

Portraits of the Sun: Violence, Gender, and Nation
in the Art of Shiraga Kazuo and Tanaka Atsuko

by

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Abstract

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The Gutai Art Association, or more simply Gutai, meaning “concreteness” or “embodiment,” was formed in 1954 in Osaka. Emerging at the close of the American Occupation, this intensely productive group took up an array of practices, including painting, performance, mixed-media installation, and calligraphy. This dissertation attempts to move away from the over-reliance on the *Gutai Manifesto* and the persistent view that Gutai was a collective of homologous interests. In response to this highly generalized approach, this dissertation focuses specifically on two key Gutai members, Tanaka Atsuko (1932-2005) and Shiraga Kazuo (1924-2008), to explore the larger stakes of the modern Japanese subject in the postwar period. Their works, often filled with crimson reds, radiating circular forms, and aggressive acts of exhibitionism, resonate with issues of nationhood and representation portrayed through a language of visual violence and gendered spectacle. An adequate account of the politically fraught, gendered stakes of Gutai art has yet to be produced, and I hope that my work will begin to uncover the intensely important, yet somewhat ambiguous questions of gender, representation, and nationhood that, as I see it, Tanaka and Shiraga insistently posed and demanded to be witnessed.

The frequent, but oblique, appearance of visual motifs that bear an analogous relationship to nationalist symbols (for example, circular red shapes reminiscent of the *Hinomaru* or sun symbol of the flag) is conspicuous in Shiraga’s art. Shiraga’s motifs were entangled in a web of violent and messy abstractions that refused to be pinned to a particular political position, whether harmonious or antagonistic to nationalist agendas. His performative invocations of the soldier and the hunter were overtly male roles that allowed a space for critical encounters: between man and medium, state and subject, and representation and envisioned nation. In Shiraga’s work, the repetition of violence enacts, facilitates, and empowers the construction of the masculine artist-hero.

Tanaka’s work is an interrogation of surface and selfhood that raises questions about the status of the female artist in 1950s Japan. Tanaka’s paradoxically diverse yet formally analogous oeuvre consistently reworked forms suggestive of the tension between containment and endlessness. Her repetitious, physical engagement with their completion became a means to

examine the relationship between subjectivity and representation. This examination ultimately culminated in a commitment to the potential of surface materiality. From the beginnings in her earliest notebooks to the last of her large-scale paintings, nearly all of Tanaka's works share a correspondence of circle and line that is intriguing for their exploration of the capacity of the gendered, mechanized, and naturalized subject. Like the notebooks themselves, they offer no clear answers, only a sense of searching for the spaces between what is known and what is not.

For Tanaka and Shiraga, fascination with bodily action was not a simple matter of self-promotion through spectacle, but rather informed a strategy through which to exploit the tension between the state and art, and to discover the possibilities of Japanese avant-garde art in the 1950s and beyond. Each used representation to interrogate the inter-relationship of artistic status, gender, and selfhood. Shiraga's violent spectacles, steeped in crimson red, and Tanaka's electric mappings of circuits and circles charted new artistic territory, asking how patterns of masculinity and femininity, reiterated and reconfigured, could be manifested within and through the entangled culture of the postwar nation.

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements	ii
List of Figures	iii
Abstract	1
Introduction	1
Part I: Shiraga Kazuo	10
Chapter One: Portraits of the Sun: Motifs of Nation in the Art of Shiraga Kazuo	11
Chapter Two: The Hero and Concrete Violence	35
Part II: Tanaka Atsuko	60
Chapter Three: <i>Electric Dress</i> and the Circuits of Subjectivity	61
Chapter Four: Scale and the Subject in Tanaka Atsuko's Notebooks	85
Conclusion	108
Bibliography	110
Illustrations	119

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List of Figures

Chapter One

Figure 1

Shiraga, *Dōzo* どうぞ, 1955, red paint on logs, height 13.22 feet x 2.36 inches. (photograph provided by ACMAH)

Figure 2

Left: Shiraga, *Dōzo*, view from interior, 1955, *ibid.*
Right: Former Japanese military flag and naval ensign

Figure 3

Shiraga, *Challenging Mud, Doro ni Idomu* 泥に挑む, 1955, mud, cement, twigs. (photograph provided by ACMAH)

Figure 4

Shiraga, *Red Liquid* 紅い液, 1956 (reconstructed 2001), glass case, white cement, red liquid, 10.35 x 10.83 x 8.27 inches (top), 7.99 x 7.87 x 6.73 inches (bottom). (photograph provided by ACMAH)

Figure 5

Shiraga, *Work II*, 1958, oil on paper mounted on canvas, 72 x 95.66 inches.
(Hyogo Prefectural Museum of Art)

Figure 6

Shiraga, *Work I*, 1954, oil paint and paper, 42.91 x 30.51 inches. (Hyogo Prefectural Museum of Art)

Figure 7

“People of the Southern Region” (from *Osaka Puck* magazine in 1942, Reprinted from John Dower *War Without Mercy*, New York: Norton and Co., 1999, 200)

Figure 8

Example of *Hinomaru Bento* (lunchbox)
from *Japan At War* (Alexandria; Time Life Books, 1980, 71)

Figure 9

Shiraga, *Occupation Forces Shinchū Gun* 進駐軍, 1947, pencil on paper, 10.51 x 13.97 inches.
(Amagasaki City Collection)

Figure 10

Soldiers at Iwo Jima, (photograph provided by Associated Press)

Figure 11

Shiraga, *Challenging Mud*, 1955, mud, twigs, cement, (photographer unknown). (photograph provided by ACMAH)

Figure 12

Onosato Toshinobu 小野里利信, *One Red Circle*, 1957, oil on canvas, 23.8 x 28.7 inches. (Tokyo National Museum of Art)

Figure 13

Okamoto Tarō 岡本太郎, *Tower of the Sun* 太陽の塔, Taiyō no Tou, 229.65 feet. (photograph provided by the Museum of Contemporary Art, Tokyo)

Chapter Two

Figure 1

Shiraga, *Tenisei Sekihatsuki, Red-Haired Devil*, 1959
oil on canvas, 71.85 X 107.28 inches. (Hyogo Prefectural Museum of Art)

Figure 2

Shiraga, *The Timely Rain Defender of Chivalry, Tenkaisei Kohogi*,
1964, 85.43 X 94.88 inches. (Hyogo Prefectural Museum of Art)

Figure 3

Hokusai Katsushika, *Suikoden*
image forthcoming

Figure 4

Hokusai Katsushika
image forthcoming

Figure 5

Hokusai Katsushika, *Untitled*
reprinted from Gian Carlo Calza, *Hokusai: il vecchio pazzo per la pittura* (Milano: Electa, 1999,
385)

Figure 6

Shiraga, *Ultra-Modern Dance*, performed May 1957, Osaka.
(photograph provided by ACMAH)

Figure 7

MacArthur and Emperor Hirohito, photographer unknown.
(reprinted from John Dower, *War without Mercy*, 177)

Figure 8

Yoshida photo archives. (photograph provided by ACMAH)

Figure 9

Yoshida photo archives, Fujiko and Kazuo Shiraga. (photograph provided by ACMAH)

Figure 10

Yoshida Photo Archives. (photograph provided by ACMAH)

Figure 11

Yoshida Photo Archives. (photograph provided by ACMAH)

Figure 12

Shiraga, *Wild Boar Hunting II*, 1963, Boar hide, wood plank, and oil paint, 72.04 x 80.31 inches. (Museum of Contemporary Art, Tokyo).

Figure 13

Shiraga, *Tenkūsei Kyūsenpo* 天空星急入先, 1962, oil on canvas, 71.25 inches x 108.66 inches. (Hyogo Prefectural Museum of Art)

Figure 14 - Shiraga painting *Fan* in his studio in 1965. (photograph provided by Amagasaki Cultural Center)

Figure 15

Shiraga, *Kannon Fudara Jodo* 観音普陀落浄土, 1972, alkyd paint on canvas, 51.18 inches x 76.37 inches. (Amagasaki Cultural Center)

Figure 16

Shiraga, *Abiraunken* あびらうんけん, 1975, alkyd paint and cloth, 51.57 X 101.96 inches. (Hyogo Prefectural Museum of Art)

Figure 17

Kanayama Akira, Film Still, *Circle: Kanayama's Red Balloon*, 1970, (Collection of ACMAH)

Chapter Three

Figure 1

Tanaka wearing the *Electric Dress* (1956), “The 2nd Gutai Art Exhibition,” Ōhara Kaikan Hall, Tokyo. October, 1956, enamel paint on light bulbs, electric cords and control console, 5.41 x 2.62 x 2.62 feet. (photograph provided by ACMAH).

Figure 2

Ibid.

Figure 3

Kanayama Akira 金山明, *Work, Sakuhin* 作品 (Railway crossing light), Summer 1955, (photograph provided by ACMAH).

Figure 4

Today's Tōkaidō Shinkansen, Nozomi. (photograph by the author)

Figure 5

Tanaka, *Untitled*, 1958, enamel paint, canvas, 88.38 x 72.44 inches. (Hyogo Prefectural Museum of Art)

Figure 6

Film Still – *Godzilla Raids Again*

Figure 7

Tanaka, *Untitled*, 1954, ink and adhesive on hemp, 5.5 x 16 1/8 inches. (Collection of Barbara Bertozzi, New York)

Figure 8

Work, 1955 (1961) rayon, 32.8 X 32.8 feet. (photograph courtesy of Hayashi Michio)

Figure 9

Stage Clothes, 1957, still from 8mm film of “Gutai on Stage.” (Courtesy of ACMAH)

Figure 10

Yomiuri Newspaper September 2, 1956.

Figure 11

Asahi Newspaper - Movie Section, March 3, 1954.

Figure 12

Tanaka, *Studies for Stage Clothes*, c.1956-1957, ink, watercolor and pencil on paper, 11.61 x 8.61 inches. (private collection)

Figure 13

Tanaka Atsuko at the Kyoto Municipal Museum of Art, November 1955 installing *Bell* (photograph provided by ACMAH)

Figure 14

Tanaka, '87H, 1987, acrylic lacquer on canvas, 6.35 x 8.44 feet. (Courtesy of ACMAH)

Chapter Four

Figure 1

Tanaka, Notebook One page one, 1955-1956. (private collection)

Figure 2

Tanaka, Notebook One, page two, 1955-1956. (private collection)

Figure 3

Tanaka, Untitled- Study for “Work” (Bell), 1955, ink on paper, (15 3/8 X 10 3/4 inches). (installation photo from “Electrifying Art,” 2005, ACMAH)

Figure 4

Tanaka, Notebook One page 67-68. 1955-1956. (private collection)

Figure 5

Tanaka, Notebook Two, pages two and three, c. 1956, (private collection)

Figure 6

Notebook Two, page 12, 1956. (private collection)

Figure 7

Tanaka, *Three Black Balls*, 1962, enamel paint on canvas, 76 3/4 x 55 inches. (Hyogo Prefectural Museum of Art)

Figure 8

Tanaka, Notebook Two, 23-24, c. 1956, pen and colored pencil on paper. (private collection)

Figure 9

Tanaka, *Stage Clothes*, 1956, 14.3 x 11.94 x .22 feet (each), enamel paint on light bulbs, electric cords, plywood, vinyl sheets, motor, gears and pulleys. (photograph provided by ACMAH)

Figure 10

Tanaka, Notebook Two p. 25, c.1956. (private collection)

Figure 11

Tanaka, Notebook Three, pp. 12-13, 1956-1963. (private collection)

Figure 12

Tanaka, Notebook Three, pp. 2 -3, c. 1956. (private collection)

Figure 13

Tanaka, Notebook Three, p. 23, 1956-1963. (private collection)

Figure 14

Tanaka clippings file. (Gallery HAM, Nagoya)

Figure 15

“Creating Outer-Space” Osaka Shinbun (Osaka Newspaper), August 30, 1959. (Gallery HAM, Nagoya)

Figure 16

Tanaka, *94B*, 1994, 118.08 x 196.8 inches, Acrylic paint on canvas. (ACMAH)

Figure 17

Tanaka, Notebook One, page 17. (private collection)

Figure 18

Notebook One, page 18, 19, 1955-1956. (private collection)

Figure 19

Tanaka, Drawing for *Electric Dress*, 1956, Ink, crayon and watercolor on paper, 42.91 x 30.31 inches. (In the Collection of the 21st Century Museum of Contemporary Art, Kanazawa)

Introduction

Portraits of the Sun: Violence, Gender, and Nation in the Art of the Gutai Group

Emerging at the close of the American Occupation, The Gutai Art Association, (Gutai Bijutsu Kyōkai 具体美術協会), or more simply Gutai, meaning “concreteness” or “embodiment” was formed in 1954 in Osaka. This intensely productive group took up an array of practices, including painting, performance, mixed media installation, and calligraphy.

The oft-quoted *Gutai Manifesto*, written in 1956 by Yoshihara Jirō 吉原治郎, the ambitious and powerful leader of the Gutai Art Association, is provocative in its terminology, bold in sentiment, at times even overwrought. The manifesto states that Gutai will “... take leave of these piles of counterfeit objects on the altars, in the palaces, in the salons and the antique shops. ... Lock these corpses into their tombs. Gutai art does not change the material but brings it to life. Gutai art does not falsify the material.”¹ While much can be made of the manifesto’s emphasis on materiality, its pat theoretical convenience has become detrimental to understanding what mattered most to artists associated with the Gutai group. That the manifesto was written by Yoshihara alone for the art journal *Geijutsu Shinchō* 芸術新潮 two years after the group had begun to work together has been largely ignored.²

As a consequence, the Gutai have been approached as a homogeneous entity despite the fact that the group had a membership of over twenty people at any one time; moreover, membership shifted over the eighteen-year period through which they stayed together (altogether fifty-eight people participated in the group, with major shifts taking place at three distinct periods).³ This dissertation attempts to move away from the over-reliance on the manifesto and the persistent view that Gutai was a collective of homologous interests. I see Gutai as an “association” rather than a collective, meaning that members were interested in sharing resources and working space, encouraging one another to produce something new, but not necessarily sharing intellectual compulsions, political viewpoints, nor artistic outcomes. In response to this highly generalized approach, I focus specifically on two key Gutai members, Tanaka Atsuko 田中敦子 (1932-2005) and Shiraga Kazuo 白髪一男 (1924-2008) to explore the larger stakes of the modern Japanese subject in the postwar period.⁴ These two were amongst the most productive in the group. Their works were often filled with vibrant colors, radiating circular forms, and aggressive acts of exhibitionism and resonated with issues of nationhood and representation portrayed through a gendered visual language.⁵

¹ Yoshihara, "Gutai Sengen (Gutai Manifesto)," *Geijutsu Shincho (New Journal of Contemporary Art)* 7, no. 12 (December 1956): 202-4.

² Hirai writes that that the magazine commissioned Yoshihara to write the manifesto. Hirai Shoichi, *Gutai te nanda? (What's Gutai?)* (Kobe: Bijutsu Shuppan-sha, 2004), 87.

³ Some Gutai scholars refer to the Early Gutai period, which was perceived to be dominated by performance art (1954-1957), the middle period (1957-1965), following Michel Tapié’s arrival, and the Late Period (1965-1972), when a new generation of artists joined the group.

⁴ Throughout this dissertation, in accordance with Japanese practice, Japanese names are written with the Family name first. Exceptions are made for Japanese-Americans or Japanese-born individuals who reside permanently abroad. Following the modified Hepburn system, macrons are used to indicate long vowels in Japanese names, excepting those standardized in English. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are by the author.

⁵ I have intentionally avoided what some might see as a more natural comparison between the married couple Kanayama and Tanaka. Perhaps the complexity of such a personal relationship would overwhelm a project that is committed to the questions of the nationhood and subjectivity. I hope to draw less on intimate personal relationships than delve further into the ways subjectivity was constituted and explored in art of the time.

Visual motifs bearing an analogous relationship to nationalist symbols, such as red shapes reminiscent of the sun symbol of the flag, are conspicuous in their work. Shiraga's motifs were entangled in a web of violent and messy abstractions that refused to be pinned to a particular political position, whether harmonious or antagonistic to nationalist agendas. Tanaka's pivotal performance art and paintings are an interrogation of surface and selfhood that raises questions about the status of the female artist in 1950s Japan. I argue that Shiraga and Tanaka were aware of how easily art mutates into propaganda, and that fascination with bodily action was not a simple matter of self-promotion through spectacle, but rather informed a strategy through which to exploit the tension between the state and art for creative ends. Art, for them, was more than a cultural practice: it was a way to interrogate issues of subjectivity and its relationship to representation.

In *Portraits of the Sun*, I hope to depart from scholarly currents in both North America and Japan that attempt to inscribe a notion of timeless Japanese essence into Japanese art. In these instances, art by Buddhist monks or contemporary figures like Murakami Takashi 村上隆 are interpreted through a similar mythologizing lens that magnifies any sign of pre-modern Japanese characteristics. Narrow parallels between Gutai art and "traditional" Japanese festivals have been overplayed, at the expense of examining the specific regional context of Osaka in the postwar period and its relationship to the hegemonic orders of art. Forgoing tired genealogies and the endless hunt for embedded mythico-oriental aesthetics, this examination of works by Shiraga and Tanaka stands at the crossroads of this nascent field of art history by considering two artists operating on the periphery of the domestic and global art world, well aware of the centers to which they did not belong. How did they respond to the conflicting demand to make art that would be in dialogue with dominant Western art practices without seeming derivative? In this moment of profound change and possibility, there was considerable burden to create art that would have currency as cultural capital. An art that would be recognizably modern, recognizably Japanese, yet not alloyed with imperialist sentiment would certainly bolster the status of the nation, domestically and internationally. I suggest that Tanaka and Shiraga self-consciously turned the tables on these demands and used their art to question the limits of representation and self.

Within the last fifteen years, the Gutai group has been heralded as the pioneers of postwar art in Japan. This is largely due to a belated but celebratory reception of Gutai both inside and outside Japan. In 1994, the exhibition, "Scream Against the Sky: Japanese Art after 1945," curated by Alexandra Munroe, did much to elevate the status of Japanese contemporary art in North America.⁶ Gutai's early endeavors to produce a radical style of art on the heels of the American Occupation earned the group a key position in the exhibition and its accompanying catalogue. Since then, Gutai have widely been understood to be foundational to Japanese contemporary art, and this may have led to a somewhat flattened understanding of their work. Munroe's conclusion that Gutai sought to "playfully ... usher in the liberal American-style democracy which history had unexpectedly granted" reveals the stubborn tenacity of the Cold War mindset.⁷

⁶ Indeed, my introduction to Gutai was through the pages of the exhibition's catalogue. Alexandra Munroe, New York Guggenheim Museum, and Yokohama Museum of Art, *Japanese Art after 1945: Scream against the Sky* (New York: H.N. Abrams, 1994), 83-123.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 84.

In Japan, critic Chiba Shigeo 千葉茂夫 also positioned Gutai as the origin of modern art in Japan (a late honor for the Gutai, since Chiba's text was not published until the 1980s).⁸ In contrast to Munroe, however, Chiba understood Gutai to demonstrate essential Japanese characteristics.⁹ The influential critic Sawaragi Noi 榎木野衣 also credits Gutai with marking a major turning point that moved the country away from its darkened past.¹⁰ Thus, the critical response to Gutai has been overwhelmingly shaped by implicit national drives, and it is perhaps remarkable that studies on Gutai have largely left the question of nationhood aside. During its heyday Gutai received little press coverage while active; the coverage they did receive was largely negative.¹¹ A critical resurrection of the group did not start until Hikosaka Naoyoshi's 彦坂尚嘉 essay, "Beyond the Enclosed Ring: What to Find in the Trajectory of Gutai..." The article was published in 1973, a year after Yoshihara's death and the disbanding of the group. Hikosaka's text was the first full-fledged academic treatment of the movement's historical significance.¹²

More than most members of Gutai, Shiraga and Tanaka exhibited extensively and continued to have flourishing solo careers after leaving Gutai (Tanaka left in 1965 and Shiraga remained in the group until they disbanded in 1972). Through the 1980s, Gutai exhibitions began to increase in number domestically and internationally, and Tanaka and Shiraga enjoyed their first solo exhibitions in Europe. Tanaka's North American debut was "Electrifying Art" at the Grey Gallery in New York in 2004.¹³ Accompanied by her husband Kanayama Akira, Tanaka

⁸ Chiba Shigeo, *Gendai Bijutsu Itsudatsushi, 1945-1985 (a History of Deviation in Contemporary Art)* (Tokyo: Shōbunsha, 1986).

⁹ Chiba seems to be persistently concerned with promoting a notion of an essential uniqueness in Japanese Art. This is ironic given his praise for Yoshihara, who always sought out universals in art. *Ibid.*; In 1981, an exhibition at the Tokyo Metropolitan Art Museum, "Trends in Contemporary Art I: Darkness and Rays of Light in the 1950s," gave credit to Gutai as postwar innovators. Several other exhibitions featuring Gutai followed in Japan that same year, such as "Yoshihara Jiro and Gutai, 1954-1972" at the ACMAH, and "Action and Emotion, Paintings of the 50s: Informel, Gutai and Cobra," National Museum of Art, Osaka. The National Museum of Contemporary Art in Madrid, Spain, hosted "Gutai Group: Actions and Paintings (Group Gutai: Pintura y Accion)" in December of 1981. Inclusion in a Pompidou Center exhibition in Paris "Japon des Avant-gardes," and the "Reconstructions: Avant-Garde Art in Japan 1945-1965" further bolstered Gutai's position.

¹⁰ Sawaragi Noi, "Anforumeru izen アンフォルメル以前" (Before Informel) in *Nihon, Gendai, Bijutsu (Japan, Contemporary, Art)* (Tokyo: Shinchōsha, 1998).

¹¹ Reviews in the 1950s mostly expressed shock at the Gutai "body-striking" works. For example see "They Call It Art," *Stars and Stripes*, October 22 1956. Also "Tanoshiso ni otona no asobi (Fun Play for Grown-Ups)," *Asahi Shinbun*, October 4 1967. The critic Ichiro Haryū 針生一郎 accused the group of catering to Yoshihara's whims, denouncing much Japanese art for being overly-sentimental. See Haryū Ichiro 針生一郎, "Busshitsu to ningen (Matter and Man)," *Mizue* no. 618 (January 1957): 45-47.

¹² Hikosaka, Naoyoshi, "Tojirareta enkan no kanata wa: 'Gutai' no kiseki kara nan o..." (Beyond the Enclosed Ring: What to Find in the Trajectory of Gutai)," *Bijutsu Techō* 370 (August 1973): 72-92. In this article, Hikosaka describes a decline in Gutai's creativity because of their transformation to conventional painting practices following Tapié's influence on the group. Since this article, Tatehata Akira 建昌哲, Osaki Shinichiro 尾崎信一路 and Hayashi Michio 林道雄 have convincingly argued that Gutai performance work always had a strong painterly current. Underlying this debate is the unspoken premise that painting is of greater value than performance work. Moreover, the divide between the genres can be somewhat arbitrary and may also contain performative gestures and interpretations. Reiko Tomii discusses "the Gutai conundrum" in Fergus McCaffrey and Reiko Tomii, *Kazuo Shiraga: Six Decades* (New York: McCaffrey Fine Art, 2009), 9.

¹³ The first Gutai retrospective was "Eighteen Years of Gutai Art" held at the Osaka Prefectural Gallery in November 1976. Shiraga's first solo exhibition was held at Galerie Stadler in Paris in 1986. The following year he had solo exhibitions in Milan and Marseille and in 1988 at Galerie Georg in Nothelfer, Berlin. Tanaka's first solo exhibition was also held at Galerie Stadler in 1987. Her next solo exhibition abroad did not occur until 2002 at

traveled for the first time abroad to see the show and passed away on December 3, 2005, months after the exhibition ended.¹⁴ Shiraga died in 2008 just over a year before his first solo exhibition in North America, which opened in the fall of 2009 at McCaffrey Fine Art in New York.¹⁵

Both artists possessed an ambitious drive to be part of the international art scene and held ambivalent feelings about following Yoshihara's advice wholeheartedly. Still, Tanaka and Shiraga both credit Yoshihara for motivating them to produce work for the stage, which led to innovations in performance art that would characterize the group for years to come. These performance works took the young artists in new directions with their painting, allowing them to consider how the body could be integrated with different media in new ways.

The two colleagues also shared a mutual engagement with conceptions of gendered subjectivity and artistic status. How did the rapid urbanization of the country affect one's sense of self as a woman? Or, as a man? How could one be "masculine" following the defeat in the war and the demilitarization of Japan? Tanaka and Shiraga's responses to these problems took different forms. Shiraga's violently gestural work has a visceral quality that is not in keeping with Tanaka's repeated conceptualist preoccupation with brightly colored mappings of lines and circles. While Shiraga performed a wrestling match against a pile of mud and brambles in a loincloth, Tanaka concealed her body beneath thick layers of electronic industrial matter, export materials emblematic of the industrialization of the nation at the time.

Japan's status as both former aggressor and former victim in the war was under intense re-examination in the 1950s. Violence in the war reached unprecedented levels, and reminders of those events — starvation in Japan, the national responsibility for acts of war, incendiary bombing, the atomic bombs — were evidenced in the severely transformed landscape and experienced as loss and trauma. However the profusion of propaganda and strict censorship under the Japanese military regime, as well as censorship throughout the American Occupation, meant that images of violence were often distorted and suppressed by both regimes. Following the war, the nation's cultural capital, often writ large onto the female body, was mined as a way to resituate Japan as a modern and peace-loving nation. Consequently, representing this complicated national past was of critical interest following the end of the American Occupation in 1952. How did the dramatically shifting visual arena (lingering imperial symbolism, advertisements for American products, photographs of war, and the representation of the life of the consumer) reveal the contradictions and capitulations between Japan and America? In particular, how was this changing visual field mediated and represented by Tanaka and Shiraga?

Could a new art exist that was identifiably Japanese yet avoided the jingoistic imagery that had helped instigate and perpetuate the Pacific War? Over the preceding decades, art and representation had undergone sharp reversals largely to comply with the demands of the imperialist nation, and later, those of the American Occupation. Propaganda, censorship, and the shifting aesthetic criteria of the art world created a field of representation wherein the consequences of artistic practice loomed large.

The ambiguous cachet of "originality" offered a pathway to overcome the standard critique that modern Japanese art was derivative of Western art. Yet it remained unclear how this notion of "originality" was to be defined and perceived. Yoshihara was aesthetically and

Galerie im Taxispalais in Innsbruck, Austria, followed by the "Electrifying Art" exhibition at the Grey Gallery in New York 2004.

¹⁴ Tanaka died of pneumonia following complications from a car accident in December 3, 2005. She was 73.

¹⁵ Shiraga died of illness at the age of 84 on April 8, 2008.

theoretically aware of these issues, if not at the forefront of the debates.¹⁶ Ironically, Yoshihara, who is often described as an autocratic leader, stressed the importance of engaging freely with artistic material without intervention from others.¹⁷ His ambiguous deployment of the term “spirit” described his unique conception of the way that both the subject and the material would mutually form each other in a free-flowing way, yet his approach nevertheless had its own (perhaps dogmatic) limitations.

Yoshihara’s call for originality was deeply bound to the larger context of the modernist struggle in postwar Japan, where *shutai* 主体 (subject) and *shutaisei* 主体性 (subjectivity) were part of a movement that promoted creative individuality in art as a means to make a sharp break with the past.¹⁸ *Zanshin* 斬新, or “newness,” was part of a constructed rebirth of Japan that sought to define itself as modern and peaceful following defeat in the Pacific War.¹⁹ This rupture with the imperialist period and its concomitant nationalist rhetoric demanded new ways to conceive of the nation, as well as different visual vocabularies to represent it.

Starting afresh was as much an issue for Tanaka and Shiraga as it was for many artists of the time. Before joining Gutai, both were members of the Kansai art group, Zero-kai ゼーロ会 (Zero Group), which formed in 1952 (Tanaka joined in 1954).²⁰ Like Gutai, Zero-kai’s stated aim was to start from nothing, to lose associations with past art forms and enter into unknown territory. Deploying artwork that could be described under these terms was a means to situate Japanese art within the hierarchies of international modernism. Ironically, and perhaps predictably, the pursuit of newness — an elusive ideal at any time — often resulted in a return to past forms.

For several Gutai members, performance art was a means to gain avant-garde status. Public performances held the potential to garner awareness of the group while simultaneously taking “leave of these piles of counterfeit objects” of art that had been created in the past.²¹ At the same time, Shiraga in particular tended to cycle back to motifs of nationalism or heroic archetypes of the warrior. Shiraga’s shifting self-stylization was highly generative and yet relied on pre-existing tropes of masculinity. For *Challenging Mud*, he cropped his hair “like a GI” and threw himself in the mud with deliberate force, lacerating his skin.²² While performing *Dōzo* (meaning “please,” or an offering of an invitation), he became an ax-wielding woodsman with a masochistic bent, bringing down the structure that was sheltering him. Shiraga’s artist-warrior configurations transformed him from woodsman to bandit to hunter, revealing how templates of the masculine hero are relational, each narrative forming a constellation of issues to inform the next. As the gendered figures of the American soldier and the American Abstract Expressionist loomed large, Shiraga’s deployment of a multiplicity of masculine tropes undid the notion of a

¹⁶ See Natsu Oyobe, "Human Subjectivity and Confrontation with Materials in Japanese Art: Yoshihara Jiro and Early Years of the Gutai Art Association, 1947-1958" (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Michigan, 2005).

¹⁷ In 1964-1965, several people departed from Gutai citing personal difficulties with his dictates. *Gutai 1,2,3*, (Ashiya: ACMAH, 1994), 38.

¹⁸ See “Introduction,” J. Victor Koschmann, *Revolution and Subjectivity in Postwar Japan* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996): 1-9.

¹⁹ John W. Dower, *Embracing Defeat: Japan in the Wake of World War Two* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1999), 172.

²⁰ There is no formal connection between Zero-kai (or Zero group) and the European movement Group Zero, who were also seeking out “pure possibilities for a new beginning.” For more on the European Movement see Otto Piene, "Group Zero," *Art Education* 18, no. 5 (1965): 21-23.

²¹ Yoshihara, "Gutai Sengen (Gutai Manifesto)" 202-204.

²² Kanayama, Akira "About Shiraga Kazuo," *Gutai* 4 (1956): 9.

fixed masculine ideal. Yet his insistent embodiment of these archetypes also calls attention to, and perhaps advances, their power.

Tanaka was engaged in practices that were often perceived to be a part of the women's world of clothing — for example making large-scale dress installations, performing fashion shows that challenged viewer's expectations, or hanging simple cloth objects as art. But rather than a simple replication of the fashion world, Tanaka's work created a space for critical engagement with surface, be it the surface of a painting, the body, or the bulbs and wires of *Electric Dress*. Her repeated attention to surface delineated it as a site of differencing, a zone where otherness is encountered, and a subjective space is defined. Tanaka's interest in subjectivity seemed closely tied to rapid transformations taking place in Japan, and specifically Osaka, following the war. Consumer consumption was flourishing as never before, and women were increasingly becoming the center of that world — as travelers, as homemakers, as objects meant to demonstrate the beauty and modernity of the state as ideal consumer-citizens. The image of a Japanese woman, fashionably pulled together in Western dress, was an ideal image of “the new face of Japan.”²³ Tanaka used art to interrogate the limits of subjectivity: What pressures of space and scale could the subject withstand?

Tanaka's work was tinged with an element of danger — be it in the piercing noise of *Bell*, or the heat of *Electric Dress* — revealing an element of explosive liability within the sphere of the female subject. Tanaka turned to conceptual modes that tended to obscure, rather than forefront her own physical form. In her notebooks and paintings, she demonstrated an interest in scale and corporeal and mechanical gestures, which were part of her continual engagement with the form of the circle throughout her career. In my view, the conceptual thrust of the notebooks supports my contention that Tanaka's creations should be considered exceptional to the physical, artist-centered works that many members of Gutai, Shiraga included, were known for. Tanaka's paradoxically diverse yet formally analogous oeuvre consistently reworked forms suggestive of the tension between containment and endlessness. From the beginnings in her earliest notebooks to the last of her large-scale paintings, nearly all of Tanaka's works share a correspondence of circle and line, intriguing in the exploration of totality and infinity of the subject.²⁴ Like the notebooks themselves, they offer no clear answers, only a sense of searching for the spaces between what is known and what is not.

Considering Shiraga's reiterations of performative masculine heroism and Tanaka's interrogation of female subjectivity, it seems surprising that scholars have largely left aside the issue of gender. Yet choosing to focus on Shiraga and Tanaka risks situating them as the Adam and Eve of the Japanese avant-garde. I do not seek to reduce male experience to that of Shiraga, nor female experience to that of Tanaka. It is my aim to explore their art in a manner that sheds

²³ Much has been written on the state's reliance on the Modern Girl (*Mōga*) during the 1930s. For example see Elise K. Tipton and John Clark, *Being Modern in Japan: Culture and Society from the 1910s to the 1930s* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2000). Postwar constructs of the modern woman made reference to these past tropes while reframing them in contemporary fashion vernacular.

²⁴ Emmanuel Levinas coins the phrase “totality and infinity,” explaining how one's encounter with the exterior is fundamental to our development as a subject. Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, Martinus Nijhoff Philosophy Texts (Boston: M. Nijhoff Publishers, 1979). I turn to Levinas here because of his insistence on the potentialities of violence and danger to the vulnerable subject. Further his use of subjectivity rather than identity emphasizes the fragmentary nature of subject formation over the tendency to read stability into constructs of identity.

light on the differences for female and male artists working at the time, while avoiding the portrayal of them as sole representatives of Japanese art.²⁵

My interest in the Gutai group was not initially motivated by a desire to research gender. I was at first drawn to the unique cultural dynamics in Japan after the Pacific War. But as I began to trace the visual culture and contemporary response to Tanaka and Shiraga, gender asserted itself as a fundamental issue that was tethered to the structure of nationhood and representation. On my first visit to the Ashiya City Museum of Art and History, I was introduced to the Gutai photo archive, a collection of black and white images of Gutai exhibitions and social occasions.²⁶ Expecting to be mesmerized by the art, I was initially struck by the inclusion of several female models at the “Gutai Outdoor Exhibition to Challenge the Mid-summer Sun.” Striking poses amidst the array of avant-garde wire installations and sculptures were several anonymous Japanese women wearing stylish bathing suits, over-sized sunglasses, and pumps – certainly not the bearing of your everyday park stroller. With their hair stylishly coiffed in a distinctively modern Western style, the ladies posed devilishly, often with one leg strewn over an art piece. Though this was not the introduction I had anticipated for the serious business of my primary research, the sight of these strategically planted female models (none of whom were Gutai artists) was a bold reminder of the gendered context of the 1950s from which Tanaka and Shiraga’s art grew.

This dissertation focuses on the negotiation of masculinity, femininity and nationhood, pointing to moments where these intertwined issues crystallize, a term that suggests the ways those paragons of gender and state can break down only to be reformed and reiterated. Gender is an arena of multiple pressure points, and to that end I intend for my project to address the constructs for both male and female artists. While I would not suggest Tanaka and Shiraga were defined by their gender alone, it is provocative to note how despite sharing similar working contexts they nonetheless faced very different artistic opportunities and limitations, as I explore in each chapter. Yet the issue of gender never operates in isolation, it is articulated and constructed through forms of nationalism and subjectivity. It is the nexus of these issues vis-à-vis Shiraga and Tanaka that I aim to address in the following pages.

In Chapter One, “Portraits of the Sun: Motifs of Nation in the Art of Shiraga Kazuo,” I focus on Shiraga’s interrogation of nationalist motifs that obliquely appear in his work and ask what was at stake in his destructive action. While reviewers have largely dismissed pieces by Shiraga as indulgent and irreverent play, this may be overlooking the social-political climate of his art within the larger discourse of 1950s Japan — a time and place that was deeply implicated in global struggles for hegemony. In Japan, as elsewhere, these battles were often staged and articulated through the field of representation. Red spheres cast over spaces of white recur in his performance pieces, installations, and paintings. Despite the prevalence of motifs connected to the nation, an acknowledgement of it is perplexingly absent from any art historical account of Gutai. Shiraga’s bodily aggression was not a matter of self-promotion through spectacle, but rather a strategy through which he exploited the tension between the state and art. Works like *Dōzo*, *Challenging Mud*, and Shiraga’s abstract “foot” paintings were creations made in aggressive performances that revealed and questioned the risks and possibilities of the masculine subject in postwar Japan. His investigations, particularly in the 1950s, seemed based on

²⁵ I hope my attention to Tanaka and Shiraga as individual artists will be understood as not only a viable scholarly practice but as an ultimately more productive and rewarding course of study. Much work remains to be done on other artists in the Gutai Art Association.

²⁶ Hereafter the Ashiya City Museum of Art and History will be referred to as ACMAH.

encrypted, destroyed, or re-envisioned nationalist visual motifs. His oeuvre, as well as his personal artistic development, paralleled — and productively participated in — a period of intense re-evaluation of the state.

In Chapter Two, “The Hero and Concrete Violence,” I examine the Gutai photograph archives, Shiraga’s writings, and his series of paintings named after heroes in the epic Chinese novel *The Water Margin*. I ask how expectations of gender were a constant backdrop in these photos, and how the body was enlisted to interrogate and perform gender roles. For Shiraga, I argue, the specter of violence was a means to present art that both defined and risked the modern subject. His allusions to premodern masculine tropes articulated through the modernist vocabulary of Abstract Expressionism illuminate his complex negotiation of gender and nationalism. I argue that his recourse to destruction, articulated a third space of art production. Shiraga’s body was consistently deployed as a force in itself, unleashed against his artistic medium, often at risking the process. Thus his work can be seen to function as a theoretical treatise that argues for violence *as art*.

Chapter Three, “*Electric Dress* and the Circuits of Subjectivity,” considers Tanaka’s personal and artistic negotiation of a particular set of circumstances in the immediate postwar period in Japan, namely, the overwhelming industrial transformation of Osaka, the ambiguous social status of women at the time, and Tanaka’s ambivalent relationship to female subjectivity. Specifically, I examine her pivotal performance piece, *Electric Dress* (1956), as an interrogation of surface and selfhood in 1950s Japan. The double-edged nature of this performance piece is evident in the frivolity of costume and neon spectacle juxtaposed with the production of heat and looming physical threat. *Electric Dress* can be interpreted as a vivid cloak that shrouds the artist-subject while simultaneously testing the limits of the self through elements of risk. Tanaka’s piece explored subjectivity as a constructed process reliant on visual signifiers, bodily performance and the fluid context of industrialization, urbanization, and the encroachment of technology into ever more corners of everyday lives. Through a brief consideration of the art and visual culture circulating in Japan during the production of *Electric Dress* and a second pivotal performance piece, *Stage Clothes* (1956), I argue that Tanaka’s oeuvre speaks to an interest in surface materiality that questions the fixity of the individualized subject.

Chapter Four, “Scale and the Subject in Tanaka Atsuko’s Notebooks,” addresses a collection of unpublished notebooks created by Tanaka between 1955 and 1963. This chapter describes these as yet unstudied primary documents and explores what interpretative frames they may offer for her paintings and performance work. What was at stake for Tanaka in the recurring interest in matters of scale and movement that notebooks reveal? How was subjectivity represented in the notebooks and do these private works suggest a continuing interest in individualism as many scholars have suggested?²⁷ I argue that this fascinating collection of drawings, diagrams, and paintings reveals Tanaka’s exploration of subjectivity and scale in her performance pieces, as well as her re-formulation of these themes in her paintings of circles and circuits. I privilege scale over size because of its emphasis on relationality — a key construct in the negotiation of subjectivity. The notebooks illustrate her ambivalence towards the notion of self-expression and her ongoing concern with surface as a site of potential activation or withdrawal of the subject.

²⁷ For example Oyobe argues that Gutai art exhibited a strong sense of individualism: “...Yoshihara stressed the subjective attitude of an individual — freed from organizations and categorical constraints — to understand and create “modernist” art.” See Oyobe, “Human Subjectivity and Confrontation with Materials in Japanese Art: Yoshihara Jiro and Early Years of the Gutai Art Association, 1947-1958,” Ph.D. Dissertation 2005, 32.

Shiraga and Tanaka avoided and perhaps even disavowed overt political statements or actions, despite the fevered political context in which they worked. Yet, to declare their work apolitical misses much of the stakes of their practice. These artists instead raised questions about the status of Japanese art and their position within that sphere. At times their works directly engaged visual vocabularies that resonated with Japan's nationalist symbols. At other moments, their creations pit the body against the elements in a manner that suggests the risks of war and questions the role of representation in relation to the nation through gendered posturing and subtle manipulations of motifs of nationalism. Tanaka and Shiraga's seemingly outlandish performance art and painting were a part of a personal and public evaluation of the nation, questioning the chameleon-like character of nationalistic representation as well as the transformative potential of art on subjectivity.

Part I: Shiraga Kazuo

Chapter One
Portraits of the Sun:
Motifs of Nation in the Art of Shiraga Kazuo

To Challenge the Midsummer Sun

Imagine the small city of Ashiya, Japan — a quaint seaside town nestled between the international port of Kobe 神戸 and fast-paced Osaka 大阪. In the city’s major park, a small art exhibition was sunlit by day and illuminated with paper lamps into the evening. On site, amidst the shady pines, a cone-like structure made of ten brightly painted, twenty-three-foot-tall poles stood wedged into the sandy ground (figure 1).²⁸ A sign nearby simply read, “Kindly Enter” (*Dōzo o hairi kudasai* どうぞお入りください), which was the work’s title and an invitation to view the installation from within. Some park visitors did so, allowing their children to wander into the space punctuated by the sharp silhouettes of the poles in the sun.

The art event, titled “Experimental Outdoor Exhibition of Modern Art to Challenge the Midsummer Sun,” (*Manatsu no taiyō ni idomu yagai modan-to jikkenten* 真夏の太陽にいとむ野外マダンアート実験展) ran for two weeks at the peak of the tourist season, from July 25 – August 6, 1955. This is the time when the seaside town hosts young couples and families who picnic along the banks of the Ashiya River. As the heat of the day progressed, Shiraga Kazuo, a 21-year-old member of the Gutai Art Association, (then a group of about twenty-three members that organized the show), stepped into the teepee-like structure, bare-chested and wielding a six-pound axe.²⁹ Armed and exposing his body, he presented a stark contrast to the quaint wooden structure, and its politely worded invitation, placed adjacent to the children’s playground. Shiraga stood inside his creation (one of his first experiments outside the arena of painting) and began to hack at the red columns with broad swings of his axe. With each hit, wood chipped away, cutting white scars into the poles. Before long, the structure collapsed, sending poles toppling and woodchips flying, endangering the artist and the handful of nearby viewers.

While the exterior of the installation was quite unusual enough for a 1950s artwork, the view from the interior of *Dōzo* (as the piece came to be known) offered an entirely different experience.³⁰ In this viewing position, the wooden poles, splayed out carefully, reveal a small circle of space in the center, radiating in a manner similar to the rays of the rising sun. *Dōzo*, especially in this photograph taken by a Gutai member (figure 2, left), recalls the former imperial military flag of Japan, which was banned from use in 1945. The overlay of the represented rays of the sun with the actual rays of the sun created an encounter between the “real” and the represented. From inside, the bold red poles fractured the light of the sun and at times, I suggest, may have led the viewer to feel they were standing below a three-dimensional Japanese military flag. In figure 2, the position of the upward shot of the photograph in combination with the exhibition’s provocative title, “The Experimental Outdoor Exhibition to Challenge the Midsummer Sun,” brings the relationship to the sun (and its association with the body politic) into sharp relief.

²⁸ 13.22 feet x 2.36 inches (x 10).

²⁹ Ukita Yōzō 浮田要三, "Experimental Outdoor Exhibition of Modern Art to Challenge the Midsummer Burning Sun," *Gutai* 3 (1955): 23.

³⁰ The work is usually exhibited in the west simply as *Dōzo*, which has been translated by most art historians to mean “Please come in.” This is a more or less accurate translation of the word *dōzo* – essentially a word of invitation, or used to mean “please.” The full title, *Dōzo o Hairi Kudasai* can be accurately translated as “Please Come In.”

Yet the existence of this national motif would be short-lived, as Shiraga soon destroyed the installation. *Dōzo*'s ephemeral nature is key. It points to the mutability of the image, to the ways that art all too easily slips into vapid symbol, commercial product, or propaganda. While reviewers both then and now have largely dismissed this and other pieces by Shiraga as indulgent and irreverent play, this may be overlooking the social-political climate of Shiraga's art within the larger discourse of 1950s Japan — a time and place that was deeply imbricated in global struggles for hegemony. In Japan as elsewhere, these battles were often staged and articulated through the field of visual representation. *Dōzo*'s subtle display and destruction of national motifs, I will argue, is tied to the associations and ideologies at stake in the inconstant nature of imagery. Shiraga's performance art, paintings and prints played a part in a larger movement to reconfigure Japan's national identity following the war.

I open this chapter with this summer scene because it sets the tone of aggressive spectacle that would be perpetuated throughout Shiraga's artistic career and is illustrative of the heroic artist persona he would continually enact. Moreover, his violent acts insist that art making (and with it, meaning making) is an unstable process. Attention to early events such as the public exhibition in Ashiya indicate that Shiraga's interests in art were, from the outset, generated through an interrogation of his bodily relationship to his medium. His actions, at times awkward, at others dramatically over-stated, raised questions about the possibilities of artistic status in modern Japan. Shiraga's practice was more than spectacle; rather, it was a concrete (as the translation of the term *Gutai* reminds us) way to bring himself physically closer to the problems and risks of art in postwar Japan. In doing so, he proposed aggression as a form of art. His performance of *Dōzo*, as haphazard and difficult to interpret as it may have been, initialized his foray into the nexus of relations between state, artist, and representation. If we accept *Dōzo*'s visual parallels with the flag, then it makes Shiraga's destructive manipulations of the piece all the more significant. Shiraga implicitly raised the connections between nationalism and art only to effectively position them as the target of antipathy and enacted rage.

This early performance piece, an aggressive encounter with nationalist symbols, was a key departure point from which Shiraga would foster his characteristic practice.³¹ As both an early performance work and installation, *Dōzo*'s significance is only revealed in the rich interplay between its first appearance as action-based work and subsequent life as photo-documents imbued with distinct critical purchase. *Dōzo* opens dialogue about the departure from the physical realm of the "real." It asks about the mutually constitutive relationship between art and object, and shows how representation can potentially reshape our own conception of our physical surroundings.

³¹ See also Osaki Shinichiro, "Gutai kaiga e itaru Akushon (Art in Gutai, Action into Painting)," in *Gutai, 1954-1972*, Ashiya City Cultural Foundation (Ashiya City: Ashiya City Cultural Foundation, 1993). Osaki characterizes the traits of Gutai as temporality, site-specificity and physicality. Although Shiraga's works sometimes call up a sense of locality, I would hesitate to say his work is site-specific. For example, Shiraga's work *Challenging Mud* was performed in different locations and did not seem to have meaning germane to geography (the performance was done near the Mukō River in Hyogo prefecture as well as in Tokyo). Kimura Shigenobu concurs with Osaki's claim, singling Shiraga out as the artist most interested in site-specificity. Kimura writes *Ultra-modern Dance* was site-specific because it was performed on stage. However, Nick Kaye convincingly argues that in a site-specific work, locality gives *the primary* meaning and definition to the work; furthermore, Kaye states site-specific art is set in an arena that does not have readily perceivable closed limits. This does not describe *Ultra-Modern Dance*'s stage setting because its architecture is limiting the geographic location of the performance is subject to change. See Kimura, "Akushon to Taburo (Action and Painting)," 15; and "introduction" Nick Kaye, *Site-Specific Art: Performance, Place, and Documentation* (London, New York: Routledge, 2000).

Standing over thirteen feet tall, the work is large enough to appear as a kind of rudimentary domicile or teepee. Although the structure is completely open to the elements, the suggestion of enclosure provided by the poles offers a sense of interiority that is often equated with safety. In contrast, however, the color of the gleaming, red-painted logs refuted innocuous domestic connotations. The unmistakable glint of Shiraga's "crimson lake red" (the name he used to refer to a hue he used almost exclusively throughout the 1950s) makes clear that his creation reflects his painterly motivations. Yet Shiraga's interests were not only painterly, as the meaning of his work is heavily reliant on its transformative nature. Like the shifting ground of representation, *Dōzo* had other lives: it was re-created as an installation in 1986 and 2001, and is commonly represented photographically. In these photographs, evidence of violence remains only in the uneven surface of *Dōzo*'s reassembled wooden poles.

From the 1950s on, Shiraga consistently produced nonfigural, abstract works that refuted symmetry and simplistic allegorical readings. His paintings, which alternate from gruesome browns and mustard yellows, to vivid red and black, are thickly textured and suggestive of the aggressive movements that created them. Although little scholarly attention has been paid to Shiraga as a solo artist, a close examination of his work suggests compelling, recurrent themes. While not overt, the oblique reappearances of visual motifs that bear an analogous relationship to nationalist symbols (for example circular red shapes that are reminiscent of the flag's sun symbol) are conspicuous. These motifs were entangled in a web of violent and messy abstractions that rejected an overt political stance, and, as a result, his art is not easily labeled as harmonious or complicit with nationalist agendas. Shiraga's ambiguous deployment and destruction of national symbols in his art can be situated in the artistic, historical, and political arena of the so-called Confusion Era.³² Red spheres cast over spaces of white recur in his performance pieces, installations, and paintings. Despite the prevalence of motifs connected to the nation, an acknowledgement of it is perplexingly absent from any art-historical account of Gutai. I will argue that Shiraga's bodily aggression was not a matter of self-promotion through spectacle, but rather a strategy through which he exploited the tension between the state and art. His violent compositions asked: What does it take to be a modern Japanese artist in a competitive global art world that was formed through asymmetrical relations of power? Works like *Dōzo*, *Challenging Mud* and Shiraga's abstract "foot" paintings were creations made through aggressive performances that revealed and questioned the risks and possibilities of the masculine subject in postwar Japan. His investigations, particularly in the 1950s, seemed based on encrypted, destroyed, or re-envisioned nationalist visual motifs. His oeuvre as well as his personal artistic development paralleled — and productively participated in — a period of intense re-evaluation of the state.

Reiterations of Violence

The violence employed in *Dōzo* remained evident in Shiraga's subsequent modes of art making: he painted with his fingers, a knife, and later developed his signature technique of dangling by a rope over canvas and painting with his feet.³³ The physicality of these efforts has

³² Mark Howard Sandler and Arthur M. Sackler Gallery (Smithsonian Institution), *The Confusion Era: Art and Culture of Japan During the Allied Occupation, 1945-1952* (Washington, D.C.: Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Smithsonian Institution in association with the University of Washington Press, 1997).

³³ Shiraga commented: "However, I could not figure out what to do next. I was so stumped that I decided to shut my eyes and trace a canvas with my finger, inch by inch, from one edge. I did this until I traced the entire canvas with my fingernails. I then wanted to make bigger paintings. In this process, I came to start using my feet." Fergus McCaffrey, *Six Decades*, 64.

recently been substantiated by the discovery of several early films from *Mainichi Hōsō*, which show Shiraga's aggressively intense, yet utterly controlled, use of his entire body.³⁴ In the case of *Dōzo*, he chose an axe as his creative implement, and for a 1957 performance of *Ultra-modern Dance* (*Chō gendai sanban hiki* 長現代三番曳), he dressed in a red demon-costume while other performers filled a canvas by shooting it full of green arrows.³⁵ In *Challenging Mud* (*Doro ni idomu* 泥に挑む; 1955), he flailed about on a heap of twigs, rocks, and mud, until he was exhausted and his body lacerated (figure 3). Then, in the early 1960s, he made several unsuccessful attempts to hunt down a wild boar, whose hide he had hoped to use as the canvas for a painting.³⁶ Titles for many later works also obscurely reference the savage heroic: Shiraga had a series of paintings that were named after the heroes of *The Water Margin*, a classic Chinese tale of epic violence, one of Shiraga's favorite childhood books.³⁷

Shiraga's art was situated within the larger discourse of 1950s Japan — a time and place that was deeply bound to global struggles for hegemony. During the 1950s, Japan's history as victim and aggressor in the world war was re-surfacing in the struggle over the political and cultural forms the future nation might take. Violence during World War II had reached unprecedented levels, and reminders of those recent events — atrocities committed in China and elsewhere, starvation in Japan, incendiary bombing, and the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki — were visible in the severely transformed landscapes and were experienced as loss, trauma, and shame at a communal level. The small city of Ashiya, Shiraga's hometown and the site for "The Experimental Outdoor Exhibition to Challenge the Midsummer's Sun," was gravely affected.³⁸ Half the city's residents had been injured or killed in the war. Osaka itself was bombed on March 13 and March 14, 1945, and approximately 10,000 people were killed. As a conscripted soldier tending to the wounded at Osaka Castle, Shiraga had firsthand encounters with the aftermath of war.

Not surprisingly, Shiraga was struck by the experience of witnessing devastation. But experiences such as these were not permissible subjects of art. Because of the profusion of propaganda and strict censorship under the Japanese military regime as well as throughout the American Occupation, memorials, references to war, and images of violence were often distorted and suppressed.³⁹ It was only as late as 1952, following the withdrawal of most American

³⁴ These films were on display in February 2010 as part of the "Shiraga Kazuo: Six Decades" exhibition at McCaffrey Fine Art in New York.

³⁵ *Ultra-Modern Dance* was performed in 1956 at Sankei Kaikan, Osaka and in 1957 at Ōhara Hall in Tokyo. It was later reconstructed as an installation piece in 1985. Murakami Saburō, "Gutaitekina Hanashi (Concrete Discussion)," in *Document Gutai* (Ashiya: ACMAH, 1993), 382.

³⁶ Shiraga described his purchase of a large lever-action gun and attempt to hunt a boar, just before working on *Wild Boar Hunting*. ACMAH, *Gutai 1,2,3*, 208.

³⁷ There are over one dozen paintings named after characters from the text, for example, *Tenkisei chitasei*, *Tenbōsen ryotoda* (1962), and *Hemmei sano* (1964). See Hirai Shoichi, *Shiraga Kazuo: Action Painter* (Kobe: Hyōgoken ritsu kindai bijtsukan, 2001), 145. These works will be discussed in Chapter Two.

³⁸ Nevertheless, the Ashiya City Art Association was established as early as 1948. ACMAH, *Gutai 1,2,3*, 28.

³⁹ Immediately after the Occupation began, any imagery that the Civil Censorship Department (the CCD was a large but invisible arm of the Supreme Commander for Allied Powers that employed over 6000 people) believed to foment nationalism was not permitted. Censorship included references to the "Great East Asian War" rather than the GHQ's preferred term, Pacific War. Images associated with the war, such as of planes, or images that were seen to elevate the status of the Japanese military were prohibited. The CCD even went so far as to censor references to the Occupation itself. Further complicating this issue was the fact that the guidelines were never publicly revealed. As Dower notes: "For publishers, broadcasters, journalists, filmmakers, and writers, SCAP's censorship operation possessed an opaque quality that made it challenging to determine how far one could go without offending the new

military troops, that opportunity to reflect upon (and reinvent) the life-changing events that had taken place over the previous decade became available. More importantly, because the political future of the country remained in question, the role that the arts would play in the construction of modern Japan was subject to heated debate.⁴⁰ In the words of Carol Gluck, “Defeated, liberated and occupied all at once, in the autumn of 1945 the Japanese were suddenly both free and unfree to confront their past.”⁴¹

The long-standing tensions between the United States and Japan were complicated and varied rather than openly hostile, and the end of the Occupation in 1952 did little to undo this fraught relationship. Long after the Occupation had officially ended, the San Francisco Security Treaty of 1951 ensured that the United States would continue to hold a great deal of power over Japan – an issue that was (and remains) intensely controversial.⁴² In return for its independence, Japan agreed to remilitarize only under circumstances to be determined in large measure by the United States, to indefinitely postpone restoration of sovereignty over Okinawa (another issue that remains sensitive today), and to allow U.S. military bases to remain on Japanese soil.⁴³ Protests against the United States and specifically against remilitarization grew in the late 1950s, and into the 1960s.⁴⁴ The degree to which Japan would support the United States’ Cold War agenda and maintain the new Constitution that greatly circumscribed Japan’s military growth galvanized political sentiment in unprecedented ways. During the conference over the possible remilitarization of Japan in 1960, things grew violent and one female student, Kanba Michiko 樺美智子, was killed during the fights between demonstrators and riot police in the incursion into the Diet compound on June 15, 1960.

At the same time, American cultural capital was booming — the echoes of its military and cultural successes rang throughout Japan. American movies filled theatres; American fashions were splashed across the covers and pages of innumerable magazines established at the end of the war, and American art increasingly held a position of power.⁴⁵ Because avant-garde

thought police. ... Such circumstances helped foster a climate of disquieting rumors that easily spilled over into a pathology of self-censorship.” Dower, *Embracing Defeat*, 410.

⁴⁰ For example see Miyakawa Atsushi 宮川淳, “After Informel,” *Bijutsu Techō* (1963). The article attributes a profound change in the direction of Japanese avant-garde following exposure to Michel Tapié’s Informel Art, and a critical re-evaluation of artistic developments in Japan in 1956-1957. Chiba Shigeo has generally argued that Informel was simply a trigger for changes that were unique to Japan and individual artists and groups like the Gutai. Although explicitly about Informel, these articles implicitly express anxiety over the influence of Western powers, and debate the meaning of terms such as “modern” and “Japanese art.” Chiba, *Gendai Bijutsu Itsudatsushi*. It should be noted that much of the debate about the future of art circulated around Tokyo artists and critics. Very little attention was directed to the Gutai group until after the 1980s.

⁴¹ Carol Gluck, “The Past in the Present,” in *Postwar Japan as History*, ed. Andrew Gordon (Berkeley: University of California, 1993), 66.

⁴² For example, protesters created small explosions by an American military base outside of Tokyo in 2007. Associated Press, “Claim for Japan Base Blast,” *The New York Times*, February 18, 2007.

⁴³ President Obama met with Prime Minister Hatoyama in December 2009 to discuss this issue.

⁴⁴ In Japan, the treaty is known as *anpo joyaku* 安保条約, a contraction of *anzenhoshō jōyaku* 安全保障条約 or *nichibei anpo jōyaku* 日米安保条約 and the student movements in the 1960s and 1970s who opposed it were known as *anpo hantai* 安保反対. On May 19, 1960 Prime Minister Kishi Nobusuke 岸信介 used police force to push the reform through, resulting in a storm of protests. On June 15th, another key date in the Anpo crisis, peaceful protestors were attacked near the National Diet Assembly. Wesley Makoto Sasaki-Uemura, *Organizing the Spontaneous: Citizen Protest in Postwar Japan*, (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2001), 76.

⁴⁵ For more on the hegemonic position of American art, see Serge Guilbaut, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art: Abstract Expressionism, Freedom and the Cold War* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983). For more on the sudden increase in publications see: “Rushing into print” – under censorship, says John Dower, there

painting was evaluated largely in terms of its relationship (disavowed or overt) to American art, territoriality over cutting-edge artistic status grew.⁴⁶ Japanese artists faced an uphill battle as they attempted to prove their sophistication without running the risk of being labeled derivative. Shiraga staked out an ambitious project of putting Japanese contemporary art back on the map — a project that would reach fruition long after Gutai disbanded.⁴⁷ Because over fifty-nine people were eventually involved during the eighteen years of Gutai's existence, it seems unlikely that their motivations, techniques and impact can be easily summarized. Hence, I argue that Shiraga's work should be examined independently of Gutai, and understood within the context of its production during a time when national identity was being hotly contested.

How did the dramatic shifts in the visual arena from ubiquitous imperialist symbolism in the 1930s and 1940s to advertisements for American products and the re-invention of the modern art world in Japan in the 1950s and 1960s reveal the contradictions and capitulations between Japan and America? In particular, how was this changing visual field mediated by Shiraga's artistic practice? Was the enacting of aggression in his art an attempt to celebrate or condemn the nation, or was it an unspoken frustration that motivated an acted-out aggression as a new art form? I am interested in exploring how his violently playful performances may have been a means of processing new relations of power at a local, artistic level.⁴⁸ Shiraga's seemingly outlandish performance art and painting were a part of personal and public evaluation of the nation, questioning the chameleon-like character of nationalistic representation as well as art's potentially transformative impact on the state.

Conflicting Art Discourses

American art historians have labeled Shiraga a performance artist, whereas in other Japanese art history circles he comes to typify Japanese Abstract Expressionism, though it is

was a hunger for words. Publishing was one of the first businesses to recover after the war. See Dower, *Embracing Defeat*, 180.

⁴⁶ Reiko Tomii writes: When we shift our attention to our immediate past, there is an intriguing instance of a locale's outward gaze: a perception of international contemporaneity (*kokusai-teki dōjisei*), articulated during the 1960s in Japan, though not so much in Euro-America. Intimately tied to the formation of *gendai bijutsu* (literally, 'contemporary art') as an institution, the sense of international contemporaneity played as significant a role in the discursive practice as in art-making, foregrounding the concept of *gendai* (an adjectival noun, meaning 'contemporary') and engendering the local discourses on *gendai bijutsu*." Reiko Tomii, "Historicizing "Contemporary Art:" Some Discursive Practices in Gendai Bijutsu in Japan" *Positions: East Asia Cultures Critique* (December 2004): 614.

⁴⁷ Gutai were largely ignored and dismissed by critics in Japan and abroad. Their 1959 exhibition at the Martha Jackson Gallery in New York was panned by Dore Ashton: "In spite of orthodox techniques — tar, plastic bags or crumpled papers mashed together — the effects are orthodox. They resemble paintings in Paris, New York, Amsterdam, London and Mexico City that resemble paintings by Pollock and his followers." See Dore Ashton, "Art: Japan's Gutai Group," *New York Times*, September 25, 1958. In Japan, a reevaluation of Gutai did not begin until the 1980s, initiated perhaps by Hikosaka's article in 1973, which suggested that Michel Tapié seriously affected the creative direction of Gutai. Tapié collaborated with the Gutai group from his arrival in Japan in 1957. Hikosaka, "Tojirareta enkan no kanata wa: 'Gutai' no kiseki kara nan O...!(Beyond the Enclosed Ring, What to Find in the Trajectory of Gutai)," 1973.

⁴⁸ Of course, even within the Kansai region, vast differences exist between communities. Ashiya, for example, is an extremely wealthy community, whereas many Gutai members, like Tanaka were from industrial areas in Osaka. These economic and geographical differences were also echoed within Gutai. Yoshihara, for example, heralded from a wealthy-business owning family. Most of the young artists in the group, however, were of the middle class, most working as teachers at the same time there were producing their art. The group as a whole saved funds for the journal *Gutai*.

unclear whether this nation-based category even existed.⁴⁹ Complicating matters is the gap between English and Japanese in the usage of terms like performance art. The very term “performance art” did not come into common parlance until the postwar period. In Japan the term performance art, パフォーマンスアート, is simply a phonetic rendition of the English word, written in *katakana*. It seems to have appeared in the 1960s in reference to the activities of the art group, High Red Center ハイレッド・センタ, such as their street-cleaning event *Be Clean!* from 1964 in the Nishi-Ginza district of Tokyo. Hirata Minoru 平田実 traces the origins of performance art through the work of Yoko Ono and her ties to Fluxus Art.⁵⁰ Not surprisingly, it is the metropolis of Tokyo from which the new term was launched. In the United States, Allan Kaprow’s introduction to the Gutai in his book, *Assemblage, Environments and Happenings* essentially equated the group with performance art, and asserted that it was the first to take art in this direction.⁵¹ As a result, many American art historians have only understood Gutai as a performance art group, even though it is clear that many Gutai works fall well outside the boundary of that particular category.⁵²

Abstract Expressionism is a similarly heterogeneous term used to refer to a wide range of diverse practices that are generally nonfigural, non-geometrical, and disinterested in naturalism or mimetic representation. Art historian Alfred Barr categorized Abstract Expressionism as an explicit category in 1936; however, the genre was only solidified by the writings of Harold Rosenberg and Clement Greenberg in the 1950s.⁵³ This timeframe also mirrors the introduction of Abstract Expressionism to Japan, according to Kumada Tsukasa 熊田司.⁵⁴ Yoshihara exhibited five works at the 21st Nika exhibition (21二科展) in 1936 which all demonstrated an interest in abstraction. Additionally, the influential magazine, *Mizue* みずえ, featured an article by Hasegawa Saburō 長谷川三郎 entitled “Abstract Art,” (Chushō bijutsu 抽象美術), and many Japanese artists increasingly created nonfigural work at this time.⁵⁵

⁴⁹ Bert Winther-Tamaki has pointed out how artists who grounded their hybrid aesthetic in the legitimating discourse of tradition and indigenous culture were criticized by Japanese critics for catering to western taste. Bert Winther-Tamaki, *Art in the Encounter of Nations: Japanese and American Artists in the Early Postwar Years* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2001), 28.

⁵⁰ Hirata Minoru, *Chō geijutsu: zen'ei bijutsuka no ashiato (Art in Action: The 1960's Avant-Garde Works and Profiles of Young Japanese Artists)*, trans. Reiko Tomii (Tokyo: Sangokan, 2005).

⁵¹ Allan Kaprow, *Assemblage, Environments and Happenings* (New York: Abrams, 1966), 211-225.

⁵² For example, see P. Schimmel and K. Stiles, *Out of Actions: Between Performance and the Object, 1949-1979* (New York: Thames and Hudson; Los Angeles: The Museum of Contemporary Art, 1998). Michio Hayashi has stated: “In the middle section of the book devoted to a series of international examples of what he called “happening,” (sic) Kaprow gave the most prominent space to the Gutai group which ‘seem to indicate the priority of the Japanese in the making of Happening-type performance.’ Since then, Gutai has been repeatedly dubbed as the first performance group in the world. This characterization continues to this day. The centrality of painting as a framework of the Gutai performances and the dialectical tension they created from within that framework tends to be overlooked in this line of interpretation originated from Kaprow.” Michio Hayashi, “Other Trajectories in Gutai: Akira Kanayama and Atsuko Tanaka,” (Lecture, Berkeley: 2008).

⁵³ Francis Frascina, *Pollock and After: The Critical Debate*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2000), 8. See respectively Harold Rosenberg, “The American Action Painters,” *Art News* 51, no. 8 (1952). And Clement Greenberg, “American-Type Painting,” *Partisan Review* 22 (1955): 179-96.

⁵⁴ Kumada Tsukasa, “Busshitsu o kiri saku sen no kiseki, arui wa ippon no michi (Jirō Yoshihara: The Trajectory of a Line Cutting across a Material, or a Single Path),” in *Seitan 100 nen ki'nen Yoshihara Jirō (Jirō Yoshihara a Centenary Retrospective)*, ed. Katō Mizuho, Yokohama Ikuko and Koichi Kawasaki (Osaka: Osaka shiritsu gendai bijutsukan (Osaka City Museum of Modern Art, 2005).

⁵⁵ *Mizue* (みづえ) was founded in 1905. It later developed into an influential journal of art criticism. *Ibid.*, 18.

Other Japanese art historians accord Abstract Expressionism in Japan a later birth. Some point to the Nihon Independent Exhibition of 1951 in Tokyo, which showcased Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, and Jean Dubuffet and was highly influential in the development of Abstract Expressionism in Japan. Pollock's drip paintings were first shown in 1951 at the "Third Yomiuri Independent Exhibition," also held in the nation's capital. After the Japanese art historian Imaizumi returned from the Salon de Mai Exhibition in Paris, he lamented the failure of Japanese art to live up to its international counterparts.⁵⁶ When the exhibition arrived in Japan, it was so earth shaking for Japanese artists that art historians have since come to refer to it as the postwar "Informel Shock."⁵⁷ Shiraga's unique combination of action art followed close on the heels of the so-called Informel Shock. His first foot paintings were done before joining the Gutai Group, as early as 1952. His abstract work began as early as 1946.

A Brief Biography

Shiraga, a self-styled rogue hero of the Kansai art world, dreamt of becoming an artist from fifteen years of age and painted continuously from 1938 until his recent death in April, 2008. He is one of a few artists from the Gutai Art Association to have had solo exhibitions in Japan and abroad.⁵⁸ Throughout his sixty-eight-year career, he ambitiously and explicitly sought new modes of painting practice. In the 1940s, Shiraga pursued courses in Japanese-style painting, or *Nihonga*, at the Kyoto Municipal Art School (Kyoto Shiritsu Bijutsu Senmon Gakkō 京都市立美術専門学校、currently the Kyoto City College of Fine Arts) and only later acquainted himself with art practices in Europe and the United States, largely by reading *Nijisseiki kaiga taikan* 二十世紀絵画大観 (*Painting in the Twentieth Century*) by Toyama Usaburō 外山卯三郎.⁵⁹ He was conscripted in 1944 to the Maebashi military academy and at the age of twenty-one was assigned to the twenty-second infantry unit in Osaka in June of 1945. There he tended to the wounded at Osaka Castle (which was being used as an interim recovery center).⁶⁰ On his return, following a hospital stay for pneumonia and rheumatism, he immediately began producing art, despite economic hardship and difficulties in accessing paints, canvas, and other supplies.

⁵⁶ Bert Winther-Tamaki. *Art in the Encounter of Nations*, (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2001), 16.

⁵⁷ "Reflecting on this moment five years later, art critic Haryū Ichirō noted, 'When the Salon de Mai came to Japan in 1951, we were spellbound by works of the middle generation of French artists who had experienced the Second World War. After the initial shock had passed, many of us felt that the work in the salon was coloured by moralistic and eclectic attitudes and we could also see how much we had been starved of modern art by the fact that we had been so impressed by such works.'" Charles Merewether et al., *Art, Anti-Art, Non-Art: Experimentations in the Public Sphere in Postwar Japan, 1950-1970* (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2007), 3. For further references to the "shock" of modern art see Haryū Ichirō, "Modan ato 1956" (Modern art 1956), *Geijutsu shinchō* 7, no. 5 (May 1956).

⁵⁸ Shiraga's early exhibitions include the "World Contemporary Art Exhibition," Tokyo and Osaka, 1957; the eleventh "Premio Lissone Exhibition" and "Arte Nuova" exhibition in Torino Italy, 1958; the "Continuite et Avant-garde au Japan," 1961; the "Contemporary International Fair" in Milan, Italy, 1961; the "Moderne Malerei aus Japan" exhibition at Kunsthhaus, Zurich, 1965, and the first "Japanese Art Festival," Union Carbide Building in New York in 1966. He was the second artist from the Gutai Group to have a solo debut in Tokyo. Ming Tiampo and Mizuho Katō, eds., *Electrifying Art: Atsuko Tanaka, 1954-1968* (Vancouver: Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery, 2004), 56.

⁵⁹ Shiraga reports reading these books in "My Path to Action Painting" in Amagasaki Cultural Center, *Shiraga Kazuo*, Amagasaki: Matsuuchi Sangyo Co., 1989), 8. Toyama Usaburō, *Junsui kaigaron 純粹絵画論 (The Theory of Purism)* Tokyo: Daisanshoin, 1932, and Toyama, *Nijisseiki kaiga taikan* (Tokyo: Kinseidō 1930).

⁶⁰ Amagasaki Cultural Center, *Shiraga Kazuo* (Amagasaki: Matsuuchi Sangyo Co., 1989).

Many artists at the time began forming organizations and groups to overcome material challenges and to foster a stronger artistic community. In 1952, Shiraga helped form *Zero-kai*, with Kanayama Akira and Murakami Saburō, and from 1953 he began engaging his body in performative modes of painting.⁶¹ His artistic journey was accompanied by other undertakings: he had a brief stint as a hunter, he was an avid camera collector, and also joined the Buddhist priesthood at the monastery Enryaku-ji at Mount Hiei, near Kyoto in 1971, (a turning point for Shiraga which will be addressed in Chapter Two). More than simply eclectic personal interests, these activities were like storyboards to his own artistic narrative: they helped him articulate and explore what masculine heroism might mean away from the battlefield.

Shiraga grew up in Amagasaki 尼崎, Hyōgo Prefecture 兵庫県, a city set between Kobe and Osaka. The city was dual-natured, at once brimming with cultural activities, such as the tea ceremony and traditional dance practices, while simultaneously profoundly affected by the active ports and busy atmosphere of industrialization. Shiraga's family had been a part of the cultural establishment. Born into a kimono merchant family established in the Meiji period, Shiraga's father (who painted as a hobby) had hoped Kazuo, the eldest of two sons, would carry on the family business. Instead, the young man opted to follow his interests in painting. Shiraga was interested in learning Western-style oil painting, but only design and Japanese-style painting were offered at his school. For Shiraga, transferring to Tokyo, where Western-style painting was taught more widely, was financially out of the question. His later description of his school reveals in retrospect profound doubts about what he saw as the conformist quality of Japanese art:

My first medium was a Japanese-style technique in the traditional school of painting. The world of *ukiyo-e* 浮世絵 with its brilliant colors of Japanese wood-block prints inspired me. Later, however, I found the limitations inherent in the traditional medium's rigid adherence to rules and forms. What I suffered from most was a suppression of individual expression.⁶²

Shiraga's words to the art historian David Kung parallel his efforts in his paintings to declaratively reject tradition, aiming instead for a more cutting-edge artistic identity, and this may have been especially important to him when addressing an American art historian. Significantly, although Shiraga asserted that his art had Japanese origins, he moved beyond them into a "free" future. It was as though Shiraga came to view his own work as framed by the binary tension between so-called traditional Japanese art and avant-garde (largely perceived to be American art).

Following the end of the war, in 1946, Shiraga began his studies at the Kyoto Municipal Art School, one of the only places in Kansai where courses in oil painting were available. He eventually left the school and found an art teacher in Osaka named Itō Tsugurō 伊藤継郎, under whom he continued to practice oil painting. During a six-month hospitalization in the 1940s, along with *Painting in the Twentieth Century*, he read *Theory of Pure Painting* (*Junsui kaigaron*

⁶¹ Tanaka Atsuko was a fellow member of Gutai who also participated in Zero-kai, joining between 1953-1954.

⁶² David Kung, *The Contemporary Artist in Japan* (Honolulu: East-West Center Press, 1966), 109. Translated by David Kung.

純粹絵画論) also by Toyama.⁶³ He was particularly compelled by Toyama's categorization of works into "hot" or "cold" styles, and the belief that "hot," expressive works were those that originated in the heart, and were considered to be spontaneous, while "cool" works were products of the mind, a conceptual division that was fairly common at the time.⁶⁴ Shiraga characterized paintings in this manner; he described his own work as "hot," for example, and Kanayama's as "cool."⁶⁵ Perhaps the facile binary categorization of painting methods and styles held some appeal in a time when things Japanese and things Western were being overwritten and co-mingled in unprecedented ways.

Searching Out the Spirit

Shiraga's binarization of "spirit" (*seishin* 精神) and "mind" (*atama* 頭) seem anything but arbitrary. The words bear striking resemblance to phrases circulating in contemporaneous popular culture; at the same time, these terms have a particular genealogy and history. For example, in the Meiji Period, "Japanese Spirit, Western Knowledge" (*wakon yosai* 和魂洋才) was a primary motivating political slogan and philosophical expression intended with a single rhetorical stroke to bridge or erase the tradition-modern, East-West divide.⁶⁶ This expression, along with casual usage of "Japanese spirit" (*Yamato-damashii* 大和魂), was common among Japanese nationalists in the 1930s and 1940s and was part of a general attempt to establish and protect an essentialized notion of "Japaneseness."⁶⁷ However, Shiraga's use of the term is not necessarily a return to imperialist doctrine. On the contrary, it resonated with the pervasive concern over the identity of Japanese art within the larger modern art world. Indeed, Yoshihara, in the *Gutai Manifesto*, repeatedly elevated the status of the spirit, describing it as earnestly real and defined by its opposition to fakery:

With our present awareness, the arts we have known up to now appear to us in general to be fakes fitted out with a tremendous affectation. Let us take leave of these piles of counterfeit objects on the altars, in the palaces, in the salons and the antique shops.

⁶³ It is interesting to note that both Tanaka and Shiraga found inspiration while hospitalized. There was a phenomenon of "sickness" circulating in the postwar. In 1946, the term "kyodatsu 虚脱" a condition of exhaustion or despair, was introduced into the dictionary. Dower, *Embracing Defeat*, 88. Similarly, in 1955, a popular phrase was "*noiro-ze no jidai* / イローゼの時代 (the age of neurosis)." As a popular weekly put it, claiming one was neurotic had now become an "accessory" (they used the English word) for modern people." ed. Andrew Gordon, *Postwar Japan as History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 18.

⁶⁴ Shiraga summarized Toyama's belief in two major types of art in the twentieth century: "1. Understanding the spirit of the painting with the mind; 2. Understanding the spirit of painting with the heart." (1. Kaigateki seishin wo atama ni yotte kanjyu suru koto; 2. Kaigateki seishin o kokoro ni oite kanjyu suru koto 1. 絵画的な精神を頭に依って感受すること 2. 絵画的な精神を心に於いて感受すること) Amagasaki Cultural Center, *Shiraga Kazuo: Action Painter*. 12. Interestingly, it was also Toyama Usaburō who initially criticized Yoshihara's reliance on titles for his works in 1937. Following this criticism, Yoshihara began creating untitled works, and after the Gutai group had formed, he pressured the members to follow his example. Kumada, "Jirō Yoshihara: The Trajectory of a Line ...," 2005, 19.

⁶⁵ Amagasaki Cultural Center, *Shiraga Kazuo: Action Painter*, 147.

⁶⁶ Kodansha Encyclopedia of Japan, (Tokyo: Kodansha, 1983), 221.

⁶⁷ "The Invention of *Wa* and the Transformation of the Image of Prince Shōtoku in Modern Japan," in Stephen Vlastos, ed., *Mirror of Modernity: Invented Traditions of Modern Japan*, (Berkeley: University of California Press), 37-47.

These objects are in disguise and their materials such as paint, pieces of cloth, metals, clay or marble are loaded with false significance by human hand and by way of fraud, so that, instead of just presenting their own material, they take on the appearance of something else. Under the cloak of an intellectual aim, the materials have been completely murdered and can no longer speak to us.

Lock these corpses into their tombs. Gutai art does not change the material but brings it to life. Gutai art does not falsify the material. In Gutai art the human spirit and the material reach out their hands to each other, even though they are otherwise opposed to each other. The material is not absorbed by the spirit. The spirit does not force the material into submission. If one leaves the material as it is, presenting it just as material, then it starts to tell us something and speaks with a mighty voice. Keeping the life of the material alive also means bringing the spirit alive, and lifting up the spirit means leading the material up to the height of the spirit.

Art is the home of the creative spirit, but never until now has the spirit created the material. The spirit has only ever created the spiritual. Certainly the spirit has always filled art with life, but this life will finally die as the times change.⁶⁸

What, exactly did “spirit” and “originality” mean to Gutai, Yoshihara, or Shiraga? The two terms were often understood to be in a mutually constitutive relationship, with the notion of “spirit” conceptualized as an elevated and naturalized essence key to “unlocking” originality. “Originality,” according to the manifesto as well as interviews with Shiraga, seemed to be tied to rejection of, or marked separation from, the past.⁶⁹ With disabuse of imperial propaganda and ambivalent feelings about the U.S. General Headquarters’ willingness to censor or manipulate the visual field to meet the narrow political aims of the Occupation, art in this view had to negotiate a crisis of representation. Both art makers and art viewers felt compelled to move into something new — regardless of whether or not originality could actually exist. As the critic Tōno Yoshiaki commented in the late 1950s: “Some Japanese have internalized something similar to Informel’s distrust of the image, its exposing ruptures in an imaginary world ... in other words, the desire to venture into uncharted seas by starting with a *tabula rasa*.”⁷⁰

Gutai’s repeated calls for originality in their journal and manifesto also suggested an overwhelming anxiety about derivation, a label that was to become a fatal blow to the Gutai Group in terms of their reception inside and outside the country. Critical response to Gutai art almost always posed them as weak facsimiles of more “genuine” American Abstract

⁶⁸ Yoshihara, "Gutai Sengen (Gutai Manifesto)," 202-4.

⁶⁹ Ibid. For example, Shiraga wrote: “An austere road to originality – run forward, run and run.” in “Action Itself kōi koso,” *Gutai* 3, (20 October 1955): 21.

⁷⁰ Translated in Merewether et al., *Art, Anti-Art, Non-Art: Experimentations in the Public Sphere in Postwar Japan, 1950-1970*, 2007, 10.

Expressionism.⁷¹ Dore Ashton and others panned Gutai's first show in North America at the Martha Jackson Gallery in 1958, suggesting that it was a weak replication of Abstract Expressionism.⁷² Yet one *New York Times* art reviewer who witnessed the Gutai perform in Osaka was struck by the originality of the group.⁷³ The discrepancy suggests the import of Gutai's stage works to their reception — how might they have been received if the group had performed *Electric Dress* or *Challenging Mud* in the mid 1950s in North America? Operating outside the art center of Tokyo, and far beyond New York (the newly christened center of contemporary art), Gutai turned to stage work and bodily expression to create something altogether new.

Profoundly connected to the notion of originality was the ubiquitous desire for newness in the postwar. Shiraga describes the quest for originality in the *Gutai* journal in 1955:

When I first discovered my own individuality, I thought I would remove all ready-made clothes and become naked. Forms blew away and all technique slipped off my painting knife, splitting in two. [This is] the perilous road to originality.⁷⁴

A fascination with stripping down, removal, and direct physical contact suggests Shiraga's interest in the rhetoric of rebirth, a concept that would be freeing in its disassociation with the past and his adamant claim to originality.

Responses to Shiraga's Art

For Shiraga, the Gutai show at Ōhara Hall in Tokyo in 1956 marked a personal debut in the nation's capital and unchallenged hub of modern art.⁷⁵ *Challenging Mud* was reputed to be one of the first performance art pieces ever recorded (see figure 3).⁷⁶ Japanese reviewers were clearly at a loss in explaining the piece, choosing to focus instead on the fact that the Gutai group had previously exhibited abroad.⁷⁷

Still, some praised the group. Allan Kaprow, for example, credited Gutai with first creating performance art, though the group's wide-ranging production of paintings and sculpture was overlooked. Further, Kaprow's conception of Gutai's aims was hazy at best, based as it was on photographs that he received from Yoshihara.⁷⁸ More recently, Western art historians, such as

⁷¹ Chiba Shigeo points out that critics in Japan felt they had to estimate a response on the basis of their exposure to American and European art. According to Chiba, contemporary critics such as Yoshiakii 乾良明 found Gutai to be overly improvised and amateurish, whereas other like Haryū Ichiro 針生一郎 saw them as following American abstract expressionists. Haryū maintains that these influences were in fact quite superficial. See Haryū Ichiro, "Busshitsu to ningen (Matter and Man)." A re-evaluation of Gutai art did not take place for the Gutai until the 1970s. See Hikosaka, "Tojirareta enkan no kanata wa: 'Gutai' no kiseki kara nan o..." (Beyond the Enclosed Ring, What to Find in the Trajectory of Gutai)," 1973.

⁷² Dore Ashton, "Art: Japan's Gutai Group," *New York Times*, September 25, 1958, 66.

⁷³ Ray Falk, "Japanese Innovators." *New York Times*. December 8, 1957, D24.

⁷⁴ Shiraga Kazuo, "Kōi Koso (Action Itself)," *Gutai* 3 (1955): 21.

⁷⁵ The work was performed twice at the First Gutai Art Exhibition, both times were called "Challenging Mud."

⁷⁶ It is not the interest of my project to argue for the first precedents in performance art, as I feel these debates often spiral into stale arguments over origination versus derivation and are not germane to my focus on gender and subjectivity.

⁷⁷ For example: "Nihon no zen'ei sakuhin o ōbei ni shokai (Japanese Avant-Garde Artworks Introduced to the West)," *Kobe Shinbun*, April 15, 1958. Or "Umi O wataru Gutai bijutsu (Gutai Art Crosses the Ocean)," *Asahi newspaper*, July 12, 1958.

⁷⁸ Allan Kaprow, *Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 16.

Alexandra Munroe, have tended to equate Gutai with Japan's supposed embrace of democratization and slip into light-heartedness emerging after the war.⁷⁹ More recent reviewers have also joined this chorus, focusing on the allegedly playful, frolicsome nature of Gutai. For example, Holland Cotter writes in 2004: "Anti-academic, studiously unserious, Gutai blended the spirits of Dada, Zen and children's play."⁸⁰ In 2003, Joan Kee wrote: "More generally, the Gutai turned to play as a means of transforming the painting process. Excitement and fun were considered integral to the Gutai painters and the act of playing was the most expansive strategy that would encompass the excitement experienced by each of painter [sic], as well as enable them to disregard self-consciousness and external notions of 'correct' ideas regarding painting."⁸¹

In many ways this assessment is not inaccurate, but I would like to push this issue of play a bit further. How finely drawn is the boundary between play and violence? Play is acting out, a working out of social and power relations, in an ontological arena.⁸² Summary responses, such as Cotter's, fail to appreciate the complex relations between politics and art of the time. Furthermore, these responses treat the diverse practices of the Gutai group with the same broad brush, a practice that persists today in critical writings about Gutai.⁸³ These theories on Gutai are not only blind to differences between artists, but they often fail to look carefully at the formal qualities of any particular composition or to consider the rhetorical strategies deployed by the artists.

To date, little has been written that adequately accounts for the issues of violence and nationhood that I see to be prevalent in Shiraga's art. The few published essays and exhibition catalogues that directly address Shiraga are concerned with questions of reception and influence from America and France. Ming Tiampo's extensive and foundational work on the Gutai group examines the collaborations, communications, and miscommunications between Art Informel, a French art movement lead by Michel Tapié, and the Gutai group in the 1960s. Tiampo's dissertation, "Gutai and Informel: Postwar Art in Japan and France, 1945 – 1964," was a ground-breaking study of the Gutai that greatly influenced my own work. However, her emphasis on art in the global context tends to overshadow attention to specific visual qualities of any single artwork.⁸⁴ Such a widely framed cross-cultural approach is a much-needed addition to studies on global art history, yet studies in this vein run the risk of eliding important aspects of national and regional history and politics, elements that I believe profoundly impacted Shiraga's work.

More recently, Tiampo has attempted to root Shiraga's work in the practice of traditional festivals (*matsuri* 祭り) in Japan.⁸⁵ By simply naturalizing Shiraga's actions with the festivals,

⁷⁹ See Munroe, Guggenheim Museum, and Yokohama Museum of Art, *Japanese Art after 1945*, 1994.

⁸⁰ Holland Cotter, "With Bells and Flashes, Work of a Japanese Pioneer," *New York Times*, (October 1, 2004): B28. Japanese reviewers responded similarly. See "Tanoshisō ni otona no asobi (Fun Play for Grown-Ups)," *Asahi Shinbun*, October 4, 1967.

⁸¹ Joan Kee, "Situating a Singular Kind of 'Action': Early Gutai Painting, 1954 - 1957," *Oxford Art Journal* 26, no. 2 (2003), 127.

⁸² For more on the notion of play as social ritual, see Victor Witter Turner, *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors; Symbolic Action in Human Society*, Symbol, Myth, and Ritual Series. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1974).

⁸³ For further examples see Munroe, Guggenheim Museum, and Yokohama Museum of Art, *Japanese Art after 1945*, 1994. Also see writings by Japanese art historians like Tatehata Akira, "Seisei suru taburo: Gutai Bijutsu Kyōkai no 1950 nendai (Creating Tableaux, 1950s Gutai Art Association)," in *Action and Emotion, Painting in the 50s, Informel, Gutai, Cobra* (Osaka: National Museum of Art, 1985).

⁸⁴ Tiampo, "Gutai & Informel: Post-War Art in Japan and France, 1945-1965," 2003.

⁸⁵ See Gutai Bijutsu Kyōkai and Galerie nationale du jeu de paume (France), *Gutai: Moments De Destruction, Moments De Beauté = Gutai : Moments of Destruction, Moments of Beauty* (Paris: Blusson, 2002).

Tiampo's argument falls into a common trap of the scholar of East Asia, namely, that all contemporary art must originate in a uniquely Japanese essentialized "tradition." I would argue that Shiraga's interest in *matsuri* stems from his self-conscious interest in modes of violence. Interpreting Japanese art primarily through the lens of tradition has been a problematic but longstanding practice for a large number of art critics both inside Japan and abroad.⁸⁶ Moreover, this expansive notion of Japanese tradition tends to anachronistically lump together cultural practices dating from as early as the Kōfun era (circa 250 - 538) and as recently as the Meiji period (1868-1912) under the same ambiguous label of "Japanese tradition," whether widely divergent Zen practices or Nō Theatre (能).⁸⁷ This teleological argument recasts the artist-subject in a limiting and essentialized role that is defined by nothing more than birth in Japan and is then mischaracterized as antithetical to so-called Western aesthetics. Furthermore, explaining Shiraga's work as a consequence of any single cultural activity also enacts a singularity of reading that does not account for the complicated factors of industrialization, democratization and transnationalism in which Shiraga's art is deeply embedded.

The Work of Color

In the early 1950s, Shiraga decided to create works from a single color, "crimson lake red." Though he later re-introduced a wider palette into his work, red persistently recurs, particularly in his work of the 1950s. Not only did the color dominate the majority of his early paintings, but he also used it in his *objet* works such as *Red Liquid* (*Kurenai Eki* 紅液) (1956, 2001), a grotesque piece made of pig's livers soaked in red dye, and *Red Bottled Object* (*Akai Bin Zume* 赤いびん詰) (1956, 2001) (figure 4). Even in the gallery space, Shiraga's performance works were transformed into installation pieces consistent with thematic coloring: *Dōzo* became *Red Logs* (*Akai Maruta* 赤い丸太) (1955, 1985), and *Ultra-modern Dance* (*chō gendai sanban hiki* 長現代三番曳) (1957, 1985) was later exhibited as a lone demon-figure clothed in a red garment with arms stretching out across the length of the gallery.

The color red was a nationalist symbol during the imperial period, used to depict the flag, cherry blossoms, and the sun (it is important to remember that while in the West the sun is conceptualized as yellow, in Japan it is understood to be red). As the color of the land of the rising sun, red was inextricably tied to Japanese nationhood. John Dower describes the phenomenon:

The sun itself became a dominant presence in the Japanese images of war, in its whiteness, brightness, or its redness. On the global maps, which all Japanese schoolchildren come to know, the homeland almost invariably was colored red...

⁸⁶ For example, see Penelope Mason's textbook, *History of Japanese Art*, opens with an "Orientation" to the book that states under a section called "Aesthetic Polarities:" "A fundamental characteristic of Japanese sensibility is the appreciation of two very different aesthetics, restrained, even understated themes and brightly colored, exuberant expressions. The modern architect Tange Kenzō traces these two different aesthetics *back to earliest times, to the dynamic, volumetric ceramics of the Jōmon period and the restrained, simple shapes of Yayoi vessels.*" (my italics). In essence this statement argues that Japanese aesthetics have been unchanged since prehistory. Penelope Mason, *History of Japanese Art*. (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1993), 10.

⁸⁷ For example, see Stephen Vlastos, "Traditions: Past / Present Culture and Modern Japanese History," in Stephen Vlastos, ed., *Mirror of Modernity: Invented Traditions of Modern Japan*, (Berkeley: University of California Press), 1 - 18, or Greg Levine, "Two (or More) Truths: Reconsidering *Zen Art* in the West" in Naomi Noble Richard et al., eds. *Awakenings: Zen Figure Painting in Medieval Japan*, (New York: Japan Society, 2007), 52-62.

The young pilots about to embark on suicide missions during the final year of the war live vividly in the mind's eye wearing white headbands with the red Rising Sun emblem, and like countless other civilian and military patriots, the kamikaze pilots were intimately associated with cherry blossoms.⁸⁸

Though red may have a wide range of associations, I argue that in the postwar moment of internationalism, where authenticity was achieved or denied through national identity, its symbolic ties to the country were paramount. These ties, I argue, were not mindlessly absorbed as part of Shiraga's cultural milieu; rather, they were examined and repositioned in his art as targets for aggressive acts. Shiraga's choice of color is too persistent to be easily dismissed, and it suggests that he was aware that color was a means to contend with a global art market that relied upon recognizable national identities for its hegemonic orders. Because red had deep links with fascism in Japan, Shiraga seemed to want to ask if the color could be de-politicized through physical, creative engagement, a move that was ironically political and linked to a desire for recognition on the international art scene. In other words, the color offered a way for Shiraga to implicitly authenticate his art as Japanese, so that it might compete on the global field (that insisted on categories of nation) without being deemed a second-rate version of American modern art. Shiraga's repeated use of crimson lake red, his destruction of *Hinomaru*-like shapes and his oscillations between destruction and creation were tied to an interrogation of the envisioned nation.

Could Shiraga have been oblivious to the formal relationship between red circular forms and the flag? I argue that given the vigorous debates around nation at the time, Shiraga could not have helped but be aware, at some level, of the meaning of form and color as they relate to nationhood. Almost all of Shiraga's paintings are made from a thick build-up of material, produced through physical gestures that create a sense of circular movement in the composition, leaving smatterings of material around the edges. For example, in *Work II* (1958) (figure 5) broad, oval layers of paint in the middle section emphasize Shiraga's circular movements as he worked the paint. Shiraga, I argue, uses color and circular form to invoke the *Hinomaru*, yet simultaneously disrupted those associations through an aggressive, physical action.

Shiraga's first foot-painting, *Work I* (Sakuhin I 作品I), completed in 1954 (42.91 x 30.51 inches, oil paint and paper) reveals how color and method are suggestive of Shiraga's engagement with issues of nationalism (figure 6).⁸⁹ *Work I* is one of three pieces, forming a foot-painting triptych, all of which were painted exclusively with Shiraga's crimson lake red. All three compositions share an all-over quality that differs from many of his later works. Though still relying on only a single red color, Shiraga varied its tone by applying differing degrees of

⁸⁸ Dower points out the ties between the color red and purity: "In Japanese, to read "sincerity" involves seeing an ideograph meaning "red" and intimating blood; and to encounter the ideograph for red, or the color itself, in turn evokes vague intimations of purity and sincerity in ways that simply do not occur in the alphabetic languages or the color perceptions of Europeans and Americans." John W. Dower, *War Without Mercy: Race and Power in the Pacific War*, 1st ed. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1986), 211. While I agree with Dower's conception of color association, he seems to want to argue that Japanese are more likely to find colors associative to meaning because of their basis in Chinese characters, and this is perhaps taking the interpretation of the Japanese language too far.

⁸⁹ Note there is no signature on this work. This further complicates the orientation of the work. In the Museum of Contemporary Art, where I viewed the work, it was hung on a horizontal orientation – the orientation that Shiraga claimed was his predominant mode to work. In the exhibition catalogue, *Ibid.* However, the work is situated on the vertical plane, along with three analogous works.

pressure to the canvas. As a result some areas appear nearly pink, others burgundy. In some sections, particularly around the edges of the frame, the paint has thickened into a blood-like red that almost appears to have congealed. *Work* brings a violent assault into the deep red, shifting its associations with the flag.

Hinomaru and Representation

In Japan, images of the sun have a long history of association with nationalism. The *Hinomaru* emblem is a plain red circle within a white background. The flag's official name in Japanese is *Nisshōki* (日章旗, "sun flag") but the flag is more commonly known as the *Hinomaru* (日の丸, "sun disc"). It has ties to the notion of Japan as the land of the rising sun, as described by Prince Shōtoku in a letter dated back to 607 B.C.E.⁹⁰ Despite the antiquary quality of this reference, resituating the words of Prince Shōtoku is a well-documented practice in Japan, often employed to gird the rhetoric of *Nihonjinron* (日本人論), or theories on the origins or character of the Japanese people. This includes texts and speeches that are flavored with ethnic essentialism and powerful patriotic overtones.⁹¹ This conflation of the nation with the pure power of the sun is deeply embedded in the origin narratives of Japan that were mined during the imperial period. Until Japan's surrender in August 1945, the Emperor had been presented as the divine descendent of the sun goddess *Amaterasu-ōmikami* 天照大神, whose name means "Great Divinity," and who was positioned as the primogenitrix of the imperial line, sanctified and elevated in State Shintō.⁹² Consequently, images of the sun were central within Japanese propaganda and the appearance of the sun motif in literature, art, and commercial products multiplied.⁹³

The Japanese government directed efforts domestically and outside the country to encourage support for the so-called "Greater East Asia Co-Prosperty Sphere."⁹⁴ This was a concept promulgated in the 1930s and 1940s by the government and military of the Empire of Japan, which sought the development of a unified Asia, led by Japan, that would expand trade and stand against Western powers. Posters from the time reveal the self-conscious attention to relations between nations, often writ onto the male body. For example, an image from 1942 representing Southeast Asian partnership (figure 7) depicts Japan aiding a man who symbolizes Indonesia, a country that had been colonized by the Dutch. In the background, a woman in a Dutch cap, dress, and wooden shoes represents the ignominious retreat of the feminized and

⁹⁰ For more on the many reincarnations of Prince Shōtoku see Itō Kunio, "The Invention of *Wa*..." *Mirror of Modernity*, 37-47.

⁹¹ For example, Befu describes how authors such as Karaki Junzō's well-circulated text, *Nihon no Kokoro* takes up historical characters such as Prince Shōtoku. Befu, Harumi. *Hegemony of Homogeneity: An Anthropological Analysis of Nihonjinron*. (Melbourne: Trans Pacific Press, 2001), 33.

⁹² For more see Shimazono Susumu, Regan E. Murphy, "State Shintō in the Lives of the People: The Establishment of Emperor Worship, Modern Nationalism, and Shrine Shinto in Late Meiji." *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies*, 36, no. 1, Helen Hardacre and the Study of Japanese Religion (2009): 93-124.

⁹³ One need look no farther for references to the sun than the *Asahi Shimbun* 朝日新聞 (Morning Sun News), one of Japan's oldest and largest daily newspapers (it began publication in 1879). Other examples include hikari 光 (light) brand cigarettes, which prominently displayed the red sun on the cover, or a series of ads from Calpis (makers of a popular milk beverage) which show the rays of the sun illuminating a glass. Reed Darmon, *Made in Japan* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2006), 105 and 111. Louise Young discusses propaganda films such as *South Manchuria Glitters Under the Rising Sun*. Louise Young, *Japan: Total Empire* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 73.

⁹⁴ For more information see Eri Hotta, *Pan-Asianism and Japan's War, 1931-1945*. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

frightened colonizer, chased away by the power of the Japanese sun, labeled “Co-Prosperity Sphere.” Beyond the clear propagandistic message, the image also skillfully meshes the national sun symbol within a highly gendered language. The omnipresence of such images would have likely compounded an overwrought sense of import surrounding the Japanese male’s role within the nation. The simple, linear drawing fits with the requirements of the professional propaganda analysts that propaganda that was accessible would be the most effective.⁹⁵ In the poster, the *Nanpōjin* (colonized subject) stands bare-chested, his body and his shovel (emblems of physical labor and productivity) illuminated by the rays of the sun.

Considering the potency and frequent appearance of the national flag and other images of the sun that circulated in wartime Japan, Shiraga’s efforts to repeatedly represent, destroy, and reflect sun-like imagery seems acutely provocative. Representations of the sun were so pervasive, either with its extended rays as in the imperial military ensign, or the simple red circle on a white background, that its image became ubiquitous. Documentary photographs reveal that the sun appeared in beer advertisements, on clothing, and even food was modeled into sun shapes. For example, in a *bento* 弁当 (lunchbox) the rice is inlaid with a salty plum, making the *Hinomaru* ingestible (figure 8).⁹⁶ The ubiquity of such imperial imagery demonstrates that there is a need to address Shiraga’s work with an approach that includes the dynamic of visibility between state-issued symbols, their appropriation by the corporation and community, and their re-deployment, fixation, and destruction in art.

War and Vision

Shiraga, who turned seventeen when the Pacific War began, has offered little insight about his years of service in the military. His descriptions of his experiences are loaded with emotion, yet at times are contradictory, especially when he considers the relationship, if any, his experiences during the war might have had to his art. In an interview from the 1960s he claims that war *is* his subject matter, an attitude he later reverses:

When I returned from the service I was shocked at the extent of wartime destruction. The naked scars of the war-torn streets and the starving people moved me to paint. I could not control my intense anger and hatred against the war, and the horrors of war became my subjects. Such subjects were almost unheard of in traditional painting, which depicted flowers, birds and pleasant landscapes.⁹⁷

In 1998, however, Shiraga seems more troubled about linking his work and the war:

My art is not affected by my war-experience. I just saw people covered with blood. I just saw war victims and Osaka burnt to the ground. A lot of people, totally smeared with blood, soot, and mud were coming to Osaka Castle for help. To put it precisely, when I stayed in Osaka Castle... I saw a lot of bombed-out landscapes, people who were crying out loudly, people who were standing

⁹⁵ Barak Kushner, *The Thought War: Japanese imperial Propaganda*. (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2006), 9.

⁹⁶ For more on the construction of rice as a “traditional Japanese cuisine” see Emiko Ohnuki-Tierney. *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, Vol. 1, No. 2 (June 1995): 232.

⁹⁷ Kung, *The Contemporary Artist in Japan*, 109. Translated by David Kung.

around, still shell-shocked, people who were bleeding and even people who were almost dying. This part of my memories was materialized in my works.⁹⁸

Shiraga's passionate narratives contradict his own claim that he is disaffected by the war. Unconsciously or strategically, his "anger with the war" is not directed at any particular subject — the Japanese military and the American Occupation forces remain unnamed and unaccountable. Instead, he focuses again and again on the way things looked. Instead of objectively describing the site of Osaka, he continually refers to his experience of seeing. Vision takes precedence over the narrative. Shiraga's description of suffering in wartime Osaka resonates closely with his own subject matter: mud-smeared subjects, and blood-red colors. Consciously or unconsciously, through his rhetoric and work, Shiraga draws links between the imagery of war and his own artistic production. Words like "blood," "naked," and "mud" reappear in his narratives of art making as well as in narratives of his experience as a soldier. A similar conflation takes place when he refers to "the naked scars of the war-torn streets" and describes his desire to "slip off man made clothes and become naked."⁹⁹ It is as though he fostered a desire to replicate, through his own physical form, the painful state of the ruins of his hometown. Yet this should not be mistaken as art that takes war as its explicit subject. Shiraga's work took a more circuitous route that consistently examined war and nation through the self-conscious frame of performance art and painting. By extension, he examined representation through the frame of the state. This interplay between his surrounding visual context and his own artistic production is an important component to understanding what was at stake in visual fantasy.

Shiraga's abstract works do not lend themselves to a transparent reading of nationalism or anti-war sentiment in part because his art obscures the situation of nationalism and nationalistic disintegration that his work emerges from. Rather than an explicitly right-wing or left-wing agenda, Shiraga's interest seemed to lie in the perceived breakdown and recovery of the relationship between art and nation. Shiraga reveals that visual meaning produced in seemingly benign aesthetic objects can transform into potent national allegories, into objects of beauty or evidence of grotesque release. His work suggests an uneasy alliance with nationalist representation, subtly calling up motifs of the state through the shape of the sun, the colors of the flag and by performing the archetype of the hero. Yet his aggressive modes of creation also affirm the mutability of the nationalist symbol.

Challenging Mud and Visual Contexts

Challenging Mud from 1955, I argue, interrogates the nature of war and representation through its medium, its interpolation of body and material, and through the framing of the event in photographs. *Challenging Mud* was performed at the "First Gutai Art Exhibition" on a plaza outside of Ōhara Hall (小原会館) in Tokyo. It was the Gutai's debut in the nation's capital and Shiraga chose to celebrate the occasion by constructing his messy pile at the entrance of the exhibition hall (a visual metaphor for human waste that Shiraga was likely far from oblivious to). *Challenging Mud* was engineered from a heaping mass of gray that was intentionally worked into an extremely dense consistency, a viscosity that allowed only a degree of constrained

⁹⁸ Tiampo, "Gutai & Informel: Post-War Art in Japan and France, 1945-1965". Interview conducted and translated by Ming Tiampo, 177.

⁹⁹ Shiraga, "Kōi koso (Action Itself)." *Gutai 3* (October 20, 1955): 21.

movement. Stone, cement, sand, gravel, clay, plaster and twigs were mixed into the one-ton pile and when Shiraga, dressed in a loin-cloth, heaved his body onto the mess, the detritus lacerated his skin. As he became dirtied by his own actions, the definition of his figure against the medium became increasingly diminished. Shiraga's sullied torso seems notably similar to his own memories of the mud-streaked bodies in Osaka during the war. By extension, the gray tones of the muck that surround him on either side, could, with imagination, be the terrain of a battlefield or trench.

American critic Ray Falk, who saw the 1957 "Gutai on the Stage" exhibition in Osaka, commented:

Kazuo Shiraga shoots arrows into a long white screen. Soon he is joined by four apprentices in black, all shooting arrows. Then Shiraga comes back for the kill, throwing red spears at the screen, closing in for the coup de grace. . . Perhaps Kazuo Shiraga best illustrates what the Gutai artists are trying to achieve in creating new impressions through sight and sound. The curtain rises on a screen marked by vertical red lines. The slow beat of a temple drum is heard. With each beat one of the red lines, which turn out to be sticks, falls forward. The beat changes and sometimes two or three sticks knock each other down. Pretty soon one sees not red falling sticks but soldiers stumbling on a battlefield as the drum beat begins to sound like a cannonade.¹⁰⁰

Falk's description does not fail to connect Shiraga's explosive energies with the visual (and aural) language of the battle. His enthusiasm for Shiraga stands in contrast to American reviewers who only saw paintings by the group, and is reliant on Shiraga's aggressive acts that "come back for the kill."

Comparisons between his art and war imagery serve to illuminate the ways *Challenging Mud* resonates with other images of the physical body made ever more vulnerable in times of war. Shiraga was certainly aware of the presence of American soldiers during the American Occupation. For example, one of his earliest surviving drawings (from 1947), is entitled *Occupation Forces (Shinchū gun 進駐軍)* (figure 9). This figural work considers the form of the American military body, and stands apart from his other pieces finished in the 1940s, which are largely landscapes of bridges and city scenes in the Osaka area. The drawing is a study of seemingly the same soldier, drawn from fourteen different angles: standing to the side, legs apart, shifting his weight from one leg to the other, or mid-stride with a large gun slung across his back. Other than some small sketches of birds in the top right corner, and a small horse in the bottom left, the soldiers are armed in an unnamed geography of negative space.

Was *Occupation Forces* a study in soldiers' bodies that would operate at some level as a template for *Challenging Mud*? Certainly the soldier standing tall and proud suggests something about Shiraga's visions of war and occupation and his interest in the masculine, military body. Indeed, Kanayama reports that Shiraga shaved his hair, "just like a GI," before performing *Challenging Mud* for the first time.¹⁰¹ It was to remain that way for the remainder of his career. I

¹⁰⁰ Ray Falk, "Japanese Innovators," *New York Times* (September 25, 1957): D24.

¹⁰¹ Kanayama, "About Shiraga Kazuo." *Gutai* 4, 1956, 9.

suggest that Shiraga productively interrogated the relationship between images and war through a performative manner, bringing this issue close to his own body and skin.

Other images afloat in the sea of postwar visual culture may have contributed to a growing need for artists to interrogate wartime imagery. An Associated Press image of U.S. Marines of the 5th Division on Red Beach No. 1 provides an interesting foil to Shiraga's performance piece (figure 10). The image is taken from the assault on Iwo Jima (Iwojima 硫黄島), on February 19, 1945. While it is unlikely that Shiraga was exposed to this particular image during the war — censorship during the American military occupation generally prevented representations of its presence — the image and reputation of the masculine American soldier seemed to have purchase on postwar Japan's imagination. Artists such as Tōmatsu Shōmei 東松 照明 have revealed a preoccupation in their work for the subject of the American G.I.¹⁰² In Tōmatsu's series *Chewing Gum and Chocolate* (1959-1969), the lanky bodies of marines who glare menacingly at the camera are prominent. One notable image was taken from the ground up and shows the broad foot of a soldier, caught moments before the act of smashing the camera. Shiraga's work, however, stops short of condemnation of the Occupation Forces and instead seems to explore how masculinity performs in the visual realm.

Challenging Mud, for example, shares interesting analogous visual terrain with documentary photographs such as that from Iwo Jima. Both images show the bodies of men, unidentifiable as they lie face-down, dwarfed by the gray expanse of an unspecified geography. In each image, details and setting are eliminated as the elements of the photograph are reduced to an image of man versus earth. Both photographs illustrate the tropes of war imagery in the bleakness of their ambience and in the vulnerability of the bodies in an inhospitable environment. In this image of *Challenging Mud* (figure 11) Shiraga's bare torso is photographed at a side angle, thereby heightening the sense of defenselessness. He has little but mud-streaks covering his body, which emphasizes his isolation and vulnerability. In the documentary photograph (see figure 10), eight men have summited the hill, and are similarly pictured as they lie in a row, face down, toward an overhang of imagined dangers. Numerous bodies lie low in the foreground, their gear appearing heavy and cumbersome, overwhelming their comparatively small frames.

Challenging Mud may also share the same visual terrain with other imagined arenas of war that circulated in books and film. Released in 1939, Tasaka Tomotaka's 田坂具隆 film *Mud and Soldiers* (*Tsuchi to heitai* 土と兵隊), detailed the sacrifice and suffering of Japanese soldiers during the Hangchow attack in China (in fact the filmmaker spent time on the frontlines of the war).¹⁰³ The propaganda film was one of the best known in its time and was loosely based on a book by the same title released when Shiraga would have been at the impressionable age of fifteen years.¹⁰⁴ In a repeated sequence, the camera focuses on the fresh footprints of the innumerable soldiers as they march through the mud, emphasizing their anonymity. The Japanese flag too, becomes splashed with mud as it is relayed across the trenches. While it is

¹⁰² San Francisco Museum of Modern Art exhibited several works from the series. See Leo Rubinfien et al., *Shomei Tomatsu: The Skin of the Nation* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2004).

¹⁰³ Peter B. High, *The Imperial Screen: Japanese Film Culture in the Fifteen Years' War, 1931-1945*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 210.

¹⁰⁴ Tomotaka Tasaka et al., *Tsuchi to heitai* (Tokyo: Hatsubai nikkatsu bideo kabushiki kaisha, 1939). And Hino Ashihei, *Mud and Soldiers* (Tokyo: Kenkyusha, 1939). This was one of many films at the time that are situated in the frontlines of the war against China. Tasaka was a director employed by the government on more than occasion and *Mud and Soldiers* was a well-known film. See David Desser, "From the Opium War to the Pacific War: Japanese Propaganda Films of World War II" *Film History* 7, no. 1 (Spring 1995): 32.

uncertain if Shiraga saw this widely distributed film, it does suggest that the tired body of the soldier had a visual currency.

Comparisons between Japanese postwar art and war imagery run the risk of becoming a simplistically pat interpretative maneuver, yet given the specificity of Shiraga's comments and experiences, it is remarkable that reviewers in the 1950s (as well as the present) have failed to draw connections with the larger visual field of the time. Instead, Shiraga is characterized as a benign and playful artist, an argument that seems to find its origins in *Challenging Mud*. Certainly, the work was packaged as shock and spectacle, a familiar strategy in performance art. The power of the performance piece was its manipulation of the tension between humorous spectacle and the darker recesses of memory and fear.

Others have picked up on the humorous value of the performance piece, at times perhaps missing the serious undertones that Shiraga held in tension with his playful attitude. One homespun (mis)interpretation of *Challenging Mud* is as simple farce. In 2006, high-school senior Klaus Voder was recorded for a YouTube video imitating Shiraga by throwing himself around in a small pile of mud to the sounds of his peers shouting, "Klaus! Klaus! Klaus!" and, "It's for art, that's all I can say."¹⁰⁵ In a 1993 interview, Shiraga laughingly reminisced about the original event at Ōhara Hall in Tokyo, 1955, explaining that when waiting for the photographers to show, his concoction had solidified and he could barely cause the sludgy muck to move at all, creating a mess.¹⁰⁶ The mud spread around and caused the photographer John Ronowa to fall down, and Shiraga's rubber pants slipped off. From that performance on, the artist was sure to wear underpants that were tied tightly with a string.

American artists in the 1950s and 1960s also seem to have found his work to be inspirational and provocative. Michael McClure wrote a long letter regarding his dreams about *Challenging Mud*, despite never having seen it performed (however, copies of the *Gutai* journal with photos of the performance work were circulating at the time). He understood the work to be mythical and primitivistic, perhaps as reflective of the artistic vernacular of the time as it was reflective of Japan as a naïve, newly born nation that needed civilizing (a concept General MacArthur did much to promote).¹⁰⁷

Shiraga's approach to documenting and planning his performances was markedly sober, however. According to Hirai Shoichi, the artist maintained a large collection of old cameras and was seemingly well aware of the ways photographs could dramatically alter the reception of a

¹⁰⁵ Jateed, "Youtube: Klaus Challenging Mud," <http://www.youtube.com/user/jateed>.

¹⁰⁶ Saburō, "Gutaitekina Hanashi (Concrete Discussion)." *Document Gutai* (Ashiya, 1993), 206.

¹⁰⁷ Michael McClure wrote: "W.B. [Wallace Berman] just told me of photographs he has seen in a catalog of Japanese art. A stage performance! - a man in a huge box or vat of clay - making in front of the audience his work of art. From this I can imagine the ultimate ecstatic art! The making of huge strange 'Kachinas' as a performance - with settings and a small audience watching the birth of a work of art. The artist buried to his chest or waist in the substance of his art. What would Freud say? Stark naked or nearly naked. Unconscious, oblivious of audience. Aware of the audience - the drama of art restored. In a sense his hand in front of his face - aware and unaware of his watchers. Almost out of his skin in embarrassment. Involved only with his act of creation. His act of creation being not the object, the Kachina, but the act of creation. Mud or clay being the substance - and perhaps thins like feathers or rope also as decorants. Objects or substances with formal purities and symbolisms and yet with the sordid and unromantic qualities of everyday life. (Is the Kachina doll held in the child's hand like this?) Moving gracefully and nakedly in the medium with frantic swiftness and grace - or with meditation of the primitive in decorating his shield. Abandonment of all everyday virtues and constraints...I have not seen it done - I have no idea what it would be like. Often it would be a failure. Each creation would be different - each would depend on the personality of the artist..." Michael McClure, "Notes on the Theatre. Notebook - Supplement #2," (Berkeley: Bancroft Library, 1958).

work.¹⁰⁸ Shiraga was ambitiously interested in promoting his work. To that end, he likely asked that a participant in the Ashiya Camera Club (a local group that often worked closely with the Gutai) take photographs of his performances. Shiraga performed the work for photographers from *Life* magazine, on a destroyed section on the banks of the Mukō River in Hyogo Prefecture, in a site that Yoshihara was said to have wanted to call “the ruins.”¹⁰⁹ Yoshihara reported conditions were cold and windy at the site of the “One-Day Outdoor Performance,” and Shiraga repeated the work three times in order for the photographer to capture the piece at its best, completely exhausting himself by the end of the shoot.¹¹⁰ Yoshihara’s description of Shiraga’s careful preparation contrasts with the pretext of spontaneity that Shiraga was likely trying to cultivate and draws attention to the prioritization of the work’s photographic documentation.¹¹¹

Photographs of *Challenging Mud* reveal a range of tensions operating within the work. One image from the Ashiya City Museum Gutai photograph archives shows Shiraga posing, his back to the camera, still covered with remains of mud and debris, as he assesses his work. Other images of *Challenging Mud* show Shiraga situated ungracefully off-balance amid the mess (see figure 11). In this photograph, the building forming the background lends the image an almost institutional quality that deteriorates the rebellious mood of the performance work. The most frequently reproduced photo shows him as small and benign, a ridiculous figure undertaking an incomprehensible task (See figure 3). Juxtaposing photographs from the event reinforces the constructed binaries operating in the work between the archetypes of hero and fool, between an image of play and that of war, and between uncontrolled performance and composition. The richly textured mud and elevated angle of the photograph in figure 3, meanwhile suggest continuities between his *Challenging Mud* and later foot-paintings.

Topos of the Times: Imaging the Sun

Was Shiraga unaware of the connections and associations of circles, the colors of red and white? As I see it, questioning past forms of representation while establishing himself as both modernist and original was at the forefront of his mind. At the same time however, his interrogation of Japan’s past was indirect. After all, wasn’t the overt manipulation of imagery into nationalist propaganda just the fakery that Shiraga sought to avoid? Ambiguity was a means to refute the role of propagandistic art, to refute even the assumption that representation could communicate political concepts unequivocally. This re-framing of the role of representation was also an important part of revitalizing the compromised status of art. Regardless of Shiraga’s intentions, his oeuvre resonated with the nation’s struggle for a new cultural identity.

Many artists, alongside Shiraga, were engaged in issues of national representation in the postwar, including Nagano-born Onosato Toshinobu 小野里利信 (1912 – 1986) who was interned in Siberia as a prisoner of war. Onosato’s *One Red Circle* (1957) (figure 12) is highly

¹⁰⁸ Hirai Shoichi describes visiting Shiraga’s home and witnessing his vast camera collection. Hirai, *Shiraga Kazuo: Action Painter*, 145.

¹⁰⁹ Yoshihara, “Kanranshya no nakatta daitenrankai (Large Exhibition without Spectators),” *Miru* 7, no. 2 (1967), 1.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ Initially Shiraga stated that he was not interested in maintaining a product, or evidence of the photograph in any way. This kind of performance art is more consistent with Allan Kaprow’s notion of the Happening, where art and artists create artworks that supposedly cannot be co-opted by museums or other institutions because they do not exist beyond the time frame of the performance. Shiraga later states that he places great value on the import of the final product.

reminiscent of the flag.¹¹² The work features a red circle in the center, but rather than the purity of white in the background that would normally appear in the flag, Onosato creates a weave of striped colors that contrast the rounded form and make it appear elevated from the space of the canvas. In an interview, Onosato stated that he sought to create a sense of invariability by examining secondary spaces and added that he was interested in the circle because it was “the most natural form of nature because it has neither direction nor predilection.”¹¹³ Throughout the interview, Onosato makes no mention of any resemblance of his work to the *Hinomaru* representation.

Without attempting an in-depth comparison between postwar art in Japan and the United States, it is important to note that reworking ideas of nationhood through the vocabulary of representation was a transnational phenomenon. Jasper Johns’s *Flag* (encaustic, oil and collage on fabric mounted on plywood) from 1954-55, took up a more direct exploration of the emblem of the United States. In this piece a tension exists between the friability of the newsprint collage and the ostensible strength and power of the most predominant national symbol. While it is uncertain the degree to which Gutai members were familiar with this particular work or with art that incorporated national symbols, it is certainly true that the ascendancy of American art was not missed by contemporary Japanese artists.

Similarly, Okamoto Tarō 岡本太郎 (1911–1996), a key figure in the 1950s art world and whose name perhaps receives broadest public recognition in Japan, used his background in ethnology (he was a student of Marcel Mauss in Paris) to bolster his sculptural program and rhetorical efforts to re-orient the rhetoric of the past. Like Shiraga, an interest in the notion of spiritual rebirth emerged frequently in his writings and art.¹¹⁴ Okamoto reveled in launching a more direct re-appraisal of past nationalist ideas. Most famously, Okamoto created the *Tower of the Sun Taiyō no Tō*, (太陽の塔), a 229.65 foot sculptural piece for the 1970 Expo in Osaka (figure 13). This grand, white, phallus-like sculpture places the sun, the symbol of Japan, within a modernist-mythical milieu through his rendition of a totem pole, complete with carved face and animistic blue sun. Today the *Tower of the Sun* remains Okamoto’s signature piece, emblazoned on mugs, t-shirts, and key chains available at most modern art museums in Japan. In what seems like a work that calls blatantly to re-invigorate the land of the sun with a new kind of mythic cultural power, however, was somewhat more complicated for Shiraga.

Shiraga, for the most part, refused to adopt an approach that could be easily parsed politically. Although Okamoto and Shiraga were contemporaries with similar interests in re-forging a name for a modern Japan in the international art scene, Shiraga’s push against the dominant flow of euphoric images like Okamoto’s set a different tone. Shiraga’s work seemed to oscillate between collaboration with or resistance to the restrained but prevalent neo-nationalism forming through the rhetoric of cultural capital in postwar Japan. The Kansai-based artist’s reliance on his body as an art-making tool allowed him to examine the underbelly of representation, and to assert art as something less pliant to the demands of mainstream national politics. Shiraga’s work revealingly enacts the fluctuations between identification with visual

¹¹² The figure included is black and white reproduction of the original. The image has been photographed from Kung, *The Contemporary Artist in Japan*, 1966, 92. The crease of the book is unfortunately visible in the photograph.

¹¹³ Ibid., 93.

¹¹⁴ These issues were clearly brought to light in the exhibition and book catalogues Setagaya Bijutsukan (Setagaya Art Museum), *Setagaya jidai 1946-1954 no Okamoto Tarō (Tarō Okamoto and His Contemporaries in the Post-War Era Exhibition Catalogue)*, 2 vols., vol. I, II (Tokyo: Setagaya Art Museum Setagaya Bijutsukan, 2007).

fields linked to nationalistic rhetoric and the disavowal of such imagery. Like his pendulum-like swings above his canvas, his work moved between political poles and his obfuscation of direct political links has perhaps not surprisingly led to a misconception about Shiraga's (lack of) politics.

To my mind, Shiraga's work is important for its ability to expose important questions about the nature of representation. His art can be understood as an argument for a third dialectical space that is neither owned by the state nor actively rebelling against it. His work reveals the challenges and slippages between nationalism and individual expressionism, between propaganda and belief. Shiraga's efforts became a complex dance that sought to capture ever-abstruse originality, ironically or perhaps predictably, an originality that was aggressively revealed through layers of the repeated, material representations of the past. Like the rest of the members of the Gutai Art Association, Shiraga avoided and perhaps even disavowed overt political statements or actions, despite the fevered political context in which he worked. Yet, to declare his work apolitical misses much of the stakes of Shiraga's practice. His work instead raised questions about the status of Japanese art and his position as an up-and-coming male artist within that sphere. From the 1940s, he wrestled with his own practice, beginning with figural art and landscapes, then developing new kinds of performance art, and finally engaging in dramatic abstract expressionist paintings created from the impact of the body on canvas. At times these works directly engaged visual vocabularies that resonated with Japan's nationalist symbols. At other times, his compositions pit the body against the elements in a manner that suggested the risks of war and questioned the role of representation in relation to the nation through a masculine posturing and subtle manipulations of motifs of nationalism. Shiraga's seemingly outlandish performance art and painting seem best understood as a part of a personal and public evaluation of the nation, questioning the chameleon-like character of nationalistic representation as well as the transformative potential of art on the state.

Chapter Two The Hero and Concrete Violence

Shiraga referenced archetypal models of the hero in his paintings and performance pieces while deftly taking up the formal language of modernism. The artist's body of work reveals an interest in tropes of masculinity, which are reiterated throughout his essays, and in the way his own masculine subjectivity is represented photographically. His masculine reworkings took many forms, appearing in his overt literary references in the titles that he gave his paintings, the spectacular self-heroization of his performance art, and in the search for heroism that he performed outside of the studio. In the following pages, I will draw upon Shiraga's writings, which often appeared in the *Gutai* journal, his self-presentation during interviews, as well as photographs from the Gutai archive, to try to understand the artist and political stakes of his postwar work.¹¹⁵ What did these multiple configurations of gender suggest about art making in the 1950s? How was Shiraga's body a site for the exploration of gender and subjectivity? As the gendered figures of the American soldier and the American Abstract Expressionist loomed large in Japanese culture, Shiraga's multiplicity of masculine tropes gives the lie to the notion of a fixed masculine ideal. Yet his insistent embodiment of these archetypes also calls attention to, and perhaps advances, their power.

Violence was central to Shiraga's performances of *Dōzo* and *Challenging Mud*, just as it had an equivalent presence in his paintings. In this chapter, I address several of Shiraga's paintings from the *Water Margin* series, asking how his work can be seen to function as a theoretical treatise that argues for violence *as* art. Shiraga consistently deployed his body as a force in itself, intensely unleashed against his artistic medium, often risking himself in the process. Never a gentle dauber of oils, Shiraga used his feet and legs as "paintbrushes," hoisting himself above his canvas with the strength of his torso and arms and then kicking his legs below. His consistent exercise of physical exertion was definitively violent, frequently causing damage to himself or the material that he engaged with, and his compositions thus became a visual manifestation of that violence.¹¹⁶ Because his methods, outcomes, and writings focused insistently on aggressive action, Shiraga's oeuvre constitutes a theoretical position on violence.¹¹⁷

Images of Shiraga's youthful bare-chested frame launched against a heap of mud, or swinging haphazardly over his smattered canvas have been featured on the opening pages of the few catalogues and texts on his art.¹¹⁸ Such imagery can also be found in private collections of Gutai photographs, which I will address shortly. Reviewers at the time focused on his unusual

¹¹⁵ Here I refer to the Yoshida Photograph Archive in the collection of the ACMAH. Yoshida Minoru was a former Gutai member. These photographs include snapshots and portraits (as well as many that blur that boundary), which have not been published.

¹¹⁶ The Oxford English Dictionary defines violence as: "The exercise of physical force so as to inflict injury on, or cause damage to, persons or property; action or conduct characterized by this; treatment or usage tending to cause bodily injury or forcibly interfering with personal freedom." <http://dictionary.oed.com/>.

¹¹⁷ A conversation with Professor Jonathon Hall during the 2009 Japanese Arts and Globalization Workshop (October 2008, UCLA Conference Center, Lake Arrowhead) inspired the direction for this chapter.

¹¹⁸ For example see Kimura Shigenobu, "Akushon to Taburo (Action and Painting)," in *Shiraga Kazuo: Action Painter*, ed. Hirai Shoichi (Kōbe: Hyōgoken ritsu kindai bijtsukan, 2001). Also see Amagasaki Cultural Center, *Shiraga Kazuo*.

“body-centered action-painting” and seemed to mock his heroic antics.¹¹⁹ More recently, McCaffrey Fine Art presented a photograph of *Challenging Mud* for the cover of the exhibition catalogue *Shiraga Kazuo: Six Decades*.¹²⁰ To date, scholars have failed to comment on the implicit gendered signification that shaped Shiraga’s artistic persona. The extravagantly overt nature of his production has perhaps led some to mistakenly assume that his oeuvre is interpretively transparent, and thus contributed to a facile equation of Shiraga’s performance artworks with the *Gutai Manifesto*, ignoring the subtle differences between that proscribed ideology and his own, as well as overlooking the important ways his art was intertwined in the politics of gender and art that were fiercely circulating in Japan.¹²¹ How can Shiraga’s performance of the hero be understood in relation to the emasculation of Japan vis-à-vis American hegemony? How did the substantive territory of the pictorial past and present inform his work?

To recognize that Shiraga’s work is coded with heroic tropes is altogether different from asserting that he is innately masculine and powerful. Such a concept is “...predicated linguistically and socially upon binary oppositions and their implied hierarchies of value.”¹²² While Broude and Garrard here point to the traditional opposition between male and female, it should also be pointed out that the same duality structures categories of maleness. If the currents of the postwar period brought about a renewed interest in the masculine–heroic artist, then attached like a shadow was the construct of the effeminate male, weak and defined by failure. How could masculinity be shaped following the loss in war and the omnipresence of the American Occupation? I argue Shiraga’s actions pointed not to his own masculinity *per se*, but to an ineffable sense of idealized masculinity.¹²³ The portrayal of a masculine desire for power that would be seen to bolster the nation was exhibited in much of his performance art; however, as a binary structure, the converse pole of emasculation (resonating with its concomitant rhetoric of humiliation and shame) was likewise interrogated. Conceptual binaries of failure and loss were inexorably tied to the re-evaluation of the male figure following the end of the Pacific War.

Shiraga – 109th Hero in The Water Margin Series

Directly alluding to the literary inspirations of his work, Shiraga has titled over a dozen of his abstract paintings after the one hundred and eight heroes in the classic Chinese novel, *The Water Margin* (*Suikoden* 水滸伝), using the Japanese pronunciations of the original Chinese

¹¹⁹ One article read, “Day of Super-Surrealism Near? This young gent isn’t trying to grapple with a robber. It’s just artist Kazui [sic] Shiraga of Amagasaki, Hyogo Prefecture, poised to swing the rope and smear paint with his feet on a No. 300 canvas for his newest creation dubbed “No Title.” “Day of Super-Surrealist,” *Nihon Times*, November 20, 1955. For example see “Pikaso kaomake? Ashi de kaku gahaku (Shaming Picasso? A Foot-Painting Master Painter),” *World News Sekai tsuushin*, November 25, 1955. Or, “Moji-dōri zenshin no Sōsaku (Literally Creating with the Whole Body),” *Mainichi Shinbun*, November 23, 1955, 22. And, Hirai, *Gutai te nanda? (What's Gutai?)*, 65.

¹²⁰ Tomii, *Kazuo Shiraga: Six Decades*. The exhibit also featured several blown up photographs of the performance.

¹²¹ For example see Shigenobu Kimura, “Action and Painting” in Hirai, *Shiraga Kazuo: Action Painter*, (Kobe: Hyogo Prefectural Museum of Art, 2001), 17.

¹²² Norma Broude, Garrard, Mary D., *The Expanding Discourse: Feminism and Art History*, 1st ed. (New York, NY: Icon Editions, 1992), 2.

¹²³ Rachel Adams and David Savrons’ warning on the complexities of defining gender perhaps bears repeating here: “Masculinity is the product of so many complex and shifting variables that to describe them in terms of any one additive identity would inevitably be reductive.” Rachel Adams and David Savran, *The Masculinity Studies Reader* (Keyworks in Cultural Studies, 5) (Malden: Blackwell, 2002), 2.

names, like *Tenkaisei Kohogi* 天魁星呼保義 (*The Timely Rain Defender of Chivalry*, 1964), and *Tenisei Sekihatsuki* 天異星赤髮鬼 (*Red-Haired Devil*, 1964).¹²⁴ All of the works in this series were completed in his characteristic style: by pouring paint on the middle of the canvas and spreading it with his feet while hanging from a rope. Definitely abstract, his paintings are neither allegorical nor do they figurally represent the characters or development of the story. Another character from the story, *Black Whirlwind*, who carried an axe in each hand, inspired Shiraga to use an axe in *Dōzo*.¹²⁵ Hence the referencing of the classic novel seems insistent. What narrative mechanisms in *The Water Margin* resonated for Shiraga and why?

While Shiraga chose to name many of his works after the heroes of *The Water Margin*, he never collectively named the series. As a result, the connection between the two series has been largely overlooked.¹²⁶ This may be due to the fact that the majority of the *Suikoden* paintings were sold to galleries in France via Michel Tapié. Today the whereabouts of many pieces in the series are unknown, while those that remain in Japan are rarely understood to be part of a series. At major museums such as the National Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo, only vague references to the actual titles are provided, such as “Hero of a Chinese Tale.”¹²⁷

The Water Margin is a vernacular novel attributed to Shi Nai’an, dating to the fourteenth century.¹²⁸ It is one of the “Four Great Classical Novels of Chinese literature,” and details the trials and tribulations of one hundred and eight outlaws during the mid Song Dynasty (960-1125). Though the protagonists in the story all hail from different regions and are drawn from different social classes, they are united by their shared existence on the margins of society through their warrior-like dispositions and intense feelings of loyalty and honor. These values are tested and proven in blood-drenched battles.¹²⁹ *The Water Margin* is remarkable for the degree of violence it depicts: the heroes frequently engage in battles described in elaborate and gory detail, and one chapter includes an episode of cannibalism. Each of the heroes is characterized and defined by his combative actions. After many victories as outlaws, the band is ultimately invited by the emperor to become an official army. At first the proposal seems an appropriate denouement wherein the loyal but true outsiders are accepted and legitimized by the forces of the status quo. But when the bandits accept the emperor’s offer, they meet their grisly deaths while

¹²⁴ Klompmakers writes: “Ogyu Sorai founded a study group under the lead of Kajima Kanzan (d. 1727), an interpreter from Nagasaki who moved to Edo in 1705. This group was involved with learning vernacular Chinese and one of Kanzan’s many activities within this group was to simplify the original *Shuihu zhuan* text for a wider Japanese readership [...] In 1727 he published the first ten chapters of the Chinese edition which consisted of 100 chapters in Japanese, and ten more chapters were published posthumously. These are known under the title, *Tsuzoku chugi Suikoden, Popular Suikoden of Loyalty*. Numerous translations followed.” Inge Klompmakers, *Of Brigands and Bravery: Kuniyoshi’s Heroes of the Suikoden* (Leiden: Hotei Publishers, 1998), 23.

¹²⁵ Ikegami Hiroko and Katō Mizuho, “Oral History Interview with Shiraga Kazuo,” in *Oral History Archives of Japanese Art* (2007).

¹²⁶ Hirai writes: “He was an introverted child who enjoyed reading Chinese classical literature like the *Shui-hu Chuan* (The Water Margin), *Sankuo chi yen-i* (History of the Three Kingdoms) and fantasy;” “The *Suikoden* series exemplified the great vitality and violence of the pictures that Shiraga painted in his later years and the dramatic imagery that resulted from physical action.” Hirai, *Shiraga Kazuo: Action Painter*, 2001, 145 and 149. Shiraga Paints: Towards a ‘Concrete Discussion’” in Tomii, *Kazuo Shiraga: Six Decades*, 21.

¹²⁷ For example, in November 2008 a wall-text title simply read, “*Tenkosei-Roshi: A Hero of a Chinese Tale*,” with no mention that it may be connected to a series. National Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo, permanent collection.

¹²⁸ The earliest extant printed copy dates to the sixteenth century. *The Water Margin* or *Suikoden* 水滸傳, in Japanese, is also referred to as *All Men Are Brothers* and *Outlaws of the Marsh*. Inge Klompmakers, *Of Brigands and Bravery: Kuniyoshi’s Heroes of the Suikoden* (Leiden: Hotei Publishers, 1998), 18.

¹²⁹ Ibid.

fighting on behalf of the imperial forces. In this story, and in other martial tales that followed it, closure is brought about through extreme violence and destruction. Heroism is not defined by defiance against or allegiance with the emperor, rather, it is a trait acquired simply because they fight.

The Water Margin was translated into Japanese from the original Chinese in the beginning of the eighteenth century, and its popularity in Japan has yet to ebb. Remakes of the story abound. In Japan alone, filmic versions number around fifty. A popular television series that began in 1977 was based on the piece, as are numerous animated features, *manga*, and video games.¹³⁰ Artists have been drawn to the theme repeatedly over time, most often by creating vivid portrayals of the heroic characters, capitalizing on the seriality of the narrative and the opportunity to represent the dynamism of the heroes whose adventures occupy the pages of the novel. The continual re-envisioning of *The Water Margin* attests both to the desire to visualize and witness heroic tales, and to the interest in the urgently transformative powers of the imagination that often shift geographies to the local context (in this case, from China to Japan), or into new forms of media.

Shiraga stated in 1993 that the names of characters from *The Water Margin* helped him to visualize and conceptualize the paintings.¹³¹ In a discussion with Murakami Saburō, another former member of Gutai and Zero-kai, he remarked that the titles “felt right” but that he did not lend much thought to them.¹³² Speaking after the Gutai group disbanded, Shiraga may have been asserting his independence as an individual artist by moving against Yoshihara’s dictates (who preferred that all Gutai pieces be untitled). Titling a piece can be a means to intentionally associate oneself with a given hereditary formation; it can be a way to reference origins as much as it is a means to lay claim to the authenticating ties to the past. Hirai finds the origins of Shiraga’s interest in *The Water Margin* to the artist’s exposure to the text at school.¹³³ This straightforward explanation is plausible, but leaves unaddressed why this particular text had such a major impact on Shiraga’s artistic career. What else might account for the enduring appeal of this legendary narrative?

Like the heroic status of the characters in *The Water Margin*, Shiraga’s art relies on violence to achieve its full salience. Consider for example, *Red-Haired Devil*, a painting from 1959 named after the *Water Margin* hero, *Liu Tang* (figure 1).¹³⁴ This work, as with Shiraga’s entire oeuvre from the 1950s onward, lacks any veristic quality and is an eruption (to use a male metaphor) of thickly textured color. A large streak seeming to move from the bottom left corner to the top right is suggestive of forceful movement. More than a gesture, the length of the painterly line exceeds normal arms-length, and we might guess by looking that the work was made in an unusual manner. Thinner pressure points with larger streaks recall the toes of a sweeping leg, pulled along by momentum. These indexical traces of Shiraga’s body reinforce a notion of speed, and with it the alluring (though constructed) notion of artistic spontaneity.

¹³⁰ The television adaptation of *The Water Margin* (Japanese: 水滸伝) was produced by Nippon Television and starred Nakamura Atsuo and Sato Kei in the main roles. The show was filmed in 1973 on location in China, and was that country’s first joint production with a non-Communist nation since the Communists rose to power in 1949.

¹³¹ Shiraga mentions that he named some works after they were finished. *Gutai 1,2,3*, 210.

¹³² *Ibid.*, 210.

¹³³ Kimura, "Akushon to taburo (Action and Painting),"145. Also confirmed in personal interview with Hirai Shoichi, October 22, 2007.

¹³⁴ There is some ambiguity of the names of paintings in the series. All refer to the same character; however, some museums give the name in Chinese, others in the Japanese translation, and yet others in English.

Despite the literary origins of the title, the composition is abstract and ironically seems beyond words; for example, figures are entirely absent from the painted field, as are linear perspective or sense of depth. The oil painting is done in a scale that closely matches others in the series. Set on a horizontal plane at 71.85 by 107.28 inches, it is completely red, although the viscosity of the paint allows for a wide range of hues. Sharp variations in the crimson field create a division between the left side, where rich applications of burgundy are mottled into scabby layers, and the right side, where light strains of red give an impression of an evenly applied under-layer before the circular sweeps of color were painted over top. The explosive splashes of red in the right top and bottom corners are reminiscent of the splattering blood so often depicted in martial arts films, in war, or in the hunt. While the heroic escapades of the *Red-Haired Devil* are not represented, the blood red color is evocative of violence.

In *The Timely Rain Defender of Chivalry* (1964), Shiraga appropriates the name of another *Water Margin* hero (figure 2).¹³⁵ Red is predominant in *Red-haired Devil*, and in *The Timely Rain Defender of Chivalry* the streaks of black over white oil paint recalls a rainstorm. Thickest at center, the composition has a vague, linear form that resembles a caricature of a cloud. Like the former work, a broad sweeping line moving diagonally across the picture plane is evidence of dramatic physical activity during the making of the painting. A first glance at this painting gives the impression that it is done in black, with some white paint below the surface showing through. However, a second look proves the artist's long-standing commitment to red, which appears to have been the first color applied to the canvas. Akin to *Red-Haired Devil*, the top right corner reveals the speckled blood-like section, alluding to both bodily and painterly aggression. This chromatic referencing and Shiraga's mode of foot-painting, combined with the titular connotations, brings the work into dialogue with other paintings linked to *The Water Margin*.

Reincarnations of the *Water Margin* Hero

Shiraga's series is in dialogue with a long line of depictions of warriors. The genre of *musha-e* 武者絵, or paintings and prints of warriors, emerged around 1660. In 1805, Takizawa Bakin released the *New Illustrated Edition of the Suikoden (Shinpen Suikogaden)*, the Japanese translation of the *Water Margin*, illustrated with Chinese-style prints by Hokusai Katsushika 葛飾北斎. Hokusai may have prefigured Shiraga in other ways. The seventeenth century artist has been described as an innovator of performance art as he painted in public spaces where the antics of the self-described "man crazy for paint" drew attention from the upper and lower classes.¹³⁶ His *Suikoden* series proved very popular and stimulated great interest in Chinese classics.¹³⁷ Hokusai's adept manipulations of his artistic persona are somewhat legendary and they spurred others to follow his lead, a trend that Shiraga may have carried into the twentieth century.

In 1827, the publisher Kagaya Kichibei commissioned Utagawa Kuniyoshi to produce a series of woodblock prints that focused on depicting the heroes alone, which was titled *108 Heroes of the Water Margin (Tsuzoku Suikoden Goketsu Hyakuhachinin no Hitori)*.¹³⁸ Many

¹³⁵ The character's name in Chinese is Song Jiang.

¹³⁶ Christine Guth, *Art of Edo Japan: The Artist and the City 1615-1868* (New York: H.N. Abrams, 1996), 113.

¹³⁷ Seiji Nagata, Hokusai Katsushika, and John Bester, *Hokusai: Genius of the Japanese Ukiyo-e* (Tokyo, New York: Kodansha, 1999), 74. Note that the writing was later done by Takai Ranzan. For an example of Hokusai's prints see *The Chinese Warrior Liu Pei on Horseback Jumping into a Wild Stream*. Hokusai Katsushika et al., *Hokusai, tozai no kakehashi botsugo 150 nen kinen* (Tokyo: Nihon Keizai Shinbunsha, 1998), 118.

¹³⁸ For more on this see Klompmakers, *Of Brigands and Bravery*.

other *ukiyo-e* artists, following on the heels of Kuniyoshi's commercial success, began to portray the characters with Japanese names and identities rather than the original Chinese.¹³⁹ Once the book took up a localized vernacular, its popularity grew, with new Japanese names offering readers a sense of the transformative potential of the heroic characters.¹⁴⁰

Shiraga, compared to Tanaka and other Gutai members, was relatively well read in the field of Japanese art history.¹⁴¹ He was interested in Hokusai and collected his prints along with other works by Meiji-period print artists.¹⁴² His interest in *The Water Margin* suggests that he would have been curious about Hokusai's *Shinpen Suikoden*, and it seems hard to imagine that he would not have seen some version of them. Originals are still in circulation and exhibited at the Hokusai museum in Nagano, and reproductions are also available. Hokusai's *Suikoden* series seems to revel in violence: on one of several pages of the eighteenth-century book, a decapitated head is depicted in grisly glory, a permanent grimace upon the face of the victim (figure 3). The blood-smeared hand of the triumphant outlaw carries the headless body, a dripping sword to his left. In other frames, the heroes bear long swords that create a sharp diagonal across the centerfold of the book, a symbol of clashing forces that has been replicated countless times in martial arts films.¹⁴³

Towards the end of the book, flurries of battles ensue and the images begin to take up increasing amounts of the page, negative space is collapsed, and the image becomes a circular amalgam of bodies and weapons (figure 4). On the third to last page, two bodies face off, fighting feverishly, with a third figure joining the fray while riding a wild horse whose mane and tail form a swirl of radial movement to the right. Amidst the throttled bodies, five swords can be counted, also represented as if in the currents of motion. In the next page, the flurry has heightened, one hero is headless, and arrows lie at the stomping feet of the remaining fighters. In each of the final pages of Hokusai's illustrated book, a strong sense of motion is emphasized through the curvature of the hero's limbs, as they grip their raised weapons tightly.

Shiraga's series is similarly awash with the representation of circular but chaotic movement even while it is non-linear and non-figural. His works share the blood-like color that is suggestive of the indulgent aggressiveness of the early nineteenth-century *Water Margin* series. Can it be argued that Shiraga directly referenced the Hokusai series? It seems that Shiraga was cognizant of the parallels to be drawn between warrior-hero and artist-hero, and took special notice of Japan's own masculinized art history. Parallels to these early compositions and the fact that Shiraga personally collected Meiji-era woodblock prints suggests that he was interested in

¹³⁹ Ibid., 25. These artists include Utagawa Kuniyasu.

¹⁴⁰ As illustrations, Hokusai or Kuniyoshi's works are suitable companions to the written text, perhaps in part because woodblock prints encourage the addictive quality of seriality, wherein viewers take pleasure in the recognition of the familiar and in monitoring states of difference. Stanley Cavell notes that in television, interest is in a serial-episode mode of composition, which is defined as revelations emerging from the conditions of monitoring. Stanley Cavell, "The Fact of Television," in *Video Culture: A Critical Investigation*, ed. John F. Hanhardt (Rochester: Visual Studies Workshop Press, 1986).

¹⁴¹ Yoshihara was well versed in contemporary art historical discourse, and kept a large collection of English language art journals.

¹⁴² Amagasaki Cultural Center, *Shiraga Kazuo*, 8. See Palazzo reale di Milano. et al., *Hokusai: Il Vecchio Pazzo Per La Pittura* (Milano: Electa, 1999), 383.

¹⁴³ Considering the violent revelry of the story, perhaps it is not surprising that several video games also bearing the name "Suikoden" are now popular.

precedents set by Asian art histories, rather than simply seeking to mimic forms of American art as has been suggested.¹⁴⁴

Shiraga's first performances of *Ultra-modern Dance* exhibit strong thematic and visual corollaries to Hokusai's other warrior prints.¹⁴⁵ In an undated Hokusai print, a warrior uses a framed representation of a waterfall as a shield (figure 5). The white colors of the waterfall are similarly reminiscent of canvas, fired upon at close range. Like Hokusai, Shiraga's performance collapsed distinctions between the warrior and artist. In *Ultra-Modern Dance* Shiraga joins a larger group of men who point arrows at a long white surface that extends across the stage (figure 6). Photographic stills of the performance show numerous arrows lodged into the white material, the spotlight forming an artificial circle around them. Innumerable arrows punctured the surface of the canvas, transforming the stage into a metaphoric battlefield. The wide expanse of white material may have conjured up images of the flag, just as it was suggestive of an artist's canvas, a metaphor for the field of representation that was under attack.

Unlike the Hokusai series, Shiraga's paintings are not allegorical or figural. Though they refer to warriors, they do not fall into the category of *musha-e* (images of warriors). Moreover, beyond the names, the paintings are non-narrative. Shiraga's use of the visual language of Abstract Expressionism, which tends to eschew allegorical tendencies, while drawing on older Japanese themes, negotiates the dual demands to create new forms of national modernism.¹⁴⁶ His work asks: What does it take for a Japanese artist to be modern, to be heroic? Rather than a playful, but frivolous, endeavor, Shiraga's art displays a subtle, yet persistent, system of aesthetics deeply connected to cultural politics. I argue that paintings such as *The Timely Rain Defender of Chivalry* or *Red-Haired Devil* disavow a dependence on Abstract Expressionism through a nominal allegiance with an Asian past that is disrupted and occluded through the violence inherent in the composition's manifestation.

Political Context and the Tropes of Masculinity

For Shiraga and Tanaka, art, enmeshed as it was in the discourses of gender, was not simply a creative practice. It was a way of working out their relationships to themselves, their fellow artists and their position in relation to the nation. The stakes for artists in the immediate postwar were significant. In the 1950s, artists were hyper-aware of the not too-distant dangers of militarism, just as they were mindful of the loss of the Pacific War and its consequences for global hierarchies and their powerful effects on economics, international relations and artistic status. Waging war and the "shameful" defeat that followed also had ramifications for the field of gender relations.¹⁴⁷ Men during the war were expected to internalize and replicate the ideal masculine soldier — a paragon of gender that, Judith Butler reminds us, is never inhabited by anyone.¹⁴⁸ In wartime, enacting aggression to allegedly protect the purity of the nation was a means to reach toward this ideal just as it masculinized the body that performed these acts. Women and children were often understood to embody a vulnerable purity, and protective,

¹⁴⁴ This was suggested in numerous reviews, including "Day of Super-Surrealist" *Nihon Times*, November 20, 1955, or Ashton, "Art: Japan's Gutai Group."

¹⁴⁵ Gutai on the stage was performed in May in Osaka and in July in Tokyo in 1957.

¹⁴⁶ Although American Abstract Expressionism often conjures allegorical content through titles.

¹⁴⁷ The term "shameful" was circulated widely to explicate Japanese anger at the imperial forces. The Asahi newspaper wrote an editorial about their shame in caving to the militarists. See Dower, *Embracing Defeat*, 509.

¹⁴⁸ Butler refers to the impossibility of obtaining these ideals of gender subjectivity in "Melancholy Gender/Refused Identification" in Maurice Berger et al., *Constructing Masculinity* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 32.

masculine behavior was perceived to be a key to the maintenance of Japan's "unpolluted" state.¹⁴⁹

The military defeat of 1945 rent a hole in the tropes of masculinity envisioned in the imperial nation. Emperor Hirohito's reduction from Divinity to a mere human (rife with shortcomings, not least when unfavorably compared to General MacArthur), combined with the authoritative presence of the American Occupation forces, inverted the trope of the soldier from a symbol of masculine power into an abject, powerless figure.¹⁵⁰ The feminization of the nation has roots in American's first contact with Japan, when, as it is often described, Commodore Perry "opened Japan."¹⁵¹ Following descriptions of this encounter, narratives of Japan's demasculinization emerged in novels, journalism, and other visual accounts.¹⁵²

No image epitomizes this phenomenon of Japan's newfound effete status more clearly than the portrait of General MacArthur and Emperor Hirohito taken shortly after Japan's surrender (figure 7).¹⁵³ The photograph was frequently reproduced in Japan and America during the Occupation, despite the wishes of the Japanese Home Ministry that it be destroyed.¹⁵⁴ How the Emperor was seen and understood was of great importance both before and after World War II — and this was something that MacArthur was keenly aware of. Hirohito's diminished stature in the photograph was shocking to the Japanese public in many ways. Up until the point of Japan's surrender, the Emperor had been presented as the divine descendent of *Amaterasu-ōmikami*, the Sun Goddess. Here, however, Hirohito is shown to be undeniably human. Indeed, most commentators expressed shock at the Emperor's comparatively small stature, standing stiffly in formal wear next to the seemingly oversized MacArthur, who appears casual, as though ready for work in his army gear. The general's clothes, stature, and easy readiness emphasize his physicality; while Hirohito's getup, in coat and tails, along with his overly formal poise and seeming diminutive size suggest that he is at a remove from the world and the decisions made in it. Ill at ease, Hirohito's participation in the photograph wordlessly made the new masculinist political hierarchy clear to the public.

As Japan sought to re-invent itself, the burden of re-creating a strong national identity (while avoiding any association with its militaristic past) fell increasingly on cultural forms. Notions of Japan's unique hold on Zen, and its material representation in the tea ceremony and "Zen" art, increasingly held sway in the postwar period in North America, and this phenomenon

¹⁴⁹ "The Pure Self" in Dower, *Embracing Defeat* (New York, Pantheon Books, 1999), 203-233.

¹⁵⁰ For an interesting discussion on the interplay of militarism and masculinity in a study of contemporary Japanese self-defense forces see Sabine Frühstück, *Uneasy Warriors: Gender, Memory, and Popular Culture in the Japanese Army* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007).

¹⁵¹ For example, a poster is currently available on amazon.com featuring Commodore Perry, in all his regalia, confronting a smaller Japanese figure. Across the top of the poster it reads: "Commodore Perry," while along the bottom it simply states, "Opening Up Japan." Other books include Francis L Hawks, *Commodore Perry and the Opening of Japan: Narrative of the Expedition of an American Squadron to the China Seas and Japan*. (Dublin: Nonsuch Publishing, 2005). The gendered visual and textual language repeatedly used to describe the first encounter between the two nations, as I see it, is problematically orientalist. Nineteenth century accounts of the treaty are filled with loaded language, consistently referring to Japan in the feminine, and the Commodore and his fleet as successful in the "opening of Japan." Many accounts also describe the period following Perry's visit as an "orgy of Foreignism" in Japan. See Heinemann, "Review of Epochs of Chinese and Japanese Art" *The Athenaeum* 4435 (October 26, 1912): 484.

¹⁵² For example see, Osamu Dazai, *The Setting Sun* (Norfolk: J. Laughlin, 1956). Also, Yukio Mishima, *Confessions of a Mask* (New York: New Directions, 1958).

¹⁵³ While this image has been frequently discussed, I raise it because of its influence in relation to Shiraga's interest in the depiction of masculine hierarchies.

¹⁵⁴ Dower, *Embracing Defeat*, 293.

was propagated by some Japanese domestically as well.¹⁵⁵ Following D.T. Suzuki's tour of the United States in the 1950s, the notion of a (peace-loving) Zen-like Japan grew, and over the decades that trend increasingly spread to the arts.¹⁵⁶ Attempting to circumvent the label of second-rate, derivative Abstract Expressionism, meanwhile, was a difficult maneuver, and imbuing works with a subtle flavor of things Japanese was a route to "originality" rich with market potential.

Modern formulations of the premodern (for example Zen, Nō) allowed Japan to develop recognizably Japanese cultural forms that were dis-aggregated, de-coupled to avoid the taint of militarism.¹⁵⁷ Shiraga's return to the warrior character as referenced in *The Water Margin* likewise drew from the well of premodern cultural forms that carried with them a geopolitically distinctive Asian identity. Moreover, Shiraga's creation of art as violence offered a model of renewed masculinity that dislodged the heroic from the battlefield and brought it into the discourse of art.

Swordplay

Around 1957, the year when *Challenging Mud* and *Ultra-modern Dance* were performed, Shiraga can be seen in photographs playing up his masculine bravado with fellow Gutai members Yoshida Minoru ヨシだミノル and Motonaga Sadamasa (figure 8).¹⁵⁸ The images have been preserved in the Yoshida photo archives in an unpublished album held at the Ashiya City Museum of Art and History (ACMAH), and provide a rare glimpse into the ways that art and performance could mutually inform masculine subjectivity and gendered relations. Rather than official documents of Gutai activities, the Yoshida photograph archive is comprised of snapshots of his family members, picnics, and leisure time spent with friends, many of who were Gutai members.¹⁵⁹ A series of photographs, which fill two adjacent sides of an album, with five images on the left page, and six photographs on the right (one image is missing), Yoshida and Shiraga each hold long wooden sabers. Yoshida and Shiraga strike different poses in each shot, making stabbing gestures, and taking up martial stances. Shiraga is central in six of the images, appearing with his wife, Fujiko, in a snapshot on the left-hand page (figure 9). Dressed in a skirt and buttoned cardigan, hair pulled neatly back, Fujiko appears to have deftly disarmed her husband with a single swipe of her bare hand. The photograph captures the sword mid-fall, played up by Shiraga's mock samurai-in-distress expression.

In each of the images, Shiraga appears bare-chested, a pair of trousers loosely buckled about his trim waist (figure 10). Yoshida's vestments are similarly minimal. He stands somewhat stooped, his shallow chest shrunk in laughter, his face darkened by the shadow of Shiraga's

¹⁵⁵ A prominent proponent of Japan's unique Zen qualities was D.T. Suzuki. For more see Gregory P. A. Levine, "Two (or More) Truths: Reconsidering Zen Art in the West," in *Awakenings: Zen Figure Painting in Medieval Japan* (New York, New Haven: Japan Society, 2007). See also Robert H. Sharf, "The Zen of Japanese Nationalism," *History of Religions* 33, no. 1 (1993).

¹⁵⁶ Even today, American critics are quick to respond to the "Zen-like" quality of any and all things Japanese; for example, John Updike's response to the new design of the Museum of Modern Art by Taniguchi in the 2005 *New Yorker* used these exact terms to respond to the secular architect's work. For more see Helen Westgeest, *Zen in the Fifties: Interaction in Art between East and West* (Zwolle and Amstelveen: Waanders Publishers, 1996).

¹⁵⁷ See Vlastos, Stephen, ed. *Mirror of Modernity* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1998).

¹⁵⁸ It is unclear why Yoshida chose to write his name in the foreign language syllabary.

¹⁵⁹ Yoshida was the official secretary for both the Gutai Group and the Yoshihara salad oil company, Yoshihara Seiyu 吉原精油, suggesting that a certain amount of crossover existed between Yoshihara's business and the Gutai Art Association. Another example of the crossover between the two is the series of advertisement designs done by various Gutai members for the company.

upright sword. They stand with frozen grimaces, swords crossed, facing outwards in an affected stance of brotherhood, an image that recalls the “gallant fraternity” of the outlaws of *The Water Margin*.¹⁶⁰ Shiraga’s untitled work, from 1956, creates a backdrop for the photo shoot: the interweave of color patterns set against the shadows of the photograph.¹⁶¹

Ironic but nonetheless irrefutable machismo is evident in the physical presence of the bare-chested figures, (underwritten to by the thinness of their frames) as well as in the combatant, pseudo-samurai poses, and in the phallic presence of the swords. In one photograph Shiraga holds the wooden sword directly at his groin, the long stick angled suggestively upward, mockingly juvenile (figure 11). Shiraga could not have missed the ribald connotations of his phallic bodily extension, and the exercise of masculinity both on and off the stage suggests a self-conscious and playful testing of gender.

Interestingly, his emphasis on heroics often included its failures. For example, Shiraga’s most phallic pose, (wooden saber held like a giant penis), is placed adjacent to the image where his empty-handed, fully dressed wife disarms him of his symbolic sexual power with a single swift gesture.¹⁶² It seems the heroic struggle as artifice, as performance, or as embodied truth was never far from his daily pursuits, even as the inadequacies of that heroic ideal were encountered.

Whereas I view Shiraga’s physical engagement with his material as self-conscious and exploratory, other critics have tended to naturalize his masculinization. Reiko Tomii describes Shiraga as a “man’s man in the traditional Japanese mold” because of his interest in hobbies like hunting and his participation in school activities like sumō.¹⁶³ Others have described the sheer spontaneous expressive aggression of his performances while I believe they could equally be described as premeditated and graceful, exhibiting deliberate force and violence.¹⁶⁴ I am wary of over-simplifying Shiraga’s biography.¹⁶⁵ His enactment of warrior-like characters seemed more interrogative than internalized, and was as fraught with failure as it was with glorifying heroics. Rather than an expression of his essential masculinity, I see Shiraga’s body of work raising questions about the position of the modern male subject and its definition through violent modes of representation. Was a posture of remasculinization possible? Could new forms of masculinity reinvigorate the nation, or would such a quest be doomed to ironic failure. Obliquely, these questions also took form in his writings.

Writing The Violent Concrete

The intertwined issues of nationhood, gender, and violence were a productive field for interrogating the notion of the self. In his essays, “Action Itself,” “Thoughts,” “On Temperament,” “The Importance of Sensitivity,” and “Establishing the Individual,” Shiraga describes the self as composed of different and often opposing elements.¹⁶⁶ For example, he

¹⁶⁰ Nai'an Shi, Shapiro, Sidney, Luo, Guanzhong, *Shui Hu Zhuan*, Di 1 ban. ed. (Beijing Shi: Wai wen chu ban she, 2003), 565.

¹⁶¹ The photographs are undated but a painting by Shiraga from 1956 hangs in the background, and Ashiya Museum curator Katō Mizuho estimates the images are from around 1956 - 1957 as well.

¹⁶² It is unclear who mounted the photographs in the album.

¹⁶³ “Shiraga Paints: Towards a ‘Concrete’ Discussion” in Tomii, *Kazuo Shiraga: Six Decades*, 21.

¹⁶⁴ For example, in the 1955 news reel that captures less than a minute of *Challenging Mud*, Shiraga moves in a his limbs in a conscious, careful, but nonetheless forceful manner. Untitled newsreel (*Mainichi Hōsō*, 1955).

¹⁶⁵ For example, all Japanese schoolchildren join a club at school. Sumō, baseball and archery are usually among the most popular choices.

¹⁶⁶ Titles are my translation. Shiraga, “Kōi koso (Action Itself).” *Gutai* 3 (20 October 1955), 21. _____, “Omou koto (Thoughts),” *Gutai* 2 (October 10, 1955), _____, “Kotai no kakurtitsu (Establishment of the Individual),” *Gutai* 4 (1 July 1956): 6 - 7.

contrasts the rational mind with the forces of the body, privileging the physical as the source of creativity. In part, this fixation on the body is not isolated from the current of thought that fetishized “the concrete” in the 1950s. He understood the concrete to be irreducible and bound with identity. With the growing interest in distancing oneself from the slippery rhetoric of wartime propaganda, artists grew increasingly fond of the notion that higher artistic truths lay in the absolutes of materiality and corporeality. This is a trend in which Gutai played no small part; after all, the word Gutai means “concreteness” or “embodiment,” a term, according to the *Gutai Manifesto*, that would bring their group “beyond the borders of Abstract Expressionism.”¹⁶⁷ To underscore the point, Yoshihara further outlined a position on the materiality of the body in the group’s 1956 manifesto:

Gutai art does not change the material but brings it to life. Gutai art does not falsify the material. In Gutai art the human spirit and the material reach out their hands to each other, even though they are otherwise opposed to each other. The material is not absorbed by the spirit. The spirit does not force the material into submission. If one leaves the material as it is, presenting it just as material, then it starts to tell us something and speaks with a mighty voice. Keeping the life of the material alive also means bringing the spirit alive, and lifting up the spirit means leading the material up to the height of the spirit.¹⁶⁸

Shiraga has frequently described his differences of opinion with Yoshihara, or intimated that he did not fit in well with Yoshihara’s stated goals for the Gutai.¹⁶⁹ However, it seems that Yoshihara felt that Shiraga’s work was apposite, since the single page print of the manifesto included a photograph of Shiraga painting with his feet.¹⁷⁰ Shiraga’s ambivalent feelings about his relationship to the manifesto may demonstrate that he was in process of working out his own notions of artistic status.

Both the manifesto and Shiraga’s text disparage those artists that allow the theoretical ideas of others to impinge on the creative process of self-development. Though never explicitly articulated, both authors address an underlying anxiety about influence, and forward an agenda that seeks out, and then guards (at times through semantic side-stepping), a self-defined notion of authenticity. Yoshihara argues in favor of a “centrifugal approach” in the manifesto and Shiraga emphasizes the importance of staying true to one’s own aesthetic sensibilities.¹⁷¹ Yoshihara pays individual attention to Shiraga’s methods in the manifesto, suggesting his cohesiveness with the group; moreover, his description of Shiraga is used to bolster his argument for the unique approach and production of Gutai:

¹⁶⁷ In the second edition of the *Gutai* journal, Ukita Yōzō closes with a short note in English that states: “Gutai might be literally translated as “Embodiment.” Ukita Yōzō, “Documentary on the Second Edition Of “Gutai,” *Gutai* 2 (October 10, 1955): 30. Ukita (b. 1924) was a member of Gutai from 1955. He was the editor for the children’s poetry magazine, *Kirin*, for seventeen years and often included contributions from the Gutai Group in the magazine.

¹⁶⁸ Yoshihara, “Gutai Sengen (Gutai Manifesto),” 202-04.

¹⁶⁹ In an interview he describes working with Yoshihara as “18 years of scolding.” Saburō, “Gutaitekina Hanashi (Concrete Discussion),” 206.

¹⁷⁰ Small photographs of Murakami Saburō’s *Opening 6 Holes at Once*, Murakami Saburō’s ball-throwing painting as well as Tanaka Atsuko’s *Electric Dress* are also included. Perhaps coincidentally, all four were members of Zero-kai before joining the Gutai group. Yoshihara, “Gutai Sengen (Gutai Manifesto),” 202-04.

¹⁷¹ See Shiraga Kazuo, “Taisetsuna shinkei (Importance of Temperament),” *Gutai* 4 (1956): 9.

Kazuo Shiraga placed a lump of paint on a huge piece of paper, and started to spread it around violently with his feet. For about the last two years art journalists have called this unprecedented method "the Art of committing the whole self with the body." Kazuo Shiraga had no intention at all of making this strange method known to the public. He had merely found the method which enabled him to confront and unite the material he had chosen with his own spiritual dynamics. In doing so he achieved an extremely convincing result.¹⁷²

Yoshihara then goes on to contrast Shiraga's approach with fellow Gutai member Shimamoto Shōzō's 島本詔三 "mechanical manipulations" and the work of Tanaka and Yamazaki Tsuruko 山崎つる子.

Other Gutai members invoked a similarly aggressive attitude to the field of painting. Perhaps Murakami Saburō (b. 1925) comes closest to approximating Shiraga's volatile methods. In 1955, Murakami performed *Breaking Through Paper*, in which he punctured through six canvases as a performance piece for "Gutai on Stage." Forcing himself through the thick canvases took a toll, and later Murakami remarked: "after making the sixth hole I was overcome with exhaustion."¹⁷³ The performance's common body-centered approach resembled Shiraga's, which was not surprising given that the two had worked together since 1952 as members of Zero-kai before joining the Gutai Group. In newsreel footage of Gutai's 1955 exhibition, the two are shown inside Murakami's paper box, staring through the holes that his body had torn through with expressions of apparent satisfaction.¹⁷⁴ Yet Murakami's interest in violence was comparatively short-lived, and the remainder of his oeuvre, such as his *objet* series of unmanipulated wooden boxes, did not involve any bodily action.¹⁷⁵

Though Shiraga's art shares terrain with some members of the Gutai group, and in some sense his work does express an interest in materiality articulated by the manifesto, he went beyond "shaking hands with the material," and in some works, he brought out a sense of vulgarity to which Yoshihara was opposed. While Yoshihara described the freedom of each group member to create and seemed to present a cavalier attitude in his description of the "spirit" in the *Gutai Manifesto*, he was in fact, unequivocal judge and jury of the younger Gutai members' work. Often, he was said to simply give approval or disapproval in a single word. He alone decided whose works would be exhibited in Gutai shows, and the members of the group often clamored for his approval. Yoshihara's choices, in the end, did reflect certain strictures — one of which was his lack of tolerance for vulgar art that did not fit his sense of aesthetics.¹⁷⁶

In Shiraga's writings, especially those published in *Gutai 4* and *Gutai 5*, he repeatedly claims to rely on physical energies rather than his mental energies: "Smart people use their brain.

¹⁷² Yoshihara, "Gutai sengen (Gutai Manifesto)," 202-204. I am less convinced than Yoshihara that Shiraga was not interested in sharing his method with the public. Shiraga frequently invited media and performed before journalists. He also wrote numerous essays that expound on his artistic methods.

¹⁷³ Yamamoto Atsuo, ed., *Murakami Saburō* (Ashiya: ACMAH, 1996), 17.

¹⁷⁴ Following this shot, the camera then proceeds to follow Murakami's action, from inside the large paper box, out towards the surrounding art exhibition. See untitled newsreel *Mainichi Hōsō*.

¹⁷⁵ Ashiya Museum curator Yamamoto Atsuo describes his work as "orthodox," mentioning a competitive spirit that existed between Shiraga and Murakami. Atsuo, ed., *Murakami Saburō*, 18.

¹⁷⁶ Murakami, "Gutaitekina hanashi (Concrete Discussion)," 205.

I don't think; I just use my power."¹⁷⁷ Similarly, he suggests that the artistic spirit can only be freed through a commitment to the corporeal self — integrity is located and accessed through force alone. These sentiments are reflective of the manifesto, just as they resonate with the rhetoric of renewal through destruction that was growing increasingly prevalent after the war.¹⁷⁸

At the same time, however, Shiraga's discourse frequently went further than the manifesto's refusal of fakery and articulated a positive valuation of violence and force. In "Thoughts," a brief text written in 1955, the artist argued that painting is like a "battlefield that he must face as a warrior would."¹⁷⁹ Further on in the same essay, Shiraga described eschewing the easel because he prefers to "take an axe to his canvas" until he was sweating and his heart racing.¹⁸⁰ True enough, Yoshihara relates that Shiraga bought a "magnificent axe" to perform for *Dōzo*, which he polished daily.¹⁸¹ The overwrought metaphors continue in "Action Itself" (also from 1956), where Shiraga wrote that he hoped to digest his heart "like a monster with a big stomach," as though sentiment could be destroyed through violence.¹⁸² Shiraga relied on linguistic turns that echo the models of heroic violence he laid claim to in his paintings. The alignment between painting production and the body is furthered in his accounts of art-making: he compared the strokes of his arm with patting or scratching his own body.¹⁸³ That Shiraga wrote about his notions of violence while exploring them physically further troubles the notion that he was expressing a nebulous sense of his masculinity. Rather, his writings reveal that his interrogation of the body and art was a means to stake out a theoretical position of violence as art.

Feet-first Painting

Outward bodily displays were a signature aspect of Shiraga's works, both in painting and in his performance pieces. He began painting with his feet in the summer of 1954, after experimenting with various modes of brushless painting. At first using his index finger, his nails, or the palm of his hand, he always began by spreading paint outwards after dropping it in the center of the canvas.¹⁸⁴ In 1953, he began using his feet to paint, at first with a series of footsteps, and then later with swinging movements of his body and legs. Shiraga's progression was therefore insistently physical and increasingly aggressive.

Catalogues generally suggest that Shiraga discovered foot-painting because he was searching for "what has never been done before."¹⁸⁵ That may be true, but why paint with the feet? What does it mean to bring the creative process down to the lowest part of the body? The feet are frequently perceived as "polluted" through their contact with the ground and this is especially true in Japan, where elaborate rules of social etiquette regulate the positioning of feet. In formal circumstances it is impolite, for example, to point feet outward, and they should never

¹⁷⁷ Shiraga, "Omou koto (Thoughts)," 20.

¹⁷⁸ For more on this see Alan Tansman, *The Aesthetics of Japanese Fascism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009).

¹⁷⁹ Shiraga Kazuo, "Omou koto (Thoughts)," 9.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid.

¹⁸¹ Yoshihara, "On the First Gutai-Ten (the First Exhibition Of "Gutai" Art Group)," *Gutai* 4 (1956): 2.

¹⁸² Shiraga, "Kōi Koso (Action Itself)," 21.

¹⁸³ _____, "Omou Koto (Thoughts)," 21. This emphasis on masculinized, physical gestures recalls Kurasawa's characters in *Rashomon* when Tajōmaru (Toshirō Mifune) frequently accentuates his physical presence by repeatedly scratching himself throughout a scene.

¹⁸⁴ Hirai, *Shiraga Kazuo: Action Painter*, 13.

¹⁸⁵ Yoshihara, "Gutai sengen (Gutai Manifesto)," 202-04.

be directed at a person or other objects of significance (such as a temple altar, or even a treasured art piece). Although these social expectations are determined in part by class, closely observed social rules govern the display of feet at schools, at homes and apartments, and in ceremonial occasions.

Thus, for Shiraga to use his feet in place of a paintbrush was not only an unprecedented act, but also a markedly rebellious one, as it flirted with a host of culturally significant taboos, and indeed, broke them. At the same time, the unshod foot has a “culture” of its own: farmers wading in wet rice fields, or the entire naked body at the public bathhouse. By painting shirtless and shoeless, Shiraga staged a kind of performative centering of the body that was crass and vulgar. His foot-painting took aim at traditional painting styles and the class formations with which they were associated, and the artist has stated that when he first tried foot-painting in the summer of 1954 he was exhilarated.¹⁸⁶ As the eldest son, as a soldier, and as an artist who worked under the tutelage of Yoshihara (known to be a strict and demanding teacher), Shiraga’s life was in certain respects hemmed in by authoritarian systems and the civilizing rituals that accompany such behavioral regimes. His painting style was likely a welcome change from the artist’s studio, where one was forced to sit in a particular way, or to hold the brush in an exacting manner as he was trained to do in Japanese-style ink painting at the Kyoto Technical School.¹⁸⁷ The artist spent little to no time on figural oil painting, and saw action painting as a direct affront to the standards of “traditional” Japanese styles.

Shiraga bucked the system in this and other ways. He did not submit to parental pressure to take up the family silk merchant business in Amagasaki (although he did build a studio above the store), and he often continued to work on pieces that Yoshihara or his wife Fujiko (a Gutai member until 1961) roundly condemned, such as *Wild Boar Hunting*.¹⁸⁸ Painting with his feet could be understood as a symbolic act of rebellion. Shiraga likely warmed to the label of the inventive non-conformist who toyed with danger, a role that has often proven advantageous to achieving avant-garde status.

Painting the Violent Concrete

Action and object are in a mutually reaffirming relationship in *The Water Margin* series as they are in Shiraga’s performance works such as *Challenging Mud*. In *The Ground of the Image*, Jean-Luc Nancy defines violence as that which “always makes an image of itself.”¹⁸⁹ His provocative but absolutist argument is accurate in most cases, where the violence of the image is at once the act of violence and the confirmation of it (for example, in the injury of the wounded, or the images of trauma that remain burned in the mind of an individual). Susan Sontag sees violence as bound to the arena of spectacle.¹⁹⁰ Both theorists concur that seeing violence affirms

¹⁸⁶ Shiraga, “Kōi koso (Action Itself).” *Gutai* 3 (1955): 21.

¹⁸⁷ Shiraga had wanted to take “western-style painting” but only traditional painting was taught in local schools, and he did not have the resources available to go to Tokyo where his preferred courses were taught. Interview with Hirai Shoichi, Tokyo (October 22, 2007).

¹⁸⁸ Generally however, Shiraga seemed to have deep respect for his wife’s opinion. For example, it was she who often decided when a painting was finished. Saburō, “Gutaitekina Hanashi (Concrete Discussion),” 210. Note that there are two versions of *Wild Boar Hunting* (both from 1963). His wife was not supportive of either.

¹⁸⁹ Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Ground of the Image* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005).

¹⁹⁰ There is the satisfaction of being able to look at the image without flinching. There is the satisfaction of flinching... Torment, a canonical subject in art, is often represented in painting as a spectacle, something being watched (or ignored) by other people.” Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, 1st ed. (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003), 42.

its existence, “completing itself in the image.”¹⁹¹ Shiraga’s art, I believe, reinforces this latter category. Though we may not be exposed to the spectacle of violence-making in his art (unless, perhaps we saw the filmic version of *Ultra-Modern Dance*, (most recently projected at the Yokohama Triennale in 2008), violence is inherent in the work. The completed composition, therefore, testifies and even authenticates the violent experience. Violence, Nancy reminds us, wants to be “demonstrative” and certainly Shiraga’s work bears out its own violence, never more so than in the context of his 1963 experiment called *Wild Boar Hunting*.

Wild Boar Hunting II, Shiraga’s apex of vulgar revelry, runs heavy with thick glutinous paint congealed on a matted boar hide, resulting in an object that few would find beautiful (figure 12). Individual hairs of the boar are clearly visible and the paint is so dense that it has its own form, equivalent to that of the hide. Holes have worn through the hide in several places suggesting that even before it was painted on, it was imperfect and aged. A congealed oblong mass of paint resembles intestines, as though Shiraga turned the creature inside out. It is perhaps overtly primitivistic, a hybrid of the caveman’s hunt and his grotto paintings. But the masculine, atavistic quality of the work is precisely why it is important. *Wild Boar Hunting* stages a return to an imaginary moment before civilization, where the hunt was a testament to manhood. This mode of primitivism was certainly not unique to Shiraga, as a brief look at European movements like COBRA informs us.¹⁹² Yet it also stands apart. The dark tone of this and other pieces marks Shiraga’s departure from mainstream personalities such as Okamoto Tarō, who produced brightly colored figural paintings that made only thinly veiled references to the primitive.¹⁹³ Unlike the European movements that referenced primitivism through color and titling, Shiraga attempted to performatively inhabit the primitive.

Initially Shiraga had attempted to shoot a boar himself, obtaining a license and purchasing a new lever-action gun. Several hunting trips later, Shiraga had not shot anything. Failing as a hunter, he ultimately decided to purchase a hide instead. Having no background knowledge about hunting or animal processing, Shiraga purchased an untanned hide to use as a canvas. Working from home, he proceeded to paint on material that must have been increasingly foul and rancid. His neighbors and wife complained loudly about the putrid smell, and eventually the decay caused the composition to rot.¹⁹⁴ Stubbornly, Shiraga bought another hide (this one tanned), and remade the work once again.¹⁹⁵

Was the purchase of the hunting gear an attempt to perform the masculine hero? Or were these hunting trips merely creative investigations that allowed the artist to bring himself closer to understanding the creative processes? Most likely it was an admixture of the two. I point to this biographical episode not to intimate any clairvoyant understanding of Shiraga, but rather to suggest that his interest in the tropes of masculinity were self-consciously explored and performed at an individually physical level. My analysis focuses on the negotiation of masculinity and nationhood, pointing to moments where these intertwined issues crystallize, a term that suggests the ways that paragons of masculinity can break down only to be reformed and reiterated. Shiraga’s was a shifting self-stylization that was highly generative and yet relied on pre-existing tropes of masculinity. Templates of the masculine hero are relational, each

¹⁹¹ Nancy, *The Ground of the Image*, 20.

¹⁹² COBRA was a European avant-garde movement active from 1949-1952.

¹⁹³ Okamoto’s works are discussed in greater detail in the chapter one.

¹⁹⁴ Shiraga relates this story in an interview from 1993. Murakami, "Gutaitekina hanashi (Concrete Discussion)." ACMAH, *Gutai I II II*, 202 - 219.

¹⁹⁵ *Wild Boar Hunting II* is 72.04 x 79.92 inches, outmatching the first version in terms of scale. *ibid.*, 208.

narrative forming a constellation of issues to inform the next, just as Shiraga's artist-warrior configurations transformed from woodsman to bandit to hunter.

Today, despite the ubiquity of shock art in the contemporary art world, *Wild Boar Hunting II* remains decisively grotesque. The slick manner in which the paint adheres to the wooly grain of the boar's hair makes it seem as though it were completed recently, sitting moist and lurid on whitewashed gallery walls. When I encountered the piece in 2007, more than forty years after it was created, a strange scent of leather and congealed paint still wafted up from its surface. Curator Egami Yuka 江上ゆか remarked to me that even though the hide has been tanned, it was one of the most difficult works in the collection to maintain.¹⁹⁶ Shiraga's most visceral piece was an apex for his career in more ways than one. His production slowed after its completion in 1963. Re-emerging in 1973, his color palette had changed to swirling colors of black and white. His reds of the 1950s appeared with far less frequency.

The provocative and sometimes repulsive quality of *Wild Boar Hunting* extends into the rest of Shiraga's oeuvre. For example, another painting from *The Water Margin* series, *Tenkūsei Kyūsenpo* 天空星急入先, done the year before *Wild Boar Hunting*, looks like it has been smeared with excrement along the left-hand side, and upper central area (figure 13). The canvas is filled with red globs that appear like blood-spotting, and is colored in green and yellow smears, making it difficult to look at it for any extended period of time. None of Shiraga's pieces, except his last series of silkscreens, displayed harmonious coloring, a balanced sense of perspective, or a linear progression. They shared none of the rhythmic evenness that Jackson Pollock's later works (lauded by Yoshihara in the manifesto) culminated in, nor were they similar to the regulated repetitions of Tanaka's paintings. Of the Gutai group, Shiraga's oeuvre is doubtless the most unsightly. Shiraga maintained an interest in violence and the body long after the rest of Gutai had moved away from performative art forms.

A lesser known piece that exemplifies Shiraga's interest in the grotesque is *Red Liquid Kurenai Eki* 紅い液, from 1956 (recreated in 2001), which showcases three distended innards, overlapping one another in a small glass container, each stuffed with cement and surrounded by red-colored water (see Chapter One, figure 4). The nauseating appearance of the animal innards in the 1956 piece perhaps prefigures Shiraga's later exploits in *Wild Boar Hunting*. The simple display of the intestines is grotesque and forcefully manipulates the biological. Stuffed with cement, the soft pale tissue creates a contrast of soft curved edges and jutting zeppelin-like ovoid forms. Rather than the body and the object "shaking hands" as the *Gutai Manifesto* would have it, here the organic becomes fully objectified by its visibility in the glass container, and the connotations of *gutai* 具体 (concreteness, embodiment) take on a solidly violent form by the ossification of the cement lodged in the biomatter. *Red Liquid* brings us too close to deadened biology, the illumination at the front of the glass giving full view to the forced expansion bringing the tissue to the brink of rupture.

The Buddhist Hero

Shiraga reported that in the early 1970s certain Buddhist sculptures caught his eye while hunting by the Ina River near the Sanda Mountains, piquing his interest in Buddhist practice.¹⁹⁷ This encounter shaped Shiraga's next heroic incarnation, as shortly thereafter he became a monk and joined the Tendai Buddhist sect at Enryaku Temple, (Enryaku-ji 延暦寺) near Mount Hiei

¹⁹⁶ Interview with Egami Yuka, Kobe, February 20, 2008.

¹⁹⁷ Kimura, "Akushon to taburo (Action and Painting)," 150.

(outside of Kyoto). He continued his training until June of 1974, and at age 50 he received the Buddhist name Shiraga Sodō (“Simple Path”), under the tutelage of Yamada Etai, the head priest of the Tendai sect. While some scholars have pointed to Shiraga’s interest in traditional Japan, his interest in Buddhism does not prove the case. It is possible Shiraga learned about Enryaku-ji from foreign artists and this cross-pollination of American-Buddhism interest destabilizes any notion of Shiraga’s essential indigenous radicality. Shiraga’s interest in Buddhism was, in comparison to other avant-garde artists, rather late in arriving — American Mark Tobey, for example, spent a month studying meditation at Enryaku-ji in 1935.¹⁹⁸ The shared geo-spiritual terrain between Tobey and Shiraga points to the divergent and unequal globalized art world of Abstract Expressionism. Was Shiraga invested in Buddhism because of its spiritual wealth, or did the opportunity to become an authentic embodiment of the mystical “Buddhist Artist” — an identity widely sought by American artists in the 1950s — present itself? This answer can’t be determined, nor are the two possibilities mutually exclusive, but it is worth bearing in mind that Buddhist spiritualism, even as late as the 1970s, was a significant source of cultural capital for Japan (as it continues to be today).

Why did artists seeking spiritual guidance seek this temple out? Other temples, more conveniently situated in city centers, like Myōshin-ji 妙心寺, were open to laymen and foreigners to visit. Perhaps Enryaku-ji’s inconvenience was its draw: set deep in the mountains, the temple is famed for its forbidding isolation and rigorous monastic practice. Offering an authentic geographical arena for Buddhist practice in the mountains, Enryaku-ji’s remove from urban space may have offered respite from the Kansai area’s rapid industrialization. Moreover, the extreme nature of isolated, mountain meditation is yet another configuration of the male hero, who chooses to face the unknown forces of nature alone. The Tendai sect, in fact, is not at all at odds with masculine tropes of heroism and aggression. Enryaku-ji, while peaceful today, had a folkloric history of aggression that may mark an unexpected continuity of male vigor between Shiraga’s interests in the artistic-heroic and Buddhism.¹⁹⁹

Shortly after Shiraga began studying Buddhism at Enryaku-ji, he began to title his compositions in reference to Buddhist sutras and figures. Significantly, his bodily relationship to his work changed as well, as he began using wooden poles and other implements on the surface of the canvas rather than his bare feet. Judging from photographs, the smears of paint were applied in a comparatively painstaking manner, with his wife Fujiko helping him manipulate the wooden boards or poles with his legs (figure 14). In 1973, Shiraga’s Buddhist works were featured in a solo exhibition at Shinanobashi Gallery 信濃橋画廊 in Osaka called the “*Godaison Exhibition*” (*Godaison ten* 五大尊展). *Kannon Fudara Jodo* 觀音普陀落淨土, a painting from 1972, was likely included (figure 15). The title refers to the island where the Water Moon

¹⁹⁸ Charles S. Prebish, Baumann, Martin, *Westward Dharma: Buddhism Beyond Asia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 370. Other American artists interested in Buddhism, (particularly Zen) included John Cage and Ad Reinhardt. See Westgeest, *Zen in the Fifties: Interaction in Art between East and West*, 43-72. Westgeest also addresses Jean Degottex, Pierre Alechinsky and Yves Klein in the subsequent chapter, “The Zen Arts in France.”

¹⁹⁹ The Enryaku-ji branch of the Tendai Buddhist sect is called *sanmon-ha* 山門派, and the temple has long held a great deal of power. In the premodern period, the site even had its own army of warrior-monks, who fought with other religious centers. “Located on Mt. Hiei just northeast of Kyoto, the complex housed some three thousand monks, well known for their various ways of putting pressure on the imperial court in issues that concerned the temple. Fighting even occurred occasionally between Enryakuji and other religious centers, in particular Onjōji, a sibling within the same Buddhist sect (Tendai). Mikael S. Adolphson, *The Gates of Power: Monks, Courtiers, and Warriors in Premodern Japan* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2000), 5.

Kannon (bodhisattva) dwells. Shiraga's version is predominantly red, made by spreading the alkyd paint (a quick-drying medium similar in viscosity to house paint) with a broad paint knife. Beginning in the top left corner, discernible rows of black, white and blue paint are overlaid across the red, and then spread steeply downwards in two sharp cascades before flattening along the bottom portion of the frame. It is a dramatic but abstract waterfall. Did Shiraga intentionally reference natural settings where the Bodhisattva is most often depicted? It seems he responded to the Tendai esoteric iconography, while insisting on a modernist visual mode.

Kannon Fudara Jodo suggests a sense of fierce movement that is akin to much of Shiraga's production. Consider, for example, one of Shiraga's most vibrant and dramatic creations, *Abiraunken* あびらうんけん, from 1975 (figure 16). "*Abira Unken*" is a mantra associated with *Dainichi Nyorai* 大日如来 – Mahavairocana, the Universal Buddha. Made of alkyd paint on cloth, the abstract work features Shiraga's signature crimson lake red. As discussed in the previous chapter, the work in many ways resonates with the motif of the *Hinomaru* flag, the broad, flat space of the canvas broken up by the central circle. Yet sharp reversals and inversions set it apart. The flag exhibits a kind of serene white, crisply centered by the red *Hinomaru*, generating a sense of stability to the rectangular frame. Here uniformity and centralized balance are emphasized whereas in Shiraga's painting we sense flurried motion and vulnerabilities of form. In other words, the coherence of the radial composition is threatened by the drips of red, yellow and black paint. White threads of dripped paint break away from the sphere, tiny threads that disobey momentum.

Violence and Ideology

Violence here goes beyond thematics. It is at the core of his work, placing Shiraga within a continuum of other artists and writers based in and outside Japan who lacerate, defecate, and enact swift and intense force on their medium.²⁰⁰ Both Shiraga's intention and the aftermath of his works suggest an opposition to composition. In a statement published in 2001, Shiraga commented that he sought to eliminate any sense of order. He wrote:

I no longer felt the need to make studies, and I started creating non-objective, automatist paintings through direct action on the canvas. ...I wanted to inject more heat and explosive energy into my expression. Therefore I decided to ignore my own previous work and the trends of art history and start over from the beginning with an empty slate, to discard all formal elements and start from zero. It proved extremely difficult, however, to reject everything from the past. Abstract painters had already rejected the attempt to depict three-dimensional space with light and shade that had been emphasized in previous representational paintings, but I was still faced with knotty problem of eliminating composition and a sense of color.²⁰¹

Nancy writes that violence is that which cannot be negotiated, composed, ordered or shared.²⁰² This concept of violence as a form of nullification may have provided a productive

²⁰⁰ Shiraga did not make any works of a scatological nature, though Mukai Shuji (b.1940), another Gutai member, made several *objet* works that featured his waste in glass containers.

²⁰¹ Hirai, *Shiraga Kazuo: Action Painter*, 12.

²⁰² Nancy, *The Ground of the Image*, 18.

avenue for Shiraga. The notion that violence negates order is similarly fulfilled by Shiraga's oeuvre, in which his hundreds of shambolic representations do not deliver any sense of development, or teleological maturation. Although his titles often reference narratives, the works themselves are not a part of a cohesive or connected whole.

In the fourth issue of the *Gutai* journal, Shiraga wrote an essay entitled "Establishment of the Individual" wherein he stated that people should focus on themselves and the quality of "spiritual egoism." He proposed that art-making, particularly action-based art, is a means to differentiating oneself from a group.²⁰³ Violence is also a tool to establish difference. Shiraga recoils from an alliance with Gutai in most of his interviews, insisting on his contrariety. His aggression was the most consistent manner in which this difference was articulated, especially pronounced in his use of weapons such as the ax, the bow and arrow, and knife, tools that were never taken up by any other members of the group. Although Gutai are frequently characterized by radical action against material, in truth only Shiraga, and perhaps Shimamoto (for a shorter time period), have developed art that grew from such a clash.

What was at stake in this tendency toward aggressive art? Can it be dismissed as a passing artistic season, or were political motivations loading the rhetoric of aesthetics? In Alan Tansman's *The Aesthetics of Japanese Fascism*, he asserts that fascism "was a cultural response to a crisis in representation" that "may have supplied the permeating stream of ideology needed to promote goals more elaborated in the political realm."²⁰⁴ Tansman's text is convincing and powerful, yet does it lead us to a facile equation from aesthetics to political labeling? It makes the case that Japanese fascism "offered images of self-obliteration evoked through the beauty of violence, often in the name of an idealized Japan."²⁰⁵ This concept is eerily consonant with the modalities of Shiraga's art, where the self is "reconstituted through the mediation of material images of decay and loss — and then through violence and death, which can heal the fractured intellect by engaging all the senses and eliciting a pure bodily experience."²⁰⁶ Tansman's description aligns with much of Shiraga's rhetoric about "breaking through" via force, to free the nude body, yet the argument forgoes attention to any single artist's unique ambivalence.²⁰⁷ It remains unclear if the notion of bodily destruction and purification amounts to the ideology of fascism, considering that similar metaphors of renewal saturate Buddhist, Shintō, and Catholic art forms. Furthermore, if Shiraga was operating in the 1950s, a historical period distinct from the imperial period, is the label of "fascism" accurate? In *The Aesthetics of Fascism*, Tansman addresses writers who create narratives that foster fascist ideals, but the physical experience is at a remove from the writers themselves. Tansman's project of literary criticism, then, has very different stakes than an art-historical one. Applying the logic of fascist aesthetics (as defined in the 1930s and 1940s) to an artist active in the 1950s runs the risk of an accusatory (and perhaps anachronistic) mode of knowledge production.

I am wary of equating an aesthetic visual language with a fixed political position, especially when artists of the time were in the process of working out the relation of their art and politics. *The Aesthetics of Fascism* perhaps at best reveals that Japan underwent an extended period of internal struggle in which the artist's role in the nation was understood to be pivotal.

²⁰³ Shiraga, "Kotai no kakurtitsu (Establishment of the Individual)," 7.

²⁰⁴ Tansman, *The Aesthetics of Japanese Fascism*. 6-7. At times it seems the notion of a "crisis of representation" is an overplayed, straw man argument.

²⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 18.

²⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 24.

²⁰⁷ For examples see Shiraga, "Kōi koso (Action Itself)."

Tansman's text leads us consider the wider implications of fascism, and how it represents itself as the negation of the bureaucratic state for an organic relationship between leaders and public, however defined.²⁰⁸ For better or worse, Shiraga was very much a part of this struggle to re-legitimize the state through aesthetic production. Instead of political complicity, I understand Shiraga's oeuvre to be actively questioning the relationship between art and the state, with violence forming the backbone of that question. Violence was an active means to negate overt relations to politics, to Gutai ideology, and to attempt to forcefully rupture linkages with past art forms, though this attempt was often complicated and contradictory.

Performing the Hero

Shiraga's visual pieces and his role as an artist are negotiated through narratives of heroism. By definition, a hero is "a man distinguished by extraordinary valor and martial achievements; one who does brave or noble deeds; an illustrious warrior, a man who exhibits extraordinary bravery, firmness, fortitude, or greatness of soul, in any course of action, or in connection with any pursuit, work, or enterprise; a man admired and venerated for his achievements and noble qualities" or "The man who forms the subject of an epic; the chief male personage in a poem, play, or story; he in whom the interest of the story or plot is centered."²⁰⁹ Heroism, as I define it here, however, refers to performative male posturing that expresses a sense of power through the stance and gesturing of the male body. It is also a tautological phenomenon – it suggests a figure whose heroic status is articulated largely through his role in a narrative that consolidates and builds on his heroism. Shiraga, to some degree, sought admiration for his artistic ability just as he often positioned himself as the central character in the story of his own work. With art as his stage, he would often undertake a series of actions challenging to both his physical self and his medium, thereby setting up a series of tests for himself and his artistic role.

Representations of Emasculation

Violence girded the rhetoric of masculinity that held great sway in the rush to build "a new Japan," and imbricated in this rhetoric of renewal was the pervasive fear over the precarious status of "Japanese manhood." A notion of failed masculinity was embedded in official and popular rhetoric since the Meiji period, when Commodore Perry was said to "open" the secluded nation, or years later, with General MacArthur's infantilizing comments that America should think of Japan "like a boy of twelve."²¹⁰ During the Occupation, this notion became firmly entrenched through film, children's play, and even in official governmental literature. The nation was declared to have its "purity" at risk, subject to the wanton sexual appetites of the GI's.²¹¹ Subsequently, film and literature in the postwar period frequently involved narratives based on a

²⁰⁸ See Harry Hartoonian, "The Imperial Present and the Second Coming of Fascism," *boundary 2*, 34:1 (2007): 1-15.

²⁰⁹ Oxford English Dictionary. www.oed.com.

²¹⁰ Dower, *Embracing Defeat*, 551.

²¹¹ For example, the Tokyo government set up their own brothels before the arrival of the troops, soliciting women to protect the purity of the country and sacrifice themselves. These brothels became quickly overrun with STDs and were shut down by GHQ. Another disturbing aspect was the appearance of the children's game, "pan-pan" in which children would pretend to be an American soldier and a Japanese prostitute. *Ibid.*, 110-112.

Japanese male character's inability to protect the purity of a vulnerable female character from the threat of encroaching sexual elements, often embodied in the American GI.²¹²

Shiraga was not excluded from the heightened awareness of Japan's involvement in the war. When Ming Tiampo, a Gutai scholar of Chinese descent, first met Shiraga, he mentioned without provocation that he did not take the lives of any Chinese during the war. Tiampo was struck by his frank desire to address the question of war responsibility, an impression that although consistent with his writings, had not been addressed in the Gutai literature up to that point.²¹³ His reflex comment only illuminates that the contextual backdrop of the war and military was prominent. Certainly Shiraga could not have avoided the manifest American (male) presence in Japan as his early drawings, *Occupation Forces* (1947) and *Occupation Forces Camp Sannomiya, Kōbe* (1947), seemed to acknowledge. The figure of the American G.I. was both a model of masculinity and a reminder of the nation's emasculation.

Kanayama and Shiraga, two childhood friends who grew to be long-time peers (and sometimes competitive colleagues), make interesting comparison for the ways they sought to represent opposing (but mutually reliant) sides to the binary of the hero — that of male bravado, dripping amid his paint, and that of the effete and emasculated figure who mockingly stares with disappointment at his own deflation. A relatively unseen work from 1970, entitled "*Circle: Kanayama's Red Balloon*" (performed by Kanayama Akira and filmed on 16mm by Fukuzawa Hiroshi) is 3 minutes and 37 seconds of filmic impotency.²¹⁴ The film opens with Kanayama wearing a red jump suit, standing alone in an unknown rural area, a sandy lot and tractor in the background. In the opening long shot of the artist, viewers might mistake Kanayama for a child. The artist encouraged the characterization, it seems, as in the film he playfully fills an extremely long red balloon with air from two oxygen tanks. Several shots jump to the image of the tanks and back to Kanayama as he watches the balloon inflate. Once inflated, the balloon forms a great, round border to the circular abandoned lot, and the artist proceeds to grab it by one end, making the two sides join together as he gleefully runs up the hill. This takes all of two seconds. Once at the top, the balloon deflates (in the film it is unclear whether or not this is Kanayama's doing), and the jump-suit-wearing artist pulls the wrinkly, deflated material back down. *Circle* closes with a hilarious shot of the artist, his bowl-cut head slightly down-turned, standing motionless beside his deflated, pink, flaccid material (figure 17).²¹⁵

Shiraga's experiments with the masculine had their own moments of hilarity and foiled machismo. For example, in a performance of *Challenging Mud* in 1955, his pants became weighted down and fell off, as described in the previous chapter.²¹⁶ Yoshihara said Shiraga worked for several days to get a proper consistency of the mud, despite that the piece was meant to be evocative of his spontaneous interaction with the material.²¹⁷ Similarly, for a photo shoot

²¹² For example, Mizoguchi Kenji's *Women of the Night Yoru no Onna-tachi* (1948) and *Repast Meshi* (1951), as well as in Murakami Ryū, *Kagirinaku tōmei ni chikai burū* (*Almost Transparent Blue*) (Tokyo: Kodansha International, 1976).

²¹³ Interview with Ming Tiampo, October 4, 2008. Ming discusses Shiraga and the issues of war responsibility in Ming Tiampo, "'Create what has never been done before!' Historicising Gutai Discourses of Originality," *Third Text* 21, no. 6 (November 2007): 689-706.

²¹⁴ Interestingly, when Shiraga saw Kanayama's *Red Balloon* for the first time, he reports that it reminded him of the sun. Shiraga, "Kotai no kakurtitsu (Establishment of the Individual)," 7.

²¹⁵ Image below is a photograph of Kanayama Akira's *Circle: Kanayama's Red Balloon*, 1970, taken at the Yokohama Triennale, 2008.

²¹⁶ Murakami Saburō, "Gutaitekina hanashi (Concrete Discussion)," 206.

²¹⁷ Yoshihara, "On the First Gutai-Ten (the First Exhibition Of "Gutai" Art Group)," 2.

for *Life* magazine in April of 1956, Shiraga completed a foot painting three times over, just to “get it right,” and exhausted himself in the process.²¹⁸ By his own record, Shiraga botched his hunting adventures, and eventually left his monk’s training. Even the painting of *Wild Boar Hunting I* was unsatisfactory in the artist’s eyes. Thus Shiraga’s visual narratives were not always declarative of the triumphant man. His postures of performance were multiple: fallen soldier, failed hunter, triumphant woodsman, and action painter. His engagements were not a simple means to enact ownership of masculine power — they were test cases that left open the opportunity for failure. Shiraga’s writings often describe his art in terms of failure or success:

I didn’t understand the meaning of *Dōzo* when making it at the time.

But the work filled my heart. The axe represented the burning strength of my passions. Still I was not satisfied and felt that I had not achieved anything. My action was too weak.²¹⁹

- Shiraga writing in 1955 for the *Gutai 4* journal.

Achievement is couched in a language that links failure to a lack of sufficient physical strength, passionate energy, or the absence of a winning outcome, in short the inverse of the masculine hero. These correctives to various acts of masculine heroism suggest how the artist can become trapped in a repeated and “doomed effort to get it right.”²²⁰ The nation was burdened with the task of reincarnating a strong masculine identity in the postwar, and this gender trouble was deeply tethered to the conflicting demands of the Japanese art world in its attempt to jockey for position on the international stage.

Destroying the Double-Bind

Michio Hayashi has aptly declared the situation of the Gutai Art Association to be that of a “double bind,” in which “Gutai artists had no choice but to follow two contradicting orders — “make a painting” and “destroy a painting.”²²¹ As Hayashi states: “For on the one hand, the centrality of painting as a field of avant-garde practice was firm and unshaken in the early 1950s and even over-determined by the fact that their patriarchal leader, Yoshihara, was primarily a painter. On the other hand, as young ambitious artists in the postwar “ground zero” situation in Japan, they intensely desired to break free from the traditional aesthetics symbolized by painting.”²²² Hayashi’s description of the “double-bind” is provocative and deserving of closer examination about how this phenomenon manifested itself in the work of individual Gutai members.²²³ The idea that following the war, a cultural impasse took place, leaving artists with the choice to leave Japan, or to “...reconstitute their expressive self through violent aggression against their own bodies which had been reduced to vehicles of the occupied subjectivity” had resonance for artists in the postwar period.²²⁴ In Shiraga’s case the dilemma of the “Occupied Subject” was palpable. Shiraga’s acts, which have been largely interpreted as a playful celebration of democracy, may instead have used violence as a mechanism to rupture the double-

²¹⁸ Yoshihara, " Kanranshya no nakatta daitenrankai (Large Exhibition without Spectators):" 1.

²¹⁹ Shiraga, "Kōi koso (Action Itself)," 21.

²²⁰ Adams and Savran, *The Masculinity Studies Reader*, 2.

²²¹ Hayashi, Lecture: "Other Trajectories in Gutai: Akira Kanayama and Atsuko Tanaka."

²²² Ibid.

²²³ Hayashi’s model seems less fitting for other Gutai artists such as Tanaka, Motonaga Sadamasa and many others.

²²⁴ Michio Hayashi, "The Occupied Subject: Painting and Body in Postwar Japan," in *A Rebours the Informal Rebellion, 1939-1968*, ed. Dore Ashton (Las Palmas de Gran Canaria: Centro Atlantico de Arte Moderno, 1999), 60.

bind.²²⁵ Because it was an unprecedented way of making art, breaking through the canvas and its symbolic power of Western freedom and hegemony allowed a presentation of violence as art.

By recourse to destruction, a third space of art production is opened up for Shiraga, rather than choosing to “destroy a painting,” destruction *became* painting. Hayashi describes Gutai work as violent “implosions” of painting, suggesting the way that the artists sought change for the genre from within. This reading makes sense of the *Gutai Manifesto*, wherein the need for creativity and destruction are metaphorically paired. Violence was a shrewd answer to the crisis of representation for several reasons. First, it held purchase on the notion of originality simply because it was an unprecedented way of making art. Second, as a mode of art-making it replaced what was perhaps perceived as the failures of painting. Japan successfully recruited numerous artists to envision and record its imperial military expansion, such as Foujita Tsuguji, who had earned a reputation as a cutting-edge Western-style painter.²²⁶ In the postwar period, artists became acutely aware that the Japanese art world had failed to elude the manipulations of government propaganda. Art, it seemed, had failed to lend itself to the enrichment of the spirit, and it had failed to elevate itself beyond the detritus of politics and war. As the *Gutai Manifesto* suggests, the “fraud” of art of the past had been revealed, and a deep-seated suspicion of established modes of creativity became increasingly wide spread.

While Hayashi’s argument is relevant to several Gutai members — particularly Shiraga, Murakami and Shimamoto — the analysis leaves aside the fact that numerous artists, particularly the women of Gutai, do not fit this model. While Tanaka was treated as an eccentric artist because of her experiments with lights, had she created works with the same level of vulgarity and destruction as Shiraga, Yoshihara and reviewers might well have taken umbrage. As it was, Tanaka challenged the norms of established interests for female artists. For her to press further into action that was perceived to fall under the male purview might have effected a total dismissal of her work. I will discuss Tanaka’s alternative to the “double-bind” in chapters three and four.

Alongside Shiraga, many artists in the 1950s, voiced their desire to move away from traditional modes of art making.²²⁷ But where and when was this tradition? Traditional Japanese art is a classification that is continually retroactively transformed at each contemporary moment. Conveniently, tradition can refer to any time period that existed previously. For an artist like Shiraga, it provided a legitimating binary against which to define himself thereby authenticating his rebellious and creative artistic status.²²⁸

²²⁵ Alexandra Munroe describes the playful attitude of Gutai: “The Gutai artists, spurred by the contemporary euphoria of political social and economic liberation from Japan’s oppressive wartime past, reveled in what Shiraga Kazuo called ‘the splendid playground.’” in “To Challenge the Mid-summer Sun: The Gutai Group” in Munroe, Guggenheim Museum, and Yokohama Museum of Art, *Japanese Art after 1945*, 98.

²²⁶ Hayashi notes that “Excepting some artists associated with Surrealism, the Japanese art world acquiesced almost completely to absolutism and militarism, an acquiescence that revealed the “Westernization” of Japanese art to have been almost entirely a matter of styles, techniques and mediums, with scant attention to modernism’s philosophical underpinnings. After the war, that realization reoriented the artistic debate toward the more fundamental question of the very *raison de’etre* of art.” Hayashi, “The Occupied Subject: Painting and Body in Postwar Japan,” 57.

²²⁷ For example, see descriptions of Nakanishi Natsuyuki, Hirata Minoru, and Moriyama Daidō in Merewether et al., *Art, Anti-Art, Non-Art: Experimentations in the Public Sphere in Postwar Japan, 1950-1970*.

²²⁸ Gennifer Weisenfeld notes: “Notions of tradition are important because they are ineluctably tied to discourses of authenticity, which still heavily impinge on the writing and teaching of the art history of Asia – not to mention feeding broader anxieties about national identity in a globalizing world.” Gennifer Weisenfeld, “Reinscribing Tradition in a Transnational Art World,” in *Asian Art History in the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Vishakha N. Desai (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2007): 182.

In Tiampo's most recent publication on the Gutai, she describes *Challenging Mud* as representative of individualistic tendencies:

For Shiraga, the purpose of this work, in fact of all art-making, was to develop, understand and express the personal material of the individual. By articulating how the individual was distinctive, *Challenging Mud* was an attack on the wartime myth of the seamless collective of the *kokutai* or nation's body and an insistence on the power of dissent. *Challenging Mud*, challenging earth and country, was thus also challenging Self – a challenge to assert the self against external forces, to articulate a radical individualism that could resist the mass psychology of Fascism. It was a political work engaging with the question of war responsibility – an explosive and bodily expression of the individual.²²⁹

But can we be sure that Shiraga's motivations were loaded with such specific political fervor? Shiraga has stated frequently that he sought out spontaneous methods of painting and attempted to free himself from consciously directing any outcome. He often invokes words such as "automatic painting," "spontaneity," and "free," and frequently wrote about the individual. It seems that Tiampo and scholars such as Oyobe and Munroe have perhaps taken his words at face value, risking an overassessment of the premium on individualism in the postwar.

Masao Miyoshi provides a counterpoint to the quick conclusion that the American Occupation brought about a flurry of excitement over the ideology of individualism:

Despite the era of so-called democracy under the US Occupation, the Japanese fascination with the collective idea of Japan was never significantly altered. There may have been a sudden emergence of cosmopolitans and anti-provincialists; the US occupation was both intensive and pervasive. And yet Japan as the frame of reference for the Japanese never disappeared. This ideology of the unitary Japan was in fact reinforced, during the six years of the US occupation, by the presence of the visible dominant other in their midst. The wartime slogans of 'national unity' (*kyōkoku itchi*) and one hundred million deaths for the fatherland' (*Ichioku gyokusai*) were switched to the postwar 'unanimous penitence' (*ichioku sōzange*) preparing the public opinion for the national ideal of 'economic superpower' (*keizai taikoku*) – via 'peaceful nation' (*heiwa kokka*), 'culture nation' (*bunka kokka*), and now even atom-bombed nation (*hibaku kokka*) in which everyone is an atom bomb victim.²³⁰

Furthermore, if Shiraga embodied the individual, as scholars have suggested, it seems ironic that he performed — even celebrated — archetypes. His resemblance to a soldier in the trenches in *Challenging Mud*, to the hunter in *Wild Boar Hunting*, the demon and archer in *Ultra-Modern Dance*, and the woodchopper in *Dōzo* are emblematic of the hero with a thousand faces. Victorious, powerful and undeniably masculine, the hero is the central icon of a narrative but always a figure of repetitive predictability.

²²⁹ Ming Tiampo, "Create What Has Never Been Done Before!," 705.

²³⁰ Masao Miyoshi, "Japan Is Not Interesting" (paper presented at the Re-Mapping Japanese Culture: Papers of the 10th Biennial Conference of the Japanese Studies Association of Australia, 2000): 17.

Shiraga turned to answer the postwar double-bind in a manner that sought to capture ever-abstruse originality, aggressively engaging the representations of the nation. He understood that physical force could open up opportunities for Japanese art, and relied on templates of the masculine hero to inform his practice as well as to potentially bolster his artistic status. Violence was a means to access new forms of modern subjectivity following the abasement of the Japanese soldier, the epitome of state masculinity. Destruction not only set the stage for creativity, it was the main act. By taking into consideration Shiraga's performance art and paintings as a whole, the self-conscious positioning of the artist within a heroic narrative and his conceptual framework of violence as art becomes demonstrable. This approach shifts perspective away from isolated moments of "inspiration" originating from narrow, singular influence (such as essentialized Japanese traditions) and frames his body-based painting within the broader context of postwar Osaka and Amagasaki, small loci within the vectors of the asymmetrical art world.²³¹

Articulated through the gendered interface of the hero, Shiraga's radicality was imbued with a sense of masculine identification. Yet to reduce his intervention to that of sexuality is to overlook the ways that gender, representations of the nation, and notions of the new modern were inextricably tied. His performative invocations of the soldier and the hunter were overtly male roles that allowed a space for critical encounters: between man and medium, state and subject, and representation and envisioned nation. Aggressive spectacle made violence a platform for art-making through a narrative of the remasculinization of the nation, filled as it was with the potential for failure and weakness, and richly imbricated in Japan's status as a player on the international art scene. Shiraga suggested that representation might be used to question what the state could be, and what role the artist-warrior might have within that field.

One could argue that the effort to recuperate aesthetics through violent bodily acts would have had a multivalent effect, constructing a new answer to political and aesthetic modalities framed through gendered identity. While contributing to the overall tendency toward an aesthetic trend of destruction and renewal, the direct involvement of the artist would also mold and shape that body into one that performs and idealizes a model of masculinity. Thus, in Shiraga's work, the repetition of violence enacts, facilitates, and empowers the construction of the masculine artist-hero.²³²

²³¹ Attention to regional politics here is important. Ashiya is a city of wealth, where Gutai members were invited to perform. Shiraga, a son of a kimono merchant, was from the city of Amagasaki, where industry and commercial products competed for space.

²³² In the words of T.J. Clark, "...selfhood can only, or most poignantly, be staged in terms of 'sexuality' – (it) is part of a bourgeois economy of bodies." T. J. Clark, *Farewell to an Idea: Episodes from a History of Modernism* (Yale University Press, 2001), 363.

Part II: Tanaka Atsuko

Chapter Three
Electric Dress and the Circuits of Subjectivity

Tanaka Atsuko was a twenty-year-old artist active in Osaka in 1952 when the American Occupation of Japan came to a close. Within a few short years, exciting and potentially destabilizing changes took place in the city: a marked growth in population density due to transportation upgrades, a sudden increase in commercialization of women's bodies in the media, unprecedented industrial development, and a surge of productivity in the arts. What effects would this potentially unsettling environment have on one's sense of self? This chapter considers Tanaka's ambivalent relationship to female subjectivity through a brief consideration of the art and visual culture circulating in Japan during the production of her 1956 performance piece, *Electric Dress*, as well as a close analysis of the work itself. It proposes that her work interrogates the commodified female form and its engagement with the allure and risks of postwar Japan's modernity.

For Tanaka, the transportation hub of the city was always a prime fixation. In 1993, reflecting on her initial interest in the project, she said:

For a long time I tried to come up with an interesting idea. After half a year or so, I was seated on a bench at the Osaka station, and I saw a billboard featuring a pharmaceutical advertisement, brightly illuminated by neon lights. This was it! I would make a neon dress!²³³

That Tanaka's initial inspiration for her most well-known work manifested from her experience of sensing and seeing the strange changes affecting her hometown suggests that *Electric Dress* was much more than a fashion-based spectacle. This arresting piece propelled Tanaka's work to the forefront of the Gutai Art Association's collective production and sparked her career as a recognized solo artist in the international scene (figure 1).²³⁴ If Tanaka's previous endeavors, such as the performance of *Stage Clothes* (1956), as well as her cloth hanging pieces such as *Work* (1955, yellow cloth), and *Work* (1955, pink cloth), suggested a development in the relationship between subjectivity, surface materiality, and the industrial transformations of the city, that development seemed to culminate in one pivotal work: *Electric Dress*.²³⁵ Moreover, her drawings and paintings from before *Electric Dress* reveal her initial forays into a visual vocabulary that was later articulated and advanced by the piece and that would become her focus of artistic inquiry for the remainder of her career.

Little information is available to suggest how to reconstruct the 1950s performances except for a very short clip of *Electric Dress* from an eight-millimeter film that is itself under

²³³ Quoted in Tiampo and Katō, *Electrifying Art: Atsuko Tanaka, 1954-1968*, 105.

²³⁴ Tanaka was the third artist from the Gutai Group to have a solo exhibition in Tokyo, following Sadamasa Motonaga and Shiraga Kazuo. *Ibid.*, 56.

²³⁵ Performed at the *Outdoor Gutai Art Exhibition*, Ashiya Park, Ashiya City. The work consisted of Tanaka taking off layers of clothing in rapid succession to reveal different outfits. Tanaka has two pieces called *Butai Fuku* 舞台服 (*Stage Clothes*). One is the aforementioned performance piece, another is an installation piece of illuminated doll-like figures shown in 1955. *Yellow Cloth* is composed of three pieces, all of commercially-dyed yellow cotton fabric created in 1955, in the following dimensions: 39.3 x 81.88 inches, 39.3 x 79.52 inches and 39.73 x 148.42 inches. located in Gallery HAM, Nagoya. This untitled piece consisted of a 10-meter square of pink rayon cloth, trimmed along the edges with blue fabric. It was positioned off the ground at the height of 11.81 inches. Originally exhibited at the "Outdoor Exhibition of Modern Art to Challenge the Midsummer Sun," (Ashiya Park, July 1955). This piece was no longer extant but was reconstructed for the *Documenta* Exhibition in Kassel, Germany, 2007.

one minute in length.²³⁶ In this film, the noisy gears of the original performance cannot be heard; instead, the soft pulsating noise of the film reel accompanies the gentle movement of the glowing lights.²³⁷ This version of *Electric Dress* was filmed at the Gutai's debut in Tokyo in 1956 at Ōhara Hall. Tanaka wore the piece in the gallery, but for the stage performance later in the day, she performed *Stage Clothes*.²³⁸ *Electric Dress* followed *Stage Clothes* immediately, so for practical reasons she did not participate in that performance. Instead, the electric clothes were worn, on that occasion, by Shiraga Kazuo, Satō Seichi 佐藤整地, and Tanaka's brother.²³⁹ For the 1957 Second Gutai Art Exhibition at the Kyoto Municipal Museum of Art, the piece was worn by Tanaka herself.²⁴⁰ Later reconstructions have been installations only, and thus were not worn by anyone. My studies of Tanaka's notebooks (1955–1963), discussed in Chapter Four, confirm Tanaka's own estimation that the original took about one year to make.²⁴¹ In contrast, her 1986 reconstruction for the Centre Pompidou took only a month, in part due to assistance from her husband as well as several electrical engineers.²⁴²

Electric Dress, in all its incarnations, was a metal structure through which wires and sockets were trellised and painted and colored incandescent bulbs of two shapes were inserted. It was fashioned from round and elliptical bulbs painted in nine colors that glowed spectacularly and generated tremendous amounts of heat. Even in its earliest versions, the haphazardly-grouped lights had an unruly effect that denied decorativeness. For the former, Tanaka and an amateur electrician friend laboriously create a switching device that allowed the lights to turn on and off at irregular intervals. The 1956 and 1957 versions were illuminated by an electric circuit that made the lights flash, while the 1986 reconstruction was controlled by computer. In the 1956 version, the performed sequence began with Tanaka wearing a separate dress of colorless battery-powered miniature lights, and the rate of blinking increased. Tanaka then changed into another dress made of 100-volt incandescent bulbs.

²³⁶ “2nd Gutai Art Exhibition.” Film, Ohara Hall, Tokyo, 1956. In the collection of Ashiya Museum of Art and History.

²³⁷ Kanayama reported that the gear box was designed by an amateur electrician and was exceedingly noisy. Oami Okabe, *Tanaka Atsuko mō hitotsu no Gutai (Tanaka Atsuko: Another Gutai)* (Ufer Documentary, 1998). Other Gutai members also describe the sound of the electric gear box as very noisy. *Gutai 1,2,3*. 44, note 38.

²³⁸ Tanaka dubbed two works *Stage Clothes* (Butai fuku 舞台服). One was a series of seven large (14.3 x 11.94 feet) cutout dolls that were displayed in *Outdoor Exhibition to Challenge the Midsummer Sun*. The other was a performance art piece for *Gutai on the Stage* in 1956, where Tanaka herself dressed in a series of dresses so that as she pulled off one dress, another dress would appear beneath it. Further complicating the naming of these two pieces is the translation of the second character, *fuku* 服, which can be translated as “dress” or “clothes.” Interestingly, English exhibitions and catalogues to date have referred to *Denkifuku* 電気服 as *Electric Dress*, whereas *Butai Fuku* has always been translated as *Stage Clothes*. The latter piece is no longer extant. Kanayama stated that initially Tanaka had paid an amateur engineer to help with her pieces in Osaka. Tanaka's father had financed this and the cost of her materials, but his limited budget soon ran out. Tanaka then began to re-use her electrical components, so work like *Stage Dress* was cannibalized for her next works. Okabe, *Tanaka Atsuko mō hitotsu no Gutai (Tanaka Atsuko: Another Gutai)*.

²³⁹ The given name of Tanaka's brother (who once wore *Electric Dress*) is unknown.

²⁴⁰ Several stage works led up to this version of *Electric Dress*, such as a preliminary version of *Stage Clothes* that was engineered for a shooting for *Life* magazine in April 1956. In May 1956 she made an enormous red dress 13.12 feet by 62.33 feet wide at the Shinko Independent Exhibition. This work later formed a backdrop for the 1957 Gutai on the stage.

²⁴¹ Tanaka Atsuko, "Seisaku ni attate (When I Make My Work)," *Kokuritsu kokusai bijutsukan geppo (The Monthly Newsletter of the National Museum of Art, Osaka)* 81 (1999). English translation appear in Tiampo and Katō, *Electrifying Art: Atsuko Tanaka, 1954-1968*, 104-105.

²⁴² *Ibid.*

Electric Dress stands higher than the average human body, and covers the wearer from head to toe. Well-circulated photographs of the piece (few that there are) show Tanaka's barely visible but recognizable visage peering out from between the tubular, hand-painted bulbs (figure 2).²⁴³ As is evident from the full-length photo (see figure 1), her legs were completely covered by spiraling wires resembling an overgrown vine. Only her phlegmatic expression and portions of her hands are visible. The captivating quality of *Electric Dress* was due in no small measure to the marked tension it created between the sphere of techno-spectacle and the vulnerable human body. In figure 2, the photograph suggests the enclosing weight of the piece, its fullness restrictively covering her head and the sides of her face. Each hand-painted bulb would have weighed several ounces, and the cumulative effect would have resulted in an exceptionally heavy contraption, all the more so given the dense quality of 1950s industrial materials — it has been estimated to have weighed over fifty kilograms.²⁴⁴ Shiraga described it as heavier than armor.²⁴⁵ Powered by a manual electric circuit, the dress flashed sequentially, and the velocity of the signals increased until reaching levels that Tanaka called "incessant and chaotic."²⁴⁶ The adornment of the physical form, one can assume, was a barrage on the senses — the brightness of *Electric Dress* hazing or blinding vision, its mass limiting mobility, its sound impeding hearing, its heat impairing touch, its immensity overwhelming the body it covers.

Tracking Transformation in Osaka

From the outset, *Electric Dress* took up a modernity that was rooted to the connections and disconnections between cities in Japan. Tanaka was born and raised in Osaka and the Kansai region, at a remove from Tokyo's sway over Japan's contemporary art scene. Her work had deep roots in Osaka, the second most populous city in Japan, which was experiencing rapid industrialization and immigration at the time. Migrant laborers and *Zainichi* Koreans (permanent ethnic residents of Japan) became the city's biggest social groups.²⁴⁷ Many of these workers were forced to live in the city's peripheral zones to survive, and the city was ill-equipped to deal with such a drastically-increased commuter population. In Osaka, the daytime population trebled, resulting in packed train lines and chaotic traffic.²⁴⁸ 1955 marked the highest population growth to date and the apex of urban transformation.²⁴⁹

Osaka has long stood in sharp contrast to the more picturesque cities of Nara and Kyoto. The latter's numerous World Heritage Sites present and preserve it as though it was a city unmarked by history. Osaka's garish industrialism has precluded any such status. People from Osaka are reputed to talk and walk faster than the rest of Japan and are notorious for their

²⁴³ Some of the bulbs were colored, some were painted with enamel paint. They were either in a household lightbulb shape, or in tubular form, the shape similar to today's phosphorescent lights.

²⁴⁴ Oyobe, "Human Subjectivity, (Ph.D. Dissertation, 2005): 224.

²⁴⁵ Okabe, *Tanaka Atsuko mō hitotsu no Gutai (Tanaka Atsuko: Another Gutai)* (film).

²⁴⁶ Tanaka Atsuko, on *Work 11: Stage Dress / "Sakuhin 11:Butai-fuku," Gutai 7* (July 1957): 13.

²⁴⁷ *Zainichi* (literally meaning residing in Japan) Koreans reached a population of 2,000,000 in 1945 and have been associated with the *yakuza* (the Japanese mafia) and have faced much discrimination. See D. L. Howell, "Ethnicity and Culture in Contemporary Japan," *Race, Ethnicity and Migration in Modern Japan* (2004), 316-336.

²⁴⁸ Chauncy D. Harris, "The Urban and Industrial Transformation of Japan," *Geographical Review* 72, no. 1 (1982).

²⁴⁹ According to Harris, the urban and rural population curves intersection occurred in 1955. In other words, the mid 1950s marked a sudden change in population that was to increase from that time forward. "1950–1955 was characterized by rapid urban development, perhaps unparalleled in the world, for speed and magnitude." *Ibid.*, 52-53.

colloquialisms.²⁵⁰ My own experiences there attest to its bustling, scrambling character: moving through the city can be a challenge, as it has none of the controlled chaotic order of Tokyo, tourist-focused organization of Nara, or cherished (and constructed) tranquility of Kyoto. As late as 1998, Tanaka's memory of Osaka was characterized by recollections of clattery train stations, which she juxtaposed with her quiet lifestyle in Nara 奈良:

I really liked the nature there, but even though I've lived there a long time, Osaka is still my favorite place, I miss it. Particularly when I see *Tsuruhashi* ... I get very nostalgic. When I hear the noise of the loop line, I really missed it. I always take the train at this station *Tsurubashi Eki*.²⁵¹

Interestingly, Tanaka described Osaka as her favorite place, despite her husband's decision that moving away from the city was necessary for her recovery from mental illness, a matter I will address shortly.

The careening lights and sense of disorder in *Electric Dress* are, in this sense, a synecdoche of Osaka's agitated environment, vividly evoking its network of trains. Indeed, *Electric Dress* first grabs attention because of its chaotic, but colorful, brightness. Like a traffic signal, the flashing colors command the viewer to stop and look. One can almost imagine the pulsating sensation that mesmerized the young artist as she witnessed the visual effects of the city's rapid commercialization. Kanayama Akira's found-art piece exhibited in 1955 meshes with Tanaka's preoccupations (figure 3). In this highly conceptual piece, Kanayama simply placed a railway-crossing signal inside Ashiya Park, juxtaposing the greenery with the bold metal form. Although the simplicity of the piece contrasts with Tanaka's techno-physical investigations, it seems that the burgeoning transportation system was a source of both inspiration and angst for Kanayama and Tanaka, a couple from the group who were married in 1965. Indeed, the rhythm of the bell on Kanayama's "borrowed" railway crossing coincided with that of the electric light in Tanaka's installation, *Stage Clothes*, bespeaking their mutual interest in urbanization and each other.²⁵²

Following the American military occupation of Japan (1945–1952), rapid transformations in Osaka occurred at a number of different levels, including changes to urban geography, population, transportation, art, and education. 1955 marked the highest population growth to date in urban areas and the apex of urban transformation.²⁵³ This period was as crucial to artistic development as it was for the development of the city as a whole. Unfortunately, despite its high population, Osaka often received less cultural and governmental attention, a policy that posed greater challenges to an artist from the area in terms of grants, venues, and publicity. In other words, the tumultuous nature of the city also brought with it an aspect of competitiveness over the resources and attention more routinely accorded to Tokyo and Kyoto. Critics were attuned to the notion that industry dominated the city at a cost to cultural production. Writing in 1965, Jules Langsner noted:

²⁵⁰ There were times during my research trips that I had difficulty understanding Osaka-ben (the Kansai regional dialect), resulting in comical episodes and missed directions.

²⁵¹ Okabe, *Tanaka Atsuko mō hitotsu no Gutai*.

²⁵² Yoshihara, "On the First Gutai-Ten (the First Exhibition Of "Gutai" Art Group)," 2.

²⁵³ According to the *Geographical Review*, the urban and rural population curves intersection occurred in 1955. In other words, the mid 1950s marked a sudden change in population that was to increase from that time forward. "...1950-1955 was characterized by rapid urban development, perhaps unparalleled in the world, for speed and magnitude." Harris, "The Urban and Industrial Transformation of Japan," 52-53.

On first acquaintance, Osaka appears to be a most unlikely city for the emergence of a creatively vital, exuberantly non-conformist development in the twentieth century art. The business of Osaka is business ... With a population of over 3,000,000, Osaka is without a single gallery of significances [sic] other than the Gutai Pinacotheca²⁵⁴ Under the circumstances, it is not surprising that there is not one art critic of national stature in the town, leaving Gutai on the fringe of attention in the art press of the country.²⁵⁵

In 1956, Japan was poised for a period of breakneck technological and industrial development and was practically buzzing with mechanical momentum. The re-establishment of Japan Railways in 1949 by the United States General Headquarters set into motion circuitries of movement across the nation at unprecedented speeds.²⁵⁶ Connections between Tokyo and Osaka were key, and by November 1956 the Tōkaidō 東海道 express was running on electricity,²⁵⁷ enabling a passenger to travel the distance in six hours and thirty minutes and paving the way for the next development in transportation. This preoccupation (if not fetishization) of speed revealed in newspapers of the time was likely born from a war-driven focus on technological escalation. The much-anticipated Japanese bullet train, or *Shinkansen* 新幹線, first proposed in 1957, was promoted throughout the fifties and had its first run in 1964 on the Tōkaidō line.²⁵⁸ Capable of enormous speed and informed by advanced technical specialization, Japan's trains were a trenchant symbol of the nation's modernity — a phallic emblem of Japan's modernism that continues to absorb a great deal of the economy today (figure 4). More importantly, the trains actively manufactured that modernity through the rapid transport of objects and bodies. As Paul Virilio has suggested, the mechanisms of war construct a direct interest in speed that has brought about a complete re-measurement of human experience.²⁵⁹ Although intended to heal the

²⁵⁴ The building was originally a Meiji period rice granary located in the Nakanoshima district in Osaka that was named by Michel Tapié. The name refers to a place for art in ancient times. At the time, it was the only space for exhibiting modern art in Osaka. Martin Cohen, "Japan's Gutai Group," *Art in America* 56 (1968): 86-69. Visitors to the Gutai Pinacotheca included John Cage, Robert Rauschenberg, Jasper Johns, Isamu Noguchi, Merce Cunningham, Peggy Guggenheim (who purchased a work by Yoshihara Michio) and Clement Greenberg. See Hirai, *Gutai Te Nanda? (What's Gutai?)*, 122. The Gutai Pinacotheca was closed in April 1970 due to urban development (on my last visit to Japan the site was a parking lot). Gutai had hoped to make a new building over 130 meters tall. According to the plans, the structure looked much like the work of Rem Koolhaas. Unfortunately, Yoshihara's sudden death in 1973 derailed these plans.

²⁵⁵ Jules Langsner, "Gutai: On the Spot Report," *Art International* IX, no. 3 (1965): 18-24. Langsner says that Tanaka's work stands out amongst Gutai as the works that "persist longest in memory," but argues that Tanaka could just as readily be from Los Angeles, Milan or New York. I believe that the specific regional context of Osaka is important to her work and affects the asymmetrical transnational relationships in which her paintings circulated. Langsner should be credited for noting that Tanaka does not easily fit within the confines of Gutai's aesthetic.

²⁵⁶ Yomiuri Shinbun (Yomiuri Newspaper), "Kokutetsu daiya o ōkaisei (Big Revisions to National Rail Schedule)," *Yomiuri*, October 3, 1956.

²⁵⁷ "Jisoku 150 kiro no densha, Tokyo-Osaka 6 jikanhan no Kōsō (150 Km Per Hour Train, Plan for Tokyo-Osaka in 6.5 Hours)," *Yomiuri Shinbun*, November 25, 1957.

²⁵⁸ Paul H. Noguchi, "Savor Slowly: Ekiben, The Fast Food of High-Speed Japan," *Ethnology* 33, no. 4 (1994): 321; K. Inuyama, "Japan National Rail's Choice of Traction System—from Loco-Hauled to Multiple-Unit Trains," *Japan Railway and Transport Review* 27 (2003): 1.

²⁵⁹ For Virilio, speed conquers space. He writes: "The invasion of the instant invades the invasion succeeds the invasion of territory. The countdown becomes the scene of battle, the final frontier." Paul Virilio and James Der Derian, *The Virilio Reader* (Malden: Blackwell Publishers, 1998): 49.

great rural-urban divide in Japan, the introduction of huge phallic locomotives in fact may have exacerbated the problem as commuting distances could be longer and extended families and nuclear families increasingly began to live in different regions. It was in this heady atmosphere of speed and dislocation, when vast electrical circuits were laid across Japan, that Tanaka turned to wire her own works.

Circuits and Surface

To my mind, wires and the connections and disconnections of circuitry are perhaps the most common element of Tanaka's work. They materialize in the sequence of cords in *Bell*, one of the first sound pieces made.²⁶⁰ Circuits were also predominant in the wires in *Electric Dress*, and even the threaded connections that linked the costume changes in the performance of *Stage Clothes* — a composition I will discuss later in this chapter. Most evident are the series of circles in her paintings that followed *Electric Dress*. Tanaka used vivid acrylic and vinyl paint to create abstract compositions of circles and lines.

In an exemplary work from 1957, the spacing of each circle, and the isolation of the single red circle on the outer right edge of the surface, shares terrain with Japan's flag, the *Hinomaru* (figure 5). Here the flag is lost in a sea of similar forms, reducing its significance through repetition. The placement of the small form teetering on the outskirts of the canvas de-centers the significance of the red circle on white, an image ever-present in imperial times. Similarly, the artificial texture of the acrylic paint emphasizes the manufactured reproducibility of form over the revered aura of national symbols. The untitled work's reiteration of circle and line suggest limitlessness and overturn the singularity and cohesiveness that the *Hinomaru* can suggest. The work reveals Tanaka's preoccupation with linkages and the spaces between them.²⁶¹

Tanaka's circuitries enact a negotiation with the geography of the ever-changing city and state; moreover, they are symptomatic of the hazardous position of the subject within that uncertain frame. Because of its emergence in a time of escalated confusion and anxiety over the course of Japan's modernization, my reading of *Electric Dress* posits it as a double-sided skin. On one hand, it shines like the alluring city, spectacularizing the mundane lights and Tanaka herself. On the other, it is a luminous shield that keeps the outside at bay. Inviting as the vividness of *Electric Dress* may have been, it refuted touch in its incandescence. The glow and reflection of the lights illuminated and enacted movement but the weight of it restricts bodily action. *Electric Dress* thus seems to activate surface as a means to explore subjectivity as a nexus between inside and outside, negotiating how the new technologies of postwar Japan might be tested in the realm of performance art and representation, as well as on the body. Tanaka's art experiment set the subject within a specifically 1950s technology that was physical and spatial, unlike later artists, such as Eva Hesse, who took up similar formal interests in wiry connections.

²⁶⁰ Janet Koplos has also commented on Tanaka's use of circuits in an essay; however, Koplos concludes that Tanaka is interested in connectedness in a Buddhist sense. I do not see any linkage between Tanaka's work and Buddhism; moreover, I feel her work often disrupts any sense of connection, thereby raising the issue of disconnection as much as connection. Janet Koplos, "Circuitries of Color," *Art in America* 92, no. 10 (2004): 147.

²⁶¹ Kusama Yayoi, born but three years before Tanaka, shares an interest in issues of finitude and endlessness. For example, *Narcissus Garden* (1966) shows the artist seated amidst a plethora of mirror-like orbs. Kusama's circles offer back a reflection of the artist, either literally or metaphorically, in a way that Tanaka's work does not. A more in-depth discussion of Tanaka and Kusama's work is overdue; however, there is insufficient space to account for these similarities in the space of this paper. For more on Kusama see: Mignon Nixon, "Posing the Phallus," *October* 92 (2000): 115.

In Hesse's work, circuitry notably lacks any urban connotation, in favor of a bodily, and even monological frame of reference.

Tanaka insists from the outset that *Electric Dress* is reliant on the body. When exhibited as an installation, it is not whole. The unfilled void at the center of the piece refers to its subject-creator, playing on the tension of the totality of the worn dress and the incompleteness of void.²⁶² Without electricity, there is a deadened sense to the work overall, as it hangs in empty stasis. Illuminated, the individualized glowing forms of *Electric Dress* give way to a unified shape, and the shining figure is brought to the fore. Thus, Tanaka's decision to have the lights blink on and off enacts the oscillation between part and whole; furthermore, it suggests that wholeness is ultimately an illusion brought about by the activation of segments.

Postwar Syndrome, Sci-Fi, and the *Electric Dress*

Art historians in Japan have frequently referred to the *tabula rasa* of postwar Japanese art, and this perception of a theoretical blank is punctuated by the war and its consequent "leveling" of Japan.²⁶³ Similarly, American art historians have tended to equate the whole of Japanese postwar art production (which even now seems not to have reached its endpoint) with traumatic outpourings from the atomic bomb.²⁶⁴ Alexandra Munroe's important, but at times reductive, text, *Japanese Art After 1945: Scream Against the Sky* (1994), uses photos of Tokyo razed following American fire-bombings to introduce chapters on postwar art, reinforcing the tired cliché that Japanese art rose from the ashes. Her rhetoric supports the mistaken notion that Japan's past had been all but eradicated and this assumption results in a misreading of Gutai work that emphasizes its so-called "embrace of democracy."²⁶⁵ This kind of problematic logic presupposes that the art of a nation is motivated and shaped by a single event. As undeniably life-altering as the atomic bomb, and other wartime traumas undoubtedly were, it is a strong over-simplification to assume that all artwork stems from such narrowly bracketed origins. Rather, multiple events have provided the complex frame for Gutai production. Moreover, to over-privilege war is to ignore regional differences in the impact of the war, as well as the distinctness of customs and art worlds, an issue that was significant for a Kansai-based group like the Gutai. Allowing the destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki to continually dominate art historical practice may permit particular national frameworks to consistently reinvent themselves.

²⁶² Hayashi Michio interprets this notion of absence in *Electric Dress* as predicated on Tanaka's interest in painting. "...the (dress) was and has been exhibited repetitively without the artist's body in numerous exhibitions, often together with preparatory drawings. The dress was, for Tanaka, simultaneously a dress and a painting." Hayashi, "Other Trajectories in Gutai: Akira Kanayama and Atsuko Tanaka."

²⁶³ Haryu Ichirō, "Busshitsu to Ningen (Matter and Man)." Tatehata Akira, "The Eve of Gutai" in *1953: Shedding Light on Art in Japan*. (Tokyo: Meguro Museum of Art, 1996): 67-74.

²⁶⁴ Julia Bryan-Wilson reads Yoko Ono's *Cut Piece* as resonating with torn clothing from the atomic bomb despite the fact that Ono was from Tokyo and spent only a short period of her life in Japan at all. Julia Bryan-Wilson, "Performance, Memory, and the Body Stripped Bare: Yoko Ono's 'Cut Piece'" (Thesis M A in History of Art -- University of California Berkeley Spring 1999, 1999). Similarly, Butoh dance is often characterized as born from the events of Hiroshima, despite that it was developed in Tokyo. See David G. Goodman, "The Return of the Gods: Theatre in Japan Today," *World Literature Today* 62, no. 3 (1988), 418-420.

²⁶⁵ For example, Munroe's ambitious catalogue devotes a chapter to the Gutai that problematically claims that the Gutai sought to "usher in the liberal American-style 'democracy' which history had unexpectedly granted;" adding, "whereas artists in the West perceived terror and chaos in the postwar condition, the Gutai experienced relief and liberation from decades of totalistic bureaucracy." Munroe, Guggenheim Museum, and Yokohama Museum of Art, *Japanese Art after 1945: Scream against the Sky*, 84.

However, to disregard any connection between the events of 1945 with 1950s art may also be a knee-jerk reaction — and one that prevents us from thinking through the ways *Electric Dress* may have posed questions about technology and the body.²⁶⁶ Viewers were likely fascinated by the piece because it displayed the living form subsumed by a seemingly science-gone-awry monstrosity — in some ways as intoxicating as in the film *Godzilla*, a frightening reminder of the effects of the atomic bomb. In the poster for the 1955 film, *Godzilla Raids Again*, the carbuncled creature chomps on several train cars and threatens the city of Osaka. In a poster for the film (figure 6), a train dangles from Godzilla's jaws, demonstrating his magnitude and power over the metropolis. This concept of "Man" versus technology and the theme of the cyborg arguably became overplayed in its incarnations in years to come. Yet, in 1956, this threat was potent. Following the war, knowledge of the so-called "A-bomb list" and the list of target cities that included Osaka may have contributed to a post-event impact,²⁶⁷ not to mention the presence of *hibakusha* (survivors of the bomb attacks) and wreckage of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. And while many Tokyo artists may have been removed from the effects of the bomb because of distance, Osaka's closer proximity to the events may have meant that its aftermath was keenly felt and that its literal impact charged artists to at least consider the human relationship to the extremes of technology and their acute impact upon the body. To be sure, much death and destruction took place in the city as well: Osaka was hit with incendiary bombs on March 13 and March 14, 1945, and approximately 10,000 people were killed.

Media was a further component of complicated postwar developments and often affected gender specifically. Sandra Buckley has noted how commercialism and images of women were intertwined in new ways in the 1950s. She writes: "Television advertising increasingly focused on a well-dressed (Western) and perfectly coiffured woman (also often Western or Japanese-American) standing in a spacious Western-style kitchen surrounded by state of the art appliances. Women were drawn into a relationship of desire with this technologized, Westernized, domestic interior."²⁶⁸ Still these representations were part of a contradictory order of gendering. Highly feminized models in magazines and newspapers circulated at a time when women increasingly found themselves in workplaces and in subject positions that had previously been reserved for men.²⁶⁹

Films too, addressed the embattled terrain of gender. Kurosawa Akira's 黒澤明 film *Throne of Blood*, or *Spider's Web Castle* (Kumon no su-jō 蜘蛛巣城) (1956), represented the failure of the powerful masculine body against the psyche and the unknown. Throughout the film, Mifune Toshirō's 三船敏郎 character wears bright metallic armor that contrasts with the shadows surrounding him. The illuminated suit of armor makes a striking comparison to Tanaka's *Electric Dress*. His glittering regalia offers no defense as he battles his inner demons of ambition, fear, and anxiety. This battle, too, is played out in a highly performative and theatrical manner. Yet, unlike the protective gear of soldiers and warriors, Tanaka's armor is as dangerous

²⁶⁶ Katō, Osaki and Tatehata, for example, have focused on specific art historical debates and have left the question of the Pacific War and its effects aside.

²⁶⁷ Reports and images of the effects of the bombings were not released until 1952, long after the rest of world had dissected much of the data and imagery of the effects of atomic bombings. A-bomb list cited from wall panel at the Hiroshima Memorial Museum, Hiroshima Japan. Sey Nishimura, "Medical Censorship in Occupied Japan, 1945-1948," *The Pacific Historical Review* 58, no. 1 (1989): 30.

²⁶⁸ Sandra Buckley, "Altered States," in *Postwar Japan as History*, ed. ed. Andrew Gordon (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 352.

²⁶⁹ Joanna Liddle and Sachiko Nakajima, *Rising Suns, Rising Daughters: Gender, Class, and Power in Japan* (London, New York, Bangkok: Zed Books, White Lotus, 2000), 132.

to its wearer as it is to a potential aggressor. Similarly, physical threats take a backseat to cultural anxieties in Ozu Yasujiro's 小津 安二郎 *Tokyo Story* (*Tokyo monogatari* 東京物語) (1953), where female characters represented the fraught position of the modern woman. In this film, the mother is a full-bodied woman, who lumbers slowly but patiently through quiet interiors (the film is almost entirely located indoors), still carrying the psychological burden of losing her son in the war. When she passes away, her large body is laid out for the private wake held in the cramped living room, her physical presence appearing like a synchedoche for the motherland of Japan and the loss of tradition. Gathered around the majestic figure, the small frames of her sons and daughters gather. The siblings have traveled from Tokyo, where they each take up positions in the modern urban system, as hairdressers that perm hair in the modern style, as government workers that care little for their responsibilities. The widowed wife of the dead son is the most traditional character of the lot, played by the star Hara Setsuko 原節子. Only this idealized figure renounces personal goals and modern values to protect the customs of the familial unit. It was in this context that Tanaka, one of a small minority of female artists in Japan, began her difficult career path.

Tanaka Atsuko: A Brief Biography

Tanaka was born to Tanaka Ishimatsu 田中石松 and Tanaka Tami 田中たみ in Osaka, on February 10, 1932, and, as the youngest child of nine, unsettled the balance of her four older brothers and four older sisters. Her lower-middle-class father supported this large family by managing a match manufacturing company.²⁷⁰ Following her high school graduation, in 1950 Tanaka enrolled in the Art Institute of Osaka Municipal Art Museum (Osaka Shiritsu Bijutsukan Fusetsu Bijutsu Kenkyūjo 大阪市立美術館敷設美術研究所) to prepare for art school entrance examinations. Shiraga and Kanayama were senior to Tanaka in the program. Her exam preparation was rewarded by acceptance into the well-respected Department of Western Painting at the Kyoto Municipal College of Art (Kyoto Shiritsu Bijutsu Daigaku 京都市立美術大学); she remained there for only a short period, however, returning in the fall of 1951 to the Art Institute of the Osaka Municipal Museum.²⁷¹ She did not complete a degree. Here, she continued to discuss contemporary art with Kanayama, who is said to have encouraged her to depart from a primarily figurative mode of painting.²⁷² Her personal life was greatly shaped by these early artistic dialogues, as she soon joined Kanayama, Murakami Saburō, and Shiraga Kazuo in Zero Society, or Zero-kai (the group began in 1952, Tanaka joined in 1953).²⁷³ This was a short-lived, but important, small group of artists formed to produce and discuss contemporary art.²⁷⁴ They held but one exhibition that took place in 1954 at the Sogō Department Store in Osaka.

²⁷⁰ It seems he was especially supportive of Tanaka Atsuko, as he funded her earliest versions of *Electric Dress*. Interview with Katō, October 21 2007.

²⁷¹ The institute is now known as The Kyoto City University of Arts (*Kyoto Shiritsu Geijutsu Daigaku* 京都市立芸術大学). When Shiraga entered the school, there was no department of Western Painting. This rapid change points to the great fluxuations take place within the Japanese art world in the 1950s.

²⁷² eds. Katō, *Michi no bi no tankyū* (Shizuoka: ACMAH, 2001), 23.

²⁷³ Zero-kai was originally said to have about fifteen members, but these four seemed to have formed the backbone of the group. Kanayama Akira, Shiraga Kazuo, Tanaka Atsuko, Kanki Sada, Shibata Ken, Shiroki Koichiro, Mizobe Miyako and Nakahashi Sakuko were listed members of Zero Kai in "Ashiyashi ten no kawari o hiro (Close-up on the Off-Beat at the Ashiya City Exhibition)," *mainichi shinbun*, June 9, 1955.

²⁷⁴ Zero kai had no formal relationship with the German "Zero Group;" however, at the Nul International Exhibition in April 1965, Gruppo T from Italy, Zero Group from Germany and the Gutai group exhibited together, and Yoshihara commented that there were some similarities to Gutai's earlier style of works. In the 1960s, another

In 1955, at the invitation of Yoshihara, all four members of Zero-kai joined the Gutai Art Association and soon began work on the “Experimental Outdoor Exhibition to Challenge the Midsummer Sun.” Tanaka, more than other members, was able to procure several solo exhibitions in Japan and abroad, and was said to have benefited from Michel Tapié’s enthusiasm, when his friend, Anthony Denny, purchased three of her works in 1960.²⁷⁵ This was a significant year for Tanaka, as she received the Mayor’s Award and also had her first solo exhibition at the Minami Gallery in Tokyo.²⁷⁶ In 1964, Tanaka received the Guggenheim International Award and had her first show in New York while continuing to exhibit with the Gutai group for the “Fourteenth Gutai Exhibition.” An American named Roland A. Gibson began to purchase several of her large-scale works after a visit to the Gutai studio, Gutai Pinacotheca 具体ピナコチカ, in Osaka in 1965.²⁷⁷ Tanaka also participated in several traveling exhibitions that played a role in defining Japanese postwar art, such as “Trends of Contemporary Painting: The West and Japan,” at the National Museum of Modern Art, Kyoto, in 1960, and “The New Japanese Painting and Sculpture” at the San Francisco Museum of Art in 1965, which traveled to over ten venues in the United States.²⁷⁸ Her solo career abroad intensified from the 1980s, as she exhibited in Oxford, Edinburgh, Madrid, Paris, Rome, and New York.

As Tanaka attracted the limelight, the Gutai group as a whole was receiving less press, and this strained relations between the leader Yoshihara and Tanaka.²⁷⁹ In 1965, Tanaka became mentally ill, was briefly hospitalized, and left Gutai together with Kanayama. The couple was married that same year. Kanayama initiated the move to live co-operatively with another couple in a detached house on the ground of the temple Myōhō-ji 妙法寺 in Nara to facilitate her recovery.²⁸⁰ After leaving the group, Kanayama took care of Tanaka’s administrative tasks and she continued to exhibit extensively. While it is tempting to connect her brief institutionalization with her interest in the new transforming subject of modern Japan, I am also wary of the quick and dismissive assumption that she was a “crazed” (read: hysterical) female artist, whose genius stems from her exceptional state. Rather, I would suggest that the rise of depression throughout the population at the time may have been indicative of larger problems within Japanese society.²⁸¹

Gender and Genres

It could be argued that part of Tanaka’s international artistic success in the 1980s was due to the revisionist art-historical drive to search out and promote more women artists that took

Japanese group was called Zero Dimension or *Zero Jigen* ゼロ次元. This Tokyo-based group was not affiliated with Zero-kai. *Gutai 1,2,3*, 39.

²⁷⁵ Tapié also selected Tanaka as well as Yoshihara, Shiraga and Shimamoto for inclusion in the Osaka “World International Modern Art Exhibition” at the exclusion of other Gutai members. *Ibid.*, 34.

²⁷⁶ Sam Francis is said to have recommended Tanaka to the gallery owner Shimizu Kazuo. Francis purchased *Work* (1963) from this show, which Tanaka then renamed *Thanks Sam*. Tanaka further expressed her gratitude by giving Francis *Work* from 1957. Interview with Joshua Mack, January 15 2008.

²⁷⁷ The Gutai Pinacotheca was opened in 1962.

²⁷⁸ Museum of Modern Art (New York N.Y.) et al., *The New Japanese Painting and Sculpture* (New York: Doubleday, 1966).

²⁷⁹ Interview with Katō, October 21, 2007.

²⁸⁰ After living for several years in the temple, in 1972 the couple moved to the city of Asuka in Nara prefecture, never returning to Tanaka’s hometown. Tiampo and Katō, *Electrifying Art: Atsuko Tanaka, 1954-1968*, 118.

²⁸¹ Mamoru Iga, *The Thorn in the Chrysanthemum: Suicide and Economic Success in Japan*. (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1986), 16.

place that decade, though she did have some international currency in the 1960s.²⁸² Certainly, her oeuvre, rich as it is in its attention to the body and its concomitant fascination with the “women’s world” of clothing, fit the bill. Interest in the Gutai group as a whole was fed by the 1985 retrospective held at the Ashiya City Civic Center. But Tanaka in particular seems to have benefited from the exposure of this event. In part, her increasing visibility rests on the fact that from the early 1950s up until the 1980s, she was one of only a handful of women artists productive at the time. The Gutai group included some of them, women such as Yamazaki Tsukuro and Kanno Seiko 神野聖子. Kanno, however, did not join the group until 1964, and her late arrival conforms to the general pattern of membership in the group.²⁸³ Over the eighteen years of Gutai’s existence, fifty-nine artists participated, with the average membership in the group around twenty. Of these fifty-nine, thirteen were women; however, the majority joined in the “late” phase of Gutai after Tanaka had left the group in 1965.

Categorizing Tanaka’s extensive period of productivity (from roughly 1952-2005), simply as feminist art, performance art, or even Gutai art is reductive at best. In the 1950s, the term “performance art” was not even in circulation, and it did not have currency in Japan until well after it gained popularity in America. The written term “pafomansu a-to” パフォーマンスアート in Japanese is simply a phonetic rendition of “performance art” in *katakana*, the foreign language syllabary.²⁸⁴

To dub her work “feminist art” is somewhat problematic as well, since Tanaka publicly disavowed political interests, stating at the “Out of Actions” exhibit and conference in 1998: “My work doesn’t have much to do with politics, although in a broader context it may ... My work has nothing to do with gender either. It doesn’t matter whether I am a man or a woman. I am not conscious of it.”²⁸⁵ Despite her protests, it is hard to deny that she was a forerunner, and her career offers a precedent for the increasing visibility of women artists. A turbulent contest over the new roles for women and men in 1950s Japan was percolating, and this context was an issue that Tanaka undoubtedly engaged with as part of her artistic productivity. Her distancing from feminism, a movement that had a very marginal position at that time, may have had many motivations. Such denials are faintly typical of women, as Wagner notes: “Keeping the jury out on the feminism question can be considered an asset for any number of reasons, from the ideological to the economic.”²⁸⁶ It is possible that, given the status of women at the time, overtly casting oneself as a feminist may have effected a pre-emptive dismissal of her work.²⁸⁷ It is

²⁸² I suggest this in part because a renewed interest in Gutai did not really emerge until the 1980s. For example, one of the first critical articles to deal with Gutai was Hikosaka’s, “Beyond the Enclosed Ring, What to Find in the Trajectory of Gutai...” in 1973. Chiba has remarked on the absence of critical discourse on Gutai in the 1960s. See Chiba, *Gendai bijutsu itsudatsushi, 1945-1985*, 24.

²⁸³ There is very little published on Kanno Seiko; however, an interesting retrospective was held on her work at the ACMAH in 1997. For more information see Ashiya bijutsu hakubutsukan, *Seiko Kanno ten: shi to kaiga to ongaku to...* (*Seiko Kanno: A Retrospective, between Poetry, Painting, Music and...*) (Ashiya: Ashiya bijutsu hakubutsukan (Ashiya; ACMAH, 1997).

²⁸⁴ The term was not used to describe the Happenings in Tokyo in the 1960s. See Kuroda Raiji, “A Flash of Neo Dada: Cheerful Destroyers in Tokyo (1993) in *Review of Japanese Culture and Society. 1960’s Japan: Art Outside the Box*. XVII (December 2005): 63.

²⁸⁵ The video *Tanaka Atsuko* directed by Oami Okabe from Gallery Ham in Nagoya includes clips of Tanaka being interviewed for the UCLA Conference *Out of Actions* in 1998. Okabe, *Tanaka Atsuko mō hitotsu no Gutai (Tanaka Atsuko: Another Gutai)*.

²⁸⁶ Wagner, *Three Artists, Three Women*, 5.

²⁸⁷ Tanaka’s comments follow on the heels of a controversial debate on feminism and art history in Japan that took place in December 1997. Reactionary commentary broke out after the Japanese feminist scholar, Chino Kaori,

equally plausible that gender politics were not explicitly on her mind. But it bears repeating that to concede that Tanaka does not define herself as a feminist is not to deny the critical role that gender plays in her oeuvre in examining the negotiations of surface and subjectivity.

Although all evidence suggests that Tanaka had the same opportunities to exhibit, perform, and paint, as did other members of Gutai, there is no doubt that her artistic abilities were viewed through a gendered lens, even within the group.²⁸⁸ For instance, Shimamoto Shōzō, a Gutai member, in 1955 said:

Among these few examples of avant-garde art, Tanaka's work has taught me about an aesthetic sensitivity that I did not have, especially an alternate possibility of rigorous beauty that can be created from womanly sweetness and frailty. They were a great influence on me.²⁸⁹

Both Kanayama and Yoshihara expressed surprise that she was able to lift some of her larger installation pieces, or frequently contrasted the slightness of her figure with her work. In an exhibition brochure, Yoshihara described Tanaka as: “an annoying person of violence who is ... endowed with a tiny body that can be held in one hand. When she plans her works, she expects no assistance from others. But who can just watch from the sidelines?”²⁹⁰ At least one reviewer posed her success as uncharacteristic of her sex, stating that her work was dynamic and “unwomanly.”²⁹¹

Contemporary reception of Tanaka's art was likewise highly mediated by comments about the artist's sex. For example, the headline of a 1955 edition of the *Asahi Newspaper* ran: “Twenty Bells Take You by Surprise: A Young Lady's Work Accepted to Genbi's Exhibition without Problem.”²⁹² Nearly ten years later, the same patronizing tone continued: this time the headline read: “Tanaka Atsuko: With her outlandish ideas, she is bold, despite her frail-looking physique.”²⁹³ In the English edition of the newspaper, *Mainichi News*, Tanaka is repeatedly referred to as “Miss Tanaka” — language that may have been axiomatic at the time but nonetheless signals difference: Yoshihara and other members of Gutai were simply referred to by their surnames.²⁹⁴

This overemphasis on her “frailness,” as well as the contestations of gender and art in general, may have elicited a degree of resentment in Tanaka, a resentment that surfaced through her declared annoyance with markers of femininity. In an untitled work, she placed an artificial,

presented a paper entitled “Today, Looking Back on Japanese Art History Studies” (Ima, Nihon no bijutsushigaku o furikaeru) at the Tokyo National Institute for Cultural Properties. Ayako Kano, “Women? Japan? Art? Chino Kaori and the Feminist Art History Debate,” *Review of Japanese Culture and Society* 15, December (2003): 26.

²⁸⁸ For example, Tanaka and other female members of Gutai were given ample space in exhibitions and in the pages of *Gutai* magazine.

²⁸⁹ “Ichi-mai no nunokire demo geijutsu sakuin ka” Shimamoto, ed. *Gutai* 4, special edition for the *1st Gutai Exhibition*, 1956, 31.

²⁹⁰ Yoshihara Jirō, “Tanaka Atsuko ni tsuite (About Tanaka Atsuko),” *Exhibition Brochure*, February 1963. Reprinted in “Electrifying Painting” in *Electrifying Art* (New York and Vancouver: Grey Gallery and Helen and Morris Belkin Gallery, 2001), 110.

²⁹¹ Akane Kazuo, “Yakudōkan afureru: onna to omoenu Tanaka no sakuin (Very dynamic: Tanaka's unwomanly work).” *Yomiuri Shinbun*, (August 1968): 30.

²⁹² *Asahi Shinbun*, arts section. November 24, 1955.

²⁹³ Hyugu Akiko, *Asahi Shinbun*, November 6, 1964.

²⁸⁹ “Gutai Art Exhibition,” *Mainichi News*, October 12, 1956, 25.

hot pink rayon material against the dirt, juxtaposing the saturated color with the unmanipulated dark soil (figure 7).²⁹⁵ Describing her aims in 1955, she said:

I wanted to shatter a stable beauty with my work. In the case of the pink fabric the size of twenty *tatami* mats [about 32.8 x32.8 feet], I wanted to use the most distasteful color imaginable. I walked all over the city of Osaka and finally found this rayon. I wanted to destroy the superficiality of the conventional ‘artist-look,’ using the weird sheen that resulted from sunlight reflecting from the cloth covering the ground.²⁹⁶

The vivid color — a nearly nauseating pink (an extremely difficult color to find or make at the time) — was chosen, Tanaka declared, because it was the color she disliked the most. Nevertheless, the bald monochrome suggests more than the limits of taste. It registers how color alone can connote the gendered issues of artifice, make-up, dress-up, and made-up frivolity — things that Tanaka may have responded to with ambivalence. Surely, her work had a comedic “lightness” to it, but it was a humor directed at the most serious and dangerous matters. This approach, as we know, has a long history in art, as Miró and others have shown us. Too often, reviewers of Gutai have caught on to the “fun” while missing the punch line of the joke. Tanaka often claimed that she wanted to destroy “safe beauty” and chose a sartorial language through which to do so. Throughout her career, her works took up a timely interest in fabric and women’s fashion that was charged with an undercurrent of disquieting ambiguity.

Material Surfaces

Tanaka participated in her first exhibition with a simple piece that had a series of numbers inked onto a hemp-colored cloth in 1954 (figure 7).²⁹⁷ In 1955, she exhibited *Work (Yellow Cloth)*, which involved three pieces of creased material hung on the wall in close proximity. Two of these pieces of unevenly commercially-dyed fabric were nearly the same size, while the third took a much longer rectangular shape.²⁹⁸ The composition might have easily been mistaken as a ready-made perhaps because of its relatively unmanipulated quality; yet, the artist’s interventions are nonetheless decisive. They are lodged in the selection of the color and cloth, the cutting of the pieces, and the specificity of their hanging.²⁹⁹ A close look at the fabric reveals that in several places approximately four-inch cuts appear in the surface that were later mended with glued-on patches of the same fabric. *Yellow Cloth*, then, does not fit the category of

²⁹⁰ Tanaka sewed a bright blue border around the neon pink.

²⁹⁶ Reprinted from *Industrial Economic News* (July 25, 1955) in Tiampo and Katō, *Electrifying Art: Atsuko Tanaka, 1954-1968*. Shimamoto Shōzō similarly described the work as “utterly vulgar” and wondered where she could have found such a nauseating color. Shimamoto Shōzō, “Ichi-mai no nuno...,” 31. Indeed, this color of cloth would have likely been very difficult to find during the 1950s.

²⁹⁷ *Work*, 5.51 x 16.14. A second piece with the numbers “33333” and “2222” inscribed on brown hemp (8.26 x 18.11 inches) was also included. Both date to 1954 and are in the Collection of Barbara Bertozzi Castelli, New York.

²⁹⁸ 3.2 x 6.82, 3.2 x 6.62 and 3.3 x 12.36 feet in size. Gallery HAM, Nagoya.

²⁹⁹ Tanaka apparently liked the way it hung with three delicate folds appearing in the cloth, and was not cavalier about subsequent hangings of her piece, asking that it appear in the same manner. That she asked curators Tatehata Akira and Hirai Shoichi to hang these pieces and install *Electric Dress* as it first appeared demonstrates her commitment to the development relations of surface. When the piece was initially submitted to the “Eighth Ashiya City Exhibition,” it was rejected. However, it was eventually accepted since Yoshihara was a juror and recommended that it be included. Interview with Katō Mizuho, October 19, 2007.

ready-made *objet*,³⁰⁰ nor did Tanaka seem overly concerned about “breaking down the boundaries between art and life” as Allan Kaprow understood the Gutai group’s goals to be.³⁰¹ Instead, she seemed preoccupied with engaging textiles in vertical format in a series, seeing how the material was affected by gravity, and the transformation of its movement in the air. For Tanaka, concerns of audience and institutional critique were secondary to issues related to an examination of connectivity, surface, and form in a non-painterly evocation of painting.

Ideas for both *Yellow Cloth*, and *Work (Pink Cloth* – see figure 8) may have grown from Tanaka’s hobby as an amateur seamstress.³⁰² These fabric-based works culminated in *Stage Clothes*, created for the Gutai Group’s first forays into performance art in 1956 and 1957 (figure 9).³⁰³ Gutai’s performance pieces were precedent-setting internationally as well as locally. *Stage Clothes* was an important precursor for *Electric Dress* and, indeed, Tanaka described it as such in the program from *Gutai Art on the Stage*, an event that took place at Sankei Kaikan in 1957: “This stage dress changes color in an unexpected manner, from red to yellow to blue. In the end it becomes an electric dress which blinks like fireworks.”³⁰⁴ Thus connectivity between her pieces was often as important as the logic of connectivity within a given piece. Most often, this connectivity is actualized on the exterior surface of the work, be it the material in *Stage Clothes*, or the bulbs and wires of *Electric Dress*.

While according to Japanese art critic Tatehata Akira, fashion-play is the shared theme between *Stage Clothes* and *Electric Dress*, I would suggest that the two works reveal Tanaka’s interest in interrogating surface as a site of gender differencing.³⁰⁵ In this context, surface refers to an arena of distinction that lies between the other, outwardly world, and the internalized self. Surface in Tanaka’s work is presented as alluring and available as a potential site of contact. But surface is also uncertain terrain, allowing the subject the opportunity to hide or withdraw. As

³⁰⁰ There is a divergence in usage between the term *objet* as used in French and English, and how it has come to be used in Japan. In English, it is typically associated with the Dadaist ready-made, but in Japan, it came to mean artworks that remained untouched and were displayed as such, *as well as* pieces that were manipulated by the artist, extensively or otherwise.

³⁰¹ See Allan Kaprow, *Happenings: Blurring the Boundary Between Art and Life*, 16. Yoshihara sent Kaprow photographs of Gutai work that piqued the American’s interest. While the Gutai were interested in finding new forms and formats for art, they were not involved in a direct institutional critique in the manner of Kaprow. In fact, the artists of Gutai were vying for exhibition space in major art galleries, and sought major media attention in magazines such as *Life*.

³⁰² Tanaka’s engagement with dressmaking had deep roots in the gendered transitions in industry in Japan. The growing interest in dressmaking began immediately after the war. For example, in 1946, the Doreme dressmaking school was opened by Sugino Yoshiko. She had prepared thirty application forms for the school, but on opening day found one thousand seven hundred women lined up outside the store. The Doreme School soon became a nationwide chain. Dower, *Embracing Defeat*, 170. This further reveals the multilayered implications of her work.

³⁰³ My comments above that Gutai may have been the first performance artists refers to the kind of performance art that developed in 1960s America that demonstrated an interest in placing creative action, rather than objects, or products, front and centre. Performance art is a broad category used to describe a wide array of art works, a category that places extremely heterogeneous works created in different times and in different nations under a homogenizing umbrella; consequently, determining what is performance art, and who produced the “first” performance art becomes a messy and possibly unproductive line of inquiry.

³⁰⁴ “Gutai Art on the Stage” program, Tokyo, (May 17, 1957).

³⁰⁵ Interview with Tatehata Akira (Osaka, 2008). During the interview, Tatehata’s summation of the work as a fashion piece and simultaneous dismissive gesture made clear that the piece was not of primary interest to him. He has continually argued for the value of the painterly quality of Gutai works, and *Stage Clothes* does not effectively substantiate this argument.

Judith Butler reminds us, surface and the boundaries of the body play a profound role in gender subjectivity.³⁰⁶

While art historians such as Tatehata Akira, Osaki Shinichiro, and Katō Mizuho argue that *Electric Dress* had a strong painterly quality, referring to Tanaka's interest in color and composition, I see it as equally plausible that Tanaka's paintings have a performative quality, as demonstrated in the bodily engagement and relation to her performance works like *Electric Dress*.³⁰⁷ Strong proponents for Gutai's painterly qualities may simply be arguing for a re-assessment of Gutai, because of the unspoken value of painting over performance art. Tanaka's works are performative in the repetition of the physical action required to make the circles, her sweeping gestures activating the surface of the canvas, they are painterly because of her commitment to surface and color. Tanaka's habituated actions are documented in the film *Round on Sand* (1968), as she silently marks perfect circles with a stick. When making a work she lays it flat on the floor, sometimes using a compass, at other times drawing them by hand.³⁰⁸ Her body is at once the means to create the painting and an obstacle within the space of the canvas that she must negotiate around.

In a 2002 essay, Katō aptly describes Tanaka as "Searching for a Boundary." Katō's analysis is one of the most interesting proposed to date: "It is my conclusion that Tanaka has always engaged with the constant metamorphosis of the body, her work has continually explored and identified the 'border' as a site where structural transformations occur."³⁰⁹ However, Katō asks few questions about how this takes place within Tanaka's paintings. Further, I question whether it is in fact the pure and controlled agent, (in this case, Tanaka) who unidirectionally explores boundaries. Perhaps, as I have been suggesting, her paintings are at once a search for self, an expression of self, and a site of self-construction. If we consider Tanaka's work as an example of the performative, then even Katō's approach might be shifted to see Tanaka's painting, the installation of *Bell*, or the making and wearing of *Electric Dress* as a metamorphosis of and through the body.

Subjectivity (*Shutaisei* 主体性) and the Postwar

My reading of Tanaka's work, and indeed my conception of performance and ontology in general, argues against interpretations that see her work as simply part of a move towards "individualism." Instead, I assert that her oeuvre reveals a lack of fixity in the subject. Following the defeat of Japan in World War II, the imperialist rhetoric that fostered a commitment to the nation over the individual was largely rejected and a re-evaluation of subjectivity (the property of being a subject or the experience of being as such) held great philosophical currency.³¹⁰ The

³⁰⁶ Butler writes: the "boundaries of the body are the lived experience of differentiation, where that differentiation is never neutral to the question of gender difference or the heterosexual matrix." Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter* (London, New York: Routledge, 1993), 65.

³⁰⁷ Tatehata Akira, "Seisei suru taburo: gutai bijutsu kyōkai no 1950 nendai, (Creating Tableaux, the 1950s Gutai Art Association)," 14-19; Osaki, "Gutai kaigae itaru Action (Art in Gutai, Action into Painting)," 19-28; Katō Mizuho, *Tanaka Atsuko: Search for an Unknown Aesthetic*, 2001.

³⁰⁸ The 16mm film *Round on Sand* shows Tanaka making perfect circles in the sand without the aid of a compass or other device. Fukuzawa Hiroshi, "Round on Sand," (Nagoya: Gallery Ham, 1968, copyright 2000).

³⁰⁹ In "Searching for a Boundary," in *Tanaka Atsuko: Search for an Unknown Aesthetic, 1954-2000* exh. Cat. (Ashiya Museum of Art and History, 2001), 15-25.

³¹⁰ According to Victor Koschmann, the terms *shutaisei* 主体性 (subjectivity) and *shukan* 主観 (the subject) were in high circulation following the postwar, in part originating from debates about Marxism lead by the communist party. These debates were concerned with how historical development would be charted and how the social subject would be used in that model. However, subjectivity also circulated as a term for a notion of Japanese existentialism that

notion of shared experience, perception, and interpretation among those of a common nation came into question. New theories of subjectivity were often divergent, contradictory, and ambiguous. Nonetheless, academics and art critics have clung to the concept of “individualism” in the postwar as having critical purchase on artists such as the Gutai. This framework has been furthered by academics that have argued that Tanaka and Shiraga were involved in creating works that affirmed a sense of individuality and were part of a growing movement towards individualism.³¹¹ At times when reading Oyobe’s otherwise illuminating work on subjectivity and Gutai it is difficult to pin down her use of the term “individualism,” as originality and individualism are often conflated in a somewhat confusing manner.³¹² Furthermore, the important question of whether or not the cult of individualism was as accessible for women as it was for men has been sidestepped. As I see it, Tanaka’s work shows consistent interest in boundaries, surface, and the in-between spaces of representation, revealing a great ambivalence towards fixed notions of individuality.

Arguments promoting Japan’s postwar celebration of individualism may also falsely frame intellectual development in Japan. An awareness of the individual subject was certainly extant previous to the 1930s. How can we be sure that the nationalist messages of prioritizing community over the individual were thoroughly internalized before 1945? How can we determine that a clear notion of individualism emerged after the war? The abrupt shift from imperialism to constitutional democracy, authored largely by the American Occupation forces, certainly required transformation and greater responsibility on the part of the individual in Japan. But we cannot assume that before the postwar subjectivity was underdeveloped or entirely group-based. As James Fujii trenchantly argues in the opening lines of *Complicit Fictions*:

In Japan, a nation persistently and misleadingly characterized by foreigners and Japanese alike as a society where “group” (family) displaces “self,” Western (particularly romantic) conceptions of the individual continue to be embraced with considerable fanfare. Naturalized by over a century of sustained rumination, individualism has been adopted as a powerfully attractive ideal, whether it finds popular expressions as an insistent and revealing emphasis on *kosei* (individuality) or when it appears repeatedly as the subject of scholarly discourse.³¹³

As Fujii insists, the shared conclusion that Gutai works speak to a newfound sense of individualism overlooks the fact that this assumption has largely been constructed by academics in the postwar. Furthermore, the argument for individuality may be a pat response that blankets the complex struggles that Tanaka and Shiraga engaged in. It neglects the resistance to and

was tied to a Kierkegaardian “leap of faith,” or, alternatively, as an individualistic ethos that was based on the protestant ethic. Koschmann writes: “In the environment of the end of Occupation in the early 1950s, the category of nation again became a major focal point for subjective identification alongside class and humanity, a process in which the sinologist Takeuchi Yoshimi played an important role.” Koschmann, *Revolution and Subjectivity in Postwar Japan*, 4.

³¹¹ See Oyobe, “Human Subjectivity and Confrontation with Materials in Japanese Art: Yoshihara Jirō and Early Years of the Gutai Art Association, 1947-1958”.; Tiampo, “Gutai & Informel: Post-War Art in Japan and France, 1945-1965”.

³¹² For example, in Chapter Four, “Laboratories of Experiments II: The Work of Three Gutai Artists, Shimamoto Shozo, Shiraga Kazuo, and Tanaka Atsuko,” Oyobe makes frequent reference to the individual style of Shiraga or Tanaka based on the originality of their art, leaving aside the question of what “individual style” means and what motivated these concerns for each artist. Oyobe, “Human Subjectivity...” (Ph.D. Dissertation, 2005): 160-236.

³¹³ James A. Fujii, *Complicit Fictions: The Subject in the Modern Japanese Prose Narrative* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 1.

complicity with gender roles that framed their production, and, in turn, homogenizes broad differences in their practices and production.

Gender and the Context of 1950s Japan

Commercial visual culture and gender were deeply intertwined as Japan struggled to regain economic footing after the war. A wave of popularity for dressmaking, fashion icons, and dressing oneself up in the 1950s is evident in the visual culture of magazines, newspapers, and posters of the time. A short perusal of the pages of the *Daily Yomiuri* (*Yomiuri Shinbun* 読売新聞), for example, reveals a high frequency of advertisements for newly opened dress shops, cosmetic companies, and fashion guides (figure 10). New Japan, these images promised, would be modern and captivating. Movie pages in the largest newspapers often featured depictions of Marilyn Monroe. Displayed in a larger size than other advertisements, her uncovered legs extend over the boundaries of the illustrated marquee, as though this boldly fashioned star, an excess of size and allure, was enticing the Japanese reader to be complicit in the glamorous dream of sexualized capitalism. Monroe's Cadillac-like figure, promoting *How to Marry a Millionaire*, sits in competition with other ads for handmade Western-style dress patterns, or discounts on kimonos (figure 11). Magazines like *Housewife's Companion* (*Shufu no tomo*, 主婦の友) maintained high levels of popularity following the war and often featured articles on how to turn kimono into dresses and new ways to apply cosmetics to make one's eyes appear larger.³¹⁴

These newspaper images, directed to the middle class, suggest a postwar re-evaluation of the *Moga* モガ, a 1930s neologism for "modern girl," who was characterized by short hair, makeup, and a new public identity. In the early Shōwa period, *moga* women were perceived as a threat to moral standards, and attempts to control the risk of their so-called brazen sexuality were instated by government rules.³¹⁵ In 1925, for example, Osaka authorities banned dancing in places serving food, limited service hours, and outlawed dim lighting as a means to control social morality. During the war and the American Occupation, the status of women underwent further changes. Following the approval of women's right to vote in 1946, media and the market capitalized on the notion of women's empowerment.

As the visibility of women's bodies promoting sales skyrocketed, *Electric Dress* offered an alternative visualization of the female body, one that neither collaborated with the commercialized female body nor affirmed the empowered female body. The translation of *Electric Dress* or *Denkifuku* also has suggested ambivalence over gender issues, which has been intensified by scholars who have offered differing rationales for their preferred appellation. There seemed to be some confusion about the title of the piece even in the 1950s. At the time of the exhibition, the *Stars and Stripes*, an English military newspaper, remarks that it was labeled kimono while other reviewers suggest it was labeled *Denkifuku*.³¹⁶ The first two Chinese characters of the title read *denki* 電気, meaning electricity or electric, and the last character *fuku* 服, simply means clothes, suggesting the plausible translation, *Electric Clothes*. Had Tanaka

³¹⁴ The journal featured interesting stories such as "How to Convert Your Kimono into Western Style Clothing." See Barbara Hamill Sato's "An Alternate Informant" in Tipton and Clark, *Being Modern in Japan: Culture and Society*. 139 and 147 respectively. Fashion trends growing in the inter-war years often became more dominant in the postwar period.

³¹⁵ For more, see Elise Tipton, "Contested Spaces of Modernity in Interwar Japan" from John Clark and Elise Tipton, eds. *Being Modern in Japan*.

³¹⁶ "They Call It Art," *Stars and the Stripes*, October 22, 1956. The article includes an interesting photo by Andrew Headlands showing Tanaka adjusting one of the bulbs of *Electric Dress*.

chosen to specify women's clothing she might have called it *denki dress* (denki doresu 電気ドレス) or *denki one piece* (電気ワンピース), but these terms created with the *katakana* foreign language syllabary would have connoted Westernism perhaps more than Tanaka may have wanted.³¹⁷ Katō argues that the piece should be translated as *Electric Clothes*.³¹⁸ This interpretation would also correlate with the English titles of two of Tanaka's early pieces, both named *Stage Clothes*, although they too could be translated as *Stage Dress*.³¹⁹ Tatehata, on the other hand, points out that Tanaka was alive when the work was exhibited abroad as *Electric Dress* and therefore would have raised objections had she had any.³²⁰ It should also be said that the debate might be overstated because "dress" can be a gender-neutral term; moreover, discussion circulating around the best translation may be taking the place of a deeper analysis on the meaning of the work itself. I think that Tanaka would have liked the catchiness and dramatic connotations of *Electric Dress*, but declined to come out strongly for any one title, enjoying the flows of (mis)translation and ambiguity that surround her performance pieces.³²¹ Certainly, Tanaka exhibited a fascination with the transformational quality of dresses, as her installation of *Stage Clothes*, the performance pieces she did under the same name, and *Electric Dress* all declare. Her fascination with dresses was shared with the vast majority of 1950s young female Japanese consumers, and her questions about the nature of that popularity, I think, are aptly exemplified in both the title and performance of *Electric Dress*.³²²

Performance and Tanaka's *Stage Clothes*

In the filmed version of *Stage Clothes*, performed in Osaka in 1957 (see figure 9), Tanaka concocted a direct response to the growing demand for commercialized beauty, inverting the sexiness of the strip tease.³²³ The young artist appeared in an organza green dress, with one yellow sock and one green sock, her face expressionless. She then proceeded to take off the sleeves and midsection of that dress, revealing a yellow frock underneath that then was transformed into a fuchsia chiffon gown. She removed her layers of costumes rapidly yet matter-

³¹⁷ A one piece, or *wanpisu* can also refer to a dress in Japanese.

³¹⁸ Katō Mizuho interview by the author February 20, 2008.

³¹⁹ *Gutai Art on the Stage* program, May 29, 1957. Gutai Art Association. Translated in Tiampo and Katō, *Electrifying Art: Atsuko Tanaka, 1954-1968*, 114. Note that there are two works named *Stage Clothes*, Figure 2, which is an installation piece and Figure 10, which is a performance piece. Note also that the names and translations of the pieces are not always clear. For example, Yoshihara translates the title, *Denkifuku* 電気服, as *Stage Costume*, in a description of the Second Outdoor Exhibition of Gutai Art although it was usually translated at *Stage Dress*. Jirō Yoshihara, "On the Second Outdoor Exhibition of The "Gutai" Art Group," *Gutai 5* (1956). 2.

³²⁰ Tatehata Akira, interviewed by the author Osaka. October 19, 2008.

³²¹ Another amusing example of such potential mistranslations in the Gutai group involved Tsukuro Yamazaki's hanging aluminum installation at the "Experimental Outdoor Exhibition to Challenge the Midsummer Sun." The work was installed near a park sign that read "danger." Since that time the piece has come to be known as *Danger*, despite that it may have never been given a title.

³²² As I have mentioned, statistics reveal the high degree of popularity for dressmaking. This was confirmed recently by a friend of mine, who shared stories from her grandmother who opened a dress store around 1950, as soon after the war as she was able. Her grandmother reported feeling thrilled with the idea of a beautiful dress after so many years of wearing the Japanese war-time clothing, the *monpe* モンペ (simple, usually dark colored pants). The store was opened outside of Hiroshima and was named after the only French word she knew, "Bon." Morimoto Maiko 森本麻衣子, March 19, 2009.

³²³ The *Gutai On Stage* show took place at the Sankei Kaikan in Osaka in 1957. An earlier version of *Stage Clothes* was completed at the *One-Day Outdoor Exhibition* in Amagasaki, a show mainly organized for the benefit of the media, including *Life* photographers working on a Gutai story that was never published, much to the disappointment of Yoshihara and the other members of Gutai.

of-factly, each action revealing another color and style of gown beneath the one before. Though the dresses were frilly, colorful, and generally ostentatious, her clipped movements and efficient manner maintained an insistently mundane atmosphere. She did not smile. Movements superfluous to the changing of clothes were kept to a strict minimum.

The mysterious way that each dress appeared, using trick sleeves and removable panels, was akin to a magic show rather than a fashion show. Tanaka's performance offered no sexy strut down the catwalk, no embellished turns. No surprise, then, that the work finished without a flourish. Instead she simply stopped when she was wearing only a thick black leotard that rendered her form invisible against the dark stage. That decision was significant. This was a striptease of anti-climax, where the body was virtually obscured in a black void.³²⁴ *Stage Clothes* constructs a tension between the viewer's desire to see and know the contours that define the individual body or character, and the ambiguous, sober performance of the artist. Unlike Yoko Ono, who a mere eight years later would represent herself as an object of others' actions in *Cut Piece*, Tanaka is aware of the interaction of objectivity and subjectivity and seems to be performing a different relation to traditional Japanese conceptions of femininity.

Tanaka's studies for *Stage Clothes* (1956) bear out a similar interest in transformation rather than individualization (figure 12).³²⁵ In each of the sketches, the figure is drawn in a series of lines across the page. Tanaka delineates the ways each piece of cloth will be worn or removed by using red watercolor to indicate the placement of the cloth on the subject. In the first plan, the repeated figure is a minimally-detailed shape with legs; in the other two plans, she draws stick-figures in succession; and in the third the rudimentary figures appears with breasts and hips. Regardless of the state of dress, the subject in the drawings and in the performances remains expressionless and vacant of personal gesture.

The refusal of the erotic stands in opposition to the ubiquitous availability of women's skin in the postwar period. Dower states that "the eroticization of defeated Japan in the eyes of the conquerors took place almost immediately, creating a complex interplay of assumed masculine and feminine roles that has colored U.S.-Japan relations ever since."³²⁶ Yet this sexualization of the nation reaches even further back to Commodore Perry's alleged "opening" of Japan one hundred years earlier. In the 1950s, the sexual tension between the Occupation Forces and Japanese citizens were no less problematic. It is well known that Japan forced women into sexual slavery to create so-called "comfort stations" for military men in Japanese-occupied territories in World War II.³²⁷ That the government called upon Japanese women to work in state-run brothels for American military men during the Occupation has received less press.³²⁸ The American General Headquarters shut down these stations because of the resulting spread of

³²⁴ In the 1957 version, Tanaka again strips down to a black body suit, but ended by releasing a piece of yellow fabric from her right glove and pink fabric from her left one. She then withdrew into the background of her set — a large fabric red dress hanging from the ceiling.

³²⁵ Studies appear in Tanaka Atsuko's 1955-1956 notebook. Atsuko Tanaka, Notebook One (New York: Private collection, 1955-1956), unpublished.

³²⁶ Dower, *Embracing Defeat*, 137.

³²⁷ George Hicks, *The Comfort Women: Japan's Brutal Regime of Enforced Prostitution in the Second World War* (New York : W.W. Norton & Co., 1995).

³²⁸ In 1945 the home ministry endeavored to protect the "good" women of Japan by exploiting the poor—more precisely the female poor—in the name, once more, of "purity." The powerful ministry, bastion of the wartime police state, ordered local associations of "special prostitutes" to be organized explicitly to serve the foreigners... In Tokyo the "special prostitutes" association was even given a formal inauguration in front of the imperial Palace, during which some thirty young women pledged, in extremely ornate language, to sacrifice themselves to "maintain and cultivate the pure blood of the race for hundred of years into the future." Dower, *War without Mercy*, 308.

sexually transmitted diseases. But erotic dance shows, prostitution, and compensated dating remained commonplace throughout the 1950s.³²⁹

The sexual commerce between GIs and Japanese women was so pervasive that children frequently played *panpan asobi*, where they would pretend to be a GIs and freelance prostitutes.³³⁰ Considering the alarming intensification of traffic in women's bodies, *Stage Clothes* hits a nerve. Rather than an exultation of individual spirit, as some scholars have suggested, the performance piece bespeaks the anxiety over the status of Japanese women in the postwar. Significantly, Tanaka covers herself with "made in Japan" exports of cloth, and in the case of *Electric Dress*, cheap industrial lights, drawing attention to capitalist evaluative systems that treat bodies and products equally. A 1956 *Yomiuri Shinbun* article the headline quotes Tanaka's summary of the piece: "it is interesting because it moves."³³¹ For her, fluidity is valued over fixity, emphasizing the flows of goods and services between Japan and the United States. *Stage Clothes*, in its attention to fashion as well as the relationship between body and performance, reveals the constructs of gender without reinventing the oft-seen icons of the *moga* (modern girls) or *panpan* girls. Like the majority of her works, it explores the touchpoints between the physical self and the outward world. At the same time, the viewer's obscured vision and the performer's multiple transformations suggest the impossibility of confidently securing any identification with the performer.

Mapping the Senses

As a whole, Tanaka Atsuko's diverse oeuvre suggests a strong interest in sensory experience. *Bell* (figure 13), for example, worked with sound, *Work* (yellow cloth) was inviting to touch, and *Electric Dress* transfixed our vision and evoked the melding of skin and machine. *Bell* (originally installed 1955; reconstructed in 1985, 2000 and 2004) is an installation piece composed of a set of approximately twenty small bells that are of similar appearance placed at roughly two-meter equidistant points around the floor of a gallery.³³² The silver, circular orbs resting on their bases have a utilitarian, non-decorative quality to them, and they are connected by a series of equally mundane-looking wires. A willing gallery visitor activates the piece through a single touch of a button. Each bell then sounds in sequence, and while all of the bells ring in a starkly-aggressive, high-pitched tone, each sound differs from the last, in a seeming endless series of unharmonious noise (it sustains for about two minutes).³³³ It is a work that

³²⁹ "The RAA or Recreation and Amusement Association was established in 1945 and women were made to have sex with 15 – 60 GIs a day ... By January 1946 American authorities shut them down because 70 percent of the women were said to have syphilis and 50 percent to have gonorrhea." Dower, *Embracing Defeat*, 129.

³³⁰ *Ibid.*, 112.

³³¹ "Yagai Gutai bijutsuten kara, ugoku omoshirosa, (From the Gutai Outdoor Exhibition: 'It Is Interesting Because It Moves')," *Yomiuri Shinbun* August 3, 1956.

³³² Reconstructions of *Bell* at the Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery show the bells placed by the floorboards near the wall of the gallery space rather than in the center of the floor. Shiraga stated that from the creation of *Bell* onward, Yoshihara always approved of her work. Okabe, *Tanaka Atsuko mō hitotsu no Gutai*. The original was made of 131.23 feet of cord, twenty bells and a notch and motor switch.

³³³ According to Tanaka, Yoshihara, and Kanayama (all whom were involved in the installation), the ringing of the bells was from front to back. However at *Electrifying Art* the bells rang only in one direction. Washida Meruro writes that "if the work is reproduced with the terminals in a spiral configuration as indicated in the remaining studies and photograph, the sounds of the bells only moves in one direction, with the bells ringing simultaneously at up to three locations." Meruro claims the engineer Tanana Shinji pointed out the impossibility of bells moving in two directions when he reconstructed the *Bells* in 2005 for the *Possible Futures* show at the NTT Intercommunication Center in Tokyo. See Washida Meruro, "Be-ru ni tsuite (About *Work (Bell)* by Tanaka

requires bodily action to be initiated, and it incurs bodily responses once sounded — if not the usual embarrassed and alarmed expression, a startled jump while covering one’s ears, or at least an extreme vibration of the ear drum. Considering the behavioral tenets in the 1950s, it is likely that the gallery-goer would have found their responsibility for the noise acutely embarrassing.³³⁴ Yoshihara commented that the work received severe criticism, adding that her “dangerous projects often terrorized us.”³³⁵

Key to the work is the visitor’s integration into the artificial sensory experience. Like surface in *Electric Dress* the place of connection (in this case the button) is the interface for *Bell*. Tiampo aptly points to the significance of the interaction but mischaracterizes the engagement as positive: “Despite its irritating sound, interacting with the work is extremely pleasurable. First there is the thrill of transgression — creating a racket in the quiet space of contemplation that is the art exhibition, as well as breaching the sacred rule, ‘do not touch.’”³³⁶ Yet this so-called transgression is at the request of the gallery/artist to the viewer, and, in fact, the ensuing shrill din is anything but pleasurable. The piece is interesting because of this disjuncture, not despite it, as Tiampo would have it.

Bell’s invitation and subsequent denial of pleasure intimate the risks in exposure to new media, a theme that recurs in *Electric Dress*. Viewers disclaimed responsibility after having pressed the button: “I didn’t know it would do that!” “I don’t know how to make it stop ...”³³⁷ This common response suggests that rather than “breaking the boundary between art and life” as Tiampo states (thus making reference to Kaprow’s text on Happenings),³³⁸ *Bell* shows both the possibilities and limits of our agency. It is in the silence before the bell sounds, and after it has caused us a mild headache, that choices present themselves within a circumscribed frame. Although the overall framework is deeply repetitive, choices nonetheless linger in the silence before the bell sounds and the quiet after their cacophony has faded away. We might choose to depress the noisy switch, but we are unaware of potential consequences, and helpless to reverse them. In the space of the sound intervals, we are faced with our own corporeality and the performative possibilities (as the security guards, the gallery-goers watch on) within that frame.³³⁹

Electric Dress elevates the sensory experience of vision and physical contact by its context and production on stage. In contrast to *Bell*, it is our eyes that meet the surface of the dress, confounding surface and light as one. There is no tangible point of contact with the work as was the case in *Bell*. Here an envisioned, imagined physicality, one that displaces Tanaka’s

Atsuko), "Kanazawa 21 seiki bijutsukan kenkyū kiyō (R: 21st Century Kanazawa Journal on Contemporary Art and Culture) 4 (2007). The number of bells was the same as was the duration of sound in the original and reproductions.

³³⁴ These are the kinds of reactions in visitors I observed at *Electrifying Art* as *Bell* was displayed in the Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery in Vancouver, British Columbia, 2005. Yoshihara also referred to this work as “violent” suggesting responses were similar in the original piece.

³³⁵ “Tanaka Atsuko ni tsuite,” exhibition brochure, Gutai Pinacotheca, Osaka (February 1963). Reprinted in “Electrifying Painting” in *Electrifying Art* (New York and Vancouver: Grey Gallery and Helen and Morris Belkin Gallery, 2001), 110.

³³⁶ Ming Tiampo, “Electrifying Painting” in *Electrifying Art* (New York and Vancouver: Grey Gallery and Helen and Morris Belkin Gallery, 2001), 68.

³³⁷ Based on my observations at the Morris and Helen Belkin Gallery at the University of British Columbia *Electrifying Art* show, 2005.

³³⁸ Allan Kaprow, *Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life* (Berkeley: University of California, 1993).

³³⁹ Kanayama noted that shifts in the sounds directly effect corporeal awareness, prompting a new sense of the viewer’s time and space “Discursive Conundrums – Rereading the Work of Atsuko Tanaka” in Katō, *Electrifying Art*, 52.

own presence, is the active site of contact. The work urges us to imagine our own immobility as we watch the lone figure that can only make small gestures from within her glowing costume. Likewise, the electric clothes and the large aluminum underclothing render the body hidden and sexless. Watching *Electric Dress*, viewers have the opportunity to realize that it is we who sex the hidden body, we who locate the subject and our role in that constitution. The repetitious flashing lights anchor the work in a system that is comforting in its reoccurrence and off-putting in its heat and light.

Spatial Dimensions in *Electric Dress*

Tanaka produced compositional plans for *Electric Dress* and drawings that followed after *Electric Dress* that were based on its form, color and patterning. While some of the drawings make reference to the circuitry and others map the structure of the piece, most are focused on the “pattern” of the dress — the surface composed of lines and circles. By “Tanakian rules” circles may appear within other circles and in varying degrees of proximity to each other, but other geometrical forms are rarely represented, and circles, circles, circles, repeat. And yet do not repeat, for each composition is observably unique. *87H*, for example falls into the second category mentioned above, is at once abstract, geometric, and serial (figure 14). Vivid circular shapes (which consistently appear throughout her body of work), are connected, bounded, distorted, and layered over by meandering lines. In the top right, the bold circle is held in tension by the wave of lines that seem to suggest a leftward movement. The intensity of lines on the left begin to meld, and distinguishing each element becomes increasingly difficult. *87H* is compact with thick wiry lines and dark black circles that lend the work a mechanical aesthetic. Acrylic and vinyl paint, which Tanaka used throughout her career, emphasize the plasticity of the textured surface.³⁴⁰ Tanaka’s choice to leave a small amount of white space surrounding the composition emphasizes its compact form, and the work begins to blur the boundary between the abstract and the figural.

Tanaka’s seemingly never-ending series of circle paintings is a painterly means of finding the limits of self and other, of how equivalence and differencing can be achieved by testing the relationship of two basic elements (circle, line) on the thin arena of paint and canvas. Perhaps the most relevant boundary that Tanaka pursues is the space/nonspace between personhood and media. She seeks out the upper limits of heat, sound, luminosity, and size that the physical body can bear. Tanaka determines the interstices between the body and technology, revealing how these technologies produce the gendered self, in their expectations, juxtapositions, and dangers.

Tanaka’s paintings after *Electric Dress* ask if surface is whole or formed by its accumulations of fractures. Obliquely, this line of visual inquiry may be bound to the confounding issue of the modern subject in Japan. Where the figure is absent, where perspective is overridden for expansiveness, where tension is palpable between chaos and order, the solidity of self is replaced with the connections and disconnections of lines and circles. These paintings refer back to *Electric Dress* but sublimate the three-dimensional quality of the work. Though depressing the fullness of the dress, eliminating its mass and the noise of its cranking gears, the paintings still preserves some aspects of the original through color and the form of line and

³⁴⁰ Tanaka strove to maintain the same hue in her works, using the same brand and supplier: a vinyl paint called VIBY produced by Isamu Paint. In the final years of her work, Tanaka also began using acrylic urethane paint called Uni Atoron. Mizuho Katō, “Searching for A Boundary,” in *Tanaka Atsuko: Search for an Unknown Aesthetic, 1954-2000* exh. Cat. (ACMAH, 2001), 25.

circle. As the movement and transformational quality of surface in *Electric Dress* become immobilized and circumscribed, one wonders if this might engender a loss of self.

Tanaka's move from three-dimensional to two-dimensional art can also be linked to the threat posed of technological advancement, wherein the possibility of physical contact with the human body is removed and replaced by the televised body, the commercially represented body, or the body-in-transport. Industrial development held the promise of progress and change, but often it revealed the risks of swift transformation. While the new high-speed Tōkaidō train line likely resulted in economic growth and access to jobs to a wider demographic, the headlines that celebrated its unremitting increases in velocity soon shifted focus.

Through my research in the archives of the Yokohama Newspaper Library, I found that from 1956, alarming reports of young women committing suicide by jumping in front of trains increasingly took precedence in the headlines, gruesomely literalizing the obliteration of bodies by industrialization.³⁴¹ As the headlines suggested, there was a surge in young women (between the ages of twenty to twenty-four) taking their lives, although the numbers for young men was also on the rise.³⁴² Young women were four times as likely to commit suicide than their American counterparts in 1955.³⁴³ Suicide remains a common problem in Japan and currently the primary cause of delayed trains is due to *tobikomijisatsu* 飛び込み自殺, meaning suicide by train. When a train is delayed due to suicide, a euphemistic announcement that there has been a "human incident" (*jinshin jiko* 人身事故) can be heard over the loud speakers. According to the World Health Organization, Japan has the highest suicide rate in the developed world, peaking at a rate of twenty-four per 100,000 people per year in 1956 — precisely the year that *Electric Dress* was made.³⁴⁴ Moreover, the urban center with the highest suicide rate was none other than Osaka.³⁴⁵

Viewing the most frequently published photograph of the performance of *Electric Dress*, one can sense Tanaka's tenuous mastery of the production; she occupied a central yet unstable position (see figure 2).³⁴⁶ The work was at once a peculiar visionary spectacle, yet somehow restrained in movement and difficult to see: it would have been eye-catching and blinding, drawing the viewer to try and focus on the artist-subject. Like a whisper in the middle of a rock concert, the low-level perceptibility of the subject-wearer marks his or her hidden import. In the act of looking, the viewer too is complicit in the performative construction. Tanaka, in the making and wearing of her "electric clothes" risks her own body's security in the performance as

³⁴¹ "Mata ressha kara ochi shibō (Another Death from Train Jump)," *Yomiuri Shinbun*, June 28, 1956.

³⁴² Mamoru Iga, *The Thorn in the Chrysanthemum: Suicide and Economic Success in Japan*. (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1986), 16. Reprinted from Ministry of Welfare, *Jisatsu shibō Tōkei* (Suicidal death statistics), 1977.

³⁴³ Following this peak in the mid 1950s, the slowly tapered off until 1967, where they reached an average of 14.2, *Ibid.*, 16.

³⁴⁴ "Patterns and trends in suicide mortality for the period 1955-89 for 57 countries (28 from Europe, the former Soviet Union, Canada, the United States, 14 Latin American countries, 8 from Asia and 2 from Africa, Australia and Oceania) were analyzed on the basis of official death certification data included in the World Health Organization mortality database." F. Lucchini C. La Vecchia, F. Levi, "World Trends in Suicide Mortality, 1955-1989," *Acta Psychiatrica Scandinavica* 90, no. 1 (1994). And see World Health Organization, "Who: Suicide Rates, 1950-2004," World Health Organization, www.who.int/mental_health/prevention/suicide/suiciderates/en/

³⁴⁵ Mamoru Iga, *The Thorn in the Chrysanthemum: Suicide and Economic Success in Japan*. (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1986), 20.

³⁴⁶ There is no photographer documented for these works; however, it is known that Yoshihara contacted Hanaya Kanbee 花谷かんび to photograph the Gutai Outdoor Exhibition and stage exhibition. *Gutai 1,2,3*, 31. Approximately five photographs of Tanaka wearing *Electric Dress* are extant.

it secures her status as artist. *Electric Dress* reveals the performative power to obliterate the body, even when the performative is what constitutes the self that “wears” it.

In *Understanding Media*, McLuhan sees art as something that helps us prepare for the coming changes in the outside world, an idea whose relevance in performance art has been further articulated by Anne Wagner in her article, “Performance, Video and the Rhetoric of Presence.”³⁴⁷ She argues that video art, particularly in its formative stage, sought to examine and expose how “art’s summoning of selfhood is compromised by what we might call a ‘media effect.’”³⁴⁸ Wagner sees early video art not as electronic narcissism but as a politicized engagement with media that reveals that video “is the medium that shapes and controls the scale and form of human association and action.”³⁴⁹ Vito Acconci, Joan Jonas, and Peter Campus are mentioned as those artists, among others, who know about “narcosis and numbing, know how to induce them and know that the reality of the body and of its senses — the reality of personhood — are somehow at stake.”³⁵⁰ Tanaka too, as I see it, was absorbed in the potentially destructive risks to the reality of subjecthood in modern Japan. Tanaka described the first time she wore *Electric Dress* in 1955:

When I was finished, I was uncomfortable with the electrical connections. Since somebody had to wear it, I covered myself with vinyl and put the electric dress on. The moment Mr. Sannomiya said, “I am turning the electricity on,” I had the fleeting thought: is this how a death-row inmate would feel?³⁵¹

Tanaka’s comment compellingly restates my central thesis: that *Electric Dress* evokes the overwhelming aspects of technology — so ubiquitous in postwar Osaka — constructed through a visual vocabulary of dress-up, and, in doing so, the work explores the interstices and limits of regional and gender subjectivity. The double-edged nature of this performance piece is evident in the riotous color and spectacular language of the dress versus the explicit threat of its staggering weight and heat — its channeling of a current that is deadly when misused. While *Electric Dress* occupies a critical position in terms of Tanaka’s work, it has consequences beyond the scope of her personal artistic development. It is revealing of issues that loomed large in the 1950s art world. Tanaka’s piece explores gender subjectivity as a constructed process that is nonetheless powerful and rife with risks, a process reliant on surface, bodily performance, and the context of industrialization, urbanization, and the encroachment of technology into ever-more corners of people’s everyday lives.

³⁴⁷ Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (Toronto: New American Library of Canada, 1964).; Anne M. Wagner, “Performance, Video and the Rhetoric of Presence,” *October* 91, Winter (2000):80.

³⁴⁸ Anne M. Wagner, “Video and the Senses, 1965-1980,” lecture at the University of California, Berkeley, March 17, 2003.

³⁴⁹ McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, 9.

³⁵⁰ Wagner, “Video and the Senses,” lecture March 17, 2003.

³⁵¹ Tanaka remarking on her work in Tiampo, *Electrifying Art*, 40.

Chapter Four Scale and the Subject in Tanaka Atsuko's Notebooks

Introduction

Between 1955 and 1963, Tanaka produced three untitled notebooks that remained in her personal collection until her death in 2005. For the sake of simplicity, I refer to them as Notebook One, Notebook Two, and Notebook Three.³⁵² This chapter describes these objects and explores the interpretative frames they may offer for study of her paintings and performance work. How was subjectivity represented in the notebooks, and how do her drawings re-imagine the divide between self and other, between inside and outside? Is Tanaka's interest in subjectivity related to her growing sense of individualism, as more than one scholar has suggested, or is she perhaps concerned with new ways of being, seeing, and acting in a mechanized world.³⁵³ This chapter addresses these questions through the translation and close examination of these as yet unstudied primary documents.

Before turning to the content of the notebooks, a cursory description of each object will help clarify their unique qualities and visual relationship to each other. Notebook One, dating from 1955-1956, is leather-bound and its pages are yellowed with age. Approximately 4 1/4 x 2 1/2 inches, the small book shows evidence of frequent use. Although it is not larger than the average hand, it is dense, with one hundred well-worn pages and a heavily stressed spine. As a result, the book has lost its shape and has become stubbornly difficult to close. Sketched plans overwhelm the sparse text throughout the book, and Tanaka's perspicacious interest in layout and patterning is immediately apparent.

Notebook Two is a larger format (8 1/4 x 5 7/8 inches) grade-school booklet that features a number of schematic drawings, many for the light-based piece, *Stage Dress*, which was shown at the "Exhibition to Challenge the Midsummer Sun." Notebook Two was created in 1956 and in terms of date and content, seems to be a continuation of the first notebook. At twenty-seven pages, it is considerably shorter than the previous book and less compactly inscribed. Text appears infrequently and is written in an expository style, with Tanaka inserting cryptic explanations between her sketches and diagrams.

Notebook Three is a binder (11 7/8 x 9 inches) filled with two-hole-punched pages, composed of thick card stock. "Tanaka Atsuko 1, 1956-1963" is written in English on the front cover of the book, which is perhaps more accurately described as a sketchbook or album.³⁵⁴ Notebook Three was completed in a variety of media: crayon, pencil, ink, watercolor, permanent marker and Indian ink. None of the twenty-eight pages contains written commentary; rather, they are filled with drawings and small paintings, many of which have been completed on

³⁵² Referring to the collection as "notebooks" also follows the established practice of Katō Mizuo and Ming Tiampo who have curated exhibitions that included selected pages from the notebooks. Tiampo and Katō, *Electrifying Art: Atsuko Tanaka, 1954-1968*. 86. Similarly, the American collector who currently owns the collection refers to the collection as notebooks despite the fact that third notebook is perhaps better described as an album.

³⁵³ For example Oyobe argues that Gutai art exhibited a strong sense of individualism: "...Yoshihara stressed the subjective attitude of an individual – freed from organizations and categorical constraints – to understand and create 'modernist' art." see Oyobe, "Human Subjectivity..."; Tiampo, "Gutai & Informel."

³⁵⁴ It is possible that Notebook Three was begun at the same time as Notebook Two; however, Notebook Three was used as late as 1963, and I have thus placed it later in the chronology. These three books were sold as a collection to Gallery Ham by Tanaka and then sold to the American collector by Gallery Ham some time after 2004. Unfortunately, the collector will not disclose the exact date of purchase from Gallery Ham.

postcard-like paper pasted into the album. Notebook Three focuses primarily on painting, presented here as an intimate and miniaturized practice.

The notebooks are important to this study for several reasons. Firstly, I argue they reveal Tanaka's exploration of subjectivity and scale in her performance pieces as well as her re-formulation of these themes in the circles and circuits that began to appear around the time of *Electric Dress* (1956). I use "scale" to refer to the relative size of an object, particularly in relation to the subject who depicts or who is depicted. I privilege the term scale over size because of its emphasis on relationality — a key construct in the negotiation of subjectivity. Secondly, the notebooks illustrate, I believe, Tanaka's ambivalence towards the notion of self-expression and her ongoing concern with surface as a site of potential activation or withdrawal of the subject. In this context, I conceive of surface as an arena of differencing that lies between the other, outwardly world, and the internalized self. At times, Tanaka's work ruptures the relationship of subject and object in favor of a visual world that shows us that "the relation between organism and machine has been a border war."³⁵⁵ Tanaka's interest in connection, disconnection, and the conditions of gender are interrogated in the notebooks, leaving the viewer with new ways about thinking about the relationship between subject and object, inside and outside.

As I see it, the conceptual thrust of the notebooks supports my contention that Tanaka's work should be considered as distinctly different from the physical, artist-centered works that many members of Gutai (Shiraga in particular) were known for.³⁵⁶ For this reason, they can be productively contrasted with Shiraga's emphasis on physicality and his oft-repeated desire to release his "true" spirit in art.³⁵⁷ The notebooks, therefore, provide a new perspective from which to understand Tanaka's larger oeuvre. At the same time, the artist's writings and sketches do not cooperate and perform as simple interpretative tools, nor are they a clear window onto Tanaka's "true" self. I view these objects as works in themselves that demonstrate her interest in scale and corporeal and mechanical gestures, as well as her continual engagement with the form of the circle.

Partly due to their unpublished status, Tanaka's notebooks have received relatively little attention compared with performance works, like *Electric Dress* (1956), discussed in the previous chapter.³⁵⁸ Yet the notebooks are equally compelling. Her plans, I argue, repeatedly illustrate the central subject in an uneasy relationship to its surroundings. Tanaka reinvents and represents the physical instability of an environment. Her abstract paintings of circles and lines demonstrate the tenuous balance between zones of the uncontrolled infinite and a circumscribed totality.³⁵⁹ Where, she seems to ask, can the subject maintain a position? Whether the drawing is

³⁵⁵ Donna Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women*, (New York: Routledge), 149.

³⁵⁶ Jinno Kimio concurs. He describes Tanaka's work as closely affiliated with the everyday world, and in that sense he sees it as having an avant-garde quality that differs from other members of Gutai. Okabe, *Tanaka Atsuko mō hitotsu no Gutai*. Also interview with Jinno Kimio, October 08, 2009.

³⁵⁷ For example see Shiraga, "Taisetsuna shinkei (Importance of Temperament)," *Gutai* 4, 9. In this essay, Shiraga admonishes against allowing the influences of others to affect art making.

³⁵⁸ Of two known dissertations that address Tanaka, neither includes the notebooks in the bibliography. See Oyobe, "Human Subjectivity and Confrontation with Materials in Japanese Art"; Tiampo, "Gutai & Informel." Pages of the notebooks have been included in two exhibition catalogs: Katō Mizuho and Minami Miyuki, *Michi No Bi No Tankyū*. Also Tiampo and Katō, *Electrifying Art: Atsuko Tanaka, 1954-1968*.

³⁵⁹ I draw on these terms from the conception of the subject as described in Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*. Levinas writes how one's encounter with the exterior is fundamental to our development as a subject. I view his concept of the subject as being most apposite to Tanaka's work not least because of his emphasis on relationality. He articulates subject-formation as a process that is dependent on a relationship to the infinity of the

a plan for a mechanical stage that conceals the performer, a platform that submerges the viewer in the ocean, or a dress so tremendously bright and large that it would completely subsume its maker, in these images Tanaka tests how the subject, rendered Lilliputian in the space of the notebooks, would respond to an altogether new spatial and representational context. Before turning to the content of this collection, I will briefly discuss my approach to these objects and their position in relation to writings by Tanaka and other Gutai members.

Negotiating the Notebooks

To an art historian, a journal may be a precious resource that can offer particular interpretative tools: the echo of an artist's unvoiced hope, moments of careless distraction, or even the candid realization of failure. Some of these interpretive tools may be as productive as they are hazardous, leading the overly zealous to make assumptions about the psychological state of the writer-artist. Upon initial encounter, a scholar may be filled with a profound feeling of awe — how amazing to hold an object that is brimming with the indexical aura of artistic authenticity. Expectations can run high as one searches within the pages for traces of that momentary spark of motivation behind creative drive or a private manifesto that neatly ties together the presumably chaotic mind of the artist-genius. Scholars attentively look back at past entries, searching for clues that might finally unlock the irrefutable meaning of an artwork. In scholarship that evokes the personal, by dint of the journal, a single meaning is often found and heralded as conclusive.³⁶⁰

As I began to plan my visit to see Tanaka's notebooks, several questions presented themselves. Can an artifact reveal the vagaries of an artist's innermost thoughts or does it reflect only the reader's desires? How can scholars understand the highly private nature of an artist's notebook and how does such a document relate to the artist's larger oeuvre? Because of the personal nature of the notebooks, their material qualities can easily become secondary to their perception as direct expressions of the artist.

I see Tanaka's notebooks as multivalent in their functions, rather than being deeply autobiographical. Tanaka made schematics of installations that she likely shared with other members of Gutai or her electrician friend involved in some of her projects; she also may have used the books as a convenient record of ideas to which she aimed to return. The notebooks can help reveal the trajectory of her oeuvre, just as they can be evaluated as artworks in and of themselves. For the artist, such writings can operate as a private, imaginative space for planning future works. From a scholarly or public position, the drawings, paintings, and notes can be shifted into the public realm in an effort to illuminate what was at stake in Tanaka's large-scale paintings and performance works.

Tanaka's Writings in Context

Although writings about Tanaka are more common than for other Gutai members (with the exception of the group's founder, Yoshihara), the vast majority of texts that address her work are brief exhibition reviews and catalogue essays. Perhaps because scholars have approached the

other that transcends and resists all categorical mediation. In my project, the concepts of infinity and totality help explicate the potential questions of subjectivity and representation in Tanaka's work. My dissertation, however, has a circumscribed focus on Shiraga and Tanaka, and is not meant to engage in a full critique of the Levinasian model.

³⁶⁰ Anne M. Wagner has revealed critics' eagerness to over-indulge in tales of female anxiety and insanity. She points to citations of Eve Hesse's diary that emphasized Hesse's general state of anxiety, while omitting that these concerns were actually about the logistics of Hesse's upcoming move to a new apartment. See Anne M. Wagner, *Three Artists (Three Women)*, 226.

Gutai as a cohesive whole, they have tended to overlook primary sources such as the notebooks, as the material within reveals fissures that thwart an assessment of Gutai unity.³⁶¹

Other than her three notebooks, Tanaka left few personal writings to posterity. Letters have not surfaced since her death in 2005, and most scholars who worked closely with the Gutai report that it was her husband and Gutai colleague, Kanayama, who handled correspondence and most other administrative matters for Tanaka.³⁶² On occasion, Tanaka wrote directly about art. A short excerpt from 1956 about artistic expression was printed in *Kirin*, a small journal about children's art that often featured Gutai work.³⁶³ The following year, a brief write-up appeared in the seventh issue of the *Gutai* journal of her performance of *Stage Dress*. In 1960, as interest in her solo career increased, Tanaka contributed to three art journals. "Michi no bi no tankyū 道の美の探究 (Search for an Unknown Aesthetic)" was published in the January issue of *Geijutsu Shinchō* (*New Journal of Contemporary Art*).³⁶⁴ This article maintained the Gutai party line of prioritizing an elusive notion of originality. Tanaka's article, Kansō ("Some Thoughts"), composed of eight brief sentences, appeared in the March 1963 issue of *Bijutsu janaru* (*Art Journal*).³⁶⁵ In 1964, the critic Tōno Yoshiaki 東野芳明 compiled statements from artists, including Tanaka, whom he considered to be the "best in Japan," for publication in the journal, *Mizue*.³⁶⁶ Tanaka's last piece, "When I Make my Work," was not published until 1999 and appeared in the newsletter of the National Museum of Art, Osaka — a fitting return at the end of her career to the place of her artistic formation.³⁶⁷ This was perhaps the artist's most contemplative piece, describing her first encounters with art and the making of works like *Electric Dress* and *Stage Clothes*.

Tanaka's spoken presence in the art world was also relatively muted. In a rare exception, she participated in a panel discussion in 1998 at the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art for the *Out of Actions* exhibition. Speaking through an interpreter, she offered only clipped

³⁶¹ Tanaka stated that it is inevitable that she would be seen simply as another Gutai member but wished that her work would be evaluated on its own terms. Okabe, *Tanaka Atsuko mō hitotsu no Gutai*.

³⁶² Interview with Jinno Kimio, October 8, 2008.

³⁶³ In this piece, "To Mothers, 1956" Tanaka praised children for their immense originality and deplored those who urge children to make something beautiful, adding, "by the concept of beauty, i.e., that which their teacher or somebody else taught them was beauty or beautiful things they have seen – what they make is often no good." Tanaka ends the article in an imploring tone: "Therefore, I ask that mothers, even if you think your children are doing something ridiculous, please be patient and carefully watch them. I beg you to create an environment in which they can grow up without pressure and constraint. Should you not understand their work, please do not give up. Instead, please try to enjoy seeing and learning with them." Tanaka Atsuko, "Kirin kodomo bijutsu ten kara: okasama gatae (from the Kirin Children's Art Exhibition: To Mothers)," *Kirin* 9, no. 3 (1956). Translation from Tiampo and Katō, *Electrifying Art*, 102. The Gutai group contributed to *Kirin* in part because many members felt that children's art was important for both adults and children to release creative potential. Several Gutai artists were also elementary school teachers.

³⁶⁴ Tanaka Atsuko, "Michi no bi no tankyū (Search for an Unknown Aesthetic)," *Geijutsu Shincho* (*New Journal of Contemporary Art*) 11, no. 1 (1960). (English title translation provided with text).

³⁶⁵ Tanaka seems absorbed with the notion of quality in art. She writes: "It feels strange to look at a work of art that was well done. If the work in question is mine, I wonder how on earth I could have made it. Then, I want to make something like it again. However, if I am too absorbed with its surface and fail to understand the underlying idea, what I create is no good. If I am hesitant, it disappears, like a liquefying lump of sugar." _____, "Kansō (Some Thoughts)," *Bijutsu Janaru* (*Art Journal*) 38 (1963): 7. Translated in Tiampo and Katō, *Electrifying Art: Atsuko Tanaka, 1954-1968*, 103.

³⁶⁶ Tanaka Atsuko, "Untitled Statement," *Mizue* 707 (1964): 40.

³⁶⁷ Atsuko, "Seisaku ni attate (When I Make My Work)." According to Tiampo and Katō, the piece was originally written on March 21st, 1993. *Electrifying Art: Atsuko Tanaka, 1954-1968*, 104-106.

responses to complex questions about gender and her art.³⁶⁸ Likewise, although she participated in a greater number of exhibitions than Shiraga, she participated in far fewer interviews.³⁶⁹ Shiraga spoke at length about his fears of failure and wrote extensively of his anxieties as an artist in a manner that Tanaka did not.³⁷⁰ Yoshihara, too, wrote of his thoughts about his position in relation to the art world.³⁷¹ Shimamoto Shōzō was quite prolific, writing about his artistic status and modes of production, which he eventually self-published as a collection. It was he, rather than Tanaka, who emphasized the avant-garde nature of her art.³⁷² On the rare occasions that Tanaka did grant an interview, she had Kanayama alongside her, who often supplemented her pithy responses.³⁷³ Beyond these few sources, there is no repository of handwritten letters and writings to illuminate a clear artistic trajectory or intent. Despite Tanaka's hesitancy to publicly raise questions about her work, it seems that modes of self-exploration may have taken other forms. Questions about the limits of selfhood and one's sense of connection (and disconnection) seem to emerge throughout the pages of the notebooks.

The notebooks begin in 1955 (the year Tanaka joined the Gutai Association) and run until 1963, two years before her departure from the group in 1965. After her death in 2005, all three books were sold as part of the Tanaka estate to Gallery HAM, a small private gallery in Nagoya run by Jinno Kimio.³⁷⁴ An American collector later purchased them, and continues to hold them in his personal collection. He had met Tanaka on several occasions, and with the assistance of translators, formed a friendship with the artist, acting as a guide during her visit to America. According to the collector, Tanaka would have been happy knowing her notebooks were in his collection — despite the language barrier the two had gotten along well. Out of gratitude, Tanaka had given him a piece that had formerly been dedicated to Sam Francis in 1956.³⁷⁵ This painting, which was completed in the nascent period of her career, was book-ended by the collector's purchase of a series of delicate prints completed in 2005, the last artworks Tanaka produced before her death later that same year.³⁷⁶

In Japan, pages of the notebooks were first exhibited as part of a solo retrospective called "Searching for an Unknown Aesthetic," at the Ashiya Museum of Art and History in 2001.³⁷⁷ The appearance of Tanaka's notebooks in the galleries shifted them from private to public space and allowed their existence to become more widely known. Here, sample pages from a single book are treated as individual works; however, the pages holding these drawings are printed out

³⁶⁸ Okabe, *Tanaka Atsuko mō hitotsu no Gutai*.

³⁶⁹ Both Kanayama and Shiraga relied on notebooks to plan their works. Kanayama's are in an anonymous private collection in Nagoya, and Shiraga's are in an anonymous private collection in Amagasaki. It is unclear if other Gutai members kept notebooks.

³⁷⁰ For example see Shiraga, "Omou koto (Thoughts)," *Gutai* 2, 20; "Shishitsu ni tsuite (on Temperament)," *Gutai* 5, 24.

³⁷¹ Yoshihara, "Kanransha no nakatta daitenranka," 1.

³⁷² For example, see Shimamoto, "Ichi-mai no nuno kire demo geijutsu sakuhin ka, (One Piece of Cut Cloth but Is It Art?)." Or, on his own work, see Shimamoto Shōzō 島本詔三, *Shōzō Shimamoto Networking* (Nishinomiya: Shimamoto Shozo, 1990).

³⁷³ For example, see Yamamura Tokutarō and Osaki Shin-ichirō, *An Interview with Kanayama Akira and Tanaka Atsuko* (Ashiya: ACMAH, 1993).

³⁷⁴ Jinno is the curator and a local art supporter who was on friendly terms with Tanaka. Interview with Jinno Kimio, October 8, 2008. Tanaka thanks him for his support in "Seisaku ni attate (When I Make My Work)."

³⁷⁵ Jinno further attested to the fact that Tanaka felt affection for the collector. Interview with Jinno Kimio, October 08, 2008.

³⁷⁶ These prints are a limited edition set of five prints. 20 editions were created and are still for sale at Gallery HAM in Nagoya.

³⁷⁷ Katō Mizuho and Minami Miyuki, *Michi no bi no tankyū*, 77 - 81.

of order and in different colors and sizes than the originals. Images were resized according to the dimensions suitable to the catalogue and consequently appear as tiny snapshots, a practical editorial decision that nonetheless upsets visual, narrative, and probable chronological relationships of the collection.

In 2005, the “Electrifying Art” exhibit included several drawings from the notebooks; but again limitations of space meant that the catalogue reproductions were small and only two pages were included.³⁷⁸ These were copies of plans for *Stage Clothes* that appear in the catalogue below photographs of *Bell*, potentially misrepresenting the drawings as plans for the sound piece.³⁷⁹ Dislocated from their sequence in the original journal, the two pages are not discernible as plans for *Stage Clothes*, plans that occupy four nonconsecutive pages of the original journal. Later in the catalogue two pages from another notebook are reproduced in full. It was a welcome and rare opportunity to have pages from the personal notebook of a (then) living artist included in the catalogue, and, as a reader, I was left with the desire to see the pages in their original form. What relationship would the drawings have to one another? Would seeing the notebooks as a whole reveal Tanaka’s working processes?

Notebook One

Tanaka’s first journal has “’55-’56” scrawled across the cover (likely in Kanayama’s handwriting, as the script does not resemble Tanaka’s). It opens with an imprinted calendar, and next to it, a list that includes several names, the words for “electric wiring,” and the word “*Kirin* キリン,” the latter referring to the aforementioned children’s magazine that frequently featured Gutai artists.³⁸⁰ Below this six-item list, two schematics for *Bell* are sketched in: the first a design with the bells indicated by six points with lines extending outward, the second composed of two intersecting lines with thick squiggles dominating the bottom half of the page (figure 1). Lines are overdrawn, perhaps to suggest the movement of electricity through the wires, channeling the impetus for the raucous noise of the bells. Processes and movement seem to be prioritized over sequence and outcome. In each schematic, labels printed in the *katakana* syllabary identify parts such as “switch” and “motor.” Inscribed with ballpoint pen, the scratchy surface and wiry edges of the drawing seems to foreshadow the abrasive spectacle of *Electric Dress*.

On page two of the journal, Tanaka has drawn another electrical schematic for *Bell* (figure 2). To maximize space, she has turned the book on its side, using the majority of the page to map how the bells would be situated in a room. In this image her rapid pen strokes dig deep into the paper, suggesting the direction and flow of electrical charges that will set off the bells. The drawing appears to have been rapidly executed. Thick lines overdrawn upon each other represent the motor and switch that give way to thin strokes representing the wiring of the sound piece. Although the drawing on the left begins with a rectilinear form, the right-hand side becomes exceedingly curved.

In addition to the notebook schematics, two other plans for *Bell* completed in 1955 explore continuity within a circular form (figure 3). In the image at left, perfect circles that seem to have been made with a compass sit one within the other. Plotted between the outer edges and the center, a sequence of dots lends the drawing a sense of movement, as do the webbed series of x-shapes branching out in an up-ended heart shape. Tanaka’s taut lines emphasize a sense of circumscription, while the tiny series of dots and the layers of circles, not unlike rings of an aged

³⁷⁸ Tiampo and Katō, *Electrifying Art: Atsuko Tanaka, 1954-1968*, 27 and 37.

³⁷⁹ Ibid.

³⁸⁰ Tanaka, Notebook One, 1.

tree trunk, are a visual metaphor for continuity. *Bell*, as a completed installation piece, is able to induce a similar feeling: once the visitor decided to press the switch, a seemingly endless series of jarring ringing noises would continue one by one throughout the gallery, the final bell eventually sounding once again near the (usually embarrassed) gallery-goer.³⁸¹ *Bell*'s uncontrolled raucous noise prompted Yoshihiro to describe the work as a living creature, an interesting observation given Tanaka's penchant for fusing the bodily with the industrial.³⁸²

Designs for *Bell* and other installation pieces make up the majority of Notebook One. Most are centrally concerned with ideas for works that include robotic elements as well as for performances or advertisements for the Yoshihara salad oil company (it seems the leader had informally petitioned the artists for ideas). Tanaka's plans reveal a tendency to emphasize the linear and spatial qualities of a work, while sequence and the specifics of construction were often secondary. Notebook One is particularly crammed with notes on several projects, including *Stage Clothes* and *Electric Dress*, as well as some unrealized works (several of which I shall explore later in this chapter). Notebook Two, in contrast, contains several blank pages and unfinished sketches.

The language of Notebook One is informal and most sentences are incomplete, perhaps not unusual for jottings of this nature. Tanaka's penmanship is also inconsistent. For example, the artist would write a word in *kanji* (Chinese characters) and then on the same page write the word in *katakana*, a syllabary usually reserved for foreign words in the modern era.³⁸³ The density of material in these pages in addition to her hurried writing style suggests that 1956 was a year of intense creative energy, a point reinforced by the fact that all three notebooks, as well as many of Tanaka's most provocative works, such as *Electric Dress*, *Work (pink cloth)*, and *Stage Clothes*, were completed that same year.

Tanaka's autobiographical comments are spare; in fact, the subject "I" does not appear in any of the notebooks. While the use of the personal pronoun is infrequent in Japanese compared to English, Tanaka forgoes even indirect commentary about herself or her day-to-day thoughts. Only on the twenty-second page does the reader catch a glimpse of the currents of Tanaka's domestic life. On this page an isolated record of dietary intake has been jotted down: "Morning. One boiled egg, one milk, one small rice."³⁸⁴ But this acknowledgement of the personal, physical body is singular and is left without further explanation. While the precision of the record is of interest, we cannot attribute any larger, broader biographical characteristics based on a single entry. Indeed, it is not even certain that the entry refers to Tanaka's own diet. At most, our

³⁸¹ There is some controversy concerning the original installation of *Bell*. Curator Washida Meruro suggests that the surviving plans for *Bell* indicate a sequence of sound that would travel in only one direction. However Yoshihara, Kanayama and Shiraga stated that the sound traveled to the end of the circuit and returned again. It is highly possible that the original installation was different from the plans, and it seems that the Gutai member's who witnessed *Bell* may be offering the most accurate account. See: Meruro, "Be-ru ni tsuite (About *Work (Bell)* by Tanaka Atsuko)." Reconstructions of the work maintained *Bell*'s alarming loudness. See Yoshihara, "Tanaka Atsuko ni tsuite (About Tanaka Atsuko)," exhibition brochure, Osaka: Gutai Pincacotheca, 1963; Also see Cotter, "With Bells and Flashes, Work of a Japanese Pioneer," B28.

³⁸² Yoshihara writes in English in the opening to the 4th Gutai Journal: "When the arrangements were near completion, loud clangs of bells began, all of a sudden seemed to run about in the Hall. The work "Bell," by Atsuko Tanaka was then at last completed. We all stood still and listened. The sounds like a living creature, flew about upstairs and downstairs." Yoshihara, "On the First Gutai-Ten (the First Exhibition Of "Gutai" Art Group):" 2.

³⁸³ Tanaka, Notebook Two (New York: unpublished, c. 1956), 4.

³⁸⁴ "Asa yude tamago ichi. gyunyu ichi. meshi sho-ichi. 朝 湯で卵一牛乳一。飯少一。" Tanaka, Notebook One 22.

interest in this potentially intimate view of the artist's life may reveal *our own* curiosity about the complexities that we believe exist in the character of the artist.

Frequently, Tanaka worked through ideas as if in dialogue with an unknown other. For example, on the forty-third page, Tanaka wrote: "While [the cylinder] is turning it doesn't matter if it's turning from the beginning or somewhat later."³⁸⁵ In several places, she made back-up plans, as though hedging for the unrealistic nature of her ideas. Regarding a plan that involved a helicopter, she wrote: "If it doesn't [fly], it can just move up and down."³⁸⁶ Amusingly, Tanaka does not explicate the role of the helicopter, never mind the question of how the young artist might procure one. This plan, as one might expect given Tanaka's financial restraints, was among those never completed. Nevertheless, it is significant that in the journals Tanaka allowed herself the freedom to imagine installations that were not dependent upon the realities of cost, space, physical ability, or social expectation.

Tanaka likely relied on these diagrams when consulting with people she worked with, specifically, her amateur electrician friend, her partner Kanayama, or other Gutai members.³⁸⁷ Tanaka's conversations about her art were likely mediated productively through such images. Precision was not important, it seems, as Tanaka rarely included dimensions or material parameters and dismisses issues of duration or other particulars. Specifically, her language and drawings emphasize movement while exhibiting flexibility on issues of sequence and control. Her comments reveal a curiosity for new forms of motion and their unknown outcomes. Focus is on the installation pieces and direct discussion of her own role as a subject is minimal. Yet Tanaka persistently questions the limits and possibilities of subjectivity within new techno-scientific environments.

In one unfinished installation plan, she constructed a way to move the waters of the ocean. This large-scale installation, illustrated from page sixty-three to sixty-eight of Notebook One would have culminated in a viewing platform set on the ocean floor, with a stairwell from the water's surface down to the sea bottom (figure 4).³⁸⁸ Deciphering Tanaka's diagram is difficult, but it appears she envisioned a large tunnel made with glass, accessible by a staircase, from which one could observe the sea. Tanaka writes: "When you step on the switch, the motor turns, rope coils up, people ride [upon...], and sink."³⁸⁹ As a large mechanized apparatus, its actual construction would have been a laborious endeavor and an engineering feat. In this project as in several others, the figure within the sketches is dwarfed by the size of the work.

If the claiming of space is an empowering act, what does it mean when these spaces are envisioned, yet never actualized? It seems critical that Tanaka used the smallest spaces to imagine overtaking the largest ones, allowing herself a compact zone of creative freedom. Restrictions of time, money, institutional support, and gender were not a problem, at least within the space of the notebook. Writing and drawing in a format not much bigger than a pair of hands, Tanaka's creative visions were expansive and refused to be hemmed in by practical realities. An ocean-viewing platform seemed no less unlikely than a painting of lines and circles. Perhaps it

³⁸⁵ "Kaiten shinagara, hajimekara kaiten shitemo sukoshi ato kara demo yoi. 回轉しながら、始めから回轉しても少い後からでもよい." Ibid., 43.

³⁸⁶ "Hikō suru no ga ikenakattara, jōgedō. 飛行するのがいけなかったら、上下動." Ibid., 52.

³⁸⁷ There is no evidence clearly showing that Tanaka consulted with other Gutai members, although the fact that the group shared studio space and socialized together suggests that ideas about art likely circulated.

³⁸⁸ Tanaka, Notebook One, 67-68.

³⁸⁹ "Suicchi o fumu to, mo-ta- ga kaiten shite, ro-pu ga makare, hito o nosete chikani shizumu. スイッチをフむと、モーターが回轉して、ロープが巻かれ、人を乗せて地下にしずむ." Ibid., 66.

bears reminding that in the 1950s this kind of site-specific work, had it been completed, would have been highly unprecedented.³⁹⁰ In the United States, site-specific work did not come into production until the late 1960s and 1970s.³⁹¹ Concepts such as installation and performance art were certainly not part of the usual curriculum in art school. Indeed, when Tanaka had attended art school in the early 1950s, avant-garde practices like Western-style painting had only begun to be taught in the Kansai-area.³⁹²

Notebook Two

Notebook Two dates to 1956, and in terms of both chronology and content, is a continuation of Notebook One. Perhaps in part due to its brevity, Notebook Two is also narrower in scope, covering a smaller range of installation plans that again situate subjects within confounding spaces or inverse expectations of scale. Plans for a cutout doll installation, that like her 1956 performance was also titled *Stage Clothes*, occupy several pages, while the majority of the other works treated in Notebook Two share a concern with mechanical dynamism, often illustrated with a small human figure standing inside larger architectural schematics. The notebook opens with a plan that depicts a large stage with moveable parts (driven by an engine), reaching upwards to form a curtain-like shape.³⁹³ In the drawing, tiny subjects are engulfed between huge waves meant to represent a stage floor that rises up to the ceiling (figure 5).³⁹⁴ Augmenting the dominance of the setting, the moveable stage is colored in red, while the people are drawn in pencil, less than one quarter of the size of the immense platform. Tanaka segregates a tiny space amidst the walls of the contraption where performers would hide until their later appearance. She writes on the first page: “People are inside the shadows,” and a thin line points to two stick figures shrouded by the upward curve of the mechanical stage.³⁹⁵ It is as though she planned to enact how the arena of performance overwhelms the subject who performs. Was this structure an attempt to reappropriate the mechanized world to see what is “natural” for women in the postwar period? Or was this theme learned from Tanaka’s experience as a minority woman artist in newly urbanized Japan?

In an untitled project that occupies pages ten through thirteen of Notebook Two, Tanaka again masterminds a contraption that reduces the subject to a confused and vulnerable character (figure 6). In these drawings, Tanaka sequesters a tiny subject within a series of box-like rooms. According to her annotations, once the unknowing participant has entered, the door slides shuts, and the person is entrapped in a small, red room the size of three tatami mats (approximately 9.38 x 18.79 feet). An exit appears that leads to the adjacent blue room.³⁹⁶ The opposite wall

³⁹⁰ Here I refer to Miwon Kwon’s definition of site-specificity where the factors of phenomenological and discursive relations with social/institutions are an important paradigm. Kwon seeks to show site as the cultural mediator of broader social, economic and political processes that organize urban life and urban space. Miwon Kwon, *One Place after Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2002).

³⁹¹ Ibid., 1.

³⁹² Hirai, *Shiraga Kazuo: Action Painter*, 146.

³⁹³ In addition to these works, Notebook Two contains several sketches of simple lines and circles that fill a blank page without text or clarification. One page is given to a potential design for a sign for the Japanese characters for Gutai 具体. The text was to appear over a group of fifteen boxed shapes and may have been imagined as an entryway sign for a Gutai exhibition.

³⁹⁴ Tanaka, Notebook Two. The plan runs from page one to page three, figure 4 illustrates pages two and three.

³⁹⁵ “Hito wa kage ni haite iru. 人はカゲにはいつている。” Ibid., 1.

³⁹⁶ “Enter the blue room and the door shuts,” writes Tanaka. “Ao no heya ni hairu to, to ga shimaru. 青の部屋に入ると戸がしまる。” Ibid., 11.

would subsequently slide open, leading to a room painted yellow on the interior. From the outside, the boxes would appear unpainted, their bright colors only visible once the subject was secured inside. Trap doors would eventually open, offering short-lived liberation, only to snare the subject again in the following room. Describing the installation, Tanaka writes:

3. The red room is the first and innermost. When you go in the red room, the door behind you closes. There are no exits on any of the four walls. Opening the door, a room of a different color appears. In the blue room, the outermost room, is moved by motor, rope, and pulley. Someone inside the room will not know this because the door closed. Entering the room, the door to the “Blue room” closes, and there is no exit in any direction.³⁹⁷

Her plan creates an atmosphere of bewilderment for the participant. We do not know how, or if, the victim would be retrieved. By situating the subject in a box, she delimits physical movement within a small, confined area, painted in bright colors that similarly inundate the senses. Such circumscription of the subject is reminiscent of *Electric Dress*. In the drawings the subject is consistently placed in an enclosed space, seemingly confused by the mechanical walls and bright colors, creating a potentially claustrophobic environment.

An encounter with these pages of Tanaka’s notebook surely provokes us to read her large-scale paintings in a different light. Rather than decorative abstract forms, they become interrogations of the viewing subject under the forces of color and entrapment. For example, a brief look at Tanaka’s painting, *Three Black Balls*, suggests how scale is central in her paintings as well as the notebooks (figure 7). Filled entirely in enamel paint, set against the light color of the canvas and sandwiched between two sections of smaller circles, the largest dark orbs immediately draw the viewer’s eye. At the top of the composition, circles are painted in bright orange, pink, black, blue, and yellow. Dark shades of navy blue, black, and one brown circle conglomerate in the middle of the canvas, their proximity building a scattered form through dots of color. Tanaka’s duplicates the navy shade above and below the mid-point of the canvas, drawing attention to the variation of size and moving the eye back and forth across the center boundary of black. Using color to emphasize modulations of scale can captivate the viewer, triggering the drive to categorization and assessment. *Three Black Balls* uses a variety of spatial schemes: the top half displays medium-sized circles that approximate orderly rows, gradually giving away to slightly larger circles that disrupt the sense of order. Rows are absent in the bottom section, where random selections of smaller dots allow for greater display of negative space. Slightly above the center point of the canvas, the three largest circles appear nearly even in space and size, reminiscent of industrial wheels.

The final pages of Notebook Two are absorbed in the creation of the outdoor installation of *Stage Clothes* (figure 8). These energetic and dynamic drawings reveal that the 1955 installation was always conceived as a serialized work, where numerous humanoid shapes would

³⁹⁷ “Aka no heya ga ichiban uchigawa de. Aka no heya ni hairu to, ushiro no to ga shimaru. Shihō deguchi nashi. To ga hiraku to, chigatta iro no heya ga dekite iru. Ao no heya, ichiban soto no heya ga mo-ta, ro-pu kassa o tsukatte ugoku. Naka ni haite iru mono wa, to ga shimatte iru kara wakaranai. Sono heya ni hairu to, [ao no heya] to ga shimaru. Shihō deguchi nashi. 赤の部屋が一番、内側で、赤の部屋に入ると、後ろの戸がしまる、四方出口なし。戸が開くと、違った色の部屋が出来ている。青の部屋、一番外の部屋がモーター、ロープ 滑車を使って動く。中に入っているものは、戸がしまっているから分からない。その部屋に入ると「青の部屋」戸がしまる。四方出口なし。” Ibid., 12.

be connected.³⁹⁸ Extending across pages twenty and twenty-one, four indistinct forms stretch out, their joined arms melded as one, without any appendage to distinguish where one figure stops and another begins. The arm of the fourth figure extends beyond the scope of the page, as though suggesting the interminability of repeated form. With only dark lines for faces, the humanoid shapes lack individuality — they suggest identically manufactured bodies, flat and expressionless.

Photographs demonstrate the eerie quality of *Stage Clothes* when it was installed in Ashiya Park in 1956 as part of the *Outdoor Gutai Exhibition* (figure 9). Each of seven doll cut-outs stood over fourteen feet high, illuminated by light bulbs painted with enamel. White vinyl stretched over the electric lights exaggerated their unnatural quality, their strange glow illuminating and juxtaposing the organic greenery of the park. The towering vinyl statues diminish the spectator in a manner comparable to her plans for the untitled work of tiny rooms. Yoshihara described *Stage Clothes* in the fifth edition of the *Gutai* journal:

Atsuko Tanaka exhibited seven gigantic human figures, which were all quite simple and of the same form. They did not express any human feeling. They were strange and even ominous. They contained strings of colored tube-bulbs in their bodies which looked like bony frameworks. The bulbs were lit automatically one after another with intervals quite rhythmically (sic), and the streams of light reminded us of blood circulation.³⁹⁹

Both *Stage Clothes* and the plans tend to undermine the viewer's sense of order, as Tanaka regulates and then deregulates sequence. In the first case, the work contains a series of rooms, but the color of each room shifts in a disorienting manner. Similarly, in *Stage Clothes* (as seen in documentary footage of the outdoor exhibition) the individual light bulbs flash randomly, and then briefly illuminate in an orderly manner, from top to bottom.⁴⁰⁰ The alternation between ordered and erratic sequences of illumination was likely both perplexing and intriguing to viewers.⁴⁰¹ Installed within the pine forest of Ashiya City, *Stage Clothes*' simulation of the female form in fourteen-foot-tall dolls illuminated with rapid-fire, random electric lights revealed our own expectations of the natural world, of the gendered body, proving that the "boundary between the physical and non-physical is very imprecise for us."⁴⁰²

Tanaka seems to have given thought to several dress-based inventions: the last nine pages of Notebook Two also contain plans for dress-based projects, indicated by triangles that are filled with circles, likely meant to indicate light bulbs.⁴⁰³ On the eighteenth page, a drawing is labeled "magic socket,"⁴⁰⁴ her terminology referencing the melding of industrial with the supernatural.

³⁹⁸ Here I refer to the installation piece that Tanaka exhibited in the *Outdoor Gutai Art Exhibition* in Ashiya Park in July of 1956. Tanaka also has a performance piece called *Stage Clothes* from 1957, which featured the artist taking off layer after layer of dresses until standing on stage in a black, rubber undergarment.

³⁹⁹ Yoshihara wrote both English and Japanese versions of his text. Yoshihara, "On the Second Outdoor Exhibition of The "Gutai" Art Group," 2.

⁴⁰⁰ These original films were on display at the Yokohama Triennale, 2008, and are also in the collections of the Ashiya Museum of Art and History.

⁴⁰¹ Tanaka includes a sketch of the brightly lit cross that also appeared in the *Outdoor Gutai Art Exhibition* held in Ashiya City Park in July 1956. Her drawing of the cross details the number of lights to be fixed to each cross bar and emphasizes the luminescence of the work with hand-drawn lines signaling rays of light. Tanaka, Notebook Two, 18-19.

⁴⁰² Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs and Women*, 153.

⁴⁰³ One drawing appears on page eighteen, with five others on page nineteen.

⁴⁰⁴ "majikku sokketo, マチックソケット Tanaka, Notebook Two, 19.

Tanaka's triangle dress schematic has correlates to plans in Notebook One; for example, on page eleven, Tanaka describes a kimono to be rigged to radios. She writes: "Put two radios inside. To hold [the front sides of the] kimono, use a button screw, not a dial one, with a bolt, and make a cover on top of the bolt."⁴⁰⁵ This repeated fusion of female fashion with the components of industry explores the subjective experience of woman as a visual amalgam of fashion and urban techno-science, as a subject constructed, limited and exposed by her exterior self.

Tanaka's persistent sketching of dress-shapes, rather than any other kind of garb, confirms that she was concerned with fashion and the representation of women, but fashion as defined and maintained by mechanized, scopic regimes.⁴⁰⁶ Their recurrence lends weight to the argument that *Electric Dress* is the preferable English title for *denkifuku* rather than the gender-neutral title, *Electric Clothes*, as some have claimed.⁴⁰⁷ Indeed, for Tanaka, gender was anything but neutral. In *Stage Clothes*, it was the female form that was hidden below so many layers of hyperbolic, feminized garb. In the notebooks, women's gowns formed the basis for installations, performance works and paintings (as her painting style developed after plans for *Electric Dress*), always tethered to wires and switches.

Yet this interest in feminine trappings does not aim to charm, and her body of work seems to undo expectations of gender. Tanaka's installation of a large, hot-pink neon canvas in 1955 at the "One-Day Outdoor Exhibition" provoked distaste for the feminine because of its brilliant, but garish, color. *Electric Dress* obscured Tanaka's form, rather than revealed it, unlike the prevalence of alluring clothes that were popularized in the postwar period. In contrast to an emphasis on frailty and the feminized petite that circulated throughout newspapers of the time, her depictions of gowns in the notebooks are gargantuan. For example, one drawing, reproduced in figure 10, a drawing of a dress is prioritized over the body that wears it.⁴⁰⁸ A headless torso appears in a shapeless gown, drawn with gangly arms and disproportionately long legs. In the first version of the drawing two large hands are depicted reaching towards the handle of a large case, their ungainly form denying any sense of delicacy. Across the base of the dress, Tanaka writes "60 yards." It is unclear whether or not the enormous length refers to the length of the fabric, the width of the dress, or the height of the subject; nonetheless, that the artist sought to rewrite the dainty attributes of fashion into a model of enormous proportions seems clear. Tanaka inscribes the feminine through color or shape, while simultaneously denying the delicate scale associated with the tropes of femininity. Tanaka's oeuvre is not conjoined with the "our bodies ourselves" movement, instead her work seems to ask: whose body? What is a body formed from? And to what end?

Like her dress-based projects, these drawings, more than any other planning pieces Tanaka produced, can be understood to refer to a central absence. *Electric Dress*, when unworn,

⁴⁰⁵ "Rajio wa, futatsu, naibu ni ireru. Kimono o awaseru no ni, daiyaru de nai, botan [neji to, bo-ruto, bo-ruto no ue ni kabuse o koshiraete oku]. ラヂオは、二つ、内部に入れる。着物を合わせるのに、ダイヤルでない、ボタン「ネジと、ボルト、ボルトの上にカブセをこしらえておく」." Ibid., 11.

⁴⁰⁶ As pointed out in the previous chapter, Tanaka was an amateur seamstress, an extremely popular hobby for women at the time.

⁴⁰⁷ For example, Katō uses the term *Electric Clothes* throughout her catalogue: Katō Mizuho Minami Miyuki, *Michi no bi no tankyū (Searching for an Unknown Aesthetic Tanaka Atsuko)*. I confirmed with Katō that she believes "Electric Clothes" to be the best translation for *Denkifuku* 電気服 in an interview. See Interview with Katō Mizuho, October 21, 2007. Interestingly, the debate over how to translate *Denkifuku* only further illustrates how the topic of gender in Tanaka's work is a charged and even divisive issue. I sense that Katō and others prefer the name *Electric Clothes* because they do not want to apply an artificial aura of femininity to the work.

⁴⁰⁸ It is sketched in pencil twice, on pages twenty-five and twenty-seven.

references the wearer implicitly through the empty space of its core. It is the body that provides support for the tiers of wires and bulbs that form the apparatus. Similarly, the sketches are suggestive of a subject-model, cued by the neckline and empty arms of the bodice-patterned shape. This mode of representation was also predominant in Notebook Two, where sketches of large-scale dresses rarely include the body, and never include the head of the potential wearer. In these moments, the balance between the subject and object has come undone, and a manufactured surface has subsumed the wearer.

Notebook Three

A third notebook made by Tanaka between 1955-1963 is a striking collection of tiny paintings and drawings. The intricate shapes, often painted onto cardboard insets contrast with the enormity of her performance works. One leaf is painted with a bright array of circles, linked together by wiry, meandering lines. The striking double set of paintings unfolds lengthwise and are filled with intricate compositions that engage the space of their respective backdrops, each design corresponding to the dimensions of the paper (figure 11).⁴⁰⁹ A continuous array of blue and black stretches out across the paper, the sharp circles giving a sense of synchronicity to the blue lines. Sensory engagement is heightened by the need to unfold the long strip nestled in the journal pages. Tanaka's tiny painting — as well as this notebook as a whole — is a palimpsest of circles and lines, suggesting a sense of perpetuity that is only contained by the boundaries of the album.

The starkly formed circles are clustered together tightly over the binding of the page yet do not map out a central axis. Perspective and centrality are eschewed and, as a result, the continuum of links suggests endlessness. Below, another painting in watercolor takes up the same motif but demonstrates its own distinctiveness through thicker circles, softer shades of black and grey, and a greater use of negative space. Running horizontally across the page, the repetitious motif of the circles creates a sense of continuity. Yet the size of the inset and the termination of the painted line circumscribe their reach. For Tanaka, the tension between limits and limitlessness demonstrated here would maintain significance. The young artist's established rhythm in the tiny painting is a synecdoche for her oeuvre, re-enacting the relational quality of the infinite and finite that binds the tiny drawings together.

In contrast to the previous two journals, here compositions are presented as finished works; they are done in paint rather than pencil, the shapes are complete and most include her signature. Several postcard-size pieces, for example, display the family name last. On the page thirteen she writes simply “敦子” (Atsuko), in Japanese characters, an unusual choice since it is common practice for Japanese to refer to themselves by their family names alone. On the sixteenth page, Tanaka includes her signature in English twice on a single card, perhaps experimenting with the two different modes of handwriting for the “A” in Atsuko. Does this suggest a heightened awareness of the potential directions and materialization for her artistic persona? Would the reorientation of her name allow for greater recognition from a Western audience? It seems that Tanaka had a self-conscious awareness about her status as a solo artist, a notion reinforced by her repeated insistence that her work was distinct from the Gutai group.⁴¹⁰

Indicative of Tanaka's interest in costume and gendered display, the opening pages of notebook three are composed of thick inlaid sheets of paper that resemble pattern templates

⁴⁰⁹ Tanaka Atsuko, "Notebook Three " (New York: unpublished 1956-1963), 12.

⁴¹⁰ Okabe, *Tanaka Atsuko mō hitotsu no Gutai (Tanaka Atsuko: Another Gutai)*.

(figure 12).⁴¹¹ Colors are minimal, with a large number of black and empty circles on the left-hand side of the insert, giving the composition a feeling of limitlessness. Because of their shared color and form, it seems as though the elements might conform to a larger pattern, but upon closer inspection each individual piece operates in isolation from the others. Color also blurs the boundary between similarity and difference as the center is filled with pink orbs, some colored over and appearing red. A thick line leads away from the deepest hue, meandering and crossing over to the right side of the image where the color relationships are inverted. Here circles outlined in black predominate, with the pinkish line forming a base. Tanaka echoes this transformation in the line of blue that circles around the reddish shapes on the left, only to lead to the formation of deep blue circles on the right. Like *Three Black Balls*, it is explorative of space through color. The work is a dissemblance of pattern, a continuation of linkages that ultimately do not cohere as a whole.

Subtly, these creations test the line between three-dimensional and two-dimensional. Raised slightly off the flat page of the sketchbook, they hint at the conceptual development from flat, compositional planning to the actualization of installations and performance pieces such as *Stage Clothes* and *Electric Dress*. Tanaka's shifts between three-dimensional and two-dimensional emphasize her awareness of surface as a site of differencing.

In the final pages of Notebook Three, four small paintings of dark black circles interwoven by undulating lines, painted delicately on cardboard inlays, demonstrate Tanaka's penchant for circuits and circles as well as her ongoing interest in scale (figure 13). On each of the four paper squares, light pencil marks map out the space in which the black circles reside. Each unique shape is chaotic, clustered around the central space of the inserts. At once solid and amorphous, the circles in her drawings are marked by their cohesiveness, tight forms conglomerating like cells in the early stages of life. Within the space of the painting there is a tension between homogeneity and differentiation: each of the circles is painted on the same medium, in the same color, each spanning a similar amount of space. Of the four squares, the top left design is least cohesive, the outer edges of line maunder, the inner circles barely suggestive of a human face. These tiny paintings stand in marked contrast with her towering installations.

Monumentality in Tanaka's oeuvre seems to work on two levels: it captures and fascinates the viewing subject, revealing our conceptual and physical limitations.⁴¹² Turning the pages of Notebook Three the circles appear miniscule and from this standpoint the viewer has power and control over the object. Conversely, when her projects were finalized, they often inverted these relations of scale. Rather than neatly fitting into her back pocket as tiny drawings, installations like *Stage Clothes* dominated Tanaka's figure. *Electric Dress* threatened to overwhelm with its intensity of heat and light. Tanaka's oeuvre displays a persistent concern with scale, often dominating or overwhelming the viewer or participant in the work, even when that subject was herself. Yet to complete such large-scale works within the pages of a tiny book

⁴¹¹ During this period, Tanaka used a very minimal color palette, focusing primarily on black, with occasional additions of red. Tanaka also seems to reference fashion design in *Notebook One*, where she likens an insert to "tanzaku," (small paper sheets commonly used in the Tanabata ceremony or pattern pieces used in clothing design). Tanaka, Notebook One, 29.

⁴¹² Stewart writes, for example: "Whereas we know the miniature as a spatial whole or as temporal parts, we know the gigantic only partially. We move through landscape; it does not move through us. This relation to landscape is expressed most often through an abstract projection of the body upon the natural world. Consequently, both the miniature and the gigantic may be described through metaphors of containment – the miniature as contained, the gigantic as container." Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1993), 71.

is to render those plans compact and controllable. Writing in her notebook, Tanaka becomes larger than life, at least for a time. That is, until pieces like *Electric Dress* suggest that the “border war” between organism and machine has shifted, and her own work shrouds her body and diminishes her capacity to act.

For Tanaka, scale may have been a means to measure and actualize control and test vulnerabilities of selfhood. In other words, scale, like surface, is a site of difference that allows the opportunity for ontological development. As I discussed in Chapter Three, art reviewers and other members of Gutai frequently commented on the disparity between Tanaka’s “frail” form and the magnitude of her art. In on the last page of the journal, *Gutai 3*, Ukita Yōzō writes (in her somewhat awkward English) of Tanaka’s work in the “Outdoor Exhibit to Challenge the Midsummer Sun:”

However, we were by no means disappointed in our own works. For example, for creations by ATSUKO TANAKA (reference page 3-5) gives us the impression that her whole capacity is well expressed in conformity with the spacial and in its plastic art [sic]. 10 sq. meters length of nylon cloth pitched 20 centimeters above the ground and the metalistic pine colour of the cloth seemed to burn the eyes under the glamouring [sic] sun. Also 17 cedar boards each 6 ft by 1 ft came hanging down from 15 meter high pole constructed in the center of the area, resembled an artificial Milky Way. This is a good illustration of how ATSUKO TANAKA who only weighs 85 lbs, appreciated the magnificence of the outdoor exhibition.”⁴¹³

Ukita lingers over size, describing the height of each work and comparing Tanaka’s installations with the vastness of the Milky Way. The insertion of Tanaka’s weight summons the reader to compare the slightness of the producer with the mass of her creations. Photographs from press coverage (collected and kept by Tanaka in a clippings file) similarly reveal a fondness for posing her slight frame in a kneeling position beside her large-scale works, or capturing her lithe form between thin aluminum siding to suggest an equivalence in dimension between her body and the narrow man-made material (figure 14).⁴¹⁴ Photographs and descriptions such as these suggest that Tanaka was profoundly aware that scale was constitutive of the subject, be it artist-subject, depicted subject, or viewing subject.⁴¹⁵

⁴¹³ Ukita, "Documentary on the Second Edition Of "Gutai," 24.

⁴¹⁴ For example, Tanaka is shown kneeling beside her work *Pink Cloth* in a newspaper article on the first page of her clippings collection. See "Motif o kataru (Talking About a Motif)", *sangyo keizai shinbun hanshinhan*, July 25 1955. On another page, she is pictured kneeling next to her *Bell* installation – the fact that she is a woman highlighted in the headline: "Ihyō tsuku 'nijū no beru' ojōsan no sakuhin genbi ten ni buji nyūsen 意表つくニューウのベル お嬢さんの作品ゲンビ展に無事入選 (20 Bells That Surprise: A Lady's Composition an Effortless Prize Winner from Genbi Exhibition," *Osaka Mainichi Shinbun*, November 24, 1955. Another picture of Tanaka kneeling before her one-ton installation piece is included in "Uchū o tsukuru 宇宙をつくる (Creating Outerspace)," *Osaka Shinbun*, August 30 1959. Gallery HAM in Nagoya currently has Tanaka’s clippings collection.

⁴¹⁵ As mentioned in Chapter Three, Shimamoto stated, “Among these few examples of avant-garde art, Tanaka’s work has taught me about an aesthetic sensitivity that I did not have, especially an alternate possibility of rigorous beauty that can be created from womanly sweetness and frailty. They were a great influence on me.” Shimamoto Shōzō, *Gutai 4*, special edition for the *1st Gutai Exhibition*, 31. Similarly, Yoshihara described Tanaka as an “annoying person of violence who is ...endowed with a tiny body that can be held in one hand. When she plans her works, she expects no assistance from others. But who can just watch from the sidelines?” Yoshihara Jirō "Tanaka Atsuko ni tsuite" exhibition pamphlet.

The issue of scale and humankind's relation to the larger cosmos was certainly circulating at the time, as Ukita's reference to the Milky Way reminds us. Faces looked upward all over the world as *Sputnik* was launched in 1957, and the United States, worried about being left behind, followed with *Explorer* in 1958. As travel to the moon and beyond increasingly seemed possible, the race for expansion and control between the dominant powers on Earth was on the rise. Confronted with an unknown future, the question of our position in relation to each other, as well as in relation to the wider world, was intensifying. How could we lay claim to space at a domestic level, at an international level? Art reviewers were quick to draw parallels between Tanaka's work and the dynamism of the Space Race. In 1959 an Osaka newspaper ran the caption, "Creating Outer-space?" below a large image of Tanaka's one-ton white cement installation piece, described in chapter three (figure 15).⁴¹⁶ The article comments on the otherworldly nature of Tanaka's art.⁴¹⁷ *Untitled* from 1959, a huge hollow orb covered in circuits and wires, was in step with the times, when a claim to increased size and heft could be translated into possibilities for outer space. Space was "the final frontier," and what was sought was quite simply that which existed outside ourselves. "Outer space" had no map or comprehensible terrain, it was (and is) unknown and for that reason inspired the imagination to edge outward, even when it was practically unmanageable.

Scaling the Insurmountable

Many of the installations within the notebooks would never come to fruition. Firstly, it is likely that for any artist the number of planned works exceeds those that are completed. Some ideas are prioritized, while others are abandoned. Secondly, cost was a primary barrier for many Gutai works, especially those involving electronics or other expensive materials. Tanaka's father provided a great deal of assistance to his daughter (the youngest of nine children), but funds from his work at a matchstick company were far from limitless.⁴¹⁸ In the 1950s, Tanaka had not yet developed relationships with buyers and museums; similarly, galleries were not accustomed to exhibiting highly abstract paintings or unorthodox large-scale mechanical installations. Thirdly, several of the plans recorded in the notebooks were potential advertising gimmicks for the Yoshihara vegetable oil company, Yoshihara Seiyu Kōjō 吉原製油工場, of which only one or two compositions from all the members of Gutai would likely be selected.⁴¹⁹ Tanaka's grandiose and mechanically complex ideas would not likely have been the ideal choice for a budget-conscious company interested in public sales. Profits from the Yoshihara company were not used for the Gutai group, and all the members were expected to raise their own funds for supplies.⁴²⁰ Finances and practicalities similarly limited Gutai Art Exhibitions as a whole, and financial need progressively influenced Gutai members to make more saleable works. It seems that after Tapié's arrival in 1957, the recognition of, and possible contact with, the overseas art market contributed to a tendency in the group to create flat, easily-transportable paintings rather than performance works.⁴²¹

⁴¹⁶ This untitled piece is no longer extant.

⁴¹⁷ "Uchū o tsukuru 宇宙をつくる (Creating Outerspace)." *Osaka Shinbun*, August 30, 1959.

⁴¹⁸ For example, in order to save costs, Tanaka disassembled her installation of *Stage Clothes* to use the materials for other works. This work is consequently no longer extant.

⁴¹⁹ According to Katō Mizuho and Ming Tiampo, who have interviewed various Gutai members on the subject.

⁴²⁰ Tatehata Akira commented that most people think the Gutai group members rich when in actuality most were middle class teachers, scrimping to put money into their art projects. Interview with Tatehata Akira, October 19, 2008, Osaka.

⁴²¹ These works are frequently referred to in Japanese as tableaux タブロ, to mean relatively flat oil paintings.

Gutai's joint exhibition practices also influenced what would be produced. Ideas were submitted by individual members to Yoshihara, who was solely responsible for selecting what would be displayed at the group shows. This contributed to a competitive atmosphere among group members that, according to Shiraga, resulted in artists trying to outdo each other, most often in terms of size.⁴²² Whether or not Tanaka was interested in competing with other Gutai members is unclear, but it seems that to a certain extent, large-scale works became a point of fascination for the group. Spectacle, it seems, is seldom an untested tactic in the field of avant-garde art, and Tanaka's ability to attract newspaper headlines may have been in part due to the scale of her experimental works. While her penchant for the grandiose may have been related to the inner workings of the Gutai group and competition for inclusion in exhibitions, Tanaka's concepts ironically may have pre-empted inclusion in shows because of their immensity.

Certainly, the fascination with large-scale works was not limited to Gutai. Rather than simply an artistic trend, creating bigger and bigger pieces was part of an international phenomenon of competition that had much to do with the context of the postwar period and the race to establish state-driven hierarchies of power.⁴²³ While the complexities of this issue are beyond the scope of this essay, it is important to recognize that the Gutai were certainly attuned to the era's zeitgeist, if not explicitly discussing the cultural stakes of the 1950s.⁴²⁴ Scale, as an expression of artistic capacity, had repercussions for Japan's position in the international art scene, as well as for the artist-subject. In 1970, size became a metaphor for Japan's cultural comeback, when Okamoto Tarō's *Tower of the Sun* was the central exhibit of the Osaka Expo. The seventy-meter sculpture was built when expectations ran high for the nation's stature in the international field — *Tower of the Sun* became a rather obvious metaphor for Japan's growth and power.

Japan's anxiety over its status was connected to the nation's relationship with the United States. Yoshihara was indeed aware of the increasing popularity of artists like Jackson Pollock, and even wrote to various artists in the United States. These letters have been exhibited at "Under Each Other's Spell: The Gutai Group and New York" at the Pollock-Krasner House in 2010.⁴²⁵ Yoshihara, with the Gutai Group behind him, pursued a position on the hierarchical

⁴²² Other large-scale works by Gutai members in the fifties include Kanayama Akira's untitled piece that consisted of a red ball on a large white sheet from 1955, at 22.96 x 22.96 feet or Shiraga Kazuo's installation of a broad, white form criss-crossed with hair-like material displayed (1956, 9.84 x 26.24 feet, no longer extant). This was a notable change from the dynamic of other local artists at the time. In a call for submissions for the first Ashiya City Art Association Exhibition (Ashiya-shi Bijutsu Tenrankai 芦屋市美術展覧会), it stated that anyone could participate and there would be no size limitations; however, most of the works submitted were small in size, at about 10 gō 号, or approximately 21 x 18 inches (gō 号 is a unit to measure the size of a canvas, the smallest of which is 0号, that is slightly larger than a cabinet size of photograph). *Gutai 1,2,3*, 28.

⁴²³ For more on this race see Guilbaut, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art*.

⁴²⁴ In North America, the creation of large works was becoming increasingly important among many artists in the Abstract Expressionist and, later, Minimalist movements. Jackson Pollock's works, such as *Mural*, from 1943-44, was 97.25 x 239 inches. He rose to stardom with works like *Autumn Rhythm* (number 30), from 1950, which was also a large piece at 105 x 207 inches.

⁴²⁵ The chosen title for this exhibition seems at odds with the fact that the Gutai exhibition in New York was completely panned by Dore Ashton in 1958. Ashton, "Art: Japan's Gutai Group." In fact the Gutai did not receive any positive press to speak of and Gutai were unable to find other exhibition opportunities in New York in the years that followed. However, Gutai's popularity continues to surge. In addition to the exhibition at the Pollock-Krasner House, Gutai were recently featured at the Venice Biennale. An entire gallery room was given over to recreating the 1956 "Outdoor Exhibition to Challenge the Midsummer Sun." See Andrew Maerkele, "Gutai Installation a Winner in Venice" *The Japan Times*, July 10, 2009.

pedestal of the art world. He corresponded frequently with luminaries outside of Japan and subscribed to a wide collection of international art journals.⁴²⁶ Tanaka, on the other hand, was far less cosmopolitan. In fact, she had never traveled outside the country before September 11, 2004, which is surprising given the fact that her paintings were frequently exhibited abroad from the 1960s onward.⁴²⁷ Tanaka, alongside several other members of Gutai, has stated she was not aware of Pollock or other leaders of Abstract Expressionism in 1955-1956.⁴²⁸ She did not seem interested in other art movements or theories, and it is unclear whether or not Yoshihara kept the group informed of happenings outside the country or in Tokyo. However, Yoshihara was responsible for the idea of stage performances and continually pressed the group members to be original.⁴²⁹

Scale and the Subject

Unlike other Gutai members, Tanaka's interest in the grandiose was not quelled with Tapié's arrival.⁴³⁰ In fact, she was preoccupied with scale throughout her career, as her later series of large-scale paintings testifies. In Notebook One and Notebook Two, she reiterated words such as "big" and makes statements such as "humongous bigness you can feel" to describe the desired effect of her work.⁴³¹ Tanaka eventually made some of the largest works that the Gutai group produced.⁴³² For example, the installation work, *Stage Clothes*, was roughly 14.3 feet x 12 feet, her untitled installation from 1959 was 9.84 x 8.2 feet, and her 1955 installation of pink rayon cloth for the "Experimental Outdoor Exhibition to Challenge the Midsummer Sun" measured 32.8 x 32.8 feet. Often, the immensity of her works was unprecedented; for example, she created the aforementioned one-ton installation piece, as well as a painting that was the size of a pool. In May 1956, she made an enormous red dress 13.12 x 62.33 feet at the "Shinko

⁴²⁶ Katō Mizuho, Koichi Kawasaki and Yokohama Ikuko, *Seitan 100 nen kinen Yoshihara Jirō (Jirō Yoshihara a Centenary Retrospective)* (Tokyo: Asahi Shinbun, 2005).

⁴²⁷ Katō Mizuho reports that Tanaka traveled with Kanayama to New York for the *Electrifying Art* exhibition and was very excited about the trip. They were in the United States for only four days (September 11 – September 15). Tanaka passed away in 2005. Personal communication with Katō Mizuho, October 28, 2009.

⁴²⁸ i.e., see Shimamoto Shōzō, interviewed by Yamamura Tokutaro and Osaki Shinichiro in *Gutai 1,2,3*. 370. Kansai-based artists like Tanaka may have been less aware of the currents of contemporary art than those in Tokyo. Pollock's drip paintings were first shown in 1951 at the "Third Yomiuri Independent Exhibition" held in the capital. See Osaki, "Body and Place" for a description of Yoshihara's encounter with Pollock's work. "Body and Place: Action in Postwar Art in Japan," in *Out of Actions*, eds, Paul Schimmel and Russell Ferguson (London: Thames and Hudson, 1998): 139.

⁴²⁹ As I see it, members of Gutai had varying degrees of ambition and awareness about the international art scene. Yoshihara was likely the most well-versed in the currents of art historical discourse, and kept a large collection of international journals. He often corresponded with artists and curators outside of Japan. For example Smithsonian Archives holds a series of letters between Oakland resident Fred Martin and Yoshihara, dated to March 1958. See Smithsonian Archives of Art, Fred Martin papers, Reel 1128.

⁴³⁰ Most Gutai members returned to paintings and flat, saleable works after Tapié became involved with the group. The Frenchman was interested in exporting works for sale, and performance works or installations posed too many difficulties. Hirai, *Gutai te nanda? (What's Gutai?)*, 96.

⁴³¹ "Hijō ni bōdai na kanji suru ōkisa. 非常にぼう大な感じする大きさ。" Tanaka, Notebook One, 33.

⁴³² The press took note of her proclivity for large-scale works. A review in the English edition of the *Mainichi shinbun* read: "Miss Tanaka, a graduate of Shoin Senior High School of Osaka, is one of the most energetic and active members of the Gutai Art Association. She displayed many large works at the association's open air exhibition in Ashiya City last summer. One of her works was a 100 feet long, 1 foot wide wooden belt suspended 25 feet high in the air by a pole and pine trees." "Rare Type of Artists," *Mainichi Shinbun (Daily News)*, March 9, 1956.

Independent Exhibition.” This work later formed a backdrop for the 1957 performance of *Stage Clothes*.

As Tanaka continued to cling to her pursuit of impractically large pieces, she faced problems in her marriage and Yoshihara’s rejection of her most ambitious ideas. In the 1998 film, *Another Gutai*, Kanayama reported that Tanaka’s unrealistic plans were frequently a point of marital contention.⁴³³ He often chastised Tanaka, particularly since she gave little consideration to who would be responsible for the physical manufacturing and transport of her art objects. Before the “Eighth Gutai Exhibition” in 1959, Tanaka had announced her intention to create an installation approximately five meters in diameter and estimated to weigh five tons. Kanayama reports saying: “Do you think you can bring that to Kyoto (from Osaka)? Do it yourself then.” The couple briefly stopped speaking to each other. Later Tanaka capitulated, returning to Kanayama, saying, “I’ll make it three meters if you’ll help me.” Kanayama agreed, and in the end the work weighed one ton.⁴³⁴ Displaying the work required the concerted effort of the entire Gutai membership.⁴³⁵ Although this plan was completed, albeit after much negotiation, many other projects were on such a grand scale that practicality would have precluded their construction, regardless of cost.

Tanaka persisted in finding scale to be crucial to her creative process long after her departure from Gutai. In a 1998 interview, the artist riposted that many people said her early works were her best, but she disagreed. Tanaka felt that her most prominent work was her (118.08 x 196.8 inches) untitled painting completed in 1994, *94B* (figure 16). Tanaka claimed that this work was good *because* of its size. She commented that the vastness of the canvas allowed “it to become far more creative.”⁴³⁶ Her language suggests that it was the object itself that was freed from limitations, as though she had no part in this dynamic. In her commentary for the Okabe Aomi documentary, Tanaka fondly refers to the painting as “that three-five one,” referring to its approximate three-foot by five-foot dimensions.⁴³⁷ The acrylic on canvas painting is a striking work in no small part due to the way it maintains a sense of even proportion, despite a lack of centrality, figuration, or perspective. In this sense, spatiality is a central component of the work. The largest of the full circles is painted in deep blue, overlaid by a smaller red and black form, their range of shapes reminiscent of the sun and moon. Her pride in this particular work is further related to scale when one considers that she seems comparatively disinterested in the two or three other works (also completed in 1994) that are similar in color and layout but of smaller size.

Containment, finitude, and the position of the subject are themes that recur throughout the notebooks. Robotics and powerful motions seemed to absorb the artist, as evidenced by the viewing platform in Notebook Two or her schematics for the *Stage Clothes* installation piece in Notebook One. Ambiguously mechanized works fill the pages, featuring large cylinders or bars that shoot outwards and then return to their original position. While this preoccupation is surely evident in works such as *Electric Dress* and the original construction of *Bell*, it becomes

⁴³³ Kanayama stated: “We often fought over matters like these.” Okabe, *Tanaka Atsuko mō hitotsu no Gutai*. (My translation is based on the original Japanese in the film, and differs slightly from the English subtitles included in the film.)

⁴³⁴ Ibid.

⁴³⁵ One photograph featured in the *Electrifying Art* catalogue shows a number of Gutai members installing *Untitled* (1959), white cement, cord, and plastic spheres. (9.84 x 8.20 feet) at the “8th Gutai Art Exhibition.” Tiampo and Katō, *Electrifying Art*, 115.

⁴³⁶ Okabe, *Tanaka Atsuko mō hitotsu no Gutai* (*Tanaka Atsuko: Another Gutai*).

⁴³⁷ Ibid.

increasingly obvious when studying the notebooks. By placing her own body in vulnerable positions (as with *Stage Clothes* and *Electric Dress*), or in spatially inferior positions (as in *94B* or the 1959 ovoid installation), Tanaka seemed to test the realm of the (gendered) subject. What can the subject withstand? How is scale determinant in sexing our experience?

The postwar period in Japan seemed to place new pressures on gender dynamics. Men were expected to build economic miracles and women were encouraged to act as a support system for that process. As Mary Brinton notes, women's first role was to supply low-income labor in their youth and after childbirth. She continues: "Women's second role in the postwar Japanese economy has been as indirect participants: they have nurtured higher-priced male labor, the labor of their husbands and sons."⁴³⁸ The notion of *ryōsei kenbo* 利用性賢母 (good wife, wise mother) that was promoted both as cultural ideology and education philosophy in the prewar had lasting effects into the postwar period.⁴³⁹ Feminine domesticity provided a perfect foil for the construction of masculinity in the postwar public, usually identified as the businessman (*sarariman*, サラリーマン). How did Tanaka come to terms with these confining gender roles?

Interiorized spaces were undergoing changes alongside the transportation and architectural developments that were affecting urban spaces. The introduction of modern conveniences like vacuum cleaners, gas ranges, and prepackaged food (for those who could afford them) meant reduced time spent on domestic responsibilities at home, and as a result, childrearing was increasingly seen as women's primary role. Tanaka was hardly the epitome of the "good wife, wise mother." Her husband often described taking care of his wife, and the couple never had children. How might the altered state of the teeming modern city, coupled with the quiet hum of new consumer durables bring new pressures to bear on the gendered subject? How might these expectations been imaged, fantasized about, or perhaps disavowed in Tanaka's art?

Representing the Biomorph

At times, Tanaka's proclivities for containment and the relationship to the subject took on an eerily science-fiction stylization. Some aspects of the drawings suggest a tension between a gendered, living being and manufactured creation. On page seventeen of Notebook One, a drawing appears that suggests a biomorph entity: it is at once womb-like, yet simultaneously morbidly mechanical, due to the numerous lines that seem to both support and threaten the forms within the circle (figure 17). Tanaka renders this "electric womb" by drawing in a loose and jittery manner, giving it a childish appearance not unlike her other pieces in the notebook. Her freeform lines would have raised the ire of an art school instructor, forgoing any verisimilitude to the nude in favor of ambiguous, coded references to the female body. Bound within the central

⁴³⁸ Brinton continues: "Yet in defining not only a direct economic role for women but a second, indirect role as 'investors' in the human capital of men, the family explicitly enters into the discussion. This is because of its ubiquitousness: marriage and childbearing are nearly universal among Japanese women. Men's and women's valuation of the roles of wife and mother is high, and women are the principal caretakers of all household responsibilities save the primary breadwinner role. Particularly important is their investment in the "quality" of children, especially sons. A full examination of women's participation in the Japanese economy therefore needs to include women's role in the development of male human capital." Mary C. Brinton, *Women and the Economic Miracle: Gender and Work in Postwar Japan* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 12.

⁴³⁹ Uno notes that: "the... Liberal Democratic Party and private companies continued to formulate policies which assumed that wifehood and motherhood came first for women." Kathleen Uno, "Death of 'Good Wife, Wise Mother,'" in *Postwar Japan as History*, ed. Andrew Gordon (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 303.

nexus, the small, rectangular forms are arresting, their battery-like shapes melded into the organic forms of the piece.

While in this drawing Tanaka presents the cohesive and inter-reliant qualities of the circle and lines, on page eighteen, she ruptures the forms of the central core and leaves behind the expanse of wires (figure 18). On the left page there is no round cohesion, no zone of (safe) enclosure. The wires instead produce a fist-like shape punctuated by tiny circles and rectangles mired in dark zigzagging lines reminiscent of a heart monitor. Echoing the previous drawing, the circuits run to the very edge of the page implying a relationship with things beyond. On the right, the thin lines that extend beyond the circle suggest connectivity, only for the connection to be abruptly severed.

In a simple yet compelling drawing from 1956, Tanaka again takes up the biomorphic motif (figure 19). The deep blue watercolor of the mixed-media work recalls the sea in her plan for the ocean-viewing platform, while the rounded orb shares an affinity with what I call her “electric womb” described above. As with the aforementioned drawings, Tanaka has drawn two pale lines on either side of the central sphere that reach out beyond the paper’s edge. Repeated strokes of red and charcoal imply a connection with the lines at either side. These wiry-thin extensions seem to speak to perpetuation beyond what is represented. Rather than a promise of immortality, this kind of interminability seems to suggest an element of risk, edging out beyond what is known and safe. Is this component connected to a larger whole? Is it but a small piece within a single, larger continuum or does it speak to an infinity of connections? What creative possibilities lie in this wiry nucleus?

In these works, Tanaka neither represents the naturalized body, nor does she paint a scientific diagram. Her hybrid form shows us the politics of the body that is born of woman and of industry. The image is a fascinating circular core set within a reticulum of connections that seem expressive of the complex intertwining of biological and mechanical creation. Circles, for Tanaka, might be understood to reference the cycles of life, just as these circles are planted firmly in the plastic realm of invented objects through the texture of bright, vinyl paint.

Tanaka worked with the format of the circle from 1956 — from the creation of *Notebook One* and *Electric Dress* — until she passed away from complications due to a car accident in 2005. She seemed to struggle with, and simultaneously be fascinated by, the subject’s limitations and potentialities for continuity and endlessness in a gendered, mechanized world. Kanayama reported that she would often paint for long hours deep into the night. Concerned for her health, he would gently urge her to take a break. At other times, she would stand idle before a painting for extended periods, undecided if it had reached its creative terminus.⁴⁴⁰ Kanayama would then nudge her on, sometimes physically prodding her in the backside to rouse her from her stupor. It was as though she herself was often physically caught between the finite and infinite.

In *Stage Dress*, Tanaka’s oversized cutout dolls are linked, while at the same time the repetitious nature of the installation reduces the sense of individuation in favor of the tedium of infiniteness. In their superhuman size, the dolls lose the quaint and ephemeral nature of paper cutouts and take on a disturbing figural anonymity that uncannily take on a human-like form reduced to mundane repetition. Similarly, in *Electric Dress* and *Stage Clothes* (the performance work), elements of fixity and continuousness are in tension. Tanaka spectacularly showed an expansive range (in the former, a range of brightness, color, and heat, and in the latter, a range of patterning, color, and material excess); yet the artist retained a fixed position on the stage. In *Electric Dress*, Tanaka compared her experience to being in an electric chair, while in *Stage*

⁴⁴⁰ Interview with Kimio Jinno, Nagoya, October 08, 2008.

Clothes the young artist gradually erased the visibility of her body by paring off her clothing until she stood in a black rubber leotard against a black stage. Thus, her performances seemed to enact metamorphism but ironically ended in stasis. *Bell*, too, allows for the aural exploration of infinity and limitation, as well as the tension between living creature and robotic object. Through the relay of sharp sounds that proceed around the edge of a room, the growing distance of the noise suggested boundlessness; yet, the circuits laid around the perimeter of the gallery represent (and actualize) both an origin and mechanized anchoring of sound.

If subjectivity is “simply an abstract principle that defies our separation into distinct selves,” Tanaka’s drawing helps us to see our reliance on outer connections as we come into being and grow.⁴⁴¹ Yet just as her sketches of line and circles reveal that the subject is always linked to something outside it, Tanaka’s work also carries an element of instability that reminds us of how easily these connections can fray or come undone. Her electric womb and sketches suggest that all too often it is the bodies of women that we rely on to build our notion of biological continuity, and it is likewise these bodies that can be overly-interiorized, disconnected, isolated, and made vulnerable to disintegration.

Tanaka’s paradoxically diverse yet formally analogous oeuvre consistently reworked forms suggestive of the tension between containment and endlessness. Her repetitious, physical engagement with their completion became a means to examine the relationship between subjectivity and representation. This examination ultimately culminated in a commitment to the potential of surface materiality. As I see it, Tanaka’s work raised questions about the viability of the female body in the modern world, her images walking the line between the natural/embodied, and the constructed/disembodied. Her dress figures and electric womb representations are marked in the gendering of their visual language. Tanaka dismantles the delicacies of the feminine by reversing assumptions of scale in her installation plans, and implicitly conflates the female reproductive system with the mechanized techno-scientific in her intricate drawings. Her biomorphic forms, I suggest, tell us that the modern machine is built into the core of our bodies, just as these mechanized processes are usually at a remove from our visual reckoning. Her drawings suggest that the boundary between realms of scientific imaginary and gendered social reality is, in Haraway’s words, an optical illusion.⁴⁴² From the beginnings in her earliest notebooks to the last of her large-scale paintings, nearly all of Tanaka’s works share a correspondence of circle and line, intriguing in the exploration of the capacity of the gendered, mechanized, and naturalized subject. Like the notebooks themselves, they offer no clear answers, only a sense of searching for the spaces between what is known and what is not.

⁴⁴¹ Nick Mansfield, *Subjectivity: Theories of the Self from Freud to Haraway* (Allen & Unwin, 2000), 3.

⁴⁴² Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs and Women*, 149.

Conclusion

Since I first began work on this project in 2006, exhibitions about and interest in Gutai have grown by leaps and bounds. This year, McCaffrey Fine Art in New York launched the first solo exhibition of Shiraga Kazuo's art in North America, which included full-color reproductions of the *Gutai* journals and an exhibition catalogue with translations into English of past interviews with the artist. The Gutai were also featured at the Venice Biennale in 2009, where an entire room was committed to recreating the "Outdoor Exhibition to Challenge the Midsummer Sun." Unlike the pine tree-lined pathways of Ashiya Park in 1955, the Venice exhibition clustered reconstructions of Tanaka Atsuko's untitled pink rayon installation, Shiraga's *Dōzo*, and other pieces (among them Kanayama Akira's untitled footprint-based composition) in a single, white-walled room, perhaps unwittingly representing Gutai's perceived departure from outdoor performance to paintings that met the demands of the international art market.

Academic scholars also have shown a growing interest in the group, as evidenced by the well-attended November 2009 symposium on Gutai held at the Guggenheim, which ran in conjunction with the exhibition, "Under Each Others' Spell: Gutai and New York," held at the Pollock-Krasner House. That same month, a smaller exhibition of Gutai works was on display at the Harold B. Lemmerman Gallery, New Jersey City University. With this flurry of activities, it seems likely that the face of Gutai studies is poised to change, and one hopes that this will lead to increasing diversification of the field, leaving behind the tendency to homogenize the group in favor of in-depth studies of individual artists. Many other interesting Gutai members have been given short shrift, in part because of the paucity of available English-language materials. All too often, North American exhibitions and scholarship on Gutai have disregarded foundational issues, such as gender and nationalism, or overlooked the ways Gutai members broke away from the missives of the group's manifesto.

In 1999, the Japanese feminist art historian, Chino Kaori 千野香織, edited a volume entitled "Women? Japan? Beauty? Toward a new Gender Criticism" (*Onna? Nihon? Bi? arata na jendā hihyō ni mukete*) that provoked questions about the established, monolithic division of gender and the essentialist construction of modern Japan, lamenting that these issues were continually ignored not only by Japanese art historians but also by academic scholarship, as constructed in larger terms.⁴⁴³ Chino argued that these categories, often assumed to be stable and independent concepts, are in fact polyvalent constructions that impinge upon and define one another. Over a decade later, it is my hope that this dissertation will contribute to the ever-growing literature on Japanese art and gender issues. Until now, Gutai studies have not been a part of that important dialogue.⁴⁴⁴ To address the art of Tanaka and Shiraga through a consideration of gender and nationhood is to argue that these concepts are never mutually exclusive, that their relationship is dialectical and shifting, but nonetheless profoundly formative of our experience in the world. Following Japanese imperialism and the subsequent forced democratization of Japan, the postwar period was fraught with tensions over how the "new" nation would be represented and perceived, domestically and internationally, which put a premium on the powerful if nebulous framework of "culture."

⁴⁴³ Chino Kaori and Kumakura Takaaki, ed., *Onna? Nihon? bi? arata na jendā hihyō ni mukete (Women? Japan? Beauty?: Toward a New Gender Criticism)* (Tokyo: Keiō Gijuku Daigaku Shuppankai, 1999).

⁴⁴⁴ English language studies of gender in the Meiji and Taishō periods (1868 – 1926) have made significant strides) For example, Joshua S. Mostow, et al., *Gender and Power in the Japanese Visual Field* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2003).

Immense pressure came to bear on artists, as politicians and the body politic sought to forge a new identity for the nation grounded in cultural production, rather than military prowess. Prime Minister Katayama Tetsu concluded his remarks to the first diet session held under the new postwar Constitution in 1947 with an appeal to advance toward “the construction of a democratic nation of peace, a nation of culture.”⁴⁴⁵ The popular post-surrender slogan “Construction of a Nation of Culture” (Bunka kokka no kensetsu 文化国家建設) was understood to be part and parcel of a forward-looking agenda grounded in the ideals of modernism, peace, and democracy. Culture, as it was deployed in the 1950s and 1960s, was an investment in civilizing rituals that emerged in aesthetic discourse, art production, and art markets.⁴⁴⁶ Through its ritualizing processes, culture can be a means to power, predicated upon binaries of tradition and modernity, masculine and feminine — paragons that were crystallized, to a large extent, in the postwar period. Cultural production, in its dependency on subjectivity, performativity and representation, can further cement gendered roles, ossifying the fluidity of everyday life into stereotypes of the hero and the housewife. Yet cultural production is still a contentious conversation, whose polemic altercations can produce unexpected results.

Sharing exhibition space and an analogous creative climate, Shiraga and Tanaka chose divergent pathways of artistic production that may have reflected the contrasting demands of gender and its relation to the artistic self. This is not to suggest that Shiraga created “masculine art” and Tanaka “feminine art,” but that each was faced with opportunities and limitations that were circumscribed by their sex. Tanaka and Shiraga both met this situation with moments of complicity and of disavowal, but most often each self-consciously interrogated questions of gender and subjectivity through their art.

Shutaisei, or subjectivity, was a widely circulating concept in the postwar period, and Shiraga and Tanaka were very much a part of this discursive environment. Rather than expressing their unique sense of individualism, I have argued that these artists understood the self to be in a dialectical relationship, one that is predicated on relations to the exterior world. Each used representation to interrogate the inter-relationship of artistic status, gender, and selfhood. Shiraga subtly evoked insecure and backward-looking motifs of nationalism in his dramatic foot paintings, only to disrupt those associations through the violence of his art practice. Tanaka interrogated surface and the commodified female form in her notebooks, performance pieces, and paintings in order to question the status of female subjectivity amidst the allure and risks of postwar Japan’s modernity. Shiraga’s violent spectacles, steeped in crimson red, and Tanaka’s electric mappings of circuits and circles charted new artistic territory, asking how patterns of masculinity and femininity, reiterated and reconfigured, could be manifested within and through the entangled culture of the postwar nation.

⁴⁴⁵ “Minshūteki na heiwa kokka, bunka kokka no kensetsu.” John Dower, “Peace and Democracy in Two Systems: External Policy and Internal Conflict,” in *Postwar Japan as History*, ed. Andrew Gordon (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 4.

⁴⁴⁶ The term “civilizing ritual” was coined by Carol Duncan. Duncan, *Civilizing Rituals: Inside Public Art Museum* (London, New York: Routledge: 1995).

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