

Peter Eckersall and Edward Scheer

Introduction: Japan after the 1960s:

The Ends of the Avant-Garde

It is widely acknowledged that dramatic changes wrought in 1960s Japan were such that art and cultural practice were transformed into an emergent avant-gardism. Hybridity, physical and intellectual intensity, innovations, and transgressive acts are all characteristics of 1960s theatre, dance, cinema, literature and performance art.

The 1960s era was significant not least for its sense of convergence and evolving political sensibilities. In Japan, as in Europe and America, artists were rethinking materials and forms. They began working with bodies which were juxtaposed with spaces and objects. Art works came to reject academic and formal qualities of art and instead related to the everyday world. The intention was often conceptual and dynamic. An emerging discourse of performance challenging ideas of representation and politics in art was evident. Performance began connecting with the social sphere: 'With performance as a kind of critical wedge, the metaphor of theatricality has moved out of the arts into almost every aspect of modern attempts to understand our condition' (Carlson, 1996: 6). This issue of *Performance Paradigm* investigates how ideas of culture and one's experiences of the world came to be actively performative in a similar vein—how perception and experience stood for the embodiment of a new politics.

By the 1950s, young Japanese artists, many born during the war and experiencing disaffection with postwar reconstruction as a dominating form of capitalist modernity, began to explore new limits for art. Visual artists explored performance art, *butô*, *angura* (underground theatre) and street happenings reconfigured our understanding of performance, the human form, and of how art occupies and interprets the social spaces of the city. Protest was everywhere: the social space became performative and images of 1960s peace and prosperity contrasted with university occupations and violent sieges. The radical student corps battling the police—and interacting with a proliferation of transgressive arts and performance events—is a defining dramatic image

of the era. Moreover, as the demonstrations were replayed on TV, Japan's 'age of revolution' (Suga, 2003: 7) was unfolding in Japanese lounge rooms.

From the perspective of today, it is clear that the 1960s scene has excelled in advancing its self-reification and progression into contemporary arts. Rejected and critiqued, mythologised and celebrated, its intersections with the culture industry and the postmodern avant-garde movement are multiple and global. The influence of Japanese performance worldwide is now ubiquitous and profound yet its radical foundations have all but disappeared.

With these thoughts in mind, *Performance Paradigm* investigates the various 'ends' of 1960s culture in Japan and the parallel, divergent, multiple outcomes of the 1960s avant-garde.

Essays address the questions: why the 1960s now; what do we know about the complex, dynamically transforming space of 1960s Japan? Conversely, we ask what histories have been authorised and whose memories were lost in the construction of a 1960s memorialisation project? Perhaps most importantly, these essays rethink aspects of the counterculture—intrinsically a mode of artistic *and* political action.

In his piece, Satô Makoto—one the significant playwrights and directors from the 1960s generation—relocates *angura* as a model of international politics and exchange. His discussion soon moves from Japan into regional contexts as he collocates the movement in arts and cultural resistance movements in the Philippines, Singapore and Indonesia.

Yasuko Ikeuchi and Vera Mackie contest the straightforward images of *angura* as a revolutionary form. These feminist critiques of plays, acting and theatre posters show how the means of production recirculated dominating forms of power in Japan. Both essays problematise the radical limits of the 1960s space and its significance for women artists and audiences. Lisa Kuly also explores the 1960s milieu in her study of Don Kenny's English *kyôgen* experiments. Kuly was a member of the Kenny-Ogawa *Kyôgen* Players (as was Eckersall, co-author of this introduction) and her essay explores questions of experimentalism, authenticity, hybridity and otherness in 1960s performance.

At the ends of the 1960s lies *butô*. Its widespread transmission and popularity have engaged scholars and audiences around the world. Three essays address aspects of the *butô* phenomenon. Shannon C. Moore's contribution provides an introduction to the arrival of *butô* in Japan and considers its premodern influences. Michael Hornblow explores *butô* in the context of Hijikata Tatsumi and Antonin Artaud. His essay offers productive theoretical insights into *butô's* immanent avant-gardism. Finally, Jonathan Marshall's extended conversation with *butô* dancer Tanaka Min and Australian based

performer Yumi Umiumare sheds light on the historical and contemporary worlds of *butô*. Marshall's contextual essay addresses significant critical perspectives on *butô* in the international scene.

Radical new modes of performance and installation arts were also prominent in the 1960s and have strongly influenced Japan's contemporary arts scene. Yet in comparison to studies of 1960s theatre and cinema, research into performance art has only recently gained attention. Gunhild Borggreen discusses Yonobe Kenji's iconic atom suit artworks in a project that revisits the Osaka Expo 70. Midori Yoshimoto looks at performance art in the context of the 1964 Tokyo Olympic Games. Both contributions explore the complex ways that performance came to occupy public spaces, especially in these ideologically significant and representative event-sites celebrating Japan's postwar modernity and progress. These essays show how performance arts refigure Japan's civic, political and cultural hierarchies. They remind us of how the critical wedge of performance obstructs the rising tremor of authoritarianism.

Uchino Tadashi's article 'Mapping/Zapping 'J' Theatre at the Moment' is an excellent essay to conclude this issue of *Performance Paradigm*. His 'cognitive map' of contemporary theatre in present-day Japan shows how diverse the various frames of Japanese performance have become. His essay locates forty groups along various cultural, political and aesthetic vectors. It demonstrates both the proliferation of performance since the 1960s and its multiple ends.

Japanese names are written surname first, the exceptions being where the person concerned has adopted Anglo-European conventions. The words *butoh-butô*, *noh-nô*, and *buyoh-buyô* are accepted spellings throughout.

We gratefully thank The Japan Foundation for supporting the production of this journal issue. We would also like to thank Baba Masaki, Yuji Sone, Helena Grehan, contributors and our referees.

References

- Carlson, M. *Performance: A critical introduction*. (London & New York: Routledge, 1996).
- Suga, H. *Kakumei teki na, amari ni kakumei teki na: '1968 Nen no Kakumei' Shiron*. (Tokyo: Sakuhin Sha, 2003).

Editorial Note

Performance Paradigm issues 1 to 9 were reformatted and repaginated as part of the journal's upgrade in 2018. Earlier versions are viewable via Wayback Machine:

http://web.archive.org/web/*/performanceparadigm.net

© 2006 Peter Eckersall and Edward Scheer



Except where otherwise noted, this work is licensed under a Creative Commons AttributionNonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-ncsa/4.0/>