Tokyo, Japan—*Kiyonori Muroga*

Introducing the cultural context

Ingo Offermanns: What's the most inspiring place for you in Tokyo?

Kiyonori Muroga: Probably Kanda Jinbocho, the neighborhood of antiquarian bookshops. It's maybe five minute walk from here, and they have nice booksellers specialized in various fields.

What about Tokyo in general? Is it a good place to live?

Actually, I don't think so. It's too dense and complex to really feel comfortable. It's also a difficult place to bring up children, especially with less support from the local community.

How about from a professional perspective? Is Tokyo a good place for graphic design?

With regards to the number of companies and cultural institutions, one could say that it is a convenient city for graphic designers, but nowadays more designers move outside of the city, making use of lower living costs. Internet makes this possible.

Where does Tokyo's graphic design scene meet and exchange ideas?
Is there a place like the Book Society in Seoul?

There are many bookshops and galleries that host events, but there isn't a central one for graphic designers. Their communities are diverse. Also, younger generations are less association-oriented than the former ones. There are still gallery spaces, like ggg and G8, run by big companies that exhibit graphic design. These places have a long and influential tradition from the 80s. But their raison d'être is changing, partly due to the shifting position of graphic design in our society, and the retirement of the former leading designers. So, there is less and less of a connection between the designers, the companies, and in the end—the public.

Is it difficult to survive as a graphic designer in Japan?

Yes. One of the most important reasons for this, I think, is the large number of colleges and the resulting large number of graduates. During the past decades design was

one of the most popular studies among young people, but there are too many graphic designers in Japan today and less social respect. As a result, wage dumping happens easily. This has a lot to do with a lack of mediation from the designers part, but also with a conventional public understanding of designers as mere craftsmen or mechanical workers.

I'm fascinated by the Japanese approach to modernity. It's seems balanced and extreme at the same time.

I think Japanese people are very much obsessed with questioning themselves, because our entire culture was questioned when western modernity forced its way into our society about one hundred and fifty years ago. It's a difficult mindset, because it oscillates between two poles—east and west. The clash of "Sakoku"—the hermetic Japanese tradition that lasted form the 17th until the 19th century—and western modernity in the middle of the 19th century still echoes in our minds and culture, making us open for experiments and extremes, but also unstable.

Speaking of aesthetic notions in Japan, I get the impression that beauty is something European.

In the course of modernizing and westernizing Japanese culture, we also adopted aesthetic notions. But in the end, platonic ideas do not really correspond well with the Japanese mentality. Japanese people think more in terms of configurations.

After being in Japan for a few days, I also have the feeling that I'm in the most modern country I've ever been to. Is Japanese society as modern as the cities it has built?

I don't think so. Notions like true democracy and human rights are rarely understood here. It's not that Japan is less individualistic than other industrialized nation, but the pre-modern structure of classes and stakeholder groups still echoes throughout our society and mindset.

What other characteristics do you associate with the Japanese mentality?

This is a great deal of pressure to conform, and the sense of discipline provides order in Japanese society.

What aspects of the Japanese mentality could other cultures learn from?

Our mentality is rooted in or at least very much influenced by the Japanese language and writing system. Our writing system uses Chinese pictograph-based characters and combines them with phonetic letters. It's complex in structure and use, but there is also a philosophical and aesthetic logic born from it, related to principles of composition and beauty, which you can find in Japanese architecture and painting for example, as well.

Introducing the person

What's the most beautiful thing you have ever seen?

Most recently, I would say my baby. There's also the town where I grew up, covered in snow at night in the moonlight. This image of beauty really became part of my basic memory.

How do you stay alert for the little miracles of everyday life?

I like observing situations. In the train, at a crossing, you can see weird, funny, absurd, or simply beautiful encounters. To me, it sometimes feels like theatrical theory.

What ideas do you find particularly interesting or fascinating at the moment?

As an editor, my interests vary and are mostly related to the magazine issues that I work on. Currently I'm focusing on the graphics for the upcoming Olympic Games in Tokyo and the question of how core aspects of Japanese culture can be visualized graphically. But the base of my interest is still Western design aesthetics and how these interact with Japanese culture.

What do you expect from life?

I don't expect anything concrete from life. I just want to make good use of this fragile moment that I call my life.

And what does life in Japan expect from you?

There's this cliché saying in Japan: a protruding nail must be hammered down. As I said earlier, Japanese society is not less individualistic than other industrialized nations. The mechanisms of the market and consumption are responsible for this. But there is still an appreciation for discipline, solidarity, and social control.

What was your dream career as a child?
Did you always want to become a publisher?

I actually wanted to become a cartoonist—a manga artist. But I never achieved a level that I was happy with. At that time, I read an autobiographical manga by the comic artist duo Fujiko Fujio, and I was struck by their hand-drawn zines, which were distributed via a circle of friends. I loved this energy, and it later pushed me to become involved in publishing.

Working life

Could you describe your typical work day?

There's nothing special about my work day routine. I get up around 6 in the morning, bring my child to kindergarden, and take a 40 minute train ride to my office. I'm not so good at managing a schedule, but I always start doing bureaucratic paper work (there is quite a bit in Japan) and answering emails. Only after that can I start doing editorial work. I end my days at about 7 or 8 in the evening, go to my favorite bar for one or two drinks, and go home.
Besides publishing, I sometimes teach or I contribute texts for exhibition catalogues. And since this is not company work, I have to do this during my vacation time.

Is working in the design field a dream job for you?

Not really, because somehow I got involved in the design field by chance. Someone passed the ball to me, and I accepted it. The job is literally a "calling". I have to pass it down to the next, making a chain. I take it temporarily, but seriously.

In respect to your outstanding achievements in the field of graphic design, this feels like an understatement to me.

As I said, every step I take, I take seriously. I do regard graphic culture as a fundamental human activity—a basic form of human interaction. And I'm certainly not just talking about printmaking, but about any form of visual coding, like signs, traces, and so on. My interest lies in the cultural scale of graphics, more than professional graphic design.

Is this the reason it's important to you to publish a magazine about graphic design?

I'm running the magazine in the first place, because it's my job. But so far, we've managed to publish some issues that were worthwhile publishing. I definitely like the idea that by making a magazine like IDEA, you can publish something culturally critical.

When putting together a new issue, how does your idea finding process work? How do you choose the work that you want to show?

It's a chain reaction. One is evolving out of another.

Does hierarchy play a role in your work as publisher?

Within my publishing team, everything happens more or less on eye level. There are certainly different fields of responsibility, but the work flow is based on open-mindedness.
It was different in the first decades of the magazine. IDEA started in 1953, and it was deeply connected to the hierarchy of the graphic masters' community. The magazine would publish the best protagonists and outcomes of their competition. But after a while, this hierarchy produced some kind of routine that I didn't like. So, when I joined the office, I tried to push for more of a punk, rebel spirit. I tried to free the magazine from this competitive hierarchy related to the graphic industry, and I pushed for creating a platform for discourse.

What are the most exciting and the most annoying moments in your work as an editor?

Developing ideas and collaborating with contributors and staff are the best parts of my job. Negotiation with the publisher and endless communication via email are probably the most stressful parts of the job. I also have to admit that I'm not too fond of writing. But since there are not a lot of writers in this industry, I'm frequently pushed to do so.

What are the compromises that you have to make as an editor?

Compromises are always about time and cost. On the other hand, if I didn't have deadlines, I wouldn't finish anything…

Who do you get your feedback from?

Primarily from my colleagues or the designers who I often drink with. But I also get feedback from events that we organize, and nowadays we also get a lot of comments via social media.

Attitude

How important is the magazine as an artifact, an object to you?

Twenty years ago, the magazine followed a basic editorial and production structure. There were neither editorial nor printing specialties applied. Around the millennium, the former chief put more stress on the magazine as an object. We wanted to introduce the same attitude of the published works into the design of the magazine itself. But this object driven approach got a little out of control, so we tried to find a better balance between ambitious content and ambitious design.

What are the qualities of a good graphic designer?

In my opinion, a good designer should have a sense for language. If a designer can write good texts, he or she is most likely a good designer.

Next to the challenges of a specific design job, there is sometimes an aesthetic meta discourse going on in the design community, which also influences daily design actions. In Europe notions like participation or generative design are part of this meta discourse. What about such a discourse in Japan?

The first generations of graphic designers in Japan were busy establishing modern graphic design as a profession. They helped to build the graphic industry and import design knowledge from Europe and the USA. Their self-conception was comparable to an ingenious artist. Professor Sugiura Kohei, who is perhaps the exclusive figure of the post-war generation, developed this industry further. He questioned the western design traditions, rediscovered Japanese and East Asian design traditions, and tried to develop an open-minded but specific Asian design approach. This came along with a more scientific conception of graphic design. Nowadays, young graphic designers are still dealing with questions of cultural identity in a globalized world, but they also have to struggle with a culturally and economically fragmented Japanese society. One of the meta topics is also redefining graphic design in this constantly changing society. Meanwhile,

there are always fashion-driven discourses around contemporary concepts imported from the West.

Would you say that there is a specific contemporary Japanese design approach?

There is indeed a movement towards a more organic, loose, and handmade type of graphic design that makes less use of grids and "mechanical" logic. This has to do with Japanese design traditions, which are rooted in calligraphy and the rather loose structure of Japanese language. But this trend is freely and unconsciously generated—not from concrete thinking.

Thinking about identity in times of late capitalism, I sometimes wonder whether cultural identity is just another resource that is being exploited by industry to create and sell something supposedly new / different / individual?

First, I have to say that I have serious doubts about the notion of "creation" in this context. Art and applied art is about mixing and connecting things based on predecessors' work. But you're indeed pointing at something problematic. In pre-modern times, and even up to the end of the 20th century, identity was connected to classes or grown social contexts. This identity could also combine contradictory elements and it was extended and colored by the individuals within the context.

Late capitalism with it's market principles fragmented and flattened this. Social contexts became more or less liquid peer groups and identity is reduced to its basic idea: difference. But this difference doesn't imply complexity or contradiction anymore. It becomes as clean, simple, and logic as brand identities should be. And identity and individuality become somehow synonyms.

Maybe this simplicity and shallowness, which doesn't connect to human needs, makes people long for something deeper and more complex again.

But after all… "cultural identity" is an invention by capitalism that adheres to the concept of the nation-state.

Would you say that graphic design is dealing more with the symptoms of communication than with its causes?

Graphic design is a very intermediate thing. It only exists between the sender and recipient. In my opinion, it touches both the symptoms and the causes.
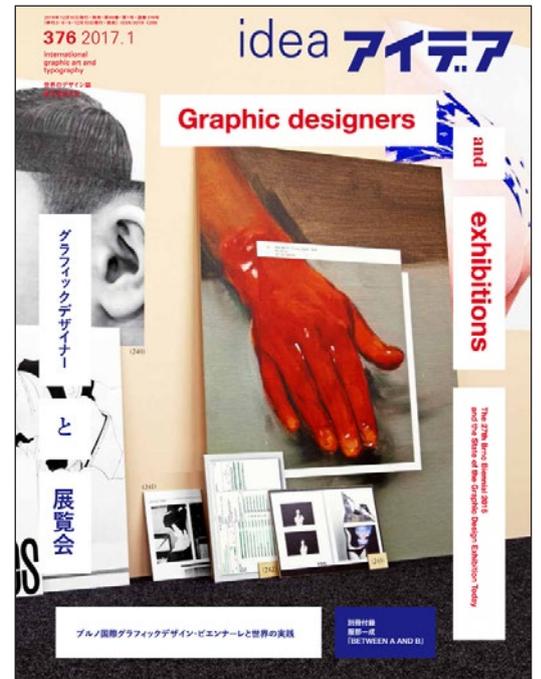
Last question: What would you do if you were the dictator of the graphic design world?

Maybe I would build a school to teach design history for designers and design for the general public.
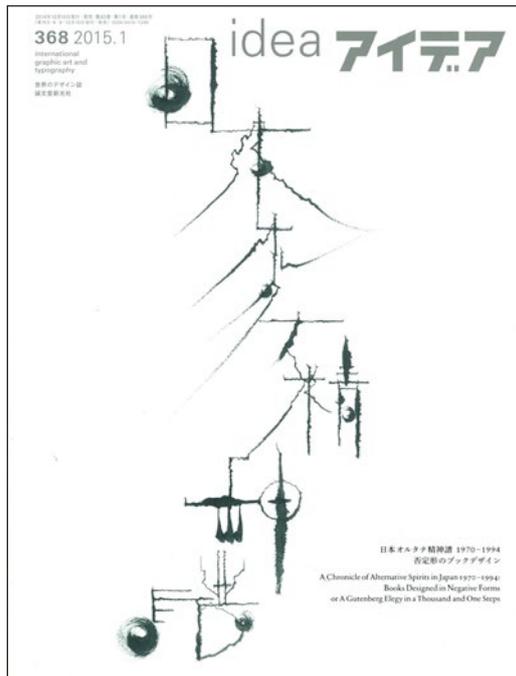
Title: Phenomenology of Koichi Sato
Year: 2016
Category: magazine
Dimensions: 200x125 mm
Client: Seibundo Shinkosha

Title: Graphic designers and exhibitions
Year: 2017
Category: magazine
Dimensions: 200x125mm
Editorial direction: Tetsuya Goto & Idea
Designer: Laboratories
Client: Seibundo Shinkosha

Title: A Chronicle of Alternative Spirits in Japan 1970-1994
Year: 2015
Category: magazine
Dimensions: 200x125 mm
Client: Seibundo Shinkosha

Title: Visual Communication in the Post-Internet Age
Year: 2014
Category: magazine
Dimensions: 200x125 mm
Client: Seibundo Shinkosha