

Yutaka Matsuzawa | Selected Press

この一枚の白き和紙の中に白き円を觀じそをあわれ死に臨める白鳥としてここに白鳥の歌を聞けよ

*Su questo foglio di carta bianca giapponese contemplate un cerchio bianco.  
Vedetevi, ahimé, un cigno morente. Sentite, proprio qui, cantare un cigno.*

*Contemplate a white circle on this white Japanese paper and view  
it, alas! as a moribund swan. Hear a swan song at this very site.*

*Yutaka Matsuzawa*



Partial installation view of YUTAKA MATSUZAWA's *The Nine Meditation Chambers*, 1977, 12 handwritten and typed sheets, 18 × 25.6 cm each, at Nonaka-Hill Gallery, Los Angeles, 2019. Courtesy the artist and Nonaka-Hill Gallery.

Widely considered the father of conceptual art in Japan, Yutaka Matsuzawa (1922–2006) spent most of his life attempting to formulate an impactful art practice characterized by invisibility and impermanence. According to an autobiographical account from the artist, he was born with eyes closed, and did not open them until 22 days after birth. Later, at the age of 42, Matsuzawa claimed that a revelatory voice once exhorted him to “eradicate all objects” from his practice.

Ultimately, Matsuzawa’s work remains solidly tied to tactile materials, due in part to his continued reliance on language, symbols, and other written forms as opposed to turning to performance or other fleeting modes of communication. But what is more significant is not necessarily the physical outcome of the works but the metaphysical experience they are able to elicit—a fact that was fully on display in the artist’s small but enlightening show at Nonaka-Hill Gallery.

Upon entering the gallery the viewer was confronted with a single, seemingly simple framed work on paper, *Contemplate a White Circle in This White Sheet of Paper (Swan Song)* (1976). The top half of the paper is blank. On the lower half, text in Japanese, Italian, and English asks the viewer to envision a circle and to view it as a “moribund swan” while hearing a swan song. In theory, one supposes, the true artwork lives within the viewer’s consciousness: the act of imagining the dying swan, visible only in the mind’s eye. To take it a step further, the artwork would vary infinitely depending on who is imagining it and under what influence or mood.

Throughout his career, Matsuzawa had a fixation on death. Instead of seeing it as a terminus, the artist seems to have viewed it as an opportunity for unending possibility. In *My Own Death* (1970), a placard in Japanese and English hung from the ceiling in the empty gallery asks the viewer to walk across the room and envision the artist’s death, considering the event’s similarity to the viewer’s “own future death” as well as the “past hundred hundred millions of human beings’ deaths and also future thousand trillions of human beings’ [deaths].” The request made the barren gallery feel as if it were brimming.

A transcendent view of death was also present in the installation *The Nine Meditation Chambers* (1977). On the floor, nine sheets of blank paper were laid out in a neat grid. On the walls, directives asked the viewer to “contemplate this paper” and “incantate” nine elements or concepts in the following order: earth, water, fire, wind, space, consciousness, time, catastrophe, and, finally, nirvana. Throughout the show, Matsuzawa’s instructions ring with didacticism as well as religiosity. There is a monastic or ritualistic quality about them, as if the artist were seeking to transcend his time and place for some unknown but hopeful beyond. Some critics have tied this obsession with death and impermanence to his witnessing of the 1945 firebombing of Tokyo, which left more than 100,000 people dead and at least one million people homeless. Perhaps seeing life obliterated sparked a desire in the artist to formulate an existence apart from this one.

Elsewhere in the exhibition, a folio of eight volumes dedicated to his work, *Matsuzawa Yutaka: ψ \_Box* (1983), was laid out against a wall, featuring images and captions of drawings, paintings, Cornell-like boxes (Matsuzawa was an admirer of Joseph Cornell and attempted to contact the Surrealist assemblage artist during his brief time in New York in the mid-1950s), timed-based works, photographs, and more. The abstruse but fascinating images came with little explanation. In all, the show felt like a powerfully compelling proposal for a more thorough retrospective on Matsuzawa at a larger institution—one that could bring together loans and recreations of his work along with meaningful research and scholarship on this little understood artist.

## Shining a Light on Portland's Art Scene: 10 Exciting Venues in the Rose City

This compilation of venues ranges from stalwart museums to emerging artists' collectives, offering a cross-section of the spaces defining art in Portland now.



Yutaka Matsuzawa, installation view, Yale Union, Portland, Oregon (2019) (photo by Leif Anderson)

Yale Union

Where: 800 SE 10th Avenue, Portland, OR

Hours: Open hours are posted online, and offered by appointment

Yale Union is a nonprofit gallery founded and run by artists in an airy loft space in the Buckman area. Their exhibitions are particularly heterogeneous, with a recent show of installation and writing changed out for an ongoing performance. The organization prides itself on unconventional, experimental artists, and their most recent show *The Dope Elf delivered: an ongoing theatrical residency that critically (and goofily) examined pop culture's interest in magic and mysticism*, which also live streamed on their website.

# FLASH ART



“...the purported cause of such unconstitutional police stop which may lead to a fatal incident, is an officer reporting a supposedly non-functioning rear taillight as a pretext to stop a civilian motorist...”

Luke Willis Thomp

*Drawing for adjacency* (Image for *Flash Art*), 2

Mixed media. Courtesy of the ar

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deep reflection and self-ness. If nothing else, this exhibition reminds us that art, sound art perhaps most richly all, offers us a place of station and motivation in a continuously evolving world.

#### YUTAKA MATSUZAWA

Yale Union, Portland  
by Lucy Cotter

the first U.S. solo exhibition of Yutaka Matsuzawa (1922-2006), the so-called "father" of Japanese conceptual art. The Yale Union's open windows were covered with pink fabric panels that billow in the breeze like silken ghosts. Their presence hints at Matsuzawa's unique, even esoteric, path, made manifest in the documentation of his graphic works on display. After hearing a voice tell him to "vanish matter" in 1964, the artist embraced the potential of material processes, adopting the Greek character  $\Psi$  (psi) to refer to a body of mixed-media works that connected physical and psychic forces. Using Buddhist meditation techniques and privilege mental imaging, Matsuzawa subsequently created an oeuvre of "non-sensory painting." The exhibition also includes instructional works and the sublime silkscreen *Contemplate a White Circle* and *this White Sheet of Paper* (*an Song*), made for the Veniceennale in 1976.

Matsuzawa is arguably at his most remarkable, however, in his insistence on the relationship between dematerialization and quantum physical reality. The artist's book *Quantum Art Manifesto* (1988), lovingly published for this exhibition, serves as a scientific koan, urging a new "post-matter" chapter in art based on the findings of string theory and particle physics. In a performance from 1966, Matsuzawa called for the "vanishing of civilization," by which he meant a shift from a mechanical to a quantum physical worldview. *My Own Death*, a 1970 installation reconstructed for the Portland exhibition, consists of an empty room with text inviting viewers to contemplate the artist's and their own future deaths and those of all people, past and present.

This fascinating survey of a rarely addressed artist is curated with the expertise of curators - Reiko Tomii, a scholar of postwar Japanese art,

and Alan Longino, who rather boldly designed the pink window panels to echo Matsuzawa's *Banner of Vanishing* (1966), a fifty-foot-long silk scroll. Elsewhere Longino oversteps the mark, however, by transposing a floor-based work made of nine sheets of paper to low concrete plinths. This curatorial intervention creates a misleading sculptural focus within an exhibition that otherwise pays due respect to Matsuzawa's commitment to post-material art.

#### 6 LOIS DODD

Modern Art, London  
by Alex Bennett

After Lois Dodd visited Maine in the summer of 1951 with Alex Katz, her fellow Cooper Union classmate and Tanager Gallery colleague, the two shared a house in Lincolnville. There, Dodd slowly adopted the practice of plein-air studies on Masonite panels, painting the world as it is given.

The buildings and domesticated nature of the Lower East Side; the Delaware River; Blairstown, New Jersey; and Cushing, Maine, have figured as content for Dodd. In all these locations, however, the world appears to be uninhabited. Inanimate objects and architectural structures - windows, doors, facades, bottles - are fixed, tense with time's friction. Sighting apertures, the imagination quivers; detecting traces of presence rouses tempestuous fictions. Like a feathery, gently puckered envelope, Dodd's doorways entice physical intervention. *Door Staircase* (1981) is the aftermath of some breeze-obedient moment; the lightly worn white door is flung open from its luminous blond façade. In its wake is a steep staircase of yawning gradient, from cool lilac to weltering, foreboding purples. The work is grave in geometry yet elusive in circumstance.

The blackening pond of night is honeyed by a light bulb in *Night House with Lit Window* (2012). Geometries compete in Dodd's blunt rendering of the clapboard house with sash windows and triangular roof typical of the rural East Coast. Transparency and opacity slither into forever as a porch light summons an aching glow of oyster-gray in reaction to an unannounced visitor. A serial evocation, a similar house façade creeps back in *Moon + Doorlight*

(2012); the light throws its buttery titanium beam once more in diagonal relation to the half-crescent moon. The restricted scrutiny lets curiosity seethe, frothing at whatever sparks fancy: a door ajar, a veil of droplets, a ruffled iris.

In the second gallery, Dodd's windows demonstrate the poignant rewards of absorption and attention. Each window becomes a riddle of reflection and dereliction, which curiously neglects a feature one has come to treasure: the view. When the view does show, it melts with the interior as in *Ice and Window* (1982), in which lush curtains hold a plump frailty; both fabric and iced snowfall appear smooth and cragged like the soft crush of meringue. *Falling Window Sash* (1992) is its rickety twin. The window is realized in the same frontal framing, but the original geometries fracture as square glass panes dislodge and veer toward fateful shattering. Though murky and drunken in plashy eggshell blue and lichen greens, the reflection is ever concise.

When threat twitches into real activity, Dodd contains its limits. In *Burning House, Night, with Fireman* (2007), a fireman douses a blaze. The house's iconic silhouette drowns in Miami-orange, its edges topped with pink smog - an American form self-destructing. An open door in *Front Door Cushing* (1982) reveals thriving foliage, alive like a flock of starlings, but the key, tipping in its lock, gives pause for intrusive footprints. For all their specificity, Dodd's subjects are continually exposed: the domestic night unloads into the primordial cosmic pool; interior life leaks in light below the doorframe. Still, these anonymous interiors cast the deepest shadow.

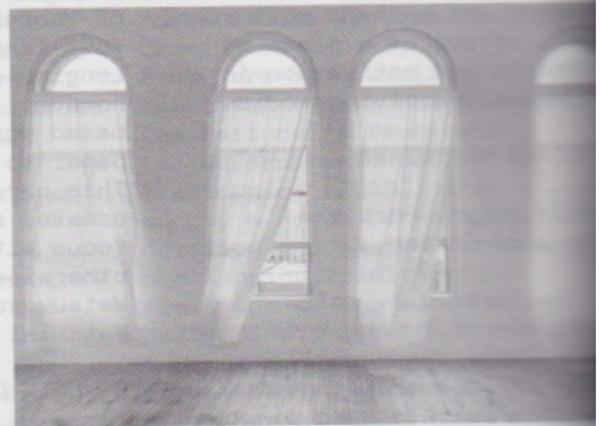
#### 7 WONG PING "Heart Digger"

Camden Arts Centre, London  
by Michele Robecchi

Wong Ping's practice revolves around three fundamental aspects - filmmaking, sculpture, and storytelling. His animated films are the result of time spent working as a digital editor for a TV station in his native Hong Kong. They are conspicuous for their very elementary yet appealing visual language, and, in the best cartoon tradition, many are able to transform potentially explosive



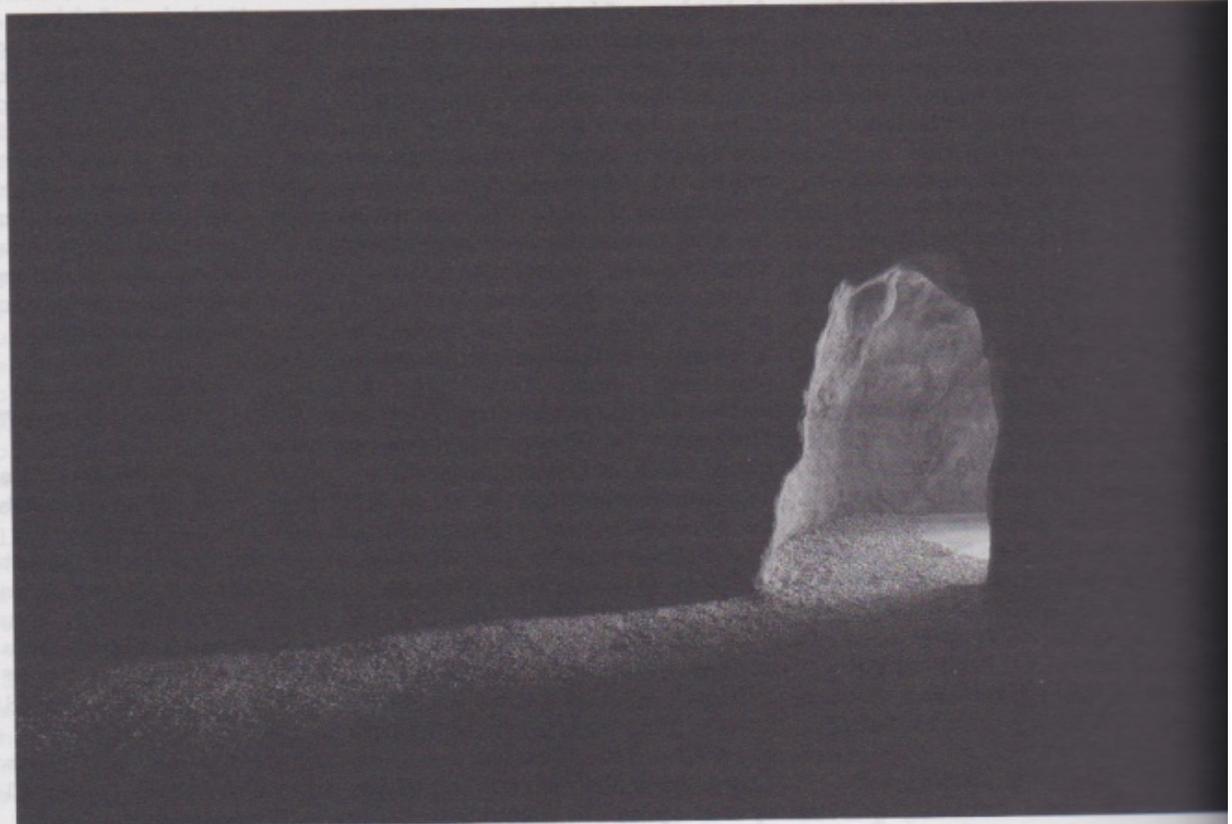
6 Lois Dodd, *Fading Amaryllis*, 2014. Oil on masonite. 15x8 1/4 in. Courtesy of the artist and Modern Art, London.



5 "Yutaka Matsuzawa". Exhibition view at Yale Union, Portland, 2019. Courtesy of Yale Union, Portland.



7 Wong Ping, *Who's the Daddy*, 2017. Video still. Single channel video animation. 9 mins. Courtesy of the artist and Edouard Malingue Gallery, Hong Kong.



8 Libita Clayton, *Quantum Ghost*, 2019. Installation view at Spike Island, Bristol, 2019. Photography by Max McClure. Courtesy of the artist and Spike Island, Bristol.

# The New York Times

## Three Radical 1960s Visions, Far From the Tumult of Tokyo

A new show at Japan Society looks at avant-garde artists who worked far from Japan's cultural capitals, in the forest, in the mountains and by the sea.

When the going gets rough — when the students start throwing paving stones and the mounted police swing their truncheons — sometimes what you need is some time in the country. In the years around 1968, American artists aghast at the Vietnam War raised their voices in New York and Los Angeles, but also set up back-to-the-land communes or constructed awesome earthworks in the Nevada desert or Utah's Great Salt Lake. In Britain, Richard Long started making art out of walks in the fields of Wiltshire; in West Germany, Sigmar Polke slipped away to a farm outside Düsseldorf, making lots of films and ingesting lots of hallucinogens.

Japan's big cities, too, were in full upheaval at the decade's end. In 1968 and 1969, students barricaded the lecture halls at the elite Tokyo University, and at Tama Art University, the students locked themselves in their classrooms and studios and demanded mass leadership resignations. Some young artists found their places in the daily demonstrations and the antiwar and antinuclear movements. For others, the best way forward was to get out.

"Radicalism in the Wilderness," a precise and sturdy exhibition on view at Japan Society, looks deeply into three bold positions rooted far from the lights of late 1960s Tokyo, and explores how putting one's distance from the capital and its art institutions could be its own productive ferment. The artist Yutaka Matsuzawa, in the forests of Nagano Prefecture, aimed to create a conceptual art that broke from rationalist thought. The collective GUN, formed in Niigata Prefecture, then an agrarian region, produced breathtaking environmental projects, as well as artsy political action and small works sent through the postal service. And the Play, an Osaka group, took its happenings out of the city and into the mountains and rivers of Kansai, where they sought a new kind of collective art-making.



Installation view of "Radicalism in the Wilderness: Japanese Artists in the Global 1960s," at Japan Society. At right is Yutaka Matsuzawa's "Banner of Vanishing (Human, Let's Vanish, Let's Go, Let's Go, Gate, Gate, Anti-Civilization Committee)," 1966/2016. Credit...via Japan Society, New York; Richard Goodbody

"Radicalism in the Wilderness" has been curated by Reiko Tomii, an independent art historian who also published an award-winning book of the same title in 2016. She's organized the exhibition into three condensed presentations, each standing on its own, but together mapping a vanguard defined by its distance from Tokyo. And a few projects by Western artists working in similar conceptual or land-oriented strains provides the ballast for Ms. Tomii's principal argument: that the full global story of art in the 1960s features both active collaborations and accidental resonances between the East and the West, and between the big city and the countryside.

Of this show's three figures, Yutaka Matsuzawa (1922—2006) had the most direct links to the structures of the art world, both in Tokyo and in the West. In the 1950s, he came to the United States on a Fulbright fellowship, made abstractions by pouring corrosive chemicals onto iron sheets, and grew fixated on a WOR radio show on paranormal activity. Back in Japan, he made collages and drawings that, so he said, captured clairvoyant visions beyond the realm of the senses. Then, on June 1, 1964, he experienced some kind of otherworldly instruction to "vanish matter" — and in his village Shimo Suwa, he started to create an art out of language alone.

Matsuzawa wrote recondite texts on extrasensory perception, arguing for an art “seen” wholly with the mind's eye, and laid them out in Buddhist-inspired grids that he printed on posters and sent through the mail. (Ms. Tomii has translated the texts here.) He began proposing “empty” exhibitions, in one case taking out an ad in an art magazine and instructing readers to send imaginary artworks into the wilderness telepathically. A poster here, entitled “Ju (Blessings): Talisman of Vanishing” (1966), sets forth his vision of progress as total nothingness: “Governments will vanish. Sex will vanish. Factories will vanish. Production will vanish. Capital will vanish ...”

To some back in Tokyo, it sounded like a cult. Yet Matsuzawa was inventing a Japanese conceptualism with Buddhist characteristics, and when he later found Western counterparts to his own immaterial practice, he happily joined in. At Matsuzawa's invitation, American artists working with nonvisual, instruction-based techniques, like Lawrence Weiner and Robert Barry, contributed to a 1970 show in Kyoto he called “Nirvana.” Eventually even the British-Italian art duo Gilbert and George came to hang out in Shimo Suwa; Matsuzawa filmed them clambering up to his treehouse studio, looking rather out of place in their tweed suits against the Japanese foliage.

The young artists of the collective GUN (or Group Ultra Niigata), led by Tadashi Maeyama and Michio Horikawa, worked even farther from the metropolis than Matsuzawa, in a city on the far side of Honshu's central mountain range. In 1970, after some unsuccessful efforts to win attention in Tokyo, they decided to work with the landscape before them — which has the heaviest snowfall in the country — by staging the first of their “Events to Change the Image of Snow.” Filling up pesticide sprayers with red, blue and yellow pigments, the members of GUN blasted snow-covered expanses with spectacular colored clouds and tramlines, transforming the fields of this “provincial” region into thrilling, joyous abstractions. GUN would eventually grow more explicitly political, creating postal art and photo collages that questioned Japan's self-defense force and imperial family.

Compared to Matsuzawa and GUN, the collective known as the Play (founded in 1967 and still active) will be the best known to Western viewers of this exhibition; they appeared in the 2017 Venice Biennale among a constellation of international collectives devoted to humor, improvisation and volunteer participation. While students in Tokyo protested their nation's alliance with Washington, the Play took a lighter view of Japanese-American connections in their early “Voyage: Happening in an Egg” (1968) — an absurd but earnest effort to release a giant fiberglass egg on the waves of the Pacific Ocean and to steer it to the American west coast. The artists enlisted the aid of oceanographers and local fishermen, but the egg went missing before long.

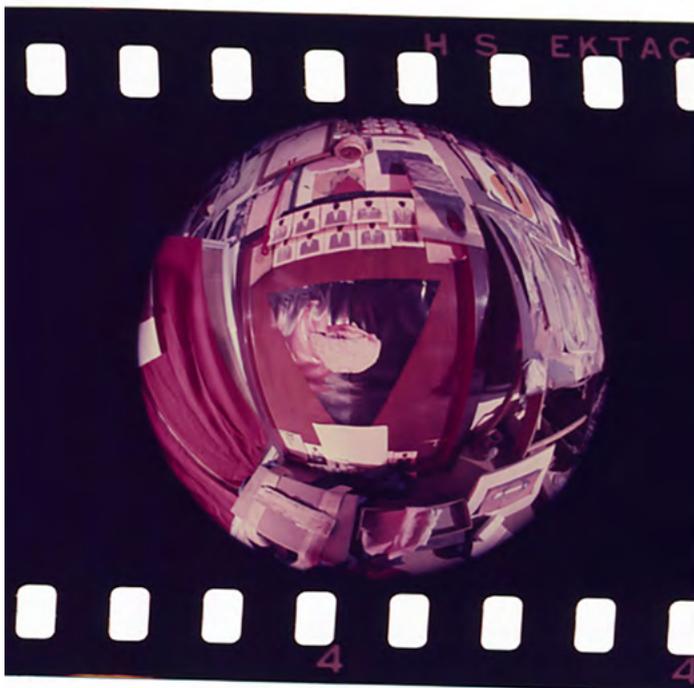
The adventure was meant to be a free activity outside of contemporary political and social boundaries, which the Play would double down on in “Current of Contemporary Art,” a summer escapade first undertaken in 1969, for which the artists built an arrow-shaped raft and rowed nonchalantly across the Kansai region. In 1972, they built a floating house of Styrofoam and plywood, where they lived together for a week as they drifted downriver from Kyoto to Osaka. For “Thunder,” an annual project, the group invited participants to build a wooden pyramid and wait for lightning to strike. Year after year, the lightning rarely came — but unlike with Walter De Maria's nearly contemporaneous “Lightning Field,” the real point of “Thunder” was the collective work and collective waiting.

Up on a mountain, deep in the snow, out in the forest: for Ms. Tomii, it was distance from Tokyo and other cultural capitals that permitted the radical innovation of these artists and collectives. Were they really so isolated, and what about today? Even in the 1960s, these radical artists were documenting their performances with photographs and 16-millimeter films, and publishing their actions in magazines and through the mail. Today, when even the most remote regions get high-speed internet and free same-day delivery, we probably have even less reason to hold onto the old distinction between the capital and the sticks.

# HYPERALLERGIC

## Japan's Radical Conceptual Art of the 1960s

An exhibition at Japan Society makes room in the modernist canon for the heady, playful ideas of free-thinking renegades.



Kō Nakajima, "Yutaka Matsuzawa's Psi Zashiki Room" (1969), one image from a projection of twenty 35-millimeter color slides (courtesy of Keiō University Art Center, Tokyo)

It is the rare exhibition that cuts through the earnestness and self-importance of some of conceptual art's supposedly heady offerings; it is even rarer for one to expose, in an illuminating and pleasurable way, the intellectual richness of its subject matter, reveling in its inventiveness while neatly unpacking its more obscure details.

With *Radicalism in the Wilderness: Japanese Artists in the Global 1960s*, which is on view at Japan Society through June 9, Reiko Tomii has done just that. Here, this Japanese-born, New York-based art historian and curator, a specialist in post-World War II modern art in Japan and this show's organizer, makes exploring the ideas that motivate the works on display as engaging as the most unusual creations among them.

Throughout the exhibition, which focuses on the work and ideas of Yutaka Matsuzawa (1922–2006), and of two artists' collectives, GUN, from Niigata Prefecture, in north-central Japan, and The Play, which was based in Osaka (both groups became active in 1967), Tomii's sense of excitement about her subjects' philosophical outlooks and unconventional working methods is palpable.

The exhibition emerged out of the research Tomii conducted for her book with a somewhat similar title, *Radicalism in the Wilderness: International Contemporaneity and 1960s Art in Japan* (MIT Press), which I reviewed in *Hyperallergic* when it was published three years ago. Working backward from book to physical presentation, *Radicalism*, the art show, gives tangible form to the insights and historical findings of Tomii's originally published survey.

Both the book and this exhibition offer vivid examples of the fresh approach that has been taken in recent decades by a younger generation of scholars and curators in Europe, the US, and Japan to examining modern art's evolution. Looking beyond such familiar centers of its development as Paris, Berlin, and New York, they have proposed a more multifaceted version of its history that also considers modernism's rise in Latin America, Asia, and Africa.

Thus, as Tomii looks back at how modern-art forms emerged in Japan during the latter half of the 20th century, she calls attention to "connections" and "resonances" that occurred between certain artists at different points in time. A "connection," she explains, "existed between two parties when there was an actual interpersonal or informational encounter" between them, even if such a relationship might have been one-sided. A "resonance" refers to an affinity of some kind between the work or ideas of two or more different artists in different places, without any explicit "connections" discernible between them; sometimes, "resonances" can more obviously be recognized in retrospect.



Curator Reiko Tomii with works by Yutaka Matsuzawa featuring the white circles the artist regarded as visual aids for meditation; he intentionally displayed the white-ink-on-paper silk screen on the right with its back side facing out (photo by the author for Hyperallergic)

During a recent walk-through of the Radicalism show, Tomii observed, “The evidence of certain resonances and then, later, certain connections between the work of Matsuzawa and his peers in Japan, the US, and Europe is very interesting, but given that he worked alone, in isolation, his unusual ideas about what art could be and his unique philosophical vision are especially remarkable.”

As Tomii explains in her book and in the current show, the “wilderness” in which these artists lived and worked — Matsuzawa’s home base in Shimo Suwa, in central Japan’s Nagano Prefecture, or the collective bases of the members of GUN and The Play — was both geographical and imagined. Their respective locations were far enough away from Tokyo and its influential national arts institutions that they could easily be regarded as “isolated” and that they would feel a sense of isolation themselves. Tomii adds that their ideas were “out there” in an aesthetic-conceptual wilderness, too, compared to those of more mainstream modern artists.

Tomii describes Matsuzawa as “a quintessential master of the wilderness,” whose formative years coincided with Japan’s militarization and war-making in East Asia. In 1943, he moved to Tokyo to attend Waseda University; he was exempted from the military draft because his field of study, architecture, was seen as vital to the war effort. In February 1945, he was sent to work in a factory in western Japan, thereby missing the US bombing of the capital the following month.

As Tomii writes in her book, he returned to Tokyo to find the metropolis “razed to the ground, literally presenting a landscape of nothingness.” In his graduation thesis, Matsuzawa, already disenchanted with material civilization, wrote, “That which humans make will eventually perish, humans will eventually perish.” In a graduation speech, he declared, “I want to create an architecture of soul, a formless architecture, an invisible architecture.”

By 1948, having given up architecture, Matsuzawa returned to his native region, where he pursued painting and poetry, and taught mathematics at a nighttime high school. He studied signs and symbols, cybernetics, and general semantics, and, with a poet friend, wrote a manifesto calling for the breaking-down of barriers between the sciences and the humanities. He won a Fulbright Fellowship to the US and studied in Wisconsin — his proposed research topic: the “objective measurement of beauty” — and in 1956, thanks to a Japan Society fellowship, moved to New York to study religious philosophy and art history at Columbia University. In fact, his real education in New York came from visits to galleries, museums, and the public library.

For Matsuzawa, a turning point in his search for an alternative to the material-physical and for finding ways to express the invisible invisibly in art came with his discovery, in 1957, while he was in New York, of a late-night talk show on the radio station WOR, whose host and guests discussed UFOs, extraterrestrials, and paranormal phenomena.

Matsuzawa cut short his US stay, headed back to Japan, and, inspired by parapsychology and other esoteric sources, began developing his assorted "Psi" (pronounced "pusai" in Japanese) works. He created a studio-cum-installation-work, his "Psi Zashiki Room," a small section of which he displayed in the 1963 Yomiuri Independent Exhibition, a group show in Tokyo sponsored by a leading national newspaper.

Moving from abstract, mixed-media "paintings" and watercolors on paper to mixed-media assemblages and the use of symbols or written language in compositions laid out in mandala-like, nine-square grids, Matsuzawa sought to provoke in his viewers what Tomii calls "a complex set of transcendental time-space experiences."

In 1964, the artist apparently had a transcendental time-space experience of his own. In what he called a "revelation," he heard a voice ordering him to "Vanish matter!" — to stop producing art objects once and for all. Unbeknownst to Matsuzawa out in his "wilderness," various artist peers in North America and Europe were also pioneering what was first known as "idea art" or "concept art" and, finally, as "conceptual art"; like him, they were seeking to, as the American critic and art historian Lucy R. Lippard would later observe, "dematerialize" the art object. In a good example of a "resonance" between artists who lived and worked continents apart, Matsuzawa would ultimately make written language alone the content and "material" of his art.



On view are photographs by Matsuzawa's friend Kō Nakajima of the artist's art-filled "Psi Zashiki Room" and of a group of his "Psi" assemblages. Many of his hand-written or printed texts are presented in square vitrines whose layouts evoke the grid-based, Buddhist-mandala format Matsuzawa often employed in such works. Each glass case is accompanied by printed cards bearing Tomii's translations into English of Matsuzawa's writing, along with explanations of how their original Japanese versions are meant to be read (often, in a spiraling-out manner from the center of a composition).

Like the instructional pieces of such Fluxus artists as Yoko Ono, Matsuzawa's mature works invite viewer-participants to realize them in their own imaginations. Matsuzawa's lofty art, which expresses his notion of "kannen" (meditative visualization), reached its apotheosis in his "hypothesis," as he called it, "that contemporary civilization is nothing but a mistake." He famously inscribed on a banner accompanying one of his performance-art pieces, "Humans, let's vanish! Let's go, let's go..."

Yutaka Matsuzawa with "White Circle" (1969), digital print reproduced from "Y. Matsuzawa," exhibition brochure published by Aoki Gallery, Tokyo, 1969, 6 x 4 1/8 inches (original photo by Kō Nakajima, this photo courtesy Japan Society)

The *Radicalism* exhibition also looks at Group Ultra Niigata, or GUN, which became known for performance art and land art. In *Event to Change the Image of Snow* (1970), GUN's members used a fertilizer blower to spray colored food dyes across a wide, snow-covered gravel riverbed of the Shinano River in Niigata Prefecture, a region famous for its long, dreary winters and heavy snowfalls. No sooner did the artists create abstract patterns on the snow's white surface than fast-falling flakes obscured their handiwork.

The show highlights some of the projects of GUN member Michio Horikawa (its central figure, along with Tadashi Maeyama), who, beginning in 1969, sent stones he collected near the Shinano River to Japanese critics and artists in a series of mail-art actions inspired by the moon-rock gathering of American astronauts. Among the recipients of his peculiar missives: President Richard M. Nixon, whose ambassador in Tokyo sent Horikawa a letter thanking him for sending his boss "a most unusual Christmas gift."

GUN's activities were rooted in the geographical-physical characteristics of the group's native region but they sometimes became overtly political, too. It produced anti-war banners and stickers, and Maeyama dared to create a photo-illustrated artist's book critiquing the Japanese emperor system and its entrenched links to — and its nuanced manifestations of — state power.

Finally, *Radicalism* examines the activities of The Play, a group of self-styled "happeners" who assembled in Osaka in 1967. Concocting "happenings," or partially scripted, partially improvised events that challenged the work of art as a physical object, The Play's main objective, Tomii writes in the exhibition's accompanying brochure, was "to take everyday consciousness trapped in familiar space and time out into the landscape."

The Play meticulously planned each of its events. In *Voyage: Happening in an Egg* (1968), the group created a gigantic fiberglass egg, which it released with theatrical flair into the ocean near the southernmost tip of Japan's main island, hoping that it would reach California's coast. Japanese marine-safety officials required that the artists write on their odd vessel, in English, "Would you please report [to] us the place and date when you found this egg[?]" Not properly weighted, it did not travel on the current the artists had anticipated for its journey; it was once sighted out at sea and then never spotted again.

In *Current of Contemporary Art* (1969), The Play's members paddled a large river raft from Kyoto to Osaka, calling attention to urban dwellers' relationship with nature. Through their playfulness, they shook up a sense of mundane, everyday life. Each summer from 1977 through 1986, in an ongoing event titled Thunder, The Play used logs to build a large pyramid structure topped with a copper lightning rod, and then waited for lightning to strike. It never did, but they enthusiastically documented their nature-coaxing efforts all the same.

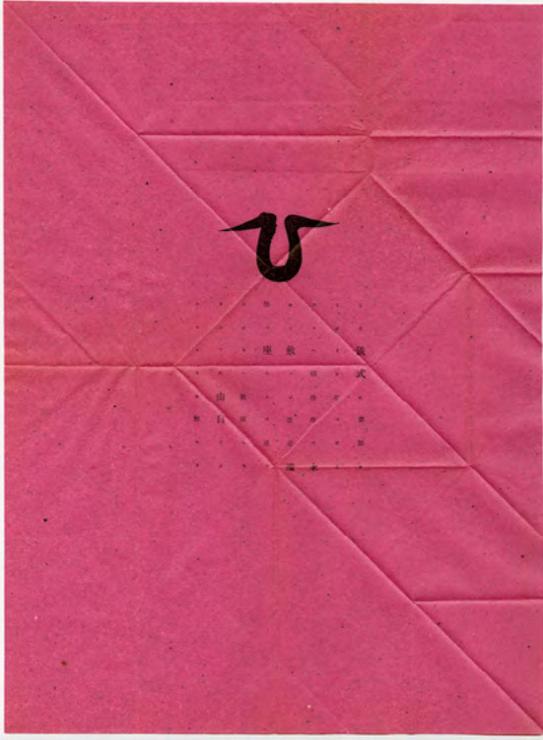
"In effect, this version of my *Radicalism* research is three monographic shows in one," Tomii said, describing the exhibition's scope and content. In showcasing the diversity of the ideas and projects of the Japanese artists whose careers it examines, it makes a strong case for the affinities they shared with those of their unknown foreign peers. These resonances occurred as conceptual art was developing during the postwar period, and now, in retrospect, they can be appreciated within the broader history of the late 20th-century avant-garde.

In light of such relationships, this *Radicalism*, like the book from which it derives, doesn't simply propose a place in that narrative for these Japanese artists' ideas and accomplishments. Instead, from and for the "wilderness," it demands, and seizes, a spot much closer to this slice of history's more familiar center.

Just how radical is that?

*Radicalism in the Wilderness: Japanese Artists in the Global 1960s continues at Japan Society (333 East 47th Street, Midtown, Manhattan) through June 9. The exhibition is curated by Reiko Tomii.*





MATSUZAWA YUTAKA, *Invitation to Psi Zashiki Room*, 1963, letterpress and envelope with stamp, addressed to Takiguchi Shūzō and postmarked Keiō University Art Center, Tokyo, 35 × 26 cm. Courtesy the artist and Japan Society, New York.

Around this same time in the 1960s, two collectives formed. Recent graduates Tadashi Maeyama and Michio Horikawa led GUN, ironically named after their origins in a remote, backwater region of Japan. They burned through their financial resources quickly, but not before executing their best-known performance *Event to Change the Image of Snow* (1970). Driven by the desire to break up Niigata's dreary, six-months-long winter, the group used a pesticide sprayer to blanket the white landscape in bright red, yellow and blue pigment. The beautiful display, which soon disappeared under the falling snow, was thankfully recorded in photographs. After the group disbanded, Maeyama went on to create several politically charged works. A reaction to the conflict in Vietnam, his *Antiwar Flag* (1970) depicts blood dripping from the red stripes of the American flag into the red circle of Japan's "sun-mark flag." Responding to another era-defining event, Horikawa began his series "Mail Art by Sending Stones" in 1969 following the Apollo 11 moon landing, and even mailed a stone to President Nixon.

Based in Osaka, The Play constitutes the second collective. Their quirky efforts included *Voyage: Happening in an Egg* (1968), launching a large, fiberglass egg into the Pacific with the hopes that the current would carry it to North America. In *Current of Contemporary Art* (1969), the group rowed from Kyoto to downtown Osaka on a Styrofoam raft shaped like an arrow. The exhibition offered a seating area outlined in the same shape, where viewers could watch footage documenting the performance. The Play continued to devise new works well into the next two decades, and spent ten years attempting to get lightning to strike a 20-meter-tall pyramid they constructed as part of their project *Thunder* (1977–86).

In the exhibition, the practices of these artists were situated alongside mentions of other notable artists and movements of the time, from Yayoi Kusama to Yves Klein's immaterialism. "Radicalism in the Wilderness" celebrated a unique period not only in Japanese contemporary art but also within a global context.



Installation view of MATSUZAWA YUTAKA's *Banner of Vanishing (Humans, Let's Vanish, Let's Go, Let's Go, Gate, Gate, Anti-Civilization Committee)* (1966/2016, right) at "Radicalism in the Wilderness: Japanese Artists in the Global 1960s," Japan Society Gallery, New York, 2019. Photo by Richard Goodbody. Courtesy Japan Society.

# Forbes

## See How A Provincial Japanese Artist Bested Neil Armstrong At This Thrilling Japan Society Exhibit

When Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin set foot on the moon, one of their primary tasks was to collect a load of rocks. At precisely the moment of their landing, a Japanese artist named Horikawa Michio led his class of seventh graders along the Shinano River in the Niigata Prefecture, instructing them to help him gather stones. They brought their bounty to the local post office, where Horikawa wrapped the rocks in wire, attached mailing tags, and shipped them to his fellow artists.

Horikawa's Mail Art By Sending Stones was a seminal work of conceptual art in 1960s Japan, yet it remains virtually unknown in the West. An important new exhibition at the Japan Society in New York is finally rectifying this oversight, bringing needed attention to the work of Horikawa as well as several other essential '60s conceptualists including Maeyama Tadashi and Matsuzawa Yutaka.

The most prominent of these artists, Matsuzawa made his name by organizing an exhibition with neither artwork nor spectators. Or rather the way in which artists submitted work and the public encountered it fell outside the realm of physical experience. "Please keep your entry in your hand and deliver the formless emission from it to the exhibition site," Matsuzawa wrote in a magazine ad. "Those who wish to enter may start contacting in material and/or immaterial ways."

Given that the exhibition site was in a field far outside of Tokyo, Matsuzawa was undoubtedly shrewd to place minimal physical demands on participants. But Independent '64 in the Wilderness was more than just a logistical workaround for an ambitious provincial artist. Even before Western conceptualists such as Sol LeWitt started dematerializing artwork by providing rules for instantiation by others, Matsuzawa revealed that art required only a common point of focus. In essence, art is a relationship between people, objects merely serving as opportune props.

Horikawa also explored art as a relationship. Although the rocks he shipped were objects in their own right, he used them as ballast for connection by transforming them into mail art.

Some stones traveled a considerable distance – if not quite as far as Apollo 11 – physically connecting Tokyo with the wilderness where they were collected by his students. The material transfer was simultaneously massive and negligible, connecting the city to the Shinano River while changing nothing about the planet's composition. Standing back, Horikawa perceived an equivalent paradox in the actions of Armstrong and Aldrin. "Nothing has changed in the universe even if humans stand on the moon and bring back moon rocks," he wrote in a statement about his work. "What changes are humans, and their thinking."

One transfer of material altered people's relationship with the universe. The other changed people's relationship with their own planet. In the midst of the Space Race, as the future of the world grew increasingly precarious, Horikawa provocatively proposed that the latter is at least as important as the former.

- Jonathon Keats

Charlotte Jansen, *Lessons in Being Radical: Free Communes, Art and Imaginary Space*,  
*Elephant*, March 31 2017

# ELEPHANT

## Lessons in Being Radical: Free Communes, Art and Imaginary Space

Live burials, radical art and roaming naked in free communes. Charlotte Jansen finds herself taken with the life of Yutaka Matsuzawa—an artist little-known to many in the mainstream art world, but recognized by some as the founding father of Japanese Conceptualism.

Words by Charlotte Jansen



Installation View: "From Nirvana to Catastrophe: Matsuzawa Yutaka and his 'Commune in Imaginary Space'" Ota Fine Arts, Tokyo

I've just watched a man wrap himself, naked, in a plastic bag, and be buried in the ground. The surrounding scene is pastoral and the naked man looks happy because, despite being wrapped in plastic and buried, he is free.

The plastic bag burial is flickering on a screen at OTA Fine Arts in Tokyo, where an exhibition on Yutaka Matsuzawa is currently being held. It's a grainy documentation of a 'free art' work, performed by Matsuzawa in the 1970s. He was an artist who was not ahead of his time, but outside of time completely.

Matsuzawa is known—or perhaps not known to most—as the founding father of Japanese Conceptualism. At this rare exhibition on Matsuzawa—because he didn't really believe in creating physical artworks—curated by Yoshiko Shimada, were some insights into this intriguing artist, who was a rational man by day, a trained architect, devoted maths teacher, and at the same time, practicing what was perhaps the most radical art form of the 1970s, setting up a free commune in Suwa, where rituals, performances and meditation took place, and later getting into esoteric Buddhism. He was part of the anti-art, anti-conformism taking place around the world in the late 1960s, and later represented Japan at the Venice Biennale in 1976, but today, his name isn't heard often. His work, as William Marrotti writes, "poses a challenge at virtually every level" and was so radical at a time, he was even thought to be running a cult.

Much of Matsuzawa's work is not visible or tangible—the current exhibit is based around letters, featuring correspondence with artists like John Baldessari (who affectionately addresses “dear Yuk Yuk” in a personal letter), photographs of performances (with more nudity, of course), leaflets and ephemeral materials for imaginary shows. And a lot of it is simply not understandable, at least, not to the ordinary human mind. But Matsuzawa's practice explores what it means to be radical, to truly live your art, to create spaces that don't exist: art that is truly transformative. There are moments where his ideas rip to the core of things with astonishing clarity. Matsuzawa writes: “Humanity is being challenged by numerous invisible things. We must learn to see the invisible.”

Here are some of the things we could learn from Matsuzawa's idiosyncratic, eccentric form of conceptual art. I'm off to find a plot of land where I can roam naked—perhaps I'll skip self-burial though.

### Create a Sacred Space for Yourself

Matsuzawa had an attic room, that was known as the “psi room”, a sacred space, stuffed, according to accounts, with all kinds of strange things like old utensils, empty boxes and animal skeletons. Some guests were too scared to go up there, including a well-known Japanese poet and art critic who visited in 1963. Gilbert and George also paid a visit, in 1975, and Matsuzawa documented it on film.

### Get Rid of All Objects

It might seem to contradict his secret stash in the attic, but at midnight on 1 June 1964, Matsuzawa was struck by an epiphany: he would renounce all material objects from his art, that moment forth, abandoning painting for works based around language and exchange. This would evolve into his idea of ‘final art’, allowing him to escape the white cube and move into the wilderness. He had been ruminating about the idea of dematerialization since 1946 when he graduated from the prestigious Waseda University, Tokyo, saying: “All manmade objects will eventually disappear, and so will human beings...”

### Try to Solve Problems on a Postcard

In 1968, Matsuzawa embarked on his 1010 Questionnaire project, and sent a postcard to friends, with ‘8 Conditions for World Peace’, requesting of its recipients to send back a reply. Ten of the postcards Matsuzawa received back were found at his house. This was not simply an early example of mail art—Matsuzawa was interested in was the exchange of ideas, not aesthetics, the veins of communication as art in and of themselves.

### Free Art

Matsuzawa received various premonitions and one of them was about ‘free art’, the criteria for which he then outlined in a leaflet he published. Loosely, free art is art that is free from regulations and prohibitions, that is without discrimination, that doesn't bear the artist's name or title and that is “neither good or bad, long or short, male or female, come or go, self or other, upside or downside, sea or mountain, beginning or end.”

### Start a Commune in the Countryside

After a legendary exhibition titled Nirvana, Matsuzawa started the Nirvana commune in Suwa, Nagano Prefecture. In many ways, it was the realization of an art utopia: open to all, clothes optional, ideas welcome. At the commune were various organisations, such as the Imaginary Space Situation Research Centre, and the Ancient Pan-Ritual Group, activities run by members of the commune, and events took place there, like a ‘concert in darkness’, where 35 guests made sounds and actions. They also made a TV programme about the relationship to snow. The commune ran until 1975 but eventually disbanded. Its ideology lives on.

## Don't Expect Anyone to Understand

Though his work was included in exhibits around the world—including Tate Modern's 2001 Century City—up until his death in 2006, his work is still marginal and peripheral in the context of contemporary art, and it's hard to find any artists who have followed in his path.

In his halcyon days, he was in contact with John Baldessari, Gilbert & George, Daniel Buren, Lawrence Weiner and Stanley Brouwn, as well as a network of conceptual artists in Japan during radical political and social times that have perhaps since disappeared forever. But Matsuzawa didn't expect to be understood, nor was that his aim. Art can be a slow trickle, revealing itself only through generations of living, breathing, beings.

*'From Nirvana to Catastrophe: Matsuzawa Yutaka and his 'Commune in Imaginary Space' runs until 22 April at OTA Fine Arts, Tokyo*



Installation view: "Utopia & Visions" 1971, Moderna Museet in Stockholm Photo: Kumiko Matsuzawa

