SUMMARY

The Relationship of Shunga to the Fine Arts as Institution:
Meiji-Period Shunga, the Discovery of Obscenity, and the Loss of Background

SUZUKI Kenkō

In this paper I aim to trace how the concept of obscenity came to be applied in the reception of shunga or erotic art, situating the process as part of the modernization undergone by visual representation in Japan during the Meiji period (1868-1912), when the fine arts became an institution. In particular, I focus on the last two decades of Meiji, a time that saw the rapid establishment of art institutions and facilities such as museums and international exhibitions. Thus, I foreground the institutional history of Japanese modernity, which sought to purify art by excluding the form of visual representation known as shunga from the category “art.”

In the second part, I take up the differences between Edo and Meiji shunga in terms of representation and note that Meiji shunga lost the background elements that in Edo shunga depicted customs and daily life. Shunga’s relationship with institutionalized art is then further clarified by examining the gaze that viewers directed at shunga as a result of these changes, i.e., by looking at Meiji shunga from the viewpoint of their expressiveness or representational qualities.

Through this discussion, I aim to deconstruct the dualistic frame of reference that categorizes Japanese shunga as either “art” or “pornography” and to simultaneously dismantle these two intimately related modern concepts as they are applied to shunga.