

Introduction

Melancholy Sites

A ready-made ruin carved on a mountainside. An oversized ear fashioned out of concrete, lying absurdly on the grounds of a world's fair. Photographs of things, and photographs of photographs. A book that is a mirror. A painting made of cast shadows. And that ultimate object—landscape.

This is a book about the object in experimental art and photography in 1960s Japan. Its protagonists are artists, photographers, and intellectuals who were active in Tokyo at the end of the 1950s and in the early 1960s. Reviving the tradition of the historical avant-garde, these artists formulated a visual language of ambiguity and disaffection, with which they sought to address the stalemate of political and aesthetic representation at a moment of social, economic, and environmental upheaval—an inquiry that led them to address head-on long-standing questions in aesthetics and epistemology.

Most of the artists discussed in this book were born in the 1930s. Too young to be sent off to fight in the Fifteen-Year War (1931–45), they experienced its effects at home. The war, of course, ended disastrously for Japan: the firebombing campaign carried out in its final months by the US-led Allied Forces decimated the civilian population, reduced entire cities to rubble, and concluded with the unprecedented use of atomic weapons against the cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Time and again, commentators in the 1960s turned to the image of the flattened ruins

of cities—the scorched fields, or *yakenohara*, of the immediate postwar period—in order to explain what these young artists were doing today: they had grown up in the rubble, and it made sense that they turned to junk in order to create art. While this observation might appear to be shallow psychologizing, it was quite perceptive. The art of the 1960s was indeed concerned with conditions of presence and absence—a question that was entirely familiar to a generation brought up in lack, both metaphoric and actual. Most immediately, rubble indexed the absence of what and who were once there and are no longer; at an operative level, it stood as a testament for the potential disappearance of what currently is. To artists of this generation, rubble thus appeared to condense the duality of presence and absence in material form. Beyond the immediate link to their surroundings, however, the turn to junk was part of a broader shift by artists as they pursued a practice that would become progressively closed off—a tautological and hermetic visual language marked by skepticism toward the uncomplicated views of political commitment that had become popular in the immediate postwar period, in the context of the rise of the cultural left and the concomitant cult of artistic subjectivity.

The artworks examined in this book advance diverse claims about the nature of the object and its relationship to concept. The importance of such experimentation to a discussion of the history and theory of art should not be lost on us, as the object is one of two central categories to fine arts discourse—the other being the once-almighty humanist subject. In classical accounts of the object, things are assumed to exist as entities independent from each other; their existence is either presumed or perceived by the knowing subject. In the modern philosophy and theory of art, more specifically, the artwork enjoys a status more rarefied than that of a regular object, like a thing of everyday use or the mere stuff that makes up the world. This is because artworks are thought to be imbued by their makers with meaning and intention, which are conveyed to viewers by their form; the subject who seeks pure judgment must appreciate such objects in the understanding of their autonomous existence.¹

Relying on insights from such apparently dissimilar fields as non-Euclidian geometry, quantum physics, philosophy, sociology, and cybernetics, the artists and intellectuals discussed here stretched our understanding of how objects behave. Their indictment of the classical subject-object dichotomy related to the particular conditions of Japan in the 1960s, but at the same time, it condensed longstanding concerns in the practice and theory of the visual arts. Some objects were woken up and activated in order to concentrate and disseminate energy; others were made to close up and refuse the world as is; still others acted as mirrors, melted into stains, or became their own negation. Objects disappeared and reappeared as landscape—objects that proved in the end that they were not quite *there*, mere things discretely fixed in time and space.

An Empire of Things

That the object became such an important point of contention for intellectuals and artists in Japan should come as no surprise. A massive shift in the relationship to *things* took place in the wake of the war, as the rapid reindustrialization of Japan transformed economic, social, and cultural structures as well as the environment. This context gave rise to new class actors: in addition to the reemergence of the industrial proletariat came the expansion of the service sector-oriented and urbanized middle classes. Moreover, the mesmerizing and not entirely planned-out growth of metropolitan areas, as well as the emergence of a new culture of leisure and consumption central to economic growth, provided rich terrain in which artists could think about the nature of objects and their social lives.

The artistic interest in everyday things is inseparable from the politics of prosperity promoted by the government in the wake of the Anpo crisis of 1960. In protests spreading over a year, almost thirty million people mobilized in order to prevent the ratification of the US-Japan Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security, known in Japanese as Anpo, which had been negotiated by the conservative government of the Liberal Democratic Party. The treaty replaced a previous agreement signed at the conclusion of the Occupation in 1952 that formalized the permanent presence of US forces on the Japanese mainland. To many, this continued foreign military presence represented an obvious infringement of sovereignty and made impossible an independent definition of Japan's foreign policy in the perilous context of the Cold War. One of the more troubling aspects of the treaty resided in Japan's ambiguous position under the US nuclear umbrella as the westernmost outpost of the United States' Pacific imperium. Many suspected that nuclear weapons would be deployed in the only country ever to have experienced an atomic bombing—a suspicion that in later decades was revealed to be correct. The Parliamentary left and the liberal media agitated against the treaty, relying on Japan's powerful unions and, especially, the All-Japan Students Federation (Zengakuren) in order to mobilize citizens in mass protests that famously culminated with a spectacular showdown at the gates of the National Diet building, Japan's seat of government, on June 15, 1960. However, the protests failed in their purpose. The ruling party literally forced the agreement through the Diet, physically removing the political opposition from the chamber as it tried to block a vote against Anpo from taking place. In the aftermath of the protests, the cabinet of Prime Minister Kishi Nobusuke fell. On taking power, new Prime Minister Ikeda Hayato, while enforcing the repression of dissent, strategically redirected public debate away from political radicalization, calling for a consensus in favor of economic growth and the formation of an affluent society.

The discursive field of the high economic growth period (1956–73) came with its own semiotics of consumption. The government's endless litany of statistics

proclaiming continued double-digit growth was mirrored in popular discourse in the cult of the so-called three regalia (*sanju no jingi*) of the postwar household—the refrigerator, the washing machine, and the television set that soon became metonyms of middle-class life.² *Things* such as these mediated the myth of an ethnically homogeneous, all-middle-class society and became the binding agent of the post-Anpo social contract.³ For the time being, a male citizen could aspire—at least in theory—to lifetime employment in a corporation, with a salary and benefits sufficient to sustain an independent household. Yet prosperity would come at a cost. As left-wing critics pointed out at the time, in promoting its mantra of endless growth, the conservative government successfully curtailed the reassessment of the contradictions of Japan's Allied-imposed democracy and the troubling institutional continuities of prewar authoritarianism in the present. Moreover, a reliance on heavy and petrochemical industries, together with intensive resource extraction and the culture of consumerism, left a toxic environmental legacy that expressed itself periodically in crises that lay bare the unequal geographic distribution of economic development and its costs.

The changing nature of the object made itself felt in the everyday—and such *things* were pulled apart with gusto by artists and photographers, in galleries, specialized journals, and (occasionally) directly on the street. Fine arts discourse has traditionally depended on the staging of a type of privileged object relationship—art being, in modern times, as Walter Benjamin once noted, the quintessential fetish in its sanctum: the gallery and exhibition hall.⁴ However, avant-garde artists realized that art could also be a laboratory for probing modes of viewing and encounters between subject and object. Photographers, who traditionally relied on the camera to mediate between subject and object, found in the materiality of the photograph—in the discovery of photography's *thingliness*—a set of questions that put them in direct conversation with other visual artists of the time. One venue for such conversation was the exhibition space, whose implications shifted dramatically throughout the decade. The highly regimented system of viewing—originally put in place in the early twentieth century and epitomized by periodic government-organized exhibitions, such as the Ministry of Education–sponsored *Bunten*—was reformed in the aftermath of the war to better reflect Japan's postwar democratic order. While such a system naturally gravitated toward centralization and conservatism, its grip finally broke down in the late 1950s and early 1960s, when the relatively free spaces of unjuried yearly exhibitions, such as the Yomiuri Indépendant (1948–63), were taken over by a generation of young artists intent on disrupting the status quo.⁵

Visitors to the Tokyo Metropolitan Art Museum in Ueno during the eleventh version of the Yomiuri Indépendant exhibition, in March 1960, were greeted by a disconcerting cacophony. The art on display was composed of everyday stuff, featuring materials as dissimilar and distinctly unartistic as clothespins, cement, rotting

food, and industrial refuse; meanwhile, naked performers and noise machines oversaw the proceedings. Artist Kudō Tetsumi, a graduate of the conservative oil painting department at the Tokyo University of Fine Arts, presented a convoluted object composed of industrial cotton insulation and urchin-like bristle scrubs tied together with plastic tubing onto a black metal frame. *Proliferating Chain Reaction B* (1959–60; presumed lost) exemplified a radical turn in art making among younger Japanese artists: the progressive abandonment of painting in favor of three-dimensional creations (*rittai*) of a disturbingly ambiguous and at times lewd nature.

The art critic Tōno Yoshiaki—who on a recent trip to the United States and Europe had come into contact with the work of assemblage artists and the French Nouveaux Réalistes—found in the work of this young generation strong resonances with the international avant-garde. He knowingly highlighted Kudō's work in a review, referring to it as an example of the “anti-art made of junk” (*garakuta no hangeijutsu*) that seemed to have invaded the exhibition in the past years.⁶ For Tōno, this was the art of a postwar generation that reacted hysterically not only to the vexing politics and stifling mores of a newly ascendant conservative consensus but also against the staid art of the establishment, whose factional politics and predominance of lofty notions of artistic subjectivity he associated (perhaps unfairly) with the then-ascendant gestural abstraction of Art Informel (*Anforumēru*). As we shall see, Tōno's comments sparked a protracted debate on the nature and meaning of new art that stretched throughout the rest of the decade. For critics, the fact that these artists actively engaged such visual idioms meant that they no longer saw themselves as laggards chasing after foreign trends. They were demonstrably in dialogue with their peers abroad, and in some cases they even anticipated developments overseas.⁷

A Method for Ambivalence

The artworks examined in this book are characterized by their investigation of presence and absence; the articulation of a warped timeframe through recurrence, repetitions, and doublings; and a reliance on the affective capacity of art to defamiliarize the everyday. I argue that the prominent use of these elements in Japan at this particular juncture corresponds in part to feelings of failure, disillusionment, and despondency—negative affects referred to variously as *zazetsukan*, *zetsubōkan*, or *datsurakukan*—in the face of the limits of mass collective action and its incapacity to prevent the ratification of the Anpo Treaty. However, they also correspond more generally to anxieties concerning the limits of art's capacity to effect change that are embedded within modernist aesthetics.⁸ I am concerned with how, in the works discussed here, artists and intellectuals articulated a language of affects in

order to give expression to their ambivalence toward the present and their anxiety about the future. My discursive reliance on certain psychoanalytic figures—in particular figures of affective ambivalence, such as melancholia, anxiety, and the uncanny—helps me unpack the formal elements I have listed above.

Such formal concerns are not new, and they stand in direct relationship to prewar antecedents, making themselves present here in particular through the legacies of Surrealism. When thinking about the postwar afterlives of Surrealism in Japan, we face a rather complex historiographical question, deriving from the fact of the movement's suppression under totalitarianism and the war;⁹ we must sort out the implications and outcomes of such repression. There is a need for a different approach—a method that can account for continuities within rupture and the enduring presence of the past in the present. Because of its concern with recursivity and latency, psychoanalytic theory presents an alternative to historicist teleology, which has insisted upon the idea of the present as an overcoming of the past while privileging the triumph of the new. In historiographic terms, rather than arguing for a simple continuity of practices, I am suggesting here that the persistence of Surrealism—or rather, the desire that is its memory—indicates a type of latency. In Japan, I argue, the full significance of Surrealism is experienced three decades later, as an aftershock. Put otherwise, the experience of Surrealism in Japan is characterized by its “afterwardsness,” or *Nachträglichkeit*, as first conceptualized by Sigmund Freud.¹⁰

Psychoanalysis, as the primary theory of unconscious life, has had an important if not always acknowledged impact on cultural discourse in Japan, especially through its historical affinity with Surrealism. As a heuristic, psychoanalysis relies on the close examination of haunted speech in order to excavate deeply buried psychic processes. It seeks out latent desire in the disavowals and lacunae made evident when observing patterns that characterize the operations of the unconscious, such as displacement, symbolization, and condensation (in other words, through close attention to the work of metaphor and metonymy). Rather than remaining at the level of what is immediately graspable (i.e., manifest content), we are called on to look closer at visible forms as concretizations of desire and to pay particular attention to the creases that render visible the presence of conflict—ambivalence being one of its classic expressions.

There are particular aspects of psychoanalytic theory that are immediately relevant to the discussion I have presented; foremost among them is its reconceptualization of the object, which here designates something that receives a subject's desire. In psychoanalysis, an object can be a physical object or a fragment thereof, a person, or an abstraction, such as the nation-state. Whether the object is in fact *there*, or whether it is entirely a product of fantasy, is inconsequential; through attachment to its object, the libido is able to provide a screen on which the self is projected. Thus, the object is always presumed to be at least partly phantasmatic.

As such, the status of the object is put into question, for it can no longer be the stable “objective object” of classical epistemology. Such contested status is referred to as a fundamental “contingency of the object”—an idea that underscores the fundamentally intersubjective nature of the psyche.¹¹ In terms of a theory of art, the projective or “objectual”—rather than objective—nature of the object and its contingency connect quite seamlessly to contemporary theorizations of the ontology of performance and its commissure.¹² This also helps account for the critical attention placed by artists on materiality and the conditions of presence and absence explored within the artwork addressed in this book.

This theory problematized the status of the object particularly through the figure of melancholia, which has presented a particular difficulty for psychoanalysis because of its apparent irresolution. As in mourning, the subject experiences affective ambivalence (i.e., feelings of love and hatred) toward a once-loved and now-lost object. However, melancholia differs from mourning in that, for some reason (Freud is inconclusive), something impedes the redirection of libidinal energies onto a different object. The melancholic subject’s characteristic dejection relates to an obsessive tendency toward self-hatred in the face of loss, which is a symptom of the progressive identification of the ego with the lost object. There is an interiorization of the conflict represented by affective ambivalence and, by extension, the redirection of the libido toward the self. Freud identified the emergence of a conflict within the ego—the obsessive hatred of self, which in its most dramatic instance may lead to suicide—as the defining aspect of melancholia.¹³

Of particular interest to us is that such loss of the object may result in a new type of object—a “phantasm,” as discussed by Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok in their revision of melancholia.¹⁴ Returning to a close discussion of introjection, a concept they borrowed from Freud’s beloved student Sándor Ferenczi, Abraham and Torok further examined the implications of the ego’s identification with the lost object. Calling attention to some of Freud’s initial observations concerning melancholic mania—the exuberant, at times erotic, responses to loss that led Freud to acknowledge that his initial assessment would be necessarily inconclusive—they focused on the pleasure found by the melancholic subject in the process of introjection. Seemingly counter to the unpleasure that marks compulsive behavior, they noted the partial fulfilment found in acts such as repetition—which they understood as a form of calling back into life the lost object in the ego, classically seen in the figure of incorporation. For Abraham and Torok, the phantasm’s function is the preservation of the psychic topography prior to loss; it transforms the subject’s world, rather than allowing loss to transform the subject.¹⁵ This account is significant because it recenters the etiology proposed by Freud onto an active subject and accounts for the place of pleasure in revisiting loss, explaining the compulsions associated with the return of the phantasm of the lost object.

In terms of the framework I propose in this book, psychoanalytic accounts of melancholia provide a useful point of reference for understanding the stakes of a *mise-en-scène* of absence. The artists at times appear unable to let go, as in the case of Miki Tomio's (apparently) compulsive return to the human ear as form or in the repetitious shadows indexing absent objects painted by Arakawa Shūsaku and Takamatsu Jirō in the mid-1960s. More elliptically, however, such recursivity is found in these artists' return to the vanishing landscape and the ruins of the *ya-kenohara*: that is, in the production of the melancholy site. In particular, Abraham and Torok cite two figures that are important to my analysis. The magic of incorporation, or the ritual cannibalizing of the object, expresses itself simultaneously in two ways. First, it operates as a form of "demetaphorization," which literalizes something that usually is taken figuratively. Second, it manifests as "objectivation," or the rendering of absence into an object. Both of these are strategies that allow the subject's unconscious to ignore the open wound produced by the original object's loss. These procedures can be seen functioning analogously in the works examined in this book: as mimetic gestures that reveal the conceptual scaffolding of art, in the constant production of indeterminate objects, and ultimately in attempts to render absence itself into an object.

Melancholic structures help me recast the importance of the preferred practices artists developed in this period: in particular, the significance of the postwar reappearance of a procedure called *obuje*. The term is a direct transliteration of *objet*, an aesthetic category and practice first developed in the context of Surrealism in 1930s France, where these relatively small, nonsculptural constructions fashioned out of everyday materials were originally theorized as concretizations and mediators of desire. In postwar Japan, *obuje* were envisioned as an effective means of subverting not only the institutions of art but also the space of the everyday, by dislocating things from their preestablished meanings and relationships. The reemergence of this method of estrangement of objects and their relationship to the everyday, together with the theoretical discussion that undergirded it, heralded a fundamental change in artistic practices away from an interest in form and metaphoric meaning and, eventually, toward a reproblematicization of materiality. But in doing so, as I will show, what began as a means of contesting the institutions of art and the space of politics would also lead to the discovery of the power of repetition and negativity.

Crucially, the artworks that produce the melancholy site mirror Japan's long postwar, in that their time is out of joint. If Freud posited melancholia as a state of irresolution that forecloses the future, Abraham and Torok's conceptualization is suggestive of melancholia's circularity as a potentially productive state of revision. Likewise, an aesthetics of disaffection, of interiority and refusal, is not necessarily productive in a traditional sense—it does not offer a final resolution of conflict, or a new path toward action. However, in its melancholic dimension, such an aesthetics

brings a new perspective from which to reconsider modernity. Melancholia as an analytical entrypoint illuminates the concern with the everyday that characterized the radical interrogation of modernity—what is usually referred to in Japanese as *kindai hihan*, or the critique of modernity—and has later been associated with the theoretical constellation of postmodernism.

In reading this book, students of 1960s experimental art in other contexts will surely find parallels with the case of post-Anpo Japan. Indeed, elements such as the ones discussed above—the ambiguity of presence and absence, recursivity, hermeticism, and the turn to a critical examination of the everyday—can be recognized in artistic practices across the world in this same time period, as the formal and theoretical concerns enumerated at the start of this section connect to those later associated with the broader umbrella term “Conceptualism.” It is my hope that the analyses developed here will offer alternative pathways for thinking about the legacies of modernist aesthetics in contemporary art and resonant practices across different geographic locations. Ultimately, I seek to reposition modernism not as a singular, cohesive, or homogenizing notion but as the fruitful outcome of concepts as they travel, develop, and transform across different locales. I offer here an argument for an art history that seeks the resonances produced by altogether *other* modernisms.

Melancholy Sites

The chapters that follow have been organized into sections that correspond to three states of the object in the experimental art of 1960s Japan—as fragment, image, and absence. In each section, I first address a number of artistic practices and critical accounts in order to characterize the parameters for the questions I have identified. I then introduce specific case studies to develop my arguments. My case studies include the examination of an individual practice, analysis of a specific artwork, and comparison of procedures and concerns in the works of two artists. The organization of this book is only partly diachronic, and the periodization used here is deliberately loose. I have sought to characterize the art field as a set of concurrent and mutually informing discussions, rather than a series of discrete events and milestones.

The first two chapters examine the work of some of the artists who remained most closely associated with the *obuje* as a type of procedure throughout the decade: in particular Kudō Tetsumi and, in the second chapter, Miki Tomio. The first chapter situates the *obuje* within a conceptual genealogy that extends to the prewar period, highlighting the reception and reelaboration of this concept before the war and its resurgence in the 1950s. Throughout, I have sought to highlight both continuities and transformations that resulted from the transfer of particular conceptions in

modernist aesthetics between different locales and historical moments. Drawing from Miryam Sas's discussion of Surrealism in Japan and the dynamics of cultural memory, I argue for an understanding of the process of "translation" as transformation.¹⁶ The second chapter develops a discussion of fragments, as a specific category of *obuje*, in Miki Tomio's famously intensive exploration of the form of the human ear. Miki's work connects this generation to an aesthetics of hermeticism (alternately characterized as *nansensu*, or nonsense, and *shinpi*, esoteric), part of a long genealogy of refusal in modernism. Hermeticism was key in Miki's development of a critique of then-fashionable notions of political engagement, thus serving as the cornerstone for an aesthetics of disenchantment that helps recast the work of the 1960s avant-garde, both in connection to prewar practices and as an immediate precedent for the type of neo-objective practices later labeled Conceptualism.

In the second section, I explore the problem of object and image in photography, showing how the concerns of the so-called Image (*eizō*) generation of photographers are connected to those usually associated with experimental art. Chapter 3 discusses the afterlives of the *obuje* in photography. Here I observe the close rapport between photographer Ōtsuji Kiyoji and critic and poet Takiguchi Shūzō. Ōtsuji's photographs of *obuje* and his advocacy for experimental approaches to photography anticipated the turn toward ambiguous approaches to representation by the younger generation who became active in the 1960s. Beyond his advocacy of expressivity in photography, Ōtsuji called attention to the material qualities of the medium, in particular its capacity to convey what he deemed the "skin" of the object. Ōtsuji's views were greatly informed by Takiguchi, his mentor and friend, who in the prewar period mediated the reception of Surrealism in Japan. Takiguchi provides a crucial bridge between critical discussions of the pre- and postwar periods and thus shows the continued relevance of the historical avant-garde to the formation of practices that heralded contemporaneity in art. Crucially, in the prewar period Takiguchi engaged in a theorization of photography that centered on the material conditions of the image. Tracing his visual experiments of the late 1960s, I show how Takiguchi returned to a problematization of the specific plasticity (*zōkeisei*) of photography and the image. Drawing from the coordinates developed in this discussion, chapter 4 develops an in-depth examination of one of the most iconic and problematic photographic objects of the 1960s: Hosoe Eikoh's photobook *Barakei* (1963), which Hosoe created as a "subjective documentary" of novelist Mishima Yukio. The chapter develops an object-centered interpretation of *Barakei*, addressing the various transgressions—authorial, formal, and mimetic—that undergird its exploration of the portrait as genre and how it folds and subverts the subject-object dichotomy.

Building on this prior discussion of fragments and the image, in the final section I explore forms in which absence is rendered present in experimental art and photography in the late 1960s. Chapter 5 concerns landscape and its critique in

photography and experimental art. Landscape is revealed to operate as a specific way of seeing: it epitomizes the world as object. In addressing the question of landscape in the second half of the 1960s, photographers and artists leveled a critique that was in part a political indictment of landscape as a technology of domination yet also quite explicitly articulated the epistemological and aesthetic entailments of landscape as symbolic form. They relied on a language of ruins, exploring visual signifiers of absence fundamental to the operation of perspective: the vanishing point and the horizon line. Chapter 6 discusses cast shadows in Arakawa's early diagrammatic canvases of the 1960s and Takamatsu Jirō's *Shadow* series, which he began formulating at the same time. The cast shadow is invited into the canvas—and painting is invited back into experimental art—as an index of the absent object. The vanishing exists as its own category of obuje: one that is created to highlight the ambiguity of presence and absence, for which photography became the paramount model for emulation.