



The Sapphic Latex of Itō Tari

ITŌ Tari (1951-2021) was a Japanese performance artist, known for contributing to different feminist projects with the intention of connecting and documenting the works and lives of women artists throughout Southeast and East Asia. Being one of the first openly lesbian artists in Japan, her own identity was often an integral part of her performances, which tended to utilize everyday objects and materials in unconventional ways that altered the artist's own body. The following essay can be understood as a material micro history, following Itō's formation as a physical artist, her unraveling of the concept of "epidermis" through her performances in the late 80s and early 90s, and her usage of Regitex S-500 latex rubber as a conduit for bodily transformation.

The skin that harbors the body of Japanese artist ITŌ Tari¹ (イトー・タリ) is not at all a discrete surface. The artist's body is often overlain with translucent, sometimes amber hued, sometimes petroleum colored layers of latex. Flaps, bulges, and feeding tubes expand and constrain the topography of her epidermis. Simultaneously contained and exposed, the latex becomes a surface of desire in Itō's oeuvre: prophylaxis not meant to inhibit pleasure, but instead to open up the contours of her embodied silhouette, losing its human form.

1. In Japanese and in other East Asian languages, the family name typically precedes the given name. When romanizing Japanese, in order to differentiate the family name from the given name, family names are often written in all capital letters.

The complex and visionary performances created by Itō drew from a nuanced array of theatrical styles and techniques, each informing her own unique artistic language. She joined the Department of Arts at Wakō University (和光大学) in the year 1970. The young Itō was drawn to the liberal arts approach of the institution, which encouraged dialogue between disciplines. This was reflected in the arts syllabus, which did not require students to specialize in one exclusive artistic medium during their studies.

1970 also marked a decade of the US-Japan Security Treaty known as Anpo Jōyaku (安保条約), which sought to expand US military bases which carried nuclear weapons in Japanese territories. The treaty initially had a ten year term, and when it came up for renewal it was met with strong opposition from the New Left, including student protests. This burgeoning student



New Left was compounded by the struggle of the Beheiren faction (an anti-war group who opposed Japanese assistance to the US during the Vietnam War), as well as the anti-pollution movement surrounding Minamata disease (a disease caused by mercury poisoning, discovered after the release of toxic chemicals into the water supply of the city of Minamata). As a Catholic school girl, Itō had secretly attended rallies against the Anpo Treaty and the Vietnam War, and she obtained a new-found freedom to openly express her progressive political views as a university student, often attending protests.

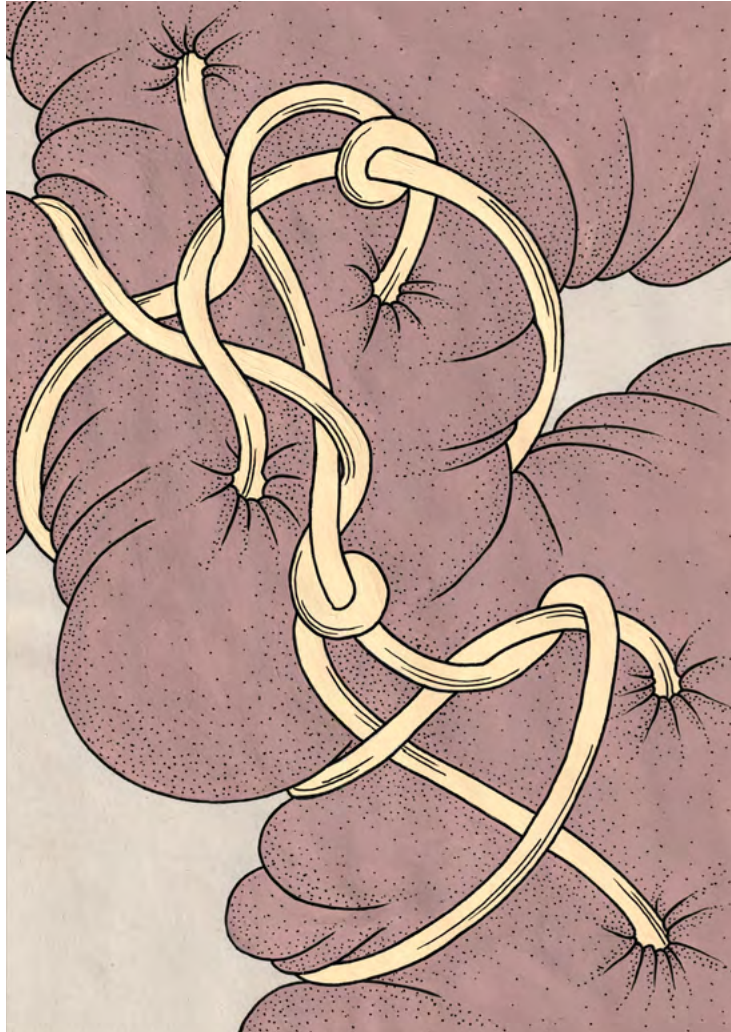
It was ONO Yūichi (小野雄一), Itō's third year seminar professor, who introduced her to two artistic movements that would influence her foray into performance art: the Soviet avant-garde as well as the Bauhaus. Professor Ono was very generous in sharing his books with artistic reproductions with his students, and his office was one of the first in the university to include a photocopy machine which Itō took great advantage of. In terms of Russian Constructivism, Itō declared the works of El Lissitzky and Alexander Rodchenko as particularly influential: both combined architecture, design, photography, politics, propaganda, and geometric abstraction in an integrated manner. The context of the Russian Revolution seemed pertinent to the young artist, who was experiencing the ongoing protests not only in the public sphere but also inside of her campus.

However, most influential to Itō would be the work of Bauhaus spearhead Oskar Schlemmer and his *Triadisches Ballett*, in which he proposed a living performance piece which integrated staging, sculptural objects worn by dancers, and choreography. All of said factors would lead to the exploration of line, volume, and geometries set in motion through the human body in action. Coming in contact with these artistic movements was an inciting motivation for Itō to enter into the theater arts, inspired by their interdisciplinary approaches and incorporation of art and design in order to improve or transform everyday living. She was reading an issue of *Teatoro* (テアトロ) theater magazine, when she found an advert for the mime seminar offered by the renowned NAMIKI Takao (並木孝雄).

Itō began training in mime through Namiki's Body Training Seminar (身体訓練教室) during her third year of university in 1972. During Namiki's stint in Paris in 1973, in which he studied with the son of Étienne Decroux (the forefather of the corporeal mime theatrical style), Itō spent over a year studying herself with Butoh legend ŌNO Kazuo (大野一雄). However, she once again focused on pantomime after Namiki returned to Tokyo in 1974, and she ended up graduating from the Tokyo Mime Institute (東京マイム研究所) which he founded in 1975. It was probably her graduation piece from the Mime Institute in 1978, *Icarus, fly and fall* (《イカロスの飛翔と墜落》), which garnered her debut in what would later come to be recognized as contemporary performance art. Traditionally, the technique



of pantomime requires a “non-objective” suspension of disbelief in which any and all staging—particularly set and props—are to be gestured by the performer in a convincing way to their audience. Itō broke this fundamental rule by oversaturating the set of *Icarus* with enormous metallic scaffolding, countless white colored tennis balls, hundreds of pieces of white paper, etcetera. Itō’s imaginative usage of everyday objects as an extension of her temperament and of her own corporeality would be a significant through line all throughout her career.



Itō began using latex rubber in her performances when she returned to Japan, after living in Holland and traveling around other European countries between 1982 and 1986. The usage of latex as a second skin in her practice is linked to her pondering over the “epidermis” (表皮) as a performative concept. She began applying the concept of epidermis during a performance organized together with the Front-line Art Collection (アート前線コレクション) group. This performance took place in 1988 at Gallery K (ギャラリーK) in Fukushima Prefecture, a small, independent art venue opened by photographer AITA Kenichiro (会田健一郎) and his wife Megumi (会田恵) as an homage to the location where the photographers’ mother had passed away. During her performance *Epidermis & Mass* (《表皮とかたまり》), the semi-translucent membrane which she utilized was not rubber, but the round outer shells of peas, a slightly obscure



metaphor for the epidermis. This performance was stripped from traditional theatre or mime techniques, and it consisted of the artist consuming a spoonful of peas, chewing them diligently, and spitting them back into the spoon. The artist repeated this action over and over, until the food became a uniform, slimy green liquid, unifying the membranes that covered each morsel with the innards of the peas. Although equal parts subtle and abject, this performance attests to the artist's profound attention to the concept of epidermis as a passageway between the personal and the public.

After some negative feedback surrounding *Epidermis & Mass* from her colleagues due to it being rather gross and cryptic, Itō began wondering what other materials could best visually convey the notion of epidermis to the audience of her performances. She eventually found liquid latex rubber at the popular art supplies store Tokyu Hands. This was the latex rubber known as Regitex S-500, a material often used in the production of masks. Consisting of half natural rubber, half water and a bit of ammonia and coagulant, this unique material can be layered over and over on different surfaces, creating a slightly pungent film that looks uncannily like human skin. The first time she used this material was in her 1989 performance *The Cosmos of the Epidermis* (《表皮の宇宙》). During this performance, she wore a rubber jacket created from the hardened Regitex. The costume created a bizarre effect, as the everyday item of clothing used as a cozy protection against the elements acquired the paradoxical appearance of bare skin. Eventually removing the coat, she then began splattering diluted plaster over layered chunks of asphalt, creating epidermal constellations as the speckled material hardened and changed in consistency. This performance was later remounted at the NAKAMURA Masayoshi Museum (中村正義の美術館) in 1990, in which the artist forwent using the coat, utilizing instead a large an amorphous rubber membrane which the artist layered over herself, expanding it throughout the space of the museum using her movements.

Also in 1990, Itō was invited to participate in the week-long residency that was the Tajima Performance Festival (田島パフォーマンスフェスティバル). This festival took place in Fukushima prefecture, in a rural city with a sinking population that had once been the site of the Yaso Copper Mine (八総鉱山). The festival consisted of over 100 foreign and local artists, plus the facilitators and audiences that also took part. The itinerary of the festival was crafted freely by the participants, and they shared the upcoming time and location for their dances, performances, sound pieces, symposia, workshops, etcetera, communally in the entrance of the shared location by chalking them on a big blackboard. Itō made her way out to the ruins of the quarries, with their concrete walls dangerously protruding into the open landscape. Barely occupying the narrow walkways leading down to the core of the earth, Itō brushed layer after layer of Regitex rubber over the dismantled concrete walls,



which were dotted in rusted and bluish hues coming from the copper residues. She applied the rubber in even, rectangular planes over the abandoned walls, and would then start ripping off the epidermis, covering her body with the strange surface. Moving in close proximity to the pit of the quarry, the guard at the event mistook the rubber as a form of vandalism that could permanently compromise the site, and the spectators of this performance had to ward him off.

After a decade-long career in performance art that took a constant toll on Itō's personal stability, specialized circuits really started to take notice of her work as the 90s continued to roll on. She was invited, still in 1990, to do a multi-city tour in Canada. There she revisited her recent work, with the new title *The Memory of Epidermis* (《表皮の記憶》). Looking closely at the available archive, it seems that during this trip she began a new approach inserting transparent acrylic tubes into rubbery surfaces, blowing air into them using her mouth, constricting and repositioning the expanded bulges, and then using them as part of her performative repertoire. Between 1990 and 1991, during a series of performances created with support from ARIMOTO Yumiko (有本由美子), Itō not only bound her own mouth with dark colored latex, but also removed the covering of the 48 square meter floor at the Proto Theater (プロトシアター) close to Takadanobaba Station in Tokyo. Itō then covered the entire floor surface with rubber, inserted her body underneath and began wiggling all throughout the space: creating a sonorous, bondage-adjacent practice that was equally related to bodily pleasure as it was to architectural layout and urban debris.

Writing this essay, I have spent a lot of time with Itō; not in the flesh, but through her own words. I am highly indebted to the fabulous source that is the book *Move* (『ムーブ』), created in 2012 by the artist as a retelling of her life-story, with an English translation provided by Rebecca Jennison. There are so many more anecdotes, performances, and stories that I wish I could share with the reader, but instead I will recount Itō's most influential performance. This was the 1996 work titled *Self-portrait* (《自画像》). Itō was invited to perform at Laplace Women's Center (女性センターらぷらす) in Setagaya, and she became resolute about coming out during her performance. However, when the public women's center found out, they strongly discouraged her from using the word "lesbian." The curator of the program, YAMAGAMI Chigeko (山上千恵子), supported the artist regardless. However, Itō became weary that the center might retaliate against the organizer if she went ahead. During the performance, Itō wore an intricate rubber suit. With the help of pre-attached tubes, she first blew a huge bulge on her left thigh, followed by a protruding, pregnant-like abdomen, and two uneven air sacs for each breast, appearing like a queer Aurignacian venus. At the height of the performance, she declared "I am a woman who loves women" (女を愛する女です). Alongside artist and Dumb Type collective

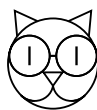


founding member FURUHASHI Teiji (古橋悌二), who had publicly come out as gay and HIV positive during their S/N multimedia performance in 1994, Itō was probably the first Japanese artist to come out publicly as a lesbian.

Us queers hold the magical power of quantum leaps: when retelling our stories, we do so regardless of omissions, lacunas, absences. We learn to recognize one another, despite our differences, in order to study our lives and our art of survival in a careful, caring way. I am a devotee of Itō's sapphic latex, and the pandemic that was transpiring around the artist's own queer circles at the time that she was creating these performances is not lost to me. Queer latex is a praxis of emancipatory desire, while writing becomes a celebration of the opalescent gleam of queer experiences: glittering defiantly over the mantle of erasure.

BIO

aliwen is a non-binary Chilean-Italian artist, writer, and researcher based in Tokyo. Their interests include artistic and curatorial practices, performance, dissent, new ecologies, and queer experiences intersected by race, and they aim to incorporate these fields in a fluid manner using archives, history, and storytelling. They are currently pursuing a Dr. phil. in Cultural Studies at Waseda University, with the support of the Honjo International Scholarship Foundation.



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