

Gutai without Frontiers.

The Japanese artistic Avant/Garde in the Aftermath of second World War

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“At the end of the war, when I came down from the mountain where I had been allowed to go and rest during that long and catastrophic period, I found myself in my studio, surrounded by a group of art students, eager to spend whole evenings on end discussing the future of the new art until the first light of dawn... After several years frequently exchanging ideas, I started to find among my new companions such high-profile personalities as Shimamoto and Yamazaki ... They were determined to free themselves of their “acquired skills” and, through experience and adventure, to discover a new space with more direct forms of expression.”¹

In the Japanese painter Jiro Yoshihara's words, it is easy to recognise the new enthusiasm and energy that animated cultural debate in Japan in the aftermath of the Second World War, and which were fundamental in the development of the idioms of the artistic avant-garde. The artists of this period found themselves facing a rapidly evolving society, characterised by profound social change and sudden exposure to greater opportunities and new freedom of expression. Japanese art was becoming increasingly aware of its own potential, and felt the need to gradually move away from western models that up to then had been the only route towards innovation. And so, a journey of daring experiment was under way, whose results made a precious contribution to the need for renewal, concerning, especially by the nineteen-fifties, the way the creative processes were understood, and which in effect formed the basis of everything that may be defined as contemporary in art today.

In this context, an essential role is played by the disruptive and innovative action of the *Gutai bijutsukai* (Gutai Art Group), the avant-garde movement which began in Ashiya in 1954, founded by the painter Jiro Yoshihara, mentioned above, a charismatic figure around whom various artists including Shozo Shimamoto, Akira Kanayama, Sadamasa Motonaga, Saburo Murakami, Kazuo Shiraga and Atsuko Tanaka would congregate. Despite the extremely varied personalities making up the group, they were united in the wish to embody and give a voice to the changes in the modern world by going beyond the known artistic methods to create something completely new and original. *“The universe never stops changing for a moment and we are experiencing it”* explained the Gutai artist Sadamasa Motonaga in 1959: *“Transformation is nothing more than renewal so it is only natural to have to try to create new phenomena or discover them with amazement. Gutai art is the creation of a group of artists using every possible technique and material. So they do not limit themselves to bi- or tri-dimensionality; they also use liquids, solid matter, gas and even clay, electricity and time itself to bring out all possible forms of beauty in its original freshness everywhere. Our motto is “Let us create something strange”. Something strange or the hesitant appearance of something never seen before, hidden away in the foundations of humanity. The Gutai artists are only the hammers or the drills that break the wall.”²*

Gutai Art, whose basic characteristics were described by Motonaga (innovation and experimentation in different linguistic media), was extraordinary significant not only in the Japanese scenario, but also well beyond the orient, especially if we consider what was happening in Europe and America in more or less the same period. The Gutai Group was especially famous for its output based on painting and gesture that was echoed in Tappin's *Informel* in the same years, but its scope was definitely greater. It may even be said that in many cases Gutai predated in its sheer originality the great changes in western art in the 60's such as the creation of genres like the *installation*, *performance* and *land art*. They were extremely central processes in the construction of contemporary artistic aesthetics that deserve to be brought to the fore. To get a fuller understanding, it is necessary to look at the socio-cultural situation at the time of the birth of Gutai, to ponder – as the title of this exhibition in Reggio Emilia suggests – on the relationships between “East and West” which have affected the group's evolution until it broke up 1972, a period after which, however, the driving force of the movement, rather than coming to a halt, opened up new avenues thanks to the individual artists who had left the Yoshihara school, such as Shimamoto, for example.

¹ Jiro Yoshihara, *Il futuro della nuova arte* taken from the *Gutai* catalogue, in “Notizie”, II, n.8 Turin 1959

² Sadamasa Motonaga, taken from the *Gutai* catalogue, in “Notizie”, II, n.8 Turin 1959

Japanese art moved towards the contemporary between the two wars, at the time of – as often happens with turning points – a tragic and destabilising event, the great Kanto earthquake of 1923. It was the time of the important experiments carried out from 1925 by the *Mavo* movement which, with their desire to provoke, provided interesting points for reflection on what would be produced later.

The models of reference were mainly imports – cubism, futurism, surrealism, fauvism – but the work that they inspired had the merit of bringing out, alongside the expressions of nature associated with the local cultural tradition, elements such as the anxiety and introspection that were needed to give a new awareness to the Japanese, little used to psychological considerations or addressing the personal inclinations of the individual.

From 1951, the year when American occupation ended, creating to some extent a distance from the horrors of the Second World War, a process of democratisation began which created a renewed interest in culture and greater opportunities for exchange abroad. Important exhibitions were being organised during that period, such as, for example, the *French Exhibition of Contemporary Art*, and the *Exhibition of the Independents*, promoted by newspapers and organised by department stores, who at that time - and also later on - played a key role in the spread of culture, and which had the merit of furthering the approach of the international art of the day in Japan, with names like Hartung, Soulages, Pollock and Tobey. Direct contact with what was happening in Europe and America served as a stimulus for Japanese artists who – increasingly organising themselves into experimental and avant-garde groups open to the new idioms – felt free to contribute in an original and autonomous way to the climate of renewal that was taking place, drawing on their traditions and giving free expression to the own inner sensitivity. This approach found an immediate response among the critics and the Kansai artists, who were the first to give an enthusiastic welcome – unlike the more cautious “official” Tokyo critics – to the disruptive new developments presented at the *Exhibition of the Independents*. And it was precisely in the Kansai region, in the small town of Ashiya, between Kobe and Osaka, that Jiro Yoshihara began his personal artistic journey and laid the foundations for the birth of Gutai.

Yoshihara, born in Osaka in 1905, completed his training at Ashiya, becoming an affirmed surrealist and abstract painter at an early age, thanks to his innate talent. In that small Kansai town, he was able to gain hands-on knowledge of the traditional calligraphy of the Zen priest and artist, Toiu Nantembo (1893-1925), famous for his unconventional style, characterised by smears and drips which he produced by becoming a single entity uniting body and paintbrush, a “*living paintbrush*”. Of great importance was Yoshihara's meeting in 1929 with the painter Tsuguharu Fujita (1886-1968) – just back from Paris – who taught him never to be influenced stylistically by others and to pursue originality before all else. Nantembo's example and the teachings of Fujita marked his conception of expression for ever: on the one hand strictly linked to the Japanese “spirit” and a Zen vision of the world and things (where the ritual of gesture and chance had a precise meaning) and on the other, fostering innovation at all costs. Aspects around which the whole Gutai aesthetic would revolve.

Jiro Yoshihara became an important figure in the Kansai artistic community and, as well as in the organisation of independent collective and avant-garde exhibitions, he took part in various discussion groups³. In 1952, invited by Hiroshi Muramatsu – expert in art, entertainment and science with the Asahi newspaper – he took part in the discussion group on contemporary art, *Genbi*, which took a global interest in the arts: painting, sculpture, calligraphy, flower arranging (ikebana) and all other forms. This possibility of conceiving art as a perfect interweaving of life, content, and means of expression already addressed by *Genbi*, would be Gutai's true starting point, in August 1954.

“*The name*” said Yoshihara “*came from a suggestion by Shozo Shimamoto, and I think it was chosen basically for the graphic form and the sound of the word. Arbitrary aspects such as this are typical of Gutai, but naturally also the idea of giving concreteness to the content was also important in making the choice.*”⁴

The term Gutai can thus be translated as “*concrete*”, “*real*”, “*material*”, and shows the aim of the group to get to the heart of pure creation, to give form to the immediacy of artistic expression, abandoning as far as possible

³ A few groups he was part of, where he also acted as promoter were, for example, Kyushitsu-kai, Nika-kai and the Ashiya City Association.

⁴ Jiro Yoshihara in *Gutai*, n.12, 1 May 1961

the superstructures that stifle the freedom of the artist.

The group's aesthetics were described by Yoshihara in the first *Manifesto*, published in January 1955 in the first issue of the "Gutai" magazine. A second, more detailed *Manifesto* appeared in December 1956 in the art magazine "Geijutsu Shincho", and there Yoshihara put into words the journey that he and the other artists of the group had undertaken with great conviction and enthusiasm: "*Our contemporary awareness leads us to consider conventional works of art as counterfeits that boast an appearance rich in meaning. It is time to say goodbye to these simulacra piled high on altars, in buildings, art schools and antique shops... Passed off as spiritual products, the materials are massacred and can no longer speak... Gutai Art does not transform matter, Gutai art gives matter life. Gutai Art does not falsify matter. In Gutai Art the human spirit and matter shake hands, all the while remaining rivals... In the search for an original and unknown world...our experiments come into being every time the opportunity to freely express creativity presents itself... Gutai exhibitions are always vibrant with a great vitality and our desire to make new discoveries in the life of matter with its resounding cries*"⁵.

"Do a painting that has never been seen" Master Fujita would repeat to his student Yoshihara, and Yoshihara insistently exhorted his artists to do the same, aiming to spur them on - sometimes even forcefully - to free their creativity in accordance with the terms of the *Manifesto*. He wasn't a master in the traditional sense of the term, he was more a kind of charismatic advisor, as Paul Jenkins says, "*a paternal figure, strong and quiet, who encouraged the young people in Gutai to discover themselves*"⁶. The group, which usually met at Yoshihara's house in Ashiya, was attended by artists such as Shozo Shimamoto, Chiyu Uemae, Tsuruko Yamazaki and later, Sadamasa Motonaga, Akira Kanayama, Saburo Murakami, Kazuo Shiraga, Fujiko Shiraga, Yasuo Sumi, Atsuko Tanaka and Michio Yoshihara, almost all from the Kansai region.

Among the latter, Kanayama, Murakami, Shiraga and Tanaka had been part of *Zero-Kai* (the Zero Group), an avant-garde group which, founded in 1952, closed down after only two years⁷, merging with Gutai, upon the instigation of Shimamoto. The contribution of the Zero-Kai artists was of great importance. Their art, based on total originality, aimed to start, in fact, from "zero", i.e., from immediacy and the essential. Shiraga used his feet and his whole body rather than the paintbrush to paint; Murakami threw balls covered in black ink onto a sheet of paper; Kanayama produced monochromes dominated by empty spaces and asymmetry, while Tanaka reproduced symbols, letters and numbers on material. They all wanted to bring together elements of the Japanese tradition, e.g., calligraphy (black ink, marks and lines, with paper and cloth as support) using expressive new modalities, outside the norm, able to translate as directly as possible the feelings of the artist and his or her interaction with the surrounding environment. So the aims of Zero-Kai perfectly coincided with those of Gutai and thus, in February 1955 the merge took place in a very natural way.

Gutai went its way for eighteen intense years until 1972, when Yoshihara died following a heart attack. The artists of the group, bereft of their guide, decided to break up in March of the same year.

Critics usually distinguish three phases within this almost twenty-year period, with different output and different levels of experimentation: the "*first years*" from 1954 to 1957, considered the most significant and original, especially because of the unusual way the exhibitions were set up, the "*middle phase*" from 1957 to 1965, with the focus on the group's relationship with other countries, in particular with the French art critic Michel Tapié, and "*the last period*" from 1965 to 1972 with works reflecting contemporary trends in the West.

Gutai's activities began in January 1955 with the publication of the eponymous magazine "Gutai", whose objective was to make the group known to a wider public, showing accounts of the exhibitions, photos of the works, and articles about Gutai philosophy, but also including the works of other artists and avant-garde movements that could dialogue with the group for their mutual growth. In Yoshihara's view, international art magazines paid little attention to Japanese artists: the new magazine was meant to fill the information gap, and great energy was consumed in making it known and distributing it in Japan and abroad. 14 issues of the magazine came out at irregular intervals until October 1965, focusing especially on the first Gutai period (a good seven issues came out from 1955 to 1957 as a further confirmation of the fact that this was the group's

5 Jiro Yoshihara, *The Gutai Manifesto* in "Geijutsu Shincho", vol. 7, nr. 12, Shinchosha, December 1956

6 Paul Jenkins, *Yoshihara and Gutai in Gutai*, catalogue of the exhibition, Paris, Galerie nationale du Jeu de Paume, 1999

7 The Zero Group held just one collective exhibition, at the Sogo department store in Osaka, in 1954.

most productive period) and unfortunately, for reasons that have never been clarified⁸, two issues – 10 and 13 which were supposed to document the exhibition at the Martha Jackson Gallery in New York and the opening of the Gutai Gallery – did not go to print.

It was through the “Gutai” magazine that the group became known outside Japan, and reached experts and artists all round the world, including Michel Tapié, Jackson Pollock and Yves Klein. In particular, Tapié, after seeing Gutai works in the magazine (received from the artist Hisao Domoto who lived in Paris) was particularly struck by the fact that in the East, work was being produced so close to the informal idiom and abstract western expressionism. And so the French critic decided to get to know the group in person and went to Osaka in September 1957. The enthusiastic reception⁹ of Gutai art by the authoritative critic also led to new interest in the group in Japan, but above all, it allowed Gutai to become an artistic movement at international level. The group also sent a copy of the magazine to Jackson Pollock who, according to his biographer Friedman, was extremely struck by it. Without the exposure provided by the magazine, Gutai would presumably not have obtained the fame and the recognition that it still enjoys in the west today.

After founding the magazine, in August 1955, the group took part in the “*Experimental Outdoor Modern Art Exhibition to Challenge the Midsummer Sun*”, an extraordinary and unusual collective exhibition organised by the Ashiya City Art Association (of which Yoshihara was a member) in the area of Ashiya’s park along the eastern oriental bank of the eponymous river. The idea of holding the event in the open was most certainly Yoshihara’s as he had been wondering with some excitement “*what it might be like to set up an exhibition under the blue sky*”¹⁰ and dreamed of exploring increasingly innovative ways of using art with the group. In addition to the Gutai artists, many other artists coming from the local schools took part, after being selected by a board headed by Yoshihara. Everyone had to think of their work in relation to its specific characteristics, in a dialectical relationship very different from what could be created within a gallery: trees, the wind, light, the public itself became a part, willing or no, of the “sense” of the works. Atsuko Tanaka, for example, presented *Wind and Cloth*, a large piece of material close to the ground, which moved and undulated in a very suggestive manner as the wind blew on it.

This unusual open air location represents a very important moment for Gutai Art as it engendered two types of awareness in the members of the group. The perishability of the works began to shift the attention of the group onto the importance of the creation process, an aspect that would later be a key element in the development of Gutai art in the direction of performative art. Also the fact of exhibiting in a park, frequented by ordinary members of the public and families, gave the artists the idea of a possible interaction between their works and the public, who would go from being passive spectators to becoming part of the creative process.

It was in effect a first experiment in *land art*, a form which would take hold in the west only in the late sixties, and which Gutai, while not specifically setting out to create a new artistic genre, predated and examined more deeply at the “*First Exhibition of Gutai Art*” organised in the same year and in the subsequent “*Open Air Exhibitions of Gutai Art*”.

The “*First Exhibition of Gutai Art*” in 1955 was, as the name itself reveals, the first dedicated solely to members of the group and was held at the gallery of the master of ikebana, Houn Ohara (the *Ohara Hall*) in Tokyo, in the open space in front of it and on two floors inside the building. The event was totally disconcerting, so much so that when Yoshihara himself arrived in Tokyo as preparations were nearing completion, he admitted that he was looking at “*an incredible sight*”¹¹. Among the more innovative works worthy of special mention are *Challenge to the Mud* by Kazuo Shiraga and *Entrance* by Saburo Murakami, both of which centred on the action of the artist and so were already linked to the concept of performance.

Shiraga, who usually painted using hands and feet, in this case went even further and obtained some builder’s clay that he put next to the entrance to the gallery and then used to put on a sort of battle: half-naked and fists

8 On this see Shoichi Hirai, *La rivista “Gutai”*, in “Gutai. Dipingere con il tempo e lo spazio”, exhibition catalogue (Lugano, 23 October 2010-20 February 2011), Silvana Editore, Milan, p. 152

9 Michel Tapié, once he arrived at Yoshihara’s home, said: “*I can only hope that you will allow me to become part of your group*”. Michel Tapié, *Gutai-ha raisan (Eulogy of the Gutai group)*, Gutai Bijutsu Kyokai, August 1957

10 Jiro Yoshihara, *Ten Years of Gutai (Part I)*, in “Bijutsu Journal” nr 38, March 1963, p.6

11 Jiro Yoshihara, *On the first Gutai exhibition*, in “Gutai” nr 4, 1 July 1956

flying, he squirmed as though imprisoned and became one with the clay, offering a vision of truly living art. Once the clay was dry, the work appeared as a painting, with its surface dense with traces still vibrant with action and bearing a title.

Murakami on the other hand, used enormous sheets of paper from packages - painted in gold - to block the entrance to the exhibition. The work consisted in jumping through the paper, an honour given to Yoshihara at the opening. Only through this laceration could the work be said to be completed, and for this reason the creative process was totally innovative, taking place in space and time. While the works of Shiraga and Murakami developed gestural and performative aspects, Shozo Shimamoto and Atsuko Tanaka focused on interaction with the visitor. With his *Please, walk on here*, Shimamoto invited people to walk on his work, made up of planks of wood forming steps which gave way under the weight of those who walked on it, causing them to lose their balance. Tanaka relied on the movement of sound in a very original way. His work *Bell* consisted of numerous small bells positioned in a hall, each one at a certain distance from the other; the visitor switched them on by pressing a button setting off their sound which, as it went round the room, gave the visitor an indirect perception of the exhibition area.

Alongside these extraordinary experiments in language, there was no shortage of more traditional pieces: Michio Yoshihara and Toshio Yoshida used oils on canvas, for example.

At the end of the show, the group felt that it had done something totally new and original within the artistic panorama of the time, as Yoshihara himself says: "*We went back and forth through the galleries several times. Our faces shone with satisfaction... We participants silently communicated to each other the fact that our vision had found concrete expression.*"¹².

But the innovations did not stop, and continued a year later with three more exhibitions: the "*One Day Open Air Exhibition*", the "*Gutai Open Air Exhibition*", and the "*Second Gutai Open Air Exhibition*" in April, July and October 1956 respectively.

The "*One Day Open Air Exhibition*" confirmed the interest that Gutai was causing throughout the world of art and criticism. The event was, in fact, set up exclusively for two journalists and a photographer sent by the American *Life* magazine to do a story on the group. The venue was an old factory belonging to the Yoshihara family oil company, and the surrounding park at the mouth of the river Muko. The Gutai artists presented a series of works made from cardboard boxes, tree-trunks, material, and balloons used as actual *installations* capable of interacting and communicating with the surrounding space. Once again ahead of their times, Gutai had opened up new vistas that, in terms of the *installation* genre, for example, would become a common idiom in the language of art only between the late sixties and the early seventies.

The next exhibition - the "*Gutai Open Air Exhibition*" - took place in Ashiya Park, already known and "brought to life" by the Group for the "*Experimental Outdoor Modern Art Exhibition to Challenge the Midsummer Sun*" in 1955. Installations were set up like, for example, *Water* by Sadamasa Motonaga, consisting in long strips of plastic hanging between the branches of the trees with coloured liquid inside, shining in the sunlight; or *Please draw freely* by Jiro Yoshihara, a white surface where visitors were encouraged to intervene, overturning the traditional roles of artist and viewer. Shozo Shimamoto on the other hand, prepared a performance wholly out of the ordinary: he built a rudimentary cannon (with a tube of metal) which he used to literally "explode" the colour on a sheet of red vinyl. The work was called *Cannon Work* and Shimamoto did it again on other occasions as for him it was the start of a series of experiments whose common denominator was throwing coloured paint, the random liberation of the expressiveness of the subject.

Even more daring were the works on show at the "*Second Gutai Open Air Exhibition*" in autumn 1956, which marked a further step forward for the group towards a new interpretation of the very concept of art. After the previous performative experiences, the Gutai artists understood that by performing before an audience, the creative process behind the finished work became the most important thing; the actions they performed, taking on a precise artistic meaning, became works of art. From then on, action, time and space were to become part of the vocabulary of means of expression, like colour and the paintbrush.

First of all, a date was fixed to do the public performance and the show began. Murakami leapt through forty-two sheets of suspended wrapping paper, assigning to the work – called *Paper Break Through* – the concept of duration via the sequence of tears in the paper. Shimamoto began using his *Bottle Crash* technique, which would become his favourite means of expression, consisting in throwing and breaking bottles full of coloured

12 Jiro Yoshihara, *On the first Gutai exhibition*, in "Gutai" Nr. 4, 1 July 1956

paint onto a canvas previously laid out on a hard surface or stones. Atsuo Tanaka wore her *Electric Dress* consisting of glowing light-bulbs and neon lights, which was very successful with the spectators.

Performing before an audience gave the artists the idea of putting on a stage show, presumably suggested by Yoshihara who had previously been involved in stagemanship. In May 1957 the Osaka *Sankei Hall* hosted the "*Gutai Art on the Stage*" exhibition, effectively a pictorial stage performance. Once on stage, the artists began their painting actions, taking their work beyond the two dimensions of the canvas and moving outwards through time and space. One of the more interesting performances was that of Yasuo Sumi, who, after hanging a transparent sheet between the stage and the audience, threw buckets of paint onto it so that the spectators felt as though the paint was being thrown at them. But Atzuko Tanaka was not to be outdone: She produced a painting on herself, tearing and opening layers of material from her dress. Motonaga and Shimamoto introduced the use of music, composing pieces for the occasion using experimental and electronic sounds. Yamazaki on the other hand, concentrated on light, creating a play of shadow on the stage. It was an exhibition/performance of a kind never seen before¹³ very similar to the later *happening* genre – created by Allan Kaprow from 1959 – showing once again the extraordinary ability of Gutai to explore untrodden paths.

In this regard, Akira Kanayama's "*Automatic drawing machine*" for the 1957 "*Third Exhibition of Gutai Art*" at the Kyoto Art Gallery is certainly worth a mention: it was a toy lorry carrying a tin of paint with a device that moved it along and distributed the paint, creating an "automatic" painting as it went. Something similar would also be produced in the west by Jean Tinguely, for example, a couple of years later.

The exhibition of 1957 was the perfect conclusion to the so-called "*Gutai first period*", considered by critics to be the most important and authentic innovative contribution to the artistic debate of the day and for years to come.

The latter part of that year saw the transition to what was considered the "*middle phase*" of the movement with the arrival in Japan of the critic Michel Tapié. As mentioned above, Tapié went to Japan specifically to meet the group, and immediately began working closely with Yoshihara¹⁴ and continued to do so until Gutai broke up in 1972. Tapié began to assiduously frequent the artists of the group, and was highly impressed with their daring experiments, but what interested him most were the pictorial works which were produced in a completely new way. As a result of Tapié's interest, the members of the Gutai group redirected their attention towards painting (many of them, especially Yoshihara, had approached the world of art as painters), also encouraged by the chance of greater visibility that the French critic envisaged for them. In fact, Tapié was determined to make Gutai art known throughout the world, and advised them to do two-dimensional works (*tableaux*) for greater ease of transportation. Naturally, this was not the only reason. Tapié wanted to show through this precious eastern testimony, the validity and importance, in the critical and artistic context of the day, of his theories on informal language, which were beginning to lose ground a little by the late fifties.

Direct contact with Tapié's *Art Informel*¹⁵ thus marked the shift of Gutai art towards the informal, as was already evident in the "*International Art of a New Era*" exhibition organised by Tapié and Yoshihara in April 1958 at the Takashimaya department store. The exhibition - which later toured Nagasaki, Hiroshima, Tokyo and Kyoto - featured works by Gutai, exponents of the European informalists, such as Mathieu and Tapiés and the American abstract expressionists, including Pollock, De Kooning and Kline.

Despite the undoubted similarity of stylistic features to those of the *informels*, Gutai painters maintained a substantial difference in the creative approach used. For Gutai, in fact, as Kazuo Yamawaki states¹⁶, "*the concept is not expression through materials, but the expressiveness of the material itself*" which, according to the principles of the traditional Zen culture absorbed by the group, is alive and can free its own intrinsic creativity through art.

Some critics and artists, like, Shozo Shimamoto for example, claim that if Tapié had not made contact with the

13 Other exhibitions of this kind were to follow: Sankei Hall in Tokyo 1957, Asahi Hall in Osaka 1958, Sankei Hall in Osaka 1962 (*Don't worry, the moon won't fall down*), Japan Expo'70 Osaka 1970.

14 Right from October 1957, Tapié organised the "*International Exhibition of Contemporary World Art*" at the Bridgestone Museum of Art in Tokyo where works by Yoshihara, Shimamoto and Shiraga were shown.

15 Gutai artists had already come into contact with informal art in 1956 at the Tokyo "*International Exhibition of Modern Art*" which brought to Japan not only informal painters, but examples of American abstract expressionism and Italian spacialism.

16 Kazuo Yamawaki, from the exhibition catalogue "*The Gutai Group 1955/56. A restarting point for Japanese Contemporary Art*", Tokyo, 1993, p. 50

group, Gutai art would have maintained a more marked originality and experimental vocation, but at the same time they acknowledge the extraordinary contribution that the French critic made to getting this extraordinary Japanese form of artistic expression widely known in the west.

Thanks to the public relations work of Michel Tapié, in fact, Gutai began exhibiting abroad. In September 1958 the group held a collective at the *Martha Jackson Gallery* in New York, which would then become the "*Sixth Gutai Art Exhibition*". In June 1959, the group held its first exhibition in Europe - the "*Seventh Gutai Art Exhibition*" - at Luciano Pistoï's Turin *Galleria Notizie*. Both events mainly displayed pictorial works.

Despite the return to painting, this "*middle phase*" was not without drive and new discoveries. An indicative example was in the spring of 1960 when Yoshihara, with the help of the now inseparable Tapié, organised the "*International Sky Festival*", on the roof of the Osaka Department Store, an event that once again departed completely from the established exhibition mode, being half way between an open air exhibition and a stage action. The works of the Gutai, European, and American artists were tied to balloons and suspended in the air. Yoshihara wanted to use this exhibition to show off the Gutai group's achievements in a spectacular way, but at the same time he was able to show symbolically and extremely poetically that there are no true limits to exploration in art.

On the subject of originality, some of the ideas presented in the "*Tenth*" and "*Eleventh Gutai Art Exhibition*" of 1961 and 1962 are worth mentioning. One of the artists at the 1961 event was Shuji Mukai, an artist who had recently joined the group, and who set up a room at the exhibition where everything (floor, furniture, and even his clothes) was covered in ideograms. An amusing device for the automatic sale of paintings was part of the 1962 exhibition: visitors inserted a token in the slot, there was an electronic sound, and a postcard-sized abstract painting came out. In reality, there was someone hidden inside the device who pushed the postcards out.

Also in 1962 the *Gutai Gallery opened*, an old Yoshihara Seiyu warehouse in Nakanoshima (Osaka), restored specifically to house the Gutai artists' exhibitions as well as those of other Japanese and foreign artists. This location, unique in Japan and open until 1970¹⁷, shows Yoshihara's vision that effectively paved the way for an industrial archaeology project *avant la lettre*. The Gallery became an international meeting point and a port of call for anyone connected with the worlds of art and culture visiting Japan (over just eight years, the gallery welcomed people of the calibre of John Cage, Peggy Guggenheim, Yoko Ono, Pierre Remain, Jean Tinguely, Sam Francis, Jasper Johns, Robert Rauschenberg, and Willem de Kooning).

The transition to the final phase, "*the last period*", of the Gutai movement was heralded by the "*NUL65*" exhibition in April 1965 at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam. The Gutai works sent for this collective were a series of informal paintings, but the Dutch artist Peeters and Yoshihara decided in the end to reconstruct and show the "installations" of the Group's first period (deemed more interesting in that context), which worried Tapié, who feared that the market price of the paintings would go down.

The exhibition was testimony to the popularity which the language of Gutai – even its most experimental – had achieved abroad, in part because it was being integrated into contemporary research, the same research that the Group had already carried out in the previous decade. There were however, some important voices in the art world wanting to play down, or who were incapable of understanding, Gutai's chronological primacy.

For example, Yves Klein claimed to have been the first to use his body as a paintbrush, sustaining that the Gutai artists had used his method¹⁸; Georges Matieu defined the activity of the Group as a carnival game that had very little to do with art¹⁹, dismissing above all the live pictorial actions, perhaps bothered by their similarity to his own. Lastly, the substantial indifference of the world of the Japanese art critics of the time is worthy of note, with its inability to grasp Gutai's cultural importance – perhaps deeming it too daring – and often remained in silence.

There is no doubt that Yoshihara's movement followed some of the routes of western art, trying its hand – already in the mid-fifties – at genres such as *land art*, *performance*, *installation* and *happening*, already mentioned above.

17 The Gutai Gallery was demolished in 1970 to make room for a road necessary for urban development. The following year, the Gutai Mini-gallery opened in the same area, but closed shortly afterwards in 1972 when the Gutai group disbanded.

18 Yves Klein, *The Chelsea Hotel Manifesto*, New York, 1961

19 Daniel Abadie's interview with Georges Matieu, exhibition catalogue "Gutai", Galerie Nationale du Jeu de Paume, Paris, 1999

But there were other forms of expression that Gutai experimented with ahead of its time. Particularly unusual were, for example, the invitation cards to the Group's exhibitions which must certainly have caught the attention of those who received them. Shiraga designed the invitation for the "Second Gutai Group Exhibition" in 1956: a piece of red paper fixed to some wire and an elastic band that leapt out when the invitation was opened. However, it was Motonaga who designed the invitation for "Gutai Art on the Stage" in 1957. It was in the form of a roll which, once opened, released a shower of confetti. They were true examples of *Mail Art*, an artistic practice that Shimamoto would develop later with greater awareness and depth in the seventies.

There remains one last aspect of the Gutai output that deserves consideration: the link with Lucio Fontana's spacialism. In the late forties, while Fontana was beginning to slash his canvases, Shimamoto was making holes and tears in his work on paper, and shortly after, Murakami would use his body to tear holes in parcel paper. This means that in two such distant parts of the world the need was felt, at practically the same time, to break with the traditional form of painting, to overcome the two dimensions of the canvas in order to add elements of space and time. A fascinating coincidence linking East and West in a period when, for example Antoni Tàpies, said that "... artistic creation addressed the great problems of our times as though in a great common explosion, and no-one thought of borders"²⁰.

In 1972, the Gutai experience came to an abrupt end. The group broke up immediately after the death of master Jiro Yoshihara that year. But the driving force which the movement had brought into play did not stop. Artists from the Group – Shimamoto, Tanaka and Motonaga – continued working and innovating, increasingly in the international eye²¹. Gutai was also a strong influence on contemporary Japanese artistic research, and was a stimulus, for example, for the birth of the conceptual group *Mono-Ha* and the *AU Group* in terms of focusing on matter and multi-disciplinary artistic languages.

But above all, Gutai has bequeathed to us a "new idea of art", interpreted as an unconditioned instrument of freedom, conceived so as to see beyond - astounding and being astounded. And as the Japanese critic Koichi Kawasaki rightly says,²² "Perhaps what we have to do today is not to situate the Gutai movement in a specific area determined by the history of art, but to try to understand the work and soul of Gutai in terms of the creative potential of human beings".

20 Antoni Tàpies, *Japanese art and the cult of imperfection*, in "Shiraga", exhibition catalogue, Paris, 1999

21 In 1998, the Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCA) in Los Angeles organised the exhibition "Out of Actions: Between Performance and the Object, 1949-1979" where Shozo Shimamoto appeared alongside Jackson Pollock, Lucio Fontana and John Cage.

22 In Koichi Kawasaki, *Gutai*, in AA. VV. *Le tribù dell'arte*, edited by Achille Bonito Oliva, Galleria Comunale d'Arte Moderna e Contemporanea di Roma, exhibition catalogue, Milan, Skira, 2011, p. 151