

AICA JAPAN CONGRESS 1998

Symposium "TRANSITION : Changing Society and Art "

■ Colloquium II *Monuments and Icons : New Dimensions of Public Art*

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"Anime" Icon in Contemporary Art - Japanese Comic Expression as a Medium

"Ukiyoe" in Edo period gave great influence on the turn-of-the-century European art, and "japonisme" or "indigo mania" eventually caught fire in America as well. Now after a hundred years, the similar phenomenon seems to occur around Japanese comics and their animated versions. Given the fact that Japan has historically absorbed the Asian culture and followed the Western in modern era, it is exceptional that Japanese "manga" became the second significant cultural exports after the Edo prints. In the 1970's, they were exported to Korea, Taiwan, Southeast Asian countries, and later to France and Italy. In the 1990's, the boom finally reached the comic giant, the United States, to find that even some Japanese words such as "manga," "anime," or "otaku" became the common currency there.

Why did the Japanese comics gain power surpassing the American counterpart? Certainly it's because of their very high quality. Especially story-oriented Japanese comics are unique in that they have achieved the level of expression equal to modern films, novels, and plays. One of the reasons is that while in the U.S. strict regulations resulted in the convergence on a Superman-type hero after the 50's, Japanese comics, considered the lowest cultural form and dismissed as "mere kids' stuff," were allowed much freedom. To take advantage of this situation, Japanese comics in the past few decades placed children as central figures, dealt with various genres from child sex to SF, and explored deep human consciousness such as pleasure, jest, cruelty, and genuine love. They also borrowed visual techniques from films and TV dramas, and generously employed nonverbal language or onomatopoeia -- "degre zero de l'écriture" in the words of Roland Barthes -- to create a popular saga.

As they said "Have a Journal in hand, 'manga' at heart," nonsense comics were filled with pathos of the disillusioned New Left, while girls' comics, featuring homosexuals or vampires as the means of thematic expression of sex of the "others," purported the feminist sensibility in flexible use of frames. Arbitrary frame setting itself from full-page to ten to twenty elaborate frames with crisscrossing lines contributed to heighten the suspense, fear and other delicate interplay of feelings.

I myself, however, consider the Japanese comics reached its peak in the 70's and early 80's. Now is the time for expansion. With the current wide popularity, crossing over national borders or language barriers or genres could add them other farces. In this Internet-generated "otaku" culture, "manga" represents what such speedy, multi-faceted exchanges can achieve. In the 90's, for example, a group of artists, namely Takashi Murakami, Chiezo Taro, and Yoshitomo Nara, emerged to form the Baroque Pop scene by painting comic images and using "anime" characters as an icon. Here I mainly noted the background of Japanese comic culture that brought forth the new works of the above artists. In my speech, I will discuss those and other Japanese, as well as foreign, artists in the context of "comic icon and contemporary art."