RE-EVALUATING MURAKAMI’S SUPERFLAT:
TOWARD A CONTEXTUALIZED INTERPRETATION
OF CONTEMPORARY JAPANESE ART

BY

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THESIS

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines Murakami Takashi’s Superflat theory and exhibition as well as the ramifications of its success. Developed through the 1990s and the early 2000s, Murakami’s Superflat theory attempts to prove a direct connection between the aesthetics of Edo-period (1603-1868) and contemporary Japanese art. Murakami built his own production studio and branding devices as an attempt to further codify Superflat as a unique movement in Japanese art. As a result of Murakami’s tactics and the popularity of his theory in North America and Europe, many of his contemporaries are frequently analyzed through the lens of Superflat. Yet, the totalizing effect of the Superflat theory does disservice to the majority of Japanese contemporary artists whose work has very little in relation to Murakami’s pop aesthetic.

To explore how Murakami achieved this result, this thesis first analyzes the art historical claims made in the Superflat theory. This is followed by an examination of the impetus for and contextualization of the creation of Superflat. As an example of the effect of Murakami’s discursive dominance over conversations of Japanese art in North America, the thesis concludes with an analysis of David Elliott’s 2011 Japan Society exhibition titled Bye Bye Kitty!!! Between Heaven and Hell in Japanese Contemporary Art. The thesis concludes with the assertion that we must fundamentally re-evaluate the ways in which Japanese art is represented, particularly within the United States.
To the memory of Professor David G. Goodman
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Chapter 1: Introduction

The massively successful Japanese contemporary artist Murakami Takashi’s 村上隆 (b. 1962) large-scale triptych titled 727 was created in 1996. Despite being created four years prior to the unveiling of his Superflat manifesto and its associated eponymous exhibition, 727 neatly encapsulates what would eventually become Murakami’s theory of Super Flat Japanese art. Murakami accomplishes this through the juxtaposition of referents to Japanese artistic traditions alongside contemporary commercial or “low” art aesthetic elements. In its composition, 727 references the centuries’ old artistic tradition of hanga 版画 (woodblock prints), while the central figure itself draws upon an anime-like character design aesthetic. While the amalgam of “high” and “low” art was not a new concept by 1996, the particular points of reference themselves may be partially responsible for the popularity Murakami’s work has maintained with North American and European audiences.

The bulbous, many-eyed cartoon monstrosity, dubbed Mr. DOB, was a mascot character Murakami created in the early 1990s in part as an attempt to counter the conceptual, text-based artwork popular in Japan at the time. In Mr. DOB’s 727 incarnation, the character occupies the right center of the triptych’s central panel, crashing in on turbulent ocean waves capped with swirling foam. Larger swells approach from the left of the canvas, threatening to overtake the razor-toothed mascot. The work is painted in the traditional nihonga 日本画 (Japanese-style painting) in which Murakami was trained at the Graduate School of Fine Arts at the Tokyo University of Fine Art 東京藝術大学.

1 Although generally translated into English as Mr. DOB, in Japanese this character’s name is somewhat more playful and is written using the diminutive masculine suffix kun (君). A further discussion of the impetus for the character’s creation will be covered in chapter 3.

Fenollosa and Okakura Kakuzō (also known as Okakura Tenshin), the *nihonga* painting technique emphasizes the use of natural, water-based pigments and painting styles similar to those employed by the classical Kanō school.³ *Nihonga* is often differentiated from *yōga* 洋画 (Western-style painting), which emphasizes the use of oil-based pigments.

In Murakami’s 727, over twenty layers of synthetic polymer paint were applied to the canvas before strategically scraping away these layers in patches in order to reveal the built up paint underneath. The effect of this technique makes the work appear almost as if painted on gold leaf that has been left to weather and age. Through the use of this technique in combination with the triptych format, Murakami’s 727 recalls the long tradition of *byōbu-e* 屏風絵 (paintings on folding screens).⁴ Yet this is not Murakami’s only referent to more traditional styles of Japanese art. Even the composition and placement of figures is reminiscent of Katsushika Hokusai’s 葛飾北斎 (1760-1849) *ukiyo-e* 浮世絵 (woodblock print) *The Great Wave at Kanagawa*, an image familiar to many viewers with a passing knowledge of Japanese woodblock prints.⁵ Fig. 2.

Murakami’s use of historicized aesthetic elements along with his proclivity for infusing his works with a variety of pop cultural artistic components—particularly referencing *anime*, *manga*, and video games—comprise the visual backbone of his market-oriented Theory of Super Flat Japanese Art. In this theory, Murakami argues that the whole of Japanese art is “extremely two-dimensional” (超2次元的), and that this two-dimensionality is a “sense” (感觉) that has

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⁴ *Byōbu-e* is at least a thousand-year-old artistic tradition in Japan, although, the technique of painting directly on gold leaf does not come into prominence until the late 15th- and 16th centuries.

run throughout the course of Japanese art history for quite some time. This assertion of a connection between the Japanese arts of present and past is not unique, of course. Any given culture’s contemporary artwork must draw upon or in some way be connected to that of past generations. However, the vagueness of this “sense” of two-dimensionality in combination with the assertion of a direct lineage between the arts of past and present, while key to Murakami’s overall project, are unsubstantiated by his written work.

From Murakami’s perspective, the assertion of direct lineage promotes a holistic view of Japanese art from the past through the present by claiming that a certain “super flatness” has always existed in Japanese art. Murakami asserts that “as the DNA that formed Japanese culture, ‘super flat-ness’ has been continually producing the ‘avant-garde’ up until the present day.” In so doing, Murakami mitigates the later influence of European and North American modernism and postmodernism in favor of a “unique Japanese sensibility.” The concept of Japanese art as wholly different from European or North American art is a major theme which runs throughout his Superflat effort. Moreover, the linkage between the arts of Japan’s past and present serve to lend authenticity and critical weight to his otherwise commercially oriented output. By asserting a connection between Murakami’s own Superflat art and the arts of the Edo period, he draws upon the legacy of an internationally recognized and respected body of work. This legitimacy then becomes the critical and theoretical backbone of his otherwise contemporary, commercially driven output.

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7 Murakami, Superflat 5.
8 Murakami, Superflat 25.
9 Ibid.
Between 2000 and 2005, Murakami unveiled his Superflat theory to the public through a series of three exhibitions (Superflat, Coloriage, and Little Boy), which he dubbed his Superflat Trilogy. These were exhibited variously throughout Japan, North America, and Europe. And yet, as Murakami’s star rose and his theory gained widespread acceptance in a non-Japanese commerce-driven art world ever at the ready to embrace new and potentially lucrative trends, the aesthetic output of Japan’s contemporary artists outside of Murakami’s cohort was adversely delimited. Critics, curators, and popular news and media outlets often depicted contemporary Japanese artists in relation to Murakami, whether or not such a connection exists. Even today, artists by no means affiliated with Murakami are oftentimes interpreted strictly through the lens of Murakami’s Superflat discourse.

It should be said here that the contemporary era of Japanese art has not been defined solely by Murakami, himself. Nara Yoshitomo 奈良美智 (b. 1959) is also a key player in defining the scene, as considered later in my discussion of the 2011 Japan Society exhibition Bye Bye Kitty!!! However, Murakami’s dominance over the contemporary scene is unquestionable. For example, since the Murakami-curated Little Boy opened at New York’s Japan Society in 2005, there have been numerous exhibitions in the Japan Society’s own galleries that have outright espoused or at least echoed Murakami’s claims regarding the aesthetic and theoretical condition of contemporary, and even modern and Edo-period, Japanese artistic practice.¹⁰

As alluded to above, Superflat is fundamentally flawed as a conceptual framework for the current state of Japanese contemporary art and its relation to historical trends on the archipelago. It cannot be properly understood as a postmodern movement, but rather as a branding technique by which Murakami gained traction in the art markets of North America and Europe. Chapter

¹⁰ The Japan Society is an internationally recognized, century-old non-profit institution dedicated to deepening the understanding between Japan and the United States. Its role will be discussed further in chapter two.
two of this thesis provides a direct examination of the aesthetic and historical claims raised in Murakami’s Superflat theory, focusing primarily on Murakami’s first Superflat exhibitions in 2000-2001 and the associated exhibition catalogue. In chapter three, I discuss why, if Murakami’s theory is incorrect, it has had such staying power outside of Japan. I will do so by scrutinizing the commercial aspirations and theories driving Murakami to create such a discourse. Finally, chapter four will close with an examination of the deleterious effect that Murakami’s totalizing discourse on Japanese art has had on disparate Japanese artists attempting to exhibit abroad. This last point will be evidenced by an analysis of the effects of Superflat’s widespread acceptance as represented by the 2011 exhibition *Bye Bye Kitty!!!* and by consideration of select artists represented in it.
1.1 Figures

Chapter 2: The Superflat Theory and Exhibitions

The world of the future might be like Japan is today – super flat.

Society, customs, art, culture: all are extremely two-dimensional. It is particularly apparent in the arts that this sensibility has been flowing steadily beneath the surface of Japanese history. Today, the sensibility is most present in Japanese games and anime, which have become powerful parts of world culture. One way to imagine super flatness is to think of the moment when, in creating a desktop graphic for your computer, you merge a number of different layers into one. Though it is not a terribly clear example, the feeling I get is a sense of reality that is very nearly a physical sensation. The reason that I have lined up both the high and the low of Japanese art in this book is to convey this feeling. I would like you, the reader, to experience the moment when the layers of Japanese culture, such as pop, erotic pop, otaku, and H.I.S.-ism, fuse into one...

- Murakami Takashi’s “The Super Flat Manifesto”

In 1993, shortly after graduating with a Ph.D. from the Graduate School of Fine Arts at the Tokyo University of Fine Art, Murakami Takashi received a two-year fellowship from the Asian Cultural Council to live and work in New York City through the PS1 artist residency program. In 1998, he was a Visiting Professor in the School of Fine Art and Architecture at UCLA. These two opportunities provided Murakami crucial experience with the dual centers of art production and sales in the United States (via the extensive gallery and museum resources available in New York and Los Angeles). However, it was during the period from 1994-95 in residency at New York’s PS1 that Murakami parlayed his ambition into the construction of an overarching vision of Japanese aesthetics: the Theory of Super Flat Japanese Art.

11 Murakami, Superflat 4-5.

12 Although not originally affiliated with the prestigious Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York City, now MoMA PS1 is an art institution dedicated to the exhibition of art and performance from new and emerging artists. For more see “About: Profile,” MoMA PS1, n.d., 13 June 2015 <http://momaps1.org/about/>.

Murakami’s newly constructed theory was explicated through both a large-scale exhibition titled *Superflat* and a series of essays accompanying the exhibition’s catalogue.\(^\text{14}\) In Japan in 2000, Murakami unveiled his first Superflat exhibition at the Parco Department Store Galleries in Tokyo.\(^\text{15}\) Later that same year, it travelled to Parco Nagoya before its largest and most high-profile showing at the Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCA), Los Angeles in 2001. Afterwards, it toured to both Minneapolis and Seattle before being retired.\(^\text{16}\) This was more than enough exposure to leave a lasting impact on the international art scene, and one glance at Murakami’s exhibition listings prior to and post 2001 confirms this break. For nearly any given year after *Superflat*, Murakami’s group and solo exhibitions outside of Japan have generally far outnumbered those held in his home country. Perhaps more intriguing, Murakami’s solo exhibitions in Japan halted altogether shortly after 2006, save for one show, *INOCHI*, housed at his own Kaikai Kiki Gallery in Tokyo in 2009.\(^\text{17}\) Additionally, a large-scale exhibition of new works was recently announced to open at Mori Art Museum in October 2015, possibly pointing toward a renewed level of interest in Murakami’s body of work within Japan.

Published in conjunction with his *Superflat* exhibition, the eponymously titled exhibition text contains Murakami’s “Super Flat Manifesto” and the extended essay “A Theory of Super Flat Japanese Art.” Along with a supplementary piece by the philosopher, *otaku*-advocate, and

\(^{14}\) As recently as 2005-6, Murakami began referring to his theory as “Superflat,” as a single world, rather than “Super Flat.” Throughout this paper, I will use the more recent single-word variant unless it is otherwise associated with a quotation, as in the title of the written piece, “The Super Flat Manifesto.” In Japanese, the word seems to have always been without an interpunct or middle dot (スーパーフラット rather than スーパー・フラット).

\(^{15}\) Parco is a highly successful chain of department stores with locations all over Japan. Not unlike other department stores of similar standing, Parco also maintains gallery spaces for the exhibition of modern and contemporary art and design.

\(^{16}\) Murakami, *Superflat* 162.

literary and cultural critic Azuma Hiroki 東浩紀 (b. 1971), all works are presented in their original Japanese along with English translations.\textsuperscript{18} \textsuperscript{19} Azuma’s text, titled “Super Flat Speculation”, will be covered later in this chapter. Both Murakami and Azuma’s texts bookend two longer pieces—the “Visual of Super Flat,” an eighty-eight page, highly editorialized reproduction of many of the works shown in the Superflat exhibitions, and an explanation of the artworks, dubbed a “manual” of Superflat. Fig. 5. Murakami also wrote the “manual.”

Murakami’s “Super Flat Manifesto” is curiously vague. At only a few paragraphs, it is more of an introduction to the subsequent text rather than an overarching declarative statement of artistic aims. In the “Super Flat Manifesto,” Murakami claims that “The world of the future might be like Japan is today – super flat.”\textsuperscript{20} He opines that all of Japanese society—its customs, art, and culture—are all “extremely two dimensional,” and that this two-dimensionality “has been flowing steadily beneath the surface of Japanese history.”\textsuperscript{21} Unfortunately, no explanation follows this assertion, and much of the writing in the remainder of the catalogue is similarly abstruse. Appeals to feeling (フィーリング) and sense (感覚) abound, as if these subjective markers were a standard by which Murakami’s argument could be won.

So, what exactly does Murakami mean by stating that society is two-dimensional and that two-dimensionality is and has been a strong undercurrent in Japanese history? In the subsequent essay, “A Theory of Super Flat Japanese Art,” Murakami attempts to link contemporary...
Japanese commercial aesthetics to an aesthetics of the Edo period. This may be the closest Murakami comes to explaining his assertion, and I will discuss this comparison later in this chapter. However, the actual meaning of Murakami’s claim may be less important than the intent behind the statement. The connection between two-dimensionality and Murakami’s idea of society (and in particular, Japanese society) is particularly important if we consider that two-dimensionality is the foundation of Murakami’s Superflat concept. If society is two-dimensional and Superflat is an emphasis on exaggerated two-dimensionality or planarity, then via the transitive property Murakami asks his reader to infer that Superflat is a distorted reflection of society. In other words, Superflat holds up a funhouse mirror to contemporary culture.

But what exactly is Superflat? It is never concretely defined in Murakami’s writing, which may be a deliberate move, rather than a mere oversight. In an afterward to the text of *Superflat*, Murakami writes that the term itself took on a mantra-like status with repeated usage as he attempted to answer several questions:

> I used the term “super flat” throughout [this] book. This was initially a keyword I used to explain my work. Once I started using it, though, I found that it was applicable to a number of concepts that I had previously been unable to comprehend, including “What is free expression?”, “What is Japan?”, and “What is this period I live in?”

If the term “super flat” was initially used to describe Murakami’s own work, what should the reader take of his assertion that the phrase be applied to concepts as abstract as “what is this period I live in?” Murakami defines Japan, Japanese art and expression, and our contemporary moment through his own self-constructed discursive lens. This totalizing effect is especially evident when read in light of Murakami’s previous comment that a sense of two-dimensionality (the foundation of Superflat) has been ever present in the arts of Japan.

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According to Murakami’s vision, the aesthetic quality of Superflat is akin to the act of merging disparate graphic layers into one – a technique common to graphic artists working in design programs such as Adobe Photoshop or Illustrator. Although this is still somewhat vague, it does align perfectly with one of Murakami’s preferred artmaking technique. He has long used computer software design programs such as Photoshop to draw and manipulate images, stretching and distorting the lines of his figures out of all sense of rational proportion. The use of computer software also allows Murakami to experiment with multiple color palettes and configurations before making a final decision and transferring his computer-generated images to canvas. Fig. 3. However, even Murakami admits that this example—Superflat as a merging of graphic layers on a desktop computer—is more a description of process and (virtual) physicality than of a fully realized aesthetic, is therefore not easily comprehended.

Murakami further links the Superflat aesthetic to Japan’s robust contemporary consumer culture. In doing so, the Superflat moniker becomes more a brand than a burgeoning artistic movement. This commercial aspect is made explicit in his “Super Flat Manifesto” wherein Murakami states that he “would like you, the reader, to experience the moment when the layers of Japanese culture, such as pop, erotic pop, otaku, and H.I.S.-ism, fuse into one.” Thus “Superflat-ness” is simultaneously an embracing of Japanese consumer culture as well as an attempt to concretize the barrage of virtual and real-world consumer-targeted imagery with which the average citizen is frequently inundated. Yet, a true definition of Murakami’s Superflat remains difficult to pinpoint. Moreover, Murakami’s trend toward subjective language (e.g., his

23 Murakami, Superflat 4-5.

24 Ibid.

25 Ibid. “H.I.S.-ism” is a reference to H.I.S., the Japanese discount international travel agency.
appeals to the sensation of two-dimensionality) and deprioritization of a concrete discourse on his aesthetics carries over into the lengthier essay titled “A Theory of Super Flat Japanese Art.”

In a reiteration of his manifesto’s computer design analogy, Murakami opens his long-form essay by stating that his primary artistic intention is to “integrate disparate background images” in preparation for understanding the “miraculous moment” (奇跡的な瞬間) in which we are confronted with artworks that are simultaneously incomprehensible and enthralling.\(^{26}\) While these sensations are also used to describe moments of religious, spiritual, or romantic enthrallment, when employed here in relation to the firsthand experience of viewing artworks, Murakami seems to evoke a long history of literature on the experience of sublimity. In this instance, the aesthetic aspect of the sublime to which Murakami refers is perhaps best understood in Kantian terms; it is that which is infinitely subjective and seemingly lacking in readily identifiable referent. It is incomprehensible and its inability to be neatly understood by means of common referents causes terror and joy in equal measure. Murakami attempts to achieve this effect through the accumulation of disparate images, both in the pages of the subsequent text, the “Visual of Super Flat,” and in his curatorial style, which may perhaps best be described as cluttered. The “Visual of Super Flat” will be covered later in this chapter. However, it is important to note that Murakami’s aim is, at least in part, to recreate that overwhelming sense of awe and the incomprehensible.

Murakami follows this passage by attempting to establish a connection between the arts of Japan’s past and present. His primary referent is the art historian Tsuji Nobuo (辻惟雄 b. 1932) and particularly Tsuji’s concept of a “lineage of eccentrics.” Tsuji’s lineage describes the shared expressionistic and playful tendencies of Edo-period artists such as Itō Jakuchū (伊藤若冲)

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(1716-1800) and Kanō Sansetsu 狩野山雪 (1589-1651). According to Murakami, the Superflat theory was born directly from the manner in which these earlier artists controlled the spectators’ gaze through an elision of gaps or interstices (隙間) thereby calling attention the “extreme planarity” (超平面的) of the works.27 Murakami’s meaning is unclear. His earlier assertions, however, have primed the reader to recognize a connection between two-dimensional “planarity” and Murakami’s concept of Superflat art and theory. If we accept Murakami’s assertion that Kanō Sansetsu’s work is highly two dimensional, then it follows naturally that Murakami’s Superflat art must build on the legacy of these artists. This rhetorical move endows Murakami’s contemporary artistic endeavor with a history far longer than could otherwise be claimed.

In order to better understand what Murakami attempts to accomplish by this line of argument, it is necessary to examine one of the works in question by Kanō Sansetsu. Fig. 4. Kanō’s The Old Plum is a large, four-paneled sliding screen door (襖) painted in ink on gold leaf. The plum tree’s trunk climbs, dips, and bends over the central two panels as smaller branches reach out to the farthest limits of the exterior panels. Despite the lack of a single identifiable light source, bright and dark tones play over the truck, implying a rough exterior, knots, and hollows. The striking outline of the plum tree and the manner in which the tree’s smaller branches bend backwards on themselves to overlap with the central trunk, as seen at the top of the second panel from the right, imbue the subject with a sense of fluidity and movement. Murakami focuses on this sense of movement as key to his argument for planarity, but this link is never explicitly proven; it is merely asserted. Throughout the essay, Murakami’s primary rhetorical tactic consists of stating an argument as fact, while offering little supporting evidence for his claim. In

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this example, Murakami traces the gaze of a hypothetical viewer first encountering *The Old Plum*:

The trunk of the plum tree, which is slightly right of center in the painting, provides a starting point… Immediately after that is a branch to the left that extends vertically, with small white plum blossoms spreading out in a strange zigzag at the top. These blossoms fix the viewer’s gaze… The observer’s gaze moves above the horizontal axis and to the right, returning to the starting point of the trunk.  

This is a representative example of Murakami’s analysis of Kanô Sansetsu, Itô Jakuchû, and others. In this type of analysis, he follows the manner of Euro-American writers fixated on the unproven idea of an artist’s technique as controlling the gaze of the viewer. Murakami interprets the movement of the viewer’s gaze across the work as indicative of an “extreme planarity.” Yet, Murakami gives no substantive evidence for this claim, merely an assertion of equivalency between the movement of a viewer’s gaze across a canvas and planarity. If one were to give Murakami leeway in his argument for two-dimensionality, one could say that Kanô Sansetsu’s *The Old Plum* was not constructed by use of linear perspective.  

However, the absence of linear perspective is not equivalent to flatness or lack of depth. Even though the pictorial space implied in *The Old Plum* is ambiguous given the extensive use of gold leaf, recall the manner in which depth of field is suggested through the overlap of smaller branches against the larger trunk. This is further reinforced by thick, black brushstrokes which outline these branches, recalling shadows as they play across the trunk. Although abstracted, *The Old Plum* is not a highly planar work, but rather one that toys with the representation of three dimensional objects in ways other than the European tradition of perspective.


29 Perhaps most famously seen in the works of Italian Renaissance artists, linear perspective is a method of conveying depth of field on a two-dimensional surface through the use of lines which converge on one or several points on a surface.
Following his essay on “A Super Flat Theory of Japanese Art,” the “Visual of Super Flat” functions as both a series of exhibition plates as well as a pictorial essay. It consists of panels in varying sizes depicting artworks and commercial products that bleed together and frequently overlap one another in competition for the viewer’s attention. Fig. 5. Commanding the top of page sixty-six of Murakami’s “Visual of Super Flat” are two facing pages from an illustrated book, which contains a series of woodblock prints by Katsushika Hokusai. The image comes from an *ehon* (illustrated book) entitled *Practicing Dance Alone* (踊獨稽古). First printed in 1815, it contains step-by-step instructions for a dance. The figure of the dancing man, reproduced multiple times and in various poses, occupies the majority of the two pages, and think black lines elucidate the proper steps and movement of the legs. Numbers accompany each position clarifying the proper order. The work is charming and understandably somewhat playful, given the subject matter. However, Murakami’s reproduces this image without offering the viewer any context or background information. The reader-viewer would have no way of knowing that this image comes from a manual.

Hokusai’s illustrated text is juxtaposed with a panel depicting a character from a popular animated television show of the 1970s, *The Gutsy Frog* (ど根性ガエル). Unlike Hokusai’s *Odori Hitorigeiko*, Murakami provides contextual information explaining the overall premise of the television show, but it lacks any context for this particular image’s creation. Students of animation might recognize this as an excerpt from a character sheet—a reference page created to ensure that a given character is drawn consistently across a team of animators. However, those unaware of the process of animation could not be expected to make this connection.

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By placing these two images together sans context, Murakami encourages the viewer to draw a rudimentary conclusion about their relationship. Yet, these images have very little in common, and neither example is uniquely Japanese. This latter point undercuts Murakami’s argument that a distinct Japanese sensibility underlay the arts of Edo-period Japan and continues to inform the creation of Japanese art in the present day. In the example of Hokusai’s *Practicing Dancing Alone*, didactic manuals for dance have a long history outside of Japan, dating back to at least the early seventeenth century in Italy. Meanwhile, animation character sheets and the art and practice of the modern animation industry are generally recognized as an invention of American artists such as Winsor McCay (*Little Nemo, Gertie the Dinosaur*) and Walt Disney.

To return to the works specifically referenced here by Murakami, both contain figures repeated in a variety of poses; both images seem playful. Is this evidence of a connection between Edo-period art and Japanese contemporary art? An uniformed viewer could not be blamed for drawing such a conclusion. However, Murakami relies on his audience’s lack of awareness in order to prove his claims. Information is deliberately withheld, encouraging Murakami’s view of contemporary artistic production to possess a longer, more storied history than it actually has.

Rather than an examination, Murakami’s “Visual” is a reproduction of the incomprehensibility referenced in both his manifesto and the subsequent text. It should be unsurprising for an artist to deal with philosophical and theoretical issues via an aesthetic medium. Yet, Murakami positions himself as a theorist of Japanese art as well as a practicing artist. So, the lack of substantive critical examination calls into question Superflat’s legitimacy.

As an addendum to Murakami’s main text, cultural critic and philosopher Azuma Hiroki contributes a text titled “Super Flat Speculation.” In this piece, Azuma claims that Superflat

31 See Cesare Negri’s *Nuove Inventioni di Balli* published in 1604.
represents a unique moment in the development of postmodern art. Superflat concretizes a burgeoning movement that can be seen as “an attempt to reclaim territory for a new art at the distant border between art and non-art.”

Murakami’s Superflat experiment—the combination of the “low” art aestheticism of anime and manga (or non-art, according to Azuma) with references to the “high” art (art) of Edo-period hanga or Kanō school paintings—is portrayed by Azuma as a distinct movement that transcends mere postmodernism. For Azuma, Superflat is more than an intriguing theory; it should be properly understood as an altogether new artistic movement along the lines of Cubism, Surrealism, or Minimalism.

Azuma’s argument for Superflat’s legitimacy situates the theory’s development in the work of another philosopher and art critic Sawaragi Noi 椹木野衣 (b. 1962). In 1999, Sawaragi curated a large-scale group exhibition of contemporary Japanese art titled Ground Zero Japan at Art Tower Mito 水戸芸術館. According to Sawaragi, the condition of Japanese art in the late nineties represents a “return to zero,” following the collapse of the Japanese economy and the massive re-evaluation of art prices which had soared during the run up to the economic bubble burst of early 1990-91.

Adding to this tabula rasa effect, Sawaragi drew inspiration for his premise from his perceived condition of postmodern art. As Azuma puts it, in the late 1990s there was a great “leveling of high culture and subculture, the dissolving of borders between genres and the successive descent into irrelevance of learning and criticism.” The concept of the irrelevance of learning and criticism seems to draw upon the work of philosopher Jean-François Lyotard in his writing on the fragmentation of meaning and the death of metanarrative in 1979’s The Postmodern Condition. Meanwhile, a “return to zero” in artistic production
following the advent of postmodernism is akin to the work of art critic and philosopher Arthur Danto in his 1997 work *After the End of Art: Contemporary Art and the Pale of History*. Both texts will be covered later in this thesis, in chapters three and five, respectively. Importantly, we can see that the creation of Murakami’s Superflat theory and aesthetic is already grounded in established discourses on postmodernism. While Azuma claims that Superflat represents a distinct movement in postmodern art arising from the “zero” point of Japan in the 1990s, does Superflat truly represent a break from preexisting art trends which blurred the lines between “high” and “low” art? British and American artists mined these artificial distinctions since the birth of Pop Art in the 1960s. From this vantage point, Murakami’s Superflat is perhaps better understood as a variant of Pop Art with distinctively Japanese referents. In order to better determine whether Murakami’s Superflat is properly understood as a new movement in art, it is necessary to examine the circumstances surrounding its creation.
Chapter 3: Commercial Aspirations and the Rationale behind Superflat’s Success

If the success of Superflat, a Murakami curatorial and theoretical endeavor rather than a solo exhibition, was in large part responsible for his enhanced profile abroad, what was it about Murakami’s theory of Japanese art that so attracted foreign audiences? Three factors play a key role in the persuasive power of Murakami’s Superflat theory. The first is that Murakami’s pop aesthetic and his theory of Superflat were developed specifically as a commercial appeal to the North American and European art markets. Secondly, and stemming from this commercial appeal, is the problem of self-management, as defined by Jean-François Lyotard. As Murakami’s appeal is directed at an external (non-Japanese) audience, his self-proclaimed position as an authority on the historical development of Japanese art is difficult for the uniformed, casual observer to call into question. Lastly, Murakami’s role as a curator and his success at New York’s Japan Society in 2005 further reinforce Superflat’s appearance of legitimacy. As curator of his own group exhibitions, Murakami is permitted to construct a narrative that accords with and reinforces his own Superflat construct. I will address these three issues individually in the following sections.

3.1 Superflat as a Commercial Endeavor

The creation and development of Murakami’s Superflat manifesto and theory was calculated. It is clear from Murakami’s own writing on the subject that his theory was built, not simply from the perspective of an individual artist grappling with the complexities of personal artistic and culturally marked expression in the age of global postmodernity, but also from the
position of an artist who saw “the West,” (欧米) and particularly New York, as the capital of contemporary art.\(^\text{35}\)

A few notes must be made here before continuing. First, the artificial distinction between Orient and Occident is reflected in much of Murakami’s discourse and is in many ways analogous to Murakami’s distinction between Superflat (planar, supposedly two-dimensional Japanese art) and non-Japanese art (specifically European and North American). This dichotomous manner of thinking may have its origins in Murakami’s artistic training. From its codification in the late nineteenth century, nihonga (traditional Japanese painting) has always been set apart from yōga (“Western” style painting), and debates about the merits of one form over the other were commonplace.

Additionally, equating New York and Los Angeles as capitals of the art world, while problematic, is inherent in Murakami’s argument. Along with the rise of a global capitalism and the spread of both biennale culture and the Internet (with the latter serving as both auction house and a means to reproduce images and distribute criticism) an argument can be made that the art world’s traditional centers of production have become highly fragmented.

In Murakami’s view, if an artist wished to succeed in the late-twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, it would be essential to storm the bastions of the New York art scene—an undertaking which would spur Murakami to “match the tastes of the West.”\(^\text{36}\) Utilizing a metaphor for the culinary arts and in particular the distinctions between the disparate “palates” of Japan and “the West” as a stand-in for his artistic production, Murakami described his ambition for success and the motivation for the creation of the Superflat theory as follows:


\(^\text{36}\) Murakami Takashi, Summon Monsters? 130.
(1) First, gain recognition on site (New York). Furthermore, adjust the flavoring to meet the needs of the venue. 
(2) With this recognition as my parachute, I will make my landing back in Japan. Slightly adjust the flavorings until they are Japanese. Or perhaps entirely modify the works to meet Japanese tastes. 
(3) Back overseas, into the fray. This time, I will make a presentation that doesn’t shy away from my true soy sauce nature, but is understandable to my audience. 

At present [2001], I’ve made it through the first gate in pretty good form. My Superflat special course was accepted, and became a great hit.  

Murakami’s choice of metaphor is telling. Like a chef preparing a dish for particular tastes, his Superflat theory was created specifically to appeal to a New York art world audience. 

As Murakami’s third stage implies, the development of Superflat must for the sake of palatability sublimate his “soy sauce nature” – his “Japanese-ness.” The concept of Japanese-ness at play here is not dissimilar to the totalizing manner in which Murakami portrays Japanese art in Superflat. Japan then becomes a costume to don and ornament when it suits Murakami’s needs for a given audience, a manner of self-Orientalization. 

But let us return to step one of Murakami’s plan for Superflat. The development of his aesthetic and theory was a sincere effort to develop a readily consumable conceptualization of Japanese art to market to “the West.” Once his goal had been accomplished and, with approval in tow, he would then “land” back in Japan to, presumably, critical acclaim. From this position, having gained the recognition of the capital the art world, Murakami could then assert his dominance over contemporary artistic production in his home country (step two). Step three remains to be seen. Although, a recent flurry of activity seems to point toward a new push into North American and European art markets. For example, his 2013 feature length film Jellyfish 

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37 Murakami, Summon Monsters? 131. It may be worth noting that the text quoted above is published in both Japanese and English. In English, Murakami makes reference to his “soy sauce nature.” In Japanese, this passage references Murakami’s taste for soy sauce taste (私の醤油テイスト, watashi no shōyu teisuto). Although, it is important to note that this taste is still used as a stand-in for “Japanese-ness.”
Eyes 「めめめのくらげ」, recently screened in a variety of venues across the United States, and, in 2014, he had an exhibition of new works at New York’s Gagosian Gallery titled In the Land of the Dead, Stepping on the Tail of a Rainbow. The Buddhist-influenced theme of several of Murakami’s newer exhibitions, at the Palazzo Reale in Milan and at the aforementioned Gagosian Gallery, take advantage of or, perhaps even simultaneously, earnestly respond to the tsunami and nuclear catastrophe of March 2011. This is entirely consistent with Murakami’s previously stated intent to go once more back “into the fray,” but this time without sacrificing his essential “Japanese-ness.”

Murakami’s intentions and the commercial aspiration underlying the creation of his Superflat theory is made even more explicit in his book Geijutsu Kigyōron 芸術起業論 (The Theory of Art Entrepreneurship). Art and culture critic, Kay Itoi writes of it:

[Murakami] worked out the place of contemporary subcultures -- such as manga, animated films and video games -- in Japanese art history. Then he contextualized this unique Japanese culture system with respect to Western art history. In this manner, Murakami… was able to present contemporary Japan to Western viewers in a way that was new, critical and attractive -- the perfect formula for the Western avant-garde art market. In other words, Murakami created a theory to use as a marketing and branding tool for the international art market. It is not unusual for artists to develop their own theories of art, but what Murakami did here is altogether different and, in a way, far more problematic. Murakami aspires to an interesting hybridity of art world roles (creator, curator, critic, and interpreter-guide to Japanese culture) as an attempt to both better sell himself to the Western art market and to circumvent being defined or pigeonholed by those he perceived as gatekeepers to the capital of


“Western” art. Yet, through the creation of a totalizing discourse on Japanese art from the past to the present, Murakami disregards the individual agency of other Japanese artists who are in no way associated with his supposed Superflat movement. When viewed from the perspective of Murakami’s discourse, these disparate Japanese artists are part of a Murakami’s long and unbroken chain of planar, extremely two-dimensional Japanese art. Moreover, as has been noted in the previous chapter, Murakami also incorrectly extends the scope of his theory backwards through time to encompass the production methods and aesthetics of artists who are several centuries his predecessors.

Murakami has spoken at great length about the commercial aspect of his work, much to his own detriment (and to which some of his critical backlash may attest). But in fact, it is highly likely that Murakami’s appeals for a blending of commerce and art is equally as responsible for his worldwide success as is his theoretical framework. To date, Murakami has designed bags for high-end fashion label Louis Vuitton, created marketing materials and produced music videos for megastar musicians Kanye West (for his 2007 album *Graduation*) and Pharrell Williams (for the single “It Girl”), and developed mascot characters for the luxurious Roppongi Hills development complex in Tokyo. Even if those who have consumed Murakami’s popular work have little idea of the man who actually created them, this market viability has stoked his recognition in the “high” art circles of New York and London, driving prices for his fine art ever higher.

This marketing drive was evident as early in his career as 1993, when his fascination with iconic character designs (Hello Kitty, Doraemon, and the work of the early Walt Disney animators) led him to try his hand at developing a lasting design of his own. He explicitly called

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40 See the protests and petitioning against Murakami’s exhibition at Versailles in 2010 or the premature reaction to speculation that Murakami may be selected to help design elements of the 2020 Tokyo Olympics.
this effort his “inquiry into market survival,” and the character he created, a strikingly Mickey Mouse-like figure named Mr. DOB, rapidly became a fixture in his paintings of this period.\textsuperscript{41} See Fig. 1, 6.

In the painting \textit{And Then And Then And Then And Then And Then (Red)}, Murakami draws direct influence from the aesthetic of the famous United States Pop artist Andy Warhol. Murakami’s painting is just one in a larger series, all similarly titled, with variations limited mostly to color palette. These were often displayed side-by-side, similar to Warhol’s rows of Campbell’s Soup cans. But unlike much of Warhol’s work, which was produced by a mechanistic silkscreening process, Murakami’s paintings are produced by hand in brush and acrylic. At Warhol’s studio, dubbed the Factory, he often had friends and partners help in the silkscreening process. Similarly, Murakami designs all of his work and then charges his assistants with the execution of the painting, although this is becoming somewhat more commonplace in the studios of wealthy artists such as Jeff Koons and Damien Hirst.

Murakami described the impetus for the creation of Mr. DOB as, “an attempt to crush [the New York] art scene,” and claimed to be unsurprised at the largely poor reaction it elicited from critics.\textsuperscript{42} Perhaps Mr. DOB’s unwelcome reception should have been expected, as it was developed simply in order to tap into and subsequently level the American art market. Ostensibly defeated, Murakami then prepared for his next gesture to the “Western” art world: his Superflat theory.

\textsuperscript{41} Murakami Takashi, \textit{Summon Monsters}? 131-2.

\textsuperscript{42} Murakami Takashi, \textit{Summon Monsters}? 133.
3.2 Murakami and the Problem of Self-Management

As previously mentioned, Murakami’s Superflat aesthetic and theory are simultaneously both vaguely defined and totalizing in their scope. When viewed critically, gaps in logic become apparent. Murakami’s rhetorical tactics are primarily limited to stating the subjective as objective fact, such as his statement that Kanō Sansetsu’s paintings “control” the gaze of the viewer. If Murakami’s grasp of the history of Japanese aesthetics is truly as questionable as is claimed here, why then has his Superflat theory seen such success abroad? Part of the answer may lie in Murakami’s relationship to his audience.

In *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, Jean-François Lyotard notes that laws are generally assumed just “not because they conform to some outside nature, but because the legislators are, constitutionally, the very citizens who are subject to the laws.”⁴³ Lyotard refers to this as the principle of self-management. In this example, the legislator Murakami, penning his Superflat “special course” targeting the American art market, created a series of linkages between himself, his contemporaries, and an authentic historical past. Whether or not Murakami’s declaration is true and can be externally verified is inconsequential. He devised a self-reflexive system whereby we accept his right to self-manage, to define the Japanese art scene (both past and present) by virtue of his naturally being subject to the rules he created. In other words, Murakami is a Japanese artist and as such can make assertions about Japanese art that a non-Japanese audience would not normally be inclined to call into question.

In the absence of this critical reflection, Murakami is tacitly permitted the right to make bold and largely unsubstantiated claims about the history of Japanese art from the Edo period to the present day specifically because his claims apply only to his own discipline and to that of an

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imagined holistic tradition of Japanese art. As a means to an end (critical success abroad), it is perhaps irrelevant to Murakami that his theory be rigorously precise; his claims are intended for a presumably uninformed foreign audience.

3.3 Little Boy and the Success of Murakami as Artist-Curator

In targeting North American audiences as a purveyor of Japanese cultural goods and academic output, the Japan Society is “committed to deepening mutual understanding between the United States and Japan in a global context,” and is widely acknowledged as a venue *par excellence*. Its programs of visual art, music, dance, theatre, and lecture series periodically receive nationwide attention from media outlets. However, there is a burden which comes with this kind of recognition—as a primary outlet for Japanese cultural goods in the United States, Japan Society exhibitions and lecture series have a presumed (even unquestioned) stamp of authenticity for the average tourist of culture. This is similar to Lyotard’s concept of self-management as mentioned in the previous section in relation to Murakami’s discourse.

As its output is targeted towards a “deepening of mutual understanding,” it can be expected that the Japan Society would put its best foot forward with regard to their programs. Japan Society’s publicity materials put it best:

Today, Japan Society has evolved into a world-class, multidisciplinary hub for global leaders, artists, scholars, educators, and English and Japanese-speaking audiences. At the Society, more than 100 events each year feature sophisticated, topically relevant presentations of Japanese art and culture and open, critical dialogue on issues of vital importance to the U.S., Japan and East Asia.  

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45 Ibid.
The two implications are that Japan Society public works are first authoritative and, second, that any complicated issues raised are done so expressly in the service of facilitating greater understanding between Japan and the United States. From this vantage point, it is not unreasonable to claim that Japan Society’s curated perspective can dramatically alter one’s reception of any given product. This is ultimately an issue of authenticity and authority, and the Japan Society by dint of its connections to the Japanese government (Takahashi Reiichiro, the ambassador and consul general of Japan in New York is on the Board of Directors) and its long history (they celebrated their centennial in 2007) certainly has the pedigree necessary to make claims of cultural authenticity that are unquestionable from the perspective of someone only passingly familiar with Japan and Japanese culture. None of this should be surprising, but it is crucially important context given that the Japan Society was the site of one of the most successful exhibitions in Murakami’s history and is partly responsible for his success over the past decade.

At New York’s Japan Society in 2005, Murakami launched the third and final exhibition of his aforementioned Superflat trilogy titled *Little Boy: The Arts of Japan’s Exploding Subculture*. This curatorial endeavor was similar to the first Superflat exhibitions, in that Murakami included only one of his own paintings. The remainder of the exhibition was devoted to a wide variety of mass-market goods, several paintings from artists handpicked and employed within his own Kaikai Kiki factory, and a sparse assortment of works from his contemporaries.

In *Little Boy*, Murakami posits that much of Japanese contemporary art is informed by Japan’s defeat in World War II, the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and subsequent feelings of powerlessness. This results in an obsession with Japan as perpetually secondary, a child to the parental figure of the United States, which in turn is responsible for
much of the infantilized, cute artwork and popular media we see today. In devoting nearly half of
the gallery space to the works of outsider *otaku* artists and their darker and more upsetting takes
on *kawaii* aestheticism, Murakami’s *Little Boy* seems to suggest that through the perversion of
the childlike image, whether through overt sexualization or violent imagery, a sense of
empowerment is regained.\(^{46}\) Why the Japan Society would embrace such a potentially
controversial narrative, is a complex question without a simple answer, and one that I will not be
able to answer here. It is, however, certainly an intriguing topic for further study. Yet, it should
be noted that Murakami’s central hypothesis may be, to the uninformed observer, quite
persuasive, and there could be some small truth to his claims. However, as has been shown with
his Superflat theory, Murakami remains in a position of authority in relation to his North
American audience. This position is further reinforced by his choice of venue for *Little Boy*, New
York’s Japan Society. Moreover, the sheer barrage of artworks, collectible trinkets, Hello Kitty
figurines, and slick *anime* television programming has an overwhelming effect – not unlike
Murakami’s “Visual of Superflat” – and the pop cultural bent of the display seems to discourage
critical reflection. No matter how seductive the imagery on display, the theory behind
Murakami’s *Little Boy* sufficed only to provide insight into the works of a very select group of
contemporary artists already working under Murakami’s guidance, including Takano Aya タカ
ノ綾 (b. 1976) and Kunikata Mahomi 國方真秀未 (b. 1979).

It is important, too, to note that even from the outset the Japan Society’s decision to
highlight Murakami via his *Little Boy* exhibition was controversial; in the world of contemporary
Japanese art it was Aida Makoto 会田誠 (b. 1965) who was generally seen as the poster child for

\(^{46}\) For more see Murakami Takashi, *Little Boy: The Arts of Japan’s Exploding Subculture*, ed. Chiaki Kasahara
Japanese art of the 1990s. As sociologist and Japanese contemporary art scene documentarian Adrian Favell put it in his 2011 piece “Bye Bye Little Boy,”

due to Murakami’s American connections—notably with the rising Los Angeles gallery Blum & Poe and Museum of Contemporary Art curator Paul Schimmel—it was "Superflat"… that made it to the U.S., arriving at L.A. MOCA in early 2001. Several years later, when New York's Japan Society decided to mount a contemporary survey,… Murakami's show—in its revamped version, “Little Boy”— came to define the young Japanese art of the 1990s for global consumption. Aida [Makoto] and many of his most important contemporaries were practically airbrushed out of the story.

Murakami’s position as both the face of Japanese contemporary art and as something of an enviable nuisance in the eyes of his contemporaries was cemented by his special privileging by U.S. curators. Favell goes on to suggest that the favoring of Murakami over Aida was in part responsible for a later reversal in theme showcased in Japan Society’s 2011 exhibition *Bye Bye Kitty!!!*—that abandoning the commercially driven, cute aesthetic was analogous to a parting of ways with Murakami and his Superflat cohort.

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48 The title is a glib rejoinder to Murakami’s curatorial effort and reference to David Elliott’s *Bye Bye Kitty!!!*, the latter of which will be covered in the following chapter.

49 Favell 86-91.
Chapter 4: Superflat’s Reach in David Elliott’s *Bye Bye Kitty!!!*

Murakami’s Superflat discourse has proven difficult to shake for critics, curators, and artists alike. It has so dominated conversations around contemporary Japanese art that other contemporary artists are often read in the context of Superflat rather than as individuals with their own unique, distinct aesthetics. In the following chapter, I will discuss the effects of Murakami’s popularity and the general or tacit acceptance of his Superflat aesthetic by showcasing its use as a foundation for the Japan Society’s 2011 exhibition *Bye Bye Kitty!!!*

New York’s Japan Society brought in British-born international curator and critic David Elliott to produce a new group exhibition of contemporary Japanese art. Elliott’s career is quite diverse, and by 2011 he had experience curating group shows all over the world, highlighting both modern and contemporary art from various regions. Yet, it was almost certainly Elliott’s experience as the founding director of the Mori Art Museum 森美術館, an institution dedicated to contemporary Japanese and Asian art, that led to his selection by the Japan Society as lead curator for a new group exhibition.

Titled *Bye Bye Kitty!!! Between Heaven and Hell in Contemporary Japanese Art*, the overall aim of the exhibition was noble, yet fundamentally flawed. From its conception, composition, and marketing, Elliott’s goal was to complicate and broaden the common view of contemporary Japanese art in North America. The exhibition attempted to challenge the notion that Japanese art is limited, thematically, to pop cultural referents—homages to *anime, manga*, and a predilection for cuteness and infantilization. As previously stated, Murakami Takashi played no small part in the creation and perpetuation of this myth, and, in his essay for the *Bye Bye Kitty!!!* exhibition catalogue, David Elliott is quick to note Murakami’s dominance of the contemporary Japanese art scene.
In contrast to Murakami’s privileging in the 2005 Japan Society exhibition *Little Boy*, Adrian Favell took great care to note the emphasis that the Japan Society’s *Bye Bye Kitty!!!* placed on artist Aida Makoto. Elliott’s reading of Aida’s body of work situates him in binary opposition to Murakami’s cute Superflat aesthetic. Yet in so doing, the theme of David Elliott’s exhibition downplays the work of the fifteen other artists represented. In the foreword to the exhibition catalogue, Japan Society President Sakurai Motoatsu claimed that all fifteen artists highlighted were brought together in discursive unity by a single commonality: their ability to “[push] the limits of creative convention by challenging their country’s long love affair with the *kawaii* (cute) aesthetic and forging new conceptual and aesthetic worlds.”50 This “challenge” to *kawaii* aestheticism is directly contrasted with Murakami’s embrasure of the same. Thus, Elliott argues that all of the artists represented in *Bye Bye Kitty!!!* represent a uniquely *anti*-Superflat groundswell. However, the only way in which a great many of these artists can be said to challenge the Murakami’s *kawaii* sensibility is through their complete disregard for *kawaii* altogether. In this case, the absence of a particular aesthetic element is falsely presumed to be evidence of deliberation rather than mere disinterest or complete disengagement.

Elliott further confounds issues of a Murakami-inflected *kawaii* aestheticism versus an *anti*-*kawaii* sensibility by asserting that Aida Makoto’s perversion of the *kawaii* represents a distinct break from Murakami and other earlier artists’ engagement with cuteness. For example, in Elliott’s critique of *Harakiri School Girls*, Elliott remarked that “Aida transforms a time-honored tragic duty into a childish erotic game as the young schoolgirls seductively and ecstatically disembowel themselves.”51 Fig. 7. However, the sexualization of schoolgirls


51 Elliott 10.
juxtaposed with incredibly violent imagery is not unlike the work of Murakami protégé Kunikata Mahomi. Indeed, Murakami’s blockbuster *Little Boy* exhibition represented all manner of artists who injected elements of the grotesque and horrific into what would otherwise be standard-fare *kawaii* imagery. The real tragedy is that this image (Aida’s *Harakiri*…), represents only a single aspect of this multifaceted and complicated artist. Yet, Elliott uses this work as a touchstone for his argument that a distinctly anti-Murakami movement exists in contemporary Japanese art. The remainder of Aida’s more intellectually and aesthetically challenging work was more or less overlooked.

What then can be made of the *Bye Bye Kitty!!!* premise and the insistence on a departure from or “challenge” to the *kawaii*? If the notion of perverting cuteness has also been a longstanding visual component in the works of Murakami Takashi, longtime partner and associate Nara Yoshitomo, and Aida Makoto, then the premise of *Bye Bye Kitty!!!* seems to fall apart. Even within the Japan Society’s gallery space, the parting image with which museum-goers were left was one of Murakami-associate Nara Yoshitomo’s slice-of-life photographs. Fig. 8. A painter by trade, Nara has contributed many of his own works to Murakami-curated exhibitions (both *Superflat* and *Little Boy*). Given the anti-Murakami theme of *Bye Bye Kitty!!!*, Nara’s selection seems confusing or misguided. Either Elliott was unfamiliar with Nara’s connection to Murakami, which is unlikely given his three-year directorship at Mori Art Museum, or Elliott found a useful means of conveying his exhibition’s theme through Nara, a convenient misreading.

Nara’s untitled photograph depicts a tombstone dedicated to a family pet and topped with two granite Hello Kitty figures. As a simple, slice-of-life snapshot, the work highlights the ways in which popular culture seems to have permeated contemporary life so fully that even funerary
sculpture is not free from its effect. Yet, similar to how Elliott overlooks Nara’s connection to Murakami in his exhibition dedicated to countering Murakami’s influence, Elliott misreads Nara’s photograph for the benefit of his exhibition’s central concept and title: “At last, it seems, even [Hello] Kitty has passed beyond the veil of cuteness and had to say, ‘Bye Bye…’”.52 Without providing the viewer any context for Nara’s image, Elliott imagines the tombstone depicted as if it were erected for Hello Kitty, itself. As kawaii made manifest, Hello Kitty is then bade farewell.

Just as Elliott projected his own construct onto Nara’s snapshot, he similarly portrayed each artist selected for Bye Bye Kitty!! as consciously having abandoned or perverted kawaii imagery. Perhaps in an effort to adjust for this oversight, Elliott structures his catalogue essay around the various means by which he claims these artists reach beyond kawaii imagery to encapsulate a wide variety of aesthetic and social concerns.

Within the space of the gallery, however, the viewer is presented with any number of artists’ works whose relation to Elliott’s anti-Superflat theme are far more tangential than those of Aida and Nara. Of all the artists represented in Bye Bye Kitty!!!, the work of Ikeda Manabu池田学 (b. 1973) presents a perfect study for the failure of Elliott’s narrative of Japanese contemporary art to adequately encapsulate the wide range of styles found on the archipelago.

Ikeda was trained in design and received his master’s degree from Tokyo University of Arts in 2000, just as Murakami and Nara’s stars were rising in the United States.53 Although there is little documentary evidence to prove that Ikeda was actively aware of the rise of Murakami’s Superflat in the U.S., as an art student graduating just prior to what the media

52 Ibid.
dubbed “The Year of Narakami”, Ikeda would almost assuredly have had a passing familiarity with these artists.\textsuperscript{54} Indeed, he would have been in a prime position to capitalize off of Nara and Murakami’s successes. However, an individual artistic style is generally not so fickle, and Ikeda’s work, even from his early years as a master’s student, showed no signs of bowing to Murakami’s Superflat aesthetic.

From as early as 1998, Ikeda’s work is staggering in its size (some canvases measure 200 centimeters wide and 100 centimeters high) and is executed in pen and ink on paper. The level of detail and density of visual information in his works elicit awe; they overwhelm the viewer with information. Each one of Ikeda’s pieces alone can exhaust the viewer, both through contemplation of the time and energy expended by the artist and by the immense amount of visual detail contained within each work.

Perhaps the most famous of Ikeda’s pieces, \textit{Existence} (2004) presents the spectator with an enormous tree, the foliage, branches, and roots of which twist and tangle themselves many times over. Fig. 9. On the surface of this Yggdrasil-like behemoth, miniscule civilizations are constructed, temples are built, and rice paddies cultivated. Yet, these tiny worlds are so densely packed and so minute as to be indiscernible from a distance. The viewer must approach the work, sometimes up to arm’s length or closer to decipher many of these minor elements. Human figures and animals appear at intervals, notable for their ghostly appearance, as only the white of the unmarked paper and the densely inked outlines give them form.

Ikeda’s meticulous style could not be further from the works of Murakami Takashi or Nara Yoshitomo, let alone Aida Makoto with whom he shared nearly consecutive rooms within the gallery space of \textit{Bye Bye Kitty}!!! Yet, Ikeda’s selection for Elliott’s exhibition seems both inspired (Ikeda is well worthy of the attention he received since his showing) and somewhat

\textsuperscript{54} Favell 86-91.
problematic. How do Ikeda’s labor-intensive attention to detail and ecological themes resonate with Elliott’s concept of a Japanese art that is actively moving beyond Murakami? The only connection Elliott offers the readers of his catalogue is a brief quotation from the artist himself in which Ikeda conveys his lack of interest in manga as a child.\textsuperscript{55} Elliott, having previously tied Murakami to manga and other pop cultural products through a brief attempt at explicating Murakami’s Superflat theory, then draws a line from Murakami through to Ikeda.\textsuperscript{56,57} At a glance this connection may appear fruitful, and without further investigation by Elliott, readers may be encouraged to view Ikeda’s lack of interest in manga as an oblique rejection of Murakami. While Ikeda’s aesthetic is surely a break from the kawaii imagery that has for so many come to define Japanese contemporary art, it would be a mistake to pronounce Ikeda’s aesthetic a deliberate rejection of kawaii if for no other reason than that it devalues Ikeda’s unique vision. The assumption that Ikeda’s work, let alone the work of the other artists represented in \textit{Bye Bye Kitty!!!}, is a rejection of Murakami’s Superflat is to depict Ikeda as grasping at alternative forms of representation merely in refutation of peers and predecessors.

Elliot’s constructed narrative is alluring—it made for excellent publicity by drawing and building upon Murakami’s blockbuster \textit{Little Boy} exhibition, and several artists have garnered much recognition through their inclusion in \textit{Bye Bye Kitty!!!} The question then becomes, is it possible to construct a single narrative of Japanese visual art, particularly in the age of global postmodernity? If one were to disregard the perils of such essentialism, do the benefits reaped,\textsuperscript{55,56,57}

\textsuperscript{55} Elliott 20.

\textsuperscript{56} Although not, it should be said, incorrectly. Murakami is eager to make this connection between his own work and that of his Kaikai Kiki Co., Ltd. cohort to such popular media. See Murakami Takashi, \textit{Little Boy: The Arts of Japan’s Exploding Subculture}, ed. Chiaki Kasahara (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005) 151.

\textsuperscript{57} Elliott 5.
such as increased exposure for new and emerging artists, outweigh the inevitable pigeonholing and misperceptions?
4.1 Figures

Chapter 5: Conclusion

Certainly Japanese contemporary artists do not work in a vacuum, and some can be reasonably compared to Murakami’s Superflat aesthetic. However, the thematic concepts and aesthetic vocabulary seen in contemporary Japanese art are as diffuse and multifaceted as those seen in art concurrently produced in the United States or Europe. The totalizing effect of Murakami’s discourse and its perpetuation in media, criticism, and theory remains highly problematic. And yet, if we are to reject both Murakami’s Superflat theory and Elliott’s oppositional binary, what theoretical approach should one adopt when examining the work of Japanese artists in the age of global postmodernity?

Many artists, critics, and theorists have struggled under the weight of what can be perceived as art’s lack of direction or cohesion following the dissolution of the Modernist narrative and the ushering in of the postmodern era. By narrative, it is important to distinguish here between pictorial narrative, for instance pictures that tell stories, and the narrative(s) of the development of style in visual art. The latter is an art-historical and philosophical construct which has been in use at least since the inception of the modern art historical discipline in the nineteenth century and has often been deployed to elucidate epochal stylistic shifts. The Modernist narrative is that which has been constructed up through Pop Art and Minimalism of the 1960s and 70s—a period wherein truly any object, action, or series of events could be defined as “art” via the proper contextualization. Here, theorist and critic Arthur Danto provides a potent and brief summation of art after the 1960s, a period in which historians and critics have struggled mightily to define art and contemporary artistic movements given art’s now expansive definition:

Only when it became clear that anything could be a work of art could one think, philosophically, about art. Only then did the
possibility arise of a true general philosophy of art. But what of art itself?... It had delivered itself of a burden it could now hand over to the philosophers to carry. And artists, liberated from the burden of history, were free to make art in whatever way they wished, for any purposes they wished, or for no purposes at all. This is the mark of contemporary art, and small wonder, in contrast with modernism, there is no such thing as a contemporary style.\textsuperscript{58}

This world, sans stylistic imperatives, beyond the overarching Modernist narrative, is precisely that into which Murakami and all of the artists represented in Elliott’s \textit{Bye Bye Kitty!!!} were born. With their multiplicity of styles, these artists have disparately drawn upon their personal histories, their self-identity as Japanese, and, at times, on popular culture. However, what they have precisely not done is worked within a paradigm that has largely been established for them by Murakami and later unwittingly perpetuated by critics such as Elliott.

In hindsight, and with the benefit of his later publications for a Japanese-literate audience, such as \textit{Geijutsu Kigyōron}, Murakami’s theory of Superflat Japanese art was suspect from the beginning. Not only had Murakami begun his project with the intention, not of grappling with problems of an individual aesthetic, but of conquering the North American and European art markets, in so doing he developed a far-reaching theory of Japanese art that still threatens to either assimilate or eclipse unique contemporary Japanese artists whose only association is that of a shared nationality. Moreover, the staying power of Murakami’s narrative combined with the difficulties of challenging it (on account of its own self-reflexivity) have created a condition wherein many who earnestly seek for a counter narrative find themselves inadvertently legitimating it through the creation of discursive binaries. It is essential, then, that one refocus debate on these entirely disparate Japanese artists, reading them not in opposition to Murakami, but in lieu of him.

References


