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Murakami's 'little boy' syndrome: victim or aggressor in contemporary Japanese and American arts?

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ABSTRACT   *This paper examines the ambiguous nature of Murakami's criticism toward the postwar Japanese condition – as the artist most effectively captured in his phrase 'A Little Boy,' which was also the title of his curated exhibition at the Japan Society of New York in 2005. As Murakami wrote in his introduction to the catalogue, demilitarized Japan after the Second World War underwent a collective sense of helplessness, and the metaphor of a little boy is intended to describe Japan's supposedly unavoidable reliance on its big brother, America. The name 'Little Boy,' in fact, originates from the code name used by the American military for the atomic bomb dropped on Hiroshima in 1945. The proliferation of 'cuteness' in Japanese contemporary art, which draws upon youth culture, especially otaku culture, evinces a common urge among the postwar generation in Japan to escape from their horrible memories and sense of powerlessness. Murakami's rhetorical analysis of Japan's self-image seems, however, contradictory, given his extremely aggressive business tactics, which can find no counterpart in the Western art world – not even in the efforts of Murakami's predecessor, Andy Warhol. Like* My Lonesome Cowboy *(1998), whose hyper sexuality defies its pubescent and immature appearance, his art, theory, and art marketing indicate the paradoxical nature of his theory of impotence. By focusing on his manifesto and writings published on the occasion of his 2005 exhibition and his style of managing Kaikai Kiki Ltd., this paper delves into the dual nature of Murakami's interpretation of postwar Japanese art and culture, particularly in relation to those of America.*

KEYWORDS: Takashi Murakami, Japanese contemporary arts, *otaku*, art and subculture, atomic bomb (Little Boy), nationalism, globalization of art market, Asian masculinity

Introduction

Mitsuhiro Yoshimoto, author of 'Images of Empire: Tokyo Disneyland and Japanese Cultural Imperial' (Yoshimoto 1994), argues that cultural 'hybridism' frequently undermines the conflict between 'the obsession with native uniqueness' and 'the indifference of origins.' Specific cultural connotations or 'meanings' become lost in this process of blending elements borrowed from different cultures (Yoshimoto 1994: 196). However, equally problematic is a series of efforts to revisit 'authentic historical memories.' The case in point is Takashi Murakami's artistic strategies and theories of 'Superflat' and 'Little Boy' from the mid-1990s onward. Murakami's work enables us to pose questions about increasingly complicated definitions of traditional aesthetics, history, and international relationships. For what Murakami has perceived as the distinctive diplomatic circumstance of postwar Japan has been subsumed by the marketplace, where 'difference' can easily be translated into a cultural commodity, especially in light of the globalized condition of the art market and collaborations between artists and multinational private companies.

Murakami's theories of 'Superflat' and 'Little Boy' grew out of the critical atmosphere of Japan in the mid-1990s, when a group of young artists, critics, and art historians began paying attention to the history of the Second World War. Unlike the generation that preceded them, Murakami and like-minded critics such as Nobuo Tsuji and Noi Sawaragi become less interested in promoting Japanese artistic achievements to 'catch up' with the trends of the international and Western avant-garde.[1] Instead, their critical and artistic outputs have concentrated on dealing with the distinctive historical and aesthetic conditions of contemporary Japanese art and society – conditions that include the tragic memory of Atomic Bomb.

Art critic Sawaragi, for instance, noted the growing influence of the Japanese subculture of manga and animation called *otaku* on contemporary art. According to Sawaragi, *otaku*, which is often denigrated and marginalized by writers on official and high arts, represents distinctively Japanese aesthetics as well as the dependent nature of Japanese arts and culture in relation to those of the United States (Sawaragi 1998: 52). Murakami, as will be discussed, was fascinated by *otaku*, as manga and animation are genres in which tragic memories of the atomic bomb and Japan's defeat in the Second World War have been transformed into narrative elements and motifs.[2] 'Little Boy,' both as the figure and metaphor for Murakami's 2005 exhibition, was originally the code name for the atomic bomb dropped on Hiroshima in 1945. According to the critic Tetsuo Shimizu, the superflatness of Murakami's art refers to 'the flatness of a mirror that reflects our other self, our alter ego suffocating for internal contradiction,' due to the limited independence that Japan is allowed to have as a consequence of the Second World War (cited in Matsui 1999: 19).

While such artistic and critical efforts to confront Japan's 'national' psychology do appear to be brave or 'honest' in Murakami's terms, the highly victimized position, almost mythologized in his art and theories, might seem to imply nostalgia for a militarized state of Japan before the Second World War (Murakami 2001a: 67). (The evocative and decorative colors and forms in Murakami's work, which is contradicted to incongruent motifs and images related to the painful history of the atomic bomb, might be adopted to satisfy the artist's need for public attention.) More importantly, Murakami's shrewd business tactics and his reconfiguration of American Pop artist Andy Warhol's *My Lonesome Cowboy* (1998) indicate a shocking and aggressive gesture toward the international art market and audience. The artist himself did not hesitate in promoting his creative projects in an increasingly globalized art market by setting up his own studio/factory named Kaikai Kiki Co., Ltd outside of Japan to oversee his international productions. Murakami's studios, one located in Brooklyn and another in Long Island, New York, are often compared to the Factory of Warhol, whose unapologetically commercial attitude toward fine arts makes him the prototypical figure of American Pop Art in the 1960s.

Murakami's blatant commercialization of art leads us to question his primary purpose of retrieving historical memory and taking the depreciative view of a national subject. What is the relationship between Murakami's theory of superflatness and the history of Japanese art and culture during the postwar years, particularly during the 1990s? What is the significance of Murakami's art concerning the American dominance of Japanese art and culture? In short, do Murakami's art and theory offer viable means of revenge, or do they represent another strategy of compensating for Japan's lack of autonomy in relation to political and cultural powers?

Upon reviewing the theoretical work of Sawaragi and a group of Japanese artists under the influence of *otaku* subculture, Yoshitaka Mori, author of 'Subcultural Unconsciousness in Japan: The War and Japanese Contemporary Artists' (Mori 2006), criticizes Murakami's generalizing tendency of characterizing postwar Japanese art and culture as immature and passive. Mori, above all, questions the over-generalization that presents victimhood as an element of the distinctive psyche of the Japanese people. 'Even if it is a fictional and

constructionist one, as he [Murakami] admits, his project of re-establishing a Japanese art history is essentially nationalist, in the sense that he imagines Japan as a homogeneous entity' (Mori 2006: 181). As Mori correctly notes, the emphasis on nationalist aesthetics and the nationality of artists in Murakami's art and theory signals the increasingly multicultural and globalized context of the art world. 'Within the concept of "superflat,"' Mori explains, '"Japan," "Japanese," "Japanese culture," and "Japaneseness" are all absolutely essentialized as a homogenous set of values and art simultaneously set up as an international commodity to be consumed by overseas consumers' (Mori 2006: 187).

Japanese cultural critic Yoshiko Shimada has also raised his critical voice against Murakami's theory of the superflat, charging that it engages in the gross simplification of Japanese culture as something that can satisfy a Westerner's fascination with 'exotic' Japanese subculture. The *otaku* themselves have become increasingly critical of Murakami's 'borrowing' of comics and animations in the arena of fine arts in the name of an 'egalitarian' approach to art and popular culture. According to Arthur Lubow, many Japanese *otaku* find that Murakami's work is exaggerated to the degree that it depreciates and parodies Japanese subculture. The case in point is Murakami's eroticized female figure with nipples enlarged to the degree of obscenity (Lubow 2005).

While criticisms of Murakami among Japanese critics and *otaku* lovers have often concentrated on his sweeping and paradoxically depreciative description of postwar Japanese history and culture, renowned Western art historians and critics have noted Murakami's business tactics in increasingly multicultural or multinational exchanges among fine artists and designer houses seeking new visual trends. Paraphrasing artist and writer Coco Fusco, British art historian Julian Stallabrass states that 'globalization has transformed the art world along with the management of racial and cultural difference to follow the model of corporate internationalism … diversity is normalized while its critical content is sidestepped' (Stallabrass 2004: 70).[3] Writing for *Artforum*, Pamela Lee, art historian and art critic, characterizes Murakami's painting as expressing 'a generic notion of globalism, in which a conflicted history of Japan–US relations – from the bomb to the bubble economy – finds peculiar expression in his manga-inspired cosmography' (Lee 2007: 340).

What follows, then, is a close examination of Murakami's strategy to investigate his contradictory and, at best, ambivalent attempts to revisit Japan's 'painful' history, a history that is perceived as having provided the foundation for the contradictory self-image of postwar Japan. The recent commercial success of Murakami's art relying upon historical memory will provoke discussions about the complicated relationships among historical memory, nationalism, and the global marketplace for contemporary arts, and this paper, influenced by critical studies of the intellectual and cultural history of Japan during the 1990s, will focus on Murakami's paradoxical return to nationalistic aesthetics in relation to Western, or, more specifically, American art history and the international art market. Contrary to the artist's vehement attacks on both Japan's self-image and the history of Japanese contemporary art, his attempt to define an 'authentic' Japanese aesthetics has consistently returned to *otaku* under the influence of American popular culture, the Warholian business strategy in American Pop Art, and the history of atomic bomb. The postwar Japanese visual culture involved with the Second World War is of particular importance, as the image of Atomic Bomb appears as a perpetual nightmare not only among Japanese, but also among Americans, particularly considering Japanese casualties of Atomic Bomb. Therefore, by concentrating on the business-oriented strategy of Murakami's entrepreneurship, I will highlight ironic circumstances of Murakami's controversial dualism between the American 'Big Brother' and Japanese 'Little Boy.' As I will argue, Murakami's 'superflat' is less concerned with the victimized condition of postwar Japanese society and culture than with the artist's passive-aggressive maneuvering between American and Japanese arts.

'Little Boy' and the birth of Mr. DOB

Murakami's 2005 exhibition entitled 'Little Boy: The Arts of Japan's Exploding Subculture' at the Japan Society in New York was part of the exhibitions series that he began curating under the concept of 'Superflat.'[4] To reiterate, 'Little Boy' refers to the atomic bomb dropped on Hiroshima in 1945, and the artist uses the phrase 'Little Boy' to represent the self-image of postwar Japan as an impotent and emasculated nation, both symbolically and figuratively.[5] According to Marilyn Ivy, an anthropologist and expert on contemporary Japanese history, Murakami originally wanted to include the term 'impotence' as part of his exhibition title (cited in Ivy 2008: 180).[6] Murakami has bluntly acknowledged Japan's subordinate position to its big brother, America: 'Postwar Japanese society developed as a complete protégé of America, with its people encouraged to produce without really having a sense of autonomy' (Murakami 2005: 227).

The Japanese constitution is no exception in reflecting Japan's lack of autonomy. The document of 'Article 9,' written during the occupational era (1945–52), is designed to prevent Japan from developing armed forces that would give the country the potential to wage war against other nations. Having included the cover page of the 'Article 9,' the exhibition also intends to highlight the 'demilitarized' state of Japan and its unavoidable military reliance on America (Murakami 2005: 8–9).

In Murakami's view, however, the tragic memory of the atomic bomb has been hardly subjected to serious discourse among the Japanese public, and one area in which one sees an exception to this historical amnesia is *otaku*, the Japanese subculture of anime, manga, and video. Murakami has chosen the word 'explosion' in describing the frequent appearances of and references to the Pacific War and the atomic bomb among characters and narratives in Japanese anime and manga.[7]

Murakami's exhibition includes an array of anime and manga images from Japanese *otaku*. He presents the atomic suit of performance artist Kenji Yanobe as well as the popular anime, *The Space Battleship Yamato* (1971), named after the Japanese Admiral flagship, which was sunk during the Second World War. *Gundam* (1979), too, features the birth of a novel human type, with superpowers, to insinuate the atomic explosion and the beginning of a new era, 'a sort of psychological escape zone for the defeated postwar Japan,' to cite Murakami's interpretation (Murakami 2001b: 66). The exhibition also displays a series of artifacts from the *Godzilla* films, which were first produced in 1954 and depict a devouring monster that is awakened by a hydrogen bomb explosion. As Murakami's favorite contemporary artists were juxtaposed along with an array of anime and manga images and related products, the exhibition reminds the audience of the history of museums or of a textbook of cultural studies on postwar Japanese subculture rather than a standard art exhibition strictly devoted to fine arts and artifacts.

By arranging art works and artifacts of 'visual culture' with a single thematic concept – 'Little Boy' – Murakami aims to shed positive light upon *otaku*, and it should be noted that *otaku* is often conceived as a culture for the 'pervert.'[8] The influence of *otaku* that reflects genuinely 'Japanese' popular culture enables Murakami to move away from the domination of the western avant-garde in Japanese contemporary arts.[9] 'The problem for my generation is to create original products without depending on an intellectual system for support, since we are aware of differences between the workings of contemporary art in the West and how things operate in Japan,' explains Murakami (Murakami and Morimura 1999: 88).

Art critic Nobuo Tsuji's interpretation of Edo painting had a huge influence on Murakami, who initially majored in *Nihoga*, a traditional form of Japanese painting. According to Tsuji, the Japanese propensity for decoration and playful and caricature-like distortions of human and animal forms is best represented in *ukiyo-e* prints and works by the 18th-century master Katsushika Hokusai. In postwar Japan, Nobuo claims, the

decorative impulse and playfulness of the Edo period paintings, prints, and graphic novels survived in Japanese comics and animations, even after the marginalization of the Edo style arts with the establishment of the modern institutions of art (Tsuji 1992: 93).

It is not, however, stylistic concerns alone, but also the historical lineage and cultural hierarchies related to *otaku* culture that have contributed to the growing reputation of Japanese *otaku* within contemporary Japanese art. The close linkage between *otaku* and Edo-style painting may demonstrate an alternative historical narrative in Japanese art. According to the dominant view, the tradition of *ukiyo-e* prints and the 17th-century Edo painting style (1614–1688) by the renowned Kano painters were replaced by modern or Western arts after the Meiji restoration (1868–1912). Therefore, to resurrect the connection between Edo arts before the Meiji restoration and the arts of contemporary Japan enables Murakami to provide an alternative interpretation of the origin and development of contemporary Japanese art.

Otaku culture can also help Murakami and like-minded critics move beyond the distinction between high and low arts and culture, a distinction more or less deeply rooted in western art, not in traditional Japanese art, as Murakami claims (cited in Howe 2003). *Otaku* is, in the end, subculture, and to underscore the relationship between *otaku* and contemporary art can challenge artistic as well as cultural hierarchies. Moreover, as critic Sawaragi has pointed out, the newfound interest in *otaku* among young Japanese artists might be a good remedy for the perennial problem with the Japanese avant-garde. 'Japanese art is driven by the sadness of those who have inherited superficial and incomplete institutions of modernity,' argues Sawaragi (1998: 30).[10] Contrary to Sawaragi's argument, Japanese aesthetics occasionally played an important role in the formation of western modernism; the cropped vision and composition of Kamikata prints during the Edo period were admired by Vincent Van Gogh and imitated in his postimpressionist paintings; and a number of New York School painters were, immediately after the Second World War, infatuated by the basic concept of Zen – albeit as articulated in D.T. Suzuki's famous lecture at Columbia University during the 1950s. Nonetheless, as art historian Alexander Monroe rightly noted, the influence of Japanese aesthetics and arts on the development of Western modernism remained sporadic and often superficial, especially compared with the development of Japanese contemporary arts during the postwar years. 'While the American interest in Asian culture rested on a tradition that could be traced back to the nineteenth century, nevertheless it amounted to little more than a sporadic tendency compared to the parentage of American culture in Europe' (Munroe 1994: 60). Unlike previous Japanese avant-garde artists who merely imitated the Western avant-garde, artists of the younger generation have drawn upon the images and motives of *otaku*, indicating their awareness of *otaku*'s historical and cultural significance in postwar Japanese society.

Japanese *otaku*, having originated in the traditional Edo style of painting and American popular culture, effectively represents the mixed nature of Japanese arts and culture. Murakami is, indeed, knowledgeable on a range of cultural and artistic styles and aesthetics from those of the 18th-century Edo period to Japanese subculture and American Pop Art. The term *Poku*, a neologism due to the combination of American Pop art and *otaku*, referring to Murakami and his like-minded artists, was also coined by Murakami (Murakami 1999a: 44; Murakami 1999b: 60–69; Murakami 2000: 8–25). More importantly, the disparate and often confusing origins of *otaku* culture, both figuratively and symbolically, corresponds to the self-image of postwar Japanese arts and culture under the heavy influence of America.[11]

According to cultural critic and philosopher Hiroki Azuma, what he dubbed 'otaku nationalism' has contradictory origins in the history of American occupation and the dominance of American popular culture in Japan. 'However attractive or persuasive the similarity between Edo culture and *otaku* culture seems, we should not forget the simple fact that *otaku* culture could not have existed at all without the influence of American

subcultures,' writes Azuma. Most subcultural forms, such as Japanese manga, animation, science fiction novels, and computer games, have American origins as the result of the postwar occupation policy of America in Japan. Therefore, Azuma maintains that Murakami's nationalistic stance and superflat aesthetics, which are inspired by *otaku*, should be understood within the distinctive context of postwar Japan, in which authentic national art and culture are cast in serious doubt.

> The otaku culture is a sort of the collective expression of post-war Japanese nationalism, although their surroundings in reality are thoroughly invaded and traumatized by American pop culture. This paradox necessarily leads otaku artists and writers to the twisted, ambivalent, complicated and a sort of self-caricaturized expression of Japaneseness. (Azuma 2001)

The hybrid nature of Murakami's superflat, or 'otaku nationalism' in Japan, as defined by Azuma, is congruent with DOB, Murakami's central character that the artist has continued to improvise and elaborate on since 1993. Murakami's signature character, DOB, is accorded with many of the primary traits of *otaku*. To name a few, these traits include 'decorative', 'superficial', 'depthless' and 'mixed'. DOB, first devised in 1993, is also evolved from characters and images from various historical and cultural contexts. The Disneyesque, Muppet-like traits of DOB are derived partly from a monkeylike figure the artist saw in Hong Kong; this character has a smiling face with big eyes, mouse ears, a button nose, and a wide, grinning mouth, similar to Sonic the Hedgehog of electronic games, the popular manga character Doraemon, or even Miffy. Occasionally, he has a mouse body with a little lightning bolt for a tail.[12]

DOB undergoes various stages of transformation, defying permanent and fixed identity. Initially featured in a number of intensely decorative paintings in 1993, DOB is pulled apart and smacked around. He is transformed into drips, test patterns, DNA strands, or multi-mouthed creatures. At other times, he erupts into a camouflage pattern. In *Castle of Tin Tin* (1998), DOB is placed next to the cyclone, whirling around vertical columns, spurting out little DOBs and rivulets of liquid. There is also DOB the inflatable, filled with helium and suspended from the ceiling in *Guru Guru* (1998), in which an enormous, looming head with a gaping mouth and many eyes peers down at the viewer. It is *Cat in the Hat* meets *Moby Dick* by way of the Macy's Thanksgiving Day parade. Recently, DOB has been also juxtaposed with a mushroom sculpture and a series of smiling flower paintings.

The meaning of the name DOB remains 'clueless.' DOB originally came from the slang expression 'dobojite,' or 'why?' in Japanese, yet it is equally important that the name is a reminiscent of Murakami's dissertation title 'The Meaning of Nonsense of the Meaning,' completed in the same year. It is a repetition of a few words, namely 'meaning' and 'non-meaning,' and similar-sounding words are juxtaposed with each other. Like Murakami's explanation that his own artistic invention should undergo various stages of metamorphosis, 'continuous changing of form,' excessively or unconsciously, 'without meaning,' the real meaning of DOB is almost elusive (Steinberg 2003).[13] Murakami further suggests that DOB is a self-portrait of the Japanese people, as 'he is cute but has no meaning and understands nothing of life, sex, or reality' (cited in DiPietro 1999).

If DOB's lack of meaning, or its lack of fixed identity, predicts DOB's endless transformation, such a trait can be also translated into the adaptability of the postwar Japanese people, which Murakami rather mockingly describes by referring to an immature Japanese culture without depth – an observation that leads him to develop his theory of 'Superflat' in 2000. In explaining Murakami's obsessive pursuit of superficial, decorative, and 'immature' artistic style, Dick Hebdige, a British art media theorist and renowned critic on subculture, argues that the DOB character illustrates Murakami's growing maturity as an artist moving beyond 'reactive' responses to the infantilizing effects of foreign occupation to engage the 'infantilization-domination nexus' (Hebdige 2007: 31).[14]

Hebdige's explanation implies Murakami's transformation from a creator of minimal-esque sculptures that make calm references to the Second World War and atomic bomb into a painter of what the artist himself has called the *superflat* style. Murakami's early oeuvre includes three-dimensional sculptures or object-type installations that contain rather critical and straightforward messages regarding militarism, racism, and the history of the atomic bomb. *Polyrhythm* (1991) is a huge slab covered by small plastic toy soldiers modeled after the infantry of the American army. While its definite meaning is open to diverse interpretations, the image of toy soldiers climbing up a monument-like column resonates with the continued threat of American military power in Asia. In *Sea Breeze* (1992), the overall shape of lighting fixtures and effects are reminiscent of the flash of the Bomb before its explosion. It remains unclear whether Murakami has consciously shifted his focus from criticism of American art and culture to full participation or competition in the international art world, as Hebdige has surmised.

Nonetheless, Murakami's assessment of postwar Japanese culture does not necessarily preclude his aggressive intent towards the American art world. The artist's self-depreciative view of postwar Japanese society and culture was deeply congruent with some of the core arguments of the 'New Nationalism.' According to historian Yumiko Lida, who also wrote 'Between the Technique of Living an Endless Routine and the Madness of Absolute Degree Zero: Japanese Identity and the Crisis of Modernity in the 1990s,' a number of scholars and writers began pointing out the lack of depth and traditional subjectivity in Japanese society and culture during the post-bubble period of the 1990s. However, Lida claims, the same historical moment witnessed the arrival of the 'New Nationalism,' a discourse that became pervasive and is articulated in immensely popular books such as Norihiro Kato's 1995 *After the Defeat in the War* and Kazuya Fukuda's 1993 *Japan's Homeland*.

> In short, the emergence and coming to popularity of the new nationalism, with revisionism as its vehicle, is to be seen as a symptomatic manifestation of the greater socio-discursive problems of current breakdown of the subject and discursive meaning…. – all troubling and salient features of Japanese society in late modernity. (Lida 2000: 454)

Murakami also completed his dissertation on *Nihonga* painting in 1994, from which he evolved his theory of 'Nonsense of the Meaning,' and 'Superflat' theory during the late 1990s. In a way, Murakami's dual position toward traditional Japanese aesthetics and *otaku* has already resonated in what Lida termed the 'New Nationalist' stances. Murakami's notions of 'Superflat' and 'Little Boy' are close to New Nationalists' interpretation of Japanese society in late modernity; his emphasis on history, traditional Edo-style painting, and *otaku* is also repeated by the New Nationalists' nostalgic writings on Japan's whole-some nationhood before the American occupation and, most recently, before the post-bubble period of the 1990s.

Art critics are divided in their critical opinions about Murakami's artistic productions and strategies. The critic Sawaragi has found that Murakami's ambiguous rendition of cultural identity and of national image have, rather, represented the artist's sincerity, for he has continued to confront the historical shame and to expose the colonial origin of *otaku* he is appropriating.[15] In theorizing the contradictory origins of what he called *otaku* nationalism, Azuma tries to explain the historical significance of Murakami's superflat style as one of the common reactions toward the discourses on postmodernism in the west as well as in Japan. According to Azuma, Japanese and Western scholars during the 1980s concurred that the discovery of Edo painting could provide them with more creative interpretations of post-modernism as a way to evade the influence of American-type modernism. 'Nevertheless, in my opinion,' Azuma writes, 'the deepest psychological element beneath this tendency is the (impossible) desire to deny the post-war American cultural influence. The

postmodernity came from the U.S. although the Japanese wanted to take it back to their national tradition' (Azuma 2001).

The critic Yoshiko Shimada, in contrast, has noted the lack of genuine historical consciousness in Murakami's work, where one finds 'distinctively Japanese qualities reduced for the commercial appeal.' 'Some Western art critics and curators seem to think that this Superflat-ness represents the ultimate form of the post-modern consumerist culture,' argues Shimada. 'They see Japanese pop culture and its eradication of history and meaning as radical, futuristic and uniquely Japanese' (Shimada 2002: 188).

Moreover, Mori of 'Subcultural Unconsciousness in Japan' contends that, contrary to Murakami's explanation of superflatness as the emblematic aesthetic expression of a homogenized and depthless Japanese society, during the 1990s, Japan witnessed an unprecedented degree of diversification of political and economic opinions and status. With a rapidly increasing unemployment rate and the success of a neo-conservative ideology that underscored the ethos of competition, the gap between the rich and poor dramatically widened in the 1990s; this is also known as the post-bubble era in Japan. The same decade also saw the popularization of terms such as *Kachigumi* (winner) and *Makegumi* (loser). Considering the economic downturn and increasingly competitive social atmosphere of that decade, from which Murakami's theory originated, 'the euphoric idea of "superflat"' in Murakami's theory might function 'as an ideology which conceals social, economic, and political crisis in Japan' (Mori 2006: 186).

Murakami's endeavor of turning what he perceived as a pathological state of superflat mentality of the Japanese people into an artistic style, and subsequently into his most profitable cultural commodity confuses the artist's serious efforts to assess the infantile nature of postwar Japanese society. Murakami has never shied away from profit making. According to his Tokyo representative Tomio Koyama, more than 70% of Murakami's sales occur outside Japan (cited in DiPietro 2001). Considering Murakami's preoccupation with postwar Japanese art and culture dominated by the influence of Western art and culture, his aggressive business tactics in the international art market, where 60% of gross sales are made in the United States and Britain, might indicate his conscious effort to transform Japanese infantile culture into a commodity.[16] In a way, Murakami's pursuit of materialistic rewards – rather than cultural integrity – parallels the Japanese diplomatic and economic policy of compensating for a lack of national pride and military power with economic power.

Mr. DOB and Murakami's marketing strategy

Murakami's artistic inspiration, as underscored, primarily comes from Warhol, a renowned American pop artist who also named his studio the 'Factory.'[17] In 1996, Murakami, after Warhol, established the 'Hiropon Factory,' a studio with assistants to produce his work. His factory gradually grew into a fully professionalized art production studio and artist management organization, and became registered in 2000 as 'Kaikai Kiki Co., Ltd' to administer numerous enterprises in which Murakami is involved, including the art fair GEISAI twice a year.[18] Kaikai Kiki, Murakami's studio as well as management office, became responsible for designing and marketing a range of mass-produced items such as vinyl figurines, plush toys, key chains, t-shirts, and posters that featured Murakami's signature images.

Unlike Warhol's Factory group, which can be regarded as more of a social gathering of writers and would-be celebrities looking for parties and opportunities to network, Murakami's factory was composed of hardworking individuals, most of whom were artists and professional designers. In addition, Murakami titled his studio/workshop 'Hiropon Factory' after the drug 'Hiropon,' which was developed by the Japanese army during the

Second World War with the aim of forcing personnel to work without sleeping.[19] The drug has remained one of the most powerful and popular narcotics in East Asian countries. The awkward naming of Murakami's factory appears important, if only symbolically, in understanding the differences in atmosphere between Warhol's Factory and Murakami's Hiropon Factory. Within Warhol's Factory, drugs and other addictive substances might be seen as important agents in connecting people and creating a decadent environment. In contrast, Murakami's selection of the name *Hiropon* for his workshop might be suggestive of its hierarchical and militaristic inner structure. Murakami's studio is known not only for its commercial approach toward art and art management, but also for its work ethic and well-organized hierarchy among artists and designers. Once they receive the artist's sketch, Murakami's studio employees usually put it into digital files through which various forms of design products and artworks will be created, keeping as close as possible to the artist's instructions.[20]

Over the last decade, collaboration between artists and design-oriented companies, including internationally well-known fashion houses for high-end clientele, became commonplace; however, Murakami's involvement with the marketplace had a broader scope, ranging from a car with the DOB image, and flowers, to small key chains and mouse pads. In 2003, he also worked as a design consultant for a Japanese real estate mogul, Minoru Mori, to decorate the special bus that would carry customers to his new shopping mall located in Roppongi Hills, Tokyo with his planet 66 characters.[21] During his one-person show at the Brooklyn Museum of Art, Murakami sold a limited-edition Louis Vuitton handbag that has the image of a Murakami-designed *Time Bokan* for US$5000. Regarding Murakami's extensive affiliation with commercial enterprises and private companies, the unique aspects of his art are open to multifarious applications to commercial products. Murakami is, for the most part, well aware of the impact of branding. When he collaborated with Marc Jacobs, artistic director of Louis Vuitton, Murakami relocated his 'Superflat' theory into his recent paintings of the Vuitton monogram, meticulously reducing his design for Louis Vuitton's logos. Murakami picked the small eyes from his previous artworks and meshed them into the overall monogram design, and the image of eyes became the part of the Vuitton monogram and vice versa.

Such recognition of the market value of the brand is consistent with Murakami's efforts to create his own character, DOB, which undergoes various stages of metamorphosis in its numerous applications, such as an oil painting and a stenciled image on a helium-filled balloon. Apart from its different materials and genres, the shapes and proportions of DOB consistently mutate. Marc Steinberg, an art critic, compares Murakami's DOB with the Hello Kitty series, arguing that Murakami's DOB corresponds with an industrial mode of commodity seriality, which is continuously modulated yet returns to its original, static model. The features of DOB, in short, fluctuate between internal changes to DOB's shape and the consistency of DOB as a recognizable character or brand, if you will.

According to Steinberg, Murakami's DOB becomes transformed within a brand series as DOB t-shirts and DOB key chains; this transformation is, however, determined by internal cycles – not by external factors. 'Their primary attributes are maximal metamorphosis combined with minimal, yet necessary cohesion (it is this cohesion that guarantees the recognizability of the brand)' (Steinberg 2003).[22] Such a systematic approach taken by Murakami certainly makes him distinguishable from Warhol's approach for his serial silkscreens. Whereas Warhol's seriality is concerned with slight variations of color and hue, Warhol never achieved an internal logic of metamorphosis within each series as well as among his different serial prints. In fact, any changes occurring within Warhol's prints usually come from exterior conditions such as commodities or media images that enable him to render everyday reality replete with consumerism and media culture. In contrast, Murakami's DOB character mutates, serving not only as the representation of the artist's

signature style, but also as the artist's brand for his products – not much different from Louis Vuitton's V logo. Murakami bluntly stated that the purpose of his KaiKai Kiki is to be 'a company that can generate merchandising profits just like Disney or Lucas' Star Wars series' (cited in Cruz 1999: 16).

Returning to Murakami's collaboration with Louis Vuitton, he sold the bag on the exhibition site. This active strategy of confusing artistic works and consumer goods constitutes an interesting contrast to the case of Dan Flavin's sculpture standing inside the Louis Vuitton flagship store on 5th Avenue in 2008. The bag is kept inside Flavin's installation only to underscore the symbolic and aesthetic meeting between art and commerce, whereas the audience can purchase a Vuitton with Murakami's design in the artist's exhibition held in art museums.[23] (Interestingly, the pattern used for the bag is an image drawn from *Time Bokan*, a popular TV series in which every episode ends with an atomic bomb explosion that vanquishes the villains.)

The artistic director of Louis Vuitton was also mindful of the controversy regarding Murakami's unprecedented levels of affinity with private companies. 'For all the critics who made fun of the installation of a Vuitton shop within Takashi's MOCA exhibition,' argues Marc Jacobs in his interview with Glen O'Brien, 'It challenged this sort of categorizing. Like, what is the art here? Is it what's on the bag? Is it the action of buying the bag – that's the art? Is it watching the people buying the art? Because it's installed in an exhibition in a museum, it is some kind of conceptual performance piece? It operates on so many levels that it's hard to categorize' (O'Brien 2008).

As Jacobs correctly points out, not only the products themselves, but also how these products are consumed in an art museum (certainly not confined to regular museum shops) confuse the audience and stir discomfort among the majority of art professionals. Scott Rothkopf, too, agrees that the controversy related to Murakami's commercial endeavors lies not in the production of commercial items alone, but also in his lack of concern with the conventional ways in which other artists approach their collaborations with the private sector.

According to Rothkopf, Olafur Eliasson, an artist whose work was shown in the Louis Vuitton shop window during the 2006 holiday season, asked that no product be shown alongside his 'artwork.' In addition, Eliasson donated his fee for the Louis Vuitton project to an organization that he and his wife established for the benefit of Ethiopian children (Rothkopf 2007: 145). Eliasson's case illustrates the complicated manner in which many contemporary artists use their opportunities to collaborate with private companies to get more media publicity while they strive to make sure that their collaboration will not ruin the idealistic, if only symbolic, status of their fine arts. Eliasson also wanted to confirm that his collaboration is not primarily to enrich his financial assets. Contrary to these 'hesitant' artists, Murakami is straightforward in his pursuit of economic gain, and as Rothkopf suggests, he is far more unselfconscious – and 'thus, ironically far more conscious – about his role in this system' (Rothkopf 2007: 145).[24]

Murakami's famous theory of art entrepreneurship does not merely propose to blur the distinction between art and commerce. Instead, as Rothkopf has implied, Murakami is extremely versatile within the art world, working as a brand manager, curator, writer, and artist. Moreover, he knows that he must underscore the fact that he can move freely among these different realms. Not unlike Warhol, who worked as a successful artist as well as designer by adopting different strategies for his shoe illustrations and silk-screens, Murakami both ignored and exploited the distinction between fine arts and design. He once criticized the Japanese art market for its lack of business ambition, arguing that his partnership with Louis Vuitton was driven by the fact that there was no market for young artists in Japan (Maneker 2003: 23).[25] This remark dovetailed with his allegedly open attitude toward fine arts and commercial design. Murakami, as cited earlier, underscored that a distinction between pure art and pragmatic craft can only be found in the Western art world – it is not

found in the history of Japanese art before the country's modernization. Murakami's graphically oriented artistic style enables him to apply his artistic design in various products and fine artistic creations with less difficulty, yet the traditional distinction is also crucial for his artistic and commercial success. Without the paradoxical boundary between art and commerce, his design of the LV monogram and the display of Louis Vuitton bags in the Brooklyn Museum would not have been able to attract much controversy and criticism. Likewise, without this distinction, famous fashion houses would not be able to imbue their products with pure exchange values of an artist's signature and design as a way to distinguish their luxury goods from ordinary consumer products. In order to banish crude economic considerations from the minds of its viewers, contemporary art must 'continually display signs of its freedom and distinction from the mass,' as Stallabrass notes, even if such 'a zone of freedom and free critique can be ironically nurtured by the instrumental system of capitalism' (Stallabrass 2004: 5–6).

What, then, is the role of *otaku* culture for his savvy business strategies? In addition to the versatility and endless transformations of DOB, cute characteristics of *otaku*, often combined with decorative elements, also have popular appeal. In the case of Murakami's work, cute characters are, however, occasionally accorded with deformed or grotesque features. *Tan Tan Bo Pucking* (2002), for instance, shows DOB in its most deformed state, with excessive liquid flowing from a huge mouth over the face. The face of DOB also appears to be overblown to the point of near explosion as the liquid spurts out. The company title, Kaikai Kiki, is also named after the dual characteristics of good and bad, and innocent and evil. Murakami recognized such duality as the key to the commercial success in both arenas of popular culture and fine arts. (The word 'Kawaii,' meaning 'cute' in Japanese, shares sonorous proximity to 'Kowai,' which means 'scary.') Referring to Damien Hirst, the artist conceived as the leader of the Young British Artist movement and the superstar of the recent booming art market, Murakami advised that the artists should effectively combine the theme of sexuality and death or the traits of kawaii and grotesque. 'If an artist aptly rotates this cycle, he/she can survive. Damien Hirst has been repeating the cycle of birth, death, love, sex and beauty' (Wakasa 2001).

Murakami's highly controversial *My Lonesome Cowboy* (1998) effectively attests to the ambivalent characteristics of Murakami's art, which can appear both cute and scary, passive and aggressive, impotent and virile. *My Lonesome Cowboy* was sold for US$13.5 million at New York Sotheby's in 2008, an auction record that remains the highest price paid for the artist's oeuvre. *My Lonesome Cowboy* is an interesting amalgam of Japanese *otaku* culture and a Warhol film made in 1968. Warhol's *Lonesome Cowboys* has a homoerotic theme, ironically combining the genres of the heterosexual romantic melodrama and the western to express close bonds among men.[26] Shot in the American West of Arizona, Warhol's original film was intended to undermine the gender connotations and patriotic message associated with American cowboys. On the one hand, the cowboy is the quintessential symbol of 'macho' and 'authentic' masculinity in America; on the other hand, its exaggerated, terse manhood was the easy target of the gay community during the 1950s and 1960s. The illustrations of Tom of Finland, popularized in gay magazines such as *Physique Pictorial* in those decades, feature images of bulky men with muscles whose macho masculinity becomes subjected to the illicit gaze of other men.[27] Made by a group of Warhol's cohorts who must have been mostly aware of the problematic aspects of rigid gender boundaries and images, images of men as blonde homosexual prostitutes, campy drag queens, or involuntary bisexuals in Warhol's *Lonesome Cowboy* consistently enables the viewer to question the monolithic category of proper manhood.

Murakami's *My Lonesome Cowboy* may seem to share Warhol's basic intent of challenging the proper gender lines of masculinity. Modeled on Warhol's film, Murakami's *My Lonesome Cowboy* is highly evocative, modifying the homoerotic boys in Warhol's work into a typical manga character with spiky hair and huge eyes. Despite his immature appearance,

more akin to the appearance of an adolescent boy than to that of a full grown-up adult, Murakami's cowboy spurts semen straight from his penis and sprays it around. His enlarged penis makes an interesting contrast to his small and lean body. Like Warhol's pretty blonde man, Murakami's cowboy is attractive, boyish and even innocent when subjected to external gazes; however, his gesture of squirting semen right in the face of the audience has no resemblance to a petty and pretty 'Little Boy'.

Murakami's depiction of the typical characters in Japanese soft comics for girls called *shōjo*, however, differs from Warhol's use of cowboy characters due to Murakami's more twisted and complicated treatment of the underpinnings of gender and racial identities. First of all, Murakami's work does not include scenes depicting homosexual or heterosexual relationships. Instead, his cowboy is eager to show off his sperm – his ability to 'shoot out' – rather than taking a passive position toward another man. In addition, Murakami's cowboy might seem to insinuate racial meanings, as his cowboy resembles a feminized comic character with dubious racial traits. In contrast to his blonde spiky hair, his nose is smaller than that of a typical Western man, and his eyes are enlarged to cover most of his face. Murakami's adaptation of the typical *shōjo* character for *My Lonesome Cowboy* thus confuses the distinction between proper and improper manhood as well as between implicitly American and Japanese physiognomies.[28]

In this respect, Murakami's title, *My Lonesome Cowboy*, might be symbolic; the meaning of the work extends to what Warhol was trying to question, namely the prototypical image of strong, patriotic masculinity. In the case of Warhol's film, different sexual desires become the primary theme; in Murakami's sculpture, it is a dubious racial line and the distinction between American 'Big Brother' and Japanese 'Little Boy' that are under scrutiny. One could argue that *My Lonesome Cowboy* emblematizes what Hebdige called the 'infantilization-domination nexus' – the passive-aggressive approach. The character's gesture of ejaculating its sperm both undermines and celebrates heterosexual and implicitly aggressive manhood. Despite its otherworldly and unrealistic physiognomy, it manages to stir controversy concerning hyperbolic and violent masculinity. Moreover, given the artist's deliberate business tactics, the cute sensationalism in Murakami's *Cowboy* is far from being arbitrary. It toys with the audience's sympathy and disgust toward the presumably superficial, cute, yet aggressive 'Little Boy'. To reiterate, the artist's conscious efforts to underscore cute aesthetics, occasionally accorded with sensual and darker visions, went hand in hand with his ambition for success in the art market.

Therefore, Murakami's dual attitudes toward nationalist aesthetics and the commercialization of art are extended to issues of gender or racial distinction. Murakami continues to underscore nationalist aesthetics and the link between Edo painting and *otaku* culture, precisely when *otaku* problematizes the authenticity of Japanese national aesthetics; likewise, Murakami continues to apply design concepts in art and commerce while relentlessly pursuing his career in prestigious art museums in order to participate fully in critical debates about history, national memory, and the relationship between subculture and fine arts. Finally, his *My Lonesome Cowboy* offers an image of aggressive manhood while its gender traits and racial identities never meet the expectations of typical American manhood. The character's identity remains ambiguous between that of a boy and that of a man. The confusing nature of his strategies and aesthetics lure international audiences with a combination of familiarity and unfamiliarity, the mundane and the exotic, and cuteness and aggressiveness.

Conclusion

Domination and submission are key historical factors in the development of the Japanese avant-garde and its self-image during the postwar period, and *otaku* is supposed to

represent this historical and psychological condition of Japanese culture. Murakami's disturbing portrayal of the postwar condition in Japan is overshadowed by the excessive and *Kawaii* nature of his arts, which became hugely popular and visually appealing among international audiences. As critic Yoshima Shimada (2002) claims, the distinctively post-bomb phenomena of *otaku* culture, in Murakami's explanation, is none other than what some Western art critics and curators have conceived as 'the ultimate form of the postmodern consumerist culture.'

Despite Murakami's serious intention of reconfiguring the relationship between Japanese and American avant-gardes, he appears ambivalent in his attitude toward the American art world. Murakami has ventured into commercial endeavors in the United States, locating one of his Kaikai Kiki offices there, as restricting himself to the domestic market for his artwork and products might be too limiting.[29] One could claim that such aggressive tactics mirror Murakami's idea of using art as a remedy for what impoverished and emasculated Japanese art and culture during the postwar years. 'Our … prescription for self-medicated denizens of a castrated nation state may well be appropriated in the future world as an exemplary model of rehabilitation,' argues Murakami (Murakami 2005: 141). Murakami's success in the international art market does not, however, lead his arts to a less victimized position; his success and failure remain largely determined by the concepts of art, originality, and so forth in Western art history and the art market.

Murakami's return to history and sarcastic portrayal of Japanese nationhood rather reflects a growing anxiety over the extended economic downfall during the post-bubble period. As the historian Takashi Fujitani has noted, the flattening out of culture during the 1990s 'may, in fact, be stimulating a new search for authenticity' (cited in Munroe 1994: 34). To reiterate, Murakami's preoccupation with the atomic bomb already resonated in the dominant discourse in the 1990s through the works of influential writers such as Kato and Fukuoka, whose theories came to provoke a rise of the new nationalistic stance – albeit historical consciousness. In that respect, Murakami's depiction of postwar Japan is less about actual conditions right after the war than about critical perceptions of Japanese nationhood, with the hindsight of the 1990s – Murakami seeks to remind us that history is, in the end, not a reproduction, but 'a reconstruction of the past.'[30]

If this is the case, what are the roles of Murakami's art and theory in the retrieval of historical memory and in the formation of a national subject? We cannot be definitive about Murakami's purpose and stance – whether he takes a critical stance or has decided to be merely complicit with the domination of American art and culture in Japan – let alone the effectiveness of his strategy. Yet we can still point out contradictions and complicated implications regarding the relationship between American and Japanese arts and culture as conceived by Murakami.

Furthermore, the international success of Japanese comics, animations, and games from the 1990s onward, particularly in the United States, has enabled scholars and critics of contemporary Japanese culture to propose totally different views about the relationship between postwar Japanese and American culture and art. In *Recentering Globalization: Popular Culture and Japanese Transnationalism* Koichi Iwabuch (2002) noted the huge popularity and influence of Japanese animation, manga, and games among international youth and children. Primarily dealing with the expansion of Japanese popular culture in America, Roland Keltz (2006) further titled his book *Japanamerica: How Japanese Pop Culture Has Invaded the U.S.*[31] Some of the fanatical phrases are equally dubious, yet Murakami's theory of postwar Japanese people during the early 1990s seems to contradict the ever-increasing visibility and presence of Japanese culture – particularly *otaku*-related culture – in the West from the 1990s. According to the 2002 report 'Japan's Gross National Cool' on the rising Japanese subculture among international youth or popular culture, published in *Foreign Policy*, Japan reinvented itself as a superpower in different areas of sub- or popular culture

throughout the 1990s. The decade of the 1990s in Japan is often considered a period of economic and social downturn, and beneath its widely reported political and economic misfortunes, Japan has quietly grown in global cultural influence. 'From pop music to consumer electronics, architecture to fashion, and animation and cuisine, Japan looks more like a cultural superpower today than it did in the 1980s when it was an economic one' (McGray 2002: 44).

Considering the growing visibility and impact of Japanese subculture in various parts of the world, especially America, it is far from a coincidence that Murakami employed elements of *otaku* culture. As a savvy artist, Murakami himself wrote that Japanese artists have to be more keenly aware of the development of international art and culture, particularly works developed in the major art market of America. In his thorough examination of marketing strategy, Murakami underscored the importance of knowledge of the western art market as well as history. 'In order to stand up to Western artists, I analyzed the mechanism of Western art. I also polished my skills in creative management, making hypotheses and testing them,' writes Murakami. Moreover, the artist, using Japanese *otaku* culture, recontextualized Japanese subculture within Western history or art history in order to make his art critically engaging yet attractive to Western audiences and critics (cited in Itoi 2005).

Therefore, the question no longer concerns whether Japan became more passive and independent of America or not; rather, it concerns the consequences of his theory of 'Little Boy.' Murakami's arts and theory, which persistently underscored the image of Japan as a victim, often led to the ignorance of the pain or voices of real victims, both inside and outside Japan. The image of the 'Time Bokan' printed on the surface of Louis Vuitton's bag may trigger an unmistakable association with the atomic bomb, but certainly not with bomb victims' indescribable pain and related historical memories. Even more so, Murakami's perception of the Second World War undermines Japan's aggression toward other Asian nations such as Korea and China during the Pacific War. (The Japanese government consistently has trouble with acknowledging Japan's violence against other Asians. The majority of Japanese students have not been exposed to any rigorous understanding of the country's wartime history and its current ramifications, and Japanese history education has become an ongoing source of diplomatic feuding with 'victimized' nations such as Korea and China.[32])

According to Mori, Murakami and his colleague Sawaragi deliberately underscore violence upon the Japanese people, rather than violence perpetuated by the Japanese people. Mori cites Sawaragi's theory of Japanese war painters such as Fujita Tsuguharu during the Pacific War. It is Sawaragi's contention that postwar Japanese art history continuously suppressed war painting that celebrates Japanese militarism, and this repressed origin, according to Sawaragi, emblematizes the distinctive historical circumstances of postwar Japanese art and culture. If the official Japanese art history consistently ignores the history of war painting, as Sawaragi argues, images of cruelty and violence remain only in the 'subcultural imagination' of TV programs, films, comics, and animations (Sawaragi 2002: 388). While Sawaragi's theory, as well as Murakami's 'Little Boy' syndrome, attempt to propose an alternative lineage of postwar Japanese art history, their historical perception never comes to terms with Japanese violence against other Asians. Mori hereby makes an important distinction between two types of violence during the war: Japan's violence toward Asians and people of other countries, and the violence that the Japanese themselves suffered. Between these two, as Mori argues, Murakami and Sawaragi concentrate on images of and references to the cruelty of war occurring within Japan, not the violence that Japan perpetuated abroad.

> If we look at the Japanese pop culture which Sawaragi identified with the followers of the war painters, we find them heavily obsessed only with the violence of the latter part of the war, in particular the atomic bombs in Hiroshima and Nagasaki and the air raids on Tokyo. (Mori 2006: 182)

Thus, the history of the Second World War and the atomic bomb may have different resonances for Japanese people, for Asians experiencing the Japanese occupation during the Second World War, and for Americans. Unlike the Japanese, who strive to forget about the tragic history of the Second World War, other Asians in the region still have a vivid historical memory of Japanese cruelty. Likewise, Americans who witnessed the destructive consequence of the atomic bomb may have concurred with Murakami's criticism of American militarism. It might not be an exaggeration to say that Murakami's tactics of using historical references to the atomic bomb, for the most part, are designed to elicit the collective guilt of Americans. With the ongoing restrictions and demonstrations against nuclear bombs in the West, the tragic historical event of the atomic bomb can be a productive, relevant, and less painful issue for a non-Japanese audience than for Japanese and Asian audiences. In that respect, the image of 'Little Boy' is less representative of an obsession of the Japanese than an obsession of Americans or Westerners, for whom most of Murakami's artistic productions are perceived as emblematizing the unique historical circumstances of postwar Japan.

Representing historical tragedy is, in the end, far from being easy. After the Holocaust, German philosopher Theodor Adorno described the impossibility of reducing historical tragedy into a work of art:

> When it [the Holocaust] is turned into an image …, for all its harshness and discordance it is as though the embarrassment one feels before the victims were being violated. The victims are turned into works of art, tossed out to be gobbled up by the world that did them in. (Adorno 1974: 88)

As Adorno puts it, artistic representation not only transports critical meanings attached to the tragedy of the Holocaust, but also makes certain meanings unthinkable. Subsequently, 'it [the Holocaust] becomes transfigured, and something of its horror is removed.' Adorno's wisdom reminds us of the fundamental problem with the representation of historical horrors and tragedies. With the coming of Murakami and Japanese contemporary artists concentrating on the historical memory of the Atomic Bomb, any efforts to re-present the victimized condition of Japan as a nation became more problematic and even appeared 'perverse.' While Murakami's 'superflat,' both figuratively and symbolically, 'flattens out' un-representable 'horrors' into a mere artistic style, his paradoxically cute art and theory concerning a victimized Japan consistently attract people's attention as the emerging hot commodity in the art market.

Notes

1. Asian contemporary art, as David Clarke noted, may still be 'viewed as comforting evidence that the non-Western world is becoming more like the West, is learning to speak its (artistic) language' (Clarke 1997: 238).
2. The 1998 Enola Gay exhibition in the Smithsonian Museum indicated the continued difficulties with dealing with the historical memory of the atomic bomb. The exhibition was about the B-29 bomber used in the atomic mission that destroyed Hiroshima, Japan, and focused on the research and reconstruction of the original Enola Gay bomb, also known as 'Little Boy,' deliberately bypassing its terrible consequences for the Japanese people. Its overly militaristic and American point of view reminded the visitor not only of the inconsiderate curatorial approach, but also of the persistent anxiety related to tragic historical memories (Crane 2006: 318-334).
3. According to Julian Stallabrass, the rise of data-based productions on a global scale was concurrent with the development of neoliberal economics, which became pronounced in Germany and Japan. During the 1990s, Stallabrass argues, these two economic powers lost the alternative model to American neoliberal economy in their domestic economic policies as they underwent serious stagnation and decline (Stallabrass 2004: 75–76).

4. The first exhibition of the 'Superflat' series took place at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, in 2001. As a student of *Nihonga* painting from the National University of Tokyo, Murakami first noted the two-dimensional and anti-realistic traits of the Edo period painting, which served as a historical prototype for the 'Superflat' style he has advocated. According to Murakami, 'Superflat' style also constitutes important characteristics of Japanese subculture such as anime and manga popularized produced during the postwar years in Japan. The 2005 exhibition 'Little Boy' is also drawn upon Murakami's interpretation of the 'Superflat' style in accordance with his basic stance toward historical and aesthetic conditions of postwar Japan (Murakami 2000: 8-25).

5. Murakami's 'little boy' metaphor resonates with the famous historical line uttered by General MacArthur during the American occupation immediately after the war. MacArthur stated that 'measured by the standards of modern civilization,' the Japanese 'would be like a boy of twelve' (Dower 1993: 550); a number of historians have already noted the problematic nature of Japan's nationhood. Mararu Tamamoto (cited in Mikanagi 2005: 3), for instance, argues that Japan's national identity is ambiguous, as it is caught in a compromised state between sovereignty and independence, particularly in relation to the United States, whose occupation reshaped the foundation of postwar Japanese society and continues to exert an influence on Japan. A similar argument was made by Marilyn Ivy, who applied the Freudian concept of trauma to the origins of the Japanese nation-state, which was heavily marked by the defeat of the Second World War and a 'split personality' (Ivy 2008: 169–178).

6. What Murakami has noted as 'little boy syndrome' or the impotent culture of postwar Japanese society is similar to the passive and feminized images prescribed by Edward Said in his influential *Orientalism* (Said 1979). While Said focused primarily on the exoticization of 'Arab Orientals,' many of the important traits proposed in *Orientalism* are applicable to other 'Oriental' nationalities, including the Japanese. Murakami's theory of the victimized self-image of postwar Japan corresponds to traditional stereotypes of 'Orientals' as proposed in Said's book. Considering his association with *otaku*, it is also worth noting David Morley and Kevin Robins's discourses on Techno-Orientalism. According to the Techno-Orientalist's view, the stereotype of the Japanese during the postwar years as lacking any critical and independent self-consciousness yet filled with technological obsession befits the typical trope used to identify the Orient as opposed to the West (Morley and Robins 1995: 153).

7. According to Murakami, anime is one of the rare popular genres where 'the impotence or weakness of Japanese cultural condition can be provided,' and thus 'the more ripples it [anime] has caused, the more Otaku has been shunned within Japanese society' (Murakami 2001b: 66); Murakami also introduces himself as *otaku*. 'I like to immerse myself in thinking and talking about things in fantasy world that have no role in society whatsoever' (Murakami 1999a: 44).

8. *Otaku* literally translates as 'your home' and by association 'you,' 'yours,' and 'home,' and it was taken from the vocabulary of fulltime homemakers whose identity is overly determined by their association with home as opposed to the social and public realm; during the late 1980s and 1990s, there were a number of incidents that provoked prejudice against the group of *otaku* people and their culture. In 1989, Tsutomu Miyazaki became known as 'The Otaku Murderer,' as his patterns of murdering small children closely resembled scenes in popular mangas and animations. Throughout the 1990s, social hostility against *otaku* seemed on the rise as more people with similar interest in anime and manga became suspects in sex crimes. In contrast, contemporary Japanese artists adopted the images from *otaku* culture as kind of anti- or counter-aesthetics during the 1990s, especially after the collapse of the bubble economy (Ito 1998: 6). Murakami also briefly explained the negative perception of *otaku* among members of the Japanese public during the 1990s (Murakami 2005: 132-34).

9. Murakami was drawn to *otaku* culture instead of Japanese avant-garde due to the absence of a system properly evaluating originality of contemporary fine arts in Japan (Murakami and Morimura 1999: 86-102).

10. According to Sawaragi, the lack of historical consciousness, pervasive among members of the Japanese avant-garde, prompted 'despair and an insecure intellect seeking solace in the rhetorical resolution of an ironic Japanese a-history' (Sawaragi 1998: 30).

11. The reputation of Japanese culture as the combination of foreign and imported cultures is far from being new, as the Kano style of painting during the Edo period is also conceived as the Japanese adaptation of 16th century Chinese ink painting with a Japanese propensity for decorations (Tsuji 1992: 4). Koichi Iwabuchi used the term 'deodorizing' to refer to how Japanese 'soft goods' such as anime, manga, and popular-culture games are consciously stripped of signs of their national origins to expand their marketability among international consumers, including Asian youths. Such efforts turn out to be successful in the international market, especially in Asian countries where antagonism against Japanese culture remains high (Iwabuchi 2002: 24–25).

12. DOB is an extremely hybrid character borrowing its features from different popular characters in manga and anime. Please refer to the detailed explanation about the origin of DOB; see Shimmel (2007: 65–66).

13. The name DOB was also believed to have been taken from the famous line of the late Japanese comedian Yuri Toru, who often posed the question *Dobojite dobojite?* (Why? Why?) in his own existential manner. Toru's philosophical manner is comparable to Murakami's open-minded approach toward the meaning of his art and theories.

14. Sawaragi also noted that cuteness could be a mask for power and control underneath (cited in Siegel 2005: 286). Yoshimoto Nara, along with Murakami, is notorious for his extremely cute characters often involved in aggressive, violent and even perverse behaviors. According to Siegel, in a 2002 drawing, Nana included one of his cute characters flying through the sky in an airplane and dropping a series of bombs (Siegel 2005: 286).

15. Moreover, in his recent comparative studies of international pop art, Sawaragi has boldly claimed that Murakami's art surpasses Western pop in his more creative and flexible mix of high and low or Eastern and Western aesthetics. According to Sawaragi, the previous generation of Japanese artists adopted popular imagery in fine art merely to follow the example of the Western avant-garde. Members of the new generation of Japanese pop artists, in contrast, have drawn their inspiration from 'authentic' Japanese experiences with *otaku*, bravely confronting 'the historical past' and 'the colonial origin of the new pop imagination' (Sawaragi 1999: 77–78).

16. Murakami played an important role in expanding the Japanese art market due to his prices soaring in the international auction houses and famous galleries in New York. With the success of Murakami and other young Japanese artists, such as Nara and Hiroshi Sugimoto, Japanese collectors became interested in Japanese contemporary arts. According to gallerist Atsuko Koyanagi, however, these works did not increase in value through Japanese auctions, but through European and American ones, and 'so in a sense it's like they are being imported back into Japan.' In terms of the scale of the art market and various forms of governmental and private funding for contemporary art, Japan still lags behind the West (Koyanagi 2009).

17. In his interview with the Lubow, Murakami said that he admired Warhol's fascination with ignoble and sometimes despicable things. In addition, Murakami's theory of the 'Superflat' is reminiscent of Warhol's famous line expressing his denial of depth and consistency of meaning: 'If you want to know all about Andy Warhol just look at the surface of my paintings and films and me, and there I am. There's nothing behind it' (cited in Stiles and Selz 1996: 340).

18. GENSAI project is an art fair and competition for young contemporary artists. It began in 1997 with the aim of blurring the distinction between professional and amateur artists and providing a platform for young artists to bypass the conventional art market system and art criticism. According to Matsui, a Japanese critic, the basic structure of GENSAI is a combination of the animations and manga fairs and festivals along with *Pride*, a new type of professional wrestling match in Japan (Matsui 2007: 98–103).

19. *Hiropon* is also slang for the drug heroin, suggestive of the addictive and perhaps unhealthy nature of *rorikon manga*, a genre of manga and anime that centers on childlike female characters being erotically portrayed. The term 'rorikon' originates from Vladmir Nabakov's famous book, *Lolita*, in which a middle-aged man becomes sexually obsessed with a sexually immature girl. Murakami also made the highly pornographic female sculpture closely resembling the typical character in *rorikon manga*.

20. Pamela Lee, a contemporary art critic and frequent contributor to *Artforum*, provided a detailed explanation of the creative process at Murakami's Factory from the artist's initial sketch to its total digitalization. This process signals the shifting concepts of artistic labor, creation, expression, etc (Lee 2007: 340–341).

21. Murakami's involvement with Minoru Mori, Tokyo real estate mogul and the most important collector of contemporary Japanese art, has been extensive. He began by designing 66 characters to be applied to various places and products, ranging from the exterior of buses carrying customers to the new shopping mall to key chains, dolls, and mugs. Murakami's design process for Mori's mall in Roppongi Hills is very similar to the transformative process of DOB (Rothkopf 2007: 151).

22. In his interview, Murakami claims that the character remains the strongest element in appealing to the audience: '[The] audience [doesn't need the artist, only the character' (cited in Cruz 1999: 17).

23. An entire museum gallery of his retrospective at Brooklyn, in 2008, is installed with Kaikai Kiki key chains, t-shirts, stickers and so forth. 'Kaikai' and 'Kiki' are cartoonish characters themselves, which represent the dual natures of angelic (Kaikai) and devilish (Kiki), and also appear in his paintings and sculptures.

24. Throughout his dissertation, essays, and interviews, Murakami repeatedly underscored that such a distinction is part of the Western artistic tradition, irrespective of the blurred boundary between art and design in Japan. Of course, historical precedent can be found in 18th-century Edo culture, particularly

Kano School artists whose decorative painting does not necessarily follow the definition of fine arts in the West. According to Murakami, it is also common for fine arts to be exhibited in department stores in Japan (Murakami 1999a: 44). The similarly critical view of the western hierarchy between fine arts and crafts is also proposed by critic Nobuo Tsuji (Tsuji 1992: 47).

25. In attacking the lack of financial stability of the Japanese art market, Murakami criticized Japanese society for discouraging the development of wealthy people who might become art collectors. '[Art] is an extremely expensive hobby.' With no self-identified privileged class after the war, Murakami laments, 'Japan failed to create an art market for the wealthy' (cited in Itoi 2005).

26. According to Matsui, the idea of the cowboy character might be drawn from a novel of the same title by Yoshio Kataoka about a truck driver on his American tour. As Murakami himself told the artist Paul McCarthy, *My Lonesome Cowboy* might be his 'twisted U.S. image,' namely his perception of America. The image of a man with an enlarged penis may remind one of a scroll from the Edo period on the theme of 'phallic contests.' Murakami installed two paintings depicting splashes of water as an imitation of Hokusai's famous rendition of an immense frothy wave (Matsui 1999: 19).

27. Tom of Finland's illustrations during the 1960s introduced images of bikers and overly masculine men, rejecting the stereotype of lean and feminine homosexual men in America.

28. Murakami's *Choas* in 1998 presents the image of DOB with darker skin, big lips, and curly hair, implying the typical traits of African physiognomy. Such an abrupt transformation of the DOB character may indicate the artist's criticism of racial purity and pride in Japan, and seen from this context, Murakami's *shōjo* character, which shows Japanese fascination with the Western physiognomy, may imply the other side of the Japanese racist complex.

29. The words 'Kaikai' and 'Kiki' roughly translate as 'good' and 'evil,' which suggests a self-conscious duality in Murakami's commercial enterprises. 'Kaikai kiki' was also used by a critic of the 18th century to describe the work of Kano Eitoku, the Kano master of the Second generation of the Kano school, a style of painting that Murakami has been greatly inspired by.

30. According to historian Dominick LaCapra, historical memory is always affected by elements not deriving from the experience itself. 'What occurs is not integrated into experience or directly remembered, and the event must be reconstructed from its effects and traces' (LaCapra 1998: 21).

31. According to Keltz, the recent wave of 'Japanophilia,' compared with the previous generation's fascination with the traditional culture of Japan during the late 19th century, sparked greater interest in contemporary Japan, Japanese popular culture, and Japanese cities (Keltz 2006: 1–8).

32. It was only in 1997 that the Ministry of Education approved of school textbooks that began to admit – albeit in very watered-down terms – acts of aggression such as the Nanjing massacre, the existence of biological warfare laboratories, and state-sanctioned coerced prostitution.

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Special terms

Dobojite とぼちて
Kaikai Kiki カイカイキキ
Kawaii 可愛い
Kawaisa 可愛さ
New Nationalism 新國家主義
Nihonga 日本画
Nihonjinron 日本人論
Otaku おたく/オタク
Rorikon Manga ロリコン漫画
The Kanō school 狩野派
The Meiji restoration 明治維新 (1868-1912)
Ukiyo-e 浮世絵

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Dong-Yeon Koh (고동연) is currently a lecturer at Korea National University of Arts in Seoul. Professor Koh specialized in the study of male sexualities within the New York avant-garde during the 1950s for her PhD in art history at the City University of New York, Graduate Center. Her work on art history and Asian Studies now focuses on issues of nationalism, popular culture, and the development of contemporary arts in Asia, in lieu with her interest in masculinities. She is currently working on the reception of Japanese animations in Korean arts and culture during the 1970s and 1980s.

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