Gutai Chain: The Collective Spirit of Individualism

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[Gutai artists] are in this sense linked chains. Individual chains vary, but each chain is seamlessly linked to another. Some are shiny, others dull. Nobody knows what each link [member] will do or when. Only the individual and time know. At the moment [of individual acts], the Gutai chain is broken apart completely . . . yet, I believe the link remains ever more solid and intimate. — Ukita Yōzō

The Gutai group was founded in the Osaka-Kobe region of Japan in 1954 by Yoshihara Jirō. The group name, which translates as “concreteness” or “embodiment,” indicates Gutai’s overarching interest in the relationship between artist and materials, but it was interpreted by the members of this group over the course of eighteen years in a dazzling variety of ways.1 With works as diverse as gestural painting, water and smoke installations, electric dresses, performances on stage, concrete music, and soap-based kinetic
art, one might wonder how all these artists even constituted a single group. Perhaps even more surprising is the fact that these artists, engaged in such heterogeneous practices, were involved in a collective enterprise that encompassed their exhibitions, publications, and discourse (see appendix). Indeed, after the French critic Michel Tapié first encountered Gutai in 1957, he marveled over the creative tension that they maintained between individual and community, speculating, “I do not think that it is possible today to find a single other group in the world that can truly be called a ‘group,’ yet encompasses such a great number of locally polarized individual elements.”

In the postwar period, when artists around the world seeking to make sense of the inhumanity of the previous war looked either to the individual as a site of existential resistance or to the collective as a source of revolutionary power, the Gutai group’s articulation of a creative relationship between individual and community represented an unusual and prescient perspective. With a leader who trumpeted his nonhierarchical status as “a teacher who teaches nothing,” Gutai developed the possibility of diversity within community, and community as a means of developing rather than repressing the individual. This article examines the dialogical relationship that Gutai established between individual and community through their work, their exhibitions, and their writings. It places their development of what I call a collective spirit of individualism in the context of postwar intellectual debates about individual and community, revealing their participation in discourses of war responsibility that have hitherto been neglected. In so doing, this study encourages Gutai scholarship to move beyond its previous formalist considerations toward an ethical understanding of Gutai’s artistic discourse.

The article begins by considering how Gutai, and in particular Shiraga Kazuo, participated in the public debate on individual and subjective “autonomy” (shutaisei) that developed as a critique of wartime notions of kokutai or the body politic. It then examines how Gutai departed from the solipsism of shutaisei to invent a new ideal of community through their group exhibitions. Focusing on an analysis of Gutai works, group exhibitions, and articles published in their group journal, Gutai, I reveal how they articulated a collective spirit of individualism that redefined community as a horizontal and creative collective necessary to the development of the individual.
Challenging “Self”: Gutai and Shiraga Kazuo

At the first Gutai Art Exhibition in 1955, Shiraga Kazuo dove into a pile of mud, clay, rocks, and sand in the courtyard of the Ohara Kaikan in Tokyo. Thrashing, struggling, throwing, heaving, and kneading, he slithered in the mud until he emerged, bruised and cut, leaving a sculptural elegy of conflict (figure 1). Despite its manifest violence, Challenging Mud has been con-

Figure 1 Shiraga Kazuo, Challenging Mud, 1955. © Shiraga Fujiko and Hisao and the former members of the Gutai Art Association. Image courtesy of Amagasaki Cultural Center
considered primarily within the formalist reception of Gutai that legitimately characterizes the work as an experiment about painting, an extension of his practice of painting with his feet to encompass his entire body.⁴ As Hirai Shōichi notes, “It is clear that [Shiraga] conceived of [Challenging Mud] as painting even if [it] was not strictly two-dimensional.”⁵ Osaki Shin’ichirō points out that the artists who made the “action pieces all considered their works as paintings (taburō).”⁶ Alexandra Munroe supports this assertion, writing that Challenging Mud and other “action events . . . used the body as a medium for painterly expression,”⁷ and Yamamoto Atsuo stresses that “for Shiraga, this work is simply a painting made with his body.”⁸

There is, however, more to this work, indeed to much of Gutai, if one looks beyond its formal project of exploring and expanding the boundaries of painting. In the introduction to this special issue, for example, Reiko Tomii explores the work’s role as a media attraction, considering its groundbreaking use of public relations to garner critical attention. Because the group had previously been received as derivative of French Informel or a precursor of US Happenings, scholarly analyses of Gutai have focused on articulating the group’s distinctive formal project. While this is certainly in keeping with Yoshihara Jirō’s modernist perspective and dictum to “do what no one before you has done!” this interpretation of the group’s activities limits the impact of their work to the formalist concerns of international modernism.⁹

Taking a closer look at Challenging Mud in relation to Shiraga’s contemporaneous writings reveals a much richer story that is situated within the larger discourse of postwar reflection on Japan’s war responsibility. In “The Formation of the Individual,” the essay that accompanied the photographic record of this performance in the fourth issue of Gutai, Shiraga wrote,

> Above all else, people need to understand the motteiru shitsu [personal material] they were born with. This material expresses one’s difference from others and emerges when a person watches and feels, talks, paints, or makes sounds. Each person should develop his or her own way of feeling, talking and painting. . . . The stronger a person’s will, the more they can resist external forces. Contemporary intellect, like consciousness, is fleeing from the darkness of the first half of the twentieth century and is longing for a brighter world.¹⁰
In this statement, Shiraga stresses the importance of the individual in resisting “the darkness of the first half of the twentieth century.” Through this gesture, Shiraga gave his views on individualism a significance beyond art for art’s sake. Indeed, rereading Shiraga’s comments on individualism and the body with an attention to his discursive context reveals an ethical engagement with the question of Japanese war responsibility in the immediate postwar period that questioned why militarism took hold so easily during the war.

Shiraga’s articulation of individualism took place against a public discourse in the postwar period that was dominated by a group of writers associated with the journal *Kindai bungaku* (*Modern Literature*) and the political scientist Murayama Masao. These voices questioned the institutionalized mythology propagated by both the US occupation and Japanese authorities that war responsibility lay exclusively on the shoulders of military leaders, thus exonerating all Japanese citizens as well as the emperor.11 One of the most important concepts of this critique from the Left was the notion of shutaisei, or “subjective autonomy.” Its lack was seen as the fundamental explanation of why fascism was successful in wartime Japan, and its development a postwar imperative to prevent the reoccurrence of militarism. They employed the idea of shutaisei to understand the fundamental factors that contributed to the failure of ordinary citizens to resist participating in the war. Rather than seeking to purify the Japanese nation as a group through a “purge of the guilty” (shukusei), as the occupation and Japanese authorities were doing, the Kindai Bungaku group forced themselves to confront their own guilt and their own responsibility. As Odagiri Hideo, a contributor to this discourse suggested, “Feudalism penetrates even the small corners of our sensibility in daily life. Therefore, we can fight against it only by conquering what is feudalistic within ourselves.”12

In 1946, the Kindai Bungaku group held a roundtable discussion on the subject of war responsibility and the emperor system, in which they articulated their key thesis: Japan pursued an unjust war because its citizens, subsumed as they were into the emperor system, were unable to think for themselves and unable to stand against the government. Ara Masato said it best during the roundtable:

The emperor system must share responsibility for the war, but the emperor has not admitted that. When confronted with this [anomaly], writers tend
either to put up a front of ignorance, on the pretext that as writers they
know nothing of politics, or just leave the pursuit of the emperor’s war
guilt to the Communist Party. But these evasions leave them impotent to
take up the war responsibility of writers. If, as writers, we are to pursue
the emperor’s war responsibility in a literary way, we will have to struggle
with the semi-feudal sensibilities, emotions, and desires that are rooted in
our own internal “emperor system.” That is the only way we can negate the
emperor system per se.

We were unable to oppose the war. . . . Why? Because we did not have
within us a modern ego.

The absence of the modern ego was thus held accountable for the feudalism
and mass psychology of Japan under militarism. According to the Kindai
Bungaku group, in order to overcome history and prevent the reemergence
of totalitarianism, Japan had to confront the question of war responsibil-
ity both internally and externally, in the realm of politics. The emperor
system had to be demolished, not only because of its culpability in the previ-
ous war but also because of its role in producing and maintaining imperial
subjects—feudal subjects. The only means of resisting totalitarian forces
was to develop a strong sense of shutaisei in the Japanese people.

Japan’s lack of humanity during the war was thus ascribed to its lack of
humanism. Where for Theodore Adorno, “to write poetry after Auschwitz
is barbaric,” the Kindai Bungaku writer Honda Shūgo expounded, “Where
joy and fascination do not burst forth from within the artist, where passion
does not flow outward from the self—the individual self—of the artist,
all art will die. Literature died during the war.” In the European Left’s
response to the end of World War II, the humanist subject was questioned as
a flawed category that had proven its failure through its complicit role in the
Holocaust. In contrast, the Japanese Left, in its critique of the war, claimed
that militarism and barbarity were the result of feudal subjectivities, or a lack
of humanism. In a rejection of wartime calls for messhi hōkō (“obliterate the
self, serve public authority”), humanism, individualism, and the development
of a modern subject were privileged as a mode of resisting totalitarianism.

For Shiraga, the purpose of Challenging Mud, in fact of all art making,
was thus to develop, understand, and express the personal material of the
individual for the purposes of creating a society of politically, ethically, and
aesthetically independent individuals. *Challenging Mud* built upon the rhetoric that Shiraga had already developed around his painting practice in which he painted with his feet in order to “be naked, stripping off all these ready-made clothes.”17 Indeed, in *Challenging Mud*, Shiraga literally stripped off his clothes and struggled against the earth, thrashing in a dance of self-expression that highlighted the power of the individual. When it came time to publish the work, Shiraga juxtaposed his article “The Formation of the Individual” against both the now-famous iconic photograph of the artist whirling in a vortex of mud (see figure 1), and time-lapse photographs of the performance that showed his body in clear contrast to the earth (figure 2). By articulating how the individual was distinctive, this work was an attack on the wartime
myth of the seamless collective of the nation as community, and an insistence on the power of dissent. *Challenging Mud* was thus also challenging Self—a challenge to assert the self against external forces, to articulate a radical individualism that could resist the mass psychology of fascism. It was therefore an implicitly political work engaging with the question of war responsibility—an explosive and bodily expression of the individual.

Shiraga systematically laid out his thoughts on the significance of the individual in a series of articles that he published in the *Gutai* journal between 1955 and 1957 that included “Action: That’s What Counts,” “The Formation of the Individual,” “On Shishitsu (Distinctive Properties),” and “The Realm of the Senses.” In these texts, Shiraga fleshed out his theory of the individual, linking body, creativity, personal expression, and personal autonomy as a means for asserting political freedom. Elaborating upon the importance of bodily expression in his paintings and actions, these articles located individuality in the physical body. The opening paragraph of “On Shishitsu” lays down the gauntlet. He writes, “Although I am neither a doctor nor a physiologist, I have long been obsessed with how art as the expression of seishin [the spirit] is contingent upon nikutai [the body].” Referring to the body as nikutai (flesh, or the carnal body), Shiraga situates his work within a larger discourse about the carnal body and the individual. By explicitly choosing the word nikutai, which is not normally used to refer to the body in general contexts, and expounding on the importance of following one’s bodily desires, Shiraga was aligning his work with that of nikutai bungaku novelists such as Tamura Taijirō, Sakaguchi Ango, and Dazai Osamu. For these nikutai or “flesh” writers, the carnal body was the site of resistance to the abstract ideology of wartime seishin and the locus of shutaisei. The flesh evoked by these artists and writers was not transcendental, nor was the physical body offered as a new ideology. Rather, the body was seen as an ugly, flawed, contingent, at times even despicable source of desire and drives that was nevertheless understood as the origins of authenticity and individuality and thus a rejection of wartime feudalism. As Shiraga commented in “On Shishitsu,” “Independent persons’ expression of shishitsu through art results in a realistic embodiment of society, not in a morally ideal art.”

 Rejecting ready-made ideology, Shiraga privileged the body as the site and origin of individual expression, and the development of subjective autonomy
as the ultimate goal of self-expression. Subjective autonomy or, in Shiraga’s words, *shishitsu*, “acts as a guide to prevent human beings from drowning or being swept irresistibly by the current of the times,” providing resistance to mass political movements.22 Shiraga’s concerns were shared by other Gutai members, notably Motonaga Sadamasa, who advocated the importance of individuation to creativity in his article “Self-Absorption,” and Gutai leader Yoshihara, who equated individualism with ethical and political freedom in his introduction to the first issue of the *Gutai* journal. For these three artists, the assertion of the individual or, as Motonaga wrote, “standing in resistance to protect and nurture self-absorption,” is of the utmost significance in preserving political freedom and preventing totalitarianism from rising again.23 As Yoshihara articulated in the first issue of *Gutai*, “Most important for us, is for contemporary art to act as a space of freedom that provides the greatest outlet for people struggling to survive in our contemporary world. It is our belief that creativity in a context of freedom will contribute to the improvement of the human race.”24

**Gutai Chain: Reinventing Community**

Despite this focus on the individual, Gutai remained interested in the concept of community, in the creative function of the social unit. Indeed, in 1955, the group submitted all their works to the 7th Yomiuri Independent Exhibition signed by a single collective author: Gutai. Although a failed experiment that was never again repeated, the incident demonstrates Gutai’s experiments with and drive toward collectivism. A key point that one notices in Shiraga’s texts is a dialogical engagement with the notion of the group set in relation to his concerns about the individual. This tension is an early iteration of the shift in left-wing debates from discussions of subjective autonomy toward a consideration of community in the late 1950s and early 1960s by intellectuals such as Yoshimoto Takaaki and Irokawa Daikichi.

In the decade after the war, community (*kyōdōtai*) or, more specifically, what sociologist Kawashima Takeyoshi called “hierarchical community” (*mibun kaisōsei o tomonau kyōdōtai*), was blamed for the “feudal mentality” that enabled Japan’s pursuit of wars of aggression in the emperor’s name.25 For modernist thinkers such as Maruyama Masao, who advocated the devel-
opment of an autonomous modern subject, no community in Japan was free of feudal hierarchies. He argued that in order to truly transcend the forces that created the emperor system, “community must become extinct.”

Younger Marxists such as Yoshimoto Takaaki and Irokawa Daikichi, with their faith in humanist individualism eroded by the “reverse course” policies of the occupation, began to rethink the community. Irokawa wrote, “To call the community a simple and irrational feudal social structure constructed haphazardly on the basis of noncontractual, direct, and emotive cooperation is both superficial and narrow. Maruyama’s contention that the community does not allow individuation, for example, is unfairly one-sided; it ignores both the value placed on competition within the community and the willingness of communities to defend themselves against outside authority.”

Not at all a reversion to wartime notions of community, this was a Marxist ideal that became particularly powerful around the time of the 1960 Anpo crisis, which centered on the renewal of the US-Japan Security Treaty (Anpo). Rather than being seen as a metonym for imperial power, this new conception of community was seen as a cancer in the official body politic, as a way for grassroots movements to assert their accumulated power against authority. In this view of community, individualism was fostered through competition within the community, and resistance against greater authority encouraged through solidarity.

It was this notion of community, rising up from the ground rather than imposed from above, that also characterized the Gutai’s prescient ideal of collectivism. Like Mavo in the 1920s, they turned away from the official gadan, or the art establishment composed of the salon and other art associations. Foreshadowing political developments in the 1960s on the New Left such as Zenkyōtō, Gutai articulated a new notion of the group that drew its direction from the horizontal interaction of autonomous individuals rather than the vertical, hierarchical dictates of a group leader or government official. Gutai’s new notion of community was conceived of as compatible with individualism and furthermore theorized as essential for the development of the individual.

Regarding the development of the individual, Shiraga wrote, “If one simply continues with the material one was born with, one never gets any
bigger or smaller, which is completely uninteresting. One has to make it grow by taking from others, to make it bigger, and hammer and temper it into shape.”28 Without community, therefore, the individual is solipsistic, locked in a vacuum and unable to progress. This is not, however, a feudal notion of community in which the will of the individual and the group are indistinguishable, a microcosm of the nation as a whole. It is a conception of community in which the egotistical individual is paramount for the formation of a group that is itself autonomous. Shiraga commented, “Unless spiritual egotism evolves, a flourishing common culture will not appear. Just as totalitarianism fails in the political field, so in the area of culture, unfree totalitarian ideas must vanish.”29

If, for Maruyama, individual and community were mutually exclusive, for Gutai, they were theorized in dialogical tension, creating an environment of creativity and individuation. As I will argue in the next section of this article, this position emerged out of the communal experience of planning, producing, and publishing the Gutai Art Exhibitions, both outdoors and on the stage.

**Gutai Art Exhibitions**

For Yoshihara, the Gutai Art Exhibitions were a way of proposing a vision without imposing his creative will on the group. In fact, it was through the Gutai Art Exhibitions that Yoshihara redefined the notion of a group leader, which had, in the years following the war, become as fraught as the social notion of hierarchical community and its art-world equivalent, the *bijutsu dantai* or art organizations. Indeed, Yoshihara framed Gutai exhibitions as an alternative to *dantai* exhibitions by organizing them on a similarly regular schedule, often timing them to coincide. Despite his somewhat bossy reputation in later years, Yoshihara consciously rejected a hierarchical model of community in defining his role as the leader of a group, writing, “To those young students of art who, following a state of national despondency after the war, began to gather at my atelier, I have been a teacher who teaches nothing. They have been able to find their respective ways by themselves. My role, if anything, has been to introduce to them one new form of manifestation after another which I have been able to think out.”30
By using innovative exhibition strategies to set forth artistic challenges for Gutai artists, Yoshihara laid the foundations of an art movement that held the individual and the community in tension, defining a body of common concerns without imposing a common style or even medium. Gutai artists produced a radically heterogeneous group of works between 1954 and 1972, responding to the artistic problems posed by Yoshihara in the form of exhibitions in a park, on the stage, and in the sky. While many of the Gutai art exhibitions served as sites for the articulation of a collective spirit of individualism, four exhibitions in particular were turning points in the theorization of the exhibition as a space of interactive creation, revealing a gradual sophistication of thought regarding the relationship between individual and community: *Outdoor Exhibition to Challenge the Midsummer Sun* (1955), *The First Gutai Art Exhibition* (1955), *The Outdoor Gutai Art Exhibition* (1956), and the first *Gutai Art on Stage* exhibition (1957).

*Outdoor Exhibition to Challenge the Midsummer Sun* was the first of Yoshihara’s experiments with nontraditional exhibitions. Although it was officially an Ashiya City Exhibition, half of the participants were Gutai members, and the show, set in a gnarled pine grove by the Ashiya River, set the tone for later Gutai Art Exhibitions. There has been much speculation about the reasons why Yoshihara planned this exhibition outdoors. It is likely that it was a combination of factors, including the fact that there had been outdoor exhibitions in Ashiya in 1922 and 1924; that Yoshihara was struck by the effectiveness of exhibiting works outdoors when he saw a group of rejected works for the Ashiya City Art Exhibition being stacked outside; that there was a tradition of mixing performance and the visual arts outdoors in Japanese matsuri festivals; and that Yoshihara was responding to Hans Namuth’s photographs of Jackson Pollock by asking, if art was now free from the museum, where could it productively go?

Taking the art exhibition outdoors, Yoshihara anticipated Allan Kaprow’s statement in 1966 that, like the canvas, “the room has always been a frame or format.” Stripped of this frame, which in its modernist guise had provided a backdrop of neutrality, the art object was no longer autonomous. Rather, the works were confronted with a space that dwarfed traditional works of art and posed unique problems of installation, forcing the artists to engage with their society and environment. As Shiraga Fujiko wrote on
creating a work for the *Outdoor Exhibition to Challenge the Midsummer Sun*, “When I brought the finished work to the exhibition site, I was shocked and dumbfounded, feeling as if I had been hit on the head so hard that I almost fainted. How insignificant my work appeared. How obviously intentional it appeared to be. It radiated power that was neither limitless nor massive.”

Faced with the challenge of responding to a site, of producing *in relation* to the exhibition concept and the work of her colleagues, it was not possible to be a solitary creator. Even keeping these issues in mind, once Shiraga Fujiko brought her work to the site, she felt that she had failed. The works that she and the other Gutai artists produced for this exhibition did, however, reveal an intuitive understanding of site specificity and a growing grasp of creativity as social praxis that later became an important aspect of their work. Shiraga Fujiko’s contribution to this outdoor exhibition, *White Plank*, was a long sheet of plywood that was painted white and cut in two by a serpentine gap that read like a line (figure 3). The work responded to both the scale of the site and the organic forms of the shadows cast by the pine grove where it was installed. Similarly, Sumi Yasuo’s *Work* expanded the magnitude of painting to fit the great outdoors (figure 4). This enormous painting was left unstretched and was hung from the trees with strings so that it would billow in the wind. Yoshihara’s own work for this show, *Figure 3* Shiraga Fujiko, *White Plank*, 1955. © Shiraga Fujiko and Hisao and the former members of the Gutai Art Association. Image courtesy of Amagasaki Cultural Center
Light Art, took the concept of responding to the site one step further, and addressed the fact that the outdoor exhibition was open around the clock, welcoming visitors on their evening strolls. His use of light in this work, which consisted simply of three vertical posts of uneven heights upon which the artist mounted rows of lit lightbulbs, greeted the changing environment of the exhibition. It acknowledged the presence of visitors in the evenings and provided a precedent for other Gutai artists, for whom light would become an important medium. More importantly, however, Yoshihara’s contribution to the development of the group lay in his planning of Outdoor Exhibition to Challenge the Midsummer Sun, which was the first of his experimental exhibitions. As these three works demonstrate, this exhibition was the first to encourage Gutai artists to begin creating in relation to the group, without imposing any uniform style or vocabulary.

The First Gutai Art Exhibition took place two months later, at the Ohara Kaikan in Tokyo. Yoshihara’s account of the exhibition in the fourth issue of Gutai, which featured this landmark event, reveals a growing sense of group identity emerging from the still nascent collective of young artists. He framed the experience of mounting the exhibition as a ludic, communal...
activity. “As if planning a picnic,” wrote Yoshihara, “they all felt like kindergarteners on the eve of an excursion.”34 The artists, who lived in the Kansai region, all traveled up to Tokyo together a few days before the exhibition in order to set up their works, which for many of the artists meant making them on-site. Clearly, this experience of creation outside the protective neutrality of the studio made an impact on the artists. In this context, creativity had to become a group activity that was embedded in the development of site and community, instigating a creative explosion of works that were concerned with a common issue: expanding the boundaries of painting. With only their departure from paint on canvas as common ground, Shiraga performed the work *Challenging Mud* described above, Murakami Saburō created *At One Moment Opening Six Holes* (figure 5), Tanaka Atsuko showed her revolutionary sound piece *Work (Bell)*, and Shimamoto Shōzō first
showed the work Please Walk on Here. In each case, the work was assertively experimental (and thus individualist) but also engaged the community’s collective challenge to the discourses of painting.

In the work At One Moment Opening Six Holes, Murakami used his body to ram through three paper screens covered in Kraft paper, creating six separate openings. As with Challenging Mud, this work was a direct confrontation between the artist and the material that was physically taxing and expressive of the body. When the artist was finished with the performance, he collapsed on the ground with a light concussion, in a dramatic finale. Although the work could, like Challenging Mud, be taken as a work driven solely by the artist’s own bodily expression, one must see it in the larger context of its installation in The First Gutai Art Exhibition, where it provided the basis of the collaborative Entrance. This work, a paper screen that Murakami erected over the entrance to the exhibition and was torn by Yoshihara, was a partnership between the two artists that also allowed members of the public to walk through the space of the work as they entered the gallery. As such, the work opened the possibility of community in relation to the expressive individual.

In Work (Bell), Tanaka delimited a space with a series of electric bells that were connected to a switch labeled simply “Please feel free to push the button: Tanaka Atsuko.” Obeying this simple entreaty, the viewer activated the mechanism, causing the bells to ring sequentially. At once, this work defined an architectural space using sound, broke taboos about silence in the gallery space, and changed the relationship between the viewer and the artist by using playful interactivity to provoke viewer participation. This work reached out to audiences even more dynamically than Entrance, inviting them to actively engage with the work. Snaking through the exhibition space, the work also operated in relation to the rest of the group’s works, acquiring new resonances in different parts of the exhibition site.

Similarly, Shimamoto Shōzō’s Please Walk on Here requested viewer participation. The work, a minimalist rectangular box covered with wooden planks, could, like Tanaka’s Work (Bell), only be experienced if fully engaged. If, as solicited, the visitor walked on the surface of the box, they quickly became aware of the “composition” of physical sensation that Shimamoto built into the work with an alternation of rickety and well-supported slats.
As with Tanaka’s *Work (Bell)*, the work was about exploring abstract composition beyond the visual, to sound in the case of *Work (Bell)* and balance in the case of *Please Walk on Here*. In both cases, the works also required audience involvement to be fully realized, taking the collective enterprise beyond site-specific and community-specific work to an aesthetic project that was incomplete without its audience, what Nicolas Bourriaud would later call relational aesthetics.35

The collective enterprise of *The First Gutai Art Exhibition* is nowhere more evident than in the documentation of the exhibition and its public presentation in *Gutai 4*, which served as the special issue dedicated to *The First Gutai Art Exhibition*. As demonstrated by its documentary photographs, these works were created in dialogue with other Gutai members and were designed to be experienced by the other Gutai members, who pose for photographs interacting with the works. In one series of photographs, Shiraga and Murakami are shown helping Kanayama inflate his work *Balloon*. Similarly, Shiraga and Kanayama are also shown assisting Murakami in his performance of *At One Moment Opening Six Holes*. In one photograph, Motonaga is shown staring intently at a work by Yoshihara. In another, Yamazaki Tsuruko is shown peering quizzically at Murakami as he looks through the remnants of his paper screen performance. *Gutai 4* is also filled with critical articles written by Gutai members on the works of other members. In addition to Yoshihara’s usual summary of works, the artists provide each other with serious reflections on their work: Kanayama on Shiraga, Kanayama on Tanaka, Shimamoto on Sumi, Shimamoto on Tanaka.36 Not only is their collective discourse extended into print, but it is also theorized in print by Ukita in his article “Gutai Chain” (quoted at the beginning of this essay), which appears on page 30 of *Gutai 4*.37

This notion of intersubjective audience participation was further radicalized in the *Outdoor Gutai Art Exhibition* held in the summer of 1956, which extended the notion of the audience as part of the creative community. Yamazaki’s illuminated red vinyl cube and mirror works literally incorporated audience bodies, by integrating their silhouettes and reflections into the picture plane (figure 6). Murakami’s *All the Landscapes*, an empty frame hung from the trees, invited audiences to frame their own works of art based on the position of their bodies in relation to the frame. Most radi-
cal was Yoshihara’s *Please Draw Freely*, a blank board that audiences filled with their own graffiti (figure 7). Where in *The First Gutai Art Exhibition*, audience participation was required to activate works such as *Work (Bell)* and *Please Walk on Here*, in the *Outdoor Gutai Art Exhibition*, the works were unfinished without an audience. Without an audience, there was no reflection in Yamazaki’s *Mirror*, no directional framing in Murakami’s *All the Landscapes*, and no graffiti in Yoshihara’s *Please Draw Freely*. This represented a radical shift in the notion of the artwork, from distanced masterpiece to site of community interaction.

The last major turning point in the conceptualization of the exhibition as a space of collective individualism was *Gutai Art on Stage*. Held in 1957 at the Sankei Kaikan hall in Osaka and in Tokyo, *Gutai Art on Stage* reflected both Yoshihara’s interest in the theater and also a dialogue with the process-based performances of artists such as Shiraga and Murakami at the outdoor
exhibitions. By its nature and scale a collaborative site, the stage challenged the already delicate balance between individual and community in Gutai even further. Not only did Gutai artists have to collaborate with each other and technicians on issues such as sound and light, but the works that they produced were often too complex to be performed by a solo artist. Shiraga’s performance *Ultra-Modern Sanbasō* required, for example, the assistance of several additional artists to shoot arrows into the cyclorama, and Tanaka’s *Electric Dress* (1956) works, too heavy for her to wear onstage and remain in motion, were worn by Shiraga and two others during the grand finale (figure 8).

Shiraga observed, “When sound, lighting, materials, actions, and functional phenomena all became one, the spiritual element gained by the individual was very strong, and the spiritual enlightenment of viewers would be incomparable to what it had been so far.”

*Figure 8* Tanaka Atsuko, *Electric Dress*, 1956. © Ito Ryōji and the former members of the Gutai Art Association. Image courtesy of the Museum of Osaka University
That is to say, *Gutai Art on Stage* became a collaborative *gesamtkunstwerk* in which individual works maintained their own identities while contributing to and taking from the larger whole. Although quite different, the works presented in the exhibition were necessarily put in creative dialogue with one another, framed by the space and narrative time of theater. Even works that were very different began to take on unexpected resonances, such as Shiraga’s multi-part *Ultra-Modern Sanbasō* in which the artist used his arms to “draw a beautiful arc” by wearing a red costume with long, pointy sleeves that undulated as he danced (figure 9); Shimamoto Shōzō’s *Breaking Open the Object*, in which the artist used a bat to open a bag full of paper fragments and smash a light bulb; Motonaga’s *Work (Smoke)* that filled the theater with oversized smoke rings lit with colored lights; and Tanaka’s *Stage Clothes*, in which the artist transformed her body into a moving tableau of color and shape through a series of lightning-quick costume changes on stage (figure 10).

**Figure 9** Shiraga Kazuo, *Ultra-Modern Sanbasō*, 1957. © Shiraga Fujiko and Hisao and the former members of the Gutai Art Association. Image courtesy of Amagasaki Cultural Center.
Confronted with this discordant symphony of individual works orchestrated into a clever and surprisingly coherent group show, we may well be left with a question: what exactly makes all of these works Gutai? Gutai heterogeneity was, in fact, theorized by its members as a constitutive requirement of the new community, undermining wartime notions of community as homogeneous. Within this perspective, the collective was formed in order to intensify subject formation and individualism, not as a means of promoting community over self. In fact, Shiraga opined that the community is necessary to the development of the individual, writing that “if one simply lives with the personal material one is born with, one never grows or changes, which is completely uninteresting. One must take from others, increasing one’s personal material, hammering and tempering it into shape. Otherwise, there is no point in being an individual.”

Finally, in a direct comment on modernist individualism, Shiraga wrote that, despite his belief in the importance of developing the individual in order to resist “external forces,” it is important to resist taking this to extremes. “In the midst of negative freedoms,” he argued, “contemporary intellect must not become a dark nihilism that tries to cling to its purity like religious fervor.” That is to say, individualism, while critical to the postwar project of examining war responsibility and resisting the mass psychological manipulations of political movements, could not exist in a vacuum.

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Figure 10 Tanaka Atsuko, *Stage Clothes*, 1957. © Ito Ryōji and the former members of the Gutai Art Association. Image courtesy of Ashiya City Museum of Art and History
Gutai Chain: The Collective Spirit of Individualism

In his important article, “Gutai Chain,” member Ukita Yōzō theorized this delicate balance between individual and community, embodied and created through Gutai Art Exhibitions. An in-depth reflection on the problem of collectivism that revealed its importance to Gutai, “Gutai Chain” characterized this equilibrium as a fragile, yet powerful aspect of the group. Reflecting on the tension between individual and community in Gutai after the First Gutai Art Exhibition, Ukita challenged readers of the Gutai journal to “gather the individual works in this journal and imagine them as a single exhibition,” remarking that “we have gathered in one place a range of works that are totally unlike.” From this starting point, Ukita challenged the wartime definition of group and community that required homogeneity, coherence, and discipline. The model that he proposed was based on the creative energy that emerged out of the group’s artistic diversity, a creative ideal that valued heterogeneity and dissent as a means of strengthening both the individual and the collective. He wrote, “I would like to say that group ‘loyalty’ can only be established when the individual has ‘self-confidence.’ The intersection between these two is geometrical, and cannot be held in the palm of the hand. However, I am forced to acknowledge its existence. Humans can only become human by founding themselves at this point, even if with hardship.”

This creative tension between individual and community was of great value for Gutai and, as Reiko Tomii has pointed out, distinguishes its collectivism from the “collaborative collectivism” of later 1960s art practitioners in Japan, who placed more of an emphasis on the group.

Ukita described Gutai community in terms that were clearly meant to distinguish it from wartime notions of the body politic or kokutai. He stressed that there are no natural ties that keep the group together, only that they have all “broken free of the past several decades of history,” revealing Gutai’s continued struggle against the lingering association between group identity and nationalism. Furthermore, in a direct rejection of the emotional appeals made by wartime propagandists for the nation’s one hundred million hearts beating as one (ichioku ishin) or for sublime martyrdom of the whole Japanese populace in the shattering of a hundred million jw-
els (ichioku gyokusai), Ukita emphasized that the Gutai community had no time for the “sentimental sympathies” that bind a group together. “Rather,” he writes, “this is a group that was formed by individuals who are totally self-sufficient. And thus the Gutai Art Exhibition was founded.”

Debate, diversity, and dissent were of great significance in Ukita’s model, which defined both the group’s membership and their discursive positions through the notion of heterogeneity. He underscored the fact that “individual diversity is recognized” and that “in this group there are no unnecessary members”; no followers, only leaders. As a result, “applause and debate are completely free, and empathy and encouragement are fully possible.” Indeed, theorizing the individual was, for Ukita, as important as conceptualizing a new form of community in this article, as the new community could not exist without autonomous members. He asserted that each individual was endowed with a notion of “self-awareness and self-confidence,” and that the community was based on a utopian ideal of equals. Not surprisingly, the model of the individual articulated by Ukita bore a striking resemblance to that proposed by Shiraga, to whom Ukita referred explicitly in this text. Like Shiraga’s notion of the individual, Ukita’s was located in the carnal body. He used the backbone as a metaphor for the individual, commenting that “Gutai members, with their delicate but strong backbone, naturally eat, drink and smoke. They are people with flesh and skin on their backbones [sebone ni wa niku mo kawa mo tsuiteiru kongen]. Due to the ethics they demand, they live authentically and take action.” The body or flesh (niku) is thus identified with ethics and authenticity, as the foundation upon which individuality, action, and resistance is built. Unlike Shiraga, however, Ukita theorizes a counterpoint to the passions of the body, writing that “this backbone is rooted in intellect,” rejecting the excesses of wanton desire championed by proponents of nikutai bungaku.

Where Ukita envisioned the individual as strong, self-sufficient, and located in the body, he theorized community as ephemeral, as a tension between individuals that produced an alchemy of creativity. The metaphor that he chose to embody this vision of the community was a special kind of chain, made of diverse links. With each Gutai member as a different link, “some are shiny, others dull. Nobody knows what each link [member] one
will do or when. Only the individual and time know.” These disparate links were activated into a chain by the creative commons of the Gutai group, in particular the Gutai Art Exhibitions, which provided a collective forum for individual creativity produced in relation to the group. He described the process of working with his colleagues in positive, creative terms, noting that “it is a mode of creation that contrasts with that of creating a masterpiece, but one does not efface oneself.” On the contrary, the collective created an environment for exploring new modes of creativity as well as new kinds of relational art. As Ukita commented on the creative process born out of this new model of community and creation, art making was transformed into a dynamic and interconnected enterprise: “The works at the Gutai Art Exhibition evolve from a state of mind and concentration analogous to the experience of aiming at a moving target.” When the creative tension vanishes, however, so too does the community, as demonstrated by the opening quote.

Conclusion

Moving beyond the fears of the immediate postwar period that the individual and collective were incompatible, the Gutai group put them in creative tension, defining a new dialogical relationship between them that I have termed the “collective spirit of individualism.” Through exhibitions that served as sites of creative exchange, works that engaged both other Gutai members and their audiences, and writings published in their collective journal, the group defined a new form of community. Kokutai, the wartime notion of community, was left behind as gutai—that is, concreteness—took its place. A dialogue between intellect and body, between group and individual, the Gutai Art Exhibitions proposed a third choice between self and selfless. They created a context for creativity as social praxis, for art that stepped out of the isolation of the studio and engaged with its community.

In recent years, however, Gutai scholarship has become more and more focused on the individual, and scholars and curators continue to ask how certain artists fit into our preconceived notions about what constitutes the Gutai group. For example, Okabe Aomi’s 1998 documentary film Atsuko
Tanaka: Another Gutai argued that Tanaka did not fit into the category of Gutai artist, as she did not engage in action painting. Moreover, in comparison with the previous forty years in which only Yoshihara, Shiraga, and Motonaga were honored with one-person museum shows, the list of artists from the Gutai Art Association who have been featured in solo museum exhibitions over the past ten years is extraordinary: Horio Sadaharu, Kanno Seiko, Kanayama Akira, Matsutani Takesada, Murakami Saburō, Tanaka Atsuko, Yamazaki Tsuruko, and Yoshihara Michio. This is, without a doubt, a positive development that deepens and nuances our knowledge of Gutai. However, when one examines the exhibition titles, none of which mentions Gutai, a methodological trend emerges in the evaluation of Gutai: to examine and construct these artists as actors distinct from the collective.

As this essay has demonstrated, however, the tension between individual and collective was regarded by Gutai artists as a necessary aspect of their creative process. Despite their clear emphasis on the individual, the collective character of Gutai altered the creative enterprise irrevocably, making it impossible to consider the work of any artist separate from the group. Rather than isolating the outliers of the Gutai group and constructing them separately as instances of individual genius, it is important to analyze the radical diversity of the group more precisely to reveal the multiple and intersecting layers of invention made possible by their collective spirit of individualism. It is perhaps time to throw off the historiographical burden of Michel Tapié and Allan Kaprow, who respectively framed Gutai as gestural abstraction and performance, the two categories that continue to persist in Gutai scholarship. Future studies may find it productive to explore other links in the Gutai chain, such as installation, earth art, sound art, conceptual art, minimalism, and of course, interactive art.
Appendix. Gutai’s Exhibitions and Publications:
A Selected Chronology

1954
Gutai Art Association founded (August)

1955
Gutai 1 published (January 1)
The Exhibition of Modern Art to Challenge the Midsummer Sun, Ashiya Park, Ashiya; sponsored by the Ashiya City Art Association (July 25–August 6)
Gutai 2 published (October 10)
1st Gutai Art Exhibition, Ohara Kaikan, Tokyo (October 19–28)
Gutai 3 published (October 20)

1956
One Day Only Outdoor Exhibition, Muko River and riverbank, Ashiya (April 9), with three-day demonstrations, Yoshihara Oil Mill, Nishinomiya (April 6–8)
Gutai 4 published (July 1)
Gutai Outdoor Art Exhibition, Ashiya Park, Ashiya (July 27–August 5)
Gutai 5 published (October 1)

1957
Gutai 6 published (April 1)
3rd Gutai Art Exhibition, Kyoto City Municipal Museum of Art, Kyoto (April 3–10)
Gutai Art on Stage, Sankei Kaikan, Osaka (May 29); Sankei Hall, Tokyo (July 17)
Gutai 7 published (July 15)
Gutai 8: L’Aventure informelle; copublished with Michel Tapié (September 29)
4th Gutai Art Exhibition, Ohara Kaikan, Tokyo (October 8–10)

1958
2nd Gutai Art on Stage, Asahi Kaikan, Osaka (April 4)
Gutai 9 (April 12)
5th Gutai Art Exhibition, Ohara Kaikan, Tokyo (April 30–May 2)
6th Gutai Art Exhibition, Martha Jackson Gallery, New York City (September 25–October 25)

1959
7th Gutai Art Exhibition, Galleria Arti Figurativi, Turin (June)
8th Gutai Art Exhibition, Kyoto Municipal Museum, Kyoto (August 25–30); Ohara Kaikan, Tokyo (September 11–13)

1960
International Sky Festival: 9th Gutai Art Exhibition, Takashimaya Department Store, Osaka (April 19–24)
Gutai 11 published (November 11). Gutai 10 never published

1961
10th Gutai Art Exhibition, Takashimaya Department Store, Osaka (April 11–16); Takashimaya Department Store, Tokyo (May 2–7)
Gutai 12 published (May 1)

1962
11th Gutai Art Exhibition, Takashimaya Department Store, Osaka (April 17–22)
Gutai Pinacotheca inaugurated in the central Nakanoshima district of Osaka (August 25)
Gutai Pinacotheca published (August 14)
Gutai Pinacotheca: Shimamoto Shōzō Exhibition published (October)
Gutai Pinacotheca: Shiraga published (November)
Don’t Worry, The Sky Won’t Fall Down! performance in collaboration with Morita Modern Dance, Sankei Hall, Osaka (November 6)
Gutai Pinacotheca—Toshio Yoshida published (December)

1963
12th Gutai Art Exhibition, Takashimaya Department Store, Tokyo (January 29–February 3)
Gutai Pinacotheca: A. Tanaka published (February)
Gutai Pinacotheca 1 published (March 15)
Gutai Pinacotheca: Murakami published (April)
13th Gutai Art Exhibition, Takashimaya Department Store, Osaka (April 16–21)
Gutai Pinacotheca: Shuji Mukai published (May)
Gutai Pinacotheca 2 published (June 15)
Gutai Pinacotheca: Tsuruko Yamazaki published (July)
Gutai Pinacotheca: Takesada Matsutani published (October)
Gutai Pinacotheca: Maekawa Tsuyoshi Solo Exhibition published (November)
Gutai Pinacotheca: Michio Yoshihara published (December)

1964

14th Gutai Art Exhibition Takashimaya Department Store, Osaka (March 31–April 4)
Gutai Pinacotheca: Lucio Fontana and Giuseppe Capogrossi published (June)
Gutai Pinacotheca: Iuko Nasaka published (November)

1965

15th Gutai Art Exhibition, Gutai Pinacotheca, Osaka (July 1–20)
Gutai Pinacotheca—Masatoshi Masanobu (March)
Gutai 14 published (October). Gutai 13 never published
16th Gutai Art Exhibition, Keiō Department Store, Tokyo (October 8–13)

1966

Gutai Pinacotheca: Chiyu Uemae published (February)
Gutai Pinacotheca: Gutai Exhibition of Three Members (Matsutani, Maekawa, and Mukai) published (June)
Gutai Pinacotheca: Norio Imai published (July)
17th Gutai Art Exhibition, Takashimaya Department Store, Yokohama (September 10–15); Gutai Pinacotheca, Osaka (October 1–10)
Gutai Pinacotheca: Minoru Yoshida published (November)

1967

Gutai, Rotterdam Design House, Rotterdam (April)
Gutai Art for the Space Age, Hanshin Park, Nishinomiya (April)
Gutai Pinacotheca: Tai Satoshi Solo Exhibition published (April)
18th Gutai Art Exhibition, Gutai Pinacotheca, Osaka (June 1–10)
Gutai, Galerie Heide Hildebrand, Klagenfurt (June)
19th Gutai Art Exhibition, Central Museum of Art, Tokyo (October 1–14);
Gutai Pinacotheca, Osaka (November 1–14)

1968
Gutai Pinacotheca: Sadaharu Horio published (June)
20th Gutai Art Exhibition, Gutai Pinacotheca, Osaka (July 1–20)
Gutai Pinacotheca: Sadayuki Kawamura published (October)
21st Gutai Art Exhibition, Gutai Pinacotheca, Osaka (November 1–20)

1969
Gutai Pinacotheca–Imanaka Kumiko published (April)

1970
Gutai Pinacotheca: The Last Exhibition at the Original Gutai Pinacotheca: Jiro Yoshihara Exhibition published (April)
Gutai Art Festival, Expo '70, Osaka (August 31–September 2)

1971
Mini-Pinacotheca inaugurated in Nakanoshima, Osaka (October 2)

1972
Yoshihara Jiro passes away (February 10); Gutai disbands (March 31)

Notes

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1. The total number of Gutai members from 1954 to 1972 was fifty-nine, but membership stayed relatively constant between twenty-five and thirty members throughout the group’s lifespan.


4. A notable exception to this trend is the interpretation proposed by Michael Lucken, who compares *Challenging Mud* to Fujita Tszuguharu’s painting *Honorable Death on Attu Island* (1943). Lucken suggests a connection between *Challenging Mud* and Fujita’s martyrdom (*gyokusai*) paintings, with their dark, muddy colors and abject lack of distinction between blood, earth, and body. While Lucken’s impulse to examine the content of Shiraga’s work is important, his interpretation, which suggests a loss of self, is contradicted by Shiraga’s strong statements on the individual. See Michael Lucken, “Yoshihara Jiro: L’envers de l’épopée” (“Yoshihara Jiro: The Opposite of Epic”), in *Gutai*, exh. cat. (Paris: Galerie Nationale du Jeu de Paume, 1999), 22.


13. Masato, in “Zadankai.”


16. This was also the contention of the SCAP (Supreme Commander of the Allied Powers), who from September 1945 to April 1952 attempted to replace all of Japan’s “feudal” sentiments with notions of democracy, freedom, and individual responsibility. It is an intersection that was not lost on the Kindai Bungaku group, some of whom believed that the US forces were a liberation army and others among whom believed that they would eventually become oppressive.


20. Shiraga uses the term nikutai extensively in “On Shishitsu.”


22. Ibid.


29. Ibid.
31. Deceptively, Outdoor Exhibition to Challenge the Midsummer Sun took place before The First Gutai Art Exhibition.
39. Ibid.
40. Ibid.
42. Ibid.
44. Ukita, “Gutai Chain,” 30. All quotes in the next two paragraphs from the same source.
45. Tanaka Atsuko: Mou hitotsu no Gutai/Atsuko Tanaka: Another Gutai, directed by Okabe Aomi (Kyoto: Ufer! Art Documentary, 1998), DVD. This argument was often made by Tanaka’s husband Kanayama Akira, about both him and Tanaka.