

KYUSHU-HA: OUR PERSPECTIVE

Kyushu-Ha was not simply a regional avant-garde movement, but a radical attempt to redefine the relationship between art and reality. We position Kyushu-Ha as a critical framework through which its significance can be reconsidered today.

From the late 1950s to the early 1960s, both in Japan and internationally, artists began to challenge existing definitions of art, giving rise to a wide range of avant-garde practices. In Japan, such movements were not limited to Tokyo; experimental artist groups emerged across various regions, driven by dissatisfaction with the established exhibition system dominated by juried salons.

Formed in Fukuoka, Kyushu-Ha occupies a distinctive position within the history of Japanese avant-garde art. While contemporaneous with groups such as Neo-Dada in Tokyo and the Gutai Art Association in Kansai, Kyushu-Ha sought to redefine art from a position much closer to everyday life.

A defining characteristic of Kyushu-Ha lies in its grounding in the perspective of the “living individual.” Most of its members had not received formal academic training in art and maintained a strong awareness of themselves as both artists and workers. For them, art was not something confined within institutional frameworks, but something to be brought down into reality. Their attempt to transform the vulgarity and materiality of everyday life directly into artistic expression was, at the time, profoundly radical within the Japanese context.

This approach was deeply connected to the social conditions of the period, particularly the rise of labor movements exemplified by the Miike coal mine dispute. The consciousness of being inseparable from social reality formed a fundamental basis of Kyushu-Ha’s practice.

This attitude is also evident in their choice of materials. While they frequently employed discarded and industrial materials, asphalt became especially emblematic. Readily available in a rapidly urbanizing Fukuoka, asphalt was inexpensive, quick-drying, and possessed a distinctive black sheen. This material evoked the coal industry and the energy of labor that supported Japan’s postwar modernization. Asphalt thus functioned not merely as a medium, but as a material embodying a specific historical and social reality.

Kyushu-Ha actively presented their work in Tokyo in an effort to assert their presence; however, internal conflicts regarding the direction of avant-garde practice led to a major split in 1959. Although the group was subsequently reorganized, its activities came to an end in 1968.

Because Kyushu-Ha prioritized immediacy, action, and impact over preservation, very few works survive today. More importantly, however, is the fact that many of its members continued their artistic practices beyond the dissolution of the group.

Long regarded as a “legendary” movement, Kyushu-Ha began to be reassessed following a major exhibition at the Fukuoka Art Museum in 1988, which helped clarify its scope and activities. With the publication of comprehensive archival materials in 2015, Kyushu-Ha has now entered a new phase of critical re-evaluation.