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Mavo: Japanese Artists and the Avant-Garde 1905-1931
(review)

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of Imanishi may be a fruitful avenue of investigation. This suggestion is also my request, because, in fact, Imanishi's public appeal is somewhat mysterious to those of us who have been immersed in his world as ecologists or primatologists. What does the public see in him? I even have had the experience of being chided by a nonscientist for not more fully incorporating Imanishi's ideas into my own research. Imanishi's public appeal has been his personal charisma and, to some extent, the readers' nationalism. The figure of Imanishi standing up to Darwin and the West appeals to many in Japan. However, I don't think these points explain his broad appeal. My own hypothesis is simply that Imanishi could stir the public through his writing, just as he inspired his students to go forth and do field work in the far corners of the earth. Imanishi's works are far more accessible to the public than those of many other members in the pantheon of Japanese scholarship, such as his contemporaries in the Kyoto intelligentsia, Nishida Kitarō and Yukawa Hideki. Just as in his persona of an uncanny leader of exploratory expeditions, Imanishi addresses the readers squarely and pulls them into joining him in the great scientific debates. *Seibutsu no sekai* was the first and still perhaps the most accessible of his books, and still the first book by him picked up by many readers. We shall now see if a new readership finds inspiration in the English version, *The World of Living Things*.

Mavo: Japanese Artists and the Avant-Garde 1905–1931. By Gennifer Weisenfeld. University of California Press, Berkeley, 2002. xi, 368 pages. \$55.00.

Reviewed by

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In recent years, social, political, and intellectual histories of Japanese modernity have become increasingly common as topics of research and publication. Yet the role of visual artists as agents of modernism is often omitted in these recent studies. Gennifer Weisenfeld's spectacular study of Mavo and the Taisho avant-garde is the first to fully examine how modern art was central to Japan's early twentieth-century debates on individualism, expressionism, and radicalism. At once meticulously researched and conceptually bold, this book encompasses the intellectual and cultural history of the origins, fields of activity, and legacy of the Taisho avant-garde.

Traditionally, Japanese art history has been defined as all art that predated Commodore Matthew Perry's arrival in 1853 and the consequent "corruption" of pure Japanese art by the forces of Westernization. The study of

modern art, meanwhile, was conventionally tied to the faith that modernism/modernity was a Western invention that spread, with considerable lag, from the center to the periphery where its production was necessarily derivative. (Curiously, such notions did not impede studies of modern Japanese literature, which early on gained international stature.) Weisenfeld's book applies revisionist theories of "multiple" or "alternative" modernisms that eschew essentialist Japanese as well as monolithic modern constructs to explore the local conditions of modernity among non-Western cultures. Rather than view Taisho modernism as an offshoot of early twentieth-century European modernism, to which it was profoundly linked, Weisenfeld rightly insists on focusing her narrative on the domestic conditions and debates that gave rise to Mavo and its larger culture of anarchism. Her book proves how vital regional studies are to our understanding of the international project of modernism; it also proves how vital modernity studies are to our understanding of a given region.

The avant-garde collective known as Mavo was active during the 1920s; Weisenfeld locates the origins and span of its activities from the end of the Russo-Japanese War in 1905 to the beginning of Japan's war in China in 1931. At the outset, she states the group's cross-disciplinary identity: "Mavo artists cast themselves as social critics, strategically fusing modernist aesthetics with leftist politics and serving as a central voice for cultural anarchism in intellectual debates" (p. 1). The founding members of the group were Murayama Tomoyoshi, Ōura Shūzō, Yanase Masamu, Ogata Kamenosuke, and Kadowaki Shinrō. At its peak in the mid-1920s, the group expanded to some 15 "artist-activists."

Murayama, Mavo's charismatic leader, had studied in Germany where he became an ardent believer in the socially transformative potential of avant-garde art. He was especially influenced by the dadaists Theo Van Doesburg, Kurt Schwitters, and Tristan Tzara, and the artist-social critic George Grosz. Inspired by ideas derived from anarchism, Marxism, futurism, expressionism, dadaism, and constructivism, Murayama returned to Japan and labeled his new theory for promoting a Japanese avant-garde "conscious constructivism" (*ishikiteki kōseishigi*). Believing that destructive acts can serve as a form of constructive criticism, Murayama championed the reintegration of art into the social and political practice of everyday life and aimed to break down the barriers between official "Art" and the chaotic materiality of contemporary being. The Mavo manifesto declared: "We stand at the vanguard, and will eternally stand there. We are not bound. We are radical. We revolutionize/make revolution. We advance. We create. We ceaselessly affirm and negate" (p. 66).

Weisenfeld constructs an intellectual history of the emergence of Mavo's radical politics and discourse of liberation that she locates in late Meiji literary and political theories of the individual. Soon after the Russo-

Japanese War, the discourse of individualism shifted from an individual's duty to state and family to a cultivation of the "autonomous self." In reaction against the oppressiveness of Meiji thought and its entrenched systems of conformity within Japanese society, intellectuals pursued their own psychological interiority, developing a style of naturalism in art and literature that centered on subjectivity and self-expression. Taking European postimpressionism and expressionism as a cue, the struggle for self-cultivation gradually took on the heroic gesture of individual genius to improve society. The first movement to proclaim expressionism and social transformation as central to new art was the Futurist Art Association, which flourished just prior to Mavo's emergence.

Mavo waged its militant avant-gardism on two fronts: it defined itself in opposition to Japan's entrenched art establishment, or *gadan*, a legacy of Meiji cultural policy; simultaneously, it sided with growing numbers of anarchist and Marxist political revolutionaries to battle against, by shock and defiance of conventions, the status quo of bourgeois capitalism. In exploring the intellectual origins and achievements of both of these oppositional strategies, Weisenfeld confronts ambiguities and contradictions. To her credit, she delves into the central tension between leftist radicalism and bourgeois culture that remains, in her mind, unresolved in the world of Mavo. This "unresolve" becomes, in turn, a cultural and intellectual space that is rooted in the state of Taisho cultural discourse.

In launching attacks on the *gadan*—the state arts bureaucracy that sponsored such juried exhibitions as Teiten and official art schools such as the Imperial Art Academy—Mavo artists cast themselves as liberators of an institutional art system that was entrenched, exclusive, and hierarchical. As Mavo took on leftist political rhetoric, the *gadan* was equated with capitalism and the bourgeoisie while Mavo anarchists were equated with liberation and the proletariat. In practice, Mavo rejected the academic styles of *yōga* (Western-style oil painting) and *Nihonga* (modern Japanese-style painting) and promoted forms of collage, assemblage, and constructivism instead. Mavo's aim, Weisenfeld asserts, was to tangibly link art to the materiality of everyday experience by using such nonart materials as ladies' shoes, human hair, cutouts from popular magazines, and fragments of discarded machinery. Assemblage was introduced to Japan after its development in Europe and came to emblemize radicalism and the destruction of traditional art forms. It also conferred upon its practitioners cultural parity with the European avant-garde and superiority over Japanese Western-style artists who were still mired, according to Mavo, in mimesis, nostalgia, and postimpressionism. For Mavo artists, who cast themselves as "madmen" and "cripples," art was meant to express the urgent domestic conditions of crisis, peril, state authoritarianism, pessimism, and melancholy.

One of the most extraordinary aspects of Mavo is the diversity of its ar-

tistic practices, especially its use of commercial publishing. Over its relatively brief period of activity, Mavo engaged in magazine publication (*Mavo*) and book illustration, cartoons and graphic design, dance and theatrical performance, stage design and architectural projects. By linking commercial design and avant-garde, Mavo members played a pivotal role in developing modern Japanese design, which excels in the international arena. (This volume, incidentally, is a most handsome tribute to Mavo's distinctive graphic design.)

Weisenfeld admirably succeeds in tracking the fluid boundaries between fine art, mass circulation print culture, commercial design, and Japan's new consumer spaces, such as cafés and department stores, where Mavo staged shows. She also describes the relationship between such "new arts" (*shinkō geijustu*) and leftist politics that increasingly shaped Mavo's thinking. By 1925, for example, *Mavo* displayed frequent references to class conflict, social revolution, and Bolshevism, calling for an all-new proletarian culture of "comprehensive construction" to bring the daily lives of artists and the intelligentsia—damned as privileged classes—closer to the reality of the proletariat. Weisenfeld sets forth the passions and rhetoric of Mavo, using their writings in *Mavo* as well as drawing from interviews and articles in the contemporary press. She juxtaposes these against the hard-line leftist critics, who largely dismissed Mavo and its related group, Sanka, as being overly nihilistic, pessimistic, and displaying a mere "opinionless, playful impulse" (p. 108). It seems Weisenfeld agrees when she observes that the "group offered only rhetoric, with little substance behind it" (p. 121).

The problem that Weisenfeld attempts to unravel is the fundamental confusion between the late Meiji/Taisho discourse of individualism and the political theories of anarchism and Marxism. Mavo confuses all three and emerges as a group of far better artists than ideologues. Unlike Marxist art theory, anarchism preserved the centrality of individual expression (deemed bourgeois by Marxists) and emphasized revolutionary practice as a means to social revolution. The Japanese Proletarian Art Movement invoked similar rhetoric during the 1920s about engaging "reality" and "daily life," but its members interpreted those terms very differently. For them, realism meant "pictorial realism" (*gaimenjō shajitsushugi*) which depicted events that accorded with Marxist dogma: rosy-colored images of the Russian Revolution and the smiling worker in his socialist factory. This happy depiction of daily life was far from the gritty "material realism" (*gazai no shajitsushugi*) of the constructivists that so inspired Mavo and Sanka.

In the end, it becomes clear that Mavo artists spouted Marxist rhetoric but their commitment to its political revolutionary movement was unclear. They were first and foremost dadaists, poised to confront and provoke the status quo within the arena of the press, galleries, cafés, and department stores with bellicose antics that aimed to shock and provoke social, sexual,

and cultural mores. They referred to themselves as “terrorists” and “black criminals” whose target of attack was bourgeois ethics, which were tantamount to the destruction of the capitalist system. Yet the very territory within which they operated was the growing middle-class consumer culture and its urban centers of entertainment. Weisenfeld explores how “Mavo artists exploited the new technologies and market systems even as they openly mocked and perverted them” (p. 168).

Aside from Mavo’s publications and significant body of media coverage, little remains of Mavo’s art and constructions. It is not clear why. Weisenfeld is rigorous in describing the few works that survive in museum and private collections in Japan, and others that she gleans from an archive of grainy newspaper photos, but shies from judging if Mavo art succeeded, in aesthetic and visual terms, in expressing its impassioned intellectual agenda.

For all its Marxist dogma, Mavo’s contribution and legacy lie in the realm of art, not politics. In the postwar period, the Taisho avant-garde was first reclaimed by art critics, art historians, and exhibition curators who sought to link Japan’s emerging postwar avant-garde to the “new art movement” of the 1920s, specifically dadaism and surrealism. Observers noted the parallels between the turbulent domestic situation in the 1920s and 1960s, and posited Mavo as the prehistory to such “anti-art” and “neo-dada” groups as Hi Red Center and the Neo Dada Organizers. Weisenfeld concludes that while this constructed “tradition of avant-gardism” in Japan, grounded in the spirit of opposition to establishment and authoritarian systems, is both ahistorical and transhistorical, it has nonetheless established Mavo as “a true Japanese artistic achievement, inscribed in the enduring tradition of Japanese avant-gardism” (p. 261).

Yōgaku: Japanese Music in the Twentieth Century. By Luciana Galliano. Scarecrow Press, Lanham, Md., 2002. xvi, 357 pages. \$69.50.

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Galliano’s *Yōgaku: Japanese Music in the Twentieth Century* is a history of an enormous amount of music written by a large number of significant Japanese composers. I agree with Yuasa Jōji’s remarks in his foreword to the English edition of *Yōgaku* (it was first published in Italian in 1998): Galliano does indeed succeed in combining stylistic analysis of music with aesthetic reflections and she effectively places musical developments within the