

## **AICA JAPAN CONGRESS 1998**

Symposium "TRANSITION : Changing Society and Art "

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### ■ Colloquium I *Memories and Visions : From Tradition to a New Identity*

Session 2 : *The Asian Perspective*

#### **UNAGAMI Masaomi (Japan)**

##### ***Ideogram Painting : Yu-ichi***

Primitivism, as YU-ICHI understood it, was then considered an important component of modern art. It induced YU-ICHI to delve into his profound nature, that which seems to be at the root of being Japanese. He devoted himself to the act of "writing" in order to set free his pure humanity. His achievements were avantgarde from the start. He created his own ideograms and wrote them down with handmixed Chinese ink on papers of non-standard size. He expressed unfamiliar characters by means of a most ordinary act, that is, by "writing."

He appeared on the scene in early spring of 1950, that is, at mid-twentieth century, only five years after World War II. During those days of world-wide efforts of revival, there was a tendency among intellectuals to reconsider the two world wars of the first half of this century as experiments in mass murder. How could this glorious century guided by intellectual and rational minds have given way to such horrors foreboding the destruction of mankind? How would our descendants be able to cope with this terror? Information, now freely flying through the air, was beginning to be transmitted much faster than before the wars and the globe was being internationalized rapidly. It was in these days of historic turnover that YU-ICHI made his debut.

At the time around of his debut as a calligrapher in 1950 the movement of Action Painting, was originated in New York. The dynamic expression of paint hurled onto canvas affected the contemporary art scene world-wide. From Jackson Pollock to Franz Kline, gestural black-and-white painting was the trend of the day, touching also on Tachisme and Informel in Paris, and it lasted into the 1960s. At its height, many Japanese calligraphers were included in foreign exhibitions that toured from America to Europe. Because those Japanese artworks reflected action, they caught the attention of painters in the West.

Although YU-ICHI was stimulated by Action Painting, he never copied it nor was he directly influenced by it insofar as Oriental calligraphy is based on "the unification of spirit and body" and "action" had always and naturally been a basic element of it. This explains the feature common to Pollock's expression and that of Oriental calligraphy. As for YU-ICHI, he thoroughly searched for this action spirit in order to attain the utmost expression in painting.

YU-ICHI, now free from the tradition of "calligraphy," devoted himself to Action Painting while adhering to the kanji (Chinese character), that is, the ideogram, so that he was to some extent restricted. Regulated in this way, his action would become freer and the gesture more pronounced. Hence, unlike other modern artists who are apt to break with tradition as an affirmative style, he revived tradition by critically transcending normative strictures. He overcame "calligraphy" which symbolized the past and pursued a completely new approach with his ideogram painting.