

Book Review

**Review of Katarzyna J. Cwiertka and
Ewa Machotka, eds.,
*Consuming Life in Post-Bubble Japan:
A Transdisciplinary Perspective*
(Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2017)**

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Based on a project that set out to explore the intersection between waste and art,¹ *Consuming Life in Post-Bubble Japan: A Transdisciplinary Perspective* is a collection of studies that analyse consumption in post-bubble Japan from various perspectives and disciplines.² The introduction segues swiftly from Japanese consumption, to art and capital, to waste and sustainable energy, and returns to the value of the study of art before providing an elaborate overview of the eleven chapters. The focus of the studies is thus fairly diverse, and in spite of the relatively frequent mention of art in the introduction, it comprises the central theme of the final four chapters only. The remaining studies analyse aspects of mass and individual consumption, and waste, with a somewhat more socio-economic take on phenomena than the central theme might suggest. They apply “how” rather than “why” questions, which the editors explain demonstrate that “contemporary life in Japan is a ‘consuming project,’ in which the meaning and the value of objects is insubstantial.”³ Several key issues nevertheless permeate the volume irrespective of subject matter. Among these are the impact of age and gender on consumption patterns, the triple disaster of 2011, and sustainability.

In the opening chapter on department stores in post-bubble Japan Hendrik Meyer-Ohle provides a brief but compelling survey of the outlets’ struggle to remain relevant in the face of today’s drastically

different consumer demands. Long considered the authorities on style and etiquette, the companies now seek to build their reputation online. The ways in which they do so make for an intriguing read, but the discussion of online advice would have benefited considerably from a genuine comparison with competing online retailers, and at least one non-Japanese department store. When arguing, for example, that “the inclusion of food is a major distinction of the web pages and online business of Japanese department stores in comparison to those in other countries,” it appears the author did not check any Korean or Chinese department store websites as they, too, tend to abound in food offers on the home page.⁴ The author nevertheless makes the important observations that department stores have come to recognise that as a result of the declining birth rate the major life events that have long been their bread and butter can no longer be relied on, and that the retirement of Japan’s post-war baby boom generation may prove crucial to the stores’ survival since it continues to hold them as the arbiters of style.⁵

Stephanie Assmann’s study of fast fashion in Japan begins with a detailed overview of social classes and income distribution since the 1950s, including the decline in disposable income and consumption expenditures in the past two decades. The author considers the effects of deregulation on workers in permanent employment, and women in particular, and what this implies in terms of disposable income.⁶ Particularly interesting in the analysis of the rise of UNIQLO and MUJI that ensues, is the companies’ attention to sustainability and ethical consumption, as it might appear to run counter to their high turnover formula. An excerpt from an interview with a single informant is to demonstrate that Japanese consumers view fast fashion retailers as brands and as such to be representing a quality standard, but the words cited are inconclusive and much more is needed to get to the essence of brand consciousness.⁷ Also somewhat puzzling is why Louis Vuitton’s decision to enter the Japanese market without a local distributor is presented as one of the factors contributing to its success.⁸ Competing conglomerates such as Zara and H&M and the high-end fashion house of Louis Vuitton are briefly considered too, though there is no mention of these retailers’ attention to ethical consumption. Assmann concludes that

the rise of the fast fashion format has led to “consumers who combine the purchase of exclusive fashion items and accessories with low-priced fast-fashion items, while at the same time pursuing sustainability and ethical consumption.”⁹ To what extent they pursue these, and to what extent the fashion houses are catering to women shoppers in particular, is not clear, though they are likely to regard their high-end fashion purchases as sustainable, or even, as Borggreen notes in her chapter, as a critique of excess.¹⁰

Gavin Whitelaw’s subsequent chapter on convenience stores takes a close look at a format that has proven most adept at responding to changes in consumer needs and behaviour. Despite their seeming ubiquity, however, *konbini* continue to make efforts to reach remote locations, sometimes through mobile units.¹¹ Interesting outcomes of their success and high visibility are that some retail chains are required to collaborate with the local community in order to minimize resistance to their establishment, and that artists have incorporated the format in projects to comment on mass consumption.¹² I expected more on the format’s iconic significance in the final section of the chapter, but it is instead dedicated to a description of the author’s experiences relying on *konbini* food exclusively for a period of one month. The great amount of plastic waste the author accumulates in his apartment leads him on a quest to find suitable *konbini* bins to deposit it into. It is unclear what the rationale for this is, and why this section ends with a brief discussion of third places. A fair number of references were missing too, which considering the fieldwork had been conducted a decade and a half ago, makes this chapter itself seem a little like a by-product of sorts.

While the previous chapter shows that due in part to their offer of fast food, convenience stores are a significant part of the Japanese consumers’ sense of national identity, co-editor Katarzyna Cwiertka’s own chapter presents the argument that *Washoku* has been a successfully crafted tradition of national cuisine. She carefully recounts the development of the practice and its name, reaching as far back as the late nineteenth century. Although she finds traces of the term throughout the twentieth century, it was used to refer to food that was eaten in restaurants, as opposed to food cooked at home, which is what the term has now

been successfully made to define. She then explains the reasons for the Japanese government's application to have *Washoku* recognized as an intangible cultural heritage by UNESCO, as deriving from "the declining competitiveness of Japan in the global marketplace, the low esteem of the Japanese population about the achievements of their country, and the country's food self-sufficiency ratio of just 40 per cent, one of the lowest in the industrialized world."¹³ It is a convincing piece of work, which, among other things, shows why Korea's failed bid to have "Royal Cuisine of the Joseon dynasty" recognized is ironically partly responsible for a newly crafted Japanese tradition.

Ofra Goldstein-Gidoni's chapter on domesticity in post-bubble Japan studies the crucial role state-induced female domesticity has played in post-disaster Japan's retrogressive nationalist discourse. It argues that by commercializing the role of housewives, magazines have exerted considerable influence on what their readership has come to regard as ideal forms of behaviour and consumption. Featuring a number of idols of domesticity who appeal to the readership because they portray themselves as being actively and happily engaged in their subservience,¹⁴ the magazines' success derives from their embedding of ideals of independence, youthfulness and romance into a package that is ultimately conservative and anti-feminist. It is an important chapter that, among other things, allows for a critical engagement with contemporary discourses around cultural nationalism and gender, and Abe's womenomics.

The next two chapters by respectively Fabio Gygi and Jennifer Robertson look at Japanese perceptions of waste from very different angles. While the former focuses on the phenomenon of hoarders and their perception among the average Japanese consumer, the latter examines robot reincarnation and the ways in which Japanese society disposes of its rubbish. Having described the public perception of hoarders since the mid-1990s, Gygi retraces how mass consumption has been viewed before the Japanese economic bubble burst. In doing so, he relies rather heavily on Bourdieu and Baudrillard's views of consumption in relation to social status, which somewhat limits the value of the deliberation to Japanese conditions; it is followed by a brief

review of the general Japanese notion of second-hand goods as opposed to new ones, and a more elaborate section on the notion of *mottainai* (wastefulness) that go some way toward answering the questions raised on the chapter's opening pages. Robertson's chapter helpfully readjusts the focus on Japanese notions of rubbish, before discussing artistic projects that question the relationship between artefact and art. She explains that humanoid robots have been created to fulfil a myriad of roles, including the preservation of Japanese customs and traditional performing arts. Arguing that automation continues post-war unabatedly on account of it being preferred to replacement migration, she considers the implications of having become "the most robotized country in the world" in terms of waste.¹⁵ In order to answer what happens to aging, defective, inoperative or damaged robots, the second part of her chapter engages in a fascinating discussion of robot funerals and reincarnation.

Gunhild Borggreen's chapter is the first of the final section that focuses on art and consumption exclusively and as such serves as an excellent introduction to related work. Opening with a mostly sociological review of Japanese mass consumption in the 1970s and 1980s, she shows how affluence and the immediate absence of socio-political activism, gave way to the promotion of individualised consumption among the *shinjinrui* (new people/breed) as a creative, self-defining undertaking. Borggreen deliberates the value of artists' interpretations to discussions of socio-political issues and addresses the three ways in which artworks have reflected on consumption: those that directly comment on representations of consumption; those that become consumer products themselves; and those that engage with the social concerns of local communities.¹⁶ While some artists like Morimura Yasumasa, whose work graces the volume's cover, have reflected on individual consumption, others have begun to explore more community-oriented values.¹⁷ The work of Murakami Takashi is included in the discussion, in part, because it represents a blurring of artistic and commercial interests, and in part, because his creation Mr. DOB from the early 1990s occupies a space in between high art and popular culture, much like the art toy movement that it helped to spark.

Hayashi Michio's chapter focuses on the loss of a truly Japanese

countryside. It is premised by a brief discussion of a series of fictional essays from 1971, in which author by Matsuda Masao argued that an authentic Japanese landscape (*fūkei*) was lost to state-led urbanization under the guidance of former PM Tanaka Kakuei. The author then introduces the literary criticism and photographic art-based magazine PROVOKE, from the late 1960s, which fails to correspond with any of the central themes of this volume. Although the magazine could be considered as a critique of the commodification of local landscapes by domestic tourism campaigns like Discover Japan, its style ended up being appropriated by the latter. Michio shows that the campaign also appropriated the anti-individualistic Mono-ha movement of the early 1970s. The appropriation, and the fact that both the campaign and the movement drew on the ideas of author Kawabata Yasunari on the Japanese landscape, point to, so the author argues, “a seismic epistemic shift” that took place around 1970.¹⁸ It is surprising that the discourse around *furusato* is only briefly alluded to at this point (it reappears in Machotka’s chapter) and that the author turns, instead, to what are mostly personal musings on the Japanese landscape’s replacement with simulacra, punishing the innocent reader with sentences such as, “Philosophically speaking, this, I argue, was the critical moment when the ‘modernist’ or ‘phenomenological’ construction of the subject, based on the transcendental-ontological ‘home’ (in the sense of Heidegger’s *Heim*), became something like an object of nostalgia and was replaced by the ‘semiotic’ or ‘structuralist’ model, in which the transcendental ground of one’s subjectivity became nothing but an object of simulation or negative theology.”¹⁹ Although further ruminations on the experience of “post-landscape” follow in an epilogue on the later work of artist Sugimoto Hiroshi, they still fail to justify this study’s inclusion in this volume.

The last two chapters by co-editors Ewa Machotka and Kasuya Akiko, respectively, examine two local art initiatives. Machotka explores the art initiative of the Echigo-Tsumari Art Field in Niigata Prefecture and the harmonious coexistence of humans and nature through socio-ecological production, or *satoyama*, it seeks to cultivate. Since 2000, the initiative has hosted an Art Triennale, which features a few hundred

artworks from participating artists and draws hundreds of thousands of visitors. The 2012 edition of the Triennale included the award-winning “Australia House,” which is a kind of open viewing pavilion that allows the occupier to experience the very landscape that Michio in the previous chapter argued had been lost. Machotka notes that the project is a little ironic due to it being partly made of cedar, which represents a major threat to Japan’s biodiversity. Nevertheless, the structure also reuses local materials, which she argues raises the question of whether reusing existing materials is synonymous with recycling out of environmental concerns. To answer this, she explores a range of installations from the same Triennale, though only to arrive at a new question: the relationship between *satoyama* and what may fall under “sustainable art.”²⁰ The latter concept is challenged, so she shows in the ensuing section, by the scope of the Art Field and its many activities. Kasuya’s chapter provides an overview of some of the installations at the 2012 Tatsuno Art Project in Hyogo Prefecture, and the 2011 Displacement exhibition the author curated at the Kyoto City University of Arts. It comprises a series of detailed accounts and personal interpretations of the artworks, which she argues explored daily life through the recycling of everyday items, memories, and places.²¹ The descriptive nature of this chapter seems a little out of place in an academic volume, despite the various chapters recognising art as an important framework and discipline.

Consuming Life in Post-Bubble Japan is a well-edited compilation of mostly rigorous studies on a wide range of topics, including mass consumption, responses to the triple disaster, art and sustainability, and local community values. While the intersection between art and consumption is not considered in much depth in the introduction, many of its aspects are explored in the chapters instead. Since editors tend to be at the mercy of their contributors, the omission of specific aspects is somewhat inevitable, but I would have loved to learn more about, for example, changes in consumption patterns among the younger generations, the consumption of national produce or second-hand items more generally, or Japanese consumption of high-end fashion. But as a collection of studies of consumption in post-bubble Japan, this collection certainly holds its own. I would recommend it to anyone interested in

Japanese mass consumption and class distinction in post-bubble Japan, in issues of art and sustainability, in social and artistic responses to the triple disaster, and in issues of gender disparity in consumption and employment in contemporary Japan.

Notes

¹ The link provided to the exhibition that preceded the volume is no longer active, but information on the broader project can still be found at <https://www.garbagemattersproject.com>.

² Katarzyna J. Cwiertka and Ewa Machotka, eds., *Consuming Life in Post-Bubble Japan: A Transdisciplinary Perspective* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2017), 12.

³ *Ibid.*, 17.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 37. See also www.lotteshopping.com; www.shinsegae.com; www.ccoymc.com; www.themalls-bop.com.

⁵ Cwiertka and Machotka, eds., *Consuming Life in Post-Bubble Japan*, 46.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 53–55.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 58–59.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 63.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 64.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 183.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 71–72.

¹² *Ibid.*, 77. Although Majima Ryōichi's Majimart project from early 2000 brings to mind Andy Warhol's flawed Supermarket project, it was considerably more intelligent; Tom Wolfe, "Chester Gould Versus Roy Lichtenstein," in *Commerce and Culture: From Pre-industrial Art to Post-industrial Value*, ed. Stephen Bayley (Kent: Penshurst Press Ltd., 1989), 39–40.

¹³ Cwiertka and Machotka, eds., *Consuming Life in Post-Bubble Japan*, 64.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 115.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 161.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 178, 183.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 188.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 206.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 208.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 226.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 250.