SUPERFLAT WORLDS:
A Topography of Takashi Murakami
and the Cultures of Superflat Art

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the
degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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DECLARATION

I certify that except where due acknowledgement has been made, the work is that of the author alone; the work has not been submitted previously, in whole or in part, to qualify for any other academic award; the content of the thesis is the result of work which has been carried out since the official commencement date of the approved research program; and, any editorial work, paid or unpaid, carried out by a third party is acknowledged.

Kristen Sharp

30 August 2006
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Note on Japanese names:

Japanese names are written in the usual Japanese style, with the surname first. The only exceptions are when an individual is better known internationally with the order of names reversed (e.g., Takashi Murakami). Macrons are put on long Japanese vowels except in the case of words commonly known in English (e.g., Tokyo). Special terms are italicised but not generally capitalised (e.g., *nihonga*).
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SUMMARY

A TOPOGRAPHY OF TAKASHI MURAKAMI AND THE CULTURES OF SUPERFLAT ART

This thesis maps Takashi Murakami’s *Theory of Superflat Art* and his associated artistic practices and works. The study situates Murakami and Superflat within the context of globalising culture. The thesis interrogates Murakami’s art and the theory of superflat within the historical, social, and cultural contexts of their production-consumption in Japan, the United States, and Europe. The thesis identifies Superflat art and Murakami’s work as actively participating in, and expressing, the cultural conditions associated with the 'global postmodern' and globalisation processes. The thesis employs a Cultural Studies theoretical and heuristic framework, utilising a range of contemporary critical theorisations on postmodern art, Japanese cultural identity and globalisation. This framework and approach are adopted in order to draw attention to ways in which Murakami and Superflat articulate and represent the fundamental contentions and dialogues that characterise contemporary globalisation processes. The tensions that are articulated in relation to the discursive construction of the concepts of art/commodity, modern/postmodern and global/local cultural identities.

Importantly, this research demonstrates the ways in which Murakami both participates in, and challenges, the conceptual distinctions indexed within the concepts of 'art' as an aesthetic expression and 'commodity' as an object of symbolic exchange in the global marketplace. It interprets Superflat as an 'expressivity' that challenges binary demarcations being constructed between art and commercial culture, and between the aesthetic-cultural identities of Japan and the West. This thesis problematises the meaning of Murakami’s concept and aesthetic of Superflat art by drawing attention to these contestations within Murakami’s works and Superflat which are generated as they circulate globally.

The thesis argues that Murakami strategically presents his work and Superflat art as an expression of Japanese identity which paradoxically also expresses the fluid imaginings of cultural
identity available through contemporary global exchanges. This deliberate territorialising and deterritorialising impulse does not resolve the contentions emerging in globalisation, but rather amplifies them, exposing the key debates on the formation of cultural identity as an oppositional expression and as a commodity in global markets. The concept of ‘strategic essentialism’ is used as a theoretical lens in order to understand Murakami and Superflat’s activation of these global processes. This research contributes a valuable case study to the understanding of cultural production as a strategic negotiation and expression of the flows of capital and culture in globalisation.
Surface is everything to Murakami - it’s all there is...If you want substance or meaning, you’re barking up the wrong show...But if you go with the visual flow, thunderbolts of impecability can keep these thoughts at bay for wonderful minutes at a time. Murakami is a style rider who works between pop art and popular culture (Saltz 1999, p. 65).

[I]t can be seen that embedded in the apparently vivid Superflat works, with their total absence of depth, are a variety of cultural, political, social and historical contexts concerning the relationships between high art and subculture, between Japan and America, between contemporary art and traditional Japanese art, between art and capitalism. If we place these contexts within brackets and pretend to ignore them, the strength of the high quality, super flat surface is most apparent, but the moment we summon up these contexts, the picture starts to hint at endless meanings. Smoothness and complication, beauty and high-functionality, Murakami imbues his paintings with unparalleled structure, a structure that resembles an incredibly carefully planned, highly-functional cyborg (Minami 2001, p. 61).

These quotations draw attention to the contested meanings generated by the ‘superflat’ surface aesthetic in the art works of the contemporary Japanese artist Takashi Murakami. The flat aesthetic not only refers to Murakami’s works; it is also a theory of Superflat art developed by Murakami. Superflat merges art with the commercial forms of Japanese popular culture, and secondly it refers to an aesthetic and genealogical connection that Murakami identifies between the two-dimensional conventions of Japanese painting and contemporary expressions of Japanese popular culture. The theory and works of Superflat art were presented in a group exhibition, Superflat, curated by Murakami himself in 2000.

Superflat is not just the title of an exhibition, a theory of art, or a description of Murakami’s artistic style; it also functions as a theorisation of the production-consumption of art within a

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1 Murakami’s Los Angeles dealer Tim Blum originally coined the term Superflat to describe Murakami’s paintings (Kaplan 2001).

2 The meanings of aesthetic are varied; it can refer to physical and visual properties and their sensational affects, and to a Kantian sense of the value and judgement of beauty in art which is determined by a broader system of cultural values. Aesthetics is used in this thesis more generally to refer to the visual properties of Murakami’s works and Superflat art; however, the Kantian reference will be explored in more detail in Chapter One in regards to post-Romantic definitions of art.
context of contemporary globalisation processes. That is, Murakami and Superflat art represent modes of meaning-making within a broadly defined and encompassing 'globalising culture'. This 'meaning-making' transverses the limited categories of 'art' or 'art production', overlapping broader cultural categories in 'commercial' and popular textualisation, as well as the range of theoretical considerations that are made evident in contemporary art and cultural analysis. Indeed, the analysis of the concept and expression of Superflat demonstrates the potential for diverse and complex interpretations which move away from and challenge Murakami's own presentation and understanding. In particular, Superflat and Murakami’s works can be understood as expressions of the complex relations between art, commodity and cultural identity in the contemporary cultural context in which they are produced-consumed. As these introductory quotations suggest, the smooth 'superflat' surface is a terrain of contestation, marking both the absence of hierarchical divisions between art and commercial culture and the presence of multiple structures demarcating the various cultural, political, social and historical contexts in which Superflat engages as it circulates globally.

TAKASHI MURAKAMI AND SUPERFLAT ART

Superflat was launched in Tokyo through the Superflat (2000) exhibition that subsequently travelled to the United States. Superflat was designed to travel globally. An elaborate, bilingual catalogue Super Flat (Murakami 2000b) was produced to accompany the exhibition which included Murakami’s A Theory of Super Flat Japanese Art (2000a), and it was the first in a trilogy of exhibitions curated by Murakami. According to Murakami, the trilogy of Superflat exhibitions were constructed to provide a cultural-historical context for the new form of Superflat art that Murakami was proposing, and which was specifically exported for Western audiences (Fujiwara 2005, p. 66).

3 For the purposes of clarity, Superflat (italicised) will be used when referring directly to the exhibition and Super Flat will be used in reference to the accompanying catalogue; Superflat (sans italics) will be used to denote the concept and theory of Superflat art. For this thesis, Superflat will be used in most instances to refer to both the theory of art and the exhibition concept more generally, unless the exhibition is specifically being referred to in which case Superflat will be used. The conflation of Super Flat into a singular term Superflat is based on Murakami’s employment of Superflat in subsequent publications (2001b; 2003).

4 Coloriage (2002) and Little Boy (2005) were the additional exhibitions in the Superflat trilogy. As well as the Los Angeles MOCA, Superflat was also shown at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis and the Henry Art Gallery in Seattle.

5 ‘Western’ is used here to denote a discursive construct, rather than an actual geo-political territory. The key difficulty in using it is that it implies a unitary category by collapsing multiple parts into one essentialised imaginary. This thesis uses Western as a
Murakami disseminates his concept of Superflat art.

*Theory of Super Flat Art* functioned as a manifesto for Murakami’s concept of a new form of art emerging from the creative expressions produced in Japanese *anime* (Japanese animation), *manga* (graphic novels), video games, fashion and graphic design. The *Superflat* exhibition at the Parco Gallery, Tokyo featured the work of Murakami, Yoshitomo Nara, HIROMIX, Shigeyoshi Ohi and emerging contemporary Japanese artists such as Mr., Chiho Aoshima, and Aya Takano. The exhibition also featured the work of graphic designers, fashion designers, *anime* and *manga* artists such as Hitoshi Tomizawa, groovisions, Henmaru Machino, Bome, Masahiro Nakagawa (20471129/Nakagawa-Sochi) and Hiro Sugiyama (Murakami 2000b).6

In *Theory of Superflat* Murakami identifies Superflat as a genealogy of aesthetics tendency in which contemporary Japanese visual culture has inherited a spirit of artistic innovation and creativity from the Edo period (1600-1867). The concept of a Superflat aesthetic lineage draws significantly on Japanese art historian Tsuji Nobuo’s *Kisō no Keifu* (Lineage of Eccentrics) (1970). Nobuo identified a common disposition among six Edo artists to ‘the production of eccentric and fantastic images’ (Tsuji qtd. in Murakami 2000a, p. 9).7 Nobuo also identified a tendency towards eccentricity and playfulness in contemporary forms of *anime* and *manga* (1986; 2001). Murakami extends Nobuo’s argument by presenting Superflat as an aesthetic that reinforces the two-dimensionality of the surface, a feature which he also recognises in the paintings of the Edo Eccentrics and *anime* texts such as *Galaxy Express 999* (2000a, pp. 9-15). This Superflat planar emphasis is achieved through a composition structure that directs the viewer’s gaze across the surface of the painting, rather than drawing it in through the conventions of Western linear perspective. As stated, Superflat can also be used to describe the visual style of Murakami’s works. In his own paintings, sculptures and other assorted productions Murakami appropriates the *kawaii* (cute) character icons and two-dimensional aesthetic of *anime* and *manga* and combines these with techniques and compositions derived from the traditions of

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6 A full list of the exhibitors is included in the *Super Flat* catalogue.

7 These include Iwasa Matabei, Kanō Sansetsu, Itō Jakuchū, Soga Shohaku, Nagasawa Rosetsu, and Utagawa Kuniyoshi.
Japanese painting.\(^8\)

By connecting Edo forms of Japanese painting with the contemporary commercial expressions emerging in \textit{anime}, \textit{manga}, video-games, fashion and graphic design, Murakami also presents Superflat as a merging of art and popular culture and a questioning of the culturally and socially constructed definition of art, particularly in Japan. In his own work Murakami reinforces this merging of art and commercial culture by producing paintings, sculptures, handbags, snack toys, t-shirts, key-chains, stickers, buttons and bandanas which are all based on the same Superflat iconography. He explicitly presents the production of his art as a business strategy and challenges the conventional avenues for the exhibition of art Japan (Wakasa 2000 para. 70-9).

Superflat theory is therefore also driven by a more politicised commentary on the modern institutions of \textit{bijutsu} (art) in Japan. The theory of Superflat is an affirmation of \textit{anime}, \textit{manga}, fashion, and graphic design as a site of artistic originality and beauty in contemporary Japanese commercial culture. Murakami rejects the modern institutions of \textit{kindai bijutsu} (modern art) which he considers to be an incomplete importation of Western concepts and institutions of art since their adoption in the Meiji period (1868-1912) as part of the process of modernisation and westernisation. To Murakami, the innovation and originality of contemporary forms of commercial culture represents a continuation of the innovations introduced by the premodern Eccentric artists. Murakami argues that these qualities of creative invention and avant-garde spirit were excluded from the practices and institutions of \textit{bijutsu}, and that it is the texts and practices of contemporary consumer culture that offer the re-emergence of what he considers to be authentic and original Japanese expression. Murakami originally trained in \textit{nihonga} (Japanese-style painting), which is one of dominant practices of modern art (\textit{kindai bijutsu}), and completed his doctoral dissertation at the Tokyo National University of Fine Arts and Music.\(^9\) However, he argues that he grew dissatisfied with the conservativeness and lack of relevance between \textit{kindai bijutsu} and contemporary society, and therefore in the early 1990s Murakami transformed his

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\(^8\) Of course not all \textit{manga} and \textit{anime} could be described as such given the variety of texts and aesthetic forms that are created; however, these are still well-recognised visual codes within \textit{anime} and \textit{manga} production (Levi 1996; Napier 2001a; Schodt 1986, 1996).

\(^9\) \textit{Nihonga} is a modern practice that is a re-interpretation of Japanese painting traditions and was institutionalised in the Meiji period. A full description of \textit{nihonga} is provided in Chapter Two.
artistic practice from nihonga to become active in the Japanese contemporary art scene.\(^{10}\)

The concept of revolutionising art was drawn from Murakami’s early aim to merge Pop Art with \textit{otaku} production-consumption practices to create a new form of popular art, \textit{POKU}. \textit{Otaku} refers to groups of \textit{anime} and \textit{manga} fan communities, who are conventionally described as ‘hard-core,’ and are prevalent throughout Japan (Lamarre 2004; Morikawa 2004; Okada, Kaichirō & Murakami 2005; Patrick & Machiyama 2004).\(^{11}\) While the aim of \textit{POKU} was to market art in \textit{otaku} cultural institutions, Murakami declared this project a failure and decided to focus on transforming the consumption of art in Japan and to bring a new form of Japanese art, albeit one that was still influenced by \textit{otaku} culture, to Western art worlds (Kelmachter 2002, p. 79).\(^{12}\) Thus \textit{POKU} was superseded by Superflat’s intention to harness the creative expressions being generated in the production-consumption of commercial culture more generally.

Murakami’s art studio/factory \textit{Kaikai Kiki Co., Ltd.}, formerly known as \textit{Hiropon Factory}, is a critical component of this strategy.\(^{13}\) \textit{Kaikai Kiki} produces Murakami’s paintings and sculptures, as well as the associated products which are sold through the studio website (KaiKaiKiki & Murakami 2002) and stores such as Lammfromm — The Concept Store.\(^{14}\) \textit{Kaikai Kiki} employs around 100 staff in its Asaka and Brooklyn studios (KaiKaiKiki & Murakami 2002). A key function of \textit{Kaikai Kiki} is to support younger artists. Indeed, Murakami has played a critical role in providing exhibition opportunities for emerging artists such as Mr., Chiho Aoshima, and Aya Takano. Murakami has also organised a number of collective shows in Tokyo under the banner of the \textit{Hiropon Factory}.

\(^{10}\) The definitions of \textit{kindai bijutsu} and \textit{gendai bijutsu} (contemporary art) and the distinctions between them are complicated and they will be discussed in more detail in Chapter Two. However, they generally refer to different types of art practice and institution.

\(^{11}\) The meaning and identity of \textit{otaku} as a subcultural group will be analysed in more detail in Chapter Two and Three. This thesis refers to \textit{otaku} culture as an assemblage of ideas and experiences forming meanings which operate through the social groupings and practices of \textit{otaku}. While \textit{otaku} are typically considered to be a particular form of fan group emerging in Japan, fan groups outside of Japan have also appropriated this term (Levi 1996; Norris 2000).

\(^{12}\) Howard Becker (1982) provides a full definition of the complex cooperative network that constitutes Western art worlds. The various facets and diversities constituting art worlds are acknowledged, and it is not intended to be a totalising term.

\(^{13}\) \textit{Hiropon Factory} was established in 1991 and was incorporated into \textit{Kaikai Kiki} in 2001. One of Murakami’s exhibition catalogues provides an extensive overview of the operations of \textit{Kaikai Kiki} (KaikaiKiki 2001).

\(^{14}\) Lammfromm is both a design store and a gallery, specialising in ‘art products,’ such as books, domestic goods, and t-shirts produced by Murakami and Yoshitomo Nara. It was set up with Tomio Koyama, Murakami’s Tokyo art dealer, and he called the gallery TKGY in homage to DKNY (Koyama 2003). Lammfromm is situated near Yoyogi Park and was created to attract the young, urban fashionista of Tokyo (ibid).
The *Superflat, Coloriage* (2002), and *Little Boy* (2005) exhibitions can be understood as extensions of these earlier activities, but in the context of major museums in the United States and Europe. In 2002 Murakami and Kaikai Kiki established the *Geisai* exhibition, an open entry art fair competition for artists who have not been trained in conventional art institutions.

As stated earlier, prior to the launch of his concept of Superflat art in 2000 Murakami was already well established as an artist in Japan and had been actively exhibiting since 1988. However, Murakami’s concept of Superflat art, and the artworks that represent it, attracted significant media and gallery attention leading to a important turning point in Murakami’s profile in Western contemporary art worlds (see Kaplan 2004). This enhanced profile significantly increased his existing reputation in Japan. In 2001 Murakami engaged in a series of curatorial and exhibition activities including *Superflat* at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles; *Wink*, an installation for Grand Central Station in New York; *Made in Japan*, a solo exhibition at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston; and finally, *summon monsters? open the door? heal? or die?*, a solo exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art Tokyo. This attention continued to increase in response to the sale of his work *Miss KO* (1997) at a Christies New York auction in May 2003 (Gleadell 2003; Wakaton 2002), which set a record price for the sale of Japanese contemporary art.

The subsidiary politic in Superflat is the affirmation of its Japanese identity in an almost recalcitrant swipe at Western art. Murakami presents it as an indigenous expression of Pop Art, a type of post-Pop. The definition of Superflat was designed to emphasise this Japanese identity, and to distinguish it from the history of Western art (Murakami 2005b, pp. 152-3). Yet at the same time Murakami also acknowledges the transformations of Superflat expression under the influences of Western culture (2000c). This position is even more complex because Murakami also explicitly emphasises his strategy to successfully sell work in the United States and European art markets - around 70% of Murakami’s paintings and sculptures are sold in these markets (Koyama 2001, p. 119). Therefore while a key aspect of his project is to affirm the Japanese

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15 *Miss KO* sold to Stefan Edis, a Chicago collector, for US$567,500. The sculpture sold in 1997 for US$20,000 (2003, p. 16). *BT*, Japan’s primary contemporary art journal, dedicated a special edition to the sale and copies were sold with a free scale-model figurine (*Bijutsu Techo* 2003).
identity of Superflat art, it is also self-consciously presented in the codes of Western art worlds and art markets. Murakami’s website describes his project as –

[Using] his deep understanding of Western art to integrate his work into its structure; working from the inside to portray “Japanese-ness” as a tool to bring about revolution in the world of art (KaiKaiKiki & Murakami 2002 n.p.).

At the same time, Murakami is using Western art markets, and the popular appeal of Japanese consumer culture both in and outside Japan, in order to propose alternatives to the institutions and practices of bijutsu in Japan. It is this tension and dialogue between the commodification of Superflat and the simultaneous challenge to existing forms of art production-consumption, through the merging of art and commercial culture, which makes the analysis of Superflat complex. This complexity arises because the meanings of art, commodity and cultural identity are themselves contested concepts in contemporary culture, particularly in the context of globalisation.

THE CULTURES OF SUPERFLAT

Contemporary culture can be defined by the multidimensional relations that constitute the cultural, economic and political processes of contemporary globalisation (Held et al. 1999). Art, as a central mode of human 'expressivity' (Deleuze & Guattari 1987), shapes and defines culture and is also constituted in culture. As the interaction between social groups has become increasingly globalised, the meaning-making and expressivities associated with 'art' have also become increasingly engaged through national and transnational gradients. Thus, the work of artists like Murakami, in many respects, articulates and represents many of the debates and issues that have accompanied this broadening gradient through the global exchange of art. In particular, Murakami’s work and Superflat theory are significant as they expose the key debates in contemporary culture regarding the relationship between art and commodity which are part of broader debates on the meaning of art in relation to consumer capitalism (Collins 2002; Frow 1995; Storey 2003) and the production of art in the processes of contemporary globalisation (Araeen, Cubitt & Sardar 2002; Fisher 1994; Papastergiadis 2003b; Queensland Art Gallery

16 A more in-depth definition of globalisation will be provided in the key concepts section in Chapter One.

17 Expressivity is used in this thesis to refer to the creative expression of Murakami’s works. It refers to the expression of ideas, which can be condensed into material form – but which is in a constant state of becoming, rather than being fixed to – an actual object or text.
Contemporary culture has been characterised by the blurring of the divide between art and commodity. The cultural-economic conditions facilitating this merger is typically referred to as the 'postmodern' or 'late capitalism' (Jameson 1991a) by which economy is dominated by 'symbolic exchange' (Baudrillard 1981; Bourdieu 1984, 1991 [1982]). But this characterisation of contemporary culture is not without its own set of contestations. The contentions between art and commodity in contemporary culture are usually contextualised in the cognitive and epistemological debates of the modernism-postmodernism dialectic, and the historical periodisation of modernity and postmodernity. Within these debates, proponents of the 'postmodern' frequently claim that the prevalence of postmodern elements, including the convergence of art and commercial expressivities, necessarily indicates the evolution of the new historical phase. For Jameson (1991a), who bemoans the move, and Jencks (1996), who celebrates it, contemporary culture is clearly 'postmodern' as it is now dominated by modes of postmodern thinking, practices and modes of expression (see Lewis 2002).

Even so, and as Murakami and Superflat clearly indicate, these typologies remain irresolvably open. The relationship between various cultural claims and expressivities, most particularly as they are constituted around the processes of globalisation, identity formation and the transformation-hybridisation of semiotic or meaning-making forms (Appadurai 1996; Castells 2004; Held et al. 1999; Iwabuchi 2002a). In particular, the formation of identity and expressive modes within a national genealogy becomes particularly problematic within a globalising cultural sphere. The articulation of a particular kind of 'national identity', for example, in Murakami’s work problematises the global-local compound and a cognition which celebrates hybridity and postmodern open identities. In particular, Murakami’s promotion of Superflat as Japanese exposes the tensions that are generated between the commodification of cultural identity and the articulation of cultural differences in contemporary globalisation.

The Japanese identity of Superflat is complicated by a number of factors. First, Superflat echoes conventional discursive constructions of a Japan/West binary which obscures the connections and

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18 A more detailed analysis of the relationship and debates regarding postmodernism/modernism and postmodernity/modernity will be outlined in the key concepts section in Chapter One.
power relations in this structure (Befu 2001; Clammer 2001; Sakai 1997). Secondly, while Murakami acknowledges the Western influences on the Superflat aesthetic, his simultaneous transposing of this hybrid identity into a reinforcement of a Japanese identity, characterised by cultural assimilation and hybridisation, reinforces a unified national-cultural identity. This identity is supported by the references between Superflat and already existing discursive constructions of Japanese culture and art as flat (Asada 1997; Barthes 1982; Hendry 1993; Tanizaki 1977). Thirdly, Superflat is also part of ongoing trade relations and cross-fertilisations of visual culture forms between Japan and the West since the late nineteenth century. These include the adoption of bijutsu in the Meiji period, the popular consumption of Japanese visual culture in the West (in late nineteenth century japonisme and since the 1990s with the consumption of anime and manga), and the post-1945 influx of commercial culture from the United States and its subsequent impact on the development of the anime and manga industries. These complex relationships demonstrate the need to locate Superflat in a global context and to critically interrogate Murakami’s concept and aesthetic.

The contested meanings between art-commodity, art-popular culture, modernism-postmodernism and global-local make the interpretation of Superflat complex. Murakami’s work and Superflat art can be understood to articulate a postmodern aesthetic and conceptualisation of art: the flattening of the distinction between art and commercial commodities and expressing the hybridising effects of global cultural interactions. This fluidity is often negated by the responses to Murakami’s work, illustrated in the introductory quotes, which continue to affirm an art/commodity distinction: Murakami’s work is either defended as an aesthetic critique of the socio-cultural conditions of commercial consumption or decried as a celebration of the lack of distinction between art and commercial production. This simple dualism limits the understanding of Superflat and reveals the persistence, through debates, of the concepts of autonomy, authenticity and aesthetic value (originality, beauty) in relation to definitions of art and cultural identity. Furthermore as stated, Murakami’s rhetoric of Superflat’s Japaneseess exposes the

19 There was contact with Western visual culture prior to this time; Dutch visual cultural forms were accessed through the trade ports at Nagasaki (see Screech 1996). From the mid-nineteenth century, exchange and interaction between the West and Japan increased significantly, under the conditions of Japan’s forced participation in trade treaties (Jansen 1988) and Japan engaged in the exhibition and export of art and artefacts in Europe and the United States (Beasley 1984; Conant 1991; Guth 1996a).

20 Manga existed prior to this but it went through significant technological and production expansion in the post-war period and what is conventionally considered manga now is associated with these post-war forms (Kinsella 2000). Concomitantly, commercial anime also developed during this time, even though animations were made prior to this period (Napier 2001a, p. 16).
tensions between the formative and deformatve processes of contemporary globalisation.

The intention of this thesis is to problematise the meaning-making, reading and understandings associated with Murakami’s work and the Superflat concept within a context of globalising culture. The thesis will map the dialogues and tensions that are generated through the production-consumption of Superflat in the diverse cultural contexts in which it functions. Murakami’s concept of Superflat as a revolution in art and the utilisation of Japanese identity as a commodity to support Superflat art will be interrogated in terms of the meanings of art and commodity in contemporary process of globalisation. Therefore, the primary question addressed by this study is:

*In what ways do Takashi Murakami and his theory of Superflat art operate within the global cultural processes of the production-consumption of art, commodity and national-cultural identity?*

The key questions and arguments of this thesis will be developed in greater detail through the discussion of current literature on Murakami and Superflat in Chapter One.

**MARKING THE TERRITORY: THESIS SCOPE AND OVERVIEW**

This thesis argues that Murakami self-consciously deploys Japanese culture and identity in multiple territories, deliberately constructing his own ‘subjectivity’ as a global brand and strategically essentialising it in order to exploit the tensions of meaning clustered around art, commodity and national-cultural identity. This strategic essentialisation demonstrates his awareness of the hybrid construction of contemporary identity, while ironically affirming its authenticity and simultaneously exploiting the potential for commodification. Therefore, while the concept of Superflat implies a levelling of distinctions and an all-encompassing inclusivity, this thesis examines the (re)formation of distinctions within Superflat art products. In particular, the thesis interrogates key concepts of art, commodity and cultural identity which are mobilised in Murakami’s strategic (re)inscription of ‘distinctions’ (Bourdieu 1984, 1993). This thesis reveals that Superflat is not a radical departure or rupture from previous modalities and discourses around these concepts, but rather it echoes earlier forms of Japan’s global encounters.²¹ It also

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²¹ This thesis is not specifically using a Foucaultian model of discourse in relation to the structuring of power relations. Discourse will be used more generally to refer to ideas, practices and institutions that formed around cultural meanings. Discourses form
demonstrates the ways in which Superflat and Murakami are embedded in contemporary networks of exchange and flows of capital between Japan and the West. This thesis is not seeking to eliminate cultural differences but to examine the points at which they are assembled and disassembled. What Murakami provides is a means through which cultural hierarchies and distinctions can be reconfigured in new horizontal and interchangeable relations in contemporary processes of globalisation.

In order to argue this position it is necessary to engage these concepts beyond a modernist binary distinction and to trace the complex interactions and cultural hierarchies and distinctions that emerge across the diverse cultural contexts in which Murakami and Superflat operate. The intention is not to fix a singular and essential meaning of Superflat art and Murakami’s works and practices but to trace the geographies of meaning that are engaged and to locate this in broader socio-historical discourses on Japanese identity, particularly in relation to the West. This thesis considers the meaning of Superflat and Murakami to be a continual state of flux, clustering and mutating and forming new spaces of meaning. Thus, the thesis does not seek to reconcile the concepts of art, commodity and cultural identity, but rather it maps the ways in which they are actively engaged and deployed in the production and consumption of Murakami’s work.

This thesis will provide a significant scholarly investigation to the existing material on Murakami and Superflat. To date there has been a little academic research published on Murakami and Superflat art, despite their increasing visibility. With this in mind, this thesis provides a timely analysis and interrogation of the production-consumption of Murakami and Superflat art. This research expands on understandings of the social, economic, political and cultural issues emerging through the networks of contemporary global art worlds, as well as discourses on Japanese cultural identity. In particular, this thesis contributes to the debates regarding the territorialisation, hybridity, and de-territorialisation of aesthetic and cultural identity emerging through contemporary global spaces and interactions. Harumi Befu (2003) has advocated for further empirical case studies of the processes of glocalisation in the dynamics of contemporary identity formation in globalisation. Glocalisation refers to the interactive processes which emerge in the interactions between local and global cultures (Robertson 1995). This thesis provides for such analysis by tracing the dynamic movements and meanings of Superflat and Murakami’s work systems of meaning that are produced within and contribute to cultural contexts. They can be produced from different expressions including image, speech and writing.
as they circulate between cultural contexts. This study presents an original interpretation of Murakami and Superflat art by focussing on his strategic deployment of meaning in the different cultural terrains in which his work circulates.

While it is acknowledged that Murakami is well known in a number of regions, for instance Australia, the thesis will focus on locating Murakami and Superflat in Japan, the United States and Europe. These are the main sites where Murakami exhibits and sells his work, and they are the major generators of discourses on Murakami. This thesis provides a focused analysis of Takashi Murakami’s works and practices since the launch of his concept of Superflat art in 2000. The sources utilised for this thesis are the actual works of Murakami, including exhibitions and their accompanying publications such as publicity, reviews, newspaper articles, catalogue essays, and interviews.

This thesis is focused largely on the ways in which Murakami is understood within an English-language based Cultural Studies. While it is outside the scope of this research to offer a disciplinary history of Cultural Studies (Barker 2000; Hartley, Pearson & Vieth 2000; Lewis 2002; Turner 2002), this thesis is designed to examine Murakami within this framework. The principal literature that supports this type of analysis is largely written in English. This is in no way to devalue the important studies that have been undertaken in Japanese. It is rather to acknowledge that the theoretical interrogation of Murakami and the global cultures of Superflat have been largely constructed around this Cultural Studies conception of ‘culture’. This thesis has been primarily focused on the ways in which Murakami is understood in the West, and especially the United States. To this end, many of the texts written in Japanese lie well beyond the scope of this thesis. Where such texts are relevant, they have been included through the translation support provided by Dr. Eiichi Tosaki (supervisor), who is a Japanese art history specialist. To supplement the English-language sources fieldwork was undertaken in Japan, whereby interviews with contemporary art professionals regarding Murakami and Superflat were conducted to critically evaluate the reception to his work in Japan.

The thesis is divided into three large chapters subdivided into three sections. It should be noted that both Chapters Two and Three contain introductions outlining the key themes and arguments addressed in the chapter. In Chapter Two the first two subsections establish the specific

22 For example, in 1996 Murakami was included in the Asia Pacific Triennial held at the Queensland Art Gallery, Australia.
Theoretical context for the chapter (Japanese cultural identity and the historical background concerning bijutsu) and the final section utilises this framework to locate the emergence of Superflat and its global circulation. In Chapter Three the first and last section clarify the specific Japanese and Western cultural approaches to the concepts of art and commodity in relation to the dynamics of Superflat, and the middle section addresses Murakami’s relationship with otaku culture.

Chapter One: Mapping the Terrain

This chapter reviews the current literature on Superflat art and Takashi Murakami in Western publications in order to identify the most pertinent themes that emerge in discussions on Superflat and Murakami. This review will identify the limitations in these discussions and the areas that require further analysis. The chapter also identifies the thesis’ primary and secondary questions, and its key arguments. The second section of the chapter outlines the thesis’ theoretical and methodological positioning in the field of Cultural Studies. This section also defines specific key terms that are relevant to the investigation, such as postmodernism and globalisation, in relation to the key theoretical debates in the field. In particular, the theorisation of art and commodity relations and cultural identity will be outlined.

Chapter Two: Made in Japan

Chapter Two interrogates the construction of Murakami and Superflat art as an expression of a Japanese cultural/aesthetic identity. It locates this demarcation of identity in relation to the broader historical relations between Japan and the West and addresses the concepts of Orientalism and self-Orientalism. The second section on Japanese art provides the historical and cultural background for the emergence of Superflat art in Japanese art discourses, particularly since the late nineteenth century. The final section directly addresses Murakami’s strategy for the global circulation of his work and it examines the aesthetic and cultural constructions that constitute Superflat art.

Chapter Three: Superflat™

This chapter identifies the relations between the concept of art as an autonomous aesthetic production and in its relation to capitalist commodity productions. It maps the contestations of the meanings of originality, reproduction and commercialisation in Japanese and Western
discourses in order to clarify the multiple meanings that are engaged, reinforced and challenged by the diversity of Murakami's productions. It examines the ways in which Murakami utilises these debates of meaning and value to construct the cultural capital of his works in different cultural terrains, including Murakami's strategic association with *otaku* culture.
1 MAPPING THE TERRAIN

1.1 DISCOURSES ON TAKASHI MURAKAMI AND SUPERFLAT ART

The English-language literature on Takashi Murakami and Superflat consists mainly of exhibition reviews, exhibition catalogues, and interviews. The amount of literature available is minimal and there has not been a scholarly publication on Murakami and Superflat art.\(^{23}\) However, this is not to say that he has not received significant attention. Images of his work are frequently reproduced, and he has a popular public image and a high profile within the contemporary art world. Murakami was recently profiled in a weekend supplement in the *New York Times* in relation to the *Little Boy* exhibition (Lubow 2005). He also received a double-page spread in *Time* magazine (Frederick 2003a). Such is the breadth of Murakami’s productions that in 2001 the iconic *Jellyfish Eyes* [Figure 1] design graced the cover of both the Asian media culture magazine *Giant Robot* and *Art in America*.

![Figure 1: Jellyfish Eyes](image_removed)

2001, Acrylic on canvas mounted on board
100 x 100 x 5cm
Marianne Boesky Gallery, New York

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\(^{23}\) With the exception of a recent Master’s thesis on Superflat (Steinberg 2002) and subsequent publications based on the thesis (Steinberg 2003, 2004). These are discussed later in this literature review.
While these sources provide a general introduction to Murakami, there is a tendency for the reviews to uncritically repeat Murakami’s own claims, or to address issues in a perfunctory and descriptive manner. However, the catalogues tend to address Murakami in a more probing manner (see Brehm 2002; Cruz 1999; Friis-Hansen 1999). Even so, there is a tendency to define Murakami’s work as a postmodern Japanese expression, but not to critically interrogate this in relation to Murakami’s own proclamations. An exception is Midori Matsui, a critic from Japan who has written extensively on Murakami and other artists associated with him such as Yoshitomo Nara (1996; 1998; 1999a; 1999b; 1999c; 2000; 2001a; 2001b; 2002). Marc Steinberg is another exception; Steinberg recently completed a Master’s thesis on Murakami’s concept of Superflat, *Emerging from Flatness: Murakami Takashi and superflat aesthetics* (2002), and he has also published significant sections of his thesis material (Steinberg 2003, 2004). To date, Matsui and Steinberg have provided the most in-depth and critical analyses of Murakami’s concepts, works and activities, but beyond their work there has been minimal scholarly engagement with Murakami and Superflat. The other type of literature on Superflat and Murakami utilise them as examples of general trends in contemporary visual culture, such as contemporary digital aesthetics (Munster 2003), animation (Lamarre 2002; Looser 2002), or as an example of the economy of cultural production in contemporary Japan (McGray 2002).

In the following review of the writing on Murakami and Superflat the debates and meanings surrounding his work and practice will be traced. The literature review is divided into four broad topics for the sake of clarity. These are: art and commodity, surface and depth; Murakami and Superflat as an expression of Japanese identity; Superflat and *Otaku*, and the critical agency of Superflat. Interpretations of Murakami and the theory of Superflat art are disjunctive and contradictory. Particular points of tension can be identified in the announcement (or denouncement) of the criticality of Murakami in relation to the aesthetics of surface, and his engagement with commercial culture. Simultaneously, there is a strong emphasis on identifying Murakami with a perceived specificity of Japanese culture, whether linked to an imagined Japanese aesthetic or to cultural identity. This view persists despite some concessions that his

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24 Other critics often use Matsui’s writing as source material (see Museum of Modern Art New York 2002).

25 Steinberg does not use capitals for Superflat.

26 There have been some recent academic symposiums that have engaged with Murakami and the concept of Superflat. For example, *The Aesthetics and Politics of Superflat*, symposium at the Donald Keene Center of Japanese Culture, Columbia University in April 2005, and *Superflat Japan*, at the Association for Asian Studies Annual Meeting, March 4-7, 2005 in San Diego.
work is familiar, and has wider global resonance. For example, the surface aesthetic of Superflat art, that is, both the flatness and the juxtaposition and transformation of imagery within Murakami’s works, is commonly articulated as being both a contemporary aesthetic and a characteristic of otaku culture. There are only a few writers who consider the identification of Murakami as Japanese in relation to the politics of identity within the context of the consumption of identity in contemporary globalisation (Shimada 2002; Steinberg 2002). The contestation of meaning between art and commodity in relation to Murakami and Superflat is therefore linked to a wider debate on cultural identity and postmodern surface aesthetics. In the following literature review, the contestations of meaning clustered around these concepts will be elucidated in order to identify a gap in the current writing on Murakami and Superflat.

1.1.1 ART AND COMmodity, SURFACE AND DEPTH

A critical point of contention in relation to Murakami’s work and practice is the incorporation of popular commercial forms and practices. Michael Darling, curator of the Los Angeles Superflat exhibition (2001a), attributes Murakami’s success to his ability to merge depth of meaning with the forms and aesthetics of popular commercial commodities. Darling points out the ways in which Murakami’s works and practices deliberately engage and interact with the categorical distinction between art and commodity:

Superflat also refers to the levelling of distinctions between high and low. Murakami likes to flaunt that he can make a million-dollar sculpture and then take the same subject and crank out a bunch of tchotchkes (Michael Darling qtd. in Howe 2003, p. 182 italics in original).

This engagement is also emphasised by Doryun Chong (2001), as well as Margrit Brehm (2002) who interprets Murakami as acting between and bringing together ‘intellectual relevance and popular appeal’ (p. 10). This type of critique presumes that art is expressive of deeper meaning, while commercial cultural forms are superficial.

Modern Western artists are not supposed to make baubles; they are supposed to produce objects that either transcend or critique filthy lucre, despite the fact that art itself is an expensive commodity. Not even Andy Warhol made truly mass-produced objects; rather, he mimicked industrial production in his studio, calling it The Factory...now titled Kaikai Kiki Corporation (meaning “bizarre”), [Murakami’s] empire

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27 Steinberg, despite this acknowledgement of identity politics, still dismisses Murakami’s nationalism as a marketing scheme (p. 451).
really functions as a major, multi-level enterprise, rather than merely satirising contemporary business (p. 48).

While Darling identifies this blurring as a form of criticality, other critics disagree. Adrian Searle's (2002) review of Murakami’s Serpentine exhibition *Kaikai Kiki: Takashi Murakami* argues that there is no critique present in Murakami’s works.

Murakami reminds me of Mark Kostabi, whose cynical, idiot-friendly paintings prove that no price is too high, no intellectual threshold too low, to make it in the art world. The over-the-top cuteness might teeter into horror, the mushrooms morphing into black atomic clouds, but so what? There’s no sign of any internal critique, just a lot of very high-class production values.

Murakami can call up Hokusai all he wants, and decide his paintings are homages to Francis Bacon’s portraits of Isabel Rawsthorne and George Dyer, but Murakami’s vomiting balloon-heads have nothing whatever to do with Bacon. There’s no homage here, only a name check. Not much art here, either - only a feeble sort of entertainment (para. 4-5).

Searle pejoratively emphasises the surface form of Murakami’s works as being indicative of a superficiality of content. Searle explicitly views the meaning of art in relation to the expression of critique, and as the binary to entertainment. Similarly, Jerry Saltz (1999) equates surfaceness and technical proficiency with a lack of ‘substance and meaning’ in Murakami’s works:

Surface is everything to Murakami – it’s all there is. I don’t know if you’re allowed to say this, but like a lot of contemporary Japanese artists Murakami is a craftmaster-whiz of flawless visual effects...Magically vapid, these Pygmalion/Barbie/Sex Toy-things are less than spectacle and more than mere technical accomplishments. But all is not right (p. 65).

Searle and Saltz explicitly categorise art as a meaningful activity and commodity, in contrast to an emphasis on surface and technique as spectacle. In contrast, other critics emphasise the meaningfulness of Murakami’s work in a way that appears not to negate its emphasis on surface, technique and commodity. For example, when Dana Friis-Hansen (1999) is confronted with Murakami’s own emphasis on commercialism, he argues for a separation of the surface aesthetic and commercial imperatives from a ‘deeper’ level of engagement with ‘serious’ issues. That is, Friis-Hansen argues that the duality of superficiality and meaning is a characteristic of Murakami’s works. However, while this view appears to present a contrasting perspective, Friis-Hansen is still working from a premise similar to that of Searle and Saltz. He conceives of art as being inherently meaningful, while commodity forms are superficial and unable to offer any critique. For example, the engagement with art and commodity is considered a ‘dilemma.’
One is certainly left to wonder whether the high stakes of his recent large-scale projects, along with their increasing visibility in the popular media, might not have distracted him from his earlier, more serious cultural concerns (p. 31).

With these comments, curator Dana Friis-Hansen is expressing a concern regarding the ‘dangerous’ effects of a high media profile, the scale and visibility of exhibition, and the convergences of art and commodity in Murakami’s works and practices in the early 2000s. In order to defend the ‘criticality’ and ‘meaningfulness’ of Murakami, Friis-Hansen locates Murakami’s more recent work and practices in relation to his earlier works *Polyrhythm* [Figure 2] and *Randoseru Project* [Figure 3](p. 41).

[IMAGES REMOVED]

To Friis-Hansen, these represent Murakami’s more ‘serious’ and politically engaged works. In a similar way, Brehm describes Murakami as ‘subversive,’ presenting seemingly simple and happy comic characters but underneath articulating a provocative response to society and the status of art (2002, p. 10). Thus, the defence of Murakami in relation to his more explicitly commercial practices and comments tends to emphasise the ‘beauty’ and ‘seriousness’ of the works in relation to their perceived critique of social and economic issues. Jeff Howe (2003), in an article for *Wired* magazine, follows a similar path, although he does allow for the conceptual value of Murakami’s self-conscious factory system and business strategies and their subsequent merger with capitalist processes:

The danger is that Murakami’s unapologetic hucksterism may obscure just how good his art is. His images are disturbing and beautiful, and, above all, full of ideas. This alone
won’t secure his place in art history. What should is the way he marries talent to a keen understanding and manipulation of market forces (p. 182).

Similarly, Katy Siegel (2003) begins her analysis of Murakami’s work by emphasising the meaning and value of art as socially constructed. Siegel uses this cultural emphasis to question the meaning and value of art across geo-temporalities and multiple media platforms. But here, she tends to uncritically adopt Murakami’s own claims of not privileging the artworks over the Louis Vuitton handbags, without engaging this debate on value and meaning further. Despite demonstrating that there is potential for a more complex analysis of the values and meanings of art, which are raised by the Louis Vuitton work, Siegel returns to privileging art as an expression of advanced knowledge and critical meaning. For example Siegel indicates that may be values present in the formal beauty and pleasures of consumption of the more explicitly commercial Louis Vuitton works (p. 48).

Why is Murakami’s art so great? Looking at it evokes the familiar experience of loving an adorable character or wanting a fashionable accessory; it also gives us something to think about. Why do we want that bag? Because it says “Louis Vuitton”? Because it’s cute? Because it’s well-made? Because it’s new? Because we are Japanese and it looks French? Because we are American and it looks Japanese? Because everyone has one? Because no one can get one? Looking can make you want, and wanting can get you thinking (p. 53).

In this way, the art-ness and the commodity-ness of Murakami are constructed as different and opposing in value, and the conceptual value beneath the surface appearance is reduced to an Adornian-like binary, opposing art (and its aesthetic value in the Kantian sense) to commercialism. Thus, Friis-Hansen’s binary between a flat aesthetic that mimics commercial products and the deeper meaning existing beneath the surface appearance of the works negates the concept of levelling that Darling proposes, and reinforces the distinction of art and commodity within Murakami’s productions.

Like Siegel, Kitty Hauser (2004) emphasises the appeal of Superflat’s polysemic flexibility and the indeterminacy that it sets up between critique and celebration. But Hauser actually goes further than Siegel in questioning why Murakami insists on distinguishing his work as art, namely, as a separate action or expression that is distinct from anime and other popular cultural forms. In critiquing his position, Hauser argues that the nature of the capitalist market is to commodify, and the blending of art and popular culture occurs as part of this process. For Hauser, popular cultural forms such as anime are complex, meaningful and beautiful, as well as being commodities. Therefore, she is sceptical of Murakami’s insistence on presenting his productions
as art, not because he is thus sullying a purely conceptual and autonomous art, but because he is unnecessarily simplifying the plural values of popular culture.28

Similarly, Steinberg argues for Superflat’s potential as a positive expression of a contemporary logic of media convergence and commodity production:

The [term] superflat, in this case, and unlike Murakami’s suggested use of it, would be used as a descriptive term for a group of contemporary artists — Japanese or otherwise — who have an open relationship with commodity culture, work according to the logic of media convergence, entertain a serial relation to the past (or no relation to the past), and display an interest in characters, surface, metamorphosis and transformation. The superflat artist, in other words, is an artist that expresses the new relations between art and commodity, artists and producer, past and present, human and character, and form and transformation that characterizes the postsubjectifying semiotic (Steinberg 2002, pp. 88-9 italics in original).

In defining the ‘super’ of Superflat, Steinberg argues it does not refer to the transcendence of commodity production, but rather the complete immersion of Superflat art in the processes of commodification. Thus, for Steinberg Superflat is

...a logic of intensification, a flattening onto intersecting planes, and an immanence to commodity flows that renders the modernist distance-based critique impossible, alters conceptions of subjectivity, and brings the human into relation with the posthuman (p. 90).

Rather than considering this to be a negative position, Steinberg argues that it enables Murakami to negotiate the realities of contemporary culture. Lamarre (2004) similarly identifies Superflat as an opportunity to recognise the sets of relations that constitute the reality of postmodern culture, while being immersed within them. In a similar though less utopic way, Minami also presents a vision of Murakami’s critical offerings within the context of late capitalism:

[T]his holy clown, this trickster (perhaps) has the ability to recall the great power to art — the power to change the world in an instant, to reopen the old sacred circuit. Or there again, is it because he (perhaps) treats art as an unknown paradigm. Will he show us the future of art or will be destroy it? When we are faced with Murakami we can only stand and cry out, “I am against being for it” (2001, p. 63).

From this analysis emerges an opportunity to examine how Murakami engages with the meanings and relationships of art and commodity without limiting interpretations to the binary opposition of art and commodity. What requires further investigation is how Murakami both challenges and

28 Hauser presents a similar argument in relation to the Sensation exhibition of the Saatchi collection (1998).
exploits existing distinctions that persist around these concepts as well as the potential for his productions to be both immersed in contemporary commodity culture and to work as creative expressions. In other words, there is a tendency to homogenise the categories of art and commercial culture and presume that commodity forms cannot have aesthetic value or offer contestations about cultural capital and hierarchies of distinctions or, alternatively, to obscure art’s embeddeness within the commodity impulses of capitalism by overly stressing its conceptual value. Therefore a more rigorous scholarly engagement with the values and meanings of art and commercial culture, particularly within different cultural contexts and in relation to Murakami and Superflat is required.

1.1.2 MURAKAMI AND SUPERFLAT AS JAPANESE

The meaning of Murakami’s works and practices as art and commodity is also explored in relation to the perception of cultural identity. Raphael Rubinstein (2001) provides a typical example of the defence of Murakami’s blurring of fine art and commercial culture as a ‘very old Japanese blending’ (p. 112). In contrast, Kay Itoi, a critic from Japan, emphasises in a review of Murakami’s and Yoshitomo Nara’s exhibitions in Japan how this blending is unconventional for contemporary Japanese artists:

Unlike most other Japanese artists, Murakami and Nara seem to disregard the line between the fine and commercial arts (2001 para. 6).

The problem is that such discussions on the cultural context of the meaning and social status of art and commercial culture remain highly generalised and are often lacking in critique. For example, Hauser (p. 48) does not challenge Murakami’s simplistic contrasting of the values placed on art and commercial products in the West and Japan. A further critical issue arises within this area - the continual emphasis on consumer culture as a definitive characteristic of contemporary Japan. For example, Cruz (1999) emphasises ‘hyperconsumerism’ as a Japanese cultural trait, despite acknowledging its prevalence in the United States. Thus, there is a tendency to uncritically adopt the 1980s image of Japan as the epitome of postmodern consumer culture (see Árnason & Sugimoto 1995; Miyoshi & Harootunian 1997). Furthermore, Cruz states that the concept of critical resistance, in relation to consumer culture, differs between Japan and the United States. The simplistic assumption here is that resistance within the United States takes the

29 The definition of Japan as postmodern and the subsequent debates on this in relation to Japanese national-cultural identity will be discussed in more detail in Chapter Two.
form of an anti-capitalist, Marxist position, whereas for Japan resistance could be expressed in relation to sub-cultural producers, independent of the commercial media. However, similar to the debates in Western Cultural Studies on the different forms of resistance and popular agency in relation to commodity culture and consumption (Certeau 1984; Fiske 1989; Jenkins 1992), there are various positions from which to view resistances in Japanese consumer culture (Clammer 2000; Field 1997; Ivy 1997; Kinsella 1995, 1998).

However, the point is that the emphasis on Superflat as a mirror for contemporary Japanese culture persists despite any concessions that may be made about the global resonances of Murakami’s work.

Superflat is nothing short of a portrait of Japan, done in the modern style (Cruz 1999, p. 237 italics in original).

Friis-Hansen and Brehm argue that Murakami’s work offers a new site for reconsidering Japanese culture. In fact, this is the title of Friis-Hansen’s essay, ‘The Meaning of Murakami’s Nonsense: About "Japan" itself’. While in some sense this approach may appear to be logical because Murakami is from Japan, such critiques neglect to consider that Murakami sells most of his work in Europe and the United States; furthermore, they do not acknowledge the resonance of the aesthetics of his work for Western audiences familiar with anime and manga forms. Thus, the emphasis on Murakami’s Japaneseness tends to uncritically follow conventional discourses that emphasise the ‘Otherness’ of Japan in contrast to the West. In this way, both Japan and the West are problematically essentialised into imaginary monolithic entities in a manner that repeats nihonjinron and Orientalist discourses. What is neglected in this position is Superflat’s ability to transcend attachments to specific cultures and to operate fluidly in-between cultural spaces and sites.

Further to this, even when Japan is considered to have a hybrid culture and the influences of Western culture are acknowledged, this is still presented as a marker of Japaneseness.

If style is an ocean, and history a series of ongoing, unspoken connections, then Japan is the island of least resistance and total receptivity; a nation where style is the bounty as well as the sea... Insular and xenophobic, Japan is also utterly open and adaptable. It is the hermit crab of nations, the puppet who intermittently becomes the puppet master, the android who finds life (Saltz 1999, p. 65).

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Nihonjinron are discourses on Japanese identity will be examined analysed in Chapter Two.
Saltz does go on to emphasise that hybrid cultures and multiple identities are also familiar characteristics of contemporary late capitalist culture:

Murakami says he wants to create a “new pop art,” and he wants to make it out of Japanese culture, which, as we have seen, is made out of other cultures. But this is a risky strategy. First, this bricolage (as the literary critics call it), this piecing-together-from-pieces, is the air we breathe, the order of the day, and it will be for the foreseeable future. Look at any magazine or the way kids dress; styles are hyper-collapsing into one another.

Second, Murakami’s main interest – the realm of Manga (the radically distorted creatures that populate Japanese comic books, toys, and computer games) and Anime (the cartoons and animated films) – is by now well travelled. Japanimation almost seems cardboardy and slightly boring. Plus, even at his most popular DOB is no Homer Simpson. So let’s not get carried away (ibid).

Similarly, in The Floating World that Almost Was Brehm (2002) emphasises Murakami’s production as emerging within the particular cultural context of contemporary Japan, which as she indicates, also offers in a general way an expression of contemporary technology and consumer culture. Brehm notes the resonances between Murakami’s works and contemporary screen aesthetics, and acknowledges that this aesthetic transcends geo-temporal boundaries. It is this dynamic between ‘proximity and strangeness’ that Brehm argues is the point of attraction for European and United States audiences (p. 8). However, she goes on to emphasise this dynamic in relation to otaku culture, and otaku culture as Japanese; thus, she relegates the concept to being identifiably Japaneseness.

Though the works are thus a result and a reflection of the global information society, they also have a specifically Japanese perspective which can only be understood against the history of Japan, from the modern era to the resent, and thus in the light of a process of westernisation and the various methods employed to integrate these manifold influences into its own system (p. 8).

In another example, Darling links the aesthetics of Superflat to the concept of globalisation as a process of the flattening of difference through the standardisation of cultural forms. Furthermore, Darling argues that Superflat, as a flattening of multiple viewpoints onto a single surface, becomes a post-human mode of viewing which re-constructs space in ways that human eyes cannot. Darling identifies a similar tendency in the work of David Hockney and in the film The Matrix (Wachowski & Wachowski 1999). Nevertheless, Darling ends up identifying this tendency as expressive of otaku culture:
This sense of post-human perception ties directly into the disconnected ways in which younger generations in Japan deal with reality, immersing themselves in the Superflat fantasy realm of comics to avoid the pressures of a newly insecure world (pp. 88-9).

The postmodern blurring of reality and fiction that Darling identifies is also a common theme when identifying the Japaneseness of Murakami (Castello di Rivoli Museo d’Arte Contemporanea & Deitch 2001, p. n.a.). The emphasis on the post-human aesthetic and the fantastical tends to celebrate Murakami and Superflat as epitomising a postmodern Japan. For example, Gareth Branwyn (2002) associates Murakami with Baudrillard’s (1988a) imaging of Japan as a postmodern playhouse of virtual reality – of detached and wonderful fictions. Another review (Wolfsburg 2003) emphasises the technological construction of Murakami’s works as characteristic of a ‘screen generation.’ In this interpretation there is a tendency to repeat what David Morley and Kevin Robins (1995b) refer to as a ‘techno-Orientalist’ rhetoric. Techno-Orientalism refers to the Western discursive construction of Japan as the site of a dehumanised, alienated and dystopic future (p. 170); it was particularly prevalent in the 1980s and 1990s, and was related to Western fears about Japan’s economic and technological power.

What can be identified in these discourses is a tendency to uncritically emphasise the differences between Japan and the West, allowing Murakami’s pronouncements regarding these differences to remain unchallenged. Therefore, a sustained analysis of identity formations within Superflat in a global context continues to be deferred. In particular, the familiar resonances of Superflat for audiences outside of Japan tends to be minimised in favour of reinforcing Murakami’s works as an articulation of Japaneseness. The association of Superflat with otaku culture is also utilised to support the identification of Superflat as a Japanese expression and aesthetic. In particular, otaku are commonly used as a critical example within techno-Orientalist interpretations of Japan, because otaku are considered to be a socially alienated culture that is detached from reality.

1.1.3 SUPERFLAT AND OTAKU

Margrit Brehm identifies Murakami’s method of ‘sampling,’ selecting and combining parts from different sources (for example, Japanese screen paintings, anime, Abstract Expressionism) as a reflection of an otaku sense of creation and authorship. These processes of fragmentation and transformation are identified by Azuma Hiroki (2001) as key characteristics of otaku culture.
which underpins consumers’ relationships to the characters they create and recreate.\textsuperscript{31} For Azuma, \textit{otaku} culture articulates the hybrid characteristics of \textit{anime} and \textit{manga} that developed primarily after the post-1945 influx of popular culture from the United States. Azuma’s philosophical intention is to theorise \textit{otaku} culture (and subsequently Murakami) as expressive of Japan’s postmodernity. Azuma is critical of discourses that neglect the historical consciousness of Japan’s defeat in the Second World War and the influence of imported commodity forms from the United States on the development of \textit{otaku} culture, including Murakami’s connection between Edo and contemporary expressivities. To Azuma, any concept of ‘pure’ Japanese identity, including the revival of Edo forms of art as expressing the ‘real’ subjectivity of Japan, is artificial:

You can easily find how Japanese typical landscapes actually are in contemporary films or comics, those filled with Seven-Elevens, McDonalds, Denny’s, comics, computers and cellular phones…they are all of American origin. In addition, my point here is that it is the \textit{otaku} culture that reflects most clearly this mixed, hybrid, bastardised condition; that is, the paradox that we cannot find any Japaneseness without post-war American pop culture (2001 para. 8).

But despite this acknowledgement, Azuma ends up affirming \textit{otaku} culture and Superflat as Japanese. In Azuma’s critique, \textit{otaku} culture comes to be identified as Japanese in place of other more conventional markers of Japaneseness, and thereby it is formed into a new subjectivity. Azuma also emphasises the specificity of \textit{otaku} as being different to other fan cultures and to consumers of \textit{anime} and \textit{manga}, and as being particular to Japanese culture. Thomas Lamarre (2004) is critical of this emphasis and its privileging of the specificity of \textit{otaku}; he argues that this contradicts the non-hierarchical and fluid subjectivity that Azuma considers a key characteristic of \textit{otaku} production-consumption practices, and neglects the global context in which \textit{anime} and \textit{manga} circulate. The emphasis on \textit{otaku} as Japanese is a common tactic in interpreting Murakami’s work. Cruz’s analysis of Murakami’s engagement with \textit{otaku} culture demonstrates an awareness of Murakami’s own ironical stance towards the influence of Western popular culture on \textit{otaku} culture (p. 16), but she consistently identifies \textit{otaku} as an ‘original Japanese cultural product’ (p. 19). In contrast, Steinberg (2004) who also identifies Murakami with \textit{otaku} culture, considers the interactivity of \textit{otaku} production-consumption practices as being

\textsuperscript{31} Azuma is an emerging Japanese philosopher and cultural critic, specialising in contemporary \textit{otaku} culture. He has published seven books in Japan, including \textit{Sonzaironteki, Yubinteki} (Ontological, Postal) (1998) examining Jacques Derrida, and \textit{Dobutsuka-suru Postmodern} (Animalizing Postmodernity) (2001) (cited in Azuma 2006). A few of Azuma’s texts, which are directly associated with Murakami and Superflat are available in English: Azuma’s writing on Superflat was included in the exhibition catalogue (2000) and he gave a public lecture on ‘Superflat Japanese Postmodernity’ (2001) to accompany the Los Angeles exhibition.
more generally characteristic of digital culture, and less expressive of any specific Japaneseness. Steinberg challenges Murakami’s presentation of Superflat as part of a specifically Japanese aesthetic lineage that traces back to the Edo period, and argues that what is more important is the underlying structure of Murakami’s works and activities which are aligned closely with the consumption and production of contemporary media texts (pp. 467-8).

Steinberg’s view is that Murakami is self-consciously and strategically deploying these associations with Japan, *otaku*, and postmodernism in order to sell his work. Therefore, even when the construction of the identity of Superflat as Japanese is examined, the overtness of this strategy is considered negative and detracting. Murakami is criticised for the deliberate and strategic marketing of his work as part of the ‘Tokyo Cool’ trend (McGray 2002).

For example, Yoshiko Shimada is critical of Murakami’s collusive Orientalist strategy:

Some Western art critics and curators seem to think that this “Superflat” represents the ultimate form of the post-modern consumerist culture. They see Japanese pop culture and its eradication of history and meaning as radical, futuristic and uniquely Japanese. This uniqueness is reinforced both by Murakami himself and by Western critics and curators, through an insistence on the influence of well-known Japanese traditional cultural productions such as ukiyo-e prints on Murakami’s works. Thus, when Murakami appropriates historical elements, it is always this Western-approved, stereotypical cliché of Japanese culture.

One cannot help feeling this as a renewed, collaborative Orientalism. “Superflat” gives Western art audiences a kind of futuristic Oriental spectacle that they can enjoy without feeling any sense of relationship to it, and likewise its approval by the West gives the Japanese a sense of self-importance and pride of being “uniquely Japanese.” The dangers of the rhetoric of the “uniquely Japanese” are evident in Japan’s recent colonial past and in the still current mythology of “one family” (2002, pp. 188-89).

However, not all critics consider this to be a negative position. Minami Yusuke (2001), who curated Murakami’s solo exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art Tokyo, emphasises the strategic coding of Murakami’s works. Minami argues that Murakami’s works are ‘fully programmed’ for achieving recognition in the European and United States art markets (p. 59).

Murakami is very conscious of his own success. He formulated a program to guide his career with the sole aim of becoming famous on the international art scene, particularly in America and Europe, and it must be said that he has most definitely achieved his goal (p. 58).

The programming that Minami refers to is the flexibility which allows Murakami’s work to be

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32 *Tokyo Cool* describes the cultural and economic capital generated from the export of Japanese visual and electronic culture.
contextualised in relation to both Western art history and to Japan. While Minami implicitly suggests (like Shimada) that this may result in the commodification of his Japanese identity, he also allows it to be considered as a liberatory and strategic means of articulating identity within the culture of late capitalism.

[W]e are presented with the endless circle of mutual cultural referential relationships that exists between Japan and America through the media of painting and manga/anime (p. 59).

The concept of agency in relation to the consumption of popular culture by otaku is critical to Murakami’s intention to create a new concept for art outside of the art establishment in Japan. However, analyses of Murakami in relation to the status of art in Japan, and Superflat’s agency in relation to that status, have not often been discussed, particularly in reviews by critics outside of Japan.

1.1.4 THE CRITICAL AGENCY OF SUPERFLAT

Murakami’s engagement with otaku forms has been interpreted as an expression of a critical and strategic agency that affirms otaku culture as the site of a particular Japanese creativity, thus challenging the status of the academic institutions of fine art (bijutsu) in Japan and the hegemonic position of the Western art world.

Murakami tries to reclaim the creativity of his domestic heritage, reinstating it in the indigenous development of Japanese popular culture... By smuggling a sensibility characteristic of both premodern and postmodern Japanese visual expression - long repressed as irrelevant to "high" cultural practices - back into the elitist system of contemporary art, he allies his practice with the wildness of Japanese popular imagination (Matsui 1999b, p. 142).

Matsui is the only writer to directly engage and locate Murakami within the politics and debates about the social and political status of art in Japan, both historically and currently. Thus, there is no discussion of the politics surrounding the importation of the Western concept of art into Japan and its subsequent impact on the status of art and aesthetic value, even though references to Murakami’s training in nihonga (Japanese painting) are commonly made (see Cotter 2001; Cruz 2000; Gomez 1999), and Murakami explicitly refers to this process in the Superflat catalogue (2000a, pp.15-25). In comparison, Matsui (2001a) identifies Murakami as an example

33 The exceptions are a small piece by Sawaragi Noi in World Art (Sawaragi 1997); and Brehm, who identifies Murakami’s own distribution outside the gallery context in relation to art’s social status (2002, p. 15).
of postcolonial agency, offering an alternative to the tensions in twentieth-century Japanese painting between Japanese and Western styles. The dilemma for contemporary Japanese artists, Matsui argues (pp. 47-8), arises from the 'colonisation' of Japanese art by the Western concept of art (bijutsu) imported during the Meiji period, and its subsequent impact on the construction of tradition and the meaning of original Japanese expression.34

Furthermore, Matsui argues that Murakami is not only contesting the academicism and domestication of Japanese art institutions, but also negotiating with the political dynamics of the international contemporary art world (2001a, p. 72), particularly what she perceives as the standardising effect amongst international art, and the tensions generated by the representation and commodification of identity within the Western-dominated art market. Matsui suggests that Murakami's critical position can be considered as being both collusive and resistant to these processes:

Murakami consciously plays off his "Japaneseness" by constantly staging his artistic struggle as simultaneously a transcendence of this modern Japanese "colonial" mentality and an articulation of his identity as opposed to Western modernism; ironically, his application of infantile motifs and ornamentation in his apparently nationalistic Super Flat campaign betrays its Enlightening characteristic, with Japan functioning as an emblem both of negativity - a nowhere of art history - and of salvation - a rich reservoir of eccentric figuration (p. 72).

For Matsui, Murakami's DOB character reflects the hybridity of Japanese popular culture, and it becomes an 'ironic' reflection of the Japanese domestication of the 'original' Mickey Mouse.

Murakami strategically sought proof of his identity in the apparently "empty" glitter of contemporary Japanese popular culture. Realizing that this culture itself copied American popular culture, Murakami created artworks whose deliberately obscured "originality" reflected the hybrid constitution of his sensibility (1999b, p. 142).

Therefore, Matsui employs a postcolonial framework through which to examine the expression of originality in relation to contemporary Japanese artists (2001a, p. 52).35 Matsui uses Stuart

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34 As will be discussed in Chapter Two, Japan's modern art has been criticised as 'incomplete' (Matsui 2002, p. 142) because the exterior forms of art were adopted but without the concept of originality or dialectical emphasis of Western modern art (see also Fox, Hara Bijutsukan & Los Angeles County Museum of Art 1990; Sawaragi 1992, 1994). The situation is further complicated because in contrast to bijutsu, there is a minimal market and professional exhibition opportunities for contemporary artists. Thus since the late 1980s, the Western art market has provided a key means for artists to exhibit and sell their work.

35 While Japan was never colonised by Europe or the United States, for Matsui the adoption of Western institutions of art during the Meiji period and the influence of abstract painting post-1945, constitutes a type of colonisation (ibid).
Hall’s concept of articulation to examine the tensions and Murakami’s experiences in relation to his identity within the international art world. Articulation enables, a marginalized subject to define a radically unique identity, existing between fixed areas of belonging such as "global" and the "domestic" (p. 52).

Thus, it involves the colonial subject employing the language of the dominant culture in which to articulate a new identity. For Hall, this identity belongs neither to the indigenous culture, nor to the colonial culture but occupies a place in-between.36

Matsui’s location of Murakami’s identity as a form of postcolonial agency is a useful starting point for the analysis of the production-consumption of his work in a global context. However, what requires further elucidation is his ‘obscured originality’ (ibid) and how this operates strategically within the flows of culture and capital occurring within contemporary globalisation. In particular, locating Murakami within contemporary debates on globalisation can extend Matsui’s postcolonial interpretation as well as other interpretations that interpret Murakami and Superflat as being in total opposition to art, commercial culture, bijutsu, or Western Art History. At the same time, the interpretation of Murakami as lacking a critique of these concepts and institutions also needs to be challenged. Furthermore, if points of resistance are sought in Superflat, as Matsui argues, the circulation of Superflat needs to be considered in relation to wider discourses on the expression and conception of national-cultural identity within contemporary global processes; this would apply in particular to the strategic essentialisation of Japanese cultural identity and the binary positions that Murakami continues to assert. His self-conscious positioning of Superflat in a global context also requires further investigation (Murakami 2000a, p. 9). While there has been consideration of these issues in relation to the export of Japanese popular culture (Ahn 2001; Allison 2000a, 2003; Iwabuchi 1994, 2002a, 2002b; Lamarre 2004; Martinez 1998; Napier & Okada 2003; Napier 2001a, 2001b; Norris 2000; Price 2001), a scholarly engagement of the global circulation of contemporary Japanese art, which draws on anime and manga sources and operates simultaneously with their export, has not been undertaken. That is, a critical and theoretical consideration of the production-consumption of Murakami and Superflat in relation to the dynamics and forces of contemporary globalisation is needed.

36 Homi Bhabha (1994) theorises a similar idea in relation to the concept of hybridity. However, as will be examined in later in this chapter, hybrid identities can be (re)configured as essentialised formations and can also result in presuming pre-existing binary formations.
1.2 DEFINING THE TOPOGRAPHY: THESIS QUESTIONS AND KEY ARGUMENTS

This thesis argues that Murakami’s work participates directly in the aestheticisation and conceptualisation of the relations between art, commodity and cultural identity outlined in the literature review. Specifically, Murakami’s Superflat aesthetic is a vehicle for the expression of the critical disputes characterising contemporary global culture: the multidimensional relations of economy and culture, the intricate intertwining of capitalism which commodifies, and the cultural expressions which can be determined by and elude that imperative. Murakami is not seeking to resolve the contradictions identified, but rather they are expressed through the aesthetics of the Superflat surface. These tensions can be considered as ‘language wars’ - a cultural tendency that simultaneously stimulates both the clustering and dispersal of cultural elements and meanings (Lewis 2005, p. 2). Language wars form points of discursive tension within contemporary globalisation processes (ibid). These tensions are partly constituted around the ideas and experiences, the ‘imaginings’ (2002, pp. 8-9), of culture and identity which merge together to form meanings. This concept of imagining is not intended to describe a fictional state and it is not separate to factual knowledge or actual experience. Rather, it plays a critical role in generating meaning and in relation to practices and the material conditions of production-consumption. Imagining is a useful concept for this thesis because the production-consumption of Superflat operates in a global space which is mediated by the ideas and experiences generated through the circulation of images, ideas and people (Appadurai 1996).

As part of the language wars of globalisation, Murakami’s work is asserted as being both art and commodity, namely, a mode of expressivity that is self-consciously aesthetic (original, beautiful, meaningful) and a product within the global cultural market place (defined by capitalism, mechanical reproduction, and symbolic exchange). Neither of these meanings necessarily overrides or negates the other; rather, Murakami engages directly in the play of contentions in and between these meanings. It is the contention of this thesis that Murakami mobilises these discourses of art and commodity as part of the intrinsic expressivity of Superflat art and its commercial success. While numerous commentators have sought to identify Murakami’s art and Superflat in terms of one or the other, it is the contention of this thesis that Murakami is deliberately invoking the tensions between art and commodity, along with other associated

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37 For the purposes of this thesis language will refer to any meaning-making system, including images and written texts.
discourses of globalisation, particularly national-cultural identity, and postmodernism in order to create his aesthetic vision and his popular commercial success. This thesis does not consider postmodernism as a complete breakdown of the categories of art and commodity, but rather that they have entered into new sets of relations and configurations under the influences of globalisation.

In summary, this thesis argues that Murakami is working in and between assemblages of meaning, which are clustered around the concepts of art and commodity, and global and local identities. These concepts are considered to be discursive constructions, rather than possessing fixed meanings. Deleuze and Guattari (1987, pp. 503-5, 508-510) argue that categories can be deconstructed and de-essentialised in order to create nomad concepts and assemblages of meanings. Murakami’s dialogue with the language wars between the assemblages (of art, commodity, and cultural identity) is an intrinsic part of his Superflat expression. That is, he mobilises the complex sets of relations between the concepts of art and commercial culture as part of a broader debate on art’s position in everyday life and consumer capitalism. Simultaneously, these sets of relations are themselves part of the broader tensions of global/national/local cultures and their expression within the processes of contemporary globalisation.

The questions that are assembled around the concepts of originality, aesthetics, meaningfulness, and active politics are central issues for the study of culture. While these studies are frequently contextualised within cognitive and epistemological debates, frequently phrased as a contention between modernism and postmodernism, for example, this current thesis argues that these discussions need to be understood not merely as a polemic, but as a broad cognition in and of themselves. This thesis contends that Murakami is actively participating in these debates and discussions as both an aesthetic and commercial argent. This thesis traces how these language wars can be engaged beyond binary relations, and seeks to understand their complex and intertwined relations in multiple cultures by mapping the production-consumption of Superflat within the flows of global capital and culture.

The primary research question for this thesis is:

- In what ways do Takashi Murakami and his theory of Superflat art operate within the global cultural processes of the production-consumption of art, commodity and national-
cultural identity?

In order to address this primary question each chapter answers a series of supplementary questions.

**Chapter One - Mapping the Terrain**

- What is the current knowledge in Murakami and Superflat art, and what are the limitations of this knowledge?
- What are the critical contestations of the meaning of art, commodity and cultural identity in the study of culture and in theories of globalisation, and in what ways can these provide useful theoretical lenses through which to examine Murakami and Superflat art?

**Chapter Two - Made in Japan**

- In what ways are the theory and aesthetics of Superflat, and Murakami’s work more generally, examples of the complex economic and cultural interactions between the global and local identities that constitute contemporary processes of globalisation?
- In what ways do Takashi Murakami and Superflat function within the discursive imagining of Japanese culture?

**Chapter Three - Superflat™**

- In what ways does Superflat complicate the conceptual divisions between art and commercial culture across and within different cultural contexts and epistemologies?
- In what ways can Murakami’s aesthetic and practices be understood as an aesthetic expression of late capital culture?
1.3 GLOBAL MOBILITIES AND GEOGRAPHIES OF MEANING: THESIS CONTEXT AND KEY CONCEPTS

This thesis employs a Cultural Studies framework that locates cultural texts within cultural contexts (Barker 2000; During 2005; Lewis 2002). In Cultural Studies, the concept of a text does not simply refer to a written language but rather to any cultural practice that signifies, and therefore a text can be any cultural production or image, such as an artwork, a practice, or an institution. Murakami and Superflat art can be considered cultural texts because they are the sites of meaning-production, formed within culture. That is, they have emerged in relation to existing cultural significations for artist and art, and more specifically, contemporary Japanese art, while also generating new meanings. It is the tension generated between existing and new meanings that are traced in this thesis.

Cultural Studies is an interdisciplinary field, employing methods and theoretical positions from multiple disciplines including Philosophy, the Social Sciences, and Art History (Barker; D’Alleva 2005). Cultural Studies provides a theoretical lens through which to conceptualise and interrogate culture and cultural change. The critical focus of Cultural Studies is the examination of the production of meaning, particularly how this production is performed through the relations between the producer, the text, and the audience; in this thesis, this is referred to as the production-consumption process. Figure 4 illustrates the process of interaction through which culture and meaning are engaged and generated:

![Figure 4: Culture, the media and meaning-making](Source: Lewis 2005, p. 6.)

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38 This is influenced by Roland Barthes’ concept that any form of signification can be considered a text (Lewis 2002, pp. 7-8).
The processes of production, consumption, and the distribution of cultural texts therefore form a negotiated relationship of meaning making. Art, as a contemporary expressive medium, operates through this model of meaning making and functions according to a mediated relationship between the texts (artwork or practice), the producer of the text (the artist), and the audience. As stated above, the audience or consumers can also be producers of meanings. In addition, art institutions (the art market, galleries, critics) can be considered producers in so far as they also contribute the production of meaning of art. New meanings are produced through this interaction; however, texts, producers, and consumers are also formed through existing meanings. Therefore, the text is not considered the primary, or only, source of meaning, but rather is located within wider cultural dynamics.

Culture is constructed out of the triad of mediation [Producer, Text, Audience], though it is also the fundamental resource for the formation of those mediations. That is, this mediation relationship operates within a context of existing meanings, though it is also active in the dynamic which stimulates the construction and dissemination of new meanings. This “construction” and “dissemination” process is as much a part of audience activities and practices as it is the role and responsibility of the text producers (Lewis, p. 5).

Approaching the analysis of Murakami using this framework allows for the analysis of Murakami’s productions, such as his artworks and writings, as well as his curatorial practices, and how these texts operate in relation to elements of the wider culture, such as art institutions and government policies, within the processes of globalisation. Textual analysis, one of the key methodological approaches in Cultural Studies, maps the generation and activation of meaning in the processes of production-consumption (McKee 2002), and thus situates a cultural text within its historical, material, and cultural contexts (Lewis, p. 35). In this way, the production-consumption processes of Murakami and Superflat can be traced in relation to different cultural contexts as they circulate globally.

Cultural Studies typically approaches the concept of culture as referring to everyday life and lived experience; it considers culture to be a negotiated space for meaning making and interaction. Lewis defines culture as:

[A]n assemblage of imaginings and meanings that may be consonant, disjunctive, overlapping, contentious, continuous or discontinuous. These assemblages may operate through a wide variety of human social groupings and social practices. In contemporary
culture these experiences of imagining and meaning-making are intensified through the proliferation of mass media images and information (Lewis 2002, p. 5). 39

The shared meanings of cultural objects are therefore produced in and through the significations of language (language in this broad sense can refer to images, speech, and sound-based texts as well as written texts). As Lewis indicates, the processes of meaning production within culture can be ‘consonant, disjunctive, overlapping, contentious, continuous or discontinuous.’ Culture can therefore be understood as a site in which the struggle for meaning occurs:

[B]ecause different meanings can be ascribed to the cultural text or practice, meaning is always the site and the result of struggle (Storey 1998, p. xiii)

It has already been noted that it is the contestation of meaning that constitutes language wars (p. 439-42). These struggles for meaning can be contextualised, in the broadest sense, as struggles for power. This contestation is a critical concern for Cultural Studies and informs the conception of consumers as active producers of meaning. 40 For example, the meaning of Superflat will inevitably transform across national borders, across audiences, and across cultures, and will be influenced by the context in which the work is consumed. Superflat has already been utilised and interpreted in various ways, including as a categorical mechanism for explaining recent tendencies in Japanese art (Brehm 2002), a means of extending the analysis of two-dimensional aesthetics in digital graphics (Munster 2003), and as a theoretical framework for contemporary Japanese architecture (Igarashi 2000). As stated in the literature review, there are numerous debates on the value and meaning of Murakami’s work in relation to the status and meaning of art and commercial culture and cultural identity. As has been noted, it is the...

39 Lewis’ definition builds upon Raymond Williams’ (1976) definition of culture as everyday experience (ibid). The meaning of culture has been interpreted in various ways (see Jenks 2005). During the eighteenth century, in association with class consciousness and the related ideas of cultivated or elite culture, culture was referred to in relation to aesthetic, intellectual, and spiritual development. Culture has also been considered a way of life, in more of an anthropological sense. Thirdly, culture has been used as a descriptor for works and practices of artistic and intellectual activity; this is closely linked to the first definition. The emphasis within Cultural Studies on culture as everyday life and lived experience challenges the equation of culture with the concept of civilisation, which has subsequently led to an emphasis within the discipline of Cultural Studies on the analysis of popular media texts and everyday consumption (see Lewis 2002, pp. 31-2; McGuigan 1998 [1992]). In particular, Cultural Studies draws attention to the politically constituted relations of culture. To this end Lewis’ diagram [Figure 4] includes government which is situated in the general context of culture, in which all social actions occur. Lewis draws from Michel Foucault’s concept of governmentality to refer in the broadest sense to social management processes and practices (2005, p. 15). The inclusion of government also highlights the governments role in policy and regulatory issues.

40 Stuart Hall (1998 [1981]) argues that because meaning is external to the text and is ascribed by consumers within specific contexts, historical moments, or discourses, the meanings of texts are therefore unstable and have the potential to be contradictory.
contention of this thesis that the contestations of meanings clustered around these concepts are an inherent part of the expressivity of Superflat art. Furthermore, the increasing complexity of contemporary culture and the intensification and extensivity of contemporary globalisation processes (Held et al. 1999) require an approach that allows for the fluidity and contestation of meaning within and between cultures.

The broader theoretical field of poststructuralism informs more recent permutations of Cultural Studies. It does not assume an underlying essential identity or absolute meaning; rather it considers meaning to be a specific production of culture at a particular moment (Lewis, p. 146). Poststructuralist theory does not presume singular or fixed meanings of texts, but rather emphasises the multiple viewpoints and meanings which can be constructed in the production-consumption process. While meaning may be temporarily stabilised for expression, it can also be conceived as being composed of multiple meanings that are in continual flux. In this way, culture can be considered an ‘assemblage’, a formation consisting of multiple fragments that are in a constant state of becoming, rather than occupying a fixed state (Deleuze & Guattari 1987, pp. 503-5). The assemblage is composed within a particular context and is formed by an impulse to movement and the creation of new meanings, and can be considered temporal. The assemblage is in a continual state of becoming, rather than possessing a fixed and stable meaning. Approaching the cultures of Superflat art and the concepts of art, commodity and

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41 Jacques Derrida (1976; 1978) argues that the sign is not unified as Ferdinand de Saussure proposed, but rather is composed of two binaries. These binaries are based on absences, namely, what is ‘not there’ and what it ‘is not.’ Derrida’s strategy of ‘deconstruction’ breaks down the constructed state of these binary relationships. Furthermore, Derrida argues that the signifier and signified are continually engaged in a process of attachment and reattachment to other signs, and therefore meaning is always in a state of procession, and always carries the trace of other signs (1973, pp. 129-60).

42 Deleuze and Guattari would resist their categorisation as poststructuralist theorists; however, they are often discussed in relation to poststructural and postmodern theory, particularly because they challenge the philosophical institutions and discourses of modernity, especially the concept of a fixed and stable identity and the separation of subject and object through concepts such as assemblage. In this way, postmodernism and poststructuralism share a concern for subjectivity as decentered and fragmented, and both conceptual fields have been used to understand the complex conditions and relations of culture. The notion of critiquing the concept of fixed and stable meaning is a significant component of postmodern discourses. Because of the similarities between poststructuralist theories and postmodernism the two are often associated (Sarup 1993, p. 144). However, Andreas Huyssen is critical of a blanket association and argues that poststructuralism, as a discourse, is still connected with modernism (1986, p. 207). Frederic Jameson argues that the poststructuralist critique of the centred subject is part of the condition of postmodernity, or late capitalism, and therefore can be considered a symptom of postmodern culture (1991, p. 12). Having acknowledged these debates, the critical difference between the two intellectual fields can be identified in their distinct histories and intellectual traditions (Lewis 2002, p. 163).
Japanese identity as assemblages allows them to be considered as sets of elements rather than as fixed and intrinsic categories. Furthermore, it enables these elements to be understood as being formed in dialogue with other assemblages. At any given time, these assemblages can be deployed as expressivities.

In this way, the meanings engaged by Murakami and Superflat are traced in this thesis; however, it is not presumed that these meanings are fixed and immutable. Rather, this thesis examines how the assemblages of meaning evoked by Murakami and Superflat can be engaged simultaneously. This approach enables the interrogation of the multiple cultures in which Murakami and Superflat operate without resorting to binary relations or fixed interpretations. In order to map this process a number of critical concepts will be engaged in order to tease out the meanings of art, commodity and cultural identity, namely, postmodernism, modernism, and globalisation. This thesis locates the dialogues and tensions between the conceptual fields of modernism and postmodernism within contemporary processes of globalisation in order to examine the meanings of art, commodity and identity in the context of the ‘non-Western’ modernity of Japan. Postmodern and modern theoretical discourses are typically located within, and in relation to, Western post-Enlightenment epistemologies (Hardt & Negri 2000, p. 142). However, while this has not precluded their adoption within Japan (see Miyoshi & Harootunian 1997), particular attention should be paid to the ways in which these philosophical positions have been assimilated and transformed within new cultural sites, to interact with local concepts (Clammer 2001). At the same time, and as will be discussed in Chapter Two, the identification of post-1970s Japan as postmodern (and Edo as Japan’s mirror of postmodernism) both by the West and Japan is embedded within Orientalist and self-Orientalist constructions (Iida 2000; Iwabuchi 1994; Yoda 2000). Therefore, while the concepts of art, commodity and cultural identity need to be examined beyond the specific epistemology and cognition of the Western postmodern/modern polemic, it is still relevant for this thesis to define their relations within Western thinking.

43 Árnason and Sugimoto (1995), Asada (1997), Clammer (2001) and Karatani (1997) highlight Japan’s modernity as being distinct from Western modernity. It should be noted that one of the difficulties in referring to other experiences of modernity, such as Japan’s, as ‘non-Western’ or even ‘alternative’ is that it tends to normalise and centralise Western modernity. These arguments are developed further in Chapter Two, particularly in sections 2.2 Nihonjinron, 2.3 Nihon Bijutsu and 2.4.2 in the subsection Postmodern Japan.
1.3.1 MODERNISM - POSTMODERNISM

For the purposes of this thesis, postmodernism and modernism are identified as conceptual fields with certain attributes (which may be shared or distinct); furthermore, they will be conceived as having dynamic relations with each other. That is, they will be understood as sets of discourses that are in dialogue with one another. Murakami and Superflat engage with the fundamental dialogue-tension between these two sets of discourses by critically and self-consciously evoking and deploying the meanings (including the institutions, expression and practices built around them) of art, commodity, and national-cultural identity.

As conceptual fields, postmodernism and modernism are highly contested. There is no agreed definition of either concept and both are internally complex and contradictory. Key contestations about the concepts and conditions that postmodernism engages with are based on the ways in which they relate to modernism and previous conditions, particularly if postmodernism is identified as a radical break with the philosophical positions of modernism and the institutions and practices of modernity. Therefore, it is difficult to consider postmodern discourses without referring to the discourses of modernism. Postmodernism is a particularly problematic term; it is in danger of being a buzzword (Hebdige 1998 [1986]), or unfashionable (Jencks 1996) or obsolete (Foster 1996). One of the key difficulties with understanding postmodernism can be traced to the term itself, namely, the use of the root modernism and the prefix post. By adding the prefix post to modern, postmodernism implies it supersedes modernism, that modernism is finished or out of date. Postmodern can similarly connote a state or expression that is beyond, or transcendent of, the present. However, the concept of an end to modernism is paradoxical, since given its orientation to present-ness, it is difficult to conceive of it as finished. The other difficulty is that postmodern, by including the root modern, still implies a connection with modernism. This is problematic for those who want to argue for postmodernism as a completely new concept. The further paradox is that the concepts of newness and opposition to the old are critical concepts and tactics within modernism. There is also a tendency in postmodern discourse to collapse the multiple forms, practices, and ways of thinking of modernism under the one banner.

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44 As a term, postmodernism has been in use since as early as the 1870s, but came into particular prominence in the 1970s (see Jencks 1996, p. 14).

45 ‘Modern’ comes from the Latin modo, meaning ‘just now.’ In one sense then, to be modern means to be up-to-date, and thus it emphasises the present.
While it is not the purpose of this thesis to become embedded in the scholarly debates on defining postmodernism as a rupture from or continuation of modernism, which were so prevalent in the 1980s and 1990s, it is necessary to define the terms more precisely to clarify the contestations of art, commodity and identity to help examine how they are employed in contemporary theoretical discourse. Postmodernity and modernity can be understood as historical and sociological phases or periods characterised by particular economic, technological and political tendencies. According to this understanding, postmodernity would succeed modernity. Postmodernism and modernism can be understood as cultural and epistemological concepts (Barker 2000; Lewis 2002). Postmodernism as the only way of understanding the conditions of postmodernity is also debated, because many of the social formations and institutions of modernity remain current, as do modern modes of expression and concepts. This inter-connection makes it difficult to ascribe a particular beginning to postmodernity or an end to

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46 The beginnings of European modernity as an historical phase can be traced back to the period following the Middle Ages, when Europe was characterised by a feudal society and the rise of the bourgeois. Modernity is conventionally associated with the conditions of modernisation, namely, the rise of industrialisation and urbanisation, which occurred around the mid-nineteenth century (Barker 2000; Harrison 1997; Sarup 1993). In Art History, modernity is typically associated with the work of Courbet, Manet and Baudelaire (Harrison 1996). Postmodernity is generally associated with the cultural, social, economic, and political conditions of the late twentieth century. The beginnings of postmodernity have been generally associated with changes in the functions and structures of capitalism (Harvey 1990; Jameson 1991a), transformations within global governance structures (Hardt & Negri 2000), and developments in technology (Castells 2000). Although not all of these authors would concur that these transformations should be categorised as postmodern, the point is that these changes have been identified, but they do not necessarily denote the end of the structures and institutions of modernity.

47 They are typically used in three ways. Firstly, as cultural concepts they can be understood as describing particular forms and experiences of their historical phase; thus, modernism refers to the experience of living in modernity. Secondly, modernism and postmodernism can be used to refer to particular styles or cultural expressions. In this way, an artist may be described as a modernist or a postmodernist in reference to particular styles that are employed. Thirdly, they can denote a set of philosophical or epistemological positions or concerns, that is, ways of thinking. The second and third usages can be related. An artistic style can be understood as expressive of a particular philosophical position. At the same time, there may be forms and expressions in postmodernity that are not considered expressions of postmodern thinking. Charles Jencks (1996, pp. 30-1) states that in following this definition capitals are typically used to denote Postmodern and Modern, whereas for Charles Harrison it is the philosophical position, Modernist or Postmodernist, which should employ caps. Furthermore, sometimes postmodernism is written using a hyphen, post-modern. This thesis is referring to the broader conceptual field of postmodernism and is not intending to be located specifically in relation to a theoretical position on the specific differences between postmodern/modern thinking; therefore, neither capitals nor hyphens will be used.
modernity.48 For example, postmodernism has been identified as an intensification of modernism’s own characteristics (Ihab Hassan cited in Jencks 1996, p. 19). In art, Andreas Huyssen identifies the Pop Art of the 1960s as the emergence of the postmodern as a critique of the elitism and academicism of modernism (Huyssen 1986). While Huyssen acknowledges that elements of this postmodern impulse existed in other avant-garde moments of modernism, he argues that postmodernism is indicative of new relations between high art and mass commercial culture which differ from the categorical distinctions of modernism (p. x). The key focus of this thesis is the contestations of meaning situated in relation to a number of specific concepts which can be broadly categorised as postmodern or modern philosophical positions. Thus, it does not directly address the specific debates on the postmodern/modern relationship beyond these specific language wars. What can be identified are new relations within postmodernism, which still acknowledge the connections and interrelations between postmodernism and modernism, and the continuance of the social, economic, and political conditions of modernity within postmodernity.

Modernism

The underpinning belief of modernism is the advancement of rational knowledge and human progress, enabled by scientific and technical development, and this can be traced back to Enlightenment philosophy. Modernism as a progressive impulse is characterised by a self-critical approach to knowledge, and a continual self-conscious break with the past or its conventions. The concept of dialectic is a critical one for modernism because it operates by a process of negation through opposition in order to seek new ground and advance understanding. In art, these concepts were expressed through the rejection of past forms of representations and the adoption of new forms and media (Hughes 1991). Charles Harrison (1997, p. 14) defines modernism as a critical commitment to both forms of convention and cultural contexts, but with an imperative to innovate and to intentionally seek alternatives to convention.

To apply the concept of modernism to the history of art, then, is to refer to a tendency that accords priority to the imagination as thus defined [as an agent of human freedom and potential], that is affirmative of the value of direct experience, and that is critical of ideas that remain resistant to change. As implied earlier, we should not expect to be

48 The deliberate destruction in the 1970s of modern architectural constructions such as the Pruitt-Igoe in St. Louis is typically used as a symbol of the recognised failure of the modernist ideology of progress and the use of architectural solutions for social problems. However, no such ‘defining moment’ exists for art or literature (Harrison 1996; Jencks 1996).
able to identify a specific modernist style. Rather, modernist art will tend to define itself by reference to the kinds of style from which it establishes its difference. In fact, we might say that one of the identifying signs of a modernist art will be a kind of scepticism or wariness about any fixed relationship between a picture and its subject — a form of self-consciousness, in other words, about how the picturing is done (Harrison 1997, p. 9 italics in original).

Harrison’s conception of modernism is derived from Clement Greenberg’s (1965) theorisation of modernist painting as both a continuation of and innovation from previous modes of painting. That is, he identifies a self-critical tendency towards the medium and the practice of painting which emphasises the originality of expression. Thus, for Greenberg modern art (painting) was autonomous and engaged in a process of self-critical dialectical development — l’art pour l’art. A key characteristic of modernism in the arts was the emergence of the twentieth-century artistic avant-garde. The avant-garde attacked modern art and the societal institutions of modernity through the presentation of new interactions between artwork and audience (Bürger 1984).

Thus, the avant-garde was considered to be at the forefront of the progressive innovation of modern art, but also emerged in critical opposition to the institutions of modern art; others (Adorno 1998 [1942]; Greenberg 1939) saw the avant-garde as a critical component of the autonomy of art.

Greenberg’s position emerges from a belief in art’s role in the advancement of knowledge and its distinction from other cultural productions, especially commercial productions; this belief underpins the concept of art being categorised as ‘high’ culture and mass-produced commercial culture as ‘low’ culture. Art was considered to have the potential to be autonomous and to transcend the imperatives of capitalism. With the development of the technologies of mass production, the importance of art was considered to lie in its effect of countering commodification. Theodor Adorno (1998 [1942]) argued that the commodities produced by the capitalist culture industry were controlled by market value and profit. The effect of capitalism was to encourage standardised and formulaic products which were easily digested. For Adorno, commodities celebrated ‘the sentimental’ and the immediate (p. 208). Adorno argued that the

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49 This essentialised view of modernism has been revised by more recent theorisations arguing that the autonomy of art was more an ideal of cultural theorists such as Greenberg than it was part of actual practice for artists (Fitzgerald 1995). However, it is the persistence of the concept of art’s autonomy that is of concern here.

50 Adorno problematically considered the audience as passive dupes who were prone to manipulation in being compelled to consume (pp. 205-6). As stated in the introduction to this chapter section, these ideas of the audience have been revised in Cultural Studies in order to consider audiences as active producers of meaning.
effects of this formulism were disguised by a ‘pseudo-individuality,’ in which the external style of a commodity changed while it retained a core structure which reproduced capitalist ideology (p. 203). For Adorno, art’s autonomy was critical in ensuring its protection from the culture industries’ economic and political influences, and in retaining its qualities of uniqueness and individuality.\(^{51}\) In his famous essay *Avant-Garde and Kitsch* (1939) Clement Greenberg presents avant-garde art as an expression of originality, criticality and autonomy, and he sets this expression in opposition to the ‘kitsch’ products of capitalist culture - kitsch refers to the mass produced forms of commercial culture, which Greenberg criticises as mechanical and formulaic. He is especially critical of the ‘faked’ ways in which kitsch co-opts high culture then ‘debases’ and ‘trivialises’ it. Greenberg calls for resistance to this ‘faked article’ of ‘high-class kitsch’ by appealing to the high culture of modern avant-garde painting (p. 534). However, while Greenberg invoked the concept of the avant-garde in order to emphasise it as the expressive force of dialectical progress and originality, and to reinforce the concept of art as high culture against the commodity forms of low culture, he excluded dada and surrealism (1965) (which were key avant-garde movements) on the basis that originality can only be found within the medium itself; thus, he excluded work that engaged with mass culture through techniques such as collage (Cooke 1990).

Another key concept that underpins modernism is the emphasis on the artist as an individual and creative genius, with art being the original and unique expression of that artist. As such, a key revolution in modern art was the rejection of the classical emphasis on the imitation of models, and the privileging of the artist’s unique and direct experience of their environment (Shiff 1996, p. 104).\(^{52}\) This shift in the conception of the artist and the emphasis on individual experience and innovation can be linked to the wider social and economic changes that were experienced in modernity, particularly the rise of the bourgeoisie. Greater value was ascribed to individual access to knowledge and to individual experience because the identity of the subject was considered to be individual and unique. From this emphasis on original experience and the original self emerged the concept of the individual and unique artist and the art object as the expression of

\(^{51}\) Hence, Adorno (1993 [1936]) was critical of Walter Benjamin’s position against autonomy and his advocacy for the emancipatory potentials of mechanical reproduction. Adorno instead sought revolutionary forces within art’s autonomy (Huyssen 1986, p. 32).

\(^{52}\) The post-Enlightenment concept of the artist as a revolutionary, as a deviator creating something new, is in contrast to the medieval conception of the anonymous artist and collective production (Harrison 1997).
that uniqueness:

Accordingly, romantics and modernists associate artistic authenticity with an expressive manner so autonomous that it must also appear innovative, in opposition to the value a classicist might have located in selective repetition (p. 107).

Paradoxically, the new value and meaning of artworks as unique and original expressions of individual artists underpinned the development of the twentieth-century art market, even though Adorno and Greenberg stressed art’s autonomy from social and economic imperatives. Accompanying the development of the art market was the emerging importance of the art critic’s role as judge and mediator, deciding what was a ‘sincere and effective’ artistic expression (Shiff 1996, p. 109). Greenberg (1939) argues that there is a general consensus by experts, whom he defines as the truth seekers, the cultivated, the enlightened, as to what is authentic and what is inauthentic. Institutions of modernity such as the art museum fostered this culture of expertise based on the rational logic that these experts possessed specialist skills and knowledge unavailable to the non-expert (Habermas 1998). In constructing this culture of expertise and differentiation, distance was created between the specialist and the wider public. These concepts of art, specialist judgement, and autonomy emerge from a Kantian concept of aesthetics. The modern theory of aesthetics identified the artwork and the aesthetic experience as a discreet domain, distinct from sacred and utilitarian objects, economic rationalism, and cultural-political considerations.

From the 1970s through to the early 1990s certain philosophical discourses emerged which

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53 The value of the unique, original art object was positioned in opposition to the copy or imitation (Krauss 1986; Shiff 1996, p. 108).

54 In *Critique of Judgement* Immanuel Kant (1952) conceived of aesthetics as the ability to judge beauty (Kant 1952) particularly on the basis of a rational understanding of perception and experience. Aesthetics can be understood as an attempt to understand sensation, to apprehend the process of experience, and in doing so to bring it into the order of reason (Pietz 1996, pp. 197-8). This judgement, in Kant’s view, is dependent on clarity of thought and knowledge, and hence the viewer’s engagement with the work is actually emphasised as disinterest. To conceive of the object as beautiful was therefore to comprehend it in terms of its formal qualities rather than as an object to be consumed, or as one that provides a sensuous or gratifying experience (Schirato & Webb 2004, p. 125). In other words, the value of the image was determined by knowledge and reason, not by subjective responses. Any other effect, such as pleasure, was considered to be in response to the admiration of the formal properties of beauty. The concept of the rational and objective process of viewing and evaluation, of being the disinterested viewer, defines the relation between the viewer and object as one based on contemplation rather than immediate gratification. It also implies that a universal standard in the judgement of beauty is possible.

55 Cultural Studies has opposed the concept of the disinterested viewer and instead seeks to locate art’s expression within specific cultural-social-historical locations.
began to challenge the modernist philosophies of art. These included: originality (Krauss 1986); the distinction between the original and the copy, the real and imaginary (Baudrillard 1983a); the autonomy of art (Bourdieu 1984; Foster 1998; Jameson 1991b); and the subjectivity of authorial creation (Barthes 1990).

Pierre Bourdieu’s sociological study of taste, Distinction: a social critique of the judgement of taste (1984), critiqued Kant’s concept of the universality of aesthetic judgement and the disinterested viewer and the ideology of artistic and cultural autonomy. Bourdieu (1993) argued that the judgement of beauty or distinction was a socially constructed practice that reproduced social status and class divisions: ‘art and cultural consumption are pre-disposed, consciously and deliberately or not, to fulfil a social function of legitimating social differences’ (p. 7). Bourdieu also drew attention to the simultaneous emergence of the art market and the philosophical emphases on the autonomy of art and the value of originality. The reduction of dependence on a patron or collector, which was considered to liberate the potential of the artist, came to be replaced by the mediations of the art dealer and the demands of the market.

In the 1980s art expressions were identified that drew on postmodern discourses and reflected

56 The understanding and application of aesthetics has also been under revision and debate in relation to contemporary art and the experiences of new technologies (Beech & Roberts 1996; Bowie 1997; Darley & Hjorth 2000). Participants in the debate have sought to reconsider the role of aesthetics and sensorial experience without recourse to the modern position which emphasises disinterested judgement, or which neglects the sensuously gratifying (Deleuze 1994; Deleuze & Guattari 1987; Zagala 2002).

57 ‘By an apparent paradox, as the art market began to develop, writers and artists found themselves able to affirm the irreducibility of the work of art to the status of a simple article of merchandise and, at the same time, the singularity of the intellectual and artistic condition. …The emergence of the work of art as a commodity, and the appearance of a distinct category of producers of symbolic goods specifically destined for the market, to some extent prepared the ground for a pure theory of art, that is, of art as art. It did so by disassociating art-as-commodity from art-as-pure-signification, produced according to a purely symbolic intent for purely symbolic appropriation, that is, for disinterested delectation, irreducible to simple material possession. …The ending of the dependence on a patron or collector and, more generally, the ending of dependence upon direct commissions, with the development of an impersonal market, tends to increase the liberty of writers and artists. They can hardly fail to notice, however, that this liberty is purely formal; it constitutes no more than the condition of their submission to the laws of the market of symbolic goods, that is, to a form of demand which necessarily lags behind the supply of the commodity (in this case, the work of art). They are reminded of this demand through sales figures and other forms of pressure, explicit or diffuse, exercised by publishers, theatre managers, art dealers. It follows that those ‘inventions’ of Romanticism – the representation of culture as a kind of superior reality, irreducible to the vulgar demands of economics, and the ideology of free, disinterested ‘creation’ founded on the spontaneity of innate inspiration – appear to be just so many reactions to the pressures of an anonymous market.’ (Bourdieu 1993 [1971], pp. 113-4).
wider changes in culture, such as the increased proliferation of media images and information, increased circulation of people, and shifts within capitalism to an emphasis on symbolic exchange and multinational corporations (Harvey 1990). Simulationism and methods of appropriation were employed to critique the models of unified subjectivity, the authenticity of authorship and creative originality (Foster 1998; Owens 1980). However, these postmodern forms of expression remained in dialogue with the codes and structures of modernism. Of particular relevance for this thesis is the continuing reliance of the art market on the signature branding of the artist as well as on innovation, even though postmodern theory has attacked these concepts of newness, originality and authorial subjectivity:

The avowed position of many...artists may be post-modern — and there may be a great deal to recommend the desire to hold that position — but the actual dynamics of the production and reception of art are as subject to the familiar economics of high modernity as they were for the reviled modernists (Williams 2004, p. 81).

The following section provides a general overview of the key concepts of originality, universal truth and the distinction of meaning in relation to key postmodern philosophers.

**Postmodernism**

Rosalind Krauss in her famous critique, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (1986), conceives of postmodernism as an attack on the modernist privileging of the original over the copy. Krauss argues that the modernist discourse of the avant-garde is based on a discourse of originality and progressivism. In a challenge to this, Krauss aims to expose the ‘false fiction’ of the modernist discourse which hierarchically privileges the concept of originality, by revealing that modernism has been a condition of repetition. In contrast, Kraus emphasises how postmodernism valorises what had been negated, namely, the copy. Krauss is influenced by poststructuralism, and thus deconstructs the assumption of a singular or originary meaning or truth and therefore art’s search for that truth through a ‘ground zero’ point of origin and originality (Shiff 1996, p. 105).

Jean-François Lyotard (1984) is also influenced by poststructuralism in identifying and critiquing the grand narratives of modernism. Lyotard conceives of postmodernism as both a way of thinking and a cultural condition, arguing that the condition of knowledge has altered in response
to the conditions of electronic culture (pp. 3-6). Lyotard defines postmodernism as ‘incredulity toward metanarratives’ (p. xxiv); these are the discourses of science founded on rational thinking that characterised modernist logic. Lyotard, influenced by Friedrich Nietzsche, argues that postmodernism is a condition of doubt or skepticism towards legitimisation by appeal to a metanarrative such as truth. Thus, postmodernism is skeptical of the idea that elements are commensurable and the whole is determinable (p. xxiv). Lyotard conceives the aim of postmodernism as the ‘tolerance of incommensurability’ (p. xxv), not reconciliation, universality, consensus or truth. For Lyotard, this heterogeneity is achieved through the concept of Language Games (pp. 9-10). Language games are characterised by relativism; they do not appeal to their own rules of legitimation, but rather emphasise dissension, innovation, and individual social contracts. While Lyotard can be criticised for narrating postmodernism in a totalising manner, his concepts of heterogeneous language games and incommensurability allow the categorical distinction between art and commercial culture to be reconsidered and the plurality of cultural identities to be explored: ‘Let us wage a war on totality; let us be witness to the unpresentable; let us activate the differences...’ (p. 82). That is, Lyotard’s critique of metanarratives and languages games reveals that concepts such as ‘cultural authenticity’ are not based on stable and fixed meanings, but always open to questioning. Nevertheless, Lyotard himself is critical of the relations between contemporary art and commercial culture, and expresses a concern for the irrelevancy of aesthetic criteria under conditions in which money becomes the only sign of value (p. 76). He argues that under these conditions there is a tendency for an ‘anything goes’ ethos and an uncritical following of the eclecticism of commercial culture.

58 In contrast, Jürgen Habermas advocates for postmodernism as a return to what he considers to be the original project of modernity, rather than it constituting a complete break. This was a return to the concept of the public sphere, where ideas could be contested and debated and not kept separate within privileged specialties. The project was based on the Enlightenment intention to develop the cultural domain of art (as well as science and morality) for the benefit of everyday life. Habermas argues that postmodernism rejects this critical and oppositional imperative of modernism. Therefore Habermas argues that the modernist project needs to be revisited rather than rejected. This position was criticised by Lyotard, who was sceptical towards Habermas’ return to truth claims because he considered they had potential for sustaining a dominant position.

59 Lyotard is critical of the aporia of legitimation in these discourses, particularly that they seek to legitimise themselves by reference to their own grand narratives of universal progression, unity, and judgements of goodness and truth. Lyotard considers the discourses to be aporias because they cannot be legitimated outside of themselves.

60 Lyotard’s concept of Language is derived from the work of Ludwig Wittenstein.

61 Science would be considered only one form of language game, and therefore would not assert itself as the one true body of universal knowledge. Language games also allow for multiple subjectivities and ways of knowing. That is, the subject is conceived as fragmented and engaged in multiple language games, each with its own rules and codes; thus there is no singular true self (p. 15).
Like Lyotard, Jean Baudrillard (1988b; 1996) is also concerned, albeit more pessimistically, about the proliferation of capitalism and media which has facilitated the accelerated production and circulation of signs and information. Baudrillard argues that the relations of capitalism have shifted and that symbolic exchange is now the key aspect of contemporary culture. He argues that the proliferation of signs has not resulted in the proliferation of meaning; rather, the over-saturation of signs and information destroys the process of meaning and signification, and results in the loss of any distinction between real and copy (1983b). Thus, he argues that postmodernism is characterised by simulation, where distinctions between reality and image are lost and there is no reality that can be understood independently from the representations of it. Therefore, Baudrillard critiques the depth model of modernism that theorised the existence of essence and deeper truth as distinct from surface appearance. He argues that the duality of surface/depth, image/reality and copy/original are no longer present in such binary terms. Baudrillard defines this new condition as hyperreality. Hyperreality is the condition under which all reality is image; it is a depthless condition of pure surface, achieved through technology and the forces of capitalism.

Abstraction today is no longer that of the map, the double, the mirror or the concept. Simulation is no longer that of a territory, a referential being or a substance. It is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal (1988b, p. 166).

In his later work, The Transparency of Evil (1993), Baudrillard continues to argue that within the postmodernist consumer and media societies, everything is sign, image and spectacle, and therefore art (along with everything else) has lost its domain of specificity. As a result he (arguably and pessimistically) claims for the end of art.

Frederic Jameson also identifies a loss of distinction between surface appearance and inner meaning within contemporary culture. Like Baudrillard, Jameson identifies ‘a new kind of flatness or depthlessness, a new kind of superficiality’ in the expressions of postmodernism (1991b, p. 9). Jameson understands postmodernism as a new cultural condition characterised by the end of the unique style of the individual author, aligned with a poststructuralist emphasis on the decentered subject. This again contrasts with the emphasis in modernism on the individual artist and their unique style, which relies on the concept of centred subjectivity. The centred subject

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62 The depth model refers to that proposed by Marxism psychoanalysis and structural theory.
emphasises the reality of appearance, and the belief that a division between surface appearance and inner meaning can be identified. Jameson considers the characteristics of postmodernism he identifies to be part of the economic, political, and social conditions of late capitalism. While Jameson stills allows for the presence of other conditions and modes of expression, he emphasises that significant shifts have occurred in contemporary (Western) economic and cultural conditions that render postmodernism the culturally and economically dominant condition. Jameson’s argument is to present postmodernism as not simply a shift in style, or a style that can be chosen, but more as an embedded condition of late capitalism.

Within this cultural state Jameson remains pessimistic about the critical potential of postmodern art. He argues that the oppositional tactics ‘from obscurity and sexually explicit material to psychological squalor and overt expressions of social and political defiance’ (p. 4) of the modernist avant-garde against the conventions of officiated culture are no longer received as scandalous but instead are immediately institutionalised and co-opted into the conventions of the art world. Thus, he perceives that this oppositional stance, in these terms, is lost in postmodernism (ibid). Jameson argues that any tactic of postmodernism to oppose conventional culture actually ‘replicates or reproduces - reinforces - the logic of consumer capitalism’ (2001, p. 36). In this way, innovation becomes a commodity within the capitalist system (1991b, pp. 4-5), which impacts the conceptual potential for an oppositionary art:

[...]ven if contemporary art has all the same formal features as the older modernism, it has still shifted its position fundamentally within our culture. For one thing, commodity production and in particular our clothing, furniture, buildings and other artifacts are now intimately tied in with styling changes which derive from artistic experimentation; our advertising, for example, is fed by postmodernism in all the arts and inconceivable without it (2001, p. 35).

Jameson is concerned that the inclusivity and incorporation of commercial forms in postmodern art is in danger of removing any distinction between art and commercial culture, resulting in the degradation of the meaning of art (2001, p. 23):

[O]ne fundamental feature of all postmodernisms enumerated above: namely, the effacement in them of the older (essentially high-modernist) frontier between high culture and so-called mass or commercial culture, and the emergence of new kinds of texts infused with the forms, categories, and contents of that very culture industry so

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63 Jameson bases his concept of late capitalism on Ernest Mandel’s theorisation of the historic phases of capitalism.

64 This is also Bürger’s (1984) argument for the end of the modernist avant-garde.
passionately denounced by all the ideologues of the modern, from Leavis and the American New Criticism all the way to Adorno and the Frankfurt school. The postmodernisms have, in fact, been fascinated precisely by this whole "degraded" landscape of schlock and kitsch, of TV series and Reader’s Digest culture, of advertising and motels of the late show and the grade-B Hollywood film, of so called paraliterature, with its airport paperback categories of the gothic and the romance, the popular biography, the murder mystery, and the science fiction or fantasy novel: materials they no longer simply “quote,” as a Joyce or a Mahler might have done, but incorporate into their very substance (Jameson 1991b, pp. 2-3).

Hence, the free-floating identities (Baudrillard 1983b) of postmodernism can be complicit with the commodification of difference in late capitalism (Jameson 1991a). Therefore, for Jameson and Baudrillard the distinctions among individual identity and art and commercial culture are dissolved under the conditions of late capitalism and symbolic exchange. For Jameson, this is understood as the loss of personal style through the commodification of aesthetic production; for Baudrillard, it is the end of art and meaning.

Others have a more celebratory view of postmodernism’s inclusiveness (Foster 1996, 1998; Hutcheon 1989; Huyssen 1986; Jencks 1996). For Huyssen, postmodernism presents a challenge to the constructed categories of high art and low culture, with high culture being the domain of the elite and specialist expert, and low culture being standardised forms of mass commercial culture. Postmodernism redefines the relation between art and mass culture as a web of mutual relations, and seeks to deconstruct the hierarchy of values constructed by modernism. Jencks (1996) also positively views the potentials demonstrated in postmodern art and architecture to simultaneously communicate in both elite and everyday codes. Thus, it becomes evident how postmodernism negotiates with the categories and concepts of modernism, but also anticipates new relations.

At the same time, while postmodernism has provided a way to move beyond the hierarchical models and canons of (Western) modernism, the postmodern celebration of difference and relativism also (potentially) becomes problematic in a global context. Postmodernism has been criticised for its limited capacity to analyse culture critically, because its own codes and ideologies

65 Gunew (2003) argues that the enthusiasm for diverse origins and multiple attachments has produced a form of ‘stranger fetishism,’ in which the desire for and possession of cultural difference is commodified.

66 Huyssen acknowledges the repeated attacks on this division by the modernist avant-garde, and views this as preparation for postmodernism, but argues that the categorical distinctions have persisted and are readdressed in the context of late capitalism.

67 Jencks concept of ‘double-coding’ will be presented in more detail in the introduction to Chapter Three.
are highly localised and self-reflexive (Callinicos 1989; Lewis 2002, p. 357). Postmodernism (arguably) eliminates the ground of a value system on the basis of which difference can be ascribed, by blurring boundaries and dissolving distinctions. Thus, the danger of the inclusiveness of postmodernism is that by explicitly privileging difference, it obfuscates the politics of difference or it neglects to account for the subtle relationship between similarity and difference across cultural contexts. In particular, questions have been raised about the ways in which postmodernism has the potential to eliminate a ground for comparative judgement, to obscure old and persistent power structures, and to smooth over difference within singular categories like ‘hybridity’ (see Araeen 2003). What this means is that while postmodernism claims to be inclusive and relativistic, it paradoxically can itself slip into various forms of essentialism.

Furthermore, when postmodernism is tied to the theories of modernism, and is thus grounded in Western epistemologies, the appropriateness of its application to cultures which do not have the same philosophical traditions can be limited. Nikos Papastergiadis (2003a, p. 161) argues that both modernism and postmodernism are potentially limited in their capacity to understand the complex dynamics of cultural interconnections in contemporary globalisation because of their Eurocentricism. Huyssen (2002) also argues that new global conditions require an expanded frame for the examination of high/low relations, beyond the terms of the Western postmodern/modern debate. Hence, this thesis aims to examine these discourses of art/commerce more directly in relation to their Japanese context.

Yet at the same time, one of the characteristics of postmodernism was that it not only challenged its own master narratives but it also challenged the European narratives being considered as a universal standard. A postmodernism approach to subjectivity, away from fixed and unified states and allowing for a plurality and multiplicity of identities within contemporary globalisation, also challenges the concept of a singular process of modernisation, and thus allows for the

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68 Callinicos argues that commodity fetishism, the loss of private/public distinctions, and the techniques of montage – all celebrated as examples of postmodernism can be identified in modernity (p. 148-9); thus, he remains sceptical of postmodernism being considered as a complete break with modernism and instead sees it as a continuation of the trends of modernism (p. 153, 163).

69 Huyssen (2002) stresses the time-place specificities of European modernity, particularly the aesthetic modernism of the avant-garde, as being adversarial to bourgeois society. For Huyssen, the opposition between social and economic modernity and the aesthetics of modernism do not always translate outside of their Western context. His argument is that the conceptual boundary between high and low culture is connected to the particular ideas of Western modernism: that the avant-garde is adversarial to bourgeois society and postmodernism offers a challenge to the high/low culture divide that framed modernism.
conception of multiple modernities and a framework in which to analyse the specificities of different cultural epistemologies. This has not only affected the reconsideration of Western modernity but also the consideration of other modernities. These other modernities, for example Japan’s modernity, have been recognised for their dialogue with Western modernism and modernity, but also for their particularity.70 This emphasis on multiplicities has not only changed and opened up the conception of art within the contemporary art world, but has also led to a greater interest in forms and styles of art previously neglected because they fell outside the purview of European modernism, particularly since the mid-1980s (Marcus & Myers 1995b). Nevertheless, this process has been accompanied by tension and friction.71 In response to the inclusion of non-Western art forms in the Western art world, there have been contestations and debates about both the commodification of identity and the assimilation of difference (Ang 2003; Gunew 2003; Mosquera 2003). Furthermore, the uncritical celebration of difference for difference’s sake can mean that consideration of the ways in which plurality and multiplicity can be commodified is neglected, as Jameson warned, particularly in global capital processes. Any counter-impulse or counter-culture that emerges can be adsorbed within the forces of capitalism. This is one of the key concerns with postmodernism’s adsorption and appropriation of difference, which potentially conceals continued unequal economic/power relations:

"Postmodernism provides a supermarket culture geared to everything and nothing in particular except maintaining the global economy, because it refuses to contextualise itself, refuses common goals for humanity, refuses an emancipatory movement built on solidarity between people, deconstructing without constructing, fragments (Hefata 1998, p. 288)."

Despite these problems with postmodern culture, which do require acknowledgement, the concepts of resistance and opposition do not need to be entirely rejected. For example, Hutcheon acknowledges the ambiguities of postmodernist criticism, considering that it is complicit with the forces of capitalism, but also that it retains the ability to offer critical challenges, though not necessarily by employing the strict oppositional terms of the modernist avant-garde (1989, p. 4). What is needed is a more complex and nuanced engagement with the relations between

70 The debates clustered around the changing art world conditions of the 1980s and 1990s (variously referred to as ‘multiculturalism,’ ‘new internationalism’ and ‘globalism’) emerged in relation to the theories and practices of postmodern art (Hanru 1994) and in response to the exhibitions Magiciens de la terre (1989) at the Centre Georges Pompidou and La Villette, Paris and Primitivism (1984) at the MoMA, New York (see Fisher 1994).

71 For example, the past twenty years has witnessed an increased interest from the West in the artwork emerging from Japan’s modernity (Clark 1998; Conant, Steiner & Tomii 1995; Munroe et al. 1994).
and within the concepts of art and commodity. The postmodern challenge to the binary
collection of these concepts is a useful starting framework, but any approach employing
postmodernism also needs to avoid negating or obfuscating distinctions entirely. The forces of
capitalism can be acknowledged, including the potential for art’s co-option by neo-liberal politics
(see Stallabrass 2004), but postmodernism also allows for the expression and theorisation of
non-hierarchical relations between aesthetics and commodity culture. Postmodernism, in this
sense, would then become a useful theoretical lens for the purposes of this thesis because it
provides a way to see art as part of a complex network of commodity and information flows which
complicate, but do not necessarily erase, the distinction between real and artificial, art and
commodity, surface and depth. In this context, contradictions and tensions can be expressed
though not resolved.

1.3.2 GLOBALISATION

Globalisation as a conceptual framework is important for this study because it helps to clarify the
complex sets of relations engaged in and generated by Murakami in many cultural contexts at
local and global levels. Stuart Hall offers a useful broad definition of globalisation as a process:

*Globalization* is the process by which the relatively separate areas of the globe come to
intersect in a single imaginary “space”; when their respective histories are convened in
a time-zone or time-frame dominated by the time of the West; when the sharp
boundaries reinforced by space and distance are bridged by connections (travel, trade,
conquest, colonization, markets, capital and the flows of labour, goods and profits)
which gradually eroded the clear cut distinction between “inside” and “outside” (Hall
1995, p. 190 italics in original).

There has been widespread recognition of social, economic, political, and cultural changes since
the 1970s, in particular the intensification of interconnectedness in which activities in one area of
the globe affect another through economic and technological forces, supported by developments
in media, communications and travel.

Globalisation is about the compression of time and space horizons and the creation of a
world of instantaneity and depthlessness. Global space is a space of flows, an electronic
space, a decentered space, a space in which frontiers and boundaries have become
permeable. Within this global arena, economics and cultures are thrown into intense and
immediate contact with each other (Morley & Robins 1995a, p. 115).

Anthony Giddens (2000) identifies contemporary processes of globalisation with the development
of worldwide communication technologies which intensified global communications (more recently
with the Internet), the shift from an industrial to an information economy; the fall of Soviet communism in 1989, and changes to gender roles and the meaning of family (p. 46). However, there is no consensus on the structures and dynamics of globalisation (Held et al. 1999; Urry 2003). As David Held argues, the ubiquity of globalisation leaves the term in danger of becoming over-used and meaningless (p. 1). What is debated is how these changes should be conceptualised, if they are new or just an intensification of processes already in place, if they are singular or multidimensional (see Schirato & Webb 2003).

David Held divides the debates on globalisation into three broad schools of thought: the ‘hyperglobalists’, the ‘skeptics,’ and the ‘transformationalists’ (pp. 2-14). The hyperglobalists, such as Kenichi Ohmae (1990), consider contemporary globalisation to be a new era of global markets driven by capitalism and technology. They celebrate the economic and neo-liberal effects of this single market place. The skeptics, such as Hirst and Thompson (1996), consider globalisation a myth that conceals the continued dominance of old powers especially the United States, Europe and Japan. They see it as an economic concept, but identify it as an intensification of the trade, investment and labour flows which have been in place since the nineteenth-century. In this way they identify contemporary patterns of production-consumption which replicate these earlier flows.

The transformationalists, such as Giddens, Castells and Urry, identify contemporary globalisation as historically unprecedented, in which distinctions between international and domestic affairs are no longer clear, and as an experience of deep change occurring through the interconnections of social, political, economic and cultural forces. They are reluctant to reduce globalisation to one influence or dimension, but consider it to be a broad process of change. They dispute that globalisation retains clearly defined core-periphery structures, but allow for the unevenness of global forces, recognising that interactions are not always equal and are influenced by existing and new relations of power. Unlike the hyperglobalists and the skeptics, the transformationalists conceive globalisation as an open-ended and unpredictable process characterised by contradictions and complexity. Giddens, for example, argues that globalisation is not a single process controlled by one country, or by the West, but acknowledges that it can be shaped by these forces such as United States domestic and foreign policy (2000, p. 46). Appadurai (1996, 72)

Anthony Giddens (2000) defines contemporary globalisation as an unprecedented collapse (of time and space), although, he considers it to be a dialectical process that is part of modernity.
Urry (2003) argues that the connections and processes of globalisation can be decoded into identifiable patterns and intensities which are not necessarily predictable. What this group, (transformationalists) including Urry and Appadurai, stress is that this process is not even or unified. Urry, influenced by Appadurai, and using Manuel Castells’ concept of the network society as a departure point, has conceptualised globalisation as a dynamic system of complexity. For Urry, this complexity has been a particular characteristic of globalisation since the 1990s.

Urry uses the metaphor of fluids to define this complexity, seeing it as a dialectical process involving mobility and fixity (p. 122). Within this system there are no longer any fixed or separate entities (such as the global or the local). Instead, everything becomes linked in a dialectical relationship between mobile connections and points of fixity. Rather than conceiving of the global and local as being in competition, Urry sees them as constituting each other (p. 15). Urry conceives of the global as a complex system comprised of components, and refers to these as ‘particles’ (p. 49) which form clusters as part of the overall system, not as a separate or oppositional positions. Particles interact dynamically with other particles in the system and can spontaneously develop patterns and collective properties through processes that Urry refers to as ‘strange attractors’ and ‘positive feedback loops’ (pp. 83-7). Urry emphasises that this system is both ordered and chaotic, and that these interactions occur and form patterns without a central organising structure, being both non-linear and unpredictable. He argues that these interactions are irreversible because there is no restoration of original states. Urry’s definition is useful for this study because it enables globalisation to be conceived as a constant state of flux in which particles can be temporarily mobilised and operate through existing structures, but can also be deterritorialised and create new pathways and formations. In this way Urry’s definition allows for the complex and multidimensional expression of Superflat (as a particle) to be theorised, particularly within the context of global production-consumption.

73 Like Giddens, Arjun Appadurai identifies contemporary processes of globalisation as part of modernity; however, his reference to ‘modernity writ large’ is conceptualised as an acknowledgment of many different experiences of modernity, not just the European experience.

74 Urry argues that while Castells anticipates a complexity framework for globalisation the concept of ‘the network’ becomes too singular to encompass all the different networked phenomena which Castells examines (pp. 8-12). Urry’s conceptualisation of globalisation is informed by the new paradigms in physics by which time and space are no longer seen as containers but are productive (pp. 17-38).
Likewise, Held’s definition of globalisation is useful because it argues that the complexity of the forces of interaction within contemporary globalisation requires explanation beyond conceiving it as the expansionary logic of earlier forms of capitalism, or as a replication of historical modes of global flows.

[A] process (or set of processes) which embodies a transformation in the spatial organisation of social relations and transactions — assessed in terms of the extensity, intensity, velocity and impact — generating transcontinental or interregional flows and networks of activity, interaction, and the exercise of power (Held et al. 1999, p. 16).

In this way contemporary globalisation can be understood as a speeding up of the diffusion of ideas, goods, information, capital and people through systems of transport and communication (Appadurai 1996, p. 29; Castells 2000). The result is a deepening enmeshment of local and global forces (Sassen 1999; 2000). This entanglement does not presume an equality of positions, but rather allows for the investigation of tensions and contradictions within this process, such as the persistence of old forms of power and domination at the same time that new cultural, economic, political and social spaces are created. Within these spaces, new instabilities and tensions emerge from the interconnections between the local and global, due to their non-synchronicity and diversification (Papastergiadis 2003a).

Therefore globalisation can be understood as a transformative and dynamic process, which embodies new effects. Although cultural interactions are by no means new, the intensity of movement and scope (scale, immediacy, geography) of these interactions post-1970s can be distinguished as a new phase. This multidimensional and asymmetric model of globalisation will be used to frame the analysis of Murakami and Superflat art. At the same time Hirst and Thompson’s interpretation of contemporary globalisation replicating previous phases of globalisation should not be entirely discarded, particularly in light of Murakami’s branding of

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75 Flows, refers to the movements of physical objects, people, images and information across spaces and time; networks, influenced by Castells (2000), refers to the connective patterns between agents, nodes of activity or sites of power that constitute the relations of globalisation.

76 Saski Sassen (2000) argues that the global and the national do not have to be considered as completely discrete zones, but they can still be distinguished from each other (p. 217). That is, the national is not entirely subsumed by the global. Furthermore, Sassen argues that the meaning of the local, national and global does not have to equal a conceptualisation of ‘local<national<global’ (p. 266). All three spaces are embedded in the global dynamics of mobility and fixity (p. 217). What Sassen usefully presents is a way to conceive of deterritorialised local cultures (using the example of metropolitan financial centres) that operate as both local subcultures and transnational networks (ibid).
Superflat as a national-cultural aesthetic that echoes Japan’s export trade in art in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Consequently, this study considers contemporary globalisation to be both distinct from and connected to previous phases of globalisation. It approaches contemporary globalisation as an intensification and extensification of previous phases of global connection and interaction.

A particularly significant consequence of the intensity of post-1970s globalisation is its influence on how identity is located and represented (Castells 2004). The role of the nation-state within global configurations and the conditions of late capitalism, and its influence on our understanding of identity in relation to place and space, which dominated earlier forms of modern globalisation, has been transformed (Jameson 1998; Morris-Suzuki 1998; Schirato & Webb 2003, pp. 104-30). The fragmented sense of time and the fluidity of transnational flows have contributed to the loosening of cultural identity from the nation-state. This does not mean the nation-state has become completely detached from the formation of cultural identity, but rather there are new relations and new forms of nationalism emerging within contemporary globalisation (see Schirato & Webb 2003; Yoda 2000). For example, the nation-state participates in the processes of late capitalism by functioning as a brand including the ‘Cool Britannia’ identity of the United Kingdom (see Hauser 1998) and Japan’s ‘Gross National Cool’ (McGray 2002). In both instances, there is a conflation of cultural identity with the economic imperatives that drive the branding of the nation.

**Globalisation, commodification and identity**

The integration of financial markets and the compression of time and space in contemporary globalisation have been interpreted as indicating global synchronicity and coherence (Harvey 1990). There is a tendency to see this system as being dominated by a single centre, the West, and driven by capitalism’s logic of expansion, hence the term, ‘McWorld’ (see Tomlinson 1991). The cultural imperialist view, examined by Tomlinson conceives of globalisation as the increased homogenisation and convergence of cultural forms under the dominance of global capitalism, particularly Western capital and culture. Thus globalisation was envisaged as the extension of Western modernity and imperialism. Tomlinson argues, however, that the cultural imperialism thesis views globalisation as a one-way process and does not acknowledge localised processes of appropriation and transformation (p. 21). While Tomlinson concedes that Western cultural forms may dominate the global market, and that patterns of homogenisation and standardisation
can be identified, he argues that these processes are still distinct from previous forms of cultural imperialism and colonisation (Tomlinson 1991, p. 175).

Therefore while globalisation is supporting standardisation, it is also producing diversity (Robins 1997, p. 33). The dominance of Western powers and institutions within these processes needs to be recognised, but the complexity of contemporary globalisation renders the concept of a singular centre-periphery model untenable. Instead global processes need to be understood in terms of interdependencies and centres (Featherstone 1995, pp. 12-3). Arjun Appadurai (1996, p. 46) also rejects the centre-periphery model. He argues that globalisation is disjunctive, contradictory and chaotic. In fact for Appadurai these disjunctures are central to the politics of global culture (p. 37). Contemporary constructions of identity become linked to these larger global forces as complex processes involving ironies, resistances and disjunctures. For Appadurai, this complexity arises from the constant transnational circulation of images and viewers that creates interrelationships between capitalism, media forms, national policies and consumer fantasies – part of what he refers to as ‘scapes’.

What is most important about these mediascapes is that they provide (especially in their television, film, and cassette forms) large and complex repertoires of images, narratives, and technoscapes to viewers throughout the world, in which the world of commodities and the world of news and politics are profoundly mixed. What this means is that many audiences around the world experience the media themselves as a complicated and interconnected repertoire of print, celluloid, electronic screens, and billboards. The lines between the realistic and the fictional landscapes they see are blurred, so that the further away these audiences are from the direct experiences of metropolitan life, the more likely they are to construct imagined worlds that are chimerical, aesthetic, even fantastic objects, particularly if assessed by the criteria of some other perspective, some other imagined world (p. 35).

In this way economic and cultural products can operate through the same networks and channels, resulting in an intertwining of flows in the process of globalisation (Jameson 1998; Miyoshi 1998; Robins 1997). Yet at the same time the connections of these networks can also

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77 Hardt and Negri (2000) also refute the dominance of a single centre, but still acknowledge that the West holds a privileged position within the global structure.

78 For Appadurai the cultural flows of globalisation can be broken down into five categories of ‘scapes’: ethnoscapes, mediascapes, technoscapes, financescapes and ideoscapes (p. 33). Mediascapes and ideoscapes are the ‘landscapes of images,’ which for Appadurai constitute the contemporary experience of ‘imagined worlds’ (after Benedict Anderson) of cultural globalisation (p. 35).
facilitate the decentring of power. Manuel Castells (2000) considers one of the key characteristics of contemporary globalisation to be networks. The network is a structure, but encompasses the flexibility and unstructured conditions of globalisation (p. 71). The same networks and scapes that contribute to the decentring and deconstructive processes of identity formation, simultaneously contribute to the re-mobilisation of cultural identity at the global, national and local levels.

The tensions between global and local identity are part of a wider debate on the cultural homogeneity and heterogeneity effects of globalisation (see King & State University of New York at Binghamton. Dept. of Art and Art History. 1991). Supporters of the homogeneity view (like Held’s skeptics) tend to envisage globalisation as the extension of Western modernisation and imperialism. In contrast, others emphasise that the increased contact of the borderless world results in increased hybridisation and new syntheses of culture (Robertson 1995). This later approach has been criticised for negating the inequalities of globalisation by idealistically celebrating difference and pluralism (Jameson 1998; Miyoshi 1998). However, the former group is criticised for negating the persistence of difference and cultural hybridity (Ang 2003; Appadurai 1996; Bhabha 1990, 1994; Hall 1991a, 1991b, 1995; Pieterse 1995). At the same time, the emphasis on cultural hybridity has also been criticised for subsuming difference under a single concept, thus obscuring real difference (Maharaj 1994). Thus while globalisation increases spaces of encounter, which can produce new forms, capitalism is also quick to adopt and commodify them (Gunew 2003).

One of the fundamental forces of globalisation is the expansion of capitalism. Capitalism, driven by profit and market expansion, desires ‘borderless spaces’ in order to create new markets, cheaper production and increased profit (Harvey 1990). Capital seeks out difference in order to absorb and commodify it, contributing to standardisation and hybridisation as well as the proliferation of difference (Hall 1991b). In order to reach diverse and niche markets effectively,

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79 For example, while the United States may still dominate the production and distribution of media forms, it does not form a centre but is more dispersed into global capital (1996; see also Featherstone 1995, pp. 12-3; Morley & Robins 1995a, pp. 223-4).

80 Anthony King’s text provides a solid overview of some of the initial debates between Roland Robertson and Immanuel Wallerstein in the late 1980s.

81 Unlike Harvey’s overly determinist position, reducing the processes of globalisation to the forces of capitalism, is too limiting (Featherstone 1995). This thesis avoids defining globalisation solely in relation to the imperatives of capitalism.
global brands require the flexibility to represent products at the local level. This process Hall refers to as ‘Global Mass Culture,’ in which the logic of capital is to both absorb and produce difference in a process of ‘orchestrated heterogenization’ (Hall 1991b, pp. 28-9 italics added). Late capitalism does not necessarily eliminate difference, but is able to assimilate difference and structure it into a commodity in relation to market forces. Morley and Robins argue that difference is impossible to eliminate or transcend in the capitalist environment, because global corporations ‘exploit local difference and particularity’ for profit (1995a, p. 113) (see also Featherstone 1995). What global capitalism provides is a common structure in which difference can exist and be commodified. Thus any production of heterogeneity, or of locality is shaped by global forces which also have the potential to homogenise (Robertson 1995, pp. 30-5).  

One of the key systems through which capitalism operates globally is a transnational (TNC) or multinational corporation (MNC). One of the major outputs of any transnational corporation is a global brand, the aim of which is to function in multiple markets simultaneously (Morley & Robins 1995a, pp. 108-9). The transnational or global corporation has a core global strategy and image with slight local market differentiations. This approach results in a certain amount of homogenisation and standardisation, easing the transitions between different spaces, which can be understood as an extension of mass-produced strategies and economies of scale. However, as well as the establishment of particular centres of domination such as the United States another process occurs simultaneously: the development of localised products. Localised products recognise the particularities of different markets and consumers and the significance of distinct local cultures. A significant aspect of these niche and customised markets is that they are not necessarily located within national borders. Instead they can be transnational because the market differentiations may not operate according to geographic demographics but instead are governed by market demographics. Manuel Castells (2001) argues that the diversity of global

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82 Frederic Jameson (1998), also argues that a key feature of what he refers to as ‘global consumer capitalism’ gives rise to heterogeneity through niche markets, customisation, and the pleasures of identity transformation. Jameson is more sceptical of Robertson’s (1995) emphasis on the combination of heterogeneity and homogeneity in globalisation, and argues that globalisation intensifies binary relations between the universal and the particular (p. xii). Jameson is also concerned that the idealisation of difference within postmodern consumer culture also obscures the unequal power relations within globalisation.

83 The terms, Global Corporation (GC), MNC and TNC tend to be defined in different ways. However in general GC is used interchangeably with TNC but is distinct from MNC because it involves a core strategy (this does not mean complete standardisation) while reaching multiple markets, rather than completely different strategies of the MNC (Jeannet & Hennessey 2004, p. 6).
demand means that standardisation and mass production are not necessarily effective. As a result, producers who desire a global reach need to balance the economy of scale offered by volume production with customised production. Through this process, facilitated by digital technologies, the global corporation can customise products for different markets (p. 77). Castells’ concept of customisation is a useful way to understand the recognition of global product flexibility in Superflat. While it offers the global brand name ‘Murakami’, products are differentiated for different markets. In the same way Murakami utilises the commodification of cultural difference in order to market his work outside (and subsequently within) Japan. In other words he utilises existing media scapes of Japanese popular culture and the previous imaginings of Japanese art in order to categorise Superflat as part of this landscape. Simultaneously, he uses his identity as a successful artist in the Western art market to strengthen his profile in Japan.

**Glocalisation**

There is a tendency in discourses on globalisation to conceive of the global and the local as occupying distinct positions. In other words the global is presumed to be a universal category within which the particularly of the local is positioned. Held stresses, however, that the local and the national are not entirely distinct from the global, but enable different flows within globalisation to be identified. That is, they are not necessarily in opposition to globalisation but part of the complex and dynamic relations that constitute globalisation. Urry (2003) likewise argues that globalisation provides a common frame from which positions can be articulated and understood, while at the same time establishing their particularity.

As Robertson (1995) argues, it is not really a question of conceiving of the global and local as polemic opposites. Rather, the local is produced within the global. Robertson understands globalisation as an organising structure producing new forms of heterogeneity as syntheses of both the global and local (see also Morris-Suzuki 1998, pp. 161-84). Thus globalisation does not override the processes of localisation and, conversely, localism is formed and articulated

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84 Castells is arguing that the Internet, as a significant development in contemporary communication technology which constructs and facilitates global networks, enables this effective balance between volume production and customisation.

85 Even though Murakami’s works are not produced digitally or distributed through the Internet the concept of customisation is still useful.

86 In this thesis, localisation refers to the interconnections within a specific locale, nationalisation refers to relations within a fixed territory, and internationalism refers to relations between two or more nations.
within the global.87

In this respect globalization, defined in its most general sense as the compression of the world as a whole, involves the linking of localities. But it also involves the “invention” of locality, in the same general sense as the idea of the invention of tradition...as well as its “imagination” (Robertson 1995, p. 35).

The global exists as a space that is comprised of units within it, not as something that excludes or is beyond the local. In the same way the local is also constructed in terms of global (or super-local) actions and processes (p. 34). Robertson conceives of them as ‘complimentary and interpenetrative,’ even though ‘they can and do collide in concrete situations’ (p. 40), hence the term 'glocalisation.'

Robertson concedes that cultural difference and the expression of localism are key commodities within global capitalism. He is, however, wary of reducing all expressions of locality to processes of commodification and argues that there are motives, such as nostalgia, which exist beyond the selling of difference for difference’s sake (p. 29). Yet Robertson acknowledges that nostalgia can also become a commodity (see also Ivy 1995, pp. 29-59). In fact, he argues that:

...we appear to live in a world in which the expectation of uniqueness has become increasingly institutionalized and globally widespread (p. 28).

Thus, localism can become generalised insofar as it is constructed according to standardised terms (p. 26). Localism should not be set in opposition to globalisation in the sense that it articulates particularity and difference, and globalisation results in homogenisation and standardisation. Both processes may be homogenous and both may be heterogenous.

It is not a question of either homogenization or heterogenization, but rather of the ways in which both of these two tendencies have become features of life across much of the late-twentieth century (p. 27, italics in original).

Thus, the local can be territorialised, but can also be territorially disembedded and can reinforce

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87 Thus, Robertson is critical of Anthony Giddens’ conflation of globalisation within the terms and concepts of modernism, as a dialectical process of ‘action and reaction’ (p. 27). For Robertson, contemporary globalisation is a more complex process that necessitates a new paradigm of understanding.

88 According to Robertson, ‘glocalisation’ has its origins in the Japanese agricultural concept of dochakuka in which farming techniques are adapted to local conditions (p. 28). The concept was used in the 1980s as a micro-marketing buzzword as TNCs sought to respond to the variety of consumers globally. Robertson acknowledges that the local is constructed as a commodity. However, he prefers to use the concept of glocalisation in order to explain the global-local relationship in a way that goes beyond its conventional representation as polar opposites (p. 29).
the national, or the regional. The processes of globalisation can also be explained in terms of Deleuze and Guattari’s (1987, pp. 503-5) concepts of ‘deterritorialisation’ and ‘reterritorialisation’ (as Held and Urry have). That is, connections where temporal assemblages and aggregates form are also constituted by the impulse to deterritorialise, and by the movements of nomads. Every assemblage is a territory made from fragments, formed through connections that are in a continual process of connection and interaction (p. 503). To Deleuze and Guattari, assemblages are not fixed territories, but are always in a state of becoming. That is, forces of connection produce a temporal whole, but the assemblage is constantly forming new connections and territories (p. 504). Nomads are free agents, or thoughts, that wander and create these new territories. In this way an assemblage is both territorialised and deterritorialised simultaneously. Global flows are concentrations, assemblages and affiliations of culture. The various localities of difference within the flows and networks combine to create non-absolute, non-fixed and temporal critical formations. These flows and pools are thus never static and may be worked away with the movement of new flows into new formations. These new formations can be utilised to form collective local or national identities, which can be resistant.

Cultural difference and resistant identities

One consequence of the perceived threat of cultural homogenisation and cultural fragmentation is the assertion of resistance through the articulation of cultural difference and particularity. This response, however, is itself an expression of the global (and occurs within global structures), and can be considered part of the same process rather than outside the global (Castells 2004; Robins 1997).

The process of globalisation may also produce a defensive desire to return to ‘pure’ culture and to restore closed definitions of culture (Hall 1995). This (re)formation of cultural identity can be seen in the rise of contemporary fundamentalist movements, heritage protection, and assertions of unified national and local identities. However, Hall explains that not all searching for a closed definition of culture is defensive. Instead a desire for resistances and renewals can be the motivation for the assertion of identity.

Castells (2004) also argues that alongside the changes in capitalism, technology and the role of the nation-state during the past few decades, which are driving the development of new societal structures in the ‘network society,’ are movements that are mobilising and expressing alternate
collective identities.

Along with the technological revolution, the transformation of capitalism, and the demise of statism, we have experienced, in the past twenty-five years, the wide-spread surge of powerful expressions of collective identity that challenge globalization and cosmopolitanism on behalf of cultural singularity and people’s control over their lives and environment. These expressions are multiple, highly diversified, following the contours of each culture, and of historical sources of formation of each identity (Castells, p. 2).

Such collective identities challenge the increased individualisation that results from the concentration of global networks. Under these conditions people seek out alternative ‘cultural communes.’ Castells differentiates these new collective identities from previous expressions of nationalism associated with the establishment of the nation-state (see Anderson 1991). He argues that these new nationalisms are more defensive of culture, rather than in defence of the state, because they emerge in response to threats posed by global networks.

The communes of resistance defend their space, their places, against the placeless logic of the space of flows characterizing social domination in the information age. They claim their historic memory, and/or affirm the permanence of their values, against the dissolution of history in timeless time, and the celebration of the ephemeral in the culture of real virtuality. They use information technology for people’s horizontal communication, and communal prayer, while rejecting the new idolatry of technology, and preserving transcendent values against the deconstructing logic of self-regulating computer networks. (p. 423).

These expressions of identity can be proactive, aiming for transformation, or reactive, resisting technological and economic forces and social movements.89

A ‘resistance identity’ is formed in response to exclusion. In this process the defensive identity is constructed within the terms of dominant institutions and ideologies, but the intention is to invert the value judgement and reinforce the boundary between identities.90 Like Hall’s theory, resistance identity works within already existing (excluded) identities in order to challenge their meaning within society, although the distinctions between those identities within society can also be proactively (re)asserted. In the latter, difference can be converted into both symbolic and

89 Castells organises collective identity formations into three broad categories: ‘legitimating identity’, ‘resistance identity’ and ‘project identity’ (p. 8). Each of these informs the others. Both resistance identity and project identity are particularly useful for considering Superflat.

90 Castells uses the example of queer culture (p. 9).
economic capital. The politics of identity are thus connected to maintaining, as well as breaking, boundaries that demarcate difference.

Hall makes a critical point in drawing attention to the fact that the mode(s) of culture defined in these identity renewals and resistances are themselves products of hybridity (1995, p. 193). Hall’s explanation of hybridity allows for asymmetric effects and processes of interaction; he considers it to be a critical political position against the hegemony of the dominant culture. He allows for the unfixing and de-essentialisation of cultural identities through which difference can be mobilised.

**Mobile Connections: hybridity**

Therefore, another active formation of resistant identity is the positive assertion of new syntheses and hybrids within global encounters. Postmodern and postcolonial theorists, such as Homi Bhabha (1990; 1994) and Hall, have analysed the concept of ‘in-between’ or ‘third-space’ to account for the interactions and negotiations of cultural hybridisation that arise from global encounters.91

> The split-space of enunciation may open the way to conceptualizing an *international* culture, based not on the exoticism of multiculturalism or the *diversity* of cultures, but on the inscription and articulation of culture’s *hybridity*. To that end we should remember that it is the “inter” – the cutting edge of translation and negotiation, the *in-between* space – that carries the burden of the meaning of culture. It makes it possible to begin envisaging national, anti-national histories of the “people”. And by exploring this Third Space, we may elude the politics of polarity and emerge as the others of our selves (Bhabha 1994, pp. 38-9 italics in original).

Bhabha displaces the polarities of the colonial encounter through the concept of Third Space: the in-between space of negotiation and (re)articulation (p. 193). However, one of the key problems with the way the concept of hybridity has been used is its presumption of the essentialism and unification of identities prior to the point of interaction.92 Pieterse (1995) also highlights the processes of hybridity within global encounters and he argues that hybridity is producing a ‘global *mélange*’ (p. 45). Hybridity to Pieterse is mixing cultural phenomena that are different or separate, which ‘blurs the distinctions’ between them (pp. 55-6). The example he gives is:

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91 The concept of third space is originally from Henri Lefebvre (see Soja 1996) and has been extended by Hall and Bhabha, as well as Deleuze and Guattari (1987).

92 Bhabha himself is wary of presuming a primordial essentialism, emphasising that all cultures are hybrids (p. 37).
Thai boxing by Moroccan girls in Amsterdam, Asian rap in London, Irish bagels, Chinese tacos and Mardi Gras Indians in the United States (p. 53).

Pieterse’s theory of hybridity, devised to clarify the process of ‘global intercultural osmosis and interplay’ (p. 54), is problematic because he presents ‘Thai boxing’ and ‘Moroccan girls’ as distinct from each other and from the space ‘Amsterdam’ in which they are located. Therefore the emphasis is not on the actual mixing or transformation of forms at every level, but rather on the presence of multiple (albeit separate) parts co-existing simultaneously in one place/space, which then presumes the unified identity of cultural forms even though they might be presented within different cultural spaces.93

Another key problem is that the uncritical celebration of hybridity can conceal the unevenness of encounters through the celebration of cultural mixing, or it can smooth over differences by emphasising new syntheses (Maharaj 1994, p. 28). For example, Benita Parry (2002) criticises Bhabha’s concept of the in-between space of negotiation because it does not explicitly acknowledge the experience of the colonised, which is an experience of domination, particularly its violent opposition and coercive nature.94 The concept of hybrid synthesis has also been criticised for its tendency to negate imbalance and conflict and reduce complex interactions into a seemingly balanced mathematical equation (Mosquera 2003). In this way the emphasis on mixing and blending obfuscates points of difference or distinction. Mosquera instead focuses on the ‘hyphen’ characteristics of interaction: the hyphen recombines and recycles not in order to reinvent the new but to emphasise both connections and distinctions within what already exists (p. 28). However, Pieterse does emphasise the potential of global subjects to engage with multiple subject identities (p. 52), arguing that there may be asymmetrical power relations within these new forms produced from mixing, but that old power relations are reconfigured. Dominance and inequality still occur but ‘may be more dispersed, less orchestrated, more heterogeneous’ than previously (p. 59). In this way Pieterse argues against views that consider globalisation a homogenising process, suggesting that they ignore the counter currents and ambivalences to globalisation as well as the process of hybridisation.

93 Hardt and Negri (2000) identify one of the key problems with postcolonial discourse is a tendency to remain fixed within binary positions emphasising differences without acknowledging the complicity of cultural difference with capital processes (p. 143).

94 However, others (see Andrews 2002, p. 320) argue, in Bhabha’s defence, that Bhabha was simply seeking to displace the conventional postcolonial concepts of dominant and dominated by asserting the emergence of synthesis as an agency (see Bhabha 1994, p. 193). In fact, Bhabha himself does not overlook the incommensurability of cultural difference within hybrid identities. He emphasises that it is not a choice of ‘either/or,’ but rather ‘both and neither ‘simultaneously (p. 219).
However, the point remains that while hybridity may be a useful way to approach the processes of global encounter beyond theories that emphasise either homogenisation or heterogenisation of culture, it does not necessarily eliminate binaries, but can still be used as a basis for (re)constructing them. Further criticisms of hybridity are the perceptions of its collusion with the domination of old hierarchies and the reproduction of exclusion, creating palatable difference for commodification, celebrating multicultural diversity while ignoring the harshness of migrant/colonised experiences of inequality, and being co-opted into the purposes of neo-liberal ideologies (see Papastergiadis 2003a). These points form part of a broader criticism of the relativism of postmodernism which (supposedly) dilutes polemic and is too tolerant of hegemony and oppression. As stated, postmodernism’s celebration of diversity and cultural mixing is seen as an apolitical and bourgeois supermarket culture (Hefata 1998, p. 288).

The concept of the in-between space of encounter can therefore still be usefully deployed with a deliberate stress on non-binaries. Rey Chow (1991) and Ien Ang (2003) both aim to deconstruct unified and essentialised concepts of national-cultural identities. Chow deconstructs the concept of a stable Chinese identity and tries to extend the limitations presented in the postcolonial polarisation of coloniser/colonised by advocating for de-essentialised identities. Chow acknowledges that because self-ethnicity (or ‘Chineseness’) can empower individuals it can also demarcate a marginalised status resulting in the re-establishment of a restricted identification of Chineseness. In this way self-ethnicity can also be disempowering.

Ien Ang (2003) also acknowledges problems with the concept of hybridity, particularly its concealment of the unevenness of global encounters, and argues against equating cosmopolitan privilege with hybridity. Ang aims to rescue the concept of cross-cultural communication from being seen as resolution or a utopian hope, and conceives of it as part of encounters and connections that occur in everyday micro-politics, in other words as an ‘ordinary part of everyday life’ (p. 40, italics in original) under contemporary global conditions, rather than as a solution or a progressive state.

[B]orderlands – or the spaces of translation – are not the relatively “free” spaces where through some magical process the tension between two (or more) cultures is resolved, on the contrary, they are spaces where those tensions, formed by prevailing hierarchies and relations of power, are intensified (p. 37).

Ang stresses the points of incommensurability and the points of connection and disconnection
within the global space (p. 38).

The concept [hybridity] has often been popularised in terms of fusion, synthesis, the smooth integration of separate parts into a new, syncretic whole. This, however, is to overlook the friction and tension, the ambiguity and incommensurability, the contestations and interrogations that are part and parcel of any process of hybridization. The usefulness of the concept of hybridity, I suggest, lies precisely in its uncomfortable ambivalence (p. 37).

For Ang, hybridity is an essential tool for analysing the complex entanglements of contemporary global experiences. It is still therefore a useful starting point from which to begin the process of clarifying the tensions and non-fixed identities that comprise the contemporary world. For Papastergiadis (2003a), hybridity can still provide a means of negotiating cultural identity, beyond the failure of the hierarchical models of modernism and the relativistic, decontextualised models of postmodernism, and can provide a useful means of understanding the ‘new’ spaces of globalisation. While these spaces are fluid, differences can (re)emerge in the guise of fixed forms of identity. Furthermore, the emergence of new spaces and new identities are played out within spheres of power, particularly the dominance of the West. Having acknowledged these challenges, the contemporary global space needs to be understood as dynamic: identifiable patterns emerge within it but are simultaneously transformed through constant movement.

What globalisation allows, therefore, is an increased space for encounters. These can produce new forms, as Bhabha, Pieterse and Robertson assert, but can also result in greater tensions between cultures and may additionally encourage defensive reactionary formations, as Castells and Hall emphasise. Under these conditions it is difficult to conceive of culture or identity as bounded or fixed because the complex interactions of connections constantly rework cultures and produce new cultural forms (Hall 1995, pp. 176-7).

The conventional model of cultural exchange, then, presumes the existence of pure, internally homogenous, authentic, indigenous culture which becomes subverted or corrupted by foreign influences. The reality, however, is that every culture has in fact ingested foreign elements from exogenous sources, with the various elements gradually becoming “naturalised” within it (Morley & Robins 1995a, p. 130).

These interactions and exchanges are accompanied by contestation and struggles for power, as Ang and Mosquera emphasise because globalisation can push and pull culture in different and contradictory ways. Therefore the politics of cultural difference need not only to account for specific cultural particularities but also for the shifting constituents of those specificities. Hybridity does not need to smooth over difference, as Hall, Ang and Chow contend. It can be deployed as
an active agent asserting difference or expressing ambivalence. Thus what needs to be acknowledged in any discussion of global cross-cultural communication or interaction is the permeability and interconnectedness of the boundaries of cultural identity, as well as the distinctions, tensions and reterritorialism that constitute those boundaries at both the economic and cultural levels.

Global Art Worlds: cultural identity and representation

The effects of this process of deterritorialisation, reterritorialisation and the commodification of cultural difference have been played out within the contemporary art world since the 1980s. The proliferation of multiple forums and sites for artists to exhibit in the past fifteen years includes international art biennials and triennials. The increased circulation of 'non-Western' art forms within the West-centred international art market has been accompanied by debates on the politics of identity and representation within the market.

Art continues to be the space in which difference, identity, and cultural value are being produced and contested (Marcus & Myers 1995a, p. 11).

For optimists the circulation of more artworks has promoted a shift away from the identification and categorisation of art based on geo-national definitions, the awareness of transcultural influences, and the articulation of plural cultural identities. However, the narratives and representations through which artists and artworks are included or excluded in exhibitions are contested and fraught with challenges. In particular, artists who were previously considered to be outside Western art can be re-positioned within a Western art, or included but identified as foreign and classified as ‘the Other.’ In this way neo-colonialist gestures can remain disguised within the celebration of cultural difference. Alternatively, the assertion of cultural difference can be presented as a challenge to the hegemony of Western art history. As Matsui identified in relation to Hall, through an engagement with Western art history, Murakami can also articulate the specificity of Superflat.

However, as stated, cultural difference always has the potential to become commodified within late capital processes, which seek out difference in order to package it for consumption. The

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95 Furthermore, while there may be an identifiable increase in the variety of cultures represented it is common for the same artists to be included in different international exhibitions (this point is noted in the section Contemporary Japanese Art in the 1980s and 1990s in Chapter Two).
danger is that in packaging difference in palatable forms, the tensions of real difference can be subsumed within an essentialised and unified construction of ‘Otherness,’ so that internal differences and variances within cultural sites become smoothed over in more generalised expressions.

Dominant major and minor circuits of museums, galleries and publications (what we might call the "universalisers") construct the ‘world art scene’, even unintentionally. This system claims to legitimise specific practices without conceiving of the international or contemporary culture as a plural game board of multiple and relative interactions (Mosquera 2003, pp. 20-1).

The hegemonic position of the West is not necessarily challenged but rather reinforced through the co-option of artworks within existing Western art world structures:

The fact that artists from every corner of the world now exhibit internationally reflects only a quantitative internationalisation, but members are not the issue. The question again is whether we are contributing or not in the transformation of a hegemonic and restrictive situation, into an active plurality, instead of being digested by it (Mosquera 2003, p. 23).

Furthermore there is a tendency for difference and cultural identity to be emphasised as the dominant subject of the artwork, or to fulfil a desire for the ‘neo-exotic’ (Mosquera 2003, p. 20). Even if an artist is presented as offering a new approach there is still a tendency to contextualise this in relation to cultural origins, which can then be connected to what is deemed to be ‘traditional’ or ‘non-Western’ (p. 20). Alternatively, artists can face criticism for being derivative if they follow the Western art canon or, if their art is deemed to have a ‘cultural accent,’ it is criticised for not acknowledging the canon (p. 19).96

This view denies the artists’ agency in constructing the self as a cultural other in order to overturn art worlds from within (Fisher 2003).97 Webb and Schirato (2000) also take a more positive view of international exhibitions than Mosquera, arguing that globalisation is not a one-way process and that artists, as agents, actively reject the view that their work is passively adsorbed into a Western narrative of art. Instead, Webb and Schirato conceive globalisation as the interaction of mobile elements. These elements, including Western art history, can always be

96 These criticisms have been levelled at Japanese art (Karatani 1994), and they echo Sakai’s (1997) argument on the conceptual dependency of universalism and particularism.

97 Jean Fisher asserts that artists have the agency required to exploit and expose the contradictions in globalisation by tactically engaging with dominant cultures.
reinscribed. Artists working within these global conditions can rework the terms of art by selectively quoting, critiquing and re-contextualising dominant discourses rather than being subsumed by them (p. 354). Because one of the effects of globalisation is the opening of new spaces for encounter simultaneous to the transforming role of the nation-state, Webb and Schirato argue that artists are able to renegotiate local identities beyond the dominance of the nation-state as a result of the less regulated spaces facilitated by global mobility (p. 357). While acknowledging the dominance of Western culture in the global art world, they reject the idea that non-Western artists are merely subsumed within a Western system of representation. They consider international biennales, such as the Asia-Pacific Triennial, to be providing a site for encounter, synthesis and dialogue, which allow for the juxtaposition of different, or even opposing, discourses (p. 350).98 The analysis raises important points on how large-scale international exhibitions can be approached as positive and liberating experiences, while not negating the challenges and relations of power present within them. For example, New York is often hailed as the centre of the international art market (Marcus & Myers 1995a; Rosler 1997).

In terms of hierarchies of production, the trends of the art world may begin elsewhere but they wind up retailed out of New York (Rosler 1997, p. 22)

Yet, while New York may be the dominant node of convergence for the multiple networks that comprise the contemporary art world system, the international art market is still dependent on networks of circulating images and information within the wider, global environment, including celebrity media culture (Cowen 1998, p. 121).99 This connection has also been supported by the proliferation of published material accompanying exhibitions now available through global Internet distributors such as Amazon.100 Therefore while there is still an economic dominance of the West

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98 Alternatively, Webb and Schirato acknowledge that these sites of interaction also have the potential to artificially smooth over and harmonise differences (p. 351).

99 The rise of online auction sites and the rise of e-commerce websites, such as Artnet, Artprice Art Market, and Sotheby’s have also facilitated a more globalised art world (Van den Bosch 2005), although in practice the extent to which this has facilitated greater diversity of buyers or access to artworks is debatable. Nevertheless these sites do have the potential to enable greater circulation of and access to information, as well as reducing intermediary transaction costs.

100 One of the critical aspects for the circulation of Murakami within the international art market has been the distribution of information about his work globally through exhibitions and catalogues (Koyama 2003). Initially Murakami’s dealer Tomio Koyama exhibited his work through international dealer fairs (Koyama 2001). In order to construct the art historical context for Superflat Murakami used the extensive bi-lingual Super Flat catalogue (Murakami 2000b) to act as a manifesto. More recently, an elaborate catalogue (Murakami 2005c) documenting Japanese post-war popular culture accompanied the Little Boy exhibition. Like the Super Flat catalogue, this text was available for purchase through Amazon.
in the art market, increased art networks help artists operate and move between different exhibition sites and markets.

The changes and subsequent tensions accompanying the global circulation of artworks, has enabled artists such as Murakami to launch their projects globally. At the same time, Superflat can be understood to be challenging Western art by asserting a particular Japanese aesthetic. However it still functions within the systems and structures of Western art markets, including presenting this difference in an easily commodifiable way.

**Global Complexities**

This thesis follows Appadurai, Held and Urry in contending that the process of contemporary globalisation is complex and cannot be understood as singular or uni-dimensionary, but as multiple and complex. While there is recognition that one of the key influences on globalisation is the expansionary imperative of global capitalism, globalisation cannot be reduced to this determinant, or to a form of Western cultural imperialism. This argument does not deny the effects and influences of capitalism which make the processes of globalisation uneven, but rather aims for a more subtle differentiation of the effects of globalisation by emphasising dynamic connections and formations. This approach goes beyond explaining these effects as binaries (art/commodity, Japan/West, global/local), but takes account of the fluid, multidimensional and deterritorialising nature of contemporary global flows, in which the forces of capital are not monolithic or one-dimensional, but complex. As Will Hutton (2000, p. 46) argues, capitalism is both a creative and destructive force, and globalisation presents new opportunities in which capitalism can be used for collective advantage, but it also creates new risks. In this context, identity can be mobilised for resistance and renewal, including the deployment of hybrid cultures, and defensive and resistant reactions to the effects of interaction as well as being open to commodification. It therefore creates spaces in which mobile elements interact with both positive and negative effects. These spaces are open to re-articulation by both global and local forces and allow for the emergence of new strategic identities, as Webb and Schirato anticipate. In this way the global may be a dominant force, but the local also remains highly significant:

Globalisation is, in fact also associated with new dynamics of re-localisation. It is about the achievement of a new global-local nexus, about new and intricate relations between global space and local space (Morley & Robins 1995, p. 116).

These identity strategies create a useful framework through which to examine Murakami’s own
construction and mobilisation of identity in a way that acknowledges the mixed relations within it, particularly in relation to national identity. Superflat articulates the balance between an essentialised Japan as affirming difference, and an imaginary that is constructed to commodify the branding of Superflat as Japanese. In other words Murakami can be understood as positively asserting the innovation of Superflat as a ‘Japanese sensibility’, but making clear that this sensibility is formed from a ‘fully Westernized Japan’ (Murakami 2000c). Therefore Superflat must be seen as being composed of hybrid forms, a point that Murakami recognises in his statement regarding the metamorphosis of Superflat over the twentieth century, especially in relation to Western cultural influences. It is also important to recognise the ways in which Murakami’s discourses and presentation of Superflat presumes a binary relationship between the aesthetic and cultures of Japan and the West, and presents them as homogenised essentialised sites.

Murakami’s engagement with the complex relations of art, commodity and identity across geo-temporal spaces, are part of the discourses on Japanese identity, particularly the emergence of nihonjinron and postmodernism post-1970s in relation to Japan’s economic and technological influence. There was a tendency in both these strains of discourse to emphasise Japan’s national identity as unique and different to the West (Iida 2002, pp. 7-8). This impulse in Superflat towards the affirmation of a national-cultural aesthetic can be considered as a form of self-Orientalism. Self-Orientalism is an identity formation that is constructed in relation to the Western Oriental gaze (Iwabuchi 1994). While self-Orientalism has been considered (although not specifically in relation to Superflat) an as empowered strategy, by appropriating the West’s gaze of Japan and re-packaging it for the same audience (Mitchell 2000), others have considered it collusive to Orientalism and a continuation of the Japan/West binary construction (Iwabuchi 1994). What is needed for this thesis is a theoretical position that is able to deconstruct the complicity between Japan’s self-Orientalism and Western Orientalism, and that allows for the recognition of fragmented, multiple and fluid identities within globalisation. This theoretical position would move away from cultural specificity being cleaved to the ‘imagined’ unity of the nation-state, but would still allow for the expression of cultural specificities (Iwabuchi 1994, p. 78), particularly the ways in which transnationally circulated images and commodities become culturally flexible when localisation processes subsume their origins under the de-centring and glocalising forces of globalisation (Appadurai 1996).

In this way, Murakami can be understood as constructing new spaces of identity within these relations as a strategy for survival, embedded within the influences of global capitalism with its
imperative to commodify. That is, Superflat counters the effects of homogenisation by emphasising its particularity, but is also part of the processes of globalisation that commodify that difference. For example, he deploys his identity as a brand and utilises the commodification of cultural difference in order to market his work. Therefore Superflat is not limited to a detached and Baudrillardian free-floating identity - the erasure of all differences on the flat surface. Instead it temporarily aggregates into points of fixity at the local and national level, so that this identity is mobilised within global networks. While Murakami can be considered collusive with the forces of commodification within global capitalism, he also strategically utilises them to articulate a resistant strategy. Murakami deploys his identity, and that of Superflat art, within the global space by engaging with Western discourses of art and commodity through the United States and European art world and art market system. This identity is structured through the existing scapes of the global art world, but also enables the deterritorialising and construction of new identities. These ‘new’ identities are in part formed through an existing database of cultural codes and images of Japanese aesthetic culture. At the same time Murakami’s skilful positioning deliberately challenges the way cultural hierarchies and categorisations, particularly the values of art and commodity, can be conceived in global contexts through his polysemic productions. Thus his strategy is also to reform the multidimensional structures and concepts of the art world in order to reconsider them as horizontal relations.

While Murakami presents the cultural and aesthetic spaces of Japan and the West as distinct and different, this thesis will also draw attention to the points of mutuality and the ways in which Japan and the West are experiencing similar contemporary conditions of globalisation as well as the ways in which Murakami’s work reflect this interaction. Because Superflat does not have fixed meanings or axiomatic differences, its meaning can be both reterritorialised and deterritorialised as part of the same production-consumption processes. The interplay and networking between circulating assemblages of art, commodity, Japan, West, local and global, in Superflat are therefore characteristic of contemporary global flows of culture and capital, and the dynamic transformations that occur in relation to those flows. By allowing for movements across different cultural contexts the potential for critical positions within the flows and forces of capital are retained, in particular the strategic mobilisations of local identities.
2  MADE IN JAPAN – MURAKAMI AND THE JAPANESE NATIONAL IMAGINARY

2.1 SUPERFLAT AND GLOBAL FLOWS

The world of the future might be like Japan is today - Superflat. Society, customs, art, culture: all are extremely two-dimensional. It is particularly apparent in the arts that this sensibility has been flowing steadily beneath the surface of Japanese history. Today, the sensibility is most present in Japanese games and anime, which have become powerful parts of world culture... This book hopes to reconsider "super flatness", the sensibility that has contributed to and continues to contribute to the construction of Japanese culture, as a worldview, and show that it is an original concept that links the past with the present and the future (Murakami 2000c).

The Superflat Manifesto can be interpreted in a myriad of ways. The underlying concept of ‘Superflatness’ is that it represents a flattening of distinctions and hierarchies. Thus it appears to represent the ultimate postmodern expression, offering no transcendent point of view or singular, unified identity. Murakami’s representation of Superflatness, however, does distinguish and reinforce the differences between Japanese and Western aesthetics, as it constructs them as binaries. Made in Japan challenges Murakami’s idea of an essential national-cultural identity of Superflat, its ‘Japaneseness’, and the ways in which Murakami reinforces a Japan/West dichotomy. This chapter contends that this binary formula is self-consciously deployed as a marketing strategy that is utilised by Murakami to sell his work in global art markets.

As argued in Chapter One, one of the early threats recognised in contemporary processes of globalisation was, and continues to be, cultural homogenisation, particularly in terms of the dominance and spread of Western culture. There have also been continued concerns and celebrations that national and cultural identities are becoming increasingly fragmented.

The notion of distinct, separate and “authentic” cultures is increasingly problematical (Morley & Robins 1995a, p. 123).

Global pressures exerted on the fragmentation and the breakdown of bounded identity give rise to impulses to reclaim local and national identities as a form of resistance (Castells 2004). This
position is complicated by the deterritorialising impulses of globalisation because it is formed in relation to the transnational imaginings of the Self and the Other, stimulated by the constant circulation of people and mediated images through globalisation (Appadurai 1996). These two processes of deterritorialisation and reterritorialisation cannot be understood as opposites, but are part of the complexities of globalisation, which makes it increasingly difficult to conceive of identity in a bounded or essentialised manner. These complex processes include the intertwining of economic and cultural flows. Therefore, any analysis of the formation of cultural identity in a global context needs to consider the influences of capital. As Harvey (1990) argues, the forms and structures of global capitalism exert a critical force on the progress of cultural homogeneity and heterogeneity, although Appadurai (1996, pp. 6-7) contends that these cannot be entirely determined by that imperative.

Two key issues emerge in these global processes. First, the problem of how to retain the concept of local/national cultural particularity and to concurrently recognise the convergences and overlaps between cultures in a global context. Secondly, how to recognise the value in cultural difference as a tool of critical (oppositional) agency to acknowledge that difference can also become a commodity in the global market place which can potentially be co-opted into dominant discourses and practices (in Murakami’s case within Western art) (see Huggan 2001). This is an irresolvable struggle. Superflat draws attention to and increases these tensions by aesthetically expressing and theorising the processes of difference/convergence, opposition/commodification, and deterritorialisation/reterritorialisation. As the opening quote suggests, Murakami demarcates the identity of Superflat as ‘Japanese’ by proposing it as an affirmation of an aesthetic that is ‘born from Japan’ and distinct from Western art, thereby identifying the ‘Otherness’ of Superflat in a positive way (Murakami 2000a; 2000c; 2003). ‘Japanese’, ‘the West’ and ‘the Other’ all denote culturally constructed categories of identity that are unstable and dynamic formations of meaning. For example, Murakami’s presentation of the aesthetic dichotomy of West and Japan is a common construction in Western and Japanese discourse.

101 Graham Huggan defines the dilemma between postcolonial oppositional agency and the process of commodification as the ‘postcolonial exotic’ (p. 82).

102 These terms are placed in quotation marks in order to draw attention to this imaginative and historically constituted construction. For the purposes of clarity from this point on quotations marks will generally not be used.
It would be a mistake to presume that Murakami is not aware of the complex relations underpinning the vulnerability and flexibility of cultural identity in globalisation. Murakami has acknowledged the hybrid cultures from which Superflat emerges. In the Superflat Manifesto he stresses how the Superflat sensibility has been transformed by Japan’s ‘westernisation’:

This book hopes to reconsider "super flatness," the sensibility that has contributed to and continues to contribute to the construction of Japanese culture, as a worldview, and show that it is an original concept that links the past with the present and the future. During the modern period, as Japan has been Westernized, how has this "super flat" sensibility metamorphosed? If that can be grasped clearly, then our stance today will come into focus.

In this quest, the current progressive form of the real in Japan runs throughout. We might be able to find an answer to our search for a concept about our lives. "Super flatness" is an original concept of Japanese who have been completely Westernized (Murakami 2000c, p. 5).

Clearly Murakami can be located in the deterritorialising and reterritorialising processes that comprise contemporary globalisation. That is, he demonstrates a capacity to articulate his work as Japanese, but he also presents this Japanese identity as flexible and interchangeable:

Unfortunately, I can never give "Japan" a fixed shape. I cannot meet my real "self". Nor can I discern what "art" really is... I thought I could solve the problem by lining up a series of images in a powerful procession that words could not clarify (Murakami 2000a, p. 9).

Murakami does not claim a unified identity for Japan, but Superflat still actively constructs the ‘japanisation’ of westernisation as a marker of Japanese identity. This self-conscious positioning of Superflat demonstrates how globalisation has facilitated greater cross-fertilisation of cultural forms, but these forms are not free from the influence of nationalising forces or from the influences of capital. At the same time, the (re)formed Japaneseness of Superflat is used as a form of resistance to Western and Japanese art. Superflat can be considered as an expression that challenges the hegemony of Western art and bijutsu (art) through its deliberate self-Orientalising process, constructed as the cultural Other. However, the danger in the self-Orientalism process, which is intended to be an act of resistance, is the tendency to (again) reproduce a Japan/West binary.

Murakami self-consciously and skilfully engages with the processes of contemporary globalisation and the politics of identity, including the commodification of cultural identity and difference. This strategy is achieved by deliberately creating an exotic spectacle of the cultural difference of Japan
which builds on the imagining of that identity in Western discourses, and a playful manipulation of market customisation. Murakami himself stresses the flexibility that is required in order to construct work specifically for niche audiences in the United States and Japan:

If you are going to match the tastes of the West...some avant-garde spices are indispensable...But it is precisely this avant-garde that doesn't match the tastes of the Japanese consumer...In order to create something that is understandable both to the West and Japan, what is needed is an ambivalent flavor and presentation... (Murakami 2001b, pp. 130-1).

A critical component of Murakami's strategy is to exhibit and distribute his works in the art markets of the West, and to use this success to construct new audiences for (Superflat) art in Japan. One of the ways Murakami achieves this is by customising the production and distribution of his work for niche markets in the United States and Japan:

My path follows these three steps:

(1) First, gain recognition on site (New York). Furthermore, adjust the flavoring to meet the needs of the venue.

(2) With this recognition as my parachute, I will make my landing back in Japan. Slightly adjust the flavorings until they are Japanese. Or perhaps entirely modify the works to meet Japanese tastes.

(3) Back overseas, into the fray. This time, I will make a presentation that doesn’t shy away from my true soy sauce nature, but is understandable to my audience (Murakami 2001b, p. 131).

Murakami’s transnational circulation is structured largely through customising his work to fit within the codes and system of Western art worlds and markets, and supported through his other ‘commercial’ activities, such as the commission for Louis Vuitton and its subsequent media exposure. On this basis Murakami’s activities can be likened to the systems and processes of the global branding strategies of Transnational Corporations (TNCs). Murakami strategically constructs and presents his core of Japaneseness, yet acknowledges that this base can be blended with other ingredients.

No matter how much trouble it takes, I see the need to create a universal taste - a common tongue - without cheating myself and my Japanese core...I continue to blend seasonings...I may have mixed in the universal forms and presentations of French, Italian, Chinese, or other ethnic cuisines - and I am vigilant in my search for their best points - but the central axis of my creation is stable...However, at its core, my standard of "beauty" is one cultivated by the Japan that has been my home since my birth in 1962...The materials I have at my disposal are Japanese art history, manga, anime,
He achieves this by emphasising Superflat as an alternative aesthetic expression to Western art and culture, constructed in response to the particularities of Japanese *otaku* culture and that positively asserts the creative expressions emerging in popular Japanese commercial forms (Murakami 2000a, p. 25). He then uses this success in Western art markets to increase his profile in Japan, where he creates Superflat as a new form of popular art, as an alternative to the status and value of art in Japan. To this end, Murakami uses the complex interplay between Western art market success, which is achieved by deliberately constructing his work in codes understandable to Western art and Western imagining of Japanese cultural-aesthetic identity, and presenting his work as culturally ‘authentic’ by addressing the history of art in Japan.

Murakami not only uses the lineage of Superflat to rework the history of art in Japan, and to question the meaning of art, but also to affirm the cultural authenticity of Superflat. The history of Japanese art to which Murakami is referring to is the imported concept of art (*bijutsu*) which was introduced during the Meiji period. He argues that, against this ‘inauthentic’ art, he is affirming the ‘authenticity’ of *anime* and *manga* forms because their aesthetic and conceptual ‘origins’ can be traced to the Edo period. Edo functions in Murakami’s lineage as a constructed site of Japanese cultural tradition. This tradition functions as the determinant of the cultural authenticity of Superflat — that is, as the point of origin. Murakami even refers to it as the ‘DNA’ of Superflat art (2000a, p. 25).

This construction of Edo is a convention emerging from modern Japanese discourses against which it can be identified as ‘tradition’ in order to support an idea of progress, which the modern could transcend, or pre-Meiji (Edo) Japan is identified as somehow more authentically ‘Japanese’ than post-Meiji Japan (Vlastos 1998). The problem underlying the imagining of Edo as the site of Japan’s cultural ‘tradition’ is the presumption of cultural authenticity as a fixed point of cultural origin and the existence of ‘unbroken cultural transmission’ (Ivy 1995, p. 16). This obscures the culturally constructed meanings of ‘tradition’ and ‘authentic’,103 It is important to draw attention to this cultural constructedness because both concepts have been used to reinforce the modern ideology of the unified nation-state, in which tradition can function as both a marker of cultural

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103 Since that the culturally constituted and constructed meanings of tradition and authentic have been established, for the purposes of clarity from this point on quotations marks will generally not be used.
particularity or as the background against which ‘progress’ can be measured, influenced by social, political and economic forces (Befu 2001).

Clearly, Murakami also uses Edo to mark the culturally authentic transmission of the Superflat aesthetic. However, as was indicated previously, he also acknowledges that he cannot give Japaneseness a ‘fixed’ shape and draws attention to Japan as a changeable culture, for example, under the influences of the West. However, the critical point remains that Edo still functions in Murakami’s discourses as a marker of Japanese identity and the point of origin for Superflat, and this echoes, rather than challenges, common discursive imaginings of Edo.

The definition of ‘authentic Japanese’ expression in relation to a fixed point of origin is challenged by the history of cultural and economic exchange between the West and Japan, including the more recent (since the 1990s) increased global dissemination of forms of Japanese popular culture, such as anime and manga. Murakami self-consciously demonstrates his awareness of this historical interaction between Japan and the West, but tends to contextualise it in relation to Japan’s skill in assimilating and domesticating foreign influences. This is then presented as a characteristic of Japanese identity, thereby reconstructing Japan’s hybridity as an essential identity. So while Murakami acknowledges Superflat’s hybrid characteristics and westernisation and affirms its flexibility as a transnational model (Kelmachter 2002, p. 73), he also re-asserts this as a new form of identity. In this way Murakami demonstrates how hybrid identities and non-nationality can be mobilised and commodified as a national-cultural aesthetic, especially outside Japan. Superflat, paradoxically, can be both an expression of national-cultural identity and a more non-specific and transnational flexible identity. Murakami’s affirmation of Superflat as an aesthetic that emerges from Japan as a model for the future of art, reiterates the recent rhetoric on Japan’s global cultural power in relation to the export of anime and manga.

The popularity of anime and manga texts outside Japan has been associated with the symbolic capital generated by a perception of the ‘coolness’ of Japanese popular culture (McGray 2002). This discourse on Japan’s global cultural power is also part of a broader national discourse, including the already mentioned presentation of the history of assimilating foreign cultures as a national-cultural characteristic (Iwabuchi 2002a, p. 17). Paradoxically, the symbolic capital generated by anime and manga exports is related to the effacement of cultural origins, which Koichi Iwabuchi refers to as ‘cultural odourlessness’ (2002a, pp. 25-6). One dominant scholarly argument on the popular consumption of anime and manga outside Japan holds that these forms
express plural cultural identities and are detached from specific representations of space and place (Allison 2000a, 2003; Napier 2001a, p. 236). Therefore, there is evidence to suggest that the consumption of Superflat, like that of anime and manga, is not simply based on a desire for reflected images of Japaneseness, as a cultural Other; rather, it offers the flexibility of alternate identities, free from specific imaginings of geo-cultural identity. Therefore it can be argued that a critical factor in the reception of Murakami’s works in the United States and Europe has been the familiarity of the Superflat aesthetic to anime and manga as part of everyday visual vocabulary. This familiarity can be attributed to two further factors: the development of contemporary anime and manga through cross-fertilisation with Western comics and cinema forms, although their particular development is specific to post-war Japan (Kinsella 2000, p. 5); and the presentation Superflat in the codes and structures of Western art, which shares a complex history with Japanese art. Therefore, Superflat echoes the paradox of affirming the culturally odourlessness of texts, or non-nationality, while also presenting them as examples of national-cultural identity.

The intention of this chapter is to tease out the subtleties in the dynamics between Superflat as a familiar aesthetic that is transnational and flexible, at the same time as exploring its differences and particular engagements with Japanese art discourses without recourse to the conventional discursive construction of a Japan/West dichotomy. In other words, Superflat can be considered to be a dialogue and/or a critique of Western art while also diverging and expressing a different formation and genesis from Western art (which can also be a critique). Superflat diverges from the national institutions of bijutsu by engaging with the localised consumption practices and aesthetics of otaku. Made in Japan examines the tensions between local/global, national/global and local/national. It explores these connections and differences, and identifies Superflat as a local expression that is also formed and constituted by global interactions. This approach allows the asymmetrical structure of global art worlds and markets, dominated by Western interests, but enabling local (and nationalised) expressivities to be acknowledged.

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104 There were precedents for anime and manga in earlier illustrative forms (2000, p. 28), including Edo period-illustrated books (kyōshi), twelfth-century picture scrolls (emaki), ukiyo-e woodblock prints, as well as Western comic forms (Napier 2001a, p. 21; Schodt 1986; Tsuji 1986, 2001). While there are identifiable influences from Western comic forms in the early forms of manga, these have been assimilated and transformed. For example, Osamu Tezuka combined Western comics with twelfth century e-maki and new cinematic style innovations (Craig 2000, p. 8). This intermixing of sources adds another level of complexity to the categorisation and identification of something as Japanese. These forms have developed within Japan, however, albeit with some foreign influences, rather than existing as cultural imports (Kinsella 2000, pp. 45-51).
The chapter examines two key questions:

• In what ways are the theory and aesthetics of Superflat, and Murakami’s work more generally, examples of the complex economic and cultural interactions between the global and local identities that constitute contemporary processes of globalisation?

• In what ways do Takashi Murakami and Superflat function within the discursive imagining of Japanese culture?

*Made in Japan* examines the symbolic power of national identity (the ‘Japaneseness’) in Superflat as a commodity and a resistant form of art expression and theorisation. It achieves this by contextualising and subsequently problematising Murakami’s assertions in relation to existing discourses of Japanese national-cultural identity.

The first section of this chapter traces the discourses of Japanese identity, *nihonjinron*. In particular, this section draws attention to the construction of ‘Japan’ as a culturally unique and unified national-cultural against which ‘the West’ is positioned. This is a mutual position existing in both Japanese and Western discourses. The difficulty is that in these discourses there is a tendency to generalise and overstate the contrasts and differences and to negate the internal differences in Japan and the West by focusing on external comparisons (Iwabuchi 1994; Morris-Suzuki 1998). This tension is examined further in the section on self-Orientalism, which focuses on *kokusaika* (internationalisation) and *mukokuseki* (cultural odourlessness) as examples of the ways in which Japan’s hybrid cultures are reformed into essentialised identities.

The subsequent section on *nihon bijutsu* (Japanese art) reveals the mobilisation of cultural and aesthetic identities for the construction of Japan’s modern (post-Meiji) national identity. The import of Western concepts and institutions of art (*bijutsu*) in the late nineteenth century is a critical stage in the contestation of Japanese aesthetic identity in a global context, particularly in relation to the formation of the modern Japanese nation-state. The ongoing tensions and debates during the twentieth century on the concept of the Japaneseness of Japanese art, the relationship between aesthetic expression and national identity, and the expression of originality, subjectivity and cultural authenticity can be traced back to this period. Although the aim of Superflat is to transcend and reject *kindai bijutsu* (modern art), by affirming those popular cultural forms previously excluded from art in Japan, it is still caught up in the same debates, especially by
trying to separate Japanese and Western aesthetic identities and to articulate an original expression in Superflat. Once the complexities of these discourses on identity and Japanese art have been made clear, Murakami’s assertions that Superflat art expresses a Japanese genealogy can then be understood and challenged further through an interrogation of his international ‘soy sauce’ strategy.
2.2 JAPANESE DISCOURSES OF IDENTITY: NIHONJINRON

Japan has developed its own specific set of discourses on Japanese identity, *Nihonjinron* (Befu 2001).\(^{105}\) Writings on cultural identity are not unique to Japan. However *nihonjinron* represents a particular set of discourses whose distinguishing features are the homogeneity of the Japanese people and the construction of Japan as a unique society (Burgess 2004). The emphasis is on ethnic and cultural homogeneity rather than internal variations (Befu 2001, p. 5).\(^{106}\) *Nihonjinron* has been criticised for emphasising a particular construction of Japan, distinguishing it from other ethnic or national groups, particularly the West (Dale 1986; Sugimoto 1999, 2000).\(^{107}\) For example a common theme in *nihonjinron* is the ‘groupism’ of Japanese society, which is usually contrasted with the ‘individualism’ of Western society.\(^{108}\)

During the 1960s through to the 1980s *nihonjinron* publications were common, peaking in the 1970s (p. 14). *Nihonjinron* can be understood as part of an ongoing discourse, however, asserting a self-confident identity, particularly Japan’s global geopolitical identity, since the late

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105 According to Harumi Befu there is a range of terms used to refer to ‘knowledge on characteristics of Japanese culture, people, society, and history’ (p. 2). *Nihon bunkaron* (knowledge on Japanese culture) is the more popular term in Japanese, but *nihonjinron* is the more prevalent term in English.


107 In particular Dale’s exaggerated criticism is dismissive of *nihonjinron*, deriding it for its essentialism, nationalistic tone and lack of scholarly basis. Sugimoto Yoshio is also critical of *nihonjinron* and challenges its thesis of national-cultural homogeneity, stressing the cultural and ethnic variations within Japan. However, Sugimoto’s later work offers a more balanced position on the usefulness of *nihonjinron* in analysing Japanese culture (Clammer 2001, pp. 66-9). At the same time, despite Sugimoto’s challenge to the homogeneity view of *nihonjinron*, and the actual structural and social varieties present in Japan, the popular image of Japanese society as unified and unique remains persistent (Smith 2000). Thus Smith argues that to theorise Japan as a ‘multicultural’ society as Sugimoto does, is misinformed.

108 Nascent *nihonjinron* discourses can be identified emerging during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in relation to Japan’s image of China (Befu 2001, pp. 124-5; see also Pollack 1986). Subsequently Japan’s relationship with the West, in particular England, Germany, France and the United States, became the central referent for the discourses of cultural particularity (Befu, p. 10). John Clammer (2001) breaks down this relationship more specifically. Clammer argues that in Japan, Europe is associated with ideas of modernity, periodisation and universality. The post-war relationship with the United States, however, is characterised by a struggle for political and economic autonomy. China, although no longer the primary defining relationship for Japan, is still present as a political rival (see also Befu 2001, p. 123; Clammer 2001, p. 45).
The rise of *nihonjinron* is strongly associated with theories of Japan’s post-war economic success, and the connections with particular features of Japanese culture (Clammer 2001, p. 59; see also Iwabuchi 1994, p. 58). This transformation is part of a large-scale global repositioning and the emergence of a strong push for a collective Asian identity (Mahathir & Ishihara 1995). Japan’s emphasis on the uniqueness of its modernity, distinct from Western modernity, is also part of this shift in thinking. However emphasising Japan’s uniqueness means that similarities with other modern cultures are overlooked (Ivy 1995, p. 5), and internal variations smoothed over. The rhetoric of Japan’s postmodern ‘triumph over modernity’ which emerged in the 1980s, is also complicit with *nihonjinron* discourses (Iida 2002, pp. 7-8) and repeats the nationalist and homogenising tendency in the ‘overcoming the modern’ (*kindai no chōkoku*) discourse of the 1940s. Of course, this rhetoric did not appear only in Japan, and will be discussed further in the chapter section Postmodern Japan. Like *nihonjinron*, the discourse on postmodern Japan developed not only as part of the West’s identification of Japan as a cultural Other, but also defined the economic, social and political differences as inherent cultural traits:

[T]he intersection of a Western fascination with an imagined exteriority fused with its own fears of the unknown; and the link was forged in such a way as to exaggerate the difference between the Western self and the Japanese other and to thrust aside the material aspects of the cultural moment, interpreting them instead in terms of Japanese cultural traits.

While the nationalistic and homogenic tendencies of *nihonjinron* should be acknowledged, it is still useful to scholars as a local form of knowledge (Clammer 2001, p. 10). John Clammer is critical of scholars, such as Befu and Dale, who negate the internal variations in *nihonjinron*, and over emphasise its importance in discourses of identity at the expense of other ‘non-nationalist’ forms of social discourse (p. 66). Clammer advocates that scholars extend their focus beyond the

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109 Befu (p. 124-141) traces this changing discourse of identity in order to underscore the fluctuations between positive and negative perceptions of Japaneseness. One of the critical and dominant events of the late nineteenth century was the forced opening of Japan to Western trade and Japan’s signing of unfavourable commercial trade treaties with Holland, Russia, the United States and Britain (see Jansen 1988, pp. 259-307). For Befu, the sense of ‘unfairness’ and ‘shame’ at the forcing of the commercial treaties is something that profoundly marks the discourses of national identity, and Japan’s ‘auto-Orientalist’ tendencies and has affected the various forms of Japanese nationalism in the twentieth century, including the post-war trauma of defeat (p. 125).

110 This led to a revival of the positive identification of Japan’s uniqueness. After the economic bubble burst in the 1990s, Befu contends that this sense of self-confidence was dampened but still remains strong (p. 141).

111 Ironically, this celebratory discourse asserting Japan’s national triumph obscures the emerging breakdown of the national structure under conditions of late capitalism in Japan (Yoda 2000, p. 649).
discourses of *nihonjinron* and examine other forms of social theorisation emerging in Japan. In this way they can acknowledge the significance of *nihonjinron* as an indigenous form of social knowledge, and recognise that there are other voices and other discourses of localised knowledge, which could be useful in framing contemporary analyses of Japan. One of the other key trends which Clammer identifies as a useful frame for analyses of Japan is the examination of local cultural expressions, such as those found in *manga* and *anime* as an expression of cultural specificity, without resorting to broad and generalised differences of a Japan/West binary paradigm. This useful proposition will be explored later in relation to Superflat. At this stage the construction and maintenance of divisions and connections between Japan and the West must be examined in more detail.

### 2.2.1 SELF-ORIENTALISM

*Nihonjinron* presents an interesting example on Orientalist discourses. It is distinct from Said’s (1995) externalised concept of Orientalism, because it is generated internally in Japanese culture. For Said, Orientalism is a discourse of power and knowledge through which the West articulates its own superiority in representations and narratives of the Orient. In this way the Orient is produced and managed discursively as the cultural Other (p. 3).

Therefore, as much as the West itself, the Orient is an idea that has a history and a tradition of thought, imagery, and vocabulary that have given it reality and presence in and for the West. The two geographical entities thus support and to an extent reflect each other (p. 5).

However, while Said’s emphasis is on how the Orient is produced as an object by the powerful West, Japan occupies an interesting position in colonial/postcolonial orientations. Japan was never colonised, although it was under Western influence power in the nineteenth century, and (Morley argues) had significant influence over the discourses on Japanese culture in the Western imagination (Morley & Robins 1995b, p. 161). Morley and Robins’ stress, in particular, how this last point has been critical to Japan’s function in the Orientalist imagination.

*Nihonjinron* can be understood as subverting the Orientalist paradigm by allowing Japan to construct its self-image and define its cultural particularism; therefore, it does not provide the West with the power of definition (Clammer 2001, p. 49). However, the situation is more complicated than simply considering *nihonjinron* as a challenge to Orientalism. As Said later addresses, Orientalism informed how Japan saw itself (Kikuchi 1997). Furthermore, Koichi
Iwabuchi (1994) argues that Western Orientalism and nihonjinron mutually maintain and reciprocate the discursive construction of a unique Japaneseness in opposition to the West. This discourse of difference smooths over internal contradictions and variances, and constructs the West and Japan as essentialised and homogenous unities. They are complicit with each other because external differences are used to suppress internal heterogeneity (p. 52). Therefore it is a dual process. Iwabuchi is particularly critical of how the self-Orientalist discourse of nihonjinron forms a powerful influence with the nation-state and obscures the hegemony of national particularism (p. 53). For example, during Japan’s period of early modernisation the discursive construction of the West as a cultural Other was used to counter the undesirable effects of modernisation. Many of the negative effects of modernisation, such as social fragmentation and alienation, were considered to be influences from the West (p. 52).

Sakai Naoki (1997) criticises the defensive positioning of Japan’s particularism against a Western universalism because it ends up reinforcing the West as central against which Japan position itself. Thus, Sakai is critical of how Japan’s identification of itself, firstly in relation to China and now the United States, becomes dependent on the Other for its own definition (p. 105). For Sakai, the determination of Japan’s particularity endorses cultural essentialism. Sakai argues that the particularity of Japanese cultural identity and subjectivity is a Western and a Japanese discursive construction, and that the insistence on Japanese cultural uniqueness parallels the equal essentialisation of the West.

Furthermore, presenting Japan’s emphasis on its particularity cannot be understood as a simple challenge to Orientalism through Occidentalism. Iwabuchi argues that Japan lacks the power to dominate the West and that the discourse is largely about Japan not the West as a cultural Other (1994, p. 52). Iwabuchi tempers his argument by critiquing the concept of self-Orientalism as a passive strategy defending Orientalism. Instead it exploits the West by reproducing the Japan/West binary division. Furthermore, Japan offers a challenge to the West’s global economic and technological power. But rather than conceiving of self-Orientalism as a challenge to Orientalism Iwabuchi argues that it should be interpreted as complicit with Orientalism. Therefore, self-Orientalism can be understood as a two-way mirror of mutual fascination and desire (Mitchell 2000, p. 187). Morley and Robins (1995b) refer to the self-Orientalising process as ‘reverse

112 While Iwabuchi focuses on cultural domination, this is debatable, especially, the extent to which Japan competes with the West economically and technologically.
Orientalism’ and also identity it with nihonjinron discourses. They follow Sakai’s argument that Japan’s particularism is just re-establishing the centrality of the West as a universal. Reverse Orientalism becomes an attempt to re-centre this dynamic, but subsequently ends up constructing a defensive position. Thus it never escapes, but rather reproduces the Japan/West dichotomy because of the (mutual) insistence on Japan’s irreducible difference.¹¹³

Morley and Robins identify a particular discourse of ‘techno-Orientalism’ associated with Japan’s economic and technological growth in the 1980s. This growth became conflated with a sense of cultural superiority, and in Western discourses Japan came to be perceived as a threat:

The “Japan problem” [how Japan asserts its difference and superiority to the West] is, in one sense, the problem of Japan’s irreducible difference. Japan’s differentness is a very particular problem for the West. The Japanese Other plays the West at its own game. Western Orientalism appears to have found its match in what seems to be an “Orientalism in reverse” (Morley & Robins 1995b, p. 163).

In the techno-Orientalist discourse Japan’s economical and technological growth was considered to be a result of specific cultural characteristics, and therefore became associated with its identity (p. 168). Japan came to represent, symbolically, a postmodern future that had successfully transcended modernity. However, Morley and Robins argue that this new identity, as identified in Western popular discourse and in movies such as Blade Runner (Scott 1982), just reconfigures earlier Orientalist constructions of Japanese culture in new cultural forms:

One response is to see pachinko and computer games simply as the postmodern equivalents of zen and kabuki. Like “traditional” forms of Japanese culture, they too embody the exotic, enigmatic and mysterious essence of Japanese particularism. This is apparent in the postmodern romanticisation of Japan as a space somewhere between the real and the imaginary (p. 169).

This techno-imagining of Japan as a dehumanised technological power ultimately stems from the West’s own crisis of identity resulting from Japan’s increasing economic prominence (p. 170).

¹¹³ Japan’s discourse on Asia made this self-imagining even more complicated. Japan was positioned centrally as a model, particularly in relation to its ‘successful’ transcension of modernity and negotiations with Westernisation. This echoes the pan-Asian discourse of the early twentieth century (see Okakura 1973 [1904]), which was utilised for Japan’s colonising activities in the twentieth century; although, it is important to note that this was not Tenshin’s political intention (Weston 2004, pp. 267-97). Tenshin’s pan-Asianism identifies Japan as the ‘museum of Asia’ and as the centre of an imagined unified Asia positioned against the West. Thus Japan reproduces the Oriental and self-Oriental binary by Orientalising the rest of the Orient. In these discourses the hegemony of the West is not dismantled, rather the divisions of ‘Japan, West and the Rest’ are retained (Iwabuchi 1994, p. 54).

The association of technology and Japaneseness now serves to reinforce the image of a culture that is cold, impersonal and machine-like, an authoritarian culture lacking emotional connection to the rest of the world (p. 169).

The Japan/West binary is difficult to transcend. For example, even when Morley and Robins critique the discourses on the uniqueness of Japanese identity they still demonstrate a tendency to reproduce the Japan/West dichotomy:

Japan is significant because of its complexity: because it is non-Western, yet refuses any longer to be our Orient; because it insists on being modern, yet calls our kind of modernity into question. Because of this Japan offers possibilities. It potentially offers us a way beyond that simple binary logic that differentiates modern and traditional, and then superimposes this on the distinction between Occident and Orient. In so far as Japan complicates and confuses this impoverished kind of categorisation it challenges us to rethink our white modernity (Morley & Robins 1995b, p. 171 italics added).

Quite clearly Morley and Robins position themselves and subsequently the reader in an assumptive and divisive us/them narrative structure despite their professed intention to critique the techno-Orientalist position.

Even the concepts of assimilation, hybridity and domestication of the foreign become caught up in the same struggle to assert Japan’s cultural particularity in relation to the West. The assimilationist position is that Japan is able to maintain its core identity whilst domesticating external cultural, economic and technological imports.

Japan assimilates, if not immigrants and American automobiles, then everything else, retaining the traditional, immutable core of culture while incorporating the shiny trappings of (post)modernity in a dizzying round of production, accumulation, and consumption (Ivy 1995, p. 1).

Japan’s success at assimilation is a critical element in the discourse on Japanese cultural hybridity (see Tobin 1992). Thus any cultural convergence is subsumed in discourses that assert this hybridity as a characteristic of Japan’s cultural uniqueness (p. 9). Iwabuchi (2002a) argues that hybridity becomes a critical formation in the construction of the essence of Japanese cultural identity (p. 71). Therefore in contrast to theorists who celebrate hybridity as an empowering position for de-essentialising concepts of national culture (Ang 2003; Bhabha 1994; Hall 1991a), Iwabuchi argues that the Japanese discourses contribute to the rhetoric of a distinct and
superior Japaneseness (p. 52). Iwabuchi refers to this as ‘strategic hybridism’: it is a discourse which emphasises the process of hybridism but which still reinforces the exclusive sense of national/cultural identity. He critiques Tobin’s *Re-made in Japan* for reinforcing a Japan/West binary and homogenising internal politics of difference (p. 60).

Strategic hybridism is one way Japan has negotiated points of contact with the West, and threats of colonisation, since the late nineteenth century. From the 1970s, especially since the growth of Japan’s economic power, this discourse has been transformed into a positive embrace of the foreign while still demarcating the boundary between Japan and the West (p. 59). Furthermore, hybrid Japan is presented as the model for other nations to follow, particularly in Asia. In this way, Japan has negotiated contemporary globalisation processes (both economic and cultural) and their potential disruption to Japan’s cultural uniqueness while embracing the cultural, economic and political benefits provided by global flows of goods. Japan is able to sustain and manage the discourse of cultural difference in globalisation by limiting imports of foreign goods and emphasising how they are localised and assimilated, emphasising a public rhetoric of internationalisation (*kokusaika*) that is not supported in practice by recognition or reward, reinforcing *nihonjinron* discourses in advertising and media reproductions and by continuing to develop cultural nationalism in relation to global and local events (Clammer 2001, p. 42).

The concept of this self-Orientalist discourse of strategic hybridism usefully explains Murakami’s own assertions of the Westernised but Japanese aesthetic of Superflat. What is evident is the continuation of these divisions as bounded aesthetic identities in Murakami’s discourse, resulting in the maintenance rather than the blurring of binary formations. The reinforcement of the concept of Japan as different and unique in relation to the West is particularly evident in the *kokusaika* discourses and the discourses that arose in relation to the export of *anime* and *manga* in the 1990s.

**Kokusaika: internationalism**

*Kokusaika* emerged in the 1970s in response to the effects of international trade and economic developments in Japan. In the 1980s state rhetoric and policy aimed to emphasise the transformation and internationalisation of Japan at a time of international pressure to open up its markets to foreign imports (goods and services). Chris Burgess (2004) stresses that the discourse of opening up simultaneously reinforced an ideology of Japan’s ethnic-homogeneity.
Rather than allowing for an actual opening up of Japan to the entry of other cultures and values, *Kokusaika* stresses how Japan can distribute its culture, values and history internally and externally.

While internationalisation elsewhere implies a cosmopolitan expansiveness (even while retaining the national frame), the Japanese state-sponsored version tends toward the domestication of the foreign...It has thus been remarked that instead of opening up Japan to the struggle of different nationalities and ethnicities, the policy of internationalisation implies the opposite: the thorough domestication of the foreign and the dissemination of Japanese culture throughout the world (Ivy 1995, p. 3).

Thus the presence of foreigners in Japan was controlled and managed through categorisation of difference, by demarcating foreigners as the Other: difference is managed through inclusion, but this inclusion only occurs in the context of particular categories of difference thereby excluding them from the ‘mainstream’. In this way *Kokusaika* is closely connected to *nihonjinron* and echoes the assimilationist argument. Therefore in response to the pressures on national culture from the global flows of people, goods and ideas, discourses such as *kokusaika* emerged in Japan in order to maintain the ‘imagined community’ (Anderson 1991) of the homogeneous national identity of Japan nation, particularly its ethnic identity.

*Kokusaika* is sophisticated because it gives the appearance of Japan’s transformation through a celebration of cultural difference and plurality, while actually maintaining the ideology of homogeneity (Burgess 2004). In this way it reflects Castells’ concept of resistant identity. In the same way Murakami’s proclamation regarding the westernisation of Japan and presenting this as global model for the future also territorialises the Japaneseness of that global identity.

A striking paradox arises in relation to the Japanese identity articulated in the discourses regarding the export of *anime* and *manga*. The cultural identity that is celebrated in the nationalist rhetoric on its success is largely attributed to the effacement of its Japanese cultural origins. The following section elucidates the details of this paradox. Its relevance to Superflat lies in the similarities between Superflat’s construction of a global identity with the effacement of

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114 Burgess highlights how the dominant discourse of *kokusaika* has declined since the 1980s, but that the exclusion of ‘others’ through categorising them as the Other still persists in other forms. Burgess also analyses other discourses which demonstrate a tendency to displace the Other: *ibunka* (different culture), *kyōsei* (co-existence), and *tabunka* (multiculturalism). However Burgess is optimistic that the increased presence of migrants in Japan will continue to apply pressure to these systems of representation that continue to construct and the ideology of homogeneity.
cultural origins and the assertion of its Japanese particularity. Superflat’s emergence during the global expansion of *anime* and *manga* exports also supports a more detailed analysis of this link.

**Mukokuseki: cultural odourlessness**

The post-war discursive construction of Japan’s global identity tended to emphasise technological and economic developments rather than global cultural influences. In the late 1990s, however, the rhetoric shifted in order to emphasise and celebrate Japan’s new position as a significant cultural global influence, particularly in relation to the export of Japan’s creative industries (Craig 2000; De Boer 2004; Frederick 2003b; Green 2003; Iwabuchi 2002a; McGray 2002). This discourse was based on the symbolic capital (Bourdieu 1984) of the ‘coolness’ associated with the global circulation of *anime*, *manga*, video games, and fashion and built on the imaginings of contemporary Japan already circulating (Appadurai 1996). Douglas McGray (2002) christened the cultural and economic impact from these exports ‘Gross National Cool’ (GNC).

McGray’s contended that the bursting of Japan’s bubble economy in the 1990s produced new innovations in the arts, and like the ‘economic miracle’ GNC, provided a model for the world.

Japan is reinventing superpower again. Instead of collapsing beneath its political and economic misfortunes, Japan’s global cultural influence has only grown. In fact, from pop music to consumer electronics, architecture to fashion, and food to art, Japan has far greater cultural influence now than it did in the 1980s, when it was an economic superpower (McGray 2002, p. 47).

Despite this highly speculative and hyperbolic analysis, when Japan’s economy slowed in the early 1990s *anime*, *manga* and the gaming industries were one of the few industries to continue to

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115 Animated television shows have been exported to the United States since the 1960s. *Anime* imports have significantly increased since the 1980s, however, mainly because of developments in technology, such as VCRs, enabling fans to access *anime* more readily (Price 2001). This trend also influenced the proliferation of *anime* fan clubs around the globe (Norris 2000). A second increase in the 1990s gave *anime* an even wider visibility beyond specialist fan groups, associated with the popularity of the television show *Pokémon* and *Spirited Away* (Miyazaki 2001) and the recent spate of Hollywood film-productions that reference Japan, such as *Lost in Translation* (Coppola 2003), *The Last Samurai* (Zwick 2003), *Kill Bill: Vol. 1* (Tarantino 2003), and *The Matrix* (see De Boer 2004; Wachowski & Wachowski 1999). However important destinations for Japanese exports of popular culture are not just in the West, but other parts of Asia (Beech & Cheng 1999). Iwabuchi argues, therefore, that debates on globalisation cannot be understood solely in relation to the spread of Western popular culture (Iwabuchi 2002a).

116 The *Superflat* exhibition was also cited as an example of this new global cultural influence (see also Swartley 2001).
increase rather than decrease in profit.\footnote{The entertainment/content industry (known in Japan as the ‘culture amusement industry’ constitute 4-5% of Japan’s GDP (approximately $400-$500 billion per year) \cite{Evans2003}.} However, McGray (and others who follow this trend) presumes that there was little cultural influence prior to this point and that Japan’s global cultural influence now is heavily indebted to these forms of visual culture.\footnote{In fact, this presumption negates how Japan’s cultural involvement in media globalisation has been discussed (in Japanese and Western discourses) since at least the 1980s \cite{Iwabuchi2002b, p. 451}. Initially these discourses were focussed on the export of technology (hardware) from Japan, it then shifted to focus on the content industries (software), such as animation and gaming characters.} Yet McGray’s concept of GNC also draws attention to the neo-Orientalist ‘soft nationalism’ emerging in these discourses \cite{Iwabuchi2002b, p. 452}. Japan was presented as the model for the future, influencing culture globally through Japanisation \cite{Iwabuchi2002a, p. 31}. There was interest in utilising the cool cache of Japanese popular culture to assert a ‘new’ identity for Japan, or at least to emphasise Japanese popular culture as a marker of national-cultural identity \cite{Japan advised to promote “Gross National Cool” as foreign policy 2004; see also Iwabuchi 2002b, p. 453}. This nationalism occurred at the level of popular media discourse like McGray’s, but also as part of the ever-increasing proliferation of state-sanctioned rhetoric and institutionalisation which accompanied the export of anime, manga and computer games and its success in a market dominated by products from the United States \cite{Okada1996}. Therefore this discourse on Japan’s cultural power remains caught up in the conventional binary relationship of power between Japan and the West.

Cultural critics, such as Okada Toshio, have interpreted the process of Japanisation as an inverse manifestation of Japan’s own yearning for the West. This desire is expressed through the consumption of popular culture, and thus Japanisation is presented as evidence of Japan’s symbolic cultural power. Iwabuchi \cite{2002b} challenges these arguments by criticising the easy celebration of Japan’s cultural influences as a narcissistic and ‘soft nationalism’ that ignores the ambivalence on what constitutes the yearned for Japaneseness \cite[pp. 459-65]{Iwabuchi 2002a, p. 268}.

Okada’s argument at least serves to remind us that a sense of yearning for a particular country evoked through the consumption of cultural commodities is inevitably a monological illusion since it is little concerned with the complexity of “real” culture \cite{Iwabuchi2002a, p. 268}.

Iwabuchi questions whether the symbolic power attributed to the yearning for ‘Tokyo Cool’ and the consumption of these products necessarily evokes a distinctly Japanese way of life, or an
appeal to a set of cultural values. He argues that ‘americanisation’ (particularly during the Cold War) used the mass media and consumer culture to disseminate ideas of Western life as modern, affluent, open and democratic. In contrast, the Japaneseness of anime is not determined by a perception of being ‘Made in Japan’, nor is it related to the materiality or quality of the product, but rather it is due to the widely circulated symbolic images of Japan. In this way Iwabuchi remains sceptical of the emphasis on anime as articulating a distinctive Japaneseness, because its international appeal is based on its ability to mask or erase tangible traces of Japaneseness and to articulate non-specific cultural identities.119

What becomes apparent in the discourses surrounding the cultural capital of Japan in the 1990s is a critical transformation in how these forms are identified as Japanese in contrast to their initial export in the 1960s. Initially exported Japanese television programs disguised their cultural origins, whereas in the 1990s the cultural capital of being ‘Made in Japan’ was increasingly emphasised. This change represents a transformation in the symbolic value and meaning of

119 In contrast, Anne Allison proposes that the reasons for the success or failure of anime texts, such as Sailor Moon, in the United States is more an issue of marketing strategy rather than a result of cultural translation (2000a). Therefore, Allison is critical of marketing strategies that persist in disguising the Japaneseness of texts when, she argues, there is an increasing awareness that anime and manga are from Japan (see also Price 2001). Allison argues that new audiences familiar with Japanese anime may be prepared to accept a greater range of anime and manga products being imported, not just those products that are deemed to be easily translatable by marketers. After interviewing fans Allison declares that anime audiences are attracted to the difference of the texts and their familiarity. Furthermore, Allison argues that the capitalist impulse drives products, such as Pokemon, which influences the pervasiveness of their consumption. De Boer (2004) also argues that the surge of interest in Japan in the early 2000s builds on a familiarity with the texts, structures and aesthetics of anime and manga. The audiences who grew up with television and video anime in the 1980s consume these texts (see also Craig 2000, p.: 5). In other publications Allison (2000b) indicated that cultural transatlatability might have been a more decisive issue: Allison argued that Sailor Moon was not as successful as The Mighty Morphin Power Rangers because it was too different and untranslatable. The girl hero was considered to be ‘too girly’ by audiences in the United States. Too girly, in the sense that the girl-hero differed from the perceived codes of male-hero characters. Yet Allison also argues (2000a, pp. 82, 6) that while Sailor Moon included explicit signs of its Japanese production within the texts, such as signs, places and activities it was very successful in France, Italy, Spain, Netherlands, Thailand, Hong Kong, and Canada. Thus she concludes that different marketing strategies influenced the reception of Sailor Moon within these sites, rather than issues of cultural translatability. Shiraishi (2000) takes a middle position, arguing that Doraemon, an immensely popular manga and anime text in Japan, was popular in places with established comic market and distribution systems such as Italy and France but not in United States. This was due to a combination of cultural and market barriers. Doraemon was considered too different to the American comic tradition and did not conform to the conventional media content convergence between film, television and music. At the time, comics were not included into this network. Furthermore, there was a lack of manga literacy among audiences on which Doraemon was heavily reliant in Japan, and in the United States there was a clear distinction made between adult and child markets. Thus Shiraishi emphasises the importance of the relationship between the introduced text and the established comic market structure and audiences in relation to success of anime.
‘Made in Japan’.

When cultural products such as Atom Boy and Speed Racer were circulated in the United States in the 1960s, their origins were deliberately disguised in order to disassociate them from any negative images of Japan as the producer of cheap trinkets and as a wartime imperialist (Ahn 2001; Allison 2000a, 2003, p. 70; Iwabuchi 2002b, p. 449). Disguising the origins of products continued during the 1980s, including explicit marketing strategies based on minimising the visible cultural origins of anime texts (De Boer 2004). However this cultural effacement was due to a general awareness that ‘non-Japanese’ looking goods performed better in export markets, and a concern over the cultural translatability of products, rather than an association with a negative image of Japan. Many texts were deliberately remade with the presumption that this would make them more accessible to an international audience (Allison 2000b). Concern about cultural translation was not only a marketing strategy: the creators of texts also believed that anime was so embedded in Japanese cultural particularities that its success in foreign markets was often considered mystifying.

Thus the success of anime and manga in foreign markets has been linked to their cultural ‘neutrality’ and cultural transportability (Iwabuchi 2002a, p. 33). These are what Iwabuchi refers to as ‘culturally odourless’ commodities (p. 28). Cultural odour refers to the conscious recognition of the country of origin at the point of consumption.

Any product has the cultural imprint of the producing country, even if it is not recognized as such, I would suggest that the major audiovisual products Japan exports could be

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120 This cultural erasure continued into the 1990s; for example, when Mighty Morphin Power Rangers was first circulated in 1993, its Japanese origin was often unknown. The Japanese-made sequences from the original Ō rangers (Oh Rangers) text (the 1975 version was called Go Ranger, Five Rangers) when the rangers were masked were interplayed with live action shots set in a United States High School and the show was renamed The Mighty Morphin Power Rangers. Its popularity was attributed to its flexible translatability and because the Japanese origins could be (largely) effaced (Allison 2000b).

121 For example, even while acknowledging the success of particular manga and anime texts in foreign markets, Osamu Tezuka remained adamant that some anime and manga texts were so embedded in Japanese culture they would be culturally untranslatable (Osamu Tezuka’s in Schodt 1986, p. 10). Similar sentiments were still being expressed in 2000 in relation to the mixed reception of the popular Japanese manga Doraemon in the United States (Shiraishi 2000). Shiraishi argues that the reason for the mixed reception of Doraemon was due to the strong comic traditions in the United States. However, since other manga and anime have been successful in the United States Shiraishi’s argument is not so convincing.

122 Iwabuchi uses the culturally odourless in preference to culturally neutral, because he argues all products have a cultural imprint even if they are not recognised.
better characterized as the “culturally odorless” three C’s: consumer technologies (such as VCRs, karaoke, and the Walkman); comics and cartoons (animation); and computer/video games. I use the term cultural odor to focus on the way in which cultural features of a country of origin and images or ideas of its national, in most cases stereotyped, way of life are associated positively with a particular product in the consumption process. Any product may have various kinds of cultural association with the country of its invention. Such images are often related to exoticism, such as the image of the Japanese samurai or the geisha girl. Here, however, I am interested in the moment when the image of the contemporary lifestyle of the country of origin is strongly and affirmatively called to mind as the very appeal of the product, when the “cultural odor” of cultural commodities is evoked (p. 27).

Iwabuchi argues that cultural odor is strongly associated with the racial and bodily images of the country of origin and in anime these markers are erased or softened (p. 28). Iwabuchi’s point is that the characters do not look Japanese; rather they are mukokuseki (lacking nationality) because their racial/ethnic characteristics are erased. What this means is that although consumers may be aware that anime text is made in Japan, that does not necessarily transpire into the communication of Japanese ‘bodily odour’ (p. 34). Despite the weakly analysed issues regarding the presence of racial and ethnic markers, Iwabuchi’s concept is still a useful frame through which to consider the complex relations of cultural identity in global flows because Iwabuchi reveals the paradox of deploying cultural odourlessness as a marker of national-cultural identity.123 That is, he identifies the essence of odourlessness. Thus mukokuseki becomes utilised as another form of strategic hybridism. Japan’s ability to domestic foreign influences and disguise cultural origins is emphasised as the critical component of its successful export of cultural products. Paradoxically, in this process of being culturally odourless, the ability to be cultural transportable and translatable is considered to be a marker of Japaneseeness.124

123 For example, he simplifies the concept of racial markers and coding within anime and manga texts (Black 2003). Another limitation with Iwabuchi’s research is that it tends to focus on the production and distribution of popular culture, rather than examining the actual consumption and meaning-making processes of consumption (see Hjorth 2005). Research into the consumption of anime outside of Japan suggests that the quality and complexity of the texts is a critical attraction for fans (Norris 2000).

124 Toshiya Ueno supports this argument that the Japaneseeness of Japanimation exists within its mukokuseki qualities: ‘Japanimation is defined by the stereotype of Japan as an image of the future. The West is seduced and attracted by the model on the one hand, while on the other hand the model of Japan is looked down upon rather than envied by the West… I think the stereotype of the Japanese, which I would like to call “Japanoid” for not actually Japanese, exists neither inside nor outside Japan. This image functions as the surface or rather the interface controlling the relation between Japan and the other’ (Ueno & Gerow). Thus, there is an inherent contradiction because Japaneseeness is only found in erasure of Japaneseeness, or in the representation of a virtual Japan: ‘If it is indeed the case that the Japaneseeness of Japanese animation derives, consciously or unconsciously, from its erasure of physical signs of Japaneseeness, is not the Japan that Western audiences are at long last coming to appreciate, and even yearn for, an animated, race-less and culture-less, virtual version of “Japan”?‘ (Iwabuchi, p. 33).
Research into the consumption of *anime* supports Iwabuchi’s arguments: Western consumers do not always identify *anime* specifically, or primarily, as Japanese. In contrast, the evidence suggests that while fans may consume texts with some techno-Orientalist desires for Japan, they are largely consumed because they offer something different to ‘mainstream’ popular culture (Norris 2000). Furthermore, while *anime* can have codes and markers from Japanese culture it can also articulate a global resonance and offer fans a site of alternate imaginings (Napier 2001a, p. 242). Napier argues that *anime* is popular because it offers a complexity that fans perceive is not present in Western media productions. In this way *anime* is identified as culturally different in the sense that it is ‘not mainstream’ and ‘non-American’ rather than being categorised as Japanese. Both Napier and Norris emphasise how *anime* offers fans a liberating space to construct new and alternative identities through consumption. Anne Allison (2000a; 2003) also argues that the global cultural power of *anime* is not necessarily associated with a Japanese way of life, but on consumers’ ability to construct imaginary worlds, detached from specific times and places, in the process of consumption. These imaginary worlds are also constructed through interactive methods of consumption as well as the multimedia platforms of the texts (2003). It is this pliability of place and identity, what Allison refers to as a ‘playscape’. The playscape defines the polymorphousness of the open-ended texts which becomes the critical point of attraction for consumers. Furthermore, while the predominance of the *kawaii* (cute) aesthetic has been identified with Japanese culture (Kinsella 1995; McVeigh 1996, 2000), the aesthetic of cuteness is not limited to Japan and can be identified in other cultures (Brophy 1994; Harris 2001). While the cultural meanings and practices of cute may differ between Japan and the West, it can be argued that there is also a resonance of familiarity (particularly with

125 Alternatively, in Asia *anime* and *manga* are consumed because they are considered to offer an alternative/localised culture that is different to the West (Allison cited in Norris, p. 265).

126 Napier does insist on the difference of *anime* as ‘non-American’ and Japanese, even while proclaiming how it offers diverse identities for consumption within the texts (see 2001b). What Napier refers to as Western is simplified to generic and essentialised Hollywood media productions; whereas, *anime* is perceived by fans as marked by complexity, quality, innovation and appreciated for its aesthetics (Napier 2001a, pp. 249-53). However, it is important to point out that Napier limits her analysis to a small range of genres and texts, and as Craig Norris points out, not all *anime* texts could be considered high quality or complex (Craig 2000, p. 6).

127 Allison’s concept of playscape is derived from Appadurai’s concept of contemporary globalisation being constituted by a series of ‘scapes’ (Appadurai 1996, p. 33).

128 While Kinsella and McVeigh disagree (see Kinsella & McVeigh 1997) on the historical presence and the socio-cultural function of cute both scholars emphasise its particular ubiquity in Japanese culture (Kinsella 1995; McVeigh 1996).
the export of *anime* and *manga* in which the cute aesthetic is prominent) which is potentially another transportable aesthetic in the polymorphous playscape that contributes to its appeal.

Therefore it is not clear that the consumption of *anime* or *manga* evokes a particular idea of Japan or that the identification of ‘Made in Japan’ is necessarily the point of attraction in consumption. While Japan may be identified by the symbolic capital of its cultural ‘coolness,’ that capital could be understood as expressive of a more generic cultural difference rather than as a specific Japanese-ness. At the same time it is clear that cultural odourlessness and the hybridity of Japanese culture have been utilised strategically to assert the cultural uniqueness of Japan. In contrast to the clearly disguised and unknown origins of early exports of *anime*, the origins of Superflat are widely known. In fact the Japanese origins were a deliberate and key part of the presentation package – it was explicitly emphasised in the catalogue as well as in subsequent exhibitions such as Murakami’s Boston exhibition, *Made in Japan* (2001). However Allison’s argument about the polymorphousness of *anime* suggests that this type of overt packaging, or conversely its deliberate erasure, is not so necessary for, or desired by, Western consumers who have consumed *anime* forms as part of their own cultural experience.

This chapter section has traced the emergence of Japan’s discourses of identity in a global context, particularly since the post-war period. The key issue that has been identified is the endurance of the construction of a Japan/West binary which mutually informs and demarcates the Other as different. This identity has permeated into discourses on the export of Japanese popular culture to the extent that cultural translatability became demarcated as a national-cultural trait. A key problem in the study of Japan is how to retain the sense of its cultural particularity while acknowledging the convergences and overlaps with other cultures emerging from global encounters, and to recognise the processes of commodification and nationalism in which the expression of cultural differences are embedded. It has been identified that the danger is that erasure of difference may result in Japan’s identity being become subsumed in a homogenous globality (Clammer 2001, pp. 52-3). Therefore this thesis recognises the importance of acknowledging Japan’s shared characteristics with other cultures as well as its particularism, without conceiving of these as binary positions.129

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129 Sugimoto (2000) also considers Japanese-ness to be comprised of multiple identities. Rather than focusing on international relations, he emphasises the ‘intranational’ variations of ethnic and cultural relations (p. 97). This view also enables him to
Superflat articulates this flexibility, operating as a specific Japanese art expression, acknowledging its hybridity, as well as being consumed as a non-specific geo-cultural aesthetic. What Murakami does is to re-articulate the *mukokusekiness* of Superflat, as an expression of hybrid flexibility, as the cultural odour of Japaneseness. This process of odourising and de-odourising the identity of Superflat is constructed during the process of its global circulation and is formed in relation to existing discursive imaginings of Japanese identity. What makes this process even more complicated is that like the inclusion of 7-11 and McDonalds as part of the landscape and culture of contemporary Japan (Azuma 2001; Iwabuchi 2002a, p. 53), *anime* is now part of the landscape and culture of Western countries, such as the United States. Thus the reterritorialised hybrid identity of Superflat can also become deterritorialised as part of a process of glocalised consumption.

The discourse on the identity of Japanese art since the late nineteenth century, when the Western concept of fine art (*bijutsu*) was first adopted, parallels this discussion on Japanese cultural identity and provides a critical historical background for the emergence of Superflat art, particularly its location in Japanese discourses on art. The next section, *Nihon Bijutsu – What is ‘Japanese’ about Japanese Art*, will examine more specifically how Japan’s earlier global interactions have informed the current debates and ideas on the identity of Japanese art.

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challenge *nihonjinron* and to propose that just because particular patterns are identified in Japan and often presented as unique to Japan, it does not mean that they are not present in any less prevalent way in other cultural sites (p. 100).
2.3 **NIHON BIJUTSU - WHAT IS ‘JAPANESE’ ABOUT JAPANESE ART?**

Twentieth century discourse on Japanese art is characterised by tension and argument on what is considered to be the original and authentic expression of Japanese cultural identity and subjectivity. Put simply, these are debates about what is *Japanese* about Japanese art. Superflat can therefore be understood as just one position among many on the aesthetic expression and construction of a national-cultural identity for Japanese art. Debates on the identity of Japanese art emerged as a result of Japan’s modern encounter with the West in the late nineteenth century, the importation of the concept and structures of fine art (*bijutsu*), and its subsequent impact on the meaning, structures and values of art in Japan. Before this time Japan did not have a concept or term for art. Therefore the Meiji period (1868-1912) is critical not only because it marks the formation of a unified national-cultural identity in relation to Japan’s global geo-economic/political position, but also because this ideology was intimately connected to the origins of *bijutsu*. The origins of *bijutsu* continue to form the basis for an ongoing conflict contemporary Japanese artists experience between ‘looking outward and returning to the domestic’ while seeking the cultural authenticity of their expression (Matsui 2001a, p. 47).

There is a particular tension arising from the difficulties that were experienced in transplanting the (Western) concept of art into Japan, including the classification, training and exhibition of art, without the European post-Romantic concept of individual subjectivity and the ideology of original expression. This gap has been emphasised when referring to Japan’s modernity (and the subsequent importation of *bijutsu*) as ‘incomplete.’

This chapter section sets out a selection of twentieth century discourses on Japan’s aesthetic identity. These demonstrate that the interests of the Japanese state, as well as the interests of capitalism in global interactions, have influenced the relationship between art and national identity. These forces have worked together to construct a cohesive imagined national identity in Japan and to distinguish this particular identity in international exhibitions and art markets. This self-conscious construction of Japan’s national identity has occurred in a global context, and is a

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130 The problems with defining Japan’s experience of modernity as ‘incomplete’ or ‘alternative’ is that it tends to normalise and centralise the Western concept and process of modernity, presenting all other experiences as deviations to this. Alternatively, what can be stressed are the points of similarity as well as differences that have been experienced in Japan’s modernity (see Tomii 1999).
product of Japan’s modern self-consciousness. Furthermore, the exchange and interaction between Japanese and Western visual forms in the late nineteenth century and in the post-war period blur the boundaries between what can be conceived as Japanese and Western, even though this mutability is not always acknowledged in discourses. This chapter section is divided into two key parts: the Meiji period examining kindai bijutsu (modern art) and the post-war section mapping the discourses of gendai bijutsu (contemporary art). In presenting a chronological historical overview of art discourses in Japan, and the representation of Japanese art globally, this section establishes a clear context for the issues of artistic identity that contemporary Japanese artists continue to negotiate, including Murakami.

2.3.1 BIJUTSU IN THE MEIJI PERIOD: HISTORICAL CONTEXT FOR NIHON BIJUTSU (JAPANESE ART)

This section identifies the cultural, political, social and economic conditions of the Meiji period which were critical in shaping the current discourses on contemporary art in Japan, and Japanese art globally, in the twentieth century. One of the ongoing tensions in Japanese art is the struggle over the meaning bijutsu since it was codified and institutionalised in the late nineteenth century.

Westernisation and Modernisation

The Meiji period involved significant transformations in Japanese culture based on the selective adoption of modern Western institutions and material culture. At the same time the modern concept of the nation (kokka) was formed. The concept of national identity was not lacking prior to the Meiji period, but there was a deliberate and structured effort to transform Japan into a modern nation-state, including the construction of a unified national identity (Guth 1996b; Morris-Suzuki 1998). This ‘imagined community’ of the nation-state was constructed around the concept of national cohesion and distinction from other nation-states.

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131 There are of course interactions and exchanges before and in-between these periods. Tessa Morris-Suzuki has identified and divided Japan’s participation in globalisation into three distinct phases: the late nineteenth century, the post-war period and the 1990s (1998, pp. 161-84). This thesis will follow Morris-Suzuki’s divisions. These two periods will be utilised as points of focus because they echo key points within art discourses and provide a useful framework to locate Murakami’s emergence in the mid-nineties.

132 It is arguable that there was no discursive concept of the Japanese nation before this time (Ivy 1995, p. 4), but the post-Meiji is distinct in its adoption of the modern Western concept of the nation-state.
During the late nineteenth and early twentieth century significant changes took place in the way that Japan conceived of itself in relation to the global structure. There was a change from a view in which China dominated Japan’s construction of itself (see Pollack 1986), to one in which the West dominated. By the 1890s this Western dominance was not just related to trade and political power but also included a way of structuring and ordering knowledge based on European scientific, education, media and governance models (Morris-Suzuki 1998, pp. 162-3, 168; Tomooka, Kanno & Kobayashi 2002, p. 49).

As a ‘non-Western’ nation participating in the international hegemonic hierarchy, the modern Japanese nation-state had an ontological dilemma: it had the contradictory task of constructing and reinforcing an internal cohesive national identity, while also seeking to participate on equal terms politically, economically and militarily with other nations. The popular slogan wakin yōsai (Japanese spirit, Western technology), adopted by the government, expressed this desire to simulate Western material conditions while also retaining a sense of ‘Japanese’ essence. What this slogan expresses is the complex dualism operating in Japan’s modernity. Firstly, there was a desire to shift away from the feudal structure to adopt Western economic and military practices and industries in order for Japan to be able to compete politically, economically and technologically with other nations. Simultaneously, selective conventions of the past were preserved in order to distinguish Japanese culture internationally.

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133 While Japan had retained limited contact with Dutch traders throughout the Edo period (see Screech 1996), there was increasing pressure on Japan to open its ports to further trade from the Dutch as well as from France, America and Britain. This series of pressures exerted on Japan, resulted in a shift in foreign policy and the forced acceptance of unfair trade treaties (Jansen 1988). While the ‘opening’ of Japan is commonly identified in relation to the arrival of Commodore Perry’s ships in 1853, prior to this time Japan had already experienced a series of internal debates on foreign policy (Beasley 1984).

134 Wakin yōsai became a common slogan in Meiji Japan. It was adapted from a slogan used since the Muromachi period (late 14th—16th C), wakin kansai (Japanese spirit, Chinese knowledge) and the late Edo phrase tōyō dōshoku seiyō geijutsu (Eastern virtues, Western skills) (Rosenfield 2001 165). During the Meiji period, when Japan adopted a rapid program of military and technological transformation, importing and adopting Western technology and political, economic and educational institutions (including art), Befu (2001) contends there was an auto-Orientalist impulse in play with this slogan: the acceptance and internalisation of the Western ‘self-denigrating’ Orientalist view, characterising Tokugawan Japan as ‘backward,’ was also ‘superficial’ (p. 127). Wakin yōsai demonstrates how the sense of Japanese identity was retained during this time. By the mid-Meiji period (1890s) there was a reassertion of a positive sense of Japanese identity, particularly in regards to a sense of cultural uniqueness and by the late Meiji period Japan’s industrialisation and militarisation were viewed confidently; this was supported by Japan’s victories in the Sino-Japan war (1894-1895) and the Russo-Japan war (1904-1905), reinforcing Japan’s sense of self-identity within a global geopolitical space.
The building of a modern society requires that non-Western places forget their past in favor of alien (modern) institutions and ideas, and yet that past must be celebrated to establish the commonality and goals of the nation-state as an organism distinct from others (Tanaka 1994, p. 25).

Thus, as Stefan Tanaka points out, the concept of tradition is formed in complicity with modernity: the rational order in which the past is conceived becomes transposed into a concept of ‘tradition’ and counterposed to the ‘modern,’ and is reframed in relation to notions of progress, development and nostalgia (see also Vlastos 1998).

Naoki Sakai (1997) also identifies the dilemma non-Western nations experience in the process of modernisation: that in order to resist the West the non-West is forced to modernise (pp. 99-105). Thus modernisation is accompanied by the adoption of Western concepts, including unified national identity and the cultural institutions of education and fine arts. This modern identity then simultaneously becomes a site of resistance for Japan, whereby it can also express cultural uniqueness, including the celebration of pre-modern forms. Therefore, modernisation provides the discursive tools of resistance as well as compliance to Western (modernist) hegemony. The difficulty with this situation is that the formation and subsequent acceptance of the categorisation as a cultural Other becomes dependent on the existence of the West, and therefore it continues to centralise Western modernity as a universal condition; against which Japan’s modernity becomes defined. Thus it is difficult for Japan to challenge Western hegemony if it is still caught up in Western discourses, like nationalism (Ivy 1995, p. 9).

Although an initial insistence on clearly delineated cultural otherness can constitute the first step in the recognition of historical domination and orientalism, it can hardly stand as the final step in a truly critical anthropology (or history, or literary analysis). Indeed, it is increasingly crucial to recognize – with as much complexity and delicacy as possible, but still to recognize – the coincident modernity of Japan and the West. And that recognition entails rejecting the fetishized simplicities of sheer cultural relativism: what are imaged as the specificities of Japan or Japanese culture can never be unilaterally deployed as unexamined critical tools to undo presumed western hegemonies (Ivy 1995, p. 8 italics in original).

The International Exhibitions and World Fairs of the late nineteenth century are a good example of how this dilemma was played out in relation to art. During the early Meiji period, through Japan’s representations at World Fairs, there was a conflict between Japan’s desire to represent

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135 Sakai challenges scholars to seek new forms of resistant subject formations beyond the complicity of the particularity-universalism dilemma that has centralised the West as a universal.
its modernity to the world - its economic, technological, military and cultural parity with the West, and the desire to emphasise its cultural distinctiveness. In relation to art, this meant that a dialogue with past conventions was sought to distinguish Japanese art from Western modes and concepts of artistic expression; past conventions became a means through which a sense of cultural distinctiveness could be articulated. However there was a conflict between the ways in which the West saw Japan, and the ways in which Japan wanted to present itself to the world. In Japan many of the pre-Meiji conventions were de-valued under ‘westernisation’ policies, and there was a desire to emphasise Japan’s new modernisation through the exhibition of Western-style paintings. Art was a critical cultural symbol for the expression of Japan’s new state image (Tomooka, Kanno & Kobayashi 2002, p. 49). It was utilised as a commodity for export purposes as well as to demonstrate Japan’s technical modernisation, and was deployed as a marker of cultural difference in order to distinguish Japan internationally (Guth 1996b, p. 17).

The common theme of the World Fairs was progress, and displays of other cultures became a mutual means of reinforcing the Western concept of ‘civilisation’ (Hendry 2000, p. 50). For example, the cultural hierarchies distinguishing fine art from craft was adopted by Japan in order to demonstrate its cultural parity with the ‘civilised’ West. The primary identification of Japan, by the West, at these exhibitions related to esteem of Japan’s technical skills in art and architecture. While there was an increasing development in the Western connoisseurship of

136 For example, at the 1893 Chicago Columbian Exhibition, the Japanese exhibit was one of the most expensive displays and was designed to demonstrate Japan’s advances in modernisation as well as the richness of its domestic art industries (Weston 2004, p. 107).

137 ‘Art’ is used here to refer to the range of cultural forms (both bijutsu and kogei (crafts)) that were exhibited during this period.

138 A key measure in the determination of what was considered a ‘less civilised’ culture was technology. In terms of presentation, cultures that were deemed ‘more developed’ exhibited machinery, technological products and fine art, whereas the cultures that were deemed ‘less developed’ tended to be represented through live exhibits of people usually practising applied arts (or crafts). Thus there was a conceptual hierarchy underpinning the exhibitions, where the display of art symbolised a ‘civilised’ culture and technology demonstrated ‘progress’; whereas, the display of artefacts equalled an ethnographic representation of what were considered to be ‘premodern’ cultures (Hendry 2000, p. 215-6). This hierarchy is based on the nineteenth-century Western distinction between aesthetic forms and utilitarian forms: art was exhibited separately in the art museum/gallery; objects displayed in science museums were machine-made goods; and natural history (or ethnographic) museums displayed artefacts from other cultures. As part of its process of modernisation, this distinction between art and artefact was adopted by Japan (Yoshida 1997, p. 21). For example, in 1910 there was concern expressed by the Japanese that their swords and amour were exhibited in the ethnographic gallery in the British Museum because Japan had already demonstrated its military power (as a coloniser) and its technological development. However, at the same time Japanese porcelain, metalwork, lacquer ware and netsuke were exhibited as art in the Asia gallery.
Japanese art (and not just the art created for export) (Benfey 2003), the identification of Japan as a cultural Other persisted (which will be discussed further in this section in relation to how Japanese art was valued at the time by collectors such as Ernest Fenellosa), and was still identified as ‘exotic’ (Conant 1991, p. 88).

The Americans were disappointed that the Japanese visitors wore Western clothes, but were delighted with the aesthetic appeal and skilled workmanship of the art and antiques, and took pleasure in comparing them favourably with the European exhibits [1876 Philadelphia Centennial Exhibition] (Hendry 2000, p. 55).

Hendry proposes that the identification of Japan as exotic and the criticism of the mimicry of Western fashion, and cultural hierarchy that this construction implied, paralleled the increasing fear and suspicion of Japan’s commercial and military successes (p. 59). While Japanese arts such as screen-painting, porcelain, metalwork, lacquer ware and netsuke were evaluated favourably by the Western audiences, the newer forms of Japanese painting (which utilised some Western techniques and materials) and Japanese paintings done in the Western style were less-well received; Hendry also ascribes this to the Western desire for Japan to remain a cultural Other (ibid). However, despite the Western criticism of contemporary Japanese art at these exhibitions, the Meiji government recognised the commodity value, and cultural distinctiveness, of what were considered to be ‘traditional’ Japanese forms. As a result, art objects (including painting, pottery, textiles and lacquer ware) were specially produced according to the contemporary definitions of what constituted traditional aesthetics, in order to cater to the tastes of the Western markets (Harris 1997, p. 142; Hendry 2000, p. 51). At the same time, it was recognised that these objects could also demonstrate Japan’s cultural particularity in a global context (Conant 1991, p. 84). The shift in government practices from the late 1870s demonstrates that the nation-state began to utilise aesthetic identity as a means of developing cultural forms that were specifically Japanese (Tomooka, Kanno & Kobayashi 2002, p. 52). From the 1890s debates focussed on defining and locating the uniqueness of Japanese identity in and outside of Japan (Morris-Suzuki 1998, p. 168). Thus the re-assertion of pre-Meiji art conventions were realised in relation to a self-conscious positioning of Japan in global structures.

In the early Meiji period, in order to bring about this reform in cultural systems, traditional cultures were at first neglected or devalued. There was a tendency to make

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139 The underpinning logic of the fairs was commodity and market flow, not just aesthetic and cultural representation (Hinsley 1991, p. 362). For example, the World’s fairs helped to stimulate domestic Japanese exhibitions and industries, which assisted in improving the quality of export goods and also to expand domestic markets (Conant 1991, pp. 82-4).
direct comparisons based on European aesthetics and methods of expression. As a result, indigenous Japanese works were either discarded as obsolete or labelled as commercial products. Ironically, Japanese antiquities were in great demand in Europe and America during this period and were exported to those countries in large quantities. Belatedly the government became aware of the serious consequences of these exports; at the end of the century, legislation to protect and preserve cultural treasures was gradually put into effect (Tomooka, Kanno & Kobayashi 2002, p. 51).

At this time, two government policies were adopted to distinguish ‘old art’ from ‘export art’. Old art was constructed as the heritage of the nation-state and during this period surveys were set up to identify and rank national treasures (kokubō) in order to ensure they remained protected from sale and export (p. 113). During this period a national museum and the Tokyo School of Fine Arts (Tokyo bijutsu gakkō), currently known as the Tokyo University of Fine Arts and Music (Tokyo geijutsu daigaku), were established. Both these institutions reinforced and promoted the concept of heritage and a lineage for Japanese art, which was supported by the development of an Art Historical narrative in Japanese art. This narrative of a lineage for art was strongly connected to a political ideology that reinforced the expression of national identity (Tanaka 1994, p. 29). Defining a tradition and a lineage for Japanese painting, as a marker of national identity, was a new concept for Japanese art, which superseded the previous categorisation of Japanese painting according to schools and movements (Morioka & Berry

Export art included prints, ceramics, and lacquer ware; these artefacts were created for sale in the United States and Europe. Old art was a description for existing objects that were marked for state protection and conservation (Yiengpruksawan 2001). The policy of protecting old art was the result of the surge of objects that were made available on the domestic market due to the proscription of Buddhism in 1868, the subsequent destruction of monasteries, and samurai, court and military families selling off private collections. Foreigners enthusiastically collected these objects, including Ernest Fenellosa (Benfey 2003). Fenellosa was linked with such groups from 1882-1884, participating in exhibitions and lectures. In 1897 legislation was introduced that established a registry of important works of art as kokuhō. These were published in a catalogue, Histoire de l’art du Japon, for the Paris World Exposition in 1900, which was prepared by Okakura and Kuki Ryūichi (who was the director of the Imperial Museum with which Okakura was closely connected) (Tamamushi 2002, p. 75). This catalogue was critical in establishing the publishing of a canon of Japanese Art History, the basis of which is still followed in the present time in surveys of Japanese art (Yiengpruksawan 2001, p. 114). Yiengpruksawan argues that this canon was implicated with state interests to establish a clearly defined cultural history based on a continuous lineage of artists and art. Furthermore kokuhō was implicit in legitimising a historical lineage of the imperial throne based on chronological classification according to imperial rule. The Western academic adoption of Okakura’s historical narrative in surveys of Japanese art has tended to conclude with the Tokugawan period which, ideologically, was based on the idea that a lineage of ‘pure’ Japanese art ended with the onset of Westernisation (Weston 2004, p. 302).

Okakura Tenshin had a significant influence in developing a lineage for Japanese art that emphasised chronological development and the continuity of an aesthetic ‘essence’ in Japanese art (see note above). The concept of a progressive dialectical developmental art historical model was derived from European epistemologies, particularly Hegel (see Tanaka 1994, pp. 29-31).
[S]ince the late 1880s in Japan…anything in the domain of artistic work and ideas which was not “Western” has been codified as “Japanese”, when even the simplest understanding of premodern art indicates this can never have been a singular nor an integrated entity. To talk about “Japanese” art before the advent of the “Japanese” state in the 1880s and 1890s is as art historically meaningless as it may be ideologically comfortable to blur over the fact that the modern state is essential for its construction (Clark 1998, p. 72).

The European concepts and institutions of art, such as a chronological view of an art lineage and the exhibition practices of museum culture, adopted during this time were a critical component underpinning this image of the unified nation-state. Modern European museum and exhibition practices played a key role in the functioning of the nation-state by presenting what Donald Preziosi refers to as ‘storied space.’

The evolution of the modern nation-state was enabled by the cumulative formation of a series of cultural institutions which pragmatically allowed national mythologies, and the very myth of the nation-state as such, to be vividly imagined and effectively embodied. As an imaginary entity, the modern nation-state depended for its existence and maintenance on an apparatus of powerful (and, beginning in the eighteenth century, increasingly ubiquitous) cultural fictions, principal amongst which were the novel and the museum (Preziosi 1998, p. 508).

Storied space links together subjects and objects and re-presents them in the narrative space created by museums and galleries. Preziosi states that museums established exemplary models for understanding objects as traces, representations, reflections, or surrogates of individuals, groups, nations, and races and of their histories (p. 509). Museums were created as civic spaces for the evocation, fabrication, and preservation of history and social memory. Gallery exhibition, as a discourse of social knowledge and value (Bourdieu 1984), demonstrates the changing social status of art in the Meiji period. The adoption of Western museum display practices, and art historical epistemologies, in Japan therefore reinforced the story of the unified nation. The following section will analyse in more specific detail the importation of the new concept of bijutsu (fine art) that underpinned the new art museum and educational institutions.

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143 John Clark argues that there were in fact many trajectories in new forms of painting at this time, which were linked to previous conventions and were trying to define new grounds for painting. What was introduced with the concept of an art historical lineage was the Western concept of art history as a succession of styles, rather than the accommodation of plural painting movements and schools (Clark 1998, p. 76).
Bijutsu

As stated earlier, part of the Meiji transformation involved changes that were instigated in the classification and management of art and artworks as well as the training of artists, based on European concepts of fine art (Tomooka, Kanno & Kobayashi 2002, p. 51). Painting, calligraphy, sculpture and printmaking were already well-established artistic practices. However, the European post-Romantic idea of painting as an autonomous expression of beauty, and the hierarchical distinction between art and craft, had not yet existed in those terms in Japan (Conant, Steiner & Tomii 1995; Guth 1996b; Moeran 1997; Sokolowski et al. 1989; Weston 2004; Yiengpruksawan 2001). Art was not a separate conceptual category, like the European concept of \textit{l'art pour l'art}. In Japan aesthetic value included both the beauty of form as well as functional value (Moeran 1997, pp. 9-15). Aesthetic forms were recognised by description (paintings, calligraphy, kimono, lacquer ware, poetry, and prose) and by schools (such as Kanō and Tosa) (Tanaka 1994, p. 27). Bijutsu was therefore a constructed definition based on a European concept of art, rather than a direct translation of existing practices and concepts.

We didn’t have the term or the concept of “art” in a modern western sense; we had craft. The main concern had to do with techniques, materials, and decoration in relation to space, architecture and lifestyle (Nanjo in Sokolowski et al. 1989, p. 16).

Once again, Japan’s self-representation at the international exhibitions was critical in relation to the adoption of Western concepts of art in Japan - the first usage of bijutsu is generally credited to the Vienna exhibition catalogue in 1873. The art historian Noriaki Kitazawa defines how bijutsu was translated in the catalogue:

To use \textit{bijutsu} (music, study of picture, the technique to make statues, poetics and so on are called \textit{bijutsu} in the Occident) for the construction of a museum (Kitazawa cited in Sawaragi 1992).\footnote{145}

\textit{Bijutsu} represents a significant shift in the conception of art objects and the hierarchical distinction of painting and sculpture from craft objects, such as prints, lacquer ware and

\footnote{144 Many painters were also calligraphers and calligraphy was a highly valued expressivity (Guth 1996a, 1999; Uyeno 1958; Yiengpruksawan 2001).

145 However, at that time Chinese concepts of art had a greater everyday impact than the European terms that were in vogue (Yiengpruksawan 2001, p. 121).}
ceramics. Accompanying the adoption of *bijutsu* was the importation of public museum and exhibition structures based on European models, which emphasised the individual art object separated from an everyday context. One of the modes of European art historical conventions adopted by the Meiji reforms was the presentation of artworks to the wider public in the form of dedicated exhibition spaces.

However, according to Kitazawa, *bijutsu* is developed from *geijutsu*, which refers to technical skill; thus *bijutsu* retains *geijutsu*’s emphasis on technique and material. Before the Meiji period the term *geijutsu* had been used to refer to the arts more generally (Kitazawa cited in Sawaragi 1992). Fumio Nanjo, a Japanese art historian and curator, describes *geijutsu* as ‘techniques to create something cultural, decorative, or entertaining such as singing, dancing, playing musical instruments, writing poems and painting’ (Nanjo 1991); whereas, *bijutsu* translates literally as ‘technique of beauty’ and is used to refer directly to painting, sculpture and calligraphy (ibid). For Nanjo, the association of *bijutsu* with technique is one of the crucial issues contemporary artists must negotiate, because it has come to refer to making beautiful objects and not ‘revealing introspective visions or addressing intellectual issues’ (ibid). Thus it diverges from a European concept of art, and becomes a challenge for artists who want to work in Western art systems.

This distinction had significant impact: in 1895 at the fourth annual *Naikoku kangyo-haku* (National trade fair) the categories of *bijutsu* and *kōgei* were distinguished and separated (Sawaragi 1992); *kōgei* were excluded from state-sponsored exhibitions until 1927 when they were eventually included as *bijutsu kōgei* (art craft) (Moeran 1997, p. 244). Furthermore, initially *bijutsu* had some reference to the wider arts (including literature and poetry) and included not only paintings and ink drawing but also lacquer ware and other ‘decorative’ arts; however this altered with the official separation of the two categories (Sokolowski et al. 1989, p. 15).

While these types of museums had not existed prior to this period this is not to say public exhibitions were absent from Japanese society (see Kornicki 1994); however, the concept of the individual art object, in the European sense, was not privileged in such displays.

In the late nineteenth century, when Japan participated in the International Exposition in Vienna (1873) and Chicago (1893) the required mode of exhibition was to mount paintings in frames and to display painting with kōgei. Judges evaluated the paintings and prizes were awarded. These practices were eventually adopted domestically transforming the presentation and reception of paintings (Morioka & Berry 1999, p. 18). Morioka and Berry note that most Meiji period *nihonga* painters divided their practices into large-sale works for such juried public exhibitions and into the smaller hanging scroll format for private domestic display (p. 19). The adoption of these Western exhibition practices marked a significant departure from the late Edo period practices of displaying hanging-scroll paintings and calligraphic works in tokonoma, or dedicated painting alcoves, side by side on the walls of shoin and sukaya style rooms as well as in Temples.

This is reinforced by critics who continue to emphasise that the aesthetic value of technique is not just embodied in the material form of objects but also through its metaphysical expression: ‘Appreciation of an artwork was based on an aesthetic life and on acquiring a certain sensibility as well as on acknowledging the time, training and skills – the artisanship – involved. The
Nanjo’s politic is informed by his own support of contemporary art practices and his role as an international curator, and thus he is overtly critical of *kindai bijutsu*.  

**Nihonga and Yōga**

Prior to the ‘full-scale’ transfer of European art methods and the concept of *bijutsu* between the 1860s-1880s, there had been multiple contacts with European art (Clark 1995, p. 258). In line with the government policy of westernisation, development of technical skills in Western drawing and painting was considered to be critical to the development of industry and technology. Consequently, the *kōbu bijutsu gakkō* (Technical Art School) was formed in 1876. Italian instructors, such as Antonio Fontanesi (1818-82), were employed to teach Western painting techniques. Parallel to government policy, Western-style culture became fashionable, including Western-style painting. However, as stated, by the 1880s as part of Japan’s modernisation the accompanying social and political resistances against the westernisation policy included a renewed interest in asserting a Japanese identity, which affected the arts (Weston 2004, p. 27). By 1883 the Technical Art School had closed and the Ministry of Education supported the establishment of a new art school *Tokyo Bijutsu Gakkō* (Tokyo School of Fine Arts) in 1887. This new school, informed by the teachings of Ernest Fenellosa (1853-1908) and his appreciation was not simply confined to objects, but was related to style as a mode of living which results in Formality. Formality helps us to acquire a certain stage of spirit. Art works operate as elements that create a particular space and mood; they were not personal artistic statements and they were not a method of defining meaning and ideas. Our main concern was not to produce or have objects, but to experience daily the different stages of the mind’ (Kohmoto in Sokolowski et al. 1989, p. 15).

150 These issues are more relevant to the chapter section on *gendai bijutsu* and on the value of ornamentation and decoration that is discussed in relation to Japanese aesthetic values in the first section of Chapter Three. They are indicated here to illustrate how there is a continuation of the pejoratively perception of *kindai bijutsu* with technical skill in relation to the philosophies of Western art stressing the conceptual value of art. Of course, there are similar contesations and challenges within the Western art world between the value of technical skill and conceptualism (Carboni 1991; Rousmaniere 2002).

151 Japan’s first contact with European art was during the sixteenth century when the Jesuits introduced (in a limited way) oil-painting techniques. During the Tokugawa period (1600-1867) the Western influence on painting decreased until there was renewed interest generated by Dutch studies (*rangaku*) in the late eighteenth century.

152 Prior to this time, the Tokugawa shogunate had initiated training in mechanical drawing for similar purposes and assigned a Dutch studies scholar (Kawakami Tōgai) to teach samurai, scholars and some Kōnō artists (Conant, Steiner & Tomii 1995, p. 23).

153 Takashina Shūji argues that one of the weaknesses of this first art school had been the utilitarian and ‘art-as-technology’ approach that underpinned it (1987, p. 24). Takashina argues that this philosophy made it difficult for artists practising Western-style painting at this time to achieve artistic independence and maturity.

154 Fenellosa, an American scholar from Boston, arrived in Japan in 1878 to teach political science at Tokyo Imperial University, and it was there that he met Okakura. He lived in Japan until 1890 when he returned to the United States.
pupil Okakura Tenshin (1862-1913),\footnote{Also known as Okakura Kakuzō.} trained artists in conventional Japanese painting techniques and subject matter.\footnote{As early as 1885 the Ministry of Education had formed a committee to establish a new art school, both Fenellosa and Okakura were on the committee. Founded in 1887 the Tokyo School of Fine Arts did not open until 1889 and Okakura was the director from 1890 – 1898 (Conant, Steiner & Tomii 1995, pp. 86-7).} As stated previously, the construction of national-cultural identity in the establishing the new educational and training system for Japanese art, which was created in order to resist the influences of the government’s westernisation policy, was formed as part of the same process using the tools of modernisation. These tools included the concept of national identity and art as an expression of that identity, as well as being more generally influenced by Western art structures, concepts, materials and techniques (Conant, Steiner & Tomii 1995, p. 86).

During this time two parallel codes of painting were formally established and institutionalised: \textit{nihonga}, which translates literally as Japanese painting, and \textit{seiyōga} (\textit{yōga} for short), referring to Western style painting.\footnote{In 1907 national exhibitions were established under the management of the ministry of Education (\textit{Monbushō Bijutsu Tenrankai} – or \textit{Bunten}). These exhibitions supported the official institutionalisation of \textit{nihonga} and \textit{yōga} as parallel canons.} \textit{Nihonga} was a constructed practice that (selectively) collectivised what had previously been plural painting schools under a unitary category as a means to differentiate these practices from \textit{yōga}.

The term [\textit{nihonga}] literally means “Japanese painting” and appears to have been adopted during the 1880s as a means of distinguishing the evolving forms of traditional painting from an increasing body of works employing Western media, format, and modes of representation. The latter works had originally been more neutrally identified as \textit{abura-e} (oil painting), as opposed to \textit{shoga} (calligraphy and painting) or \textit{suiboku-ga} (ink painting) in the native tradition, but the later acquired the politically fraught designation of \textit{yōga} (literally Western painting) (Conant, Steiner & Tomii 1995, p. 14).\footnote{Morioka and Berry (1999, p. 19) cite the initial circulation of the term \textit{nihonga} in 1883, when it appeared in the art magazine \textit{Dainihon Bijutsu Shinpō} (Great Japan art news); however, the term \textit{nihon} was in use by artists before this time. For instance, some \textit{ukiyo} artists in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century used it to distinguish their work from that of the older tradition of \textit{yamato-e}, Japanese-style painting; \textit{yamato-e} was distinguished from \textit{kara-e}, Chinese style painting.}

Thus a variety of Japanese pictorial arts and terms, all in use in 1882, including \textit{kara-e} (Chinese style painting), \textit{wa-e} or \textit{yamato-e} (Japanese style painting), \textit{saiga} (Indian-style drawing), \textit{kanga} Chinese style drawing, and \textit{nihon-e} (Japanese style drawing), were subsumed under the singular term \textit{nihonga} and differentiated from \textit{yōga}. \textit{Nihonga} and \textit{yōga} are best understood as dialectical
concepts dependent on each other for meaning. In practice, Conant argues that outside the institutional structure there were significant amounts of crossover and influence between the two forms (1995, pp. 12, 30). However, the binary institutionalisation of ゆうが and にほんが tends to subsume any difference and variation in and between their practices.

ニホンガ was formally institutionalised with the creation of the 東京美術学校; however, ゆうが was excluded from the curriculum until 1896 when it was established as a separate category. While the origins of ニホンガ are conventionally connected with オカクラ and フェネルソア and the Tokyo School of Fine Art, Ellen Conant argues that it is ‘arbitrary’ to identify ニホンガ solely with フェネルソア and オカクラ because there were many different painting factions at that time advocating for different expressions of Japanese painting and debating how it should proceed. In fact there was much support for Japanese painting; フェネルソア was representative of one group and one view of how Japanese painting could proceed.

Two critical issues emerge in relation to the codification of ニホンガ and ゆうが. First the presumption that there was a ‘revival’ of Japanese painting conventions necessary in relation to the ‘threat’ of westernisation and the popularity of ゆうが. Secondly the political motivations underpinning the formation of a Japanese painting movement implied that ニホンガ was considered to be more expressive of Japan’s modern national identity and painting ‘traditions’, as opposed to ゆうが, or conversely that ゆうが and Western concepts of art were more appropriately aligned with ideas of progress and innovation in relation to the formation of the nation-state. Because ニホンガ incorporates the term 日本 (Japan) implies that it is somehow more Japanese

159 Weston (2004, p. 299) proposes that one of the critical reasons for フェネルソア and オカクラ being commonly presented as the originators of ニホンガ is their successful recognition as public intellectuals in Japan and internationally. Both Conant and Weston are part of the (English language) revisionism of the origins of ニホンガ and フェネルソア’s influence. This re-evaluation on フェネルソア’s role in the establishment of ニホンガ is influenced by revisionist Japanese art discourses, particularly by the art historians Kitazawa Noriaiki and Dōshin Satō (cited in Kikuchi 1999, p. 85).

160 In 1884 フェネルソア and オカクラ founded 風景画会 (Painting Appreciation Society). It emerged from a division in the painting world between the new faction (新派) and the old (旧派). フェネルソア and オカクラ were part of the new faction which wanted to promoted a new innovative form of ニホンガ, in part to counter the influences of Western codes of painting that were becoming dominant at the time, and were critical of 旧派 who wanted to follow the formal styles of the Tokugawa period (Conant, Steiner & Tomii 1995, p. 102). However, there was overlapping membership between the associations and the ‘new’ faction was not necessarily any more ‘progressive’ than the ‘old’ (p. 29). Thus over the 1890s the ニホンガ/ゆうが split was dominated by an old/new factionalism (Takashina 1987, p. 27).
than *yōga* (Rimer 1995). The politicising of these terms was further enhanced by Fenellosa and Okakura’s association of art, in particular *nihonga*, with a collective nationalism.

What Fenellosa promoted was a new school of Japanese painting merging Western materials and techniques with the conventions of the *Kanō* and *Tosa* schools (Weston 2004, p. 7). Fenellosa was critical of Japan’s westernisation policy and the increasing adoption of Western painting practices; he sought to protect what he perceived to be the uniqueness of Japanese painting. Yet at the same time, he criticised existing Japanese painting schools for being stagnant and restrictive. Thus he reduced the multiple painting practices in the Meiji period into three categories: Western painting (*yōga*), traditional painting, or those that practised ‘new’ forms of painting (*nihonga*) (p. 28). For Fenellosa, *nihonga* (modern Japanese painting) was the most appropriate way for Japanese painting to be innovative and at the same time retain the conventions of Japanese painting (p. 7). This ‘third way’ formed the basis of his concept of *nihonga* as a synthesis of convention and innovation, the latter being what Fenellosa considered to be influenced by Western styles and materials. Japanese painting was therefore caught in the paradoxes of modernism. The affirmation of the particularity and uniqueness of Japanese painting as a means of transcending modernity is the product of the same modernisation processes. Hence, John Clark defines *nihonga* as ‘neo-traditional’, arguing that it is ‘the product of a modern situation’ (1998, pp. 73-5) and the consequence of the construction of the modern nation-state.

161 In a further reinforcement of the concept of the Japaneseness of *nihonga*, the Heian (794-1185) period motifs are the most favoured subjects of *nihonga*. The aesthetic connection with the Heian period reproduces the construction of *nihonga*’s national identity because the Heian period is conventionally constructed as the time in which Japan developed a distinct and unique artistic identity as contact with China became limited during this time (Rosenfield 2001, p. 177; Tsuji 2002, pp. 15-6).

162 Fenellosa also advocated for merging Japan’s aesthetic and technical skills of high art painting with its technical skills in ‘applied arts’ or crafts (Weston 2004, p. 29).

163 Clark’s employment of neo-traditional is derived from Hobsbawm’s concept of ‘invented traditions’, in order to differentiate tradition as an ideological invention (cited Clark 1998, p. 73). However, the implication that *nihonga* was invented tends to then de-emphasise how Japanese painting conventions were continued in *nihonga* practices (see Conant, Steiner & Tomii 1995). Furthermore, while Clark (1995) identifies Edo precursors, he argues that Japan’s modernity in art emerges in the Meiji period (p. 257). For Clark, this modernity is determined by art’s autonomy, particularly from the political influences of patrons. However this autonomy can be traced back to the emergence of the commercial market in art that occurred during the Edo period. This situation gave rise to the Edo Eccentrics, who also sought an innovative art ‘revitalising’ painting conventions and including Western styles and subjects (Rosenfield, Cranston & Richard 1999). Thus while Clark revises Japan’s modernity as particular and distinct from Western modernity, he still emphasises the Meiji period as Japan’s modernity and does not examine prior examples of artists seeking to synthesise older conventions with new forms.
The ‘traditions’ that Fenellosa promoted as a revitalisation were selectively based on his ideas about what constituted the uniqueness and quality of Japanese art. However, Fenellosa’s reductive ideology was formed by using Western concepts of art (p. 44), particularly the demarcation of cultural difference as an expression of originality (Karatani 1994, pp. 33-4). Fenellosa believed Japanese art to be expressive of spiritual values with a close affinity to nature. In this way, he constructed Japan as a cultural Other, an alternative to Western rationalism and the material conditions of modernisation. Fenellosa emphasised the potential of nihonga as a national expression - a means through which Japan could assert its cultural particularity and attract international attention (Weston 2004, p. 27). However, while Fenellosa stressed the uniqueness of Japanese aesthetic expression, he also believed that all art could be measured by a universal standard (p. 264). He implied that a ‘revival’ of Japanese painting was initiated when it was already a ‘vital tradition’ supported by the established painting associations (Conant, Steiner & Tomii 1995, p. 12).

Okakura’s aim was different to Fenellosa; he had a more global intention for art. While he

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164 Fenellosa was selective in what he considered to be the best examples of Japanese art and he ignored ukiyo-e woodblock prints, until he realised their value for European artists (Benfey 2003). This distinction continues even in more recent Western histories of Japanese art, such as Richard Lane (1978) and Joan Stanley-Baker (1984), where the development of ukiyo-e prints are considered to be distinct from the historical development of painting traditions. Fenellosa’s bias was also towards the painting traditions of the Kanō school, and he was critical of other forms of painting, such as literati (bunjin painting of the middle-late Tokugawa periods) (Varley 2000, p. 206). Similarly, Fenellosa rejected yōga because he pejoratively thought it mimicked European styles, even though his own intention for Japanese painting included the adoption of some Western techniques, and was conceived in Hegelian terms.

165 However, Fenellosa’s knowledge of European modern art was also quite limited (Weston 2004, pp. 5-6).

166 Collectors from the United States, such as Ernest Fenellosa, had additional motives in emphasising the aesthetic and spiritual values of Japanese art, and Japan as a culture that valued beauty, nature and skill rather than mass production, was a means by which to distinguish their collections from any commercial imperatives (Benfey 2003). During the height of Japonisme (in the 1870s and 1880s) the distinction between art and commercialism blurred. The Japanese goods that were highly popular in the West were products of mass production and the merchant industry (although, in an inversion of conventional the Western hierarchical values between art and commodity goods, the acquisition of these goods gave elite status to the bourgeois consumers who purchased them). This conceptual shift, emphasising the aesthetic and spiritual values of lacquer ware, pottery, textiles and prints, all previously considered ‘non-art’ objects, also coincided with the British arts and crafts movement.

167 Thus, Fenellosa’s rhetoric closely mirrored the objectives of the Meiji government in situating Japan within the contemporary geo-political global structure. As well as university level, Fenellosa and Okakura’s vision for Japanese art included the reformation of art education in schools (Weston 2004, p. 29).

168 In this way, Fenellosa sought to establish connections between Japanese art, Chinese art and other Western practices.
emphasised *nihonga* as a synthesis like Fenellosa, encouraging the inclusion of Western techniques for rendering spatial depth and light effects, his overall political intention was to assert a pan-Asian aesthetic identity (Okakura 1973 [1904]). Within this pan-Asianism, Okakura centralised Japan as Asia’s great power, and countered this to the West (Morris-Suzuki 1998, p. 170). For Okakura, Japan was the model for the rest of Asia because of its history of assimilation, including other Asian cultures and the West. Okakura’s aesthetic vision included the strategic integration of Western elements and concepts in order to ‘revive’ an Asian spirit and preserve the cultural uniqueness of Japan against its ‘degradation and extinction through Westernisation’ (Weston 2004, p. 230).\(^{169}\)

Throughout the twentieth century *nihonga* has continued this connection to Japan’s global national identity so that its status in Japan has been transformed accordingly. In the pre-Second World War period *nihonga* became associated with Japan’s nationalistic and colonial activities.\(^{170}\)

In the post-war period, *nihonga* lost favour as Western art theories became increasingly influential (Murakami 2000a, pp. 17-9). In the 1960s and 1970s it again became a symbol of cultural origins and national identity; whilst at the same time, *yōga* lost popularity as *gendai bijutsu* artists and critics sought a more contemporary expression for Japanese art that was not so explicitly reliant on the styles of modern Western art (Tomii 1999, 2004a). Matsui (1999c, pp. 22-3) argues that Murakami is careful to separate Superflat from the previous representations of *nihonga* as a ‘false emblem’ of Japanese national identity. Certainly, Murakami does not present Superflat as a new form of *nihonga*, despite his training in *nihonga*, and his contemporary work is not acknowledged as such by the *dantai* (although, this has potential to be an area of future research on Murakami). However, Murakami’s rejection of the ‘colonial’ institution of *bijutsu*, whilst simultaneously utilising Western art markets, suggests that the nationalism of Superflat is a continuation of the modern debates between *nihonga* and *yōga* as expressions of a ‘culturally

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\(^{169}\) Okakura presented subtle variations on his vision for Japanese painting outside of Japan as compared to his discourses within Japan. In the West he tended to emphasis a simplified dichotomy in Japanese painting between traditional and Western forms of painting. Thus he played to the Western pejorative image of *yōga* as imitative and traditional painting as an expression of the uniqueness of Japanese identity (Weston 2004, p. 302). However, in Japan he was more subtle, dividing painting into three categories: traditional (which he decried as stagnant), *yōga*, and a hybrid form of *nihonga* which was intended to revitalise painting conventions (p. 230).

\(^{170}\) Okakura’s text, *The Ideals of the East* (1973 [1904]), was appropriated by the nationalists in the pre-war period to privilege Japan as the bringer of modernity to Asia as part of the Great Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere discourse (*dai-kō kohei-seki*) (Karatani 1994, p. 35).
authentic' Japanese identity.

[T]he concept of super-flat is called upon variously as something that already existed in Japanese culture, as something that would surpass preceding theories, as something that would surpass all Euro-American visual art practices and theories. The concept of super-flat, as long as it is articulated within such as web of relations, is not only postmodern but also very modern in its consciousness of the historical and the geographical (Otori 2003, p. 102).

An early dictionary of art terms *Bijutsu jiten* (1914) highlights the resistance *yōga* painters expressed against *nihonga* as the embodiment of a national-cultural essence and their work being categorised as Western:

*Nihonga*. Along with Chinese painting, Indian painting, etc., that are included within Eastern painting (*tōyōga*) is the term *nihonga*. However, the extant paintings in Japan contain nothing that predates the introduction of Buddhism. Therefore *nihonga* represents all paintings produced in Japan after the advent of Buddhism. However, in the beginning paintings were imported from China, Korea, etc., thus a few works by foreign artists are mixed into this designation. From the Meiji period the term *nihonga* was used in distinction to the newly imported Western paintings (*seiyōga*) (also applied to such works painted by Japanese artists). But some people dislike the idea that the Japanese will indefinitely continue to use the term *seiyōga*, feeling that regardless of this painting style, and these painting materials, all paintings created by Japanese are paintings of Japan (*Nihon no e*), and thus should be called *nihonga*. Perhaps this will become the practice in the future.

*Seiyōga*. In distinction to Eastern painting, painting practiced in the West is called *seiyōga* in Japan. Now, however, it is also used with a separate meaning. Namely, Western-style paintings by Japanese are called *seiyōga* to distinguish them from *nihonga* painted by Japanese. However, this "Seiyōga" is a usage that may someday expire. Previously, some artists have shunned the appellation "*seiyōga painters" (Morioka & Berry 1999, pp. 19-20).171

The implication was that *nihonga* was considered to be an aesthetic of Japaneseness (a politic Okakura and Fenellosa advocated), in contrast *yōga* was considered to be Western (even if the painters were Japanese, or were living in Japan). As stated earlier, despite the significant mutual influences and overlaps between *nihonga* and *yōga* painters, Fenellosa’s and Okakura’s influence on their institutionalism unnecessarily polarised them as parallel codes.

Not all critics wanted the practices to remain dichotomous. For example, Ishii Hakutei, an early twentieth century *yōga* painter, emphasised that the future of Japanese painting should be a

171 Compiled by Ishii Hakutei (*yōga painter*), Kuroda Hōshin (critic), and Yūki Somei (*nihonga painter*).
synthesis of yōga and nihonga merging elements of conventional Japanese subjects with Western techniques (Hirayama 1996, p. 60). The new Japanese painting would therefore be determined by the Japanese identity of the author rather than being defined by style, material or ideology (Hirayama 1996, p. 59). These new ideas asserting a hybrid identity of Japaneseness were part of a larger national confidence Japan experienced as part of its international relations, for example the military victory in the Russo-Japan War (1904-5) (Hirayama 1996, p. 61). The reappraisal of yōga was therefore connected to Japan’s growing confidence in demonstrating its skill in adopting Western technology and techniques.172

Yōga and Nihonga (traditional Japanese-style paintings) dictated both the institutional structures and artistic perceptions of Meiji Japan. This dichotomy was accentuated by periodic fluctuations in national policies, particularly during the early Meiji period, when the state championed the technological value of Western art as part of its utilitarian cultural agenda. State support, however, began to shift from yōga to Nihonga during the late 1870s as the government’s pursuit of Western technology gradually gave way to cultural nationalism. By the late nineteenth century, the dual structure of Japanese art was firmly established, with each style constituting an independent realm (Hirayama 1996, p. 57).

At the same time the artists that were becoming internationally recognised were those who were perceived by the West to have a tangible presence of ‘traditional Japaneseness’ in their art (Guth 1996b, p. 19; Bolas 1987). Thus, both nihonga and yōga were considered to be outside the discursive construction of authentic Japan: yōga was perceived to be less developed than the Western styles it followed, conflicting with Western ideas which privileged originality and individuality in art. The Western concept of Japan’s uniqueness also conflicted with Okakura and Fenellosa’s ideas of nihonga as a synthesis.

Japanese art therefore had an internal dichotomy between nihonga and yōga, whilst simultaneously being position as a cultural Other against Western art. John Clark refers to this parallelism and dialecticism of nihonga and yōga, and their relationship to Western art as a ‘double othering’ -

This complex relativisation or “othering” of one set of painting discourses by another also occludes a further relativisation...This is a further “othering” or a “double othering”, where the products of the primary discourse relativised by contact with the

172 The changing attitude towards yōga is evident in its representation at World Fairs. It was exhibited with nihonga at the 1900 Paris World Fair, whereas, at the 1893 World Exposition in Chicago it had been excluded (Hirayama 1996, p. 57). In 1896 the Tokyo bijutsu gakko expanded and Okakura employed Kuruoda Seki, a yōga artist who had studied in Paris.
“tradition” to which they are transferred are relativised once more by their autonomous development away from that different and other “tradition” from which they have been transferred. Thus “Western-style” art is not “Japanese” art, but neither is it any longer “Western” art from the inception of transfer (Clark 1998, p. 74)

For Clark, this double othering enables the creation of a third space, a space beyond the control of either ‘tradition’ or ‘Western-style’ but operates in an in-between space, much like Bhabha’s (1990) concept of hybridity. There is a particular complexity to this issue, because yōga artists were largely influenced by early European modernism, which itself had been significantly influenced by Japanese art, particularly ukiyo-e (Bromfield 1994; Evett 1982). Thus turn of the century yōga, was in fact a ‘re-importation’ of elements of Japanese art, like a return of japonisme (Takashina 1987, p. 31). In this way both yōga and nihonga could be regarded as a synthesis and subsequent transformation of Japanese and Western styles.

Despite this recent art historical acknowledgment of the complex history of Meiji art, the parallelism between the two codes of yōga and nihonga still operates, particularly at an institutional level, even though in practice the distinctions between them are less clear (Rimer 1995). However, both yōga and nihonga have been criticised by artists and critics who wish to challenge the rigid conservatism of the art establishment, leading to the emergence of the ‘Japanese avant-garde’ and post-war gendai bijutsu (contemporary art). Yōga has been repeatedly criticised as being imitative, restrictive and repetitive; these criticisms are in conflict with the notion of modernist art in a Western sense, which emphasises individuality and originality. Conversely, nihonga is criticised for its rigidity, elite hierarchical structure and conservatism. Despite these criticisms, nihonga is not a static entity; rather, it can be considered to be a continually evolving and shifting practice (Clark 1998, p. 76; Conant, Steiner & Tomii

173 There is a tendency for Clark to echo uncritically Fenellosa’s own concept of Japanese painting as a synthesis. However, Clark does differ in that he emphasises both yōga and nihonga as new modern practices which assimilate and transform Western and Japanese influences; whereas, Fenellosa considered yōga to be purely following Western painting; rather than, as an expression of aesthetic hybridity.

174 Yōga and nihonga are still utilised as classifications in organised exhibitions, such as Nitten, and are supported in wider discourses by critics, curators and scholars, as well as artists (Morioka & Berry 1999, p. 20).

175 The problematic framing of post-war Japanese art under the rubric of ‘avant-garde’ will be discussed in the criticism of the Scream Against the Sky exhibition later in the chapter.
More recent Western scholarship on nihonga (see Rosenfield 2001) emphasises the experimentation and innovation underpinning nihonga, albeit contained in the strict boundaries of ‘decorum of style and subject matter’ (p. 176) which define nihonga training. In the same way, yōga has been reconsidered not as imitative of Western styles, but rather as re-made in Japan, transforming and assimilating practices (Clark 1998; Takashina 1987).

In many ways, Murakami’s theorisation of Superflat continues the convention of dichotomising yōga and nihonga painting and cynically rejects kindai bijutsu, rather than re-constructing the perception of these practices. Despite his circumnavigation of kindai bijutsu and desire to create different structures and institutions for his new art, based on the ‘beauty’ of otaku culture, Superflat is still caught in the identity dilemmas of kindai bijutsu. However, the movement of Superflat globally articulates both its cultural specificity and difference, in order to resist Western art hegemony, while still constructing the terms of its discourse in Western art codes. At the same time, the complex interrelations between the multiple aesthetic signifiers in Murakami’s works, like My Lonesome Cowboy [Figure 17] echoes the cross-cultural history of yōga and nihonga – this last point will be elucidated in the section Superflat Spaces of Identity.

The following section returns once more to Japanese art discourses in the post-war period in order to examine how artists rejected kindai bijutsu and sought to articulate a more ‘contemporary’ expression in their work. These artists wanted to transcend the dichotomy of Japanese/Western painting, to reject the institutions of kindai bijutsu, and to engage with practices that had relevance internationally and could express a more authentic Japanese identity. These attempts provide a critical art historical platform for the emergence of Superflat art, particularly as 1990s gendai bijutsu artists began to appropriate the practices and forms of Japanese popular culture into their works.

2.3.2 POST-WAR GENDAI BIJUTSU

The term gendai bijutsu came into usage after the Second World War, and while it did not replace

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176 Recently the Museum of Contemporary Art Tokyo titled their annual exhibition of emerging Japanese artists From nihonga to nihonga (2006). The intended aim of the exhibition was to inspire questions on the contemporary expressions of nihonga, referring to its movement beyond its perceived institutional and academic conservativeness (Wise 2006).

177 Contemporary is an ambiguous definition, see note below.
kindai bijutsu it emerged in opposition to the art establishment (gadan), which is the basis for kindai bijutsu (Shioda 2000, p. 163; Tomii 1999, p. 17). Despite an enduring popularity and elitist status, the gadan is criticised for its conservativeness and irrelevancy to contemporary society (Sawaragi & Nanjo 1992; Shioda 2000; Tomii 1994). Tomii Reiko (1999) argues that gendai bijutsu presented a conceptual challenge to geijutsu and bijutsu, which indicated the collapse of kindai bijutsu.

Gendai bijutsu artists criticised kindai bijutsu for demonstrating a lack of reflexive interiority and ‘uncritically’ assimilating the stylistic trends of Western modernism (Havens 1982, p. 108; , p. 163). Like the earlier debates in the Meiji period, yōga artists continued to be criticised by many gendai bijutsu artists for copying the techniques of Western modern art without adopting the ideologies of originality and the expression of individual subjectivity accompanying it.

The externally induced process of Japan’s modernization inevitably caused the incomplete simulation of modern Western institutions. Without understanding social and intellectual backgrounds, the arts or sciences were frequently reduced to technical problems. The idea of art as an expression of the unified individual sensibility was foreign to many Japanese artists who eagerly adsorbed its techniques (Matsui 1999a, p. 9).

178 Bijutsu is the generic term for art and kindai bijutsu refers to art (nihonga and yōga) that was institutionalised during the Meiji period (1868-1912). It needs to be clarified that kindai and gendai are not always discrete terms or practices. The term gendai bijutsu (contemporary fine art) introduces another layer of complexity within this dynamic. Contemporary art can refer to the art of the present time, and in this sense all art that is made currently could be considered gendai bijutsu. Thus, both nihonga and Murakami’s works can be considered gendai bijutsu. However, the historical context and the common understanding is that gendai bijutsu refers more specifically to art that rejects kindai bijutsu, dantai and gadan, particularly in the post-war period. This has also been referred to as the ‘post-war Japanese avant-garde’ (Munroe et al. 1994), even though its origins can be found in pre-war art.

179 Top nihonga painters can earn a substantial income from the sale of works (Rosenfield 2001, p. 163). However, the market for nihonga is largely domestic (Rosenfield 2001, p. 163), and many contemporary artists, such as Murakami, are critical of this internal isolation (Sawaragi & Nanjo 1992, p. 75).

180 In the 1960s and 1970s there was a further series of conceptual attacks on art, which paralleled Western conceptual art, but also expressed local concerns against the institution of bijutsu (Tomii 1999, p. 15). While gendai bijutsu was considered to be an attack on modernity in so far as it was aimed at the institution and codes of painting (p. 19), it had a different angle of attack to the Western avant-garde because this anti-bijutsu stance could also be considered an attack on the Western origins of those art institutions. The Japanese conceptual attack was also different because kindai bijutsu museums and galleries did not hold the same hierarchical position within society, or in relation to ‘master’ works, as they did in the West (ibid). While there were previous challenges within kindai bijutsu, such as Nika-kaï, against the conservative academicism of yōga, these challenges were eventually adsorbed by gadan (Tomii 1994, p. 394). Criticism against the art establishment in the form of gendai bijutsu became more clearly distinguished from gadan in the 1950s and 1960s (p. 395).
More recently, *gendai bijutsu* has been criticised in a similar way by contemporary art historians, such as Sawaragi Noi, who argue that the foundations of *gendai bijutsu* (particularly post-war abstract expressionist painting) were built on importing trends from Europe and the United States in the 1950s. Sawaragi (2000a) parallels this with Japan’s ideological alignment with the West during the Cold War.\(^{181}\)

Undeniably, Japanese “contemporary art” had developed by avidly importing the trends of American and European “contemporary art,” imitating and arranging its accepted formulae. All the institutions surrounding it, including scholarships, museums, galleries and journalistic media, were constructed according to this principle (p. 71).

As such, for Sawaragi *gendai bijutsu* is caught in the same dilemma as *kindai bijutsu*. *Bijutsu* is part of Japan’s process of modernisation, including the inherent contradictions of national identity in that process. Thus *gendai bijutsu* is still embedded in the imported (and the subsequent indigenised) concept of *bijutsu*, despite the protestation that it offers authentic Japanese expression in contrast to *kindai bijutsu*.

Sawaragi aims his criticism of *gendai bijutsu* against the position of the Chiba Shigeo, a Japanese art historian, who was critical of the confined dichotomy in Japanese art between Eurocentricism and ‘pure nativism’:

In order to examine the history of modern art in Japan, we need a radical break from Eurocentricism at one extreme, pure nativism at the other extreme, and eclecticism in the middle [a blend of the vernacular and Western]…We will then be able to understand that the history of modern art in Japan from the Meiji era to the present is not about Westernization or eclecticism but about an endeavor to create art that differs from both the Japanese traditional mode and the Western canon (Chiba cited in Masatoshi & Tomii 1994, p. 389).

Chiba argues that Japan’s self-identity, which was constructed during the process of modernising, resulted in conflicting positions for Japanese artists. They could either accept the self-consciousness of modernity, that is to become the Other to the West and thereby emphasise their

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\(^{181}\) Matsui supports Sawargi’s criticism and argues that despite the emphasis placed on ‘authentic innovation’ in *gendai bijutsu*, particularly in the theorisation of Post-Painterly Abstraction in the 1970s and 1980s by the art historians Teruo Fujieda and Toshiaki Minemura, these works were merely modified versions of what was occurring in the United States and Europe. Okazaki Kenjirō also challenges the ‘myth’ of art’s autonomy from political ideologies, as promoted by Greenberg and *Art Informel* in the 1950s and 60s, and argues that post-war Japanese art needs to be considered in relation to the hegemonic power structures of the Cold War. Okazaki goes on to argue that the myth of autonomy became represented as an indigenised concept within the discourses of Gutai and Mono-ha (Okazaki cited in Munroe et al. 1994, p. 388).
particularity, or reject this position by focusing on assimilating the West (Chiba cited in Sawaragi 1992, p. n.a.). Chiba refuses this split and believed *gendai bijutsu* could transcend it. Thus he identified the activities of *Gutai*, *Hi Red Center*, *Tokyo Fluxus*, and *Bi-Kyōto* as a ‘deviation’ from this dichotomy. It is a deviation because the artists created work outside of the modern (*kindai bijutsu*) institutions of painting and sculpture. Thus, Chiba argues that post-war art movements produced a unique and authentic expression of contemporary Japanese identity, liberated from the dichotomy of *kindai bijutsu* (ibid). However, Sawaragi draws attention to Chiba’s failure to acknowledge that this ‘deviation’ and ‘authentic innovation’ ignores the connections between 1970s and 1980s *gendai bijutsu* painting and Western art, and that Chiba still identifies the West as a point against which Japanese artists must articulate their particularity.

Despite his criticisms of Chiba, Sawaragi also wants to distinguish the particularities of *gendai bijutsu*. He argues that Western contemporary art emerged from the modern avant-garde, which had developed from an internal reflexivity and dialectical development; whereas, like Tomii, Sawaragi argues that *gendai bijutsu* developed specifically from a position of resistance to the institutions of Western modernity, *kindai bijutsu*. Furthermore, Sawaragi contends that *gendai bijutsu* did not possess an underpinning rational principle by which to critique *kindai bijutsu* from within, unlike the Western avant-garde (Sawaragi 1997).

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182 Akira Tatehata (cited in Annear 1991) states that after 1945 two discourse of art emerged in Japan: the first conceived of Japanese art as the assimilation of Western Art History, following the trends and styles of Western artists; the second type of discourse interpreted Japanese art on a level separate to that of Western Art History and tended to emphasise *Gutai* and *Mono-ka*. Tatehata argues that neither view is particularly accurate or addresses the entire situation. He argues that a pessimistic view would emphasise the first trend as copying and the second as asserting a cultural uniqueness (p. 28). He states that this type of split discourse arises because there has not been an objective assessment of post-war ‘fringe’ activity.

183 However, Chiba has a tendency here to echo Fenellosa’s own reductive essentialism of Japanese painting being divided into the first conceived of Japanese art as the assimilation of Western Art History, following the trends and styles of Western artists; the second type of discourse interpreted Japanese art on a level separate to that of Western Art History and tended to emphasise *Gutai* and *Mono-ka*. Tatehata argues that neither view is particularly accurate or addresses the entire situation. He argues that a pessimistic view would emphasise the first trend as copying and the second as asserting a cultural uniqueness (p. 28). He states that this type of split discourse arises because there has not been an objective assessment of post-war ‘fringe’ activity.

184 In fact, by refusing to present the artwork as a finished object these post-war artists denied the material autonomy required of *kindai bijutsu*, and therefore rejected the imported concepts of art.

185 Sawaragi refers here to Bürger’s (1984) concept of the ‘historical avant-garde’ which acted as both an adversary to modernisation and was a part of it. Art became the driving force and agent of social change. Bürger classifies the avant-garde as ‘historical’ because it became subsumed by the academy, which it had initially opposed. In Japan modern art did not originate from resistance to the academy or the institution of art (*kindai bijutsu*); *yōga* (influenced by Western modernism) was part of the institutions of *Kindai bijutsu* from the beginning (Havens 1982, p. 106). Thus, since the post-war period *gendai bijutsu* artists have resisted modern (*kindai bijutsu*) Japanese art.
The Japanese avant-garde has nothing to do with the intellectual impetus of the Western avant-garde, whose resistance to modern institutions is carried out by a strong individualism and rationality rooted in the same modern solipsisms. The Japanese avant-garde has been driven by the sadness of those who have inherited superficial and incomplete institutions of modernity, destructive energies without direction, anarchism motivated by despair and an insecure intellect seeking solace in the rhetorical resolution of an ironic Japanese a-history (Sawaragi cited in Matsui 1999c, p. 25).

According to Sawaragi ‘ahistorical’ and the ‘destructive energies without direction’ represents a post-war avant-garde that believed it had transcended (or deviated from) modernity. However, for Sawaragi the avant-garde lacked the dialectical impulses of Western modernism, and therefore did not leave a solid foundation from which future art could develop (p. 163). What Sawaragi identifies is the weakness in Chiba’s argument, where deviation implies a connection to modernity, even though this remains unaddressed in the discourse.

In opposition to “Japan” and “Nihon bijutsu” [Japanese art] – generally consisting of Nihonga and yōga – which serves as a mirror image of Western self-consciousness imposed from above by the state, a resistance movement sprang up from below and has flowered into “gendai bijutsu (of Japan)” as a vehicle of the true self-consciousness of the country. Therefore, gendai bijutsu as a vehicle of Japan’s true self-consciousness is not a translation of “contemporary art” which has international currency as a universal concept. While Western “contemporary art” suggests the avant-garde in art history, Japanese “gendai bijutsu” has been more or less formed through indigenous resistance to modern consciousness. Therefore, rather than merely reflect contemporary consciousness gendai bijutsu, supported by “self-consciousness” wishes to restore the lost premodern (i.e. before the coinage of “bijutsu”). Here we encounter a paradox: self-consciousness, which was demanded of the state and the individual, is in itself a product of modernization. In this sense, the modern is presupposed as being indispensable (Sawaragi 1994, pp. 389-90).

Midori Matsui argues that Sawaragi was critical of Chiba and the post-war expressionist painters because they proposed that there was such a thing as ‘original’ Japanese expression. Thus, Sawaragi critiqued gendai bijutsu for the ‘false game of “authenticity” and “deviation” in a closed circuit, which bore no relation to international art history’ (Matsui 2001a, p. 48). Furthermore,

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186 Sawaragi is critical of how Gutai and the Yomiuri An-pan (Yomiuri Indépendent exhibition) eventually became so iconoclastic that the exhibition was cancelled and alienated from the general public: ‘The avant-garde became self-perpetuating, existing as the “avant-garde for the avant-garde’s sake”, rather than criticizing modern art from the inside and transcending it. Corresponding to the hedonistic celebration of pleasure fuelled by the rapid economic development of the time, it turned into versions of loud, slapstick acts without principle (2000b, p. 165) (see also Ito et al. 2004). John Clark echoes Sawaragi’s criticism, although his reasons are different because Clark emphasises the influences of Western art and capitalism: ‘In Japan the avant-garde has become almost entirely self-preoccupied with a kind of high bourgeois formalism, which has almost no broad political concerns nor, given its isolation from the pre-war art groups, any important institutional counter-discursial position’ (1998, p. 290).
Sawaragi felt the art establishment had failed to adequately address the relationship of contemporary Japanese art to international art worlds (1992).

In contrast, Sawaragi seeks to reconsider the category of *gendai bijutsu* in order to question the continuation of a ‘blind’ following of the post war institutions of *gendai bijutsu* and the colonialist identity of Japanese art (2000a, p. 71). From this place of ‘weakness’ and closure Sawaragi wants post-*gendai bijutsu* to emerge (Sawaragi qtd. in Matsui 2001a, p. 48). Hence, he titled one of his early exhibitions *Ground Zero* (2000) to express this argument (2000a, p. 71). Sawaragi argues that this palimpsest breaks free from the institutions and academic nature of *kindai bijutsu* and reconstitutes art in Japan by including the forms that had formerly been excluded from *bijutsu*, such as *anime* and *manga* (p. 70).

Sawaragi identified this new generation of artists in the 1990s as ‘Neo-Pop,’ because they engaged with the popular imagery and products of *anime*, *manga* and game culture (Sawaragi 2000b). Neo-Pop included Takashi Murakami, Mariko Mori, Kenji Yanobe, Taro Chizeo, and Minako Nishiyama. For Sawaragi, Neo-Pop artists emphasised the self-reflexive ironic awareness of artistic and cultural identity and the paradoxes of art production in Japan: that any self-conscious expression of Japanese artistic identity is itself a product of modernisation and the imported concept art, and that Japanese popular culture is also influenced by post-war Western cultural forms. Thus, for Sawaragi the identity of contemporary Japanese art remains ambiguous and these artists tease out that ambiguity in their work.

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187 Sawaragi argued that *bijutsu* was an imposed colonial concept and was not an adequate translation of conventions in Japanese art. He considered *nihonga* to be an orientalist construct, based on Fenellosa’s Western-influenced ideas of what constituted Japanese art and tradition; in this way, it is a mirroring of West’s image of Japan (Sawaragi 1992). Sawaragi also considered *yōga* to be a mirror image because it uncritically assimilated the external structure of Western painting styles.

188 For Bürger, postmodern artists examined and exposed the contradictions, tensions and internal resistances to the concept of progressive development that underpinned the historical avant-garde. Similarly, Sawaragi, while distinguishing the avant-garde impulse in Japan, also argues that contemporary Japanese artists were exposing these contradictions in modern Japanese art.

189 By appropriating the visual aesthetics of *anime* and *manga*, Sawaragi argued that the Neo-Pop artists were extending the subject matter and audiences for art.

190 The Röntgen Kunst Institute, a gallery in Tokyo, became the central venue for the Neo-Pop artists. Neo-Pop is an important precursor for Murakami’s view of a new art which engages with contemporary visual culture in Japan, even though by the mid-1990s Murakami distanced himself from it.

191 Sawaragi identifies the paradox in this situation. The nihilism of Neo-Pop was based on the concept of disinheritance; since there was no ‘history’ of contemporary art in Japan because of the ‘ahistorical’ position of the avant-garde, this position can be
In this intellectual environment [with the influence of postmodern theory on Japanese art], artists were licensed to engage a wide array of references without the modernist onus of concealing their bounty under fabrications of originality (Winther-Tamaki 2001, p. 62).

Neo-Pop artists were aware of the paradox that Japanese artists experienced in trying to articulate originality using these borrowed forms (of art and popular culture). Their work was expressive of a play of meaning and fragmentation of identity, that Sawaragi argued reflected the postmodern Japanese society of the 1990s. This postmodern approach, emphasising appropriation of the imagery of popular culture (what had been excluded from bijutsu) and exposing the ‘myth’ of originality, ironically deconstructed the claims of authentic identity by presenting markers of identity as detached signifiers.\(^{192}\) However, rather than presenting Neo-Pop as a postmodern expression (in the Western theoretical sense) because it expresses particular relations with its Japanese context Neo-Pop can be considered as post-*kindai bijutsu*.

However, while Sawaragi’s position aims to transcend and reject *kindai bijutsu*, it tends to reproduce similar problems to Chiba’s position. For example, Sawaragi argues that Neo-Pop artists forgo the expression of authenticity, emphasising that all art is borrowed; however, this new art is still presented as an accurate reflection of Japanese society and culture than *kindai* and *gendai bijutsu*.\(^{193}\) Sawaragi affirmed the ‘non-art’ forms of *manga* and *anime* as authentic expressions of Westernised Japan. Thus, he reterritorialises the group identity of Neo-Pop as Japanese. What is significant about this identity is the way in which it was played out in a global context. For example, while the impersonal and mass manufactured surfaces of consumer culture (including the perceived hegemony of *kawaii* culture) were utilised by artists as a critique of individual subjectivity and expression (Sawaragi & Nanjo 1992), outside of Japan this was utilized to proclaim the identity of a ‘new art’. Initially, in the exhibition Anomaly (1992) Sawaragi emphasised the rejection of art as part of his criticism of *gendai bijutsu*; however, in the later exhibition Ground Zero this nihilism morphed into a more affirmative and future-orientated position (see Matsui 1999c, p. 26). Sawaragi’s analysis on the status and meaning of *bijutsu* was translated into English in the catalogue for the Anomaly exhibition (Sawaragi 1992).

\(^{192}\) In this way, Sawaragi’s concepts paralleled Western postmodern theories, particularly Craig Owens’ (1980) ideas on simulationism (see Matsui 2000, p. 168).

\(^{193}\) As will be discussed later in this chapter, Sawaragi’s identification of a ‘new’ identity for Japanese art echoes the public discourses at the time, in which there was a paradoxical re-essentialism of this postmodern fragmented and ironic identity being considered to be peculiarly Japanese (Iida 2002).
interpreted as the Japaneseness of Neo-Pop (Friis-Hansen 1992). Since the late 1980s the export of manga, anime and gaming culture had proliferated so that increasingly Japan was being defined as a postmodern society; therefore, Sawaragi was not creating a new identity for Japanese art internationally, but was reproducing existing Western techno-Orientalist discourses. In this way, even with its ironic play on identity, Neo-Pop still ends up being demarcated as Japanese.

[IMAGE REMOVED]

Figure 5: 727
1996, Acrylic on canvas on board
300 x 450 cm
Collection of Misawa Art Project, Kenji Misawa, Shizuoka

Like Neo-Pop, Superflat does not necessarily offer a new identity for Japanese art, in relation to its global circulation, but rather is self-consciously presented in relation to already circulating techno-Orientalist and postmodern consumer images of contemporary Japanese identity. Murakami’s work is caught in the same dilemma and paradox of reterritorialising the ‘bastardised’ (Azuma 2001 para. 17) culture of Superflat as an expression of Japaneseness. Like the postmodern aesthetic of Neo-Pop, the iconography of Murakami’s work is influenced from a range of art and commercial sources, which are then combined together. For example, in works...

194 A clear example of this is the Australian Exhibition Neo-Tokyo: Japanese Art Now (Sydney 2002), which emphasised Japan as a postmodern playhouse of commodity culture.
such as [727 Figure 5], the references to the ‘high art’ styles of Japanese screen painting and techniques of *nihonga* are not privileged over the influences of the *kawaii* aesthetic and character iconography of everyday commercial forms. This issue, of the conceptual and aesthetic relationship between art and commercial forms, is examined in more detail in Chapter Three. It is mentioned here to highlight the ways in which Superflat, like Neo-Pop before it, shares many characteristics with the appropriative practices of Western postmodern art (Foster 1998), including the mobilisation and expression of multiple identities in a non-hierarchical manner. What is distinct about Superflat, as opposed to Neo-Pop, are the ways in which the self-reflexive awareness of the vulnerability and flexibility of contemporary identity is played out in a global space. While Neo-Pop, and other contemporary Japanese art in the late 1980s and 1990s, played a significant part in increasing the international exposure of Japanese contemporary art and broadening the markets for contemporary artists, Murakami was able to extend this further and demonstrate how these networks could be utilised more strategically to construct his own rules for art. The following section examines the international exhibition of contemporary Japanese art in the late 1980s and 1990s in order to identify the persistence and challenges to the definition of Japaneseness in relation to these exhibitions.

2.3.3 CONTEMPORARY JAPANESE ART 1980s - 1990s

During late 1980s and 1990s there was a proliferation of exhibitions of contemporary Japanese art outside of Japan, for example *Primal Spirit* (1990), *Against Nature* (1989), *Cabinet of Signs* 1991-92), and *Scream Against the Sky* (1994). Supported by the changes internationally in the art world, this period represents a significant period for contemporary Japanese art internationally (Turner 2000). While this can be attributed to the shift in Western art discourses and the reconsideration of ‘non-Western’ art, as outlined in the Chapter One section *Global Art Worlds*, others associate the specific interest in Japan to a wider Western fascination connected to Japanese economic power (Tatehata in Annear 1991, p. 28).

Mami Kataoka (2003) argues that the mid-1990s brought increased opportunity for young contemporary artists. Encouraged by the success of exhibitions such as *Against Nature* and

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195 In Australia, the emergence of the Asia-Pacific Triennial (1993) at the Queensland Art Gallery, along with exhibitions such as *Japanese Ways, Western Means* (1989) and *Zones of Love* (1991-92), represented a significant increase in the exhibition of contemporary Japanese art.
Primal Spirit overseas, emerging artists found a model that enabled them to be based out of Japan and be able to exhibit internationally. These new artists were not interested in fitting themselves into a Western art canon, or in trying to define their Japanese identity; they saw both global and local identities as being accessible to them. This new generation of artists were engaged with the visual culture of their everyday environment, and there was a growing shift away from the academic character of bijutsu towards ‘art’ (pronounced phonetically in English) (Kataoka 2001). It attracted the support of a new generation of Japanese audience, who did not differentiate art from the forms of visual culture and commodities, such as graphic design or interior design, opening the way for a greater diversity of practices to be exhibited as ‘art’ (or not even needing to be categorised as art) (2003). An excellent example of this cross-discipline concept is the JAM Tokyo-London (2001) exhibition curated by Kataoka. In this changing art scene, there is also a new generation of dealer galleries emerging with directors interested in establishing wider networks through international art fairs.

However, despite the proliferation in the number of exhibitions of Japanese contemporary art outside of Japan, the actual number of artists exhibited is limited because the same artists tend to be utilised (Clark 1998, pp. 279-80). Thus a limited number of artists become representative markers of Japanese contemporary art, rather than the actual diversity of the Japanese contemporary art scene being exposed. The exhibition of these artists tended to reinforce the futuristic-technologically driven image of Japan. For example, the curators of Against Nature (Osaka et al. 1989) explicitly wanted to identify a particular essence of Japanese identity in the artists represented. This intention to define cultural identity was eventually abandoned when it became too difficult to categorise Japanese artists using an abstract concept of a Japanese aesthetic, particularly because some of the artists had more obvious similarities with artists...

196 A useful example of this is the artists exhibited in JAM Tokyo-London and Facts of Life. However, even the curators of Primal Spirit emphasised the lack of concern that artists expressed in defining their cultural/national identity (Hara 1990, p. 12). Yet at the same time, the curators of Primal Spirit also stressed the difference and uniqueness of Japanese artistic and cultural codes (p. 10), thereby, re-asserting a Japan/West dichotomy contradicting claims of similarity to the West and non-nationalistic identities.

197 As an example of this change, the art journal bijutsu techo changed its name to the romanji initials BT.

198 Tomio Koyama is a good example of this new type of dealer. Eriko Osaka argues that having Japanese dealer galleries within Japan so actively promoting Japanese art internationally is relatively new for post-war artists (Osaka 2003). Supporting this was the emergence of independent curators such as Fumio Nanjo. Nanjo was a prominent figure in these exhibitions, promoting the work of contemporary artists such as Morimura Yasumasa and Miyajima Tatsuo. Although Osaka’s comments were relative to post-war gendai bijutsu, useful comparisons could be made with the emergence of Japanese international art traders in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century (Harris 1997, p. 142).
internationally. Instead, the conventional association of Japan and nature was critiqued in favour of a theme that reinforced a contemporary (Japanese) experience, aligned to the artificial and synthetic. However, while this imaginary of Japan intended to critique previous stereotypes, it ends up constructing a techno-Orientalist view of contemporary Japan and reproducing existing discourses. In this way, Japan was presented as a 'postmodern Disneyland,' a Baudrillardian futurist virtual playhouse (Donald Richie cited, p. 8).

_Cabinet of Signs_ (Tate Gallery 1991) followed a similar premise to _Against Nature_ and presented Japanese artists as an expression of global urban experiences. The urban experience connected local environments and that of similar global experiences.

> [This new art] concentrates on those areas of contemporary culture defined by the city itself — the culture of appropriated images, high technology, travel, popular (Western) culture, art and ideas mediated through a global magazine (and TV/film and video) culture and the debates about modernism, particularly in New York. It is not that the culture of nature is untrue, rather it is outdated and not useful as a guide to working in a city (Francis 1991, p. 10).

Despite these intentions towards emphasising similarities the curators had a tendency to emphasise differences, rather than connections between Japanese artists and Western artists. This in itself led to some awkward and simplistic representations in the exhibition catalogue.199 Furthermore, the construction of Japanese identity as a postmodern pastiche or hybrid (Osaka et al. 1989, p. 21) failed to account for the potential essentialism of hybridity as a marker of national identity (Iwabuchi 1994).

One of the most significant survey exhibitions of post-war Japanese art was _Scream Against the Sky_. The ideological basis for this exhibition was examination of Japanese art since 1945, which had been relatively neglected in Western discourses on Japanese art, and the establishment of a historical lineage from the beginning of the avant-garde in the 1930s up until the 1990s.200 The catalogue essays emphasised the uniqueness of the Japanese avant-garde as ‘authentic’ and ‘original’ Japanese expression (Munroe et al. 1994). This rather forced emphasis was intended to

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199 For example, the following statement regarding Morimura emphasises his identity as Japanese and as a cultural Other:

‘Morimura on his return from the opening of the Metropolis exhibition in Berlin, where he had been included as a ‘world artist’ wanted urgently to eat sushi’ (Francis 1991, p. 12).

200 The exhibition curator Alexandra Munroe advocated the need for a comprehensive historical narrative and critical context for the study of twentieth century Japanese art because, she argued, the dominant focus in Western surveys of Japanese art had been on pre-Meiji art forms rather than on contemporary art (1994c, p. 20).
be a counter-offensive tactic against the Eurocentric criticism of Japanese modern art being derivative and imitative. However, while Munroe offered a comprehensive account of post-war art, the danger with the approach is the tendency to over-emphasise and prioritise the differences and uniqueness of Japanese art in order affirm its originality and to frame this identity using a Western conception of avant-gardism. Mimi Hall Yiengpruksawan (1996) argues that, in trying to use art to locate a ‘pure’ Japanese subjectivity at the centre of post-war art, *Scream Against the Sky* problematically emphasises the cultural differences of Japan in the manner of *nihonjinron*. Furthermore, Yiengpruksawan argues, *Scream Against the Sky* equates originality with avant-gardism in a way that disregards the postmodern criticism of the concept of avant-gardism as an authentic expression of subjectivity and original identity (Krauss 1986).

In *Scream Against the Sky* Munroe presents the Japanese post-war avant-garde as a resistant position against Japanese nationalism and Western hegemony: artists opposed the conservative, hierarchical, bureaucratic art establishment and simultaneously sought autonomy from the dominance of Western modernism. Thus, to Munroe the Japanese avant-garde represented and strong impulse in the revisionist position of considering the distinctions of Japanese modernity based on cultural autonomy:

> Whereas other histories have seen the interaction between Japanese and Euro-American artist as a process of assimilation, this history highlights the Japanese artists’ creative will to differentiate themselves from the dominant culture in an attempt to establish an autonomous modernity (p. 23).

However, despite Munroe’s emphasis on cultural autonomy and the unique of the Japaneseness of the avant-garde, there were quite strong ties between the Japanese avant-garde and Western art movements and theories, as the catalogue essays do acknowledge. All of these connections are minimised in *Scream Against the Sky* because the overall agenda is to assert the particularity of Japan. For example, Munroe (1994b, p. 341) locates Murakami in the context of Japanese artists searching for a new authenticity. There is little acknowledgement of the complexity of global interactions and cross-influences, or the self-conscious reflection on how that identity is, and has previously been, constructed. As Yiengpruksawan (2001) has indicated in her critique of *Scream Against the Sky*, Munroe is reliant on a ‘rhetoric of difference’ and

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201 For example, Lee U Fan (*Mono-ha*) drew on Heidegger’s studies of phenomenology (Munroe 1994d, p. 257). There are also links between Japanese Conceptual Art and Marcel Duchamp (Munroe 1994a, p. 215) as well as Art Informel and the Yomiuri Indépendent artists.
framing Japanese avant-garde expression through the lens of originality and authenticity; concepts that are privileged in Western modern art discourses. Thus, while Munroe intended *Scream Against the Sky* to serve as a counter-offensive against the neglect of Japanese twentieth century art by historians, the overt emphasis on difference and originality avoids deconstructing how that Japanese-ness is constructed. The result is the ‘the banality of exoticism’ (Francesco Pellizzi qtd. in Yiengpruksawan 1996, p. 1012), in which difference is produced and consumed as part of global postmodern capitalism.

Both exhibitions, *Scream Against the Sky* and *Against Nature*, therefore, stress difference over connection. This difference is defined in relation to a national ‘essence’ of Japanese-ness. Thus, there is a tendency to essentialise a national aesthetic expression in Japanese art. Therefore, while the early 1990s were critical in generating exposure and discourse of art histories outside of what had previously been included in the West, such as post-war Japanese art, the reinforcement of territorialised identities *in opposition* to the West remains. As already stated in the *Global Art Worlds* section of Chapter One, these ‘alternate’ art histories tend to make cultural identity or Otherness the subject of the work, and reinforce a binary position between ‘the West’ and the ‘non-West’.

More recently there was been a revision of these positions, for example *Facts of Life* (2001) and *Living Together is Easy* (2004). In these exhibitions identity is not considered to be the key subject of the exhibition. *Facts of Life* was explicitly presented as a reaction to discourses on contemporary Japanese art which emphasised Japan as an amalgam of virtual realities, celebrating its synthetism (Watkins 2001).\(^\text{202}\) *Facts of Life* focussed on the everyday and the diversity of experience in contemporary Japan, and represented a range of artists in in order to de-emphasis contemporary art being equated with the categorisation of ‘young and emerging’ artists. Exhibitions such as *Facts of Life*, therefore, represent a distinct curatorial shift away from trying to define ‘national essences’ towards identifying other connections between artists around the world. This position is not just occurring in Western art discourses, in Japan there is an emerging rhetoric that appeals for liberation from the ideological association linking national identity and art (Yiengpruksawan 2001). This type of critique questions the presumption that

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\(^\text{202}\) *Facts of Life* specifically excluded Murakami, Nara and Mariko Mori from the exhibition.
there is a national aesthetic and that art necessarily embodies a Japanese identity; instead, there is an emphasis on more differentiated and localised identities in and across national borders.\textsuperscript{203}

In this section, the key tensions and dialogues on bijutsu have been established in relation to the construction of Japan’s modern national identity. In particular, it is the dichotomy of nihonga and yōga that has framed the formation of modern Japanese art: both distinct from Western art and yet able to adopt Western concepts and styles of art. For the West, however, Japan in many ways remains a cultural Other in the expression of art, including contemporary art. Thus, while some Japanese art historians, such as Chiba, have sought to define post-war gendai bijutsu as a means through which to transcend this divide and the colonial importation of the concept of bijutsu, others, such as Sawaragi, have argued that gendai bijutsu is still caught up in the dilemma of seeking the ‘authentic’ expression of identity for Japanese art. Certainly the circulation of contemporary Japanese art outside Japan suggests that the issue of authentic identity is still a position that Japanese artists must negotiate — both in terms of self-representation as well as how they continue to be interpreted as a cultural Other. As Kataoka argued, contemporary Japanese artists do not necessarily feel constrained by an identity restricted to an expression of Japaneseness or some generic (though Western dominated) form of international art. They now consider a range of identities available to them, so that the quest for authenticity has been subsumed by the glocalisation processes of globalisation and the increased global circulation of contemporary art. Yet there is a danger in viewing this situation too optimistically. Scream Against the Sky still demonstrated the tendency to stress difference and the concept of original expression being tied to national-cultural identity. The danger is that this occurs without deconstructing how that Japaneseness was conceived.

The ongoing and contested concept of national-cultural identity, and the acknowledgement of the imported foundation of the concept of bijutsu, underpins the emergence of Superflat art globally.

\textsuperscript{203} This is one of the key issues that Winther-Tamaki (2001) argues in relation to the exhibition of Japanese artists in the United States from the 1950s to the 1980s. Artists were bracketed off as ‘the Other’ to Western art. However, Winther-Tamaki contends that from the 1980s, with the emergence of postmodern concepts of appropriation and techniques of pastiche, signifiers marking Asian culture still emerged but became detached from the symbolic representation of subjectivity or internal identity (p. 62). Therefore, artists could assert signifiers of ‘Asia’ but they did not have to present this as an expression of identity or subjectivity. However, Winther-Tamaki also anticipates the ways in which such signs became circulated within the American and European art markets and how artists (from Japan and the United States) became complicit in constructing the United States as the centre of art (p. 63). Winther-Tamaki advocates that this position is transcended and essentialised identities are deconstructed, in order to allow for the expressions of the ‘frisson of encounter’ and the multiplicity of artistic identity to emerge (ibid).
Superflat is therefore a part of these ongoing and persistent dialogues of identity. Superflat can be understood to offer a ‘new’ post-
kindai bijutsu paradigm for Japanese art because it has the potential to deconstruct the concept of art as it has been categorised in Japan by self-reflexively setting up a new standard of beauty for Japanese painting. This is achieved by connecting earlier forms of pre-Meiji art with anime and manga. In this way, Murakami departs from Sawaragi’s nihilism and rejection of art by actively reconstructing the concept and institutions of art (the latter is achieved through his studio structure and the Geisai exhibitions, both of which are discussed in more depth in Chapter Three). However, what also requires consideration are the ways in which Murakami self-consciously manipulates and plays with the identity of this new art in order to globally market his work effectively. In many ways, Murakami’s global marketing parallels the early Meiji representation at World Fairs: art was utilised both to demonstrate Japan’s parity with the modern West, while at the same time representing the cultural distinctiveness of Japanese art; all the while utilising international exhibitions as an opportunity to generate export revenue and to stimulate domestic production and markets.

The international exhibition and response to contemporary Japanese art demonstrates that artists feel they have the freedom to work outside the constraints imposed by limited and outdated concepts of Japanese identity. Yet the representation of their work reveals the persistence of the image of Japan and the West as oppositional cultures, with a reductive emphasis on cultural differences. Murakami, following on from this, consciously manipulates the plural identities available to him, and plays them off one another. That is, he plays with the ‘non-identity’ of transcultural contemporary art, but also deliberately self-Orientalises the image of Superflat in recognition of the art market, which has tended to demarcate Japan as a cultural Other, and utilises the subsequent commodification of that identity. These self-Orientalist images of Japan, and the Orientalist concepts of Japan, rely on the possibility of an authentic identity for Superflat based on Japanese aesthetic culture. Yet Superflat and Murakami’s strategy draws attention to the concept of authentic identity as a cultural and discursive construction, continually open to re-inscription and reformation. The following section will analyse the specific

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204 For example, while Japanese artists, such as Morimura, in the 1990s have been critical to increasing the exposure of contemporary Japanese art within the Western art world, and in critiquing and activating the in-between space of Japanese and Western Art Histories; Murakami and Superflat are significant because of this self-conscious active manipulation of the Western art market and the extension of this into more ‘commercial’ products.
constructions of that identity and the ways in which authenticity operates in Murakami’s work and the discourse of Superflat art.
2.4 SUPERFLAT AND MURAKAMI’S SOY SAUCE STRATEGY

As stated in the introduction to this chapter, Murakami asserts Superflat as Japanese, as currently influencing global culture, and as a model for a future aesthetic. Even though Murakami acknowledges that this sensibility arises from Japan’s process of westernisation, he simultaneously asserts the originality of Superflat as a Japanese sensibility. This is what he refers to as his ‘soy sauce’ strategy. Japanese contemporary art has a long history of trying to hide the soy sauce. Perhaps they will strengthen the flavor to please the foreign palette, or perhaps they’ll simply throw the soy sauce out the window and unconditionally embrace the tastes of French or Italian cuisine, becoming the Westerners whose model of contemporary art they follow...Though it may be easier that path is not for me, I think. No matter how much trouble it takes, I see the need to create a universal taste - a common tongue - without cheating myself and my Japanese core...I continue to blend seasonings...I may have mixed in the universal forms and presentations of French, Italian, Chinese, or other ethnic cuisines - and I am vigilant in my search for their best points - but the central axis of my creation is stable...However, at its core, my standard of "beauty" is one cultivated by the Japan that has been my home since my birth in 1962 (Murakami 2001b, p. 130).

This essential Japanese identity of Superflat is reinforced by the ways in which Murakami connects (visually and ideologically) the kawaii (cute) forms of anime and manga with the playful aesthetic of the Edo Eccentrics and the flat aesthetics of Japanese screen painting. In Superflat the Edo Eccentrics function as the ‘DNA’ of contemporary anime and manga culture and visual aesthetic (Murakami 2000a, p. 25), following on from Tsuji Nobuo’s argument of a lineage of playfulness in Japanese art (1986; 2001). This foundation is then used to propose Superflat as an alternate lineage of Japanese visual culture, one that breaks away from the canon of twentieth century bijutsu and Western art history.

Murakami argues that Japanese post-war popular culture is more culturally authentic than the imported forms and concepts of kindai bijutsu. While Murakami’s affirms the hybridity of contemporary Japan and its westernisation, this is then reterritorialised as both a characteristic of contemporary Japanese national-cultural identity and as something that existed prior to Japan’s modernisation. In this way Murakami locates himself at the centre of discourses which construct Edo and pre-Meiji Japan as the site of Japan’s cultural authenticity and then connects this to contemporary expressions, thereby circumnavigating post-Meiji Japan (see Gluck 1998; Ivy 1995). In these discourses Edo becomes the repository of nostalgic yearnings for premodern,
‘traditional’ Japan (see Ivy 1995) or, alternatively, postmodern expressions in Japan are considered to be a revival of Edo Japan (Edo functions here as the site of a culturally authentic Japan), and thus postmodern expressions are considered to be particularly ‘indigenous’ to Japan (Karatani 1997).

[IMAGE REMOVED]

Figure 6: Cosmos

At the same time, Murakami (qtd. in Kelmachter 2002, p. 73) has emphasised that he is not presenting Superflat as the definitive interpretation of Japanese art, but that his curatorial intention is to use the opportunity to create an epistemological context (in Western art worlds, and then subsequently in Japan) for his assertion of anime and manga as being at least as equal in aesthetic value, if not more so, to bijutsu and Western art (Fujiwara 2005, p. 67). Murakami’s ideology of original contemporary Japanese identity is articulated clearly in the context of trying to establish his profile internationally, however.

...I was looking for a form that would express my originality, or, let’s say, that would make my name, so that my works could be sold in the art world as I then perceived it. But what was my identity? So I felt that the only thing I could do, to explain that absence of identity; was to pile up all the formative layers that had contributed to my background: for example, my work in the field of nihon-ga, the solider figures that I used, my very marked taste for manga and for anime. I thought that by making all that clear, by showing how I had existed without any real identity, I would be able to start up something else (Murakami qtd. in Kelmacher, p. 73).
As stated previously, Murakami does not use original to refer to a ‘pure’ concept of a cultural expression unformed by other foreign influences; rather, Murakami positively asserts the innovation of anime and manga culture as Japanese while simultaneously recognising that these are influenced by westernisation. Furthermore, when he refers to the absence of his identity, this is his perception of the lack of a clearly understood foundation for art in Japan. Murakami explains this lack in Japan by dismissing the non-provision of a Western post-Enlightenment conceptual framework for art in Japanese art education, as an outcome from the implementation of kindai bijutsu.

In the West, music, painting, sculpture, poetry, and the like are called bijutsu. ...Today, the differences among the terms geijutsu, bijutsu, and "art" have become very minute. ...Geijutsu I use to refer to all forms of art. Bijutsu, on the other hand, refers to the visual arts, does not include music or poetry, and is divided into Japanese painting, Western painting, and sculpture. Art, however, seems to me to be the contemporary form of the term geijutsu. The concept of "freedom" within in these various terms for art in Japan is not freedom in the sense of discovering oneself and then examining one's surroundings from that perspective. In the Japanese context, the term refers to a state like that of a newborn: not bound by limits, not connected to the system, not filled with information. It is a blank state (Murakami 2000a, pp. 15-7).

Later, Murakami re-emphasises how this ‘non-discriminating freedom’ became the basis for art in Japan, and how the focus on technique rather than art historical context and dialectical development in Japanese art education has reinforced this ‘groundless’ place. Therefore for Murakami, art in Japan remains an ambiguous concept for the general population (p. 17).

Once the axis of time has been introduced, how can we achieve "freedom"? The approach to that sort of original concept is done through the Western-style view of "art." The respect afforded to originality in that view of art is one of great difference from the Japanese view (p. 23).

Although Murakami’s intention is to address this state of groundless freedom, and he aims to utilise the Edo Eccentrics as a marker of Japan’s own avant-gardism, he ends up not only reasserting a division between a Japanese and Western concept of art, but he then privileges a Western theoretical framework for art.

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205 In particular, this Westernisation refers to the influx of American popular culture, particularly after the Second World War, as well as European comic and cinematic conventions that influenced the development of manga and subsequently anime (see Kinsella 2000).

206 Kaneda (2003) argues that the concept of ‘freedom’ in Japanese Art Education is adopted from the West (p. 18), but that there was difficulties in communicating this concept more generally within Japan, and it remains a challenging concept to address within contemporary art education.
As stated, one of the characteristics of globalisation is its potential to enable a de-centring movement, what Appadurai (1996) refers to as isomorphic formations, in transnational cultural flows. At the same time, one of the key means through which the non-West is able to articulate its identity in this process is by engaging with Western codes and structures (Hall 1995). Therefore, Superflat is able to communicate a cultural specificity through the framework of Western exhibitions and art markets. Yet the ever-present danger with this position is that the centrality of the United States and Europe is re-asserted rather than challenged (Winther 1994, p. 63). Murakami explicitly reinforces this centrality by stating his clear intention of establishing a profile in the New York, London and Paris art scenes, and always setting up the West as a standard (Kelmachter 2002, p. 76). Murakami demonstrates careful consideration of the ways in which his work is received in the West:

Currently, the ivory castle of contemporary art is the U.S. and Europe, in other words, the West. It is certainly not Japan, China, or Australia. The influence of the U.S., and New York in particular, is still as powerful as ever (Murakami 2001b, p. 130).

In Murakami’s rhetoric Japan is discursively constructed in a variety of often seemingly contradictory ways: it is offered as the site of future global creativity, as a site of cultural particularity, and as a site that lacks a strong foundation for contemporary art. Thus, Japan is not a singular entity in Murakami’s statements; it operates as both the problem and the solution for Japanese art. Furthermore, in Murakami’s own work there is ‘endless circuit of mutual references’ (Minami 2001), and he reinforces Japanese popular culture, drawn from *anime* and *manga*, as ‘inauthentic’ and post-war Japan as ‘fully Westernised’. Yet at the same time, this hybridity can also be essentialised to present Japan’s national identity as a culture of assimilation. Thus the Otherness of Superflat is itself comprised of many signifiers, which are reterritorialised as Japanese.

In some ways, Superflat can be interpreted as a postcolonial defensive reaction to the colonisation of *kindai bijutsu*. Superflat is presented as a localised expression of cultural uniqueness that resists the global hegemony of Western art and the colonialist history of *bijutsu*. Thus, it follows other defensive formations of local expressivities in relation to cultural homogenisation (see Hall 1995). Superflat can therefore also be seen as challenging Western art history by offering *otaku* and Edo forms as ‘icons of excessive otherness’ (Matsui 2001a, p. 48). This resistance, in turn, can also be interpreted as a strategic use of identity as a commodity and
as a collusive Orientalist spectacle. This is a position Sawaragi (qtd. in Maeda 2002) tries, unconvincingly, to deflect. By explicitly emphasising the differences of Superflat, and Superflat as Japanese, Murakami becomes open to criticism that he is merely providing a futuristic Orientalist spectacle for Western audiences (Shimada 2002, pp. 188-89). Even Murakami acknowledges the tendency for Superflat to be conceived as a self-Orientalised vision mirroring Western Orientalism:

When I conceive an exhibition, I try to determine which aspect of the “core” of the Japanese specificity it is most important to focus on, and also which is our biggest complex. And, at the same time, where I would like to locate the meeting between us and, say, the French or the English, what are the aspects of our culture that they detest…But if I were to succumb to the temptation of doing the same thing [as the “exotic” or “colonialist” Western curations of Japanese artists], I would create a world that was completely shaped by Western vision. That’s why I wanted to present what is going on in the Japanese world in my own way. But I am well aware that most people don’t see much difference between my approach and that of Western curators (Murakami qtd. in Kelmachter 2002, pp. 99-101).

He demonstrates his awareness of the politics in play by defining his exhibition Coloriage (Colouring) at the Foundation Cartier as post-Japonisme:

[The concept behind the exhibition] is the new, transforming and morphing context which brings to the surface the sense of distance, both conceptually and time-wise, between the contemporary creative sense of Japan and the Japonisme of the past which retains the context of Western art while straying from those orbits. In other words, new Japonisme, or post Japonisme…they came not out of the Western “art,” but out of the genres that are called subculture in the West. That is the coloring book created by Japan… (pp. 103-4).

Murakami’s strategy echoes the export art of the late nineteenth century in which new works were deliberately created for foreign markets, according to the dictates of those markets (Conant 1991, pp. 82-4). Export objects were deliberately constructed to appeal to the taste for Japonisme that was fashionable in Europe and the United States at the time. With these objects, aesthetic expression was not detached from commercial imperatives. In this way, objects were deliberately self-Orientalised in order to capitalise on their cultural Otherness in Western markets. In fact, Murakami’s work has been explicitly identified in this manner:

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Q: Is it not the case, though, that the more Murakami draws on non-western elements, the easier it is for Westerners to view him with Orientalist eyes?
A: This is a difficult argument to refute. However, it is not the case that he is just exporting products to suit Western taste. The work has an edge to it, it exists at the frontline of the divide between the two cultures (Maeda 2002)
Here’s a fresh version of Japonisme for the twenty-first century (Rosenblum 2002, p. 80).

However, in this proposal Murakami tends to repeat the ongoing discursive constructions of Japan and the West as a dichotomy, which tends to mutually form and reinforce each other as different, for example:

The difference in the reception of the games “Virtual Fighter” and “Mortal Combat” in the United States and Japan made me think about how each country weighs the importance of dimensional reality. Americans do not find the three-dimensional polygons of “Virtual Fighter” realistic, and even base their two-dimensional animation on reconstruction of footage from actual actors in order to make it more real. I thought that perhaps understanding the difference in that montage circuit might be the new theme of Japanese painting in the international art world. When “Virtual Fighter” appeared, we Japanese felt that we had finally entered actual space within the computer (Murakami 2000b, p. 123).

For Murakami the key difference between Japan and the West is the definition of what constitutes contemporary art:

Although Superflat may have carried the label of “art” in Japan, it never escaped its subcultural identity. But in American, where the hierarchy of genres is well-established, the exhibition was immediately accepted into the critical discourse of art. In the same Western context, the exhibition was invited to France as an “art exhibition,” plain and simple (Murakami 2005b, p. 157).

As Iwabuchi (1994) argues, self-Orientalism, while expressive of some resistance, is a two-way mirror of mutual fascination in which Japan and the West construct each other. In contrast, the interaction between cultures, which occurs in contemporary globalisation, problematises the discursive construction of Japan and the West as essentialised and bounded territories, always in opposition.

At the same time, to only assume that Murakami simplistically essentialises Japan and the West misrepresents the complex operations engaged in the production-consumption of Superflat. While Murakami explicitly defines Superflat as ‘anti-Western’ (2003), at the same time he emphasises how Superflat is intended to bridge the gap between the different cultural sites of Japan and the West:

Japan is cursed with a particularly troublesome awareness of “beauty.” Getting your message across in American is simpler, sometimes almost too simple…On the other hand, we Japanese are quite adept at the difficult art of expressing the nest of snakes in our heads, a form of expression which of course proves incomprehensible to the average Westerner. I feel that projects like my Superflat exhibition and other
presentations of my work are good examples of art that bridges this gap (Murakami 2001b, p. 144).

While he proposes Superflat as ‘bridging the gap,’ Murakami has a tendency to negate and limit other points of possible connection between the Superflat aesthetic and Western visual culture, such as the experience of late capitalism and digital technology which influence both Japanese and Western contemporary cultures. He also argues for the ‘incomprehension’ of the situation Western audiences and proposes Superflat as a means to contextualise the situation (ibid).

However, to reduce Superflat to a collusive Orientalism, or to see it as just a commodification of identity, in a pejorative sense, misinterprets the dynamics in play. Murakami’s position is complex and contradictory. There is evidence that Murakami is both proffering resistance as well as marketing his work strategically. Firstly, Murakami articulates his identity through the exhibition structures of the West as well as through conventional signifiers of Japanese aesthetics in order to establish his profile and to sell his work. Yet, he also acknowledges the ambivalences of his own position, and the playfulness of this global ‘soy sauce’ flavouring.

In the worldview that holds delicate flavouring as the only concept of “beauty” with any value, heavy flavouring is taboo, and too much stimulation is definitely problematic... In order to create something that is understandable both to the West and Japan, what is needed is an ambivalent flavor and presentation... (p. 131).

One of the key strategies articulating this ambivalent flavouring is the way in which Murakami has constructed his identity as a global brand.

2.4.1 GROSS NATIONAL COOL: THE GLOBAL BRANDING OF MURAKAMI

Recognizable fashion brands, interpreted as status symbols around the globe, have become perhaps the most fluid cultural currency in the world. In Japan the display of branded clothing and accessories takes on almost messianic fervor, and has arguably spawned the recent fad of excessive label consciousness among the top-level designers themselves. It is a process one could call superflattening, as the essence of the coveted object - in this case a brand-name dress or purse - is transformed through hype and consumer demand into a stylized graphic object that is almost nothing but brand (Darling 2001b, p. 83).

Global branding and the commodification of cultural identity are useful conceptual frameworks for Superflat and Takashi Murakami. Murakami and Superflat are global brands operating through customised markets and products, utilising the processes of glocalisation – adapting a globally dispersed product for local conditions. By using the concept of customisation the global
circulation of Murakami’s core image can be examined. Murakami’s global image has been constructed and circulated through media image networks, such as the Internet, television, magazines and newspapers, simultaneous to his exhibitions. The construction of the ‘Murakami’ brand has enabled him to utilise these networks to promote a particular image of his work, while simultaneously allowing him to articulate and express different facets of this image in different markets, forms and products. In the United States and Europe in general Murakami circulates his work as art through the conventional institutions of art, primarily galleries, auction houses, exhibition catalogues and art publications, whereas in Japan he operates through established commercial institutions, such as Louis Vuitton, and amateur fan markets, such as komike (comic fan conventions) and Geisai. Of course, this is an obvious generalisation. Murakami is a well-established figure in the contemporary Japanese art world, and he is published in the major art magazine Bijutsu Techo. Therefore, he still exploits his position as an artist in Japan, even if the public exposure to his work is through commercial contexts. Furthermore, these two spheres of activity are not completely separate; there are points at which they overlap and contradict each other. Through the complex entanglements of global media networks shared transnational audiences for Murakami’s works emerge. In order to understand how Murakami has created this position it is necessary to trace how he first established his profile in the United States and Japan.

Murakami initially trained in nihonga, but has revealed that he became dissatisfied with the hierarchical structure of nihonga and its lack of relevancy with contemporary forms of popular culture (Murakami 2000a, p. 17). He sought to rectify this by establishing himself in the contemporary art scene in Tokyo. As part of his desire to create a bridge between young consumers and art, Murakami started to collaborate with otaku model-makers to create models of his figure sculptures.208 During this period, due to the minimal market and audience for contemporary art in Japan, Murakami wanted to establish a profile and market for his work in the United States and European art worlds (Koyama 2001; Murakami 2001b).209 Initially there was little interest from conventional Japanese contemporary art galleries in what Murakami was doing;  

208 These figures were exhibited at the model exhibition Wonder Festival and featured in the model magazine Model Graphix (April, 1998). The Superflat exhibition was also a significant break from Neo-Pop in that it launched the practices of otaku, such as Bome, internationally (Ito et al. 2004). On some level what Murakami is doing is not new; Tadanori Yokoo was well known for crossing-over between the art and commercial design worlds; what is different is that Murakami is doing this within an international platform. The relationship between art and commercial graphic design is examined in Chapter Three.

209 Murakami first met Tomio Koyama while a student at the University of Tokyo; Koyama’s knowledge of the media and international art markets was critical to Murakami’s establishment overseas (Kaikaikiki 2001).
the link with *otaku* culture seemed obvious to most Japanese critics and curators (Koyama 2001).\(^{210}\) Not until 2001, after the success of *Superflat* overseas, Murakami was given a solo exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art Tokyo. For a young Japanese artist to be granted a solo exhibition at one of the large municipal contemporary art galleries in Tokyo was unusual. These galleries try to attract audiences through the exhibition of 'big name' overseas artists (Minami 2003).\(^{211}\) In the West Murakami has been more clearly located in an art context.\(^ {212}\) As stated in the introduction to this chapter, *Superflat* was immediately accepted in the art discourses of Western art worlds (Murakami 2005b, p. 157), whereas in Japan it was still connected to *otaku* identity and consumption particularly because that was one of Murakami's early areas of focus in relation to his *POKU* (*Pop Art + otaku*) concept.

Murakami’s construction of his identity as a Japanese artist was first formed while he was overseas:

> I would like to say that this [Superflat] is the response to the question “what is Japan’s own post pop culture?” Or else, to the question “Is an original and typically Japanese concept still possible while the Japanese quote, unquote, became so “sadly westernised”? This was a theme I permanently had to deal with as I was pursuing artistic activities outside of my home country (Murakami 2003).

While Murakami’s initial profile in Japan was more clearly associated with art, this identity is now influenced by the commercial contexts in which he operates, for example his commission for Louis Vuitton and the Roppongi Hills development. In 2003 Murakami was commissioned by Marc Jacobs for Louis Vuitton to redesign the Louis Vuitton logo for a line of accessories in the Spring/Summer Collection (Vuitton 2003) [Figure 38]. This was a lucrative decision by Louis Vuitton, and it helped to establish Murakami as a major figure in the art world.

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\(^{210}\) There are only two or three museums in Japan that have works by Murakami in their permanent collection (Hirano 2003; Sato 2003); the majority of Murakami’s works, at least seventy percent, are sold in the United States and Europe (see Koyama 2001).

\(^{211}\) The conceptual bias around the cultural capital of categorising Murakami’s works as art and/or commercial production is examined in Chapter Three. This view was reinforced by the way in which Murakami’s work can be viewed and accessed within Japan, which is mainly through commercial venues. For example, the curator of Murakami’s show at the MOT was also criticised by the contemporary art world in Japan for being ‘too populist’ (Minami 2003).

\(^{212}\) In 1994 Murakami was awarded an Asian Cultural Council Fellowship as part of the P.S.1 International Studio Program. In 1998 he was a Visiting Professor at the School of Art and Architecture, UCLA, in Los Angeles. Tim Blum, (of Blum & Poe gallery, Los Angeles) was also a critical in launching Murakami’s profile in the United States (McGee 2003). Blum lived in Tokyo in the late 1980s and early 1990s and was a professional associate of Tomio Koyama. Blum acted as a mediator for Murakami in the United States. Murakami also participated in the 1996 Asia-Pacific Triennial at Queensland Art Gallery in Australia. However, it was not until the exhibition *Superflat* in 2001 that his image was propelled into the wider public arena and received international media exposure within contemporary art worlds.
Vuitton; a third of all Louis Vuitton sales are in Japan, they are mainly consumed by women in their twenties and thirties with a high disposal income (Japan’s schizophrenic shoppers seeks only the best 2001). That same year, Murakami was also commissioned by Mori Minoru to create the graphic identity for the new Roppongi Hills complex, a high profile development in Tokyo. This project included designing a series of character-based graphic identities for the complex, as well as short animation that is played prominently in the key entry to the museum [Figure 7, Figure 8].

This commercial identity is reinforced by the utilisation of the character aesthetic of anime and manga, so ubiquitous in everyday life in Japan. Murakami’s identity as an artist is now more associated with his success in Western art markets, particularly how he exported the Superflat aesthetic to art markets in the United States. This profile has been well supported through the media: Bijutsu Techo, lifestyle magazines such as Brutus and Luca, and NHK produced television programs (Yoshitomo Nara X Takashi Murakami: New Pop Revolution 2002).213

There is a great complexity operating in Murakami’s strategy: Murakami is reliant on the differentiation between the geo-cultural markets, which allows for the different niche projects to be realised. Simultaneously, he is reliant on a certain amount of intertwining and fluidity between those markets in order to build up his profile as an artist. Establishing his art identity in the United States and Europe becomes critical in enabling Murakami to work in Japan. In this way Murakami is explicitly manipulating the structures that facilitate international cultural exchange in a global paradigm, and then using this strategy to create audiences for his work in Japan (Otori 2003). However, this strategic interplay of markets does not occur without conflicts and contradictions. Murakami has been criticised in Japan for explicitly making work to sell in the United States and European markets (Shimada 2002), and reinforcing the institutional aesthetic

213 Murakami was the major feature in a special edition of Luca in 2003 (‘10 Stories about Takashi Murakami’ 2003).
of those markets (Matsui 1999a, p. 53). In contrast, in the United States he is criticised for his ‘brash’ commercialism and blatant marketing of art as a business (Finch 2003). This complex game, intertwining the cultural capital of Murakami’s identity as an artist and the definition of his art works from the commercial products, is examined in more detail in Chapter Three. However, it is useful to indicate this relationship here as an example of the global dynamic in which Murakami operates, and the way in which he produces his work for customised markets in between different sites. Murakami utilises this specificity as a commodity to market his work in the West, including constructing Superflat in the terms of Western art. Superflat was intended to be understandable in a Western art historical and postmodern framework and is clearly linked to familiar constructions of Japanese aesthetics embodying two-dimensions: drawing from screen-paintings, *ukiyo-e*, and contemporary *anime* and *manga*.

Murakami wants to create a new epistemology for art in Japan — his soy sauce recipe for beauty — based on the synthesis of the Edo Eccentrics and the contemporary aesthetic of *manga* and *anime*. The following section introduces Murakami’s presentation of the Edo Eccentric lineage in Superflat and examines how this is framed by a Western concept of avant-gardism and original expression. While Murakami uses this concept of lineage to construct an alternative history of Superflat art and the revival of premodern forms of artistic avant-gardism in contemporary expressions, the next section seeks to problematise the avant-garde and lineage concept. The subsequent association of Edo culture with contemporary Japanese popular culture also reinforces the identity of Superflat as Japanese. *Past + Present=Future* examines the discourses and exposes the conflicts built around this conflation between Edo, contemporary expressions, and the postmodern identity of Japan.

### 2.4.2 *PAST + PRESENT=FUTURE*

Murakami emphasises Superflat as emerging from an alternate lineage to Western art history. This lineage is presented as a synthesis between Edo forms and artistic sensibility and the aesthetics and culture of contemporary *anime* and *manga*. For Murakami, this synthesis provides a model for the future. Murakami argues that the visual analogy between the paintings of the Edo Eccentrics and *anime* and *manga* is a particular ‘structural methodology’ controlling the speed of the viewer’s gaze and reinforcing the planarity of the picture surface. This sensibility is what Murakami refers to as ‘Superflatness’. Murakami’s theory of superflatness is influenced by Tsuji Nobuo’s (1970) *Kisō no Keifu* (Lineage of Eccentrics).
I thought that perhaps the way that a picture controls the speed of its observer’s gaze, the course of that gaze’s scan, and the subsequent control of the information flow might match well with the artists concepts that Tsuji described in his book. It was from that hypothesis that my theory of “superflat” was born. All of the “eccentric” artists shared a certain structural methodology, in which they created surface images that erased interstices and this made he observer aware of the images’ extreme planarity (Murakami 2000a, p. 9).

While Tsuji (1986; 2001) makes references to the similarities between the playfulness and distortion of form in the Eccentric artists and contemporary forms of manga and anime, Murakami takes this a step further by identifying similarities between the ‘strange timing’ structure of television animation and the manner in which the Eccentrics (as well as the ukiyo-e artist Katsushika Hokusai) dynamically structure the viewer’s gaze in a zigzag motion [see Figure 9].

This compositional structure not only emphasises the two-dimensionality of the picture surface, but also visualises points of accelerated and de-accelerated movement and tension, as well as static moments, in the painting or animation.

That extreme planarity and distribution of power allowed the viewer to assemble an image in their minds from the fragments they gathered scanning the image. This
movement of the gaze over an image is a key concept in my theory of "superflat" (Murakami 2000a, p. 15).

While it is not the purpose of this thesis to analyse and debate the merits of Murakami’s theory of surfaceness and structuring of the gaze in terms of compositional or pictorial properties, what is examined is the way in which he asserts this structural methodology as ‘extremely Japanese’ - a method of composition and visualising the gaze that occurs prior to the influence of (Western) single-point perspective (p. 15). Murakami identifies both a tendency towards two-dimensionality in Edo works, as well as a tendency towards individualism and eccentricity. Thus by referring to the Edo Eccentrics as the DNA of Superflatness, Murakami sets up a lineage that is both aesthetic and conceptual. Associating Superflat with the Edo Eccentrics reinforces the Japanese identity of Superflat because Edo has been continually constructed as the repository of Japan’s ‘tradition’ throughout the twentieth-century (Gluck 1998). The emphasis on the two-dimensionality of Edo painting (as well as Japanese screen-painting more generally) also serves to reinforce the Japanese identity of Superflat, as it links in to the early influences of Japanese ukiyo-e woodcut prints on Western art (Evett 1982; Guth 1999). This in turn associates Superflatness with the Western discursive construction of postmodern Japan (Barthes 1982; Baudrillard 1988a, p. 76). At the same time, in Japanese and Western discourses Edo figured as the model for Japan’s postmodernity (Karatani 1997). Furthermore, Murakami’s identification of Superflatness as transcendent of Western art is complex: many of the Edo Eccentrics were already including Western painting techniques into their work (Rosenfield, Cranston & Richard 1999); and, as already stated, Murakami frames the Eccentrics in the terms the Western modern avant-garde. Furthermore, Murakami’s merging of Edo with the present, particularly with otaku consumption of anime and manga, also tends to reinforce a particular Japanese identity, even though much of the analysis of otaku culture emphasises its deconstructive processes of identity (see Azuma 2000). The following subsections will address each of these three issues, the avant-gardism of the Edo Eccentrics, images of postmodern Japan, and the construction of otaku identity, in relation to Murakami’s presentation of Superflat.

Eccentricity and avant-gardism

During the Tokugawa (Edo) period (1600-1867) there was ‘a growing penchant for eccentricity’
Eccentricity refers to the alternate creations and socio-political resistances expressed by artists, writers and scholars during this period, both in their work and their behaviour. The alternative resistance expressed acted against the dominant Confucian ideology of the period, which emphasised harmony, consensus and group-orientated society (p. 20). The Eccentrics drew on ideas of individualism, reclusion and personal elevation influenced by the Chinese literati beginning in the early eighteenth-century. They also drew on, as well as rejected, the values, techniques and scientific attitudes of the West (pp. 267-70).

Figure 10: Soga Shōhaku, *A dragon emerging from the sea* mid-eighteenth century, *Makuri* panels, ink on paper, 165.2 x 270 cm (2 panels), Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Source: Tsuji 1986, p. 70.

In his major study of the Eccentrics, Tsuji Nobuo (1986) emphasises that Edo eccentricity was characterised by two key features: parody and visual tricks (p. 63). He defines this period as being characterised by strong individualism, freedom, the desire for innovation and strangeness, and a spirit of play. Two critical factors influencing the propensity towards eccentricity in art during this period can be attributed to the increase in a competitive market for art sales, which was driven in part by the increased economic growth in the new merchant class, and the sense of ‘stagnation’ in the two major painting schools (*Kanō* and *Tosa*) of the time. During the Edo period, the arts, which since Nara had been cultivated by the aristocracy and samurai class,

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214 The term *kijin* is taken from the Chinese term *ji ren*. It has been variously translated as extraordinary or exceptional and it refers to persons exempt from normative rules of behaviour because they belong to a transcendent realm (Rosenfield, Cranston & Richard 1999, p. 26). These people were seen as superior and their extraordinariness was considered to be an inherent trait rather than resulting from attainment or learning.

215 While these artists are often grouped together because they were considered eccentric and worked at the same time in Kyoto, they were quite distinct from each other (Hickman 1989, p. 15).

216 Rosenfield identifies that a similar situation occurred in China during the Ming period (1368-1644), when the *Zhe* School became popular (Rosenfield, Cranston & Richard 1999, pp. 286-7).
became the domain of urban townspeople in Edo, Kyoto and Osaka (shimin geijutsu) (Tsuji 1986, p. 61). The rise of the urban Edo culture, with the new merchant patrons, and the commercialisation of cultural forms, such as the development of commercial print culture, created a competitive environment for artists that stimulated artistic pluralism and the pursuit of novelty (Guth 1996a, pp. 11-2). The increase in exhibitions enabled artists to exhibit outside of the conventional schools, Kanō and Tosa, which encouraged the construction of individual artist celebrities, supported by the emergence of artist biographies (p. 40). Furthermore, the competitive markets for court, religious and private patronage in Kyoto during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century influenced professional artists such as Maruyama Okyō, his followers Nagasawa Rosetsu (1754-1799) [Figure 11] and Ito Jakuchū (1716-1800), and rival Soga Shōhaku (1730-1781) [Figure 10], to use ‘novel and sensational effects’ (p. 17). At the same time, eccentricity had become fashionable for patrons (both wealthy Samurai and merchants) who demanded ‘novelty and excitement’ from artists (p. 286). Tsuji argues that during this period new avenues of development were pursued in art, particularly entertainment and play. Tsuji stresses that the pursuit of play was already a feature of art during the Heian (794-1185) and Kamakura (1185-1333) periods; however, this revival was distinct in that it was influenced by Chinese and European art.

[IMAGE REMOVED]

Figure 11: Nagasawa Rosetsu, Bull and Elephant
late eighteenth century, 6 six-fold screens, ink and colour on paper, 155.5 x 360.4 cm, Shin'enkan Collection Los Angeles County Museum of Art. Source: Tsuji 1986, p. 66.

While open criticism of Tokugawa rule was illegal during the Edo period, ‘outlandish’ behaviour

217 Tsuji (1986) also includes Katsushika Hokusai (1760-1849).
was validated through association with Daoism, and artists were accredited further flexibility in their behaviour. Artists expressed this resistance in a variety of ways, demonstrating novel and exciting effects. These expressions included emphasising anti-craftsmanship, sensational compositions and outrageous themes, producing unusual quantities of works, abnormal attention to detail, and the emphasis on grotesque, supernatural, and sadistic subjects.

The artists...violated the rules of the orthodox, establishment painting schools [Kanō, Tosa, and later Rimpa] in their compositions, and brush techniques. They contradicted the values of the ruling elite either by ignoring their favorite pictorial themes or by lampooning them. Kijin artists adopted and encouraged mental attitudes (irreverence, egotism, sensationalism, lubricity) that conflicted with the puritanical ethos of Japanese Neo-Confucianism (Rosenfield, Cranston & Richard 1999, p. 35).

In his research on the Eccentrics, the art historian John Rosenfield emphasises that while the Eccentrics may share similarities with late eighteenth century Romantic artists such as Blake and Goya or the early avant-garde work of Vincent van Gogh and Picasso, because they express individuality and personal visions, ultimately ‘eccentricity in Japanese art was traditional and conventionalised’ (p. 36). Thus, the Eccentrics were not necessarily seeking explicitly to abolish or subvert societal structures in the manner of the modern Western avant-garde (ibid). While Rosenfield’s analysis of Western avant-gardism is somewhat generalised and idealised, the critical point is that Japanese Eccentric artists were as much conformists as they were dissenters against conventions. Rather than seeking to overthrow or revolutionise pictorial representation, as the early twentieth-century Western avant-garde did, the Eccentrics aimed to reinvigorate older stylistic and thematic conventions. However, it is interesting to note that when artists did create a ‘truly radical transformation’ in terms of pictorial representation this was heavily influenced by Western ideas and practices circulating in the Edo period (ibid). Yet, for Rosenfield, the Eccentrics provided a critical philosophical foundation that anticipated the social, political, economic and military transformations of the Meiji period:

Japan is often called a land of paradox, and the historical role of Japan’s kijin artists – radically shaking up a system they sought to preserve – was paradoxical indeed. By altering the norms of ruling class imagery, they subtly undermined the authority of the Tokugawa regime. By giving artistic voice to elements in society estranged from the regime, they anticipated the emergence of the leaders of the Meiji Japan. By adsorbing

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218 For example, Ōkyo focussed on greater realism (shasei) and extreme detail than had previously been evidenced in painting. Nagasawa Rosetsu emphasised gross distortions of natural forms and macabre subjects. Soga Shōhaku parodied of high-culture themes (classical Chinese themes) and painted familiar subjects in exaggerated ways (p. 70). Ito Jakuchü created innovative painting techniques, such as the mosaic pattern of Birds, Animals and Flowering Plants.
Chinese and Western imagery and ideas, they enriched the nation’s intellectual life and planted the seeds for greater changes to come. Arising from a tradition that allowed for limited dissent, Japan’s kijin artists and writers helped prepare Japan for its forceful entry into the Modern age — and for retaining the basic elements of its traditional, cultural, and artistic polity (Rosenfield, Cranston & Richard 1999, p. 37).

The Eccentrics provide a useful model for Murakami because of how they expressed resistance using existing structures, synthesised a range of art codes and influences, and worked outside the dominant art system, supported by a growing urban commercial culture. In many ways, this commercial model provides an interesting comparison to Murakami who utilises the networks of the commercial urban culture to sell his work, such as the konbini (convenience store) edition of Superflat Museum (2003), the Geisai exhibitions modelled on komike (comic fan convention) and the Louis Vuitton commission. There are also parallels between the logic of capitalism and contemporary art markets, with the marketability of novel effects. Like the Eccentrics, Murakami is able to utilise the avenues and influences of commodity culture, in order to sell his work, issues that will be analysed in more detail in Chapter Three.

As stated, Murakami argues that the Edo Eccentrics are the model DNA for the avant-gardism of contemporary otaku culture:

“Super flat,” one form of “Japanese “avant-garde” “art,” is an “-ism” — like Cubism, Surrealism, Minimalism, and Simulationalism before it — only this is one we have created. Though the Japanese “avant-garde” has always been alternative and underground and has not yet made its appearance on the main stage, as the DNA that formed Japanese culture, “super flatness” has been continually producing the “avant-garde” up until the present day (Murakami 2000a, p. 25).

Murakami then connects this new beauty to contemporary otaku culture. He argues that this broader conception of art has more relevance to contemporary Japanese society, as well as relevance to Western art history, because otaku culture demonstrates the creativity and originality that is (or has been) privileged in Western art history. By self-consciously emphasising the uniqueness of otaku and Eccentric avant-gardism, Murakami aims to represent a trajectory distinct from modern Western art history and from the imported concepts and institutions of bijutsu.

Simultaneous to this localised expression of originality, Superflat is also presented in the terms of a Western post-Enlightenment view of art and avant-gardism. Therefore the trajectory and avant-gardism of Superflat is still framed in a Western European concept of art. Furthermore, as well as
working in the structures and codes of Western art markets, Murakami continues to follow the national exhibition painting rules, so that he reinforces the ‘institutional aesthetic’ of the finished autonomous object (Matsui 1999a, p. 53). His whole project, emphasising the Murakami brand, also serves to reinforce his own subjectivity and is underpinned by a critical rationality. As a result, Superflat can be understood to be both constructed in terms of post-Enlightenment Western art discourses, while also emphasising its distinct identity.

The interest in the Eccentrics cannot be wholly detached from Murakami’s aim to market his work as Japanese in Western art markets. It is thus critical to note that the Eccentric works that are included in the Superflat catalogue are all held in United States collections. Thus the lineage of Eccentricity that Murakami presents is very much one that is already familiar and accessible to Western viewers. Western patrons have also avidly collected the Eccentrics (Rosenfield, Cranston & Richard 1999); as Rosenfield’s interpretation attests, the concept of artistic resistance can be readily identified in the codes of Western art and avant-gardism. This deliberate structuring of Superflat in terms and codes understandable in a Western art context is also the means through which Murakami can articulate the uniqueness of his Japanese identity. Simultaneously, it also facilitates the sales of his work in the Western art markets. It is clear that the aesthetic lineage of superflatness from the Edo Eccentrics is utilised as a strategic means to articulate the Japanese identity of Superflat in the terms and concepts of Western art. Thus it demonstrates Murakami’s ability to negotiate his particular artistic identity and lineage within the hegemony of Western art.

As well as constructing the origins of Superflatness in Edo art, the Superflat lineage also articulates a synthesis between Edo and postmodern expressivities. In this model, Murakami presents Edo as the point of origin for contemporary Japanese visual culture. The following section will situate the presentation of the ‘past + present = future’ ideology of Superflat in relation to the 1980s rhetoric on Japan’s postmodernity, in order to reiterate how this postmodern identity continually reproduces established discourses on the cultural uniqueness of Japan. Murakami again utilises this postmodern identity in order to frame Superflat as Japanese.

219 Since the 1950s interest in the Eccentrics has proliferated in Japan, China and the West. A relevant example here is Tsuji, who published *kisō no keifu* in the 1970s. Rosenfield attributes this interest in Eccentricity to the increased recognition of the particularities and localised versions of ‘non-Western’ modernities as well as Japan’s own interest in its unique modernity.
Postmodern Japan

As already discussed in the literature review in Chapter One, there is a tendency in analyses of Superflat to identify it as a postmodern aesthetic clearly associated with contemporary Japanese culture. Japan has commonly been cited as the epitome of postmodernity in many Western, and subsequently Japanese, postmodern theoretical discourses, particularly in the 1980s and 1990s (Barthes 1982; Kojève 1980 [1969], pp. 161-2). In these discourses, Japan was considered to be a model for the world in terms of challenging the unified subjectivities and binary formulations of modernism; features that Western postmodern (and poststructuralist) theories interrogated.

“Japan” came to be defined, first by foreigners (mostly Western), and later by the Japanese themselves, as a cultural entity lacking the modern notion of the autonomous subject and thus one not only aiding and abetting the proliferation of fetishism, snobbery and aesthetic stylisation but one actively encouraging it (Iida 2002, pp. 7-8).

In popular Western media discourses Japan was used as an example of postmodern virtual realities, for example the novel Neuromancer by William Gibson (2000 [1984]). At the same time, postmodern philosophy, particularly French poststructural theory, began to influence Japanese critical theory and the analysis of contemporary culture (Ivy 1997).

Aspects of Japanese culture, previously considered pejoratively, such decoration and technical skills of mimicry were re-evaluated in light of postmodern theories that challenged the modernist concepts of originality, rationality and subjectivity and celebrated the copy, the decorative, and non-essentialised identities. These were features of Japanese culture established prior to its twentieth century modernisation and the adoption of Western epistemologies and economic and political structures. Thus, as part of the discourse debating Japan’s postmodernity and the re-examination of Japan’s modernity, there was a re-evaluation of the Edo period as the repository of Japan’s tradition and as the site of Japan’s ‘original’ postmodernity (Karatani 1997), as well as an affirmation of concepts and forms that had initially been rejected during the Meiji period transformations (Gluck 1998; Ivy 1995). Another feature of this period of discourse was the introduction of French poststructuralist theory to Japan with a particular cultural inflection. For

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220 Alexandre Kojève identified Edo as a precursor to postmodern society and similarly Roland Barthes interpreted cultural elements of Japan (many that were based on forms and ideas from Japan’s nineteenth century) as a realisation of poststructural semiotics. However, while it is important to note that Barthes was not trying to identify or define the ‘real’ Japan his approach did contribute to the image of Japan as postmodern.
example, the critique of the logocentrism of Western modernism was adopted as part of the
critique of Japan’s adoption of Western modernism and an assertion of the Japaneseness of the
features of late capitalism in Japan.

A conflation of factors led to Japan being identified as postmodern as scholars in Japan and the
West tried to come to terms with the changing conditions in Japanese culture, and late capitalism
more generally. Coupled with Japan’s status as an economic superpower, many saw
postmodern Japan as triumphing over modernity and over the West (Yoda 2000, p. 648). This
view is highly contested, both in terms of actual evidence of a postmodern change to the social,
political and economic structures of Japan but also the appropriateness of applying the
(arginably) Western philosophical concept to Japan (Árnason & Sugimoto 1995; Miyoshi &
Harootunian 1997). Alternatively, the conditions of late capitalism in Japan are presented as
an opportunity to reconsider Japan’s modernity (Harootunian 1997; Sakai 1997).

One of the problems of the postmodern Japan framework is that it had the potential to reproduce
the paradoxes of modernist discourse by presenting postmodernism as point of cultural
uniqueness, and (Karatani excepted) reinforce a modern chronological and dialectical idea of
linear development, by presenting Japan as the future model for the world. Another critical
issue arises when the rhetoric of Japan’s postmodernity reproduces the same issues of identity
and difference experienced since the late nineteenth century, as Japan grappled with
modernisation. Japan’s identity is asserted as being radically different to the West, to the past,
and as providing a future global model. Indeed there is a tendency in the rhetoric on postmodern
Japan to exaggerate and generalise the differences between Japan and the West in relation to the
influences of late capitalism. This ‘othering’ of postmodern Japan and the West is mutually

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221 In Japanese public discourses there was significant focus on changes to the social, political and economic systems, which had
been constructed as part of Japanese national identity over the previous decades; these discourses emerged in relation to events
such as the death of Emperor Hirohito in 1989, the 1993 election loss by the Liberal Democratic Party (who had been in
government for the previous 38 years), and the bursting of the ‘bubble economy’.

222 For example, different interpretations of postmodern Japan emerge within Miyoshi and Harootunian’s text. Firstly, that Japan’s
premodern Edo period represents the quintessential postmodern (Karatani 1997). Secondly, the postmodern consumer and
commodity culture in 1980s Japan is celebrated, applying Western postmodern concepts to the analysis of Japanese cultural
forms (Field 1997).

223 Of course, some of these criticisms have also been levelled at Western theorisations of postmodernism (see Callinicos 1989).

224 Yoda (2000) emphasises that the collective and the fragmented aspects of Japanese society are not oppositional or
anachronistic impulses, but rather are interconnected dimensions within the (at times contradictory) logic of late capital society
complicit (Iwabuchi 1994), and derives as much from the West’s own perception of Self and Japan as the Other:

[T]he intersection of a Western fascination with an imagined exteriority fused with its own fears of the unknown; and the link was forged in such a way as to exaggerate the difference between the Western self and the Japanese other and to thrust aside the material aspects of the cultural moment, interpreting them instead in terms of Japanese cultural traits

The rhetoric of Japan’s ‘triumph’ over modernity and Japan as a signifier for postmodernity is also complicit with *nihonjinron* discourses (Iida 2002, pp. 7-8) and repeats the nationalist and homogenising tendency in the ‘overcoming the modern’ (*kindai no chōkoku*) discourse that emerged in the 1940s.225 One of the other critical issues raised, in relation to the non-challenge discourses of postmodernism offered to existing epistemologies in Japan, is that postmodern theory became easily consumed as a fashionable commodity and was seen to be collusive to neo-liberal purposes (Ivy 1997, p. 39).

Furthermore, while Western postmodern and poststructural theories deconstructed and challenged modernism, cultural critics, such as Karatani Kōjin (1997), exposed the difficulty in applying this critique to Japan when the logocentrism of Western modernism was never fully characterised by large corporations as well as a labour market based on individual competition. Therefore, Yoda critiques the way in which the dichotomising of individualism and collectivism, which was so prevalent in *nihonjinron* discourses, has also been utilised to reinforce a simplistic binary between Japan and the West, and thus to obfuscate how both individualism and collectivism has supported the logic of late capitalism. Yoda advocates for new ways in which to conceive of contemporary identities in Japan in order to avoid the anti-modern position of reviving pre-modern tradition as Japan’s cultural authenticity; or alternatively, returning to the modern image of the homogenous national unity which is positioned against the fragmented identities of Japan’s postmodernity. For Yoda, both positions reaffirm the identification of Japan in opposition to the West, or the national in opposition to the global, and obfuscate the fundamental issue, which is the globality of capitalism (p. 665). For example, while Akira Asada has been critical of the nationalist rhetoric of the Japan postmodern discourse, Asada also ends up demarcating Japan in contrast to the global. Asada examines the popular cultural expression of J-Pop and J-League (the professional soccer league in Japan) as examples of new forms of commercial cultural expression. For Asada, these expressions are considered to be completely distinct from the aesthetic images of pre-modern Japan, which is conventionally posited as the opposite of the West and from the modern (cited in Yoda, p. 659). Asada criticises ‘J’ culture as a ‘populist, infantile, shallow, and parochial defensive reactions to the deterriorialising impulses of globalisation (ibid). While Asada critiques the superficiality and ‘infantilism’ of J-culture as a parochial retreat from globalisation, Yoda takes an oppositional position and emphasises how it is formed not in opposition to globalisation but as part of the same processes. For Yoda, Asada ends up repeating the dualism that presents Japan as the dichotomy to the West. Yoda advocates for re-imagining the Japan/West binary, and challenging the reification of Japan and the West by revealing the de-centred and pervasive processes of global capitalism.

225 Ironically, this celebrationary discourse asserting Japan’s national triumph obscures the emerging breakdown of the national structure under the conditions of late capitalism in Japan (Yoda 2000, p. 649).
established in Japan. Karatani argued that because Japan had no pre-existing logocentrism it cannot be considered postmodern (in a Western ontological sense, if postmodern is seen as a deconstruction of modernism) (see also Koschmann 1997, p. 139). Karatani argues that Japanese culture has been deconstructive since the Edo period. He argues against the chronology of premodernity, modernity, postmodernity, by presenting Edo Japan as a transcending modern rationality (in this case the epistemologies of China), and thus challenges the idea of Edo Japan as underdeveloped. In contrast to conventions presenting Japan’s modernity as beginning in the Meiji period, Karatani asserts that Japan was postmodern before it was westernised. He thereby disrupts the Western modernisation theory of historical linear continuity and the interpretation of Japan’s modernisation as a parallel to Western modernisation. While the latter points echo other conceptual revisions of modernisation theory, Karatani extends this further by identifying the Edo period as Japan’s postmodernity and as prefiguring that of the West’s. By highlighting the specificities of Japanese culture (the transcendence of the modernity model through the realisation of Japanese sensibilities) Karatani also challenges the Western-centric perspective of poststructural and postmodern theory (Ivy 1997, p. 40). Along with the challenges to rationality, Karatani also argues that Edo Japan experienced a proliferation of mass media images - what Karatani refers to as a state of ‘lightness’. He argues that these elements did not disappear but have persisted and re-emerged in the consumer culture of the 1930s and 1980s. Karatani identifies an ongoing resistance to a depth model of subjectivity and the persistence of play and lightness in Japanese culture. Thus, for Karatani, the 1980s does not present a new cultural condition for Japan, but is a revival of the (already) postmodern Edo.

It is therefore impossible to consider the nineteenth century simply as a premodern era. What stubbornly resisted the “modernization” of Japanese thought and literature in the twentieth century was not simply a premodern sensibility but a mode of thought which in some sense had already transcended the modern. This naturally took the form of a citation of the anti-Western elements of Western thought. Its grand finale was the wartime ideology of “overcoming the modern.”

A similar situation prevails in the Japan of the 1980s. Japan has become a highly developed information-consumption society, in which meaning is information and desire is the desire of the Other, because the “subject” of the nineteenth-century West has never existed in Japan, nor has there been any resistance to the modern. In 1980s Japan (a Japan “liberated” from its obsessions with modernism), parody, pastiche, and collage have become dominant trends. But in the Japanese context, this amounts to a rehabilitation of the nineteenth century. It is a revival of that mood within which late Edo society saw itself as a “paradise of fools.” …The “overcoming of the modern” is once again being touted, but in a different context. This historical stage should not be called postmodernity. For the postmodern, as I have emphasized earlier, designates that which
is transcendental in contradistinction to a mode of thought which lacks exteriority and perceive history in terms of stages and ends (1997, p. 271).\textsuperscript{226}

Therefore Karatani challenges the definition of Japan’s postmodernism as an application of a Western theoretical framework, and the view of postmodern Japan as ‘fully Westernised’. In contrast, for Karatani postmodern Japan is continually providing a model through which the West aims to escape modernity; firstly in the late nineteenth century as the West looked to Edo forms in the development of European modern art and literature, and then again in its latest manifestation in the late twentieth century (Karatani 1994).

The Europeans found in “Japanism” a way out of their own century: they discovered a world without a point of view (a subject), one indifferent to all meaning (p. 262).

At the same time as the West sought from Japan a way out of its own nineteenth century, Japan utilised the modern West to reject its own nineteenth century. Thus Karatani emphasises the ‘incompleteness’ of Japan’s modernity due to the lack of logocentricism and the resultant difficulty of identifying it as postmodern, in a Western poststructural sense.

...Japanese literature attempted to use the nineteenth century of the West to suppress its own Japanese nineteenth century. At the very moment when the avant-garde of the West was challenging the episteme of its nineteenth century and looking to the non-West (especially to Japan) for a way out of its impasse, Japanese literature found itself inscribed within the framework of the nineteenth century, or rather (to go back even further) within a logocentric system. But it is not all that simple. Japanese writers were entirely lacking in the ability to construct, to create a world in its totality, as appeared in Western nineteenth-century novels (p. 264).

However, the conflation of 1980s Japan and Edo is not without criticism. Carol Gluck (1998) dismisses Karatani’s connection between the two periods as ‘silly’, because she argues it eliminates the actualities of Japan’s modernity in the twentieth century. She identifies Karatani’s critique as part of the 1980s ‘Edo boom’, in which critical theorists were trying to come to terms with the transformations of late capitalism, and wanted to identify its sources in ‘nativist tradition’.\textsuperscript{227} As part of this discourse selective elements of Edo culture, such as the Edo Eccentric artists and writers, were celebrated, and Edo become an imagined postmodern playhouse of resistance and triumph over the ‘tyranny of the linear, rationalist modern’ (p. 273-...
4). Gluck argues that Edo functioned in these discourses as an invented repository of Japaneseness and tradition; a cultural Other against which Japan’s modernity could be positioned (p. 262). From the early 1870s until the 1990s Edo has operated as a cultural space that denotes Japanese uniqueness; at different times this has been viewed positively or negatively, so that Edo is continually held up as the mirror for Japan’s modernity (p. 263). The role of Edo as a construction of tradition, and the nostalgic desire to recover a ‘lost’ Japan is examined in the following section in relation to Murakami’s presentation of the Superflat lineage. What needs to indicated here is that in these discourses on Edo, as the model for Japan’s postmodernity, there is clear positing of Japan’s postmodernity in contrast to Western modernism and the West generally, even in Karatani’s discourse.

For Karatani, Edo Japan is not only victorious over modernism, but then the features of postmodernism that can be found in the Edo period are therefore ‘indigenous’ to Japanese culture. However, Karatani’s position results in the same dilemma and duality, in which Japan is positioned against the West and in which Edo is considered to be more culturally authentic than what preceded or followed. Therefore Gluck argues that a new ‘nativist’ discourse emerges in Karatani’s discourse, in which the Japan/West dichotomy remains intact despite the search for a future free from Western definitions, and in which an ‘indigenously’ postmodern Japan provides the model for the world (p. 275-6). Furthermore, Karatani’s discourse has been criticised for failing to acknowledge that contemporary cultural expressivities, such as *otaku* culture, should be considered as late capital developments and expressions.228

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228 Iida (2002) characterises 1990s discourses on Japanese identity, including the ‘Edo boom,’ as a desire for transcendence and spiritual renewal through the restoration of ‘traditional’ cultural values. This occurred simultaneously with Japan’s policy of *kokusaika* and the strengthening of the Japanese economy, and in response to contemporary global processes of transnational economic, political and cultural flows, particularly the changing relations between Japan and United States under post-Cold War conditions. Iida argues that this desire for transcendence can also be read as an internal breakdown in subjectivity and social imagining which is an ongoing effect of historical progression of modernity and can be traced back to the Meiji period. What happened in the 1980s and the 1990s was an intensification of the commercial penetration of subjectivity and the acceleration of a high-technology driven information economy. Furthermore, Iida argues, that challenges within Japan’s modernity throughout the twentieth century have been typically expressed in terms of calls for Japanese identity (p. 6). The 1990s, Iida argues, were accompanied two parallel discourses. Firstly by nihilistic and ‘ironic’ simulated identities of *otaku* culture, and secondly, by the attempt to recover a ‘true’ identity and meaning for Japan through historical revisionism. Iida argues that the split between anxiety and nostalgia are in fact the janus-faced expressions of late modernity: ‘[S]ince both entail a paradoxical self-defence premised upon an inversion of the pain of self-destruction into a seemingly unshakable self-certainty…the former anti-essentialised stance is pregnant with the possibility of the latter: the transcendental perspective emerges out of the repetition of an ironic practice that ultimately frees consciousness from things empirical; and the eruption of suppressed reactionary sentiment is the precursor
Despite Karatani’s tendency towards positing Japan’s indigenous postmodernism as an absolute difference to Western postmodernism, his point of challenge in positing an Edo/1980s Japan analogy is to revisit the formation of post-Meiji subjectivity in art and literature (see also Karatani 1993). Other scholars also support the view of that the debates on Japan’s postmodernity can provide an opportunity to challenge the concept of modernisation as a Western model, and to consider Japan experiences in terms of a non-Western modernity (Árnason & Sugimoto 1995; Asada 1997; Clammer 2001). In this way, as Karatani anticipates, Japan’s postmodernity can be considered, not as an extension of Western modernity, but as a source of questions that undermines West-centric universalism and enables the questioning of the paradigms through which Japan was previously understood in comparison to Western modernity.

Murakami appears in many ways to echo Karatani’s position, identifying the re-emergence of Edo in contemporary Japanese visual culture and using this to affirm the cultural specificity of Japan against the West, and to reject the modern institution of art in Japan. Karatani’s critical challenge is to re-examine the formation of modernist literature in Japan as a product of Western modern thinking. Murakami is doing a similar thing in exposing the imported origins of kindai bijutsu and its formation in modern (post-Meiji) thinking. However, he sets up Superflat as an alternative and reworks the terms of art by ironically exposing the concept of original Japanese

to the rise of a sublime superego’ (p. 258).

229 In a roundtable discussion with Karatani and Akira Asada, Jacques Derrida proposes that contemporary Japan is very much a hybrid of different epistemologies, and therefore the role of Western postmodern theory in Japan could be to deconstruct some the Western ideas that have been assimilated and thus should not be entirely disregarded (cited in Ivy 1997, pp. 41-2).

230 For example, Asada Akira, a critical theorist who was a key figure in introducing French poststructural theory to Japan (see Ivy 1997), argues that the 1980s focus on synthesising the premodern with postmodern forms of quotation and appropriation misunderstands the context of contemporary expressions (Asada & Woznicki 1998). He is critical of the ‘pseudo-Edo’ postmodern view of Japan that erases Japan’s modern history and posits postmodernity as a progressive shift forward. He argues that these positions neglect the distinctive features of Japan’s modernity. He advocates a return to Marxist-influenced positions that continue the early twentieth century modernist critique and which also engage with postmodern concepts and theories in order to create new openings. He argues, in opposition to Karatani, that postmodernism does not reject knowledge (and therefore is not a ‘paradise of fools’), but rather demonstrates a flexibility of knowledge that is not reliant on a privileged subjectivity of Japaneseness. Asada asserts that individuals need to be cognisant and critical of postmodern codes and thus require postmodern theory in order to analyse and critique commodity culture (cited in Matsui 2000). These debates are similar to Western debates on postmodern theory as a critical position in relation to contemporary culture; however, in this context postmodern theory has the additional criticism of being considered an imported and assimilated concept in Japan.

231 However, Karatani would possibly be critical of Murakami’s fine line between critique and celebration of the ‘fool’s paradise’, which for Karatani characterised contemporary consumer culture in Japan.
art. Matsui (1999c, p. 22) argues that to confuse what Murakami is doing with the 1980s concept of postmodern Japan as a transcendence of modernity would be incorrect, and that Murakami is trying to reveal the spirit of innovation and self-reflexivity present in Japanese art prior to bijutsu, similar to Karatani’s ideas. Thus, Superflat becomes meaningful in its challenge to the ‘incomplete’ modernity in bijutsu by re-addressing the concept of original expression. However, Matsui is perhaps more optimistic about Superflat’s difference to the 1980s discourses on Edo and postmodernism. It can be argued that Murakami is, at the same time, mobilising these discourses as part of his strategy to identify Superflat as Japanese. That is, the postmodernism of Superflat is not totally liberated from the hierarchical privileging of its identity. In this way, Murakami’s construction of an aesthetic and conceptual lineage from Edo to Superflat is not necessarily the most important critical potential, but rather this thesis argues that it is the way in which this is deployed as a marker of Japaneseness that is crucial.

Dismissing Murakami’s Superflat lineage as a marketing tool, Steinberg argues that the function of Edo in Superflat is to perform relations between works, rather than acting as an aesthetic lineage (2004, p. 467). Steinberg identifies that the aesthetic of Superflat is defined by particular sets of relations expressed in the juxtaposition of contemporary and premodern Edo forms in the Super Flat catalogue. What Steinberg emphasises is that in the Super Flat catalogue the juxtaposed images from premodern to contemporary art illustrate a ‘diagram of relations; a diagram which produces these relations even as it draws them out’ (p. 34) [Figure 9]. Therefore, Steinberg argues that the lineage of eccentricity that Murakami presents is more usefully considered as a series of relations rather than a continuous lineage.

What is of importance is the relations created between works, and, despite Murakami’s comments to the contrary, not the overarching narrative connecting all of these varied works together. History is flattened into atemporal, serial relations (p. 82).

The concept of new synchronic relations being produced challenges Murakami’s (2000c) assertions of Superflat as a Japanese sensibility; the series of relations between selective images rather than being chronological or genealogical creates visual analogies. Furthermore, Steinberg argues that while there are obvious visual similarities with premodern Japanese painting in Murakami’s works, they simultaneously operate according to an anime-influenced logic of sequentiality and surface (p. 50). This logic is not limited to the compositional structure of

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232 In this way, the Edo reference is useful as a conceptual device for understanding contemporary modes of consumption, as opposed to functioning as cultural lineage (p. 468).
individual works, like in Japanese premodern painting, but operates in the similarities between the works (see also Lamarre 2002; Looser 2002). Thus, Steinberg considers Superflat to be expressive of the production-consumption practices of *otaku* culture. The following section continues this debate on the connection between Edo and postmodern Japan in relation to *otaku* culture, and how this also results in the territorialising of *otaku* identity.

**Postmodern Otaku identity**

Azuma Hiroki (2001) is another theorist who remains critical of the continuous historical linkage made between Edo and contemporary Japan. As such, Azuma challenges Karatani and Murakami’s synthesis of these two periods and the emphasis on Edo as an authentic origin of postmodern Japanese identity. As stated in the literature review on Superflat in Chapter One, Azuma argues for the interruption of this narrative of historical continuity by stressing the post-war influx of popular culture forms from the United States and their subsequent influence on the development of *otaku* cultural forms. Azuma argues that critics in the 1980s (such as Kojève, Barthes and Karatani) who sought to identify links between contemporary Japan and Edo culture betray a ‘historical amnesia’ towards the trauma of defeat experienced by Japan at the end of the Second World War and the influence Western forms on Japanese popular culture. He rejects the construction of ‘authentic’ Japanese art and culture outside of the post-1945 influences of Western culture, and theorises *otaku* culture as an expression of postmodernity, ruptured from Japan’s modernity. This consequently disrupts the concept of continuous cultural lineages between premodern and contemporary Japan. Azuma also critiques the writings of Okada Toshio, Otsuka Eiji and Karatani who present *otaku* culture and contemporary forms of popular culture as the inheritor of Edo consumption practices. By emphasising the post-1945 development of *anime* and *manga*, and its subsequent influence on the formation of *otaku* culture, Azuma articulates a point of interruption in the concept of a continuous lineage between Edo and contemporary Japan. Therefore, he criticises Murakami’s emphasis on the connection between Edo forms and contemporary expressivities, because it neglects to consider Japan’s modernisation and westernisation in the twentieth-century.

The *otaku* culture in general is often claimed to be a sort of cultural successor of premodern Japanese tradition, mainly the Edo tradition. This succession is emphasized by leading *otaku* critics like Toshio Okada or Eiji Otsuka. According to their pretension,
the consumptive structure of manga or anime is remarkably similar to that of Kabuki or Joruri in Edo era. Murakami’s argument you can read in the catalogue is on the same premise. He draws a direct line from Kano Sansetsu to Yoshinori Kaneda, that is, from the 17th century paintings to 1970’s anime films. This conception can be analyzed as a variation of the prevailing idea that premodernity and postmodernity is directly connected in Japan without enough modernization. You can find this cliché everywhere in Japanese postmodernism.

However, the reality is more complicated. 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. Manga, anime, tokusatsu (SFX movies), SF novels, computer games, all are of American origin and imported from the US with its post-war occupation policy. The otaku culture should not be seen as a direct successor of Japanese premodernity, but as a result of the recent “domestication” of post-war American culture, which was developing just at the same time with Japanese rapid economical growth and the recovery of national self-confidence in 1950s and 1960s. In this sense, otaku culture is essentially "nationalistic" though its characteristic and expression are far from those of traditional ordinary nationalism (Azuma 2001 para. 11).

Azuma’s argument is that otaku culture expresses the hybrid process of Japanising, or localising, imported commodity forms, like 7-11’s, comics and McDonalds. These expressions are not without tensions. “[T]he paradox that we cannot find any Japaneseness without post-war American pop culture,” is what Azuma identifies in the ‘twisted’ and ‘self-caricaturised expression of Japaneseness’ in otaku forms (ibid). For Azuma, this new identity is asserted to transcend Japan’s post-war feelings of inferiority, supported by the successful export of anime and manga to the West. However, Azuma potentially over-states the importance of the post-war influence of the United States, thereby replacing the centrality of Edo (in Karatani and Murakami’s discourses) with the United States.

From the evidence in his concluding statements, Azuma’s emphasis on hybridity is contradicted by his demarcation of this otaku identity as an expression of a contemporary national identity, albeit in a new form:

In this sense, otaku culture is essentially "nationalistic" though its characteristic and expression are far from those of traditional ordinary nationalism (ibid).

Even in the subtitle of his essay, Otaku Nationalism (2001), Azuma betrays his tendency to identify otaku as Japanese and distinct from other fan cultures. Therefore, Azuma still ends up reterritorialising otaku identity as form of Japanese expression (Lamarre 2004).234

234 Thomas Lamarre argues that Azuma’s emphasis on otaku as a rupture with the Enlightenment concept of subjectivity and as
The new subjectivity that Azuma identifies in otaku culture is partially constructed through Azuma’s identification of the difference of otaku from other fan cultures. More importantly, it is through Azuma’s emphasis on otaku as a rupture with Japan’s modernity and with the West that a new subjectivity is substituted for the older one. Azuma subsequently identifies Superflat as the articulation of this new subjectivity. In *Super Flat Speculation* (2000), Azuma conceives of Superflat as ‘castration’s dysfunction’ (p. 149) framing it through Lacan’s theorisation of the subject and the gaze and Derrida’s theory of the postal.\(^{235}\) Azuma’s argument is that Superflat is a contemporary cultural logic expressive of a late-capitalist or postmodern concept of subjectivity, or more specifically, a ‘lack’ of unified subjectivity, which can be identified in otaku consumption practices. Azuma emphasises that a process of fragmentation and transformation underpins the relationship between otaku and the characters they create: otaku can express a psychosexual or emotional relationship with the characters they create, but on the other hand there is no sense of loss when they dismantle the characters and rearrange them to create a new figure, and they can be shared with other otaku.\(^{236}\) The lack of distinct ownership boundaries also underpins the hacker tendencies of otaku. Otaku raid Internet sites and games and then reconstruct the texts into their own productions. Azuma argues that this system of values is based on a series of

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\(^{235}\) Azuma’s application of Lacan has been criticised for its naivety. Otori Hidenaga (2003) argues that Azuma’s tendency is to replace one system, castration, with the affirmation of another, castration’s dysfunction. Otori questions the relevancy of Azuma’s application of Lacan to Japan by arguing that if Japan had an ‘incomplete’ modernity, as Azuma proposes, meaning that the Cartesian subject was not fully internalised within twentieth century Japan, then he questions if dysfunctional castration could emerge from a site that has not experienced castration. Otori also points out that Lacan identifies a ‘crack’ within the Symbolic phase of development: that concealed beneath the surface of the Symbolic is the ‘fragmented body’ which has the potential, and always threatens, to break through. Steinberg also criticises Azuma’s reading of Lacan for a similar misreading of the fragmented subject within the Symbolic realm (Steinberg 2002, pp. 56-8).

\(^{236}\) These ideas on *otaku* and their relationship to characters are developed further in Chapter Three.
accepted codes, which form the fragments of the characters that can potentially be created; however there is a continuous freedom to break down the system and reassemble works. These fragments thus form a giant database from which otaku can construct their creations. To Azuma, Murakami articulates this sense of transformation and reassembly in his DOB paintings, such as *And then, and then and then and then and then* [Figure 12], *DOB surrealism* [Figure 13] and *Tan Tan Bo* [Figure 14]

DOB emerges from one prototype but is transformed and reassembled onto different surfaces and into different objects, such as soft toys [Figure 16], t-shirts, stickers or giant inflatables, such as *Chaos* [Figure 15].

Figure 12: And then, and then and then and then and then
1996, Acrylic on canvas mounted on board
300 x 300 cm

Figure 13: DOB surrealism
1997, Acrylic on canvas mounted on board
50.8 x 73.4 cm
Collection of Missy Bernstein, Los Angeles
Figure 14: Tan Tan Bo

Figure 15: Chaos

Figure 16: DOB plush
Mixed Media, 47 x 33 cm. Source: Brehm 2002, p. 64.
For Azuma (2000), the ultimate collapse of distinctions between high/low culture, dominant and marginalised cultures, and the presence of fragmented and non-unified identities confirms the saturation of postmodernism in Japan. Thus, Azuma sees *otaku* culture, and subsequently *Superflat*, as an expression of a rupture between modern and postmodern Japan. For Azuma, *Superflat* represents a new paradigm of aesthetic expression in which hierarchies have been dissolved. However, Lamarre argues that the tendency to define this as Japanese contradicts Azuma’s foundational argument that *otaku* culture presents an opportunity to consider *otaku* methods of consumption-production as a new form of authorship and subjectivity, identified by continual transformation, interconnectivity and non-essentialisation. However, as stated earlier in this chapter, it has been argued that both the de-centred and fragmented postmodern expressions of youth culture in Japan, such as *otaku*, and the collective national order characteristic of Japan’s modernity are collusive to the purposes of late capitalism (Yoda 2000, p. 654). They are also part of the ongoing effects of Japan’s modernity and the destabilisation of Japanese identity in that process. The rhetoric of difference and individuality that is presented as a challenge to the concept of unified and homogenous identity became banal and lost its critical edge in the fragmented cultural scene of the 1990s (Yoda 2000, p. 651). In contrast, Azuma’s stress on postmodern expressions, and the Japaneseness of those expressions, substitutes the hierarchies of modern subjectivity with a new hierarchy of Japanese postmodern identity.

For Azuma, for instance, a simple break marks the movement from modernity to postmodernity (or alternatively, the posthistorical). In a predictably modernist fashion, the historical break between modern and postmodern is reinscribed as a geopolitical break: Western modernity versus Japanese postmodernity. Consequently, what began as

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237 Like Azuma, by removing the definition of subculture away from a high/low culture binary, the critical theorist Otsuka Eiji emphasises how that socio-cultural binary has shifted within Japan. However, while Otsuka proposes that *otaku* be read as a postmodern expression, in the sense that it lacks the binary structure of modernism, he tries to reinforce *otaku* culture as a subcultural formation that is more directly associated with developments in late capitalism in Japan (Yoda 2000, pp. 650-1). In this way, Otsuka distances himself from the neo-liberal postmodern rhetoric of 1980s, which emphasised an underlying nationalism in celebrating Japan as postmodern, as well as distancing himself from the Japan/West binary construct that characterised modern discourses in Japan and the concept of postmodern Japan as a supersession of modernity.

238 This discourse was celebrated and adopted by neo-liberals in Japan; as Sakai argues (1997), difference becomes universalised. At the same time, postmodern theory also became a commodity in Japan during the 1980s (Ivy 1997).

239 Similar definitions of Japanese identity are asserted by Okada Toshio, the self-proclaimed professor of *otaku-*ology (see 1996). Okada has emphasised the Western interest in *otaku* as an interest specifically in Japanese culture. Therefore, he considers this to be an opportunity to reinvestigate the ‘origins’ of *otaku* within Japan.
a raid on hierarchies, subject positions and identities turns into a defence of precisely
these hierarchies, positions and identities (Lamarre 2004, p. 178).

As Marilyn Ivy states, the hybridity of contemporary Japanese culture is continually
reterritorialised in discourses emphasising Japan’s cultural boundaries, particularly its absolute
difference to the modern West, which draws upon a nostalgic appeal to Edo as the site of Japan’s
tradition:

The hybrid realities of Japan today — of multiple border crossings and transnational
interchanges in the worlds of trade, aesthetics, science — are contained within dominant
discourses on cultural purity and nondifference, and in nostalgic appeals to
premodernity: what makes the Japanese so difference from everyone else makes them
identical to each other; what threatens that self-sameness is often marked temporally as
the intrusively modern, spatially as the foreign. Although those discourses are altered by
the effects of advanced capitalism…they have proved to be remarkably resilient as they
haunt the possibilities for a postnationalist consciousness in contemporary Japan (Ivy
1995, p. 9).

This type of viewpoint tends to invert the Western Orientalist gaze, and as Iwabuchi argues,
becomes a mirror for Japan’s own self-Orientalist view of otaku culture. An alternative perspective
would argue that while otaku have emerged in the particular social/cultural conditions of Japan,
they do share similar characteristics with other fan cultures (Kinsella 2000, p. 14), and can be
identified in relation to late capital commodity culture, characteristics of which are also shared
globally (Iida 2000, pp. 252-3).240

Like Azuma and Steinberg, Thomas Lamarre (2004), in his analysis of contemporary anime,
emphasises otaku and anime consumption and production as presenting a new form of
experience expressive of the contemporary moment.241 However, unlike Azuma and Okada,
Lamarre emphasises the transnational sphere in which otaku culture and anime are circulated,
and stresses that while there may be cultural articulations specific to Japan these do not occupy a
more privileged position than other non-specific meanings that (Western) consumers of anime
may make (p. 181). Therefore, when anime is consumed outside Japan there is no deterioration
of ‘original’ meaning in the process of cultural translation of anime texts, but rather additional

240 Furthermore, Azuma’s and other critical theorists interest in fan cultures parallels a Western scholarly interest in the
consumption-production processes of fan, and consumer cultures more generally (Certeau 1984; Jenkins 1992; Jenson 1992).

241 Thomas Looser (2002, pp. 310-1) also emphasises the potential within anime and Superflat to offer more postmodern
modes of identity. He points to the functions of shifting relations within, and between anime, which are brought together without
fixed relations or singular origins, locating this as a critical characteristic of contemporary ‘postmodern’ experience.
meanings are created during this process. For Lamarre this is a continuation of the hybrid character of *otaku* texts, which are themselves composed from the database of multiple fragments.

Like Lamarre, Marc Steinberg (2002; 2003; 2004) links Murakami’s work with *otaku* consumption practices, influenced by contemporary digital culture, particularly the aesthetic of surface and metamorphosis and the method of serial production underpinning Murakami’s works. Steinberg defines Superflat as a theme, or logic, of surfaceness that is an aesthetic expressive of late, or what Steinberg refers to as ‘cybernetic’, capitalism. Therefore, to Steinberg Superflat is not solely expressive of a particular Japanese sensibility; rather it is, ‘an aesthetic and a logic that is informed by global cultural and technological shifts, even as this aesthetic grows out from the local environment of contemporary Tokyo’ (p. 4).

However, Murakami’s nationalism of *otaku* is more ambivalent than Lamarre allows, and is something that Steinberg dismisses too easily as pure marketing technique. Murakami is far more mercurial in establishing the subjectivity of *otaku* by emphasising its inauthenticity. For Murakami, the essence of *otaku*-ness is its non-essentialised identity that (potentially) evades definitive subjectivity: $[O] taku$ is “uncool indigenous Japanese culture;” as *otaku* insist, “at least it’s homegrown.” *Otaku* are mercurial, and embrace the internal contradiction of considering such definitions “*un-otaku*” (Murakami 2005a, p. 132).

Like Azuma, Murakami acknowledges the complex historical development of *anime*, particularly

242 Steinberg’s thesis is that Superflat is expressive of a ‘postsymbolifying regime’ (influenced by Deleuze and Guattari’s semiotic regimes). The postsymbolifying semiotic operates through connection rather than exclusion, series rather than chronology, and transformation rather than separation (p. 86). Steinberg emphasises that the postsymbolifying regime allows for the simultaneous presence of semiotic regimes (p. 85). The postsymbolifying semiotic is defined by the characteristics of surface, metamorphosis, transformation, and new sets of relations between art/commodity, past/present, and form/transformation. Steinberg argues these are the characteristics of a ‘digital age’ (p. 88-89).

243 Sawaragi Noi and his presentation of the Neo-Pop artists in the 1990s have had a significant influence on Murakami’s own emphasis on the inauthenticity of *otaku* cultural identity. Sawaragi presented post-war popular culture as imported and domesticated: ‘[I]t is not an originality deriving from Japanese history, but something foreign that has been processed into its ‘own’ thing’ (Sawaragi cited in Woznicki). Thus, for Sawaragi the Neo-pop artists take this ‘negative’ situation of the post-war period as an ‘empty’ space for Japanese art, and then creating something positive from it. Sawaragi argues that the originality of Neo-pop is expressed through the remaking of ‘borrowed’ cultural forms. For Sawaragi this represents a refusal of using the West as a mirror through which to reflect Japan’s self-image. So like Murakami, Sawaragi takes the hybrid identity of post-war Japan and uses it as an expression of original Japanese identity, albeit ironically.
the early influences of comic forms from the United States. However, he then emphasises how anime (and subsequently otaku culture) has developed its own (Japanese) particularities (Murakami 2001a). It is also important to note that Murakami’s quest for rediscovering his otaku identity was only formed once Murakami had lived in the United States.

It was when I went to the United States that I really discovered my identity there as an otaku (Murakami qtd. in Kelmachter 2002, p. 76).

Murakami’s acute awareness of the audience for Superflat in the West demonstrates a self-consciousness of the cultural capital of otaku outside of Japan, as well as how the association with otaku is constructed as a marker of his own identity as a Japanese artist. Otaku culture is utilised as a strategic marker of Japanese identity in two ways in Murakami’s discourse. Firstly, it acts as a point of difference to the West and as a solution to the problems of Japan’s modernisation and kindai bijutsu. Once Murakami’s emphasis on finding a market for his work is factored in, this becomes an effective marketing technique. Secondly, as discussed previously, otaku becomes a mirror for the hybrid realities of contemporary Japanese society expressed in the forms of commodity culture. As stated, Murakami’s nationalism is somewhat ambivalent. Even though he affirms otaku culture as Japanese, he still demonstrates his awareness of the complexity of cultural identity in contemporary globalisation, in which cultural difference as well as mutability can be critical to the global circulation of visual culture.

They [collectors and dealer galleries in the United States] think that my art provides them with knowledge about Japan that they lack. They listen to me because they want to understand Japan. On the other hand, most Japanese would not listen to me when I start talking about otaku. Japanese journalists say that since they don’t understand otaku, they can’t write about my work (Murakami qtd. in Wakasa 2000 para. 60).

Murakami’s connection between Edo and otaku culture could be understood as resisting Western art historical hegemony by asserting its foundation in Edo and contemporary Japanese cultural forms; however, at the same time, Superflat demonstrates a complex entanglement with globally circulated aesthetic and commodity forms. Even though Murakami essentialises the postmodern Japaneseness of this otaku identity, the expressive forms and processes of consumption-production in this culture reflect a far more fluid and hybridised identity that is similar to the consumption practices of contemporary media forms outside of Japan. As stated, anime and manga are not just consumed as an exotic form of Japanese culture; rather they offer amorphous and alternate identities for consumers.

244 Murakami identifies the development of otaku culture with late 1970s Japanese society (p. 133).
In this way, Superflat acts as lens through which familiar late capitalist visual cultural expressions and consumption practices are engaged. To return to Azuma’s concepts of the database, Edo and *otaku* provide the formative elements of a bountiful database of existing aesthetic codes in Japanese and Western culture, which Superflat art can use to mark out new aesthetic territories by re-assembling multiple aesthetic and cultural codes. Murakami is selectively playing with this database of free-floating signifiers of identity, temporarily marking points of fixity, but then deterritorialising and reforming these to express other identities. Murakami’s sculptures and paintings are a critical example of this multifariousness, and they will be examined in the following section.

2.4.3 SUPERFLAT SPACES OF IDENTITY

Murakami’s work acts in the multiple spaces in and between Japan and the West. They express and are codified by an ‘endless circle of mutual cultural referential relationships’ (Minami 2001):

> The materials I have at my disposal are Japanese art history, *manga*, *anime*, *otakudom*, J-POP culture, postwar history, and imported accounts of contemporary art (Murakami 2001b, p. 130).

While Murakami’s intention here is to locate Superflat in relation to the specificities of Japanese aesthetic and history, it is quite clear that this list includes imported aspects of Western art history. His figure sculpture, *My Lonesome Cowboy* [Figure 17], can be linked to a number of familiar aesthetic forms — from both Western and Japanese art history.

> The large lasso of ejaculate is reminiscent of Jackson Pollock’s splash paintings [Figure 21]. The confident masturbatory pose of the figure can be interpreted as a parodic and sexualised reference to the phallo-centric ideology of Western Modernism, in which the autonomy and expressive subjectivity (as well as the masculinity) of artists such as Pollock was celebrated (Landau 1989, p. 15). The title itself, *My Lonesome Cowboy*, also references the heroism and romanticism of the iconic image of the cowboy, which was celebrated in relation to the Abstract Expressionist painters (ibid), and was parodied in the homo-erota of Andy Warhol’s film *Lonesome Cowboys* (1969).
Figure 17: My Lonesome Cowboy
My Lonesome Cowboy has often been exhibited in front of one of Murakami’s large-scale ‘field’ paintings, such as Milk [Figure 18, Figure 19]. The stream of ejaculation fluid forms a three-dimensional version of the splash in the Milk painting. It is both an exaggerated and grotesque parody of otaku imaginings and masturbatory activities and a parody of the ‘unique’ stroke of the brush of the artist: the overt and ironic decorativeness of the splash, which is reinforced by its repetition in the painting, subverts the modernist ideology of the unique mark of the artist’s hand as an expression of interior subjectivity. Furthermore, the unmodulated and clearly demarcated application of colour in Milk is reminiscent of Roy Lichtenstein’s series of screen-prints, Brushstrokes [Figure 20]. Lichtenstein’s prints also parodied the unique gesture of individual brushstrokes so lauded in Abstract Expressionism by presenting a mechanically reproduced iconic brushstroke in the flat technique of commercial screen-printing.

I was very interested in characterizing or caricaturing a brushstroke … the very nature of a brushstroke is anathema to outlining and filling in as used in cartoons. So I developed a form for it, which is what I am trying to do in the explosions, airplanes, and people — that is, to get a standardized thing — a stamp or image. I got the idea early because of the Mondrian and Picasso paintings, which inevitably led to the idea of a de Kooning. The brushstrokes obviously refer to Abstract Expressionism (Coplans 1972, p. 51).
These Western art historical references are then combined with recognisable Japanese aesthetic markers. For example, the *Dragon Ball Z* character Goku is the model for the head of the cowboy; the splash of ejaculate is also reminiscent of the static dynamism of Hokusai’s *ukiyo-e* print *View of Mount Fuji through High Waves off Kanagawa* [*Figure 22*]; and the division of the painted surface in *Milk* into panels references Japanese screen paintings. The standing pose of the figure with the power and energy concentrated in the hips thrust forward, accentuated by the expulsion of liquid from the penis, is something that has also been specifically linked to the style of character pose developed in *anime* (*Shimada 2001, p. 96*).\(^{245}\)

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\(^{245}\) This is then contrasted to the Western comic hero pose in which the concentration of power and muscular strength is emphasised in poses drawing attention to the pectoral muscles (*ibid*).
The sense of static dynamism can also be linked to various forms of visual expression in Japanese culture, particularly anime. One of the key features of early Japanese television animation is an aesthetic based on the frozen pose, in which a figure can leap in the air and freeze the pose, unfixed from gravity. By juxtaposing time and space in this way, animation sets up an interrelationship between the static pose and a sense of dynamic movement (Lamarre 2002). Part of the rationality behind the frozen moment in animation was a response to budget constraints, and efficient production processes, by freezing the frame and allowing the dialogue to continue, less frames of animated movement were needed for the narrative (p. 335). As a stylistic tendency, the technique of freezing the action in animation relies on selecting the most dramatic or aesthetic moment to freeze, creating a dramatic pause before the action (pp. 335-6). Murakami also connects the dynamism of the splash with the specific timing structures of Kanada’s anime, Galaxy 999 and the zigzag compositions of Japanese screen-paintings [Figure 23] (Murakami 2000a, pp. 9-15).

Figure 22: Katsushika Hokusai, Under the wave off Kanagawa (Thirty-six views of Mt. Fuji) c. 1830-5, woodblock print, 24.1 x 36.8 cm, British Museum, London. Source: National Gallery of Australia 2006.

Figure 23: Kano Sansetsu (attributed), Old Plum c. 1645, Four sliding door panels (fusuma), ink, colour and gold leaf on paper, 174.6 cm, Collection of the Metropolitan Museum. Source: Metropolitan Museum of Art 2006.
This visual aesthetic of the dynamic frozen moment is also evident in other forms of Japanese culture, such as the mie pose in kabuki theatre, in which the most characteristically expressive pose is frozen (Toita 1970, p. 81). Images of kabuki actors in these representative poses were captured in ukiyo-e prints during the Edo period [Figure 24].

[IMAGE REMOVED]

The composition of Hokusai’s Wave print has also been interpreted as stop-action’ similar to the techniques of kabuki theatre in which motion is captured in a single pose and thus becomes a ‘thing’ in itself (Yi 1991, p. 54). Yi likens this to the stop-action effect of photography, but stresses the manner in which the Wave emphasises a certain visual aesthetic involving the reduction of movement into a single instant (ibid). When it is applied to the human action in kabuki this reduction is referred to as kamae, ‘the assuming of an attitude.’

“attitude” is meant here in both its physical and psychological senses...an attitude presents all action, be it movement that is about to occur or movement that has already happened, in reduced form. It is that single moment of action that contains both the beginning and end of action. It is completely different from the Western concepts of style and form, which treat all action as a discrete unit. An attitude is not static. We can simply say that Hokusai’s wave print shows “the attitude of waves” because it is stillness in motion (p. 55).

Furthermore, all of Murakami’s paintings are largely hand-painted by his assistants, a point that he clearly emphasises as being linked to his nihonga training and to the conventions of Japanese screen-painting (Takashima 2005).

What is evident is that Murakami simultaneously articulates Japanese and Western aesthetic markers in My Lonesome Cowboy. Yet, what is particularly interesting is that while these
references can be individually demarcated and identified, there is also an interchangeable flexibility that is addressed. More specifically, what this means is that the splash of semen can simultaneously reference Pollock, Lichtenstein, Hokusai and Kanada. Thus, it becomes a fluid and slippery signifier. It is this exchangeability that Allison identified in *anime* texts as a key component in their global circulation. It can thus be argued the one of the reasons for the prominence and popularity of Superflat and Murakami globally is this multiple coding and intertextuality - the way that the visual forms of Western art history, Japanese art history and contemporary popular cultural forms, are referenced simultaneously. Furthermore, the art historical and popular cultural references (both Japanese and Western) would be considered relatively conventional markers for audiences conversant with these texts. As stated previously, many of the Japanese works in the Superflat catalogue are held in Western collections, including Hokusai’s *Great Wave*. Murakami’s works are therefore characterised by a particular fluidity and inter-determinacy, which enables him to manipulate the Japanese identity of the works whilst also utilising the familiarity of the visual references for Western audiences. The references to Western art history also enables his work to be categorised in relation to Western art discourses (see Darling 2001a; Minami 2001).

This strategy is further complicated by the multiple and overlapping historical aesthetic relationship between these two geo-cultural sites. First, the concept of Superflatness, as an aesthetic of two-dimensionality reinforces the Western construction of Japan as a culture of surfaceness. The development of the flat unmodulated surface, which has been interpreted by Clement Greenberg (1965) as the underpinning aesthetic realisation of Western modern painting, was influenced by Japanese art, particularly *ukiyo-e* prints in the nineteenth century (Evett 1982, pp. ix-x). In particular, an aesthetic of two-dimensionality was identified as a distinctive feature of Japanese art in late nineteenth century Europe (p. 30). In contrast to the Western discursive construct of Japanese art as *inherently* two-dimensional, by this time Western practices of linear perspective had already influenced Japanese art. In fact, Hokusai’s *Great Wave* ([Figure 22]) is

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246 Japanese *ukiyo-e* prints were not at first accepted as ‘art’ in the United States (Guth 1999, p. 30).

247 However, it needs to be noted that this interpretation was informed by Western concepts of Japanese culture as well as European art (p. xiii). In particular, the image of Japanese visual culture as decorative, with skills in mimicry, was contrasted to the Western emphasis on realism in art (Tamamushi 2002). This will be discussed in more detail in Chapter Three, in relation to Japanese discourses on the art/commodity hierarchy.

248 For example, from the mid-eighteenth century a new genre of print emerged that utilised Western techniques of linear perspective, *uki-e* (Lane 1978, p. 78).
an example of the synthesis between linear perspective and Japanese techniques of perspective (Lane 1978, p. 167). Secondly, contemporary *anime* and *manga* forms, which influence the aesthetic of Superflat, are influenced by Western comic traditions and previous graphic traditions in Japan (Kinsella 2000; Schodt 1986). Additionally, because *anime* and *manga* are increasingly familiar to consumers outside of Japan, particularly since their export in the 1990s, they have become part of the database of visual aesthetics of artists and fans outside of Japan (Craig 2000, p. 7). This complex visual cultural relationship between Japan, United States and European art is more politically intertwined than these explicit and obvious references imply, and are influenced by ideologies and constructions of national identity, which were discussed earlier in this chapter.\(^{249}\)

The image of Japan as a culture of surface continued into the twentieth century and was translated into the confirmation of Japan’s postmodernity: Japan as a culture of surfaceness was now celebrated (Barthes 1982; Field 1997). Even the discourses that emphasised Japan’s creative skill in domesticating foreign imports (Tobin 1992), as a contrast to the earlier pejorative concept of mimicry, reinforces the image of Japan as an appropriator of different styles, or surfaces. This redefinition was part of the same postmodern discourses which revisited Japan’s modernity beyond the terms of Western modernity (Asada 1997; Berque 1992; Karatani 1993, 1997; Smith 2000; Sugimoto 2000).

In Western modernist discourse the surface was considered to be the expression of a deeper meaning. For example, in modern psychology the exterior was considered to be the manifestation of the interior subjectivity. In this way, the surface was considered to be the visible expression of original subjectivity (Sarup 1993). This subjectivity was considered to be a singular and unified authentic identity. In opposition, postmodernism challenged the depth model and the concept of a fixed identity that could be traced back to an authentic point of origin. For example,\(^{249}\)

\(^{249}\) An example of this nationalist rhetoric in relation to cross-cultural influences occurred in discourses on Abstract Expressionist and Colour Field painters in the 1950s and 1960s. These styles were critically influenced by ‘Eastern’ concepts, such as Zen Buddhism, but this was not always explicitly acknowledged in Western discourses, particularly from the United States (Winther-Tamaki 2001). The negation of the ‘Eastern’ influences of these forms was part of the nationalistic impulse underpinning the discourse on American Abstract Expression. Concepts from ‘East Asia’ such as the void, transience, and chance became prominent issues for Abstract Expressionist artists; however, these concepts became identified under the nationalistic banner of ‘American’ painting (p. 17) This exposes the paradox of the rhetoric of the ‘universal’ language of abstract painting being identified and celebrated as ‘American’; for example, artists such as Franz Kline, and critics like Greenberg, denied the influences of East Asian calligraphy and Zen Buddhism on their work (Winther-Tamaki 2001, pp. 58-9).
Baudrillard’s concept of hyper-reality (1988b, p. 166) stresses the profusion of free-floating signifiers of identity in late capitalist culture, in which the distinction between the dimensions of reality and representation have imploded (p. 170). Jameson considered postmodernism as a culture of surfaces in which everything is imitation. Unlike parodic imitation, this imitation was without a sense of a point of origin against which it could be compared. Jameson refers to this ‘blank parody’ as pastiche (2001, p. 25). In this way, he argued that concept of authentic subjectivity, which characterised modern culture is lost. All that remains is a culture of surfaces from which it is no longer possible to create new expressions:

in a world in which stylistic innovation is no longer possible, all that is left is to imitate dead styles, to speak through the masks and with the voices of the styles in the imaginary museum (p. 26).

Paul Virilio (1991) also argued that technological developments in late capitalist culture have resulted in transformations in spatial experience. He argues, somewhat pessimistically, that the experience of the screen culture of television and digital technology is an aesthetic of surfaceness in which a sense of critical distance and dimension is lost (p. 62). In this state, all surfaces are transient, because the screen becomes an interface, and a fixed and stable point of view is lost.

Each surface is an interface between two environments that is ruled by a constant activity in the form of an exchange between the two substances placed in contact with one another… This new scientific definition of surface demonstrates the contamination at work: the “boundary, or limiting surface” has turned into an osmotic membrane, like a blotting pad... The limitation of space has become a commutation: the radical separation, the necessary crossing, the transit of a constant activity, the activity of incessant exchanges, the transfer between two environments and two substances...the appearance of surfaces and superficies conceals a secret transparency, a thickness without thickness, a volume without volume, an imperceptible quantity (p. 17).

These critical views of surface in postmodernity are in contrast to the celebrationary views of Superflatness by Azuma and Murakami. Unlike the pessimistic views of surface in Western postmodern theory, Azuma utopically considers Superflat’s rupture with the unification and ordering of the image in linear perspective as offering liberation from the unified subjectivity of modernity (2000). For Azuma, Superflat refers to the lack of a transcendent point of view and structural system; thus he sees it as ‘deficient’ in space (p. 149). Rather than viewing this deficiency critically, Azuma celebrates the potential for non-hierarchical expressions (ibid). In contrast to Azuma, Murakami does not consider the de-centralised surface of works such as
*Jellyfish Eyes* [Figure 1] to represent a lack of space, but rather they act as a horizontal diffusion of multiple spaces:

For me, it was not a null, but an infinity. Like David Hockney’s graphical collages, there are many different camera eyes, but when you start linking them up one after another into infinity, at some point you break [sic] through into the "world without the camera eye" (2001b, p. 138).

In this way, the ‘post-human’ aesthetic of Superflat, a ‘world without the camera eye’ emphasises simultaneity and in-between spaces. For example, the unmodulated background colour of *Milk* tends to create a non-hierarchical all-overness. This does not mean however that there is a lack of differentiation. Each area of colour is carefully delineated, marked by crisp outlines. Yet, the space is not defined by conventional perspective relations (in the sense of foreground/background), but occurs between the flat areas of colour. As such, it becomes difficult to ascribe particular weight, or privilege to one section of the painting.

One reason to account for this difference in the conception of Superflat surface and Western postmodern views of space can be related back to how surface and depth is conceived in Japanese culture. While the distinction between surface and depth is not absent in Japan, the duality between surface and depth in Western modern epistemology (and even in subsequent discourses that challenge it) is not necessarily expressed using those dichotomous terms in Japanese culture; rather, the surface is considered to be meaningful and creative. For example, Tsuji identifies the decorative surface as providing a link between the ordinary and everyday sphere (*ke*) and the extraordinary metaphysical realm (*hare*) (Tsuji 2002, p. 18). In this way, the decorative surface does not ‘lack’ meaning but rather is incredibly conceptual active as an intermediary expression and aesthetic. Hendry (1993) also identifies the importance of ‘wrapping’ in Japanese culture, in which the external layers, whether it be clothing, architecture or gifts, form the critical meaning structure; this is an inversion of the Western philosophical privileging of the core or centre as the site of meaning.

A Western perception of the practice prepares us to regard wrapping as a means to obscure the object inside, whereas in a Japanese view it would seem that the function of wrapping is rather to refine the object, to add to it layers of meaning which it could not carry in its unwrapped form...It will become clear that these two aspects of presentation - the object enclosed and the wrapping enclosing it - cannot in fact be separated from each other, so that the vital meaning of any presentation must include the importance and value of the wrapping used (p. 17)
Tanizaki Jun’ichirō (1977) also stresses the importance of layers embedded into the decorative surface of lacquerware (p. 13-14), and the importance of shadows in Japanese architecture—not as a void, but as an active physical component of the environment (p. 20-21). Imitation is also viewed as a creative expression, rather than as an expression of a lack of centred subjectivity (Berque 1994). Even when Western, particularly Dutch, techniques of scientific observation were adopted in the Edo period, there was not the same subject/object differentiation (Screech 1996, p. 172). In fact, the subject/object relationship was considered to be interlinked and forming part of each other.

Sight in Japan had previously been imagined as something discursive or extrapolatory, moving from object to object associatively, or traversing the seen and unseen by passing along links that were historic artistic, or poetic, but not coordinated by logic. The dominant Japanese fabrication of seeing, simply put, was synaptic, such that objects viewed were attributed meaning by the instant formation around them of a ring of association, drawing the empirically seen into a web of things previously learnt...The “Western scientific gaze” was a regime of visuality incompatible with this...this gaze dissected and selected, dwelling on objects and separating them as autonomous and apart, evacuating their cultural ballast. The Western scientific gaze was rooted in close and objectifying observation (p. 104).

While flatness and the emphasis on surface quality and decoration in Superflat art can thus be considered an exploitation of the Western construct of Japan as a culture of surface aesthetics, it can also be interpreted as an assertion of the value and meaning of surface aesthetics in Japanese culture. In this latter interpretation the flat surface references creative meaning and depth. For example, the flat unmodulated background colour of Murakami’s Milk painting does not have to be read as a void or an erasure of information, but rather as enabling the presence of multiple elements and an active site of meaning production. This concept of continual transformation is particularly evident in the painting In the Deep DOB Pink [Figure 25]. The shapes and lines of the morphing facial features are dispersed across the surface. This sense of movement is further reinforced by Murakami’s serialised reproduction of the DOB character across media platforms; the overall impression is of a dynamic and fluid identity, in the manner of otaku consumption processes.

250 In Chapter Three the concept of copying or parody (mitate) as a creative act is discussed.

251 The issues of the value of decoration within Japanese culture will be examined more specifically in Chapter Three, in relation to the adoption of the Western art/craft distinction in late nineteenth century Japan. However, it is mentioned here to indicate how Murakami utilises flatness as a marker of Japanese identity.
Like the aesthetic of Superflatness, it is difficult to differentiate a singular point of origin or a stable and unified subject to the multiple cultural identities embedded in My Lonesome Cowboy. Such is the shared history and cross-fertilisation of aesthetic forms that these multiple layers of references and aesthetic histories of Japan and the United States/Europe present a significant complexity to the explicit identification of these references as Japanese or Western. Once more, it becomes problematic to clearly differentiate these codes specifically as Japanese or Western or to presume that they will even be decoded as signifying these geo-cultural aesthetic territories.

While the Superflat concept of identity is not necessarily presented as a direct challenge to the unified subjectivity of Western philosophy because it is not clear that aesthetic expression in Japan ever fully adopted such concepts in those terms, interpreting Superflat in relation to postmodern concepts of fluid identities is still useful. It is evident that Murakami’s explicitly playful references act as heterogenous and malleable signifiers of identity, and thus can be readily interpreted as a postmodern expression of multiplicity. Furthermore, the intertextual references to Japanese art history, Western art history, and imagined constructions of Japanese identity plays to the knowing bricoleurs (Weinstein & Weinstein 1991) in audiences.

252 However, what does need to be stressed is how these formations may take on a different accent within Japan (see Clammer 1996; Clammer 2000), particularly as a challenge to Japan’s modern concept of national identity and its formation in relation to Western modernity.

253 The concept of the bricoleur is derived from Claude Lévi-Strauss.
At the same time, what continually needs to be reinforced is how the application of different identities, from the shared aesthetic database between Japan and the West, continues to reinforce rather than challenge discursive constructions of Japan as a culture of hybridity. Murakami consciously manipulates this image of Japan in affirming the hybrid construction of Superflat, whilst at the same time presenting Superflat as both transcending the imported identity of art in Japan and the aesthetic opposite to Western art. In other words, the westernisation of Superflat or its Japaneseness is just one of many identities that Murakami can access from his database. What is especially significant about the concept of Superflat is how these different visual signifiers are deployed in a horizontal manner, echoing the flatness of the Superflat aesthetic. Even though Murakami may privilege and distinguish one over the other, at particular times, as part of his strategy, the aesthetic of Superflat demonstrates that they are operating as mutable and exchangeable components.
2.5 SUPERFLAT STRATEGIC ESSENTIALISM

In *A Theory of Superflat Art* Murakami portrays his ‘struggle’ as the ability to transcend the borrowed subjectivity of *kindai bijutsu*, and to present an artistic identity that is different to that of Western art. To Murakami *otaku* are the inheritors of Japanese avant-garde expression, that is, they express the qualities of originality and innovation that he believes has been absent from *kindai bijutsu*. In Murakami’s discourses, Japan operates as a paradoxical construction; it functions as both the nowhere of art history, but also as the means of transcending the dilemma in defining original Japanese creative expression by affirming an *otaku* sense of beauty which has been derived from the products of popular culture. The additional contradictions in Murakami’s position is that the Superflat aesthetic is influenced by Western forms, which he acknowledges, and that its understanding of original expression is framed in terms of the Western modern avant-garde. Therefore his assertion of the originality of Superflat is both ironic and strategic.

This chapter has demonstrated that Murakami’s position is more complex than simply presenting *otaku* beauty as an opposition to Western art. Superflat is still embedded in the debates of Japanese identity in which Superflat is defined, particularly in relation to the West as the Other, even though the intention of Superflat is to assert a new identity for Japanese creative expression. In this way, the self-Orientalist impulses of Superflat do not resist or oppose the West or modern Japanese identity *directly*, but use existing discursive constructions in order to re-work the meaning of contemporary Japanese identity by exploiting global processes, in which in-between and hybrid identities are an ordinary state (Ang 2003; Papastergiadis 2003a).

The local identity expressed in Superflat utilises the connections with Edo and *otaku* to articulate its cultural specificity and yet it also expresses a fluidity that enables it to be globally circulated:

> The local is increasingly disassociated from specific social spaces and relations we inhabit as it is constituted through the processes of commodification. Rather than inscribing a sociocultural boundary between the inside and the outside (that takes the national interiority as the ultimate horizon), the local in the global postmodern operates on a more fluid, affective distinction of familiar and exotic or a visceral sense of proximity and distance that need not presuppose a fixed historical or social point of reference (Yoda 2000, p. 661).

Like Iwabuchi’s concept of cultural odourlessness, Yoda highlights how nationalism may be expressed in Japanese popular culture through localised markings and codes, but also how these
can be interchanged between cultural sites and co-exist with non-localised elements. That is, individual content can be substituted, even though the external structures remain the same. Yoda presents contemporary *anime* forms as a useful example of this coterminous fluidity. Elements in the text can be interchanged and adapted for different audiences, and these elements are simultaneously collated with non-specific elements drawn from a wide variety of sources; therefore, the overall form remains transportable as well as expressing cultural proximity. This is similar to Azuma’s concept of the database tendencies of *otaku* consumption-production practices, and Allison’s ideas on the playscape of *anime*. While this process of adaptation is not new, what Yoda indicates is that it is increasingly becoming a normative process within the logic of postmodern consumer society. National-cultural identity can be considered as an imagined construction of unification (Anderson 1991), and what Yoda indicates is that Japanese popular culture articulates a new level of abstraction, removed from concrete social contexts where ‘the signifier of locality can be immediately - that is, non-dialectically - subsumed into the general economy of value underwritten by global capital’ (p. 662). Therefore, despite Murakami’s tendency to nationalise the local expression of Superflat, it is better considered as an expression of ‘glocalised’ identity (Robertson 1995). In other words, Superflat is a local expression that is formed as part of global processes and subsequently is not a completely separate expression to the global. Superflat then occupies an ambiguous (albeit productive) space between essentialised conceptions of Japanese and Western art, as well as deconstructing the concept of local cultures presented against the global.

This re-working of identity, in which Murakami draws selectively from a range of sources (his database) and customises them for different cultural contexts, is better understood as a series of ‘strategic essentialisms’. Robertson (p. 36) identifies strategic essentialisation as a necessary part of the historic phases of globalisation, particularly during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. This thesis extends Robertson’s concept of strategic essentialism by arguing that Murakami is a part of the processes of contemporary globalisation and the commodification of identity within that process. Strategic essentialism is a method by which Murakami can negotiate and articulate the particularities of local/national cultural identities by actively using the commodity potential of cultural Otherness in a global context. It is a strategic identity because the

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254 Robertson cites the International Exhibitions of the late nineteenth century as an example of this strategic essentialism of identity within a global context, including allowing for the commodification of that identity for strategic means of Japan’s global self-representation.
multiple aesthetic identities constructed in his work are not hierarchically or historically privileged, but are assembled and deployed strategically from the database in different cultural contexts. Therefore, strategic essentialism encapsulates the mutable and horizontal relations of postmodern identity. Denoting it as strategic suggests a self-reflexive and playful state of identity that is more temporal and enables the potential for this mutability to slip into its own forms of essentialisation - thereby revealing one of the paradoxes of global postmodern identity. Superflat also participates in the commodification of identity and uses cultural difference as a self-Orientalist marker to exploit and cater to art market demands, while also challenging Western and Japanese art histories. Therefore strategic essentialism does not intend to resolve the dilemmas of cultural identity, nor does it try to present and ‘authentic’ identity. Instead, it draws attention to them.

Strategic essentialism shares a similar approach with self-Orientalism, strategic hybridity (Iwabuchi 2002a, p. 71), and what Kikuchi (1997) refers to as Oriental-Orientalism. These refer to formations of resistant identity that are constructed in relation to the Oriental/Occident relationship in Japanese and Western discourses. They refer to the ability to manage existing codes of cultural-aesthetic identity through subversion and redeployment. Like self-Orientalism strategic essentialism can be collusive to a Japan/West discursive binary, reinforcing it, but it can also be resistant. However, strategic essentialism amplifies the instability of identity and draws attention to the selection of essential codes in its expression. It is more translatable and flexible, and moves beyond the Self/Other configuration in order to more explicitly acknowledge global intermixing.

One way to understand Murakami’s array of identities, which are re-essentialised as Japanese, is a contemporary variant of nineteenth-century export art. That is, Superflat is explicitly constructed in relation to global processes of identity commodification. As Hall (1995) argues, the collision between the processes of globalisation and the construction of local identity can involve commodification and/or nostalgic impulses. Of course, nostalgia, as an expression of difference, particularity and locality, is a key component of global capital (Ivy 1995), but at the same time it cannot be reduced to fulfilling the purposes of commodification (Robertson, p. 29). Murakami may be affirming the local identity of Superflat art by utilising Edo as the context for the lineage of contemporary Japanese visual culture, but he also uses Edo as a construction of cultural authenticity to commodify his work as Japanese in Western art markets.
However, understanding Superflat as just a commodity, or constructed only for Western art audiences, is too limiting. Superflat operates on multiple levels. The limited interpretation of Superflat as Orientalist spectacle is problematic because it assumes that the Western audience desires and exoticises the differences of Japan and constructs it as a cultural Other. In contrast, what this chapter has demonstrated is that the research on the consumption of anime and manga in the West suggests that these products are not just consumed because of a perceived Japaneseness, but also because of their culturally odourless translatability. Therefore, if Murakami is strategically deploying a self-Orientalist image in order to sell his work in Western art markets, like the consumption of anime and manga, this does not have to determine its consumption as Orientalist spectacle. While Murakami’s presentation of Superflat art may reference the image of Japan and otaku as postmodern (which can include Japan functioning as the cultural Other to the West) it is also an aesthetic expression that is familiar to Western viewers in their own experiences of global capitalism and commodity culture.

Murakami’s strategic essentialism of Superflat offers an alternative identity to Western art history by expressing and articulating the particularities of Japanese contemporary art and visual culture, while simultaneously constructing that identity in the familiar terms of Western art discourse. At the same time, in Japan, Murakami is setting up new structures through Geisai and Kaikai Kiki for contemporary art expressivities to be practiced and consumed outside of the conventional bijutsu institutions and structures. The introduction to this chapter presented Murakami’s statement of his intention to develop a third stage - after he has re-written the rules for art in Japan and established his profile in Western art markets – and to take these new rules for art into a Western art context in order to transform it. At this stage, Murakami’s statement is highly speculative, because he has only recently completed the Superflat trilogy of exhibitions; however, it does once more demonstrate that he intends to use the different exhibition contexts in a dialectic manner to disseminate his theory and aesthetic of Superflat. Murakami refers to this as his ‘soy sauce’ strategy.

Murakami can strategically deploy the multiple markers in his work, emphasising or de-emphasising different influences and codes. However, despite Murakami’s (at times generalist) essentialisation of this hybridity, it is difficult to separate the markers and codes of Japan and the West when analysing the actual art works. This exposes the limits of Murakami’s soy sauce strategy.

255 These ideas on Murakami’s new structures for art in Japan will be developed further in the next chapter.
strategy because it continually returns to a Japan/West binary. Therefore, rather than rigidly defining Murakami’s work as Japanese, his work is better understood as expressive of the fluidity, multifariousness and polysemy of cultural identity in contemporary globalisation. Therefore, to consider them a rupture, as Azuma does, or as a radical departure, would be limiting. However, it can still be considered postmodern, in the sense that strategic essentialism offers a means through which to acknowledge the connections between Superflat and previous discourses on Japanese identity, while also acknowledging that it extend this identity at the same time.

Made in Japan has demonstrated that the new and complex relations created between the local, national and global, which were outlined in Chapter One, are the processes through which Murakami can articulate his aesthetic expression. He is able to use the global space to activate a resistance to the art establishment in Japan, as well as present an alternative genealogy from that of Western art history. Murakami also demonstrates his awareness of the art market in which difference is privileged in the terms of Western art discourse and in which difference becomes a commodity. Superflat is best understood as a local expression in a global context, which can be commodified and mobilised as a national identity, and can also express resistance and points of divergence to other cultures. This chapter presents Murakami’s strategic essentialism as a useful model for negotiating global complexities, particularly how cultural, national and aesthetic identity can be utilised as a global brand. It has argued that Superflat does not resolve the complex and contradictory relations of globalisation. Rather, it exploits the two-way mirror of mutual fascination between Japan and the West, which is an established convention in nihonjinron and self-Orientalist discourses. In this way, it elaborates rather than eliminates the differences. At the same time, Superflat offers challenges to Western art history and the construction of binary relations by expressing the mutability of plural identities. That is, Superflat challenges the essentialised dichotomy of Japan/West that views Japanese art as either assimilating Western art codes or being completely separate to Western art. Neither is adequate for understanding Superflat art. Murakami’s strategic essentialism could be understood as a model for a new paradigm of identity construction, and it provides an opportunity to rethink and remap territories, nodes and points of cultural fixity in global networks.

Murakami moves within global networks and mobilises certain points of fixity at the same time. As Papastergiadis and Ang argue, globalisation forms, and is formed by, fluid spaces in which cultural particularity can emerge in fixed forms, but these are always part of a dynamic momentum. Essentialised identities can also be used strategically, and as part of this momentum,
as an expression of complex identities. Therefore, while Murakami presents Superflat as blurring or removing boundaries, and then privileges its identity as Japanese, this chapter has argued that Superflat retains points of distinction, but the differences and essentialisms expressed are non-absolute, non-fixed and non-durable. Superflat is thus an expression of permeable boundaries and connections. In fact, like the potential for anime to present alternative realities or fantasy spaces, which are detached from actual and specific cultural particularities, Superflat highlights the paradoxes of presenting a mukokuseki text as an expression of a national, aesthetic identity. What it offers is the potential for a site of imagining, or an aesthetic construction, of alternate identities.

The next chapter continues to locate Superflat in a global space, by tracing the dynamic relations between the identity of Superflat, and Murakami’s works more generally, as art and simultaneously as commercial commodities between the geo-cultural sites of Japan, the United States and Europe. What is examined is the discursive terrain that defines the cultural capital of Murakami’s work in relation to its identity as art. This extends the argument of this chapter that the consumption of Murakami’s work in the West is not necessarily based on its identification as Japanese; rather, it is potentially attributed to the greater elasticity between the aesthetics of art and commercial culture in late capitalist culture more generally.
3.1 HIGH AND LOW IN AN EXPANDED FIELD

*If you’re not making money with your art, you have to say it’s art. If you are, you have to say it’s something else (Warhol qtd. in Ratcliffe 1983, p. 109).*

The value and meaning of the concepts of ‘art’ and ‘commodity’ are critical dialogues within the global production-consumption of Murakami’s work. Murakami initiates these dialogues by simultaneously exhibiting his paintings and sculptures within conventional art world institutions (galleries and auction houses) and distributing them as part of commercial media culture. Murakami engages the popular media in a variety of ways, from creating a series of snack-toy figurines in *Superflat Museum* to being commissioned to design a range of accessories for Louis Vuitton. While these activities potentially allow consumption by audiences outside of art worlds, Murakami is still represented as an artist in connection to the popular media works and these ‘design work’ productions are distinguished from the ‘pure art’ of his paintings and sculptures. However, the intertextual references between the art and design works blurs this distinction and make it difficult to sustain.

![Image Removed]

Figure 26: Superflat Museum

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256 This title is taken from Andreas Huyssen’s paper ‘High/Low in an Expanded Field’ (2002).
For example, the *Superflat Museum* figurines [Figure 26] exist as items of commercial culture, circulated through such non-art sites as *konbini* (convenience store); however, they also reference the art context of the life-size figure sculptures Hiropon [Figure 27] and *Miss KO* [Figure 28]. Therefore, the definition of these expressivities as ‘art’ or as ‘commercial’ product is not exclusive because the meanings begin to overlap through the conceptual and aesthetic references between them. Furthermore, Murakami’s explicit emphasis on art production as a business renders the value distinction between the meaning of art as an autonomous aesthetic expression and commodity production as standardised and repetitive equally problematic and permeable. For example, within Murakami’s pluralistic production range, aesthetic value does not operate solely in relation to the art works but is also attached to his design commodities.

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257 This dichotomous relationship is derived from Romantic philosophy and the literature of writers such as William Coleridge (1772-1834) and later Mathew Arnold (1882-88). It is fully demonstrated in Adorno and Horkheimer’s (1979) critique of the influences of the ‘Culture Industry,’ in which high culture is set in contrast to mass commercialised culture (Jenks 2005, pp. 16-4).
The previous chapter located Superflat and Japanese art more generally in relation to ongoing debate on the expression of originality and Japanese cultural identity, particularly within the context of Japan and Western relations. The meanings and values of art and commodity forms are critically intertwined with these politics of cultural identity. Murakami’s contention is that the Western distinction between art as ‘high’ culture and mass-produced commercial forms as ‘low’ or ‘popular culture’ does not operate with the same values in Japan. Murakami extends this issue further by arguing that while fine art (bijutsu) may occupy a privileged position within Japan in relation to cultural institutions and state support it lacks conceptual and aesthetic relevance for young consumers. Murakami attributes this lack of interest in kindai bijutsu to a sense of betrayal because of the ‘blind’ following of Western art within the academicism of kindai bijutsu, particularly yōga (2001b, p. 145). He argues that in contrast, popular commercial media forms such as manga and anime demonstrate the qualities of originality and creativity that young consumers desire, and according to Murakami, Superflat artists are sourcing their ideas from

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258 As will be discussed later in the chapter it is important to approach Murakami’s claims critically. The major kindai bijutsu exhibition, Nitten, is highly popular in Japan; in comparison the audiences for nihon gendai bijutsu are small [interview with Osaka]. Furthermore, as was discussed in Chapter Two, the idea that kindai bijutsu is lacking in originality is being revised by scholars (Conant, Steiner & Tomii 1995; Morioka & Berry 1999; Rosenfield 2001).
within these forms. It is within otaku culture and post-war commercial media forms that he seeks Japan’s (own) source of original expression and creative energy (ibid). As stated in Chapter Two, it is ironic that this originality is found in the ‘bastard’ commercial popular culture forms that developed in post-war Japan (see Azuma 2001 para.17). Murakami rejects the concept of fine art (bijutsu) by affirming the expressivities found within commercial media forms:

Let’s find and analyze the new standards of “beauty, eros, and sculpture” that arise after we have fulfilled otaku’s desire by flawlessly converting a 2-D anime character into a 3-D figure, then let’s take that figure out of the context of otaku, and into the context of art. This was the concept that gave birth to the “figure project”…This project is an ongoing effort towards joining the context of the art which is my life’s work now with the search for an otaku sense of “beauty” (Murakami 2001b, pp. 137-8).

Murakami’s conflation of art with the forms and practices of anime and manga can be conceived as a postmodern expression of late capital cultural conditions (Jameson 1991b) and a challenge to the modernist hierarchical dichotomy of high art and popular culture (Foster 1998; Huyssen 1986). Yet, as stated previously, this conflation is also intended as an expression of art/popular culture relations within Japan, currently and historically, particularly in relation to the ubiquity of anime and manga and the social status of contemporary art. Murakami’s ‘revolution’ is thus a clever exploitation of the status of art and commercial culture within Japan, and is also able to articulate the above-described blurring in the terms of Western postmodern art discourses. There is a duality in operation here with the postmodern identity of Superflat. First, the interpretation of Murakami’s diverse art and commercial activities and the associations with popular culture forms can be understood in the terms of Western postmodernism, which make it more easily categorised in Western art discourses. Secondly, the presentation of Superflat as transcending Western modernist categories of high/low culture, connects it to discourses that conceived of Japan, particularly with respect to the features of pre-Meiji Japan, as an exemplar of the ‘postmodern’ (Karatani 1997). As stated in Chapter Two, this ‘postmodern’ identity of Superflat serves to reinforce the idea that it is inherently Japanese.

Prior to the Meiji period Japanese culture did not make hierarchical distinctions between art and craft, or aesthetic and utilitarian values. The distinctions between art/craft emerged as part of the processes of Japan’s modernisation and Westernisation in the Meiji period. Murakami makes a

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259 Murakami’s argument is that in Japan ‘no difference between the main and subculture exists’ (Murakami qtd. in Kelmatcher, p. 105). He refers here to the ubiquitous consumption of anime and manga and also reinforces the concept of Japan as a homogenous society (Befu 2001).
connection to the pre-modern ideas of creative expression through the affirmation of popular cultural forms which he considers to be a continuation of these concepts. Nevertheless, to simply interpret Japan as a site in which there is no concept of originality or of high/low cultural distinctions is to misinterpret the complex relations among these elements within Japanese culture and simplify the dynamics of Japanese consumer culture (1996; Clammer 2000). Such distinctions between everyday commodity forms and art do occur, but not necessarily according to the terms and conceptions of Western modernism (and subsequently postmodernism) (see Moeran 1997, pp. 1-19). For example, there has not been a strict conceptual division between use value and aesthetic value. During the Edo period for instance, it was not simply the material form of an object that was valued; it was considered a performative expression of beauty (Guth 1993). Furthermore, there is not the same division between playful and serious meanings in Japan (1986; Tsuji 2002). That is, the Kantian concept of disinterested aesthetic judgement and the boundary between entertainment and aesthetic value that operate in Western thought have not been constructed within Japanese philosophy.

While the differences between the Japanese and Western concepts and values of high/low culture therefore need to be acknowledged, postmodernism can still provide a theoretical lens through which to approach and acknowledge the fluid relations between art and commodity, particularly within the conditions of late capitalism. High culture associations have not necessarily disappeared from art worlds, nor have the distinctions between art and commodity totally collapsed in the way that Lyotard and Baudrillard interpreted; in fact, their persistence is still acknowledged (see Williams 2004). However, the relationship between art and commercial culture can no longer be considered according to the strictly hierarchical and essentialised terms of modernism, where aesthetic value is privileged as elitist and belonging only to art. Furthermore, it needs to be acknowledged that art expressivities can be subsumed by capitalist imperatives; at the same time, new negotiations can develop within global capitalism, including

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260 The tea ceremony (chanoyu) demonstrates this value structure with its emphasis on aesthetic discrimination, connoisseurship and creativity, in which the concept of beauty (and its appreciation) was not associated primarily with viewing the object, but with its use and environment (Yanagi 1958, p. 12). The interests of Edo-period tea connoisseurs ranged from the elite forms of fine arts to everyday objects utilised by the general public (ibid). Nevertheless, in Japan ‘high’ culture was distinguished from everyday culture and the tea ceremony was practiced by wealthy connoisseurs, although it was not displayed to the general public in the manner of Western art institutions. In contrast, modern Western gallery/museum display practices emphasise objects as spectacles to be looked at and their presentation was designed to disassociate them from everyday use, which supported the post-Romantic division between art and craft (Noordegraaf 2004, pp. 9-10).
the simultaneous expression of pleasure and aesthetic value in the consumption of commercial forms. Within this context distinctions between art and commercial culture can still be usefully mobilised (Storey 2003, p. 73). Therefore, what needs to be recognised is how these distinctions exist in complex horizontal relations (Huyssen 2002, p. 368). Charles Jencks (1996) offers a useful theoretical model for conceptualising postmodern expressions in art and architecture practices, which simultaneously codes art and architecture in the language of the elite specialist and the everyday person such that they are ‘double-coded’. (p. 30).261 Double-coding allows for the interrelationship between art and commercial culture, and for the simultaneous addressing of different audiences without invalidating or privileging one over the other. Therefore, Jencks considers double-coding to present emancipatory opportunities, because it allows art/architecture expressions to operate and be read on different levels simultaneously. It is therefore able to accommodate more complex positions than the binary separation of art and commercial forms.262 However, one of the limitations of double-coding is that it still relies on a dualistic structure (the codes of the elite and everyday) and does not completely account for the multiple dimensions of the varied global cultural contexts in which expressivities operate.

Superflat could be considered to be double-coded because it inscribes itself within the conventions of art while also engaging with popular culture forms and practices. Yet this does not satisfactorily encapsulate Murakami’s relationships with art and popular culture within Japan. In particular, Murakami is not necessarily subverting the commodity form or the status of art, nor can these activities be clearly assigned to elite and popular categories in the way that Jencks conceives. Murakami is still reinforcing his identification as an ‘artist’ (although this category has its own contentions) and the status of his work as art, while simultaneously utilising the association with *otaku* as cultural capital (Bourdieu 1993) within an art context. At the same time, he affirms *otaku* values and aesthetics by distributing his work within the structures of popular culture in Japan and subsequently critiques the institutions of Japanese art. Thus, Murakami is simultaneously reinforcing and eroding the cultural distinctions constructed around the concepts of art and popular culture.

261 Double-coding is presented by Jencks as both the transcendence and continuation of modernism. Jencks does not interpret postmodernism as replacing modernism, but rather acknowledges the different philosophical approaches to the high/low culture division.

262 While double-coding does not negate the presence of the other or privilege art over the everyday, it does acknowledge that they may be conflicting.
If the relations between art and commodity forms are understood as complex horizontal interactions then the availability of Murakami’s work for consumption in a variety of forms and institutions can be analysed more effectively. This is a critical point because Murakami can self-consciously mobilise the distinctions between art and popular culture across cultural contexts for different purposes. Murakami operates in a manner similar to a brand. This brand is based on Murakami’s identity as an artist who engages with art and commodity forms. It is therefore the identity of the artist that is centralised in this brand, and it becomes a banner under which all his activities are eventually identified. Thus, the blurring of art/commodity relations in Murakami’s work also evokes the aura of the individual artist and his artwork, particularly through the processes of media celebrity. The notion of aura employed here is a reconfiguration of Benjamin’s specific attributes of aura in relation to the original object, because multiple productions can be dispensed under the ‘aura’ of Murakami’s branded identity.

The focus of this chapter is the identification (and subsequent contestation) of the categorisations of Murakami’s work as ‘art’ and himself as a practitioner defined as an ‘artist’, and the associated cultural capital associated with these categorisations. The chapter especially focuses on the ways in which these categorisations are transformed within the different cultural contexts in which Murakami operates: Japan, the United States and Europe. It therefore traces the ways in which Murakami’s works and practices are differentiated from each other, and further differentiated within these different cultural sites. Murakami’s engagement with otaku culture is a useful example of this process, as Murakami utilises this association as cultural capital within art worlds, and also uses otaku culture to examine the construction of aesthetic value in relation to commodity forms. Bourdieu’s (1993) ideas on the dimensions and contestations for symbolic capital within the field of cultural production, based on the principles of autonomous and heteronomous art, provide a useful framework in which to analyse the debates and tensions that Murakami is engaging in Superflat, particularly because the social construction of these values is acknowledged. This thesis considers the identification of art to be socially and culturally determined rather than being an inherent property of the works or assigned based purely on the mode of production. It recognises commercial culture and art not as fixed categories but as changeable and contested concepts in social discourse and institutions. Superflat and Murakami’s works are considered to be meaning-making texts that construct, reinforce, and challenge those concepts. Multiple players are involved in these processes: Murakami, agents in art worlds, and the consumers of his work. As was noted in Chapter One, these production-
consumption positions overlap. This chapter analyses the relations involved in constructing, maintaining and deconstructing the distinctions between the sets of values associated with art and commercial products, with a particular focus on how these categories have been constructed within Japanese and Western discourses. The chapter addresses two key questions:

- In what ways does Superflat complicate the conceptual divisions between art and commercial culture across and within different cultural contexts and epistemologies?

- In what ways can Murakami’s aesthetic and practices be understood as an expression of late capitalist culture?

The first section of this chapter traces the evolution of the concepts of art and commercial forms within Japan, as well as the current social status of contemporary art, in order to critically locate Murakami’s ‘flattening’ of art/commodity distinctions within the context of Japanese cultural values. The second section analyses Murakami’s relationship with otaku culture, in order to address his concept of POKU art as an appropriation of and immersion in otaku culture, and demonstrates his strategic and ambivalent relationship with otaku culture. The final section addresses the relationship between Murakami’s art activities and his more explicitly commercial productions in order to identify the complex dialogues between art and commodity in his works. This section will address more specifically the importance of authorial aura in relation to the production-consumption of Murakami’s work.

This chapter does not define Murakami’s work as art, or alternately as commercial culture, but rather maps these notions within the discourses on Murakami and Superflat. It will be argued that one of the key characteristics of the production-consumption of Superflat and Murakami is its engagement with the distinctions (and blurring) between ‘art’ and ‘commodity,’ and that this is a strategic deployment of both his expression and the commercial success of his work. The ambiguous and even contradictory meanings within Murakami’s strategically playful engagement with anime, manga and other mass-produced commercial forms associated with those media can be illuminated and analysed. This chapter therefore does not attempt to reconcile the concepts of art and commodity but rather attempts to reveal their complexities and demonstrate the heterogeneous meanings of cultural texts across and within different cultural contexts. The

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263 For example, agents in the art world are both producers of art and consumers of art.
cultural meaning of Murakami’s works and practices can thus be located within Western and Japanese discourses, and the occasions where these overlap can be illuminated.
3.2 JAPANESE DISCOURSES OF ART AND COMMODITY

As stated in Chapter One, postmodern theory has contributed to the extension of the possibilities for conceiving of the relations between art and commodity, particularly within different cultural contexts. Art can thus be considered to be part of a complex network of commodity and information flows that complicate, but do not necessarily erase, the distinction between art and commercial culture, and between aesthetic and commodity values. However, contemporary global conditions require an expanded frame through which to examine art and commodity relations and postmodernism’s challenge to the conceptual categorisation of elite cultural forms (such as art) as ‘high’ culture and commercial consumer culture (such as graphic design and advertising) as ‘low’ culture. In a global context, art cannot be presumed to hold a privileged status within cultural production, and therefore the concept of aesthetic value needs to be reconfigured:

[I]n view of the fact that an aesthetic dimension shapes not just the high arts but also the products of consumer culture via design, advertising, and the mobilization of affect and desire, it is simply retrograde to claim that any concern with aesthetic form is inherently elitist (Huyssen 2002, p. 368).

This thesis recognises the complex nuances of the flexible dialogues and tensions between aesthetic and commodity values within the dynamics of globalisation. In particular, the following section will examine the historic and contemporary conceptual distinctions between high and popular culture within Japan. Late nineteenth and early twentieth century changes in the cultural values of art and commercial culture need to be considered, as well as the more recent institutional celebration of anime and manga. These considerations will provide a critical context in which to elucidate whether Murakami present any sort of radical challenge to the status of art, anime, manga and otaku culture in Japan by joining art and otaku.

264 While it is expected to be obvious that the meaning of the conceptual categories would differ within different cultural contexts, it is surprising to find how infrequently they are defined when discussed in English-language academic publications on Japan, especially those on Japanese art. For instance, an entire paper devoted to art and cultural government policy in Japan (Tomooka, Kanno & Kobayashi 2002), discusses the popularisation of high art(s) and the lack of funding for popular culture, without actually defining the terms. To be fair to the authors, the paper is not concerned with the cultural meanings of the concepts of art and popular culture, and it begins by stressing that the concept of fine arts was a Western notion imported during the Meiji period and how this importation included the reconsideration of particular activities as ‘art’ which were differentiated from others considered to be ‘craft.’
The theory of Superflat identifies and reinforces a flattening of hierarchical distinctions between fine art and commercial art forms such as graphic design, animation and fashion. This blurring is extended in Murakami’s production of work both in art and more commercialised contexts such as the fashion industry. In the Japanese context the Western post-Romantic hierarchical distinction between art and commercial art production was never fully adopted even after the institutionalisation of bijutsu in the Meiji period (Bornoff 2002). Furthermore, the status of contemporary art in Japan is particularly ambiguous because its existence is largely independent of established kindai bijutsu institutions. However, this does not mean that there are no distinctions. In Murakami’s statements about the social marginalisation of otaku and the status of manga as an entertainment form rather than as a serious cultural expression, it becomes evident that the cultural value of these forms can be distinguished and that they are not, or have not always been, considered in the same way.

Therefore, an analysis of the discursive borders between art and commercial culture in Japan can be utilised in order to contextualise Murakami’s engagement with aspects of contemporary commercial culture, such as the kawaii (cute) character culture and the consumption practices of otaku, in order to establish how it may offer a new paradigm for art.

3.2.1 BIJUTSU AND COMMERCIAL ART

In Western post-Romantic philosophy hierarchical distinctions have been made to differentiate high art culture from commodities and production technology (Adorno 1998 [1942]). These distinctions are based on the valuing and conceptualisation of originality, creativity, and autonomy. ‘Craft’ occupies an ambiguous space in between art and mass-produced commercial goods because its emphasis is perceived to be on technique and form rather than on the expression of ideas. That is, craft was considered as a technical and commercial product with closer relations to mass production and with an emphasis on form, decoration and techniques of production. In contrast, art was considered to be expressive of intellectual or spiritual meaning. While this philosophical hierarchy has been challenged in the West (Parker & Pollock 1981), within Japan there has not been the same value ascribed to the separation between art and goods produced for explicitly commercial purposes (Conant 1991; Guth 1999).

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265 These distinctions can be traced back to the Western development of bourgeois art in the late eighteenth century (Bürger 1984, pp. 41-2).
In the pre-Meiji period, Kanō and Tosa school painting and calligraphy were patronised by the aristocracy and upper-class samurai. They were considered to produce high culture products for a small and elite audience and their intention was the pursuit of 'beauty' (Gerhart 1999; Guth 1996a; Rosenfield, Cranston & Richard 1999). In contrast, other 'expressive' objects such as pottery, textiles and lacquerware – which were more widely consumed – had a clear utilitarian function but also an associated aesthetic value (Moeran 1997). It was not until after the importation of the concept of bijutsu that the aesthetic value of art and the everyday use and commodity value of craft (kōgei) were categorically distinguished (Hendry 2000, p. 217). Prior to this, the development of technical skill and the concept of copying were not hierarchically devalued in Japan, nor was there the same historical ideology of art being privileged as an expression of originality, and many artists created both art and craft objects (Hendry 2000, p. 71; Yanagi 1958, p. 12; Rosenfield 1999, p. 39).

In the early Meiji period bijutsu was used more broadly to refer to a wide range of art and craft productions, but by the end of the Meiji period bijutsu had become institutionalised and referred strictly to sculpture and painting; kōgei was considered to be a separate category. When the term bijutsu was first introduced in the 1870s some kōgei practitioners considered it to mean the detailed and skilled (technical) production of objects that used rare materials and were highly valued, because the literal translation of bijutsu includes reference to the technique of creating beautiful things (see Sokolowski et al. 1989). Therefore, the use of bijutsu to mean ‘art’ in the Western sense of autonomous objects produced for aesthetic value, detached from use value, and emphasising concept over technique of production, was not adopted by all practitioners in Japan (Uyeno 1958, p. 120). Furthermore, the institutional distinction between bijutsu and kōgei in national exhibitions was not necessarily recognised by the general public or by artisans (producers of kōgei) who considered their work to be of the same value as bijutsu. In contemporary Japan, kōgei is used to refer to industrial arts and technologies as well as craft.

266 This is not to say that aesthetic beauty was not valued, in fact it was highly revered. For example, during the early twentieth century period, when Japanese artists visited the United States they expressed shock at what they saw as an overt emphasis on art being purchased as a fashionable domestic commodity, rather than for more informed aesthetical choices: ‘Here I am, in the nation of money. I am quite depressed about America; it is different from what I thought it would be…In America, expensive works are thought to be the best…We of the East often wonder whether your society cares for art. You seem not to want art, but decoration – decoration in the sense of subjugating beauty for the sake of display…The paintings that cover the walls are not of your choice, but those dictated by fashion’ (Taikan qtd. in Weston 2004, pp. 269, italics in original).
(Uyeno 1958, p. 112). This is not to say that challenges were not made after the adoption of \textit{bijutsu} in the Meiji period and the subsequent shift in the value and institutionalisation of craft such as pottery, metalwork and lacquerware demonstrates this change (Yanagi 1958).\textsuperscript{267} Yet these challenges are even more complex because they are also hybrid theoretical positions influenced by European philosophies, and they also tend to presume that ‘art’ expressions prior to the Meiji period are more culturally authentic (Kikuchi 1997).

The debates between the newly imported concept of \textit{bijutsu}, commercial products and \textit{kōgei} are part of wider tensions around the adoption of mass production techniques in the production of crafts for export and the revival of local domestic production as part of Japan’s shift to modernisation in the Meiji period. The International Fairs and Exhibitions in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century were a key impetus and platform for Japan’s global self-representation, and a site for the influence of Western culture and the West’s desire for Japanese goods.\textsuperscript{268}

The Meiji government was able to utilise the commodity value of the Japanese works displayed to generate revenue for its newly formed administration. There was recognition of the Western fashion for ‘exotic’ Japanese goods. As a consequence, the government instigated foreign policies emphasising the economic benefits of the production of (new) works that catered to the export demand for ‘traditional’ looking Japanese goods (Hendry 2000, p. 51). Objects at the exhibitions were thus not simply considered as aesthetic objects, but were also recognised for

\textsuperscript{267} Yanagi Soetsu (1889-1961), a writer and philosopher, advocated for a revival of these ideas in twentieth century Japan and coined the term, \textit{mingei}, an abbreviation of \textit{minshu-teki kōgei}, which means the crafts or arts made by the people to be used daily by the people. Yanagi was influenced by the concepts of \textit{chanoyu} but also broadened their application to include a wide range of everyday objects. Part of Yanagi’s politic was to resist the privilege that was given to \textit{bijutsu} in the post-Meiji period by returning to (and extending) earlier concepts of beauty. Yanagi was also influenced by the ideas of William Morris and the nineteenth-century Arts & Craft movement, which presented a similar challenge to the hierarchical distinction of art and craft.

\textsuperscript{268} The World Expositions that proliferated in the late nineteenth century were considered an opportunity for both (global) self-representation and stimulating export trade. Initially the emphasis was on industrial development, while later fairs focussed on the exhibition of ‘other’ cultures (Hinsley 1991). Both of these impulses spring from notions of civilization and progress, which in turn emerge from an underpinning logic of commodities and market flows in the expositions, calculated in terms of the tourist gaze and the commodity value of entertainment (Hendry 2000, p. 66; Hinsley 1991, p. 362). Japan’s self-presentation at these exhibitions can be understood in terms of the commodity value of cultural presentation, particularly with respect to exoticism and the marking of cultural difference. However, Japan was not simply a passive recipient of an Orientalist construct: it not only constructed and presented its own exhibitions (unusual for countries outside of Europe/United States), but it actively utilised these events to generate revenue for the newly formed Meiji government and to stimulate domestic production.
their commodity value. At the same time, Western collectors of Japanese goods during this period sought to distinguish them from any commercial imperatives by emphasising their aesthetic (beauty) and moral values in order to categorise them as art objects according to definitions of art as autonomous (see Benfey 2003).

The close relationship between the public exhibition of art and its commodity value was already a part of established discourses in Japan prior to the World Fairs and Exhibitions, even though the concept of international exhibitions (hakurankai) was promoted as novel and was influenced by Western exhibitions (Kornicki 1994). Peter Kornicki argues that hakurankai can be understood as a development from the styles of display practiced in the Tokugawa (1600-1867) period rather than being an imported Western institution, in terms of allowing public access and the range of both aesthetic and utilitarian objects that were included together. During the Tokugawa period, public displays and exhibitions of art and craft developed from private gatherings to more public displays and became a critical part of an urban landscape of commercial display (p. 179). A commodity culture emerged around these public displays, and therefore the exhibition of art and craft became associated with the world of goods. The promotion of these goods included publicity guides for consumers, printed advertisements, works of popular fiction, and brand-conscious consumerism. Kornicki cites two critical tendencies that are indicative of the increasing commercialisation of display. First, the increasing association with the printing industry through advertising, publicity and souvenirs (p. 180-181); secondly, the shift away from learned culture and exclusiveness toward entertainment and inclusiveness (p. 181). These commercialised features of Tokugawa exhibition practices, in which exhibitions were seen as public entertainment with an emphasis on curiosities and rare objects to attract visitors (and thus increase profits) and the blending of popular and high culture (p. 193-194),

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269 At this time however, bijutsu had not yet been established as a cultural category.

270 Kornicki concludes that presenting these exhibitions as 'new' and 'Western' should be considered as a strategic move taken in order to emphasise how much Japan had changed and developed (p. 195), rather than as evidence of any actual change in display practices. Kornicki even traces some forms of public exhibition to the Heian period (792-1185).

271 Prior to this art exhibition, for example, of calligraphy, had been held in private and exclusive contexts and often in domestic settings, but increasingly during this time such objects were displayed more publicly.

272 While this process is certainly is not unique to Japan, Kornicki points out that this type of commercialised display was found in only a few Western European countries during this period. By the mid-late nineteenth century parallels can be made with the general commercialisation of culture that was occurring in Europe (p. 183).
also characterised Japan’s presentations at the World Fairs and were evident in domestic exhibitions during the Meiji period.

The conflicts arising during Japan’s period of modernisation led to debates on the utility and decorative value of works, and the relationship between commercial manufactured goods and handcrafted goods created for a limited audience (p. 116). This shift in values was influenced by Japan’s changing relationships with Europe, the United States and Asia.  

In the 1888 Japan Art Association (Nihon Bijutsu Kyōkai) exhibition there were no hierarchical distinctions between bijutsu and kōgei and they were exhibited together. It was only after the Paris World Exhibition in 1900 that kōgei was exhibited separately from painting and sculpture, based on the Western hierarchal order. There were multiple factors, in addition to the significant influence of Western ideas, driving the hierarchical categorisation of art and craft: Japan’s global status was shifting and it wanted to demonstrate its identity with ‘civilised’ nations, there were new patrons for art, and developments were made in the methods of mass production of craft which increased its output and further distinguished it from hand-made paintings and calligraphy.  

By 1907, with the initiation of the government-run fine art exhibition Bunten, only painting and sculpture were included; kōgei was exhibited separately. However, in 1927 a separate section was added to include kōgei in the Teiten exhibition (the successor to Bunten). Yet kōgei was now distinctly separate to bijutsu (Uyeno 1958, p. 120), and was hierarchically placed after the categories of nihonga, yōga and sculpture in exhibitions.

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273 The Imperial Court recognised the work of ceramicists, a recognition which previously had only been accorded to painters and calligraphers. This was also influenced by the contemporary collaborations between artists and artisans. This collaborative dynamic changed as artists once again found patrons for their paintings and calligraphy works and as mass production came to dominate craft production.

274 In 1893 at the World Fair in Chicago, Japan was the first non-Asian country to exhibit under the category of ‘fine arts,’ as opposed to categories such as ‘manufacturing and liberal arts’. This was due to the Western practice of equating fine arts with ‘civilization’ and associating craft, such as pottery, metalwork and lacquer, with ‘pre-modern’ nations (Conant 1991). Thus, Japan was able to position itself in the international hierarchy of the time.

275 One of the key contributors to this transformational shift to include kōgei in the government exhibitions in the 1920s was a movement affirming the folk arts (mingei) in Japan. Folk arts had flourished in the Tokugawa period, and referred to objects that had a clear utilitarian value; however, in the Taisho period there was an increasing recognition of the merits of these objects. Yanagi Soetsu, Hamada Shōji, and Kawai Kanjiro coined the term mingei (popular utilitarian arts) in 1927 (Kikuchi 1997, 1999). Mingei is a conflation of minshū kōgei, (peoples’ craft). What is interesting about mingei is that Yanagi perpetuated the concept of mingei as authentic and traditional culture in a self-Orientalised vision of Japanese national culture (ibid). Mingei was considered to capture an ‘original’ Japanese expression, and Yanagi adopted Western concepts of nation and culture in defining mingei as a cultural expression of national identity (Kikuchi 1997, p. 346).
The impact of the mass production of objects for export purposes, intensified through the Worlds Fairs, coincided with debates on the adoption of the hierarchies of value associated with bijutsu in the 1870s. The debates were intimately tied to the purposes of the state during this period of change. The conventional domestic market for kōgei (ceramics, lacquerware, metalwork) was shrinking due to political and economic changes and the Meiji government was focussed on generating income through export goods, as they were conscious of the popularity of Japanese craft goods internationally. Consequently, there was a shift towards the mass production of kōgei by adopting new factory-based production techniques based on European industrial models. The meaning of kōgei as such was expanded to refer to industrial arts and technology as well as craft (Uyeno 1958, p. 112). Prior to this, Japanese crafts had been hand-made and were produced in limited quantities (Uyeno 1958, p. 110). This shift towards the mass production of kōgei was met with renewed calls for creative and original design work, and concern over the threat that standardised production presented to the quality of manufactured goods.\(^{276}\)

For the government, the maintenance of quality standards in manufacturing was important (Uyeno 1958, p. 112). The government was particularly focussed on adapting the ‘high’ culture products previously consumed by society’s elites into mass production items, and wanted to encourage co-operation between artists (painters and sculptors of bijutsu) and the artisans (technical manufacturers of kōgei) in the design of such work.

It is evident that the changes in the status and value of art and craft were part of a complex confluence of factors. In particular, Japan’s position in the late nineteenth century global order and the economic and aesthetic value of works produced in Japan for export and international exhibitions were critical factors in the separation of the aesthetic and utilitarian values of craft goods. Furthermore the relationship between art and commodity was already established in Japanese discourses of public exhibition prior to the Meiji period. The recognition of the commodity value of art intensified through Japan’s participation in World Fairs and International Exhibitions, in which the export of art and craft goods was used to generate revenue and to

\(^{276}\) In particular, the producers of lacquerware and metalwork refused to mass produce goods (Uyeno 1958, p. 110). One reason why lacquerware and metalwork artisans may have been more readily able to challenge the shift in production practices was that their goods were generally associated with decorative and luxury purposes, as opposed to ceramics and textiles that were more closely associated with everyday consumption practices.
stimulate domestic production and markets. The desire to retain high standards of technique and innovation in art and craft production was also not isolated from the recognition of commodity value.

In many ways Superflat is a contemporary variant on these historical examples. The aim to use the commodity value of art in order to stimulate domestic production-consumption, and the global influences on this aim, is therefore not an entirely new strategy. The same tension between global influences and local expressions are engaged by Superflat. Superflat is distinct, however, because it is not formed through national (government) structures, but emerges through the agency of the individual, Murakami. This reflects the contemporary conditions of globalisation in which local identities (even if they are mobilised as expressions of national-cultural identity) can work through global networks in a more extensive way than has been previously available because of the networks created by developments in media and communications technologies and travel (Castells 2001; Robertson 1995; Sassen 2000).

Furthermore, Murakami argues that the non-hierarchy of art and popular culture in Superflat work is a reinvigoration of the pre-Meiji position, in which ‘art’ did not exist as a separate category to everyday objects and technical skill was highly valued. He argues he is constructing his own concept of beauty which explodes the concept of ‘art’ as it has existed in Japan since the Meiji period by including the commercial forms of manga, anime and video games.

However, Murakami’s argument that the non-hierarchical quality of Superflat expresses ‘authentic’ Japanese cultural values which existed prior to the import of bijutsu, tends to uncritically echo the self-Orientalist positions of the early twentieth century when the post-Meiji devaluing of craft was challenged (Yanagi & Leach 1972). While this challenge was asserted as a return to ‘original’ Japanese expression, the Western art and crafts movement of William Morris (Moeran 1997) influenced its underpinning philosophy, and it was formed within the modern concept of national identity and the attendant notions of cultural authenticity and tradition. Similarly, Murakami’s notion of a ‘revival’ of everyday aesthetic value as particularly Japanese is influenced by Western postmodern discourses and the awareness of the popularity of the anime and manga aesthetic outside of Japan. The re-evaluation of the authenticity of popular cultural forms in relation to the notion of unified national-cultural identity can be traced in Japanese discourses defining the meaning of the term ‘popular culture’.
Taishu Bunka: popular and mass culture in Japan

Two terms emerged in the late nineteenth century and were used to define popular culture in Japan; these are *taishu bunka* and *minshu bunka* (Robertson 1998). Both terms are translated as popular/mass culture in English, but express different meanings and relate to different conceptions of national identity. The political uses and meanings of the terms *taishu*, *minshu* and *masu* (mass culture) have continued to shift throughout the twentieth century.  

*Taishu* is derived from a Buddhist context, and was used as a transcendent term referring to the size of a mass audience. It has been used in reference to the working class and is now frequently used to refer to the proverbial 80-90% of Japanese who identify themselves as ‘middle class’ (Robertson, p. 32-33). In comparison *minshu* is more commonly used in reference to a sense of human agency and populist politics (p. 33). It has more of a class-based connotation, formed in opposition to elite culture.

In more contemporary discussions of mass-produced culture, *masu bunka* (mass culture) is often used in relation to an Adornian sense of commercial culture, thus referring to standardised, large-scale production that is conceived as a threat to local and communal consumption. Some cultural critics consider *masu* to be a more appropriate term for goods that are mass-produced, whereas *taishu* can be more loosely used to refer to popular (broadly consumed) culture that is not a mass-produced object, such as the theatre, literature and art. The critics who use the term *masu* tend to reject the sense of agency and creative invention that is associated with the term *taishu bunka* (Bardsley 1997, p. 11). In contrast, other cultural theorists want to reclaim the sense of the uses and practices involved in everyday ‘popular agency’ (in a de Certeauian sense), and therefore use *taishu bunka*. Furthermore, the concept of mass culture has also been...

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The term for culture, *bunka*, emerged after the Meiji Restoration (Moris-Suzuki 1998, p. 64) and was linked to the term *bunmei* (civilization). *Bunmei* referred to the concept of improvement and order achieved through the attainment of knowledge and learning, and it became associated with Westernisation and industrial production during this time, which was the domain of high culture and social elitism. However, from the 1920s, with the growth in mass production, a wider section of the new urban population could consume the fashionable Western-style goods and these goods became identified as *taishu bunka*. However, the definition of this term was highly contested (Bardsley 1997, pp. 8-10), ranging from the original Buddhist associations of the term in relation to a non-class ‘multitude,’ to the meaning of ‘popular’ as used to describe something having appeal and entertainment value for large groups, as well as in relation to class distinctions. However, the reference to class distinctions was ambiguous because *taishu bunka* was used at various times to differentiate ‘elite’ culture, the ‘middle class,’ and the culture of the working class (*nōdō taishū*) and farmers (*nōmin taishū*). Under the influence of Marxist theory, some critics wanted to distinguish the proletarian meaning of the term from its meaning of general popular appeal, and the association of *taishu bunka* with the working class still persists in contemporary dictionaries.
dismissed altogether in order to emphasise the dominance of the fragmented and niche cultures of contemporary Japanese society, and to challenge the connection between popular culture and the notion of a homogenous Japanese society (see Katō, Powers & Stronach 1989).

Taishu bunka has been deployed to evoke the notion of ‘authentic’ or ‘traditional’ culture, and to serve as an egalitarian ideal that connects all consumers. Yanagita Kunio (one of the first ethnographers in Japan), in the early twentieth century coined the term jomin as a reference to the ‘ordinary and abiding people’ of rural areas and their practices of consumption (Robertson 1998, p. 28). Yanagita was concerned about the effects of urbanisation and industrialisation in earlier twentieth century Japan and conceived of jomin as the source of ‘authentic’ cultural Japanese. In the late twentieth century these ideas persist and taishu bunka is used to refer to a transcendent concept of culture shared across social, gender and regional spaces. Thus, it comes to be utilised in constructing national identity. Katō Hidetoshi (1989) refers to popular culture as ‘the culture that is shared by every single individual’ (p. 315); thus it transcends any class divisions, or high/low culture divisions, because it is shared. Again this references the ubiquitous middle class and the ideology of the homogenous Japanese society:

[I]t may be safe to say that: (1) Japan has been an egalitarian country, though the origin and nature of the philosophy are somewhat different from those of Western countries. Japanese egalitarianism was accelerated by the reforms of the postwar period. (2) The Japanese population is extremely homogenous, and the gaps between social classes are probably much narrower than in other societies. (3) On the part of the elite in Japan, there seems to be less class consciousness and anxiety. They usually do not have much psychological and ideological resistance to popular culture (p. 316).

Katō’s presumption of Japan as a site of homogenous and egalitarian production-consumption practices neglects any consideration of the actual fragmentary and diverse consumption practices and inequalities of consumption in Japan (Robertson 1998, p. 31). The concept of the homogeneity of Japanese society has already been critiqued in Chapter Two. However, two related points require further consideration: first, a recognition that the discourse of the popular has become embedded in ideological statements about the uniqueness and homogeneity of Japanese culture; and secondly, while Katō proposes that there is a concept of popular culture (mass-produced, commercial forms) in Japan and its elements have been conceptually

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278 Yanagita’s work became part of a popular intellectual discourse of nostalgia in the 1970s. It has been criticised as an idealised discursive construction which ultimately became embedded in the ideology of the state and the construction of a homogenous and essentialised discourse of Japanese uniqueness (pp. 28-9).
Distinguished from ‘high’ cultural forms, popular culture is not necessarily hierarchically conceived as ‘low’ culture:

All major forms and artefacts of Japanese artistic expression have a multi-layered history connected with both popular culture and with the world of elite and government patronage (Bardsley 1997, p. 12).

While the postmodern reconsideration of the socially constructed values of high/low culture in the West reveals a similar fluidity, it is not clear that in Japan popular culture has been considered as low culture. For example, elements such as the tea ceremony and bijutsu which in the West may be considered as high culture are consumed by large sections of the population in Japan. Thus, one of the (contested) Western definitions of popular or mass culture cannot be strictly applied in a Japanese context.

It is clear that the meaning and value of popular culture are contested areas in Japanese discourses, and the terminology used in the discussion of commercial commodity forms and consumption practices reflects this contestation. Within Japan this tension is intimately connected to discourses on national identity and the introduction of mass-production goods, which reflect the influences of Western culture. As was discussed in Chapter Two, a critical issue generated around the conceptualisation of popular culture in Japan is the accentuation of the link between contemporary cultural forms and the emergence of Japan’s urban-based merchant economy in the Edo period, and how this link is used to mark the Japanese nature of popular culture (Karatani 1997; Katō, Powers & Stronach 1989).

It must be recognised that Murakami also slips into a self-Orientalist position that presents Superflat’s blurring of art/commodity distinctions as a particularly ‘Japanese’ cultural trait that is reflective of Japanese society more generally. Murakami deploys Superflat as a marker of Japan’s middle-class: ‘In Japan, 99% of the population believes it belongs to the middle-class. One could say it is a “Superflat society”’ (Murakami 2003). However as stated, this concept of homogeneity has been heavily criticised and challenged by scholars (Befu 2001; Clammer 2001; Morris-Suzuki 1998).

279 The Edo period produced many different forms of popular culture, such as ukiyo-e woodcut prints and kabuki theatre. This popular culture is generally referred to either as tsuzoku bunka, the ‘culture of the mundane world,’ or shomin bunka, the ‘culture of the peoples without pedigree’ (Katō, Powers & Stronach 1989).
Yet, this does not mean that Murakami’s philosophical position in asserting the aesthetic and decorative value of everyday commodity forms is not valuable; rather, it highlights the relations between art and commercial culture as they currently exist in Japan. In particular, Murakami’s serialised work and production practices, particularly the use of a computer database of vector drawings to reproduce icons such as the smiling flowers, DOB characters, and eyes, connects with the value of copying in Japanese culture. When bijutsu was adopted such ideas were not rejected, even though Western critics considered them pejorative. Murakami reveals a difference to Western modernist notions in his approach to the concepts of authorial creativity and expression and the value of technique.

**Mitate: reproduction in Japanese culture**

Post-Romantic Western thinking tends to devalue copying and accurate reproduction as a lesser expression to what is considered original and new. In contrast, the following of models is a highly valued element of practice in Japan, and the concept of copying does not necessarily preclude creativity; rather it is linked to the acquisition of skills and learning through emulation and the expressive potentials of citation (Hendry 2000, pp. 179-200). Copying and reproducing external forms is considered to have an expressive function in many different practices (not only art) within Japan (Yamaguchi 1991). While the West may have influenced the institution of art, the devaluing of the concept of the copy was clearly not adopted. Copying is considered to be a key form of learning through the reproduction and mastery of codes. The value of mimesis was retained in Japan, and utilised in such a way that it is now considered to have been a positive contributor to Japan’s economic growth in the late twentieth century, and an active, creative expression of cultural agency in relation to the import of foreign forms (see Tobin 1992).

Noel Burch (1979) opposes the limitations of the dual imaging of Japanese artists as either ‘creative assimilators’ and ‘transformationalists’, or ‘lacking in originality’. Burch argues that both views tend to reproduce ideologies that privilege originality. According to Burch, ‘originality has never been a dominant value’ in Japan and ‘the specifically bourgeois notion that the artist is the

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280 The negative value of the copy in Western discourses can be traced to Darwinian ideas regarding social evolution and the association of copying with the ‘primitive’ behaviour of apes; hence the pejorative term ‘aping.’

281 *Kata* (meaning shape) is a key concept in this process of copying; in Zen arts such as *shōrei jūkō* (a martial art) and *sado* (tea ceremony) creativity is associated with copying the performance of the teacher model (Rupert Cox cited in Hendry 2000, pp. 182-4).
creator and proprietor of his [sic] work is utterly meaningless within the framework of the traditional arts of Japan’ (p. 31, italics in original). Nevertheless, the emphasis on ‘name’ artists and reputations within the dantai (art associations in bijutsu) tempers Burch’s argument that the individual creator is not celebrated or privileged in Japanese art; however, it is true that historically the structure of the art school system tended to emphasise the following of models.  

Burch emphasises Japan as a point of contrast with the valuing of originality in Western art history.

[D]ifferent types of art, generated in different periods, did not supplant each other, but co-existed and remained more or less creative from the time of their first appearance up to our time...Practically no style ever died. In other words, the history of Japanese art is not one of succession but one of superposition (Kato Shūichi cited in Burch & Michelson 1979, p. 33).

In practice, however, while it is debatable whether art styles completely superseded each other in Western art, it can certainly be argued that new innovative styles were privileged in post-Romantic discourses on art. What Burch does provide is the suggestion that the privileging of originality does not exist in Japan. Thus, it can be argued that the values of innovation and individualism can be identified, but are expressed in ways that differ from Western expressions (Clammer 2000).

The Japanese concept of mitate (the art of citation), considers imitation as a conduit to the metaphysical realm (Yamaguchi 1991, p. 58). Mitate (Mi = to see, tate = to stand/arrange) refers to the symbolic performative act of connection through copied production (or making, tsukuru). It was used originally in relation to Shinto and Buddhist ritual, in which the display of everyday objects created a mediatory space that opened into the metaphysical realm (ibid). It involves both a reproduction, in that the object may reference a classical figure or myth, and an active space that forms a connection between the everyday object and the metaphysical. Thus, the ‘reproduced’ image is considered to be an extension of the real. In mitate imitation is not devalued nor considered as a secondary expression to the ‘original’ or ‘real’ object but rather it

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282 Thomas Havens (1982, p. 71) argues that in bijutsu innovation for its own sake is not a critical value in the production of work (see also Tomooka, 2002). This tendency is influenced by the traditional workshop/studio painting system in Japan, which ‘did not encourage innovation and irreverence. Indeed it fostered conformity to the wishes of the patrons, obedience to the workshop head, fidelity to old models, perfection of craftsmanship, and selfless devotion to teamwork’ (Rosenfield, Cranston & Richard 1999, p. 285).
is an inversion where the ‘real’ (which may be a place or a metaphysical or classical mythological reference) follows the copy. The value is located in the properties of the citation, rather than in the object itself (Hendry 2000, pp. 189-90). Yamaguchi understands *mitate* to be similar to Baudrillard’s concept of simulacrum, but is closer to the meaning of simulacrum as a pseudo-object (associating the object in view with something else) considered to have a positive quality, not a ‘fake’ quality (Yamaguchi 1991, pp. 64, 66). *Mitate* is also distinguished from Walter Benjamin’s (1969) concept of mechanical reproduction, in which the reproduction changes (or destroys) the aura of the original object as it was used in ritual and display. For example, the replication of famous tea wares provided aesthetic connections between artists and owners, as well as ensuring that designs and traditional techniques of making them were passed on (Guth 1993, p. 185). This included the replica object becoming a conduit for the spiritual aura of the original, which was expressed through the copy. Thus, the copy is not a ‘degraded reproduction’ of the original, but is itself considered to be creative (Hendry 2000, p. 190). In a similar way *kazari* (decoration) and playfulness in pre-Meiji expressions provided a valued mediation point between the function of everyday objects and the supernatural sphere (Tsuji 2002, p. 18). In this way, reproduction is seen as both a functional and actively creative force. Augustus Berque (1994) examines a similar concept in relation to *mitate*, which is a code of copying that ends up producing something new. He argues that in Japanese culture, reality is schematised (codified) into sets of ‘forming forms’ (phenomenal matrices) and ‘formed forms’ (physical imprints) (p. 98). The concept of *kata* refers to both of these, which can act as a mold or matrix and also shape new forms so that they ‘resolve into each other’ (p. 103). For example, a famous landscape can act as a matrix for appreciating other landscapes or shaping a garden (in the manner of *mitate*). These physical imprints can then become matrices for shaping other gardens and at the same time can admit new forms and expressions (p. 99). The process is not considered to be one way, from original form to copy form, since the distinction between the two forms is blurred. A copied object makes reference to things beyond itself; it is not simply an empty form. On this basis, the expression of self-identity is not privileged as a unique imprint.

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283 Yamaguchi also refers to the Japanese concept of *mono* (object) in examining the multiple expressions of objects, because it developed alongside the techniques of *mitate*. *Mono* is the expression of organic existence referring to the visible and invisible properties of objects; only recently has it focussed on material existence (p. 62). ‘Mono connotes not a single existence, but rather plural existences constituted by virtue of their connection with other things’ (p. 63).

284 Paul Ricoeur contends that the meaning of the copy in *mitate* is closer to Aristotle’s sense of mimesis as a creative practice that enhances the act, more than as an expression of technical expertise (cited in Hendry 2000, p. 183).
Form exists beyond the sphere of individual action and also has the potential to be modified. In Japan, the concept of the self is seen as porous in relation to the social and physical environment and is considered to be simultaneously ‘being’ and ‘becoming’ (ibid). Therefore, kata does not conform to the post-Romantic Western conceiving of identity as a binary split between self and other. A copy is not devalued as a lesser production of an original reality, but is considered to be a productive expression. The copy may replicate the external form, but it is still recognised for its expression of something new, which is not entirely separate from the original.

These ideas on the creative value of the copy have been transferred into the forms of mass reproduction. There has not been the dichotomy of mass reproduction and creative expression as Adorno may have perceived it, or the devaluing of decoration because it is superfluous to the Western concepts of the expression of subjectivity and the aura of originality (see Carboni 1991, p. 106). For example, in the anime production studios of Miyazaki Hayao (Rodriguez del Alisal 2002) production is not considered to be separate to pleasure or creation; instead the emphasis is on the interconnection between the two. John Clammer contests the dichotomy in Western thinking, arguing that such divisions as that between a work ethic and aesthetic value do not exist in Japanese culture (1995, p. 214). One consequence of this is that the embrace of capitalism and commodity consumption has different meanings within Japan; materialism has been synthesised with social harmony and continuity (Clammer 2001, p. 107). Thus, there are not necessarily the same (Judeo-Christian) conflicts around the negative effects of ‘materialism;’ in fact, there have been complex ‘accommodations and resistances’ to contemporary capitalism (p. 113). Capitalism and consumption are mediated by the state and bureaucracy, and utilised for the purposes of nationalism. At the same time capitalism allows liberatory impulses of non-conformity, through the profusion and production of multiple identities enabled by consumption (p. 108).

It is evident that the qualities of creativity and originality, the values of everyday functions and aesthetics, and the production of subjectivity, operate and are conceived of differently in Japan than they are in the West. While Western ideas of art’s autonomy have influenced Japanese institutions and discourses, as is evidenced by the separation of kōgei and bijutsu, the notions of mitate, tsukuru and kata persist, expressing plural states of being without a strict binary or hierarchical division between the original and the copy. Furthermore the strict separation of art

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285 This is closer to Deleuze and Guattari’s (1987) concept of subjectivity as a continually dynamic state.
and commodity is problematised by the values accorded to reproduction and techniques of production. Hence, postmodern and poststructural theorists such as Barthes (1982) and Baudrillard (1988a) were fascinated with Japan and they interpreted Japanese approaches to art and commodity according to Western cultural epistemologies. However, to consider the values accorded to these (usefulness, copying, and technique) as postmodern (in a Western sense) is only partially adequate. The values of originality and authorial subjectivity are not entirely absent from Japanese discourses, but they do operate under a different schema. Thus, while postmodern discourses are a useful starting point in recognising such non-binary formations, the Japanese understanding of copying as a creative expression should not be understood as a challenge to originality or subjectivity (in terms of postmodernism’s challenge to modernism). In Murakami’s practice, a useful application of these concepts of authorial subjectivity, reproduction, and the status of the material form of the artwork can be found within the structure and production processes of his art factory Kaikai Kiki.

**Kaikai Kiki: art factory**

Murakami’s process of realising his works in material form is based on techniques of reproduction and seriality. A digital base model (rendered as Bezier curves) is utilised in the creation of his paintings (Kaikai kiki 2001, p. 76). Each painting becomes a unique variance connected to a central database of characters and icons (*DOB*, flowers, mushrooms, eyes, *Oval*, *Kaikai Kiki*, skull, splash), which are transformed and recomposed within the different works (Murakami 2001b) [Figure 29].
By deploying one character such as $DOB$ on different surfaces (paintings, sculpture, stickers, t-shirts, and soccer balls) [see Figure 12, Figure 13, Figure 15, Figure 16] the concept of seriality is reinforced. The ‘original’ character is thus constructed as a series of components stored in the database which can be composed and decomposed for each work. This process challenges the concept of uniqueness or originality referring to a self-contained form. Murakami’s productions are more akin to Berque’s interpretation of kata or the concept of mitate, in which the reproduction and the original form are interconnected.

Alongside Murakami’s questioning of the value of originality and working within Japanese definitions of reproduction, he also reinforces the aesthetic properties and technical qualities of the ‘original’ object in the production of the work. Murakami’s production process is highly manualised with stringent quality controls and an emphasis on the value of technique; works that are deemed to be of insufficient quality are often discarded and remade (Kaseno 2001, p. 78). Murakami has strict criteria for the finished aesthetic presentation of his works, and the final surfaces of his paintings, such as the flat colour segmentations in Tan Tan Bo [IMAGE REMOVED], are still painted in order to retain the energy of hand brushwork (ibid). In this way the object status of the work is reinforced.286 Murakami has been utilising screen-printing as part of the painting process; however, he is still strongly insistent on the hand-production of his paintings. Murakami has stressed that he wants to differentiate his work processes from Warhol’s screen-printing techniques and that he values the utilisation of traditional Japanese painting methods in the production of his paintings (Kaseno 2001, p. 78). Murakami’s emphasis on hand-production can be understood as reinforcing the connections he desires with premodern Japanese painting, not only philosophically but also aesthetically. The different surface effects in his early paintings, such as the layered and scraped-back surface of 727 [Figure 5], are derived from nihonga painting techniques (ibid).287 Tracing methods, also derived from nihonga practices, were initially used to convert the compositions of Murakami’s works from the computer onto the painting surface. This labour intensive process was later replaced by screen-printing the outlines of the base design onto the canvas and then manually painting in the colour sections.

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286 By asserting a new identity and reaffirming the ‘beauty’ of painting, Murakami also departs from the nihilism of Neo-Pop, which rejected conventional forms of painting and the objects of art.

287 For example, Murakami’s painting assistants use the materials of nihonga such as shiratama, sokumyo, and renpitsu brushes (Hirata 2001, p. 81).
The collaborative system of production within the *Kaikai Kiki* studio can also be interpreted as a challenge to the post-Romantic status of the artist as the individual creator of the works and the notion of the artwork as an expression of the individual. Like Andy Warhol, who famously utilised factory assistants to produce his screen-prints, Murakami also employs assistants to produce his paintings. Murakami overturns these post-Romantic conceptions in a far more organised and structured manner than Warhol’s factory by emphasising the underlying principles of business efficiency in the production of his works. Murakami has stated that the change in the name of the studio/factory from *Hiropon* to *Kaikai Kiki Co., Ltd.* reflects a conceptual shift away from the studio as a practice that merges art with popular culture to a factory that is more explicitly producing ‘art products’ (Kelmacher 2002). These ‘art products’ are all distinguished by their prominent copyright marks [Figure 30].

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*Kaikai Kiki* has thus become more like a corporation, employing staff to produce and manage the distribution of Murakami’s paintings and sculptures and associated products; this is emphasised through the publication of an extensive catalogue detailing the processes of production (*Kaikai Kiki* 2001). In the studio there is a thick manual outlining the production process for studio staff (ibid). These processes are derived from business models such as the Bill Gates model for Microsoft (Takashima 2005). This is in contrast to the initial activities of *Hiropon* which had the feeling of an art collective with a range of shows in alternative spaces similar to *komike*.

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288 Initially Murakami curated a series of art shows at alternative venues, such as the *Hiropon* show in 1997 at Shop 33, which included Bome. Shop 33 is a techno-shop in Kichijoji and is a haven for *otaku*. 
Murakami’s technical production decisions, such as the shift to the use of screen-printing, are also based on the value of economic efficiency as much as they are aesthetic decisions (Yoshitomo Nara X Takashi Murakami: New Pop Revolution 2002; Takashima 2005).

Murakami also emphasises the role of the assistants in the production process. By listing their names on the back of each work he presents them as collaborators. In this way, Kaikai Kiki seems similar to an architectural practice/studio. In large architectural studios there is a head architect after whom the studio is usually named and with whom the reputation of the practice is associated. The staff may perform a significant amount of the design work and production and are usually acknowledged for their collaboration. Therefore, in architecture there can be a greater acknowledgment of artistic production as a collaborative rather than an autonomous process. Alternatively, Murakami links the structure of Kaikai Kiki with the structures of premodern painting such as the Kanō school and Tosa schools (Murakami 2001b, p. 146). Under the iemoto system according to which professional ateliers were structured, there was a head artist who directed the expressive output of the studio, while the apprentices and assistants created the works and carried forward the skills of the master artist (Rosenfield, Cranston & Richard 1999, p. 285). In both of these analogous systems, architecture and iemoto, the identification with the ‘name’ artist is still reinforced within the collaborative production process. Therefore, while the work produced is not specifically created or constructed by the name artist, the individual subjectivity of the artist’s identity is still reinforced. However, this artistic identity is nevertheless built around an explicit acknowledgment of the collaborative process. Murakami’s comparison of Kaikai Kiki with the anime production system is also a useful clarification of the complexities of this position. In anime the author (or director) facilitates the overall production process, utilising assistants to produce the work. Paul Wells, in his analysis of the production process of Miyazaki Hayao, emphasises the role of the director as the articulator of texts (1997). The expression of individualism and original authorship occurs through the process of drawing together images from a pre-existing database of images.

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280 One of the key activities to emerge from Murakami’s studio/factory has been the training support provided for young, urban artists and the facilitation of exhibitions for amateur (non-institutionally trained) artists such as Geisai.

280 For example, in the Jean Nouvel exhibition at the Tokyo Opera City Art Gallery November 1, 2003- January 25, 2004, there was a photo installation profiling all of the staff working for Nouvel and listing their roles within different architecture projects.

291 Not all Kanō school workshops functioned in the same way and the application of iemoto varied between ateliers. The more prominent workshops established strong artistic identities, whereas many of the smaller workshops were less associated with a distinctive style (ibid).
Arguably, this dilutes an auteurist interpretation of Miyazaki’s films, but self-evidently, Miyazaki’s mobilisation of diverse styles, with their attendant signs and signifiers, remains consistent, and ultimately informs a typology of theme and execution…Miyazaki’s use of animation successfully enables him to redefine the terms of authorship within the Japanese context. Animation effectively becomes the language of mediation between the accumulation of aesthetic and cultural forms and the articulation of authorship (p. 23 italics in original).

There is a complex process in play here which reveals that the expression of artistic subjectivity does not have to be connected with singular original objects or individual subjects. Murakami’s practices utilise the creative potential within the collaborative process and the processes of reproduction; at the same time, the luxury status of the art object and the distinction of his individual identity are preserved. The issues arising from the aauric value of the identity of the artist and the art object will be examined in further detail in the final section, Japan’s Andy Warhol. Furthermore, it is not clear whether Murakami is challenging the current status of art and commercial culture in Japan, or rather is reinforcing the status quo. The following section examines in more detail the current social status of art and commercial culture in Japan in order to critically evaluate Murakami’s criticisms about the lack of status afforded to art in Japan.

3.2.2 ART AND COMMERCIAL CULTURE IN CONTEMPORARY JAPAN

In contemporary Japan, while a general institutional distinction may be made between ‘pure art’ and ‘commercial art,’ commercial art remains highly popular (Murakami 2001b, p. 135). Successful commercial artists from the fields of manga, anime, and advertising can achieve the same, or even greater, status as ‘high art’ artists (Bornoff 2002, p. 43). The form of citation and cross over between contemporary art and the world of fashion and design celebrated in Superflat is not new; Yokoo Tadanori was involved in cross-disciplinary work in the 1960s. Furthermore, Superflat and Geisai can be considered to be the latest permutations in a long history of cross-boundary exhibitions in Japan (Ito et al. 2004). What is new is the way in which Murakami is utilising an international platform as part of his project and for the launching of

292 Bornoff presents this lack of distinction in comparison to the status of European artisans working in medieval guilds, and thus challenges the linear development of modernisation theory in his comparison of Western and Japanese art history.

293 Yokoo Tadanori is a well-known graphic designer and illustrator who has been simultaneously exhibiting as an artist in galleries since the 1960s, with evident similarities between the commercial and gallery work.

294 Ito traces a lineage from the 15th Yomiuri Independent exhibition (1963) to Roppongi Crossing 2004 (Ito et al. 2004). Ito considers the Nippon Graphic Exhibition in 1980 (renamed the Nippon Object Exhibition in 1984) as the equivalent of Geisai 1 and Geisai 2 (2002) in that it provided an opportunity for young, urban artists to exhibit.
Murakami’s polemic is against the privileging of the imported concept of ‘pure art’ and the art establishment, which he argues have minimal relevance to contemporary Japanese society.

In Japanese society, the world of contemporary art seems, in some respects, pretty close to collapse. In the United States and in Europe, works are sold at very high prices but there is no structure in Japan that makes it possible to reach such high prices. The works by manga authors sell large numbers of copies and those people are very much respected in society: The “kind” of artists that are respected in Japan are not at all the same as abroad. And at the same time, if the manga authors or, as we might say, the “stars of the subculture,” are still greatly admired by the public, there is also a world that is quite separate, that of “pure art.” To a large extent, this is driven by the Japanese inferiority complex in relation to the West. A complex that Japanese society ended up putting to one side by dropping art as a luxury object in order to turn towards art for the masses. So I thought that that was maybe where the real possibilities were. I too worked to create and present abroad the context that would enable Westerners to understand the new possibilities available to art…I wanted to exhibit my work in the West, which I see as the homeland of the fine arts from the Japanese perspective (Murakami qtd. in Kelmatcher 2002, p. 93).

Murakami’s argument is intended to shift the focus away from bijutsu, which he argues has struggled to find a mature identity and define its own way in relation to Western art; these issues were analysed in Chapter Two. However, if art is consumed in a manner similar to other commercial products (such as music and fashion), and if Japanese consumers do not necessarily privilege contemporary art above these products, then Murakami is not so much challenging the distinctions between art and commercial culture, but rather reinforcing the status quo. Murakami has stated that, ‘The modern Japanese does not believe in the native or Western concept of “art”’ (2001b, p. 144). He argues that bijutsu lacks relevance to the younger generations of Japanese, and that the belief in creation as an expression of individual identity has been betrayed by the conservativeness of bijutsu and the focus on following Western high art hierarchies (p. 145). Professional artists and critics in Japan support Murakami’s view regarding the lack of support for contemporary art, although they do not necessarily agree with his entire interpretation or response.

There is a widely shared opinion amongst art professionals working in the Japanese contemporary art scene that contemporary art in Japan is generally not popular or well understood by the general public (Kataoka 2003; Osaka 1999, p. 70; Matsui 1999c, p. 25; McDonald 2002). The lack of curatorial and critical debate and a market for contemporary art within Japan, as well as the structure of the contemporary art gallery system, are common
As a result of this situation, curators argue that there is a lack of critical awareness about contemporary art amongst the general public, which subsequently drives the tendency to show only large brand shows in the (many) large municipal galleries (Osaka 2003). Furthermore, professional exhibition opportunities for young and emerging artists are relatively limited. As a result of this situation, many contemporary Japanese artists seek international exhibitions in order to attract the interest of foreign collectors and museums. As was discussed in Chapter Two, the increased number of international exhibitions of contemporary

Discourse around contemporary art has been comparatively limited in Japan, a commonly cited example being the lack of art publications – there is only one major art magazine, Bijutsu Techo (Roberts 1991, p. 21) - and the lack of contemporary art critics (Elliott 2003; McGee 2003). However, since the 1990s there have been attempts to address this issue, and more recently (in 2003) a new bi-lingual art magazine, ARTiT has been launched. There are curators who are trying to address this situation in a proactive manner. Mami Kataoka (formerly director of Tokyo Opera City Gallery and now curator at Mori Art Museum) and Roger McDonald (who helped to found the arts collective AIT) are actively attempting to engage a wider audience in discourses on contemporary art. Under these conditions however many artists have sought out alternative means of exhibiting their work and establishing an audience (Hjorth 2001; Lloyd 2002, p. 20; McDonald 2002). Nevertheless, the popularity of the Yokohama Art Fair suggests there is potential for increasing the support of contemporary art.

During the late 1980s and early 1990s there was museum building boom, and from 1990-2000 the number of registered museums (art and otherwise) increased from 534 to 827 (Segi 2002). However, during the economic downturn in the 1990s, many of these museums lost their funding and struggled financially (McDonald, 2002). As a result, many galleries are now reluctant to take on ‘risky’ exhibitions (Osaka 2003). Meanwhile, the municipal galleries often exhibit the work of artists who are well connected with local politicians. During fieldwork in Tokyo, the Satsuma Museum of Art had an exhibition of this type; it was criticised by one of the museum’s curators because of the lack of peer review involved in this type of exhibition (Hirano 2003). On a more positive note, this situation has also enabled younger and emerging contemporary artists such as Murakami to exhibit in these larger institutions from the mid-1990s onwards (Kataoka 2003).

One of the difficulties facing contemporary artists (especially young, emerging artists and graduates from the numerous art colleges) is the difficulty of exhibiting in a contemporary art gallery. There are six categories of galleries operating in Japan: ‘commercial galleries’ (kikaku-garo), stocking a stable of artists, which have curated exhibitions where the work is for sale – an example would be Tomio Koyama (Murakami’s dealer); ‘rental galleries’ (kashi-garo), hiring out spaces to artists with no publicity or curatorial assistance; ‘corporate galleries’, sponsored by large corporations, such as NTT’s Intercommunication Center (ICC) gallery, or the Mori Art Museum; ‘municipal and prefectural galleries’, such as the Museum of Contemporary Art Tokyo (MOT); depiito (department store) galleries, such as Parco where Superflat was launched (many depiito galleries have closed in the past few years); and ‘others’, such as bookstore galleries like Nadiff and National Embassy galleries. Fifty percent of contemporary art galleries in Tokyo are rental spaces, and this is the dominant form of gallery exhibition available to young and emerging artists. Artists can rent these spaces for a short time (one to two weeks), but the fees are very high (Nagoya 1996) and artists have to provide their own publicity; there is no wider connection with the media or an established client list, so many exhibitions reach a limited audience, usually the artist’s friends and family (McGee 2000). Since there is such a high number of these exhibitions changing over rapidly, a lack of a peer-review process in their selection, and no system for regular communication with art critics many of these exhibitions are not covered by the local media (McGee 2003). The only other option open for contemporary artists is to belong to an art association (dantai) and exhibit at Nitten; however, these are very conservative and exclusive exhibitions (Matsukage, Shimuta & Shinkawa 2004; Roberts 1991).
Japanese art in the 1980s became a critical model for contemporary artists such as Murakami to follow (Kataoka 2003). For example, Murakami’s solo show at the Museum of Contemporary Art Tokyo in 2001 was considered a moderate success (Minami 2003). However, while Murakami established himself within the Tokyo contemporary art scene early on in his contemporary art career, his desire is to reach a much larger audience. Rather than seeking to change the existing contemporary art scene, Murakami aims to create his own categories and institutions of Superflat art amongst the forms and structures of contemporary *otaku* culture.

It is not common for many Japanese people to purchase and live with a work of art. Even among the younger generation, art enthusiasts are greatly outnumbered by enthusiasts of *manga* comics, *anime*, and rock music. However, architectural design and interior design have become very popular in the past few years, and contemporary art is considered to be the next trend. As many magazines are now covering art, there are signs of people considering purchasing a work of art. I hope that the *shokugan* figure, which customers may purchase at a convenience store, will become a ‘starter kit’ for their art collection (Murakami & Kaikai kiki 2003, p. n.a.).

Nevertheless, Murakami argues that this lack of belief in art does not reflect a negation of the importance of creative expression, but rather that there is a general interest in the value of aesthetics and expression within the consumption of commercial culture. For example, the television show, *Everyone’s a Picasso*, in which ‘amateur’ participants have their artwork judged by an artist (Murakami is one of the trained experts who act as judges), is highly popular (Murakami 2000a, p. 23). Similarly, at *komike*, a comic fair at which both amateur and professional *manga* artists display and sell their work, there is a clear convergence of specialist and non-specialist artists, and the value of both genres is recognised. The art establishment has largely ignored these outlets for creative expression and Murakami is critical of this separation.

While his participation in *Everyone’s a Picasso* was attacked by the ‘serious art people’, Murakami

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298 Murakami’s show attracted more than 30,000 visitors; this is considered a very good number for a contemporary Japanese artist (Minami 2003). In an interview with Minami Yusuke, curator at the MOT, he stated that normally an exhibition of contemporary Japanese art would attract 15,000-20,000 people; the most successful show at the MOT prior to this had been the collection from Center Georges Pompidou, which attracted over 300,000 visitors and the Andy Warhol exhibition drew 120,000 (ibid). Consequently, Murakami’s show was considered a small success but not an ‘explosion.’ In comparison, at the same time as Murakami’s exhibition the Yokohama Museum of Art presented a Yoshitomo Nara show which attracted over 90,000 people. Minami suggested that the reason for Nara’s popularity is to do with his attraction amongst the fashion/opinion leaders for young Japanese girls, such as Banana Yoshitomo and other music stars; it is also possible that the sentimentality of Nara’s characters is more appealing to this audience. Minami pointed out that the MOT exhibition was held at the beginning of Murakami’s rise to prominence, and now that Murakami’s profile has increased such an exhibition would potentially attract higher numbers. The profile that Minami refers to is the way in which Murakami’s activity, particularly the sale of his work at a Christie’s auction, was reported in every major Japanese newspaper.
argues that the general audience does not understand or care about this type of art distinction and therefore he disregards the views of art critics, preferring the judgements of popular opinion (Murakami qtd. in Nakamura 2001, p. 26).

[I]t is very difficult to explain to the Japanese people because they aren’t interested in my issue. It is just everyday. It is normal. I’m really interested in exact Japanese culture, but in Japan I cannot present art in a very straight way. It is so hard, so I must make a twist (ibid).

The twist that Murakami refers to is the extension of his work (and his persona) beyond art world audiences by going to other sites where people engage with art, for example, the show *Everyone’s a Picasso*, where the audiences may not be familiar with his gallery work. He then attracts their interest (to create what he calls ‘art fans’) and leads them from that site into the fine art context of his work. This process he refers to as ‘educating’ them about his ideas; *Super Flat* (the exhibition catalogue) was one means of explaining those ideas, particularly to younger audiences (p. 24).

This position is complex because at the same time Murakami is explicitly emphasising his success within Western art worlds. Thus, his disregard of (Japanese) art critics expresses a certain ease and confidence. The fact that the majority of Murakami’s sales occur within Western art markets perhaps also allows him the safety of this disregard.

In Japan, the established audience [for contemporary art] does not exist, it is not the same as in the United States or in Europe, so the real collectors are very few (real collectors with money) so people say there is no art market in Japan…Murakami’s strategy is a kind of development of his own art market, so collector with a lot of money are very few, but ordinary people with their own (little) money are many (Minami 2003).

However, the respect accorded to *manga* within Japanese society requires further investigation in order to consider how Murakami is utilising this situation to his advantage. Murakami contends that he is looking to the areas of creative expression that are popular. Yet, at the same time he is directing his attention towards selected forms of commercial culture and ignoring particular forms of art that are popular (in terms of appeal) and widely consumed.

It has already been established that Murakami distinguishes and affirms select *manga* texts, namely, those that have already been legitimated by government and popular media discourses. Furthermore, he differentiates the criteria for popular art (in terms of attracting large numbers of people) from the popular consumption of *bijutsu*. While the contemporary art world (gendai
Nitten is concerned over a lack of interest in and attendance at contemporary art exhibitions, conventional kindai bijutsu exhibitions such as Nitten are extremely popular. Nitten is the major open-entry and juried exhibition (koboten) of the art establishment (gadan). The exhibition is highly prestigious and senior members of Nitten and the dantai command high prices for their work (Tomii 1994, p. 395). Nitten emphasises the status of the artist rather than the work, and this tends to underpin the selection and sale process (Havens 1982). For example, for a recent Nitten, of 2000 paintings submitted only 400 were selected, and only thirty-five of these artists were exhibiting for the first time (Matsukage, Shimuta & Shinkawa 2004). Nitten’s hierarchical structure, factionalism and links with government support are continually criticised (Tomii 2004b).

While the Japanese contemporary art world considers Nitten to be derivative (largely of early European modernists), conservative, and removed from the experience of everyday living (Matsukage, Shimuta & Shinkawa, p. 81), it is extremely popular with Japanese audiences. The Tokyo venue attracted 200,000 visitors, and there were 700,000 visitors nationwide (ibid). Because it is consumed by such large numbers of people, it is therefore difficult to refer to it as a form of ‘elite’ or even restricted consumption. In contrast, gendai bijutsu attracts much smaller audiences (Osaka 2003). However, the consumption patterns of contemporary art in Japan are changing and there are more avenues allowing audiences to consume art. Popular publications — for example, Luca and Brutus — have been increasingly including contemporary artists (both Japanese and foreign) among the usual mix of fashion, music, and design articles. Furthermore, there were positive responses to the establishment of the Yokohama Triennale (which attracted 300,000 visitors in 2001), and the Mori Art Museum attracted 50,000 visitors a week when it first opened (Elliott 2003). In this context, art (äto, pronounced phonetically) has come to be consumed along with other media forms and is not necessarily privileged as more aesthetically valuable. The emergence of Superflat can be located as part of this much larger consumption pattern.

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299 Nitten is part of the conservative dantai (art association) art establishment.

300 The initial curiosity factor should not be discounted here, and the ticket to the gallery also included the attraction of the ‘Tokyo View’ from the top of the museum.
In addition to supporting young artists (such as Mr. and Aoshima) through Kaikai Kiki and organising 'conceptual exhibitions' such as Superflat, Murakami refers to the Geisai exhibition as part of his overall 'campaign of enlightenment,' which has the goal of transforming the consumption of (Superflat) art. Modelled on komike, Murakami created Geisai as a forum for commercial and amateur artists to exhibit in, as a response to what he felt was the betrayal of creative expression by the art establishment (Murakami 2001b, p. 145). Geisai is presented as offering an alternative to institutionally trained artists, and Murakami argues that he is trying to change the way the general public considers amateur artists. Murakami considers Geisai as a means of establishing ‘art fans’ for his convergence of art and otaku culture (Murakami 2001b, p. 147). He argues that he wants to create a market for art that is cheap and accessible, like DVD and CD art (KaikaiKiki 2005), whilst also creating art exhibitions ‘as spectacles to bring in the money.’ There is concern, however, that such activities destroy the already ‘thin’ understanding and interest in contemporary art (Minami 2003), and his strategy is criticised by art professionals who are attempting to proactively change the general public’s level of

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301 Earlier versions of Geisai were called Geijutsu Dojo GP (Grand Prix). A dojo is a practice space; therefore, Geijutsu Dojo means a practice space for art. Entry is open and a small fee is paid to hire a stall. Recent Geisai exhibitions include Geisai 3: Pacifico Yokohama (March 2003) and Geisai 4: Tokyo Big Site (August 2003), held at Roppongi Hills.
302 While Geisai was originally created as an alternative art venue and resisted any connections with high art institutions, Murakami has recently shifted his position to invite well-known curators from the (international) contemporary art scene, such as Fumio Nanjo and Eriko Osaka, to be judges. Furthermore, the extent to which Geisai offers a direct challenge or questioning of bijutsu is negligible, since their audiences appear to be quite distinct (Osaka 2003).
engagement with contemporary art (McDonald 2002, 2003). To Murakami the destruction of the contemporary art world would be acceptable because he does not think that contemporary Japanese art or *kindai bijutsu* (as it is currently) is needed by or relevant to the wider public.

Sawaragi Noi reinforces the concept that *manga* and *anime* are not oppositional cultural expressions in Japan, but are highly valued by the wider public and are consumed with the same degree of discrimination and aesthetic judgement that has been ascribed to art connoisseurship in the West (Sawaragi 2000b, p. 166). When *manga* and *anime* are exhibited in a gallery, Sawaragi argues, they are not presented as a challenge to high/low cultural distinctions but instead demonstrate their already wide popularity and esteemed value. The *Superflat* exhibition, by presenting painting, *manga*, *anime*, illustration, graphic design, sculpture, figurines, games, fashion and photography in 'parallel positions rather than hierarchical,' reflects the ways in which these genres are already consumed in Japan (ibid). Sawaragi argues that *Superflat* assumes 'the impossibility of defining subculture in the absence of high art, the boundary between the two is merely institutional' (ibid). Murakami also affirms what he considers to be the irrelevance of Western distinctions between high and subculture in Japan:

At the same time, subcultural expressions can be discussed as something just as important as literature, film, or other "high" art. So I wanted to present this mixture, or hybridity, as both really everyday and original aspects of Japanese culture…

The division between subculture and fine art [for the "people"] seemed to be irrelevant. And that’s exactly what I was aiming for. By placing these works in an in-between area that didn’t solely belong to any individual category of animation, comics, art or literature, I wanted to suggest a freer position (Murakami qtd. in Matsui 1998 para. 26).

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303 *Arts Initiative Tokyo (A.I.T)* is one such initiative that attempts to present more opportunities for the public to engage with art, and to present alternatives to how art is seen, digested, and thought about (A.I.T). A.I.T. is a non-profit artist organisation that aims to be a centre for discourse, and which runs a diverse range of activities from artist talks to curatorial training. Its operation is based on the concept of networking among small independent groups who focus on both the local and global: for example, in 2004 A.I.T. organised a show at the Govett Brewster gallery in New Zealand. This situation is not unique to Japan and over the past decade similar 'artist-run' spaces have emerged in other parts of the globe.

304 It should be noted, however, that Sawaragi does appear to contradict this statement later as he emphasises *Superflat* as a levelling of the hierarchy between high art (as a Western import) and the post-war subculture of Japan (as in *otaku* culture) (Sawaragi 2005, p. 158).
Western critics and curators in contrast would tend to consider the content of such an exhibition as a ‘statement’ rather than as the status quo. However, Sawaragi’s position, presented for a Western audience within the context of an exhibition, simplifies the complex cultural and economic values underpinning the exhibition of manga. The many new municipal museums built during the 1980s have struggled to attract visitors and have therefore been promoting programs that would appeal to large numbers of visitors, for example, increasing community-oriented services such as educational programs for children. The exhibition of manga can therefore be understood as part of this general popularisation of gallery exhibitions.

According to Sharon Kinsella (2000) manga has not always been readily accepted as a respected cultural form, particularly by the state. Nor has its consumption always been considered a positive characteristic of Japanese society. The manga that is celebrated is generally the work of a select group, and Osamu Tezuka is one of the major manga and anime artists to be celebrated (Schodt 1986). In the 1970s and 1980s the production-consumption of commercial manga expanded significantly. However, despite its wide consumption manga did not receive significant attention from corporations or the government. In contrast, from the mid-1980s onwards manga began to attract significant attention that was both positive and negative. By the late-1980s manga had become linked with Japanese cultural and artistic traditions, particularly ukiyo-e prints, manga exhibitions were held at major public galleries, and it was utilised by the politically conservative establishment (Kinsella 2000, pp. 91-4). Not all manga were treated with such celebration. A clear distinction was established between the conception of high culture (jōhin bunka) manga and what was considered low culture manga (p. 200). Prior to this point manga had been primarily identified with entertainment forms, the working class, and counterculture (pp. 200-1). Nevertheless, as stated, the manga that was officially promoted by corporations, the

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305 For example, the National Gallery of Victoria is currently (2005) organising an exhibition of the work of the manga and anime artist Osamu Tezuka.

306 Over 500 new museums were built in Japan between 1973-1987 (Van den Bosch, 2005, p. 32). Similar changes, in terms of community and education programs, are also occurring in the Western gallery system.

307 In the early post-war period the story manga of Osamu Tezuka was associated with entertainment, child readers and the kawaii (cute) style (Kinsella 2000, p. 28). This style of manga was thus distinguished from the graphic realism style of gekiga (dramatic picture) (Ito 2005a, p. 467). Gekiga emerged in the late 1950s, and was linked with Tatsumi Yoshihiro and Saito Takao. Gekiga was associated with working-class artists and readers, and with the anti-establishment political radicalism of the 60s (Kinsella 2000, p. 28).

308 Manga was used to demonstrate political flexibility in being able to communicate regarding the interests of the general public, as well as being used as a symbolic link to the early working-class and left politics of gekiga manga. See note below.
state and cultural institutions came from select genres: the work of Osamu Tezuka and other creators, such as Tetsuya Chiba, the new wave ‘pro-establishment’ manga done in gekiga-style, and the new genres of political, economic and information manga (see Lamarre 2004). These are the same genres and texts presented by Murakami in Superflat and Little Boy.

However, amateur manga and otaku culture, which grew simultaneously with the expansion of commercial manga, were still considered pejoratively in the 1990s and were seen as symbolic of a fragmented and dysfunctional youth culture (Kinsella 2000, p. 137). In the 2000s, however, the Japanese government promoted otaku culture. In 2004 the Japan Foundation organised an exhibition of otaku culture for the Japanese pavilion at the 9th Mostra Internazionale di Architettura La Biennale di Venezia: Otaku persona = space = city, curated by Morikawa Kaichiro. Otaku is now seen as a particular cultural expression of national identity, albeit one that is increasingly globally ubiquitous and familiar. As argued in the previous chapter, presentations such as these are closely aligned with the purposes of the nation-state and the economic and cultural rhetoric of ‘Gross National Cool’. Suffice to say, the changing status of manga and anime in the post-war period in Japan is complex, particularly during the 1990s with the emergence of contested social/cultural/economic meanings of otaku culture and of anime/manga fans more generally.

Murakami is circumspect regarding his awareness of the shifting social status of manga and of otaku, particularly with respect to manga’s origins as a low-budget form of entertainment in the post-war period, but he also recognises its cultural influence.

While Manga ensures such a rare and precious presence [referring to the valued work of Osamu Tezuka], its social status within Japan had been considered low until quite

309 Manga editors in the 1990s began to nostalgically seek out genres and styles from the 1960s and 1970s, which were identified with ‘underground’ manga (Kinsella 2000, pp. 181-2). Nevertheless, the realistic and political style of gekiga manga that appeared in commercial manga during this time came to be seen as pro-establishment. To many artists who were involved in the early forms of gekiga manga this was considered the death knell of left-wing politics and social political activism, because it lacked in the radical, anti-establishment content of the 1960s and 1970s. The rise of business manga and their alignment with the purposes of large corporations and the state government were also significant shifts in the status of manga from its early development as part of the working-class and counter culture movements.

310 This discursive construction was part of a general feeling of ‘crisis’ associated with the downturn of the economy and a series of environmental and social events within Japan, such as the Awaji-Hanshin earthquake and the Tokyo subway gas attacks in 1995.
recently, as a form of “Otaku expression,” a rather negative presence. “Otaku” seems to be translated in English as nerds, like computer nerds.

As the Manga industry could not secure animation-level budgets, it really started to develop as a media that could bring out maximum effect with minimum budgets. In a way, this form of expression has even surpassed the area of fine arts that had been relying in a way on influences from Western culture. This post-pop culture context in the world of visual arts is really what I have been calling “Superflat.”

However, this effect really had been mutually influencing the whole of the cultural bandwidth in Japan, such as music, architecture, sports, philosophy, and so on (Murakami 2003).

Murakami is thus not trying to make high art in Japan but to affirm manga, anime, and otaku culture as original and creative expressive forms. Even though anime and manga have received notable attention in gallery exhibitions and are now utilised as forms of national representation, such as at the Venice architecture biennale, Murakami considers himself as a presenter of these cultural forms in contemporary art. At the same time his presentation of otaku as a marginalised group also needs to be reconsidered in relation to the changeable status of otaku within the global context.311 Murakami contends that he provides an alternative platform for otaku creators with these exhibitions; for example, Murakami credits himself with securing the solo exhibition of the celebrated otaku figurine modeller Bome in the Un Art Populaire (2001) exhibition at the Foundation Cartier pour l’art contemporain, Paris.312 However, Murakami’s claim is not always positively received by otaku, and thus the relationship needs to be understood as a strategic association. Therefore, Murakami’s emphasis on the lack of distinction between commercial forms of media culture and art needs to be considered as a strategic and selective construction, rather than as a challenge to the status quo. These issues related to the status of otaku culture will be analysed in more depth in the following section, POKU.

This chapter section has established that any blurring that Murakami engages in between art and commercial media forms should not necessarily be strictly conceived as a postmodern challenge to modernist high/low culture distinctions, because these distinctions have not been clearly established in Japan. In particular, the value of reproduction within Japanese discourses of expressivity affirms rather than devalues the concept of copying. Murakami’s serial productions assert these positive values of creative construction. Murakami’s factory-based production

311 In concession to Murakami it should be noted that some of his more explicit statements about the marginalisation of otaku occurred during the early 1990s (Murakami 1996), well before otaku culture achieved an international profile.

312 Bome is a revered figurine modeller within the otaku community.
system does not present a strict challenge to the subjectivity of the artist, but rather continues to affirm his own identity within a head artist/assistant structure. Kaikai Kiki is also utilised as a training opportunity for young artists, avoiding the conventional art institutions in Japan. Furthermore, it is evident that the interaction in his work between art and commercial culture does not present a direct challenge to kindai bijutsu. While the adoption of kindai bijutsu appropriated the Western hierarchical distinction of fine art as opposed to craft, Murakami consciously avoids working within the conceptual structures of kindai bijutsu. Furthermore, while Superflat was immediately accepted into Western art worlds and its associated discourses (Murakami 2005b, p. 157), within Japan Superflat’s affirmation of the aesthetic value of anime and manga was viewed by the contemporary art world as an obvious and banal connection (Hirano 2003). Within the contemporary art scene in Japan, Murakami’s work is considered to be popular not because it is understood as art, but because it is understood as a form of manga art. When it was considered a challenge to art, this was in relation to Western art, not the institutions of bijutsu. However, some of Murakami’s Japanese supporters tend to uncritically distance his work from the everyday forms of manga and anime by comparing it to the revered qualities of Japanese painting:

After this [his earlier work, Randoseru Project], he turned to anime like paintings that were an instant hit. However if one was to honestly rank this work, it was not “first class” at all; it would come in at about 41st class. It was vulgar. It was entertainment, childish, bad-taste, and frivolous. However, Murakami’s frivolity was calculated. It was in fact a symbol of the death of “philosophical art,” or “modern art.” Murakami’s art was an attack on western art institutions.

While Murakami’s colouring book-like paintings might first appear like popular culture — and manga in particular — their origin lies elsewhere. It can be found in the very upper-class practices of Heian Period painting, and in particular their approach to perspective” (Hikosaka 2002).

Yet this type of association tends to misdirect attention from Murakami’s rhetoric to merge art with the creative expressions in Japanese commercial culture; subsequently, this defence of Murakami’s work through recourse to links with ‘high art’ reinforces art/commercial distinctions. Furthermore, it is also difficult to disassociate Murakami’s activities from the general trends of the 1990s in which anime and manga and more recently otaku culture have been emphasised and celebrated. These two issues strengthen the cultural capital involved in distinguishing Murakami’s work as ‘art’ and the association with otaku culture, anime and manga. This identification and the associated cultural capital vary between cultural sites, particularly between the Japanese art world and Western art markets. The next section, POKU, will interrogate Murakami’s connections with
otaku culture and the final section, Japan’s Andy Warhol, will examine the identification of his work as ‘art’ in relation to his art/commercial productions.
3.3 POKU: POP ART + OTAKU

Murakami’s interest in *otaku* cultural forms and practices is the point at which the critical themes of this thesis converge. Murakami stimulates the meanings of art, commodity and subcultures across various cultural terrains; at the same time, the presentation and emphasis on his relations with *otaku* culture within the United States/European art worlds once again demonstrates a strategic deployment and engagement with the constructed meanings of Japan in the Western imagination, and with Japan’s self-imagining in relation to the West.

![Image Removed]

Murakami’s particular focus in merging art with forms of popular culture has been his association with the practices and aesthetics of *otaku* connoisseurship. Murakami’s engagement with *otaku* culture is most readily apparent in the series of figures made in collaboration with Okada Toshi, Kaiyodo (a commercial company involved with figurine production), and Bome. Together they have created a series of full-scale figure sculptures, including, *Second Mission Project KO2*.
(S.M.PK02) [Figure 32], Miss KO², Hiropon, My Lonesome Cowboy, and more recently, Inochi [Figure 33]. The size of the figures was an unusual departure from the typical bishōjo (beautiful girl) scale-model figurines, called garage-kits, which are usually collected by fans. The association with Kaiyodo continued with the release of the shokugan (snack toy) Superflat Museum, a series of miniature figurines. The (otaku) staff working in Murakami’s art studio, Kaikai Kiki creates further important links to otaku culture. Kaikai Kiki employs young art students as well as self-confessed otaku creators to produce Murakami’s work (Kaikaiki 2001). Both the studio and the Geisai exhibition, therefore, provide significant forums for the exhibitions of amateur artists. Despite these overt references and linkages to otaku culture, Murakami’s attitude towards them remains ambivalent, while otaku opinion of Murakami remains largely critical and sceptical of the artist’s stated desire to merge otaku culture with art.

Figure 33: Inochi

2004, FRP, steel, acrylic and clothing
140 x 62.5 x 35.5 cm
Source: Palais de Tokyo 2006

Otaku is a vernacular term used by amateur manga and anime fans and artists to refer to themselves (Kinsella 2000, p. 128). Generally translated as ‘hard-core’ fans or ‘nerds,’ otaku are avid consumers of anime, dōjinshi manga, bishōjo figures, yaoi, pro wrestling, and b-class idol singers (Patrick & Machiyama 2004, p. 14). While the term otaku is currently widely known, even outside of Japan, its meaning and value as a fan culture has a varied history in the Japanese

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313 The original meaning of otaku derives from a formal (and impersonal) manner of address meaning ‘your home’ with the associated meanings of ‘you,’ ‘yours’ and ‘home’ (ibid).
popular imagination. Within fan communities the definition of *otaku*, its use, and meaning is also contested.\(^{314}\) The first publication of the term *otaku* outside of the fan culture is generally credited to Akio Nakamori, who in 1983 adopted the term to describe the social phenomenon of hardcore fandom in Japan during this time (ibid).\(^{315}\) Nakamori chose the term *otaku* to describe what he identified as the particularly driven characteristics of fandom, in preference over the more conventional term, *nekura* (maniac or enthusiastic fan).\(^{316}\) Suffice to say, Nakamori’s analysis of *otaku* is not positive.\(^{317}\) In Okada Toshio’s *Otaku no Video* (1991), a seminal video on *otaku* culture, *otaku* is employed in parodic self-depreciation by *otaku*. Alternatively, the formal style of address embedded within the history of the nomenclature of *otaku* is interpreted as confirming *otaku* social isolation and impersonal exchanges. Thus, the term itself reinforces the view of *otaku* as antisocial and outside the norms of society – this negative perception of *otaku* is also celebrated by some *otaku* within the community, indicating that they do not necessarily want to be considered part of mainstream society.

### 3.3.1 OTAKU: MERCURIAL SOCIAL STATUS

The widely publicised arrest of Miyazaki Tsutomu in 1989 was a key marker for the negative perception of *otaku* in popular media discourses.\(^{318}\) Public debates focussed on Miyazaki as a socially alienated youth who was disconnected from reality and immersed within an *otaku* fantasy

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\(^{314}\) According to Kinsella’s research, amateur fans are mainly young, mid-teens-mid-20s, suburban and from low-income families; they are not highly educated (p. 110). Although as Kinsella acknowledges no official statistics have been taken, she emphasises how *dōjinshi* (amateur manga) has attracted fans who have been excluded from the social status of education and wealth since the 1960s (p. 111). The use of the descriptor ‘*otaku*-generation’ (*otaku* sedai) refers to those people who were born in the 1960s and grew up consuming *manga* and *anime*. Murakami and the cohorts of Superflat art are considered to be part of this generation.

\(^{315}\) Murakami (2001a) and Tomohiro Machiyama (2004) identify the first uses of *otaku* by fans with the *anime*, *Super Dimensional Fortress Macross* (1982).

\(^{316}\) *Nekura* means ‘black’ and ‘dark’ and evokes the quality of a melancholic and extremely introverted character.

\(^{317}\) ‘Isn’t it creepy to see junior high school kids calling each other ‘*otaku’ at comic and anime conventions’ (Nakamori qtd. in Patrick & Machiyama 2004, p. 14).

\(^{318}\) Miyazaki was arrested for the abduction, murder, and mutilation of young girls. Images of Miyazaki’s room published in the media drew attention to his collection of *rorikon* *manga* and *anime* and his links to *dōjinshi* (amateur, or non-commercial, *manga*) culture (Kinsella 2000, pp. 126-7). *Rorikon* (or, *lolikon*) is a genre of *manga* that emerged in the 1980s named after Vladimir Nabakov’s *Lolita* that emphasised sexualised images of young girls. Murakami has commented on the effect of this in his own life, recalling when his mother commented on how similar his room was to Miyazaki’s; thereby he aligned himself early on with *otaku* culture (1996).
world (Kinsella 2000, p. 127). The Miyazaki case became part of a much wider discourse on the perceived breakdown or fragmentation of social relations in contemporary Japan, associated with the economic downturn. This breakdown was particularly identified with the perception of individualistic, consumer driven and self-interested youth culture and the influences of media and technology on social fragmentation and alienation (p. 137), and *otaku* became a pejorative symbol for what was considered to be the crisis of the 1990s Japan (Iida 2000). Many artists and fans involved in the *dōjinshi* culture felt marginalised by the negative public discourses around *manga*, and also by police attempts to censor and restrict the exhibition of sexually explicit material (Kinsella 2000, pp. 131-3). In public discourses in the 1990s a clear distinction was made between *dōjinshi* and professional, commercial *manga* artists in response to the negative perception of *otaku*. Prior to the 1980s, many *dōjinshi* artists had gone on to become professional artists (p. 133). Commercial *manga* editors reinforced the distinction by referring negatively to artwork that resembled the style of *dōjinshi* in order to disassociate commercial *manga* from the negative image of *otaku*.

319 Kinsella (1998, p. 291) traces the origins of the concept and rhetoric of youth culture (*wakamono bunka*) in Japan to the 1960s when youth were involved in radical political movements and new popular cultural activities such as *manga* consumption. In the early 1970s in parallel with the expansion of these culture industries, youth were considered to be self-consciously immature, regressive and dysfunctional because they emphasised individualism (*kojinshugi*) and a lack of affiliations with organisations (Kinsella 1995). In the 1980s the mass media and culture industries were criticised for encouraging youth culture and its individualism, for example the ‘crystal tribes,’ who were considered to be passionless cultural connoisseurs (1998, p. 292). In the mid-1980s a new term emerged to differentiate a new generation of affluent, consumer orientated youth, *shinjinrui* (new human race) (p. 293). The rhetoric around *shinjinrui* emphasised a disengagement from society and passive consumption practices. *Otaku* culture emerged within the context of these debates and, Kinsella argues, came to embody in the public imagination a particular section of youth who were considered the embodiment of individualism, fragmentation and infantilism (p. 294). The interpretation of fans as symbolising the decline of community, with audiences being passive consumers of mass media, resulting in pathological fans who are unable to differentiate between fiction and reality, is also considered to be an unacknowledged critique of postmodernity (Jenson 1992). For example, Murakami’s affirmation of *otaku* creativity is often critiqued as an uncritical celebration of the breakdown of Japanese society (Otori 2003). For Otori Hidenaga, the utopian picture of *otaku* culture presented by Superflat tends to negate the ‘reality’ of the economic and social situation of contemporary Japan, particularly in the 1990s. This is something that Iida addresses, in arguing that the emergence of *otaku* can be traced to the post-1970s emergence of late capitalism in Japan and subsequent transformations in society, which are part of ongoing contestations within Japan’s modernity.

320 Kinsella indicates that the effectiveness of police efforts to restrict the distribution of amateur *manga* is debatable.

321 *Dōjinshi* *manga* developed during the 1960s through to the mid 1970s. In the 1970s *dōjinshi* was considered as an alternative expression to the large-scale, mainstream production of commercial *manga*; it was largely ignored by commercial publishers and by the government (1998, p. 295; Kinsella 2000, p. 102). During the 1980s it grew significantly in scale, which can be attributed to developments in cheap print technologies (ibid) which occurred alongside the growth of the commercial *manga* industry (1998, p. 298) facilitated by *komike*. Simultaneous with the loosening of ties between non-commercial and
During this period, the discourses around *otaku* culture shifted as intellectuals such as Otsuka Eiji and Okada Toshio began to emphasise *otaku* culture as a symbol of Japan’s information society. These new scholarly discourses occurred alongside the continuance of the negative discourses. This shift also contributed to and was influenced by a transformation in defining *manga*, and the promotion of certain forms of *manga* artistic lineage, as part of national culture within and outside of Japan. More recently *otaku* have established closer links to the commercial *manga* and *anime* world. Tomihiro Machiyama also contends that there has also been a shift away from the negative perception of *otaku* and towards recognition of their creative consumption.

The word “otaku” has acquired a positive connotation, suggesting that a person has his or her own sense of values, is not a snob, has a child’s purity and passion, and possesses in-depth knowledge and an uncompromising opinion on his own likes and dislikes. A person minus *otaku* leanings is assumed to be without uniqueness, originality or creativity (Patrick & Machiyama 2004, p. 15).

Nevertheless, despite the positive image of *otaku* that is emerging, particularly in relation to the export of *anime* and *manga*, attention needs to be given to the persistently negative images of *otaku* and its continued marginalisation within Japanese society. The positive image of *otaku* conflicts with *otaku* self-definitions that emphasise, as a matter of positive subjectivity, their social unacceptability. However, the critical point here is that whether it is conceived positively or negatively the continual emphasis is still on identifying *otaku* as different to other consumers of media forms.

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professional (mainstream, high circulation) *manga* there was a distinct shift in the roles of editors and artists, and the rise of new ‘white collar’ genres - the realist political, economic and educational *manga* (Kinsella 2000, pp. 71-3). During the 1990s, editors assumed greater creative control than artists, which resulted in the devaluing of the artist’s role (p. 184). Kinsella contends that compared with the 1960s and 1970s this has been perceived as reflective of a wider social shift, and a sense of the loss of creativity and the spirit of political activism (pp. 181-2). Conventionally, editors were from more socially and educationally privileged backgrounds than the artists, who typically originated from the working class. Thus, in the 1990s a greater gap opened between the amateur and professional artists which had not occurred in the 1960s when their relations were more fluid. Furthermore, whilst select *manga* were celebrated, there was simultaneously an increase in the regulation and police interventions with respect to the distribution of certain genres, resulting in a significant decrease in the distribution and availability of amateur *manga*. Kinsella also attributes this to the severing of the ties between commercial and amateur *manga* in the 1990s (1998, p. 312).

Okada Toshio argues that most professional animators in Japan have links to dōjinshi. He sees it as a system in which amateurs can influence the professionals, and thus the *otaku* form a kind of giant think tank (Napier & Okada 2003, p. 21).
3.3.2 OTAKU AS SUBCULTURE

Murakami reinforces this image of *otaku* as a form of culture that is discriminated against within Japan, and which is distinct from the mainstream:

I think otaku are discriminated against in this society...The latest example of the discrimination is the suppression of the Aum Cult...I’m not surprised that Aum Cult emerged in Japan and that it was connected to otaku culture. Most of the newly developed cults consist of people like the otaku because they are so severely discriminated and alienated that they either choose to join these cults or create new cults in their desperate search for salvation. Then, when I consider what Japanese culture is like, the answer is that it all is subculture. Therefore, art is unnecessary (Murakami qtd. in Wakasa 2000 para. 6).[^233]

The concept of defining what constitutes a subculture is complex, particularly in relation to how it normalises what is perceived to be the dominant and mainstream culture by defining something else as an ‘alternative’ culture. Furthermore, it is not always clear what Murakami (or others) mean when they refer to *otaku* as a subculture. Ōtsuka Eiji, a key theorist writing on *otaku* culture in Japan, defines *otaku* as a subculture, but he uses subculture to denote individuated consumption within an advanced consumer society (kōdo shōhi shakai), rather than denoting a counterculture (Ōtsuka cited in Yoda 2000, p. 650).

Subculture, [Ōtsuka] says is a collection of disjointed ideas, phenomena, and artefacts that have become detached from their historical origins. Subculture or subculturalization, therefore, is not defined via the binary between high versus low, centre versus periphery, or mainstream versus counterculture. The prefix sub- suggests that these subcultural forms no longer participate in the hegemonic contest that both presupposes and feeds into the shared symbolic horizon of a society, not even as an antonym or an alternative to the mainstream and dominant culture (Yoda 2000, p. 651).

Yoda argues that *otaku* culture does not directly challenge ‘mainstream’ or elite culture[^243]. What Ōtsuka seeks to clarify is that *otaku* culture differs to the general consumption of *taishū bunka* (Yoda 2000, p. 650). While this marks a departure from the conventional homogenous images of

[^233]: It needs to be noted that many of the members of the Aum cult were from relatively privileged backgrounds and included science graduates from elite universities (Muir 1999, p. 85). Hence, there was some confusion generated by their association with *otaku*.

[^243]: Furthermore, Yoda contends that in his definition of subculture, Ōtsuka was wary of linking his analysis of *otaku* culture with 1980s discourses (commonly referred to as ‘new academics’) in Japan which deployed postmodern concepts as part of consumer marketing strategies and which were criticised for reinforcing neo-liberal policies; this was his reason for the emphasis on not defining *otaku* in postmodern terms.
consumer consumption and Japanese society, Ōtsuka’s discourse retains similarities with Yanagita’s concept of ‘authentic’ Japanese culture because he links *otaku* consumption to Edo culture as an example of ‘authentic tradition’ (Steinberg 2004). The purpose of this section is not to validate or criticise such claims regarding the particularities of *otaku*, but rather to examine how Murakami utilises the cultural capital of the connotation of subcultural marginalisation in order to set his work in opposition to the status of art:

*[O]taku constitutes the lowest and the least esteemed class in Japanese society, and … they are almost discriminated against. While the position of “art” in Japan is not clearly defined, it is nevertheless associated with the privileged classes of society. So I thought that in order to get to that kind of art I had to drop this culture (Murakami qtd. in Kelmatcher, p. 77).*

Yet, at the same time Murakami argues that subcultural *otaku* expressions influence artists who are examining the alternative expressivities of everyday contemporary Japanese commodity culture and presenting these expressivities as equitable to high art:

*[S]ubcultural expressions [referring to *otaku*] can be discussed as something just as important as literature, film, or other “high” art. So I wanted to present this mixture, or hybridity, as both really everyday and original aspects of Japanese culture (Matsui 1998 para. 25).*

Suffice to say, applying the term ‘subculture’ to *otaku* culture raises complex issues. When *otaku* first emerged in the 1970s as part of the proliferating cultures of *anime* and *manga*, they were considered a minority culture; this image was compounded by the negative perceptions in the media, who emphasised their marginal image. Despite the view of *otaku* as socially isolated, one of the key features of *otaku* culture is that it has existed as a network culture; prior to the advent of domestic technologies (desktop publishing and printing) *otaku* would network at face-to-face events such as *komike*. It is also possible that *otaku* were less visible primarily because they were not necessarily acknowledged in public discourses.

In contrast, Okada contends that since numbers of *otaku* have now increased to the point that they are widespread and more integrated into society, they can no longer be considered a subculture:

Back then (during the 1980s and early 1990s), there were a hundred thousand, or even one million people who were pure *otaku* – 100 proof *otaku*, if you will. Now, we have close to ten million *otaku*, but they are no more than 10- or 20-proof *otaku*. Of course, some *otaku* are still very *otaku*, perhaps 80 or 90 proof. Still, we can’t call the rest of them faux *otaku*. The *otaku* mentality and *otaku* tastes are so widespread and
diverse today that *otaku* no longer form what you might call a “tribe” (Okada, Kaichirō & Murakami 2005, p. 165).

Morikawa Kaichirō considers *otaku* to be distinct from other forms of fan groups, both in terms of how they see themselves, and in the types of texts that they consume:

[M]ania are “obsessives” who are socially well adjusted. They hold down jobs and love their hobbies. In contrast, *otaku* are socially inept. Their obsessions are self-indulgent. This point is raised mainly by the self-proclaimed *mania*, critical of *otaku*… *Mania* tend to be obsessed with, for example, cameras and railroads, which have some sort of materiality (*jittai*), while *otaku* tend to focus on virtual things such as manga and anime… *A mania* tends to concentrate on a single subject — say, railroads — whereas an *otaku* has a broader range of interests, which may encompass “figures,” manga, and anime (Okada, Kaichirō & Murakami 2005, p. 170).

Morikawa contends that *otaku* consume *anime* because it is *dame* (no good), and that *otaku* is a *dame* culture (p. 166). Again, the negative meaning of *dame* is inverted within *otaku* culture, and becomes a way to differentiate *otaku* preferences from mainstream consumption. Morikawa argues that prior to the 1980s Miyazaki Hayao’s and Oshii Mamoru’s *anime* were popular with *otaku*, but once they began to be consumed by the wider public they became acceptable and thus lost their attraction for *otaku* who went on to find more ‘repugnant genres’ (p. 173).

Okada and Morikawa disagree about what ‘true’ *otaku* are, and in a sense their debate on *otaku* culture highlights the multiple and fragmented identities within it, and hence the problems in conceiving of it as a unified culture or clearly defining its boundaries. Morikawa argues that *otaku* consumption is based on what is considered socially unacceptable, such as the *bishōjo* figures. In contrast, Okada is critical of the new *dame* generation *otaku* that Morikawa refers to, considering them as ‘hopeless’ (ibid). Okada’s understanding of *otaku* is based on their appreciation for high quality products, and he emphasises them as connoisseurs with strict criteria for technological and informational knowledge. These contestations amongst the different groups within *otaku* culture provide an explanation for Murakami’s appearance of ambivalence regarding *otaku* culture — he shifts from emphasising their creativity and connoisseurship to distancing himself from them and emphasising their non-ability.

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325 Furthermore, *dame* is not considered by Morikawa to be ‘anti-establishment’ (ibid).
The *otaku* subjectivity expressed by both Okada and Morikawa (however conceived) is still based on the differentiation of *otaku* from other fan cultures, as well as other general consumers of *anime* and *manga*. These debates are concerned with the cultural capital of ‘subculture,’ which when applied in the case of trying to differentiate *otaku* from mainstream culture, tends to reinforce and normalise the distinction, and thus essentialises the identity of both. This presumption of the difference between mainstream/subculture and the concept of a ‘resistant style’ of subculture in contrast to the ‘conformist’ mainstream (see Hebdige 1979) has been criticised in Cultural Studies (see Storey 1993). The presumption that resistance is only articulated by subcultures and that once a text moves beyond circulation within a subculture to become part of the wider culture, and thus becomes incorporated into the purposes of commercial culture, it loses its resistant edge, reproduces a Frankfurt School view of mass culture being positioned against ‘elite’ culture. This view of subcultures privileges subcultural groups as active consumers and the mainstream as passive consumers. Thus, the paradox in Okada’s argument is that with greater recognition of the identity of *otaku* as a marginalised and minority group, ‘faux *otaku*’ have also emerged.

In this debate, what emerges is not only the cultural capital of being considered a ‘marginalised’ culture, particularly when presenting *otaku* within the context of a public exhibition such as *Little Boy*, but also how the distinction between ‘authentic’ and ‘inauthentic’ cultural identity still persists in the context of affirming the identity of subcultural groups. The same problems that arise out of an emphasis on subculture are also present in relation to Henry Jenkins’ (1992) study of fans, even though his intention was to affirm the active and creative consumption of media texts by fans. Moreover, such moves tend to re-create a defined and ‘authentic’ boundary of subcultural identity, rather than acknowledging the overlaps between different forms of cultural consumption (Frow 1995, p. 12). Frow challenges the view that cultural groups are homogenous and unified in their practices:

> To say that the concept of culture refers to the existence of social groups – their formations, their maintenance as coherent entities, their definition against other groups, the constant process of their reformation – is to raise difficult questions about the categories of unity that groups lay claim to, and upon which the theorization of groups often uncritically relies...cultures [are] processes that divide as much as they bring together (p. 13).

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326 Jenkins critiques the conventional representations of fans as obsessive, excessive, hysterical, deranged, and anti-social.
Postmodern approaches to subcultural identity expose this paradoxical position, claiming to be inclusive in relativism, but frequently slipping into various forms of essentialism – including the privileging of a subculture as a radical identity. Hence, the construction of an essentialised, bounded definition of *otaku* identity contradicts its characterisation as a non-hierarchical, networked community, a point that was analysed in Chapter Two. Murakami strategically utilises these debates on identity in order to position his work in relation to *otaku* culture.

### 3.3.3 POKU AMBIVALENCE

Murakami has been hailed as an important *otaku* figure, particularly in terms of generating an international profile (Izawa 2003). Yet as stated, his views on *otaku* are ambiguous, since he conceives of them as being critical and connoisseurs as well as passive consumers:

> Since my early childhood, I have suffered from an acute fascination with “manga” and animation. I therefore had the ambition of making a career in that area. However, as a high school student, I became aware of my lack of talent in that domain which led me to give up this dream. This is why my career as an artist begins by the fact that I had to settle with choosing to go to an arts university to learn fine arts only by resignation and compromise.

In art school, I specialized in traditional Japanese painting, just because the entrance exam seemed to be easier than other departments. I still managed to flunk the entrance exam twice, and finally made it the third year, then remained a student for a total of 11 (eleven) years until I received a doctorate (a PhD degree) in Japanese painting. This is why pure coincidence really made me become aware, somehow, of common traits between “traditional Japanese painting” and “Japanese animation.” I then became obsessed by the desire of somehow elucidating the reasons behind this commonality, and that is when my search for the “Superflat” began (Murakami 2003).

At other times, Murakami (with his tongue firmly in cheek) emphasises the strict criteria of *otaku* knowledge and his own failure to be recognised as an *otaku* (1996).

> I am one of the losers who failed to become an otaku king. Only a person who has a superb memory in order to win at a debate can become a king of otaku. Since I didn’t have that ability, I became an artist. There is a difference between an artist whose creativity stems from otaku-like ideas and a genuine otaku who can win at a debate to be the king. Most people do not recognize the difference. In addition, I thought I could grasp an understanding of present Japan by analysing otaku (Murakami qtd. in Wakasa 2000 para. 2).

This playful privileging of *otaku* culture, with recognition as an *otaku* being more difficult to achieve than successful recognition in the art world, is contradicted by Murakami’s own emphasis on the ‘successful’ sales of his work within the art world. He thus plays the cultural capital of the
art world and that of *otaku* culture against one another, because at other times he rejects the label of ‘*otaku* artist’:

I am not an *otaku*. *Otaku* are pure dilettantes. They never create anything, but they know the minutest detail about strange animation films, comics, and game software. And they can only critique them with the language of anime or comics. But I still thought it was great that they had a system of criticism made up entirely from the language of their media. So I wanted to participate in their events, listen to them talk, and pick up on what looked really strange to me — the things that seemed to reveal the deepest mystery of the *otaku* mind (qtd. in Matsui 1998 para. 19).

This position is complex because it does not necessarily express a negative criticism. As stated, *otaku* embrace the concept of ‘failure,’ or *dame*, as a marker of identity. Therefore, Murakami’s relationship with *otaku* and the art world is complex and self-contradictory. *Otaku* have expressed both a lack of interest and curiosity regarding their involvement in the art component of Murakami’s practices. For example, with respect to Murakami’s early sculpture piece, *Polyrhythm* [Figure 2], *otaku* were critical of the figures used by Murakami. Since *otaku* culture is a culture of details and particulars their attention was focused on the technical aspect of the figures, rather than on the work’s conceptual emphasis from within an art perspective. To *otaku* the figures were not constructed with a high level of technical expertise. Sensitive to *otaku* criticism and their stringent connoisseur values, in the creation of his full-size model figure series Murakami sought out expert assistance through a collaboration with the plastic model company and manufacturer Kaiyodo. Yet, his collaboration with the *otaku* community was not always considered positively within the *otaku* community. Fears were expressed by Bome and Kaiyodo (and others working on the project) that the association with art, and with Murakami’s stereotypical presentation of *bishojo*, might harm their own cultural capital within the *otaku* world (see Asano 2001).

This game is an utterly artless pandering to stereotypical *otaku* fetishism. Nor is it an original — rather it was created with a complete understanding of the tastes of the entire *otaku* market for uniform fetishism…where’s the art? (Bome qtd. in Murakami 2001b, p. 139).

Miyawaki Shuichi (2001) also emphasises that Murakami was labelled a ‘heretic’ within the *otaku* community for taking his figurine sculpture into the art world (pp. 90-1). He also expressed that there was greater freedom within the *otaku* community for breaking codes than there was in the more rigid structures of the art world.

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327 Miyawaki Shuichi (2001) also emphasises that Murakami was labelled a ‘heretic’ within the *otaku* community for taking his figurine sculpture into the art world (pp. 90-1). He also expressed that there was greater freedom within the *otaku* community for breaking codes than there was in the more rigid structures of the art world.
Figure 28] went through many different versions before both Murakami and the modellers were satisfied. The final full-scale version was exhibited at the otaku fair at the Tokyo Wonder Site in 1988, and the same figure was exhibited at Features Inc. (another fan model convention in New York City). Neither exhibition attracted attention from the contemporary art world, even though by then Murakami was regularly exhibiting in Japan and the United States. Murakami states that he created Hiropon and My Lonesome Cowboy to attract the art world’s attention:

Because making a life-size figure is really no different than making a sex doll (a dutch wife) in the context of the anime figure. It’s safe to say [that] ours was a fairly shameless plan from the start. But for me, aside from what one might think in that context, we were making a kind of human sculpture new to the history of art, and its reality within the otaku world was something that only occurred to me a while after the project was underway. In one sense we were recreating an unknown world, the world of the otaku, in a new context (Murakami 2001b, p. 138).

Murakami’s own presentation of otaku culture reinforces the differentiation of mainstream society and otaku as well as his own distance from otaku culture. That is, Murakami presents an intellectualised, analytical view of otaku culture, and thus separates himself from the concept of the fan as one who avidly consumes texts with intensity (Jenkins 1992). By presenting his work as an analysis of (or comment on) otaku consumption (in works such as Hiropon and My Lonesome Cowboy) Murakami appeals to the concept or sense of aesthetic distance (in the Kantian sense) in relation to his own otaku expressions. However, the concept of aesthetic distance and judgement has been critiqued by Bourdieu (1984) as reproducing a social hierarchy. Thus, while Murakami purports to affirm otaku consumption, this is a two-faced gesture that simultaneously functions to distances him from otaku.

Otaku working on the project were reluctant to make Hiropon [328](Jenkins defines fans in relation to their intensity of intellectual and emotional involvement with the texts.)
Figure 27], recognising it as a parody of moe and also discomforted with Murakami’s overt emphasis on gaining recognition in the art world.

I believe that it was the sense of cynicism that resulted from Miss Hiropon’s increasing deformity, her very uniqueness and originality in the sculptural genre, that made her unpalatable to Bome and his fellow otaku figure artists (Murakami 2001b, p. 141).

To *otaku*, the sense of aesthetic distance is not necessarily a positive quality. The ‘mannequin’ qualities of *Hiropon* and *My Lonesome Cowboy* were considered to be an objective representation rather than a direct expression of attachment to or desire of the figure, and thus *Hiropon* and *My Lonesome Cowboy* did not appeal to *otaku* who were working on them (Asano 2001, p. 95). Therefore, the expression of distant (or objective) appreciation of aesthetics is not valued in *otaku* consumption, as it is in the Kantian sense of the judgement of beauty in art, and such expression is perceived to be an irrelevant value within their codes of aesthetic judgement and distinction.

Murakami contends that his work is nothing new and that he is simply presenting *otaku* culture within the art world. Yet this stance obscures the malleability of his discussion of the figures. Firstly, he emphasises them as ‘art:’

*Wakasa*: So are the sculptures merely animation figures for *otaku*?

*Murakami*: No. They are art. Therefore, *otaku* dislike my work. They don’t want me to reveal their discriminated status. *Otaku* want to be left alone because they are happy by themselves, when enjoying events for *otaku* (underground comic fairs) like the Wonder Festival or comike (comic market), where 350,000 – 400,000 people come together.

Then, in contrast, *S.M.PKO2* [Figure 32] was presented as an erasure of art references, and was geared more specifically towards *otaku* interests:

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329 The difference between the mannequin and figurine is elaborated by Asano Masahiko, who produced *S.M.PKO2*, “What I mean when I say “mannequin” here is a question of specialized semantics. Mannequin contrasts with the figurine, which is the object of love, an assertion of identity that says “look what I have created,” and a outlet for sexual desire…The most important aspect of this project for me was seeing how little could be lost — how much of that tightly wound essence could be preserved — through the translation of the figurine into a life-size form.” (p. 95).
S.M.Pko2 was going to be simpler. I was going to make a life-size transforming robot girl, something never seen before. This would give a voice to the mechanism fetish at the core of my fetishism, and confirm a figure otaku awareness of “beauty”…the art context of the project was mostly eliminated. I did this because I felt that it was precisely a presentation that earnt full marks in the figure otaku community that would reveal the next form that the pre-existing art context for my work would take… However this presentation of a piece of art at the Wonder Festival caused a great paradigm shift within me. My new goal would be to change everything, to change art itself! (Murakami 2001b, pp. 142, 3).

If Murakami considers Hiropon and S.M.PKO2 as quite different expressions, then there is the sense that Murakami is not challenging any distinctions between otaku and art, but rather reinforcing them as separate spheres. Murakami’s strategy and ideas have altered since the late 1990s and increasingly he has emphasised his own separation from otaku.

I was the one who coined that expression [POKU]. But nowadays, it had fallen into disuse. In fact, I tried to popularise the term, notably in the essays I wrote for magazines, but it wasn’t very well received…Art and otaku culture are like oil and water, in the sense that they can’t really mix. My vision of pop culture was originally as follows: this culture could only develop because it had a certain financial wealth based on the extraordinary expansion of the capitalist economy. But this was not the case for otaku culture: even someone fairly poor can enjoy it…I coined the term poku in an attempt to blend the oil and water, but it didn’t work. It was after that that I opted for the term superflat, which evokes more of a compression than a fusion of these two elements (Murakami qtd. in Kelmatcher, p. 79).

Otaku remain ambivalent about their involvement with Murakami, particularly regarding how Murakami uses his association with them to further his own profile, something which he also acknowledges:

[On POKU] It is sophistry to order to market my work by doing presentation regarding subculture (Murakami qtd. in Wakasa 2000 para. 12).

In the end Murakami declared POKU to be a failure, because like oil and water, art and otaku could not mix, and he shifted his focus more directly to the art world with Superflat (Kelmachter 2002, p. 79). Yet despite Murakami’s emphasis on bringing otaku culture into an art world context, as a means of levelling the distinction, otaku do not necessarily recognise the cultural dominance of art. That is, the concept of art as high culture that is privileged or more prestigious

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330 Murakami refers here to a review of Project KO² that was presented in Monthly Model Graphics magazine, a magazine for figurine fans. The essay addressed the gap in art criticism within Japan, and thus tried to present Murakami’s connection between otaku culture and art (Murakami 2001c, p. 89).
is largely irrelevant to *otaku*. In the exhibition *Otaku persona = space = city*, *otaku* cultural production was presented independently of any sense that it was being exhibited as ‘art.’ For example, the exhibition included rental showcases where collectors and sellers exhibit their collections, models of the spaces of Akihabara and *komike*, and photographs of *otaku* bedrooms. However, Murakami has not abandoned the association with *otaku* entirely; with the more recent exhibition of *Little Boy*, Murakami’s intention was to present *otaku* culture for a Western audience in a different way to scholarly discourses on the topic.

The series of Superflat exhibitions are the business of translation, which exports the concepts. The completion of the survey of the exhibitions is the *Little Boy* exhibition; it is my own collective thoughts about *otaku* and its expressions (Fujiwara 2005, p. 67).

Again, this is another instance of engagement that Murakami considers as positive, for example, promoting modellers such as Bome overseas, but which is not necessarily considered positively by *otaku*.

Murakami’s relation to *otaku* is therefore highly complex and ambivalent. It is not apparent that he is challenging any current cultural values of *otaku* culture, but is merely reinforcing the shifting social status of *otaku* that is already present in Japan. Similarly, rather than blurring the *otaku*/art distinction, he is reinforcing their differences. Nevertheless, his deployment of the consumption-production process of *otaku* challenges how contemporary art practice can be perceived. *Otaku* culture can be traced to particular post-war conditions, but also shares characteristics with contemporary fan culture more globally, and with the forms of consumption-production of contemporary media. As was argued in Chapter Two, *otaku* are better understood as a ‘local’ culture. However, beyond the debates around the cultural capital of Murakami’s association with *otaku*, as creative expressions within commercial media forms his works provide a model for exploring the concepts of authorship and the aura of the original object within the conditions of late capitalism. Having established that an exact identification and definition of *otaku* culture is difficult to clarify, there are particular characteristics of authorial expression within *otaku*

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331 A similar criticism is made by Frow against Bourdieu’s assumption of high cultural aesthetic distinctions as a ‘norm’ accepted and recognised by different consumers (1995, p. 37).

332 Arguably, this reconstructed presentation occurs within the context of an international architecture exhibition, rather than being experienced in its actual physical environment, and therefore it is still relatively recontextualised.

333 Murakami’s own association with *Little Boy* is heavily emphasised and a significant section of the catalogue is devoted to his work – including work which was not included within the actual exhibition.
consumption that are particularly utilised by Murakami, and therefore these can be usefully elucidated.

*Crash, Reboot, Remix: Otaku practices of consumption*

It is not necessarily the consumption of *anime* or *manga* that distinguishes the subcultural identity of *otaku*, rather, the differences occur in the ways in which the texts are consumed. As stated in Chapter Two, *otaku* consumption is characterised by networked communities and processes of fragmentation and assembly, transformation and interaction. Saito Tamaki characterises *otaku* as people that

1. Exhibit an intimate familiarity with fictional contexts
2. Resort to fictions as a means of “possessing” love objects
3. Live via multi-orientations, not merely bi-orientation
4. Take fictional constructs for sex objects

*Otaku* seek value in things generally regarded as fictional; at the same time, they are extremely sensitised to levels of fiction. Within a highly developed media environment, where clear-cut dividing lines between reality and fiction no longer exist, our judging something as real or unreal is largely beside the point; the more apt question is, “what level of fiction is it”? (Saito 2004, p. 40).

What Saito refers to is the detailed knowledge that *otaku* possess about the ‘fiction levels’ of media forms. Their knowledge about the content of the text, the artist of the text, and the relations of production and distribution around the text are considered extremely detailed. Kinsella identifies this knowledge in relation to the two major forms of *dōjinshi* (amateur) *manga*: parody and original (2000, p. 113). In this way, *otaku* are recognised as highly knowledgeable arbiters of *anime*, *manga* and gaming texts.

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334 ‘Parody is based on revised versions of published commercial manga stories and characters. While often radically altering the content of original stories and implicitly criticising the morality of the original themes, parody does not always imply a specifically humorous re-rendering of texts’ (Kinsella 2000, p. 113 italics in original ). Parody is by far the more dominant form of *dōjinshi*. The debates between artists producing parody and ‘original’ manga are founded on the perceived values of innovation and copying, demonstrating that there is circulation of such meanings in relation to artistic production within this particular context, and that concepts of originality are afforded a privileged and hierarchical status in determining ‘quality’ *manga* production. Thus, parody can be derided for its unoriginality (see Kinsella 2000, p. 117), or because it is lacking in social and political comment (p. 119); or alternatively, it can offer a ‘critical sensibility’ (ibid). While Kinsella argues that the reason for the popularity of parody *manga* amongst amateur *manga* fans is because it is less intellectually challenging for the audience (a highly debatable argument
The application of this detailed knowledge through an *otaku*’s process of selecting (existing) texts, disassembling and re-assembling them to create new formations, is one of the key characteristics identified with *otaku* culture (Azuma 2000, 2001; Steinberg 2004). As stated in Chapter Two, Azuma (2001) emphasises the process of fragmentation and transformation that underpins the relationship between *otaku* and the characters they create. Azuma argues that *otaku* demonstrate profound attachment to their objects, texts or characters. This attachment is best expressed through the term *moe*. *Moe*, according to Saito, is the psycho-expression of sexualised feelings towards a character and is based on the same detailed knowledge; hence, there may be a special attraction towards a particular attribute or accessory of that character. Saito argues that *moe* is both an abstract detachment from the figure and a direct desire for it (pp. 40-2). Despite this profound form of attachment to characters, Azuma stresses the process of assembly and reassembly that also underpins *otaku* production. While *otaku* can have expressive psychosexual or emotional relationships (*moe*) with the characters they create, on the other hand there is no sense of loss when *otaku* dismantle the characters and rearrange their elements to create a new figure. *Otaku* also share their creations with each other through group events such as *komike*. The lack of distinct boundaries around the concept of ownership is also apparent in their hacker tendencies. *Otaku* raid Internet sites and games and reconstruct them to

Influenced by a Derridian concept of deconstruction, Azuma emphasises that postmodern expressivities in art (as well as music and literature) are defined by methods of deconstructing existing texts into fragments and reassembling them into new works. The fragments of existing texts form a database which is accessed in the process of reconstruction. Azuma identifies this as a process occurring within *otaku* culture: characters are created from a database of multiple fragments. The database, regulated by the aesthetic codes of *otaku* values, is comprised of physical markers of identity: hair, accessories, and clothing. The ‘new’ characters created from these fragments represent the surface. In this way the surface is a complex space produced from these fragments. Within the process of deconstruction, reconstruction, and rereading of the database, Azuma argues that new forms of authorship and concepts of originality are articulated. Therefore, Azuma’s concept of ‘lack’ is more complex than a complete absence of identity, or the complete lack of depth identified in Jean Baudrillard’s concept of simulacrum (1988b). To Azuma, Superflatness is not two-dimensional but rather articulates a sense of a postmodern database depth/surface relationship that is in a continual process of consumption-production and assembly-disassembly.

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336 Kaichiro Morikawa (cited in Tack n.d.) defines *moe*: ‘[T]o be attracted to a specific character or its specific partial element and to have favour [sic] feeling toward it. ‘Moe’ suggests the condition of being infatuated with the one characteristic of a thing and implies an image of someone burning with desire...this taste fetishises the feature itself of glasses-wearing. In this case, glasses are the ‘moe’ element.’ Saito refers to it as direct desire in the sense that imaginary sexual relations with a figure are translated into masturbatory actions. Thus, he wants to emphasise *moe* as ‘alternative’ sexuality, or sexual relations, rather than being a complete replacement for ‘real’ ones (p. 40).
produce their own works. In this sense, otaku have ordered systems within which particular texts are evaluated and valued, but they also have the freedom to break down the system and reassemble texts. In Azuma’s opinion, Murakami employs this process of transformation and reassembly in his DOB works. DOB emerges from one prototype and is transformed and reassembled onto multiple different surfaces and objects such as paintings and key-chains. Hence, consumption by otaku can be articulated as a process of crash, reboot and remix.\(^{337}\)

While DOB is a constructive example of this process, Murakami’s series of figures demonstrate it more effectively. They emerge within a process of collaboration (with Bome), combine pre-existing ideas and images of bishojo figures, and appear in different versions – for example, there is the full-scale figure Miss KO\(^2\), the garage kit version and more recently the shokugan version. While Murakami may have utilised the media attention given to the art market sale of the full-scale model to promote these other versions, it is not clear that this model has in any way been considered or privileged as the original or central text by consumers. The following section examines the shokugan series Superflat Museum.

### 3.3.4 KONBINI ART: SUPERFLAT MUSEUM

Superflat Museum [Figure 26] is a self-conscious engagement, on a mass-produced scale, with commercial commodity forms.\(^{338}\) The serial production of the figurines replicates (and also references) the serialised editions of the larger scale ‘sculptures’ exhibited in both art and otaku contexts. At the same time, while the figurines reference the art world contexts of Murakami they simultaneously exist as commodities to be sold and exchanged within the figurine collection world.

*Superflat Museum* is a limited edition series of ten shokugan (snack toy) figures based on Takashi Murakami’s artworks, sold through konbini (convenience stores) in Japan.\(^{339}\) Shokugan

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\(^{337}\) This consumptive process also more generally echoes the interaction with digital culture (see Darley & Hjorth 2000).

\(^{338}\) Murakami is not the only person making links between shokugan and the Japanese art world. In 2005 Art Tower Mito, a contemporary art gallery, had a retrospective exhibition of over 2,000 Kaiyodo shokugan, including Murakami’s.

\(^{339}\) The Superflat Museum Convenience Store edition was sold in konbini’s in December 2003; other editions have been released through art museum stores, such as the Roppongi Hills edition. Superflat Museum can now also be purchased on e-bay. Each set was sold in a limited edition of 30,000, and each figure comes with a certificate of authenticity. They were made in collaboration with the toy manufacturer Kaiyodo and model makers Bome and Tomohide Enoki (who work for Kaiyodo).
are ubiquitous snack toys that are commonly sold through retail outlets such as *konbini*. They are highly detailed, intricately crafted, hand painted and mass-produced objects. They are usually based on popular *anime* and *manga* series characters, though they are not strictly limited to these sources. Typically, *shokugan* are released in a series and each is cheap to purchase, costing about ¥300. Murakami’s limited edition series was sold out within hours in central Tokyo and many sets had been pre-ordered, although this is not unusual for limited edition releases (Ishii 2004).

Murakami’s intention with *Superflat Museum* was to experiment with the meanings of art and commodity in response to the high-profile auction sale of the life-size *bishojo* (beautiful girl) figure *Miss KO* at Christies’ New York auction.

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340 *Shokugan* are popular in Japan, especially with 30-50 year old males, although collectors are not limited to this group (*‘Takashi Murakami’s works to come as candy freebies’ 2003*). While the market has grown significantly since 1998, and it understood to be a ¥60 billion industry, there is some concern that the market peaked in 2002 (*‘Collectible Toys leave a sour taste with candymakers’ 2004*). The attraction of *shokugan* is based on the high quality of manufacture and their cheapness and accessibility (Koji 2005).

341 Examples of non-*anime* *shokugan* are the Star Wars series. Thus while Murakami’s *shokugan* are unusual because his figurines are based on characters from his paintings and sculptures, the style of characters that Murakami has created are indebted to the visual aesthetics of *anime* and *manga*.

342 The series had been advertised in Japan’s major newspapers previous to its release at midnight on December 8, 2003 (*‘Takashi Murakami’s works to come as candy freebies’ 2003*).
*Shokugan* in Japanese means “snack toy,” toys that are found in boxes or snacks and sweets – that is, in principle you are paying for the snacks and the figures enclosed in the packages are essentially free. In other words the values of these figures are not defined by any set price. Even in my artistic career this is something quite unprecedented. One of my works, a life-size sculpture “Miss KO,” fetched over a half million dollars at a Christie’s auction in New York City in 2003. I hear that it has set the record for contemporary Japanese art. The same figure, “Miss KO,” is also included in “Takashi Murakami’s SUPERFLAT MUSEUM.” To generate a great confusion of values by juxtaposing a half million dollars and “free,” that is the purpose of creating the artistic shokugan figures. What is art in the first place? Is it about quality? Concept? Or monetary value? The standards vacillate throughout history. My definition of art is the moment that an artist or a work appears with the power to instigate the overturn of values. Therefore the crucial point for the presentation of “free” artwork in the current artistic shokugan project is the moment it can provide the opportunity for people to rethink the sense of values itself (Murakami & Kaikai kiki 2003, p. n.a.).

Murakami boldly asserts that the value of the art object is questioned by *Superflat Museum* because the consumer can purchase a miniature version of the ‘art sculpture’ that was sold at Christies. There are particular similarities that set up interesting juxtapositions between the two items, such as the shokugan version being manufactured using similar production techniques, both the figurine and the full-scale figure being based on scale models created by Bome, and, just like the life-size version, each shokugan being individually hand-painted and coming with its own certificate of authenticity and an edition number. Thus, the seriality of the shokugan still constructs a sense of value associated with singularity: the techniques of signature, numbering and hand-painting are used to signify authenticity and to produce variation. Therefore, despite Murakami’s claims, *Superflat Museum* is not so much a post-Duchampian challenge to the values of the art institution; rather, it reinforces the sustained importance of singularity and brand signature even within seriality (Frow 2002, p. 62). This is what Rosalind Krauss referred to as the construction of the ‘culture of originals’, in which the discourses around reproduced forms, such as the posthumous castings of Rodin’s sculptures, continue the ‘myth’ of originality underpinning the modernist avant-garde (1986, p. 156). Thus, while Murakami argues that the figurines in *Superflat Museum* are valueless because the commodity transaction is based on the snack and the toy is free, the gestures of signing and editioning each figurine reinforce the author-ity of Murakami. Murakami’s identity as an artist is thus centralised and *Superflat Museum* is given

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343 *Shokugan* are normally manufactured in China by highly skilled workers from rural areas who hand-paint them in large factories. There is a complex discourse to be uncovered here, as China often figures in Japan’s popular imagination as a repository for the ‘vanished’ values of premodern traditions; this is part of a complex postcolonial discourse on the relations between Japan and China a discourse that Murakami is aware of when he visits the factories (*Takashi Murakami* 2002).

344 Although the toy may be a selling point, it is essentially understood as a gift accompanying the snack.
an existence within the social institution of art. *Superflat Museum* is identified in relation to Murakami’s high media profile as an artist and clearly references his artworks.\(^\text{345}\) What these intertextual references support is the production of *Superflat Museum* as a form of commercial consumption that is identified with Murakami’s profile as an artist.\(^\text{346}\) Furthermore, *Superflat Museum* is also distinguished from general *shokugan*: it was released in a limited edition that sold out immediately, and it received press coverage as a special edition produced by Murakami ‘the artist’.

Therefore, it can be argued that Murakami is not so much challenging the value of art as reinforcing the cultural capital of the identification of himself as an artist and his own artistic reputation within the art institution by producing commercial goods based on his artworks — similar to other art gallery store merchandise.\(^\text{347}\) Furthermore, *Superflat Museum* shares similarities with the convention of the artist multiple. The multiple has been widely utilised by artists in the twentieth century - from Duchamp to Warhol with his signed Campbell’s Soup cans.\(^\text{348}\) Multiples are artworks produced in editions, and therefore are not intended as unique

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\(^{345}\) Each figurine comes with a pamphlet that traces the lineage of the character within Murakami’s artworks and the title of the series is ‘Superflat Museum.’

\(^{346}\) However, the extent to which the purchasers of Murakami’s *shokugan* are ‘art fans’ (followers of his work) or general consumers who come across the series while browsing in the *konbini* for other items is not known.

\(^{347}\) As stated, Murakami’s skilful game with the value of art could be understood as a form of merchandising and distribution no different to the process associated with commercial film and television texts or the forms of merchandising operating within the contemporary art gallery system, where increasingly the gallery shop occupies a prominent position and becomes a way to ‘materialise’ the visit through the purchase of an art-related object (Noordegraaf 2004, pp. 221-2). This transformation in gallery display practices accompanies changes in the aesthetics of commercial display in late capitalism in which retail culture is an economy based on experiences rather than concrete products or services, and the customisation of that experience for different consumers. Noordegraaf argues that this situation has arisen due to competition: museums must compete with other leisure industries for audiences, based on their expectations of ‘entertainment’ (that it has to be experiential and eventful) (p. 231). The gallery shop (and café) play a key role in this presentation and experience (ibid). Thus, *Superflat Museum* demonstrates its own embeddedness in the processes of symbolic commodity exchange which dominate the experiences of postmodern commodity culture (Baudrillard 1988c; Jameson 2001). What symbolically differentiates *Superflat Museum* as a commodity is its signification as an art object in itself, reinforced by Murakami’s identification as an artist.

\(^{348}\) While Duchamp created a series of multiples in *Boîte-en-Valse* (1946), his ready-mades have been cited as having a critical influence on the development of the artist multiple. Stephen Bury argues that the ready-made is quite distinct from the artist’s multiple: ‘But the readymade is not a multiple. It is almost its opposite. The readymade imports the quotidian into art, whereas the multiple exports the art object into everyday life’ (Bury 2001, p. 12). Nevertheless, Bury is too limited in his own definition of the artist’s multiple, and his claim of the multiple exporting the art object into everyday life is difficult to sustain because many of the audiences and consumers of multiples are already within an art world context. Multiples were particularly prolific in 1960s as part of the Pop Art movement. They were often considered as collaborative pieces between the artist and a technical manufacturer,
works, but rather are understood to be part of a larger edition or series. There are obvious similarities between Superflat Museum and the multiple, in that it is a limited edition series of works produced by an ‘artist’ with obvious references to ‘artworks.’ Pop Art multiples also generally tended to be miniature versions of larger artworks, as are Murakami’s shokugan. However, the point that needs to be stressed is that shokugan are a pre-existing cultural form distributed through konbini stores. They have their own culture of display and cultural capital. Shokugan can be collected for a variety of reasons, including aesthetic appeal, economic concerns (as an financial investment), or as a nostalgic item (Patrick & Machiyama 2004). Superflat Museum, therefore, engages with an established commercial genre and operates within the normal distribution systems of shokugan (the konbin). Thus, by distributing Superflat Museum beyond the gallery site, Murakami potentially engages with the extensive networks of consumption of popular cultural forms; albeit, in a limited way because of the art references contained in the packaging and presentation [see Figure 34]. Superflat Museum is thus part of the historic and ongoing relationship between corporations and the exhibition of contemporary art in Japan. Art galleries in department stores (depāto) play a significant role in the exhibition of contemporary art and are a common feature in Japan. It was in one of these, the Parco Gallery in Shibuya, that Superflat was first exhibited. The konbini can be understood as an extension of the art gallery/depāto relationship.

349 Multiples are often considered to be three-dimensional works, however, their differentiation from editions of photographs and prints is not always clear.
350 Many of these department store galleries have recently closed (Corkill 2002). Since the Meiji period depāto have been a key avenue for introducing and educating the Japanese public about Western consumer goods and art (Creighton 1992). Hyakkaten (a store with a hundred items) is the Meiji period term for the department store and is still in use. Depāto is a more recent and popularly used term (Creighton 1992, p. 42).
351 The konbini is a relatively recent development in the urban and rural commercial consumer landscape in Japan, first emerging in the 1970s and dramatically proliferating since then (Terasaka 1998). Konbini are distinct, however, because they proliferated while other types of retail stores declined in the 1980s, and they have a greater concentration in urban and rural regions than
Murakami’s engagement with the institutions and forms of *otaku* culture can be understood as contributing to a new paradigm for contemporary art in Japan and globally — particularly because he does not simply appropriate the imagery of *otaku* culture into his work, but also examines the processes of consumption and uses this as a basis for his Superflat aesthetic. However, while *Superflat Museum* demonstrates the flexibility of Murakami’s production by engaging with one of the key forms of *otaku* culture, these forms are still recoded as part of his broader artistic identity. However, *Superflat Museum* also reveals the ways in which aesthetic value in *otaku* culture can be ascribed to reproduced commercial forms — this is particularly apparent in the way in which *moe* can be projected onto an individual character or component thereof. Yet, this understanding of value is not entirely dependent on the inherent properties of a specific text because each character can be shared or disassembled and recreated over again. Thus the reproduced object, within *otaku* culture, is ascribed a particular essence or value that is constructed in the consumption of the work. Thus, a further investigation into the concepts of aura and reproduction, particularly in relation to Murakami’s identity as an artist, is relevant. The following section will address this issue in more detail.

*depāto* or larger supermarkets (ibid). Therefore, it is possible to argue that they are more widely accessible than the *depāto*, and thus potentially facilitate a greater distribution of Murakami’s work.
3.4 JAPAN’S ANDY WARHOL

Murakami argues that he is not necessarily relying on the valorisation of the art world, but instead is looking at the processes of all markets, art and commercial, to define the value of his works. Murakami’s activities and his comments on the markets draw attention to the ways in which these markets are intertwined. It is also evident that Murakami’s activities come to be identified, by himself and others, as distinct expressions, either as commercial productions or as art. This distinction constructs these categories as separate actions or expressions. The attempt to defend the boundary of art and commercial production reveals the persistence of the contestations of meaning around these categories, and the simultaneous challenge to them by the diversification of Murakami’s work in art and commercial contexts.

Figure 35: Keith Haring, Untitled
1985, Acrylic on canvas
152.4 x 152.4 cm
Source: Postcard from the Estate of Keith Haring, New York

As stated in Chapter One, Murakami’s blatant pronouncements of his intentions to perform as a business and to make his art production as efficient as possible, and his simultaneous ‘merchandising’ of his painting and sculptures, render his work frustrating to those who would seek to distinguish the commodity forms from the ‘pure art’ works. The 2003 Venice Biennale presented an excellent opportunity in which to consume Murakami’s work in a variety of ways: it could be viewed as an ‘art’ object in the Biennale exhibition, or purchased as a handbag at a Louis Vuitton store or on the street as a ‘fake’ replica Louis Vuitton bag. Each of these products has the potential to attract different audiences and carries different values, yet there is also the potential for overlap between these modes of consumption. Even those who would seek to
consider Murakami’s blurring of art and commercial culture as some sort of challenge to the categorical definition of art tend hesitate when confronted with Murakami’s explicit emphasis on selling his work (Frederick 2003a). Murakami’s own expressions of concern, in response to the criticism of the explicit commodification involved in his art practices, can be considered tongue-in-cheek (ibid). Murakami is ironically able to strategically utilise the public debate surrounding the commercialisation of his art in order to increase his media profile. Therefore, his business model approach is deployed to generate, rather than obliterate, the cultural capital of his work within art and celebrity discourses.

Figure 36: Jeff Koons, Rabbit
1986, Polished Steel
105.4 x 48.3 x 30.2
Museum of Modern Art New York

This simultaneity of art and commodity production is not new, particularly as the art market has long dealt in commodities; however, the value accorded this relationship in art discourse has not always been explicitly emphasised. 1960s Pop Art from the United States was criticised for being embedded within capitalist ideologies and for its celebration (rather than refusal) of the commodity market of capitalism.\footnote{While I refer here to the broader movement of ‘Pop Art,’ which emerged in the 1960s, the more specific variances between the American, British and German expressions of Pop Art are noted (see Cooke 1990; Huyssen 1986).} The work of Andy Warhol expressed and anticipated what Jean Baudrillard (1988c) referred to as the implosion of distinctions in the proliferation of sign-
exchange value in late capitalism. The work of artists such as Jeff Koons in the 1980s continued to exploit the absorption of aesthetic and exhibition value into the processes of symbolic exchange. His work both participated in and parodied the processes of consumerism (Foster 1996). In Koons’ work the distinction between advancing a critical position against spectacle and a complete immersion in and celebration of it is difficult to decipher. For Hal Foster, Koons’ gestures offered a nihilistic and cynical substitution of the aura of celebrity and the aura of commodity under the conditions of late capitalism (p. 114).

However, not all theorists of postmodernism rejected the potential of critical positions emerging within the conditions of postmodernity (Hutcheon 1989; Kipnis 1993), nor has the conceptual distinction of art necessarily disappeared. Linda Williams has argued that contemporary art needs to acknowledge its subjection to the economic effects of the art market and celebrity culture in order for new conceptions of criticality to emerge:

[W]e need art that has the sophistication and maturity to engage with the rhetorical politics of the lens and the screen at the heart of commodity spectacle. It seems to me that what we don’t need are more slick special effects that we can marvel over as examples of formalist resolution of technical problems, or, alternatively as cute homilies…(2004, p. 91).

There are many recent examples of artists who recognise how the processes of commodification can be exploited and subverted. For example, artists such as Chanschatz, the Bernadette Corporation and ®™ark fully immerse themselves in the processes and spectacles of commercial culture, while offering subversive and critically engaged positions in relation to the

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353 The ambivalent relationship that Warhol expressed in relation to commodity culture and art and his challenges to the tenets of modernism, particularly the concepts of originality, authenticity and innovation, were critically re-evaluated in postmodernism (Cooke 1990; Foster 1998; Huyssen 1986).

354 The perceived potential of advancing a critical position has been a key contestation in relation to postmodernism’s challenges to high/low culture distinctions (Callinicos 1989; Foster 1996, 1998; Hutcheon 1989; Jameson 1991b). The artwork of the 1980s and 1990s was considered by some to be collusive, whether intentional or not, with neo-liberal politics and capitalism. Postmodern art was also critiqued for vacating the ground from which an attack against those ideologies could be launched because its own codes and ideologies were highly localised and self-reflexive. By challenging the concept of meta-narratives and the semantic distinction between the real and the copy, postmodernism was seen as abandoning a position of attack (Callinicos 1989).

355 Williams’ essay draws attention to the way in which the celebratory discourses on Patricia Piccinini’s work emphasise the conceptual value of the work as a critical expression of biotechnology issues, which tends to obfuscate the seductive technical virtuosity that is clearly a critical part of its attraction, and the complicity of this with media spectacle, celebrity and commodification.
The concept of the artist/artwork as a brand (Simpson 2000). Murakami is not necessarily doing anything new or different from these other artists. He has established himself as a brand — with a range of outputs and activities, rather than simply the conventional forms of painting or sculpture — under the banners of 'Takashi Murakami' and 'Superflat.' Murakami thus utilises the economic and cultural environment of late capitalism in which aesthetic value becomes part of the commodity value of mass-produced goods (Harvey 1990).

The new networks of media technologies (Castells 2000) and new patterns of marketing and consumption have affected all forms of culture, including that of the gallery and museum. Mass and niche marketing exists for all forms of cultural consumption. There is no singular, monolithic culture industry (as Adorno conceived it) from which art can remain autonomous. At the same time, the forms of aesthetic connoisseurship which for Bourdieu constructed and reinforced class structures are also questioned within the contemporary context, where aesthetic value is not directly correlated with social elitism and can be identified in the consumption of mass-produced commercial culture (Frow 1995). For example, there has been an identifiable increase in the mass-production of design wares — goods that are marketed as designer products but are mass-produced and sold through large department stores. Issey Miyake’s range of ‘cheap’ designer clothing created for Target stores offers a useful example of this utilisation of the cultural capital of a name artist, which can then be translated into economic capital. Jeff Koons had earlier pointed out the implosion of high/low distinctions within symbolic exchange; however, there was still a presumption of the aesthetic categories and the social distinction of art within his presentation (Foster 1996, p. 116).

Whether Murakami is advancing a critical position in relation to the processes of commodification and niche marketing, and the identification of these in relation to art, requires investigation. The following section interrogates the contestations of meaning related to Murakami’s practices within the institutions of art and the cultural capital of his identification as an ‘artist.’ It traces the ways

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356 The art duo Eric Chan and Heather Schatz collaborated under the name, Chanschatz. Chanschatz is a brand in the sense that it encompasses a conceptual system of production, in which the collaboration extends from the artists to guest participants accessing a central ‘Interactive Design Module’ database to create works which are then materialised by Chanschatz. Bernadette Corporation is a group collective founded in 1994 based on the idea of corporate and brand identities, with the intention of subverting the process through which identity becomes commodified and fixed (see Simpson 2004). ©™ark is an online interactive corporation which receives project ideas from different users that are posted and discussed online (http://www.rtmark.com).
in which the aura of the artist is regenerated under the conditions of celebrity culture and contemporary commodification processes. Murakami’s commission for Louis Vuitton will provide the critical examples of this process.

3.4.1 REPRODUCTION AND AURA

In his essay ‘The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction’ (1969), Walter Benjamin argues that the advent of mechanical reproduction changed the meaning and value of the aura of art in relation to its reception. In his definition of aura Benjamin ascribes specific attributes to it; in particular, the values of authenticity and originality are linked with the aura of the unique work of art and its subsequent cult value. Benjamin traces the value of aura to the function of art in ritual, where it was understood in relation to the singularity of the unique object in time and space. In the Renaissance period the role of art in ritual was transformed by the exhibition: aura was still identified with the unique art object, but also with the artwork as an expression of the uniqueness and individuality of the artist. For Benjamin the presence of the original, singular work of art is the prerequisite for authenticity. That is, the original work occupies a singular space in time that cannot be shared with a copy:

Even the most perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking in one element: its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be. This unique existence of the work of art determined the history to which it was subject throughout the time of its existence (p. 220).

Accordingly, mechanical reproduction destroys the aura of the unique and individual art object. However, Benjamin emphasises that within this context the original becomes even more valuable because it is the original object, and the aura of the original is increased in ways previously unknown when copies were themselves handcrafted originals. While mechanical reproduction destroys the aura of the original object through its plural availability, this also reduces the distances of reception. For Benjamin, mechanical reproduction facilitates mass participation, simultaneous collective experience, and a new role for the audience in the critical evaluation of works. Therefore, simultaneous with the challenge that mechanical reproduction offered to the singularity of the art object, it also attacked the elite position of the gatekeepers who patrol and maintain exclusivity of access to the original object (p. 243). Benjamin, unlike Adorno and others

357 Benjamin acknowledges that the reproduction of art has always been possible, but argues that nineteenth century technological developments in lithography and photography represent a distinct transformation in terms of mass reproduction (p. 218).
in the Frankfurt School with whom he was associated, emphasised the emancipatory and political
potentials within the new technologies of reproduction, photography and film. He saw these
media forms as liberating art from a dependency on ritual and its institutionalisation through
limited exhibition and access. Benjamin emphasised the role of consumption and the political
potential that arises from the collapse of distanced reception. Despite a tendency towards
technological determinism in Benjamin’s argument, it opens up possibilities for conceiving of
transformations in reception, particularly the generative role of consumption and the
reconceptualisation of aura in relation to technological developments.

Despite his tendency towards an exaggerated optimism with regard to the accessibility created by
mass reproductions, Benjamin also anticipates some of the negative possibilities of reproduction.
In particular, Benjamin is wary of the aestheticisation of politics and the potential for capitalist
industries to exploit the destruction of aura through spectacle (p. 232). In his criticism of the film
industry, Benjamin draws attention to the aura of the film star as a ‘false’ replacement for the
auratic presence of the original.

The film responds to the shrivelling of the aura with an artificial build-up of the
“personality” outside the studio. The cult of the movie star, fostered by the money of
the film industry, preserves not the unique aura of the person but the “spell of the
personality,” the phony spell of a commodity (p. 231).

The ‘phony spell’ highlights the clear distinction that Benjamin makes between the ‘authentic’
aura derived from presence and the ‘inauthentic’ replacement aura of the film star. For Benjamin,
the latter is inauthentic because it is not derived from the physical presence of the film star — the
authenticity and aura of an original object/person cannot be reproduced because the value of the

358 Adorno was critical of Benjamin’s emphasis on the libratory potential of technological change (1936). Adorno had a more
pessimistic view of mass culture than Benjamin, but also emphasised the importance of avant-garde art in maintaining some
distance from economic and social forces. For Adorno this distance enabled art to have the critical power to challenge the
establishment; thus he appealed to Benjamin to emphasise ‘an even stronger dialecticization of utilitarian art in its negativity’ (p.
522).

359 Andreas Huyssen (1986) returns to Benjamin’s ideas of political emancipation through art reproduction technologies in
criticising the failure of 1960s American Pop Art to utilise new forms of technology for emancipatory purposes. Huyssen argues
that Pop employed modern methods of mass reproduction which enabled it to be distributed widely and to have a political
function. However, Pop failed to link artistic technologies with political action; rather than overthrowing the contemplative
reception of bourgeois art, Pop Art became co-opted into the canons of high art (p. 156). This meant that art, insofar as it is
exhibited in art gallery institutions, retained the qualities of ‘bourgeois contemplation’ associated with such display and the role of
the specialist art critic as a mediator (ibid).
aura is derived from a unique presence in time and space. Rather than considering reproduction as enabling a reconfiguration of aura, he emphasises it as the demise of aura. Thus, Benjamin retains an absolutist definition of aura. While the specific attributes Benjamin ascribes to aura are expressive of particular modes of modernist thinking prevalent at the time he was writing, his emphasis on the ‘cult value’ of aura already begins to suggest that aura has the potential to be understood as a manifestation of the processes of reception and consumption associated with artworks or film, rather than as an intrinsic quality of its material presence (Silverman 1996, pp. 93-104). Thus, the meaning of aura can be understood more flexibly than Benjamin’s specific interpretation allows. Rather than being fixed to a singular object, there are numerous ways in which aura can be reproduced and projected onto mass-produced items (Collins 1995; Frow 2002). Mass produced goods can be ascribed aura, and authenticity can be reproduced, packaged and commodified as part of a brand identity (Sturken & Cartwright 2001, p. 123). Of particular importance for this thesis is the way in which the aura of Murakami’s overall identity becomes more important than the individual aura of his different productions.

Art Stars: aura and celebrity

Under the conditions of late capitalism and with the acceleration of art reproduction technologies the value of the aura has continued to transmogrify. The pervasiveness and intensity of contemporary celebrity media culture and the mass circulation of mechanically reproduced imagery amidst the rapid acceleration of global capitalism has produced an ‘economy of effects’ which simultaneously erodes and reinvigorates aura (Williams 2004, p. 77) (see also Turner 2004). In particular, since the exhibition of Marcel Duchamp’s ready-mades such as Fountain [Figure 37] it has become even more apparent that the aura of the artist, rather than simply that of the work itself, is a critical undercurrent in art discourse. Duchamp himself criticised this process of aestheticising and canonising his philosophical challenges to art and the aura of originality and uniqueness.

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360 Charlie Bertsch (1996) has also argued that while emphasis is continually placed on the destruction of aura in Benjamin’s essay, an awareness of the emergence of a new form of aura, the ‘simulacral aura,’ can also be identified.
In Neo-Dada they have taken my ready-mades and found aesthetic beauty in them. I threw the bottle-rack and the urinal into their faces as a challenge and now they admire them for their aesthetic beauty (Camfield 1989, p. 96).\footnote{Camfield draws attention to the point that while the anti-art and anti-aesthetic position of Duchamp is often stressed, and this quote is often used in support of this interpretation, further comments by Duchamp regarding his ready-mades suggests that his position in relation to the commodification of his work and its institutionalisation is more ambiguous (ibid).}

This transformation of a challenge to the art institution into a legitimisation anticipates the economy of effects in contemporary art. What Duchamp identifies is the inverse effect of Benjamin’s argument, whereby an attack on the aura of originality actually increases the aura of the reproduced work. A particular status is accorded to artwork when it is conceived of as offering a challenge, and Duchamp’s gestures were thus absorbed into the conventions of art discourse.\footnote{For Bürger (1984) this process of co-option represents the end of the modernist avant-garde.} Duchamp’s exhibition of \textit{Fountain} both challenged and reaffirmed the boundary between the exhibition space of the gallery and everyday space and that between the art object and the mass-produced commodity.

Figure 37: Marcel Duchamp, \textit{Fountain}.
1917, Glazed porcelain
Dimension unknown
Location unknown
Source: Camfield 1989, p. 12.

Duchamp’s ready-mades offered a conceptual challenge to signature value as a certification of aesthetic and economic value, in so far as it was considered to be an expression of authorial authenticity (Bürger 1984, pp. 52-3). However, Duchamp’s philosophical attack on art is not as clearly polemic as Bürger indicates; Duchamp also explicitly engaged with the symbolic exchange and commodity value of art with his ‘financial ready-mades’ in the early twentieth century, for
example *Tzanck Cheque* (1919). Duchamp created *Tzanck Cheque* by signing a hand-drawn replica of a bank cheque; it was created in exchange for services provided by Duchamp’s dentist, Daniel Tzanck. *Tzanck Cheque* demonstrates Duchamp’s awareness of the processes of symbolic exchange in capitalism and the particular value of the signature as a certification of the authenticity of the ‘non-art’ object (in the case of *Tzanck Cheque*) or the reproduced object (in the case of *Fountain*) (Velthuis 2000). The singularity of the work remains emphasised, even when reproduced, and the signature functions as a marker within the art institution as a means of attributing Duchamp’s identity.

In his analysis of the role and value of signatures and brands within the art world, John Frow (2002) argues that there is a convergence of the semiotic meaning of the signature with the trademark properties of the corporate brand, and also that there has been an identifiable increase in the branding of all cultural texts. The brand functions like a signature in that it denotes authentic identity, but it is not attached to a singular object. It is rather a ‘semantic matrix,’ and an auratic source of meaning and identity (p. 64). The trademark is the central core of the brand, and its role is the protection of intangible rights. It generates its own value and thus is not attached to an object; it is rather a complex set of meanings and values abstracted from the object and not reducible to the producer or corporation (p. 64). The trademark is a complex matrix of meaning consisting of the name, image and slogan of a corporation (p. 67). The signature, however, denotes the singularity of the authentic object. Thus, there is a particular tension articulated between the aesthetic imperative to achieve innovation and originality in the signature, and the aesthetic imperative to achieve product uniformity across a series in the

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363 Duchamp produced three other financial ready-mades: *Monte Carlo Bond* (1924), *Cheque Bruno* (1965), and *Czech Check* (1965).

364 The origin of Tzanck Cheque is as an object of economic exchange for services rendered; however, the transaction is not simply a reduction of the artist’s signature to a commodity value, but also a gift and a barter trade (Velthuis 2000). At the same time, it was not necessarily recognised for its aesthetic value. It went through a complex process of being bought back by Duchamp for 100 francs (the original value of the cheque was $115.00), and was then involved in a series of further transactions and exhibitions (ibid). Through this process the interrelationship between the art market and art world value is revealed as a process of symbolic social exchange, rather than depending upon the intrinsic value of an object. Interpreting *Tzanck Cheque* as a critique of the process of generating financial value within the processes of the art market, as Bürger does, negates Duchamp’s own self-conscious complicity with these market mechanisms (Camfield 1989). Duchamp still participated in the commodification of his work, selling replica editions of his ready-mades and protecting the value of his signature in relation to those editions. While this could be understood as an inversion or reinstatement of Duchamp’s critique of the art world, it reveals the complexity of Duchamp’s position; he also emphasised the philosophical value of the actual object over the editioned and exhibited object and he often refused to exhibit his work.
brand. However, Frow argues that the signature operates in a similar way to the brand; it denotes a ‘unique’ name and a difference compared with all other brands or products available. At the same time, it can also be recognised only because it is repeated, thus, a ‘brand’ identity is created for the artist (p. 71).

This process of the auratization of the art object and the self-commodification of the artist as a celebrity and brand is completely exaggerated by Andy Warhol and Jeff Koons. The autonomy and originality of the art object are attacked through Warhol’s techniques of reproduction. However, the rhetoric on the authenticity of his mass-produced works (Shnayerson 2003) and the aura created around Warhol’s celebrity as a star artist (Bourdon 1989) reintroduce the importance of aura and the concept of authentic originality (Huyssen 1986, p. 156). Warhol underscored the importance of his celebrity aura, whilst simultaneously celebrating the vacuousness and pleasures of fame:

But being famous isn’t all that important. If I weren’t famous, I wouldn’t have been shot for being Andy Warhol…A good reason to be famous, through, is so you can read all the big magazines and know everybody in all the stories (Warhol 1975, p. 78).

Similarly, Jeff Koons appropriated commercial cultural forms and emphasised the embedding of art within the capitalist system, particularly the functioning of the aura of celebrity and the commodity value of the art object within the art market (Foster 1996; Koons, Rosenblum & Sylvester 2000).

In these conditions art and commodity become merged; both are signs for exchange. In the same way that we consume Nikes, not shoes, our reception of art is also governed by sign exchange value – we covet and consume not just the work, but the work as a “Koons” (Foster 1996, p. 112).

By selecting kitsch objects and displaying them elaborately, Koons accentuated the identity of the art object as a coveted luxury commodity – an object of desire and a vehicle for social distinction (Foster 1996, p. 114). This becomes a twofold process: Koons draws attention to the desire for the commodity while simultaneously embedding his own work in the same process (ibid). Thus, he emphasises the seductive pleasure of the perfect surface of the commodity object as well as the commodification of the artist’s name.

In his book on celebrity Graeme Turner (2004) emphasises the pervasiveness of contemporary forms of celebrity production-consumption in the mass media. Turner notes that celebrity is not a new cultural condition, but can be understood as an extension of previous conditions; however,
he argues that the visibility and role of celebrity in different cultural fields has expanded. Turner does not include art in his analysis of celebrity; nevertheless, he emphasises that the concept can be applied across a range of fields. Turner acknowledges that different kinds of celebrity operate within these different domains, such as literature or film, but also stresses the importance of the similarities between different cultural fields. For example, artists can participate in forms of ‘persona’ generating activities which are similar to those of film and sports celebrities, such as publicity, television talk shows, interviews and feature articles. By emphasising this similarity, Turner challenges the political positioning set up through the emphasis on ‘high culture’ fields, for example, literature or art, which seeks to establish that these fields operate differently to other forms of ‘commercial’ celebrity.

Turner pays particular attention to the relationship between production and consumption processes in his definition of celebrity:

Celebrity, then, is a genre of representation and a discursive effect; it is a commodity traded by the promotions, publicity, and media industries that produce these representations and their effects; and it is a cultural formation that has a social function we can better understand (p. 9).

He recognises the pleasures and identifications made by consumers of celebrity and how these can express contradiction and ambivalence, while also acknowledging the role of commodification in the production of celebrity. In particular, since the 1990s celebrity has become an increasingly significant commodity. This has contributed to the expansion of content available within the media industry and is also a part of the general climate of cross-media ownership and cross-platform media content (ibid).

One of the critical developments in contemporary forms of celebrity production that Turner identifies is the way in which celebrities have become brand commodities. In this manifestation there are a range of media products associated with one person (the celebrity) rather the concentration being on a particular work or text (p. 37). The emphasis here is on the individual person, not the works created.

A star is anyone whose name and fame has been built up to the point where reference to them, via mention, mediatized representation or live appearance, can serve as a promotional booster in itself (Andrew Wernick qtd. in Turner, p. 9).

The celebrity functions as a brand, distributing numerous media products all connected to the original brand. This form of branding is not only the product of changes in media distribution and
ownership; it also functions to support the capitalist imperatives that drive the commodification of celebrity.

The celebrity, of course, is a very useful way of connecting these cross-media processes. They become a means of taking product from one format to the next, a fundamental part of the process of content streaming. In one sense this is not new. The star of a new movie release will routinely do a round of television talk shows to promote the product. What does seem new, however, is the importance of the celebrity as a branding mechanism for media products that has assisted their fluent translation across media formats and systems of delivery (Turner 2004, pp. 33-4 italics in original).

What becomes important in this context is the persona of the individual. A similar emphasis is apparent in the role that exhibition catalogues play in the distribution of art. For example, in the exhibition catalogue for *Sensation: Young British Artists from the Saatchi Collection* (1997), photographs of the artists were given as much space and prominence as the reproductions of the art work (Hauser 1998, p. 157).

Typically, media publications on Murakami include photos of him; these images can be more prominent than those of the work itself (see Frederick 2003a). The emphasis on Murakami in feature articles and in media discourses thus serves to reinforce the centralised branding of his persona, rather than focussing on individual artworks or products.

The reinforcement of the aura and celebrity of the artist converges with the capitalist imperatives of individualisation and celebrity culture in the post-1980s art market. The twentieth-century art market has always been reliant on the entwined factors of reputation, identity and economic value. This reliance is part of the discourse around the ‘brand’ of the artist in relation to the value of the name and identity of the artist within the art market.

**Art markets and celebrity artists**

Howard Becker contends that the identity and cultural capital (influenced by Bourdieu) of an artist within art world structures are linked to the authenticity of the artwork as a product of the artist, and therefore each reinforces the legitimation of the other (1982, pp. 22-3). Becker draws attention to the functioning of the art market in relation to these principles: the reliance of the economic value of the work and the artist’s reputation, but also the critical effect of distribution

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365 “The work of the artists is inextricable from the hype of the yBA “scene.” This is illustrated by the very layout of the *sensation* exhibition catalogue, where Johnny Shand-Kydd’s photographs of each of the exhibiting artists, smoking and drinking, posing and generally noncing about are given a whole page each. In many cases, that is as much space as is devoted to images of the artist’s work’ (Hauser 1998, p. 157 note 11).
(exhibition, sales, inclusion in discourses) on reputation (see also Heilbrun & Gray 2001). The judgement of authenticity, the artist’s reputation and the attribution of artworks to the artist(s) are critical to the establishment of the market value of an artwork (Becker 1982, pp. 315-71).

The modern art market has always dealt in commodities (Fitzgerald 1995), but this has not always been explicitly acknowledged because the philosophical emphasis has been on the autonomy of art from social, historical, economic and political interests (Adorno 1936; Greenberg 1939). The notion of art’s autonomy has been critically challenged not only by Pierre Bourdieu (1984), but also by postmodern theories confronting the presumption of art’s independence from commercial influences (Baudrillard 1983a; Jameson 1991a). Re-examinations of the relationship between market success and critical acclaim for early modern artists, such as Picasso (see Fitzgerald 1995), have also challenged the claims to autonomy. These philosophical challenges to the autonomy of art and the function of art as commodity were made even more explicit by the art market boom in the 1980s and the changing relations between corporate and state funding of art exhibitions and institutions (see Bourdieu & Haacke 1995; Lewis 1990).

Inflationary price growth in the art market in the 1980s was supported by significant increases in the construction of new museums of contemporary art, and also attracted significant media attention (Van den Bosch 2005). George Marcus and Fred Myers (1995a, p. 21) argue that this media attention made it difficult to sustain the refrain of art’s autonomy from economic influences (see also Rosler 1997). Paul Wood (1996) also contends that the ‘supercommodification’ effect of the 1980s art market generated scepticism, especially amongst the wider public and artists, about the use and exchange value of art. Baudrillard’s nihilism regarding the implosion of the commodification of art emerges within this context (1993). The effect of the inflated art market and the postmodern theorisations that were prevalent during this period converged to undermine clear distinctions between art and the circulation of other commodity forms. This market effect and its postmodern interpretation emphasised the complex and powerful relations among the economic influences of the art market in relation to the development of aesthetic value and artists’ reputations in art discourse - a point that Jameson emphasises:

[A]esthetic production today has become integrated into commodity production generally: the frantic economic urgency of producing fresh waves of ever more novel-seeming goods (from clothing to airplanes), at ever greater rates of turnover, now

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366 It was the conflation of these factors that Marcus and Myers emphasise as ‘radically undermin[ing]’ the concept of autonomy in ways that had not previously occurred in twentieth century art, despite multiple challenges from the avant-garde (p. 23).
assigns an increasingly essential structural function and position to aesthetic innovation and experimentation (Jameson 1991b, p. 5).

Therefore, while the philosophical concept of the originality of art works and the privileging of authorial expression were being challenged (Krauss 1986), the inflated art market continued to emphasise the economic value of the individual artist and their art works, as well as emphasising innovation. Thus, the social distinction of art was maintained. One of the critical effects of this emphasis was an increase in the speed of the turnover of artists and art works and the quick inflation/deflation cycle of artist (and dealer) reputations.

In terms of the system of art, the increased scale of the art market had the effects of further stimulating the cycles of innovation which had been part of the modern system of the arts from the beginning. Artists and dealers alike sought the kind of differentiation from other products in the market which both conferred the related values of individuality and originality (themselves components of the “valorization” process) and also promised a share of the spiralling exchange values. That is, market success, or even market survival, fed back more powerfully than ever as a determinant on the form of production. What that process did to the public at large was to generate extreme scepticism about the use value as well as the exchange value of such art and to render it part of the fabric of hegemony rather than critical of it (Wood 1996, p. 276).

Aura becomes reinvigorated by this emphasis on the individual artist, and the artist as a form of celebrity comes to perform a key function within the art market, paralleling the increased culture of celebrity in the mass media (Van den Bosch 2005, p. 5). The focus is on the brand of the artist rather than on the individual works produced – this occurs even for postmodern work that may challenge the concept of the individual artist or unique object because innovation itself is subsumed as a commodity (Harvey 1990, p. 292). The function of the artist thus becomes complicit in contemporary forms of celebrity and the commodified image of a celebrity-as-brand. This parallels the process that Turner defines in the production-consumption processes of celebrity: the artist becomes the commodity, rather than the artwork. This is not to argue that the celebrity artist has not appeared prior to this time, but rather it is the particular convergence of economic and cultural effects in the post-1980s art world that has explicitly drawn attention to the commodification of the artist’ reputation.

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367 Van den Bosch (2005, pp. 9-39), emphasises that the key difference in the 1980s market compared with earlier post-war markets was the speculative investment in contemporary art and the value of the financial investment of art for buyers (see also Heilbrun & Gray 2001; Rosler 1997; Van den Bosch 2005, p. 27).

368 This process parallels the processes of capitalism in modernity but is intensified in postmodernity (Harvey 1990, p. 293).
The importance of media promotion and interaction with the production of the artist celebrity was a critical theme in Murakami’s early work. In _Kase Taishuu Z Project_ (1994) Murakami expressed an ironic critique of media identity, copyright, and celebrity branding. However, his recent explicit self-promotion exploits the possibilities of this celebrity branding. A critical aspect of Murakami’s strategy is to reach a large audience; to achieve this, he has utilised his popular media profile in Japan (Osaka 2003) (see also Wakasa 2000). When Tomio Koyama, Murakami’s Tokyo dealer, and Murakami met in the early 1990s, it was Koyama’s contacts with the media world that assisted in establishing a significant media presence for Murakami (Koyama 2001). The support from the editor of _BT_ (*Bijutsu Techo*) has also been critical in fostering discourses around Superflat in the contemporary art world (Hirano 2003). Beyond these art world forums, Murakami has stated that gaining exposure through a magazine cover was more important to him than showing his work in a gallery (ibid).

This emphasis on self-promotion is unusual for the Japanese art world. It is considered to conflict with the idea of the artist as ‘inscrutable,’ exclusive and reticent (Hirano 2003). At the same time, the extension of Murakami’s profile beyond the art world may be attributable less to Murakami’s own strategy (although that is significant) than to the emergence of Japanese lifestyle publications and Murakami’s inclusion in these.

The operations of branding are explicitly at work in Murakami’s practices. His signature is used to mark the authenticity of individual paintings or sculptures, but it has also become serialised and is used as a brand to rarefy certain commercial products such as t-shirts, toys and stickers. Therefore, his products have an auratic value of meaning that is not limited to a particular product, such as a painting, but can be applied to other goods such as t-shirts. In this context it is the ‘murakami-ness’ of the brand that is important. The products have external value that is based on the semantic matrixes of the Murakami brand. This signature brand is linked to the individual ‘Murakami,’ rather than to the individuality expressed in the work itself.

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369 Tomio Koyama has stated, ‘I have a partner like relationship with the artist. In corporate terms, the artist takes care of product development, and the dealer is responsible for publicity and marketing’ (Koyama qtd. in Nonami 2003).

370 For example, Murakami’s work was on the cover of _BT_ in May 1999 v51 (770) and November 2001 v53 (812). His work was also included with editions on Superflat Architecture and Roppongi Hills in May 2000 v52 (787) and June 2003 v55 (835).

371 This image of the artist echoes post-Romantic ideas of the autonomous creator. Morimura Yasumasa provides a useful comparison to Murakami in terms of the generation of a significant international and domestic profile. In contrast to Murakami, for many Japanese art critics Morimura retained the identity of the esoteric artist (Hirano 2003).
In order to clarify the meaning and value of Murakami’s identity as an artist and examine the conflation of reputation and market value in relation to the aura of the artist and the work, it is useful to examine Bourdieu’s definitions of the structure of the field of cultural production and the value and status of the identity of art within that field. This will assist in the establishment of a framework and terms for the debate that persist around Murakami’s work, particularly in relation to his commissioning by Louis Vuitton.

**Bourdieu: cultural capital and art**

Pierre Bourdieu (1984) framed his sociological study of taste and the operations of cultural distinction and power through the concepts of ‘fields’, ‘habitus’ and ‘capital’ (see also 1993). Bourdieu’s concept of fields refers to cultural productions and social formations, and the sets of relations and sites of practices that exist within these. A field can be any social formation: economic, political, educational, philosophical or cultural. Art is one of the key examples that Bourdieu analyses in relation to the field of cultural production. Each field is a hierarchically organised and structured space with its own internal rules of play that produce and authorise particular codes and practices through institutions, rules, conventions and definitions. The authorisation of the dominant codes and practices in each field is structured by the relations of power between ‘agents’ (1993 [1983], pp. 37-40). Bourdieu refers to the process of authorisation as a contestation for capital. The status and power within each field is dependent on the type of capital agents can mobilise (1984, p. 113). Numerous agents operate in the art field, including artists, critics, curators, dealers and audiences.

The constant struggle for capital, status and power between agents constitute the dynamics of the field. There is thus a constant dynamic flux generated from these internal struggles in each field: because every position-taking move inevitably changes the structure of the field, the field and the meaning of positions within it are variable (1993 [1983], p. 30). Each field has a dominant form of capital (economic, cultural or symbolic) that determines the currencies of exchange and value within that field. For Bourdieu, the production of art generally involves the competition for symbolic and cultural capital, rather than being specifically or solely based on

372 While each field is constituted independently from all other fields they do share a similar structure (Webb, Schirato & Danaher 2002, pp. x-xi).
According to Bourdieu, the cultural field of production can be divided into different hierarchies and dimensions of artistic activity. A variety of positions can be occupied within this multidimensional structure. The key division that Bourdieu makes is between the ‘restricted field of production’ and ‘large-scale production’ (1993 [1971], p. 115). These divisions are based on the dominant principles and hierarchies that operate between economic and cultural capital. Bourdieu emphasises the key differences between the restricted field, where work is produced for other producers, and the field of large-scale production where work is produced for non-producers (or consumers) (1993 [1971], p. 115). For Bourdieu, the distinctions that operate in the field of restricted production (art) involve power relations that are dependent on the type of capital agents (artists, critics) possess. This subsequently determines the dominant definition of the capital and legitimises the mode and definition of art in the field (1993 [1983], pp. 41-2).

Bourdieu further divides restricted and large-scale production into a hierarchy between autonomous and heteronomous production (1993 [1983], p. 40). Heteronomous production refers to uses beyond the field (economic or political) and is largely determined by economic capital, and autonomous production is concerned only with the cultural values of the field for example, ‘art for art’s sake’. The heteronomous pole is divided into ‘middle-brow’ and ‘commercial’ art (1993 [1983], p. 53). Commercial art is committed to economic principles and middle-brow art is committed to satisfying the largest possible audience of consumers through a strategy of generalisation (1993 [1971], p. 126). Autonomous art is divided into ‘conventional’ and ‘avant-garde’ art. Conventional art works within the established conventions of the field, and avant-garde art challenges those conventions. Art and artists can and do alter their positions within this structure and can also occupy intermediary positions (p. 127).

While Bourdieu contends that the dominant capital that operates in the field of art production is symbolic, he also acknowledges that even when art claims to be autonomous it still operates

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373 Symbolic capital refers to an abstract form of capital that is reliant on external recognition by the legitimate authority within the field, for example, artistic reputation. Cultural capital refers more specifically to the value given the possession of particular forms of knowledge, skills or practices (Johnson 1993, p. 7; Schirato & Webb 2004, p. 111).

374 Large-scale production, which has an amorphous concept of a market audience, is defined by ‘accessibility’ because it is intended for the widest-possible audience in order to generate the largest amount of profit (p. 126).
within an economic structure that requires some form of financial support (1993 [1983], p. 37). However, the rules of the field of autonomous production involve strategies to emphasise symbolic capital and to renounce economic or political uses (1993, p. 78). Although not reducible to each other, one form of capital can also be converted into another form. Thus, the symbolic capital generated by the autonomy of art can be converted into economic capital even if this is not the intention of the producer (1993 [1983], p. 40). For example, the concept of the artist as lacking in popular or financial success can generate cultural capital in the autonomous field of art through the symbolic distinction of this ‘lack’. This can subsequently be converted into economic capital through the increased sale of the particular artist’s work (1993 [1971], pp. 115-20). Furthermore, while agents cannot possess capital simultaneously in different fields, because the logic of each field determines what is the valid form of capital (p. 113), they may have additional capital. In other words, Bourdieu insists that different forms of capital theoretically cannot be operative at the same time because the field is reliant on the antagonism between commercial/art production (1993 [1983], p. 64). That is, the ‘disavowal’ of economic interest helps ascribe symbolic capital in autonomous art. However, in practice this symbolic capital can later be transposed into economic capital (1993, pp. 75-6). The ability to construct an image of autonomy from economic influences or interests while also participating in the economic and symbolic connections that structure the operations in the field of art, is a complex operation for artists. It requires the appearance of an ‘authentic’ lack of interest in economic influences on the part of artists so the belief in the symbolic value of autonomous art to be maintained. This is what Bourdieu refers to as ‘position taking’ and he acknowledges the ways in which artists self-consciously and strategically position themselves in relation to different artistic identities (1995, p. 165). There are multiple positions available in the field of art:

The range might include avant-garde works on the road to consecration, works of ‘bourgeois art’ aimed at the non-intellectual fractions of the dominant class and often already consecrated by the most official of legitimising institutions (the academies), works of middle-brow art aimed at various ‘target publics’ and involving, besides brand-name culture (with, for example, works crowned by the big literary prizes), imitation culture aimed at the rising petite bourgeoisie (popularising literary or scientific works, 375 Bourdieu emphasises that one of the determining principles of recognition within the field of restricted production may be based on its distinction from ‘public success’ (Bourdieu 1993 [1971], p. 116). He then exposes the paradox of this position: the field is reliant on reciprocal peer recognition for its definition.
Bourdieu’s use of the phrase ‘on the road to’ betrays his own emphasis on this process as a sort of linear continuum rather than one that is multi-dimensional. Artists cannot obtain cultural capital through all these activities simultaneously. What becomes evident in the analysis of Murakami’s process of establishing his global profile is how he self-consciously and strategically manipulates this process and at the same time challenges it by distributing his works simultaneously as ‘autonomous’ art and as ‘commercial’ products. Before this point is discussed in more detail it is necessary to indicate a few problems in Bourdieu’s conception of the structure of the art field.

First, it tends to reinforce the legitimisation of conventional art institutions and discourses occupying a dominant position, and avant-gardism and conventionalism are presented as separate and distinct stages along a linear structure which creates the impression that art, artists, or audiences can occupy a ‘pure position’ at either end of the scale. This is particularly evident in works made by artists outside of the ‘Western tradition’ (Schirato & Webb 2004, p. 114). Nevertheless, Webb, Schirato and Danaher contest the idea that Bourdieu’s divided field should be understood as a linear structure, and they argue for the usefulness of Bourdieu in providing a structure in which to map the tensions and dynamics of art production (2002, pp. 169-71). Importantly, Bourdieu’s approach acknowledges the social and cultural constructions underpinning art production-consumption. However, the second problem is that Bourdieu also demonstrates a tendency to privilege ‘autonomous’ art as dominant, and thus he reproduces the logic of the dominant discourse and presumes that the dominant structure is always accorded recognition (Frow 1995, p. 37).

Frow also criticises Bourdieu’s approach for its presumption of two separate and essentialised aesthetic sites, ‘high art’ and ‘the popular’ with each one equated to class positions (p. 5).

376 Bourdieu’s definition of the avant-garde in opposition to conventional art is based on the concept of the historical avant-garde (Bürger 1984). However, it can be argued that the modernist concept of the avant-garde is not sufficient for understanding the complex and blurred conditions of art and commodity relations within contemporary practice and culture (Huyssen 1986, p. ix).

377 Frow criticises Bourdieu for his lack of evidence demonstrating that the importance of autonomous art extends beyond the dominant class (p. 45).

378 Frow is therefore wary of the application of Bourdieu’s rigid class structure in social contexts outside of France. Japan, for example, does not conform to the same class structure that Bourdieu defines.
This assumes a single class experience and an aesthetic logic that differ for each site (p. 31). Frow criticises Bourdieu’s understanding for not only reproducing the high/popular binary, but also neglecting to consider these sites as being constituted by contradiction and tension, and for presuming that the sole function of aesthetic texts is the reproduction of status and distinction (pp. 38-9). Frow argues that the categorical distinction of high/low culture is theoretically unsustainable because ‘high culture is fully absorbed within commodity production’ (p. 23), and there is also a lack of a clear centre of cultural authority under the conditions of mass media forms such as television (p. 24). Subsequently, he argues that high culture does not equate with Bourdieu’s concept of the ruling class, but rather the high/low division operates at all levels of culture. Furthermore, the increased ‘fusion and play’ between texts explodes the modernist notion of art as operating in opposition to commodity culture (Frow 1995, p. 25).

Bourdieu’s theoretical approach is quite different to the typical responses to Superflat, which demonstrate the lack of privilege ascribed to art as a dominant form within the field of cultural production. The graphic designers included in the multi-disciplinary exhibitions Jam Tokyo-London (2001) and Superflat argue that the art presented in them lags behind current design ideas and that the exhibited design work was already part of a ‘graphic design graveyard’ (Sato & Ukawa 2004, p. 50). The designers quite clearly articulate their opinion regarding the lack of original and innovative design work in art, particularly when compared with commercial production. Therefore, while the art world may consider Superflat to be an innovative convergence of art and the commercial world, this view is not shared by graphic design professionals. Additionally, otaku and other consumers have criticised Murakami’s appropriation and expression of the anime and manga aesthetic. Murakami’s work is not necessarily considered innovative or creative. In fact, his figures have been criticised as too ‘dry’ lacking in emotional interaction (Minami 2003), and drawing on hackneyed imagery (Bome qtd. in Murakami 2001b, p. 139). While this could be considered an example of the conflict between the mobilisations of capital within different fields, it also demonstrates that art is not as universally privileged or hierarchically positioned in offering creative expression as Bourdieu assumes (1993 [1971], p. 126). It could be argued that an inverse process has occurred in Murakami’s work: art has acquired capital through the inclusion of commercial art. Art might look to reinvigorate itself by learning from the pleasures and spectacles of the commercial entertainment industry (see Walker 379 Frow argues that this is too singular, not allowing for any explanation of other uses, and also that it does not provide a means of explaining other social functions of texts such as pleasure (pp. 5-6).
Art Center 2000), but there is still a desire to differentiate art by emphasising its critical edge against the subsumption of capital (Sirmans 1997). Therefore, the distinction and legitimation of art and its institutions are still held in place.

Within his heterogeneous approach to production, making everything from paintings to toys, Murakami emphasises his desire to deploy his diverse productions in order to reach the largest possible audience. He is thus critical of the limitations of the audience for art within a gallery in comparison to the global audiences for film. Rather than redefining the existing terms of autonomous art in Japan, Murakami is setting up his own field of ‘heteronomous’ production with Superflat. However, the interesting dynamic in Murakami’s production is that the possibility of a autonomous art production persists in relation to the discourses on his work in the West: even when the commercial qualities are acknowledged they are framed as a challenge to autonomous art, and are still contained within the discourses of that field.

Primarily, the differentiation of Murakami’s identity as an artist depends upon the context in which his work is distributed and discussed. His paintings and sculptures are exhibited in galleries and museums, sold through conventional auction sites and discussed in art publications. Murakami thus has accumulated sufficient symbolic capital as an artist that he is considered an artist in a conceptual way. That is, he is considered to be an artist engaging with commercial forms: the exhibition Superflat, and the theory of Superflat, are largely constructed as a presentation in art contexts and Murakami is conceived as an artist working within this field. Murakami’s own background training in nihonga at the prestigious Tokyo University supports this identification. Nevertheless, this is a flexible distinction and different audiences respond in different ways to the mixing of activities:

[T]he reception of the art/artwork depends on the audience, and the audience can be separated in some categories, and some audience[s] are real art collector[s], and some artist[s] are just watching [the] exhibition as a kind of entertainment/pleasure, so the audience’s commitment varies… So for some audiences he makes/mixes high art/popular culture, but for some audiences there is no difference. This kind of audience doesn’t like Murakami’s kind of art (Minami 2003).

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380 The desire to extend the audience for art is certainly not a new concept and it can be traced to the activities of the modernist avant-garde. Although in Dada the intention was to take a stance against the institution of art, rather than making art more inclusive, contemporary contestations focus on the role and function of museums and art galleries in relation to entertainment culture (Simpson 2000; Walker Art Center 2000).
Murakami’s position is complex. He achieved commercial and conventional popularity simultaneously. The combination of releasing his ‘commercial’ productions (t-shirts, stickers and toys) with his ‘artworks’, as well as engaging with exhibitions and codes outside of the field of art through collaborations with *otaku* in producing the figure sculptures, makes it difficult to clearly distinguish these activities independently. Whether positively or negatively, each builds on or deconstructs the reputation and value of the other. Furthermore, the forms of cultural capital he acquired in Japan and the West were quite distinct. As stated, in the West, his identity is connected to conventional contemporary art discourses. In contrast, in Japan he has become more visible within commercial markets through projects such as Louis Vuitton and the commission for the Roppongi Hills complex. This is not to say he is not recognised as an artist in Japan, but access to his work is largely through these commercial forms rather than through exhibitions (with the exception of his solo show at the Museum of Contemporary Art Tokyo). Furthermore, the attention given to his status as an artist in the popular media is largely in relation to his success in the Western art markets. Murakami recognises this delicate balance regarding his status and recognition. He emphasises his dual engagement with the art and commercial worlds and the ways in which he does not privilege either activity. At the same time, he insists on distinguishing these activities from one another:

"Louis Vuitton is exactly that: design work. The collaboration is separate from my sculpture, like the *Lonesome Cowboy*. I didn’t really use those characters in the context of fashion. …I did the collection with Louis Vuitton and Issey Miyake, but it was the fashion designer who wanted to carry my design; the work wasn’t linked to a pure art concept. I see the work I do as an artist as being separate from the work I’ve done for fashion and design (Murakami qtd. in Kaplan 2004)."

However, this distinction can also be considered an ironic response. Part of Murakami’s strategy is to position his work within Western art discourses that may still privilege the categorical distinction of art. This is a critical point, because the contestation that occurs within Murakami’s challenging of the categorical distinction of art and *otaku* culture enters into a game of legitimation which also presumes these to be separate categories, while he simultaneously legitimises the capital and codes of the art world.

Bourdieu argues that entry into a field requires an agent to act according to the rules of the field. Agents must possess the attitudes and dispositions that are expressive of the particular cultural and historical values of the field, what Bourdieu refers to as ‘habitus’ (Bourdieu 1984, p.
Habitus amounts to playing the game of the field (p. 250). To enter into the game, which is a battle for recognition, is also to take part in it and thus to legitimate it (p. 250):

The struggles which aim, for example, to transform or overturn the legitimate hierarchies through the legitimating of a still illegitimate art or genre, such as photography or the strip cartoon, or through the rehabilitation of ‘minor’ or neglected authors etc., or to impose a new mode of appropriation, linked to another mode of acquisition, are precisely what creates legitimacy, by creating belief not in the value of this or that stake but in the value of the game in which the value of all stakes is produced and reproduced (1984, p. 569 note 81).

As discussed previously, Murakami’s ambivalence around otaku culture can also be interpreted as a strategic utilisation of the cultural capital gained through appropriating ‘subcultural’ forms in his presentation of Superflat within the art world. What this demonstrates it that there is a complex intertwining of the cultural capital generated by the intimate relationship between art and commodity in Murakami’s work, and works such as the Louis Vuitton commission draw attention to the conflicts around these forms of cultural capital.

3.4.2 EYE LOVE: MURAKAMI AND LOUIS VUITTON

Recently, I started a collaboration with a fashion conglomerate from France called LVMH, particularly with their flagship brand, Louis Vuitton. Even in that project, I am consciously reflecting a “Superflat” context both in my visual expression as well as in the way I interact with the project (Murakami 2003).

The representation of the Louis Vuitton commission [Figure 38] in a range of general media as well as specialist art world publications has generated critical debates around the identity and ‘authenticity’ of Murakami as an ‘artist’. The success of the Louis Vuitton handbags was discussed (and marketed) in a wide variety of Western media publications (see When fashion and art are meant for each other: Marc Jacobs and Takashi Murakami got together and, boom--magic!)

381 Habitus is transferable and agents entering into a new field can adopt the values of that field. One of the effects of habitus is to create a belief in the innateness of the game in the field, therefore disguising the fact that fields are constructed from struggles for validity. This belief in the game is achieved by presenting the values of each field as normative in order to smooth over the sense of struggle. While habitus provides a programmed structure for practices, agents can respond to any given circumstance in a variety of ways because Bourdieu allows for a limited amount of improvisation and incorporation of new values by agents. However, by and large responses are still determined by existing structures (see Webb, Schirato & Danaher 2002, pp. 21-44).

382 The Louis Vuitton commission is not Murakami’s first foray into fashion; he collaborated with Naoki Takizawa for Issey Miyake in 2000. The Louis Vuitton commission could be considered a lucrative marketing exercise for LVMH because a third of its global sales are in Japan (this excludes sales to Japanese tourists at sites outside of Japan); its merging of the kawaii iconography of Murakami and its emphasis on Murakami as a Japanese artist appealed to Japanese consumers.
2003; Porter 2002) and was profiled in a range of publications from *Vogue* (Griffin 2001) to the cover of *Artforum* (September, 2003).\(^{383}\) In *Art Asia Pacific* (no. 38, 2003) there was an interesting conflation in the ‘art celebrity’ pages of photographs at openings, which not only featured Murakami at the opening of his exhibition *Superflat Monogram* at Marianne Boesky, but also included the usual ‘crowd’ photographs of the opening with people wearing the *Eye Love* handbag. In a further intertextual conflation, the paintings in this exhibition, such as *SUPERFLAT monogram* [Figure 39], were identical to the Louis Vuitton monogram design. Like the Louis Vuitton handbags, these paintings were also produced in series with only minor colour modifications.

![Figure 38: Louis Vuitton Eye Love Multicolour (white)](image)

2003, Leather
30 x 10 x 5cm
Source: ioffer 2006

![Figure 39: SUPERFLAT Monogram](image)

2003, Acrylic on canvas mounted on board
180 x 180cm
Source: Art Asia Pacific 2003, p. 94.

The intimacy between this art world context and what was perceived as a commercial commission was heavily criticised in the Western art media (Finch 2003). The negative responses generated in art world discourses can be traced to the perceived loss of cultural capital as a result of (over) exposure in the media and the persistence of the value ascribed to an imagined autonomous art expression. That is, even if the commodification of art is acknowledged in the discourse, artists

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383 The *Artforum* cover is an interesting example. The cover image was of a Venice street vendor selling Louis Vuitton ‘fake’ handbags. The article in the journal, on the Venice Biennale, emphasised the range of opportunities for consuming Murakami’s work within the exhibition, in the Louis Vuitton handbags, and in their knockoffs.
must still participate in the delicate dance of performing a critical position in relation to commodification, in order to demonstrate their authenticity within the art world. Murakami’s blatant forming of connections between the Louis Vuitton commission and his gallery paintings SUPERFLAT monogram, as well as the exposure of his work within the media, was criticised for its explicitness by the art world. However, following Bourdieu, this is all part of the ‘game’ of art in which critics and artists play. It is a game in which Andy Warhol also cleverly participated:

Business art is the step that comes after Art. I started as a commercial artist, and I want to finish as a business artist (Warhol 1975, p. 92).

For Murakami’s Los Angeles dealer, Tim Blum, the high level of attention given to Murakami within more generalist media publications and the Louis Vuitton commission represent the mainstreaming of Murakami within the United States. Blum has emphasised the positive role the Louis Vuitton commission played in extending the audience and profile of Murakami’s work:

Previously, everything existed on a museum or art world level. The Vuitton collaboration slammed him into the real world. It couldn’t have been anything other than fashion. The speed with which fashion can be conceived, developed, and made is different from film. The fashion connection was a no-brainer. You can’t script that kind of thing (Tim Blum qtd. in Kaplan 2004).

Murakami could ironically demonstrate his own lack of regard for the criticisms generated within the art world because by this time he had potentially generated sufficient cultural capital to establish his reputation as a ‘serious’ artist and ensure the stability of his status and position. This stability was particularly based on the high prices received at auction for his work as well the art historical context and manifesto that was constructed for the Superflat exhibition. External interests within the art market also ensured that the investment value of Murakami’s work remained stable (Elliott 2003).

These contestations are also part of the variegated groupings and identities within the art world categorised by Bourdieu. Murakami’s work is considered ‘conventional’ within the art world. His work is sold within the large, high-profile auction houses of Sotheby’s and Christie’s, exhibited in established art institutions, such as public museums and prominent dealer galleries (Marianne Boesky in New York, Galerie Emmanuel Perrotin in Paris and Blum and Poe in Los Angeles), and included in conventional art publications such as Artforum.

Understanding Murakami’s concepts, his mix of contemporary imagery and pop sensibility with classical allusions, has been a long process for collectors…but his work
has always had a certain level of accessibility, and now it’s gone mainstream (Marianne Boesky qtd. in Yanagihara 2004).

Boesky also alludes to the fact that Murakami must maintain a balance between establishing an art context, namely, his reputation as an artist for collectors and investors, while at the same time establishing his accessibility for the wider public. Of course, these activities are not completely exclusive or always in conflict. Part of Murakami’s status within conventional art discourses involves his identity as an artist who blurs the distinction between art and commercial culture.

The Louis Vuitton commission is, therefore, an exaggerated example of the internal struggles within the art world between the concept of the autonomous artwork and art that is created for specific use and exchange value. On the other hand, Louis Vuitton products themselves can be just as exclusive as art: objects in the store are displayed in a manner similar to a museum, with each object displayed and lit individually, emphasising it as singular and precious rather than being a mass produced item.\(^{384}\) The art paintings and the Louis Vuitton goods share similar tendencies towards the generation of economic and cultural capital and can be deployed as markers of distinction; in addition, value can be ascribed on the basis of the identification of originality and the presence of forgeries. Furthermore, both (as well as the ‘knock-off’ Louis Vuitton goods sold on e-bay) are produced in serial forms, have niche markets, and demonstrate the tensions among elite, conformist, progressive, and mainstream identities.\(^{385}\) Thus, what had previously been categorised as specifically high and low cultural codes do operate at all levels of culture.

A continual problem in theorisations which seek to relate art and popular commercial culture or to view commercial forms through the criteria or concepts of art, is the way in which they still reinforce these categories as distinct, and therefore treat them as categorical givens (Storey 2003, pp. 92-106). That is, they presume that cultural texts can already be determined as ‘art’ or as ‘commercial’ and actually do not question these cultural values but rather assume their intrinsic worth (p. 100). For example, when commercial forms are taken into the category of art they are presumed to have a pre-existing condition outside of art, as art’s Other. This is, of

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\(^{384}\) The visual displays of public museums and shopping sites have been closely related since the nineteenth century; contemporary forms of retail display increasingly emphasise the object as an item of display rather than as an object of merchandise (Noordegraaf 2004, p. 231).

\(^{385}\) Although, with the proliferation of cheap ‘fake’ Louis Vuitton handbags, the exclusivity of the ‘authentic’ Louis Vuitton becomes more complicated (Rothkopf 2003, p. 175).
course, a historically constituted cultural construct that has emerged from the categorical separation of art and commercial culture in modernist discourse since the late eighteenth century. At the same time, a secondary distinction operates, according to which particular commercial forms are selected to be included in art or academia and thus valorised as ‘good,’ in the sense that they are seen as aesthetic, subversive, or resistant. Therefore, there is a strict selectivity about the commercial forms that are chosen as art and the manner in which they can be included (p. 102).

What lurks behind this categorisation is a Frankfurt School ideology according to which intellectual, serious art is ‘good’ and non-intellectual, non-critical art is ‘bad.’ However, while the introduction of new elements into the art field may enlarge the sphere of aesthetic value, the distinctions of exclusion still persist. Frederic Jameson’s pessimism over the effacement of art in late capitalism has a basis in retaining the distinction that art can be identified apart from popular culture, even while he laments its embedding in the conditions of postmodernity. He considers that postmodern art is not simply incorporating and quoting from the popular but is degrading the concept of art.

[O]nne fundamental feature of all postmodernisms enumerated above: namely, the effacement in them of the older (essentially high-modernist) frontier between high culture and so-called mass or commercial culture, and the emergence of new kinds of texts infused with the forms, categories, and contents of that very culture industry so passionately denounced by all the ideologues of the modern, from Leavis and the American New Criticism all the way to Adorno and the Frankfurt school. The postmodernisms have, in fact, been fascinated precisely by this whole "degraded" landscape of schlock and kitsch, of TV series and Reader’s Digest culture, of advertising and motels of the late show and the grade-B Hollywood film, of so called paraliterature, with its airport paperback categories of the gothic and the romance, the popular biography, the murder mystery, and the science fiction or fantasy novel: materials they no longer simply "quote," as a Joyce or a Mahler might have done, but incorporate into their very substance (Jameson 1991b, pp. 2-3).

Alternatively, to celebrate something as ‘popular art’ still retains the notion that there is something that can be identified as ‘art’ and it therefore preserves the categorisation of art.

Why call it popular art? Why not simply say that it is art? To say popular art is to affirm the reality and status of art – the very institution that would insist on the qualifying term popular (Storey 2003, p. 101).

In his analysis of the method of appropriation in art Jim Collins (1995) takes a more celebratory position than Jameson. He contends that appropriation is not simply an anti-Romantic challenge to the expression of originality and subjectivity; it involves acknowledging the limits of discourse
and institutionalism previously restricting the use of particular images, and then denying those limits and the cultural authority of those institutions (p. 92). Appropriation should, however, not simply replace the cultural authority of one institution with another, for example, where popular culture remains a category framed by the institution of art (p. 108). Collins advocates for art that engages with the heterogeneous conventions, contestations and institutions of popular culture (p. 113).

The identification of Superflat as art and Murakami as an artist contradicts the concept of Superflat as blurring or challenging those distinctions because it still participates in the game of distinction. At the same time, the Louis Vuitton commission draws attention to the similar distinctions of elitist, conformist, progressive and collective which operate in different cultural domains. Murakami is playfully (and potentially cynically) immersed in the processes of late capitalism, in proposing that he is challenging the distinction of art, while at the same time exploiting and celebrating the processes of commodification and symbolic exchange that exist in the postmodern. Postmodern art, as much as commercial productions, can be commodified, used for social distinction and valued aesthetically. Superflat Museum demonstrates that the distinctions can be deployed simultaneously and do not necessarily occlude one another — art and commercial culture are heterogenous and original and can have uses both as and beyond carriers of commodity value; furthermore, it demonstrates that the processes of symbolic exchange occur at all levels of cultural production. Thus, Superflat Museum disrupts Bourdieu’s insistence on the differences in aesthetic logic and appreciation between high art and popular culture and the equation of this to specific classes of consumers because it draws attention to the multiple values and audiences operating within commercial culture. Shokugan are a key collectible item within otaku culture (Patrick & Machiyama 2004), but are also collected widely by a range of consumers. Thus, they are not limited to one class of consumer. At the same time,

386 For example, Collins contends that Roy Lichtenstein’s appropriation of comic art still reinforced the parallel distinctions of art and commercial culture rather than eroding them because the work remained within the discursive space of art rather than initiating dialogue beyond this sphere (p. 98). In this way, the inclusiveness of Pop Art challenged the limitations of discourse, but it failed to overthrow the legitimating authority of art discourses and institutions. Even when artists such as Barbara Kruger and Jenny Holzer moved outside of the gallery space into the urban spaces of advertising (billboards, magazines), their work was still denoted as ‘public art’ in art discourse.

387 Similar debates around the pleasures and contradictions of popular culture and the institutionalisation of critical theory rose to prominence in the discourses around the ‘New British Art’ in the 1990s (Beech & Roberts 1996, 1998; Bernstein 1997; Bowie 1997; Hauser 1998; Roberts 1996).
different series of *shokugan* are created to meet the demands of different niche markets. Thus, they are a varied rather than homogenous form.

*Superflat Museum* demonstrates the possession of aesthetic and commodity values that exist in both art and commercial products. *Superflat Museum* can be understood as an appropriation of commercial cultural forms within the art world. However, this interpretation is limited. *Superflat Museum* is also a direct engagement with the aesthetic, economic and symbolic value (in Bourdieu’s terms, the cultural capital) of *shokugan*. The consumption of *shokugan* in many ways parallels the processes and hierarchies of value in art. Like items in the art world they can be valued as creative objects, and they are manufactured by highly skilled labourers. At the same time, the relation of this manufacturing process to economic influences should also not be discounted: using low-cost rural labourers in China in order to produce high-quality goods to attract consumers is also driven by the desire for profit and sales. *Shokugan* also have economic value based on the value of authenticity. This authenticity is not based so much on authorial reputation as on the value of rarity or nostalgia. Murakami also argues that *shokugan* are the contemporary form of *netsuke* in the Edo period, which were highly popular with Western collectors in the late nineteenth century [Figure 40].

This is another way in which Murakami associates his work with the aesthetic value of everyday forms within Edo culture. The motivation for large-scale production is the creation of ‘average’ forms in order to generate as much capital as possible. Yet while this standardisation certainly should not be discounted, it is not the only factor in the consumption of *shokugan*: the manualised and detailed production of *shokugan* is one of their defining characteristics.

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**Figure 40: Netsuke - Bashful Monkey**

Eighteenth century, Ivory 7.5 cm
Charles A. Greenfield Collection, New York

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388 *Netsuke* are miniature figurines which were popular in the Edo period. They had both a functional value, being used as a toggle to stop the cord holding the *sageno* (writing implements, tobacco pouch, purse, pipes) from slipping through the *obi* sash, and an aesthetic value; they were exquisitely sculpted and detailed and used precious materials such as ivory.
The value and meaning in Murakami’s many productions can be understood as exchangeable and horizontally relational, and not hierarchically differentiated.

Things in any minimally complex system carry an indefinite number of actual or potential overlapping uses, significations, and values. No single game exhausts their function; no single description exhausts the uses to which their properties might appropriately or inappropriately lend themselves, and they are always shadowed by the traces of virtual uses and the complicated circuits of knowledge, need, and desire that map those virtualities (Frow 2001, p. 284).

In this way distinctions can be made between objects based on their recognition and uses, but these need to be understood as fluid relations. Therefore, the pieces in Superflat Museum (or the Louis Vuitton paintings) are neither art nor entirely commercial products – their ontological meaning is not absolute (p. 278). They demonstrate the mutability of art/commodity relations, while at the same time retaining the concept and institution of art and the brand identity of the artist. They celebrate the subversive potential of penetrating different markets, rather than offering a critical position against commodification. Therefore, like Koons, Murakami celebrates being embedded within commodification and draws attention to it through Superflat Museum and the Eye Love handbags. However, Murakami differs from Koons because his work can be consumed in multiple ways, by a number of consumers, not simply within the art world.

[IMAGE REMOVED]

Figure 41: Murakami Monopoly
3.5 SUPERFLAT HETEROTOPIA

In tracing the contestations of meanings in Murakami’s work and practices it becomes clear that he is not so much obscuring the distinctions between art and commodity as he is actively deploying their different definitions within Japan and the West as the critical expressive component of his work. The Louis Vuitton commission, *Eye Love* paintings, and *Superflat Museum* demonstrate the variety of ways in which Murakami’s art is consumed: in a gallery, through reproductions, through merchandising (including the gallery shop), and in fashion. Distinctions made regarding Murakami’s work are therefore not based on the material form or type of object created; rather, it is the context and usage of a work that determines its identification. For example, the Louis Vuitton design is differentiated as art when it appears as a painting in a gallery, and as an object of commercial design when it is applied to a handbag and sold in a retail environment. This type of conceptual categorisation in relation to use and context is not a new debate or paradigm within art discourses. Murakami is particularly interesting however because all his works function intertextually, and he distributes his work simultaneously in different cultural contexts. While the aesthetic imagery of the paintings and that of the handbags echo one another, both items can be considered as relatively restricted luxury commodity items. This heterotopic intermixing makes it problematic to categorise his works according to modernist binary distinctions and hierarchical values — in which art is considered to be high culture and commercial culture, low culture.\(^{389}\) This complexity reveals the aesthetic and economic values that operate in both the art and the design/commercial works and the ways in which these values are constructed within different cultural contexts.

This is not to say that there are no dominant values present in Murakami’s work; all his activities still reinforce the institution of art and centralise his identity as an artist. Murakami is creating niche and customised products that build on his own signature brand of Murakami the artist. This ‘artist’ identity is a key component of his work and strategy that can be projected onto his various activities. Therefore, at the same time that Murakami blurs the distinctions between his art and commercial works, there are still identifiable points of differentiation between them.

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\(^{389}\) Heteropic is drawn from Terence Riley’s use of the term *heterotopia* in reference to his concept that the MOMA architecture should express ‘many places’ to reflect the variety of uses and practices within galleries. Under this concept spaces can be distinguished from one another, but in a non-hierarchical manner (Foster et al. 1998, pp. 6-7). While the conceptual and physical application of this term is criticised in the same interview (although not entirely discarded), the term itself is a useful lens through which to consider Murakami’s range of activities because they are distinct yet not necessarily hierarchically distinguished.
aura of authorial subjectivity and the original object is thus not destroyed through Murakami’s serial reproductions, but rather is reconfigured. This aura can then be translated into commodity value – in both art and commercial cultural contexts. For example, Superflat Museum explicitly reinforces Murakami’s identity as an artist through its packaging and promotion, while simultaneously being presented as a new form of collectible art commodity which can be purchased through the everyday context of the konbini. In some sense, Murakami is merely capitalising on the merchandising potential of his artwork. However, the ways in which he utilises the cultural site of the konbini demonstrate potential for generating new audiences and consumptive patterns for his work, beyond art world institutions. Furthermore, Superflat Museum also demonstrates the affirmation of the aesthetic value recognised in commercial products by consumers. In particular, the productive role of consumption, such as the expression of moe in regards to characters within otaku culture, which is facilitated by the processes of reproduction and deconstruction, provides an interesting framework through which to consider how aesthetic value operates at all levels of production.

Despite this utopian concept of new audiences, Murakami has demonstrated his ambivalence towards otaku culture. This ambivalence betrays his use of otaku in order to ascribe cultural capital to his own artwork. The cultural capital of this association is continually reconfirmed even when otaku are interpreted as a marginalised group, because it presents them as a unique and distinct culture. For the Western art world in particular this is interpreted as a radical innovation in its incorporation of different forms of cultural consumption and aesthetic value into an art context. However, as this chapter has demonstrated, Murakami does not necessarily expand the concept of art but works within already existing categories. For example, Murakami tends to continually distance himself from otaku culture, identifying himself as a presenter and interpreter, and constructing, rather than deconstructing, the boundaries between the art world and otaku. Furthermore, while the definition of otaku remains a contested category, Murakami is able to utilise its multiplicity and flexibility in order to strategically locate his own work – at times affirming or alternatively denying the value of creativity within otaku culture.

Murakami demonstrates that in Japan and the West the categories of art and commodity are historically and socially constituted and are open to fluctuation and contestation. This chapter has argued that the relations between aesthetic and commodity values need to be reconsidered as interdependent, fluid and contested, and that the differences between the conceptualisations of high/low culture in Japan and the West also need to be acknowledged when contextualising the
This thesis has examined the multifaceted networks and processes of the production-consumption of Takashi Murakami and Superflat art. The thesis began with a single and overriding question:

In what ways do Takashi Murakami and his theory of Superflat art operate within the global cultural processes of the production-consumption of art, commodity and national-cultural identity?

The thesis has answered this question through a close examination of Murakami's art, the theory of Superflat and an interrogation of key contextual issues, theorisations and concepts generated around globalisation and the formation of global culture. Murakami's work and the Superflat concept emerge in the particular cultural environment of contemporary Japan, while simultaneously engaging in the global economy and global culture. This thesis has argued that Murakami engages directly in the 'language wars' in and between the meaning of art as an aesthetic expression and its existence as a product in the global cultural market place in a manner that does not negate or supersede the presence of the other. In fact, Murakami self-consciously mobilises the contestations of meaning between art/commodity and global/local in order to generate the strategic expression of Superflat art.

SUMMARY

Contemporary studies of culture have identified the new and complex relations that are created between local, national, and global spaces particularly in relation to the 'global' flows of capital and culture. Recent studies on the functioning of global contemporary art markets, introduced in Chapter One (Mapping the Terrain), have argued that one of the key issues in contemporary globalisation is the ways in which cultural differences can become subsumed in the dominant terms of Western art discourse, absorbed as a commodity in art markets (with the markers of cultural specificity being commodified) or, alternatively, be articulated as an expression of resistant identities at global, national and local levels. For example, artists such as Murakami can challenge the hegemony of Western art and art institutions in Japan by offering alternative artistic
lineages and aesthetic expressions.

Consequently, contemporary theorisations of cultural globalisation have sought to illuminate the tensions clustered around the meanings of cultural identity and art production in order to understand the social, economic and political dynamics in which they are embedded. With this in mind, this thesis contributes to understandings of the ways in which art production-consumption can strategically utilise existing image scapes and cultural identities in order to extend the expressive as well as the commodity potential of art. The tensions around the meaning of cultural authenticity and originality, aesthetics and active politics have been identified as central issues in the study of culture, commonly contextualised in the polemic between postmodern and modern epistemologies and periodisation. While this thesis has approached contemporary culture as postmodern, it also considers epistemologies in Japan in which the tensions and dialogues between the concepts of art and commodity operate.

This thesis has demonstrated that these dialectical cultural modes - artistic expression and commodity - are not mutually exclusive and they can operate simultaneously with a range of outcomes. The analysis of Takashi Murakami and Superflat art offers a valuable case study through which to interrogate these global processes in relation to contemporary art production. Murakami is particularly significant because he demonstrates the territorialising and deterritorialising impulses of globalisation, and actively exploits these processes in order to sell his work in different countries. Moreover, Murakami uses this strategic deployment of his art to establish new forms of art consumption through Superflat Museum and the Geisai exhibition.

A limited number of scholarly investigations into Murakami and Superflat have been undertaken. As identified in Chapter One, the existing literature on Murakami and Superflat tends to limit interpretations of Murakami’s criticality, or lack thereof, in relation to an oppositional relationship between art and commerce. Additionally, the full range of Murakami’s productions and practices across art and commercial platforms have not been fully addressed in an integrated manner. When they are acknowledged, the art/commercial expressions tend to be addressed separately. It is also evident that there are few detailed interrogations of these art/commodity entanglements and tensions in relation to contemporary globalisation. There is also a tendency uncritically to emphasise the Japaneseness of Superflat, and a failure to contextualise this in relation to the broader social-historical status of art in Japan and the politics of identity construction within the dynamics of contemporary globalisation. This thesis has attempted to address these limitations
and to trace the complex global cultures that Murakami’s theory, works and practices engage.

Chapter Two (Made in Japan) established the way in which Murakami articulates the aesthetic genealogy of Superflat as an alternative to the art establishment in Japanese and Western art history. The national identity of Superflat can be understood as a discursively constructed and actively territorialised identity created in response to the cultural exchanges and interactions of globalisation, including global art markets, resulting in a self-Orientalist expression. In this way, national-cultural difference is articulated as both an ideological resistance to the hegemony of Western art and an exploitation of its commodity potential. This chapter argued that the articulation of resistance and commodification essentialises the differences between Japanese and Western art while exploiting the two-way mirror and mutual fascination between Japan and the West, which is an ongoing discursive construction. The section on Nihonjinron drew attention to the importance of this collusion between self-Orientalism and Western Orientalism and the subsequent binary relationship between Japan and the West against which differences are expressed.

Made in Japan critiqued this formation of national-cultural identity and argued that the aesthetic expression of Superflat offers a challenge to the construction of binary relations by expressing the mutability and exchangeability of plural identities which are part of the deterritorialising impulses of globalisation. It exposed the ways in which Murakami playfully manipulates cultural identity for the purposes of market customisation in Japan, the United States and Europe. By constructing his work and Superflat in terms and codes that are familiar to Western audiences, Murakami builds on the already complex historical intertwining of visual culture between the West and Japan, particularly in relation to art, but also including the more recent export of anime and manga. Superflat is created within these existing discursive constructions of Japanese aesthetic identity for the purposes of reworking them. The analysis of My Lonesome Cowboy demonstrated that the visual codes and markers in Murakami’s works are interchangeable and flexible, in a manner that is similar to the potential for anime texts to present alternative realities or fantasy spaces for consumers which are detached from actual and specific cultural particularities. In other words, Murakami’s works express the ability to become un-fixed and to be transformed into alternate imaginings of identity. This reinforces the understanding of the processes of cultural identity formation in globalisation as dynamic and fluid. Yet at the same time, his work highlights the paradoxes of presenting a culturally flexible text (its cultural odourlessness or hybridity) as an expression of Japanese culture. Again, this is key feature of globalisation in which cultural
particularities can be expressed in seemingly fixed forms, while also remaining temporal and open to re-inscription.

In order to understand the dynamics in Superflat and Murakami’s work between the essentialised concept of Japanese and Western art and the concept of cultural authenticity as a cultural and discursive construction, which can be reformed, this thesis established the concept of ‘strategic essentialism’. Strategic essentialism refers to the expression of multiple identities which are not hierarchically privileged, but which can be assembled and mobilised for different cultural contexts. Strategic essentialism therefore articulates the mutability and hybridity of postmodern global identities, while also exploiting the paradox of that identity which can slip into points of fixity and essentialism. Strategic essentialism provides a useful model to understand how aesthetic identity can be used as a brand commodity as well as reworking and challenging existing art discourses. In this way, strategic essentialism highlights the ways in which Murakami and Superflat do not resolve the complex and contradictory relations of globalisation, but rather accentuates them.

The examination of Murakami’s work as a global brand highlights his synchronous operation in the conventional practices and institutions of art worlds and in commercial consumer culture. This thesis has argued that the circulation of Murakami and Superflat in the different geo-cultural sites of Japan, the United States and Europe, not only demonstrates the fluid relations between the concepts of art and commodity under the conditions of late capitalism, but also their culturally specific construction.

The cultural hierarchies and distinctions constructed around the definition of Murakami’s work and Superflat as art (aesthetic, autonomous expressions) and commodity was highlighted in the analysis of Superflat Museum and the Louis Vuitton commission Eye Love in Chapter Three (Superflat™). This analysis was framed within Bourdieu’s concept of art as a cultural field of production structured by position takings and cultural capital. Murakami’s work and Superflat challenge the conceptual dichotomy between art and commodity by expressing the value of aesthetics and commodification operative at levels of cultural consumption, they also demonstrate the persistence of the distinction of art from commercial culture and the cultural capital of art. For example, the analysis of Murakami’s supposed disregard for art world critiques and subsequent privileging of otaku aesthetic criteria examined in the POKU section also reveals his participation in the legitimisation of the distinction of art. This is expressed through the conceptual distance Murakami inserts between his figure works and otaku character creations.
Murakami participates further in the game of distinction by using the association with *otaku* culture as cultural capital in art world environments. At the same time however, the assumption of the cultural privileging of art as a form of high culture is challenged by the response of *otaku*, because they do not show partiality towards the meaning of art above their own aesthetic standards and criteria.

The examination of the social status of art in Japan, in the section *Japanese Discourses of Art and Commodity*, demonstrated that Superflat’s affirmation of the consumption of *anime* and *manga* is not necessarily challenging the meaning or position of art and commercial culture in Japan because contemporary art holds a tenuous social status (in comparison to the art establishment) and the distinctions between the consumption of art and commercial culture have not been privileged in the manner of Western modernism. This highlighted the need to re-examine the terms of the postmodern challenge to modernist hierarchical distinctions in relation to the concepts and values of originality, citation, aesthetics, uses and playfulness in Japanese culture. The analysis of Murakami’s studio *Kaikai Kiki* demonstrated an engagement with the historical-cultural structure of the art-studio system and the value accorded to technical skills of production in Japan. The examination of Murakami’s role as the director of *Kaikai Kiki* also anticipated how Murakami’s status reflects the value of signature branding in late capitalism. Therefore, while it can be argued that Murakami is engaging with specifically historical-cultural practices of art in Japan, he is also engaging with the values and aesthetics of postmodern culture more generally.

The concept of signature branding, as a symbolic practice underpinning the production-consumption of art, demonstrated the ways in which Murakami reconfigures Benjamin’s concept of aura in relation to the original object. The identity and persona of Murakami becomes centralised when applied to his serialised production of paintings, sculptures, figurines, t-shirts and handbags. Aura is not lost through reproduction but is enhanced. The signature status of the artist is not a new concept in twentieth century art markets, and was already anticipated by Duchamp and his financial ready-mades. Murakami follows Warhol’s and Koons’ challenge to authorial subjectivity and the concept of originality through industrial reproduction processes and appropriating kitsch and commercial icons. However, the importance of aura was still reintroduced through the culture status of the artist – a process that echoed the expanding role and visibility of the culture of celebrity across a range of cultural fields including post-1980s art markets. What this thesis has argued is that Murakami exploits this process more assertively than Koons and Warhol by self-promoting his work across a range of media platforms and publications.
inside and outside of specific art world environments. The analysis of the breadth of Murakami’s productions also drew attention to the ways in which particular symbolic (signature) elements can be disassembled and recreated between the different works.

This process of reproduction and seriality is a critical aesthetic in Murakami’s work and is drawn from *otaku* practices of consumption, which Azuma referred to as a database. Of particular interest to this research were the ways in which the individual components (or signature elements) are drawn together under the Murakami brand and how this branding operates globally. Therefore, while Murakami contributes a new form of subjectivity that challenges the modern notion of the confirmation of individuality through innovation, originality and fixed origins, these new open modes of identity, formed through multiple elements, are drawn together to reinforce the overall subjectivity of the Murakami brand. The serial productions of paintings, sculptures, figurines and other associated objects are collated under this overall ‘Murakami’ brand. This process echoes the exchangeability of signifiers in *My Lonesome Cowboy*, in which the aesthetic markers referencing Japan and the West can be deployed strategically.

This thesis has demonstrated that Murakami actively exploits the conditions of late capitalism in which symbolic value is the dominant cultural currency. He enters and actually celebrates the possibilities for commodification in commercial culture and reproduction. Murakami utilises the distinction and status of his identity as an artist, not in the strict hierarchical terms of modernism in relation to the autonomy of art, but as a commodified brand identity. This thesis draws attention to Murakami’s immersion in the aesthetic values of contemporary consumer culture and the deliberate use of the networks of consumer capitalism to support the distinction of his work as art. That is, he does not completely destroy or remove the distinction of art because he still relies on existing modes of gallery consumption for his paintings and sculptures. Therefore, Superflat does not represent the complete erasure and blurring of art/commodity distinctions in the sense that postmodernist theorists such as Jameson and Baudrillard propose. However, he is making use of the process of late capitalism (global branding and commodification) to construct new modes of art consumption in the *konbini* and fashion store. Murakami is not subverting commercial consumer culture, but raiding *otaku* practices of consumption in order to support the identification of his work as art. Yet, this study has also demonstrated the limitation of restricting the interpretation of Murakami to a form of appropriation rearticulated in art contexts.

*Superflat Museum* and *Geisai*, for example, illustrate Murakami’s involvement with practices of
aesthetic production-consumption that are (relatively) outside of the conventions of art. Murakami is setting up alternative systems of exchange and value for his own work and that of other creative producer-consumers in Japan. While it is acknowledged that Murakami’s productions such as Superflat Museum could be considered a form of merchandising, the interesting point regarding Murakami’s multiple productions is that they exist concurrently, contributing to an evolving image reinforcing the Murakami brand. In this way, the ‘art’ paintings and sculptures are not necessarily privileged (conceptually at least) as being more central or important than the works sold in the konbini. What emerges from the range of Murakami’s production is a heterogenous and integrated network of products and images which all contribute to the construction of the global Murakami brand. Furthermore, the analysis of the historical and social contexts from where Superflat art emerges, demonstrates Murakami’s self-reflexive engagement with Western art history and Japanese art history. This positioning makes Superflat more than just a commodity - it demonstrates a critical engagement with the social status and the cultural identity of art in Japan.

Therefore, this thesis has argued that Murakami’s and Superflat’s embeddedness in the networks of late capitalist production, exchange and consumption does not negate the functioning of his work as an expression and critique of that culture. Superflat offers both a utopian vision of amateur creative consumption and the dystopian expression of commercialism. This duality is expressed through Murakami’s DOB paintings when the character transmogrifies between a benign cute smiling figure into a grotesque vomiting and fragmenting figure floating on a vast void of flat colour. The serialised branding of Murakami also works to deconstruct the momentary stasis of composition in the individual pieces by reproducing DOB as paintings, sculptures, stickers and soft toys. The DOB character becomes a symbol of destruction as well as the creative potential in continual transformation. DOB’s operation as a mitigating agent, acting in between spaces of formation and deformation, echoes the complex dynamics at play in the production-consumption of Murakami and Superflat.

FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research into the significance and contribution of Murakami and Superflat could examine in more depth the aesthetics and practices of seriality and remediation in Murakami’s works, particularly in relation to his DOB character. The serial production of the Superflat iconography across multiple media platforms can be understood to be part of the shifting structures in the
production-consumption of commercial consumer culture more generally — where increasingly immersive environments are created for consumers based on character-driven texts such as Hello Kitty (McVeigh 2000) and *Yu-gioh* (Ito 2005b). The characters and their associated products emerge in a range of media platforms and they become an ongoing production and experience that is not limited to a central or singular text. What is particularly interesting about this intermedia structure is the integration between the forms and practices at the user level and the networks of production between the creator, media industries, retailers and advertisers. While it is acknowledged that the serialised production of Murakami has started to be addressed by academics in relation to the serial aesthetic of Superflat (Steinberg 2003), the broader investigation of the user/production integration model would provide a useful comparison between this pre-existing commercial model and Murakami’s utilisation of it in an art context. Research on the consumption of *shokugan*, particularly *Superflat Museum*, and participation in Geisai would provide further insight into these cultural practices in view of Superflat’s utopian vision for the creative production-consumption of amateur artists in Japan.

A further area related to the production of seriality in Murakami’s works, which was anticipated by this study but remained beyond its scope, is to extend Murakami’s concept of Superflat in relation to theorisations of contemporary spatiality and surface aesthetics, particularly in terms of the emergence of digital technologies and cultures (Darley & Hjorth 2000). Superflat could be analysed as an aesthetic which articulates both a demarcated space, one that is known and fixed, and spaces which are continually forming spaces and are never fully realised or fixed. This is what Deleuze and Guattari (1987) refer to as ‘striated’ and the ‘smooth’ spaces. This further study could examine the multiple and transformative compositions anticipated by Murakami’s application of his various DOB, flower, mushroom and eye iconography to various surfaces which are then reformed in different painting compositions. What requires more detailed examination is the ways in which this aesthetic echoes the treatment of spatiality in digital culture as a development of a surface aesthetic in contemporary culture more generally.

While this thesis focussed on locating the emergence of Superflat modes of consumption in relation to *anime* and *manga* consumption and the status of art in Japan (as well as forming part of the global brand ‘Murakami’), it also raises the possibility that the type of multimedia model being used by Murakami could be employed by other artists working in different cultural contexts. Furthermore, one of the more interesting questions arising from this current thesis is the potential for Murakami’s strategic essentialism and global branding to function or be adapted by
artists in other contexts, such as Australia.

The plural cultural identities that Murakami assembles onto the Superflat surface (*otaku*, Japanese, postmodern, avant-garde) comprise a database of codes, images, and discourses. While the proliferation of the Murakami brand may suggest that the Superflat aesthetic is an absent sign devoid of interior depth or integral meaning, which can be applied to any surface or object, this thesis emphasises the ways in which Murakami is able to strategically deploy the conceptual and aesthetic elements from the database in different cultural contexts. This study has drawn attention to the highly structured diversity of Superflat. Consequently, Superflat is not interpreted as an expression of the loss or erasure of demarcated territories under the smooth surface, but rather the emergence of multiple meanings, organised in new horizontal relations. Through these Superflat relations Murakami is able to dialogue with past codes and images as well as marking out new territories. This thesis argued that the strategic essentialism of Murakami creates a mechanism through which to negotiate and exploit the global networks and flows of cultural and capital flows, in which the demarcations and essentialisms expressed are non-absolute, non-fixed and non-durable. The exploration of the cultures of Murakami and Superflat art has therefore made a significant contribution to the understanding of the dynamics of contemporary globalisation - articulated through the tensions between art/commodity, and global/local identities. Murakami and Superflat demonstrate that these contestations should not be understood in rigid binary formations, but rather as fluid and interactive facets of contemporary global cultures.
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