

# Socioaesthetics

*Ambience – Imaginary*

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# Cute and Cool in Contemporary Japanese Visual Arts

*Gunhild Borggreen*

## Introduction

In February 2009 the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs announced three new ambassadors to Japan. Announced as *kawaii taishi*, “cute ambassadors,” three young female fashion icons, Aoki Misako, Kimura Yû, and Fujioka Shizuka, were promoted to represent Japan as “Trend Communicators of Japanese Pop Culture.”<sup>249</sup>

Figure 8.1 is a photo from the official announcement ceremony in Tokyo. News media around the globe reported on this event, and many images of the new pop culture ambassadors circulated worldwide. The three cute ambassadors have been busy travelling the world to engage in events related to Japanese popular culture, such as the Japan Expo in Paris in July 2009, xv Sal n del Manga in Barcelona in November 2009, or participating in a Lolita’s Parade in Rio de Janeiro also in November 2009. Thousands of fans of Japanese sweet and cute popular culture gather at such events to cheer their idols and to be part of the activities through dressing up in the same style of clothes or participating in amateur catwalk display. Blog comments on YouTube video documentation of such events reveal enthusiastic expressions, as when the user identified as kagenotenshi writes “kawaii,” or shatteredlolita exclaims that “you just have to love the gothic lolita fashion.”<sup>250</sup> The cute ambassadors are subject to great attraction and thousands of fans around the world have expressed their fascination. One fan expressed devotion toward one of the cute ambassadors, Aoki Misako, in a comment on a YouTube blog: “Misako!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

\* All Japanese names in the text are given in the Japanese order with last name preceding given name. The text was first published in a shorter version in *The Copenhagen Journal of Asian Studies* 29:1 (2011), 39–60.

249 Ministry of Foreign Affairs “Commission of Trend Communicators of Japanese Pop Culture in the Field of Fashion”, 2009 [http://www.mofa.go.jp/announce/event/2009/2/1188515\\_1152.html](http://www.mofa.go.jp/announce/event/2009/2/1188515_1152.html), accessed 27 April 2009.

250 kagenotenshi, “Kawaii”, 2009, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9nK-RpDSUkl&feature=related>, accessed 3 May 2010. Shatteredlolita, “You just have to love the gothic lolita fashion”, 2009, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6aTQ525RoAM>, accessed 3 May 2010.



FIGURE 8.1 Three “cute ambassadors” assigned by Japan’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs in February 2009.

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Is my idol and is the cutest thing in the world. I have seen her alive and she is even [more] beautiful than [on] pictures and videos. Misako keep it up!”<sup>251</sup>

In contrast to the apparent wholehearted admiration of fans around the globe, the appointment of three cute ambassadors was received by Western media with equal amounts of blunt ridicule and dumbfounded headshaking. One blogger commented: “Is this serious? It seems so and still can’t find my jaw somewhere around the floor.”<sup>252</sup> The announcement was mainly dismissed as either the Japanese government’s total disregard of the fine art of diplomacy, or as yet another proof of the Japanese government’s complete surrender to the logics of soft power promotion of popular culture to boost Japan’s Gross National Product.

The main concept in this performance of international diplomacy is the word *kawaii*. *Kawaii* translates as sweet, cute, innocent, pure, gentle, vulnerable,

251 MadameGinerva, “Misako”, 2009, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NR8SsqWKJ1c&feature=related>, accessed 3 May 2010.

252 Toonleap, “March 12, 2009”, <http://www.cartoonleap.com/2009/03/12/japan%C2%B4s-ambassadors-of-moe-and-kawaii/>, accessed 14 July 2009.

weak, but the concept also associates to something pathetic, poor, or pitiable, as in the word *kawaisô*.<sup>253</sup> In global context, the term *kawaii* has come to signify a specific “Japanese” kind of cute style found in various aspects of popular culture such as in fashion, design, *manga* (comic strip stories), *anime* (animated films and TV series), computer games, gadgets, and many other domains. *Kawaii* can be said to represent a dimension of contemporary aesthetics in Japanese culture that interacts with popular culture and the dynamics of everyday life. The concept of *kawaii* has also been prominent in the field of visual arts from Japan. A number of recent art exhibitions and publications both in and outside Japan have focused particularly on the visual and stylistic aspects of cute and colourful expressions found in many of the works by Neo-pop artists such as Murakami Takashi, Nara Yoshitomo, and Mr., along with younger generations of female artists such as Takano Aya, Ban Chinatsu and Aoshima Chiho.<sup>254</sup> This seems to suggest that visual arts are being identified and promoted as part of a larger popular culture framework, and that visual arts too are being included as part of Japan’s newly discovered soft power resources. The concept of *kawaii* is an excellent trope for discussing socioaesthetics because the concept covers a set of social practices and cultural imaginations in combination with two dimensions of aesthetics, namely the formal and conceptual properties of art works and artistic practices, and the sensory and corporeal experiences in everyday life. The term socioaesthetics thus provides a double analytical register that allows for investigating how the social and the aesthetic mutually inform one another. For the following analyses of *kawaii* in contemporary Japan, the central question might be: If cuteness in visual arts is seen as representing “Japaneseness,” how, then, can visual art provide an insight into the social and cultural dynamics of *kawaii* within the Japanese society?

In order to investigate these questions in detail, I will start by looking into the discourses of “Japaneseness” in relation to popular culture and the awareness of soft power potentials to argue that a change in the status of *kawaii* took place around the turn of the millennium. In my analyses of works by the two Japanese contemporary artists Nishiyama Minako and Sawada Tomoko I will locate the

253 S. Kinsella, “Cuties in Japan”, in L. Skov and B. Moeran (eds), *Women, Media and Consumption in Japan*, Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1995, p. 220.

254 To mention some examples: the *Superflat* exhibition trilogy curated by Murakami Takashi, including the show *Little Boy. The Arts of Japan’s Exploding Subculture* at Japan Society in New York, 2005; the exhibition *My reality – contemporary art and the culture of Japanese animation* at Des Moines Art Center, 2001; the touring exhibition *Girls don’t cry*, curated by Nanjo and Associates from Tokyo; the exhibition *Neoteny Japan. Contemporary Artists After 1990s – From Takahashi Collection* in 2008; and the show *Winter Garden: The Exploration of the Micropop Imagination in Contemporary Japanese Art, The Japan Foundation Traveling Exhibition* in 2009.

concept of *kawaii* in popular culture as well as visual arts, and propose that *kawaii* in visual arts provided a framework for cultural critique during the 1990s, even before *kawaii* became a sign of soft power cultural export. Drawing on the notion of “the artist as ethnographer” I will argue that the art works by Nishiyama and Sawada contain significant gestures that create an awareness of the participatory elements in *kawaii* popular culture and the potential for social and political change. I will conclude that the concept of *kawaii* has potential for powerful social subversion, and that disarming such potentials may be one reason for official Japanese institutions such as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to endorse only a certain type of *kawaii* as an image of Japanese cultural identity.

### Cultural Odour

The intense export of *kawaii* aspects of Japanese popular culture as seen in the “cute ambassadors” incident is not new. The figures of pop culture icons such as Astro Boy and Hello Kitty have been well known in USA and many other parts of the world since the 1960s and 1970s. Other more recent Japanese products related to figures such as Pokemon or Super Mario Brothers are also widespread on a global market. During the early 1990s, however, most foreign consumers would not relate such products to Japan, as the characters and the narratives in many cases remain what cultural critic Iwabuchi Kôichi identifies as “odourless” – that is, “products which [...] do not immediately conjure images of the country of origin in the minds of consumers.”<sup>255</sup> According to Iwabuchi, the explicit lack of nationality, *mu-kokuseki*, in cultural products made in Japan during the early 1990s also implies an erasure of racial or ethnic characteristics – a trend which is particularly dominant in the area of manga comics and animation film, where producers and animation directors in many cases draw characters modelled on Caucasian types.<sup>256</sup> This can be seen as an example of “glocalisation,” a term invented in Japan and according to Roland Robertson closely related to the term “micromarketing,” which signifies companies’ attempt to create standardized global markets while at the same time being sensitive to local markets and differentiated consumer segments.<sup>257</sup>

255 K. Iwabuchi, “Marketing ‘Japan’: Japanese cultural presence under a global gaze”, *Japanese Studies*, Vol. 18, No. 2, 1995, p. 165.

256 Iwabuchi, “Marketing ‘Japan’”, p. 167.

257 R. Robertson, “Glocalization: Time-Space and Homogeneity-Heterogeneity”, in M. Featherstone, S. Lash and R. Robertson (eds), *Global Modernities*, London: Sage, 1997 (1995), p. 28.

As Iwabuchi notes in his extensive study from 2002 of the globalization of Japanese culture, if the “Japaneseness” of Japanese animation derives from its erasure of physical signs of Japaneseness, then Western audiences have come to appreciate “an animated, race-less and culture-less, virtual version of ‘Japan.’”<sup>258</sup> Iwabuchi argues that although there may be a fascination and even an influence from Japanese pop culture products in the West, such a consumption is a “monological illusion” because it is not associated to particular or tangible Japanese lifestyles, and it lacks the full understanding of the socio-cultural context in which the artefacts are being produced.<sup>259</sup>

### Gross National Cool

Such notion of cultural modesty in Japan was altered at the beginning of the twenty-first century. These days, most Japanese cultural export is branded as “made in Japan,” especially after 2002, when the Canadian journalist Douglas McGray published an article in the journal *Foreign Policy* with the title “Japan’s Gross National Cool.”<sup>260</sup> Punning on the term Gross National Product as an indicator of a country’s total income, McGray launches the concept “Gross National Cool.” With this concept McGray argues that Japan is reinventing its superpower status by means of popular culture, and that the impact of Japanese culture on a global scale is more powerful in the early 2000s than Japanese economic influence was during the 1980s.<sup>261</sup> Listing a whole range of different cultural items such as manga, anime, games, fashion, food, and pop music, McGray points out that Japanese products have become increasingly distinct “Japanese” when marketed in the West. McGray refers to Joseph S. Nye Junior’s concept of soft power to understand the dynamics of Japanese popular culture, and concludes that Japan, along with only a few other nations in the world, has understood how to combine a “flexible, absorptive, crowd-pleasing, shared culture” with a domestic culture, and taking advantage of this balance to create a “mighty engine of national cool.”<sup>262</sup> McGray’s article became quite influential in Japan and elsewhere after 2002: the article has been translated and reprinted in other publications, numerous references have been

258 K. Iwabuchi, *Recentring globalization. Popular culture and Japanese transnationalism*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2002, p. 33.

259 *ibid.*, p. 34.

260 D. McGray, “Japan’s Gross National Cool”, *Foreign Policy*, May/June 2002, pp. 44–54.

261 *ibid.*, p. 47.

262 *ibid.*, p. 53.



made to McGray's concept Gross National Cool, and McGray himself was invited to Japan and other places to lecture on his prophecy about the future of Japan's cultural export. The popularity of McGray and his article was no doubt related to the lure of soft power, as if McGray's identification of Japan's Gross National Cool was a recipe for becoming attractive through cultural power.

But being "cool" is not the same as having soft power. As Anne Allison points out, because of the strong elements of *mu-kokuseki* ("without nationality"), Japanese popular culture products may be yearned for everywhere around the globe, but for the same reason the products also lack a firm anchorage in the actual culture itself. While Allison does not specifically argue against McGray's interpretation of the direct link between Japanese Cool and soft power, she suggests that new models of global imagination have developed in which Japanese Cool carry an attractive power, but not one that generates an attraction for the actual culture of the producing country. Instead, Allison argues, Japan produces *fantasy-ware*: "goods that inspire an imaginary space at once foreign and familiar and a subjectivity of continual flux and global mobility, forever moving into and out of new planes, powers, terrains, and relations."<sup>263</sup> Thus, the cultural influence attributed to *kawaii* or other Japanese concepts does not necessarily lead to increased soft power value of Japan's Gross National Cool, but rather points out the power of mobile imagination that may instead defy cultural hegemony and offer decentred and globalized exchange.

### Cool Contemporary Art

Contemporary Japanese art has played a significant role in the attempt to market Japan specifically as a distinct cultural brand, and cool has been the main concept in promoting a Neo-Pop style in visual arts that reflects the increasing attention on Japanese popular culture from abroad. In 2001 the exhibition entitled *Superflat*, curated by the Japanese Neo-Pop artist Murakami Takashi, toured USA. At that time, Murakami was already a well-known artist on the New York art scene for his *manga*-like character Mr. DOB as well as his collaboration with the international fashion company Louis Vuitton. The idea of visual art as part of a new source of soft power for Japanese culture has been widespread within Japan as well. In 2004, Japanese art critic Yamaguchi Yumi published a book in Japanese entitled *Cool Japan. Shissô suru Nihon gendai aato*

<sup>263</sup> A. Allison, "The Attractions of the J-Wave for American Youth", in Y. Watanabe and D.L. McConnell (eds), *Soft Power Superpowers: Cultural and National Assets of Japan and the United States*, Armonk, New York: M.E. Sharpe, 2008, p. 107.

(Cool Japan. The exploding Japanese contemporary art), in which Yamaguchi refers explicitly to Douglas McGray's article.<sup>264</sup> And indeed, McGray himself appears in the publication in an interview with Yamaguchi about art and other aspects of Japanese popular culture. When asked explicitly about Murakami Takashi, McGray mentions Murakami's success in USA as an important phenomenon, and argues that the circulation of Murakami's exhibitions and the translation of his essays has generated a deeper understanding of Japanese art in general in the USA.

The blockbuster exhibition *Little Boy. The Arts of Japan's Exploding Subculture* was shown at Japan Society in New York in 2005 as the third and last of the *Superflat* exhibition series. Curated by Murakami, the exhibition featured a number of objects related to popular culture as well as art works from Japan's post-war period, providing a framework for the mutual influence between cultural patterns on a broader scale and specific art works as reflection of such trends. Striking a critical note towards the influence of especially American influence in post-war Japanese culture, the *Little Boy* exhibition aimed at emphasizing traits related to unique aspects of Japanese popular culture, especially the concepts of *otaku* (nerd culture) and *kawaii* (cute). The exposure of Murakami's art works in New York, McGray continues, has prompted a wave of "Post-Murakami" artists who wish to repeat his economic success, and thus the number of contemporary Japanese art works on the New York art scene and the amount of money exchanged in this respect has increased due to the huge attention on Japanese art.<sup>265</sup> What is lacking in Yamaguchi's and McGray's admiration for the Superflat concept, however, is the search for a criticality that embodies much international contemporary art, and which is usually seen by art critics and curators of contemporary art to be a sign of quality. Since many of Murakami's art products are mass-produced and hereby turn into pop culture artefacts, the distinction between art work (usually attributed qualities such as singularity and uniqueness) and pop culture (associated with mass production and mass consumption) becomes blurred. Even Murakami himself admits in a *Time* article from 2003 that it may be harmful for his image as artist that many critics in the West regard his art as too commercial.<sup>266</sup>

264 Y. Yamaguchi, *Cool Japan. Shissô suru Nihon gendai aato / The exploding Japanese contemporary art*, Tokyo: BNN Shinsha, 2004.

265 *ibid.*, p. 46.

266 J. Frederick, "Move over, Andy Warhol", *Time*, Vol. 161, No. 21, 2003, pp. 60–61.

### *Kawaii* in Visual Arts

While many “Post-Murakami” artists address the notion of *kawaii* both as style and as artistic identity, the concept of *kawaii* in Japanese visual art is not a recent phenomenon. During the 1990s *kawaii* became significant as a discursive element within visual arts in Japan. In the beginning, *kawaii* in visual arts was particularly connected to the emergence of a number of young female artists in the mid-1980s, the so-called “Super girls in art,” a concept coined by *Bijutsu techô* (Art Notes), one of the influential art magazines in Japan. Under the headline *Bijutsu no chôshôjo-tachi* (Super girls in art), the August issue of 1986 featured a number of young Japanese female artists.<sup>267</sup> Artists’ profiles and feature articles emphasised new styles and expressions connected with female artists, and general traits point forward to some of the stylistic characteristic of *kawaii* in visual art: young female artists, it was claimed, often include objects related to household goods and consumer products as well as aspects of fashion and ethnic art. These new modes identified by a leading art magazine in Japan appear to rely on some essential “feminine” qualities rooted in biological determinism. The emphasis on women’s art being especially bright and colourful and connected to consumer products established a discursive link between certain tendencies within visual arts to the way in which *kawaii* historically has been connected to *shôjo*, or girl’s culture. Young female artists in Japan were seemingly being empowered by the label “super” (*chô*), but they were also still named “girls,” *shôjo*. Taking the low representation of female artists in the Japanese art world in the mid 1980s into consideration, the special issue on “Super girls in art” most likely presented a dilemma for some of the artists involved – on one hand the attention from a leading art magazine such as *Bijutsu techô* must have been helpful in promotion and exposure, while at the same time many artists probably did not recognize themselves within these limited descriptions of *shôjo* art.

*Kawaii* as concept in the art world was not only attributed to young female artists in the 1990s. Visual elements of cuteness were also associated with a number of young male artists, including Tarô Chiezô, Itô Gabin, Nakahara Kôdai and Murakami Takashi. These artists represented a generation who grew up during the 1970s and 80s, where economical growth prevailed. A gap emerged between the post-war youth and their parent generation, and a generational conflict was reflected for example in a concept such as *shinjin-ruï*, “the new human type” or the “new breed.” The term was invented in the

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267 R. Enomoto and K. Matsuoka, “Ima kakeru onna” [Women advancing now] *Bijutsu techô*, Vol. 38, No. 566, 1986, pp. 46–59.

mid-1980s by the sociologist Nakano Osamu, who defines the traits of this new generation as “narcissistic and often exhibit autistic symptoms.”<sup>268</sup> The *shinjinrui* artists were seen as subverting the concept of adulthood by maintaining a youthful lifestyle and appropriating elements of cute and childlike as critical elements in their art works. American art critic Alexander Munroe, for example, wrote in the influential international art magazine *Flash Art* in 1992 that these Japanese artists “mock the Japanese *kawai* [sic] culture – the cute, vapid Disneyish world of girly taste...”<sup>269</sup> Other foreign critics, however, were critical towards the content of *kawaii* art works at that time, such as Japan-based art critic Azby Brown, who coined the term “the Great Tokyo Art Hoax” in the English-language magazine *Tokyo Journal*.<sup>270</sup> Brown suggested that the media in Japan, together with Japanese and foreign art critics and dealers, promoted young “brat pack” artists in order to create a lucrative art market. In his view, many young artists did not create challenging and provoking art, but merely produced novelty goods, and he disagreed strongly with Munroe and others, who found the references to *kawaii* elements to be subversive and critical.

### *Kawaii* as Critique

At the height of the critical concern of *kawaii* on the Japanese art scene, a number of critics and artists have linked the concept to broader political issues such as national identity and the imperial system. In his 1992 article in *Bijutsu techô* art critic Sawaragi Noi is highly critical towards mainstream “cuteness” in contemporary Japanese art.<sup>271</sup> *Kawaii* art is weak and thin, he states, and contains only what Sawaragi defines as “a minimum of life.” Sawaragi points out that foreign art critics have observed the *kawaii* phenomenon in the Japanese society at large, but regrets that *kawaii* art is promoted only as yet another layer of the already existing Orientalist perceptions of Japanese art.<sup>272</sup> Sawaragi argues that *kawaii* art, as a subdivision of Neo-Pop, may function as a protest, especially if *kawaii* is understood as an antithesis to the lofty and sublime. Other

268 O. Nakano, “A Sociological analysis of the New Breed”, *Japan Echo*, No. 15, 1988, p. 12.

269 A. Munroe, “Wandering Position. Conceptual Art in the Post-Hirohito Era”, *Flash Art*, Vol. 25, No. 163, 1992, p. 74.

270 A. Brown, “The Great Tokyo Art Hoax”, *Tokyo Journal*, No. 9, 1993, pp. 26–33.

271 N. Sawaragi, “Rori poppu – sono saishôgen no seimei” [Lollipop – a minimum of life]. *Bijutsu techô*, Vol. 44, No. 651, 1992, pp. 86–98.

272 *ibid.*, p. 92.

observers too have tried to place the concept of *kawaii* in broader political perspectives, such as sociologist Ôtsuka Eiji, who relates *kawaii* to a subcultural nationalism emerging from young Japanese women's grief during the Shôwa emperor's period of illness and his passing in 1989.<sup>273</sup> Within visual arts, Japanese art critic Matsui Midori identifies *kawaii* in visual arts as a means of defying social systems and hereby overcoming the entrapment of simulation art from the early 1990s.<sup>274</sup> Art critic and curator Hasegawa Yûko extends the term *kawaii* by relating it to the concept *yôjika*, infantization, and interprets an infantization of post-war Japanese culture as a system of patriarchal control following the defeat in World War II and psychological loss of confidence especially among the Japanese male population.<sup>275</sup> Murakami Takashi too connects the concept of *kawaii* with traits of the nation in the catalogue for *Little Boy*. Cuteness, *kawaisa*, becomes the core of a pre-child state that Murakami identifies in post-war Japan, linking it to what Murakami sees as a "culture frozen in its infancy," leaving the Japanese as "truly, deeply, pampered children. And as pampered children, we throw constant tantrums while enthralled by our own cuteness."<sup>276</sup>

These critical voices in the Japanese art environment against an unreflected notion of *kawaii* as a signifier of Japanese culture contribute to a more nuanced picture of the debates by trying to bring forth elements of various cultural and political tensions within the Japanese society. The overall notion of the art critics' remarks may, however, appear as an attempt to characterize some kind of essential psychic nature of the Japanese people. As the sociologist Carl Cassegaard points out, Murakami Takashi in particular, but also to a certain degree Sawaragi Noi, draw on nationalist rhetoric while at the same time subverting conventional nationalist discourse. This kind of "outcaste" or "underdog" nationalism that Murakami represents is not affiliated with right-wing extremism, but, as Cassegaard argues, the rejection of the post-war narrative

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273 E. Ôtsuka, *Shôjotachi no kawaii tennô. Sabukaruchaa tennôron* [Girls' cute emperor. Theories of the emperor in subculture], Tokyo: Kadokawa bunsho, 2003.

274 M. Matsui, "Hen'ai no maikuroporitikusu. Itsudatsu no shingô to shite no 'kawairashisa'" [The micropolitics of partiality. 'Cuteness' as a symbol of deviance], *Bijutsu techô*, Vol. 48, No. 720, 1996, pp. 25–41.

275 Y. Hasegawa, "Post-identity *Kawaii*: Commerce, Gender and Contemporary Japanese Art", in F. Lloyd (ed), *Consuming Bodies. Sex and Contemporary Japanese Art*, London: Reaktion Books, 2002, pp. 127–128.

276 T. Murakami (ed), *Little Boy. The Arts of Japan's Exploding Subculture*, New York: Japan Society, 2005, p. 138 and p. 141.

may end up supporting a more ambiguous type of cultural essentialism that leads to a “reversed nationalism.”<sup>277</sup>

### The Artist as Ethnographer

After this outline of how *kawaii* has become part of economic politics and soft power in national branding and cultural export, as well as how *kawaii* functions as a critical term for social and political perspectives, I now move on to explore how contemporary art practices apply the aesthetics of *kawaii* from within. Many artists working in the 1990s and onwards operate in the realm of the two aesthetic dimensions outlined above and merge formal and conceptual properties of the art work with the notion of aesthetics as sensorial and corporeal experience and articulation of meaning in everyday life. This merging of different trajectories of the aesthetic is prominent in the so-called Ethnographic Turn in contemporary art, for which art theorist Hal Foster in the mid-1990s coined the term “the Artist as Ethnographer.” For Foster, the concept denotes an artistic practice in which the artist is “self-aware reader of *culture understood as text*.”<sup>278</sup> Art critic Miwon Kwon notes that ethnography became a methodological approach for artists in the 1980s and 1990s because traditional ethnography based on participant observation promises a dialectical position of both experience and interpretation.<sup>279</sup> This experience is often based on personal experience centered around popular media as a means to consolidate such types of cultural knowledge, especially when the artwork recognizes the relational dynamics between experience and interpretation, and between participation and observation.<sup>280</sup> This is significant in the art works by Nishiyama Minako and Sawada Tomoko, who explore the ethnographic dimensions of young females in Japanese media and popular culture with about a decade between.

277 C. Cassegaard, “Japan’s lost decade and its two recoveries. On Sawaragi Noi, Japanese Neo-Pop and anti-war activism”, in N. Cornyetz and J.K. Vincent (eds), *Perverion and Modern Japan: Psychoanalysis, literature, culture*, London: Routledge, 2010, pp. 39–59.

278 H. Foster, *The Return of the Real. The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century*, Cambridge Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1996, p. 180, emphasis in original.

279 M. Kwon, “Experience vs. Interpretation: Traces of Ethnography in the Works of Lan Tuazon and Nikki S. Lee”, in Alex Coles (ed), *Site-Specificity: The Ethnographic Turn*, London: Black Dog, 2000, p. 75.

280 *ibid.*, p. 87.

## The Pink House

Throughout her artistic career, Nishiyama Minako has been exploring the colour and concept of pink in *kawaii* culture, and investigates not only the visual significance but also participatory aspects of *kawaii*. One of Nishiyama's early works is an installation seen on Figure 8.2 entitled *The PINKÚ House* from 1991, in pink colours and pseudo Rococo style ornamentation.

The installation extends from the wall into the gallery space by a rug covering the floor, and the centre part is a large three-dimensional box covered with plastic sheets made to resemble a bed. The plastic bedspread is white with an ornament in the centre, and pink ribbons, rosettes and laces on the sides. The wall part has a pattern of pink hearts and dots on a white or light pink background, and several heavy draped curtains in pink colours at each side and in front of a two-dimensional image of a window in the centre. Pieces of furniture are painted on the back wall as well.

The pink Rococo style ornamentation in Nishiyama's installation *The PINKÚ House* points towards another significant *kawaii* style, that of the cute and sweet in *shōjo manga*, or girls' comics. From the 1970s onward a number of



FIGURE 8.2 Nishiyama Minako, *The PINKÚ House*, 1991/2006. Acryl on plastic cloth, urethane mat, iron, etc., H310 × W400 × D370 cm. Collection: 21st Century Museum of Contemporary Art, Kanazawa.

PHOTO: KUNIO OSHIMA

female manga artists developed stories of romance and love within a distinct *kawaii* style of flowers, hearts and excessive ornamentation, such as Ikeda Riyoko's *Berusaiiyu no bara* (the Rose of Versailles), one of the best known manga-narratives from the 1970s.<sup>281</sup> Another explicit reference in Nishiyama's work alludes to Rika-chan, a doll character that was invented in Japan in 1967 as a Japanese equivalent of the Barbie doll. The main difference between Rika-chan and Barbie is the physical appearance of the doll related to its age representation: Barbie is significantly portrayed as an adult ideal image of radical proportions of swelling breasts, pronounced body forms and long legs with feet designed for high heel shoes. Rika-chan, on the other hand, portrays a teenage girl with chubby childlike face and an adolescent body without any bodily signs of female adulthood. Rika-chan's face has the signature elements of *kawaii* appearance in her large eyes, small heart-shaped mouth and diminutive nose. As toy product, Rika-chan is accompanied by numerous family members as to induce the values of the post-war nuclear family.

Rika-chan's relationship to middleclass dreams of obtaining a single family house in the suburbs can be seen in the fold-up plastic house products to be acquired and inhabited by Rika-chan and her friends and family members.<sup>282</sup> In her art work, Nishiyama refers not to the Rika-chan doll itself, but to these plastic doll houses that often had a hexagon shape and formed as a small suitcase that could be opened and closed for transportation. Nishiyama's installation resembles a Rika-chan doll house produced in human scale. Audiences are invited to enter the installation and interact with the plastic furniture elements, thus performing a cliché fantasy of girlhood dreams by acting in place of the doll and entering an idealized make-believe world. By sizing up the stage set of many girlhood fantasies the mechanisms of ideological enchantment through childrens' cute toys are disclosed and deconstructed.

### Sexual Desire and Display

The bed at the centre of Nishiyama's installation as well as the pink and cute ornamentation becomes a euphemism on an aspect of sexuality, namely that of dating clubs, escort services and prostitution in the Japanese sex industry.

<sup>281</sup> F.L. Schodt, F.L., *Manga! Manga! The World of Japanese Comics*, Tokyo: Kodansha International, 1986, p. 101.

<sup>282</sup> S. Masubuchi, "Rika-chan to Rika-chan hausu" [*Rika-chan and Rika-chan House*], in *Rika-chan hausu no hakurankai. Maihōmu doriimu no hensen* [*Rika-chan house exhibition. Changes in the 'my-home' dream*], Tokyo: Inax Shuppan, 1997, pp. 6–7.



In another work by Nishiyama Minako, a poster design on Figure 8.3 entitled ♡*Tokimeki Erika no telepon kurabu*♡ (♡Erika's Palpitating Telephone Club♡) the artist explores the ambiguous juxtaposition of style and subject matter between cute *shôjo* culture and sexual services.

Nishiyama's design mimics *pinku bira*, pink flyers, small advertisements for "health clubs" and "pajama clubs" often pasted on the walls of public telephone booths or handed out by young girls on the streets of red light districts in Japan's urban centres. Many pink flyers produced during the 1990s, such as seen on Figure 8.4, were designed in pink and pastel colours with illustrations of young women drawn in the style of *shôjo manga*.

The cute and innocent in style and character clashes with the intent of the advertisement in what art critic and curator Hasegawa Yûko has identified as



FIGURE 8.3 *Nishiyama Minako*, ♡*Tokimeki Erika no telepon kurabu*♡  
(♡*Erika's Palpitating Telephone Club*♡), 1992. Poster work.  
PHOTO: NISHIYAMA MINAKO



FIGURE 8.4 *Pink Flyer*, 1994.

“an example of terrorism, which highlights the questionable aspects of the sex industry.”<sup>283</sup> Nishiyama offers an investigation into the visual vocabulary of sexuality on display, in which the cute and innocent not only becomes a dream world *for* the *shôjo*, but also *of* the *shôjo*. Nishiyama’s work reveals the borderlines of desire and the subject position involved by investigating the social codes for a desirable body and the urge to behold and control this body of desire. The divide between these two positions is not easily detected in Nishiyama’s works, but as Hasegawa continues, Nishiyama’s use of *kawaii* points “towards a frivolous emptiness, an absence of meaning that pervades the sense of kitsch and cuteness unique to Japan.”<sup>284</sup> While it is tempting to see Nishiyama’s use of

<sup>283</sup> Hasegawa, “Post-identity *Kawaii*”, p. 129.

<sup>284</sup> *ibid.*, p. 130.

*kawaii* as an ironic feminist position in which the artist dissociates herself from the *shôjo* culture inherent in her work, it may also be possible to understand Nishiyama's focus on *kawaii* as a reflection of *shôjo* ambiguity that surfaced in Japanese mass media during the 1990s concerning the appearance and behaviour of young women in public space, to which I shall return shortly.

### Performance and Play

Nishiyama's work *The PINKŪ House* includes allusions to a theatrical event because of the distinct stage set appearance and the performative engagement with the audience. The element of theatre emphasizes the aspect of role playing within the culture of *kawaii*, not only in the physical appearance of the body on stage, but also in the aspect of dressing up and making up the body for display. These tendencies of displaying *kawaii* fashion on the streets of urban centres in Japan are reflected in more recent art works from the 2000s by Sawada Tomoko, whose main project includes photographic images of herself in various guises. By use of computer manipulation of digital photographic images, Sawada has immersed herself in group photos, school photos, wedding pictures, series of single portrait images and many other genres of photographic portraiture that connect to everyday life and popular culture. In the work *School Days* from 2004, Figure 8.5, Sawada herself poses as forty different female high school students as well as their teacher lined up in a photo studio in front of a back drop of the school building and a cherry blossom tree in full bloom.

The almost identical faces of all persons involved echo a similarity in the dark blue school uniform that all figures are wearing. Military style uniforms have been a part of Japanese national school system since the nineteenth century, linked to ideas of modernization as well as tradition in dress codes. Sharon Kinsella points out how female high school uniforms in particular gained fashion status in the mid 1990s and became central in the so-called high school girl "boom." Media interest in *kogyaru*, high school girls, included attention on the alleged involvement in new forms of amateur prostitution by high school girls referred to as *enjo kôsai*, compensated dating, in which the school uniform came to play a significant visual role in discourses of female sexuality.<sup>285</sup> While the identical faces in Sawada's art work appear as a consequence of the repetition of the model (the artist herself), the use of a generic high school uniform points towards the use of uniforms in society in general as a way of homogenizing particular social groups and making visible their social

<sup>285</sup> S. Kinsella, "What's Behind the Fetishism of Japanese School Uniforms?", *Fashion Theory*, Vol. 6, No. 2, 2002, pp. 215–237.



FIGURE 8.5 *Sawada Tomoko, School Days, 2004.*

©TOMOKO SAWADA, COURTESY MEM, TOKYO

function rather than their individuality in the public sphere. As curator Kasahara Michiko notes in her comments on Sawada's *School Days* series, Sawada portrays a paradox in the behaviour of many school girls in Japan today: "they want to distinguish themselves from their friends to a certain extent but not enough to stand out from the group."<sup>286</sup> Although the faces of the figures in Sawada's work display small variations in hair style and eye brow shape, the lack of more significant individual differentiation among the faces invites the viewer to reflect upon the way in which certain institutions and rituals erase the unique and personal in favour of standardized appearance.

### Schoolgirl *Kawaii*

Another work by Sawada Tomoko, entitled *cover* from 2002 in Figure 8.6, relates to similar issues of role-playing and display when Sawada takes the role of two cute-looking girls in casual clothing and fluffy hairstyle.

<sup>286</sup> M. Kasahara, "Gender Issues in Japanese Contemporary Photography" in A. Zohar (ed), *PostGender: Gender, Sexuality and Performativity in Japanese Culture*, Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009, p. 48.

While the official uniform is not apparent in this work, Sawada still points to the concept of uniformizing physical appearance and the way in which group identity is also about dressing and acting like other members in the group to reinforce aspects of bonding and a sense of belonging. The repetition inherent in the figures in Sawada's works points towards iterative performance of social roles that form the basis in identity formation.

The performative elements of *kawaii* in both Nishiyama Minako's and Sawada Tomoko's art works can be seen as artistic comments on tendencies from the mid 1990s in Japan, where journalists and sociologists started to focus on the social behaviour of cute and sweet girls in public places. Media reported on a number of different styles and youth from different social segments under the generalized and derogatory category of *kogyaru*, short of *kôkôsei gyaru*, or high school girl. Media reported how high school girls tampered with their school uniform, for example by folding the waistband to shorten their skirts into miniskirts or using long thick white socks that are made to fall down



FIGURE 8.6 *Sawada Tomoko, cover, 2002.*

©TOMOKO SAWADA, COURTESY MEM, TOKYO

around the ankles. Some girls manipulate with buttons or other apparently insignificant details; some girls acquire uniforms from other, more prestigious schools, and some may not even be high school students at all. Sociologist Jennifer Craik notes that while Japanese school uniforms signify discipline, authority, and hierarchy, uniforms also embody erotic impulses as fetishized objects.<sup>287</sup> Sawada Tomoko's mock group portrait of high school girls with grave faces seems to point at the uniformity that is constantly challenged in real everyday life situations. This goes not only for the conformity of clothing, but also the standardized black hair and the apparent lack of emotions in the faces of the figures in Sawada's photo. Kasahara points out that in spite of the many layers of restrictions placed upon Japanese high school girls, Sawada's series show the different character that each girl has.<sup>288</sup> According to anthropologist Laura Miller's research on beauty ideals in Japan, a number of real life high school girls in the 1990s started bleaching their hair, tanning their faces and would no longer comply to the century old tradition of women in Japan holding their hand over the mouth when smiling or laughing in order not to expose their teeth.<sup>289</sup> In the 1990s, young women would flash their white teeth, often made more white through expensive processes of dental aesthetics. The innocent and non-sexual school girl was gradually changing into more slim and sexy bodies as the trend of fitness centres and aerobics hit Japan and generated what Miller has identified as a repudiation on part of the *bodiikon gyaru*, "body conscious girl," against the previous paedophilic ideal.<sup>290</sup> While the two figures represented by Sawada in Figure 8.6 may not fit the slim-ness ideal, they feature elements of hair bleaching and face tanning, the later emphasized by the white lining around eyes and lips in reference to a make-up style known as *ganguro*, "black face".

### *Kawaii* as Protest

When the phenomena of *ganguro*, "black face," hit the street of Tokyo by late 1990s, voices of concern or even panic from the media became louder. Anxious grown-ups from parents to school authorities and politicians worried about what they conceived as deviant behaviour, rough manners and deliberate ugly

287 J. Craik, *Uniforms exposed: from conformity to transgression*, Oxford: Berg, 2005, p. 225.

288 Kasahara, "Gender Issues", p. 48.

289 L. Miller, *Beauty Up. Exploring Contemporary Japanese Body Aesthetics*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006.

290 *ibid.*, p. 26.

appearance. As anthropologists Laura Miller and Jan Bardsley write in the introduction to the anthology on *Bad Girls of Japan*, women who defy patriarchies draw attention to borders of propriety and invite public debate.<sup>291</sup> The two figures in Sawada's *cover* display some of the significant features of *ganguro*, the dark tanning or painting of the girls' faces, which is contrasted or highlighted by white makeup around the eye and on the lips. The street provides a space of freedom from school authorities or parents, where high school girls can display their latest fashion fads and still remain anonymous for everyone but their peer group with whom they hang out. But through their visibly transgressive trajectory, Miller and Bardsley argue, "bad girls" are easily recuperated by the media, in which they are either ridiculed or naturalized.<sup>292</sup> This *ganguro* type of girl made headlines in media because many observers found that these girls on purpose made themselves look unattractive and repelling with their peculiar make-up and style. According to Sharon Kinsella's analyses of male-centred media, the visual appearance of the *kogyaru* in general and the *ganguro* in particular were interpreted in terms of ethnic and racial references because many saw the black faces as symbolic of "primitive" or Southern races. *Ganguro* girls became subject of racist assaults and regarded as a threat to the alleged "purity" of the Japanese race.<sup>293</sup>

The girl culture, from which the *kawaii* modes of expression originates, highlights the *shôjo*, the girl, as a segment of society that denotes a transitional phase from childhood to adult. It is tempting, therefore, to see this phase as a site of resistance. Sharon Kinsella concludes from a survey conducted in 1992 that most young people conceive of adulthood as involving responsibility (*sekinin*) and lack of free time. Kinsella notes that there is no ideal in Japan that links maturity to individual emancipation, and cute lifestyle is seen as a way of acting vulnerable and immature and thus unable to carry out social responsibilities for family or work place.<sup>294</sup> Many of the girls indulging in *kawaii* are deliberately extending the period of *shôjo* in order NOT to grow up and become *shakaijin*, member of the society. In some media, girls engaged in such "derivative" *kawaii* culture are blamed for the economic crisis and general misfortunes that Japan has suffered in the so-called "lost decade" of the 1990s. As Kinsella argues, the journalistic material, although not intentionally dealing

291 L. Miller, and J. Bardsley, "Introduction" in L. Miller and J. Bardsley (eds), *Bad Girls of Japan*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005, p. 1.

292 *ibid.*, p. 5.

293 S. Kinsella, "Black Faces, Witches, and Racism against Girls" in L. Miller and J. Bardsley (eds), *Bad Girls of Japan*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005, p. 147.

294 Kinsella, "Cuties in Japan", pp. 242–243.

with metapolitics, gave the impression of a dangerous female conspiracy against the patriarchal society through a combination of sexual deviance, violence and subcultural nonconformity.<sup>295</sup> Kinsella also notes, however, that the ontological status of “bad” schoolgirl behaviour, such as *enjo kôsai* (compensated dating) or *terekura* (telephone chat lines), has never been established through statistical survey, suggesting that much of the *kawaii* revolt may in the end be taking place on the front pages of media rather than an actual cultural resistance on the streets.

### Resistance and Recuperation

The ambiguity of *kawaii* in art works such as those by Nishiyama Minako and Sawada Tomoko discussed above is important because it reflects the ambiguity between conformity and resistance among youth population in Japan. The concept of *kawaii* cannot be ignored as empty or meaningless; as I have argued, *kawaii* as cultural code regains meaning in the hands of the actual players in the subculture environments. Since the 1900s, parts of the high school girl population in Japan have declared a distance to the mainstream society by behaving childlike, provoking and angry, and thus emulating but also resisting the image of cute and sweet girls. As Laura Miller points out in regards to *kogyaru* subcultures, “these youth styles are usually not connected to radical politics, but rather are self-expressions of resistance and rebellion.”<sup>296</sup> However, it is also the same mechanisms that sustain certain norms and values in society by enacting and re-enacting the embodied gestures and signs. The *kogyaru* and the *ganguro* may be subverting certain elements of the expectations of adulthood, but they also re-enact stereotypes of femininity by highlighting youth, sexually alluring body parts, and loads of make-up. This leaves little or no room for re-enacting other versions of embodied gender nor to escape binary gender notions all together.

The Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs’ promotion of three young women as cute cultural ambassadors is a way of embracing *kawaii* culture on a national level and feminizing the image of Japanese national culture. On Figure 8.1 we can recognize three distinct fashion styles here: the pretty-in-pink cute attitude to the left, the street fashion mode in the middle, and the schoolgirl uniform

295 S. Kinsella, “Female Revolt in Male Cultural Imagination in Contemporary Japan” in *The Fourth Chino Kaori Memorial ‘New Visions’ Lecture*, Kyoto: Medieval Japanese Studies Institute, 2007, p. 18.

296 Miller, *Beauty Up*, p. 27.



paraphrase to the right. They all refer directly to the main styles flourishing in the streets of Shibuya and Harajuku in the early 2000s, but in this specific context of cultural diplomacy, the three *kawaii* ambassadors give these styles a face and a body that can be controlled by official policy and cultural export. Media use of categorisations such as *kogyaru*, including distinct styles visualised and embodied in the three cute ambassadors, may serve as what Laura Miller identifies as “a vehicle of mainstreaming [...] cultural power of youth, especially the subcultural compositions of young women.” Paraphrasing Stuart Hall’s identification of power structures, Miller notes: “the media ‘records’ girls’ resistance, but then ‘recuperates’ it through labelling and redefinition.”<sup>297</sup> The official strategy of feminizing and sweetening national identity may be seen as a way of downplaying the social and cultural dynamics of *kawaii* culture in Japanese society in general.

### Conclusion

The codes of appearance and behaviour in public space of *kawaii* girl culture depend on inside knowledge to be translated or understood. We can see this kind of ethnographic knowledge manifested in the works by Nishiyama Minako and Sawada Tomoko in so far that both artists address the ambiguity of *kawaii*: their art works expose the dichotomy between the cute and innocent on one hand and the display of Otherness on the other, challenging the idea of a hegemonic national culture. As Sawaragi Noi argued, the paradox of *kawaii* as “minimum of life” was connected with the imperial institution and the situation in Japan in general at the key moment of economic and cultural transition at end of the 1980s. Two decades later it seems as if *kawaii* is reinvented as the soft power tool to boost Japanese economy in the age of globalization. The attractive aspects of Japanese popular culture have changed from what Iwabuchi Kôichi dubs “odourless” products and brand names to the current interest in performative and participatory elements.

This is true for *kawaii* aspects of visual arts produced by Murakami Takashi and his associates as well. Cute and art as the new “odour” of Japanese culture has joined forces through the promotion of Murakami related art. Art works by Murakami and other Neo-Pop artists appear to a domestic Japanese audience as *mu-kokuseki*, without nationality, because of these artists’ commercial success on the international art market, while the same type of works are being promoted for an international audience as exotically “Japanese.” The art scene

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<sup>297</sup> *ibid.*, 30.

activates the “marketing boomerang” that other companies within Japan’s creative industries have done successfully in the first decade of the twenty-first century.

When examining the concept of *kawaii*, we see how the different trajectories of the socioaesthetic are at work. Artists manifest personal everyday experience of negotiating *kawaii* in the social and cultural sphere of contemporary popular culture and interpret and transform such experiences into formal properties of the artwork. At the same time, other actors in the complex field intersecting art environment, cultural politics and national identity explore the same concept, as when official Japan now seems to be embracing and even exporting aspects of *kawaii* as a strategy to gain the control of the subversive. In this process of flattening the depths of critical encounters and softening the sharpness of subversive resistance, the social critique inherent in *kawaii* culture thus becomes silenced. By assimilating and mainstreaming the culture of *kawaii* and furthermore exporting *kawaii* out of its original context, specific socio-political aspects get lost, or transformed into something else.

After the triple disaster of earthquake, tsunami and nuclear meltdown in Japan in 2011, the aesthetics of *kawaii* in Japan is vanishing. The socioaesthetic trajectories of the contemporary art scene have moved away from *kawaii* and towards new types of relational aesthetics. While the official Japan in the months after the disasters promoted discourses of national unity, contemporary artists explored the potential for disclosing social issues through the performative and participatory aspects inherent in relationships and networks, whether these are virtual on social media or community-based in the regions of the north-eastern Tōhoku area.<sup>298</sup> Based on performance and experience rather than representation and symbolic value, the elements of formal artistic properties appear to become even more integrated with the sensory and corporeal aesthetics of everyday life as the “socio” gains the upper hand in the socioaesthetics in contemporary Japanese visual arts.

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298 L.M. Thorsen, “Aesthetics of Concern: Art in the Wake of the Triple Disaster of North-Eastern Japan and Hurricane Katrina”, COPAS- *Current Objectives of Postgraduate American Studies* Vol. 14, No. 2, 2014 (forthcoming).