"Manga and/as Art Avant Gardism: Japanese Comics within 1960s Japanese Visual Culture"

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MANGA AND/AS ART AVANT-GARDISM: JAPANESE COMICS WITHIN 1960S JAPANESE VISUAL CULTURE

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Introduction: Intersections of Manga and Art

This paper is my initial attempt to articulate the intersections and implications between Japanese comics (or manga) and avant-garde art movements in 1960s Japan.[1] Particular focus will be on how socially and politically concerned creators—both avant-garde artists and manga creators (*manga-ka*)—produced their works inside and outside the matrix of the culture industry or institutionalized domain of "art."

In previous scholarship, manga have been discussed mostly as part of Japanese popular culture or mass-produced media objects, but not so much as "art." Scholars and researchers have approached manga from the perspective of cultural anthropology, sociology, or gender studies, discussing them in relation to social and cultural power, media industry, or fan participatory culture. While several art galleries and museums have begun exhibiting manga prints in recent years, art historians and art scholars are relatively indifferent to this medium.[2] Historically speaking, however, manga have been produced not only by professional manga creators, but also by art school-trained practitioners—such as painters, designers, and illustrators—especially during the interwar period when many painters were contributing their single-image cartoons and comic strips to newspapers, magazines, and

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[1] In this paper, I will use the words "comics" and "manga" interchangeably to refer to a medium for communication and/or narration that combine words, pictures, and other text-visual signs, including (but not limited to) single-image cartoons, comic strips, and long-form narrative comics (or "story manga"). In so doing, I would like to draw attention to the diversity of form and style of Japanese comics while resisting the stereotypical perception of "manga," often associated with cartoony drawings of mainstream postwar manga.

[2] One of the few exceptions might be art critic Ishiko Junzō who was active in writing about manga/*gekiga* in the 1960s. See also Suzuki 2014.

in-house union papers while producing paintings for exhibitions.[3] In discussing manga and art together, however, one should *not* prescribe the uncritically repeated belief that Japanese comics evolved from premodern art and visual culture. Such a view is structurally similar to the "invented tradition" in modernity (Hobsbawm and Range, 1983), which easily verges on cultural nationalism.

Of course, art is a contested concept. Particularly, in the late 1950s and in the 1960s, the concept of "art" was intensely challenged and reexamined by avant-garde artists, practitioners, and critics (as I shall discuss later). My goal in this paper is, therefore, *not* to claim "manga is art"—although such a view is not excluded—but to illuminate how and in what contexts manga and avant-garde art intersected, cross-pollinated, or appropriated each other and, as a result, have played a part in shaping the mediascape of the Japanese version of counterculture of the global sixties.[4]

The Radical Shift of Visual Culture in 1950s Japan

In Japanese art history, the 1950s marked a renewal of art experimentalism, inspired by the (re-)introduction of Euro-American modernism (Merewether, 2). It was perceived as a fresh new start with a sense of democratic optimism after the end of the oppressive wartime period followed by the period of the Allied Occupation (1945-1952). It is well known that the annual Yomiuri Independent Exhibition (nicknamed "*Anpan*") became a vibrant outlet for the emergence of new, innovative, and unorthodox art

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[3] In the 1920s and 1930s, painters like Matsuyama Fumio, Yanase Masamu, Murayama Tomoyoshi, Okamoto Tōki, and Ono Saseo were engaging with producing paintings, designs, and manga (comic strips and single-image cartoons).

[4] The term "mediascape" was coined by Arjun Appadurai, referring to the "image of the world," the way people perceived the world, which is shaped by the "global cultural flows" of electronic and print media. Appadurai explains that "(m)ediascapes, whether produced by private or state interests, tend to be image-centered, narrative-based accounts of strips of reality, and what they offer to those who experience and transform them is a series of elements (such as characters, plots, and textual forms) out of which scripts can be formed of imagined lives, their own as well as those of others living in other places." (35)

works in a major way due in part to its non-screening policy.[5] Initially, surrealist-inspired paintings dominated the earlier period of this exhibition, but they were soon superseded by Dadaist assemblages of "junk art" and "readymade" objects as well as "happenings" by artist collectives. These artworks were driven by the impetus of experimentalism and transgression, which had been categorized under the name of Anti-Art (*han-geijutsu*), the term introduced by art critic Tōno Yoshihiro in 1960.[6] Similar to European Dadaism in the early 20th century, the Japanese Anti-Art movement shared the iconoclastic urge of challenging the traditional or institutionalized form of art. Yet, unlike previous, elitist "high modernism," which often argued for the autonomy of an art object, the Anti-Art movement attempted to involve or provoke the viewers and even the public on the streets in urban areas. Most notably, artist collectives such as Neo-Dada (formerly known as Neo Dadaism Organizers) and Zero Dimension (*Zero jigen*) demonstrated their performances in and out of museums, on the streets, and around train stations, aiming to ask questions on the relationship between art and life while disrupting their "everyday life" that was increasingly governed by the logic of industrial capitalism because of rapid economic growth (Yoshimoto 104).

The rise of art experimentalism in the late 1950s coincided with the time when Japanese comics—in particular, long-form narrative comics called "story manga"—developed into something more than just children's entertainment. The growth of story manga took place under the name of *gekiga*, arguably conceived as Japanese alternative comics.[7] The term *gekiga* was coined by manga creator Tatsumi Yoshihiro who intended to differentiate his works aimed at a more mature readership from postwar

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[5] The Yomiuri Independent Exhibit started in 1948, emulating the idea of the French "independent" art exhibit, but as the name of the exhibit shows, it was sponsored by the company, Yomiuri Newspaper. Since around 1957, experimental and avant-garde art became more visible.

[6] For artists such as Shinohara Ushio, a former member of Neo Dada, the label is misleading since they were not *against* art, but had attempted to expand the definition of art (Yohimoto, 102).

[7] See Suzuki, 2017 for more details.

mainstream story manga for children in order to circumvent the increasing pressure for censorship over graphic depictions and violent content in manga. While earlier *gekiga* works remained commercialist-oriented, the shifts of generic focuses from boy-oriented genres such as adventure, science fiction, and sports to film noir-inspired mystery, suspense, and horror, commenced a nascent exploration of the darker side of humanity and society. In retrospect, one of the earlier *gekiga*'s achievements was to make other manga creators—and possibly editors and publishers, too—realize new potentials of the medium for formula-defying, innovative narratives or artistic expression, breaking with conventions of postwar mainstream story manga that catered to children. In fact, it can be argued that Tezuka Osamu's adult-themed works (such as *Phoenix, Buddah,* and *MW*) and Nakazawa Keiji's internationally well-known work *Barefoot Gen* (with its graphic depictions of *hibakusha*) were possible in the comics cultural landscape which *gekiga* had cultivated from the late 1950s and throughout the 1960s.

It was in the 1960s when *gekiga* became prominent in Japanese comics culture with the rise of student political movements, most notably manifested in the anti-Anpo movement (1959-60). In this period of "the season of politics (*seiji no kisetsu*)," *gekiga*—and also manga—evolved as a more sophisticated medium, inviting college students, cultural critics, and artists in other fields as readers. One of the major outlets for *gekiga* was the monthly comics magazine *Garo,* the first alternative manga magazine. The magazine was founded in 1964 by Shirato Sanpei, a son of proletarian art painter Okamoto Tōki, along with legendary editor Nagai Katsuichi. While this alternative manga magazine was founded with the intention to serialize Shirato's planned epic work (*The Legend of Kamui*), it also offered an outlet for unorthodox *gekiga* creators such as Mizuki Shigeru, Tsuge Yoshiharu, Sasaki Maki, Tsurita Kuniko, and Hayashi Seiichi, all of whom brought diverse aesthetics, formal experimentation, and/or unconventional subject matters into the genre of story manga.

Among them, Tsuge Yoshiharu and Sasaki Maki stood out due to their avant-garde proclivity in their works. Tsuge's seminal work *Neji-shiki* (Screw Style/Screw Ceremony) demonstrated a

surrealistic, existentialist (non-)narrative, betraying the conventional formal and narrative coherence and linearity of postwar story manga.

On the other hand, Sasaki Maki's works exhibited Pop Art and a kitsch sensibility combined with a cosmopolitan, non-native style, inspired by both Western art tradition (painting, sculpting, architecture, etc.) and contemporaneous American "underground comix" (i.e. Robert Crumb). It seems appropriate that art critic Ishiko Junzō called their works "anti-manga" (石子, 185) due to their formula-defying, non-conformist attitude toward manga conventions (in terms of both form and content).

The maturity of the comics medium as a means for non-orthodox and experimental purposes as well as its appeal to intellectual readers (i.e. cultural critics and artists) prompted art-school trained artists to experiment with the medium. Most notably, artists such as Inoue Yōsuke, Nakamura Hiroshi, and Tateishi Kōichi (Tiger Tateishi) started to explore the potential of the medium for their artistic expressions. At the same time, already well-known avant-garde artists such as Akasegawa Genpei, Minami Nobuhiro (Minami Shinbō), and Matsuda Tetsuo, produced comics or comics-inspired art works for the fine art magazine *Bijutsu techō*. Among them, Akasegawa Genpei, a former Neo Dada member, expanded his field and began serializing his comic strip first in the leftist-oriented magazine *Asahi Journal* and then in *Garo,* a comics magazine. These artists transgressed the narrowly defined "art world," and found the medium of comics an enthralling "new" medium for artistic exploration and experimentation.

Global Mediascape: Creating a "strip" of reality for youth

Manga (or *gekiga*) and avant-gardism shared the same cultural plane at the height of Japanese counterculture in the 1960s, participating in the larger visual culture and cultural politics of the age. The late 1950s and 1960s also witnessed an emergence of new media discourse on "image," or more precisely, "*eizō*" in Japanese. The discourse on image (or *eizō-ron*) was prompted mainly by the advent of television but also the permeation and proliferation of mass- and technologically-mediated images through other media outlets such as newspapers, magazines, and advertising. Originating in film theory and media criticism, the discourse on image went beyond the discussion of each distinct

medium (such as film, television, photography, etc.) and created a theoretical and cultural space in which all image-making practices—both static and moving images—could be theorized, practiced, and explored (Ryan, 5 par.). It is this discursive space in a newly shaped media environment that allowed for avant-garde art and experimental manga to encounter, intersect, and appropriate each other. [8]

The image-making practices in 1960s Japan cannot be fully considered without paying attention to images (and narratives) in manga. Shirato's epic *gekiga Ninja Scroll* (*Ninja bugei-cho*) and *The Legend of Kamui* (*Kamui-den*), both of which depict the struggles and resistance of peasants against the oppressive feudal lords in Tokugawa Japan, was argued by critics and by readers to be symbolic of the student activists' resistance against the state authorities in the political movement in their social reality. *Garo*'s non-manga pages, in fact, politicized their readers by constantly featuring articles about domestic and international social and political issues such as food contamination, educational governance, and Japan's political standing in relation to the Vietnam War.[9]

By the late 1960s, however, both manga and avant-garde artists began to critique this new, image-saturated environment and the confusion regarding the political discourse of the 1960s. For instance, Sasaki Maki's experimental manga "The Vietnam Debate" (1969) is a meta-commentary on an image-saturated society in relation to the confusion about political discussion.

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[8] I should mention the avant-garde film director Ōshima Nagisa who adapted Shirato's *Ninja Scroll* and created an experimental film with the same title in 1967. See Furuhata and Sas a more detailed discussion on Ōshima's work.

[9] See Suzuki, 2017.

This work consists of a collage of seemingly unrelated media images and spoken words, taken from TV commercials, programs, and advertisements, all of which do not communicate any meaningful message. Akasegawa's *Sakura gahō* (1970-71), on the other hand, might be a parodic depiction of the student political movement, which might have foreshadowed the decline of the student movement and even the end of "the season of politics."

Concluding Remarks: Participation in the "image politics" of the age

Japanese manga historian Miyamoto Hirohito pointed out that in the early Meiji period, manga was thrown into the gap between Literature (*bungaku*) and Fine Art (*bijutsu*) in the process of institutionalizing the modern concept of "pure art." Since then, manga has been an "impure art" due in part to its combined nature of words and pictures, and further regarded as a "bastard" medium which did not attract much support from high culture or official institutions (until recently).[10] Given this genealogical damnation, it is no coincidence that transgressive art avant-gardism and manga with alternative proclivity intersected with each other during the height of the Japanese countercultural movement. As film scholar Yuriko Furuhata notes, "the season of politics. . .was, in effect, the season of *image* politics" (Furuhata 2) and, I would add, manga/*gekiga* were one of the important participants that shaped the image politics of the 1960s.

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[10] See Iwabuchi for the Japanese government's appropriation of the global popularity of Japanese popular culture, especially, manga, anime, videogames, fashion, etc. as a form of "soft power" to nationally brand "Japan."

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