

# Relentless Presentism: Life and Art in the Superflat Dimension<sup>1</sup>

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## Introduction: Magical timelines

What do timelines (*nenpyō*) and contemporary Japanese art have in common? My question alludes to the erasure or evacuation of history from Japanese popular culture and art today, the subject of this chapter.<sup>2</sup> The expression “relentless presentism” in my title, refers the pervasive flattening of time and space as a wholly *unironic* mode of historical understanding.

Most art books and exhibitions in Japan include a *nenpyō*, literally, “year-chart.” The method of making a *nenpyō* involves the juxtaposition of selected events or snippets of historical data to establish, from the perspective of the present moment, a sense of their spatial contiguity and temporal continuity. The timelines appearing in postwar (post-1945) art books and exhibitions more often than not skip over the period 1937-1945, when Japanese artists were recruited by the military state to create pictures that aestheticized the country’s imperialist aggressions.<sup>3</sup> In other words, the wartime productions of many artists, litterateurs, professionals and intellectuals in general tend to be erased from the bibliographic entries and *nenpyō* that are included in postwar catalogues and books.

*Nenpyō* can also serve to create, almost like magic, *new* genealogies. One way in which timelines achieve this is through erasure. Another way is by juxtaposing things that are otherwise unrelated in time and space in order to deliberately create an illusion of their relatedness. Timelines are, in effect, chronological montages. I have coined this magical phenomenon “*nenpyōlogy*,” a “science” of genealogy-building that is fundamentally ahistorical and hyper-relativistic, and that also *displaces, disrupts, and discourages* historical analysis.<sup>4</sup>

The magic of *nenpyōlogy*, that is, the creation of a pervading, dreamlike synchrony, or what I call “relentless presentism,” was given full expression in the Mori Museum’s inaugural exhibition, “Happiness: A Survival Guide for Art and Life.” The Mori Art Museum occupies the 52<sup>nd</sup> and 53<sup>rd</sup> floors of Mori Tower at the center of Roppongi Hills, a sleek vertical-city complex in the middle of Tokyo. It is not a collecting museum but rather was conceived as an arena of display.<sup>5</sup> According to the Museum’s public relations brochure, it serves as a venue that provides a “dynamic interface between the contemporary art and culture “of our times” and as broad a public as possible.<sup>6</sup>

Mori Yoshiko, who chairs the Museum’s board, describes the “Happiness” show as

a look at the many diverse ways in which artists have expressed ideas of happiness over the past two millennia. At times it has seemed like a universal human right, at others it has been an intensely personal even private moment. Now, at a time of war and international instability, happiness and the positive ideas it expresses seem to have a particular importance.<sup>7</sup>

The “Happiness” show consisted of the work of 127 international artists and many anonymously produced ritual objects spanning two thousand years of global history. A giant poster imprinted with the image of performance artist Morimura Yasumasa as an eclectically outfitted, multicultural goddess bedecked each side of the escalator entrance to the Museum.

Then director of the Mori Museum, the Briton David Elliot, rationalized the deployment of “happiness” as the starting point of an inaugural exhibition: a discussion about happiness he suggested, is “long overdue” – two thousand years overdue.<sup>8</sup> Elliot seems to invoke a spurious nostalgia for an ancient time when presumably the world was infused with happiness, by declaring that the Mori Museum show was “part of the redrawing of a circle that has somehow been broken.”<sup>9</sup> The itinerary, or “survival guide” in Elliot’s words, for the show describes it as a journey across four “continents” of happiness – Arcadia, Nirvana, Desire and Harmony – that presumably represent and recreate an original, globally homogenized happiness.

What the “Happiness” show aimed to achieve “in this time of war and instability,” was not a proactive engagement with the social, psychological, economic, political circumstances of war and global instability. Rather, the show aimed to transcend the discomfort – or perhaps, “inconvenience” – of having to think about such disturbing and traumatic subjects, especially in the oasis of conspicuous and luxurious consumption that is Roppongi Hills. Happiness, it seems, is not to have to think about the unhappy subjects of war and global instability. And since war and instability are endemic on our battered planet, happiness means not having to think at all!

### **Happiness is overcoming history**

As I toured the “Happiness” show, the thought came to me that the exhibition was devoted to overcoming history in a way that was similar to the attempt made in 1942 by Japanese intellectuals, to “overcome the modern.” The ahistorical aspect of the show prompted me to create my own *nenpyō* by juxtaposing these two discontinuous events. Let me explain.

In July 1942, a conference titled “Overcoming the Modern” (*kindai no chōkoku*) was convened by prominent scholars and social critics at the height of Japan’s imperial expansion.<sup>10</sup> Note: by 1942, not only did Japan control most of the Pacific Rim countries, but it was also at war with the United States and its allies following the bombing of Pearl Harbor in December 1941. In part, the “modern” to be overcome or transcended was the ongoing westernization or Americanization of Japanese popular culture. The participants included philosophers, critics, artists, novelists, and politicians who pondered whether the trajectory of Japan’s modernization could be rerouted by refuting the capitalist paradigm. To take its place, they proposed instead a nostalgia-steeped platform that reified an autonomous, nationalist, and spiritually pristine conception of Japan’s superior cultural essence. This cultural essence, or Japanism, was perceived as something that existed outside of history and that therefore was immune to sociohistorical transformations; it was something that was always already continuously present.

There have been many efforts over the past millennium to reify Japanese cultural essence. Historians of Japan will recall the similarities to the nativist (*kokugaku*)

movement of the 18<sup>th</sup> century that called for a return to the ancient spirit or essence of Japan as it allegedly existed before the introduction of Buddhism and Confucianism in the 6<sup>th</sup> century. Nativism called for a return to a purely Japanese past based on indigenous traditions as a way of overcoming the then Chinese-inflected modernity. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century China was perceived as the usurper of Japanism; in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it was “the West,” and more specifically the United States.

More recently, in the late 1970s and early 1980s, some conservative ideologues proclaimed that Japan was no longer a post-war country, and that the rubric “post-war” had too many associations with the Allied Occupation of Japan (1945-52). Ironically, but not surprisingly, *post-post war Japan* was imagined as a national *furusato* or native place/old village. Basically, this amounted to a celebration of what Japan was no longer, that is, a village-based agrarian society. Many television programs and magazines were devoted to the discovery – or invention, or both – of the village in the city. Since the late 1970s, *furusato* or native place has been a pervasive subject and theme of everything from national policy (rural revitalization) to theme vacations (traditional farm houses), and from entertainment (revival of festivals) to food (heritage vegetables).<sup>11</sup>

The *furusato* or native place movement in part is a product of the refusal of the postwar – or post-postwar – state to acknowledge the dimensions and legacies of Japan’s imperialist aggression in Asia and the Pacific. It was only in 1997 that the Ministry of Education approved of school textbooks that began to admit – albeit in very watered down terms – such acts of aggression like the Nanjing massacre, the existence of biological warfare laboratories, and state-sanctioned coerced prostitution. I should note that since 1945, the majority of Japanese students have not been exposed in any rigorous way to the country’s wartime history and its ramifications today. However, this admission was short-lived. As reported in the 11 March 2007 *Japan Times*,

Former education minister Nariaki Nakayama takes pride in an achievement he and about 130 fellow members of the Liberal Democratic Party took the past decade to accomplish: getting references to Japan's wartime sex slaves struck from most authorized history texts for junior high schools...."Our campaign worked, and people outside the government also started raising their voices, creating a national trend," said the 63-year-old Lower House member from Miyazaki Prefecture, who also openly claims the 1937 Nanjing Massacre was a "pure fabrication."<sup>12</sup>

Not surprisingly, many Japanese, especially those born since 1970 – there are always exceptions of course – are stunningly ignorant about the history of Japanese imperialism and colonialism.

In this connection, not to be overlooked as a conscious act of neo-nativist renewal today is the so-called “liberal historiography” (*jiyūshugi shikan*) of Tokyo University Professor Fujioka Nobukatsu. In the mid-1990s, Fujioka organized a revisionist movement to restore a “correct history” (*seishi*) of Imperial Japan in textbooks. By choosing the term “liberal,” Fujioka and his supporters seek to represent their position as a breakthrough from the stale and unresolved polarities of postwar discourse into something fresh and new.<sup>13</sup> “Liberal” here is simply short for “liberating” without the political nuances it carries in English. At the core of Fujioka’s message is a view of history centered upon the lament for the loss of a “distinctive Japanese historical

consciousness" (*Nihon jishin no rekishi ishiki*). He takes particularly strong exception to school history texts approved for use from April 1997 that refer to the "forcible abduction of comfort women" (and also to accounts of the Nanjing massacre and other atrocities committed by the Japanese imperial forces).<sup>14</sup> That exception is now, as the former education minister has seen to, a moot point.

If the 1942 roundtable was devoted to the quest of "overcoming modernity," the Mori Museum's "Happiness" show was devoted to "overcoming history." In this respect, it was similar to the Fujioka's revisionist movement to "correct history." One of the corrective, revisionist aspects in the "Happiness" show that was especially blatant, in my view, was the puzzling—and troubling—inclusion of Leni Riefenstahl's "Olympia I & 2: Festival of the People, Festival of Beauty" of 1936-37. Her cinematic homage to the Nazi cult of the idealized Aryan body was included among the works, including Buddhist sculptures, making up the Arcadia "continent," which is described in the catalogue by David Elliot, as "a mythical world of hope and promise that encompasses the possibility of their being a social paradise on earth." Could the message be that the Nazi *lebensraum* and the Buddhist nirvana were equivalent sources and sites of "happiness"? Apparently, the history-erasing magic of the two-thousand year "Happiness" *nenpyō*, or timeline, was powerful enough to overcome even the overwhelmingly overdetermined relationship of Reifensstahl's "Olympia" to genocidal policies. Herein lay the danger of willful nostalgia and its corollary, relentless presentism: one cannot remember *never to forget* if there are no memories to remember *never to forget*.

### **Morimura, Takarazuka, and Delacroix**

Another thought that occurred to me as I made my way through the "Happiness" show was how conceptually similar conception it was to the Takarazuka Revue. Let me explain.

The management of the all-female Takarazuka Revue perceives of the Revue as a "living" timeline. An excerpt from the Revue's public relations brochure illustrates my point here.

Foreigners visiting Japan often comment on how difficult it is to understand the Japanese. ... [Takarazuka] affords both Japanese and foreigners an instant history of an incredibly complex artistic heritage, a window to view Japanese life, dance, music, culture and, what is perhaps most interesting of all, a playback of how the Japanese see and interpret the West.

"Takarazuka" is Japan. It is a race through history, a course in theatre and a cultural experience all wrapped up in sparkling sequins and gorgeous costumes....[N]owhere else is there so much to learn and see and enjoy about Japan.<sup>15</sup>

However, as I discuss at length in my book on Takarazuka, the "race through history" timeline offered by Takarazuka is ahistorical: its version of a national cultural genealogy is a montage of invented and revised traditions. Takarazuka's Japan is unsullied and uncompromised by the ugly realities and uncomfortable memories of wartime atrocities.<sup>16</sup> The Revue is in the business of selling dreams, and with the

exception of revues produced at the height of Japanese imperial war-mongering, between 1937 and 1945, the Revue stages only shows that recall a safely distant Japanese past or that conjures up fantastic visions of exotic lands across the ocean.

Founded in 1913 by Kobayashi Ichizō (1873- 1957) a leading entrepreneur and developer of a Japanese-style capitalism, the Revue's sumptuous sets and exotic foreign and classical local settings provided spectators with an enticing and accessible vision of what capitalism and commodity culture could mean in the here-and-now present in terms of entertainment, pleasure, and desire. The Revue consists of a montage-like linkage of different, even contradictory, images, lands, settings, peoples, and scenarios. In the wartime period, the Takarazuka Revue was deployed as a system of cultural artifacts in the service of Imperial Japan; it was an important proving ground where a composite image of modern Japan, itself a synthesis of the slogan, "eastern spirit, western technology" (*wakon yōsai*), could be crafted, displayed and naturalized. In keeping with its etymology, the "revue" theater represents a break from "the past." With its fast-paced juxtaposition of fragmentary episodes, the montage-like revue allows for a "blossoming of allegories" which provide for multiple jumping-off points in the present from which to generalize human experience, such as expressions of "happiness."

Earlier, I noted that Morimura Yasumasa's multiculti goddess images welcomed visitors to the "Happiness" show. Morimura is a longtime, avid fan of the Takarazuka Revue. Born in 1951, he is also a product of the postwar educational system; as a young adult, his worldview was influenced more by the anti-establishment/anti-American student movement of the late 1960s than by an interrogation of Japanese militarism and imperialism.

I wish to emphasize here the important influence of the Takarazuka Revue on Morimura's performance art. His connection with the Revue tends to be overlooked by many literary and art critics, who credit him alone with ideas and practices about the mobile and shifting relationship of sex, gender and sexuality that have a very long history in Japanese culture. The Revue is quite central to his work in three major ways. One way is the uncoupling of sex from gender (and sexuality). Although most reviewers of Morimura's work focus on this aspect, it is not what I find to be the most salient feature of his work. The mobile and shifting relationship of sex, gender and sexuality has a 2,000-year history in Japan and is not particularly radical or even controversial (in Japan, at least).<sup>17</sup>

Morimura's model is the *otokoyaku*, a female assigned to perform idealized masculinity on the Takarazuka stage. The *musumeyaku*, in contrast, is a female assigned to perform an exaggerated femininity that highlights the masculinity of the *otokoyaku*. The Revue is a pink and blue universe, although it has inspired a "butch-femme" lesbian subcultural style in Japan (figs. 1 and 2).

The Takarazuka *otokoyaku* is not the equivalent of the Kabuki *onnagata*, or femininity specialist, who, especially before the postwar period, metamorphosed (*henshin*) into a woman. Yoshizawa Ayame, an *onnagata* who established the theoretical foundation of that role in *Ayamegusa* (Ayame's miscellaneous writings) in the early 18<sup>th</sup> century. He conceived of the *onnagata* not as "a male acting in a role in which he becomes a 'woman'," but rather as "a male who is a 'woman' acting a role." In other words, the transformation is not part of a particular role but precedes it. The *onnagata* was also regarded as a model of femininity for females to emulate. *Otokoyaku*, on the other hand, are not to become unequivocally masculine, much less a model for males to

emulate. Rather, their achievement of manliness is expressed in terms of “putting something on the body,” (*mi ni tsukeru*), in this case markers of masculinity.<sup>18</sup> Similarly, Morimura does not so much metamorphose into as inhabit the public personae or outward appearance of glamorous women, who are themselves inhabiting an ideal-type – a manufactured and commodified image. Where Morimura is similar to the Kabuki *onnagata* is in his reproduction of an ideal-type feminine form – neither he nor the *onnagata* impersonate ordinary females (fig. 3).

A second way in which the Revue is central to Morimura’s work is what I call “cross-ethnicking,” itself a mainstay of Takarazuka theater but with a more controversial history. Gender is constructed on the basis on contrastive physical and behavioral stereotypes about females and males. Similarly, the theatrical construction of ethnicity is based on reified images of “us” and “them.” In addition to “doing” a wide range of men and women, the Takarazuka actors have also embodied and performed non-Japanese characters of diverse national and ethnic backgrounds. The colonial subjects represented on stage were circulated, in the 1930s and 40s, as models of “cultural correctness” to be emulated by colonized peoples. Just as the Kabuki *onnagata* exemplified ideal femininity, so the Revues actors portrayed the proper, “Japanese” way to look and act Chinese, Korean, Indonesian, Taiwanese, and so forth. Morimura also cross-ethnicks, a point often overlooked by scholars who focus only on the sex-gender dynamic of his work.

Let me add as an aside that cross-ethnicking is not limited to popular Revue actors or performance artists. Even Hello Kitty engages in “cross-ethnicking”; Ainu, Chinese, Thai, Indian, Vietnamese, Korean, among other versions of the doll are available for purchase. Although mouthless, Hello Kitty nevertheless manages to cannibalize distinctive ethnic identities as a cutsified *Japanese* homogeneity.

The third way, and in my view the most disturbing way, in which Morimura’s work is related to the Takarazuka Revue, recalls my earlier elaboration of montage. All of Morimura’s work is conceived and produced in the spirit of montage. He poses himself in different guises, photographically splicing or grafting himself into canonical paintings and thus shifting the historical referent of a given painting to the *present* of Morimura, whose *presence* flattens the contextualizing time and space of the work.

For the Takarazuka Revue’s 90<sup>th</sup> anniversary album, titled *Takarazuka: The Land of Dreams*, Morimura produced three images with the same title – “The power to dream” – but different subtitles. I will focus on only one of the images in order to illustrate my point about montage, nenpyology, and the simultaneous erasure and flattening of history together with the invention of a new genealogy.

“The power to dream: materialized into history, erased into history.” It is a cropped photo-reproduction of the romanticist painter Eugène Delacroix’s large painting “Liberty at the Barricades” exhibited at the Paris salon in 1831. Morimura here plays with presence and absence. Delacroix’s figure of Liberty is missing from both of Morimura’s renditions. She is missing from the “erased” version, and in the “materialized” version (fig. 4), she is replaced with the image of Morimura as Oscar, the bisexual, transgendered protagonist in “The Rose of Versailles,” Takarazuka’s most popular and regularly reprised revue based on the comic book by Ikeda Riyoko. Morimura puts his face on the other figures as well, transforming Delacroix’s homage to the rebellious cross-section of revolutionary French society into a self-referential homage. He also positions Oscar – or rather, himself as Oscar – for the missing Liberty, who in Delacroix’s original, wears the red cap of liberty, the emblem of freed slaves.

Oscar, born as a girl and raised as a boy by her father, lives a luxurious life as a member of the aristocracy – “he” becomes commander of the palace guards – before the revolution, but who at the same time is troubled by the abject poverty of the lower classes. The only liberty Oscar represents is the liberty from a strict alignment of sex, gender and sexuality – Oscar at times is masculine and partnered with a masculine male, masculine and with a feminine female partner, and feminine and with a masculine male partner. In other words, Oscar occupies many different sexualized and gendered subject positions.

Morimura’s “Barricades” is neatly incorporated into Takarazuka’s ninety-year timeline, or more appropriately, “dream-line.” He chooses his “originals” carefully and calculatedly; doubtless he knew that in his time, Delacroix was acknowledged (with reference to “Barricades”) as employing artistic license to create a new idiom, namely, the vista, which was cropped from Morimura’s version. Delacroix created in short, a history painting that was also an allegory with broad significance because he avoided references to specific locations and actions.<sup>19</sup>

But whereas Delacroix’s painting nevertheless reverberated with the righteous self-determination of the French, both of Morimura’s versions are wholly self-referential. And whereas Delacroix’s painting was displayed only a year (in the Luxembourg Gallery) before being put into storage for fear of inspiring insurrection, dozens of copies of Morimura’s version were available for sale from the outset. In fact, one-part of Morimura’s website ([http://www.morimura-ya.com/shop\\_m/index.html](http://www.morimura-ya.com/shop_m/index.html)) is designed as a department store.<sup>20</sup> And whereas, over the past century, Delacroix’s “Barricades” has become intermingled with personifications of the French Republic and has come to embody the authority of the French state – from 1979 until 1994, it was placed on the back of the hundred-franc note – Morimura’s version celebrated the 90<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Land of Dreams, and the ascendancy and dominance in Japan today of, in Morimura’s words, art as entertainment.

Like theater, art can also be deployed as a powerful instrument in shaping popular attitudes, and the relationship between entertainment and social engineering has long been manipulated. Thus, just as the Japanese (anti-miscegenist) colonial policy of Japanization was erasing the cultural and historical differences embodied by non-Japanese Asians, Takarazuka actors were neutralizing and sterilizing those differences through wartime dramas, set in the colonies, that were designed to familiarize the public with the vast range of geographies and cultures contained within the Japanese Empire. Like both the wartime and postwar Japanese state, Morimura strategically assumes a protean or hybrid character, which in effect cannibalizes or assimilates or neutralizes the “other,” in effect subverting the possibility of subversion.<sup>21</sup>

As I see it, Morimura’s “Barricades” is about the evacuation of history and historical context and its substitution with presentist references, including the artist himself. In this respect, Morimura’s work is also analogous to Japanese textbooks that elide any meaningful and reflexive attention to the Japanese state’s imperialist aggression in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries; an elision that continues to pose serious political and cultural ramifications today for Japan in Asia.

## Murakami and Superflat

Nothing in what Morimura has said or done suggests that he conceives of his work as subversive or as a critical commentary on a range of subjects, from colonialism to sexism. His guiding principle is summed up in the expression, “art is entertainment,” and he has successfully exploited the fact that he, and his work, are symptomatic of “relentless presentism,” or what Murakami Takashi calls “super-flat,” the subject to which I now turn.

The 43-year old Murakami designed the cute (*kawaii*) theme characters for the Roppongi Hills complex and his work was also featured in the “Happiness” show. Like Andy Warhol and Jeff Koons before him, Murakami emphasizes his affinity (even identity) with commercialized, commodity-driven popular culture and its glitzy surfaces. And like Warhol and Koons, Murakami also produces his art work in a factory. He employs a staff of sixty who punch in and do group calisthenics before painting Murakami’s designs in bright acrylic colors. What Andy Warhol said about himself could easily have come from Murakami’s own mouth: “If you want to know all about Andy Warhol [read Murakami Takeshi], just look at the surface of my paintings and films and me, and there I am. There’s nothing behind it.”<sup>22</sup>

It does not surprise me that Murakami, a product of the postwar education system, should have developed the concept of “superflat,” which I interpret as a clever rubric for the absence of historical context in Japanese popular culture and its substitution with “corrected” history and invented tradition(s). Murakami’s first use of the concept of superflat was actually used in reference to the lack of linear perspective in pre-European-influenced painting, such as that produced by the Kano school in the pre-modern period. Murakami expounded on Japanese art historian Tsuji Nobuo’s idea that formal characteristics such as the flat, shallow space and bold linear elements found in *nihon-ga*, or Japanese-style paintings, are also evident in contemporary art forms such as animation. Instead of engaging critically in the pathological aspects of “superflat,” Murakami chooses to implicate himself as part of the pathology of a willfully amnesiac society, and thereby to release both himself and his viewers “from grappling with the contradictions of Japan’s wartime experience as predator and victim.”<sup>23</sup>

Unlike Morimura, Murakami does not use himself as a model; rather, he creates his own characters, like DOB, into which he himself is absorbed (fig. 5). (DOB is the abbreviation of a nonsensical phrase.) Murakami claims that “DOB is a self-portrait of the Japanese people. He is cute but has no meaning and understands nothing of life, sex, or reality.” Although DOB is referred to as “he” (*kare*), most of Murakami’s characters are also “superflat” in the sense of being without sex and gender distinctions.

One exception to this is his Hiropon series of “female” sculptures that are anything but flat. Hiropon has two meanings: it alludes to the popular term for amphetamines in immediate postwar period, and it means “exploding (*pon*) hero (*hiro*).” The Hiropon characters were first created in 1997, and are an exaggeration of the *bishōjo* (pretty girl) fetishized in the “often blatantly pedophilic” *otaku*, or “geek,” subculture. A typical *otaku* is male, ranging in age from teens to middle age, obsessed with prepubescent girls, and attached to comic-book characters and dolls that are explicitly sexual.<sup>24</sup>

Ms. Ko<sup>2</sup> (Koko) is a two-meter tall “female” Hiropon who encircles herself with milk squeezed from her gargantuan breasts. Apparently, she was inspired in 1997 by a



cartoon Murakami had seen of a woman with nipples in the shape of a penis. The following year, in 1998, he created a “male” companion piece, “My Lonesome Cowboy,” whose ejaculate forms a lasso (figs. 6 and 7). Milk and semen are equated. The perversely copious body fluids of both Hiropon characters create a self-enclosed, self-contained space, with references to the toys called *gashapon* that are sold in capsules and that are made with obsessive-compulsive collectors in mind.<sup>25</sup>

Murakami claims that *otaku* are uncomfortable with his oversized images as they prefer small, more cuddly, submissive dolls. Rather, the sculptures have apparently caught the fascinated fancy of Euro-American males, who have paid record prices (over \$500,000) for them. Murakami claims that his Hiropon characters are not intended to critique or parody *otaku* culture; rather he says he wishes to provide them with objects of affection – which is perhaps why he has turned to creating cute, flat, superficial cartoon characters in the spirit of *poku* or pop *otaku*, as a recent show of his was titled. Accordingly, whereas the earliest DOB had sharp teeth, he now sports a benign smile.

### Epilogue: Embodied critical practice?

Like Murakami, Morimura offers very little in the way of critical commentary about his work, apart from enigmatic titles. They both choose to remain enigmatic by choice. Some scholars have referred to what Morimura does as “embodied critical practice.” What Morimura himself has actually said is this: “I had an interest in art, and as I was wondering how to engage with it, I eventually came to the realization that I needed to understand it with my body.”<sup>26</sup> Although he has never described his own work as “embodied critical practice” – which is beside the point – he and Murakami have certainly generated an academic industry in commentary about their work. Morimura leaves as self-evident what it means to “understand art with one’s body.”

Since he began using himself as his sole model in the mid-1980s, Morimura has inserted his body into a number of iconic art works. One of his best-known works is “Futago” (Twin) his 1988 interpretation of Manet’s “Olympia,” in which he portrays both the courtesan and her black servant. Morimura here exploits, with the aid of computer technology, photography’s ability to both deceive and duplicate (fig. 8).

In his observations about Morimura’s cross-dressing performances, British art historian Norman Bryson suggests that Morimura’s “Olympia”/“Futago”

maps the placement of Asian and African bodies in the psychogeography of a world once dominated from the West. Within that map, if the Asian male is the place of imagined phallic lack or deficit, then the black male body is the place of imaginary phallic surplus. What Morimura describes is a fantasy of the body outside Europe organized in terms of pluses and minuses....As in Manet’s “Olympia,” the white figure is placed as “top” and...Asian and African bodies assume their preordained compliant positions.”<sup>27</sup>

Contrary to Bryson, I argue that Morimura actually shies away from cultural critique and that he is much more invested in binary constructions than others believe. The exaggerated anatomies of Hiropon figures point to Murakami’s own investment in sex-and-gender binarism, a dichotomy flattened in DOB and other of his sexless and genderless cartoony characters. Morimura’s binarist impulse is evident in his evocation

of European colonial history: not surprisingly, but disturbingly, Japanese colonialism is an absent referent. Japan was an anti-colonial colonizer, and does not fit into the tidy binarist schemes of East vs. West, North vs. South that tend to characterize critical theories of colonialism premised on a western perspective. What if Morimura had turned Olympia into a Korean comfort woman bearing his Japanese face and her servant an Imperial Army Soldier also bearing his face? Now that would have been an act of “embodied cultural critique”! In the end, however, Morimura retains an ambivalent, facile, and wholly ahistorical attitude toward colonial fantasy, and profits handsomely from postwar – or postpost-war – presentism.

As I argued earlier, the boundaries of sex and gender that Morimura is credited with pushing have already been pushed – by Kabuki and the Takarazuka Revue. Cross-dressing and cross-ethnicking are hardly novel or radical, and Morimura himself stays well within the received paradigm of a Eurocentric postcolonial critique of western colonialism (as described by Bryson). Moreover, cross-dressing and cross-ethnicking reinforce the dualism of oppositionally constructed images of females and males, us and them. For cross-dressing and cross-ethnicking to truly frustrate binary thinking, the element of serious parody (as opposed to playful self-referential entertainment) must also be mobilized to draw attention to the artifices that uphold the status quo.

Androgynes and hybrids can create an illusion of symmetry and in this way conceal the asymmetry of power that is the cause of its existence in theory and practice.<sup>28</sup> Timelines create the same illusion and conceal the same reality. Ambiguity and ambivalence *can* be used strategically in multiple, intersecting discourses, in this case art, both to contain difference and to reveal the artifice of containment. However, the creative tension between the containment of difference and the exposure of the artifice of containment – is missing in the realm of the superflat where distinctions are deliberately disappeared.

### Coda

In his 1995 article, “The Murakami Method,” Arthur Lubow observes, very problematically in my view, that

the grab-bag appropriation, inexact simulation and accelerated speed that characterizes [Murakami’s method] no longer appear[s] peculiarly Japanese. They feel *now*. We live in an age when distinctions are arbitrary, originality is devalued, hierarchies are discredited and authenticity seems meaningless. ... We are surrounded today by too many images to source or rank. While it would be fatuous to say that we are all Japanese now, we are surely living in Murakami’s world.<sup>29</sup>

But is living in Murakami’s world the same thing as subscribing to and internalizing its pathologies? How is “Murakami’s world” so different from “George W. Bush’s world”? Both are worlds epitomized by indifference. There is simply too much at stake for us to indulge in the cult of detached ambivalence, arrested intellection, convenient truisms, and insipid, self-righteous happiness that thrives in a superflat universe. In 1942, a conference was convened in Japan to think about ways of overcoming modernity. In 2003, the “Happiness” exhibition was staged to celebrate a seamless 2,000 years of global

joy. The time seems right for a conference or exhibition on challenging and dispersing the homogenizing force of relentless presentism.

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<sup>1</sup> This chapter is an expository version of my keynote lecture for the Postgender exhibition and conference at the Tikotin Museum of Japanese Art, Haifa, Israel, 8-9 December 2005.

<sup>2</sup> A couple of definitions are necessary: my use of “history” refers to a theoretical approach to history known as “cognitive realism,” or a tacit assumption that there exists an actual historical reality beyond our senses about which we can obtain increased knowledge through assiduous research. Cognitive realism is not to be confused with “naïve realism,” which assumes a past reality that is directly reflected in already available sources and narratives. Second, I use “popular” as something both favored by the people, who have some sense of agency, and as something produced for the people, who also exist as the object of technological developments and social actions. (“mass”) Without going into too much detail, suffice it to say that, in my view, popular culture comprises social formations that mark and sustain, for an indeterminate period, some kind of distinction among the ubiquitous elements of everyday life. What is popular then, is that which has been framed and mobilized from among that which is everywhere, and has, as a result, become topically conspicuous. The question of why one ubiquitous thing and not another achieves popularity is related to who or what are the agents of the process of selection and mobilization and framing. The spectrum of agents ranges from the power bloc, the bourgeoisie, and the elite, to the working classes and the subordinated and disempowered. No single agent or agency has sole responsibility, although one may wish to claim that privilege. Popular culture thus is the result not of a homogeneous will – although it can be deployed in an attempt to create one (as in the case of a national popular culture) – but of many wills that sometimes overlap and appear to coincide and at other times are antithetical (Robertson 2001 [1998], chap. 1).

<sup>3</sup> For extensive information on the genre of war art, see Tsuruya 2005. Put here work on *kiroguka*/war art, some titles; brief hist of recruitment. Note wall text in takebashi museum.

<sup>4</sup> For more information on *nenpyō* see Robertson (2005) and Yamaguchi (2005).

<sup>5</sup> I recently learned that the Mori Museum has started its own collection.

<sup>6</sup> Mori 2003: 7

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

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<sup>8</sup> Elliot resigned in October 2006 at the end of his five-year tenure and was replaced by Nanjo Fumio, Mori's deputy director and an influential independent curator.

<sup>9</sup> Elliot 2003: 9.

<sup>10</sup> Harootunian 2000: 34-94.

<sup>11</sup> See Robertson 1991 & 1997.

<sup>12</sup> Yoshida 2007.

<sup>13</sup> McCormack 2000: 57; Gerow 2000.

<sup>14</sup> McCormack 2000: 59.

<sup>15</sup> Takarazuka 1989: 4-5.

<sup>16</sup> Robertson 2001 (1998): 212.

<sup>17</sup> see Robertson 2001 (1998).

<sup>18</sup> Imao 1982: 147-153; Robertson 1992: 423-425.

<sup>19</sup> Lee 2003.

<sup>20</sup> The Takarazuka Revue theater was originally conceived an extension of a railroad terminal department store, and Takarazuka productions likewise showcase the dramaturgy of capitalism, what with their opulent sets and material splendor.

<sup>21</sup> Robertson 2001 (1998), chp. 3.

<sup>22</sup> See <http://www.artquotes.net/x-art-quotes-jan04.htm>.

<sup>23</sup> Lubov 2005.

<sup>24</sup> DiPietro 1999.

<sup>25</sup> DiPietro 1998; Lubov 2005.

<sup>26</sup> Mackie 2004.

<sup>27</sup> Bryson 1995: 74-75; see also Morimura Yasumasa 1996.

<sup>28</sup> Robertson 2001 (1998): 215.

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<sup>29</sup> Lubov 2005.

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Robertson – Relentless Presentism  
Figures

Fig. 1: Morimura as Marilyn Monroe. ([http://www.saatchi-gallery.co.uk/imgs/artists/morimura\\_yasumasa/yasumasa\\_morimura\\_monroe1.jpg](http://www.saatchi-gallery.co.uk/imgs/artists/morimura_yasumasa/yasumasa_morimura_monroe1.jpg))



Fig. 2: Takarazuka *otokoyaku* and *musumeyaku* on the cover of Robertson 2001 (1998).

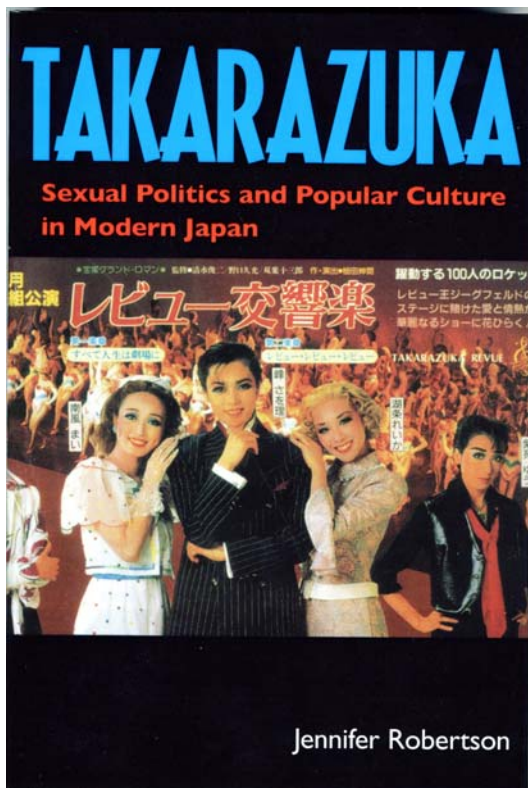


Fig. 3: Tamasaburo Bando, Kabuki *onnagata*.  
(<http://www.clas.ufl.edu/users/jshoaf/Jdolls/lionladyt.JPG>)



Fig. 4: Morimura (as Oscar) in Delacroix's "Liberty to the Barricades." (*Takarazuka: The Land of Dreams*)



Fig. 5: Murakami's DOB. (<http://www.thecityreview.com/s04pconp.jpg>)



Fig. 6: Murakami's Ms. Ko<sup>2</sup> (Hiropon).  
(<http://www.thestranger.com/binary/e65e9c29/japan-9732.jpeg>)





Fig. 7: Murakami's "My Lonesome Cowboy."  
(<http://digilander.libero.it/gokachu/mylonesome.jpg>)



Fig. 8: Morimura's "Olympia"/"Futago."

([http://www.cc.ncu.edu.tw/~sctseng/ArtandGender/10\\_performance/19.jpg](http://www.cc.ncu.edu.tw/~sctseng/ArtandGender/10_performance/19.jpg))



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