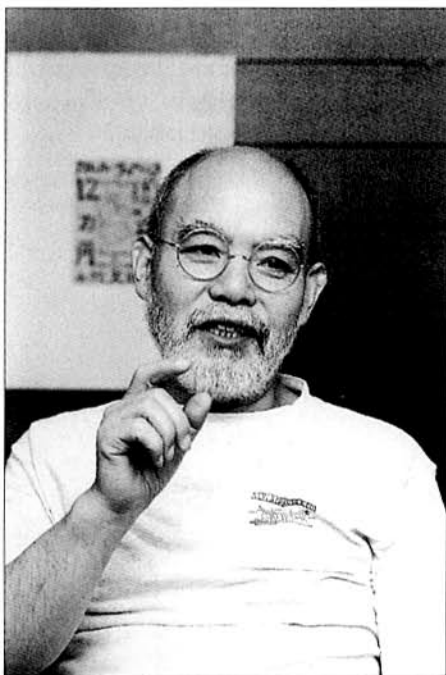


An 'Alternative' Designer

By Steven Heller

Koga Hirano, in Japan, has developed an anti-traditional visual language that looks like, but pre-dates, New Wave design.



Koga Hirano

Before the New Wave hit America in the early 1970s, some Japanese graphic designers were already playing with the visual forms, discordant relationships, and multi-leveled typography of Western Postmodernism. In fact, contrary to the belief that Japanese graphic design leans heavily on Western culture, Tadanori Yokoo, Akira Unio, Kiyoshi Awazu, and Genpei Akasegawa conducted graphic experiments in Japan well before they were introduced in the U.S.

Yet no Japanese designer has been more committed to defining an alternative graphic language than Koga Hirano, who since 1965 has designed literally thousands of posters and book jackets. In particular, the posters Hirano created between 1968 and 1982 for the Black Tent Theater, a traveling company, both responded to and helped to define Japanese underground culture of the late 1960s and '70s. Influenced by the '50s Gutai group, or Japanese beatniks, and the early '60s happenings of John Cage, the theater collectives that were part of this culture rebelled against Japanese tradition. And Hirano's posters, with their often transparent layers of color and multiple levels of type, offered a visual corollary to the anti-establishment feeling among Japanese youth. Like the postwar generation in the West, they, too, fought the dominant conservative attitudes of their culture.

Hirano's posters long preceded all work that would come to be identified as Postmodern. Given that many Japanese graphic arts organizations and annuals were displaying international trends, it's likely that Hirano saw contemporary Western work; and some of it may have been assimilated into his occasional Modern book jacket designs. But he did not develop his methods directly from Western design movements as much as tap the same historical well that fed them. One notable influence is Berlin Dada. Hirano translated this early-20th-century art movement by combining two traditional methods of everyday Japanese writing that are not ordinarily mixed—horizontal and vertical—and thus demanded that the reader come to the page from two different vantage points. This approach is anathema to traditional Japanese esthetics and politics. In the 1920s, the vertical typesetting of most Japanese texts was altered to accommodate horizontal settings. But as Richard Thornton points out in *Japanese Graphic Design* (Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1991), there was no directional consistency; sometimes the type read from left to right, other times from right to left. Hirano's intersecting directional typography

exploits the complexity of his language in the service of youth culture's visual codes while testing a rather arbitrary linguistic decree. He also customized and distorted Chinese-derived *kanji* characters to create word images, and cut and pasted photographs and drawings onto layouts that looked as if they had been designed only minutes before going to press. The casualness is deceptive, for the posters were painstakingly composed.

Hirano compares his method of "action design" with the clean, staid boardwork—what he calls "desk work"—of Japanese corporate designers. Not all of the posters are slap-and-paste, however. Some of his most exquisite work has combined 19th-century Japanese woodblock influences with typographic twists that bring the retro illustrations up to date. Occasionally, he has added tame typography to a powerful black-and-white photograph to underscore its force.

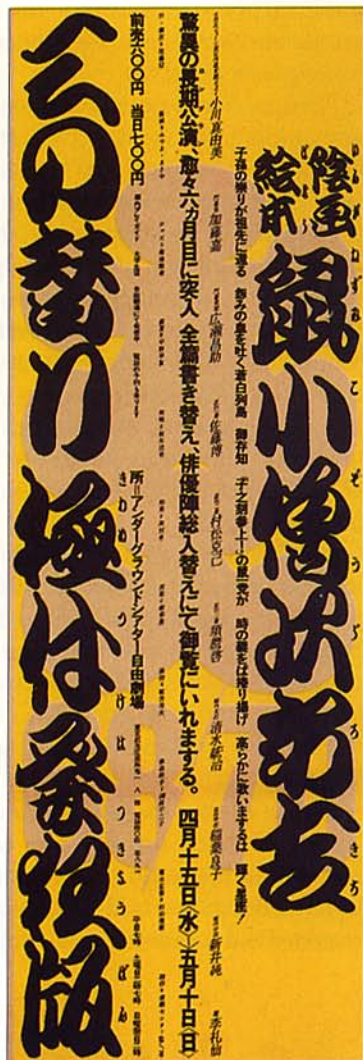
Hirano was fluent in many forms of graphic expression before joining the alternative movement. Like many of Japan's socialist graphic designers from the late 1920s and early '30s, he has been inspired by German Expressionism—especially the work of George Grosz—and the Russian avant-garde—particularly the graphics and poetry of Vladimir Mayakovsky. A Japanese influence was the 1925 group formed by Murayama Tomoyoshi, an illustrator who spent 1922 in Berlin and upon his return to Tokyo promoted Expressionism, Dada, and Constructivism through an arts periodical, MAVO, that gave the group its name. Bauhaus theories brought to Japan from Europe by design pilgrims such as Tomoyoshi and Yanase Masa-mu also had a strong impact on Japanese graphics between the wars. For the mainstream, though, 1920s Western design styles were introduced to Japan through trade magazines. A 26-volume encyclopedia titled *Commercial Art* that was distributed widely to advertising and interior designers showed graphic artists how to apply these styles to everything from trademarks to window displays. The emergence of a nationalist military government in 1936 put a halt to most foreign influences. Decades later, Hirano helped to rekindle the spirit.

According to Kohei Sugiura, a Japanese design scholar, Hirano's book work introduced contemporary European ideas—a strange combination of ad hoc French street graphics and the German grid—to Japanese graphic design. Asked about this contribution, Hirano says, "I've never consciously tried to do my work in a European style. Nevertheless, I think the European taste was

1. "Nezumi Kozo 3," poster for Black Tent Theater, 1971.
2. "Nezumi Kozo 3," poster for Black Tent Theater, 1971. Illustrator: Koga Hirano.
3. "Tsubasa o Moyasu Tenshitachi no Buto" (The Dance of Angels Who Burn Their Own Wings), poster for Black Tent Theater, 1970.
4. "Buranki Goroshi, Shanghai no Haru" (The Killing of Blanqui, Spring in Shanghai), poster for Black Tent Theater, 1979.



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within me before I became a designer." His book jackets for Japanese reprints of European and American titles may borrow an illustration or some other element of the original design, but "turning Western idioms into something Japanese is not part of his approach," wrote James Fraser in a 1993 catalog for an exhibition of Hirano's work at Fairleigh Dickinson University Library. "Yes, there are influences, but more in that subtlety in which a master draws the viewer's eye into the unfamiliar by giving an illusion of the familiar."

Koga Hirano was born in 1938 in Seoul, Korea (renamed Keijo by the Japanese forces that occupied Korea at this time), to Japanese parents. At the conclusion of World War II in 1945, his architect father moved the family to Tokyo. As a teenager, Hirano hoped to be an architect, too, but lacked an aptitude in mathematics. His second choice for a course of study at Musashino Art University was graphic design. One of his earliest student posters, a proposal for an advertisement for a book titled *Jump Before Seeing* by Kenzaburo Oe, was awarded the grand prize by Nissenbi, the association of Japanese advertising designers and artists. In the rigidly hierarchical Japanese business system, this prize was the key to a career. In 1961, Hirano was hired by the advertising division of the prestigious Takashimaya department store to design newspaper ads.

"Designers in those days were considered unimportant," he said in a 1985 interview. Clients were "suspicious of the word 'design.'" After two years of turning out formulaic work, he quit to freelance. In 1964, left-wing political interests led him to help found the June Theater, a company whose roving band of actors performed dramas and dances with antiwar and anticapitalist themes under a black tent. (In 1968, the company changed its name to the Black Tent Theater.) Hirano originally worked as the theater's set designer and designed its posters and brochures from 1968 to 1982.

In 1964, Hirano also earned his first commission designing a book for Shobunsha publishing company. Since then, as the company's principal freelance consultant, he has designed thousands of jackets and covers for individual titles and series. The collected work offers a vivid, evolutionary picture of his career.

Hirano entered the field at a time when Japanese industry had begun to compete seriously in the world market, and when Japanese design emerged, by corollary, as a respected and commercially vital profession.

5. "Sayonara Max" (Farewell, Max), poster for Black Tent Theater, 1979. Illustrator: Koga Hirano.
6. *Masan Jiken* (An Incident at Masan), book jacket for Soshisha, 1983.
7. *Hongo*, book jacket for Kodansha, 1983.
8. *Hasegawa Shiro Zenshu* (Complete Works of Hasegawa Shiro), book jacket for Shobunsha, 1976.
9. *Uekusa Jin'ichi Jiden* (The Memoirs of Jin'ichi Uekusa), book jacket for Shobunsha, 1976. Illustrator: Makoto Wada.
10. *Nippon no Kigekijin* (Comics of Japan), book jacket for Shobunsha, 1977. Illustrator: Koga Hirano.

11. *How to Live with a Calculating Cat* (original title), book jacket for a Japanese edition for Shobunsha, 1976. Illustrator: Eric Gurney.
12. *Ma Vie* (My Life; original title), book jacket for a Japanese edition of Edith Piaf's autobiography for Shobunsha, 1980.
13. *Oyoyoio no Boken* (Adventure at Oyoyo Island), book jacket for Shobunsha, 1972. Illustrator: Yasuhiko Kobayashi.
14. *Tetsugakuteki* (Philosophical), book jacket for PHP Kenkyusho, 1983. Photographer: Nobuhiko Anzai.



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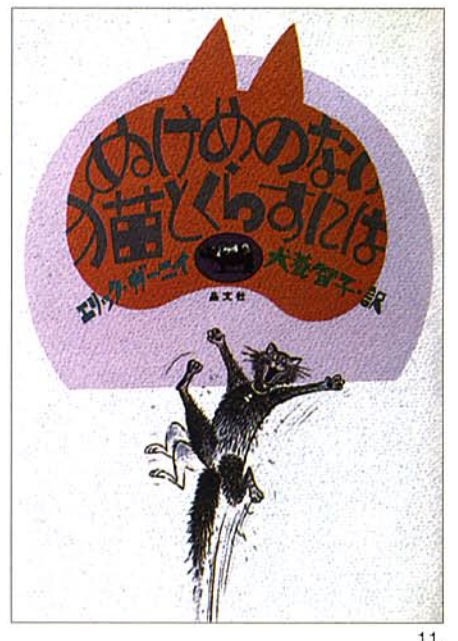
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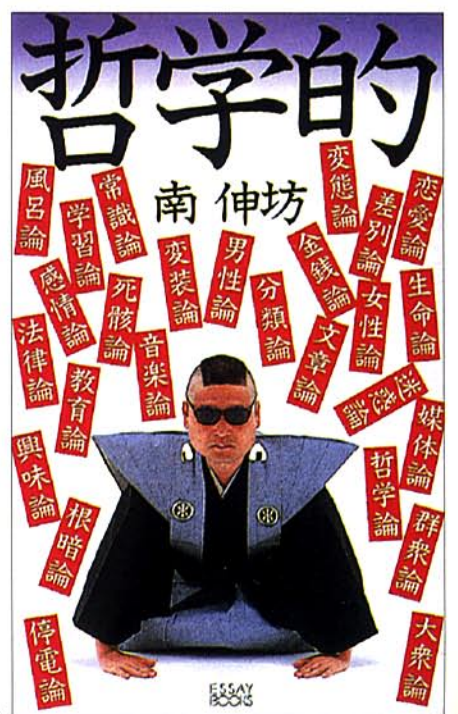
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15. "Abe Sada," poster for Black Tent Theater, 1973. Illustrator: Koga Hirano.

16. *Akuma no Shitamawari* (The Devil's Lackey), book jacket for Shinchosha, 1984. Illustrator: Yosuke Kawamura.

17. *Zoo Vet* (original title), book jacket for Japanese edition for Shueisha, 1979. Illustrator: Takeshi Kojima.

18. *Karajishi Genji Monogatari* (The Tale of Karajishi Genji), book jacket for Shinchosha, 1982. Illustrator: Yosuke Kawamura.

19. *Washi no Uta* (The Eagle's Song), book jacket for Rironsha, 1983. Illustrator: Daihachi Ota.

20. *Shikeidai kara no Seikan* (Back from the Gallows), book jacket for Rippu Shobo, 1983.

21. *Henjin Nijumense* (The Oddball with Twenty Faces), book jacket for Kadokawa Shoten, 1983. Illustrator: Toru Minegishi.

22. *Shinmadikuto J no Tanjo* (The Birth of Cinema Addict J), book jacket for Shobunsha, 1979. Photographer: Jin'ichi Uekusa.

23. *Fanki Jazu no Benkyo* (The Study of Funky Jazz), book jacket for Shobunsha, 1977. Illustrator: Jin Fujjoka.

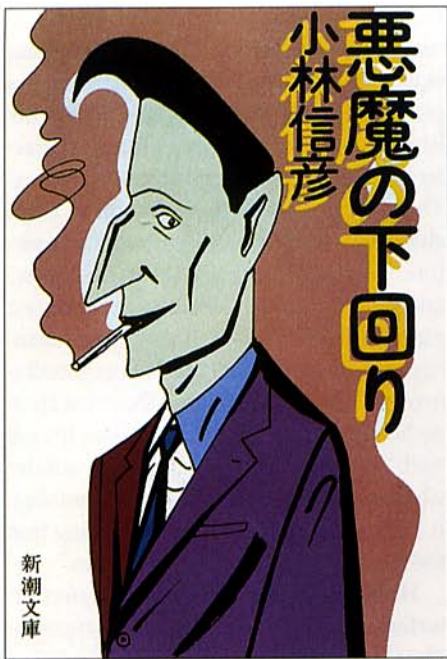
24. *Jazu Fan no Techo* (The Pocketbook of a Jazz Fan), book jacket for Shobunsha, 1979. Photographer: Jin'ichi Uekusa.

Although by the mid-'60s Japanese designers were experiencing a golden age, Hirano was cautious: "Still a newcomer in a designer's world, I told myself not to fall [into the trap] of people's admiration," he says. "I wanted to avoid becoming popular so I could do things my own way and not be in a situation where I was always thinking about meeting expectations." One method of avoiding popularity was to tinker with the Japanese language in ways that other designers had not attempted, by mixing type styles and typefaces as well as using verbal puns as a counterpoint to pictures. Still, he insists that he was no reformer. "I accepted the Japanese typesetting systems as they were," he says. And despite years of experimenting with type and calligraphy, he believes that the goal of design is to permit a book to be read.

Even with his rebellious nature, Hirano prefers the medium of book jackets precisely for its limitations. "I have to be given some restrictions for my work—in colors, size, etc.," he says. "I can come up with more interesting ideas by trying to be as eccentric as possible within the restriction." He points to a particular series of books for Shobunsha as an example: Each of the jackets is printed in bright yellow with a hard-to-read bold, black ideogram on the front. Individually, the designs look abstract, but when more than five different books are displayed together, the characters reveal a message.

Hirano also is attracted to book publishing because he can be inside the editorial process. "An ideal system for book designers is one where they are the exclusive designer for the publishing company. I say this because I myself cannot be merely a designer. I have to be in the working group of people who know the plan." As the member who gives the project a visual identity, Hirano tries not to reflect any "personal matters" in his work. Within the group, which comprises an editor, assistants, marketing people, and others, everyone must have an image of how the book is supposed to look. The editor, however, is in charge of "coordinating" the members so that everyone shares the same ideal. Sometimes, of course, this is impossible. In such cases, Hirano draws his image from the conceptions of different members, and "from there I create my own design." This seemingly contradictory procedure, says Mari Hyodo, a design scholar, stems from the "typical mentality of Japanese groupism where public and private affairs cannot be completely separated."

Hirano is passionate about letterforms. "Designing a character is almost like awak-



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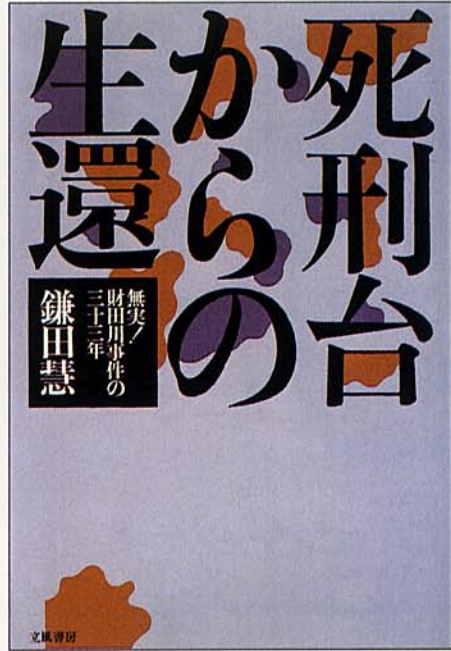
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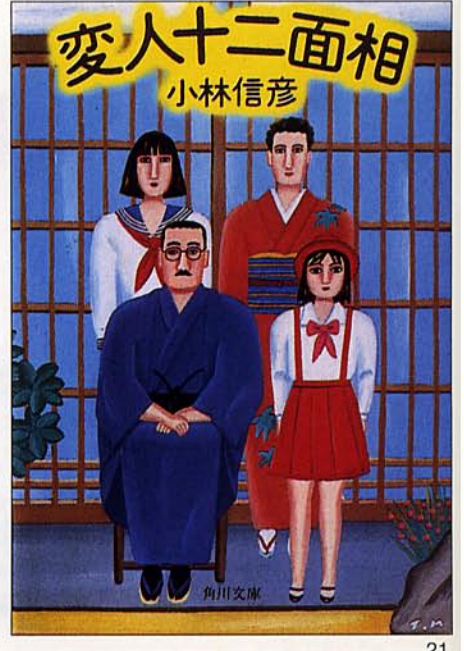
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光州5月

出演—水牛楽団 モンコンウトルク 林光 高橋アキ 水木陽子

林光 光州5月
伊伊島 間奏曲△
その日
渡にわたる豆湯河
鳥ト鳥ト
小とと連池
自由な労働者

モンコンウトルク
高橋アキ「羅針」
ソウルペク道
うはわれし野に華はくさか
他郷ぐらし

女性入権の歌
帰りにたぐ

映画「自由光州—1980年5月」
絵—富山好子
詩—芝充世
音楽—高橋悠治
(幻燈社・火種プロ)

前売1500円 当日1800円

水牛楽団

6:00開場 6:30開演 協賛—韓民統

5月17日(月)中野文化センター

水牛楽団—東京都世田谷区新町2-15-3/8 地方 425-9658

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25. "Koshu Gogatsu" (May in Kwangju), playbill for Suigyū Gakudan Concert, 1982.
26. *It's Only Rock and Roll* (original title), book jacket for Japanese edition for Shobunsha, 1982.
27. *Tsushima-maru*, book jacket for Rironsha, 1982. Illustrator: Shinta Cho.
28. *Mick Jagger: Everybody's Lucifer* (original title), book jacket for Japanese edition for Shobunsha, 1975.
29. *Doshi! Boku ni Tsumetai Biru o Kure* (Comrade! Give Me a Cold Beer), book jacket for Kodansha, 1980. Photographer: Katsuo Nakamura.
30. *Jazu wa Umi o Wataru* (Jazz Crosses the Ocean), book jacket for Shobunsha, 1978. Illustrator: Michihiko Sato.

31. *Chunen Tantei-dan* (Mid-Lifers' Detective Club), book jacket for Bungeisyunjusha, 1981. Illustrator: Koga Hirano.
32. *Kodomo ga Ikiru* (A Child Survives), book jacket for Sekaishisoshā, 1979. Illustrator: Koga Hirano.
33. *Nonsensu Taizen* (Nonsense Encyclopedia), book jacket for Shobunsha, 1977. Illustrator: John Tenniel.
34. *Children of Longing* (original title), book jacket for Japanese edition for Shobunsha, 1985. Photographer: Ruiiko Yoshida.

ening its original soul," he says. He recognizes in *kanji* ideograms a tool without visual equal. "As a rule, each Chinese character is a picture. People from cultures using the Roman alphabet often say a Chinese character is like a well-composed abstract painting. That may be true for them, but for us these characters are given an all too concrete picture. One would be amazed by its descriptive and symbolic impact, but also experience a moment of bliss in which shape and meaning coincide and reveal themselves simultaneously." This precisely describes what Hirano hopes will happen when he does his job well: "One would no longer need to wonder which came first, the shape or the meaning. It becomes a composition demanding that the reader receive it with all five senses."

Hirano is not on a quest for the perfect letterform. He claims not to want his typography to look "too soft or beautiful," but rather to have a quality that will "force people to think and wonder when they look at it." He is therefore fond of *maru-gochi*, round gothic type common on store signs. Describing it as "frightening" because it represents thoughtless, mass-market typography, Hirano claims to use it a lot "solely because I am afraid of the results."

His work for other political and cultural media, such as *Takarajimi* (Treasure Island), an alternative arts magazine he co-founded in 1972, reveals how Hirano reclaimed gothic letterforms called *goshikku* from crass commercial use and even made them hip.

Except for a few curious homages, such as a jacket for *William Morris Kenkyū* (Studies on William Morris, 1991), a monograph about the late-19th-century English design pioneer in which Hirano addresses the Morris esthetic with a uniquely Japanese interpretation, few of his current works have European overtones. Over the past decade, as Japanese graphic design has found its own identity, he has led the way in developing a design language that belongs exclusively to him and Japan. Recently he has begun to focus on typography. His letterforms and compositions push the Japanese character into new areas of expression. Now approaching 60, both Hirano and his work have matured, but he is no less passionate in his commitment to the alternative.

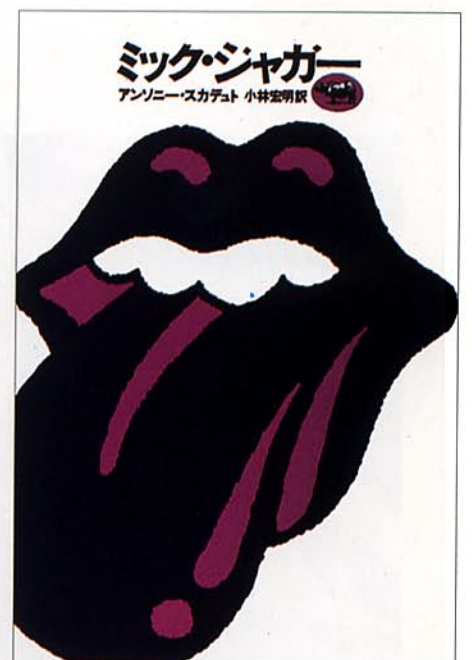
Steven Heller is co-author with Seymour Chwast of Jackets Required: An Illustrated History of American Book Jackets, 1920–1950 (Chronicle Books). He is currently working with James Fraser and Seymour Chwast on Japanese Modern: Graphic Design Between the Wars (Chronicle Books).



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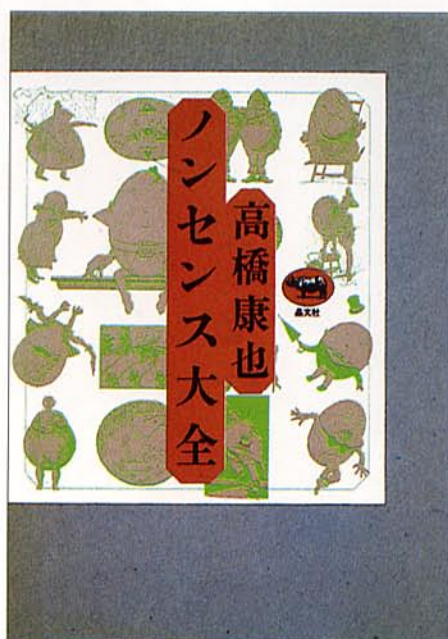
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