

Sixty Years as an Artist

What Was Avant-Garde?

IKEDA Tatsuo

I first set out on the path to becoming an artist in 1948 when I entered the Tama Art and Design School (present day Tama Art University) and from the autumn of the same year, I joined OKAMOTO Taro, HANADA Kiyoteru and the rest of the 'Avant-Garde art movement'. Over sixty years have now passed since we set out from the burnt-out ruins of crushing defeat after the war in search of the future of art; we had no map to guide us but simply groped our way forward.

I wonder whether this sixty-odd years has been a long or short time. If time is regarded subjectively, it is hard to say. It seemed long while it was happening, but looking back afterwards, it seems to have passed in a moment. It is difficult for me to tell how much I have achieved in this fleeting moment, but during that period, the world has changed beyond all expectation and art, too, has undergone a total transformation in form, concept and even system.

The word 'avant-garde' is French for 'vanguard', meaning 'to lead the way', but in art terms, it refers to art that remains at the forefront, forever pioneering new fields. However, this is easier said than done, because the term does not refer to any particular style, method or technique. I personally take it to mean 'to possess a state of mind that never seeks refuge in the contemporary condition.' However, this is even harder to grasp and at some point along the way, the term avant-garde became obsolete.

I think it was sometime around the mid-sixties that the term began to disappear. The avant-garde movement in the early fifties, when I was involved with it, was influenced by HANADA Kiyoteru, it was linked to the avant-garde political movement, and participated in social reform. In those days I thought of my brushes or pens as swords with which I could cut my way into the consciousness of the people who saw my work and reform them. This led to the creation of numerous satirical or accusatorial works; my 'Uchinada', 'Bakemono no Keifu' (Genealogy of Monsters), 'Kinjuki' (An Album of Birds and Beasts) and 'Hyakkamen' (One Hundred Masks) series of pen and ink drawings were all produced with this aim. I am not sure about literature, but in the art field, we gradually realized that such hopes were unrealistic.

As far as I am concerned, I believe it was the failure of the movement to overturn the revision of the Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security in 1960 that finally brought about the end of avant-garde art, although its decline started during the latter part of the fifties. The rapid economic growth at that time created a short-lived art 'bubble' that revitalized the art world but it also had

the effect of swamping the fifties' avant-garde movement, which sank out of sight amidst all the bustle, or perhaps it would be truer to say, became scattered. Despite this, I imprudently chose not to jump on the bandwagon and took care not to turn back either. From around that time, I began to think about the relationship that exists between people's inner minds and outer bodies, imagining them as nesting inside each other with no boundaries separating them, like a kind of Klein bottle. At that time my eye, or rather my interest started to shift from the outer world to the inner world, then passing beyond the inner world to return to the outer world, forever circulating. My 'Daen Kukan' (Elliptical Space) and 'Gangu Sekai' (Toy World) series date from this period. After this, at the beginning of the seventies I spent a whole year working on the 'ASARAT Kanrankan Keikaku' (ASARAT Olive Ring Project) event which consisted of planting olive seeds all the way around the base of Mt. Asama. This led to the endless 'Bonten no To' (Tower of Brahma) performance and also the large-scale 'BRAHMAN' series that was carried out during the same period. When I embarked on this work it was my secret intention to make it my life work but it drew to an end fifteen years later. The picture scroll of 'Life', as I call it, consisting of fragments that had been evolving and floating in cosmic space, amounted to over three hundred dots (for a work is counted in terms of dots, this scroll could not become a long one) which were captured by 'Universal Gravitation' and then arrived at the places considered 'Fields' that exist everywhere throughout this world.

Finally, there is the 'Ba no Iso' (Phase in Fields) series that I am still working on. This concludes a brief summary of the sixty years of my artistic activity.

I have paused occasionally during this period and used things that I picked up along the way to create art objects but these can be described as being done simply to pass the time or as a game. Of course, all painting can be described as 'a game' but simultaneously, it is also a battle. Surely a game upon which you have staked your life is a battle. This is true not only of painting, everything I do in life, eating, sleeping, walking, or standing, are a game on the same level, the same dimension, as painting; they are also a battle.

I have realized that the endless depths that exist within my skin and the vastness of the wide world outside my skin intertwine with no boundaries between them, in the same way that time and space, phenomena and objects, are one. That is why I have ceased to differentiate between painting and living. I decided to no longer draw a line between art and life.

Once this has been achieved, painting becomes extremely enjoyable.