

## The Electric Geisha

Educated as a Geisha, Hanayo is an artist of many stories. She was part of the glamorous circles of Tokyo's entertainment elite for many years before moving to Europe in 1995. In her work the borders between performance and photography blur. Most of her snaps are taken on the road, it is no less, but a new style of tourist imagery we are talking about here.

THE MOANS OF passionate couples resonate from the walls of most buildings in Maruyama-Cho, one of the many 'Love Hotel' areas in the heart of Tokyo. The streets are thronged with people dashing between appointments - lovers are not famous for their patience, especially when they are paying by the hour.

This is where money buys privacy. And privacy provides relief from the fantastic and often garish sights on the crowded streets - phallic towers adorned with Vegas-style kitsch and the ubiquitous sleaze create a distinctive skyline of 'hybrid' architecture. The area is obviously not designed for residents. Nonetheless, one building stands in stark contrast to the brilliant commercial landscape. A single house, in traditional Kyoto-style, stands in the centre of this neon-lit chaos. This was a home to geishas living many centuries ago. Today, the building seems to be the sole sanctuary in the heart of Tokyo.

This is where I first met the Japanese artist Hanayo. Hanayo chose this district as her place to live and work. Maruyama-Cho provided a convenient base for her vocation as both geisha and photo-artist until she left Japan in 1995. While Hanayo received her training in geisha academies, Yutaka Yano, an editor of one of Japan's most powerful publishing houses, discovered a collection of interesting photographs belonging to the geisha student. Using her father's old camera, Hanayo had captured literally thousands of significant moments from her childhood. There were so many beautiful and compelling images that Yano decided to publish them. The collection marked Hanayo's first publication and was entitled *Hanayome* (1995). But before the public discovered Hanayo as a photo artist, she had already embarked on the career for which she had been formally trained.

### **The Body as Art .**

The education required to become an accomplished geisha requires discipline and talent. Firstly, a geisha needs to perfect the art of traditional Japanese singing and dancing. Also, a geisha must study strict rules of etiquette - for example, how and when to bow. This is a valued skill in Japan, one which is called upon when a geisha is obliged to entertain the country's leading politicians and other VIPs. The education period itself is long and demanding. For some women, like Hanayo, it can prove too tedious, so they occupy themselves with other activities. Some join a band . Others become models. Not long after starting her training, Hanayo started appearing in television commercials and on talk shows. Naturally, she would wear her geisha kimono, while acting like " Amanda de Cadenet on acid" ('Japan's New Generation', *The Face*, April 1993). This bizarre image was not only a shock for the Japanese. Her look enthralled the likes of Jean Paul Gaultier, for whom she eventually modelled, as well as the editors of *The Face* magazine, who dedicated a cover story to the Hanayo phenomenon. If, historically, geisha referred to the act of turning one's body into art, then Hanayo became the best contemporary example of such a

definition.

This story may read like an Arthur Golden narrative. However, the image of a geisha is an enduring one that continues to sell, especially in the West. If that fantasy is further embellished with elements of science fiction, the end product sells even better. As various cultural artefacts attest – from Yellow Magic Orchestra's first album in the early '80s to futuristic pornography in the late '90s - the electric geisha is essentially a romantic image, in which historical continuity and cultural coexistence are reaffirmed. Ancient Eastern cultures fuse perfectly with Western hi-tech modernism. But has the role of the woman behind the geisha become increasingly marginalised? For Hanayo, being reduced to an image or object of desire is also a form of performance. Hanayo has accordingly used her photographs as a personal interrogation of the geisha myth(s).

### **Geisha Unplugged**

When Hanayo moved to Europe it was not her intention to leave Japan permanently. In fact, she left many assets behind - fans, contracts, new projects and the clamorous Tokyo media. Needless to say, she encountered new levels of cultural reductionism. It was obvious from the outset that she would serve as another image, an Oriental Asian stirring up Caucasian Europe, an exotic accessory for Western consumption, a "vapid dolly" (her phrase and one that eventually became the name of her first band in London, involving musicians from Daisy Chainsaw).

When touring with her band, Hanayo plays the role of the performance singer, with the emphasis on performance, rather than on the act of singing itself. Styles vary from Neo Glam Rock to Techno Noise, which brings us to Alec Empire and Hanayo's collaborations with his DHR label mates. Imagine a dense wall of noise triggering fragile fragments of apocalyptic atmosphere in DAT format, and then a dancer, dressed in sixteenth century feudal fashion, performing a riot dance of contemplative yoga. Of course, Hanayo has performed similar concerts in Japan, with people like Massami Akita and Violent Onsen geisha. But only in Europe did this approach attain an unprecedented level of deconstruction. Here it is geisha unplugged, geisha burning and falling into pieces, an S & M ritual, satanic and naive, unique.

In many of the photographs displayed in Hanayo's exhibitions, she is dressed in traditional geisha costume. Through self-parody, she gradually began to reclaim her image. She challenged the power of the objectifying gaze by abandoning the role of a passive art/aesthetic body (the geisha). A period of deconstruction followed. However, it is significant that her self-portraits stem from different time periods and production contexts. I remember a series of articles in the trendy Japanese magazine *Studio Voice*, in which she regularly visited a variety of celebrities in their homes. This feature became an eagerly awaited ritual and always ended with everybody gathering in front of the camera and adopting a big smile. Then came *Hanayo's Travels*, set in the biggest metropolis in the world, with the geisha exploring, entertaining and even moon walking. The project references her time spent working in geisha clubs, the only difference being that her encounters are made public. Yet, the most interesting aspect in all of her work is the recurring theme of travel. In fact, her photography can be viewed as an alternative form of the travel diary. Consider, in this respect, another cross-cultural stereotype: the Japanese tourist.

### **Interiorising the Exterior**

If travel is a central motif in Hanayo's work, the links between her alluring and unassuming snapshots and herself-portraits become clear. The act of performance - performing a photographer, and/ or a photographic subject - establishes a deeper

connection between the two genres. In more recent pictures, which Hanayo has been exhibiting in Europe, she poses in a more detached manner, holding her daughter Tenko (a frequent subject in her work). Both are dressed in traditional Japanese costume - a perfect family photograph, minus father. Yet, according to Japanese tradition, the absence of the father is somewhat disturbing. No family photograph is complete without the head of the family. In these photographs Hanayo returns the camera/viewer's gaze while locked in a myriad of thoughts inaccessible to the viewer. The traditional geisha image is pushed to its limits.

The indistinct contours of a puppet caught in a net, an erupting volcano in the back-ground; graffiti on a wall with a phantom head emerging from the centre; a Chinese theatre group during rehearsal on an open-air stage, captured from a bird's eye view. All these photographs are out of focus, which might be taken to signify a rejection of the return of realism in the age of digital reproduction. But the photographs are also presented as spontaneous snapshots, despite the fact that several of them are consciously staged - one of many paradoxes inherent in Hanayo's work. The end product of 'snapshot-photography' is usually more exciting than its producer. It is the moment, the place, the event, or the face that is remembered, rather than the person who has seen and captured it. The photographer could be anyone. So snapshot photography could easily be considered 'unauthored'. It could be argued, therefore, that Hanayo's work, appearing in books and exhibitions, emerges from an archive without a genre code.

At first glance, her photographs take the form of 'domestic snapshots' of pets, dolls, toys, and even the television screen. Yet it is only the 'sense' of interior, not the interiors themselves, that the artist has captured. If you take a closer look, you realise that many pictures depict exterior scenes. This encourages us to read Hanayo's approach as one of interiorising the outside world. This is how the original subject comes into play again. Furthermore, these supposedly 'unauthored' images, even those depicting recognisable characters, are more than mere documentation. For example, Christoph Schlingensiefel, a fellow theatre activist, appears in juxtaposition with imaginary landscapes of floating colours and forms.

It is not only a highly subjective territory that Hanayo unveils, but also one that is fantastic. Through her camera filter, her subjects turn into virtual objects, imaginary architecture, phantasmagorical sites. Taking into account that most of her photographs are taken 'on the road' or on tour, her art is not just a new style of tourist imagery, but an alternative poetics of performance.

**- Krystian Woznicki-** nu: the Nordic art review