

Art Education Research No. 13/2017

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Acting Together: rethinking existing approaches to *collective action*

I first contacted the Tokyo exhibition venue ASAKUSA for my research on MAVO, a Japanese avant-garde collective of the mid-1920s.¹ ASAKUSA recently curated an archival exhibition, *1923: Action, Mavo, Futurismo, DVL and others* (2016), that focused on 'the footsteps of early Japanese avant-garde artists active during the 1920s in East Tokyo'.² There I met Koichiro Osaka, a director at ASAKUSA, and we discussed our shared interest in the past avant-garde practices of solidarity and its transformation. He then invited me to be one of the participating artists in *Acting Together*³, a two-person exhibition with Yoko Ono and Rirkrit Tiravanija.

Acting Together sought to rework key strategies of the avant-garde – a practice of everyday life as a work of art – based on the theoretical frame of *Relational Aesthetics* (see Bourriaud 1998). I found this challenge intriguing as a way to re-examine collective action in the contemporary visual arts: rethinking the political agendas of the 1960s avant-garde in the U.S. together with the 1990s avant-garde in Europe and the U.S. that sought to revise the agendas of contemporary art criticism. (Bishop 2004: 53-54)

In response to the invitation from ASAKUSA, I realized *Soybean-sprout Invitation: Acting Together with Sakiko Yamaoka*, a collectively authored on-site performance inspired by 'A Sedimentation of the Archival Mind I',⁴ an

essay by Japanese archive theorist Sen Uesaki. In an invitation to the performance, I quoted a few sentences of 'What Is an Author?' by Michel Foucault: 'What is a work? What is this curious unity which we designated as a work? Of what elements is it composed? Is it not what an author has written?' (Foucault 1998: 207) I referred to 'this curious unity' again in the performance; it was written on a small piece of newspaper and placed against one of the risers on some wooden stairs in the exhibition, while Sakiko served green tea to the audience. The performance, however, did not mainly focus on the relationship between text and author as Foucault did in his text, but rather questioned what it means to act together with an interest in discussing authorship in collectivism.

I would now like to introduce the idea of collective action I experimented with in the performance at ASAKUSA. Sen Uesaki, who 'examines non-curatorial, non-displaying, hence archival state of art'⁵, proposes to no longer prioritize things. According to him, the notions of privileged and banal do not concern the archivist – or the banal is to overthrow the privileged. In the essay, 'A Sedimentation of the Archival Mind I', he mentions a 'bean-sprout' dried and attached to the invitation card for a performance by Yoko Ono at Sogetsu Art Center in 1962. Sugiura Kohei, who designed the invitation card, came up with the idea to dry bean-sprouts 'because they were easy to grow'.⁶ The 'bean sprout' allows 'archival mind' to be conceived of beyond the authorship of the artist (see Uesaki 2013): As both a tribute and a challenge to the exhibition *Acting Together*, I sent a 'soybean-sprout invitation' to Sakiko Yamaoka, proposing *acting together* to her. The invitation was then temporarily

¹ MAVO was launched by Tomoyoshi Murayama, a self-proclaimed interpreter of European modernism who witnessed the Dada movement during his stay in Berlin in 1921. The initial members of MAVO came from the Japanese Futurist Art Association (see Weisenfeld 2002: 29). MAVO took Western modernist aesthetics such as Futurism and Dada as a model to set up its own social and political agendas. It aimed to reconnect art to social and political life after the Meiji period and challenged the institutionalization of Western art (see *ibid*: 2-6).

² 1923: Action, Mavo, Futurismo, DVL and others, 3 March – 3 April 2016. <http://www.asakusa-o.com/1923.html> (14.02.17)

³ *Acting Together*, 24 Nov. – 25 Dec. 2016. http://www.asakusa-o.com/Acting_together.html (09.02.17)

⁴ Published online in post, the MoMA's online resource in 2013. http://post.at.moma.org/content_items/199-a-sedimentation-of-the-archival-mind-1 (20.02.17)

⁵ He was invited as one of the panelists to a discussion I organized as part of my research-oriented work, *Can We Talk About MAVO? A Makeshift Platform of the Japanese (Contemporary) Art Topography for All Dada in Japan*. The self-introduction was provided by him at my request.

⁶ Originally quoted from Sugiura Kohei, 'Memories of Sogetsu Art Center and Related Events' in *The Brilliant 60s: A Complete Record of the Sogetsu Art Center*. Film Art-sha, 2002, p. 114-119.

published on ASAKUSA's website and sent as an invitation to the public. The performance was based upon an agreement between Sakiko and myself to look for such a thing as a 'bean sprout' as a metaphorical catalyst to set up the mode of the gathering.

I am interested in adopting an 'archival mind' in action and togetherness in order to become conscious of collective action. Let me elaborate on this. I refer to collective action as a collaborative practice in the visual arts, a practice adopted by generations of the avant-garde both within artist groups and involving the audience and other artists socially and interactively. This practice was particularly redefined in relational art since the early 1990s in which a paradigm shift from the exhibition venue as 'white cube' to 'experimental laboratory' is considered an aspect distinguishing relational art from the collective practices of past avant-garde movements. Such a 'laboratory' becomes a space where the audience participates in a staged situation collectively but temporarily; the audience ultimately constitutes the artwork.⁷ In practice, it has become common for an artist to take on the role of the curator of an exhibition. This

curatorial practice challenges the mode of an exhibition and the role of a curator as the director. However, I question this 'curatorial mind' in the sense that it often comfortably adjusts itself to an institutional frame; the status of a curator as stage manager is removed from sight, which makes it more complex for the audience as participants to look at the frame. This in turn makes it more difficult to become conscious of participation itself. I consider an 'archival mind' a *critical* mind of action and togetherness, challenging its institutionalization by collectively authoring an action. Consciousness of action and togetherness as a precondition of shared activity would reveal questions of temporality, occurrence, occupation, participation and possession, addressing them pragmatically in order for all (potential) participants (including artist, curator, audience and institution) to participate in the action. 'Archival mind' as a concept encourages us to explore this in a broader sense, not only in the relations to an artwork set up by an artist, but also in an actual relationship created within the circumstance of the artwork itself.

Literature

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⁷ See Bishop 2004: 51-54. The 'laboratory' paradigm is mainly argued by the author in the text. The author writes, 'The Palais de Tokyo's improvised relationship to its surroundings has subsequently become paradigmatic of a visible tendency among European art venues to reconceptualize the 'white cube' model of displaying contemporary art as a studio or experimental 'laboratory'.'