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BEYOND THE CIRCLE

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IF AVANT-GARDE art is defined as a radical protest against the establishment, then the history of Japanese modern and contemporary art has witnessed several major waves of avant-garde art when looking back at the past half century. Though today many of us may have forgotten or are forgetting about these waves, they certainly helped push forward the Japanese contemporary art riding on them.

These waves of avant-garde movements were Mavo (1923–25), the Gutai Art Association (1954–62), and the many groups that appeared in the 1960s to about 1970: Neo Dadaism Organizers, Hi-Red Center, Jikan-ha (School of Time), Kyushu-ha, Zero Jigen (Zero Dimension), Film Independents, Situation Theatre, Tenjō Sajiki (Theatre Experiment Room), butoh, among others.

We would like to viscerally recall these memories. The attempt is through this book, and the collection of research, documents, and photographs compiled within it.

Japan is called a country of the Far East. Japan has also been called “Europe in Asia” or “America in Asia.” This is not without reason. In the field of art, since the Meiji era (1868–1911), Japan has actively embraced European culture, and by the Taishō era (1912–1926), a system had already been established to assimilate contemporaneous European art, from the academic style of Italy and France to Post-Impressionism. Furthermore, it was during the Taishō and Shōwa (1926–1989) eras when the system for accepting American culture and art that came to Japan after World War II had been created. Meanwhile, there emerged movements in opposition to the newly established systems of each era. Globally and historically, this was not a distinctive phenomenon.

However, unlike the case of Western European art history, the Japanese phenomenon, for better or worse, might have produced a peculiar result. The artists ventured to cultivate new movements of expression in circumstances where the imperial system and the remaining vestiges of feudalism such as the family system conflicted with the modernism prompted by the rapid development of industrial society. We must remember this complicated situation. We should also understand the consciousness of the artists who worked under such circumstances. Furthermore, we should question the capacity of the creative act during these structural changes in Japanese society,

politics, and culture from the modern era to the present.

LED BY MURAYAMA TOMOYOSHI (1901–1977) in the Taishō era, Mavo was closer to its European counterpart of Dada or Constructivism. Rather than nihilism and "destruction of culture" foreseen as a cultural crisis by Tristan Tzara (1896–1963), Mavo acted from the position of optimism and established willingly a culture and nation as found in a developing country. Its actions were a challenge for the art establishment and society, and given that the words *culture*, *cultural*, and *modern* were in vogue, the Japanese movement, though it shared ostensible similarities, entirely differed from Dada in Europe in its content. However, under boiling fascism after the Great Kanto earthquake (1923), Mavo was the first truly avant-garde group in the history of Japanese modern art that undertook a conscious and radical attempt to extend the boundaries of "art" to society, everyday life, and the masses.

Since the beginning of its activities, Mavo had encountered significant problems with the institution, mechanism, and structure of artistic expression that Japanese art would have to face in the future, which led to contradictions and its eventual dissolution, as the group could not overcome these questions and chose politics over art. We must not forget that this phenomenon, when the immaturity of politics stamped down the immaturity of art and the political avant-garde replaced the artistic avant-garde, was one of the fundamental features of the waves in the history of the Japanese avant-garde.

However, Mavo did not perish with the dissolution of the group. For example, Murayama exercised his talent and influence as a playwright, stage director, novelist, architect, and children's book illustrator. Yanase Masamu (1900–1945) drew socio-political satirical manga and painted landscapes and people. Takamizawa Michinao (1899–1989), under the pen name Tagawa Suihō, added a page to the annals of Japanese manga as a popular manga artist renowned for *Norakuro*. Mavo did not vanish, rather these artists captured its essence from the art world and formed a profound relationship with culture. Between 1923 and 1925, Mavo, which coexisted with art movements around the world and sought new horizons for Japanese art, planted its message deeply into the unconsciousness of Japanese art beyond the derivative notion of

"Japanese-style Dada."

The agenda of today is the need to reconsider the turbulent world of the Taishō era, which up to now has not been sufficiently evaluated. All the structures, features, and so forth of Japanese contemporary art in their original forms are deeply rooted in that period.

THE AVANT-GARDE GROUPS of the 1960s exercised artistic experimental practices similarly to Mavo but even more rigorously. Their radical experiments explored new ways of subverting the established frameworks of "art," "culture," and "everyday," among others, and creating new ones. Their practices also went beyond the field of art and covered film, theater, dance, music, photography, and graphic design, to name a few. These avant-garde movements spread beyond the center, meaning Tokyo, the symbol of Japan's rapid economic growth, as they emerged naturally and simultaneously in cities throughout Japan.

The hectic 1960s were more intensive than any other period in the history of Japanese modern and contemporary art. Avant-garde art clashed with the social, cultural, and political climate of the time, and generated something powerful. Furthermore, we should recognize that in comparison with the Western avant-garde movements of the 1960s, for example, Fluxus, Japanese avant-garde groups did not possess the same content or follow a similar trajectory, though they shared the terms and phenomena of *happening* and *underground* contemporaneously with their Western counterparts.

The 1960s avant-garde movements shared the underlying features of Mavo. The 1960s faced more complex social, political, and cultural issues than in the Taishō era, such as the Anpo protests against the passage of the revised US-Japan Security Treaty, the 1964 Tokyo Olympics, the Vietnam War protests, and Expo '70, Osaka. However, art was in severe conflict and mutual intrusion, not only with itself but with other realms as well, and was forced to undergo major changes. Being aware of this situation, the 1960s groups shared the avant-garde sensibilities in the essential sense of Mavo's social critique.

YET AT THE SAME TIME, Gutai Art Association possessed another underlying feature of the waves. In contrast to Mavo and the 1960s

movements, Gutai hardly expressed social critique or an ideology. Its consistent priority of form was highly praised for enabling the group to create its own style and escape the influence of Western art, even if only temporarily.

Artists including Allan Kaprow recognized the originality and significance of numerous artistic experimentations with forms performed by Gutai Art Association under the leadership of Yoshihara Jirō (1905–1972) between 1955–60 in the Kansai region. Gutai was the first Japanese avant-garde movement since the post–World War II era. Its happening-style actions and free creativity inspire even today. Though Gutai was often labeled as "Japanese-style Art Informel," this was clearly incorrect. Rather, there actually existed works that exceeded the scope of Art Informel's abstract painting. Gutai anticipated the tendencies of the 1970s such as Conceptual art, Minimal art, light art, installation art, and happenings. The world of Gutai amalgamated these tendencies and created clearly, albeit unconsciously, one of the deep undercurrents of the waves.

IT IS UNCERTAIN if Japanese art achieved the same prosperity that modern Japanese society did in economic areas. As mentioned above, one of the reasons was a great amplitude between ideology and form that the waves of the avant-garde art movements have drawn, the repeated loss of foundation amid this amplitude, and the struggle of original artistic expression to achieve cultural maturity through its own works and history. Those artists who sought expression outside the amplitude went to New York and Paris. In any case, these three avant-garde movements emerged from Japanese society and the art establishment, operated, and dissolved. Furthermore, many works of art have vanished after their dissolution because the art institutions had not yet matured to the point where museums could acquire and exhibit their avant-garde works of art. The possibility for further progress was also diminished. Many avant-garde artists themselves, as if to disavow their former activities, rushed to keep up with the new trends in art that were introduced at a rapid pace from abroad. Art journalism, critics, museums, and public exhibitions, among others, exacerbated these processes. Art making was beginning to resemble an American-style success story. Artists could not overcome the binary

nature of the amplitude. Their energy was consumed by absorbing and adapting to new art trends, and though this resolved the tension temporarily, it did not provide a fundamental solution. As a result, the *wave* would reappear in a new form but with the same issues. This has become a kind of *circle*.

However, it is noteworthy that the three avant-garde movements obviously achieved maturity. We might decipher the enigma of their maturity by investigating the conscious and the unconscious sides of it. In their seemingly naive, nonsensical, and primitive Don Quixote-like adventures we might grasp the essence of creative practice. A sense of urgency, novelty, and contemporaneousness permeates their works. Artists ventured at great risk to create their own foundation and original forms of expression as they used themselves as a subject of an experimentation, and everything as an object and means of expression. This was an incoherent case that is difficult to grasp from the perspective of Western art and culture.

Then, the three avant-garde movements had to dissolve themselves according to their respective movements within the structures of society and art of their time. Mavo dissolved into the socialist movement under the direction of the Communist Party, Gutai into Art Informel, and the avant-garde groups of the 1960s into independent activities each bearing their own contradictions.

The Western European art historical concept of entirely positive and straight-line "development and progress" is not useful for our analysis of the movements. Indeed, the avant-garde movement is not a phenomenon only of Japan, but unfolded simultaneously around the world. However, unlike the West, this movement did not develop and progress in a linear manner but occurred in a "circular" manner in *waves*. This inevitably raises the following questions:

> 1. Why is the trajectory of Japanese avant-garde art circular? Why is there not enough autonomy within Japanese social, cultural, and political milieu, and within the context of Western European art (in all facets of expression, structure, etc.)?
> 2. Since the Meiji era, when Japanese culture opened up to Western culture and inevitably suffered from self-division and inconsistencies, could the circular nature be some

> unconscious effort toward its unification?
> 3. Have the efforts of the Japanese avant-garde movements been fruitful? Haven't they repeatedly failed when encountering the same obstacles?

HOWEVER, WE STILL have only partial answers to these questions. The trajectory of the avant-garde movements suggests the characteristics, limitations, and possibilities not only for themselves but for us Japanese as well. Probably, they also foreshadow the future of Japanese art.

As a clue to answering these questions, I would like to introduce some materials related to these three avant-garde movements. Though I did not collect complete documentation (each year it becomes more challenging), my intention is to create the opportunity to raise these questions. The following photographic materials will shed light on today's Japanese art and culture for Japanese and Western people. These materials will also help to overcome the biases that exist between the two worlds. Thus, a sense of agreement will grow. This is the hope that we have today, especially for the younger generation.

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This book is based on the catalogue (*Dada in Japan. Japanische Avantgarde 1920–1970*, Düsseldorf, Kunstmuseum Düsseldorf, 1983) published on the occasion of the photographic records-based exhibition *Dada in Japan* curated by the editor (Shirakawa Yoshio) at the Kunstmuseum Düsseldorf (now Museum Kunstpalast) in West Germany in 1983. All illustrations are taken from the German version (though some pages have been moved and some have been deleted). The editor included only text originally written in Japanese and omitted the writings of Albert Peters, Stephan von Wiese, and Ben Vautier.

Initially, the editor planned to publish both the German and Japanese text at the same time. However, due to certain circumstances, only the German version was published at the time of the exhibition, and the Japanese edition was finally released five years later. I am delighted that the original goal has been accomplished, though with a delay.

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