

## Text of Lecture

Performance in Taisho Period Avant-garde Art of the 1920's  
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Japan's Taisho period lasted only fifteen years, from 1911 to 1926. The preceding imperial era, the Meiji period, lasted 45 years, and the following Showa period lasted 64 years. Sandwiched between these two longer reigns, the Taisho period has often been simply seen as an extension of the Meiji, or a precursor of the Showa. Today the Taisho period is being reevaluated as a period with its own unique identity.

The Meiji period was a time of building a new, a modern nation, one that heralded civilization and enlightenment, and the paired concepts of national wealth and military might. With the arrival of the Taisho era, democracy was progressing in Japan, and a deepening of the nation's spirit accompanied the incipient infiltration of "culture". This period witnessed the appearance of an individualistic consumer society, and the establishment of Japan's middle class.

In the realm of art, the modernization of traditional Japanese arts was encouraged, and the Meiji period's active absorption of the realism of western art was gradually digested and integrated. The Bunten <sup>government-sponsored</sup> exhibitions established in the late Meiji period gathered together Japan's diverse artistic schools, and their intention was to form the basis for an art world in Japan. With the arrival of the Taisho period, those who advocated newer trends separated from the government-sponsored exhibitions and formed as un-official groups. Thus, two paths were established, official and un-official, and the modernization of the art world continued apace.

From the beginning to the middle of World War I, previously unseen artistic trends appeared one after the other throughout the world, and with the arrival of the 1920s, these new trends were wholeheartedly absorbed into the Japanese art world.

Up until this period, a group known as the Nikakai represented the newest trends in art. The name Nika, or second division, comes from the idea that the conservative trends of the Bunten exhibitions represented the first division or Ika, which had as its antithesis the advanced trends represented by the Nika, or second division. These artists formed their unofficial group with this succinct name as their banner. In 1922, a group of even more advanced artists gathered within the Nikakai and formed a group called Action. The expressive elements of this group reveal a blend of Fauvist, Cubist, and Futurist expression.

Two years prior, in 1920, a Futurism group under the name of Miraiha Bijutsu Kyokai (Futurist art Association) had been formed completely outside of the ordinary art circles. But the members of this association did not fully understand the meaning of Futurism, taking a literal interpretation of the art of the future, and their inclusion of a miscellaneous array of new trends resulted in an amateurish group. But then David Burliuk, a White Russian painter in exile who is known as the father of the Russian futurist movement, joined the group's second annual exhibition. Thus the group gained a more accurate understanding of new European art trends and groups, and Burliuk was central in this education.

Murayama Tomoyoshi returned to Japan from Germany in 1923 and established the extremist group Mavo. He had been inculcated by the Dada movement in Berlin, had contact with the Italian Futurists, and had also been influenced by the Constructivist movement of Russia.

But this was basically a small group, and no matter how radical their assertions, they can be considered to have played an outsider's role vis-à-vis the majority of the art world, one that provided a sudden, peripheral, fire cracker-like stimulation to the whole. But some of these young artists considered themselves the standard bearers of a new age, and as their enthusiastic energies burgeoned forth, they channeled their newly awakened

aims in 1925 into the Sankakai group. The Sanka, or third division, was thus named to signal that its members were even more advanced than those of the Nika.

The Sankakai member exhibition was held in May of the following year, and in quick succession the Gekijo no Sanka (Theater Sanka) was held at a small theater in Tokyo's Tsukiji district. They rented the theater for one night, and it was a rather utilitarian affair, completely unlike an ordinary theatrical play or musical event. These Sankakai member artists held what contemporary terminology would describe as an evening of performance art. They were tired of simply painting and sculpting, they sought new expressive means through the actions of the entire body. And this effort proved the liveliest representation of the special characteristics of Taisho period new arts.

While this movement had existed in earlier fragmentary, suggestive forms, the gathering and cross fertilization of these diverse elements surpassed earlier boundaries, and here appeared in a defiant, challengingly provocative form. We can mention two or three examples, but by far the most intense example is found in Murayama Tomoyoshi. He returned to Japan as both a painter and as a dancer, under the influence of the *Neue-tanz*, then the talk of Berlin. This dance form was performed in Tokyo by a woman with the then newest styles of bobbed hair. But his dance was not held in theaters, rather he danced in school yards at night, taking photographs of himself, moving around the city in guerrilla theater-like fashion, holding individual exhibitions in each locale. A magazine Mavo was published in conjunction with the Mavo group, and there is a photograph in its third issue which is titled "Odori" (dance). It is a still image that captures three Mavo members dancing upside down. This image is often quoted as an example of Dadaesque performance, and it follows Murayama's announcement style.

One of the works exhibited at the Sankakai member exhibition created quite a stir. This work entitled "Costume Construction" was by Kinoshita Shuichiro, an

artist who participated from the Futurist Art Association lineage. The work consisted of three young people with their faces painted red, blue and black. These painted visages were then decorated with eerie paintings of randomly placed snakes, lizards, horses, birds and other images. The three took on the guise of mannequins, but in fact they were living humans, exhibiting human, not clockwork, movements. This work was not very correct in its manners, they smoked cigarettes, sipped coffee before their audience. And it was not the Kinoshita's unique creation, undoubtedly he had referred to Burliuk's activities in Russia.

Painting pictures on faces, and then appearing before the masses was one of the styles of the Russian Futurists, and it had already made its appearance in 1912-13. Burliuk participated in a 1913 Futurist street parade down the main street of Moscow with his face painted with pictures, wooden spoons hanging from his buttons, reciting Futurist poems as he marched along. Then again, "Why we have painted ourselves with colors - A Futurist Manifesto", was published in a magazine, stating "Now art is seeping into life, painting our faces is the beachhead of this influx." Thus we can consider the deep roots of Kinoshita's expression via living humans.

On the 30th of May 1925, the "Gekijo no Sanka" opened at 6:30 p.m. as the latest thing in town. The theater was filled with a capacity crowd of 500 and the event was said to have reaped full-house bonuses. There were twelve acts, a description of the principal events follows.

As previously noted, Murayama Tomoyoshi danced two Neue Tanz pieces, and they served as inter-act elements for the other works. He was a self-styled professional dancer, and these inter-act elements may have been an attempt to appear less conspicuous amongst the amateurish performances of the evening. But if we think about it, it is the first time he had danced upon a normal stage as a dancer.

Kinoshita Shuichiro painted his own face red and white for this occasion, and in imitation of Burliuk, he appeared in formal attire, top hat and tails, to recite poems. With a considerably stimulating, almost roaring delivery, he recited in a manner which one newspaper reporter noted as shouting "Wa - - , Wa- - , Wa- -".

The work by Asano Mofu, Okamoto Toki and Yoshida Kenkichi was titled "Construction". They painted their bodies with spiraling smoke, and when stage curtain was raised slightly, the three scampered across the stage with only their legs visible to the audience. When the whole curtain was raised, red, blue and green balloons were released, and Asano began his dance among them. As he danced, a single rope descended from the stage ceiling, and Okamoto slipped down the rope from a height of around fifteen to sixteen meters. The act continued with Yoshida performing a pantomime of a deluge. Okamoto remembered this scene in a painting created for his retrospective painting collection in his later years. The languid movement of the balloons, the slicing descent of the figure, and then all is swept away in the deluge. This can be seen as suggesting the development of the world. Kanbara Tai's work "Jinsei", or humanity, was similarly suggestive. Asano Mofu appeared as "Painter" and Yabe Tomoe appeared as "Philosopher". On a platform stacked in an exaggerated double structure, two people conversed in whispers. The audience couldn't understand what they were saying. Without any apparent reason the curtain was then lowered, then raised, and the whispering conversation would begin again. Heckling, jeers of "Curtain!!" flew, intermittently, as if they in fact wanted the opposite. We might see this as an effect of "interval", those moments when we are drawn to listen, similar to the intermittent, irregular movements of contemporary sculpture.

The work by the Action member Yabe Tomoe was titled with the group name "Action", but only scant information on the piece remains. The same three people acted, A, B, and C, and they wore cubist inspired cardboard

costumes. It seems that the last scene left an especially intense impression and has been noted in a number of articles. They burned orange peels, filling the theater with smoke, and then from up on stage, they faced the back of a large motor bike at the audience, raced the engine and with a tremendous explosive bang they let out yet more oily smoke. The curtain rang down to a chant of Move! Move! Move!. The script included the words "Today, today, has been completely assaulted" signaling the openly defiant challenge to the audience.

During his time in Berlin, Murayama met the Italian Futurist painter F. T. Marinetti, and it is said that he was entrusted with the manifesto statement of Miracle Theater supervised by Marinetti. This meant that in the middle of the performance, a fantastically moving thing came flying out and hence the surprise theater with its strong shocks to the audience. The appearance of the motor bike in the Sanku Theater reminds us of this theater of surprises.

The theatrical elements incorporated in the program were Yoshida Kenkichi's "Button" and Murayama Tomoyoshi's "Birthing Prostitute". "Button" was the evening's opening act, and we might consider that Yoshida's role was two-fold, to smooth the progress of the entire event, and emblematic of the fact that the event was taking place in a theater. The greatest number of people appeared on stage in this act, a staging whose new structure resembled the continuation of actions that occur in a happening. A film was screened in one scene, and when the film was finished, thirty some workers shredded and burst forth from behind a paper screen. Indeed, it reminds one of the happenings held by the Gutai group. In any event, an amateurish, ad-lib performance continued, with the film cut en route, and we can imagine all sorts of things happening which were not what we could call theater.

Murayama's actual appearance in a piece was greatly anticipated, and even though it was such a topic of discussion, only fragmentary records remain of the event. There were a great number of participants, and from the extant photos that seem to show rehearsal scenes, the work had quite a lively

composition. We can infer that it had its dramatic elements. One scene, however, is noted in the Hochi Shimbun newspaper. According to this record, Shibuya Osamu played a prostitute who appeared on stage with a huge belly. He stood on stage and gave birth to a child, a form which lowered gradually from beneath his skirt. This was then suspended from a bamboo pole and raised up. The newspaper article ran a photograph of this scene and criticized the work as a joke. They implied their conclusion in the line, "The See and Don't Understand It Play".

Whatever the press reactions, this kind of underground theater which enmeshes its viewers saw the lowering of the curtain amidst enthusiasm. One newspaper expressed the incoherence of the situation with such comments as "Well it was surprising. It was a full house. It was a spasm, a fit. It made you dizzy. It made your eyes dilate. It made you lose your appetite." (Yomiuri Shimbun).

A certain art critic noted with a somewhat bantering admiration, "Sanka has gone as far out as theater." For the artists, just as they smeared paint on canvas, the force of their compelling need to express themselves through the actions of their entire bodies ran unimpeded, and the results can be considered the pinnacle of the avant garde arts of the Taisho period. In effect this was the pinnacle of their efforts, almost immediately after this evening the Sankakai moved rapidly into a Dadaesque expression. The domestic quarrel between the elements of this disparate union exposed its very fragility. Just a few months after the Sanka Theater, the group disbanded in September. Their disbanding also signaled the last moments of progressive art movements, a boundary was cut the following year, 1926, the end of the Taisho period. The majority of these artists then leaned left in the midst of proletarian art.