

# The Success and Failure of Gutai

by Ben Davis

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Shiraga Kazuo, "Work II," 1958

(© Shiraga Hisao, courtesy Hyōgo Prefectural Museum of Art)

What to make of Gutai? The [Guggenheim's survey of the mid-century Japanese avant-garde group](#), which closes today, is dazzling but also perplexing. There are iconic works like Tanaka Atsuko's famous fashion-sculpture-technology hybrid "Electric Dress"; photo documentation of key moments from Gutai history, including its early outdoor exhibitions of 1955, and the 1960 "International Sky Festival" in Osaka, for which paintings were flown on balloons high in the sky; a recreation of an art vending machine the group operated in the early '60s; drawings for never-realized projects, like those for a 1965 plan to take over a pier in The Hague with interactive installations; and even a new work, an odd metal tube sculpture that snakes through the galleries, serving as a scaffolding for paintings and emitting an eerie sound. All art movements require context to tie together their various products, but Gutai offers a particular challenge: on the one hand, its ideology mandated that members follow their own individual visions rather than any set of rules, yielding baffling diversity; on the other, it pioneered performance-based work, so much of its output feels like it requires knowledge of some original moment to get it.

It's an important show, returning Gutai's precient experiements — their turn towards performance actually pre-dates Allan Kaprow's "happenings" — to their rightful place at the center of postwar art. My one quibble would be that curators Alexandra Munroe and Ming Tiampo, in their eagerness to make a case for the group's collective genius and cut against [the Western-centric bias that has often characterized its reception](#), downplay some of the thornier issues that determined the trajectory of this unusually long-lived art movement (it was active from 1955-1972). To see the stakes of Gutai's project and the lessons it offers, it helps to turn up the contrast a bit, setting it off against the background of Cold War politics. This is a devilishly complex task. Still, I think I can do it, drawing a line through two of the key pieces.

Kazuo Shiraga's canvas "Work II" (1958) conveys all the exuberance of early Gutai, with trails of dark red forming a clotted sunburst at its center. As a composition, it would seem to share the rugged brilliance of Abstract Expressionism — but it's important to know that "Work II" and other paintings like it by Shiraga were exercises in performance painting, created before a crowd by the artist as he suspended himself above the canvas, dragging his feet through masses of paint. He chose this method specifically because he thought that his feet were less trained than his hands, and would therefore better allow him to escape whatever artistic habits he had inherited. Such an aesthetic of innocence was seen to have a political value: "Without establishing psychic individualism, we cannot establish any worthwhile culture for the whole," Shiraga wrote in the *Gutai Journal* #4, in 1956 (this and most other quotes from the artists I'm taking from the Guggenheim show's fine catalogue). "In politics, totalitarianism fails; in culture, that which is unfree and akin to totalitarianism must be purged."

At a time when Japan was still haunted by autocracy and wartime discipline, Gutai artists — particularly their guru, the eccentric food-oils millionaire Jiro Yoshihara, whose motto was, "Never imitate others! Make something that has never existed!" — conceived of their radically playful style as a celebration of individualism and innovation, and a rebellion against the previous top-down martial culture: "When only war-themed paintings were allowed, any other works were deemed mere 'play,' a deplorable act in the national emergency," Yoshihara would explain. As a keen aficionado of Western avant-gardes, he looked to the role European modernism had played three decades earlier as his model: "An innovative idea not seen in the prewar

period must rise in the painting world, something akin to Dada that emerged after World War I.”

The curators stress how Gutai's free-thinking ideals chimed with Japan's fledgling democratic culture. Yet the conditions of Japanese postwar democracy were actually quite fraught in the 1950s, and far from ideal. Following U.S. occupation, Japan regained its sovereignty in 1952, in return for ceding control over Okinawa and essentially agreeing to turn the entire country into a potential American military base — indeed, [Japan was the staging ground for the tremendous carnage of the Korean War that began in 1950](#). Pivoting to contain Communism post-WW2, Uncle Sam decided Japan would serve as its Asian bulwark; it therefore repurposed the former Empire's unreconstructed war criminals as new leaders of government and industry. Throughout the '50s, escalating waves of anti-U.S. bitterness led to [confrontations between authorities and popular anti-military movements](#). After an American thermonuclear bomb test on Bikini Atoll irradiated a Japanese whaling vessel and its crew in 1954, 30 million people — [as Linda Hoaglund notes](#), an astounding half of the adult population of Japan — signed a petition against nuclear weapons. A decade of turmoil came to a head with the thunderous protests against ANPO, the U.S.-Japan Security Treaty, in 1960.

Against this background, Gutai's vaunted cosmopolitanism — Yoshihara's insistence on positioning his art in relation to U.S. and European avant-gardists — takes on a different sheen; it is no coincidence that the Japanese art movement with by far the most self-conscious and successful ambitions for global relevance emerged not from the heart of Japan's art scene, in Tokyo, but from its periphery, in Ashiya. Very early on, in 1956, one important Gutai exhibition was even staged specifically as a two-day-only affair exclusively for photographers from American magazine *LIFE*. Meanwhile, Gutai was not at first well-received in Japan's capital; many intellectuals thought that so-called “Reportage Painting,” a kind of Surrealist spin on socialist realism that directly addressed the political events roiling the country, was a more appropriate artistic response in such troubled times. Gutai artists were accused of decadence, of “bourgeois play.”

[Jackson Pollock's](#) action painting — or rather Hans Namuth's pictures of Pollock at work — were the original impetus for Gutai's pivot towards performance painting, an influence that is obvious in a piece like Shiraga's “Work II.” In the context of the

tremendous controversy over the American presence, Yoshihara self-consciously promoted American artistic ideology as a healing political salve: “I think contemporary American painting has spontaneously resolved the problem of humanism today, because it relates at a deep level to the psychological experience of the human being.” (Indeed, I know of no example that better justifies [the C.I.A.’s faith in Abstract Expressionism’s Cold War ideological value](#).)

The purpose of making this last point is not to say that Gutai acolytes were naive, but to better focus on the tensions that would propel the group's evolution. Because in the course of the '60s, while the spirit of economic dynamism flourished in Japan — paving the way for the establishment's embrace of Gutai's brand of ludic innovation — its very success would make this ideology's less seemly side more and more visible. Japan's political and economic elite allied with the free-market West in return for growth; experiencing one of economic history's great growth spurts, Japanese citizens suddenly found themselves on the cutting edge of world manufacturing and consumer culture. But at the same time, this triumph came to many to seem like a deal with the devil. [Pollution became a bitter public issue](#) — the so-called “Big Four Environmental Diseases,” cases of shocking corporate malfeasance, vividly illustrated the costs of development — while the escalating brutality in Vietnam fortified the resistance to the U.S. military presence. Japan in the late '60s experienced its own version of the seismic countercultural movements that shook the rest of the world.

Corresponding to this transformed political and economic space, Gutai's “Phase 2” — symbolically marked by the founding of its own institutional space, the Gutai Pinotheca, in 1962, which became a pilgrimage site for international luminaries like [John Cage](#) and Lawrence Alloway — showed a shift in emphasis. The movement's previous free-wheeling celebration of artistic individualism yielded to experiments with various forms of whimsical multimedia art, both mimicking the new technological marvels flooding society and working to humanize them, as with their art vending machine, which was actually installed in an Osaka department store in 1962. Yoshihara's preferred foreign reference point also changed: in the 1950s, Gutai aligned itself with Art Informel, with its existential overtones; in the '60s, it came to engage instead with the lyrical industrialism of Zero art.

Such are the changes that explain the long shift that the Guggenheim survey charts, taking us from Shiraga's "Work II" to another Gutai work, a sculpture that stands almost at the end of the show's narrative. Minoru Yoshida's "Bisexual Flower" (1969) couldn't be more different from Shiraga's messy and affirmative brand of expressionism: a large, eerily glowing contraption built to resemble a mutant mechanical plant, its protrusions slowly moving to transfer a glowing green fluid, the whole thing looking like some queasy science project. Contrasted with the celebratory humanism of early Gutai, this sculpture's effect is deliberately alien. "Bisexual Flower" had a part in Gutai's crowning achievement, the group's role as representatives of Japan's artistic mainstream at Expo '70, an immense World's Fair-style event in Osaka that was to showcase the country's status as a world leader in technology (as a wealthy industrialist, Yoshihara was on the programming committee, securing Gutai's place at the table). Aside from curating various on-site showcases of Gutai works (including the "Flower"), the group choreographed a massive, fantastical performance art ceremony in the Expo's stadium, featuring men levitating on huge balloons and a fire truck spewing bubbles — interactive art as arena entertainment, sharing the fair program with Sammy Davis Jr., Sergio Mendes, and Andy Williams. Literally millions of people were exposed to Gutai at Expo '70.

For Japan's left, the Expo whitewashed the dark side of progress and was, moreover, an attempt to distract from the struggle over the renewal of ANPO in 1970. The curators of the Guggenheim's survey are keen to recover an idea that Gutai artists maintained a critical stance, resisting the Expo from within, so to speak — and, indeed, with its radioactive glow, you can read "Bisexual Flower" as an ambiguous critique of technology (in his writings, Yoshida described himself as drawing on what he called "Third Earth Power," a mystical force he aligned with the student and youth movements, against the heedlessness of high-tech capitalist society). What you cannot dispute, however, is the angst that participation was bound to trigger for these artists, as their sense of art's purpose hit up against the realities of how it was perceived by their peers. One Gutai artist remembers receiving a bitter card from anti-Expo activists: "While you are discussing your dreams from the top lobby of a skyscraper, our comrades are in prison."



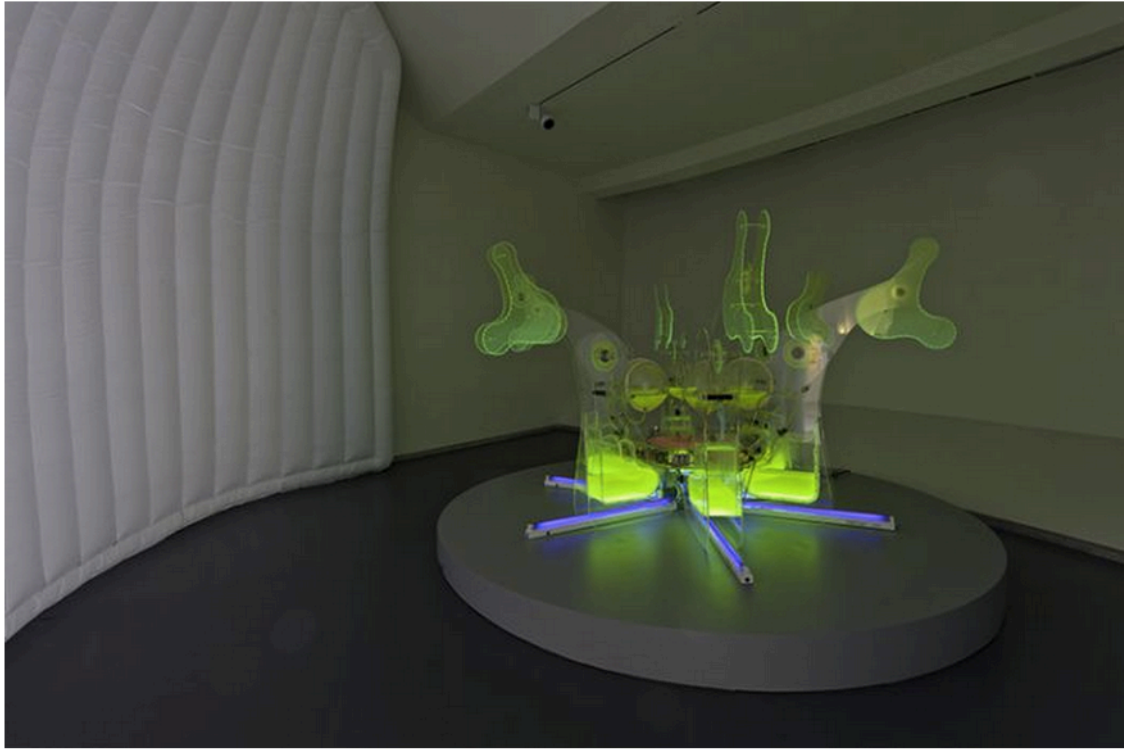


Photo: David Heald © Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation

Back in 1963, Gutai artist Shozo Shimamoto would write, with regard to calls for national unity in the face of the upcoming Tokyo Summer Olympics, “I cannot collaborate with those who make such a simplistic claim, which tramples on the feeling of every individual, as though we still lived in wartime Japan.” In the lead-up to the Expo, something called the Artists Joint-Struggle Council [issued a statement](#) addressed to those participating. Coming full circle, Gutai was compared to the very blind war-time ideology that it had been founded to challenge: “At a certain critical point, apathy tends to make us stampede with the majority, like war painters did.” The group’s starring role in Expo '70 effectively broke the back of the its claims to stand on the side of progressive ideals. The higher mission that held them together melted away, leaving only individual ego.

And so it was that the moment of Gutai’s greatest influence was also the moment of its exhaustion. Its major figures quit in the wake of the Expo; some of its younger practitioners had become disillusioned by the event. The movement petered out in exhaustion in 1972, when Yoshihara died — a whimper after the bang of Expo '70. And this aftermath, in fact, is as key as any of its successess for assessing Gutai's significance for world culture, because these Japanese artists learned earlier than

anyone, and on a scale that their Western counterparts have only rarely achieved, the price paid when critical art becomes repurposed as high-tech entertainment.

*“Gutai: Spended Playground,” is on view at the Guggenheim Museum, though May 8, 2013.*