

Ruins of the Future: Yanobe Kenji Revisits Expo '70

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When the contemporary Japanese artist Yanobe Kenji was a boy in 1971 and his family had just moved to Ibaraki prefecture north of Osaka, he would ride his bicycle for about five minutes from his home and arrive at the abandoned site of the Japan World Exposition (*Nihon bankoku hakurankai*). Also known as *Osaka banpaku* or Expo '70, the event that took place from March to September 1970 was a grand, national performance which served, among other purposes, to increase the economic growth that Japan had experienced since the early 1960s, and to consolidate Japan's international position by repeating the success of hosting the Olympic games of 1964. Expo '70 drew more than 64 million visitors to a spectacular display of advanced technology of all kinds, innovative architectural construction principles in the many national and industrial pavilions, sophisticated communication systems for internal as well as external use, and a number of new forms of transport and infrastructure. Designed and built as a unified entity from the beginning, the site of Expo '70 came to signify a large-scale model of the city of the future, *mirai no toshi*.

At the time when Yanobe passed on his bicycle, less than a year after the Expo '70 had ended, most of the buildings, pavilions, and infrastructure from the Exposition had been torn down, leaving only a few selected buildings and monuments among heaps of scrap and broken concrete. Yanobe's personal childhood experience at Expo '70 was therefore not *mirai no toshi*, city of the future, but rather what Yanobe terms '*mirai no haikyo*, ruins of the future.' [1]

Many art works by Yanobe Kenji are conceived and created from this concept of '*mirai no haikyo*, ruins of the future,' which bears a contradiction: 'future' is usually associated with something not yet in existence, something to come, something that has to be constructed and built up or carried out, while the word 'ruins' is associated with the past, something that does not exist anymore in its original form, but is in a state of decay or demolition. Yanobe investigates this tension by focusing not on the future from where we are in time and space right now, but how the future was imagined and constructed in the past. The ruins in Yanobe's concept are not the relics of history but what we can see and experience around us in present time, namely the leftovers of that imagined future.

Yanobe's narrative of *mirai no haikyo* contains more than a childhood memory of things lost and demolished. Yanobe also tells the story of the origin of his artistic vision because he witnessed, among other things, the demolition of giant robots that had been one of the main attractions during the Expo '70. It had an impact on Yanobe that later led him to create large robot-like sculptures that could move or be operated from inside; a concept that has been a part of his artistic projects since his first work *Tanking Machine* in 1990.

(http://web.iminet.ac.jp/yanobe/aw/aw_tankingmachine.html) [2] The idea that all his 'wearable sculptures' are able to actually function in real life was conceived at the time when Yanobe saw the last glimpse of the Expo robots through the fences of the former Expo site

(Yanobe, 2005: 92).

From the late 1990s onward, Yanobe Kenji produces a series of art works and art projects in which he returns to the former site of Expo '70 in order to include the actual space and the remaining buildings in a performance of revisit. The art works include a series of staged photographs where Yanobe places himself as a figure dressed in a radiation protection suit at various sites of the former Expo '70. They also include production of sculpture and installation works with visual references to Expo '70 as well as actual fragments from demolished constructions, and they include video documentation of interviews with various people who had been engaged in protest-related activities during the Expo '70. The all-inclusive nature of Yanobe's art projects broadens the perspective from a personal search for the origin of artistic creation and brings Yanobe's art works in dialogue with numerous public discourses of cultural performance and national identity on a wider level.

Homi K. Bhabha writes in the introduction of *The Location of Culture* about the concept of 'past-present', and emphasises how contemporary art in some cases not just recalls the past as a social event or aesthetic model, but that this art 'renews the past, refiguring it as a contingent 'in-between' space that innovates and interrupts the performance of the present' (Bhabha, 1994: 7). Yanobe Kenji creates an 'in-between' space through his interaction with specific sites and his construction of a whole range of elements that intertwine in a complex new narrative. The various elements work together on a performative level as a way of interrupting the legacy of Expo '70 as it is maintained in present day Japanese society, and offers a way of reinterpreting the overall national performance of the Expo '70 event. [3]

In 1998, Yanobe Kenji produced the work entitled *Remains of a world's fair in Osaka (EXPO '70). 'Nostalgia' of 'future' dreamt by Atom* as a part of an ongoing photo series entitled *Atom Suit Project*. The title of the work as well as the visual narrative refers explicitly to Expo '70, and the photo shows the figure called Atom standing on the former Festival Plaza. Atom is a human-looking figure dressed in a yellow body suit of protective plastic with a helmet resembling a diver's helmet on the head. Numerous pointed antenna-like glass tips containing Geiger counter tubes protrude from the suit, placed at areas of the human body that are especially delicate; eyes, viscera, and genitalia. The Geiger counters measure the level of natural as well as artificial radioactivity from nearby surroundings, and the result of the measuring is displayed in red numbers on a display panel on the front of the suit. The suit also includes a black protective plate, broad shoulder pads, as well as black rubber boots and gloves. The colours yellow and black are references to warning signs against radiation used at nuclear sites, x-ray rooms in hospitals, and similar places (see: http://web.iminet.ac.jp/yanobe/aw/aw_atomsuit.html).

The figure is dwarfed against the Tower of the Sun (*Taiyû no tō*), a large-scale sculptural construction that served first of all as the main symbol of Expo '70, and as an exhibit space and passage way to other exhibits. The Tower of the Sun was designed by the artist, writer, and critic Okamoto Tarô, who was appointed producer and had authority over the whole area known as the Symbol Zone (or Symbol Area) which constituted the central part of the entire

Expo site. [4] Several sun faces decorate the Tower of the Sun, including a bright Golden Mask placed at the summit of the tower. The Golden Mask is a sculptural disk of twelve meters in diameter with a protruding triangular form and two round holes to suggest facial elements of nose and eye sockets. The sun face visible is the Black Sun of black tiles with green flames facing towards the former festival plaza.

The figure Atom is Yanobe Kenji's direct reference to a well-known manga character from the early 1950s, namely *Tetsuwan Atomu*, Mighty Atom, perhaps better known outside Japan in English as Astro Boy. The character was invented by manga artist Tezuka Osamu in 1951, and appeared first in a manga and later in a series of animation films that became widely popular and were exported to a number of countries during the 1960s. It is a story set in the twenty-first century of the robot boy Atom, whose ultimate goal as superhero is 'peace,' which he fights for with his robot features and equipment: a nuclear reactor for a heart, a computer brain, rockets in his feet, and a strength of one hundred thousand horsepower. Manga critic Frederik Schodt quotes Tezuka Osamu that he had created Atom as 'a nearly perfect robot who strove to become more human and emotive and to serve as an interface between the two very different cultures of man and machine' (Schodt, 1996: 245). According to Schodt, the interaction and relationship between man and machine continues to be one of the main themes in Japanese manga culture today.

Yanobe Kenji's yellow Atom suit is based on an earlier art work by Yanobe which also refers visually to the character of Mighty Atom. Entitled *Radiation Suit ATOM*, the work was made in 1996 and is also made to be worn by a person (see: http://web.iminet.ac.jp/yanobe/aw/aw_r_suit.html). This earlier version of Atom has more direct visual links to Tezuka's character because of the colours: the black and white body and head, the green belt around the waist, and the red part of the boots. Two pointed extrusions from the back of the head refer to two tufts of hair in the manga version. The two round Geiger counters on the face of Yanobe's sculpture allude to the large eyes on the face of Mighty Atom. Large eyes were to become one of the significant elements of not only Tezuka Osamu's personal style, but of *kawaii*, or cute, style of early Japanese manga in general.

The references to manga and anime in Yanobe's art aligns him with a number of other contemporary artists in Japan, who in various ways include visual or contextual allusions to popular culture, among these Murakami Takashi, Nara Yoshitomo, Tarô Chiezô, and Aida Makoto, who all grew up under the influence of manga (see Hyôga, 1998: 72-75). Yanobe Kenji's recreation of the figure of Atom is a reference to Yanobe's own childhood, where his interest for manga and robots developed on the basis of Tezuka's popular story. As Frederik Schodt argues, by creating Atom, Tezuka 'had laid the groundwork for what may arguably be modern Japan's greatest contribution to world fantasy – the interactive, drivable, transforming giant mecha-robots that have altered childrens' play habits all over the world' (Schodt, 1996: 245). This aspect of human-piloted robots that forms one type of robots in Japanese fantasy can be identified in many works by Yanobe Kenji. His versions of Atom may not have a 'cute' appearance, but they embody the fascination of robots that grew out of Tezuka Osamu's characters. Many of Yanobe's works are constructed as 'wearable sculpture' that can be

controlled and manipulated by a human being inside, and at the same time offer a kind of protection or shield to ward off dangers from the outside. [5]

In the later version of the Atom suit, Yanobe has changed the colours from mainly black and white into black and yellow, and changed the figure into a slimmer model. The yellow Atom suit was conceived around 1995 and was included in a large-scale performance project executed by Yanobe Kenji that extended over several years. The main idea of the project was for Yanobe to gain official permission to visit the deserted site of Chernobyl, which after the nuclear disaster in 1986 still was contaminated by radioactivity and thus required a protection suit of some kind. Yanobe dressed in his yellow protection suit and visited the area in 1997 along with a photographer, who wore a similar suit. The result of the project can be seen in the art series *Atom Suit Project* in which a number of photos feature Yanobe dressed in the yellow suit and staged at various sites of Chernobyl: an amusement park, a former military site, a children's home, as well as other places. These were the first visions of *mirai no haikyo*, ruins of the future, which Yanobe goes on to investigate further in the ongoing *Atom Suit Project*.

From 1998 onwards, *Atom Suit Project* series includes various sites of Expo '70. When the Yanobe alias Atom visits the former Expo '70 site, he re-enacts the presence of Mighty Atom and Tezuka Osamu at the event back in 1970. The popular manga artist Tezuka was appointed as the producer of Fujipan Robot Pavilion, one of the many Japanese pavilions representing corporate institutions that were built along side the numerous national pavilions. Inside the Fujipan Robot Pavilion a large variety of robots were displayed, ranging in style, size and function, and many of them made with a specific attention to children. One section of the exhibit was devoted to the theme of Future of Robots, emphasising the futuristic aspects of robot science and technology that Tezuka himself had addressed in many of his manga stories (Official Report, 1972: 454-455).

Robot technology was promoted at the Expo '70 as an image of national performance that Japan could prove itself by at this international occasion. In the period of postwar industrial development during the 1960s, Japanese government supported industries of advanced technology that required a high level of innovation and skills, including car manufacturing and production of all kinds of electronic devices. In the Fujipan Robot Pavilion the popularity of Tezuka Osamu and his manga character was coupled to futuristic visions of the development of robot technology, promoting hereby a positive image of robots directed towards children as bearer of the future. Robot technology was and still seems to be a perfect symbol of high-tech development in Japan: the machines themselves embody an image of a nation of hardworking and diligent citizens. At the same time, advanced technology robots are often designed for show rooms with a human appearance by means of anthropomorphic details such as eyes, mouth and arms. Robots on public display often appear 'cute' and playful, and they pose no apparent threat to anyone. In his performance of Atom at Expo '70 Yanobe alludes to his own childhood imaginations of friendly robots and manga figures, and re-enacts the fantasy figures that he and his generation of Japanese youth grew up with. Many of Yanobe's wearable sculptures also feature anthropomorphic elements, only in Yanobe's

machines the references to human body and face are more often in the form of gas masks, reconnaissance and surveillance equipment and other types of protection devices. Yanobe presents the backlash of the image of the cute and harmless robot, and by staging his Atom figure as a protection suit he contests the child-like innocence that embraced the robots at Expo '70. In his reinterpretation of robot appearance and performance, Yanobe questions apparent innocence of the robots' human-like appearance because it provides a kind of concealment or 'protection suit' to ward off criticism of the development of advanced technology.

The word Atom itself relates to the aspect of atomic energy and radioactivity. While Tezuka Osamu's peacekeeping humanistic robot has a nuclear reactor as heart, emitting a message of atomic power as harmless and even friendly, Yanobe's Atom as protection suit alludes to the threats and dangers from nuclear power. Yanobe maintains that he is not referring to the force released by the atomic bombs at Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945 because that happened long before he himself was born. Rather he refers to the many accidents of catastrophic dimensions that have happened at nuclear power plants in Japan and elsewhere (Yanobe, 1998). The artist is contesting the idealised version of nuclear power as a safe and reliable source of energy, an ideal that was introduced at Expo '70. Yanobe himself has made the connection between the positive image created around nuclear energy and the Expo '70 as he states in an exhibition catalogue:

Atomic power was formerly seen as the symbol of hope for the future, as was the Osaka Expo. That idea was destroyed with Chernobyl. We have lived in the crevice between prosperity and decay. (Yanobe, 2005: 67).

In spite of, or perhaps because of, the aspect of *higaisha ishiki*, victim consciousness, that had prevailed in Japanese postwar discourse, Japan took it on its shoulders to create a productive and lucrative energy sector based on atomic power, and hereby become a global role model for applying nuclear energy in an optimistic and affirmative manner. This is evident in the discourse of atomic power surrounding a number of pavilions and exhibitions at Expo '70 that displayed a positive perception of nuclear power, promoting a 'peaceful use of atomic energy for the happiness of mankind' (Official Report, 1972: 184). Visitors could see the peaceful appliance of atomic energy in many sorts of advanced new technology with their own eyes, and hereby be confirmed in the overall positive attention to nuclear power at the Expo '70. Stable energy supply was furthermore crucial to the increasing activities in the Japanese industry and infrastructure, and Japan became focused on nuclear power as an energy source to induce national independence from other countries regarding supply and price level. A national self-awareness of turning 'victim' into 'winner' may thus have been incorporated as a part of a larger narrative of economic growth that was rocketing at the end of the 1960s and expected to increase even further as a result of the Expo '70 itself. Embracing nuclear power became a part of a narrative to ensure national independence and economic growth, but also to rework collective memory of the atomic bombs twenty-five years earlier.

Yanobe's many works of protection suits and Geiger counters point at this act of turning a

negative image of atomic power and Japan as 'victim' into a positive attitude towards nuclear energy and a renewed self-confidence in national performance. Yanobe's own performance thus intertwines with the national in that Yanobe too, by wearing the Atom suit, transgresses into a seemingly peaceful creature with a nuclear heart and human emotions, but also 'covering up' and concealing many conflicted issues underneath.

One area of conflict was the many anti-war groups and protest movements that flourished in Japan from the 1950s through the 1970s. Campaigns emerged in the early 1950s against nuclear weapons, and an anti-nuclear sentiment among the general population was reinforced when a Japanese fishing boat was exposed to radioactive fallout from an American hydrogen bomb test at Bikini atolls in 1954. [6] Anti-nuclear movements were formed, and many non-partisan groups joined in the protest against nuclear weapons and American testing grounds in particular, and protest against the United States in general (Havens, 1987: 9). Large-scale demonstrations and protest marches were organised in 1960 when the Japanese government was planning to renew the Security Treaty with USA, also called Ampo, short for *Nichi-Bei anzen hoshô jôyaku* (Japan-U.S. Security Treaty). Some of the radical protest movements of the New Left during the 1960s emerged from student organisations at universities, while other types of New Left groups were peace movements formed by citizens groups throughout Japan, demonstrating among other things against the Vietnam War and Japan's role in this as an allied of the United States. One such group was *Beheiren*, short for *Betonamu ni heiwa o – shimin rengô* (Citizens' League for Peace in Vietnam), a pacifist anti-war movement founded by writer and critic Oda Makoto in 1965 (Fukashiro, 1970: 31). The movement was characteristic of being a civic movement rather than an organisation, and they emphasised a sympathy-based non-hierarchical participatory engagement of individuals regardless of background or political affiliation. Numerous prominent writers, critics and artists were active in the creation of Beheiren, including Okamoto Tarô (havens, 1987: 56). Beheiren arranged large-scale demonstrations against the Vietnam War and the Japanese government's cooperation with the United States in this regard. Other movements organised protests and mass demonstrations at different sites and directed towards a number of different goals throughout the 1960s, and some of the protests were specifically directed against the Expo '70.

In a recent project carried out between 2001 and 2003, Yanobe Kenji re-enacted a performance of resistance that had taken place in 1970. [7] During Expo '70, Satô Hideo, a young radical activist, had staged a hunger strike for almost a week while he holed himself up in the eye socket of the Golden Mask of the Tower of the Sun. Occupying the eye of the central symbol of Expo '70, Satô Hideo quickly captured the attention of everyone at the Expo, including the media. Several newspapers featured the story on the front pages of what became known as the Eye Ball Man, including guesses as to his motives and intentions. By the time Satô Hideo eventually did come down on the 3rd of May and was arrested by the police, the media had invented a pun on the English word 'hijack' and dubbed the event 'eye-jack' (*aijakku*). [8]

Yanobe's project was entitled *Tower of the Sun Hijacking Project*, and included among many

things the difficult task of locating Satô Hideo, who later on had settled in the city of Asahikawa in Hokkaido in the north part of Japan. During a visit to Hokkaido in 2003, Yanobe interviewed Satô Hideo and recorded the conversation on video (Megalomania, 2005). In the recording, Satô explains how he in 1970 participated in anti-Expo activities, which included student groups who made tent camps in the park of Osaka Castle as demonstration of their protest. Satô was active in the Beheiren movement mentioned above, and in his recollection of the events in 1970, Satô talks about one of the main characteristic of Beheiren, namely the belief in 'more action than words,' and the emphasis on a person's ability to substantiate his or her position in action rather than words. In his conversation with Yanobe, Satô reveals that among the Beheiren anti-Expo activists, someone had suggested to occupy the eye of the Golden Mask, and discussions had taken place as to what would happen to the Expo if the person fell down and died, an effect that would oppose Beheiren's non-violent policy. It was on the basis of such discussions that Satô decided to carry out the idea, adhering to the Beheiren's emphasis on direct action. Satô also mentions Okamoto Tarô, the creator of the Tower of the Sun, and although Satô does not think highly of Okamoto's Tower as an artwork, he claims that he sympathised with Okamoto's radical and artistic ideas. Satô recognises Okamoto as an anarchist within the art field, and he points out that Okamoto himself agitated at the Expo '70 and encouraged everyone to 'liberate themselves' (*jikaihô*) by doing what they wanted to at the Festival Plaza.

Such a remark indicates that the appointment of Okamoto as producer of the Symbol Zone and Theme Pavilion as well as the creator of the Tower of the Sun probably did have some significance for radical groups and left-wing movements. Those who felt excluded from mainstream national policy and cultural production would perhaps accept and feel included in Expo '70 because of Okamoto Tarô and his status in the art circles as a radical artist. Other contemporary artists had a prominent role at Expo '70, such as the Osaka-based art group Gutai, who participated in several exhibitions and performance events. One reason for including Gutai was that the group worked within the cross field of art and science by including electricity and other forms of technology in their art works, and supported the general positive image of advanced technology (Gutai, 2004: 138-9). Other artist groups, however, such as *Zero jigen* and *Bikyôtô*, directly opposed the Expo '70 and compared Expo with the enforced production of propaganda painting during World War Two as a way of glorifying Japanese Imperialism, hereby also alluding to Japan's role in the Vietnam War (Munroe, 1994: 259).

The impact of artistic events during the Expo '70 appears to be an important topic for Yanobe, also considering Yanobe's personal narrative of the site as the origin of his own artistic aspiration. Expo '70 was not only a means to further economic growth and technological development, but was also a demonstration of Japan's level of cultural sophistication. Okamoto Tarô's official involvement in Expo '70 provided him with a stage from which he could pursue some of his artistic goals; he was known as an anti-government activist and rebellious artist encouraging 'disagreeable art,' and he wanted to show contemporary Japanese art to Western audiences as a means of searching for a universal language for art that could free Japanese artists from the dominance of conventional Japanese art (Munroe,

1994: 154-6). For Okamoto, then, the more contemporary Japanese art that was exposed at Expo '70, the better. At the same time, Gutai was never conceived by the group themselves nor by the public as being involved in social or political critique through their art works. Gutai's international acclaim earned the group status as 'heroes of Osaka's avant-garde art scene,' and they fitted an international modernist notion of experimentation and expressionism very well (Gutai, 2004: 142).

Apart from the overall interaction between art and Expo, Yanobe Kenji appears to be fascinated by the radical dimension of Satô Hideo's action at Expo '70. Yanobe may have felt a kind of affinity with the Eye Ball Man in his intervention with the official Expo version of the 'future.' The Eye Ball Man had climbed the Tower of the Sun, the symbolic tower of Expo '70 and had found what Yanobe terms 'another exit to the future.' Yanobe states:

That's just the reason I wanted to see the potential for a breakthrough to the future, just as the Eyeball Man, who had travelled through time by climbing through the period of evolution of life, saw the sky of the future open before him. What indeed could be seen now through that giant eye? (Yanobe, 2005: 107). [9]

As a way of answering this question, Yanobe Kenji ventured on to his own search of a breakthrough to the future. Dressed in the yellow Atom suit, Yanobe climbed the inside of the Tower of the Sun and found the narrow passage way up through the neck of the Tower to reach the Golden Mask. The journey was documented by a video camera that recorded Yanobe's conversation with the camera crew as well as his comments to himself while climbing stairs and narrow ladders. The trembling effect of a hand-held video camera underlines the dramatic aspect of the ascent, and the soundtrack consists of Yanobe's brief comments in between his exclamations and irregular breathing. After some time Yanobe finally reaches a small hatch leading out into the circular eye socket, and he crouches for a while inside with the hatch slightly open. The camera shot now changes to a camera on the ground which focuses up on the Golden Mask of the Tower of the Sun from below. We can hear Yanobe and the camera operator exchange views as to the right time for Yanobe to pass through the hatch and enter into the open-air circular space of the eye without anyone on the ground discovering the action. We see Yanobe in his yellow protection suit crawl through the hatch and cling to the large lamp in the eye socket with one hand, while he puts on his helmet with the other. Yanobe's fast breathing and the sound of a strong wind adds a powerful tension, emphasised by the way in which Yanobe clings to the searchlight rack. A photographer on the ground documented the event.

In the case of this specific *Tower of the Sun Hijacking Project*, Yanobe adapted another dimension of the concept of *mirai no haikyo*, ruins of the future. During Satô's and Yanobe's video recorded conversation, a direct parallel is made between the Vietnam War and the invasion by the United States into Iraq, which had taken place only a short time before the conversation between Satô and Yanobe took place in March 2003. This indicates a reconstruction of the ideological perspectives of anti-establishment activist groups and student organisations that flourished in Japan during the 1960s and early 1970s; they were

performing a resistance to American presence in rebuilding Japanese society on the ruins of the war. The Vietnam War movements were protesting against Japan's alliance with USA that included American troops being sent off to Vietnam from military bases on Japanese ground; this was seen by many as a double standard to Article Nine of the postwar Japanese constitution that ruled out sending troops abroad. The topic was a major issue again in Japanese political discourse in 2003 as to whether or not Japan should send troops to Iraq as an allied of United States, and with what purpose. By referring to this issue of contemporary war in the conversation with Satô, Yanobe seems to be voicing political concern in relation to peacekeeping issues and Japan's role on the global scene. By re-staging a protest from 1970, Yanobe creates new meaning of the current discussions, and launches a return to political consciousness in the contemporary art scene in Japan.

Yanobe's re-enactment of Satô's event, however, is not a nostalgic admiration of revolutionary heroes. In the conversation, Yanobe denounces the radical and often violent actions that anti-American activists carried out during the protests in the 1960s, and makes a clear distinction between political protest and artistic performance. Yanobe acknowledges and admires Satô's action as performance, as an act of committing oneself to an idea by means of physical embodiment. Yanobe may be expressing a certain longing for a commitment to art production that centres less on the final art work as a result, and instead stresses the process of actually executing the work. Such attitudes were central for many artistic groups formed in the late 1950s and early 1960, such as Neo Dada Organizers and Hi Red Center and others, some of whom were closely connected to the demonstrations and Ampo protest around 1960 (Nihon no Natsu, 1997). Artists at that time were engaged in interconnecting various expressions and media, mixing visual and performance art, and also included elements of political activism in a bodily investment of struggle. Many avant-garde artists engaged quite literally in a physical fight with their works: Gutai artist Murakami Saburô hurled himself through layers of paper in his performance *At One Moment Opening Six Holes* in 1955; another Gutai member Shiraga Kazuo performed *Challenging Mud* also in 1955; while Neo Dada Organizer artist Shinohara Ushio performed his *Boxing Painting* in 1960.

Yanobe recreates the meaning of physical involvement of the 1960s' art and performance by involving not just his own body and physical presence, but also that of the audience. Compared to conventional art viewing practice, where audiences in general move only little and the art works are taken in through the eyes rather than through physical contact or bodily engagement, Yanobe's 'wearable sculptures' have always been conceived to be touched, climbed upon, entered and operated. When Yanobe's first work *Tanking Machine* was displayed in a small gallery in Kyoto in 1990, audiences were invited to bring swimsuits and take a dive in the water inside. Another example is *Atom Car* from 1998, a small three-wheel vehicle that visitors could ride by putting 100-yen coins into a slot inside and hereby activate the car. However, when a built-in Geiger counter has detected radiation ten times, the car stops, and the driver will have to put in more coins in order to keep driving (and be able to evacuate) (Yanobe, 1998: 5). In this and similar works by Yanobe Kenji, audiences who enter his sculptures may believe in a certain degree of autonomy and security inside the vehicle, but will also experience an external force that manipulates them and interrupts their sense of

protection. Visitors are made aware of their own interaction with the artwork: they can manipulate the machine to a certain level, but they must also realise the impact and control the artwork has of them. Yanobe's bodily investment in art is truly performative because his audience become an integrated part of the artwork.

Many critics discuss Yanobe Kenji's art works in the context of 'survival' and 'delusion.' Art critic Sawaragi Noi describes Yanobe's work as stemming from melancholy because the 'future' is already a past. While 'future' according to Sawaragi is 'presented as a planned and extended whole,' delusion on the other hand 'does not have a wholeness or a planning quality, and therefore, no type of construction exists there' (Sawaragi, 1998: 19). Sawaragi sees this lack of wholeness as embodied in a society beyond the future because the present day world is characterised by a capitalist desire in unlimited motions. Yanobe Kenji's concept of 'ruins of the future' and the focus on delusion in relation to the Expo '70 may also be seen as a part of a larger discourse of crisis and collective trauma in Japanese society that has taken place within the last decade. As historian Yoda Tomiko points out, a large number of Japanese politicians, critics, and artists have debated in public media the current situation of Japanese economy and culture, and contributed to a discourse of crisis in regards to the so-called economic recession since the bubble-economy burst in the early 1990s. The discourse is further backed by an image of a collective psychological trauma in the Japanese population triggered by the shock of the sarin gas attack in the Tokyo underground in 1995, the authorities' fatal lack of action after the 1995 Hanshin earthquake, the many violent assaults among Japanese school children, and similar events that were seen by some as representing 'an imploding national economic system, a disintegrating social order, and the vital absence of ethical and competent leadership' (Yoda, 2000: 635).

Many elements in Yanobe's works appear to confirm such pessimistic discourses, and public debates focusing on crisis may also have been the driving force for Yanobe in producing the works. Yanobe's 'wearable sculptures' include references to *otaku* nerd culture that have been associated with youth-related violence and introvert fortification, and the works point to the desire to protect oneself against real or imagined dangers. Yanobe's concept of *mirai no haikyo*, ruins of the future, alludes to collective as well as individual dreams that never came true, and may be understood, therefore, as the artist's contribution to the discourse of crisis and chaos in post-Expo Japanese society.

However, I do not see the way in which Yanobe Kenji re-uses Expo '70 as an expression of nostalgia for a long gone bright and optimistic view of the future. First of all, Yanobe's works signify 'serious' art works because it is apparent for audiences that the 'wearable sculptures' and installations have demanded many hours of labour and detailed technological knowledge to make them function in reality. At the same time the works denounce this seriousness by being somewhat exaggerated, not only in regards to the technical matter, but also in their visual context. Yanobe's works are humorous and playful, revealing a discreet ironic comment on the discourses of trauma and recession rather than a direct critique. Considering the vast impact of any imagined danger, the tiny figure dressed in yellow plastic protection suit becomes a parody on ready-made survival kits sold at the local hardware store, which are

designed to provide a feeling of security rather than actual protection. Again, Yanobe seems to show us both sides of the coin: his protection suits make us laugh at the absurdity they embody, but at the same time they confront us with our own need for safety and shelter. In an age of wartime rhetoric, being the Cold War of the 1960s or the War against Terrorism in this century, Yanobe's works remind us of the short distance there is between discussing issues of safety to restricting limits of open-mindedness and tolerance.

When Yanobe revisits Expo '70, he completes his own return to a new beginning. In regard to his own artistic practise, Yanobe closes a circle from his first thoughts of creating sculpture more than thirty years ago to his present identity as artist by relating to the actual site of this personal experience. By referring explicitly to Expo '70 and its demolition, Yanobe re-enacts parts of several cultural performances: on one level he refers to the optimistic hope for the future instigated by the official production of Expo '70, while on the other relating to the more recent discourse of national crisis in economy and social values. By juxtaposing these very different aspects of national self-awareness and cultural identity in the same work, Yanobe also reveals the elements of construction and ideology inherent in both discourses. This leaves new space for intervention; it may question how 'natural' the idea of grand national performance in the economic, social and cultural sphere actually is.

The performance of *Tower of the Sun Hijacking Project* resulted in another kind of rebirth for Yanobe and his identity as artist, and this is linked closely to the physical enactment of the action itself. By performing the radical challenge of the physical human body in a narrow and unprotected space high above the ground, Yanobe is confronted with the consciousness of death as gravity and strong winds threaten to pull him down. After his ascent to the Golden Mask of the Tower of the Sun, Yanobe Kenji abandons the yellow protection suit and does not wear it again – as if his journey to *mirai no haikyo*, ruins of the future, is now completed and the need for protection has passed.

Notes

[1] I am grateful to Steve Clark at University of Wisconsin-Madison for reading an earlier draft and providing insightful comments.

Yanobe Kenji presentation at Club Metro in Kyoto, July 2004. See *Megalomania* (2005)

[2] All art works by Yanobe Kenji referred to in this text can be viewed on the web site <http://web.iminet.ac.jp/yanobe/>, particularly in the section Atom Suit Project.

[3] Within the field of art and culture, there has recently been an actual Expo '70 'boom' going on, such as, for example, the inclusion of Expo '70 references in the Japanese pavilion at the Venice Biennale for Architecture in 2004, where Expo '70 was directly connected with the concept of *otaku*. *Otaku: persona=space=city* (Tokyo: Japan Foundation, 2004). Another example of references to Expo '70 and Okamoto Tarô is seen in the recent large-scale exhibition in New York curated by artist Murakami Takashi (Murakami, 2005). See also

Sawaragi (2005).

[4] The Official Report states that 'The pavilions were located in good order and harmony so as to be easily accessible from the Symbol Area. The spirit of the Central Theme was fully incorporated into the site master plan.' (Official Report, 1972: 11).

[5] This includes works such as *Foot Soldier (Godzilla)*, *Nest (for dictators)*, *Yellow Suit*, all from 1991, *Grand House Go!Go!Go!* and *Soul of Bubble King* from 1992, *Emergency Escape Pod* from 1996, and others

[6] See: 'Lucky Dragon Incident', <http://www.american.edu/TED/lucky.htm>

[7] Yanobe announced the project in a lecture at the Okamoto Tarô Museum in 2001 (Yanobe, 2005: 107).

[8] 'Aijakku: Orita medama otoko taiho' (Eye-jack: The Eyeball Man came down and was arrested), *Mainichi Shinbun* Morning Edition, 4 May 1970

[9] The quote refers to the exhibit inside the Tower of the Sun during Expo '70 entitled *Tree of Life*, which displayed the evolutionary processes of living beings.

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