

#### THE DAWN OF CROSS-GENRE: JIKKEN KÔBÔ AND GUTAI

While the struggle around the figure was unfolding in the 1950s, another important tendency—cross-genre or interdisciplinary and intermedia work—was coalescing in postwar Japanese art. The chief proponents of these movements were two artists' collectives, Jikken Kôbô/Experimental Workshop, based in Tokyo, and Gutai Bijutsu Kyôkai (Gutai art association) in the Kansai (Osaka-Kobe) region. In addition to their cross-genre orientation, Jikken Kôbô and Gutai had two other important things in common. First, both were groups of young, enterprising artists who came under the leadership of an older and charismatic leader—poet and critic Takiguchi Shûzô and artist Yoshihara Jirô, respectively—who had established vanguard credentials in prewar Japan. And second: unlike the numerous artists' societies and collectives that flourished from the immediate postwar years into the early 1950s, these two groups enjoyed a measure of longevity; Jikken Kôbô existed from the early 1950s nearly to the end of the decade, and Gutai from 1954 to 1972. The similarities, however, more or less end there.

Based in Kansai (second only to Tokyo and its surrounding region in size and significance), from where most of its members hailed, Gutai took care from the beginning to present itself outside its immediate environs. The sporadically published *Gutai* journal—tightly edited and designed and generously filled with reproductions and writings by group members and occasional outside contributors—was distributed both in Japan and overseas.<sup>24</sup> Influential French critic and curator Michel Tapié visited Japan in 1957 and 1958 and subsequently promoted the group in Europe and America, securing them much-desired recognition in the international scene.

Within Japan, Gutai had begun its campaign of self-promotion early on, and in its first years members organized group exhibitions and stage performances in Tokyo as often as in Kansai. In fact, some of the most iconic early performative actions were carried



**Fig. 7**  
Shiraga Kazuo making *Challenging Mud* (*Doro ni idomu*) at the first Gutai Art Exhibition (Gutai bijutsu-ten), Ohara Kaikan, Tokyo, October 1955  
Photographer unknown

**Fig. 8**  
Murakami Saburô making *Six Holes* (*Mutsu no ana*), from *Paper-Breaking* (*Kami yaburi*), at the first Gutai Art Exhibition (Gutai bijutsu-ten), Ohara Kaikan, Tokyo, October 1955  
Photographer unknown

out in Tokyo.<sup>25</sup> The first Gutai exhibition in Tokyo was presented at Ohara Kaikan; there, Shiraga Kazuo, dressed in white boxer shorts, dove into and wrestled with a pile of mud in *Challenging Mud* (*Doro ni idomu*, 1955; fig. 7), and Murakami Saburô broke through multiple screens of Kraft paper in violent movements in *Six Holes* (*Mutsu no ana*, 1955; fig. 8), from *Paper-Breaking* (*Kami yaburi*). In the *Gutai Art on the Stage* (*Butai o shiyô suru Gutai bijutsu*) event held at Sankei Kaikan, Tokyo, in October 1957, Shiraga and two male performers walked onstage wearing different versions of Tanaka Atsuko's *Electric Dress* (*Denki-fuku*, 1956; see p. 115, fig. 17), an elaborate contraption made of lightbulbs and tangles of electric cords.<sup>26</sup>

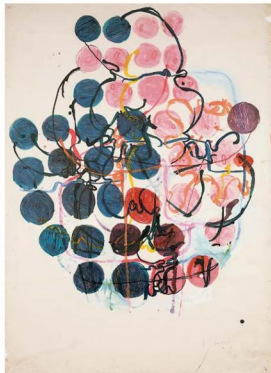


**Plate 34**  
**SHIRAGA KAZUO**  
**Untitled**  
**1958**

Oil on Japanese paper lined  
 with linen  
 71 5/8 × 95 3/8 × 1 9/16"  
 (182 × 242.4 × 4 cm)

Interestingly, although Gutai may today be best remembered for these groundbreaking performance-based innovations, and their performances continued into their later years, the artists regarded themselves primarily as painters. Shiraga, Murakami, Tanaka, and others developed their own unique painterly vocabularies and practices, to which they adhered throughout the Gutai years and afterward. Shiraga painted with his feet on canvases laid horizontally on the floor (plate 34). Tanaka made numerous paintings and drawings featuring her signature repeating circles and tangled lines derived from *Electric Dress* (plates 35, 36). In *Work Painted by Throwing a Ball* (*Tōkyū kaiga*, 1954; plate 37), Murakami hurled an ink-soaked ball onto a pictorial surface, leaving traces

of a forceful registration of the moving object—anticipating his plunges through paper surfaces with his own body. But not all Gutai paintings were performatively inspired, nor were all engaged in a direct relationship between action and picture. Motonaga Sadamasa's *Work (Water)* (*Sakuhin [Mizu]*, 1955; fig. 9) consists of teardroplike transparent plastic bags filled with water tinted with a range of bright hues. Motonaga hung this work at Gutai's first exhibition in Tokyo, amid his own paintings as well as a group of brightly colored stones, and remnants of other artists' actions and interactive works—a truly cross-genre event. His work underscores Gutai's contribution to art not only in the realm of performance but also in that of installation.



*Top left:*  
**Plate 35**  
**TANAKA ATSUKO**  
**Drawing after "Electric Dress"**  
**(Denki-fuku no tame no sobyō)**  
 1956

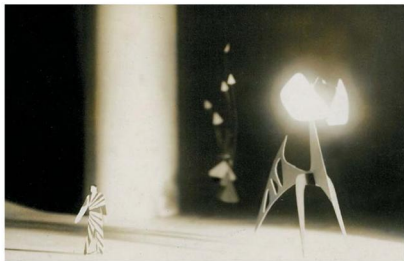
Crayon on paper  
 42<sup>3</sup>/<sub>8</sub> × 29<sup>13</sup>/<sub>16</sub>" (108.6 × 76 cm)

*Bottom left:*  
**Fig. 9**  
**Motonaga Sadamasa with**  
**his 1955 pieces *Work (Water)***  
**(Sakuhin [Mizu]), hanging**  
**from the ceiling on the right;**  
***Liquid, Red* (Ekitai, aka,**  
**suspended above the artist);**  
**and *Work (Stones)* (Sakuhin**  
**[Ishi]), in front of him), at the**  
**first Gutai Art Exhibition**  
**(Gutai bijutsu-ten), Ohara**  
**Kaikan, Tokyo, October 1955**  
 Photographer unknown

*Top right:*  
**Plate 36**  
**TANAKA ATSUKO**  
**Work (Sakuhin)**  
 1957  
 Permanent marker and oil on paper  
 43 × 30<sup>13</sup>/<sub>16</sub>" (109.2 × 78.2 cm)

*Opposite:*  
**Plate 37**  
**MURAKAMI SABURŌ**  
**Work Painted by Throwing a Ball**  
**(Tōkyū kaiga)**  
 1954  
 Ink on paper  
 41<sup>3</sup>/<sub>8</sub> × 29<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub>" (105.7 × 75.6 cm)





**Fig. 10**  
Model of stage set designed by  
Kitadai Shōzō for a performance  
of the ballet *Joy of Life* (*Joie de  
vivre*; *ikuru yorokobi*), the first  
Jikken Kōbō event, produced  
as part of the Picasso Festival,  
Hibiya Kōkaidō Hall, Tokyo,  
November 16, 1951  
Photograph by Kitadai Shōzō

**Plate 38**  
**FUKUSHIMA HIDEKO**  
*Visitor* (*Gairaiisha*)  
1956

Gouache on paper  
26<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> × 21<sup>1</sup>/<sub>16</sub>" (68 × 53.5 cm)

**Plate 39**  
**FUKUSHIMA HIDEKO**  
*Work 109* (*Sakuhin 109*)  
1959

Oil on canvas  
62<sup>1</sup>/<sub>16</sub> × 44<sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub>" (162.1 × 112.4 cm)

Gutai worked as a tight-knit group, its members devoting their energies solely to Gutai projects; this contrasted with a certain looseness that characterized the collaborations of Jikken Kōbō, whose members' activities were somewhat more diffused. This Tokyo collective—made up of visual artists, musical composers, photographers, and an engineer—first came together in 1951 on the occasion of a Pablo Picasso retrospective, specifically, the performance of the ballet *Joy of Life* (*Joie de vivre*; *ikuru yorokobi*, 1951; fig. 10) that coincided with the exhibition.<sup>87</sup> Many of them already knew one another as members of artists' societies and study groups. Takiguchi, a mentor to many of them, christened the group.<sup>88</sup>

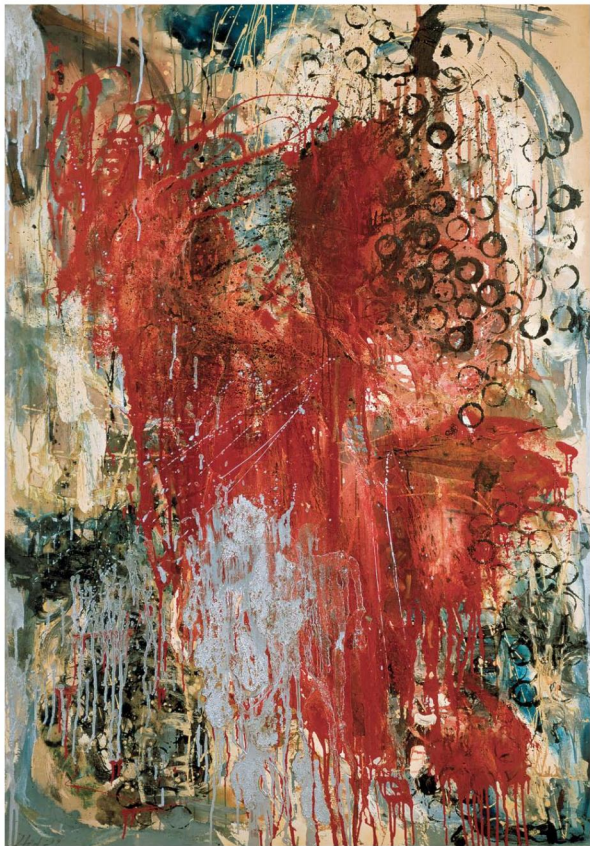
The works of the visual artists of the group—Fukushima Hideko, Kitadai Shōzō, and Yamaguchi Katsuhiro—had few obvious commonalities.<sup>89</sup> Fukushima, the only female member, could be described as the most "classical" visual artist in the group; her principal mediums were painting and drawing, and her gestural brushstrokes and drips on canvas and gouache on paper were in many ways in line with gestural abstraction, which was becoming an important trend in painting. One particularly distinguishing factor in Fukushima's pictures is her use of stamps made of cans—circular forms that contrast with the supposedly intentional incorporation of

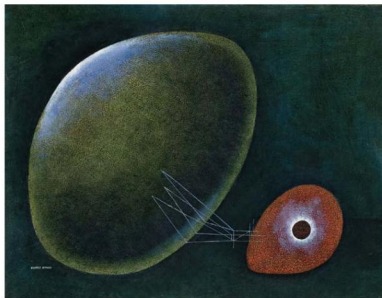
not-wholly-controllable material qualities and physical forces, as seen in *Visitor* (*Gairaiisha*, 1956; plate 38) and *Work 109* (*Sakuhin 109*, 1959; plate 39).

Having both studied engineering, Kitadai and Yamaguchi were naturally interested in science and technology and in their interface with art. While Kitadai's painting *Egg of Oedipus: Wish to Return to the Womb* (*Oidipusu no tamago: Shikyū kaiki ganbō*, 1952/1988; plate 40) features forms that are Surrealist-inflected, around the same time he was also beginning to explore a Constructivist formal language in paintings such as *Composition of Rotary Panels* (*Kaiten suru men ni yoru kōsei*, c. 1952; plate 41). Furthermore, having seen Alexander Calder's works in reproduction, Kitadai was engaged in figuring out the construction of mobiles—an experiment that began as emulation but soon evolved into its own distinctive artistic statement, using wood and *washi* (Japanese paper). His mobiles and stables recall *shoji*, the sliding screens that are characteristic of Japanese architecture (*Mobile* [*Mobiru*], 1956/1992; plate 42).

Particularly interested in movement of pictorial space, Yamaguchi, after many experiments, arrived at his first major artistic series, *Vitrine* (*Vitorinu*; plates 113, 132).<sup>90</sup> The series utilizes corrugated glass that diffuses light and causes the image behind



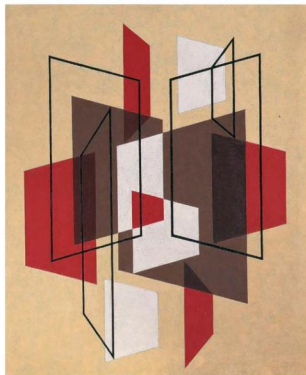


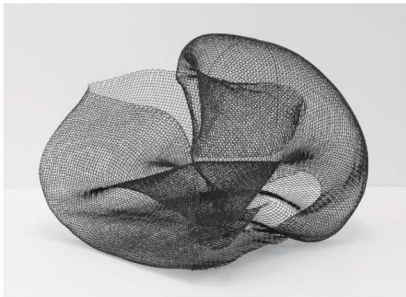


**Plate 40**  
**KITADAI SHŌZŌ**  
*Egg of Oedipus: Wish to Return to the Womb (Oidipusu no tamago: Shikyū kaiki ganbō)*  
 1952/1988  
 Oil on canvas  
 15<sup>7</sup>/<sub>16</sub> × 20<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub>" (40 × 52 cm)

**Plate 41**  
**KITADAI SHŌZŌ**  
*Composition of Rotary Panels (Kaiten suru men ni yoru kōsei)*  
 c. 1952  
 Oil on cardboard  
 28<sup>7</sup>/<sub>16</sub> × 28<sup>7</sup>/<sub>16</sub>" (72.3 × 60.6 cm)

**Plate 42**  
**KITADAI SHŌZŌ**  
*Mobile (Mōbiru)*  
 1956/1992  
 Wood and Japanese paper  
 8<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> × 60<sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub> × 1<sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub>"  
 (22.2 × 153 × 0.6 cm)





**Plate 43**  
**YAMAGUCHI KATSUHIKO**  
*Wire Mesh Sculpture*  
*(Kanaami chōkoku)*  
 1961  
 Wire mesh  
 19 7/16 × 17 11/16 × 15 3/4"  
 (49 × 45 × 40 cm)

**Plate 44**  
**YAMAGUCHI KATSUHIKO**  
 Untitled  
 1962–63  
 Iron and sackcloth  
 39 3/4 × 27 7/16 × 2 15/16"  
 (100 × 69 × 7.5 cm)

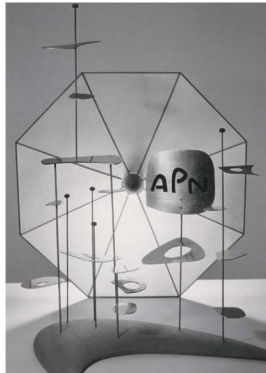
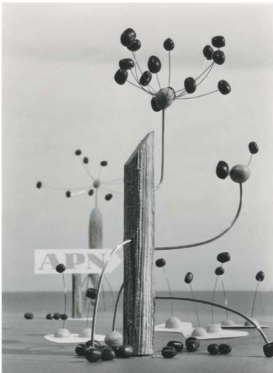
it to change depending on the position of the viewer. Takiguchi, always adept at naming, offered the French word for the series, as well as additional poetic appellations such as “music box for the eye” (*me no orugōru*) and “moving relief” (*ugoku rerifu*).<sup>31</sup> Yamaguchi was an indefatigable explorer of new materials and forms. His investigations would continue after the dissolution of Jikken Kōbō, as exemplified by his *Wire Mesh Sculpture* (*Kanaami chōkoku*, 1961; plates 43, 112) and *Untitled* (1962–63; plate 44).

While the spirit of experimentation is evident in their shape-shifting practices, it is important to note that what constituted the truly collective work of Jikken Kōbō was in other mediums. Yamaguchi encapsulated this well in an essay he wrote some years later: “The energy of [Jikken Kōbō] always radiated in both centripetal and centrifugal directions. By centripetal I mean an inward movement away from the outer directed teamwork of the group, a return to individual work. By centrifugal I mean the attempt to combine work in the various fields of art, music,



and literature through logically necessary ideas.”<sup>32</sup> In 1953 photographer Ōtsuji Kiyoji was added to the roster when the group was commissioned to contribute photography to the *Asahi Picture News* (APN) section of the newly launched magazine *Asahi Graph* (*Asahi gurafu*), as seen in the Compositions for APN (APN no tame no kōsei, 1953–54; plates 45–48). The photographs, most by Ōtsuji with Kitadai and Yamaguchi, were of sculptural constructions made by the latter two, as well as by a number of unofficial members who were invited to contribute for the occasion.<sup>33</sup> The photographs (almost all of which feature the letters APN) appeared—at times unexpectedly and in no relation to the texts around them—in seventy-one issues of *Asahi Graph*, from January 1953 until May 1954.<sup>34</sup> The sculptural constructions, made exclusively for the purpose of photography, did not survive, but the images reveal that they were made from a wide range of easily available materials, such as acrylic panels, wood, paper, pins, and so on. Though mostly abstract, the





*Top left:*  
**Plate 45**  
**ŌTSUJI KIYOJI and**  
**YAMAGUCHI KATSUHIRO**  
Composition for APN (*Asahi*  
*Picture News*) (APN no tame  
no kōsei)  
**February 11, 1953**  
Gelatin silver print  
7<sup>3</sup>/<sub>16</sub> × 5<sup>7</sup>/<sub>16</sub>" (18.7 × 13.1 cm)

*Top right:*  
**Plate 46**  
**ŌTSUJI KIYOJI and**  
**YAMAGUCHI KATSUHIRO**  
Composition for APN (*Asahi*  
*Picture News*) (APN no tame  
no kōsei)  
**1953**  
Gelatin silver print  
8 × 5<sup>3</sup>/<sub>8</sub>" (20.3 × 13.6 cm)

*Bottom left:*  
**Plate 47**  
**KITADAI SHŌZŌ and ŌTSUJI KIYOJI**  
Composition for APN (*Asahi*  
*Picture News*) (APN no tame  
no kōsei)  
**January 1–7, 1953**  
Gelatin silver print (2003)  
8<sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub> × 5<sup>7</sup>/<sub>16</sub>" (21 × 13 cm)

*Bottom right:*  
**Plate 48**  
**KITADAI SHŌZŌ and ŌTSUJI KIYOJI**  
Composition for APN (*Asahi*  
*Picture News*) (APN no tame  
no kōsei)  
**December 23, 1953**  
Gelatin silver print (2003)  
6<sup>7</sup>/<sub>16</sub> × 4<sup>13</sup>/<sub>16</sub>" (16.3 × 12.2 cm)

**Fig. 11**  
**LÁSZLÓ MOHOLY-NAGY**  
*Lightplay: Black/White/Gray*  
c. 1926  
Gelatin silver print  
16<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> × 10<sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub>" (37.4 × 27.4 cm)  
The Museum of Modern Art,  
New York. Gift of the photographer

images overall convey a certain sci-fi sensibility and humor, and hearken back to the Bauhaus photographs of Naum Gabo or László Moholy-Nagy (fig. 11).

At the same time that the APN photographs were being conceived and made, Jikken Kōbō members were engaged in another project, utilizing the "auto-slide"—an automated combination tape recorder and slide projector. This device had been developed for educational purposes by Tōkyō Tsūshin Kōgyō, the Tokyo telecommunications engineering company (later renamed Sony), which also sponsored the project. Each auto-slide show brought together a visual artist in the group with a composer or two: Yamaguchi was paired with Suzuki Hiroyoshi in *Adventure of the Eyes of Mr. W.S., a Test Pilot* (*Shiken hikōka W.S.-shi no me no bōken*, 1953; plates 123–25); Fukushima Hideko with her younger brother, Kazuo, in *Foam Is Created* (*Minawa wa tsukurareru*, 1953; plates 126–28); and Kitadai with Yuasa Jōji in *Another World* (*Mishiranu sekai no hanashi*, 1953; plates 129–31).<sup>35</sup> These collaborations were presented in the Fifth Experimental Workshop Presentation (Jikken Kōbō dai-gokai happyōkai) at Dai-ichi Seimei Hall, an event that also included music and sound compositions by the members. Seen together, these auto-slide works, mixing still images, music, and spoken narrations, are strikingly imaginative and original, situated somewhere between composed still images, illustrated literature, and cinema. The futuristic and Constructivist aesthetics, suffused with a surreal air of the auto-slide works, culminate in a spectacular way in *Bicycle in Dream* (*Ginrin*, 1955; plates 133–35), a collaboration of Kitadai and Yamaguchi, with filmmaker Matsumoto Toshio and with special effects by Tsuburaya Eiji (of *Godzilla* fame).<sup>36</sup>

From the time of the group's founding, Jikken Kōbō's work was inherently collaborative, cross-genre, and multidisciplinary. Music played a significant part in this mix (by sheer number, there were more composers/musicians in the group than visual artists).

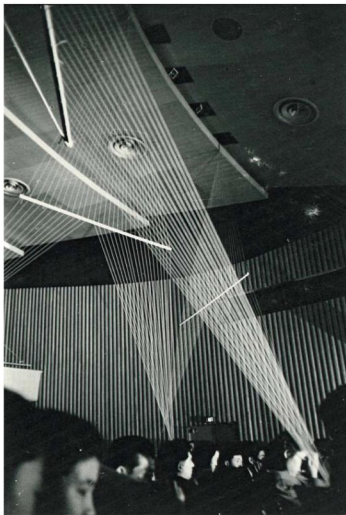


In addition to Fukushima Kazuo, Yuasa, and Suzuki, the collective also included Satō Keijirō, musicologist and critic Akiyama Kuniharu, and pianist Sonoda Takahiro, as well as Takemitsu Tōru, arguably the most celebrated composer to emerge from postwar Japan. A large number of their official public presentations were musical concerts—featuring the members' compositions and also music by European contemporaries or predecessors, including Arnold Schoenberg, Erik Satie, and Olivier Messiaen. More experimental music was presented in February 1956 at the *Musique Concrète/Electronic Music Audition* (*Myūjikkū konkureto/Denshi ongaku ōdishon*) at Yamaha Hall. Two members of the group, Takemitsu and Suzuki, were joined by the members of the so-called Sannin no Kai (Society of three, made up of composers Akutagawa Yasushi, Mayuzumi Toshirō,

Fig. 12  
Environmental installation  
by Yamaguchi Katsuhiro for  
Jikken Kōbō's concert *Musique  
Concrète/Electronic Music  
Audition (Myōjūku konkurēto/  
Denshi ongaku ōdishon)*, by  
Mayuzumi Toshiro and Takemitsu  
Tōru, at Yamaha Hall, Ginza,  
Tokyo, February 4, 1956  
Photograph by Ōtsuji Kiyoji

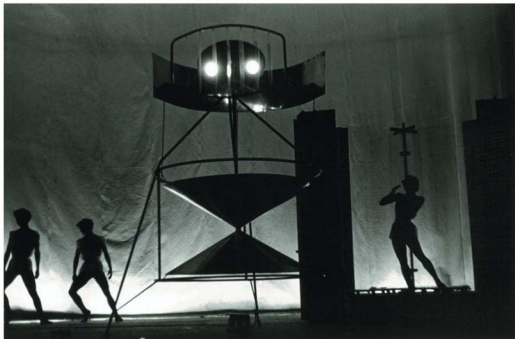
and Shibata Namio). Notable also was Yamaguchi's dynamic spatial installation of ropes tautly stretched between the audience area and the ceiling, like vertical hammocks (fig. 12)—a precedent to environmental art, which would become an important trend in Japan a decade later.

Ultimately it was Jikken Kōbō's dance and stage performances that utilized the members' wide-ranging skills most successfully. All participated



in these projects, also collaborating with outside dancers and choreographers, dramaturges and directors. In 1955 Jikken Kōbō organized two stage performances—*L'Ève future* (*Future Eve*, or *Mirai no Ivu*; fig. 13), a ballet; and *Pierrot Lunaire* (*Tsuki ni tsukareta Piero*; fig. 14). Schoenberg's *Sprechstimme* (spoken-voice) musical cycle of poems from 1912—in March and December, respectively. Although both are preserved only in documentary photographs and preparatory drawings, and scant written information survives, one can nonetheless glean from what documentation remains an air of invigorating experimentalism.<sup>37</sup> Kitada's stage sets—massive, metal, anthropomorphic constructions for *L'Ève future* and Japanese-style wood-and-paper folding screens for *Pierrot Lunaire*—not only attest to his long-standing dialogue with Western precedents such as Alexander Calder, Jean Tinguely, and Isamu Noguchi, but also demonstrate his success in personalizing them in his own practice and naturalizing them in the milieu of postwar Japan. While *L'Ève future* evoked an air of a futuristic (as suggested by the title) society of mechanization, *Pierrot Lunaire* was a reinterpretation of a benchmark work in early twentieth-century European avant-garde music. Working with Takechi Tetsuji, a radical theater director, Jikken Kōbō engaged three actors from three different genres/traditions (Shingeki or “new Western-style theater,” Noh, and Kyōgen), each to play one of the three characters of Columbine, Harlequin, and Pierrot.<sup>38</sup> The final result was a realization of a *Gesamtkunstwerk*, the defining ethos of Jikken Kōbō.

The efforts of both Gutai and Jikken Kōbō serve as reminders of what was at stake at this purported end of the postwar years. As much as young artists could construct new milieux for experimentation, their work was also a salvaging operation in search of the legacy of prewar avant-gardes, both Western and Japanese, and the relevance of their work vis-à-vis the larger culture.



**Fig. 13**  
 Jikken Kōbō's performance  
 of *L'Ève future* (*Future Eve*;  
*Mirai no Iju*, based on Auguste  
 Villiers de l'Isle Adam's 1886  
 novel), in collaboration with  
 Matsuo Akemi Ballet Company;  
 stage design by Kitadai Shōzō;  
 directed by Kawaji Akira;  
 choreography by Matsuo Akemi.  
 Haiyūza Theater, Roppongi,  
 Tokyo, March 29–31, 1955  
 Photograph by Ōtsuji Kiyoji

**Fig. 14**  
 Jikken Kōbō's performance of  
 Arnold Schoenberg's 1912 *Pierrot  
 Lunaire*, directed and produced  
 by Tetsuji Takechi; script trans-  
 lated by Akiyama Kuniharuzō  
 stage design by Kitadai Shōzō  
 and Fukushima Hideko. *Pierrot  
 Lunaire* (translated as *Tsuki ni  
 tsukareta Piero*) was part of  
*An Evening of Original Plays*  
 by the Circular Theater (*Enkei  
 Gekijō kenshūki ni yaru sōsakugeki  
 no yūbe*) at Sankai Interna-  
 tional Conference Hall, Tokyo,  
 December 5, 1955  
 Photograph by Ōtsuji Kiyoji



DORYUN CHONG

with essays by

MICHIO HAYASHI

MIKA YOSHITAKE

MIRYAM SAS

and additional contributions by

MITSUDA YURI

NAKAJIMA MASATOSHI

# TOKYO

1955-1970  
A NEW AVANT-GARDE

The Museum of Modern Art, New York

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Front cover: Nakanishi Natsuyuki performing *Clothespins Assert Churning Action*

(*Sentakū basami wa kakuhan kōdō o shuchō suru*), for Hi Red Center's

*Sixth Mixer Plan (Dai-roku-ji mikisa keikaku)* event, Shimbashi, Tokyo. May 28, 1963.

Photograph by Hirata Minoru (detail; see p. 63, fig. 17).

Back cover: Akasegawa Genpei. *Ambivalent Sea B (Aimai na umi B)*. 1961 (detail; see plate 52)

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