

**Zeitschrift:** Asiatische Studien : Zeitschrift der Schweizerischen Asiengesellschaft = Études asiatiques : revue de la Société Suisse-Asie

**Herausgeber:** Schweizerische Asiengesellschaft

**Band:** 58 (2004)

**Heft:** 3: Performing cultures in East Asia : China, Korea, Japan

  

**Artikel:** Performing the avant-garde : the adaptation of Dadaism in Japan

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**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-147647>

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# PERFORMING THE AVANT-GARDE THE ADAPTATION OF DADAISM IN JAPAN

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*Everything of any value is theatrical.*  
F.T. Marinetti, E. Settimelli, B. Corradini:  
*The Futurist Synthetic Theatre* (1915)

In recent decades the term “performance” has developed into “a central metaphor and critical tool for a bewildering variety of studies, covering almost every aspect of human activity. Performance discourse and its close theoretical partner, ‘performativity’, today dominate critical discourse [...] in all manner of cultural studies [...]”<sup>1</sup> What began in the 1950s in Austin’s speech act theory as a linguistic term, has now become a multi-faceted concept that is used in a multiplicity of academic contexts and meanings.<sup>2</sup> This shift has been considered so fundamental, that it even has been called the “performative turn” after the “linguistic turn” of the beginning of the last century. As Erika Fischer-Lichte pointed out, however, this “performative turn,” which occurred within the sphere of academic research, already had been preceded by a “performative turn” at the beginning of the 20th century, which swept all spheres of cultural and social life. Late 19th century Europe had seen itself as a text-centered culture, in which the text had primacy over performance, the word (the spirit) over the body. The abundance of cultural performances in everyday life had been ignored; the non-textual was thought as a characteristic of primitive cultures of distant places or times.<sup>3</sup> The emerging of a new sensibility for the performative was closely connected to developments in the field of theatre and theatre studies. Theorists and artists no longer understood theatre as the performance of a given text, but more and more as a medium in its own right.

1 Marvin Carlson, *Performance: A Critical Introduction*, 2nd edition, London / New York 2004, p. IX.

2 Cf. Uwe Wirth (ed.), *Performanz*, Frankfurt/M. 2002; Carlson, 2004.

3 Erika Fischer-Lichte, *Theater als Modell für eine performative Kultur*, Saarbrücken 2000; *Ästhetische Erfahrung*. Tübingen / Basel 2001, pp. 16–19.

This phenomenon is especially obvious in the early avant-garde movements, which began to spring up in 1909, when Filippo T. Marinetti published his “Futurist Manifesto” and then spread quickly in Europe and other parts of the world in the years before and after the First World War. Inspired by the rapid industrialization of Northern Italy, the Italian Futurists turned the *ennui* of romanticist decadence into the dream of an industrialized and imperialist Italy, which had freed itself from the burden of its long cultural tradition. In manifestos, exhibitions, and performances they spread their ideas of a new art and society, characterized by the love of speed, machines and war. The enormous value the Futurists attached to performance is indicated not only by their many manifestos concerning the theatre, but also by their inclination to interact with audiences in tumultuous soirées and other occasions. The impact of these theatrical activities was, as Mario Verdone wrote, “notable: nearly the entire avant-garde was influenced directly or indirectly.”<sup>4</sup> Dadaism without the stage of the “Cabaret Voltaire” would be as inconceivable as Surrealism without its scandalous performances. All these performances transgressed the limits of conventional concepts of theatre and contributed to the emancipation of ‘performance’ as a medium in its own right. The deliberate shock of the audience, a common element in avant-garde performances, was aimed at the interaction of artist and audience and simultaneously at the interplay of performance and representation. This tendency is also obvious in the inclination of the historical avant-gardes to abolish the division between art and life, which Peter Bürger in his much discussed theory of the avant-garde regards as one of the main characteristics of historical avant-garde movements.<sup>5</sup>

The appearance of these movements did not escape the notice of the Japanese public. Almost immediately, newspapers and literary magazines introduced to Japan the avant-gardes and the ideas they promoted. In spite of the broad flow of information, however, before 1920 Japanese authors did not begin to take up the names and slogans of avant-garde movements and to adapt the ideas of their West and Central European counterparts in their own work. As much because of individual predilections, as because of the alterity of the literary tradition and the social conditions in Japan, forms and content often changed considerably during the process of adaptation. Toshihiko Ellis stated:

4 Mario Verdone, “Theatre,” in: Pontus Hultén (ed.), *Futurismo & Futurismi*, Milan 1986, pp. 584–586.

5 Peter Bürger, *Theorie der Avantgarde*, Frankfurt/M. 1974, pp. 63–75.

[...] the Japanese modernists were faced with a complex set of factors [...]. They had to define themselves not only against contemporary Japan and its modern institutions, but also against the traditional Japan [...], and furthermore against the West, which was the source of their inspiration as well as a threat to their cultural identity.<sup>6</sup>

In most of the research published on the avant-gardes in Japan, this adaptation is discussed as an adoption of new styles in poetry or painting, thus implying a complete loss of the theatrical or performative elements. This seems astonishing, considering not only the importance the European avant-gardes attached to the transgression of genre boundaries, but also Japan's abundant tradition of performative practises in literature (*utaawase*, storytelling etc.). That the adaptation of the historical avant-gardes did not at all (exclusively) consist of a reduction to questions of literary style can be seen in the example of Dadaism and its pre-eminent representatives in Japan: the poet Takahashi Shinkichi and the essayist Tsuji Jun.<sup>7</sup>

## Dada and its way to Japan

During the First World War refugees from many European countries were stranded in Switzerland, among them many artists and intellectuals. It is against this background that in Zurich the Dada movement began to emerge. In order to "create a center for entertainment of artistic value"<sup>8</sup> and also to make some money, in 1916 the German Hugo Ball and a handful of his artist acquaintances founded the so called "Cabaret Voltaire" in the back room of a pub, where they presented poetry readings, concerts, lectures, etc. At the beginning the participating artists and writers did not have much in common other than an interest for the latest trends in art and literature and a tendency to anarchism, which was more individual than political. Soon the cabaret gathered momentum, by chance the word "Dada" – probably taken from a local brand of soap – was adopted, and the first loosely knit group turned into the Dada movement. Especially after the group in Zurich split up and its members left for Berlin and Paris, "Dada"

6 Toshiko Ellis, "Questioning Modernism and Postmodernism in Japanese Literature," in: Johann P. Arnason / Yoshio Sugimoto, *Japanese Encounters with Postmodernity*, London 1995, p. 142.

7 A broader and more detailed overview of the Japanese adoption of Dada and Futurism see my book, *Dada und Futurismus in Japan*, Munich 2001.

8 Hugo Ball, *Die Flucht aus der Zeit*, Zurich 1992, p. 79.

became a catch phrase for often-nonsensical performances and events, attacking bourgeois conformism and the authoritarianism of state and military. Freed from the anxieties of refugee life in a foreign country, the Dadaist performances became more provocative than ever and were no longer limited to the cabaret stage. Often the audiences reacted to the stage-managed scandals and theatrical provocations with violence, verbal or non-verbal, and the state, with police operations and legal prosecution.

Although news about the avant-gardes generally did not take much time to reach Japan, in the case of Dadaism news traveled more slowly. Not until 1920 – four years after the foundation of the “Cabaret Voltaire” – the first articles that introduced Dadaism appear in the Japanese press. The pictures these articles (and some of the later ones) drew, were not always accurate, but in general the Japanese reader was able – at worst – to get at least a rough idea of the movement. Still, in contrast to the mostly friendly welcome Futurism had received, Dadaism often was considered to be decadent and destructive. Several Japanese artists and authors, however, got into direct contact with European avant-garde artists and thus were not dependent on information from secondary sources. Some writers and artists eventually began to incorporate avant-garde ideas into their works. This active adoption of the avant-garde began around 1920. It developed roughly in three phases:

- a) the adaptation by individual writers (from 1920)
- b) the formation of groups (from 1923)
- c) the split into a *literature engagée* (Proletarian literature) and a modernist literature (Neo-sensualism, Surrealism) (from 1925).

Mainly because of the political situation, the development came to an end after 1930: the adaptation of the historical avant-gardes in Japan was roughly a matter of a single decade.

In Japan the avant-gardes never attracted as widespread a response as in Europe. Especially the first stage, just a few isolated individuals adopted avant-garde ideas. The only writer in Japan who explicitly adapted Futurism was Hirato Renkichi. In 1921 he distributed his Futurist Manifesto. Although it is doubtful, that he ever intended to launch a Futurist movement, Hirato's early death at the age of 29 just a few month later put an end to the development of Futurism in Japan. Tsuji Jun and Takahashi Shinkichi, the main representatives of Dadaism in Japan, also belong to the first phase. In 1922, Tsuji, previously known only as translator, published an article in which he claimed to be the first

Japanese Dadaist and declared a young man called Takahashi Shinkichi to be the poet of Japanese Dadaism. Actually, neither at this time nor later did a Dada *movement* exist in Japan; the first avant-garde groups developing from 1923 were the very short-lived anarchistic group centered around the Poetry magazine “Aka to kuro” in 1923,<sup>9</sup> and especially the Group “Mavo” in 1924.<sup>10</sup> Murayama Tomoyoshi, the leading figure of the Mavo group, had close contact with avant-garde circles during a one-year stay in Berlin and became deeply influenced by constructivism. This may be the reason that, in terms of contents as much as in terms of the broad range of its activities (literature, art, architecture, theatre), this group most closely resembled the European groups.

During the first two phases of the adaptation of the avant-gardes most artists were more or less deeply influenced by individual anarchism. They were part of a diffuse “Left” and often published in leftwing publications. Around 1925, however, influenced of an increasingly prevalent Marxist dogmatism, Murayama and many others began to feel that they had to make a choice between either avant-garde or politically committed literature, that is the Proletarian literature movement, which then was becoming the dominant power in Japanese literature. Murayama, like many others, gave up experiment for commitment. On the opposite side emerged groups, such as Neo-sensualism or Surrealism, that did not want to submit to the aesthetic views prescribed by the Communist Party and, often in spite of strong political sympathies for the radical left, stressed the autonomy of art, and no longer showed an interest in putting art into life.

## How to become Dada

In the previously mentioned article that Tsuji Jun published in the magazine “Kaizô” in September 1922, he wrote, “I was the first one in Japan who called himself a Dadaist, but there is also a young poet named Takahashi Shinkichi, who introduced himself to me as Dadaist poet.”<sup>11</sup> Probably Tsuji had come across Dadaism for the first time the year before, during a visit by the twenty-year-old Takahashi Shinkichi, who asked Tsuji for support.

9 Cf. Hackner 2001, pp. 124–141.

10 Cf. Weisenfeld, Gennifer. *Mavo: Japanese Artists and the Avant-Garde*. Berkeley 2002.

11 Tsuji Jun, “Dada no hanashi,” in: *Tsuji Jun zenshû*, vol. I, Tôkyô 1982, p. 286.



Takahashi, born and raised in rural Shikoku, had run away from home in 1918 – just before his graduation from school – and gone to Tôkyô. An avid reader, he had been spending his days in the Ueno library and the nights on park benches. After two months he had returned home. His family had found him a job in a clothing store in Ôsaka, but Takahashi, unable to accommodate himself to the life of a shop assistant, soon had quit the job. Living on the street again, he worked in confectionary shops and restaurant kitchens, but his vagrant life took a serious toll on his health and again he had to return to his family. During this stay he happened to read a newspaper article about Dada, which left a deep impression on him. One last time he had tried to begin a conventional life. Knowing that without a proper education he would not have a chance to make a career in business or letters, Takahashi decided to renounce the world and to become a novice in a Buddhist temple. After half a year Takahashi had to leave the temple and again went to Tôkyô to try to succeed in the world of literature. But his poetry did not sell at all. He visited famous authors to beg for money, books, or support in finding a publisher. One of them happened to be Tsuji Jun.

At the time of their encounter Tsuji was already a renowned translator. Born in 1884 in the Asakusa neighborhood of Tôkyô, he had studied English and begun to work as an English teacher. This career came to a sudden end when an affair with one of his pupils, the sixteen-year-old Itô Noe, came to light. Since Tsuji could no longer find another teaching job, to earn a living, he began to work as translator. Among the works he translated were Cesare Lombroso's *Genio e follia*, Thomas De Quincey's *Confessions of an opium eater*, Oscar Wilde's *De profundis* and Max Stirner's *Der Einzige und sein Eigentum*.

Tsuji's first "Dadaist" act was to declare himself a Dadaist. But what makes a Dadaist a Dadaist? To call oneself a Dadaist? To act like a Dadaist? After all, what does it mean to be Dadaist? In his "Dada Manifesto 1918" Tristan Tzara had written: "Dada means nothing."<sup>12</sup> Richard Huelsenbeck had asserted, that the word "Dada" can be found in all languages thus showing the internationality of Dada.<sup>13</sup> Probably the best characterization of the word "Dada" is what Umberto Eco wrote in a completely different context about the word "rose": "It is a symbol of so multi-layered meaning, that almost no meaning is left. The reader is [...] lead in many directions (i.e. in no direction)."<sup>14</sup> The European Dadaists

12 Tristan Tzara, "Manifest Dada 1918," in: Richard Huelsenbeck (ed.), *Dada Almanach*, Berlin 1920, p. 118.

13 Richard Huelsenbeck, "Erste Dadarede in Deutschland," in: Richard Huelsenbeck (ed.), *Dada Almanach*, Berlin 1920, p. 107.

14 Umberto Eco, *Nachschrift zum Namen der Rose*, Munich 1984, p. 11.

always refused to give a definition of “Dada”. Instead they turned to paradoxical, nonsensical and ironic explanations. Believing that the nature of life is permanent flux, the Dadaists believe that any fixed definition would be an obstacle to the eternally changing free flow of life. The very reason for making “Dada” the name of the new movement was the impossibility of defining it. Although the Dadaists avoided any clear-cut definitions, their attitude and their art show common characteristics that can be described negatively as being anti-bourgeois, anti-militaristic, anti-conservative and so on. For the Dadaists in Zurich the label “Dada” was just an *objet trouvé*, a word that was characterized by its openness and had yet to be filled with meaning.

For Tsuji, however, “Dada” already meant something. By calling himself a Dadaist, he willingly associated himself with the European Dadaists based on his knowledge of them. At the same time, however, Tsuji tried to conceal this relation. He emphasized that for him becoming Dadaist did not mean becoming a member of an already established art movement. He even denied any knowledge of European Dadaism and the articles published in Japan about it, even though clearly he was well acquainted with them. In a later text he claimed that such knowledge is not necessary, because “I am my own Dada movement.”<sup>15</sup> Tsuji even created a Dadaist tradition of his own. In order to do so, he went back to the British eighteenth-century author Laurence Sterne. In Sterne’s famous novel “Tristram Shandy” the word “hobbyhorse” is a kind of *leitmotiv*. Tsuji interpreted “Dada” as the French equivalent to Sterne’s “hobbyhorse,” with both words meaning “whim.” He drew the conclusion that the essence of Dada is to follow one’s intuition. But this philosophy, Tsuji asserted, is not only older than the avant-garde movements in Europe, it had existed as long as mankind, and therefore European Dadaism is not more than one branch of a very old tree. In this way he tried to undermine the authority of the European movement to represent exclusively the true Dadaist spirit. According to Tsuji, European Dada is just one possible manifestation of Dadaism within many, and it even might not full express or share the “true Dada spirit.” Obviously the situation Tsuji was confronted with, is much more complex than that of his European counterparts. “Dada” was no more a completely “open” or “empty” word. In his playful adaptation, Tsuji aims at a certain liberty from his foreign models. Although he is indebted to them for creating a space for the development of his own interpretation, simultaneously he is also forming his own Dadaist identity by citing European Dadaism.

15 Tsuji Jun, “Mélanges,” in: *Tsuji Jun zenshû*, vol. I, Tôkyô 1982, p. 273.



## The *dao* of Dada

His scandalous relationship with Itô had been a turning point in Tsuji's life. The loss of job and reputation was synonymous with a loss of social acceptance, but also with the liberation from the pressure of social conventions. Work as translator meant more to Tsuji than a mere way to make a living. He obviously chose texts that reflected on the relationship between society and an individual, who in one way or other can not cope with social norms and therefore is ostracized. This is especially obvious in Max Stirner's *The ego and his own*, the only philosophical work Tsuji translated. The German philosopher, who had aroused much animosity in the young Marx, defends the individual against all demands from society and preaches a radical individual anarchism or egotism. This philosophy was not only to have a determining influence on Tsuji's life and art, but also on many younger authors who were associated with the adaptation of the avant-gardes. Thus translating for Tsuji was also a way to reflect on the dialectics of individual and society in general, and in particular his very own role in society. When Tsuji took up Dadaism in 1922 this process of reflection came to an end. Tsuji had found his role. He gave up translating almost completely and started writing essays, which were printed in magazines and newspapers and were to fill six volumes of collected essays by the time of his death in 1944. His writing combines autobiographical reflection with literary criticism and philosophical elements.

When Tsuji turned to the writing essays, he also gave up home for a vagrant life. Tsuji traveled Japan, playing the bamboo flute, sleeping in temples, at friends' places, or wherever he found shelter. The underlying pattern in his life as in writing is spontaneity. While in life he traveled where his whim carried him, in his writing, he employed a method, which he called, in allusion to the "Tsurezuregusa" "following the brush," or to De Quincey "following my own humours." Both this way of life and his writing are not only indispensable to Tsuji's Dadaism, they are also closely intertwined: "I try to write down the data of my life [...] this might be a description of progression in Dada."<sup>16</sup> While Tsuji declared it necessary to be an artist in order to be Dadaist, he also stressed, that everybody can be an artist. Nonetheless Tsuji emphasized that Dada *is not* a modern art movement: "The spirit of Dada is dead, when people just string together words without meaning, music without harmony and just put shabby rags

16 Tsuji Jun, "Bungaku igai," *Tsuji Jun zenshû*, vol. I, Tôkyô 1982, p. 326.

and bent nails on canvas.”<sup>17</sup> In Tsuji’s Dadaism, the creative reflection and expression of one’s own life is essential and important, as important as or even more so than the resulting work of art. Living and writing the way he did is to perform Dada. Thus in Tsuji’s interpretation Dada becomes a way of life, as paradoxical as life itself. “Only those who follow the way of Dada are for ever new and always alive,”<sup>18</sup> wrote Tsuji, who confessed: “By my Dadaist consciousness I have gained (at least to a certain degree) happiness.”<sup>19</sup> Dada turns into a kind of “way” and it is only natural that Tsuji even tried to link Dada to Asian traditions: “I want to express my Dada in an eastern, Japanese way [...]. I always have been an epigone of Daoism and still now like to read Zhuang-zi and Lao-zi. And happily I find the Dada spirit in Buddhist writings.”<sup>20</sup> Tsuji, however, is neither Buddhist nor Daoist. He may have traveled Japan *like* a wandering monk, but he is not a wandering monk. His relationship to religion is purely literary: “I haven’t meditated a single time, not even thought of it. I just read Buddhist books as literature.”<sup>21</sup> As in his relation to European Dada Tsuji takes up elements, but avoids to become part of whatever.

His Dadaism is as much indebted to the European model of the dandy and bohemian as to the Chinese and Japanese tradition of wandering monks and literati. Tsuji builds up his identity as a Dadaist by citation, citing the bohemian or dandy, citing Stirner’s philosophy, Buddhist and Daoist thought, citing Sterne’s “Tristram Shandy,” the classics of Japanese *zuihitsu*-literature and last but not least citing “Dada.” Tsuji is building up his identity as author and human being and at the same time never giving in completely to any of the concepts and patterns he relates to. While Tsuji never gave up this Dadaist way of life, in his later years he called Dada a “moldy ghost, a monster living in a back corner of an suburban junk shop”<sup>22</sup> and abandoned the term completely.

17 Tsuji Jun, “Gurinpsu DADA,” *Tsuji Jun zenshû*, vol. I, Tôkyô 1982, p. 449.

18 Tsuji Jun, “Gurinpsu DADA,” *Tsuji Jun zenshû*, vol. I, Tôkyô 1982, p. 452.

19 Tsuji Jun, “Kyapurisu purantan,” *Tsuji Jun zenshû*, vol. I, Tôkyô 1982, p. 438.

20 Tsuji Jun, “Gurinpsu DADA,” *Tsuji Jun zenshû*, vol. I, Tôkyô 1982, p. 449.

21 Tsuji Jun, “Mizushima Ryûkichi no oboegaki,” *Tsuji Jun zenshû*, vol. IV, Tôkyô 1982, p. 352.

22 Tsuji Jun, “Sakkaku shita shô-uchû,” *Tsuji Jun zenshû*, vol. IV, Tôkyô 1982, p. 24.

## The mantra of Dada

After Takahashi had visited Tsuji, Tsuji helped him to get texts published in magazines, a few poems here, a short story there. A first *soirée Dada* was announced, but in December 1922 Takahashi beat up a cab driver, was arrested, declared insane and sent back to his family in Shikoku. This was not an unusual occurrence then, for many young people from the countryside migrated to the big cities, could not cope with the new environment, showed signs of a mental disorder, and were sent back home.<sup>23</sup> Tsuji, however, interpreted Takahashi's insanity as a sign of genius. Had not Nietzsche thrashed the driver of a horse carriage? Accordingly, he compiled a collection of Takahashi's texts under the title *Dadaisuto Shinkichi no shi* (*Poems of the Dadaist Shinkichi*). The collection included published and unpublished poems, some short stories, and the manifesto "Dangen wa dadaisuto" (*The Dadaists declare*). Tsuji was not a very careful editor, and the "hermetism" of some of the texts is probably due to his chaotic editing.

Takahashi's poems are written in free metre and use modern colloquial language (*kôgo jiyû shi*), a style that had been introduced in Japan about ten years before. The texts are based on Takahashi's experiences, most of them dark, in Ôsaka and Tôkyô. A good example is the following poem, which is also probably the most famous of the collection:

dish dish dish dish dish dish dish dish dish dish  
 dish dish dish dish dish dish dish dish dish dish dish  
 ennui  
     passions crawling like a spider on the brow  
 Don't wipe dishes  
     with the rice colored apron.  
 a woman with black nostrils  
     Humor is becoming sooty there too.  
     Dissolve life in the water.  
     On a cooled stew pot  
 weariness floats.  
     Smash dishes.

23 Cf. Suzuki Sadami, *Modan toshi no hyôgen*, Tôkyo 1992, p. 15.

Smash dishes and then  
there will come out the echo of ennui.<sup>24</sup>

Obviously this poem is autobiographical and deals with Takahashi's vagrant life, about which the reader is also informed in the postscript and the preface of *Dadaisuto Shinkichi no shi*. Thus, the reader can easily relate this poem to Takahashi's job in the canteen of a newspaper, where he had to fill rice in bowls all day. This autobiographical element can be found in almost all the other texts of the collection and also in the novel *Dada*, which Takahashi published in 1924 with the help of a physician who specialized in delinquent youth, after he recovered, contrary to all expectations, from his mental disorder and returned to Tōkyō.<sup>25</sup>

While the second part of the poem is stringing together fragmented impressions and thoughts, which also is typical for Takahashi's poems, in the vertically written Japanese original of this poem, the repetition of the character "sara" (*dish*) at the beginning not only is expressing and emphasizing the boringness of the job, it also is representing a pile of dishes visually.

Although Takahashi in later recollections described how deeply he impressed he had felt when he read that the European Dadaists experimented with the arrangement of letters, in his own poems experiments with the graphic and phonetic dimension of language as means of representation are comparatively rare, mainly because he believed that Hirato Renkichi had already exhausted this possibility. Still repetition and seemingly meaningless sounds play a important role in the texts, although their function is not representation.

In Takahashi's texts signs of Buddhist influence in style and content are abundant, for example in the manifesto "Dangen wa dadaisuto." While the final paragraphs denote Dada as destructive and negative, the first part describes Dada as anti-rational, monistic and positive:

DADA asserts and negates all.  
Infinity, naught – only reecho the sound "cigarette", or "waistband" or "word".  
What gushes in imagination is reality.  
[...]  
DADA finds the self in all.

24 Takahashi Shinkichi, [untitled poem], *Takahashi Shinkichi zenshū*, vol. I, Tōkyō 1982, p. 81. Engl. translation by Ko Won. In: Ko Won, *Buddhist Elements in Dada*, New York 1977, p. 40.

25 The publication of the novel marked also the end of Takahashi's Dadaistic phase.

In the air's vibration, in the hatred of a germ, and in the stink of the word "self," there to it finds the self.

All is not two. A saying from the Buddha's clear vision emerges: all is all.

All is seen in all.<sup>26</sup>

Although in Takahashi's poems the Buddhist tone is not as prevalent as in this manifesto, the fact, that he recited his poems the same way sutras are chanted in Buddhist temples (as Tsuji reported) points in the same direction and indicates the strong impact of Takahashi's temple experience. The temple, in which Takahashi had spent time as novice, belonged to the Shingon sect. In Shingon doctrine the assumption of an ontic relation between language and the phenomenal world plays a fundamental role. Therefore in Shingon practice language is much more than a simple vehicle to transport meaning, as can be seen in the meditation on the letter "a" or in the recitation of mantras. Takahashi's duties in the temple consisted mostly of simple tasks such as cleaning the *tatami* mats. He did not get any instruction in Buddhism or Shingon. Nonetheless Takahashi learned that words are more than just meaning, that they are also sound and form and that their sound can exert a magical power. Mantric expressions can be found in many of Takahashi's poems, and especially in his novel *Dada*, but like Tsuji, he also does not follow the orthodox ways. Takahashi creates new "mantras" of his own. For him any utterance, even nonsensical ones, may have the power to change reality. Thus, the function of repetitive patterns and seemingly nonsensical sounds often is not the onomatopoetic representation of the outer world (as in the poem above), rather they are pure sound with a possibly magical potential.

In Takahashi's Dadaism can be seen the same strong interconnectedness of life and writing that we have discovered before in Tsuji, but whereas for Tsuji the spontaneity of writing is as important as the resulting texts, for Takahashi this element is less pronounced. Rather, the performative dimension of his texts is in those moments when he is abolishing meaning for the magic of pure sound.

26 Takahashi Shinkichi, "Dangen wa Dadaisuto," *Takahashi Shinkichi zenshû*, vol. I, Tôkyô 1982, p. 50. Engl. translation by Ko Won. In: Ko Won, *Buddhist Elements in Dada*, New York 1977, p. 31.



## Conclusion

The examples of Tsuji and Takahashi show that the adaptation of the historical avant-gardes in Japan not at all did consist of their reduction to questions of literary style. This kind of adoption only set in with Surrealism and Neo-sensualism as a reaction to the Proletarian literature movement and pressure from the state. In the first and second phase of adaptation, the performative and theatrical element, the effort to transgress the border between life and art, can also be found in Japan, even though other characteristics of the European avant-garde like the fundamental critique of art as an institution were lost on the way from Europe.

While remaining close to their European counterparts in tearing down the border between art and life, both Tsuji and Takahashi realize the performative dimension of Dada in quite individual ways, different from their European ancestors but also different from one another. Tsuji tries to develop a tradition of his own to free himself from his European counterparts and combines Western and Eastern elements in his formation of Dada. In his understanding, Dada is a way of life in which a vagrant lifestyle is intertwined with its reflection in literature. The production of artworks is an integrative part, but, more than the result, the process of production is important. The predominating pattern in life as in literature is spontaneity and a distrust of any kind of regulation or given structure. Takahashi, less handicapped by knowledge of Dada in Europe than Tsuji, naturally feels much less restricted by the European model. While he is and wants to be a poet in the conventional sense, the production of texts is, as in Tsuji's case, closely intertwined with his life. His poems describe his life on the street, but for Takahashi the resulting poem or text is the aim. The performative space is his life, which is represented in literature.

The performative element in Takahashi's text stems from a completely different influence, Shingon Buddhism and its concept of language. Shingon doctrine assumes that there exists an ontic relation between language and the phenomenal world. Reciting his texts, or at least the mantra-like parts of it, for Takahashi is a magic act, which transcends the representational function of language.

Both writers share the importance they attach to the autobiographical with the literary main stream of the times, the authors of the so called *shi-shôsetsu*, the explicitly autobiographical Japanese I novel. As the *shi-shôsetsu* is based on a supposed identity of writer and narrator, its aesthetics demand the authenticity of the story. The author has to live a life which follows the conventions of the I



novel in order to write a good novel, and if his life does not fit the author has to stage-manage it (or to give up writing). His life becomes part of his art.<sup>27</sup> Thus, the literary mainstream already had paved the way for Tsuji's and Takahashi's Dadaism.

27 Cf. Irmela Hijiya-Kirschnereit, *Selbstentblößungsrituale*, Wiesbaden 1981, p. 143.