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Japanese Art around 1970: Technology, Environment, Matter

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- 1 Enthusiasm seemed to reign during Japan's "Golden Sixties": considerable economic growth, increased household comfort among the population, the 1964 Olympic Games held in Tôkyô, and the country's return to the international stage after the defeat of 1945. But the ambient euphoria was not shared by one and all, and especially not by left-wing organizations which, in 1959, protested against the renewal of the Security Treaty Between the United States and Japan, planned for 1960. As the re-negotiation of the treaty drew near in 1970, there were more and more strikes and demonstrations, which broadened to include the student uprisings of 1968-1969, and opposition to the construction of the Narita International Airport. It was in this turbulent context that several major exhibitions would be held, which, in a far-reaching way, changed the Japanese art world and its relation to the West, at the beginning of 1970.
- 2 The World Exposition in Osaka (Expo '70) was held from 15 March to 13 September 1970, and played host to more than 64 million visitors, hastening to discover that window onto the future. Every country and company rivalled each other in architectural daring for the construction of their pavilions. Tange Kenzo produced the site's overall plan as well as the main building—The Great Roof—, while architects belonging to the Metabolist movement (Kikutake Kiyonori, Kurokawa Kishô) helped to design several buildings. New technologies were predominant inside the pavilions, in the form of multi-screen projections and computer-assisted creations. Emblematic in this respect was the Festival Plaza [*O-matsuri hiroba*] designed by Isozaki Arata, and filled by two gigantic robots, 14 metres high, which moved about and acted as a control room for various equipment: light rays, soundtracks, and smoke machines. Conceived as a meeting place and information centre, this square played host to spectacles and performances programmed by Tôno Yoshiaki (critic), Isozaki Arata (architect), Akiyama Kuniharu (composer), and Yamaguchi Katsuhiro (artist). In a letter to Pierre Restany, Tôno Yoshiaki explained the main features: "First of all, in a ridiculous way, we will show national and touristic-folkloric

things, such as the carnival dances of ancient Japan, but our programme committee for avant-garde performances is trying to produce somewhat novel and fresh events like E.A.T. of New York, Andy Warhol's Velvet Underground, the Niki-Tinguely Company's Mechanico-sensual Opera, etc."¹

TAPESCRIPT LETTER TO PIERRE RESTANY WRITTEN ON FEBRUARY 1969 THE 1ST BY SHIN. ICHI, FONDS PIERRE RESTANY © D.R.

- 3 Despite the declared wish to turn the Festival Plaza into an open space, the critic Haryû Ichirô lamented the authoritarian nature of the way it was set up, as well as its reliance on technology.² During the preparatory phase of Expo '70, several voices (including the critic Taki Kôji, and the Bikyôtô and Zero Jigen groups) spoke out against the political use of the Fair, which was suspected of diverting the attention of the Japanese population, in the midst of re-negotiating the security treaty with the United States. Such critics rebuked artists for their systematic recourse to a spectacular environmental art, wondering whether all those grandiose projects might not have come into being outside the context of the World Exposition, in which the great Japanese electronic and industrial companies (Hitachi, Fuji, Tôshiba, Mitsubishi, Sumitomo, etc.) were ready to invest astronomical sums of money for their pavilions. And, in fact, Expo '70 symbolized both the climax but also the swansong of Japanese environmental art.³
- 4 At the same time, from 10 to 30 May 1970, the 10th Tôkyô Biennial opened up another avenue.⁴ For the critic Segi Shin.ichi, that 10th Biennial was to be one marked by renewal: "If the Tokyo Biennial can be held next year [in spite of student demonstrations], it will be organized differently from the previous forms. No national section, and all artists will be invited by the Commissioners thematically and individually."⁵ In the end of the day, there was just a single curator in charge of the selection, the critic Nakahara Yûsuke, who chose particularly young Japanese and Western artists (almost all of them were under 35; Giuseppe Penone and Horikawa Michio were only 24). Unlike in the previous Biennials, Nakahara moved away from painting and sculpture, in a conventional sense, and adopted all the various tendencies of present-day art: Minimal Art (Carl Andre, Sol LeWitt), Conceptual Art (Matsuzawa Yutaka), Arte povera (Mario Merz, Gilberto Zorio), and figures such as Christo, Daniel Buren and Bruce Nauman. By broadening the research undertaken by Japanese anti-art artists [*han-geijutsu*] of the 1960s, involving moving and unstable forms, as well as their refusal of any established system for producing and embracing art, the Biennial gave tangible form to Nakahara's concept of *rinjô-shugi* ["in-situ-ism"], enjoining the artists to react to the spaces of the exhibition, the museum, and the surroundings.⁶ These latter were thus invited to Tôkyô to produce ephemeral

installations for the exhibition, rather than sending works already conceived in the studio. The number of artists was also reduced in comparison to previous Biennials—40 in 1970, as opposed to 280 for the previous Biennial. The overall look of the exhibition was radically transformed because, unlike the usual profusion, there were few works in the museum's rooms. Jannis Kounellis's gesture even consisted in blocking the access to the room reserved for him with an iron bar.

Photograph of the artwork *Kûsô – Mizu* [Emptiness in Everything – Water] of Sekine Nobuo; view of the exhibition at the museum of the town of Tôkyô, 1969, fonds Biennale de Paris © With the courtesy of the artist

- 5 The Biennial seized the changes which were taking place in art in around 1970, in both the United States and Europe, just like the 1969 exhibitions *When Attitudes Become Form* in Bern, *Op Losse Schroeven* at the Stedelijk Museum, and *Anti-Illusion: Procedures/Materials* at the Whitney Museum of American Art. (Nakahara incidentally saw this last show during a visit to New York). The Biennial introduced the latest Western artistic practices to Japan, and compared them with their Japanese equivalents.⁷ These latter included Enokura Kôji, Koshimizu Susumu, Narita Katsuhiko, and Takamatsu Jirô⁸, who were subsequently brought together in the Mono-ha movement. In the exhibition, Enokura placed on the floor his work *Ba* [Place], made of sheets of Kraft paper soaked in oil, Narita showed *Sumi*, a series of charred wooden blocks, while Takamatsu installed *Jûroku no tantai* [Sixteen Units], a series of tree trunks, whose upper part was partly sculpted. The physical presence of matter was quintessential in these works, as well as in the large, dark and reflecting urethane surface which Tanaka Shintarô applied to the floor. The Biennial's theme, incidentally, was “man and matter” [*Ningen to busshitsu*].
- 6 Some artists associated with Mono-ha had already exhibited at the 1969 Paris Biennale. Then in charge of the Japanese section, Tôno Yoshiaki formed a group of four artists which he called “4 Bossots”, made up of Narita Katsuhiko, Sekine Nobuo, Takamatsu Jirô and Tanaka Shintarô. In it Narita showed his work *Sumi*, in an earlier version of the one

shown at the 1970 Tôkyô Biennial; Tanaka prepared a pile of sand in the guise of sculpture, and Takamatsu laid flat on the floor a piece of partly crumpled fabric, in the wake of his research to do with visual perception. Sekine showed two sculptures made of lacquered iron with simple volumes, of different sizes, but with the same bearing. Tôno explained that “the work [...] is composed of two black iron recipients of the same capacity, but with different base areas, each one filled with water. Here, water, which is the most neutral and the most transformable matter, is solidified through a “topological” notion”.⁹ The proposal of the “4 Bossots” had trouble winning Pierre Restany over: “The Japanese get to grips with the heart of the matter several months late, as usual. They want to do better than Bob Morris, Lawrence Weiner, Joseph Beuys and Robert Smithson combined. We are invited to a festival of elementary fetishism: water in a cylindrical tank, the heap of earth, the block of coal, the tarpaulin on the ground.”¹⁰ Borrowing the rhetoric of Lee Ufan about Mono-ha, Tôno, for his part, saw in it a desire to show matter as it is: “If young [artists] readily use forms of natural matter, like water, fire, canvas and sand, this is because these latter go hand-in-hand with no specific expression and are neutral.”¹¹

Invitation card announcing *Besubio daisakusen purojekuto-ten* [Exhibition of the project *Grande Opération Vésuve*] at the Minami Garô, Tôkyô, September 20-30 1972 (detail), fonds Pierre Restany © d.r.

- 7 Similar works were presented at the 1971 Paris Biennale. The curator of the Japanese section, the poet and critic Okada Takahiko, included in his selection two artists who had already been exhibited at the Tôkyô Biennial the year before: Enokura Kôji and Koshimizu Susumu. The work *Kabe* [Wall] by Enokura consisted in a concrete and mortar wall, measuring three metres by five, built between two trees, whose presence prompted the viewer to become aware of his body and surroundings. Koshimizu exhibited *Hyômen kara hyômen e* [From Surface to Surface], consisting of partly sculpted wooden beams arranged directly on the floor. Here again it was the raw matter which counted, in both its depth and its density. For Okada Takahiko, these two artists “understood that this reality which they wanted to possess refuses to be affected by a conceptual language”,¹² whence their elementary gestures and their deliberately reduced, almost instinctive interventions. The same applied, for him, with the photographer Nakahira Takuma¹³ (who belonged, like Okada, to the Provoke group), who showed at the Biennial his in situ and evolving installation *Sâkyurêshon. Hizuke, basho, kôî* [Circulation, Date, Place, Events].

- 8 We find several of these figures during the *Operazione Vesuvio* organized by Pierre Restany in 1972, which involved installing on Mount Vesuvius an “international culture park”. Tôno Yoshiaki curated the Japanese part of the project (which was split into three sections: Europe, Japan, United States), first exhibited at the Minami Garô in Tôkyô in September 1972, and then at the Galleria d’Arte Il Centro in Naples in November. Among the 25 people brought together to come up with works in the volcano site, Tôno invited several artists belonging to the Mono-ha movement, who had taken part in the 1970 Tôkyô Biennial, and the Paris Biennales of 1969 and 1971: Enokura Kôji, Koshimizu Susumu, Sekine Nobuo, Takamatsu Jirô, Tanaka Shintarô and Yoshida Katsurô.
- 9 The way Mono-ha had developed marked the confirmation of a new system of representation and a renewal of forms, going hand-in-hand with questioning western artistic models. To be sure, Tôno Yoshiaki had, for example, been greatly inspired by American art after his numerous visits to New York, but this knowledge helped him above all to “forge a new direction for Japanese art”.¹⁴ In the early 1970s, arguments which were gradually veering away from modern western thinking and its aesthetic values were underpinned by the “Big Three critics” [*Bijutsu-hyôron no go-sanke*]: Haryû Ichirô, and the two people whom Pierre Restany nicknamed “the former young tiger” (Nakahara Yûsuke) and “the fed up panther”¹⁵ (Tôno Yoshiaki). Their ideas were also spread by the various curators of the Japanese pavilion at the Venice Biennale (Haryû in 1968, Tôno in 1970 and 1972, Nakahara in 1976 and 1978) and at the São Paulo Biennial (Nakahara in 1973 and 1975). The art practices championed by them, while calling to mind their contemporary western equivalents though without causing any “Larsen effect”,¹⁶ marked the end of both the environmental art and the anti-art of the 1960s, outlining in around 1970 the features of a Japanese art with a clearly re-asserted national identity.¹⁷

NOTES

1. An undated handwritten letter from Tôno Yoshiaki to Pierre Restany, fonds Pierre Restany [FR ACA PREST ART354]
2. Haryû, Ichirô. “Bunka no haikyo to shite no banpaku” [The exhibition as ruins of culture], *Ken*, no.1, June 1970, p. 110-117
3. Environmental art [*kankyô geijutsu*] was a tendency in the latter half of the 1960s which aimed at introducing a new relation to space, light and technology. See: Yoshimoto, Midori. “From Space to Environment: The Origins of Kankyô and the Emergence of Intermedia Art in Japan”, *Art Journal*, vol. 67, no.3, Autumn 2008, p. 22-45; Tsuji, Yasutaka. “From Design to Environment: “Art and Technology” in Two 1966 Exhibitions at the Matsuya Department Store”, *Review of Japanese Culture and Society*, vol. XXVIII, 2016, p. 275-296
4. It subsequently travelled to Kyôto, Nagoya and Fukuoka between June and August 1970.
5. A typed letter from Segi Shin.ichi to Pierre Restany dated 14 August 1969, fonds Pierre Restany [FR ACA PREST TOP ASI016]
6. Nakahara, Yûsuke. *Ningen to busshitsu. Dai 10-kai Nihon kokusai bijutsu-ten* [Man and Matter. 10th Tôkyô Biennial], 2 vols., Tôkyô : Mainichi shinbunsha, 1970. See also the special dossier which the

magazine *Bijutsu techô* devoted to the Biennial: “Kore ga naze geijutsu ka?” [Why is it art?], *Bijutsu techô*, no.329, July 1970, p. 1-79.

7. Despite the importance of the 1970 Tôkyô Biennial, it was only recently the subject of any studies. See: Tomii, Reiko, “Toward Tokyo Biennial 1970: Shapes of the International in the Age of ‘International Contemporaneity’”, *Review of Japanese Culture and Society*, vol. XXIII: “Expo’70 and Japanese Art: Dissonant Voices”, December 2011, p. 191-210. In its presentation of its permanent collection, Tate Modern is currently bringing together works associated with the 1970 Biennial under the title “A View from Tokyo: Between Man and Matter” (curated by Mark Godfrey).

8. Although Takamatsu Jirô influenced the Mono-ha artists and exhibited with them, he did not strictly belong to the group.

9. A typewritten document by Tôno Yoshiaki, “Œuvres présentées par le Japon”, 1969, fonds Pierre Restany [FR ACA PREST ART354]. The term “topological” refers explicitly to the famous work *Isô - Daichi* [Topos - Earth] which Sekine worked on in 1968 by digging an impressive cylinder in the ground, and which Tôno refers to earlier in his essay.

10. A typewritten document by Pierre Restany, “Pauvre jeunesse !”, 1969, fonds Pierre Restany [PREST.XSF36]

11. *Ibid.*

12. A typewritten document by Okada Takahiko, “Texte pour la participation japonaise”, 1971, fonds Biennale de Paris 1959-1985 [BIENN.71 Section Japon]

13. Nakara Yûsuke had chosen two photographs of Nakahira Takuma to feature on the poster and on the cover of the catalogue for the 1970 Tôkyô Biennial, although the images of this latter were not shown in it.

14. Imura, Yasuko. “Tôno Yoshiaki and the Influence of American Art”, in *From Postwar to Postmodern, Art in Japan 1945-1989: Primary Documents*, New York: MoMA, 2012, p. 121. Ed. by Chong Doryun, Hayashi Michio, Kajiya Kenji, Sumitomo Fumihiko

15. A typed letter from Pierre Restany to Kudô Tetsumi dated 18 August 1969, fonds Pierre Restany [FR ACA PREST ART193]

16. Lucken, Michael. *L’Art du Japon au vingtième siècle*, Paris: Hermann, 2001, p. 220

17. See: Yoshitake, Mika. “The Language of Things: Relation, Perception, and Duration”, in *Tokyo, 1955-1970. A New Avant-Garde* (exh.cat.), New York: MoMA, 2012, p. 120-137. Ed. by Chong Doryun. It is worth noting that, in 1970, Tôno also organized an exhibition at the National Museum of Modern Art in Tôkyô titled 1970-nen 8-gatsu : Gendai bijutsu no ichi danmen [August 1970 : Aspects of contemporary art], which brought together thirteen young artists, half of them associated with Mono-ha.

AUTHORS

LILIAN FROGER

Lilian Froger has a PhD in the History of Contemporary Art. His research focuses on Japanese photography from the 1950s to the present day. It questions the relations and meeting points between photography, publishing and exhibiting. In tandem with his university research, he has written critical essays which have been published in *esse arts + opinions*, 2.0.1, *Critique d’art*, IMA and 02. These writings deal with the role of fiction in the sphere of contemporary art and design, as well as the necessary involvement of the spectator, reader and user in the activation of objects

and in the understanding of images. He is currently at work on a lecture cycle at EESAB (Brest site) about the oppositional power of design.