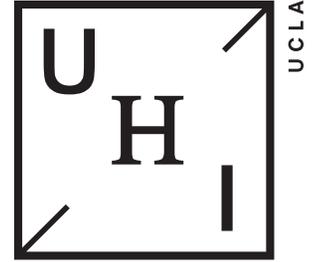


**BODY/
VIOLENCE/ CITY**
*The Neo-Dada Art
Actions in 1960 Tokyo*



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NEO-DADA IN SHINJUKU

1960 was a moment in the history of Tokyo abound with political tensions and ideological confrontations. One year before, Japan won the rights to host the 1964 Olympics, which provided an opportunity for the country to present its national identity to international audiences and for Tokyo to stage itself as a worldclass city. This resulted in a plethora of massive-scale urban development projects, meant to construct a more modern Tokyo. Meanwhile, a sense of nationalism was growing in postwar Japan, exemplified by the the massive 1960 protests against the renewal of the US-Japan Security Treaty, the ratification of which allowed US military bases to continue their activities on Japanese territory. Amidst the intertwining of nationalism and internationalism, subversive political movements wwand the dramatic transformation of urban space, emerged the Neo-Dada group in Tokyo—a group of young avant-garde painters and performers whose

contentious works are ”suspended between art and guerrilla warfare.”¹ Assembled by Yoshimura Masunobu in 1960, around ten avant- garde figures gathered regularly at Yoshimura’s atelier, the “White House”, in Shinjuku. They called themselves “Neo- Dada Organizers” (soon shorten to Neo-Dada) and announced their radical stances through introducing destructive akushon (action) that deviates from any conventional form of art. These art actions were held in public spaces throughout Tokyo, often in very busy urban areas, and were meant to shock the audience with impulsive, disturbing performances. Through formal analysis of the Neo-Dada actions, this paper will investigate the medium of these artistic representations in relation to the socio-political climate. By comparing the places of political demonstrations with artistic performances, this paper will further interrogate the dialectical relationship between the changing of social life and spatial transformation of Tokyo city during the late 1950s and the early 1960s.



FIG 01. Yoshino Tatsumi ignites his work *Danger* inside Yoshimura’s Aterlier in Shinjuku at the 2nd “Neo Dada” Exhibition in July, 1960

01. Doryun Chong, Michio Hayashi, Mika Yoshitake, Miryam Sas, Yuri Mitsuda, Masatoshi Nakajima, and Nancy Lim. Tokyo, 1955-1970: A New Avant-Garde. New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2012. pp.124-25



FIG 3-6. During the 3rd “Neo-Dada” Exhibition, Yoshimura Masunobu, Masuzawa Kinpei and Shinohara Ushio wrapped their naked body with the group’s exhibition flyers and walked through the streets of the Ginza, the busiest district in Tokyo.



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- April 4-9** The first Neo-Dadaism Organizer[s] exhibition was held at Ginza Gallery in Tokyo. Ishibashi Yasuyuki presented his improvisational work Fifteen-Minutes in Waseda Street in the Morning, which reminds the American Neo-Dadaist Robert Rauschenberg's Automobile Tire Print in 1951. In this work, Ishibashi laid a large sheet of Kent paper on the street and let automobiles run over.
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- June 18** In memory of the signing of the Anpo Treaty, which signified the failure of the protests, the Neo-Dada Group held shocking performances inside, outside, and on top of Yoshimura's atelier.
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- July 1-10** The 2nd "Neo-Dada" Exhibition was organized at Yoshimura's Atelier in Shinjuku, during which Yoshino Tatsumi ignited his work Danger inside the atelier. (Fig. 1)
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- Sept 1-7** The 3rd Neo-Dada exhibition was held at the Hibiya Gallery near Hibiya Park, where Shinohara Ushino slashed a temporary installation in the park. (Fig. 2) Yoshimura Masunobu wrapped his naked body with the group's exhibition flyers and walked through the streets of the Ginza, the busiest district in Tokyo. (Fig. 3-9) Covered in fragile light bulbs, Masuzawa Kinpei strolled through Hibiya Park, past the luxury Imperial Hotel, and then hopped on and off public transport. (Fig. 10)
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- Sept 30** The Bizarre Assembly, the outdoor destructive performance was displayed at Yoshimura's atelier. Yoshimura, Masuzawa, and Shinohara struck jagged holes into a metal sheet. (Fig. 11) Shinohara Ushio performed his "boxing painting," in which he creates a series of blots by hitting a large piece of paper with boxing gloves that had been dipped into a bucket of sumi ink. (Fig. 12-13)

VIOLENCE OF THE BODY

It was no coincidence that the Shinjuku-based Neo-Dada group resorted to the body as their artistic vehicle at this time in Tokyo. The destructive performances of the Tokyo Neo-Dada² group were influenced by the American Neo-Dadaists Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg in the 1950s, who had consciously deviated from abstract expressionism by exploring the materials and ideas of “the everydayness.” The displaying of primitive nudity, the outrageousness of their performances, and the brutal intrusion into urban districts are all indicative of their American forerunners. Nevertheless, the Tokyo Neo-Dada performances are distinctive for their qualities of indignation and aggression. Using the human body as a medium of intervention, their violent performances not only have an artistic intention but also respond to the political protests taking place at the time. This is demonstrated by a slogan they shouted during an anti-treaty demonstration—“Down with anfo”—a play on the term Anpo and Art Informel.

The Tokyo Neo-Dada group was also reacting to the increasing number and tenacity of public policies aimed at regulating the body. At the beginning of 1960, the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) led by

Prime Minister Kishi Nobusuke attempted to revise the original 1951 United States-Japan Security Treaty with a view to obtain an equal status with their Western ally. However, Kishi’s government precipitated the ratification of the renewed treaty, pushing for a “bilateral military responsibility” that, instead of articulating equality, allowed the US military free access to Japan. Kishi’s political maneuver aroused public discontent and led to massive opposition rallies. Tens of thousands of protesters from a broad social spectrum surrounded the Diet building to show their opposition to US hegemony and Kishi’s authoritarian power. A large number of protesters, mostly students, were injured in the violent clash with the police. In his book *Bodies of Memory*, historian Yoshikuni Igarashi considered the anti-Anpo movement as an opportunity for the protesters to express their long repressed nationalistic feelings.² In doing so, Igarashi extends the emotional impetus of the protest movement to a deeper sense—a catharsis of the body seeking revenge against the increasing political and social control of the government.

Shortly after the treaty’s ratification, in the years leading up to the 1964 Olympics, came various laws and policies that sought



FIG 7. The Bizarre Assembly, the outdoor destructive performance was displayed at Yoshimura’s atelier on September 30, 1960. Yoshimura, Masazawa, and Shinohara struck jagged holes into a metal sheet.

02. Yoshikuni Igarashi, *Bodies of Memory: Narratives of War in Postwar Japanese Culture, 1945-1970* (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 2000), 131-43.

to “clean up” the city by regulating both the urban spaces and the human behaviors within those spaces. The Women’s Bureau in the Tokyo Metropolitan Welfare Office initiated a campaign to protect Japanese women from the romantic and sexual impulses of foreign men. Popular culture magazines also began to encourage the chastity of Japanese females, which formed part of a larger discourse that claimed cleanliness as an important facet of modernization. The Tokyo Metropolitan Hygiene Office announced intensified supervision over public bathhouses for fear of poor sanitary standards. Workers at the Olympic facilities and employees of public consumption sites were even required to take blood tests for venereal disease. Lastly, new metropolitan ordinances were passed to restrict the business hours in entertainment districts, which were deemed the areas where young people were most easily prone to dark temptations. All-night coffee houses were required to maintain a specified level of brightness in an attempt to deter crime behaviors. Yoshikuni argues that the desire of the metropolitan government’s beautification campaign was “part and parcel of Japan’s attempt in the 1960s to construct a more modern, rational space in Tokyo.”³

Seen in the light of these circumstances, the role of the body in the actions of the

Neo- Dada group presents a direct response to the subjugated condition of social and cultural life in the beginning of the 1960s. Their performative activities demonstrate the rebellion against the modernist ideal of “art for art’s sake” through deploying the bodily representation. At the same time the shocking performing process interrupted the everyday life of Tokyo, evoking in the audience a bodily experience of being increasingly obstructed, sterilized, and surveilled through Tokyo’s path to modernity. It is worth noting that though the group’s avant-garde rejection of modernism is admitted, whether they consciously sought artistic meaning remains debatable. In his book *Radicals and Realists in the 3*. Ibid. 153 Japanese Nonverbal Arts, historian Thomas R. H. Havens argues: “Far from [the Neo-Dada group’s] works mostly displayed a cheeky and querulous attitude toward received artistic axioms.”⁴ He criticized the group’s unthoughtful attitude towards “the American value of abundance and proliferation of manufactured products that were permeating their country” and their indiscriminate acceptance of mass media to address wide publicity.⁵ Nevertheless, the Neo- Dada art actions resonate with the anger and frustration of the Anpo-Treaty protestors, which in a sense expose the logic of the government’s increasingly aggressive policies to regulate

03. Ibid. 153

04. Thomas R. H. Havens, *Radicals and Realists in the Japanese Nonverbal Arts: The Avant-Garde Rejection of Modernism* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2006), 139

05. Ibid., 141.

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VIOLENCE OF THE CITY

By holding art actions in public spaces in the city, the Neo-Dada group broke through the normative boundary of art institutions at the time. What does it mean to walk through the Ginza, the most flourishing commercial district in Tokyo, with one's body exposed and messily wrapped in banners? Why did they not perform in front of the Diet building as the protesters did? In his book *Money, Trains, and Guillotines: Art and Revolution in 1960s Japan*, William Marotti interprets the group's intervention strategy as a "radical defamiliarization and disidentification against unconscious forms of routine" so as to unearth "the hidden connections to politics and history in the simplest objects of daily life."⁶ The Neo-Dada art actions were more than just an attempt to draw the public's attention. Conscious or not, these artistic performances respond to the transformation of urban space and everyday experience in 1960 Tokyo

After being nearly destroyed in WWII, large redevelopment projects were planned in the post-war reconstruction of Tokyo in order to create a modern metropolis that could compete with Western cities. Urban geographer André Sorensen points out the

contradiction of rapid urbanization in Japan at this period. The focus on large-scale growth-oriented infrastructure led to rapid economic growth and facilitated increased mobility in the Tokyo region, while at the same time neglecting the public services and amenities that supported livability. The resulting unplanned residential areas and weak regulation of private development left huge areas lacking basic infrastructure and social facilities, causing an environmental crisis in the 1960s.⁷ Under this circumstance, the inspiring news arrived that the capital city won the bid for the 1964 Olympic Games, furthering the municipal government's desire to present a new sanitized Tokyo to the world. The squalor and decay in parts of the city was hidden behind the reconstruction of Ginza—Downtown Tokyo's shopping district and the nucleus of the city's beautification campaign.

In the mid-50s, most of the districts of Tokyo, including Ginza, were waterfront districts that still relied on river transport. With the economic growth and the development of vehicle-centered transportation, the moats around the Ginza area were filled up and transformed into

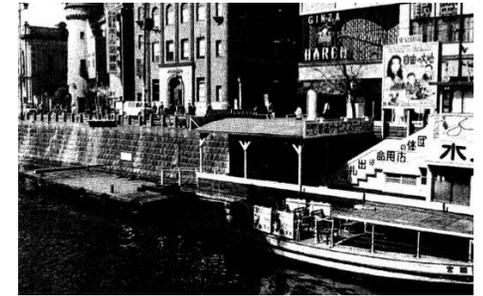


FIG 8. Yoshino Tatsumi ignites his work *Danger* inside Yoshimura's Aterlier in Shinjuku at the 2nd "Neo Dada" Exhibition in July, 1960

06. William A. Marotti, *Money, Trains, and Guillotines: Art and Revolution in 1960s Japan* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2013), 199.

expressways at the end of the 1950s. (Fig. 14) The construction of subway lines followed shortly afterwards. Since the first completion of Ginza station in 1957, several lines and subway stations were opened one after another in the early 1960s. Motorized traffic eventually led to the shutdown of the trams in 1967, which at the time had busily shuttled passengers throughout the city. (Fig. 15-16) This urban renovation tremendously changed the cityscape—both spatially and socially—and created an iconic image of Ginza: the interweaving flow of crowds, motor traffic, and flickering neon signs. (Fig. 17)

In critiquing the consumption-mediated relationship between individuals in modern society—“the spectacle,” as he calls it—Debord argues that the place of spectacle deprives people of their power to be active participants in their surroundings and degrades them into passive spectators. In doing so, the relationships between commodities replaces those between individuals.⁸ While images of large department stores and shopping streets overflowing with pedestrians have become a popular representation of the city, the urban space of Tokyo in a sense demonstrates the spectacle that celebrates commodities and diverts the public attention from the

vast disregarded civic spaces. Primitive and anarchic, the Neo-Dada art actions interrupt Ginza’s glossy varnish by abruptly intruding into its constructed image of dynamism and modernity. The invisible process of consumption is rematerialized by the memorable corporeality and nudity, whereby the body—as the medium of experience—shatters the logic of the spectacle. Such a bare presence in public space puts forward criticism on the growing fascination with progress and modernity that leads to the ever-increasing consumption of Japan society, whether they realized it or not.

If the motivation to display the roughness and brutality of the human body, as a vehicle of self-expression, can be interpreted as a form of social practice, such social practice is always place-bound. In his book *The Production of Space*, Lefebvre argues that the body
 What is the ‘subject’? A momentary centre.
 The ‘object’? Likewise. The body? A
 focusing of active (productive) energies.
 The city? The urban sphere? Ditto.¹⁰
 Stating this, Lefebvre articulates the dialectical relationship between the body and space. For him, the underpinning of the existence of social relations is spatial—architecture, urbanism, and spatial planning

08. Debord, Guy. *The Society of the Spectacle*. New York: Zone Books, 1994.

10. *Ibid.*, 399.

11. *Ibid.*, 410.

are fundamental to the social space hierarchy.

Modern technologies desensitize the human body—the advance in mobility reduces the contact between people and between the body and its surroundings. The culture of spectacle deactivates the human body—masses assemble in department stores for consumption rather than for complex social purposes. Lefebvre distinguishes such transformation as between “the mode of production of things in space” and “the mode of production of space” and thus generates his theory of the “revolution of space.”

The production of things was fostered by capitalism and controlled by the bourgeoisie and its political creation, the state. The production of space brings other things in its train, among them the withering-away of the private ownership of space, and, simultaneously, of the political state that dominates spaces. This implies a shift from domination to appropriation, and the primacy of use over exchange (the withering-away of exchange value).¹¹ When the protestors gathered in the streets in front of the Diet building, the prime minister’s residence, and the American Embassy—all symbolic sites of political power, they recorporealize these urban

spaces. The crowd congregated with a collective belief, sought for mutual supports, and demanded to express their discontent with the dictatorial politics. They stood hand-in-hand and clashed head-on with the police using their body as the medium for political expression. In this way the living body—as both the user and producer—endowed the space with new social order while also creating new space through the appropriation of the built environment. (Fig. 18-19) Architect Bernard Tschumi uses the term violence as a metaphor to elucidate “the intensity of a relationship between individuals and their surrounding spaces.” His interpretation of the inseparable and active relationship between the human body and space resonates with