

Edited by Katarzyna J. Cwiertka
and Ewa Machotka

Consuming Life in Post-Bubble Japan

A Transdisciplinary Perspective



Consuming Life in Post-Bubble Japan

Consumption and Sustainability in Asia

Asia is the primary site of production of a myriad of commodities that circulate the globe. From cars and computer chips to brand clothing, material objects manufactured across Asia have become indispensable to people's lives in most cultural contexts. This mega production generates huge amounts of waste and pollution that threaten the health and lifestyle of many Asians. Yet, Asia is not only a site of production, but also one of the most rapidly growing consumer markets.

This series focuses on consumption – the engine propelling Asia onto the world economic stage – and its implications, from practices and ideologies to environmental sustainability, both globally and on the region itself. The series explores the interplay between the state, market economy, technologies, and everyday life, all of which have become defining facets of contemporary Asian culture. Shifts in consumption that have taken place across Asia since the 1950s have had a deep impact on new and emerging informal economies of material care, revealing previously invisible sites of innovation, resistance and co-option. The series will bring together studies by historians, anthropologists, geographers, and political scientists that systematically document and conceptualize Asia's engagement with consumption and sustainability in the global environment.

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Acknowledgements

This book originated from the interdisciplinary endeavour of two scholars who decided to explore contemporary Japanese material culture from the perspective of sustainability. Our own research interests – waste (Cwiertka) and art (Machotka) – formed the point of departure for this experiment, titled ‘From Garbage to Art: Environmental Consciousness in Japan in the Post-Cold War Era’. The project received generous support from the LeidenAsiaCentre (formerly MEARC) and aimed to explore popular attitudes towards the environment, recycling, and energy conservation, combined with a study of the cultural articulation of a newly emerging consciousness in the visual arts.

In the first instance, we planned to study the eco-art movement – in particular, the process of the artistic recycling of rubbish into art as a way to challenge the existence of the intellectually and socially flat contemporary Japanese culture that has been created by the consumerist agenda. However, since its inception in 2013, the project has undergone continual transformation, largely influenced by the scholars we have met on our journey and the ideas they have shared with us. We are indebted to all of them.

During the inaugural workshop we organized at Leiden University in May 2014 we were joined by Kasuya Akiko, Isabel Hoving, Eiko Maruko Siniawer, Anne Murcott, Helen Westgeest, and Gavin Whitelaw. The second workshop, titled ‘Art with Agenda: Socially Engaged Art Practices in Post-Cold War Japan’, took place in November of the same year. This time, we benefitted from the ideas presented by Gunhild Borggreen, Adrian Favell, Hasegawa Yuko, Hayashi Michio, and Jennifer Robertson. The conference session ‘Rubbish! The Underworlds of Everyday Life’, organized by Cwiertka at the European Association of Japanese Studies (EAJS) Conference in Ljubljana in the summer of 2014, further enriched the scope and depth of our explorations. We are grateful to Sabine Frühstück, Fabio Gygi, Joseph Hankins, Eiko Maruko Siniawer, Anemone Platz, and Brigitte Steger, who participated in this conference panel.

While engaging in conversations on the topic of waste and art with our colleagues, we pursued work on the second pillar of the project – an exhibition that explored contemporary Japanese packaging conventions. Since packaging is both a major source of waste in Japan and an important genre within the domain of Japanese design, it is hardly surprising that this was an area in which our research interests intersected. The exhibition was put on display at three different locations: Japanmuseum Sieboldhuis in Leiden

(10 June 2016-28 August 2016), the Museum of Japanese Art and Technology in Cracow (9 November 2016-28 February 2017), and the Asia and Pacific Museum in Warsaw (30 May 2017-17 September 2017). Additional funding for the exhibition was provided by the Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research (NWO, project number 277-53-006, www.garbagemattersproject.com). The catalogue of the exhibition is available to download from <https://www.cwiertka.com/news/the-catalogue-of-the-exhibition-too-pretty-to-throw-away-packaging-design-from-japan-is-now-available-for-download/>.

Over the course of the three years (2014-2016) of our engagement with this experimental project, we came to the realization, as we explain in the Introduction, that the debate focusing on the relationships between consumption, sustainability, and art may offer a fresh view of the everyday reality in post-bubble Japan. We hope that this volume will provide a useful contribution to the literature, especially as the LeidenAsiaCentre grant has enabled us to publish this book as an Open Access publication.

The diverse intellectual backgrounds of our contributors formed the groundwork for this transdisciplinary volume. We would like to thank all of our contributors for their hard work and patience. As is often the case with edited collections, this one comes out later than originally planned. We are also indebted to the two anonymous reviewers of the manuscript, whose critical remarks were tremendously helpful in sharpening our focus. Finally, we are grateful to Klarijn Anderson-Loven for her superb editorial work. Needless to say, the responsibility for any shortcomings of this volume lies with us.

Katarzyna J. Cwiertka and Ewa Machotka
October 2017

Notes to the Reader

All Japanese words in this book have been indicated in italics, except for personal, geographical, and institutional names, or words that occur frequently in a given chapter. Words that are considered to have entered the English language, such as *manga* and *tsunami*, are also set in roman type. Diacritical marks have been omitted in the names of major Japanese cities and the four main islands, except where these names appear in the titles of Japanese publications. Titles of artworks and the like are rendered in the original language at first occurrence, after which a translation and, if necessary, a shortened title in English are given. Product and company names have been rendered in the romanized transcription preferred by the respective company; this results in the occurrence of 'Tobu' next to 'Shōji'. Japanese personal names are presented following the Japanese convention in which the family name precedes the given name, except for those Japanese authors whose works are mainly or exclusively published in English. In the 'Works cited' section at the end of each chapter, the names of Japanese authors writing in English are treated in the same way as Western names, whereby a comma is used to separate the family name from the given name. A comma is not used to separate the first and last name of Japanese authors writing in Japanese, however, as the word order in such titles already reflects the correct notation of a Japanese name. Sometimes the suffix '-san' (meaning Mr/Mrs) is attached to personal names as an expression of respect, for instance Nagatanigawa-san.

Currency amounts, when given in a currency other than the euro, have been converted into euros using the fxtop.com currency converter tool, which takes account of the historical values of various currencies (<http://fxtop.com/en/currency-converter-past.php>). Please note that before 31 December 1998 the euro exchange rates are theoretical ones. Where a certain month is specified with regard to a currency amount, calculations are based on the historical conversion rate on the 15th of that month; if only a year is specified, calculations are based on the historical conversion rate in the middle of that year (1 July). All converted amounts are approximate and for illustrative purposes only.

Introduction

Katarzyna J. Cwiertka and Ewa Machotka

Consumption

In 2011, the journal *Current Anthropology* published a provocative article by the renowned social theorist David Graeber in its 'Keywords' section. The author called for an abandonment of the discourse on consumption, warning scholars about the dangers of importing into cultural and social analysis 'the political economy habit of seeing society as divided into two spheres, one of production and one of consumption' (Graeber 2011: 501).

Certainly, since the late 1980s, the study of consumption has expanded from the domains of consumer research and marketing, successfully 'taking over the academic galaxy one discipline at a time' (Cluley and Harvie 2011: 502-3). The processes of consumption are now universally acknowledged as defining the activities of modern life, and are studied extensively by anthropologists, geographers, sociologists, and historians.¹ The purchasing of commodities and services, and the processes that precede and follow these actions, are now considered essential in shaping individual and group identities in different parts of the world. They have simultaneously merged with leisure activities, so that shopping has now become a ritual in its own right. In his article, Graeber asks the important question of how the concept of consumption has come to encompass all activities that one engages in when one is not working for wages: 'what does it mean that we now call certain kinds of behavior "consumption" rather than something else?' (Graeber 2011: 491). This question is the point of departure for this volume. We argue that, despite the economic regression that the country has experienced since the 1990s, post-bubble Japan brings to light the total victory of commodification over all spheres of life, which marks the logic of late capitalism (Jameson 1991).

Between the 1960s and the 1980s, Japan experienced uninterrupted high levels of economic growth. The foundation for this economic 'miracle' was a combination of wartime industrialization (1937-1945); reforms implemented during the Allied Occupation (1945-1952); and a strategic alliance with the United States, which was nourished by the Cold War climate (Johnson 1982;

¹ Bock 1993; Miller 1995; Aldridge 2003; Goodman and Cohen 2003; Zukin and Maguire 2004; Trentmann 2012, 2016.

Katz 1998). The most tangible evidence of successful post-war development in Japan was the dramatically rising standard of living: per-capita GDP doubled between 1960 and 1970, and then doubled again during the following two decades (Taira 1993). Economic affluence transformed the everyday practices of housework, shopping, and leisure, and the culture of scarcity and ethos of frugality – characteristic of the 1940s and 1950s – gradually gave way to the veneration of material comfort and convenience (Franks 2009; Usui 2014). During the Cold War, consumption served to legitimize capitalism in the eyes of millions of ordinary people, evolving into the central experience in the lives of First-World populations, with the Japanese leading the way as the first fully fledged consumer society in Asia.

The end of the Cold War era, coupled with the bursting of the bubble economy, shook the very foundations of the post-war economic ‘miracle’ – the promise of material affluence for all represented by the myth of Japan as a ‘middle-class’ society (Murakami 1982). Yet, it by no means stripped consumption from the pivotal position it occupied within Japanese society – quite the contrary. Building on the foundations of the 1970s and 1980s, the logic of late capitalism permeated every corner of post-bubble Japan.

The historical development of consumption in Japan since the dawn of modernization has in recent years received growing scholarly attention.² These pioneering studies cover consumer goods (clothing, household appliances, confectionery, and cosmetics) and services (lighting, trains, postal services, and mail-order retailing), conveying consumption ‘as part of the dynamic cycle of production, exchange and utilisation that characterises the everyday economic activities not just of individuals, but of all groups in a society’ (Franks and Hunter 2012: 3). The scope of *Consuming Life in Post-Bubble Japan: A Transdisciplinary Perspective* is much broader, as we are convinced that a significant shift has taken place in the final decades of the twentieth century. Today, consumption is no longer simply a component of everyday economic activities, but rather a mirror of a society guided by the ‘logic of late capitalism’, as defined by the prominent political theorist Fredric Jameson (1991). Sociologist and philosopher Zygmunt Bauman describes the same phenomenon as a ‘society of consumers’, of which the most prominent feature is ‘the *transformation of consumers into commodities*; or rather their dissolution into the sea of commodities’ (2007: 12; italics in original). Bauman’s monograph *Consuming Life* has been an inspiration for this collection, in which we provide ethnographic evidence of how a ‘society of consumers’ operates in post-bubble Japan. As Bauman points

2 Franks 2009; Gordon 2011; Franks and Hunter 2012; Usui 2014.

out in the introduction to his book, consumerist patterns of interaction and evaluation have a growing impact on 'various apparently unconnected aspects of the social setting, such as politics and democracy, social divisions and stratification, communities and partnership, identity building, the production and use of knowledge, or value preferences' (2007: 24).

In this volume, we demonstrate this condition in Japan through a variety of case studies that apply disparate methodologies and theoretical insights. The open-ended, transdisciplinary approach that guides this project reflects the nature of the human experience of life that is the main topic of this enquiry. The case studies discussed in this book can generally be classified into two types: classic analyses of consumption, revolving around commodities and shopping, and less orthodox examples of the production and consumption of contemporary art. One chapter also touches upon the use of the consumerist approach in the construction of national identity. Most processes described in this collection are not new, and the sample presented is by no means exhaustive. However, together they shed light on the need to approach the all-encompassing nature of commodification and consumption as a 'total phenomenon', including the environmental dimension. Thus, *Consuming Life in Post-Bubble Japan* is not an analysis of how consumers in Japan make their purchasing decisions, how they use different products, or how this behaviour has been influenced by the recession and other post-1990 events. Instead, contributors to this volume reveal how contemporary life in Japan is a 'consuming project', in which the meaning and the value of objects is insubstantial, while they 'float with equal specific gravity in the constantly moving stream of money' (Simmel 1969: 52, quoted in Bauman 2007: 12). The juxtaposition of ordinary consumer items with art in our discussion is critical to conveying this message.

The interrogation of the relationship between art and capitalism is not a new topic for academic enquiry. Stewart (2007: 15) observes that '[a]rt's relation to commodification is an unavoidable and entrenched condition for much of the theory, history and practice of art today'. The examination starts with the classical Marxist accounts of 'commodity fetishism' and the 'culture industry' (Horkheimer and Adorno 1991 [1944]) that challenged the romantic view of art as the self-expression of an artist as a free, autonomous creator. Subsequent studies, among others by Walter Benjamin (1968), who investigated the notions of the uniqueness and authenticity of art (its 'aura'), and Pierre Bourdieu (1986), with his groundbreaking concept of cultural capital, complicated the early materialist understanding of art within the framework of the 'exchange value'. The issue of the commodification of art has also been interrogated by diverse artistic

practices, ranging from pop art to conceptual art.³ Recent decades have seen intensified critique of capitalism and the emergence of notions of socially engaged art; that is, the concept of relational art, which emphasizes the production of social relations rather than objects/artworks that are to be consumed individually (Bourriaud 2002). On the other hand, Jacques Rancière (2008: 7) argued that the ‘critique of the spectacle’ formed by repressive capitalism (Debord 1994 [1967]) cannot function as a universal solution for social problems.

Although these discussions have not resolved the question of whether art is a commodity or not, they have exposed the ambivalent relationship of art with its socio-economic status. Also, they have made it clear that the question is something of a rhetorical one. In fact, the point is not establishing what constitutes a commodity or trying to devise an (impossible) universal definition of art, but rather understanding what it does to social relations and practices and how it affects society at different places and points in history. This is precisely the objective of scholars who study ‘ordinary’ commodities as well, and due to the ambiguous and fluid status of art, its inclusion in the present discussion on consumption in post-bubble Japan is particularly valuable.

Sustainability

As we have pointed out above, consumption retained the pivotal position it occupied within Japanese society after the bursting of the economic bubble. However, a new development surfaced during the 1990s, which was to become a major transformative force affecting consumption practices in Japan: sustainability. As Barrett demonstrated in his 2005 volume *Ecological Modernization and Japan*, the first decade of the post-bubble era proved critical in bringing about the rise of progressive environmental governance. In the period between 1990 and 1999, eighteen new environmental laws were introduced in Japan (Barrett 2005: 17), and the commitment to sustainable development was symbolically sealed by the 2001 establishment of the Ministry of the Environment (Kankyōshō). At the same time, public concern about the environment moved from the Nimbyism of earlier decades to the implementation of more professional ecological processes, in which NGOs

3 Reviewing all these diverse positions is beyond the scope of the present discussion. For a detailed analysis, see Stewart 2007.

often worked together with local governments and businesses (Broadbent and Barrett 2005: 84).

Scholars agree that the shift towards ecological modernization in Japan was caused by both internal pressures – such as growing public concern over industrial pollution and overexposure to dioxin and other toxic chemicals – and the need to respond to global initiatives aimed at tackling environmental problems. For example, Peter Kirby (2011: 163-4) explains that the notion of ‘sustainable development’, first presented in 1987 by the Brundtland Commission of the UN as a viable strategy for the future, initially met with little enthusiasm from Japanese policymakers, whose attention was directed entirely towards the economic bubble. It was the international pressure that built up after the 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) in Rio de Janeiro that provided the first impulse for the rhetoric of sustainability to gain some currency in Japan. The hosting of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) in Kyoto in 1997 provided an additional incentive (Kirby 2011: 178). It must be pointed out that the aura of frugality and restraint, which arose in the climate of the post-bubble hangover, had a positive impact on the rise of a sustainability consciousness among the Japanese public.

It is in these circumstances that the virtue of recycling began to be inculcated as a fundamental civic and moral duty in Japan. The promulgation in 1995 of the Containers and Packaging Recycling Law (*Yōki Hōsō Risaikuru Hō*) marked the beginning of this process (Yamamoto 2003; Mizoiri 2009). The law introduced the system of Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR), which holds producers responsible for recycling the packaging of their products. In practice, waste plastic, glass, paper containers, and packaging have since been collected from households by municipalities and retailers, before being delivered to the Japan Containers and Packaging Recycling Association (JCPRA, *Nihon Yōki Hōsō Risaikuru Kyōkai*) for recycling (Tanaka 1999). Depending on the municipality, there are differences in the number of recyclable materials and the method of collection, but since the initial separation of waste is performed by citizens before they put their refuse out for collection, the habit of recycling has, in the last two decades, become an integral part of everyday life.

The growing awareness among ordinary Japanese of the importance of sustainable consumption, recycling, and energy conservation was further strengthened by the aftermath of the ‘triple disaster’ of 2011. On 11 March 2011, Japan was struck by an earthquake of 9.0 magnitude and a tsunami, which resulted in damage to the nuclear reactor at the Fukushima Daiichi

Nuclear Power Plant (Fukushima Daiichi Genshiryoku Hatsudensho). The meltdown of the reactor was classified as a Level 7 nuclear accident, the highest level on the International Nuclear Event Scale. Along with damage and loss of lives, it had a lasting impact on the public perception of nuclear energy worldwide (Kim, Kim and Kim 2013; Poortinga, Aoyagi and Pidgeon 2013). In Japan, nuclear power had long been a national strategic priority, and was perceived as one of the solutions to environmental problems. For example, the 2010 Strategic Energy Plan (Enerugi Kihon Keikaku) committed to a radical reduction in greenhouse gas emissions through investments in renewable energy, the promotion of energy conservation, and an ambitious expansion of Japan's nuclear-energy-generating capacity from 26 per cent in 2010 to nearly 50 per cent in 2030 (Poortinga, Aoyagi and Pidgeon 2013: 1205).

Yet, the public reaction to the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant meltdown resulted in public opinion turning against nuclear energy. For example, a poll conducted by the *Asahi Shinbun* newspaper in 2007 showed that only 7 per cent of the population was against nuclear power plants. This number increased tenfold following the disaster (Omura 2012: 127), and was followed by hundreds of demonstrations and events held nationwide to protest the government's plans to relaunch Japan's nuclear power programme (Mie 2013). In September 2012, the Japanese government announced its intention to end the use of nuclear power by 2040. This announcement was shortly followed by the qualification that future policy was constantly under scrutiny and subject to change, thereby allowing the government the possibility of continuing to use Japan's other nuclear facilities. Despite this amendment, this commitment represented a huge departure from previous policy (Poortinga, Aoyagi and Pidgeon 2013: 1205).

In conclusion, the developments of the post-bubble decades had made it increasingly clear to the authorities, businesses, and the population at large that the persistent veneration of the material comfort and convenience pursued in the post-war period was no longer viable, as it conflicted with the goals of sustainability and energy conservation. This dilemma was not peculiar to Japan, but rather inherent to consumer capitalism itself. As has been frequently pointed out, early usage of the English word 'consumption' had exclusively negative connotations, meaning to use up, to destroy, to burn up, to devour, to exhaust, or to waste away (Williams 1976: 68-9). 'Continual growth' and 'endless production', which are the defining features of capitalism and the consumer society, are in fact 'endless cycles of destruction', as Graeber shrewdly observes. 'To make way for new products, all that old stuff must somehow be cleared away, destroyed, or at least cast aside as outmoded or irrelevant' (Graeber 2011: 492).

The post-bubble era and research on consumption

The early 1990s – the moment when the Japanese bubble economy began to show clear signs of decline – coincided with an outpouring of scholarship on Japanese consumption. A critical role in shifting consumption towards the centre of sociological and anthropological research on Japan was played by the ConsumAsiaN network, set up by Brian Moeran and Lise Skov, then affiliated with the University of Hong Kong. Although the network itself did not survive the test of time, the volumes that emerged under the inspiration of its activities confirmed the validity of consumption as a tool for understanding Japanese society.

The first book in the ConsumAsiaN book series, *Women, Media and Consumption in Japan* (Moeran and Skov 1995), remains a seminal work on the topic. The volume pinpoints the contradictory nature of the relationship between Japanese women and consumerism that had evolved by the end of the twentieth century. While consumption constitutes an important element of female agency, as women consume to construct statements of self and social position, at the same time their individual freedom is constrained by the fantasies of an ideal life that are generated through engagement with the media and consumerism. The promise of individualism projected through consumer marketing has a paradoxical connotation in a society that exerts strong pressures to conform.

This point was stressed by Merry White and John Clammer, the authors of two groundbreaking monographs on consumption in Japan published in the 1990s, who also contributed chapters to Moeran and Skov's 1995 volume. In *The Material Child* (1994), a cross-cultural study of Japanese and American teenagers, White demonstrated how strongly the demands for conformity and performance perfection in the realm of consumerism are experienced by teens in Japan. Clammer, in turn, argued in *Contemporary Urban Japan: Sociology of Consumption* (1997) that although, generally speaking, variety and originality are devalued in Japanese consumer culture relative to newness or up-to-dateness, homogeneity prevails alongside differentiations that develop between each segment of the consumer market.

While the body of scholarship on Japanese consumption gradually expanded and matured,⁴ the subject also began to infiltrate scholarship that did not focus on consumption per se, such as Marily Ivy's *Discourses of*

4 This is clearly discernible, for example, with regard to research into food and fashion; see Ohnuki-Tierney 1993; Ashkenazi and Jacob 1998; Bestor 2004; Cwiertka 2006; Rath and Assmann 2010; Slade 2009; Steele et al. 2010; Gordon 2011; and Kawamura 2012.

the Vanishing (1995), Goldstein-Gidoni's *Packaged Japaneseness* (1997), and McVeigh's *Wearing Ideology* (2000). While this was clearly a reflection of how consumerist patterns of interaction and evaluation have successively colonized every aspect of contemporary living in Japan, there were other forces at work as well. One of them was an increased awareness of the multifaceted relationships between people and objects in processes of social interaction.

The first signs of this changing attitude could be observed among social scientists in the late 1980s. An important role in placing objects at the centre of intellectual debate about late-capitalist societies was played by an interdisciplinary field of enquiry generally referred to as 'material culture studies', which quickly extended its influence across the social sciences (Hicks and Beaudry 2010; Tilley et al. 2013). While anthropology, archaeology, folklore studies, cultural geography, and sociology were particularly influential in the construction of this new trans-discipline, the art history perspective – which could be described as the study of objects par excellence – was largely absent from the discourse. Three main reasons were responsible for this status quo (Yonan 2011). To begin with, the very definition of 'material culture', employed by art historians primarily to denote a category of objects traditionally understood as 'less intrinsically meaningful' (Yonan 2011: 235), led to the downplaying of materiality within the discipline. The second predicament that prevented art history from fully engaging with socio-anthropological approaches to material culture was the focus on objects as part of particular collections, rather than in their original use. Finally, as Michael Yonan observes, privileging the visual aspects of art as represented in much art-historical writing has tricked art history 'into believing that it is a discipline of images, when really it has always been a discipline of objects' (2011: 240).

While *Consuming Life in Post-Bubble Japan* builds on the legacy of the scholarship on consumption, the message we seek to convey lies beyond the domain of marketing behaviour. Through the diverse disciplinary perspectives of the case studies presented in this collection, we aim to identify the pervasive links between materialism as the realm of consumption and materiality as the domain of the object. We argue that the methodological and theoretical insights developed as part of an art-historical enquiry into an art object can enrich the study of consumption, and elevates its significance for the understanding of social life.

Konbini, landscape, and sustainable art

The first five chapters of the collection focus on classic cases of commodities and their relationships with consumers. The volume opens with a study of one of the most notorious symbols of Japanese consumption – the department store. As Hendrik Meyer-Ohle argues in the first chapter, the deteriorating sales, mergers, and bankruptcies of many department stores since the 1990s are not necessarily related to economic factors alone, but are a result of changing consumer needs, largely motivated by the social and technological transformations that have taken place in the post-bubble era. He observes that the success of Japanese department stores in the pre-bubble era relied on their social function as an educator, instructing the Japanese masses on how to dress and behave, following middle-class models. That the material objects required for these purposes were available for purchase at the department stores seemed to be a matter of little consequence. As Meyer-Ohle demonstrates in his chapter, the (largely unsuccessful) attempts of Japanese department stores to recover their sales in recent years have been primarily targeted at regaining their authoritarian presence as the dictator of good taste. The author suggests that a more substantial transformation is needed to ensure the survival of Japanese department stores. An important point that this first chapter underlines is the fact that it is not the negation of consumption on the part of Japanese shoppers as such that has been responsible for the post-bubble troubles that the department stores in Japan have found themselves in, but rather the inability of the department stores and other shops to catch up with the shifting social reality.

The subsequent chapter provides the flip-side of this story, exploring the successful growth of ‘fast fashion’, provided by brands such as UNIQLO and MUJI. Stephanie Assmann attributes the growing popularity of these stores in the post-bubble era to two factors: first, the growth of unstable working conditions, which led to a decline in disposable incomes, and second, a change in attitudes towards consumption, which began to serve as a means of individual self-expression, rather than of conspicuous consumption. Another factor Assmann mentions is the increasing concern with sustainability and ethical consumption among Japanese consumers, which has pushed ‘fast fashion’ to implement recycling programmes and charitable initiatives. This sustainable consumption is part of a major societal change that has gradually taken place since the bursting of the bubble.

Chapter 3 tests this assertion through a focus on *konbini* (Japanese convenience stores), which are unlikely to qualify to enter the ranks of sustainable retailers. As Gavin Whitelaw reveals, the popularity of *konbini*

has grown continuously since the 1990s, despite repeated public criticism of the poor quality of the food on offer and the excessive production of waste, among other issues. The author pursues the factors responsible for the *konbini*'s success and stresses that convenience is not the main issue. Instead, he highlights the process of 'structured differentiation' as a key feature that has turned *konbini* into important sites of human interaction in Japan. The distribution of the stores across the country is adjusted to meet local demand, as are the services and products offered in specific locations. *Konbini* fulfil the important social role of the 'third place'. Unlike the 'first place' (the home) and the 'second place' (the workplace), *konbini* provide a more neutral ground, fostering communication. Thus, the spectacular growth of *konbini* since the 1990s reflects societal, demographic, technological, and political changes, rather than economic shifts.

While not addressing the issue specifically, the first three chapters of the volume relate to the issue of branding. Whether this concerns the declining brands of department stores or the successful brands of MUJI, UNIQLO, 7-Eleven, Lawson, FamilyMart, and Ministop, branding is taken for granted in Japan, and since the 1990s has rapidly expanded beyond the landscape of Japanese retailing (Rausch 2009; Porcu 2014). In Chapter 4, Katarzyna Cwiertka presents the case of *washoku* (lit. 'Japanese food' or 'Japanese cuisine'), which demonstrates the use of branding on the national level. She argues that the branding of *washoku* serves the socio-political agenda of the government, which is responding to 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 low food self-sufficiency ratio. Cwiertka's account not only makes it clear that the principles of the marketplace have infiltrated the domains of intangible heritage, but also highlights the ambiguity of the process of its consumption.

The ideological authority of the state also features in Chapter 5, this time in relation to gender. Ofra Goldstein-Gidoni demonstrates the diversification of the models of domestic femininity during the post-bubble era, introducing the new ideals of *karisuma shufu* (charisma housewife) or 'hot mama', which have featured widely in the popular media. The author points out that these models are a response to the conservative socio-political climate in post-bubble Japan. However, in contrast to previous generations of Japanese women, these women do not sacrifice themselves on the altar of domesticity, but rather are committed to enjoying it – through consumption.

Yet, as the following chapter reveals, the domestic arena can also facilitate subversive, anti-consumption reactions. Fabio Gygi charts these phenomena through the study of *gomi yashiki*, or 'rubbish houses', in the

contemporary context of sustainable consumption. Gygi argues that hoarding reveals human anxieties about consumption, ownership, and the value of things. *Gomi yashiki* interrupt and reverse the trajectory of objects' social lives, exposing transformative and unpredictable relationships between meaning and matter. In the pre-bubble era, this trajectory was imagined as a linear development from product to waste, while in the post-bubble era the notion of a circular path implying recycling and reuse has been introduced. However, Gygi problematizes the issue by showcasing *gomi yashiki* as representing a refusal to participate in the processes of consumption and of assigning value altogether.

The issue of negotiating the value and meaning of used and unwanted objects is explored further in Chapter 7. Jennifer Robertson discusses the recently emerged practice of funeral rites for robots and electronic devices, a type of commodity that is characterized by a very short consumption cycle. Instead of entering the state of waste with its related annihilation of value (even if followed by recycling), these objects are reborn through funeral rituals, with a different status and value. This rebirth is in an ontologically different category from recycling, as it assumes a continuation of the 'spirit' beyond the death of the 'body', as well as implying personal growth and improvement (of the object, in this case). Buddhist rites such as these can lessen the human anxiety related to guilt about the overconsumption of objects for which novelty is the major appeal, and ease the emotional stress related to discarding items of profound personal significance. All this points to changes in the consumption of new technologies, a pivotal development in the context of the Japanese state, which has embarked on the process of robotization in response to its demographic problems related to the ageing and shrinking population. It is intended that humanoid robots will replace humans in providing various services, mainly nursing and caring for the elderly. On the one hand, the introduction of funeral rites for electronic devices offers an opportunity to ease the personal trauma related to the discarding of objects, but on the other hand, it also disturbs the standard trajectory of the social life of things and invites consideration of the fluidity of the value of objects in general. This crucial issue is also the main focus of the subsequent chapters, which focus on art.

The questions of value and aesthetic judgement are some of the most notorious and persistent issues in the art world and the art market. Although the romantic notion of 'art for art's sake' produced by high modernism has already lost currency, in academia the distinction between 'pure art' and commercial objects persists as the guiding principle in the social and economic process of assigning a value to objects. The problem is largely a methodological one: how to study objects simultaneously as art and as a

commodity? Gunhild Borggreen proposes an appropriate methodology in Chapter 8 of this collection. She approaches art as an ethnographic endeavour in which artists operate as ethnographers involved in the study of social issues. She argues that this outlook provides an excellent opportunity to create an ideological distance between the domain of art and life, and art and the material object. Following this premise, Borggreen charts the diverse artistic engagements with consumption in post-bubble Japan, ranging from critical commentaries on consumption and the blurring of the distinction between art and commodity, to the shift from producing objects to artistic recycling prompted by the growing social and environmental consciousness. Although this shift may indicate that consumerism has been replaced by social engagement, Borggreen argues that it is by no means a new phenomenon, nor has it replaced other approaches to objects and their consumption.

In the following chapter, Hayashi Michio discusses the power of consumption to create uniformity through his analysis of the impact of economic growth on the pictorial imagination of the landscape. He investigates the 'death of landscape', a cultural phenomenon originating in the 1970s that continues until the present day. This phenomenon implies the homogenization of the provincial landscape across Japan – its 'Tokyo-ization' – which transforms diverse places into copies of the national capital, resulting in 'mini-Tokyos'. Hayashi discusses the artistic practices of the 1970s that pursued an immediacy and authenticity of experience that counterbalanced this destructive tendency. Paradoxically, these newly developed ways of artistic expression, which emerged to express the authenticity of the experience of reality, quickly came to be co-opted by consumer culture, namely, by advertising. Hayashi argues that the impact of economic growth resulted in a process in which the landscape as a certain artistic genre started to exist as a symbol of itself, a simulacrum, onto which the viewer projects her/his nostalgic yearning for 'the real'.

The processes that began in the 1970s continued beyond the bursting of the bubble, as Ewa Machotka testifies in the next chapter. Recent years have seen a rise in art initiatives that are trying to recover the diversity and authenticity of Japanese landscapes. One such initiative is the Echigo-Tsumari Art Field (Daichi no Geijutsusai no Sato), established in 2011 in a depopulated area of Niigata Prefecture. Guided by the romantic vision of *satoyama*, or 'village mountain', the project refashions the local, social, and physical landscape into an ideal of harmonious interaction between humans and the environment that challenges consumption and emphasizes social relations. Machotka reveals that the project is based on a solid material

foundation that contributes to the economic and social revitalization of the area, and argues that it serves diverse economic, social, and political agendas. However, rather than providing evidence of the corrupting power of commercialization, Machotka suggests that this phenomenon points to the performative properties of art objects themselves and the ambiguous relationships between art and commodity, which are perceived not as fixed but as temporary.

These fluid characteristics of an object that, in the course of its social life, can move between being a commodity, waste, and art (not necessarily in this order) are also discussed by Kasuya Akiko in the final chapter of this volume. Adopting a curator's perspective, Kasuya focuses on several art events, including the yearly art festival Tatsuno Art Project: Arts and Memories (Tatsuno Āto Purojekuto: Toki no Kioku), organized in a town in Hyōgo Prefecture. She investigates the work of contemporary artists invited to exhibit at Tatsuno and that of a group of young graduates from the Kyoto City University of the Arts (Kyōto Shiritsu Geijutsu Daigaku) who are interested in (re)using mundane, everyday objects in their artistic practices. In these processes, the artists change the linear trajectory of consumption. Through artistic recycling they give objects completely new meanings, status, and value. Kasuya suggests that these practices can be linked to the bursting of the bubble, which forced people to re-examine their lives and attitudes to objects, and to rediscover the recycling of the mundane as an artistic practice.

Collectively, the chapters in this volume remind us that the bursting of the asset bubble in the early 1990s did not halt consumption. On the contrary, in the context of late capitalism, 'consuming' has become the central experience in human life. While the last quarter of a century shows a clear downward trend in terms of the performance of the Japanese economy, this cannot be said about consumption as such, which, as pointed out by Graeber, now encompasses practically every activity that one engages in when one is not working for wages.

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