

## Wabi–Sabi and Counter-Culture:

### Coaxing beauty from ugliness

Michael Arrigo

Beginning in the 1950's with such counter culture movements as the beats and hippies, the culture of Japan has proved to be regular stop along spiritual quest of countless young people over the last 50 years, providing, as one aging nippophile recalled, "a perfect antidote to the pervasively slick, saccharine, corporate style of beauty that was desensitizing American society" (Koren 9).

While this steady and continually growing fascination with Japan has never led to a prominent counter-culture made up of adolescents dutifully practicing Zen meditation and mastering the intricacies of the tea ceremony, traditional Japanese aesthetics and metaphysics have continued to reach ever wider and younger audiences. One can get a quick sense of the impact this steady stream of eastern ideas has had by looking at the popularity among young people of Japanese artistic forms such as *manga* (comics), *anime* (animations), *sentai* (live action TV programs), and the "mon" phenomena (Pokemon, Digimon etc.)

Elsewhere I have commented upon some of the complex social, economic and developmental reasons that these specific art forms currently enjoy such huge popularity among children and young adults. In this paper I would like to explore a more general nexus of Asian aesthetics and values for which the Japanese use the compound term *wabi-sabi*. In its fullest sense *wabi-sabi* defines a holistic worldview and way of being. In its narrowest sense it defines a particular kind of earthy style, flawed beauty and practiced unpretentiousness. I believe that *wabi-sabi* can be a useful concept to help describe and examine the systems of values and aesthetic sensibilities produced by various youth subcultures. I will focus specifically on the ways in which *wabi-sabi* can be used to describe the alternative system of values and attitudes that afford adolescent girls with some measure of freedom to oppose the dominant social values and to negotiate their own economic exploitation with a greater sense of individualism and empowerment.

## The Way of Tea

As early as the 6<sup>th</sup> century the word *wabi* had been used in classical Japanese literature to describe a sense of destitution, forlornness, desolation or distress usually associated with the wilderness. During this same time *sabi* was associated with concepts that best translate as chill, lean or withered. In the following centuries the distinct meanings of these two terms had blurred to such an extent that by the time that *wabi* had come to be associated with the tea ceremony in the late 15<sup>th</sup> century, they had become virtually interchangeable, a semantic fact that has persisted to the present and accounts for the convention, popular among average Japanese citizens, of using the compound *wabi-sabi*.

Beginning as early as the 14<sup>th</sup> century the significance of *wabi-sabi* underwent an amazing transformation. At this time it began to shed its former negative connotations of decay and impoverishment to emerge at the pinnacle of positive spiritual virtues and aesthetic values. To a large extent this can be attributed to a wave of minimalism and “naturalness” inspired by a rise in popularity of Taoism, Zen, and monochromatic ink painting among the warrior, literary and merchant classes. However, it took Soeki Sen Rikyu, “master of the Way of tea in mode of *wabi-style*” of to complete the semantic transformation of *wabi* and, in the process, precipitate an almost complete inversion of artistic expression and aesthetic significance in Japan.

Until Rikyu Chinese influence had dominated Japanese aesthetics. The pomp and ostentation evident such objects as Chinese porcelain intricately decorated in bright saturated color and gold leaf, highly polished lacquers, multi-colored satin with gold brocade, and ornate pagodas. These were highly prized and formed the basis of Japanese notions of beauty. Previous masters of the Way of tea had begun to erode this Chinese hegemony by introducing simpler symbolic rituals and more humble domestic and Korean utensils and into the practice of tea. Under Rikyu this trend was intensified and culminated in a complete substitution of all courtly values including delicacy, refinement, symmetry, ostentation and flawlessness for a much more stark and humble concept of beauty that privileged the artless over the artificial and the natural over the cultural. Thus the hallmarks of the *wabi* style in the Way of tea became asymmetry, incompleteness, imperfection, unshapeliness and a simplicity and gracelessness that to the uninitiated appeared crude and unsophisticated.

The radical new values that gained expression in the Way of tea were soon felt throughout all aspects of Japanese society, taking their place alongside, and often replacing, the more familiar aristocratic norms of flawless beauty and Confucian morality that had been imported from China. As Toshihiko and Toyo Izutsu have observed, many of the most salient features of Asian culture that we currently recognize as being distinctly Japanese can be traced either directly or indirectly to the Way of tea and to the ascendance of the *wabi-sabi* aesthetic (47).

## **A Prize Horse Hitched to a Thatched Hut**

It has been well documented that many of the various counter-culture movements that developed in the 1950's and 1960's such as the beats and the hippies very self consciously looked to the east, and especially Japan, in the formation of their oppositional values and new modes of expression. As we move through the last three decades up to the present, the proliferation and depoliticization of sub cultures makes arguments for their oppositional status much more tenuous, and their relationship to mainstream American culture much more complex. This is especially true of the numerous youth subcultures, which have had elements of their self-defining style co-opted by commercial interests and absorbed into mainstream culture.

And what are these elements of self-defining style produced and consumed by the subcultures of this period? Youth subcultures such as rap, punk, skater, grunge, riot girl, goth and rave all share a common preference for that which is dark or concealed over that which is bright and overt. These qualities are reflected in their gathering places, for the most part dimly lit streets, bars, clubs and converted industrial spaces. Their choices of imagery are also characteristically dark, brooding, and polysemious. This is usually carried over into expressions of style that tend to conceal rather than reveal, such as baggy clothes, or the use of hermetic lyrics. For nearly all of these groups, it's in the concealment and mystery of the night that things happen. As a friend sympathetically related to me in me a number of years ago, "Seeing a goth by day is just sad."

Nearly all subcultures of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century place a decided emphasis on the plain, the graceless and even the crude. This has been variously interpreted as "grunge", blue collar, punk, "rad", "slacker", "street" or "ghetto". This rawness, grittiness, and the ability to "keep it real" is in most cases *the* measure of truth and authenticity. Anything that is perceived as artificial--the slick, corporate, suburban, and the sentimental (rappers will "break it down" about sex but rarely about love) is afforded very low status. As a result, qualities such as imperfection, incompleteness, inconsistency and even asymmetry are understood to be signs that guarantee authenticity and become positive rather than negative values. This can be seen not only in the habit of some groups to "dress down" with practiced unpretentiousness or carefully orchestrated casualness, but also in some forms of "dressing up" that use the formula of combing disparate fashions, say, combat boots with a long chiffon dress, baggy pants with a tight crop top or fancy gold jewelry with a jogging suit, to create the proper ensemble.

This same inconsistency and asymmetry is evidenced in the ways that many of these subcultures mix and match from unrelated or contrasting musical, artistic or cultural traditions, and then reassemble these stylistic elements into alternative

expressions. Wholes become parts to be reassembled into inconsistent wholes whose very inconsistency makes them feel correct and complete. The seventeenth century Japanese poet, Murata Shuko, described *wabi-sabi* as “a prize horse hitched to a thatched hut” (Hume 274). This statement demonstrated his keen sense of observation and economy, for in this single line he evoked an image that summed up many *wabi-sabi* values: simplicity, earthiness, contradiction, inconsistency, and asymmetry. The crude exterior of Shuko’s hut, like the raw and unpolished façade of counter-culture, is a thing of beauty, for it is an assurance of the worth of that which lies within.

I have used a very broad brush here and I do want to stress that the specific expressions of alterity differ greatly from one subculture to the next owing to the unique social, economic and geographic conditions that gave rise to each group. However, this being said, subcultures such as rap, punk, skater, grunge, riot girl, goth and rave do seem to share a surprisingly similar set of aesthetic principles, all of which are entirely consonant with the Japanese aesthetic of *wabi-sabi*. For the purposes of this paper I have been primarily concerned with exposing some of the shared values and common aesthetic principles that underlie subcultural expressions that developed half a century and half a world apart. A more thorough study would tease out some of the very real differences, and begin to explore the ways that American subcultures have had direct exposure to elements of the *wabi-sabi* aesthetic through exposure to Japanese philosophy or other cultural products such as comics, animation, video games and movies. Such a large undertaking would prove to be a daunting, and perhaps even in some cases, a fruitless task. However the fact that an extremely popular rap group is called the Wu-Tan Clan and that members of the punk/grunge band Sonic Youth have cited Zen among their influences hints that in our complex global culture, *wabi-sabi* influence may have seeped into even the unlikeliest places.

## **Images of Perfection**

In his book, *The Cultural Contradictions of Late Capitalism*, Daniel Bell characterized the culture of late capitalism as one of self-expression and self-gratification. “The individual is taken to be the measure of satisfaction [...] not some objective standard of quality and value...” (xvii). Since the time that Bell made this observation in the early seventies, many commentators have not only come to agree with his opinion but have noted a marked acceleration of this trend. With the privileging of the individual over objective standards of value has come a simultaneous broadening of the range of acceptable social roles and normative behaviors, a fact that some conservatives have lamented as the erosion of the family or slackening morality, and most liberals have lauded as strides towards equality and tolerance. Women have been among the largest beneficiaries of this widening field of opportunity. The options of lifestyles and careers open to women and girls are significantly greater than those that were available to their mothers and grandmothers. Girls today can delay marriage or

choose to forgo it completely. They can frequent tattoo parlors, or wax their bikini line as they daydream of their future career spent in the military, the boardroom, the basketball court or the ivory tower.

However, as much as the field of roles and behaviors open to women has expanded due to the general destabilization of “traditional” values, many of the aesthetic ideals and dynamics that were fundamental in the formation of these traditional values have been left largely unchanged and unquestioned. It’s now not uncommon to see images of powerful women in the media, career women who opt to wear power-red lipstick rather than pink. However positive the role model, these images typically don’t question the need for the lipstick. As one self-described “bold”, “smart” and “powerful” 15 year old girl recently put it, “ We want to achieve and excel but we’re not sure if the way to succeed isn’t to have longer eyelashes, and if perfect thighs aren’t the ultimate signs of achievement” (Carmichael 272). Political activism, and more importantly, labor and market forces, have done much to provide girls with media images of women who are increasingly free to move about within mainstream culture--to “bring home the bacon and fry it up in a pan”. In contemporary ads, girls are encouraged to live independent “Stayfree” lives, to make noise and make waves--so long as they look beautiful while they do it.

The styles and fashions of mainstream culture may readily change but the underlying aesthetic system that attaches value the stylish and the fashionable has remained the same. Here the term *aesthetics* is used not only in its narrow sense to refer to ideals of beauty but also in its more fundamental sense to refer a group’s shared notions of precision, consistency, excellence, correctness, and completeness. Style and fashion may be understood to be a subset of the values and norms that a group associates with conceptions of beauty. These shared values and norms are themselves articulations of the underlying aesthetic system. The relative positions and arrangements of various cultural values and norms are free to change with time and tide, and even to cluster asynchronously into distinct subcultures, but not everything is possible, or even thinkable.

Aesthetics comprise the relatively stable (but by no means inert) field that sets limits to the types of relationships, the degree of mobility and range of movement that values might assume relative to each other. Viewed in this way, aesthetics may be understood as the geography of value. If I dare to push this metaphor to the brink of caricature, I can say that aesthetics constitute the “terrain” that exists between cultural sites. These cultural sites include family, work, leisure, the body, youth, etc. The aesthetic “landscape” will encourage or inhibit certain value constructions at specific sites. It will also have important consequences for a given site’s stability, and be an important determinant in the ways in which values circulate between sites. Aesthetics are intimately tied to a group’s ontology, its collective, and largely unconscious, understanding of what there is, how things work, what is valuable and what is possible. An Individual’s belief system is

fundamental in formulating and negotiating notions of self and world. This belief system is forged in the crucible of the group aesthetic.

As was hinted at earlier, I believe that the aesthetic topology of contemporary mainstream culture shares many important features with the courtly aesthetics of 16<sup>th</sup> century China. In the course of researching an unrelated project, I was struck by just how much these same aesthetic principles reflect the visual logic that lies behind mainstream pop culture images in general, and is especially evident in media images of femininity and the female body. For clarity I will simply list these aesthetic principles below:

- Purity— New, fresh, unspoiled, untainted and therefore young
- Delicacy— Both as an adjective-- grace, exquisiteness; but also, not surprisingly, as a noun-- something to be consumed, a delicacy
- Symmetry— balance proportionality,
- Consistency— coherence, conformity, predictability
- Ostentation— A display meant to impress others
- Flawlessness— Perfection; unblemished, undamaged, and unimpaired\*

\*This list reflects the scholarship of Asian art specialists including: Haga Koshiro (Hume 245-275), Izutsu and Izutsu (46-61).

These shared aesthetic ideals might be generalized and summed up in a few important observations. Sixteenth century Chinese and twenty-first century pop culture aesthetics are comparable in that both exhibit aesthetic sensibilities that privilege appearance over functionality and cultural convention over natural appearance or authenticity. And finally, both aesthetic systems are preoccupied with display rather than concealment, fully accepting surface appearance as a reliable measure of value. Parents may say “Don’t judge a book by its cover,” but the images they make and consume say otherwise.

While it may initially seem fatuous to compare Ming dynasty porcelain to Brittany Spears or a Clearasil ad, it will perhaps seem less so when we remember that just as the Japanese subculture of tea enthusiasts adopted principles of *wabi-sabi* in response to the dominant Chinese aesthetic listed above, so many of the subcultures that have developed in response to the dominant pop culture over the last thirty years also share the same cluster of underlying aesthetic principles. It’s methodologically o.k. to compare apples and oranges as long as what you’re saying is that they’re both round. I am making no

claims of historic parallelism or that these groups experience(d) their sense of cohesion or opposition vis-à-vis the dominant culture in even remotely similar ways. Let me also add here that a cross-cultural analysis such as this in no way disputes the importance of political, social and economic forces in shaping cultural values, it simply holds that very similar aesthetic systems can be articulated in widely divergent cultural contexts and artifacts. The final and most important reason to consider an analysis such as this is that I believe it can highlight a few important considerations about the relationship of mainstream images of femininity and the female body to the subcultural expressions that many young women adopt in order to provide themselves with some measure of freedom to oppose the dominant social values and to negotiate their own sexual and economic exploitation with a greater sense of individualism and empowerment. Let me conclude by briefly sketching out just three of these observations.

### **1. *Wabi-sabi* and the positive impact of female subcultures**

**Affiliation with a subculture offers the potential for girls and young women to resist their exploitation by the unrealistic body images presented to them by mainstream culture in ways that “media education” or exposure to feminist theory cannot. This is especially true of subcultures that are spontaneously started by girls and that are not “fan” oriented.**

If I am right, and elements of the wabi-sabi aesthetic are encoded within the expressions of resistance generated by many subcultures, then the inversion of the dominant aesthetic offered by a girl’s subcultural affiliation would begin to attach positive values to the imperfect realities of her genuine body and negative values to the unnatural and disingenuous “perfect” bodies presented to her by the media. This would allow many of the girls and young women who are members of these subcultures to truly experience what McRobbie characterized as “a sense of oppositional sociality, an unambiguous pleasure in their [alternative] style” (33).<sup>1</sup>

As an art professor I encounter many young women, students and instructors, who are aware of the ways in which media images of perfect hair, perfect teeth, and perfect bodies create unreal expectations and plays into the insecurities they have about their very real and imperfect bodies. However, this understanding usually has little bearing on the gnawing dissatisfaction they still feel with their own bodies.

This disconnect between rational knowledge and felt experience can be illustrated by the fact that most people can recognize the difference between real wood and plastic wood-grained laminates. This doesn’t stop the majority of them from experiencing these particleboard imitations as wood furniture in their day-to-day lives. It’s only when one’s aesthetic sensibility cannot abide the phoniness of the imitation that we refuse to have it in our house.

Perhaps this helps to explain why, despite the inroads that feminism and feminist theory have made in expanding the roles available to women, it has seemed to stall out by comparison when it comes to expanding the norms of beauty as reflected in media images of women. This also speaks to the anticipated effectiveness of efforts to introduce “media education” into high schools as a means of stemming the tide of anorexia and bulimia among young women. Knowledge is power, but its not enough. True change can only come from altering the ways in which members of a society experience their aesthetics, not from the ways in which they understand them.

## **2. Wabi-sabi and the integrity of the female body**

**Affiliation with a subculture can allow girls to re-envision and accept their bodies as organic wholes rather than as a collection of fetishized parts to be mastered and perfected.**

In the first chapter of her book, *The Body Project* Joan Brumburg relates a discussion that took place with her students following a lecture. Several of her young female students informed her of the fairly common habit among young women to “manage the bikini-line area”. After learning of the extent to which this routine of shaving and waxing was currently practiced, Brumburg confides to the reader, “...this generation has taken on the burden of perfecting yet another body part” (195). Brumburg’s study goes on to chronicle the disturbing history, from Victorian corset to *Thigh Master*, of the ways in which young women have “policed” their own bodies, and documents the increasing tendency of girls to view their bodies as a collection of individual parts to be closely monitored, enhanced, camouflaged, or most commonly, “battled against” using any number of commercial products and tortuous regimes.

The fragmentation of the female body image is conventionally attributed to the fetishization of the male gaze. While I do not question this as a factor, the fracturing of the female body can also be understood as simply a predictable result of aspiring to the dominant pop-culture aesthetic of perfection.

At first, this may seem a little confusing because mass media images of women do express a visual logic that attaches a great deal of positive value to wholeness and completeness--but it is a very specific kind of wholeness, one based on consistency. Only once all aspects are uniformly perfect can a sense of integrity be achieved. In order to arrive at this desired state of “integrated perfection” girls must carefully and continuously monitor their bodies for inconsistencies--inconsistencies that will always arise with girls’ actual bodies. This demands “cordoning off” the offending area until such time as it can be improved and brought into accord with the whole. Hair, nails, lips, complexion, thighs, belly, breasts, and now it seems even the “bikini line” must all simultaneously meet the demanding aesthetic standards set by the mainstream norms of female beauty in order for integration to occur. Thus, striving for wholeness within an aesthetic that recognizes perfection as the ideal, can only lead, paradoxically, to fragmentation.

By contrast, ideals of wholeness within subcultures tend to be built upon the *wabi-sabi* aesthetic principles of incompleteness, inconsistency and asymmetry. Integration of the female body is not predicated upon perfection; therefore girls are freer to fully embrace all aspects of their actual bodies, even the imperfections. In fact, imperfection is not only accommodated within the *wabi-sabi* aesthetic, it is afforded a positive value because it is understood to be a measure of authenticity. Authenticity stands in the same place within subcultural aesthetics as perfection does within the mainstream aesthetics--as the highest value and the most complete expression.

Finally, as you will recall, the *wabi-sabi* aesthetic privileges concealment over display, and by extension, interiority over exteriority. Through affiliation with a subculture, girls should be expected to be less inclined to define self-worth through outward appearance. Does this mean that association with a particular subculture permits its female members to feel entirely comfortable within their own skins? Probably not. Insecurities seem to dog us all. But subcultures do offer their members comfort and even empowerment by chipping away at the monolithic model of bodily perfection offered to them through the mainstream media. Subcultures supply girls with alternative systems of value that promote a more integrated sense of their own body image, and a means to resist, or at least modify, their own economic exploitation.

### **3. Girl subcultures and the potential for social change**

**As girl subcultures become more numerous, increasingly “decentralized”, neither tied to a particular locality or single code of oppositional style, and “destabilized”, quickly morphing into new forms or evaporating completely under the pressure of corporate co-option, they hold the potential to meaningfully erode the hegemonic pop-culture aesthetic of artifice and perfection disseminated by the mass media.**

My own sense of things is that girl subcultures, like subcultures in general, are becoming more numerous. While I have yet to see any hard data to confirm this suspicion, an informal poll of my class did yield some interesting if only hopelessly anecdotal support. I passed out a questionnaire that had only two questions: Do you believe that you are, or have been a member of a subculture? And, if so, what? Ninety-two percent of my class of seventeen students felt that they were, or had been, members of a subculture. Their affiliations ranged from “rodeo” to “nerd” to “zippy”. (My curiosity piqued, I inquired, and was assured that this was not just made up. A zippy, according to my 20 year old female student, is a “technology savvy hippy, a cyberpunk without all the angry shit.”)

Now, of course, my survey means relatively little except to serve as some sort of indication that a lot of young people certainly want to *believe* that they have some affiliation with a subculture. Few people, or at least few of my students, are comfortable with the idea of being average. There is a tendency to define themselves in terms of how they are unique, rather than how they are similar to

their peers. However, this uniqueness that they want to recognize within themselves should ideally bring with it peer respect or acceptance. Affiliation with a subculture, where like-minded peers are “built into” the expressions of individuality, is one way to satisfy these two desires. Commercial interests have long recognized these two strong and apparently conflicting needs for acceptance and for tangible expressions of individuality. Playing to these two desires is what keeps the wheels of fashion turning. This has led advertisers and networks to not only exploit mainstream aesthetics to create desires for their products and services, but to co-opt “alternative” expressions as well.

The corporate co-option of subcultural expressions has had two major effects. First it has begun to erode somewhat the hegemony of the dominant aesthetic of “perfection”, as advertisers increasingly incorporate elements of the *wabi-sabi* aesthetic into their campaigns in an attempt to produce images that young people will perceive as authentic. The exception to this general trend has been the mainstream image of female beauty, which has proved to be more resistant. But even here co-option has led to a greater range of ways to image femininity. Pierced, tattooed and athletically muscular (as opposed to simply toned) bodies, once conspicuously absent in mainstream images of young women due to their “hardcore” and “butch” associations, now crop up on a fairly regular basis on television, on fashion runways, and on magazine covers.

The second effect of co-option is that subcultures are forced to mutate, dissolve and coalesce at an ever-increasing rate in order to maintain their positive sense of marginality and uniqueness.<sup>2</sup> The speed at which this cycle of co-option/subcultural “drift” is played out has increased rather dramatically due to the number and variety of media outlets and the pressure generated by this crowded market to appeal to ever more narrow target audiences. This allows subcultural expressions to percolate into targeted media rather quickly, and then get “picked up” by advertisers and the mainstream media. In response, subcultures have become increasingly unstable, both in the speed at which they coalesce and evaporate, and in the consistency of their subcultural expressions over time, in order to stay just out of step with popular culture. The general widening of the mainstream aesthetic that results from this cycle should also apply to the mainstream aesthetic standards of female beauty, though more slowly, providing girls with a range of conceptions of beauty that will be more in line with the range of social roles that they currently enjoy.

In addition to these market conditions that can be considered more or less external to a particular subculture, there have also been internal changes in the ways in which members within a given subculture can communicate and interact with each other. Most notable is the impact of “zines” and the widespread availability of the Internet. In many ways the Internet acts like a traditional media outlet, participating in the cycle of subcultural co-option with its own channels, large corporate stakeholders and advertising. However, the Internet is not only about consuming images and information. It is also about production, and lots of

it. Anyone with access to a computer and a phone line can be an active participant in an online community by e-mailing responses, engaging in chat rooms or by starting up their own web site and linking it to others. These web sites in many instances have become essentially “e-zines”.

Zines are typically inexpensive, homegrown newsletters produced by individuals or small groups that are devoted to a particular interest such as hobbies, bands, sports, celebrities, politics, etc. These are photocopied in editions that range from a couple dozen to a couple thousand and then distributed through personal contact and the mail, or at clubs, concerts, conventions, coffeehouses and bars. Marion Leonard has traced the history and impact of zines. Following Vale, she claims that in the 1970's alone over 50,000 different zines were produced in America, and that this number increased dramatically in the two decades that followed (105). Personally, as an undergraduate in the late eighties I had managed to assemble a collection of a dozen or so zines from only casually frequenting punk shows and clubs. Since then, the introduction of the Internet has led to an exponential mushrooming in the number of zines produced with a keyboard, a mouse and a scanner, and has made access to these e-zines virtually unlimited, provided you know where to look.

Leonard's study of zines, and in particular the varied and evolving expressions of *riot grrrl*, a loose and multivocal girl subculture, led her to conclude that, “Subcultures should not be considered groups tied to a particular locality, creed, or style but as dynamic, diverse and geographically mobile networks” (101). She observed that zines and the Internet move the site of subculture from public spaces like the street or the club, and locates the participant, who is now as likely to be a producer as a consumer of images, indoors, usually in the private space of the bedroom. In discussions of girl subcultures the bedroom has generally been understood as a feminized space of teen consumerism. However, Leonard contends that with the use of the Internet, the bedroom becomes a productive site as well. As subcultures and especially girl subcultures move into this networked space, traditional geographies become telescoped and conflated. Private spaces become sites of public dialogue, and the informal and personal become public persona. Members have access to a multitude of “authentic” expressions, ranging from confessional narratives and daily journals in the form of live webcam feeds found on other member's personal pages, to professionally produced, for-profit web rings (linked affiliated websites) such as *riot gurl* or *chick click*. In all of these forms, girls are invited to actively participate by joining in online discussions, building their own personal websites, or by contributing articles. In this networked environment subcultures become much more fluid, multivocal and polysemous.

Both the cycle of corporate co-option and this new subcultural geography have de-centered and destabilized subcultural expression and sped up the rate at which these expressions are picked up by mainstream media. My best guess

is that these processes will only intensify, exposing girls, and especially girls who are affiliated with certain subcultures, to an ever widening range of female voices and images of feminine beauty, some of which will be genuinely authentic and others that will use elements of the *wabi-sabi* aesthetic to encode authenticity as a means of continuing their economic exploitation. In either case, I believe that we are at the beginning of a true change in the cultural aesthetic, not just another changeover in style.

There is little evidence to suggest that the thorough integration of the *wabi-sabi* aesthetic into Japanese culture by the eighteenth century did much to decrease the subordination of Japanese women or alter their body images in ways that afforded them a greater sense of empowerment. Likewise, there are no guarantees that as the elements of the *wabi-sabi* aesthetic filter into mainstream culture that young women will experience a greater sense of empowerment and equality. But I am an optimist, and this isn't sixteenth century Japan. Despite the very real inequities that still exist, these days, women commonly occupy positions of power, and, as a group, they have achieved a level of autonomy unmatched in recorded history. Sub Cultures, co-option, and the Internet hold the very real potential to expand the range of female images to match the lifestyle choices currently available to women, and, in the process, meaningfully erode the hegemonic pop-culture aesthetic of artifice and perfection imposed upon them by the mass media. As girls feel freer to expect less than perfection from their bodies, perhaps they will feel empowered to expect even more from themselves.

---

<sup>1</sup> Even if I am wrong and no inversion of the underlying aesthetic takes place, there is still research that seems to support the claim that subcultures can have a positive effect on girl's self images of their bodies, just three of which are Blakeman's study of "New Wave" girls in Britain, Richard and Kruger's account of the rave scene in Germany, and Leonard's study of the Riot Grrrl subculture (all Skelton and Valentine, 1998).

<sup>2</sup> A side effect of co-option is that as particular subcultural expressions are absorbed into mainstream culture, the subcultures themselves begin to police authenticity among their own members much more aggressively. As I was researching this paper, I "lurked" in a number of goth and riot grrrl chat rooms. Much, if not most of the conversation revolved around the denigration and ferreting out of "posers", or of defending one's own authenticity by reciting "pedigree" (I was into x,y, and z bands, clubs, clothes, films etc. way before... I met, knew, e-mailed x) or by demonstrating a thorough knowledge of the history of the subculture.

## References

Barker, Olivia. "The Asianization of America." *USA Today* 22 March 2001: 1-A.

- 
- Bell, Daniel. *The Cultural Conditions of Late Capitalism*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. London: Heinmann, 1975.
- Blackman, Shane L. "The School: 'PoxyCupid!' An ethnographic and Feminist Account of a Resistant Female Youth Culture: The New Wave Girls." *Cool Places: Geographies of Youth Cultures*. Ed. Tracy Skelton and Gill Valentine. New York: Routledge, 1998. 207-228.
- Brumberg, Joan Jacobs. *The Body Project: An Intimate History of American Girls*. New York: Vintage Books, 1998.
- Carmichael, Emily. "Fight Girl Power." Ed. Sara Shandler. *Ophelia Speaks: Adolescent Girls Write About Their Search for Self*. New York: HarperCollins, 1999. 270-274.
- Esman, Aaron H. M.D. *Adolescence and Culture*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1990.
- Izutsu, Toshihiko and Izutsu, Toyo. *The Theory of Beauty in the Classical Aesthetics of Japan*. Boston: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1981.
- Koren, Leonard. *Wabi-Sabi for Artists, Designers, Poets and Philosophers*. Berkeley: Stone Bridge Press, 1994.
- Koshiro, Haga. "The Wabi Aesthetic Through the Ages." *Japanese Aesthetics and Culture*. Ed. Nancy J. Hume. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995, 245-278.
- Leonard, Marion. "Paper Planes: Traveling the New Grrrl Geographies." *Cool Places: Geographies of Youth Cultures*. Ed. Tracy Skelton and Gill Valentine. New York: Routledge, 1998. 101-120.
- McRobbie, Angela. *Feminism and Youth Culture*. Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1991.
- Mitsukuni, Yoshida, Tanaka Ikko, and Sesoko Tsune. *Tsu Ku Ru: Aesthetics at Work*. Hiroshima: Mazda Motor Corporation, 1990.
- Richard, Birgit and Heinz Hermann Kruger. "Raver's Paradise?: German Youth Cultures in the 1990's." *Cool Places: Geographies of Youth Cultures*. Ed. Tracy Skelton and Gill Valentine. New York: Routledge, 1998. 161-174.
- Shandler, Sara. *Ophelia Speaks: Adolescent Girls Write About Their Search for Self*. New York: HarperCollins, 1999.