

## Gutai in Europe, starting from Italy

Among the many events organized over the past years to present the research carried out from the mid-1950s by the artistic group Gutai under the charismatic guidance of Jiro Yoshihara was the exhibition *“Under Each Other’s Spell”: Gutai and New York* held at the Pollock–Krasner House and Study Center. This had the merit of raising a query that from the New York scene, and the figure of Jackson Pollock in particular, may also be extended to other leading art cities in Europe in the same period. The American exhibition, whose staging was made possible by the presence of items from the archives of Paul and Suzanne Jenkins, as well as those of other generous lenders, stressed the efforts made by members of the Gutai group, including Jiro Yoshihara and Shozo Shimamoto, to circulate their magazine more widely, and their desire in the early months of 1956 to find out what Pollock thought of their art. They themselves openly expressed their admiration for Pollock’s work, as well as for that of French artist Georges Mathieu. As the catalogue of the exhibition reveals, Pollock – who unexpectedly died in a car accident only a few months after Shimamoto’s letter (in which he was asked an opinion on Gutai’s work) had reached him – never provided an answer to this query. What is nonetheless certain is that he was aware of the work of the Gutai group, as evinced by the presence of some issues of the magazine *Gutai* in the artist’s library at the time of his death. The American exhibition therefore helped to illustrate the direct and indirect relations between the Gutai group and certain stars of the New York cultural scene, which in those momentous mid-1980s, aside from Pollock, also included Lee Krasner, Paul Jenkins (fig. 1), Alfonso Ossorio and art dealer Martha Jackson (who in 1958 took up Michel Tapié’s suggestion of hosting an exhibition of the group in the United States), as well as Ray Johnson, writer Tennessee Williams and a few others. Later, particularly after 1960, American artists showed increasing interest in the Gutai group. This was the case, for instance, with Allan Kaprow, who organized happenings closely reminiscent of Gutai events. By 1964, the Gutai Pinacotheca – a space in Osaka housing a permanent exhibition of works by the Gutai group – had become a cultural landmark for American artists, critics, collectors and curators in Japan. Besides Jenkins, the Gallery was visited by John Cage, Merce Cunningham, William de Kooning, Lawrence Alloway, Clement Greenberg, Peggy Guggenheim, Geoff Hendricks, Jasper Johns, Robert Rauschenberg, and many others. The American exhibition provided an indirect stimulus for current research on the presence of the Gutai group in Italy and suggested the need to launch an enquiry into the relationships between the representatives of the Japanese group and Italian artists, galleries, critics and cultural milieus, without any pretence of exhausting a field whose exploration would require far more space than is available here. Yet it is worth at least making a start. The first traces of this itinerary are to be found in 1956 in Turin, Piedmont, a city which French art critic Michel Tapié de Céleyran – already acclaimed at the time – often used to visit and stay in. As has been documented, the renowned critic, who since 1948 had been theorizing the idea of Informel and within it that of “Art autre”, first arrived in Turin for a number of different professional reasons. Tapié was soon taken up by Luciano Pistoï, who after a few years of work as a journalist and of training in art galleries and studios in Turin had opened his own exhibition space, Galleria Notizie, in 1958. Tapié began closely collaborating with Pistoï, in whose gallery he staged exhibits of French, American, German, and Japanese artists, thus using Notizie to promote the Informel trend which he was theorizing. After having come across the work of Luigi Spazzapan at the 27th Venice Biennale in 1954 and having been “amazed” by it – as he himself put it – in Turin the French critic met sculptor Franco Garelli

and painter Franco Assetto. They introduced Tapié to Luciano Pistoï and to a series of other artists, including Mattia Moreni, Umberto Mastroianni, Adriano Parisot, Sandro Cherchi, Piero Rambaudi, Pinot Gallizio and Antonio Carena, as well as to certain art collectors such as Ada Minola – who later became the president of the ICAR (International Center of Aesthetic Research), the institute which Tapié founded in Turin and was closed many years later, in 1977. The partnership between Pistoï and Tapié was very intense and led to the staging of several exhibitions and groundbreaking cultural events in Turin. In March 1958, following a lecture at the Galleria Notizie, Tapié penned the presentation of the major posthumous exhibition of Spazzapan. Between May and October of the same year he used the Notizie spaces to introduce the works by Japanese painters Hsiao Domoto and Toshimistu Imai. It is they who had first informed Tapié of the existence of the Gutai group the year before, when he was curator of the Galerie Stadler in Paris. Besides, in 1957, after showing two works by Paul Jenkins in this Parisian gallery (March–April 1957), Tapié had introduced the artist – who was then visiting Japan – to Jiro Yoshihara and the whole Gutai group. It thus appears increasingly clear that Tapié’s mercurial action proved particularly significant and fruitful, not least in the light of his later critical contributions and his staging of exhibitions of works by artists involved in the relationship between the Gutai group and Italian art and culture. One of the figures to be mentioned in this context is artist Carla Accardi, whose paintings Tapié presented in the Galleria Notizie in February 1959 (*Dipinti e tempere*). A member of the Forma 1 group, since 1951 she had been one of those Italian artists – along with Capogrossi, Burri and Fontana – whose works Tapié had displayed and studied with great foresight. When Tapié presented Capogrossi at the 27th Venice Biennale, acknowledging the artist’s importance – he was one of the first international critics to do so – he used the expressions “informe généralisé” and “art autre”, which were only later adopted in Italy, in 1957–58 (Bandini). Carla Accardi and Giuseppe Capogrossi were the only Italian artists whose works were already being featured, since 1958, in the exhibitions curated in Japan by Tapié and Yoshihara, the leader of the Gutai group. From September 1957, the French critic, who had arrived in Japan, actively participated in the work of the Gutai group and of the other exponents of the Japanese art scene. Among other events held in 1958 in Osaka, Tapié and Yoshihara organized an international exhibition entitled *The International Art of a New Era: Informel and Gutai*, which alongside the art of Gutai members Fujiko Shiraga, Sadamasa Motonaga, Jiro Yoshihara and Atsuko Tanaka also featured works by Georges Mathieu (fig. 2), Robert Motherwell, Paul Jenkins, Giuseppe Capogrossi, and Carla Accardi. The following year, Lucio Fontana’s work stood out at the *International Sky Festival* organized by Tapié and Yoshihara in Osaka, which had been extended from the Gutai group to nineteen foreign artists. The Italo-Argentinian artist had already been featured on the cover of issue no. 8 of *Gutai* magazine (September 1957), an issue entirely devoted to Michel Tapié’s *aventure informel*. With the aim of promoting Gutai, Tapié even asked its members to produce two-dimensional paintings that could easily be transported on journeys abroad. Many of the earliest members of the group followed this suggestion, not without distorting the original modes of expression that characterized their art. As has rightly been observed, “Tapié’s work was not limited to writing and curating exhibitions. He was also deeply involved in the purchasing and selling of art. Among other things, he did his best to place with art dealers and collectors the works of artists he supported”. It soon became evident, however, that the members of the Gutai group who previously – from 1954–55 to 1958–59 – had engaged in both painting and other kinds of art, had largely turned into a group of painters. In this way, while later reaping great benefits in terms of the expansion of its own work on an international level, the original Gutai group,

which had stood out for the variety of its modes of expression, “ceased to exist” (Shoichi Hirai). In the light of the above process, what appears particularly timely is Luciano Pistoï’s decision in 1959 to host an extraordinary exhibition of the Gutai group in his Galleria Notizie. First suggested by Tapié, this show featured works by Jiro Yoshihara, Saburo Murakami, Fujiko Shiraga, Yasuo Sumi, Masatoshi Masanobu, Teruyuki Tsubouchi, Sadamasa Motonaga, Tsuruko Yamazaki, Kazuo Shiraga, and Shozo Shimamoto. This was the first time the group held an exhibition in Europe and Italy, although by then it had already abandoned its bodily and theatrical modes of expression. Meanwhile, in May 1959, in the Circolo degli Artisti of Palazzo Graneri in Turin a new and wide-ranging exhibition was inaugurated by Michel Tapié and Luciano Pistoï, in collaboration with Angelo Dragone and Coichi Tominaga, featuring works by European, American, and Japanese artists. Bearing the title *Arte nuova*, which Pistoï had devised to counterbalance the impression left by Tapié’s label *Art autre*, this exhibition included works by Akira Kanayama, Masatoshi Masanobu, Sadamasa Motonaga, Saburo Murakami, Shozo Shimamoto, Kazuo Shiraga, Atsuko Tanaka, Sofo Teshigahara, Jiro Yoshihara, Hsiao Domoto, Toshimitsu Imai, Ideku Fukushima, and Jorinasa Yanagi, as well as by Carla Accardi, Alberto Burri, Giuseppe Capogrossi, Lucio Fontana, Mattia Moreni, Antonio Sanfilippo, Luigi Spazzapan, Emilio Vedova, Garelli, Assetto, Boille, A. Carena, Cherchi, Chighine, Morlotti, Rambaudi and Somaini. Works were also featured by American and other international artists, including Pollock, de Kooning, Sam Francis, Krasner, Jenkins, Kline, Marca-Relli, Ossorio and Tobey, as well as Fautrier, Mathieu, Tàpies, Riopelle, Saura, Serpan, and others. It appears evident that via artistic events such as those mentioned so far for the first time in Europe and Italy a conspicuous number of artists, art dealers, critics, journalists, art collectors and enthusiasts of various kinds became aware and acquired first-hand knowledge of the work of the Gutai group. Particularly from a strictly artistic point of view, it then became possible to draw a distinction, before the 1960s, between those who had already developed an artistic language of their own and whose work was therefore to be considered contemporary to that of the Gutai group; and those who were not yet active at that date and thus were destined to draw certain effective and positive suggestions and influences from the group. To explore this issue, it suffices to consider certain works and modes of expression of the Gutai group, along with their aesthetic language, and compare them to the work of other artists whose distinguishing qualities and specific modes of expression have already been examined. As tellingly observed by Jole de Sanna – a leading scholar who prematurely passed away – in her studies on form, the expressive modes of certain members of the Gutai group were inspired by Western artists of various backgrounds. While in 1955 Kazuo Shiraga performed the action *Challenging Mud* by plunging into and writhing in a muddy mixture on the ground, Saburo Murakami engaged in breaking through a series of paper screens with his body that were vertically arranged like diaphragms, to create the work *Six Holes*. In both cases, the source of inspiration behind the performances is quite clear. “The former artist was directly inspired by Action Painting, and especially Pollock (fig. 3); the latter explicitly by Fontana’s *Hole*” (de Sanna). Naturally, the reflection engendered by these findings in no way detracts from the extraordinary intuitions of Gutai artists. Aside from all questions of expressive derivation, of the influence exercised or undergone by Gutai or the artists who came into contact with it and began their work after the legendary season in which the group had first appeared on the art scene, the most interesting issues concerning Jiro Yoshihara’s valiant team (fig. 4) may be summed up in just a few points: first of all, Gutai’s extraordinary opening up of Japanese culture and art on an international level through a “regeneration of means, space, the body and matter ... a broadening of its scene to provide a new framework. As Tapié noted, art after Gutai can only

be approached on a global scale (1958)". The second point is the introduction of a performance element, often highly theatrical, into the works. This indicates the group's attempt to reaffirm the simultaneous engagement of body and mind, both of which are so strikingly absorbed in the ancient practice of writing (Sho) and in the formulation of Gutai's new works. The latter spring from an "instantaneous impulse" – if repeated, they are likely to undergo a loss of tension. No doubt, instantaneousness for Gutai is one of the most central elements in the fashioning of art, which is bound to prove more thrilling in the phase of its conception than in its final outcome. A further initial aspect of the "concreteness" displayed by the members of Yoshihara's group is their tendency to operate outdoors, in natural spaces, by shaping matter through the body. For these reasons, if on the one hand Tapié's strategy for critique and communication proved invaluable in terms of promoting the work of the Japanese members of Gutai in Europe and the USA, on the other the cultural and commercial praxis he developed, and which limited the considerable potential and attitudes of the group by confining it within the aesthetic boundaries of Informel, reduced the revolutionary potential of Gutai and its tendency to resist all labels – an initial characteristic sought by Yoshihara to match the adoption of unprecedented artistic practices. Following the Gutai exhibition in the Galleria Notizie (1959) and the *Arte nuova* exhibition in the Circolo degli Artisti of Palazzo Graneri (1959), Turin witnessed further signs of the creative meeting between Pistoï and Tapié, with added contributions from the young critic Carla Lonzi on the occasion of the subsequent solo exhibit of paintings by Kazuo Shiraga, which was held in both the International Center of Aesthetic Research and in the Galleria Notizie. As for the works dated between 1959 and 1961, while Tapié presents them within the context of the memorable encounter that took place in Osaka in 1957, Lonzi – in a fraught article featured in the catalogue of the exhibition – broaches the problem of the relation between Shiraga's "feet painting" and Pollock's "dripping" (fig. 5). Lonzi sees the extreme gesture of the Japanese artist as "a final liberation from intellectual frameworks and the replacement of an obsessive and tense movement with natural and perfectly free gestures". The Shiraga exhibition, however, was not the only new event devoted to Gutai. In autumn of the same year, Pistoï, Lonzi and Alberto Ulrich organized *Incontro di Torino: Pittori di America, Europa e Giappone* in the Palazzo della Promotrice delle Belle Arti, inside the Valentino Park. They did so in the footsteps of Tapié, who in June had inaugurated an exhibition entitled *Strutture e Stile. Pitture e sculture di 42 artisti d'Europa, America e Giappone* in the Galleria d'Arte Moderna of Turin. The exhibition staged by Pistoï, Lonzi and Ulrich consisted of three sections and pursued a number of aims. The first was Pistoï's intention to criticize the 31st Venice Biennale and its academicism – as symbolized by the striking presence of "new figuration" – while simultaneously launching an appeal for Informel painting. The second aim was to pay homage to the stars of the post-war period, including Burri, Bacon, Dubuffet, Fautrier, Hartung, Jorn, Kline, de Kooning, Mathieu (fig. 6), Pollock, Matta, Rothko, Spazzapan, de Staël, Tàpies, Tobey and Wols, as well as Yoshihara and Domoto, through an essay written by Lonzi in praise of both "Art autre" and Tapié. The *Incontro di Torino* exhibition also included a solo show of works by Lucio Fontana from the years 1946–62, which was discussed in another essay by Lonzi. The critic sharply examined the revolution in artistic language brought about by the master of Spatialism via "spatial concepts", "graffitos", "holes" and "cuts" – forms that by transcending signs herald a "creative concreteness" (Lonzi) that bestows an independent and autonomous existence on form. By the late months of 1962, after some resounding events, exhibitions devoted to members of the Gutai group came to an end, as did the public collaboration between Tapié,

Pistoï and other promoters interested in the Informel – a pictorial trend on which the curtain was soon to fall.

### **“Creation is self-determination” (Motonaga, 1956)**

While within a decade, leading to the death of Yoshihara (1972), the heroic initial phase in the history of Gutai was destined to come to an end, in the US, in Europe and in Italy a considerable number of new works soon revealed not only what independent art had in the meantime been developed in these countries, but also what the outcome was of the influence which Gutai had undoubtedly exercised. It has already historically been ascertained that in Italy, aside from Fontana’s enquiry on the notion of “spatiality” and on gestures, another research developed independently of Gutai was Alberto Burri’s early work on matter, Capogrossi and Accardi’s research on signs, Gallizio’s on behaviour (fig. 7), that of Manzoni, Castellani, Uncini and Lo Savio on the semiological re-envisioning of the body, and that of Fernando Melani on matter, based on the recording of particles and atoms in painting. Alongside the clear trajectory of Paul Jenkins’s dialectical engagement (fig. 8) with the work of Yoshihara and other Gutai painters, the United States also witnessed significant metamorphoses and developments of the artistic language through the work of artists such as Allan Kaprow. In 1966, while acknowledging that Gutai artists had been the first to develop the idea of happening, Kaprow claimed that he had been unaware of the group’s existence until 1963 because of the “poor functioning of means of communication”. This statement is rather surprising, considering that Gutai had first made its appearance in the US back in 1958, thanks to the exhibition held in the Martha Jackson Gallery in New York – an event that received immediate coverage through an article published by Dore Ashton on the *New York Times*. A similar course was taken by certain Fluxus members, who following John Cage’s attempt to blend Western and Eastern culture (starting from 1952), pushed the art-life equation drawn from Gutai to its very limits. Following the years 1959–60, criticism of Informel art and hence Gutai gradually took hold. For certain artists, the razing of existing modes of expression had opened up new ways of envisaging artworks by abolishing the equation between painting and pictures. The notion of painting thus came to be associated more with one’s mental conception of the spatio-temporal dimension than with the use of oil colours, acrylic or pure pigments. The generation of Italian artists that had been engaging in research since the mid-1950s started developing a distinct mode of formal expression towards the end of that decade; this, not so much by absorbing influences from Informel art or Gutai, as on the contrary thanks to the exhausting of those emotional and irrational artistic drives. These artists thus focused their energies on “re-writing” – on both an ideal and a technical level – the grammar and syntax of the language of art, grounding artistic practice itself in new conceptions. The most important innovations brought by artists such as Castellani, Manzoni, Lo Savio, Uncini, Colombo, Dadamaino, Paolini, Pistoletto, and Alviani were developed on the basis of the previous research carried out by Fontana and Burri, as well as by engaging with the historical avant-garde – especially the art of Balla, Boccioni, Malevich, Mondrian and later Duchamp, Picabia, Bacon, and Giacometti. On the other hand, it is well known by now that the first artistic innovations to have been introduced in the post-war Italian context by members of the Forma 1 group such as Accardi, Dorazio, Turcato, and Consagra (among others) were inspired by the vast range of experiences made by European abstract artist, ranging from Kandinsky and Klee to Alberto Magnelli. Finally, while some of the work carried out by the leading figures of Arte Povera presents certain analogies – in terms of approach and outcome – with that of the Gutai group, particularly in the case of actions or works *en plein air*, most Arte Povera works at a closer scrutiny actually reveal

traces of very different notions, largely developed and drawn from the artists' close acquaintance with the European and North American artistic tradition. The "decultural" intention behind the works of Mario Merz – who was already active in Turin in the 1950s, when the city was first being introduced to the Gutai group – dialectically engages more with Pinot Gallizio (fig. 10) than it does with the Japanese artists. The ideational originality of Luciano Fabro is rooted in an aesthetics of plasticity that extends from Medardo Rosso down to Fontana. Pistoletto conceived his "mirror paintings" after studying Bacon and adopted a phenomenological approach by drawing inspiration from reflection for all his subsequent works. Paolini examined all previous art in detail and attained the enigmatic quality of de Chirico, which he then exponentially developed. Kounellis, after Masaccio and Caravaggio, looked towards Pollock and Burri. Before the close of the 1960s, other artists, such as Anselmo, Zorio, Boetti, Marisa Merz, Pascali and Prini, guided by "live in your head" aesthetics, implicitly followed rules leading to outcomes well known and which were illustrated on an international level by Harald Szeemann through the exhibition *Live in Your Head. When Attitudes Become Form*, staged in Kunsthalle Bern in 1969. This, however, is a different story, although it does not rule out – as previously mentioned – the sharing on these artists' part of certain principles informing the work of Gutai, as conceived by Jiro Yoshihara (fig. 9) when he argues that, "in Gutai art the spirit of man and matter go hand in hand, despite being the opposite of one another. Matter is not absorbed by the spirit. The spirit does not force matter into submission. If matter is left as it is, and simply presented as matter, it will tell us something and speak with a powerful voice. Keeping matter alive also means enlivening the spirit; lifting the spirit means lifting matter up to its height".<sup>10</sup> Before bringing these brief considerations to a close, a series of exhibitions and historical and critical events must be mentioned that in the years between 1960 and 2000 in Europe, and Italy in particular, have contributed to draw interest on the prolific work of the Japanese group. Gillo Dorfles should be credited with having been the first, in 1959, to write a review of the *Arte nuova* exhibition of Gutai works in Turin. He then wrote that "it would be wrong to treat Gutai as a sort of Dada revival. Actually, while it employs a number of unusual tools (sticks, sheets hung between trees, torn paper, paintings executed by an artist with his feet as he swings from a rope, and so on), this trend embodies a conscious will of creating new and dynamic forms of expression freed from all naturalism yet capable of creating new modes of communication by the adoption of the most varied and unexpected techniques".<sup>11</sup> Another text was penned some ten years after Dorfles's by Aldo Passoni. As assistant director of the Galleria d'Arte Moderna of Turin, on the occasion of the exhibition *Conceptual Art, Arte Povera, Land Art*, curated by Germano Celant, Passoni wrote in his foreword to the catalogue of the exhibition, "Among the most important artistic movements of the recent past that strike me as being closely linked to Arte Povera I would mention the Japanese 'Gutai'." Regardless of whether one agrees with the reasoning presented in this text, and despite a couple of mistakes in the dates given for certain Gutai events, it is clear that Passoni provided a broad outline of the group, whose influence and significance he helped recall – and this in the very city in which Gutai had first surfaced ten years before. The remarks which Pierre Restany formulated at a later date, in 1976, in the magazine *XX<sup>ème</sup> Siecle*, sound a bit odd. Here the author recalls a trip he made to Japan in 1962 and in the course of which he was struck by the level of indifference on the part of Japanese critics and press towards the Gutai group. Yet, he did not take the chance offered by the influential magazine to shed light on the many doubts surrounding Yves Klein's relation with Yoshihara's artistic community, doubts ill-founded in my opinion – not least for chronological reasons – but which may have been addressed starting from the ties of mutual

esteem existing between the French critic and many Gutai protagonists. Additional occasions to appreciate Gutai were offered by the critical contributions made in *Art International* by scholars Jules Langsner and Joseph Love – who provided original and nonconformist readings – in 1965 and 1972 respectively. Likewise, one should not overlook the critical contributions made by Yoshio Shirakawa for the *Dada in Japan* exhibition in the Kunstmuseum in Düsseldorf (1983), by Kazuo Yamawaki and Tore Haga for the *Grupo Gutai* show in the Museo de Arte Contemporáneo Español in Madrid, and finally by Yoshiaki Tono and Alfred Pacquement – the latter in a fraught essay – for the exhibitions *Jackson Pollock* (1982) and *Japon des avant-gardes* (1986) respectively, both of which were held at the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris. Italy returned to being a centre for reflection on Gutai with the interesting references made to the group by Maurizio Calvesi in his presentation of the exhibition *Monoha. School of Things* (Rome, 1988), as well as with the exhaustive historical and critical overview provided by Osaki Shinikiro in ten issues of *A & C* magazine between 1987 and 1989. In December 1990, a great anthological retrospective of the group was held in the Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna in Rome. This exhibition, curated by Osaki together with Augusta Monferini and Marcella Cossu, featured both paintings and a number of live performances directed by artist Fabio Mauri and coordinated by Giovanna De Feo. Just as Gutai had found Pistoia's Galleria Notizie in Turin a favourable location for its début in Europe, so the critical acclaim it received as the most important group of the Japanese post-war avant-garde – which has most recently been acknowledged at the latest edition of the Venice Biennale – was destined to continue progressively increasing thanks to the Milanese Fondazione Mudima and art dealers Rosanna Chiessi from Reggio Emilia and Carla Pellegrini from Milan. *August 2010*

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