



ASIAN ART HISTORY

IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

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Reinscribing Tradition in a Transnational Art World

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There is no typical contemporary Asian artist. There are no overarching trends that bind the diverse and increasingly nomadic experiences of artists from Asia working in the global context of the contemporary transnational art world. And despite the ideological and rhetorical claims for national identity and cultural unity bounded by the nation-state that are still in currency, these claims are spurious in light of the heterogeneity of individual experience inflected by location, class, and gender. Yet, artists, art historians, curators, and art critics concerned with Asian culture regularly return to a notion of “tradition”—sometimes national, sometimes regional—and its ostensibly tension-filled relationship with the modern to frame their discussions of a distinctive Asian modernity. I would like to revisit the critical problem of “tradition” here to hopefully complicate the discussion. Close inspection of contemporary artistic production reveals a range of strategic operations in the rhetorical deployment of “tradition,” from the lucrative commodification of difference in a neo-auto-orientalization mode to the most biting and ironic forms of postmodern critique (often equally lucrative). And when postmodern critique is situated within a changing political climate of neoconservatism, counterculture can be slyly inverted to support nationalist ideologies of cultural essentialism. Nothing is as it appears.

By now, everyone is well aware that tradition is not static, it is not singular, and it is not transhistorical. And rather than focus on a limitless search for historical formal sources, it is clearly more illuminating to concentrate on the choices made in the present that frame and articulate particular traditions, as the past is reinscribed and given new meaning in the present through this process. My research focuses on Japan, and I will concentrate here on Japanese artists in the larger context of contemporary Asian art as a case study, not because these same questions might not be equally relevant to Thai or Chinese artists, or because Japan is any less heterogeneous than the rest of Asia, but rather because my own limited knowledge prevents me from wandering too far beyond these parameters. And because I do strongly believe that the historical specificity of each Asian country’s experience of modernity greatly impacts the story—it certainly does in Japan, which often has an ambivalent relationship to the rest of Asia (as the rest of Asia has with it). By focusing in on two of the most successful and widely acclaimed

Japanese artists exhibiting in Japan and abroad today: Murakami Takashi and Araki Nobuyoshi, I will show how their invocation of traditions specifically associated with Edo-period visuality and its libinal economy fuses the material, spiritual, and erotic into a distinct and highly marketable cultural essence that still effectively positions itself as an extreme counterculture critique championing postmodern hybridity. While I hesitate to claim that these artists represent any kind of norm in such a heterogeneous sphere of visual culture production, their immense success in a range of markets and their highly influential writings have certainly framed the reception of Japanese art around the world in the past decade by constructing a critical benchmark for discussions of contemporary identity politics in art.

Notions of tradition are important because they are ineluctably tied to discourses of authenticity, which still heavily impinge on the writing and teaching of the art history of Asia—not to mention feeding broader anxieties about national identity in a globalizing world. As Partha Mitter has succinctly noted, “neurosis about authenticity was a very nationalist preoccupation all over the world.”¹ Successful international careers from those of Okakura Kakuzō to D. T. Suzuki were made on the basis of separating East and West and identifying “authentic” traditions and sensibilities to reinforce this division. This was not just a preoccupation of nationalists. In the face of the cultural dilemmas prompted by the universalizing impetus of modernism, modernist artists and architects in Asia were equally dogged by the problem of authenticity throughout the twentieth century, as exemplified by the Japanese Bunriha (the Secessionists) in the 1920s, discussed by Jonathan Reynolds,² who were concerned with identifying and maintaining what they termed “authentic localism.” Or, after the Second World War, in the climate of “artistic nationalism” encountered by Japanese abstract artists like Okada Kenzō described by Bert Winther-Tamaki,³ when a debate emerged about authenticity that implicitly questioned who had the right to speak for the nation, a debate that prefigured the current ongoing discussions among Chinese artists and critics described by Wu Hung and colleagues in *Chinese Art at the Crossroads*. Japanese abstract expressionists successful in the American art market in the 1950s who grounded their hybrid aesthetic in the legitimating discourse of tradition and indigenous culture were derided by many Japanese critics as producing “Karayuki-san art” catering to the postwar Western taste for “Japonica,” thus likening these artists to prewar Japanese prostitutes who were forced to sell themselves abroad to foreigners.⁴

One of the key objectives of the 1997 groundbreaking Asia Society exhibition *Contemporary Art in Asia: Traditions/Tensions* as described by its guest curator

Apinan Poshyananda was “to demonstrate that tradition should not be interpreted as the opposite of contemporaneity,” as individuals throughout the heterogeneous regions of Asia were continually assimilating, adapting, and resisting a range of traditions—that is to say, they were engaged in an ongoing process of negotiation rather than experiencing a binary divide with discrete boundaries.⁵ Tradition (or the past) then might be conceived of as being in a continuum with the present rather than representing a relationship marked by rupture. Moreover, the long-term diversified experiences of colonial encounter, the intra-Asian power relations and history of imperialist hegemonic aspirations within Asia by China and Japan (which unfortunately were not included in the exhibition but were present historically in the background), further complicate the simple dichotomies of East-West-tradition-modernity-spiritualism-materialism and so forth. Yet, as the exhibition also demonstrates, it would be misleading to assert that all practices of the past have continued into the present in an unbroken lineage and that contemporary Asian artists do not experience a distinct break with some of the traditions of the past, a historical distance that produces a sense of externality or exteriority. Thus, the approach to these “traditions” is less one of parallel coexistence and more one of self-conscious historicist revivalism. There have been many examples of politically and ideologically motivated artistic revivals in the East Asian context over the centuries, which have often been considered self-reflexive forms of archaism.

In the discourse of tradition and modernity in contemporary art, we find a division between the characterization of the resulting hybridity as self-reflexive pastiche that seamlessly sutures incongruous parts to synthesize a new whole or as marking a tension-filled relationship of incompletely sutured elements that emblemizes rupture, thus remaining in a state of conflict. As Geeta Kapur has forcefully argued in her essay “Globalisation and Culture,” postmodern hybridity often elides disjunctures and tensions, and its seamless multiculturalism can sidestep problematics of responsibility and agency. She advocates a conflictual approach to postcolonial culture rather than the negotiating stand of hybridity.⁶

Curating Japaneseness: Heterogeneity and Heterotopia

Keeping these issues in mind, I would first like to turn to a discussion of Murakami Takashi, not only because he is without question the most economically successful Japanese artist on the contemporary art scene—equally popular at home and abroad—but also because he functions in the dual role of artist and curator. As is already well known, Murakami curated two major exhibitions in the United

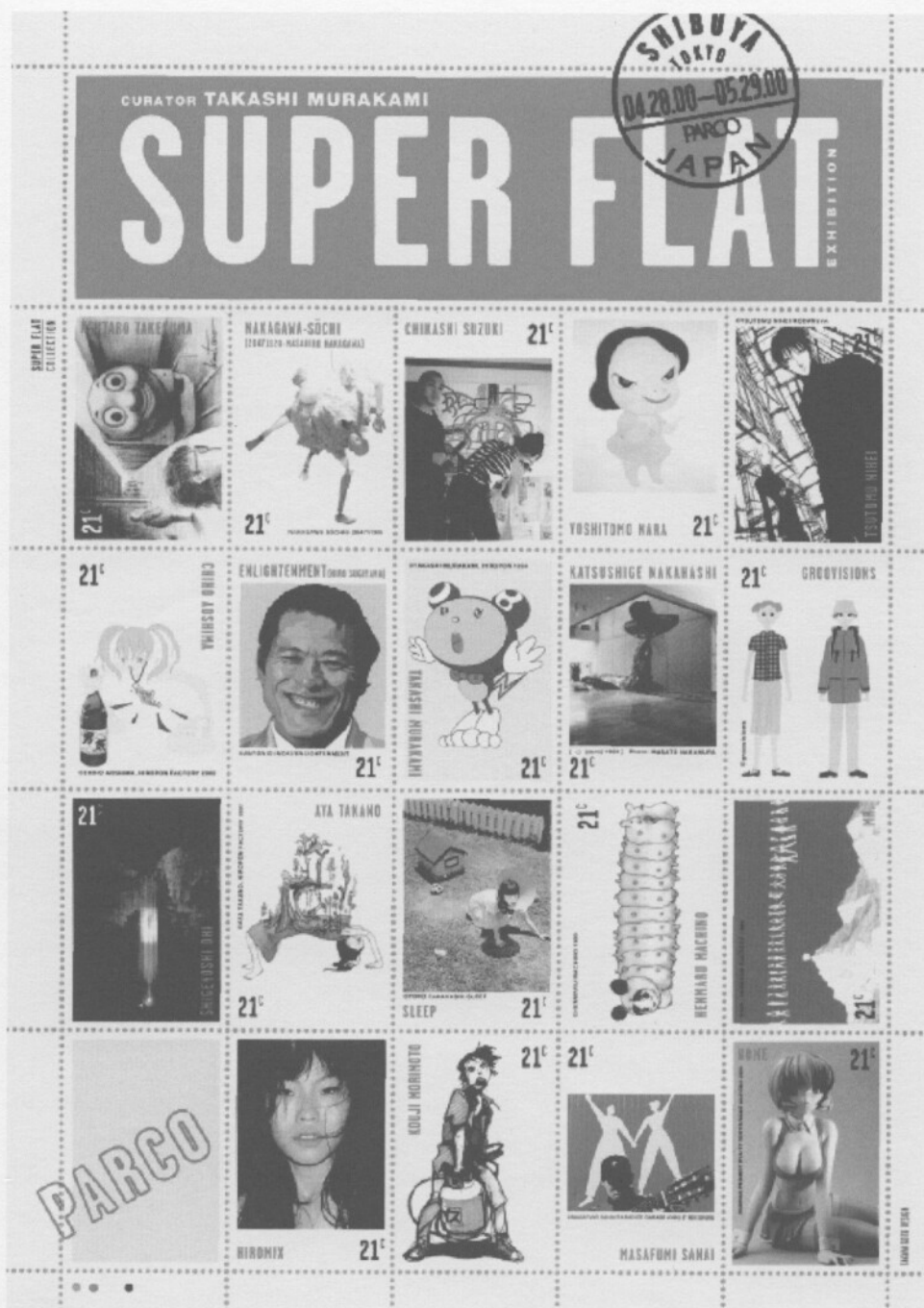


Fig. 1. Exhibition flyer designed by Goto Takaya for Murakami Takashi exhibition *Superflat* at Parco Gallery, Tokyo, 2000. Printed paper, 11 1/16 x 8 7/16 in. (29.7 x 21 cm)

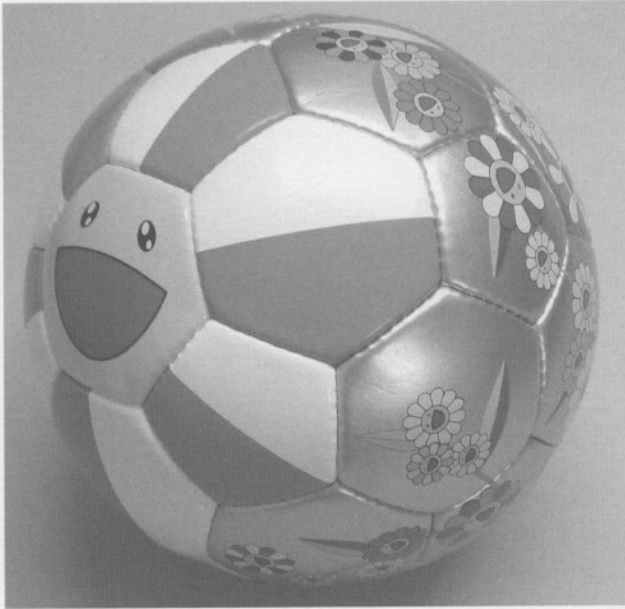


Fig. 2. Murakami Takashi (Japanese, born 1962), *Flower Ball*. Artificial leather (hand-sewn), diameter 8 $\frac{1}{16}$ in. (22 cm). Courtesy of Workaholics, Inc.

States in the past five years, the *Super Flat* exhibition that went from Parco Department store in Japan to the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles (and on to Minneapolis and Seattle) in 2001 (fig. 1); and the exhibition *Little Boy: The Arts of Japan's Exploding Subculture*, at the Japan Society in 2005, which was named best thematic museum show in New York for 2004–5 by the American chapter of the International Association of Art Critics.⁷ In Europe, he had major exhibitions at prestigious international venues like the Fondation Cartier, Paris, and

the Serpentine Gallery, London, in 2002, when he was chosen as an honorary speaker to address the British Royal Academy of Arts. This is, of course, in addition to regular solo and group exhibitions throughout Japan and parts of Asia—and a burgeoning empire of pop designer goods from soccer balls to Louis Vuitton bags (fig. 2).

Supremely concerned with delineating Japaneseness and locating Japanese originality for a world audience, Murakami proclaimed his Superflat theory in a bilingual (Japanese and English) book-length manifesto that claimed a distinct aesthetic flatness in Japanese culture over the past several centuries.⁸ Murakami's Superflat constructs a genealogy for contemporary "subcultures" of anime, manga, and video games—the inspiration for his artwork—by linking them to the decorative, flat, and eccentric artistic practices of a select group of artists working in the Edo period (the period from the beginning of the seventeenth to the mid-nineteenth century) (fig. 3). According to Murakami, the masterful surface control of the viewer's gaze in works by Edo artists such as Kanō Sansetsu, Soga Shōhaku, and Itō Jakuchū "erased interstices and thus made the observer aware of the images' extreme planarity."⁹ Not to mention emphasizing their scopic sensuousness.

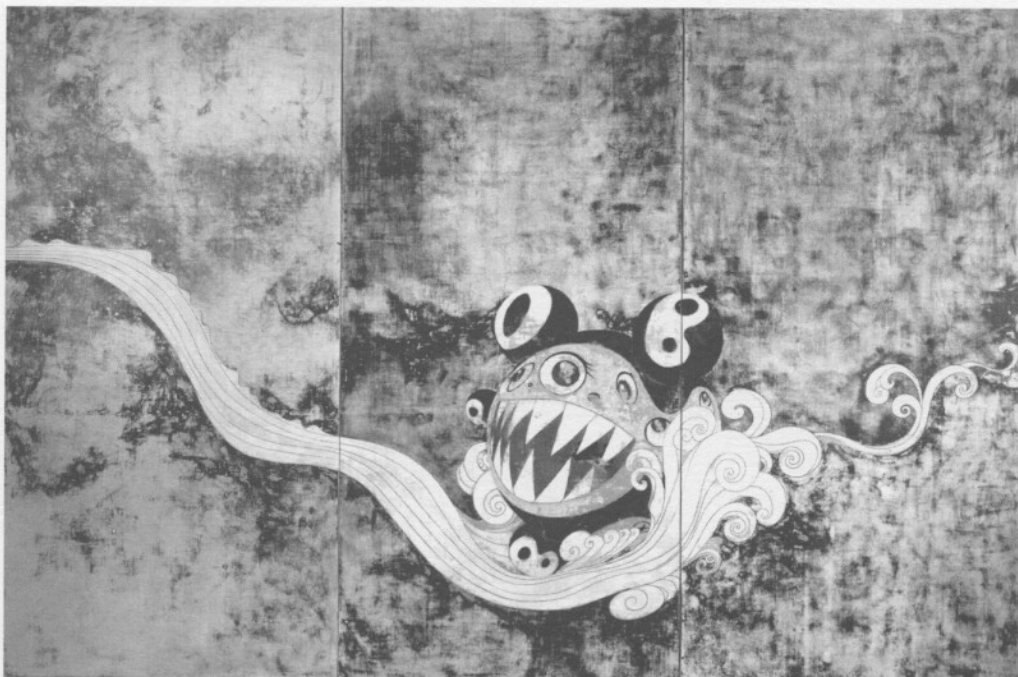


Fig. 3. Murakami Takashi, 727, 1996. Acrylic on canvas mounted on board, 9 ft. 10¹/₁₆ in. x 14 ft. 9⁷/₁₆ in. x 2¹³/₁₆ in. (300 x 450 x 7 cm). Courtesy Tomio Koyama Gallery, Tokyo/Blum & Poe, Los Angeles

Extending this metaphor of planarity, Murakami writes in *Super Flat* that Japanese “society, customs, art, culture: all are extremely two dimensional.”¹⁰ In other words, this planarity refers to both the pictorial surface, and to the lack of depth in contemporary Japanese culture as a whole, focusing on consumerism and play (and sex and violence) without a profound political or social consciousness.

In the *Little Boy* exhibition project, the third phase of the Superflat trilogy, he further elaborates on this theory, positing a kind of collective psychic infantilization of the Japanese populace after the war under the umbrella of American regional political power—thus heroizing the emotionally crippled *otaku* (geeks), the subculture aficionados, as true Japanese who are at the same time maverick individualists, techno-wizards, and masters of an infomatic society. Murakami’s art is the synthesis of pop and the distinctly Japanese *otaku*, which he skillfully brands “poku.”¹¹

Slick commercialized postmodern hybrid or probing analysis into the stunted collective psyche of postwar Japan, or perhaps both?¹² But equally important for our purposes, why anchor this discussion in the traditions of Edo? According

to Carol Gluck and Marc Steinberg, the Japanese Edo booms of the 1980s and 1990s in television, manga, literature, and critical theory identified the Edo period as “the site of the lost-but-not-forgotten authentic Japan, the pre-Western ‘outside’ modernity. It was also, conversely, the precursor and reflection of Japan’s consumerist, postmodern present.”¹³ Edo became a critical “site of the regeneration of Japanese tradition.”¹⁴ Edo’s distinctness and value as a historical antecedent for Murakami’s pop subculture resides in its perceived fusion of high and low, the eccentricity and individuality of some of its greatest artists, its unabashed commercialism, its abiding refined levels of cultural connoisseurship, and its brazen libidinousness (evident in the copious production of erotica). Sidestepping the many incongruences in Murakami’s argument—and there are many—such as the willful misreading of the hierarchies of artistic production in the Edo period that were keyed to class-based aesthetics—still, the counterculture, counter-Western modernity, and antimodern nation-state position taken by “Edo boom-ers” like Karatani Kōjin, Ōtsuka Eiji, Okada Toshio, as articulated in the discourse of Murakami and his supporters such as independent curator Sawaragi Noi and critic Matsui Midori, has morphed into a kind of “otaku nationalism,” according to cultural critic Azuma Hiroki, initially an enthusiast of Murakami’s Superflat theory and co-author of his 2000 manifesto publication, who has increasingly become concerned with what he sees as a nationalist turn that feeds into *nihonjinron* ideology—that is, theories of Japanese distinctiveness.¹⁵

Since the 1980s, when Japan’s economic surge drew unprecedented world attention to its contemporary art, Japanese art professionals have been contending with the dilemmas of cultural essentialism. A number of influential curators have sought to counter essentialist discourses by embracing plurality and heterogeneity, first among them Nanjo Fumio, a veteran of the field, who is currently deputy director of the Mori Art Museum and will soon take over the position of director. In the past decade, he has been joined by a prominent group of women curators who have risen to the forefront of the art world, including Osaka Eriko from the Art Tower Mito, commissioner of the 2001 Japanese pavilion at the Venice Biennale; Hasegawa Yuko of the Kanazawa Contemporary Art Museum, who previously worked at Art Tower Mito and the Setagaya Art Museum and was commissioner in Venice in 2003; and Kasahara Michiko, previously of the Tokyo Metropolitan Museum of Photography and now curator at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Tokyo, who was commissioner at the Venice Biennale 2005—all of whom have dedicated themselves to showcasing diversity.

In the late 1980s, Nanjo worked with a binational curatorial team in Japan and the United States to produce the landmark exhibition *Against Nature: Japanese Art in the Eighties*, which was explicitly designed to counter stereotypical notions of a “pure” Japanese tradition, taking on surging trends in cultural essentialism and *nihonjinron* theories of Japanese uniqueness. The exhibition highlighted the hybrid, the eclectic, and the international currents in Japanese visual culture, underscoring Japan’s intrinsic connection to the United States through global consumer culture and technology. The curators specifically sought to undermine the persistent binaries of East vs. West, nature vs. culture, national identity vs. private individuality, and cultural isolationism (peripheralism) vs. internationalism upon which Japanese cultural essentialism was predicated.¹⁶

In this context, Osaka’s choice of Nakamura Masato’s glowing minimalist shrine of golden McDonald’s arches for the 2001 Venice Biennale also stands out, as it focused on the globalization of food culture and the homogenizing transformation of disparate local cityscapes through corporate branding. In combination with his convenience store neon sign installations, Nakamura’s work is a generalized commentary on the new icons of daily life in Asia. Taking an entirely different tack, Kasahara’s choice in 2005 of the female photographer Ishiuchi Miyako’s series of highly personal photographs of her mother’s possessions and her aging body instead centered on the gendered, the subjective, and the emotional. It boldly posited individual, embodied biography rather than generalized collective psyche as history.

Hasegawa’s 2003 pavilion theme of Heterotopias or “other spaces” (based on a concept developed by Michel Foucault) explicitly sought to identify “sites of resistance.” It attempted to reveal the “other space” of the periphery that “threatens the rigidity of mainstream modernism” and illuminated the contestation of heterotopia that “transcends systems, politics and the notion of right or wrong, resulting in an ecological transformation or mutation.” In Hasegawa’s concept, Japan itself is posited as heterotopic, because “Not only is it geographically peripheral as an island that lies in the Far East, it embraces a wide range of cultures with great voracity, deconstructing that [*sic*; those] other cultures while Japanizing them within its own context.”¹⁷ Yet, even in her laudable attempt to counter the cultural hegemony of Western modernism, Hasegawa’s Japan-as-heterotopia still valorizes the amorphous cultural process often characterized as “Japanization,” producing Japan as a distinctive peripheral space of “intensely hybridized sub-cultures” that Murakami could just as comfortably inhabit.

Centers and Peripheries

Discussions of contemporary Asian art struggle with the question of positionality, perceptions of a center and periphery, which has been perpetuated by the very real geopolitical conditions of colonialism and postcolonialism, and the economic realities of global capitalism that have a cultural imperialist dimension. But at the same time, like Hasegawa's theme of heterotopia, a distinct movement has been afoot to decenter this center-periphery model through biennales and triennales throughout the Asia-Pacific region, now well established in Gwangju, Guangzhou, Shanghai, New Delhi, Queensland, and Yokohama among other places. Moreover, within Japan more specifically, the Fukuoka Triennale, begun in 1999, has enacted a double decentering in that it not only moves away from the East-West power structure (and the centrality of established venues like Venice) but also moves away from the Tokyo-centered Japanese art world to a sphere of purportedly greater inter-Asian contact, Kyūshū. The twenty-one-country triennale is a grand cultural gesture toward a new Pan-Asian centrism (which the museum's curators want Japan to join) as clearly indicated by the museum's chief curator, Ushiroshoji Masahiro, who sees the founding of the museum itself and the triennale as enabling the posing of the question, "What is Asia? What is Asian art?" Without this opportunity, according to Ushiroshoji, these questions would be left unaddressed in Japan.¹⁸

Staff curator Kuroda Raiji takes this mandate one step further. He states that the museum is looking for an audience "not polluted by the idea [that] modernist Western art [equals] contemporary." Proposing that Asian artists explore their own ways of being contemporary, Kuroda says, "We decided we do not have to compare Asian art with Western art, but we could still find something very positive in each country." They sought to avoid what they describe as "colonialist curatorial methods" whereby guest countries are visited and works chosen that reflect the host country's cultural standards. To this end, Ushiroshoji and Kuroda collaborated with art professionals from each nation: twenty-one coordinators and twenty co-curators are listed in the catalogue as the team responsible for choosing the exhibition's fifty-three artists. As one might expect, this produced a wildly diverse and divergent exhibition exposing the tremendous disparities of experience in contemporary Asia. It also revealed the broad concern among all the co-curators with the "rapid erosion of homogeneous communities and indigenous culture."¹⁹

These pluralizing and decentering impulses, however, are in tension, and sometimes in collusion, with the dogged and interlinked problems of authenticity and identity that pervade Japan's other public sectors of politics, education, and

business. Sociologist Yoshino Kosaku's studies of Japanese cultural nationalism and *nihonjinron*-ism indicate the powerful resurgence of essentialist notions of national culture in Japan during the latter stages of the bubble economy and through the post-bubble period of economic recession that followed in the 1990s. He notes that "An attempt to improve intercultural communication, accompanied by an excessive emphasis on Japanese peculiarities, can ironically have the unintended consequences of strengthening cultural nationalism."²⁰ Yoshino argues that these primarily non-state driven discourses were not only reproduced and consumed in the marketplace of high culture but in the general marketplace that inflects everyday behavioral culture—two markets that artists like Murakami Takashi and Araki Nobuyoshi actively seek to span. But rather than representing ethnocentrism, Yoshino argues that Japanese cultural nationalism is more a form of "ethnoperipherism" because of the longstanding perception in Japan of its peripheral location in relation to the central civilizations of China and the West.²¹

Moreover, while Murakami posits the otaku's beloved pop subcultures as a grassroots radicalism historically based on an alternate model of modernity, the Japanese government's very recent recognition under previous Prime Minister Koizumi Junichirō of their status as significant and unique Japanese cultural exports ironically co-opts these forms for national purposes. This represents a major position reversal from the government's earlier staunch aversion to pop culture forms as degraded commercial endeavors unworthy of Japan's great traditional cultural contributions. And to solidify this move, the government just recently awarded Murakami the prestigious "Minister of Education's Art Encouragement Prize for New Artists" for his curatorial work on the *Little Boy* exhibition.²²

Although cultural studies scholar Iwabuchi Kōichi has argued convincingly that Japanese multinational corporations have gone to great lengths to ethnically "de-odorize" their pop culture products like Pokemon, particularly in Asian markets where a "Japanese whiff" might make them less palatable and marketable, Murakami's explicit claiming of the otaku and pop subcultures for Japan (side-stepping the corrosive influence of Americanism) can be seen as a direct effort to re-odorize these cultural forms.²³

The Authenticity of Edo Sexuality

Murakami's otaku is identified as a *tsū*, an aficionado or expert in the navigation of the economy of mass media, like the aficionados of the Edo pleasure quarters. They are also drawn into the exaggerated fantasy world of the libidinal economy



Fig. 4. Murakami Takashi, *My Lonesome Cowboy*, 1998. Oil, acrylic, fiberglass, and iron, 8 ft. 4 1/8 in. x 3 ft. 10 1/8 in. x 3 ft. (254 x 117 x 91.5 cm). Courtesy Blum & Poe, Los Angeles

of these subcultures, although their engagement is primarily autoerotic. These eroticized bodies (and by association the national body of Japan), such as Murakami's life-size anime figure *My Lonesome Cowboy*, who sprays a geyser of semen (fig. 4), and many of the Superflat artists he promotes, ranging from the soft-porn figures by BOME to the young girls in Takano Aya's paintings, parallel the onanistic erotic print culture (*shunga*) produced in the Edo period described by Timon Screech.²⁴ These fantasies indirectly reinforce the grand narratives of Orientalism, where eroticism inheres in the Oriental other, symbolized by the seraglios or harems and their oversexed denizens.

The extended eroticization of the Japanese nation as a whole through the figure of Edo and the body of the courtesan is not new. And the eroticization of

Japan in contemporary Japanese art is evident in many areas, from the naked contortionism of Butoh to the technospiritual shamanesses of Mori Mariko.

Emblazoned on the wall of Araki Nobuyoshi's recent retrospective at the Barbican Gallery in London (fig. 5), a text proclaimed "obscenity is the spice to enjoy human life." To punctuate that thought, Araki splashes colored and white liquid over many of the large-scale photographs foregrounded in the front rooms of the exhibition, in a sense ejaculating over his images (fig. 6). "Photography isn't just about taking a good shot: it's about wanting to project images outwards. It's essentially about insertion, about penetration!" declares Araki, claiming his camera as a surrogate penis.²⁵ And the artist invites the viewer to use his images like *shunga*—as autoerotic stimulus. Circulated extensively in book form, Araki's work has appeared in close to two hundred and fifty solo publications; the artist offers a private encounter as well as the titillation of public exhibitionism in a museum context.²⁶

Evocation of the Edo pleasure quarters intertwines the traditional with the autobiographical for Araki, who grew up near Yoshiwara, the old Edo pleasure

The poster features a black and white photograph of a woman in a kimono, with a small lizard resting on her lap. The Barbican logo is in the top left, and the artist's name 'araki' is prominently displayed in the center. Text at the bottom left includes a warning about adult nature and exhibition hours. The top right contains contact information and admission details.

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Fig. 5. Araki Nobuyoshi (Japanese, born 1940), *Suicide in Tokyo*, 2002. C-print. Barbican Art Gallery Exhibition Poster; London, 2006



Fig. 6. Araki Nobuyoshi, *SHIKI IN*, 2005. Acrylic on black-and-white print. Courtesy of the artist and Taka Ishii Gallery

quarters. Writing in the publication *Nobuyoshi Araki: Self, Life, Death* that accompanied the Barbican exhibition, Tanaka Yuko tries to link Araki's work with three traditional Japanese aesthetic concepts: *basara*, *kyō*, and *iro*. *Basara* connotes disarray, outlandishness, and willfulness (it is associated with the outlandish vitality of the Kabuki theater); *kyō* means frenzy, an antonym of correctness, a refusal to observe social order and mores, and a spirit of parody; and *iro*, the sexual and erotic. Araki himself uses the artist's pen name "shakyōjin" (combining the term for frenzy with one of the characters used in the word "photography"). Tanaka locates Araki's eccentricity and socially rebellious identity in his connection to these traditions, declaring laughter as his means of rebelling against conventional forms—a time-honored tradition in Japan that she claims was lost in the modern times of Westernization (presumably referring to the Western scientification of the body and the related anathematization of desire). The bawdy, erotic culture of Edo often incorporated humor into its treatment of sex; *shunga* were commonly known as "laughter pictures" (*warai-e*). Humor and parody in Araki's work, therefore, is by implication liberated from the confines of a Western-derived modernity.²⁷



Fig. 7. Araki Nobuyoshi, Installation view of *Araki Retrographs*, 2 August–12 October 1997, Hara Museum of Contemporary Art. Courtesy of the artist and Taka Ishii Gallery

Araki's work raises myriad moral conundrums with its seemingly exploitative, sometimes misogynistic, sometimes pedophilic tendencies (specifically in its Lolita-complex fetishization of schoolgirls). Yet, he has succeeded in becoming a champion of breaking public morality taboos and the status quo by assaulting viewers' sensibilities (fig. 7). Not to mention the fact that, like Murakami, he willfully and enthusiastically transgresses the borders of high and low art—particularly in his extensive use of Polaroid prints.

Any critique of Araki's work is complicated by its endorsement of free expression in the face of state censorship. The strong prohibitions on pornography, specifically depicting genitalia and pubic hair, make Araki's explicit photographs that much more daring and counterculture. Despite his critics' claims of exceptionality for Araki's work, in this regard, he is clearly part of an international cohort of artists pushing the boundaries of sexual taboos and voyeurism, including Robert Mapplethorpe, Jeff Koons, and Nan Goldin (with whom he has collaborated), among others. Araki's arrests and censures have made him a martyr for the cause

of civil liberties—which, it goes without saying, was great PR for his work and public career. By the 1990s, he was firmly ensconced as a titan in the world of Japanese photography, a nationally and internationally recognized celebrity with women lining up on his doorstep to be photographed. He has also become mentor to a new generation of young women photographers like Hiromix and Ninagawa Mika who are now celebrities in the current Japanese photography scene.

Araki's pornographic work is only a part of his total production, but it is without a doubt the reason for his fame—or infamy—in the art world. He defends his sadomasochistic scenes of bondage (fig. 8) (the *Kinbaku* series, which refers to Edo-period macabre prints of bondage by print designers like Yoshitoshi [fig. 9] and images of bestiality such as Hokusai's female pearl diver being ravished by an octopus) as staged collaborative works with his subjects, claiming that they are not exploitative because of their controlled and mutually constructed settings. In the documentary video *Arakimentari* on view at the exhibition, numerous women subjects declare themselves to be willing participants in Araki's series *The*

Eroticism of Married Women, which they argue enables their sexual self-realization.²⁸ His alluring subject Komari, a fashion model, who was his “collaborator” for two publications in 2002 (*Lamant D'Août* and *A Woman Called Komari*), and who graces the Barbican exhibition pamphlet, asserts herself as an equal in the artistic process of updating *shunga*, invoking a now familiar rhetoric of cultural essentialism as she describes how their collaborative rediscovery of a unique Japanese sexuality has enabled the return of emotion to sex (previously repressed under the yoke of Westernization). In the documentary, no different than styling a model's clothing on a fashion shoot, Araki reaches over and



Fig. 8. Araki Nobuyoshi, *Bondage Copy*, 1979–83. Black-and-white print. Courtesy of the artist and Taka Ishii Gallery



Fig. 9. Tsukioka Yoshitoshi (Japanese, 1839–1892), *Saisaburo Cruelly Murders Ohagi*, 1867. From the series *Twenty-eight Verses for Famous Murders*. Color woodblock print; oban format, 13 1/8 x 9 1/2 in. (34.9 x 24.1 cm). Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco. Museum purchase, Achenbach Foundation for Graphic Arts Endowment Fund

rearranges Komari's kimono to better frame her genitals and coifs her pubic hair with his fingers.²⁹

Conclusion

Can the work of a handful of artists, however popular, fully capture the diverse field of artistic production in Japan? No, of course not. And I don't want to leave the impression that these highly selective examples represent all of Japan, not to mention Asia. If anything, I hope I have emphasized that we need to disaggregate these categories and look at the complexities of individual situations in the specific contexts of national and international politics as well as transnational market systems that exert intense pressures on art professionals. In this matrix, a work can be simultaneously counterculture and hybrid, and essentializing and culturally nationalist. It can be critical of dominant structures and reinforce those structures. Clearly

the work of Murakami and Araki remain in such tension. Perhaps what is most important to take away from this discussion is that concepts of tradition continue to be compelling rhetorical devices in contemporary art because they are immediate markers of identity that can provide a foil against which to highlight tension, rupture, and conflict or, conversely, offer a fabric from which to weave a genealogy of cultural continuity.

In terms of artistic production, then, can non-Western contemporary artists forge a distinct identity from the master narratives of the West, and in turn, what can they contribute to the construction of a world contemporary art culture if not local flavor and exoticized difference? Ironically, despite the continued ex-

clusion of contemporary art from the canon of Asian art taught in the West (and in many Asian countries as well) due to its uncomfortable hybridity and, by extension, inauthenticity, contemporary art is often privileged by critics over historical work as uniquely able to talk back to the colonial discourse of the past.³⁰ Perhaps it is in that very ability to talk back to history and to speak to local social and political issues, a domestic turn, that will be the beacon for contemporary Asian art, but the profitability of commodifying difference in the art market and anxiety about homogenization and cultural erasure under globalization—despite the assurances of cultural critics theorizing “the glocal” that these anxieties are unfounded—will continue to make tradition a freighted issue.

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2. Jonathan Reynolds, “The Bunriha and the Problem of ‘Tradition’ for Modernist Architecture in Japan, 1920–1928,” in *Japan’s Competing Modernities*, ed. Sharon Minichiello (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 1998): 228–46.
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4. Winther-Tamaki, *Art in the Encounter of Nations*, 28.
5. Apinan Poshyananda, *Contemporary Art in Asia: Traditions/Tensions* (New York: Asia Society Galleries, 1996), 15.
6. Geeta Kapur, “Globalisation and Culture,” *Third Text* 39 (Summer 1997): 25.
7. *Japan Art Monitor* 2, no. 18 (15 April 2006): 2.
8. Murakami Takashi, *Sūpā furatto = Super Flat*, exh. cat. (Tokyo: Madora Shuppan, 2000). Note that Murakami first introduced the term as “Super Flat” in Japan, but thereafter presented it as “Superflat.”
9. Murakami Takashi, “A Theory of Super Flat Japanese Art,” in *ibid.*, n.p.
10. Murakami Takashi, “The Super Flat Manifesto,” in *ibid.*
11. Murakami Takashi, ed., *Little Boy: the Arts of Japan’s Exploding Subculture*, exh. cat. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005).

12. In her exhibition catalogue essay, Alexandra Munroe carefully explores the critical debates surrounding the *otaku* in Japanese postwar society and the wellspring of anti-Western, nationalist sentiment that complicates their social status as merely nihilistic outsiders. Alexandra Munroe, "Introducing Little Boy," in *Little Boy*, 241–58.
13. Marc Steinberg, "Otaku Consumption, Superflat Art and the Return to Edo," *Japan Forum* 16, no. 3 (2004): 449; Carol Gluck, "The Invention of Edo," in *Mirror of Modernity: Invented Traditions of Modern Japan*, ed. Stephen Vlastos (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998): 262–84.
14. Steinberg, "Otaku Consumption," 451.
15. *Ibid.*, 457–61; Mori Yoshitaka has recently discussed the emergence of a kind of "otaku nationalism" in "Subcultural Unconsciousness in Japan: the War and Japanese," a lecture delivered at the Chelsea College of Art and Design, London, 2006.
16. *Against Nature: Japanese Art in the Eighties*, exh. cat. (New York: Grey Gallery and Study Center, 1989).
17. "Venice Biennale 2003 50th International Exhibition of Art—National Participation: Japanese Pavilion," http://www.jpfb.go.jp/e-others-old-0212-12_01_02.html (accessed 1 November 2006).
18. Ann Wilson Lloyd, "Reorienting: Japan Rediscovered Asia," *Art in America* 87, no. 10 (October 1999): 105.
19. *Ibid.*
20. Yoshino Kosaku, "Rethinking Theories of Nationalism: Japan's Nationalism in a Marketplace Perspective," in *Consuming Ethnicity and Nationalism: Asian Experiences*, ed. Yoshino Kosaku (University of Hawai'i Press, 1999), 23.
21. *Ibid.*
22. *Japan Art Monitor* 2, no. 18 (15 April 2006): 3.
23. Iwabuchi Kōichi, *Toransunashonaruru Japan: Ajia o Tsunagu Popyura Bunka* (Tokyo: Iwanami shoten, 2001).
24. Timon Screech, *Sex and the Floating World: Erotic Images in Japan, 1700–1820* (London: Reaktion Books, 1999).
25. Ian Jeffrey and Akiko Miki, *Nobuyoshi Araki: Self, Life, Death* (London: Phaidon Press, 2005), 266.
26. In the past five years Araki has had major retrospectives in Japan and abroad. He was also included in the Italian pavilion at the 2002 Venice Biennale and the "Images of Asia Festival" in Denmark 2003.
27. Tanaka Yuko, "Japan in Araki's World" in *Nobuyoshi Araki: Sex, Life, Death*, 546–48.
28. *Arakimentari*, directed by Travis Klose, 2004.
29. A move reminiscent of Edo-period pseudoscientific gynecological prints that were really thinly veiled pornography, often displaying a male hand or finger inserted into the female genitalia and the reproductive organs.
30. Kobena Mercer, ed. *Cosmopolitan Modernisms*, "Introduction."