

**PLACING GUTAI WITHIN TRADITIONAL JAPANESE ART THROUGH ITS SENSORY
ELEMENTS**

MARIKO AOYAGI

Abstract

With the recent upsurge of interest in the Gutai Art Association (hereafter Gutai) there has been a matching upsurge in research. As one of the first post-war avant-garde art organizations, their accomplishments are laudable. At the time when Gutai was active, however, Japanese critics considered their activities unworthy of mention. After an appraisal by Michel Tapié, it was Allan Kaprow who first noted Gutai artists as the progenitors of the Happening.¹ Due to this ignorance, study of this important avant-garde group was re-imported rather recently to Japan from the U.S.A. with an inherently Euro-American perspective. The most prominent studies done on Gutai hitherto are by Shinichiro Osaki and Joan Kee. Osaki states the Gutai movement focused on painting from the beginning, and that their actions or experiments were only means to achieve painterly form.² Kee, on the contrary, assesses their single-minded inclination to action.³ All other studies on Gutai only concentrate on their formal analysis and were produced from a Western perspective. Most of these studies are focused on figurative similarities with Abstract Expressionism, or more specifically, with the style of Jackson Pollock.⁴ To a certain point, it is plausible to study Gutai based on Western perspectives. The notion of forming a group based on art theory is a Western idea, and influences from the West on artists of the time are noticeable. Yet, considering certain major differences between Japanese modern art and Euro-American modern art, those comparisons seem to be problematic. My aim in this paper is to assess Gutai from not only a figurative perspective but also to include background factors such as social conditions, political situations, and most importantly artistic intentions.

Before I begin, I would like to emphasize that the meaning of the name Gutai is 'embodiment';² the pervasive translation of Gutai as 'concrete' will not be adopted here.⁵ Although Jiro Yoshihara stated in the *Gutai Manifesto* that "[the] Gutai Art Association, founded three years ago, was accompanied by the slogan that they would go beyond the borders of abstract art and that name Gutaiism (concretism) was chosen", this manifesto was written two years after their formation. It can be said that the translation does not reflect the original meaning of the name of the group. The kanji used to write 'gu' means tool, measures, and a way of doing something, while 'tai' means body. Shozo Shimamoto suggested this name on the basis that it included the character for body, and use of the body was crucial to the investigations of the group. Shozo Ukita and Shoichi Hirai both also translated 'gutai' as 'embodiment'.⁶ I will examine the Gutai group within the context of Japanese modern art history, and hope this will help to clarify understanding of the Gutai association.

Introduction

Jiro Yoshihara founded Gutai in 1955 in Ashiya, Kobe. At that time, he was already an established artist. The group was ostensibly an association but in reality had more of a school structure whereby Yoshihara himself became a kind of mentor to the other members. Members brought their work to him and he criticized them as “good” or “no good” without any legitimate explanation. The group was comprised of around fifteen members and the exact membership of the group was subject to change. The main active members were Kazuo Shiraga, Shozo Shimamoto, Saburo Murakami, Sadamasa Motonaga, Fujiko Shiraga, Atsuko Tanaka, Yasuo Sumi and Tsuruko Yamasaki. They were not bound by a common philosophy, and differed in their types of art. The only shared aims were ‘to do what has not been done before’ and ‘not [to] copy other people.’ The group dissolved in 1967, soon after Yoshihara’s passing. For over thirteen years, they organized many exhibitions and performance activities. They also published the journal *Gutai*, which has been a significant resource for their research.

Their first exhibition was held in the summer of 1955, named “Outside Gutai Exhibition: Challenging the Midsummer Sun” in Ashiya’s pine tree arboretum. Members exhibited their rather large-scale sculptures and set up performances, anticipating installation art. One of the most notable works was a sculpture by Shiraga, *Please come in (Dozo Ohairikudasai)*. He constructed pieces of wood in a cone shape and cut with an axe from the inside. The action was shown to the public as a performance. After the action, the sculpture was exhibited throughout the show.

It is widely known that the French critic Michel Tapié came to Japan in 1957 and extolled the association, comparing them to the Informel movement. Unfortunately, Gutai received little attention from the Japanese art world. Even though its members tried to propagate their activities, Japanese art critics showed little interest until outside critical evaluation, meaning evaluation from a Western viewpoint, was made. Allan Kaprow made one of the first remarks on them in his well-known publication *Assemblage, Environment, and Happening*. There he located Gutai as harbingers of Happening.⁷ Gutai’s appreciation was therefore re-imported from Western countries. In 1973, Naoyoshi Hikosaka regarded Gutai as a connecting force in Mono-ha. This essay is worth noting here since it saw Gutai in the context of Japanese modern art history and gave an apt description of their actions as “a disruption of poesis by autodelication of a process of production”.⁸ Yet, this simple critical commentary did not receive any follow up. Hikosaka’s criticism did stimulate researchers, however, to hold a greater number of retrospective exhibitions.

It is a wildly held idea that the Gutai members’ processes of making works have similarities to Jackson Pollock’s action painting. Shiraga’s foot paintings perfectly match Rosenberg’s notion of action painting as “canvas as arena”.⁹ Nevertheless, to connect them simply because of their formal

similarities is controversial. Osaki asserted in his recent thesis on Gutai that they produced painting through action from the beginning, denying the influence of Tapié on their later inclination toward painting. Osaki listed three specific features of their work: time as an element in painting; the actual site as a spatial problem; and fierce physicality. Having named these three, he located Gutai's painting as between process and materiality. He concluded that due to their inclination to materiality, their works ultimately converged into a form of painting.¹⁰ Despite the fact that his analysis of the group is credible, to describe their activities as only a form of painting is implausible. Even after the group disbanded, members continued to produce installation art and action-related works.

In *Situating a Singular Kind of 'Action': Early Gutai Painting, 1954-1957*, Kee called attention to the *Gutai* journal and analyzed the group in a succinct way. She challenged the association of the action painting of Pollock and that of Gutai members. By comparing Gutai artists with Pollock in their formal styles, she revealed their distinctions. Yet, Kee's argument regarding early Gutai painting, describing their production only in terms of action, does not seem to be convincing. Murakami said "I don't distinguish between painting and action at all".¹¹ Yoshihara, on the other hand, valued the work remaining after action. Shimamoto told Osaki in an interview that Yoshihara cared only about a work after the action.¹² As for Shiraga, he oscillated between action and painting. At one point, he claimed that action was vital to his work, dismissing the importance of vestiges of action,¹³ and at another point, he implied that both are essential.¹⁴ Their attitudes regarding action or painting vary, thus, the argument of whether the Gutai members valued the work of art itself over their performances or vice versa is abortive. Their approach to art did not consider this distinction meaningful. What matters, rather, are their ideas and attitudes toward art.

In this essay, it is not my intention to discuss the formal differences of Gutai members and Pollock or Western modern art in great depth since Kee has successfully verified their dissimilarities. I attempt instead to assess peripheral conditions; namely the social situation, political background, intentions, and notions of art at the time. I believe it is necessary to consider the background conditions of Japan in order to compare the Gutai group's actions to those of Pollock. Moreover, the previous studies I have mentioned here are problematic since they all see Gutai within the context of Western modern art. Nario Chiba once pointed out the disputability of situating the Gutai association in the context of Euro-American art,¹⁵ but did not take this critique any further. My intention in this essay is to eliminate the Western point of view toward Gutai in order to locate Gutai in the context of Japanese art history.

In 1955, social conditions in Japan were improving. After a catastrophic war, people began to hope again. They were vivacious and full of energy. The economy, people's living environments, and social atmosphere improved. Gutai was founded under these circumstances. Yoshihara was a son of a wealthy business family in Ashiya, one of the more prestigious towns in Japan. He had the money and power to do whatever he wanted to do. At the time, Japanese people were driving toward

economic growth and were somewhat indifferent to avant-gardism. There was no dissident feeling in the founding of Gutai. The United States, on the other hand, was struggling with conflicts to win their hegemony in the world at large as well as in the art world. The Cold War had started, and people were still recovering from the Depression. Political conflicts deeply affected artists in the U.S..

It is clear that political tendencies pervaded Abstract Expressionism. Rosenberg's contribution to the movement and his concept of a new art with political intentions seem to have been inevitable. In his landmark essay *The American Action Painters*, he says:

“The act-painting is of the same metaphysical substance as the artist's existence. The new painting has broken down every distinction between art and life”.¹⁶

He then states: “the gesture on canvas was a gesture of liberation, from Value—political, aesthetic, moral”.¹⁷ In *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art*, Serge Guilbaut not only described Abstract Expressionism as Cold War propaganda, but also affirmed the political orientation of artists and their paintings. When Guilbaut spoke of “a political apoliticism”,¹⁸ he asserted that the New York School represented the individual and liberal energy and power of America, usurping the glory of the Paris School. Around 1945, after many years of having fluctuated between left and right, American artists tried to be independent. Pollock was typical of those American artists. However, despite their intentions, artists were now:

“politically ‘neutral’ individualists, (and) articulated in their works values that were subsequently assimilated, utilized, and co-opted by politicians, with the result that artistic rebellion was transformed into aggressive liberal ideology.”¹⁹

Pollock, among other Abstract Expressionists, expressed alienation from both political sides.²⁰ In those conflicts, Pollock was made out to be an American hero who symbolized the country's power and was celebrated popularly.

On the contrary, Gutai seems to have had no political orientation whatsoever. Although the avant-garde had often been associated with Communism, they were not interested in applying political aspects to their work. Shiraga declared his apathy toward political art and empathy with pure art, which was invoked by pure aesthetic sensation.²¹ There is no sign of political values in the *Gutai* journal other than a denial of them. Japanese society did not give attention or meaning to them in any artistic or political way. While the action of Pollock's action paintings included political action, Gutai's actions were purely the acts of creating a work.

After the failure of Marxism, Pollock was to demonstrate his individuality by his very actions, as Guilbaut has pointed out.²² Although he employed automatism during the process, he controlled

it precisely, which enables us to identify his use of brush strokes, dripping, and pouring. Moreover he said in an interview that the modern artist is “expressing an inner world”, and that his paintings were about his inner thoughts. He mentioned the importance of individuality in his paintings as well.²³

Gutai, however, negated individuality in their art. They strictly followed Yoshihara’s tastes and categorical judgments, which were often ambiguous and depended on impression, and disposed of their own opinions. Their action paintings are another example of works that did not represent their individuality. Their action or automatic paintings often became extreme. Murakami went into a sort of trance state of mind when he performed *Paper Breakthrough (kami yaburi)*. He actually fainted at the time he produced *Six Holes (Muttsu no ana)*, a performance in the *Paper Breakthrough* series. Due to their extreme states of mind, which led to incapacity, their employment of automatism went beyond individualism in ways that the Abstract Expressionists did not. For instance, Shimamoto used a radio-control model car to create paintings. Naturally, those paintings do not show any trace of his authorship. Shiraga even denigrated the idea of individuality, referring to it as “a weak thing that is acquired and unexpansive.”²⁴ They were in search of a more universal perception than individuality could offer.



Murakami Saburo, *Six Holes*, 1955. ©Makiko Murakami, and the former members of the Gutai Art Association . Reproduced courtesy of Ashiya City Museum of Art & History. All rights reserved.

All these comparisons and contrasts between Pollock and Gutai stem from a fundamental concern: the definition of art itself in the modern context. The Japanese 'geijitsu', art, was adopted to designate 'fine art' at the end of the 19th century. The word *geijitsu* did exist prior to this, yet its meaning was much broader; like the Greek term *techne*, its definition included skills and knowledge. Due to the fact that the Japanese term for art had no historically rigid definition like that of the West, viewing the Gutai movement from the perspective of any Euro-American art movement or theory becomes problematic. This is the core reason for the oblique Japanese criticism of avant-garde movements. Although on the surface the Japanese avant-garde attempted to break the definition of art, they were unable to properly attack this concept as it was not yet fully assimilated. If Japanese and Western artists do not share a common definition of art it is difficult to compare them. I intend to distinguish Pollock and Gutai and to eliminate the Western point of view in order to clarify understanding of Gutai.

Sensory creation of art

In spite of the fact that Gutai did not have any rigid rule or doctrine and claimed to be a free association, there was one shared feature, namely, the corporeal element in their works. Regarding their works and self-organized exhibitions as experiments, they sought to find their essential matter in art through the involvement of the body. During the journey, they become fixated on the use of the body and the relationship between the body and material. Their integration of the body into their works has been noted in a number of studies.²⁵ Physicality includes all other senses that are not normally associated with visual art. As physical involvement within the works; in the other words, with sensory impact, dominated their concerns, they are not focused on a theory of art making. This notion is crucial to the Gutai association. They were anti-theoretical and regarded their own sensibility as primary.

Body

Gutai's actions, performances, and other works of art are involved with the body. Their inclination to be physically involved in their works is often noted as the group's original contribution. Unlike Pollock's, their actions directly incorporate the physical into a painting. Through the corporeal experience, they sought to find a connection to the basic material of art works, as is claimed in their manifesto.²⁶

Yet, the members wanted to connect with raw materials such as clay, wood, water, and light, but they were more intrigued by physicality than by the materials. For Shiraga material itself was not the main concern but a single element for his corporeal experience. He included a performance in

the Gutai Art Exhibition in 1955 called *Challenging Mud (Doro ni Idomu)*. He brought mud into the entrance of Ohara Hall in Tokyo and wrestled with it. During the exhibition period, he performed the 'act' three times. "I could not stop thinking of art which is an expression of a human being's spirit to return to the condition of the body,"²⁷ he said. Yet, he never implied that there was a distinctive meaning to mud.

In fact, none of the Gutai members have ever stated a specific reason for their choice of a material or sought meaning from it. Motonaga made a so-called water sculpture, just because he thought the idea of using water as medium of sculpture was innovative. Shiraga used wood for no particular reason. Naïve observation might suggest a primitive influence or

association with nature, yet Gutai did not display any taste for a "return to nature". Their intention was simply to be original, whereas the notion of "nature" was traditional. They adopted raw materials due to their craving for originality and physical connection and for their meditative spirit. Shiraga unequivocally revealed his focus on corporeality. He once became obsessed with animal fur. He stuck fur on the canvas and covered it with paint, applying the process of foot painting as he had in other works. He was intrigued by the body and went further to explore inside the body. The use of visceral objects indicates this notion plainly. He experimentally made a sculpture of a bovine organ. Kidneys, the most visceral material, depicted the corporeal essence and invoked the viewer's inner physicality as well.



Shiraga Kazuo, *Challenging Mud*, 1955. © Fujiko Shiraga and the former members of the Gutai Art Association. Reproduced Courtesy of Ashiya City Museum of Art & History. All rights reserved.

Challenging Mud displays an artist's intervention in his work. This type of work stimulates the viewer's physicality, yet the audience is not physically engaged with the work. In contrast, *Please come in* by Shiraga is an installation work where the audience participates in the work by going inside it. Viewers put themselves into the installation work in order to enjoy it. Shimamoto made an experimental sculpture *Please Walk on Top (Kono Ue Wo Aruitekudasai)* at the outside exhibition in 1955. Visitors walked on plates under which he secretly hid different springs. As they walked on, they became conscious of their sense of balance as well as the sensation of their bodies. Gutai members

created a number of interactive art works.

However, the members did not distinguish between, on the one hand, works or actions in which artists insert only *their* body and the audience's experience of physicality is subsidiary and, on the other hand, interactive works in which the audience senses an immediate physicality. Insistently they were a sense-oriented group who did not like to analyze or theorize their actions, paintings, sculptures or process of making art. As long as they could express their primary motif, namely corporeality, they did not advocate any method or rigid theory. Expression of corporeality connected with notions of the body's sensitivity. Asserting the body inside the painting, sculpture or other media is the result of their orientation to sensory impacts. Shiraga spoke of his penchant for sensuous experience. He had stated his will to express the human spirit through his artwork. Nevertheless, he never made it clear what spirit it is that he wanted to show in those works. His definition of spirit is very vague, something that we have but we are not very conscious of. The spirit, according to Shiraga, stands as an irrational entity. He talked about his expression of perception: "my thought for art expression goes to where invisible spirit becomes formed and transformed by the condition of physicality."²⁸ Physicality stands here as a body itself but also as a means for adopting sensory elements. To seek the ultimate expression of corporeality, Gutai explored sensory elements in their works.



Shimamoto Shozo, *Please Walk On Top*, 1956. © Shimamoto Shozo and the former members of the Gutai Art Association. Reproduced courtesy of Ashiya City Museum of Art & History. All rights reserved.

Senses

Through analysis of their works, the significance of the body as a medium in Gutai works has been well demonstrated. Even from their very first exhibition, Gutai artists created large scale sculptures which required bodily involvement. Employment of tactile, audible, and senses other than the visual attempted to represent corporeality as a whole. They attempted to create something that gives pure experience using their bodies and various senses. As Yozo Ukita wrote in the second issue of *Gutai*:

“it is noteworthy that all these young artists have one thing in common—their abstract method of expression and their composition as based on a perfect realization of their own susceptibility.”²⁹

That is to say, they attempt to achieve beauty and aesthetic experience not by theory but by using their dynamic body, sounds, tactility, visual effects and energy. As I interpret these documents, they corroborate the importance that Gutai placed on sensory orientations.

The series *Paper Breakthrough* by Murakami was conceived from this perspective. For Murakami, personal mentality was of no concern: the crucial matter was his bodily experience. Murakami emphasized the sound of the breaking paper, making an exclamatory ‘whomp’ or ‘boom’ sound. The sound as well as the action amused and intrigued other Gutai members.³⁰

Another example of involvement with the body in Gutai’s art is a work by Yamazaki. *Red* was made in 1956 and reproduced in 1985. The work is a box like sculpture consisting of red vinyl and wood. Entering the box provides a pure sensuous experience in your whole body, like the typical format of installation art. Even Motonaga, who seemed to adhere to traditional forms of painting and sculpture (aside from his water sculpture) was fascinated by the auditory. Later in his career he published a number of illustrated books. In collaboration with Shuntaro Tanikawa, he published a children’s book named *Moko Mocomoko* and another book, *Gacya Gacya Dondon*. They both consisted of only onomatopoeic words and pictures that explain the sounds. Those books elucidate that he was indubitably interested in those sound effects and their expression in pictures. His series of paintings made by pouring the paint onto the canvas are notable as well. The paint is smooth in one part and jagged at another part of the painting. The attractive texture stimulates the viewer’s tactile feeling, making them to want to touch it.

It is already recognized that the works of Tanaka stimulate sensory impressions. Her work *Electric Dress* brings out physical sensations as well. By wearing her work of art, she stimulates our cutaneous sensation. Curator Mizuho Kato articulated the tactile sensation that Tanaka’s works produce, connecting it with the viewer’s body.³¹ In the case of *Bell*, the consequences are more direct. Tanaka placed bells in a gallery with a button for the audience. When a visitor presses the button, each bell rings noisily around the whole gallery. The experience of being surrounded by the bells and sounds is purely physical and sensory. By situating corporeality within their use of perceptions, Gutai sought sensory effects. For Gutai, sensuous experiences are shared by artists and audiences. While the actions include artists’ physicalities, performances and installation art evoke all senses of the viewers.

Their positioning of sense experience as an essential subject matter was reflected in their way of creation. In the course of creation, it is notable that Gutai artists entered extreme states of

mind. As I mentioned previously, they often entered a trance state. In a trance, they could only rely on the natural acts of the body and their senses. Since they are unconscious, they become irrational, untheorized. Shiraga, for example, once confessed that he did not remember what happened to him after fighting with the mud.³² Motonaga's "pouring painting" was born out of non-theoretical form. His method of making pictures was to place a canvas on a slightly inclined floor. He poured paint on the slanting canvas and left it. He then left the studio or took a nap during the procedure.

Gutai's automatism differs from that of the Surrealists in that they strive for extreme automatism and unconsciousness. Sumi once commented that:

"the paint that bit [into the canvas] to overjoy me, fulfills its purpose in each part of the canvas, retreating far from my consciousness."³³

Murakami said "our job is nothing but to create something that strikes people's sensation and consciousness,"³⁴ and that "actions without purpose (not even a purpose of spirit) shape beautiful forms and sounds."³⁵ Universal spirit is expressed as practical, pure, sensory form. Fujiko Shiraga wrote, "I used to fiercely crave for a being more than myself. I, as one person, wanted to express a force that no human being can grasp."³⁶ Those ideas of the group explicitly display their proposal not to associate beauty or aesthetic experiences with theory, but the attempt to achieve them with sensibility.

Gutai once stated that they were an anti-theoretical group. There was no rigid ideology. Even when Tapié came to Japan to propagate the Informel movement with his esoteric theory, Gutai members did not understand it or even try to understand it. All they wanted from him was a simple approval by an established critic. Their great regard for child painting also evidences their non-theoretical attitude. The anti-theoretical aspect is in a way shallow, yet allowed their success in producing purely sense-oriented works. This aspect is a great characteristic of traditional Japanese art. As Yoshihara stated in the first issue of *Gutai* and the article *Gutai Manifesto*, Gutai is deliberately concerned with traditional Japanese art:

'We would like to discover friends in the general visual art fields, such as calligraphy, flower arrangement, arts and crafts, and architecture.'³⁷

Here he precisely exhibits his interest in traditional art in accordance with the original definition of Japanese art, which includes the tea ceremony and other disciplines beyond 'fine art'. This paradoxical reference to traditional Japanese arts is crucial to investigation of Gutai's work. Traditional arts are incorporated for their use of bodily senses, divorced from legitimate art theory.

Sensory Effect as Japanese Tradition

Sensory elements are important in Japanese art. For example, unlike English gardens, Japanese gardens do not have a theory; they instead stimulate our sensory experience. Although, as I noted earlier, the notion of art in modern days depends on Western definitions, there is a deeply rooted aesthetic native to Japan that is expressed in modern Japanese art. The beauty of nature is signified within the Japanese lifestyle unconsciously.

Tomonobu Imamichi avows that aesthetic categories in Japan stemmed from nature. Yukio Yashiro emphasised the significance of nature to Japanese art in his book, *Nihon Bijutsu no Tokucho*. Taking as an example Japanese traditional architecture, which does not fully distinguish between inside and outside, he asserted that there is a Japanese sensibility that absorbs nature into art.³⁸ He stated that “the basis of Japanese art boils down to the most advanced love of nature”.³⁹ In the ultimate analysis, Japanese aesthetics are based on nature. It is worth noting that historically, the Japanese have thought highly of nature and admired it. Due to this deference, the arts are not meant to exceed nature, nor do they subjugate nature. In the tradition of Western aesthetics, imitation of nature transcends natural beauty: therefore nature’s beauty stands in contraposition to art. In contrast, the Japanese aesthetic, based on natural beauty, uses art to access natural beauty. In other words, art locates its attainment in the process of approaching nature.

Nature is experienced through all of our senses, therefore, a comprehension of natural beauty in aesthetic matters is a sensual, aesthetic experience that cannot be understood through theoretical interpretations. Traditionally, Western art attempted to express nature by limiting its expression to the visual sense. Yet, Japanese art tried to achieve nature’s beauty in sensuous ways. The experience of natural beauty tends to require not only visual but also other senses. As you put yourself in nature, you feel the wind and temperature of the atmosphere, listen to the surrounding sounds, and smell the air. Regarding the attitude of the Japanese toward wind and water, Nobuko Hashimoto demonstrated Japanese artists’ sensuous comprehension of art as seen, for example, in the poetry of Matsuo Basho, who uses audible and tactile as well as visual expressions.⁴⁰

In addition, I must call attention to the idea of dualism in Western culture. That is another perspective that Japanese aesthetics do not share. The reason for the distinction is clear considering the difference of religions. As there is no belief system disdaining sensory or corporeal matter, the Japanese were able to treasure it. During the Meiji Period, when Japan opened to the world, Western art and theory was imported extensively. Since then, art theory has been an eclectic blend of Western and Japanese views. It was then that Okakura Tenshin, a connoisseur of art in the Meiji Period, felt the need to organize Japanese art history in such a way as to appeal to Western countries. Shigemi

Inaga claims in a comparison of Okakura's *Book of Tea* with *Kouhon Nihonteikoku Bijyutsu Ryakuki* that:

“in choosing the tea ceremony, rather than visual art works which would be exhibited in public places, he prioritises an aesthetic experience appreciated in a private space using not only the visual but also the tactile, auditory, olfactory, and gustatory senses.”⁴¹

According to him, even amid the confusion of the immense influx of Western cultures, Okakura put importance on the five modalities of traditional Japanese art. Here again, I observe the dominance of sensory experience in Japanese art.

At the same time that Okakura tried to disseminate Japanese art to the Western world, he inculcated in the Japanese people Western ideas of art. He encouraged contemporary artists to employ Western art theory. In spite of Okakura's attempt, imported ideologies were not fully absorbed by Japanese artists. Western painters in the nineteenth century were influenced by the sensuousness of Japanese *ukiyo-e* in their use of flat structure and lighting effects, so that, when Impressionism came to Japan, Japanese painters abandoned theory and reverted to this more sensuous form of painting.

Ever since the time that fine art was imported to Japan at the end of the nineteenth century, artists have been torn between the Western definition of art and Japanese tradition, namely the conflict between theoretical art and sensuous art. Yet, tradition has a significant power to dwell in human beings. Even under the strong influence of Western culture, the Japanese perspective has survived. Japanese tradition, which highly regards natural elements, still lives in contemporary society no less than it did at the time of Gutai.

Conclusion

The sensory effect in the process of art making has been of significant concern to Japanese artists since ancient times. Due to the fact that there was no prejudice against corporeal matter as in the dualism of the West, the Japanese valued physical, sensuous beauty in art and nature. Those indigenous views are essential for the innovation of Japanese art throughout history, and in modern times also. By situating Gutai within the peculiar context of Japanese modern art history, I can conclude that Gutai, whether consciously or not, possessed the schematic character of Japanese traditional sensibility. It has also been suggested that there exists an anti-individualism among Japanese art as a whole,⁴² and I mentioned Gutai's lack of individuality, yet, I must leave this question unresolved. Gutai succeeded within Japanese tradition; they did so through the inclusion of corporeal and sensory elements in their art. Gutai, as an avant-garde art association, tried to create original work by obliteration. Yet, unconsciously, the Japanese aesthetic of sense without

theory pervaded their work. Although Gutai was heavily influenced by Euro-American avant-garde art movements, there are some factors within their works which were based on traditional Japanese perspectives. Gutai art ironically stands as an exemplar of Greenberg's notion of pure art: art for art's sake, achieved through pure experience.

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Mariko Aoyagi is an M.A candidate in Art History at Stony Brook University, State University of New York.

Endnotes

All quotations from Japanese sources have been translated by the author.

- 1 Kaprow, *Assemblage, Environment, Happening*.
- 2 Hirai, *Gutai tte nanda: kessei gojisshunen no zen'ei bijutsu gurupu juhachinen no kiroku*.36.
- 3 The most recent studies of Gutai are done by Ming Tempo exhibition "Under Each Other's Spell", Pollock and Krasner House and Study Center (2009) and by Joan Kee. "Situating a Singular Kind of 'Action': Early Gutai Painting, 1954-1957." *Oxford Art Journal* 26 (2003): 121-140.
- 4 Osaki, "Art in Gutai; Action into Painting." *Document Gutai*.
- 5 Kee, "Situating a Singular Kind of 'Action' : Early Gutai Painting, 1954-1957."
- 6 Hirai, *Shiraga Kazuo Ten*.
- 7 See note 2 above.
- 8 Hikosaka, "Tojirareta enkan no kanatahe." 87.
- 9 Rosenberg "The American Action Painter." *Abstract Expressionism*,
- 10 Op.cit.note 5.
- 11 Osaki, *Document Gutai*, 374.
- 12 Ibid., 369.
- 13 Shiraga, "Koi Koso." *Gutai* 3, 22.
- 14 Shiraga, "Seishin no Seiriteki na Hyogen." *Gutai* 6, and interview in *Document Gutai*, 385.
- 15 Chiba, "'Gutai' he no Iriguchi." *'Gutai', mikan no zen'ei shudan*.75-79.
- 16 see note 10 above, 78.
- 17 Ibid., 79.

- 18 Guilbaut, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art*, 2.
19 Ibid., 198.
20 Ibid., 197.
21 Shiraga, "My path to Action Painting." *Shiraga Kazuo Ten*. 8.
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23 Wright, William, "An Interview with Jackson Pollock." *Abstract Expressionism*, 358.
24 Shiraga, "Shishitu ni tsuite." *Gutai 5*, 26.
25 Osaki, "Art in Gutai; Action into Painting." *Document Gutai*, 19-27 ; Nakajima, "Kakusan to Gyousyuku." *"Gutai", mikan no zen'ei shudan*, 70-74.
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28 Ibid.
29 Ukita, "Documentary on the Second Edition of "Gutai." *Gutai 2*, 30.
30 Yoshihara, "Gutai dai ikkai ten no Kiroku." *Gutai 5*, 3 ; Murakami, "1996 nen no Koten ni Saishite." *Murakami Saburo ten*, 7.
31 Kato, Mizuho. "Searching for a boundary." *Tanaka Atsuko: Michi no Bi no Tankyu 1954-2000*, 15-25.
32 Shiraga, "Bouken no Kiroku 3." *Bijutsu Techo*, 146-147.
33 Sumi, "Automatism no Kaiga." *Gutai 7*, 8.
34 Murakami, "Kanso." *Gutai 2*, 15.
35 Murakami, "Koi no Gomibako." *Gutai 4*, 13.
36 Shiraga, Fujiko. "Yagaiten zengo no Watashi." *Gutai 3*, 23.
37 Yoshihara, "Hakkan ni saishite." *Gutai 1*, 1.
38 Yashiro, *Nihon Bijutsu no Tokucyo*, 55.
39 Ibid., 66.
40 Hashimoto, "Nihon no Bigaku no Atarashii Kanseiron wo Mezashite." 111-123.
41 Inaga, "'Nihon no Bigaku' : Sono kourou to kanousei." 30.
42 Imamichi, *Toyo No Bigaku*.

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