

Anti-action: Atsuko Tanaka and the Aesthetics of Post-War Mass Culture in Japan

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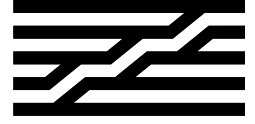
Saloua Raouda Choucair, *Fractional Module*, 1947-1951, 49,5 x 59 cm, Courtesy Saloua Raouda Choucair Foundation

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Abstract Art and the Japanese Art World after the Second World War

Let me begin by looking at two paintings. The first is a painting by Kazuo Shiraga (*Work II*, 1958, Hyogo Prefectural Museum of Art), in which a crimson lake paint spurts like blood from the canvas, leaving clear traces of the artist's body and inscribing an aggressive act of creation. In dialogue with Informel, he believed that action was the most important aspect of painting,¹ and famously made these works directly with his feet on the canvas. The second, by Atsuko Tanaka (*Work*, 1964, The Miyagi Museum of Art) is orderly yet dynamic, flat but oppressive, artificial yet vividly coloured. There are no traces of the painter's physical movements, as was the case in action painting, nor of the unstable materiality of Art Informel. As is well known, they both belonged to the post-war Japanese Gutai Art Association, whose male artists, such as Shiraga, were known for their action painting. Produced as a reaction to action painting like Shiraga's, Tanaka's work has yet to be fully understood in its relation to it.

This paper is a case study of the gendered history of post-WWII abstract painting in Japan: it explains the reach of those gendered assumptions, yet showing how Japanese women artists resisted these narratives and defined an equally powerful language of expression. I will be reflecting on Tanaka's work in the context of other women artists of the period. Post-war painting is largely remembered as a period defined by male-dominated institutions and masculine expressions. However, in Japan, the main players of abstract paintings included a number of female painters, among whom the artists range from the well-known Yayoi Kusama and Atsuko Tanaka to under-represented artists like Hideko Fukushima. The key term here is "anti-action",² which will help not only to highlight what there is in common in the women's artworks, but also to identify differences between them, and to differentiate their works from those of their male contemporaries. In terms of the history of abstract painting, women artists in Japan are still historically marginalized or over-individualized. This study will eventually demonstrate how their works in the 1950s and early 1960s challenged and diversified the history of Japanese and world post-war abstract painting. By doing so, this paper attempts to position Tanaka's work as a critique of post-war abstract painting's masculinist aesthetics.

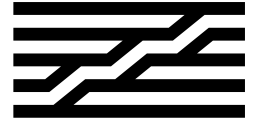


Post-war Abstract Art and Gender in Japan

After the Second World War, women's suffrage was granted at the instigation of the U.S. occupation army in 1947, and women garnered attention as symbols of the new post-war era. It was at this time that Art Informel and Abstract Expressionism were introduced to Japan. Notably, this was a period in the history of art in Japan during which many women were active. The ideology that was conveyed with expressive abstraction, such as liberal universalism and individualist freedom, influenced the nationalism of Japanese post-war society in a complex way. One such influence can be seen in new art criticism that allowed women artists to be one of the beneficiaries of abstract universalism. The result in Japan was that Art Informel supported the advancement of women artists. The French art critic Michel Tapié counted women artists like Joan Mitchell and Claire Falkenstein as practitioners of Art Informel. When he came to Japan, he included a number of women artists – including Fukushima and Tanaka – in his choice of Japanese Informel artists.

Following Tapié's inclusion of women artists, the tendency of art criticism in Japan changed. The post-war notion of abstract universalism in the country at the outset encouraged pure formalist criticism, which gave women room to participate fully in the artistic arena. Works by women artists began to be evaluated on the basis of criteria other than that of "womanliness", which had traditionally been imposed on women. In previous criticism by critics of the pre-war generation, works by women were almost invariably associated with their artist's physicality. With the advent of the Informel aesthetic, younger critics instead turned their attention to the materiality of the work, the process of making it, the method, and other aspects that characterised post-war abstraction. This tendency resulted in the liberation of women from the expectation of conventional femininity, albeit temporarily and falsely. There were even some women artists who won recognition that exceeded that of men. Indeed, there are more works marked by unique originality by women artists than by men, whose production more often than not was considered a substream of American action painting. Post-war abstract art in Japan was initially an art movement that contributed to the breaking down of gender barriers.

However, a turning point soon arrived, and abstract art ended up being heavily masculinised. Once the Allied occupation of Japan came to an end, in the 1950s a tendency arose to recognise more "masculinity" in Japanese art than in its more feminised counterparts in Europe and the US. Bart Winther-Tamaki's *Art in the Encounter of Nations*, which discusses Japanese artists in American Abstract Expressionism, argues that there is a gendered structure to the cross-cultural exchange that took place through post-war abstract painting. The role assigned to Japan in the first place was only «otherness» to which femininity was attached.³ Japanese critics, who were mostly male, gradually became aware of the paternalistic response of Western critics, including that of Tapié, to Japanese art, and came to realise that there would be no post-war restoration of Japanese contemporary art through Informel.



From around 1960 onwards, “action painting” replaced Art Informel. Works by Jackson Pollock and other American action painters were received in Japan as masculine art from the very beginning.⁴ By introducing “action” – a masculine style of heroic, violent gesturality – into abstract art by Japanese artists, Japanese art critics sought to assert the authority of Japanese art in the face of emasculation in Euro-American art criticism. For example, in 1960, the critic Shin’ichi Segi described paintings by Hisao Dōmoto, who was regarded as a key artist of Art Informel, as follows:

[Dōmoto’s paintings] have a somewhat bold and big-hearted character which dispels the flimsy nuance lingering around emotion. They are manly, so to speak. Bearing in mind that the majority of Japanese art which has been acknowledged abroad until now has been feminine, the significance of an artist like Dōmoto appearing on the international stage is truly enormous and capable of redeeming the Japanese from servility.⁵

Segi’s account seems to imply the critic’s desire to protect works by Dōmoto, then an internationally recognized Japanese artist, from feminization and to emphasize their symbolism. Artists who were identified as “Art Informel” gradually came to be appreciated mainly for their “action”, that is to say the *act* of painting, and painting in general became a field in which the act of creation was coded as masculine.

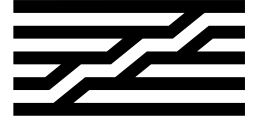
“Anti-action”

Thus, in the mid-1960s, “action”, meaning the masculinity of pictorial representation, began to be emphasised, and recognition of women abstract painters receded. Of course, that does not mean that women stopped producing works. In fact, it is notable that when “action painting” was in vogue, there were numerous artists pursuing “non-action” works. A number of prominent women abstract artists shared, albeit not openly, a sense of discomfort at or rejection of “action”. This triggered expressions of resistance against action as a pictorial tendency, which had become masculinised in art critical discourse. These responses, by such women artists as Yayoi Kusama, Hideko Fukushima, and Atsuko Tanaka, represent, I argue, a tendency that I call “anti-action”. Kusama wrote in 1961 that her method of expression was “the exact opposite of the emotional space created by action painting”.⁶ It can be said that her famous net paintings were, at least in part, produced as a counter-attack on the masculine implications of action painting. Kusama commented as follows:

Hidebound art historians worshipped the patterns made by action painting and, in fact, Jackson Pollock’s actions of urinating on white snow or concrete, thus seriously upsetting the methodology of the penis.

The sun shines brightly on the penis, and the earth rotates around it.⁷

The *infinity nets* that Yayoi Kusama produced with minimal movement of the hand were, in a sense, negating the brutality of action. Alternatively, although she is not so well-known at present, there were



artists like Hideko Fukushima. Fukushima said she “had doubts about the act of painting”.⁸ In order to erase traces of herself while producing a painting, she devised a unique technique of “stamping”. She would create a painting by putting *sumi* ink on a bottlecap and pressing it onto the image. As an expression, this meant no more than leaving marks in a passive manner and could be regarded as a method of painting opposite in character to the gushes of paint generated by aggressive “action”.

Many artists demonstrated tendencies that ran counter to action painting, but here I would like to focus in particular on the Gutai artist Atsuko Tanaka. Here, I will demonstrate how her work resists the modernist idea of creation represented by action painting through a language of invention inspired by post-war consumer culture.

Those of you familiar with Tanaka will no doubt know her painted “technical drawings” related to her best-known work – *Electric Dress* (1956, Centre Pompidou) – which she regarded as paintings. The jumble of bright colours and reflecting lights is intense. Their impact is not very different from that of “action paintings”. Yet, whereas other Gutai members like Shiraga and Shōzo Shimamoto demonstrated characteristics of “action” to the fullest, Tanaka said she wanted to produce paintings not with “action” but “composure”.⁹ Indeed, her works were produced with neither extravagant gestures nor traces of the artist. She used shiny enamel paint applied in thin layers that disguise her gestures. Consequently, decisive interpretations of her paintings were long to emerge.

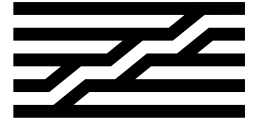
In order to consider the significance of Tanaka’s works in the history of abstract painting, I shall focus on two characteristics.

Matter, Materials and Mass Culture

First, let us look at the uniqueness of Tanaka’s work from the point of view of their materiality. As Jirō Yoshihara, the leader of the Gutai group, mentioned in *The Gutai Art Manifesto*, “matter” was an important subject at the Gutai Art Association. Yoshihara states as follows:

*Gutai art does not transform the matter. Gutai art gives the matter life. Gutai art does not falsify the matter. In Gutai art, the human spirit and the matter shake hands while remaining in rivalry. The matter does not assimilate the spirit. The spirit does not require the matter to be subordinate.*¹⁰

The subject discussed in the original Japanese manifesto was *busshitsu*, a word that covers a broad range of meanings that range from substance to material or medium. The quotation shows that the “matter” Gutai artists were referring to connotes a strong sense of materiality and symbolism characteristic of abstract art. Viewed in the context of action painting, the Gutai Art Association’s “matter” has been understood as the material that received the artist’s physical action, such as the crimson lake paint and mud Shiraga used, or the paint explosions employed by Shimamoto. There, the materiality of painting in action painting was considered as violence and aesthetics centred on the artist. Three of the seven illustrations in the Gutai



Art Manifesto are scenes of Murakami, Shiraga, and Shimamoto at work, and in these photographs, the male body comes to the fore as they hit the paper, throw paint bombs, and push paint with their feet while half-naked. There is no doubt that these images of Gutai artists engaging with “matter” contributed to the formation of the gender image of the Gutai group.

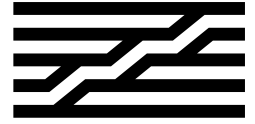
On the other hand, Tanaka used paper, cloth, ready-made bells and lightbulbs, industrial paint, etc. in her works. That is to say, she employed new post-war substances and materials that did not necessarily induce artists’ physical involvement. Tanaka considered these the “matter” that composed her “paintings”. Indeed, the “matter” Tanaka employed was the opposite of what “matter” was to the “action painters” of her time, in the sense that her materials were not expected to embody the subjectivity of the artist, but rather reflected her fascination with Japan’s new emerging mass culture.

There is no doubt that, to Tanaka, *Electric Dress* (1956) represented her greatest challenge with regard to the use of “new matter”. It is well-known that *Electric Dress* was inspired by the neon lights Tanaka saw from a train station in Osaka in the 1950s. Tanaka’s statement that “the neon lights of the medicine advertisements were dazzling” suggests a fresh reaction to the booming city of Osaka during the reconstruction period of the 1950s, when neon signs and lights were still rare. From a conventional artistic perspective, a leap was required to arrive at the idea for a work of art from her observation, but what Tanaka sensed from the city lights was that her desire for expression and her sense of transformation into a method were in line with the urban cultural ideas of the 1950s, and not with the artistic expression articulated by action painting. She explained that her purpose was “to eliminate all human emotions and produce the beauty of the ‘matter’ itself”.¹¹

Thus, I argue that Tanaka’s view of matter is not so much that of a creator of culture seeking self-expression in abstraction, but closer to that of a “consumer” stimulated by the new materials of the post-war era. In other words, taking up a position that ran counter to the principle of modern art that privileged the act of creation, Tanaka produced her works in accordance with the principles of reusing and remaking. Deborah Cherry and other feminist art historians have long pointed out that the critical apparatus of post-war abstract painting had a seriously misogynistic character, excluding women and popular culture as “cultural impurities”.¹² Tanaka’s interest seems to have been in actively engaging with this “impurity” of popular culture, which was not integral to high art. This also foreshadowed tendencies in the 1960s that engaged more explicitly with mass culture.

“Unpainted Paintings” and reuse of mass culture

The second characteristic of Atsuko Tanaka’s works that I would like to discuss is that she hardly placed any emphasis on the “act of painting” in relation to her treatment of “matter”. From the very beginning, far from action, Tanaka’s works aimed at “not painting”. For example, *Calendar* (1954) is a calendar she created at the start of her career. Sheets of paper made from different materials are collaged to create the form of



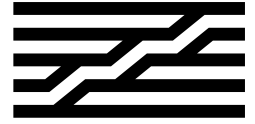
a calendar. Subsequently, she made “paintings” using cuts. In *Work (Yellow Cloth)* (1955) she made almost invisible cuts to the edge of commercially dyed pieces of yellow cloth. Although nothing was painted, and there was almost no intervention at all, she nonetheless referred to the technique as “painting”. Regarding the commercial yellow cotton cloth, Tanaka states that she chose the “disgusting colour” to avoid finding aesthetic value in it.¹³ She also made the following comment about the pink rayon (artificial silk known as “Jinken” [human silk]), which she used in her next painting, *Work* (1954).

I wanted to break away from the stable beauty of my work. The peach-coloured cloth that covers about 20 tatami mats is artificial silk, which I bought after searching all over Osaka for the most disgusting colour. I wanted to break through the conventional artistic facade by laying it out on the ground and letting it reflect the sun in a strange glow.¹⁴

Chemical fibres offered a substitute for natural materials, a man-made material that symbolised the new post-war era of industrialisation, but its novelty also implied poor quality and bad taste. In Tanaka’s words, the mass-produced, poor-quality cotton and artificial silk used in these works are presented as non-artistic “materials” that do not carry the cultural symbolism and meaning of traditional artistic materials such as canvases and oil paints. The use of these materials was a test of new artistic values that challenged traditional taste. In this work, it was once again the newly introduced post-war “matter” that was conveyed artistic expression, not the hand of the artist. In these works, Tanaka appears to have been aiming at “not painting” while producing “painting”. Bearing in mind that the trend of the time attached importance to the act of painting, this was a conscious act of refusal. At a time when “action” bore strongly masculine traits, Tanaka’s attitude could be regarded as an expression of “anti-action”, which she proposed as an alternative form of painting that reflected the material culture of the time rather than her interiority.

Following this, Tanaka returned to “painting”, but her passivity towards the “act of painting” was manifested in the way she incorporated finished mechanical drawings in her works. This form of anti-action can be associated with the consumer characteristic described earlier on. The design drawings on which Tanaka based her paintings remind us of the post-war explosion in science magazines and vogue for science kits. In the course of Japan’s remarkable technological progress after the war, a physics boom occurred in the country, and many science magazines were launched for both children and adults. They explained how to make appliances and toys based on simple electrical systems, and people were introduced to technical drawings while enjoying science as a pastime. I repeat, in the 1950s, Tanaka’s artistic sensibility touched on the exhilaration brought about by post-war material affluence and the impact of technology and electricity on the lives of city-dwellers, and their interest in the reuse and remaking of popular culture by artists rather than the traditional practice of individual creativity.

We can understand Tanaka’s pivot away from action towards anti-action strategies that embraced consumer culture and tactics of “not-painting” in relation to Andreas Huyssen’s argument that modernism,



in its pursuit of self-authenticity, has represented itself as masculine and popular culture as feminine.¹⁵ Tanaka's position of being a "consumer" can also be explained in terms of the gendered nature of cultural production and consumption. In Tanaka's early works, experience of the new industrial and consumer culture is extracted, highlighted, and re-presented as an aesthetic expression of a new sensation. If, with the development of capitalist culture, the autonomy of modern art is regarded as a masculine cultural act, we can re-evaluate the relationship between art and women and popular culture through Tanaka's work. Essentially, Tanaka developed a new mode of being an artist, in which she actively used her close relationship with popular culture in her work, and defined herself as both a cultural producer and consumer. As I have explained, most of those who were eventually recognised as creators of post-war abstract painting were traditional creators of culture, that is to say, male artists. By taking into consideration the connections between Tanaka's works and industrial culture or mass culture, my analysis demonstrates how her works could be described as a form of resistance to the focus given to action-oriented art produced mainly by men. To all intents and purposes, they were attempts by a woman searching for a new relationship between industrialisation, consumerism and art.

The lucid compositions, flat surfaces, and shiny colours presented no doubt repelled the critical gaze of viewers seeking "action painting", anticipating works in which they could imagine the artist's gesture or identify symbols in the traces of the artist's hand. There is no room for the viewer to project his or her personal emotions onto Tanaka's production. Exposure to her "anti-action" works has affinities with experiences of materials in commodity culture, such as industrial products and artificial colours. Far from being expressions of artistic interiority, these works are representations of the new sensations the Japanese public experienced during the 1950s. This principle of Tanaka's work demonstrates how, in denying action, women artists were finding alternatives to the abstract painting of post-war art. It can be said that rather than the individualism of action painting, Atsuko Tanaka was bringing the experiences of the masses, including women, to fruition in her art.

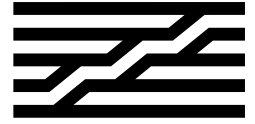
Notes

1. Kazuo Shiraga, "Kōi koso" [Action Is What It's All About], in *Gutai shiryō-shū: Dokyumento Gutai 1954-1972* [Gutai Documents: Document Gutai 1954-1972], Ashiya City Foundation for Cultural Promotion, 1993, 274 (first published in *Gutai*, no. 3, October 1955). In this text, Shiraga emphasises the importance of "action" in production, and in *Gutai* no. 5 (July 1957), he states that through action "body and spirit have been integrated."

2. Izumi Nakajima, *Anti-akushon; sengo nihonn bijutsu to josei gaka* [Anti-Action: Postwar Japanese Art and Women Artists] (Tokyo: Brücke, 2019).

3. Bert Winther-Tamaki, *Art in the Encounter of Nations: Japanese and American Artists in the Early Postwar Years* (Honolulu [HI]: University of Hawai'i Press, 2001).

4. Yusuka Nakahara, "Jakuson Porokku no baai" [In the Case of Jackson Pollock], *Bijutsu Techō* [Art Note] (June 1960), 76-84.



5. Shin'ichi Segi, "Gendaibijutsu no sakka zo2 Dōmoto Hisao" [Portrait of Contemporary Art 2], *Bijutsu Techō* [Art Note] (February 1960), 132-41.
6. Quoted in Atsushi Tanikawa, "Zōshoku no Gaenma- Kanojo ha ikanishite jidai wo kakenuketaka"[The Phantom of the Multiplication: How She Went Through the Ages], *Bijutsu Techō* [Art Note] (June 1993), 65-78. "I lived in the heyday of Tens Street, the mecca of action painting, and I didn't do action painting in the wave of their time. I stood right in the middle of it and immediately did the opposite of action painting. It's a whole net. There was no composition, no center, no shimmy of paint".
7. Yayoi Kusama, *Uddosutokku Inkei giri* [Woodstock penis slicer] (Tokyo: Peyotol kōbō, 1988), 242.
8. Quoted in Atsushi Miyakawa, "Atorie deno taiwa/Fukushima Hideko Onkyōteki na kukan" [Dialogue in the Studio / Hideko Fukushima, Acoustic Space], *Bijutsu Techō* [Art Note] (August 1964), 17-26 (here 24).
9. Quoted in "Tanaka Atsuko: Kaiga no denki gurubu" [Tanaka Atsuko: electric groove of painting], *Bijutsu Techō* [Art Note] (July 2001), 109-17 (here 111).
10. Jiro Yoshihara, "Gutai Bijutsu Sengen" [Gutai Art Manifesto], *Geijutsu Shichō* [Art New Current] (December 1956), 202-204.
11. Unsigned article, "Ishō nii denkyū ippai 'butai no bijutsu' ni uchikomū" [Lots of Light Bulbs in the Costume: Devotion to 'the art of the stage'], *Kokusai shinbun* [International Newspaper] (13 July 1957).
12. Jane Beckett, Deborah Cherry, "Modern Women, Modern Space: Women Metropolitan Culture and Vorticism" in *Women Artists and Modernism*, Katy Deepwell, ed. (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1998), 36-54.
13. Tanaka Atsuko, "Tanaka Atsuko jisaku wo kataru" [Tanaka talks about his work], *Circle/Lines Tanaka Atsuko ten fukyu puroguramu kirokushū*, (Shizuoka: Shizuoka Prefectural Museum of Art, 2003), 9.
14. Tanaka, "Mochifu wo kataru" [Talking about motifs], *Sangyō Keizai Shinbun* [sangyō keizai newspaper], 21 July 1955, 3.
15. Andreas Huyssen, "Mass Culture as Woman: Modernism's Other", in *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture and Postmodernism* (London and New York: MacMillan, 1986), 44-64.