All the Landscapes: Gutai’s World
By Alexandra Munroe

“We are following the path that will lead to an international common ground where the arts of the East and the West will influence each other. And this is the natural course of the history of art.”

“In politics, totalitarianism fails; in culture, that which is unfree and akin to totalitarianism must be purged.... If you believe that your art has a spiritual meaning and it helps you develop yourself, such art will truly be on the cutting edge of global culture.”

On February 25, 1957, President Dwight D. Eisenhower presented the first Guggenheim International Award to British artist Ben Nicholson at the White House. This painting competition was noteworthy for its international focus and its promotion of abstraction as the lingua franca of modern art. Barely a decade after the Second World War, the Guggenheim created a prize exhibition with a genuinely idealistic aim: to repair the world’s divisions through the unifying power of human expression. At this time, the museum’s goals paralleled the American government’s postwar cultural policies. Eisenhower had just won a second term, and the United States was on the offensive in an escalating Cold War that was not only a political and ideological struggle but a cultural struggle as well. Attempting to position America as the global cultural leader of the postwar era, such high-profile traveling exhibitions identified big, bold, free abstract painting with the triumph of American-style liberalism, individualism, and internationalism.

The first Guggenheim International Award (GIA) exhibition opened at the Musée National d’Art Moderne in Paris before moving on to the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York. An international jury selected works by artists from eighteen countries, including, significantly, former Axis states Austria, Italy, and Japan. Their inclusion was no happenstance, and Japan in particular was key to the internationalist vision of the U.S. cultural establishment. After a century of projecting itself as a Pacific power both geopolitically and culturally, America no longer conceived the world in terms of Europe and the Americas alone. The time to bring the non-Western world into the purview of modern art had come, and Japan was well positioned to serve as ambassador; Japanese artists would be included in every iteration of the GIA show over its fifteen-year life span. Seeking artists who “break open and enlarge our artistic frontiers,” Guggenheim director James Johnson Sweeney promoted the increasingly interconnected and mutually resonant currents of Abstract Expressionism in the U.S. and Art Brut, Cobra, and Art Informel in Europe while also following the work of Japanese painters like Okada Kenzō, who
were developing styles of calligraphic abstraction, and Yamaguchi Takeo, whose ideogram-like painting *Work – Yellow (Unstable Square)* (1958) had a place of honor in the rotunda along with Constantin Brancusi’s totem *King of Kings (Le roi des rois, ca. 1938)* in the Guggenheim’s inaugural show at its Frank Lloyd Wright–designed home in 1959. Sweeney’s perspective on contemporary abstract painting reflected the period’s fascination with Asian art and philosophy; he enthused about the “frank adaptions of Oriental motives and calligraphic features” and wrote, “It is perhaps not going too far to see in this interest a straining towards the East, rather than to the magnetic center which held their predecessors for so long: Europe and Paris.”

Around the time Sweeney was constructing America’s cultural internationalism with an eye to the East, the Gutai Art Association and its leader, Yoshihara Jirō, were reconstructing the Japanese art world and looking to the West. The influential artist, teacher, and critic Yoshihara founded Gutai in the well-to-do town of Ashiya, near Osaka, in 1954. The group included young artists who had gathered under his progressive tutelage and embraced others whom he met through various cultural activities during the postwar years. Against the backdrop of wartime totalitarianism, the American Occupation, and Japan’s postwar renewal as a democratic state, Yoshihara directed Gutai as an experimental environment in which his protégés could explore the full potential of their individual creative free wills. Urging them, “Do what no one has done before!” he championed art making as an act of liberation, a gesture of individual spirit, a rite of destruction to create something new. This ethical stance, born from Yoshihara’s prewar experience as a modernist painter in cosmopolitan circles and honed during the oppressive years of Japanese militarism, was closely aligned with his equally passionate belief in a shared community of interests among different nations. He found a resonance for his outlook in the liberal ideology of Japan’s 1947 U.S.-drafted constitution and the Occupation era’s cult of the new. At the same time, keenly aware of Gutai’s peripheral status, he positioned the group as both a vital outpost of international tendencies and as antidote to narrow, exclusionary Western modernism. Yoshihara built Gutai as a means to “an international common ground” of transaction and mutual influence. As this essay will trace, over the course of the group’s eighteen-year history, its network reached Jackson Pollock and American Abstract Expressionism, Michel Tapié and Art Informel, Allan Kaprow and Happenings, and the 1960s intermedia movements Nul, Zero, and Experiments in Art and Technology (E.A.T.).

Given the cultural currents at work, the encounter between the New York museum and Japan’s most internationalist avantgarde collective was perhaps inevitable. In 1963, Guggenheim curator Lawrence Alloway traveled to Japan to select artists for the following year’s GIA exhibition (fig. 95). He met with Yoshihara and other Gutai artists at the Gutai Pinacotheca, the group’s communal gallery in Osaka, and selected paintings by Yoshihara and Tanaka Atsuko to include in the show. By this time, not yet a decade since Gutai had begun, Yoshihara’s utopian notion of “an international common ground” was giving way to a more complex accommodation of pluralism in an era of rapid globalization. Communications, travel, and print media were expanding the channels of art’s distribution and accelerating the traffic along them. The British-born Alloway, operating in the Kennedy era, was able to view the world with less of the Cold War lensing implicit in the GIA’s earlier exhibitions. He found artists from Osaka to Cairo...
content with their positions on the periphery in a world where distance to the center mattered less and less. As Alloway’s thinking evolved, it became clear that his curatorial challenge was to present paintings that shared a modernist expressionist language but whose meanings were specific to various national, cultural, and intellectual histories.

Dismissing “linear or hierarchic reductions of experience,” Alloway proposed dialogue as a way to conceptualize the “points of unity and constancy” that emerge among the great varieties of art production “in widely separated places at the same time.” In the catalogue to the 1964 show featuring Yoshihara and Tanaka, he wrote:

> When an exhibition is predicated on the fact of diversity, as this exhibition is, the notion of hierarchy in the arts becomes expendable; one can also dispense with some confidence in the universal status of art which former writers could express so cordially. The claim for art’s universality usually involved its detachment from life and its contact with a realm above and beyond a changing world and the corruptible flesh. Now it is possible to value the artist not to the extent that he is the agent of power (platonic essence or whatever), but to the extent that he is himself. When one faces a work of art, what is extraordinary is the fact of its creation.8

Alloway’s articulation of these quandaries seems strikingly farsighted. His attempts to reconcile the volatile paradoxes of non-Western modern art and local national identities in an increasingly global art world are as current now as they were fifty years ago. Yet despite the fissures he and others so thoroughly explored, the monolith of Western modernism has remained remarkably intact. The leading university textbook in use today, Art since 1900, reserves a scant five of its 816 pages to “the dissemination of modernist art through media and its reinterpretation by artists outside the United States and Europe.”9 The authors cite Gutai and the Brazilian NeoConcretists but misread both as derivative, disregarding their critical agency. Indeed, their terms “dissemination” and “reinterpretation” preserve the construct of Euro-America as the dominant center and Western modernism as the master narrative, perpetuating a kind of canon that other disciplines have long since dismantled. Such closed, geocentric views of the history of modernism perpetuate the West’s stronghold on avant-garde originality, relegating modern art made outside the putative centers as belated and derivative.

Gutai offers a paradigmatic example of a non-Western art movement and aesthetic discourse that was, as it saw itself, at the “cutting edge of world culture.” Spanning Hiroshima and Expo ’70 (figs. 2–3), Yoshihara’s group arose from local, regional, and national conditions in Japan but also intersected with, co-produced, and stimulated developments in postwar international vanguard art. The exhibition Gutai: Splendid Playground and this accompanying catalogue draw on theories of transnationalism and “modernity at large”10 to reconsider, through Gutai, the contemporaneity and multiplicity of modern cultural developments around the world. In a transnational reading, the conditions of modernity both in the West and non-West are defined by dynamic intercultural flows between peoples of different nations. To reconstruct history, we must narrate the political, cultural, and social interactions that cross borders, including wars,
colonialism, migrations, and trade, and appreciate the movement and invention of culture through individual translations, imagination, and inspired creativity. Through the flows of artists and critics, works of art, illustrated books, rambunctious ideas, and imperfect translations between Japan, Europe, and the Americas, Gutai’s history reveals the postwar project of late modernism not as a single story line but as an “interactive and refractive” network crisscrossing the entire globe (fig. 4). The group’s encounters with key European and American artists led to mutual, discursive constructions of identities and reciprocally shaped self-formation, aesthetic strategies, and ethical positions.

An apt emblem of a transnationalist reorientation lies at the heart of Gutai’s corpus. At the 1956 Outdoor Gutai Art Exhibition, Murakami Saburō hung an empty picture frame from the trees and wittily titled the work All the Landscapes (plate 53). The work continues to serve as a poetic reminder of how reality shifts according to the viewer, time, and place.

Please Forgive Our Audacity

Yoshihara’s vision of the international art world as interconnected and contemporaneous drove his ambitions for Gutai. The scion of a successful food-oil manufacturer, and a successful businessman in his own right, he used his considerable financial resources and formidable connections with the cultural establishments in Tokyo and Osaka to further the group’s contacts globally. He consciously constructed Gutai’s identity as a distinct product of the Kansai region of Japan, and even more specifically of the Hanshin Belt, a stretch between Osaka and Kobe three hundred miles west of Tokyo, with the goal of creating a critical position within a dynamic network that extended through Japan and beyond. In his search for an artistic presence that would “appeal to people all over the world,” Yoshihara used distance and difference to theorize Gutai’s particular universalism as “a free site [that] can contribute to the progress of mankind.”

Confronting the challenges of Japan’s peripheral position in the global cultural network, Yoshihara seized on the power of media to receive and to circulate ideas and foster international avant-garde camaraderie. A self-taught abstract painter with intellectual roots in both prewar European and Japanese modernism, Yoshihara avidly consumed publications such as the Taishō-era art journal Shirakaba (1910–23), the Surrealists’ Minotaure (1933–39), and Abstraction-Création (1932–36), and accumulated a substantial art library over the years. From such sources, he became versed in Futurism, for example, whose outlandish tactics as a peripheral vanguard with global aspirations to forge a new aesthetic for a new age resonated with Gutai’s. Not surprisingly, perhaps, his first act as leader of the Gutai Art Association was to orchestrate the publication of several hundred copies of a coterie bulletin to distribute worldwide. Dated January 1, 1955, the first issue of Gutai reproduced members’ works alongside an introductory message by Yoshihara in English as well as in Japanese:

This bulletin is issued to present the works by sixteen avant-garde artists residing in the Hanshin district…. What matters most to us is to ensure that contemporary art provides a site enabling people living through the severe present to be set free…. We never cease to
pursue fresh emotions in all types of plastic arts … [and] hope to work closely with other
genres in contemporary art such as children’s art and literature, music, dance, cinema,
theater and others.15

Over the next year, Gutai spectacularly fulfilled Yoshihara’s call for new forms of
interdisciplinary art in its first outdoor exhibition in Ashiya and first official group show in
Tokyo, both duly recorded in ensuing issues of the Gutai journal. Engaging and optimistic,
Yoshihara used the journal to connect to a global network of like-minded artists. In February
1956, the group sent Gutai 2 and 3 to Jackson Pollock, reaching his home in East Hampton, New
York, with a cover letter asking “forgiveness for our audacity.”16

Yoshihara’s internationalist outlook reflected sweeping changes in postwar Japan as the country
rebuilt its economy and sought to reform itself as a modern, secular, demilitarized, and
democratic nation on the world stage. For the first time, Japan was invited to participate in the
major biennials in São Paulo and Venice, compelling its art community to shed its insularity.
Official cultural exchange between Japan and its new Western allies increased dramatically with
the end of the American Occupation and signing of the San Francisco Peace Treaty in 1952,
boosting participation in exhibitions abroad by Japanese artists; that very year, for example,
Yoshihara took part in Paris’s Salon de Mai and the Pittsburgh International.

While the expectation that Japanese artists contend in the global arena was liberating, it also
exposed a challenge that had vexed Japanese artists since the late nineteenth century: as
latecomers to modernity operating at the periphery, how could they create their own authentic
culture of modern art? And now, amid rampant Americanization, how could they articulate an
autonomous artistic identity and cultural values? The influential critic Takiguchi Shūzō, who had
been arrested in wartime because of his affiliation with Surrealist writer André Breton, urged
avant-gardism as the only way for Japanese artists to achieve “world relevance” (sekai-seti).17 To
do so required knowledge of one’s original, individual being, he felt:

Perhaps we haven’t completely digested the movements and principles of Western art.
Japanese contemporary art must exist in our guts and bones. This is where everything
begins. Is it possible that we do not yet understand our very own substance?18

For Yoshihara, Jackson Pollock provided the catalyst to overcome this impasse. Yoshihara had
his first in-person encounter with Pollock’s work thanks to an increase in loan exhibitions
traveling to Japan from overseas. At the 3rd Yomiuri Independent Exhibition, which opened in
Tokyo and traveled to Osaka in 1951, he saw two of Pollock’s drip paintings, *Number 11* (1949)
and *Number 7* (1950, fig. 5). Struck by them, he was among the very first in Japan to articulate
the radical import of Pollock’s position as, he argued, the greatest living painter in the United
States. Like humanism, painting was in crisis after the war, and Pollock’s purity and directness
inspired a way forward: “It might be called psychological realism,” Yoshihara said in a
roundtable discussion published in the art journal Kansai bijutsu. “I think contemporary
American painting has spontaneously resolved the problem of humanism today, because it relates at a deep level to the psychological experience of the human being.”

Yoshihara not only conveyed Pollock’s impact within Japan; he also felt it distinctly on his own thought. Bypassing the dialectic of Japanese and Western modernisms, he turned to substance itself, pursuing raw being, or “psychological realism,” as the fundamental matter of art. The kinesthetic aspect of Pollock’s work offered a means for forging a direct physical connection between artist, material, and viewer, thereby overcoming alienation. Yoshihara grasped the freedom of Pollock’s leap into the concrete, where “drops of paint are more beautiful than that which they present.” He praised Pollock’s brute materialism further in 1956’s “Gutai Art Manifesto,” writing how his drip painting “reveals the scream of matter itself, cries of the paint and enamel.” These remarks were in step with Pollock’s own. He described his flowing skeins as “energy and motion made visible,” something “concentrated—fluid” that arose from “human needs and motives.” For Yoshihara, this art, which centered around the individual artist, the process of creation, and matter itself, shaped his own ideas of an authentically humanist art for the “severe present.” Too, Yoshihara understood the value of Pollock’s originality, the power of throwing the history of easel painting literally on the floor and tossing out the last vestiges of representation with it. It was never Pollock’s style that impressed Yoshihara; it was his sheer abandon.

Pollock never answered Gutai’s letter; he died in summer 1956. But his close friend, the critic B. H. Friedman, found the journals in the artist’s library and sent a letter to Japan saying they “must have been loved by Jackson” because they are “concerned with the same kind of vision and reality.” Gutai ran an essay by Friedman on Pollock in their next issue, printed in English and Japanese alongside an iconic Hans Namuth photo of Pollock painting (fig. 6). Through such connections, the journal became a space for dialogue on the meaning of contemporary art, enabling a virtual global community of like minds. It demonstrated the potential for art to transcend national boundaries through a shared ethos of individualism and subjective free will, what Yoshihara called “spirit” (seishin).

When Gutai had their first American show at Martha Jackson Gallery in New York in 1958, critics largely dismissed the paintings as derivative of Pollock. Dore Ashton commented, “Automatism is rampant, and the young people who have put their faith squarely in unorthodoxy turn out to be completely orthodox in their devotion to what they believe Jackson Pollock represented.” Since then, commentary on Pollock’s influence typically reinscribes modernism as a one-way distribution system from the West to subordinate geographies, marginalizing Gutai in the process. But Gutai’s catharsis was not unique, and distance was not the issue. Harold Rosenberg famously wrote of Pollock’s influence on American Action painters, “At a certain moment the canvas began to appear to one American painter after another as an arena in which to act.” And Allan Kaprow, anticipating his movement into environments and Happenings, stated that Pollock’s art of concrete facts “left us at the point” where “substances of sight, sound, movements, people, odors, touch … all will become materials for this new concrete art.” Like
artists everywhere, Gutai took what it needed from Pollock to solve its own crisis of representation in the aftermath of world war.

Gutai’s early paintings, made by bodily processes, may look like Pollock’s, but they are fundamentally different propositions. In *Number 7*, Pollock displays the practice of drawing, respects the frame’s sanctity, and manifests substantial compositional deliberation. His nine-foot-long horizontal format is structured around a first layer of broad aluminum-paint brushstrokes, vaguely letterlike, overlaid with applications of watery yellow oil paint and finally interwoven with cursive white and black enamel lines, all composed within rectilinear bounds. This kind of automatism is painterly and ordered compared to that of Gutai members like Sumi Yasuo, who worked by “going recklessly wild,” splattering paint with vibrating devices to create self-described works of “ardent beauty gushing out from my disposition” (plate 81). Despite the myth of Pollock acting “in” his painting, he actually painted around his canvases tacked to the floor. In contrast, Shiraga’s action-packed foot painting uses the floor “as a physical location of his struggles” and is “a more radical manifestation” of the arena idea. Shiraga Kazuo’s kick-strokes through thick gobs of red, black, and ocher pressed straight from the tube produce paintings that are not so much traces of Pollock-like dynamic rhythm as visceral figures of ritual self-purging (plates 75, 78). Likewise, Shimamoto Shōzō’s works made by smashing glass bottles of paint against canvases rely on chance to a radically different degree than did Pollock’s. If the American’s aim was to deconstruct the easel tradition to a point of no return, Shimamoto’s was to create an artistic site of pure destruction: “Even though destruction itself may be the opposite of creation, in this age, the boundary between the two no longer exists.” By radicalizing Yoshihara’s call for direct encounter between spirit and matter, Sumi, Shiraga, and Shimamoto shifted the locus of painting from the foreign, contested canvas to one’s own present body and took Pollock’s “psychological realism” to an unexpected end. Clearly, Gutai’s reading of Pollock was not, as Ashton claimed, a simple, “orthodox” one.

Most radically, Gutai transfigured Pollock’s “death of painting” into a new manifestation of lived reality itself. Expanding the definition of painting beyond a work on canvas, Murakami Saburō proposed “picturing” (ε) to be “a work you experience with your whole body,” anticipating moves in directions that Pollock himself could not have imagined and opening up the theoretical possibilities for painting to include any act of picture making in time and space. At the *Outdoor Gutai Art Exhibition* in 1956, Motonaga Sadamas tied polyethylene tubes loaded with colored water between the trees, making giant brushstrokes out of catenaries in the open air (*Work [Water]*, 1956, plate 10). Yamazaki Tsuruko created a room-size illuminated red vinyl cube that people could enter; inside, they were swathed in a field of pure red while animating a shadow play for those outside (*Work [Red Cube]*, 1956, plate 13). And indoors, at the *1st Gutai Art Exhibition*, Tanaka Atsuko’s *Work (Bell)* (1955, plate 44) reimagined painting as acoustic composition of living sound through a sequential ringing of electric alarm bells wired across forty meters of an exhibition space, moving first away and then back toward the visitor-activated switch. By making art that could not be defined by Western artistic categories, Gutai arrived at a new site of originality.
Imagining Gutai: Tapié and Kaprow

Gutai flourished during an age of manifestos. Around the world, revolutionary artists, intellectuals, and philosophers called out the bankruptcy of Western civilization and declared the terms of a new culture. World War II had left countries across Europe and Asia in spiritual as well as physical ruin and cast a moral pall over the entire planet. The vast intellectual project of modernism had been torn asunder by Auschwitz, Nanking, and Hiroshima, brutally betraying the Enlightenment’s promise of rationalism, technological progress, and international cooperation. The French literary critic Maurice Blanchet wrote that, after the atomic bomb, humankind had “departed historical space” and declared, “Henceforth the world is a barracks that can burn.”

Artists everywhere who had survived the onslaught of fascism and totalitarianism saw the end of war as a means to expunge the past. “Man will take on a new psychic structure,” Lucio Fontana predicted in 1946 from Buenos Aires, in his “Manifesto blanco.”

Like many observers, Fontana went on to draw conclusions about the future nature of art: “Painted canvas and standing plaster figures no longer have any reason to exist,” he wrote. Others went further, calling for the liquidation of the foundations of figuration, narrative, and even abstraction. Jean Dubuffet lambasted the “dead language” of Renaissance humanism and advocated an art of “savagery ...instinct, passion, mood, violence, madness.” Writing the “Gutai Art Manifesto” from his vantage in Osaka, Yoshihara exhorted Gutai to dispatch the “fraudulent” art of the past and embrace the “intense cry” that accompanies “the discovery of the new life of matter.” Renouncing Cartesian constructions of reality for phenomenological encounters with reality, the postwar declarations all announced the release from abstraction to concrete facts, from the static picture plane to a totally sensorial art of everyday existence. In 1959, Jean Tinguely scattered copies of his manifesto from an airplane over Düsseldorf: “Be free! Live!”

Two of the most ardent and influential promoters of new art after the war were the French critic Michel Tapié and the American artist Allan Kaprow. Although Informel and Happenings arose from different contexts and involved experimentation with very different media, each constituted a radical avantgarde in terms of gesture, improvisation, and materiality. Each of the men sought to situate his movement, based in Paris and New York, respectively, in an international arena, affirming its cosmopolitan relevance. Once again, Yoshihara’s targeted circulation of the Gutai journal made contact with Gutai’s distant co-fraternities, and this time, interest was reciprocal.

While Tapié and Kaprow would serve Yoshihara’s internationalist aspirations beyond his wildest dreams, they also skewed perceptions of the reality of Gutai and have for decades exerted an undue influence on its legacy. Nouveau Réaliste critic Pierre Restany criticized Tapié for promoting Gutai’s affinity with Informel, which both misread Gutai art as if it were European and avoided dealing with the fact that its performance-based work actually predated New York Happenings. Others, including Yoshihara, have refuted Tapié’s Zen-arts rhetoric. Still worse, his distortions have been credited to his commercial interests as an art adviser. Scholars have also been wary of Kaprow, who, conversely to Tapié, adopted Gutai only by focusing on the group’s live events to the exclusion of painting, failing to recognize their conceptual coexistence.
And while Kaprow gave Gutai cult status abroad, he also consigned their contributions to legend while the group was still very much alive. But such critical attempts to recuperate Gutai from the “Western gaze” tend to overlook the importance of mediation, imagination, and appropriation in the process of cultural history. From an inverted vantage, Gutai becomes critical to the discursive construction of Tapié’s and Kaprow’s own historically important movements, redefining Gutai’s reception abroad as a culturally productive phenomenon rather than an instance of passive reception.

In prewar Europe, the Surrealists’ anarchism sowed distrust in the formalist aspects of modern art. Postwar, art needed to prove its ethical worth to regain its stature. The Spanish intellectual José Ortega y Gasset condemned the modern artist in his 1948 treatise *The Dehumanization of Art*, observing that, nowadays, “art is a thing of no consequence.” Drawing on Heidegger’s attack on reason and Husserl’s emphasis on the “lived moment,” French thinkers Albert Camus, Jean Paulhan, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, among others, began to reconsider man’s being in the world in purely experiential terms. The new phenomenology upheld intuition and contingency over rational thought and fixed design. Paulhan urged artists: “Enough of spectacles, we need things / don’t copy nature, do as she does / constitute a pictorial fact.” Postwar politics also contributed to the urgency artists felt to expel themselves from official culture; their disgust with French complicity with Nazism made them want to be “completely other, in a world completely other,” wrote Michel Foucault.

Two shows in Paris at the end of the war marked a watershed: the painter Jean Fautrier’s *Les otages* in 1945 and Dubuffet’s *Mirobolus Macadam & Cie: Hautes pâtes* the following year, both at Galerie René Drouin. Fautrier had begun the *Otages*, or “Hostages,” series in 1943 while hiding from the Gestapo in an asylum outside Paris, where he reportedly heard the cries of civilians being tortured and executed by German soldiers. Struggling to express such horror without trivializing it through form, he built up a rough, loose impasto surface using a stuccolike matter over which he applied pale colors and ghostly shadows (fig. 8). Dubuffet’s paintings were similarly about *matière*. Calling his enterprise “The Rehabilitation of Mud,” the artist presented thick impasto surfaces mixed with “dirt, trash, and filth” incised with deformed human figures (fig. 9). Tapié identified these painters as well as Wols, Hans Hartung, Giuseppe Capogrossi, Georges Mathieu, and Jean-Paul Riopelle as agents of a new avant-garde, calling it *Art Informel* in 1950 and publishing his polemic *Un art autre* in 1952. Overthrowing formalism and abstraction, Informel offered France an art sufficiently grounded in réalité. By claiming a wide international allegiance—including Pollock, whom Tapié featured in his show *Véhémences confrontées* (Opposing forces) at Galerie Nina Dausset, Paris, in 1951—it could also restore the country’s relevance to global culture.

Against this backdrop, artists in France resumed their long-established intellectual interest in the “other.” Their purview included outsider art and art of the mentally ill; “primitive” cultures of Africa, Polynesia, and South America; and Zen Buddhist and literati traditions of China and Japan. By the early 1950s, China and Japan had become the “other” of choice among Tapié’s expanding group of Informel painters in Paris. Seeking a radical ethics of being and authenticity,
Pierre Alechinsky, Sam Francis, Henri Michaux, Pierre Soulages, and Mark Tobey, among others, undertook a concentrated if eclectic study of the arts and philosophies of “pure consciousness” and “unmediated experience.” They equated the East’s calligraphic gesture with an ethics of direct action, a way of mark making that sidestepped the suspect intellect and overcame the Western split between self and world. For example, Alechinsky made the influential film *Calligraphie japonaise* (1956) with the vanguard calligrapher Morita Shiryū, a friend of Yoshihara’s who actively advanced a utopian vision of calligraphic abstraction as the shared supralanguage of East-West art. At first, Tapié looked to a charismatic Japanese trio living in Paris, painters Dōmoto Hisao and Imai Toshimitsu and scholar Haga Tōru, as tutors in Informel’s pursuit of an alternative philosophy of art. But with Gutai, he found a whole movement to legitimize his solution for Europe’s postwar crisis. Introduced to the *Gutai* journal by Dōmoto in 1957, Tapié saw the collective as Informel’s perfect complement—and, importantly, one that could extend its reach globally. He initiated a decadelong collaboration with Yoshihara that would include international exhibitions in Osaka, Tokyo, New York, Paris, and Turin, as well as several joint publications. Tapié promoted these projects, ambitious even by today’s standards, to prove the ubiquity of gestural matter painting and the urgent humanity of an “international art of a new era,” as the title of one of their joint endeavors put it. In the process, he hoped to revitalize Informel at a time when its relevance had begun to wane.

By appropriating Gutai as a Zenlike embodiment of “a different, unpredictable, unpredicted, totally other power,” Tapié and his circle could construct a new cultural paradigm that was outside the West, outside modernity, and outside the teleology of Western rationalism, whose failure the war had exposed. Further, the resonances between Japanese and Western painters all tending to “this open, symbiotic, and dynamic vision, to this world of living interparticipation” fulfilled the expectation for art in the reconstruction period to offer a redemptive humanism. In October 1957, after months of correspondence leading to the joint publication of *Gutai* 8, which celebrated “the Informel adventure,” Tapié traveled to Osaka to meet with Yoshihara. The Gutai group greeted him with huge fanfare, setting in motion the patterns of spectacular homage that would characterize their public friendship over the following decade.

Yoshihara and Tapié’s first exhibition collaboration was *The International Art of a New Era: Informel and Gutai* (fig. 10). Opening in 1958 at the Takashimaya department store in Osaka, this presentation of works by seventy-six artists from Japan, Europe, and America toured four cities in Japan and then headed to the U.S., where a smaller selection of Gutai works opened at Martha Jackson Gallery. Yoshihara praised Tapié’s curatorial efforts, which “reached beyond racial differences and boundaries,” and expressed hope that “these exhibitions would provide a stimulus to a broader international exchange of new arts throughout the world.” Paintings by Gutai artists were installed beside works by such artists as Karel Appel, Capogrossi, Kline, de Kooning, Mathieu, Joan Mitchell, Robert Motherwell, Pollock, and Antoni Tàpies, suggesting a shared language of gesture, material, and looseness of form that transcended nationality. “Art now cannot be considered other than on a global scale,” Tapié proclaimed in the show’s catalogue, a dedicated issue of the *Gutai* journal. “Basically, there is an agreement on a global scale about the new road of morphological possibilities.”
For all the rhetoric, however, the commonality between Informel and Gutai is valid only up to a point. In theory, both movements are engaged in the artist’s gestural process of art making as a direct, phenomenological encounter with matter, using thick, impasto surfaces variously mixed with tar, sand, pebbles, and, in Gutai’s case, glass shards, spent bullets, mounds of matchsticks, and even the caps of paint tubes. Gutai was interested in children’s art as a means of nurturing free thought, while Informel drew from outsider art as a model of primal and untutored form. In his manifesto, Yoshihara praises Mathieu’s works alongside Pollock’s for revealing “the scream of matter itself” and, like Paulhan, refuses art that can be assimilated into any human concept, image, or symbol:

When the individual’s character and the selected materiality meld together in the furnace of automatism, we are surprised to see the emergence of a space previously unknown, unseen, and unexperienced. Automatism inevitably transcends the artist’s own image. We endeavor to achieve our own method of creating space rather than relying on our own images.\(^{51}\)

Shiraga Kazuo, who once floated cow livers in a formaldehyde-filled vitrine and made paintings on flayed boar skins (plate 60), comes closest to Fautrier and Wols in displaying grotesque matter as natural form. But if we look at the massive poured paintings by Motonaga Sadamasa, in which the artist pooled and dripped viscous paint mixed with pebbles over tilted canvas surfaces (plate 71), or Yamazaki Tsuruko’s paintings on zinc, which are just stains on a slithery surface (plates 67–68), we find their approach is far less authorial than, say, Mathieu, whose studied “spontaneity” never abandons design. The paintings Yoshihara Michio made by ladling hot tar over sand spread across a wooden board (plate 62), or Murakami Saburō’s “peeling paintings,” which are left over time to decompose (plate 90), reveal how Gutai artists use the nature of materials to tap into chance and indeterminacy. By letting matter act through itself rather than their acting through matter, Gutai artists’ “formless” works were fundamentally more deviant and “animalistic” than European Informel art. Ironically, these Gutai artists evoke Georges Bataille’s “base materialism” more than the Informel artists who consciously drew from it. In his influential 1929 *Documents*, Bataille states, “The time has come, when employing the word *materialism*, to assign it to the meaning of direct interpretation, excluding all idealism, of raw phenomena.”\(^{52}\)

Much as Gutai became a touchstone for Informel’s internationalist premise within the context of postwar France, Gutai played a role in Kaprow’s construction of the American neo-avant-garde of the 1960s.\(^{53}\) And once again, Gutai’s Japanese identity supported the Westermer’s claims for the international significance of his own movement, Happenings (fig. 11). In 1955, Kaprow stated, “[It] is no longer possible to exist purely as a nation and culture separate from other[s].”\(^{54}\) But whereas Informel rose from the existential crisis of postwar France, his strategies responded to the rapidly advancing industrial complex and superpower status of Eisenhower’s America. The non-Western world, and Japan in particular, appealed to Kaprow and others who were skeptical
of the U.S. government as a militarist and corporatist machine and who resisted the rising tides of American conformism and materialism. Implicit in Kaprow’s mentor John Cage’s radical proposition “to stop all the thinking that separates music from living” was a critique of the West’s doomed fixation on objectification and rationalism. His famous 1952 “silent” music composition, 4’33”, opened the way for new structures of durational time, spatial transparency, and experiential being, allowing the accidental contents of sensory perception to become art itself. Taking Cage’s proposition to its radical end, Fluxus founder George Maciunas called for the total elimination of Western cultural production in his 1963 “Fluxus Manifesto”: “Purge the world of bourgeois sickness, ‘intellectual’, professional & commercialized culture, PURGE the world of dead art, imitation, artificial art, abstract art, illusionistic art, mathematical art,— PURGE THE WORLD OF ‘EUROPANISM’!”

Arising from this rupture, Kaprow set out to chart the theoretical terms and “international scope” of the emerging phenomena in his 1966 book Assemblage, Environments & Happenings. This pioneering publication expanded on Kaprow’s idea that painting after Jackson Pollock was dead and articulated a legacy for Pollock of environmental art that was based on events and performance, incorporating chance, the everyday, duration, and audience interactivity. By featuring action shots of Gutai’s intermedia performance paintings and stage events alongside those of event-based works by Kusama Yayoi in Milan, Kudō Testumi in Paris, Wolf Vostell in Cologne, and Milan Knížák and Sonia Švecová in Prague, Kaprow could demonstrate the far-reaching breakdown of Western formalism and classical plastic arts. Via Cage, his proposal for a set of “form-principles” that would render “the line between art and life ... as fluid, and perhaps indistinct, as possible,” appropriated such Asian-derived concepts as “change,” “chance,” “accidents,” and a notion of time that was “variable and discontinuous.” Casting his new worldview as a “philosophical quest” rather than an “aesthetic activity,” Kaprow was at the forefront of a cultural movement to deconstruct the certainties of Western modernism, those “knots of ‘knowables,’ of groupings, relationships, and larger structures which have become obsolete.”

Kaprow’s capacious narrative could not encompass the startling curiosity of Gutai’s chronology, however. Works like Murakami Saburō’s 1955 Work (Six Holes) (plate 57), where the artist flings himself through a series of taut paper screens to make art out of an act of performance, and Motonaga’s 1957 Smoke, which literally dematerialized the art form in time and space, predated Kaprow’s own experiments. “For the record,” he wrote in his book’s introduction to Gutai, “these dates seem to imply the precedence of the Japanese in the making of Happening-type performance.” He summarily declares that he “knew nothing of Gutai’s activities” until 1959. Kaprow, the committed internationalist, could not fathom how the periphery could develop a trajectory other than a Westerncentric one. However productive Kaprow’s imagination of Gutai was for his own theorization of the neo-avant-garde, the untidy facts of Gutai’s precedent remained unresolved.

Yves Klein went further in distancing himself from an unfavorable comparison to Gutai. Because Klein had lived in Japan between 1952–54 and presumably followed developments between
Paris and Japan, some critics assumed his *Anthropometry* series (for example, fig. 12) using nude women “diving themselves into color and then rolling on their canvases” was influenced by Shiraga Kazuo’s foot painting. In his 1961 “Chelsea Manifesto,” Klein dismissed those “deformed ideas spread by the international press—I speak of that group of Japanese painters who with great refinement used my method in a strange way.” This potent intellectual problem, striking at the heart of modernism’s geocentric claim to originality, and hence at the question of Gutai’s reception, would require new art-historical tools to recuperate Gutai’s critical and creative agency in an interconnected and contemporaneous history of ideas.

**Open Work**

Gutai’s second phase (1962–72) was marked by the opening of the Gutai Pinacotheca in 1962, the group’s participation in the groundbreaking show *Nul 1965* at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam, and its highly visible role in Osaka’s World Exposition of 1970. Invigorated by the influx of younger members who thoroughly rejected the “Informel whirlwind,” Gutai built on its experiments with environment art, technology, and intermedia throughout the 1960s. But whereas its earlier event-based works for the outdoors and stage sought to redraw art, its new directions sought to remake society. Gutai’s sculptural installations incorporating sound, light, and motion, directly engaging the viewer through optical tricks, are a call to pacify technology and invoke the cosmic in the rapidly advancing space age. Corresponding to and connecting with the New Tendency movement in Europe, these conceptual shifts occurred in tandem with a complex collection of events that would make the 1960s the most philosophically revolutionary decade of the twentieth century. What Italian semiotician Umberto Eco called “open work” to describe how kinetic, contingent, and participatory art forms reveal “other ways of configuring reality” also encompasses the collapse of high modernism and the emergence of radically pluralistic worldviews. In this context, Gutai’s own internationalism and its reception abroad shift to what Japanese critic Haryū Ichirō would later in the decade term the global “consciousness of ‘contemporary.’”

Yoshihara’s call to do what had never been done urged Gutai to transcend the conventional bounds of art and move into daily life. Gutai artists claimed the outdoors, theatrical stages, the pages of a printed journal, and the newly founded Pinacotheca as sites of production, not merely as sites of display. Perhaps the most spectacular event, and the most widely circulated internationally, was *The International Sky Festival*, in which paintings by thirty artists from America, Europe, and Japan were sent aloft in the urban sky over a department store in Osaka on banners tethered to huge advertising balloons, creating a vast, kinetic happening in open air. Gutai also followed a path of experimentation with both industrial and natural “found” materials like electric lights, cellophane, smoke, water, motorized devices, and concrete sound. Both strains in the group’s work garnered international attention.

By 1959, Gutai’s participation in such international group shows as *Arte nuova* at Turin’s Circolo degli Artisti was continuing to challenge the status of New York and Paris as the presumptive centers of advanced art. Predicting a shift that would decenter metropolitan modernism through
In the 1960s, Arte nuova co-curator Luciano Pistoi wrote that “new forms of pictorial expression ... are now emerging with equal force in France, America, Italy, and Japan.” In 1968, Jean Clay, prominent editor of the French art magazine Robho, wrote to Yoshihara proposing a special issue of the publication on Gutai. Directly challenging the ways that Tapié and Kaprow distorted Gutai to serve the narratives of Informel and Happenings, he set out to correct the historical record and prove Gutai had offered “prophetic ... propositions” in experimental art. The resulting issue of Robho, published in 1971, featured documentary photographs of Gutai’s performance and event-based works with Yoshihara Jirō’s explanations. In his introduction, Clay wrote:

It took all of the Atlantic geocentrism of cultural Meccas and the high opinion that they have of their own importance for all of Gutai’s prodigious creativity to pass almost unnoticed in the Occident.

Gutai was the first to bring about the passage from an object-based art to a performance and event-based art on a large scale—several years before New York and Paris.

Clay’s attempt to adjust Gutai’s place in Eurocentric art history arose from a burgeoning critique of the modernist discourse of originality. The idea of the “avant-garde” had defined art as a progressive chronology of innovations and discriminated against signs of influence or derivation. As a system of art, it also defined its operations in geographic terms rooted in the West. These entrenched ideas had long classified avant-gardism outside the West as derivative and hence inconsequential as formal or conceptual advances. Reflecting the poststructuralist critique of the metanarratives of history that developed among French intellectuals in the 1960s, challenging the political and social assumptions that underpinned such “regimes of domination” as colonialism, which had recently collapsed, Clay vehemently argued for Gutai’s reevaluation.

Such thinking reflected larger intellectual currents, which were gradually eroding the hierarchies of geography and even of race in the telling of the history of modernity. The question that Japanese thinkers had investigated since the late nineteenth century—how to separate the “modern” from the “West”—was now relevant to poststructuralism. Gutai’s reception abroad shifted accordingly. Postcolonial thought clarified differences between the modern period (characterized by international trade, imperialism, colonialism, and industrial and metropolitan development) and the systems of modernism (its philosophy, politics, ideology, and aesthetics, including avant-garde art). Likewise, mobility and intercultural contact were seen as the essential condition of modernity, meaning that transnationalism was basic to the process of modernization itself. Considered within this evolving intellectual framework, Gutai’s innovations were no longer subject to the West’s geocentric narrative of avant-garde art, which could only construe the affinities between the group’s early experimentations and kindred Western ideas as freak coincidence. As Alloway had predicted in 1963, hierarchies had outlived their usefulness; what mattered in the new world disorder was to “value the artist not to the extent that he is the agent of power (platonic essence or whatever), but to the extent that he is himself.”
Gutai’s international profile during the course of the 1960s developed against the backdrop of tumultuous change in Japan. Despite the spectacular economic recovery and mobilization toward peace, prosperity, and progress, social and political turmoil rocked the tenuous foundation of the postwar Japanese “miracle.” Renewal of the U.S.-Japan Security Treaty, known as “Anpo,” became a focal point. The agreement, ratified in 1952, gave the United States the right to develop Japan as a military base in the expanding East Asian front of the Cold War, implicating Japan in nuclear threat and regional conflict when it had accepted the terms of disarmament and was still recovering from the horrors of its own militarist past. Popular opposition culminated in a national crisis around massive demonstrations against Anpo’s renewal in 1960 (which succeeded nevertheless) and again with violent antiwar and student protests in 1968, providing the key condition for Gutai’s second phase. The anti-Anpo movement linked Japanese radicals, artists, and grassroots opposition groups to a transnational phenomenon emerging in opposition to the gathering peril of a worldwide military technocracy. The race for ever-deadlier nuclear arsenals, the race to land a man on the moon—and develop intercontinental ballistic missiles—and the environmental threat of industrial pollution for the first time made not just human but planetary survival a matter of manmade science and technology. But rather than retreat in the face of such threats, an emerging network of younger artists working around the world were emboldened to counter science and technology by harnessing their possibilities for art. Proposing that the exploding atom bomb would be “the most perfect kinetic sculpture, could we observe it without trembling,” the founder of Düsseldorf’s Zero group, Otto Piene, asked optimistically, “How big is art? How small is art?” For him and a coterie of like-minded artists around the world, the future of humanism depended on taking a hopeful outlook toward global society. “We want to exhibit in the sky,” Piene dreamed, as if referring to the *Sky Festival*, “not in order to establish there a new art world, but rather to enter new space peacefully—that is, freely, playfully, and actively, not as slaves of war technology.”

Zero was part of a European group of New Tendency collectives that included the Parisian group GRAV (Groupe de Recherche d’Art Visuel) and the Italian collectives Gruppo N and Gruppo T, all of whom would show alongside Gutai at the critically important exhibition *Nul 1965*. In 1962, GRAV, Gruppo N, and Gruppo T took part in the exhibition *Arte programmata* at the Olivetti showroom in Milan, and in its catalogue, Umberto Eco offered a cogent summary of what linked these movements. Rejecting Informel’s expressionism, these artists experimented in a collaborative, scientific spirit to affect the viewer’s perception of time, space, and even her own body through moving objects, geometric forms, and high-tech materials. Giving form to a philosophy, they used movement to show how “past, present, and future are present simultaneously,” courted instability as “a visual equivalent of ambiguity,” and involved the spectator not as “audience but participant.” Describing contemporary trends in kinetic and optical art in the terms of poststructuralist plurality—the condition of multiple, mutable, and ambiguous realities over fixed absolutes—Eco defined “kinetic movable structures” as a “field of events” revolving around the viewer. Employing light and motors to create the illusion of movement in space, these sculptures offered a new kind of “open work” proposing “other ways of configuring reality.”
Once again, Yoshihara’s promotion of Gutai’s activities sparked introductions to key actors in the international art community. A book he created with Tapié and scholar Haga Tōru, *Continuité et avant-garde au Japon*, published in Italy in 1961 and in the U.S. the following year, featured black-and-white photographs of Gutai’s performances and installations in the context of Japanese aesthetics. Through Zero’s Heinz Mack, Henk Peeters came upon the book and was struck by Gutai’s prescient experiments. A founder of the Nul group in Amsterdam in 1961, Peeters was investigating the emergence of similar postpainting practices across Europe and had established close ties with Mack, Piene, and Günther Uecker in Düsseldorf; with Piero Manzoni, Enrico Castellani, and their mentor, Lucio Fontana, of the Milan-based group Azimut; and with Yves Klein, whose mystical influence was felt everywhere but whose closest association lay with the Nouveaux Réalistes in Paris. Beyond exploring synthesis through intermedia experiments in art, nature, and technology, these Nul/Zero artists also imagined synthesis as a social model of “internationalist collaboration” beyond “homogeneous or nationalist membership.” In the war’s aftermath, it was liberating to build “new brotherhoods in the arts” and forge “bodily and cultural encounters with people who had been branded arch-enemies.” Determined to demonstrate that this positive phenomenon was consciously operating outside institutionalized politics and art-world centers, Peeters mounted the first Nul survey at the Stedelijk Museum in 1962. It featured twenty-five artists from eight countries. For its sequel, *Nul1965*, Peeters wrote Yoshihara and invited Gutai to participate.

Yoshihara and his son Michio arrived in the Netherlands with a suitcase full of paintings, sketches for new installations, and Kanayama Akira’s vinyl inflatable air sculpture, *Balloon* (1956, plate 109). Yoshihara was surprised when Peeters rejected the paintings as overly Informel and asked him instead to reconstruct Gutai’s most experimental installations dating to a decade before (fig. 100). Once on site, Yoshihara and Michio furiously refabricated several works from the group’s 1955 and 1956 exhibitions. These included Motonaga Sadamasa’s *Work (Water)*, whose suspended plastic tubes filled with colored water resonated with Zero’s interest in combining natural and industrial elements, and sheets of plain fabric by Tanaka Atsuko resembling her earlier *Work (Yellow Cloth)* (1955, plate 38), which blew in the wind of a fan and underscored Gutai’s affinity with kinetic art. Yoshihara Michio created a new work composed of lightbulbs shining through mounds of sand on the floor, alluding to his *Discovery* (plate 11) and linking the group’s early use of light to Zero’s. Nearby, Mack’s crystalline structure of reflective and perforated metal sheets, *Light Carousel* (ca. 1965), was suspended from the ceiling and lit from below, creating an immersive environment in continual spatial flux as ‘its planes dissolved in light and shadow, and Uecker’s spinning totems punctured with hundreds of nails conjured whirling rockets’ (fig. 14). The most significant juxtaposition was Kanayama’s amorphous white vinyl *Balloon* installed beside iconic *Anthropometry* and monochrome works by Klein (plate 109), suggesting that the late Klein, Nul/Zero’s most revered friend, was in fact artistically connected to the Gutai group whose influence he had disavowed. Such pairings delighted Yoshihara. Reporting on the Amsterdam show in the *Gutai* journal (fig. 13), he described the effects of highlighting Gutai’s precedence over the European movement:
I was able to vividly sense the amazement that those artists felt from Gutai’s works, which were first created ten years ago. The works of [Hans] Haacke and Peeters extensively utilize water in this exhibition, but Motonaga began using water way before them; Haacke’s present work has close resemblance with Tanaka’s wind-based work, which was created ten years ago. Gutai’s manifestations (that I referred to as “the fruits that should be picked” in the Gutai journal published at the time), which were presented ten years ago in a pine grove in Ashiya as well as at various theater halls; were “picked” by ... the art museum in the Netherlands.74

Unlike Tapié, Kaprow, or Klein, whose defenses distorted Gutai’s critical reception, Peeters and his Nul/Zero colleagues recognized that Japan was ahead in precisely the kind of experiments that they themselves, as Western vanguard artists, were pursuing. To Mack, “this unbelievable coincidence”75 called for a new kind of mapping of contemporary art. In his Diagram (1970, fig. 15), which spatially maps the transnational dynamics that produced Zero, Mack draws a two-way arrow to Gutai. Another visualization of Gutai’s “international contemporaneity”76 is Peeters’ photomontage of the unrealized outdoor extravaganza Zero on Sea (Zero op Zee, 1966, fig. 16). Conceived as a huge artistic event on Scheveningen pier in The Hague, Zero on Sea would have involved a confluence of art, nature, technology, and urban design among some fifty artists from more than ten countries. Gutai artists, including several younger members substantially engaged in environment art, contributed more drawings for Zero on Sea installations than any other participating group (1965–66, plates 112–13), engineering kinetic systems for large-scale sculptures of bubbling detergent foam, motorized disks of blinking lights, propeller-operated plastic shafts blowing confetti, and triangular multicolored rafts at sea.77 In Peeters’s photomontage, Gutai is fully integrated into the most far-reaching proposition for avant-garde art anywhere in the world at the time.

**Gutai as Method**

By the mid-1960s, what Lawrence Alloway had disparaged as the “cordial language of universalism” had begun to appear bankrupt. The rise of dictatorships in postcolonial Latin America, the Middle East, and Asia, as well as the American war in Vietnam, had undercut earlier hopes for liberal internationalism and its instruments like the United Nations. The dominant mood was protest. In Japan, university students mobilized massive, frequently violent anti-U.S. demonstrations against the impending 1970 renewal of Anpo and, more widely, against the Vietnam War, global corporatism, and entrenched authoritarianism in education and government, linking themselves to the campus protests and Third World revolutionary fervor sweeping Europe and the United States in 1968–69.

In this context, even the most internationalist artists moved away from the postwar liberation rhetoric. This critical distance launched a trend to relocate “universalism” in Japan’s own intellectual and cultural history. The popularity of such thinkers as Yanagita Kunio, whose writings on Japanese folklore sought to define a unique Japanese mentality through its ethnic traditions, stimulated a renewed discourse on nativism and on historical perspectives grounded in
the periphery. The literary scholar Takeuchi Yoshimi theorized how Japanese modernism could be emancipated from “simple binary oppositions” with the West and instead be “grounded in Asian principles.” If the goal of Japanese modernization was to achieve global equality, it had to universalize its cultural values, an approach that Takeuchi called “Asia as method.” He wrote:

The Orient must change the West in order to further elevate those universal values that the West itself produced. This is the main problem facing East-West relations today, and it is at once a political and cultural issue…. When this rollback takes place, we must have our own cultural values…. I suspect that they are possible as method, that is to say, as the process of the subject’s self-formation.

Yoshihara’s response to these changing attitudes was twofold. He embarked on a series of works that sought to unify and equalize Eastern and Western painting, and he turned to strengthening Gutai’s base in Osaka, promoting the Pinacotheca as a platform for Japanese contemporary art to be seen within its own local yet cosmopolitan context. Yoshihara’s internationalism had always veered between the center and periphery, Kansai and New York/Paris. He variously promoted exchange and interconnections, struggled against Western critical bias, and celebrated the periphery as a freer, more experimental space than the art world’s centers, whose power actually endorsed conservatism. With Expo ’70 coming to his hometown, he eagerly supported Osaka’s having achieved the status of an important hub of transnational contact and exchange. After Alloway’s visit to the Pinacotheca in 1964, he realized that the notion of a geographic center had been superseded by a “state of knowledge” mediated by increasing mobility and faster distribution systems. Yoshihara also grasped that networks, not centers, were the key to the flow of ideas, and Osaka had become a node in the global circuit.

For Yoshihara, the Zero projects and Gutai’s success in intermedia art ended any lingering nostalgia for the “Informel adventure.” From the mid-1960s, his long-term devotion to gestural abstraction and rich, impasto surfaces evolved into his Circle series (1965–72), hard-edge black-and-white paintings of a single circular form floating on a flat, matte surface. In the tradition of Japanese Zen painting, the ensō, or circle, brushed in a single act of ink on paper or silk is the highest and most essential expression of the “empty mind” (mu shin). Yoshihara translates this cultural sign, so charged with aesthetic and philosophical power, into a minimalist object signifying “zero.” In a 1971 Circle (plate 126), he dilutes the oil paint to make it as fluid as ink but inverts the evocation of calligraphy by reversing the composition to white form on a black ground. Like the work of American painter Ad Reinhardt, who came to Asian aesthetics from the West, Yoshihara’s Circle project could also be cast as a “logical development of personal art history and the historic traditions of Eastern and Western pure painting.”

Yoshihara, now in his sixties, had found an application for “Asia as method.”

Gutai’s multiplatform participation in Expo ’70 was Yoshihara’s final experiment. It fulfilled the two criteria he had set for the group since its inception: bold innovation expressing the “spirit of the age” and connection to contemporaneous international artistic movements. The exposition certified the shift in the global status of Japan, no longer a defeated nation in the throes of
postwar reconstruction but an emerging technological superpower leading humanity to the world of robotics and computers. Isozaki Arata, who worked on the fairgrounds as a master designer under architect Tange Kenzō, envisioned a “post-industrial” exposition, “initiating a new century of design and planning and visitor participation.” Leftist groups criticized the artists who took part in the Expo, including Gutai members, equating their work on this national project with the wartime mobilization of artists for war propaganda. While the critique devalued Gutai’s contributions, both in Japan and abroad, the exposition’s significance as a site of extraordinary experiments in art and technology deserves its recent reappraisal.

Expo ‘70 culminated the group’s second phase and featured several of a younger cohort of twenty-four members who joined after 1961. Imai Norio, Imanaka Kumiko, Kikunami Jōji, Matsuda Yutaka, Nasaka Senkichirō, and Yoshida Minoru, among others, constructed their “dreams for a new society” through optically dazzling participatory environments, often motorized, illuminated, and wired for sound. Gutai’s collaborative environment in the lobby of the Midori Pavilion presented a zigzagging structure of gleaming aluminum pipes that served as a giant armature for their optical, kinetic, and electric-light sculptures as well as geometric paintings (1970, fig. 47, plate 123). The mirrorlike pipes, ten centimeters in diameter, distorted visitors’ reflections, altered their sense of space, and broadcast an electronic sound recording through a sequence of punctures. Likewise, the theatrical spectacle Gutai Art Festival (1970, plate 125) immersed the audience in a cacophony of stimuli, culminating in figures flying from helium balloons in the vast reaches of Isozaki’s Festival Plaza while fire engines spewed foam on stage and Motonaga’s iconic smoke machine puffed clouds into the strobe-lit atmosphere.

Gutai’s intermedia ambitions resonated with the American installation designed by E.A.T. for the Pepsi Pavilion. Organized by E.A.T. founders Billy Klüver and Robert Whitman and housed in a structure like a geodesic dome, the project was a multidisciplinary collaboration among some seventy-five visual artists, composers, choreographers, scientists, and engineers, including the core team of Robert Breer, Frosty Myers, and David Tudor (who had visited the Gutai Pinacotheca with John Cage in 1962). The dominant feature was the Mirror Dome, a ninety-foot-diameter spherical inflated mirror made of aluminized Mylar whose reflections created the optical effect of holograms. Using sophisticated electronics, E.A.T. conceived the space as a totally immersive, interactive environment of moving sound and light. Although the science and engineering of the Pepsi Pavilion were superior to those of Gutai’s spectacles, both sought to transport the viewer into technologically mediated environments. In so doing they jointly harkened back to Gutai’s initial and ultimate internationalist vision: to create art at the cutting edge of world culture that would “contribute to the progress of humanity.”

The postwar reconstruction cultures of Japan, the United States, and Europe were driven by a liberal internationalism and a prevailing optimism about their shared future of globalism. However suspect their underlying ideologies, they were confident of their ethical projects’ ability to forge authentic subjectivity as resistance against the legacies of wartime totalitarianism. Allan Kaprow’s sentiments were typical: “[It] is no longer possible to exist purely and simply as a
nation and culture separate from other nations and cultures.... We can only guess at the next step: a non-national language of painting, perhaps of speaking too, in which a ‘world style’ is given variety and richness by a range of accents modifying it in each country where it is practiced.”

The Vietnam War, the Watergate scandal, and the 1973 oil shock eroded these internationalist visions. By the time of Yoshihara Jirō’s death and Gutai’s dissolution in 1972, America’s aspirations for a vanguard “world style” had come to be dismissed as regressive imperialism, and adventurous museum exhibitions seeking to map the “variety and richness” of contemporaneous artistic developments around the world were largely abandoned in a mind-set of overall retrenchment. (As a case in point, the Guggenheim’s own International Award ended in 1971.) Conceptual art grounded in “institutional critique” dominated museum programs of contemporary art for the following decades, and the 1980s’ critical discourse on the political uses of Abstract Expressionism, focusing on the Museum of Modern Art’s International Council’s touring exhibitions during the Cold War, further discredited the kind of internationalism that had animated such impresarios as Yoshihara, Tapié, Peeters, or, for that matter, Alfred Barr. As a certain American parochialism set in, and with Yoshihara gone, Gutai, like other outsider modernisms, was sent to art history’s cold storage.

Subsequently, after the Berlin Wall’s collapse, the development of postcolonial theory and new forms of global arts study provided fresh impetus and new tools for examining art beyond Western Europe and America. But these exercises have been biased toward contemporary art and, like the prevailing international biennials, often end up positioning “diversity” in a model that flattens out differences. When they address art of the modern or late-modern periods, the approach tends to view non-Western modernism as a mere translation of established historical movements from the center to the periphery. Gutai: Splendid Playground and this essay argue that Gutai is a potent and original movement and critically relevant to a broader appreciation of the modernist project.

Until recently, Gutai’s critical legacy in the West (and in Japan) was determined by terms set forth by Tapié with Informel, Kaprow with Happenings, and, to a lesser extent, Peeters via Zero. These intermediaries’ assimilation of Gutai’s “coincidental” experiments are significant for how they demonstrate the ways vanguard positions based on internationalism were constructed in postwar Europe and America. But new perspectives on Gutai in keeping with a more contemporary logic are long overdue; for, as globalization theorist Arjun Appadurai has written, “Culture does imply difference, but the differences are now no longer taxonomic; they are interactive and refractive.” It is instructive that Yoshihara avoided the terms “modern” and “avant-garde” and that he used seishin, or “spirit,” to describe Gutai’s aesthetic attitude not as a system but rather an ethics of subjective individualism acting in the world. He and the rest of the group saw themselves as part of a great human project, one capacious and perceptive enough to encompass distant views.

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17. Experiments in Art and Technology (E.A.T.), Pepsi Pavilion for Expo ’70, 1970. Interior view


Notes
My first chance to work on Gutai was made possible by the Yokohama Museum of Art in the early 1990s. I offer thanks to my Japanese colleagues, especially Amana Tarō, for his early encouragement of my research. The field of postwar Japanese art history, and Gutai and transnational art studies in particular, has advanced tremendously since then thanks to my colleagues on this project, Ming Tiampo and Reiko Tomii. I offer deepest thanks to Reiko for intellectual camaraderie that has sustained and pushed my own engagement. Ming’s study of Gutai as a transnational phenomenon in the history of modernism, Gutai: Decentering Modernism, inspired many conversations that have found their way into this book, and her joyful spirit infused the entire project team. I would like to thank Chief Exhibition Designer Melanie Taylor for giving shape to our curatorial vision and Senior Editor Domenick Ammirati for his insightful honing of our written ideas.


4 By the mid-1960s, major American museums were organizing survey exhibitions devoted to contemporary Japanese art. See, for example, Contemporary Japanese Painting (Washington, D.C.: Corcoran Gallery of Art, 1964) and The New Japanese Painting and Sculpture (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1965), the latter of which toured the U.S. through 1967. The annual Japan Art Festival exhibition, organized by Tokyo’s quasi-governmental Japan Art Festival Association from 1966, also presented surveys that toured U.S. museums, including the Guggenheim, which hosted the Fifth Japan Art Festival Exhibition in 1970.


7 This was the first time the Guggenheim organized the GIA independent of the international panel, which was henceforth responsible for selecting the award recipients rather than for proposing the artists and artworks. Alloway selected eighty-two artists from twenty-four countries and organized the catalogue bibliography by a set of categories that hint at his curatorial approach: “Problems of Communication and Nationality” (fig. 4); “Old World, New World”; “Cobra”; “East-West”; and national styles by country. See Lawrence Alloway, Guggenheim International Award 1964 (New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 1963). I am indebted to Francine Snyder for her archival research on the Guggenheim International Award.

8 Ibid., p. 24.


13 I am indebted to Vivien Greene for this insight.


24 B. H. Friedman, quoted in “Jackson Pollock’s Obituary,” Gutai 5 (October 1956), unpaginated.


30 Sumi Yasuo, “Ōtomachizumu ni yoru byōga” [Drawing by automatism], Gutai 7 (July 1957), unpaginated.


36 Ibid.


Jean Dubuffet, “Rehabilitation of Mud” (1946); quoted in Art since 1900, pp. 369–370.

One of Morita’s forums was held at the Museum of Modern Art in 1954: Franz Kline, Joseph Albers, Hasegawa Saburō, and Morita participated in a panel discussion, “Abstract Art around the World Today,” in conjunction with a show of contemporary Japanese calligraphy that Morita organized. Intent on constructing a broad humanist aesthetic founded on the principles of ink painting and calligraphy, he wrote: “For us, expression directly linked to life and the actualization of a life-filled universe are a return to our native way, but for Europeans and Americans, this represents the creation of a new dimension of art. Here we have the construction of the true meeting place for shared humanity.” Morita Shiryū, “Gen shodan no tenbō” [The outlook for the contemporary calligraphy world], Bokubi 48 (September–October 1955), p. 33; quoted in Bert Winther-Tamaki, “The Asian Dimensions of Postwar Abstract Art: Calligraphy and Metaphysics,” in Alexandra Munroe, The Third Mind: American Artists Contemplate Asia, 1860–1989 (New York: Guggenheim Museum, 2009), p. 154.

Michel Tapié, “Hommage à Gutai,” Gutai 8 (September 1957), pp. 4–44.


One of the artists in International Art of a New Era was the New York painter Alfred Leslie. One year later, he appeared in Kaprow’s historic 18 Happenings in 6 Parts at the Reuben Gallery in 1959. Leslie’s enthusiasm for Gutai impressed Kaprow, who cited the “Gutai group in Osaka” in an Art News piece on Happenings in 1961.


George Maciunas, “Manifesto” (1963), repr. in Elizabeth Armstrong and Joan Rothfuss, In the Spirit of Fluxus, exh. cat. (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 1993). p. 25


Ibid., p.181.

Ibid., p. 212.


Haryū Ichirō, “Hihyō no yori takai kinō o” [Wishing art criticism to have a more functional role], Geijutsu Shinchō (January 1968), p. 15; quoted in Reiko Tomii, “‘International Contemporaneity’ in the 1960s: Discoursing on Art in Japan and Beyond,” Japan Review 21 (2009), pp. 126.


76 Reiko Tomii has theorized the idea of “international contemporaneity,” discussed by Japanese critics in the late 1960s, as a construct for assessing the tensions between local and international sites of “contemporary art.” See Tomii, “International Contemporaneity in the 1960s,” pp. 123–47.

77 See de Westenholz, “Zero on Sea.” I am grateful to Nina Horisaki-Christens for helping decipher and translate the instructions on several Gutai sketches for the *Zero on Sea* project.


79 Ibid., p. 165.

80 Alloway, “Introduction,” in *Guggenheim International Award 1964*, p. 15.


