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# THE GUTAI

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# INTRODUCTION

In the year 1955, in the suburban town of Ashiya, near Osaka in Japan, a group of energetic young Japanese artists took over a pine grove park and presented an outdoor exhibition there. The exhibition lasted for thirteen days, twenty-four hours a day. The show was presented by the artist Jiro Yoshihara and his group the Gutai Art Association and was totally unprecedented in form, scale and concept and contained highly experimental work. Founded in 1954, the Gutai Association was a group of some twenty artists, who under the progressive leadership of Yoshihara were encouraged to do away with convention in the creation of art. The word Gutai literally means 'concretetness'. Composed of two parts, 'gu' meaning tool or means and 'tai' meaning body or substance, the word Gutai locates art in the interaction of body and matter, so that process and content become one. There was a strong anti-academic slant to the groups ethos that encouraged them to experiment with original methods and materials. This led to them creating paintings with bare feet, remote-control toys and bottles among other things. The Guta were the first post-war avant-garde movement in Japan and were to profoundly influence the path of Japanese art in the following decades. In fact, the work they created was to pre-date the western avant-garde by nearly ten years. This is an interesting point, as for most of its modernist history, Japanese art was seen to mimic western trends, based on the idea that the Japanese 'imported' modern art and as such could not develop original trends in what was essentially a eurocentric phenomenon.

In the following chapters the work of the Gutai will be looked at in detail and parallels between what was happening in the West in the same period will be discussed. As we will see, the Gutai group were identified with different western art movements and

consequently received international recognition. The repercussions of the Gutai being identified with western art movements will be discussed in detail. But firstly, it is necessary to look at how the Gutai developed in the post-war years.

## CHAPTER 1

## THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE GUTAI IN POST WAR JAPAN

To understand how an avant-garde movement could develop in Japan in the post-war years, it is necessary to look more broadly at the first half of the century. In the early decades of the twentieth century Japanese artists were aware of and inspired by various movements in Europe such as Post-Impressionism, Fauvism and futurism. Also many artists developed an interest in Dada. However, into the thirties as feelings of radical nationalism became stronger due to the propaganda of the totalitarian government of the time, many artists turned their backs on Western art and looked instead to their traditional arts. One artist who resisted this path was Jiro Yoshihara. Yoshihara was to become a very prominent figure in the post-war Japanese art world. This will be discussed in more detail later.

With the onset of the Second World War, Japan's totalitarian government banned all art exhibitions except those of propaganda art which were organised by the Great Japan Patriotic Art Association. (Munroe, 1994, p.86). Also the prohibition of abstract painting was enforced at this time. It is not surprising then that in the post-war climate many artists again looked to the West after being discouraged and prevented from doing so for so long. With the allied occupation (1945-1952) after the War, artists became aware again of what was happening in the West. Joy Hendry argues in her book *Understanding Japanese Society*, that after the incredible atrocities inflicted on the Japanese by the first use of atomic bombs, strong feelings of invincibility that had been fostered by the totalitarian government leading to the attack at Pearl Harbour were well and truly extinguished. (Hendry, 1989, p.17) The sheer scale of the atrocities not only

caused tremendous physical ruin in the country but brought about the end of the short-lived Japanese Empire. The consequent psychological shame in the face of such terrible defeat brought on a loss of belief in national culture values and nationalistic ideologies. This meant that the allied, chiefly American occupation of Japan was accepted quietly by the Japanese and so the westernisation of Japan began.

Initially many artists welcomed the opening up of Japan to outside influences again. So for a time there was an eagerness for contact and exchange with Europe and America that overshadowed the interest in national art that had been the focus early in the century. In fact these feelings of animosity towards native culture became quite extreme as anything that hinted at enshrined culture was seen to have strong right-wing imperialist associations. So any efforts to preserve or transform traditional arts in Japan were seen as conservative, nationalistic and so, reactionary.

So in the immediate post-war years the occupation of Japan was seen as reformist and was supported by many artists. As it appeared to be replacing the totalitarianism and emperorworship of pre-war years with democracy and civil rights this is understandable. In fact artists who had painted propaganda art were seen to have supported the imperialist cause and many had to flee the country.

However, these feelings were short-lived as increasing government control over individual rights led to the passing of the Subversive Activities Prevention Law in 1952, which was strongly opposed by many artists and others as an infringement on basic rights to freedom of expression. (Munroe, 1994, p.127) So, many who had supported the

American reforms initially now formed an opposition and again began to look to Japanese tradition as well as to Western values.

In this context then, it is interesting to look in more detail at what was happening in the Japanese art world at the time, specifically looking at the early development of the Gutai. Until the middle of the century, western influences could be recognised quite clearly in Japanese art but in the fifties some Japanese artists had developed a style that went beyond mere mimicry of Western art movements. This is certainly the case with several artists in the Zero group based in the Kansai district, in the early fifties. This group is interesting to look at as four of its most prominent members went on to become equally prominent in the Gutai group. The artists Kazuo Shiraga, Saburo Murakami, Akira Kanagama and Atsuko Tanaka, all members of Zero went to join the Gutai in 1955. They, along with the founder Jiro Yoshihara and Shozo Shimamoto were the foremost members of the Gutai. The name Zero, coined by Saburo Murakami was chosen to refer to the basic principles of the members. He claimed that 'Zero means nothing: start with nothing, completely original, no artificial meaning. The only meaning is being natural, by body.' (Westgeest, 1997, p.181) What is of particular interest here is the idea of being completely original within the context of Japanese art. To be completely original or avant-garde was a relatively novel idea within Japanese culture and so illustrates one of the most fundamental influences of the West on the Japanese art world. Alexandra Munroe states 'that to be modernist, avant-garde and Japanese had been a continual dilemma for artists since the turn of the century.' (Munroe, 1994, p.41) Within the traditions of Japanese art, artists served long apprenticeships to 'masters' and only achieved levels of mastery themselves after long periods of imitating others. Though there are some parallels here with traditions within the Western art world, it was in the

previous century with the advent of modernism that these ideas were well and truly relegated to history by Western artists. So although the Japanese had been aware of radical art movements in the West from the beginning of the century, it was only in the 50s that artists began to take on one of the most fundamental premises of Western art in the twentieth century.

One of the main reasons for this happening in the post-war period, was because of ideas of re-birth or new beginnings that materialised at this time as a consequence of the cultural and psychological devastation of the war. It is interesting to note parallels with Dada after the First World War. Similarities between Dadaism and the works of the Gutai will be discussed in more detail later. So it is understandable that in the post-war years Japanese artists would look so far beyond their own cultural traditions. However, although this aspect of the Zero ideology can be seen as having made a total break with the traditions of the past, artist Kazuo Shiraga also emphasised many parallels with these traditions. For instance, the Zero ideology and practice tended toward simplicity not unlike the traditional Japanese tea ceremony.

The actual works created by the Zero artists can be seen very much as precursors to the Gutai work. In 1953 Murakami created a series of works that involved bouncing an ink soaked ball against sheets of paper leaving what looked like an explosion of black ink on the paper. Again the emphasis here was to start with nothing, no paintbrush, no composition and no subject. Also no artificial meanings were to be read into the works. The only meaning permitted was located in the physical action of throwing the ball. The series of works were simply called *Boru* (ball). And Helen Westgeest argues that they can be seen as the first successful integration of Western and Japanese elements, since

they combine the characteristics of traditional Japanese ink paintings with the Western artists desire to create something new. (Westgeest, 1996, p.181)

Kazuo Shiraga also aimed at a 'physical' form of expression. Initially he applied paint in a uniform manner on the canvas with a palette knife, in an attempt to ignore composition. In 1953, he started to work the paint directly with his hands. This technique had traditions in China for centuries but the use of this technique with oil paints was new. A few months later he began painting with his feet. He did not use his feet in an expressionistic style but more mechanically in a continued attempt to avoid composition. It is interesting to note that he took these methods even further on joining the Gutai in 1955, where they would take on a more theatrical slant.

In 1955 the Zero group was approached by the artist Shozo Shimamoto who asked it to join the Gutai group. As their ideologies were essentially the same, the Zero artists agreed to merge with the group. In fact, as mentioned earlier, the Zero group members along with Yoshihara and Shimamoto were to become the most prominent Gutai members. So their three years as the Zero group can be seen very much as a crucial formative period.

The Gutai group then, formed in 1951, only really took off when it merged with the Zero group in 1955. In their bulletin entitled *Gutai*, Yoshihara stated that they were a group of seventeen artists whose aim was to show their work to the world and to be recognised internationally. With reference to their general philosophy he stressed that it was important for each of them to be seen as creatively independent. The works reproduced

in that bulletin were all paintings and mainly abstract. However, other than that there was little resemblance between the works.

The second issue of Gutai appeared in 1955 after the linking up with Zero, but the subject of group ideology or philosophy was still ignored. It wasn't until the following year, 1956, that Jiro Yoshihara published the Gutai manifesto. Here Yoshihara gave a very detailed account of what the Gutai intended to do and how they felt about modern art generally. In strong words Yoshihara accused art of the past of being fraudulent. He claimed that materials, paints, metals and so on were through meaningless acts of signification by artists, made to assume a deceptive appearance. Yoshihara claimed that this approach to the manipulation of material essentially killed the essence of the material. (Munroe, 1996, p.370) As we will see, this idea had a long tradition in Japan, and had its foundations in the Shinto religion, the national religion of Japan.

A strong theme for the Gutai then, was respect for the inherent 'spirit' within material, whatever the material might be. 'Crashing through paper, throwing paint, displaying water alone - these serve to bring the spirit of the material to life, rather than dominating it with brush or chisel'. (Altshuler, 1994, p.187) As we will see, this focus on bringing out the spirit in material led the artists to experiment with novel materials and to attempt unusual forms of creation. These efforts were set in contrast to art of the past which, as already stated, was seen as obsolete. These ideas put the very notion of what constituted an artwork up for revision and so led to an emphasis on the working process itself. So in many cases the actual creation of a piece was often just as important as the finished product.

To see how these ideas were acted upon we look to the first outdoor Gutai exhibition held in July 1955, in a large pine forest in Ashiya. The exhibition was entitled "The Experimental Outdoor Modern Art Exhibition to Challenge the Burning Midsummer Sun". Because of the elements of the natural environment like sandy ground, tree roots and so on, artists had to deal with these peculiarities in order to successfully use the space. Because the artists attempted to take advantage of and transform their surroundings, their works took on an ephemeral site-specific quality. This ephemeral quality was to be a predominant theme of the Gutai work. Shimamoto erected a large sheet of tin, one side of which he had painted dark blue the other side white. He had knocked a series of holes into the sheet and as the evening wore on the little holes became spots of light. Atsuko Tanaka presented a 30 foot square piece of bright pink nylon suspended seven inches off the ground, which gave off subtle reflections under the light of the sun. Shiraga's work consisted of ten wooden poles painted red, made to lean against each other to create a cone effect. He entitled the work *Please Come In*, and on entering the space the viewer could see that the insides of the logs had been hacked at with an axe producing marked gashes in the surface. Sadamasa Montonaga exhibited water by hanging one and a half red-dyed gallons from a tree in a sheet of plastic to form a tear shape that only came alive 'when the fluid began to burn together with the setting sun in the west'. (Altshuler, 1994, p.176) Yoshihara exhibited a piece that consisted of two wooden crosses supported by thin pieces of metal. However, although the exhibition had an air of defiance and irreverence about it, it received little attention from the critics.

The Gutai artists would continue to be treated with relative indifference by the Japanese art establishment. However, they continued to exhibit and in October of the same year they held an exhibition indoors entitled The First Gutai Exhibition. This exhibition would reinforce directions taken in the previous summer's exhibition. This time the artists performed before the audience and as mentioned earlier this elevated the creation of the work to the same level of importance as the finished piece. Kazuo Shiraga's piece entitled *Challenging Mud* (Fig. 1), was performed at the opening for the press and audience. This consisted of Shiraga throwing himself into a large pile of mud placed outside the exhibition centre. He thrashed about violently for about twenty minutes and having thoroughly displaced the mud, he stood up from the piece, bruised and exhausted. This work illustrates well the idea of catharsis that seemed to be prevalent among the Gutai. We can see how Shiraga activated the 'spirit' in his material without altering it fundamentally and in so doing ignited a spirit within himself. Murakami also illustrated this theme of catharsis strongly. His work, entitled *At One Moment Opening Six Holes* (Fig. 2), consisted of three large wooden frames covered with paper. The frames were lined up, one behind the other and the work consisted of Murakami literally throwing himself through the sheets of paper to create six holes. This evoked ideas of re-birth or starting afresh, very much in keeping with the ideas in Yoshihara's Manifesto of distancing their work from the past. Shimamoto's work consisted of a long catwalk of wooden planks that the audience were invited to traverse. However, as the planks were spring-mounted this proved to be less simple than it appeared. Montonaga displayed coloured water again, this time in twenty-five bags, once more playing with light.

**Figure 1:** **Kazuo Shiraga, Challenging Mud, 1955.**

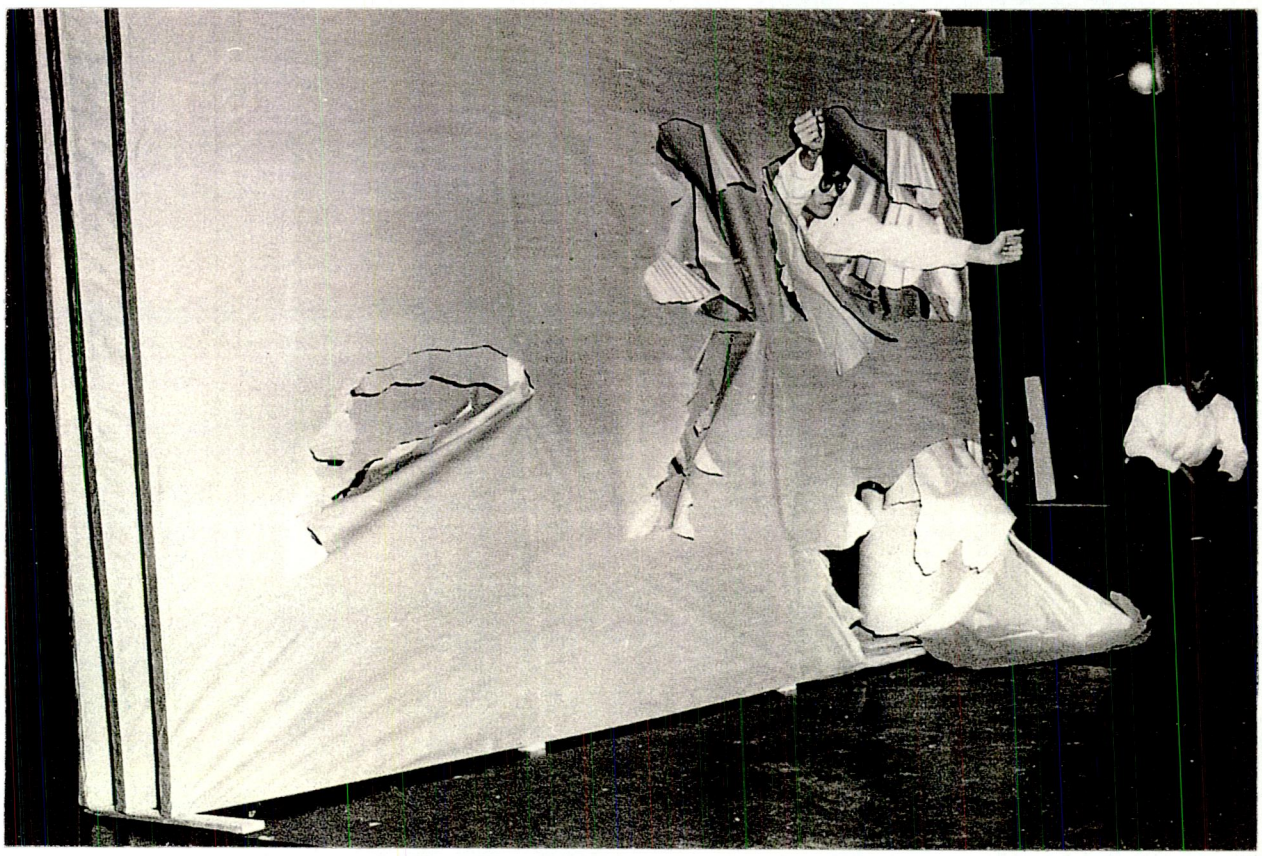

**Figure 2:** **Saburo Murakami, At One Moment Opening Six Opening Holes, 1955.**

Although the Gutai were still receiving little attention at home, there was some interest brewing abroad. In April of 1956, two reporters from *Life* magazine were sent over to observe the workings of the group. The artists put on a special 'One Day Only Open-Air Show' to mark the occasion. (Bertozzi, 1991, p.98) The exhibition took place in a burnt out arsenal, a relic from the war. This was the first time works of art identified with an entire setting. Again the artists used objects at their disposal, painting them with strong primary colours, giving life to what was essentially a dead environment. The article never appeared in *Life* magazine as apparently the work was seen as too outlandish. (Bertozzi, 1991, p.98) Three months later the artists returned to the Ashiya pine forest, for what was to be their largest outdoor exhibition. Shiraga continued his experiments with mud, this time encouraging more audience interaction. He made two large heaps of mud, covering both with cellophane to prevent them from drying out. He placed hemp in one to create an unsettling hair-life effect, and invited visitors to shape and mould the mud. Montonaga worked in a similar way to before, hanging long tubes of coloured water between the trees, again with the intention of playing with light. Murakami presented a piece entitled *Sky* (Fig.3), that consisted of a tall cylindrical tent. On entering the tent and looking up, a section of the sky 'framed' was revealed to the viewer. He played with this idea further by suspending an empty frame among the trees. Akira Kanayama presented a three-hundred foot long piece of white vinyl, imprinted with black footprints. Again, playing with audience expectations, the piece wound its way through the various exhibits only to terminate oddly at the base of a tree. One of the liveliest pieces of the exhibition was Shimamoto's piece, which consisted of a large sheet of red plastic at which he fired volleys of enamel paint from a home-made cannon. A

continuing theme within the exhibitions was a desire to bring painting to a new level, by doing away completely with the use of the brush.

We see this in the next indoor exhibition which took place in October 1956, where Shiraga continued on from his earlier experiments by painting with his feet, suspended above a large sheet of paper. Murakami worked with paper again creating a huge cube-shaped environment with a maze of paper walls inside.

The work encouraged the audience to break through the walls he had left intact. Toshio Yoshida created works by pouring india ink form a watering can suspended ten feet above the canvas. There are obvious parallels between the work the Gutai painters were doing and the work of Jackson Pollock. As the Gutai were influenced by Pollock this will be further discussed in the next chapter. Tanaka created a costume that consisted of hanging coloured fluorescent light bulbs. It also worked as a free standing sculpture.

At this stage the Gutai looked to a new environment to display their work. As a logical conclusion of the theatrical direction of some of the work, the group decided to attempt to create art on stage before a live audience. This was a novel concept within the context of both Eastern and Western art as the Happenings devised by Allan Kaprow had yet to appear in the States. So in May 1957 Art on Stage took place in Osaka. The show consisted of twelve works ranging from stylised performances by Shiraga, to the destruction of objects by Shimamoto, to Yoshihara displaying an empty stage. Shimamoto also created a musical piece that contained the distorted sounds of traffic, pieces of metal moving against each other and other sounds of an urban environment. Another piece involved throwing paint towards the audience from behind clear plastic.

**Figure 3: Saburo Murakami, Sky, 1956.**

It is interesting then, to note the development of the Gutai from a group of abstract painters to a highly experimental art group who questioned many of the most basic assumptions about art. In their creation of 'events' they pre-dated some of the most avant-garde work done in the West in the sixties. With this in mind it is interesting to look at how this experimental work of the Gutai related to what was happening in America and Europe, looking specifically at Pollock and John Cage.

## CHAPTER 2

## INFLUENCES FROM THE WEST

In the Gutai Manifesto of 1956, Yoshihara mentions two artists, Jackson Pollock and Georges Mathieu. He claims that both artists seemed to 'serve' their materials and were highly regarded by the Gutai because of this. It is interesting then to look at the similarities between Pollock's work and some of the Gutai painting. It is possible to speculate that though they suffered nothing like the atrocities of Hiroshima and Nagsaki, many Americans were profoundly disturbed by these nuclear attacks during the war. It was especially evident within the art community as a comment by Barnett Newman reveals, 'The war .... has robbed us of our hidden terror .... We now know the terror to expect. Hiroshima showed it to us. We are no longer in the face of mystery. After all, wasn't it an American boy who did it.' (Honour, 1991, p.696) So whereas the Gutai almost had an attitude of being born again from the ashes of war, the Americans seemed to feel burdened with guilt in the post-war years. Pollock's disturbed and melancholy disposition had no parallels with the unbridled enthusiasm for life that the Gutai seemed to express. However, as mentioned earlier there were many similarities in how they approached painting. As Abstract Expressionism relaxed an emphasis on form, colour and composition, what mattered was the act of painting itself. As Pollock was said to have difficulty with using oils in the traditional manner, the freedom he must have experienced after abandoning conventional methods is evident in his works. By tacking his canvas to the floor instead of working on the traditional easel, he immediately changed the dynamic of his painting. He could work from all sides and even walk on the surface of his painting. Also, his rejection of paintbrushes in favour of pouring and dripping paint was similar to the Gutai approach if we think of Shiraga's foot paintings

and Shimamoto's bottle paintings (Fig.4). And although Pollock's paintings were very much the finished artwork, his method of working has been well documented. A point of difference between the Gutai and the Abstract Expressionists is that the latter never formed a recognised group as such but were labelled later by critics. Though the main figures of abstract painting in America in the post-war years would all have been familiar with each other, they had no common ideology or manifesto. If anything they epitomised the ideas of the isolated individual of Jean-Paul Sartre's Existentialism. So as they had no common agenda they all worked in a particular identifiable manner. We can see how the Gutai differed in this approach in that many of them took up where Pollock left off by trying to take the idea of creating a painting in the most unconventional manner to an extreme. For instance, Shimamoto's paintings were created by firing volleys from a home-made cannon and Kanayama's works on vinyl were created by using a remote control toy filled with paint. Both illustrate this point. In other words the Gutai seemed to be in constant dialogue with one another as well as with artists like Pollock.

The other artist mentioned in the manifesto, Georges Mathieu, is also worth looking at. Mathieu, as a member of the French group Art Informel, is of interest as the Gutai would eventually be identified with the group. Another interesting point about Mathieu is that although Yoshihara mentioned him in the manifesto, Yoshihara had only just become aware of the Art Informel group. (Altshuler, 1994, p.187) As Yoshihara's international ambitions were widely recognised it is probable that Yoshihara was attempting to establish the Gutai by identifying them with recognised artists in both Europe and America. However, Mathieu's working method did have many parallels with the Gutai's.

**Figure 4:** **Shozo Shimamoto, throwing bottles of paint at a canvas, 1956.**

Mathieu believed that painting needed to reach new horizons. He believed the way to achieve this was to work with no preconceived plan and so let chance and spontaneity take charge. He had a strong interest in calligraphy and has been described as 'the first Western calligrapher'. (Westgeest, 1996, p.99) There was a theatrical bent to his style of work that was not unlike the Gutai's approach. He re-enacted the thirteenth century Battle of the Bouvines on canvas, by wearing appropriate costume. He wore a black silk jacket, white-cross leggings and a white helmet. His friends dressed as the opposing Count of Flanders and Toulouse. The creation of the painting, based on detailed historical research, was executed during the same hours of the day that the battle was actually fought. (Kirby, 1985, p.28) Again it seemed to be the element of action that appealed to the Gutai, in fact one Japanese artist stated that he didn't care for Mathieu's 'too-delicate tableau paintings but rather for his painting method which by means of action, unequivocally and instantaneously demolished accepted painting methods.' (Munroe, 1996, p.373) It is interesting to note here, that Mathieu's use of the calligraphic mark was seen as radical because his work was defined within Western traditions, where the traditional calligraphic gestures of the East were seen as exotic. This created a dilemma for the Japanese who, when they attempted to be modern in the Western sense were accused of mimicry, but when they returned to Japanese traditionalism, they were viewed as cutting edge. The theatricality of Mathieu's approach made a huge impression on the Japanese generally. Mathieu visited Japan in 1957 after Yoshihara made contact and performed a demonstration of action painting in a department store window in Osaka (Fig. 5). For the work he dressed in a kimono and made exaggerated calligraphic strokes that entailed the use of his entire body on a huge canvas. Art Informel was the first contemporary art movement to arrive in Japan in the

post-war years and was referred to as the "Informal Whirlwind" as it was to dominate Japanese painting well into the sixties. (Munroe, 1996, p.308)

Michel Tapie, the founder of Art Informel, along with Mathieu and Sam Francis went to Japan with the intention of adding Japanese artists to the list of Informel artists, and although this was to bring the Gutai international recognition, it can be argued, as we will see later, that in fact Tapie did them a disservice.

One of the main problems with identifying the Gutai strongly with a Western art movement is that it denies the fact of their Japanese cultural heritage as a hugely important source of influence. In fact, some of the most fundamental aspects of Gutai ideology are firmly rooted in Eastern philosophy and history. For instance, one of the most basic aspects of the Gutai belief, that all materials possess an inherent spirit, has strong links with the ancient cult of animism in the Shinto religion, and also has parallels with Zen philosophy. In the Shinto religion all the forces of nature are deified. As stated already, a primary focus for the Gutai was to release the spirit in any given material without altering it fundamentally, which they believed killed the spirit in material. It is on these grounds that Yoshihara discounts most of the work created before the twentieth century.

Another interesting link with Eastern heritage can be seen with Shiraga's approach to painting. As mentioned earlier, Shiraga's use of his hands directly on the canvas, had precedents in China for centuries. His use of his feet also had historical precedents. Eighth century Taoists devised a method of painting that involved one person standing

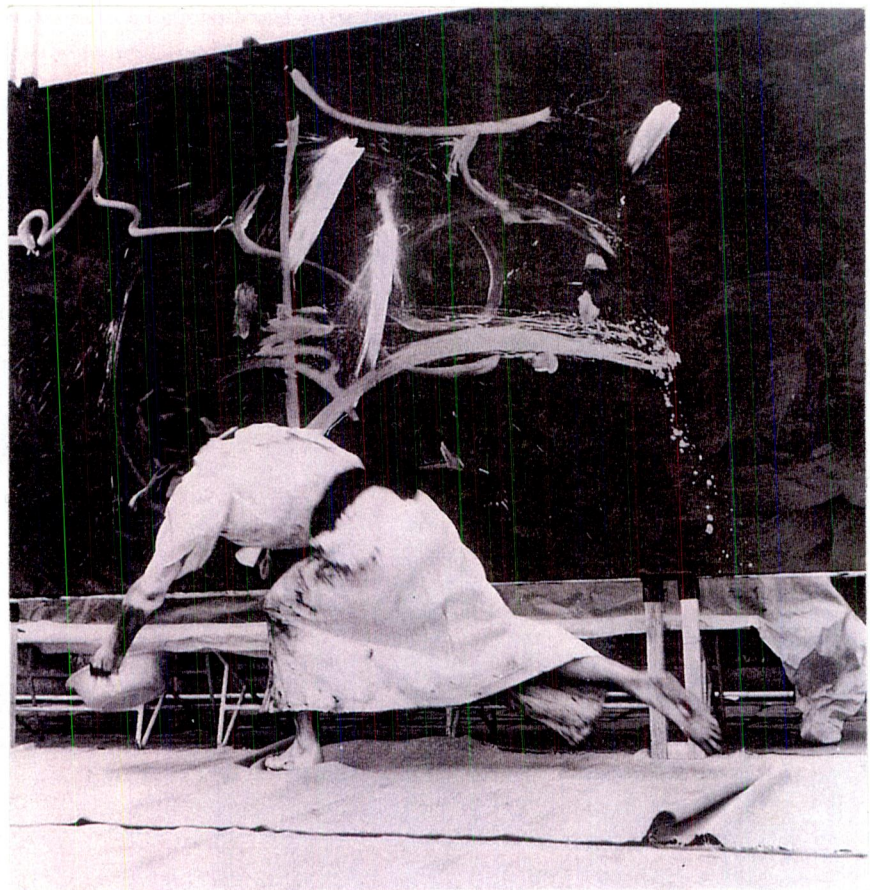

**Figure 5:** **Georges Mathieu, performing a demonstration of action painting, 1957.**

on a large piece of paper using both hands and feet to apply and move the paint, while several people sat around playing drums. Although Shiraga was unaware of his predecessors, is still serves to illustrate a connection with Eastern tradition. (Westgeest, 1996, p.186) other more obvious sources of inspiration for the Gutai were the traditions of the Japanese festival, called Matsuri, of farce and comic folk theatre. Here we can see some of the sources of the Gutai's interest in the interplay of body, time, material and space. The Gutai's propensity toward manic performances and events had a long history in Japanese fringe theatre. We can see a direct link to tradition with Shiraga's opening of the 'Gutai Art on Stage Event' in 1957. Here, in a performance entitled *'The Modern Transcendent Sambaso'* (Fig.6), Shiraga paid homage to traditional Japanese theatre. He dressed as the Sambaso character who, in the traditions of Japanese theatre, always appears before a show to perform a blessing. In a ritualistic act Shiraga 'both parodied and embodied drama's sacred dimensions.' (Munroe, 1997, p.97) So although the Gutai looked beyond their own culture for inspiration, many aspects of their work and ideology are undeniably steeped in Eastern tradition.

Looking then to Western influences, parallels have been noted between Dada and Gutai. There are definite parallels here on some levels. Dada can be seen to have risen from the ruins of the First World War and as their main focus was to break with the past and redefine art, similarities with the Gutai are evident. Also the apparent destructive bent of the Gutai had many echoes in Dadaism. In fact, as Takashina states in *Art in Japan Today*, many of the Gutai works at first seemed Dadaist as 'they liberated Japanese art from the narrow conventions of two-dimensional painting. Dramatising spontaneous encounters between human actions and objects in simple settings, they were symbolic of growth and death in nature'. (Takashina, 1974, p.18)

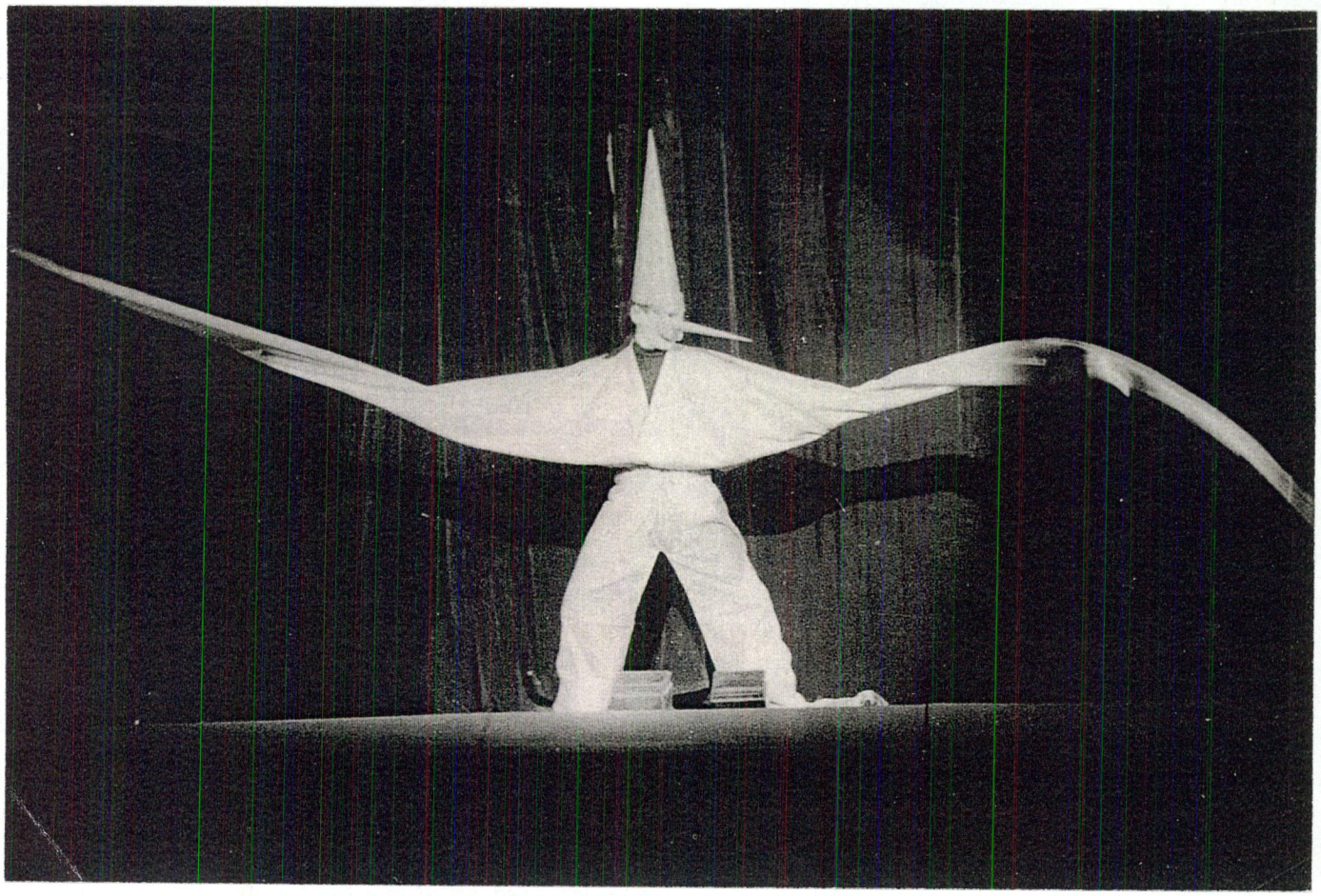

**Figure 6: Kazuo Shiraga, performing The Modern Transcendent Sambaso, 1957.**

However, one crucial difference between the Gutai and Dada was ideology. Though both groups had a strongly anarchic bent, Dada's anarchy was based in nihilism and disruption, whereas Gutai's anarchy had more positive overtones. Both wanted to do away with accepted conventions but the Gutai's enthusiasm about the potential for the future contrasts sharply with the Dadaists belief that society based as it was on greed and materialism had reached its end. So there was a cynicism that was rife in Dadaism that was non-existent in the Gutai.

It is interesting to note here that the Gutai did not hold radical political viewpoints. They never rejected the West on political grounds. Instead, they hoped to integrate Western ideas of modernism with traditions within their own culture, in an attempt to achieve international relevance. At this point it is interesting to look at the composer and visual artist, John Cage, as he was also strongly influenced by Dadaism and Zen philosophy. In the post-war years Zen philosophy was made available to Westerners by a writer called Daisetz T. Suzuki. He wrote a number of books and gave many talks all over America that helped disseminate the ideas of Zen Buddhism for the Western mind. It can be argued that after the war a certain amount of confusion prevailed that led people to question some previously accepted basic assumptions about the nature of life. And so a positive life-enhancing philosophy like Zen was consequently very appealing. In fact, many American artists in the 50s and 60s were familiar with Suzuki's writings. However, Dore Ashton argues that the interest was more to do with style than content. 'The abbreviated, fragmented forms of Zen writings and the immediacy of brush painting influenced by Zen attracted them.' (Westgeest, 1996, p.54) John Cage, however, could not be accused of superficial interest in Zen as he attempted to live the ideas he was encountering. In fact he followed D.T. Suzuki's courses from 1952 onwards. Through

his work, Cage strove to achieve a feeling of oneness with his materials. He attempted to achieve a level of pure experience by focusing on the here and now. One basic idea behind Cage's approach was that the function of art should be to help people to wake up to everyday experience. In that sense he hoped to break down the boundaries between art and life. One way Cage attempted to achieve this was by the use of everyday objects and sounds in his work. Cage's approach to music was particularly radical as he attempted to go far beyond the accepted boundaries of what constituted music. One way he achieved this was by modifying instruments. He wrote a piece for a ballet on a piano that had screws placed under the strings and various other objects inserted in the piano. Another piece he created for radio was similarly innovative as he used city noises as music. This has interesting parallels with the work Shimamoto created for 'Gutai Art on Stage', already mentioned, which consisted of the distorted sounds of traffic. So although the Gutai group and Cage were apparently unaware of each other they were producing somewhat similar work. In fact, during his stay at the experimental art institute, Black Mountain College in 1952, John Cage organised a performance that would have many similarities with what the Gutai would do a few years later. At this performance, freedom and chance were emphasised. Cage delivered a lecture from a stepladder, while various other artists recited poetry, danced, and played the piano, all simultaneously. Paintings by Robert Rauschenberg were hung on the walls. This performance caused a tremendous sensation at the college and was to influence the later Happenings. As we will see, the Gutai were also seen as forerunners of the Happening movement.

Audience interaction was a primary concern for both Cage and the Gutai. In 1952 Cage created a work that consisted of the pianist David Tudor, sitting at a piano silently for 4

minutes and 33 seconds. The noises of unease and unrest in the audience constituted the contents of the work. The work was framed by Tudor opening the lid at the beginning of the piece and closing it again after the designated time. This perfectly illustrates how Cage played with notions of what constituted a musical piece.

As mentioned, there are parallels between the Dada philosophy and Cage's work. If Dada can be seen to have caused a crisis in Western consciousness for the first time, Cage certainly continued to question basic conventions as to what exactly constituted a work of art, or piece of music. However, as with the Gutai, Cage was not as attracted to the nihilism of Dada. Cage's fascination with the ordinary things of everyday life is more in keeping with Zen philosophy.

It is interesting then that Cage and the members of the Gutai were developing along similar lines while being relatively unaware of each other. It would seem that this can be explained by the common interests of both. In fact, Cage could very much be seen to have been attempting the marriage of East and West from a Westerner's point of view, and the Gutai could be seen to have been doing the equivalent in the East.

So then, it could be argued that the similarities between Abstract Expressionism, Art Informel and the Gutai are relatively superficial. Art Informel and Abstract Expressionism had no real parallels with the event like atmosphere that surrounded the creation of the Gutai works. As this was one of the most interesting aspects of the Gutai work it cannot be overlooked. So although not widely recognised, the connections between the works created by John Cage and the Gutai are perhaps more interesting. With that in mind, then, it is interesting to look at how the Gutai came to be identified

with Art Informel and Abstract Expressionism and how this was to make them look staid and derivative in the late 50s.

## CHAPTER 3

## THE CRITICAL LEGACY

Michel Tapie, the founder of Art Informel, on hearing about the Gutai, arrived in Japan expecting to find a tentative, loosely knit group of artists. Of course what he found was a sophisticated advanced art movement. So on arrival in Japan he changed his approach and instead of seeking to convert the Gutai to Art Informel he sought to amalgamate the two on the grounds of similar concerns. Yoshihara welcomed Tapie and this is not surprising after years of ridicule from the Japanese art establishment and indifference from abroad. And of course, Tapie was genuine in his interest in the Gutai. However, it is argued by some that too much of Tapie's interest arose from the fact that by being linked to Art Informel, the Gutai served to reinforce the importance of his art movement and to emphasise its universality. An argument has been put forward that Tapie was motivated by the belief that the Gutai proved the global dimensions of an aesthetic revolution predicted in his book *Un Arte Autre*, published in 1952. He proposed that because of the affinity between Informel and Gutai and 'the Gutai should be understood within the framework of Art Informel and thereby accepted into the canon of modern art.' (Munroe, 1994, p.97) Art Informel as already stated was primarily a painting movement, so identification with Art Informel for the Gutai had the inevitable effect of focusing on their painting. It is fair to say that the Gutai were primarily a group of painters and that their concerns dealt with developing and breaking down accepted ideas of what constituted painting. However, as we have seen, much of their work focused on the process of the creation of a painting or art-piece, so focusing solely on the finished work led to inaccurate readings of their work.

However, this is exactly what happened in 1957 when the group held their fourth indoor exhibition. Introduced by Tapie, the show contained only paintings. This, then, was the beginning of the establishment of the Gutai into the world of international gesture-painting. So although Tapie had a genuine appreciation for the Gutai and the Gutai seemed perfectly happy to be associated with Art Informel, it would eventually lead to a situation where the Gutai were seen as little more than derivative of gesture-painting.

This idea was reinforced in April 1958, when Tapie organised a large exhibition in Osaka entitled Art of a New Era: Informel and Gutai. The show contained eighty-four artists, twenty-seven from Japan, twenty-six from Europe and thirty-one from the United States. Among the Americans were people like Pollock, de Kooning and Motherwell and among the Europeans were the artists Mathieu, Tapies and Appel. One can see how after years of attempting to achieve international recognition, this must have felt like a tremendous achievement for the Gutai. And it had the effect of finally giving them status in Japan as they could now be identified with famous members of Art Informel and the New York School. It was also the beginning of recognition from abroad and Tapie aided this by continuing to promote the group internationally. He introduced their work to Italy where they showed twice in Turin, in a joint exhibition entitled Art Nuovo and then in an exhibition on their own. Their work was very well received in Italy and the April 1959 issue of the Italian Journal *Notizie* was devoted to their work. This was the first comprehensive assessment of their work and parallels were made with radical work being done in Europe by artists like Piero Manzoni and Yves Klein.

Tapie's final collaboration with the Gutai took place in 1960 and was entitled the International Sky Festival. It was held above the roof of a department store in Osaka. They had collected drawings from various international artists, including Sam Francis and Alfred Leslie. The Gutai then enlarged these drawings, attached them to balloons and left them floating over the roof of the department store. As Altshuler states although 'in form a radical exhibition concept, its transfer of standard media to larger format failed to engage the substantial concerns of earlier shows'. (Altshuler, 1994, p.174).

It is important to note here that as that Gutai became established into the world of Art Informel and international gesture-painting in the late fifties, the avant-garde artists in America and Europe were turning their backs on this kind of work. The repercussions of this can be seen when the Gutai exhibited in the Martha Jackson Gallery in New York in 1958. The exhibition contained only paintings and received a cool reception because as Dore Ashton states, the exhibition 'consisted largely of automatistic exercises in paint that looked all too familiar to New Yorkers, who were already turning away form action-painting'. (Munroe, 1994, p.97) The irony was, as we will see, that the kind of work that European and American avant-garde artists began to do in the late fifties and early sixties was very like the work the Gutai had been doing in the early to mid-fifties. In fact it wasn't until 1964 at the Festival die Kusnt Neuen in Aachen, Germany, that the 'action event' and 'art on stage' originated by the Gutai between 1955 and 1957 became widely recognised as a new direction in art. (Munroe, 1994, p.97)

At his point then, it is interesting to look at the Happenings movement in America in the early sixties. This is an interesting group to look at as the founder of happenings, Allan Kaprow was to identify the Gutai with his movement such as Tapie had done previously.

On the surface there were many parallels between both movements, since both used a radical performance style. However whereas the Happenings could be seen to have been trying to fuse life and art as a means of denouncing the commodification of culture, Gutai's earlier versions of Happenings were very much an affirmation of art in the everyday ordinariness life. So, again although there were obvious parallels in how the work was crated, both movements had stemmed from very different political and cultural backgrounds. As stated earlier, the Gutai's interest in performance manifested a long enthusiasm in Japan for fringe theatre in the form of popular culture. And as Tapie's claiming of the Gutai denied the event-like creation of the work, Kaprow's emphasis on the performance aspect of their work denied their emphasis on painting. And this goes to illustrate another marked difference between the intentions of both groups. As stated earlier a primary concern of the Gutai was to develop painting, which was of no concern to the Happenings movement. As with Tapie it could be argued that when Kaprow claimed the Gutai he did so because of superficial similarities between what he was doing in the sixties and what the Gutai had done in the mid-fifties. His desire may have been to express the universality of his own movement rather than to acknowledge the Gutai as a separate and distinct movement.

When dealing with the development of both the Gutai and the Happenings movement without apparent knowledge of each other, it is worth noting that an article appeared in the New York Times on December 8th 1957 entitled *Japanese Innovators*. The article, written by Ray Falk, described in detail the work of the Gutai. (Hapgood, 1994, p.119) In an interview with Susan Hapgood in her book *Neo-Dada, Redefining Art*, Kaprow claims that although he did not read the article he was made aware of it by Alfred Leslie. (Hapgood, 1994, p.119) In the same book, in an interview with Hapgood, Claes

Oldenburg claims that 'it was an interesting article. I know that everybody read it.' (Hapgood, 1994, p.126) In his own book *Assemblage, Environments and Happenings*, Kaprow claims that it was as late as 1963 before he obtained any real information about the Gutai. (Kaprow, 1993, p.212) so although Kaprow appeared to have been unaware of the Gutai until quite late, American artists generally would seem to have known about the group and their radical style of work.

So Tapie and Kaprow, the two western critics who promoted the Gutai abroad, created a legacy which has lead to much confusion about the Gutai in the West, in subsequent years. In both cases the Gutai received attention because of fortunate parallels with specific art movements in Europe and America. And although a chief concern of the Gutai had been to achieve international recognition which it did courtesy of Kaprow and Tapie, it never achieved the status of an independent art movement. Instead it was absorbed within the traditions of already established art movements and so, was defined within Western terms with its Eastern heritage often overlooked. The negative repercussions of this were manifold. Firstly it has meant that because the Gutai were so quickly accepted within those definitions, many aspects of their earlier work were ignored. For instance, their early experiments into more conceptual, minimalist art forms were overlooked. And their affinities with movements like Fluxus, Body Art and Earthworks, have never been fully explored. And as already stated by emphasising aspects of the Gutai that relate most to Art Informel or Happenings both Western and Japanese critics have tended to play down some of the chief sources of influence on the Gutai.

This confusion about the Gutai has lead to constant misreadings of their work. For instance, the founder of Fluxus, George Maciunas, denounced the Gutai as a derivative movement, claiming that it originated in 1957 after George Mathieu had given his action painting performance in a department store window. Kathy Halbreich relates that on remarking that she found a Kazuo Shiraga foot painting in the Against Nature Exhibition 1988, very interesting, was informed by a pre-eminent critic at the show that the painting was little more than 'Grade C Abstract Expressionism' (Against Nature, 1998, p.14|) Halbreich goes on to relate how she feels that a problem arises when critics use criteria that one would apply to a particularly Western phenomenon to define something that has developed to some degree outside those boundaries. So many questions are raised as to how successfully a movement that develops in the East can be defined within Western terms. It is interesting to note as Helen Westgeest argues, that even when a group like the Gutai in Japan appear to take on fundamental concepts, like ideas of originality for instance, that because of subtle but profound cultural differences, there may be a great difference in what a particular concept means to a Western and Eastern mind. (Westgeest, 1996, p.200) In other words ideas of self-expression and originality may be very different things depending on your cultural background. Nihei Nakamura argues that in order for a Western artist to express himself he sets his 'ego' off against the outside world, whereas the Eastern artist seeks an 'archetype', turning to nature and the self in his search. (Westgeest, 1996, p.200) This is illustrated well by the work of the Gutai where the direct experience of the self rather than the individual expression of the ego was focused on. In the Gutai work the emphasis appeared to be on liberating the self from the ego. Murakami's work involving throwing himself through sheets of stretched paper would seem to illustrate this. Ideas of 'individual freedom' appear to be a peculiarly Western phenomenon, that have little meaning in Japanese culture. Freedom

in the Japanese sense would seem to be more about a desire to transcend cerebral limitations.

Fumio Nanjo approaches this point from another angle and claims that 'you can only import technique and material. You cannot import art, it has its culture and context.' (Grey Art Gallery, 1989, p.20) In light of the points made above this would seem like a fair statement and can be related directly to the Gutai. As stated earlier the approach of the Gutai was often to use a method of working based in tradition, for instance, Shiraga's use of his feet to paint, and to alter it by using a modern material, namely oil paint. So in a sense much of the ethos of Modernism was never imported. And this would surely highlight the problems of defining a non-Western art movement solely in Western terms. Another aspect of cultural difference between East and West throws a different light on accusations of mimicry often levied at Japanese artists. Kazue Kobata states that 'perhaps the idea of imitation as negative value is particularly Western, connected somehow to the aggrandisement of individuality or ego which dominates Western ideology.' (Grey Art Gallery, 1989, p.20) In relation to this point Fumio Nanjo argues that when people accuse Japanese art of mere mimicry they deny the difference between the Euro-American and Japanese approach to aesthetics, both in terms of approach and meaning. He expands by stating in the West, artists first have a concept and adapt a technique to it whereas in Japan an artist sees a technique as a process to reach a concept and that through technique a style can develop. (Grey Art Gallery, 1989, p.15)

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion then, it would seem that where exactly the Gutai stand in relation to the international artworld has to be carefully looked at. Although discussions about the Gutai are far from resolved in relation to Japanese and international modernism, their outstanding achievements are now widely recognised. Alexandra Munroe claims that this overdue recognition as Japan's primary avant-garde movement is in no small part due to 'a national revisionist effort to establish a history of Japanese modernism, independent of Euro-American narrative.' (Munroe, 1994, p.84) It is undeniable that the Gutai group were outstanding in their questioning of issues surrounding the creation of art. As we have seen they drew on a vast range of Eastern and Western intellectual sources and artistic practices and thereby advanced modernist artistic practices into areas to include the representation of time, space, movement and process. As stated their adventurous and experimental work pre-dated directions in art in the sixties and seventies, in areas like anti-art, conceptual art, performance art and so on. The Gutai on a domestic level, can be seen to have strongly influenced two different directions in the Japanese art of today. With their aggressive physical action they can be seen to have influenced Tokyo's Neo-Dada Organisers and on the other hand their respect for materials could have influenced the development of Mono-ha, who emphasised the use of natural materials and elements in a minimalist way.

The Gutai's artistic activity lasted from 1955 to 1972, when they disbanded on Yoshihara's death. As we have seen, they were uninterested in the formalist arguments of western modernism and averse to using art in an overtly political manner. This was in no small part due to feelings of new beginnings, after the ending of pre-war imperial

Japanese culture and the establishment of a democracy. Emerging from the devastation of the war, the Gutai symbolised Japan's new post-war idealism and attempted, in the creation of artworks to explore the universality of the present, here and now.

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