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Answerability

Exhibition, Documentation, and Historical Evidence in Postwar Japanese Art

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This paper develops the concept of historical answerability through an engagement with Reiko Tomii's scholarship on operation in postwar Japanese art. It proposes a criterion for examining how evidence of exhibition, documentation, and artistic organization bears upon the scope and justification of art-historical claims. Published as part of Museum of One's ongoing research in Post-Interpretive Criticism and art historiography.

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The Historical Work and the Account

The boundary of a work is already a historical claim. When an art historian names an action, an object, an exhibition, or a photograph as the subject of an account, that choice establishes what the account proposes to explain. The choice may be entirely justified. Yet it acquires authority only through the evidence that supports it and the distinctions it preserves. A history of an action need not become a history of everything that surrounded the action; a history of its exhibition need not exhaust its aesthetic significance. The responsibility is more exacting than completeness. The historian must remain answerable for the boundary through which the work is made historically intelligible.

Reiko Tomii's scholarship on postwar Japanese art gives this question unusual force. Her distinction between expression and operation identifies the labour of making art and the labour of making it public, including arrangements through which artistic activity is sustained. The two may be distinguishable in principle while becoming inseparable in particular practices. An exhibition, a photographic presentation, a negotiation over space, or a collective arrangement can enter the conditions under which the artistic proposition is realized and subsequently known (Tomii, "Thinking Operationally," 60–61, 67–69). Tomii's contribution is neither a plea for additional context nor a merely sociological supplement to aesthetic analysis. It alters the historical questions available to an account of the work.

This essay asks what follows for the account once those relations are admitted. The proposal is answerability: a claim-specific discipline through which the historian identifies what a proposition asserts, which evidence gives it support, how the evidence bears upon its scope, and what must happen when that support is challenged. The term is intentionally broader than Tomii's operation. Operation names a historical dimension of artistic practice; answerability names an obligation of explanation. Operational evidence is one class of evidence capable of putting that obligation under pressure. The relation between them is the subject of the inquiry, rather than a terminological inheritance that settles the inquiry in advance.

The principal object of examination is the published account. Tomii's discussions of Shiraga Kazuo's *Challenging Mud* are read beside Namiko Kunimoto's "Shiraga Kazuo: The Hero and Concrete Violence," with a shorter comparison drawn from Tomii's discussion of Hi Red Center and GUN. The purpose is not to install one scholar as custodian of facts and another as custodian of interpretation. Their questions and evidential uses differ; both make interpretive and historical judgments. A close comparison should establish where those differences matter, where they are compatible, and which further inferences their texts can sustain. If the result is compatibility rather than disagreement, that result belongs to the argument.

What Operation Already Explains

Tomii's account of operation has a specific historical content. Artistic production can depend on forms of organization that are obscured when attention rests exclusively on the finished object or the exceptional gesture. Making an exhibition possible, arranging a public situation, securing access, coordinating participants, or circulating a document may be integral to how an artistic activity exists in the world. These are not automatically equivalent acts. Their relations must be reconstructed from the practice at issue. Tomii's formulation makes it possible to investigate the artistic significance of such labour without dissolving the distinction between expression and its enabling arrangements (Tomii, "Thinking Operationally," 60–61).

The historical significance is particularly visible where making and showing meet. If an action is planned in anticipation of a durable result, then exhibition may enter the preparation of the action. If documentation is selected and circulated as part of an artistic presentation, the image has a public role before it becomes a later historian's evidence. If an intervention requires permission or the use of a specific site, the arrangement can shape what was possible without necessarily determining what the work meant. Each relation opens a different inquiry. A theory that calls them all operation without distinguishing their consequences would give up the precision that makes Tomii's concept valuable.

The extension proposed here concerns the subsequent account. A historian may accurately report that a work required organization yet draw conclusions whose scope remains unaffected by that report. Sometimes this is defensible: the evidence may be relevant to a different question. Sometimes the reported relation is indispensable to the very claim being made. The task is to determine which situation obtains. What has the evidence changed about the description of the historical work, the attribution of agency, or the limits of documentary inference? A fact's presence in a footnote is not yet an explanation of its bearing. Neither, however, is its absence proof of neglect. The relevant test begins with the actual proposition.

Published Arguments as Evidence

A published historical account is direct evidence of what its author argues. It can also serve as scholarly testimony about an earlier event. These are different evidential roles. Tomii's 2011 conversation with Jane DeBevoise establishes, through its wording and sequence, the claims Tomii makes and the uncertainty she marks. When the same conversation supplies a premise about a material mixture or a photographic record, the premise belongs to her historical reconstruction. Reading the conversation does not convert the reconstruction into an independently inspected archival fact. Conversely, the absence of such independent inspection does not prevent careful analysis of the argument as an argument.

Three judgments must therefore remain distinct. The first concerns attribution: what does the author actually claim, about which occurrence, and with what qualification? The second concerns justification: do the reasons the author presents or explicitly invokes adequately support that claim? The third concerns historical accuracy: did the event happen as described? These questions overlap, but they cannot be exchanged without changing the inquiry. A conjecture may eventually prove true while having been falsely represented by a later writer as a certainty. An inference may exceed its stated evidence without being historically false. An account may be adequately justified on the available record and still remain open to correction by further evidence.

The unit of analysis is the developed argument, including its notes, qualifications, and stated purpose. A short description and a specialist article have different legitimate ambitions. An account concerned with gesture is not thereby an account that excludes the object; a history of exhibition is not indifferent to bodily action merely because it follows a different explanatory path. The American Historical Association's standards of attribution and evidential accountability, together with Aviezer Tucker's distinction between historical practice and the finished presentation of research, provide precedents for this discipline (American Historical Association, "Statement on Standards," §§2–3; Tucker, *Our Knowledge of the Past*, 4–7). The present proposal does not claim to originate the duty to justify an inference. It asks whether that duty can be made more exact when the evidence concerns the making-public of art.

A Criterion of Answerability

The criterion begins with a proposition fixed before a challenge is evaluated. Its referent, meaning, scope, degree of certainty, and evidential basis must be stated as precisely as the text permits. A claim about one recorded execution differs from a claim about every execution. A gesture that appears spontaneous is not necessarily an action undertaken without preparation. Permission to use a site differs from control over the artistic choices made there. When these distinctions are left unstable, an argument can appear to survive criticism only because its terms have shifted. A critic can commit the inverse error by enlarging an author's claim, defeating the enlarged version, and declaring the actual account refuted.

Four responses are possible. Retention preserves the original proposition, with the same meaning and scope, because its positive support remains adequate after a genuine challenge. Limitation narrows the proposition's reach. Revision changes its substantive content. Suspension withholds judgment where the evidence cannot decide the question. These are not stages that every inquiry must pass through, and a useful study need not manufacture one example of each. Their purpose is to make the consequence of evidence legible. A claim that once concerned every execution and now concerns one has changed, even when the change is presented as a clarification. An apparent contradiction that dissolves because two authors asked different questions has not refuted either author.

For the historical boundary of a work, the criterion has a conditional form. Where an account claims to identify its object exhaustively, or where a conclusion depends upon excluding a relation among making, showing, and recording, evidence that materially bears upon that conclusion requires a response. The account can incorporate the relation, explain why the challenge leaves its claim intact, limit the claim, revise it, or suspend judgment. Material consequence must be demonstrated. It is insufficient that two things occurred near one another or that an institution participated in both. The question is what becomes mistaken or materially incomplete if the relation is omitted from the explanation actually offered.

This also guards against indefinite expansion. A camera, a mixture, an organizer, and a permission document need not all become components of an artwork's identity. The term historical work names the object reconstructed by an account, not a final metaphysical verdict about what the artwork essentially is. An account of an exhibition may require the camera because it explains the public image; an account of a bodily technique may not. Relevance is established by an explanatory dependency rather than by the critic's appetite for more context. The boundary remains provisional without becoming boundless.

Challenging Mud: Preparation and the Displayed Result

Shiraga's *Challenging Mud* supplies the principal historical problem because its public life cannot be described responsibly without attending to the relations among action, material preparation, and display. In "I challenged mud, after…" and her conversation with DeBevoise, Tomii distinguishes executions of the action and describes circumstances affecting their realization. Her reconstruction links the use of cement to the intention that the resulting mud painting remain available for exhibition. She also discusses the difficulty of working with a changing mixture and the conditions surrounding the earlier action (Tomii, "I challenged mud, after…," stanzas beginning "After we decided" and "After we mixed"; Tomii, "Conversation," paragraph beginning "In the mud painting" and the following paragraph).

The most useful evidence in this passage is also evidence of Tomii's care with her own inferences. She gives the duration of display an explanatory role while qualifying the proposed reasons for a change in mixture with expressions such as "probably" and "I imagine." The historian's account thus differentiates an attributed material condition from a conjectural explanation of a sequence of decisions. The distinction is not merely a sign of caution. It is part of the content of the historical claim. To paraphrase the conjecture as a documented decision would change its evidential status, even if later evidence happened to confirm it. To erase the relation between material preparation and intended display would remove a dependency the account has explicitly proposed.

What does this mean for the boundary of the historical work? It does not settle whether *Challenging Mud* is properly understood as performance, painting, action, or an unstable relation among those categories. The answer depends upon the claim at issue. If the historian asks why the material result endured, the anticipated exhibition is explanatorily relevant. If the historian asks how bodily movement was composed, the same exhibition condition may be relevant without answering the entire question. If the historian claims that the public presentation was indifferent to material preparation, Tomii's reported relation becomes a direct challenge. The criterion locates the point of pressure: the relation changes what a particular description can justifiably exclude.

There is a further temporal distinction. The event, its displayed result, and the documentation through which it became known have distinct temporal relations, even where their production or presentation overlaps. An account can properly focus on one of them. But it should not allow a selected image of the action to stand silently for every execution, nor infer the full sequence of bodily movement from a fragment of recorded presentation. A later audience may know the work primarily through images. That fact concerns transmission and reception; it does not by itself establish that the photographic selection exhausts what occurred. The record can be constitutive of a public appearance and partial as historical testimony at the same time.

Tomii's own later investigation of the mud action makes the distinction between encounter and historical evidence particularly clear. Her written account differentiates investigation from reenactment (Tomii, "I challenged mud, after…," stanza beginning "After clarifying"). The later material experience may disclose resistance, duration, and difficulty as questions worth asking of the earlier practice. It remains a later encounter. Its significance depends partly on refusing to claim identity with Shiraga's experience. An investigator's bodily knowledge is real evidence of that investigation; it becomes evidence of the earlier event only through a further historical argument. Here, answerability protects the difference between proximity and substitution.

A Worked Test: How Far the Cement Explanation Reaches

Tomii's discussion of the cement mixture offers a concrete test of the distinction between an account's evidence and the certainty of a conclusion. In the 2011 conversation she connects the material mixture with the need to keep the resulting painting on display, but uses qualified language when explaining why the mixture changed between executions. The exchange itself thus distinguishes a reported exhibition requirement from a proposed reconstruction of artistic decision-making (Tomii, "Conversation," paragraphs beginning "In the mud painting" and "I imagine"; Tomii, "I challenged mud, after…," stanza beginning "After we mixed").

For this illustrative test, take the categorical proposition that the artist changed the mixture for a fully established reason across the executions. That proposition is stronger than the account's qualified explanation. The evidence presented warrants a more limited statement: Tomii links cement to the intended durability of the displayed result and proposes reasons for the changes while

explicitly marking uncertainty. A subsequent historical account that presents the proposed reasons as settled decisions must either produce additional support or narrow its claim. The result is limitation of a specific inference, rather than a claim that Tomii herself made an error. Her careful phrasing supplies the grounds for the distinction.

The same test shows how the historical boundary depends on the question asked. Exhibition duration is material to an explanation of why the resulting mud painting endured. It may be relevant, without being decisive, to an account of the bodily action. The evidence does not compel every study to treat the object as primary or to reconstruct the entire infrastructure of display. It requires a historian who invokes the material choice to preserve the relation and its degree of certainty. Answerability has done identifiable work here: it separates a supported preparation–display relation from a stronger, insufficiently supported account of intention.

Documentation as Operation and as Evidence

Tomii's account of press presentation and photographic selection introduces a second kind of boundary. A photograph can be made, chosen, or circulated within the original operation of making art public. Later it may become a source for art history. These roles can overlap without becoming equivalent. The first concerns the organization of public visibility; the second concerns what a record can justify about the event it depicts. The distinction is central to a field in which actions may survive for subsequent audiences principally through selected images and accounts (Tomii, "Conversation," paragraphs beginning "There are two aspects" and "For example, in Shiraga's scrapbook").

A historian may use an image to establish that a bodily configuration was presented publicly. To conclude that the entire action had the same rhythm or that all its gestures were similarly controlled requires more. The image's selection can be historically consequential without making it comprehensive. A moving excerpt may offer information unavailable in a still photograph, but its duration cannot be substituted for the duration of the original event. A caption may identify an execution; a later compilation may juxtapose distinct occasions. The proper inference depends on provenance, selection, and the relation between the represented moment and the claim. None of these distinctions makes documentation secondary to the work. They specify the two kinds of labour a document can perform.

The proposed extension of Tomii's operation is therefore located at a threshold. Her historical work shows how public presentation enters the practice. Answerability asks how the resulting records should constrain the accounts that inherit them. A document's importance to the work's public existence does not grant every later interpretation equal authority. Equally, the selectivity of documentation does not make it useless. It makes the scope of its testimony a matter for explanation. This is a question of how the historical account is justified, not an attempt to assign the document a final ontological status.

Kunimoto and the Limits of a Replacement Claim

Namiko Kunimoto's "Shiraga Kazuo: The Hero and Concrete Violence" offers a complementary test of inference. Her study relates action and object explicitly, and its larger argument examines the construction of agency, gender, and selfhood. It cannot responsibly be characterized as an account that excludes the material result. In discussing spontaneity, Kunimoto draws on reported preparation and reads photographic and newsreel evidence as suggesting deliberation and

controlled movement (Kunimoto, “Shiraga Kazuo,” 161, 168–69, 172; nn. 26, 51–54). Her interpretation has a broader evidential basis than a single filmed passage.

The methodological distinction concerns the burden carried by an objection and the burden carried by its replacement. Evidence of preparation can challenge a categorical description of an action as wholly unprepared. It does not follow that the entire sequence was determined in advance. Deliberation can coexist with improvisation within prepared conditions. Kunimoto’s qualified reading supplies reasons for reconsidering a simple spontaneity model, while a stronger assertion of complete predetermination would need further support. The point is not to impute that stronger assertion to Kunimoto. It is to specify what later accounts may responsibly carry forward from her argument.

Tomii and Kunimoto thus illuminate different explanatory relations. Tomii’s account gives anticipated display a role in material preparation; Kunimoto asks how action and object participate in a representation of force and selfhood. Their questions are compatible at the level of acknowledging the relation between act and result. Compatibility is a finding, not a failed attempt to discover a dispute. It prevents the next writer from inventing an opposition between history and interpretation. Answerability here consists in preserving the distinct evidential burdens of two accounts whose emphases need not be identical.

Public Authorization and the Scale of Inference

A shorter comparison from Tomii’s discussion of Hi Red Center and GUN tests the criterion outside the relation between action and documentation. Tomii contrasts Hi Red Center’s unauthorized *Cleaning Event* with GUN’s authorized *Event to Change the Image of Snow*, while also distinguishing their relations to public programmes, local settings, and intended audiences (Tomii, “Localizing Socially Engaged Art,” “Wilderness ‘Operations’ in 1960s Art,” text accompanying nn. 18–19). Her account reports a restoration condition attached to GUN’s use of the site. The condition matters because authorization is an arrangement with practical consequences; it is not simply an abstract legal label.

The inference must remain at the scale of the evidence. Permission establishes authorization under its terms. A restoration requirement establishes a constraint on realization. Neither, without further argument, identifies the artistic decisions that the authority controlled or the political commitments the work expressed. Conversely, the absence of permission does not establish the full politics of an intervention. Tomii already distinguishes these relations in her historical explanation. The present criterion adds a rule for subsequent accounts: preserve the connection between a condition and the particular claim it supports, rather than allowing the word authorized or unauthorized to substitute for a history of artistic agency.

The Afterlife of the Historical Account

Once a historical account circulates, its distinctions acquire another life. A museum label, catalogue entry, archive description, or scholarly summary may become the means through which a later reader encounters an earlier practice. The account is itself an arrangement of access. This does not make the historian the co-author of the artwork, nor make the later text equivalent to the artist’s operation. It does make the account answerable for the authority it exercises over subsequent identifications. An omitted date, a collapsed execution, or a conjecture converted into certainty can travel far beyond the page on which the alteration first occurred.

The Museum of Modern Art's collection record for Hi Red Center's *Street Cleaning Event* provides a restrained example of responsible differentiation. Its wording distinguishes a work associated with 1964, a specified New York realization in 1966, and the collected photographic medium (Museum of Modern Art, "*Street Cleaning Event*," title, date, and medium fields; object 2224.2008.1x1–x4). The entry does not answer every historical question, and its metadata cannot stand in for an investigation of audience reception. Its value here is narrower: it keeps distinct things distinct. The record shows why institutional mediation must be assessed by the relations it preserves rather than judged in advance as either clarification or distortion.

A historical account can therefore fail through excess or through omission. It may interpret beyond the reach of its sources; it may also withhold the qualification needed to prevent an attractive simplification from becoming a false identification. The ethical responsibility is symmetrical. To preserve an artwork is partly to preserve the limits of what the surviving evidence permits us to say. Restraint cannot be measured only by how much the historian refuses to write. It must also be measured by the distinctions the historian refuses to erase.

What This Contributes to Tomii's Historical Problem

The proposal does not discover operation, the importance of documentation, or the duty to justify historical claims. Tomii's scholarship supplies the historical and conceptual starting points for the first two; the third belongs to established historical practice. The narrower contribution is to bring two questions under one inspectable criterion: what historical work does an account claim to explain, and what can the evidence associated with its public realization actually justify about that work? The same relation may require a change in the object described, a limitation of an inference, or no change at all. Naming the possible outcomes matters only when it makes such a difference visible in a specific argument.

In the cases examined, the criterion clarifies the bearing of exhibition duration upon material preparation, the double role of selected documentation, and the distance between evidence of deliberate preparation and a complete account of intention. It also explains why the Tomii–Kunimoto comparison should not be staged as a disagreement about the existence of a resulting object. These are modest results, but they are genuine ones. The analysis identifies what an account can carry forward and what it must leave open. It does not show that the criterion is unique among historical methods, nor that every scholar would reach a different conclusion by adopting its vocabulary. Its value lies in a disciplined account of inferential reach within the particular historical problems Tomii's research makes visible.

A further application would compare two published descriptions that demonstrably draw upon the same identified photographic sequence yet assign it incompatible historical implications. Such a case would permit a sharper judgment about documentary inference. The present accounts do not establish that degree of documentary identity, and no disagreement should be manufactured to simulate it. The criterion also needs tests in which a proposition survives a serious challenge with its meaning and support intact. Agreement between authors is not such a test. These conditions mark the scope of the current argument rather than an embarrassment to be hidden by grander claims.

A Reciprocal Consequence for Post-Interpretive Criticism

Post-Interpretive Criticism enters this discussion as a philosophy concerned with the authority of explanation over an encounter. In *Interpretation at Risk*, I argued that interpretation can become

disproportionate and envisaged reduced narration as a practical consequence of restraint (Vale, *Interpretation at Risk*, 3–5). Tomii's historical work makes a particular difficulty plain: explanation can preserve the relations through which an artistic encounter becomes identifiable. Her reconstruction of material preparation is a historical argument, not a wall text and not evidence of how a visitor responds to one. It cannot be used to prove that longer museum commentary produces greater presence. It does, however, give criticism reason to ask what an explanation supplies before prescribing its removal.

The practical consequence for PIC is therefore secondary but real. The ethical demand for proportion survives; the amount of language cannot be determined before its function is examined. A short label may conceal an essential distinction. A longer historical account may make its evidential limits unusually clear. Either may also overreach. The critic's task is to examine the authority exercised by the account and the historical relations it makes available. This is a refinement in the application of PIC, not the subject or destination of the present study. The central question remains what Tomii's operation requires of the histories that inherit its evidence.

Conclusion

The historical work is not simply what remains after an event has passed. It is also what an account can responsibly identify and explain from the evidence that survives. Tomii's scholarship shows why the arrangements of making, showing, and recording belong to the history of postwar Japanese artistic practice. The present argument follows those arrangements into the justification of later accounts. A description of *Challenging Mud* may concentrate on bodily action, material result, or public image, but its explanatory boundary must be supported by the claim it actually makes. A photograph can be both an instrument of public presentation and partial historical testimony. A condition of authorization can matter without deciding the politics of an entire work. These are not reasons to enlarge every artwork indefinitely. They are reasons to preserve the exact connections upon which historical explanation depends.

Answerability names that obligation at the level of the claim. It asks what the evidence supports, what it leaves undecided, and what a subsequent account must preserve when it carries a conclusion forward. Its purpose is to develop, beside Tomii's work, a criterion through which the consequences of operational evidence remain open to examination. For exhibition history, this yields a specific question: at what point do arrangements of display and documentation become so consequential to a published explanation that the historian must reconsider the historical object the account claims to describe? The answer will depend on a demonstrated relation between the arrangement and the claim, rather than on a general preference for expanding the artwork's boundaries. A history honours its subject not by claiming everything, but by allowing its reasons to remain visible where another reader may need to question them.

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Citation note

For unpaginated texts, citations identify paragraph openings or the words following the recurring refrain in Tomii’s “I challenged mud, after…”. These are passage locators, not numbering supplied by the original publications. References to *Interpretation at Risk* count the title page of the six-page PDF as page 1. Other page references use printed pagination.