

THE INVISIBLE MALE BODY

HIROSHI YOSHIOKA

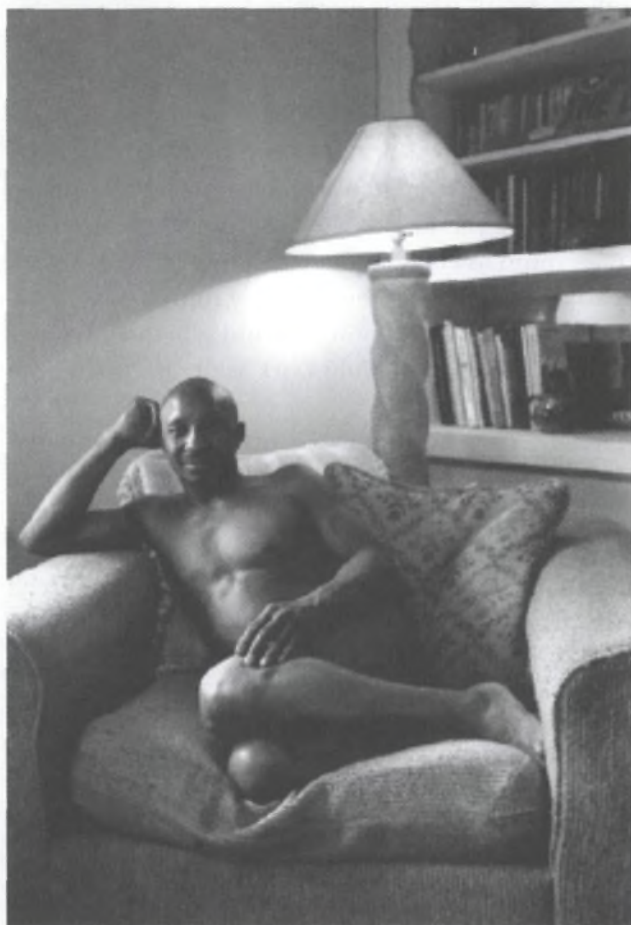
Two conversations I recently had with friends motivated me to write on this subject. One was about the leaflets I always find in my mailbox at my apartment in Kyoto. They are all the same size, as small as a page of a pocket paperback, showing naked young female bodies, with their stereotypically innocent-looking faces, unsuited to their provocative poses. These are advertisements for a “sex delivery service,” which is quite common in Japan’s urban areas today. Girls are delivered like pizza, and the customer is charged for every twenty minutes (the maximum use is 120 minutes). Once when I showed a magazine to my friend she found an advertisement in it recruiting new “workers” for this job; the advertisement explained how easy and safe the job was. I even found an advertisement for males who could work as drivers taking the girls to the customers.

“Here, you see,” said the friend, “you can buy sex on one side, and sell it on the other. This kind of business used to be dominated by yakuza (Japanese gangsters), and perhaps still is, but you can no longer detect any danger or crime in this advertisement. Prostitution has become a part of industry in this country. Sex is just consumption, neat, safe and systematic. Girls are not forced to do it from poverty. They just want to make quick money for their own pleasure. So, what’s wrong?” I replied that sex is always represented through female bodies, and they are therefore too visible in the society. This overexposure blinds us, and makes *our* own bodies invisible. On the other hand, male bodies are invisible behind the profusion of female. Perhaps male bodies are inseparable from industry itself. They are submerged in the system.

The other conversation was about the photo exhibition of Laurie Toby Edison, an American photographer, which took place in September 2001 at The National Museum of Art in Osaka.¹ The show included works from two of

¹ *Recent Works of Laurie Toby Edison: Meditations on the body*, The National Museum of Art, Osaka, Japan, August 2, – September 2, 2001.

her series of work: *Women En Large*, *Familiar Men* and *Japanese Women*, a new series she was working on. I have been interested in Edison's approach to photography because she challenges the representation of human bodies that is deeply influenced by mass media. In mass media you can never encounter fat female bodies unless they are supposed to illustrate something negative (the body before dieting).² In the same way, men's naked bodies are not shown as such, never seen as something "familiar." They are always represented as signs of sexual (bodies of actors, rock musicians, etc.) or physical strength (those of athletes, football players, etc.). Edison's photography breaks this unspoken code, and makes us notice how invisible human bodies are in fact in our society.



Laurie Toby Edison,
from *Meditations on the
Body* (2001)

² *Women En Large: Images of Fat Nudes*, Photographs by Laurie Toby Edison. Text by Debbie Notkin, Books in Focus, San Francisco 1994; website: <http://www.candydarling.com/lte/gallery.html>

I have known the curator of this exhibition, Ms. Akiko Kasuya, for many years. When the exhibition was over I asked her what kind of response she had got from visitors. "It's amazing," she said. "First I thought it would be the nudes of fat women that might be provocative to some of the audience. I was wrong. It was the male bodies in the *Familiar Men* series which turned out to be more embarrassing." "Embarrassing to whom?" I asked. "To some middle-aged male viewers, those who work in the administrative office of the museum, for example. They found the series almost disgusting. They told me that they just couldn't stand looking at that part of Edison work." I asked: "Is this because they think male bodies are not something you can appreciate in the artwork?" Kasuya answered: "Perhaps, because those are the bodies of ordinary men, in normal, everyday situations."

I thought she was right. If the male body were shown as something exceptional, like those of macho athletes, film stars or even gays, these images would be accepted much more easily. Finding the body marked as something extraordinary, the viewer would have a feeling of safety, a feeling that would reassure him that *he* doesn't belong to what is represented here. But what we can see in Edison's photos are just ordinary males. They are naked, but without any appeal to their physical strength, nor can we see here any sign of sexual seduction.

So, why should usual and ordinary male bodies be seen with embarrassment, while unusual and extraordinary ones are seen as a commonplace?

These conversations reminded me of a passage in a newly published book I am reading, whose title could be literally translated as *What It Means to Make Love with a Man*.³ The book is the record of a long talk by three female writers based on their experiences with men. The main topic of their conversation is how men are framed with a limited image of sex and sexuality in our contemporary society. Among the three is Tomoko Minami, a writer and sex worker who declares that she has seen more than thirty thousand penises(!) She has observed that many men seem to hate looking at their own naked body in the mirror. "Many men feel that the male body is ugly. They say their desire is spoiled by seeing their own body in the mirror. It's perhaps because they are not accustomed to being looked at. They don't understand how women look at them, either in a sexual or non-sexual way."

The sex industry exploits fantasy. It casts sexual fantasy into a certain mold, which is based on the dichotomy of the overexposed female body and the invisible male body. What interests me here is that, in industrialized soci-

³ *Otoko wo Daku to Iukoto*, by Ayako Saito, Tomoko Minami and Xanae Kameyama, Asuka-shinsha publishers, 2001.

eties, to be a man one is required to hide the individual body under one's social function. Being a man means being able to identify oneself with what one is supposed to be in society, instead of what one really is. And I suppose this can be seen in Japan in an especially obvious form, as here modernization in this aspect has gone very far, even farther than in Western countries.

Modernization has taken the form of standardization and uniformity. Uniform might be the key to thinking about the structure of desire in this culture. People love being uniformed, because they are brought up in such a way. The uniform put on the body produces "uniformed sexual fantasy." Uniforms for female students and workers are very often associated with men's sexual fantasies. Miwa Yanagi, a contemporary Japanese artist, critically represented this shared male view in her early works.⁴ On the other hand, uniforms for men show how they function in the system. By wearing uniforms, women have to suggest, and men have to deny, the existence of their body.

Here I am not only referring to uniforms like those of policemen, but to everything people put on the body to show how they should be treated. Uniform culture in this sense can be seen in two very popular male stereotypes in modern Japan: "Salary-man" and "Otaku." "Salary-man" is a Japanized English word for an office worker, but the important thing is that it implies that someone is decent, normal, average and safe. Their actual uniform is a suit and a tie in a rather sober color. "Salary-man" represents the sociable side of the Japanese male identity. "Otaku" is the other extreme. They can be recognized by their untidy clothes, disheveled hair, stubble and so on. They restrict their world to a particular field (such as animation, computer manipulation, etc.) and they typically lack skills in sociability and communication. They are sometimes even infamous for their "loli-con," the sexual fantasy about prepubescent females (the word is derived from "Lolita complex").

These two types – Salary-man and Otaku – may seem to be the opposites of each other, but they have the same desire in common, to deny their individual existence as a man. They share the hatred of looking at their own body, and try to hide behind the uniform appearance. It is important to understand that these two characters stand for two basic functions in Japanese society which enabled the quick development of the country: Salary-man represents the spirit of cooperation, while Otaku is an expert in technology. What we can see behind the diffusion of these two popular male stereotypes is how important the process of industrialization is in transforming the individual male body into an invisible one; it was made, transformed into an anonymous part of the system in order to maximize the efficiency of the state machine.

⁴ <http://www.yanagimiwa.net/>

To make the male body invisible means, however, to set it up in the mythical dimension. The Japanese body has become a sanctuary, like the emperor's body used to be before World War II. The body is not just invisible, but something that shouldn't be mentioned in secular words. Sheer racism can result from this when people have to face the body issue. In 1994 some "onsen" (hot spring) bathhouses in the small town in Hokkaido put up signs "Japanese only," because they had been disturbed by drunken Russian sailors. They tried to exclude *all* foreigners, but actually the nationality was not the point, the distinction was made between Japanese and "foreign" bodies. A person who had already become a naturalized citizen of Japan was also denied entry into the bathhouse because he had a Western body⁵.

In this context, I have been very interested in works of art which attempt to resist this invisibility and mystification of the male body, and to recover the possibility of its representation.

Miyako Ishiuchi has taken photographs of human bodies, both male and female, but they are not normal nude photos. Like Edison, she is interested in the aspect of the body that has been excluded in the mass media. She has been attracted, for example, to "scars" on the body, the skin of old people, rough nails of middle-aged women and so on. In the interview I had with her for the critical journal *Diatx.*,⁶ I asked about the interest she has in "scars" and the skin of elderly people. "For me, the photograph is a device for visualizing the flow of time, rather than fixing a moment," she replied. "Time is invisible, but you can see it on the human body." In the course of conversa-



Tadasu Takamine,
Kimura-san, performance (2000/2001)

⁵ For further information on this incident. visit: <http://www.debito.org/otarulawsuit.html>

⁶ *Diatxt.* volume on "Future Memory," ed. Hiroshi Yoshioka, Kyoto Art Center, 2000. For further information on this journal, visit http://www.diatxt.com/index_e.html

tion she mentioned the “quietness” of the body in her works. Though her works include criticism of the mass media which brainwash us everyday with perfect young bodies, Ishiuchi’s works are an alternative way of looking at the body, rather than an attack on the dominant way of body representation.

It is also important to mention Miyako Ishiuchi’s selection of works entitled *Sawaru: Chromosome XY*,⁷ which shows close-up images of male bodies together with their normal portraits. Their bodies are all so close that we feel as if we are touching, rather than watching them (The first part of the title “Sawaru” simply means “touch” in Japanese). Closeness creates a feeling of intimacy, but it doesn’t lead to the eroticism we see in commercial photos. Here again, the crucial thing is that they are all ordinary men, young and old, Japanese and non-Japanese. Under each portrait you read their name (in English) and their year of birth, without any implication of their job or any social role. Still, most men in the portrait seem to try to show their social status (you can read this from their expression). By presenting this interesting contrast between the ID-like portrait and the unusually close sight of the body, Ishiuchi seems to suggest a new way of looking at male bodies. In other words, she is trying to demystify the male body, to ease its tension, and to rescue it from the suppressive invisibility in our modern society.

While Ishiuchi’s work suggests the possibility of representing the male body by giving it a gentle look, Tadasu Takamine’s approach shows a harsh and violent approach toward the issue. In his multi-media performance entitled *Kimura-san*, he obviously addressed the subject of “disability,”⁸ but I think the work connotes the issue of the male body too, or, maybe the male body as something systematically “disabled.”

“Kimura-san” is the name of a man who was a victim of the Morinaga arsenic milk poisoning incident in 1955 in Japan. In spite of the disability affecting a large part of his body, he has lived alone in Kyoto for fifteen years. Takamine had worked for five years as one of the voluntary aid staff visiting his house once or twice every month. One day, he happened to “discover” that Kimura-san had a sexual drive like any other man, and this dramatically changed his views of the bodies of disabled people. He masturbated the man who was obviously unable to have a relationship with a woman in a normal situation. The artist videotaped the scene, at that time without any intention

⁷ *Sawaru: Chromosome XY*, by Miyako Ishiuchi, Shinchosha publishers, 1995.

⁸ In relation to the more general theme of this work, i.e., to the issue of the sexuality of handicapped people, I would like to note that there is a book and website by a writer who is in a wheelchair himself, about freedom of sex for people with handicaps. *Tatta Gosenchi no Hadoru or Sex for the handicapped, which has never been spoken of*, by Yoshihiko Nojo, Wani Books, 2001. <http://www.netlaputa.ne.jp/~k-nojo/CHIKA/>

to make it public. But he finally decided to use the tape in his performance, partly because Kimura-san himself wanted the tape to be publicly presented.

In the performance Takamine wears a kind of framed headgear (like that of an ice hockey player), with two small video cameras attached inside of it which take close-up pictures of his eyes. He sits in front of a table with plates of glass on it, and behind him there is a huge screen showing the scene of Kimura-san's body. In the course of the narration (which is in English and read by his own recorded voice), he abruptly smashes the glass by hitting it with his head, and the moment he does this the screen suddenly changes into the image of his irises. He does this again and again.

"The world awakes by laughter," when Kimura-san's face shows the moment of ecstasy on the screen. "This is based on something, but not on sexual desire. His behavior – just the opposite of masculine – is a rare sphere in which no one will lose their reality." By "opposite of masculine," the artist refers to Kimura-san's disability, not only in the sense of his physical handicap, but in the sense of "the disability to refuse." In order to survive, the man has no choice but to accept others. ... "his body does not have privacy in the first place."⁹ This very "disability" leads to the laughter that awakes the world, affirming the visibility and existence of the body.

The body is not a matter of fact. On the contrary, it is still an unknown dimension which we should explore very carefully, through artistic expression and philosophical thinking as well as normal scientific investigation. And I believe that various attempts to recover the visibility of the male body could radically change our view of many problems in our society, many of which are caused by the stiffness of masculinity.

⁹ The full text of the narration (both English and Japanese) is published in *Diatxt.*, vol. 3., "Vita Sexualis," 2001, including other works by Tadasu Takamine.

