

**JIKKEN KŌBŌ/  
EXPERIMENTAL  
WORKSHOP (1996)**

Yamaguchi Katsuhiro

IT IS ALREADY 45 YEARS since “Jikken Kōbō/Experimental Workshop” began its activities as a collective. If we consider the time when members first began gathering as part of the collective’s early period, 1948 would be the starting point. In other words, Jikken Kōbō began half a century ago.

Yet, even today, it is difficult to define with any precision what Jikken Kōbō was or did. Although the group’s active period ended around 1958, it is not as if its members have since been busy trying to understand the reality of the collective. Jikken Kōbō’s *idée* has been carried on in the work of its former members and, at times, the group’s activities have been continued through collaborative projects.

Last year marked 50 years since the end of WWII. In recent years, various people have begun to reflect on our military history, and there have been demands for an explanation of the collective’s inscrutable art practices. The upcoming exhibition *1953 Light Up: Seeing a New Image of Postwar Art* provides an occasion to attempt to elucidate the collective’s activities. But the subtitle, “a new image of postwar art,” presents a problem. Already, in the present context, we are expected to use terms such as postwar art and contemporary art to discuss art history. However, the reality of “Jikken Kōbō” will remain obscured if we view it within the frame of art.

Nothing of Jikken Kōbō’s reality will become apparent if we fail to address this fundamental issue. And I only came to this realization recently. One reason is external, that is to say, social. The other is internal to Kōbō itself.

First, let me consider the external reason. As abovementioned, in the 50 years that have passed since the war, Japan’s postwar art history has gradually been framed in a certain way, discussed repeatedly, and turned into a coherent narrative, with similarly set content. As this narrative takes shape, certain commonplaces also naturally arise, and historical truths become summarized as so many common understandings. In shaping postwar Japanese art history, this process has inevitably limited the field of art. Unfortunately, Jikken Kōbō’s

actions expand beyond the parameters of art. When Euro-American postwar art history is used as the standard, the activities of groups such as the Gutai Art Association, with which Jikken Kōbō is often compared, are nearly exclusively framed in terms of painting and performance. Neither group falls outside the trends that are seen to shape postwar art history. In fact, they fall within its mainstream. Moreover, their activities are easily woven into the history of art, which is written with the US and Europe at its center. Japanese art historians have also readily accepted the Western perception of Gutai's actions to help establish an identity for contemporary Japanese art.

<sup>1</sup> [The exhibition was actually held from 1986 to 1987.]

As an example, neither the *Japon des avant-gardes 1910–1970* exhibition held at the Pompidou Center in 1989<sup>1</sup> nor the *Japanese Art After 1945: Scream Against the Sky* exhibition held at the Yokohama Museum of Art in 1994 were able to portray the entirety of Jikken Kōbō. The reason was internal to Kōbō. Perhaps Jikken Kōbō should not have been considered in an art historical context. Perhaps it should not have been considered in the historical context of contemporary classical music. It is difficult to ascertain the group's activities through these professionalized fields formed in the 1990s. In other words, the main reason its activities are not generally understood, I think, has to do with Jikken Kōbō itself.

Before examining this further, I want to touch on one thing. The 1991 “Experimental Workshop: 11th Exhibition Homage to Shūzō Takiguchi” at the Satani Gallery in Tokyo was the first exhibition to objectively evaluate the group since its formation in 1951. The over 130-pages long A4 sized catalogue that accompanied the show should have been published by a first-class museum rather than a private gallery. Nonetheless, the exhibition and the historical materials provided in the catalogue finally made Jikken Kōbō's activities visible. In the catalogue, I summarized Kōbō's art activities and Akiyama Kuniharu summarized the group's music activities.

In reconsidering Jikken Kōbō's activities and analyzing them for the current exhibition, I have come to realize that the group's actions were not sufficiently explained in the catalogue for the “11th Exhibition

Homage to Shūzō Takiguchi.” I have even begun to think that this may be the most crucial key to elucidating Jikken Kōbō’s obscure activities.

As I have already noted, Jikken Kōbō’s activities deviated from the fields of art and music. Its practice was interdisciplinary. Seen from a different perspective, I wonder whether it was a social movement that arose during a period of new cultural developments in postwar Japan. At least within Jikken Kōbō there was a strong centrifugal energy emanating from the specialized art fields. Takiguchi Shūzō, whom Takemitsu Tōru considered his spiritual patron, was the one who presaged the group’s accelerating centrifugal force.

Let me now attempt to provide a more specific explanation of Jikken Kōbō. The group first formed when around ten members met at Kitadai Shōzō’s house after the end of the “Summer Course in Modern Art” in 1948, which was sponsored by the Japan Avant-Garde Artist Club. Four months later, seven of these members went on to organize the *Shichiyōkai* exhibition, for which Kōbō members Kitadai, Fukushima Hideko, and Yamaguchi contributed abstract paintings. The following year, Akiyama Kuniharu, who was the core musical element of the group and was majoring in French literature at Waseda University at the time, organized the “Contemporary Music Study Group” and eventually met Yuasa Jōji, who was studying at the Keio University School of Medicine. From around 1947, Yamaguchi frequented the CIE Library, which was established by the US Civil Information and Education Section in Yurakuchō, Tokyo, where he had access to new books and magazines, attended weekly record listening concerts, and became familiar with newly released contemporary music. He eventually came to know Akiyama, who was helping to explain the music at the CIE Library. And so, as 1950 approached, the energy of the art and music cores of the group began to intensify, and Takemitsu Tōru, Fukushima Kazuo, Suzuki Hiroyoshi, and other art members began to meet.

These inseparable occurrences in the early 1950s, both coincidental and inevitable, brought into being a group that was globally anomalous in regard to its aim to make intermedia work.

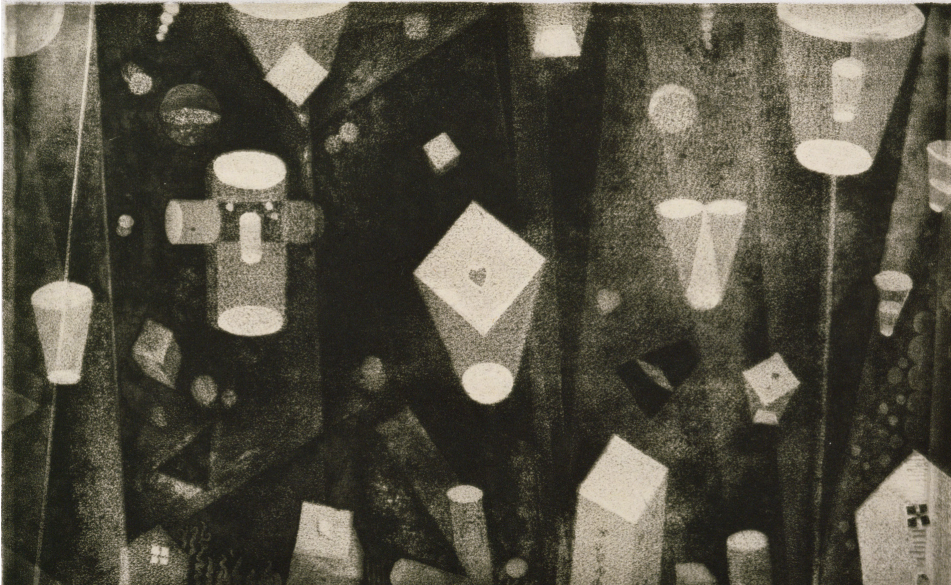


fig. 1

Komai Tetsurō, *Momentary Vision*, 1951

©Komai Yoshiko 2022/JAA2200026

Collection of the Yokohama Museum of Art, Gift of Kitaoka Fumio



fig. 2

Komai Tetsurō, *Gifts of the Moon*, 1952

©Yoshiko Komai 2022/JAA2200026

Collection of the Museum of Modern Art, Saitama

During this embryonic period, it was Kitadai's specialized knowledge in science and engineering, which he was passionately curious about, that spiced up the interactions between the members. His knowledge of the latest theories on cosmic formation, such as the Big Bang theory, as well as physics and especially quantum mechanics, excited the members. These stimulating spices likely propelled Jikken Kōbō from aligning its activities with science and technology, which was rare in Japan at the time, toward constructivism, as well as *musique concrète* and electronic music.

Now, I believe that although these contextual factors influenced Jikken Kōbō's character, the most unique influence was when *Yomiuri Shimbun* commissioned and sponsored the group's first ballet concert *Joie de Vivre*. After this, Jikken Kōbō members worked not only on collaborative internal productions but also on projects commissioned by artists and producers working in other fields. That Jikken Kōbō members worked in various teams composed on a project basis, and not exclusively under the Jikken Kōbō banner, was very unique. In other words, while artists belonged to "Jikken Kōbō," the projects were carried out by alternating members and the works Kōbō showed were similarly varied. Kōbō was more involved in producing stage-based total works of art involving people from multiple fields than exhibitions or concerts.

Although called Jikken Kōbō [Experimental Workshop], the group had no physical workshop. The artists participated in a virtual workshop and produced works in a very fluid manner. To put it differently, Kōbō was an early adopter of the "project team" approach. Furthermore, Takiguchi Shūzō was the one who actively pushed this approach through his philosophy at the time. Okamoto Taro, who had as many expectations for Jikken Kōbō as Takiguchi, wrote about similar ideas at every opportunity. Kōbō's style was to reject established values and pursue fresh approaches that were lacking in the fields of art and music at that time, which tended to be provincial in the typical Japanese sense. It was the singularity of this style which was evaluated socially.

For Jikken Kōbō's first exhibition nearly all the members, through

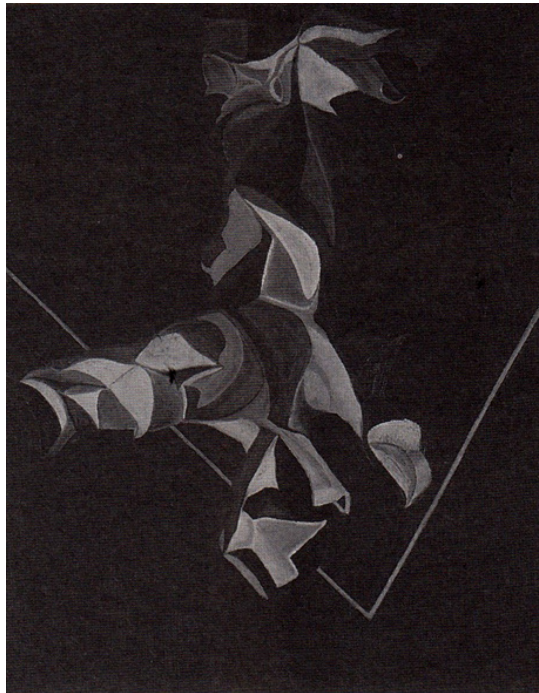


fig. 3

Fukushima Hideko, *The Reaction of the Red Wind*, 1955

©Fukushima Kazuo

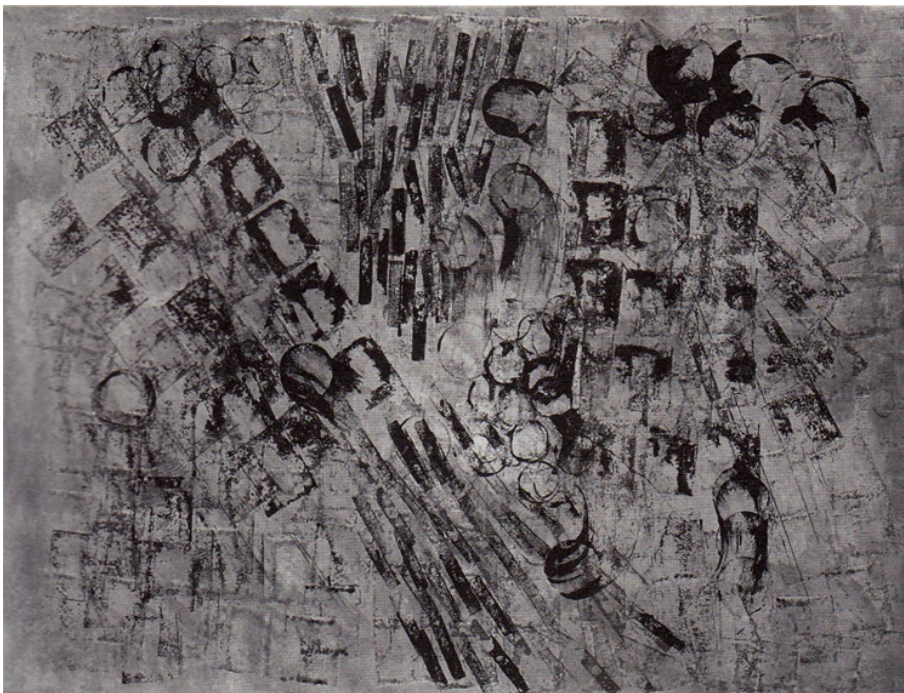


fig. 4

Fukushima Hideko, *The Reaction of the Red Wind*, 1955

©Fukushima Kazuo

trial and error, started using this workshop approach to create a comprehensive artwork.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> [Here the author is likely referring to *gesamtkunstwerk*.]

The Picasso festival *Joie de Vivre* featured a ballet performance by the choreographer and dancer Masuda Takashi and ballerina Tani Momoko, which was directly commissioned by the *Yomiuri Shimbun*. However, in 1950, during Kōbō's nascent year, Kitadai and Imai had already produced an abstract sculptural set design for the Yokoyama Haruhi Ballet Company's performance of *Paradise Lost*. In 1951, they handled the lighting and set design for the same company's performance of *Kappa*. Akutagawa Yasushi and Mayuzumi Toshirō composed the music for both performances. Within this context, Kōbō members met in 1951 to plan an exhibition. This exhibition turned out to be much more than a conventional showing of works. It treated the exhibition space itself as a work, which included ballet stage sets, and brought together works and music, as well as works and lighting that operated with mechanical devices, to dynamic effect.

<sup>3</sup> [The title printed in English on the flyer and program is "Experimental Workshop's 2nd Exhibition."]

Kōbō also discussed the possibility of staging its own ballet, with *Beauty and the Beast* considered as a possible theme. It was within this atmosphere, just when the group was charged with such explosive energy, that the opportunity arose to stage the Picasso festival ballet. Therefore, the incorporation of sculptural objects and lighting design in the contemporary music recitals for the 1952 "Second Experimental Workshop Presentation"<sup>3</sup> and after should be understood as implementations of the above-described intermedia methodology.

It would also be possible for this intermedia concept to be paralleled in an inter-artist approach. Hence project teams were established by artists working in various fields. As the program for the 1952 "Jikken Kōbō Second Recital" indicates, the show included premier performances of compositions by Olivier Messiaen, as well as Bartok and Copland. The brochure, flyer, and tickets for the show were also all designed by Jikken Kōbō.

In addition to its own exhibitions, Jikken Kōbō contributed a collaboratively produced relief work to the "Fourth Yomiuri

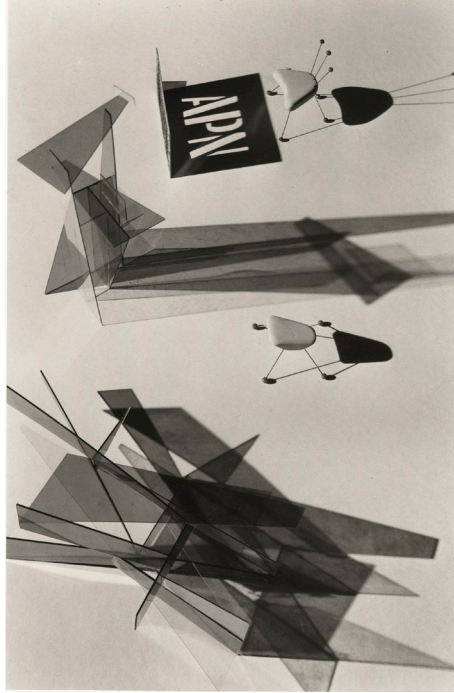


fig. 5

Composition: Kitadai Shōzō

Photography: Ōtsuji Kiyoji

Composition for the “APN” page in *Asahi Graph*, 1953

©Tokyo Publishing House

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Collection of the Musashino Art University Museum & Library

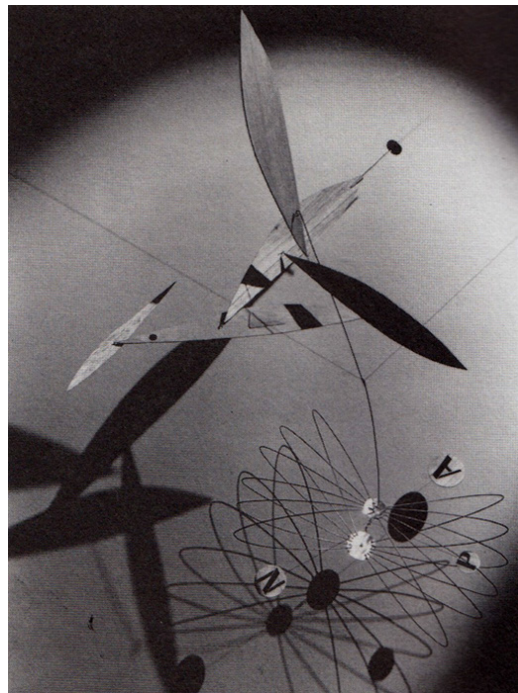


fig. 6

Composition: Yamaguchi Katsuhiro

Photography: Ōtsuji Kiyoji

Composition for the “APN” page in *Asahi Graph*, 1953

©Estate of Katsuhiro Yamaguchi

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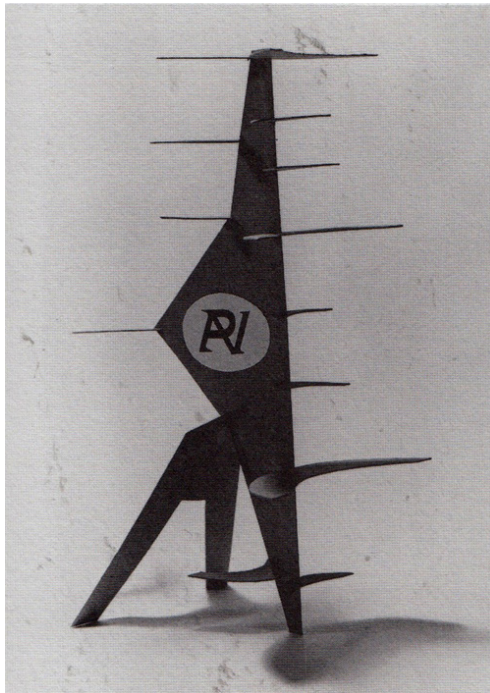


fig. 7

Composition: Kitadai Shōzō

Photography: Ōtsuji Kiyoji

Composition for the “APN” page in *Asahi Graph*, 1953

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fig. 8

Composition: Yamaguchi Katsuhiro

Photography: Ōtsuji Kiyoji

Composition for the “APN” page in *Asahi Graph*, 1953

©Estate of Katsuhiro Yamaguchi

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Independent Exhibition.” The “Third Jikken Kōbō Recital” was centered around sculptural works. It should be noted that these events were called “presentations.” In August of the same year, Kōbō members Takemitsu, Yuasa, and Suzuki presented their new compositions for the first time alongside works by Satie and Messiaen at the “Fourth Experimental Workshop Presentation.”

4 [Konishiroku Shashin Kōgyō Kabushiki Gaisha (later Konica).]

In 1953, the “APN” column in *Asahi Graph* was serialized. Although not a Jikken Kōbō project, the objects captured in the photographs that constitute the column, which were taken by Ōtsuji, were created by Kitadai, Yamaguchi, and Komai. Here too, Saitō Yoshishige, Teshigahara Sōfū, Hasegawa Saburō, and Hamada Hamao, with whom Kōbō developed relationships, were added to the mix. At that time, Ōtsuji was a member of the photo-based graphic art group “Graphic Shūdan,” for which Abe Nobuya and Takiguchi Shūzō served as advisors. Hamada and Kitadai would also later join this group, which would also count Ishimoto Yasuhiro as a member for a time. Kōbō thus also interacted closely with Graphic Shūdan.

That same year, the “Fifth Presentation” was held. While this event was being organized, *Asahigraph* editor Izawa Tadasu introduced Kōbō to the Tokyo Telecommunications Engineering Corporation (later SONY), which had developed an “autoslide projector,” a slide projector with synchronized sound. The group established a relationship with the company, and the Kōbō members worked together to create an audiovisual piece for this device. Within Kōbō, there was already a heightened interest in cinematic experiments, and members had been testing the possibilities of shooting in color film with Konishiroku<sup>4</sup> and others. Around this time, Kōbō also started to work on a trial version of the later completed film *Mobile and Vitrine*.

In addition to the members’ compositions, the “Fifth Presentation” featured Akiyama’s *Poem for Tape Recorder* and four autoslide pieces.

### *Making Foam*

Composition: Fukushima Hideko

Music: Fukushima Kazuo

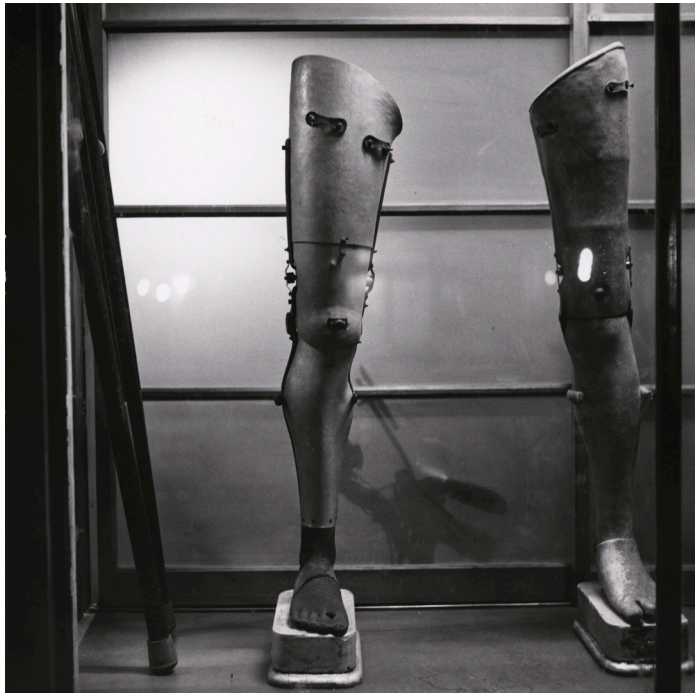


fig. 9

Ōtsuji Kiyoji, *Display Window*, 1954

©Ōtsuji Tetsuo

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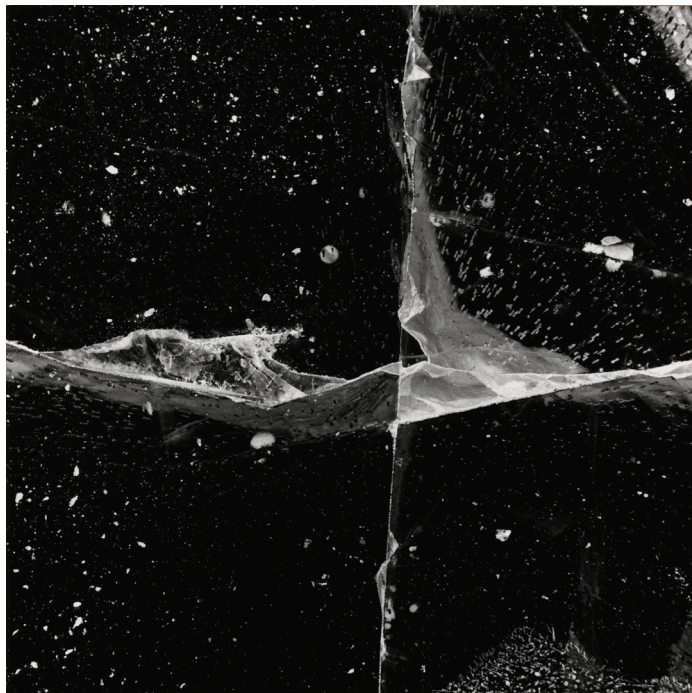


fig. 10

Ōtsuji Kiyoji, *Crest of Ice*, 1956

©Ōtsuji Tetsuo

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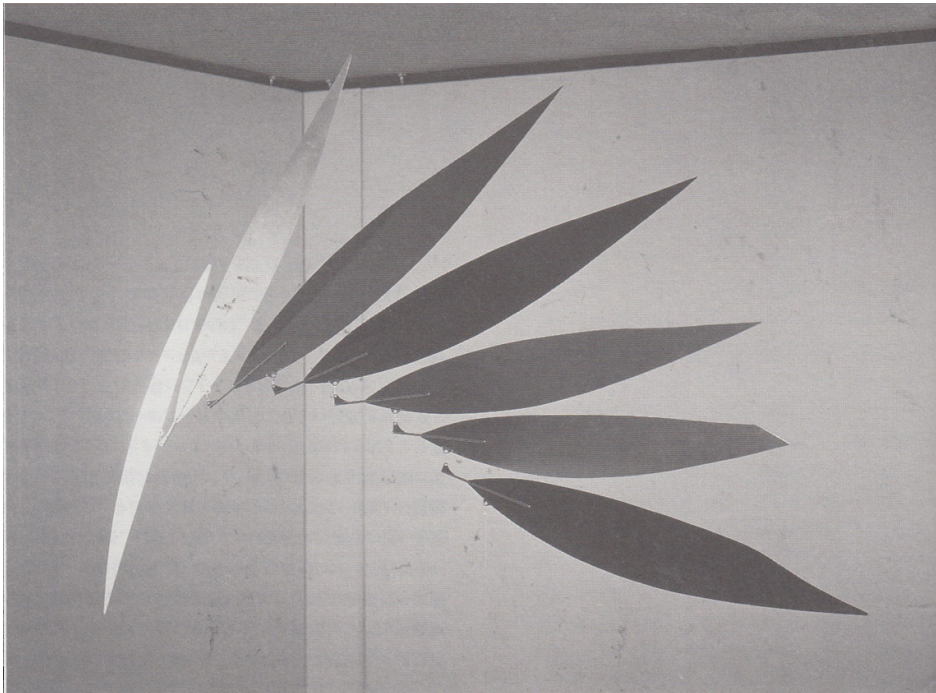


fig. 11

Kitadai Shōzō, *Tracks of the Solar Eclipse*,  
1956–57/1988–89

©Tokyo Publishing House

*Lespugue*

Composition: Komai Tetsuo

Music: Yuasa Jōji

*The Adventure of Test Pilot W.S.'s Eyes*

Composition: Yamaguchi Katsuhiko

Music: Suzuki Hiroyoshi

*Tales of an Unknown World*

Composition: Kitadai Shōzō

Music: Suzuki Hiroyoshi and Yuasa Jōji

In 1954, Jikken Kōbō organized the “Schönberg Recital,” in which *Pierrot Lunaire* and other pieces by Schönberg were presented for the first time in Japan. In 1955, Kōbō collaborated with the Matsuo Akemi Ballet Company. Yamaguchi, Fukushima, and Kitadai were involved in the stage and costume design for *Illumination*, *Pauper Prince*, and *Future Eve*. The scores for these works were composed by Kōbō members as well as Akutagawa, Mayuzumi, and Takemitsu. In this year, Kōbō’s core energy expanded dramatically through various social developments.

Takechi Tetsuji, who had been producing experimental kabuki performances in the Kansai region, had noticed Jikken Kōbō’s activities and asked the group to collaborate on productions of *Pierrot Lunaire* and Mishima Yukio’s *The Damask Drum*. Additionally, Nichigeki Music Hall commissioned Kōbō to provide visual, sculptural, and musical accompaniments to the vaudeville work titled *Kami no kuni kara tanizoko wo mireba* [Seven Peeping Toms from Heaven] produced by Okada Keikichi. This was likely the first theatrical performance with stage design incorporating film and slide projection in postwar Japan, not to mention multiple projections on three screens, which would not be seen again until the 1970 Osaka Expo.

Also that same year, Matsumoto Toshio, production assistant on the PR film *Ginrin* [Bicycle in Dream], requested help from Jikken Kōbō

to realize his experimental visions for the film. Produced by Shinriken Eiga, which was commissioned by the Japan Automobile Manufacturers Association, *Ginrin* was a groundbreaking PR film that incorporated abstract elements and used Surrealist methods to depict the fantasies of a boy dreaming about cars.<sup>5</sup> In terms of experimental techniques, it was also the first color film in Japan to use special effects, realized with help from Toho special effects director Tsuburaya Eiji.

<sup>5</sup> [The film was actually commissioned by the Japan Bicycle Association and depicts a boy dreaming about bicycles.]

In simultaneously presenting their own works and collaborating on various intermedia pieces, the Kōbō composers pioneered uncharted territories. Jikken Kōbō was increasingly recognized for its innovation in these postwar years and began producing new experimental events, such as the 1956 “Musique Concrète/Electronique Musique Audition.” The audition, which was hosted by Jikken Kōbō and supported by Okamoto Taro’s “Contemporary Arts Institute,” NHK, and others, brought together a number of composers and featured works by Mayuzumi Toshirō, Moroi Makoto, Shibata Minao, Akutagawa Yasushi, Takemitsu Tōru, and Suzuki Hiroyoshi (Yamaguchi Katsuhiro’s piece *The Adventure of Test Pilot W.S.’s Eyes*). The auditorium was also altered by Yamaguchi, who used rope to radially shape the audience space.

Experiments in such a broad range of activities doubtlessly shaped the core of the Kōbō members’ artistic spirits. Jikken Kōbō constantly identified contemporary trends, incorporated new technological possibilities and humanized them, and tried to convey new sensations. All the while, Kōbō also understood the core and cultural essence of traditional Japanese art, and always made an effort to make its works evoke its sensibility.

Takiguchi Shūzō paid careful attention to Jikken Kōbō’s expanding activities, sometimes as a member and sometimes as a third party. At times he criticized the group harshly, but he never abandoned Kōbō,

and he saw a future of infinite possibilities. Takiguchi was obsessed with the experimental spirit and aimed to share its products with as broad a public as possible precisely because that was how he envisioned the art of the future in the 1950s.

Takiguchi was always a practitioner and he was also a utopian. Jikken Kōbō never published an overstated manifesto. Instead, the group believed in communicating with people through its broad and varied practice. This is why it was able to sustain spiritual experimentation as an intangible workshop.

In many of the texts that Takiguchi wrote during Jikken Kōbō's nascent period, he discusses the direction and potential of the group's activities. For example, for the "Second Jikken Kōbō Recital" program, he wrote an essay titled "On the Spirit of Experimentation," in which he states, "From now on, to coordinate our breaths with the art of the world, we will need to have a much stronger theory. And for this, I believe it necessary to cultivate a spirit of experimentation." Experiments, in his understanding, should not be confined to laboratories, but instead, he emphasizes, should come into contact with reality and society. For the May 1952 issue of *Bijutsu hihyō*, Takiguchi wrote a thesis titled "Art and Experimentation," in which he explained the differences between scientific and artistic experimentation. He also noted that many artists carried out experiments during the periods when the contemporary artistic uses of media such as photography, cinema, radio, and television were being developed. He writes, "It is desirable for art to have a large public, but new art today requires an experimental period. Skipping that stage, to reach a broad public, results in a commercialist gesture. Modern art is likely to be mixed up with frivolous modernism in such cases. The true public, however, probably does not desire such a gesture from art in the final instance."

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This text was originally published as "Jikken Kōbō" in *1953-nen raito appu: atarashii sengo bijutsuzō ga mietekita* [Shedding light on art in Japan 1953] (Tokyo: Meguro Museum of Art, Tama Art University, Asahi Shimbun, 1996), 189–96; reprinted in Yamaguchi Katsuhiro, *Ikite iru zen'ei: Yamaguchi Katsuhiro hyōronshū* [Living avant-garde: A collection of criticisms by Yamaguchi Katsuhiro] (Tokyo: Suiseisha, 2017), 59–64. Translated by Taro Nettleton.

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