# The State of the Arts

To understand the relation between fine, applied, and popular art in Japan, one should abandon the distinction between "fine" and "applied" art.

Tetsuo Kogawa

When Ray Anderson, a New York-based Jazz trombonist took a walk with me on the streets of Tokyo the other day, he suddenly stopped and exclaimed, "it's really postmodern!" What impressed him were the small plastic flowers decorating the lamp posts. Apparently, they were the decorative remains of a street festival recently held in the area.

Artificial flowers used to be a symbol of Japanese modern culture and commodities. International taste, however, has changed. Japanese cars, cameras, and electronic goods are no longer considered as imitation or fake. Japanese fashion and graphic design are creating great interest on the international cultural scene. Japan also seems to be making inroads into world culture markets. Indeed, the Japanese expect that the same reappraisal as with cars and radios will be made in the cultural field. However, it is unlikely that areas like the fine arts and human sciences will soon obtain international recognition.

There are social and historical reasons for Japan's cultural seclusion. Japanese artists and scholars have had little support in achieving an international reputation: government and private support has been limited. Recently, industry has stepped in to fill this void, and its new commitment to culture is stimulating a recovery of the arts. The reasons behind this move can be summed up as follows. Japanese firms have traditionally behaved as the "obedient" children of officious government. This helped them to accomplish a "high rate of economic development" in the sixties. In the late seventies, however, the growth of economic activity changed the governmental attitude toward intervention. The transnationalization of Japanese industry and its restructurization in response to developing technologies stimulated deregulation. The standard of living improved greatly, and a new, "gentrified" life style was gradually established. Today the new upper middle classes prefer quality shopping to mass consumption. They are less "collectivistic" than the typical Japanese (as shown in Western movies, for instance) used to be. "Walkmen" hold a clue to why contemporary young people are individualistic, although the individualism these devices encourage is merely electronic. In this situation, the applied arts, such as industrial design and the design and packaging of clothing, have to be sophisticated and diversified. Artists "mobilized" in this field enjoy greater freedom to experiment artistically; it is easier for artists to establish careers in the applied arts than in the fine arts. Ad pages in popular magazines, TV commercials, and industrial design are still "free spaces" where artists can satisfy their creative urges. This is the essential reason why the applied arts are so important in Japan.

One may ask why the applied arts were able to develop so rapidly, what kind of arts were considered "applied," what resources were used. The late sixties and the early seventies were the golden age of comic strips, in which American pop culture, Japanese regional folk culture, and new avant-garde images were unified. American culture had begun to permeate everyday life at the end of World War II. Regional culture preserved traditional influences that differed from one another and from conventional Japanese culture. As has become increasingly clear during the last two decades, manifestations of "traditional" Japanese culture, such as *Shinto, Kamikaze,* and *Mikado,* were intentionally reconstructed during the period of modernization in the nineteenth century. Thus, a truly traditional culture persisted only in regional areas and through other historical channels. Comics united American and Japanese cultural elements and created a new culture; they influenced not only the form of the visual arts, but also the style of discourse in all the arts. In order to understand the particular relation between fine, applied, and popular art in Japan, one should abandon the distinction between "fine" and "applied" art. Japanese utilitarian arts are not "applications" of fine art, but a complex combination of both. Art and utility are inseparably related to one another. Once Muneyoshi Yanagi (1889-1961), the exponent of the Japanese folk art movement, pointed out that utility is the essence of Japanese art, and that the *Chanoyu* (tea ceremony), for instance, had gradually lost the "aesthetics of utility" and become a mere formality. It could be assumed, however, that only the deconstruction of utility could create fine art in the Japanese context. The history of aesthetics has been a process oscillating between utility and antiutility.

In the mid-seventies, parody was an important method of deconstruction. However, parody did not create a critical fine art; it simply added another type of utilitarian art to those already in existence. This is part of the very nature of Japanese art. Throughout the seventies, the pop culture on television and in magazines (since the late seventies at least five to ten new magazines have appeared every month) was full of linguistic and visual parodies. One of the most





typical examples was a TV show in which *sokkurisan* (impersonations) of popular stars and figures, à la Marilyn Monroe, appeared. Fake aesthetics was a dominant ethos in this period, and one preferred a fake feeling to the "real" touch. In TV commercials, for instance, paronomasia and visual quotations from famous films were popular.

The pop culture of the seventies eventually exhausted its resources. Thus, Japanese culture in the eighties is confronted with nothingness: both high and popular art have no "otherness" to reconstruct or deconstruct. Everything tends to become an eternal return of signs. This "white nihilism" defines every postmodern culture in advanced capitalist society, but Japan is far too full of it. In this context even a cheap plastic flower looks artistic in this country. I think this has something to do with industry's recent interest in cultural activities—publishing sophisticated magazines; producing films, museums, and performing spaces; holding international academic conferences; and so on. These activities are not tax deductible; there is far less privilege of exemption than in the U.S., for instance. This means that Japanese firms are aware of a cultural crisis that could extend before long to the industrial structure itself, and they have begun to counter it. A cultural crisis can cause a drying-up of information resources, just as Japanese industry is becoming more and more information-oriented. Unfortunately, the industrial patrons of the arts don't seem to realize where the greatest potential for development lies; for although they are quick to endow cultural institutions, they are slow to support individual artists. This basic trend is not destined to change in the near future. ■

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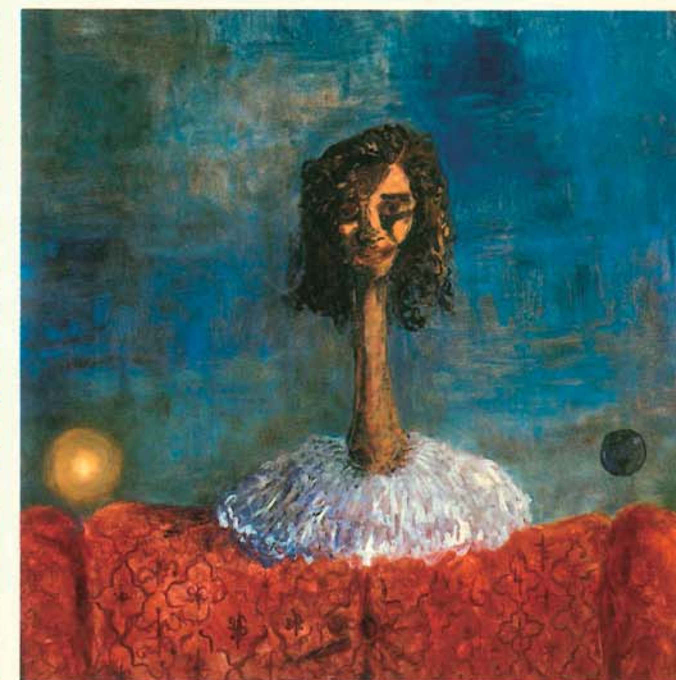

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