Reflections: Writing Comics into Art History in Contemporary Japan

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In 2015 Japanese publisher Shogakukan completed a collection of lavishly illustrated coffee-table books on Japan's art history (*Nihon bijutsu zenshū*). Each of the 20 hard-cover and boxed volumes in B4 size contains more than 200 mostly full-page color images. While collections like these are a well-established Japanese tradition dating back to the early 1930s, the new edition proves to be exceptional in a number of regards.[1] In addition to the volumes on *Japanese Art in East Asia* (vol. 6) and *War and Art* (vol. 18), it stands out for the inclusion of *manga*, as comics are called in Japanese (Fig. 1).[2] Volume 19, which covers the period from 1945 to 1995, features eight manga works in its main part: two double-spreads of Tezuka Osamu's pioneering graphic narrative *The New Treasure Island* (*Shintakarajima*, 1947; with Sakai Shichima), one pre-print page consisting of six panels from Mizuki Shigeru's *Kitarō of the Graveyard* (*Hakaba no Kitarō*, 1960), one double-spread with eleven panels from Shirato Sanpei's *The Legend of Kamui* (*Kamui-den*, 1964; original ink-drawing with typed dialogue lines pasted into the balloons), one frontispiece page with title and two panels from Akatsuka Fujio's gag manga series *Tensai Bakabon* (1974), two panels from one of Tanioka Yasuji's nonsense manga (*Yasuji no mettametagaki dōkōza*, 1970), single-image illustrations by Nagai Gō (*Devilman*,

1972–1973) and George Akiyama (*Ashura*, 1970–1971) as well as the watercolor picture by Miyazaki Hayao which adorned the cover of volume 6 of his manga *Nausicäa of the Valley of the Wind* (*Kaze no tani no Naushika*, 1993).[3] The editor in charge was Sawaragi Noi, an art critic who had made a name for himself in Japan around 2000, mainly by revisioning modern Japanese art from the perspective of Murakami Takashi and others' Neo-Pop. Due to this focal point, he had also been taking popular forms of visual art into account. With respect to the recent coffee-table book, Sawaragi explicates that "we included manga works in the color illustrations of this volume to an extent beyond comparison with any other collected edition of Japanese art so far", framing this with the

Fig. 1. Volumes 19 and 20 of *Japanese Art* (*Nihon bijutsu zenshū*, Shogakukan 2015) next to some manga in book format (*tankōbon*). Photo by Jaqueline Berndt.

imperative "to not just do away the rise of manga in this era as a mere fashion, but rather ask ourselves how to class it as one form of postwar art".[4]

The above case may appear exceptional within the domain of Japanese art history, but actually it is very much in line with contemporary manga discourse. Firstly, manga is conceived here – even if visually represented by unpanelled images – in the sense of graphic narrative, not caricature or newspaper comic-strip and neither a specific illustration style or character design. In modern Japan, the semantic spectrum of the term *manga* had become broader and broader since 1902, when Kitazawa Rakuten launched a newspaper Sunday supplement under that name.[5] In the 1970s, however, entertaining fiction serialized in special magazines started to predominate the meaning. Accordingly, Japanese comics criticism has been preoccupied with so-called *story manga* at the expense of single images. In contrast, the modern institution of art, and art history as one of its branches, has shown an inclination to take the reverse stance. This began in the late 19th century when image and text, which had traditionally been entwined in pictorial narratives and illustrated literature, saw their segregation for the sake of modern autonomy, and manga was conceptualized as a form of pure visual art.[6] A century later manga studies gained academic currency, but unlike comics studies in Europe and North America the new field did not take the route from fine art to literary studies; it has rather been dominated by sociological media-studies approaches with a special focus on publication modes as well as reader demographics. In keeping with manga's industrial and fan-cultural particularities, critics interested in visual storytelling have been inclined to focus on genre conventions and widely shared topoi.[7]

As the major publications evince, since the 1990s manga studies has considered art history mainly in regard to institutional legitimization and, if linked to aesthetic properties at all, premodern Japanese visual art, such as the famous *Scrolls of Frolicking Animals* (*Chōjū jinbutsu giga*, 12th century) or the *Hokusai Manga* (1814–1878).[8] To date the art-historical perspective has still not surfaced in the journal of the Japan Society for Studies in Cartoons and Comics (*Nihon manga gakkai*, founded in 2001). In regard to carving out manga's medium specificity as comics, film studies has played the crucial role, beginning with the popular characterization of postwar story manga and its pioneer Tezuka Osamu (1928–1989) as filmic or cinematic.

Secondly, it is noteworthy that all manga works which take center stage in volume 19 of *Japanese Art* are by male artists. Admittedly, Sawaragi's explanatory essay in that volume touches also upon pioneers of girls (*shōjo*) manga and acknowledges some of them by means of smaller images, namely Yamagishi Ryōko, Ōshima Yumiko, Takemiya Keiko, Hagio Moto, and Mutsu A-ko. But the overall emphasis is on manga by male artists targeted at boys and male youths, attesting to the fact that they have represented the standard despite the increased importance of female genres since around 1980. Female art historians who are familiar with modern girls media such as Sano Midori and Yamamoto Yōko have interrelated the gender aspect of contemporary manga narratives with distinctly female traditions of Japanese art, stretching from mood-oriented visual storytelling, decorative designs and stylized, as opposed to individualized, visages (for example in the illustrated scrolls of *The Tale of Prince Genji/Genji monogatari emaki*, 12th century) to women as artists and recipients.[9]

Thirdly, it deserves attention that manga is given prominence in the volume which covers the so-called postwar decades, but not in the final volume 20 titled *Present and Future of Japanese Art 1996–Today*.[10] In addition to the already mentioned images, volume 19 even includes an essay authored by a manga critic: Itō Gō.[11] Itō gained renown with the monograph *Tezuka is dead* (2005), which suggested to question the central role of Tezuka Osamu and thereby grand narratives in manga discourse against the backdrop of transmedial characters and fannish appropriations.[12] He drew attention to the fact that the media usage of teenagers, manga's initial readership, had changed with respect to both favoring video games and, in regard to comics, going beyond traditional, i.e. author- and meaning-oriented, forms of reading. Under the conditions of digitalization and gamification, the manga medium as it has been known – that is, print-based graphic narratives composed of still, mute, and monochrome sequences – is aging, and with its zenith passed (as decreasing magazine print-runs indicate), it enters the realm of Japanese art history for good.

Attempts at inclusion were made already in 1998, when the Japan Art History Society held a much-noticed symposium on the matter as part of their spring conference.[13] Since then, the share of discourse analysis and institutional self-critique of the discipline of art history in modern Japan has abated, making way for more specific investigations. These show mainly two orientations: one towards historiographic, the other one towards conceptual concerns. Art history in the strict sense falls into two strands due to Japan's particular modernization project: Japanese art history and Western art history. Both variants are represented in the Japan Art History

Society although rarely in the same section. The 1998 symposium was an exception in that regard and as such indicative of a period when art historians were not yet certain about what to address under the name of *manga*. The talks given discussed a broad range of subjects, stretching from Gustave Doré's caricatures and cartoons by Japanese pre-war avant-garde artists to the Belgian comics series *Yoko Tsuno* (Roger Leloup, 1970–) and 1970s girls manga. In the 2000s, however, magazine-based Japanese graphic narratives took precedence. By now they represent comics' medium specificity even for Japanese specialists of modern Western art.

This inclination manifests itself in a collected volume whose title is best translated as *The experience of 'watching' manga* due to the exclusive reference to neither caricatures nor Franco-Belgian *bande dessinée* but contemporary manga and commercially successful series at that.[14] In a rather unusual attempt, Japanese historians of Western art – mostly specialized in Surrealist painting – collaborated with representative manga critics to explore how temporality in the representation and perception of comics differs from film, the medium which manga has been preferably compared to. In his introduction, editor Suzuki Masao starts from the observation, that Surrealist painting and graphic narratives occupy a similarly awkward position within the discipline of art history, and he identifies the relation between duration and moment, or more precisely, the favoring of discontinuous movement, as the main reason for that. In order to make painting and manga comparable, the emphasis is put on "watching" rather than "reading", at least as a point of departure. Thus, Suzuki's own chapter, which aims at demonstrating that in manga/comics, "the moment does not exist", analyzes first a

number of single panels instead of sequences. Rather than clipping an individual moment out of the flow of time, in comics even the single panel contains a duration, a layering of various moments in juxtaposition: "Pictured in the same panel, different persons, objects, and landscapes each live their own time [and] the different times traverse due to our [the reader's] influence."[15] His visual examples, however, do not comply with what Scott McCloud called a "polyptych", that is, a single panel relating a duration of time against a continuous background, reminiscent of a horizontal camera pan.[16] Rather various points in time are layered in a way which cannot be shot with a camera. This applies, for example, to cases when a speaker and the mimic responses to her utterance appear behind each other in one and the same panel, or when the object at which a character gazes appears behind this very character as if the character could gaze with the back of her head. In the globally successful manga series of the early 21st century, this device serves further to conjoin subjective and objective perspectives pictorially: characters are not only given an inner voice but occasionally also an inner (self-)image, which may differ from their outer looks to an extend that readers who are not manga-literate do not even recognize the identity. Izumi Nobuhiko has coined the term *out-of-body shot* for that.[17] But duality is not limited to the representation of characters and moments; it also pertains to perception. According to Suzuki, the comparison with Surrealist painting helps to realize that it is the "duality of the watching subject" which sets the manga image in motion.[18] Like Surrealist painting, manga/comics engage their reader as observer and participant at the same time which makes identification without immersion possible, as distinct from film.

To Suzuki the pleasure of constantly negotiating the above duality is crucial to both Surrealist painting and comics (in the form of contemporary manga), and he emphasizes that this would not have been possible before the 19th century, pointing to the modernity of visuality as the pivot of comics research from the side of a conceptually rather than historiographically informed study of art. In a similar way, Kajiya Kenji foregrounds modern visuality and its consequences for the image.[19] Reflecting upon comics against the backdrop of the art criticism of Abstract Expressionism, he maintains that both forms deviated from the representation of privileged moments in empirically verifiable images, giving preference to "transcendental", or diagrammatic, pictures instead. As such they exhibit an "indeterminacy of the frame of vision", which goes beyond the ambiguous relation of panel and page in comics as introduced by Itō Gō.

The "indeterminacy of the frame" (*frame no fukakuteisei*) was a core concept in Itō's 2005 monograph. Put simply, he explained that comics/manga, as distinct from the unchanging size and form of a film screen, invite the recipient to change their frame of vision, focusing alternately on panel, page, and double-spread, zooming-in and zooming-out, so to say. In order to avoid blatant generalization, Itō introduced two specifying terms: panel layout or composition (*koma kōsei*), and panel progression or transition (*koma tenkai*). While the first one draws attention to the whole page and its breakdown or sectioning, the latter focuses on the relation of the panels to each other, that is, a kind of interconnection which does not let the page stand out as a composition in its own right. Importantly, these two ways of framing the field of vision are not regarded

as alternative, but complementary and there-fore "indeterminate". While as a matter of course the two variants assume different weight in different works, the interplay between panel and page, up to the awareness of the double-spread as an important aesthetic element, is by tendency more pronounced in manga than in Western comics (among other things due to the traditional publication mode of magazine serialization).

Applying Itō's concept to his own field, Saitō Tetsuya, another contributor to the above-mentioned edited volume, maintains that Surrealist paintings like René Magritte's *Man with a Newspaper* (1928) or Victor Brau-ner's *The Strange Case of Monsieur K* (1933) may exhibit panel layout (*koma kōsei*), but no panel progression (*koma tenkai*).[20] That is to say, even if the picture plane is divided into sections – or panels, to use the non-art historical term – the connection between these sections remains purely pictorial and as such external from a narratological perspec-tive. With the sections' sequence staying non-directional and as such "indeterminate", it is up to the viewer to see the image as an addition of panels or a divided plane or both, a continuous as well as discontinuous entity. Although pursuing differences between Surrealist painting and manga, Saitō also acknowledges the importance of discuss-ing manga with respect to modern visual culture, as distinct from the majority of jour-nalists, educators, and exhibition organizers who address manga, whether from the pos-ition of art history or comics criticism.

Within scholarly manga studies, the role of modernity has been stressed since the mid-1990s, mainly in regard to the emergence of newspapers and magazines as mediators of a new public sphere in the late 19th century, the concurrent spread of novel printing and binding technologies, and the general role of Westernization in Japan's modernization. Twenty years ago, manga columnist Natsume Fusanosuke pointed out that "Japan's traditional aesthetics experienced a break with the past" due to its collision with a stronger foreign culture, and that "before long, a modern form, that is, the panel sequence of the Western comic-strip (in other words, the function of articulating dis-crete moments of time in the course of events) was imported".[21] Whereas Western art historians like Suzuki are intrigued by the fact that "the moment doesn't exist" in man-gaesque time, Natsume took the articulation of discrete moments for granted, thereby accentuating the "determinacy" of the frame. At the time, he maintained that the panel or single frame was an imported concept, which rendered the ambiguous pictorial time and space of traditional handscrolls (*emaki*), for example, unequivocal. His claim was directed against specialists of Japanese art history (which usually ended before the 20th century back then), namely the inclination to pass over modernity and replace historic change with cultural as local, or even national, parti-cularity. Tsuji Nobuo, a pioneer of including previously marginal subjects, who has collabo-rated frequently with Murakami Takashi since the 2000s, is representative in that regard:

> … I believe there is merit in looking from a broader art historical perspective to examine transhistorical resonances when they can be discovered […] we should not simply look at *anime* [or manga] as a direct import from the West, which evolved in Japan according to postwar consumer tastes.[22]

Like comics critics before him, Tsuji tried to make manga and other undervalued forms of

popular art acceptable by underlining their Japaneseness.[23] Admittedly, the aesthetic concepts he brought into play were not the internationally already established ones linked to Zen-Buddhism or the tea ceremony, but rather eccentricity, playfulness, and laughter. In part due to the early point in the development of the field, manga's Japanese particularity was emphasized at the expense of medium specificity which would call for both distinguishing comics from animation and considering the role of intercultural exchange for manga as a form of popular art.

Over the last two decades the discussion has developed much further not only with respect to the conceptual, but also to the historiographic strand of art-historical engagement with manga. Most noteworthy in regard to the latter are the publications by Yamamoto Yōko. Already in 2004, she attracted attention with an article in which she compared the representation of time and space in traditional Japanese painting with paneling in manga narratives.[24] She clarified that traditions of purely pictorial storytelling – including expressions of movement in time and lines which visualize voices, alleged predecessors of speech balloons – had not only a narrative function different from contemporary manga but were also discontinued historically: voice lines, for example, disappeared in the early 15th century when dialogue text entered the image, adopting the respective functions. Other devices lived on but were not appreciated by the popular artists of the 18th and 19th centuries. Subdividing the picture plane into panels was one of them. Viewers with the ability to recognize the passage of time, that is, sequentiality within simultaneity, were not in need of such a visual aid.[25] On the contrary, the resulting lack of ambiguity diminished the playfulness which recipients expected from entertaining illustrated narratives. Besides, this technique was too strongly laden with religious connotations to be taken lightly. Often used in hanging scrolls illustrating Buddhist tales or the life of famous monks (setsuwaga), such sequences were not targeted at an individual reader, but a group of more or less uneducated people who would listen to a priest's instructions.

As a historian, Yamamoto attaches importance to "reading" the artifacts in regard to for whom they were created and with what intention on part of the artists, how they circulated at their time and what meanings their motifs carried. In relation to her colleagues she seeks to demonstrate the value of these images as historical sources; in relation to manga discourse she insists on the necessity of art-historical knowledge as a prerequisite of any attempt at relating contemporary comics to premodern visual art.[26] While historicization is vital, it will however not suffice in the face of popular desires and institutional requirements to cater to such desires, one example being the persistence of manga exhibitions that promote alleged origins. Against this backdrop, manga studies seems to be better advised to make the frequently invoked characteristic of its subject – "indeterminacy" – its methodological motto. The continuity or discontinuity between traditional visual art and contemporary manga is not only a matter of historiographic evidence; it is also a matter of perspective: art historians may, for example, overlook the most striking commonality between the famous *Hokusai Manga* and today's manga, namely the role of pictorial reference books shared by followers or recipients-turned-creators.[27] Instead of favoring one side against the other, "indeterminacy" holds the potential for exploring possible interrelations. Such a

mindset could help to close the gap between historiographic and conceptual approaches and also bridge the cultural divide within comics research, where the study of manga (or manga-style productions) is still boxed off from other kinds of graphic narratives, not only in Japanese academia.

Endnotes

1. In his art-sociological monograph *Shakai to tsunagaru bijutsushi-gaku: Kingendai academism to media, goraku* (Tokyo: Yoshikawa kobunkan, 2015), Ōta Tomoki describes the development of these collections (pp. 51–81).

2. Following Japanese, and Japanological, custom, Japanese names are given in the form of surname preceding given name without separation by comma. For the romanization of Japanese words, the revised Hepburn system is used. Accordingly, Japanese terms are given without "s" in the plural form.

3. *Nihon bijutsu zenshū, dai-19kan: sengo – 1995 kakuchō suru sengo bijutsu*, edited by Sawaragi Noi, Tokyo: Shogakukan, 2015.

4. Sawaragi Noi, "Yomigaeru »sengo bijutsu«: shikashi kono kuruma wa moto kita hōkō e hasshiteiru de wa nai ka", in id., ed., 2015, pp. 183–184 [170–187]. The Japanese expression "postwar" (*sengo*) applies to a longer period than the immediate years following WWII, that is, usually from 1945 to 1989 (when the Shōwa emperor passed away).

5. Cf. Ronald Stewart, "Manga as Schism: Kitazawa Rakuten's Resistance to «Old-Fashioned» Japan", in Jaqueline Berndt & Bettina Kümmerling-Meibauer, eds, *Manga's Cultural Crossroads*, New York: Routledge, 2013, pp. 27–49.

6. Miyamoto Hirohito, "The Formation of an Impure Genre: On the Origins of *Manga*", transl. Jennifer Prough, *Review of Japanese Culture and Society*, Jōsai University, Tokyo, Vol XIV, December 2002, pp. 39–48.

7. Cf. Jaqueline Berndt, "Manga Studies #1: Introduction", *Comics Forum* (academic website for Comics Studies, Leeds University), 2014. http://comicsforum.org/2014/05/11/manga-studies-1-introduction-by-jaqueline-berndt/ (last accessed 20 September 2016).

8. The discursive interrelation of manga and art (from premodern to contemporary) in manga criticism subsided after the 1960s. Exceptional for Japanese manga studies, Sasaki Minoru traces the history of panelling from a crosscultural and aesthetic point of view in *Mangashi no kiso mondai: Hogarth, Töpffer kara Tezuka Osamu e*, Tokyo: Office Helia, 2012. As for the discourse on manga traditions, cf. Jaqueline Berndt, "Permeability and Othering: The Relevance of »Art« in Contemporary Japanese Manga Discourse", in Livia Monnet, ed., *Approches critiques de la pensée japonaise du XXe siécle/ Critical Readings in Twentieth Century Japanese Thought*, Montréal: Les Presses de l'Université de Montréal, 2001, pp. 349–375, and "Drawing, Reading, Sharing: A Guide to the *Manga Hokusai Manga* Exhibition", in *Manga Hokusai Manga: Approaching the Master's Compendium from the Perspective of Contemporary Comics*, exh.cat., The Japan Foundation, 2016, pp. 3–38; https://www.academia.edu/22879183/HEAVY_FILE_Drawing_Reading_Sharing_A_Guide_to_the_Manga_Hokusai_Manga_Exhibition_ (last accessed 20 September 2016).

9. Cf. Sano Midori in conversation with Tsuji Nobuo, "Taidan: emaki no yūgisei to tanoshimikata", in Iwasugi Junji, ed., *Emakimono no kanshō kiso chishiki*, Tokyo: Shibundō, 1995, p. 137 [pp. 132–144].

10. Yamashita Yūji, ed., *Nihon bijutsu zenshū, dai-20kan: 1996 – genzai Nihon bijutsu no genzai, mirai*, Tokyo: Shogakukan, 2015. This volume contains manga images from Okazaki Kyōko's *Helter Skelter* (2003), Matsumoto Taiyō's *Ping Pong* (Vol 5, 1997), and Araki Hirohiko's *JoJo's Bizarre Adventures* (*JoJo no kimyōna bōken*, part 6, 2003).

11. Itō Gō, "Manga to bijutsu no »aida«", in Sawaragi, ed., 2015, pp. 195–198.

12. id., *Tezuka izu deddo: Hirakareta manga hyōgenron e*, Tokyo: NTT Publ., 2005.

13. Tan'o Yasunori, "Shinpojiumu hōkoku *Bijutsushi kara manga o kangaeru*", *Bijutsushi* (Journal of the Japan Art History Society), #145, Vol 48, No 1, Oct. 1998, pp. 190–196.

14. Suzuki Masao, ed., *Manga o 'miru' to iu taiken*, Tokyo: Suiseisha, 2014.

15. Suzuki, "Shunkan wa sonzai shinai: mangateki jikan e no toi", in id., ed., 2014, pp. 66–67 [57–86].

16. Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics, the Invisible Art*, New York: Harper Perennial, 1994 (1993[1]), p. 115.

17. Izumi Nobuyuki, *Manga o meguru bōken 1*, no place: Piano Fire Publ., 2008, pp. 39–44.

18. Suzuki, 2014, p. 82.

19. Kajiya Kenji, "Manga to bijutsu: Gendai bijutsu hihyō no shiten kara", in Suzuki, ed., 2014, pp. 159–182; see also id., "Ishiko Junzō no chikakuron-teki tenkai: Manga hihyō o chūshin ni", *Bijutsu Forum 21*, No 24, 2011, pp. 104–112.

20. Saitō Tetsuya, "Bunretsu suru frame: Surrealism 'to' manga", in Suzuki, ed., 2014, p. 128 [123–156].

21. In Natsume Fusanosuke et al., *Manga no yomikata*, Tokyo: Takarajimasha, 1995, p. 209.

22. Tsuji Nobuo, "Early Medieval Picture Scrolls as Ancestors of *Anime* and *Manga*", in Nicole Coolidge Rousmaniere, ed., *Births and Rebirths in Japanese Art*, Leiden: Hotei, 2001, p. 54 [53–82].

23. Tsuji Nobuo, "Tanioka manga no art-sei", in *Yasuji no mettametagaki dōkōza*, Tokyo: Jitsugyō no Nihon-sha, 2004, pp. 282–285 [279–290].

24. Yamamoto Yōko, "Manga izen no Nihon kaiga no jikan to kūkan hyōgen: Manga no koma to no taihi ni oite", *Meisei daigaku kenkyū kiyō*, No 12, March 2004, pp. 113–126. The article was reprinted together with others in id., *Emaki no zuzōgaku: "E soragoto" no hyōgen to hassō*, Tokyo: Bensei shuppan, 2012.

25. Yamamoto, 2004, p. 125.

26. Yamamoto, 2012, pp. ii, iv.

27. Cf. Berndt, 2014, pp. 28–32.

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