The name of Conrad Fiedler (1841–1895), the founder of Kunstwissenschaft (the science of art), continues to draw attention among Japanese scholars of aesthetics and art history, although Fiedler did not have any special ties with either Japan or the Japanese world of the plastic arts.1 This renewed interest in a scholar who is essentially a forgotten name in the West can only be explained on the grounds of a deep affinity between his theoretical work and attempts made by Japanese artists, philosophers, aestheticians, and art historians to overturn the rigidity of Cartesian dualistic modes of knowledge in favor of monistic views of the mind-body compound.2 Fiedler’s publication of Über den Ursprung der künstlerischen Tätigkeit (On the Origin of Artistic Activity, 1887) did not escape the attention of Japan’s foremost philosopher, Nishida Kitarō (1870–1945), who found in Fiedler’s thought a sobering exception to the simple aesthetic conceptualization of a work of art in terms of an observing subject and an object of pure contemplation. Fiedler’s theory of art was a fierce attack against the aesthetics and the historical conscience dominating the nineteenth century. As the title On the Origin of Artistic Activity indicates, the meaning of artistic activity should not be sought in the effects (edification) that a work of art has on the viewer’s spiritual life. Instead, the viewer should concentrate on the realization of the bodily-spiritual construction of reality that such an activity brings about. This difference can only be caught at the beginning of a process which later will come to be known as artistic. The unfolding of this original moment is realized when all

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1 From the long list of essays on Fiedler published in Japan, especially in the Kansai area, I will only mention one of the most recent which appeared in the journal of the Department of Aesthetics and Art History at Osaka University: Ishihara Midori, “Zōkeiteki na Me de Miru: Fīdorā no Geijutsuron no Kanōsei,” pp. 19–35.

2 This topic is thoroughly discussed in Yuasa Yasuo, The Body: Toward an Eastern Mind-Body Theory.
the effects of the work of art are bracketed, so that the origin of artistic activity can eventually be abstracted. Why is such a bracketing necessary? Because we cannot posit an external reality which is separate from the spiritual formations (perceptions, representations, or concepts) which are actually defining what we call external reality. Paradoxically, we could even argue that, since human beings cannot possess the notion of any object apart from the spiritual forms in which such objects are configured, it would not make any difference to us if no object actually existed. Of course, objects need to exist in order to be perceived. However, our possession of reality does not depend on autonomous objects separated from the process of perception. From the very beginning our possession of reality is a “bodily” possession.3

To concentrate on the effects of a work of art fails to go beyond the notion that the observer already has of the essence and goals of art. Then, the judgment becomes more a valuation of the spirit of the observer than of the work itself. In other words, history has the upper hand over the real meaning of art. Rather than being the beginning of a historical structure, Fiedler’s “origin” is an eternal vortex, the foundation of becoming and life. History is simply the space in which expressive movements appear as vortex. Once historical issues are set aside in the judgment of art—notions such as, for example, the role played by minor artists so dear to Romantic historicism—it becomes impossible to found a critique on any aesthetic principle. The space of aesthetic judgment must instead be replaced by an understanding of the activity of the artistic process based on the pedagogical goal of making the observer of art into an artist. The eye must be sensitized to the importance of the field of visibility. This becomes particularly difficult in light of the fact that the scientifically oriented nineteenth century privileged a mode of experience based on conceptual cognition rather than on perception. Everyone, especially the artist, must be re-sensitized to the realm of visual imagination or ideas (Vorstellungen) in which perception takes place. The preeminence that has been given to concepts has made conceptual or abstract cognition superior to the world of perception. Fiedler’s theory of art aims at challenging this distortion and reversing the trend from “sensuous to the non-

3 Conrad Fiedler, Über den Ursprung der künstlerischen Tätigkeit, section 1, pp. 1–23.