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PURE TRANCE



Visions of Tokyo in Japanese Contemporary Art

ADRIAN FAVELL

SO MANY FOREIGNERS “EXPERIENCE” TOKYO for the first time through the incandescent images of *anime* movies or the startling pages of cult *manga*. It is no surprise, then, that visions of Tokyo taken from Japanese contemporary art have been filtered significantly by Japan’s most internationally visible forms of pop culture.¹ This, of course, was the strategy adopted with success by Japan’s most famous contemporary artist, Murakami Takashi (b. 1962), as curator and featured artist in his landmark touring shows “Superflat” and “Little Boy.”² Many Western curators and art publishers have lined up to reproduce this selective vision of contemporary art in Japan.³

“Cool Japan,” the political branding of this troubled, ambiguously modernized Asian society in terms of its pop culture, turned the nation into a kind of cartoon during the years before the devastating earthquake and tsunami of 2011.⁴ The “superflat” screen of popular *anime* and *manga* was used to mask bad news about the place: a drastic loss of financial and manufacturing might to China and the rest of Asia; stagnant party politics; an aging population whose youth refused to procreate; dramatic regional decline at the expense of overgrown urbanization; far too many suicides; and worrying numbers of ambitionless young people. Instead, uncomfortable politicians and bureaucrats exhorted the world to celebrate all things “*kawaii*” (cute) and “*kakkoii*” (cool) in Japan’s frequently bizarre subcultures.⁵

At the heart of this Asian wonderland lay “Neo-Tokyo,” an idealized vision of the metropolis as a futuristic archetype producing unprecedented Asian popular culture. These representations were saturated with images of Japan’s sprawling Eastern capital that blurred reality and fantasy.

“Neo-Tokyo” was named first by the breakthrough *anime*, *Akira* (1988). A postmodern, hyper-real marvel built out of the ashes of nuclear war, it could be seen in the pulsating neon, concrete and steel backdrops and in many subsequent Japanese sci-fi animations. It also influenced the Hollywood sci-fi of that era: Ridley Scott’s 1982 *Blade Runner*, for example, is set in a futurist Los Angeles, but the visual referencing is an exaggerated pan-Asian metropolis, obviously in large part Tokyo. In *manga*, the perfect example is the zany universe of Mizuno Junko’s (b. 1973) all-girl *kimo-kawaii* (“sick cute”) vision of Tokyo in her 1998 *Pure Trance*: doped-up sexy nurses and their *idoru* (pop idol) hospital inmates playing out

< FIG. 1. Mizuno Junko.
Cover of *Pure Trance* (San Francisco: Last Gasp, 2005; first published in Japanese 1998). 26 x 20 cm. © Mizuno Junko. Courtesy of the author

FIG. 3. Gothic Lolitas in Harajuku, Tokyo. 2008. Photo: Ann-Christina Lauring Knudsen



FIG. 2. Mizuno Junko. Illustration from *Pure Trance* (see fig. 1) © Mizuno Junko. Courtesy of the author

Nurse Kaori escapes to the outside “surface world” beyond the protective dome of the crazy underground city.

a sadomasochist struggle for postdisaster urban survival, protected by a golden dome over the city through which the apocalyptic outside world only occasionally smashes through (figs. 1, 2).

TOURIST FANTASY

Neo-Tokyo was a voyeuristic, tourist fantasy, perfect for foreign consumers. First-time visitors to Tokyo had no trouble finding it, just as easily as they might find old Edo in a temple visit in Asakusa or the Kabuki-za Theater in Ginza. It was there in photos taken of the glamorous crowds on Shibuya Crossing; in the marvels on every floor of the *otaku* (nerds) emporium in Nakano Broadway; or in the shy smiles of the sweet *gosu roris* (gothic Lolitas) they ogled outside Marui Young (OI) department store in Shinjuku (fig. 3).⁶ Better still, it was delivered every time in the twenty-dollar adrenaline rush when they made the smooth nighttime elevator ascent to the fifty-second floor Tokyo City View atop the steel monolith at the heart of all Neo-Tokyo—the Mori Tower, Roppongi Hills. There, behind glass windows, Neo-Tokyo lay below in its black and neon infinity, kinetic streams in all directions, red lights twinkling over the void. At the Mori Tower, weather permitting, visitors might go to the roof helicopter pad to experience the sublime, without even a glass windscreen. A Godlike view,



FIG. 4. Roppongi Hills and Mori Tower from Tokyo Midtown. 2013. Photo: Julian Worrall

said to be the vastest in the world, can be seen from the roof of the highest tower—in the middle of a fatally dangerous major earthquake zone (fig. 4).

Tokyo City View, of course, was meant to be just an hors d'oeuvre for the main dish of high culture on the fifty-third floor, the Mori Art Museum (MAM). Since 2003, it has put on a credible show as a major global art destination. But it could never compete with the view from the floor below—perhaps only when it occasionally opened up the walls of its white cubes, making the city view the backdrop, as it did to great effect in the pop artist Kusama Yayoi's (b. 1929) 2004 exhibition, when her black dots on red were spread around the Roppongi Hills complex like a tantalizing art virus.⁷

THE CITY WITHIN A CITY: ROPPONGI HILLS

Roppongi Hills was Neo-Tokyo incarnate. The very vision of “a city within a city,” it was the personal landmark of Tokyo's most powerful real-estate developer, Mori Minoru (1934–2012)—in his view, his greatest legacy to the city.⁸ Mori truly believed in the multipurposed business-residential-leisure-tourist complex that would draw back upper-middle classes to live in the city center through the allure of high culture: a total environment, endowed with world-class architecture, design and art to give rich residents, business clients and impressionable visitors a unique experience.

The utopian dimension of the shiny heart of Neo-Tokyo was therefore no accident. Roppongi Hills and the Mori Tower were designed to deliver a clean-cut, thoroughly “branded” experience. The most famous artist’s version of the tower was, appropriately enough, a cartoon full of inimitable Japanese “characters.” Murakami, the star of Japanese contemporary art, who was just going big-time with his branding work for Louis Vuitton, was famously brought in to anoint the controversial new building. He redesigned Roppongi Hills as a cartoon tower, with his trademark poster-paint colors, smiley faces, a goofy dinosaur, and—underneath, surrounding the immaculate silver tower—nothing but (cartoon) flowers. Murakami put these images on the side of public buses, on souvenirs, and—in a supreme twist—a specially produced Roppongi Hills Monopoly game.

Irony or not, the real story about Roppongi Hills was what in reality lay below all those happy flowers. The complex covered twelve hectares of old Tokyo. It was a sleazy, *yakuza* (mafia)-infested, yet working-class and sentimentally remembered neighborhood of Roppongi that had taken the persistent Mr. Mori seventeen years to obtain as he bought out every single small-lot owner in the area. The Tokyo Metropolitan Government, led by the populist Ishihara Shintarō from 1999 to 2012, was delighted. For Tokyo’s black crow and rat-baiting governor (for these read: African immigrants and mafia), it was the perfect monumental project with which to clean up and start again. And it satisfied the lust of global capital for a massive blank slate on which to build an architect’s dream of Tokyo. For the sleek silver monolith would also be thoroughly securitized from ordinary folk: sliced through by freeways; monitored on every corner; kept clear of homeless and undesirables; and armed with electronic doors and escalators that could be bolted at the flick of a switch. A year after the opening of the Tower in 2003, tragedy struck when the sensors of the building backfired, and a child was crushed to death in an automatic glass door.

TWIN TOWERS BURY THE PAST

Roppongi Hills incarnated Neo-Tokyo in the swaggering years of the early 2000s, but it was just the biggest example of the march of global finance into Tokyo.⁹ This process was turning the unique old Eastern Capital into a generic global city, populated by McDonald’s, Starbucks and Krispy Kreme Donuts. The more Japanese (or Asian) variations on this ubiquitous consumption were represented by *conbini* (convenience stores) on every street corner, *pachinko* parlors in every poor neighborhood and expensive hairdressers and art/design galleries in every rich one. The Tokyo of smelly coffee shops, wooden or corrugated aluminium *sentō* (public baths), retro *nomiya* (drinking bars) and *shokudō* (diners) was block by block being transformed into Neo-Tokyo, but not before the lot would turn first into parking spaces at two-thousand yen per hour. One tower masks another. After the spatial shift to the southwest cemented by the Roppongi Hills complex and the parallel Tokyo Midtown development, the retro *shitamachi*, low-rent commercial buildings and tenements of the

FIG. 5. Mariko Mori. *Love Hotel*. Japan. Heisei period, 1994. Fuji super gloss (duraflex) print, wood, aluminium, pewter frame. 121.9 x 152.4 x 5.1 cm. Edition of 4 +1 AP. Courtesy Deitch Projects, NY © Mariko Mori 2009, All Rights Reserved, Photo courtesy Mariko Mori/Art Resource, NY © ARS NY

Mariko Mori portrays herself in different roles in her *cosplay* (*kosupure* or “costume play”) photographic series. *Cosplay* is the famous Japanese subculture in which Japanese *otaku* (“nerds,” or “obsessive fans”) play out the fantasy roles of fictional idols.



northeast became the next target of the governor and Tokyo developers, under the guise of a bid for the Olympics. A gargantuan steel TV tower—the Tokyo Sky Tree, even higher than the Mori Tower—was planted in the middle of a working-class neighborhood in Sumida Ward. And so it was: Twin Towers rising up to bury the past.

The question is how the art world responded to these urban changes, particularly as *manga* and *anime* have become sharp vehicles for social realism and criticism in Japan. The dominant response was Murakami’s: the queasy celebration of corporate power and urban fantasy. This was first pinpointed by Mori’s niece, Mariko Mori (b. 1967), in her staged “Play With Me” robot-girl photographs of 1994: the android on the metro; the *cosplay* girl in Akihabara; the automated tea lady serving irritated salary men; the blankly cute schoolgirl in the love hotel (fig. 5). These were in-your-face, “Made in Japan” representations of some of the most salacious Western fantasies about Tokyo subculture and the pliant Asian girls who lived there.¹⁰ Murakami’s company, Kaikai Kiki, reproduced this logic to great success on the Western art market with his roster of naïve and fresh-faced “Tokyo Girls,” with their weird bedroom fantasies of life in the city.¹¹ The best of those, Aoshima Chiho and Takano Aya, looked like the graphic art (in both senses) of Mizuno Junko: sexy sci-fi *manga* as contemporary art, and/or contemporary art as sexy sci-fi *manga*. Murakami, in any case, was laughing all the way, “This is What You Want, This is What You Get,” as he spelled out in his Warhol-esque manifesto, *The Art Entrepreneurship Theory*.¹² This rampant bestseller for his young followers mixed exuberant art-bubble celebration with a bitterly nationalist anti-Western spite at all the people he had fooled.

Yet, there were other contemporaries of Murakami—some of them air-brushed out of his selective reconstruction of Japanese contemporary art since 1990 in “Superflat” and “Little Boy”—who responded differently to a

FIG. 6. Nakamura Masato.
TRAUMATRAUMA. Japan. Heisei
 period, 1997. Installation view at SCAI
 The Bathhouse, Tokyo, November 7–
 December 14, 1997. Courtesy Nakamura
 Masato and 3331 Arts Chiyoda

The installation consists of the
 ubiquitous colored neon lights of
 Tokyo's main convenience stores.

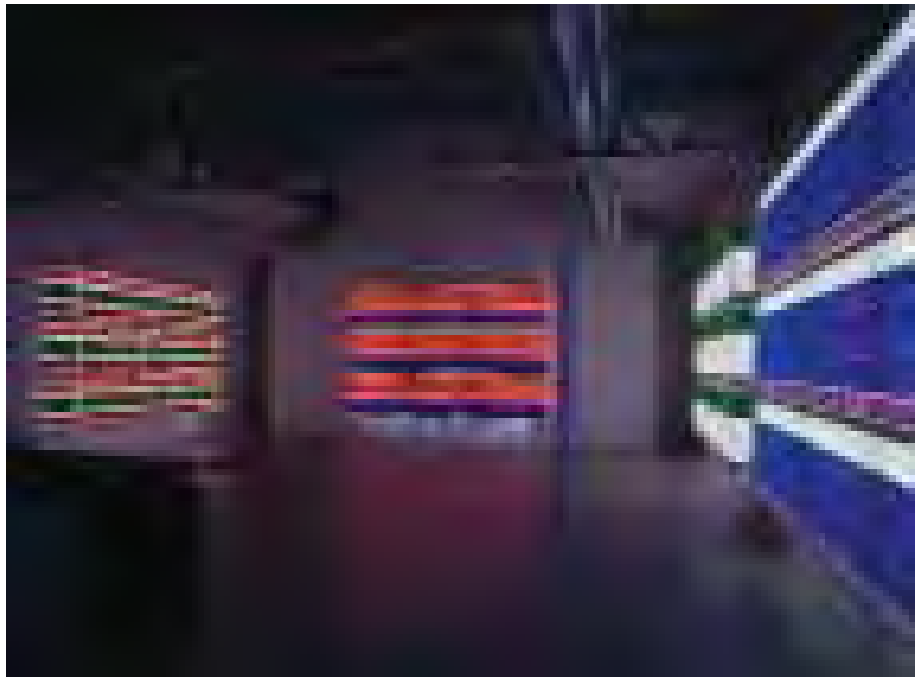


FIG. 7. Matsukage Hiroyuki and
 Okusada Yasuyuki. Cover of *Shōwa*
40 nenkai no Tokyo annai (1965 Tokyo
 Guide Book). 2008. 19 x 13 cm.
 © The Group 1965

FIG. 8. Anzai Shigeo. *June 9th 08 Shibuya*.
 2008. Courtesy The Group 1965 and
 Anzai Shigeo

The Group 1965 shown at Shibuya
 Crossing, Tokyo. From left to right: Arima
 Sumihisa, Matsukage Hiroyuki, Kinoshita
 Parco (seated), Aida Makoto and Ozawa
 Tsuyoshi (Oscar Oiwa not pictured)



changing Tokyo. For them, the real story was the treacherous co-option of their city and its amazing sub- and pop-cultural diversity into the smooth, ultramarketable narratives of global corporate/political branding. This, indeed, had been the underlying message of Murakami's earliest partner in neo-pop in the early 1990s, Nakamura Masato (b. 1963), whose most well-known works—such as *TRAUMATRAUMA*, his lights installation of the famous convenience-store colors for SCAI The Bathhouse in 1997—also played with the allure of corporate branding-as-art (fig. 6). But Nakamura quickly became disgusted with the fame game in the global art world, and by the end of the decade was devoted to urban interventions that politically questioned the changes going on in the city. He would later become the director of 3331 Arts Chiyoda, a converted middle school in a rundown area of northeast Tokyo, which opened in 2010 and became one of the city's liveliest alternative art locations.

SOCIAL-REALIST MANGA

Representing the rougher reality of the metropolis was also the modus operandi of the art unit *Shōwa 40 nen kai* (The Group 1965): the six-way personality clash of the mercurial talents (all born in 1965) of conceptual artist Aida Makoto; social and relational artist Ozawa Tsuyoshi; pop trash photographer Matsukage Hiroyuki; soulful painter Oscar Oiwa; naïve *manga* artist Kinoshita Parco; and electronics master Arima Sumihisa (figs. 7, 8). Stubbornly refusing to translate very much for confused foreigners, their on-and-off performances, provocative installations and 2008 Tokyo guide book mapped out their drinking habits, underworld tastes and bitter nostalgia for the disappearing corners of the city.¹³ Above all, their art evoked the long Shōwa period (1926–1989) into which they were all born, in its clearly glorious fortieth year: 1965. As with all of Murakami's generation,

FIG. 9. Oscar Oiwa. *Kita-Senjū*. Japan. Heisei period, 2010. Oil on canvas. 227 x 444 cm. © Oscar Oiwa. Courtesy of the artist





FIG. 10. A music critic's residence and workplace in a suburb of Tokyo, from Tsuzuki Kyōichi, *Tokyo: A Certain Style*. (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1999). Courtesy Tsuzuki Kyōichi

OPPOSITE

FIG. 11. Yamaguchi Akira. *Tōkei* (Tokyo): *Hiroo and Roppongi* (Tōkeizu Hiroo Roppongi). Japan. Heisei period, 2002. Pen and watercolor on paper. 73.5 × 65.5 cm. Photo: Kioku Keizo. Courtesy Mizuma Art Gallery and Mori Art Museum

Using a traditional *yamato-e* bird's-eye view, with clouds floating over the urban panorama, Yamaguchi transforms Roppongi Hills into a humorous riot of contemporary and older buildings. At the top center is a cut-away of the Mori Tower, with a strange, templelike addition at its base. To the left of this icon of the Tokyo cityscape is the maze of freeways through Roppongi. At the bottom is the neighborhood of Hiroo, where Yamaguchi lived until he was three. Sites are identified with labels reminiscent of traditional *Scenes In and Around the Capital* (*Rakuchū rakugaizū*). Some of the tiny pink cartouches (cartoonlike dialogue bubbles) describe personal places, including his family's old house, with self-portrait of the artist at the lower left, and, at the lower right, a *sentō* (public bathhouse) "where I stayed in the water too long and got dizzy" and a "very kind tobacco store whose owner cared for me." At the top left, there is a large, old, yellow building, the Ministry of Defense.

manga was a key part of the story. But this was the underworld, social-realist *manga* of a Tokyo different from any celebrated in Westernized tales, the kind of *manga* Aida turned into a pornographic revision of the Pacific war, in which a monster schoolgirl takes on the power of the American empire (*Mutant Hanako*, 1996); or Kinoshita's narrative of a loser schoolteacher sinking into middle-age despair, in his classic *Drifting Teacher* (*Hyōryū kyōshi*, 2001). Old-school painter Oiwa, meanwhile, reveled in his sweet reconstructions of Tokyo, realist versions of quiet neighborhoods or favorite haunts of the Shōwa 40 nen kai gang, such as the working-class district, Kita-Senjū (fig. 9).

Tsuzuki Kyōichi (b. 1956), the photographer/impresario and editor of hipster magazine *Brutus*, has long been documenting the oddball side of contemporary culture in his popular photobooks. *Tokyo: A Certain Style* portrays the affectations and miniscule apartment size of urban Tokyo dwellers (fig. 10).¹⁴ This book charmed foreigners, imagining what it must be like to live as (for example) an old-school hip-hop *otaku* resident in the tiny fifteen-square-meter sprawl of a high-rise pencil building. But in Tsuzuki's lens, there was a vision of a slightly psychotic and unfamiliar Tokyo, with a sense of a life going severely out of balance for many of its characters.

Tsuzuki was good at putting his finger on a streak of reality and the fast-disappearing traditional and subcultures. The new director of the MAM, David Elliott, went so far as to commission Tsuzuki to do his own parallel branding of Roppongi Hills for the opening group show in 2003, called "Happiness: A Survival Guide for Art and Life."¹⁵ But Tsuzuki's version of Roppongi Hills was nothing like Murakami's; it was a scurrilous *manga* created with cartoonist Shinsan Nameko titled, *Memento Mori: Hills of Dreams*, poking poisonous pins into the great, newly inflated tower. Tsuzuki and Shinsan's *manga* was a hilarious spin on the marketing purpose of Roppongi Hills. In a badly drawn, Monty Pythonesque tour of the tower, a Jesus character and a Devil-like monster vie with arguments to sell the building to visitors. The devil tempts the rich with the glory of a Hills' life; and indeed, the *Hiru zoku* (Hills' tribe), whose *über*-cool luminaries include celebrities such as Sakamoto Ryūichi and Nigo, of A Bathing Ape, did indeed move in. But the satellite residential towers, as Jesus points out, were still overlooked by the bankers sitting in the Mori Tower. The residences were also infested by bedbugs, expensive to heat and light, and far from secure in the event of a major earthquake. And so it is Jesus who seizes the true purpose of the tower: not high culture, but sex. In a city where public space is chronically limited, and the intimacy of personal space even more so, the dimmed lights, mirrorlike windows, futurist design and the heart-stopping view over the void was actually the perfect place for courting couples ready to go all the way—a kind of collective love hotel for





FIG. 12. Ikeda Manabu. *Ark*. Japan. Heisei period, 2005. Pen and acrylic ink on paper, mounted on board. 89.5 x 130.5 cm. Photo: Kioku Keizo © Ikeda Manabu. Courtesy Mizuma Art Gallery and Mori Art Museum

the romantically challenged. Could it be that the true purpose, Jesus suggests, is that Roppongi Hills is a giant, modern-day fertility tower for a decadent society blighted by terminal population decline and coitus interruptus?

Needless to say, the overbearing public relations folk at MAM were not amused by this particular sales pitch for the tower. Tsuzuki and Shinsan's work was rejected for the "Happiness" exhibition, and the *manga* was suppressed (but later appeared in four volumes of the weekly magazine *SPA!*). It was Murakami's cartoon version of the Hills that they needed, even if other uncomfortable aspects of human reality could not be airbrushed from the press releases.

The curators at MAM struggled to preserve their independence and keep the museum relevant to the global art world. Yet, the most memorable art for those high on the city view would be seen when the elevator spilled them out on the third floor, where tables awash with Murakami and Kaikai Kiki products forced the public to exit through a gift shop of inane pop art. Other artists were recruited to the "pop life" on sale, and still others contributed to the stock of cartoon images of the tower. Particularly memorable—and eminently collectible—was Yamaguchi Akira's (b. 1969) nerdy cutaway *manga* drawing of the Roppongi Hills complex: juxtaposed images of contemporary urban Japan with humorous details taken from traditional images of urban life in the pre-1860 Edo period (fig. 11). On one level,

his work utilizes the short circuit of all neo-Japonisme, which plugs contemporary irony back into the “superflat” of Edo-period “floating world” art, so beloved in the West since its nineteenth-century discovery of Japan. It is a seductive vision, conflating postmodern with premodern, and conveniently eliding all other problematic stages of Japan’s modernization and competition with the West along the way. Yet, the trick with Yamaguchi is always to look closer at detail that defies the simplicity of the “superflat” slogan. Are those Edo-period clouds floating over the *shitamachi* (old downtown), or is it just toxic smog? Who are those grotesque, everyday characters at work in their old-fashioned, back-street workshops? Why do the samurai horses have motorbike engines? Why are modern buildings giving way to pagoda roofs? Yamaguchi’s Tokyo is closer to his friend Aida Makoto’s and the other Shōwa boys; a Shōwa-period nostalgia for the seedy, disappearing other side of the city, the types of places tourists are never likely to see.

CULT ARTISTS

Yamaguchi is often paired with Ikeda Manabu (b. 1973), another cult graphic artist managed by the mercurial art gallerist Mitsuma Sueo of Mizuma Gallery. Like Yamaguchi, Ikeda’s work has a certain teenage boy’s fantasy-world appeal. He makes enormous, pointillistic drawings that imagine Babel-like worlds, full of Asian creatures and buildings that blend in with dystopian visions of technological conflict or environmental breakdown (fig. 12). In 2011, David Elliott won acclaim for the Mizuma artists when he opened the exhibition “Bye Bye Kitty!!!” at Japan Society in New York, with three rooms of Aida, Yamaguchi, Ikeda and pop-artist Tenmyouya Hisashi (b. 1966).¹⁶ Each illustrated Mizuma Gallery’s taste for a hybrid of traditional Japanese icons with contemporary graphics and a foreboding of present and future disasters. Ikeda, in particular, suited Elliott’s subtitled “between heaven and hell” motif perfectly. [For a review of that exhibition, see Midori Yoshimoto, “Bye Bye Kitty!!!,” *Impressions* 33 (2012): 119–27. Ed.]

A lot of the Mizuma artists’ reference points—their local Tokyo culture as much as the specific Asian religious/historical references—remain opaque to foreign viewers without extensive knowledge of Japan. Murakami, meanwhile, won the world’s favor but upset his Tokyo contemporaries with his blatant salesmanship to the West. Younger artists have little time for his pop-culture references, although they have sometimes shown interest in his organizational methods. They are a generation who never enjoyed the Bubble years, and have been much more concerned with the everyday, depressing reality of growing up—not as the golden *shinjin rui* (new breed) of 1950s and 1960s baby boomers, but as the despised and pitied “lost generations” born in the 1970s and 80s.¹⁷ Many simply took off for education and experience in other world cities, gaining an objectivity about Japan, Japaneseness and Japanese nationalism that is quite different from the Japan- and Tokyo-centered narratives of their older peers now in their mid-to-late-forties.

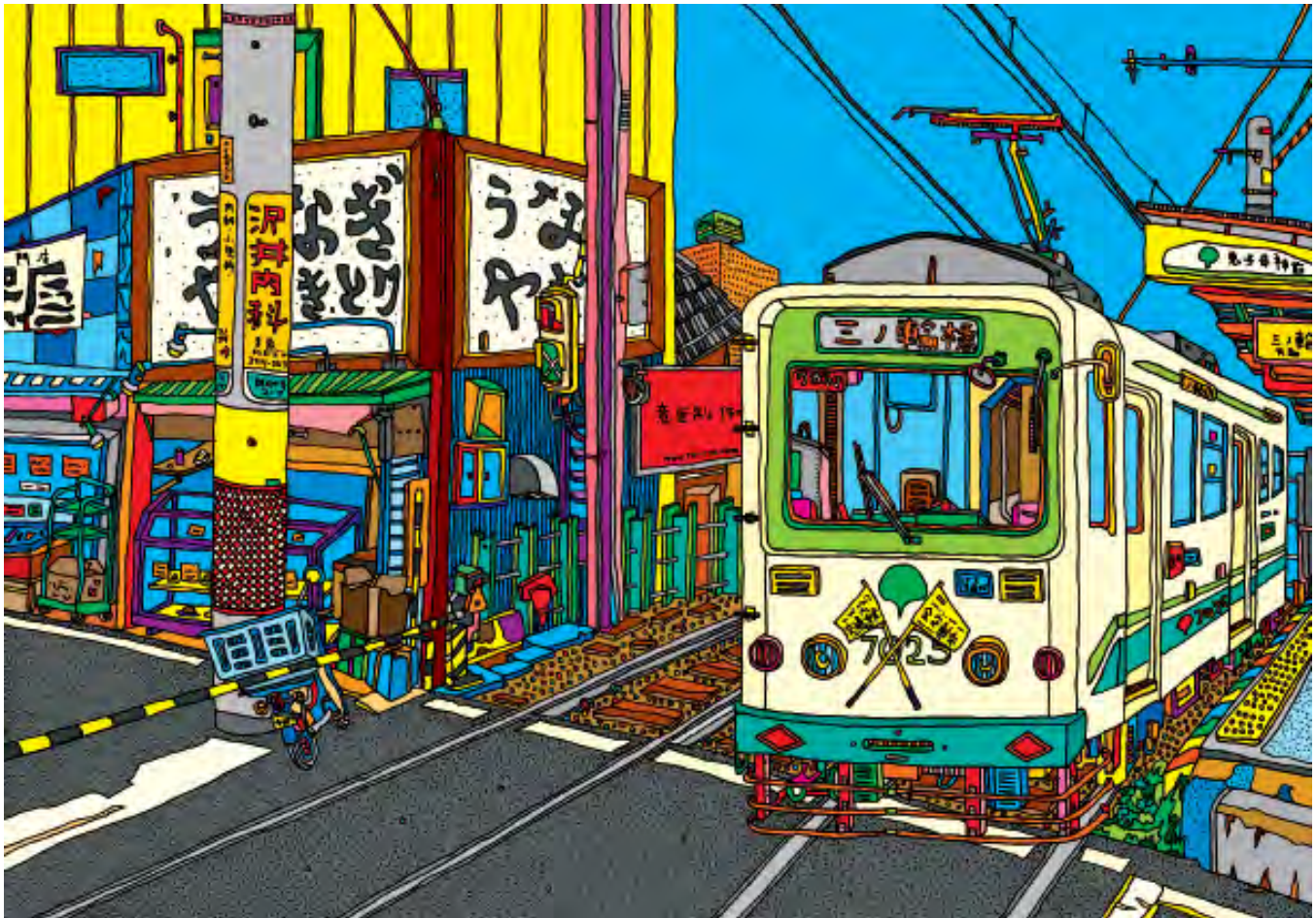


FIG. 13. Itadani Ryu. *To-Den*. Japan. Heisei period, 2005. Inkjet print on paper. 29.51 x 42.2 cm. © Itadani Ryu. Courtesy of the artist

As well-trained Japanese artists, the younger generation's graphic skills and sense of the urban are still evident. For example, the crossover graphic designer/artist Itadani Ryu (b. 1974) uses computer technology to render his vision of Tokyo, drenched in an attractive pop sheen of bright colors.¹⁸ Notably, his sprawling visualization of Omotesando Hills, another Mori development, is less a cartoon and more a heightened reality. Itadani is just as fascinated by everyday, mundane objects. With acrylic on small white blocks, he paints his icons of Japanese consumption in the series *Things That I Like, Hope You Like It Too* (2007): beer, soy sauce, instant noodles, mayo, cheese and onion crisps and Tabasco sauce. Then there is his *To-Den* (2005), a warm celebration of this rickety prewar tram line, which connects some of the least glamorous northern quarters of Tokyo, making it a branded icon of the city (fig. 13). Could it be that the magic of this metropolis might be found just as readily in the rundown charms of the Machiya and Kita-Senjū districts, or of old Arakawa and Sumida Wards, far from the big-city vibe of Shibuya or Shinjuku? *To-Den*, indeed, is about as far as contemporary Japan gets from the shiny blur of the global brand image of the Shinkansen Bullet Train.

Or, there are the *anime*-like installations of prodigious video artist Tabaimo ("Tabata's little sister"; b. 1975). She was Japan's 2011 choice for its pavilion in the Venice Biennale. Tabaimo hates the association with *manga* and *anime* foisted on her by many Western curators. If anything, her work

sits in an older tradition of social-realist *manga*, not a cartoon Japan, but a real Tokyo through animated art: sordid tales from an old-man's public bathhouse; the anxiety of a packed commuter train; or, most graphically, of a women's public latrine, in which isolated women undergo the trauma of what appears to be self-administered abortion. Tabaimo's videos are uncomfortable tales unfolding in claustrophobic installation spaces.¹⁹

In her breakthrough signature work, Tabaimo's *Japanese Kitchen* (1999) is an animated video taking place in a small tatami room, in which you are profanely instructed to keep shoes *on* upon entering (Japanese visitors rarely do). On three screens, this story is set in an average residential neighborhood: ugly prefab 1960s high rises; a mess of wires against the sky; and a shabby kitchen, in which an unhappy mother labors making *nabe* (Japanese hot pot). Bugs come out of cracks in the walls, an angry politician screams on the television, the pot boils away; and in the fridge there is an anxious salary man at a desk, awaiting his fate among the other vegetables. The mother reaches in and cuts his head off for the stew. Outside, school girls walk past laughing; an old car drives by; and then, out of a high-rise window, bodies start falling, one after another. This is the urban Japan I grew up in, says Tabaimo. A country where about ninety people commit suicide every day. *Japanese Kitchen* was her graduation work from Kyoto University of Art and Design, when she was twenty-four, and was an overnight sensation.

Some of the techniques of *manga* and *anime* need not be associated automatically with corporate branding or sci-fi idealizations of the city, but their international consumption changed the meaning of those art forms. Political and social critique in this art gave way to sci-fi fantasies and corporate celebration. It is a screen that has blocked a real view of Japan for over twenty years now. Beyond Neo-Tokyo, we might look for a new view on post development, post-Bubble society—a less glamorous place that may have little to do with dominant visions of Neo-Tokyo rampant since the 1990s. Today, this type of vision may have more to say to us, not least because post-Bubble Japan has been living with a steady, decadent decline for far longer than the West, a future the West is beginning to awaken to after its own 2008 crash.

POST-BUBBLE JAPAN

Why did we believe in Neo-Tokyo for so long? The West perhaps needs an Asian “Other” on which to project its growing impotence. For years, it had Japan. Now, it has China, Singapore or India—the hotter, faster-moving destinations, all still on the upswing. The reality of the declining, post-Bubble Japan remains largely unknown. The branding is all nostalgia for the 1990s subcultural boom as much as nostalgia for a pre-Bubble time, when Japan was on its way up and going to be a worldbeater.

At the 2011 exhibition about metabolism at MAM, the modernist nostalgia of the Roppongi Hills experience became clear in a lavish celebration that Mr. Mori financed to remind everyone from whence his triumphalist

ideas came.²⁰ Budgets at the money-losing MAM may ordinarily be a problem for its curators, but the museum had never put so much financing into any of its exhibitions. There were computer generated re-creations of massive urban projects, with extensive documentation of every invention of the visionary architects—the brilliant students of Tange Kenzō, who, from the 1950s on, imagined the ever-expanding space of Tokyo as the future of global urbanism. Spectacular plans were left to influence city planners, a roster of public works wowed the world, and, although the most internationally famous of them, Isozaki Arata (b. 1931), never had the public acclaim of his principal rival, Ando Tadao (b. 1941), he did get to orchestrate the landmark Osaka World Expo in 1970, where futuristic artists fantasized about an urban Japan—a Neo-Tokyo—before it was so named. Everyone remembers Osaka 1970 as the moment the West first awoke to the future: the twenty-first century as the triumph of Asian modernity. It was seduced and left dumbstruck by a vision that for at least another twenty years would lead the world in its spectacular, urban-driven development dynamics, before it all went awry. It is worth remembering this story, when so much of that dream has since ebbed away—poisoned, shaken, crumbled or washed away in the years since 1990.²¹

The tragedy of March 2011 was, in many ways, the return of the real again. Cool Japan died that day. With resident Tokyoites anxiously checking their personal Geiger counters or still feeling the aftershocks weeks later (over a thousand in the first month alone), holidays for tourists were canceled for the foreseeable future. Images of the Tōhoku disaster on YouTube played on endlessly; these will be the dominant images to define Japan internationally for the next few years.

The visitors will return. And those who still come looking for Neo-Tokyo will not be disappointed; the edgy modernity of the city still amazes. Roppongi Hills, Shibuya, Akihabara and Shinjuku are all still open for business. But some of the newer representations of Tokyo might give pause for thought. If the tourists could only sample a bit more of the real, rougher, everyday city underneath the fantasy—some of its less glamorous or well-known neighborhoods, the real places in which Tokyoites live, work, struggle and dream—they may come away even more amazed. 🍣

NOTES

1. A version of this essay was published in Stéphane Duval, ed., *Mangalapolis: La Ville Japonaise Contemporaine dans le Manga*, exh. cat. (Poitiers: Le Léopard Noir, 2012), 114–26.

2. Murakami organized “Superflat” for Los Angeles MOCA (2001). The show then toured to Fondation Cartier, Paris, as “Coloriage” (2002), and was reassembled as “Little Boy: The Art of Japan’s Exploding Sub Cultures” at Japan Society, New York, with an eponymous catalogue (New York: Yale University Press, 2005).

3. A good example is the lavish and widely

available book about Tokyo design and fashion, Ian Luna et al., eds., *TokyoLife: Art and Design* (New York: Rizzoli, 2008), which presents the Japanese contemporary art scene as if it is nothing more than Kaikai Kiki artists.

4. See especially, Douglas McGray, “Japan’s Gross National Cool,” *Foreign Policy* (May/June 2002): 44–54. For the story of the rise and fall of “Cool Japan” in Japanese contemporary art, see Adrian Favell, *Before and After Superflat: A Short History of Japanese Contemporary Art 1990–2011* (Hong Kong: Blue Kingfisher, 2012).

5. The most perceptive analyses of the underlying pathologies of “cute” in Japan remain Sharon Kinsella’s writings in the 1990s, including “Cuties in Japan,” in Lise Skov and Brian Moeran, eds., *Women, Media and Consumption in Japan* (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 1996), 222–54.
6. For a flavor of the sheer thrill in Western touristic consumption of pop culture in Neo-Tokyo, see two of the best guides: Patrick Macias and Tomohiro Machiyama, *Cruising the Anime City: An Otaku Guide to Neo-Tokyo* (Berkeley, CA: Stone Bridge 2004); and Patrick Galbraith, *The Otaku Encyclopedia: An Insider’s Guide to the Subculture of Cool Japan* (Tokyo: Kodansha, 2009).
7. Kusama Yayoi, “Kusamatrix,” Mori Art Museum, February 7–May 9, 2004.
8. See Roman Cybriwsky, *Roppongi Crossing: The Demise of a Tokyo Nightclub District and the Reshaping of a Global City* (Atlanta: University of Georgia Press, 2011); Fumio Nanjo et al., eds., *Art, Design and the City: Roppongi Hills Public Art Project 1* (Tokyo: Mori Art Museum, 2004); Favell, *Before and After Superflat*, 139–54.
9. Takashi Machimura, “The Urban Restructuring Process in Tokyo in the 1980s: Transforming Tokyo into a World City,” *International Journal on Urban and Regional Research* 22 (2) (1992): 114–28; Paul Waley, “Tokyo-as-World-City: Reassessing the Role of Capital and the State in Urban Restructuring,” *Urban Studies* 44 (8) (2007): 1465–90; Julian Worrall and Erez Golani Solomon, photographs by Joshua Lieberman, *21st Century Tokyo: A Guide to Contemporary Architecture* (Tokyo and New York: Kodansha International, 2010), 150–57.
10. See Allison Holland, “Mariko Mori and the Art of Global Connectedness,” *Intersections* 23 (Nov. 2009) at <<http://intersections.anu.edu.au/issue23/holland.htm>>; Gunhild Borggreen, “Japan in Scandinavia: Cultural Clichés in the Receptions of Works by Mori Mariko,” *HZ* 4 (2008) at <<http://www.hz-journal.org/n4/borggreen.html>>.
11. See Takashi Murakami, ed., *Tokyo Girls Bravo* (Tokyo: Asaka-shi, 2002); original exhibition 1999. Matsui Midori celebrated the works of two Kaikai Kiki artists, and several others with similar styles in *The Age of Mipop: The New Generation of Japanese Artists*, exh. cat. (Tokyo: Parco, 2007). A best-selling collection of the Kaikai Kiki girl artists in the West is Ivan Vartanian, *Drop Dead Cute* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2005).
12. Murakami Takashi, *Geijutsu kigyō ron* (The art entrepreneurship theory) (Tokyo: Gentosha, 2005).
13. Shōwa 40 nen kai, *Shōwa 40 nen kai no Tokyo annai* (Tokyo: Akio Nakagawa Publishers, 2008); Shōwa 40 nen kai/The Group 1965, *The Group 1965—“We are Boys!”* exh. cat. (Düsseldorf: Silvana Editoriale, 2012), shown at Düsseldorf Kunsthalle, May 21–July 3, 2011. For a long time, the group planned on titling this show, their first major retrospective in Europe, “Uncool Japan,” before settling on the final title, a bad joke in honor of Düsseldorf’s most famous artistic son, Joseph Beuys.
14. Tsuzuki Kyōichi, *Tokyo: A Certain Style*, trans. Alfred Birnbaum (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1999), first published in Japanese (1997). See the account of this story by former *ART-iT* editor Ozaki Tetsuya on his blog *Real Tokyo*: <<http://old.realtokyo.co.jp/english/column/ozaki77.htm>> and </ozaki78.htm>. The blog includes images from the controversial *manga*.
15. “Happiness: A Survival Guide to Art and Life,” Mori Art Museum, October 18, 2003–January 18, 2004.
16. *Bye Bye Kitty!!! Between Heaven and Hell in Contemporary Japanese Art* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011); for information on these artists, see <<http://mizuma-art.co.jp>>.
17. See Roger Goodman, Yuki Imoto and Tuuka Toivonen, eds., *A Sociology of Japanese Youth: From Returnees to NEETs* (London: Routledge, 2011); Hiroshi Ishida and David Slater, eds., *Social Class in Contemporary Japan: Structures, Sorting and Strategies* (New York: Routledge, 2011).
18. See the artist’s website: <<http://www.ryuitadani.com>>.
19. For further information on Tabaimo and images of her video installation, see: <<http://www.jamescohan.com/artists/tabaimo/selected-works/>>.
20. Mori Art Museum, “Metabolism: The City of the Future—Dreams and Visions of Reconstruction in Postwar and Present Day Japan,” September 17, 2011–January 15, 2012.
21. See Favell, *Before and After Superflat*, 185–229.