

The first Gutai exhibition in Japan marks the dissemination of modernist art through the media and its reinterpretation by artists outside the United States and Europe, also exemplified by the rise of the Neoconcretist group in Brazil.

In the fifth issue of the journal *Gutai*, published in October 1956, this brief statement appeared: “The US artist Jackson Pollock, whom we highly esteemed, has passed away all too early in a road accident, and we are deeply touched. B. H. Friedman who was close to him, and who sent us the news of this death, wrote: ‘When recently I looked through Pollock’s library, I discovered issues two and three of *Gutai*. I was told that Pollock was an enthusiastic disciple of the Gutai, for in it he had recognized a vision and a reality close to his own.’” This last sentence is subject to doubt, to say the least (was Friedman excessively polite, was his letter tampered with?), and we should not make too much, as far as Pollock’s interest in Gutai is concerned, of the oddball presence in his East Hampton studio of the two October 1955 issues of a confidential Japanese journal among those of more familiar magazines about American or European art.

The reference tells a lot, however, about what Pollock represented for the collaborators of the journal (for it was most probably they, despite the feigned surprise of the statement quoted above, who had sent it to the American painter): he was the imaginary audience, the revered master. Just a decade after Hiroshima and Nagasaki, in a schizophrenic Japan endorsing Americanization at the economic level but resisting it at the cultural one (the two most trodden paths were a “return to order” that called for the rehabilitation of age-old Japanese practices on the one hand, or “socialist” realism, on the other), this enthusiastic endorsement of an American artist was deliberately shocking.

A creative misreading of Pollock

Jiro Yoshihara (1905–72), the mentor and financial backer of the Gutai group, had enthusiastically written about Pollock in 1951 when several of his paintings had toured Japan, and he would persist in acknowledging his and his friends’ debt. But more than an actual contact with the works themselves, it was no doubt the famous photographs by Hans Namuth (1915–90) [1] and Rudy Burckhardt showing Pollock dripping and pouring paint that galvanized the young artists gathered around Yoshihara. By December 1954 (that is, at the time of the group’s foundation), Yoshihara had already acquired a national reputation as a

painter—his works then were competent yet rather provincial versions of European postwar abstraction. It is not so much his own art as his independence of mind, his defiance of bureaucracy, his willingness to seize the opportunity of a clean slate afforded by the historical situation of postwar Japan, and his encouragements to be as radical as possible that explain the attraction he exerted on artists who were a generation younger. His interest in performance and in the theater—the only domain where he was as innovative as the other members of Gutai—also played a major role in defining the group’s activity.

It is this performative angle from which Gutai looked at Pollock that resulted in one of the most interesting, albeit short-lived, “creative misreadings” of twentieth-century art. Because they knew



1 • Hans Namuth, Jackson Pollock painting *Autumn Rhythm*, 1950

next to nothing about the context that had presided over the invention of Pollock's drip technique, because they read it through cultural codes that were utterly foreign to the American artistic ambience, the Gutai artists were able to zero in on aspects of Pollock's art that would become available to Western artists (notably the post-**▲** Minimalist proponents of "antiform") only fifteen years later.

But Gutai's eccentric reading of Pollock did have a American origin. Even before the group was formed, the Gutai artists had **●** endeavored to literalize Harold Rosenberg's (antiformalist) notion that the Abstract Expressionist canvas is an "arena for action" and that the pictures themselves are far less significant than the gestures that produced them. In fact, it is the new technique adopted in 1954 by Kazuo Shiraga (born 1924), who was to become the most brilliant member of the group, that functioned as a catalyst: abandoning his brush, Shiraga began to paint with his feet [**2**], **■** ceiving of this bodily method as a radicalization of Pollock's horizontality. Upon seeing Shiraga's pictures, other artists such as Shozo Shimamoto (born 1928), who had been puncturing holes in thick screens of painted paper, or Saburo Murakami (born 1925),

who had been throwing balls dipped in ink, realized that they had a double interest in common: in order to prevent a protectionist return to the traditional artistic practices of Japanese art (the extremely codified calligraphy, for example), one had not only to invent radically new modes of engendering a mark, but also to take advantage of the highly ritualistic nature of Japanese culture in order to transform the artistic act into a transgressive and ludic performance. It is this dual investigation that characterizes the most interesting productions of Gutai. The word itself is formed of two characters: "gu," signifying tool or means, and "tai," which means body or substance; it is translated as "concreteness."

The inventiveness of Gutai artists in their choice of material and working method for their paintings—most often realized during their exhibitions (several of them outdoors)—is staggering. The spectacularization of the production, especially during the two first years of the group's existence, almost inevitably called for an emphasis on chance and contingency (like Pollock, they insisted on severing the link that—via the brush—had always tied hand, gesture, and inscription). To apply paint or ink, Akira Kanayama

1950–1959



2 • Kazuo Shiraga, *Work II*, 1958

Oil on paper, 183 x 243 (72 x 95%)

▲ 1969 **●** 1960b **■** 1949



3• Kazuo Shiraga, *Challenge to the Mud*, October 1955
Performance

(born 1924) used an electric toy car, Yasuo Sumi (born 1925), a vibrator, Toshio Yoshida (born 1928), a sprinkling can held ten feet above his waiting surface; Shimamoto smashed jars of pigment on a rock placed on his canvas, or he used a rifle, while Shiraga favored arrows to pierce pouches of paint.

Not surprisingly, the resulting pictures were of no great interest (Shiraga's numerous "foot paintings" are among the very few pictorial traces of those events that do not look drab—undoubtedly because the indexical footprints clearly register the temporality of the act). But the Gutai artists knew as much and, initially at least, they did not particularly value these remnants, considering them as mere props for their performances or multimedia installations.

The performances proper, later somewhat mistakenly celebrated by Allan Kaprow as anticipating his happenings, also pay a direct tribute to Rosenberg's trope of the "arena." For the opening of the first indoor Gutai exhibition, held in Tokyo in October 1955, Shiraga threw himself into a pile of wet mud, where he thrashed around half naked while the audience gathered round him [3]. The same evening, Murakami thunderingly crashed through a row of six

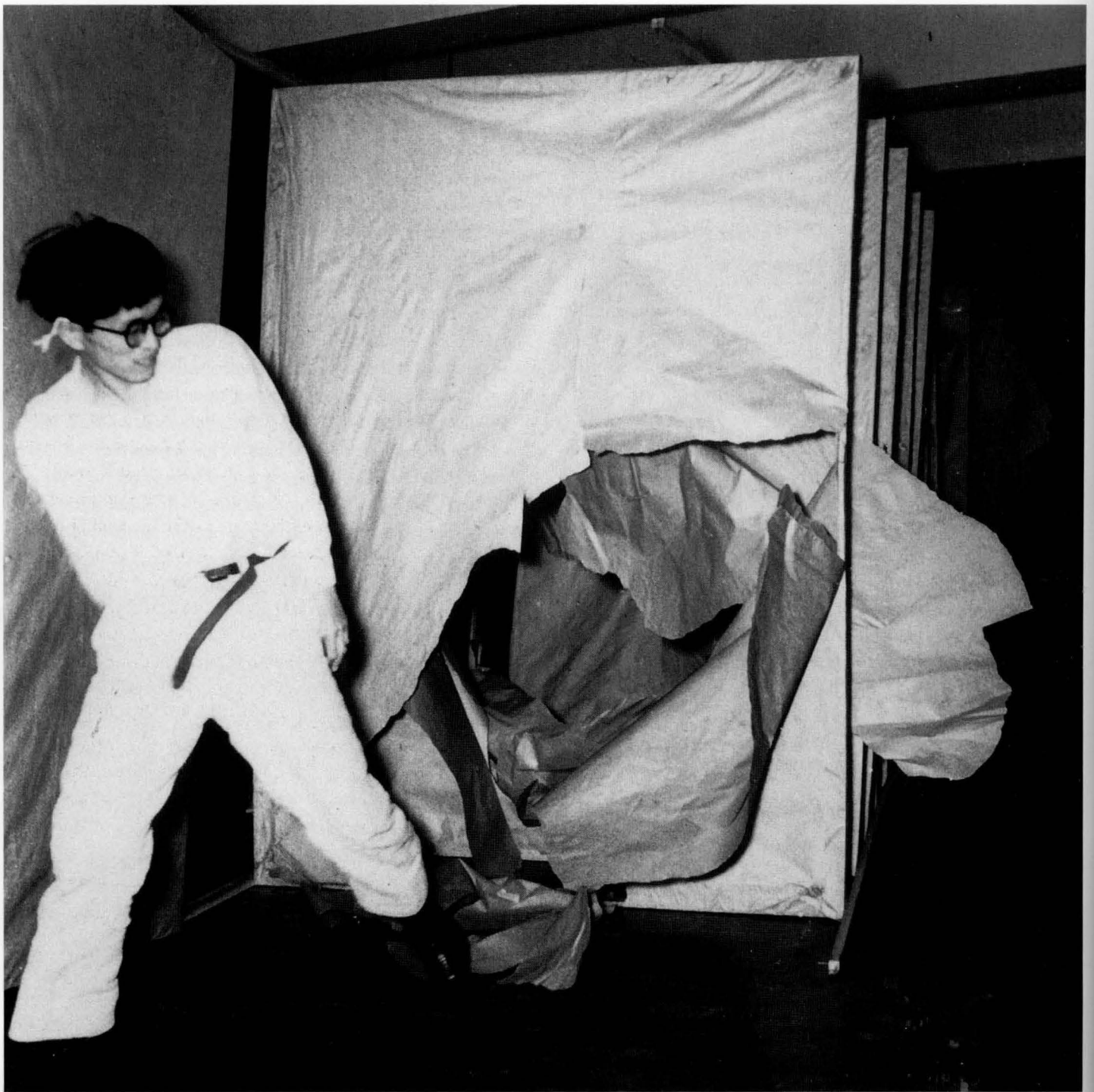
large paper screens, the gaping holes he left deliberately assaulting that icon of traditional Japanese interior architecture, the paper partition [4]. But soon the very theatricality of these actions developed to the stage where, from 1957 on, Gutai mounted grandiose audiovisual shows whose main characteristic was, in a manner that recalled Dadaist theater, a predilection for the grotesque and an aggressive stance toward the audience (just as in 1924 Francis Picabia had blinded the Parisian public of the ballet *Relâche* by pointing at it 370 automobile lights, Sadamasa Motonaga [born 1922] chased his spectators away with his "smoke cannon").

It is, however, in its conception of exhibitions as vast amusement parks containing pockets of meditative spaces and delicate sculptural objects that the Gutai group excelled. In its second outdoor show (July 1956), for example, held like the first in a pine forest, Motonaga hung between the trees long sheets of plastic filled with colored water that filtered the sun's light; Michio Yoshihara (born 1933) dug a hole in the sand where he almost buried an electric light; Shimamoto constructed a catwalk of planks, supported by uneven springs, on which people were invited to walk; Kanayama zipped through the entire ground with a 300-foot-long strip of white vinyl, adorned with black footprints that made it look like a runway and ending up in a tree. A sense of play was pervasive (many works exhibited in Gutai shows were directly inviting the spectators to participate), but also a genuine interest in new materials (with a definitive fascination for plastic, which marked worldwide the period of reconstruction after World War II), both often combining in an appeal to the uncanny. A case in point is the *Electric Dress* of Atsuko Tanaka (born 1932), a costume made of several dozen incandescent bulbs and colored neon tubes with which she wrapped herself, risking electrocution, for the opening of an exhibition in Tokyo in 1956.

By the time Gutai was presented at the Martha Jackson Gallery in New York in October 1958, however, it had grown stale. The main cause of this debacle was a shift of emphasis: in great part as a result of French critic Michel Tapié's visit to Japan, during which this champion of *art informel* in Paris had managed to persuade them that this was to be their forte, the Gutai artists now concentrated their energy on painting. Tapié's cynical marketing strategy had a devastating effect: no longer considered mere props, the material products of Gutai's theatrics were exhibited as autonomous, idealized abstractions. Understandably the Martha Jackson show, curated by Tapié at the very juncture when the notion of action painting had become utterly academic in America, was very badly received. The group never recovered from the fiasco and slowly degenerated into a caricature of itself. Gutai disbanded only in 1972 (at the death of Jiro Yoshihara), but it had long lost its flame.

Geometry turned against itself

It is interesting to compare this fate with that of the Neoconcretist movement which emerged in Brazil at the end of the fifties—just as Gutai was slackening—for it was similarly born out of the



4 • Saburo Murakami, *Passage*, October 1956

Performance

reinterpretation, from a peripheral outpost, of a canonical trend of Western modernism, this time the geometric abstract art that had ▲ been institutionalized in the thirties. It all started with the retrospective of the work of Swiss painter, sculptor, and architect Max ● Bill at the Museu de Arte Moderna in São Paulo in 1950, followed by his reception of the Grand Prize at the first Biennale of Rio de Janeiro in 1951: enthusiasts of Bill's "Concrete Art" (in which everything had to be planned by arithmetic calculations) suddenly

flooded the tiny Brazilian art world, which had been, until then, recalcitrant toward modern art.

Returning to her native Brazil in 1952, after a year in Paris (where she had studied with Fernand Léger), Lygia Clark (1920–88) quickly assimilated Bill's rationalist catechism and soon began to sap it from within. Noting that Bill often borrowed his forms from topology, she resolved to go beyond his purely iconographic appeal to this scientific field. Her first mature paintings (1954) were modular jigsaw

▲ 1937b

● 1937b, 1947a, 1967c

puzzles in wood in which she endeavored to give a positive role to the black interstices (empty joints) between the color blocks, and to transform the frame into a pictorial element: as she insisted at the time, her goal was to undo the empty/full, inside/outside oppositions upon which planar geometry and rationalism are based.

Her next step, following her discovery of the ambiguous spaces of Josef Albers's *Structural Constellations*, was a series of pictures (or rather wood reliefs) in which a square mechanically painted in a matte black is bordered on one or several of its sides (and sometimes divided) by a recessed white line which functions more like a hinge than like a frame. In these, she had managed to illusionistically torque the plane, an accomplishment she verified in a tondo called *Linear Egg* (1958), a black disk bordered by an interrupted white line. Because the white line laterally dissolves into the surrounding white wall, we refrain from the gestaltist habit of closing the circle, and the black area tends to shift visually in depth with the line, one area receding while the other seeming to protrude toward us. It is this perceptual to and fro, conceived as a "suppression of the plane," that propelled Clark to secede publicly from Bill's school and to found "Neoconcretismo," with several younger artists, in March 1959.

The only major figure besides Clark to emerge from this movement, Hélio Oiticica (1937–80), rallied to the cause only after the publication of the group's manifesto penned by the poet and critic Ferreira Gullar (this text was entirely based on Clark's reinterpretation of the tradition of geometric abstraction through the lenses of the phenomenology of perception, often quoting Maurice Merleau-Ponty's philosophical work, which she had recently discovered and which would remain a lifelong interest). The publication of the Neoconcretist manifesto coincided with Clark's elaboration of a series of

reliefs called *Cocoon* [6] and *Contra-reliefs*, in homage to Vladimir Tatlin, all dating from 1959, in which she translated the perceptual instability of her preceding works into the real, phenomenal space of our senses (Oiticica soon proposed his own version, which he called *Spatial Relief*). Each *Cocoon* is made of a single rectangular sheet of metal partially cut and folded (but not cut out—nothing is deleted nor added) so that its frontal proportion, whatever its projection in space, is always a square (hiding, so to speak, an interior space that the beholder discovers when stepping aside). The fold engenders the fantasy of unfolding and of the plane as a compression of volume, an idea developed further in the *Contra-reliefs*, where void is sandwiched between layers of black or white boards.

That plane has a volume, and that this volume can be opened up (as a cocoon) is at the core of Clark's most celebrated works, the *Animals* of 1960–4 [5, 7], free-standing structures made of hinged plates of metals that one can manipulate to give the sculpture various shapes (when stored, an *Animal* is perfectly flat—just like the suspended sculptures of Aleksandr Rodchenko). The articulation and disposition of the metal plates determine a set of possibilities that are often unforeseeable. In these first participatory works, Clark transposed her topological investigations (concerning the possible abolition of the reverse side of a plane) into the mode of relations between subject and object: neither is passive nor entirely free. The *Animal* is conceived as an organism that reacts, with its own laws and limitations, to the movements of whoever manipulates it to modify its configuration. Often it requires certain gestures or unexpectedly turns itself inside out: the dialogue between *Animal* and "beholder" is at times exhilarating, at times frustrating, but it always undermines the notion that one could ever be in control of the other.

1950–1959



5 • Lygia Clark, installation in the Brazilian Pavilion at the Venice Biennale, 1968

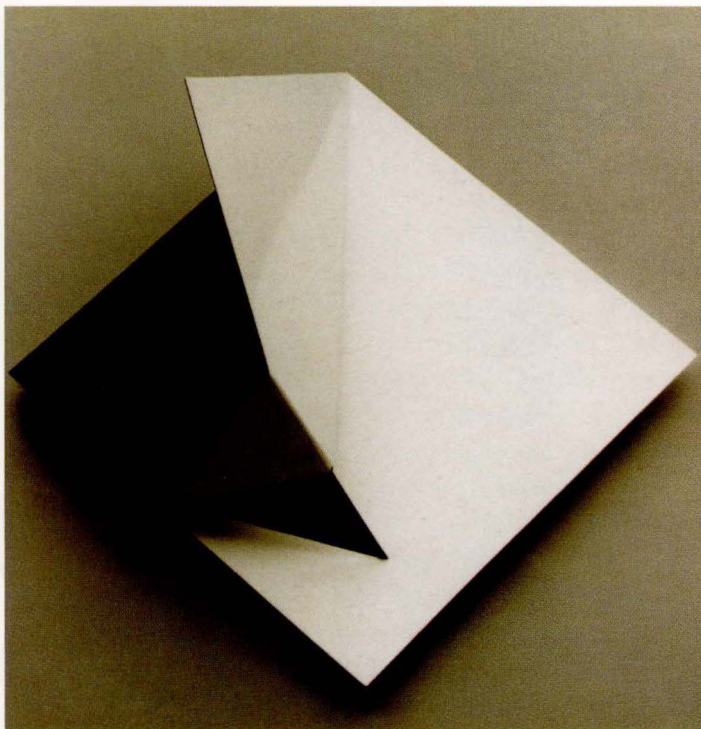
Clark's *Animals* can be seen on the plinths and on the floor under the black-and-white painting in the upper left corner.

▲ 1947a

● 1965

▲ 1914, 1921

● 1921

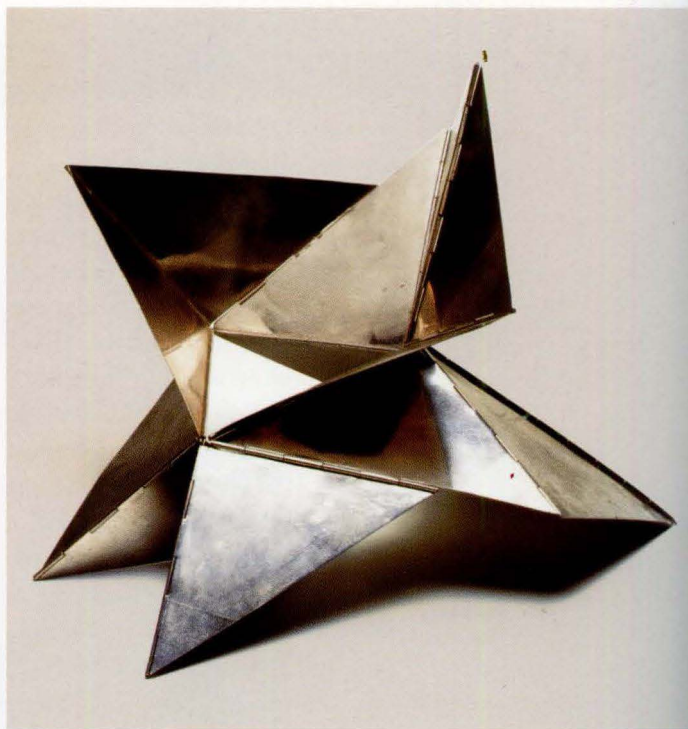


6 • Lygia Clark, *Cocoon*, 1959
Nitrocellulose paint on tin, 30 x 30 x 30 (11 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 11 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 11 $\frac{3}{4}$)

From painting and sculpture to the absence of objects

It is at this juncture that Clark invented the *Caminhando* (poorly translatable as “Trailing,” “Walking along”), which in 1964 marks both her definitive farewell to geometric art and the beginning of a trend in her work and in that of Oiticica that one could characterize as the progressive disappearance of the art object as such. (In other words, perhaps because of their total disregard for the strictures of the art market, the logical development of the Neoconcretists followed a path rigorously inverse to that of Gutai: they began with pictures and ended with props that were nothing if not manipulated.) The *Caminhando* returned one more time to Bill’s infatuation with the morphological wonders of topology, but rather than being an object it is conceived as an existential experience that has to be lived through: the basic material is a paper Moebius strip, a shape that Bill had many times carved in granite. Here are Clark’s do-it-yourself instructions: “Take a pair of scissors, stick one point into the surface and cut continuously along the length of the strip. Take care not to converge with the preexisting cut—which would cause the band to separate into two pieces. When you have gone the circuit of the strip, it’s up to you whether to cut to the left or to the right of the cut you’ve already made. The idea of choice is capital. The unique meaning of this experience is in the act of doing it. The work is your act alone. To the extent that you cut the strip, it refines and redoubles itself into interlacings. At the end the path is so narrow that you can’t open it further. It’s the end of the trail.”

What’s left, a pile of paper spaghetti on the floor, is ready for the wastebasket: “There is only one type of duration: the act. The act is that which produces the *Caminhando*. Nothing exists before and



7 • Lygia Clark, *Animal*, 1960
Steel, 45 x 50 (17 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 19 $\frac{3}{4}$)

nothing afterwards,” writes Clark, adding that it is essential “not to know—while you are cutting—what you are going to cut and what you have already cut.” And then: “Even if this proposition is not considered as a work of art, and even if one remains skeptical in relation to what it implies, it is necessary to do it.”

From the *Caminhando*, Clark and Oiticica developed, throughout the sixties and beyond, a complex interactive practice that steered away not only from any consideration of the object *per se*, but also from any notion of theatricality (no performance, not even in the “propositions” that involved multiple “participants”—to use the words that now respectively replaced “object” and “beholder” in their numerous texts). More important yet, the very concept of the artist gradually became irrelevant (as “art” became a kind of therapy or social work): the Neoconcretists’ propositions might very well be “arenas for action,” to refer again to Rosenberg’s coinage, but not as vehicles for the expression of an authorial subject. If a cathartic liberation is indeed the goal, it is that of the participant.

FURTHER READING

- Barbara von Bertozzi and Klaus Wolbert (eds), *Gutai: Japanese Avant-Garde 1954–1965* (Darmstadt: Mathildenhöhe, 1991)
Manuel J. Borja-Villel (ed.), *Lygia Clark* (Barcelona: Fundació Antoni Tapies, 1997)
Guy Brett et al., *Hélio Oiticica* (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 1994)
Lygia Clark, “Nostalgia of the Body,” *October*, no. 69, Summer 1994
Rosalind Krauss and Yve-Alain Bois, *Formless: A User’s Guide* (New York: Zone Books, 1997)
Alexandra Monroe, “To Challenge The Mid-Summer Sun: The Gutai Group,” *Japanese Art After 1945: Scream Against The Sky* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1994)
Harold Rosenberg, “The American Action Painters,” *Artnews*, December 1952

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To Nikos Stangos (1936–2004), in memoriam

With love, admiration, and grief, we dedicate this book to Nikos Stangos, great editor, poet, and friend, whose belief in this project both instigated and sustained it through the course of its development.

We would like to thank Thomas Neurath and Peter Warner for their patient support, and Nikos Stangos and Andrew Brown for their editorial expertise. The book would not have been begun without Nikos; it would not have been completed without Andrew.

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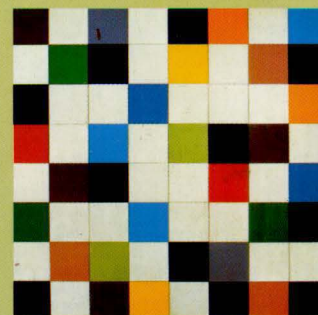
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1940–1944

292 1942a The depoliticization of the American avant-garde reaches the point of no return when Clement Greenberg and the editors of *Partisan Review* bid farewell to Marxism.

297 1942b As World War II forces many Surrealists to emigrate from France to the United States, two shows in New York reflect on this condition of exile in different ways.

box • Exiles and émigrés
box • Peggy Guggenheim

302 1943 James A. Porter's *Modern Negro Art*, the first scholarly study of African-American art, is published in New York as the Harlem Renaissance promotes race awareness and heritage.

308 1944a Piet Mondrian dies, leaving unfinished *Victory Boogie-Woogie*, a work that exemplifies his conception of painting as a destructive enterprise.

313 1944b At the outbreak of World War II, the "Old Masters" of modern art—Matisse, Picasso, Braque, and Bonnard—consider their refusal to flee occupied France as an act of resistance against barbarity: discovered at the Liberation, the style they had developed during the war years presents a challenge to the new generation of artists.

318 Roundtable | Art at mid-century

1945–1949

332 1945 David Smith makes *Pillar of Sunday*: constructed sculpture is caught between the craft basis of traditional art and the industrial basis of modern manufacturing.

337 1946 Jean Dubuffet exhibits his "*hautes pâtes*," which confirm the existence of a new, scatological trend in postwar French art, soon to be named "*informel*."

box • *Art brut*

343 1947a Josef Albers begins his "Variant" paintings at Black Mountain College in North Carolina a year after László Moholy-Nagy dies in Chicago: imported to the United States, the model of the Bauhaus is transformed by different artistic imperatives and institutional pressures.

348 1947b The publication of *Possibilities* in New York marks the coalescence of Abstract Expressionism as a movement.

355 1949 *Life* magazine asks its readers "Is he the greatest living painter in the United States?": the work of Jackson Pollock emerges as the symbol of advanced art.

1950–1959

362 1951 Barnett Newman's second exhibition fails: he is ostracized by his fellow Abstract Expressionists, only later to be hailed as a father figure by the Minimalist artists.

368 1953 Composer John Cage collaborates on Robert Rauschenberg's *Tire Print*: the indexical imprint is developed as a weapon against the expressive mark in a range of work by Rauschenberg, Ellsworth Kelly, and Cy Twombly.

373 1955a The first Gutai exhibition in Japan marks the dissemination of modernist art through the media and its reinterpretation by artists outside the United States and Europe, also exemplified by the rise of the Neoconcretist group in Brazil.

379 1955b The "Le mouvement" show at the Galerie Denise René in Paris launches kineticism.

385 1956 The exhibition "This is Tomorrow" in London marks the culmination of research into postwar relations between art, science, technology, product design, and popular culture undertaken by the Independent Group, forerunners of British Pop art.

391 1957a Two small vanguard groups, the Lettrist International and the Imaginist Bauhaus, merge to form the Situationist International, the most politically engaged of all postwar movements.

box • Two theses from *The Society of the Spectacle*

398 1957b Ad Reinhardt writes "Twelve Rules for a New Academy": as avant-garde paradigms in painting are reformulated in Europe, the monochrome and grid are explored in the United States by Reinhardt, Robert Ryman, Agnes Martin, and others.

404 1958 Jasper Johns's *Target with Four Faces* appears on the cover of *Artnews* magazine: for some artists like Frank Stella, Johns presents a model of painting in which figure and ground are fused in a single image-object; for others, he opens up the use of everyday signs and conceptual ambiguities alike.

box • Ludwig Wittgenstein

411 1959a Lucio Fontana has his first retrospective: he uses kitsch associations to question idealist modernism, a critique extended by his protégé Piero Manzoni.

415 1959b At the San Francisco Art Association, Bruce Conner shows *CHILD*, a mutilated figure in a high chair made in protest against capital punishment: a practice of assemblage and environment is developed on the West Coast by Conner, Wallace Berman, Ed Kienholz, and others that is more scabrous than its equivalents in New York, Paris, or elsewhere.

421 1959c The Museum of Modern Art in New York mounts "New Images of Man": existentialist aesthetics extend into a Cold War politics of figuration in the work of Alberto Giacometti, Jean Dubuffet, Francis Bacon, Willem de Kooning, and others.

box • *Art and the Cold War*

426 1959d Richard Avedon's *Observations* and Robert Frank's *The Americans* establish the dialectical parameters of New York School photography.