Great Crescent: Art and Agitation in the 1960s – Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan

“We are art terrorists,” announced Katō Yasuhiro, who headed the Zero Dimension group in the 1960s. The declaration accurately represented the Zeitgeist and the volatile atmosphere opposite the political establishment, as well as the art establishment, which has pervaded Japan in the 1960s. Ayelet Zohar on an exhibition surveying the avant-garde in Japan, Korea, and Taiwan during that period.

Essay / Ayelet Zohar November 5, 2015

Katō Yasuhiro, a not-so-young, attractive man, dressed in what appeared to be old-fashioned 1960s Hippie style (long hair and a military-type jacket), stood on the stage at the Mori Art Museum during one of the programme events complementing the exhibition, at the end of June of this year, and introduced the single screening of an hour-long film, which was actually a documentary video-art piece, showing several provocative and challenging performances by the Zero Jigen (Zero Dimension) group, which Katō had headed during the 1960s. The slightly archaic presence of this kind-looking man, and the style of his talk, which he indiscriminately sprinkled with quotes from Freud and Marcuse, Hare Krishna and Beuys, offered a living testimony to an unruly, defiant era of “anti-art” in 1960s Japan, which has since lost much of its charm and its relevance to Japan today, despite the fact that the social, political, and cultural issues on the agenda of Japan’s contemporary artists may find inspiration in the acts of Katō and his friends.

קבוצת מימד האפס, מרץ 1968, צילום: קיטדה יוקיו. באדיבות קאטו יאסוהירו



[1]Zero Dimension, Zero Dimension
March 1968 Photo: Kitade Yukio Courtesy: Kato Yoshihiro

The legacy of those avant-garde artists continues to resonate and draw attention to the extreme, defiant acts of their art, especially in light of the local critical discourse which has been developing in the last decade. The documentary film, created during Zero Jigen's street performances, including many clips shot on the streets of Tokyo, Osaka, and Nagoya, in which the group members march naked, bound in chains, or top hats or gas masks, as they hold up anti-government signs, sing Hare Krishna songs, read from books, dance, kick, performing acts representing freedom and anarchy. "We are art terrorists," Katō announced in an article he wrote, titled "Performance Rising in Rebellion Against Modern Civilization." The title perfectly embodies the zeitgeist and the volatile opposition to the political and artistic establishment prevalent in 1960s Japan.

The Great Crescent was the term American intelligence officials used to label US deployment in East Asia – a great arc reaching from the Persian Gulf, via Vietnam, to Japan. The curators of the exhibition, first shown at the Para-Site alternative gallery in Hong Kong (Nov 2013- Feb 2014), followed by the show at Mori, have chosen this name as an allusion to the expanded context and political sphere (the US military-political umbrella) under which the various events occurred. The title encapsulates the historical, political, and social backgrounds against which the artists and other performance and "anti-art" groups operated. A chart of timelines displayed at the entrance to the show, tracks the events and struggles across East Asia – political and economic – along with a survey concerning the development of avant-garde movements, especially the performance movements in each of the countries participating in the exhibition.

צ'ה בונגהיון ואחרים. מיצג עם מטריית פלסטיק ונרות, צילומים דוקומנטריים, דצמבר 1967. באדיבות המכון לחקר האומנות (KARI), סיאול **[2]**



[3]Choi Boong-hyun et al. Happening with a Plastic Umbrella and Candles
December 14 (4 pm), 1967. documentary photographs. Courtesy: Korea Art Research Institute (KARI), Seoul

The turmoil of the 1960s did not bypass East Asia, particularly Japan, Korea, and Taiwan - the countries at the focus of the current exhibition. 1960 marked the 15th anniversary of the end of the Asia-Pacific War, as well as the dropping of the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Japan's economic success was meteoric, partly as a consequence of the Korean War. This process culminated in the 1964 Tokyo Olympics (and the introduction of the shinkansen bullet train), the 1970 EXPO, and the global admiration for Japan's economic miracle and its amazing rise from the ashes of war. In Korea, though, these were years of deep political crisis. Recovery from long years of Japanese colonialism (1910-1945), and three grueling years of war (1950-1953), has just got on its way in the early sixties, thanks to extensive investments by the US and Japan. Taiwan, on the other hand, was constantly threatened by the reclusive, belligerent Communist China, and had won overall protection from the US, effectively becoming the Republic of China.

As long as China remained isolated behind the Bamboo Curtain and locked to the world (until the early 1970s), Taiwan had been the actual Chinese representative to global institutions. Simultaneously, the absolute dependence of the lonely island state on the US and its policies in the Pacific region had become a threat to the local sense of sovereignty.

In Japan, the new decade began with a series of fervent demonstrations by large groups of citizens,

students, and workers, who had demonstrated their rage and grief over the government's intention to resign the ANPO Security Treaty with the US.1 Many in Japan became disillusioned with the ideas of democracy and peace after witnessing how the US military had taken advantage of its bases on Japan's soil during the Korean War, and used them to maintain military balance in Asia against the Soviet Union, realizing how Prime Minister Nobusuke Kishi himself had been acting illegally (see footnote 1), pushing the Parliament towards swift ratification of the Treaty's renewal, betraying national interest. The demonstrations lasted only three weeks, but their impact, and the resentment they exposed, remained in Japan's collective memory for the years to come.

In his book History and Repetition, Japanese literary critic Karatani Kōjin argues that the events around the ANPO treaty have raised awareness to the shifts clearly marked in Japan by the terms postwar and Shōwa 35.2 Karatani points out that the use of the Japanese calendar term, raises issues already encompassed in the continuous struggle of Japanese identity, history and modernity, locality and the influence of the west - questions already present in the Japanese sphere since Meiji period and the start of Japan's modernization process. Karatani quotes Takeuchi Yoshimi, who argues that the ANPO struggle, between the people and the government, had raised serious tensions present in Japanese society between "democracy and dictatorship".3 Ming Tiampo, on the other hand, argues that art groups like Gutai, mostly active in the 1950s, put this tension between conformity (to social values) and individualism (expressed through extreme forms of creativity) at the core of art activities in the 1950s, as a way of distancing themselves from war discourses and from the spirit of Nationalism (and fascism) that was identified with those years.4

The following years saw an impressive cultural blossoming, including the rise of new film directors such as Ōshima Nagisa (1932-2013) (Night and Fog in Japan, Cruel Story of Youth, Violence at Noon, Diary of a Shinjuku Thief, Death by Hanging, Empire of the Senses, and many more), as well as individual artists and avant-garde groups such as the aforementioned Zero Dimension, Hi Red Centre, and other artists of whom Yoko Ono was possibly the most famous, and her work Cut Piece (1964) had been screened at the exhibition.

Yoko Ono, Cut Pieces (1964) **[4]**

Video of Yoko Ono, Cut Pieces (1964)
Yoko Ono, Cut Pieces (1964)
Albert Maysles + David Maysles

The four curators - Cosmin Costinas of Para-Site (Hong Kong), Doryun Chong, the chief curator at Hong Kong's M+, Lesley Ma, curator at Ink Art and M, and Mami Kataoka of the Mori Art Museum (Tokyo) – got together to engage with this charged, complex subject, and to bring some of the rage and anger, the sense of powerlessness, the political involvement, and the will to confront the entangled political reality reflected in these artists' work. The three archives represent three cultures that had been closely linked in the past5, their cultural and artistic traditions tightly intertwined up to the end of the 19th century. Conversely, the first half of the 20th century had been marked by the extreme violence inflicted by Japan on Taiwan and Korea – occupation, colonialism, settlement, harsh treatment, and exploitation of the countries' resources, both material and human. Japan's colonial rule in Korea and Taiwan collapsed in 1945, with Japan's surrender to the Allied Forces at the end of the Asia-Pacific War, but the tension, hatred, suspicion, and negativity towards Japan have gone on for many more years, and to some extent, still exist today. The exhibition partly represents a willingness to recreate possible collaborations between the three countries, stemming from the need to advance reconciliation, trust, and the possibility of combining the three archives under the aegis of resemblance and comparison, and thus, overcoming the barriers of hostility and distrust, which

are still part of daily discourses among the three countries. In this sense, the exhibition proposes a new avant-garde in its attempt to bring together these closely-related cultures.6

Beyond the historical and revolutionary aspects, the exhibition offers Japan a new self-perception in relation to the Asian sphere: after 150 years of turning away from Asia in general, and from China in particular, all the while attempting to approach Europe and the US, currently Japan is showing interest in renewing its relations with Asia, reviving the glorious days of extensive economic and cultural ties between Japan and China. It should be noted that this concept prevails among intellectuals and the art world, but in political circles there are some reservations and concerns regarding the meteoric rise of China over the past decade, along with concerns that China may seek revenge for the traumatic events associated with Japan’s occupation of the country during 1931-1935.

The exhibition combines photographs, film clips, documentary video art, magazines, and contemporaneous news clippings. It has an archival structure – the display attempts in effect to create three parallel linear archives containing works of art and performance, which do not coincide or directly relate to each other, but had occurred in parallel. This form of archive-like display, beyond the dimension of memory and historical structuring it forms, helps to generate tension and to distinguish between lines of similarity and change as a way to understand the massive developments in the 1960s in Asia, and their ongoing influence reaching the present day. Interestingly, a special emphasis is placed on the individual and creative nature of these artists, presented as those whose efforts and language have brought about the great changes in the art worlds of Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan in later years.

The cooperation between the three venues adds a new dimension to the understanding of the distant historical relations, the animosity during the war period, and the common interest in the avant-garde and subversive, performative, and deconstructionist actions during the 1960, shared by the artists in the three countries, which might have saved local discourses from over-stressing societal and family issues, and from the fossilized Modernism shared by the art groups active around that time.

קאנג גוקג'ין, ג'ונג גאנגג'ה, ג'ונג צ'אנסונג. רצח על גדת נהר האן, 17 לאוקטובר, (16:00). באדיבות המכון לחקר האומנות (KARI), סיאול **[5]**



[6]Kang Guk-jin, Jeong Gang-ja, Jeong Chan-seung, Murders on the Han Riverside October 17 (4pm), 1968, Seoul Courtesy: Korea Art Research Institute (KARI), Seoul

The exhibition was first shown at Para-Site Centre in Hong Kong (Nov 2014-Feb 2015) highlighting acts of “anti-art,” and focusing on performance pieces in Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan, in a decade marked by significant global changes. While that decade was marked by socially and politically saturated upheavals and cultural changes, the background for the changes in each country was different – in Japan it was the events surrounding the renewal of the Security Treaty with the US; in Korea, it was the rise of a new regime and increased economic activity; and in Taiwan – the strained relations with china. Mainstream art in Japan and Korea was dominated by abstract, Modernist painting at the time, but the change toward avant-garde movements (which made direct use of the artist’s body), occurred not only as specific cases influenced by various performance styles coming from the main Western cultural centers (Yves Klein, Chris Burden, etc.), but also presenting performance as a possible means of local cultural expression, and as a response to the Western performance works, reflecting local cultural context.

The exhibition comprises three parallel narratives, mainly because the avant-garde movements in each of the three countries had evolved independently, with no apparent inter-connection. One reason for this is the colonial past, which still reverberates with loathing and resentment, as do the political and cultural gaps between the three countries. A bit of history of these cultural tensions is due here: in 1895 Japan had annexed Taiwan, and then colonizing Korea from 1905, with full annexation in 1910, turning the two countries into Japanese colonies. The move generated great tensions, accompanied by rebellion against the power imposed, and deep resentment toward the Japanese in Asia. When the Asia-Pacific War had ended, and Japan surrendered to the Allied Forces,

the former colonies found themselves in an independent position, which was quickly replaced by growing anxiety due to the increasingly powerful Communist regimes in china and North Korea. In fact, the first encounter artists in Taiwan and in South Korea had with Modern Art occurred under Japanese occupation. After the war, Japan had become pacifistic under its new constitution of 1947, but in each of the three countries, as part of their special status within the Great Crescent, there was (and there still is) heavy American military presence. Broad interactions with the US in many areas of life followed; therefore, American culture permeated the local fabric of life, and gained much influence and special standing in each of the countries. As a consequence of the new political environment, and the massive American presence in political, military, and cultural contexts, contemporary art trends such as activism in American and European art movements influenced artists in the three countries. This exhibition dealt specifically with the impact of Western avant-garde movements and artists such as Josef Beuys, Allan Kaprow, George Maciunas, and the Fluxus group, all of whom exerted massive influence on the avant-garde in Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan.

Yoko Ono’s Cut Piece is probably the most well-known video-art project on the show. It refers to issues of direct violence –audience members use scissors to cut the artist’s dress, piece by piece, and after a long, slow, gripping process, she is left naked. Another engaging work is by the artists Jiro Takamatsu, Genpei Akasegawa, and Natsuyuki Nakanishi – three artists who have made names for themselves individually but also known as the artist group Hi Red Centre (HRC). In the HRC performances they operated under a different inner logic. In their Cleaning Event (1964), they performed a street-cleaning event: equipped with buckets, rags, and face masks, HRC went out to the prestigious Ginza district and asked passersby to help them in cleaning the street and the city. This was a critical act, directly responding to the ways city officials tried to recruit residents to clean and refurbish the city for the coming Olympic Games. In the hands of Takamatsu, Akasegawa, and Natsuyuki the event became a critical moment - a parodic gesture on the way the public is being recruited for a cause whose necessity and efficiency are questionable. This issue resonates today in regard to the huge investments Japan is planning for the coming 2020 Tokyo Olympic Games – which have already brought on a great debate and much public criticism.

מינורוהירטה "ארוע הניקיון של Center Red High (הידוע רשמית כהיו נקיים! וגם המהלך לעידוד ניקיון וסדר במטרופולין"). 1964. © מינורו הירטה. באדיבות גלריה טאקה אישי, טוקיו **[7]**



[8]Minoru Hirata "High Red Center’s Cleaning Event (officially known as Be Clean! and Campaign to Promote Cleanliness and Order in the Metropolitan Area)"
1964, Gelatin silver print © Minoru Hirata / Courtesy of Taka Ishii Galery, Tokyo

Choi Boong-hyun’s project was the first happening to take place in Seoul, titled “Happening with a Plastic Umbrella and Candles”. The performers danced in a circle around Choi, who was singing 19th-century revolutionary farmers' songs, lighting the candles affixed to the umbrella. As the umbrella spun, drops of candlewax flew in all directions, until the candles were extinguished. The umbrella served as a metaphor to the “atomic umbrella” and to the significance of that term in South Korea, living in constant fear of its northern sister’s nuclear power.

Chang Chao-Tang’s photographs are among the most significant, longest bodies of work in Taiwan, extending over six decades. The group of works displayed in the current exhibition included the series Modern Photographs (1965), which presented a series of performative portraits of his friends, taken in abandoned sites and in natural settings around the capital, Taipei, which was undergoing a process of accelerated industrialization at the time. As one who’s been influenced by Western modern art, as well as by contemporaneous Taiwanese writers, Chang’s portraits showed amputated, faceless, blurry and distressed figures, as part of the attempt to show the traumatic aspect of the intense changes Taiwan has been experiencing in the course of the 20th century.

The exhibition is an interesting effort to deal with archives of knowledge by analyzing processes that have been only partially documented, where the visual material plays a secondary role to the knowledge and the understanding of the contribution of the various projects and their impact on creative spirits in those countries in later decades. The political and the economic struggle, the wish to engage with new idioms of representation, and the intense work on new formats of performance, photography, and video art have brought about this blossoming, the fruits of which we now see in the domain of visual arts in Taiwan, South Korea and Japan.

The exhibition was on view at Mori Art Museum, Tokyo (April – July 2015). The participating artists: Chang Chao-Tang (Taiwan), Choi Boong-hyun, Chuang Ling (S. Korea), Hi Red Center (Japan), Huang Huacheng (Taiwan), Jeong Gang-ja (S. Korea), Leung Chi Wo (Hong Kong), Kang Guk-jin (S. Korea), Yoko Ono (Japan), Zero Jigen/ Zero Dimension (Japan).

- 1. ANPO - The Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security between the United States and Japan was first signed in 1952, at the end seven years of occupation following the war in the Pacific theatre. Since Japan's new constitution banned any kind of military action, the task of defending Japan had been taken over by the US, who built a series of bases throughout the country, including massive air force bases in Okinawa, which later served as deployment centers for American forces during the Korean and Vietnam wars. The Security Treaty was designed to be renewed every 10 or so years, however, resentment welled up as the supposed 1960 renewal approached, due to the way the US had used these bases as a launch pad to actions serving American interests in Asia. This criticism found expression in long speeches given by members of the opposition in Parliament, however, since Prime Minister Kishi was pushing for summing up the debate and renewing the treaty prior to President Eisenhower's planned visit to Japan in June, on the 19th of May he invited the police to the Parliament building to remove the opposition members forcibly. The vote was passed right after that, with the support of the coalition votes and with no further interruptions... On the next day, the event was widely publicized in the press, thus becoming the trigger for an explosion of enormous demonstrations with one million participants, lasting three weeks and completely disrupting life in Tokyo. For more information on the chain of events see: George R. Packard (1986). Protest in Tokyo: The Security Treaty Crisis of 1960. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP (Reprint of: Connecticut: Greenwood, 1978) 15, 40-42.
- 2. The year according to the Japanese calendar, counting the years of the ruling emperor, and starting over when a new emperor assumes the throne.
- 3. Karatani Kōjin (2012). 'The Discursive Space of Modern Japan', History and Repetition, New York: Columbia University Press, 47-84.
- 4. Ming Tiampo(2011). 'Decentering Originality: Originality, Individualism and Subjective Autonomy', Gutai: Decentering Modernism, Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 37-43.
- 5. Taiwan was the main representative for Chinese culture in this case, due to China's absence from the international relations map in the years 1949-1972.
- 6. An academic conference took place during the exhibition, a collaboration between Mori Art Museum and the University of Tokyo, under the title "Global Asia and Diasporic Art in Japan and Asia". I was invited as a speaker, and in my talk I discussed the question of why did Morimura Yasumasa, who was well-recognized for the restaging and performance of iconic images, have so few Asian images (only three photographs: Mao Zedong, Mahatma Gandhi, and the execution of a Vietcong officer by Saigon's police chief, as captured in Eddie Adams's famous image, from 1968). For more information about the conference, the various speakers, and its proceedings, see: http://www.mori.art.museum/eng/nyu/index.htm.

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