The Exhibition Policies of Shunga

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Resumen
Uno de los elementos más interesantes de la biografía de la estampa erótica japonesa shunga, radica en las maneras que se han estructurado sus relaciones con los diferentes contextos por los que ha transitado a través de más de tres siglos. A pesar de los altos índices que alcanzó su producción durante el período Edo, de que a partir de 1990 se convirtiera en un nuevo y fértil terreno para la investigación, y del boom de publicaciones japonesas sobre estas imágenes, hasta el día de hoy no se ha realizado en Japón ninguna exhibición pública de estas piezas. La ponencia, entonces, examinará las diferentes políticas de exhibición, relativas a la estampa erótica japonesa shunga, que se han implementado en Japón y en otros países. Para esto se revisará además aquellas exhibiciones que recientemente se han realizado fuera de Japón, y se analizará, por vez primera, los vericuetos detrás del proyecto para una magna exhibición de shunga programado para el año 2013 en el Museo Británico, y su posible impacto en Japón.
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Some months ago, in June of 2010, in a meeting with colleagues at a Kyoto restaurant in Arashiyama, surrounded by a magnificent view of the river, eel dishes and sake, the possibility of an exhibition of Japanese erotic prints (shunga) was extensively discussed. This was not only the main subject of conversation, but the main reason behind the meeting. This shunga exhibition, which will be held by the British Museum during the spring of 2013, will be the largest ever organized in addition to the fact that it runs parallel to a three year project sponsored by Leverhulme Trust and developed by SOAS, the British Museum, the International Research Center for Japanese Studies, and Ritsumeikan University. The aims of the project, addressing as it does the study of shunga production, will be carried out through a series of workshops and publications, in order to support this major event.

Although this exhibition may very well be the largest of its kind to date, it won’t be the first. There have in fact been several previous instances when shunga was publicly exhibited, with full or partial shows devoted to its display. We can trace these back the ukiyo-e exhibition curated by Marco Fagioli in 1989 at the Musée d'Ixelles in Brussels, where some of the most celebrated works were indeed shunga. Sometime after that moment, there were other cases: Forbidden images: Erotic art from Japan’s Edo period (Helsinki Art Museum, 2003), Desire of spring: Erotic fantasies in Edo Japan (Kunsthall, Rotterdam, 2005), Hell at the library: Eros in secret (National Library of France, 2008), The Art of Love: Ofer Shagan's Shunga Collection (Tikotin Museum of Japanese Art, Haifa, 2009), Shunga: Art and Eros in Japan during the Edo Period (Palazzo Reale, Milano, 2009), and Secret Images: Picasso and Japanese Erotic Prints (Picasso Museum, Barcelona, 2010).

Even at a glance we immediately notice that, with only one exception (Israel), all the exhibitions took place in Europe. In this regard it is significant that there have never
been (at least to my knowledge) any similar exhibitions in the Americas. The United States, an important base for scholarship on Japan, has never organized any such show, and there are hardly any scholars working on this subject in North American institutions. In the case of Latin America and the lack of such exhibitions, far beyond reasons concerning any kind of prudish compulsion, I consider that the rationale lies with the general lack of knowledge about this production, the absence of specialists on the matter, the difficulties for finding funds for this, and, why not, the concentration on other sorts of “bombastic” exhibitions.

Now, returning to the aforementioned meeting in Kyoto, in spite of the fact that these prints were an integral part of the Japanese urban-popular culture of the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries, and that nowadays we are fortunately aware of the existence of a growing number of public and private shunga collections, there has never been a public exhibition of shunga in Japan. The only limited attempt, I am informed of, was a small and non-public show organized by the Art Research Center, at Ritsumeikan University in Kyoto in December 2009, which was part of the series of activities and a workshop in preparation for the future British Museum exhibition. This small display of shunga was mainly publicized among the participants of the event and other scholars working on the subject.

Some of the reasons behind the non-explicit prohibition against organizing public exhibitions of shunga in Japan lie in the ways that, even today, the legal apparatus perceives these prints. Causes related to the ambiguous, and sometimes absurd, ways in which shunga was classified as “obscene” during the second half of the 19th century, when Japan was importing many Western modern discourses from above, Victorian Puritanism being one of them.

There is no doubt that the modern public emergence of shunga it’s closely related to the controls on waisetsu (the obscene). It was logical to expect that “visual obscenity”, and Edo period sexually explicit prints, would be totally removed – apparently at least – from the public arena. From the Meiji period on, the good family customs’ image (zenryō na katei no fūshū) would work as a mask to hide that “immoral” past then attributed to shunga, in any case on a discursive level.
Therefore, during the majority of the XX century, shunga was regarded as inadequate and obscene, and its publication followed the regulations stipulating that any bodily representation should be arranged or altered in a manner such that zones like the genitals and the pubic hair be kept hidden. All the studies about shunga published in Japan since then, and until the end of the XX century, are “ornamented” with patches placed over the genitals, making it impossible to properly view the print. However, as part of the early efforts to achieve changes in public tolerance towards shunga, some publications will make great contributions to the proliferation of its serious study and display. Among those, I would like to highlight the active role performed by Kikan ukiyo-e (Ukiyo-e Quarterly) a journal, edited continuously from 1962 to 1984, which actively published articles on shunga.

This journal, during the 22 years of its existence, maintained an honest position concerning the study and transmission of those aspects (or subjects) of ukiyo-e neglected by other researchers, publications, institutions, and associations, including articles about shunga, in practically every published number. Of course, notwithstanding the fact that it followed the laws regarding the exhibition of “indecencies”, bleaching or patching the genital area, it was directly affected by the censorship’s attack.

In a note, published in number 43, in 1970, the editors commented that:

To foreign readers: Despite the increasing freedom of publication enjoyed abroad, the Tokyo Metropolitan Police have seen fit to decree that Japanese shunga should only be published so as to “show no hint of lovemaking” – and commenced confiscating recent copies of this journal.

Since, in Japan, the Police have extra legal powers to enforce such decisions, a lengthy court appeal would only result in making publication of this journal commercially unfeasible.

Therefore, rather than discontinue publication of this vital material in ukiyo-e studies, we shall be forced to employ more drastic cropping in the future – for which, our
apologies both to readers, and to the original artists who must have their work thus bowdlerized (Kikan ukiyo-e. No. 43. Gabundō, Tokio, 1970, p: 2).

It is worth noticing that the previous message was published after a series of articles written by Richard Lane – in addition to other texts by Japanese authors –, in which he strove to summarize the history of shunga, contributing in this way to the journal’s increase in sales in Japan as well as abroad.

This location of shunga as part of the “obscene realm”, and its relationships with the official public control apparatus, would continue for some few years, and during the 1990s the discussions about it will explode anew. Once again, periodical publications took on an active role in polemics intended to eliminate or lessen those regulations imposed upon the publication of nude or sexually explicit images. The controversies were then centered on hae ronsō (“the debate about the hair”; “the debate about pubic hair”), which had their most vigorous moment at the beginning of the 1990s. This particular debate also carried out strategies focused on legitimizing a sector of the sexually explicit images under the well known concept of “art”. In order to collaborate with this legitimization as art, the journals and magazines frequently included articles where the argument was repeated that in the West similar kind of works were considered as “art” and so there was no reason why in Japan nude and shunga images should be condemned as “obscene”.

In addition to the efforts undertaken to transform shunga into “art”, would be added other factors contributing to the different nuances and ambiguities which characterize contemporary discourses on the subject such as the researchers, editors and institutions. Parallel to the discussions carried out through diverse media about the pubic hair issue, a photographer, Fukuda Kazuhiko, and the publishing company Kawade Shobō, began an unbridled race publishing catalogues and books which allowed the public to witness part of the shunga “heritage” returning to public discourse again. Although the first of these new catalogues were published in correspondence with the censorship laws, obscuring the genitals, the controls over these publications was progressively becoming more and more lax. As a final result censorship of those books disappeared altogether, while,
simultaneously, shunga underwent a remarkable metamorphosis from “obscenity” (waisetsu) to “art” (bijutsu).

Kawade Shobō was not the only case of this, of course. Those first catalogues published without being censored, should uphold the idea that “this is art”, and so, almost all of the first ones were absolutely qualified publications for that: big books, with beautiful hardcovers, made out of excellent paper, and with superb reproductions. We do not find then, as it is today, non-censored pocket-shunga-books. Besides, it is interesting too, that on some of those first catalogues, which still “hid” the genitals, instead of using common methods like bleaching, or patching, they painted over the “contested” areas with golden or silver colors, emphasizing the august character those “newly artistic” images had.

The contemporary situation happens to be a more complex. The fact that today shunga is ready to belong to the respected “artistic heritage of Japan” has also raised questions on an academic level, about the pertinence of such strategies as its conversion into art. Aren’t we trying to erase at all cost any kind of allusion regarding shunga’s modern “obscene” past, constructing a grand vindication of the intrinsically artistic condition of it? With this maneuver, aren’t we also discriminating many of its popular and even sometimes “vulgar” character, for the sake of “art”? Aren’t we privileging the study of the so-called meihin (that is “masterpieces”), and forgetting about a huge amount of a less qualified production?

In any case, and in spite of all of this process, in my opinion there is still one last important step to finishing the transformation of shunga into art, and that is a public exhibition in Japan. This situation could perfectly being accomplished during the next few years because of the impact the already mentioned exhibition at the British Museum, could have in the public opinion. By the way, the proposed title for the exhibition is Shunga: Sex art in Japan.

Finally, what interested me most of the aforementioned meeting in Kyoto, was that many of the colleagues gathered there are forecasting the success the shunga exhibition at the British Museum will have, in order to construct a positive public opinion, with the help
of the media, and this way to prepare the way for a public exhibition of shunga for the first time in Japan.