

At the end of World War II, Japan was left in ruins and a relative cultural void. There was a great need to redefine the various artistic fields. During this period, information on new cultural developments through books and journals was largely only available to the public through the library of CIE (Civil Information and Education section) set up by the Allied Occupation authority. Their weekly record concerts played the latest releases and also functioned as a meeting place.

Soon after Allied occupation ended in 1951, numerous innovative artistic groups emerged in Japan. They tested definitions and the practice of art by producing works in a variety of traditional and new media. The artists collaborated beyond the boundaries of artistic collectives, genres, and conventional exhibition spaces.

The earliest Japanese artist collective was the Jikken Kobo - Experimental Workshop. Founded in Tokyo 1951, with the encouragement of the poet and art critic Shuzo Takiguchi, the group included several composers, visual artists, set designers, a lighting designer, an engineer and musicians. Together with outside collaborators such as film-makers, dancers, choreographers and actors the group developed innovative multimedia and inter-disciplinary events producing concerts, performances, ballets, recitals and environmental art that paved the way for future avant-garde artists. Their focus was on the issue of collaborative work and the experimentation with new exhibition formats, they were constantly trying to break away from the narrow borders of the different field of arts. During these formative years in post-war Japan, the activities of the Experimental Workshop can be also understood as a social movement, the members working in a highly fluid way like a project team.

Incorporating new technology into their experiments was also important and led to the first use in an artistic context of the newly developed cassette recorders and slide projectors. Throughout the years of their activities until 1957, the group was pioneering the idea of inter-media and inter-disciplinary approach which is now never questioned any more.

Given that several members of the group were composers and musicians, from the very beginning the activities included musical experiments and recitals of new European contemporary music. Works by Schönberg and Messiaen were performed for the first time in Japan at recitals of the group.

Toru Takemitsu worked part time for the Tokyo Tsushin Kogyo K. K. (now Sony) in the early 50's, where the prototype for a Japanese-made tape recorder had recently been created. Sony and the Jikken Kobo entered a collaborative arrangement, where members of the collective created demo

tapes to promote the product, while the company aided the Jikken Kobo by providing space to present their creative works. Thus the earliest pieces of Japanese 'musique concrète' were performed by the Jikken Kobo in 1952 (compositions by Shibata and Takemitsu). The Workshop's 5th Exhibition and Presentation was an influential multimedia experiment. Apart from new compositions by members of the group the program showcased works that integrated automatic slide projections with montages of recorded everyday sounds or a narration, these were made using new technology produced by Tokyo Tsushin Kogyo K. K. It was the first concert in Japan for 'musique concrète' and electronic music.

To represent how important experimental music were for the activities of the Jikken Kobo a compilation of compositions by Jikken Kobo members from 1952 - 1962 is part of the exhibition.

Three of these 'Auto-Slide' works from the Jikken Kobo/Experimental Workshop are part of our exhibition. We can also screen the film 'Ginrin (Silver Wheel) Bicycle in a Dream' (1955), a collaboration between the experimental film maker Toshio Matsumoto, Katsuhiro Yamaguchi and other members of the Jikken Kobo. This promotional film for the Japanese bicycle industry used entirely newly developed visual effects and for the first time special effects in colour. One special effect used in the film was created through a new glass product fabricated in Japan in this time. Corrugated glass, known from skylights, greenhouses or industrial buildings, were used by Yamaguchi to diffuse light. The sci-fi/surrealistic lighting in the film was achieved through the use of this type of glass together with coloured light.

While the members of the Jikken Kobo were constantly striving to work with the newest artistic trends and technology, they also incorporated traditional Japanese forms into their projects. Experimentation was however not a means in itself but always meant an active engagement with society and the realities of the present.

In our entrance space a documentary film by Shozo Kitadai from the year 1956 shows the Jikken Kobo group and friends going on a journey together. Starting of as a classic 'road movie' the film is very soon transformed into something else, scenes appear upside down or sideways, images overlap each other, the running speed varies or the film runs in reverse. Traditional landscape views are cut into these experimental passages and comic antics of the Jikken Kobo members. The undulating movement and playful experimentation with the medium reflect perfectly the Avantgarde spirit of the group.

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