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Combining Sequential Art and Research Communication

Reflections on the Creation of a ‘Manga Project Report’ on Creative Collaboration Practices

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Kombination von sequenzieller Kunst und Forschungskommunikation. Reflexion der Erstellung eines „Manga-Projektberichts“ zu kreativen Kooperationspraktiken

Abstract: Dieser Beitrag reflektiert die Erstellung eines im Manga-Stil gestalteten Projektberichts für ein vom AHRC gefördertes britisch-japanisches Forschungsnetzwerk. Das Projekt untersucht gruppenbasierte kreative Praktiken und konzeptualisiert sie unter dem Begriff „relationale Kreativität“. Unter Einsatz sequenzieller Kunst als Methode und Medium stellt es individualistische Kreativitätsnarrative durch die Zusammenarbeit zwischen Forschenden und einer japanischen Manga-Künstlerin infrage.

Keywords: Kreativität, Kollaboration, Forschungskommunikation, Manga, Japan
(Übersetzt mit DeepL.com und bearbeitet von Victoria Hegner)

The following manga was created as a project report on the activities of a research network called *Relational Creativities in East Asia*, which was funded by a UKRI AHRC Networking Scheme award from 2020–2023. The network convened to study the meaning and impact of creative practices, specifically those conducted in groups. We asked: what do people get out of group-based or dyadic creative practices?

This initial question emerged from fieldwork reflections in Japan, but it is also part of a broader query about what forms of creativity need more than one person, and what happens to creativity when it is practiced in groups of two or more. We developed the concept of relational creativity from these initial questions to think about collaborative forms of creativity. The theoretical foundation for how we define this kind of group-based relationality draws from Georg Simmel’s sociological insight that interaction among three or more individuals – what he terms a “triad” – produces qualitatively different social possibilities than those found in individual or paired relations (Simmel 1971). Within a triad, the relationships are not only multiplied but begin to take on a life of their own; even if one member exits, the remaining connection and memory of the third still influences the group’s shared meanings and norms. In simpler terms, Simmel proposes that while individuals and dyads may yield personal insights, it is the triad that truly opens the door to what we might call ‘social life’.

In examining this question, we hoped to challenge older Eurocentric narratives that celebrate the lone creator as the ultimate symbol of vision and independence (Ingold/Hallam 2008). Yet, we faced several puzzles in our examination of creative practices in East Asia. For instance, as Leach and Stevens (2020: 95) remind us, in the eyes of most social researchers “all human creativity is collaborative and social” to a certain degree. This view is echoed across interdisciplinary research, with growing emphasis on the roles of collaboration (Littleton/Miell 2004), improvisation (Ingold/Hallam 2008), and social networks (Cattani et al. 2013) in shaping creative processes. Yet, while these dynamics are acknowledged, there remains a need to better understand the varied social configurations through which such relational creativity emerges. Extending this idea, our project explored how these creative processes unfold through similar group-based dynamics – where creativity gains significance beyond the contributions of any single participant. We explored forms of creativity deeply rooted in the presence and engagement of others, including making music, writing poetry, designing images, constructing model environments, or choreographing. Moreover, we applied this same lens to ourselves, as research collaborators and creative actors who provoked, responded to, and shaped one another’s actions within the network.

The network began from a focus on Japan, where group-based creative practice is a common activity. We drew inspiration from the Japanese *sākuru*, a borrowed term derived from the English word “circle”, which refers to groups of people who share common interests or goals. Over the course of the funded period, we inquired how the concept of relational creativity could illuminate the ways creative practices shape relationships and other social forms, both institutional and informal, through a series of case studies of amateur and professional creative collaboration across East Asia.

Creative Rationale: Why Use Manga to Report to Communicate Research on Creativity?

The idea of creating a manga project report on the network’s activities arose from the pre-established collaborative work of one of our participating researchers, Christoph Schimkowsky, and manga artist and illustrator Amaebi (Schimkowsky 2022a). Much like comics, manga is a form of sequential art that combines visual storytelling with textual narration. Although manga has become a globally successful art form, it originated in Japan and is thus the product of a media history and artistic conventions that are – partially – separate from that of “Western” comics (Napier 2011). At first glance, these differences are evident from the characteristic right-to-left reading order of panels and predominantly black-and-white artwork. Still, much like comics, manga is a versatile medium encompassing a wide variety of genres and visual styles.

Given the research network’s focus on creativity in East Asia, manga emerged as an almost obvious choice when considering a format for the network project re-

port. Manga (and related local forms such as *manhua* in Chinese-speaking countries) represent an important media genre in Japan and the wider East Asian region. As an emic form of popular art and culture, manga was thus well-suited to the geographical research contexts explored by members of our research network. Moreover, the manga format was appealing due to its versatility, which is evident in the wide range of genres published both in mainstream and niche markets – including educational manga, a popular genre readily available in Japanese bookstores.

Another reason for choosing the manga format for the report was that the creation process itself – as we also outline in the manga – closely mirrored the network’s focus on *relational* research activity. The manga was created collaboratively by Christoph, who prepared the script, and the Japanese artist and illustrator Amaebi, who then translated this script into visual form. Amaebi is a former research participant of Christoph, and the two had previously collaborated on a creative project. Accordingly, the manga report was facilitated by a strong rapport between researcher and artist.

The visual affordances of sequential storytelling enabled us to foreground relationships in both linear and non-linear ways, within and beyond the frame. In addition to the artist’s attention to guiding readers through the material in an intuitive manner, Amaebi also suggested that two team members serve as protagonists for the story, because the manga format supported more effective and engaging communication of ideas through conversation between protagonists than through large quantities of text boxes surrounding a lone protagonist with no one to “talk to.” In the end, one of the researchers and their pet dog acted as protagonists, observing and commenting on the activities both inside and outside of the panels. In this way, during the development of the manga we found that the format was even more suited to reporting on the concept of relational creativity than we had at first thought. By allowing both linear and non-linear narrative perspectives to coexist, this format enabled characters to interact directly with key metaphors of relational creativity throughout the panels, and provided multiple perspectives on different events depicted within the panels. Unlike conventional academic reports, which prioritise a singular thesis and authorial voice, the manga format accommodated multiple voices and fostered more dynamic, dialogic engagement with conceptual thinking.

In this process, we jointly made some adjustments to standard manga conventions. While we maintained some genre conventions (e.g. clear assignment of protagonist roles), some tweaks were necessary to match the content expectations of a research report, as well as the limited number of pages feasible within our financial and time constraints. For example, Amaebi suggested deviating from the typical right-to-left reading order as we could not assume that the intended international audience of the report was familiar with this cultural convention. The reading order was thus simplified by using a layout with one panel per row, allowing for intuitive

reading from top to bottom. On the other hand, coloring, which is only rarely found in print manga, was added to make the report more visually appealing and impactful.

This joint undertaking also allowed Christoph to “give something back” to a key interlocutor for her extensive help in an earlier research project (see for example Schimkowsky 2022b). For Amaebi, joining the project meant diversifying her client portfolio by securing a contract with a British university, where the project was hosted. The project funding also allowed us to appropriately compensate her for her creative work. In line with both the notion of “relational creativity” and ideals in anthropological research to grant research participants representational agency, we explicitly put Amaebi in charge of creative decisions. Thus, the co-creation of the manga report was framed as a collaborative project occurring at the level of a flat hierarchy between researcher and artist, rather than as a commissioned piece needing to match the (potentially limited) artistic vision of a paying client.

Discussion and negotiation of these adjustments and expectations was in itself a concrete example of relational creativity. At the same time, Amaebi’s questions and suggestions for Christoph and the research network leaders led in key instances to improved theorization of the concept of relational creativity by the researchers, as well as findings which underscored the deeply relational nature of manga as a medium. Prior to working with Amaebi, much of our theory-building had focused on the relations found within the creative groups we researched with, but we had paid less attention to how relational creativity often produces something greater than the sum of its parts. The manga itself showed how working creatively on something as quotidian as a group report can produce something beyond the expectations of this format. Moreover, through workshoping the idea of the composite robot we were able to develop an engaging way of conceptualizing the recombinant possibilities of relational creativity. The artist suggested that the concept could be illustrated with an annotated image of a robot assembling itself (*gattai suru*), or coming to life through a combination of separate parts (Figure 1). The idea neatly communicated the network’s hypothesis that relational creativity emerges in scenarios where individuals can work on their own but prefer to work in groups. A combination robot is made of individual components that can function autonomously but when combined, are stronger together. Amaebi’s observation was foundational to the account of relational creativity and its operations that the research network produced for a special issue of an academic journal devoted to the concept (Coates and Coates forthcoming), demonstrating how creative practice and collaboration can strengthen academic conceptualization as well as offering an accessible mode of communicating academic ideas.

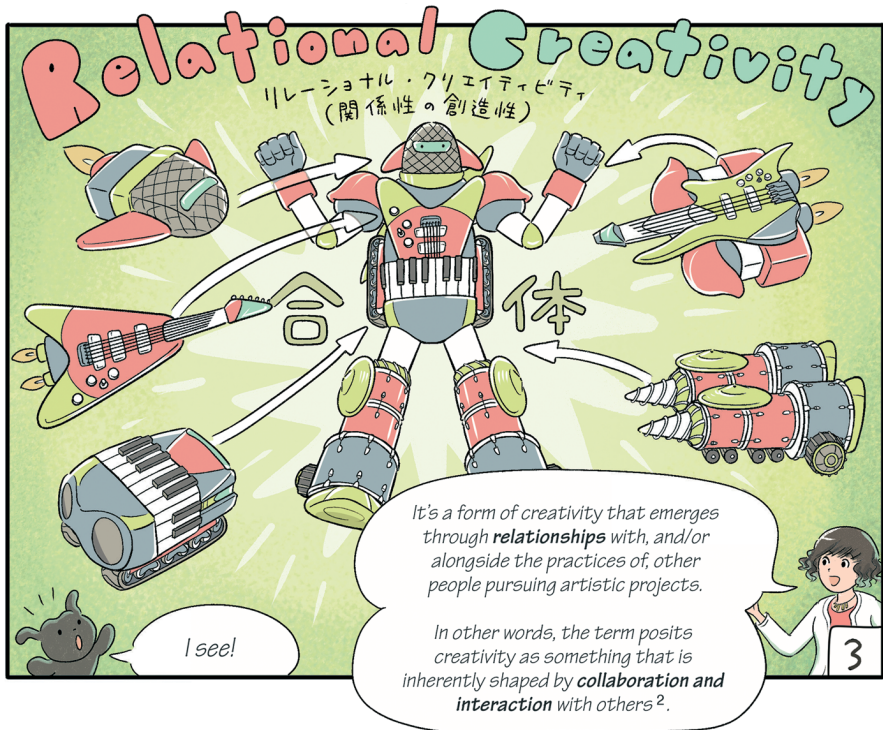


Fig. 1: Use of Amaebi's "robot" metaphor in the manga.

Implications for Knowledge Communication

The chosen manga format offered multiple practical advantages. Firstly, the visual and narrative format allowed for a text that is far more engaging and likely to attract reader interest compared to typical "project report" style documents. It thus enabled us to transform the funder's formal requirement – writing a project report – into a medium for science communication and outreach, potentially generating wider interest in both the project and the manga itself as a practical exercise in "relational creativity." While the funder (AHRC) uses the platform *ResearchFish* for granular reporting on the outcomes of research projects, and more general reports are in principle available to the general public, a list of publications and outputs does not quite capture the imagination, crucial for a nuanced understanding of the findings of research on relational creativity. We felt that it was important to make a project report which was not only accessible but attractive to a public readership in order to maximise the likelihood of the general public actively using our research findings. The combination of text and image made the document overall more inviting and readable. This was also achieved through creative appropriation of the page margins

or “gutter”, in which we also incorporated narrative and playful visual elements to keep the reader engaged.

A general challenge of using sequential art in the context of academic research communication is the limited text that can fit within speech bubbles. An appropriate balance between visual and textual content is crucial, both to maintain accessibility and to match genre conventions. This can present a challenge to academics used to writing in dense style, often attempting to stuff as much nuance, evidence, and theoretical considerations into sentences as possible. Whereas academic writing typically only has words, manga is inherently multimodal, with the inclusion of text as dialogue, narration, and onomatopoeia, alongside visual choices such as line, colour, characterization, and layout. The nuance in manga is often found in inferences between modalities of communication rather than within the single modality of text. This allows for more gestural forms of conceptualization that privilege affect over precision. Consequently, writing for sequential art demands a crisper, punchier style of text, and provides an opportunity to hone one’s research communication skills through different modalities. Through our experience working in this format we found that, although impressionistic in some ways, the level of conciseness required when employing sequential art in knowledge production and communication can push researchers to sharpen their analysis.

Still, since the report remains academic in nature, it was at times necessary to reference other researchers’ work or provide deeper clarifications than the speech bubbles could accommodate. On these occasions, the margins again provided a useful space to include footnotes and additional explanations, thereby preventing cluttering the individual panels and preserving the integrity of the manga format.

A final practical advantage of the manga format concerns the affordances of its visual style. As a medium, manga is largely free from the representational expectations of other, more “serious” media that makes greater claims of accurate depictions of reality (e.g. with higher “modality”, see Kress and van Leeuwen 2006: 154 ff.). This enabled more playful approaches to representation and communication, which in turn allowed for a more engaging and narrative-driven presentation. Furthermore, the format also allowed for innovative anonymization techniques. While most members of the research project were happy to be depicted as avatars reflecting their likeness, others preferred not to appear in identifiable form. However, we did not want to exclude these individuals from the report, as this would have risked omitting their contributions. The manga format provided a solution to this conundrum by allowing us to feature these network members as anthropomorphized characters – visually unidentifiable yet clearly indicating the involvement of additional actors in network activities. Like participants in an ethnographic or sociological research project, the network members could flexibly opt in or out of this anonymisation schema at different moments, making their contributions to the network known to a

selected few (e.g. workplace managers, other researchers) at moments advantageous to themselves (e.g. promotion applications, networking, etc.). The inherently playful visual style of the manga report facilitated this approach without creating a sense of incongruity for readers.

Concluding Remarks

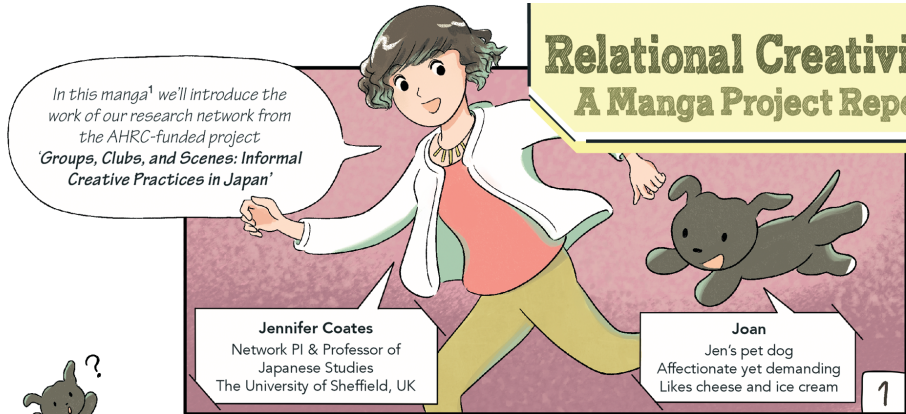
Over the course of their academic careers, the authors have (both individually and collaboratively) worked with a range of alternative modes of communicating research findings, from making documentary and art films to creating exhibitions. However, the genre of manga has proved to be the most well-suited to the kind of theoretical work that our research network sought to undertake. The deeply collaborative nature of the format, from the planning stage to the two-protagonist conversational structure of the content and the relational meaning-making undertaken by the final readers, meant that manga was an ideal genre through which to communicate our ideas about relational creativity. Not only did the genre allow us to share these ideas in an engaging and accessible way, the conventions of the format and the creative interpretations of the manga artist added richness and depth to our academic theorising and strengthened our understanding of the concept of relational creativity itself, as well as what it can do when applied.

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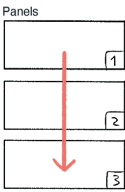
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Relational Creativity A Manga Project Report

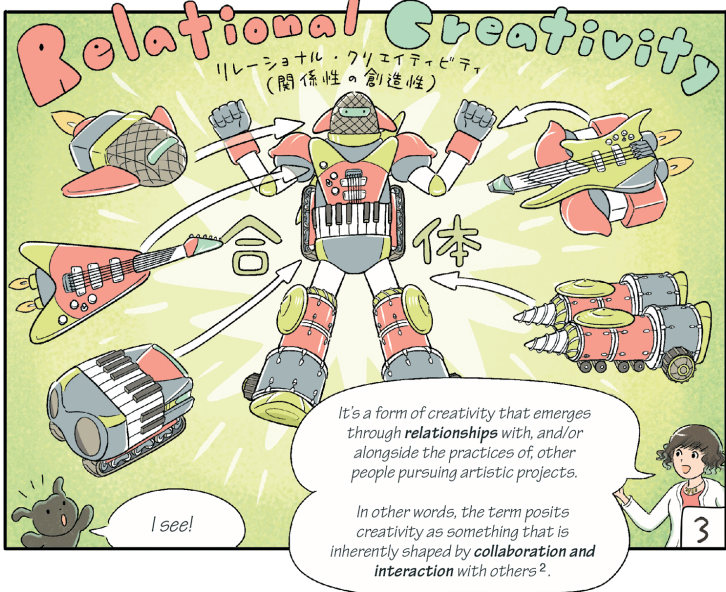


01 About 'Relational Creativity'

1
Manga Reading Order
Read the panels from top to bottom according to the numbers in the bottom-right corner. The text within each panel should be read from top to bottom and from right to left.



2
This draws on an understanding of creativity as 'collaborative and social' (Leach & Steven 2020: 95) and highlights the importance of understanding creative processes as something driven by collaboration, interpersonal improvisation, and social networks. For more info, see Littleton & Miell 2004; Ingold & Hallam 2007; Cattani et al. 2013.



Actually, this manga is the product of an **exercise** in **relational creativity!**

January 2023
Somewhere in Tokyo

The idea for a manga report was born in a conversation with Chris, the network's Administrative Research Assistant.

How about turning the report into a **manga** of sorts? It would be in line with the focus on creativity...

Christoph Schimkowsky
Postdoctoral Research Fellow
The University of Tokyo

Sounds interesting! Let's try that.

4

3 Colloquial Japanese term for northern shrimps which literally translates to 'sweet prawn' (ama-ebi). Northern shrimps have a sweet taste when eaten raw, hence the name. They are often eaten as sashimi or sushi.

Amaebi
Mostly does illustration work but also works as a manga artist sometimes

Sure thing!

Chris asked the Japanese illustrator Amaebi³ for help.

We'd like to turn the report into a kind of manga, can you help us with that?

5

Please don't eat me!
They say you taste sweet?

The document evolved in conversations between Chris and Amaebi

Chris wrote a draft of the script and discussed it with Jen

6

As you can see, we all worked together to create this manga.

Amaebi and Chris turned the draft into a manga while consulting Jen and drawing on photographs provided by network members for the artwork.

7

I'm getting ahead of myself! Let us first look at the origins of the network.

8



02 The Story of the Research Network



October 2018
Sainsbury Institute for the Study of Japanese Arts and Cultures (SISJAC)⁴

The *idea* for a project on relational creativity emerged at a workshop in Norwich.

8

5
Rather than supporting original research, this funding programme is designed to bring together teams of people who have already studied a related topic, and allow them to think about new directions for their work together.

Granted funding under the AHRC Research Networking Scheme⁵

December 2019

Applying for funds from UKRI

UKRI おねがいしませーす

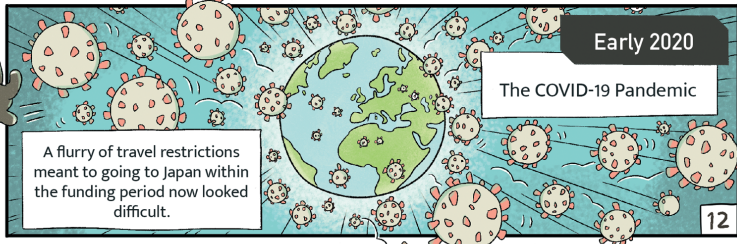
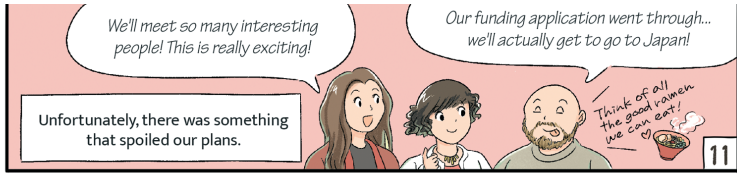
9

The network planned to organise a study trip to Japan, during which network members would introduce each other to **fieldsites** they have previously worked in.

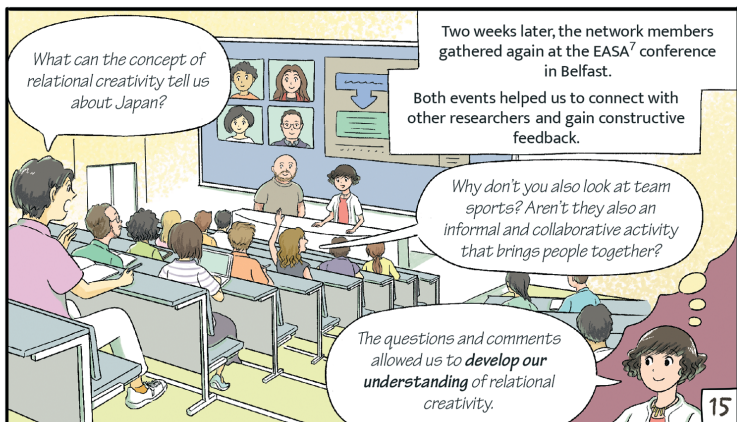
JAPAN

We chose Japan because daily life in the country is notable for its high number of activities conducted in **organised groups**. There are many groups dedicated to arts at schools, universities, and other institutions which **bring creative people together**.

10

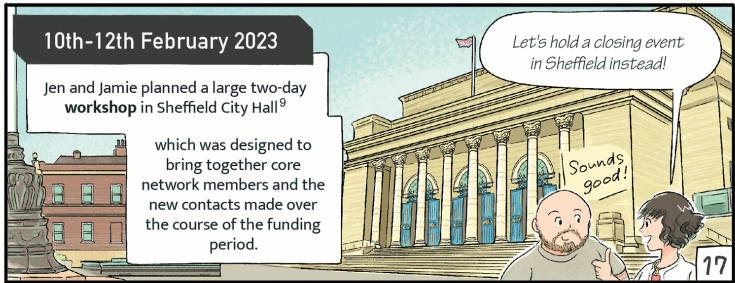
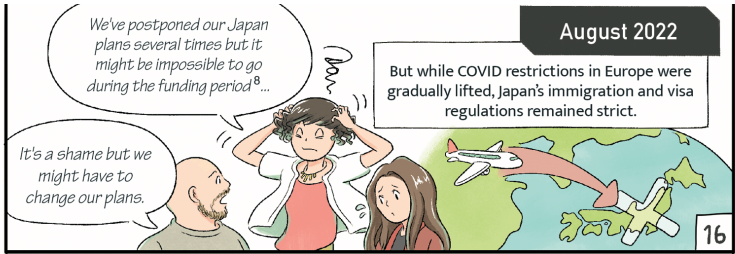


6
JAWS: Japan Anthropology Workshop

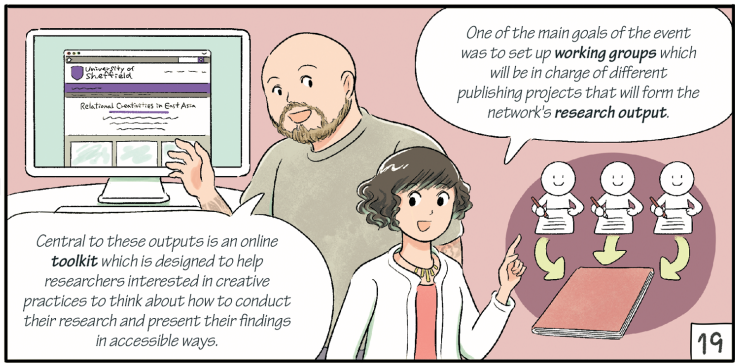
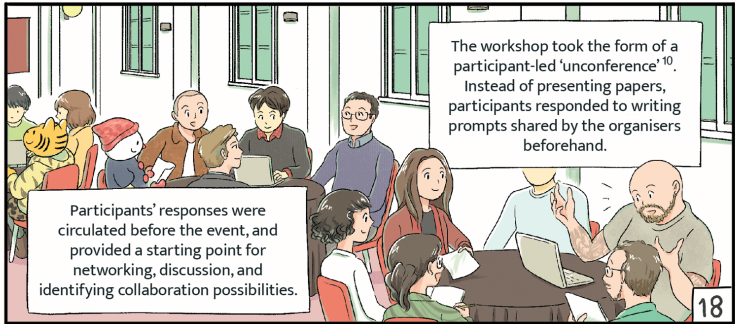


7
EASA: European Association of Social Anthropologists

8
The funding period lasted from September 2021 to March 2023. The grant was originally awarded in August 2020 but the start of the funding period postponed because of COVID-19.



10
For more on the idea of an 'unconference', see Misha Glouberman and Sheila Heti's 'The Chairs Are Where the People Go'





Projects advanced at the workshop

20

Jen

Jen will guest edit a special issue which brings together network members who will apply the concept of 'relational creativity' to a series of East Asian case studies.

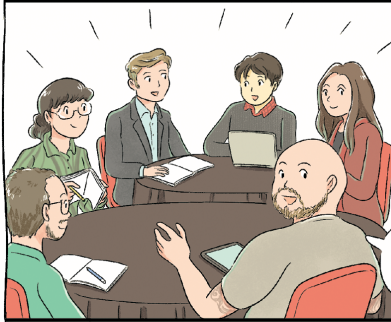


The Special Issue will help us better understand how groupbased creative practices are employed to satisfy the varying desires and goals of creative groups and their members.

21

Jamie et al.

Jamie, Iza and Christian are planning a special issue which will engage with the idea of 'relational creativity' from an anthropological, bottom-up perspective.



The issue will focus on agencies, relationships, and human/non-human configurations.

22

Iza and Rob

Iza and Rob will host a new season of the anthropology of art podcast Artery.

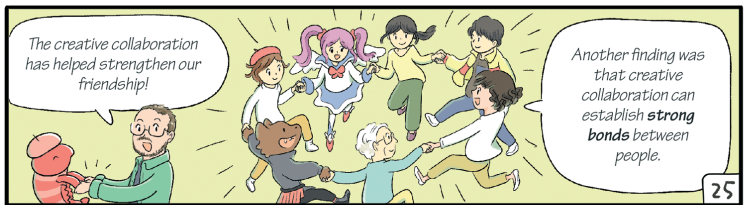
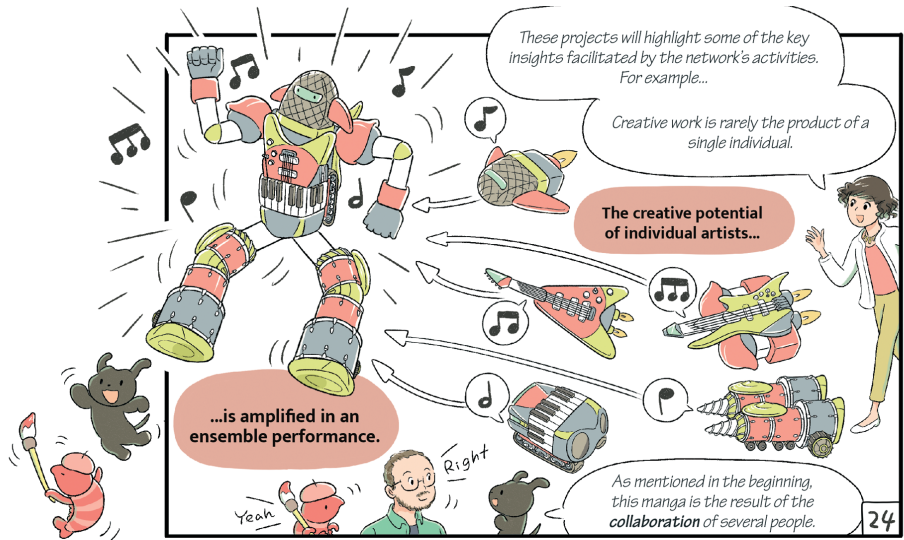


Also check out the first season!

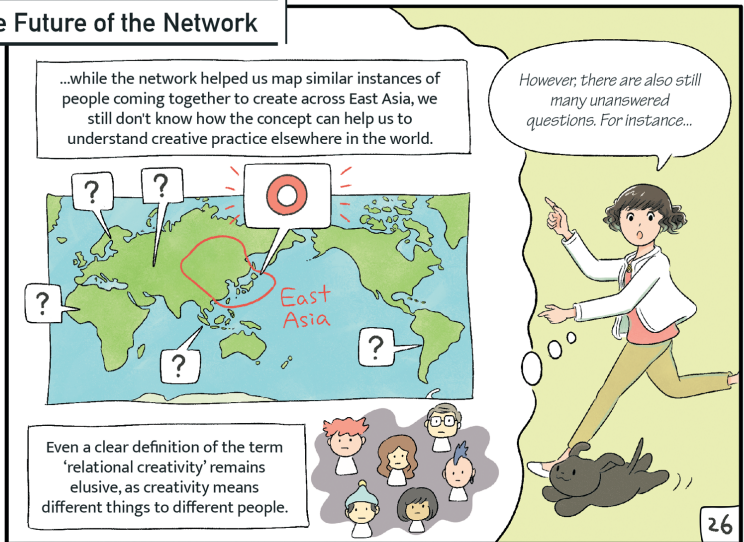


We'll collaborate with researchers we recruited at the workshop to produce a new season that'll focus exclusively on Japanese artists.

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03 The Future of the Network





In other words, more work remains to be done.

So please get in touch if you want to help us tackle these open questions or are interested in exploring collaboration opportunities.

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Relational Creativity A Manga Project Report

リレーショナル・クリエイティビティ/関係(性)の創造性 漫画報告書

AHRC Research Network
Groups, Clubs, and Scenes: Informal Creative Practices in Japan
Grant number: AH/V00090X/1

Principle Investigators : Jennifer Coates and Iza Kavedija
Art: Amaebi
Concept and Script: Christoph Schimkowsky

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