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Term Paper
Alternate Trajectories of Modernism

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Internationalism and the Japanese Gutai Group

“We are following the path that will lead to an international common ground where the arts of the East and the West will influence each other. And this is the natural course of the history of art.”
-Yoshihara Jiro: “A statement by Jiro Yoshihara: Leader of the Gutai”, Martha Jackson Press Release, 1958

Introduction

In this paper I will look into the development of the Japanese avant-garde group Gutai and raise questions about its location in Japanese modern art in the 1950s, when the group was initiated by Yoshihara Jiro and its international relevance and engagement.

Therefore I will briefly look into the history of Japanese art starting post World War l. until the 1950s and the relationship between the political situation and artistic practice at that time. Mapping the history of intercultural exchange between Japan and the West will help to understand tendencies and problems of Internationalism.

Internationalism in this case means the cooperation of artists, art historians and writers across nation borders in order to find a common language.

The term Japonisme will be examined in order to analyse intercultural exchange between the West and Japan in origin and see if there are resurfacing problems. Japanese modern artists were often accused of imitating western styles. The leader of the Gutai group developed in reaction to this the principle: “Do not imitate”, a head note, the members of the Gutai group followed eagerly. Why was the an anxiety about imitation and originality in the Japanese art movement before the 1950s?

And why did the Gutai group never became part of neither the Japanese modern art history nor fully entered the western mainstream modernist discourse? Even though they where written about as a “forerunner of Happening-type performance”, by Allan

Kaprow in his anthology “Assemblages, Environments & Happenings” (Monroe 1994, p. 89). I will try to point out in which way the group tried to overcome the boundaries of nation.

However, it is noticeable that the Gutai group had a number of blockbuster exhibitions in big western museums in the recent past, amongst others: “Splendid Playground” at the Guggenheim New York in 2012.

Furthermore I will look into individual attempts to promote the group in the West and draw a history of events that lead to misinterpretations of their work and artistic goals. The Gutai group has been researched by Japanese and western scholars and entered the debate about an Eurocentric way of reading modernism, as Ming Tiampo describes in the monograph “Decentring Modernism – Gutai”, where he speaks about the groups attempt of decentring modernism for the periphery, through the publication of journals, as one example.

Alexexandra Munroe, published numerous essays, amongst others “To challenge the Mid Summer Sun” in “Japanese Art after 1945” in 1994 and essays in the catalogue “Splendid Playground”, together with Ming Tiampo, in the occasion of the 2013 exhibition at the Guggenheim Museum in New York.

The group Gutai was active from 1954 to 1972, based in post-war Japan. The group had about 59 members, all significantly younger than the founder Yoshihara Jiro. The name of the group “Gutai” means “concreteness” or “embodiment” as opposed to abstract or figurative. Their primary aim was to break with boundaries and conventions of the material. Jiro Yoshihara lead the group with the motto: “Do what

no one has done before". Under this motto the group came up with a fast array of experimental works, challenging material, format and the medium of painting.

Art in the 1950s in Japan was mainly dealing with figurative socialist realist-inspired paintings that depicted motives related to problems of post-war corruption. The 1950s were overshadowed by the U.S. occupation that followed the country's defeat in World War II, until 1952. And they were eclipsed by what followed: the "income doubling" policies initiated in 1960 that, for the first time, drew international attention to Japan's economic reconstruction. In fact, this was a tortured and tumultuous decade. Traumatic memories of the recent war that ended in Hiroshima and Nagasaki followed by a cold-war nuclear arms race and a hot war in neighbouring Korea. For many Japanese the 1950s seemed like an era of "civil war"—if not literally in a military sense, then certainly politically and ideologically. This was a far cry from the harmonious place mythologized by later artists of "Japan Inc.", "Reportage painters" was a loose label attached to left-wing artists of the time who rejected conventional aesthetics, while experiencing military and political pressure. The artwork they produced in the 1950s and early 1960s is now largely buried in museums, and even in their own time they had few opportunities to exhibit their work, and found few patrons willing to buy it. The response to Gutai very poor at this time, and as much as they were ignored, very few reactions from the critics were of a rather negative sort, accusing them of engaging in an "bourgeois play". In the years of their upcoming they faced the rivalery between the Tokyo and the Kansai region and received little critical support from outside. (Munroe 1994, p. 154-210)

Looking back in time to understand the group's affinity for internationalism, the idea was shaped much earlier through the "Surrealist International during the 1920s and 1930s" (Tiampo, p. 14) and Japanese artists Takamura Kotaro (sculptor) and Mavo leader Murayama Tomoyoshi, who went to the west and participated in the dialogues of intercultural exchange. Likewise European modernist art and Russian artists like Kasimir Malevich and Vladimir Tatlin were exhibited widely in Japan before the ll. World War. This way, abstract and non-figurative art was introduced in Japan.

But, on another page, the appreciation and understanding of Japanese art in the west was rather low, "Japan was perceive as a source of inspiration, not innovation" (Tiampo, p. 16), which is termed "Japonisme".

After Japanese ports reopened to trade with the West in 1853, countless foreign imports came to Europe, such as woodcut prints from Japan by masters of the ukiyo-e school which transformed Impressionist art by demonstrating that simple everyday subjects from "the floating world", as Japan was called after an island which was used for trade only and accessible by very few, could be presented in appealingly decorative ways. Japanese products became 'chic' in the West. Parisians saw their first formal exhibition of Japanese arts and crafts when Japan took a pavilion at the World's Fair of 1867. But already, shiploads of oriental bric-a-brac, including fans, kimonos, lacquers, bronzes, and silks, had begun pouring into England and France and the bourgeoisie had drawn their own picture about Japan and what it is like.

Together with these goods woodprints came to Europe that influenced the European artists. It is said that James Whistler discovered Japanese prints in a Chinese tearoom near London Bridge and that Claude Monet first came upon them used as wrapping paper in a spice shop in Holland. James Tissot and Edgar Degas

were among the earliest collectors of Japanese art in France. Their own art was formed by exotic things in very different ways. Unlike Tissot, Degas avoided staging Japoneries that featured models dressed in kimonos and the conspicuous display of oriental props. Instead, he absorbed qualities of the Japanese aesthetic that he found most sympathetic: elongated pictorial formats, asymmetrical compositions, aerial perspective, spaces emptied of all but abstract elements of color and line, and a focus on singularly decorative motifs. In the process, he redoubled his originality. Experimentation with a wide range of pictorial modes, and with printmaking techniques as well, coincided with the growing popularity of Japanese woodcuts during the 1890s. Toulouse-Lautrec adopted the colorplay and facial expressions found in Kabuki theater prints in order to create his eye-catching posters. Meanwhile, Pierre Bonnard and Édouard Vuillard, who called themselves "Nabis" or "prophets" of a new style of art, relied upon unusual viewpoints of ukiyo-e printmakers for inspiration. Only Paul Gauguin, who was attracted to the native arts of many cultures, explored the then-current practice of lithography and adapted Japanese woodcut techniques to the abstract expression of his forward-looking art. (Colta, 1974, p. 24-45)

Ming Tiampo called this form of exchange *cultural mercantilism* or *cultural imperialism,* to point out that Europe had focussed on importing the material, the fabric of Japanese culture to inspire the modernist western artists, and returned the products of that back to Japan. This constitutes a problem of double standards: “Europeans borrowing from Japan are considered inspired, whereas Japanese borrowing from Europe are seen as derivative” (Tiampo, p. 17)

According to Tiampo, Japanese artists were very aware of the problems of cultural mercantilism and wrote about their anxiety in relation to originality and

modernism the circulating magazines of the 1920s. Yoshihara Jiro, the founder and leader of the Gutai group, highly influenced by his two mentors, Kamiyama Jiro and later Fujita Tsuguharu developed in his early years this as a main principle for his work, to be original and to work with a strong personality.

Jiro Yoshihara was from a small city called Ashiya, in the province Kasai, situated between Osaka and Kobe, far away from the centre of the Japanese art secene and capital Tokyo. In the 1920s and 1930s the Kasai area was highly influenced by western architecture, art and lifestyle, in order to feed a cultural interest of the new upscale society of that region. “Yoshihara typified this Kansai cosmopolitanism”. (Hirai Shoichi, 2013, p.244)

Yoshihara himself had studied art in Osaka, with an interest in European avant-garde art. He started off with painting in the manner of Giogio de Chirico and then he turned to abstraction. He collected a large number of western publications, such as exhibition catalogues, magazines and art books from the 1930s onwards in his library, mostly dealing with abstraction. This interest alone varies enormously from the art that was produced in Japan at that time. And also provided him with an extensive amount of reproductions to study, much more then his colleagues who had less access to this material. Gradually he developed the idea that abstraction is the ultimate way to express an artistic endeavour regardless of national and ethnic origin all over the world. Yoshihara developed an international perspective, in a small town on the Japanese coast far away from the centres.

The Gutai group organised an exhibition in 1955 in the pine grove park along the industrial beach of the suburban town of Ashiya. 13 days long and 24 hours open the outdoor exhibition featured paintings suspended from trees. “The experiment is to

take art from closed rooms into the open air exposingthe works to the natural forces of sun, wind and rain", Yoshihara explained. (Monroe 1994, p. 82) The group saw art making as an act of freedom, a gesture of individual spirit and destruction in order to create something new. They wanted to challenge the boundaries or methods and material. Gutai avoided political or mythological content in their works and focussed on relief and liberation instead or terror and chaos of the post-war traumata.

Already in the year 1955 the group worked on its "international common ground" in the Gutai Journal. The idea of the journal was to reach out to a bigger audience and moreover international attention. Gutai group members had thanks to Yoshihara's library access to a wide range of publications and through that gained knowledge about the art movements all over the world. After his engagement with pre war modern art, after World War ll, Yoshihara became member of different artist collectives, such as Tenseki-kai and founded a Pan Artists Association in 1948. From 1952 he entered the international art scene and was invited for exhibitions abroad, like the "Pittsburgh International Exhibition of Contemporary Painting and Sculpture" at the Carnegie Institute and later in major exhibitions in France and the United States. (Tiampo, 2011, p. 77)

At the same time, he followed up on challenging the concept of Japonisme, by collaborating in an avant-garde calligraphy movement called Bokujin-kai (Ink Human Society), in order to challenge what was imposed on artists, who were interested in the traditional arts through abstraction. Primarily aim of the group was to achieve world relevance for calligraphy, by analysing abstract American artists like Jackson Pollock through using calligraphy principles and aesthetic concepts of the usage of

line and empty space. Yoshihara's work from that time visualizes the struggle between abstract painting and calligraphy. (Work 2, 1954)

Out of this struggle he founded in 1954 the Gutai journal, which aimed to spread reproductions of works by the Gutai group and to communicate calls for submission worldwide. The journal wanted to create an international platform for Gutai art. This lead to new difficulties, as Tiampo writes: "Yoshihara's lack of foreign travel combined with the fact that his extensive of international art movements came via printed matter meant that the Gutai leader developed an idealized, almost deterritorialized view of the art world." (Tiampo 2011, p. 80) On the other hand Yoshihara had understood the importance of information transfer for cultural exchange, from a first hand point of view and not through critics only.

The first issue featured black and white photographs of the members of the Gutai group and additional information on the artists. Furthermore it was written in English and Japanese. The second and third issue were sent to Jackson Pollock by the Gutai artists Shimamoto and accompanied by a letter, asked him about his opinion about their works.

For Yoshihara publishing the journal was more important then making exhibitions. He saw the journal like a mobile exhibition, or as a medium and transnational exhibition space. Two of the Gutai artists, Yoshida and Kanayama created works, that were reproduced mechanically and were given with the journal, an attempt that aimed to question boundaries of the original. For the second issue Shimamota had experimented with an earlier work, the "Holes Series" and the cover page was in orange paper, perforated with circular holes in it. Later issues dealt with the

documentation of their own exhibitions. Photographs showed installation shots, exhibition visitors witnessing performances as well as photographs of single artworks. However, Yoshihara's plan to use the journal as a tool for international exchange seemed to work out well, when the Gutai group received a letter by B.H. Friedman in 1956, who had found by chance the issues 2 and 3 in Jackson Pollock's studio. He asked the group for a subscription, which can be interpreted as their stepping stone into the international art discourse. And the exchange worked in a way, as Friedman wrote an essay on Pollock for the Gutai journal and Gutai published an essay written by Friedman's friend Ray Johnson.

In 1956 the group member Kanayama had contacted the *Life* magazine and announced an exhibition. *Life* magazine publishers were interested and had sent two journalists who found themselves in an exhibition without an audience, other then themselves. The exhibition was planned as a media event with an international audience through the reviews of the journalists. Unfortunately due to insufficient photo footage, the photo essay was never published in *Life* magazine. One year later an essay of the cultural correspondent in Tokyo, Ray Falk, was published in the *New York Times*. This well informed article was a well-researched essay on the group and their different projects, like performances and painting but also speaks about their realms in theatre and their use of material, space and sound. Ray Falk had understood the avant-gardist meaning of the Gutai group. Through this essay Allan Kaprow got to know about the artists and in his writings the group would always be mentioned in terms of international happenings. Kaprow shared the group's attempt of Internationalism and he affirmed it as an ethical position. In his work Assemblage, Environments, and Happenings, published in 1966 he wrote about the group:

> "For the records, these dates seem to imply the precedence of the Japanese in the making of Happening type performance. Even earlier in America, John

> Cage in 1952 organized an event at Black Mountain College combining paintings, dance, films, slides, recordings, radios, poetry, piano playing and a lecture. Since my own first efforts, in 1957, were done in John Cage's composition class, where he described this even, I should mention it as an important catalyst… Of the Gutai's activities I knew nothing until Alfred Leslie mentioned them to me two years later, and it was not until late 1963 that I obtained the information presented here. This is a rare case of modern communication malfunctioning. (Tiampo, 2011, p. 90)

This validation is flattering and difficult at the same time. Kaprow somehow describes them as not known, but also highly qualified. Kaprow and some of the group members finally met only in 1993 on the *Venice Biennale*.

Earlier than the contact with the American writers, the French Informel leader Michel Tapié collaborated with the group, even before he had visited Japan. Tapié had received the journal through two travelling artists of the group in France and contacted them in order to work together. This collaboration took part inform of the 8th Gutai journal, which had bindings from both sides which two covers, since French and Japanese books have bindings on different sides. Martha Jackson from New York and Tapié had organised that the journals were distributed and sold in galleries in Paris, Turin and New York. A year later Matha Jackson had sent the new exhibition catalogue to press, museums and galleries and collectors and therefore covered a wide range of possible interests.

However, Tapié returned to France after his stay in New York and published the book *Continuité et avant-garde au Japon* in which he "argued for the existence of a movement that, opposed to what he called the 'false avant-garde' of European-influenced salon art, was deeply invested in Japanese traditional art" (Tiampo, 2011, p. 93) and created through this a form of Neo Japonisme. Even though each and every artist of the group was mentioned and represented with one artwork either in black & white or colour reproduction, the whole group was labelled as "Contemporary Zen Painting", and came with no explanation. Also were the artists represented through

works of art, rather then performances and thus the section of the book was called "Gutai Group Activities". Later Heinz Mack from the group Zero saw the book and envisioned their works as a kindred spirit. "Where Tapiè saw Informel painting and Kaprow saw Happenings, the members of Zero saw post-contructivist challenge to space and a Zen-like engagement with nature." (Tiampo 2011, p. 94) Nevertheless Heinz Mack's discovery of the group, lead to the invitation to the exhibition *Nul* at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam.

The Gutai group's effort of using media and publications as their major exhibition space worked out and even though they were based in the periphery, it did not cross their plans of gaining international reputation.

Unfortunately, the western world did not always understand where to locate the artists, how to interpret them or even communicated their work in a way that was not in tune with the aims of the group.

It needs to be underlined that art historians and writers of modern art after the World War ll. worked within national models. In addition to that there was the struggle between New York and Abstract Expressionism and Paris and Informel, in which the group got caught up, due to different interests.

A lack of information on the art and goals of the the group plus the fight for the centre of the art world, resulted in bad press reviews, as Art News wrote after the 1958 exhibition in New York: " Gutai (Jackson/Gallery) group, a number of Japanese artists much influenced by New York Abstract-Expressionism, and much in awe of Europe, where introduced in a fancy exhibition that was generally disapproved of as derivative and trival." (Timapo 2011, p-107.)

On the other hand on the verge between the 1950s and 1960s the group gained popularity again, but this time through Japan. They participated in international exhibitions, like *International Art of a New Era* in 1958 and *The International Sky Festival of 1960.* The Japanese critic Haryu Ichiro put the "international contemporaneity" together as follows:

> "In my opinion, the concept of art internationally underwent a major change around 1955 or 1956. In retrospect, the tendency varingly called 'Informel' and 'Action Painting' arose like avalanche in this transitional period. As far as Japan is concerned, we have now transcended the dualism of East vs. West, the coice between the borrowed Modernism and Japonica-traditionalism. We have finally achieved the consciousness of 'contemporary' in the sense of 'international contemporaneity.'" (Tiampo 2011 p. 121)

Conclusion

Yoshihara's death in 1972 meant also the end for the Gutai group. His visionary initiative, in finding different exhibition settings, the artistic practices of the group were pioneering not only in the Japanese post-war avant-garde development and throughout the 1960s, but also in the global context of artistic practice, as their acknowledgement by Allan Kaprow in as early as 1966 shows (Kaprow 1966, p. 211-225)

Yoshihara's attempt in challenging Japonisme had failed, and also projections from outside had always imposed western ways of reading the traditional influence in their work. On the other hand, the journal and the idea of mobile exhibitions within a publication that could be spread via post, was an extremely well thought of plan that was successful to a certain extend. They challenged their nonmetropolitan location and therefore one of the main aspects of Modernism, which a mostly a history of

centres and periphery. Through publishing the journal they contributed into Modernism on a global scale.

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