

SOLOMON R. GUGGENHEIM FOUNDATION

Gutai Main Exhibition Video Transcript

ALEXANDRA MUNROE:

Gutai from its inception was dedicated to one thing: breaking boundaries. Breaking through the boundaries of convention, including the conventions of art.

MING TIAMPO:

Gutai: Splendid Playground is an exhibition of the Gutai Art Association, a group from post-war Japan that was active from 1954 to 1972. They were a group of 59 artists that spanned 18 years and worked under the leadership of Yoshihara Jiro. Yoshihara led the group with the mantra: Do what no one has done before. A mantra that led the group to a vast array of experimental works in a variety of media from gestural abstraction to art and technology to interactive art and installation and performance.

ALEXANDRA MUNROE:

The first exhibition that Gutai organized in the summer of 1955 was set outdoors in a pine grove public park in Ashiya, a very cosmopolitan town between Osaka and Kobe that was the home for the Gutai artists and the home for the leader Yoshihara Jiro.

In 1956, Motonaga first hung by the trees the plastic tubing filled with colored, bellies of water that we now have in the atrium of the Guggenheim Museum.

MING TIAMPO:

The rotunda is dominated by a beautiful work by Motonaga Sadamasa, which consists of polyethylene tubes that sweep across the rotunda. These clear plastic tubes are filled with colored water. People will be looking up at these brush strokes through the entire space and will be able to compose for themselves their own experience of this work.

The group name Gutai means "concreteness" or "embodiment," and this name comes from their early interest in materials. For Gutai, they approached it from an extremely radical perspective. They actually were more willing to do away with the traditional materials of art making, of painting, oil on canvas.

ALEXANDRA MUNROE:

They never thought of themselves as painters. They were artists. And art for them was from inception a cross-genre, creative activity. And for them, the act, the process of making painting really co-existed in their mind with the product of the painting itself.

MING TIAMPO:

Gutai artists determined that the paintbrush was the instrument that had dominated paint historically, so Shimamoto Shozo writes an article called "Executing the Paintbrush" where he encourages artists to engage with paint as paint. Throw away your paintbrushes. Execute your paintbrushes.

So, they painted by throwing glass bottles of paint onto the canvas that then explode. They painted with canons. They painted with bicycles. They painted by, by pouring tar onto a canvas. They painted by using vibrating devices and abacuses and umbrellas. Some of these processes you'll be able to see through small television monitors that we've mounted next to the paintings, so that you can understand what the process is that the artists used to make these works.

ALEXANDRA MUNROE:

So the very first activity that Gutai did, it was not an exhibition of its works. It was the publication of the first issue of the Gutai Journal, which became a very essential platform for Gutai's artistic creativity for their expression and for their internationalism. The first Gutai Journal, which they published on January 1, 1955, they sent around the world. The second issue landed in Jackson Pollock's library. It was through the journal that many artists abroad first encountered the experimentation of Gutai, including Allan Kaprow, Michel Tapié, and Japanese artists who were living in Paris. The Gutai Journal, illustrated Gutai's activities, including its stage events, its outdoor exhibitions, and then of course the Gutai Journal also included a number of essays and articles.

Japan had emerged from a period of complete devastation, its economy completely shattered, to being the second largest economy in the world, a nation of high industrialization that was generating a great deal of tourism including artistic exchange.

MING TIAMPO:

The showcase for Japan's rapid economic growth was Expo 70, which was the first world exposition ever in Asia, and the culmination of the Japanese government's desire to re-enter the international stage.

So, Gutai participated in Expo 70 in the Gutai Art Exhibition that was mounted in the Midori Pavilion. Gutai artists created a group show that was at once an exhibition and an environment.

An important work from the Expo 70 exhibition was Yoshida Minoru's "Bisexual Flower." It's almost like a science experiment gone awry but also a fantasy about the possibilities of science.

ALEXANDRA MUNROE:

If you look at "Bisexual Flower," this crazy, organic machine, of the six petals that are kind of pollinating this central flower made of all of these wildly colored Plexiglas, a new material for the 1960s, and colored with these weird psychedelic colored bath salts, you see this attempt of Gutai artists to humanize technology.

MING TIAMPO:

Another work that was proposed and which was ultimately accepted for the Gutai art exhibition was Nasaka Senkichi's "Armature". We asked Nasaka Senkichi to reimagine his work for the Guggenheim space, for Frank Lloyd Wright's spiral, and he created this installation, which consists of a metal tube, about 10 centimeters in diameter that snakes around the exhibition space. The tube bends at 90-degree angles, moves up, moves down. And on that tube, are mounted works of art by some of the other Gutai artists.

ALEXANDRA MUNROE:

Gutai's experiments in Expo 70 reflected this kind of experimentation, interest in technology, interest in new material, interest in systems and interest in environment.

MING TIAMPO:

From our perspective now, Gutai's works were incredibly prescient. They established ideas about performativity, about interactivity, about art and technology, earlier than any other artists of their generation from around the world. The networks that they created as a result of being situated on the outskirts of the art world extended to Paris, New York, Turin, even Johannesburg, Amsterdam. They refused to believe that modernism was just a Western story, and they inserted themselves into that story.

ALEXANDRA MUNROE:

It is only really in the past 20 years that we have begun to see a really radical shift in the telling of art history of this period where Gutai has a very important role to play, not as a distant cousin of the Western avant-garde but as a very significant agent to the avant-garde.