

Generation Superflat: Fashion Fusions and Disappearing Divisions in the 21st Century

Cindy Lisica
University of the Arts London

With the import and export of culture being as quick and simple as the click of a mouse, or as complex and historic as global political conflict, the development of cross-cultural relationships is critical to the success of today's major artists and galleries around the world. It is important for artists to have a comprehensive knowledge of multiple disciplines of visual art, technology, design and fashion. Many rising artists are focused on creating a body of work that leaves a lasting impression through commerce, and the synthesis of ideas and layering of identities via cross-cultural exchange have produced a new form of hybrid and hyper Pop art, often as high fashion items and other retail products. Superflat art and theory, conceived by Takashi Murakami, is a multi-dimensional concept (or, a complex flatness) that merges art with popular culture, while also referring to the two-dimensional aesthetic in traditional Japanese painting.

In a globalised world, contemporary conditions require an expanded examination of the crossovers between 'high' and 'low' culture, as well as challenges to the concepts of art and its privileged status within cultural production. This paper does not attempt to reconcile the division between art and commodity, however, it will reveal the contestations and complexities in the way Superflat relates with the conceptual line between traditional binary divisions, with particular focus on the worlds of art and fashion, and the occasions where the layering of meanings are highlighted. By connecting the anime and manga forms in Superflat to Edo techniques, Murakami presents his Superflat concept as a merging of art and commercial culture, while also establishing it as a carefully selected Japanese export to the West and questioning the socially and academically constructed definitions of art.

Although Murakami once stated that 'nothing new is coming out of the Japanese art scene' (2000a, n.p.), there is nonetheless something extraordinary that has resulted from its appropriation of Western popular culture and in relation to the psyche of the generation to which Murakami belongs. Superflat results from a postwar culture of fantasy that is both unique to contemporary Japan and hugely successful in the international art market. In Murakami's oeuvre, hyper-colored mushroom forms create cartoon landscapes. Naked girls transform into fighter planes, while inflatable heads hover above, staring down with multiple eyes and random patches of hair. Images of mutation, war and exhaustion are disguised as playful, lovable and marketable characters with names like 'KaiKai' and 'Kiki.' One critic asks, 'If you can give a face to the fear that hangs over the twenty-first century, does it become easier to live with? If you can stylize angst, does this allow you to step back from it?' (Roberts 2002, 70). By way of the events of the past and present media saturation, Superflat art is born.

According to scholar and curator Midori Matsui, Superflat refuses to be categorized as "homogeneously Japanese" (2007, 34), while offering a precedent for Japanese art with a universal appeal, opening the Japanese establishment to contemporary art and helping to explain contemporary Japan to the world. (ibid., 37) Marc Steinberg sees Superflat as a logic of surface-ness that is a condition of what he calls "cybernetic" capitalism. (2003) To Steinberg, Superflat is less an expression of a Japanese sensibility and more an aesthetic that is informed by the presence of technology and digital environments in a globalised world. (2004) Victoria Lu, Curator of the Museum of Contemporary Art, Taipei, describes an 'ultra new vision in contemporary art,' recognizing the

creative development and 'self-identity of the new generation' with aesthetic tastes influenced by popular culture and digital environments, combined with the limitless desires of consumers. (Lu 2004, 18-19)

Superflat attempts to understand the confusion of a generation who did not experience first-hand the devastation of the second World War, but were handed down the experience of a post-defeat culture and questions of identity during a period of mass economic growth and Americanization, certainly heightened by the 1980s bubble economy, its bursting, and Emperor Hirohito's death in 1989. Murakami's international success begins shortly thereafter in the early 1990s, when he patented his 'Dob' character. Today, Mr. Dob can be found on T-shirts, keychains and plush toys in museum shops around the world.

Dob is Murakami's 'self-portrait of the Japanese people.' (Murakami 1999, 63) In the 1999 sculpture *Dob in a Strange Forest*, the character appears sweet and innocent, approaching a colorful mushroom gathering. Later (along with Murakami's popularity and workload), the character evolves, perhaps corrupted by what he has encountered. Over the years, Dob is nothing short of monstrous; he has jagged teeth, he is vomiting, and we also see the recurring and now classic Murakami motif of multiple eyes, which, he says, 'see everything but understand nothing.' (2007, n.p.) *Tan Tan Bo Puking (a.k.a. Gero Tan)* was created in 2002, within the first year of the formation of Murakami's commercial enterprise, Kaikai Kiki Company, Ltd. As Dob is frequently understood to be Murakami's alter-ego, it is interesting to witness the transformation of the character into a completely new one with a (not so cute) new name. He has consumed and regurgitated; there are other creatures feeding from his excretions. It is a scene of graphic violence, in which the character has sprouted eyes that cannot seem to focus, and we are no longer able to locate his gaze.

Murakami's original Dob character also appears in the monumentally large painting (15'L x 10'H), 727, which featured prominently in all four locations of ©MURAKAMI retrospective and appears as the cover image of the exhibition catalogue. The surface texture was created by laboriously applying and then sanding away layer upon layer of paint to the canvas, a process that evokes techniques of nihonga, the late nineteenth century form of traditional Japanese art that was a nationalist response against Western styles of the time (such as Impressionism) and also the subject and practice of Murakami's PhD. At first look, the curling lines that engulf him resemble a wave, recalling the famous *Great Wave* presented by one of the most recognised Japanese artists of all time, Katsushika Hokusai (1761-1849), and his *36 Views of Mt. Fuji*. Considering the title of 727, which commonly refers to a passenger jet airplane, Murakami's black lines actually form a cloud through which Dob is floating (or flying). Associations with World War II air raids may come to mind, and this is not the first time Murakami has used an airplane theme. *Miss Koko* as *The Second Mission Project* transforms into a fighter jet. Murakami's 727 has been compared to Warhol's "Oxidation" series (Schimmel 2007, 72-73), because of the similarities in the appearance of the surface texture. The main source, however, is the early-Edo period painting by Sotatsu Tawaraya, *Wind God and Thunder God*, which bears a similar composition and depth created with ink on gold leaf. (Mori 2003, n.p.)

In early works from the start of the 1990s, the original Dob character is always blue. Close scrutiny of the monochromatic work, *Dob Genesis* (1993), reveals that this blue is no ordinary blue; it appears to be remarkably similar to Klein blue, whose medium was developed and patented by the artist Yves Klein in the late 1950s, and the pigment is now officially known as *IKB* or *International Klein Blue*. Murakami was also interested in the neo-Expressionist works and heroic personas of Julian Schnabel and Anselm Kiefer at the time. (Yoshitake 2007, n.p.) Murakami acknowledges Western art historical influences, and consequently, by connecting his emphasis on planarity and surface value to an authentic Japanese tradition through his *Theory of Super Flat Japanese Art* (Murakami 2000b, 9-25), he challenges indications that Western artists offered innovation to Japanese early modern styles, insinuating that Edo period art was essentially postmodern and that Superflat art is even flatter than 1950s American Modernism.

Murakami's *Signboard TAKASHI* (1992), created while Murakami was still in art school, is a painted replica of the print advertisement and logo for the plastic and resin model kit manufacturer, Tamiya, the same company who made the miniature plastic tanks and toy soldiers that Murakami enjoyed as a child in the late 1960s. It was not until later that Murakami reconsidered the company's slogan, 'First in quality around the world,' which he considers to be a remarkably ambitious, rare and grand statement for a Japanese company, especially in the postwar time period. (2007, n.p.) He appreciates its pride, as he believes the Japanese had no collective confidence after the traumatic end of World War II. His appropriation of the advertisement, inserting his own name ('TAKASHI' in place of 'TAMIYA'), also demonstrates that Murakami was developing the idea of his own brand identity.

The anime and manga-influenced work often empathizes with and then violently corrupts, even demonizes, the false innocence of this monster of modern society. Daniel Etherington of the BBC says, 'There's an apocalyptic, religious dimension to the deceptively innocent cartoon psychedelics.' (2003, n.p.) This paradox is crucial to the

analysis of Superflat, as Americanization and traditionally dominant Eurocentric art establishments are imbedded in the work, yet directly conflict with it. Murakami has stated, 'Superflatness is an original concept of the Japanese, who have been completely westernized.' (2000b, 5) Thus, Murakami indicates that this crisis of identity need not be resolved and cannot be separated from the influence of Western culture, which is now so intrinsically part of Japan's modernization; the inauthenticity of Japanese contemporary society is what makes it unique.

Murakami believes that 'only those artists who have an ability in marketing can survive in the art world,' (2000a, n.p.) and he proves his marketing talent with his business enterprise, Kaikai Kiki Company, Ltd., which manages and promotes artists careers, handles production, and states on the website that it is the 'first Japanese company looking to the future to develop and promote state-of-the-art contemporary artworks.' Not only does Murakami manage the studios and offices of Kaikai Kiki in New York and Tokyo, but he also included a fully functional Louis Vuitton designer retail shop selling the handbags sporting his original designs in the middle of his current traveling retrospective exhibition.

Murakami's marketing and networking talents resulted in the Louis Vuitton commission and his teaming up with high-profile fashion designer Marc Jacobs. Driven by a huge marketing campaign and hype created via limited availability, the bags garnered instant success. The 2007-2009 ©MURAKAMI exhibition was heavily criticized in the media in the United States for its inclusion of the retail shop selling the full line of Murakami-designed Louis Vuitton handbags and products. In an article in the NY Observer in 2008, during the Brooklyn Museum tour of the ©MURAKAMI Retrospective, a contributor writes, 'He makes deals with the likes of Mr. Vuitton because he knows that Significant Artists have their day in contemporary culture and that fashion is forever. In a few years or so, some savvy operator will exploit adolescence with a similar showmanlike immediacy and upstage Mr. Murakami.' (2008, n.p.)

This view looks regards the Louis Vuitton collaboration as a 'deal' and implies that Murakami is a manipulative businessman or a status-hungry pseudo-celebrity, poised to pounce upon and 'exploit' anyone who is naive enough to buy or want his product (or image), which further removes Murakami from the notion of being a respectable artist. However, the collaborative nature of art, fashion, and business practice has been demonstrated by artists throughout the twentieth century. Warhol began his art career by illustrating fashion advertisements and designing department store window displays, as did Salvador Dali. Picasso and Matisse both designed textiles for British manufacturers after the war. Designer Coco Chanel drew inspiration from modern art movements, while Surrealism branched out into cinema and fashion.

In the history of fashion, encounters with art have usually been limited to a designer having looked at and been 'inspired' by a painting or an art movement. In the history of art, many artists have either come to use fashion as a subject for their art, or fashion objects, such as clothing, as a medium for their work. Man Ray and Dali formed exchanges with fashion designers and worked with photography in the 1930s, which was radical and avant-garde at the time. In the 1980s and 1990s, many artists translated their artistic sensibilities into projects with fashion designers, as revealed in the *Art/Fashion* exhibition catalogue at the Guggenheim Museum Soho:

Today art and fashion hold up a mirror, where each can sparkle in its own right, or seek to find a reflection in the other's activity. The encounters and collaborations between Tony Cragg and Karl Lagerfeld, Miuccia Prada and Damien Hirst, Jil Sander and Mario Merz, Oliver Herring and Rei Kawakubo, Roy Lichtenstein and Gianni Versace, Azzedin Alaïa and Julian Schnabel, Jenny Holzer and Helmut Lang, move within the tradition of the historic avant-gardes. They are the closing of a circle, one that reopens with infinite questions about the future of art as well as fashion. (Asbaghi 1996, 39)

Murakami has introduced another combination, or reopened this circle. His collaboration with designer Marc Jacobs goes in a new direction, creating a more complete relationship between the two worlds and forming an interesting cycle of inspiration and innovation between mutually creative muses. The monogram design becomes the subject of his paintings. The relationship becomes the subject of an animation shown at Louis Vuitton shops as well as fine art galleries, which is an advertisement for the Louis Vuitton brand. Simultaneously, Murakami's colorful monogram design for the handbags also comes to symbolize Murakami's own brand. All of these crossovers sometimes feel uneasy for art professionals, and familiar Pop art debates (and the legacy of Warhol) arise about whether the work is a celebration of commercialism or a critique of contemporary post-capitalist conditions. In either case, the tension and criticism generated continues to affirm the existence of a division between art and product. The tendency to blend art into the postmodern climate of global capitalism serves commercial interests, but also presents a risk wherein the critical content of art is evacuated.

While Murakami acknowledges the characteristics of modernization in Superflat, he is able to reconstruct Japanese identity as a flexible model of hybridity and asserts this as a new identity, where assimilation is a skill

characteristic of Japanese culture. He then presents the cultural difference as a unique commodity in the global art market, while simultaneously highlighting the occasions where cultural signifiers overlap. He is then able to re-import his identity as a successful artist in the West in order to strengthen his profile in Japan.

Warhol said in his comical and thought-provoking book *America*, 'When you think about it, department stores are kind of like museums.' (1985, 43) Perhaps no one would agree more than Murakami, who claims, 'Art is not universal, but more like a fashion with a little longer life span.' (in Itoi 2003, 134) One can find Murakami's larger-than-life size fiberglass figures in Louis Vuitton retail shops, paintings inspired by the LV monogram, and, in the museum exhibition retail shop, Murakami has taken the material used to make the handbags and stretched it over canvas frames to sell as limited edition prints. So, with Murakami, we have luggage displayed in a museum and art displayed in a luggage shop; and in his native Tokyo, where there is a long history of art galleries in department stores, none of this would seem out of the ordinary.

One Japanese curator has asks about Murakami, 'Will he show us the future of art or will he destroy it?' and finds that, 'when we are faced with Murakami we can only stand and cry out, 'I am against being for it.' (Minami 2001, 63) Despite some critics who view this work as opportunistic and superficial, Murakami's status continues to build. With record sales, an international museum retrospective, a biannual successful art fair and hundreds of employees working for his offices in New York and Tokyo, it is plausible to say that Murakami has secured a significant place in art history.

Does Superflat capture the new aesthetic of the twenty-first century? The bright colors, shiny appearance, precise craftsmanship and seductive forms give Superflat work qualities shared by the commodities it supposedly should question, but is the line between art and product really being threatened, or does the distinction between the two remain intact, while Murakami has it both ways? Not everyone agrees about where the art ends and the commerce begins, or if the distinction even matters, but, in Murakami's case, the artist has control of every facet of his organization and his projects, including the licensing and sale of any related merchandise in the museum shop. Contrary to Western avant-garde ideals, but right in line with neo-Pop banality, Murakami is certainly making commercial culture work for him, and if there ever was a tangible line between art and product, Murakami is flattening it.

Works Cited

- Asbaghi, Pandora Tanatabai (curator) and Celant, Germano (ed.). *Art/Fashion*. New York: Guggenheim Museum SoHo, 1996.
- Etherington, Daniel. "Editors Review: Takashi Murakami at the Serpentine Gallery." 14 November 2003. *BBC Collective*. Accessed 18 January 2007 <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/dna/collective/A875162>>.
- Itoi, Kay. "The Wizard of DOB," in ARTnews 100, no. 3 (March 2001): 134-137.
- Lu, Victoria in Suchen Hsieh. (ed.) *Fiction. Love: Ultra New Vision in Contemporary Art*. Taipei: Museum of Contemporary Art, 2004: 18-19.
- Matsui, Midori. *The Age of Micropop: The New Generation of Japanese Artists*. Tokyo: Parko, 2007.
- Minami, Yusuke. "Takashi Murakami Strikes Back," in Takashi Murakami (ed.), *Summon Monsters? Open the Door? Heal? Or Die?* Tokyo: Kaikai Kiki, 2001, 58-63.
- Mori, Yashiko. "Japanese Cultural Evening." The Royal Academy, London, March 2003. Unpublished CD-ROM, 2003.
- Murakami, Takashi. "Exhibition Tour." ©MURAKAMI. 2007. Museum of Contemporary Art. Accessed 29 January 2008 <<http://www.moca.org/murakami>>.
- _____. "Kaikai Kiki's Objectives." 2005. *Kaikai Kiki Co., Ltd.* Accessed 15 September 2008 <<http://english.kaikaikiki.co.jp/whatskaikaikiki/activity>>.
- _____. Interview with Mako Wakasa. "Takashi Murakami." 2000a. *The Journal of Contemporary Art*. Accessed 3 March 2004 <<http://www.jca-online.com/murakami.html>>.
- _____. *Super Flat*. Tokyo: MADRA, 2000b.
- _____. *The Meaning of the Nonsense of the Meaning*. New York: Center for Curatorial Studies, Bard College and Harry N. Abrams, 1999.
- Naves, Mario. "Warhol, Porn and Vuitton." 15 April 2008. *The New York Observer*. <<http://www.observer.com/2008/warhol-porn-and-vuitton>>.
- Roberts, James. "Magic Mushrooms." *Frieze* October 2002: 66-71.
- Schimmel, Paul. "Making Murakami" in ©MURAKAMI. Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art, 2007, 52-79.
- Steinberg, Marc. "Otaku consumption, superflat art and the return to Edo." *Japan Forum*. November 2004, Vol 16, Issue 3: 449-71.
- _____. "Characterizing a new seriality: Murakami Takashi's DOB project" in Parachute # 110 (April/ May/June 2003): 91-109.
- Warhol, Andy. *America*. New York: Harper & Row, 1985.
- Yoshitake, Mika. "Gallery talk" (gallery tour for ©MURAKAMI) at MOCA Geffen Contemporary, Los Angeles (13 January 2007, 3pm).

Please mention the bibliographic information when referring to this book:

Imaginary Japan: Japanese Fantasy in Contemporary Popular Culture. Edited by Eija Niskanen. Turku: International Institute for Popular Culture, 2010. (Available as an e-Book at <http://iipc.utu.fi/publications.html>).