

KIRIN AND GUTAI ART¹

Katō Mizuho



Kirin, August 1951
Sakamoto Masami
(Nishinomiya City Ashihara ES,
1st grade)



Kirin, November 1951
Fujiwara Misako
(Kishiwada City Yamataki ES,
1st grade)



Kirin, September 1953
Nishinomiya City Kōyō Gakuin MS*
(7th grade)



Kirin, March 1955
Amagasaki City Nanatsumatsu
KG kindergartener



Kirin, January 1956
Kitada Masaaki
(Osaka City Sonezaki ES, 6th grade)



Kirin, April 1956
Hanamura Michiko
(Osaka City Minamikata ES,
2nd grade)



Kirin, October 1956
Miyatake Kuniko
(Amagasaki City Tsukaguchi ES,
4th grade)



Kirin, January 1957
Miyatake Kuniko
(Amagasaki City Tsukaguchi ES,
4th grade)



Kirin, November 1960
Katō Shihoko
(Osaka City Masadayama ES,
2nd grade)

GUTAI-RELATED EXHIBITIONS
(Discussed in this essay)

1955
October 19–28: *1st Gutai Art Exhibition*, Ohara Kaikan, Tokyo

1956
May 1–8: *Shinkō Independent Exhibition*, Shinkō Newspaper Company's third-floor hall, Kobe

1957
October 11–November 11: *International Contemporary Art Exhibition–Informel: Genesis of an Other Art*, Bridgestone Museum of Art, Tokyo

1958
April 12–20: *International Art of a New Era: Informel and Gutai*, Takashimaya Department Store, Osaka

Of course, it is important to listen to opinions of people respected in society. At the same time, we cannot overlook the importance of thinking up what you like and doing it yourself. In this sense, I would like you to make a lot of mischief. ... If you find an interesting kind of mischief and show it to your friends, and you make them think, "I want to do it, too!" that's great art. I want to recommend this kind of mischief, rather than a carefully drawn picture.

—Shimamoto Shōzō, "Let's Make Mischief!"

An important thing when you draw is to draw as you like. Do not draw as others like you to draw. ... With this in mind, please never imitate your friends. Even if your drawing is a bit strange or awkward, if you want to surprise everybody by inventing a picture or an object, any of you can make a good work of modern art. I am sure of it.

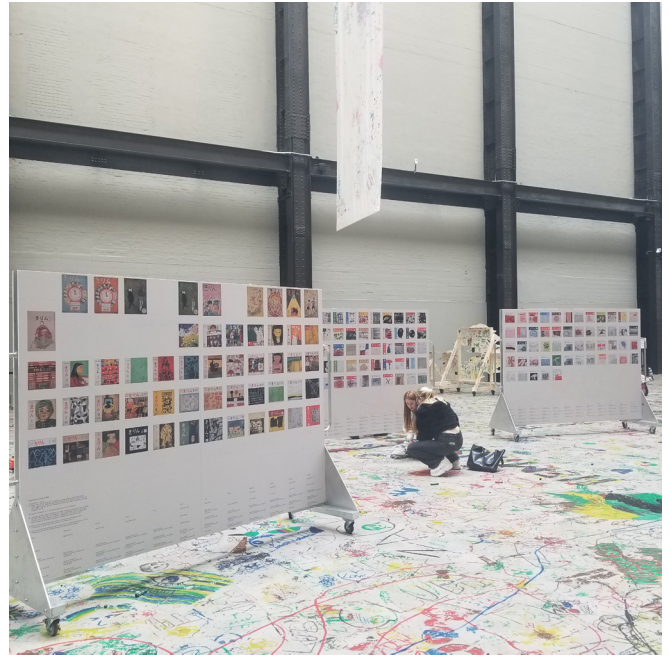
—Kanayama Akira, "What I Want to Tell You"

These two texts by two members of the Gutai group were published in *Kirin*, a journal of children's poetry, in 1956.² Their group, Gutai Art Association (Gutai Bijutsu Kyōkai; hereafter Gutai), was founded in 1954 under the leadership of Yoshihara Jirō and has since become known for their innovative activities that challenged the conventional framework of art. In the mid-1950s, when their experimental spirit was most vividly felt, the main members also contributed their texts to *Kirin* in which they enthusiastically encouraged children to make non-figurative works, thereby introducing off-the-wall ideas to the world of children's art education. In this short essay, I would like to examine the relationship of Gutai with *Kirin* and look at what Gutai members had in common with children's art.

Kirin (meaning "Giraffe" in Japanese) was a monthly journal that accepted mailed-in poems and compositions from children with no restrictions. It was inaugurated in February 1948 by Ozaki Shobō, a publisher in Osaka, and overseen by Inoue Yasushi, a novelist who was then a reporter of the culture section at the Mainichi newspaper company's Osaka headquarters, and Takenaka Iku, a poet.

The journal began when Ozaki Kitsurō of Ozaki Shobō talked to Inoue about the publication of a cultural newspaper. Inoue responded, "What is needed most now is a more beautiful magazine for children," and recommended Takenaka, who then served as a poetry

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selector for *Mainichi Children Newspaper* (Mainichi shōgakusei shinbun), to oversee the publication.³ As a model, Inoue had in his mind *Akai tori* (Red bird), a children's journal in which the poet Kitahara Hakushū served as a selector-commentator of free verses mailed in by children; Inoue and Takenaka had a number of meetings, before the first official editorial meeting was convened in December 1947, attended by the publisher's staff including Ozaki, Hoshi Yoshirō (Ozaki's brother), and Ukita Yōzō, among others. The title *Kirin* was proposed by Takenaka for its "sonority that will never wear out," and accepted at the meeting in the hope to light a flame of hope in the mind of children who had to live in the shattered state of postwar Japan.

Thus born, *Kirin* in its first year published children's poems and compositions, which they mailed in, and Inoue and Takenaka selected and commented on. After about one year, when Inoue was transferred to the newspaper's Tokyo headquarters, Sakamoto Ryō, then an Asahi reporter, took over. Meanwhile, Hoshi, Ukita, and Adachi Ken'ichi established Japan Children's Poetry Study Group (Nihon Jidō-shi Kenkyūkai) to edit *Kirin*.

Gutai's involvement with *Kirin* began in December 1947, when Inoue instructed Ukita, a future Gutai member, to ask Yoshihara Jirō, the future Gutai leader, to contribute a cover image. Since the journal's inauguration, the journal invited cover images and illustrations from established and promising midcareer painters such as Itō Tsugurō, Inoue Kakuzō, Uemura Shōkō, Kawanishi Hide, Koiso Ryōhei, Komatsu Masuki, Suda Kokuta, Tsutaka Waichi, Hayakawa Yoshio, Yamazaki Takao, and Wakita Kazu, all active in the Kansai region around Kyoto, Osaka, and Kobe. Among the midcareer artists were Azuma Sadami and Shimamoto Shōzō, who would participate in the founding of Gutai; they made contributions upon recommendation by Yamazaki and Yoshihara. Into the 1950s, children's works began to appear on the covers and pages.

From the mid-1950s onward, a majority of illustrated works were pictures and objects made by children, while the adult works were mostly by Gutai members—Yoshihara, along with Shimamoto, Shiraga Kazuo, Tanaka Atsuko, Masanobu Masatoshi, Murakami Saburō, Motonaga Sadamasa, and Yamazaki Tsuruko. This concentration was due to Ukita's joining Gutai in 1955. From around this time, Ukita also asked other Gutai

members to critique the cover images and offer discussions on avant-garde art for *Kirin*. In these texts, they frequently made their activities into topics. For example, in his “Let’s Make Mischief!” Shimamoto talked about works presented in *1st Gutai Art Exhibition* in October 1955.⁴ Illustrating his text with photographs of Shiraga’s *Please Enter*, Murakami’s paper breaking, and Sumi Yasuo’s vibration-based work, Shimamoto described in detail their experiments unrestrained by the established ideas of art for the young readers.

In the August 1956 issue, Motonaga reported on Gutai’s participation in *Shinkō Independent Exhibition* in May 1956.⁵ He called Gutai’s room in the exhibition, “a children’s room created by grownups” and explained the works by Tanaka, Murakami, Motonaga, Yoshihara, and others, which were illustrated on the cover and inside pages. In addition, the December 1957 and June 1958 issues carried a detailed discussion by Shimamoto on International Contemporary Art Exhibition—*Informel: Genesis of an Other* in 1957⁶ and another by Ukita on *International Art of a New Era: Informel and Gutai* in 1958.⁷ These texts candidly discussed the ideas on art held by Gutai members at the time. *Kirin* indeed serves as a set of important documents for understanding Gutai’s creative spirit.

In their texts, Gutai members emphasized three points. First, it is not necessary to make a representational work. Second, do not imitate others; be honest with what you think and make what your heart desires. Third, enthusiasm is the most important thing when you try to make what your heart desires. Differently put, the members tried to instill in children’s minds the importance of 1) liberation from given ideas, 2) discovery and pursuit of originality, and 3) enthusiastic immersion in one’s pursuit of originality. Their encouraging words were informed by their belief that art is the concrete manifestation of each individual’s life, which can be concretized in an ideal state only when each individual pursues his or her desire sincerely and proactively. This was Gutai’s core belief, as declared by the members frequently in their journal *Gutai*. In the context of art education, two texts in particular articulated it: Shiraga’s “The Baby and Milk, or Proof of Life” in the May 1956 issue of *Kirin* and Murakami and Motonaga’s “Gutai’s Goals” in the November 1956 issue of *Biiku bunka* (Art education and culture).⁸

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In looking at what children do, Gutai members found something akin to the mental state that they aspired for. Children frequently repeat an act that seems to adults meaningless or even useless. For children, just doing something like that is a pleasure, a direct manifestation of what they desire.

In contrast, adults act according to the social norms. It is usually regarded desirable to make an effort for a certain goal and avoid senseless acts as much as possible. As a result, adults learn to suppress their desire and determine the most effective means for a given goal; and this can constitute criteria to judge one's capability. Humans thus become adults by suppressing what may be called their "child-ness," whereby they find a distinct pleasure in being absorbed in an purposeless act.

However, Gutai members saw art as "concrete manifestation of each individual's life" and "that which can be concretized in an ideal state only when each individual pursues his or her desire sincerely and proactively." For them, then, it is tantamount to negating the existence of art itself if they were to deny the "child-ness" in which life may manifest itself in the purest form. Shimamoto called for "mischiefs" and repeatedly instructed children to "think many more useless things" on the pages of *Kirin*, precisely because he thought that an act liberated from the utilitarian purposefulness could occasion an art that would meet Gutai's ideal. No longer children, Gutai members consciously sought to recover their child-ness and cultivate a new aesthetic in this endeavor. Therein laid the originality of Gutai.

The early Gutai members embraced an ideal of child-ness when they taught art to children. At the time, Shimamoto was an art teacher at middle school, while Kanayama and Tanaka organized private art classes at their residences and other venues they rented. Shiraga taught art to children at home and at elementary school, even though the latter lasted only for a few years. Murakami and Yamazaki, too, regularly held extracurricular art classes at kindergarten and elementary school.

Notably, Shimamoto, Tanaka, and Yamazaki served as lecturers for the "Children's Art Class" held monthly at Osaka Municipal Cultural Hall from around 1953. This class was modeled after the "Children's Poetry Society," a monthly program inaugurated around 1952 with Sakamoto Ryō as a lecturer. Among avid students of this art program was Inui Michiko, whose works not only frequently graced the covers and inside pages of *Kirin* but also received a feature treatment in the second issue of *Gutai* (1955). At the class, children were encouraged "not to borrow forms from what they see, but to create new forms on their own when they make a picture or an object."⁹ In addition to Inui, more than a handful students revealed their originality.

Additionally, Kanayama, Shimamoto, and Shiraga were invited to lecture to kindergarten and elementary-school teachers on the necessity of upholding the ideal of originality in art education for children.

These activities led to the *Kirin Exhibition*, held at Osaka City Museum of Fine Arts over eighteen days on December 13–18, 1955. It was an open-call exhibition, with Yoshihara and Suda Kokuta serving as its jurors. Along with Kanayama, Shimamoto, Shiraga, Tanaka, Murakami, and Yamazaki, Ukita assisted in organizing it. The call-for-entries ad outlines the qualifications. Applicants must be "elementary- or middle-school pupils or preschool children." Submissions, not previously shown in public, can be paintings, sculptures, or

crafts in new styles (abstraction or non-figurative works) or equivalents.” And size and material are “free.” The exhibition organizers clearly intended to encourage children to exercise their creativity to the fullest extent. Submissions were directly brought to the museum two days prior to the opening and put through the selection process on the following day. The aforementioned Gutai members undertook the delivery and selection process and subsequently installed the selected works overnight.

In a statement posted at the entrance to the exhibition, Kanayama summarized the exhibition’s goal as follows.

Art education for children has hitherto focused on the instruction of techniques. This was an adults’ idea of art education. Instead, this exhibition aims to nurture children’s capacity for free expression. ... We are afraid that the imposition of old-fashioned education should suppress children’s limitless artistic creativity that arises from their liberated humanity.

Looking at installation photographs, we can immediately understand that the exhibition was full of lively works by children. A work on paper with sand-mixed paint. A drawing with marker on a thirty-meter-long sheet of paper. A work with a huge hole in it. A work with a long bamboo pole with fabric and paper attached to its top. A wooden board with a massive number of nails stuck in it. A brick bound by rubber strings. The walls and floors were teemed with numerous concoctions made of all sorts of everyday materials, including wires, wire meshes, empty cans, and scraps of fabric.

As Kanayama put forth in his statement, those who stepped into the exhibition would “feel very happy and begin smiling even if they don’t know what modern art is.” They may “think that children are so out of control, perhaps with a bit of disapproval, but at the same time, feel like they also want to make things like these.” They will come to know that there existed an aesthetic experience that challenges the conventional notion of “art appreciation.” That is, not to analyze the work, inquire its content, and judge its value, but to have an experience more fundamentally linked to human senses. Think, for example,



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an immediate attraction that we may feel when we see something unexpected. We can feel such a natural movement of our mind here. *Kirin Exhibition* was a rare occasion arose from the encounter of children and Gutai members who cherished children's potential for creativity.

The relationship between Gutai and *Kirin* was very close in the mid-1950s. However, toward the late decade, the relationship became less close, with only Ukita and Shimamoto contributing texts to the journal. In 1962, their relationship stopped. Thereafter, Gutai artists contributed nothing, not even an illustration or a short report.

That was because in 1962, Ukita resigned from the editorial office. According to him, from around 1958, the year when the administrative system of "duty reviews" (*kinmu hyōtei*) for teachers was introduced, elementary-school teachers, who had by then constituted the journal's readership base began to drop subscription. The financial difficulty this change caused forced the journal's transfer to Rironsha, a publisher in Tokyo, as of the April 1962 issue that marked issue no. 162. With this transfer, Ukita resigned from *Kirin*. After the transfer, *Kirin* continued through until the March 1971 issue, reaching a total of 220 issues. Yet, the post-transfer *Kirin* was a moderate publication, no longer the magazine that the early Gutai members had poured their thoughts as serious as their own creative works.

The second, more indirect, reason that weakened Gutai's relationship with *Kirin* was the change in Gutai itself, which began with the group's meeting with the French critic Michel Tapié, who visited Japan in September 1957. According to Shimamoto, Yoshihara showed children's works to Tapié, who said he was not at all interested in them. Since this episode, Yoshihara expressed far less interest in children's art than before. Tapié's visit marked the shift in Gutai's focus from the early off-the-wall, transdisciplinary experiments to the production of paintings. In the first half of the 1960s, with new members joining the group, the overall tenet of Gutai's painting became more structurally solid. It was no coincidence that these developments overlapped with the waning of the group's active exchanges with *Kirin*. In the early days of Gutai, members began their work by eschewing all and every convention, even such a minimal requirement of painting as "flat, rectangular support" of canvas. Their work unmistakably shared a light-hearted free spirit that permeated the children's art that filled *Kirin Exhibition*. A liaison between Gutai and *Kirin*, Ukita left Gutai in 1964. His departure perhaps silently embodies the change in Gutai.

Regardless, many of those early Gutai members who had been involved with *Kirin* continued to maintain their interest in children's art. Their interest was most evident in the fact that they have served as jurors for *Dōbiten* (Children's art exhibition), an annual open-call exhibition hosted by Ashiya City Art Association, since the 1950s to today [1994] when it marked the 45th presentation. Today, at *Dōbiteni*, we not only find the fresh ideas of children but also feel the continuing presence of the spirit of Gutai who gave high esteem to children's creativity.



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Katō Mizuho is a scholar of Gutai, and currently a visiting associate professor at the Museum of Osaka University. She was a former curator at the Ashiya City Museum of Art and History, Hyogo, Japan.

Translated by Reiko Tomii: an independent scholar based in New York. She is Co-Director of PoNJA-GenKon, a scholarly listserv for postwar Japanese art.

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1 Originally published in Japanese in *Narihira* 19 (June 30, 1995): 2–4. *Narihira* is a journal published by Ashiya City Museum of Art & History.

All historical Japanese names are presented in the East Asian order, surname first, as in Shimamoto Shōzō.

2 Shimamoto Shōzō, “Itazura o shimashō,” *Kirin* 9, no. 2 (February 1956): 18–21; translated as “Let’s Make Mischief!” in Ming Tiampo and Alexandra Munroe, *Gutai: Splendid Playground* (New York: Guggenheim Museum, 2013), 276–77. Kanayama Akira, “Minasan ni iitai koto” [What I want to tell you], *Kirin* 9, no. 3 (March 1956): 15–18.

3 Based on Ukita Yōzō, “Boku to ‘Kirin’ to hone to” [I and *Kirin* and bones] and Kuwajima Genji, “*Kirin* no ayumi” [The history of *Kirin*]. *Jurin* [Forest] 326 (March 1992): 7–10 and 4–6.

4 For the detail of these Gutai exhibitions, see Table.

5 Motonaga Sadamasa, “Otona ga tsukutta kodomo-beya: Kongetsu no katto ni tsuite” [A children’s room created by grownups: On this month’s cover image], *Kirin* 9, no. 8 (August 1956): [back page of cover].

6 Shimamoto Shōzō, “Ichiban atarashii sekai no e: Anforumu-ten o mite” [The newest pictures in the world: Seeing the Informel exhibition], *Kirin* 10, no.12 (December 1957): [back page of cover].

7 Ukita Yōzō, “Ningen no kokoro ni oshimai wan ai: ‘Atarashii kaiga/sekai-ten’ o mite” [There is no end in human minds: *Seeing International Art of a New Era*], *Kirin* 11, no. 6 (June 1958): [back page of cover].

8 Shiraga Kazuo, “Aka-chan to miruku: Ikigai to iu koto,” *Kirin* 9, no. 5 (May 1956): [back page of cover]; translated as “The Baby and Milk, or Proof of Life,” in Tiampo and Munroe, *Gutai*, 277. Murakami Saburō and Motonaga Sadamasa, “Gutai no shushi”

[Gutai’s goals], *Biiku bunka* [Art education and culture], 6, no. 11 (November 1956): 18.

9 Ukita Yōzō, “Hyōshi-e ni tsuite” [On cover image], *Kirin* 7, no. 7 (July 1954): [back page of cover].

Translator’s Notes for Creators of *Kirin* Covers

1) This list was originally compiled by Teshigahara Kimie for Ukita Yōzō, *Kirin*, ed. Katō Mizuho and Kurashina Yōzō (Ibaraki: *Kirin Tomo no Kai*, 2008), 234–39. In the compilation, data was taken verbatim from the original *Kirin*.

2) Japanese proper names rendered in *kanji* (Chinese characters) can be read in more than one way. For example, a girl’s name 幸子 can be read either Sachiko or Yukiko. Where in doubt, translator has tried to adopt the most common or probable reading for practical considerations.

3) Where obvious mistakes were made, corrections are made at the translator’s discretion and noted with asterisks (*).

4) The following abbreviations are used: ES for Elementary School, KG for Kindergarten, MS for Middle School, NS for Nursery School.