reviews

Book

Review by Patrick Lichty

JPG is a thick catalogue chronicling a number of Japan's hottest young graphic designers, many of which exhibit a do-it-yourself approach to design. In fact, this approach is nearly taken to logical extremes, as noted by Hideki Inaba, in that he and many of his colleagues have little formal training, but are driven by their surroundings and the elec-tro-media culture that surrounds them. Reflected in this mix of stylistic treatments are those representing the now familiar neo-retro 60s style adapted to handheld phone displays and video games.

The question arises as to why a new media magazine is reviewing a book on contemporary Japanese design, which can be summed up in two points. First of all, the current milieu in Japanese contemporary art is extremely porous: within the Japanese scene, there are large overlaps between contemporary art, graphic design conceptualism and new media arts. This becomes obvious in the inclusion of artists such as Groovisions and Junya Nishioka -- the former was included in Takashi Murakami's *Superflat* exhibition, and the latter in the *Chiwawa World* animations of late 2002 that were nearly ubiquitous during my stay in Tokyo. While Groovisions exhibits the easy slippage between graphic design, con-sumer culture and high art, Nishioka plays with tropes seen in video game culture through the surreal lens of placing haloed anthropomorphic Chihuahuas in an exal-ted dreamworld (I actually have a *Chiwawa World* key-chain).

This brings me to my second point; due to the porous-ness of Japanese visual culture, there are simultaneous referents to mobile technologies, retro gaming, typography, and consumer culture that also inform the work of many new media artists, such as Cory Arcangel, Amy Franceschini, Josh Davis, and many others (including myself). I would argue that these influences take diverse forms, ranging from animation to consumer electronics to video games, to name just a few. Considering Japanese graphic design in a new media context therefore means to explore one driver of the new media culture which in turn is fed by the net of associated genres within the current electronic society, such as the aforementioned areas of gaming, design, museum culture, and typography.

As the book mentions, the designers of *JPG* draw from their daily lives, filtering traditional forms, the latest technology, global media, and the flood of visual information bombard-ing them every day to create their work. The peculiarity of a reference to 'foreign' media becomes even more ironic when some of the culture under scrutiny is derived from television, video games, mobile devices and the like, which

have a tradition of innovation in Japan itself. Therefore, what is set up is a synergistic dialogue in which the technoculture intertwines with itself on a global scale, thus problematizing art genres.

The variety of everyday influences evident in *JPG*, com-bined with the number of artists, as well as the amount of visual information is so immense that one can only focus on a handful of designers in order to avoid mirroring the infoglut of the technoculture from which these practitioners come. Tsuyoshi Hirooka (aka LEVEL1), for example, operates across a large number of genres, from simple bitmaps to slick graphics reminiscent of point-of-purchase displays. Most striking are his treatments informed by classic video games, such as "Super Torio Bros." and "World Tetris," which reflect Hirooka's personal landscapes in terms of video games. This aesthetic is carried over into T-shirt designs, such as one with a headless Mario, say-ing "Could you live one day without video games?"

The pixellated video game style exhibited in everything from early Nintendo titles to later gaming scenarios such as *The Sims* can be traced in the work of Nendo, ShakaGraphics, and Locker Room Design.
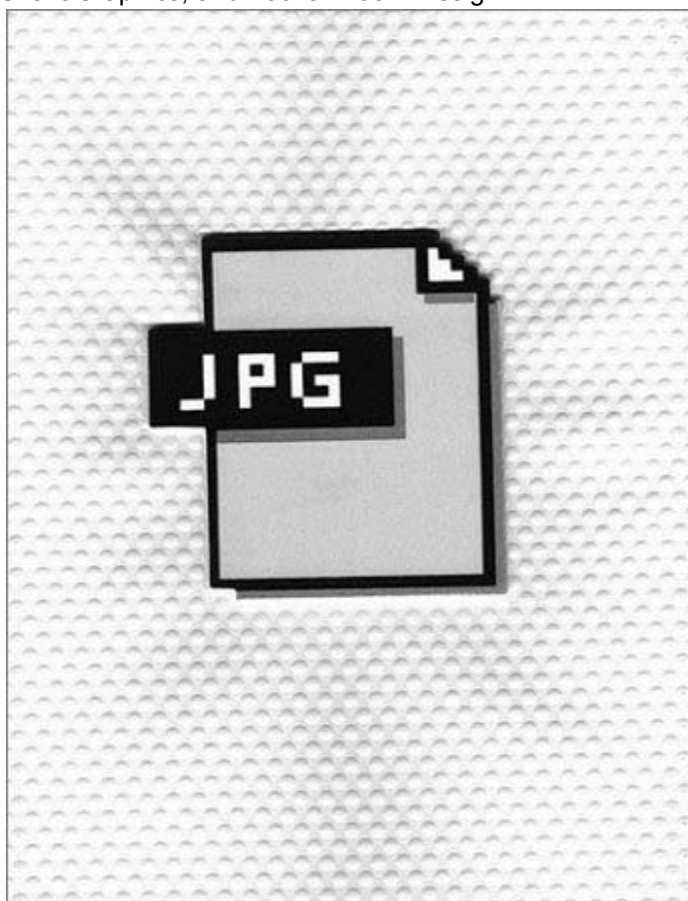
Looking at this arc of influences, one can see numerous impact sites vis-à-vis technological culture in Japanese life; the unfolding of dominant consumer entertainment cultures, their ubiquity, the symbiotic relationship between Japan and the United States with regard to cyberculture, and many more.

One of the multi-media designer / artists who stands out most prominently in this volume goes by the alias Delaware and mixes a low-rez aesthetic with contemporary Japanese I-Mode mobile technology. The One Image / One Hour project allows an I-Mode phone user to access a new ASCII-esque image every hour, mixing the advanced technology of the I-Mode platform with the pseudo-retro look of his graphics. In addition, the Color_Cycletoon music program, which is visually informed by historical sources such as Matisse and Ukiyo-e, merges the creation of music with character-based graphics to create distinctly styled images that are also uniquely digital in nature. In many ways, Delaware represents the genre of artist / designer who is self-reflexive about his sources, but not apologetic in any way, as these influences are merged with contemporary digital culture and techniques to aptly reflect the zeitgeist of the day.

Addressing all the styles employed and issues explored by the artists covered in this 300+ page book would necessitate a review far longer than this one, and artists such as Groovisions are well documented through their acceptance in larger art circles. This is not to say that typography by groups like Dainippon and Zettuei, and the ultraslick images of Power Graphixx are not without merit, but they are more abstracted from the links between new media art and Japanese design practices. *JPG* represents a genre of graphic design derived from everyday interactions with technology and media that show the interdependent nature of art, design, and electronic culture. Within *JPG* one can see the cross-pollination within global technocultures, and the common threads with US artists like Amy Franceschini and K10K. Although *JPG* addresses themes relating to Japanese artists and designers and their uniquely Japanese experiences, one may find -- upon greater inspection -- that these everyday experiences have a lot in common with those of the technological First World and are not necessarily specific to Japan only. *JPG* is a mirror through which one peers into a culture, and its historical roots (albeit rather recent ones), that permeates much of the Japanese and US culture, but also seems to reflect much of the rest of the world.