

**Commodifying Identity: Takashi Murakami 1989-2008**

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**Abstract**

A look back at what can now be understood as the millennial art world's decadent period reveals an overlap between art and commerce that is unprecedented in its degree and pervasiveness. On the forefront of this exploration is art star Takashi Murakami (b.1963), who has garnered a tremendous amount of fame for both his art and his collaborations with entities such as luxury goods conglomeration Louis Vuitton. Because of this, most of the scholarly criticism about Murakami's work frames it as a harbinger of the collapse of the fine art/commercial product dichotomy. This paper will bypass this issue and argue instead that Murakami's oeuvre, including his painting, sculpture, writings, curatorial endeavors, and mass produced goods, should be read as an appropriation of the systems that drive capitalist consumption. Murakami's work mimics the semiotics of commodities, which are necessarily arbitrary but naturalized through advertising and consumption. The looseness of signification immanent in capitalism allows subjects to piece together an identity of their own choosing, transcending divisions of traditional identity politics, such as gender, race, or nationality.

**Introduction**

Takashi Murakami is without a doubt an art star. He embodies all of the clichés connoted by this hyperbolic term, commanding major museum retrospectives, astronomically high prices, and instant name recognition, aided and abetted by his collaborations with big-name corporations. Despite these accoutrements of success, his voluminous critical reception is surprisingly uneven. Reviewing Murakami's 2007 retrospective at the Brooklyn Museum for the *New Yorker*, Peter Schjeldahl writes, "Murakami used to strike me as the most tin-eyed big name purveyor of bold color since Peter Max," before conceding that the artist's "gaudy chromatic schemes" were most likely intentional. Schjeldahl adds archly that his favorite aspect of the exhibition was the fully functioning Louis Vuitton boutique, for the minimalist respite it provided his weary eyes.<sup>1</sup> Although extreme in its adherence to traditional standards of beauty, Schjeldahl's unwillingness to engage Murakami's production of commercial products as a serious art practice is typical of the academic criticism about him. The few who attempt to deal with this issue end up trapped in the looping contradictions of Murakami's own extensive writing, which frames his work as a profoundly nationalistic gesture while pingponging a reader back and forth between muddled definitions of "East," and "West," and "high" and "low." This paper will examine representative examples from Murakami's oeuvre in an attempt to trace their theoretical commonality. My ultimate goal is to demonstrate that Murakami's deep engagement with the commercial sphere, including his issuing of mass-produced commodities, is an integral part of his art practice as opposed to a nihilistic anti-art gesture. Just as Thomas Crow demonstrated that Warhol's seemingly cliché

aphorisms originated as profound insights into American Cold War culture,<sup>2</sup> I contend that Murakami's cheerful focus on commercialization belies an incisive inquiry into the nature of commodities. Writing about the importance of form to identity, David Joselit notes, "[b]oth the 'modern' and the 'postmodern' art struggle over the same stakes – namely, how to locate subjectivity in the disciplinary world of late capitalism."<sup>3</sup> Within Murakami's calculating artistic practice, late capitalism is itself the tool by which emancipatory subjectivities are formed.

### Marketing Murakami

Admittedly, Murakami does not make interpretation of his work easy. His penchant for intentionally incendiary remarks frequently obscures the complexity of his project. A prime example of this is his 2000 interview with Mako Wasaka of the *Journal of Contemporary Art*. At the beginning of the interview, Murakami responds to a question about his source material by saying: "[i]t is sophistry in order to market my work by doing presentation regarding subculture." When Wasaka asks him if he is allowed to make such a dismissive statement, Murakami explains cheerfully: "[e]veryone works in order to make a living. So do I. I expected that some people would be interested in my art if I offer an expression of Poku [pop + otaku] culture, since it is funny."<sup>4</sup> This is just one of numerous instances in which Murakami has stated that his goal as an artist is commercial success. In this context, Murakami's frank admission that market forces determine the content of his art seems to be the most genuine moment of the *JCA* interview. Unsurprisingly, statements such as these tend to polarize art historians. Some dismiss them as second-rate Warholian posturing, while others find a conceptual pleasure in his utter disregard for the sanctity of the art object.<sup>5</sup> By insisting that Murakami's promotion of art's commodity status is the single defining feature of his work, both approaches mistake the mechanisms that underpin his project for its sole aim. Indeed, Murakami's glib statements belie the complicated examination of the nature of commodities that occurs in his work.

Like many of his statements, "Life as a Creator," Murakami's catalogue essay for the 2001 exhibition *Summon Monsters? Open the Door? Heal? Or Die?* at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Tokyo, is deceptively straightforward.<sup>6</sup> As in the interview with Wasaka, Murakami explicitly states his desire to become a well-known artist, laying out a roadmap to "creating something that is understandable both to the West and Japan." He writes:

- 1) First, gain recognition in (New York). Furthermore, adjust the flavoring to meet the needs of the venue.
- 2) With this recognition as my parachute, I will make my landing back in Japan. Slightly adjust the flavorings until they are Japanese. Or perhaps modify the works to meet Japanese tastes.
- 3) Back overseas, into the fray. This time, I will make a presentation that doesn't shy away from

my true soy sauce nature, but is understandable to my audience.<sup>7</sup>

This calculating proposal is more akin to a business plan than an artist statement. Not only does he clearly state that “recognition” in both the United States and Japan is his primary goal, he also demonstrates a willingness to “modify” his work in order to achieve it. In addition to this essay, Murakami allowed curators to interview every one of his staff members, including his dealer, his studio assistants, his registrar, and even his publicity department for inclusion in the catalogue. The decision to make available even those employees who were not involved in the fabrication of his art indicates the broad scope of his art practice. As art historian Katy Siegel points out in her essay “Into the Air,” Murakami is more like the head of a large animation studio, concerned with delegating responsibility and strategizing marketing demographics, than a traditional fine artist.<sup>8</sup> Her model of the artist-as-filmmaker allows us to understand Murakami’s calculated marketing strategy as an appropriation of these strategies, and thus commensurate with his art practice. Localization is a marketing strategy that was developed to make pop culture products more palatable - less foreign - to other countries (markets) in an era of globalization. Hirofumi Katsuno and Jeffrey Maret’s essay “Localizing the Pokemon TV Series for the American Market,” reveals the mechanisms of this process, analyzing the changes made to a Japanese cartoon series to make it more appealing to American audiences.<sup>9</sup> They detail a number of minute changes, including the transformation of background locations and the swapping of Japanese for English in signs, which allowed the series become a smash hit in the United States. That an entire television show can be stripped of its foreignness with only a few adjustments indicates the arbitrariness of signification within pop culture products.

Murakami’s interest in capitalist systems of signification is apparent in his early experiments with appropriation, which were influenced by the work of the Japanese Neo-Pop group. Featuring artists such as Kenji Yanobe and Yukinori Yanagai, this movement recognized the post-war guilt inscribed in Japan’s pop culture. They appropriated this material as a way of laying bare the pathos of Japan’s defeat in World War II, subtly critiquing what they deemed “Japanese imperialist power” in the process.<sup>10</sup> *Banzai Corner* (1991) by Yukinori Yanagi typifies the Neo Pop ethos. The work is made up of hundreds of identical action figures from the popular Japanese television show *Ultraman*, which Yanagi placed in concentric circles to form the rising red sun of the Japanese flag. The *Ultraman* television series tells the tale of a powerful alien that vows to protect the Earth from attack after accidentally killing a human being.<sup>11</sup> This premise of crime and redemption, an obvious allusion to Japan’s aggression in World War II, is pervasive in Japanese pop culture. The narrative arc underscores Yanagi’s juxtaposition of impotent action figures with the visual symbol of Japanese nationalism, transforming *Banzai Corner* into a hand-wringing gesture of sadness.

Although Murakami utilized Neo Pop aesthetics for his work in the early 90s, he diverged

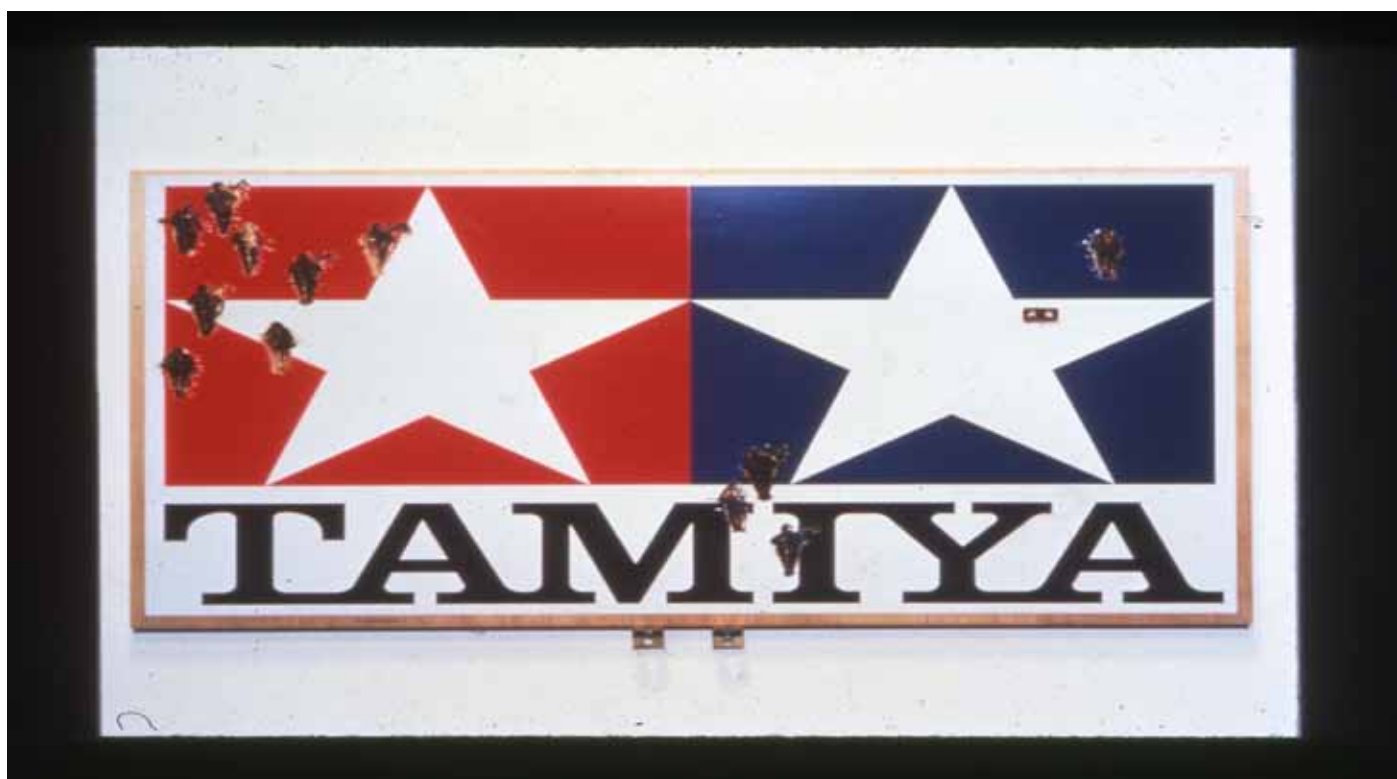


*Randoseru Project*, 1991, Children's backpacks in various animal skins, 300 x 230 x 200 mm, Collection of Gallery Cellar, Nagoya, Japan, Courtesy Shiraishi Contemporary Art, Inc., Tokyo, ©1991 Takashi Murakami/Kaikai Kiki Co., Ltd. All Rights Reserved.

from the movement's appropriation of fictional symbolic narratives, focusing instead on the products themselves. This impulse was evident in his first solo gallery show, *Randoseru Project*. For this exhibition, Murakami installed eight Japanese randoseru, or children's backpacks, in a row on a blank white wall. Despite its status as a quintessential symbol of Japanese childhood, the randoseru was in fact introduced to Japan by the Dutch military at the beginning of the Meiji Period.<sup>12</sup> Murakami fabricated his randoseru out of exotic (and in some cases, endangered) animal hides that were dyed bright colors, underscoring this unnaturally sinister genesis. Despite this minor tweak, the cool, clinical instillation presented them as archaeological artifacts, focusing on the narratives inherent within the objects. Simply by presenting these bags as an object of contemplation, Murakami emphasized the way in which the Japanese have internalized Western imperialism, without moralizing about the issue.

The Tamiya series (1989-1992), began at roughly the same time as *Randoseru Project*, signaled a shift in Murakami's thinking about appropriation. The project took its name from a popular Japanese toy company that produces painstakingly accurate military model kits. The earliest works in the series resembled *Polyrhythm* (1991), a 7 ½ foot resin slab swarming with clusters of tiny Tamiya soldiers. Like *Randoseru Project*, *Polyrhythm's* appropriated materials are a seamless amalgam of Japanese and

Western sources. While Tamiya soldiers themselves might bear a Japanese name, this work exclusively features models of United States Infantry soldiers, pointing to the U.S. military hold on Japanese popular imagination. The yellow rectangular monolith is reminiscent of the work of Minimalist artists such as Robert Morris and Donald Judd, whose simple installations of plywood boxes and galvanized steel columns were assailed as fetishized industrial materials by some critics.<sup>13</sup> Murakami's blatant appropriation of Minimalist aesthetics slyly indicates his awareness of the criticisms that might be leveled at his obsession with the commodity, while at the same time highlighting the complicated global origins of his own art practice.



*Signboard TAMIYA*, 1991, polywood, sticker with brand (branded with red hot iron), 700 x 480 x 15 mm  
Courtesy Shiraishi Contemporary Art, Inc., Tokyo, © 1991 Takashi Murakami/Kaikai Kiki Co., Ltd. All Rights Reserved.

Although ostensibly a continuation of the Tamiya series, *Signboard TAMIYA* moves away from the curatorial appropriation that had up to this point characterized his work. Unlike *Polyrhythm* and *Randoseru Project*, *Signboard TAMIYA* explores the structure of signs that drive consumption. For this work, Murakami affixed a sticker of the Tamiya logo alongside photographs of model soldiers and explosions onto a simple plywood board. His blunt juxtaposition of the Tamiya brand with images of the product it is associated with reveals the constructed relationship between the two. Although brands and products usually come in tandem, the emphasis is typically placed on the product. For example, the package for a Tamiya model tank displays a large picture of the tank and a very small Tamiya logo. *Signboard TAMIYA* reverses this scale, revealing the way the brand dictates the product. The collaged

images of toy soldiers and explosions further underscore this point. Although completely without visual context, their proximity with the Tamiya logo evokes numerous historical and cultural narratives, simply because of Tamiya's association with historical military models. By presenting the Tamiya brand as an object of contemplation, this work invites the demystification of the very idea of brands. The self-perpetuating structure of advertising and consumption naturalizes this arbitrary association between signifier and signified.<sup>14</sup> *Signboard Tamiya* illuminates this manufacturing of meaning by the capitalist system by demonstrating how easy it is to mimic these processes on the level of the image.

Murakami probes the implications of this idea with *Signboard Takashi* (1992), replacing the brand name Tamiya with Murakami's similar first name, Takashi, and juxtaposing it with the slogan, "First in Quality Around the World." Murakami thereby assumes this vague, boastful statement by physically aligning his name with it, mimicking the activity of a brand and exposing the fluidity of its constructed meaning. *Signboard Takashi* also marks one of Murakami's earliest attempts at self-promotion, an impulse that would become more prominent as Murakami began to transform his own persona into a brand. On a very simplistic level, a brand is similar to an art object in its use of a symbol to convey a substructure of messages; it diverges in its ability to naturalize itself through repetition and consumption. By transforming himself into a brand, Murakami is able to appropriate this self-perpetuating system of signification.

Perhaps the most recognizable component of the Murakami brand is DOB, a cartoon creature that has been likened to the love child of Mickey Mouse and Sonic the Hedgehog. This blue, mouse-like creature is Murakami's logo,<sup>15</sup> and the first character in what would eventually become his empire of the cute and cuddly. DOB is also one of the few constants in Murakami's corpus, reoccurring in paintings, sculptures, and various other products from his inception in 1993. Although DOB appears in a variety of forms across many works, his identity is literally enmeshed with his physical being, rendering him instantly recognizable despite his various forms. On one ear is the letter "D" and the on the other is the letter "B," with his round face standing in for the "O" in between. His moniker is an abbreviation of the word *dobozite*, an Anglicization of a Japanese cognate, which is itself deliberate mispronunciation of the Japanese word *doshite*, meaning "why." Even in his linguistic form, DOB is already three degrees removed from the "true" linguistic signifier, which in a Derridian sense is itself a construct.

DOB first appeared in the work *Dobozite Dobozite Oshamanbe* (1993), as a word on a glowing neon sign rather than as a full-fledged character. Katy Siegel has called this piece "a rejection of postmodernist Conceptual Art," noting that it literally asks the question "why" to the text-based practice of artists such as Jenny Holzer and Barbara Kruger. In doing so, Murakami simultaneously parries the influence of contemporary Western art practices while absorbing their lessons. From this work, it is apparent that DOB's conceptual roots cannot be traced back to a particular culture or idea, but instead

lies in the imperfect translation of one to another. Its paradoxical existence in the spaces between reified truths makes it the perfect representative of Murakami's practice.

In fact, DOB the character was created for precisely this purpose. Its Disneyfied form originated as a logo for the 1993 exhibition featuring *Dobozite Dobozie Oshamanbe*. Artist Manabu Koga suggested that he invent a character to promote this event, and Murakami immediately seized upon this idea.<sup>16</sup> In his essay "Life as a Creator," he writes,

What powerful icons of the present day serve as the context for our art? What power do the characters (characters as a creators, and the character of their creations) of Cezanne, Duchamp, Warhol, Picasso, and Taro Okamoto have that sustains their works over decades of art history? This is an inquiry into the "secret of market survival," or the "universality" of characters like Mickey Mouse, Sonic the Hedgehog, Doraemon, Miffy, Hello Kitty, and even the Hong Kong-made rip-offs. The implementation and analysis of this was the first goal of the DOB project, but over the years it has really become more of a self-portrait.<sup>17</sup>

It is apparent from this statement that DOB did not become a stand-in for Murakami's work organically; his button nose and wide eyes were carefully calibrated to assume the mantle of pop culture icon. Murakami conflates the timelessness of canonical Western artists with the popularity of mass culture figures under the term "secret of market survival," provocatively proposing that the underlying appeal of both are derived from the same forces. DOB allows Murakami to test this thesis by striving for success in both realms. It is a metabrand, a brand created to act as a brand, in order to explore the concept of a brand.

Despite these radical roots, DOB's main vehicle of transmission is the highly traditional medium of painting. The appropriately named *DOB Genesis* (1993) was one of the first paintings to feature the DOB character. In this work, a tiny, pink DOB head floats exactly in the center of a square plane of indigo. The surface of this painting is flawless, unmarred by imperfection or brushstroke. While the deep field of monochromatic blue immediately calls to mind Yves Klein's iconic cobalt canvases, *DOB Genesis* most closely recalls Andy Warhol's *Gold Marilyn Monroe* (1962). Both use large, unblemished fields of color to set off an iconic center image, although the gold of Warhol's canvas references the literal icons of Medieval times, lending a quasi-religious feel to his already deified subject. Conversely, Murakami's DOB emerges from a primordial stew of Murakami's own mind, a goop that is revealed by this painting as mechanized planarity. Literally nothing surrounds the DOB in *DOB Genesis*, and his own appearance is similarly pared down. His head is no more than a collection of small circles, much like a cluster of pink cells in a Petri dish. The only perceptible distinguishing feature are the D and the B written clearly on DOB's ears, which announce his identity in writing. This frontal presentation reveals an interesting

perversion. While the D on DOB's right ear and the B on its left allows any (English-speaking) individual to read its name clearly, the positioning of the letters are reversed in real space. In other words, unless someone is looking at DOB, his identity is gibberish. DOB exists expressly to be consumed; he simply does not make sense any other way.



727, 1996, acrylic on canvas mounted on board, 3000 x 4500 x 70 mm, © 1996 Takashi Murakami/Kaikai Kiki Co., Ltd. All Rights Reserved.

Another iconic representation of DOB is the triptych 727. A large and monstrous DOB rides an anime-style white wave across a background of mottled purple, yellow, and white paint, which have been meticulously worked to create a beautiful false patina.<sup>18</sup> Curator Michael Darling notes the similarity between this surface and nihonga painting, which Murakami studied for his Ph.D. Darling points out that this “traditionally Japanese” form is not without a wrinkle, observing, “Nihonga’s bizarre marriage of ancient painting techniques and the latest in Western approaches form an institutionalized national style that is contrived, to say the least.”<sup>19</sup> The ferocious DOB embodies this seamless erasure of national identity. While DOB’s genesis can be traced back to an amalgam of Japanese and Western influences, its monstrous transformation renders the divisions between these two sources imperceptible. The multiple eyes, rows of sharp teeth, and malformed body separates DOB from its previous incarnations

as a cheerful, Mickey Mouse-type character. 727 put Murakami on the map, and was snapped up by a major collector who promised it as a fractional gift to the Museum of Modern Art, New York. So iconic is this image for Murakami that he created an updated version ten years later, called 727-727. Its reiteration transforms 727 into a brand in and of itself, representing both Murakami and the success of his endeavor. Although the soft layers of purple and white have been replaced by a jarringly metallic color scheme reminiscent of Warhol's oxidation paintings, the reissue of this image maintains its deceptively simple obliteration of nationalism.

Ultimately, 727 lays bare the stakes of Murakami's gambit. Any attempt to determine the national origin of 727's disparate components rapidly degenerates into a funhouse of confusion, from the "traditionally Japanese" background rendered in a Western academic painting technique taught by Japanese art schools, to the Japanese cartoon character that has its roots in the work of artists like Jenny Holzer. That the looseness of signification within brands can be applied to inculcated notions such as national identity indicates the ambitious scope of Murakami's endeavor.

### Superflat Multiplicity

Murakami's cultivation of his image extends beyond the confines of his painting and sculpture. He has written numerous essays and curated several major exhibitions to explain the cultural and art historical context of his artistic project, which he calls "Superflat." Although elucidation is the ostensible goal of Murakami's ambitious textual efforts, he evinces an allergy to explicit definition, relying instead on metaphors (such as soy sauce or a computer desktop) and aphorisms to evoke the "feeling" of Superflat. Accordingly, the exact definition of Superflat is exceedingly difficult to pinpoint. Compounding this problem is the fact that Murakami presents Superflat in a multiplicity of forms, including museum exhibitions and numerous catalogue essays.<sup>20</sup> Instead of taking these statements literally, the Superflat project should be understood as a work of art in and of itself, an heir to the curatorial interventions pioneered by Michael Asher, Marcel Broodthaers, and Hans Haacke. That Murakami is trafficking in institutional critique is no secret; he explicitly states his goal of overthrowing the western-centric art world in several essays. Despite these stated intentions, Superflat undergoes a dialectical reversal that broadens the scope of this inquiry, transforming its conservative formal reading and even more conservative conclusions into an incisive inquiry into the interaction between the viewer and the object of apprehension.

The first definition of Superflat appeared in the catalogue for the eponymous 2000 exhibition, which originated at the Parco Department Store Gallery in Shibuya, Tokyo, and traveled to the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, and the Walker Arts Center in Minneapolis. In addition to curating

the exhibition, Murakami wrote two essays, “The Superflat Manifesto,” and “A Theory of Japanese Superflat Art,” for the catalogue. The latter presents a two hundred year aesthetic genealogy of Japan, providing Murakami’s project with a rich historical context. This essay begins with a formal analysis of several Edo Period Japanese works, which are described by Japanese art historian Nobuo Tsuji as carrying on a “lineage of eccentricity.”<sup>21</sup> Murakami notes that these works “share a certain structural methodology, in which they created surface images that erased interstices and thus made the observer aware of the images’ extreme planarity.”<sup>22</sup> This “eccentric” aesthetic combines pictorial imagery with formal flatness, undermining any sense of realism in the scene and instead directing the viewer’s gaze across the canvas in a series of diagonal jumps, rendering the images completely planar. Murakami traces this unique dictation of perception to the films of animators such as Yoshinori Kanada. Kanada produced anime hits such as *Space Cruiser Yamato* (1974), a hallucinatory film that features several shots of wispy smoke curling across the flat expanse of space. Murakami frames this kind of stylized animation as a contemporary counterpoint to Edo, likening the composition of Kanada’s shots to historical Japanese artists.<sup>23</sup> In the context of this transhistorical narrative, formal flatness takes on a distinctly nationalistic connotation, coming to stand for an innate Japanese aesthetic.

Within the textual confines of *Superflat*, this aesthetic also embodies the larger schism between the West and Japan. The second section of “A Theory of Superflat Japanese Art,” discusses the historical impact of the Meiji Restoration of 1868 on Japanese cultural production. Also known as the time of “Enlightenment and Civilization,” this period was precipitated by the arrival of American Commodore Perry, who forced Japan open to pan-Western influence. In the space of a few years, almost every aspect of Japanese society shifted to conform to the newly adopted Western standards. Murakami cites Japanese art historian Noriaki Kitazawa, who points out that the Japanese word for fine art, *bijutsu*, was invented in 1872 to market Japanese products at the annual Vienna Exhibition.<sup>24</sup> In contrast, *geijutsu*, the word that denoted art before the Meiji Restoration, literally translates to “technique of creating beautiful things.” Through this historiography of terms, *bijutsu* is shown to originate in the nineteenth-century European idea of fine art, which privileges the heroic mediums of painting and sculpture over so-called “minor” arts. Murakami’s essay demythologizes the naturalization of *bijutsu*, framing it as a foreign imposition that contradicts the historical Japanese approach to cultural production.

He also links this leveled hierarchy of art production to the visual flatness of pre-Meiji works, anime, and contemporary Japanese art. Formal flatness is intrinsically bound up with the conceptual flatness - that is the lack of distinction between mass and high culture - that characterizes traditional Japanese work. In Murakami’s mind, aesthetically flat Japanese “art” physically embodies the collapse of *bijutsu* and *geijutsu*, rendering it “Superflat.”

Although Murakami’s alternative narrative of Japanese art history is undoubtedly compelling,

it is premised upon an essentialized notion of Japanese identity. This tendency is more pronounced in his catalogue entries for individual artists, which present their work as a manifestation of an innate artistic sense. Murakami's discussion of Chiho Aoshima in the *Superflat* catalogue marvels at her ability to produce art using only her "own, untrained sensibility."<sup>25</sup> Underscoring this point, he writes, "Using a Macintosh and a huge printer as weapons, she produces "pictures" through her completely personal art consciousness." Like all theories of essentialized existence, *Superflat* becomes exponentially more complicated when considered in its historical and cultural context, and particularly its indebtedness to a host of Western sources. For example, although Murakami positions manga and anime as a contemporary manifestation of the *Superflat* sensibility, their emergence can be attributed to the American reconstruction of postwar Japan. In her book *Adult Manga: Culture and Power in Contemporary Japan*, sociologist Sharon Kinsella traces the increased popularity of manga to postwar socioeconomic conditions, noting that the depressed Japanese economy created "a destitute audience for cheap instant entertainment."<sup>26</sup> She also details the sudden influx of Western animation into Japan following World War II, and its tremendous aesthetic influence on manga. Kinsella's historical analysis muddles Murakami's thesis, laying bare his omission of American influence in the aesthetic and cultural development of anime and manga.

Compounding this problem is the glaring lack of reference to *Superflat*'s obvious Western art historical predecessors. Murakami's extensive knowledge of Western art history, obtained during his art school education as well as his time in New York City as a fellow at P.S.1, makes it impossible to believe that these parallels are mere coincidences.<sup>27</sup> Most obvious is *Superflat*'s debt to Pop Art, and particularly Andy Warhol, whose masterful showmanship and business acumen is one of the most important influences on Murakami's practice. *Superflat*'s conceptual proximity to this movement reveals that the proclivity to collapse high art and popular culture extends beyond Japan's borders.

The lionization of flatness also invokes one of the dominant critical traditions of post-war American art: Clement Greenberg's version of Modernism. In his canonical essay "Modernist Painting," Greenberg praises abstraction and its aesthetic hallmark, flatness, as the most important development in Western art in the modern era. He bases this assertion on the Kantian idea that Modernism should be an exercise in self-criticality.<sup>28</sup> Greenberg and Murakami's shared preoccupation with formal flatness is the only theoretical commonality between them; they diverge completely when considering its significance. While the former sees it as indicative of a progressive avant-garde, the latter interprets it as a manifestation of a cultural tradition. Yet, given Greenberg's cultivation of a specifically American theory and artistic school,<sup>29</sup> Murakami's use of formal flatness to define a national aesthetic is telling, revealing the ambitious scope of his project. Indeed, he calls *Superflat* "one form of 'Japanese' 'avant-garde' 'art,' [it] is an '-ism' – like Cubism, Surrealism, Minimalism, and Simulationism before it – only this is one we have created."<sup>30</sup> At the same time, this gesture is extravagantly ironic in its premising of

a Japanese artistic identity on Western art history.

Murakami is acutely aware of the self-destruction built into Superflat's armature, and occasionally allows sly moments of self-awareness to slip into his text. One such aporia occurs in "A Superflat Manifesto," his other essay in the 2000 catalogue. A pithy statement comprised almost entirely of aphorisms, "A Superflat Manifesto" defines Superflat as "an original concept of Japanese who have been completely Westernized,"<sup>31</sup> while at the same time wondering how it might have been transformed by Westernization. He thus defines Superflat as both predating and utterly dependant on Western culture, illuminating the importance of context to the fraught topic of identity formation. Murakami presents an argument for essentialism using loaded terms that practically beg the reader to demythologize them; indeed, this seems to be the point of the entire endeavor. In this way, Superflat ironically reveals that nothing is reducible to its surface. Concepts, words, and theories are richly textured with a context that is imparted upon it by the viewer, or in this case, the reader.

Four years after the smashing success of *Superflat*, New York City's Japan Society invited Murakami to curate another exhibition to elaborate on his thesis. Like *Superflat*, this second exhibition, *Little Boy: The Arts of Japan's Exploding Subculture*, was ostensibly an exploration of Japanese nationalism and its status after World War II. As we have already seen, Murakami uses this topic as a platform to discuss the broader issue of identity formation, and *Little Boy* is no exception. In this exhibition, however, he shifts the focus of inquiry from the viewer to the object of apprehension, specifically exploring the role it plays in the formation of subjectivity.

In "Earth in My Window," the lead essay for this exhibition, Murakami laments the state of contemporary Japanese culture, contending that it remains shell-shocked in the face of the tragedies of World War II. The title phrase "Little Boy" refers both to the nickname of the bomb dropped over Hiroshima, and to General MacArthur's infantilizing statement calling post-war Japan "a little boy of twelve,"<sup>32</sup> in its complete acquiescence to American reconstruction efforts. Murakami thereby defines the contemporary Japanese condition as kind of complicit victimhood, perpetrated by its guilt and perpetuated by its passivity in dealing with guilt.<sup>33</sup>

To him, Japanese popular culture is a physical manifestation of this pathetic condition. *Little Boy* presents icons such as Godzilla, which originated from nuclear tests conducted in the Pacific, and Hello Kitty, an infantile, purely passive best friend,<sup>34</sup> as evidence of Japan's postwar impotence. As in the *Superflat* exhibition, Murakami uses aesthetics to prove his point, packing the galleries with artifacts such as anime films, television shows, and children's books, which display themes or imagery relating to World War II. Unlike *Superflat*, however, *Little Boy* is not an exhibition of Japanese art, but a presentation of objects evidencing Japan's contemporary malaise. Everything in the show, including

the work of artists, is emphatically an object physically encoded with proof of Murakami's thesis.

This focus on physical objects is also evident in discussions of the otaku subculture that appear throughout the *Little Boy* exhibition and catalogue. They are the subculture of *Little Boy's* subtitle, and the driving force of the exhibition. Otaku, which translates literally to "your household," is a term applied to young men obsessed with anime and manga. While there are many theories as to how the otaku emerged, a commonly held one blames the confluence of several factors, including the destruction of traditional Japanese familial structures, the increasing urbanization of the Japanese population, and the widening availability of mass media products - all of which stem from postwar reconstruction.<sup>35</sup> Their closest Western equivalent might be science fiction-obsessed geeks, such as the self-proclaimed "Trekkies," although the otaku is an entirely different breed. Many of them literally shut themselves in their rooms in order to conduct all relationships within the fictional universes of pop culture products. Most disturbingly, some otaku truly believe that the anime and manga they worship represent reality. Instead of embodying the otaku's suffering, anime and manga enable it by allowing them to create an identity comprised entirely of commodities. As if to emphasize this point, *Little Boy* focuses on bishoujo otaku, who literally fall in love with the heroines of these fictitious worlds, using dolls or figurines as material stand-ins for these animated characters.<sup>36</sup> They are so deluded that many of them buy dolls of their beloved and, as journalist Arthur Lubow puts it, "relate to [their] collection, with caresses and ministrations, as to a girlfriend."<sup>37</sup> The extreme example of bishoujo otaku highlights the performativity of the otaku identity, explicitly revealing they way the otaku use objects to define themselves as otaku.

The idea that objects can be used to constitute subjectivity unites Murakami's curatorial endeavors into one coherent theoretical statement. *Superflat* and *Little Boy* privilege the subject as the active creator of its own identity, although the former focuses on its experiences and the latter on its actions. The receptacle - in this case the physical object - is the conduit for this activity, embodying and facilitating this creative force. Moreover, Murakami's aforementioned interest in the resignification of commodities is the very process by which this occurs. The formation of subcultural identity is the subject of Dick Hebdige's 1979 book, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*.<sup>38</sup> This Marxist-inflected semiotic analysis examines a plethora of British youth subcultures, asserting that because nothing is outside of ideology, "there is an ideological dimension to every signification."<sup>39</sup> For instance, Hebdige claims that a punk's use of a safety pin as jewelry undermines the safety pin's connotations of domesticity and responsibility. Furthermore, he contends that merely combating this traditional mode of signification constitutes a definitive challenge to hegemony. This theory seems naively idealistic today, in part because it frames subculture as an inherently class-based structure.<sup>40</sup> Yet, the provocative idea that identity might be constructed out of material bits of everyday life warrants a closer examination.

Hebdige grounds his scant discussion of the process of identity formation in the theory of bricolage, coined by Claude Levi-Strauss to describe how “primitive” people order their universe using only the objects that surround them. Levi-Strauss uses the bricoleur and the engineer as archetypal models, writing: “[i]t might be said that the engineer questions the universe, while the ‘bricoleur addresses himself to a collection of oddments left over from human endeavors.”<sup>41</sup> Yet, while bricoleurs might stay within their familiar, concrete environment, they create extraordinarily unique associations between the world of objects and the world of ideas. The bricoleur may construct “personality and life” in any way he sees fit, using the immediate logic of his surrounding world to do so. Otaku’s use of material goods as a means to create a new identity for its practitioners is certainly a form of bricolage. By adopting “instrumental objects” to create a sense of themselves, otaku actively transforms itself from a subculture to an identity. Using this as a model, *Superflat* expands upon Murakami’s semiotic experiments with commodities by presenting these objects as the basis of a purely performative identity.

### Expanded Practices

Levi-Strauss’s theory casts Murakami’s commercial production, defined for the purposes of this paper as anything meant for mass consumption, as a continuation of this meditation on the relationship between objects and subjectivity. Like his engagement with branding, Murakami’s experiments with commercial products stretch back to the beginning of his career. Curator Paul Schimmel explains that Murakami first caught the attention of French gallerist Emmanuel Perrotin’s with a t-shirt featuring the anime-inspired character Hiropon. Perrotin was immediately taken with this product and exhibited the shirts in his Paris gallery, which eventually led to Murakami’s first solo New York show and effectively launched his career.

Although Murakami issued sundry items from the mid 1990s, his next major commercial endeavor was in 1999, when he produced a group of souvenirs for his exhibition *DOB in the Strange Forest*, at Japan’s PARCO Gallery.<sup>42</sup> Murakami’s studio, christened Hiropon Factory in a nod to those first t-shirts and to Andy Warhol, designed and produced most of these products in-house, outsourcing the more difficult items to the fabrication company CUBE.<sup>43</sup> The *Hiropon Chronicle*, a month-by-month history of the Hiropon Factory, indicates that it was at this exact moment that Murakami started to garner some financial success. The chronicle notes that the month *DOB in the Strange Forest* opened at Parco, Hiropon started paying its volunteer staff.<sup>44</sup> After this crucial point, Hiropon Factory started to move away from its scrappy artist studio roots and began to function like a business, a shift encapsulated by its new moniker, Kaikai Kiki Ltd.<sup>45</sup> In 2002, Murakami rocketed to prominence with the help of Marc Jacobs, the creative director of esteemed French fashion house Louis Vuitton. Jacobs commissioned

Murakami to design a limited edition series of handbags, which combined the artist's sense of color and character with Vuitton's iconic LV monogram. The final product was a white handbag, interspersed with rainbow-coloured LV monograms and Murakami's jellyfish eye motif. Although Murakami has recently distanced himself from Louis Vuitton, giving all the credit to Jacobs for instigating the collaboration, the formal aspects of these handbags draw on his previous experiments with capitalist semiotics. The design synthesizes two seemingly oppositional brands: Murakami's youthful, pop-inflected verve, and Vuitton's stately wealth and luxury. As Jacobs put it: "we approached the idea of the 'icons' of Takashi and the 'icons' of Louis Vuitton, being the monogram, and we worked on creating a brand new canvas that had the spirit and presence of Takashi and the history of Louis Vuitton."<sup>46</sup> This repetitive motif infuses both brands with the qualities of the other, resulting in a product that is simultaneously youthful, vibrant, and luxurious. The Eye Love bags were a smash hit, selling out across the country and earning Louis Vuitton over three hundred million dollars.<sup>47</sup> So integral are these products to Murakami's image that his 2007 retrospective at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles and the Brooklyn Museum included a functioning Louis Vuitton store in the exhibition.

Murakami's most recent endeavors continue this incursion into the commercial sphere, dovetailing with his rise as a superstar artist. He was invited twice more to collaborate with Louis Vuitton, and was courted by commercial entities such as the Roppingi Hills Mall in 2003, and bestselling rapper Kanye West in 2007. Murakami created an advertising campaign for the former and art directed the latter's Grammy winning album *Graduation*, designing LP covers and even animating a music video for its first single, which was also screened at the 2007 retrospective. He also started his own line of jewelry and furniture, which debuted at the 2008 Design Miami Fair. In addition, Murakami recently tackled the final frontier of pop culture - Hollywood. In 2007, he completed a twenty minute animated film *Planting the Seeds*, and is currently planning to launch an animation studio in Los Angeles.

Murakami's commercial activity in the past few years is breathtaking in its sheer velocity and scope. It begs comparison with the career of just one other artist - Andy Warhol. Many scholars have detailed the numerous aesthetic and philosophical similarities between the two artists, most comprehensively Scott Rothkopf in his essay "Company Man." Taking stock of Murakami's universe of goods, Rothkopf is alternately awed and depressed by its implications. He ties Murakami's commercializing impulse to an extension of modernity's "ambition to be in the real world,"<sup>48</sup> invoking examples such as the Constructivists and Maurizio Cattelan's Wrong Gallery (1995-2000) to demonstrate this desire. To Rothkopf, Murakami's commercial ventures are a vulgarization of this utopian dream, noting that this practice "may deal the true death-blow to art's still-resilient aura."<sup>49</sup> Although he acknowledges that Murakami's commercial ventures might be "his greatest conceptual gambit,"<sup>50</sup> Rothkopf's reaction to this "loss of aura" seems overly histrionic. He ends his essay with the admonishment that Murakami's

proposition could “lead to art’s vanishing.”<sup>51</sup>

Like other critics, Rothkopf’s focus on Murakami’s collapse of high art and mass culture blinds him to the mechanisms that drive this action. In particular, the persistent need to present Murakami as Warhol’s logical heir obscures the vast differences between the two artists. Benjamin Buchloh’s essay “Andy Warhol’s One-Dimensional Art: 1956-1966,” investigates Warhol’s relationship with high and mass culture. He premises his essay on the idea that Warhol “literally “embodied” the paradox of Modernist art: to be suspended between high art’s haughty isolation...and the pervasive debris of corporate domination.”<sup>52</sup> Ultimately, Buchloh concludes that Warhol is a theorist of high and low, demonstrating mass culture’s domination of high culture and presenting this as modernism’s failure.

In contrast to this subtle theoretical posturing, Murakami’s commercial production comes across like a shovel to the face. In his 2009 essay “Drawing Blanks: Notes on Andy Warhol’s Late Works,” Buchloh dismisses him as a proponent of the “encroaching forms of proto-totalitarian consumption,” that afflict the contemporary condition. To him, Murakami’s work takes Warhol’s proposition to its logical extreme, celebrating the demise of the “differentiation between the production and perception of an artistic object and an object of industrial consumption.”<sup>53</sup> Although an elision between the two is certainly present in Murakami’s work, it is a symptom rather than a motivation. Buchloh incorrectly assumes that Murakami’s project is a continuation of Warhol’s theorization of the high/low dichotomy. As we have seen with his appropriation of capitalist semiotics, Murakami’s primary concern is how he can use instruments of hegemony as a medium for his art. His production of commercial goods is a continuation of this impulse; the breakdown of hierarchies of taste is merely its byproduct.

In this way, his work is more akin to Joseph Beuys’s radical real-life interventions than Warhol’s cagey theoretical maneuvering. Beuys is as well known for his detritus-filled installations as he is for his polemic political opinions. Like both Warhol and Murakami, Beuys’s artistic practice encompasses a huge variety of activities, including lectures, performances, teaching, and installation. According to critic Michael Breson: “[i]n his concept of ‘social sculpture,’ everything was art, and every aspect of life could be approached creatively, with a sense of inventiveness and ritual.”<sup>54</sup> The aptness of this statement in relation to Murakami’s work is no coincidence; in fact, Murakami was deeply influenced by Beuys. Paul Schimmel notes that Murakami saw Beuys speak in 1984, when he came to the Tokyo University of Arts and Music to give a lecture. Murakami was alternately disgusted and impressed by Beuys, who dismissed questions about his signature fisherman’s vest and his use of a blackboard by saying: “[t]his question has no meaning. I would like a more meaningful question.” At the same time, Murakami was disappointed in both his classmates and his professor, who tried to remove Beuys’s blackboard after the lecture.<sup>55</sup> Schimmel claims that this was the moment Murakami “realized he needed to be more knowledgeable about contemporary art, while simultaneously recognizing art-

world elitism..."<sup>56</sup> Judging from the deep parallels between the two artists, Murakami took much more than just this lesson from Beuys, and modeled his entire system of cultivating influence on his practice. Beuys did not concern himself with implications of his activities for the art object, simply using the systems available to him as his medium.

Beuys used mass produced goods in a similar fashion. When asked about his "multiples" in 1970, he pointed to his series of tonic-water bottles, *Evervess II* (1968) as an example of a consumable good's political utility. "Just by being an article of commerce," he noted, "this bottle can communicate much through repetition...But actually it's more important to speak of distribution, of reaching a larger number of people."<sup>57</sup> As Katy Siegel notes, this need to influence as many people as possible also underpins Murakami's own production.<sup>58</sup> Siegel's deceptively simple point illuminates perhaps the most crucial difference between Murakami and Warhol. Although Warhol's work certainly comments on contemporary consumption, it does not need to be initiated with the active participation of the viewer. Beuys and Murakami's work is driven by consumption: how many people will buy it, see it, or be influenced by it, and what kind of message it will impart. The difference between these two artists lies in the exact message they are trying to convey. Beuys's foray into commodity production, with its insistence on individual participation to "complete" a work of art, was informed by his Marxist politics.<sup>59</sup> Murakami's position is much subtler, and driven by his exploration into subculture.

While Murakami was deeply influenced by the otaku's relationship with commodities, he turned to another subculture when it came time to produce his own products. Kawaii, literally "cute" in Japanese, is both an aesthetic and a subculture built around that aesthetic. The adorable, innocuous creatures that populate Murakami's plush dolls, keychains, t-shirts, as well as his collaborations with Louis Vuitton and Kanye West, all derive from this "culture of cuteness." Murakami made this shift deliberately in 1999, when he came to New York to install his first major American museum exhibition, *The Meaning of the Nonsense of Meaning* at the Center for Curatorial Studies at Bard College. In her catalogue essay, curator Dana Friis-Hansen recalls an encounter with Murakami just a few days before the opening of the exhibition. Instead of focusing on the task at hand, he was firmly fixated on his future work, commenting: "[n]ow my concept is more pure: I make what I like to make. Right now the young female audience is the hardest to attract, and the challenge of my new work is to get popular with that group."<sup>60</sup> Although Murakami's words must always be considered critically, this statement still constitutes a considerable change in focus. Whereas he was previously concerned with the hermetic, predominantly male world of the otaku, he now focused on a much less exclusive audience. As a result, his work moved away from the suffering that pervaded his early DOB works, and became more adorable, and optimistic - in other words, more kawaii.

At this time, cute characters such as Kaikai and Kiki replaced the angst-ridden DOB as the main

subject of Murakami's work. Made up of the virtuous Kaikai and the mischievous Kiki, these characters lack DOB's pathos. Although Kiki is slightly malformed, sporting three green eyes instead of two, this deformity renders him goofy instead of grotesque. Other adorable characters introduced around this time include Cosmos, a gaggle of colorful smiling flowers, Mr. Pointy, whose head shape provides his name, and Panda, a cheerfully grinning bear. Their easy smiles, bright eyes, and hot pink accents form the backbone of Murakami's commercial empire, their likeness emblazoned on sofas, rugs, stuffed animals, jewelry, bags, and numerous other products.

Like most of Murakami's inventions, the innocuous appearance of these characters conceals tremendous complexity. As theorist Sianne Ngai has pointed out in her study "The Cuteness of the Avant-Garde," the kawaii aesthetic is loaded with sinister connotations. She writes: "[i]t is crucial to cuteness that its diminutive object has some sort of imposed-upon aspect or mien – that is, it bears the look of an object not only formed but all too easily de-formed under the pressure of the subject's feeling or attitude towards it."<sup>62</sup> Ngai further proposes that this formal indication of object-status is particularly salient in post-War Japan, noting that the kawaii goes as far as to (her emphasis) "foreground the violence in its production."<sup>63</sup> Kawaii subculture transforms this aesthetic into an identity for its adherents. This process is driven by a huge variety of products - everything from cell phone charms to entire airlines<sup>64</sup> - that bear the images of cute characters, and are therefore kawaii. According to Japanese cultural historian Eiji Otsuka, the emergence of the kawaii subculture: "[p]aralleled the rise of a mass consumer society: character goods' like Hello Kitty, domestic designers' brands, and Japanese Barbie dolls called Licca."<sup>65</sup> Like the otaku, the kawaii relate to these characters as if they were real, substituting the gentle, non-threatening creatures that populate the kawaii universe for real friends. Yet, they go a step further by actually adopting kawaii aesthetic as their identity. Girls not only stuff their bedrooms with kawaii objects, but embody the idea of kawaii with their personalities and dress. Coquettish, passive, and shy, practitioners of kawaii consider their "self-image as the "cute, innocent I."<sup>66</sup> Unsurprisingly, many Japanese cultural historians view the kawaii subculture as a pathetic manifestation of postwar Japan's infantilization. Although this analysis may be true, the process by which the kawaii subculture transforms an aesthetic into an identity has tremendous potential for upending inculcated notions of essentialism.<sup>67</sup> This type of subversive act was described in Judith Butler's seminal text *Gender Trouble*.<sup>68</sup> In it, she reverses the inculcated idea that identity derives from an ontological center, radiating from the interior to the exterior, instead defining gender as "performative".

In understanding identity as enacted and created on the surface of the body, Butler also sees the body as the site of potential subversion. Butler proposes drag, a starkly artificial performance of gender identity, can undermine the entire notion of identity, writing, "In imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself – as well as its contingency."<sup>69</sup> Butler nuances this stance slightly in her essay "Gender is Burning: Questions of Appropriation and Subversion," an examination

of the drag film *Paris is Burning*. She cautions that her previous exuberance does not mean that drag is a purely emancipatory activity, but is instead necessarily “ambivalent,” reflecting its status within the dominant regime of power. She ultimately concludes: “[d]rag is subversive to the extent that it reflects the imitative structure by which hegemonic gender is itself produced and disputes heterosexuality’s claim on naturalness and originality.”<sup>70</sup>

In appropriating *kawaii* aesthetics, Murakami’s commercial products embody Butler’s theory. They are the tools with which to collage together a new identity that utilizes the freedom of signification immanent in capitalist semiotics to overcome essentialism. In this sense, his seemingly banal keychains, plush dolls, stickers, and postcards are the culmination of his practice, combining his exploration of capitalist signs with his interest in identity politics. He is a theorist of consumption, and ultimately turns to the objects he knows best as a medium for his work. Like Beuys, his main concern is disseminating his message to the masses, offering them an alternative to the nationalism that initiated Japan’s downward spiral. Despite the optimistic implications of his project, however, Murakami’s project is still firmly situated within the hegemonic regime of power, using monetary capital as its democratizing equalizer. Ngai’s analysis only adds to the bleakness of Murakami’s option, demonstrating the traumatic undertones of this gesture. Ultimately, Murakami’s project is profoundly ambivalent, offering us a glimpse of future that may trigger an intense longing for the past.

## Conclusion

One of the more astute analyses of Takashi Murakami’s project comes from his frequent collaborator, fashion designer Marc Jacobs. Speaking about Murakami’s handbag collection for Louis Vuitton, Jacobs notes: “[w]hat it showed the art world and the fashion world was how we together create the landscape of the actual world we live in.”<sup>71</sup> While it is tempting to dismiss Jacobs’s statement as mere fashionista hyperbole, this description eloquently distills the driving force behind Murakami’s corpus. His expansive body of work proposes the commodity as the basis of subjectivity, and as a burgeoning alternative to essentialism. It remains to be seen what will become of Murakami’s thesis after the collapse of what can now be understood as the art world’s decadent period. Events such as Zaha Hadid’s collaboration with Karl Lagerfeld on Chanel’s Mobile Art Pavilion, Damien Hirst’s public auction of his work, and John Baldessari’s contention that, “I’m interested in the gradual fusion of high and low culture, and fashion and art,”<sup>72</sup> added gravity to Murakami’s focus on commodities. In the aftermath of the catastrophic financial events of fall 2008, the Mobile Art Pavilion was cancelled for its remaining two venues and Damien Hirst’s auction was immediately castigated as a bacchanalia of greed.<sup>73</sup> Although Murakami was closely associated with the pre-collapse period, his work appropriated and analyzed the mechanisms that drove this unsustainable extravagance. Now that the guilt has been

stripped off the art world's façade, perhaps the depth of Murakami's project will finally be appreciated.

## Notes

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1 Schjeldahl, Peter. "Buying It." *The New Yorker*, April 14, 2008. Available at [http://www.newyorker.com/arts/critics/artworld/2008/04/14/080414craw\\_artworld\\_schjeldahl](http://www.newyorker.com/arts/critics/artworld/2008/04/14/080414craw_artworld_schjeldahl)

2 Crow examines two of Warhol's most famous statements, "I want everybody to think alike," and "I think everyone should be a machine," in their original context within a 1963 interview with G.R. Swenson. From this, he concludes that they concerned "meanings normally given to the difference between the abundant material satisfactions of the capitalist West and the relative deprivation and limited personal choices of the Communist East. Thomas Crow. "Saturday Disasters: Trace and Reference in Early Warhol." Reprinted in *Modern Art in the Common Culture*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1996, p. 50.

3 Joselit, David. "Notes on the Surface: Toward a Genealogy of Flatness." Originally printed in *Art History* 23, 1 (March 2000). Reprinted in *Theory in Contemporary Art since 1985*. Zoya Kocur and Simon Leung, ed. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2005, p. 306.

4 Wakasa, Mako (interviewer). "Takashi Murakami, Murakami Studio, Brooklyn, New York, February 2000." *Journal of Contemporary Art*, 2001. Interview available at <http://www.jca-online.com/murakami.html>

5 For an example of the former, see Benjamin H.D. Buchloh. "Drawing Blanks: Notes on Andy Warhol's Late Works," *October* 127, Winter 2009, pp. 3-24. For an example of the latter, see Scott Rothkopf. "Takashi Murakami: Company Man." Murakami, Paul Schimmel, ed. Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, 2007, pp. 128-159. Both essays will be discussed later in this paper.

6 Although I do contend that much of Murakami's written work should be understood as an art project, this essay falls out of the scope of that group because Murakami did not curate this exhibition.

7 Murakami, Takashi. "Life as a Creator summon monsters ? open the door ? heal? or die? Murakami, Takashi, ed. Exh. cat. Tokyo: Hiropon Factory, 2001, 130.

8 Siegel, Katy. "In The Air." *Little Boy: The Arts of Japan's Exploding Subculture*. Murakami, Takashi, ed. Exh. cat. New York: Japan Society, 2005, p. 276.

9 Hirofumi, Katsuno and Jeffrey Maret, "Localizing the Pokemon TV series for the American Market" in , *Pikachu's Global Adventure: The Rise and Fall of Pokemon* , Durham: Duke University Press, 2004: p. 82.

10 Siegel, 271.

11 "Ultraman/Ultraseven." *Little Boy: The Arts of Japan's Exploding Subculture*. Exh. cat. New York: Japan Society, 2005, p. 25.

12 "Takashi Murakami." *Little Boy: The Arts of Japan's Exploding Subculture*. Murakami, Takashi, ed. Exh. cat. New York: Japan Society, 2005 p. 14.

13 Halley, Peter. "The Crisis in Geometry." *Arts Magazine*, New York: May 1981. Transcript available at: <http://>

[www.peterhalley.com/ARTISTS/PETER.HALLEY/WRITINGS.htm](http://www.peterhalley.com/ARTISTS/PETER.HALLEY/WRITINGS.htm)

14 This is not to say that the arbitrariness of the sign is unique to capitalist signification. This was of course first proposed by Fernande de Saussure in his *Course in General Linguistics*. I am merely offering capitalism as a site where these associations are codified in a systematic way, allowing an artist like Murakami to break into these processes.

15 Steinberg, Marc. "Characterizing a New Seriality: Murakami Takashi's DOB Project." *Parachute*, No. 110, April/June 2003: p. 90-109.

16 Murakami, Takashi. "Life as a Creator summon monsters ? open the door ? heal? or die? Murakami, Takashi, ed. *Exh. cat.* Tokyo: Hiropon Factory, 2001,132.

17 Ibid.

18 Ibid.

19 Darling, Michael. "Plumbing the Depths of Superflatness." *Art Journal*, v. 66 no. 3, 2001: p. 76-89.

20 Murakami, Takashi, "Earth in My Window." *Little Boy: The Arts of Japan's Exploding Subculture*. Takashi Murakami, ed. *Exh. cat.* New York: Japan Society, 2005, p. 153.

21 Murakami, Takashi. "A Theory of Japanese Superflat Art." *Superflat*. Murakami, Takashi, ed. *Exh. cat.* Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 2000, 9.

22 Ibid.

23 Ibid.

24 Many of Kitazawa's essays have not been translated into English. According to a brief synopsis in John Clark's *Modern Asian Art*, "The term was first used by Fenollosa in his 1882 speech and was in use in art circles by the end of the 1880s. But it did not become institutionalized as an official exhibition category until 1907 and was only defined in ordinary dictionaries in 1927." John Clark, *Modern Asian Art*. Hawaii: University of Hawaii Press, 1998, footnote 19, p. 89. Clark was quoting from Noriaki Kitazawa. "'Nihonga' Gainen no Keisei ni Kansuru Shiron," in Aoki Shigeru (ed.) *Meiji Nihonga Shiryo*, Tokyo, Chuo Koren Bijutsu Shuppansha, 1991.

25 Murakami, Takashi. "Chiho Aoshima." *Superflat*. Murakami, Takashi, ed. *Exh. cat.* Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 2000, p. 117.

26 Kinsella, Sharon. *Adult Manga: Culture and Power in Contemporary Japanese Society*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2000, 24.

27 Murakami attended the Tokyo University of Arts and Music, graduating with a B.F.A. in 1986, an M.F.A. in 1988, and a Ph.D. in 1993. He was a recipient of the Asian Cultural Fellowship at the P.S.1 International Studio Program in 1995.

28 Greenberg, Clement. "Modernist Painting," 1965. Reproduced in *Art In Theory 1900-1990: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, Harrison, Charles, and Paul Wood, ed. London: Blackwell Publishers, 2003, 774.

29 For more information on this topic, see Serge Guilbaut. *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985.

30 Murakami, Takashi. "A Theory of Japanese Superflat Art." *Superflat*. Murakami, Takashi, ed. *Exh. cat.* Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 2000, 25.

31 Murakami, Takashi. "Superflat Manifesto." *Superflat*. Murakami, Takashi, ed. *Exh. cat.* Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 2000, p. 5.

32 Hunt, Michael H. *The American Ascendancy*. Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 2007, p. 137.

33 Ibid.

34 Journalist Arthur Lubow interviewed Yuko Yamaguchi, the chief designer of Sanrio, for his 2006 article on Murakami. According to Yamaguchi, the secret to Hello Kitty's success is its lack of mouth: "In most Sanrio

- characters, we don't express an emotion through the mouth,' [Yamaguchi] said. 'With Kitty, you don't even see a mouth.' She credited this mouthlessness for much of Kitty's popularity. 'When someone feels blue or depressed, they may want the character to sympathize with their feeling or to get angry with them or to offer encouragement,' she said. 'Without a clear expression of the mouth, this is possible. It can be interpreted in different ways.'" Arthur Lubow. "The Murakami Method." *New York Times Magazine*, New York: 3 April, 2006. 48-57, 64, 76-79
- 35 Sawaragi, Noi. "On the Battlefield of 'Superflat: Subculture and Art in Postwar Japan'" *Little Boy: The Arts of Japan's Exploding Subculture*. Murakami, Takashi, ed. Exh. cat. New York: Japan Society, 2005,189.
- 36 Lubow, 64.
- 37 Ibid.
- 38 Hebdige, Dick. *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*. London: Routledge, 1979.
- 39 Ibid, p13.
- 40 While this might have been true at the time he was writing in the 1960s, new developments in the field, now christened "post-subcultural studies," have troubled the idea of a so-called "heroic" subculture that resists hegemony through resignification. For a recent discussion of this topic, see the Introduction of David Muggelton and Rupert Weinzierl. *Post-Subcultures Reader*. Oxford: Berg Publishers, 2004.
- 41 Levi-Strauss, Claude. *The Savage Mind (Nature of Human Society)*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968, p19.
- 42 "The Hiropon Factory Chronicle." *summon monsters ? open the door ? heal? or die?* Murakami, Takashi, ed Exh. cat. Tokyo: Hiropon Factory, 2001, 126. PARCO Gallery is itself housed in a mall.
- 43 Murakami, Takashi. "Life as a Creator *summon monsters ? open the door ? heal? or die?*" Murakami, Takashi, ed. Exh. cat. Tokyo: Hiropon Factory, 2001. 138.
- 44 "The Hiropon Factory Chronicle." *summon monsters ? open the door ? heal? or die?* Murakami, Takashi, ed Exh. cat. Tokyo: Hiropon Factory, 2001, 126.
- 45 This occurred in 2001, according to the *Hiropon Factory Chronicle*.
- 46 Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles. "Mark Jacobs on Takashi Murakami," October 7, 2007, interview available at: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8qWbt\\_Ao\\_d0](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8qWbt_Ao_d0)
- 47 Ropthkof, 130.
- 48 Rothkopf, 159.
- 49 Ibid.
- 50 Rothkopf 146.
- 51 Rothkopf, 158.
- 52 Buchloh, Benjamin H.D. "Andy Warhol's One-Dimensional Art," reprinted in *Neo-Avantgarde and Culture Industry: Essays on European and American Art from 1955-1975*, Cambridge: MIT Press, 2003, p. 463.
- 53 Buchloh, Benjamin H.D. "Drawing Blanks: Notes on Andy Warhol's Late Works," *October* 127, Winter 2009, p. 15.
- 54 Danto, Arthur. "Foreword: Style and Salvation in the Art of Beuys." *Joseph Beuys: The Reader*. Claudia Mesch and Viola Michely, ed., London and New York: I.B. Taurus, 2007, p. xiv.
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