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Havens/Radicals and Realists in the Japanese Nonverbal Arts

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introduction

Postwar Vectors in the Japanese Nonverbal Arts

Japanese artists in every genre after 1945 saw themselves as belonging to the contemporary (gendai) era of world culture, no longer to the near past connoted by the term commonly used since the late nineteenth century, kindai (recent times, hence “modern”).\(^1\) Almost uniformly, they regarded the surrender at the end of World War Two as a clean break with Japan’s disgraced militarism and as an unbridled opportunity to create a new culture for their country and the world. Yet many avant-garde Japanese artists in the 1950s and 1960s found themselves once again taking up the prewar riddle — “how to grapple with modernism in a partially modernized society,”\(^2\) as the billionaire novelist and arts patron Tsutsumi Seiji (1927–) puts it. For more than two decades after 1945, Japanese thinkers, writers, and arts professionals wrestled with ideas of artistic modernity, eventually joining in the worldwide attack that broke out in the 1960s against high modernism as a mode of thought and culture.

“We are finally at the stage where we can see such things as modernism objectively,” the Japanese composer of art music Ichiyanagi Toshi (1933–) pointed out in 2002. “The pace of change was so rapid in the 1950s and 1960s because we were trying so hard to catch up with Western culture. In those days our approach to modernism was superficial and brief. We moved to the next stage, beyond modernism, without deeply experiencing modernism as in Europe or America. In 1970 our understanding of modernism was still shallow; today enough time has elapsed that we can finally discuss modernism, antimodernism, and postmodernism.”\(^3\) Although Ichiyanagi probably stints his fellow artists’ appreciation of modernism as of 1970, the passage of time has likewise given much greater clarity to other intellectual and artistic
currents from abroad, from surrealism and existentialism in the late 1940s to
(highly premature) theories of the death of God — or at least the author —
two decades later.

Japan was considerably cut off from global artistic developments from the
onset of war with China in July 1937 until regaining self-rule in April 1952 —
a time of enormous intellectual and artistic upheaval in the rest of the world.
Today we know that many wartime artists of the pen, keyboard, brush, and
stage brimmed with pride at Japan’s military conquests in Asia and the Pa-
cific; others were driven inward in compliance with authority or unspoken
resistance to it. The scholar Tatehata Akira says flatly: “The history of the
postwar arts cannot overlook wartime painting. Much of it was seized by the
Americans right after the surrender, taken to Washington, and only slowly
returned to Japan. A reconsideration of this strange wartime era is slowly
taking place among art historians on three levels: (1) the rather romantic
portrayals of war, together with relations between artists and military lead-
ers; (2) social conditions within Japan itself; and (3) the moral dimension
of silence or cooperation, together with subsequent accusations of complicity
after 1945.” In the same vein, an understanding of the arts of the 1950s and
1960s must be anchored in knowledge of the occupation era.

Once shorn of empire and freed of direct American administration apart
from Okinawa, nonverbal artists and other intellectuals began to rethink
nationality and cultural distinctiveness while the country as a whole fin-
ished recovering from defeat and launched an era of high-speed economic
growth in the 1950s. The most forward-looking among them sought to cre-
ate a new culture that was neither imperially Japanese, as in the 1930s and
early 1940s, nor postimperially American, as during 1945–1952. Certain
artists constructed idioms reaching beyond the binarisms of national/univer-
sal, traditional/modern, Japanese/Western, or ours/others’ to become,
more simply, commentaries on the human condition, based in the local but
extending globally. A number of them ended up producing non-Western
or even post-Western contemporary art, although some of it was neutrally
nonnational or even transnational in direction. Other avant-garde figures
were more mimetic. Many of the most innovative works exceeded syntheses
of domestic and Western idioms to develop radically new stances on the rela-
tionship between the spatial (Japan) and the temporal (the contemporary). In
doing so, some of these works repositioned themselves as transcultural: now
deterritorialized as place-specific to Japan and instead engaged in a dynamic,
interactive process of cultural creolization that began early in the century
and accelerated among artists around the world after World War Two.

The 1950s in Western Europe and North America were years of great ar-
tistic creativity beneath an overlay of dour political conservatism and social conformity. The same is true of Japan, where the veneer of conventionality was periodically ripped by labor conflicts, ideological struggles, and political turmoil. Much of the disquiet emanated from Japan’s return to world affairs, especially the Japanese government’s unswerving support of the United States in the cold war: (1) as staging area for American armed forces during the Korean War of 1950–1953, (2) as steadfast anticomunist ally at the United Nations, and (3) as junior partner in the Japan–United States Mutual Security Treaty of 1952 (known as Anpo, it was revised in 1960 and is still in effect). Thus Japan, while independent, was and is still in-dependence. The 1950s were also a decade of renewed Japanese interest, although little actual participation, in international artistic movements. The Kamakura museum director Sakai Tadayasu points out that “artistic trends from abroad mainly affected Japanese painters and sculptors indirectly. Many Japanese artists created works without much contact with outside ideas. Nor were experiments in Japan during the 1950s well known overseas. There was a good deal of creativity here that wasn’t much recognized in Europe or America. For example, the print maker Munakata Shikō was well known abroad, but the equally great print maker Onchi Köshirō was not.”

A decade later Japanese artists grew more knowledgeable about world movements, mainly through travel abroad and visits by foreign professionals during boom years of national economic prosperity. Beginning with vast demonstrations with postcolonial overtones to protest renewal of the Japan–United States Mutual Security Treaty in May and June 1960, the decade simmered with political and cultural ferment, as in other industrialized societies, then boiled over in massive protests against the Vietnam War, university governance, and the security treaty during 1968–1970. Yet this was also a time of creeping artistic decampment, particularly among the younger avant-garde, moving beyond internationalism and especially modernism in all genres. Leading-edge artists searched for local elements to give greater distinctiveness to their cultural projects. This quest was less nationalist than it was a foray into the everyday — the artifacts, materials, and experiences of ordinary life, which are perforce near to hand. By steadily rejecting canonical high modernism and formalism from abroad, Japanese artists partly overcame their anxieties about whether their oeuvre was symmetrically equivalent to that of Vienna, Paris, or New York and instead began to express their ideas in the art of the everyday. This shift meant that progressive artists no longer fantasized about the Western Other, but neither did they indulge in nostalgia, or simple yearning, for an essentialized Japan. Incomplete as the process was by the end of the decade, 1970 marks a surprisingly clear bound-
ary between the artistic experimentation of the postoccupation era and the establishmentarian arts culture of mature capitalism that took firm hold in Japan’s bureaucratically administered society thereafter.

The 1950s and 1960s are a germinal but ill-studied era of cultural redefinition in Japan. However conflicted they may have been by war and peace, by Japanese military rule and American military occupation, or by global approaches and local sensibilities in the creative sphere, most avant-garde artists (which in Japan means anyone who is artistically progressive) saw the years after their country regained autonomy in 1952 as ones of challenge, sometimes conflict, often ferment, and nearly always innovation. The painter Enomoto Kazuko (1934–) recalls that for her “the 1950s and 1960s meant that the craving for recovery from the ashes of war produced an energy different from today. Politics, society, and culture were filled with unprecedented vitality. On the one hand, the prewar musical, artistic, and literary establishment was revived; on the other, young artists with a clear understanding of contemporary issues attempted to express themselves outside this framework in progressive ways. I think it was a truly stimulating period.” Sakai Tadayasu, a specialist on postwar sculpture, concurs: “The 1950s and 1960s were the most energetic years of modern art in Japan. There was an explosion of creative vigor after war and defeat.” A main task facing the historian of culture is to explain how and why this artistic efflorescence took place in a country so devastated by wartime destruction and postwar malnutrition that it began the 1950s with an economy scarcely larger than that of Indonesia or Peru.

This is a book about Japan’s avant-garde artists, the work they produced, and the historical environment in which they produced it. Most of them were radicals in two senses: they rebelled against existing canons in their respective genres and against established authority in some form or other, whether diplomatic, governmental, corporate, or artistic. Many were also realists, particularly in the 1960s, in choosing concrete materials, sounds, and themes from everyday life for their art and in gradually adopting tactics of protest or resistance through accommodation rather than confrontation. Yet whatever the means of expression, the production of art was never devoid of historical context or political implication. Like other forms of social knowledge, art is inherently linked with political nuance and the assertion of power, even when the artist repudiates formal party politics (of the left or right) and refuses to engage in public protest. To reject politics entirely, as some claimed to do, was still to make an unmistakable political choice: it was no more possible to be a truly apolitical artist in Japan during the 1950s and 1960s than under the surveillance and censorship that prevailed before 1945.

The focus here is on the nonverbal arts of dance choreography, art-music
composition, painting, and sculpture from the end of military occupation in 1952 through the brilliant arts festivals of the Osaka world exposition in 1970 — years rapidly receding from memory as the avant-garde of that era faces inevitable decline and death. Each of these media might well receive separate monographic attention for the period under consideration, yet four reasons particularly justify this choice of art forms for collective examination: (1) they are relatively understudied, both in Japan and elsewhere; (2) they were central to debates across artistic genres in the late 1940s and 1950s; (3) they lend themselves especially well to understanding interactions with the global avant-garde during these decades; and (4) they best illustrate the twin themes of generational and political difference that undergird my analysis. Other equally fascinating realms of artistic expression such as architecture, drama, fiction, film, and poetry are omitted because they are much better known. So too are the sizable domains of popular music, radio, television, and cartoon and commercial art where great innovations — few of them considered avant-garde — took place during the postwar years.

It is true that to dichotomize too rigidly along an elite/popular or a verbal/nonverbal axis is to create false distinctions among art forms that share much in common, in Japan as elsewhere. As the literary critic Howard Hibbett quips, “The main difference between high culture and low culture is that high culture costs more and earns less.” The art critic Chiba Shigeo notes that “the art world from Meiji [1868–1912] down to the Pacific War was not clearly divided by genre, and it was so small that many artists in various media knew one another. Even in the 1950s and 1960s, the idea of the arts included everything: literature, film, theater, dance, and music as well as the visual arts.” Rather than literally “nonverbal,” perhaps “paraverbal” comes closer to characterizing dance choreography, art-music composition, painting, and sculpture, since no medium of artistic expression can exist in the total absence of words. Compared with other genres, are dance, music, and the visual realm less encumbered by the verbal and thus by a need to be translated in order to be cross-culturally significant? Or is their language no less place-specific than creative products that rely on words? Questions such as these rivet the attention of East Asian specialists in all disciplines no less than they engage humanists around the world. The world of the arts in Japan during the quarter-century after World War Two provides rich soil for seeking answers.

While respecting the individuality and diversity of art production in early postwar Japan, this book emphasizes the domestic and transnational interactions of avant-garde genres, each of which must be seen in dynamic collaboration with one another rather than in isolation during the years in question.
Like Deborah Poole, I believe that the “image world” of vision and representation is social: “the specific ways in which we see (and represent) the world determine how we act upon that world and, in so doing, create what that world is.” Media of all kinds, including choreographic, musical, and visual texts, reveal both transcultural themes and local practices through the study of art in its social context. I argue that, like many other social groups in postwar Japan, artists were divided as much by generational distinctions as by aesthetic or ideological disputes. This was especially true for those born between 1926 and 1934 — the so-called single-digit generation (hitoketa) of the Shôwa (1926–1989) era, who self-consciously stood apart from all others and “virtually captured the memory market in the postwar decades.” Internally colonized, in a sense, as youths by Japan’s wartime military government, they were profoundly suspicious of authority of any sort, yet after 1945 most of them felt grateful to the semicolonial American occupation of their country for its relative freedom and for the chance to catch up with artistic modernism from the West. This age cohort generally rejected party politics, especially the newly legalized Japan Communist Party, and took little part in protests against Japanese or American foreign policies.

By contrast, younger subsets of postwar artists adopted different, if less unified, stances on both political and artistic questions compared with the Shôwa single-digit group. Generational and political divergences among artists became most apparent in the 1960s, when the internal divisiveness of society, labor, and government of the previous decade was replaced by economic prosperity, bureaucratic management, and the languor of social sameness in the form of middle-class, pret-a-porter consumerism. Younger avant-garde artists, suspicious of the hegemonic aspects of high modernism, often turned to antimodernism to protest this new capitalist conformity, whereas many of their older counterparts took nominally apolitical positions that, in effect, endorsed the new status quo. In moving beyond modernism after the late 1950s, the avant-garde increasingly produced art that was post-Western in method and local in materials, focused on everyday experience. The lavish Osaka exposition of 1970 exemplified the new ascendency of corporate culture in a country typified until recently by farms and small businesses. In that same year, the collapse of protest movements against the Vietnam War, against Japan’s treaty ties to the United States, and against university-governance policies paralleled the “attenuation” of countercultures in all the arts, leading to a “tremendous sense of loss of innocence and idealism,” as Ann Sherif has written of the novelist Murakami Haruki (1949–). As a cultural threshold, 1970 stands shoulder to shoulder with Japan’s continental turn in 1931 and the debacle of military defeat in 1945.
The chapters that follow concentrate on the most progressive individuals in the relatively narrow nonprofit sector of the nonverbal arts where the greatest risks of novelty and experimentation were taken in the name of art. The aim is to discover how some of the most imaginative figures in dance, music, and the visual arts set about devising new cultural modes during two of the most turbulent and fast-changing decades in Japan’s modern history. Their activity took place in a balmy climate of considerable postoccupation (and somewhat postcolonial) artistic freedom, in contrast to strict wartime controls on expression by the Japanese state and postwar censorship under American occupation. The genres selected for scrutiny here are particularly useful prisms for refracting the contemporary experience of the arts in both Japanese and comparative culture as a whole. The guiding theme is that generational and political differences largely account for the divergent stances artists took vis-à-vis modernism, the international arts community, Japan’s ties to the United States, and the alliance of corporate and bureaucratic interests that solidified in Japan during the 1960s.

Chapter 1 discusses the arts and cultural change in Japan immediately after World War Two. The narrative then divides into two chronological sections dealing with the 1950s and the 1960s, bisected by the rise of an artistic underground in Shinjuku and the security-treaty crisis of May–June 1960. Part 1, “Experimental Voyages: The 1950s,” treats Japanese artists who studied abroad as well as the vast palette of experiments in each of the nonverbal avant-garde arts that took place within Japan during that decade, after long years of artistic insularity and near-stasis throughout war and occupation. Chief among the intellectuals who stimulated experimentation were the art critic Takiguchi Shūzō (1903–1979), the painter Okamoto Tarō (1911–1996), and the businessperson-painter Yoshihara Jirō (1905–1972). Each was born in the late Meiji era, each had a following among the early-Shōwa generation, and each held his own distinctive views on art as well as politics. Takiguchi inspired the mixed-media workshop Jikken Kobō, where composers, painters, and others shared fresh ideas about art between 1951 and 1957. Okamoto encouraged radical innovations in painting and sculpture during the 1950s as well as popularizing art through the media in the 1960s and beyond. Yoshihara founded the Kansai-area Gutai group, a congeries of visual and performance artists active between 1954 and Yoshihara’s death in 1972. Other experiments took place in Japanese natural-pigment (Nihonga) painting, calligraphy, and ceramics as well as photography and ballet. By the end of the decade, the key nonacademic locale for innovations in the most cerebral forms of art-music composition, oil painting, and film making became the fashionable Sōgetsu Art Center, founded by the film director Teshigahara.
Hiroshi (1927–2001) in the brand-new Sōgetsu Kaikan in 1958. This was a main site of contestation where competing strands of abstraction and the concrete, of l’art informel and the representational, and of serial music, musique concrète, and chance operations vied for favor in Japan’s avant-garde arts community.

Part 2, “Alternative Modernities in the 1960s: Locating the Everyday,” addresses a multifront assault on formalism (confusingly known as anti-art) led by visual artists nationwide who mainly showed their products at an annual nonjuried exhibition in Tokyo sponsored by the Yomiuri newspapers. Likewise composers of both Western-style and contemporary Japanese-style art music increasingly chose everyday themes from folk music and the pre-modern musical repertoire for their new presentations. Avant-garde print makers and choreographers similarly moved beyond the modern, and modernism, in their new works. Emblematic of the nonformalist embrace of the everyday was a loose assemblage of sculptors working with natural materials who emerged in 1968, eventually known as the MonoHA. It was here, above all, that radical artistic discourse shifted to a post-Western phase where the relationships among unmediated objects — everyday things as they are, with minimal intervention — and the links between locale (Japan, where the cultural products exist) and time (the current moment, especially for temporary installations or performances) superseded the hoary preoccupation with geographical identities — Japan and the West — from Meiji to the early 1960s. Although artists born in the Shōwa single-digit years were not immune to antiformalism during the 1960s, their younger counterparts were the chief antimodernists, offering greater resistance than their elders to established authority in both domestic and foreign-policy matters. A chapter on “Art, Money, and Politics” examines the artistic apex of the postwar period: Osaka’s 1970 world exposition, where more avant-garde art music, painting, sculpture, and dance was on display than at any other point in Japan’s history, before or since.

Reconnoitering the history of Japan’s most progressive art genres during these fascinating decades is complicated by spotty documentation, a dearth of scholarly attention, and the low esteem in which the country’s business and political elites held most artists and their works. Segi Shin’ichi (1928–), an art critic and bibliographer of the era, points out that few records exist for any of the avant-garde arts before the 1960s. Exhibit catalogs were seldom produced; little remains from many shows except invitations on postcards and single-sheet lists of works on display. Gradually photographic
records began to be retained, in order to document collections and build archives.\textsuperscript{16} Although musical scores survive, sound recordings and other materials on music and dance performances from the 1950s are surprisingly scarce. Nor are there many reliable scholarly studies to guide the researcher.

Nevertheless superb exhibition catalogs from retrospectives on postwar culture have appeared during the past decade, and biographical materials abound for composers and choreographers. Writings by major arts figures in high-quality journals published during the 1950s and 1960s constitute excellent primary-source material. Reviews in newspapers and magazines compensate for their occasional lack of sophistication with a flair for conveying the contemporary flavor of an exhibit or performance. Vinyl recordings of musical performances from the 1960s together with compact discs containing the aural record of retrospective concerts held in the 1990s and early 2000s help to offset the diaphanous documentation of the first postwar decade. Numerous interviews with choreographers, composers, and visual artists active in the 1950s and 1960s supplement the archival record, providing considerable insight, little faulty recollection, and a good deal of evidence from the artists’ personal files.

This narrative of some of Japan’s most innovative artistic forms during the mid-twentieth century invites readers of history to consider the place of art in cultural change as well as cultural continuity. To be sure, artistic ferment at any level of taste, from the most refined to the most earthy, does not necessarily portend upheaval in the distribution of power and privilege. Pierre Bourdieu (1930–2002) is undoubtedly correct that social regimes often use culture and education to preserve themselves: “art and cultural consumption are predisposed, consciously and deliberately or not, to fulfill a social function of legitimating social differences” and thus contribute to social reproduction.\textsuperscript{17} But art is far more than a handmaiden of established authority — much more than a safety valve for confirming it by letting off the excess steam of dissent. At certain moments art can also reject conventional criteria of stratification and defy accepted social knowledge by exercising its obligation as critic, as is true for all intellectual, scholarly, and artistic activity whether verbal or nonverbal. The historian must not merely transmit but also examine art,\textsuperscript{18} for its own textual integrity and also for its social and cultural significance, first at the site of its production and then in relation to the wider world of learning.

The focus here is on art produced in Japan during two crucial postwar decades by persons native to that country or working there during the 1950s and 1960s. I assume, with Bourdieu, that “it is possible to enter into the singularity of an object” — here, Japanese society — “without renouncing the ambig-
tion of drawing out universal propositions.” Comparisons with other cultures permit one to “avoid unjustifiably universalizing the particular case.” In the chapters that follow, comparative comments are offered where appropriate about transnational artistic phenomena such as the surreal, the modernist, and the many schools of music composition and visual art that swept the globe following World War Two. It should not be expected that these phenomena meant precisely the same things from one culture to another. To examine the field of cultural production is to engage in “a radical contextualization.” Bourdieu’s editor notes, far beyond particular social classes toward the total context of culture in a given era as proposed by Mikhail M. Bakhtin (1895–1975). The first level of inquiry beyond the national, namely, the one-on-one comparative method — as scholars from previous generations such as Marc Bloch, Henri Pirenne, and C. Vann Woodward remind us — consists as much in identifying differences as similarities in historical phenomena. Although a compass wider than the comparative is beyond my reach here, future scholars may wish to extend the scope to a second level, regional analysis, by incorporating evidence of artistic counterparts in China, Korea, and adjacent areas. Even more broadly, art forms are attractive grist for research on a third level, the transregional scale long favored by economic analysts of world-systems and, ultimately, for the kind of meta-history being attempted by newly emerging world historians since the start of the twenty-first century.

Yet it is worth remembering the parameters as well as the possibilities of transnational research on the arts. As Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan point out, “art provides access to a different kind of truth than is available to science, a truth that is immune to scientific investigation because it is accessible only through connotative language (allusion, metaphor, symbolism, etc.) and cannot be rendered in the direct, denotative, fact-naming languages of the sciences” or the quantitative social sciences.

My working assumption is that any text — choreographical, musical, visual, as well as verbal — is susceptible to study in two modalities: (1) that of the moment when it was produced by a specific artist and (2) that of each successive point of retrospect, when a subsequent generation rereads it in different terms, and altered circumstances, for current purposes. Cumulatively the reception and impact of the text can change markedly across time. The challenge of cultural criticism is not merely to engage texts and their artists as timeless artifacts but also to situate them in timeful context: both theirs when produced and all subsequent times when recaptured. No single methodological approach or theoretical position can adequately interpret the multiplicity
of artistic expressions found in Japan during the 1950s and 1960s. Instead the reader can be reassured, as Victor Brombert writes, that “eschewing a dogmatic approach and stressing diversity and variation do not preclude a search for underlying patterns and common tendencies.” It is to these patterns and tendencies that I now turn.