

Avant-Garde in Japan

Deconstruction and Decentralization

Olga ISAEVA

Keywords:

Avant-Garde, Japan, Murayama Tomoyoshi, MAVO, Center-Periphery

1. What is Avant-Garde?

The expression “avant-garde” was first used in military history and has at first no connection to its later aesthetic concept. “Avant-garde” describes a small force, which surveys the area ahead of an advancing army, in order to provide a secure advance.¹

The artistic phenomenon “avant-garde” itself denies by its nature a clear definition, but art historical research often tries to describe it with the following characteristics, although they do not apply to all artists. In general, avant-garde is associated with international literary and artistic movements which began in the early 20th century. These artists often worked in groups led by a charismatic personality. They developed a self-reflective and self-critical art theory and presented their theoretical concepts as manifestos. Avant-garde artists challenge, in an aggressive and radical way, the common perspectives and definitions of art in order to deconstruct the boundaries between art and everyday life. At the end of the 19th century art in Europe arrived at the point where it developed an autonomous character, without any religious or cultic context, detached from life, just being art for the sake of art. Avant-garde artists intend to deconstruct this elitist position and return art into the daily life. Two further aspects are particularly relevant here. First the avant-garde movements typically did not develop a new art language, which was the case for the past epochs. On the contrary, they deconstructed contemporary and previously canonized art styles in order to discover an ahistorical and universal art language and style. In other words, artists could work without limits on stylistic and material norms or standards. Second, and more importantly, avant-garde is an internal self-reflective critique of art in the bourgeois society. This self-criticism implies a critique of art institutions in general including museums, exhibitions, galleries, the art market and so forth.²

2. International Dimension of the Avant-Garde

Right from the start the so-called “classic” or “historical” avant-garde cultivated an international image personified especially by the group members themselves, their biographies, magazines, international conferences and boards. The international dimension of the avant-garde movement is gradually moving into focus. With this knowledge in hand I was struck by the following question: *what would happen if*

we leave the modern art archetypes of the 20th century, for instance those of Italy, France, Swiss or Germany, and focus instead on Hungary, Bulgaria, Brazil or Japan?

My personal encounter with the international dimension of the Avant-Garde beyond the mentioned archetypes happened through the Japanese Avant-Garde group MAVO.

Murayama Tomoyoshi 村山知義 (1901–77), the theoretical leader of MAVO, had close contacts to the European avant-garde scene because he spent a year abroad in Berlin in 1922. Inspired by the diverse artistic atmosphere in Germany, Murayama returned to Japan and founded the group MAVO, which was active only few years 1923-25 in Tokyo. MAVO's main role on the stage of art developments during the 1920s lies for the most part in the discussion and reflection of the chaotic states of the modern age in Japan. Topics such as the industrialization of daily life, the spreading consumerism and the mass media find their place in paintings, collages, constructions, three dimensional objects, spontaneous performances, theater pieces and design as well as in architectural models.³

3. “Center-Periphery”-Problematic

What often appears in academic discussions in the context of modern art movements outside of western art positions the European tradition well above the so-called non-west in an archetypical hierarchy. The western or European artists act as the central role model. The non-western artists of the periphery kneel before the “western genius” and have no other choice but to study the master pieces of Europe in order to achieve recognition by those in the metropole. Ironically, instead of the desired appreciation the non-western artists see themselves faced with a creative and epistemological dilemma: they could imitate the Europeans and abandon their own cultural roots or refuse the influence of western art and be criticized by their European counterparts for misunderstanding modern art.⁴ Even recent publications stay true to these terms, but, at the same time, try to deconstruct this unequal relationship. This brings me to the other question at the heart of my work: *why do we still need terms and distinctions like “center and periphery”? Aren't they a mere construct of an Eurocentric point of view?*

While visiting the exhibition of the avant-garde group “Action” アクション in 1924 Murayama Tomoyoshi delivered a harsh judgement driven by a similar thought: Japanese artists have been enslaved by the western art for generations. He calls the “Action”-painters “apes,” who are only able to create a copy of Grosz, Archipenko, Rousseau, Picasso and other European artists. Murayama was literally disgusted by

the works and he appealed strongly to the artists to leave imitation behind and be simply themselves.⁵

In my dissertation, I intend to rethink such terminology and critically reflect on the Eurocentric point of view at the heart of art history as a discipline. While comparing the prewar and postwar Avant-Garde movements I seek to define the Japanese Avant-Garde depending on the time period and on the protagonists.

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 - 2 Bürger, Peter: *Theorie der Avantgarde*. Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp 1974.
 - 3 For more information please refer to: Omuka, Toshiharu: *Nihon no avangyarudo geijutsu ‚Mavo‘ to sono jidai*. Tokyo: Seidosha 2001. Omuka, Toshiharu: *Taishōki shinkōbijutsu undōno kenkyū/ The Japanese modern art movement and the avant-garde 1920–1927*. Tokyo: Sukaido 1995. Weisenfeld, Jennifer: *Mavo. Japanese Artists and the Avant-Garde 1905–1931*. Berkeley: University of California Press 2002.
 - 4 Mitter, Partha: *The triumph of modernism. India’s artists and the avant-garde, 1922–1947*. London: Reaktion Books 2007. Said, Edward W.: *Orientalism*. New York: Vintage Books 1979.
 - 5 Murayama, Tomoyoshi: „Akushon no shokun ni kugen wo tei suru“. In: *Murayama Tomoyoshi. Bijutsu hihyō to handō* (Bijutsu hihyōka chosaku senshū16). Omuka Toshiharu (Ed.). Tokyo: Yumani shobō 2013, p. 43–44.