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Analysis of curatorial practices and perception of art in
comparison with western influence

Supervisor

Ch. Prof. Angelo Maria Monaco

Assistant supervisor

Ch. Prof. Silvia Vesco

Graduand

Cecilia Maccario
906014

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ABSTRACT

With this thesis I want to explore the relationship between exhibition venues and cultural perception to contemporary art through a comparative analysis between Europe and Japan. The research is grounded in an auto-biographic approach, based on a six-month travel experience in Japan, during which multiple contemporary art institutions, exhibitions, and artistic sites were visited and critically observed from the perspective of a Western student.

The study investigates how curatorial strategies and choices influence the experience of contemporary art, with particular attention to the cultural and social differences between Japan and Europe. Case studies such as Naoshima, the Chichu Art Museum, and the 21st Century Museum of Contemporary Art, highlight how these exhibition spaces, along with their curatorial choices and architectural design, reveal much about the culture and society of a country like Japan, while at the same time maintaining a strong influence from Western art.

At the same time, European art was marked by significant aesthetic contamination through influences from Asia that started in the late 19th and early 20th centuries particularly with the emergence of *Japonisme*. This phenomenon marked the beginning of a cultural bridge between Europe and Japan, a dialogue that has continued to develop over the past two centuries, progressively bringing the two contexts closer and revealing a strong bond.

This thesis therefore aims to analyze this tension between distance and connection, highlighting how direct experience within a culturally distant context can generate not only disorientation but also new forms of mutual understanding. By combining personal narrative with theoretical reflection, this research proposes a reading of the museum not only as a space of conservation and education, but as an active tool of cultural and social expressions.

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INTRODUCTION

There are distances that go beyond kilometers, made of silences and gestures that quickly change your perception of reality, making you understand that the true distance lies in feeling out of place. My arrival in Japan made all of this evident from the very first moment. It was not a cultural shock initially, but rather a sensation of strangeness and detachment.

I remember my first train journey inside a carriage during rush hour, taking me from Tokyo to Yokohama. It seemed like a simulation of a dystopian reality, where all the passengers, even before boarding, were lined up in orderly queues and entered the train through automatic and composed movements, in a rigorous and silent manner. The almost total absence of noise and the rigidity of movements in that shared space, where in a European context conversation and interaction for example would be the norm, assumed a structural dimension, contributing to a feeling of alienation and disorientation. This sense of distance triggered in me a gradual process of solitude and apathy, which perhaps forced me to step out of my patterns.

It was precisely within this cultural and spatial distance that deeply human aspects began to emerge, helping me to feel less out of place and more welcomed. It was through direct interactions, even when brief, that a human sensitivity became apparent, capable of overcoming cultural barriers. All of this helped me understand that in a country so far from the dynamics we Europeans are used to, and in which I felt like a guest, there existed details capable of warming the heart, nourishing the mind, and making me feel more at home. The opportunity to explore and investigate Japan for six months offered me a unique chance to step outside the conventional touristic experience that not anyone can have, forcing me to adapt and learn from one of the world's most fascinating and complex cultures. From the very beginning, my journey was driven by a desire to deepen my understanding of a society that, in hindsight, I realized I knew very little about. The discovery of what was hidden under the surface of widespread enchantment and idealization, understanding in a relatively short time that significant aspects of the country's history and cultural background are underrepresented or insufficiently addressed, not only externally, but within Japan itself. Certain contradictions gradually emerged, elements that are rarely discussed openly and that appear to be systematically overlooked or downplayed, were coexisting with others that are celebrated and praised, almost as if to distract attention from the former.

It is precisely from this tension between visibility and omission that my research began to

take shape, leading me to investigate and explore the role of art as bridge between East and West.

My curiosity manifested in a dedicated study of the artistic landscape across Japan, with the primary goal of documenting my experiences through the museums and the cultural institutions spread around the country. This immersion provided a new perspective on the distinctive approaches to contemporary art within Japan, revealing an art world that, while engaging with global trends, maintains an independent identity in relation to Western modernity¹. Japan, after all, remained for centuries uncontaminated and separated from the rest of the world. Its traditions and culture developed independently, without Western influence, allowing for an isolated form of growth. This isolation created a sense of exceptionalism and an unparalleled social cohesion. It enabled the development of unique religions, artistic expressions, values, and traditions, making the country truly one of a kind. The opening to the West, which began only in the mid-19th century, marked one of the most rapid and radical transformations in modern history. Westernization brought significant changes to Japan's social and political structures, yet the country's ability to celebrate and preserve its origins ensures that the charm of its unspoiled traditions remains intact today continuing to spark deep curiosity and fascination in the West.

The time I initially spent in museums purely for personal enjoyment quickly evolved into a series of growing reflections and critical observations on the approach to contemporary art in Japan, in comparison with the Western context in which I was raised. I quickly realized that while I was immersed in a social environment that demanded constant adaptation and new cognitive frameworks, contemporary art spaces offered a surprising sense of familiarity. What I noticed is that no matter how far I was from Europe, the fundamental frameworks and curatorial methodologies employed in presenting contemporary art were aligned with Western institutions.

This sense of familiarity was, in many ways, an epiphany. It was not only as a personal comfort, but also as a symptom of a broader process of 'Westernization' within the field of contemporary art. Twentieth-century art marks the end of the isolation of various national cultures² and western art has become the dominant architecture of the global scene. As a

¹A. Favell, *Creative East-West Cosmopolitanism? The Changing Role of International Mobility for Young Japanese Contemporary Artists*, in *Making and Unmaking of Transnationalism: The Nation and Citizenship in East Asia*, ed. by Y. Soysal, S.-Y. Wong, Stanford, Stanford University Press, forthcoming, p.7.

² L. Granieri, *Le basi dell'avanguardia artistica in Giappone: passato e presente*, in *Il Giappone*, vol. 39, 1999, p. 49

Western visitor, it became increasingly evident that contemporary art institutions in Japan are deeply influenced by European and American models, both in their curatorial approaches and in the structuring of exhibition spaces. Contemporary art, as a global category, often relies on frameworks that have been historically developed in the West, and these models tend to reproduce themselves across different contexts.

At the same time, this apparent proximity coexisted with significant differences. If the containers, the museums and the exhibition layouts, echoed the halls of London, Paris, or New York, the 'soul' of these spaces remained distinctly Japanese, revealing a distinct cultural specificity. These differences emerged not only in the artworks themselves, but also in the ways institutions are managed and experienced. It was clear that the country's historical background and social dynamics were reflected in the arts within museum contexts. Phenomena such as *nation branding* and *soft power*³ are deeply rooted in the culture and influence what is produced and presented, from politics to entertainment and, of course, art. As a student, I developed a deeper understanding of these internal mechanisms as I began to educate myself further, discovering each day new underlying social, cultural, and even bureaucratic frameworks that shape the whole country.

My time in Japan did not simply reveal the duality between external influences and cultural independence; rather, it significantly expanded my horizons. I was particularly struck by how deeply Japan recognizes and attributes value to contemporary artistic production, with notable attention to Western models, which are not only widely exhibited but often positioned as key points of reference. Observing my own culture through this lens, while at the same time being fully immersed in a different cultural context, provided me with a privileged pathway for my research.

³ S. Giusti, C. Pagani, *I musei e le relazioni internazionali*, Pisa, Pacini Editore, 2023, p. 48.

Chapter 1

EXPERIENCING CONTEMPORARY ART IN JAPAN: CASE STUDY OF THREE DIFFERENT JAPANESE CONTEMPORARY ART INSTITUTIONS

The intention of this chapter is to walk through the main and most relevant exhibitions and art spaces I visited around Japan during my six-month stay, from September 2025 to March 2026. As I have already mentioned, the opportunity of staying in a country as Japan for more than a standard tourist trip, granted me the necessary time and depth to explore places beyond the typical itinerary, including lesser known and harder to reach areas. This extended period allowed for a more meaningful engagement with the Japanese contemporary art scene and has been central to my research and investigation.

1.1 21st Century Museum of Contemporary Art

Upon my arrival in Yokohama, only a week had passed, and the initial priority was undoubtedly to settle down, acclimate and orient myself in the new environment. However, running parallel to this necessity was a compelling, almost urgent, need to compile a comprehensive list of places I simply had to visit. This initial sense of urgency, driven in part by a fear of missing out, led me almost immediately towards the west coast, more precisely to the prefectures of Nagano and Ishikawa, where I encountered my first experience in a contemporary art museum.

The journey led me to the city of Kanazawa, a city historically celebrated for its traditional crafts and cultural preservation, but which also hosts a powerful symbol of contemporary vision: the 21st Century Museum of Contemporary Art, Kanazawa. Opened in 2004, this institution stands out compared to more traditional art museums. For over two decades, the museum has been working to awaken Kanazawa's creative energy and establish itself as a compelling regional and international cultural attraction.

Their mission is focused on «generating new culture while simultaneously revitalizing the

community of the city»⁴. This statement encapsulates the dual mission of the 21st Century Museum of Contemporary Art in Kanazawa, as an institution born not simply as a repository of artworks, but as a true engine of urban and social regeneration. Historically renowned for its traditional crafts and extraordinary feudal heritage, Kanazawa faced the challenge of keeping its legacy alive without remaining frozen in the past. The first part of the mission is linked to fostering the emergence of contemporary languages that rework tradition rather than simply preserve it. This drive for innovation relates to the second part of the mission, which focuses on community revitalization. The building breaks down hierarchical barriers, creating a large, open-access area designed as a public plaza ideal for meeting, studying, and playing. Kanazawa's philosophy wants to demonstrate that a community regenerates when it finds a common ground in which it can identify, and that a culture only survives when it has the courage to continue evolving into the future.

The first impression of this museum in fact is already striking. Its circular and transparent design, conceived by architects Kazuyo Sejima and Ryue Nishizawa (SANAA), immediately signals a commitment to openness and accessibility. The museum is designed around the architectural concept of a 'public square', envisioned as a park where anyone can enter freely and where people can gather and interact with one another; a conception of urban architecture that in Japan seems to be particularly alien and distant from their customs.



⁴ W. Meruro, *Director's statement*, in 21st Century Museum of Contemporary Art, Kanazawa <https://www.kanazawa21.jp/data_list.php?g=34&d=1&lng=e> (Last check June 2026).

Fig. 1. Exterior view of the 21st Century Museum of Contemporary Art, Kanazawa.
Source: Museum's website

The site, surrounded by three streets, is accessible from multiple directions, which informs its circular layout. Visitors can enter the museum from any side, facilitating ease of access and fostering a strong sense of connection between the building and the city. The sense of openness is already well obtained in these exterior spaces, particularly during the summer season, when a feeling of conviviality emerges and the boundary between public zone and the museum zone becomes increasingly blurred.

A closest example of something like what has been just described is the new vision for Zaha Hadid's MAXXI plaza. It's about a project aimed to transform a museum space into something able to collect people and connect them. What the 21st Century Museum of Contemporary Art in Kanazawa and the National Museum of 21st Century Arts in Rome have in common, beyond the name, is an identical philosophy regarding the museum's social role. Both were created to challenge the idea of the museum as a 'closed temple' of culture, transforming it into an urban plaza.

The approaching Grande MAXXI Project consists of an urban regeneration and expansion plan launched in 2022 and fully implemented in 2026, transforming the Roman museum into a living, accessible, and zero-impact laboratory. The heart of the project focuses on transforming the concreted Piazza Alighiero Boetti into a park filled with trees and building the new MAXXI Hub, a sustainable building with a walkable roof that will house classrooms. The two art centers, although aesthetically different, share exactly this goal of transforming the external spaces of the museum into something that the citizens can enjoy and live in daily life. In this way, the museum becomes more than a mere container of art, but a true place of social interaction, capable of serving the community and attracting a wide audience, including families and children.

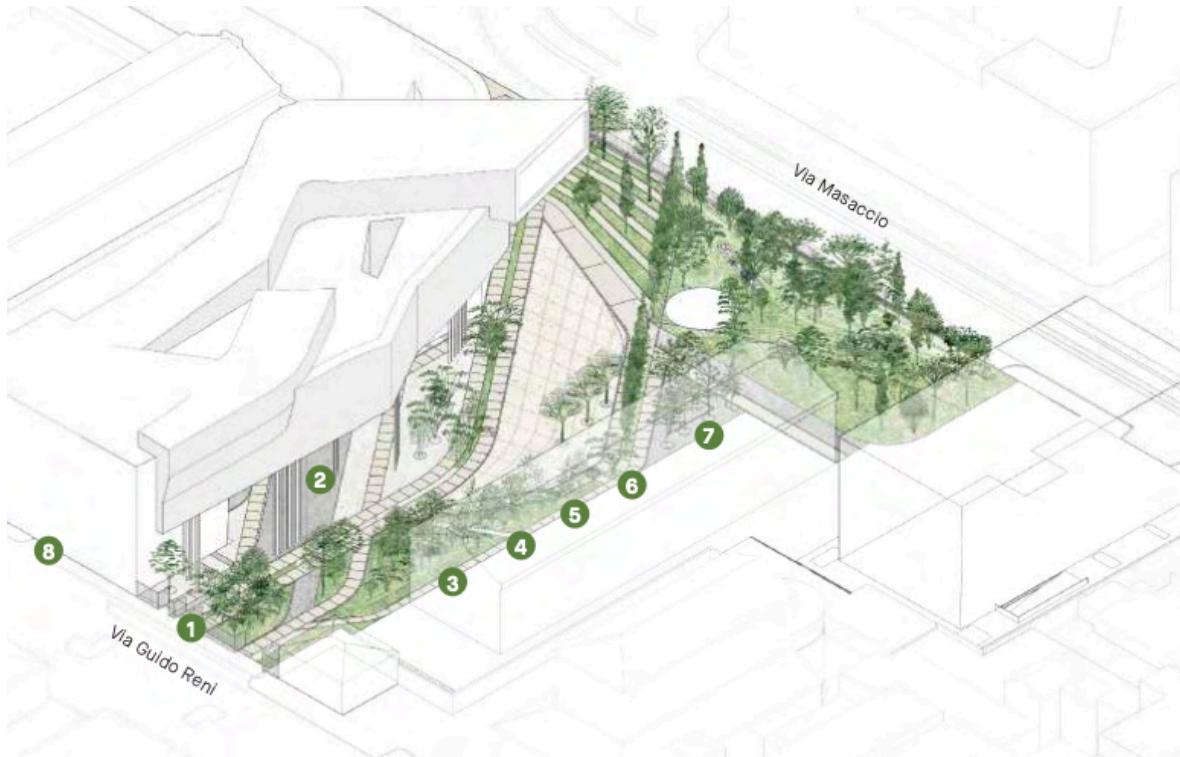


Fig. 2. Axonometric view of the green plaza project for MAXXI, Rome. Source: Bureau Bas Smets.

Furthermore, a dimension of playfulness is enforced in the Japanese museum by the presence of works that invite direct engagement and physical interaction, introducing experiential components to the visit. Permanent installations such as Olafur Eliasson's *Colour Activity House* exemplify this approach, transforming the viewer from a passive observer into an active participant. From within the folds of the pavilion, visitors look out onto a tinted urban environment, while externally, its glass walls present hued reflections to passers-by. Both effects transform the everyday scenery into a polychromatic cityscape, turning the artwork into a lighthouse of colours.



Fig. 3. Olafur Eliasson, *Colour Activity House* (2010). Source: Author's photograph.

The building has no defined front or back, allowing it to be explored freely from all directions. Its minimal architecture anticipates the nature of the collections housed within, reflecting the essence of the contemporary exhibitions it contains. Inside, the exhibition area is fragmented into numerous galleries that are all embedded in circulation space. This approach provides each gallery with a distinct identity while maintaining a high degree of flexibility in the overall layout, allowing for multiple configurations and the possibility of hosting smaller exhibitions.

The various exhibition paths that unfold within the museum do not follow a single predetermined route. Instead, galleries and rooms are interconnected in a nonlinear manner, encouraging a sense of exploration and discovery in the visitor. At the same time, however, this spatial complexity does not result in disorientation. Despite the seemingly irregular arrangement of the different areas, the layout allows visitors to navigate intuitively, often without conscious effort, naturally finding their way from one exhibition space to the next. Furthermore, the lighting system and the presence of internal courtyards play a crucial role in

shaping the overall experience. The careful use of natural light, combined with open transitional spaces, prevents the visit from feeling claustrophobic or overwhelming, an effect that might otherwise arise in a labyrinthine structure. Instead, the museum maintains a balance between complexity and clarity, offering a spatial experience that is both engaging and accessible.



Fig. 4. SANAA (Kazuyo Sejima and Ryue Nishizawa), Floor plan of the 21st Century Museum of Contemporary Art, Kanazawa. Source: Museum's website

The museum hosts a vast permanent collection, which has been gradually developed since the museum's opening in 2004. The museum only acquires pieces created in 1980 or later, with a particular focus on those that contribute and influence new values or offer points of reference within the context of post 1900 art history, with a preference for works by or connected to

artists from the Kanazawa region. Artists included in the collection are often encouraged to create site-specific installations, allowing their work to engage directly with the architecture and surroundings of the museum, and thereby anchoring their practice within the cultural and spatial identity of Kanazawa.

As Hiroaki Ochiai, the museum's public relations chief, stated «I believe that the permanent exhibition works associated with the building and grounds of the museum are distinctive and noteworthy as part of our collection. [...] Since contemporary art encompasses a wide range of expressive forms, we do not focus on any particular genre. Rather, we aim to avoid an overemphasis on any one genre and instead look for a diverse range of expressions»⁵.

The work carried out by the museum reflects a continuous and determined effort to build a collection of the highest quality. The goal of its acquisition program is the systematic formation of a unique collection that responds to the current state of the world, remaining oriented towards the present through works that reflect contemporary artistic practices.

During my visit in September, I had the opportunity to see the two main temporary exhibitions on view at the time.

The first, *Layers of Accumulated Time: Depicting the World We Live In*, opens with a video installation by the Taiwanese artist Pei-Shih Tu, which introduces the visitor to the key themes of the exhibition. The work, *The Adventures in Mount Yu V (From Michel Foucault to Our Glorious Future)*, combines animation and collage in a video that addresses, through colorful and seemingly idyllic imagery, historical events and real narratives of violence and destruction⁶.

⁵ K. Hansen, *An Art Lover's Guide to Kanazawa's 21st Century Museum of Contemporary Art*, in Oserver, <<https://observer.com/2025/04/21st-century-museum-of-contemporary-art-kanazawa-20th-anniversar>> 2025, (Last check June 2026).

⁶ *Layers of Accumulated Time: Depicting the World We Live In*, exhibition catalogue ed. by Yumiko Nonaka and Kana Miyazawa (Tokyo, The National Art Center, 8 July – 19 October 2015), Tokyo, The National Art Center, 2015, p.24.



Fig. 5. Pei-Shih Tu, *The Adventures in Mount Yu V (From Michel Foucault to Our Glorious Future)*, (2011). Source: Museum's website

In this context, it introduces a reflection on various aspects of the world, explored through multiple temporal perspectives; the past history and memory, the present moment, and an uncertain future. The exhibition as a whole brings into dialogue some of the most pressing issues affecting the contemporary world, including environmental crises, conflicts and wars, poverty, racism, the rights of sexual minorities, and questions related to migration and refugees. At the same time, it acknowledges the foundations for a potentially better future, shaped by scientific and technological advancements as well as social and cultural developments.

From a historical perspective, it becomes evident that events do not occur in isolation; rather, they are part of recurring patterns that re-emerge over time. For this reason, the path is

constructed in which time is never linear, but stratified, overlapping, almost sedimented in space and images. The underlying idea is that the present is never pure but can only be understood as the result of accumulations of history, memory, conflict, progress, trauma, and imagination coexist simultaneously.

The concept of ‘layers’ is also explored materially and visually, through the act of layering paint, materials, and images within artistic practice. This approach offers visitors a framework through which to interpret both the past and the present, while encouraging reflection on the next temporal layer to come, the future.

In the following rooms, themes such as women and mythology in colonized contexts are examined from the perspective of female artists. The work of Balinese artist Citra Sasmita *Timur Merah Project XI: Bedtime Story*, for example, combines myths and misconceptions surrounding Balinese art and culture, while critically addressing the status of women within social hierarchies⁷. Her practice seeks to challenge and subvert normative gender constructs. Her compositions, which feature female figures intertwined with elements of nature, draw on the visual language of the traditional Kamasan style of Balinese painting, which she reinterprets and expands through a contemporary lens. While rooted in mythological frameworks that include both Hindu and specifically Balinese references, her work also reflects an effort to imagine new, powerful secular narratives oriented towards a post-patriarchal future.

⁷ *Layers of Accumulated Time* cit., p.45.



Fig. 6. Citra Sasmita, *Timur Merah Project XI: Bedtime Story* (2024). Source: Author's photograph.

Continuing along the path, at the end of this first exhibition, visitors are immediately directed to the entrance of the second. The *Possibilities of the Written Word* invites us to reflect on the meaning of words and their power and influence in today society⁸. This exhibition presents works from the museum's collection, including paintings, posters, calligraphy, ceramics, and videos, united by the common use of words or their central presence.

The real reflection arises from the omnipresence of letters and words in our daily life, but above all from the impact they can have, their ability to generate new meanings or to encourage deeper thought. They have become an inseparable part of everyday life, yet we rarely stop to acknowledge their presence or to consider their design and functions⁹. Words are the main means of communication we know. On one hand, they help in the understanding

⁸ A. Umetani, Y. Nonaka, *Collection Exhibition 2: The Possibilities of the Written Word*, press release, in *21st Century Museum of Contemporary Art, Kanazawa*, (17 September 2025), p.2.

⁹ Umetani, Nonaka, *Collection Exhibition 2 cit.*, p.2.

and imagination; on the other, they can sometimes be misleading, used in the wrong way or misunderstood. When an artwork is explained through words, those same words can confuse its meaning or make it more difficult to understand.

I found it particularly interesting to focus on the meaning created by text in works of art and on the way it is expressed through writing, drawing and reading, not only as a means of communication, but also as a form of artistic expression. For example in the series of works by Awazu Kiyoshi he explores the forms of ancient Chinese pictographs. Those ones were born as visual representations of the world, identifying shapes that recall images and symbols. In this case the ideogram itself becomes a source of imagination and fascination through its form and design alone. The sign is not faithfully reproduced, but reworked, expanded, almost reconstructed as an image. The writing loses its purely linguistic function and becomes a visual tool that invites the viewer no longer to read, but rather to observe and contemplate.

Another fitting reflection on the look of letters, how they are written and designed along with their meaning, is done by Izumi Taro with *Old Name*, or: *Sorry, It's Already Taken*. In this case, the artist, who works with video installations, focuses on the different feelings that words can convey. He investigates language not only as a means of communication, but as an artistic material capable of producing meaning, relationship, and ambiguity. Izumi Taro placed live eels in iron containers shaped like letters of the alphabet; their writhing movements, paired with the words 'so mean' which they spell out, may provoke a sense of unease¹⁰. The simplicity and familiarity of the sentence attract the viewer, but at the same time destabilize them when isolated and recontextualized. Taro takes this very type of everyday language and brings it into the space of art, transforming it into something to be observed and questioned.

¹⁰ Umetani, Nonaka, *Collection Exhibition 2* cit., p.4

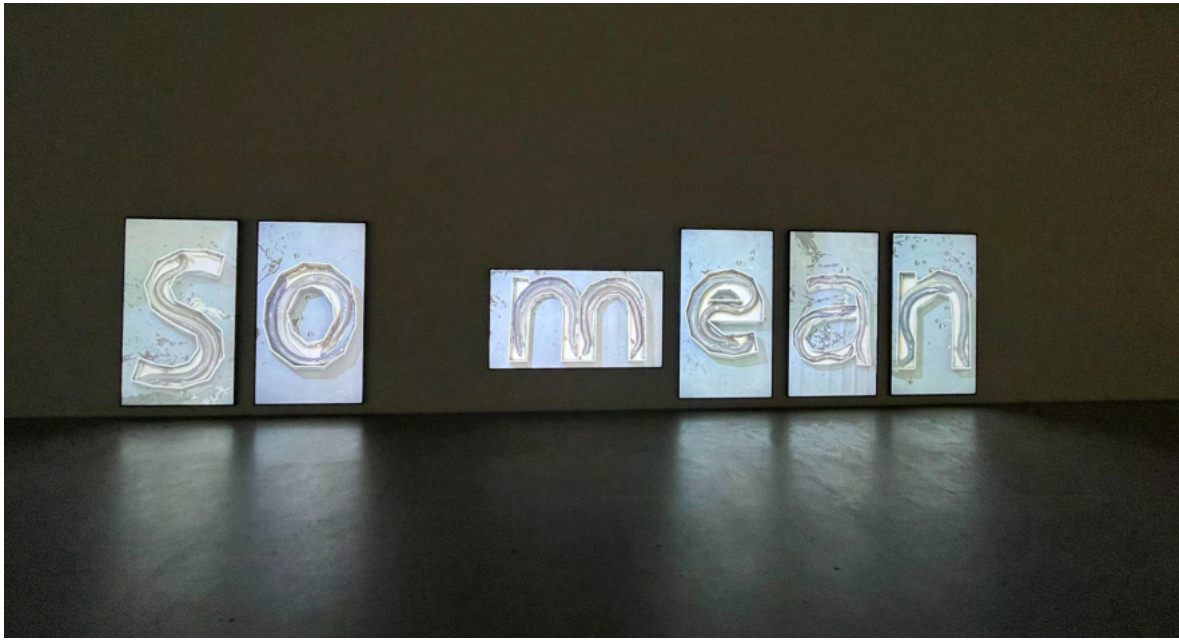


Fig. 7. Izumi Taro, *with Old Name, or: Sorry, It's Already Taken* (2018). Source: Author's photograph.

Towards the end of the exhibition, we encounter further references to Asian cultures. One significant example is *One Word One Stone – Success or Failure* by Qiu Zhijie. This work recalls ancient traditions, such as the Buddhist practice of copying sutras or religious texts by carving individual characters into stone. He reinterprets this ritual practice by engraving one to four characters at a time¹¹. Words do not form a continuous sentence anymore but appear fragmented and spatially dispersed.

This fragmentation plays a crucial role since language is not anymore something that can be read linearly, but something that must be experienced and reconstructed. Each stone becomes a unit of meaning, but none is complete on its own.

¹¹ Umetani, Nonaka, *Collection Exhibition 2* cit., p.6



Fig. 8. Qiu Zhijie, *One Word One Stone – Success or Failure* (2018). Source: Author's photograph.

In Kanazawa, at the 21st Century Museum of Contemporary Art, I immediately found myself immersed in a profoundly contemporary environment that captivated me from the very first moment. During the visit, I found it particularly interesting to observe how the management and interaction dynamics of a contemporary art museum were different from Europe. In Japan, respect and politeness are expressed through measured distance, and hospitality often relies on the concept of *omotenashi*, which involves anticipating the needs of the guest while maintaining a formal boundary. In contrast, the approach I encountered in this museum reflected a more proactive and Western-oriented friendliness, perceived more as a professional practice than as an expression of deep respect.

Leandro Erlich's *The Swimming Pool* in Kanazawa offers a relevant sociological case study for this reflection on social and cultural dynamics. When viewed from the deck, the pool appears to be filled with deep, shimmering water. In fact, however, a layer of water only some 10cm deep is suspended over transparent glass. Below the glass is an empty space with

aquamarine walls that viewers can enter. The work sets up an unfolding sequence of experiences, from our astonishment at peering down and finding people under the water to our gazing upward from the interior of the pool. While undermining our everyday assumptions about what we think to be obvious, the work once we catch on to its deception and produces a sense of connection between people looking at each other. This installation invites our active involvement in its spaces, pushing visitors to engage physically, greet one another through the glass surface of the water, and take photographs. In doing so, the work disrupted the norm of distance or confidentiality, and encouraged a more open and less formal form of interaction.



Fig. 9. Leandro Erlich, *The Swimming Pool* (1999). Source: Author's photograph.

This initial experience in Kanazawa set definitely a high benchmark for the cultural journey that lay ahead. The luck of having such an institution in the city clearly demonstrates a strong commitment to international contemporary art and, at the same time, serves as a source of pride and a showcase of the central role Kanazawa occupies within the global artistic landscape.

1.2 Benesse Art Site Naoshima

My months from September to December were full of trips around the entire country, starting from the main tourist destinations like Kyoto and Osaka to the extreme south on the island of Okinawa. Around Christmas I had to spend my first holiday away from home and family and in order to overcome the feeling of loneliness I decided to give myself a journey to Naoshima.

I first heard about this island almost ten years ago, when my aunt came back from a trip to Japan. The description of a small, rural island, once nearly abandoned and later revived through museums and contemporary art installations spread across it, immediately sparked in me an indescribable sense of curiosity and fascination. When I imagined the place before visiting it, I pictured something closer to a natural park dotted with land art installations that subtly guided visitors through the landscape. The reality, however, far exceeded my expectations. Naoshima revealed itself as a place where art, architecture and nature coexist in a remarkably harmonious way.

Tetsuhiko Fukutake, founding president of Fukutake Publishing, and Chikatsugu Miyake, then incumbent mayor of Naoshima, aspired to revitalize the Seto Inland Sea by establishing a children's campground where kids from around the world could gather¹². The project began in 1989 with the Naoshima International Camp, designed by Tadao Andō in the island's southern area, fulfilling Fukutake's vision. In 1992 the Benesse House Museum opened as a facility integrating both contemporary museum and hotel functions. At the same time, it started its artistic activities under the name of Naoshima Contemporary Art Museum, holding temporary exhibitions from 1992 to 1995 and housing works by luminaries including Bruce Nauman, Frank Stella and Hiroshi Sugimoto.

¹² *History of Benesse Art Site Naoshima*, in *Benesse Art Site Naoshima*, <https://benesse-artsite.jp/en/about/history.html> (accessed May 2026).

«The initial goal wasn't to promote tourism», said Soichiro Fukutake's son Hideaki, who now leads the Fukutake Foundation, «but rather to revitalize the region through art and help locals feel a renewed sense of pride in their hometown¹³».

The mission of the Benesse Art Site has extended far beyond the mere construction of new galleries. Since 1998, with the inauguration of the Art House Project in the historic fishing village of Honmura, the guiding principle of «using what exists to create what is to be» has transformed many disused buildings on Naoshima and the neighboring islands of Teshima and Inujima to be reborn as art.

What began as a localized initiative has evolved into a spread cultural ecosystem, obtaining what nowadays is not just an art collection but a real pilgrimage site for contemporary art. Navigating the island of Naoshima, one encounters a seamless dialogue between the landscape and the installations. The journey is punctuated by iconic site-specific works, such as Yayoi Kusama's *Yellow Pumpkin* (1994), which stands as a silent sentinel on a weathered pier.



Fig. 10. Yayoi Kusama, *Yellow Pumpkin* (1994). Source: Author's photograph.

¹³ S. Richmond, "The Japanese Island That Was Saved by Art", in *BBC News*, 2025, <<https://www.bbc.com/travel/...>> (accessed 16 July 2026),.

The relationship between Kusama and Naoshima started in the early '90s¹⁴, during the birth of the Benesse project when she realized this dotted pumpkin. This work of art became not only the symbol of the island, but almost the image itself of the Benesse Art Site Naoshima and of contemporary art in Japan. Kusama has transferred her trauma into creativity and opened up a new horizon while struggling against obstacles. This work reflects her life as such and also seems to represent how Benesse Art Site Naoshima has communicated alternative values and ways of life to the rest of the world from a remote island in the far east¹⁵. It was clear the vision and the direction of the philosophical curatorship at the base of this project, aimed to dialogue with the island and to celebrate Japanese contemporary art. Central to the transformation of this island are also the architectures of Tadao Ando, which function as vessels for the private collections of the Fukutake family and various newly commissioned masterpieces. His contribution helped in the transformation of Naoshima into a world-renowned art destination. Working alongside Benesse Corporation, Ando integrated his signature minimalist concrete architecture with the island's natural landscape, creating silent, contemplative spaces that completely redefined the island's history. He has designed a remarkable series of museums and hospitality projects that burrow into, sit alongside, and embrace the mountainous terrain¹⁶. The majority of the structures spread across the island are of his own production, such as the Lee Ufan Museum, a semi-underground structure that houses paintings and sculptures by the Korean artist, where nature, architecture and art come in resonance with each other, inviting to peaceful and quiet contemplation. Ando's portfolio also includes the Naoshima New Museum of Art, opened recently in 2025, which exhibits and develops a collection of major works and commissioned works of artists from the Asian region including Japan.

¹⁴ L. Itzkowitz, *How the Benesse Art Site Naoshima Revitalized a Cluster of Japanese Islands*, in *Architectural Digest*, <https://www.architecturaldigest.com> (accessed 23 June 2026).

¹⁵ A. Miki, *Yayoi Kusama: "Art is an Endless Struggle, Art is Love, Art is Life" (#1)*, in *Benesse Art Site Naoshima*, <https://benesse-artsite.jp/en/story/20220930-2466.html> (accessed May 2026).

¹⁶ N.R. Pollock, *On Naoshima Island, Tadao Ando Digs into the Earth to Explore the Ways Time and Light Shape Architecture*, in *Architectural Record*, 2024, <https://www.architecturalrecord.com> (accessed May 2026).



Fig. 11. Interior view of the Naoshima New Museum of Art (2025).



Fig. 12. Lee Ufan Museum, Naoshima (2010).

The goal of all these projects was to blend seamlessly the architecture with the natural environment, fostering a state of harmony that invites profound contemplation of spiritual values and human existence. In the end the result is a profound spatial symbiosis where the museums do not merely sit upon the land, but dialogue with the surrounding nature, becoming an indistinguishable part of the topography.

The greatest example of coexistence of art, architecture and nature is the subterranean and minimalistic Chichu Art Museum. Ando's concrete structures are buried to preserve the natural scenery of the Seto Inland sea, as the name suggests (*chichu* literally means 'in the ground') while housing permanent works by James Turrell, Claude Monet and Walter De Maria¹⁷. As you approach the site, it is impossible to perceive the structure you are about to enter. Tadao Ando intentionally made the building without an exterior to preserve and dissolve into the mountain landscape. The visitor is welcomed on an immersive path where

¹⁷ Y. Akimoto, H. Yasui, *Chichu Handbook*, Naoshima, Chichu Art Museum, Fukutake Foundation, 2005, p.3.

the narrow corridors that connect each room are carefully designed to slow you down and reflect, capable of evoking a sense of peace from the first moment. The museum's very purpose is to craft an immersive experience where light, silence, and the sound of the sea converge to invite a state of meditation, following the idea of «a site to rethink the relationship between nature and people»¹⁸.



Fig. 13. Tadao Ando, Aerial view of the Chichu Art Museum, Naoshima (2004). Source: Benesse Art Site website

This search for harmony between nature and perception is reflected in the choice of artists exhibited. What Monet, De Maria, and Turrell share is an interest in creating works that originate from an observation and interpretation of nature, later translated into artistic form through deeply personal and distinct approaches. Each artist investigates light, its colors, shapes, and perceptual qualities in a different way, developing individual methods through which natural phenomena are transformed into visual and spatial experiences. The light and its study thus emerge as the true common thread of this museum. It repeatedly emphasized the existence and transformative power of light, presenting it as something capable of shaping atmosphere, influencing emotional response, and redefining the relationship between the viewer, the artwork, and the surrounding environment.

Among the works on display, the one that inspires the entire concept for the museum are

¹⁸ Akimoto, Yasui, *Chichu Handbook* cit., p.54.

Claude Monet's *Water Lilies*. Five paintings from the artist's late production, created between 1914 and 1919, are displayed in a room designed according to the architectural and decorative scheme that Monet himself conceived for his *grandes décorations* during the final years of his life¹⁹. To enhance this concept, the room hosting the five canvases was specifically designed as a faithful reproduction of Monet's ideas of walls without corners, indirect illumination, and an overall whiteness achieved through marble and plaster. The floor is made of Bianco di Carrara marble cut into two-centimeter cubes. To maintain chromatic uniformity, the frames were produced using Greek marble known as Thassos White, while the walls were covered with a coarse sand-based plaster.



Fig. 14. Claude Monet, Installation view of the *Water Lilies* series in the Claude Monet Room, Chichu Art Museum. (1914-1919). Source: Author's photograph.

This exhibition space represents a clear example of how an architectural container can perfectly communicate with the artworks it houses and be conceived specifically around

¹⁹ Akimoto, Yasui, *Chichu Handbook* cit., p.9.

them. The overall effect recalls the same dreamlike atmosphere found in the two elliptical and minimalist galleries of the Musée de l'Orangerie in Paris. The *Water Lilies* completely absorb the visitor, disconnecting them from external reality and allowing them to focus entirely on what unfolds across the walls. In the case of the Japanese museum, this immersive effect is amplified by the opening in the ceiling, which not only allows natural light to enter the space, but also lets the sound of the waves from the nearby shore become part of the experience itself.

Observing the *Water Lilies* under natural light is perhaps the most important element for understanding the paintings, since they were created *en plein air*. Within this series emerges the vital force of nature in the form of light, which Monet studied and revered throughout his life through the endless movement of water and the continuous growth of plants.

The investigation of light finds its highest expression in the work of James Turrell. For over half a century, the American artist James Turrell has worked directly with light and space to create artworks that engage viewers with the limits and wonder of human perception. As Calvin Tomkins noted, «His work is not about light, or a record of light; it is light, the physical presence of light made manifest in sensory form»²⁰. Inside the Chichu Art Museum are displayed three works by James Turrell that trace how his handling of light has evolved over the years²¹. In the earliest pieces it's possible to see the attempt to visually objectify light, to then arrive in more recent years in structures where the viewer can enter inside and perceive the light physically.

Once again the works created for the Chichu Museum dialogue seamlessly with the architecture designed by Tadao Ando. Both philosophies of emphasizing the use of natural light to create a space of contemplation and introspection complete each other. In Turrell's *Open Sky*, for example, the light that filters through the ceiling opening is in constant flux, changing with the time of day and season, which enhances the visitor's sense of connection to both the space and the sky above. In the case of *Open Field*, part of the Aperture series, a pale blue rectangle dimly visible in the darkness is actually an opening in the wall. The hollow space beyond it is filled with light and the visitor can step through the light-filled space, entering inside an imperceptible depth. While walking through this area of uncertain dimensions, the work allows the viewer to feel the light that absorbs their body.

²⁰ C. Tomkins, *The Space Jammer*, in *The New Yorker*, <https://www.newyorker.com> (accessed 23 June 2026).

²¹ Akimoto, Yasui, *Chichu Handbook* cit., p.27.

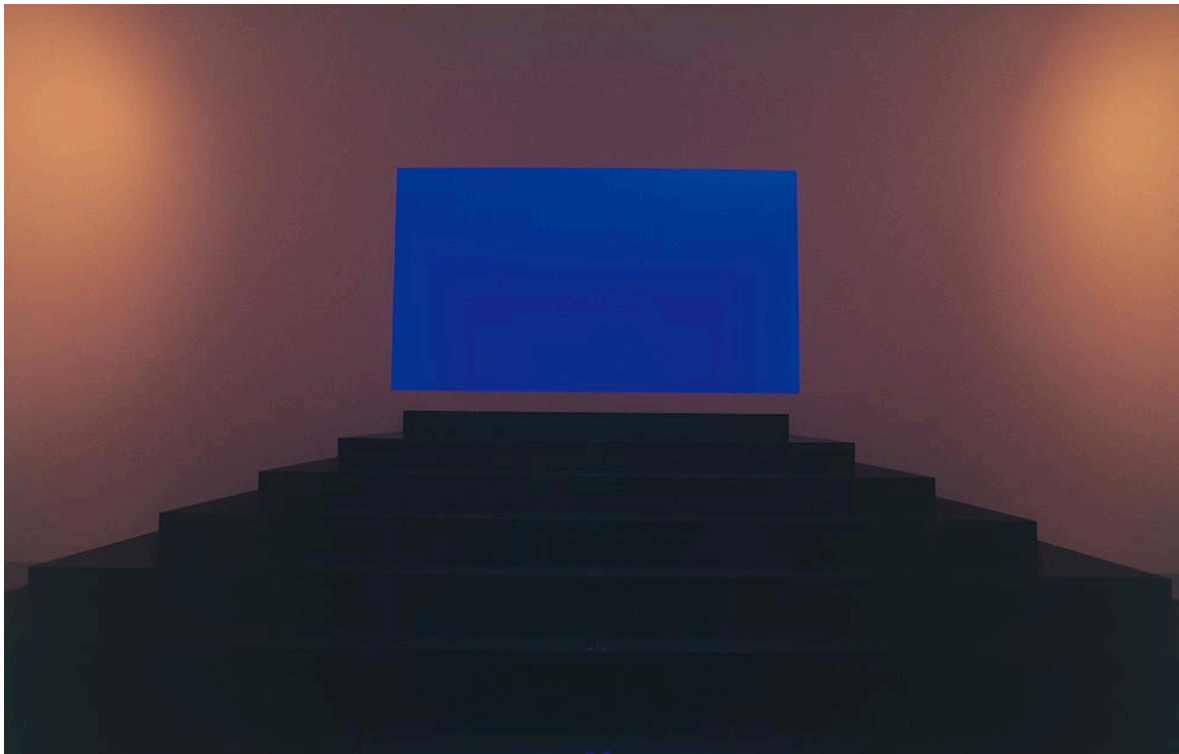


Fig. 15. James Turrell, *Open Field* (2000). Source: Benesse Art Site's website

Turrell's works are not merely visual experiences, they are immersive environments that provoke a deeper, almost spiritual engagement. The choice of the artist and his installations complement the island's landscape, creating an experience where art and nature come together in perfect harmony.

Perfectly aligned with his works is one of the most significant pieces of Walter De Maria, *Time/Timeless/No Time*. The entire art space was created under the direction of De Maria as an artwork, and it offers a tangible manifestation of his philosophical approach to art. The room contains a sphere 2.2 meters in diameter and 27 gilded wooden geometric forms, which challenges the concept of time and provides a physical and sensory experience of its flow. Viewers experience this space under the natural light coming in from the ceiling, producing dramatic changes in the room's illumination depending on the hour. De Maria's use of natural elements invites viewers to experience time not as an abstract concept but as something that

is grounded in the world around us²².

The experience of his work in relation to the others mentioned, in the specific context of Naoshima, creates a profound dialogue between art, space, and nature, forming a seamless union that goes beyond aesthetics and prestige to offer an immersive and cohesive experience.



Fig. 16. Walter De Maria, *Time/Timeless/No Time* (2004). Source: Author's photograph.

It is certainly not the first time in the history of art and museum development that we encounter the idea of an 'art island'. One only must think of San Giorgio Island with the Giorgio Cini Foundation and Le Stanze della Fotografia, or San Giacomo Island with the Sandretto Re Rebaudengo Foundation in the Venetian lagoon. Examples extend well beyond Italy as well, such as Porquerolles Island in France with Villa Carmignac, or Mallorca with the Es Baluard Museum of Contemporary Art. What makes the Japanese case particularly fascinating, however, is the complete sense of immersion that takes place on the island, an

²² Walter De Maria and the Chichu Art Museum: Art Beyond Time and Space on Naoshima, in *Finding Naoshima*, <https://finding-naoshima.co.jp/walter-de-maria/> (accessed 26 June 2026).

experience capable of pulling you away from reality and suspending time. It feels like exploring an untouched place where the only traces of human presence are tied to contemporary art, coexisting with the few remaining signs of the island's past and becoming a true pilgrimage destination for art lovers.

1.3 National Art Center Tokyo

The last museum I want to focus on is the National Art Center, Tokyo (NACT) opened in the Roppongi area. Opened in January 2007, it is one of the five institutions of the Independent Administrative Institution National Museum of Art. The neighborhood in which the museum is located is among the fastest growing areas and destined to become one of Tokyo's main cultural centers. It represents the first 'national' art museum to be built since the National museum of Art, Osaka, and it is certainly one of the most prestigious and expensive cultural projects by the national government in Japan. Of the 45,000 m² of floor area in the museum, 14,000 m² are used for gallery space, making it one of the largest in Japan, that even exceeds the 12,500 m² of the refurbished museum of modern Art in New York.²³

Designed by the great architect Kisho Kurokawa (1934-2007), the pioneering architect of the Metabolist Movement²⁴, this center combines futuristic and technological elements to the concept of a 'museum in a forest'. Its structure stands out for its fluid and dynamic architecture, characterized by large undulating glass façades that extend across the entire exterior like waves. The primary sensation upon entering is of great openness and permeability between interior and exterior. The high ceilings offer views through the glass of the surrounding greenery, including Aoyama Park, allowing visitors to feel immersed in nature even if they are in the very city center and creating the ideal environment for resting between one exhibition and another. The building develops over four floors and, in addition to its seven exhibition galleries, includes three cafés, a restaurant, and a museum shop, all organized around a concrete conical structure rising within the main lobby. The glass walls allow light to flood the interiors, while the wooden walls and interior design create a relaxing atmosphere, ideal for visiting an exhibition.

²³ Masaaki Morishita, *The Empty Museum: Western Cultures and the Artistic Field in Modern Japan* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2012), p. 13.

²⁴ "Project in-depth: The National Art Center, Tokyo," Rethinking The Future (RTF), <https://www.re-thinkingthefuture.com/case-studies/a13894-project-in-depth-the-national-art-center-tokyo/> (accessed June 2026).



Fig.17-18. Kisho Kurokawa & Associates, The National Art Center, Tokyo, (2007).
Source: Condé Nast Traveler.

I visited the museum twice during my stay in Tokyo, which gave me the opportunity to experience several different exhibitions over the course of a few months. Between my first and second visit, many of the exhibitions had already changed, allowing me to enjoy the peculiarities and dynamics of the organization and of the program. Upon entering the National Art Center Tokyo, I was immediately struck by the way the building hosts several simultaneous and independent exhibitions. Rather than a single unified show, the space functions more like a long corridor of autonomous galleries. Each entrance introduced a separate exhibition with its own curatorial logic, thematic identity, and spatial arrangement tailored specifically to the works on display. The various galleries are separated from each other by partitions that can be moved or removed to create larger or smaller rooms depending on the event. The word ‘museum’ is perhaps not the most appropriate term to describe this place, whose philosophy is based primarily on a dynamic vision of art. The National Art Center is often described as ‘an empty museum’²⁵, precisely because it has neither a permanent collection nor a curator. This building offers its spaces only for temporary exhibitions, some of which are organized directly by the National Art Center, while others are sponsored and coordinated by art institutes and private associations.

The first exhibition I saw was in October, titled *Prism of the Real: Making Art in Japan 1989-2010* and organised by The National Art Center, Tokyo, in partnership with M+, Hong Kong. These two institutions formed a partnership in March 2024 to engage more actively with global audiences. The central idea was to reexamine Japanese art history in the 21 years from 1989 to 2010, which have been a time of profound upheaval in politics, the economy and broader society²⁶.

²⁵ Morishita, *The empty museum* cit., p.13

²⁶ "Prism of the Real: Making Art in Japan 1989–2010," Exhibition overview, The National Art Center, Tokyo, https://www.nact.jp/english/exhibition_special/2025/JCAW/ (accessed June 2026).



Fig. 19. Poster of the exhibition: *Prism of the Real: Making Art in Japan 1989–2010*.

The exhibition attempted to construct a fragmented narrative through different sections, which function as lenses on the art that emerged in Japan and how Japanese culture inspired the world in those two decades. It was a critical transitional period that saw the end of the Cold War and the advent of contemporary globalization, enabling the freer movement of people, goods, and information, and greatly encouraging international dialogue and engagement. In the 80s the interest in art from regions outside the West was growing, and several exhibitions featuring avant-garde art from Japan were held in Europe, expanding awareness of and interest in Japanese art. In addition to this the acceleration of globalism in the 1990s and 2000s fueled an increased movement of people, goods, and information around the world. Many works in the exhibition demonstrate that artists were no longer interested in representing Japan through exoticism or traditional imagery aimed at Western expectations. Instead, they addressed universal themes such as migration, sexuality, memory, environmental destruction, consumerism, and social isolation.

As the curators commented: «This collaboration with the National Art Center, Tokyo extends and deepens M+'s commitment to Japanese contemporary art and visual culture in the museum's transnational collections and programming. We are confident that *Prism of the Real: Making Art in Japan 1989–2010* offers a refreshing look at a critical moment in

Japanese culture and society in the first two decades of globalization, when contemporary art served as fertile ground for porous exchanges and dialogues. Eschewing a national framework, the exhibition hopes to remind viewers of a remarkable period of internationalism and encourage them to reflect on the possibility of dialogues with the wider world in the 21st century»²⁷.

The exhibition begins with a prologue that explores the early stirrings of internationalization in the 1980s. It is followed by a critical turn, beginning in 1989, marked by a surge of artistic activity during a period of dynamic socio-political transformation in Japan. The examination of this era is conducted from three thematic perspectives. The first, *The Past Is a Phantom*, explores how artists continued to engage with the subject of war and its impact on the social, cultural, and individual psyches. The second, *Self and Others*, focuses on artistic practices that interrogate issues of identity, gender, and traditional hierarchy, showing how Japanese culture can facilitate interpersonal exchanges. The third, *A Promise of Community*, features projects that explore fresh possibilities of relation through interactions with existing communities or the creation of new ones.

1989 was a year of great social change characterized in Japan by new critical perspectives. The year before, the Japanese artists Yasumasa Morimura and Tatsuo Miyajima were selected for the Venice Biennale's newcomer category *Aperto*, presenting their work at exhibitions overseas²⁸.

Morimura exhibited *Portrait (Twins)*, a reminiscence of Edouard Manet's painting *Olympia* (1863).

²⁷ Doryun Chong (Artistic Director and Chief Curator, M+), quoted in M+, "Prism of the Real: Making Art in Japan 1989–2010 opens at M+," Press release, May 15, 2025, <https://www.nact.jp/english/exhibition_special/2025/JCAW/> (accessed June 2026).

²⁸ *Prism of the Real: Making Art in Japan 1989-2010*, exhibition review, in ARTPREVIEWTOKYO, <https://artpreviewtokyo.com/en/exhibition/prism-of-the-real/> (accessed June 2026).



Fig. 20. Yasumasa Morimura, *Portrait (Twins)* (1988). Source: Exhibition photography: Muto Shigeo.

The models for the prostitute reclining in the foreground and the black-looking maid in the background are both the artist himself. In his conceptual works, the artist explores binary oppositions such as male and female, East and West, and photography and painting, revealing identity and culture as layered and constructed phenomena. Through this approach, his practice has contributed to a renewed international interest in Japanese contemporary art.

The other exhibition that struck me the most was the one presented in the same space in the months after has been *YBA & BEYOND: British Art in the 90s from the Tate Collection*.

This exhibition maintains a clear line with the one that anticipated it, proposing an overview on the art movements from the 80s to the 2000s, but in this case not anymore in Japan, but in the United Kingdom. Organized in collaboration with the Tate Gallery in London, the exhibition traces the radical creativity and groundbreaking approaches that redefined British

art during the 1990s. On display there are more than ninety works by approximately fifty artists, including figures who left a lasting mark on global art history, from Damien Hirst and Tracey Emin to Francis Bacon. The exhibition explores the evolution of Britain when, after going through the Thatcher era, a new generation of artists challenged traditional norms and embraced bold, experimental practices, producing a form of art that permanently changed the language of contemporary artistic practice²⁹. The neoliberal economic policies promoted by Margaret Thatcher since 1979 widened social inequality in the United Kingdom. Against this background, young artists began critically questioning ideas of 'Britishness', using the visual language of mass media, advertising, consumer culture, and popular imagery. Artists no longer attempted to preserve traditional artistic hierarchies. Instead, they embraced provocation, fragmentation, and themes taken directly from everyday life.

Many of the newer generation of artists who came to prominence in the 1990s were referred to in the art and popular media under the title Young British Artists (YBAs), and they started choosing materials from entirely new perspectives, using animal carcasses, pornography, and everyday objects and found items to create innovative works.

A good example shown during the National Art Center's exhibition is Damien Hirst's *The Acquired Inability to Escape* (1991), which reflects many of the obsessions that defined the YBA movement: confinement, death, scientific control, and the body as an object of observation. His work transformed subjects traditionally considered uncomfortable or taboo into central artistic material. «The packet of cigarettes, an ashtray, and a lighter set on the desk serve as metaphors for death or suffocation, implying a worker spinning in an unescapable cycle»³⁰.

²⁹ *About the Exhibition*, in *YBA & BEYOND: British Art in the 90s from the Tate Collection Official Website*, <https://www.ybabeyond.jp> (accessed June 2026).

³⁰ . Reyes, *YBA & BEYOND: British Art in the 90s from the Tate Collection*, in *SHIFT*, <https://www.shift.jp.org/en/archives/2026/03/yba-and-beyond.html> (accessed June 2026).



Fig. 21. Damien Hirst, *The Acquired Inability to Escape* (1991). Source: DACS & JASPAR.

Another revolutionary aspect explored in the exhibition is the influence of music, fashion, and subculture on artistic production. In the section *Everybody in the Place: Music, Subculture and Style*, the exhibition explains how artists drew inspiration from club culture, magazines, advertisements, and youth movements to capture the instability and energy of the decade. Works such as Mark Leckey's *Fiorucci Made Me Hardcore* (1999) combine archival footage and sound to reconstruct the emotional memory of British nightlife and collective youth identity.

The exhibition further shows how YBA artists like Tracey Emin have been able to transform private trauma into a public narrative, addressing shame, female vulnerability, and empowerment through a confessional visual language such as *Why I Never Became a Dancer* (1995). In continuity to this it ends in one of the last sections with an important overview on

how many artists reacted to scientific anxieties and the AIDS crisis, addressing the fear surrounding disease, medical systems, and bodily control during the 1990s.



Fig. 22. Tracey Emin, *Why I Never Became a Dancer* (1995). Source: Sammlung Goetz.

What I found particularly captivating about this center, beyond its remarkable architecture and the context in which it is situated, was its ability to bring together so many different forms of art and exhibition under one roof. It feels like more than a museum, a cultural center. People are welcomed in, free to connect with what feels most familiar to them and discover something entirely new.

In my personal experience, my attention was drawn to exhibitions that clearly followed the standard model of modern and contemporary curatorship, such as major retrospectives, conceptual shows, and presentations of artistic collectives. At the same time, during my visit to the National Art Center, I also took advantage of the opportunity to explore high-jewelry exhibitions like *Bulgari Kaleidos: Colors, Cultures and Crafts*, as well as another one dedicated to Japanese haute couture, *HANAE MORI Vital Type: The 100th Anniversary of Birth*. Finally, even if less publicized and smaller, were equally fascinating all the exhibitions hosting Japanese artists' associations, regional groups, academy students, or those focused on pure experimentation.

Leaving the National Art Center, I was left with the unmistakable feeling of having witnessed a genuine celebration of culture in motion.

Chapter 2

THE MAKING OF JAPAN'S ART INSTITUTIONS THROUGH WESTERNIZATION AND GLOBALIZATION

Naoshima, Kanazawa, and the National Art Center in Tokyo left me with a question that none of the three, taken individually, could answer. Each of these institutions spoke a language of contemporary art that I recognized instantly, one built from the same architectural grammar, the same white cubes and concrete volumes, the same rhetoric of openness and public accessibility that I had grown up with in Europe. And yet each of them was unmistakably, irreducibly Japanese, despite that shared language but somehow through it. To understand why, it is necessary to step back from the exhibitions themselves and try to understand where the Japanese museum came from. How did a country that spent centuries deliberately isolated from the rest of the world come to build, in the span of little more than a hundred and fifty years, one of the most sophisticated and internationally engaged museum systems on earth?

2.1 The origins of the Japanese museum and western legacy

The history of museums in Japan can begin with the fact that the word for ‘museum’ did not exist in Japanese before the Meiji era (1868-1912). Neither did the word for ‘art’ in the modern, aesthetic sense we now take for granted. *Hakubutsukan* (博物館) and *bijutsu* (美術) are both nineteenth-century neologisms, invented to translate Western concepts that Japanese simply had no term for, as historians of modern Japanese art such as Satō Dōshin and Kitazawa Noriaki have shown in their reconstructions of this terminological shift³¹. This is not a minor philological curiosity. It means that Japan did not simply import a building type or an administrative practice when it opened itself to the West in the mid-nineteenth century; it imported, and had to invent a language for, an entire way of thinking about objects, history, and public knowledge. Westernization, in the museum field as in so many others, began at the

³¹ Noriaki Kitazawa, *Me no shinden: "Bijutsu" juyōshi shiron*, Tokyo: Bijutsu Shuppansha, 1989; Dōshin Satō, *Modern Japanese Art and the System of "Art": Culture, People, and Society*, trad. Hiroshi Nara, Tokyo: Global Oriental, 2011, pp. 17-45.

level of the concept before it ever reached the level of the institution.

The first encounter with the Western museum did not even take place inside a museum. It happened at the great World's Fairs of the 1860s, where Japan appeared not as a visitor studying an institution but as an exhibit being studied by one. The country sent its first delegation, the Takeuchi mission, to the London World's Fair of 1862, and five years later chose to send artefacts to the Exposition Universelle in Paris³². Japan's first lesson in museology, in other words, was learned from the inside of a display case, as an object of Western curiosity rather than as its subject. It was in the wake of these encounters that the idea of the museum began to circulate seriously among Japanese officials and intellectuals. The statesman Sano Tsunetami, having observed with fascination the collections of London's South Kensington Museum during a visit in August 1872, proposed it as the most suitable model for Japan to follow, and the Meiji government duly built its own version of the South Kensington Museum in Ueno Park, Tokyo³³.



Fig. 23. View of the main building of Tokyo National Museum in Ueno, Tokyo, 1910.
Source: Wikipedia.

³² W.-C. Chang, *A Cross-Cultural Perspective on Musealization: The Museum's Reception by China and Japan in the Second Half of the Nineteenth Century*, in *Museum History Journal*, 2012.

³³ "Studies in Modern Japanese Art History: Art and National Identity", in *Arcadia*, <https://www.env-hum.net/arcadia/> (accessed 15 July 2026).

The best-known example of this process of Westernization is undoubtedly *Seiyō Jijō*³⁴, literally translated as *Conditions in the West*. This work offered one of the earliest and most comprehensive accounts of Western institutions, customs and political systems available to the Japanese public. Based on travels to the United States and Europe, the book introduced readers to Western forms of government, economic organization, educational systems and everyday social practices. More than a simple travel account, *Seiyō Jijō* became a model from which knowledge could be acquired and adapted.

The government's ambition, at this early stage, was not to assert difference but to establish congruity with the Western powers³⁵ and to be recognized as civilized on Western terms. One of the clearest ways to demonstrate that recognition before it could ever be asserted diplomatically were museums and cultural centers. This same logic, of the museum as an instrument of legitimacy and, ultimately, of power, did not remain confined to the home islands. As Japan's own imperial and colonial ambitions expanded into East Asia and the Pacific, so did its museums, which soon came to function as tools for their expansion³⁶. By the mid-1930s, the Japanese museum system had established or absorbed institutions in Taiwan, Korea, Sakhalin, and Manchuria, extending a Western-derived model of cultural custodianship into the very colonies that Japan's own modernization had made possible³⁷. Furthermore, within Imperial Japan's goal of Asian peoples coexisting in 'mutual prosperity'³⁸, the excuse of the museum became essential for collecting knowledge about the nature, cultures, and populations of colonial territories. In this way, the museum, imported as a tool of domestic self-modernization, was swiftly repurposed as a tool to support the colonial project; an early, unmistakable instance of what today we would call cultural soft power.

Scholars of comparative museology have coined for this entire process the term *the museum transplant*. A transplant is never simply an insertion, it is a graft that the receiving body inevitably works to adapt, sometimes rejecting parts of it, sometimes reshaping it into

³⁴ Y. Fukuzawa, *Seiyō jijō: The situation in western countries*. Tōkyō: Shōkodō, 1869

³⁵ A. Y. Tseng, *The Imperial Museums of Meiji Japan: Architecture and the Art of the Nation*, Seattle, University of Washington Press, 2008.

³⁶ M. Nardoni, *Queer Museology and Japanese Artistic Heritage: Rereading the Collections and Institutional Activism*, tesi di laurea magistrale, Ca' Foscari University of Venice, a.a. 2024-2025. p. 23.

³⁷ N. Aso, *Public Properties: Museums in Imperial Japan*, Durham, Duke University Press, 2014.

³⁸ Nardoni, *Queer Museology and Japanese Artistic Heritage* cit., p. 23.

something the donor organism would barely recognize. This metaphor helps in the comprehension of how the museums were a product of the appropriation of Western formats, yet one profoundly shaped by pre-existing local attitudes toward the preservation and display of cultural heritage³⁹.

Japan, after all, was not devoid of its own museological instincts and has seen an evolution similar to the one that took place in Europe with the exposition and veneration of relics between the 12th and 13th century. The practice of *gokaichō*, already in the Edo period, consisted in the opening of the storehouses of Buddhist temples and Shinto shrines to expose sacred images and historical objects to public view. What the Meiji state imported from the West, then, was not the impulse to preserve and display as such, which Japan already possessed in its own idiom, but a specific version of that impulse of collecting works of art under one roof.

2.2 Legislation

In a single year, 1951, Japan acquired nearly the entire architecture that still governs its museum system today with the Museum Act. It distinguished formally between public museums, established by local governments, and private museums, established by incorporated associations and foundations⁴⁰, and laid down in considerable detail the qualifications required of directors and curators. In that same year, the Japanese National Committee of ICOM was founded, barely five years after the International Council of Museums itself had come into being in Paris, immediately binding Japan's museum profession to an international framework of standards and ethics⁴¹.

It was this same Museum Act that gave legal shape to the Japanese curator, the *gakugeiin* (学芸員), certifying as such anyone holding a university degree with the required museum-related credits under the relevant ministerial ordinance⁴². But it would be a mistake to treat *gakugeiin* as a simple translation of 'curator'. The term was built, from the outset,

³⁹ Chang, "A Cross-Cultural Perspective on Musealization" cit.

⁴⁰ *Museum Act (Hakubutsukan Hō)*, Law No. 285 of 1951, as amended, in *Japanese Law Translation*, <https://www.japaneselawtranslation.go.jp/en/laws/view/4309/en> (accessed 15 July 2026).

⁴¹ Institutional website "About ICOM Japan", in *ICOM Kyoto 2019*, <https://icomjapan.org/icomkyoto2019/icom-japan.html> (accessed 15 July 2026).

⁴² *Ibid.*; M. Morishita, I. Gouveia (eds.), "Dossiê Museus e Patrimônio no Japão", in *Museologia e Patrimônio*, MAST, vol. 10, no. 2, 2017.

around a generalist rather than a specialist figure. The idea of a curator revolves around a single professional, often working alone or in very small teams, responsible simultaneously for collection, conservation, exhibition, research, and education, regardless of the museum's subject matter, whether art, natural history, or archaeology. Europe at the same time pushed the curator in the opposite direction, toward specialization and a critical authority that went well beyond the original task of organizing works on a wall. The curator, as we are going to see in the next chapter, has become something closer to an author or almost an artist in his own right, no longer someone who merely arranged meaning but someone who actively produced it, guiding the visitor's understanding rather than simply making it possible. Japan's law did the reverse, building a professional deliberately as broad and interchangeable as the collection they were asked to serve.

More recently the evolution of the museum's bureaucracy worldwide and especially in Japan saw during the 25th ICOM General Conference held in Kyoto a new shift. A new definition of a museum was acquired, understood as a politically and socially engaged institution. This definition was then officially adopted in 2022 in Prague, and a first Japanese translation was published in 2023. This moment marks a significant turning point for both the international and Japanese museum sectors. Since then, a growing number of professionals have been reflecting on how museums can open up to those who don't yet perceive them as their own spaces⁴³ and significantly helped shape the social purpose of those institutions.

2.3 The birth of contemporary art museums

If the early 1950s gave Japan the skeleton of its museum system, it was in the 1980s that museums acquired a different kind of body altogether, not simply more institutions, but a different idea of what an institution was for. Until then, on both sides of Japan and the West, a museum's first duty had been essentially custodial. Collecting, cataloguing, conserving and only afterward, almost as an afterthought, to interpret and display. It is a debt Japan had inherited with remarkable fidelity. The earliest photographs of the Tokyo National Museum, taken not long after its foundation, could almost be mistaken for images of a provincial European institution⁴⁴. Glass cases arranged in disciplined rows, labels in careful vertical

⁴³ Nardoni, *Queer Museology and Japanese Artistic Heritage* cit., p. 7.

⁴⁴ Yang, *Exhibitionary Spaces in Japanese Art* cit., p. 29.

script, an atmosphere of scholarly hush that owed everything to nineteenth-century taxonomy and nothing, visibly, to any older Japanese way of showing things to a public.



Fig. 24. Interior view of the Tokyo National Museum (TNM) exhibition galleries

What changed in the 1980s was not the museum's contents but its ambition. Museums stopped being asked merely to preserve a national past; they were asked, increasingly, to produce a cultural present. It is no accident that this is precisely the decade that produced the first wave of institutions built expressly for contemporary rather than merely modern art. It was in this period that culture, for a brief and expensive moment, looked like the natural next stage of national development after industry and technology had already been conquered.

A museum, in this new logic, no longer simply held a nation's memory. It performed a nation's contemporaneity, its ability to sit at the same table as New York, London, and Paris. Arts and culture became a sort of political project aimed to modernize the country, to educate the population and to position Japan as a nation in step with the rest of the world.

Museums, in Japan and the West, were reimagined as venues for education, entertainment, escapism, and aesthetics rather than as simple repositories of objects. On both sides the museum arrived at the very same unexpected conclusion that the artwork has stopped being

the centre. What mattered, increasingly, in Japan as in the West, was the experience of being there.

What distinguishes contemporary art museums in Japan in particular are certain sensibilities that align perfectly with the culture of the entire country, and that make the experience distinctly Japanese. The same reverent silence found on the subway carriages I described in my introduction, resurfaces in the galleries of the Japanese museums. Visitors move through them with remarkable delicacy and respect, qualities that, today, can be harder to find in Western museums, where visitors tend to be louder and more chaotic. The harmony achieved between architecture and territory speaks volumes about the country in which these museums are built; one need only think of the structures scattered across Naoshima. This same dialogue between architecture, history, and contemporary art can also be found in some of Italy's great museums, where historic buildings now house contemporary collections. The Castello di Rivoli Museum of Contemporary Art, or the Pinault Collection at Palazzo Grassi in Venice, are excellent examples of places that once narrated the history of noble or royal families and now enclose collections and exhibitions that are, in many respects, thoroughly contemporary.



Fig. 25. *Interior view of Palazzo Grassi, Venice.* Source: Author's photograph.



Fig. 26. *Exhibition room inside the Castello di Rivoli Museum of Contemporary Art.* Source: Author's photograph.

In Japan, however, architecture more than speaks for history, it speaks first and foremost for the country's own philosophy. The minimalism, the cleanliness, the meditation, are all distinctive elements that run through everyday Japanese life itself. The visitor moving through Chichu, or through SANAA's building in Kanazawa, is not simply looking at art in a well-designed room; they are being asked, quite deliberately, to slow down, to notice light shifting across a wall, to hear the sea through an opening in the ceiling. This kind of experience differs from what is found in the West, speaking about Japan's centuries-old culture, reflecting the same discipline found in the tea ceremony or the raked gravel patterns of a Zen garden.



Fig. 27. Hiroshi Sugimoto, *Glass Tea House Mondrian*, 2014 (permanently installed 2022). Hiroshi Sugimoto Gallery: Time Corridors, Benesse Art Site Naoshima. Source: Author's photograph.

2.4 Japan's influence and contribution on western art

Coming to the present day, this discourse of influence from the West to Japan resurfaces, in a new form and it is even clearer within the field of contemporary art museums. If it is true that these museums remain, in their institutional genesis, direct offspring of the Western model, as demonstrated in the first part of this chapter, it is equally true that, on the level of artistic

languages and practices, the relationship has gradually reversed itself. This is no longer an episodic influence or a moment of exotic curiosity, but something more stable and structural. Japan has become part of the very imagination through which the West now thinks about the contemporary museum, its architecture, and its way of treating space and the visitor.

This phenomenon does not begin today. Already at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, *Japonisme* had shown how Japan could be not merely a receiver but a genuine engine of transformation for European art. As Siegfried Wichmann has documented⁴⁵, the Japanese prints and decorative objects that reached Europe provided painters such as Monet, Degas, Whistler, and Van Gogh, with new compositional principles, flattened perspective, emptiness treated as an active compositional element, contributing directly to the birth of Impressionism itself.

Japanese influence on Europe, beyond the Japonisme phase, which was more closely linked to a visual aesthetic, offered also a different way of conceiving experience, time, space, and the relationship between the individual and the environment. This philosophical dimension resurfaces with particular force in the postwar decades, this time explicitly tied to Zen Buddhist thought. Western artists and the whole society we are living in chose to adopt, not merely imitate, an entire philosophical apparatus belonging to another culture, translating it into its own terms until it became an integral part of its own artistic language. The Buddhist principles of sensibility, presence, contemplation, the acceptance of emptiness, has today become a stable reference point in Western museum architecture as well. Tadao Andō, architect of the Chichu Art Museum on Naoshima, later applied this same language, exposed concrete, calculated voids, an almost meditative use of natural light, to the renovation of two historic Venetian buildings for the Pinault Collection⁴⁶.

⁴⁵ S. Wichmann, *Japonisme: The Japanese Influence on Western Art Since 1858*, New York, Harmony Books, 1981.

⁴⁶ “Punta della Dogana”, in *Pinault Collection*, <https://www.pinaultcollection.com/palazzograssi/en/punta-della-dogana> (accessed 31 July 2026).



Fig. 28. View of Tadao Ando architecture in Punta della Dogana, Venice. Source: Marco Cappelletti

The result is not a Japanese museum transplanted into Europe, but a Japanese architectural mode of thought so thoroughly consolidated that it could be applied, quite naturally, to a European monument, changing the way the Italian public experiences its own history. Rome's MAXXI, already mentioned earlier, tells the same story from a different angle. Although signed by a Western architect, Zaha Hadid, the museum unmistakably recalls the same logic of dissolved boundaries and public space that characterises so much recent Japanese museum architecture.



Fig. 29. Interior view of the main lobby and staircase at MAXXI by Zaha Hadid, Rome.
Source: Valerio Pellegrini

These examples become the sign that this logic is no longer perceived as ‘foreign’, but has become part of the very vocabulary through which the West designs its own museums.

Furthermore, many contemporary artists adopt Japanese concepts or practices in their artistic production, in some cases taking a far culture and making it yours and in other cases just bringing to a new public, like the western one, a piece of art that it’s able to talk about the traditions the artist grew up in. In the first case it is possible to find western artists that propose in their works aspects that perfectly align and blend with elements characteristic of Asian religions. One can consider for example Anish Kapoor; although his works contain no direct references to the East, they stimulate a process of introspection and an engagement with the void that are characteristic of Zen Buddhism. In this sense, Kapoor aligns with the Eastern concept that the invisible can hold as much significance as the visible.



Fig. 30. Anish Kapoor, installation view a Palazzo Manfrin, Venezia, 2026. Source: Artribune

In a much more direct manner, Chiharu Shiota, a Japanese artist based in Berlin, uses thousands of red wool threads to create large, immersive environments that visitors physically enter. Her works combine Shinto elements, such as memory, spirituality, and the relationship between humanity and the universe, with the language of contemporary art. These threads are not merely an aesthetic element; they represent invisible connections, emotional bonds, memories, and human relationships. The work is therefore not a standalone object but a living system of relationships, in which each individual element acquires meaning only through its connection to the others. One example is the installation *The Key in the Hand*, presented at the 2015 Venice Biennale.



Fig. 31. Chiharu Shiota, *The Key in the Hand*, 2015. Site-specific installation (red yarn, keys, wooden boats), Japan Pavilion, 56th Venice Biennale.

Thousands of keys suspended within a network of red threads evoke personal memories and symbolic gateways into individuals' lives ⁴⁷. The keys belong to strangers yet are united within a single collective tapestry. Shiota with her works successfully communicates philosophies rooted in the influences of her native country, effectively conveying them to a Western audience. It is not a matter of fascination with the exotic, but rather an open doorway between these two parts of the world.

When discussing mutual influences, one will always find elements of one culture within another. It is not enough to speak merely of Westernization; rather, one must speak more broadly of globalization and continuous interconnection. This broader process of globalisation enabled a rapid and continuous circulation of ideas, practices, and visual languages across different regions, developing a cultural convergence. This phenomenon has made possible a dialogue between Western and Eastern art, to the point that neither can be

⁴⁷ N. Azzarello, *Chiharu Shiota Weaves an Immersive Labyrinth of Keys and Yarn*, in *designboom*, 6 May 2015, <https://www.designboom.com/art/chiharu-shiota-venice-art-biennale-the-key-in-the-hand-05-06-2015/> (accessed 31 July 2026).

considered autonomously today. In the contemporary context, art can no longer be understood within the boundaries of a single cultural or geographical centre. As several scholars have observed, we are witnessing a significant shift from a system historically centred on Europe and the United States towards a more dispersed and pluralistic configuration⁴⁸. We can talk about a standardized aesthetic language, on which the art world operates and that Japan clearly has adopted and aligned. In this sense, many of the museums and art centers I encountered in Japan appeared to follow exhibition logics and spatial narratives that closely resemble those found in European institutions.

The history of Japanese museums demonstrates that cultural exchange is never a linear process of imitation, nor does it move in only one direction. The museum arrived in Japan as a Western institution, but through absorption and adaptation it became the vehicle of a distinctly Japanese sensibility, generating aesthetic and philosophical models that no longer belonged solely to the country that had first borrowed them. Today that sensibility has travelled back across the world, shaping the way museums are designed, the way artworks are experienced, and the way visitors are invited to inhabit cultural space.

⁴⁸ M. Antoinette, C. Turner, *Contemporary Asian Art and Exhibitions: Connectivities and World-Making*, Canberra, ANU Press, 2014.

Chapter 3

CURATORSHIP BETWEEN THE WEST AND JAPAN

One of the most striking impressions I formed during my fieldwork in Japan concerns how exhibitions are framed and credited. Moving through museums in Kanazawa, Tokyo or Osaka, I began looking for the curators behind temporary exhibitions, first on wall texts and opening panels, then in catalogues, press releases, and institutional websites. What became clear immediately was the absence of a curatorial centrality. Instead of a named individual, I consistently found collective attributions that were mentioning ‘exhibition organized by the museum’, giving credits to departments, or, at most, acknowledgments of sponsors and supporters. This absence did not seem as a lack of curatorial work, but more like a different settlement model of authorship and public address. The museum appeared as the speaking subject, while curatorship operated as a collective process.

This realization prompted a series of reflections shaped by my prior habits as a visitor in Western contexts, where the curator’s name is typically prominent. I understood how contemporary art can appear globally uniform, following recognizable formats and display conventions. Yet on this specific point a major divergence opened. The Japanese model, with its collective authorship and institutional voice, stands in sharp contrast to the Western emphasis on the curator-as-author. Recognizing this difference became the starting point for a reflection on how these two approaches frame exhibitions, distribute credit and responsibility, and shape access and interpretation for audiences.

This contrast with the Western model, where the curator often acts as an authorial figure and sometimes as a public personality, opened a central question on the different regimes of authorship and how they have developed or shaped the production of meaning.

3.1 The rise of the Star-curator

The Western model of the modern curator emerged in the late twentieth century through a gradual change from the role of the caretaker and organizer, working with collections out of sight of the public, to a more central position on a much broader stage, as an author and

intellectual agent. This transformation consolidated in the 1960s and 1970s, when the exhibition began to be understood as a medium with its own grammar. In those years, a number of exhibitions had developed a symbiotic relationship between the exhibition space and conceptually led artistic production. Within this framework, the curator moved beyond selection and logistics to construct narratives, articulate hypotheses, and set interpretive horizons. Ever since the 1960s, there has been a growing understanding and acceptance of curators as having a more pro-active, creative, and political part to play in the production, mediation, and dissemination of art itself⁴⁹.

In 1969, Harald Szeemann with the curatorship of the exhibition *When Attitudes Become Form* at the Kunsthalle Bern, signed a turning point. The exhibition transformed the traditional role of the curator and anticipated many of the dynamics that still define contemporary art today⁵⁰. Rather than presenting artworks as isolated objects, Szeemann conceived the exhibition itself as a conceptual and intellectual framework.



Fig. 32. Exhibition: *When Attitudes Become Form* 22 March – 27 April 1969, Kunsthalle, Bern. Source: Kunsthalle website

⁴⁹ P. O'Neill, *The culture of curating and the curating of culture(s)*, Cambridge (Massachusetts), The MIT Press, 2012, p.9.

⁵⁰ Emily Steer, *The Rise and Rise of the Celebrity Curator*, *Elephant*, November 16, 2021, <<https://elephant.art/the-rise-and-rise-of-the-celebrity-curator/>> (accessed June 2026).

The focus shifted from the finished artwork to artistic process, experimentation, and gesture, bringing together conceptual art, Arte Povera, and performance practices. His independent projects after the Kunsthalle Bern exemplified the idea of the 'exhibition as work', where the curator's conceptual design and spatial dramaturgy formed an integrated whole. Szeemann advanced the view that an exhibition is not only a container of artworks but an authored composition in its own right. The exhibition becomes like a show that has its own concept, structure, rhythm, and rhetoric, much like a film or a book. Works are chosen for how they participate in an argument and not only for intrinsic value. The curator does not assemble objects, he script relations among them so that new meanings arise from sequence, adjacency, and spatial tension. From this moment onward, the curator assumed a recognisable voice, capable of producing meaning through juxtaposition, sequencing, and discourse. The 1970s and subsequent decades amplified this role through biennials, thematic surveys, and new institutional forms that demanded a strong interpretive stance.

Szeemann's role was crucial in redefining the figure of the curator as an author. Through the selection, arrangement, and interpretation of works, the curator gained a new level of visibility and influence within the art system, laying the foundations for the contemporary idea of the curator as a central cultural figure. The result was a curatorial persona that operated not only within institutions but also in the public sphere, often functioning as a brand.

This evolution has led, today, to an association between the figure of the curator and that of a star or celebrity. The curator is now seen as a glamorous, internationally recognized figure, spreading cultural prestige across the globe and increasingly likely to become famous in his or her own right. Over time, curators have gained a more advantageous position and greater visibility than the artists themselves, becoming the point of reference and sometimes the very reason why one visits an exhibition or event. Luca Rossi's recent article on the drift of superstar curators has raised a topic of great interest and perfectly relevant to this topic:

«Curators have become stars and have overshadowed the works and the artists. The great exhibitions, such as the Biennales and Documenta, are remembered for the curators, not the

artists. A surreal system that threatens to make art die by reducing it to a media spectacle»⁵¹. The 'celebrity curator' can be exemplified in part by figures such as Hans Ulrich Obrist or Klaus Biesenbach, who are almost mythologized today, considered like a true star, dynamic and always on the move. What has emerged especially in the West is the figure of the independent curator, a mobile author who constructs narratives across venues and audiences. We can observe a significant evolution in the responsibilities assigned to curators compared to how the role was understood in the first half of the century. To the traditional function of selecting works and shaping artistic taste, has been added a wider range of responsibilities related to collaboration with artists, bureaucratic and administrative aspects, the presentation of artworks, and the mediation between the works and the public. One of the major changes that is manifested in the curator's functions concerns his more active involvement not only in the selection of artworks, but in the very production of art and its meanings.⁵² In other words, the curator has gained greater influence in shaping the value of artworks, contributing not only to their presentation and interpretation but also to the processes through which their meaning and accessibility is constructed.

In Bauman's formulation emerges a debate against this role nowadays. «On the one hand, there is the positive assessment that the figure of the curator represents the hope for finding footing again in the jungle of meanings that has resulted from the loss of clarity and binding norms. On the other hand, there are reservations about giving the installation a new position of authority that lays claim to special powers to interpret the processes of connection»⁵³.

As Western curators became influential figures and prominent personalities within the art world, they increasingly came to be seen as connoisseurs of taste and trends, a position that naturally brought greater visibility. The name can become a focal point that draws attention, but it can also risk over-personalizing exhibitions and framing them as stages for curatorial performance or for the institution's own benefit.

This conflict around the status of the curator as an art-world celebrity raises important questions about the value and work of the curator himself. Especially what I questioned myself is how a figure originally conceived as a mediator for knowledge and cultural dissemination has progressively come to resemble that of the artist and in some cases even

⁵¹ Luca Rossi, *By now in art, the stars are the curators, the artists are gone: a grotesque paradox*, Finestre sull'Arte, August 25, 2025

⁵² P. O'Neill, *The Curatorial Turn: From Practice to Discourse*, p. 15

⁵³ Beatrice Von Bismark, *Curatorial Criticality – On the Role of the Freelance Curators in the Field of Contemporary Art*, "OnCurating", Issue 09, 2011, p. 19
https://www.on-curating.org/files/oc/dateverwaltung/old%20Issues/ONCURATING_Issue9.pdf (last access June 2026)

surpassing them in terms of public recognition.

The literature, most notably *A Brief History of Curating*, documents and theorises this evolution, reflecting on the fluidity of the curatorial role and its relationship with institutions and artists. As already mentioned, today we are faced with figures such as Obrist, who is not only responsible for curating exhibitions and art installations but also acts as a public figure.

What was originally intended as an organisational profession, one that appears already built into preexisting art professions, such as museum director⁵⁴, now increasingly distances itself from these administrative functions and moves closer to the position of the artist.

This shift is undoubtedly linked to the direction contemporary art has taken, becoming increasingly conceptual and functioning as an expressive medium in itself. «The curator as creator»⁵⁵, as Bruce Altshuler defined it, assumes the role of administering the cultural meaning of art through the construction of narratives that shape both the objectives of the exhibition and the interpretation of the artist's work. The art world increasingly required an entity capable of giving meaning and coherence to new and abstract artistic forms. As a result, curators began to be seen as 'imparters of value', using the artist's work and the museum space to create complex exhibitions and turning curating into an art form of its own.

In the past, artists often acted as mediators of their own work, playing an important role in the creation and organisation of their exhibitions and collections. Today, however, the professionalisation of the curator's position sometimes can almost replace the artists' involvement in the organization of the exhibitions.

Large events like biennials or exhibitions with a powerful impact, to which we are accustomed today, create a narrative around the curator's vision and ideas, allowing the works to become the characters of a story. These strong curatorial presences are increasingly typical, especially in Western circles, and undoubtedly raise criticism, but also excellent points for reflection.

⁵⁴ Hans Ulrich Obrist, *A Brief History of Curating*, Zurich, JRP|Ringier, 2008, p.5.

⁵⁵ Bruce Altshuler, *The Avant-Garde in Exhibition: New Art in the 20th Century*, Harry N. Abrams, New York 1994, p.236

3.2 The absence of a central authorship in Japan

In Europe, the model we are used to, in museums and in large-scale exhibitions such as the Biennale, places the curator at its center. Conversely, the situation in Japan differs in terms of authorship and public crediting. Exhibitions are presented to the public as institutional projects or as results of a collective function of the museum, giving credit to the group of people involved in their organization. The curator is not idolized as an individual, in the way artists often are; instead, authorship is distributed across departments, with credit most often given to the museum's curatorial team as a whole.

This tendency to reward the group rather than the individual can be observed, on a cultural level, in many social dynamics that take place daily in Japan. This attention to collectivity and mutual cooperation is not a recent phenomenon, nor is it limited to the art world. It is a phenomenon that characterizes this country and that can be traced back to deeper historical roots, defining the current organizational form. It can be read as the continuation of social structures that have shaped Japan since premodern times. The origins are often linked to the country's agrarian past, and in particular to wet-rice cultivation⁵⁶, an activity that, unlike many forms of Western agriculture, demanded coordinated labor and the shared management of irrigation systems among entire village communities. This necessity for cooperation gave rise to long-standing models of collective responsibility, in which individual success was inseparable from the wellbeing and functioning of the group.

These social patterns were later reinforced by the spread of Confucian ethics. Between the 17th and 19th centuries, Neo-Confucian thought contributed to consolidating a social model based on group harmony and hierarchy, social harmony and the subordination of individual interest to the maintenance of order⁵⁷. This same logic continued to operate well into the modern era. In the post-war period, Japan's rapid economic reconstruction was largely built around group-oriented corporate structures with professional identity linked to the organization and distributed responsibility⁵⁸. As well, the decision-making practices were structured on building consensus among all parties before a decision is formally made.

⁵⁶ T. Talhelm, A.S. English, *Historically rice-farming societies have tighter social norms in China and worldwide*, in *PNAS*, vol. 117, no. 33, 2020, <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1910902117> (accessed 23 June 2026).

⁵⁷ M.B. Jansen, *The Making of Modern Japan*, Cambridge (Mass.), Harvard University Press, 2002, p.100.

K. Paramore, *Japanese Confucian Philosophy*, in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/japanese-confucian/> (accessed 23 June 2026).

⁵⁸ Y. Sugimoto, *An Introduction to Japanese Society*, 4th ed., Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2014, pp.143–167.

These mechanisms clearly reflect a cultural inclination to favor cooperation and shared responsibility over individual self-assertion and personal credit. It is within this historical perspective, that it is possible to understand the collectivity in contemporary curatorship as the result of a specific genealogy. Far from being an isolated institutional choice, the practice of crediting curatorial work to a team, appears more as an expression of a much older social model.

Following this line of thought, the lesser centrality of the curatorial figure in the Japanese context can be understood not as an absence of authorship, but as the result of an administrative and organizational tradition that tends to distribute recognition among the members of the institution. Exhibitions are frequently presented as the outcome of a negotiation among departments, curatorial research and museum administration. In this way, the institutional character of cultural production remains consistently visible and acknowledged. The formulas appearing on websites, posters, or introductory panels typically refer to the Curatorial Team, the Organizers, the Museum Staff, and similar collective designations. Consequently, credit for the exhibition project is attributed to a plurality of professional figures, even in cases where a chief curator or artistic director is involved.

Greeting

The idea of forming a team of curators from the National Art Center, Tokyo and overseas to reexamine Japanese art history was first explored three years ago. United by a deep commitment to contemporary art, the National Art Center, Tokyo and M+, both based in Asian megacities, formed a partnership in March 2024 to engage more actively with global audiences, and both institutions have since worked with great dedication to prepare for this exhibition. We are delighted that this collaboration has led to the realization of *Prism of the Real: Making Art in Japan 1989–2010*.

The 21 years from 1989 to 2010, spanning the turn of the millennium, were a time of profound upheaval in politics, the economy, and broader society. In 1989, the Showa era came to an end and the Heisei era began in Japan, while globally the Berlin Wall fell, the Cold War drew to a close, and advancing globalization saw increased movement of people and goods along with rapid acceleration of international exchange. During this period of change, transition, and transformation, what kinds of art emerged in Japan, and what forms of expression were conveyed to the wider world? Approaching Japan as a multifaceted creative platform, this exhibition examines the practices of more than 50 artists and groups from both Japan and abroad.

In closing, we extend our most heartfelt gratitude to the artists and specialists who provided generous cooperation and guidance from the research stage onward, and to the museums and collectors who kindly lent their important works. We are also deeply thankful to all those who provided funding and support, and to everyone whose efforts made this exhibition possible.

The Organizers

Fig. 33. Introductory panel of the exhibition *Prism of the Real: Making Art in Japan 1989–2010*, Tokyo. Source: Author's photograph.

Ultimately, when you think about the actual work of the curator, you never stop at a specific task, but it is precisely their versatility that makes them suitable for the role. Curators have progressively absorbed responsibilities traditionally associated with other professions,

making the definition of their role increasingly blurred. Harald Szeemann described the curator, simultaneously as an administrator, amateur, author of introductions, librarian, manager and accountant, animator, conservator, financier, and diplomat⁵⁹. As Werner Hofmann observes «The boundaries are fluid»⁶⁰ and it is not possible to provide a fixed definition of this profession, just as it is impossible to reduce it to a single task.

Following this reasoning, therefore, the Japanese curatorial system simply distributes among the members of a team all the jobs that would be agreed upon under the figure of the star curator. While the signature of a single individual may be absent, what emerges instead is an attribution of the project's value to a multiplicity of names, without placing the spotlight on any one figure.

3.3 Curatorial approaches from Benesse Art Site to Documenta 5

Certainly, this Japanese *modus operandi* brings to light a more institutional approach, in which the museum is privileged as a productive entity and cultural guarantor. Exhibitions are not personalized through the figure of the curator, as often happens in the West, nor is individual affirmation pursued. What emerges in Japan through the absence of the curator as the author of the exhibition is a shared narrative that is less overtly subjective. The focus is not on the intentions or critical position of the person organizing the exhibition, but rather on the relationships created between the artworks, the space, and the visitor.

A particularly effective example of this can be found on the island of Naoshima or the nearby Teshima with its Art Museum located in the corner of a rice terrace, overlooking the Seto Inland Sea. On this island stands an architectural concrete shell called *Matrix*, that silently reveals the creative visions of artist Rei Naito and architect Ryue Nishizawa.

⁵⁹ Obrist, *A Brief History of Curating* cit., p.34.

⁶⁰ Obrist, *A Brief History of Curating* cit., p.165.



Fig. 34. *Rei Naito and Ryue Nishizawa, Matrix, 2010. Exterior view of Teshima Art Museum, Benesse Art Site Naoshima, Kagawa. Source: Author's photograph.*

The artist himself describes it with these words: «Two oval openings in the shell allow wind, sounds, and light of the world outside into this organic space where nature and architecture intimately interconnect. In the interior space, water continuously springs from the ground in a day-long motion [...] Immersing calmly in this space, feeling united with nature, we may sense the joy of life on earth»⁶¹. Here the dialogue and connection between environment, artists, and visitors result in an experience of meditation and immersion in both the artwork and the territory. Emotional engagement is not constructed through a curatorial presence that guides interpretation, but rather through the rhythm of the visit itself, through pauses, silence, harmony and light.

Furthermore, on the island of Naoshima has been developed an entire museum system whose vision is not attributed to a single figure, but to the whole group of artists exhibited on the island. Visitors enter spaces that do not constantly remind them who conceived them. Walking among museums and artworks, the sensation is that of entering spaces that already belonged to the island. This is also what happens at the Naoshima New Museum of Art, the tenth intervention by Tadao Ando within the Benesse Art Site project and the first museum to

⁶¹ Rei Naito, "Matrix" (2010), artist statement / artwork description, *Benesse Art Site Naoshima*, <https://benesse-artsite.jp/en/art/teshima-artmuseum.html> (accessed September 21, 2026).

carry the island's own name. The institution was conceived as a place of encounter and exchange between residents and visitors, a window onto major artists and collectives from Japan and neighboring Asian countries, designed to sustain a living relationship with the local territory⁶². The works featured in the inaugural exhibition, which I visited in early 2026, were carefully selected to embody the message Honorary Chairman Soichiro Fukutake wishes to convey for the future. An invitation to rediscover the value of slowness, nature, and community through the stimulating power of art, in contrast to the frenetic pace and homogenization of today's major metropolises⁶³. The curatorial approach is based on a collection conceived not around a single authorial thesis, but rather intended to offer multiple perspectives and create a space for collaboration and sharing.



Fig. 35. Cai Guo-Qiang, *"Head On"*, 2006. Installation view at the Naoshima New Museum of Art, Benesse Art Site Naoshima, Kagawa. Source: Author's photograph.

⁶² Naoshima New Museum of Art Opens Saturday, May 31, 2025. Inaugural Exhibition-From the Origin to the Future, press release, in Benesse Art Site Naoshima, 30 May 2025,

⁶³ *From the Origin to the Future: Naoshima New Museum of Art*, in *e-flux Announcements*, June 5, 2025 <https://www.e-flux.com/announcements/647474/from-the-origin-to-the-future> (accessed 30 June 2026).

Naoshima represents a contemporary model that shares certain affinities with projects closer to us and Europe, such as Fondazione Prada in Milan. Both are private institutions that invest in the production and promotion of contemporary art, in the commissioning of new works, and in the construction of a strong cultural identity, expressed both through architectural choices and through the definition of their collections and exhibition programs.



Fig. 36. Exterior view of *Fondazione Prada*, Milan (designed by OMA / Rem Koolhaas).
Source: Author's photograph.

The comparison with Atlas, the permanent collection display at Fondazione Prada, is particularly fitting, as both spaces are built around permanent collections that evolve over time and a shared mission of regeneration and enhancement of the local community. Much like what happened in Japan with the island of Naoshima, the creation of this new cultural hub in Milan has brought about the revitalization of the Largo Isarco neighborhood, through the restoration of a former distillery and the architectural intervention of studio OMA.

In Naoshima New Museum of Art, through the display and rotation of works, including specific site-commissioned pieces and acquired ones, the project aims to offer diverse perspectives and fresh viewpoints on contemporary society and the times we live in. The exhibition resonates with the daily life and rhythms of the island through such works as Do Ho Suh's major *Hub series*, replicating the places he has inhabited and now including a new

corridor from a house in Naoshima, as well as the series exhibit in the museum's café of perspectives painted to match the museum's multipurpose café that serves as a space for locals and visitors to interact⁶⁴.



Fig. 37. Do Ho Suh, *Hub/s*, Naoshima, Seoul, New York, Horsham, London, Berlin, 2025, translucent fabric, installation view, Naoshima New Museum of Art. Source: Author's photograph.

Once again on Naoshima, the location, the artists, nature, and architecture take center stage, relegating the curators' intentions and interventions to the background. Art is left to speak and convey its meaning without needing any mediation.

At this point another question comes naturally: to what extent do the curator's interpretations, in shaping the meaning of an exhibition, influence the viewer's understanding of the artworks

⁶⁴ Naoshima New Museum of Art Opens press release cit.

it contains?

The role of the curator extends far beyond that of an organisational figure, and contemporary exhibitions are never simply a collection of artworks. Selection, sequencing, spatial relationships, as well as texts, lighting, and the rhythm of the visitor's experience are all the result of curatorial choices and personal interpretations. Curators do not merely present the meaning of artworks; they partially construct it⁶⁵.

Harald Szeemann himself described exhibitions as spaces through which to project ideas rather than simply fill available space⁶⁶. The risk of shaping an exhibition around the curator's own vision, reflections, and critical awareness is that it may lead to an actual overwriting of meaning. When an exhibition project becomes strongly authorial, visitors may encounter the curator's thinking before engaging with the artworks themselves. The curator decides what to emphasise, what to display, and what to exclude; in this way, exhibitions inevitably become a reduction of reality, based on selection and interpretative frameworks. Consequently, the stronger the curatorial authorship, the greater the possibility that the exhibition reflects personal positions and sensibilities.

In the Western curatorial model the visitor enters an exhibition and encounters a clearly articulated critical perspective, which is considered a dynamic standard practice in contemporary art. However, when observing Japan, a subtle difference in the perception of curatorship emerges. Visitors are encouraged to understand the works more autonomously through the conditions created by the curator rather than through the curator's explicit personal interpretation. The absence of a visible curatorial signature or a spotlight on the individual curator does not mean that exhibitions lack narrative structures or curatorial positions. Many of the exhibitions I visited presented strong viewpoints and reflective paths addressing historical, social, and contemporary issues.

A good example is *Layers of Accumulated Time*, presented at the 21st Century Museum of Contemporary Art in Kanazawa. This exhibition originates from a fundamentally curatorial question: how can the present be represented without isolating it from the weight of the past and the uncertainty of the future? The exhibition develops a route that connects colonialism, memory, ecology, war, mythology, and media imagery, encouraging discussion and reflection. In this case, as well as in the other exhibitions I visited in Tokyo at institutions such as the National Art Center and the Museum of Contemporary Art, the exhibitions presented are not

⁶⁵ Jeffery, Celina, ed. *The Artist as Curator*. 1st ed. Intellect, 2015, p.9

⁶⁶ H. Szeemann, *Museum der Obsessionen*, Merve, Berlin 1981, p. 239

simple collections of artworks but thematic exhibition models in which works are selected and placed in dialogue to construct a broader reflection around a shared theme.

It was at this last-mentioned museum that the exhibition *YBA & BEYOND: British Art in the 90s from the Tate Collection*, brought together the most celebrated works by the Young British Artists, constructing a precise historical narrative.



Fig. 38. Poster of the exhibition: *YBA & BEYOND: British Art in the 90s from the Tate Collection*.

What is traced along the exhibition is the emergence of the young British art scene in the 1990s, exploring its relationship with pop culture, the crisis facing traditional art institutions, and the rise of new identities and visual languages. The exhibition does not merely gather works, but it aims to show how the 1990s redefined the British art scene and indirectly influenced the Japanese one as well.

It is interesting how a narrative, that is systematically Western and organized by a Western institution, was presented in Japan. The Japanese people do not necessarily identify with the references made throughout the exhibition, nor do they share this memory, yet in some way,

they can relate to it. What is being constructed is a form of cultural mediation that enables an objectively distant audience to understand the historical dynamics that, in turn, have influenced contemporary art and, by extension, Japanese art. In this instance, the curatorial choice was to preserve the historical and cultural specificity of the narrative without attempting to 'Japanize' the YBA phenomenon with a local reinterpretation.

In this regard, however, a statement published in Frieze's article notes that, exporting in Japan an exhibition in bulk with a standard arrangement, risks to appear «slickly packaged»⁶⁷. This review criticizes mainly the failure to attempt to relate the YBAs to the Japanese context. «This celebratory exhibition doesn't do much to complicate existing narratives of the Saatchi decade, or to rigorously position the legacy of the YBAs in relation to a Japanese context». On paper, it could be an effective product, yet inevitably different from the British context that spawned it. A review by Tokyo Art Beat, however, poses an even more provocative question: «Where has the radicalism of YBA gone?»⁶⁸ According to the critic, the passage of time and the context of the museum tend to transform a movement born as a provocation into a chapter of art history, thereby diluting its subversive edge. The viewer is presented with a highly orderly version of a phenomenon that, in the 1990s, was instead deeply chaotic, contentious, and provocative.

All of this is certainly natural and inevitable. When a historical event is recounted by an institution, the works themselves do not change, but the context surrounding them does. These pieces of art become documents of a historical moment that has now concluded, and it is precisely here that the power of curation emerges, in passing on a narrative and guiding the process of discovery and learning. An exhibition does not merely preserve the past, it organizes it, renders it intelligible, and transforms it into shared memory. Curatorial practice in this case presents history in its entirety, instead, it selects and organizes it, establishing connections with the present.

It can be compared to the European exhibition *Paris 1874: Inventing Impressionism*, presented in 2024 at the Musée d'Orsay in Paris. This one too offers an overview of a historical phenomenon that revolutionized the art of an entire era. It was not an exhibition about the Impressionists, but rather the birth of Impressionism as a historical event, between the Salon d'Automne, critical reception, and artistic rebellion.

⁶⁷ J. Park, 'YBA & BEYOND' Exports British Cool', exhibition review, in Frieze, 14 May 2026, <https://www.frieze.com/article/yba-and-beyond-2026-review> (accessed 2 July 2026).

⁶⁸ 1 A. Suwa, "Where has the radicalism of YBA gone? Paintings in the 'Tate Gallery – YBA & BEYOND: 90s British Art That Changed the World' exhibition", exhibition review, in Tokyo Art Beat, 13 April 2026, <https://www.tokyoartbeat.com/articles/-/yba-and-beyond-review-atsushi-suwa-202604> (accessed 12 July 2026).



Fig. 39. Installation view, Paris 1874: Inventing Impressionism, Musée D'Orsay, Paris 2024. Source: Sophie Crépy - Musée D'Orsay.

Musée d'Orsay and the curator Sylvie Patry presented some 130 works and brought a fresh eye to bear on the key date of the first impressionist exhibition opened in 1874. The major difference in this case lies in the intent behind the historical narrative, which aims to reinvent the way the origins of this artistic movement are recounted. The approach of the lead curator, Sylvie Patry, was based on revisiting history, not in a revisionist perspective, but unearthing and locating what happened, in a way that is both faithful and groundbreaking⁶⁹. The piece of history being told is one that many are familiar with and, moreover, it takes place in the very city where these events happened. Both exhibitions address a movement and construct a narrative arc, yet the exhibition in Tokyo *YBA & BEYOND* displays works as if they were objective historical documents creating a bridge with a distant culture, whereas the French exhibition explicitly declares its intention to reconstruct history as a curatorial project.

Turning to examples where curatorial practice and the curator's own authorship stand in contrast with the dynamics observed in Japan, one cannot fail to mention exhibitions such as

⁶⁹ D. Grau, "Paris 1874: Inventing Impressionism", exhibition review, in *The Brooklyn Rail*, May 2024, <https://brooklynrail.org/2024/05/artseen/Paris-1874-Inventing-Impressionism/> (accessed 13 July 2026).

Documenta 5, curated by Harald Szeemann in Kassel. In 1972, thanks to an unprecedented budget, Szeemann conceived this exhibition as a 100-day event that brought together all the emerging artists of the late 1960s, featuring performances and happenings, outsider art, and even non-art. More than a mere collection of works, it was a selection guided by the curator's personal ideas and taste. The entire project was grounded in a subjective reflection on the relationship between reality, fiction, image, and society. The aim was not to present a neutral overview of contemporary art, but rather to offer a specific interpretation; a model destined to redefine the very concept of an exhibition. Through a conceptual narrative, Szeemann devised an almost philosophical journey capable of stimulating profound reflections on the role of art in contemporary society. «With Documenta I wanted to trace a trajectory of mimesis, borrowing from Hegel's discussion about the reality of the image [Abbildung] versus the reality of the imaged [Abgebildetes]»⁷⁰. This strong authorial presence was immediately criticized by artists such as Daniel Buren, who said curators were becoming super-artists who used artworks like so many brushstrokes in a huge painting⁷¹. The artist himself wrote in a review about *Documenta 5*: «The exhibition is no longer an exhibition of works of art, but the exhibition of the exhibition».

⁷⁰ Obrist, *A Brief History of Curating* cit., p.115.

⁷¹ Obrist, *A Brief History of Curating* cit., p.114.



Fig. 40. Ben Vautier, *Art is superfluous* (*Kunst ist überflüssig*), 1972, installation view, Museum Fridericianum, documenta 5, Kassel, 1972. Photo: Manfred Vollmer.

In cases like this last one, the curator's aim is precisely to draw the visitor into their own mind. Conversely, in exhibitions such as *YBA & BEYOND* or *Layers of Accumulated Time*, the visitor does not enter the curator's thought process or vision, but is instead invited to engage with a historical moment and the cultural context to which the artworks bear witness. In the Japanese curatorial model, although there is no single curatorial signature that monopolises the narrative, a sense of authorship remains strongly present and unlike in the West, this authorship is attributed to the museum as a collective entity. The exhibition path is constructed with meticulous precision, offering clear interpretive cues that create a shared narrative without centering on an individual's subjective perspective. The result is a series of exhibitions that speak for themselves, where the exhibition itself is perceived as the author, shifting the focus away from the 'star curator' model.

CONCLUSION

This whole analysis of contemporary art museums in Japan is therefore an opportunity to reflect on how the museum institution has transformed over time and how, a model born in a predominantly Western context, has assumed increasingly broader meanings and functions. The museum's arrival in East Asia can also be interpreted as part of a broader process of adopting Western institutional models, linked to modernization and the desire to place Japan within an international cultural system. However, looking at the evolution of Japanese museums and the role they play today, it becomes clear that the importation of a model does not necessarily coincide with its simple reproduction.

The museum model adopted by Japan has over time been adapted and inserted within a specific cultural context. Although languages, exhibition practices, and ways of enjoying them are shared, at the same time museums develop intrinsic characteristics of this country's culture. What these places represent today for the community and for the international landscape is therefore much broader than their origin. These are no longer just institutions that have adopted a model from outside, but places that have acquired their own identity and are now able to contribute to the very definition of what a contemporary art museum can be. Nowadays, the contemporary museum is no longer to be considered as a container where objects are collected, preserved and exhibited. It has become that place of culture capable of stimulating reflection and critical thinking, but also a place of encounter and sharing. It is a space in which knowledge can be transmitted through different ways and in which the visitor is not necessarily called upon to possess specific knowledge in order to be able to relate to what he sees. Discovery and curiosity find space and time to be nurtured and, above all, by the very act of entering a museum, they declare their intention to dedicate part of their time to culture and beauty.

The museum then becomes a space in which time takes on a particular value. In an increasingly fast-paced daily life characterized by a constant overlapping of images and information, the museum offers the opportunity to slow down. The visitor can stop in front of a work, cross a space without necessarily having a precise destination and build a personal relationship with what he encounters. As Claire Bishop affirms in her book *Disordered Attention*, the museum doesn't properly build a type of attention, but more the conditions for a temporal experience. In terms of what happens inside a cultural institution she talks about a

«relaxed distribution of focus⁷²», to be intended as the ability of a museum to offer a space for mobility and sociality, to react, share and archive while we observe.

In the same way what happens within Japanese museums remains in line with what happens in the rest of the world, but at the same time maintains specific nuances linked to the cultural context in which these institutions developed. By entering a contemporary art museum in Japan, as well as in many other parts of the world, the visitor can recognize languages and exhibition modalities that are now international. The growing circulation of artists, curators and works has in fact made the art system increasingly interconnected. The reason why today, when entering a contemporary art museum in Japan, one does not necessarily perceive a strong cultural detachment from a European or American museum cannot therefore be traced back only to a greater process of Westernization. It is also the result of the progressive construction of a global art system in which practices, ideas and languages have continuously influenced each other. The contemporary museum has thus become a meeting space not only between cultures, but also between experiences, philosophies, and different ways of interpreting the present. Within this process, the visitor is no longer simply someone who observes a work from the outside, but is directly involved in the construction of its meaning. Contemporary art museums, including those in Japan, create the conditions for individual experience to complete the work itself. This happens in different ways and can involve reflection, participation, movement, or simply the possibility of experiencing a space differently from everyday life.

The experiences analyzed in this thesis demonstrate precisely how contemporary art around the world can be a tool for examining today's reality or as a starting point for new reflections. Exhibitions such as *Layers of Accumulated Time* in Kanazawa invite reflection on the relationship between time, memory, and stratification, while initiatives linked to the YBA in Tokyo refocus attention on the events, transformations, and movements that have shaped Japan's recent history. On the island of Naoshima, by contrast, the role of art is inextricably linked to architecture and nature; these elements merge together and bring the experience to a more contemplative dimension, in which the visitor is invited to slow down and build a more intimate relationship with the space that surrounds him. These examples, while very different from each other, show how the museum can become a space in which art creates the conditions for developing questions or sparking emotions without the need for answers. The museum's function goes beyond the mere transmission of information, and from a popularizer

⁷² C. Bishop, *Disordered Attention: How We Look at Art and Performance Today*, London-New York, Verso Books, 2024.

it also becomes a place of meditation, discovery and almost introspective. The museum is no longer just the container of the work, but becomes the container of the experience that the work can generate.

The particular Japanese contemplative dimension that can be encountered in many museums and art projects can be related to some aesthetic and philosophical traditions specific to Japanese culture itself. The relationship with nature, attention to the dimension of space, and the value attributed to time contribute to creating a broader mode of enjoyment in relation to the environment, architecture, and the visitor's body. This does not mean that there is a single Japanese way of conceiving the museum or that contemporary museum practices can be traced back to a simple opposition between East and West. The characteristics that can be recognized in Japanese museums in fact coexist with international practices and a continuous circulation of models and influences.

On an international level, for example, the influence of some Japanese artists has contributed to the transition from experiences that were purely visual, to ones that involve the body and the senses. The case of Yayoi Kusama is particularly significant as his immersive installations brought the visitor inside the work, transforming the exhibition space into an environment to be traversed and moved around. In this type of experience, light, space, reflections, movement and perception take on a central role. Immersive installations have increasingly found space in contemporary temporary exhibitions and have also changed public expectations. The work is therefore not simply observed, but experienced. The visitor is not necessarily just looking for a work to look at, but can expect an experience in which to be involved. The body becomes part of the visit and the exhibition space becomes an integral part of the construction of meaning.

The phenomenon of immersion cannot of course be attributed to a single artist or a single cultural context. However, the global spread of Kusama's work represents a particularly significant example of how a Japanese artist has participated in a broader transformation of the way art is presented and experienced. Japan once again takes a very stable position on the world scene and establishes itself as a protagonist of the contemporary scene. Precisely in this regard, Japan has not been a spectator in the world of contemporary art for years, but rather an increasingly integrated and independent one. The art that was born as a function of recognition by the outside, today is an international and independent firm garment.

This transformative discourse is also helped by the way of curation. In fact, even without the presence of strong authorial voices, Japanese museums have contributed in recent decades to the diffusion of Asian arts in the rest of the world. Japanese museums have assumed an

important role in building international networks and collaborating with institutions, curators, and artists from backgrounds scattered across the Far East. The work that has been done and continues to this day has helped amplify Asian voices that have long been left on the sidelines.

This process has allowed us to question an exclusively Eurocentric reading of contemporary art history. Exhibitions such as *Prism of the Real: Making Art in Japan 1989–2010* in Tokyo have placed Japanese and Asian art at the center of a transnational context. It has been possible to showcase narratives in which Japan is not isolated from the West, but considered an active part of a global network of exchanges, in which influences move in multiple directions. The relationship of influence between Japan and the West is reversed, and if in the past the process was mainly from the West to Japan, today this relationship appears much more complex. Japan has itself become an international reference point and is now positioned as one of the main centers of contemporary artistic production, on a par with the main Western contexts.

In conclusion, the development and circulation of new forms of contemporary art was a process that, particularly from the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries onwards, started in Europe and America before reaching and being reinterpreted in other parts of the world. Today, these forms of expression have become an integral part of the art market and dominate the international landscape. The result is that the cultural boundaries that once appeared more clearly defined have become increasingly more subtle. What we encounter in an exhibition space close to home can easily be encountered thousands of kilometres away, in contexts that don't have anything in common except for these art languages.

This process should not be identified only as one of Westernization, but also as a form of cultural exchange between worlds that, for long periods of history, had separate paths and distances. As the anthropologist James Clifford suggests in *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century* «the cultural influences move in both directions⁷³», theorizing how all cultural encounters are never unidirectional.

These studies on cultural flows and transnationality see museums as sites where different histories, perspectives, and cultural practices meet and negotiate with one another. This understanding of cultural exchange can be further explained by Mary Louise Pratt's concept of the 'contact zone'⁷⁴, interpreting exhibition spaces exactly as spaces where people that are

⁷³ J. Clifford, *Museums as Contact Zones*, in J. Clifford, *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century*, Cambridge (MA)-London, Harvard University Press, 1997, pp. 188-219.

⁷⁴ M.L. Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*, London-New York, Routledge, 1992.

geographically and historically separated can enter in contact with one another, establishing relationships.

It is precisely this dimension of the museum as a contact zone that, in my own experience, probably allowed me to feel at home within certain exhibition spaces despite being geographically and culturally far from home. In a country where many dynamics of everyday social life feel so aseptic and where I was constantly feeling a visitor, museums became places of familiarity and refuge. The artworks, exhibition formats, architectural spaces, and ways of experiencing art created a form of cultural continuity that transcended geographical distance, without nullifying identity. All those global influences have made possible today the development of a strong contemporary scene in the East, moving the center of gravity in countries like Japan, shifting the gaze in a new direction.

APPENDIX:

Biographical notes on the artists, organized by geographic region

Asia

PEI-SHIH TU

Born in 1981 in Miaoli, Taiwan and living and working in Taipei. Tu is known for works that combine animation and collage, questioning "history" and "truth" as entities that lie between reality and fiction. In her videos, seemingly innocent and colorful idyllic scenes unfold, but in fact they address historical events and actual people, telling true stories of violence and destruction. Her style, which ironically addresses issues of colonialism and the power of global capitalism in contemporary society under a veneer of vibrant, euphoric colors, has garnered international acclaim.



Fig. 41. Tu Pei-Shih, *Making Fantasies*, 3-channel stop-motion animation video.

CITRA SASMITA

Contemporary artist from Bali, Indonesia, born in 1990 and living and working today in Singaraja. Her work challenges myths and misconceptions surrounding Balinese art and culture. She critically examines the status of women within social hierarchies and aims to subvert normative gender concepts. Her compositions, featuring female figures intertwined with various elements of nature, are rendered in a visual language rooted in the Kamasan style of Balinese painting, which she has reinterpreted and expanded through her own practice. While rooted in mythological thought that includes both Hindu and uniquely Balinese references, these scenes also reflect a contemporary process of envisioning powerful secular myths for a post-patriarchal future.



Fig. 42. Citra Sasmita, *Timur Merah Project XII: River With No End*, 2023, commission artwork of Diriyah Biennale 2024.

KIYOSHI AWAZU

Born in Himonya, Meguro ward, Tokyo, in 1929. Pioneering Japanese graphic designer, artist, and cultural innovator whose eclectic and vibrant work reshaped post-World War II Japanese aesthetics. Awazu was a self-taught artist whose creative output spanned graphic

design, poster art, architecture, set design, filmmaking, and illustration. His distinctive style blended traditional Japanese art forms, such as ukiyo-e prints, calligraphy, and mingei (folk art), with modern influences from pop culture, surrealism, and the Bauhaus movement, creating a visually striking and socially engaged body of work.



Fig. 43. Kiyoshi Awazu, undulating "mountain" motif (left) and radial rainbow portrait (right), 1970s. Details of screenprints or posters.

TARO IZUMI

Born in 1976 in Nara (Japan). He lives and works in Tokyo. Taro Izumi combines absurd and physical experiences in his videos, creating funny and touching optical illusions. Always using raw materials and daily objects, he transports us into his burlesque and chaotic world where the videos shot in private by the artist are integrated in big installations. His world is childlike, tinted with irony and organized by absurd game rules that he follows obstinately. So as to stress the intimate relation between the action and the place, he documents his performances with fragmented videos where images and sounds are treated like purely sensorial information. Bringing to light the absurdity of daily life, each film expresses the

desperate but funny mental state of a person pushing away his boredom and desperation by continuously inventing games.



Fig. 44. Installation view Taro Izumi solo exhibition *Ex*, Museum Tinguely, Basel

QIU ZHIJIE

Born in Zhangzhou, Fujian Province, China in 1969. As an artist, Qiu Zhijie is known for his calligraphy and ink painting, photography, video, installation and performance works. His art is representative of a new kind of experimental communication between the Chinese literati tradition and contemporary art, social participation and the power of self-liberation of art. The artist, writer, curator, and teacher has earned critical recognition worldwide for his concept and practice of 'total art', which forges new cultural meaning from various philosophies and systems of thought from anytime, anywhere.



Fig. 45. Qiu Zhijie, *Map of Art and China after 1989: Theater of the World*, 2017.

LEE UFAN

Born in Gyeongsangnam-do, Korea, in 1936, under Japanese occupation. After training in traditional ink painting techniques at Seoul National University High School, he moved to Tokyo in 1956, where he studied philosophy at Nihon University. He was one of the leading figures of the Mono-ha school (School of Things), a contemporary art movement emerging in the late 1960s. Lee's works in the museum include two-dimensional paintings featuring repetitive brushstrokes laid down with the rhythm of quiet breathing and sculptures that organically combine stones and steel plates, in which the artist's interventions are reduced to the bare minimum.

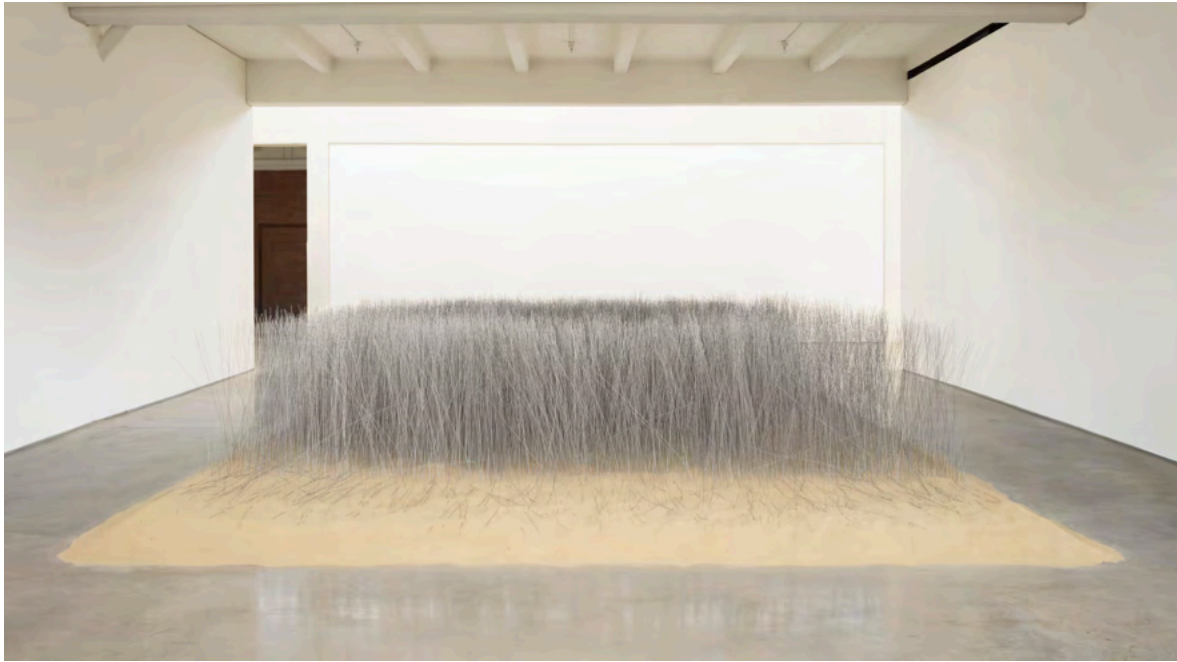


Fig. 46. Lee Ufan *Relatum, Formerly Iron Field*, 1969/2019.

YAYOI KUSAMA

Born in 1929, in Matsumoto City, Japan. From childhood she experienced visions and hallucinations, which engendered her first polka-dot and net-themed drawings. Using watercolors, pastels, and oil paints, she developed her own unique form of expression at an early age. Kusama relocated to the United States in 1957. The following year, while based in New York City, she began exhibiting innovative works in rapid succession, including net paintings, soft sculptures, and installations employing mirrors and lights. She formulated a philosophy of art she dubbed “self-obliteration” based on simple motifs of obsessive repetition and proliferation. The scope of her activities widened to include body painting events, fashion shows, anti-war “happenings,” films, and newsletters, helping to establish her status as a leading avant-garde artist. After returning to Japan in 1973, she resumed writing fiction and poetry and created outdoor sculptures, large-scale installations, and the “Infinity Mirror Room” series. In 2009, she began work on her “My Eternal Soul” series, which continued until 2021, by which time she had produced roughly 900 paintings. In 2021, she began work on a new series, “Every Day I Pray for Love”. Today she continues energetically producing works with a consistent theme of infinity transcending nature, love, life, and death.



Fig. 47. Installation view of Yayoi Kusama in Infinity Mirror Room, Phalli's Field, at her solo exhibition "Floor Show" at R. Castellane Gallery, New York, 1965

TADAO ANDO

Born in 1941 in Osaka, Japan is one of the most renowned contemporary Japanese architects. Characteristics of his work include large expanses of unadorned architectural concrete walls combined with wooden or stone floors and large windows. Active natural elements, like sun, rain, and wind are a distinctive inclusion to his style. He has designed many notable buildings, including the Ando Gallery at the Art Institute of Chicago (1992) and the Japanese Pavilion (1992) at Expo '92 in Sevilla, Spain. He continued to design large-scale projects in the 21st century. Notable examples are the renovation of the Palazzo Grassi and the Punta della Dogana (2009), in Venice, to showcase pieces belonging to the Pinault Collection. Andō's consistent aesthetic won him numerous international awards, including the Pritzker Prize in 1999, and gold medals from both the Royal Institute of British Architects in 1997. Ando's work not only defines modern architecture in Japan but also offers a unique perspective on the relationship between built environments and the natural world,

influencing architects globally. He continues to live and work in Osaka, leading his firm, Tadao Ando Architect & Associates.



Fig. 48. Tadao Ando, *Hill of the Buddha*, 2015. Interior view of the concrete rotunda enclosing the Great Buddha at Makomanai Takino Cemetery, Sapporo.

KISHO KUROKAWA

Born in 1934 in Nagoya, Japan. He was a visionary architect and one of the founders of the Metabolist movement in the 1960s. He grew up during post-war reconstruction, a time when the entire nation was reimagining its future. After studying architecture at Kyoto University he became one of the founding members of the Metabolism movement, alongside architects like Kiyonori Kikutake and Fumihiko Maki. This group of young visionaries believed that buildings shouldn't be static monuments but dynamic systems capable of growth and change. Kurokawa's philosophy went beyond mere functionality. He developed the concept of symbiosis, arguing that architecture should create harmony between different elements: tradition and technology, East and West, humanity and nature. Throughout his career, he designed over 100 buildings worldwide, from the Kuala Lumpur International Airport to museums in Europe and America, winning numerous awards including the Gold Medal from the French Academy of Architecture.



Fig. 49. Kisho Kurokawa, *Nakagin Capsule Tower*, 1972 (demolished 2022). Exterior view, Ginza, Tokyo.

YASUMASA MORIMURA

Born 1951 in Osaka, Japan. He has been working as a conceptual photographer and filmmaker for more than three decades. Morimura transforms himself into iconic images from pop culture, the media, and art history and deconstructs them using costumes, makeup, props, and digital manipulation to make provocative self-portraits. He bases his works on seminal paintings by Frida Kahlo, Vincent Van Gogh or Diego Velázquez and deals with issues of cultural and sexual appropriation. The artist's reinvention of iconic photographs and art historical masterpieces challenges the associations the viewer has with the subjects, while also commenting on Japan's complex absorption of Western culture.



Fig. 50. *Self-Portrait through Art History*, (*Van Gogh/Blue*), (*Van Eyck in a Red Turban*), *What Leonardo's Face Says*, 2016 /2018.

HIROSHI SUGIMOTO

Born in Tokyo in 1948. In 1970 he graduated from Saint Paul's University in Tokyo and subsequently, in 1974, from the Art Center College of Design in Los Angeles. In that same year he moved to New York and today he splits his time between Tokyo and New York. A multifaceted figure, he has developed his artistic practice mainly through photography, sometimes associated with sculptural objects, architecture and experimental exhibition installations. Grouped in thematic cycles that develop over a long period, Hiroshi Sugimoto's photographs are an instrument of investigation into the photographic medium itself, through which to hide or reveal the thin line that separates reality from appearance. His research presents itself as a reflection on time, which passes through both the working procedure and the choice of subjects, crystallised in an instant and made eternal by the artist's shot with an almost visionary intuition.



Fig. 51. Hiroshi Sugimoto, *Pine Trees, Coffin of Light, Five Elements*, Benesse House Park, Naoshima, 2009.

CHIHARU SHIOTA

Born in 1972 in Osaka Japan, is a performance and installation artist who uses wool, blood, metal and earth to make her works. She is well renowned for her large-scale installations that have been made using string, sometimes connected to everyday objects such as keys, windows, dresses and boats. These installations have been exhibited around the world including Melbourne, Tokyo, Venice, Madrid and now Adelaide. Shiota's work explores themes of motherhood, lifecycles and geographical displacement. These are deeply connected to her personal experience as a woman, an artist and an immigrant.



Fig. 52. Chiharu Shiota, *Uncertain Journey*, 2019, Mori Art Museum, Tokyo, Japan, photo by Sunhi Mang

REI NAITO

Born in Hiroshima, Japan, in 1961 and lives and works in Tokyo. Favoring ‘understated, fragile things’, she uses familiar materials like fabric, bits of wood, beads and shells in combination with unusual lighting that transforms the visitor’s experience into a time of recollection and contemplation.

Questioning her way of comprehending the world and our relationship with it, Rei Naito works with the void, with space and absence, with delicate, insignificant forms of life like dust and variations in light. Through her discreet installations, at times at the limit of the visible, her work echoes the violence and most indescribable weaknesses of our lives.



Fig. 53. Rei Naito *Matrix*, 2010, Teshima Art Museum

RYUE NISHIZAWA

Born in 1966 in Kanagawa Prefecture, Japan, is a Japanese architect who has contributed to contemporary architecture through minimalism and refined design. He earned his architecture degrees at Yokohama National University and co-founded the firm SANAA (Sejima and Nishizawa and Associates) in 1995 alongside Kazuyo Sejima. Nishizawa's work builds on Japan's modernist legacy and international minimalist trends, directing them toward greater lightness, transparency, and fluid spatial experiences. His designs make use of slender structures, extensive glass, and layouts that blur the boundaries between interior and exterior. Over a career spanning three decades, Nishizawa has produced projects worldwide. His portfolio includes the 21st Century Museum of Contemporary Art in Kanazawa, the New Museum of Contemporary Art in New York, the Glass Pavilion at the Toledo Museum of Art in Ohio, the Rolex Learning Center in Lausanne, the Louvre-Lens in France, the Teshima Art Museum, the Moriyama House in Tokyo, and the Garden & House in Tokyo.



Fig. 54. SANAA, Kazuyo Sejima and Ryue Nishizawa, Campus for Bocconi University, Milan, 2019.

DO HO SUH

Born in 1962 in Seoul, Korea. He works across various media, creating drawings, film, and sculptural works that confront questions of home, physical space, displacement, memory, individuality, and collectivity. Suh is best known for his fabric sculptures that reconstruct to scale his past and present homes and studios in Korea, Rhode Island, Berlin, London, and New York. Suh is interested in the malleability of space in both its physical and metaphorical forms, and examines how the body relates to, inhabits, and interacts with that space. He is particularly interested in domestic space and the way the concept of home can be articulated through architecture that has a specific location, form, and history.



Fig. 55. Do Ho Suh, *New York City Apartment/Corridor/Bristol*, 2015.

Europe

OLAFUR ELIASSON

Born in Copenhagen, Denmark in 1967. Lives in Berlin, Germany and Copenhagen. Olafur Eliasson has been a frequent invitee to international group exhibitions ever since his participation in the 1995 Venice Biennale. He has also held numerous solo exhibitions at major art museums in Europe and North America. Eliasson's work is recognized for its capability to undermine the viewer's routine visual perceptions and awareness, using light, shadow, color, fog, wind, waves, and other phenomena appearing in nature. His highly successful *The weather project* installed in the Tate Modern's Turbine Hall in London, in 2003, earned him critical acclaim.

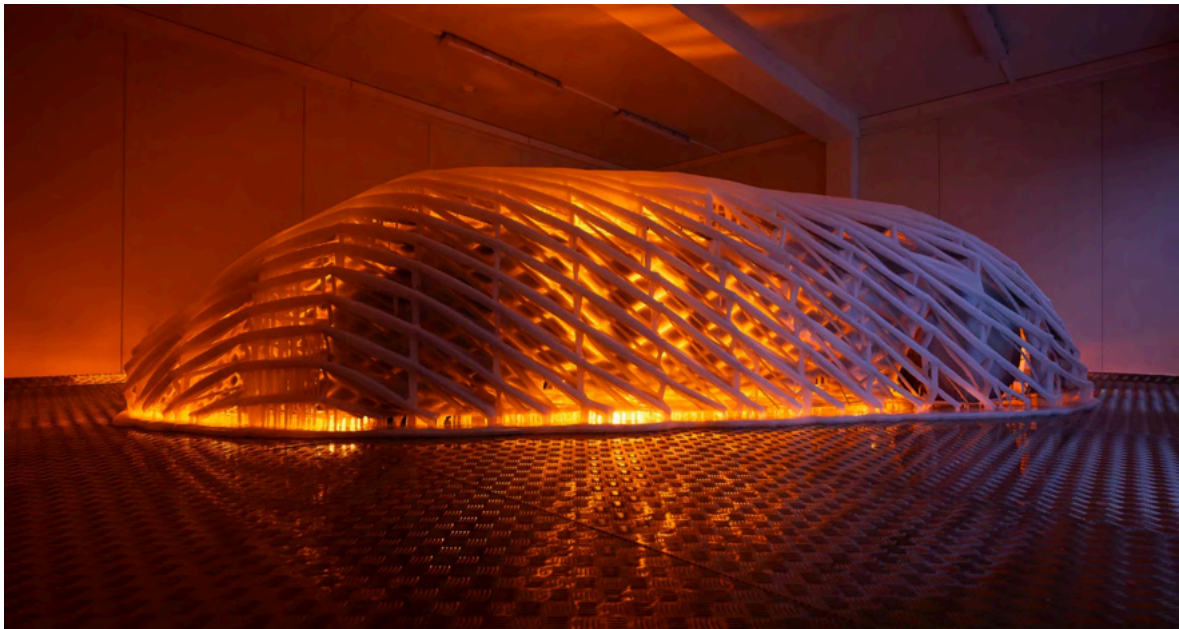


Fig. 56. Olafur Eliasson, *Your mobile expectations: BMW H2R project*, 2007.

DAMIEN HIRST

Born in 1965 in Bristol, England and considered amongst the most influential contemporary British artists. Damien Hirst is leading figure of the Young British Artists (YBA) movement of the 1990s, he became known for challenging established artistic conventions through works such as his iconic shark installations, Spot Paintings, and diamond-encrusted sculptures. Throughout his career, Hirst has explored themes of mortality, existence, belief,

and desire, transforming provocative conceptual inquiries into globally recognised cultural and market phenomena. His work investigates the tensions between life and death, reason and faith, love and hate, inviting viewers to question their own perceptions and convictions. Since 1987, he has presented more than 90 solo exhibitions worldwide and participated in over 300 group exhibitions. His works are held in major international collections, including the British Museum, the Museum of Modern Art in New York, Tate, and Fondazione Prada.

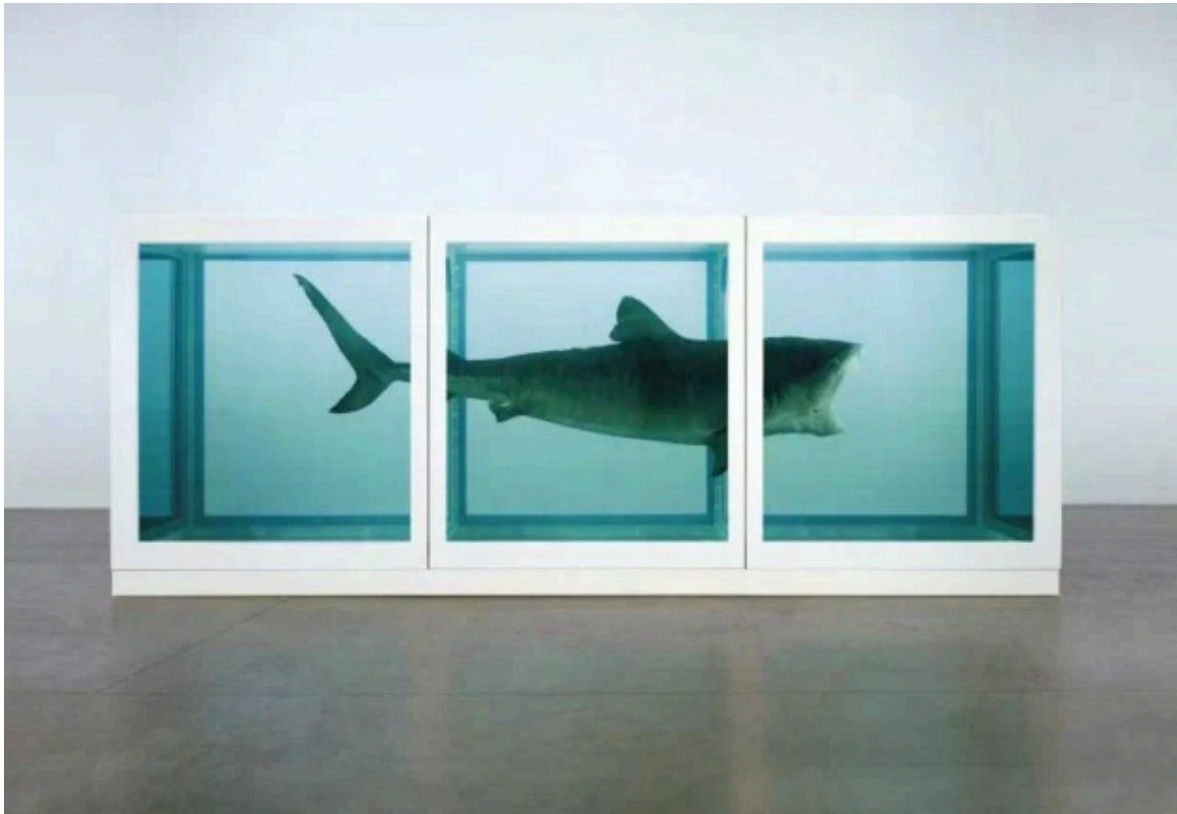


Fig. 57. Damien Hirst, *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living*, 1991.

TRACEY EMIN

Born in 1963 in Croydon, London, UK. Tracey Emin is an English artist known for autobiographical and confessional artwork, produced in a variety of media including drawing, painting, sculpture, film, photography, neon text and embroidery. She draws on her own life, referencing deeply intimate experiences from her sexual history, abuse, and abortion to gender, relationships, and, most recently, her cancer and disability. Central in Tracey Emin's practice is her autobiographical approach, resonating with feminist efforts to illuminate the experiences of previously voiceless women. In 1999 she attracted huge publicity when she

was nominated for the Turner Prize and exhibited *My Bed* at Tate Gallery, London. From there, Emin's career continued to grow. In 2007 she represented the United Kingdom at the 52nd Venice Biennale and in 2011 she was made the Royal Academy's Professor of Drawing, one of the first two female professors in the history of the institution.



Fig. 58. Tracey Emin, *Like A Cloud of Blood*, 2022

ZAHA HADID

British-Iraqi architect and designer, widely regarded as one of the most influential figures in contemporary architecture. Born in 1950 INBaghdad, Iraq, she studied mathematics before moving to London, where she attended the Architectural Association. She began her own practice in London in 1980 and won the prestigious competition for the Hong Kong Peak Club, a leisure and recreational center in 1983. Painting and drawing, especially in her early period, are important techniques of investigation for her design work. Known as an architect

who consistently pushes the boundaries of architecture and urban design, her work experiments with new spatial concepts intensifying existing urban landscapes and encompassing all fields of design, from the urban scale to interiors and furniture.



Fig. 59. Zaha Hadid Architects, *Heydar Aliyev Center*, 2012. Exterior view of the cultural center, Baku, Azerbaijan.

ANISH KAPOOR

Born in 1954 in Bombay (now Mumbai), moved to London in the early 1970s and now divides his time between homes and studios in London and Venice. Throughout his career, Kapoor has been fascinated with exploring negative space through geometric, curvilinear, and reflected forms, often created from diverse materials such as mirrors, stone, granite, dirt, concrete, wax, and PVC. He is best known, however, for his large-scale, abstract, public sculptures that manipulate form and the perception of space. He received critical acclaim for his most recognizable work, *Cloud Gate* (2004), otherwise known as the “Bean,” which is installed in Chicago’s Millennium Park.



Fig. 60. Anish Kapoor, *Cloud Gate*, Millennium Park, Chicago, Illinois, 2004–2006.

America

LEANDRO ERLICH

Born in Buenos Aires, Argentina in 1973. Through artworks that undermine the human senses, Leandro Erlich explores the ways we understand phenomena, enter into relationships with spaces, and grasp reality. Erlich's works investigate perception and cognition not with the rigor of scientific experimentation but with rich humor and wit, in a dimension of trompe-l'oeil. The works relax relationships among viewers experiencing them together and produce a place they can share.



Fig. 61. Leandro Erlich, *Infinite Staircase*, 2005.

JAMES TURRELL

Born in 1943 in Los Angeles and known for his work within the Light and Space movement. He is nowadays one of the most famous representatives of the international art scene, engaging in all his works with the many and varied appearances of natural and artificial light.

Turrell pushes at the borders of perception. His installations and environments make it possible to experience light as an artistic medium. The rooms are not lit in the traditional sense, rather they are filled with light and colour. In such light spaces the architecture seems dematerialised plane, colour and space interact so that the viewer is immersed in a mysterious painterly world. The timelessness and fascination of his works are due mainly to the fact that Turrell succeeds in allowing us to experience light directly as a form of reality, without the use of symbolism or pictorial representation.

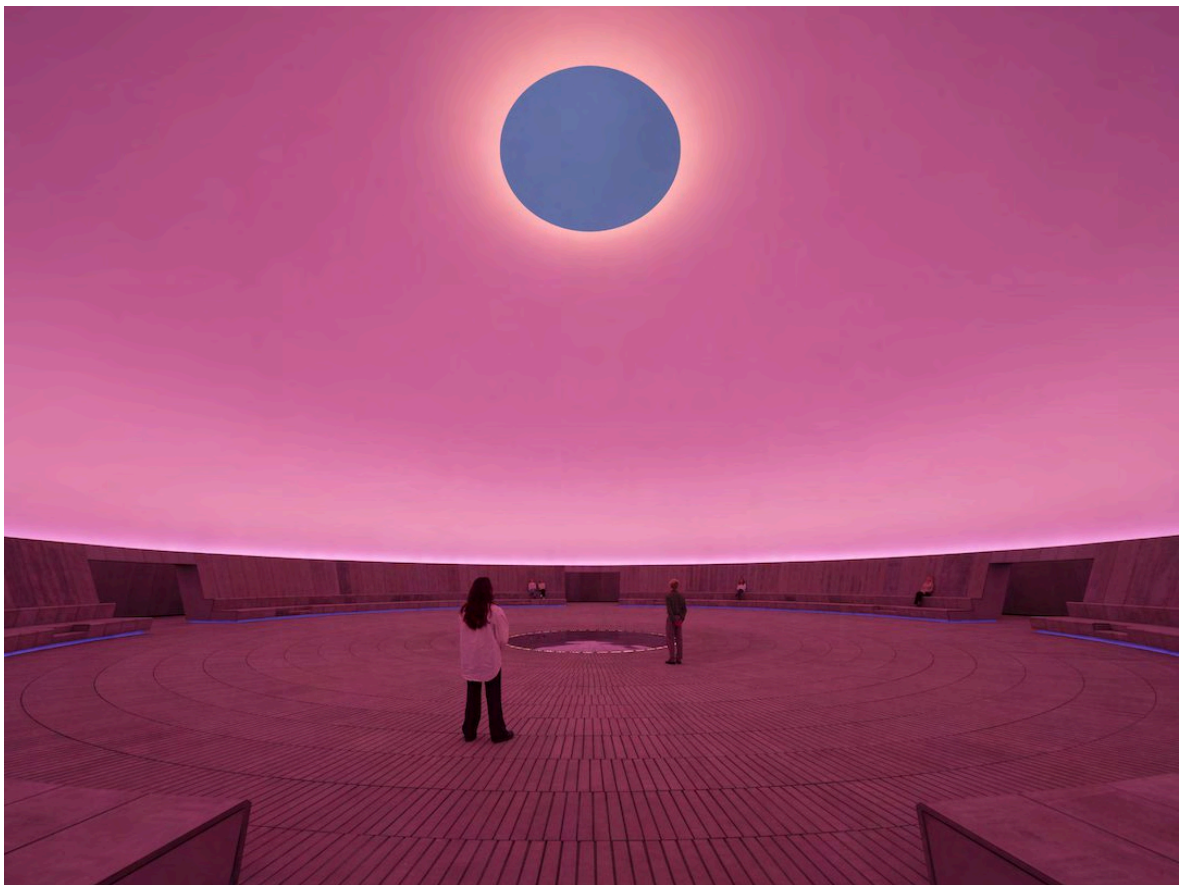


Fig. 62. James Turrell, *As Seen Below*, 2024. Permanent installation view at ARoS Aarhus Art Museum, Aarhus, Denmark.

WALTER DE MARIA

Born in 1935, in Albany, California, near San Francisco. Walter De Maria was an American artist whose work played a central role in the development of Minimalism, Conceptual Art, and Land Art during the late 20th century. He studied music and art, eventually moving to New York, where he became associated with a generation of artists pushing boundaries of

scale, perception, and context. De Maria's works are known for their use of natural materials, geometry, and immersive spatial experiences. His most iconic pieces, such as *The Lightning Field* (1977) and *The New York Earth Room* (1977), emphasize themes of time, isolation, and the relationship between nature and constructed environments. He often worked on a monumental scale, encouraging quiet contemplation and physical presence. Though he kept a low public profile, De Maria profoundly influenced the trajectory of installation and environmental art, blending precision with poetic resonance. His legacy continues through permanent works maintained by the Dia Art Foundation.



Fig. 63. Walter De Maria, *The Lightning Field*, 1977. Site-specific installation in Quemado, Catron County, New Mexico

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