

The Play

Kalejdoskop | solo exhibition | september 16 - november 14, 2020

curators | Yoann Gourmel & Élodie Royer

Staging most of their actions, “without particular reason,” in “natural outdoor spaces,” and admitting they “only like[d] the infinite time and space of open air,” [1] The Play is a fluctuating art collective that is still active today, gathering individuals with various personalities and skills. It was formed in 1967 in the Japanese Kansai region. Beyond its critique of social and artistic institutions—a typical stance in the 1960s Japanese art scene—the group has constantly devised its own methods for collective actions and the ways for transmitting them, its members coming together to create the possibility of an event without any concern for its result. Rejecting the notion of the artwork as an end, The Play has always stressed its own particular dynamics, based on sharing and on “making-together,” in a physical as well as a spiritual sense, through the staging of ephemeral situations.

Following a large presentation of their actions in the collective exhibition « Le Mont Fuji n'existe pas » at Le Plateau / Frac Ile de France, Paris in 2012, this first solo exhibition of the group in France gathers together works from 1969 to 1988. It focuses on the relationships between human beings and their natural or constructed environments through outdoors physical labor, cultivating care for the living, which is still of particular relevance nowadays. Drawings, sketches, posters, photographs and videos, the documents of these actions are presented in a site-specific installation from 1983 entitled *Kalejdoskop*, which spreads out on the entire gallery floor.

In the mid-1960s, slightly more than ten years after the end of the American occupation, the war traumas were starting to wear off as economic prosperity and modern comforts were setting in—a change the whole world witnessed during, for instance, the 1964 Tokyo Olympics or the Osaka *Expo 70*. Japanese society was then subject to significant protest movements directed against institutions and the new credit-based way of life promoted by the United States. Feeding on this wave of social protest, as well as on ideas of openness and of exchange with Western artistic avant-gardes, many artists got involved with generally ephemeral collectives as a vehicle for political, radical, resolutely provocative and often clandestine actions in the streets of major cities. [2] Most of these collectives aimed at getting out of the museum, at demystifying their space, as well as that of the work, through the bypassing of institutional rules, at taking part in the emergence of “direct,” political actions, at extending the notion of experimental research to other creative fields. An advocate of this new current, art critic Atsushi Miyakawa described it as a “descent to everyday life.”[3]

In this climate of confrontational, artistic ebullience, and following their involvement in several independent exhibitions and curatorial projects, Keiichi Ikemizu and other fellow artists founded The Play. Following a logic in which the projects lead to unforeseeable results, the group attempted to recover fundamental relations uniting mankind and nature by turning away from urban civilisation and technology. As the group stated, “In the feeling of reform or change that controlled the ‘sixties,’ it was ‘THE PLAY’ that went outside of the system and was the synonym to outdoor art. The importance is to continue daily experimentations like an agriculturist. ‘THE PLAY’ action is a return to the eternal human life and it will be called ‘art,’ meaning: cultivating around its existence.” [4] Seeking to create a form of temporary and ever-moving community inspired by counter-culture, the group members were interested in the construction processes of situations “between a person and another person, a thing and another thing, and a person and a

thing." Their projects oscillated between meticulously prepared constructions demanding a considerable temporal and physical involvement to actions relying on the mere displacements of its members, like *Cross Meetin'* (1969) for which, using all sorts of available transportation means the members of the group met at a given date on a spot previously marked on a map.

Setting off for collective excursions on which detours were more important than the final destination, several actions were also conducted on carefully chosen sites to underline their history. *Torokko* (1974), for instance, reveals the memory of the former production of sugarcane in the Minamidaitojima Island in Okinawa and the transformation of its landscape, by pushing trolley cars on the abandoned railroad running around the island; while the large cardboard tubes painted in yellow manipulated by the group's members in *Yellow Pipe* (1988) absurdly highlight the presence of the disused mining site of Komouri on the Mount Oe, in Kyoto.

Besides its determined drive to carry out actions, the group's persistence may be explained by the way each member was free to participate, or not, in the projects, and by their desire not to follow the rules of a particular manifesto, aesthetics, or agenda. Its organisation, its reasons, its ideals thus developed freely and gradually, along with their various accompanying activities and texts. For the action *White Cross, As a Matter of Sight and Thought* (1970), which consisted of deploying, during twenty-four hours, a 50 × 50 m white cross made of cloth over Mt. Rokko, visible from three different Kobe neighborhoods, and publishing its documentation, an unsigned text, written in Japanese and English [5], entitled "Comment," however recalls a manifesto: "Our group "THE PLAY" was organized in 1966. It is not a group of people who have the same way of thinking or ideology. Each member has his or her own thoughts about "art" or "happenings." We have debates and discussions from time to time, and we perform a "happening" when we come across the point of intersection of our thought. Therefore, it is often a case of finding that the members of the group are motivated by the thoughts of different points of view at the time of the "happening." It is not our aim to convey a certain ideology to spectators. We only expect that something will happen in their consciousness by learning about our "happenings." We have used natural outdoor spaces as the stages for most of the "happenings" we have performed so far. There is no special reason for this, however. We only like the infinite time and space of open air. "THE PLAY" practises two kinds of activities in parallel: One is to perform "happenings," and the other is to publish the organ paper THE PLAY.

The purpose of publishing THE PLAY is to deepen and enrich our thoughts and advocate these. » [6] In order to make their actions public and to circulate them beyond their (small) circle of regular followers, made up of relatives and friends, The Play published photocopied newspapers that included photographic reproductions of their actions, usually accompanied by a brief, concise statement, posters, plans and articles [7]. Even though they never shied away from media coverage, they were aware of the importance of communicating about their activities, for if they "fail to enter people's everyday life through these means of communication, their project will never be anything other than personal experiences." [8]

For all that, the group also accepted invitations for museum exhibitions, and proposed actions aiming at testing the limits of such spaces. When they were invited to the 2nd Kyoto Biennial in 1973, The Play transplanted for the first time its outside-looking aspirations into an exhibition space, while still taking care to keep a way out at hand. The members chose to build a 30 m high hanging bridge connecting the entrance to the exit door of the room they were assigned, then moved it outside into a natural environment once the exhibition was over. With this typical, oscillating gesture between the museum and the outside, they returned its main essence and main functionality by creating a new crossing path over the Kizu river for a single day. In 1982, at the Prefectural Museum of Modern Art in Kobe, they conceived *MAP 1/1*, a real-scale, 3.000

square-metre map surrounding a temple on the outskirts of Osaka. Following the same desire to bring everyday life and exteriority inside the museum through a process of constant displacement, The Play organised *Kalejdoskop*, an exhibition taking place in 1983 at Namba Media Studio in Osaka, for which they created a floor with wooden logs, providing an environment for the documentary presentation of the group's former actions, currently adapted to the Salle Principale gallery space.

As art critic Keiji Nakamura explained in 1985 in the newspaper *Yomiuri Shimbun* after an exhibition of the group called *Traces and the Present of N Floating Entities*, at Gallery 16 in Kyoto: "Devoid of any artistic pretence, their activities were predicated upon physical labor outdoors. However, their activities are not completely mundane. That is to say, their voluntary and unrewarded act defies our common sense, yet this precisely and barely makes their labor art. Still, they never aspire to "climb up" onto the stage of art, but stay in a place where staying there itself constitutes a critique of art. It's neither inside nor outside art. Their presence in a strange/delicate nook is dangerous and annoying to art that is content with its existence". [9]

Refusing to distinguish art from life, The Play dwells in an in-between space, removed from the established structures of art, from its production to its consumption. For these reasons long ignored even in its own country, The Play is now raising a certain critical interest in Japan and abroad. [10] Through its involvement, the group underlines, for more than 50 years an attitude and an outlook focused on playing, sincerity and humor, notions that remain crucial today. Its persistence and longevity, which may be partly explained by the collective organisational model, as well as the outstanding motivation of its members for each project, have set The Play apart from other groups in Japanese art history, never completely integrated, yet never completely at the margins. Their persistence in collective and ephemeral actions still crystallizes a refusal to abide by the codes of the (art) world, situated at the exact opposite of a search for efficiency, performance or success.

Yoann Gourmel & Elodie Royer * – 2020

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[1] "Comment", unsigned, reprinted in *Play* [black cover], trans. Reiko Tomii (Osaka: self-published by The Play, 1981), n.p.

[2] It would be too lengthy to detail the agendas and actions of the groups and collectives that helped redefine production and exhibition processes of art during this period. For a deeper study of art during that period, see art historian Reiko Tomii, more specifically "After the 'Descent to the Everyday': Japanese Collectivism from Hi-Red Center to The Play, 1964-1973," in Blake Stimson, Gregory Sholette (eds), *Collectivism After Modernism: The Art of Social Imagination After 1945* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 45-76.

[3] Atsushi Miyakawa, quoted by Reiko Tomii, in "After the 'Descent to the Everyday'", 47.

[4] Unsigned preface, printed in *Play* [black cover], n.p.

[5] It should be noted that all the actions' titles and descriptions, as well as the name of the group, were translated into English from the onset.

[6] "Comment," unsigned, reprinted in *Play* [black cover], n.p.

[7] Later collected by the group in two self-published books, both with a print run of 500 copies (*Play* [Black cover] in 1981 and *Play* [Blue cover] in 1991).

[8] Quotation from *Play* [black cover], n.p.

[9] Keiji Nakamura, *Yomiuri Shimbun*, March 29, 1985

[10] The group recently had a retrospective exhibition, *THE PLAY since 1967: beyond unknown currents* at the National Museum of Art in Osaka (2016) and was included in the 57th Venice Biennale (2017). In France, a set of videos documenting their actions was presented in 1986 for the exhibition *Japon des avant-gardes* held at the Centre Pompidou. More recently, we invited The Play to take part in *Le Sentiment des choses* at Le Plateau—FRAC Île-de-France, in Paris (2011), and *Le Mont Fuji n'existe pas*, also at Le Plateau (2012), for which, besides presenting a vast array of documents related to their past actions, the group continued the action *Current of Contemporary Art* on the Seine.

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Yoann Gourmel is a curator at Palais de Tokyo where he has recently curated Ulla von Brandenburg's exhibition *Le milieu est bleu*, presented until January 3rd, 2021.

Élodie Royer is an independent curator. She currently works on a long-term curatorial collaboration between KADIST and the MOT Museum of contemporary art in Tokyo initiated in 2016 with Tokyo-based curator Che Kyongfa. They have recently curated the collective exhibition *Things Entangling* presented at MOT until September 27th, 2020.

Together, *Yoann Gourmel and Elodie Royer* have collaborated with different contemporary art organizations in France (DOC !, Le Plateau-FRAC Île-de-France, CEAAC) and abroad (Mercer Union, Tate Modern, GAMEC). In 2011, they were laureates of the Villa Kujoyama residency program in Kyoto for a research on Japanese post-war conceptual and performance art. Since then, they have been regularly working with the group The Play. This on-going dialogue has led to different exhibitions at the Plateau-FRAC Île-de-France, in 2011 and 2012, as well as the retrospective publication on the group's activities in 2014, published by <o> future <o> and BAT.

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