

# Reinscribing Tradition in a Transnational Art World

Gennifer Weisenfeld, Duke University

## Introduction: A Question of “Tradition”

There is no typical contemporary Asian artist. There are no overarching trends that bind the diverse and increasingly nomadic experiences of Asian artists working in the global context of the contemporary transnational art world. Despite the ideological and rhetorical claims for national identity and cultural unity bounded by the nation-state that are still in currency, these claims are spurious in light of the heterogeneity of individual experience, inflected by location, class, and gender. Still, artists, art historians, curators, and art critics concerned with Asian culture regularly return to a notion of “tradition”—sometimes national, sometimes regional—and its ostensibly tension-filled relationship with the modern to frame their discussions of a distinctive Asian modernity. I would like to revisit the critical problem of “tradition” here to hopefully complicate the discussion. Close inspection of contemporary artistic production reveals a range of strategic operations in the rhetorical deployment of “tradition,” from the lucrative commodification of difference in a neo-auto-orientalization mode to the most biting and ironic forms of post-modern critique (often equally lucrative). When post-modern critique is situated within a changing political climate of neo-conservatism, counter-culture can be slyly inverted to support nationalist ideologies of cultural essentialism. Nothing is as it appears.

By now, everyone is well aware that tradition is not static, it is not singular, and it is not transhistorical. Rather than focus on a limitless search for historical formal sources, it is clearly more illuminating to concentrate on the choices made in the present that frame and articulate particular traditions, as the past is reinscribed and given new meaning in the present through this process. My research focuses on Japan, and I will concentrate here on Japanese artists in the larger context of contemporary Asian art as a case study, not because these same questions might not be equally relevant to Thai or Chinese artists, or because Japan is any less heterogeneous than the rest of Asia, but rather because my own limited knowledge prevents me from wandering too far beyond these parameters. I also strongly believe that the historical specificity of each Asian country’s experience of modernity greatly impacts the story—it certainly

does in Japan, which often has an ambivalent relationship to the rest of Asia (as the rest of Asia has to it). By focusing on two of the most successful and widely acclaimed Japanese artists exhibiting in Japan and abroad today, Murakami Takashi and Araki Nobuyoshi, I will show how their invocation of traditions specifically associated with Edo-period visuality and its libidinal economy fuses the material, spiritual, and erotic into a distinct and highly marketable cultural essence that still effectively positions itself as an extreme counter-culture critique championing post-modern hybridity. While I hesitate to claim that these artists represent any kind of norm in such a heterogeneous sphere of visual culture production, their immense success in a range of markets and their highly influential writings have certainly framed the reception of Japanese art around the world in the past decade by constructing a critical benchmark for discussions of contemporary identity politics in art.

Notions of tradition are important because they are ineluctably tied to discourses of authenticity, which still impinge heavily on the writing and teaching of Asian art history—not to mention feeding broader anxieties about national identity in a globalizing world. As Partha Mitter has succinctly noted, “neurosis about authenticity was a very nationalist preoccupation all over the world.”<sup>1</sup> Successful international careers from Okakura Kakuzō to D.T. Suzuki were made on the basis of separating East and West and identifying “authentic” traditions and sensibilities to reinforce this division. This was not just a preoccupation of nationalists. In the face of the cultural dilemmas prompted by the universalizing impetus of modernism, modernist artists and architects in Asia were equally dogged by the problem of authenticity throughout the twentieth century. This is exemplified by the Japanese Bunriha (the Secessionists) in the 1920s—as discussed by Jonathan Reynolds—who were concerned with identifying and maintaining what they termed “authentic localism.”<sup>2</sup> Another example: after the Second World War, in the climate of “artistic nationalism” encountered by Japanese abstract artists like Okada Kenzō, described by Bert Winther-Tamaki, a debate emerged about authenticity that implicitly questioned who had the right to speak for the nation, a debate that prefigured the ongoing discussions among Chinese artists and critics described by Wu Hung and colleagues in *Chinese Art at the Crossroads*.<sup>3</sup> Japanese abstract expressionists successful in the American art market of the 1950s, who grounded their hybrid aesthetic in the legitimating discourse of tradition and indigenous culture, were derided by many Japanese critics as producing “Karayuki-san art,” catering to the postwar Western taste for “Japonica,” thus likening these artists to prewar Japanese prostitutes who were forced to sell themselves abroad to foreigners.<sup>4</sup>

One of the key objectives of the ground-breaking 1997 Asia Society exhibition, *Contemporary Art in Asia: Traditions/Tensions* as described by its guest curator Apinan Poshysnanda, was “to demonstrate that tradition should not be interpreted as the opposite of contemporaneity,” since individuals throughout the heterogeneous regions of Asia were continually assimilating, adapting, and resisting a range of traditions—that is to say, they were engaged in an ongoing process of negotiation rather than experiencing a binary divide with discrete boundaries.<sup>5</sup> Tradition (or the past) then might be conceived of as being in a continuum with the present rather than representing a relationship marked by rupture. Moreover, the long-term diversified experiences of colonial encounter, the intra-Asian power relations and history of imperialist hegemonic aspirations within Asia by China and Japan (which unfortunately were not included in the exhibition, but were present historically in the background), further complicate the simple dichotomies of East/West, tradition/modernity, spiritualism/materialism, and so forth. Yet, as the exhibition also demonstrates, it would be misleading to assert that all practices of the past have continued into the present in an unbroken lineage, and that contemporary Asian artists do not experience a distinct break with some of the traditions of the past, a historical distance that produces a sense of externality or exteriority. Thus, the approach to these “traditions” is more about self-conscious historicist revivalism than parallel coexistence. There have been many examples of politically and ideologically motivated artistic revivals in the East Asian context over the centuries, which have often been considered self-reflexive forms of archaism.

In the discourse of tradition and modernity in contemporary art, we find a division between the characterization of the resulting hybridity as a self-reflexive pastiche that seamlessly sutures incongruous parts to synthesize a new whole, or as marking a tension-filled relationship of incompletely sutured elements that emblemizes rupture, thus remaining in a state of conflict. As Geeta Kapur has forcefully argued in her essay “Globalisation and Culture,” postmodern hybridity often elides disjunctures and tensions and its seamless multiculturalism can sidestep problematics of responsibility and agency. She advocates a conflictual approach to postcolonial culture rather than the negotiating stand of hybridity.<sup>6</sup>

## Curating Japaneseness: Heterogeneity and Heterotopia

Keeping these issues in mind, I would first like to turn to a discussion of Murakami Takashi, not only because he is, without question, the most economically successful Japanese artist on the contemporary art scene—equally popular at home and abroad—but also because he functions in the dual role of artist and curator. As is already well known, Murakami curated two major exhibitions in the United States in the past five years, the “Super Flat” exhibition that went from a Parco department store in Japan to the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles (and on to Minneapolis and Seattle) in 2001;



Fig. 1: Flyer designed by Goto Takaya for Murakami Takahashi exhibition “Superflat” at Parco Gallery, Tokyo, 2000. Printed paper: 11 11/16 x 8 5/16 in. (29.7 x 21 cm). (C)2000 Takashi Murakami/Kaikai Kiki Co., Ltd. All Rights Reserved.

and the exhibition “Little Boy: The Arts of Japan’s Exploding Subculture” at the Japan Society in 2005, which was named best thematic museum show in New York of 2004/2005 by the American chapter of the International Association of Art Critics.<sup>7</sup> In Europe he had major exhibitions at prestigious international venues like the Fondation Cartier Paris and the Serpentine Gallery London in 2002, in which year he was chosen as an honorary speaker to address the British Royal Academy of Art. Most recently, he had a major solo retrospective in 2008 at the Brooklyn Museum—“Copyright Murakami.” This is, of course, in addition to regular solo and group exhibitions throughout Japan and parts of Asia—and a burgeoning empire of pop designer goods from soccer balls to Louis Vuitton bags.



*Fig. 2: Murakami Takashi (Japanese, born 1962). “Flower Ball”. Artificial leather (hand-sewn), diameter 8 11/16 in. (22cm). Courtesy of Workaholics, Inc. (C)2000 Takashi Murakami/Kaikai Kiki Co., Ltd. All Rights Reserved.*

Supremely concerned with delineating Japaneseness and locating Japanese originality for a world audience, Murakami proclaimed his “Superflat” theory in a bilingual (Japanese and English) book-length manifesto that claimed a distinct aesthetic flatness in Japanese culture over the past several centuries.<sup>8</sup> Murakami’s *Superflat* constructs a genealogy for contemporary “subcultures” of anime, manga, and video games—the inspiration for his art work—by linking them to the decorative, flat, and eccentric artistic practices of a select group of artists working in the Edo period (the period from the beginning of the 17<sup>th</sup> to the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century). According to Murakami, the masterful surface control of the viewer’s gaze in works by Edo artists such as Kanō Sansetsu, Sōga Shohaku, and Itō Jakuchū, “erased interstices and thus made the observer aware of the images’ extreme planarity,”<sup>9</sup> not to mention their scopic sensuousness.



Fig. 3: Murakami Takashi, “727”, 1996. Acrylic on canvas mounted on board, 9 ft. 10 1/8 in. x 14 ft. 9 3/16 in. x 2 13/16 in. (300 x 450 x 7 cm). Courtesy Tomio Koyama Gallery, Tokyo/ Blum & Poe, Los Angeles. (C)2000 Takashi Murakami/Kaikai Kiki Co., Ltd. All Rights Reserved.

Extending this metaphor of planarity, Murakami writes in *Superflat* that Japanese “society, customs, art, culture: all are extremely two dimensional.”<sup>10</sup> In other words, this planarity refers to both the pictorial surface, but also to the lack of depth in contemporary Japanese culture as a whole, focusing on consumerism and play (and sex and violence) without a profound political or social consciousness.

In the “Little Boy” exhibition project, the third phase of the *Superflat* trilogy, he further elaborates on this theory, positing a kind of collective psychic infantilization of the Japanese populace after the war under the umbrella of American regional political power—thus heroizing the emotionally crippled *otaku* (geeks), the subculture aficionados, as true Japanese who are at the same time maverick individualists, techno-wizards, and masters of an infomatic society. Murakami’s art is the synthesis of pop and the distinctly Japanese *otaku*, which he skillfully brands “poku.”<sup>11</sup>

Is this a case of slick commercialized post-modern hybrid or a probing analysis into the stunted collective psyche of postwar Japan, or perhaps both?<sup>12</sup> But, equally important for our purposes, why anchor this discussion in the traditions of Edo? According to Carol Gluck and Marc Steinberg, the Japanese Edo booms of the 1980s and 90s in television, manga, literature, and critical theory identified the Edo period as “the site of the lost-but-not-forgotten authentic Japan, the pre-Western ‘outside’ modernity. It was also, conversely, the precursor and reflection of Japan’s consumerist, postmodern present.”<sup>13</sup> Edo became a critical “site of the regeneration of Japanese tradition.”<sup>14</sup> Edo’s distinctness and value as a historical antecedent for Murakami’s pop subculture resides in its perceived fusion of high and low, the eccentricity and individuality of some of its greatest artists, its unabashed commercialism, its abiding refined levels of cultural connoisseurship, and its brazen libidinousness (evident in the copious production of erotica). Sidestepping the incongruences in Murakami’s argument—and there are many, such as the willful misreading of the hierarchies of artistic production in the Edo period that were key to class-based aesthetics—the counter-culture, counter Western modernity, and anti-modern nation-state position taken by “Edo boomers” like Karatani Kōjin, Ōtsuka Eiji, Ōkada Toshio, as articulated in the discourse of Murakami and his supporters such as independent curator Sawaragi Noi and critic Matsui Midori, has morphed into a kind of “*otaku* nationalism” according to cultural critic Azuma Hiroki, who was initially an enthusiast of Murakami’s superflat theory and co-author of his 2000 manifesto publication, and has increasingly become concerned with what he sees as a nationalist turn that feeds into *nihonjinron* ideology—that is theories of Japanese distinctiveness.<sup>15</sup>

Since the 1980s, when Japan’s economic surge drew unprecedented world attention to the country’s contemporary art, Japanese art professionals have been contending with the dilemmas of cultural essentialism. A number of influential curators have sought to counter essentialist discourses by embracing plurality and heterogeneity, first among them Nanjo Fumio, a

veteran of the field and current Director of the Mori Art Museum. In the past decade, he has been joined by a prominent group of women curators who have risen to the forefront of the art world, including Osaka Eriko from the Art Tower Mito, commissioner of the 2001 Japanese pavilion at the Venice Biennale, Hasegawa Yuko of the Kanazawa Contemporary Art Museum, who previously worked at Art Tower Mito and the Setagaya Art Museum, and was commissioner in Venice in 2003, and Kasahara Michiko, previously of the Tokyo Metropolitan Museum of Photography and now curator at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Tokyo, who was commissioner at the 2005 Venice Biennale.

In the late 1980s, Nanjo worked with a binational curatorial team in Japan and the United States to produce the landmark exhibition *Against Nature: Japanese Art in the Eighties*, which was explicitly designed to counter stereotypical notions of a “pure” Japanese tradition, taking on surging trends in cultural essentialism and *nihonjinron* theories of Japanese uniqueness. The exhibition highlighted the hybrid, the eclectic and the international currents in Japanese visual culture, underscoring Japan’s intrinsic connection to the United States through global consumer culture and technology. The curators specifically sought to undermine the persistent binaries of East vs. West, nature vs. culture, national identity vs. private individuality, and cultural isolationism (peripheralism) vs. internationalism upon which Japanese cultural essentialism was predicated.<sup>16</sup>

In this context, Osaka’s choice of Nakamura Masato’s glowing minimalist shrine of golden McDonald’s arches for the 2001 Venice Biennale also stands out, as it focused on the globalization of food culture and the homogenizing transformation of disparate local cityscapes through corporate branding. In combination with his convenience store neon sign installations, Nakamura’s work is a generalized commentary on the new icons of daily life in Asia. Taking an entirely different tack, Kasahara’s choice in 2005 of female photographer Ichiuchi Miyako’s series of highly personal photographs of her mother’s possessions and her aging body, instead centered on the gendered, the subjective, and the emotional. It boldly posited individual, embodied biography rather than generalized collective psyche as history.

Hasegawa’s 2003 pavilion theme of Heterotopias or “other spaces” (based on a concept developed by Michel Foucault) explicitly sought to identify “sites of resistance.” It attempted to reveal the “other space” of the periphery that “threatens the rigidity of mainstream modernism”;



and illuminates the contestation of heterotopia that “transcends systems, politics and the notion of right or wrong, resulting in an ecological transformation or mutation.” In Hasegawa’s concept, Japan itself is posited as heterotopic because “not only is it geographically peripheral as an island that lies in the Far East, it embraces a wide range of cultures with great voracity, deconstructing that [sic those] other cultures while Japanizing them within its own context.”<sup>17</sup> Yet, even in her laudable attempt to counter the cultural hegemony of Western modernism, Hasegawa’s Japan-as-heterotopia still valorizes the amorphous cultural process often characterized as “Japanization,” producing Japan as a distinctive peripheral space of “intensely hybridized sub-cultures” that Murakami could just as comfortably inhabit.

Sone Yutaka, one of the two artists featured in the heterotopia pavilion, created multimedia spaces of deviance that were to be understood as “counter-sites”—his installations “Double River Island” and “Snow Leopard Island” produce a physical and metaphorical journey to an “unreachable place.” His amusement-park spaces and jungles bring to mind mysterious, liminal islands like the location of the television show *LOST*.

Following this trajectory of exploring modes of cultural critique through liminality, heterotopia, and resistance, curator Minashima Hiroshi, professor at the women’s university, Joshibi University of Art and Design, and the former Director of the Contemporary Art Museum, Kumamoto commissioned rising female star photographer and installation artist Yanagi Miwa to create the Japanese pavilion for the 2009 Biennale. Under the theme “Windswept Women,” Yanagi shrouded the modernist Yoshizaka Takamasa Pavilion with a funereal black, membrane-like tent, transforming the space of contemporary time into a representation of the eternal temporal fluidity and spatial mobility of “death.” Yanagi’s primal, mystical, shamaness-like figures of “old young women,” (young women imagined as old) who are familiar characters in her recent works, appear here as gigantic, surreal visitors from another world—life-sized images of “death” incarnate. Yanagi envisions death pervading life—particularly through memory—and conceives of it as an eternal element of the human condition. The momentum of life is conveyed through the often invisible and marginal figure of the old woman. Each viewer picks up a “particle of death” in the viewing experience as he or she moves through the space.

## “The Biennale Effect”

The institution of the Venice Biennale is implicated in a multinodal system of globalization that has produced an interconnected network of biennales and triennales around the world—“the biennale effect.” As John Clark has astutely noted, we must think about the cultural shifts represented by the biennale effect and ask how such international exhibitions function institutionally in the context of internationalism and globalism. What kind of exhibitionary complex do they produce? How have the emerging public sphere, global capitalism, and the global art market impacted on this exhibitionary complex, and what are the implications for artistic production and collecting? Clark specifically asks, what role the biennale effect plays in forging the circuits for the recognition and distribution of contemporary art around the world, consequently establishing the international canons of contemporary art, and what does it mean for center/periphery cultural relations in the world art market? That is to say, what are the geopolitics of inclusion and exclusion? Like the esteemed aristocratic art patrons of old, biennales serve as arbiters of taste in the contemporary art world—they constitute a form of cultural mediation.<sup>18</sup>

Biennales have thus produced an internationally recognized set of curators who work in a range of venues, what some have now come to refer to as the “curatoriate” or the “curatorium,” demarcating this group’s elite and powerful decision-making role. They provide, in John Clark’s words, a kind of cultural “consecration” into the international sphere. This constitutes a valuable form of cultural capital for those involved and can easily be converted into real capital through collateral exhibitions and sales. It bears mentioning that the curatorial selection itself is a commodity and is as much on display as the art works exhibited—it can be said that curators curate for each other as much as they curate for the art world or the general public. There are a select few among these curators who take on a semi-star status in this circuit of exchange; they can even be, as Clark rather cynically notes, symbolic simulacra of curators as much as physical presences (that is simulations that even supercede representation in terms of their accuracy and power of imitation). However, it is important to remember that these individuals are not ethically neutral, nor are they free from the imbrications of their own local cultural economies and the public/private spheres of self-interest. If anything, it is their effective ability to maneuver within the freighted ethnoscaples and mediascaples of contemporary culture that enable them to succeed. The culture of the curatoriate is mirrored by what Clark calls the media “chatter” of critics, which is crucial to the dissemination (or ripple effect) of the actual events. The chatter also has inherent value on the market.

Clark argues that biennales have the *de facto* effect of taking national or regional art to the “international” level, and have only just begun to function in a transnational way transcending the national/international binary. In effect, biennales designate local/national art worthy of exhibiting to international audiences. In so doing, they draw contemporary regional art into new interregional settings of comparison and circulation.

### **Centers and Peripheries**

Discussions of contemporary Asian art struggle with the question of positionality, perceptions of a center and periphery, which have been perpetuated by the geopolitical conditions of colonialism, postcolonialism, and the economic realities of global capitalism that have a cultural imperialist dimension. At the same time, however, like Hasegawa’s theme of hetertopia, a distinct movement has been afoot to decenter this center-periphery model through biennales and triennales throughout the Asia-Pacific region, which are by now well established in places such as Gwangju, Guangzhou, Shanghai, New Delhi, Queensland, and Yokohama. Within Japan specifically, the Fukuoka Triennale, begun in 1999, has enacted a double decentering by not only moving away from the East-West power structure and the centrality of established venues like Venice, but also by moving away from the Tokyo-centered Japanese art world to a sphere of purportedly greater inter-Asian contact, Kyushu. The twenty-one country triennale is a grand cultural gesture toward a new Pan-Asian-centrism, which the museum’s curators want Japan to join, as clearly indicated by the museum’s chief curator Ushiroshoji Masahiro, who sees the founding of the museum itself and the triennale as enabling the posing of the questions, “What is Asia? What is Asian art?” Without this opportunity, according to Ushiroshoji, these questions would be left unaddressed in Japan.<sup>19</sup>

Staff curator Kuroda Raiji takes this mandate one step further. He states that the museum is looking for an audience “not polluted by the idea [that] modernist Western art [equals] contemporary.” Proposing that Asian artists explore their own ways of being contemporary, Kuroda says, “we decided we do not have to compare Asian art with Western art, but we could still find something very positive in each country.” They sought to avoid what they describe as “colonialist curatorial methods’ whereby guest countries are visited and works chosen that reflect the host country’s cultural standards.” To this end, Ushiroshoji and Kuroda collaborated with art professionals from each nation: twenty-one coordinators and twenty co-curators are listed in the catalogue as the team responsible for

choosing the exhibition's 53 artists. As one might expect, this produced a wildly diverse and divergent exhibition exposing the tremendous disparities of experience in contemporary Asia. It also revealed the broad concern among all the co-curators with the "rapid erosion of homogeneous communities and indigenous culture."<sup>20</sup>

These pluralizing and decentering impulses, however, are in tension, and sometimes in collusion, with the dogged and interlinked problems of authenticity and identity that pervade Japan's other public sectors of politics, education, and business. Sociologist Yoshino Kosaku's studies of Japanese cultural nationalism and *nihonjinron*-ism indicate the powerful resurgence of essentialist notions of national culture in Japan during the latter stages of the bubble economy and through the post-bubble period of economic recession that followed in the 1990s. He notes that, "An attempt to improve intercultural communication, accompanied by an excessive emphasis on Japanese peculiarities, can ironically have the unintended consequences of strengthening cultural nationalism."<sup>21</sup> Yoshino argues that these primarily non-state driven discourses were not only reproduced and consumed in the marketplace of high culture, but also in the general marketplace that inflects everyday behavioral culture—two markets that artists like Murakami Takashi and Araki Nobuyoshi actively seek to span. But rather than representing ethnocentrism, Yoshino argues that Japanese cultural nationalism is more a form of "ethnoperipherism" because of the long-standing perception in Japan of its peripheral location in relation to the central civilizations of China and the West.<sup>22</sup>

Moreover, while Murakami posits the *otaku*'s beloved pop subcultures as a grass-roots radicalism, which is historically based on an alternate model of modernity, the Japanese government's very recent recognition under Prime Minister Koizumi Junichirō of these subcultures' status as significant and unique Japanese cultural exports ironically co-opts them for national purposes. This represents a major position reversal from the government's earlier staunch aversion to pop culture forms as degraded commercial endeavors unworthy of Japan's great, traditional cultural contributions. To solidify this move, the government just recently awarded Murakami the prestigious "Minister of Education's Art Encouragement Prize for New Artists" for his curatorial work on the "Little Boy" exhibition.<sup>23</sup>

Although cultural studies scholar Iwabuchi Kōichi has argued convincingly that Japanese multinational corporations have gone to great lengths to ethnically "de-odorize" their pop culture products like Pokemon, particularly in Asian markets where a "Japanese whiff" might make them less palatable and marketable, Murakami's explicit claiming of the *otaku*

and pop subcultures for Japan (sidestepping the corrosive influence of Americanism) can be seen as a direct effort to re-odorize these cultural forms.<sup>24</sup>

### **The Authenticity of Edo Sexuality**

Murakami's *otaku* is identified as a *tsū*, an aficionado or expert in the navigation of the economy of mass media, like the aficionados of the Edo pleasure quarters. They are also drawn into the exaggerated fantasy world of the libidinal economy of these subcultures, although their engagement is primarily auto-erotic. These eroticized bodies — and by association the national body of Japan—such as Murakami's life-size anime figure *Lonesome Cowboy*, who sprays a geyser of semen, and many of the Superflat artists he promotes, ranging from the soft porn figures by BOME to the young girls in Takano Aya's paintings, parallel the onanistic erotic print culture (*shunga*) produced in Edo described by Tim Screech.<sup>25</sup> These fantasies indirectly reinforce the grand narratives of Orientalism, in which eroticism inheres in the "Oriental Other," symbolized by the seraglios or harems and their oversexed denizens.



*Fig. 4: Murakami Takashi, "My Lonesome Cowboy", 1998. Oil, acrylic, fiberglass, and iron. 8 ft. 4 1/8 in. x 3 ft. (254 x 117 x 91,5 cm). Courtesy Blum & Poe, Los Angeles.*

The extended eroticization of the Japanese nation through the figure of Edo and the body of the courtesan is not new, and the eroticization of Japan is evident in many areas of contemporary Japanese art: from the naked contortionism of Butoh to the techno-spiritual shamanesses of Mori Mariko.

Emblazoned on the wall of Araki Nobuyoshi's recent retrospective at the Barbican Gallery in London, a text proclaimed, "obscenity is the spice to enjoy human life."



Fig. 5: Nobuyoshi Araki (Japanese, born 1940), "A Woman Named Komari", 2002. RP Direct print. Barbican Centre Exhibition Poster; London, 2005-2006.

To punctuate that thought, Araki splashes colored and white liquid over many of the large-scale photographs foregrounded in the front rooms of the exhibition, in a sense, ejaculating over his images. “Photography isn’t just about taking a good shot: it’s about wanting to project images outwards. It’s essentially about insertion, about penetration!” declares Araki, claiming his camera as a surrogate penis.<sup>26</sup> The artist invites the viewer to use his images like *shunga*—as auto-erotic stimulus. Circulated extensively in book form, Araki’s work has appeared in close to two-hundred-and-fifty solo publications; the artist offers a private encounter as well as the titillation of public exhibitionism in a museum context.<sup>27</sup>



Fig. 6: Nobuyoshi Araki, “SHIKI IN”, 2005. Acrylic on black-and-white print. Courtesy of the artist and Taka Ishii Gallery.

Evocation of the Edo pleasure quarters intertwines the traditional with the autobiographical for Araki, who grew up near Yoshiwara, the old Edo pleasure quarters. Writing in the publication *Nobuyoshi Araki: Sex, Life, Death* that accompanied the Barbican exhibition, Yuko Tanaka tries to link Araki’s work with three traditional Japanese aesthetic concepts: *Basara*, *kyo*, and *iro*. *Basara* connotes disarray, outlandishness, and willfulness (it is associated with the outlandish vitality of the Kabuki theater); *kyo* means frenzy, an antonym of correctness, a refusal to observe social order and mores, and a spirit of parody; and *iro*, the sexual and erotic. Araki himself uses the artist’s penname “shakyojin” (combining the term for frenzy with one of the characters used in photography). Tanaka locates

Araki's eccentricity and socially rebellious identity in his connection to these traditions, declaring laughter as his means of rebelling against conventional forms—a time-honored tradition in Japan that she claims was lost in the modern times of Westernization (presumably referring to the Western scientification of the body and the related anathematization of desire). The bawdy erotic culture of Edo often incorporated humor in its treatment of sex; *shunga* were commonly known as “laughter pictures” (*warai-e*). Humor and parody in Araki's work is by implication liberated from the confines of a western-derived modernity.<sup>28</sup>

Araki's work raises myriad moral conundrums with its seemingly exploitative, sometimes misogynistic, sometimes pedophilic tendencies (specifically in its Lolita complex fetishization of schoolgirls). Yet he has succeeded in becoming a champion of breaking public morality taboos and the status quo by assaulting viewers' sensibilities, not to mention the fact that, like Murakami, he willfully and enthusiastically transgresses the borders of high and low art, particularly in his extensive use of polaroids.



Fig. 7: Nobuyoshi Araki, Installation view of “Araki Retrographs”, 2 August–12 October 1997, Hara Museum of Contemporary Art. Courtesy of the artist and Taka Ishii Gallery



Any critique of Araki's work is complicated by its endorsement of free expression in the face of state censorship. The strong prohibitions on pornography, specifically depicting genitalia and pubic hair, make Araki's explicit photographs that much more daring and counter-culture. Despite his critics' claims of exceptionalism for Araki's work, in this regard, he is clearly part of an international cohort of artists, including Robert Mapplethorpe, Jeff Koons, and Nan Goldin (with whom he has collaborated) among others, who are pushing the boundaries of sexual taboos and voyeurism. Araki's arrests and censures have made him a martyr for the cause of civil liberties, which, it goes without saying, was great publicity for his work and public career. By the 1990s, he was firmly ensconced as a titan in the world of Japanese photography, a nationally and internationally recognized celebrity with women lining up on his doorstep to be photographed. He has also become mentor to a new generation of young women photographers like Hiromix and Ninagawa Mika who are now celebrities in the current Japanese photography scene.

Araki's pornographic work is only a part of his total production, but it is without a doubt the reason for his fame—or infamy—in the art world. He defends his sado-masochistic scenes of bondage (the "Kinbaku" series, which refers to Edo period macabre prints of bondage by print designers like Yoshitoshi and images of bestiality, such as Hokusai's female pearl diver being ravished by an octopus, as staged collaborative works with his subjects, claiming that they are not exploitative because of their controlled and mutually constructed settings.

In the documentary video *Arakimentari* on view at the exhibition, numerous women subjects declare themselves as willing participants in Araki's series *The Eroticism of Married Women*, which they argue enables their sexual self-realization.<sup>29</sup> His alluring subject Komari, a fashion model, who was his "collaborator" for two publications in 2002: *Lamant D'Août* and *A Woman Called Komari* (and who graces the Barbican exhibition pamphlet), asserts herself as an equal in the artistic process of updating *shunga*, invoking a now familiar rhetoric of cultural essentialism as she describes how their collaborative rediscovery of a unique Japanese sexuality has enabled the return of emotion to sex, previously repressed under the yoke of westernization. In the documentary, in a manner no different than styling her clothing on a fashion shoot, Araki then reaches over and rearranges Komari's kimono to better frame her genitals and coils her pubic hair with his fingers.<sup>30</sup>



*Fig. 8: Nobuyoshi Araki, "Kinbaku", 1979. Black-and-white print. Courtesy of the artist and Taka Ishii Gallery.*



Fig. 9: Tsukioka Yoshitoshi, 1839-1892, Inada Kyûzô Shinsuke murders the kitchenmaid suspended from a rope, 1867. Color woodblock; 34.9 x 24.1 cm. Fine Arts Museum of San Francisco. Museum purchase, Achenbach Foundation for Graphic Arts Endowment Fund, 1986.1.86

## Conclusion

Can the work of a handful of artists, however popular, fully capture the diverse field of artistic production in Japan? No, of course not. And I do not want to leave the impression that these selected examples represent all of Japan, not to mention Asia. If anything, I hope to have emphasized that we need to disaggregate these categories and look at the complexities of individual situations in the specific contexts of national and international politics, as well as transnational market systems that exert intense pressures on art professionals. In this matrix, a work can be simultaneously counter-culture and hybrid, and essentializing and culturally nationalist. It can be critical of dominant structures and reinforce those structures. Clearly the work of Murakami and Araki remain in such tension. Perhaps what is most important to take away from this discussion is that concepts of tradition continue to be compelling rhetorical devices in contemporary art because they are immediate markers of identity that can provide a foil against which to highlight tension, rupture, and conflict, or conversely offer a fabric from which to weave a genealogy of cultural continuity.

In terms of artistic production, then, can non-Western artists forge a distinct identity from the master narratives of the West, and, in turn, what can they contribute to the construction of a world contemporary art culture if not local flavor and exoticized difference? Ironically, despite the continued exclusion of contemporary art from the canon of Asian art taught in the West (and in many Asian countries as well) due to its uncomfortable hybridity and, by extension inauthenticity, contemporary art is often privileged by critics over historical work as uniquely able to talk back to the colonial discourse of the past.<sup>31</sup> Perhaps it is this very ability to talk back to history and to speak to local social and political issues, a domestic turn, that will be the beacon for contemporary Asian art, but the profitability of commodifying difference in the art market and anxiety about homogenization and cultural erasure under globalization—despite the assurances of cultural critics theorizing “the glocal” that these anxieties are unfounded—will continue to make tradition a freighted issue.

---

I would like to acknowledge the invaluable support of the Sainsbury Institute for the Study of Japanese Arts and Cultures. I am also grateful to Vishakha Desai for her insightful comments. A slightly altered version of “Reinscribing Tradition in a Transnational Art World” was originally published in *Asian Art History in the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Vishakha Desai (Williamstown, Mass.: Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, 2007), pp. 181-98, and is reprinted with the permission of the publisher.

- 1 Partha Mitter, "Reflections on modern art and national identity in colonial India: an interview," in *Cosmopolitan modernisms*, ed. Kobena Mercer (London and Cambridge, MA: Institute of International Visual Arts and MIT Press, 2005), 33.
- 2 Jonathan Reynolds, "The Bunriha and the problem of 'tradition' for modernist architecture in Japan, 1920-1928," in *Japan's competing modernities*, ed. Sharon Minichiello (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1998): 228-246.
- 3 Bert Winther-Tamaki, *Art in the encounter of nations: Japanese and American artists in the early postwar years* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2001); Wu Hung and Institute of International Visual Arts, *Chinese Art at the Crossroads: Between Past and Future, Between East and West* (Hong Kong and London: New Art Media, 2001).
- 4 Winther-Tamaki, 28.
- 5 Apinan Poshyananda and Asia Society Galleries, *Contemporary art in Asia: Traditions/ Tensions* (New York: Asia Society Galleries, 1996), 15.
- 6 Geeta Kapur, "Globalisation and Culture," *Third Text* 39 (Summer 1997): 25.
- 7 *Japan Art Scene Monitor*, 15 April 2006, 2.
- 8 Murakami Takashi, *Supa furatto = Super flat* (Tokyo: Madora Shuppan, 2000).
- 9 Murakami Takashi, "A Theory of Super flat Japanese art," in Murakami, *Supa furatto = Super flat*, n.p.
- 10 Murakami Takashi, "The Super flat manifesto," in Murakami, *Supa furatto = Super flat*, n.p.
- 11 Murakami Takashi, ed., *Little Boy: the Arts of Japan's Exploding Subculture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005).
- 12 In her exhibition catalogue essay, Alexandra Munroe carefully explores the critical debates surrounding the otaku in Japanese postwar society and the wellspring of anti-western, nationalist sentiment that complicates their social status as merely nihilistic outsiders. Alexandra Munroe, "Introducing little boy," in *Little Boy*, ed. Murakami (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 241-58.
- 13 Marc Steinberg, "Otaku consumption, superflat art and the return to Edo," *Japan Forum* 16 (3) 2004: 449; Carol Gluck, "The Invention of Edo," in *Mirror of Modernity: Invented Traditions of Modern Japan*, ed. Stephen Vlastos (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 262-284.
- 14 Steinberg, 451.
- 15 Steinberg, 457-461; Mouri Yoshitaka has recently discussed the emergence of a kind of "otaku nationalism" in a lecture he delivered at the Chelsea College of Art and Design, London, 2006.
- 16 *Against Nature: Japanese Art in the Eighties*. Edited by Eriko Osaka and Kay Kline. New York: Grey Gallery and Study Center, New York University, MIT List Visual Arts Center, The Japan Foundation, 1989. Exhibition catalog.
- 17 "Venice Biennale 2003 50th International Exhibition of Art / National Participation: Japanese Pavilion," accessed November 11, 2006, [http://www.jpjf.go.jp/e/others/old/0212/12\\_01\\_02.html](http://www.jpjf.go.jp/e/others/old/0212/12_01_02.html)
- 18 John Clark, "Contemporary Asian Art at Biennales and Triennales: The 2005 Venice Biennale and Fukuoka Asian Triennale, the Sigg Collection, and the Yokohama and Guangzhou Triennales," *caa.reviews* (September 7, 2006), accessed January 5, 2009, doi: 10.3202/caa.reviews.2006.88. John Clark, "Histories of the Asian 'New': Biennales and Contemporary Asian Art," in *Asian Art History in the Twenty-First Century*. Clark Studies in the Visual Arts, ed. Vishakha Desai (Williamstown, MA: The Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, 2007), 229-249.
- 19 Ann Wilson Lloyd, "Reorienting: Japan Rediscovered Asia" *Art in America* 87, n. 10 (October 1999): 105.
- 20 Lloyd, 105.

- 21 Yoshino Kosaku, "Rethinking theories of nationalism: Japan's nationalism in a marketplace perspective," in *Consuming Ethnicity and Nationalism: Asian Experiences*, ed. Yoshino Kosaku (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1999), 23.
- 22 Yoshino, 23.
- 23 *Japan Art Scene Monitor*, 15 April 2006, 3.
- 24 Iwabuchi Kōichi, *Toransunashonaru Japan: Ajia o tsunagu popyura bunka* (Tokyo: Iwanami shoten, 2001).
- 25 Timon Screech, *Sex and the Floating World: Erotic Images in Japan, 1700-1820* (London: Reaktion Books, 1999).
- 26 *Nobuyoshi Araki: Self, Life, Death* (London: Phaidon Press, 2005), 266.
- 27 In the past five years Araki has had major retrospectives in Japan and abroad. He was also included in the Italian pavilion at the 2002 Venice Biennale and the "Images of Asia Festival" in Denmark 2003.
- 28 Yuko Tanaka, "Japan in Araki's world" in *Nobuyoshi Araki: Self, Life, Death* (London: Phaidon Press, 2005), 546-48.
- 29 *Arakimentari*, director Travis Klose, Troopers Films, 2004.
- 30 A move reminiscent of Edo period pseudo-scientific gynecological prints that were really thinly veiled pornography, often displaying a male hand or finger inserted into the female genitalia and the reproductive organs.
- 31 Kobena Mercer, "Introduction," in *Cosmopolitan Modernisms*, ed. Kobena Mercer, 18.