

*Seeking the Reality: Japanese Avant-Garde during the 1920s/30s
and the Collage Technique*

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Abstract

This paper takes a close look at the Avant-Garde movements in Japan during the 1920s/30s and their practice of the “collage/ montage” technique. By analyzing art works and theoretical writings by Kawabe Masahisa 河辺昌久 (1901 – 1990), Murayama Tomoyoshi 村山知義 (1901 – 1977), Shibuya Osamu 澁谷修 (1900 – 1963) and Ei-Q 瑛九 (1911 – 1960) the aim of this research is to explore the aspects of destruction in the illusionistic depiction of space and the change in the narrative unity within the collage and montage pieces.

Keywords: Japanese/ European Avant-Garde, Collage, Montage, Kawabe Masahisa, Murayama Tomoyoshi, Shibuya Osamu, Ei-Q

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Introduction

With the invention of the so-called „collage/montage“-technique the Avant-Garde movements at the beginning of the 20th century not only revolutionized art but also changed how art would be received. Over the course of the 15th century a traditional way of representation and storytelling was established in European paintings by using a central perspective and a uniform conception of space. Avant-Garde artists shattered this 500-year-old tradition. They intended to create works which did not pursue the illusionistic depiction of space, but embodied unmediated reality. For example, the first artists experimenting with the collage method in paintings were the Cubists Pablo Picasso (1881 – 1973) and Georges Braque (1882 – 1963) around 1910. Picasso added everyday objects as fragments of reality in his paintings. In doing so he destroyed the unity in the painting as something created solely by the subjectivity of the artist.

My interest in this paper will be to examine the early Avant-Garde movements in Japan during the 1920s and 1930s and their practice of the collage and montage technique. I will sketch briefly the definitions of “Avant-Garde” and “Collage/Montage” and continue with examples by the Japanese artists Kawabe Masahisa 河辺昌久 (1901 – 1990), Murayama Tomoyoshi 村山知義 (1901 – 1977), Shibuya Osamu 澁谷修 (1900 – 1963) and Ei-Q 璜九 (1911 – 1960). For the sake of space, I will focus on experiments with the collage/ montage technique mostly in visual arts and photography and close with a consideration of the following question:

How did these artists destroy the illusionistic depiction of space and change the narrative unity in their collage/ montage works?

1. Definitions

The following instruction for writing poetry by the Dadaist Tristan Tzara (1896 – 1963) from 1916 includes references to the concept of Avant-Garde and it also illustrates the practice of the collage technique:

To make a Dadaist poem

“Take a newspaper.

Take a pair of scissors.

Choose an article as long as you are planning to make your poem.

Cut out the article.

Then cut out each of the words that make up this article and put them in a bag.

Shake it gently.

Then take out the scraps one after the other in the order in which they left the bag.

Copy conscientiously.

The poem will resemble you... (Janis & Blesh, 1962, p. 56)”

Instead of simply copying the clippings one could paste them in a graphic or picturesque way to create dynamic and tension – as seen in the collage by Filippo Tommaso Marinetti (1876 – 1944) “In the Evening, Lying on Her Bad, She Reread the Letter from her Artilleryman at the Front” (“Le Soir, Couchée dans son lit, elle relisait la lettre de son artilleur au front”, 1917, Letterpress, 34 cm x 23.4 cm, The

Museum of Modern Art, New York). The language particles seem to fly, circle or whirl across the space and culminate in a unique plasticity. Or one could make a letter poem by cutting the individual letters and pasting them on the surface randomly rather than using the words as a whole¹. The reader must dive into the search for meaning by putting the single letters into possible, familiar words, by adding, by making free associations or simply letting the sound of the poem to sink in.

To write a Dadaist poem one don't require a degree in art or any particular creative talent. Instead one need every day "not-artistic" objects such as for example a newspaper, scissors, a bag and a pen to record a unique and charming sensibility. There is no need for planning or drafting. The coincidence will take over those problems. The result: the poem, may shock, disturb, and confuse one or the readers about a possible hidden meaning behind this piece. *Must this search for a meaning be at all successful? Or is it far more likely that the non-sense is the true sense behind this work?*

Let us first put the "collage/ montage" method in the context of the "Avant-Garde" movement. The expression "Avant-Garde" appeared initially in military history without connection to its later aesthetic concept. The term describes a small force, which surveys the area ahead of an advancing army, to ensure a secure advance (van den Berg, 2009, pp. 4–5). On the other hand, the artistic phenomenon "avant-garde" is usually associated with international literary and artistic movements which began in the early 20th century. At the end of the 19th century art in Europe arrived at the point where it developed an autonomous character, without any religious or cultic context, detached from life, just being art for the sake of art. Avant-garde artists intended to deconstruct this elitist position and return art to the daily life (Bürger, 1974, pp. 64–67). One of the tools to achieve this goal is the mentioned collage/ montage technique.

The terms collage/ montage have a long and varied history. In ancient Greek "kólla" was used in the context of speech and meant literary "to solder sth. or to paste something together". The word entered later the French language foregrounding its significant texture namely "papier colle" = paper. The practice of the "collage" in its original context meant creating a speech by combining different parts of earlier speeches. For the most part his technique was to remain concealed or at least not made obvious to the audience, which gave the method a negative connotation (Möbius, 2000, p. 15).

As for the term "montage", it was applied in the 18th century in French as "monter" (mont = to lift, mount) in the context of industry and craft (Möbius, 2000, p. 16). It is remarkable that the first people who transferred this term out of its primary context into the art world were artists themselves and not art historians or critics. These artists – most notably John Heartfield (1891 – 1968) and George Grosz (1893 – 1959) -- called themselves "Monteure" = assemblers. Heartfield and Grosz provocatively took "montage" from its industrial and mechanical space and applied it to the artistic world challenging the myth of an artist as a genius and unique spirit (Möbius, 2000, p. 17).

¹ For example the work by Raoul Hausmann (1886 – 1971) "Fmsbwtözäu", Poster poem, 1918, Letterpress, 32.5 cm x 48.4 cm, Musée national d'art modern, Centre national d'art et de culture Georges Pompidou, Paris.

Though there is not a firm consensus among scholars about these terms, in this paper, however, I will refer to the term “montage” as an overall term. It implies assembling external materials on a surface using mechanical skills and tools such as wire or nails. In comparison, the “collage” method presents a special form of montage embracing the paper as its main source. Further, relying on the primary meaning of the terms there are two types of the montage technique. On one hand the so-called open technique, demonstrates the obvious construction surface of the work and demands the technique as its main principle. The integrating method on the other hand, hides the extraneous materials for the sake of a homogenous and organic atmosphere (Möbius, 2000, pp. 28–29).

2. The Rise of the Japanese Avant-Garde

Only three months after Marinetti published his futuristic manifesto in “Le Figaro” a Japanese translation in May 1909 by Mori Ōgai 森鷗外 (1862 – 1922) appeared in the literature magazine “Subaru” スバル (Mori, 1909). It took the Japanese art scene, however, another ten years to fully embrace these new and radical ideas. The year 1920 was crucial for the development of the Avant-Garde and the collage/ montage method in Japan. The Futurist Art Association (Miraiha Bijutsu Kyōkai 未来派美術協会) held their first exhibition in September, but unfortunately little is known about the exhibited works. A month later, the so-called father of the Russian Futurists David Burliuk (1882 – 1967) arrived in Japan and remained there until August 1922. He was accompanied by the Ukrainian artist Viktor Palmov (1888 – 1929) and the Czech Václav Fiala (1896 – 1980) but most importantly, he brought over three hundred modern Russian paintings.² In 1920 Japanese artists encountered many avant-garde and modern art works in original for the first time, which led to the development of a creative, radical, self-critical discourse within the Avant-Garde art in Japan.

2.1 Found material and its textural variety

It is not necessary to know the title of the work³ by Kawabe Masahisa in order to grasp the main idea: the superiority of the industrialization and the mechanization of humans and their bodies. A human head is placed in the center of the picture and is surrounded by various machines. If one examines the work more closely, one can identify some of those tools as wheelworks, screws, metallic pipes and one will find beneath the human head a small typewriter and a piece of a map. Other human parts such as a dissected throat and hand are also depicted. Kawabe used the collage technique in a subtle way. Only if one is standing directly in front of the art work one will notice that some parts of the machinery instruments, screws and pipes are made of paper. They were cut out and inserted into the painting very precisely and with careful regard to their connection with the painted parts. None of this was coincidence. On the contrary the artist did this self-consciously. *What kind of external materials did Kawabe use?* A hint for one main source can be found in the writing on the upper

² For more reference about David Burliuk’s activities in Japan please refer to Omuka, Toshiharu 五十殿利治 (1995).

³ “Mechanism (Mekanizumu メカニズム)”, 1924, Collage and Oil in Canvas, 65.2 cm x 53 cm, Itabashi Art Museum, Tokyo.

left side of the picture, namely the phrase: “L’Esprit Nouveau”. It is a magazine by Le Corbusier (1887 – 1965) and the painter and designer Amédée Ozenfant (1886 – 1966) published between 1920 and 1925 in Paris. This magazine offered a space for communication between all areas of life, including topics related to art, literature, architecture, industrial design as well as politics and economics. Kawabe was aware of the developments in the European art scene and probably saw similarities to Japan. The fragment “L’Esprit Nouveau” does not only injects its own original, primal, and historical context, but it also changes the environment in which it is being inserted.

The Avant-Garde artist and theorist Murayama Tomoyoshi experimented with languages, especially German and Hebrew. The two montages “Dedicated to the Beautiful Young Girls”⁴ and “Portrait of A Young Jewish Girl”⁵ have three aspects in common: the not-figurative representation; words, numbers and everyday objects as external materials and finally, titles that confuse more than clarify. The title of the work “Dedicated to the Beautiful Young Girls” was indicated in the work itself by the written words in German “Schönen Mädchen gewidmet”. Besides this, one can recognize in the center the word for number „Nummer“ and on the upper side the word young girls „Mädchen“. Abstract and geometric forms cover the surface of the painting and if one looks closely one will notice that one of the forms is made of an actual piece of found fabric.

For the background of his montage “Portrait of a Young Jewish Girl” Murayama used a German form for shipping goods. A variety of “non-artistic” objects are assembled on the form such as wood scraps and a piece of a small fabric. Hebrew words are written in the center of the picture, but cannot be easily identified. They are probably linked to the title of the work, as was the case in the previous work with the German title. For a Japanese audience the external everyday objects appeared displaced and confusing – as did the languages, German and Hebrew. Materials which seem to be ordinary or worthless, like scraps and fragments of fabric or wood are placed alongside one another next to the oil paint. *What is happening within an oil painting when found material interrupt the even surface?* Their multidimensional character exposes their nature as fragments, which were cut out of reality and tension is being demonstrated between the texture of the canvas and the external objects. The viewer is using his visual sense to step into the space of the tactile sense or to put it in words by the Italian Futurist Marinetti the sphere of “tactilism” (Marinetti, 1995).

Murayama Tomoyoshi was aware of the theories and manifestos by the European Avant-Garde due to his year abroad in Berlin in 1922. Inspired by the diverse artistic atmosphere in Germany, Murayama returned to Japan and founded the Avant-Garde group MAVO マヴォ in Tokyo.⁶ The works referenced above are clearly related to his stay in Germany and to his intellectual discourse with the artistic movements. The influences which he experienced can be traced in his art works as well as in his theoretical writings and his theory the so-called “Bewusste(r) Konstruktionismus =

⁴ “Dedicated to the Beautiful Young Girls (Utsukushiki shōjora ni sasagu 美しき少女等に捧ぐ)”, ca. 1922, Mixed media and Oil on Canvas, 93.5 cm x 80 cm, Private Collection.

⁵ “Portrait of a Young Jewish Girl (Aru Yudaya no shōjo no zō 或るユダヤの少女の像)”, 1922, Oil and Mixed Media on Paperboard, 40.2 cm x 26.8 cm, The National Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo.

⁶ For detailed information about MAVO please see Weisenfeld (2002) and Omuka, Toshiharu 五十殿利治 (1995).

Conscious Constructionism”. Here Murayama reflects about ideas by Wassily Kandinsky, Filippo Marinetti, by the German Expressionists, Russian Futurists and the Dadaist Kurt Schwitters. Murayama’s thinking and work was also inspiring for the members of the Group MAVO and artists such as Ōura Shūzō 大浦周蔵 (1890 – 1928), Ogata Kamenosuke 尾形亀之助 (1900–42), Kadowaki Shinrō 門脇晋郎 (unknown), Yanase Masamu 柳瀬正夢 (1900–45) and Shibuya Osamu. Unfortunately, most of the montage works by these artists are presumed to be lost. However, a few theoretical writings can provide us with hints about the ideas behind the experiments with collage and montage.

In his essay “Taktura and Faktura“ Shibuya Osamu defines the tactile sense as a fundamental perception which we are not aware of as it appears irrationally (Shibuya, Osamu 澁谷修, 1925, pp. 33–35). The artist referred to Sigmund Freud’s theory of the unconscious and his model of psychic structure comprising id, ego and super-ego or the Pleasure- and Reality-Principle. According to Shibuya the tactile sense is connected to the Pleasure-Principle as for example various objects depending on their surface cause unconscious impulses, emotions and reactions (Shibuya, Osamu 澁谷修, 1925, pp. 35–37). These irrational and hidden pleasures are part of human life and must be represented in modern art. How can unconsciousness be translated into reality? Shibuya solved this problem by referring to the theory of the futurist Marinetti and described the process of translation with the help of “tactilism art” (Marinetti, 1995). In other words, the collage/ montage technique with its usage of materiality in the found everyday objects can sensibelize and stimulate our senses and create higher awareness of our daily lives.

2.2 Causality

In a review of the exhibition of the Japanese Avant-Garde group MAVO 1923, the critic Asaeda Jirō 浅枝次朗 rejected the montage pieces as art because of the use of assembled everyday objects and the absence of a clear message (Asaeda, Jirō 浅枝次朗, 1923, p. 7). Kawaji Ryūkō 川路柳虹 summarizes the uncomprehending, amused, confused and almost pained reaction of the audience, in his review of the MAVO exhibition in 1925, with one question: Why and how should one understand these works? (Kawaji, Ryūkō 川路柳虹, 2011, p. 123) The missing causality seems to be received as a problem. Murayama Tomoyoshi, the theoretical leader of the group, reacted to these critiques by saying that it was not his purpose to create art with one obvious message or express emotions that are free from any confusion or doubt. In short, his art was not an “after dinner tea” (Murayama, Tomoyoshi 村山知義, 1923, p. 6). The experience of causality was not a matter of course any more. The audience of these exhibitions and the critics were used to experience causality and expected it from art. Avant-Garde does not offer a narrative unity and causality, on the contrary it demonstrates this mistake of expecting causality from art. As a result, the lack of causality and clear meaning shocked the viewer. How should the shocked viewer approach these works?

The work „Construction“ from 1925 is a montage assembling found scraps such as wood, various fabric pieces, straw, metal, photographs and numbers⁷. The objects are often painted

⁷ Murayama Tomoyoshi: “Konsutorukuchion コンストルクチオン“, 1925, Oil and mixed media on wood, 84 cm x 112.5 cm, The National Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo.

over or cut to fit in the frame, with the exception of one wood piece sticking out on the left side. Most of the materials are fixed obviously with nails. The white fabric parts are apparently filled to imitate a soft surface. An overall thematic topic of the chosen photographs is not easy to grasp. At the same time, motifs such as industry, architecture, electricity, the military and images of fashionable women, seem to suggest that the artist's chief inspiration was modernity. Instead of searching for a superficial meaning, it is possible to connect the fragments with the title, "Construction". Rather than paying attention to causality and the illusionistic depiction of space, the viewer of a montage art work is challenged to pay more attention to the method as a combining and meaningful tool.

In this sense photography is a very radical technique as it allows one to insert the complex reality of a fragment in a suggestive way. Sugita Hideo 杉田秀夫, later known by his pseudonym „Ei-Q,“ created in 1936 a series of photomontage works called "Reason(s) for Sleep (Nemuri no riyū 眠りの理由)" exposing cutout drawings, pieces of fabric, wire, nets and other materials to light on photosensitive paper. This technique was clearly inspired by Man Ray (1890 – 1976), László Moholy-Nagy (1895 – 1946) and the surrealist' and by their methods to reveal the unconsciousness. Only few of the objects in the photographs can be easily identified: like a piece of fabric or wire and the cutout figure of a human body, which appears throughout the whole series. Most of the forms however have been totally obscured, so it is impossible to guess their original context any more.

In his "Real レアル"-collage-series from 1937 Ei-Q emphasized the medial part of photography by using sources from newspapers and fashion magazines. By cutting the photographs into pieces, the artist deformed, distorted the images and put them in a new context. The audience is now challenged to reconstruct the pieces and to fill in the gaps and spaces. Due to the nature of collage/ montage however as an open art work that defies unity, causality and single interpretations, Ei-Q's photomontage works were impossible to be completed.

3. Conclusion

How did these artists destroy the illusionistic depiction of space and change the narrative unity in their collage/ montage works?

By assembling found materials and deconstructing causality, montage art works destroy the illusionistic depiction of space and change the narrative unity. Montage elements are fragments which originated from a certain author or a manufacturer, referring to a certain space and time within a historical context. As a documentary source they possess their own perspective and texture. In the process of entering the art space the fragments became a part of art, but at the same time, they still referred to their nature as everyday objects. This "non-artistic" material puts art into perspective by simultaneously alienating art and creating a dialog between art and non-art, as well as, between art and everyday life.

The recipient of the montage works is not simply enjoying art passively – like Murayama's cup of "after dinner tea" – on the contrary he is shocked, confused and challenged. Hanno Möbius described the part of the recipient as the main hero who is challenged to step into the montage in order to reconstruct the fragments and find their origin (Möbius, 2000, p. 29).

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