki... 2025*.
- 19 For example, one of the works bears the following title:
Heads poking out, a shape with lion body and man's head. A gaze blank and pitiless as the sun. Embankment crowded, a vast image troubles my sight. Everyone shouting, voices affectionate, half-crying. We're all gonna die. Darkness drops again. I heard ducks floating.

Black rocks absorbed light. Was I all along born on the far shore? Cave pitch dark. Colors fade. Stretch out a hand. World already ended. Spread legs. Never to perish again. Only a presence – the subtle movement of air as someone searched. Solely ephemeral presence lingers. I remember who I am. Earthquake shook. Sun black as sackcloth. Moon like blood. Stars fell to earth, fig tree dropping unripe fruit. Sky split apart, mountains and islands moved. Kings, slaves shouted, "Hide us from the throne, from the Lamb's wrath." Their day has come. I'm gonna faint!

Refer to the exhibition website for images of the relevant works. <https://www.mot-art-museum.jp/en/exhibitions/kenjiro/>. (accessed October 14, 2025)

20 Rancière 2008, pp. 17-20.

21 For the curators' overview of the exhibition, see the official exhibition website: <https://www.momat.go.jp/en/exhibitions/563>. (accessed October 14, 2025)

22 International Council of Museums (ICOM), "Museum Definition – Standards & Guidelines," 24 Aug. 2022, <https://icom.museum/en/resources/standards-guidelines/museum-definition/> (accessed 14 Oct. 2025).

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