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Identities and Identifications: Politicized Uses of Collective Identities

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***Superflat* and the reconsideration of the Western heritage, for a new definition of the Japanese identity**

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From the fifth century, Japan is a country having taken advantage of the foreign influences. Its first influence came from China. To differ from it, Japan then tried hard to build up for itself its own classical education. Then the country operated the same process since the post-war period, by transforming the West a product of the antithesis face of the culture and for the Japanese thought. In particular after 1945, the efforts of differentiation has been transferred towards intellectual questions, through debates relative to the matter and to the environment.

Indeed, the urban area had developed to intensify its expansion, whereas the country was developing its strong economic growth and policy on an international scale. The city of Tokyo standardizes and the urban landscape is disinfected. Then, within twenty years, both at the level of the society and of the living environment had seen the opening of the mentalities. In this way, the ancient Japanese values of the darkness and the wet, the disorder and the ambiguous, has been repressed, synonymic of underdevelopment. Thus the popular morality had changed into an ideal materialist. So, the consumption standardizes the tastes, and then engenders the conformity and the passivity. The awakening of the individual consciousness is going to be one of the urgent matters of the counterculture.

The era Heisei, "era of stability and development ", began on January 8th, 1989. After a period during which the energies and the looks were attracted by the speculative or big projects, the national creation had been able to widely develop in the domains of the arts, the architecture, cinema, animation, the comics and the fashion. In this way, this period is characterized by a cultural dynamism which was recognized all over the world. It was a major change for Japan. Since the beginning of the nineties, the country spreads gradually its popular culture by media of mass throughout the world.

So, how was organized the claiming of a Japanese national art through the subculture? How do the artists succeed in claiming to be from a Japanese artistic lineage, either western, either both? Face the global art history, how Japanese artists have created a national identity throughout new social and theoretical position?

Throughout the Gutai and Mono-ha movements, then the Japanese Pop art, artists tried to cast doubt on the Western heritage by drawing on traditional and conceptual roots. These two avant-garde movements have tried to define their own and new artistic researches to find a resurgence from the shocks of the atomic bombs in 1945. The engagement with the matter, space, stage and frontal art, through Shintoism and the pre-war imagery, were used to express a Japanese essence. These first steps toward the formation of national art will define by the main figures of Yokoo Tadanori and Morimura Yasumasa. This analyze of these artists will demonstrate how they have reached to mix the elements from the Japanese and the Western art. The part of this study will try to define the first steps toward the formation of a national art, by the main figures of Yokoo Tadanori and Morimura Yasumasa. Then, we will focus on the pregnancy of the popular art in Japan and the subculture as tools to show the outline of a Japanese identity through the Superflat established by Murakami Takashi and his artists. The part of the popular culture of Japan has been defined by the West as "cool". The last point will tried to clarify the measures and impacts of the Japanese influence through the politic of the "cool Japan".

Reconsider the Western in the postmodern age

Quotation and parody expression throughout the Japanese Pop Art and Postmodern age

Taking out of the idea that the art is a practice amounting to a confrontation between the material and the artist, as metaphor of a confrontation with the world, is one of the researches for the Japanese artists of the Pop art at the beginning of the 60s. The Japanese Pop art is characterized the graphics, because this discipline is characterized by its mechanical serialization. Then, the references to the Japanese popular culture were numerous. At this moment, the Pop art was the opportunity for the artists of a re-examination of the tradition of the print on wood of the Edo period. By this analysis of the art of the past, the artists also questioned on the sense

of the art in Japan, in a fast-changing context continuation from the American departure in 1954. The choice of a new reflection on Ukiyo-e was bound to the main fact that it was an eminently popular art. Yokoo Tadanori was the first one to claim a direct inspiration with the Japanese prints¹.

By the contact of the underground (*angora*), he found a singular style, mixing strong colors, the Ukiyo-e pictures, the Japanese traditional iconography and Western paintings to express the mutations and the paradoxes of his country. He plays also on the anachronisms to realize commercial posters, magazines and entertainments. The fact of drawing from the Ukiyo-e, by quoting Hokusai and the other masters of the Japanese wood engraving, it was a way to assert that the modernity is to be found in a pre-modern system, before the huge influence of the West.

The postmodern context has seen the birth of a generation of artists were born after the Second World War. They grew up with the Western culture, and more specially, they were educated by learning the Western art. Among them, Morimura Yasumasa uses what he learnt from school and university to twist the Western legacy. He was born in Ôsaka in 1951 and was formed at the School of Fine Arts in Kyoto. His international career begins in 1985 when he presented his very first self-portrait, *Portrait (Van Gogh)*. Through different processes, Morimura imitates and copies the famous names of the Western painting to question this complex relation between the defense of Japan on its own cultural traditions and the process of modernization imported from the American power from 1945. Moreover, he questions the combination of the values and the images with its own Japanese culture².

From this first step of quotation, Morimura uses to slide inside the narration of the famous masterpieces. His substitutions and hybridizations reflect another historic alternative. The postmodern context is characterized by a return toward the painting and manual works. The idea of a unique and linear history of art didn't exist anymore. A multitude of processes and attitudes appeared in order to attract the attention. In a search of recognition of Japanese path, cross-culture and cross-genders are instruments to set up a dialogue face the Western influence. But the self-portrait and the over-exposition of his Japanese affiliation are not the only process to claim a Japanese specificity.

Japanese hybridizations and re-appropriation

The vision of Japan taking for models sources that are outside of its context, is emphasize by the simulacrum and pastiches enacted by Morimura. He blurs the limits between the low and high art by revisiting the most important artistic periods and its masterpieces. Thanks to the slides and the transformations of his body, Morimura opens a dialogue with the past, the present and the future³, genres, cultures and nations. Taking place in the narration of the famous painting, and thus in the Western heritage, he demonstrates that "modernization" is a process of reproduction. In this sense, there is no doubt reproductions are a results from hybrid imitations.

Simultaneously, Morimura supposes a criticism of Japan and its acceptance, an acceptance without a reflection background. In spite of a clear patent westernization, in reality, it is a stylized blame of a passive reception. For example in *Portrait (Futago)*, Morimura has imitates an appropriation of the famous painting of Edouard Manet, the *Olympia*, in 1988. In his new version, the Japanese artists poses with an androgynous body that cancels every phenomenon of seduction, where we can find in the Manet's painting. More particularly, he replaced the original elements of the *Olympia* by objects belonging to the traditional culture of Japan⁴.

This new metamorphosis of a Western picture into a Japanese image proves that Japan also had its part of influence on Western art by the way of Japonism. In reality, thanks to the traditional art of *ukiyo-e*, Europe saw the emergence of the biggest artistic revolution through the famous paintings of Manet, Van Gogh, Gauguin and many others. Then at the beginning of the twentieth century, these masterpieces became symbols of modernism in Japan⁵. However by the *Portrait (Futago)*, it is more about a simple postmodern illustration; Morimura confronts the exchanges, the hybrid and strange consequences of a Japan subversive and obsessed by modernization, to the detriment of its own identity.

Superflat and otaku aesthetic: a new national art

Murakami strategy lineage through Japan history

The photography, the digital animation, the sculpture and the installations took an important part in the creation of the end of the twentieth century. Murakami Takashi is one of the first Japanese artist to understand the importance to mix specialization for the benefit of a collective production. Born in 1962 in Tokyo, he was

formed at the School of Fine Arts of Tokyo until the end of his PhD, in the *nihon-ga* section⁶. Thanks to his deep theoretical training, he is a fine expert in Japanese art. Rich of this panel, and aware very early the importance of his presence in the center of business art, he has lived in New York for several years. In 1989, he established the Hiropon Factory to federate a great number of Japanese artists and professionals.

In spring 2000, he established the movement *Sûpâfuratto*, which means Superflat.

Murakami defines this term means the two-dimensional reality which characterizes as well the Japanese art as the cartoon movies⁷. *Superflat* is determined by a present frontal character for a long time in the national art. Thus, he evokes something of the order of the Japanese tradition, but also, by the pronunciation, a bend in the Anglo-Saxon culture and in the new technologies of the image. As a matter of fact, it is to update something which would be of the order of a constant in the Japanese culture, what Murakami calls his reality. In this way, to justify it, he takes position face to the Western art. Contrary to the classic processes of representation according to a perspective from a unique focus, Murakami explains that the idea of Superflat aims to be the multiplicity of points, without a real idea of perspective. This characteristic allows to find a Japanese specificity.

In this idea, Superflat would represent a line with the various artistic stages of the past, a unique common point to the Japanese painting. Thus, Superflat suggests the reference to the old Japanese painting, that it is described as a the taste of the ornamental which answers a celebration of the life, the beauty, the fragility and the consciousness of the fleetingness of things, as well as the presence of the art in the everyday life. That is why, Murakami describes the fusion between the Japanese culture and the art as a new and totally Japanese phenomenon. He defines the Japanese contemporary art under the specific influence of manga and anime⁸. Manga constitutes a real social phenomenon in Japan, as well as in all other Asian countries and in the West, touching all the public and all the ages. In a certain way, manga embodies a research for identity which seems to cross even today the Japanese contemporary art.

The search for identity from the subculture otaku

Murakami and the artists of the Kaikai Kiki Corporation has always shown themselves as an emanation of the otaku culture. Manga and anime has always been an indispensable component of their everyday life. Before becoming an artist, Murakami wished to become a director of cartoon movies. From this culture of manga and anime was born a fascination for the metamorphosis of the image. It is that represents the creature Mr. Dob. Indeed, since 1994, Murakami has created the character Dob-kun to shape his own aesthetic. This character, whose the appearance is almost similar to the famous mouse of Disney, is treated by tint area of lively colors, and his features are bound by distinct black lines. Dob-kun appears as a character of the animation. Indeed, his treatment is worked by the same processes of the cartoon movies, and it is a strong reference to the fictional universe. By its various metamorphoses, Dob-kun symbolizes the long search for identity of Murakami⁹.

On the other hand, the artist Nara Yoshimoto represents a case essential because he embodies the filiation otaku and traditional art of Japan¹⁰. Indeed, he has produced a series of works entitled *In the Floating World* who mixes representations of Ukiyo-e and graphic characters close to the manga aesthetic. We can note how the reference to the Ukiyo-e, from the Yokoo Tadanori, is still essential. But contrary to the ninetieth century, the importance and the popularity of the Ukiyo-e does not base any more on the recognition of the West. For now, it is the Japanese artists themselves who rediscover a national and traditional art, associated with manga.

By these directions of search, we can interpret the Japanese art that does not ignore the context of the Western art. It is not anymore in the center of their concern. Then, Japanese artists developed their own formulation to designate the contemporary art of Japan. The purpose is to distance itself clearly from the West and to create an identity appropriate to Japan by employing exclusively Japanese tool. The obtained result is the reflection of an identity assertion.

Linear vision of art and the rejection of hierarchy

Superflat of Murakami and quotations performed by Morimura evokes a linear vision of the art history. By their claiming and appropriations, they demonstrate an art which refuses any hierarchy in time, the space and the values. The art of the past and the subculture are seized to create spaces not depending anymore on a clarification making by the West, to understand the world according to a unique point of view. Spaces and values become tangled.

By taking back the Western arts of the past, the Japanese traditional art and subculture, the artists balanced these various plans of the history. To get into the society and the market of the art, the artists inserted their work into the global art history. Then, they have parodied the images of the most famous cultural

masterpieces and the techniques of reproduction and entertainment. The artists already think in terms of market of the international art¹¹.

On the other hand, artists conceived a Japan with the notion of flatness in terms of space and time. In this sense, Japanese artists can play on anachronisms by quoting artists of the past, such as Rembrandt, Manet, Van Gogh, Frida Kahlo, Andy Warhol, but also Kanô Sansetsu, Ôgata Kôrin, Hokusai and Sharaku. The reference of these great masters allows not only a legitimization, but also to join a national genealogy for Murakami and international heritage for Morimura. Time and space are gathering in one and same lineage. By playing himself Japanese and Western characters, the cross gender performances of Morimura are replacing the Western art history in a Japanese perspective. For this reason, the citation to such genders, types and to such artists considered as eccentric in the history, are transformed into quality and originality¹². Murakami demonstrates this quality as an integral part of a lineage of Japanese artists. He emphasizes the idea of a tradition. He presents the Japanese civilization as not normative, off-centered of the western values. Therefore, this post means a resistance in front of the heart, of the globalization.

The “Cool Japan” and the promotion of the subculture

The new infrastructural ways and the new collaborative forms.

The development of infrastructures had been implemented to establish a strong artistic and cultural statute were made possible thanks to the initiatives of the Japanese government. Since 1989, the speculations around the economy have participated in the financing of projects where the architecture and the field of the animation. Japan exports the image of "Cool Japan" by the means of multimedia towards the American and European markets. But such media measures would not have been made possible without the infrastructural developments in the cultural life in Japan by the government.

The dynamism of the post-war years marks the opening of numerous institutions. The National Agency for the Culture (Bonkachô, in 1968), the Foundation of Japan (1972), and numerous public museums of modern art, in Tokyo as in the province, are built. These three important points of the artistic life at the end of the twentieth century, demonstrate the asserted return by the State in the heart of the cultural affairs. The National Agency for the culture (today the Ministry of Education and Sciences) has four main mission to manage the heritage and of encouraging the creation¹³. From 1995, the National Agency for the culture gave for mission to enrich the social link between the art and the citizens, to offer to its country the possibilities to succeed in the international competition, but also to guide the technological and industrial creativity. So, the country wishes that the art participates to a functional logic, to be in the service of the Japanese society. Thus, this policy came along with a deep transformation to value the art. Indeed the space of creation opens to the high computing technologies.

The introduction of the computer technologies breaks the romantic conception of art, because it implies a teamwork process, a partnership between research laboratories, companies and creators. In Japan, measures are then adopted in favor of the new technologies. At the beginning of the 80s, the first exchanges between artists, state employees and industrialists lead to the constitution of the association CG arts. The activities of this association are to promote the work on the computer graphics, the multimedia and the treatment of the image. Its success of this association gave the possibility the training and the development of active subject areas within the creative processes, as well illustrates the case of the Kaiki Kiki Corporation. This notion of a collaborative work finds a strong echo in Japan because the assimilation in the fine arts at the end of the ninetieth century had not affected in depth all the strata of thought in the Japanese arts. Therefore, the idea of the artist that we are made in West, a creative and independent genius, had no historic depth in Japan.

“Cool Japan“, an actor of the cultural expansion of Japan.

This infrastructural dynamism reinforced the social role of art and are still a way for the promotion Japan on the international level. In the industrial and economic progress, Japan is known how to take advantage of its development of the high technology to affect the Western continents and its Asian neighbors. Whereas the country was blamed for having no cultural influence for the benefit of its economic and technological power, the symbol of an economic stagnation, he became at the end of the 1990's an exporter of a strong and dynamic culture¹⁴. By the culture which the country conveys in the media of mass, Japan is celebrated as a "global cool culture".

However, Westerners have continuously given a weighty Orientalist look for the on Japan, which exists since the moment of the construction of its Japanese national identity in the era Meiji (1868-1912). Indeed, these foreign comments played a crucial role in the fact that Japan discovered that it had become "cool". As a consequence, the country establishes a new national brand image. States began to be interested in the creation and in the promotion of "national brand images" which the world would find "cool". Nevertheless the borders did not disappear, as well as the national feeling. Even if Murakami Takashi wishes to take part of the cultural company "Cool Japan", he still participates implicitly in the cultural promotion by the emphasis of the Japanese subculture *otaku*. Furthermore, the way of functioning of the company *Kaikai Kiki Corporation*, like the collaborations made with Louis, demonstrates an approach linked to the field of advertising¹⁵. Therefore, Murakami affects not only the collectors and the museums, and he also succeeds in reaching the youngest having knowledge of the popular animation of Japan. By calling upon such universe, Murakami seems to play on the same ground as the Japanese government.

To conclude, it seems that the Japanese art never stops asking the questions linked to its cultural identity, more specifically since the Mono-ha and the Pop art aesthetics. As a shape of constant dissatisfaction in esthetics, the Japanese artists treated in this study are ceaselessly pushed towards a nostalgic past of the pre-war Japan, then producing a disturbing art. We can even speak about a school of the wind (*koto-ha*)¹⁶ to seize this lack and a state of the impermanence. Thus, Japan never stopped adjusting the elements of its exception and its peculiarity. Every generation tried to propose its solutions, face to the influences come from the West

Through these artists, the questioning of the Western inheritance became a necessity to mark a strong cultural identity and a national art history. The imitation, the copy, the appropriation and the misappropriation are major stylistic ways to question the inheritance of a visual conception too long centered on the West. Secondly, the artists remove from it a quintessence which would be specific in Japan, by the subculture of *otaku* and cross-genders.

The popular culture became a principal advantage for the policy "Cool Japan". It allowed to give a face to the Japan on the global scale, but also to justify an eccentric image of the figure of the Japanese artist. The filiation with Hokusai and the popular art of Ukiyo-e has still been an essential component of this identification. However, we shall ask ourselves the question on the activity of Murakami, justifiable for his innovative initiatives regarding conception, but always close to an advertising limit which he claims not to want to cross.

¹ Anne Gossot, *L'apport de Yokoo Tadanori au graphic design japonais : art design et société dans les années soixante* (The contribution of Yokoo Tadanori in the Japanese design graphic: design art and society in the sixties)(Paris, University of Paris 7, PhD thesis: 1994) 106-135.

² *Morimura Yasumasa : Self-portrait as art history* (Museum of Contemporary Art of Tokyo, Asashi Shinbun: 1998)

³ Motoaki Shinohara, "Morimura Yasumasa, "My" machine of war" ("Watashi" no sensō kikai)(in Tokyo, *Bijutsu Techo, Monthly art magazine*: 1996) 118-132

⁴ *Daughter of Art History. Photographs by Yasumasa Morimura* (New York, Aperture Foundation: 2003)

⁵ Yasumasa Morimura, *Bijutsushi no kaibōgaku kōgi* (Conference on the dissection of the history of art), Tokyo, Chikuma Gakuei Bunko: 2001)

⁶ This education category is an artistic style created in the end of the 19th century. It designates a Japanese style and gathers masterpieces using Japanese traditional tools and subjects.

⁷ Takashi Murakami, Naoki Takizawa, "Kuru Kaiga, tatama chōkoku" (Tokyo, *Bijutsuhi techō*, n°780: December 1999) 42

⁸ Charlène Veillon, *L'Art contemporain japonais: une quête d'identité. De 1990 à nos jours* (The Japanese Contemporary Art: a search for an identity. From 1990 until today) (Paris, l'Harmattan: 2008) 80-102

⁹ Takashi Murakami, *Little Boy, The Arts of Japan's Exploding Subculture* (Tokyo, Japan Society: 2005)

¹⁰ Yoshimoto Nara, *Yoshimoto Nara: Complete work* (California, Chronicles Books: 2001)

¹¹ Arthur Lubowapril, "The Murakami Method" (New York, *The New York Times*: April, 3 2005)

¹² Tsuji Nobuo, *Kisō no keifu* (Genealogy of the eccentricity), (Tokyo, Pelikan-sha: 1988)

¹³ Christophe Marquet, "Conscience patrimoniale et écriture de l'histoire de l'art nationale" (Patrimonial Consciousness and Writing of the National Art History), in Claude Hamon and Jean-Jacques Tschudin, *La Nation en marche* (Arles, Philippe Picquier : 1999)

¹⁴ Koichi Iwabuchi, *Recentering Globalization : Popular Culture and Japanese Transnationalism* (Durham (NC), Duke University Press: 2002)

¹⁵ Adrian Favell, *Before and After Superflat: A Short History of Japanese Contemporary Art 1990-2011* (Hong Kong, Blue Kingfisher: 2011)

¹⁶ Michael Lucken, *L'art du Japon au vingtième siècle* (The Japanese art of the twentieth century) (Paris, Hermann: 2001)

Biography

Specialized in the arts of Japan and studying Japanese language since 2005, she wrote a research work in the Master's degree in art history, entitled "*Mitate* and quotation in the work of Morimura Yasumasa and Yoshida Kimiko, 1980s in our days". The researchers began to turn to the notions of imitation and quotation through the concept of *mitate* past. The study of the contexts of mutual influences between Europe, the United States and Japan in the contemporary period to study the flows of conceptual, theoretical and plastic exchanges.

The impact of the Western art in the postwar Japan is deeper analyzed by the writing of a PhD thesis. Entitled "Quoted Self-portraits and mediations of the self in the work of Morimura Yasumasa", the interest of this work is the real first research in-depth and written in France on Morimura Yasumasa. In this purpose, she received the grant of the Bridgestone Foundation to make a stay of two years in Japan (2012-2014), then a second scholarship from of Japan Society for the Promotion of Sciences (2015-2016) as guest looks at the University of Tokyo. Simultaneously, she teaches the Japanese history of art at the University of Nanterre Paris Ouest la Défense.

Key words: Japanese art, assimilation, quotation, identity