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| Gutai Art Association (Gutai Bijutsu Kyōkai / 具体美術協会) was an influential post-WWII Japanese avant-garde collective with an outward-looking mindset. Founded 1954 in Ashiya, near Osaka, by Japanese artist Jirō Yoshihara (1905-1972), it had fifty-nine members over the course of its eighteen-year lifespan. Gutai – meaning ‘embodiment’ and ‘concreteness’ – saw its artists engage a plethora of media and presentation contexts, often beyond gallery walls and frequently with more emphasis upon the process than on the finished product. A unifying factor among its multifarious tendencies was a spirit of adventure, exemplified by Yoshihara’s call to ‘do what no one has done before.’ Embracing performance, theatricality, and outdoor manifestations, with a characteristic impromptu modus operandi, Gutai’s experimental tendencies and liberal ideals breathed new life into art and into a society remaking itself following the cataclysm and repressions of WWII. As Japan entered the 1960s, consolidating its economy and engagement with the rest of the world, the decidedly offbeat stance of Gutai’s earlier years assumed a cooler demeanour, due in part to nation-wide technological advancement, growing internationalism, and an evolving audience base and receptivity. The Gutai group disbanded following Yoshihara’s passing in 1972.  File: Gutai\_members\_Gutai\_Pinacotheca\_Osaka\_1965.jpg  Figure 1: *Gutai members at Gutai Pinacotheca*, Osaka, 1965. Photo copyright the former members of the Gutai Art Association. Courtesy: Museum of Osaka University.  Gutai’s public announcement of its formation was via the first issue of its own journal, *Gutai 1*, in January 1955. Often bilingual, and documenting its activities and ideas, copies later went to American painter Jackson Pollock, French critic Michel Tapié, and other notables. Members also contributed to *Kirin* [*Giraffe*] magazine, its focus on children’s art and poetry consistent with Gutai’s stance on unfettered artistic originality.  *The Gutai Manifesto* [*Gutai Bijutsu Sengen*], a polemic penned by Yoshihara and appearing in *Geijutsu Shinchō 7*, no. 12, 1956, sought to outline the movement’s aims and harness momentum. Proclaiming the art of the past as ‘fakes fitted out with a tremendous affectation’, it charged members to ‘take leave of these piles of counterfeit objects on alters, in palaces, in salons, and antique shops.’ It also featured approving references to Georges Mathieu, Tapié, and Pollock (whose paintings Yoshihara had encountered in 1951 in Japan), and to Art Informel and Dada. With regards artists and their media – and here Gutai members utilised highly unorthodox materials alongside more traditional ones – the manifesto highlighted the importance, as Yoshihara saw it, of refraining from forcing materials into submission, and of letting the material speak ‘as it is, presenting it just as material […] with a mighty voice.’  File: Shozo\_Shimamoto\_2nd\_Gutai\_Art\_Exhibition\_1956.jpg  Figure 2: *Shōzō Shimamoto making his work at the 2nd Gutai Art Exhibition*, Ohara Kaikan, Tokyo, 1956. Copyright the Estate of Shōzō Shimamoto. Photo copyright the former members of the Gutai Art Association. Courtesy: Museum of Osaka University.  Contrasting with romantic notions of artists closeted in ateliers, the dissemination of these publications in tandem with artistic activity – amounting to a charter and a public relations exercise – posited a different artistic identity. In the 1950s this helped court attention in a Japan still preoccupied with post-war renewal, and also assisted Gutai in expanding its reach with exchanges and exhibitions in Europe and America.  Gutai is often seen as consisting of two phases, allowing primary shifts in tandem with changing times to be discerned. The initial phase (1954–1961) is testament to the decisive individualism of its artists and a rejection of the conformism and totalitarianism of the wartime period. Members brought to life not only their own autonomy and that of their materials, but also that of their audience. Gutai manifestations during this time were often staged in outdoor contexts, with expansive and sculptural artworks along with with those of a performative and theatrical nature helping generate audience participation. Two early exhibitions exemplifying this direction held in Ashiya Park – *Experimental Outdoor Exhibition of Modern Art to Challenge the Mid-Summer Sun* of 1955 and *The Outdoor Gutai Art Exhibition* of 1956 – featured work by early members, among whom were Shōzō Shimamoto (1928–2013), a Gutai co-founder credited with coining the group’s name, Masatoshi Masanobu (1911–1995), Tsuruko Yamazaki (1929–), Sadamasa Motonaga (1922–2011), Saburō Murakami (1925–1996), Kazuo Shiraga (1924–2008), Akira Kanayama (1924–2006), and Atsuko Tanaka (1932–2005). Other manifestations of this period included *The First Gutai Exhibition* at Ohara Hall, Tokyo, 1955; *Performance of the Gutai Group* at Yoshihara Oil Mill Refinery, Nishinomiya, 1956; and *Gutai Art on the Stage* at Sankei Hall, Osaka and Tokyo, 1957.  File: Yamazaki\_Work\_Red\_Cube\_1956.jpg  Figure 3: Tsuruko Yamazaki, *Work (Red Cube)* (1956). Wood, vinyl, and lightbulbs. At the Outdoor Gutai Art Exhibition, Ashiya Park, Ashiya, 1956. Copyright Tsuruko Yamazaki. Photo copyright the former members of the Gutai Art Association. Courtesy: Museum of Osaka University.  In line with Japan’s growth and modernisation, Gutai’s second phase (1962–1972) witnessed considerable experimentation with newer technologies, their artworks sometimes wryly critiquing the dehumanisation perceived with such advancement. The collectively made *Gutai Card Box* of 1962, assuming the form and function of a vending machine distributing postcard-size Gutai artworks, is a good example. Much Gutai artwork from these years is imbued with restraint and technical sophistication, its artists including Minoru Yoshida (1935-2010), Tsuyoshi Maekawa (1936–), Sadaharu Horio (1939–), Kumiko Imanaka (1939–), Norio Imai (1946–), and Keiko Moriuchi (1943–). The year 1962 marked the opening of Gutai Pinacotheca in central Osaka, as the group’s headquarters, exhibition venue, and networking base. With Japanese and foreign artists, critics, curators, gallerists, and collectors crossing paths at what Tapié dubbed the group’s ‘manifesto museum’, the venue was a keystone and catalyst for Gutai’s inclusion in strategic events at home and abroad, including the ‘NUL Exhibition’ at the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, in 1965 and at the 1970 World Exposition (Expo ’70) in Osaka. Pinacotheca closed in April 1970, before Yoshihara’s death and Gutai’s dissolution in 1972.  File: Yoshida\_Bisexual\_Flower\_1970.jpg  Figure 4: Minoru Yoshida, *Bisexual Flower* (1970). Copyright details to come.  The twenty-first century has seen Gutai the focus of renewed critical attention, in part addressing its relationship to modernism while questioning notions of modernist influence as a one-way dynamic from centres to the peripheries. Gutai exhibitions have included participation in the 53rd Venice Biennale International Exhibition, *Making Worlds*, 2009; *Under Each Other’s Spell: Gutai and New York*, Pollock-Krasner House and Study Center, New York, 2009; *Gutai: Painting with Time and Space*, Museo Cantonale d’Arte, Lugano, Switzerland, 2010-11; *GUTAI: The Spirit of an Era* at The National Art Center, Tokyo; *Tokyo 1965–1970: A New Avant-Garde* at MoMA, New York, 2012-13; and *Gutai: Splendid Playground* at Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, 2013.  \*Still need to add permissions information to photos, as request by the contributor. |
| Further reading:  (Associazione Shozo Shimamoto)  (Atsuko Tanaka: The Art of Connecting)  (Gutai: Painting with Time and Space)  (Gutai, part 01/5: Outdoor Gutai Art Exhibition, 1956 -05'43" (silent))  (Gutai Splendid Playground: February 15 - May 8, 2013)  (Hirai, Yamada and Yoneda, Gutai: The Spirit of an Era)  (Hirai, What's GUTAI?)  (Katō and Watkins)  (Tiampo, Gutai: Decentering Modernism)  (Tiampo and Munroe, Gutai: Splendid Playground)  (Yoshihara) |