



Popular Culture and Gender Issues in Miwa Yanagi's Art Practice A Critical Approach Towards Images of Identity and Femininity Currently Circulating in Japanese Popular Culture

This paper explores the crossover between art and popular culture in the art practice of the contemporary Japanese artist Miwa Yanagi, arguing that her art works seem to take a critical approach towards images of identity - and above all images of femininity - currently circulating in Japanese popular culture. At the same time, this paper also demonstrates that Miwa Yanagi's works appear to engage in issues of identity and gender from a more overall and philosophical perspective, in a way which moves beyond an entirely Japanese context. Note: all illustrations included by courtesy of the artist.

By Krestina Skirl

This paper concerns the art practice of the contemporary Japanese artist Miwa Yanagi (b. 1967) which can be said to be of current interest. Not only because Miwa Yanagi was appointed as artist for the Japanese Pavilion at the 53rd Venice Biennale of Art held in 2009. But also because her art practice forms part of a newer tendency in Japanese contemporary art which refers to or interacts with social and economical dimensions in contemporary Japanese society. This tendency of interaction with social and economical dimensions of society is of course not only the prerogative of Japanese contemporary art in particular, but seems to be present today in the art practice of several artists on the international art scene in general.

In both a Japanese and international art context, Miwa Yanagi is considered to be one of the most recognized, contemporary Japanese photo and video artists (Grigoteit et al. 2004, Hara 2005, Yamaguchi 2007). In addition to being appointed as a representative of Japan at the Venice Biennale of Art, her work has been exhibited internationally in numerous solo and group exhibitions since 1996 and is represented in several museum-collections in both Japan and abroad.¹ Living

¹ In an exhibition context, Miwa Yanagi has, among other things, been categorized as a representative of contemporary Japanese photography in for example the group show *Illusion. Japanese Photography* at Kulturhuset in Stockholm in 2001 and in 2002 at Museet for Fotokunst, Brandts Klædefabrik in Odense as well as in the group show *The History of Japanese Photography* at The Museum of Fine Arts in Houston in 2003.

and working in Kyoto where she completed a Master's degree in Art Research at Kyoto City University of Arts and held her first solo exhibition in 1993, Miwa Yanagi has been experimenting with photography, video and computer graphics for years to create art works which are centred on the subject of women. Her works present various images of femininity and different types of women, but in a way which challenges existing gender roles. Through strategies of identity-play, reminiscent of those employed by other contemporary artists like Mariko Mori, Yasumasa Morimura and Cindy Sherman, Miwa Yanagi's art works challenge our expectations of matters such as self, gender and age. Furthermore,

Miwa Yanagi has also been represented more broadly as an international photo artist in for example the group exhibition *Prospect 96* at Schirn Kunsthalle in Frankfurt in 1996 together with the American artist Cindy Sherman, the Canadian artist Jeff Wall and the British artist Sam Taylor-Wood. And, more recently, she has been categorized as a representative of international photo and video art in the group show *Still/Motion: Liquid Crystal Painting* at Mie Prefectural Art Museum, The National Museum of Art, Osaka and Tokyo Metropolitan Museum of Photography in 2008. Furthermore, Miwa Yanagi has been placed in the context of contemporary Japanese art in general in for example the group exhibition *Gendai: Japanese Contemporary Art – Between the Body and Space* at Centre for Contemporary Art in Warsaw in 2000 and *Roppongi Crossing – New Visions in Contemporary Japanese Art* at Mori Art Museum in 2004. Finally, her work has been recognized in the context of contemporary East Asian art in for example the exhibition *Everyday: Contemporary Art from China, Japan, Korea and Thailand* at GL STRAND in Copenhagen in 2003.



through a multimedial and complex aesthetic which combines not only different types of media such as photography, video, computer technology, sound and text, but also several forms of artistic expression such as for example performance, film and poetry. Miwa Yanagi's works often launch a crossover between art and popular culture that challenges our conventional conception of an art work.

In this context, I would like to discuss the relationship between art and popular culture in Miwa Yanagi's art practice and will do so by concentrating on her two artistic series *Elevator Girls* (1994-1999) and *My Grandmothers* (1999-) which - contrary to her other artistic series *Fairy Tale* (2004-2006) and *Windswept Women* (2009) that were both also represented in a large installation at the Venice Biennale of Art - interact more explicitly with social and economical dimensions of society. Thus, I will argue that her art works scrutinize aspects of Japanese popular culture by appropriating elements from and engaging in themes central to consumer culture. I will in particular be arguing that *Elevator Girls* and *My Grandmothers* seem to take a critical approach towards images of identity - and above all images of femininity - currently circulating in Japanese popular culture. Yet at the same time, one of my main arguments will be that Miwa Yanagi's art works also appear to engage in issues of identity and gender from a more overall perspective, in a way which moves beyond an entirely Japanese context.²

Elevator Girls (1994-1999)

Miwa Yanagi's photographic series *Elevator Girls* which consists of 22 individual works altogether presents women performing as elevator girls, once a particular occupation for young women in Japanese department stores, where they were hired to operate elevators, assist customers and look nice.³ Elevator girls were also required to wear a special uniform and perform a choreography consisting of repeatedly elegant arm-movements and bows in front of customers, in order to

² For example, the Japanese art critic Yuko Hasegawa has stated that Miwa Yanagi, along with other contemporary Japanese artists, tries to establish a more complete national identity in her art works, as a consequence of a general "crisis of masculinity" in Japanese society, caused by lack of a secure feeling of identity among Japanese men. However, in my opinion and as I will argue in the following, Miwa Yanagi's works seem to engage in the subject of identity on a more general and philosophical level, rather than just portraying a specific Japanese identity (Hasegawa 2002).

³ The *Elevator Girls* series is accessible via Miwa Yanagi's internet homepage <http://www.yanagimiwa.net>.

make them feel especially welcome. In Miwa Yanagi's photographic works, the elevator girls appear in sceneries which are reminiscent of those where real elevator girls can be found, such as department stores or shopping arcades.



Miwa Yanagi: *Elevator Girls / Elevator Girl House 1F* (240 x 200 cm, 1997)

However, if we take a closer look at these sceneries, they appear somewhat strange and almost unreal - almost like sceneries from a science fiction movie - which has to do with the fact that they do not exist in reality but are created by means of computer graphics. The *Elevator Girls* series consists of so called image-syntheses which are transformed into hyper-realistic compositions. Compositions that, on the one hand, seduce us to see the sceneries as real and, on the other hand, call attention to the fact that they are fictitious. There is also something artificial about the elevator girls who seem lifeless and apparently do not have any mutual contact. Furthermore, they all look so alike - not only because of their identical uniforms, but also in terms of similar looks - that they get a doll-like character. The elevator girls give the impression of being devoid of any personality and identity and appear, more than as different individuals, as repetitions of each other.

In all the works in the *Elevator Girls* series, we can find various references to consumer culture by virtue of the department store-like sceneries and the repeating subject of the elevator girl which is a figure that is in particular linked to Japanese consumer culture. But there are also other references to Japanese consumer culture, as for example in the work *The White Casket* (1994) where three elevator girls are being gradually transformed into what seems to be a pool of red colour or maybe even blood which is again changed into a pattern of red drops that resembles the pattern of the



wrapping paper of the Japanese department store Mitsukoshi.



Miwa Yanagi: *Elevator Girls / The White Casket* (90 x 77 cm x 4, 1994)

Finally, there are references to consumer culture in the *Elevator Girls* series by virtue of the design that the works themselves have. They resemble large-scale commercial posters or light box advertisements as they are composed of high-quality, large-scale, and glossy prints, and are often displayed in light boxes. Having a glamorous outlook and presenting young and beautiful women posing like models Miwa Yanagi's works more specifically seem to appropriate the iconography from fashion photography. The artificiality and severely constructed realism as well as the exaggerated retouching, present in the images of the *Elevator Girls* series, is also very much a characteristic trait of fashion photography.

The presentation of numerous repetitions of young, beautiful, but doll-like women in the *Elevator Girls* series can be read as a critical comment on the homogenizing image of femininity and ideals of feminine beauty which are created in and distributed by means of the various representational systems of consumer culture. Miwa Yanagi's works can be said to address how consumer culture - by virtue of commodities and advertisements - fixes women in stereotyped images, and they seem to call attention to the anonymous uniformity resulting from women trying to conform to this image, among other things through their own consumption.⁴

In this context, the employment of the figure of the elevator girl in Miwa Yanagi's works appears to take the critique of the existing images and ideals of femininity even further, since this figure in itself holds several elements of artificiality. During her working day in a department store, an elevator girl is not only obligated to wear a special uniform. She also has to repeat the same rehearsed gestures over and over again, in order to please the customers and facilitate their shopping experience. The job of an elevator girl is in other words marked very much by routine and involves strict rules with regard to dressing and appearance. Therefore, the figure of the elevator girl can be said to already contain aspects that are also characteristic of dolls or even robots. In addition, there are elements of ritual and role playing in the job of an elevator girl, exactly because she has to dress and perform in a particular manner. Miwa Yanagi has pointed out herself that to her the figure of the elevator

⁴ This interpretation of the *Elevator Girls* series is inspired by the reading of the same series in: Gunhild Borggreen, 2003.



girl, on a symbolic level, illustrates the idea that all people - Japanese or non-Japanese - carry a kind of a "uniform". That we all, in our everyday life, dress in accordance with or act out particular roles.⁵

This last matter has been explored further by the American gender studies scholar Judith Butler through her conception of "the subject as performance" which was first introduced in 1990 in her book *Gender Trouble* (Butler, 1999, 1993). By means of this concept Judith Butler is defining subjectivity, and in particular gender subjectivity, as some sort of role-playing and as something without an essential core. In other words, subjectivity and gender are regarded as historically and culturally determined categories that are incorporated in and formed according to particular social and discursive practices. In Judith Butler's view one is not *born* a man or a woman, but rather *becomes* one through what she calls "gender performativity" - performances of actions in conformity with the existing norms of masculinity and femininity. According to Judith Butler, our identity is shaped through the choices we make in terms of, for example, the choice of our partner in life and the way we behave and dress. However, these choices must always fit into the existing gender roles. Hence, identity and gender are understood by Judith Butler neither as pre-existing nor fixed categories, but as dynamic entities that are socially and discursively "constructed".

Miwa Yanagi's *Elevator Girls* series seems to introduce a parallel conception of identity and gender. For instance, the repeated presentation of women performing as elevator girls can be interpreted as a strategy of masquerade used by the artist in order to stress that the ritualized and theatrical aspects, already inherent in the figure of the elevator girl, are also essential traits of the feminine identity in general. By means of the figure of the elevator girl, femininity is in Miwa Yanagi's works presented as a "masquerade", a form of role-playing or performance. Instead as something unique, femininity seems to be portrayed as an *effect* or *product*, not only of particular actions performed by different women, but also of the images of women that contemporary consumer culture distributes.

Miwa Yanagi is neither the only nor the first artist to explore these issues. In the context of contemporary Japanese art, the Japanese artist Yasumasa Morimura (b. 1951) has, since the mid 1980s, portrayed identity and gender as a form of role-playing by posing in several photographic works as, among other things, different feminine icons well known from Western popular

culture such as Marilyn Monroe, Marlene Dietrich and Madonna. Yasumasa Morimura's works parody conventional and stereotypical female representations by creating photographic performances that hold and display a deliberate erroneousness. This erroneousness is intensified by the fact that Yasumasa Morimura, in his embodiment of primarily western feminine icons, is accentuating rather than hiding his masculine and Asian features. By openly staging himself as an Asian man disguised as a Western feminine ideal, Yasumasa Morimura emphasizes that his performance as a woman is a masquerade. His works thereby seem to imply that the real women which he represents are also playing or adjusting to a role.⁶

Furthermore, a similar strategy of masquerade in relation to phenomena of Japanese popular culture has been employed by the female artist Mariko Mori (b. 1967) in her early works from the mid-1990s. In computer-manipulated photographs, she has repeatedly staged herself in various types of roles and costumes at different public places in Tokyo and often in the role of a character reminiscent of well-known characters from popular *manga* or *anime* series, wearing costumes with clear references to the costumes of the heroines in these series. As in Miwa Yanagi's *Elevator Girls* series, the characters in Mariko Mori's works also appear very doll-like or robot-like, and the artist's performances thereby call attention to the artificial and stereotypical elements of female representations in *shôjo manga* and *anime* in general.⁷

My Grandmothers (1999-)

In Miwa Yanagi's subsequent series *My Grandmothers* the strategy of masquerade is also employed. For the time being, the series - which is a work in progress - consists of 25 individual photographic portraits of seemingly elderly women and is made in collaboration with the people that Miwa Yanagi is portraying. For instance, she has asked various women and in some cases also men - mostly in their 20s and 30s - to tell how they see themselves in 50 years in the role of a grandmother. Afterwards, she has staged their visions of the future in separate photographs and made them look 50 years older, using computer graphics and special effects make-up. Moreover, each photographic

⁵ Author's interview with Miwa Yanagi at The National Museum of Modern Art Kyoto, September 20th 2005. See also Wakasa, 2002.

⁶ For further readings on Yasumasa Morimura's work in relation to the subjects of identity and gender, see for example Gunhild Borggreen, 2003; Tina Raun, 2002; Kolesch and Lehmann, 2002; and Bryson, 1996.

⁷ For further readings on Mariko Mori's work, see for example Bryson, 1998-1999 and Hasegawa, 2002.



portrait is attended by a text, reminiscent of those one can find in diaries, with words or statements stemming from the person portrayed.⁸ *My Grandmothers* thus represents different fantasies of being aged, rather than ageing itself, which is made clear to the beholder by virtue of the presentation, in each picture, of women with extremely stylized old faces, not old faces themselves. But also through the behaviour of these women who generally act more like young people than old people.⁹



Miwa Yanagi: *My Grandmothers* / YUKA (160 x 160 cm, 2000)

In the portrait of YUKA, for example, we encounter an elderly Japanese woman, crossing the Golden Gate Bridge on a motor cycle together with a young man who, we learn from the accompanying text, is her rich lover. So in this portrait, we see a woman who is not only acting, but also dressing in a way which is usually associated with youthfulness. Furthermore, we can read in the text that, although YUKA has children and grandchildren, she has not seen them in several years. She is apparently living an independent life far away from her family. In the portrait of YUKA - as in all the other portraits presented in *My Grandmothers* - the conventional role of the grandmother is transformed into something new and radically different. And though most of the women who Miwa Yanagi is collaborating with in this series are at an age where

⁸ All the portraits in *My Grandmothers* including texts are accessible via Miwa Yanagi's internet homepage <http://www.yanagimiwa.net>.

⁹ A similar reading of *My Grandmothers* has been put forward in Herbstreuth, 2004.

they ought to be engaged with marriage and creating a family, none of them appear to be thinking about the own future in the context of a conventional family-system.

As the photographs in *Elevator Girls*, the portraits in *My Grandmothers* share stylistic traits with the imagery of popular culture since they have the same colourful look and clearly staged quality that a lot of images circulating in popular culture also have. Moreover, there are references to popular culture by virtue of some of the characters portrayed in *My Grandmothers*, as is the case with the portrait of ERIKO which is representing one of the greatest feminine icons in popular culture, the supermodel.



Miwa Yanagi: *My Grandmothers* / ERIKO (120 x 180 cm, 2001)

In this portrait, we see another seemingly old woman, posing as a supermodel on what appears to be a cross between a runway and a gravestone at a cemetery. While the portrait seems to point at the future old age and death of ERIKO, it also presents her in a role which is normally limited to a young person. Performing as an old supermodel with a haggard face, ERIKO is presenting a "reinterpretation" of a feminine popular cultural icon. Her performance challenges the conventional ideal of feminine beauty which is summed up in a youthful and beautiful appearance and which is being dictated in the realm of popular culture, exactly by means of the presentation of young supermodels as feminine icons. But in the portrait of ERIKO, the conventional image of femininity is also challenged at another level. For in the accompanying text, ERIKO is described as "(...) the great actress" and "(...) a fashion super model who traversed all the boundaries - sex, age,



and nationality (...)"¹⁰ So, if we take this description into account, it would seem that the elderly woman we are seeing in the picture is in fact a young man in disguise, and that this man is also of another nationality than Japanese.

The person portrayed in this work is really a young American man named Eric whereas some of the other women who are portrayed in *My Grandmothers* are the same who performed as elevator girls in Miwa Yanagi's *Elevator Girl* series. When Miwa Yanagi worked on the *Elevator Girls* series, she experienced that most of the young women she was using as models were not able to express their dreams and wishes for the future, and she was therefore inspired to create *My Grandmothers*. Miwa Yanagi wanted to get these women to reflect upon their roles in society and make them live out some of their dreams - at least at a fictitious level.¹¹ Thus, the strategy of masquerade, taking place in *My Grandmothers* makes it possible for Miwa Yanagi's models to "play" with their own identity. In the future role of an imaginary grandmother the models are no longer tied to their present situation and are freed from the pressure of the expectations with which they as young women - or men - are currently met.

This way, *My Grandmothers* appears to be illustrating yet another point that has also been made by Judith Butler, namely that precisely because gender roles are mere constructions they are also open to changes (Butler 1999, 1993). The series challenges the accepted image, not only of age, but also of gender roles. It challenges the social role of a grandmother and, at a higher level, it intervenes in the conventional images of women. Furthermore, in the portrait of *ERIKO*, the boundaries between femininity and masculinity, as well as between different nationalities and races, are transgressed or blurred. Hence, whereas the *Elevator Girls* series seems to suggest that the existing images of femininity circulating in Japanese popular culture are stereotyped constructions, the portraits in *My Grandmothers* undermine and change conventional female roles and thereby offer new and different images of women.

Miwa Yanagi's works can thus be said to generate a fruitful dialogue between the sphere of art and the sphere of popular culture. A dialogue which produces new meanings in relation to concepts of identity and

gender as expressed in the discourse of Japanese popular culture. Yet, at the same time, this crossover in Miwa Yanagi's works between art and popular culture also challenges conventional conceptions of art such as, for example, the modernist conception of art as something highly autonomous, separated from society and elements like mass culture and consumer culture. Miwa Yanagi's works create a fusion of two discursive fields which are conventionally considered to be distinct, namely the artistic field on the one hand and the popular cultural field on the other. A fusion which can also be characterised as a strategy of so-called "site-specificity", employed not only by Miwa Yanagi, but by various contemporary artists on the international art scene in general, and where popular culture, in this particular case, functions as a "site" for artistic exploration and critical intervention.¹²

I would like to conclude by arguing that, although some of the criticism inherent in Miwa Yanagi's art practice is aimed at particular aspects of contemporary Japanese society, there also appears to be several elements in her practice that are not necessarily tied to a Japanese context. With regard to the images of femininity which Miwa Yanagi's works scrutinize - that being the representation of women in Japanese popular culture, the conventional image of the supermodel, or the conventional image of the grandmother - similar images are widely distributed in Western culture as well. Moreover, her art practice steps beyond an entirely Japanese context through its engagement with politics of identity and gender since these are subjects that move across different cultures. By relating Miwa Yanagi's art practice to the theories of Judith Butler, I demonstrate that Miwa Yanagi's art works seem to address issues of identity and gender on a more overall philosophical level which is not necessarily tied to a Japanese context, and which - from the point of view of the reception of her art works - makes it possible, not only for Japanese people or people with a good knowledge of Japanese culture, to relate to and identify with the subjects of these works.

Finally, seen from an art historical point of view, issues of identity and gender have long been very privileged on the international art scene in general. The same can be said of the artistic strategy of masquerade which Miwa Yanagi is employing in both the *Elevator Girls* series and *My Grandmothers*, and which has been put into use by several other artists on the international art scene since the 1970s and 1980s. Among others by

¹⁰ For a complete version of the text, see <http://www.yanagimiwa.net>.

¹¹ Interview with Miwa Yanagi in Mullins, 2002/2003, and in Wakasa, 2002.

¹² For a further reading on "site-specificity" as an artistic strategy, see Kwon, 1997.



Cindy Sherman (b. 1954) who - in her various photographic stagings of herself - has deconstructed existing images of femininity by parodically mimicking representations of women and femininity in Western popular culture and displaying these representations as "fake".¹³ Finally, in the context of the Danish contemporary art scene, the artist Jesper Just (b. 1974) also has explored and challenged gender clichés in his video-works and films via strategies of masquerade and through appropriation of the iconography from Hollywood-movies. And the artist Lilibeth Cuenca Rasmussen (b. 1970) has employed masquerades and addressed issues of gender, identity, and society in several performances, music videos, and art films, to name but two examples.¹⁴

Bibliography

- Bonde L. and Sandbye M. (2006) *Manual til dansk samtidskunst*, Copenhagen: Gyldendal 2006
- Borggreen, G. (2003) "Gender in Contemporary Japanese Art", in Joshua S. Mostow, Norman Bryson and Marybeth Graybill (eds.), *Gender and Power in the Japanese Visual Field*, Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press
- Bryson, N. (1998-1999) "Cute Futures. Mariko Mori's Techno-Enlightenment", *Parkett*, vol. 54
- Bryson, N. (1996) "Morimura: 3 Readings", *The Sickness unto Beauty - Selfportrait as Actress*, Yokohama: Yokohama Bijutsukan
- Butler, J. (1999) *Gender Trouble. Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, New York and London: Routledge
- Butler, J. (1993) *Bodies that Matter. On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"*, New York and London: Routledge
- Cruz, A. et al. (2003) *Cindy Sherman. Retrospective*, Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago and The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles. New York: Thames & Hudson.
- Gade, R. and Jalving, C. (2006) *Nybrud – dansk kunst I 1990erne*, Copenhagen: Aschehoug
- Grigoteit, A. and Hütte, F. (2004) "Zwischenstopp in Berlin", Grigoteit, A. and Hütte, F. (eds.), *Miwa Yanagi*, Berlin: Sammlung Deutsche Bank, Deutsche Bank Art, Deutsche Guggenheim
- Hara, T. (2005) "Foreword" in: Hara Museum of Contemporary Art (ed.), *Miwa Yanagi: The Incredible Tale of the Innocent Old Lady and the Heartless Young Girl*, Tokyo: Hara Museum of Contemporary Art
- Hasegawa, Y. (2002) "Post-identity *Kawaii*: Commerce, Gender and Contemporary Japanese Art", Fran Lloyd (ed.), *Consuming Bodies. Sex and Contemporary Japanese Art*, London: Reaktion Books
- Herbstreuth, P. (2004) "Unterschiede im Gleichen - ein Erinnerungsprojekt. Zur Bildkonzeption von Miwa Yanagi", Grigoteit, A. and Hütte, F. (eds.), *Miwa Yanagi*, Berlin: Sammlung Deutsche Bank, Deutsche Bank Art, Deutsche Guggenheim
- Kolesch, D. and Lehmann, A. J. (2002) "Zwischen Szene und Schauraum - Bildinszenierungen als Orte performativer Wirklichkeitskonstitution", Wirth, U. (ed.), *Performanz. Zwischen Sprachphilosophie und Kulturwissenschaften*, Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp
- Kwon, M. (1997) "One Place after Another: Notes on Site Specificity", *October*, no. 80, MIT Press
- Mullins, C. (2002/2003) Interview with Miwa Yanagi in: "Künstlerporträt: Miwa Yanagi in: *Visuell*, Frankfurt: Deutsche Bank Art
- Raun, T. (2002) "Skæve iscenesættelser - om etniske og kønslige "skævejetheder" hos Yasumasa Morimura", *Passepartout - skrifter for kunsthistorie: Globalisering*, No. 20, Institut for Kunsthistorie, Aarhus: Aarhus Universitet
- Wakasa, M. (2002) "Miwa Yanagi", *Journal of Contemporary Art*, New York
- Yamaguchi, Y. (2007) *WARRIORS OF ART. A Guide to Contemporary Japanese Artists*, Tokyo: Kodansha International

¹³ For an extensive overview of Cindy Sherman's work, see Cruz et al., 2003.

¹⁴ For further readings on Jesper Just and Lilibeth Cuenca Rasmussen, see Bonde and Sandbye, 2006; Gade and Jalving, 2006.