

Birgitte Kirkhoff Olsen

Call at me

“Call at Me” is the title of Anne Marie Ploug’s latest exhibition. The paintings depict various types of Japanese girls with phone numbers written on them. The numbers are for real: if you dial one of them, you’ll get through to a real-life massage girl or escort in Tokyo.

The pictures refer to ads for escort-girls found on the city’s pay phones and the title “Call at Me!” is an invitation to follow through and do something about it. The peculiar wording is typical of the Japanese-English used enthusiastically in Japanese commercials, where nonsense slogans (such as “Let’s go sports for the spirit city”) are constructed simply because they sound good. Forget all about meaning or context. In the same way, we are fascinated by their written characters: they look amazing and are incredibly decorative. It is the sensuous materiality (the sight and sound) of the expression that’s being fetichized here. The content is not important as long as the expression is exotic, foreign and flashy.

The arbitrariness of expression is precisely the phenomenon that characterizes postmodernism. Expressions are randomly put together and the context generates meaning. Postmodernism was heralded by pop-art, where the language of commercials and mass-culture was adopted by high culture. “Pop” derives from “popular, populus”, population – it is the taste of the people. Anne Marie Ploug’s paintings represent pop-art of the nineties, simply because she mixes familiar expressions from the commercials of mass-society, playstation and comics. This is where the Japanese element comes in, for is there any society in the world that is as commercialized, kitsch, technologized and modern?

In fact Japan has been modern for about 130 years. In the 1860s Japan opened up to the West, breaking centuries of national isolation. Already at the world exhibition of 1862 in England, general enthusiasm about Japanese art and design prevailed. Edmond de Concourt wrote in 1884: “When I said that Japonisme was in the process of revolutionizing the vision of the European peoples, I meant that Japonisme brought to Europe a new sense of colour, a new decorative system, and, if you like, a poetic imagination in the invention of the objet d’art, which never existed even in the most perfect medieval or Renaissance pieces.” Nothing could be closer to the truth.

Japanese wood carvings inspired the European artist to such an extent, that they (Manet, Whistler, Monet, Degas, Seurat, van Gogh, Gauguin, Toulouse-Lautrec, Signac, the Art Nouveau movement, Klimt and Matisse) worked out a completely new decorative framework, hereby anticipating the heyday of modernity.

The West, however, has also had tremendous influence on Japanese art and society. The country has undergone capitalization in a degree that stuns our last remains of Protestant moderation. Everything is for sale: Schoolgirl’s soiled hygienic towels and dirty underwear are sold in vending machines and certain Western brands are subject to an almost psychotic idolization. Call a hooker while you’re in the phone booth anyway! The Japanese entertainment business has mushroomed into quiz shows (where the participants are humiliated in the most sadistic manner - in one show for instance, losers were taken to the harbour, placed in a large glass cage and transmitted on live-television, while they horrified were lowered into the water) prostitution, amusement arcades and tamagotchis.

The Japanese music industry has been ahead of us for some years. The range of Japanese punk, heavy metal and electronic music has grown, there are nine symphonic orchestras in Tokyo and as

for pop, there's Pizzicato Five, Fantastic Plastic Machine and the Boom Boom Satellites. Popmusic has been a phenomenon in Japan years before it hit Europe. The first popsinger to make the audience go into mass hysteria was Hibari Misora. She made a name for herself with "Tokyo Boogie-Woogie" in 1948 and maintained the lead up to her death. In those days, concerts were held with a live orchestra, Misora's voice coming from the loud-speakers and otherwise an empty stage. This gripping event should be considered in the light of the blooming Japanese karaoke-industry (kara - empty, oke - orchestra), that took off in the seventies, today keeping 6 million Japanese singing every day after work.

Karaoke was introduced to Sam's Bar several years ago and followed up by sushi, Sony playstation and Manga-cartoons. Japan puts out 6 billion publications each year, of which manga accounts for 2,1 billion (pile them on top of each other and it amounts to 180 kilometres - put them side by side on a straight line and you would be able to walk on them straight through Europe). Talk about mass-culture! But don't get it wrong: Perhaps Japan will once again be the country to redeem Western art and carry us into the year 2000. In any case, Western and Eastern culture have mirrored each other in the 20th century: While we -much to our own surprise- find the unscrupulous capitalist auto-representation in the streets of Tokyo, the Japanese prostitutes can see themselves as works of art in a small gallery in Copenhagen.

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