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Gutai Art Association was established in the summer of 1954 by Jiro Yoshihara and 16 young artists. Gutai caused a sensation in the art world at the time, exhibiting their original works outdoors and presenting novel performances on stage, they developed a form of expression and action which was free from traditional ideas. Michel Tapié came to Japan in 1957 and was highly impressed by Gutai art and from about 1958, their works were exhibited in Europe and America and their similarities with Informel became apparent. In 1962, the Gutai Pinacotheca (Gutai Museum) was founded in Osaka as a center for their activities and they formed close relationships with a wide range of people abroad. From about that time, second generation members joined and the style started to change somewhat compared to the earlier period of activity. In 1972 the group dissolved because of Jiro Yoshihara's sudden death. Twenty three years have passed since then and now Gutai's eighteen years of activity is recognized as an important epoch not only in Japan but also in the international arena.

"Create an art never known until now." (1) This is what Jiro Yoshihara said to the young artists who gathered at his studio after the war. As he himself said "Painting has been changed by the war", being unsatisfied simply with abstract work, and sensing that without the reintroduction of the human element itself to painting nothing could be settled. (2) This is the period when Yoshihara who had been active as one of the pioneers of abstract painting before the war in Japan, turned his back on his life's work up to then and started walking back to the starting point as a human being and an artist.

Among Japanese artists around 1950 soon after the war, some tried to reestablish what they had developed by themselves before, and some tried to

follow western art again, however Yoshihara tried to find an original path saying "I think epoch making ideas which did not exist before the war should happen now in the world of painting"(3) In Tokyo around 1950, the Experimental Studio organized by the critic Shuzo Takiguchi and the Yomiuri Independent Exhibition organized by the Yomiuri Newspaper took shape, and in Kansai, there were frequent study meetings and group exhibitions revolving around artists. One of the key figures was Yoshihara. Yoshihara was connected with the artists who exhibited at the Ashiya City Art Exhibition in his hometown Ashiya and many artists of different genre such as painters, calligraphers and flower arrangement artists who were members of the Contemporary Art Council (Genbi). Among them communication with the calligraphers(4) who were publishing avant-garde calligraphy magazines such as "Bokubi" and "Bokujin" resulted in considerable influence on Yoshihara's style and ideas. The main contrast or distinction between Yoshihara's style and that of ordinary calligraphy is the words of which literature is made and the formative process. The fact that the letters or words which are the foundation of calligraphy exceed normal limits and become action painting means, for calligraphers, to step into a world from which they can't return. However, Yoshihara was able to discover a new world of abstract painting in calligraphy. And this was very much evident in the "Gutai Art Manifesto"(5) of 1956, the only theoretical manifesto of Gutai, written by Yoshihara. Earlier than that in 1952, Yoshihara had already said at a discussion meeting, comparing calligraphy of the 1920's written by the calligrapher Nanten-bo with Franz Kline and Jackson Pollock, "There is a common thread linking Kline's beautiful flowing sumi, Pollock's splash and this calligrapher's splash"(6) and concerning this calligraphy he said "I was not impressed with it as calligraphy, but I feel somewhat as if the form of painting we are looking for and which new artists

are searching for with great suffering, has appeared in front of our eyes unexpectedly." (7) Yoshihara's interest was not limited to the beauty to be found in a cross-over between painting and calligraphy but in sensing the material as form and this was unlike the typical evaluation or feeling regarding calligraphy. Around the same period, Saburo Hasegawa (1906-1957) an artist and contemporary of Yoshihara's, sent letters to Franz Kline and P.Tal.Coat exchanging opinions about "gest" in painting. (8) This fact proves that two artists who were leaders of abstract painting before the war were searching for something new in calligraphy based on self-examination. Yoshihara judged that there was a spiritual element shared by calligraphy and their creative field saying, "That which is formless and automatist expresses character and psychology directly and clearly even in one line or one dot." When it comes to Yoshihara's influence on Gutai artists, I suppose these things had a great impact on their creative activities not only in painting but also performance.

The establishment of the Gutai Art Association was not the result of planning. Young artists who had met with Yoshihara from before 1950 to receive his critique of their paintings held the "Young Artists Avant-Garde Exhibition" in 1954 (9). To document the works and activities centering around Yoshihara they decided to make a journal and the name "Gutai" was given to the group. This originated in the statement "Give concrete expression to formlessness and spirituality." (10) This journal was published as the first edition of "Gutai Journal" in January 1955 and Jiro Yoshihara and the 16 artists whose works were listed with their photographs were considered to be

the establishing members of Gutai. They are : Jiro Yoshihara, Michio Yoshihara, Shozo Shimamoto, Tsuruko Yamazaki, Toshio Yoshida, Chiyu Uemae, Masatoshi Masanobu, Hideo Yoshihara, Yutaka Funai, Shigeru Azuma, Tamiko Ueda, Hiroshi Okada, Sadami Azuma, Kei Isetani, Hajime Okamoto, Yoshio Sekine, Toichiro Fujikawa. In a preface to the journal it is noted "We are hoping to present the proof concretely that our spirit is free. We are compelled to seek fresh inspiration in all manner of form giving activities." (11) In March, 12 members exhibited at the 7th Yomiuri Independent Exhibition and all of their works were named "Gutai". However, during that period 8 members who couldn't accept Yoshihara's dogmatic aesthetic left the group and so Gutai's beginnings were not glorious. Under such a circumstance Yoshihara tried to energize Gutai by inviting Kazuo Shiraga, Saburo Murakami, Akira Kanayama and Atsuko Tanaka, who were members of Group Zero (12) which was a radical and active movement in Osaka at that time. They had already exhibited their work and received public attention at the Group Zero Exhibition.

In July 1955, by holding the Experimental Outdoor Exhibition of Modern Art to Challenge the Midsummer Sun, Gutai showed its substance clearly and took its first step. The first exhibition organized by the Gutai Art Association was held in Tokyo in October. It was said that art was an act of imitation, but they created new expressive forms one after another, expanding the idea of art. Considering the commonly accepted norms up to that time, this site did not constitute an appropriate place for the exhibition of art and yet it was there that the artists' individuality and perceptivity was revealed, not out of any logical strategy but through the desire to express purity, simplicity and clarity using this space and any suitable material which came to hand. This experiment can be seen as the starting point of Gutai's activities. That is

to say, it expressed their admiration for the playful spontaneity and creativity of the innocent art-loving child. If any restriction existed it was Jiro Yoshihara's edicts, "Don't imitate others" and "Create an art never known until now." What is common in the creative attitude of the artists who exhibited at the outdoor exhibitions or Gutai exhibitions at that time was that all of them while involved in creative action sought a kind of purification. We should keep in mind the fact that all of them began their painting careers by learning the traditional techniques of European art in the post Meiji era. Almost none of them, however, had completed studies at universities then providing specialised art education. Some had started at art university only to abandon their studies due to doubts about the teaching methods and even those who did graduate seem to have turned their disgust and repulsion into a form of motivation. Instinctively they knew the importance of originality. Then, upon meeting Yoshihara who shared their doubt and continued to strive for a new art form, they responded to his words with exhilaration. As if to substantiate his ideas almost all of the Gutai members taught painting to children. Through teaching in these art classes they tried to learn something from children. This "something" was perhaps not the style of art made by children but their attitude, which was capable of producing unique and surprising results swiftly from an empty white space in an unselfconscious manner. Something marvellous to adult eyes.

We feel that Gutai is quite incomprehensible unless we designate it as outside art or meta-art, yet we should probably look upon it as a form of activity which springs from an art lost to human memory. Could we say that Gutai is a representation of a conception of creation that has been submerged through an overabundance of technique and intellectual thought? No formalised

theory exists. They only tried to search for their individual originality with the stimulus of Yoshihara's charismatic existence. Shozo Shimamoto clearly insisted "Not only in fine art education but all kinds of education, it's not possible for art theory to precede art itself. If it were so, then, there wouldn't be any reason for art to exist. (13).

From 1955 to 1960, Gutai held 9 Gutai Art Exhibitions(14), outdoor exhibitions and stage exhibitions as well as publishing 11 journals. Considering the fact that Gutai Art Exhibitions were held 21 times (15) altogether until their break-up in 1972 and that the journal terminated with the 14th edition published in 1965, we can see how radical Gutai's activities were in the early years. The actions and performances which Allan Kaprow calls "the initiative for happenings" (16) were created in the early period.

Before meeting Yoshihara, Kazuo Shiraga had already made paintings with his feet, and at the first Gutai Art Exhibition he appeared as a figure grappling in the mud as his work. Further, at the outdoor exhibition, he created a work which consisted of logs with an axe and another work of wrapping mud. At the Gutai On-Stage Art Show in 1957, he performed "Sanbaso Super Modern" the image of which originated in Kyogen, Japaneses traditional theater. The on stage sacred attitude of Shiraga dressed in red clothes and a mask reminds us of the traditional ceremony. After that he created some works in different styles, however he continued foot painting and maintained his spirit unchanged saying "Devote everything to action".

Like Shiraga, Saburo Murakami before joining Gutai, had shown "Throwing

ball painting", a work made by throwing rubber balls painted with sumi onto canvas. He amazed people by the action works of running, tearing asphalt roofing (a paper material for building) at the outdoor exhibition in 1955 and a performance of tearing paper at the first Gutai Art Exhibition. Also at the outdoor exhibition in 1956, his works "Sora" (Sky) and "Arayuru Fukei" (All Possible Landscapes) let viewers participate and made their vision limited. Later at the on-stage show "Byobu to torikumu" (Tackling a Japanese Screen) he made a comment, "By negation, can't we create a chance for a new aesthetic? This is my subject. Paper exists to be drawn on and paint exists to be applied physically. When we want paper or paint to remain fixed and stable, tearing or peeling should be avoided as a subject. However, this is a part of the character of the material and I think it's necessary to show it. There may be the potential to discover a new category of beauty by neglecting the established sense of beauty which guarantees certainty and daring to choose danger by exploiting a quality which "should" be avoided. (17) Based on such ideas, even after Gutai moved over to tableaux, he showed "Hakurakusuru Kaiga" (Peeling painting). "Paper Tearing" performance which can be seen often even now tells us that there exists an eternal sense of tension in Murakami's work.

Also "Hajimemo Owarimo nai Ongaku" (Music Without Beginning and Ending) by Shozo Shimamoto or "Waku no nai Ongaku" (Music without Limits) by Michio Yoshihara at the Gutai On-stage Art Show was so called "Music Concrete"; "it should be called sound rather than music and there aren't any musical rules." (18) Also "Electric Costume" by Atsuko Tanaka should be evaluated highly as a work of the period.

It is difficult to find any positive critical evaluation of early Gutai

exhibitions. Perhaps their paintings, actions and three dimensional works which go beyond the limit of sculpture, exceeded the capacity of viewers and critics of the time. This in itself was remarkable. Yoshihara clearly insisted that "Works should not be conceived out of a response to theory. I believe theory should evolve out of the appearance of art activity." (19), however, the origin of Gutai is that human beings should live in purity, something which we now almost forget and this attitude should be common to all artistic expression. This reflects the era 10 years after the war of which they were a part. In September 1958, Gutai held the first overseas exhibition at Martha Jackson Gallery in New York on the recommendation of Michel Tapié. Eighteen members exhibited paintings at the show and documentary film of two stage shows was shown. The content of the stage shows which were intended to strengthen the "frontier spirit" of the members gained public attention however, and ironically the paintings were criticized as well as Tapié's Informel movement : "Although the form of these works breaks with encumbrances, strangely these Gutai paintings don't contain a sense of life. The artists don't appreciate that movement can't be expressed on the two dimensional surface directly. Movement should be made abstract and woven into the flow of time in stages." (20) "The history of Informel started with the rejection of cubism" (21), but Gutai's paintings never were like that. It may be natural to say their work is part of the flow of abstract art in the 1950's as stated before. It becomes clear when we think that the works of all members which were exhibited at Gutai exhibitions were all filtered through Jiro Yoshihara's eyes with his dogmatic sense of aesthetics. That is to say all Gutai artists had their works exhibited only after receiving Yoshihara's approval. Yoshihara was a charismatic figure for all members. His approach was not based on art education but self study and the only guidance he received when he was young was

from Tsuguharu Fujita. In 1928 when Fujita saw Yoshihara's work for the first time, he insisted on the importance of originality and bitterly criticized imitation. This is what Fujita himself fully realized after living abroad.

In Gutai, Yoshihara showed his talent not only in painting but also as an organizer and the talented Gutai members went beyond Yoshihara's leadership to create that era together. This was the first Japanese art movement that tried to be consciously international. Now we should not only evaluate their activities highly but should also discuss thoroughly their work and the merits of the individual artists.

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