



Please Walk on This: Gutai and the Emergence of Walkable Art

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In the 1950s, a significant turn began that would redefine a spectator's relationship to forms of visual culture displayed on the ground. Namely, although spectators have long walked on various kinds of decorative art, such as rugs and mosaics, a wide array of artists since the mid-1950s have created works of fine art for audiences to step on, or what one might call 'walkable art'. Examples include spring-loaded planks that throw a spectator off kilter when walking forward, cement blocks or marble slabs that break apart under the pressure of footsteps and sprawling environments with floors covered in highly textured materials such as wet sand and straw.

Although art historical turns are seldom traceable to a single origin, the first walkable work of fine art appeared in 1955, when Gutai co-founder Shōzō Shimamoto (1928–2013) displayed *Kono ue o aruite kudasa* [Please Walk on This] at the First Gutai Art Exhibition, which took place at Tokyo's Ohara Hall and featured works by artists who had joined the Kansai-based group after its formation the previous year.¹ Essentially a pair of narrow wooden objects placed flush with the floor and meant to make audiences slightly lose their balance when walking, *Please Walk on This* provided both a point of departure and a conceptual foundation for the wider proliferation of walkable art that began roughly a decade later among artists from the Americas, Asia and Europe.

Shimamoto explained his basic intentions for *Please Walk on This* in a brief account of this work that he published in the *Gutai* journal, the source of the installation photograph reproduced here (plate 1). Describing one of the work's two objects—a long wooden board painted black or dark grey—Shimamoto remarked that 'some parts are covered with small pieces of wood or leftover cuttings while other places suddenly cave in', which 'makes you feel like crossing an earthen bridge where the footing is bad' (plate 1, foreground).² Much like this board, the work's second object—a series of rectangular planks enclosed in a box-like structure painted white or off-white—provoked instability as a spectator walked on top of its surface (plate 1, rear). Only here, such instability came from the fact that the springs supporting the planks had different compression levels. In Shimamoto's words, 'Depending on how strong the spring is, some [planks] sink deeply in while others hardly move. The overall feel... is strangely awkward so that anyone walking on top of them would feel the exact opposite of walking on top of a cloud'.³

For Shimamoto, the fundamental reason for having spectators walk on these objects was to address their sense of tactility. As he explained, *Please Walk on This*

Detail of Kazuo Shiraga performing his foot-painting technique, 1956 (plate 2).

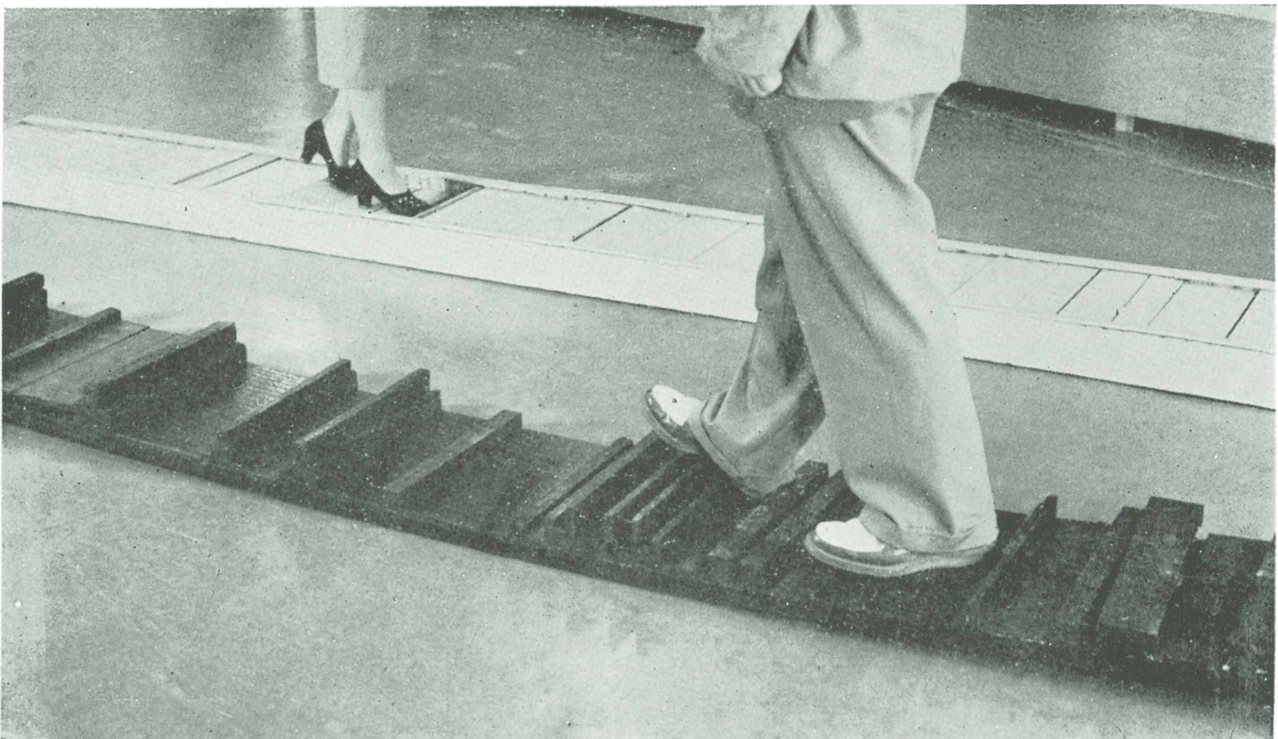
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was an ‘experimental trial piece’ that reflected his conviction that ‘art goes beyond the domain defined as visual art’ and constitutes ‘an area explored by the tactile sensation’.⁴ At first glance, Shimamoto’s decision to explore ‘tactile sensation’ through such a patently three-dimensional artwork might lead one to assume that *Please Walk on This* sought to intervene in the historical development of sculpture. However, Shimamoto almost certainly envisioned *Please Walk on This* as a challenge to painting. This is suggested partly by how he positioned his investigation of tactility as a move beyond the ‘domain [of] visual art’, as if to decouple the work from painting’s privileging of vision.⁵ This challenge is further suggested by Shimamoto’s various writings from the same moment, in which he stressed the need to shatter the conventions of painting: for example, by banishing the paintbrush altogether.⁶

That Shimamoto would use the ‘tactile sensation[s]’ provoked by *Please Walk on This* to challenge painting’s conventions is hardly surprising, since the liberation of painting was a goal shared by numerous early Gutai artists.⁷ What remains significant about *Please Walk on This*, however, is that Shimamoto advanced this goal through the first work of fine art expressly made to be walked on by audiences—and not just the first for the Gutai group, but also for the history of art as a whole. Given this, the present essay uses *Please Walk on This* to trace the rise of walkable art and the wider stakes of inviting audiences to touch an artwork with their feet while walking. Although the article pursues this line of inquiry by focusing largely on *Please Walk on This*, it also examines the 1956 work *Ashiato* [Footprints] by Akira Kanayama (1924–2006), which played a supporting role in the ‘birth’ of walkable art. By placing these two case studies in dialogue with several ground-based works by Kazuo Shiraga (1924–2008), the essay argues that the earliest examples of walkable art mediated the reconstruction of human subjectivity through a close engagement with bipedalism, a feature long associated with human bodies and

1 Shōzō Shimamoto, *Please Walk on This*, 1955, at the First Gutai Art Exhibition. Reproduced in *Gutai*, 4, 1956. Photo: Private collection.



one that helped make the act of walking on art a catalyst for reflection about facets of the human condition in postwar Japan. Among other implications, such works reveal the expanded interest among postwar artists in using the ground as a site for displaying and experiencing art—an interest that turns well-worn narratives of horizontality on their head.

Shōzō Shimamoto's *Please Walk on This*

On its own, Shimamoto's stated interest in tactility was scarcely unique to *Please Walk on This*. After all, a strong interest in tactility extended to countless other artists—certainly to fellow Gutai members, but equally to artists from earlier generations and groups, both within Japan and beyond.⁸ Additionally, Shimamoto himself had created several earlier works with a strong tactile quality, such as those from his *Holes* series between c. 1949 and the mid-1950s, which comprised paintings with irregularly pierced surfaces that were highly textured. However, whereas works from that series were conceived for display on walls and thus addressed a spectator's 'tactile eye', *Please Walk on This* was exhibited flush with the ground, a mode of display that Shimamoto used to address a spectator's sense of pedestrian touch.⁹ Broadly defined, if the term 'pedestrian' connotes 'going, walking, or running on foot,'¹⁰ 'pedestrian touch' describes the tactile sensations that arise when placing one's feet along the surfaces of an object or the ground when walking or running, as social anthropologist Tim Ingold has explained.¹¹

Precisely what led Shimamoto to address a spectator's sense of pedestrian touch in *Please Walk on This* remains unclear. For example, the foot paintings of Kazuo Shiraga may have somehow informed Shimamoto's approach, if only because Shiraga began making these works in 1954, just before Shimamoto had recruited Shiraga and other members of the Zero Group [Zero-kai] to join Gutai (plate 2).¹² However, Shimamoto recounted in a 1994 text that he had already encouraged his pupils to paint with their feet in 1953, when working as an art teacher at a middle school.¹³ Shimamoto also recalled becoming more aware around that time of the calligraphy of Zen monk-artist Nantenbō (1839–1925), who occasionally applied ink by kicking his feet and created various works that captivated the interest of Gutai members, particularly the group's leader Jirō Yoshihara.¹⁴

By summarising such events, I do not seek to make claims about how or even whether one artist explicitly influenced the work of another. What interests me, rather, is that Shimamoto created *Please Walk on This* following various events that likely heightened his awareness of pedestrian touch's role in applying paint or ink. Decisively, though, Shimamoto shifted the mode for engaging pedestrian touch away from a maker's creation of an art object to a spectator's experience of such objects after creation—experiences that became integral to a work's completion. Through this shift, *Please Walk on This* somewhat recalls Shimamoto's 1955 text 'The Mambo and Painting', in which he imagined affixing canvases to trees and then having visitors, with brushes in hand, spontaneously paint on these surfaces 'while dancing the mambo'.¹⁵ Loosely in the spirit of this text, *Please Walk on This* offered spectators an interactive experience with a tactile quality that implicated them in moving their legs and stepping on surfaces flush with the ground. Yet *Please Walk on This* offered an even more radical challenge to painting: both by largely eschewing the use of paintbrushes, as Shimamoto would urge two years later in his provocative text 'The Idea of Executing the Paintbrush', and by displacing tactile contact from hands to feet, extremities less commonly associated with



2 Kazuo Shiraga performing his foot-painting technique, 1956. Photo: Amagasaki Cultural Foundation.

touch—especially within an art context, where hands have been long linked to the mark-making of painters.¹⁶

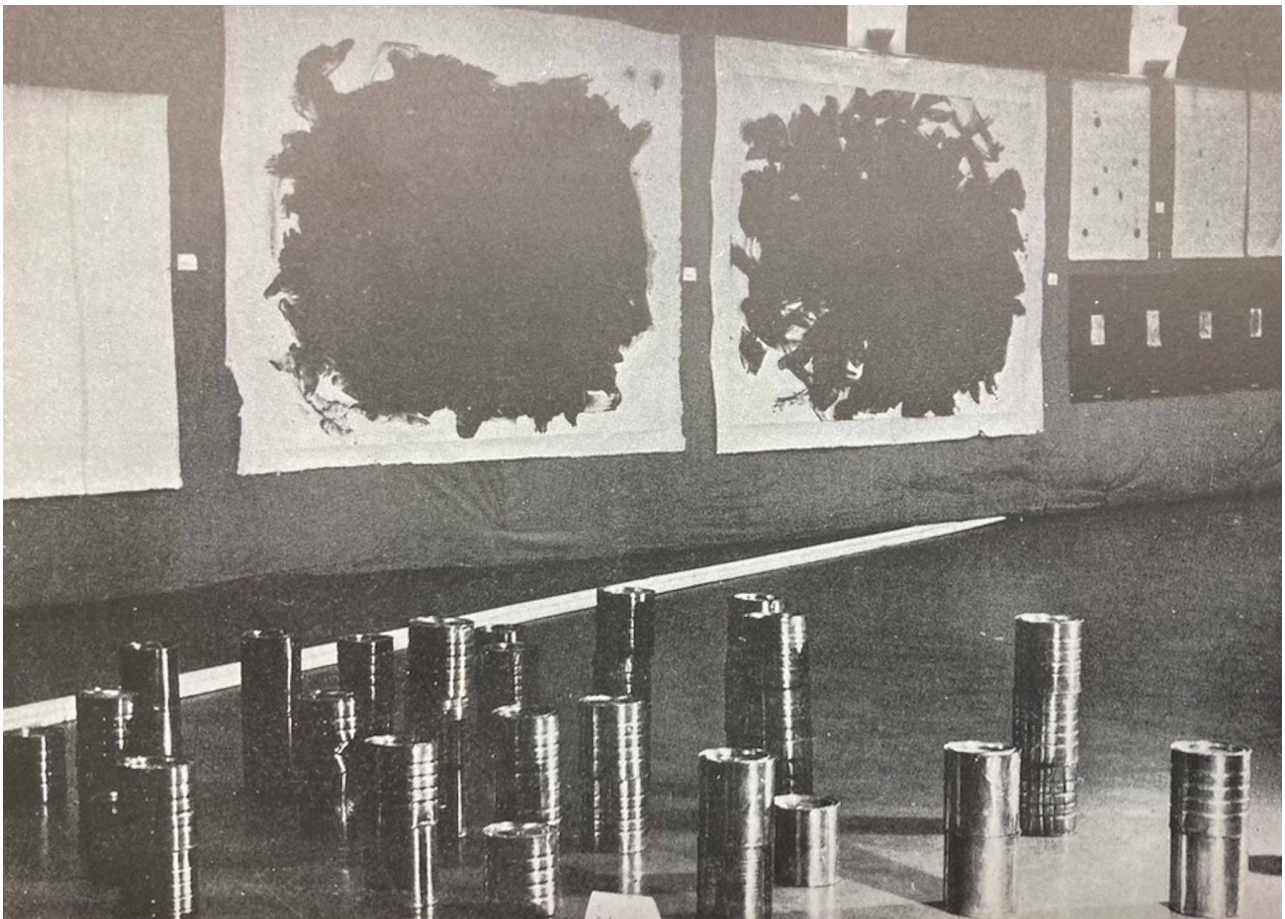
Pedestrian Touch and Freedom

Given that Shimamoto created *Please Walk on This* precisely when Shiraga was experimenting with the possibilities and limits of pedestrian touch within his own art practice, it is useful to briefly consider *Please Walk on This* in relation to Shiraga's works, particularly those that audiences encountered at the First Gutai Art Exhibition, where Shimamoto's 'experimental trial piece' first appeared. There, not far from *Please Walk on This*, visitors would have seen two of Shiraga's foot paintings (plate 3).¹⁷

As already noted, the most pronounced difference between such paintings and *Please Walk on This* is that Shimamoto shifted his engagement with pedestrian touch from an artist's creation of an artwork to a spectator's experience of it. Nevertheless, more subtle differences existed. For example, although Shiraga slid on the canvas to spread paint with his feet, the extreme physical exertion involved in this act led him to hold onto a rope suspended from the ceiling as a standard part of his working process, thereby allowing him to maintain greater control over how he used his legs as 'paintbrushes'. By contrast, *Please Walk on This* clearly sought to trip up audiences—rather like when Shiraga slipped during his first trial run of foot painting, but by using harder materials on the ground that, by means of their spring-loaded planks and uneven surfaces, repeatedly threw a spectator off-balance. This effect was apparent in a short film that shows Shiraga himself navigating *Please Walk on This* at the 1956 *Outdoor Gutai Art Exhibition*, where he maintains his balance only by constantly peering down at his feet, adjusting his legs, tilting his torso, and instinctively extending his arms (plate 4).

Although Shiraga was an unusually nimble spectator, his experience captured on film indicates that however much *Please Walk on This* addressed one's sense of pedestrian touch, the work also provoked an all-over bodily experience that exceeded tactile perception. This is consistent with Shimamoto's remark, several decades later, that *Please Walk on This* was 'art that you feel throughout the body... When you walk on it, you feel [like you are] drifting, being plunged, or being rattled'—a rattling intensified by the sounds that inevitably accompanied the act of tripping or falling on the work.¹⁸ Understood in this light, pedestrian touch was not an end in

3 Two foot paintings by Shiraga (far wall, left) at the First Gutai Exhibition, 1955. Reproduced in *Gutai*, 4, 1956. Photo: Private collection.



itself but the anchor and catalyst for a qualified disturbance in a spectator's sense of proprioception, the multi-sensory perception of stimuli through eyes, skin, tendons, joints, muscles, the inner ear and other elements of the body that allow a person to sense their position and movement in space.¹⁹

The stakes of disturbing a spectator's sense of proprioception become clearer when we compare *Please Walk on This* to Shiraga's *Challenging Mud*, a performance painting for which the artist thrashed around in a mixture of mud and several other materials, including cement, clay and sand, on the ground outside the hall where the First Gutai Art Exhibition took place (plate 5).²⁰ To a large extent, *Challenging Mud* and

4 Kazuo Shiraga walking on Shōzō Shimamoto's *Please Walk on This*, 1955, at the Outdoor Gutai Art Exhibition, 1956. Photo: Nakanoshima Museum of Art.





5 Kazuo Shiraga,
Challenging Mud, 1955.
Photo: Amagasaki Cultural
Foundation.

Please Walk on This upended the conventions of painting in similar ways: by banishing paintbrushes, by shifting an artwork's display from a vertical to horizontal plane and by placing human bodies in relation to the ground or materials placed flush with the ground. Nonetheless, the works diverged in two key respects. First, Shiraga's work demonstrated the limits of pedestrian touch, if only because the artist's tactile contact with the ground frequently occurred through his entire body (or most of it) rather than just his feet. By contrast, *Please Walk on This* made feet the main 'axis point' between a spectator's vertical body and an object placed flush with the ground.²¹ Second, by writhing in mud with much of his body positioned so close to the

ground, Shiraga created a performance painting that loosely recalls Georges Bataille's concept of *la bassesse* [baseness, lowness], which the philosopher and writer associated with 'wallowing' in muddy ground.²² By contrast, *Please Walk on This* tripped up an upright spectator and thus highlighted a key mechanism for achieving baseness: what art historian Rosalind Krauss has termed the 'mechanics of [the] fall', which occur through 'axial rotation from vertical to horizontal'.²³ However, because this work both tripped up spectators and instinctively led them to re-establish their verticality, *Please Walk on This* revealed not just the mechanics of the fall but, more precisely, the mechanics of regaining one's balance *after* a near fall.

The differences in how these two works positioned a human body in relation to the ground encapsulate the divergent approaches used by Shiraga and Shimamoto to mediate subjectivity. As art historian Namiko Kunimoto has persuasively shown, because the act of writhing on the ground carried associations with wounded soldiers on a battlefield, *Challenging Mud* contributed to 'the re-evaluation of the male subject following the end of the Pacific War' by 'dislodg[ing] the heroic from the battlefield—an arena now associated with shameful loss and regret—and [bringing] it into the domain of international art'.²⁴ Compared to that work, *Please Walk on This* clearly had a more playful quality and did not as strongly evoke battlefields or other haunting memories of war. Yet it, too, turned on the reconstruction of subjectivity: in this case, by emphasising individual freedom. This seems evident based on Shimamoto's comment several decades later that a will to express the 'extraordinary nature of freedom' following its total absence during the war had motivated much of his work and that of other first-generation Gutai artists.²⁵

With *Please Walk on This*, Shimamoto mediated individual freedom and the closely related concept of subjectivity by playfully subverting the process of 'dressage', which philosopher and sociologist Henri Lefebvre has called the training of an individual's bodily gestures that results in an 'automatism of repetitions' and 'determines the majority of [our bodily] rhythms'.²⁶ To this end, *Please Walk on This* simultaneously exposed and destabilised such automatisms. On the one hand, the work repeatedly provoked automatic bodily responses that encouraged a spectator to reflexively maintain their balance and therefore remain vertical. On the other hand, the work's uneven surfaces caught a spectator off-guard, always putting them at risk of falling toward the horizontal ground.

To a certain extent, this playful subversion of dressage called into question the automatisms that shape bodily rhythms in any context. Yet for audiences who first encountered this work in mid-1950s Japan, *Please Walk on This* also had the potential to conjure, however subtly, the dressage of bodies under wartime totalitarianism, consistent with what art historian Joan Kee has called Gutai's strategy of 'remastering violence into a kind of play'.²⁷ For example, because *Please Walk on This* loosely resembled a makeshift children's game,²⁸ the work bore a qualified kinship with the numerous 'playrooms, playgrounds, books, magazines, and paper games' from wartime Japan that used play to 'introduce [children] to, and familiarize them with, all things military', as cultural historian Sabine Frühstück has observed.²⁹ Moreover, by disrupting the repeated movements of walking with objects that somewhat recalled a children's game, *Please Walk on This* managed to simultaneously evoke and playfully undermine ways in which children's bodies had become mechanised and militarised in wartime Japan through repetitive bodily gestures and rhythms. Such mechanisation and militarisation occurred, for instance, through the closer links forged between school physical education and national defence, which resulted in more exercises that involved

walking, running and jumping,³⁰ or through the mobilisation of children too young for conscription to work in munitions factories, which affected those from the junior high school that Shimamoto attended during the war.³¹ Finally, by so emphatically situating sensory perceptions on the level of an individual spectator's body, *Please Walk on This* severed the link between an individual body and the national or collective body [*kokutai*] that loomed large in the discourse and cultural production of wartime Japan—a concern that also shaped the work of other early Gutai artists and various postwar Japanese writers, filmmakers and intellectuals.³² Seen in this light, assuming *Please Walk on This* did engage pedestrian touch to destabilise a spectator's sense of proprioception, or what film scholar Scott Richmond describes as a 'set of perceptual processes whereby we orient ourselves in and coordinate ourselves with the world', this artwork reoriented and re-coordinated a spectator's relation to the world by un-training their bodily rhythms, a small but still tangible step toward learning how to be free in a postwar context.³³

Figure, Ground, Bipedalism

Based on my discussion thus far, *Please Walk on This* almost certainly acquired specific resonances in a postwar Japanese context by disrupting the trained automatism of a spectator's body when walking. However, the artwork also arguably instantiates a wider postwar interest in reconceiving figure-ground relationships to reconstruct human subjectivity—a reconstruction that ultimately helped make art more relevant to what philosopher Hannah Arendt in 1958 called the human condition, broadly defined as the 'basic conditions under which life on earth has been given to man'.³⁴ To a considerable extent, this interest recalls artistic concerns from earlier periods. For example, as art historian T.J. Clark has noted, some Renaissance painters such as Pieter Bruegel the Elder made 'contact of the body with the ground' an important subject of their painting to highlight the 'down-to-earthness' of figures involved in the 'class-specific' activities of making 'the earth even and measurable,' such as 'patting it down and truing it up'.³⁵ Indeed, it is not simply bodily contact with the ground that Clark identifies as a key artistic concern for painters from the late Middle Ages onwards. More specifically, 'in a world of uprights, inhabited by bipedal bodies', some artists took uprightness as 'a subject in itself' that 'inflects and informs the whole texture of human doings' while also 'set[ting] limits to those doings, threaten[ing] their equilibrium constantly, put[ting] them off their stride'.³⁶

The interest that Clark describes among certain artists in the contact between an upright, bipedal body and the ground underfoot closely chimes with what art historian David Kim has termed 'groundwork', which hinged on the ground's 'fundamental [importance] for viewership' during the Renaissance. However, although Clark largely focuses on the ground's signifying potential, Kim places greater emphasis on how the ground helped forge links between a painting's illusionary world and the physical world of a spectator presumed to be upright and bipedal, thereby deepening an audience's understanding of and implication in a work's 'narrative action and meaning,' to borrow Kim's words.³⁷ Moreover, because a painting's ability to forge such links often depended on linear perspective—as suggested, say, by the ubiquitous use of floor tiles in Renaissance paintings to create both an illusion of spatial recession and a connection to a spectator who frequently views a 'picture [while] stand[ing]...on a squared-off architectural ground'—the reconfiguration of figure-ground relationships during this period closely tracked larger developments related to the pursuit of illusionism.³⁸

Although contact between the ground and an upright, bipedal human body informed the work of some artists roughly around the time of the Renaissance—and

thus at the historical moment when linear perspective took hold—it also played a key role during the decades leading up to the rise of abstraction, when artists increasingly contested the strictures of figurative representation. For instance, European artists from Paul Gauguin to Pablo Picasso to Oskar Schlemmer developed what art historian Emmelyn Butterfield-Rosen has termed ‘a new vocabulary of poses and postures in art [that] participated in what it meant, for the hegemonic cultures of Western Europe around 1900, to be human’.³⁹ Indeed, although this new vocabulary certainly continued as fully nonrepresentational art gained traction roughly a decade later, it was just after World War II when artists perhaps most dramatically reconfigured figure-ground relationships in ways that invited reflection on ‘what it meant...to be human’. This likely occurred for two reasons: first, because of the increasingly polemical ideological stakes that figuration assumed during the 1930s and 1940s; and second, because of the unprecedented level of human destruction and suffering associated with the war, which prompted countless artists to wrestle with how to represent the human condition following such calamitous events.

Among the many countries where postwar artists reconfigured figure-ground relationships in ways that invited audiences to ‘reconstruct the [human] subject’, Japan emerged as an important hub.⁴⁰ There, artists often paid particular attention to the uprightness of bodies and, in so doing, to the related issue of bipedalism, a feature that has long been associated with ‘what it mean[s]...to be human’ and presumes that human beings not only stand upright but also use their two legs and feet to move.⁴¹ To a certain extent, this interest was already tacitly discernable during the country’s Allied occupation between 1945 and 1952: for example, among the group of pottery artists called ‘Sōdeisha’ [the ‘Group of Mud-Crawling’], which adopted its name based on a Sung dynasty ‘glaze pattern resembling the trail of an earthworm “crawling in mud”’, as art historian Bert Winther-Tamaki has explained.⁴² However, some of the most explicit and striking artistic engagements with bipedalism emerged just a few years after Japan’s Allied occupation among early members of the Gutai group, such as Shiraga and Shimamoto.

To a large degree, this emphasis on bipedalism and human uprightness more generally chimed with a wider assault by postwar Japanese artists on figurative representation—an assault that, as Winther-Tamaki and others have shown, contributed to the reconstruction of human subjectivity.⁴³ Crucially, however, Gutai artists pushed this assault into the physical space of a spectator, with the ground becoming a decisive plane that created a connection between a spectator’s typically upright, ambulatory body and the materials of artworks—one means by which such artists moved ‘beyond abstraction’ to forge more ‘concrete’ forms of embodied experience that resonated with different aspects of the human condition in a postwar Japanese context.⁴⁴ This was certainly evident in pieces such as Shiraga’s *Challenging Mud*. After all, *Challenging Mud* did not simply offer a performance-based representation of the artist’s own embodied experience with the mud-covered ground. Because Shiraga worked the mud-based material into what Kunimoto has called ‘an extremely dense consistency to allow [only] a small degree of constrained movement’, *Challenging Mud* also implicitly established a juxtaposition between a spectator’s relatively unconstrained movement when walking upright around this ground-cum-‘battlefield’ and the artist’s laboured movement when heaving his body onto the muddy ground.⁴⁵ Among other implications, this juxtaposition could raise questions about different degrees of (un)freedom and their relation to the wartime battlefield violence that the artist enacted. At the same time, whereas Shiraga’s work maintained a separation between a spectator’s body and that of the artist qua performer, *Please Walk*

on *This* essentially placed a spectator in the role of performer. As a result, Shimamoto's work directly engaged with a spectator's own bipedalism: above all, by eliciting tactile contact with their feet to provoke a qualified disturbance in their proprioception.

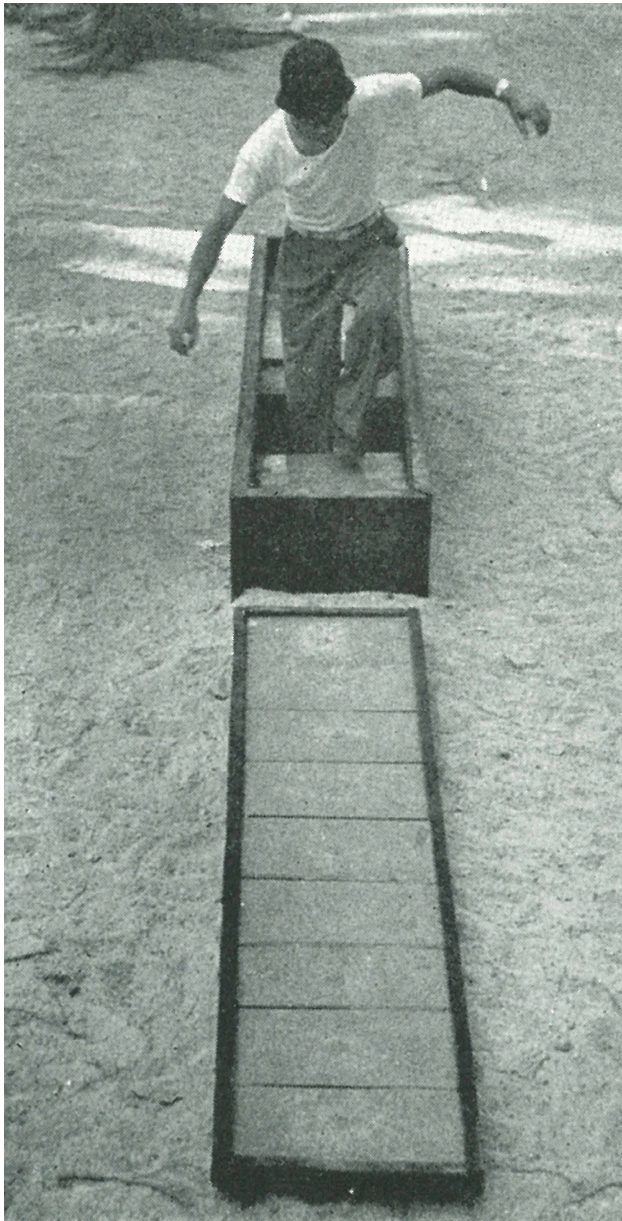
As noted earlier, one consequence of this partial disturbance of a spectator's proprioception was that *Please Walk on This* subtly subverted the wartime dressage of bodies. And in so doing, the work drew attention to one key facet of the human condition in postwar Japan: namely, the process of learning how to be free in the spectre of wartime totalitarianism. That said, even if bipedalism is widely assumed to be a distinct feature of the human body and thus a prerequisite of sorts for the human condition, *Please Walk on This* complicated such an assumption by inviting audiences to think critically about bodily differences, particularly those defined by physical disabilities. As I will elaborate in the next section, this invitation to think about bodily differences helped cast a spotlight on the limits of individual freedom when (not) walking on this work, thereby tempering the upbeat, even utopian quality that one might otherwise associate with the work's playful subversion of dressage.

Bodily Differences and Disability

In many ways, forms of bodily difference scream out for consideration in the installation photograph reproduced at the start of this essay. In this patently staged image, we see two figures: a man in the foreground with flat shoes and loose-fitting pants, and a woman in the background with fashionable heels and a narrowly cut skirt. On the most obvious level, these two figures reveal how gendered clothing inflects the process of dressage, since the woman's heels and narrow skirt would have made it more difficult to navigate the unsteady surfaces underfoot. What interests me most about this image, however, are the bodies we do not see. I refer here to bodies that, despite the artwork's invitation to 'please walk on this', could not do so because of a physical disability—especially a disability that resulted in impaired mobility.

No evidence, to be clear, suggests that Shimamoto pondered how disability made it impossible for some spectators to walk on the artwork. However, given his sustained involvement several decades later with disability education and advocacy, I suspect he would have welcomed an attempt to explore the connection between disability and this work.⁴⁶ Yet regardless of his intentions or concerns, disability-related issues certainly shaped the context in which this artwork first appeared to audiences. For example, contemporary photographs suggest that there was no passenger elevator in Ohara Hall, the building where this work debuted.⁴⁷ If true, this would have meant that wheelchair users or others with serious mobility impairments could not reach the second floor, where *Please Walk on This* was installed.⁴⁸ Perhaps just as significantly, the extreme instability of the work's walkable surfaces cast a spotlight on the inaccessibility of *Please Walk on This* for anyone with mobility impairments—an inaccessibility that persisted even at venues where audiences could reach the work without mounting a staircase, such as the 1956 *Outdoor Gutai Art Exhibition* (plate 6).

If inaccessibility characterised the artwork and the venue where *Please Walk on This* first appeared, disability issues also shaped the socio-political landscape at this time. Briefly, although disability had a long if largely undocumented history in Japan before World War II, the war brought a substantial increase in the number of disabled individuals living there. This is suggested by a 1949 survey, which, although almost certainly underreporting Japan's disabled population, gives a rough sense of the magnitude of those with war-related disabilities. As reported by this survey, among the c. 248,000 physically disabled individuals in Japan, around 27,000 former soldiers and military personnel (nearly all male) had become disabled



6 Shōzō Shimamoto, *Please Walk on This*, 1955, installed at the *Outdoor Gutai Art Exhibition*, 1956. Reproduced in *Gutai*, 5, 1956. Photo: Private collection.

through the war, including c. 20,000 who experienced lower-limb injuries.⁴⁹

Although the war considerably increased the number of disabled individuals, Japan's defeat also brought major changes in how those who had become disabled through military service were compensated, cared for and otherwise treated differently. As historian Lee Pennington has observed, during the country's Allied Occupation, 'many wartime institutions and practices were dismantled and thrown away,' including 'imperial gifts such as artificial arms and legs' and 'access to state-funded assistance [and] military pensions'.⁵⁰ Partly to assuage the 'political voice of veterans', the Law for the Welfare of Physically Disabled Persons was enacted in December 1949 and went into effect the following year.⁵¹ This law provided assistance to the physically disabled, such as access to rehabilitation programs, hospitalisation and the repair of devices such as wheelchairs.⁵² However, the legislation did not tackle the essential problem of how disabled military personnel could financially support themselves if unable to work, since any additional state aid or pensions granted because of disabilities remained scant—undoubtedly a reflection of the law's central objective to rehabilitate those with physical disabilities so they could work again.⁵³ Confronted with this limited financial support, disabled veterans not only became more active in recently formed advocacy groups. They also solicited funds in the streets of cities such as Tokyo and Osaka while singing and wearing white hospital gowns, giving rise to the terms 'white-robed fundraising' [*hakui bokin*] and 'white-robed fundraisers' [*hakui bokinsha*].⁵⁴ Such soliciting, although soon banned by Tokyo's municipal government, remained visible until the 1953 introduction of a more

comprehensive military pension law⁵⁵ and, according to historian John Dower, continued to 'haun[t] public spaces until the late 1950s'.⁵⁶

If white-robed disabled veterans haunted public spaces during the 1950s, they also haunted images of public spaces by contemporary Japanese photographers such as Ken Domon. An influential figure in the photo-realism movement, Domon considered wounded veterans among the 'most typical social phenomena' of postwar Japan and made them the subject of several photographs from the 1950s (plate 7).⁵⁷ Domon also made such veterans the focus of a 1953 article for the magazine *Camera*—an article that, in the words of historian Julia Thomas, underscored the extent to which Domon remained 'obsessed' by an image of a wounded soldier, 'unable to get [it] out of his mind or, by now, the minds of his readers'.⁵⁸ Wounded veterans further surfaced in contemporary images by other Japanese photographers: for instance, Rikko Nakamura's *Hakui no yūshi* [White-Robed Hero] (plate 8), which reveals how prostheses and mobility devices not only assumed a central place in postwar Japanese photographs of war veterans but also became

integrated within modernist formal strategies. This is evidenced here by the ‘faint grid pattern of the sidewalk’ on which the white-robed figure stands, such that he becomes almost abstracted to a ‘column of white supported by a delicate black base and an angled black line’, as Thomas has observed.⁵⁹

The developments just described may not have been on the minds of most spectators who encountered *Please Walk on This* in the mid-1950s. Nonetheless, the increased visibility of the physically disabled in postwar Japan—through new legislation, rehabilitation centres, advocacy groups, the return of wounded soldiers, and ‘white-robed fundraisers’ in city streets—does suggest that disability belonged to the context in which this artwork was initially conceived, exhibited and experienced by audiences. As such, disability hones our understanding of how Shimamoto’s artwork mediated individual freedom after World War II. In a nutshell, one might be tempted to interpret *Please Walk on This* solely as a celebration of individual freedom, since the work so strongly emphasised an individual spectator’s perceptual experiences. Yet consistent with Kunimoto’s claim that a ‘recourse to individualism’ may be insufficient as an ‘explanation of artistic practice’ among early postwar Japanese artists, it is difficult to interpret *Please Walk on This* strictly as a celebration of individual freedom.⁶⁰ After all, one could interpret the work’s inaccessibility as a tacit form of ableism: that is, as a form of discrimination that, however unintentional, limits the freedom of disabled individuals. In this respect, *Please Walk on This* recalls the implicit ableism that has characterised numerous walkable artworks in subsequent

7 Ken Domon, *Wounded Veterans*, 1952. Photo: Ken Domon Museum of Photography.



decades. Only here, such ableism was even more glaring: partly because the considerable instability of *Please Walk on This* did not extend to most later walkable works, and partly because this work's title drew so much attention to the act of 'walk[ing] on this', which had the observe effect of emphasising those who could not accept this invitation due to the exclusion built into the artwork's design.

Notwithstanding such tacit ableism, though, *Please Walk on This* paradoxically laid bare the critical power inherent in disability by 'demand[ing] a reckoning with the messiness of bodily variety, with literal individuation run amok', to borrow the words of disability studies scholar Rosemarie Garland-Thomson.⁶¹ This reckoning came above all from how the walkability of Shimamoto's work—and the limits thereof underscored through its highly unstable surfaces and title—instantiated the triangulation between disability, individual freedom and the spectre of wartime totalitarianism in 1950s Japan. For instance, given that Japan's postwar increase in



8 Rikko Nakamura, *White-Robed Hero*, 1954. Photo: Tokyo Photographic Art Museum.

individuals with limb injuries stemmed predominantly from the war, and given that the individuals who incurred such injuries were overwhelmingly male, *Please Walk on This*'s oblique allusion to an absent body that could not 'walk on this' had the potential to evoke male soldiers injured and disabled in battle. As such, one might read the absent male body conjured by this highly inaccessible walkable work as a counterpoint to the bodies of white-robed disabled veterans, who remained resolutely present when walking or otherwise moving with prostheses, canes and/or crutches across the walkable surfaces of city sidewalks.

If the absent male body conjured by *Please Walk on This* provided a counterpoint to the white-robed disabled veterans visible in city streets and represented in contemporary Japanese photographs, it also somewhat recalled Shiraga's *Challenging Mud*, which cast the body as a 'threshold of exposure' where postwar 'anxieties were palpably manifest' through 'the intersection of gender, the body, nationhood, and representation', to borrow Kunimoto's words.⁶² Yet compared to *Challenging Mud*, Shimamoto's work raised more pointed questions about the participation of disabled bodies within postwar Japan's nascent democracy. For instance, given that this work invited participation, and given that the unsteadiness of its walkable surfaces exemplified the obstacles confronting nonnormative bodies, *Please Walk on This* offered a subtle, performative reminder of how various modalities of participation, be they in art, games or even forms of democratic government, may inadvertently propagate the exclusion of disabled bodies.⁶³ The greater visibility of disability in postwar Japan described earlier also meant that at least some spectators who encountered *Please Walk on This* were probably aware of contemporary efforts to 'normalise' the exclusion of disabled bodies through references to the idea of participation. This occurred by framing physical disabilities as conditions that individuals must willingly overcome in order 'to participate in the social and economic activities as quickly as possible' (to quote the 1949 law), rather than by adapting compensation schemes, modes of work, architecture, the design of objects and other aspects of a shared culture to make participation possible.⁶⁴

Against this background, both the participatory nature of *Please Walk on This* and the work's glaring inaccessibility evoked the constraints imposed on the participation of disabled individuals in postwar Japan. In this respect, not only does the work offer a concrete example of the fact that not all participatory art is inherently emancipatory;⁶⁵ it also draws attention to how ableism may limit participation in both the aesthetic field and beyond. *Please Walk on This* equally raises larger questions about the conceptual relationship between walking and freedom. For instance, *Please Walk on This* might seem to epitomise the implicit ableism that routinely underpins conceptions of walking, as disability studies scholar Michael Oliver and others have shown.⁶⁶ However, because *Please Walk on This* so strongly highlights its own ableism through its title and the instability of its walkable surfaces, Shimamoto's work has invited audiences, both then and now, to think critically about how nonnormative bodies experience freedom differently and how freedom may be delimited based on normative conceptions of the human body.

Please Walk on This, in short, may appear to assume a normative conception of a spectator: one who remains upright and can walk with their own feet and legs. But in the end, the work does not reinforce the reductive assumption of a normative body that, according to several scholars, underpins the concept of pedestrian touch as described by Ingold: that is, the assumption of a body 'without missing limbs, sticks, canes, [or] the wheels of a wheelchair,' in the words of sociologist Mark Paterson.⁶⁷ After all, if the work's inaccessibility may in fact prompt reflection about how

ostensibly harmless objects such as artworks lead to the exclusion of nonnormative bodies, *Please Walk on This* pushes audiences to think through but also beyond walking: that is, to forms of mobility that do not depend entirely on one's feet and legs yet still may be broadly understood as walking among disabled individuals.⁶⁸ In so doing, the artwork highlights how 'non-walker[s] can make a significant contribution to our understanding of walking...without distorting the experience of walkers', in Oliver's words.⁶⁹ Only whereas Oliver distinguishes the mobility of 'walkers' from that of 'non-walkers' and 'nearly-walkers',⁷⁰ *Please Walk on This* beckons us to think about everyone as a walker: that is, not only those who 'move about on foot' (even if this remains the most common meaning of walking), but also those who 'move about, journey, [or] circulate' through means other than the feet.⁷¹

Akira Kanayama's Footprints

After creating *Please Walk on This*, Shimamoto swiftly moved on to other experimental approaches for artmaking, particularly painting. As one example, at the 1956 *Outdoor Gutai Art Exhibition*, where *Please Walk on This* also appeared, Shimamoto inaugurated a new way to make paintings that involved filling a cannon with paint and then exploding the material against vinyl cloth. In so doing, Shimamoto embarked on what became a signature technique for much of his career: the use of projectiles to throw paint onto canvas or other pictorial surfaces. Although Shimamoto did not limit himself to this technique, its longevity in his oeuvre suggests that *Please Walk on This* probably emerged less from a sustained interest in walkable art and more from his concern with developing experimental approaches to 'execute the paintbrush'.⁷²

Much like Shimamoto, fellow Gutai artist Akira Kanayama also explored new ways of applying paint to canvas, most strikingly by using remote-controlled model cars. At the *Outdoor Gutai Art Exhibition*, however, Kanayama briefly extended the banner of walkable art by displaying *Footprints* (plate 9). A long and narrow sheet of white vinyl covered with a seemingly endless series of black painted footprints, this work shared two key features with *Please Walk on This*. The first and most obvious was that spectators could walk on Kanayama's work. The second, closely related feature was that *Footprints* demonstrated an engagement with bipedalism. This engagement was revealed partly by the footprints themselves, which suggested traces of an upright and ambulatory body; and partly by the tacit invitation to walk on such marks, which largely seemed to address spectators who themselves were upright and ambulatory. That said, several differences existed. For instance, whereas *Please Walk on This* invited spectators to walk on uneven, unstable surfaces that rose several inches from the ground, *Footprints* was extremely thin and pliable, which caused the work to cling to the ground. This effectively meant that as a walkable artwork, *Footprints* was less concerned with disrupting a spectator's ambulation, as *Please Walk on This* sought to do, and more with forging a relationship between an ambulatory, upright spectator and the ground to which *Footprints* largely adhered. Additionally, whereas *Please Walk on This* was displayed solely on the ground so audiences could step on this work, *Footprints* 'strolled through the park grounds and up into the trees, inviting viewers to walk on it but also transforming the instruction into an imaginary act that could only be completed in the mind', as art historian Ming Tiampo has insightfully observed.⁷³ In this respect, *Footprints* was not solely about the physical act of walking on art but also about beckoning audiences to combine physical and imaginary acts of walking.

Although *Please Walk on This* served as one key reference point for Kanayama, another was an untitled artwork by Shiraga that had appeared 2 months earlier at the *Sinkō Independent Exhibition* in Kobe (plate 10).⁷⁴ This work, which I will refer to as



9 Akira Kanayama with his work *Footprints*, 1956, at the *Outdoor Gutai Art Exhibition*, 1956. © Kanayama Akira and Tanaka Atsuko Association. Photo: Kanayama Akira and Tanaka Atsuko Association.

Feet, consisted of a long strip of paper upon which Shiraga applied his feet to make a series of footprints in his trademark paint colour, crimson lake red, which he used primarily for its evocations of blood.⁷⁵ That *Feet* informed Kanayama's conception of *Footprints* seems almost certain, as suggested by the two works' similar format and the fact that Kanayama and Shiraga were close artistic interlocutors and long-time friends.⁷⁶ Yet, as curator Mizuho Kato has noted, the works diverged in important ways. For our purposes, the most significant is that Shiraga used his own bare feet to make marks on paper, whereas Kanayama used a stencil to paint an outline of a shoe's sole.

One implication of this divergence is that *Footprints* demonstrated a different engagement with pedestrian touch. For instance, Shiraga's footprints offered a physical trace of his ink-covered feet that had already come into contact with paper, loosely recalling the 'that has been' quality that literary critic and semiologist Roland

10 Kazuo Shiraga, *Title Unknown*, 1956, installed at the *Sinkō Independent Exhibition*, 1956. Photo: Amagasaki Cultural Foundation.



Barthes ascribed to the photographic trace.⁷⁷ By contrast, although the stencilled footprints of Kanayama's work similarly offered a trace of prior physical contact, they also provided an invitation for contact with a spectator's feet in both the present (when audiences encountered the work) and the future (say at an exhibition site not yet known). Furthermore, although Shiraga broke artistic ground with his decision to paint with feet rather than hands, the traces of his feet touching paper or canvas still constituted gestural markings that emphasised the artist's individuality and connected such individuality to Shiraga's body. With *Footprints*, however, Kanayama made the footprints ambivalent enough to become traces of anyone—an ambivalence

conveyed through the anonymity of the stencil, the fact that the footprints depicted the soles of shoes rather than feet, and the artist's involvement of individuals other than himself in the stencilling process. Through such ambivalence, *Footprints* not only combined traces of previous tactile contact with invitations for contact in the present and future; it also seemed to posit a link between the tactile contact of different individuals across these different moments in time.

11 Visitors stepping on Akira Kanayama's *Footprints*, 1956, while inside Tsuruko Yamazaki's *Work (Red Cube)*, 1956. Photographed at the *Outdoor Gutai Art Exhibition*, 1956. Reproduced in *Gutai*, 5, 1956. Photo: Private collection.

Double Walker: Walking on and alongside *Footprints*

The ambivalence evident in Kanayama's stencilled footprints was considerably amplified through the seemingly contradictory ways that the artist beckoned spectators to walk in relation to these markings. For example, much like with *Please Walk on This*, spectators were clearly invited to walk directly on *Footprints* (plate 11). This invitation occurred not just through the footprints themselves, which cued spectators



to place their own feet on top of such marks, but also through the humble material of vinyl, which, together with the nails used to fix this material into the ground, reminded spectators that there was nothing especially precious about the work to be stepped upon. At the same time, Kanayama offered spectators several clues to suggest that they might walk *alongside* this work. One, of course, came from the basic fact that walking on an artwork violated the traditional rules of spectatorship. Yet even for those willing to break such rules, Kanayama subtly encouraged audiences to walk alongside *Footprints* through the substantial amount of ground that bordered each side of the work, which allowed for a much less confining path of movement than the narrow piece of vinyl. A further cue came from the way in which the work meandered into shrubs and trees, where spectators could not walk unless they wanted to risk falling to the ground and breaking some bones. Moreover, when we expand our gaze to the *Second Gutai Art Exhibition* later the same year, we discern a more explicit attempt to have spectators walk alongside *Footprints*. There, the work appeared not only on the flat floor of the ground-level gallery but also on the stairs, where it lay on the left-hand side, with footprints pointing forward (plate 12). However seemingly incidental, this meant that the work likely appeared next to visitors when climbing the staircase, since it is customary in Japan to mount steps on the righthand side.

By cuing spectators to walk not only on but also alongside *Footprints*, Kanayama allowed the work to function as a double for a viewer's ambulatory body—or better, as a *doppelgänger*, the original German term for double that means 'double walker' or 'double goer'. In making this claim, I do not wish to suggest that the work only conjured a double for a viewer's body, since we can certainly imagine scenarios in which different spectators walked alongside one other. That said, when a spectator walked alongside *Footprints*, the serial footprints did have the potential to conjure a certain kind of *doppelgänger*: a 'double walker' whose moving yet invisible body provided a foil for a spectator's moving yet visible body.

As literary scholar Baryon Posadas has shown, although the *doppelgänger* first appeared in nineteenth-century German literature, it surfaced in Japan during the early twentieth century, after which it became a common motif in Japanese literature and film, particularly from the 1920s onward.⁷⁸ In Japan, the use of the *doppelgänger*—frequently translated as *bunshin* and sometimes *dopperugengā*—built on the figure's rich array of connotations in a European and North American context, such as the *doppelgänger*'s associations with the *unheimlich* [the uncanny]. As Posadas has insisted, however, the *doppelgänger* motif in Japanese culture should not be treated as a derivative Euroamerican import but 'as a historically specific formation', with its 'effective translation and popularisation... into the Japanese context' resulting from 'its parallel (yet nonetheless locally distinct) historical experience'.⁷⁹

During the first few decades of the twentieth century, one manifestation of this historically specific formation was the proliferation of the *doppelgänger* figure in Japanese detective fiction, which Posadas has interpreted largely as an outgrowth of Bertillon-like policing systems within Japan. In his words, 'doppelgängers, disguises, and multiple identities became more than just merely figures of fantasy, but scientific problems in the field of policing and the management of populations'.⁸⁰ Although Posadas does not elaborate on the *doppelgänger* motif during the first few decades following World War II, literature scholar Masahiko Watanabe has shown that it proliferated in this period, which became a peak moment for doubling novels in Japan. Such novels, Watanabe suggests, provided a means both to evoke and to negotiate the fragilisation or dissolution of an individual's sense of self that stemmed from developments including the relatively recent experiences of war.⁸¹



12 Akira Kanayama, *Footprints*, 1956, installed at the Second Gutai Art Exhibition, 1956. © Kanayama Akira and Tanaka Atsuko Association. Photo: Kanayama Akira and Tanaka Atsuko Association.

It remains unclear whether Kanayama conceived *Footprints* in response to the doppelgänger motif in various forms of Japanese cultural production. Yet, assuming a spectator who walked along the artwork understood their own ambulation as paralleling that which the footprints visualised, a visitor would have been at least loosely aware of a relationship of doubling between their own walking body and the one conjured by the stencilled shoe prints. One question we therefore must probe is how *Footprints*'s evocation of a 'double walker' helped mediate the reconstruction of selfhood in mid-1950s Japan—a question that stems partly from the fact that the doppelgänger often assumed that role in postwar Japanese novels, and partly from the motif's more general role in negotiating social change at key historical moments.

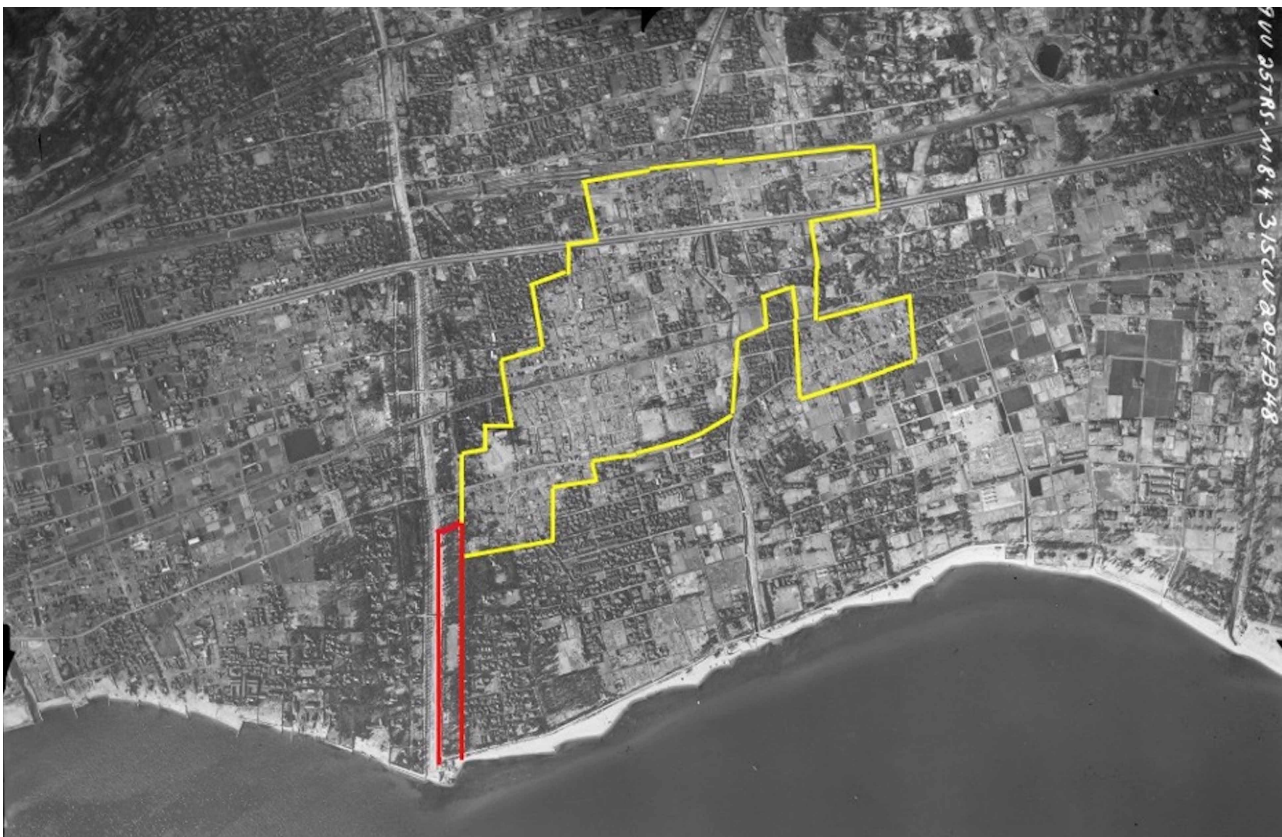
Although the doppelgänger may appear in an individual's most intimate, personal experiences, such as dreams, the motif often surfaces in forms of cultural

production experienced by multiple individuals, such as literature, film and art.⁸² One key reason is the figure's role in helping individuals 'manage' a past that haunts the present because this past has not yet been mastered, to invoke an Adornian phrase.⁸³ In so doing, the *doppelgänger* constitutes what film scholar Andrew Webber calls 'at once a historical figure, re-presenting past moments, and a profoundly anti-historical phenomenon, resisting temporal change by stepping out of time and then stepping back in as a revenant'.⁸⁴

At first blush, *Footprints* would appear to have little in common with the anxieties associated with the *doppelgänger* figure, since the work plainly operated in a playful register. However, as Kato has noted, *Footprints* remained noteworthy within Kanayama's artistic development because it instantiated the artist's burgeoning interest in how an exhibition environment shapes a spectator's experiences. Given this, it seems necessary to consider not just how environmental factors such as 'time, weather, [and] the presence or absence' of exhibition visitors could inflect a spectator's experience but also how the initial exhibition site may have informed how *Footprints* 'managed' the past in the then-present.⁸⁵

Although Ashiya Park was certainly an idyllic site with its abundant pine trees, the small and prosperous city of Ashiya was heavily damaged near the war's end through several aerial bombing raids, the most devastating of which occurred in August 1945, when US aircrafts dropped lethal incendiary bombs.⁸⁶ During these raids, Ashiya Park itself was not bombed. However, it did lie next to a large area devastated by the bombings that required substantial rebuilding after the war—an area that directly abutted the park's northeastern edge (see annotations in plate 13).⁸⁷ More generally, the park belonged to a city where the bombings destroyed an estimated 1.8 square

13 Aerial image of Ashiya, taken by US forces in 1948 [Ashiya Park is outlined in red; a heavily bombed area is outlined in yellow]. Photo: Geospatial Information Authority of Japan.



kilometres, a swathe of destruction that affected over 18,000 inhabitants (over half the city's total population) and resulted in 145 deaths and 170 injuries.⁸⁸ When displayed at such a highly charged site, *Footprints* admittedly did not conjure wartime destruction in an explicit way. Yet one could argue that the very invitation to walk alongside *Footprints*—and thus to evoke a 'double walker' both present and absent—had the potential to posit a connection between a visitor in the then-present and those who had stepped on the same ground in the recent past but who were no longer there. This potential connection, I acknowledge, is clearly speculative. Nevertheless, assuming that the ambivalence of the stencilled footprints could evoke a link between different individuals across multiple moments in time as I suggested earlier, one implication was that *Footprints* could invite a spectator to reflect on their own relationship to the wartime destruction that had defined the presence and absence of individuals who, roughly a decade earlier, had walked or otherwise moved across, within or near the same park.

Understood in this light, *Footprints* cannot be treated solely as a playful invitation to walk in the park, even if many visitors undoubtedly treated it as such. Rather, by evoking the figure of the double walker when a spectator walked alongside *Footprints* in Ashiya Park, the work also could provoke darker wartime associations: particularly with forms of wartime destruction near the exhibition site, but even possibly with events that involved walking but took place further afield, such as the long marches that Japanese soldiers sometimes walked upon surrender. In the end, however, what allowed *Footprints* to 'remaster violence as a form of play', instead of merely juxtaposing play and violence as two simultaneous elements, was the degree to which this artwork conveyed the hope inherent in potentiality.⁸⁹ That is, the footprints did not solely embody 'that [which] has been'. For because the double walker conjured by the footprints seemed to defy gravity, the work equally celebrated what could be: the path not yet taken, the path that diverges from one's own and the path pursued in one's imagination. As such, the work celebrated not just the freedom to walk and to walk however one wanted. It also suggested the liberation of a walker's body, perhaps partly to repair what Posadas considers the 'psychical fragmentation' encapsulated in the *doppelgänger* motif.⁹⁰

Epilogue: Beyond Horizontality

Although this essay has offered a close reading of two works associated with walkable art's emergence, I would now like to broaden my discussion by considering how the category of walkable art pushes us to rethink canonical narratives of horizontality that have long underpinned Euroamerican-centric histories of postwar art. As many readers know, Leo Steinberg offered one of the most influential accounts of horizontality in his 1972 essay 'Other Criteria'. There, the art historian and critic presented the concept of the 'flatbed picture plane', which he used to describe the 'characteristic picture plane of the 1960s' that found its clearest articulation in the work of American artist Robert Rauschenberg.⁹¹ This 'tilt of the picture plane from vertical to horizontal,' Steinberg asserted, expressed 'the most radical shift in the subject matter of art, ... from nature to culture', by allowing the 'pictorial surface [to] let the world in again'.⁹² As he elaborated, 'it is not the actual physical placement of the image that counts' but its 'psychic address... its special mode of imaginative confrontation', a precision that allowed Steinberg to distinguish postwar modern art from earlier examples of ground-based decorative art, such as mosaics and rugs, and from the occasional 'tilting' of such decorative artworks from a horizontal to vertical plane through their mode of display.⁹³

Although Steinberg offered the most canonical account of the picture plane's 'tilt...from vertical to horizontal', art historian and critic Rosalind Krauss provided a close second with her brief entry on 'horizontal' in *Formless: A User's Guide*, which appeared twenty-five years later.⁹⁴ As art historian K.L.H. Wells has observed, Krauss 'countered Steinberg by arguing that [Jackson] Pollock's drip paintings present a radical horizontality', despite being 'excluded...from [Steinberg's] theory of the flatbed'. Wells further points out that although Steinberg and Krauss 'disagreed on whether or not Pollock's work should be regarded as radically horizontal', they concurred that an artwork's 'psychic address' mattered most and not its actual 'physical placement'.⁹⁵

While Wells makes these comments mainly to highlight how modernist textiles challenged the horizontal-vertical dichotomy in art-historical narratives of horizontality,⁹⁶ walkable art's emergence also complicates such narratives by revealing the complex ways that artworks address a spectator's feet. As we have seen, a significant part of this address was physical, as evidenced by the fact that *Please Walk on This* and *Footprints* invited audiences to step on these works. However, another part was 'psychical', since the works could provoke what Steinberg termed an 'imaginative confrontation'—a confrontation exemplified by how Kanayama's *Footprints*, in meandering through trees and bushes, encouraged spectators to complete the act of walking in their minds. Yet in both parts of addressing a spectator's feet, an artwork's physical placement mattered greatly, as did the work's relationship to a spectator's moving and generally upright body.

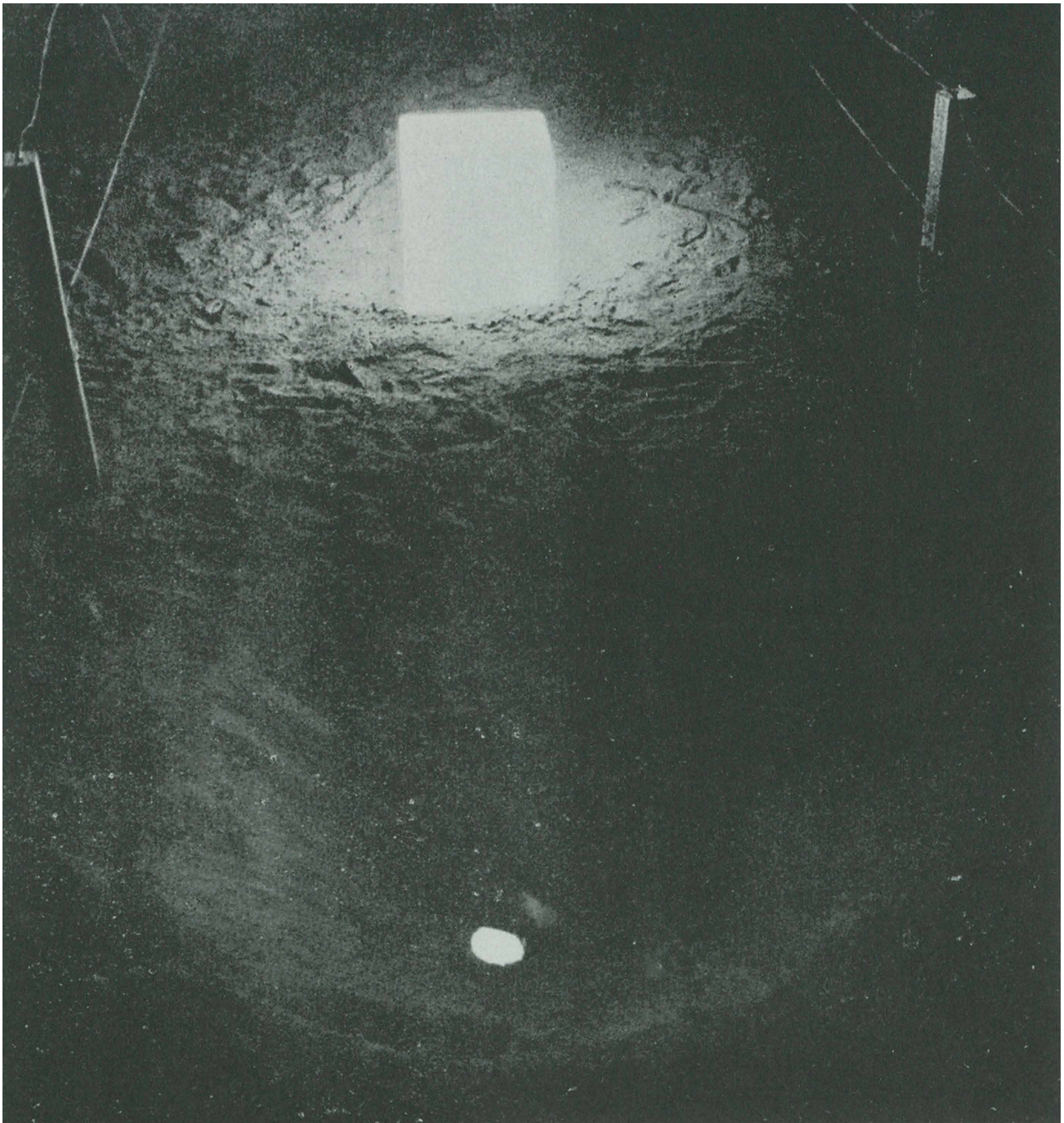
As I have suggested throughout this essay, one key motivation for this mode of address was an attempt to mediate the reconstruction of subjectivity through an engagement with facets of bipedalism. That said, I would like to propose that this interest in bipedalism itself intersected with a closely related but more general art-historical development that contributed to fuelling the rise of walkable art: namely, the postwar impulse to move art off the vertical plane of the wall.

Although artists explored a range of approaches for moving art off the wall, many of these approaches involved the creation of 'ground-centric' art—a term I coined in an earlier essay to describe any artwork that lies flush with, clings to, hovers close to, gets incorporated into, or otherwise enters into direct dialogue with the ground, be this the floor inside a building or a similarly horizontal or quasi-horizontal surface outside.⁹⁷ However, whereas my previous invocation of this term occurred when discussing the floor-hugging sculptures made by American artist Carl Andre from the late 1960s onwards, here I wish to consider the 'zero hour' of ground centrality that coincided with the rise of walkable art in mid-1950s Japan. I do so largely to stress that ground centrality provided an important foundation for the exploration of bipedalism in the earliest walkable works, which, like those in subsequent decades, hinged on modes of tactile contact between the surfaces of an artwork placed on or near the ground and the feet of a spectator's body often presumed by artists to be bipedal. Given this importance, I will conclude by sketching a brief conceptualisation of ground centrality in hopes that doing so helps us to move beyond the narratives of horizontality that have often constrained how we write about spectatorship within global histories of modern and contemporary art.

Around the time of Gutai's emergence, numerous members created ground-centric works, particularly before the group's greater emphasis on large-scale painting. Besides the works by Shimamoto and Kanayama analysed in this article, a few such examples include Kazuo Shiraga's *Challenging Mud*; Atsuko Tanaka's *Work (Bell)* (1955), which appeared at the *First Gutai Art Exhibition* and featured a series of small bells

placed around a gallery's floor; Fujiko Shiraga's *White Plank* (1955), a bisected piece of painted plywood that met the ground at a slight angle when the work debuted at the 1955 *Experimental Outdoor Exhibition of Modern Art to Challenge the Midsummer Sun*; and Michio Yoshihara's *Discovery* (1955), for which the artist dug a hole in the ground and then inserted a small light into the dug-out space at the *Outdoor Gutai Art Exhibition* (plate 14). These and other examples of the wider interest in ground-centric art among Gutai artists likely arose for various reasons: above all to challenge the conventions for creating and exhibiting art, but also to mobilise the ground's symbolic associations and materiality. This interest in ground-centric art also almost certainly emerged through the strategic decision by group leader Jirō Yoshihara to stage several early

14 Michio Yoshihara, *Discovery* (foreground) and *Shining Water* (rear), both 1955; installed at the *Outdoor Gutai Art Exhibition*, 1956. Reproduced in *Gutai*, 5, 1956. Photo: Private collection.



Gutai exhibitions outside, which effectively transformed the ground into one of the most significant surfaces used to develop new approaches for displaying and experiencing art.

Within the array of ground-centric artworks created by first-generation Gutai artists, only a few works were explicitly conceived to be walked on—possibly because Shimamoto, Kanayama or others felt that this idea had run its course. Yet by the mid to late 1960s, the interest in creating walkable forms of ground-centric art extended far beyond Japan. This interest likely arose in response to various developments. One may have been a heightened awareness outside Japan of the two earliest walkable artworks by Shimamoto and Kanayama: for instance, through images of the works that appeared in the *Gutai* journal, or through the subsequent display of these works in high-profile international exhibitions.⁹⁸ Other, more general catalysts included the burgeoning, transnational embrace of participatory and interactive art from roughly the late 1950s onward; the roughly contemporary interest among artists from various countries in issues related to phenomenology and human perception;⁹⁹ the c. 1960s explosion of installation art, which made walking on an artwork's floor more integral to a spectator's experiences; and the expanded interest in environmental art, which led some artists to create walkable works that integrated or otherwise entered into dialogue with the ground. The proliferation of ground-centric artworks made to be stepped on also reflected several less obvious or less historicised interests, such as efforts to instrumentalise the ostensible humility, lowness or invisibility of the ground; to explore the ground's connection to politics, violence and potentiality; and to interrogate a beholder's relationship to the built and natural environment.

As suggested by this article's earlier comparison between *Challenging Mud* and *Please Walk on This*, the concept of ground centrality bears a qualified kinship with the Batailleian notion of *bassesse*. This kinship is evident in the emphasis that some later artists have placed on the ground as a source of libidinal energy (for example Hélio Oiticica in the 1969 installation *Eden*); as a surface for critiquing the spectre of Fascism (for example Hans Haacke in his 1993 work *Germania*); or as a field for challenging the conformity endemic to industrial capitalism and bourgeois society (for example Andre in his many floor-hugging sculptures, or Carlos Cruz-Diez in the colourful zebra crossings that he temporarily sited in urban intersections to disrupt the automatism of pedestrians). Notwithstanding such overlaps, however, ground-centric art departs from the concept of *bassesse* in several respects. The most glaring divergence is ground-centric art's frequent embrace of the idealism inherent in utopianism. Other differences include the works' lack of sustained concern with the scatological or abject, and the ways that artists and even some spectators-cum-protesters have used ground-centric works to critique violence through the lens of race and gender—issues that intersect with but tend to eclipse the questions of class struggle that underpinned Bataille's conception of baseness and his related ideas about base materialism.¹⁰⁰

When we think broadly about ground-centric works made to be walked on, the main goal is usually not to 'attack' or 'strike against' the vertical axis that the human 'body shares with culture', as Krauss suggested in her account of horizontality, which was strongly informed by the concept of *bassesse*.¹⁰¹ To the contrary, such artworks frequently place considerable emphasis on physically and imaginatively addressing the upright bodies of ambulatory spectators, as revealed by *Please Walk on This* and *Footprints*. That said, walkable forms of ground-centric art do chime with Krauss's emphasis on the importance of yielding to gravity. Only whereas Krauss considered yielding to gravity to be oppositional to the 'axis of the human body',¹⁰² walkable art

uses gravity to ‘magnetise’ a spectator’s body to both the work itself and the ground on which this body moves and rests.¹⁰³ In many cases, walkable art also problematises an upright, ambulatory spectator’s centre of gravity to shape how one engages with both artwork and ground: for instance, in many works that Gianni Colombo and other artists have created from the 1960s onward that feature oblique floors or uneven steps. In such ways, walkable art casts a spotlight on the ‘centricity’ of ground centricity, which, together with the intersecting interest in bipedalism, provided key impetuses for the rise and proliferation of walkable art.

In closing, any account of walkable art demands that we move beyond the flatbed picture plane and related accounts of horizontality to better understand how the ground functions as a surface for shaping a spectator’s experiences of such artworks. However generative these entwined concepts have been, they mainly converge around American painting and, as such, cannot fully account for the rise and proliferation of walkable art in a global context.¹⁰⁴ But what other criteria—or other ‘other criteria’—must we consider? As should be clear from this essay, one criterion is a walkable artwork’s physical mode of address. Another is the interrelationship between its physical and ‘psychical’ modes of address. Yet another concerns how artists have combined physical and psychical modes of address to beckon a spectator’s sense of pedestrian touch through ground-centric artworks that implicitly or explicitly engage with aspects of bipedalism. At stake in these other criteria is not simply a more robust framework for understanding how a walkable artwork formally functions. Rather, these other criteria allow us to account for how walkable art may foster a more reflexive, critical encounter between spectators and the world in which they live, thereby opening up new possibilities to let the world in again.

Notes

- 1 The artwork’s Japanese title also has been translated as ‘Please Walk on Here’ and ‘Please Walk on Top of This’. Unless otherwise indicated, Japanese terms and texts quoted in this article have been translated by Miharu Hori, who equally provided invaluable research assistance.
- 2 Shōzō Shimamoto, ‘Please Walk on Top of This’ [1956], trans. Kikuko Ogawa, in *Gutai: Facsimile Edition*, ed. Chinatsu Kuma, Tokyo, 2010, 25.
- 3 Shimamoto, ‘Please Walk on Top of This’, 25.
- 4 Shimamoto, ‘Please Walk on Top of This’, 25.
- 5 Shimamoto, ‘Please Walk on Top of This’, 25 (emphasis added).
- 6 Shōzō Shimamoto, ‘The Idea of Executing the Paintbrush’ [1957], trans. Kikuko Ogawa, in *From Postwar to Postmodern, Art in Japan 1945–1989: Primary Documents*, ed. Doryun Chong, Michio Hayashi, Kenji Kajiya, Fumihiko Sumitomo, New York, 2012, 92–93.
- 7 See, for example, Atsuo Yamamoto, ‘Space, Time, Stage, Painting’, trans. Ming Tiampo, in *Gutai: Moments de Destruction/Moments de Beauté*, eds., Atsuo Yamamoto, Ming Tiampo, and Florence de Mèredieu, Paris, 2002, 32.
- 8 On this interest among early Gutai artists, see Tomoko Mamime, “‘Als sich Geist und Materie die Hand gaben’: Haptik in den frühen Arbeiten von Gutai”, in *Jenseits der Repräsentation: Körperlichkeiten der Abstraktion in moderner und zeitgenössischer Kunst*, ed. Olga Moskatova, Paderborn, 2013, 93–107.
- 9 Jennifer Barker, *The Tactile Eye: Touch and the Cinematic Experience*, Berkeley, 2009.
- 10 ‘Pedestrian’, *Oxford English Dictionary*, oed.com, accessed 27 September 2023.
- 11 Tim Ingold, ‘Culture on the Ground: The World Perceived through the Feet’, *Journal of Material Culture* 9: 3, 2004, 330–331.
- 12 Reiko Tomii, ‘Shiraga Paints: Toward a “Concrete Discussion”’, in *Kazuo Shiraga: Six Decades*, ed. Reiko Tomii and Fergus McCaffrey, exh. cat., New York, 2009, 15.
- 13 Shōzō Shimamoto, ‘Art is Astonishment’ [1994], trans. Andrea Mardegan and Adrian Bedford, in *Shozo Shimamoto: Opere 1950–2011*, ed. Lorenzo Mango, Silvia Cavalchi, Federica Franceschini, exh. cat., Torino, 2012, 151.
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Please Walk on This: Gutai and the Emergence of Walkable Art

Michael Tymkiw

This essay traces the emergence of ‘walkable art’, a term used to describe works of fine art made to be walked on by audiences. Focusing on the two earliest examples of such works, created respectively by Gutai artists Shōzō Shimamoto and Akira Kanayama in 1955 and 1956, it argues that the rise of walkable art evinced an attempt to mediate the reconstruction of human subjectivity in postwar Japan through a close engagement with bipedalism. By offering a new model for conceptualising a spectator’s relationship to ground-based works, the category of walkable art that emerged in mid-1950s Japan challenges canonical, Euroamerican-centric narratives of horizontality. It also attests to the expanded interest among postwar artists from the Americas, Asia and Europe in using the ground to develop new approaches for displaying and experiencing art.

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