

City of Girls

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City of Girls *1

The concept for this presentation was born out of discussions which took place in 1999 between the Commissioner, Arata Isozaki, and myself as curator of the Venice Biennale's Japanese National Pavilion for the 7th International Exhibition of Architecture. We agreed that Massimiliano Fuksas' theme "City: Less Aesthetics, More Ethics" really was urging us to rethink our concepts of the system in which the city's structure conforms to and contributes in the overall image of our age. I thought that this was especially true in Japan where the political, economic, social and educational scenes are fractured by "structural fatigue," with everything becoming frayed and exposed.

From which standpoint can we as Japanese propose ethics? "We can only think of gender," said Isozaki. "Well then, I want to focus on Girls," I replied. Why?

Let me first define the meaning of GIRLS as "that splendid existence" which occurs before a young female is drawn into a system of gender-bias, and the separation of masculinity and femininity. The poet, William Wordsworth, once said of youth: "...nothing can bring back the hour/Of splendour in the grass, of glory in the flower." Yet, Girls at present are more déraciné a French word meaning rootless weeds. In the Japanese Family System, the framework of a Father-dominated structure disappeared long ago. Today's Girls find that the only secure proof of their own existence is in their bodies...they flow and roam in and around the city. There is no conscious decision made forming a division between what is inside and what is outside. Like life within

an environment constantly under phosphorescent lighting, everything looks flat and undistinguishable and this creature Girl while comfortable here, lacks the knowledge of how to deal with the dark. However, she is not isolated, since her thumb is in constant movement - in instant communication on a cellular phone that can reach her friends and fellow creatures.

Her instinctive feeling, a tactile antenna, has throughout history pursued the ideal of Pure Beauty. When she judges adults as disgusting or ugly, the Girl shows physical responses immediately towards the object of disgust, whether it be the shape of a body, or the odor of the body or breath, even the adult voice. The materialistic and media-oriented environments of the multilayered city amplify her metaphysical reactions to that physical stimulus.

The entire psychological and even the fleshy existence of these Girls has become a sensory apparatus. And these sensors are the core of what the curation of the Japanese Pavilion intends to present, consider and criticise about the contemporary city. The way these Girls live may strike us as negative and unpleasant to us - a phenomenon due to the combination of toughness and kitsch taste they display - but I would like to discover in them the future of the 21st century City.

Territory of Girls *2

Looking back to that point in the 1970's when the genre of Girls' Comics was born, we probably should have been able to predict that this phenomenon would lead to the appearance of the kind of Girls we now see all over the country, and who have such tremendous impact upon the cities of Japan. Amazingly, the faces and body language of the Girls appearing in illustrated media at that time were largely dismissed by serious adults as insignificant, cheap stereotypes, while in fact they were already evolving into new standards of social communi-

cation for Girls and Girls-to-be.

With totally different characteristics from the female image of any previous decade, this new Girl type was developing into a printed heroine while also generating impetus for the red carpet introduction of their virtual reality counterparts into the age of digital media.

That the character of real Girls developed out of the artificial imagery which preceded them - a kind of conclusive phenomenon - is remarkable, as Girls of matching body proportions derived from cartoon prototypes began filling the streets of Japanese cities with figures exhibiting nearly identical skin color, the same eyes, the same voices, faces and make-up.

In Japanese vocabulary, the word "kawaii" is one that fits all circumstances and expresses the perceived charming qualities of dress, accessories, interior design, writing stationery and...well, everything. Literally meaning "cute," the word is most often used to indicate a trendy fetishism that implies a depth of caring - even love - for some material thing or media object.

When the majority of Girls show an interest in an item or product, it quickly emerges as a mainstream trend in the consumer marketplace. "Loose socks" (thick cotton long socks which are worn loosely hanging between the knee and ankle - often held up by glue or tape), "Tamagotchi" (the digital pet which must be fed and nurtured to prevent it from dying), "Purikura" (personalized photo stickers dispensed by a vending machine), and the newest and smallest "Keitai" (cellular phones) are just a few of the many products that are vitalized within the Japanese market by these Girls. It is not a question of good or bad taste; it doesn't matter whether the item is digital or analog: when the thing these Girls care about has been declared THEIR favorite, THEIR territory, its status as such is all that matters.

The city in such cases as this may not actually be too far removed from the urban images we recall from the film "Blade Runner," in which a contemporary Asian sense is mingled with that of the West in a vivid depiction of a chaotic situation similar to the real present. The character of Rachael in the film represents the artificially idealized, stylized android woman - manmade and provided with implanted memories of a nonexistent childhood, as well as with computer created snapshots of herself as a 6-year-old with parents she never really had, supporting and renewing the manufactured memories in her brain or data processor.

In the same way, each of us has private memories which help us to establish our identities and grasp the reality of our own individual existence, separate from those of others. Take these memories away and what do we have left? And what about the Girls of the 21st Century and the new millennium...especially those who do not have fond memories of a real home and a vital urban existence? The singleminded determination one observes when they choose even a trivial course of action may be the result of a desperation and an insecurity which many adults can never really fully fathom.

Girls say that they have to generate their own memories, that they have to establish memories of the present and of the future. The blank spaces created by the architects Sejima/Nishizawa at this pavilion provide a floating space in time where these Girls can begin to wander among their new reminiscences.

Do they dream of electric sheep? I wonder. *3

*1 The term "Shōjo Toshi" (City of Girls) first appeared in the title of a "Jōkyō Gekijyū" (Red Tent Theatre Troupe) play by Jyuro Kara in 1969.

*2 The term "Shōjo Ryōiki" (Territory of Girls) is the title of a 1999 book by the author Eiri Takahara.

*3 "Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?" is the title of the original 1968 Science Fiction novel by Philip K. Dick which later became source material for the movie "Blade Runner."