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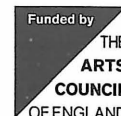
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Cover: Detail of Door, Wood, h 146 cm, Baule, Côte d'Ivoire, 19th-20th century, Musée Barbier-Mueller, Geneva.

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To Be a Japanese Artist in the So-Called Postmodern Era

Shigemi Inaga

In this paper I shall present three 'representative' Japanese contemporary artists in a postmodern context. But first, I would like to ask one question. What is the most typical Japanese postmodern architecture? I propose in the guise of introduction one famous architectural work just completed this year after more than 20 years of long and painful preparation. I am speaking of the Ise Shrine, main sanctuary of the politically and ideologically overcharged monument of the 'national' worship called Shintoism.

This monument without monumentality is postmodern in the sense that it consists entirely of quotations and copies of its own precedent archetype which, according to mythology, has been razed to the ground and rebuilt once every 20 years since the immemorial past. Yet its myth of immaterial continuity is itself an historical artefact. Its purified 'national style', free from any trace of Chinese or Korean influence, is nothing but a fiction produced by the national ideology and reinforced in the modern era by foreign architects like Bruno Taut. With these operations of critical consciousness, all historical experiences and memories of the monument are erased from — or rather negatively compounded in — this seemingly pure Japanese style, which has therefore no proof of authenticity if not in its retroactive —and chronopolitical — denial of historicity itself.

As simulacrum without original (Baudrillard), reproduced in succession, the Ise Shrine would serve as an ideal illustration of Japan as a post-historical paradise of "*snobisme pure*" (Alexandre Kojève). Since its origin (origin is always a fiction fabricated *a posteriori*), any possible material referent has been subverted or elided by the systematic elimination of the unique referent in every 20 years. The self-referential loop, of which the present wooden structure is the latest incarnation, is sustained by the *imaginaire collectif* of the Nation in search of its cultural 'uniqueness'.

But what is most striking is the way the first Europeans described, or rather failed to describe, this a-historical replica without original. In front of this sanctuary with no carvings, no paintings, no images, a disappointed foreign tourist is said to have declared that "there is nothing to see and they (ie the Japanese) won't let you see it". Such was the remark recorded by Basil Hall Chamberlain in his guidebook of Japan published at the end of the 19th century.¹

¹ Basil Hall Chamberlain, 'Ise', in *A Handbook for the Traveller in Japan*, 3rd ed, 1891.

I begin with this anecdote because what I have to do in this paper is just like the impossible and treacherous task the guidebook on Japan was obliged to undertake on behalf of its dear European and American readers: what is typically postmodern Japanese is nothing but an ideological artefact, and — what is worse — the reality supposedly hidden in its heart is simply empty, meaningless and irrelevant for the foreigner eager to penetrate into the 'secret' of postmodern Japan.

I

Before presenting three Japanese artists in a postmodern context, let us have a brief look at the general situation. Firstly, the end of the 60s witnessed a disillusionment with the avant-garde movements in art, which came with the conviction that the refusal of continuity motivated by the aspiration of the new merely amounts to the continuity of refusal. With this shift of viewpoint, a hidden reactionary mechanism inherent in the modern became evident. The obsessional teleology of the whole programme of modernism reached the point of saturation, which was also the point of catastrophe. As a result, the decade of the 70s was experienced as a kind of air pocket, where the modern principle was gradually replaced by another, which was to be called the postmodern. From production to consumption, from technology to semiology, from dialectic to rhetoric, from the desire of production to the production of desire: in this paradigm shift, all the elements which previously had been cast away from the programme of the modern as irrelevant to functional finality were recuperated to fill up the cavity left after the explosion of modernism.²

Secondly, in artistic creation, the modernist notion of unilateral progress as continuous negation of the precedent style is definitively abolished (the notion of linear progress from modern to postmodern is therefore against the idea of the postmodern). Instead of building up vertically a column of styles with the latest style on top, each piece is now unriveted and scattered horizontally at our disposal. Multiplied quotations and an eclectic collage of heterogeneous styles characterise postmodernism. In place of monotonous Internationalism with its essentialist approach, cultural pluralism with an ethnic flavour is welcomed. The search for difference results in the conjunction of aesthetic regionalism with the return to tradition. But the semiotic differentiation soon comes to a saturation, where people become indifferent to difference.

Thirdly, in the postmodern era the West is no longer the only model to follow. The above-mentioned conjunction of two factors has enabled Oriental artists to conceive of the return to their own tradition as something other than a retrogression. Yet the decisive factor was that this Oriental tradition happened to be in accordance with the main programme of postmodernism itself, resulting in a somewhat predestined and euphoric sense of overdetermination: it was just at the moment when Japan began to think that it no longer had anything to learn from the West that the West began to regard Japan as the incarnation of the postmodern. The Japanese were exonerated from a duty in the performance of which they have the reputation of being poorly talented: the Japanese are said to be able to imitate everything but they cannot invent anything at all. It was enough for the Japanese, without marking the painstaking effort to find out a new model, simply to look back into Japan's own pre-modern tradition in order to prescribe its own (and world-wide valid) postmodern programme...³

In this scheme, the postmodern was identified with deconstruction. It is often said that the Japanese tradition consisted of rendering foreign models amorphous

² Akira Asada, 'Introduction to the Post-Modern Cities', *Kikan Toshii*, No 1, 1989, pp 51-53.

³ Shigemi Inaga, 'L'invisible avant-garde au Japon', *Ecrit-voir*, No 10, 1987/8, pp 48-49.

and fuzzy whether these models were imported from Korea, China in antiquity or the western countries in the modern era; in Japan there is essentially no structure as was defined by structuralism. And when there is no such pre-existing logocentric structure, how is deconstruction possible? Japanese culture is an apparatus of deconstruction, and deconstruction is part of the Japanese tradition... That's why in Japan modernism was unsuccessful and the idea of deconstruction imported from the West was too easily consumed to achieve any of its essential impact as the critical limit of logocentric western rationalism... Anyhow, the deconstruction of modernism turned out to amount to the revival of pre-modern Japan, according to Japan's mainstream post-structuralists.⁴

⁴ Marilyn Ivy, 'Critical Texts, Mass Artifacts', *Postmodernism and Japan*, (ed) Masao Miyoshi and H D Harootunian, Duke University Press, 1989, p 40.

II

The case of Toshimitsu Imai (1928-) is representative in this general context. His name has been connected with the Informel Movement in the 50s, one of the main streams of French avant-garde abstract painting. An unknown young foreign student from a defeated country under American occupation, Imai arrived in Paris in 1952 and suddenly became one of the key persons in the international art scene. This success story, characteristic of the period of the *immédiat après-guerre* in the heyday of modernist painting, was followed by a drastic conversion dating from 1983 with his series of 'Kachofugetsu'. A Japanese traditional way of meditating on nature and the changing as they present themselves through the combination of flowers, birds, winds and the moon, 'Kachofugetsu' was appreciated largely by many critics as Imai's return to, and rediscovery of, the Japanese tradition which he seemed to have refused.

The action painter of the 50s suddenly introduced decorative patterns into his

Toshimitsu Imai, *Wave and Butterfly*, 1984, 90 x 360 cm.



paintings in 1983. Borrowed from traditional motifs, these patterns are mechanically reproduced by stencil, giving the impression that the printing is a manufactured fabrication similar to the traditional folding screen, which has no clear limit of its own, either as a work of art or as a cultural product of an individual artist, but which is subjected to the changes of the surrounding nature. Imai's previous avant-gardism was, apparently, replaced by a pre-modern aesthetics of decorative panel.

Is this shift Imai's negation of his modernist past? Rather, he interprets it as a prolongation of his eternal pursuit of cultural identity. One art critic sees in his technique of palimpsest a sophisticated tentative move towards deconstructing the evolutionist programme of modernism.

This deconstruction is double: at first, he tries to abolish the conventional distinction between abstract painting and ornamentation. By this abolition he reveals the fact that modernism, in its struggle with academicism, shamelessly relied on the academic distinction between Fine Arts and decorative arts. Secondly, in this revenge against modernism, Imai consciously mimics decorative art, which has been considered as lacking in modern artistic consciousness. Imai's mimic of ornamentation was therefore a conscious strategy designed to refuse definitively any creation aware in advance of its own programme and finality.

What Imai attempts is not a simple return to tradition. It is rather an extension of the spirit of 'Informel', because from the beginning the 'Informel' aimed at a categorical refusal of any pre-established aesthetic programme, which makes it fundamentally different from American abstract expressionism.⁵ Yet a problem remains. An execution refusing any finality itself becomes a finality, a recipe. In order to overcome this dilemma, Imai undertook a radical reversal by intoxicating himself with the world without finality, which was artisanal decorative art. To pretend to be an artisan lacking any critical spirit is the choice of a highly critical spirit who tries to be consciously hypnotic. Here lies Imai's challenge to modernism.

Yet it is a suicidal challenge, because his demonstration can easily be reduced to an interiorised Orientalism, ie a false image of the Orient fabricated for western consumption only, by an authorised 'Oriental' artist for the propaganda exportation of his national aesthetics creed (which consists of being hidden rather than exposed, as the Ise Shrine shows).

III

Yayoi Kusama (1929-), the so-called obsessional artist, is free from the risk of Orientalism to which Imai exposes himself. Since her childhood, her main motif has not changed. 'Infinity nets' and 'polka dots' ceaselessly proliferate from her atelier with obsessional repetitiveness and profusion. The intensity of this repetition is so high and so repulsive that the opposition between the decorative wall-paper patterns and artistic expressivity — the opposition Imai struggled with — simply does not exist in Kusama's nightmarish 'accumulation' (as she calls it). The endlessness, and the 'flamelessness' of her creation, exaggerated by the use of a mirror room in recent exhibitions, results in the total confusion of interior ornamental decoration and the performance of an environmental installation.

What Kusama tries here is a feminist deconstruction of modernism. It is indeed a typical attitude of modernism to despise decoration as an unconscious form of repetition reserved for femininity. And it was this masculine and phallogocentric ideology which praised the autonomy of artistic expression in the modernist movement. The irony in Kusama's art is that, in it, all kinds of furniture are

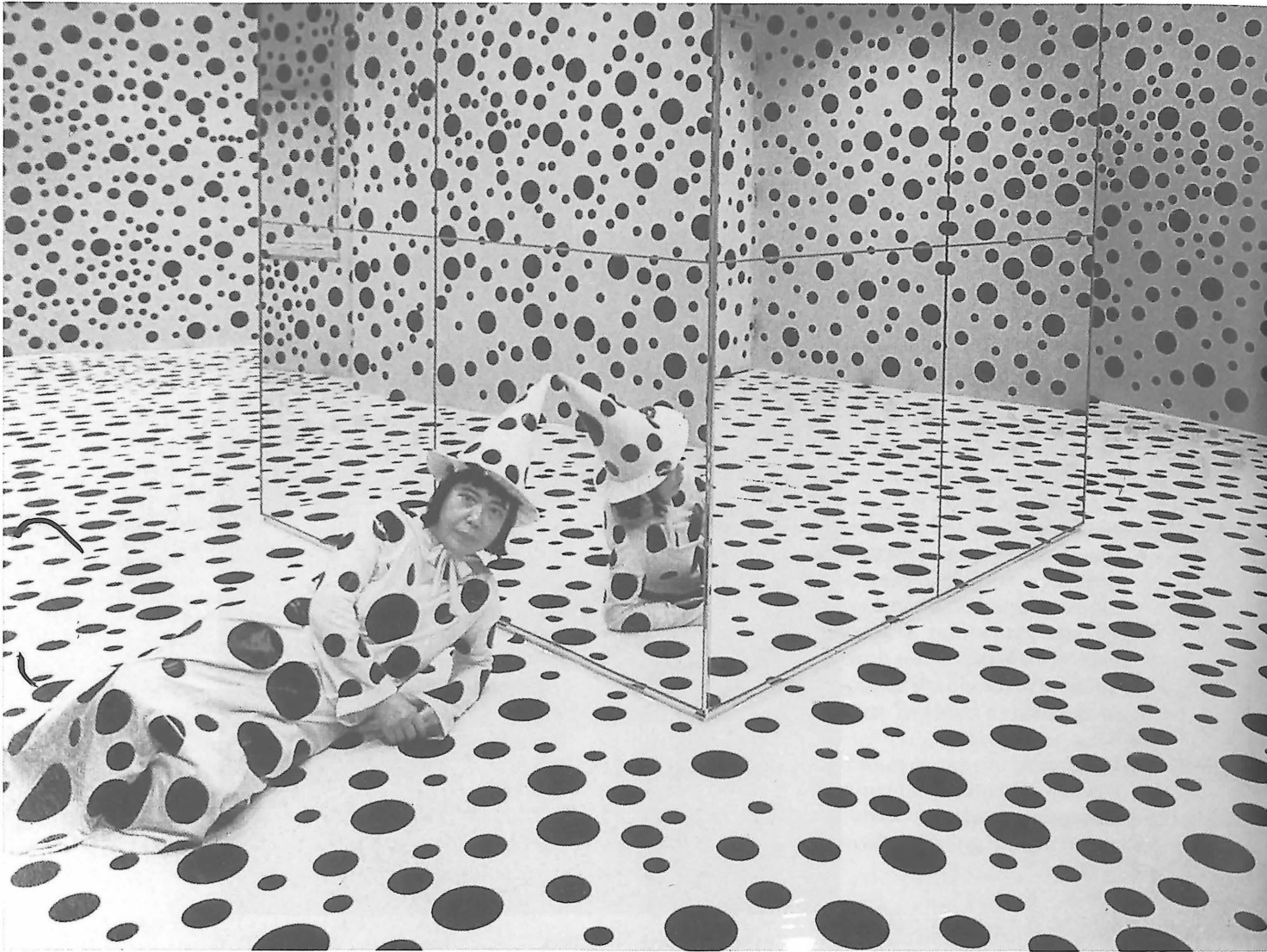
⁵ Hisao Matsuura, 'Rhetorics of Metempsychosis', *Kachofugetsu*, 1985, Bijutsushuppansha, Tokyo, pp 68-69.



Yayoi Kusama, *Dressing Table*, 1990,
mixed media, Sogetsu Museum, Tokyo.

covered with innumerable 'phallicshaped' objects resembling *nkonte* sculptures of exorcism from central Africa. The furniture had to be contaminated by these 'penis-like' masculine parasites in order to be exorcised and transformed into authentic art works called 'soft sculpture' (despite Oldenburg). Before the birth of feminist critique, Kusama had already been exercising an ironical and compulsive contestation against the phallic character of modern art.

Constantly suffering from priority disputes with other creators, working at the fringe of persecution-obsession, telaesthesia, and pirate listening, Kusama objectifies and sublimates these schizophrenic experiences of mystical synchronicity into a multiplication of outrages. The 'obliteration' of the world by her act of painting is the only means of restraining her eccentric self from (postmodern?) disintegration.



Yayoi Kusama, *Mirror Room and Self-Obliteration*, 1992,
Hara Museum, Tokyo.

IV

Yasumasa Morimura, also tries to obliterate the world with his own signs. Morimura suddenly became an eminent figure in the world art scene with his famous series of appropriations. By playing the roles of personages in famous European paintings, he multiplies his own self-portraits. On his mischievous homage to his artistic ancestors, I shall make three remarks:

Firstly, these photographic works are no longer copies, but claim their own originality, putting into question what the copyright is. Morimura begins by analysing objects represented in a chosen painting, and reconstructs the situation with real materials. In the photographic images obtained from such real

reconstitutions, Morimura inserts his face with the aid of computer graphics and thus disguises himself as the Infanta Margarita, Van Gogh, Marcel Duchamp (disguised himself as Rose Sélavy), or even as Cézanne's apples... This paradoxical process was invented by the artist in order to make his works "more real and superior" than the original paintings to which, nevertheless, he refers, respectfully...

Secondly, these works, which pretend to be superior to their own original, are specifically made for art historians and art critics only, in order to stimulate critical discourses, thereby inducing these respondents to enter into complicity with the artist in the crime of manipulating Art as Institution in the triple interplay of critic, dealer and painter, causing, as a result, a circular hyper-inflation of critical commercialism.

Thirdly, his marketing manipulation is based on a double standard. While his art historical devices are calculated exclusively for the use of foreign art journalism, any critical interest manifested abroad is reflected in the prices of his work on the Japanese domestic market, which is more profitable for the artist than the international ones. With this reversed dumping operation, Morimura commercialised his own body and face, with(out) narcissistic exposure, as if they amounted to a logotype of his monopolised act of usurpation. Based on the megalomaniacal will to self-multiplication, he incorporates the western history of painting into his multiplied self.

To conclude, we at first have to get rid of Morimura's selfadvertising strategy



Yasumasa Morimura, *Portrait (Van Gogh)*, 1986, colour photograph.



Yasumasa Morimura, *Taburakashi (Marcel)*, 1993,
juxtaposed with Marcel Duchamp's *Lovingly Rose Sélavy*.

of usurping critical discourses. Two concluding remarks: firstly, these famous 'Japanese' artists in the contemporary world art are individuals who are either independent or thrown out of Japan's influential domestic artists associations. In this sense these 'representative' Japanese artists do not at all represent the postmodern art scene of domestic Japan. Representable Japanese are not representative but rather eccentric Japanese, and vice versa. Here lies the limit of representability, as well as its intrinsic nature of distortion.

Secondly, I have to admit to a difficulty I could hardly overcome during the investigations for the preparation of this paper. Information is so rapidly and so massively consumed in Japan that the documentation of a specific subject is almost impossible to accomplish. Postmodern Japan is a system without structure floating on a flow of bits of mass-information which are not destined to accumulate and be piled up as the bases of further research in the future. On the contrary, these items of mass-information constantly run away and disappear one after another like objects dropped in the current of a river. Like the Ise Shrine, Japan's post-historical historicity is not based on anything, but floats on its own self-referential loop which defies any attempt at historical construction (including my own).