Atsuko Tanaka (1932-2005)

Born in Osaka in 1932, Atsuko Tanaka studied Western oil painting at Kyoto Metropolitan University and later continued researching art at the Osaka City Art Museum. In 1954, Tanaka joined Zero Society, a group of young innovative artists including Akira Kanayama, Kazuo Shiraga and Saburo Murakami. During this period, Tanaka was drawn to avant-garde art, and began to make collages and drawings using everyday materials such as calendars and shipping waybills.

Along with other members of Zero Society, Tanaka joined the Gutai Art Association in 1955, the first radical artist collective in postwar Japan. Founded by Jiro Yoshihara in 1954, Gutai emphasized the relationship between body and matter, presenting staged performances, theatrical events and large-scale installations as a means of realizing this concept. Gutai’s action-driven activities were highly influential in the international art scene and anticipated many developments in the West such as performance art, minimalism and conceptual art. During her time at Gutai, Tanaka produced experimental pieces that explored the relationship between art, technology and human physicality by means of intangible elements such as light, sound, space and electricity. ‘Bell’ (1955) is one such example, which consisted of 20 electric bells connected by an electrical cord, with a switch that the audience could press to activate the line of bells ringing consecutively. ‘Bell’ was ahead of its time in placing environmental and relational factors at the core of its aesthetics. Another piece pivotal to Tanaka’s career was ‘Electric Dress’ (1956), which was a costume composed of nearly 200 hand-painted lightbulbs and electric cables. Designed to be worn by Tanaka on stage, the artist’s body inserted amid the flickering neon lights exemplified the visual spectacle and sensuous immersion brought by the rapid modernization in postwar Japan.

Following the suggestion of the French art critic Michael Tapié, Tanaka soon began to make paintings resembling electrical circuitry. Like many other Gutai artists, Tanaka was keen to employ non-traditional materials in artmaking and used industrial enamel paint to execute her signature image: intertwined networks of circles and lines. The use of enamel paint allowed Tanaka to create paintings with a flat, fluid and sheer surface showing no trace of her brushstrokes. This gave her tableau a unique tactility that was simultaneously organic and mechanical. Tanaka left Gutai in 1965 and continued to produce work until her death in 2005. Throughout the 1970s and 2000s Tanaka created a vast variation of paintings on the same theme. Built upon her previous work, Tanaka’s paintings expanded in scale, some showing chaotic accumulations and others grid-like compositions. Ranging from performances and installations, to drawings and paintings, Tanaka’s work is consistent yet diverse in form and connotation, and welcomes multiple interpretations that transcend the narratives of Gutai, postwar Japanese art and Feminist art. Tanaka’s prolific body of work emerges as an evocation of the universal vulnerability of the human body and our fundamental desire for interconnectivity.

In her lifetime, Tanaka regularly held exhibitions in her immediate locale (the Kansai area) and beyond, and after her death she started to gain an international recognition. Tanaka was indeed the first former Gutai member to be featured in overseas exhibitions, and between 2008 and 2011, Tanaka’s retrospectives were held in Innsbruck, New York, Vancouver, Birmingham and Castellón. Her artistic experimentation, innovative for its time, has been lauded in the contemporary art field in recent years and her work was featured at Documenta 12 in 2007, and in 2008 at the Sydney Biennial. Major public collections include the Museum of Modern Art, New York, the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum of Art, New York, and the Centre Pompidou, Paris.
Biography

1932  Born in Osaka
1950  Studies Western oil painting at Kyoto Metropolitan University
1954  Joins Zero Society
1955  Joins Gutai Art Association
1965  Leaves Gutai in August
2005  Dies at the age of 73 in December

Selected Solo Exhibitions

1963  Atsuko Tanaka, Gutai Pinacotheca, Osaka
1967  Atsuko Tanaka, Hakusuisha Gallery, Osaka
1968  Atsuko Tanaka, Akao Gallery, Osaka
1972  Atsuko Tanaka, Minami Gallery, Tokyo; Fumiji Gallery, Osaka
1974  Atsuko Tanaka, Nihonbashi Gallery, Osaka
1978  Atsuko Tanaka, Asahi Gallery, Kyoto; Imabashi Gallery, Osaka
1980  Atsuko Tanaka, Ban Gallery, Osaka
1982  Atsuko Tanaka, Museum of 81, Tokyo
1985  Atsuko Tanaka, The Contemporary Art Gallery Seibu, Tokyo
1986  Atsuko Tanaka, Gallery Takagi, Nagoya
1994  Atsuko Tanaka, LADS Gallery, Osaka; Gallery Takagi, Nagoya
2000  The World of Atsuko Tanaka, Gallery HAM, Nagoya
2002  Atsuko Tanaka, Galerie im Taxispalais, Innsbruck
2011-12  Atsuko Tanaka: The Art of Connecting, Ikon Gallery, Birmingham; Espai d’Art contemporani de Castelló, Castelló; Museum of Contemporary Art, Tokyo

Selected Group Exhibitions

1954  Zero-kai, Sogo Department Store, Osaka
1955  Experimental Outdoor Exhibition of Modern Art to Challenge the Midsummer Sun, Ashiya Park, Ashiya
  1st Gutai Art Exhibition, Ohara Kaikan, Tokyo
1956  Outdoor Gutai Exhibition, Ashiya Park, Ashiya
  2nd Gutai Art Exhibition, Ohara Kaikan, Tokyo
1957  3rd Gutai Art Exhibition, Kyoto Municipal Museum of Art, Kyoto
  1st Gutai Art Exhibition with stage, Sankei Kaikan, Osaka
  4th Gutai Art Exhibition, Ohara Kaikan, Tokyo
1958  2nd Gutai Art Exhibition with stage, Asahi Kaikan, Osaka
  International Art of a New Era: Art Informel and Gutai (produced by Michel Tapié), Takashimaya Department Store, Osaka
1958  5th Gutai Art Exhibition, Ohara Kaikan, Tokyo; Martha Jackson Gallery, New York, NY
1959  Arte Nouva: Esposizione Internazionale di Pittura e Scultura, Circolo degli Artisti, Turin
1962  Structure de Répétition, Galerie Stadler, Paris

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1964  Contemporary Japanese Art, Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington D.C.
      Guggenheim International Award 1964, Guggenheim Museum, New York, NY
      Francisco, CA
      Museum of Art Nul 1965, Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam
      Modern Art from Japan, Kunsthauw Zürich, Zürich
1981  Trends of Contemporary Japanese Art I, the 1950s: Gloom and Shafts of Light, Metropolitan
      Art Museum, Tokyo
      Grupo Gutai: Pintura Acción, Museo Español de Arte Contemporáneo, Madrid
1993  The 45th Venice Biennale, Venice
1994  Japanese Art after 1945: Scream Against the Sky, Yokohama Museum of Art, Yokohama;
      Guggenheim Museum SoHo, New York, NY; San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, San
      Francisco, CA
2007  Documenta 12, Kassel
2008  Art, Anti-Art, Non-Art: Experimentations in the Public Sphere in Postwar Japan, Getty
      Research Institute, Los Angeles, CA
      The 16th Sydney Biennale, Sydney
2009  The 53rd Venice Biennale, Venice
2010  Gutai: Painting with Time and Space, Museo Cantonale d’Arte, Lugano
2012  GUTAI: The Spirit of an Era, National Art Center, Tokyo
2013  Gutai: Splendid Playground, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, NY
      NY

**Awards**

1960  The Mayor’s Award at the Thirteenth Ashiya City Exhibition
1964  Guggenheim International Award
      The Mayor’s Award for Excellence at the Sixth Contemporary Art Exhibition of Japan

**Major Public Collections**

The Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY
Centre Pompidou, Paris
The National Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo