

GUTAI MOVEMENT IN JAPAN AND ART AFTERWARDS. TOWARDS NEW UNDERSTANDING OF CURRENT MEDIA ART

Rie Saito

This paper will explore about GUTAI and Japanese avant-garde art especially concentrate on Atsuko Tanaka's 'Electric Dress' from cultural and sociological view to reconsider contemporary role of art and the relationship between culture and society. The paper will open a path to new understanding of media art in today's situation.

Is contemporary art still functioning as a role to propose an issue in a current society? In a complex world like today, it is difficult to answer this question and to think about the relationship between art and society. However, even under chaotic circumstances after postwar in Japan, there were specific intentions and certain art movements that took place, such as GUTAI, which is one of the most important movements that took at that time period. By focusing on this movement, it may enable us to rethink the practice of today's media art.

This paper will focus on Atsuko Tanaka (1932 – 2005) who expressed her artistic work in GUTAI during 1950's in Kansai, western region of Japan. The purpose of this paper is to investigate how the artist's personal catches and transforms to the public perspective.

Moreover, by reconsidering Tanaka's work as a prehistory of media art, the paper will particularly examine how postwar Japanese avant-garde art connect to today's media art. Especially, focusing on the work 'Electric Dress' will bring us a new understanding towards current media art in Japan.

In 1945, after the World War II, under chaos and desperation in the Japanese society, some artists tried different artistic work and activity to find the new world. GUTAI was one of these movements which happened in Hyogo prefecture in Kansai more than 500 km away from Tokyo. The artist Jiro Yoshihara formed GUTAI as a Gutai Art Association. In the first issue of GUTAI magazine, Yoshihara wrote a manifesto as below.

The most important thing for us is that present art is in the most liberal position for these who are living in this a severe time, because they deeply believe that the creation of freedom leads to human development. We earnestly wish to specifically indicate and prove that our spirits are free, and continue searching for fresh impression in every creation to the end. [1]

As described, the idea of GUTAI was to confront with the severe reality of the society and to conquer this situation. Atsuko Tanaka, who was active in Zero-kai emphasized this idea, and decided to participate in GUTAI officially. The first exhibition of GUTAI was held in June 1955 at Ashiya-city in Hyogo prefecture. It was an outdoor exhibition and Tanaka created 'Stage Clothes' which can be said the basis of 'Electric Dress'. There Tanaka made an enormous seven human figures and these figures had many colorful electric bulbs.

On October 1955, GUTAI held the first group exhibition in Tokyo. Tanaka exhibited one of her major work entitled 'bell'. Next year, October 1956, the second GUTAI exhibition was held in the same place in Tokyo and she placed her works on the show, including the 'Electric Dress'. Tanaka herself had put on the dress. In the famous photo of this work, her face shows obvious anxiety covered by the wrapping electricity. At that time, she had support from the electronic professionals to construct the electric dress, but there was certainly a risk for an electric shock. Tanaka herself says that she was a little bit scared. [2] This performance could be seen as insane. However, because she had put the electric dress on herself, the work was accepted with overwhelming existence.

Kato describes that in order to distinguish from all the others, Tanaka's 'Electric Dress' needed to cross over and transform the visual surfaces of the 'clothes / body'. Moreover, she considers Tanaka's 'Electric Dress' implies the general nature of clothing profoundly related to the formation of the 'self', which could also be expressed as 'Meta Clothes' by presenting a figure of continuing change in the body's image. [3]

According to Kato's opinion, Tanaka's 'Electric Dress' connotes various meaning about the body. Electric Dress is an extension of the body and it represents the body itself. The electric bulbs somewhat look like bone structure and blood, which have an uplifting image. However, the most critical point is the anxious face of Tanaka herself who actually controls the real body. She has an uncertainty towards her body but as an artist who tries to transcend this skepticism, the cloth, which is made from electricity, must have had a heavy strain. This is connected to Japanese traditional Kimono that wraps the body with many layers of fabric. Actually, when Kimono becomes a formal attire, the heaviness of the cloths constraints the body. Nevertheless, by bearing with this restraint, Kimono brings out its beauty as a dress. It can be considered that by putting her electric dress, Tanaka struggled to overcome the low status of female artist at that time and the burden from the society. When these personal issues forms as an artistic work, "Electric Dress" sublime as a crucial work that is still considered a remarkable piece until the present moment. One could feel her eagerness to create a new sensitivity after the defeat of war and the rapid transition of the society.

Today many contemporary artists create works which reflect a social issue where private and public sphere is ambiguous. Even more, they try to subvert the dualism itself. In the world where every issue can become a pop and mob, we are confronting the state which we cannot differentiate the reality and fiction in our daily life. In a situation like this, there is a lot of work that refer to virtualism or 'new' gender images of the body. It is clear that the body images change accordingly as time changes. When we look back to the work of Tanaka, it is notable that she was seeking the area where contemporary media arts were groping -- in the very early era of 1950's.

In addition, one must not miss that Tanaka was producing the 'Electric Dress' as stage clothes. In GUTAI's use of the stage in 1957, she made a performance called 'Stage Clothes'. She changed her clothes continuously in this performance and the 'Electric Dress' recreated fluidity in space. Regarding 'Stage Clothes', Tanaka describes as follows.

This cloth start form the green cloth, the figure and the color of the clothes transform with rapid blinks of the electric light bulbs.

Electric Dress starts from small colorless bulb, then one hundred volt color bulbs, color pipe bulbs, bulbs which is covered by rigid vinyl and so on. Many figures, colors and lights of clothes appear blinking, and the tempo speeds up to a point where blinking lights look messed up.

What is interesting to me is that by blinking the electric bulbs with a motor machine, the electric bulbs that I myself set up turns with obsessive beauty that cannot be created by human's hand. [4]

From this, it is understandable that Tanaka focuses her attention to the change of time and brings her stage performance toward space to attract the audience. Her ability to construct the special atmosphere can be seen in her another work entitled 'Bell', her first GUTAI exhibition, which presents a blinking motor switch and continuous sound of the bell.

As just described, Tanaka's work is not just using the newest technology but it is a pioneering experiment by using the electric media to create an artistic work at that moment. Moreover, her skills to change small object into dynamic dimensional work is extremely avant-garde and still gives unjaded impression to us.

Unfortunately, Tanaka's work could not be appreciated by the right in Japanese art scene. Her work may have been too radical and awe-strike for the new born of art. However, person from overseas who is related to the art world such as the French critic, Michel Tapié, gave her a reputation. Nonetheless, a sequence of GUTAI's activity and Tanaka's work gave an enormous encouragement to Japanese media art afterwards. They cultivated its pioneer spirit, avant-garde motivation and the quest for new beauty.

In 1960, Tanaka contributes articles to the magazine titled "Search for an Unknown Aesthetic" which states:

The new artistic work has to create different beauty that past works already have. Repeat of presenting already existing beauty is a kind of handwork by craftspeople. I think person who tries to create art has a responsibility to find unknown beauty and set it in place.

Everyone can paint on a canvas and it is totally free to express anything. The most interesting thing is to draw the thing, which nobody knows, including myself. [5]

If contemporary art still respond to the complex society and create new work, this text most directly expresses the situation. We are now surrounded by the confusion and anxiety as if it is postwar, but we are still trying to find a faint glimmer of hope. In such circumstances, conflicts are natural and many work will express embarrassment and delusion. However, unfazed attitude to search for a new art will bring out hope that will brighten the present and future with self-reflection. Now in Japan after the disaster of March 2011, this movement is slightly seen. Japanese contemporary art nourished the spirit to move people's feelings even if it is made of a very simple structure. From this point of view, Tanaka's 'Electric Dress' will be reappraised as a pioneering piece.

References and Notes:

1. Jiro Yoshihara, "Gutai Manifesto," in *Gutai Journal 1* (1955).
2. Tokutaro Yamamura and Shinichiro Osaki, "Interview: Akira Kanayama – Atsuko Tanaka" in *DOCUMENT GUTAI 1954-1972*, 396-402 (Ashiya: Ashiya City Museum of Art and History, 1993).
3. Mizuho Kato, "Searching for a Boundary," in *Atsuko Tanaka: Search for an Unknown Aesthetic 1954-2000* (Ashiya: Ashiya City Museum of Art and History, 2000), 6-14.
4. Atsuko Tanaka, "Work 11 Stage Clothes," in *Gutai Journal 7* (1957).
5. Atsuko Tanaka, "Michi no bi no Tankyu," in *Geijutsu Shincho 11*, no. 1 (1960): 271-272.