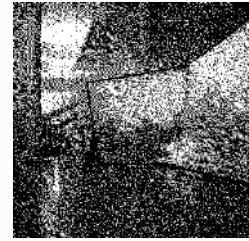




# *Real/Life: New British Art\** and the Reception of Contemporary British Art in Japan

Article by **Kajiya Kenji**



## Abstract

This essay explores the ways in which the exhibition *Real/Life: New British Art* was conceived and received in Japan, where contemporary British art has been shown since the 1960s. Taking place at five museums in the country between 1998 and 1999, the exhibition aimed to show how British artists in the 1990s struggled with realities, internal and external, but its response was not as satisfactory as was expected. The essay examines the exhibition as a turning point for the transformation of exhibition culture in Japan from nationally themed exhibitions to showcases of contemporary art in the global context.

Contemporary British art began to be shown in Japan in the 1960s. *Recent British Sculpture* was held at the Bridgestone Gallery (now Bridgestone Museum of Art), in Tokyo and the National Museum of Modern Art in Kyoto in 1964; and *Recent Prints by Some British Painters and Sculptors* took place at the above museum in Kyoto in 1969 and Niigata Prefectural Museum of Art in 1970. Both were worldwide travelling exhibitions organized by the British Council.<sup>1</sup> In 1970 the first full-scale group exhibition planned in Japan, *Contemporary British Art*, was held at the National Museum of Modern Art in Tokyo, following a Henry Moore show the previous year. Organized by the museum and the British Council, it featured forty-eight artworks made in the 1960s by twenty-five artists in their thirties and forties.<sup>2</sup> Many participating artists could be categorized as “New Generation” sculptors, such as Phillip King, Tim Scott, and William Tucker, but also included were artists of the previous generation such as Eduardo Paolozzi, William Turnbull, and Anthony Caro, as well as younger Pop artists such as Peter Blake, David Hockney, and Allen Jones.

After the 1970 survey exhibition, three major group shows of contemporary British art took place at Japanese museums, in 1982, 1990, and 1998. Because the curators and institutions that organized the three exhibitions loosely overlapped with each other, they conceived the three shows as part of a continuing project of showing contemporary British art in Japan. *Aspects of British Art Today* in 1982 was the first and biggest show of the three, and travelled to five cities: Tokyo, Utsunomiya, Osaka, Fukuoka, and Sapporo.<sup>3</sup> It featured 177 artworks by thirty-three artists.<sup>4</sup> The introductory section contained nineteen works by eight known artists,

including Anthony Caro, Phillip King, and Bridget Riley, and the main section had 158 artworks made during the past five years by twenty-five artists, who were, at the time, less well known in Japan, such as Tony Cragg, Gilbert & George, David Hockney, Howard Hodgkin, Richard Long, and David Nash.

Cragg's sculptures made of plastic rubbish he found in Tokyo and Nash's wooden sculptures made in the mountain snow near Nikkō aroused particular interest.<sup>5</sup> The fact that they made their works during their stay in Japan, without bringing works made in their own country, left a vivid impression on the Japanese audience. Because all four museums to which the exhibition travelled apart from the Tokyo Metropolitan Museum were opened in the 1970s, many of the curators learned how to introduce contemporary foreign art and artists to Japan through organizing this exhibition, with the ungrudging support of the British Council.<sup>6</sup> After the show, David Nash had a one-man exhibition that travelled to five venues including three museums in 1984–85, and Anthony Green also had a solo circulating exhibition at four museums in 1987–88. Roger Ackling, Mark Boyle, Tony Cragg, Barry Flanagan, Hamish Fulton, Gilbert & George, Alan Green, Nigel Hall, David Hockney, Richard Long, Bruce McLean, and Paul Neagu were offered solo shows at galleries in Japan in the 1980s.<sup>7</sup> The number of their exhibitions in Japan is an indication of the ways in which contemporary British art had an impact on the art world in Japan, functioning as an alternative to the austere aesthetics of Mono-ha artists and their monotonous shapes and styles that were prevalent in 1970s Japan.

*British Art Now: A Subjective View* was the second of the three post-1970 shows. Held in 1990, it travelled to six cities: Tokyo, Fukuoka, Nagoya, Utsunomiya, Kobe, and Hiroshima.<sup>8</sup> Organized by the museums, the British Council, and the Asahi Shimbun, the show focused on British art made after 1983, resulting in the selection of fifty-two artworks by sixteen artists including Cragg, Richard Deacon, Ian Hamilton Finlay, Andy Goldsworthy, Antony Gormley, and Anish Kapoor.<sup>9</sup> The artists who were selected had not been included in the 1982 show, with the exception of Cragg, whose inclusion was decided due to his importance for the “New British Sculpture” and the transformation of his style after the 1982 show, according to Shioda Junichi, a curator who was involved with all the three shows.<sup>10</sup> The subtitle, *A Subjective View*, reflected the organizers' intention to avoid the characterization and categorization of contemporary British art. Shioda writes that, as a result of their research in London in 1988, they were impressed by “the diversity of contemporary British art and the independence of the artists”. That is why they concluded that “the best way to convey the essence of British art was to stress the artists' individuality.”<sup>11</sup> In spite of their emphasis on the individuality of the artists, their presupposition of “the essence of British art” was handed down to the next show, held eight years later.

The third and final exhibition, *Real/Life: New British Art*, was held in five cities between 1998 and 1999: Utsunomiya, Fukuoka, Hiroshima, Tokyo, and Ashiya (fig. 1).<sup>12</sup> It featured British art made after the mid-1990s and comprised twenty-seven works by twelve artists: Mat Collishaw, Willie Doherty, Ceal Floyer, Anya Gallaccio, Mona Hatoum, Gary Hume, Sarah Lucas, Georgina Starr, Sam Taylor-Wood, Gillian Wearing, and Rachel Whiteread (fig. 2). In contrast to the previous two shows which had focused on painting, sculpture, and photography, video projection was conspicuous at this exhibit, featuring in more than half of the exhibited works. For this show, three curators (Shioda Junichi from Tokyo, Sugimura Hiroya from Tochigi, and Suhama Motoko from Hiroshima) and two representatives of the organizers (Obikane Akio from the Asahi Shimbun and Sakurai Takeshi from the British Council's Tokyo Office) went to London, Liverpool, Manchester, and Glasgow in the autumn of 1995. They saw the Turner Prize show at the Tate Gallery (now Tate Britain), where Damien Hirst won the prize, and *The British Art Show*

4 in Manchester, which included many “Young British Artists” (YBAs). They also saw *Brilliant!* at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, a showcase of YBAs in the United States, although they were not able to see the *Life/Live* exhibition at the Musée d’Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, from October 1996 to January 1997.



Figure 1

Installation view, *Real/Life: New British Art*, Museum of Contemporary Art, Tokyo, 10 Oct.–13 Decirca 1998, showing Sam Taylor-Wood, *Atlantic*, 1997, three screen projection with sound, dimensions variable. Digital image courtesy of Zeit-FotoDACS ref no CL-1772 / © Shigeo Anzai.



Figure 2

Installation view, *Real/Life: New British Art*, Ashiya City Museum of Art & History, video installation with two screens, 300 × 400 cm each; and (left) Sarah Lucas, *Me Suspended (second version)*, 1993, PVC photocopies, poles, and wire. Digital image courtesy of Ashiya City Museum of Art & History / Photo: Yamamoto Atsuo.

During their research trip they gathered data on more than one hundred artists. After narrowing down the selection of artists, the organizers, with slightly different members, visited Europe for further research in June 1997 before making another trip to Britain in the autumn of the same year to make their final selection, and to visit the *Sensation* show at the Royal Academy of Arts.<sup>13</sup> The organizers hoped for the inclusion of work by Hirst, but the artist declined to participate in this show. According to the Foreword to the catalogue, the artist insisted that he would not participate in a show he could not be fully involved with, and that he declined to join all the group shows at that time—although this was not actually the case, given his inclusion in many group shows held in Europe and America.<sup>14</sup>

Probably adapting the *Life/Live* show in Paris for the title of the exhibition, *Real/Life* indicated the organizers’ intention to show how British artists dealt with the realities of contemporary life, rather than just to introduce the latest styles and trends in British art:

*Nowadays we often come across works of art which are concerned with real life, representing private lives or reflecting harsh political situations. . . . Emphases have been put on the “pop and fashionable” aspect of the British art in the nineties that is connected with subculture. But underneath its bright surface it severely stares at reality.*<sup>15</sup>

Shioda, one of the main curators of this show, regarded the reality that British artists of the 1990s were struggling with to be not so much the social and political reality on its own, but “the situation, the state of being, in which humanity finds itself today”, which, “in contemporary society, is fragmented, divided, traumatized”. That is why the participating artists often referred to wounds to the body, inner traumas, and multiple identities as both literal and figurative

subjects for their works.<sup>16</sup> But these wounds, traumas, and multiple identities were clearly not unrelated to the social and political situation at the time. The exhibition dealt with the internal reality that was shaped in relation to the social and political issues of the day.

This is exactly what the organizers wanted the exhibition to show in Japan. As Shioda writes:

*The state of affairs in Britain is not irrelevant to Japan. During the latter half of the 1990s, the collapse of existing systems and other difficult circumstances affecting human existence have stepped up rapidly, reaching by now almost tragic proportions. For such reasons, New British Art, with its examination of fragmented and traumatized being, will surely be seen by many people as being of universal significance.*<sup>17</sup>

The 1990s saw the bursting of the economic bubble in Japan and the prolonged recession it caused, in addition to the increasing sense of unease brought about by tragedies such as the Great Hanshin earthquake and the Tokyo subway sarin attack in 1995 and the Kobe child murders in 1997. Wounds, traumas, and identities should have been topics of interest to many people in Japan.

But it seems that the high-minded ambitions of this exhibition were not completely understood by its audience. In his review of the show, Sawaragi Noi, a leading Japanese art critic known for his fondness for subculture, emphasized the close connections between contemporary British art and subculture.<sup>18</sup> In her review for *Bijutsu Techō*, the most popular contemporary art magazine in Japan, Katō Emiko, an independent curator, insisted on the difficulty of presenting the “real time” of contemporary art in big institutions, owing to the complicated ways in which such institutions operated.<sup>19</sup> These reviews indicate that the critics prioritized their own agendas, without paying attention to the proposed idea of reality and its significance in Japan. Few of the other reviews in Japan seem to have been any different.

Ultimately it is important to consider at least how far the show succeeded in introducing contemporary British art to Japan. Sugimura Hiroya, a curator at the Tochigi Prefectural Museum of Fine Arts, who participated in the last two exhibitions, writes that although they recognized the rising popularity of the YBAs in Europe, the intention of the *Real/Life* exhibition was not only to introduce YBAs to Japan:

*British art in the '90s, rich in the entrepreneurial spirit while maintaining its links with subcultures, has been a major stimulus to modern art in other parts of the world. . . . one almost has the impression that the 90s in Britain has been the age of the YBAs. However, they were something more than that. There are others too, such as the energetic artists who clustered in alternative spaces in Glasgow; the artists who carry on their activities in Northern Ireland, such as the Willie Doherty represented in the present exhibition; and others who, like Mona Hatoum, remain in London yet tread a solitary path. Anya Gallaccio, who formerly showed work in Freeze,<sup>20</sup> has extended her sphere of activity all over the world. . . . British artists skillfully evade school and return to their own individual places.*<sup>21</sup>

By including non-YBAs such as Doherty, Hatoum and Floyer, *Real/Life* aimed to introduce not only YBAs but more broadly the current situation of contemporary British art. But its ambition was not understood in a satisfactory way in spite of the rising interest in British culture in Japan in the late 1990s. In the sphere of contemporary art, Japan began to foster an interest in young artists at home and in Asia rather than just following in the footsteps of European and American art, as it had been for a long time.

In terms of introducing European and American art to Japan, nationally themed exhibitions had been popular for a long time in the country together with one-person shows. But this framework was losing its validity in the late 1990s, when local governments began to cut down the budgets

of the public museums by outsourcing their operations to *shitei kanrisha*, or designated administrators, whose system was legislated in 2003, for greater efficiency and transparency. That is why public museums began to have difficulty organizing large-scale exhibitions of overseas art based on long-term research at home and abroad. Another reason for the decrease of nationally themed exhibitions, especially for European and American art, was that the idea of national schools, or groupings, became increasingly questionable, in view of the increasingly transnational character of much contemporary art. It was not until the early years of the twenty-first century that the YBAs achieved the fame they deserved in Japan, not so much as a major movement in the 1990s within the United Kingdom, but rather as what triggered recent tendencies in contemporary art in the global context. In this sense, the *Real/Life* exhibition was a turning point for the transformation of exhibition culture in Japan and beyond around the turn of the millennium. It should be better considered as an historically important exhibition that encapsulated the practices developed by Japanese museums over the years, for dealing with contemporary art from overseas up to the point where they, like everyone else, were overtaken by the surge in globalization of the art world.

## Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Chinzei Yoshimi, Ōtsuki Akimi, Sugimura Hiroya, Suhama Motoko, Yamaguchi Yōzō, and Yamamoto Atsuo for sharing the documents and information on the *Real/Life: New British Art* exhibition and letting me know the details and context of the show.

## About the author

Kajiya Kenji is an art historian and associate professor of representation studies at the University of Tokyo. Kajiya also serves as a director of the Oral Art History Archives of Japanese Art. He co-edited *From the Postwar to the Postmodern, Art in Japan 1945–1989: Primary Documents* (New York, 2012). His book manuscript, *Color Field Painting in the Cultural Context of America*, explores how Color field painting negotiated contemporary art, design, and culture in the United States.

## Footnotes

1. *Recent British Sculpture* travelled to Canada, New Zealand, Australia, Japan, and Hong Kong between 1961 and 1964; *Recent Prints by Some British Painters and Sculptors*, with several different titles, travelled to Mexico, Cuba, Peru, India, Japan, Portugal, Spain, Denmark, Chile, Brazil, Argentina, and Colombia between 1968 and 1975. See <http://visualarts.britishcouncil.org/exhibitions/exhibition/artistas-grficos-britnicos-de-la-dcade-del-60-gravuras-de-artistas-britanicos-na-dcade-dos-60-1968> (accessed 1 Oct. 2015) and *British Artists' Prints of the Sixties: A British Council Exhibition* (London: British Council, 1973).
2. The participating artists were David Annesley, Peter Blake, Anthony Caro, Patrick Caulfield, Bernard Cohen, Robyn Denny, Barry Flanagan, David Hall, Richard Hamilton, David Hockney, Howard Hodgkin, John Hoyland, Allen Jones, Phillip King, R. B. Kitaj, Mark Lancaster, Eduardo Paolozzi, Bridget Riley, Tim Scott, Peter Sedgley, Richard Smith, Joe Tilson, William Tucker, William Turnbull, and John Walker.

3. The venues were Tokyo Metropolitan Art Museum, Tochigi Prefectural Museum of Fine Arts in Utsunomiya, National Museum of Art in Osaka, Fukuoka Art Museum, and Hokkaido Museum of Modern Art in Sapporo. The exhibition was organized by the museums, the British Council, and the Asahi Shimbun with the support of the Japan Foundation.
4. The exhibiting artists were Frank Auerbach, Anthony Caro, Patrick Caulfield, Lucian Freud, Phillip King, Kenneth Martin, Bridget Riley, John Walker, Roger Ackling, Art & Language, Adrian Berg, Mark Boyle, Tony Cragg, Michael Craig-Martin, John Davies, Braco Dimitrijević, John Edwards, Barry Flanagan, Hamish Fulton, Gilbert & George, Alan Green, Anthony Green, Nigel Hall, John Hilliard, David Hockney, Howard Hodgkin, John Hoyland, Bob Law, Richard Long, Bruce McLean, Keith Milow, David Nash, and Paul Neagu.
5. Shioda Junichi, "Introduction: The Selection", trans. Janet Goff, in *British Art Now: A Subjective View* (Tokyo: Asahi Shimbun, 1990), 16.
6. The role of the British Council cannot be overemphasized. According to Henry Meyric Hughes, who was Director of Fine Arts at the Council between 1982 and 1992, the Council provided necessary contacts for Japanese curators on their various visits to London for exhibitions and arranged for them to meet artists, critics, and others as well as guiding them in their choices of artists and works and helping with the detailed loan negotiations. The Japan Foundation also played an important part in the development of artistic and curatorial exchanges between Britain and Japan. I sincerely thank Hughes for giving me useful comments on my manuscript.
7. *David Nash* was shown at the International Contemporary Sculpture Symposium 1984 in Moriyama, Tochigi Prefectural Museum of Fine Arts, Miyagi Museum of Art in Sendai, Fukuoka Art Museum, and Sogetsu Hall in Tokyo. *Anthony Green 1960–86* travelled to Niigata City Art Museum, Setagaya Art Museum in Tokyo, Daimaru Museum Umeda in Osaka, and Iwaki City Art Museum. For the above artists' shows at galleries, see Shioda, "Introduction", 16.
8. The venues were Setagaya Art Museum, Fukuoka Art Museum, Nagoya City Art Museum, Tochigi Prefectural Museum of Fine Arts, Hyogo Prefectural Museum of Modern Art in Kobe, and Hiroshima City Museum of Contemporary Art. The exhibition was organized by the museums, the British Council, and the Asahi Shimbun with the support of the Japan Foundation.
9. The participating artists were Steven Campbell, Helen Chadwick, Tony Cragg, Richard Deacon, Ian Hamilton Finlay, Andy Goldsworthy, Anthony Gormley, Anish Kapoor, David Mach, Christopher Le Brun, Lisa Milroy, Paula Rego, David Tremlett, Boyd Webb, Kate Whiteford, and Adrian Wiszniewski. Richard Harris, an artist working closely with nature, was subsequently included in the showing in Fukuoka. Goldsworthy's new work was made in Utsunomiya and shown in Utsunomiya, Kobe, and Hiroshima, although his old works were shown at all the venues. Mach's large installation was shown only in Setagaya but his movable works were shown at the other venues.
10. Shioda, "Introduction", 17. Shioda participated in organizing each show at three different museums: Tochigi Prefectural Museum of Fine Arts in 1982, Setagaya Art Museum in 1990, and Museum of Contemporary Art in Tokyo in 1998.
11. Shioda, "Introduction", 17.
12. The venues were Tochigi Prefectural Museum of Fine Arts, Fukuoka Art Museum, Hiroshima City Museum of Contemporary Art, Museum of Contemporary Art in Tokyo, and Ashiya City Museum of Art & History.

13. Chinzei Yoshimi, curator at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Tokyo, Obikane, Sakurai, and Yamaguchi Yōzō, curator at Fukuoka Art Museum, joined their research trip to England in June 1997 and Obikane, Sakurai, Shioda, Sugimura, Suhama, and Yamamoto Atsuo, curator at the Ashiya City Museum of Art & History, participated in their research in the fall of the same year.
14. The Japanese Organizers, “Foreword”, in *Real/Life: New British Art* (Tokyo: Asahi Shimbun, 1998), 7.
15. The Japanese Organizers, “Foreword”, 6. I modify the English translation in the catalogue according to its original Japanese text.
16. Shioda Junichi, “Fragments and Traumas: A View of British Art in the 90s”, trans. John Bester, separate leaflet set with the catalogue, 8–12.
17. Shioda, “Fragments and Traumas”, 12.
18. Sawaragi Noi, “Sabu karuchā kara umareta Igrisu no āto: 'Riaru Raifu: Igrisu no atarashii bijutsu ten [British Art Born from Subculture: Real/Life: New British Art]”, *Mr. High Fashion* 87 (Dec. 1998): 142.
19. Katō Emiko, “12 nin no kūru na geijutsuka tachi [12 Cool Artists]”, *Bijutsu Techō* [Art Notes] 757 (June 1998): 109–23.
20. *Freeze* was an art exhibition held in London in July 1988. Organized by Damien Hirst, a then second-year student at Goldsmith’s College, it featured works by sixteen students at his school and pioneered the subsequent development of the Young British Artists (YBAs).
21. Sugimura Hiroya, “Notes on ‘Real/Life’”, trans. John Bester, separate leaflet set with the catalogue, 5.

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