

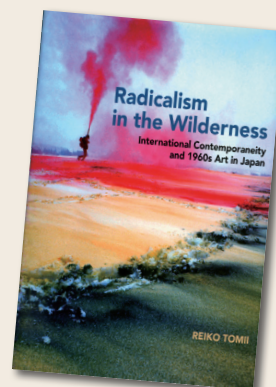
BOOK REVIEW

Radicalism in the Wilderness: International Contemporaneity and 1960s Art in Japan

By Reiko Tomii

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293 pages.

Reviewed by Gary HICKEY



In the context of world art history, Japanese art is often characterized as either peripheral or derivative. And yet, in terms of the development of world art, Japan has played a role far exceeding its size. The Japanese have achieved this through their ability to engage in an inventive way with both tradition and foreign-derived ideas. With globalization and the dominance of Euro-America in the development of contemporary art, this characterization is even more pronounced and, with the exception of a few Japanese artists who have achieved notoriety outside of Japan, developments in contemporary art within Japan are seen as either quirky, irrelevant, or merely mimicking overseas trends. For artists outside Tokyo, this characterization is even more pronounced.

Radicalism in the Wilderness: International Contemporaneity and 1960s Art in Japan by New York-based scholar and curator, Reiko Tomii, posits an alternative understanding of art contemporaneity that includes artists often seen as being on the periphery of “international contemporaneity” (p. 12). Following an outline of Japanese art from Gutai to Bikyōtō in which the mainstreaming of contemporary art follows a process of “connections and resonances,” or what Tomii characterizes as a synchrony of ideas, she sets out to show that “contemporaneity” is a geohistorical concept defined by both facts and lived experience. She examines three Japanese artists/artist groups working away from major Japanese art centers, “in the wilderness.”

She introduces three artworks as representative of the isolated nature of their formation and execution. The first was in 1964 when the conceptualist, Matsuzawa Yutaka, opened an exhibition in Nagano Prefecture that consisted of no physical works but “formless emission” “transmitted” by the artists involved (p. 1).¹ Four years later, an Osaka-based collective of happeners (*hapunā*) known as the Play released a “humongous fiberglass egg” off the coast of southern Japan, which Tomii puzzlingly describes as being “built into the ocean” (p. 4). According to Tomii, this egg “unmistakably” carried “an image of liberation from all the material and mental restrictions imposed upon us who live in contemporary

1 Matsuzawa 1964, p. 51.

times” (p. 4).² Created in 1970 by a local collective known as GUN (Group Ultra Niigata), the final work *Event to Change the Image of Snow* (or “color field”) utilized the idea of nature as a blank canvas, in this case snow-covered river beds on which artists sprayed color pigment to focus attention on the harsh climate, and as “a reminder of the burdens such severe weather brought to everyday life” (p. 5).

The ephemerality or nonexistence of these works enhances their isolation from the mainstream. At their core are ideas rather than concrete artworks, and Tomii’s analytical frame of mind is well suited to an investigation of the concepts behind their creation. Before majoring in art history, her background was in mathematics, and thus she is understandably excited by the speculative ideas underpinning conceptual art.

Tomii sees history writing as “no precise science” (p. 201), and her exhaustive investigation of ideas finds resonance with the heavily theoretical aspect of conceptual art. This is most apparent in her admiration of the work of Matsuzawa Yutaka. His was an “alternative to the objects-based convention of art making” by “vanishing materiality,” a conceptualism he equated with the Pure Land Buddhist technique of visualization (p. 46). Matsuzawa’s theoretical ideas read like the path taken by a religious convert. Matsuzawa’s art is intellectual and prompts an engagement with his ideas. This engagement extends the creation of the artwork to include the audience as interpreter. Tomii enthusiastically partakes in this collaborative process, and her interpretations lend credence to their ideation, but rarely extend to their aesthetic value. On the rare occasions when she does reference visual values she does so pithily, for example describing Matsuzawa’s 1961 “Meaning of Psi” and “Psi Chamber” (a stenciled diagram and page of text) as “well crafted” and “exquisite” (p. 58), and GUN’s “color field” as “gorgeous” (p. 5). She gives most weight to the intellectual ideas behind their creation.

It is clear that the contribution of contemporaneity in late 1960s Japan was in exploring the boundaries of art and in challenging the conventions of art making. By their nature, these artworks are experiments, and as such a fertile field for new art making. Where does this place the art critic? In seeking to elicit a written response from art critics and others to his *Mail Art by Sending Stones*, Horikawa Michio sought complicity, and by mounting these responses as artworks he aimed to validate his ideas. In the case of the stones he sent to Richard Nixon, Tomii becomes a participant by reiterating the three meanings assigned to this act: environmental awareness, race relations, and political activism (p. 125). Without the critic, these meanings would lack significance. By historicizing the creation of this work, Tomii gives the work value. Tomii dismisses as “harsh” Lee Ufan’s assessment of Horikawa’s *Stones* as nothing but “idea-cum-object” (p. 123).

Tomii takes pains to dismiss the accusation of imitation levelled against contemporary artists in Japan. Describing their works as “similar yet dissimilar” to works made elsewhere, she characterizes them as finding “resonances.” Is this perhaps an example of the Japanization that has characterized Japanese art development historically? At one point, Tomii describes the Play’s Happening as “articulating their own discourse—in order to repossess the imported idea,” which approaches a definition of Japanization (p. 110). She also likens this process to an idea or a word “sometimes dissociated from its original meaning

2 Ikemizu Keiichi, quoted in *Shūkan Asahi* (date unknown), reprinted in the *Voyage* section in *Play* (Paris: Bat and Osaka: The Play, 2014).

but gaining layers of significance” elsewhere, in other words “internalized interface” (p. 159). When she includes historical Japanese art connections in this “internalized interface”—as with dry river beds as the site for performance and land art (a seventeenth-century screen depicting *Entertainment on the Riverbed at Shijō* and *Hole* by Group “I”) and Matsuzawa Yutaka’s readings of the *Diamond World Mandala*—this process appears much more complex, localized, and interesting than mere aping. Tomii feels that Japanese art has not been given its due, and she sets out to bring Japanese artists in from the periphery to the center.

Tomii’s dense discussion reads like a life’s work. By including, in a global historical narrative, artists who until now had existed on the periphery, her theoretical approach provides an important perspective. Articulating this history of ideas in the “lingua franca of contemporary art, English” (p. 158) helps give this fringe development in Japanese art an international context. Tomii’s essay is an exemplar of more inclusive thinking towards an all-encompassing definition of world art history, and will provide an essential reference source for specialists. The importance of her work is in opening a door to further consideration of the role that Japanese artists played in the field of world art history, a narrative that will hopefully continue from the viewpoint of differing perspectives.

REFERENCE

Matsuzawa 1964

Matsuzawa Yutaka 松澤宥. “Kōya ni okeru andependan-ten ’64” 荒野におけるアンデパンダン展’64. *Bijutsu jōnanaru* 美術ジャーナル 51 (October 1964).