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## Ushio Shinohara, *Boxing Painting*, 2009

Born in 1932 in Tokyo, Ushio Shinohara came to New York in 1969 and today lives in Brooklyn. A hero of the Anti-Art epic of 1960s Japan, he had devised *Boxing Painting* and *Imitation Art* before he moved on to deploy junk objects abundant on the streets of downtown New York in creation of his lively *Motorbike Sculpture* as well as energetic drawings and paintings.

His credo, “Be speedy, beautiful, and rhythmical,” is best exemplified by *Boxing Painting*, as captured by the photographs taken by William Klein, which reveal the wild beauty of the artist in his ferocious attack on the white expanse. They even hint at the speed and rhythms of his boxing act.

These *Boxing Painting* were produced with ink on cheap Kraft paper. At least on one occasion, the paper was pasted onto a concrete block fence, so the resulting painting deteriorated, exposed to the elements. Shinohara himself explained that his pursuit of “pure action” distinguished him from Jackson Pollock, Georges Mathieu, and Gutai’s Shiraga Kazuo, who used action to create paintings.

It is important to note that only few of his works, including his large-scale works shown at the annual Yomiuri Independent Exhibition, are extant today. Not only did he not think of selling his works, but he also took no active measures to preserve them. *Boxing Painting* was no exception. As a result, *Boxing Painting* of the 1960s is preserved only through photography. This is the first phase of *Boxing Painting*.

Shinohara later recalled, “It is way, way afterward that I came to realize that my *Boxing Painting* was a very important art.” The art-historical significance of *Boxing Painting* began to be recognized when 1960s art was historicized. Particularly important is *Japanese Anti Art: Now and Then*, a 1991 exhibition organized by the National Museum of Art, Osaka. For this occasion, *Boxing Painting* became more than a photographically documented event. Shinohara was invited to create his *Boxing Painting* before the public for the first time since the 1960s and the resulting black-on-white canvas was displayed as his work. He has since regularly created *Boxing Painting* before the public. The catalogue of his 2005 retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art, Kamakura chronicles this development: he frequently used canvas instead of paper as support and introduced colors. Moreover, along with his “action,” the “results” have also been recognized as his “work.”

This turn of events cannot be solely explained by the museological concern for display and preservation. Above all, the result of his action was legitimately a “painting.” It reveals the temporal unfolding of his action from right to left just like a traditional handscroll. When I witnessed his public demonstration at the Ise Cultural Foundation Gallery in New York in 2003, I myself had a distinct

impression that his action indeed made a painting, contrary to his assertion that picture-making was not his goal. In a sense, *Boxing Painting* had changed from its first phase in the 1960s. I thus propose to define his public demonstrations since the 1990s as the second phase of *Boxing Painting*. In this phase, Shinohara, who lives in the present moment, transcended the narrowly defined “recreation” of a past work and “revived” it in response to a new environment.

Yet another new development took place in 2009, launching the third phase of *Boxing Painting*. The canvases alone, unaccompanied by public demonstrations, were displayed at Ethan Cohen Fine Arts. (A few examples are included in the current exhibition.)

Some may condemn the fact that the work that began as Anti-Art has now reverted to painting and consequently been absorbed into the art market. Others may positively evaluate it as a welcome evolution in an artist’s oeuvre.

A historical comparison may be useful here. In terms of “action painting,” Pollock demonstrated the versatility of his drip painting within a space of some ten years, while Shiraga pursued the possibilities of his foot painting throughout his life and arrived a state of *tariki hongan*, or entrusting his action to the Fudō, a guardian of Buddhism. In parallel to these precedents, I would like to think that Shinohara has arrived at a stage in which he can examine the possibilities of *Boxing Painting* as “painting.” The speed and chance element in his boxing act, the potential of color and monochrome palettes, and the multiplicity of structures—doesn’t *Boxing Painting* hold more possibilities than we and the artist himself have come to think that we know?

—Reiko Tomii, August 27, 2011  
(Translated by author from the Japanese original)