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Olympic Dissent: Art, Politics, and the Tokyo Olympic Games of 1964 and 2020

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Precis

Through an examination of Olympic-related art and the gendered, labored bodies that produce the Olympic spectacle, "Olympic Dissent: Art, Politics, and the Tokyo Games" reveals continuities in the political and artistic stakes of the Tokyo Olympic Games in 1964 and 2020.

Keywords: 1964 Olympics, art and politics, 2020 Tokyo games, national identity, Nakamura Hiroshi, Takayama Akira

The 1964 Tokyo Olympiad was intended to confirm Japan's role in the new world order, implicitly celebrating both its so-called economic miracle and the central place accorded Japan in the U.S. strategy for the "containment of Communism in Asia."[1] The stakes of political hegemony became paramount, encompassing spatial, cultural, and national identity. Noriko Aso has cogently pointed out how "…*culture* (*bunka*) has served, as in the prewar and wartime periods, as a key term in postwar articulations of national polity."[2]

As the Tokyo Games approached, the rhetoric around the role of so-called "national culture" crystallized, and designers, art museums, exhibitions, and artists were mobilized in a manner that recalled the patriotic fervor of the 1930s and 1940s during Japan's 15-year war. Some artists, like Kamekura Yusaka, readily took up the Olympic cause, while other Japanese artists, including groups such as Hi Red Center were openly critical of the games. Nakamura Hiroshi, an artist and illustrator born in 1932, focused on the unequal positions of America and its vassal state, Japan, within the Cold War's political and cultural order. This essay discusses Nakamura's response to the 1964 Tokyo Olympic games and closes with a brief look at contemporary artwork by Takayama Akira, a performance artist born in 1969, whose work addresses the upcoming Tokyo 2020 Olympics in similar terms.

Nakamura was previously a reportage painter affiliated with the Japanese Communist Party, and his resistance to the 1964 Tokyo Olympic Games grew from his involvement with left-wing activist groups such as the Japan Art Alliance and his awareness that the state was marshaling art to forward its liberal capitalist agenda. The patriotic flavor of the state's Olympic rhetoric, which called on citizens to actively clean up their neighborhoods, fund lotteries to benefit the Olympics, and to tolerate heightened policing and intensive construction was distasteful to Nakamura and his peers.[3] Although the state sought to leverage the Olympics to disassociate Japan's fascist, wartime identity from its postwar democratic and internationally-engaged identity, the Olympiad demonstrated many holdovers from the Imperial period. These continuities included mass mobilization, the promotion of a unified Japan, and, not least, the role of the Emperor in building Olympic momentum and presiding over the opening ceremonies.

Nakamura used his art to emphasize the

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continuities between the past and the present through color, the refiguring of Olympic motifs, and the representation of the steam engine. The young artist wished to interrogate the state's heavy reliance on visual culture and, as his writings have shown, he believed that innovative art tactics, along with actions in the streets, were a vital means to achieve change. He understood the Olympics to be a key moment for the state to express a fully consolidated postwar identity, one that would ideally cement Japan in place as a loyal subordinate of American power. Nakamura also understood this to be a key moment to assert resistance to this agenda, and perhaps also to garner recognition as an avant-garde artist.

The games would not only be the first in Japan, but the first held in Asia, (indeed in any non-Western country). The perceived 'symbolism of global comity' would ironically render invisible Japan's reconfigured postwar economic imperialism. Nakamura, who had been actively involved in the anti-ANPO movement opposed the state's narrative of harmony and collaboration with the United States. Moreover, the state was keen to standardize and commercialize a new national identity that would finally escape the shadow of Japan's wartime aggression and demonstrate to its own citizens that the deprivations they had endured in the 1930s and 1940s would never occur again. Tokyo underwent vast architectural and infrastructural development in preparation for tourists and worldwide viewing audiences, and trains re-emerged as a highly visible symbol of Japan's new modernity, a point that Nakamura did not miss.

The state was also well aware of the impact and import of the visual, be it art, design, and architecture, and invested in Olympic branding that would assert Japan's leadership position in Asia as a peace-loving, economically powerful nation without reference to the power of the United States. Cutting-edge design teams organized by Japan's Olympic committee set to work, rapidly creating a cohesive approach to symbols, pictograms, and typography that became a model for future Olympic design planning.

Kamekura Yusaka's Olympic emblem design conspicuously incorporated the red circle from the Japanese flag, the *hinomaru,* positioned large and bright above the Olympic rings (Kamekura Yusaka's Olympic emblem design, 1964). The image suggested the significance of the 1964 Olympic Games to Japan's resurgence less than twenty years after the end of the Pacific War. According to Kamekura, the design was also intended to suggest movement to convey the kinetic feel of the Olympics, which simultaneously implied Japan's upward mobility.[4]

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Nakamura's painting, *Sacred Torch Relay*, from 1964, also engaged the image of the *hinomaru*, but in a critical manner (Nakamura Hiroshi, *Seika senriko* (*Sacred Torch Relay*), Oil on canvas, 1964, Copyright Nakamura Hiroshi, Courtesy of the Takamatsu City Museum of Art). The work was Nakamura's contribution to an Olympic-themed exhibition at the Sixth Contemporary Art Exhibition of Japan, an independent exhibition sponsored by the *Mainichi Shimbun*. In this oil-on-canvas composition, the billowing edge of the *hinomaru* flag floats upward to reveal six steam locomotives, their engines emanating outward like cannons. Just when the state was proudly displaying it's new *shinkansen* (bullet train) lines, and leaning heavily on imagery of the trains to promote Japan as a futuristic nation, Nakamura used the emblem of the steam locomotive as an explicitly historical and potent reminder of the continuities between past and present.

Nakamura references Sakai Yoshinori, the boy born in Hiroshima on August 6, 1945, and chosen by the Olympic committee to be the final bearer of the torch, as a symbol of Japan's ability to overcome the atomic bomb with grace and agility. According to Yoshikuni Igarashi, the media heightened this sense of recovery by making reference to Sakai's aesthetically pleasing body and running style.[5] But in *Sacred Torch Relay*, the artist multiplies the body across the center of the canvas, his torso itself a torch, overtaken by flames, creating an eerie line of homogenous figures somewhat reminiscent of the military. Kamikaze planes sky-write large Olympic rings that are seemingly blown sideways from the force of the engines, again summoning the viewer to consider the continuities between imperial desire in the 1930s and 1940s and Japan's nationalistic desires in the postwar period. Although hallmarks of celebratory patriotism such as the *hinomaru* flag, the Olympic rings, and the Olympic torch are clearly visible in the work, the image stops short of pure triumphalism. The flag is cut from the frame, billowing up and revealing a teeming group of abstract mechanical red forms, lending the painting a menacing edge. In the foreground, waves rush toward the frame of the painting, seemingly about to overtake a lone plant (extending from the whale's spout) standing amidst the waves. *Sacred Torch Relay* repurposes recognizable Olympic motifs and expresses ambivalence toward the state, targeting Japan's implicit nationalist motivations.

Still, Nakamura later found the ambivalence he had expressed in *Sacred Torch Relay*

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insufficient; indeed, in a recent interview he was rueful about not taking his 1964 critique further, remarking that at the time he feared he would not be included in the exhibition nor have a chance at winning any awards if he submitted a heavily politicized artwork.[6] Yet, *Sacred Torch Relay* and *Sightseeing Empire*, completed in 1964 (Nakamura Hiroshi, *Kanko teikoku Sightseeing Empire,* Oil on canvas, 1964, Copyright Nakamura Hiroshi. Courtesy of the Yokohama Museum of Art), as I see it, connect the disastrous consequences of imperial Japan's ambitions to the rhetoric of new state power embodied by the postwar emphasis on infrastructure and economic growth. In other words, his work critiques the 'construction state' *dokken kokka*, the sturdy triangular relationship between the LDP, major banks and construction firms that would define the landscape of postwar Japan.[7] Again, in this artwork, Nakamura opts for the steam locomotive, an emblem of the mechanized past, rich with nostalgia. The image situates masculinized machinery as a national emblem of power and disaster. Nakamura's trains are a vibrant crimson, the hue of the *hinomaru* flag and his color of choice for many works in this period. The engines in *Sightseeing Empire*, exuding excessive amounts of red steam (the same color as the *hinomaru*), are so powerful they have literally gone off the rails.

Soon after completing this painting, Nakamura sought other means to critique the visual representations of Olympic fanfare. He joined forces with Tateishi Koichi (born 1941), and founded the Sightseeing Art Research Institute (Kanko Geijutsu Kenkyujo). In March 1964, Nakamura and Tateishi (also known as Tiger Tateishi) began to exhibit their work outdoors. Moving outside the structured spaces of buildings offered a way for these artists to feel as though they were escaping the heavy hand of the state's drive to coopt and control cultural capital. That the Sightseeing Art Research group began in 1964, as tourists flooded into Japan in unprecedented numbers for the Olympics, makes the organization's titular irony plain. Nakamura has pointed out that while the term "sightseeing" conjures visions of fun and visual pleasure, businesses that promote sightseeing are, by their nature, concerned firstly about profit.[8] Tateishi and Nakamura's use of the term "sightseeing" also captures the importance of vision, and they hoped the movement would bring about a re-examination of painting, representation, and viewership.

That same year, Nakamura and Tateishi pushed movement and art together more forcefully by organizing a one-day guerrilla-style event on the banks of Tokyo's Tama River, under a railway bridge for the Chuo Line. Tateishi had created a large image (approximately seven meters by four meters) of Mount Fuji – the single most powerful symbol of unified Japan – that was too large to display elsewhere, so the pair opted for an illegal site. Sam Francis, Yoshiaki Tohno, and other artists attended the event, dubbed "The First Sightseeing Exhibition," in reference to Mount Fuji as an international tourist draw for Japan.[9] Some artists crossed the river to join them, wading through it barefoot. Once at the site, Tateishi and Nakamura rapidly created and then destroyed various artworks, thereby locating the art object within performative action, defying the cycles of visual commercialism that Olympic tourism brought with it.[10] According to Nakamura, the event was meant to critique the notion of sightseeing: for most viewers, the term suggested whimsy and enjoyment, but Nakamura states they wanted to point out that sightseeing is usually an operation by tourism companies that are only interested in financial gain.[11] Their actions were part of a broader movement to take art of out the museum and into the streets in the 1960s.

The Sightseeing Art Laboratory disbanded after about one year, in part because the topicality of critiquing Japan's Olympic fever had waned, and in part because Tateishi and Nakamura

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had arrived at the limits of their common ground. Tateishi went on to complete artworks relying heavily on motifs of Japanese essentialized masculinity, such as the samurai warrior, as in *Samurai, the Watcher (Koya no Yojinbo)* (1965). It is tempting to describe his later work as ironic, but the art market has swallowed them whole, keen to embrace the traditional Japanese hero represented in a modern medium. In 1964, Artists went on to be involved in undocumented art activist events like NOlympic held at Hijikata Tetsumi's Asbestos Hall, but by 1970, Nakamura's belief in the ability of artists to step outside the system he wished to critique had also been tempered:

> I think that anything we call artwork can never escape from "the museum." So that means our life itself cannot escape from the state or from class relationships. Oh, damn it! (*aaa, iyada! iyada!).* Even if a piece of art does escape from "the museum," outside, another "museum" awaits – the state. Then, escaping from the museum only means getting closer to the state.[12]

With the 2020 Games on the horizon, Japan's stakes have shifted but much remains the same. Rather than celebrating its emergence as a world power, Japan's leaders aspire to prove it is still a leading economy, despite lackluster growth in the post-bubble years of the 1990s and 2000s and the surging Chinese economy replacing Japan as the second largest economy and leading trading nation. A younger generation of artists has begun to critique anew the state's embrace of capitalism and its disregard for economic inequality. Artists such as Takayama Akira have created performance art and installations that critically engage with the use of athletic and laboring bodies for the benefit of state development.

Takayama Akira founded "Port B," an experimental theatre company, and organized an event called Tokyo/Olympic in 2007. (The company is named after the Spanish border town where Walter Benjamin, 1892–1940, ended his life). For his first Port B project, Takayama gathered a group of 30 volunteers in the Sugamo Jizo-dori shopping district, chartered a Hato tour bus, and spent a half day crisscrossing the city to visit places that were established for the 1964 Tokyo Olympic Games, including Yoyogi National Stadium and the Budokan. The theatrical work featured actress Neko Akiko, posing as tour guide, as the bus made its way around the city, reproducing the performative, spatial, and durational characteristics of a typical Japanese sightseeing tour bus. Instead of a nostalgic tour, participant Ozaki Tetsuya said, "the tour aimed to dissect images, sensations and experiences from the 'high times' of the 1960s and reconnect them with the present globalised cityscape of wider Tokyo."

Gathering in front of Yoyogi National Stadium, an iconic Olympic site designed by Tange Kenzo (1913—2005), the audience was presented with the first of several commemorative photographs taken by a roving photographer with a telephoto lens. Other aspects of the tour were more disruptive; for example, while walking down Takeshita-dori in Harajuku, the group listened to recorded interviews of workers on the strip, many of them undocumented workers, conveying concerns about personal security and anxiety about the future. Participants also experienced a demonstration explaining how tour guides were trained to stand and present to audiences: one foot strategically placed, tucked behind and at 45 degrees to the other, a ballet position emphasizing decorum and idealized femininity. These kinds of deconstructive activities raised critical awareness about the ways the Olympics marshalled bodies in the past and the ways it will do so in the future.[13]

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In an installation work displayed in 2016 at the Mori Art Museum, Takayama took a different tactic, this time drawing viewers into the complex relations between bodies and Olympic building (Takayama Akira, *Babel: The City and its Towers* (detail), 2016, Published in *My Body, Your Voice: Roppongi Crossing 2016*, (Tokyo: Mori Museum of Art, 2016), 48-9. Copyright Takayama Akira). In his piece *Babel*: *The City and its Towers,* Takayama projects video interviews with two elderly men: one is the founder of a lucrative construction company, who previously participated in planning some of the high-rise buildings in down town Tokyo in the 1960s, while the other man is a migrant day-laborer from Niigata, who worked construction in Tokyo during the period leading up to the 1964 Games.

Sitting in his makeshift home, sporting an Oakland Raiders cap, and surrounded by Doraemon toys and misplaced umbrellas, the worker known as "Makoto" describes being a scaffolder during the intense period of construction leading up the 1964 games. Now, he says, they are cleaning up the city for the next Olympic Games, and he will have nowhere to live.

On the other side of the wall, separate video projections display life-sized images of four migrant workers from Iran, Ghana, Turkey, and Vietnam, posing in front of the construction site for the 2020 Olympic Games (Figure 5, Takayama Akira, *Babel: The City and its Towers* (detail), 2016, Published in *My Body, Your Voice: Roppongi Crossing 2016*, (Tokyo: Mori Museum of Art, 2016), 48-9. Copyright Takayama Akira). In a voice-over, they tell folktales about building towers in their respective native languages. The same story is simultaneously voiced over in Japanese and transcribed in English. The blend of the voices enacts the titular reference to the story of Babel, wherein God is angered by their hubristic tower-building and confounds their common language. In Takayama's video art, after each person speaks, their bodies gradually become indistinguishable from the white around them, rendering them invisible, much like the invisible labor they have performed to create the next Tokyo Olympic spectacle.

Takayama's dissent speaks in urgent tones about the exacting toll on human bodies, making clear that it is those most vulnerable, in terms of class and race, who must make the greatest sacrifices for the nationalist spectacle of the Olympics.

As the 2020 Tokyo Olympic Games draw closer, another No Olympics group, referencing the

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1964 name, has organized numerous political events. The anti-Olympic Arts Council Tokyo renames the Olympics "Festivals of Repression." Takayama is an active member of the group. In conclusion, both Nakamura's and Takayama's artworks call direct visual attention to the infrastructure of the Olympics and the national and/or imperial desires that foster Olympic development. They make similar points, although perhaps Takayama pays closer attention to the human costs of Olympic spectacle. Though Takayama too may encounter an exasperating inability to escape Japan's tight state-capital nexus, his voice and vision will be added to Nakamura's and others of the postwar generation, encouraging critical engagement and solidarity in the arts and beyond.

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Namiko Kunimoto is a specialist in modern and contemporary Japanese art, with research interests in gender, race, urbanization, photography, visual culture, performance art, transnationalism, and nation formation. Her essays include "Olympic Dissent: Art, Politics, and the Tokyo Games" in *The Asia Pacific Journal: Japan Focus,* "Tactics and Strategies: Chen Qiulin and the Production of Space" in *Art Journal* and "Shiraga Kazuo: The Hero and Concrete Violence" published in *Art History*. Dr. Kunimoto's awards include a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada Fellowship, Japan Foundation Fellowships (2007 and 2016), a College Art Association Millard/Meiss Author Award, and the Ratner Award for Distinguished Teaching (2019). Her book, *The Stakes of Exposure: Anxious Bodies in Postwar Japanese Art*, was published in 2017 by the University of Minnesota Press.

Notes

[1] Noriko Aso, "Sumptuous Re-past: The 1964 Tokyo Olympics Arts Festival" *positions: east asia cultures critique,* vol. 10, no. 1 (Spring 2002): 14.
[2] Noriko Aso, "Sumptuous Re-past: The 1964 Tokyo Olympics Arts Festival" *positions: east asia cultures critique,* vol. 10, no. 1 (Spring 2002): 10.
[3] Noriko Aso, "Sumptuous Re-past: The 1964 Tokyo Olympics Arts Festival" *positions: east asia cultures critique,* vol. 10, no. 1 (Spring 2002): 15.
[4] National Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo, *Design Project for the Tokyo 1964 Olympic Games* (Tokyo: National Museum of Modern Art, 2013), 122.
[5] Yoshikuni Igarashi, *Bodies of Memory: Narratives of War in Postwar Japanese Culture,*

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1945-1970 (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2000), 153-55.
[6] Author interview with the artist at Fuma Contemporary, Tokyo, May 23, 2017.
[7] For more on the construction state in Japan, see Gavan McCormack, *The Emptiness of Japanese Affluence*, Japan in the Modern World (Armonk, N.Y: M.E. Sharpe, 1996); Thomas Feldhoff, "Japan's Construction Lobby Activities - Systemic Stability and Sustainable Regional Development," *ASIEN* 84 (January 1, 2002).
[8] Author interview with Yoshiko Shimada and the artist at Fuma Contemporary, Tokyo, May 23, 2017.
[9] Fujieda Teruo, "Painting After the End of the Avant-Garde" *From Postwar to Postmodern: Primary Documents,* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2012), editor's notes, Note 1, page 305.
[10] As a result, the works are no longer extant and cannot be included in this essay.
[11] Author interview with Nakamura Hiroshi, Tokyo, May 23, 2016.
[12] Nakamura Hiroshi, "Akasegawa Genpei: A Proletariat with an Object" in *Kagaisha*□Tokyo: Bijutsu Shuppansha, 2003), 147.
[13] For more on this, see Kyoko Iwaki, "The Politics of the Senses: Takayama Akira's atomized theatre after Fukushima" in eds. Barbara Geilhorn and Kristina Iwata-Weickgenannt, *Fukushima and the arts: negotiating nuclear disaster* (London: New York : Routledge, 2017), 199-220.

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