

The New Japan¹

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In the closing months of 1945 Tokyo lay in ruins. General McArthur was in charge of the Occupation Army Head Quarters, soldiers began to flood home from the Front and slowly the city began to return to order. It was a time of uncertainty, homelessness, food crises and social unrest. After a long period of privation and war artists started to work again: the conservative *Nitten* group show was held in 1946, the following year saw the first *Nihon Indépendant* exhibition and the formation of the *Nihon Avant-garde Artists' Club* with Fukuzawa Ichiro, Furusawa Iwami, Okamoto Taro and others as members. 1948 saw the publication of the art magazine *Bijutsu Techo* that is still produced today and in 1949 the first *Yomiuri Indépendant* exhibition was held. This was to provide an outlet for many avant-garde artists over the following decade.

Fukuzawa, who had been arrested by the Military Police in 1941 because of suspected communist tendencies, was at the forefront of a strong movement of artists who tried both to denounce and digest the horrors of the war. The pyramid of bodies in his large painting "Group of Figures Defeated in Battle" 1948 echoes the pile of skulls in "The Apotheosis of War" 1874 that had been dedicated by the Russian painter Vasili Vereshchagin "to all conquerors, past, present and to come" [cat.9-1]. Furusawa Iwami had served as a soldier in China, taken prisoner and returned to Tokyo in June 1946 to find that his house, its contents and all his previous work had been bombed and burned. In "Demonic Music" 1948 he surrealistically grafted his memories of the battlefield with the reality of a bombed-out Tokyo, dwarfed by a giant red female devil and a vast atomic mushroom cloud [cat.9-2]. Okamoto Taro's large painting "Heavy Industry," 1949, is more optimistic and playful. Okamoto, who had lived in Paris before the war and had contributed to the International Surrealist Exhibition in 1938, had also served a soldier in China and returned home to a bomb crater yet, with typical surrealist verve, he presented an eccentric image of an economy getting back on its feet, building up steam and power, surrounded by arabesques of small waving mannequins and spring onions [cat.9-8].

Surrealism continued to be a strong force in the Japanese avant-garde into the 1950s. Yamashita Kikuji, who had been haunted by atrocities he had witnessed during the war in both Taiwan and China, composed hard-hitting paintings against social inequality. "The Tale of Akebono Village", 1953, is a kind of reportage, based on a newspaper story of a village revolt against a landowner. A number of events are compressed into a single image: an old

¹ I would like to acknowledge my indebtedness to the work of Kaido Kazu in writing this piece.

lady who has committed suicide after a bank default with her fox-headed granddaughter for whom her savings were intended; the dead man is a communist agitator who had been sent to support the revolt but who had been drowned after being chased by the members of the local fire brigade [cat.9-10]. His “Tale of New Japan”, 1954, is an allegory of Tokyo under the American Occupation. It shows a red light district, possibly Roppongi, the sign “MS Avenue” refers to the Mutual Security Pact of 1951 and the cow, the artist tells us, “...is the personification of the USA. She does not give milk and if you upset her she may get violent.”² The head of the woman is certainly that of a prostitute, as indicated by the derogatory sign “yellow stool” against which she leans [cat.9-11].

The paintings of Ishii Shigeo and Kawara On, both born in 1933, represent the attitude of a younger generation that had not been directly involved in the war. They were trying to create a new form of realism that confronted the pain of existence while avoiding any programmatic moral or political statement. In these works strong feelings of anxiety and menace can clearly be felt, a characteristic of the work of all the members of the Artists’ Discussion Group [*Seisakusha kondankei*], to which Ishii and Kawara belonged. In July 1955 Kawara, in a rare statement, illuminated the background to such paintings as “Pregnant Woman,” 1954 and “Black Soldier,” 1955: “Recently the notion of humanity has been threatened by matter. In daily life I feel this every moment. Political and economic anxieties overwhelm individuals.”³ [cat.9-4,5]. Yet, in spite of their shocking subjects and distorted forms of expression, these works are not without ironical distance. The same could be said of the grimacing, fashionably dressed, semi-naked bobbysoxers in Ishii’s “Violence Series: Pleasure”, 1957 [cat. 9-3]. Kawara continued this dark existential irony in the mid-1960s in his Date Paintings and “I AM STILL ALIVE” series of postcards after he had settled in New York and started to work as a Conceptual Artist.

From 1951, artists and composers Takemitsu Toru, Yuasa Joji, Yamaguchi Katsuhiko, Kitadai Shozo and others gathered together in the *Jikken Kobo* [Experimental Workshop]. This was the first multi-media group in Japan and was instrumental in developing concrete as well as electronic music alongside a playful often abstract visual art. In their interest in the importance of process in making art they anticipated the formation of the *Gutai* in Osaka in 1954 but did not have their painterly bias. In spirit and working method they had more affinity with the workshops of the Bauhaus as well as with the collages and constructions of László Moholy-Nagy and of some of the Berlin Dadaists. The photographs shown here, almost all by Otsuji Kiyoji, are of

² *Reconstructions: Avant-garde art in Japan 1945-1965*, Oxford, Museum of Modern Art, 1985, p.36.

³ Kawara On, “Atarashii ningenzo ni mukatte” [Towards a new image of man], Tokyo, *Bijutsu Hiho*, July 1955, p.46.

mobiles, sculptures and designs made by Kitadai Shozo as part of *Jikken Kobo's* project to provide regular images for the Photo News Section of the weekly magazine *Asahi Graph* during 1953 and 1954. In these works design, art and technology are brought together in a new and challenging way [cat.9-20-1 to 9-20-32].

During the mid-1950s AY-O made paintings of urban building sites populated by vast faceless robotic figures; in 1958 he moved to New York and in the early 1960s became involved with both Fluxus and Pop-Art. As part of his Fluxus activities he collaborated with George Maciunas, Emmett Williams and Nam June Paik on a number of joint works and also made such interactive objects as the "Finger Box", 1963 shown here. Around this time he wrote the Rainbow Manifesto and started the series of brightly colored rainbow-like paintings by which he is best known [cat.10-24].

In 1958 Kusama Yayoi also moved to New York where she began to perfect her large, obsessive dot and net paintings and to work on series of performances and environments. "Untitled (Gold Chair Object)", 1966, is a chair encrusted with gold painted, penis-like excrescences. At the time it could have been incorporated by the artist into an environment of different objects that had all been covered in a similar way [cat.10-4].

Kudo Tetsumi's assemblages have a strong Fluxus character as well as a grim humor concerning the condition of contemporary life. "Your Portrait", 1963, is composed of four boxes each containing on a cushion a brain, an eye, a mouth and an ear, representing the five senses. Within this reductive format, the decorated lids of the boxes may be closed and parts of the subject isolated – the brain would then be confronted only by a crossword and meaningless concepts, the eye by a blank TV screen, the mouth would have to swallow medicine and the ear hear only the blaring sound of a transistor radio [cat.10-3].

The Neo-Dada Organizers were started in Tokyo by Yoshimura Masunobu and Shinohara Ushio in 1960. They had a number of other members including Arakawa Shusaku and Miki Tomio but its rebellious and chaotic activities did not last even a year. Every Saturday night performances were staged at different venues including Yoshimura's studio "The White House", one of the first buildings by architect Isozaki Arata [cat.10-40,41].

A similar spirit was continued in the group Hi-Red Center, formed in 1963 by Takamatsu Jiro, Akasegawa Genpei and Nakanishi Natsuyuki, its name coming from the English translation of their surnames: *Taka-Aka Naka*. They acted collectively as if they were a limited company with an exclamation mark as their logo. Allying themselves with international Fluxus and

continuing the Luddite tradition of Dadaism, many of their actions such as “Be Clean!” and “Dropping Event”, 1964, were mistrustful of authority and doubtful of the benefits of new technology. In 1963 Akasegawa designed and distributed an imitation 1,000 yen note as an invitation to his one man show, as a result he was prosecuted and, in 1970, found guilty in the Supreme Court of having violated the Securities and Currency Counterfeiting Law. The celebrated “1,000 yen Note Case” initiated a long debate on freedom of expression in which the defence submitted many art works and argued in court that an imitation was not the same thing as a counterfeit. Just as in New York Kusama was smothering everyday objects in dots and plaster penises, so in 1963 Akasegawa was starting to wrap similar objects in paper printed with 1,000 yen notes [cat.10-12 to 10-23].

By 1964 when Tokyo hosted the Olympics, the first expressways and Bullet Train were in service, new electronic goods were being produced, the economy had started to pick up, and Japan was again accepted into the international community. Pop Art, which now started to make an impact, combined mass media with the native graphic tradition of *manga*. Yokoo Tadanori and Tiger Tateishi had both, at times, worked as artists on comic books and this, with a knowledge of traditional arts, influenced their way of working. Yokoo’s posters for art exhibitions, avant-garde theatre productions and Kabuki, mix photographs, images from traditional art and popular culture, and flat areas of color in a way that established a new graphic language; the poster for “The Ballad of the Severed Little Finger”, 1966, includes a photograph of writer Mishima Yukio [cat.10-6 to 10-11]. Tateishi’s “Tokyo Baroque”, 1963-64, presents a simultaneous aural and visual impression of the old, new and transforming city [cat.10-5].