

Akahata, Japan

BRINGING LIGHT TO WOMEN IN THE DARK

Aiming for social change through art

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"I would like to sound an alarm in a world where violence and discrimination against women have become commonplace" There is an artist based in Switzerland who is working to raise social awareness about discrimination and violence through art. Starting in 2016 in Zimbabwe in southern Africa, Franziska Greber (¥69) has initiated art projects around the world featuring the difficulties faced by women. We focus on her thoughts on her work.

A three-meter-high white cube appeared on the premises of a Bank in Freiburg, southern Germany, which was created by her. It consists of 690 white shirts sewn together, each with a message and a drawing that reads, such as "You can't take my dignity away from me" written with a red permanent marker. The red color of "blood, pain but also life and love" underscores the cries, hope and demands of women who have been victims of violence and harassment.

The title of the international art project is "WOMEN IN THE DARK" and has been implemented in eight countries, including China, India, the Republic of Mauritius, and Switzerland, etc.

In Germany, about 150 women's organizations from 12 federal states took part in the art project and exhibitions were held in different cities. A book with 690 original messages in 40 languages were translated into German, a video in which women from other collaborating countries read the text they wrote on their shirt and there also was an audio installation with texts from women from Germany. Visitors stopped one after another to watch closely.

Ms. Greber, who also works as a trauma therapist, has cared for the physical, emotional, sexual trauma suffered by women. The turning point for her was the experiences of women she met in Zimbabwe, talking their story. ▽Women wrote about violence by their partner or other caregivers ▽discrimination based on sexual orientation ▽working as a prostitute so she can send her children to school ▽being raped by the boss, getting pregnant and having to leave the child abroad because she could not tell her family. "Each of these horrific experiences is a mirror of society. In order to make a change, we need to look at the 'darkness' of everyday life"

When she saw a large number of white shirts for sale at the market, she conceived of a way to bring social issues to the public's attention through art. She bought them and discussed the idea to her friend on how women from Zimbabwe could be encouraged to write down their thoughts and feelings to give testimonies.

The project had sometimes difficulties due to religious, political and cultural differences. However, the "international project" against discrimination and violence against women was the key to overcoming the difficulties, as for certain countries, a prerequisite for participating in the art project. She says that for example, China and India would not have participated without European countries taking part too.

Interviews with visitors were filmed and made public, understood as a "resonance" to the women's voices. A male construction worker said, "I will discuss violence and discrimination with my colleagues." The director of the bank in Freiburg, which provided the venue, explained that they will use the exhibition as a starting point for gender equality measures.

"Resonance is the opposite of silence and ignorance, and an important step toward social change"

Since her family has Jewish roots, she is aware of that "democratic values are not stable and must be constantly and critically examined."

When asked about her goals for the future, she responded: "Social change process must continue until all forms of gender-related violence are eliminated and the global situation is radically improved. Art can contribute to the protection of basic and equal rights in all areas of society and lead to a reorientation. I will continue to work to protect women's and human rights within international networks and collaborations."