Visions of Tokyo in Japanese Contemporary Art
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To cite this version:
Adrian Favell. Visions of Tokyo in Japanese Contemporary Art. Impressions: Journal of the Japanese Art Society of America, 2014, pp.69-83. hal-01025180

HAL Id: hal-01025180
https://hal-sciencespo.archives-ouvertes.fr/hal-01025180
Submitted on 17 Jul 2014

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S
o 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. 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.” Many Western curators and art
publishers have lined up to reproduce this selective vision of contemporary
art in Japan.

“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. 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.

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


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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). 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,
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: ROPOGGI 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 annoint 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. 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...
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 airbrushed 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.


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

© The Group 1965


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. 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,
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 (Hyōryu kyōshi, 2001). Old-school painter Ōiwa, meanwhile, revealed 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). 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.” 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
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). 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. 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.
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. 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-Senju 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.29

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
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.

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 Tohoku 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
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.
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.


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>.


19. For further information on Tabaimo and images of her video installation, see: <http://www.jamescohan.com/artists/tabaimo/selected-works/>


21. See Favell, Before and After Superflat, 185–229.