Anti-Manga: Sasaki Maki, Ishiko Junzō, and Avant-Garde Comics in Japan

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In August 1969, as part of its regular coverage of Tokyo's youth counterculture, *Weekly Asahi* (*Shūkan Asahi*) published a short piece entitled "A Vogue for I Don't Get It" ("Wakaranai no ga ryūkō suru"), featuring three artists who drew for the alternative manga (comics) magazine *Garo*: Sasaki Maki (b. 1946), known for sequentially paneled but nonnarrative, collage-inspired work; Hayashi Seiichi (b. 1945), known for elliptical breakdowns and minimalist compositions influenced by New Wave cinema, animation, contemporary poster design, and classical Japanese art; and Fujisawa Mitsuo (b. 1943), who specialized in slightly raunchy, cartoonish, surrealistic-metamorphic stories. The last artist is all but forgotten today, while the first two still epitomize avant-gardism in Japanese comics more than fifty years later.[1]

That a high-circulation newsmagazine was covering experimental manga was not that odd. Since the early 1960s, there had been regular articles in both the popular press and intellectual journals claiming that the speech patterns, body movements, and sound effects of comics and television (animated and live-action programming) were having a greater shaping effect on baby-boomer children than what was taught to them at home and in school. By mid-decade, as those kids grew into young adults, there appeared reports on the "troubling" phenomenon of university students' reading manga when they should have been reading Dostoevsky and Sartre. Heady social and political analyses of manga by academics and public intellectuals (mostly liberal) proliferated. The print runs of the leading manga weeklies approached and then eclipsed one million copies, boosted by extensive cross-platform marketing and merchandising via television and toy stores. "*Asahi Journal* in the right hand, *Shōnen Magazine* in the left," ran one popular description of the intellec-

1. In English, the first two artists' work can be read in the following editions: Sasaki Maki, *Ding Dong Circus and Other Stories, 1967–1974*, trans. and ed. Ryan Holmberg (London: Breakdown Press, 2015); Hayashi Seiichi, *Red Colored Elegy*, trans. Taro Nettleton (Montreal: Drawn & Quarterly, 2008/2018); Hayashi, *Gold Pollen and Other Stories*, trans. and ed. Holmberg (New York: PictureBox Inc., 2013); *Flowering Harbour*, trans. Holmberg (London: Breakdown Press, 2014), rpt. in *Vérité: Comix India*, vol. 2 (Summer 2019); "Street Performer," trans. Holmberg, in Tom Devlin, ed., *Drawn & Quarterly: Twenty-Five Years of Contemporary Cartooning, Comics, and Graphic Novels* (Montreal: Drawn & Quarterly, 2015); and Hayashi, *Red Red Rock and Other Stories, 1967–1970*, ed. and trans. Holmberg (London: Breakdown Press, 2016).

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"A Vogue for I Don't Get It,"
in Weekly Asahi, *August 22, 1969.*

tual diet of Japanese university students, naming a popular left-leaning opinion weekly and the top-selling manga periodical.

Once the late '60s arrived and youth culture turned more aggressive and exotic, the mainstream barely tried to hide its voyeurism. In the months leading up to "A Vogue for I Don't Get It," *Weekly Asahi* dedicated numerous photographically embellished essays to the gamut of hip youth culture and artistic goings-on in Tokyo, organized around buzzwords like *harenchi* (shameless, lewd), *saike* (short for the English "psychedelic"), and the all-encompassing *angura* (underground), of which the Shinjuku district, with its many bars, theaters, and hipster shops, was the undisputed mecca. While student radicals were ribbed for reading bombastic sports and irreverent slapstick "gag" manga inside university barricades, avant-garde manga was framed as of a piece with the psychedelic posters, street happenings, antiwar protests and folk sing-alongs, go-go dancing inside film projections, and other novelties that urban youth supposedly spent their hours immersed in. Avant-gardism was thus seen not just as a new development within the history of comics, an esoteric experimentation with the medium's codes and conventions, but as part of a new reality, a new way of seeing, and almost a new way of being human. Here is how *Weekly Asahi* described it in "A Vogue for I Don't Get It":

> Manga are booming. Amidst the flood of salaryman manga, nonsense items, and *gekiga* [mature, action-focused comics for young men], were you aware of a certain faction of manga that commands the crazed support of young readers, especially college students? The support of these so-called fans is so great that they say they want to shove these artists' work into their pockets before they smash their way through the riot police.
>
> As you can see [from the accompanying illustrations], this type of manga is a far cry from what we usually think of as comics. Though many people say they simply don't get what they're about, there's no

> doubt we are witnessing a "new phenomenon" in which manga have sallied forth from the world of stories into that of the image [*imeeji*]. Young people do not like having things explained to them. They say it should be up to the reader to decide how one feels about a manga. "We understand through our senses [*kankaku*]," "We get it through our skin," they explain about immersing themselves in this new breed of manga.[2]

Such was the outsider view of avant-garde manga. It gives the wrong impression about a few things. For one, the politics of avant-garde manga: Hayashi and Sasaki were openly nonpolitical, while most committed members of the student movement probably would have seen only bourgeois decadence in their work. Second, the artists' social environments: Sasaki lived in drab Kobe while developing his signature style and had little contact with the Shinjuku scene even during the one year he lived in Tokyo (1968–69), while Hayashi frequently dropped in on the nightlife but was too busy with his full-time job as an animator and illustrator to be a scenester. Third, neither partook of mind-altering drugs, so if any "expanded consciousness" was to be found in their work, it was purely a trope and not a reflection of personal experience.

2. "Wakaranai no ga ryūkō suru," *Shūkan asahi*, August 22, 1969.

Sasaki Maki, "Lullaby" (Komoriuta), *in* Asahi Journal, *August 17, 1969.*

On the other hand, *Weekly Asahi* touches on two points that even committed manga critics thought were essential: that this "new breed of manga" privileged images over language, and that this shift necessitated a new, more intuitive way of "reading" that was probably better described as a kind of immersive "feeling." Elsewhere in the press, "avant-garde manga" (*zen'ei manga*), "difficult-to-understand manga" (*nankai manga*), "image manga" (*eizō manga*), and "anti-manga" (*anchi manga*) were among the names bandied about for this new comics paradigm. So was "incomprehensible manga" (*wakaranai manga*)—which hardly sounds like a category, until you recognize that a revolution in "getting it," in aesthetic experience and semiosis, was precisely what was at stake, and not just for commentators. According to a short article about Sasaki's curious stardom among rebellious youth in *Weekly Post* (*Shūkan posuto*, September 1969), pinned over the artist's desk was a list of self-imposed creative rules, the first of which was "REFUSE COMPREHENSION" (*RIKAI KYOHI*).[3]

3. "Zenkyōtōha ga netsudoku suru mangaka Sasaki Maki," *Shūkan posuto*, September 12, 1969, p. 47. See also Sasaki's comments in a dialogue with Hayashi, "Mizukara no uta o utatte," *Garo* 56 (February 1969), pp. 130–34, translated by me as "Singing Our Own Song: Hayashi Seiichi vs. Sasaki Maki, 1969," *The Comics Journal* online (January 2016).

*Hayashi Seiichi, "Red Red Rock" (*Makkakka rokku*), in* Garo *no. 62, July 1969.*

But not everyone was sympathetic, or even curious, about this new breed. Some months later, in February 1970, *Sunday Mainichi*, another popular weekly, published a dialogue on the topic of new developments in manga. Chosen to lead the conversation was Kondō Hidezō (1908–1979). If you wanted a devil's advocate, you couldn't do better than old Kondō, sixty-one at the time. Hanging on by a thread to his postwar fame as a creator of mildly ribald men's humor strips, Kondō had a hard time accepting long-format story manga as anything but children's entertainment and thought *gekiga* (again, action-oriented comics for male adults) were poorly drawn trash. As Kondō was also the author of virulent Allies-bashing cartoons during World War II and of pro-Right, pro-state, pro-military, and pro-nuclear cartoons in the 1960s and '70s, politically and artistically you would have been hard-pressed to find a voice of authority more out of step with the times.

"That Sasaki Maki person," complains Kondō, "his work I don't get at all. If you ask me if I think they're interesting as pictures, I'd say the drawing isn't good enough to grab the eye. I'm sure he knows what he's up to, but it takes someone with a pretty strangely wired brain to figure them out. People even send in letters of 'admiration' that praise him by asking what's wrong with not getting it." Kondō then turns to Mizuki Shigeru (1922–2015), an author of humorous and lugubrious ghost-hunter action tales, and asks if Sasaki makes any sense to him. Since Mizuki also drew for *Garo*, one might expect a modicum of support. But no: "Nope, I don't get it" is all he says. Kondō continues, "I don't get it at all. But it seems like more and more people think that not getting it, that's just fine."[4]

Mind you, this was in 1970. Pop art, New Wave, psychedelia, Surrealism, collage, and most of the other influences upon and precursors to "incomprehensible manga" were hardly new developments. Nor were dialogues between art and manga rare. This was the case whether one's definition of artistic avant-gardism derived from the old Left and the Communist Party–centered politics of the prewar and early postwar years or those of the New Left of the '60s. For example, hearkening back to the close association between manga and avant-garde art since the 1920s in Japan, socialist reportage painters like Ikeda Tatsuo and Nakamura Hiroshi embraced cartooning as a means to engage the contradictions of postwar society, creating what they called "black manga" ("*kuroi manga*," à la "black humor," as opposed to apolitical "white manga") and paintings using surrealistically deformed figures with allegorical meanings, inspired partly by political cartoons.

Some of the leading art critics of the '60s were also dedicated comics critics. Chief among them was Ishiko Junzō (1928–1977), one of the primary subjects of this essay. Centrally involved with the illusionist art that preceded the Arte Povera-esque Mono-ha (school of things) movement's phenomenological interest in natural and industrial materials and an important voice in the defense of multi-disciplinary

4 Kondō Hidezō and Mizuki Shigeru, "70 nen no shuyaku wa gekiga ka manga ka," *Sandee mainichi*, February 15, 1970, p. 116. Mizuki also takes a swipe at Sasaki in his short comic "Silent Shock: Wakaranai manga," *Gendai komikku* (May 14, 1970), rpt. in *Reikei shujutsu: Mizuki Shigeru daizenshū* vol. 75 (Tokyo: Kōdansha, 2015), pp. 159–62.

artist Akasegawa Genpei during the "Model Thousand Yen Note Trial" (1964–1970), in which Akasegawa was accused (and convicted) of breaking currency "imitation" laws, Ishiko also oversaw a short-lived attempt to popularize the spirit of reportage paintings through a form of surrealistic cartoon drawings he called "*hyōga*" (critical pictures) and was the co-founder of what may be the world's first journal dedicated to comics criticism, *Manga-ism* (*Manga shugi*, 1967–74), the covers of the earliest issues of which were drawn by Akasegawa. In some cases, art and manga were connected literally by blood. Okamoto Tarō, painter, sculptor, writer, and booster of postwar avant-garde art, was the son of Okamoto Ippei, one of the leading cartoonists of the 1910s and '20s. Shirato Sanpei, premier author of leftist historical comics in the late 1950s and '60s and co-founder of *Garo*, where Hayashi and Sasaki published, was the son of Okamoto Tōki, leader of the prewar proletarian-arts movement. Gutai member Motonaga Sadamasa drew cartoons during the war, while his colleague Murakami Saburō's son, Murakami Tomohiko, became one of the leading critical voices of the amateur *dōjinshi* (fanzine) scene in the mid-'70s.

As for the stars of the late-'60s counterculture, designers Yokoo Tadanori and Tanaami Keiichi submitted cartoons to manga magazines as aspiring artists in their youth in the early '50s. American and Japanese comics feature frequently in their signature work from the '60s and onward; Yokoo even did design work for manga magazines. Shinohara Ushio—a member of the Neo-Dada Organizers best known for his boxing paintings and as a progenitor of Pop art in Japan—began creating experimental comics and comics-inspired drawings in the late '60s, and sculptures and paintings in the '70s. Akasegawa, painter Tateishi Tiger, and designer Awazu Kiyoshi similarly made their own comics and comics-like work. Playwright, poet, and filmmaker Terayama Shūji wrote a radio play parodying the moral panic around comics among teachers and PTA groups titled *Adult Hunting* (*Otona gari*, 1960), staged a happening commemorating the death of a popular boxing manga character in 1970, and wrote numerous articles about comics. Doyen of Japanese New Wave cinema Ōshima Nagisa created a filmic adaptation of Shirato's leftist ninja and peasant-rebellion epic *The Legend of Kagemaru* (*Ninja bugeichō*, a.k.a. *Band of Ninja*) in 1967 by photographing and montaging the original drawings. When members of the Japanese Red Army Faction hijacked a commercial airplane to defect to North Korea in 1970, one of them declared to the TV cameras, before disappearing into the plane, "We will all be Tomorrow's Joe," referring to the working-class star of the same boxing manga, Chiba Tetsuya and Kajiwara Ikki's *Tomorrow's Joe* (*Ashita no joo*, 1968–73), that Terayama had honored.[5]

Which is all to say that, in Japan, comics were firmly a part of both mass culture and the counterculture and were a central presence in important sectors of contemporary art and cultural theory as well. Very little of the reductive stereotyping of and condescension toward the medium that colors, say, the work of or writ-

5. For an overview of art/manga crossovers in the '60s, see Ryan Holmberg, "When Manga Was Pop," *Art in America* (January 2016), pp. 56–63; and *1968 nen: Gekidō no jidai no geijutsu / 1968: Art in the Turbulent Age*, exh. cat. (Japan: Chiba shi bijutsukan, et. al., 2018), passim.

ing about Roy Lichtenstein is to be found among Japanese artists or critics of the time, though most were familiar with American Pop art. The Lettrist and Situationist position, that comics were an iconic cultural form but one hampered by regressive social and political views and whose artistic potential had been woefully underexplored by its professional practitioners, would have resonated with very few members of Japan's counterculture. Within that milieu, manga were respected—even admired—as a self-actualized artistic medium and a generation-defining cultural and social force. Forms of manga were so prevalent, and executed and appropriated in such a wide variety of ways, that one could even speak of the Japanese '60s as an era of "expanded manga" à la "expanded cinema."

Alas, the manga establishment was not generally inclined to return the compliment. When avant-gardism landed in manga's backyard, for most insiders it might as well have been a slimy alien speaking in bleeps and bloops, the befuddlement and disgust were so great. When poet and playwright Amazawa Taijirō proposed that Tsuge Yoshiharu's (b. 1937) legendary manga "Nejishiki" ("The Stopcock," *Garo*, June 1968) marked a momentous occasion in the wider world of "art" (*geijutsu*), critics associated with *Garo* and *Manga-ism* lambasted his use of that word as elitist appropriation by someone who didn't have a clue about manga or mass culture.[6] Tezuka Osamu (1928–1989)—the most famous of postwar Japanese cartoonists, lionized for elevating long-format narrative manga—also responded unkindly. About Sasaki's series of short, experimental, partially paneled pieces for *Asahi Journal* (June 1969–March 1970), he publicly complained that they belonged in self-published magazines, where intellectuals could fawn over them at their leisure and they wouldn't waste regular people's time or the valuable page space of mass print magazines.[7]

Tezuka "got it," or so he thought. He thought Sasaki was an elaboration of nonsense cartoons in the vein of Saul Steinberg, and accused him of "fooling around with illustration"—observations that were narrow but not off the mark, considering that Sasaki has admitted to being influenced by Steinberg and similar cartoonists in Europe like J. M. Bosc, whose work he came across in the magazine *The Cartoon Reader* (*Manga dokuhon*).[8] Tezuka didn't blame Sasaki for the "I don't get it" circus. After all, Sasaki himself asserted that there wasn't any meaning in his work. Tezuka blamed the literati and the journalists for creating a fuss over nothing and thereby making a mockery of their profession. Sasaki may have been the first Japanese cartoonist whose reputation was established primarily by critics, amateur and professional, rather than

6. Amazawa Taijirō, "Tsuge Yoshiharu oboegaki: 'Nejishiki' ni okeru geijutsu no jōkyō," *Tenbō* (February 1969), p. 177. On the response to Amazawa's essay, see Kani Yōsuke, "*Garo* jidai no Tsuge Yoshiharu: *Manga shugi* o chūshin toshita dōjidai gensetsu bunseki," *Manga kenkyū* 17 (March 2011), pp. 17–19. More generally about "Nejishiki" and its reception, see Ryan Holmberg, "Dreams and Wanderings: The Yoshiharu Tsuge Revolution, 1968–72," in Yoshiharu Tsuge, *Nejishiki* (Montreal: Drawn & Quarterly, 2023).

7. Tezuka Osamu, "Wakaranu manga," *Bungei shunjū* (March 1970), pp. 82–83.

8. Sasaki, "Still a Cartoonist," in *Ding Dong Circus*, pp. ix–x.

a consumer public. But while such a process of legitimation was typical in the art world and other elite corners of culture, Tezuka thought it unacceptable in a self-respecting, self-sustaining mass-entertainment field like comics.

Almost immediately after Tezuka's fusillade (published in March 1970), Sasaki stopped drawing for *Asahi Journal*. Maybe this was a coincidence; Sasaki claimed that, regardless of "the god's wrath" (referring to Tezuka's popular reputation as the "god of manga"), he had simply run out of ideas.[9] Few in the manga industry at the time would have cared either way. Sasaki shifted the focus of his practice to children's books shortly thereafter. A collection of his *Garo* work was published by Seirindō (*Garo*'s publisher) in June 1970; another would not appear until 2011, and with only a handful of his *Asahi Journal* pieces—notable gaps in a country that has otherwise faithfully documented the history of its avant-garde art, and where manga accounts for well over a third of all publishing. There remains, to this day, very little scholarship about Sasaki Maki, though most everyone in post-war art and manga studies knows his name.[10]

Nonetheless, Sasaki Maki's short period of experimental production (roughly 1967–1971) is singular and important—for the history of contemporary art as much as for manga. Never before in the history of manga had an artist challenged norms of creation or practices of reading so totally that onlookers were unsure how to classify his work medium-wise. Never before had an oeuvre inspired such a lively (if short-lived) discourse about avant-gardism in manga, one that is still unmatched today. At the same time, it is rare in the history of art, regardless of medium, that the primary practitioner of avant-gardism should also be one of its most dismissive critics. While critics and fellow artists earnestly tried to make sense of Sasaki's alleged nonsense by applying the terms of art history, art criticism, and media theory, the artist himself openly mocked attempts at theorization and interpretation, both in interviews and in the panels of his work. "I really don't understand the purpose of critics," Sasaki said in a conversation with painter Nakamura Hiroshi, published in the December 1969 issue of *Garo*. "As much as I try to respect them, I can't see them as anything but fussy readers. Sorry if that sounds rude."[11]

What follows is thus not just an account of critical ideas and aesthetic strategies but a tale of misdirected overtures and unrequited love, of avant-gardism in a field that was deeply ambivalent about avant-gardism and for the most part still is.

9. Sasaki, "Atogaki," in *Umibe no machi: Sasaki Maki no manga 1968–81* (Tokyo: Ōta shuppan, 2011), pp. 409–11. When this text was adapted for *Ding Dong Circus*, for some reason Sasaki deleted reference to the Tezuka episode.

10. The only previous attempt to survey this literature is Kani Yōsuke, "Sasaki Maki o meguru gensetsu: *Garo* dokusharan o chūshin ni," *Manga kenkyū* 15 (April 2009), pp. 28–53, though he focuses specifically on responses to Sasaki's work in the reader pages of *Garo*.

11. Sasaki Maki and Nakamura Hiroshi, "Manga o kaihō suru manga," *Garo* 69 (December 1969), rpt. in *Taiwaroku: Gendai manga erejii* (Tokyo: Seirindō, 1970), p. 111.

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One of the main terms around which critics rallied in their attempt to explain avant-garde manga was "anti-manga" (*anchi-manga*). The subject of thoughtful theorization for about a year and a half in 1969–1970, the term and the ideas behind it virtually vanished from manga criticism thereafter. The other main term, "image manga" (as both *imeeji manga* and *eizō manga*), had a slightly longer life (1967–70) but likewise disappeared with the passing of the era. Broadly speaking, "anti-manga" spoke mainly to the ways in which avant-garde manga challenged norms of narrative and meaning in comics, while "image manga" pointed to the ways that such challenges opened up manga to participation in broader inquiries concerning visual images in the age of the mass-media spectacle. "Objet manga" (*obuje manga*), which I will talk about briefly at the end of this essay, surfaced momentarily in 1969 to account for the material immanence and force of Sasaki's opposition to narrative and metaphor, but never, to my knowledge, circulated beyond the single text in which it was broached.

As a term, "anti-manga" was bound to be coined sooner or later. Inspired by European and American writing on Dada, Neo-Dada, and Nouveau Réalisme, "anti-art" ("*han geijutsu*") had been a key term in Japanese art criticism since 1960 as a way to assess the emergence of junk sculpture and assemblages in the late '50s.[12] As far as I know, manga was never part of this discourse in its original phase in the early '60s. The only comics-related works to come directly out of the "anti-art" movement were the anarchic, explosively expressionistic drawings produced by Shinohara Ushio for various print venues in the mid-to-late '60s, including a rock/action comic titled *Vietcongs* for the magazine *Bijutsu Journal* in 1967, and the cartoonish drawings and collages (some with faces and panels clipped from American superhero comics) he created to embellish his autobiographical account of postwar art, *Avant-Garde Road* (*Zen'ei no michi*), in 1968. Though hardly "anti-art" in look or spirit, Akasegawa's involvement with *Manga-ism* as a cover designer and his polished manga/illustrated broadside series *The Cherry Illustrated* (*Sakura gahō*, 1970–71), published in *Asahi Journal* and *Garo*, arguably spring from the anti-establishmentarian impulses and fascination with the found and retro that characterized his activities with Neo-Dada Organizers and Hi-Red Center. However, as far as professional cartoonists, the manga industry, and manga critics were concerned, neither the things typically called "anti-art" nor the terms of "anti-art" discourse had any appreciable impact on what they drew or wrote—even when critics started using the word "anti-manga" years later, circa 1969. "Anti-manga" was "anti" in a very different way from "anti-art."

12. For an overview of the "anti-art" debates and the artwork and exhibitions that informed them, see Reiko Tomii, "*Geijutsu* on Their Minds: Memorable Words on Anti-Art," in Charles Merewether and Rika Iezumi Hiro, eds., *Art Anti-Art Non-Art: Experimentations in the Public Sphere in Postwar Japan, 1950–1970* (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2007), pp. 35–62; and William Marotti, *Money, Trains, and Guillotines: Art and Revolution in 1960s Japan* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2013), pp. 152–99.

Given the term's art-world genealogy, it is not surprising that one of the earliest published articles to seriously explore the idea of "anti-manga" was by a prominent art critic and curator, Nakahara Yūsuke (1931–2011), who only occasionally wrote about comics. Aside from general references to medium reflexivity and countercultural opposition, however, there was little in Nakahara's "From Manga to Anti-Manga" (*Manga kara anchi manga e*), published in the literary magazine *Bungei* in March 1969, that spoke to the democratizing, anti-aesthetic, and deskilling impulses that had underwritten "anti-art" earlier in the decade.[13]

Nakahara begins by proposing that postwar story manga falls into two general categories: the image-based storytelling of Tezuka Osamu and the expository (*bensetsu*) storytelling of Shirato Sanpei. The first, he claims, comes out of animation, while the latter is rooted in *kamishibai* (literally "picture theater"), a form of storytelling using picture cards supplemented by vocal narration that had been popular among children since the '30s but was absorbed by the commercial explosion of manga in the '50s. For both artists, Nakahara uses the term "*gekiga*"—an odd choice, at least for Tezuka. Typically, the term signified comics for a teenage or older male audience featuring anti-heroic forms of masculinity, ambiguous morality, and settings and characters derived from Japanese society's lower echelons, articulated through the genre codes of suspense, horror, and hard-boiled action, with visual storytelling and cinematic framing privileged over textual exposition. Tezuka had adopted the themes and breakdown techniques of *gekiga* as he branched out to more mature readers in the late 1950s and '60s, but few would have described his style as *gekiga*, least of all the artist himself, because of its continued allegiance to cartoonish exaggeration, slapstick humor, and optimistic heroism. For Nakahara, "*gekiga*" seems to have meant something like long-format storytelling in the comics medium whose language is the product of remediation from other visual (though not exclusively visual) modern storytelling media. Many artists and writers turned to the name "*gekiga*" as a way to pry comics production and criticism away from the history of humor and caricature that "manga" implied. Perhaps Nakahara saw it in a related way as a means to open up comics discourse to a wider range of media histories and theory.

Like many observers, Nakahara saw in *Garo* circa 1968 a watershed in how manga was created and consumed. Adapting ideas of active viewer participation in happenings, post-Minimalism, and Conceptual art, Nakahara locates the essence of *Garo*'s break in the way that certain of the magazine's artists allowed sense and meaning in the work to be determined by the reader rather than the author. His first example is Tsuge Yoshiharu's "Nejishiki," mentioned earlier as a work about which insider manga critics (which Nakahara was not) were particularly touchy when it came to appreciation and appropriation by high culture. While associating the story's lack of clear cause-and-effect narrative development (which universally

13. `Nakahara Yūsuke, "Manga kara anchi manga e: gendai manga sakuhin shōron," *Bungei* (March 1969), pp. 198–201; rpt. as "Koe naki nikukoe: manga kara anchi manga e" in *Nansensu geijutsuron* (Tokyo: Firumu aato sha, 1972), pp. 205–11.

stumped critics when it appeared in *Garo* in 1968) with its themes of loss of home and existential wandering, Nakahara argues that, above and beyond any single reader's interpretation of the work, what is important about "Nejishiki" is how it confounds the expository, authorial voice that had become conventional in *gekiga*. Appropriately, though he does not comment directly on it, the page from "Nejishiki" that accompanies Nakahara's essay shows the protagonist struggling to walk upon overgrown train tracks while surrounded by stacks of blank signposts—as if Tsuge were literally trying to set both the protagonist and reader adrift by obscuring typical pathways and withholding standard communicative signals. Later editions of Nakahara's essay use the text in the speech balloons of this page as an epigraph: "This road sure is hard to walk on / It's just making me more agitated." Explains Nakahara, "Tsuge forces the reader to use their own physical voice while reading the work. Adapting the buzzword anti-art, we could say that an anti-manga impulse is operating here."

Tsuge Yoshiharu, "Nejishiki," in Garo *no. 47, June 1968.*

Even if on the surface their work resembled "Nejishiki" very little, Nakahara thought something similar was going on in Hayashi's and Sasaki's work. He writes: "Like Tezuka Osamu, Hayashi Seiichi and Sasaki Maki emphasize the importance of the image, yet one struggles to find a connection between one panel and the next in their work. Who creates those connections is not the artist but the viewer. It is the viewer to whom is entrusted the task of recognizing the work as manga. We can thus say that these artists also belong to the anti-manga faction." Anti-manga were thus more "readerly" manga, not only for how they required the viewer to actively interpret elliptical breakdowns—Nakahara thought the closest analogue was Jean-Luc Godard's films—but also in that they required the viewer to first recognize adjacent panels as part of a narrative breakdown and, thus, the work as a comic. Anti-manga were thus also meta-manga.

The internal stylistic diversity, collage-like compositions, and disjunctive panel-to-panel transitions of Hayashi's and Sasaki's work marked, for Nakahara, the emergence of a new kind of immanence within the field of manga. "Rather than narrating something through the medium of manga, by using such compositions they are attempting to speak directly in the language of images. Each panel may be interpreted in its own way, but at the same time they carry meanings in relationship to the overall assembly. Though perhaps we can no longer call such works manga, as long as manga was part of the wider world of visual media, this development was inevitable." In their experimentation with "manga as [a medium of] images" (*imeeji toshite no manga*), he explains, many of these works were also "anti-manga" in that they incorporated reflexive critiques of the paneling and expository conventions they were breaking with. They were thus also close to "nonsense manga" by artists like Takita Yū, Tominaga Ichirō, and Sonoyama Shunji, not because they traded in non sequitur visual and verbal jokes but because, in a deeper sense of "nonsense," they rendered the sense-making conventions of the comics medium opaque and thus subject to play and questioning. As such, concludes Nakahara, anti-manga share with the counterculture the goal of interrogating and negating the dominant structures of reason and value within Japanese middle-class society.

Art historically, I don't think it's possible to account for the emergence of Hayashi's and Sasaki's work without attending to the increased cross-media interaction between comics and other visual arts in the late '60s, or to the shift to a more strongly visual mode of storytelling in manga beginning in the mid-'50s, which emphasized showing through breakdowns over telling through dialogue and exposition (in other words, the language of *gekiga* pioneered by Matsumoto Masahiko and Tatsumi Yoshihiro). These two developments set the stage for the relative autonomy of panels, elliptical visual fields, and graphic diversity that characterized so-called anti-manga.[14] Sasaki's encounter with European and American "nonsense" cartoons, intuited by Tezuka, also deserves closer consideration; his unpublished scrapbooks are filled with collages of cartoons and photos clipped from *The Cartoon Reader* and other magazines. Nonetheless, Nakahara's general point that heightened visuality, reader/viewer participation, and social disaffection went together is well taken and was echoed in other period assessments of avant-garde manga as well as in the details of the works of its practitioners.

Nakahara's peer Ishiko Junzō (1928–1977) took theorization of "anti-manga" much further. With a master's degree in aesthetics from the University of Tokyo and many years of active involvement with contemporary art as a critic and curator, Ishiko did not traffic in high-culture xenophobia. He was more open-minded

14. In general, see Ryan Holmberg, "The Eye and the Storm: Speed Lines and Gekiga FX," *International Journal of Comic Art* (Fall 2013), pp. 389–420; "Hayashi Seiichi's Pop," in *Red Red Rock*, pp. iii–lvi; "Seiichi Hayashi's Nouvelle Vague," in *Red Colored Elegy*, paperback edition (2018), pp. 263–72; and the various articles I have written about *komaga* and *gekiga* for *The Comics Journal* online.

and potentially more capable of handling the art/comics crossover than anyone else in Japan, especially its visual aspects. Given his background, however, as well as his penchant for abstraction and convoluted prose, he was also a prime target of the backlash against theory in manga.[15]

Ishiko threw down the gauntlet from the get-go. His first book was entitled *A Theory of the Art of Manga* (*Manga geijutsu ron*, March 1967), juxtaposing two words that many in both fields would have considered antithetical. Surveying the various things that went by the name of manga at the time—different forms of narrative comics, caricature, political cartoons, animation, TV commercials using animation and/or characters licensed from popular manga and anime—and their relationship to adjacent and overlapping fields like painting, journalism, and humor, Ishiko came to the conclusion that, "while I cannot ally myself with those who say that manga is not art. . . . I will also not say that manga are art."[16] The ambivalent not-art character of manga, for Ishiko, has nothing to do with aesthetic or intellectual qualities but rather with manga's original and primary location within mass media. While painting, for example, had the freedom to experiment with internal formal relations owing to the medium's autonomy in the modern era, manga always had to attend to the expectations and literacy of the mass readership that consumed the print magazines and newspapers in which they were published. Far from a limitation, this situation, Ishiko argues, means that manga represent an important and multifaceted enterprise of maintaining and expanding the bounds of "communication" within the modern visual arts. Presaging the terms that framed discussions of avant-garde manga in the popular press a few years later, Ishiko writes that manga represent a more accessible version of "getting it" (*wakaru*) in a century during which modern art had become so arcane as to appear that "not getting it" (*wakaranai*) was the aim.[17]

This issue—what constitutes "comprehensibility" in the visual arts—is a leitmotif that Ishiko returns to again and again in his writings on manga. It may seem trivial and remedial in retrospect, but it is important to recognize the novel position Ishiko occupied. His seminal texts on manga appeared not only in books and journals for comics insiders but also in art and design magazines and mainstream news and culture weeklies. Of experimentalism in manga, he was a popularizer as

15. On Ishiko's manga criticism, see Kajiya Kenji, "Ishiko Junzō no chikakuron-teki tenkai: manga hihyō o chūshin ni," *Bijutsu Forum* 21.24 (November 2011), pp. 104–12; and Shige CJ Suzuki, "Traversing Art and Manga: Ishiko Junzō's Writings on Manga/Gekiga," *Comics Forum* online (2014). For an overview of Ishiko's work as a writer and curator with copious illustrations, see *Ishiko Junzō teki sekai: bijutsu hatsu, manga keiyu, kitchu yuki*, ed. Fuchū bijutsukan (Tokyo: Bijutsu shuppansha, 2011).

16. Ishiko Junzō, *Manga geijutsuron: gendai nihonjin no sensu to yuumoa no kōzai* (Tokyo: Fuji shoin, 1967), p. 22.

17. Note here, for the later discussion of "image manga," that Ishiko positions manga within the same nexus of mass media and journalism that politically oriented experimental filmmaking saw as its primary field in the 1950s and '60s. For the most part, long-format narrative manga ceased to have any meaningful relationship with newspapers or other journalistic publications in the '30s, and "journalistic" story manga of any sort had always been quite rare. But it's interesting that he would insist on that context nonetheless.

well as a theorist. He was trying to carve out not just a place for manga within the art world but also a place for intellectualized discourses related to the visual arts within manga, a field where practice remained largely untheorized beyond how-to books for youths and broad surveys for popular audiences, and which was dominated by artists few of whom had gone to college and many not even to high school. (Sasaki dropped out of art school after his first year, while Hayashi started working full-time after graduating middle school.) The anti-intellectualism that reared its head later in the decade was thus to some extent sociologically understandable. Indeed, while one might assume that Ishiko's biggest hurdle was persuading denizens of the art world of the merits and interest of manga—based on comics' ongoing challenge in the West—he appears to have experienced far more resistance from people in manga, and even from ostensibly "avant-garde" corners like *Garo*. His repeated return to the issue of "comprehensibility" partly stems from a recognition that he could not simply write off dismissive responses as philistinism and still hope for a wider appreciation of avant-garde aesthetics and discourses of contemporary art and media studies among manga creators, editors, and readers. Through no fault of his own, he perpetually had to return to step one.

Tezuka, for example (who had a doctorate in medicine but rose to fame at a time—the late 1940s and '50s—before manga criticism was common), regarded Ishiko as one of the worst of the nonsense-generating intellectuals and enablers of the "I don't get it" craze and derided him as such in the press, leading to a public exchange of letters between the two.[18] In the desultory *Sunday Mainichi* roundtable of February 1970, Kondō Hidezō likewise knocks "a certain critic who writes ridiculously complicated stuff" in support of *gekiga*—most likely a reference to Ishiko—before pooh-poohing Sasaki's work.[19] In a dialogue between Sasaki and painter Nakamura Hiroshi published in *Garo* in late 1969, both artists spend a surprising amount of time bashing critics who hunt for hidden meanings rather than enjoying the images as immanent visual entities. They never name Ishiko, but Nakamura, at least, is clearly thinking of him, for reasons explained below. Nakamura goes so far as to state that critics should stop writing altogether and try drawing instead, for that was the only proper and self-respecting way to appreciate the possibilities that Sasaki's manga had unleashed.[20]

Nonetheless, Ishiko was invited by the same *Sunday Mainichi* to explain these "manga that are not manga" for a special issue on comics in 1970. His article

18. Though their substance is not directly related to the present topic, Tezuka and Ishiko had previously exchanged some very bitter and public words about Ishiko's worth as a critic and Tezuka's high-handedness. See Tezuka, "Ishiko Junzō shi e no kōkaijō," *COM* (February 1968), pp. 154–55; and the multiple versions of Ishiko's response, "Tezuka Osamu shi e no hanron," *Nihon dokusho shinbun*, February 19, 1968, p. 2; "Tezuka Osamu shi e no hanron," *COM* (April 1968), pp. 84–85; and "Haikei Tezuka Osamu sama," *Hanashi no tokushū* (April 1968), pp. 44–45. Thanks to Nariai Hajime for drawing my attention to this exchange.

19. Kondō and Mizuki, "70 nen no shuyaku wa gekiga ka manga ka," p. 116.

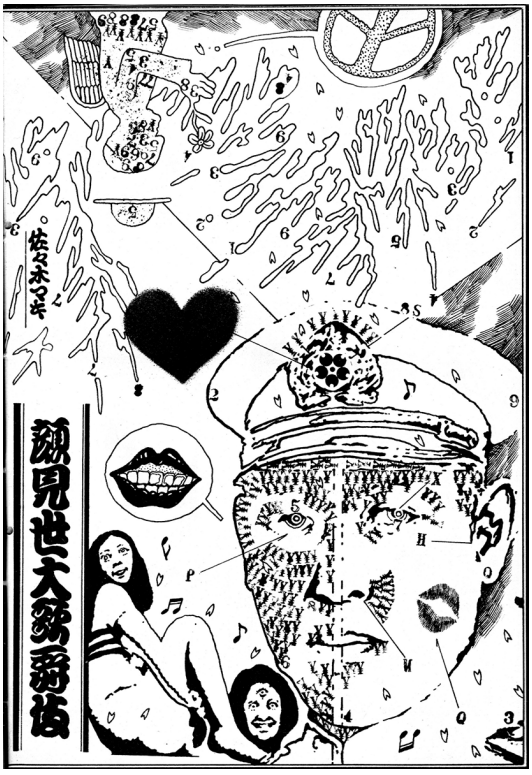
20. Sasaki Maki and Nakamura Hiroshi, "Manga o kaihō suru manga."

begins with a sympathetic citation of Kondō and Mizuki's dismissal of such comics and a disclaimer that he isn't sure if he will be able to successfully put what Sasaki and Hayashi are doing into words. "One has to see the work for oneself," he writes. This wasn't just an obligatory expression of humility. Language, Ishiko believed, was precisely what kept people from properly appreciating avant-garde manga. It was language and its limits, as well as popular sentiments regarding avant-garde culture and a loose adaptation of Marshall McLuhan's ideas, that underlie the title and thesis of Ishiko's article for *Sunday Mainichi*, "Anti-Manga: A Drama of Feeling" ("Anchi manga: kansei no dorama," May 1970). Ishiko had used the term "anti-manga" previously in an essay about Tsuge Yoshiharu for *Garo* (February 1968) to describe the artist's subtly non-naturalist handling of figures, dialogue, and narrative. He also wrote a short article on the topic of "anti-manga" for *Graphication*, a promotional journal dedicated to arts and media published by Fuji Xerox, in September 1969. But this *Sunday Mainichi* essay appears to have been his first extensive exploration of the subject.[21]

So what makes Sasaki's and Hayashi's work so different from manga as we know it? "In Sasaki's work," writes Ishiko, referring primarily to the more abstract *Asahi Journal* pieces, "there are no identifiable characters, nor is there a story. You cannot even say that there are panels. The overall design could be regarded as a form of illustration." As for Hayashi's work, which is far less confusing, "there are proper panels. There are also young men and boys who function like protagonists. His earliest work had stories, but recently that has dissipated. Though I don't think you can say that Hayashi has totally gotten rid of stories, there are at least no narratives in his work that develop along conventional dramatic principles of having a beginning, elaboration, twist, and conclusion [*kishōtenketsu*]."

Responding to criticisms like Kondō's that Hayashi's and Sasaki's were poorly drawn and therefore failed to succeed even as stand-alone pictures, Ishiko argues that picture-making in the usual sense is not what those artists were aspiring to anyway. "If, for example, in Sasaki's pictures, you see something that looks like a fish or a bird, in many cases it won't look like actual fish or birds. In Hayashi's case, you can tell what's depicted. Still, when he draws people or landscapes, he does so as if they were flat and there were no conventions about how to render light and shadow. Some people may thus say that these artists can't draw well. However, just because you can name who or what is depicted or know how they look, that alone doesn't mean that you understand that particular manga. Eventually we come back to the question: What does it mean to 'understand'

21. Ishiko Junzō, "Anchi manga: kansei no dorama," *Sandee mainichi*, zōkan: Manga to gekiga 2, May 9, 1970, pp. 202–203. The ideas in this essay were subsequently adapted for a chapter titled "Anti-Manga" in Ishiko's *Gendai manga no shisō* (Tokyo: Taihei shuppansha, 1970), rpt. in *Komikku ron: Ishiko Junzō chosakushū*, vol. 3 (Tokyo: Ramasha, 1988), pp. 181–91. The two other essays mentioned here are "Sonzaironteki anchi-manga," *Garo* (February 1968), rpt. in *Tsuge Yoshiharu no sekai* (Tokyo: Seirindō, 1970), pp. 19–32; and "Manga buumu o koeru mono: anchi manga no taibō," *Graphication* (September 1969), pp. 6–7.



*Sasaki, "The Great Kabuki All-Star Revue" (*Kaomise Ōkabuki*), in* Asahi Journal, *September 7, 1969.*

[*wakaru*] manga?" His answer: "Put simply, 'to understand' is the experience of *reading an event* [*koto o yomu*] through what has been drawn."

It might seem strange, more than fifty years after the advent of modernist abstraction, that Ishiko found it necessary to explain that naturalism or specific references to the outside world were not the only ways to make a compelling picture. It is almost as if he were addressing an audience familiar with nothing but genre painting, portraits, or landscapes—or mainstream comics and editorial cartoons. Compared to Nakahara, Ishiko was less interested in medium specificity, or whether a reader consumes the work as comics per se, or even in the ways in which Hayashi or Sasaki arranges and juxtaposes images across panels or the page. He focuses instead on the drawing inside panels because he wants to establish that "anti-manga" demand that we rethink our relationship to the visual world. What reading manga usually involves, he says, is "a receiver using language to make sense of images and put meaning to phenomena [*jishō*] according to his or her own perspective. In other words, while looking at manga, a reader relies on their own personal knowledge and experiences to exercise their imagination and interpret the pictures and the dialogue, thereby making connections between them and experiencing the work as dramatic." This norm was, in Ishiko's view, what the "anti" of anti-manga primarily negated: They denied the reader's accrued common sense and everyday life experience as interpretive ballast.

Half-jokingly, Kondō had wondered if Sasaki's brain wasn't wired differently. Similarly, Tezuka inferred that Sasaki's *Asahi Journal* work was comparable to the doodling of children and the insane.[22] "The issue of whether or not one understands the work," retorted Ishiko, "has nothing to do with brain structure [*zunō*

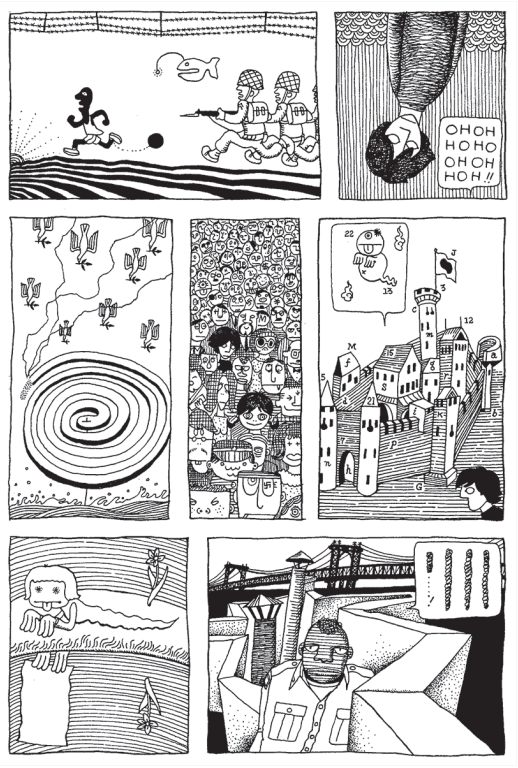
22. Tezuka, "Wakaranu manga," p. 83.

kōzō] but rather with perceptual structure [*chikaku kōzō*]." Before one could process these manga properly, one first had to learn how to see differently. And to do that, one had to abandon default dependence on language and the logical structures that went with it. Ishiko explains, "The images of his [Sasaki's] work do not operate as a complement to language. That's why, if you try to make meaning out of them through words, you'll only confuse things more. It would also be pointless to try to seek cause-and-effect relations on the basis of verbal meaning or expect to be moved dramatically. In other words, one cannot 'read' [*yomu*] the image. One can only 'view' [*miru*] it."

Through this proposed shift from comics *readership* to a new comics *viewership*, Ishiko was arguing not only that these new manga were essentially visual but that they redefined visual experience and what an "image" could be. "These are not images of something," he says of Sasaki's work, "but rather images that are themselves something. Even if there's a drawing of something that looks like a dove, it has nothing to do with actual doves, nor is it a symbol of peace. It is a dove image that manifests 'here and now' by being drawn and being viewed." The proper way to appreciate these immanent and autonomous images, explains Ishiko, was to focus on nothing but the image itself and appreciate that visual experience as a self-sufficient dramatic event. When Nakahara wrote that Hayashi and Sasaki were "attempting to speak directly in the language of images" by using elliptical and graphically heterogeneous compositions, it initially sounds as if he was leaning in a similar direction. But the essential difference is that, while Nakahara embraced the widened interpretive possibilities thereby unleashed in the form of a more participatory *reading* experience across panels, Ishiko thought them void. "One cannot 'read' Sasaki's work," he insisted in unambiguous grammar: "*yomu koto wa dekinai*."

While Ishiko here is clearly channeling the discourse of abstract art, in *A Theory of the Art of Manga* he repeatedly asserts that manga's allegiance to figurative representation and narrative marked it as being fundamentally at odds with abstract art and its prioritization of internal formal relations. But in his texts about avant-garde manga circa 1969–70, Ishiko seems to have hit upon a bridge between comics and abstraction by expanding his thinking not just about comics but also about abstraction, as something that can incite a synesthetic experience, which he here applies to figurative arrays. "Enjoy the dynamism of the beat as the image events follow one after another," he says about Sasaki. Likewise with Hayashi, though his work proliferates with familiar figures and symbols (girls, mothers, flowers), "there is no cause and effect on the basis of verbal meaning." Instead, the reader must "allow their blood to flow through the flattened pictures [*gazō*]" and "follow the drama of feeling" that results. He also references music, calling Sasaki's work "a jazz of the image" and Hayashi's "*kayōkyoku* [Japanese country/blues songs] sung with the eye." Though musical analogies, of course, have a long history in writing about abstract art, Ishiko's evocation here of an

embodied, anti-linguistic experience also recalls theories about the participatory nature of electronic media as posited by McLuhan and the "retribalizing" experiences that were supposed to arise from participation in immersive multimedia events like Andy Warhol's *Exploding Plastic Inevitable* (1966–1967), which were reproduced in Japanese dance clubs, art events, and movies featuring the counterculture and were much talked about in both specialized art magazines and in the popular press.[23]



Sasaki, "A Dream in Heaven" (Tengoku de miru yume), *in* Garo *no. 39, November 1967.*

Indeed, though Ishiko ignores them, in Sasaki's manga there are many passages evocative of the montage-based, multiscreen projections of expanded cinema. There are also hands that talk, speech that physically moves and crashes through space, and other figures evocative of synesthesia. But did the artist embrace the emancipatory discourse that was often woven into these worlds? Ishiko thought so, though in muted tones. He closes "Anti-Manga: A Drama of Feeling" by arguing that "anti-manga" derive their negational anti-ness from being sensitive to '60s Japan's own (non-drug-induced) bad trip. After all, Ishiko was writing in 1970, after the struggles to shut down and revolutionize Japanese universities had failed owing to internecine warfare and a strengthened police force, and as many artists of the counterculture were actively embracing cooptation by the state through commissions for Expo '70 in Osaka. Ishiko thought there were deep social underpinnings to the anti-communication turn in the otherwise highly reader-satisfaction-sensitive world of comics. To those who described the rise of manga as simply an index of declining "intellectual abilities" under the stupefying influence of tele-

23. On McLuhan's popularity and reception in Japan, see Marc Steinberg, "McLuhan as Prescription Drug: Actionable Theory and Advertising Industries," in Marc Steinberg and Alexander Zahlten, eds., *Media Theory in Japan* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2017), pp. 131–50. On Warhol's multimedia events, see Branden W. Joseph, "'My Mind Split Open': Andy Warhol's Exploding Plastic Inevitable," *Grey Room* 8 (Summer 2002), pp. 80–107.

vision and an educational system emphasizing rote memorization, Ishiko replies that he wishes the problem were so simple: "Having been thrust into the obscenities of life and civilization as we know it, and due to the pain and anger that arises from being forced to deal with that situation even if we don't want to, one is bound to find themselves at a loss for words, or, alternatively, interpreting words as visual rhythms, or be drawn to autonomous images that have refused all relationship with words."

While this positive pairing of wordlessness and visual dynamism resonates with recent appraisals of abstract comics,[24] the purely formalist motivations of the latter seem a far cry from the social discontent driving Ishiko's texts and Sasaki's work. By invoking "a loss of words," Ishiko is echoing a common perception at the time that an unbridgeable generation gap had been created—leading to fights between police and students in the street, barricades on campuses, a spate of teenage defections from the countryside, and hedonistic behavior in the cities—owing to a failure of communication between the baby-boomer generation and their parents, teachers, and the state. Some people called this crisis "discommunication," using the English. If "anti-manga" were anti-verbal and anti-message, it was in response to the perception that communication and language operated in a world of corrupt conventions. Mediation itself was a problem. Hence the drive toward a new culture based around entities that were supposedly more immediate and with less room for manipulation than words. Hence also, for Ishiko and *Weekly Asahi* alike, the autonomous "image," the intuitive and synesthetic "feelings" that arose from immersion in a purely visual field, and the rejection of "not getting it" as substantive critique.

But this "image" was tricky and itself a corrupt thing, and I'm not sure that Ishiko's limited formalism or his vague gestures toward emancipation were up to grappling with it whole, or even as it manifested in Sasaki's work, where visual images were handled with as much suspicion as words, and not only as adjuncts to verbal communication.

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No doubt, Sasaki suspected words. Though Ishiko argues that this was expressed in the artist's work mainly secondhand through the image—by privileging what Ishiko thought were pure, non-referential pictures over polluted, linguistically determined symbols—the artist also launched attacks directly against words and speech. In many such works, however, Sasaki also questions images themselves (as visual entities independent of their function as linguistically reducible signs) as vehicles of control and persuasion. It is hard not to read this anti-word/anti-image conjunction as critical commentary on the dominant forms of audiovisual and print media of the day, particularly television, for reasons that will be explained below.

24. See the various texts in Andrei Molotiu, ed., *Abstract Comics* (Seattle: Fantagraphics, 2009).

In an earlier and fuller text on Sasaki's work, a chapter titled "The Image Event" ("Imeeji no ivento") in the co-authored classic *Contemporary Manga Theory: A Collection of Essays* (*Gendai manga ronshū*, November 1969), Ishiko attempts to analyze Sasaki's work through so-called image theory (*eizō ron*, sometimes *imeeji ron*). As explicated by Yuriko Furuhata in her book *Cinema of Actuality: Japanese Avant-Garde Filmmaking in the Season of Image Politics* (2013), "*eizō* theory" had a galvanizing effect on documentary and experimental filmmaking in Japan in the late 1950s and '60s and eventually rewrote how artists across media thought about the nature and politics of image-making. As a term, *eizō* referred specifically to technologically mediated images, both still and moving, encompassing photography, cinema, television, projection, and, later, video. As a discourse, *eizō* theory began by tackling the nature of the image within documentary filmmaking, opposing its supposed transparency and facticity and advocating for its interrogation through strategies of defamiliarization, inspired by Marxist, Freudian, and existentialist theory and the historical avant-garde. Over the course of the '60s, as a new wave of Western theorists like Daniel Boorstin and Marshall McLuhan were translated into Japanese and television consolidated its hegemony over audiovisual media and journalism, *eizō* theory became more broadly engaged with issues of remediation, intermediality, and politics and life in the age of the spectacle. Within film, Matsumoto Toshio and Ōshima Nagisa were *eizō*'s prime theorists as well as its leading artistic practitioners.[25]

Though writing on manga had, since the early '60s, frequently broached the influence of television on the content, language, and publishing of comics as well as on its child consumers, to my knowledge, *eizō* theory did not enter manga discourse until Ishiko touched on it in 1967 in *A Theory of the Art of Manga*. Interestingly, that book's inside flap features a promotional blurb by Ōshima, who only a month prior had premiered his adaptation of Shirato's *Legend of Kagemaru*, regarded by Furuhata as a key work in *eizō* practice for its extensive use of remediated imagery. Alas, Ishiko's adoption of the terms of *eizō* theory was rather haphazard. He even sometimes used the term *gazō*—which likewise means "visual image" but signified still and hand-drawn images rather than technologically produced ones and so is perhaps better differentiated as "picture"—as a synonym for *imeeji*, which is understandable given that manga were typically hand-drawn and printed, but which nonetheless obscures *eizō*'s primary engagement with film, photography, and television. Ishiko was also reluctant to elaborate upon the political claims made for *eizō*-conscious experimental filmmaking and photography, which ultimately hamstrung his reading of Sasaki's work, as noted below. Nonetheless, his writing on the topic represents the most concerted attempted to bridge manga criticism and advanced media theory in these years.

After citing Boorstin's *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America* (1962)—which had been translated into Japanese in 1964 as *Gen'ei no jidai: masukomi ga*

25. On *eizō*, see Yuriko Furuhata, *Cinema of Actuality: Japanese Avant-Garde Filmmaking in the Season of Image Politics* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013).

seizō suru jijitsu (The age of the image: The truth as manufactured by the mass media), with the word for "image" in the title (*gen'ei*) connoting "illusion"—Ishiko writes that manga, as a medium that matured as an adjunct to print journalism within modern mass media, has an obligation to question the manufactured "pseudo-events" that plague the news cycle in Japan as much as in Boorstin's America and thereby help the reading masses be more critical about the media they consume. While focusing on how this spirit of "self-critique" (*jiko hihan*) within manga is most immediately important for combating propaganda and false consciousness in political cartoons, Ishiko notes that it also informs—or at least *should* inform—the long-format, serialized story manga that had come to dominate comics in Japan since World War II. However, he adds that story manga were not yet up to that task, for they were still caught in "the age of the picture" (*gazō no jidai*), while mass media had moved into "the age of the image" (*eizō no jidai*). As something akin to "novels to be viewed" (*miru shōsetsu*), story manga remained tied to the structures of prose fiction and had not yet "achieved their own independent dramatic construction as pictures," in other words, their own independence as a medium. *Gekiga*, on the other hand, with their incorporation of cinematic camerawork and their elaboration of aesthetic elements specific to comics—varying frame size, decorative and reflexive play with panel frames, the design and size of onomatopoeia—represented the dawn of manga's "image-ification" (*eizōka*), and thus the ability for manga to engage critically with mass media in its current post-print and post-verbal phase. Yet, as Ishiko offers the names of no artists in whose work that potential has been realized, the potential stands as just that: a theoretical potential edging toward a burgeoning horizon.[26]

Writing in "The Image Event" in 1969, Ishiko seems to have found in Sasaki a cartoonist whose experiments with the language of comics and whose consciousness of their rooting in mass media were advanced enough to engage "the age of images" with sufficient criticality. The "image itself" principle of Sasaki's work, Ishiko explains, is not some esoteric modernist experiment. It is, rather, a practice reflecting the "age of image events" as proposed by Boorstin. Thanks most of all to the power of "pseudo-events" on television, writes Ishiko, images have achieved an "independent actuality" versus their traditional function as language-like vehicles of communication. One experiences the image itself directly as something with its own reality rather than indirectly as a stand-in for an event happening in some other place and/or at some other time. As precedents within the visual arts, Ishiko cites Pop-art painting (no specific artists named) and Godard's films as pioneering "artistic expressions that used the direct and concrete image as their base." Such explorations began as "self-negations" of genre conventions but ended up unearthing basic conditions pertaining to the experience and structure of images in general.

Sasaki follows in these artists' footsteps, says Ishiko, by challenging the conventions of comics and pushing the envelope of the magazine, with the parallel

26. Ishiko, *Manga geijutsu ron*, pp. 122–26.

result of reconceiving the magazine and the manga page not as a "medium" in the traditional sense of a vehicle of communication but rather as a "site" [*ba*] for experiencing the image as image in the "here and now." "Since his works are printed, composed of panels, and appear in magazines, you could call them manga. But then again, you don't have to. And even if you do, then you could probably say that they are manga that interrogate and critique their very status as manga by virtue of the fact that they are comprised purely of pictures [*gazō*]."[27] Again, Ishiko's use of *gazō* here is a bit confusing within a discussion inspired by *eizō* theory, which was constructed around the nature and possibilities of photomechanically produced images. However, if one were to be generous, one could argue that this confusion is itself key, given that Sasaki increasingly used a hybrid of manual, photomechanical, and pseudo-photomechanical means—hand-drawing, collaging, and tracing via light box—similar to the heterogeneous remediated imagery typical of films made under the influence of *eizō* theory. Sasaki's manga thus represents an *eizō*-fication at the level not only of the iconic image but also of the physical act of drawing and creating paneled breakdowns.

If Sasaki's work is incomprehensible to most readers, continues Ishiko, that is only because most readers are mistakenly looking for meaning behind the "image event" of Sasaki's artwork. If they find his manga esoteric and opaque, it is because they wrongly assume that his images harbor codes. Precisely because they don't, because Sasaki's images are visual images and nothing more, they are "more open and accessible" (*kaihōteki*, *ippanteki*) than traditional forms of manga that do harbor codes, even when those codes are ones that most people with any experience in reading comics can decipher with ease. Liberation required effort, however. In order to appreciate this novel paradigm, the reader had to meet Sasaki halfway by relinquishing their readerly habits and entering a viewerly state of mind. This was, of course, the crux of his theory of "anti-manga" and represents the point at which his idea of "image manga" diverges from politically oriented *eizō* theory, which aimed for liberation through dialectical critical consciousness vis-à-vis the spectacle, not through disinterested, post-semiotic aesthetic pleasure.

Later, Ishiko goes even further: Sasaki's image manga—being "neither manga nor illustration nor design, but an inclusive manifestation of the image" encompassing those fields and more—becomes anonymous and collective, indistinguishable from the wider culture of the image.[28] In line with *eizō* theory of the later '60s, Ishiko seems to be suggesting that Sasaki's work is essentially intermedial. He also hints that Sasaki's manga are participatory—but the irony is that the participatory nature of Sasaki's work can most easily be demonstrated by a historical fact that contradicts Ishiko's thesis: the large amount of interpretive ink spilled in *Garo* and student newspapers. While Ishiko wants to wish away such discursive responses as a wrongheaded, logocentric approach to Sasaki's work, and Tezuka

27. Ishiko Junzō, "Imeeji no ivento: Sasaki Maki ron," in *Gendai manga ronshū* (Tokyo: Seirindō, 1969), pp. 216–18.

28. Ishiko, "Imeeji no ivento," p. 221.

dismissed them as overintellectualized rubbish—as the artist himself did—Sasaki also clearly enjoyed the dissonance that arose from juxtaposing ostensibly unrelated images and words. As much as his work was composed of autonomous imagery, it also engaged attempts to *interpret* such imagery. His anti-manga and meta-manga, over time, became increasingly anti-critical and metacritical, reflecting a negative-feedback loop between practice and theory.

One odd thing about Ishiko's "Image Event" essay is his limited engagement with other media. By framing his analysis through Boorstin, he presumably implies that Sasaki's "images" are related to those of television, a central concern of *eizō* theory in general. But the most Ishiko says in this regard is that the manner in which Sasaki's images achieve an "independent actuality" is similar to the way television collapses the difference between fiction and reality.

However, both internal and anecdotal evidence makes clear that television was one of Sasaki's central concerns, especially after late 1968. In a number of his *Garo* and *Asahi Journal* works, for example, Sasaki placed traced and collaged photographs inside monitor-like frames. Even actual TV sets appear occasionally: in one instance as surveillance-like monitors inside a bedroom, in another with puffs of dust (traces of feet in flight, a.k.a. "briffits" in English-language comics jargon) radiating from a cabinet set with a mushroom cloud on its screen. If such examples position television as a site of violence and social control, others identify its programming as a novel form of sequencing and visual heterogeneity. In an interview published in *Garo* in late 1969, Sasaki responds with enthusiasm when asked if he's interested in TV advertising. As an example, he names the Japanese clothing company Renown's iconic "Yeah Yeah" campaign, featuring women in chic nylon outfits jumping and walking through the city and limited animation sequences of women's heads with bob cuts saying "Yeah Yeah" via speech balloons.[29] Usually grouped under the broad rubric of "nonsense advertising" in Japan, the ad is notable here because of its combination of live-action shots with the hand-drawn and elements of the language of comics—a mix similar to Sasaki's own often graphically cacophonous work.

Arguably the most trenchant critiques of television Sasaki produced do not explicitly name or depict television at all. Like avant-garde film created under the influence of *eizō* theory, his engagement with television arises out of reflexive critique of his own home medium (comics) and through processes of remediation. The first such work, an untitled comic published in the December 1968 issue of *Garo*, comprises twenty pages of panels containing figures traced from photographs in magazines coupled with blank speech balloons. Though most of the figures are anonymous, some are recognizable celebrities, including the Beatles, JFK, and the actors Katsu Shintarō (*Zatoichi*) and Mifune Toshirō (*Rashōmon*, *Seven Samurai*, in addition to numerous other samurai and Kurosawa films). The idea of appropriating mass-media photography and the simulated high-contrast style (produced here by manually tracing photographs using a light box) was inspired,

29. Sasaki and Nakamura, "Manga o kaihō suru manga," pp. 111–13.

according to the artist, by Warhol's silk screens. Sasaki never engaged with celebrity glamour in any meaningful way and for the most part privileged anonymous subjects over famous ones, and rarely are his works deadpan in a Warholian way. However, the more Sasaki employed "photo-manual" images (that is, photographs traced in a way to look like they could have been photomechanically produced), the more his manga evoke the discontent and horror lurking behind the banal cheeriness of commodity exchange and the mass-media spectacle, as has been argued vis-à-vis Warhol's early and mid-'60s work. Juxtapositions of joy and fear, consumerism and war, date to Sasaki's earliest non-narrative works from 1967, before he started tracing photographs. Yet the tenor grew more strident and urgent after he started doing so, which suggests not so much a conscious emulation of Warhol's thematics as a common recognition that remediating mass-media imagery—transferring the spectacle onto the canvas or page—also meant importing the violence within which such imagery was inscribed.

That it is most fruitful to see this concern in relationship to television—rather than, say, newspapers and current-events tabloids, whence he sourced his images—is suggested both by the qualities of his graphics and the manner of their assembly. Not only do Sasaki's traced photographs resemble the ghostly images of low-res black-and-white television, but their randomized sequencing also evokes the jumbled broadcast flow of television, toggling between programmed content and advertising, or perhaps channel surfing. He also seems to have taken issue with the quality of discourse on television, of talking heads babbling to fill the time but saying little, a feature of TV programming bemoaned in Japan as much as in other countries. In the untitled work, representatives of politics and entertainment are constantly speaking in the manga (they have balloons), yet they have literally nothing to say (the balloons are blank). In the one passage where they do muster words, at the end of the manga, they do so only to raise the tentative possibility of conversation—"Let's talk . . . ," an off-panel voice says repeatedly—before quickly slipping back into wordlessness. A plea for communication slides back into inarticulate silence.

The subsequent issue of *Garo* carried a more aggressive work, "The Vietnam Debate" ("Betonamu tōron," January 1969). Once again, photographs have been traced from magazines. This time the speech balloons are filled with run-on tracts of words in kanji (Sino-Japanese characters) pulled from texts critical of World War II and the Vietnam War. There is no grammar. Place names, hot-button political words, and evocations of war and violence are simply arranged one after another, though with some thematic grouping. A few of the texts, appearing as traced typography, come instead from print advertising for store sales and medical products. Meanwhile, the traced personages smile, dance, sing, and play, implying a gulf between the banality of mass visual media and violence in the world outside. By ripping words out of speech and grammar out of sentences, Sasaki seems to suggest that language itself no longer sufficed to engage with the contemporary situation.

*Sasaki, "The Vietnam Debate" (*Betonamu tōron*), in* Garo *no. 55, January 1969.*

Considered reflexively, as commentary on comics as such, both the untitled work and "Vietnam Debate" turn one of the medium's core narrative and expressive figures—humans engaged in speech acts through proliferating balloons—against itself, undermining the medium's efficacy as a means of communication.[30] But as was often the case with experimental film, breaking with narrative and formal conventions opened up the medium to analogies with other media, most often television, a medium characterized by fractured narratives, jarring juxtapositions, and verbosity without substance. If, as Ishiko argued in *A Theory of the Art of Comics*, *gekiga* represented a cinematic form of comics on the cusp of "the age of the image," Sasaki's work suggests that what was necessary for manga to fully move forward into such an age was not so much expanding the graphic possibilities of text and non-referential images, but rather breaking with the linear narrative of cinema and giving the multipanel breakdown over to televisual modes of visual flow. Viewing Sasaki's work as "image manga" is useful, but only if the wider implications of post-cinematic comics are considered.[31]

The other essential feature that Ishiko overlooks is Sasaki's cynicism. Even in the absence of broken speech situations or overt media critique, Sasaki's use of images could be highly referential, contrary to what Ishiko claimed. It seems safe

30. For a closer analysis of speech acts in Sasaki's work, see Ryan Holmberg, "Hear No, Speak No: Sasaki Maki manga and *nansensu*, circa 1970," *Japan Forum* 21.1 (2009), pp. 115–41.

31. For those who see similarities in Sasaki's work to the *détourned* comics of the Situationists, produced slightly earlier, in 1967–68, I offer the following. While Sasaki similarly employs the comics form (panels and balloons) to raise questions critical of society and its imbrication in the spectacle in an ironic tone, those questions are not analytical, unlike in the Situationists' interventions, and Sasaki does not appropriate existing comics to infer that comics are themselves part of the stupefying spectacle under scrutiny. Similarly, while the verbiage in "The Vietnam Debate" comes from (unidentified) left-wing texts, as evidenced by terms like "class struggle" and "Japanese Empire" and evocations of Japanese and American wartime atrocities, that discourse itself seems to be part of the parody.

to say, following Ishiko, that the artist did not believe in the ideas behind such symbols as doves, hearts, and flags. But that does not mean that he rejected their semiotic functioning as symbols as such. Like empty and malfunctioning speech balloons, it is precisely as empty or beleaguered semiotic vehicles that these overdetermined images appear in his work. If all a reader did was groove to the visual rhythms, as Ishiko recommended, they would miss a lot of what Sasaki had to say about the world beyond his panel frames. About politics, mass media, and language, Sasaki was cynical. But it is precisely in his decision to remain and toy with the referential image that this cynicism is most clearly expressed.

In "The Image Event," Ishiko goes on to describe in general terms the withering of modern individualism and personal privacy in the shadow of the growing mass-media machine. But overall, his appraisal of Sasaki's "image events" is positive—which is understandable given his placement of Sasaki's work in an avant-garde trajectory of perceptual liberation, but perverse from a critical-theory perspective (which is implied in Ishiko's citing of Boorstin and using the term "*imeeji*" even while trying to avoid *eizō*) because he ignores those features of Sasaki's work that indicate critical intent. With his oversized formalist's brush, Ishiko painted himself into a corner. On the one hand, he wanted to link Sasaki's avant-garde aesthetics with the wider discourse on the image, which was typically political and rarely silent on specific social events. Yet his insistence on non-referential immanence barred him from any type of iconographic reading or directed social commentary about contemporary political events or mass media. He could not see how self-referentiality and media critique went hand in hand in Sasaki's work. He could not see that a dove might be a meta-dove, that the supposed non-icon might actually be a meta-icon—intended to evoke and question the various meanings that loaded images have for readers—the possibility of which Sasaki himself proposed (with snarky glee) in some of his more overtly discursive works, which gloss recognizable drawn objects and oblique balloon text with phony and pretentious-sounding interpretive tags.[32] At the same time that he was deconstructing comics and parodying mass media, he was also thwarting and mocking any attempt to read those gestures as symbolically or politically significant. Any theorization of Sasaki's work needs to take this contradiction into account.

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Though Sasaki's manga might have been "anti" on many fronts, they employed a number of semiotic and structural conventions that made them far more comprehensible than either his supporters or detractors claimed. Despite Ishiko's emphatic statements to the contrary, Sasaki's work can definitely be "read." What makes theorizing Sasaki's work difficult, in my view, is not so much

32. On the cheeky self-referential games with interpretation that Sasaki liked to play, see the discussion of "The Dog Goes" ("Inu ga yuku," *Asahi Journal*, January 18, 1970) in Holmberg, "Hear No, Speak No."

its unconventionality as comics as the artist's repeated assertions that any attempt to interpret it is intellectualized rubbish. "They always immediately try reading my work allegorically or symbolically," said Sasaki in 1969, speaking of professional critics. "They are incapable of seeing it as no more nor less than what it is."[33]

Of course, as we've seen, neither Nakahara nor Ishiko went in for such readings—nor, for that matter, did the popular press—so it is a little unclear whom, exactly, Sasaki is criticizing here. Nonetheless, in their attempt to contextualize Sasaki's works through wider critical discourses and by borrowing some of those discourses' emancipatory claims (even if in muted tones), they neglected to simply look at the work.

To begin with, his manga abound in what comics theorist Thierry Groensteen calls "braiding" (*tressage*): the conscious repetition of motifs across multiple panels (contiguous or not) for aesthetic and/or symbolic effect, requiring the reader to scan the entire page or multiple pages and interpret them as a whole, rather than consume panels sequentially in a linear fashion, as in a strip. In Sasaki's case, such repeating motifs range from human characters and emotive expressions to pregnant objects and iconic historical images like barbed wire, American soldiers, and hippies, in addition to the sorts of clichéd symbols that Ishiko named. Groensteen regards braiding strictly as a *supplement* to more conventional forms of narrative in comics, like linear sequence and expository diegesis.[34] Sasaki, on the other hand, made it a *substitute* for narrative, indicating at least a *mock*-allegorical orientation on his part. He may have denied that his manga were allegorical, but he still structured them as such. In this, his work is not dissimilar to Robert Rauschenberg's, not to mention in its assemblage of disparate mass-media images that have been flattened and made equivalent by common and indiscriminate graphic treatment, in its experimentation with forms of photo-manual transfer, in its references to and structural analogies with television, and in his vocal opposition to having his work's imagery read metaphorically.[35]

Given Sasaki's interest in television, advertising, and mass media, braiding was arguably a way for him to invest the ostensibly benign "image event" with a kind of subliminal narrativity, one that peeks its head out from time to time to provide anchors in a visual field otherwise dominated by graphic and iconographical excess. "Information overload produces pattern recognition," McLuhan (borrowing from IBM) liked to say, which could probably serve as a simple summary of why Sasaki's work generated so much interpretation. My point, rather, is that Sasaki planted distinct, repeating signals in his nonsense noise fields and thus

33. Sasaki and Nakamura, p. 108.

34. In English, see Thierry Groensteen, *The System of Comics*, trans. Bart Beaty and Nick Nguyen (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2007), pp. 144–149 and passim; and Groensteen, "The Art of Braiding: A Clarification," *European Comic Art* 9:1 (Spring 2016), pp. 88–98.

35. I am thinking here, most of all, of the readings of Rauschenberg in Rosalind Krauss, "Rauschenberg and the Materialized Image" (1974), and Branden W. Joseph, "A Duplication Containing Duplication" (2001), both reprinted in *Robert Rauschenberg*, ed. Joseph (MIT Press, 2002).

intentionally invited interpretation, or rather baited readers into it. The artist even stated as much in a conversation with Hayashi for *Garo* in 1969: "In my case, there are intellectual readers. They will look at a panel that has no meaning and read something deep into it. I really hate that. They debate about these empty theories. You can watch them at it in these intellectual salon type journals. The kind of people who will look at a rock and won't stop until they find some sort of philosophical meaning in it. That's why I intentionally include meaningless panels that look like they suggest something."[36]

Furthermore, since many of these repeating motifs have a topical and political edge to them (one usually implying violence), even if Sasaki was not trying to "communicate" a verbally reducible message, he certainly thought of his image-chains as vehicles for inducing heightened states of emotion oscillating between joy and fear. While his earliest non-narrative manga from 1967 and early 1968 do indeed emphasize the graphics of drawing itself and the joy of disparate, nonsensical iconographical juxtapositions (this is where Ishiko's formalist reading makes some sense), here too, overarching tropes of murder, oppression, and alienation are readily apparent. By refusing to consider what kind of icons Sasaki's beat was synced to, Ishiko at the very least misjudges the emotional tone of the artist's "dramas of feeling," while missing the quasi-allegorical motifs that assert themselves through the visual cacophony.

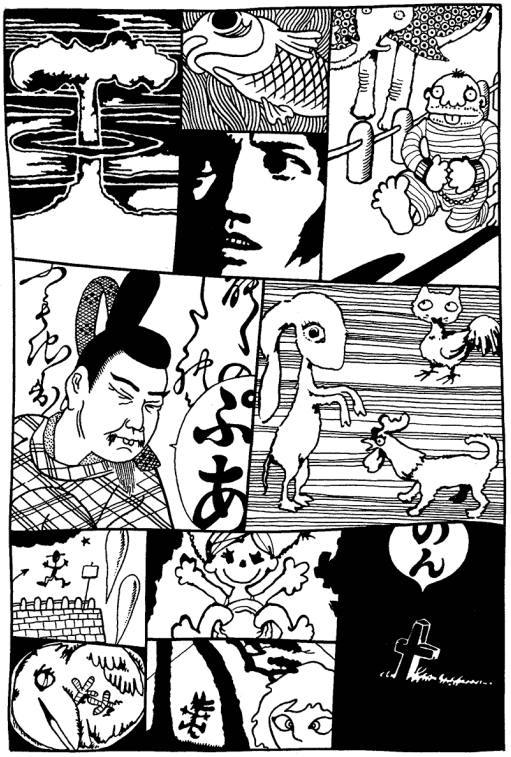
By late 1968, the intensification of the Vietnam War and the conflicts in Japanese cities between militant students, antiwar protesters, and the police had clearly disturbed Sasaki. The marked increase in his work of images of violence, pain, and war, and the frequent incorporation of traced photographs from magazines, together express a concern with the relationships between the mass-media "image event" and social control. I am not sure how aware Sasaki was of contemporary experimental cinema, but this feature of his work invites comparison with the collage-based, multiscreen projections of Matsumoto Toshio, particularly *For My Crushed Right Eye* (first shown in April 1968), and similar endeavors in experimental film and expanded cinema. If the goal of *For My Crushed Right Eye*, as Furuhata argues in her study of *eizō* theory and practice, was to "foreground the coexistence of heterogeneous images types" through remediation and simulate the newspaper page's nonlinear simultaneity of topical events through the form of a rapidly changing cinematic mosaic,[37] then perhaps it can likewise be said of Sasaki's work that it employed forms of remediation (tracing and collage) and the sequential paneling of comics to evoke the cacophony and actuality of contemporary mass media in general. In other words, contrary to Ishiko, he was aiming not for images as immanent visual entities, as internal event, but as ciphers of the actuality of the present.

36. "Singing Our Own Song" (1969).

37. Furuhata, pp. 48, 69–72.

Even in Sasaki's most entropic works, like "Sad Max" (*Kanashii makkusu*, February 1969), subliminal narrativity continues to assert itself through the pulsing repetition of a young man's face, which I take to be a cipher (reminiscent of, say, Paul Sharits's work) of a single perceiving subject onto whose consciousness the surrounding visual chaos is mapped. Sasaki might have abandoned the organizing principle of "story" in comics, but avant-garde art, filmmaking, and graphic design offered artists and viewers plenty of other ways to organize images coherently, as did the breakdown of comics, with panels organized in a tabular manner, which complicates linear reading even in the most tightly plotted of stories. The purportedly "unreadable" (in both the dismissive Tezuka and modernist Ishiko senses of the term) *Asahi Journal* series draws additionally on established techniques of Dadaist and Surrealist photomontage to offer what feels like one extended, staccato scream against "discommunication" and the generation gap, the breakdown of the New Left and the alienation of youth, American hubris and violence, Japanese state power and spectacle, the vapidity of mass media and consumer culture, and any number of other themes commonly associated with the late '60s.

The violence of the imagery is palpable even if one does not attend to its specific content. In what is probably the most insightful and formally engaged discussion of Sasaki's work, painter Nakamura Hiroshi's dialogue with Sasaki in the December 1969 issue of *Garo*, published under the title "Manga That Liberate Manga" (*Manga o kaihō suru manga*), Nakamura argues for the sheer materiality of Sasaki's images in terms that resonated with contemporary leftist discourse about political protest and interventionist art. Nakamura argues that this materiality stems from the fact that Sasaki has "objet-ified" (*obujeka*) manga, using a term popularized during the anti-art and subsequent happenings movement in the early and mid-'60s but without the usual connotations of the political defamiliarization of



*Sasaki, "Sad Max" (*Kanashii makkusu*), in* Garo *no. 56, February 1969.*

everyday life. "If manga were [fully] objetified," says Nakamura, "there would be nothing left but motifs and panels," with "motifs" referring to concretely represented objects independent of any sort of thematic grouping.[38]

Against the norm in story manga in which the composition and layout of panels were dictated by the need to describe the passage of time—which he saw as nothing more than a slavish adoption of cinematic techniques—Nakamura describes Sasaki's work as an art of paneling, in which images complete and compelling on their own are juxtaposed. "Some of your panels would be fine standing alone, yet instead of leaving them as single-panel manga you make them multiple panels. I find that interesting. It's like your panels are alive," he says. "As you turn the pages, the panels unfold, but it's not the passage of time. One panel becomes the whole, and the whole becomes one panel."[39] This toggling between the part and the whole—between the single panel and the multipanel page and multipage work, reading neither as primary—provides Sasaki's manga with a certain "materiality" (*busshitsu*), according to Nakamura, an independent thingness beyond their function as referential images.

While this sounds not dissimilar to what Ishiko had argued in his "Image Event" and "Anti-Manga" essays, Ishiko remained almost wholly focused on the drawings within the panels, paying little attention to their framing as comics panels and their juxtaposition with other panels. In addition, Nakamura makes a point of distinguishing his position both from the critics who hunt for hidden meanings as if they belonged to "the literature department of the University of Tokyo" (the country's elite institution of higher learning, and, as it so happens, Ishiko's alma mater) and from the "image-ists" (*imeeji-shugisha*) who try to "yank people away from materiality," from the supra-linguistic thingness of the panels themselves, so that they can keep their jobs as professional interpreters. His reason for describing Sasaki's work as "manga that liberate manga" is not just that they break with the hegemony that cinematic time has exerted over the breakdown of panels in comics, but also that they negate the need for criticism by asking of the reader only that they enjoy the pictures as graphic assemblies and try out the creative process for themselves. Nakamura is not explicit, but he seems to regard the word "image" as too referential, too much about the world outside the artwork, and thus detracting from the materiality of Sasaki's pictures as "objets."

Throughout the dialogue, Sasaki agrees with Nakamura's analysis. "Just so you know, I am always thinking about images as matter," he says at one point. He also supports Nakamura when he bashes critics. More valuably, he offers a number of insights into his process that resonate not just with what Nakamura says but also with some of what Nakahara and Ishiko wrote about his work. He claims that the

38. Sasaki and Nakamura, p. 113.

39. Sasaki and Nakamura, pp. 98–99.

style for which he is known began humbly as a form of doodling in high school, and that the only reason it's called manga is that he happened to submit it to *Garo* rather than an illustration magazine—a somewhat disingenuous claim given his use of panel frames. In support of Nakamura's observation that in Sasaki's works the panel is primary, Sasaki explains, "If I want twenty panels, I'll start by just drawing twenty panels [frames]. Just blank panels, one after another. . . . It's only after that that I think about what to draw [inside them]."[40] In other words, he begins with the multipanel layout, not in the usual way as the structure for the visual breakdown of a preconceived narrative but as an organizational framework for what Sasaki jokingly describes as a form of "visual hoarding" (*shikakuteki shūshūheki*).[41] He becomes excited when Nakahara compares his visual arrays to an illustrated field guide (*zukan*), adding that he loves looking at the pictures in encyclopedias independent of their corresponding written entries. Underscoring his aversion to even accidental meaning, he also says, "I sometimes shuffle my pages after I'm finished drawing them. I want to do the same sometimes with the panels on a given page, but that's not possible because the panels are all different sizes."[42] However, because he often repeated motifs or a group of related motifs within a given work and divorced such braiding from sequence and narrative, such randomization and rearrangement did not fundamentally impact the latent theme of a given work.

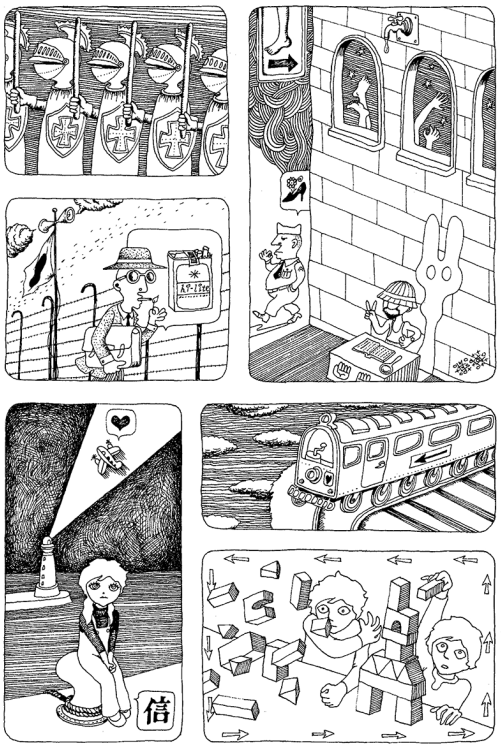
While Sasaki adamantly denied engaging in allegory, one thing he certainly did embed in his work were reflexive signs. Some of these have to do with speech and its emptying, as noted above in relation to his untitled work from late 1968. Some of them had to do with his interest in television, as evidenced by the appearance of televisual imagery of different sorts. Some arguably even referred to the games he knowingly played with meaning and interpretation. For example, one panel in his "Seventeen" (*Garo*, August 1968)—the bottom right panel in the page reproduced here—shows a young man stacking building blocks to create a tower, then swiping his hand through the structure, sending the blocks flying. A circuit of arrows around the inside edge of the panel frame suggest that this—the building and dismantling of structure—is an endlessly repeating process. Yet, as Nakamura argued with regard to the part (panel) and the whole (the work) in Sasaki's work, the building block always reads as a block, as part of a structure, whether lying in a heap on the table or neatly nestled in the structure.

What is this panel but a figure of what it means to "read" a Sasaki manga? Ishiko wanted to put Sasaki's work in an idealized space where semiosis is magically

40. Sasaki and Nakamura, p. 100.

41. Ibid., p. 102.

42. Ibid., p. 99.



Sasaki, "Seventeen," in Garo *no. 49, August 1968.*

frozen in the middle of a forest of signs. But Sasaki knew that people would always try to fashion structure out of chaos, would always find a way to use language to make sense of the world, even in a situation where words could no longer be trusted. "One cannot 'read' Sasaki's work," Ishiko declared, hoping against hope, while Sasaki embraced the fact that manga "viewers" would always remain "readers," no matter how many obstacles were put in their path or what demands were made upon their eyes. "One should not read," Sasaki seems to say, "but you will nonetheless."

And so, in an ironic twist of cross-purposes between allies, while the premier theorist of "anti-manga" posited escapist modernist pleasures for the genre, its most extreme practitioner reveled in reaffirming the chaos of contemporary life by teasing readers with deconstructivist play.