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The craft debate at the crossroads of global visual culture: re-centring craft in postmodern and postcolonial histories

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Over the last decade the craft debate has stimulated contemporary visual culture globally. Questions such as ‘what is craft?’, ‘how do we define craft against fine art and design?’, and ‘why is craft important to us?’ have been hotly debated topics. In Anglo-America, in a notable achievement among significant numbers of publications and exhibitions on crafts, Glenn Adamson led the creation of the field of academic craft studies through the launch of The Journal of Modern Craft (2008–) and The Craft Reader (2010). The differing camps of critics and makers have developed a broad range of criticism. In a tantalisingly interesting correlation, visual culture in Japan has also been excited by a craft debate led by Kaneko Kenji, Kitazawa Noriaki and Mori Hitoshi. This debate has excited the public as it involved the national concerns of re-centring crafts in Japanese art history. This paper compares and analyses the scope and nature of craft debate in Anglo-America with that of Japan, and investigates where they converge and diverge. Drawing upon the approaches taken by Murakami Takashi and Grayson Perry, I will further examine how this craft debate impacted on the world of fine art. Through these comparisons, the paper investigates how the craft debate engages with postmodern/postcolonial views on visual cultural history and how it is negotiating histories in Anglo-America and those in Japan.

Keywords: craft; Japan; Anglo-America; global visual culture; postmodern; pre-modern; postcolonial; twenty-first-century history

Introduction

Since the 1990s, there has been an overwhelming interest in craft in visual culture, a phenomenon that has been visible both in Anglo-America1 and Japan. Questions such as ‘what is craft?’, ‘how do we define craft against fine art and design?’, and ‘why is craft important to us?’ have all been hotly debated topics. That ‘craft’ is indefinable, or at the very least ‘difficult to define’, is a point on which the majority of craft and design...
historians in the Anglo-American world and all of the Japanese commentators can concur. Tanya Harrod (2007: 34) describes ‘craft’ as ‘too pregnant with meaning’, while Paul Greenhalgh (2002: 1) states that ‘crafts are a consortium of genres in the visual arts, genres that make sense collectively because for artistic, economic and institutional reasons, they have been deliberately placed together’. Glenn Adamson (2007: 6) suggests that craft is an idea – an idea formed by ‘a constellation of stars’. For Kitazawa Noriaki (2003: 13–17), ‘craft rejects unification’ because ‘craft’ is categorised wrongly by modern history, and the actual entity of ‘craft’ encompasses art, industry and life, while Kaneko Kenji (2001, 2002) argues that ‘a new logic of creating form’ is required for the term’s definition. Despite the contrasting points of view, these writers share a common concern in raising the question of ‘craft’. I would like to examine the ideas and issues discussed both in Anglo-America and in Japan, where the craft debate appears to be highly active, by introducing some of the inspirational and thought-provoking works recently published. While I seek to identify where ideas converge and diverge, my primary aim in this paper is to introduce the main arguments of the craft debate in Japan, which have rarely been published in English, as a way to explore further the significance of what is called ‘craft’ in contemporary visual cultures and the implications for postmodern and postcolonial histories.

Part 1: Craft debate in Anglo-America and Japan

1.1. Craft debate in Anglo-America

As a point of departure, it is useful to start with Paul Greenhalgh, who attempted a useful categorisation of the craft debate in his 2009 review of recent publications on crafts, published in the Journal of Design History. I would like to interpret critically and expand his discussions to identify the scope and nature of the specifically Anglo-American debate.

First, craft is defined neither as art nor design, but rather argued to represent a political statement for vernacularism, amateurism, DIY and the various ‘indie’ decorative movements, as in Levine and Heimel’s Handmade Nation: The Rise of DIY, Art, Craft, and Design (2008). Craft is also deemed to take an ideological position in broadly defined human activities. Richard Sennett’s definition of ‘craft’ in The Craftsman (2008) encompasses the work of a carpenter, a violinist, an orchestra conductor and a lab technician as well as that of the Linux system programmer. Craftsmanship is a combined physical and intellectual act that is underpinned by populist notions such as the ‘10,000-hour rule’. In this example, Sennett (2008: 20, 172) argues that 10,000 hours of experience, which translates into practising three hours a day for 10 years, would be required to produce a master craftsman. Craft is described as inherently
related to human nature and as vital for human fulfilment and enlightenment. Therefore, if craftmakers are at the centre of our society, society and human relations will work better.

Second, craft is situated within art, but only if the latter is an open-ended, undefined, pluralistic hybrid art, as demonstrated by Laurie Britton Newell’s *Out of the Ordinary: Spectacular Craft* (2007) and Imogen Racz’s *Contemporary Crafts* (2009). The latter, in Greenhalgh’s words, is ‘very much committed to the idea of craft as an open discourse’ with ‘great diversity’ (2009: 409). Glenn Adamson also depicts the heterogeneous nature of ‘craft’ and highlights the many moments in which it has held the power to break boundaries. Among craft critics, it is Adamson who most extensively and eloquently debates craft issues. He has established an academic field of craft studies through numerous publications, including *Thinking Through Craft* (2007), *The Craft Reader* (2010) and *The Journal of Modern Craft*, which he jointly founded in 2008. These works boosted further interest in the historical study, critical analysis and philosophical contemplation of crafts. Although the latter two publications present a wider scope of meaning and contexts for craft through many non-Anglo-American cases, Adamson points to a key problem in Anglo-America whereby craft is portrayed as a victim, subjected to marginalisation and discrimination in a hostile visual culture environment centred on ‘avant-garde’ and ‘fine art’. He reveals how craft has been relegated to a ‘supplemental position’ because of its association with function, decoration, material, hand, skills, pastoral countryside, amateurism, femininity, and ethnicity. This would also explain how these factors have prevented craft from being ‘avant-garde’.

Adamson’s initial defence of ‘craft’ articulates the binary oppositions: ‘fine art’ vs. ‘craft’; ‘avant-garde’ vs ‘non-avant-garde’. Ironically, and perhaps unintentionally, his defence had the effect of emphasising the ‘supplementary position’ of crafts (the very idea Adamson sought to problematise) because he was forced to highlight the moments in which crafts had failed to become ‘avant-garde fine art’. This invited some criticism, namely that *Thinking Through Craft* might be more accurately called *Thinking About Craft Through Art*, as Adamson had become trapped in a tautology whereby craft’s subservient position rendered it incapable of ‘developing a critique of its own’ (Darwent 2008). The diversity of crafts is also demonstrated by makers’ oral histories in *Choosing Craft: The Artist’s Viewpoint* (Halper and Douglas 2009). The thrust of this work is that some high-profile craft-based artists see themselves as indistinguishable from artists, yet at the same time makers also talk about the specificities of craftmaking, which creates uneasy relations with some aspects of ‘fine art’. Last, the craft debate is also creating an immutable, anti-pluralistic field, as in Howard Risatti’s *A Theory of Craft: Function and Aesthetic Expression* (2007). Risatti
argues for the independence of ‘craft’ from ‘art’ and ‘design’ through repositioning ‘function’ and ‘applied objects’ as characteristics of crafts, thus demanding a material- and technique-based taxonomy to define crafts. However, Greenhalgh (2009: 410–11) dismisses Risatti’s approach as outdated and parochial ‘boundary-building’.

1.2. The craft debate in Japan

In a tantalisingly interesting correlation, visual culture in Japan has also been invigorated by a craft debate. This debate is conducted mostly by museum curators, historians, and practitioners. However it is broadly shared by the public who support the market for crafts and are enticed by celebrities, such as ex-footballer Hidetoshi Nakata, who currently plays an ambassadorial role in promoting Japanese crafts. Unlike in Anglo-America, this debate on ‘craft’ hardly touches upon the philosophical debate arguing for an ideological relationship with humanity; nor does it engage with DIY, craft as a hobby and feminist activist crafts, while ‘ethnic crafts’ are clearly excluded. Craft is a strictly professional, male-centred world. The debate is centred on the diversity within craft and its former central position, which is not demarcated from ‘fine art’ or ‘design’. Kitazawa Noriaki, a historian of Japanese art and craft, opened up the craft debate by re-centring craft in his influential publications including Me no Shinden (The Shrine of Eyes, 1989), Kyōkai no Bijutsushi (The Art History of Boundaries, 2000) and Avangyarudo ikō no Kōgei (Craft After the Avant-garde, 2003). He traces the history of imported and translated terminology and the subsequent emergence of the modern national art system.

The birth of Japanese art history and the ensuing reorganisation of the visual art system started with the invention of the Japanese terms bijutsu (fine art) and kōgei (craft), which were translated from European terms in the late nineteenth century. The new term bijutsu was officially used at the time of Japan’s attendance at the Vienna International Exhibition in 1873. While the primary definition of the term kōgei is ‘industry’, this encompasses a broad range of concepts associated with industrial, commercial and handmade products. As defined in the first modern treatise on craft, Kōgei Shiryō (1878) by Kurokawa Mayori, kōgei includes makers of textiles and pottery, stonemasons, metalsmiths, lacquer workers, wooden sculptors, Buddha carvers and painters. When the national academy exhibition called Monbushō Bijutsu Tenrankai (Ministry of Education Arts Exhibition, sometimes abbreviated to Bunten) was established in 1907, modelled after the French Salon, kōgei was excluded from the categories. It was not represented at the exhibition until the ‘Craft Art’ section was added in 1928 to a reorganised Teikoku Bijutsu
Tenrankai (abbreviated to Teiten and translated as the ‘Imperial Arts Exhibition’), reflecting the first wave of the studio craft movement.

The process of translation of alien modern Western concepts and the subsequent reorganisation of the visual system brought about a number of predicaments, but ‘craft’ in Japan persisted and now rather comfortably situates itself in what Anglo-America calls the ‘post avant-garde’ (Kitazawa 2003). Kitazawa’s aim in examining this genealogy of modern craft is to find the proper location of contemporary ‘craft’. As the title of his book Modernity of Japanese ‘Crafts’: As a Foundation of Fine Art and Design (2009) shows, Mori Hitoshi similarly demands recognition of an original foundation of visual culture – the botai (meaning fecund female body) of crafts, prior to the differentiation determined by Western modernity (Mori 2009). Inaga Shigemi’s Nihon no Dentō Kōgei Saikō (Traditional Japanese Arts and Crafts in the 21st Century: Reconsidering the Future from an International Perspective, 2005) addresses global questions through considering ‘craft’ from the local perspective of Kyoto, Japan (Inaga and Fister 2005). Elsewhere, he writes of the ‘deconstruction of kōgei’ but also clarifies what he sees as the predicament of modern Japanese crafts in terms of the situation of non-Euroamerican crafts. He identifies three predicaments for locating Japanese objects that could be called crafts in the Euroamerican-centric visual system. First, if there are no similar values or forms in Euroamerica, Japanese objects are quite likely to be neglected or not properly evaluated. Second, if Japanese objects are evaluated according to Euroamerican values, the dominant hierarchical order or value system is likely to be imposed. Third, if there are similar values or forms in Euroamerica, Japanese objects are quite likely to be called copies (Inaga 2007: 17–18). In trying to comply with the Euroamerican system, Japan’s modern history is one of continuous confusion, and as a result it struggles and fails to fit. Inaga points to the asymmetrical politico-cultural relations between Euroamerica and non-Euroamerica as the cause of the predicaments of crafts.

The common factor shared by these influential critiques of craft from Kitazawa, Mori and Inaga is the postcolonial perspective. The common tone is the idea of recuperating ‘tradition’ – a notion that has had strong currency over the last century – as well as the readjustment of the field of ‘crafts’ to a more comfortable visual cultural environment, as had existed before the rupture caused by Western intervention. Here, cultural nationalism is entangled with the contemporary craft debate, which has been noted as a historical characteristic of the development of modern Japanese crafts centred on ‘tradition’ (Kida 2014; Kikuchi 2004). Therefore, the craft debate in Japan presents this multilayered complexity by engaging with postmodern and postcolonial perspectives while identifying a pre-modern condition as the basis for a way forward. The Japanese debate in fact shares much with global postmodernity, but articulates
postmodernity by problematising the intercultural dimension of East–West with a hint of postcolonial backlash.

**Part 2: The current state of crafts in Japan**

This craft debate reflects the lively contemporary state of ‘craft’, which engages widely with the public in Japan. The diversity, richness and depth of contemporary craft activities is exceptional. Crafts are primarily regarded as a form of highly specialised professional art, minutely institutionalised and factionalised, a situation that is unique to Japan. Unlike in Anglo-America, the demarcation of ‘craft’ from ‘fine art’ and ‘design’ is unclear and irrelevant. Regardless of the type of craft, the makers are all conscious of being artists and in some way they all share the global visual culture and sense of subjectivity characteristic of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, while designers are also seamlessly involved in craftmaking. In a very simplified manner, I list here four distinctive types of professional craft activity that are equally active in contemporary Japan. However, these types are clearly separated and institutionalised under the Japanese system, with their own critical languages and conventions of aesthetic evaluation.

### 2.1. Traditional art crafts (dentō kōgei)

In traditional art crafts, the core works are created by master craftsmen – the ‘Living National Treasures’ – and their disciples. This category was officially defined after the Second World War. Following the Law for the Protection of Cultural Properties, enacted in 1950, the system for the designation and recognition of ‘Important Intangible Cultural Properties’ (popularly known as ‘Living National Treasures’) was set up in 1955. The status is conferred on a person who holds skills ‘of particularly high value’ (waza) in the field of ceramics, dye and weaving, lacquer, metal, wood and bamboo, doll-making, or miscellaneous (glass, cloisonné, gold leaf, etc.) and who ‘if they were not supported by the government were in danger of disappearing’. Craftmakers who are so designated enjoy a high level of prestige, but also have a national responsibility to transmit these skills to the younger generation. For example, Nakano Kōichi became a Living National Treasure in 2009 for his skill in makie (sprinkled pictures), in which a black lacquer surface is decorated with gold. Nakano makes use of traditional techniques developed for the lacquerwork of Kaga, present-day Ishikawa prefecture (Figure 1). The essential notion of Japanese ‘tradition’ is defined through craft skills and widely disseminated through an annual Exhibition of Japanese Traditional Art Crafts (Nihon Dentō Kōgei ten), which since 1954 has continued to exhibit works...
by these master craftmakers and their disciples, funded by a mixture of Japanese government and commercial bodies. Every autumn, it opens at the Mitsukoshi department store in Tokyo and travels throughout the nation to be hosted at major department stores from Hokkaidō to the Okinawan islands over a period of six months.

2.2. Mingei-style crafts

Following the Mingei or Japanese Folk Crafts movement led by Yanagi Sōetsu in the 1920s, Mingei-style crafts – traditional, handmade, functional crafts using regional materials and techniques – have continued to be produced. Both old Mingei and newly created Mingei-style crafts are currently undergoing a major revival. The younger generation, born long after Yanagi Sōetsu died, has rediscovered Mingei and is creating a lifestyle trend led by companies like Beams, a high-end boutique store that is rebranding Mingei. This phenomenon has successfully created a revival of 1950s Scandinavian and Japanese design in connection with Mingei. Industrial designer Yanagi Sōri is championed in this market, and, ironically, Sōetsu is only vaguely known to the consumers of Beams as Sōri’s father. Beams customers are interested in the lives of the craftmakers, their pride in and devotion to their skilful work as well as, to some degree, the historical and local context. It is a current fashion trend, but it is also enmeshed with a philosophy of everyday life (Figure 2).
2.3. Kurafuto/craft design

Kurafuto or craft design has roots in the export craft design of the 1920s and is centred on the activities of the Kōgei Shidōshō (national Industrial Arts Research Institute). In the 1950s, these types of craft were promoted as part of the global ‘Good Design’ movement. Japan’s representatives of this movement established the ‘Good Design’ award system in 1957, which has tended to reward products originating from locally made Mingei objects but with some involvement of contemporary design and designers. They are partially handmade and partially machine-made, not one-off but made by small to mid-sized companies. For example, the company Ōdate Kōgei has designed and produced magewappa (bentwood) products made of Japanese cedar and rooted in the folk craft of the Akita region, where the bentwood tradition stretches back over 300 years. The company’s long-continued product line of lunch boxes has received Good Design awards on many occasions (see Figure 3 for an example from 1993). MUJI also emerged from this line of development (i.e. kurafuto). Generally, this is an area witnessing a boost in collaboration between regional manufacturers and designers. In 2004, the Japanese government launched its ‘Japan Brand’ project, which subsidises and offers advice to regional handicrafts industries with the aim of revitalising regional economies through the development of branding for craft design products that could be useful for the contemporary Japanese lifestyle, as well as being marketable worldwide.
2.4. Craft art, or ‘craftical formation’

This last type of craft comprises individualistic one-off works, often produced by art college graduates and categorised as studio crafts. Many female artists can be found working in this area, outside the state-sponsored, highly privileged field of traditional art craft. Whether working with traditional functional forms or not, makers pursue individual expression as is customary in fine art practice, but the works reflect an obsession with specific materials and techniques as defined by Kaneko Kenji’s idea of ‘craftical formation’. According to Kaneko, ‘craftical formation’ is achieved through material relativism. He argues that the medium (material) draws a line between this type of practice and fine art, because it determines processes that cannot be explored solely through fine art concepts. It is more material-driven than concept-driven; or rather, the material and the process of handling materials drive the concepts. Forms are determined by the chosen material, the making process and techniques involved rather than by a pre-conceived intellectual idea. Kaneko (2001; 2002) identifies throwing, forming, drying, glazing, firing and finishing (and the technical skills they require) as determining factors in the making process. Artists and critics who promote these types of craft argue that they have a positive uniqueness in that they focus on ‘materials’ and ‘decoration’ while exploring uncharted territory.

This ‘craftical formation’ acts as a convergence point for makers across the world, and, in addition, there is some engagement with ‘fine art’.

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Figure 3. Ōdate ‘magewappa’ (bentwood) lunch boxes in Hangō (cooking utensil for camping originally in metal) shape, Akita cedar, 17 × 9 × 9.5 cm, Ōdate Kōgei Co., 1993 Good Design Award.
Kaneko traces his idea of ‘craftical formation’ back to Tomimoto Kenkichi. Tomimoto (1886–1963), a studio potter, was arguably the first maker clearly to articulate this relationship with materials. For example, he explained in 1914 what he meant by the ‘battle of the lines’: ‘When I focus mentally on the external lines of the pot I am trying to throw, I see an infinite number constantly shifting, inside and outside the pot, in the flexible clay’ (Tomimoto 1981: 489; Kaneko 2001: 202; English translation from Imai 2004). Tomimoto was followed by Takamura Toyochika, a metal artist who proclaimed in 1930 the ‘autonomy of crafts’, saying that ‘the creator’s subjectivity becomes a puppeteer, letting the nature of the material dance as it will, following its physical or chemical changes, without adding extraneous decoration’ (in Imai 2004: 12). In the 1950s, Yagi Kazuo, another studio potter and one of the artists of Sodeisha (the ‘crawling through mud’ association) founded a new logic of craft that Kaneko would term ‘material relativism’. This new logic for craft focused on materials rather than starting from form. Kaneko traces its remarkable development since the 1990s when this ‘material relativism’ ignited a variety of individual creative expressions. Subsequently, traditional techniques (such as enamel decoration) and traditional function (such as tableware) are now being freely reinterpreted and relativised.

More recently, artists have eloquently contributed to what Kaneko calls a ‘new logic of creating form’. For example, metal artist Hashimoto Masayuki (in Kaneko 2002: 33) stated in 1996: ‘To be able to limit oneself to one material and its associated techniques is to have the freedom to reject freedom. The issue is whether or not one can make the logic of materials implied by adherence to a set of limitations the starting point for the realisation of one’s creative ambitions’. The dynamics between materials, techniques and primal forms were brilliantly articulated by female basketry artist Sekijima Hisako (1988) with her ‘formula of basketry’, inspired by Noam Chomsky’s ‘transformational generative grammar’. She has devised a grammar of basketmaking through an understanding of the relationship between the intrinsic nature of different materials and basketry/textile techniques, and of how these relationships create inevitable forms and structures (Shiraishi, Hida and Moroyama 1994: 86). Figure 4 shows an object made of mulberry: the bark’s natural properties cause the inner side to shrink, allowing the rim to roll inward during the process of drying. Learning from experiments, Sekijima (1988: 93–5) made slits on the surface so that they opened like a natural net as the object dried, creating structural depth. She talks of her battles and negotiations with materials, while her final artistic judgement emerges from this material-driven process.

In his highly subjective comparison between current crafts in Japan and Britain, Kaneko (2001: 44) provocatively suggests that the British debate on craft is in a ‘cul-de-sac’, trapped in a binary system of ‘fine art’
and subordinate ‘applied art’. He dismisses the British debate as ‘outmoded’ and too ‘simplistic’ (30). Quoting Alison Britton’s argument on the distinctive tendency of craft to take ‘pleasure in limitations’, Kaneko (30) criticises this view, scornfully noting that this ‘limitation of materials’ is a ‘fundamental premise’ beyond which lies the real issue, i.e. finding ‘what can be achieved by working with and through the limitations imposed by particular materials’. His conclusion is that the British craft debate has stagnated for too long, lagging more than 10 years behind the Japanese debate on craft (10, 181). Although Kaneko’s view may be extreme, he is one of the few craft critics in Japan to attempt to engage with the situation outside the country, and so has been receiving substantial support and respect within Japan as a critic with a global view.7

**Part 3: Essential craft issues: convergence and divergence**

Japan’s craft critics and makers have made a strong case for material relativism; but the core argument for materiality, material-driven process or material logic can also be found in the Anglo-American debate – for example, forming the central argument of Howard Risatti in support of his claim for the independence of craft. I would like to explore further the common areas of historical negotiation, convergence and divergence in the craft debate in Anglo-America and Japan by analysing what makers and critics on each side regard as the essential craft issues.
3.1. Material
The proposition that material is a crucial factor in craft is unanimously and historically agreed upon by the makers of craftwork. In the modern age, Bernard Leach (1940) stressed the tenet of truth to materials, involving an honest choice of materials that are fit for purpose while advising that nature speaks itself in making a good pot (Leach 1940). Anna Fariello (2004: 151, 166) considers how materials connect to nature and record the making process as well as the maker’s personal mark. Materials are part of makers’ artistic expression in as much as makers explore their understanding of the inherent structural qualities and strength of materials. Textile artist Michele Hardy (2004: 181) argues that materials activate the bodily sensitivity of craftmakers, which ‘determines, develops, and changes throughout a process’ of making. Another textile artist, Warren Seeling (in Halper and Douglas 2009: 54–5) writes that material contains ‘unique information’, allowing artists to discover their ‘own personal sense of reality through a subconscious process – an intuitive, creative process in which material is an active partner’. Moreover, material is more than a means to an end; that is, it is not there to realise pre-conceptualised ideas, but rather to ‘offer clues about form yet to be visualized’. However, unlike in Japan, as Adamson (2007: 38–65) shows in the contemporary Anglo-American world, craft artists struggle to justify the material-centred language in an environment where material is the antithesis of Modernists’ emphasis on purely visual qualities: the ‘Greenberg effect’.

3.2. Function
‘Function’ or ‘utility’ is intrinsically associated with the nature and structure of craft. It creates limitations in the sense of John Cage’s proposition that music is separated from noise by the creation of a structure. However, since the late nineteenth century, ‘function’ in relation to decorative and applied arts was hierarchically demarcated and gradually relegated to a secondary status in Anglo-America (Greenhalgh 1997), resulting in a fierce defence from makers. Rob Barnard (2004: 64), who makes functional tableware, states, ‘use is what makes crafts accessible to us’ in the way craft relates to us through its form in everyday domestic space. John Perreault (2004: 77) argues that ‘eliminating use makes form symbolic, denying the full force of the chief aesthetic virtue of craft objects: their perceptual and conceptual complexity’. Yet this is the very quality that fine art disapproves of most. Basket artist Ed Rossbach (in Halper and Douglas 2009: 249–50) shrewdly points out that ‘function’ is a linking of the memory from the past informing contemporary work, noting that ‘a clear distinction between utilitarian and non-utilitarian was
not recognised in the past. The meaning of one is intimately related to the meaning of the other'. He sees contemporary ‘baskets that are not intended to satisfy any utilitarian purposes yet perpetuate utilitarian features’ as some kind of ‘legacy’ from the past. Peculiarly, however, ‘such references to past times determine and intensify the non-utilitarian basket’.

In Japan, ‘function’ has not been an issue in the past, nor has it been an issue in the current craft debate. As long as aesthetic ideas surrounding tea continue to inform the consideration of tea drinking bowls, which are thus venerated and given high aesthetic value, and Mingei ideas are still strongly supported by the public, function will be less of a defining criterion for craft than in Anglo-America. No conflict accompanies looking at the objects’ artistic value with or without function. The notion of ‘function’ for craft seems to be detrimental to creative expression in the West, while there is no need to defend it for artists in Japan.

3.3. Skills, hand

In Anglo-America, contemporary discussions on ‘skill’ started with David Pye, speaking from his experience as a wood carver. Mediating between the definitions of ‘skill’ given by Pye and art historian Michael Baxandall, Adamson (2007: 69–78) argued that skills are the craftsman’s knowledge of the management of the risk involved in the process of making, as well as his (or her) judgement of what is right, and that these two fit together in mutual dependence in the making process. Sennett (2008: 10) defines skills as ‘bodily practices’ acquired from repetitive training, while ‘technical understanding develops through the powers of imagination’. Higher skills involve ‘tacit knowledge’ (Michael Polanyi’s term), whereby we find ‘a constant interplay between tacit knowledge and self-conscious awareness, the tacit knowledge serving as an anchor, the explicit awareness serving as critique and corrective’ (Sennett 2008: 50–51). Yet skills are reviled in Modernist aesthetic theory as ‘supplemental’ and are placed in opposition to creativity (Adamson 2007).

By contrast, the Japanese indigenous term *waza*, meaning ‘skill’, used primarily in traditional arts, is one of the most respected notions in Japanese culture, and so defensive justification is not required. Although the argument surrounding *waza* is not without its problematic aspects, especially in terms of the often nationalistic and androcentric perspectives, the notion of *waza* offers a diametric contrast with the debate on skills in the Anglo-American world. *Waza* is a central notion of ‘traditional art craft’, discussed above as part of the first type of Japanese crafts. Some of the best works by the ‘Living National Treasure’ craftsmakers were also exhibited at the British Museum in 2007. The title of this exhibition was *Waza no Bi* (Beauty of Skill), which was translated
into English as Crafting Beauty in Modern Japan. Whether this was an intentional avoidance of the word ‘skill’, which has unfavourable connotations in the West, is not known, but an understanding of the different evaluations of skill suggests that the translation was shrewd.

The association of the notion of skill with national tradition sometimes sparks nationalistic comments. This can be seen in the comments of progressive craftmakers, such as textile artist Fukumoto Shigeki’s (Fukumoto 2003: 275–7) essentialist view that ‘Japanese skill’ is ‘passive’ – an uncontrolled artist’s reliance on nature as opposed to ‘Western skill’, which is an ‘aggressively’ controlled subjective force. In contrast, ceramic artist Fukami Tōji (in Fukumoto 2003: 275–80) denies such a cultural dichotomy, stressing skill as the maker’s ‘subjective’ relationship with particular media, which builds up through continuous practice by trusting the self. Skill improves through this continuous practice and leads to better management of risk. Therefore, he argues, skill is inseparable from the maker’s subjective control of the material, the process and the final form.

3.4. The avant-garde versus craftsmanship

Adamson’s (2007) study clearly shows how Modernist art discourse is centred on the notion of the ‘avant-garde’. Art is considered autonomous, pure, and self-critical in its production and reproduction of ‘avant-garde’ art, whereas craft is supplemental, impure, and uncritical because it is ruled by ‘material’ and ‘skill’. The notion of the avant-garde is idealised as the essence of human creativity, but is not applicable to craft, explaining why craft is denigrated. However, as many in the craft scene argue, ‘avant-gardeness’ is not a relevant notion for craft, and what matters more is the integrity of craftsmanship. Sennett (2008: 20, 172) argues that craftsmanship consists of ‘problem solving and problem finding’, which accords with the inherent human nature to seek new challenges. Further to the view that the notion of craftsmanship is irreconcilable with the notion of the ‘avant-garde’, Kitazawa Noriaki (2003: 16–18) astutely describes craft as ‘avant-garde without avant-gardism’ and ‘avant-garde in the age without avant-garde’. He argues that while the notion of the avant-garde stands on the border of art and non-art, and is also supported by the polarised concept of human mind and machine, craft resides borderlessly in both art and non-art, in a state in which the human mind and machine are enmeshed. In post-industrial society, where this demarcation has become increasingly blurred, the notion of the avant-garde has collapsed and art has become increasingly like craft. Craftmakers in Japan – consciously or unconsciously – seem to feel this situation of post-avantgardism keenly, as discussions on the avant-garde can hardly be found in Japanese debate. This makes a sharp
contrast with the craft debate in the Anglo-American world, which needs to engage with the debate on avant-garde art.

3.5. The totality of the body experience – haptic

Craft is not only an optical experience, but also a haptic one. Ceramic artist Julian Stair (2000: 19), who organised a conference in 1999 called ‘The Body Politic: The Role of the Body and Contemporary Craft’, proposes the appropriation of a term from human cognitive science term, ‘haptic’ (referring to the psychological orientation of touch), to discuss critically the relationship between body and craft. Art critic John Perreault (2004: 77) also states that ‘craft objects have a more balanced relationship between their haptic and their optic qualities than paint-on-canvas art or noncraft sculpture, thus allowing a doubleness of being’. The nature of craft and craft practice involves a haptic, optic and sensory experience, as a holistic and visceral physiological human experience of perception. Sekijima Hisako’s (1988: 76) use of the analogy of the bird’s nest to suggest the unity of body and craftwork also explains this idea effectively. The totality of the work and the body of a bird’s nest comes from selection of a particular kind: of the size and weight of a material, determined by the physical characteristics of a bird, and of the form, determined by the bird’s posture of making while flying in the air. Sennett (2008: 168, 170) invokes the moment when the fingertips’ physical movement connects with the haptic experience that becomes technique, which realises ‘the unity of head and hand’ – an idea he illustrates by examining child violinists studying under the Suzuki method. The haptic element involved in craftmaking is thus well articulated and supported in both Anglo-America and Japan.

3.6. Gender, class, race, professionalism

Craft is a gendered and ethnicised field in Britain. As noted by Adamson (2007: 5), craft’s inferiority stems from aspects of a ‘sexist, classist, racist’ typecasting, as well as its tendency to be ‘coded as feminine or even “ethnic”’. The idea of femininity is also associated with ‘amateurism’, and craft may be regarded as a hobby lacking the ‘self-critical values of the avant-garde’ – it is thus part of ‘outsider’ visual culture (Adamson 2007: 139). However, in Japan this situation is diametrically different, and even illustrates some of the irony in Japan’s modern history. Craft is traditionally male-centred professional territory that women cannot enter. This is still evident in the state-sponsored official system that frames dentō kōgei (traditional craft). Among the 111 master craftmakers exhibited in the British Museum’s Crafting Beauty in Modern Japan,
only 12 women artists were included – mainly in the sections displaying textiles and dolls. Therefore, while both cultures are genderised, the direction is opposite.

While the notion of craft and the idea of a feminine hobby exist in Japan, this is clearly demarcated from the professional craft world. There are other words, such as shumi (hobby), shugei (handicrafts), and kurafuto, that are used for hobby (i.e. non-professional) crafts and indicate a vast body of female craftmakers operating in community centres, schools and at home. On the other hand, there are many professional female craft artists who operate outside the traditional craft world and are creating a vibrant world of craft. However, there is also a historical irony in Japanese craft. Exquisite art craft exported from Japan to the West since the late nineteenth century has often been appreciated for its pleasing decorativeness, which exists without spirituality, and its closeness to nature, based on a feminine and ethnic aesthetic. Contemporary accounts (e.g. Alcock 1878) suggest that Japan was regarded as a nation without higher art and architecture, but excelling to a peculiar degree in decorative and industrial art, i.e. lower art forms. This Eurocentric art discourse has produced a legacy in terms of how Japanese craft has been perceived in the West up until the present.

3.7. Decoration (kazari)

‘Decoration’ associated with craft has been problematic in Anglo-America. Adamson (2007: 31–2) discusses the case of the artists of the Pattern and Decoration Movement of the 1970s, who used pattern and decoration as a tactic to present ‘a vision of multi-cultural, non-sexist, non-classist, non-racist, non-hierarchical art’, but did not succeed in becoming avant-garde. ‘Decoration’ has been belittled by modern art history; nor has it been recognised as having positive potential within the craft debate. On the other hand, an interesting debate has developed recently in Japan on kazari (decoration), led by the eminent art historian Tsuji Nobuo (1992, 1998), who rewrote the history of Japanese visual culture by putting ‘decoration’ at the centre. Tsuji argues that kazari is the essence of Japanese art, which has lain between ‘fine art’ and ‘craft’ throughout its history, but has been neglected due to Western influence on modern art historiography. Following Tsuji, art historian Nicole Rousmaniere curated an exhibition entitled Kazari: Decoration and Display in Japan 15th–19th Centuries at the British Museum in 2002, which also proposed to re-examine, literally to “re-vision” the materiality and appearances of Japan’s artistic heritage, providing a key to the understanding of aesthetic environments and their impact on people’s lives’ through the neglected concept of kazari (Rousmaniere 2002: 31). MOMA Tokyo’s exhibition The Power of Decoration: A Viewpoint on Contemporary Kōgei (2009) was
also key in delivering the Japanese perspective on ‘decoration’, strongly supported by contemporary artists whose work is characterised by excessive decoration. The curator of the exhibition, Kaneko Kenji, explored various meanings of ‘decoration’ in contemporary craft art by locating the fundamental human expressions of emotion, desire, obsession, and the transformation of nature and the environment. The perspective links up contemporary craft with pre-modern ‘tradition’ and prehistory (Kaneko, Karasawa and Kida 2009).

The postcolonial revision of modern art history and the modern historiography of Japanese art both engage with the craft debate in respect to the idea of ‘decoration’. The idea of decoration in relation to the haptic has also been discussed. For example, art historian Tsuruoka Mayumi (in Fukumoto 2003: 68–72) argues that all Japanese art is applied or decorative art, giving the example of the fusuma (sliding door) in the Japanese house, which is painted but has function, alongside ‘haptic beauty’, in the specifically built environment. She goes on to say that fine art has been supplemental to applied or decorative art in Japanese art from the Neolithic to the present. This widely shared, comfortable, haptic aesthetic still exists in Japanese decorative culture and should be clearly articulated to ‘avoid being swallowed by the western global standard’ (in Fukumoto 2003: 68–72). Tsuruoka’s argument is not only addressed to ‘decoration’ but can also be placed in the larger picture of a continuing Japanese cultural debate that has repeatedly resurfaced since the Second World War and has now appeared again with the recent surge in popular neo-nationalism. It is a critique that questions the limitations of ‘Modernism’ and argues that Japan has been always ‘postmodern’, even before Western cultural colonisation. Japan therefore needs to ‘overcome modernity’ (kindai no chōkoku) to de-centre the Western paradigm and construct a unique Japanese cultural identity.9

Part 4: Convergence and divergence in global contemporary art

The essential craft issues that have been identified and debated both in Anglo-America and Japan demonstrate that ‘crafts’ are at the cutting edge of contemporary visual culture. Reflecting this revival of interest in craft, designers have been trespassing on craft’s territory in a positive way through designer–maker collaborations and by boosting creative industries globally.10 This act of trespass is also evident in the ‘fine art’ world, where craft has been persistently marginalised in Anglo-America by assuming a ‘supplemental position’. I would like discuss how two artists working in ‘fine art’, Murakami Takashi and Grayson Perry, relate to these phenomena. These two artists have a common interest in working within but challenging the world of ‘fine art’ by using ‘craft’ and non–fine art elements as their artistic strategies. Inasmuch as they could both be
regarded as rebels, the two offer an interesting comparison: Murakami is a Japanese artist known for his rebellion against the traditional high art world of Japanese-style painting; similarly, Perry with his odd but welcomed ‘nice rebellion’ (Perry 2013b) has emerged from the traditional British ‘fine art’ world. They have both used ‘bad’ popular taste (i.e. subcultures, brand commercialism, manga, and crafts) as artistic strategies for breaking down the boundaries of ‘fine art’. These artists also negotiate with histories of visual and material cultures from their locally and globally informed positions, and craft issues are situated at the core of their work.

4.1. Takashi Murakami’s superflattening visual hierarchy through mingei

Takashi Murakami’s strategy is to place the ‘Japanese specific cultural system into the context of Euroamerican Art History’ (Murakami 2006: 89) by challenging the ‘high art’ of the Euroamerican art system through Japanese subculture. He theorises this strategy as ‘superflat’. The key concept of ‘superflat’ is the ability of technique to capture ‘directness and gaze movement’ (Murakami 2000: 13). Murakami argues that his work attracts the viewer’s gaze so that it becomes fixated on a plane by means of a key motif. The gaze is dragged in different directions on the plane, sometimes with accelerating and sometimes with decelerating speed, but is maintained by violent movements and changes that create a super-real feeling and a ‘contemporary Japanese sensibility’ (Murakami 2000: 11). Murakami finds this technique and aesthetic concept unique to Japanese art, and traces its continuity from the works of the eccentric artists of the Edo period to contemporary subcultural art such as animation and manga.

This aesthetic of ‘flatness’ is situated in opposition to the realistic three-dimensional illusion that is at the core of Western fine art. Flatness is rather an essence of decoration, with a history as an intrinsic and highly praised value in Japanese art (as noted by Murakami’s mentor Tsuji Nobuo), yet it has a discomforting quality and unappreciated value in modern Western art. Flatness, as opposed to hierarchy, also symbolises the level-headed public and democracy, a reflection of Murakami’s hatred of the snobbery and hierarchy of the conservative world of Japanese art. While Western critics have commented on his unashamed commercialism, there has been little comment on or interpretation of his postmodern reinterpretation of Japanese art history and his presentation of Japanese distinctiveness in engaging with the Anglo-American question of Modernism in visual culture.
In a similar manner to ‘flatness’, Murakami has also identified ‘crafts’ as an important area from which artistic strategy can be drawn. His discussions on crafts have also failed to attract the attention of critics outside of Japan – perhaps because Western critics have been much more interested in the issues of subculture, sexual vulgarity and commercialism. However, in my view, this neglected aspect of Murakami’s engagement with crafts is important not only in reading his art strategy, which specifically negotiates with Japanese art history, but also because of its local significance, reflected in the overwhelming support for him from the young generation of Japanese. Murakami has revealed his own collection of over 1000 Mingei objects as part of his investigative search for the Japanese aesthetic as well as for a uniquely Japanese form of expression (Casa Brutus 2008). Recently he has even opened Oz Zingaro, his shop/gallery in Tokyo’s shopping mall, through which he sells historical Mingei, such as antique tea bowls and seikatsu tōgei (ceramic tableware), alongside contemporary art from across the world (Murakami 2013: 12–23) (Figure 5). He describes seikatsu tōgei – contemporary Mingei – as ‘accomplished art with a profound context, and not necessarily identified as crafts, this is Japan’s postwar art that is loved by Japanese people’ (Geizutsu Shinchō 2013). Its uniqueness lies in its low prices that are affordable for everyone, and so it has a large market share in Japan’s art scene. The shop is a practice ground for his idea of ‘superflattening the visual hierarchy’ (Murakami 2013), or breaking ‘the rules of the art game which were set by the victors of the war’ – that is, the Euroamerican superpowers (Murakami 2013). Thus he seeks to change

Figure 5. Murakami’s Oz Zingaro shop with Mingei objects. Photo by KENTA AMINAKA. Courtesy of Kaikai Kiki office.
the rules from the Japanese aesthetic point of view through a contemporary reappraisal of Mingei.

4.2. Grayson Perry’s homage to ‘unknown craftsmen’ and exploration of pottery

Like Murakami, Grayson Perry is also experimenting with guerrilla tactics that could be compared with Murakami’s ‘superflattening the visual hierarchy’. In his recent popular exhibition at the British Museum, *The Tomb of the Unknown Craftsman* (2011–12), he placed a shrine for his teddy bear Alan Measles alongside an eighteenth/nineteenth-century Russian triptych shrine, a Japanese portable shrine of the eighteenth century, and a hand towel of Hello Kitty dressed as though for a pilgrimage. The idea of pilgrimage and the artist’s quest for ‘religion’, ‘truth’ and ‘a sense of universality’ is unashamedly brought into a contemporary art world that can only dismisses these ideas as ‘irony’ (Perry 2013b). The theme is a journey of pilgrimage to the tomb of the unknown craftsman – ‘makers and builders, all those countless un-named skilled individuals who have made the beautiful man-made wonders of history’, and Perry is ‘an artist in the service of his religion, his master, his tribe, his tradition’ (Perry 2011: 20). He reinterprets world history and objects through his subjective intervention.

This journey to world civilisation and rediscovery parallels his own series of pilgrimage journeys, including his trip to Germany with his ‘living god’ teddy bear, Alan Measles, riding in an excessively decorated ‘popemobile’ (Figure 6). Among the crafts made by unknown craftsmen, pottery is his main interest and his strategy. Perry (in Jones 2006: 192) talks about the effectiveness of using pottery in the fine art world: ‘I was attracted to pottery because it was naff – that was the subtext. I was aware of ceramics being the underdog’. He plays with the longstanding British cultural associations (including his own) surrounding pottery: the ‘woody, nutty, wholesome, truth-to-material-ness around it … However trite and dilettante the images I put on the clay, the material would bring it, literally, down to earth’ (Perry in Jones 2006: 193). His interest is in the ‘underdog’ quality of craft that strikes at the heart of the supplementary status of ‘craft’, as Glenn Adamson noted. Craft only gains power when it is outside and marginal. Like his cross-dressing, it cannot stand out without the existence of ‘straight-dressing’. Craft as a guerrilla tactic – as what Perry (in Klein 2009: 39) calls ‘stealth bombs’ – is ultimately empowering contemporary art in Britain.

Perry has a complex attitude to ‘skills’ and ‘decoration’. He emphasises technological reproducibility and digital technology; for example, during experiments for his tapestry project, in which he digitally programmed his design into a computer-controlled loom that wove at
high speed, producing a 4 × 2 m tapestry in just five hours (Perry 2013c: 11). Thus, he dismisses the idea that making by hand would create a special quality and dodges the aura of ‘skills’. Perry deliberately forms his pots using an amateurish coiling method rather than by showing off traditional throwing skills, but he does not forget to point out that Duchamp’s urinal was handmade by a potter. His official manifesto to the public is that skills, in particular those realised by hand, are not relevant for his contemporary art, nor does it help to talk about them when ‘beating the bounds’ of ‘art’ (Perry 2013a). He reminds us that ‘decorative’ is the most insulting word for art (Perry 2013a), that the words ‘beauty’ and ‘decoration’ are ‘swear words in contemporary art’ (in Klein 2009: 60). However, irony and contradictions are everywhere, as is the case within his art. As Jacky Klein (2009: 39–43) points out, behind his ‘punkish attitude’ and his denial of any association with the idea of the ‘ethical pot’ (influentially propagated by Bernard Leach in the Anglo-American world), there is a deep-rootedness and some undeniable evidence of his love and belief in the supreme quality and ‘the standards of the world’s best pottery’ (Leach 1940: 4). For Perry, this means British studio pottery of the early twentieth century by Leach, together with the work of Mingei philosophers and studio craft artists in Japan.

Perry’s irony is ingrained with a deep appreciation and critique of pottery art and its history. This is apparent from the commentaries on his love for the slipware dishes by Ralph Simpson and Ralph Toft in seventeenth-century Staffordshire. He talks of their ‘cheeky Englishness’ and identifies ‘the roots of my culture in the same way a Japanese artist
might see the roots of his in an Edo period tea ware’ (Perry 2011: 173), while he also fondly says that ‘in Japan, there is a great reverence for the peasant aesthetic. The organic aspect of craft pottery, the dribbles, cracks and crumbles have become central to the Japanese rustic tradition. They loved it when the ash that flew around the wood-fired kiln would chance to land in the glaze, forming little lumps and discolourations’ (in Klein 2009: 53). These statements reveal Perry’s warmth towards the art of pottery and the irresistible attraction of its intrinsic traits, such as truth to materials, skills, decoration and beauty – in short, ‘craftmanship’. Ironically, he must detach himself from these as a gesture towards being a fine artist, while at the same time admitting that there is ‘a profundity to be found in decorativeness’ and ‘quiet contemplation and veneration’ that the art of pottery reveals beyond his ‘guerrilla tactics’ (Klein 2009: 60, 54).

Perry’s positioning of pottery as an irony is in stark contrast to the way Murakami talks about his Mingei. Pottery in Japan is a form of ‘high art’ that is inseparable from the unshakable values of ‘sincerity’, ‘authenticity’ and ‘realness’ – values that Perry finds most difficult to talk about as qualities of art in contemporary visual culture, where everything is ‘irony’ (Perry 2013b). The revelation that Murakami is an avid collector of Mingei pottery is a refreshing re-evaluation of traditional popular art. Murakami’s use of popular culture is not limited to contemporary popular art but also includes the pre-modern (i.e. the Edo period), meaning the period of Japanese history pre-dating any Western intervention. There is a strong element of romanticisation of Edo culture as the period that represents the original essence of Japanese popular art and culture. Murakami presents superflatness as ‘an original concept of Japanese who have been completely Westernised’ (Murakami 2000: 4). This reappraisal of pre-modern Japanese culture also emphasises the disruption caused by Western culture. It contains a reactionary view towards Western cultural imperialism. The craft-centric view also represents postcolonial trends being embedded within current cultural nationalism.

Both Perry and Murakami were drawn to ‘craft’ and the values historically constructed around it, yet interestingly their cultural contexts are very different. The Anglo-American view of pottery summarised by Perry as ‘not shocking’, ‘suburb[an]’, ‘amateurish’ and above all ‘decorative’, is not relevant to Japan’s context, where Murakami is working. Murakami’s art and his reappraisal of crafts appears to be a postmodern moment at a superficial level, but it marks a moment of Japanese modernity that is making art out of a historical revision of an indigenous tradition. It is making sense of the past and ‘tradition’ through contemporary media by identifying contemporary ‘Japaneseeseness’. It connects present and future. Somehow, an interesting convergence around ‘craft’ can be observed in the work of these two artists, who are both strategically stretching the boundaries of art. However, the comparison also exposes
incompatible differences and culturally specific issues surrounding crafts in Anglo-America and Japan.

**Conclusion**

The recent debate on ‘crafts’ in Anglo-America and Japan represents a shared questioning of the contemporary situation of visual culture. It problematises the hierarchy and system of modern visual culture, and reveals global concerns about the detachment of art from humanity and everyday life. In short, the craft debate exposes the fundamental question of what art is in the twenty-first century. On the other hand, significant differences are also revealed. The context of the reality of crafts in Anglo-America converges into one unified voice of the ‘victim’: it is marginalised by ‘fine art’ and there are trends towards all craft being lumped together. In Japan, meanwhile, the rich diversity within crafts is recognised by complex and longstanding institutionalisations and craft is ring-fenced as an independent field. The specific issues debated surrounding material, function, skills/hands, the haptic, gender, class and race also reveal different historical contexts. While in Anglo-America there is primarily a postmodern questioning of the self-regulating visual system, in Japan it is more a case of a postcolonial moment that empowers the nation to articulate difference, demanding a rewrite of history from the subjective everyday perspective of the regions. This confidence is expressed, for example, in a project called ‘Revive Japonisme’ (Japonisme Saikō) launched by MOMA Tokyo Craft Gallery and led by Kaneko Kenji. This project promotes the use of the Japanese term **kōgei** in non-Japanese texts outside Japan to replace the English term ‘craft’, because the contemporary English term ‘craft’ includes the cultural baggage of European Modernism and is therefore imbued with a problematic history in Japan (*Asahi Shimbun* 2010) (Figure 7).

**Kōgei** is considered to embrace wider human creative activities that have evolved historically from specific Japanese contexts, to take on an untranslatable divergence, as discussed above, for example in the context of essential craft issues such as ‘function’, ‘skills’ and ‘decoration’. This movement is also an obvious part of the government’s recent cultural policy that Iwabuchi (2007) calls the ‘branding of soft culture’, whereby Japan’s uniqueness is marketed with a view towards increasing national income through consumption and tourism. The success of the strategy can be gauged by the international profile of exported terms such as **anime**, **manga** and **washoku**. This is a statement of divergence, and summarises Japan’s postmodern and postcolonial stance on recovering its ownership of craft matters. We can also take note of the interesting engagement with craft, alongside an increasing convergence between contemporary artists Murakami and Perry, whose interests also lie in negotiating histories
through their postmodern, postcolonial yet subjective reappraisal of histories. The craft debate therefore may well be regarded as being at the crossroads of the convergence and divergence of global contemporary visual cultures.

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Notes
1. I use the term ‘Anglo-America’ to point to the recent craft debate as captured by publications in English through mainly British and North American publishers, while ‘Euroamerica’ is a translation of the historical term obei and ‘West’ is a translation of the historical term seiyō. The latter two are often used interchangeably in Japanese writing, and both are culturally discursive concepts that date from the nineteenth century up to the present, rather than geo-cultural or linguistically specific concepts. They are
indispensable concepts in the cultural debate in Japan, particularly with respect to discussions of Japanese culture.


3. With a personal interest in and passion for Japanese crafts, Nakata travels around Japan to learn regional craftmaking. He now runs his own project, ReVALUE (http://nakata.net/rnp/cat/cat1/), to promote the local handicrafts and culture of Japan.

4. According to art historian Tsuji Shigebumi (2003), the term dentō, meaning ‘tradition’, acquired positive and nationalistic connotations in the late 1930s and frequently went hand in hand with the tide of ultra-nationalism during the war. This continued to the 1950s and onwards with the official systematisation of dentō kōgei (traditional craft) and dentō geijutsu (traditional arts).

5. For a description of how this system operates and how it has created paradoxes and controversies, see Bambling 2005.

6. For further information on the Odate Kōgei company and their products, see the website at http://www.magewappa.co.jp/.

7. Japan’s craft world normally shows little interest in engagement outside of Japan. Therefore, when Kaneko invited Edmund de Waal to MOMA Tokyo’s craft gallery for a craft debate, we witnessed a refreshingly new approach. This debate was published in Kaneko Kenji (2007b).

8. Shugei is a category of craftmaking activity that features in girls’ school curricula, and it is also used to indicate amateur crafts made by women. See Yamasaki (2012).

9. The term ‘overcoming modernity’ (kindai no chōkoku) first appeared in the title of a symposium organised in 1942 during the Second World War in Japan. At the symposium, 13 of Japan’s leading cultural authorities discussed the modernisation and westernisation of Japan since the late nineteenth century and questioned the issue of Japanese identity in a wide range of cultural fields: literature, history, theology, film, music, philosophy, and science. An English translation of the symposium proceedings can be found in Calichman (2008). For the development of nihonjinron (the discourse of Japanese uniqueness) during the 1970s and 1980s and the recent popular cultural nationalism led by manga artist Kobayashi Yoshinori since the 1990s, see Dale (1986) and Sakamoto (2008).

10. This recent trend of designer–maker collaborations is demonstrated in trade shows including those of Tent London, Maison et Objet, Salone Internazionale del Mobile and Ambiente.


12. Netto! Nihon Bijutsu Shi (Battle Royal! Japanese Art History), which is structured through dialogues between Murakami Takashi and Tsuji Nobuo, has become a bestseller for young Japanese interested in Japanese art history (Tsujimi and Murakami 2014).
13. *Washoku* (Japanese cuisine) was designated as Intangible Cultural Heritage by UNESCO in 2014 as a result of successful lobbying on the part of the Japanese government.

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