

ORIGINS OF JAPANESE MEDIA ART – ARTISTS EMBRACING TECHNOLOGY FROM 1950S TO EARLY 1970S

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INTRODUCTION

This paper excavates and analyzes works of Japanese artists from 1950s to early 1970s that anticipated media art to come, with original ideas and innovative use of technology.

It is never clear when and where “media art” started. However, it is important to trace back its history and examine what may be called “pre media art” in order to better understand media art today. By exploring postwar Japanese art history retrospectively from today’s media art point of view, elements that have been neglected or put aside can be rediscovered with different meanings.

HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL BACKGROUNDS

In order to analyze their relationship to technology it is important to understand the historical and cultural background. Japanese postwar avant-garde artists emerged from a specific situation when the value system went through a drastic change in a short period. Nationalistic ideology that the government had successfully established since Meiji Restoration in 1868 collapsed with two atomic bombs and the occupation that followed. The defeat meant liberation from the exclusionist doctrine that practically banned anything Western or international and praised “Japanese spirit” (yamato-damashii) as the winning force. The American occupation forces overwhelmed the Japanese with their material and technical superiority. To many Japanese it became clear that spiritualism alone could not compete against the power of technology. Interestingly similar to what happened less than a century earlier, Japan was determined to catch up by focusing at science and technology, transforming itself into an industrial country.

However, ultranationalism was not a Japanese tradition. Before the war, especially in the 1910s and 20s, lively urban culture prospered with real-time influence from Europe and America. New trends and movements were introduced in real time. Dadaist movement was introduced in 1920 and had a strong impact especially on poets. A group of artists founded MAVO in 1923 with publication and activities that encompassed a wider field including art, design, theatre, architecture, among others. Surrealism was introduced in late 1920s by poets, theorists and artists including Shuzo Takiguchi, who later led Jikken Kobo (Experimental Workshop) in the postwar period. In music jazz, French chanson and European classic music were popular numbers for gramophone and radio. In less than half a century since Japan opened its border to the world with Meiji Restoration and launched an accelerated modernization, Western culture was already integrated in urban life.

However, the occupation of Manchuria in 1931 and invasion to China that followed put an end to the liberal and international atmosphere. By 1940 cultural figures who were active abroad including the painter Taro Okamoto were forced back to Japan. In 1941 Takiguchi and a Surrealist painter Ichiro

Fukuda were arrested for a groundless suspect that avant-garde artists were involved in the international communist movement. Any cultural activities that looked “western” would be considered suspicious. In the daily life use of English was banned, as well as listening to British, French or American music. Painters -- both in Western style (yo-ga) and Japanese style (nihon-ga) – willingly or reluctantly painted war propaganda. As war situation got worse metal objects – anything from statues and temple bells to “unnecessary” machines, toys, kitchen utensils, etc. - were collected to be recycled for army use. Women and children were trained to fight using bamboo spears. To compensate the lack of arms and daily commodities the authority promoted the idea of superiority of spiritual strength over material power.

When the war ended in 1945 with two atomic bombs that exploded over the cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, it was natural that awe for the power of science and technology came back, with a hope to catch up the world standard. New companies emerged right after the war founded by engineers who had fresh ideas that could not have been realized during the war. Sony, for example, was established in 1946 and its products played an important role in avant-garde art. Japanese love for technology is a widely known cliché, but in fact curiosity for new things among Japanese had been reported by foreign visitors over centuries.

JIKKEN KOBO (EXPERIMENTAL WORKSHOP, 1951-1957)

Without doubt Jikken Kobo was the most experimental and technologically advanced group of artists in the 1950s Japan. Aforementioned Shuzo Takiguchi played a leading role both as a theorist and a poet in re-launching contemporary art, attracting young artists, poets and composers around him. Consequently Jikken Kobo was formed in 1951 with a multimedia ballet performance titled “Picasso, le Joie de Vivre”. Inspired by a painting by Picasso, the stage set was designed by Shozo Kitadai and Katsuhiko Yamaguchi, costume designed by Hideko Fukushima, music composed by Hiroyoshi Suzuki and Toru Takemitsu, lighting designed by Naotsugu Imai - - as a collaboration of major members of the group. The choice of ballet as a form of collaboration was an homage to Dada’s and surrealist’s experimental ballet, from Francis Picabia, Erik Satie and others in 1920a to Jean Cocteau and Diaghilev, and further to American avant-garde scene with John Cage and Merce Cunningham. Helped by Takiguchi’s career and his worldwide network experiments by Jikken Kobo paced up with international movements in art.

For a self-taught composer Takemitsu who was severely rejected from the academic world at a competition the year before, Jikken Kobo was a place for unlimited experiments and multidimensional activities. Takemitsu became one of the main composers of the group and collaborated with other members such as Katsuhiko Yamaguchi for experimental theatres and performances.

Musique Concrète, which was originally developed by Pierre Schaeffer around 1950, was brought to Japan in 1953 by Toshiro Mayuzumi. Mayuzumi had graduated from Tokyo University of the Arts and studied at Conservatoire de Paris the year before. The new form of music based on magnetic tape recording technology was brought to the next level immediately by Takemitsu and his collaborators at Jikken Kobo. They expanded the concept of Musique Concrète to an audiovisual form that integrated latest electronic audiovisual technology of the time, rather than purely musical experiment. Sony’s Automatic Slide Projector system was just introduced as an educational device to synchronize a slide projector and a tape recorder. Combining Musique Concrète with slides created by artists and photographers, Jikken Kobo produced several “Auto Slide” works in 1953 with surrealistic imagery such as “Adventures

of the Eyes of Mr. Y.S., a Test Pilot” (composition by Katsuhiko Yamaguchi, music by Hiroyoshi Suzuki). The system was offered by Sony and the artists worked at Sony’s studio.

The incredible quickness with which Jikken Kobo artists grasped the possibilities brought by these new reproduction technologies and developed a new form of creation must be understood within the social context. An interest element in their activity is the combination of European and American influences. While Takiguchi In addition to aforementioned atmosphere of the era and a longer tradition of appreciating technology and new things in Japanese culture, the academism in art had not recovered yet. The fact that the major part of Jikken Kobo members did not have academic background probably helped them to think more freely.

Jikken Kobo members continued to be involved in experimenting new ideas and technology after the group diminished in 1957 after Takiguchi’s death and played major roles in the Osaka World Exposition in 1970, although it does not mean that they embraced technology without criticism. Ambivalence was felt widely among artists who had experimental approaches as in case of Osamu Tezuka who named his major robot character “Atom” (Astro Boy outside Japan) postwar Japan. Yet, as the title of the book “Robot Avant-garde” by Yamaguchi (1985) suggests, their curiosity toward technology and experimentalism shared by the Jikken Kobo members founded a basis for Japanese media art today.

PAINTING BY MACHINE

The Gutai artist Akira Kanayama is less known compared to his partner Atsuko Tanaka, the artist known for her “Electric Dress (1956), although the original use of technology and interest in materials that had not been traditionally used in art were shared among them. Kanayama helped Tanaka in realizing her ideas that involved technology such as her piece “Work (Bell)” (1955). Kanayama’s “Work” series produced mostly around 1957 involved a remote-controlled car with paint tanks he built himself, modifying a toy car. Kanayama tested a variety of crayons, markers, black and color ink with which the car scribbled or dripped while moving on large pieces of paper and later on white vinyl sheets, which he found the most appropriate for his purpose. While the artist operated the car on a sheet laid on the floor, its trajectory and the resulting traces of ink were never under the perfect control of the artist. Instead of directly employing one’s own body, as in case of other Gutai artists such as Kazuo Shiraga and Saburo Murakami, Kanayama used a mechanical medium and chance operation to draw lines. His use of plastic inflatables and footsteps on vinyl sheets in other works also suggest his positive interest in new materials, and mediated representation of body. However, when Gutai was “discovered” by the French critic / art dealer Michel Tapié and internationally introduced, these features of Kanayama’s works were disregarded. It is said that his “Work” series was interpreted as alike of Jackson Pollock’s “all-over” style in the art world outside Japan, neglecting the interesting questions that arose about originality and the role of technology in art.

Eventually Gutai artists including Tanaka shifted to “paintings” rather than three-dimensional works involving unusual medium. By the time when Gutai was invited to participate the 1970 World Exposition in Osaka, Kanayama and Tanaka left the group.

DOMESTIC AND INTERNATIONAL, POLITICAL AND NON-POLITICAL

It has been considered that the isolation from the international art world during the first years after the war helped giving birth to original and often extreme approaches by Gutai artists and by those who submitted to the annual Yomiuri Independent exhibition[1949–1963] including Neo-Dada artists. While the role of isolation was more obvious in case of Kyushu-ha, which was notorious for their wild junk artworks that contributed in putting an end to Yomiuri Independent, there existed multiple channels of information on movements in art.

Taro Okamoto, who had lived in Paris before the war and achieved recognition among surrealists and abstract painters, was most influential among the young postwar Japanese avant-garde artists. Okamoto's knowledge and understanding on avant-garde art combined with his interest in Japanese prehistoric Jomon sculptures created a complex effects on young artists, together with his Polarism (taikyoku-shugi) that regards contradictory ideas as the source of creation. Jiro Yoshihara, who founded Gutai in 1954, had access to the international art world, and communicated with his friends from the prewar period. Aforementioned Takiguchi kept communication with surrealists including Andre Breton 、 Marcel Duchamp, and László Moholy-Nagy. As Duchamp and Moholy-Nagy moved to the United States, Takiguchi's spectrum widened to the latest art movements in America. Another information source for some of the young artists including Yamaguchi was the library of the Occupation Force in central Tokyo. The library was open to everyone and had books on contemporary art. Using the still brand new LP record player, contemporary music was also presented. When America, especially New York, was becoming the center of the most experimental movements in visual art, music, and dance, such up-to-date information flow no doubt provided a ground for Tokyo-based artists and composers. It was missing from artists in other regions such as Gutai.

Another important issue in postwar art was politics. As the reaction to the wartime totalitarianism, movement for democracy and influence of communism widely spread, involving young artists. Struggles took place as the US government changed the policy before the end of the occupation and started oppressing leftist movements. The conflict continued in a greater scale in 1960 and in 1970, when the Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security between the United States and Japan was to be signed.

TECHNOLOGY AS A MEDIUM OF ART

What seems to be in common among artists such as Akira Kanayama, Atsuko Tanaka and Katsuhiro Yamaguchi is the conscious distance they kept from being trapped in domestic value system, and certain "coolness" in representing their concepts. Instead of being involved in "Japanese" aesthetics or local (i.e. Japanese) politics, or creating artworks that radiate strong messages, they used technology as a medium through which their ideas could be observed and enjoyed by others. Yamaguchi's "Vitrine" works offer different colors and patterns according to a viewer's position and movement. Kanayama's "Work" series is a whimsical experiment with a toy radio control car, which was an extremely popular hobby object of the time. By placing technology as a core part of their works, they opened up a new approach in art, consciously or unconsciously connecting the long tradition of "technology as entertainment" in Japan, and media art to come.