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ASIAN CULTURE QUARTERLY

SKIN

Fashion & Photography issue

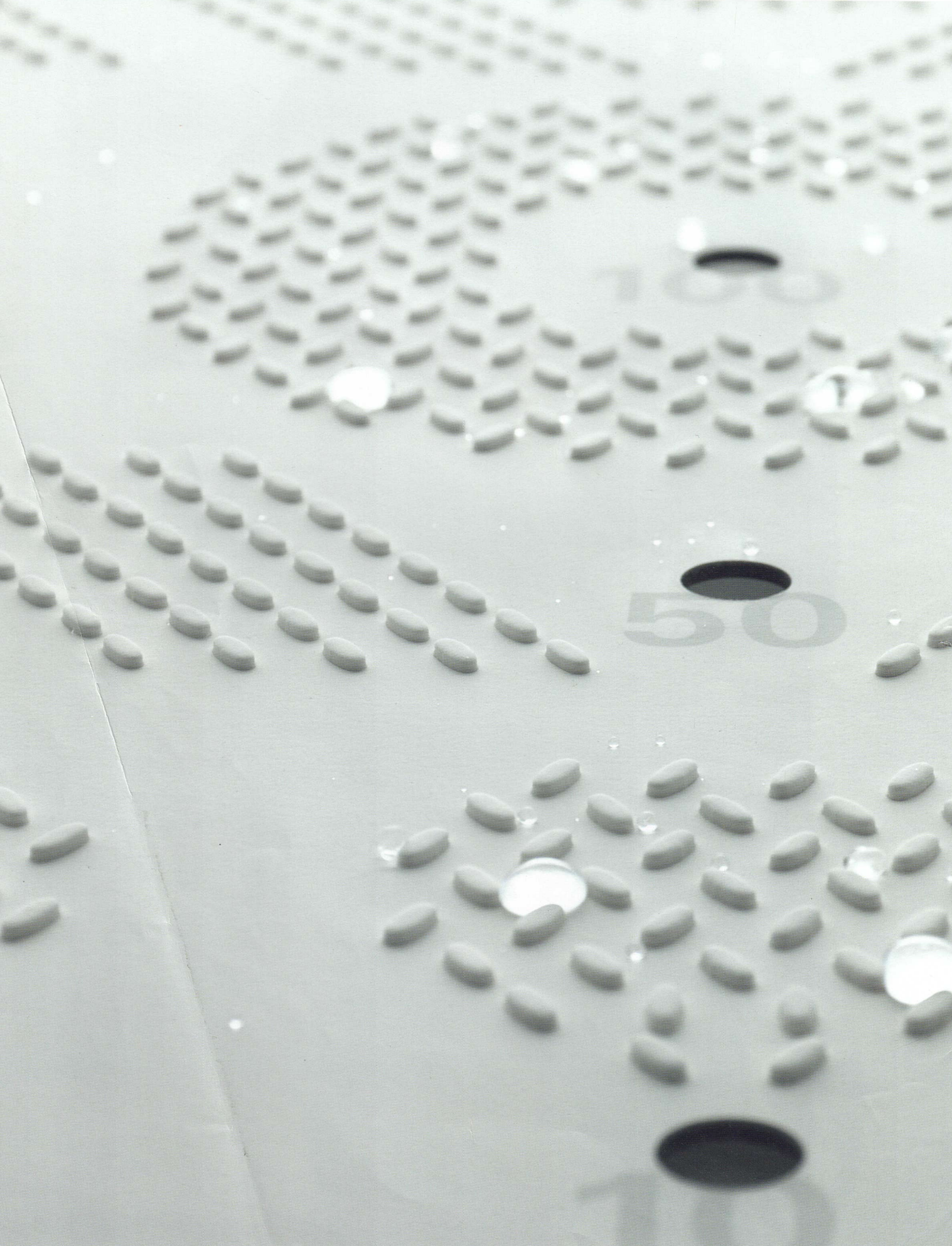
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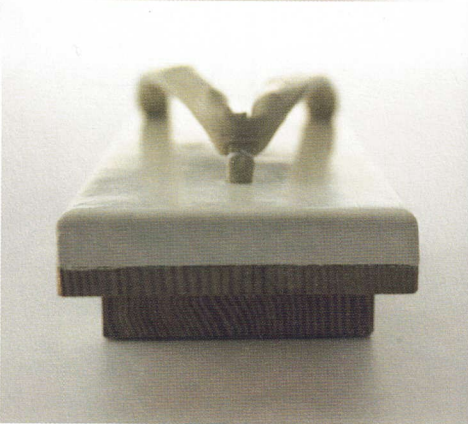
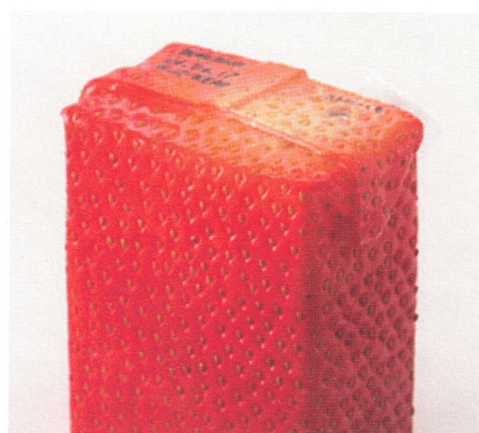
VINYL, HIRAGANA, STRIPES, & ICE CREAM

KENYA HARA MAKES
AN IMPRESSION

WORDS MAGGIE KINSER HOHLE PORTRAIT STEVE WEST

Kenya Hara is a forty-something graphic designer based in Tokyo. Although he has designed the usual things in that field—posters, packaging, signage, corporate identities—what he’s really good at, and becoming best known for, is looking at the big picture of where design fits into real, modern, daily life.

Hara’s a cerebral designer, but also eloquent and he produces exquisite work. Whenever possible, he elucidates the concept behind the project, and clients will pay him to hear it. Sometimes this means he’s asked to join the advisory board of a corporation and help guide the organization itself rather than just design a package for its latest product, which is highly unusual for a “mere” designer! This he’s done for Muji, a Japanese manufacturer and brand that’s already had a design-heavy history.



HAPTIC EXHIBITION CURATED BY KENYA HARA

ABOVE FROM LEFT TO RIGHT **KAMI TAMA** BY KOSUKE TSUMURA **GETA** BY SHUHEI HASADO **JUICE SKIN** BY NAOTO FUKUSAWA

BELOW TAKEO PAPER SHOW 2004 **HAPTIC**

PAGE 30 & 33 **WATER PACHINKO** BY KENYA HARA



While books on design theory are not exactly flying off the shelves in most countries, Hara has sold 31,000 copies of his in Japan alone. He's widely seen as a vibrant representative of Japanese design; his work for the Nagano Winter Olympics and several traditional Japanese products has been extremely successful.

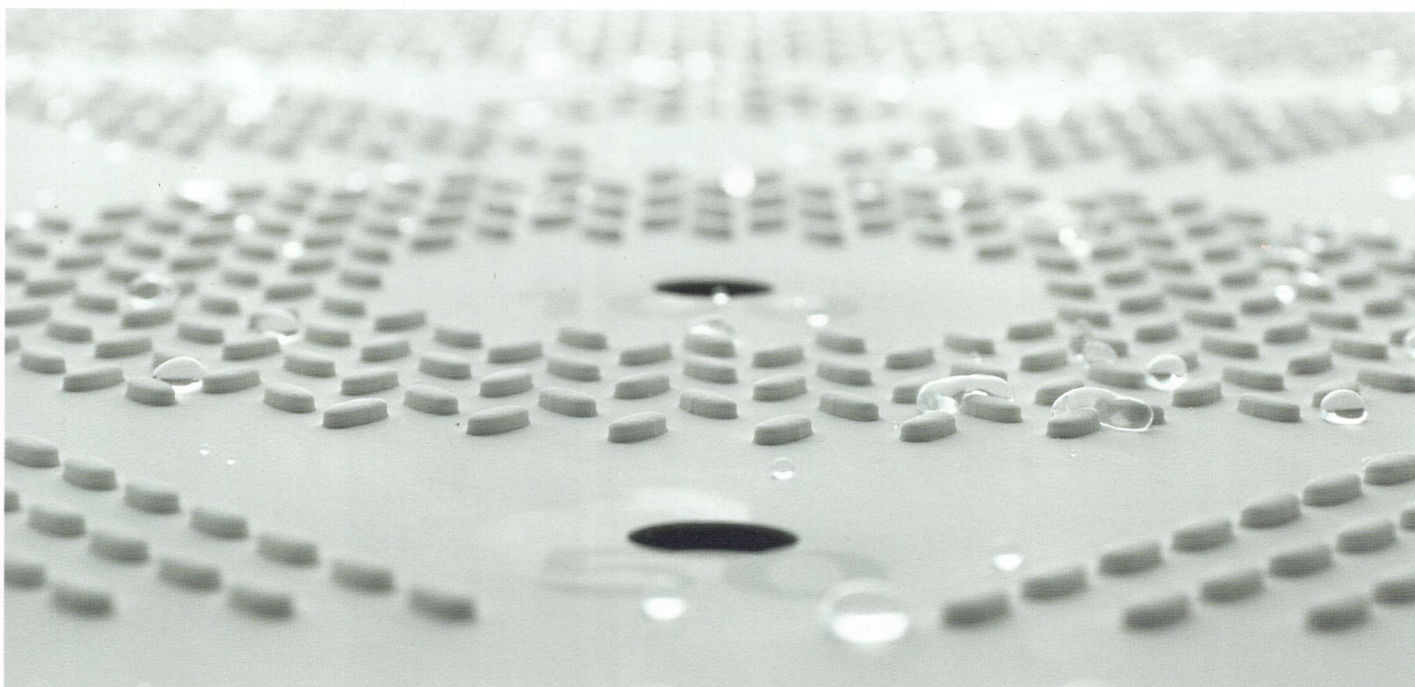
Hara also collaborates often with creators around the world, giving them exciting projects to do in Japan, and by doing so is helping to build the next generation of an international design network with a strong base in Japan. All of this Kenya Hara has done because he is well-educated, cares deeply about the quality of life, and has a powerful set of ideas about what designers can do to make our lives truly pleasant, and what Japanese experience and understanding can do to add to this better future.

I met Hara in Tokyo in 2001 to interview him for *Graphis* magazine. And although he'd just become the director of the colossally important Nippon Design Center (the initial and vital link between Japan's first generation of graphic designers and its burgeoning postwar manufacturing industry) in Tokyo, he was hardly full of himself; he told me he was still searching for his design methodology, and that it was thanks to his good relationships with intelligent fellow creators that he was beginning to find it.

Shortly before he passed away in 2002, Ikko Tanaka, the first art director of the now international "no-name" brand Muji, personally approached Hara to take this job. Hara became a member of Muji's board of directors as well, taking one huge step for design.

With my translation partner I have worked regularly with Hara, having interpreted for him at the British Museum, at City Tech University, and for his signage proposal at MoMA for Tokyo's Mori Museum, and so have been able to follow his trajectory at the distance of the comet's tail.

This fall, as he prepares to publish a compendium of his work and thought based on his best-selling Japanese book *Design no Design*, I am happy once again to ask him to explain himself. It's easy. Hara is a natural educator. He lives and works in Tokyo and teaches at the prestigious Musashino Art University. His exhibitions feel like professionally produced senior assignments for the world's most experienced designers. And Hara's thoughts about what sets Japanese design apart from that of the West, where Asia fits into the future of design, and what virtual reality really means exhibit a concern for society that I don't believe have been seen among Japanese designers since Ikko Tanaka and Sori Yanagi. In this era of blips and blogs, the depth is refreshing.





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Theme: Some of your signature white works have the effect of creating a simultaneous desire and hesitancy to touch it. What's your intention in making such "untouchables?"

Kenya Hara: When a fragile beauty is hidden inside, we hesitate to touch, for fear of spoiling or breaking it. At that moment of hesitation, we perceive the object a little more sensitively and delicately than usual. I believe it's important to communicate so that I allow the other person to experience this perception, because given the chance, we will try to precisely understand even a message delivered in a whisper.

Our lives are becoming more oriented toward virtual experiences, but actual, live skin, as a contact point, is mostly forgotten. Do you think it's important to address skin, as a sensor?

Lately, technology's been the world's driving

force and our sensory perceptions have grown comparatively dull. But it's not technology's fault. We haven't developed technology to entertain or please our cutaneous sense. In our sensory perceptions, there must be places that remain undiscovered, the "American continent of the senses" if you will. The field of design is going to be dramatically expanded by our attempts to unearth these locales. We will be approaching design from the perspective of how we perceive, and will design "ways of perception." Here lies dormant a massive vein of design.

How do you feel about the encroachment of the virtual world?

I'm not anti-technology; basically I'm concerned with thrilling and inspiring the senses. Human happiness lies in how fully we can savor our living environment. If we can fully

perceive and enjoy the world in a newly emerging reality, virtual or not, that's great. In fact, the term "haptic" is used extensively in virtual reality research. And virtual technology is in its nascent stage; we can't judge it too harshly. One day—in two or three centuries—we might not be able to tell the difference between virtual and physical reality. But we shouldn't stay where we are for long, because this technology doesn't make us feel good.

What do you mean?

Everyone says the 21st century is the information century, and even complains of too much information, but I disagree. All the information we get is fragmented, half-baked. I'll give you an example of lots of information: I was in Bali recently, and I walked around barefoot on the hotel's stone



floors. Eventually my feet began to go numb. That actually felt really good. The amount of information my feet were picking up was enormous. The human brain likes to receive massive amounts of information. The technology and media today give us very little, so our brains are unhappy. I'm looking forward to a sense-driven world, after the end of the technology-driven phase.

Your projects are sense-driven, but sometimes I think you use the outer membrane, the skin, to hide the contents. Take the Mukau pamphlet and the Hakkin bottle: one obscures the contents, one reflects the surroundings, hiding the contents again. Is this what you intended?

The concept of "emptiness" is one of my methods of communication design. I don't launch a message at my viewers, but instead provide an empty vessel. In turn, I expect them to deposit something there, their own messages or images. This is an important aspect of communication, accepting what the other has to say. Neither the Mukau pamphlet nor the Hakkin bottle is aggressively expressive, and each carries less "information" than the usual pamphlet or bottle, but because of their intervention, images well up in the minds of the viewers, and the designs are ready to accept and hold these images.

You have created beautiful exhibition catalogs for Haptic and Re-Design. Is it hard to present projects that explicitly depend on the five senses as books, with flat photos and uniformly sized pages? Do you give any special orders to your photographers to help them elicit the haptic aspect of the objects?

I consider a book an integrated medium that actually helps awaken the senses. The five senses are connected and interrelated, so just looking at a photo can stimulate our sense of smell or touch. And remember a book is not just a 2-D bundle, but a bundle of material

called paper. It is, as it were, "information sculpture." This is how I always think when I design a book. And I direct the production staff to present every object as simply as possible, revealing as little production as possible.

When I think of "skin," what comes to mind are the very important aspects of honne and tatemae (true, private feeling vs. formal expression) in Japanese communication, shoji in architecture, the refinement of washi paper, and of course your sensuous Haptic project. What is the relationship between Japanese culture and skin?

A very delicate sensibility and perception runs through Japanese culture. The *Haptic* project is a message born of Japan, based on this premise. And while haptic literally means to delight the sense of touch, I don't think of it as involving only occurrences within the realm of that sense. When we see food that looks delicious, our mouths water. In my definition, *Haptic* is phenomenally relevant to that which make all the senses drool!

The physicist Hermann Von Helmholtz said, "everything happens on the skin." The sense of sight is the perception of light via a membrane called the retina. The sense of hearing is the perception of sound waves on a membrane called the eardrum, and so forth. A human being is comprised of extremely delicate bundles of sensory perceptions, whose capability I think becomes either more sensitive or blunt depending upon training. The surface skin feels many objects, and in the center is the heart. This is how we relate to the world. Design is a service to this sentient skin.

Your Ex-Formation project with your seminar students at Musashino University also seems to me to be innately Japanese. What's the gist of this project?

Ex-Formation encourages communication that helps us understand how little we know, not only giving information, but also understanding what lies outside of that information.

That's one of your design concepts, right? Making things unknown?

Yes. Design is a technology that helps us grasp the essence of things, the methodology that helps us constantly feel the world afresh. It might mean revitalizing our way of perceiving the world and our daily lives, by tracing perceptions and objects to their origins. The project's theme this year was the Shimanto River, which is very well known across Japan. A book of the results will be published this fall.

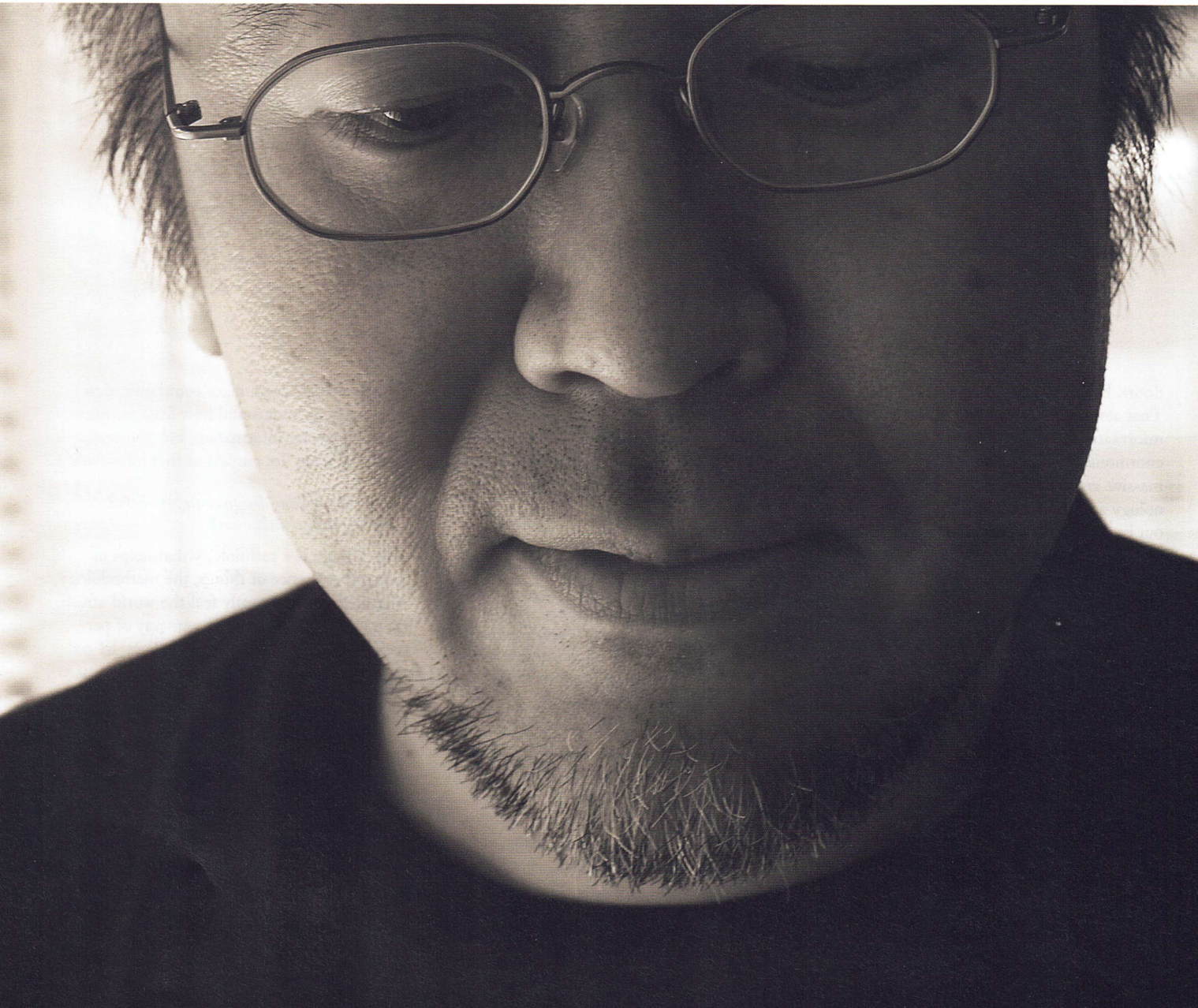
What's the theme for 2006?

"Resort." Not resort facilities, but the "resort" that's hidden in our perceptions of ordinary routines, like when you peel the skin of a mandarin orange, all the strings come off and inside is a perfect, seedless fruit. Or when you take off your work shoes and relax barefoot at home after a long day. Some of the likely "locations" of our resort will be vinyl, *hiragana*, stripes, and ice cream.

The concept of "resort" is the sensibility that's opposite of the sense of tension demanded by modern design. One of the students described "resort" as a combination of the concepts of rest and basic creature comforts: food, clothing, and shelter. I expect the research will bear interesting fruit.

This reminds me of your Muji work, especially Muji House. How would you describe the Muji project?

The integration of all the Muji commodities is designed to give form to "living." Since the Meiji era (1868–1912), Japan hasn't been able to depict "Japanese lifestyle" within the



modern context. I want to be able to address the issue of how to live in modern times through our sensibility, one that's been toughened by living in the rabbit-hutch environment to which most urban Japanese are accustomed.

What else are you working on?

It's hard to describe, but the architect Shigeru Ban (who created the Nomadic Museum in New York and won the design competition for the Euro Pompidou Centre) and I are creating a building-less design museum, a kind of "planning engine." In Japan the creativity of independent designers has never been mixed with a corporation's resources. I've got a corporate partner I can't name yet, but this project would allow more interesting exhibitions by integrating the planning ability

of designers with the achievement and history of certain companies.

I'm also going to be keeping my eyes and ears open for opportunities to send the *Haptic* exhibition to Europe, and will be publishing a design book simultaneously in Japan and China. It's going to describe my work and theories, and will be divided equally among text and images.

What areas of interest have you developed since maturing as a designer?

Everything in the world has become an object of interest for me. Everything is designed.

What country is most interesting to you now?

I like China. The China of the past.

Which past?

Before the Han Dynasties, about 206 BC–220 AD, that is, before Mongolia was unified. I like the China that was a multitude of countries, before the colors on the palette were mixed into grey. The China of that time was made up of people who put human wisdom to work to make sure their countries weren't destroyed. But even after China was unified, there were emperors with good taste. With an emperor with both good taste and power, the culture changes drastically. The Song Dynasty [960–1279 AD] was one of those. As was the Tang [618–907 AD]. So I like the antiques from these eras.

But today it's a completely different China. Ideologically, they aren't connected with those of the past; there's been a huge gap in the culture. But surely as modernism



advances, the culture will advance ideologically, and so will research into the past. I'm convinced that the Chinese will quickly awaken to their culture and it will change a lot.

The Chinese are not just a bunch of people who are working for cheap to build up their infrastructure; there's an amazing treasure in their sleeping culture. And as the Chinese begin to recognize that one person at a time, their country is going to become really interesting. I don't think it will split up, but will become more like the US, with the formation of four or five states, and then China will be easier to understand. From now on, it's going to be the Asian era, not just China but Vietnam, Laos, Thailand, Indonesia....

What Japanese quality are you most thankful for possessing?

That I can design outside of a consideration of form. Japanese design makes more of the issue of how something is felt or accepted. I consciously refer to this in my work. The religious anthropologist Shinichi Nakazawa said that I don't use traditional icons to express Japanese-ness, but express what the medieval Japanese called *kizen*, which literally means "prior to existence," or "before becoming explicit in the real world." That was a word I didn't know before, but I thought that was interesting.

Whom do you most admire?

Isamu Noguchi. His sculpture park is itself

sculpture. His thinking is amazing, and I really feel Japaneseness in his work, even though he was only half Japanese. His work also gives off a feeling that something is about to happen, and his sculpture celebrates the haptic element.

What would you be doing if you weren't a designer?

I would be a marine biologist, studying plankton in the ocean.

What qualities of your personality do you think have contributed most to your success?

I don't quit until I've won. ☞