



Yoshitomo Nara, *Harmless Kitty* (1994)

Before and After Superflat



Talk of Japanese contemporary art and everyone inevitably thinks of the pop culture fantasies of Takashi Murakami, along with Yoshitomo Nara and others connected to Murakami's "Superflat" movement. Meanwhile, Japan has stumbled through a series of economic, social and ecological crises since the collapse of its "Bubble" economy in the early 1990s. How did Murakami, Nara and "Superflat" rise to become the dominant artistic vision of Japan today? What lies behind their image of a childish and decadent society unable to face up to reality? *Before and After Superflat* tells the true story of the Japanese art world since 1990, its struggle to find a voice amidst Japan's decline and the rise of China, and the responses of other artists, less well known outside, who offer alternative visions of its troubled present and future.

Before and After Superflat

A Short History of Japanese Contemporary Art 1990-2011

Adrian Favell

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Front cover: Makoto Aida, *Azemichi* (1991)



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Makoto Aida, *Azemichi* [A Path Between Rice Fields] (1991)
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Yoshitomo Nara, *Harmless Kitty* (1994)
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PROLOGUE

Tourists in the Japanese Pavilion

What image should Japan present to the world? The Japanese worry a lot about this question. Every year, in fact, the Japanese Foreign Ministry, Japan Foundation and Agency for Cultural Affairs (*Bunka-cho*) spend millions of yen trying to answer it. Among the many fields of culture they cover, contemporary art is one of the central pillars of their mission. Although it is a small and specialized field, contemporary art is the cultural *lingua franca* of some of the world's most cosmopolitan and influential elites. In major cities around the globe, it is what can be seen at top museums, in the fanciest auction houses, and on the walls of the richest millionaires.

With the symbolic importance of art in mind, the Japan Foundation organizes the Japanese Pavilion at the Venice Biennale once every two years. This is the world's biggest festival of global contemporary art. At any World Expo like this, with so many wonderful countries on show, strong images are needed to

pull in the viewers. Many will often overlook or forget the Japanese Pavilion. But, although it was not the official selection in the Pavilion that year, at Venice in 2009 a contemporary Japanese artist certainly gave the world something “Japanese” it could remember.

The sun was shining, and the famous old city was full of rich and beautiful tourists. High on their list of things to see was the newly reopened customs house on the Grand Canal. On display here were the works of a global art collector, François Pinault, the multi-millionaire owner of Gucci and Christie’s auction house. He had engaged the Japanese architect Tadao Ando to renovate this spectacular waterside building at the entrance to the city. There are many famous American, German and British names in Pinault’s collection. But at Venice there was also something Japanese. Near the centre of the show, in a big white room, stood a monstrous eight foot high plastic sculpture. It seemed like something straight off the pages of a disturbing adult comic book. A naked cartoon boy with a big grin, enormous eyes and crazy hair stood there masturbating, a wild lasso of plastic semen filling the air around him.

The sculpture was Takashi Murakami’s *My Lonesome Cowboy*. Sold to Pinault by the auction house Sotheby’s of New York in May 2008 for a reported \$15 million, Murakami’s provocative “little boy” stands as the most successful piece of Japanese art ever. It was one of the last big trophy acquisitions of the global art elite, before the collapse later that same year of the world economy and the global bubble in art prices of the mid 2000s. As a result of his success, Murakami represented during those years most of what anybody in the West knew about Japanese contemporary art. He called this distinctively Japanese style art “Superflat”. It was inspired by the country’s animation and comic cultures, and it seemed to be everywhere. ©MURAKAMI, a major world tour and retrospective of the artist’s works during 2008 and 2009, took his vision from Los Angeles, via New York, to Europe and the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao. In 2008 he was listed by *Time* magazine among the 100 most influential persons of the year – the only fine artist in the list – and in 2009 was ranked

by the magazine *Art Review* as no.17 of the 100 most important persons in the global art world today – the only Japanese in the list, one of only three Asian names, and one of only about 20 artists. In the autumn of 2009, London tourists packed into the Tate Modern to see Murakami bookend a retrospective history of contemporary art after Andy Warhol, with a huge mural of Akihabara, the electronics and video game epicentre of Tokyo, and a video featuring Hollywood actress Kirsten Dunst singing “I’m turning Japanese”, an old punk rock song also about masturbation. In the autumn of 2010, Murakami’s giant and colourful installations found a home in the Palais de Versailles in Paris, en route for an even bigger show for the Qatar royal family in 2012. It all confirmed “Takaashi” – as he is known to his American friends – as Japan’s most visible international art superstar. He alone was able to rub shoulders with global art superstars, such as Jeff Koons and Damien Hirst.

There are many other Japanese artists, but few in the 1990s and 2000s had anything like the kind of recognition Murakami enjoyed in terms of international sales and consistent museum visibility. The cult illustrator, Yoshitomo Nara, was one. Nara was a worthy partner to Murakami, with his childlike paintings, toys, playroom installations – and big sales. He too fitted the idea of superflat art. Nara spent much of the 2000s on a world tour of his own, rounding up an impressive decade with a large new catalogue and retrospective show in New York in the autumn of 2010 which celebrated his alternative status. Behind his international success, Murakami was also able to cultivate the careers of a number of young girl artists, employees at his Kaikai Kiki corporation which produces all his art works and spin off products in a related style. This obviously adolescent art appealed to a Western sense of what they thought Japanese youth culture must be like. Then there was, for a while at least, Mariko Mori, with her fantasy girl photos and space age machines.

Takashi Murakami, Yoshitomo Nara and Mariko Mori were successful internationally for a simple reason. Each made an art that confirmed, reproduced and sold to the West a certain vision of Japan that reigned until March 2011.

This was “Cool Japan”: a kind of *neo-Japonisme*, which worked as an updated version of the historical Western fascination for classical Japanese culture known as *Japonisme*. It was the hip high-end tourist’s Japan that everybody wanted. Countless books, magazines, travel guides and websites for international tourists celebrated this image. Japan, for this kind of consumer, was a land which during the 1990s and 2000s became a cartoon: full of cute-yet-seductive schoolgirls, super-nerds with weird fetishes, and a warped, decadent pop culture. Young people in North America and Europe rushed to learn the words to describe this Asian wonderland. It was the land of *otaku* (obsessive nerds), of *manga* (comics) and *anime* (cartoons), of all things *kawaii* (cute) and *moé* (a word expressing an *otaku* nerd’s adoration of a cute young girl). It was also a Japan whose capital was a futuristic techno-scape called “Neo-Tokyo”, overlooked by the gleaming towers of Tokyo’s high rise city centres, Roppongi Hills and Shinjuku, and full of the sensory overload and neon-possibilities of its commercial hubs, Akihabara and Shibuya. Where once Japan had an exotic culture of *geisha* (entertainment women), tea ceremonies and zen gardens, and an art of subtle wood block prints and *ukiyo-e* (Edo period pictures of the floating world), it now became a Cool Japan of maid cafes, outrageous teen street fashion, and infinite lines of plastic collectible products. The art of Murakami, Nara and Mori somehow succeeded in packaging this mostly youth and teen oriented pop culture for the elite, adult, and very rich global art world. Like the Young British Artists – a parallel generation who managed to re-invent London and “Cool Britannia” with a dramatic and often shocking pop art in the 1990s – this group of Japanese *otaku* style artists found international acclaim by presenting Japan and its capital city, as the artists in London had, as uninhibited “Sensation”.

To say the least, this superflat vision of Japan seems history now. The international image of Japan may have changed forever. Cool Japan is over. Japan is no longer seen as the leader of high tech modernity or the world’s Asian future. And for weeks in 2011, all the world saw on 24 hour news channels

and YouTube were images of buildings shaking and the sea smashing into a vulnerable coastline. It watched in horror as nuclear reactors exploded, and numerous cities and towns were laid waste. For years the world had known that Japan had a stagnant economy, and even more stagnant politics. It had an ageing population and a desperately low birth rate. It had too many suicides, and a massive gap between urban growth and rural decline. It was being supplanted industrially and financially by China. But at least it had culture. For a decade, Cool Japan provided an alternative vision. It was government policy, and the first line in all the tourist guidebooks. Then, all of a sudden, the long distance air flights were nearly empty. Cool Japan became history, the bad memory of another “lost decade”. Internationally, Japan nearly dropped off the world map.

In the Japanese contemporary art world, the problem with Murakami and associates was already visible a long time before 2011. The easy eye candy of superflat art was, to anyone that knew anything about the place, a blatant caricature and distortion of modern Japan. For a decade, it became practically the *only* Japanese contemporary art *ever* seen internationally. In fact, the success of their *otaku* style art stood as the stunning exception to the dismal failure of much Japanese contemporary art to match the international impact of Japan’s other creative industries. As a result, aside from Murakami and co., contemporary art from Japan was much less globally appreciated than its *anime* and *manga* artists, its character and toy producers, its architects and fashion designers, or even its cooks and novelists. The Japanese art scene in reality languished for over a decade in the shadow of a far bigger Chinese art boom. Its turnover was a miniscule part of the global art market, and its many expensive museums and ambitious art festivals were largely overlooked by foreigners. Tokyo’s lively but small art world has never been anything but a minor outpost on the global map. Successive waves of home grown artists and creators articulated a variety of original and alternative visions to Murakami, Nara or Mori. But in the shadow of Cool Japan, they struggled to attract much attention or sales.

Meanwhile, Takashi Murakami's heady cocktail – written down in his 2001 manifesto for the Western art market, *Superflat*, that blended oriental stereotypes, deviant sexuality, corporate branding, and promiscuous pop culture iconography – was channelled into a bigger entrepreneurial mission back home. He successfully promoted himself as the guru of the *kuriieta* (creator) generation, the young adults of Japan's two "lost decades" of the 1990s and 2000s who grew up in a society in decline, but who dreamt of the freedom to travel and to express themselves creatively. To these followers in Japan, he declared he was on a mission to fool the West and smash the Japanese art system. Yoshitomo Nara meanwhile pursued a no less successful path to independence. He built on smart collaborative ventures across Asia, drawing on the help of thousands of internet fans. He also tapped into an outpouring of regional development aid from his native region, putting on touring shows that fronted his own multi-million yen book, toy and merchandise franchise.

The essays in this book retell the story of these two remarkable artist-entrepreneurs, as well as others close to them – both in terms of what they achieved and what their success prevented during their two decade long rise. They portray the social and cultural milieu out of which they came, and get inside the Japanese contemporary art world to explain its rare successes – and more frequent failures – on the international stage during these years. Based on over five years of interviews, documentary research and participant observation as a visiting writer on the Tokyo art scene as well as its outposts in Asia, America and Europe, it is a sociologist's account of the Japanese contemporary art world today. Placing art in context this way is in fact one way of narrating the dramatic social and generational change of Japan since its own economic "Bubble". This was when Japan's incredible post-war boom years came to an end at the beginning of the 1990s, and it entered a period of long, slow decline that has continued through to the new shattering disasters of 2011.

Takashi Murakami and Yoshitomo Nara did it "their way", but not by themselves. They joined forces with a new generation of art world entrepreneurs –

leading gallerists, impresarios and writers in Tokyo, as well as foreign dealers and curators. Together these people invented an international art scene, with new networks of museums and curators, and a new contemporary art market in Japan. Japanese government and corporations ignored this until it became something they too could use. Artists, curators and entrepreneurs tapped into an extraordinary creative boom of crisis-stricken Japan in the mid 1990s. They invented ideas, attitudes and imagery that were later made successful on a global scale. Yet along the way, an essentially radical and transformative cultural movement was hooked to much more powerful conservative forces of urban development and political nationalism. Big financial interests such as the Mori Building Co., and big political concerns, such as Tokyo Governor Shintaro Ishihara's Olympics-driven vision for Tokyo, were able to appropriate the creative surge to their own ends. So did bureaucrats and ambitious leaders of Japan's conservative Liberal Democratic Party, desperate to find a new image for Japan internationally, using Cool Japan to boost its "soft power".

As part of the global Cool Japan mania, superflat art came to dominate the world's view of Japanese contemporary art, monopolizing spaces and opportunities where other visions might have been seen. It offered false promises to young artists who thought they could follow the path of these older artists, leading many astray. Meanwhile, the world grew tired of Murakami and Nara's pop production lines in the international art world, with nothing emerging to take its place. It was already clear by the end of 2010 that there would be a terrible void in Japanese contemporary art the day that Cool Japan ended. The Western art world was already getting bored with images of Akihabara and cute cartoon characters. Its interest had long since moved on to other, hotter, Asian destinations such as China and India.

Still, something important started in the difficult years before March 2011. A younger generation of artists, now in their late 20s and 30s, absorbed the business lessons and international ambitions of Takashi Murakami and Yoshitomo Nara, while rejecting their aesthetic stylings and obsessions. Others initiated

distinct forms of creativity under the influence of various less well recognized figures from the early 90s wonder years. More idealistic entrepreneurs in the art world inspired extraordinarily ambitious festivals and redevelopment projects that brought in art and architecture to some of the most declining regions and urban neighbourhoods in the country. And the disasters of 2011 inspired a new kind of community engagement from artists looking for a redefined role in a troubled society. After the rise and fall of *Superflat*, there was still hope for a fresh and more sustainable vision for Japanese art.

Little Boys and Tokyo Girls: The Rise of Superflat

Artist in Wonderland: Takashi Murakami

Cool Japan was a fantasy, and it always sounded silly to many ordinary Japanese. But it certainly existed. Not really in the glossy tourist brochures and leaden policy plans of bureaucrats trying to revive the sorry fortunes of the nation with the idea of “soft power”: the export of Japanese popular culture and contemporary aesthetics that was supposed to replace its former manufacturing and finance might lost after the Bubble of the 1980s. But it did exist in the heads of the many trendy young and affluent international tourists who came to Tokyo during those years looking for the wonderland promised in their urban city guides.

Welcome to Neo-Tokyo. Neo-Tokyo was not only the name of the city reborn in the aftermath of nuclear war in *Akira* (1988) – the first Japa-

nese *anime* to breakthrough into the international market. It was also the concept promoted by these guides as the ultimate allure of this amazing metropolis. The best place to see Neo-Tokyo was, and still is, from Roppongi Hills, Tokyo developer Minoru Mori's famous "city within a city". Roppongi Hills Mori Tower is the central icon of this wonderland, representing the attempt by the most powerful urban developer in Japan to wipe out the complex fabric and underbelly of old Tokyo beneath. It took Mori 17 years to buy up all the ramshackle houses, junk stores, cheap *ryokan* hotels, and seedy dining bars that used to cover the area – in the name of his shiny new urban philosophy.

Before taking the elevator to the 52nd floor, it is best to wait until dark. Usually it is impossible anyway to get a glimpse of Japan's oldest icon of all, *Fuji san* (Mount Fuji), way out across the city. But at dusk, Neo-Tokyo comes alive: an immense, infinite urban sprawl, kinetic flows and neon light in all directions, red beacons twinkling over the black void. Safe behind the glass, it can feel like being God in the clouds. Neo-Tokyo from up here is remote, breathtaking, and magnificent. The lighting was a little subdued after March 2011, but the experience has not changed much.

Next there can be a visit to the 53rd floor Mori Art Museum. Or there are amazing fish to see in an aquarium while taking tea at the café. But when the tourists exit, the elevator down spills them out in one place, unavoidably: the art-shop on the third floor. Exit through the gift shop. During the 2000s, this shop was the perfect place for Cool Japan souvenirs. Only the hippest J-art and J-design. Lots of collectible images of Roppongi Hills itself, and all kinds of toys, posters, books and goodies. There was also art on sale here but it was all pop-art. Art



Roppongi Hills rising up. Photo by Ann-Christina Lauring Knudsen.

NEO-TOKYO



View from roof top of Mori Tower at night. Photo by author.

NEO-TOKYO

some of the old 1960s hippy favourites like Keiichi Tanaami or Tadanori Yokoo; some kids' friendly stuff by a cult illustrator called Yoshitomo Nara, and glamour fashion photos by a female photographer called Mika Ninagawa; and a few girly artists with the typically colourful Japanese teenage-style doodles. But above all, there would always be lots and lots of work by one particular artist: Takashi Murakami.

For years, the table in the shop entrance was stuffed full of Murakami's colourful *superflat* Kaikai Kiki products. It was an art store installation, in fact. A uniformed guard was even posted at all times to prevent any photos of this magnificent haul. A few books and postcards, a calendar with cartoon girls, some collectible looking objects that might be "art". But above all, lots of his signature style products: tons of daft happy flowers, furry mushrooms, wonky dinosaurs, t-shirts and badges, a football, even a Roppongi Hills Tokyo Monopoly game, all with the same distinctive imagery. All designed and branded by the maestro himself, ©MURAKAMI. The Monopoly game was particularly amusing. The grey steel monolith that wiped out several popular neigh-

that came from the same country that turns everything into colour cartoons and cute characters. These were the Japanese artists the tourists would discover here. There would be something by the iconic, veteran pop artist, Yayoi Kusama, for sure;

bourhoods over the protests of residents and anti-development groups became, with Murakami's branding, a *kawaii* super-cute tower of smiley flowers. This was the art approved by Mr Mori as the image of Neo-Tokyo delivered by the Roppongi Hills experience. The museum in the clouds was the shrine, but down here in the souvenir shop you saw the art that everyone would remember. During the 2000s, the Mori corporation effectively subsidized and promoted a certain kind of young Japanese artist, the ones that conformed to the image of Neo-Tokyo – one of which, was Mr Mori's niece Mariko – as the key to this sublime experience.

But it was Takashi Murakami – a goateed, perpetually cheerful art-guru – who internationally became the most famous face of Cool Japan. His rise to prominence is a fabulous story: the kind of rare global success that, in the 2000s, nourished a Japan that had grown used to disillusionment and decline since the 1990s.

Murakami was born in 1962. Growing up in Saitama, north of Tokyo, he became familiar with the ominous sounds of American military planes reminding Japan of its foreign domination. His mother even told him that he would not be alive had the Americans gone ahead with their plans for the second nuclear bomb and bombed Kokura near Fukuoka, where she lived, instead of Nagasaki. Murakami grew up with the 60s generation's love of *manga*, *anime* and cult sci-fi television series. He became an artist himself – an intellectual and conceptualist – but was always most inspired, he says, by the masters of Japanese *anime* such as Hayao Miyazaki, as well as the cult TV obsessions of his youth.

Murakami was not an outsider in Tokyo art terms. He was, rather, a graduate of the elite national Tokyo University of the Arts (known as *Geidai* for short). Indeed, he trained in classical *nihonga* (traditional Japanese art), becoming the first ever PhD in this old department. But he was, famously, the son of a Tokyo taxi driver, from the wrong side of the tracks. At Geidai, from the late 80s on, he became a core member of a gang of brilliant young art students who

were all about to seize the day. These included a prolific art-organizer called Masato Nakamura, his closest partner; Min Nishihara, a young woman writer and close friend; Murakami's gallerist-to-be Tomio Koyama; two would-be curators, Yuko Hasegawa and Shin Kurosawa; and a couple of livewire younger artists, Makoto Aida and Tsuyoshi Ozawa, who would become founding members of an art group, *Showa 40 nen kai* ("The Group 1965", i.e., they were born in the 40th year of Emperor Hirohito). These artists and future art world leaders would leave art school and come to maturity during the creative ferment of the immediate post-Bubble chaos of the early 90s. An innovative alternative art space, the Röntgen Institute, founded in an old industrial warehouse by an iconoclastic gallerist of the same generation, Tsutomu Ikeuchi, was one key platform for these new young artists. Other influential creators, critics and intellectuals circulated in this world, and Murakami's early work was associated with the theories of "neo-pop", a term coined by the art magazine *Bijutsu Techo's* editor Kiyoshi Kusumi, and promoted by another editor friend of the gang, Noi Sawaragi. Sawaragi wrote for fashionable magazines and had a new spin on the idea of Japanese postmodernism developed by the popular philosopher Akira Asada. With American pop art as its antecedent, Sawaragi's idea was that Japanese "neo-pop" parodied the infantilism of post-war Japanese consumer culture, making art by "sampling" and "remixing" the endless array of consumer junk with which Japanese filled their passified US-dependent lives.

Murakami's art was arch and conceptual in this early period; it was explicitly political and a provocative reaction to older Japanese *avant garde* art movements of the 50s and 60s. But while he became a key figure on the burgeoning new Tokyo art scene, which was a whirl of parties and art events, he struggled to sell much or retain value on his work. Yet, already by 1992, he had invented his brand image: the DOB character – a kind of perverted cartoon Mickey Mouse in the shape of a basketball – an image that would become a signature. DOB was debuted at a solo show in 1994 at a beautiful new gallery in the his-

toric Yanaka neighbourhood, called SCAI The Bathhouse, that was founded by an internationally minded art entrepreneur, Masami Shiraishi. Murakami then took a crucial sojourn in New York in 1994/5, encountering the financial core of the Western art world, and getting a first hand taste of the world of Jeff Koons, Keith Haring and the legacy of Andy Warhol, his biggest hero. The American pop influence, and Koons' brash, factory-made sexual sculptures in particular, turned out to be what he was looking for. He came back to Tokyo armed with an idea of turning the character figurines collected by Akihabara *otaku* nerds – a group he identified with but was not really part of – into massive pop art installations. Out of this, in 1997 and 1998, came the eight foot high plastic sculptures of *Miss Ko²*, a sexy Japanese waitress, *Hiropon*, a girl with huge breasts spraying milk, and then *My Lonesome Cowboy*: his best works, a brilliant, succinct and technically perfect marrying of idea and form, that was simple yet distinctive enough to break into the global art world. It was not yet an overnight sensation: *otaku* themselves didn't like the work, and Japan was not yet ready for it. But the American connections on the East and West Coast continued to develop, with small shows and a few press articles. Murakami set up a production company, *Hiropon*, to produce his increasingly ambitious lifesize models and computer based art. He was also, throughout, a prolific and innovative curator of others' work in Tokyo. This eventually led to putting on a show called "Super Flat" in 2000 of related *otaku* and pop culture inspired work by a whole generation of artists like him: at the very high profile location of the Parco department store in Tokyo. Shortly after, plans were made to take the show to the US and France. Murakami's trajectory started to go global...

This is where I enter the story. One sunny day in early 2001, I was driving up La Brea in Los Angeles, when I started to notice rows of cute, colourful characters smiling blankly down at me from streetlamp billboards. These were "Chappies", a Japanese design brand, advertizing a show at LA's Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCA) on contemporary Japanese art called, in a now

more streamlined title, *Superflat*. I had always had a latent “thing” about Japan; this looked great, so I immediately went to the “great blue whale” in West Hollywood (the Pacific Design Center), where the show was taking place. It was a typical Western seduction: I had never been to Japan at this point. Over two floors, the show was a sensory overload of childish art, dream characters and *pachinko* style lights and colour. It offered that familiar promise of an alternative Asian modernity which first time visitors looking for Neo-Tokyo always experience. There was also a lot of sex in the show (although not so much in the catalogue), and no end of images of young Japanese girls. But it was all cartoonish, colourful and fun, albeit a little weird. It was something like being teleported unprepared in the middle of Akihabara on a busy Sunday afternoon, with curator Murakami as the laughing *otaku* guide. I totally loved the show, and my thoroughly enchanted ideas of Japan, like Roland Barthes, were thus cemented well before I ever travelled there.

I was only one viewer among nearly 100,000 that saw the show in this small annexe of MOCA. But this was a select crowd and the show became the talk of the town. LA loved Murakami. Masterminded by his LA gallerists, Blum and Poe, and Tomio Koyama – who was like Jay Jopling to Murakami’s Damien Hirst – he started making serious sales to the pop art collectors in the hills, as well as serious waves over in the East Coast art media. In Europe, Murakami was represented by another young gallerist he had known since the early 90s in Tokyo, Emmanuel Perrotin, who will go on to broker his bigger deals to elite European contemporary art collectors, such as François Pinault. Moreover, back home in Japan, the general public started to take notice of a new Japanese star rising in the West. *Superflat* toured in the US then went to Paris (as *Coloriage/Kawaii!! Summer Vacation*, 2002), to similar acclaim. The American media, meanwhile, had noticed, and the fashion world started to show interest in this new whiff of Tokyo cool. Also in 2002, Marc Jacobs offered him the job of re-designing the Louis Vuitton handbag, “Takashi-style”. The bag became a smash hit: a must have item on Omotesando (the most chic

street in Tokyo), 5th Avenue and, most importantly, at the Venice Biennale. In early 2003, Roppongi Hills then hired him to brand the about-to-open towers. Around this time, Murakami's works started selling for over a half a million dollars. Marc Jacobs' favourite model Sofia Coppola made *Lost in Translation*, the film starring Bill Murray that seemed to capture the essence of the new American fascination for Japan that was exploding. The *New York Times* had begun its serial obsession with all that is cool in Tokyo; the Japan Society kept sending an endless stream of over-excited American journalists paid to go and write about the secrets of the creative new Japan. By 2005, Murakami was back in New York persuading the Japan Society and big Manhattan corporations to foot the bill for the show *Little Boy*, an even grander re-run version of *Superflat*. Murakami, who himself had put cartoon balloons and an hilarious "Mr Pointy" installation outside the Rockefeller Centre in 2003, would now put paedophile images on pristine New York museum walls and plastic elephants and dung in Central Park, giving birth to an elegant catalogue that was practically a DIY sociology of post-war Japan written through the eyes of 1960s and 70s nerds. Murakami was now the talk of the town here too, celebrated alongside all things truly "Japanese" by hip New Yorkers, along with their vintage sake bars and dragon roll sushi.

Even all this was only a preamble to an even more triumphant 2006 and 2007. One work hit one and half million dollars at Art Basel, the world's most important art fair. Murakami dumped his (small) New York gallerist, Marianne Boesky, and joined Gagosian, the most powerful gallerist in New York and the man behind the Warhol phenomenon. Kanye West – a black American hip hop artist with a fascination for Japanese pop culture – commissioned him to do all the art and visuals for his new album. The record hit number one in the US and the UK in late 2007. Back in LA, his most committed American curator, Paul Schimmel, was hard at work on his first big retrospective, the show that was going to cement his place in art history. The MOCA show was slated for Brooklyn, New York, Frankfurt, and the Guggenheim in Bilbao. With big

shows in London, Paris and the Middle East also in the pipeline, the Murakami juggernaut, that had been showing work like this since 1994, was now going to be on the road well into 2012.

Late October 2008, ©*MURAKAMI* opened in triumph in LA, with a massive oversized and overpriced catalogue, a Vuitton boutique in the museum, an *anime* premier by the maestro himself, and a Hollywood VIP style opening gala fit for a movie star. The show was dominated by a massive silver smiling Oval Buddha self portrait weaving mystical elements – and more irony – into the heady brew. May 2008, Takashi Murakami broke with convention, sitting smiling at the back at Sotheby's as he watched the sale of *My Lonesome Cowboy*. As the hammer came down \$13.6 million (plus commission), he shouted "Banzai!" as the sale took him into the superstar league.

This is a good moment to pause. May 2008 was surely a historical moment for Japanese Art, as much as for Murakami. Thousands of years of Japanese art history, with its exquisite and refined aesthetic sensibility, as well as the most dramatic surge of post war urban development and cultural change seen anywhere in the twentieth century, had somehow all been concentrated into this: an eight foot high plastic figurine jerking off in front of a crowd of applauding executive class magnates and catwalk stars in the heart of New York City. His hero Andy Warhol would have been proud. But what did this moment really say about modern Japan in the world? And from where did the power and fascination of Takashi Murakami, this laughing Japanese Wizard of Oz, really come?

The Little Prince: Yoshitomo Nara

Takashi Murakami was not alone. Not quite. Internationally speaking, the grand ladies of the 1960s – pop artist Yayoi Kusama and conceptualist Yoko Ono – are always remembered and still hugely influential. There are also a number of other Japanese names whose breakthrough dates back to 1980s –

Hiroshi Sugimoto, Yasumasa Morimura, Tatsuo Miyajima, or Tadashi Kawamata – who are also sometimes mentioned in rarefied circles. There have been some younger artists who might one day make it to this level: names such as Tabaimo, Miwa Yanagi, Motohiko Odani or Kohei Nawa. But the glossy Taschen Art Now round up for the new millennium in the mid 2000s told its own story. In the 81 names listed in the book as the rising leaders of global art, only three Japanese were mentioned: Takashi Murakami, Yoshitomo Nara and Mariko Mori.

Nara has been, in many ways, Murakami's only real peer. In 1998, they were both teaching at UCLA, as visiting professors. They shared an apartment, and at first were suspicious. But as they became friends, they started to plot a "new pop revolution", as they christened it. In the 1990s and 2000s, Murakami was like the Pokemon franchise of the contemporary art world – a multi headed monster spinning off lines of new products from his factories in Tokyo and New York, that morphed into high art and low pop. Yoshitomo Nara, on the other hand, was like Hello Kitty, his trademark sad and lonely little kids mass produced into instantly recognisable, heartwarming images, adorning eminently affordable lines of postcards, t-shirts, badges, bags and art toy collectibles. The two were both businessmen as much as artists. But their public image could not be more different. Murakami, passionate, aggressive and loud, upsets everyone where he goes. Nara, meanwhile, shambling, shy and monosyllabic, still comes off as the casual punk rock artist, chain smoking with the cool haircut. Now well past 50, he still plays the boyish loner, while heading up massive collaborative projects that have drawn on the talents of many close associates, as well as sometimes thousands of volunteers. Yet in sales, Nara has matched Murakami through the sheer quantity of his inventory, and the obsession with which some collectors have chased it. And, in terms of commercial spin offs, his works during the 2000s if anything grew into an even bigger franchise operation, targeted at a mass global public audience rather than art world elites like Murakami.



Artist Yoshitomo Nara. Photo by Mie Morimoto. Courtesy of Tomio Koyama Gallery.

Yoshitomo Nara is a self-styled country boy, from Aomori, the North, born in 1959. The Nara story is always told in teenage romantic form, always as a secret diary written for a fan, as in his art autobiography, *Little Star Dweller*. The aesthetic is just like the famous children's classic by Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, *The Little Prince*. He too remembers nothing but the drone of American military bases, and the music and fashion it brought. He spent his childhood as the latch key kid on the block, playing by himself, or off cycling with friends. He imagined he was a girl – his parents lost a daughter before him, her spirit passed into him, he says. He dreamt away his time listening to American and British rock bands. He went to Tokyo then Nagoya to study, picked up odd jobs as an art tutor, and eventually left in his mid twenties for Europe, to Germany. He had heard that the state there would pay for his scholarship – so he could continue being a student for ever. This was the dream life of the young international free floater, a lifestyle sometimes rather naively associated with the term

freeter (free arbeiter, or flexible worker, which can have more exploitative connotations). It is something that thousands of young Japanese in the 1990s and 2000s would later turn into a whole way of life in cities around the globe. They followed their *jibun sagashi* (self discovery) as free spirits and *kuriiteita* (creators) on the road, soaking up experiences in foreign lands. In Germany, cities are good to artists and they tend to like Japanese. There were a lot of fans of Japanese movies and comics; people were starting to discover sushi and sake. Nara studied in Düsseldorf, then moved to Cologne, making friends with an international group, and starting to work as an artist. But it was remote and cold Northern Europe. He started to paint little childish figures that were maybe boys, maybe girls. His breakthrough moment came in 1991, when he started to directly translate his lost and alienated feelings onto the canvas, leaving off the elaborate backdrops and landscapes, and just painting the figures lost against a blank sky and meaningless language. They were cute figures, a little deformed maybe. Like cartoon characters, only something different. Nara says they were all self portraits. There was a hint of something violent, maybe sexual, underneath. The children looked angry; sometimes they carried a knife or swore. One little boy was riding a Mitsubishi Zero. Others looked sad against a night sky, or played punk rock guitar like rebellious teenagers. Nara travelled around remote parts of Europe – the Balkans, the Mediterranean – taking scrappy photos of dogs and funny looking kids.

Nara was a late starter. He was 30 before anything much happened in his career. But then it moved fast. His slogan was always: “Never forget your beginner’s spirit”. He scrawled it on the walls of his studios, which looked like children’s playhouses full of toys and sketches, with all his obsessive collections, as well as empty bottles and ashtrays. This was who he was; my world is my studio, he seemed to say. Nara preserved this ingenuous self-image, even as the sophistication of the presentation grew. The images never really changed, but they morphed easily into all kinds of other things. He started making models of the kids, setting them up as characters in strange shed-like

installations. He also started making model dogs as sculptures, and then as toys and little story books. There was always an almost *haiku* (Japanese poetry) like simplicity of form in Nara's work. Just a few strokes of the brush on an empty canvas. Hello Kitty needs only twelve strokes of the pen; an average Nara not much more. A lot of Nara's collectible works have just been doodles sketched on bits of paper and turned into litho prints. The solo art shows started in Japan and Germany in the late 1980s, and the US from 1995. At first, he stayed based in Germany, but with frequent flights to Japan and the US. Like Takashi Murakami, he hooked up with Tomio Koyama, who was working for Masami Shiraishi at SCAI, then establishing itself as a premier location of the new contemporary art in Tokyo. They put on his first important Tokyo show in 1995, *In the Deepest Puddle*. Koyama had an eye for the commercial childish art that Nara was producing, even though in Japan all the trends at the time were against painting and against such personal expressionism in art. Nara simply painted and expressed himself as he felt. Koyama took Murakami and Nara with him and founded his own gallery.

The early shows in Los Angeles were organized by the same gallery that represented Murakami: Blum and Poe. They had an immediate impact and good media coverage. In particular, Midori Matsui, a very articulate and ambitious literature PhD turned art writer, picked up Nara and started to promote his work in both the Japanese and US art press. Matsui had studied at Princeton but was also around the Tokyo scene in the early 1990s. Tomio Koyama meanwhile found he could sell small Nara collectibles to curious LA collectors. Some of them bought the strange images or figurines as presents for their grandchildren. Nara finally published the catalogue of that first Tokyo show – *In the Deepest Puddle* – as a book in 1997. The works themselves started to sell in Japan, but only modestly; it was his books that became cult items first. In 1998, he went to UCLA, getting to know Takashi Murakami. Nara was amazed by the West Coast pop culture: he bought a battered car, and drove round the city visiting old record stores, collecting stuff.



Nara dog outside Yoshii Brickhouse brewery, Hirosaki. Photo by author.



Banner for Yoshitomo Nara exhibition, *Nobody's Fool* at Asia Society, New York (2010). Photo by author.

YOSHITOMO NARA

Nara's moment was now arriving. He was about to return definitively to Japan, and put together a new book of paintings and poems, *Slash With a Knife*. It was a word of mouth smash hit, especially among students and teenagers. Nara was then persuaded by Murakami to join his *Superflat* show in 2000, and became one of its signature images. He was, by this stage, becoming like a pop star in Japan because of the book, mobbed at signings by fans, especially girls. But he was not so popular with the authorities in Germany, who basically kicked him out of the country. One day, Nara discovered a fan internet site called "Happy Hour" run by a fan called "naoko." and started to write blogs for it. Plans were being laid for a first major solo show in Yokohama (2001) by a visionary curator Taro Amano, at the same time as Murakami would have his first big Tokyo show at the Museum of Contemporary Art. Using the blog, Nara decided to invite fans to make toys in his style for the show, that will be called *I Don't Mind If You Forget Me*. Expecting a few, they were overwhelmed by the hundreds of hand made stuffed toys of his characters that arrived by post in Yokohama. The toys were just put into the show, which became a huge hit, with nearly 100,000 visitors, a record for a contemporary art show in Japan at that time.

Being back in Japan suited Nara. He had friends, connections, and a fan base to draw on. He said he liked being back a country where they eat rice, think communally, and speak his language. It was a country now where he only needed to make an announcement on the internet and thousands of young fans from around Japan – but also Korea, China and Germany – would help him re-build his little teenage den over and over again, or send him stuff for the show. Also he was able to use his links with his home region – Aomori and the city of Hirosaki – where officials were not slow to realize the potential of a local artist in regional development efforts and tourism. Plans were laid for the first of three large collaborative shows in the old Yoshii brickhouse brewery, Hirosaki. Amazingly, a total of over 3000 volunteers showed up to help build this show for him. With a team of carpenters from Osaka called graf,

led by an old friend Hideki Toyoshima, he then developed a style of installation based on the ramshackle sheds and small rooms they would build to show off the endless line of Nara images, toys, books, and collectibles – as well as the fan copies of them. Nara says fixing up galleries and old buildings with his friends like this was just like playing as kids on an empty lot. The shows were another huge success raising large profits that were turned into a local NPO organization. The city got a big cute white doggy in the empty lot outside the abandoned building, and the new Aomori Museum set up a special Nara collection. The show itself then became *A to Z*, a global touring show that travelled the world from 2005 onwards – a vital lifeline for his New York gallerist, Marianne Boesky, who had lost Murakami. At his first big retrospective in Korea in 2005, there were lines around the block. But it's the same at any Nara show. There are always thousands of visitors. He was so successful in Seoul that Nara decided to just donate the museum there his work, which became permanent.

Yoshitomo Nara, then, is an artist of the people. But it has been a popularity also plotted on the art market. His work throughout has sold well, especially on the Asian market. A mark of success was that there have been many fakes in circulation, as well as small and giveaway works of which Nara and his gallerists have lost track. As plans were being laid for a big retrospective style show in New York at the Asia Society in 2010 titled *Nobody's Fool*, it was also the moment to bring together a major *catalogue raisonné* that sought to document the whereabouts of all his work. During these years, you could see the little Nara houses everywhere – his sheds, part studio, part *hikikomori* (obsessive recluse) bedroom. A DVD film documented his life and work as a happy-go-lucky artist – mostly it's just him and his friends hanging out. Nara breezed through 50, getting arrested in New York for two nights after doodling on a subway wall and getting into a fight with the police. Then he decided to get married, to a younger woman who worked in a gallery. It must have been a day as sad for young Japanese and Korean girls as it was for English girls

the day Paul McCartney married Linda in 1969. But the 2010 show in New York didn't suggest any change in lifestyle – or any approaching maturity. It was like the installation permanently placed in Nara's honour in a room in the back of Hara Museum in Tokyo, which is a reconstruction of his old studio from Germany in the usual style. Nara's art and life seemed to be locked in a permanent, sweet and nostalgic, adolescence. His fans and the Japanese art world have only loved him all the more for it.

Tokyo Girls Bravo! Kaikai Kiki and Mariko Mori

During the years of Cool Japan, the artists might have might have been middle aged men but the images that Western audiences remembered about Japanese contemporary art were always girls. As has been well analysed by writers such as anthropologist Laura Miller and sociologist Sharon Kinsella, girls and girls' culture have been at the heart of everything that is most striking about Japanese contemporary culture. The *otaku* mentality referenced by *Superflat* artists channelled above all the idea of hopeless, ageing, obsessive *dame* (loser) guys longing day and night for their unattainable, cute, and dangerously young girl *idoru* (idols). Intellectualized, it was presented as the core gender dynamic of an infantilized consumer society trapped in endless, introverted fantasy and escape. More basically, it was a vision of Japanese society and culture supposedly straight out of the closed bedrooms of the original generation of ageing male nerds born in the 1950s and 60s. They were a population that could be seen in droves on the streets of Akihabara: a generation who, it was thought, had never held a proper job, never had to deal with a real relationship, lived with its parents, and sat day and night at home poring over its obsessively catalogued collections. Murakami celebrated this culture in *Little Boy*; Nara's fixations and iconography embodied it.

The pervasive images in *Superflat* were clear enough. The show was full of pretty girls' faces and crude, repetitive boys' cartoons of their fantasy objects. But the catalogue's essays put the accent on serious art history, drawing parallels

between traditional Japanese art and postmodern theory. *Little Boy*, however, was full of explicit *otaku* talk and things from *otaku* bedrooms. While still tastefully packaged, and always kept on the right side of real scandal, the book of the show marked a shift in Murakami's thinking from the influence of Noi Sawaragi to Midori Matsui. Sawaragi's writings are relatively unknown and inaccessible outside of Japan, whereas the fluent English speaker Matsui rose with Nara and Murakami to become almost the only serious recognized commentator on Japanese contemporary art known in the West. The reception and understanding of Nara and Murakami's work was significantly filtered through Matsui's reading, as she came to monopolize much international communication.

Midori Matsui left behind the obsession with war and boys' sci-fi that permeated Sawaragi and Murakami's early formulations. She focused instead on the centrality of teenage girls' culture in Japan, as well as the warped perceptions of the middle aged *otaku* consumers that are so fascinated by it. She was most concerned with the inner world of the bedroom: the introverted, small scale and almost invisible "minor" creative reactions shown by the younger generations to the harsh and adult world outside. Matsui generalized this form of creativity as a "political" response to the condition of Japanese contemporary society. Nara was the godfather of this movement, which Matsui called "Micropop". But his self-obsessed expressionist sensibility passed on most obviously to the legions of girl fans he inspired. Matsui then explored what was unleashed when this culture was brought out into the street.

Takashi Murakami – neither a true *otaku* or *hikikomori* – nevertheless always understood the explosive power of presenting this particular, odd dynamic of Japanese society in a gallery context. For example, he put Hiromix's face and photos all over *Superflat*. Hiromix was the pretty young star of the brief late 90s boom in "girly photography" (*onna no ko shashin*) in which the art and photo world in Japan was wowed by a provocative glimpse of the inner bedroom worlds and outer street life of teenage girls, in photos taken by the

girls themselves. Other male *svengali* in the 90s, such as the photographer behind *Egg* magazine, Yasumasa Yonehara, had already found ways to put teenage girl *talento* and their obsessive self-centred photo stories into successful books and gallery shows. The strange relationship here was like the fragile conspiracy of the schoolgirl and *oyaji* (middle aged) man who takes her out and buys her clothes. Or, as sociologist Sharon Kinsella suggests, it was the “rejuvenation fantasy” of the ageing man, of being close to his object of affection, or even (secretly) of wanting to become her. Hiromix was already a star when Murakami selected her, but he also cultivated girls of his own. Ever since he played with the idea of a fake boys’ band called Kase TaishuU in the early 90s, he had been tempted by the role of impresario and star-maker: the power he could exercise by plucking unknown young artists out of school for his company and productions.

Superflat thus established with a wider audience the work of Murakami’s earliest and most talented girl protégés: Aya Takano and Chiho Aoshima. The work of these two artists was full of the delicate and pretty iconography of the teenage girl’s bedroom, and typical of “Micropop”. They pictured cartoon girls self-absorbed in adolescent sci-fi and dreams of a future paradise. It was mixed in with androgynous romance, naïve sexuality, and full of images of injured doll girls and submission fantasies. It was all sweet, colourful, girly – but a little disturbing. The appeal of Takano and Aoshima was the appeal of ordinary but strange girls next door, clutching their overflowing notebooks full of introverted ideas: perfect *otaku* boy fantasy objects. There was nothing at all unusual in their iconography. If you look through any teenage girls’ magazine, *manga* or photo book, you see all the same images. They have been the staple of Japanese teenage girls since the 1980s, with even older roots in historical girls’ (*shojo*) visual cultural. But it was some of the easiest imagery to market internationally in the alternate context of contemporary commercial art. Western audiences were fascinated by the strangeness, and only too ready to buy this kind of thrilling fantasy of Japan. Both girl artists thus became

very successful internationally under Murakami's tutelage, with their own major shows, sales and design commissions. In the US, they were represented by the same gallery who worked with Murakami and Nara: Blum and Poe. They also played an important role as employees in Kaikai Kiki, especially Aoshima, who introduced the computer illiterate Murakami to illustrator technology and oversaw part of the technical production of his work.

American audiences loved this part of *Superflat*, and Murakami clearly saw the larger potential of using girl artists to broaden the appeal of his Kaikai Kiki products. *Tokyo Girls Bravo*, which had its first showing in Tokyo and then LA in 1999, became a parallel albeit smaller touring show, in which he played impresario to around ten young girl artists, including Takano and Aoshima, selected out of nowhere design schools or through DIY art competitions. The catalogue pictured them as naïve teenagers, even though the oldest, Aoshima, was nearly 30 at the time. In the photos, the girls were raw and fresh faced, accumulating art in their bedrooms as a private reaction to the sprawling decadence of Tokyo all around them. The book was cute and colourful throughout, but the bio stories included speak of psychological anguish, perverted ideas, and underlying violence. Murakami's introduction celebrated his juicy *otaku* vision of decadent Neo-Tokyo through their eyes, with the inner life of girls the perfect metaphor for his fantasies: "The Tokyo of the 21st Century has finally passed through its maturity, and is only now getting good and decaying. Like horse meat is best a little past its time, 'Tokyo' and its residents are just now getting tasty. This is the 'Tokyo' where these girls live: overripe but still with a smell of bright red blood, sweet and wholesome, coming from somewhere. Let us applaud them as we take a tour into their very hearts, with these pages as a guidebook". Nothing of course was more universally marketable than a group of pretty young girls like this, especially when hitched to a weird subplot.

Murakami continued to recruit for his team throughout the 2000s, always with the same idea. As the talent wore thin, the presentation became increasingly provocative. After Aya Takano and Chiho Aoshima, his – and Midori Matsui's

– most visible prodigy was the overweight, supposedly bulimic, Mahomi Kunikata, who made directly graphic and disturbing art out of her psychological anguish and troubled sexuality as a child. The paintings were an overload of psychiatric confession: a brother who died young, predatory adults, girls who hurt themselves with knives, or dressed up like car wreck victims. Executed on large canvasses with poster paint colours and cartoony drawing techniques, they could only be presented as straightforwardly amateur works in the outsider art tradition. But it is what happened when this and other similar work was presented internationally that was most interesting. On the road, Murakami and Matsui were able to package Kunikata as the best of Japanese contemporary art. So, by the time Kaikai Kiki arrived at Art Basel Miami Beach in 2007, Kunikata was selling miniature pornographic sushi for the gleeful western shoppers, dressed up in the booth as a waitress. This was the kind of Japanese contemporary art seen during the 2000s at the world's top art venues. *Irasshaimase! Superflat* shop girls could be bought everywhere over the counter: at art fairs and museum shops the world over.

Looking back, the simple binary of girls' imagery and male fascination has always been there in Japanese contemporary art. Japan's most famous photographer, Nobuyoshi Araki, made a career out of these kinds of obsessions. In the late 80s and early 90s, artists such as Chiezo Taro and Ryoichi Majima were pursuing similar ideas and imagery. Downstream, the photographer Miwa Yanagi made her first international breakthrough using a similar brew, particularly her very successful picture series of mannequin-like shop assistants, *Elevator Girls* (1994-9); although her later work such as *My Grandmothers* – in which a series of young women imagine themselves when they are old and grey (1999-) – or the tempestuous and huge scale *Windswept Women* (2009) offered very different representations of women. And the idea of building art out of the provocation of the *lolikon* (lolita complex) of the *otaku*, owed most to another 90s Geidai artist, Makoto Aida, who took the ideas further than anyone that decade. But its clearest success commercially in the West was



Artist Mariko Mori. Photo by David Sims. Courtesy of SCAI The Bathhouse.



Artist Miwa Yanagi. Courtesy of Yoshiko Isshiki Office.

WOMEN'S ART

through the sharp rise in the mid 90s of Mariko Mori. As a forerunner of what would eventually happen to Cool Japan, it is a salutary tale.

Mariko Mori is younger than Takashi Murakami and Yoshitomo Nara, and came from a completely different background. She was born in metropolitan Tokyo in 1968 into one of Japan's richest families. She was never a conventional art student in Tokyo, which accounts for some of the diffidence with which she has always been received back home in Japan. After studying fashion at the height of the Tokyo bubble in the prestigious Bunka Fashion College, she left at 21 (in 1989) to study art in London. Fashion continued to be a key part of her work, and she dabbled in modelling and fashion photography, using herself as the mannequin for the clothes designs that would become an integral part of the work. Her early London work reflected an experience of the cosmopolitan city around her. There was, for example, some clumsy satire on Lady Diana and an obsession with Vivienne Westwood, more than ten years after punk rock. After London, she moved on to follow an independent study programme at the Whitney Museum in New York. There she absorbed a much harder edge of critical art theory, filtered through the characteristically "political" New York sensibility of post colonialism, identity and gender in art. This was the early 1990s, and in photography the work of Cindy Sherman was everywhere. It was the moment that commercial photography boomed, with the emergence of new video and computer based art using manipulated photographic images. Mori positioned herself here – as the Japanese glamour girl artist in New York.

This all sounds like the dream of the international *freeter* life – a female Nara. Except Mariko Mori of course had the curse of being incredibly well connected and financially privileged from the outset. As the niece of the chair of the board of the Mori Art Museum and the CEO of Tokyo's most powerful development corporation – her aunt and uncle respectively – she had from the start connections, financial possibilities, and opportunities of which others could only dream. There was not much comparison between Yoshitomo Nara and his friends living as so-called "survival artists" in Germany, and Mariko

Mori's fluid, frequent flying, first class existence between London, New York and Tokyo. In one famous anecdote, she arrived at a London gallery in a scruffy neighbourhood looking every inch the New York catwalk model lost in the wrong part of town. They asked, where were her bags? Mori laughed and said she only ever carried a credit card.

In New York, she found the collaborators through art world and family connections to put together the signature images and high tech know how that were to make her career. But she also experienced the kind of stereotyping typical in the Western world: the pretty Asian women in the Western gaze. Her early, most famous work reflected this. As signature images of Cool Japan, there were no better visualization of the Western fantasy of Neo-Tokyo, or indeed the image of the internationally mobile Japanese girl as an object of Western desire – all executed some five or six years before Murakami's *Superflat*. Her famous breakthrough photographs of 1994/5 pictured her as a schoolgirl plaything in a love hotel; a robot doll outside an Akihabara *otaku* shop; a pliant mechanical woman serving tea to irritated salary men; a mermaid sitting on an artificial beach; an anxious cyborg on a busy commuter train. *Play With Me*, she said. These images remained staples of the Western media and tourist fantasy of Neo-Tokyo. There was costume play, transformed identity, elements of performance and weird sex tourism, as well as the self-conscious "neo-pop" reflection on Japanese culture. It was work that exposed openly the male gaze and sex drive that was behind the (limited) appreciation of much Japanese contemporary art, as well as capturing the mid-1990s "post-human" moment.

Mori's breakthrough work was simple, one dimensional, and suitably sensational. It didn't hurt that she was herself a pretty girl, or that the works were executed as impeccable glossy fashion magazine shoots. In their original presentation, they also took on the traditional *Japoniste* trappings of *nihonga* screens, while plugging into hip New York art trends as accompanying live performances. The business dynamic behind the success was also essentially a classic Japanese-New York story. The hugely influential New York galler-

ist, Jeffrey Deitch was, in the mid 1990s, looking for a Japanese girl artist he could market. Initially, he picked up Emiko Kasahara, reckoned at the time by some as potentially the most important Japanese woman artist of the 90s, although she languishes in obscurity now. Kasahara was photogenic enough – Murakami had a crush on her while he was in New York. But her installations, which created orifices and wombs in strange tactile materials – a kind of earlier female version of Ernesto Neto – were visceral and uncompromising. No such problem with Mariko Mori. This was seductive, self-orientalizing, “Made in Japan” pop art that Deitch could easily sell to the Western mainstream. Within two years, with Deitch behind her, she went from obscure gallery showings to a prize winning appearance at the Venice Triennial in 1997. Deitch himself would later be hired by the Mori Building Co. to draft the business strategy for the Mori Art Museum in 2003.

The problem with Mariko Mori’s sensational photo series was that it was a one shot idea. Perhaps as a reaction to this early tumultuous success, Mori, now a global traveller herself, started searching for meaning and substance. The metaphor she grasped was the space age alien in a capsule shooting around the world for a series of glamorous tourist shots: her series *Beginning of the End* (from 1996). Back in New York, she also looked for meaning by making a move familiar among the *neo-Japoniste* artists, which Takashi Murakami has often used: the kitsch appropriation of religious mysticism as a subtext. Mori used first Buddhism, then a mix of more transcendental religious imagery. These were picked up with an earnest seriousness, but never more than superficial and selective appropriation. Struggling to get the back story right, she took advice from famous Japanese photographer Hiroshi Sugimoto, an antiques specialist, getting some basic indications about dress and poses. Mori then started to develop these into a constant theme. But the works were something quite different to the early images: spectacularly expensive productions that required large commercial sponsorship and collaborations with scientists, designers and architects to create space age installations, videos and interac-

tive spaces. One of the scientists involved was even a Nobel prize winner from the University of Tokyo, Masatoshi Koshihara, who had invented a galactic subatomic particle detector. Into this machine, Mori plugged *Tom Na H-iu* (2007), a white, vaguely celtic, chrySTALLINE sculpture which received flashing light messages from across the universe.

This was art with Hollywood sized pretensions. And, unfortunately, Mariko Mori trapped herself in a classic *neo-Japoniste* trope: Japan as futuristic techno-paradise. There she was: the pretty girl in an astronaut's jump suit welcoming the tired space traveller with a few words of mystical Asian religion. It was contemporary Japan as it had been envisaged at the Osaka World Expo of 1970: the landmark exhibition and celebration of Japan's modernity that first wowed the Western world. It was about as far from the Japanese reality of the post 1990s – of crumbling regional towns and grimy city *shitamachi* (“downtown” working class neighbourhoods) – as possible. In the 2000s, it did still look good in one place, though: outside her uncle's Roppongi Hills, where they placed one of her futuristic sculptures for the tourists to enjoy. For awhile, Mori's fantasy visions continued to delight Western publics looking for a taste of Neo-Tokyo in second tier US and European museums, but her serious curatorial and sales credibility fell steadily during the 2000s, especially as 1990s art theories about performance, identity and “post-human” futures became less fashionable. Even more fatal was the shift of Western imagination of the global future from Japan to China and elsewhere in Asia. Especially post 2008, the overblown budgets and credit lists for the work looked irresponsible and tasteless.

There was an early warning lesson here for Takashi Murakami and Kaikai Kiki. By 2011, he had not yet been victim of such a harsh re-evaluation. He has continued the characteristically expensive art bubble style of the pre-2008 era, toying with a similar mix of Japanese pop culture, Asian mysticism, high tech production values, and get-out irony. The spectacular rise – and subsequent decline – of Mariko Mori as a global art superstar underlined the po-

tency of combining Tokyo girls images and *otaku* “little boy” consumers. But it also illustrated the dangers of betting everything on a two dimensional *neo-Japanisme* for a Western art world with congenital attention deficit disorder.

Utsukushii Kuni: Yokoso Japan!

It might be thought that *otaku* style representations of Japan would not go down so well with policy makers. Yet there was a strange alliance between conservative policy makers and *otaku* obsessions, as Cool Japan became official foreign policy in the 2000s.

Before they were swept away by the victory of the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) in the 2009 elections, the last years of unbroken Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) rule were marked, as always, by a series of forgettable prime ministers, stumbling through one political crisis after another. What they talked about, as the economy remained stagnant and Japan’s influence in the world declined, was culture: how to rebrand and repackage Japan’s international image. And so they put *manga* and *anime* on official brochures. Video games and toy character stars replaced cars and computers as the image of Japan’s principle export industries. The men in suits supported a world *cosplay* (costume play) competition, promoting the bureaucrat behind the idea to an ambassadorship. One prime minister, Mr Abe, talked about the *utsukushii kuni* (beautiful country) – a deeply conservative pre-war vision of Japan – while his bureaucrats were hiring J-pop stars like Puffy AmiYumi for *Yokoso Japan* (Welcome to Japan) tourist campaigns. Another, Mr Aso, a huge old school *manga* fan who had appealed to *otaku* in his leadership battle, went one better and talked about Akihabara as a national treasure. In the final, desperate days, the LDP government created a global media storm by appointing three teenage looking girls from Tokyo’s fashion streets in Harajuku and Shibuya – a garish style “Shibuya 109” girl (the style of a famous teen department store), a punk schoolgirl, and a *gosu rori* (gothic lolita) – as the nation’s foreign ministry “Ambassadors of Cute”.

Much of the logic behind these strange policies was built on a set of ideas about Japan's future identified by an American technology journalist, Douglas McGray, in an article for the widely read American *Foreign Policy* journal in 2002. Japan's burgeoning pop cultural and content industries, he argued, could provide an alternative to its former manufacturing and financial influence in the world. Japan could reposition itself internationally, with a new leading role in Asia, through its growing "Gross National Cool" (GNC). Although neither a culture nor Japan specialist, McGray's article was rapidly hailed as visionary in Japan. Travelling around the big cities at the start of the new millennium, McGray was really only observing the tail end of the post-Bubble cultural explosion of the early to mid 90s that was already beginning to fade. But the politicians and bureaucrats seized his words with the fervour of prophecy. This unlikely foreign policy guru was then flown back to Japan to speak to packed policy conference audiences taking notes.

The new branding of Japan borrowed directly from what had been going on for a few years in the art world, as it sought to make a sensational splash for Japanese contemporary art on the international scene. After Takashi Murakami's *Superflat*, the Japan Foundation – on the whole a rather conservative institution usually attuned to avoid offence at all costs – nevertheless thought it a good idea



Japanese Foreign Ministry "Ambassadors of Cute" (2009).
Press photo by MOFA.

to sponsor a huge *otaku* pavilion at the Venice Architectural Biennale in 2004, curated by cultural studies professor Kaichiro Morikawa. The show recreated in explicit terms the ambiance and visual stimulation of Akihabara. The catalogue even included a plastic toy kit by Yuki Oshima – a cult designer who has also featured in Murakami's shows – of a giant cartoon schoolgirl straddling an

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Akihabara train in a mini skirt. Meanwhile, over in New York, it was the equally conservative, corporate funded Japan Society, more known for its sponsorship of classical Japanese arts, who adopted Murakami's *Little Boy*.

This was the Cool Japan of the 2000s. Mid-level bureaucrats involved in implementing these ideas were themselves secret *otaku*, the same original generation as Murakami and Nara. The new cultural policy gave these fans in suits the chance to talk about *manga* characters, *anime*, or a J-pop idol in the middle of a boring policy document. They could mix nerdy graphics and projections of sales in the content industries with images of a maid café, or fashion snaps like Shoichi Aoki's *FRUiTS* (a famous Japanese street fashion magazine). If this was trade and foreign policy, then, it's no surprise that Takashi Murakami, the most successful and most "pop" of Japanese contemporary artists, also became a poster boy for the policy makers. He was one of their star "global performers", as a Japan Foundation brochure described him. Another official document identified him – alongside such names such as fashion designer Issey Miyake, *anime* artist Hayao Miyazaki, star chef Nobu Matsuhisa, and film maker Takeshi Kitano – in its "dream team" of creators who could rescue the Japanese economy.

Of course, it might be a mystery why an ironic and controversial radical, famous for celebrating the culture of the most marginal and despised outsiders in Japanese society, should have so willingly hitched his vision to conservative government policy. Yet the answer lies in what always unifies left and right in Japan: its contempt for America and an underlying nationalist resentment of the West.

During the 2000s, Murakami was always laughing. Laughing at his audience in the West, principally. When his manifestos in Japanese to his catalogues in English are compared, there is a massive gap. In Japanese, he has always been angry and vitriolic in his anti-Americanism. He was, he said, happy to sell a "soy sauce" culture to Westerners if they will buy it. Behind this has been a bitter drive to assert Japanese national culture: to put his contemporary art on

the front row of the starting grid, like Ayrton Senna, the upstart fast car driver from Brazil. For Western viewers and curators, it was nothing but the boundlessly happy neo-pop vision that he sold.

This strategy worked for Murakami because there was for years a startling mismatch going on: between the Japan out there in the struggling cities and regions of a country in decline, and the fantasy Japan in the Western audience's heads, as it enjoyed *Superflat*, *Little Boy* and ©MURAKAMI. This could be boiled down to three peculiar selection mechanisms at work here. It was these ironic differences that lay behind the success of Murakami, Nara and *otaku* style art internationally:

- 1) Timing: Cool Japan peaked worldwide in the mid to late 2000s, yet by all accounts the Tokyo scene was much more interesting in the 90s.
- 2) Selectivity: What got represented and consumed in the West as Cool Japan was always a narrow slice of any given creative field.
- 3) Taste: The selections of Cool Japan were a lot more underground, marginal, and weird than either mainstream or hip pop culture in Japan.

One of the key players in the making of Cool Japan in the US, Eric Nakamura, has a good answer for all this. Nakamura is second generation Japanese American, and the cultural entrepreneur behind the Los Angeles based magazine, shop and website for Asian pop culture, *Giant Robot*. At a business conference in LA to discuss transnational opportunities in Japanese media and creative industries, a Japanese audience member asked angrily why Westerners like him only pay attention to a tiny amount of the popular culture coming out of Japan. Why do they distort everything with their weird selection? Nakamura was unfazed. He said he knew that real Japan was out there, but like any country most of it is boring and provincial. Like all the fans in the West he was only interested in the 2 or 3% of it that was cool from his point of view. In other words, when he started going to Japan he only had time for Neo-Tokyo. *Giant Robot* magazine started printing features about this stuff in the mid 1990s, originally

photocopied for friends out of their bedroom. So it took a long time to make Cool Japan cool in the US: more than ten years. *Giant Robot* was among the first to run feature stories on Yoshitomo Nara and Takashi Murakami. It treated them like any of the cheap commercial pop art in California, which is fun and easy to consume, and possible to pick up as postcards or t-shirts, or \$30 or \$40 for a print. Soon Nakamura and his Chinese-American partner, Martin Wong, had a little empire with two stores and a restaurant in LA, plus stores in San Francisco and New York.

But what about the question of taste? The art was superflat, but there was some kind of power underneath the surface. One American curator in LA, Catherine Taft, put it nicely when she described this kind of Japanese contemporary art. It was all “eye candy”: easy to like, very attractive, yet it was those disturbing, subliminal messages underneath that hooked the viewer. During the 2000s, Western viewers let these Japanese artists get away with it – because they were “typically” Japanese. The presentation of women and girls in Japanese art would not be acceptable for an American artist. But *Little Boy* and *Tokyo Girls Bravo* thrived on this subliminal thrill: the underlying sex,



Shibuya crossing at night. Photo by Ann-Christina Lauring Knudsen.

strangeness and violence that Westerners identified with Cool Japan. Contemporary art viewers like to feel they are “on the edge”. Even the anti-American nationalism was a kind of thrill for countercultural viewers in the US,

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especially in the era of George W. Bush. At Murakami's big show at MOCA, in 2008, the entry looked like a children's adventure playground, but the monstrous masturbating giant and the girl with milk spraying out of her breasts had some children sobbing with fear. Yet no scandal erupted. And Nara was anything but kids' stuff: with all that anger and sorrow in the children's eyes. There was something very dark going on in these images. As such, American collectors entertained their own rumours on what it was all really about. While Cool Japan reigned, they enjoyed the ambivalence as the sign that this was truly great art.

In the 1990s, Takashi Murakami's contemporary Makoto Aida and others in Japan also made art out of similar sources: the marginal extremes of contemporary Japanese society. But they pushed it way over the line. Many people in Japan think Aida is the most important artist of his generation. Yet he has been misunderstood or ignored in Europe and America. Murakami always recognized he and Aida shared similar ideas and sensibilities, but Murakami has been far more effective in masking it with a flat and attractive surface. In one of his best works, from 1996, Aida painted Mitsubishi Zeros circling in a *moebius* loop over a burning New York skyline, appropriately enough in the flat Japanese painterly style on folding bedroom screens. It was hard to see this one going down well at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. And, indeed, when it was shown post 9/11 as part of an Anti-Americanism show at the Whitney Museum in 2003, it didn't. There was a scandal. When Aida went to the self-styled Capital of the Western World in 2000, he had a hard, disillusioning time. Murakami, however, came home from New York triumphant, one in a million. He did it His Way. The underlying message was still there. He called his show after the name of the bomb that flattened Hiroshima, and mentioned mushroom clouds and *Akira*. But then he turned the mushrooms into cartoons, and filled the show full of happy flowers. He made it big in America, showing off marginal and deviant art from Japan made by his friends back home to the applause of a basically ignorant foreign audience.

Now Cool Japan is over. Politically, the tide had turned in Japan well before the disasters of 2011. The new DPJ government scrapped the idea of a manga museum, and turned away from culture in favour of economic priorities. The Tokyo Metropolitan government passed legislation in December 2010 that criminalized the commercial use of sexual images of virtual cartoon characters that looked underage. There was a threat to close down Akihabara and half the *manga*, *anime* and toy figurine industries with it. It became dangerous to sell Japan as “Sensation”.

Murakami had a magical run. Cool Japan celebrated Japan, when there wasn't much to celebrate otherwise. Depressing politics; shaky global business; bad relations with Asia; a demographic crisis looming; a lot of young people locked in bedrooms with psychological problems. Also, after 9/11 in the US, there was a need for images of shining silver towers with flowers and happy dinosaurs, not one collapsing, with smoke and flames billowing out. So the tourists got their ©MURAKAMI Roppongi Hills monopoly game, with its happy dinosaur, and plenty of smiling flowers. They had their unattainable cartoon girls, always giving service with smile. They had Groovision chappies staring blankly back. These were, during the 2000s, the kinds of things they might have hoped and wished for when they visited Japan: the things Mr Abe might have been suggesting when he talked of an *utsukushii kuni*.

So it may have seemed silly, but Cool Japan made sense for Murakami and the politicians that used it. There was one Japanese writer I talked with who had nationalist views on international relations and Japanese wartime history that quite shocked me. He reserved his biggest scorn for the Japan Foundation, and the policy of promoting *otaku* culture as an image of contemporary Japan. He thought it was a conspiracy of New York Liberals and Democrats and what he called “Asia-loving multiculturalists” in Japan who wanted to present Japan to the West as a “submissive female”. He felt ashamed by this representation. It was wrong to present Japan as an *otaku* paradise, he told me. But in a way, he was wrong. For political purposes, while Cool Japan lasted, the opposite

was true. What better than representing Japan in the world as eye candy? Flat, colourful art that put a smile on your face. Who could see past those computerized colours, those simple seductive lines, the happy celebration of all things “pop”? The screen was captivating and complete. The nationalist politicians and civil servants understood this art very well. Behind the screen, you could do anything you want.

How to be A-Zillionaire: Commerce, Design and Art in the Superflat World

The Art Entrepreneurship Theory

Takashi Murakami's blend of deviant *otaku* style sexuality and warped representations of post-Bubble Japan was certainly a potent cocktail for the international art market. But it was not his greatest work. As emphasized by curator Paul Schimmel, Murakami's most important contribution as far as world art historians will be concerned was his revolutionary practice of commercialization and branding. It took Andy Warhol's notions, turning artistic creation into commercial factory line production, far beyond anything that Warhol dreamed possible. It was this that positioned him for great success during the global economy and art bubble of the late 1990s and early 2000s, but it also drove him to a conceptual dead end when the era and the currents on which he had

been surfing came to an end in 2008 with the Lehman shock and collapse of the world financial markets.

Viewed historically, Murakami's greatest single work could well be his self-help book, *The Art Entrepreneurship Theory*, a runaway bestseller in Japan in 2007. In 2011, he published a follow up, *Art Theory Battle*. In these books, he spoke to the wannabe *kuriieta*. These were the young students or adults who have grown up in the post-Bubble era, but who wanted to be free, individual, and above all creative in their life and work. I did it my way and here is how to follow, Murakami said. In plugging into the self discovery cult of *jibun sagashi*, Murakami evoked the most powerful individualist ideology of the times. The 2007 bestseller was also part of the self-help boom of the 90s and 2000s, joining many other famous creative gurus of the decade.

The Art Entrepreneurship Theory was a book, of course, unlike *Superflat* and *Little Boy*, not written for foreigners. The cheerful, slightly sardonic translated voice heard in those carefully airbrushed catalogues, was replaced by Murakami himself in the original version: an angry, bitter, often vitriolic vision of Japanese art and culture. He poured scorn on the international system that he had learned to play, and unleashed great gales of anger against the stupidity of the domestic Japanese art establishment. He lambasted Japan's museums, curators, art market, art critics and art schools, while idealistically seeking to smash this system and replace it with his own. It was a didactic and paternalistic vision, yet full of the irrational exuberance of the global art bubble years.

As during those years, the bottom line was money, and so this is how the book started: "How I sold my work for a billion yen" (\$1 million). In 2007, the idea of making \$15 million for a sculpture was still a fantasy, but other works had already broken the \$1 million barrier. These are by no means unbelievable figures for contemporary global art. A famous triptych by Francis Bacon sold the same day as *My Lonesome Cowboy* for \$87 million; top works by Damien Hirst or Jeff Koons have routinely sold for more than \$10 million. Modernist

and impressionist art can sell for even more – as it did when Japanese buyers were at the height of their outrageous spending spree in the late 1980s.

As Murakami analyzed it in his book, what gives art work value is telling a good story about it. It is, first, about the time and refinement that goes into the conceptual idea – something not taught at Japanese art schools, where technique is everything. It matters little that Damien Hirst’s famous \$12 million shark started rotting in the box after five years. He could just make it again for the collector. It was the patented idea that counted. The idea for Murakami was to position himself in that history, fitting at once with the dominant discourses of the international art world, while also – in a post-colonial world – portraying an idea of where his art came from in global or world art terms. Murakami said this was “knowing your own identity”: about recognising the Western gaze at Japan and playing along with it for all its worth. Murakami played the western art game and won. He sold them back the image that they most wanted to consume, then made a *gaisen kouen* (triumphal return performance) to come back validated to stardom in Japan. Phase two, he says, would be him showing to the world “the real thing”, now on his Japanese terms.

Presenting post-war *otaku* culture, and its inversion of American pop culture was all important to *Superflat* and *Little Boy*’s success. But Murakami’s credibility was solidly anchored in a realization that the only existing narrative about Japanese art traditionally in the West is the classical *Nihonjin ron* (the theory of Japanese cultural uniqueness) said to be found in its classical *ukiyo-e* and later *nihonga* arts. These are the only modern era arts from Japan that have won their recognized place in the international pantheon – the triumph of *Japonisme* in the late 19th and early 20th century. So, as the old Japanese culture was linked with the new, in the *Superflat* ethos, Murakami was able to hitch his work to obvious postmodern ideas (from the 1970s and 80s) of blurring of high art and low popular culture, East and West, amorality and consumerism. All could be associated with the pre-existing historical “Japanese” genius for flatness. This was a further reason why Murakami, for all his

truculent radical views, was easy to absorb into a nationalist foreign policy frame. Running together traditional and contemporary Japanese culture was a recurrent theme in Japanese “soft power” propaganda of the last few years. It is also the only way Western art historians know of narrating this relation. Paul Schimmel laughs proudly at how he has specialized in “turning young UCLA Japanese art historians to the dark side”, recruiting young scholars to give art historical depth to Murakami’s flat presentations – Michael Darling for *Superflat*, Mika Yoshitake for the MOCA show. Writing scholarly footnotes is an important part of the value-making business of putting an artist’s name in art history.

But more important than this scholarly procedure – which is familiar from the massive literature on Murakami that his “story” has helped generate – was the thoroughgoing commitment to commercialism and branding. From the moment Murakami hit the spot in the mid 90s, he stayed right on theme. Murakami’s time in New York was by all accounts a fairly unhappy one personally. He found the place tough to deal with. But surrounded by the pressures of the American art market and gallery system, Murakami learned that he must dump his over-intellectual Japanese art world preoccupations – that he didn’t need the simulationist theory or the Dadaist attitude that launched his career in Japan. He just needed to brand himself “Japanese”. The meticulous *nihonga* techniques he learned at school could still be important. Not so much thematically, rather as a training in something exotic to Western eyes – particularly the painstaking attention to detail and finesse, so much associated with Japanese arts.

One of his very early works parodied the slogan of the famous Japanese toy maker, Tamiya: “Takashi: First in Quality” (1991). High production values were a big part of Murakami’s success. Attention for detail was after all also a great classic Japanese post-war corporate virtue. Take what the West does – the production technique and marketing savvy – and sell it back to them with improved added value. An entire boom economy from the the 1960s to 1980s

was based on this idea. It is what made Toyota great. Murakami's world beating formula was this: Warhol + Koons + Hirst, only better. His works technically always looked superb.

A good example was his use of translations in the catalogues. They were all translated by three or four different native and Japanese hands, and carefully compared and worked over until they were just right. Westerners will simply not read the dreadfully translated texts that routinely accompany art catalogues in Japan. Japanese cultural exports have often failed for the simple reason that this good practice is not followed. Here is a good example, which can be found in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs brochure on *Creative Japan* that came out in 2007 as part of the Cool Japan policy. In it, contemporary art was proudly presented alongside *manga*, *anime*, video games, fashion, food, literature, design and architecture as one of the nation's great new cultural exports. The section on art was authored by Yumi Yamaguchi, a self-appointed "cheerleader" of Japanese contemporary art at home and abroad. Her writings are easy and simplistic – a gentle introduction from an enthusiastic eye. But the translation of her text in this lavish booklet for foreigners was laughably incompetent, a classic example of "lost in translation". The text trivialized Murakami's theories into one brief paragraph, but the mess it made of Nara was unforgivable: "He is known for his idiosyncratic treatments of young girls with distinctive facial expressions highlighted by slanted eyes". One could hear the howls of laughter following Bill Murray up the corridor.

Murakami never made such mistakes. He took a similar meticulous attitude to the production of objects, such as the figurines. Returning to Japan, he immediately enlisted commercial figurine producers such as Shuichi Miyawaki – a cult hero of the *otaku* world – to help him realize his visions in art form. The eight foot plastic monsters he then took to *otaku* collector fairs – with smaller limited edition versions on sale – were a shock to the shy, nerdy collectors who normally collect eight inch doll figures to pet and love. Many were unhappy seeing their lifestyle and obsessions parodied this way as "art".

But the early versions still sold out. The Hiropon company was first founded with a handful of close associates: notably Murakami's key right hand man, Mr., a hardcore *otaku* artist, whose openly paedophile paintings and toys were also taken to international success by Kaikai Kiki and Tomio Koyama. Initially, they worked on a number of other ideas and prototypes – some of which took hardcore *lolicon* (lolita complex) forms – as they worked out a line of products for the new company. The “staff” came next – young artists, ready to work for the corporation, including the “Tokyo Girls” Murakami went on to present to the world. Most were volunteers at first, and many came and went under the intense work pressure demanded of them at the company's Saitama base. But in five years the workforce expanded to more than 20 regular personnel. Murakami also took the ambitious step of opening an American “factory” in New York in 1997, which dealt mainly in painting production lines of his signature works. It drew mostly on visiting Japanese art students who usually cannot work in the US for more than three months. A PR office there also dealt with international press. The exploitation of young artists as a workforce has become routine practice in the contemporary art business – check any major artists' studio. But Murakami's studios were notable for the sheer number of willing workers and the degree of organizational control he imposed on their work. This included rigidly defined corporate roles, check in times, and even early morning team callisthenics and a pep talk from the CEO, who often slept in his office. This was nothing like Andy Warhol's party atmosphere “factory” of the 1960s. Murakami *really* had a Fordist-style production line. In the two locations, during the 2000s, up to 100 employees were working away on computers, models, construction, packaging, marketing, accountancy and PR, micro-managing every detail of the production line from first sketch to installation. If his art all looked and felt seamlessly corporate, that's because it was.

The other secret of Murakami's success was his talent as an organizer. From the beginning, curation was as much a part of his art practice as making his

own shows. He sought alternative venues for art and he took work not seen as important and presented them as the best of Japanese contemporary art. He completely ignored the dominant art system. *Superflat* was a sample of friends, famous pop cultural figures, and young unknowns, along with some of the best figures in contemporary commercial design. Murakami added one image from Yoshitomo Nara – who was by then a star in his own right – and contributed just one work of his own, the famous eyeball poster. Murakami took care of all the production, marketing and PR, with a brilliantly written catalogue and manifesto, and then just put his own name in lights on the cover. *Superflat* was revolutionary in that it showed you could take commercial arts from other fields, or pluck artists straight out of school and, with the right packaging, put value on them in both the local and global contemporary art context. Almost overnight it brought into question the whole value system of the Japanese art world: of slowly accumulating credentials from schools, galleries, critic, and museums – in short, of building up a conventional career.

The *Pop Life* show at the Tate Modern in London in 2009 gave Murakami the honour of the final room, positioning him as the last of the line of art-as-branding and commercial production running from Andy Warhol through Jeff Koons, Damien Hirst and others, to the mid 2000s global art bubble. Conceived before the financial crash of 2008 with the title *Sold Out*, the curators were forced by the artists to change its name, toning down their implicit critique of the artists as puppets to global capitalism. Either way it still all looked very tasteless in the context of the economic recession. It underlined how much Murakami's commercial logic might be the end of the line for this kind of brash style of money-driven contemporary art.

But what became apparent in the late 2000s was how the real story in fact was all about Takashi Murakami's relation to Japan. It became clear that recognition in Japan, getting his page in Japanese art history, is what really matters for him. It was not idle rhetoric: Murakami really wanted to smash the system. But, at the same time, he also craved acceptance. The Tokyo art world

may have celebrated his big auction sales, and Kaikai Kiki may have spent a fortune buying monthly advertizing space and special features in the leading Japanese contemporary art magazine, *Bijutsu Techo*. But money doesn't buy love. Practically nobody in Tokyo ever has a kind word for Murakami. "Takashi" became a caricature they could see on TV, wearing a tacky Louis Vuitton jacket, shouting at art students on the "Beat" Takeshi Kitano show for their complacency and lack of ambition. He broke with his closest associates in the Japanese art world – by the late 2000s about the only person he was still on speaking terms with was Nara. So Murakami has gone it alone. His people were not the insider Japanese art world. But he has had another resource to turn to: the *kuriieita* masses. These are the followers who could give him the love he craves. He would lead them to the promised land. Murakami set out to smash the art system: the lame art education, the exploitative galleries, the parochial debates, the ineffective market, the claustrophobic schools. And he replaced it with his own: the school of GEISAI.

Nara as Businessman

Whatever they think of Takashi Murakami, everybody loves Yoshitomo Nara. Nara was the quieter partner in the "New Pop Revolution", but he scored comparable local and global success while losing none of his credibility or insouciant rock star image in the process. The eternal, ageless dreamer, he even got all the girls. It always rankled with Murakami, who is driven by his "asshole competitiveness", as he admits.

Nara was never an ideas man; he is not a theorist. He has always had very little interesting to say about his own work. It's all in the imagery, the craft, and the feeling of the work: old fashioned aesthetics which register less in academia, but which may have much longer lasting impact. There have been few contemporary artists whose work is so apparently guileless and simple, and yet so absolutely, immediately, recognizable. The power of the work lay in just how close it is to the charm of children's book illustration: a sheer com-

mercialism with its insidious *kowa-kawaii* (creepy cute) hook, that Murakami never got close to with his brands and characters.

The fact is, after Cool Japan, they now have only each other to talk to. Both have maintained a determinately autonomous and sometimes hostile stance to the mainstream Tokyo art world, guarding their independence as agents from galleries and the media, and displaying the confidence and ego of artists that know that there is no one else locally who can touch them on the international stage. It was their shared American experience, in Los Angeles, and more generally in dealing with the American gallery system and art market, which created this alliance. They were thrown together at UCLA simply because they were both Japanese, but the friendship and mutual respect they developed lies in the depth of their respective ambitions. Murakami still calls Nara to compare strategies, or anxiously discuss his next big – maybe foolish – move.

Nara's naïve image is a front – as it must be for an artist who has been continually exhibited, internationally famous, and is now well past 50. Nara always was, in many ways, the cooler business head of the two stars. Murakami's big sales were spectacular, but he didn't have an extensive in-depth inventory. The suspicion of insider dealing with Gagosian, Bernard Arnault (who owns Louis Vuitton and Christie's auction house) and François Pinault hung over his landmark sales. The massive leaps in value during the art bubble years also meant his prices were fragile. Nara's prices rose over the years in a steady, unbroken ascent. His works range from famous paintings that went for over \$1 million in the auction house, right the way down to mass produced commercial editions selling for a few dollars on an open air market. But the big money was always in the middle range of collectibles, where his inventory was massive.

I once got caught in the Nara trap myself, trying to pick up a litho print at TKG Editions (Tomio Koyama's small shop) in Ginza: no 70 in a series of 72, a very sweet but incredibly simple colour drawing of an angry girl exclaiming "Beh!". The endearment is every bit as important to the sale as the name. It has

always been the key to Nara's failsafe charm – his pictures always remind you of someone. I asked the price... Wow! It seemed like a bargain, until I worked out I'd got my zeros mixed up. Not \$300 but *san jyuu man en*, approximately \$3000 at the time. If very minor multiple prints like this run off at \$3000 a piece (x 72), and the most expensive for over a \$1 million, the mathematics is obvious. Checking in three years later, TKG still had the very last in the series on their books. It was currently hanging in the Mori Art Museum shop, they said, and was now listed at \$8000. I looked on longingly, the would-be collector. On paper, I could have made \$5000 on it in three years – if I'd emptied my bank account in 2007. There was clearly a solid operation going on here. Nara has works in many major Western collections. He has been avidly collected by Sue Hancock and the Rubell family in the US, Frank Cohen in the UK. But even more significantly, Nara has strength in depth value for Japanese and Asian collectors, who have been more likely to give wide berth to Murakami.

Much of Nara's inventory in the 2000s was in fact largely undocumented. When fakes were exposed in some Asian auction sales, it pointed to how the real power of Nara's work lay in its unquantified nature. To satisfy my longing for a print, I could instead go buy a small copy on Spitalfields flea market in London, alongside similar "works" by English graffiti star, Banksy. Nara copies exist alongside all the works he has given away and lost track of. Nara, himself, has an elephant's memory for people he has given work to, and has been known to fly into a wild rage with anyone who has broken the gift and tried to sell on the work. Individual works were always signed with legal contracts preventing any flipping onto the market. But at the same time, the fakes and copies have guaranteed another level of fame.

As Tomio Koyama's longest standing and most important artist, the two had a close but difficult relationship. They had a series of arguments about sales strategies. By 2009, Nara was keen to go completely independent of the commercial gallery structure, looking for staff to man his own independent operation. In the meantime, he was always unusually powerful in dictating

how Tomio Koyama presented his work. He would tip off Koyama about new artists, and foisted any number of derivative manga style and *kawaii* artists onto the gallerist, including several who were taught by the same teacher, Nobuya Hitsuda at Aichi City University of Art. Koyama himself always had a *kawaii* taste, but Nara kept them coming. During Cool Japan, the combination guaranteed a distorting effect on the value of some rather mediocre artists in Tokyo because of Koyama's big name. And so *kawaii* art became what Tokyo was known for, and the sole reason why some collectors go there.

The real key to understanding Nara's success, though, is the fact he was an artist who made his name outside the white cube of the gallery, on the pages of books. Initial reactions to Nara's shows in the mid 1990s didn't know whether to treat him as anything more than a character illustrator. He had been around since the late 1980s commercial design/illustration boom, and had tried unsuccessfully to present himself in this context. Some early commentaries, such as one by the influential curator Eriko Osaka, associated him with the notion of *heta uma* (intentionally clumsy or badly skilled art). This had been developed by conceptualists such as Hideki Nakazawa as a kind of levelling anti-art strategy in *avant garde* circles. But the underlying point with Nara was commercial – and nothing to do with his formal technique, which is very good. He was swept along by a different trend – the independent book publishing boom of the late 1990s. When the second book, *Slash With a Knife*, was picked up in late 1998 by Masakazu Takei of FOIL, it was because this small time magazine entrepreneur and photo curator had spied a non-art world market for the work. Tokyo has a large small scale book publishing industry able to produce and distribute books quickly; Japan has a ravenous appetite for printed works. Photography had similarly been pioneered in this form. Araki and Daido Moriyama made their careers through publishing in books, not hanging in galleries. It was the same story with Nara, who overnight found a huge cult audience by side stepping the conventional gallery and museum system.

Outside of the carefully controlled art market context, Nara was always indifferent about price for his works or how they were copied. Fans need to collect, he said. They have no money, and they need to be able to buy stuff as souvenirs, even if it's next to worthless in art terms. Murakami's entire theory was grounded in a simulationist aesthetic of "remake and remodel," borrowing freely from commercial design and toy makers. Yet he tied himself up in legal knots by trying to sue companies that "copied" his DOB brand image. Nara just learned to let go and watch his own images reproduce. Moreover, as Murakami notoriously sought to consolidate his Fordist model of production under one roof from start to finish, Nara organized his business as a series of loose franchise contracts to outside firms who took care of business while leaving him with clean hands. And so he had Lamm Fromm stocking his products out of a base in Yoyogi, Workaholics Inc. producing made-in-China dogs for him in Harajuku, and Chronicle books publishing worldwide out of San Francisco. Yoshi Kawasaki and his company 2K by Gingham in LA took Nara's images and did the same thing with T-shirts internationally that Masakazu Takei did with the picture books and postcards. The spin offs seemed to be infinite.

Distribution was the other side of the business. Nara's work, however, casual as it may have seemed, showed up not only in museum shops, but in alternative art stores and off beat hipster boutiques the world over. These are the kind of fashionable stores where affluent adults, locked into a fad-obsessed adolescence well into their late 20s, 30s, even 40s, hang out and fill their lives with "cool" stuff. Once Nara started producing three dimensional toys, he positioned himself at the head of the 2000s adult vinyl collectible boom. Nara thus sold in a lot of contexts where no-one had any idea who the artist was – it just looked "cute" or "cool". You might well own a Nara without knowing it – that was part of the charm and commercial power of his art. It was the base of a pyramid atop which stood his major auction and gallery sales.

And so Nara kept giving it all away. When he let the museum in Seoul keep all his work, Tomio Koyama argued with him about the danger to sales. Nara

knew he would just get a permanent museum collection in his name. Nara may not have worried about the sales, but he was screaming down the phone and at meetings with the curators when they screwed up the catalogues or the website. Koyama was also furious about the café in Omotesando, that Nara set up with a partner as a permanent installation of his *A to Z* show. Parts of the famous Yokohama show were installed there, together with a small “shed” that recreated the atmosphere of the tour for fans, while charging Y700 for a cup of *café latte*. It is questionable who was the better businessman.

As *A to Z* became an almost permanent, endless world tour – with dozens of variations in different countries – Nara perfected a business organization so much more effective and manageable than Murakami’s authoritarian corporate model. Nara always came over as the consummate slacker CEO, while being an extraordinarily manipulative and demanding individual according to those who worked closely with him. He succeeded by channelling the spirit of the voluntary feel good NPO. His organizational experiments in his home town, Hirosaki, were striking for how well they tapped into a different feeling in Japan after the Kobe earthquake of 1995 – the same spirit as seen again after March 2011. With local aid, he set up his art operation as a charitable NPO, with himself as a sleeping director. He got his friends and fans in to help build the exhibitions. They called all this “collaboration”. As Nara said, with a charming smile: “This is where I started to get a kick out of it – it’s like there were a hundred of me”. It was the community spirit he inspired – but it was all in *his* name. After *A to Z*, Midori Matsui was less impressed with these politics. It no longer conformed to her introvert “Micropop” theories. She criticized Nara over the Hirosaki shows for their “regressive populism”. Yet still she pointed to its basic power: of “how it had become a contemporary equivalent of folk art, representing and consoling people who feel alienated from modern art”. His home region, meanwhile, could not believe its luck. The visitors in Hirosaki or at the Aomori Museum of Art are all there to see Nara. He has become as much a part of the local tourist industry, in this sad and grey corner of Japan, as the region’s famous lacquerware or seafood.

It is hard to think of any comparable story in global contemporary art. Talk of Takashi Murakami's explosive anger, exploitation, bad feelings and resignations have always been rife about Kaikai Kiki. Nara's massive operation has never been portrayed as anything but an enormous and fun fan club. Not everyone was happy at Hirosaki, though. Some fans vowed they wouldn't come back, after the hard labour involved. Nara kept his money tight, and expected everyone to pay their own way at after work drinks parties. Not everyone could live off his own preferred diet of cigarettes and curry rice. Nara's operation was thus a rolling organization, in which he managed to get everyone working for him while having next to nobody on the payroll. Yet, as a collective art practice, Nara's methods were never theorized as important. Paul Schimmel, for example, doesn't get Nara at all. Ask him, and he thinks he is just stuck doing pictures of little girls and cute dogs. Well, yes, and that's the point: at \$8000 a pop Nara has been much closer to becoming like Picasso signing a beer mat than Murakami. Or, for that matter, Damien Hirst, when he signs off on another one of his automated \$50,000 spin paintings. Nobody would ever describe one of Hirst's cynical rejoinders to the emptiness of contemporary art cute or cool. Nobody *loves* Damien Hirst or his work, however much it is theoretically admired. Nara is almost universally adored.

Yoshitomo Nara's identity as a populist "folk artist" – with very solid sales – may augur well for his prospects in the era after the global boom of the 2000s, just as Murakami may be dated by his association with the branded "pop life" of Warhol and Koons. It may even allow him to survive the demise of Cool Japan. Like Murakami, though, it is Japan and its long term regard for him, in the end, that Nara cares about. And on this point, Nara has unquestionably ruled as the most popular and visible contemporary Japanese artist. It's the fans that count. When he started writing his blog before Yokohama, it was the master stroke – the moment that Nara made the transition from cult pop-art star to major cultural figure. Nara has made work that is instantly recognisable, loveable, but then copyable by all. He was always an artist in whom everyone shared.

There was little development in his style as he moved from gallery painting to installation artist. But he alone turned his audience into Nara producers as well as Nara consumers. What other major contemporary artist could send out the word and have thousands of fans making the art for him, as they did in Yokohama and Hirosaki? Forget Yoshitomo Nara? There doesn't seem much danger of that. The audiences have kept growing. At an opening in Japan in mid 2011, the now married 50-something artist still had a long line of teenage girls queuing for him to draw on their arms. The cult continues.

The World is Flat

Takashi Murakami and Yoshitomo Nara's sudden rise to prominence as global artists owed much to the fact they were both consummate artists of the so called "Web 2.0" moment. Around the year 2000 the internet came of age, with a second generation of technology introduced that expanded its reach and power beyond all recognition. With the introduction of broadband, an ever-improving line of visual software applications such as Photoshop and Illustrator, the expansion of home made websites and blogging, 3G telephones with cameras and internet (in Japan, years before anywhere else), affordable home scanning and on-line sharing and, a little later, social networking and wiki sites, all kinds of local and global communication or information flows were transformed.

In this new world, digital and virtual imaging takes over. It became as easy to steal and mass produce art or photography as two clicks on an internet website, and just as easy to manipulate it on a flat computer screen. The really smart idea of *Superflat* and the word of mouth internet gossip that led to Nara's Yokohama breakthrough was not its specific *otaku* style content, or even any *neo-Japoniste* strategies these artists may have had, but the generic medium shift onto which these visual ideas latched. Murakami and Nara's art worked best as art taken out of the gallery and put indifferently into mass produced books, on t-shirts, as collectible toys and badges, on video screens,

on websites, and instantly copied-in-China luxury bags. Art gave way to new technologies of design and illustration, and the power of instantly reproducible imagery. Artists' names became brand names. Art became something communicated and shared through blogs and virtual networks by fans, not only or principally through physical gallery shows and auction sales for rich elites. Murakami and Nara were the two visible Japanese artists most boldly embracing this global shift. Their art made a virtue out of Walter Benjamin's gloomy predictions about the work of art in the age of mechanical production.

Superflat art of the kind mastered by Murakami and Nara, in short, plugged perfectly into the remarkable global flattening that was just coming online in the year 2000. That is "flat" as understood in the famous book by the *New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman, *The World is Flat*, published in 2005. In it, Friedman identified the essence of technology driven globalization. How it is collapsing cultural borders and global distances, democratizing production, distribution and consumption, as well as outsourcing the origins of culture to new parts of the globe. Murakami and Nara's art concentrated Japan into a simple digital code that was flat and easy to understand: Japanese yet "odourless", as Waseda University sociologist Koichi Iwabuchi puts it. Something that could be copied the world over, and everybody could like. It is the same power that lay behind *manga* and *anime*'s global explosion of the 1990s and 2000s, as well as the astonishing success of Pokemon or Hello Kitty. In this world, complex ideas or feelings are much better communicated through imagery and instant-impact design. Imagery and graphics took over from text with the internet revolution: visual creativity became the new rock and roll. Everyone now wanted to be an artist or a graphic designer – or, more precisely, something in between.

Murakami and Nara, of course, were not of this digital generation. They had to rely on much younger collaborators and staff to operationalize their ideas. But this was a *modus operandi* that suited well the new role of the artist as CEO of a branding agency with a staff of assistants, working at the borders of art and design, aiming at global markets. A good case in point is the design group,

Enlightenment, led by Hiro Sugiyama, who provided some of the signature images of the *Superflat* show. For a start, the disciplinary distinction between art and design is an artificial Western notion in the Japanese context. The blending of art and design in Japan is as old as the Japanese visual arts themselves. Historically, design has always had a stronger institutionalized schooling than the fine arts. There is therefore no implicit superiority of a fine art career, and the commercial infrastructure and impact of design has always also been an important part of its creative status. During the 1970s and 80s boom years in the Japanese economy, contemporary art of international standing in Japan had barely yet emerged, but Japan's commercial designers were already received as global leaders. Their ideas and images were linked to products that embodied the notion of Japan as the new image of an alternative Asian future.

In this period, graphic designers dominated the visual arts in Japan. Big commercial shows with prestigious competitions in places such as the Parco department store made stars of designers, turning their works into commercial art – and suggesting to many artists and theorists at the time that “art” itself was finished with the power of new technology and visual forms. An artist such as Hiro Sugiyama, part of the same generation as Takashi Murakami and Yoshitomo Nara, found no way to pursue an artistic career other than through commercial design fields and education. The channels for a conventional art career as understood in the West – through art school, galleries, the market and museums – simply did not exist in Japan in the 1980s. Freelance commercial design work, with art on the side, thus became a common route for an older generation of art stars, who were all graphic designers – including cult figures going back to the 60s such Keiichi Tanaami or Tadanori Yokoo, as well as the big prizewinning cult artist-designers of the 1980s shows, such as Shinro Ohtake or Katsuhiko Hibino. The work they were already doing in the 1980s was not a lot different in its “pop” sensibility or its attractive “flatness” than the art that was to later become a global sensation – in fine art – in the 1990s. Takashi Murakami, for one, long denied the influence from Shinro

Ohtake that is obvious enough in his work and style. Murakami and Nara indeed first tried to present their work within the competitive design fields, but were not skilled enough as graphic artists.

Operating out of an office close to Tama art school, Enlightenment are a small group of four or five artists, with a classic corporate structure. While publically presented as a collective, Sugiyama has all the ideas, and has over the years brought in a changing roster of younger collaborators through his art teaching. The younger partners do the work on the computers: actualizing or extending his basic sketches. They also make the tea, clear up, and defer to the master on all business matters. Sugiyama's big break came through his invitation to become a VJ for live shows by the New York Japanese musician Towa Tei, one member of the early 80s pop group Deee-lite. Like his older peers in graphic design, building a cult status – and eventually international recognition – was achieved outside the bounds of conventional high art. But the blurring of design and art as a career positioned him, as it positioned others in Japan, to be at the cutting edge of global art trends in the late 90s and early 2000s.

This was, then, another source of *Superflat's* great power, as it was in parallel terms for Yoshitomo Nara's book publishing and toy manufacturing crossovers. The signature images of *Superflat* were straightforward forms of contemporary Japanese graphic design – Enlightenment's computerized portrait of Ayrton Senna, Groovisions, irresistible Chappies, Nara's doleful little characters. In Japan, putting all this in Parco department store was business as usual: cult graphic design in a large public commercial context. Transposed to an elite Western art gallery – in the pop cultural capital of the world, Los Angeles – it was dynamite. It mattered little that few of the artists on show had any kind of conventional art career credibility back in Japan. It was a Japanese equivalent of the transvaluation of low art from the street into a high art in a white cube context, that was being effected elsewhere in the art world with graffiti artists such as Banksy and Shepard Fairey, and (a little later) with fashion designers such as Hussein Chalayan or Viktor and Rolf.

This is why the timing of Murakami and Nara's global breakthrough looked like such a stroke of *zeitgeist* genius. Their art was carried mainstream into the far bigger, new technology driven flows and trends of popular culture. Fine art is always at best in the slipstream of these far hipper and edgier trends. At worst, it is a stuffy, clunky, elite version of younger, cooler forms of creativity that are moving around the planet far more rapidly through more instantaneous channels of communication. Murakami and Nara were among the first fine artists to hitch a lift with these channels. They presented something that itself looked cool, or at least irresistibly cute, and certainly exotic, in a world overwhelmed with a choice of other similar brand images.

The global art business was repositioning itself culturally during these years. As has been brilliantly diagnosed by the British art critic, Julian Stallabrass, it became a vehicle for cultural globalization and city place branding that has itself transformed museums, galleries and art festivals from staid repositories of national high culture, into front line tourist attractions for high end global consumption. With new technologies, art itself was liberated from the flat canvas on white walls, to take multiple, ever more spectacular digital, video, plastic or architectural forms, requiring ever more massive financial investment and logistical organization. Takashi Murakami, Yoshitomo Nara and Mariko Mori – while the good times lasted – were the only Japanese artists able to compete in scale and ambition on a global level with the overblown productions needed to impress anybody at the Tate or MOMA in the 1990s and 2000s. Think of any of the global art stars dominating the scene of these decades: Jeff Koons, Damien Hirst, Pipilotti Rist, Ernesto Neto, Bruce Nauman, Olafur Eliasson. Global times, and apparently limitless finance, encouraged everyone to think big. And, with economies of scale so much easier, and human and social resources so much more accessible there, who could compete with boom time China? Even Murakami was dwarfed by the size and ambition of the work of Chinese artists Ai Weiwei or Cai Guo Qiang.

It did not often matter how mindless – or at least intellectually superficial – a lot of this new global art was. Indeed, Jeff Koons taught the world that art could in fact be empty, and just “fun”. Such was the pact that Koons, this always smiling Mephistopholes from the New York finance world, offered Murakami during his first year in the US. But an art hitched to rampant urban development and limitless finance, would come crashing down if the boom times came to an end. And there was also a kind of technological submission going on: of making art merely the follower of whatever new trend in computers, design, fashion, textiles or architecture, is actually leading the way. Artists cannot possibly keep abreast of technological change driven by commercial logic: they will always be derivative and behind other fields. And so, as with Mariko Mori, and increasingly with Takashi Murakami, as the credits for the shows began to read like a Hollywood movie reel, with ever massive rosters of scientists, consultants and financiers as part of the production, the work looked increasingly pointless, dated and out of touch.

The other dangerous blurring of the mission of art – that tempted Murakami more than Mori or Nara – was the call of television media and celebrity. During the years of Cool Japan, Murakami copied his moves fairly openly from his friend and partner, the household Japanese TV celebrity and comedian “Beat” Takeshi Kitano. The two had an association going back ten years, when Murakami introduced Kitano’s comic “gag art” to the show he curated at the Fondation Cartier in Paris in 2002. Kitano is better known in the West as a cult movie director, but in Japan he is famous as a foul-mouthed stand up comic. He brings the humour and edge of a poor Tokyo neighbourhood, Kita Senju, to the TV screen, in his zany, often sadistic, comedy shows. In securing his Japanese career, he developed a serious reputation in the West as a movie director with ultra-violent Japanese gangster movies. Takeshi Kitano is no contemporary artist, but he is a master media manipulator, and it is not difficult to see he was a kind of *sensei* to the younger Murakami, who was impressed by his talent of translating trashy local Japanese pop culture with

an edge of the violent and obscene, into a marketable global version of Cool Japan. Kitano's view on art is encapsulated in his long running TV show *Dare demo Picasso* ("Anyone can be Picasso"), on which Murakami sometimes appeared as a judge: a vulgar talent contest, trivializing the business of art. It was one of the models for Murakami's GEISAI. In the summer of 2010, Kitano was able to return Murakami the French favour, as a summer show of his "artworks" at Fondation Cartier packed in French families and Japanese tourists, and became a tacky *hors d'oeuvre* to the big Palais de Versailles show hosting Murakami from September.

As Takashi Murakami became a TV celebrity in Japan, he similarly sought to take his art down market with high profile collaborations with American pop stars such as hip hop artist Pharrell or idol Britney Spears, in the wake of his designer deal with Vuitton. The question was whether these side operations were somehow supporting his art practice, or had *become* his art practice. Was there no longer any difference between a Kitano and a Murakami? Was Murakami on stage next to Kanye West, a *pop artist* in the same sense? Andy Warhol's famous 15 minutes of media fame is the most dangerous and transient fame of all. In this respect, Murakami took the idea of "pop life" further than any of his peers in the elite global art world, even Hirst or his beloved Koons.

The Creative Surplus

Art is a naturally exploitative and unfair social structure. It thrives on the hopeless dreams of thousands of artists, young and old. They pursue their creative impulses and variable degrees of talent, and try to live and work outside of conventional employment or everyday social norms. Art students in a class know that almost certainly none of them will ever make a living out of the subject they spend years training in. A lucky few might get to teach, or have their talent exploited for little money working in a successful artist's studio. And yet artists keep trying. In his book, *The \$12 Million Shark*, Don Thomp-

son estimates that as many as 40,000 artists in this sense might be living in London, New York or Paris, scratching out a living in the most expensive cities on the planet. They do it for love and self-gratification, not money.

Nowhere in the world has there been such a willing population of hopeless creatives as in Japan. The collapse of the Bubble economy in the early 90s and the breaking of Japan's post-war myths of progress, left an entire generation of young Japanese, born too late for the boom, with nothing but idealistic, self-obsessed dreams in their heads. They were fuelled by the liberating images of global culture and consumerism of the 80s, but devoid now of hope in a society and economy now set on a path of apparently permanent decline. They turned away from the illusions of employment in Japanese corporations and the responsibilities of the traditional household. Then, with maybe a small part time *freeter* job for pocket money, these masses dreamt of escaping the dreary bonds of everyday social reality, and living their lives as free spirited *kuriieta*. They had the ease of living in a still wealthy society with a strong community-based sense of welfare, as well as families willing to let them live for free at home long into their adult lives. With nowhere else to go, their own bedrooms became art studios, fantasy realms of free expression and pure imagination.

Still today, the fruits of this generation are best seen at Design Festa, one of the massive regular festivals of creativity that take place at the enormous Tokyo Big Sight, the exhibition spaces built in the 90s on the new dockland developments of Odaiba. Design Festa is a Do-It-Yourself artists' flea market, started up in 1994 by a stylist Kunie Usuki, to enable young creative people to show off and maybe sell some of their personal products. Twice a year, it attracts about 6,000 wannabe designers and artists of all kinds, mostly in their late teens or early twenties, who set up cheap, small booths to present their work over two days. There are about 50,000 visitors. There is live music, fashion shows and performances, and you see some of the same sub-cultural groups dressed up for the weekend as you would in Harajuku on a Sunday afternoon. A few of the exhibitors are looking for a professional breakthrough.

Design talent scouts visit the show, a few parts are corporate sponsored. But most participants are simply desperate for someone – anyone – to look at them, and talk about their work. Mostly the point about Design Festa is simply to be part of it.

Based out of a wrecked, graffiti covered building in Harajuku, which is open throughout the year for similar DIY shows, the organization have a proudly flat, non-hierarchical approach. It rests on a self-declared punk rock ethic: anyone is good enough to participate, and all creativity however cheap (or hopeless) is good. It is an idealistic philosophy, but also a kind of “pay-per-play” mentality typical of contemporary Japan, as Tokyo based blogger W. David Marx calls it. In Japan, you create your own stuff, you buy your own booth, you make your own show, you reflect your own image. I create therefore I am. Mostly it’s only for yourself or a few friends. And the most you are likely to sell at the show is a few postcards back to others who are just like you, collecting their own little mementos of something that briefly caught their eye. The scale of collective activity here is enormous. It is breathtaking, endearing – and pathetic.

Foreign visitors have always loved Design Festa, as it confirmed their images of Cool Japan. Part of this was what fascinated the West so much about contemporary culture in Japan in the years before 2011. It was the sheer overwhelming volume and diversity of the stuff. Even if it was strange or out of fashion, creativity in Japan also seemed so enthusiastic: so naïve, fresh and sincere. Creativity in the West is different: it is always so self-conscious and ironic. From a serious art world point of view in Japan, of course, Design Festa has almost always been completely ignored and irrelevant – even if the participants are the same youngsters filling many of the mainstream art and design schools.

So much useless beauty. This is the “creative surplus”, the daunting social mathematics of wasted talent and human resources in a post-Bubble, post-

Disaster society living on nothing but illusion and fantasy. Art has in Japan been the biggest dead end of all, sucking all these young people in, as long as they could stay at college or live off their parents. It has been just another one of the many ways you can postpone growing up in Japan. Of course, the “creative surplus” is a problem in all highly industrialized late-modern societies now facing decline. But other such societies have different ways of dealing with it. The writer Richard Florida claims that 30% of the American work force are members of the “creative class”. This is America’s entrepreneurial myth. It allows a lot of not very creative or original people to feel good about themselves. In Japan, creative youngsters who opt out of regular corporate jobs and family lives are made to feel like unwanted losers and deviants. As manufacturing and basic economic activity shifted away from the developed world, creativity in the global 1990s and 2000s became a universal ideology; a sign of the narcissistic times. In many countries creativity was meant to fuel the new economy. To not be creative in this world, they said, was to be dead in the water.

Japanese governments eventually bought into the idea of “cool” and “creative” Japan. Yet they approached it as they always seem to do with policy: as a top down corporate plan that could be designed in a committee by men in suits. But if creativity in society exists, it is something that grows from the ground up. It is made by people who are still young and energetic. It has to be harnessed. But Japan has wasted its creative surplus. The masses of *kuriieita* remain, hiding most of the time in their bedrooms, or stocking shelves at a *conbini* (convenience store). They cannot identify with the men in suits or the proud corporate brands that made Japan rich in the past. But they can identify with artists who seem to live the way they do, who have been successful doing the thing they love. Artists who have also, it seems, successfully refused to grow up.

And so it was, during the years of Cool Japan, Takashi Murakami and Yoshitomo Nara harnessed the power of this creative surplus to their own work:

stealing beauty, it might be called. When Nara put out the call, he tapped into the community spirit of all these Japanese youth. Murakami was even more ambitious. He saw the masses of *kuriieita* as his natural followers. And so he set up his own school, the school of GEISAI.

GEISAI was Murakami's version of the classical Japanese *iemoto*, or art school, in which followers are trained in a technique by a single master. Beyond the rarefied world of contemporary art, the classical system of traditional art schools still goes strong in Japan. Thousands of practicing artists are organized into these schools, which are led by a single *sensei* who trains his followers to reproduce a particular style. Essentially, it is still a traditional *tenno* system, which mirrors the dynastic structures of historical Japan under the Emperors. Alongside all this, a system of specialized art colleges offer something that looks more like a Western art training. There is the subsidized national university (Geidai) at the top, other regional schools in Kyoto or other cities, and private schools such as Tama (Tamabi), Musashino (Musabi), or Zokei, all providing education in various fields, including contemporary art. Within these schools, though, the same kind of hierarchical system and routine emphasis on technique and reproduction continues to be stronger than conceptualism or innovation.

GEISAI was designed to destroy all of this. Launched as part of Murakami's large homecoming show at Tokyo's Museum of Contemporary Art (MOT) in 2001, it developed into a twice yearly festival, based on the end of year art shows that take place at the regular art schools. GEISAI also took place at Tokyo Big Sight at the weekend. Participants applied, paid for a booth, and showed their work. Although it started much smaller, it expanded into a mass event, sometimes with over 2,000 artists. GEISAI was essentially a straightforward copy of Design Festa. Many of the same young hopefuls – if they could afford it – would show at both. However, GEISAI, unlike Design Festa, was also a competition: a talent show, in effect, in which Murakami used his personal networks to invite a number of distinguished Japanese and interna-

tional judges to pick out the most promising young artists, and eventually a top three of prize winners. As the show expanded, it was supplemented by a stage show and side events for visitors. It was also pitched strongly at tourists looking for Cool Japan. At its peak, in 2008, GEISAI 11 had maid cafes and a “school playground”. Murakami also tried to get extensive television and media coverage. Participants paid for the privilege. A small space with walls costed between 10 and 20,000 Yen for a day. Electricity, furniture or a pass for parents to help set up were all charged as extra fees. The artists got a tiny solo booth in the middle of a sea of other artists. The prices were, per day, about as expensive as hiring one of Ginza’s infamous *kashi garo* (rental galleries).

The work seen at GEISAI was exactly the same kind of thing as at Design Festa. It was a splurge of adolescent style outsider art with the occasional interesting or talented artist. Yet Murakami packaged the whole thing as a massive celebration in his own honour. He wanted to demonstrate the power of Kaikai Kiki to select and make artists famous in Japan, regardless of the official art system. In 2008, the show was about to open to the public after the frenzied early morning set up, and the young participants were called to the main stage. Murakami jumped up, screaming his enthusiasm for his followers, and calling them all to swear by his ethos: “Will you swear to make art until the day you die?” The doors opened and the public were allowed in. During the day, the official judges – dressed in fake art school *happi* (traditional indigo coats) – were carefully chaperoned around the booths so that they could make their selection. With translators at the ready, they got a few seconds at best to look at each.

The Japanese judges were invited to suggest that winners have a chance of breaking into a serious career in the Japanese art world. Famous foreign judges were meanwhile sold the show as a sampling of the very best of young Japanese contemporary art. Paul Schimmel, a judge one year, afterwards politely described it as an attractive celebration of “folk art”. He knew what he was looking at. But at the prize giving ceremony at GEISAI 11, it was clear some

of the judges were fooled by Murakami. For example, there was Philip Segalot, one of the contemporary art world's most important buyers. He spends millions of dollars of other people's money at auctions, often for François Pinault, and he was in fact bidding for someone at Sotheby's *against* Mr Pinault when Pinault bought *My Lonesome Cowboy*. He said he had never been to Japan before but was deeply impressed by what he saw. A lot of the Western press invited to show were similarly fooled, because they were similarly ignorant about Japanese art. During Cool Japan, they would go home and write about GEISAI as the first place to go on any visit to the Tokyo art scene.

GEISAI became a huge vehicle for Murakami's art operation – and ego. It tapped into the power of reality TV contests, and served a recruitment function for his corporation. Winners of the competition were sometimes offered a job with Kaikai Kiki, although only one – Mahomi Kunikata – became an established name through this route. Most GEISAI winners never got much further than Murakami's stage. The judges sometimes also picked out conceptual or installation work, but the winner selected for Kaikai Kiki was invariably a pretty girl doing *kawaii* bedroom art who could be brainwashed and trained to paint flowers by numbers. The winner at GEISAI 11 – Kyoko Nakamura, was a good example. This rather desperate looking 35 year old was completely overwhelmed by her few minutes of fame as she stood, like a shy teenager, crying on stage in front of TV screens that had cost Murakami \$1 million to install. As the expensive show continued with a J-pop band coming on stage, the crowd surged back out into the exhibition area in the hope of seeing some of Nakamura's works. Fighting a way through the crowd, all that could be seen was that several of her fragile childish doodles and sketches of the countryside had been ripped from the walls of her booth in the hope they might be the next "Micropop" masterpieces from Kaikai Kiki.

Elsewhere in the Tokyo art world, not surprisingly perhaps, there was a lot of resentment, even disgust expressed about GEISAI. During the 2000s, it undercut the efforts of galleries to build sustainable value on emerging artists'

works. It distracted the attention of the global art media away from serious Japanese art. Aspects of GEISAI and Kaikai Kiki reminded people too much of a cult. Despite nearly going bust in 2009 and winding up in hospital with exhaustion, Murakami kept GEISAI alive as his platform for an alternative Japanese art system of his own. He started a paid lecture series in which other “creative gurus” were invited to tell young hopefuls how they should forget art school or university, and just build a way to fame and fortune by following the self-help advice on offer. Murakami also intended to open a GEISAI museum that would create a permanent building for his art empire in Japan.

It is true the existing art system had failed too many young artists. At Japanese art schools, there has always been an unwillingness to break the stifling conventions, or even to engage in the kind of constructive criticism needed for talent to develop. There is some value in learning the hard way: students at the USA’s top art schools are ruthlessly ripped apart as part of their training. When does anyone ever say what they are thinking in Japan? Takashi Murakami has certainly always said what is on his mind. Perhaps he was right to rant at some aspects of the Tokyo art world. But what was GEISAI but a big operation to sustain his company and name in Japan? GEISAI removed the need for serious art education and filled young heads full of illusory dreams. There were similar problem with Yoshitomo Nara’s “community”. What was it but a temporary refuge from reality, where costless volunteers were put to work for an artist’s brand? Murakami and Nara were the exceptions. They made it big through talent, chance, and particular conditions that pushed their work onto the world stage. They kept saying young artists could do it “my way”, but it wasn’t true. Now Cool Japan is over. Murakami and Nara’s children have nowhere to go. They are orphans.

Murakami and Nara were, however, true revolutionaries. Their new pop vision sought to tear down the system, then erase the history that produced them. They hid the complex story behind the glow of a shiny, colourful flat screen, and locked the experience of their generation permanently in a nostalgic chil-

dren's playroom. They gave the world Cool Japan, and for years that was all the world could see. But now the truth is clear: a superflat art world with its history erased was one with no future.

Whatever Happened to the Likely Lads? The Tokyo Art World in the 1990s

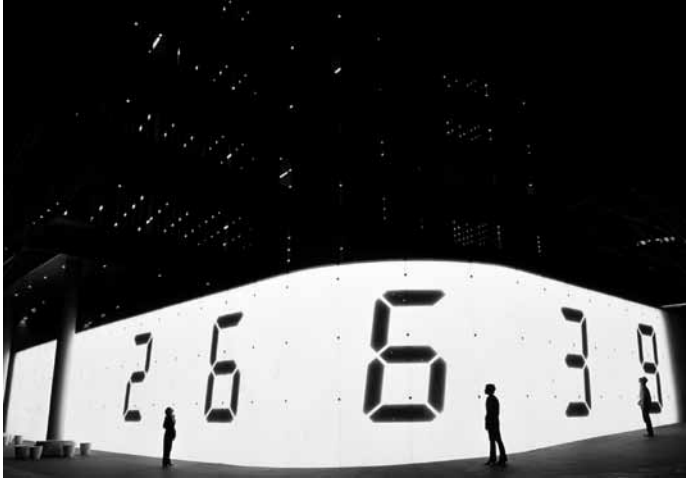
Tokyo 1991-1995: The Birth of the Cool

Western art history will tell the story of Japanese contemporary art in the 1990s as the triumph of Takashi Murakami, Yoshitomo Nara and, more distantly, Mariko Mori. As is the custom with the writing of history, there may only be room for one page about Japan. There may also only be room for one annointed “genius” from that time and place. Paul Schimmel and others have made their choice. But this is not the viewpoint of the Tokyo art world. To understand this, it is necessary to go back in time, to the moment of the Bubble.

For the young Japanese artists born – like Yoshitomo Nara and Takashi Murakami – in the baby boom of the 1950s and early 60s, coming of age in

Japan in the 1980s was like being born with a winning ticket in the lottery of life. The 1980s were the age of plenty, of Japanese splendour at its peak. Japan will probably never again know this kind of global ascendancy; it may never again feel this self-confident. Japanese corporations and its millionaires were literally buying up the world. They couldn't keep their hands off rich Western trophies, such as the modern and impressionist art they bought for such crazy prices. The most famous – infamous, in fact – was the \$82.5 million spent on one Van Gogh painting by a Japanese businessman in 1990. Meanwhile, Japanese products were dominating world markets. The most famous was the Sony Walkman, a symbol of Japanese style and technological ingenuity. There was a never ending boom in property prices. Tokyo was, by far, the most expensive and luxurious city in the world – for those that could afford it. And, the myth was, if you were young, you just had to reach out and you could get it. Corporate opportunities would come knocking, and you had as much money as you needed to buy whatever you felt like. Children as they grew up in this age could have every toy or fantasy object that they could desire. And the adults they grew up into wanted their own toys to continue the game.

In the decades since the war, the Japanese economy had impressed – and shocked – the West by its clinical efficiency, and the speed of its technological and financial advance. At first, its contemporary culture seemed uninteresting: a black hole of bland, mass-marketed imitations of the West. Japan's hyper-modernity was always contrasted to a relatively unchanging classical backdrop: of exquisite gardens, cuisine and tea ceremonies. This was the old Japan, still preserved in thick plastic packaging amidst the rampant urban development and economic growth. A major exhibition in late 1991, *Visions of Japan*, organized by the architect Arata Isozaki at London's Victoria and Albert Museum, celebrated these two archetypal faces of Japan. As this suggests, it was only in the 1980s and after that Japanese contemporary creativity really started to be appreciated on the global stage, firstly through commercial



Tatsuo Miyajima, *Counter Void* (2003). Neon, glass, IC, aluminium, electric wire. 5 x 50m installation outside Roppongi Hills. Collection of TV Asahi. Photo by Kunihiko Katsumata. Courtesy of SCAI The Bathhouse.



Yasumasa Morimura at opening of *Requiem*, Hiroshima Museum of Contemporary Art (2010). Photo by author. Behind are posters for the show (Morimura as Albert Einstein) and one by Yoshitomo Nara.

1980s BREAKTHROUGH ARTISTS

design and architecture, then fashion designers such as Yohji Yamamoto, Rei Kawakubo (*Comme des Garçons*) and Issey Miyake.

The creativity of Japanese modern and contemporary artists since the War – which included important *avant garde* and experimental movements such as *gutai*, anti art, and *mono-ha* – had mostly been ignored. But in 1988, the Japan Foundation curator Fumio Nanjo was able to introduce two artists at the Venice Aperto for new talent: Yasumasa Morimura and Tatsuo Miyajima. Morimura played games with Western art history, manipulating photos of himself to question the hierarchy of Western assumptions, as well as his own sexuality. Miyajima made spectacular technological installations, using digital numbers, darkness and light, to create an intense zen-like atmosphere for visitors. It was a moment when the art world was opening up to alternative global vision of non-Western art: for example, the famous exhibition of 1989, *Magiciens de la Terre*, at the Pompidou Centre in Paris. Observers realized something extraordinary and different might start to come out of Asian societies as they started to develop, catch up and maybe even overtake the West.

What a wonderful world. But then something happened. The Japanese bubble burst. There was the final crazy period of excess in 1988-90: wild speculation, a miraculous pyramid of value, incredible financial acrobatics; then the Japanese economy went into a slow, but inexorable decline. The graph of the relative land price values before and after the end of 1990 is the most powerful image that can be presented to explain this. It looks like Mount Fuji. Straight up and straight down. The world has only even seen anything else quite like this one other time – nearly 20 years later, in September 2008, with the collapse of Lehman brothers and the ensuing financial crisis around the globe. All this already happened a long time ago in Japan. This is one reason why the experience of post-Bubble Japan should be interesting to everybody nowadays. Looked at in the long run, Japan has had now two decades' experience of post-Bubble stagnation, a situation the Western world has been getting used to since 2008.

In fact, the Bubble deflated quite slowly. It was more like little holes being punched in the golden dome over Neo-Tokyo. The effect was a slow, insidious one, like a poison slowly circulating the body. Analysts reckon that the Japanese economy only really reached its nadir in the late 1990s, when the depression sank in across all sectors of the society. By then other traumas had added themselves to the mix.

Something interesting happened, though, with culture in Japan in the immediate post-1990 period. Those who were creative among the baby boom kids started to look around them at a world that was changing unpredictably. There was a feeling of decadence in the air, a feeling of “no future”. The party was coming to an end, in a spectacular burnout. They were staring into “the void”. With the passing away of the Emperor Hirohito in 1989 – the end of the *Showa* period – there was also a strange feeling in the air of infantile helplessness. Yet they still had money in their pockets. They had the wild dreams and aspirations of the Bubble years in their heads. They had the feeling that anything was possible. The consumer boom in fact took a few years to really come to an end. Yet the myth about invincible Japanese corporations and the controlled post-war miracle was beginning to collapse. Everyone felt it was time to express themselves: to go it alone and break out.

For example, consumer magazines. These are always one of the best indicators and illustrators of the Japanese cultural industry. In the early 1990s, the magazine industry went into its most intense period of expansion and success, sucking in talent and creativity out of the conventional corporate economy. Advertising booms, and companies started to outsource the work to creative freelancers. There was a boom in graphic design, in toy design, in music, in fashion, in literature, in independent publishing, in freelance journalism, in film making, in *manga*, in *anime*, in video game design – and in contemporary art. All of the eventual protagonists of Cool Japan emerged during the period that gets going in the early 1990s. The economic boom led to a cultural boom, driven by a generation who grew up in the bubble, but who now found their

creativity liberated by the post-Bubble chaos. It produced a golden decade of creativity in Tokyo comparable to Paris and Berlin in the 1920s, California in the 1960s, or London and New York in the punk era of the 1970s.

It was, of course, a generational effect. Takashi Murakami was 30 in 1992, starting to reach his creative peak. The generation born between the late 50s and mid 60s were the lucky generation that invented Cool Japan. Pop and sub culture started to drive the streets of Tokyo. What became the quintessential locations of the mythical Neo-Tokyo are precisely the areas of the city that went through a brilliant, sparkling pop culture makeover during the 90s. The trends of commercial areas like Shibuya, Ebisu and Harajuku; the style of places like Daikanyama and Naka-Meguro; the darker more urban edges of Shinjuku *nichome* (2# district), and Ikebukuro East and West side; the *otaku*-planet of Akihabara. There were also the student and youth culture boomtowns out West, on or off the central Chuo train line: Nakano, Koenji, Kichijoji, Shimo-Kitazawa. There was the birth of every kind of crazy sub-culture in these places, every kind of consumer niche for pop music, fashion, games or collectibles. The entrepreneurial legends started to appear: Hiroshi Fujiwara, music producer and branding maestro extraordinaire; Nigo, his “second” who built a street fashion empire out of *ura-Hara* (the underground scene in Harajuku) through clever limited edition sales techniques; Jun Takahashi (“Jonio”, after Johnnie Rotten), the punk rock designer; Kensho Onuki, (“Ken Rocks”) with his legendary DJ nights in Shinjuku; the iconic musician Cornelius (Keigo Oyamada); the graphic designer, Kashiwa Sato; the girls’ gang of photographers led by Yurie Nagashima, Hiromix and Mika Ninagawa; the cult street photography magazines established by photographers Yasumasa Yonehara (*egg*), and – during the brief Sunday “pedestrian paradise” of Omotesando from 1996-8 – Shoichi Aoki (*FRUiTS*). Girls culture, especially, exploded, as young women started to assert their independence as free thinkers, consumers, and as the drivers of street fashions. As always in Tokyo, there was the ferocious processing of global cultures, just as omnivorous and meta-

bolic as ever – but the culture produced out of this decadent period looked like nowhere else in the world.

In all these creative fields, these were the names that eventually became famous internationally. It took over five years for any of the excitement of Cool Japan to reach the consciousness of bureaucrats and politicians. They had been brought up to despise the individualistic choices of the “new breed” younger generation (*shinjinrui*), for not following the corporate or political identity they had. Using the language of conservative sociologists, they now described Japanese youth with negative concepts like *parasaito singuru* (unmarried children still living at home), *hikikomori* (bedroom recluses) or *make inu* (loser dogs, i.e., unmarried women). *Otaku*, too, was a very negative concept until it was adopted internationally. It was associated for many years with social deviants, and particularly the infamous “Otaku murderer” Tsutomu Miyazaki who in 1988-9 stalked and killed four young girls. Only after Douglas McGray said it was ok, sometime in the mid 2000s, did the bureaucrats and politicians start to get hip to anything. It took even longer, up to ten years or more, for the rest of the world to wake up to what was happening in Japan. After the Bubble burst in 1990, all the Western financial interest in Japan started to evaporate and move away. Other parts of Asia started to seem more attractive: Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore, then China. And so the world was simply not looking when Japan became, in fact, the coolest place on the planet. By the time consumers in North America and Europe started to read *manga* or Japanese novelists, get fascinated by the street fashions and music of Neo-Tokyo, or start to describe themselves as *otaku*, the golden age of the 90s was long over.

The era in many ways had ended already in 1995. This was the “zero year” of post-war Japan, its low point: the year of the Kobe earthquake and the Aum Shinrikyo cult sarin gas attack on the underground. What happened in contemporary art in particular, was the fruit of a very special time and place before this. Tokyo 1991-1995, the place where it all happened.

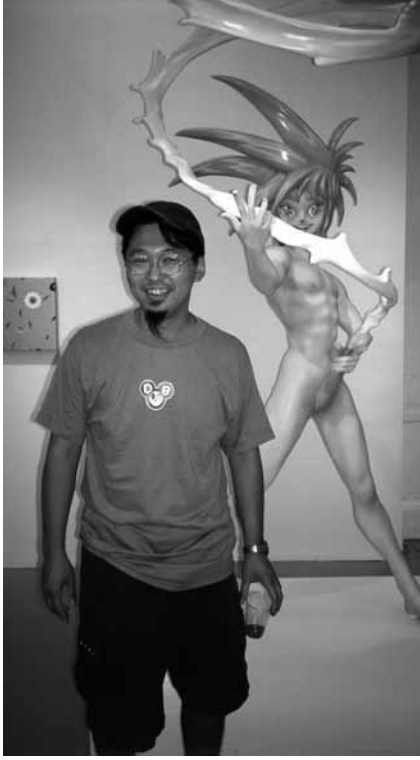
Ginza Days, Omori Nights: The Birth of a Contemporary Art Scene

For a group of students, who had all studied at Tokyo's prestigious national University of the Arts (Geidai) in the late 80s, these years were the golden years. Their dynamism was born of frustration. They were frustrated by their teachers, who focused only on technique and ignored the exciting conceptualism that they could read about in the global art press. They were frustrated by the dominant trends in art criticism in Japan, that focused on the elite *avant garde* legacy of the 1950s and 60s. And they were frustrated by galleries and curators, with practically no contemporary gallerists willing to nurture new artists, and at that point in time, virtually no art museums showing international contemporary art.

The biggest frustration, though, was the Ginza rental gallery system. The young artists faced the impossibility of showing their work publicly, because of the domination of this *kashi garo* system. These were the commercial galleries for rent by artists trying to sell work, that mostly promoted vain and conservative styles for old fashioned collectors. Tokyo's historical city centre, Ginza, was ageing in the early 1990s, but it was outwardly still the shiny silver heart of the Japanese capitalist dream. In the 1980s, in the midst of the crazily overheating Japanese consumer economy, it had become the most expensive few square miles on the face of the planet. The commercialism and corporate face masked a backstreet scene of underworld money and secret dens of business and pleasure, in which the deals that drove the dream were made. It was also the heart of the old Tokyo art world. Some of the galleries dealing in antiques or Western modern art were owned by *yakuza* (Japanese mafia) because they were the perfect front for laundering money. The young artists were shut out of this world, unless they had rich parents who could pay for a gallery show.

But still, the group were young, and these were exciting times. There was the amazing pop culture buzz in Tokyo, with new magazines, club nights and alternative fashions, popping up everywhere. They were a gang, and they spent all their time together: talking, arguing, dreaming, checking out the scene. The emergence of “Tokyo pop”, as their movement came to be known, was not some kind of accident. It was a moment in time that brought together a group of extraordinarily talented and energetic people. It was a place too: a school, however old fashioned some of the professors were. A group of friends pushing and inspiring each other. The western art world usually only knows the name of one character from this group: Takashi Murakami. But the truth is, as sociologists know, “it takes a village”: a whole social network, place and time, for such creativity to be born.

I have talked with many of the people involved in or around this Tokyo gang at the time. Min Nishihara, Murakami’s close friend and “muse” in the early 90s, an art writer who formulated many of the key ideas of “Tokyo pop” in the brilliant, trashy articles she wrote. Tomio Koyama, now the most famous commercial name worldwide in Japanese contemporary art. Tim Blum, Koyama’s drinking partner at the time, a brash young Los Angeleno helping to run a small gallery in Tokyo, and sketching a manifesto that will one day turn this amazing new art he finds into something global. Yuko Yamamoto, now one of the most important gallerists in Tokyo, who was a young gallery assistant to Tsutomu Ikeuchi at Röntgen, and met her husband there, Noi Sawaragi, the art writer. Yuko Hasegawa, the ambitious and tireless editor and art organizer, who is today the most powerful museum curator of contemporary art in Japan. Kiki Kudo, now a well known art writer and critic, an art school dropout who became Murakami’s first assistant. Hideki Nakazawa, the key conceptualist of the group, who has gone on to become the most important chronicler in Japanese of those exciting times. And Masato Nakamura, the organizer and closest partner of Murakami, an art intellectual with a talent for conceiving *avant garde* public interventions in the great tradition of Japanese radical 60s artists.



Artist Takashi Murakami unveiling *My Lonesome Cowboy*, at Tomio Koyama Gallery in 1998. Courtesy of Peter Bellars.



Artist Masato Nakamura at the March 1994 opening of his show *Lucy* at SCAI The Bathhouse. Courtesy of Peter Bellars.

THE LIKELY LADS

History blurs chronology, and so much of what happened in those times takes on the misty glamour of myth. For example, there was the birthday party on February 1st 1992 of the two young leaders of the movement, Takashi Murakami and Masato Nakamura. They shared the same birthday; Murakami is one year older, he was turning 30. Of all the young ambitious artists, these two were the most “likely lads” coming out of Geidai – the ones who seemed most destined for great things. They had a friendly rivalry, as well as a contrast in styles. They had known each other since the mid 80s from Geidai and tutoring



Art Writer Noi Sawaragi. Courtesy of Noi Sawaragi.



Gallerist Yuko Yamamoto. Courtesy of Yuko Yamamoto.

RÖNTGEN AND AFTER



Artist and Art Writer Hideki Nakazawa. Courtesy of Hideki Nakazawa.



Art Writer Kiki Kudo at Mori Art Museum, visiting installation by Takashi Kuribayashi, *Wald aus Wald*, at Mori Art Museum (2010). Photo by author.

ART WRITERS

together at art prep school. Murakami had since 1991 started to make waves on the Tokyo scene. At his first proper solo exhibition in December 1991, he exhibited *Randoseru*, a series of Japanese children's school bags made out of precious, illegal animal skins. Nakamura shared his feeling of frustration with the contemporary art scene, but was plotting ways of taking art into the streets. Their attitude had especially taken shape around a controversial book published in 1986 by art critic Nobuo Nakamura, *Shonen Art* (Youth Art), which castigated the lack of any real art scene in Tokyo. Now they were trying to invent one by themselves.

Kiki Kudo, who was 20 at the time, gatecrashed the party with a friend. She had recently failed the entrance exam to Geidai – an archaic system where hundreds of candidates, desperate for one of the subsidized places, have to sit through hours of drawing and painting exams. It was the only art school at which students of poorer class background could afford to study. Murakami, as always was the centre of the crowd, loud, laughing. Kudo and her friend thought he was some kind of funny *oyaji* (old bloke), a 30 year old intellectual type, who was just finishing his PhD, but obsessed with teenage youth culture. Murakami asked what she was doing? Nothing much, she said. Ok, do you want to be my studio assistant? Murakami didn't have a studio, he just had an apartment. Kudo had no formal skills, but she knew a lot about the strange sub-cultures Murakami liked, as well as many of the actual people involved. She became an "ideas" person for Murakami.

Kudo's greatest influence, though, was Min Nishihara, Murakami's "muse". Nishihara had a style of writing totally unlike the high brow intellectualism of other art critics, such as Noi Sawaragi and Yuko Hasegawa, who wrestled with postmodern art theory. Nishihara had more of a down-to-earth, "hardcore" style: fast moving, sharp and throwaway, the style of writing seen nowadays in blogs. Like many people who remember her writing from that period, Kudo describes her as the "genius" of Tokyo pop. Min Nishihara and Takashi Murakami were inseparable, a non-stop barrage of back and forth argument and

ideas. Nishihara wrote for the same magazines as Noi Sawaragi and Yuko Hasegawa, and she travelled together with Murakami to exhibitions. She tried to discover and promote new artists. They travelled together to Europe, to see the famous Documenta show in Germany in 1992, writing scathing critical reviews on every piece they saw. She and Murakami talked about launching a magazine called “Art Sex”.

Takashi Murakami was a brilliant networker, always at the hub of things, a classic “connector”. He was also pushy. When somebody important came into a gallery, the group would move over to try to catch their attention. Min Nishihara remembers meeting Jay Jopling, the famous British gallerist, and Jeff Koons, this way. Koons was friendly to the young group, who were all huge fans of his work. Murakami would just phone people up, tell them to take notice of his work. Murakami is like that, one old friend says, he never stops “being Murakami” 24/7. That’s how he had first contacted Noi Sawaragi in the late 1980s. Sawaragi was a young editor at *Bijutsu Techo*, the most important Japanese art magazine, who had been writing provocative articles about global art trends that all the students had read. They met and got on famously. One day, in early 1991, Sawaragi was going to check out a new, yet-to-open art space in South East Tokyo, and he invited Murakami to come along. It was a totally unexpected place – a big old warehouse in an obscure industrial area, Omori. They met the owner, a young man their age, who was the son of a famous antique tea utensils dealer. Tsutomu Ikeuchi had started his own gallery, and was already showing extraordinary electronic pop art in strange booths at the art fairs. Now he had spent a large amount of his family’s money on renovating this big space for art events. It had three floors, and lots of room for big installations or a huge party. Ikeuchi called it the Röntgen Kunst Institute, because of his fetish with German futurism. He didn’t have many clear plans yet, so over an all night *izakaya* session, the three decided that they would organize Murakami’s exhibition together. They agreed that the event shouldn’t be like a normal art opening: it had to have music and publicity, and they had

to try to get some of the cool Tokyo pop scene to come and look at contemporary art for a change.

Even younger art world people in Tokyo, who could only have been young students at the time, always claim to have been there at the packed opening for *Anomaly*, the show to which that first meeting led, at the new Röntgen in November 1992. It was chaotic: people were pushing in, with music and noise everywhere, and the featured artists tried to compete for attention with each other. Other just brought their work to display unannounced. Tsutomu Ikeuchi couldn't control it, but this was what he wanted. *Anomaly* was the spectacular show that launched the career of Takashi Murakami, as well as the careers of the well known Osaka *otaku* artist Kenji Yanobe, who built child-like survival machines and costumes for some future apocalypse, and Kodai Nakahara, a much discussed pop-artist, who was making plastic figurine sculptures and art out of toys. The *Bijutsu Techo* special at the time linked these artists to others also making "Tokyo pop": including Chiezo Taro, who had already shown how to make Japanese pop art successful in New York, and Yukinori Yanagi, who was making political art that critiqued Japanese nationalism with playful and ambitious installations, and had already enjoyed some significant international attention and sales since the late 1980s. These were more of the "likely lads": the new young emerging stars of Japanese contemporary art. All together, the scene was like the famous *Freeze* show in London of 1988 that launched the careers of the Young British Artists (YBAs), such as Damien Hirst and Sarah Lucas. What was happening in Tokyo was every bit as provocative and creative. At *Anomaly*, it was Takashi Murakami who eventually triumphed amidst the chaos, upstaging everyone by unveiling his sculpture/installation *Sea Breeze* with high drama. A painted trailer with doors was wheeled out into the crowd to the accompaniment of opera music and a naked dancer with a hula-hoop. Inside the trailer there was a massive floodlight from a sports stadium. To everyone's astonishment it exploded with intense light and heat into the room when the shutters were opened.



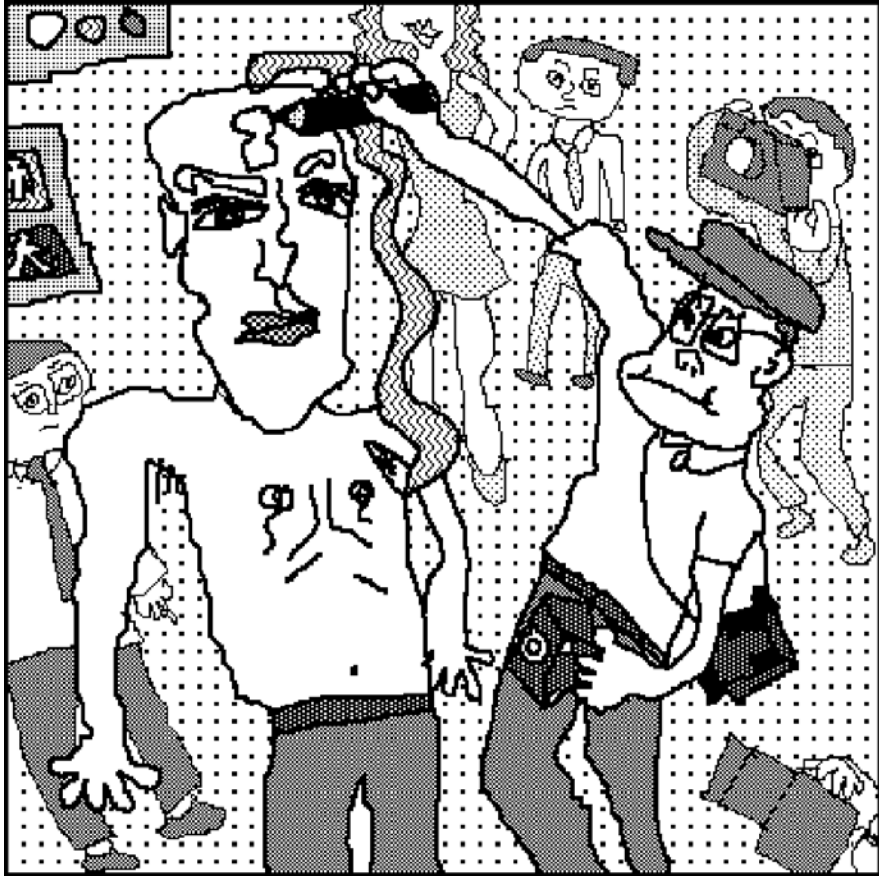
Performance of *Osaka Mixer Plan* by Small Village Centre, with friends, Osaka, Dec 1992. From left, standing, in white coats, Hideki Nakazawa, Takashi Murakami, Masato Nakamura, Min Nishihara. Seated, centre, Tsuyoshi Ozawa, and right, Gallerist Tsutomu Ikeuchi. Courtesy of Min Nishihara.

NAKAMURA, MURAKAMI AND FRIENDS

All of these people and many others were part of a scene that gave birth to ideas, images, installations, and emotions that were simplified and made world famous under Murakami's name in the touring shows *Superflat* and *Little Boy*. The years from 1992 to 1994 were an extraordinary blur of events, parties, publications, new art, and new talents appearing. The young artists soon found other alternative spaces in which to organize events in. After *Anomaly*, the gang shifted to P-House, an alternative art/culture space in Shibuya, run by an underground figure called Taka Akita. All the time Noi Sawaragi, Yuko Hasegawa and Min Nishihara wrote about the events for the hippest Tokyo magazines, such as *Brutus* and *Atelier*, linking the contemporary art scene for the first time to parallel happenings elsewhere in clubs, music and street fashion.

When they couldn't show in Tokyo, they took the events elsewhere. Already before *Anomaly*, the gang had travelled to Seoul for an exhibition organized by Masato Nakamura, who was studying there for a while. Nakamura and Murakami, who would show together there, had done a survey, and discovered that they had the two most hated Japanese names in South Korea, because of the war. So they called their shows together *Nakamura to Murakami* (Nakamura and Murakami). Nakamura often developed the issue of Japanese-Korean relations in his work: his wife Shin Myeong-Eun was a Korean artist, and a best friend of Min Nishihara. Also, two slightly younger Geidai artists, Tsuyoshi Ozawa – a friend of Murakami's from Saitama – and Makoto Aida, came along to Seoul as video documentarists. They were both buzzing with their own sub culture-inspired ideas.

After *Anomaly* the whole group had gone to Osaka in December 1992, mainly to show off in front of what was then a more prestigious art scene than Tokyo in the Kansai region. Tsuyoshi Ozawa, Takashi Murakami, Masato Nakamura and Hideki Nakazawa sometimes performed as the group, "Small Village Center", a pun on their names and a reference to the 1960s radical art group, Hi Red Center, led by Genpei Akasegawa. In Osaka, they made a provocative performance to "clean up" the streets, a direct reproduction of one of Hi Red Center's famous



●「中村と村上」展

©HIDEKI NAKAZAWA, 1992

Nakamura to Murakami, (Nakamura on left, Murakami on right), an art work by Hideki Nakazawa about the Geidai group's visit to Seoul in 1992. An example of Nakazawa's *Baka CG* (silly computer graphics), a development of the notion of *heta uma* (unskilled or clumsy art) using primitive computer technology. Courtesy of Hideki Nakazawa.

NAKAMURA, MURAKAMI AND FRIENDS

street cleaning performances in Ginza during the 1964 Olympics. Next up, Min Nishihara introduced extraordinary new work by the younger pair of Makoto Aida and Tsuyoshi Ozawa, in a second important show at Röntgen called *Fo(u)rtune* in January 1993. Aida's unforgettable *manga*-style update of Hokusai's *The Dream of the Fisherman's Wife* (1814) was unveiled at this show: *The Giant Member Fuji versus King Gidora*, a 12 metre square acrylic painting that was so big it had to be laid out on the floor. Here was an artist willing to take his ideas to the limit, as his cult book of the same year, *Seisyun & Hentai* (Adolescence & Perversion), made clear. With a close association initially through Röntgen, Aida and Ozawa were also founding members of the Tokyo art group, the *Showa 40 nen kai* ("The Group 1965"), which also included photographer/performance artist Hiroyuki Matsukage, manga artist Parco Kinoshita, painter Oscar Oiwa, and the architecturally trained Yutaka Sone. As a group, their only manifesto or *raison d'être* was, comically, that they were all born in 1965, the 40th year of the *Showa* period. They launched their art unit at a mock serious press conference at the Japanese television headquarters of NHK in 1994. The *Showa 40 nen kai* became a legendary drinking club, mapping out the city with their art interventions, raunchy performances, and written social commentaries. Min Nishihara, meanwhile, forged a powerful curatorial alliance with Shin Kurosawa, another influential member of the original Geidai gang who often worked with Tsuyoshi Ozawa, and she would also later curate Yutaka Sone at Röntgen.

When the 90s artists couldn't find exhibition spaces, they took to the streets. A defining moment arrived when Masato Nakamura laid the plans for an open air "terrorist" art event, *The Ginburart*, that would take place on the streets of Ginza in April 1993. Nakamura was a quieter personality than Murakami, but also a leader with a phenomenal talent for persuasion and organization. Again, with the radical legacy of Hi Red Center in mind, but also the more recent example of 80s street art interventions in the East Village, New York, Nakamura targeted the eight *chome* (districts) of Ginza, challenging eight artists to make a public art event in each.



Young members-to-be of *Showa 40 nen kai* at SCAI The Bathhouse, taken June 1994 at the opening of Takashi Murakami's *Fall in Love*, where Murakami introduced his *DOB* character. From left, Artists Makoto Aida, Tsuyoshi Ozawa, Parco Kinoshita. Courtesy of Peter Bellars.



The *Press Conference Performance* launch of *Showa 40 nen kai* (1994), from left, Artists Makoto Aida, Oscar Oiwa, Hiroyuki Matsukage, Tsuyoshi Ozawa, Yutaka Sone, Parco Kinoshita, with centre right, critic/curator Chie Kaihatsu. Courtesy of Hiromi Hasegawa and *Showa 40 nen kai*.

BIRTH OF SHOWA 40 NEN KAI (THE GROUP 1965)



Muneteru Ujino performing *Art Mikoshi* at *The Ginburart* (1993). Courtesy of Hideki Nakazawa, who published the floppy disk journal *Japan Art Today*. Edition 5 featured *The Ginburart*.

THE GINBURART

Masato Nakamura's *The Ginburart* stole Takashi Murakami's thunder as the leader of "Tokyo pop". The concept of Murakami's early work hinged on his anti-art intellectualism. Albeit provocative, his art was a purposely meaningless translation of Japanese popular culture. It was only later, after New York, that he discovered it could work so well as a signifier of "Japan" for foreigners. Nakamura was more of an idealist, and believed in art as a social intervention, a means of changing society. A close associate of Nakamura and participant in *The Ginburart*, Peter Bellars, an English artist and art writer, had also suggested the idea of making the art system itself the target of the art. Bellars couldn't understand why Tokyo artists didn't make more art about the extraordinary street life and culture around them. Following Masato Nakamura's "rules of the game", each of the participating artists at *The Ginburart* did something that upset the normal, everyday functioning of the Ginza districts they had been assigned. For example, Min Nishihara painted white text on the

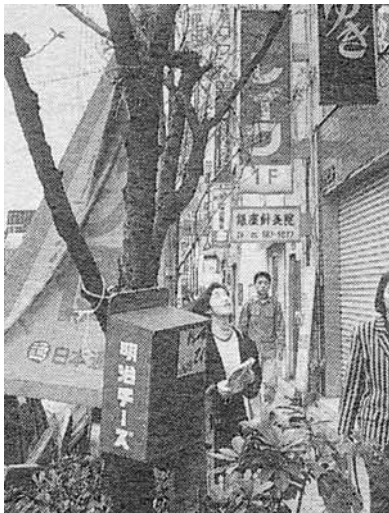
streets; Peter Bellars nailed up “Love Hotel” signs outside corporate office entrances. Meanwhile, another Geidai friend, Muneteru Ujino, later famous as sound sculpture and performance artist, gave a popular commentary tour of all the works, dressed as an angel and carried by six men in a Shinto style “Art Mikoshi” shrine.

The most famous art work to come out of *The Ginburart* was the invention of the *Nasubi* gallery. This was the perfect visualization of the young artists’ struggle for space, as well as an accidental product of the rules of the game set up by Nakamura. Tsuyoshi Ozawa was given the honour of performing his work in Ginza 1# *chome*. For this work, Ozawa decided to parody the Ginza art system by showing various alternative gallery spaces, tiny platforms for works that could be thought of as an exhibition. He called the idea *Nasubi Gallery* (Eggplant Art Gallery) as a parody of one of the famous Ginza galleries, *Nabisu*. One of these was an old milk delivery box, painted inside like a tiny “white cube”, which he could hang on a wall or post in the street anywhere. Murakami had been invited to participate in *The Ginburart*, but his plan to make a masochistic “rejection tour” of the Ginza galleries in his district with his art portfolio failed because it was a Sunday, and the galleries were closed. Nakamura, irritated, insisted he had to do something. Murakami asked if any gallery would do? Yes, he was told. So he asked Ozawa if he could make an exhibition inside his milk box gallery. It was the first *Nasubi* gallery show: a miniature Murakami installation, using coloured paint and plastic Tamiya toy soldiers,



Art work by Masato Nakamura at *The Ginburart* (1993).
Courtesy of Peter Bellars.

THE GINBURART



Installation of Tsuyoshi Ozawa, *Nasubi Gallery*, #1 chome, at *Nasubi Gallery* (1993). Courtesy of Hideki Nakazawa.



Tsuyoshi Ozawa and Parco Kinoshita, *Nasubi Gallery* (1994). Mixed media. 33 x 19 x 14cm. Courtesy of *Showa 40 nen kai*



Tsuyoshi Ozawa demonstrating back pack installation of *Nasubi Gallery*, exhibition *Top Breeder Series Vol.2* (1994) by Complezzo Plastico (art unit of Hiroyuki Matsukage and Hiro Jirano). Courtesy of Peter Bellars.



Curator Shin Kurosawa at *Shinjuku Shonen Art* (1994). Courtesy of Peter Bellars.

CONTEMPORARY JAPANESE STREET ART

which he often used in his earliest works. The show was called *Takashi Murakami's Large Retrospective Show*. The two artists have fought ever since over who owns the concept, but Ozawa has gone on to show many other artists around the world in his Nasubi gallery.

The impact of *The Ginburart* surprised the young artists. Not only did they attract a big audience and a lot of curious passers-by, as well as the police. They also made a very powerful statement about art in the city from a generation that felt locked out of the system. It galvanised more young artists to action. One of these was a young sculptor named Yoshihiro Suda, who carved tiny flowers and plants out of wood. Later that year, he hired a daily parking space in Ginza, and parked an empty wooden crate there. Inside this strange installation space was one of his tiny fragile weed sculptures (*Ginza Weed Theory*, 1993). It was a beautiful metaphor for the struggle of contemporary artists in Tokyo.

In April 1994, Masato Nakamura planned a second, even bigger street event, *Shinjuku Shonen Art*, in the Yakuza red light district of Kabukicho. Things were beginning to take off for all the group, but with so many plans and artists crowding the scene, it was beginning to fragment. Murakami declined to take part in Nakamura's new show. He was set on pursuing his idea of turning *otaku* ideas into commercial contemporary art, and he abandoned Tokyo for New York in late 1994. It marked the end of a short golden era, and of working relations between Masato Nakamura and Takashi Murakami, whose friendship had chilled after *The Ginburart*. Tomio Koyama and Min Nishihara visited Murakami while he was in New York. He was depressed and homesick. It was the beginning of 1995. While Murakami sat and hatched his plans in the US, back in Tokyo, two terrible events were about to change everything in Japan again ...

Art and Money: The Birth of a Contemporary Art Market

The emergence of this dynamic group of young artists was only half of the story. In parallel to this, as suggested by the Röntgen story and the role of

gallerist Tsutomu Ikeuchi, there was the emergence of a new gallery scene, which would offer the artists a place to show their work. Contemporary art in Tokyo has always faced a struggle to survive. It is a small part of the arts, in which traditional and classical forms are more appreciated. The collectors and the corporate buyers that fuel the business in Europe and America are scarce in Japan. Many rich Japanese who might pay embarrassingly large sums of money for modern Western art works do not even look at Japanese contemporary artists. The city of Tokyo has historically offered very little support to contemporary art. There is a constant struggle for the money to finance the careers of young and established artists, and to find the space to show their work. And so, as Tokyo art journalist, Lucy Birmingham puts it, Tokyo galleries and art spaces move around the city, using old buildings and abandoned spaces, only ever “one step ahead of the wrecking ball”.

What did exist prior to the new possibilities of the 1990s were commercial gallery-like spaces in department stores, associated with the burgeoning design and pop illustration scene. There was one exceptional space, the Saison Museum, in the large Seibu department store in Ikebukuro. The writer Noi Sawaragi, for example, points out that this is where he learned about international contemporary art, not from public museums. The Saison Museum of Modern Art was backed by the company’s chairman Seiji Tsutsumi, one of the very rare corporate figures interested in contemporary art. From the mid 1970s onwards this department store location had been organising high quality contemporary exhibitions, mixed in with other commercial and design shows. The museum was run by Kazuko Koike, an advertising consultant for Muji, with her partner Atsuko Koyanagi. In 1983, looking for more freedom to do their own events, the two women discovered an old, unused rice building in Koto-ku – the Shokuryo building – by the side of Sumida river in North East Tokyo. It had extraordinary 1920s architecture, ideal for alternative art spaces. This became Sagacho, Tokyo’s first true alternative contemporary art space. The city offered no help. Koike and Koyanagi relied on raising sponsorship

from enlightened companies like Shiseido and Asahi, fighting against ever rising rentals. As the operation expanded into the 1990s, several new young commercial gallerists opened spaces there, including Shugo Satani, Taro Nasu and, in 1996, the young Tomio Koyama of the Geidai gang. These were a new generation of gallerists. Like Tsutomu Ikeuchi, they felt a mission to cultivate and support young and radical art, but also that a more internationally open attitude might bring better commercial success.

Sagacho became a new departure for the Tokyo art scene, a mix of the best of western artist with new Japanese names. It played a decisive role, particularly, in the discovery of Yasumasa Morimura, as well as the breakthrough of photographer Hiroshi Sugimoto, who later became Koyanagi's husband, becoming one of the other great alliances of contemporary art in Japan. Building on her family's Ginza based ceramics business, Atsuko Koyanagi set up her contemporary art gallery in 1995. Still today, she preserves much of the quiet charm and efficiency of the old style Tokyo art business. Sitting in the elegant surroundings of her gallery – one of the largest art spaces in the centre of the tightly packed Ginza streets – she says that she and fellow gallerists, Tomio Koyama, Shugo Satani and a fourth group member Kiyoshi Wako, who deals mainly in European artists, still sit down for a regular dinner to discuss business and cooperation. Among her many well known Japanese and international artists, Koyanagi has placed her biggest hopes in Tabaimo, the young female video artist who represented Japan at Venice in 2011. Notably, she withdrew support for Mariko Mori, after the financing costs started to get too high.

Parallel to the Seibu Saison museum, the Touko Museum on the corner of Omotesando crossing also established a venue at the turn of the 1990s for cutting edge contemporary art. This small but very visible corporate museum was run by a commercially minded entrepreneur, Masami Shiraiishi, a new breed on the scene. He was a tough and pushy businessman, who had worked for the top modern gallery in Tokyo in the 1980s, Fuji Television Gallery. Smoothly internationalized in his manners, he was not afraid to put noses out of joint or take



Gallerist Tomio Koyama. Courtesy of Tomio Koyama.



Gallerist Atsuko Koyanagi. Courtesy of Gallery Koyanagi.



Gallerist Masami Shiraishi. Courtesy of SCAI The Bathhouse.



Gallerist Suelo Mitsuma. Photo by Hiroyuki Matsukage. Courtesy of Mizuma Gallery.

PIONEERS OF THE CONTEMPORARY ART MARKET

risks on new artists. With Etsuro Ishihara, of ZEIT photo salon, he founded the international contemporary art fair in Japan, NICAFA, in 1992, after they were shut out of the foreign dominated Tokyo Art Expo. Etsuro Ishihara was a similarly brusque character, whose bold business mind established the international careers of the pop photographers, Araki, Daido Moriyama and others associated with the controversial “provoque group”. The first NICAFA made a lot of money, establishing the first real bridgehead for a home grown contemporary art market in Japan and evolving later into the annual Art Fair Tokyo. The first SCAI (Shiraishi Contemporary Arts Institute), up a small hill in Omotesando, put on the Seoul *Nakamura to Murakami* show in 1992, remembered by all as one of the most brilliant of the era. Shiraishi opened SCAI The Bathhouse, a reconverted old *senjo*, an architectural gem in the quiet old neighbourhood near Yanaka cemetery, in 1993. It showed Takashi Murakami solo in 1994, Yoshitomo Nara in 1995, supported Masato Nakamura’s extraordinary *conbini* and McDonald’s installations a little later in the 90s, as well as Mariko Mori and Tatsuo Miyajima’s expensive futurist works.

Sitting in an office at SCAI, overlooking a shrine, Masami Shiraishi relishes retelling the stories of those years. At a David Lynch opening at Touko Museum at the height of his global cult popularity in 1991, Shiraishi recalls a noisy young student with a gang of friends taking over the gallery. It was Takashi Murakami. A huge fan of Lynch, Murakami queued with a book for a signature from Lynch. When done, he bought another and went to the back of the queue. Then another. Shiraishi asked who he was. Later, when Murakami came to present his work to him, Shiraishi gave him his first business lesson. Murakami asked for ¥5,000 for one of his small plastic soldier sculptures. Shiraishi told him he couldn’t get enough food to live on with that, and paid him ¥10,000.

Masami Shiraishi also discovered Tomio Koyama, giving him his first break as a gallerist at Touko. If anything, Koyama was even more outgoing as a businessman, and more willing to take risks internationally. He would sit

alone at small art fairs in LA and Miami with his funny, childish Tokyo pop art on sale. Yet this was how he made his great breakthrough international sales, such as to the Nortons in Los Angeles. Like Shiraishi, Tomio Koyama recognized the importance of a good gallery location. After Sagacho, he started to plan with Atsuko Koyanagi the well organized Kiyosumi complex in the same North Eastern area of Tokyo near the Sumida river. This would gather several other gallerists, and take over part of a still working factory. After opening in 2005, it became the number one stop on any collectors' visit to Tokyo, hosting the galleries of Tomio Koyama, Taka Ishii, Shugo Satani and Hiromi Yoshii. Parties became a more genteel affair, yet there has always been a trace of the underworld origins of the Tokyo art world. One Tokyo based American writer recalls how he and his Japanese friends got into an argument at the Hiromi Yoshii gallery one evening, and were then threatened with *yakuza* language.

Across town, Sueo Mitsuma (Mizuma), a former 80s art dealer and collector with a strong taste for Asian contemporary art, opened his Mizuma Gallery, first in Aoyama, in 1994. This became another key location on the Tokyo art map. As the first gallery eventually became too small and expensive, he moved to an old warehouse, with spaces on two floors, in Kami Meguro. Mitsuma was a bold collector himself, but struggled financially during what he recalls as the “patient years” of the early 1990s. The end of the Bubble was a moment when the old corrupt system of art dealing was exposed in Japan, leading to a great discredit internationally. It was exposed how naively some collectors in Japan had paid incredibly excessive prices for their Western trophy art, sometimes without proper certification. It was also discovered how there had been many bribe schemes using expensive foreign art, in which a piece was bought at a high value, was then given to a politician as a bribe, who then sold the work on at a much lower price back to an art dealer, benefitting everyone all round. Mitsuma was one of the figures trying to re-establish a credible art market in the wake of this disastrous collapse. Unlike others, though, he was not concerned with fit-

ting in with the Western art system, or getting in line with global trends. Rather, Mitsuma believed there was a place for an Asian art world, in which Japanese contemporary art and artists could take the place alongside other artists across the region. He particularly liked young, provocative Japanese artists, who would consciously play with older styles, traditions and political themes with an ironic spirit. He thought it was a scandal that Japanese industrialists or corporations would spend a fortune on Western art works, or even set up museums to them, without ever buying any works from their own culture. He also believed in the value of a good social scene for art: Mizuma Gallery openings became legendary for their atmosphere, and the *nijikai* and *sanjikai* (2nd and 3rd round after parties) into which they spilled.

A momentous meeting for Japanese contemporary art took place in 1997, when the psychiatrist Ryutaro Takahashi discovered Mizuma Gallery. Takahashi was one of several wealthy medical psychologists and doctors who developed in the 1990s and 2000s an intense interest – and collection – of contemporary art. There was also Hisashi Hozumi in Akita, an avid collector like Takahashi of Yayoi Kusama, who set up a centre which used art and visiting artists as a form of therapy for ageing patients with mental problems. Yayoi Kusama is an artist herself who has lived for a long time in a mental institution. And there was Satoshi Okada, a psychologist and Tokyo socialite who became a key supporter of many new young artists in the 2000s. Ryutaro Takahashi was of an older generation, born in 1946, a sixties radical, whose father was a surgeon. At the gallery for the first time, Suelo Mitsuma showed him something by Makoto Aida from the Geidai group. Mizuma still had “on sale” some of Aida’s extraordinary first works from the 1993 show at Röntgen. Takahashi was engrossed by Aida’s vision. He also thought Aida’s folding screen manga of *Mutant Hanako* (1997) – a violent and very pornographic sci-fi satire about the Pacific War in the 1940s – would be perfect for his hospital reception room. It inspired the start of a collection that has become one of the most important and rare collections in Japan of its post-90s contempo-



Collector Ryutaro Takahashi. Photo by Rie Odawara.
Courtesy of Mizuma Gallery.



Collector Satoshi Okada. Courtesy of Satoshi Okada.

THE COLLECTORS

rary art. In 2008-9, Takahashi's collection, toured the country under the title, *Neoteny*, which refers to the strange condition of animal species who retain the features of infants long into adulthood – a metaphor for the Japanese post-Bubble condition. Takahashi also opened a space in Hibiya, in the center of Tokyo, for prominent shows of different parts of his collection. Takahashi's mission became quite clear. He wanted to save this work from the fate of previous era's masterpieces from Japan, such as its best *ukiyo-e*, which were sold cheaply to Western museums and collectors, never to return.

Art spaces in Tokyo invariably come and go, though. The Sagacho building, the first of the pioneers, was sold and scheduled for demolition in 2000, by a city deaf to the significance of a contemporary art space, and blind to the

architectural heritage of the building. The main exhibition space closed, and the building stumbled with financial difficulties until its sentimental farewell show, *Emotional Site*, in late 2002. This was like a who's who of local and international artists, filling the broken down spaces for one last *kampai* (toast). Like so many influential shows of the last twenty years, it was only made possible by the strong social connections that have soldered the Tokyo contemporary art world together in spite of all the problems. The closing struck a chord, with thousands of visitors, waving goodbye – again – to an era.

When Will Aida Be Famous? Before and After Zero Japan

Looking back, 1995 was the year things really went wrong for Japan. It was the year when all the nightmares came true. In January, a huge earthquake devastated Kobe. Then, in March, a cult group led by a 50s born *otaku*-style guru, Shoko Asahara, planted sarin gas on the Tokyo metro, shattering the nerves of a population that felt it lived in the safest major city in the world. The impact of the two disasters, so quickly one after the other, was a crushing blow to the society. Even though there had been a financial crash in 1990, people and businesses were still running in the air, like a cartoon character after the ground has disappeared from under its feet. In 1995, they looked down and saw nothing underneath.

For the hardcore *otaku* – such as the writer Toshio Okada interviewed by Murakami in his 2005 book *Little Boy* – it was a moment of pure fantasy. All the monsters, madness and apocalyptic destruction they could possibly imagine were appearing. Okada recalls rushing down to Kobe to take “cool” photos. For others, it was the moment to question the assumptions of social harmony, rampant capitalism and sprawling urban development that had driven post-war Japan. All kinds of volunteers had to help clear up the mess in Kobe: the public services couldn't cope. In particular, it led to the legal establishment of new non-profit organizations (NPOs) to take up the work that governments and businesses seemed unable to do.

After this, the late 1990s were a struggle for everyone. After all the high hopes of the early 90s, many artists gave up and moved to New York, LA, London or Berlin. It could well be asked: Whatever happened to the “likely lads”? Yukinori Yanagi, the most internationally successful of the new young generation in the early 1990s, disappeared off for years to the US, only to return in 1995, settling in a seemingly quiet position at Hiroshima University. He had become disillusioned with the New York art market and was looking for a more meaningful “lifework” project. Hiroshima became his regional base to launch a variety of spectacular group projects that engaged with art in the city, as well as the base for discovering new possibilities for art on the islands of Japan’s industrially polluted Seto inland sea. It was here he first sketched the plans to develop the extraordinary *Seirenscho* (“Refinery”) copper factory art conversion on the desolate island of Inujima – now the most impressive part of the network of art projects centred around the island of Naoshima. Kodai Nakahara, reckoned to be the most original of the three young heroes at *Anomaly* in 1992, became disillusioned with gallery shows after 1995 and retreated to a professorial position in Kyoto. He is still widely mentioned as one of the most influential teachers of the next generation. Meanwhile, Masato Nakamura, Takashi Murakami’s earliest partner and rival, remained highly active in Tokyo and was selected for Venice in 2001, the peak year for Japanese contemporary art internationally. He too came back home disillusioned. At the exclusive party for biennale invitees, he felt intimidated by all the rich global art people and tacky Italian celebrities. He realized with disgust that he was a token Asian face, and that his art in fact had no meaning in this context. Takashi Murakami was much more comfortable than all his rivals in selling himself to foreigners. Masato Nakamura came back to Tokyo, to also devote himself to making art in the city.

The contributions of Min Nishihara, meanwhile, are largely forgotten. Much of her writings, as those of Noi Sawaragi, were encompassed in the more accessible writings of Midori Matsui. Min Nishihara married Shin Kurosawa,

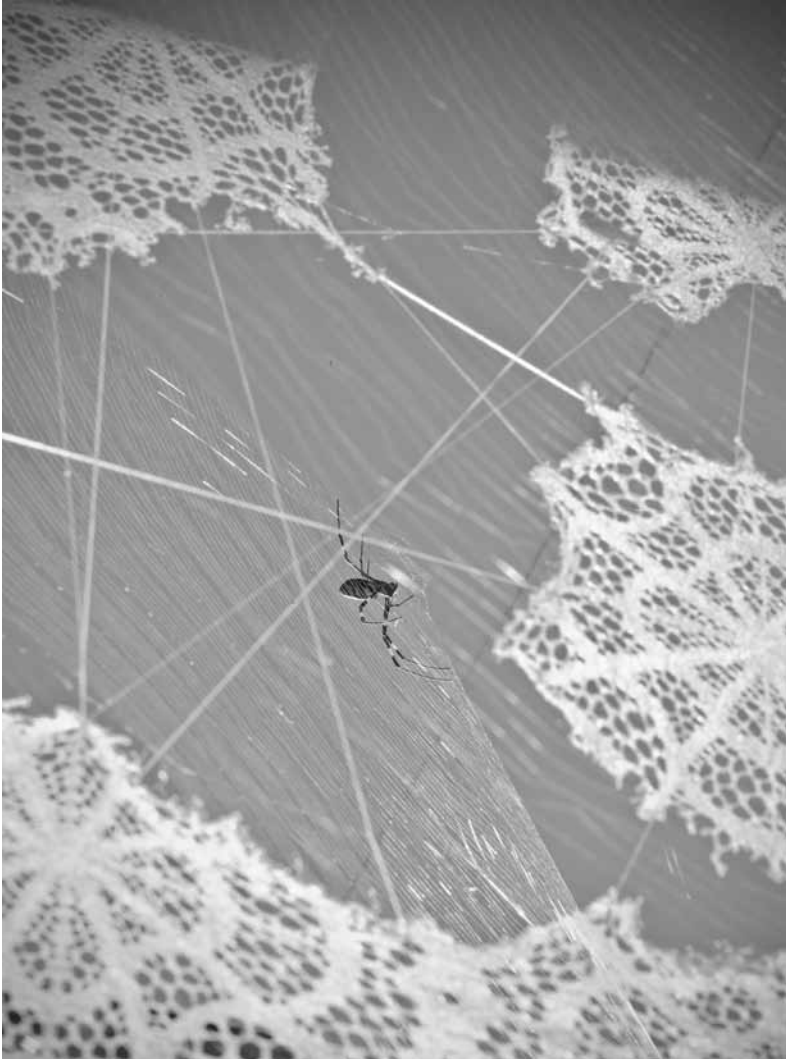


Artist Yukinori Yanagi. Photo by Yoshikazu Nishijima. Courtesy of Yukinori Yanagi and Miyake Fine Art.



Aerial view of Inujima Art Project *Seirenscho* (2008). Copper refinery site conversion and museum conceived by Yukinori Yanagi with Architect Hiroshi Sambuichi, Inujima island. Photo by Road Izumiyama. Courtesy of Yukinori Yanagi and Miyake Fine Art.

YUKINORI YANAGI



Detail of Yukinori Yanagi, *Dollar Web Garden* (2010), "S-House Project". Part of Art House Project on Inujima island, installation in collaboration with Architect Kazuyo Sejima and Art Producer Yuko Hasegawa, Inujima island. Olive trees, arrows, leaver lace, insects. Photo by Road Izumiyama.
© Yukinori Yanagi. Courtesy of Yukinori Yanagi and Miyake Fine Art.

YUKINORI YANAGI

who was involved in some of the most innovative shows of the era at Mito Art Tower, a museum to the north of Tokyo. Kurosawa was the central curatorial influence, for example, in Tsuyoshi Ozawa's landmark 1995 work, *The University of Sodan Art* (Consultation Art), in which, during a two month long residence, Ozawa produced works in flexible consultation with a passing cast of artists, curators, writers and members of the general public. Later, after she and Kurosawa split, Nishihara married the original Group 1965 member Yutaka Sone. When, after 1999, Paul Schimmel suggested they come to LA, with Sone teaching at UCLA, they moved, leaving the Tokyo scene behind.

Shin Kurosawa, like the influential BT editor, Kiyoshi Kusumi, more or less dropped out of the contemporary art scene in the 2000s. Others among this group will be better remembered. Yutaka Sone will certainly be viewed as an important artist of the period. He had first burst on the scene in 1993, with *Her 19th Foot*, a perplexing sculpture of 19 bicycles welded together which he would challenge people to ride. In his later work, he used surreal marble sculptures, performances and video to continually confound audiences with new conceptions of beauty and artistic communication. He was selected for Venice in 2003, alongside the young gothic style sculptor Motohiko Odani. Sone's residential collaborations with artisans and labourers in China and Mexico also positioned him as the one contemporary Japanese artist whose practice and methods rival those of the leading Chinese artist, Ai Weiwei. Of the original Group 1965 members, Tsuyoshi Ozawa has remained an important figure, as has Hiroyuki Matsukage, with his own sometimes shocking translations of trashy Tokyo pop culture in photography, video work and highly physical performances. But the question on everyone's mind in Tokyo has always concerned that other original member of the *Showa 40 nen kai*: Makoto Aida. "When will Aida be famous?"...

Again, it is a question of history – although the question has for years remained unanswered. Tsutomu Ikeuchi closed Röntgen Institute in December 1995. It was the anxious end of an era. He had been representing Ozawa and



Photo of Artist Yutaka Sone and Art Writer Min Nishihara (1997). Photo by Shigeo Anzai. Courtesy of Min Nishihara.

ART COUPLES



Artists Makoto Aida (centre) and Hiroko Okada (right), with Artists Hiroyuki Matsukage (left) and Mario A (behind), at Mizuma Gallery opening, late 1990s. Courtesy of Peter Bellars.

ART COUPLES

Aida, but they declined to move with him to the new, more conventional gallery he opened in Omotesando. It was rather with Mizuma that Aida was to find his permanent home. Aida always had an unusually close relationship with Sueo Mitsuma, who saw him as the most important Japanese artist of the era. This was also the consensus view of the Tokyo art world at the end of the 1990s, when he was featured as the cover artist in *Bijutsu Techo* in the Dec 1999 roundup of the decade in Japanese art, *J-Art at the Turn of the Millennium*. At Mizuma, he became, in effect, a “house” artist, allowed *carte blanche* and underwritten by the gallery. Mitsuma carefully managed his career and sales, with one eye someday on the huge retrospective that would be made in his name in Japan. He was always reluctant to sell Aida’s works in the West, to avoid the fate of so many other Japanese artists whose work was sold to foreigners thus rendering a big retrospective or museum collection in their honour at home very difficult, if not impossible, to organize. For example, when

the most important Japanese modernist artist of the 20s and 30s, Tsuguharu (better known as Leonard) Foujita, was to have his big career retrospective in Japan, he had to simply paint new works in one year to fill the show. Others like Taro Okamoto had to go outside the system and simply build their own museum. In this respect, the premier place given to Aida's work in Ryutaro Takahashi's collection is of historical importance.

So Makoto Aida has, of course, been very famous – and popular in Japan since the 1990s. When he was paired with the cult Mizuma graphic artist – and close friend – Akira Yamaguchi at the Ueno Royal Museum in 2007, the show was said to have had 30,000 visitors a month. His sales on the Asian market have always looked good in relation to Takashi Murakami – his rival in art historical terms – because Murakami has mostly been seen as an artist for the Western market. In Tokyo, in the late 2000s, Aida would always seem everywhere – an everpresent influence in galleries, talk shows, cram classes, openings.

In the West, though, it has been another story. There were sporadic, minor, outings in New York and San Francisco; the occasional glimmer of interest among Japanese specialists in Europe. Mizuma Gallery kept up a steady supply of Aida publications, including a DVD, *Mukiryoku Tairiku* (Apathetic Continent, 2003) and comprehensive catalogue, *Monument for Nothing* (2007). But the message through the late 1990s and 2000s never got through. For example, there was the story of Makoto Aida and those other famous bad boys of contemporary art, the Chapman Brothers, who were big stars of the Young British Artists movement. When Aida and the Chapman Brothers were brought together for the show *Lonely Planet*, by curator Kenji Kubota at Mito in 2004, they and Aida got on like a house on fire. The Chapmans wanted to bring him to London. Mizuma gallery duly followed up, sending all Aida's back catalogue to Jay Jopling at White Cube, a top London gallery. The package came back, return to sender, practically unopened. The English gallery just didn't get it. The Chapman's infamous huge plastic dioramas of model Nazis killing each other in an orgy of violence somehow has never faced the

same problem of acceptance in the global art world as loving drawings and sculptures of edible *Mi-Mi chan* (2001) – Aida’s dubious plan to solve future global food shortages by promoting a line of miniature edible artificial girls that would be served as Japanese culinary delicacies. M. Pinault or Mr Saatchi, who gladly own the Chapmans, have not been buying up Aida’s work, and do not seem likely to any time soon. In this respect, Murakami’s Japan has proven so much more marketable than Aida’s. *Superflat*, which featured one work by Aida was, in many respects, Aida-light all the way. *Superflat* turned Japanese hardcore into Japanese kitsch.

Another issue was Suelo Mitsuma’s strategy for his star artist. Unlike other contemporary gallerists, such as Tomio Koyama or Masami Shiraishi, who learned very well how to do business in the global market, Mitsuma has always insisted on keeping exclusive representation of his artists internationally. This meant he has struggled to develop the *quid pro quo* international networks needed to secure regular invitations and custom at international art



Artist Makoto Aida. Photo by Hiroyuki Matsukage. Courtesy of Mizuma Art Gallery.

BAD BOYS OF JAPANESE ART

fairs. It also meant he could not easily secure the financial cooperation needed in other major world cities to launch prominent exhibitions. During the 2000s in Europe and America, he was left selling his more kitsch and pop culture related artists who fitted the more commercial *neo-japoniste* mould. Back in Japan, it was rumoured that Mitsuma was holding on to some of Makoto Aida’s most important works. Whether or not this was true, Mitsuma was evidently betting

on the long run. But it is still not clear that any Japanese artist can do without the *gaisen kouen* (triumphant return performance) if they want to make it to the historical pantheon.

Some of the problems with understanding Aida were, of course, about production values. Takashi Murakami's carefully airbrushed translations modulated *otaku* ravings for the sensitive tastes of star struck Los Angelenos and politically correct New Yorkers. Makoto Aida's vision always included a fair dose of pure unadulterated Tokyo trash, often as ugly and in your face as the crows in Yoyogi Park as the sun goes down. Moreover, Aida gave away his own "self-defeating" game at the start of *Mukiryoku Tairiku* (Apathetic Continent), when he admitted his voracious appetite for ideas, tended to lead to an inevitable "falling away" in the final product. It has been difficult to brand and mass market this kind of restless art, even with such technical mastery and original-



Artist Hiroyuki Matsukage, performing *ECHO* at Mizuma Gallery (2002), in which he smashes bottles in a confined space, reciting a prayer for each until he is done. Sound and interactive system design by Sumihisa Arima. Courtesy of Mizuma Art Gallery.

BAD BOYS OF JAPANESE ART

ity. In a world of high resolution Taschen art books – in which Takashi Murakami and Yoshitomo Nara always looked good – Aida's major book, *Monument for Nothing*, could easily seem like a half-baked collection of mad ideas thrown together by an art school professor. For every inspired moment, there were just as many duff items and hungover gags that should have just been left in the closet. That's Makoto Aida: a ¥100 slot machine of ideas, and why he has always been so loved by the Tokyo art world. They have been willing to follow him, because Aida has mirrored all of its joys, its frustrations, its bile, and its beauty.

The work of Japanese contemporary artists of the early 90s was powerful because it

had somehow prefigured the emotions and trauma unleashed for real in 1995. There was the decadence and extremity of the pop culture they simulated; the strange and violent dreams of the *otaku*; the feeling of hopelessness and loss; the worry about being Japanese. Takashi Murakami and Yoshitomo Nara were like original generation *otaku* who rejected the system and started their own cult. Masato Nakamura and Tsuyoshi Ozawa were looking for other, socially responsible, alternatives in community art activities they knew Japan had to find. Makoto Aida, meanwhile, was an artist willing to think the unthinkable. Such as his contribution to Ozawa's *Nasubi Gallery* in 1994, when he first moved to live in the suburbs. He expressed his disgust by placing a painting of a sarin gas bottle inside, and hung the box in the street outside his house. The artists were already staring at the "void".

Looking back, it was Noi Sawaragi who best expressed these ideas, in his books of the late 1990s. Japanese contemporary art was in a "bad place", he argued. He then gathered together the most important art works of the 1990s, the legacy of the new generation, at a show called *Ground Zero Japan* at Mito right at the turn of the century in late 1999. Much of it focused on the overriding concern that Sawaragi and many other intellectuals felt at the time, that after the events of 1995 they had to rethink all their ideas and assumptions about Japanese history and culture. They had to re-



Makoto Aida, *Sarin* (1994). Exhibition in *Nasubi Gallery*, shown at *The Group 1965 - We are Boys!*, Düsseldorf Kunsthalle (2011). Photo by author.

MAKOTO AIDA AND ZERO JAPAN



Makoto Aida, *Beautiful Flag* [War Picture Returns](1995). A pair of two-panel sliding screens, hinges, charcoal, self-made paint with a medium made from Japanese glue, acrylic. 169 x 169cm each. © AIDA Makoto. Japanese girl on left, Korean on right. Photo by Kei Miyajima. Courtesy of Mizuma Art Gallery.

MAKOTO AIDA AND ZERO JAPAN

ally go digging in the dirt, and unearth feelings and expression buried by post-war illusions, especially Japan's unhealthy relationship with the US, and with the rest of Asia. Sawaragi went back to Taro Okamoto and Tadanori Yokoo. He gave a place to Shinro Ohtake, and featured a reprise of Kenji Yanobe and Takashi Murakami from *Anomaly*. And at the center of the show, there was Makoto Aida's astonishing *War Picture Returns* paintings (1996 and after): a series of massive *nihonga* screens on which he painted twisted fantasies of Japanese nationalism that evoked both high classicism and the bombastic style of official wartime Japanese army art. Aida's paintings were like a visual psychoanalysis of the whole question of "Zero Japan". At the time, major curators in the US, such as Alexandra Munroe, realized that this was the show about Japanese contemporary art in the 90s that should be seen in the West. Munroe was the most important Japanese art curator in New York, and she became the main local organizer of *Little Boy* at Japan Society in 2005. But Noi Sawaragi's presentation was difficult, and framed everything in terms of its significance for Japan and Japanese art history. The idea was lost. Takashi Murakami, via his gallerists Blum and Poe and his curator Paul Schimmel, was on hand instead. His *Superflat* sampling and re-mix proved to be a so much easier show to translate. The Americans preferred to listen to a much simpler and more comfortable story.



Takashi Murakami, *Cosmos* (2003)

Installation view at *Happiness: A Survival Guide to Art and Life*, Mori Art Museum (18/10/2003 - 18/1/2004)

Courtesy of Mori Art Museum

MURAKAMI'S WORLD



Yoshitomo Nara, *The Little Star Dweller + Star House* (2006)

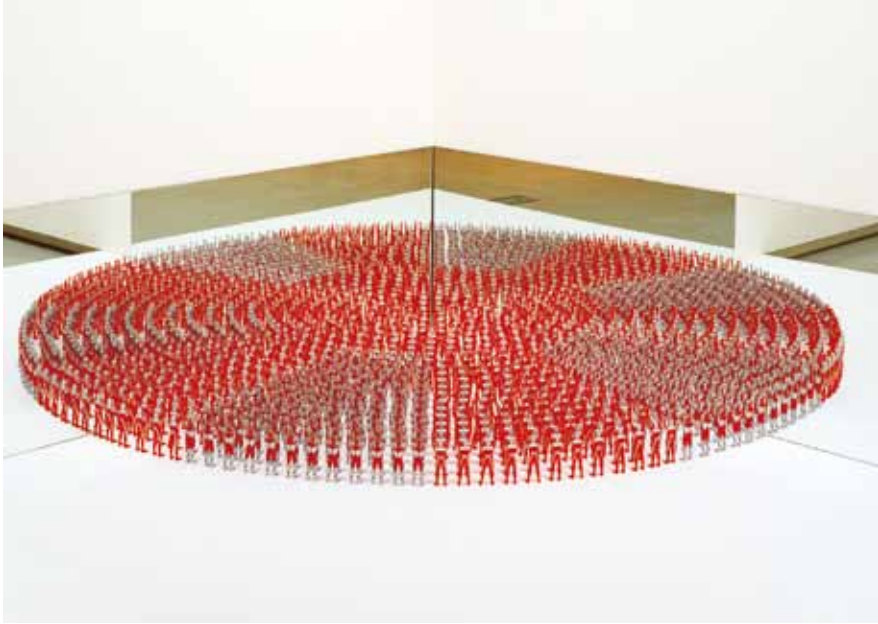
acrylic and glitter on canvas

228 x 182cm

© Yoshitomo Nara

Courtesy of Tomio Koyama Gallery

ETERNAL DREAMER



Yukinori Yanagi, *Banzai Corner* (1991)

plastic toys (×380 pieces) and mirror

92 x 183 x 183cm

Collection of Yokohama Museum, Benesse Art Site Naoshima, Okinawa Prefectural Museum & Art Museum

© Yukinori Yanagi

Courtesy of Yukinori Yanagi and Miyake Fine Art

RISING SON



Makoto Aida, *The Giant Member Fuji versus King Gidora* (1993)

acetate film, acrylic, eyelets

310 x 410cm

photo by Hideto Nagatsuka

© AIDA Makoto

Courtesy of Mizuma Art Gallery

OTAKU OBSESSIONS



Yayoi Kusama, *Dots Obsession* (2004)

Installation view at *Kusamatrix*, Mori Art Museum (7/2/2004 - 9/5/2004)

Photo by Masataka Nakano

Courtesy of Mori Art Museum

PERENNIAL FAVOURITE



Yukinori Yanagi, *Hero Dry Cell "Solar Rock"* (2008)

Installation at Inujima Art Project *Sereinsho*, parts from Yukio Mishima's ex-house in Shoto (three tatami mat room, vestibule), a single slab of Inujima granite (44 tons), water, Inujima slag, light bulbs, sunlight

Photo by Road Izumiyama

© Yukinori Yanagi

Courtesy of Yukinori Yanagi and Miyake Fine Art

INLAND SEA AMBITIONS



Tsuyoshi Ozawa, *Vegetable Weapon: Saury Fish Ball Hot Pot / Tokyo* (2001)

Type C Print

113 x 156cm

Courtesy of Tsuyoshi Ozawa

ART WEAPONS



Makoto Aida, *A Picture of an Air Raid on New York City [War Picture Returns]* (1996)

six panel sliding screens, hinges, *Nihon Keizai Shinbun*, black and white photocopy on hologram paper, charcoal pencil, watercolour, acrylic, magic maker, correction liquid, pencil, etc

169 x 378cm

CG of Zero fighters created by Mutsuo Matsuhashi

photo by Hideto Nagatsuka

© Makoto Aida

Courtesy of Mizuma Art Gallery

AMERICAN DREAM



Masato Nakamura, *TRUMATRAUMA* (1997)
Installation view at SCAI The Bathhouse (7/11/97 - 14/12/97)
Courtesy of Masato Nakamura and 3331 Arts Chiyoda

CONSUMER IDENTITIES



Miwa Yanagi, *My Grandmothers / YUKA* (2000)

laser jet, text panel

160 x 160cm

Courtesy of Miwa Yanagi and Yoshiko Isshiki Office, Tokyo

FEMININE FANTASY



Yutaka Sone, *Dice-Toss* (2006)
performance curated by Heidi Zuckerman Jacobson, Aspen Art Museum (17/2/2006 -
16/4/2006)
Courtesy of the artist's studio

SNOW KING



Tabaimo, *public conVENiencE* (2006)

Video installation

© Tabaimo

Courtesy of Gallery Koyanagi

ZERO ZERO GENERATION



Chiharu Shiota, *Dialogue with Absence* (2010)

Installation view

photo by Sunhi Mang

© Chiharu Shiota

Courtesy of Kenji Taki Gallery and the artist's studio

BYE BYE KITTY



Miwa Yanagi, *Windswept Women 2* (2009)
framed photography
300 x 400cm (with frame)
Courtesy of Miwa Yanagi and Yanagi Yoshiko Isshiki Office, Tokyo

BIG GIRLS



Kohei Nawa, *PixCell-Deer#24* (2011)
Mixed media
H:205 x W:150 x D:200cm
Photo by Omote Nobutada (Sandwich)
Courtesy of SCAI The Bathhouse

DIGITAL OR ANALOGUE?



Kei Takemura, Detail of *A.N.'s Living Room in Tokyo: Premonition of an Earthquake* (2005)

Italian synthetic cloth, Japanese silk thread, transparency, permanent pen

380 x 1120cm

Courtesy of Kei Takemura (a participant of *The Echo* at ZAIM, Yokohama 2008)

AFTER THE TSUNAMI

Art & The City: How Art Replaced God at the Heart of Neo-Tokyo

The Tower of Power: The Mori Story

There was a new hope in the air in Tokyo at the turn of the millennium. With the globalization boom elsewhere in the world, Tokyo's fortunes as a global city were finally picking up again, and there was a new wave of urban development and building. Moreover, somebody was for a change paying attention to the arts. Policy makers and urban planners had become alive to internationally fashionable ideas about the "creative city", and the role that art, museums and high end culture might play in driving new economic development. There seemed to be a growing international awareness of new young Japanese art. More generally, the extraordinary cultural creativity of the 90s was finally putting Tokyo on the map as a capital of global fashions. In 2000-2001, plans

were being laid for the first big retrospectives of Yoshitomo Nara and Takashi Murakami back in Japan after their international breakthrough. Simultaneously, the Yokohama Triennial was being seen as a new move to establish Japan and Tokyo as the global gateway for the Asian art boom just around the corner. And, above all, the planning of the Mori Art Museum (MAM) atop the Roppongi Hills complex promised to give Tokyo a world class museum at the heart of the city. And so, after the gloom and despair of the 1990s, everyone started to focus attention on the shiny new tower rising over the South West part of the city...

The anticipation was intense because Minoru Mori, Tokyo's most powerful developer, was planning to put the museum at the pinnacle of the new tower: a trophy location on the 53rd floor of what would become the most visible building on the Tokyo skyline. The construction would push the very limits of height regulations in the earthquake prone city. It would cover a prominent lot totalling a massive 11.6 hectares in a city with intense space restrictions on new buildings. Like all his previous buildings, Roppongi Hills was a statement about translating prestige and power into architecture; about leaving his mark on the city.

Unusually, Minoru Mori was a philosopher. Unlike his brother, Akira, who inherited the other half of the family business, Minoru saw his development plans in grandiose social terms, as "tools for social betterment". Their father, Taikichiro, was said to be the richest man in the world in 1991-2, although he died the next year. Minoru Mori saw himself as a "builder of cities" and above all was influenced by the French architect Le Corbusier, whose work as an artist and designer he avidly collected. The development plan for Roppongi Hills was thus dressed up Le Corbusier style as a social philosophy: an "urban new deal", Mori claimed, about reinventing the inner city. It would aim to rebuild community and culture in locations being vacated by families and the middle class because of urban decline. Roppongi Hills was visualized as an idealized high rise oasis in a city where there is very little open public space. It would be

mixed use: with an office tower joined by residential units, a commercial centre, and leisure facilities that would make it a day and night location.

The Tokyo Metropolitan government was keen on the project because the grime, poverty and messy sprawl of the old Roppongi neighbourhood, associated with the sex business and *yakuza* interests, would be cleaned away. Roppongi Hills was conceived as a metallic raised space that would feel like a castle above the city. It could be sealed off, monitored 24 hours a day, kept clear of homeless or poor people, and would be sliced off from the city around it by expressways and new metro connections. Prestigious clients were drawn to the offices – including a Hyatt hotel, and banking firms such as Goldman Sachs and the Lehman Brothers – and high end residents attracted to live in the apartments. The Roppongi Hills “tribe” (*Hiru zoku*) were typically media stars who represented the new generation of entrepreneurial cultural figures of the 1980s and 90s – for example, musician Ryuichi Sakamoto and hip hop designer Nigo. The aesthetic of Roppongi Hills was smoothly internationalized; a statement about Tokyo as a hub of the global economy. Yet Mori saw the place as an inclusive, universal offering to the city. The notion of public space was softened by the expensive art and design works that would be placed around the complex. Culture was thus the key to breathing life into what would otherwise be a sterile and elite business and commercial development. “Cutting edge” global artists and designers would be used to replace the tatty soul of the old city with a new shrine to modernity and the future. It would inspire the people of Tokyo and those that visit it. And, above it all, in the clouds, a museum. A place that might bring viewers to worship Neo-Tokyo from the pinnacle of the city.

The combination of art, redevelopment and tourism has been a familiar theme in urban planning in recent times. London, for example, did it with the riverside Tate Modern development. In a few short years, it became the biggest attraction in the city. But the draw in this kind of high end location is ultimately the spectacular art collection that the Tate holds, and its importance as a glob-

ally renowned museum. The Mori Art Museum was new and did not hold a great collection. The art it was planning to show would be unfamiliar to most people who might visit. The logic of Roppongi Hills has therefore been the reverse. A museum was put in the tower, and given an international mission. But the masses were also drawn in to see the art shows with a work of human hands that the museum would find it very difficult to compete with – the view through the windows on the 52nd floor. This is still the case today. If they are really lucky, and it is not too windy, visitors can even take a small lift up to the open-air helicopter pad on the roof. This is the God-like view promised by the “Tokyo City View” sold to tourists in the foyer. It is a truly sublime experience, especially at night, not least because there is nothing safe about being up this high in a building in an earthquake prone region like Tokyo. So Roppongi Hills became the classic experience of Neo-Tokyo, with its breathtaking philosophy of no-tomorrows, the source of the city’s restless dynamic. Live the future now, keep wiping away the past, because nothing may last. All this was ashes and rubble only a few years ago; it may be so again... Entry to whatever is on at the museum is basically free after that.

That said, the creation of the Mori Art Museum was a key moment in the attempted internationalization of Japanese contemporary art. A moment when the street level creativity of the 90s started to crystallize as something significant, and intersect with ambitious business and urban development plans that first Japanese society, then the rest of the world might begin to notice. Mr Mori was not then a noted art collector or connoisseur, and he wavered over the kind of art museum he wanted. But the Opera City development in Hatsudai in the late 90s, which had successfully included a contemporary art museum, had shown that high culture ambitions could be combined with commercial goals. Mr Mori was even more ambitious, and for the museum he encouraged something that was unheard of in the staid Japanese curatorial world. The committee broke with tradition and scouted out a foreign director, someone who would become the very first foreigner to lead a major art museum in Japan. It was a big hire: the Englishman David Elliott, a renowned

scholarly curator, respected for his work on world art, and with a strong pedigree in Japanese art history. The headhunting searched far and wide. Among those approached were leading American curators with Japan connections: Paul Schimmel in LA, and Tom Sokolowski, who had co-curated the one major contemporary Japanese show seen in the US during the 1980s, *Against Nature*, in 1989. But it was David Elliott who accepted the position after several years in Stockholm. Elliott had played big part in keeping alive an international appreciation for Japanese modern and contemporary art in the West. His early show and catalogue, *Reconstructions* (1985) at the Museum of Modern Art in Oxford, was a forerunner of the later survey of post-war Japanese art in *Scream Against the Sky* (1994-5). Elliott's perspective emphasized more the radical politics of earlier Japanese *avant garde* movements. At Oxford, where he had been director, he also played a part in restoring interest in Yoko Ono, whose serious reputation declined in the years after she married John Lennon, as well as Yayoi Kusama, who was nearly written off entirely as a crazy old lady in the 70s and 80s.

Elliott arrived in 2001, with a two year start up phase to establish the museum. His first achievement was to refuse to accept that it be called an "art centre", as Mr Mori envisaged. Elliott insisted from the beginning it had to be a real museum. It had to be high brow and aim for the global elite, it had to put on original shows, it had to foster young curatorial and artistic talent, and it had to collect art (although this only started later). Becoming director of this museum was not a job to take on lightly, given the notorious hierarchical management structures of a typical Japanese corporation, and the pressure of living up to Mr Mori's vision. There would be the intense difficulty of dealing culturally with an entire museum staff as a foreigner – even as one well versed in Japanese art. There would also be the daily pressure of dealing directly with the Mori family at every step: Mr Mori made his wife, Yoshiko, the chairperson of the museum's board. So here was a good test of Tokyo's pretensions as a global "creative city". MAM could recruit the best of international talent to a key position in the art world, but could it enable them to

thrive and do what they might do to internationalize the scene and put the Tokyo art world on the map?

The curators at MAM have always stressed that there was never any pressure put on them in the choice of art itself. But it was a strange kind of museum. An army of public relations officers were deployed to manage the museum's corporate image. Like any Japanese corporation it was intensely self-conscious of its image with the public and the Japanese media. It was obsessed with knowing all potential measurements of its success in terms of visitors and media visibility. Mr Mori considered the idea of an art museum a kind of experiment. Could they make something from elite, high culture popular and open it up to a broad public? Elliott needed a second-in-command to help him, and he appointed Fumio Nanjo, arguably the most powerful name in the Japanese art world. Nanjo was a long time key player on the Japanese art scene, both through the Japan Foundation where he had worked for years, as well as his own art management business, Nanjo and Associates. He was also an ambitious curator and art writer, one of the very few globally recognized names from Japan. He had made a name for himself at the Venice Biennale, and also through involvement in the successful *Against Nature* touring show. Unusually, though, Fumio Nanjo was somewhat an outsider to the academic Japanese curatorial system. He had a background in politics and finance, and his company was better known for its involvement in art buying and redevelopment schemes, as well as various public art projects that were a forerunner to the public art installations at Roppongi Hills that became a signature. Nanjo and Associates also cultivated a roster of younger curators in Nanjo's image, and some of these came in to fill junior curatorial positions at Mori. One of the other key hires was Mami Kataoka, an ambitious young female curator from Opera City, which had pioneered the slick combination of popular art and aggressive corporate sponsorship.

Elliott recognized immediately that communication at Mori needed revamping. As an assistant, he brought in Edan Corkill, an exceptionally articulate



Curator and Art Producer Fumio Nanjo, director of Mori Art Museum. Courtesy of Mori Art Museum.



Curator David Elliott, former director of Mori Art Museum. Courtesy of David Elliott.



Curator Mami Kataoka, chief curator at Mori Art Museum. Courtesy of Mori Art Museum.

MORI ART MUSEUM CURATORS

and energetic Australian, and editor of the longstanding online newsletter, *Japanese Art Scene Monitor*. The curators at the Mori Art Museum also faced problems over and above the unusual corporate management context, and the never ending pressure to make money or score high visitor numbers. There were basic issues with putting massive – and sometimes extraordinarily expensive – art works up at the top of a very high building. With Mori's connections, insurance was not said to be a big problem, although this was a point of financial vulnerability. The logistics, though, could be highly complex. Although it had a designated lift for art works, for some of the bigger gallery construction materials the museum had to share the Tower's one big central elevator with all the other prestigious clients in the building. It was a 24 hour building, and everything required careful scheduling, and the museum's needs were often not top priority.

The two year initial planning period saw Elliott upturning carts and galvanizing energies for the opening of the museum. Initially, the museum was allowed to incorporate the two floors, integrating the city view into the presentation of the art works to stunning effect. The first show, *Happiness: A Survival Guide for Art and Life*, opened with the museum in October 2003, six months after the opening of the Roppongi Hills complex. A *tour de force* from Elliott as a curator, it showed off his signature style, juxtaposing a panorama of traditional Asian arts with the best of contemporary global art to pose historical and philosophical questions. A huge 730,000 entrants are said to have visited the show, which gained great media exposure for the museum locally but also unusually serious global art world coverage for a Japanese event. As a presentation it made an important statement about the globalization of art and how to transcend Western art chronologies and categories.

Next up came the first Roppongi Crossing (2004), designed as a review of the best of Japanese art of the last three years. Although not quite envisaged to emulate the Turner Prize in Great Britain, the selection functions similarly as a way of singling out periodically emerging Japanese artists, to underline

their importance in Japan and their potential impact internationally. There is both a public voted prize and one selected by curators each time. The show is absolutely central to MAM's mission, and the first one represented a high point, with a strong selection of artists and a self-confident message from the museum about its new role in the Tokyo art scene. Coupled with a Yayoi Kusama show on the floor below, it kept strong media attention on the museum. Kusama's famous red polka dot installations were blended with the city view at night, and spread all over the Roppongi Hills complex as a tantalizing art virus. This show in particular was a huge hit with the public. Kusama became a regular favourite with Roppongi Hills, developing her visibility as a brand with products and sales. As with Takashi Murakami, who played a similar role for Roppongi Hills, the artwork-as-branding blurred the line between art experience and commerce, and might cheapen the experience of the art. It was never clear the audience could tell the difference.

The opening of Roppongi Hills was part of a spatial realignment of high culture in the city around the Roppongi area. This was quite an achievement for a part of the city mostly identified with red light night clubs and the entertainment industry for foreign corporate clients. This was all still there, but a new Roppongi Arts Triangle and, later, an integrated annual Arts Night was promoted to link Roppongi Hills with the newly opening National Art Centre Tokyo and the upcoming Tokyo Midtown complex with a traditional arts museum, the Suntory Museum, and the new design-focused 21_21 DESIGN SIGHT museum. The NACT was the classic "white elephant" public development project: a fantastic piece of architecture that has been underused for serious art exhibitions, and instead mostly used to house the *nitten* art competitions for the traditional system of *iemoto* art schools, in which amateur artists follow the training of an established traditional or modernist art master.

Minoru Mori certainly entertained other, international aspirations, for the Mori Art Museum. He was also prepared to work with the Tokyo gallery world. At the wedding party for Mariko Mori, Atsuko Koyanagi planted the

idea with him of creating an alternative art space in the area, as a way of backing up the Museum's serious credentials, and linking it to visiting international buyers. He then offered the gallerists a battered old building down the hill from Roppongi crossing, which became the *Complex* building, opening in April 2003. Koyanagi suggested it to the several gallerists that couldn't be offered spaces in Tomio Koyama's planned new Kiyosumi building. After a basic refit of the rough four storey space, the new tenants included several key symbolically important players in the art world, including Ota Fine Arts, who still represented Yayoi Kusama, and Tsutomu Ikeuchi's Röntgen, still pursuing edgy crossover art. There was also the fast upcoming younger gallerist, Hiromi Yoshii, who had strong New York connections.

Yoshii thought there needed to be a more alternative non-commercial side to the place, getting together with a group of key art world figures to open the Magical Art Room. This group included collector and psychologist Satoshi Okada, the Kyoto academic Shigeo Goto, well known art writer Kentaro Ichihara, and the Enlightenment designer/artist Hiro Sugiyama. Again, this was a key moment in encouraging new grass roots to emerge. It was all motivated by Hiromi Yoshii's melodramatic "After the Reality" philosophy. After the shock of seeing 9/11 in New York on television, he had the feeling that something needed to be put back into the art system to help younger artists do something meaningful and emotional again: to not to just stare blankly at the void. There was a peculiar transference going here as often in the US dominated post-war Japan. The indulgent identification with the pain of New York became a metaphor of the psychological anguish of the decadent, declining Japan, now decentered even from a leading role in Asia. The partners did not invest equally in the idea. Over time, only Satoshi Okada, one of the most important collectors of new young Japanese art, really stuck with the vision. Yet Magical Art Room exceeded its expectations, and became a source of new young art discoveries, owing much to the dynamism of its manager, a young art theory student from Kyoto, Haruka Ito.



Art Writer Chie Sumiyoshi. Courtesy of Chie Sumiyoshi.



Night time view of Traumaris bar, mid 2000s. Courtesy of Chie Sumiyoshi.

TRAUMARIS

The Complex building also became a focal point for the art scene for another reason. It had a bar. Okada and (initially) Yoshii owned this part, opening the bar with Chie Sumiyoshi, a noted art journalist and urban culture *flâneur*, who cultivated an underground, backstreet bar atmosphere. *Traumaris*, as she called it, became a special late night oasis for the Japanese art world to mingle in, with Sumiyoshi presiding over off-the-record talk and gossip. Visiting international artists and curators would also drop by, staying late into the morning; David Elliott was a regular. There were frequent *avant garde* music and performance events. *Traumaris* became another crucial hub of the social network.

Daikanyama was the other key place on the map, not far away to the West. Complex encouraged Tomio Koyama and Atsuko Koyanagi to open a small viewing gallery so that visitors would not have to spend so much time in taxis darting across town to disconnected places. A key player in this respect, was Johnnie Walker, a legendary cosmopolitan figure of the scene with his massive wolfhound Bacon, who founded an art foundation with hedge funds based in nearby Yoyogi to try to kick start corporate interest in Japanese art. He would be the one chaperoning key foreign collectors around the galleries, or warming them up for sales at openings. Daikanyama also housed the offices of the two major art project development companies, headed by the rivals Fumio Nanjo and Fram Kitagawa. Nanjo helped launch there the non-profit Arts Initiative Tokyo in 2002, an alternative art school and location for foreign art residencies. And just around the corner, in Kami Meguro, was Mizuma gallery. This became the other key local hot spot of the early 2000s, with its buzzing social openings, and a Friday night late bar organized among others by the now Mujin-to Production gallerist, Rika Fujiki, that would sometimes spill on over to the warren of drinking bars at the Golden Gai in Shinjuku. With Makoto Aida and the extrovert photographer Hiroyuki Matsukage always competing for attention at the centre of things, the spirit of the *Showa 40 nen kai* lived on. Again, David Elliott was often there too, soaking up the best of the local scene, hooking up and swapping ideas with others who might drop

in. 2001 is often mentioned as the key year. To the outside world, and even the Japanese popular media, the return home in 2001 of the internationally successful Takashi Murakami and Yoshitomo Nara seemed to be the big story: it was “the year of Narakami”, they said. But from the point of view of the inner Tokyo art world, it was Mizuma and, a little later, *Traumaris* – the social world hosted by the so-called “glamour girls” who organized the events – that was the real hot bed of the early 2000s. This was a new golden period of creativity for the galleries and the artists connected to it.

Embedded in this exciting new local scene, Roppongi Hills got off to a good start. The first half dozen or so shows planned under David Elliott had a big impact, including a major show for Hiroshi Sugimoto, an important show for Tsuyoshi Ozawa, and an international touring show *Africa Remix*. Elliott enjoyed a full remit over shows in the first three years of the museum, but as his contract neared an end, there was no longer a consensus about future planning. Both Fumio Nanjo and Mami Kataoka were keen to take over more curatorial leadership. Financial pressures were mounting from the family. The Moris suggested Elliott might move into a more advisory role. They also wanted him to be involved in developing a new museum in China. Elliott decided not to accept, and Nanjo – who had very good relations with the Moris – moved into the leadership of the museum in October 2006, completing his ascent to power in the Tokyo art world.

The ending of the Elliott period is shrouded in a kind of glum silence among all parties. Art journalist Lucy Birmingham remembers it as the moment when the hopes of the early 2000s faded. Elliott decided to move on from Japan. Other leading curators who were brought in to Mori found themselves unable to work there comfortably for the corporation, including Eriko Osaka, who later became director at Yokohama Museum of Art. The nature of the shows over time subtly changed, giving more emphasis to corporate sponsored exhibitions that pleased the public and reduced the space for the art: fancy goldfish shows or designers cars, for example, as well as more space for an expensive

café. The 52nd floor was given more priority. The Mori family wanted to see more architecture and design featured in shows, a broader public appeal. Despite the positive numbers always claimed to visit the museum – including about 10% non-Japanese – it was never clear how many were really there for the art. There were more secondary touring shows. The curators at MAM became nervous about how long the Mori family would continue to bankroll contemporary art. It was said that the museum, which was always going to be a kind of loss-leader for the corporation, was in fact losing about ¥9-10 million a year. David Elliott meanwhile adopted a more roving identity as a global curator. However, his next move, to Istanbul, working for a powerful family with a big art museum, didn't work out. He felt he had a lack of support and curatorial independence, and quickly decided to resign.

The 2007 and 2010 Roppongi Crossings both made a concerted attempt to get back the mojo for the tower. Noi Sawaragi was one of the guest curators invited in 2007, and it was a good selection. Sawaragi contextualized new young artists in terms of key antecedents from an older generation. Allegations of nepotism, however, hung over the show. Three artists were selected from the gallery of Noi Sawaragi's wife, Yuko Yamamoto, and none from several major Tokyo galleries. Tomio Koyama, in particular, was furious. The three curators made their own choices with little coordination or focus. In 2010, an emphasis on street art and fashionable graphic designers brought in a large crowd. The show was curated by the MAM insider, Kenichi Kondo, and two strong minded independent curators, Kenji Kubota and Chieko Kinoshita. Although reduced in size, it was a better coordinated show, focused around the legacy of the legendary 80s/90s performance art group from Kyoto, Dumb Type. It provided an important piece of art history and was a serious reflection on the purpose of art in Japan at the end of the 2000s. But it was a show with a pervasive introspective feeling: of Japan talking to itself.

By the end of the 2000s, the most telling thing about Roppongi Crossing events were the press conferences. There was always a good showing of Japa-

nese journalists, anxious to find some scandal to write about. They would typically seek to oppose the outlandish curators with the good taste of the public, corporate sponsors, or the Mori family. But in a crowded press room, politely listening to Fumio Nanjo's introductions, there were now only ever two or three Caucasian faces. Interest in the Mori Art Museum internationally over the years melted away. By 2011, there was barely any coverage of events there in the dominant world art press, such as *Art Forum* or *Frieze*, and the magazines wouldn't send anyone to cover openings. A more obvious commercialism, targeted at the still large potential Japanese audiences, seemed the only obvious path. Roppongi changed. The Complex building was shut down at the end of 2007 as a prelude to a commercial redevelopment of the building. Other galleries that were part of the spatial realignment towards Roppongi moved away again from the neighbourhood. Tokyo gallerists started to remind foreign visitors that MAM might also be worth checking out.

Still, the expensive opening parties would go on for shows at the museum. They took place in a spectacular room on the 52nd floor, with a massive glass window overlooking the city. Mrs Mori would come out and make her usual speech about how she didn't understand the art, how it all seemed a bit rude and provocative in fact, but that she was sure it was important. The audience would politely clap and get another drink. It was the one time when nearly all the Tokyo art world would be gathered in one room. All except Takashi Murakami and Yoshitomo Nara, that is, who would never show. Everyone knew that for all the fine words by Mr Nanjo about the global art scene, this was not the same as being part of it. By 2011, the Japanese art world didn't seem to mind that the West was no longer looking. There have always been enough bright and beautiful people in the Tokyo art scene to make it feel important enough: especially when the champagne flowed, and the red lights and neon twinkled over the void. At Mori openings, there was always plenty enough of them to have a good time, and to talk, nostalgically perhaps, about the 90s – when they were young and things were hot in Tokyo. But when the doors

shut, and everyone would be cleared out on the dot at 10pm, a troubling question would remain: Had they really been close to God, or had they just lost their soul?

Yokohama: From Triennial to Debacle

The second arm of the much longed for internationalization of contemporary art in Japan at the turn of the century was the attempt to establish the Yokohama Triennial as a major global art event. On the face of it Japan was already a little late to the biennial/triennial game, given that the first Yokohama event only opened in the autumn of 2001. There had already been major art events established in Shanghai in 1996, Taipei in 1998, and Busan, South Korea in 1998, each a part of the late 1990s rash of art triennials that were one of the major symptoms of the globalization of art in this period. Ostensibly part of a decentering of the art world away from the West, they became a vehicle by which dominant Western trends set by famous curators found ways of commercially absorbing non-Western art into a dominant Western theoretical discourse. They have been colonial operations, in other words. Biennials and triennials rose with the role of the freelance global independent curator. In the 1990s and 2000s, the prototype for this was the Swiss curator Hans-Ulrich Obrist. As a group, socialized together by curatorial programmes in the free moving global 90s, this cadre of younger curators seized leadership of the global art world. Released from the frustrations of running fixed museums, they became roving art intellectuals and impresarios. They could make and break the careers of their favourite artists, worked with gallerists and collectors to oil major deals or put value on new discoveries, and collaborated with cities to turn contemporary art into big commercial events aimed at tourists.

Even if late, there was unquestionably a demand at this time for Tokyo as a location for a major global art event. This was not unlike the demand, as yet unquenched, for a commercial international art fair in Tokyo worthy of the name. Tokyo has always sat in a potentially pivotal position between East

and West. Japan is, after all, the place where many Westerners learned how to do business in Asia, even if they started moving on after 1990. The talk for a long time in the 1990s was to compete with Asian rivals by launching a Tokyo based event. Fumio Nanjo describes the whole process as a “bungled opportunity”. In the late 1990s, the Tokyo Metropolitan government cut down the budget for the arts and severed the idea. At the time, the city didn’t even have a serious art fair. The focus of the idea moved on to Yokohama, where a new young mayor, Hiroshi Nakada, saw the idea of major art event as a potential keystone of his enthusiasm for new ideas about the creative city.

In the last few decades, Yokohama became an upstart rival city to Tokyo. It is proud of its international connections, as the first port to the West in the modern era, and a long term host of the American military. Only 30 minutes train ride out of Shibuya, it feels like a new city (it is Japan’s second largest now) with a brand new spacious waterfront/downtown that makes Tokyo feel dated and claustrophobic. Yet underneath the shiny service and finance sector driven growth and construction of the 90s, there was a declining industrial port town, with some of worst examples of poverty and urban decline in Japan. Art came to the service of both upper end development projects and lower end social welfare work.



Yokohama waterfront and Minato Mirai. Photo by author.

YOKOHAMA TRIENNIAL

The adoption of the Triennial was part of a move by the city to gain control over the port and seafront at Yokohama, whose political jurisdiction has always been separate. The idea was to turn the waterfront into a kind of touristic arts park, with the Triennial and regular art events at its heart. This in turn would converge with the ongoing de-

velopment of the shiny new Minato Mirai district. The impressive Yokohama Museum of Art there would become a central part of this activity, with the influential role of long time chief curator Taro Amano, a powerful figure on the Japanese art scene, and one of the few to directly articulate a social and political role for art. Yokohama also put money into developing alternative art centres in disused buildings – with space and resources for younger artists and independent art professionals – at two sites called BankArt and the now defunct ZAIM. And it sought to use art as a tool of social policy, bringing it in as part of a gentrification effort in Koganecho and Kotobukicho, two of the least savoury examples of urban squalor in Japan. Here run down homeless doss houses, or seedy *nomiya* (small restaurants) in an area of prostitution once controlled by the *yakuza* were renovated and turned into accommodation for young artists, as well as hosting regular community art festivals. The mantra promoted by Yokohama officials was the “creative city”: the idea that culture and the arts can lead to economic development, as well as be used to rebrand a city internationally.

Four Japanese directors were brought in to lead the first Triennial in 2001: Nobuo Nakamura, Fumio Nanjo, Akira Tatehata and Shinji Kohmoto. It was an arrangement that no one was happy with, and it led to arguments. Still, the tense dynamics produced a comprehensive selection that worked to genuinely decentre the usual Western art festival paradigm. Yokohama 2001 was the first truly Asian triennial not directed by Western curators or colonial ideas. Nor did it reflect Western financial interests or sponsorship. There was a large bulk of Japanese artists, an excellent selection of emerging artists from elsewhere in Asia, and Western artists were chosen to fit in with the whole rather than as leaders for the Asians to follow. The Japanese artists were the dominant selections, and they rose to the event: a reflection of how strong Japanese art had become in the 1990s. Original Group 1965 members, Makoto Aida, Tsuyoshi Ozawa, and Yutaka Sone were all there. The show introduced the brilliant Berlin based installation artist Chiharu Shiota; there was an early showing for the

still very young animated video artist Tabaimo, as well as photographer Miwa Yanagi's best work, *My Grandmothers* (1999 and after). Older heavyweights, such as the classically stylish photographer Hiroshi Sugimoto and installation artist Noboru Tsubaki added strong work. And the selection built continuity with the Japanese *avant garde* tradition: the key figures of social/performance artists Genpei Akasegawa and Tatsumi Orimoto represented. The academic minded Akira Tatehata, in particular, was one of the very few Japanese curators with the sufficient international experience to make the presentation work for visitors. His career defining moment was the resurrection of Yayoi Kusama he effected by insisting on her presenting solo at the Japanese pavilion in Venice in 1993.

Fumio Nanjo, though, was the lynchpin. His connections with the Japan Foundation secured its support. He brought his corporate knowledge to the questions of sponsorship, and his logistics knowhow to the public art presentations. Moreover, he had a clear vision that saw this as a strategic move to put Japan at the heart of Asia, and to lead the Asian art boom from the front. It was an unusual investment for the Japan Foundation: a big scale, costly event held in Japan when their mission is usually more narrowly defined as a foreign diplomacy effort to promote Japanese culture in other locations. Yet Fumio Nanjo's vision was essentially Japan Foundation policy, as they were shifting their efforts to spreading Japanese cultural influence in Asia, in the name of "multiculturalism". There were ideas of Japanese brokerage, and leadership as a power balance to China behind this, as well as older notions of its civilizing mission. One key idea that during these years quietly shaped curators careers in Japan was the Japan Foundation's promotion of Asian curatorial networks – again, with Nanjo a central figure, cultivating an alternative, yet still global, perspective on art from the East.

It was Autumn 2001; a highpoint for Japanese contemporary art. David Elliott had just moved to join the Mori Art Museum, and the new Triennial coincided with Murakami at MOT in Tokyo, and Nara at the Yokohama Museum of Art.

There was a genuine excitement in Japan about the event as a two-way door opening to the world. The city was a good host, and they used the waterfront location like a classier version of the Venice Arsenale, with a multitude of events around the city. The event was a big success: over 300,000 visitors, including a lot of foreigners, but also a significant, serious global art media impact. The world, for once, was watching.

The second Triennial was projected for 2004. With the Mori Art Museum opening just around the corner, and the global art world wondering if they were witnessing the birth of new global art capital, Arata Isozaki, the celebrated Japanese architect, was put in charge. Isozaki, for sure, was one of the most powerful figures in the creative field in Japan. An internationally established architect since the 1980s, he for a long time dominated much public architect projects in Japan, as a key broker for many of the biggest public works since the 1960s, as well as a dominant influence on a school of young followers. There was a thought – a good one – of linking contemporary art with Japan's creative ace in the pack: its international reputation for contemporary architecture. The Japan Foundation was delighted. Architecture has always been at the heart of its mission, and there was much to be proud of. The economic downturn of the early 90s, and the subsequent ending of lots of big architectural contracts, had sent a new generation of younger architects back to the study and drawing board. They invented a non-monumental, domestic scale architecture for the 21st century, with ideas about sustainability, new materials, and a new experience of space at the fore. This was the roster of names who would emerge as world leaders during the decade: Toyo Ito, Jun Aoki, Shigeru Ban, Kazuyo Sejima and Ryue Nishizawa (SANAA), Atelier Bow Wow, Junya Ishigami.

The possibilities sounded brilliant, but it was not to be. It would take nearly another ten years before the creative potential of Japanese art and architecture together would be seen on the world stage: at the extraordinary Venice Architectural Biennale curated by Kazuyo Sejima in 2010. Yokohama 2004 was a

great lost opportunity. As Fumio Nanjo points out, too much uncertainty has dogged all the Triennials. The city was unable to commit to a specific location, or make timely decisions. The Japan Foundation wavered continually over funding. Notoriously, it is an organization whose personnel are constantly changing, its hierarchies are slow and old fashioned, and it is not always comfortable working with foreigners. The planning for 2004 soon began to run into problems, with difficulties over projected costs with the Japan Foundation, and the two primary sponsors, the public television channel, NHK, and the newspaper Asahi Shimbun. A delay was announced – to 2005. But the real conflicts emerged over Isozaki’s vision and his relationship with contemporary art. He launched plans for the show, with art pavilions sponsored by foreign foundations. It would be an architecture-oriented event that would remove curators entirely from the organization, and cut the event off from the Tokyo contemporary art world. At a tempestuous public meeting in December 2004, organized by Tama Art University students at Bank Art, with panelists representing the royalty of Japanese art power – Yuko Hasegawa, Fram Kitagawa, Fumio Nanjo, and Akira Tatehata – there was an argument over these plans. Isozaki accused curators of hubris and of colluding with gallerists to place artists in events for commercial purposes, and caring for nothing except their egos. Nanjo accused Isozaki of being out of touch with the art world. A young member of the audience asked what Isozaki knew anyway about curation, and the meeting descended into a shouting match. It was a debacle. In the next days, Isozaki resigned spectacularly after the city refused to allow him to delay the event another year to 2006. He left a half prepared Triennial, a huge bill, and with the reputation of the event in tatters.

To some extent, the situation did inspire some fresh thinking. The respected installation artist Tadashi Kawamata was put in charge, and he announced an improvised “work in progress” style Triennial, that would build on his own mainly Japanese networks to inspire a more *in situ* event the following year. The event was artistically interesting, but cut off from its international aspira-

tions, and with the cloud of its history over it, there was a low public turnout. The second Triennial was thus widely perceived as a shambles. The networks problem returned: the show was not taken seriously internationally, largely because international names were not involved. The debacle unleashed too a typically Japanese orgy of self-defeating critique and reflection. Meanwhile, the global art world, with its limited attention span, was quick to move to the much more forthcoming and generously sponsored Chinese and Korean events, where Western curators would be allowed to call the shots. What chance Japan had to become the gateway to Asia was lost.

The Yokohama Triennial had to do something to restore its face. In 2008, it appointed another local curator, Tsutomu Mizusawa, a respected but conservative curator from Kamakura–Hayama Museum. Art world folk in Tokyo muttered that he was not up to the job. Version 3.0 became the product of a lot of hands, a nicely produced package with varied content – but the concept was Mizusawa’s. “Time crevasse” was the slightly awkward English title, a poor translation for something that meant more “outside of time/space” or “time pocket” in Japanese. In English a crevasse is a crevasse – a crack in the snow. The journalists at the press conference joked that he should have called it “black hole”. Mizusawa defended his title, which could have been used brilliantly if it had been translated properly. But he was not in control of much. The Triennial had gone for a committee approach, matching junior Japanese curators with an all star foreign cast who knew nothing about the Japanese art scene. It was dominated by the two big Europeans: Hans-Ulrich Obrist and Daniel Birnbaum. They were veterans of the colonial operation in China, and Obrist brought in a friend from the Center for Contemporary Art (CCA) in Kyushu, Akiko Miyake, to cover Japan. She was a Japanese curator of the other kind: an internationalist with global education, for whom all contemporary Japanese art is but a pale and distant shadow of the world’s centre in New York, London or Berlin. The Kita Kyushu Center is a money making centre which over the years has spent a lot inviting over foreign curators such as Obrist to educate fee paying Japa-

nese about global art. The Triennial committee collectively was determined that absolutely no Asian related logic should be allowed in the selection: it was the 180° reverse of Fumio Nanjo's strategy from 2001. The event might as well have been taking place in Zurich as in Yokohama.

Tsutomu Mizusawa, the chairman, was resolutely anti-political, so refused to allow any kind of city related dimension into the event. He distanced himself and the Triennial from Yokohama creative city philosophy, and pursued a wilfully elitist line about the art chosen. It immediately drew a lot of local media criticism, and created bad relations with the city. Taro Amano at Yokohama Museum of Art picked up the slack, organising a series of counterpoint art events and funding for local community action. Amano had radical ideas about using his museum as a 24 hour space, building on local social and political activism, even letting the homeless sleep over there. His events were like fringe events, and actually generated a good deal of interesting art around the city at the time of the Triennial, even though much of it was not formally linked to the main event.

The selection – from a Japanese point of view – was not inspired. Hans-Ulrich Obrist and Daniel Birnbaum dominated in an off-hand way. Obrist talked about changing the “rules of the game” – his pet theme for the year – but the choice of a Triennial based on time and space specific “performance” was a tired repetition of global trends everywhere. The Triennial was forced to face up in shame to its lack of pulling power – it could not even get the selected artists to take the event seriously. One famous American, Matthew Barney, posted in a DVD, which was shown in desultory fashion high on a screen in an uncomfortable small room. Another, Mike Kelly, refused to use the space he was given and in the end an old piece was desperately borrowed from a collector to half-fill it. Cao Fei, the hot Chinese selection, sent in a video game machine that sat in a corridor. The spaces in the purpose built main gallery were ugly pre-fabricated white boxes, whereas previous shows had worked creatively with existing industrial locations in the port.

The message the 2008 Triennial gave to the Tokyo art world, meanwhile, was a big kiss off. Young Japanese artists and all the Tokyo contemporary galleries, not unreasonably felt locked out of the event. There was nothing to relate to in the relentlessly elitist, Eurocentric discourse emanating from the curators. But it was a successful Triennial for visitors. Good weather drew a lot of Japanese visitors, despite difficulties with the performance based presentation of many events, which meant they had to be there at the right time and place to catch some of its key moments. Internationally, though, it attracted virtually no attention. Its “success” thus fell into the dangerous category that has always measured success in Japan according to how well international contemporary art is introduced to a Japanese audience – that is, as a secondary, receptive role – rather than how well new Japanese art is introduced to an international audience – the big impact of 2001. For a long while, doubts hung over the next Triennial – its funding, its viability, its location, its whole *raison d’être* in a packed global art calendar. Meanwhile, a new mayor, Fumiko Hayashi, had come to power. She was more of a traditional business operator, and seemed less interested in the political or economic uses of art and creativity.

After Yokohama 2008, Mizusawa went back to his position in Hayama and Miyake back to her outpost in Kita Kyushu. Obrist and Birnbaum meanwhile moved on to their next breathless engagement around the planet, having learned next to nothing about Japan and Japanese art in the process. Already late in 2010, it was announced that the 2011 would be taken on by Eriko Osaka, who was now the director of the Yokohama Museum of Art. The Japan Foundation had withdrawn funding, and the city would take on full responsibility for the event. Even the waterfront location would be left behind, for something based only in existing art buildings and museums. In ten short years, the Yokohama Triennial had gone from being a big open swinging door to the world to an obscure dot on the global art map.

What are Contemporary Art Museums in Japan Really For?

Contemporary art in Japan has not been well served by its public museums. They were very slow to represent the new trends that swept through Japanese contemporary art in the 90s. They were too slow to buy the works of emerging Japanese artists. When they started to acquire Takashi Murakami and Yoshitomo Nara, for instance, they were already too expensive.

Not that there has been any shortage of museums. The 80s bubble years were characterized by a rash of museum building all over the country. Every municipality had to have one, preferably designed by an A-list Japanese architect. They were part of the many log-rolling and pork-barrelling public construction schemes that had driven rapid development of the country in the post-war period. Cities and private patrons of the arts also needed to put somewhere their wickedly expensive bubble period acquisitions, which were mostly Western modern art classics – all those Rodin sculptures, or Van Gogh and Monet paintings, for which they paid too much money. These were lavish museums with stunning collections – even if, in some cases, it wasn't always sure if the origins of the art had been adequately certified as genuine. Another part of the old dealer system was to take the transactions on trust. To question the work being sold was a matter of shame, as well as financially ruinous. Some minor public museums in Japan have very strange collections on display – of long lost “Picassos” and “Giacomettis”. In any case, many of the long planned schemes for building new museums continued well into the 90s until the public money dried up. What is likely to be last municipal museum in a long line, in fact, opened in Okinawa in 2007.

The first real contemporary art museum in Japan only opened in Hiroshima in 1989, followed quickly by Yokohama (1989) and Mito (1990). During the next decade, many other municipal museums opened as part of the urban development plans of major cities. Important among these have been Toyota Museum (1998), Sendai Mediathèque (2001), Kanazawa 21st Century

Museum of Art (2004), the refit of Osaka National Museum (2004) and, of course, the Museum of Contemporary Art Tokyo (MOT), which opened in 1995 in Kiyosumi.

In the 1990s, it was Art Tower Mito, with its iconic tower designed by Arata Isozaki, which led the way in experimentation. Daring shows by two of the young original 90s Geidai gang, Yuko Hasegawa and Shin Kurosawa (who she recruited) are well remembered. Over the years, it has continued to be a “curator incubator”, as one of its products, Mizuki Endo, calls it. During the 1990s and 2000s, though, the contemporary art scene was led much more obviously by the private museums. Long before Mori Art Museum appeared on



Curator Kenji Kubota. one of the products of the Mito "curator incubator", now independent. Courtesy of Kenji Kubota.

the horizon, the Hara Museum (in Tokyo and Gunma) – financed by the Foundation Arc-en-Ciel and which showcases the collections of industrialist Toshio Hara – had a long history of important shows, including Japanese artists. Two famous international touring shows of Japanese contemporary art, *A Primal Spirit* (1990-1) and *Photography and Beyond in Japan* (1995-7), originated here. They were shows that helped establish important Japanese sculptors and photographers from the 1980s internationally. The Hara Museum also played a key part in the careers of Tatsuo Miyajima and Yoshitomo Nara, for whom it has permanent installations, and

MITO ART TOWER CURATORS

Japan's biggest young new star, Tabaimo, whose early solo show here in 2003 (aged 28) had a huge impact. Two years after Hara, the opening of the Watari Museum in 1990, again inspired by a rare Japanese contemporary art collector, Etsuko Watari, provided another key art space in Tokyo. Both these museums had programmes and acquisitions policies free of the restrictions that hold back municipal museums.

Akira Tatehata, who became director of Osaka National Museum of Art before moving to direct the top art school in the Kansai region, Kyoto City University of the Arts, has an acute analysis of these problems. One thing he points to is the inability of curators working at museums to make aggressive bids for works when they become available. In the US, a quick phone call by the curator would be enough to secure funds to buy an expensive work.



Curator Akira Tatehata, in front of the National Museum of Art, Osaka. Courtesy of Akira Tatehata.

In Japan, before decisions can be made it sometimes has to go back to a museum committee, or maybe even seek approval from government bureaucrats. To some extent, the lean years that started in the late 1990s for municipal museums were a reaction against the profligacy of the high spending 1980s. The Museum of Contemporary Art, Tokyo, for example had no money whatsoever for new acquisitions for five years at the start of the 2000s. There had been a huge scandal when they paid \$6 million for a Roy Lichtenstein pop art painting – although this has proven a bar-

KANSAI ART POWER

gain in time. But when Hiroshima opened in 1989, in contrast, it had a very free hand to build an impressive modern collection.

The problems that this can lead to were brilliantly demonstrated in an exhibition of the Hiroshima collection in late 2007 by curator Kenji Kubota, called *Money Talks*. Kubota was another ex-Mito curator, a free thinking independent, who also had an unusual background in the finance world. Kubota's idea was to place the works room by room in order of how expensive the works were. The early "cheap" rooms were characterized by a series of smart acquisitions when the museum bought something special – for example, a Keith Haring or a Yoko Ono – before prices were rising. As the prices went up, the art works matched the skyrocketing budget of the museum during the boom years, and there were more obscure works. At its most flush in the early 1990s – before the economic depression set in – the museum made a number of spectacular acquisitions that have either proven brilliant, if expensive, investments – a Warhol, for example – or complete disasters, artists whose prices ballooned and then burst after the 1980s, such as Julian Schnabel. Soon after, from the mid 1990s, they had no money at all to spend, not even on cheap Japanese artists. The quality of the collection collapsed.

MOT in Tokyo was from the beginning under intense pressure from the Tokyo City Government. Located in Kiyosumi, a difficult to find area in the East of Tokyo, it has always struggled to attract the public. Like all the Tokyo museums, it has been vulnerable to the criticisms of politicians and the whims of bureaucrats. For example, curators are public employees, who each year can face being rotated to another museum, with no choice in the matter. When the then Governor of Tokyo, Shunichi Suzuki, visited the inaugural show at MOT in 1995, the curators covered up the erotic photography by Araki, in case there would be offense. In most advanced countries, it would be expected of the major public institutions that they show challenging, even provocative art. In Japan, the curators are accused by the politicians of "mental masturbation". This was the verdict of the famous writer Shintaro Ishihara, when he came to

power as Governor of Tokyo in 1999. He had a strong conservative agenda, and MOT was immediately targeted for attack. The budget was slashed and the staff reduced. In 2002, he installed as director, Seiichiro Ujiie, a 75 year old TV company president, who launched a plan for the museum to hold exhibitions of sports cars and Japanese baseball. The museum became a kind of joke in the art world. To this day, it has to rely on manga exhibitions – Hayao Miyazaki and Ghibli are the favourite – to get enough visitors to cover it for more serious shows.

MOT like nearly all the famous museums and art centres in Japan boasts spectacular architecture. This points to one of the recurring problems in the Japanese art world. How can the museums be valued for their collections or their exhibition policies when the architecture and the architects that produce it are so much more impressive than anything done by the curators inside? During these years, it was almost an embarrassment, for example, to make the long trek to see the stunning new museums designed in the north of Japan by Jun Aoki and Ryue Nishizawa – The Aomori Museum of Art and the Towada Art Center, respectively. Everything inside was so weak in comparison to their beautiful architectural work. Aomori housed a terrible collection of local artists. In the huge central hall it had three oversize fabric murals by Marc Chagall, on which the museum spent all of its opening budget. All it really had to be proud of was an impressive permanent collection of works by Yoshitomo Nara, its local hero. Towada Art Centre, meanwhile, was a project managed by Nanjo and Associates that was full of the worst kind of oversized and toxic plastic installations that became so fashionable during the global 2000s. Apart from a peace tree by Yoko Ono, and a big red ant outside by Noboru Tsubaki, it was a forgettable collection of second hand works by fashionable foreign artists, a sample of world art to educate Japanese on what was happening in the rest of the world.

What were these museums for if not to promote the best and most important trends in Japanese contemporary art? The key story in the tale here has to be



21st Century Museum of Contemporary Art, Kanazawa, by architect firm SANAA.



Towada Arts Centre, Towada, by Ryue Nishizawa (partner of SANAA's Kazuyo Sejima). Ant installation by Noboru Tsubaki. Photo by author.

BEAUTIFUL MUSEUMS IN REMOTE PLACES

Kanazawa's 21st Century Museum. Kanazawa is a very conservative historical town, a kind of mini Kyoto on the north coast, associated with famous samurai and geisha houses, as well as one of Japan's most beautiful gardens. Around 2000, like in Yokohama, the long time mayor, Tamotsu Yamade, introduced plans to improve the city through the concept of creativity and the arts. And so Kanazawa planned a contemporary art museum right in the centre of town as the heart of this idea.

The building went on to become one of the most celebrated and discussed public constructions in world architecture of the 2000s, making the careers of the new wave Japanese architects SANAA (Sejima and Nishizawa). The circular museum they built embodied everything that was brilliant about the new wave of young Japanese architecture. It was non-monumental, simple, accessible, and melded inside and outside, nature and artifice, through its use



Curator and Art Producer Yuko Hasegawa, who established her reputation at Mito Art Tower and elsewhere before directing Kanazawa's 21st Century Museum and MOT. Courtesy of Museum of Contemporary Art, Tokyo.

TOKYO ART POWER

of light, space and revolutionary materials. Yet it also worked perfectly as a public art museum, inviting citizens to walk through its airy corridors and patios, while providing an ever changeable space that could adapt to all kinds of installations. A museum like this needed a collection and a profile to match, and to prepare for its opening in 2004 it brought in the biggest name in the Japanese curatorial world, Yuko Hasegawa.

Yuko Hasegawa was an imposing figure: politically adept, sharp tongued, and well known for her toughness. Her curatorial writing has always been mostly unappealing and difficult art theory. Like a lot of famous curators, it is not by reading them that you get a sense of why they are good at what they do. That is the rest of the job: organizing a museum staff, managing external relations, choosing and installing works, cultivating and contextualizing artists visually, and nurturing the best in younger curatorial talent. Hasegawa did all this brilliantly. She was a journalist by background, going back to the 1980s, before completing her art studies at Geidai; she was a little older than the rest of the Geidai gang. Even then she had a formidable reputation, ringing people up in bed in the middle of the night to get the latest info or gossip on a museum show, or leaving bruised associates in her wake.

Still, the art world is a world of struggle and distinction like any others, and it could be expected that figures such as Yuko Hasegawa and Fumio Nanjo, at the top of the game as political and commercial operators, might need to break a few eggs to accomplish their goals. Above all, Hasegawa is remembered for having put on a series of brilliant shows in the 1990s at Mito, Setagaya and Meguro, although she was slow to get respect from some quarters. As a result, there were for years artists her age and younger with whom she would refuse to work. The move to Kanazawa around the turn of the century was, again, an exciting moment in the Japanese art world. She was given the go ahead for major acquisitions at a major new museum, even when there was no money left elsewhere in the public system.

Yuko Hasegawa's policy for Kanazawa, however, highlighted the dilemma of the ambitious Japanese curator seeking international relevance for their museum. Internationalization for her, like Akiko Miyake at CCA in Kita Kyushu, meant getting the best international people in, and showing their works to a Japanese public and media. Hasegawa is proud of being a global curator: "I never use the word 'Asian' or 'Japanese'", she says. Her global knowledge can be impressive for the audience, as Kanazawa certainly was for Japanese viewers

when it opened. But the documentation of her signature opening show, from an international point of view, looked like a recycling of current fashions in an obscure Asian context. In *Polyphony*, in late 2004, the only Japanese artist allowed to rub shoulders with the who's who of global installation artists presented, was Yutaka Sone, a long term favourite of Hasegawa. And the only curatorial voice allowed to be heard alongside the Western curators and intellectuals flown in – including the ubiquitous Hans-Ulrich Obrist, of course – was Hasegawa herself. There was clearly no problem with the international networks and connections she had. Hasegawa had a fluid appreciation of both Western and Asian trends. But there was a hollowness about the museum she built inside that wonderful building. She did not initially focus on acquiring important Japanese artists, who might be thought to be significant in that context. The early programme at Kanazawa, as in other places in Japan like Towada or Chichu Art Museum on Naoshima in the inner sea off Shikoku, instead became a condescending lesson in teaching Western art norms to an ignorant Japanese public – as well as a lovely location for top Western artists to take a Japanese holiday.

This indeed was the outcome of Yuko Hasegawa's most important and ambitious piece of curating during this period – her involvement in the Matthew Barney production of *Drawing Restraint 9* (2005). Barney, from New York, was a performance/video artist who many saw as one of the greatest of the age. The perfect model of the busy globetrotting artist, Barney arrived prior to the planned show at Kanazawa with nothing much decided, no clear ideas, and a plan to just improvise the making of a film with his partner, Björk, on the spot. With art producer Makoto Sano, Hasegawa set about enabling all the ambitious filming plans (which involved Japanese whaling ships, big sushi knives and samurai costumes), as well as all the cultural references needed for Barney to make his “Japanese” film. With his wife providing the music, it became a long and very strange Björk video. As Hasegawa relates the story, she was clearly an integral, creative part of the final work. Yet for this, she received not much more than a small production footnote – although later she

was to court controversy at MOT by acquiring a print of a photographic still from the film for a cool \$300,000.

Barney and Björk were a highpoint for the museum, but Hasegawa was much less happy with the involvement of the city and the mayor who has wanted his own personal stamp on the museum as the symbol of his city. The art there had to serve a local function formally, and the management had a hard time convincing the sceptical and traditionalist tax paying voters to be footing the bill for cutting edge contemporary art. Hasegawa had to give a description and explanation for everything she intended to buy, not only the ten big commissioned pieces. There were inevitable arguments. In the end this was the issue that led to Hasegawa moving on after a relatively short and unfulfilled stay in the open museum, to an even bigger job, at MOT in 2006. Kanazawa receded somewhat into a backwater status, a museum where the building was so much more impressive than any of the works they had. Her successors, though, advised by Akira Tatehata amongst others, focused more on picking up emerging Japanese artists for the collection. They also initiated *in situ* local artist residencies as public projects.

At MOT, Yuko Hasegawa faced even more difficult challenges. Her first move was to dislodge the freeze on acquisitions. The Tokyo Metropolitan government imposed financial targets for sponsorship, and even forced the management to compete for the tender of managing their own museum. Although everybody denied it, Ishihara sometimes censored what the museum bought. Over time, Hasegawa's collection policy changed. She started to lead an aggressive move to pursue the kind of Japanese contemporary collection that a national Japanese museum should have. Many of the 90s artists became better represented, and a survey of their late 2000s acquisitions, for example, would reveal ample evidence that MOT was investing in new young artists. Some curators worried that the relation with some commercial galleries became a little too direct: the values of some young artists had not yet been established on the open market. Hasegawa, as always, had a strong vision of what she is do-

ing. Above all, she has always nurtured many of the most important younger curatorial talents.

She boldly justified the crass commercial shows to finance the ambitious serious programme of new artists, leading foreign names, and big Japanese retrospectives that MOT posted under her tenure. During the 2000s, the MOT annual was one of the few new survey shows always worth watching for its discoveries. In late 2007, Yuko Hasegawa's personal inaugural *Space for Your Future* effectively reconciled the tensions of the national and the global with a sprawling and impressive show that weaved some of the best Japanese architectural and installation art, including the architects SANAA and Junya Ishigami, and the photographer Mika Ninagawa, into a seamless global narrative. MOT under Hasegawa was clearly filling a mandate.

MOT, though, was far from the centre of the Tokyo art world, despite its closeness to Tomio Koyama's Kiyosumi complex. The public art museums lost their leadership function to the private museums, and even more to the aggressive commercial gallerists that were really finding, selecting, promoting and making the new artists. One symptom in summer 2009 was that Tomio Koyama and Atsuko Koyanagi decided to join together to promote an exhibition, catalogue and series of events dedicated to the work of the new young Japanese architects – because no public authority had thought of stepping in to create a museum, or even archive, in their honour. It is a strange situation indeed when commercial gallerists have become the leading museum curators. In Tokyo, by 2011, the golden days of David Elliott were a fading memory. It is doubtful now that any major foreign curator would move to Japan, even if they were asked.

So what are contemporary art museums in Japan *really* for? It is hard to say sometimes. Or, rather, it is all too obvious to see that they have been used to fill other, non-cultural goals. These museums have raised the stock of property developers, city mayors and architects the length and breadth of the country,

but very few have increased the awareness, prestige, circulation or valuation of contemporary Japanese art and artists.

Echigo-Tsumari and Rural Art Festivals: Rise of the Northern River

There are two Japans. One is the futuristic, fast moving, high tech, city-scape of urban sprawl: the Tokyo conurbation that stretches for hundreds of kilometres north and south, as well as the nation's other important urban hubs. The other Japan is the quiet, declining rural hinterland, with its crumbling small cities and towns, an ageing population, young people moving out to the city, no children being born, and the old traditions disappearing. The context of social change is dramatic, one of the most extreme social polarizations in the modern world. Most of the population of Japan is now urbanized; the rest of Japan is – socially speaking – a rural wasteland.

In 2000, Fram Kitagawa, a developer based in Daikanyama and Fumio Nanjo's biggest rival in the business of public art management, inaugurated the Echigo-Tsumari ("big field") art triennial. His idea was to bring art, visitors and investment back to a sharply declining region on the Northern side of Japan, in Niigata. Echigo-Tsumari, and other adapted versions of it – such as the summer Setouchi Festival in Japan's inland sea – were triennial art festivals that invited the best of Japanese and global contemporary artists to make installation works in a remote rural region of Japan facing underdevelopment or industrial decline. Echigo-Tsumari, the original version, combined art installations that sat as sculptures or art spaces in the countryside, with works that used and reconverted old empty buildings. Its most distinctive feature was that the festival is like an impossible "treasure hunt" requiring several days following mountain roads and country paths to locate the hundreds of exhibitions. They were dotted around area that stretched (in the 4th version in 2009) over 760km²: bigger than the 23 wards of Tokyo put together, but with only about 100,000 residents. In the meantime visitors

were also invited to meet local people and try some of the wonderful local food and hospitality.

Fram Kitagawa was a financier, with a classical background in Buddhist art. Beginning in the 1970s, he started to make money brokering the sale of public art installations to major corporations. They often wanted some kind of sculpture outside on the south west corner of the building, a good luck tradition for businesses. His ambition was to use this and his other corporate development activities as a platform to enable his passion for curation. He started to finance and organize large art projects and exhibitions for cities and corporate clients.

Kitagawa's idea with Echigo-Tsumari was to take art out of the city and back to the land. It would centre on the crumbling rural town of Tokamachi, and the famous old river that runs through it, the Shinano river. This part of Niigata, Kitagawa's home region, is very symbolically important for Japan, as one of the most noted areas of top quality rice production. Expensively subsidized to a level as much as seven times above international prices, the prized Japanese rice is grown on artificially terraced fields on the hillsides. Kitagawa focused in his vision on the notion of *satoyama*, which is literally the connecting hillside space between the flat lands of modern urban Japan and the uncultivated mountains and forests behind. For him, it symbolized the unity of the Japanese with the landscape, as well as a lost sense of rural tradition among the populations who now could only experience an alienated modern urban life. Kitagawa wanted to bring these people back to the countryside, to experience an art festival there that could reconnect them with their regional roots.

There is also an interesting political side to the region. This part of Niigata was one of the most solid and archetypal heartlands of conservative Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) power during its long reign in government. This power was based on the way the LDP cultivated constituencies through regional investment deals. In particular, a local politician, Kakuei Tanaka, who was prime minister in the early 70s, was long the dominant charismatic figure

in the region. He ensured that Niigata would always have its huge agricultural subsidies, as well creating a flow of lucrative public works projects for businessmen in the region. This built schools in villages where children's numbers were declining, paved rivers and hillsides in case of any natural disaster, and laid out roads and tunnels through mountains that led nowhere. Export industries were also imposed on the region in place of the self-sustaining local economy. His most famous scheme was to persuade the state to finance the Joetsu northern *shinkansen* that runs through mountains and over rivers from Tokyo to Niigata city, stopping in many tiny towns and small tourist resorts en route. It was the notorious *shinkansen* that went nowhere. Huge new railway stations were constructed to attract people and development, but all the *shinkansen* did was enable the population of Niigata to move out even more quickly to the city. After the 80s bubble, when the money ran out, the region was left with empty schools and public buildings, failed businesses, a disappearing population, and grass growing over brand new highways.

Echigo-Tsumari used these buildings and this forgotten landscape to find a new purpose for art. It was presented as the alternative to the urban culture and development model that dominated in Tokyo and elsewhere in Japan. Mention of it among art world folk in Tokyo and would tend to lead to an avalanche of support in favour of Fram Kitagawa's idealistic philosophy of public art, over the axis of political/corporate interests that dominated art in the big city during the 2000s – most obviously the Mori corporation and museum, as well as other projects



Art Producer Fram Kitagawa. Courtesy of Art Front Gallery.

ECHIGO-TSUMARI ART TRIENNIAL



Sayaka Ishizuka, *Rice Deity*. Outside abandoned village house and inside installation of rice strings, kitchen utensils, light and mirrors at Echigo-Tsumari Festival (2009). Photos by author.

ECHIGO-TSUMARI ART TRIENNIAL

linked to Fumio Nanjo. Kitagawa and Nanjo, both born in the late 1940s, have vied over the years to impose their visions over various major art projects and festivals. Describing the titanic struggles of Kitagawa and Nanjo to court corporate and government sponsorship, it was sometimes referred to as the “*nam-boku senso*” (civil war) of the North and South in Japanese art: with Kitagawa from Niigata and Nanjo from Nagoya, their names literally translated mean “northern river” and “southern quarter”, respectively. The sleek 50th floor corporate offices of the Mori Art Museum contrasted with the messy and chaotic activity at Kitagawa’s Art Front Gallery office headquarters. Even late in the evening, young assistants would be running around, with coffee cups and ash trays everywhere. Kitagawa has always inspired fierce loyalty in his associates, and is blunt about his opinions.

The 20th century, he says, was an age of cities that led to a dark, if not self-destructive, art and culture. The unhealthy alliance of art, urbanism and commercial interests has become dominant in Japan, and Japan more than anywhere has lost touch with its rural traditions, and its aesthetic roots. Art, he claims, should not be an index of modern development, or a monument to consumerism, but a way of measuring what has been lost: the distance between urban life and the nature or traditions they have left behind. Nowadays, the modern world only values how fast we can absorb new information. This is why Kitagawa conceived Echigo-Tsumari as a deliberately difficult, “inefficient” experience: it forced the visitor to slow down and think, to not just consume everything, but appreciate what they were able to do, as they tracked down the art in abandoned village schools, remote old houses, up a hill, or across a deserted field. It was contemporary art, not packaged as a slick tourist experience, but found in the severest or most unlikely of places.

“Art should not just sit on top of consumerism.” From Kitagawa is referring, of course, to Japan’s most famous urban art experience, the Mori Art Museum. He scoffs at Minoru Mori’s philosophy of cleaning up the city, and re-educating urban populations through the sublime experience of art and culture

in a futuristic museum. For Kitagawa, this was tantamount to saying that Art had replaced a God that has been lost. A museum on the 52nd floor became “a Parthenon for the contemporary world”, as he puts it. Art here became always a commercial accessory to urban living, as well as an excuse for ever more urban development. Behind this, Kitagawa explains how he too, ever since he was young, wanted to destroy the existing art system. This has been a familiar refrain from nearly all the pioneers of the Japanese contemporary art world in the 1990s and 2000s. But he feels that the commercial gallerists, as well as artists such as Takashi Murakami or the older conceptual artist On Kawara – who developed the idea of a “Western” commercial strategy well before Murakami – simply reproduced the Western, US-dominated system. It worked well for Japan to be in this subservient position during the “air pocket” of the cold war years. It gave them the financial bubble, Kitagawa says, but this is when the Japanese lost their ethics. Art was then co-opted in the 1990s and 2000s to keep the development logic going. Something different needed to be done to create a civil society that was missing in Japan’s relations between the state, cities and its consumer populations.

Echigo-Tsumari instigated a pause in the decline of the region, and Kitagawa extended the idea to the city of Niigata itself. At the local level, the effects could be seen in the cooperative ventures that art groups have brought to many small villages. The festival relied on the “NPO spirit” of voluntarism, with hundreds of *kohebi* (little snakes) as volunteers doing the work – students and young artists. During the event in 2009, the villages were full of posters for the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) politician, Yukio Hatoyama, in his brief period of electoral success. The region had swung dramatically to the more liberal DPJ – although it was said mainly because of the daughter of the Tanaka family, Makiko, changing sides just before the election. From Kitagawa always faced a huge struggle creating his vision against the resistance of local politicians, or convincing local residents about the virtues of an elite contemporary culture - when they, like most people in Japan, prefer baseball, *pachinko* and McDonald’s.

Even more striking was the alliance he struck in the mid 2000s, with one of the Japanese art world's other big power brokers, the CEO of Benesse Corporation, Soichiro Fukutake. Fukutake made millions out of cram schools, but invested his wealth in the redevelopment of a former industrial island, Naoshima, in the Japan's Seto inland sea. He built museums for his collection (Tadao Ando's Chichu museum, and a second for contemporary art), and initiated projects to bring in artists and architects to develop installations in houses and open air sites. This included *Seirenscho*, the spectacular conversion by artist Yukinori Yanagi and architect Hiroshi Sambuichi of an old copper refinery on the island of Inujima. It became now a naturally sustainable museum that housed Fukutake's collection of Yukio Mishima memorabilia and a series of works by Yanagi. Although he was initially driven by ideas of tourism and a strong corporate art philosophy like Mr Mori's, Fukutake was impressed by Echigo-Tsumari and brought Kitagawa in, first to manage the museum, then to direct much bigger plans to create an art festival that would span a number of other abandoned industrial islands in the area. This became the Setouchi festival, which had its first outing in summer 2010. Using the exact same model of Echigo-Tsumari, and sharing its environmental and rural re-investment ideals, it took place in a much more tourist friendly location, and became a stunning surprise success. Nearly 1 million visitors crammed local boats and buses during the sweltering summer months to visit the "art islands". For Kitagawa it was a doubled-edged success. Fukutake had also been sponsoring part of



Artist Chiharu Shiota. Photo by Sunhi Man. Courtesy of Kenji Taka Gallery and artist's studio.



Chiharu Shiota, *Farther Memory*. House and installation on Teshima island, Setouchi (2010). The rice house building was formerly the community centre, the installation was made of old windows taken from abandoned houses around the island. Photos by author.

CHIHARU SHIOTA

Echigo-Tsumari but he withdrew this sponsorship to concentrate on his legacy in the inland sea. It was said his personal fortune was so large that – with no children to pass it on to – his endowment could finance Setouchi festivals every three years for the next one hundred. Forced to look for new sponsorship, Echigo-Tsumari faced a more uncertain future. After March 2011, the mountain to climb became ever harder – although it could be argued that its vision and philosophy was needed more than ever.

The style and philosophy of Kitagawa's festivals obviously changed over time. The permanent open air installations from earlier editions were often the typical artificial plastic or steel works so familiar from the global art bubble years. These toxic monuments sat incongruously in their beautiful surroundings, and over the years have cost a fortune to maintain. Yet the accent in later editions, at both Echigo-Tsumari and Setouchi, became one of conservation and renovation as well as the use of natural products and locations. Parts of the festivals were organic and community-based, living up to the presentation. Other parts felt top down and imposed by politics. This mix has always been a familiar one in the Japanese art world. The logistics as well as the financing involved were daunting. For example, the 4th Echigo-Tsumari in 2009 had a budget of 900 million yen, over half of which had to come from paying visitors – meaning between 150,000 and 200,000 paying entrants. That's a lot of city folk trampling over the countryside, or driving around in their cars in search of *satoyama*.

Public art management will always be a macho business in Japan. Fram Kitagawa is a tough political and financial operator, and the contradictions in his philosophy are part of the inevitable price of making the vision work. Scandal also swirled around his management, for example, when he was forced to resign in early 2010 from his position as director at the Museum of Niigata. A delivery of priceless classical art they were arranging was found to be infested with insects. At the same time, other people in the more modernistic, urban planning world, would dismiss him as a “hippy”. There were aspects too about Echigo-Tsumari and Setouchi that confirmed the possibility of a

new *sakoku* – the idea that Japan might just be turning in on itself defensively again, closed off from the world as it did in the pre-modern era. This seemed the greatest danger in a post-Bubble Japan giving up on its international ambitions. It was a trend well in evidence before the earthquake and tsunami of March 2011. For example, for all their roster of international artists, and the universal message, Kitagawa's festivals were almost invisible to the global art media, and there were virtually never any Western visitors. Setouchi was such a smash hit because the concept of an "art trip" holiday became hugely fashionable that summer – especially for groups of girl friends and office ladies. But the rurally focused message of Echigo-Tsumari and Setouchi about renovation and revitalization did transmit something important, even if this was not being heard much outside of Japan.

In the near past, Japan's urbanization represented the future. Art and culture was hitched to this development, whether in driving the building of big new urban monuments or aiding inner city renewal. In post-Bubble, post-disaster Japan, that future may be over. But rampant urbanization still rules in many parts of the planet. In America, the dominance of city life over rural alternatives is absolute. This will go on as long as there are fresh fields and deserts on which to build new housing tracks, and still more oil to put in the tank. In Asia, China in particular, the frenzy of over-development seems unstoppable. Europe faces many of the same problems that are felt in Japan today. Someday all these places will sober up. When they do, they may look again at Japan's recent experiences for inspiration. Even before the disasters of March 2011, with its post-Bubble gloom and shocking urban/rural divides, Japan faced urgent issues in managing its own decline and the social divisions it heralded. Japan in the 1990s and 2000s may be everyone's future tomorrow. It is, for sure, not a happy prospect. Echigo-Tsumari and Setouchi helped visitors think about a different kind of future. It was a future a million miles from the vision Japan gave to the world at the Osaka Expo in 1970. And it was such a long way from the Cool Japan experience given to tourists at Roppongi Hills on a clear night in Neo-Tokyo.

After the Gold Rush: The New Japanese Art Scene in the 2000s

China Mania

The Japanese art world at the beginning of the 2000s made the mistake of thinking that it would become the central hub of the Asian art world, and the gateway for the West to the rest of the region. There were reasons to think it might have been successful. Japan – and certain Japanese art dealers – had long been involved in discovering and selling art from other Asian countries. The key pioneer in this respect for modern and contemporary art in Japan was Yukihiro Tabata at a long established gallery in Ginza, Tokyo Gallery. He was involved in bringing over *avant garde* Chinese artists well before Tiananmen. There were ways of avoiding Chinese taxation if the transaction was routed through Japan. Tokyo also established some of the first important Asian art

auctions. Asia was also a key part of Sueo Mitsuma's strategy as a gallerist since the 1990s. He went so far as to open a Beijing gallery with a Chinese partner in 2008. A bi-lingual (Japanese-English) magazine *ART-iT* was launched in 2003 by the Real Tokyo arts and culture writer, Tetsuya Ozaki, to build on the concept of a unified Asian art discussion. Fukuoka opened an Asian Art Museum (FAAM) that has a very respected Asian Art Triennial, spearheaded by a visionary curator Raiji Kuroda. The biggest Chinese name of all, Cai Guo Qiang, in fact lived and worked in Japan for ten years before becoming a New York artist in 1995. And among leading Japanese artists, Tsuyoshi Ozawa throughout the 1990s and 2000s continually used pan-Asian themes in his work: for example, his early *Jizo-ing* travelogue photography, or the *Xijing Men*, his hilarious three man collaboration with Chinese and Korean partners, which visualized a fictitious unified Asian state centred on the non-existent "Western capital".

Yet for all these efforts, as Sueo Mitsuma admits, the assumption about Japan as a gateway proved naïve. Westerners curators all just flew over, direct to China or Korea, non-stop, before connecting to other places. By the mid 2000s, whether it was gallery openings, biennials, auctions, or new museums, it was all China, and beyond that, the rest of Asia beckoned. Anywhere but Japan, it seemed. Western faces became surprisingly absent from most Japanese art world events. For a major opening in Shanghai or Hong Kong during these years, the Chinese hosts would fly in 200 western gallerists and curators – a who's who of global art – on an all expenses paid trip to make sure they talked and wrote about what is going on there. It was summed up for me by Atsuko Koyanagi, one of the most internationally minded dealers in Tokyo. She asked me: Why on Earth was I writing a book about the Japanese art world when everyone knew that China was where the action was?

Why indeed? There seemed little doubt that, commercially speaking, in the 2000s Chinese artists left their Japanese rivals for dead. International auctions told a clear story. The catalogue from Sotheby's New York "Contemporary Art

Asia” sale from March 2008 at the height of the global art bubble was a good indicator. After the financial crash later that year, this became a fascinating historical document. Of the 290 or so lots listed in this fat and expensive catalogue, there were only four Japanese names: a couple of pieces by Kusama, one Kaikai Kiki girl, a Hiroshi Sugito – a Tomio Koyama artist close in style to Yoshitomo Nara – and one old piece by *avant garde* Gutai master from the 50s, Kazuo Shiraga. Apart from two Koreans, the rest were all Chinese, and much more expensive.

Chinese artists during these years abundantly showed that they could do it bigger, better and bolder than the Japanese. The Takashi Murakami philosophy in fact made more sense in China with its vastly more favourable economies of space, production and exhibition. Chinese artists also had the limitless resources of their historical culture, as well as the whole question of post-communism, to draw on for imagery. And there was always much more governmental investment in the art infrastructure than ever there was in Japan.

For sure, China has also been more interesting if the subject is following money, second guessing trends in the world art market, or seeking out scandal. The involvement of the Western art world followed a predictable colonial pattern, as the speed of economic development in China led entrepreneurs to realize it was the new land of opportunity. The Japanese art world, on the other hand, never really let in the Western art elite. Even the financial scandals in art have been kept among Japanese. During the globalization of the late 1990s and early 2000s Chinese contemporary art in contrast became a fertile soil for investment schemes that discovered unknown Chinese artists and then inflated their value to extraordinary levels.

One notorious scandal involved the top Danish museum, Louisiana. Out of the blue, curators at the museum were offered the chance to show a mysterious, hitherto unknown collection of 200 major Chinese works called the “Estella collection”. The museum accepted, preparing a lavish show and accompany-

ing catalogues in 2007. It got a lot of media attention, and was planned for a major international tour. The prestigious “collection” was in fact the cover for an investment fund snapping up Chinese works, headed by a New York dealer Michael Goedhuis, involving various other American corporate investors. He used the lure of a major European museum and international touring show to persuade ten of the top Chinese artists to sell him brand new works at very low direct sale prices. He assured them that the works would later be donated to a major museum in the West and that they would be kept together. In fact, the collection only travelled to Israel, before being sold (for \$25 million), then rapidly “flipped” onto the market, the first half of 108 works appearing for sale in a great fanfare at Sotheby’s Hong Kong in April 2008, netting \$18 million, \$5 million more than expected. The duped artists and curators involved were understandably upset, having been used to inflate prices and make money for others. The office dealing with the original negotiations had used a fake address and numbers, and artists reluctant to participate had been pressurized or offered bribes, such as mansions in Venice during the Biennale.

This kind of thing has been all in a day’s work for the Western gallerists and dealers out in China who, along with the superstar curators flying in and out, were piloting the business behind the China bubble. For some reason, a lot of them seemed to be Swiss: slick men in suits and expensive watches, who blend in perfectly to the colonial expat business scene in Shanghai and Beijing. In the specially designated “art villages” of these two cities, there have been dozens of galleries mass producing copies of Asian and Western modern art, in every style possible from impressionism to superflat. Early pioneers in China included the Hong Kong based collectors David Tang and Johnson Chang. Yet there was no lucrative contemporary art scene in China until figures such as the Swiss gallerist Lorenz Helbling at ShangArt or collector Uli Sigg came along in the mid 90s and, together with the curators such as Hans-Ulrich Obrist and Hou Hanru (a Chinese curator who left to work in Paris and the US), started to select and validate unknown local artists. The show

by Harald Szeemann in 1999 at the Venice Biennale was then the key tipping point. These Western (or Westernized) entrepreneurs blew up the China art bubble that made everybody rich. During the 2000s, the ShangArt gallery space, for example, was bigger than any similar gallery in Tokyo. It was always ready for sales to the many art world tourists who come by. Look behind a wall and there would be dozens of copies of works by the gallery's artists stacked up like cornflakes packets. A gang of Chinese workers – rounded up off the streets for a minimal wage – would be stuffing thousands of envelopes with publicity. They would send them to every known art gallery, curator, agent, museum, scholar or magazine in the West. This was how to make an art market out of nothing.

There was never anything like this in Japan, because there was no longer this kind of opportunity to make money. Japan stopped developing in the 1990s and so – the global art world thought – Japan was no longer interesting. This was wrong. After the gold rush – the *tao-jin* as it is called in Chinese – there might be something to learn again from the Japanese experience. China and other parts of Asia are still on an upswing, and so the West continues to be fascinated by its art and contemporary culture. It is also afraid of the future competition. But why is non-Western art only interesting when non-Western countries are developing? There is in fact a strong case to read Japanese contemporary art and society as being on a very different, even opposed trajectory to China and the rest of developing Asia. Unlike these nations Japan is definitively post-development. It is a post-Bubble society. It has finished with absorbing the lessons of American and European modernity, and by the late 2000s stood more as an alternative to both Western and Asian (Chinese) modernity. It could be said to have more in common with the declining, decadent welfare states of Europe than the growth and power obsessed US. And its dignified and calm response to the terrible catastrophes of 2011 demonstrated its resilience in adversity. Japan's crisis of confidence in these years might, therefore, offer a much better guide to the uncertainties and fragilities of the 21st

century than the rampant, unsustainable visions of globalization that drove the last two previous decades.

By the end of the 2000s, China was roughly speaking where Japan was during the heady years between the 1964 Tokyo Olympics and the 1970 Osaka World Expo. These were Japan's own development showcases to the world. For these events, then, read 2008 Beijing and Shanghai 2010. Of course, many Japanese politicians wish they could go back to the golden years. Governor Shintaro Ishihara saw what was happening with the Beijing Olympics and thought Tokyo had to compete. Olympics bids have become part of the routine branding and development drive of global cities as they try to kick start an economic boom.

Arts and culture were part of the vision for the Tokyo Olympics bid for 2016. Governor Ishihara put the director of Tokyo Wonder Site, Yusaku Imamura, in charge of the committee. During the 2000s, Tokyo Wonder Site was an organization providing new art spaces for young and emerging artists in the city. It attracted controversy when Ishihara made his "playboy" fourth son, Nobuhiro – an unsuccessful painter – its chief advisor. Ishihara himself sometimes used Tokyo Wonder Site's small Hongo headquarters as a place to have "secret" meetings away from the Japanese media. But Imamura, who was an architect and a protégé of Arata Isozaki, used the organization to create interesting exhibitions and new opportunities for young artists, as well as creating an interesting international art residency programme.

The Tokyo Olympics bid was packaged in the language and visuals of Cool Japan. They created colour brochures and cute characters to promote the bid. At Schiphol airport in Amsterdam, I picked up a little box of colour crayons from a pretty Japanese girl in a costume. It was a nice *omigae* (souvenir) of an event that was never going to happen. Perhaps there was a dream that the Olympics would come to Tokyo. They could make Takashi Murakami "creative director", like Cai Guo Qiang was in Beijing. After Ai Weiwei's birds' nest stadium at the Chinese Olympics, they could knock down Kenzo Tange's aus-

tere modernist architecture from 1964, and ask the Mori Building Co. to build a shiny new Olympics stadium for Tokyo. Murakami could come and fill the place with happy flowers and mushrooms, and open a *meido kissa* (maid café) to serve the thirsty spectators in the hot summer sun.

It was not to be. Tokyo was not cool enough anymore. In October 2009, the Olympic committee opted for Brazil, and the sexy samba of Rio instead. But Mr Ishihara could still get what he really wanted. The Tokyo Olympics bid was the perfect excuse to launch another round of urban development in the city before he retired. It was the perfect excuse to pull down the cheap municipal housing in the rich neighbourhood of Omotesando, and build an expressway through the heart of bohemian Shimo-Kitazawa. It was the perfect excuse to clean the teenagers and their strange sub-culture performances out of Yoyogi park, and the African immigrants out of sleazy Roppongi. And it was the perfect excuse to try and close the famous, but shabby, Tsukiji fish market, and wash the fishermen out into the Sumida river – in order to build some new and expensive high rise properties. It was a clever strategy. He would then collect the votes from anxious city residents worried about all the change going on around them. He announced his retirement in 2011; then the earthquake struck. Perfect timing for Mr Ishihara to “save” the city again. He rejoined the election as a candidate, and easily won a fourth term as Governor of Tokyo.

The Zero Zero Generation

What was left after Zero Japan, post 2000, and the fading of hopes of the 60s’ born generation? The 2000s were a frustrating decade. The overwhelming focus internationally on a legacy dominated by Takashi Murakami and Yoshitomo Nara largely blocked the recognition and emergence of a younger generation.

The one thing for sure about artists born about 1975 and after is that they are very different to the baby boomers. The experience of coming of age around 1995 and after was nothing short of disastrous. They left school or university

to a world in economic shock. The opportunities had dried up. No one was hiring. The wild ambitions of 80s Japan had all disappeared. Tokyo was still the place to go, because the pain of the provinces was so much greater, and the culture of the big city provided escape from its economic gloom. Japan's post-Bubble decline is most visible far from the lights of Neo-Tokyo, out in the empty regional towns, or in the shabby lower class *shitamachi* in the peripheries of the big city. The best that they could do was to get a *freeter* job in a *conbini* or *nomiya*, and hold on to their private dreams in some inner world. The younger Japanese who never knew the Bubble years as adults are the “lost generation”.

As a result, the sensibility of artists from this generation has been quite distinctive from the world conquering baby boomers. The video artist, Tabaimo, who was born in 1975, speaks of the experiences of her generation as those of the *danmen no sedai* (the “cross-sectional” or “cut across” generation), so different to the *dankai no sedai* (baby boomers) of her father's generation. Although she explains the concept quite differently, the idea of this generation being somehow “cut off” is very appropriate. The baby boomers were born

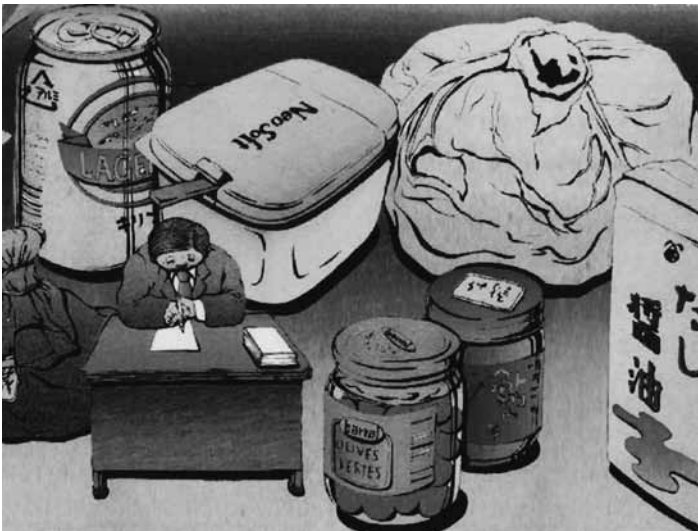


Artist Tabaimo. Courtesy of Gallery Koyanagi.

running. The lost generation had to learn to crawl again. On the other hand, as they matured in the 2000s, the artists born after the early 1970s – the zero zero generation, or *zero nen sedai*, as they are also often referred to – displayed a much less anguished relationship with national culture and identity than older generations. They were much more at ease with the world, and their experiences of budget travel in the West and, increasingly, around Asia were assimilated as a taken-for-granted dimension of their global connectedness. They were much more comfortable with



Tabaimo, installation view of *Japanese Kitchen* (1999). © Tabaimo. Courtesy of Gallery Koyanagi.



Still from video installation *Japanese Kitchen* (1999). A salary man sits at a desk in a fridge working until the mother in the kitchen pulls him out and cuts off his head with knife on the cutting board. © Tabaimo. Courtesy of Gallery Koyanagi.

TABAIMO

new technology. They tried to use its possibilities in the service of their aesthetics rather than giving way to the inevitable collapse of art into flat computerized reproduction. There was a clear return to individual craft and technique, together with a certain sincerity of expression, while assimilating a consciousness of Western conceptualism. And, above all, there was a modesty about their work. It had an economy born of difficult times, as well as a new kind of humanism after the nightmares of the “post-modern” or “post-human” 90s. There was a search for something more sustainable after the extravagances of the previous generation.

Long before March 2011, the “catastrophe” of the early 90s had already happened. That was a numb memory now. The question for this generation was, as art writer Kiki Kudo suggests, how to go from the “no future” of zero Japan to “post no future”. The one comprehensive account of the post neopop scene in Japan is Midori Matsui’s *Micropop* (2007 and after), which was both a series of shows she curated and a book. Matsui has an unusually strong sociological reading of Japanese contemporary art, and contextualizes the post-1970s generation in terms quite similar to those above. Influenced by certain strains of Japanese feminism, she chooses to focus on the small forms of resistance that can be found in the personal expression of younger artists. Her accent, though, has been on the defensive inward turn of younger artists – the return to the inner world of the bedroom – and she was always drawn particularly to fragile, juvenile and ephemeral styles. With its roots in the popular culture of *shojo* (girl) comics and aesthetics, the style was introduced in contemporary art by Yoshitomo Nara, although he was dropped from later iterations of *Micropop*.

During the 2000s, Midori Matsui was seen as a difficult personality to work with, but was universally admired for her intellect and articulacy. Art curation is rarely so well theorized, or so thoroughly analyzed in terms of social change. The inward turn, throwaway creativity and perpetual adolescence of the post 1970s generation was clearly part of the story of the 2000s, although

there were just as many emerging artists of the same age whose work was, in contrast, outgoing, conceptually ambitious and psychologically mature. Matsui tended to select artists as channels for her theories, and artists often complained that she did not listen much to their ideas. For years, she remained ferociously loyal to both Kaikai Kiki and Tomio Koyama in all her shows, which meant that there was never a clear break from *Superflat* and the aesthetics of the neo-pop generation and its followers. Matsui herself was an *otaku* style thinker. When her shows and writings travelled internationally, it was inevitably her preference for strange “eye candy” that the foreigners saw first.

As a reaction against the dominance of heavily theoretical curators such as Noi Sawaragi and Midori Matsui in Japan, artists in the 2000s began to seek ways to organize their own shows. Partly this was also due to Takashi Murakami’s example. The younger generation rejected his aesthetics, and cannot relate to his *otaku* obsessions, but they absorbed his business lessons very carefully. One good example was the artist organized show, *The Echo*, in late 2008. During the Yokohama Triennial, which basically ignored the current Tokyo art scene, a network based group of semi-established artists, mostly in their early 30s, put on an alternative show at the public art space ZAIM in Yokohama. The show was surrounded by energetic talk shows, linked up with art school volunteers, and brought in Haruka Ito from Magical Art Room, as a producer. It was a determinedly artist organized show. It refused a curatorial line, and focused on the work itself, as well as the sheer physical effort of transforming the battered old rooms of the ZAIM building into an elegant series of connected gallery spaces. *The Echo*, as it was called, was a genuine showcase for new talent, centering on the networks of some of the most established artists involved: in particular, the Kyoto connections of sculptor Kohei Nawa, and the Nagoya connections of installation artist, Kengo Kito. Refusing to impose a curatorial discourse on the show, the idea of networks and virtual communication in the silver light of a computer screen became the linking theme.

The young artists – which included names such as Satoru Aoyama, Kei Takemura, Satoshi Ohno, Daisuke Ohba, Taro Izumi, Koichi Enomoto, Hiraki Sawa and Ichiro Isobe – were particularly incensed by their exclusion from the Yokohama show. The show was their response: a statement about a Japanese contemporary art scene that the world still didn't know. It was part of a wealth of events in Yokohama during the Triennial that were organized out of frustration with the main event. *The Echo* was ignored by the international curators celebrating the opening event on the famous international pier, and heavily criticized by established art critics in Tokyo for excluding curators from the presentation. But the show offered a comprehensive survey of many of the most significant artists of the zero zero generation, showcasing their concerns with labour intensive craft, sustainable materials, and technologically aware communication. There was nothing introverted, childish or nationalist about this work.

Many of the artists seen at *The Echo* were linked with another emerging feature of the 2000s: a second or even third generation of dynamic commercial gallerists. Many of these gallerists worked for the first generation pioneers – Tsutomu Ikeuchi, Masami Shiraishi and Suelo Mitsuma, in particular – learning their trade from them. They were, overwhelmingly, female gallerists, former assistants now with their own companies and art spaces. They grouped together under the banner “New Tokyo Contemporaries”, and from the mid 2000s on showed a strong commitment to supporting innovative and even non-commercial artists. Alongside Yuko Yamamoto's Yamamoto Gendai (she worked for Ikeuchi, and is married to art critic Noi Sawaragi), there was ArataniUrano (Tomoko Aratani and Mutsumi Urano, who worked with Shiraishi), Hideki Aoyama's Aoyama | Meguro (who was at Mizuma), and the edgy tastes of former Mizuma gallery's Rika Fujiki at Mujin-to Production. The emergence of this generation pointed again to the strong feminization of the scene, with so many of the key curatorial or Japanese art entrepreneurial roles taken by women.

With many such new galleries opening, and a new global art bubble developing, the signs for the commercial scene seemed better again in the mid 2000s. From 2005, the city tried to maximize this energy, through the creation of a Tokyo Art Week, which centred on the genteel and colourless Art Fair Tokyo in the middle of the festive *hanami* season. This was an event dutifully attended by all the galleries, and all the main figures of the Tokyo art world. It took place in Marunouchi's International Forum, Tokyo city government's famous, big money losing, monster exhibition venue. The fair was said by its former director Misa Shin, another protégé of Fumio Nanjo, to make respectable amounts of money each year, but not much ever left Japan because foreign visitors were so rare amongst the crowds. Virtually no foreign galleries ever participated. In 2010, the event even publicized talk shows to discuss the "Galapagosization" of the Japanese art world: to muse about how Japan had become a group of strange islands way off in the Pacific, full of weird and wonderful creations, but disconnected from everything else in the world. The organizers then refused to provide translation from Japanese for any international visitors who happened to be interested in the discussion.

In 2008, supported by the two most internationally connected stalwarts of the Tokyo art world, Tomio Koyama and Johnnie Walker, the New Tokyo Contemporaries were persuaded to align with a new and exciting art fair that opened in the shadow of the much larger Art Fair Tokyo: 101 Tokyo. This was an attempt by foreign art enthusiasts, many of them *gaijin* (foreign) writers based in Tokyo connected to the online bilingual art magazine *Tokyo Art Beat*, to create a more dynamic satellite art fair to the main event, as would be found at any major international art fair. Above all, they sought to invite young foreign galleryists from Europe and North America to build international appreciation for the grass roots excitement of the Japanese scene. The myth of London's Frieze art fair was running high with a big party launch during art week in 2008 at the abandoned old Rensei Junior High School near Akihabara. It was a breath of fresh air in the Tokyo art world, bringing many new foreign visitors to the city.



Collector and Tokyo socialite Johnnie Walker holding the first Bacon Prize at 101 Tokyo Contemporary Art Fair (2008). In background from left, Antonin Gaultier and Agatha Wara, respectively producer and director of 101 Tokyo, with guest artist Joseph Kusuth. Courtesy of Kosuke Fujitaka, *Tokyo Art Beat*.



Yoshihiro Suda, *Rose* (2010). Painted on wood. © Yoshihiro Suda. Installation at Gallery Koyanagi booth, Art Fair Tokyo 2010. Photo by Keizo Kioku. Courtesy of Gallery Koyanagi.

TOKYO ART FAIRS

Sadly, the organizers of Art Fair Tokyo, thought otherwise, seeing only a foreign threat, and claiming that it had taken away some of the leading young Tokyo galleries from the bigger show. The next year, they decided to create their own well-controlled “satellite” to kill off the rival’s energy. All the main Tokyo contemporary galleries were then pressganged to join the main events. 101 Tokyo still managed to put together an event, but it collapsed financially soon after. A gallery assistant at Tomio Koyama Gallery blithely told me that she had put off a foreign partner gallery who was thinking of coming to 101 Tokyo: “I told her not to come, as she wouldn’t sell anything”. It summed up the self-defeating attitude of the mainstream Tokyo art world during these years. They even stole Johnnie Walker and his famous dog Bacon for the art fair prize which had been a key motif of the first 101 Tokyo.

Art Fair Tokyo became another hoped for gateway to the world, and particularly, the Asian art boom, that failed. In 2010, several of the major galleries – including Mizuma, Taro Nasu and Shugo Arts – decided not to show. They bet instead on a more rarefied gathering under the heading “G12”: a who’s who of Tokyo leading galleries going back to the 90s originals, that has over the years been hosted at the Art @ Agnes hotel and at the Mori Tower. Atsuko Koyanagi, one of the inner circle, chose to show nothing but a minimalist red rose by Yoshihiro Suda in her booth at the Art Fair Tokyo in 2010. It was perhaps a suitable valedictory gesture to a beast that might be dying, as Edan Corkill suggested in the *Japan Times*. When disaster struck in March 2011, it derailed a much hoped for revitalization of the art fair under the youthful leadership of a younger generation gallerist, Takahiro Kaneshima.

Supported by the ever-hopeful collector Satoshi Okada, the catalogue for *The Echo* came out a year and a half after the show in early 2010. The time lag was typical and pointed to problems of presentation and documentation of the scene, however interesting it became. After disagreements between the founders, Magical Art Room closed, and the manager Haruka Ito left to open her own alternative space “Island” way out of the city in Kashiwa.

Okada made plans to continue the support for young and emerging artists in cooperation with Yusaku Imamura of Tokyo Wonder Site, the day when Governor Ishihara cuts the funds. As always, the scene was surviving by adapting as best it could to the limited spaces and small finances. The *gaijin* writers in Tokyo also re-emerged from the bruising experience of 101 Tokyo, with *Tokyo Art Beat* extending its operation to New York and *Tokyo Art Beat* writer Ashley Rawlings editing an elegant guidebook to the Tokyo art world with start-up publisher Craig Mod.

Other developments in the art media were not good. After 24 high quality editions, *ART-iT* magazine was forced to go to an online version only, and editor Tetsuya Ozaki left to concentrate on his Real Tokyo platform. One criticism of *ART-iT* was the incestuous nature of the art coverage. The owner, Eijiro Imafuku, was thought to have interest as a collector in many of the artists covered, and the magazine tended to reflect a small circle of gallerists and emerging artists, the self-appointed insider Tokyo scene. Meanwhile, the venerable magazine *Bijutsu Techo* (BT) took to interspersing tourist style guide books and art encyclopedias with more serious art coverage in an attempt to survive. *BT* also reflected a closed circle of writers and artists. Indeed, the Tokyo art world as a whole remained a small world. Another upstart internet magazine, Kalonsnet, was created by an art enthusiast and entrepreneur, Miyuki Manabe. Her aim was also to create opportunities for the sort of intellectual critical writing about culture that used to be such a vibrant feature of the Tokyo publishing world. It was a culture that was already fading with the decline of magazine and book publishing that started in the mid 1990s, but the process intensified dramatically from the mid 2000s onwards. Kalonsnet made a point of trying to generate coverage of less well known galleries and artists as a way of challenging the pervasive complacency of the scene.

It seemed, though, that much of the time during these years the Tokyo art world was simply happy with its smallness and insularity. The folks behind Art Fair Tokyo, as ultimately at the biggest public museums, seemed to like it

best that way. It was all so much easier when the Japanese were just talking to themselves and those pushy, noisy foreigners didn't get involved. That is, just like when the black ships had gone, and the country could quietly fade back into a new era of *sakoku*.

Aida's Children

The Echo artists were a group of relatively established artists, with galleries and (in most cases) some kind of name recognition. A number had been featured in the occasional surveys of emerging young artists put together by *Bi-jutsu Techo* to shape the scene. Among the most well known, sculptor Kohei Nawa for example set up his own art production site, Sandwich, which drew on students from the Kyoto University of Art and Design, where he taught. Two other comparable artists by age and style who might also be mentioned here, installation artist Teppei Kaneuji and video artist Koki Tanaka, could easily have been part of *The Echo* with their lo-fi ethos and everyday concerns. They like the others might be considered this generation's "likely lads". Behind them, though, were legions of other young artists caught in the wilderness years between art school and an art career that might never arrive. These are the "survival artists" that have always populated the base of the Japanese art world, living hand to mouth, looking for a break.

As Takashi Murakami also discussed in his books, there was always a kind of fictional classlessness in the Japanese art world, which belied the social distinctions and social disadvantages that actually run through it. In art worlds anywhere there are always quite a few artists, curators or collectors with independent resources who were simply born to be part of it. Others have to struggle to make their way. Murakami's modest class origins drove him towards commercial strategies with a hungry ambition. So when he became successful, he showed off his success with the gaudy taste of the *nouveau riche*. His path through Geidai was exceptional, though. Geidai is in theory strictly egalitarian – it is a national school with entrance exams anyone can try – but the reality is

that social connections help a lot in getting a coveted place. Privileged young hopefuls also spend a fortune on prep school training courses to help them get ready. This system also provides jobs for the unemployed art school students coming out the other end. All of the well known names did their time as prep school teachers when they were still in “survival artist” mode.

During these years, there was one special art school in Tokyo: Bigakko in Jinbocho, the second hand book neighbourhood. The school had its roots in *avant garde* radical art of the 1960s. Genpei Akasegawa and Natsuyuki Nakanishi of the 60s art unit, Hi Red Center, were involved in setting up the school in 1969 as an alternative, open art school for students not able to get into Geidai and who could not afford one of the much more expensive private art schools. Artists volunteered to do courses there, and the school’s history has been a parade of illustrious figures over the decades.

On a rainy afternoon during Tokyo art week in 2010, the chaotic meeting room at Bigakko was alive with a group of this year’s teachers. They were there to view or experience the graduation works that had just come out. It was quite a strange collection of bits and pieces, installations and bizarre performances. There was an impromptu after party going on, with rice snacks and cans of beer; lots of talk and laughter. Looking around, it was almost a gathering of the original *Showa 40 nen kai*. Makoto Aida and Hiroyuki Matsukage were vying for attention as always with scurrilous jokes. There were joined by the charming Parco Kinoshita, a gentle giant of a man. There was also the younger video artist Jin Kurashige and installation artist Midori Mitamura. Makoto Aida’s wife Hiroko Okada was also present. She is a Mizuma artist with a similar warped humour to Aida’s, who manages to infuse her work with an unlikely feminist sensibility. In the past, she has sometimes involuntarily found herself part of Aida’s works: for example, when he started filming her giving birth, as she explains in her notes “Greetings from the wife”, for his DVD, *Mukiryoku Tairiku*. In a series of dubious “girly photos” Aida did for *BT* in 2009, one of them presented a naked airbrushed picture of

his wife entitled “38 minus 24 = 14”. Their ten year old son, Torajiro, said to be a prodigy himself, was running around and playing on a hand-held computer game.

Perhaps the answer to the big Aida question could be found here? With the inevitable cigarette and can of Sapporo beer in hand, it is possible that Aida could still have the last laugh. Flicking through the catalogues or the DVD, the young collaborators and co-conspirators can always be seen crowding round him in the photos or video footage. Technically extraordinary himself, Makoto Aida has been an inspiring and generous teacher. Some of the most exciting things on the Tokyo scene during these years have sat in a direct lineage from Aida. A blog I posted about him the week of a new opening in Spring 2010 got 2000 hits in a week – from fans and students mainly. It was clear, in other words, that there was a real “school” of art here, an Aida school, of which his contemporaries may be jealous. Like a parent slowly resigning himself to the declining years of middle age, Aida could yet fulfill some of his wildest ambitions – in his children.

During the late 2000s, at least one international curator was alive to the broad influence that Aida has had on younger artists responding in new ways to the inspiration of the 1990s and after. Gabriel Ritter’s involvement with Aida has tried to establish his name correctly in the account of Japanese contemporary art’s golden years. Ritter worked with Paul Schimmel at MOCA, before starting a PhD at UCLA. While developing his academic credentials in an earlier, more classical, period of Japanese art, he continued his work as an independent curator. In 2007 he brought a sampling of the best of contemporary Japanese video art to MOCA with the show *Out of the Ordinary*. One of the works was Tabaimo’s *public conVENIENCE* (2006), a harrowing animated video she made for Venice that was set inside a public women’s toilet in Japan. Paul Schimmel couldn’t believe the asking price: only \$20,000. He snapped it up for the MOCA collection. There was also Aida’s brilliant *The Video of a Man Calling Himself Bin Laden and Staying in Japan* (2005), which he performed

as a joke for friends who said with a beard he looked just like Bin Laden. While drunkenly enjoying *sake* at a traditional *nomiya* style table, Aida told the world in simple Japanese how he had renounced terrorism and was now mellowing out living in rural Japan.

In his next project, Ritter raised support to bring a sampling of the best of the new young action artists to Los Angeles. Working with an alternative art space funded by Toyota, *Tokyo Nonsense* (2008) was a showcase of a wacky, reckless and energetic new generation of artists who have developed with Aida as their mentor. The opening drew a crowd of LA hipsters, who might have been expecting something like Murakami's famous touring shows, or something closer to the nearby Royal/T in Culver City, the alternative Japanese pop culture space and maid café opened by collector Sue Hancock to house her impressive collection of *kawaii* style pop art. Instead, they were astonished to find a feast of urban stunts, explosive performances, and surreal "gag art" (comedy art) reflecting Tokyo in the late 2000s. Aida and followers' art had strong roots in the Japanese popular comedy tradition, with its raucous and uncompromising sense of street humour. It also had a populist, rabble rousing social dimension that suggested that after two decades of escape and introversion young artists were beginning to find a social voice.

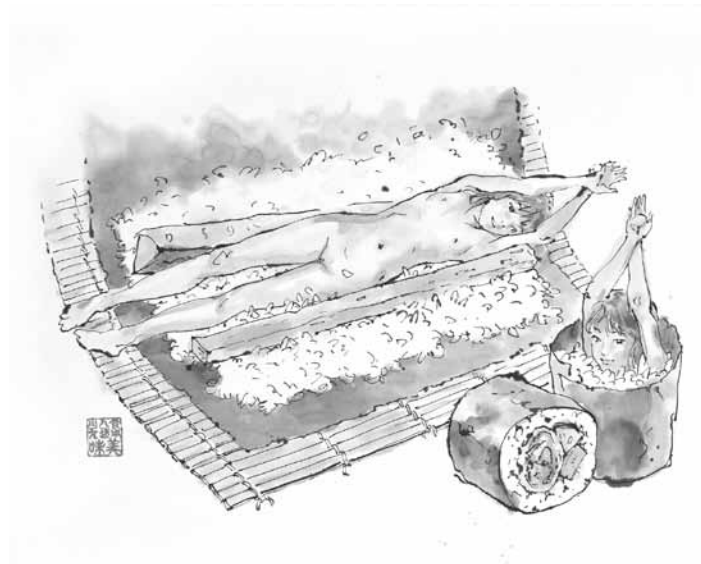


Ellie-chan of Chim ↑ Pom, holding up t-shirt during auction show for *I'm Bokan*, P-House, Roppongi (2007). Photo by author.

CHIM ↑ POM



Makoto Aida, *A Video of A Man Calling Himself Bin Laden Staying in Japan* (2005), 8'14". Courtesy of Mizuma Art Gallery.



Makoto Aida, *Edible Artificial Girls, Mi-Mi Chan - Mi-Mi Roll* (2001). © AIDA Makoto. Courtesy of Mizuma Art Gallery.

MAKOTO AIDA

Central to Ritter's show were the six person art unit Chim ↑ Pom, who at the end of the 2000s became the most discussed – and notorious – young artists on the Tokyo scene. Chim ↑ Pom looked like a pop group. Five perpetually grinning young guys having a good laugh, and a girl – Ellie chan – a blonde “airhead” who was a permanently method acting “Shibuya girl”. They were all in their mid twenties and had been part of Makoto Aida's group for several years. They either studied with him at Bigakko, or came along for fun. Ellie was the model for an infamous Aida painting of a naked girl and salamander when she was a teenager; the boys were stunt men in several of Aida's biggest conceptual experiments.

Chim ↑ Pom made videoed performances of their humourous “Jackass” style stunts, that offered an oblique comment on the black absurdities of contemporary Tokyo life. In 2006, Chim ↑ Pom went out and caught a bunch of Shibuya rats, stuffing them and decorating them as Pokemon heroes, while taunting the company to sue them. The resulting exhibition was called, laughably, *Super-rat*. In *I'm Bokan* (I'm “boom”, 2007), as a homage to Lady Diana, they took some Takashi Murakami Vuitton bags and other tacky Shibuya girl accessories to Cambodia and blew them up with landmines, before selling them for auction to a rapt Tokyo art crowd in the new P-House in Roppongi. In *Black of Death* (2008), they videoed Ellie-chan on the back of a moped with a dead stuffed crow in her hand driving around the famous sites of Tokyo early in the morning. A crowd of angry black crows swarmed in the skies above them as they careered past Shibuya 109 and the Diet building. Governor Ishihara made big political capital from vowing to rid the city of its vermin, but the crows still pick over the remains of the night in the streets of Shibuya when the party goers have finally gone home with the first light. In autumn 2008, they went down to Hiroshima and flew an airplane in the blue sky that wrote “Pika” (flash) in white smoke above the Hiroshima war memorial.

It was this last stunt that really attracted attention. They had been invited to do a show at the Hiroshima Contemporary Art Museum, and it was wrongly

thought that the Museum itself had sanctioned the airplane “performance”. A scandal exploded, exposing the chief curator Yukie Kamiya, who had to disassociate the museum from the art group, and cancel the planned show. The irony was, of course, that superstar Chinese artist, Cai Guo Qiang, was allowed to more or less do the same thing, with permission, exploding his fireworks in the sky over Hiroshima as part of an official memorial. Chim ↑ Pom gained notoriety, and the events were written about in a specially produced book about them soon after, with art writer Kenichi Abe.

Chim ↑ Pom’s activities have been officially managed by Mujin-to Production gallerist, Rika Fujiki, who was delighted to become a quasi music and video producer for their collectible spin off productions. But some observers in Tokyo have questioned whether, or to what extent, Chim ↑ Pom were in fact really a cover and proxy for Makoto Aida’s ever fertile imagination. He often



Sociologist and Art Writer Yoshitaka Mouri, Tokyo National University of the Arts. Courtesy of Yoshitaka Mouri.

ART WRITERS

appeared at talk shows with the group. Apart from the articulate leader Ushiro, the rest of the members would sit there silently while Aida talked for them. Aida was at least their dominant educational influence: they were clearly his children. The game took Chim ↑ Pom to the top of *Bijutsu Techo*'s lists of emerging artists in 2010. It also secured them a very visible place in the 2010 Roppongi Crossing, which featured several other artists or units reflecting an active albeit warped engagement with contemporary Japanese society and its post-Bubble condition.

As Geidai based sociologist, Yoshitaka Mouri, has analysed in his writings on art and social engagement in post-Bubble

Japan, it is sometimes difficult to discern the clear politics in the art when the artists looks so much like pop idols playing an empty media game of provocation and satire. Yet there was a relationship between the Tokyo Nonsense artists and a new kind of street politics that emerged, surprisingly, after the self-styled nihilism of the 90s generation and the professed numbness of the zero zero generation, in the late 2000s. Mouri points particularly to the street art protests that galvanized many artists over plans to remove homeless people from a Shibuya passageway that was – with the dominant logic of creative city development – planned for a new set of smart gallery and creative design spaces. The concerns were prefigured by Aida's longstanding theme of homelessness in his work, such as his famous temporary cardboard *Shinjuku Castle* (1995) that he installed and left as accommodation for four days in the shadow of Shinjuku's monster corporate towers.

But will Makoto Aida's visions ever translate? Aspects of Chim ↑ Pom's crude humour could be easy enough to grasp, and they have been shown internationally in the US and Asia. But they remained a phenomenon that only really made sense amidst the cultural reference points and consumer overload of Tokyo. Aida himself has always been condemned by his reluctance to do as Takashi Murakami and others have done so willingly: to denature the local origins of the art in order to sell it to the global market. One of Aida's most brilliant and funny moves was also one of his most self-defeating: the refusal to communicate in English. This reached a peak, appropriately during his Yokohama Triennial show (2001), built around his self-assisting suicide machine (that didn't ever work). Aida was right of course. Why should he speak English? Why should he provide anything more than a battered, half-way useless dictionary, for example, to explain his 1997 *manga*, *Mutant Hanako* – to defective observers who happened during the years of Cool Japan to wander into the vaudeville street show of contemporary Tokyo as naïve, impressionable foreigners? One had to admire his *coglione*, as the Italians would say. Yet, during these years, it was Maurizio Cattelan seen up on the Venice walls, or the

Chapman Brothers celebrated in Venice installations, not Makoto Aida. A lot of Aida's best ideas were flattened and amputated as they got transmitted around the world in a more Western-friendly style. They became part of an art history called *Superflat*, appropriated by others and bearing the stamp ©MURAKAMI.

Space for Our Future

The Echo was like *Emotional Site* at Sagacho, a kind of final hurrah for another alternative art space about to disappear on the Tokyo-Yokohama landscape. The space in question, ZAIM in Yokohama closed down in March 2010. Without such spaces new art cannot develop. This was the void in which Murakami's GEISAI thrived. In terms of Tokyo's gallery scene, the situation was obvious. By the end of the 2000s, Atsuko Koyanagi was no longer actively looking for new young artists, and SCAI The Bathhouse had mostly restricted their international art fair shows to local Asian destinations. For years, Tomio Koyama and Hiromi Yoshii ploughed lines of mainly derivative pop art or *kawaii* artists as the only viable growing commercial line. After the 2008 financial crisis, almost nothing was selling for a while. Artists were giving up and leaving to go abroad again, passing other older ones who had tried to make it in Berlin, London or New York but were now giving up and heading home for an easier middle age. These were lean times for everyone.

The new gallerists, the young survival artists, and the mid career artists had all been trying to create a space for their own work. Space for a future, when there had been, since the 90s, no future. The struggle for space has always been the defining characteristic of the Tokyo art scene, finding a way to develop in the margins of the city. Or, to use a metaphor often used by the 90s art organizer, Masato Nakamura, as a logic for his urban art interventions, it was trying to make art and make meaning in the "cracks" of the city, between the walls of tightly packed buildings, or the small amounts of personal space between its always hurried residents.

The fight for space also became the *modus operandi* of a younger generation of curators, who were frustrated with the conservatism of the traditional museum world. Again, as with artists, there had often been a dynamic of first moving externally out of Japan, in search of the freedom and space of fresh international experiences, before returning to start fighting for these things internally. As narrated by one such curator, Mizuki Endo it, Japan's weak NPO culture led to a dearth of the kind of political alternative art spaces that were found everywhere else in most East, South and South East Asian societies. In these countries, artists were much more engaged as an *avant garde* social voice, and art has often been used as a vehicle for protest against repressive regimes. A case in point is Japan's close neighbour, South Korea. Fukuoka curator Raiji Kuroda, the most important supporter of new Asian art trends in Japan, made his early career as a specialist in Korean contemporary art and its edgy, highly politicized agenda.

Japan is quite different as a country. Pacified by long years of economic success and commercial gratification, art in Japan has typically often sublimated its political agenda into its methods and techniques. *The Echo* artists, for example, were not overtly political; there was none of the residual anti-American radicalism that could be found in the 60s generation. Yet in their "neutral" stance, the quiet return to intensive individual technique, and their concern with avoiding the excesses and waste of the plastic world of reproduction celebrated by neo-pop, a certain social and political stance was revealed. It spoke of a more responsible, engaged and sober view of Japan's future. They offered a different way of thinking about art in a material world far from Takashi Murakami's superflat pop life. It was one much more in tune with environmental and social issues that those artists working under intense spatial and financial constraints – unlike global superstars such as Murakami – have to increasingly encounter in their everyday practice.

Although this could be seen in a number of initiatives in Japan, the most striking example of the new attitude and the new kind of art practices it might lead



Artist Masato Nakamura. Photo by Ryosuke Takeda. Courtesy of 3331 Arts Chiyoda.



Aerial view of 3331 Arts Chiyoda, converted Rensei Junior High School, near Akihabara. Courtesy of 3331 Arts Chiyoda.

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to, could be found in the movement led by the former “likely lad” Masato Nakamura after he renounced the illusions of the commercial Western art world and returned to make a locally-based art in the city. Clearly, it was a movement that paralleled Fram Kitagawa’s visions of environmental art and rural redevelopment in Echigo-Tsumari. Nakamura, though, has sought to pursue something similar in the heart of Tokyo, building on his extraordinary powers of organization and political persuasion. He first persuaded the city ward of Chiyoda to give him an alternative art space, called Kandada, in an underused building near Jimbocho. This became the base in 1997 of his art organization Command N. Teaching at Geidai, he created the “sustainable art” group in the mid 2000s to foster a new kind of art that broke with the commercial concerns of his own 60s generation. They put on a number of art shows in and around Ueno that used abandoned buildings or recycled waste materials, and the units it fostered participated strongly in the Echigo-Tsumari and Setouchi festivals. All this was a prologue for the creation in early 2010 of Tokyo’s largest alternative art initiative, under Nakamura’s leadership, with the conversion of the abandoned Rensei Junior High School near Akihabara into a large art centre called 3331 Arts Chiyoda.

As Masato Nakamura explains, the location of 3331 in Chiyoda ward was highly symbolic. It is a part of the city where all kinds of lines of transport come together, a historical meeting point and entrance to the city in the North East, which has faded over the decades in the dramatic switch of urban development towards the South and South West boom zones. The world knows Akihabara, but this unusual electronics hub is distinct from the rather grey and shabby neighbourhoods around it. Chiyoda is mainly made up of small businesses and factories that have born the brunt of the city’s decline. This is one reason for the underuse of property in the area. Then, back in the late 1990s, when building development started again with a new infusion of global direct investment, the new buildings that went up in Chiyoda were left unused because of a sudden over supply of rented space. At the same time,

the population of the ward was declining and ageing sharply, as younger families moved out. Chiyoda has a bizarrely distorted population profile. A day time population of 800,000, shrinks to an overnight 40,000 when all the commuting workers go home. Rensei Junior High School was once a big inner city school, at which the Mayor of Chiyoda ward, Masami Ishikawa, himself studied. By 2003 the population of the local district had shrunk so much due to Japan's post-Bubble blight of young couples refusing to procreate, that they had to close the school. After his proud memories as a student, the Mayor decided after long negotiations to invest some sentimental public money in this old building.

The project galvanized many leading figures of the Tokyo art world not aligned with Mori or the other major museums. For instance, the graphic designer Naoki Sato brought his property connections, the Kyoto based academic Shigeo Goto his aggressive support for new art, and art writer Tetsuya Ozaki his open minded enthusiasm for Tokyo culture. Numerous other artists and curators also joined the large circle of people willing to put some commitment into a new idea of art in the city, a long way from the expensive plastic and steel public art seen in the other, richer half of the city. A new spatial shift in the Tokyo art world towards the North and East had already been underway, first with Kiyosumi, then with the openness of Chiyoda-ku to art initiatives and the availability of new spaces in and around Asakusabashi. And to the North East in the old *shitamachi* quarter of Mukojima, there was Takaaki Soga's Contemporary Art Factory in a converted old family electrics factory, that has, often in cooperation with the nearby Asahi Art Square Building, long provided a alternative art space for shows and events in the area with strong connections to the local community.

The low rent charms of Sumida-ku and Arakawa-ku in the North of Tokyo have often provided many artists with a base. Yet there, like everywhere in urban Japan, the atmosphere of "Real Tokyo" found in the *shitamachi* has, during these years, been rapidly disappearing. Almost weekly, it sometimes



"Tokyo Sky Tree" television tower near Sumida river. Photo by author.



Midori Mitamura, *Knitting Woman in the Tenement House* (2007). Taken during the Mukojima Art Project, a month long "knitting" residency (2007), and part of the protest against the television tower in Sumida-ku. Photo by Art Unit Midori Ikeda (Midori Mitamura + Masanori Ikeda). Courtesy of Midori Mitamura.

ART IN THE CITY

seems, old *kissaten* (coffee shops), wooden *sentō* (public baths), or retro dining bars were being torn down or forced out of business, to make way for new development, and the inevitable arrival of more *conbini*, *pachinko* parlours and McDonald's. Against this, art became central to local activism. It was particularly galvanized by the plans for a gigantic new Tokyo Television Tower (the so-called "Tokyo Sky Tree") in Sumida being brought in to force new investment, wiping out the traditional working class neighbourhood around it. It all looked like a parallel to what had happened with the Roppongi Hills development in the South East ten years previously. They were like the "twin towers" of high city politics and corporate power rising up to bury the old city with a very different kind of vision of the future.

3331 Arts Chiyoda was quite consciously a community project in this lineage. A part of the activities of the centre were from the beginning dedicated to art in the community, involving schools, local residents and associations in collaborative efforts. Unusually, though, major artists were often involved. For example, in the early days of the centre in 2010, Katsuhiko Hibino, a well known pop artist from the 80s, decorated the building with flags stitched by members of the local community. Masato Nakamura also positioned 3331 at the centre of a national and increasingly international network of NPO based art spaces across Japan and in East Asia. 3331 offered a portal and booking site for the network, as well as a programme for visitors to Japan. Most days, 3331 was also alive with artist organized talks, openings and shows. The logic is very much to build it on the mass of young artists needing a location and focus for their careers after art school. They have always been such a hugely underused resource. Perhaps the key part of the school was to provide new kinds of courses and training in art management that might structure the art world in a new way less reliant of hierarchical traditions. Nakamura points out that everyone involved, whether they intend to be an artist, curator or some other art world role, would all get hands on experience of all aspects of art production, including raising money or hammering nails in the wall.

The renovation of the old school, and the creation of a well furnished art centre with all kinds of commercial, exhibition, and production space, was funded by Chiyoda ward with a budget of ¥200 million. The centre was given a five year lease, extendable to ten, under Nakamura's leadership, once they had raised ¥30 million themselves. He separated the activities of Command N, making the original art group an independent NPO under the co-directorship of his long time collaborator Peter Bellars, and creating Command A as a management structure for 3331. But the deal was that the Centre had to be self-supporting, which has meant combining its mission for education and alternative art with commercial revenue. A number of galleries and shops thus were also rented rooms in the corridors, as well as paid exhibitions. Everyone was worried about its financial viability. Chiyoda ward might waver in its commitment, and Nakamura faced pressure from his main employer, Tokyo University of the Arts, who saw a conflict in his roles as teacher and manager of the centre. Yet 3331 has remained a hugely idealistic venture, one fitting for the corridors of a building that was intended for the education of young children who are no longer being born.

In the Spring of 2010, a surprising thing happened. Masato Nakamura was in the middle of a meeting when a very unexpected visitor dropped in to say hello. It was Takashi Murakami. Murakami was in town in connection with his sponsorship of called Chaos Lounge, an event promoting an even younger new wave of artists at the Takahashi Collection space in Hibiya. It was another attempt by Murakami to rejuvenate his activities by promoting yet more unknown young pop artists using *anime* and new technology. As always it had generated a lot of press attention and buzz, even while every one else in Tokyo was wondering how he could always get away with such brazen attempts to detract attention from everything else going on in Tokyo.

Murakami is a Twitter and blogging addict, and he videod the whole story for his website. Nakamura took Murakami to visit an art student room full of video installations. They sat down awkwardly to talk to the camera. Murakami,

who was always the louder and more extrovert of the two, laughed and joked around with the art students, speaking warmly to “Masato-kun”. They got up and looked around a couple of other gallery spaces. Murakami, perhaps jokingly, then threatened to sue a fan who was taking a photograph of him. He exclaimed *sugoi ne!* (fantastic!) and *omoshiroi!* (wow, interesting!) a lot as they walked around. Then, after much persistence, when he finally got Nakamura to talk about how the place was financed, he switched off the camcorder so they could discreetly talk about money.

It was quite a momentous occasion. The relation of these two old friends had soured badly after 1995. Once Murakami left for New York, he and Nakamura were set on irrevocably different paths. Nakamura favoured local intervention and institutional change back home, and slowly but surely created an education and community base that might make this possible. He believes in burrowing inside of existing institutions in order to effect change. In the projects at 3331, and in his experimentations at Geidai and Command N, this could be witnessed happening. Murakami wanted to just tear everything down. He built his own corporation to replace traditional galleries and museums and, in GEISAI, a semi-cynical anti-art education system. Each, in other words, built his alternative art system to respond to the failings of the existing one. It may “just” be art, but during these years their influence was touching thousands of young people at a critical moment in their lives and careers.

Masato Nakamura and Takashi Murakami were the brightest of the “likely lads” of the early 90s, a kind of John Lennon and Paul McCartney of Japanese contemporary art. Lennon and McCartney were once friends and partners in creation, but became estranged business moguls exchanging bitter anecdotes and comments via the media. When McCartney famously showed up with a guitar at Lennon’s apartment in the Dakota building in New York, Lennon turned him away saying that he was too busy looking after his kid, Sean. It’s a sad story. After they split, the two artists were never the same, neither as powerful, nor as good as when they were together. Nakamura didn’t turn Mu-



Masato Nakamura, video installation on computer monitors in Akihabara shop during *Akihabara TV* (1999). Courtesy of Masato Nakamura and 3331 Arts Chiyoda.

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rakami away. It was good to see these two artist friends together again for a few moments on screen. It was clear a creative reconciliation would be a good thing for the Tokyo art world.

After a couple of hours, Murakami got back in his taxi and made a second video reflecting on the meeting. It made for strangely uncomfortably viewing. Murakami said that he was happy that Nakamura had finally done something. How good it was, he said, that he had finally positioned himself with an enterprise and a company just like his own. Yet while Murakami and his assistants had been painting happy flowers, and recycling tacky visions of Akihabara and Cool Japan for the applause of foreigners, Nakamura had, since 1997, consistently promoted edgy interventionist art in Tokyo. His *Akihabara TV* interventions of 1999 questioned the changing city and the whole point of doing contemporary art in it. It didn't just reproduce Akihabara in a gallery as Murakami has done. Rather, Nakamura and the other artists he invited intervened into the everyday functioning of Akihabara by putting *avant garde* video art on the shop window television screens and computer minitors around town. Or his landmark *conbini* and McDonald's installations of the late 90s. In *TRAUMATRAUMA* (1997) he persuaded the four major convenience store corporations to let him borrow their mesmerizing shop front neon strip lights, which he installed at SCAI The Bathhouse. These colours are arguably the most visible urban iconography of Japanese cities; indeed cities all around Asia where Japanese convenience stores are found. He extended the idea in 1999, at SCAI, and then Venice in 2001, by borrowing a global icon: McDonald's golden arches. When asked why, he joked it was "M" for Masato, and yellow was his favourite colour. But the implication of putting these brand symbols inside the Japanese national pavilion was clear. The installations not only predated Murakami's stunning branding deals with the Mori Building Co. and Louis Vuitton, but also took a more rigorous theoretical line on how and why the artist should make contracts with the corporations that dominate Japanese (and global) consumer identity. At the end of the video, Murakami

rather ruefully admitted that Nakamura's community interventions and his subversive organizational form of art practice had made him think about how he might pursue more corporate responsibility in the world of capitalism he so joyfully embraced. Maybe he did have something to learn from the ethics and politics of Nakamura's project.

And so the end of 2010 marked the end of another decade. The 1990s, at least viewed from Tokyo, were arguably best represented by Makoto Aida's extraordinary production. The 2000s, in contrast, surely did belong to Takashi Murakami, from the first *Super Flat* that opened the decade at Parco department store, all the way to the thousands upon thousands of confused tourists who saw his work in the famous royal chambers of Versailles just over ten years later. Yoshitomo Nara's decade wasn't too bad either. He had become an immortal art guru himself in all his travels. He had gone from the first big show in Yokohama to becoming the toast of New York City in the Autumn of 2010. This was happening just as Murakami – and the scandal that followed his show – was filling the press across the water in France. The future might look gloomy for everyone else but, as the new decade began, Japan was surely still “cool” for Murakami and Nara.

EPILOGUE

After the Tsunami

After their triumphant 2000s, the legacy of Takashi Murakami and Yoshitomo Nara was now, assuredly, art history. They would have their page in the textbooks. But the question remaining at the end of the decade was: How long would the world continue to be fascinated by their reproduction and recycling of images from an imaginary Neo-Tokyo or a lost childhood in post-War Japan, so long after their generation's heyday in the early to mid-1990s? And would Japan ever find a next generation? The country needed new ambassadors, and new images in the pavilion.

The staleness of the Western vision of Japanese contemporary art was already apparent to some critics who questioned the recycling of Nara's greatest hits at Asia Society in the Autumn of 2010. And the issue was central to the selection proposed for David Elliott's long awaited exhibition, *Bye Bye Kitty!!!*

Between Heaven and Hell in Contemporary Japanese Art, that was to open at Japan Society in New York, in March of 2011. Elliott was determined to tell a different story to the one now cast in stone by Murakami: a selection of “other” important artists of the 1990s and 2000s, centering on the legacy of Makoto Aida and Mizuma gallery, the rising importance of the somewhat younger women artists Miwa Yanagi and Chiharu Shiota, and the sculptors Motohiko Odani and Kohei Nawa. Downbeat and troubled in its mood, *Bye Bye Kitty!!!* seemed like a repudiation by Japan Society of *Little Boy* and the laughing pop monster it unleashed in 2005. It was not so much farewell to Hello Kitty, as “Bye Bye Little Boy”. Time was being called on Cool Japan at last.

As it was, any lingering image of Cool Japan would not last long. On March 11th 2011, a little after 3pm in the afternoon, Cool Japan was – along with many lives and a large part of the Northern Japan coastline – swept away by a devastating earthquake and tsunami that irrevocably changed Japan once again. As everybody recognized, it was certainly the end of an era and, as a beleaguered Prime Minister Naoto Kan noted, high time a new Japan emerged from the despair.

The atmosphere in post-tsunami Tokyo was strange. On the face of it, it didn’t take long for Japan to get on its feet. Even as the Fukushima reactors were spewing unknown quantities of radiation into the air and water, and the politicians dithered, the famed Japanese bureaucratic state quickly got into action moving populations, building new roads, and restoring much of the country to a kind of normality. Anxious Tokyoites checked the radiation levels daily on new internet sites, or felt the aftershocks (over 1000 in the first month after), but apart from the dimmed lights and reduced air conditioning – and the almost total absence of Western tourists – the city didn’t seem so different.

The real change was symbolic, and felt internationally: as the empty transcontinental jet flights underlined. With the government’s struggle to brand Japan in the newly competitive Asian environment, tourism in Japan had lived off Cool

Japan for a decade in the 2000s. It had hitched traditional arts and culture to the weird and wonderful worlds of Akihabara and Shibuya, and elevated all kinds of creative faces as representatives. In contemporary art, Takashi Murakami and Yoshitomo Nara were the poster boys – overgrown boys, in fact, confirming all the other international stereotypes that Japanese was a hopelessly infantilized society refusing to grow up or face up to its demons.

After March 2011, naive celebrations of bizarre Japanese pop culture or futuristic Neo Tokyo were going to look tasteless. Cute kids who once looked cool now looked silly. Murakami tried to plough on regardless: filling the Gagosian gallery in London that summer with a three metre high maid café waitress with huge breasts and a pair of massive cartoon genitalia. But the images that resonated now were the infinite slag-heap piles of salary men etched into Makoto Aida's massive painting *Ash Colour Mountain* (2009-10), or *Dialogue with Absence* (2010), the virgin's dress wired up with tubes of blood by post-cancer-treatment Chiharu Shiota – two of the arresting works chosen by Elliott for Japan Society that Spring.

That was the art that New York saw, and the intellectual and creative elites of the city duly turned up and emptied their pockets for the Japan Society's immediate charity drive. Either way, though, it was not going to put the tourists back on the planes. Japan might face a decade in which the only images Westerners would associate with the place would be wobbling skyscrapers, boats, trucks and people being swept away by terrible waves, and nuclear reactors exploding. Holidays in wonderland were cancelled – for the foreseeable future. There was nothing more “uncool” than the thought of being there in Japan while the Big One rocks Tokyo, or worrying about how invisible radioactive particles might be poisoning you as you enjoy sake and fish in a downtown restaurant.

In the Japanese art world, after the tsunami, things were even more depressed than usual. Art in and around Tokyo shut down for up to two months: museum

shows, openings, residencies, fellowships, installations – cancelled. That year’s Art Fair Tokyo was postponed and Tokyo Art Week in April was wiped out. It might be a long time before the commercial world would pick up again. Art world people always party hard. But now, when the openings started up again, the hard drinking, chain smoking celebrations seemed a little more desperate. More than ever people were talking of leaving – or begging foreigners to come back.

Yet the Japanese art world had perhaps changed, too, in ways that confirmed a deeper shift that had taken place during the 2000s. The commercial obsession of that decade seemed out of place now compared to the imperative and obligation to do something about the disasters. In Japan, and in the major centres of the Japanese art diaspora such as New York, London and Berlin, artists realized they had the ability – and leisure – to mobilize. Everywhere, they engaged in events, donated to auctions, or planned ambitious artist interventions. In all places, the artists received an outpouring of sympathy and support for Japan; they also found a sense of community for themselves. The country’s image in eyes of the world was everywhere seen to be positive and affectionate.

In a sense, the trend confirmed something that perhaps had always been obvious about the role of contemporary art in this perpetually post-Bubble, post-disaster society. Art was a kind of welfare for a society unable to handle its problems politically, or absorb and utilize the creativity of its youth. It was an alternative vision to the economic juggernaut that was still polarizing urban and rural society, despoiling the landscape, or wiping out the charms of the old city.

Viewed this way, it is easy to make sense of the choices and commitments of the major artists of the 60s generation: Takashi Murakami’s partners and rivals, the “likely lads”. Community-centred work had long been the practice of Yukinori Yanagi, Masato Nakamura and Yutaka Sone. Yanagi and Nakamura indeed explicitly came back to Japan after getting disillusioned with the global commercial market at the end of the 1990s. On one reading, Yoshitomo Nara

had also come home and become a community artist. Makoto Aida's warped commentaries and his engagement with homelessness issues was also a form of local politics, interventions that had deeply influenced a younger generation of artists in Tokyo. The Echigo-Tsunami and Setouchi festivals were massive community interventions, that invented new roles for artists in unlikely community settings. Art in the city projects had been mobilized to give new meaning to culture in deprived or depressed urban areas. But perhaps the significance of the communal turn in contemporary art could be appreciated most clearly through the example of that other "likely lad" from the original Geidai gang, Tsuyoshi Ozawa.

Tsuyoshi Ozawa was always a quieter member of the *Showa 40 nen kai* alongside the extroverts Makoto Aida and Hiroyuki Matsukage. His work since the early 90s had in fact seen him pioneer a form of "relational art" some time before this movement in global terms was recognized and named as such by the art critic Nicolas Bourriaud. His long running series sought to find a meaning for community art interventions that had been squeezed out of conventional art spaces. He had been wondering ever since the beginning: What is the point of art? Who is it really for? How can new spaces for art be created in a hyper-modernized society where there is no space or time? A milk box for artists hanging on a street wall was one way. A couple of days out of time with local residents shopping and cooking together could be another. What became obvious after March 2011, in the light of all the other community efforts now being made by artists, was that Ozawa's gently humorous, humanistic, communicative art work was just the kind of art to find its true place and role in this situation. This was Ozawa's moment.

At Düsseldorf Kunsthalle in May 2011 a large show opened of the *Showa 40 nen kai* – both a retrospective and a presentation of new work. It was the first time the group of 1965 born artists were recognized in the West as a major part of the history of Japanese contemporary art in the 1990s and after. Ozawa contributed a series of historical *Nasubi* galleries and a special show-



Artist Tsuyoshi Ozawa. Courtesy of Tsuyoshi Ozawa.



Showa 40 nen kai at opening of *The Group 1965 - We are Boys!* at Düsseldorf Kunsthalle, May 2010. From top left: Oscar Oiwa, Hiroyuki Matsukage, Tsuyoshi Ozawa, Parco Kinoshita, Sumihisa Arima. Bottom: Makoto Aida (left), with Curators Gregor Jansen and Inka Christmann, and (right) Manager Hitomi Hasegawa. Photo by author.

TSUYOSHI OZAWA AND FRIENDS

ing of his *Museum of Soy Sauce Art* (1999): a small purpose built gallery in which the entire history of Japanese art is retold in works painted or executed in soy sauce. But his central contribution was a performance on the opening night, in which he gave a talk and slideshow. It was a kind of poem or children's story, which eventually became a more elaborated video installation.

There was an artist who lived in a big city. It was about 200 km away from a terrible poisonous fire that was burning. The artist sat at home wondering what he could do. He always wanted to help people with his art, but it was not easy. What could be done with art that might make any difference? This time, he was like everyone else in the big city. He sat there watching the terrible news on the internet and TV.

One day, about 1000 people – lots and lots of children – arrived in his hometown. They had had to flee their homes because of the fire, and stayed at the local school, camping rough. He visited them, to see if he could help. They were trying to improvise the graduation ceremonies they had missed at their school, which had had to close down. He proposed to have a workshop making kites with the children. They tried to have some fun. After the workshop, the kids played with the kites, they were happy and smiling again, for a little while. He was happy to see it.

The artist thought he should visit where these people came from. He knew some friends there and travelled to this place. He had to take a bus, as there were no trains working. In the town there was just a few people. The atmosphere was fear. They had to wear masks, and be careful everywhere. The smell was bad. Still, it was spring. Even here there were flowers blooming, cherry blossoms. He took some photographs.

The artist talked with his friends. He had an idea. There was an art work he sometimes made. Strange weapons – guns and bazookas – made out of vegetables: the *Vegetable Weapon* series (begun in 2001). He would travel to

different places, in different countries, and meet some locals. They would go shopping for local vegetables. He would make a gun out of the vegetables, then take military style photos of girls holding the guns. Then everybody would get together and cook the vegetables in a big party, according to a local recipe. The art work was the whole event: the relations it made or changed between the people; the small new space in time it created. After he had done a series of these, in many different countries, he had a cook book made.

He thought he would do another one of these events. The artist went back to the town. The people living there had had to leave their houses and live in public refuges. This place, not far away, in fact was famous for its vegetables. But because of the fire, the people growing the vegetables could no longer sell them. So the artist and his friends got together with some of the locals living rough, mostly young people. They bought some of the vegetables they shouldn't buy from the farmers. Some of the farmers were desperate: they were close to giving up because they had lost their livelihood. Some of the locals were angry: they didn't understand or appreciate what the artist was doing. Others were happy: it was an important event. The art was relational, and it was conflictual: an intervention of sorts.

They made two guns, and two sets of photos. They were sitting eating under the cherry blossom. One of the guns they could eat, one of them they shouldn't. They cooked everything in a stew, and also made tempura. It was an art event. He was a famous artist. But he didn't have any plans for an exhibition of these photos. He needed time to think about it. It was a very delicate projet. The dinner was fun, though.

That was the end of Tsuyoshi Ozawa's talk. As always, he had said what he had to say quietly. His final comment summed up where Japan was in the long, strange months after March 2011. Nobody knew if, after all this, the country would get well again or not. Nobody knew. The name of the story was "Happy Island": the literal English translation of Fukushima.

Ozawa's intervention was just one tiny act in the huge human drama, but it was paradigmatic. During the 2000s, many other artists similarly started to go out into the city or to the villages of rural provinces in search of meaning. When they hadn't found space or purpose in galleries and museums, they found it in empty schools, or abandoned country houses. In this sense, *Bye Bye Kitty!!!* failed to represent the most important trend of all in Japanese contemporary art of this period. It was limited by its restriction to the conventional white cube space, as much by the small scale of Japan Society's galleries.

As the mobilizations after March 2011 demonstrated, so much else could be seen to be going on in Japanese contemporary art. Japanese contemporary art in the 1990s and 2000s had in many ways been a long struggle: a fight against time, and a fight for space. The most successful version, *Superflat*, had tried to stop time, flatten history, and lock visions of Japan into an eternal childhood of pop culture and *otaku* obsessions. It had reigned supreme, while others had sought to engage in different ways with Japanese society. Faced with the limitations of the Japanese museum and gallery world, some had gone looking for alternatives in unconventional places. By moving out into abandoned rural provinces or unused pockets of the city, artists had discovered new spaces and a new sense of freedom. Facing the speeded up time of globalization, and the problematic consequences of modernization in the country, others had sought to reinsert art back into a past it had already lost. After the gold rush, artists had rediscovered purpose beyond the commercial market and the big global game. After the tsunami, they had faced the silence – of devastation and of clocks stopped. But artists could also find a purpose here. It might even be that they had all the time in the world, and all the space they could imagine. If only its contemporary art could be viewed this way, Japan's unusual experiences and the extraordinary art it has inspired might have something to show the rest of the world after all.

Sources and Acknowledgements

This book would have been impossible without the help of many friends and fellow scholars, and the use of innumerable formal and informal sources in the course of the five years of research in Japan, North America and Europe. It started life as a research project supported by the Department of Sociology and the International Institute at UCLA in 2006. Research in Japan in 2007 was made possible by an Abe Fellowship of the Japan Foundation/SSRC Center for Global Partnership, and research 2008-11 has been supported by Aarhus University, a Danish government EliteForsk prize funding, and a European Union Marie Curie International Reintegration Grant.

The intention of the book is to portray the Japanese contemporary art scene in its full social and economic context during the 1990s and 2000s, and from the point of view of those active in the Tokyo art world. My aim is to faithfully reflect as far as possible the voice and viewpoint of the many people I have met and talked with during my research. It does not seek to present it from the

point of view of the two most famous names in the story – Takashi Murakami and Yoshitomo Nara – as their writings and interviews are already so widely available. I have, of course, consulted all the available catalogues and literature by and about these two artists, but theirs is practically the only perspective ever heard or seen in the West.

As an “outsider” observer of the art world, the sociologist naturally tends to want to demystify aspects of this world. These are the very things which most “insider” writings by art critics and art curators tend to reproduce: particularly the focus on the “genius” of certain artists and the “sublime” status of certain forms of art. I have my own tastes, of course, but as a sociologist, I have tried to take a “flat”, non-hierarchical view of the world I encountered. Everyone I met there, from the lowliest gallery assistant or art student trying to start out in their career, to the superstar artist jetting from Tokyo to New York and back, is an important part of the system. I have listened to their stories. The art world is a complex mix of creators, entrepreneurs, enthusiasts and dogs-bodies. This is also a reason why artists – particularly famous ones – are not always the most interesting people to talk to. Ironically, this attitude is the opposite of what has made curator Hans-Ulrich Obrist – the author of numerous books of interviews with famous artists – so powerful and well known. I would like to thank everyone who helped along the way, especially those who made extra time as the project developed to read my drafts, give me advice or put me right.

I owe a special acknowledgement to several foreign or English language writing “guides” to the Tokyo art world, who have been involved in the place far longer than I. Early on the writings of journalist Lucy Birmingham helped open the world to me; Edan Corkill’s regular bulletin, *Japan Art Scene Monitor* (<http://jasm.australia.or.jp>) is an always invaluable archival source of information, as are the online writings “Out of Tokyo” by former *ART-iT* editor Tetsuya Ozaki (<http://www.realtokyo.co.jp>), and curator Roger McDonald’s “Tactical Museum” (<http://rogermc.blogspot.com>). Then, as

brilliant guides to the broader cultural and design scenes in Tokyo, there are the indefatigable “gaijin bloggers”, W. David Marx (<http://neojaponisme.com>) and Jean Snow (<http://jeansnow.net>), as well as the two indispensable guides to Japanese *otaku* culture, Patrick Macias and Patrick Galbraith. I also signal my admiration for the many writers who have been involved in online English art magazine *Tokyo Art Beat* (<http://www.tokyoartbeat.com>), particularly Ashley Rawlings, now based in New York. I hope my work can provide an historical companion to the superb city guide book edited by Ashley Rawlings and Craig Mod, *Art Space Tokyo* (2nd ed. 2010, see <http://artspacetokyo.com>).

This is a journalistic style work, so a full set of references to textual and oral sources will have to await another more scholarly publication. I can only offer a few basic references here. I have drawn widely on art magazines *Bijutsu Techo* and *ART-iT*, and consulted archives and catalogues held at the library of the Museum of Contemporary Art (MOT) in Tokyo. Many thanks to editor Eri Kawade for talking me through some of the key points in *BT*'s coverage of the art scene since the early 1990s, and to Tokyo based artists Peter Bellars and Mario A. for their advice and taking me through their personal archives of writings. Curator Dominic Molon kindly offered me sight of his detailed notes of interviews he made in April 2005 with a series of the same curators and art world commentators in Japan that I met. I have also learned much about Japanese politics from long discussions with Kazuto Suzuki of Hokkaido University.

The starting point for scholarship in English about Japanese modern and contemporary art is Alexandra Munroe's *Japanese Art After 1945: Scream Against the Sky* (1995), complemented with publications and events linked to the New York based Post-1945 Japanese Art Discussion Group (PoNJA GenKon), a list serve organized by Reiko Tomii and Miwako Tezuka (<http://www.ponja-genkon.net>). In French, there is Michael Lucken, *L'Art du Japon au XX siècle* (2001). Also important are early discussions in a spe-

cial edition of *Flash Art* (1992) on “Japan Today”, by Alexandra Munroe, Dana Friis-Hansen, Noi Sawaragi and Fumio Nanjo. Not much yet has been written about the 90s and after in Japan. We are mostly stuck with the heavily airbrushed versions of the Japanese contemporary art world by Takashi Murakami, and the cloud of work surrounding him and (to a lesser extent) Yoshitomo Nara. Beyond this, the only other widely available texts in the West are Midori Matsui, *The Age of Micropop* (2007), which is strong on sociological analysis but far from representative in its selection of artists, and Yumi Yamaguchi, *Warriors of Art* (2007), which is more like an introductory guide book. There is also Melissa Chiu, *Contemporary Asian Art* (2010), which deals in passing with Japan, and in French/English, Sophie Cavaliero, *Nouvelle garde: de l’art contemporain japonais* (2011). I have drawn more directly on Hideki Nakazawa’s excellent but hard-to-find *Contemporary Art History: Japan* (2008), as well as some of Midori Matsui’s other writings, including her two very rich essays “Conversation days: new Japanese art between 1991 and 1995” (2001) and “Beyond the pleasure room to a chaotic street: transformations of cute subculture in the art of the Japanese nineties” (2005). Other excellent curatorial introductions to the Japanese contemporary art scene can be found in various essays by David Elliott and Mami Kataoka. In Japanese, I have referred especially to the writings of Noi Sawaragi (2006), *Bijutsu ni nani ga okottaka 1992-2006* (What Happened to Art 1992-2006), Tamaki Saito (2008), *Artist wa kyoukai sen jyo de odoru* (Artists are dancing on the border line), and Kiki Kudo, *Post No Future* (2008), as well as the popular “shinsho” style books published by the gallerists Tomio Koyama and Hiromi Yoshii. There is also a very useful collection of interviews by Hiroyasu Yamauchi with leading Tokyo gallerists, *G12: Twelve Gallery Owners* (2009), published in English and Japanese.

Parts of this work have been presented at the Asian Studies Conference Japan, the European Association for Japanese Studies, and American Association of Asian Studies conferences, as well as at Akita International Universi-

ty, Tokyo University of the Arts, Sophia University, Hitotsubashi University, Waseda University, the Japan Foundation, Tokyo, and as a talk for the exhibition *The Echo* at Yokohama ZAIM in September 2008, which later became a catalogue essay. Many of the chapters started out as essays for my online *ART-iT* blog (<http://www.art-it.asia/u/rhqiu>), which I have been writing since July 2009. While I cannot here thank everyone in person who has influenced me, nor acknowledge adequately all the scholarship on which I have drawn, I do owe special thanks to several friends and colleagues: to Gunhild Borggreen and Anemone Platz, who helped organize the “Visualising Asian Modernity” project (<http://www.vam.ku.dk>); to Laura Miller, who opened up so many aspects of Japanese popular culture to me; to Sharon Kinsella and her extraordinary writings about contemporary Japan; to Sarah Thornton, who showed how effectively ethnography could be used in her book *Seven Days in the Art World*; to the leading Japanese sociologist of popular culture, Yoshitaka Mouri, who has advised and assisted me in all kinds of ways; to James Jack, Olivier Krischer and Julian Worrall, for the numerous discussions we have had; and to curators John Tain and Gabriel Ritter in LA, for their enthusiastic insider knowledge. Many thanks also to Takashi Machimura (Hitotsubashi University), Koichi Iwabuchi (Waseda University) and David Slater (Sophia University) for their kind hospitality and advice in Tokyo.

I have had fantastic support with research assistance and translation from Kristin Surak and Misako Nukaga at UCLA, and Motoko Uda Joergensen at Aarhus University. I also owe thanks to Satomi Verhagen in London for her help with translation and correction. In the final stages, I must thank again all the artists, gallerists, gallery assistants, curators and writers, who helped me piece together access to the images and photos for the book or check facts.

My greatest help and inspiration has been the very many Japanese friends and acquaintances I have made in the Tokyo art world and elsewhere, who have shared their news, views, triumphs and frustrations over the years with me. Many are important characters in the story I tell, others are more any-

mous witnesses, but I must thank everyone who gave their time to talk to me, who took me to wonderful shows, introduced me to their friends, or took me along as the curious foreigner to *izakaya* parties or late night drinks. It was they who convinced me that this book really needed to be written. In the end, though, while I have tried to listen to everybody, what is written here is *my* interpretation of the recent history of Japanese contemporary art. Any mistakes or misinterpretations that remain, therefore, are my own.

Cast of Characters / Index

The following is a list of the names of the principle characters who appear in this book and their roles in the Tokyo art world or their relation to it, as well as other key informants who are significant figures on the scene. Many other voices – such as assistant gallerists, art students, and other friends or colleagues – I have left anonymous. I talked and/or spent time with about half the “cast” below; these names appear in bold with dates. Others not in bold with dates are people I met briefly.

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