Questions of Cultural Identity and Difference in the work of Yasumasa Morimura, Mariko Mori and Takashi Murakami

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Contents

Abstract

This thesis explores the work of three contemporary Japanese artists – Yasumasa Morimura, Mariko Mori and Takashi Murakami – in relation to cross-cultural exchanges and differences between Japan and the West. In carrying out such an investigation, this study illustrates how these artists play with Japanese and Western cultural forms in the context of postmodern challenges to concepts of essence and authenticity, and in a technologically transformed world shaped by unprecedented global flows of information, people, products and capital. In Morimura's art-making, this play is characterized by appropriations and parodies of Western cultural icons. The idea of identity-as-essence is superseded by a vision of identity-as-performance – a conception of identity as a creative act, taking place within an immanent system of global exchanges. Whilst Morimura's work tends to reify difference, for Mori the opposite is true. Melding arcane scientific and religious ideas, Mori creates technological spectacles with which she fantasizes a vanishing of determinate identities and difference within the encompassing field of a culturally amorphous techno-holism. Murakami's 'superflat' art raises the possibility of resolving this tension between the reification and effacing of difference. In his work, 'Japan' and 'the West' are represented as discrete entities that, at the same time, emerge already entangled, as *effects* in a pre-existing system of global exchanges.

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A note on names

Many texts follow the Japanese practice of writing names surname first. However, exceptions are made for Japanese-born individuals who live and work in the West (e.g., Yoko Ono). In order to avoid any confusion, and in light of the fact that this thesis is presented in English, I use the Anglicised form for names throughout (i.e., surname last).

Introduction

Real Identities, Imaginary Essences

This thesis considers the work of three contemporary Japanese artists – Yasumasa Morimura, Mariko Mori and Takashi Murakami – in relation to the idea of a cross-cultural dynamic or dialogue between Japan and the West, and the notion of cultural difference. That such a study is worth undertaking is apparent when one considers Japan's status (since the 1980s) as the world's second largest economy – an economic pre-eminence predicated, in no small part, on sales of consumer products (automobiles, electronic appliances) to the West. These commercial links form part of a greater dialogue between Japan and the West that dates back to the Meiji Restoration of 1868 (when Japan's rulers instituted a program of modernisation based on Western models), and which includes a history of exchanges in the domain of culture. Thus, as Fumio Nanjo observes, Japan adopted the notion of 'fine art' (with its hierarchical distinctions between 'art' and 'craft' or 'art' and 'decoration') from the West in the post-Meiji period.[1] Conversely, as Kōjin Karatani points out, European Impressionist and Post-Impressionist artists drew inspiration from Japanese printmaking. Indeed, Karatani emphasizes how nineteenth century Europeans viewed Japan in aesthetic terms: 'In the European mind, more than anything else, "Japan" signified "art." '[2]

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[1] Fumio Nanjo, 'Afterward, Nature and Culture in Japan' in Tate Gallery, Liverpool, *A Cabinet of Signs, Contemporary Art from Post-Modern Japan*, exh. cat. (London, 1991), p.13.

[2] Kōjin Karatani, 'Japan as Museum: Okakura Tenshin and Ernest Fenollosa,' trans Kosho Sabu in Alexandra Munroe, *Japanese Art After 1945, Scream Against The Sky*, exh. cat. (New York: Harry N. Abrams Inc., 1994), p.34.

Morimura, Mori and Murakami are highly regarded artists – not only in Japan but also in the context of international contemporary art – and for this reason alone, their work invites scholarly attention. All three artists exhibit widely around the world, and whilst Morimura lives and works in Osaka, Mori and Murakami maintain studios in both Tokyo and New York. Morimura, Mori and Murakami exemplify that generation of Japanese artists who have attained international prominence in the wake of postmodern critiques of essentialist ideas of cultural identity. Their work illustrates the complexity and sophistication that greets such issues in the contemporary era, and provides evidence that contemporary art, whilst still dominated by Western institutions, is nevertheless characterized by a greater sense of inclusiveness and an unprecedented cultural pluralism. Furthermore, insofar as the artists in question all achieved international notice in the period 1988-2000, their work also invites consideration in relation to Japan's efforts to define its role in the 'new world order' that is emerging in the wake of the Cold War.

One of the main questions this study asks is: how are the cultural crosscurrents and differences between Japan and the West articulated? Significant, in this regard, is the fact that the work of Morimura, Mori and Murakami emerges in a world transformed by unprecedented global flows of information, people, products and capital. It is in the context of such a global reality that this thesis seeks to understand how these artists negotiate the terms 'Japan,' 'the West,' 'cross-cultural exchange' and 'cultural difference.' Working towards such awareness raises further questions – in particular: to what extent can 'Japan' and 'the West' be considered as discrete and self-sufficient entities that exist apart from the web of global exchanges?

In viewing Japan and the West from such a perspective, this project is guided by twentieth century challenges to the notion, long perpetuated in Western thought, that there exist fundamental origins and essences upon which judgements of absolute truth and value might be secured. Exemplary is Roland Barthes' essay 'The Death of the Author' (1968), where his statement: 'The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture… the writer can only imitate a gesture that is always anterior, never original'[3] undermines the notion that artists are authors (i.e., originators) of culture, asserting instead that both authors and texts are culturally emergent. Although it is not possible to deal with his ideas in detail here, one can also point to the influence, on contemporary theory, of Jacques Derrida and deconstruction. Implicit, in a movement of deconstruction, is the idea that, as Derrida writes in his essay 'Differance' (1968), one never finds a concept fully determined or 'present in itself… that would refer only to itself.'[4] Instead, concepts are 'necessarily… inscribed in a chain or a system, within which [they refer]… to another and to other concepts, by the systematic play of differences.'[5] In other words, a concept *means* by virtue of its differential relationships with a potentially unlimited set of other concepts which it is *not*. On this basis, truth and meaning can never be absolutely determined (i.e., made *present*) but must be regarded as emerging from a fundamentally indeterminable interplay of presence and absence.

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[3] Roland Barthes, 'The Death of the Author,' *Image-Music-Text*, trans Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977, originally published as 'La mort de l'auteur,' *Mantéia* n5, 1968), p.146.

[4] Jacques Derrida, 'Differance,' in Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena, And Other Essays on Husserl's Theory of Signs*, trans David B. Allison (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973, originally published as *La Voix et le Phénomène*, Presses Universitaires, France, 1967; 'Differance' originally appeared as 'La Différance' in *Bulletin de la Société Français de philosophie*, v67, n3, July – September 1968), p.140.

[5] Ibid.

Indeed, in *Of Grammatology* (1967), Derrida challenges 'logocentrism' which he defines as the fixation of Western metaphysics on 'the meaning of being… as *presence*' – that is, the notion that truth and meaning inhere in origins and essences, the existence of which is taken to be self-evident.[6]

As the writing of Barthes and Derrida suggests, whilst it may be reasonable to speak of cultural *identity* the notion that such identities express self-sufficient and immutable cultural *essences* is a myth. This is Peter Dale's position, in *The Myth of Japanese Uniqueness* (1986), where he discusses the existence, in Japan, of an enormous body of literature devoted to the question of cultural identity. In Dale's view, this writing (called the *nihonjinron*) makes a variety of logically incoherent and tacitly nationalistic claims about Japanese 'uniqueness.'[7] Among the examples Dale invokes to illustrate his argument is the frequent claim, in the *nihonjinron*, that Japanese culture is so inherently enigmatic it eludes Western modes of analysis. By framing identity in paradox and illogic, those who would argue for Japanese uniqueness can thus sustain a position of privilege whilst denying their opponents critical traction.[8]

As Dale points out, such tactics appeal to the notion that a profound *alterity* separates the cultures of Japan and the West. Dale identifies the same oppositional logic in Western discourses on Japan that privilege emic (i.e., indigenous) over etic (i.e., foreign) perspectives. This approach, whilst ostensibly motivated by a desire to avoid

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[6] Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore and London: John Hopkins University Press, 1976, originally published as *De la Grammatologie*, Les Editions de Minuit, 1967), p.12.

[7] Peter N. Dale, *The Myth of Japanese Uniqueness* (London and Sydney: Croom Helm Ltd., 1986), pp.14-18.

[8] Ibid, pp.12-13.

imposing Western values on non-Western cultures, engenders a cultural relativism that ultimately inhibits any meaningful cross-cultural dialogue.[9] Moreover, as Dale also observes, such a relativity of truth and value evidently plays into the hands of the *nihonjinron* insofar as it 'merely shifts the locus of bias from the foreigner to the insider.'[10]

Whilst Dale doesn't specifically define it in such terms, the relativism to which he alludes is a particular feature of certain postmodern discourses where the undermining of *absolute* determinations of truth and value is pessimistically assumed to imply that such judgements, in general, are neither valid nor even possible. Although it is not strictly accurate to describe Barthes as a 'postmodern writer,' such an attitude is evident in his *Empire of Signs* (1970), wherein 'Japan' is posited as a fictional country that 'in no way… represent[s] or… analyze[s] reality itself (these being the major gestures of Western discourse).'[11] In the catalogue to the exhibition *Japanese Art After 1945, Scream Against The Sky* (1994), Alexandra Munroe suggests that Barthes' semiotic game-playing has been taken literally in the domain of social anthropology. She observes that, in the context of Japan's heated consumer economy and embracing of information technology, Barthes' text has encouraged interpretations of Japanese society as paradigmatically postmodern. As Munroe further notes, this attitude was evident in several well-received exhibitions of contemporary Japanese art in the 1980s and 1990s. Hence, in shows like the Tate Gallery, Liverpool's *A Cabinet of Signs, Contemporary Art from Post-*

[9] Ibid, pp.5-7.

[10] Ibid, p.5.

[11] Barthes, *Empire of Signs*, trans Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982, originally published as *L'Empire des Signes*, Geneva: Editions d'Art Albert Skira S.A., 1970), p.3.

Modern Japan (1991), there was a tendency to regard the work of Japanese artists less as an expression of Japanese cultural 'reality' than a 'transcultural postmodern' condition in which 'the real… no longer exists and all is simulation and pastiche.'[12]

The critical perspective, to which Munroe alludes, is again symptomatic of overly pessimistic applications of postmodern ideas. The discrediting of a philosophical system (i.e., classical Western metaphysics) in which identity was grounded in essence is taken to justify the view that the very concept of identity eludes philosophical enquiry. Whilst Barthes' decision, in *Empire of Signs*, not to treat 'Orient and Occident… as "realities" '[13] may be reasonable in the context of his exploration of semiotic difference, it will not suit a project of this sort, concerned as it is with the *practical* reality (however elusive or ambiguous this 'reality' may be) of actual artworks created in cultural contexts that are also real. In what follows, whilst remaining fully cognizant of the implications of postmodernity's scepticism of origins and essences, it is the 'nature' of this 'reality' – how it is represented, constructed, interpreted – that is this study's primary concern.

Bearing this in mind, the thesis is divided into three chapters, focusing on Morimura, Mori and Murakami in turn. In Chapter One I examine Morimura's photography-based appropriations and parodies of Western cultural icons. In particular, I ask how Morimura's work represents identity and difference (in the realms of culture, race and gender) in light of postmodern challenges to notions of essence and authenticity. I also investigate the relationship between Morimura's pictures and contemporary global

[12] Munroe, p.21, p.25, n11.

[13] Barthes, *Empire of Signs*, ibid.

exchanges of information and capital – seeking to understand how this global reality affects considerations of Japan and the West as 'discrete' cultural entities. In Chapter Two I extend these ideas in my consideration of Mori's photographs, films and installation art. I devote particular attention to a central theme in Mori's work: humanity's technologically assisted apotheosis in a world where, to paraphrase the artist, 'science and religion are fused through art.' Here, my concern is to understand what Mori's vision of a technologically deified and united humanity implies for questions of cultural identity and difference. In Chapter Three I examine a selection of Murakami's *anime*-influenced screen prints, sculptures and paintings, drawing together various strands raised in my previous discussion of Morimura and Mori. In pursuing this objective, I consider Murakami's work in relation to its proximity to commerce and its impetus towards universality. However, my primary concern is with Murakami's 'superflat' construct. I seek to articulate and unravel the internal contradictions of superflatness, and in the process arrive at a conception of cultural identity and difference that is tenable in this postmodern, global age.

Chapter One

Yasumasa Morimura: Creative Ambiguity

1.1 Introduction

Yasumasa Morimura is probably the best-known contemporary Japanese artist to engage with issues of culture and identity in the contexts of postmodernism and globalisation. Given that Morimura's photographic self-portraits both appropriate and 'Japanize' Western cultural icons, they provide an obvious starting point for a study concerned with the cross-cultural dynamic between Japan and the West, and the notion of cultural difference. In the following chapter, I focus on Morimura's *Self-portrait as Art History* re-enactments of canonical Western paintings and *Self-portrait as Actress* images drawn from popular Western film. In these pictures Morimura reconstructs the *mise-en-scène* of the originals with the aid of painted and sculpted sets, props, costumes, make-up, photomontage and (by the late 1980s) digital image-processing techniques. He also impersonates the characters portrayed in the original images, replacing their faces and bodies with his own. In juxtaposing and hybridising Western and Japanese cultural signifiers, Morimura's photographs blur boundaries and destabilize essentialisms in multiple domains. Moreover, by subjecting his sources to bizarre and often hilarious transformations, Morimura deliberately cultivates ambivalence and indeterminacy in order to maximise possibilities for creative free-play.

1.2 Morimura's Double Act

Among the earliest of the *Art History* works, *Portrait (Futago)* (1988, fig 1.1), re-enacts an icon of Western culture (Manet's

Olympia (1863)), and in so doing exemplifies the degree to which Morimura's self-portraits court ambiguity and resist univocal interpretations. Indeed, the very title of the work is a double entendre. *Futago* translates in English as 'twin' or 'twins' – emphasizing the status of Morimura's picture as an image that is both appropriated and photographic (i.e., mechanically duplicated). As Dana Friis-Hansen points out, the fact that 'Manet' sounds like the Japanese verb 'to imitate' adds a further dimension to Morimura's wordplay.[14] Furthermore, in place of Manet's portrayal of Victorine Meurent and a woman known only as 'Laura,'[15] Morimura employs photomontage to incorporate his own face and body. Hence, in addition to being a 'twin image' of *Olympia*, *Portrait (Futago)* is, quite literally, a double self-portrait or an 'image of twins.'

The imposition of the artist's male, Asian body in place of *Olympia*'s two female figures, one European, one African, is only the most obvious of an entire chain of substitutions by which *Portrait (Futago)* not only blurs distinctions between 'copy' and 'original' but also between 'white' and 'non-white,' 'male' and 'female.' By virtue of these substitutions, Morimura's self-portrait intermixes Western and Japanese cultural signifiers. Thus, the relatively austere dressing gown depicted in Manet's painting is traded for an extravagant wedding kimono embroidered in gold and silver with two traditional symbols of Japan: cranes and cherry blossoms. Furthermore, displacing *Olympia*'s bristling feline is a beckoning cat or *maneki neko* – a ubiquitous symbol of commercial solicitation typically associated with Japanese shops and

[14] Dana Friis-Hansen, 'Yasumuasa Morimura,' *Frieze*, n20, January 1995, p.57.

[15] Manet's female models are identified in Theodore Reff, *Manet: Olympia* (New York: Viking Press, 1976), p.77, p.93.

restaurants.[16] As a *photograph*, *Portrait (Futago)* offers to represent Japanese and Western cultural signs (i.e., cultural differences) as objectively real. At the same time, however, the manner by which these pictorial elements are so readily (one might almost say wilfully) detached from their original cultural contexts and jarringly juxtaposed undermines the very notion of cultural 'origins.' *Portrait (Futago)* is ambiguous, therefore, insofar as it asserts the 'reality' of Japan and the West, whilst at the same time implying these cultural identities are sufficiently mutable and equivocal as to resist absolute determination.

The incorporation of the wedding kimono and the beckoning cat figurine accentuates another key feature of Morimura's self-portrait – its pictured 'marriage' between fine art and popular culture, or fine art and commerce. This union is 'consummated' by *Portrait (Futago)*'s unabashed embrace of a kitsch aesthetic. Thus, in stark contrast to the muted tonalities of *Olympia*, Morimura employs a garish, high-key colour scheme exemplified by the kimono and the red and gold screen at upper left. *Portrait (Futago)*'s figures are equally over-the-top. Indeed, whether garbed in a blonde wig, false eyelashes, orange nail polish and metallic magenta high-heeled slippers as the reclining female figure in *Olympia*, or bedecked in dark face paint, blue eye shadow and a glaring pink gown as the courtesan's companion, Morimura's outrageous transvestism makes Manet's painting look positively demure.

As a drag act that parodies a famous image of a courtesan, *Portrait (Futago)* tacitly equates the confluence of art and capital with sexual deviancy and proscribed sexual practices. Characteristically, however, Morimura's satire admits multiple interpretations. In

[16] Janet Koplos, 'Yasumasa Morimura at NW House,' *Art in America*, v77, n6, June 1989, p.189.

common with Manet's painting, *Portrait (Futago)* depicts the 'prostitution' of fine art to commerce and thus exposes myths by which art-making is privileged as an exalted activity existing independently of crass, commercial imperatives. As a mechanically reproduced appropriation, in which kitsch elements are prominently displayed, Morimura's re-enactment of *Olympia* also plays with the iconic status of Manet's painting, reflecting its dual existence as a unique art treasure and mass-produced item of exchange, endlessly reproduced in art books, advertising imagery, and in the works of other artists – for example: Larry Rivers' similarly doubled-up sculptural creation *I Like Olympia in Black Face* (1970). Yet another possible reading is that *Portrait (Futago)*'s imposition of Japanese cultural signifiers into a canonical Western artwork refers to a 'selling out' of Japanese culture to the West – an ironic reference, perhaps, to Japan's post Meiji Restoration embrace of Western values (i.e., fine art, technology, capitalism).

In addition to blurring boundaries of race and gender, and undermining distinctions between fine art and commerce, it is also worth noting that Morimura's self-portrait freely juxtaposes prefabricated objects with painted and sculpted items. *Portrait (Futago)* introduces further ambiguities, therefore, insofar as it combines different art media in the same work. Thus the flowers in Laura's bouquet are plastic readymades wrapped in 'paper' that is, in reality, a painted clay form similar to the moulded pipe, hat and jacket Morimura created for the *Art History* series prototype: *Portrait (Van Gogh)* (1985, fig 1.2), after Van Gogh's painting *Self-Portrait with a Bandaged Ear and Pipe* (1888-89).[17] The combination of mass produced and individually handcrafted items is

[17] *Portrait (Futago)*'s artificial flowers are identified in Koplos, ibid. The painted clay construction of *Portrait (Van Gogh)* is described in Yasumasa Morimura, 'About My Work' in *Daughter of Art History, Photographs by Yasumasa Morimura* (New York: Aperture, 2003), p.121.

reiterated in *Portrait (Futago)*'s juxtaposition of a readymade divan and painted surround. Upon this backdrop is a painted representation of Laura's dress (apparently embellished with actual pink drapery and a lace collar) in which Morimura has left a hole for his head. In producing the final work, assistants photographed the artist, suitably made up, performing each of *Olympia*'s figures in turn. These images were then pieced together and re-photographed.[18] The formal construction of Morimura's double self-portrait thus exemplifies to what extent it is less a 'twin' of *Olympia* than an 'image of duplicity' – a kitschy counterfeit distinguished by fakery and artifice.

Portrait (Futago) provides a perfect example of what Morimura describes as a 'wearable painting'[19] or a 'wearing [of] Western art history.'[20] This activity implies that culture (or indeed identity in general) is a *performance* in which, suitably costumed, anyone might participate. Judith Butler has advanced this performative model of identity in *Gender Trouble, Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990). Butler suggests that drag performances, in particular, 'denaturalize' sex and gender, disrupting the 'regulatory fiction of heterosexual coherence.'[21] On this basis, Butler argues that transvestism does not parody 'original' gender identities so much place in question the 'very notion of an original.'[22] In this

[18] The creation of *Portrait (Futago)* is detailed in Morimura, 'About My Work,' p.123.

[19] Yasumasa Morimura, lecture at the Power Plant, Toronto, Spring 1994, quoted in Benjamin Weil, 'Yasumasa Morimura,' *Atlántica de las Artes*, i9, 1994-95, n1, <www.caam.net/en/atlantica.htm> (30 May 2005).

[20] Morimura quoted in Kay Itoi, 'Yasumasa Morimura, Museum of Contemporary Art, Tokyo,' *Art News*, v97, n10, November 1998, p.175.

[21] Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble, Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York and London: Routledge, 1999 (1990)), p.175.

[22] Ibid.

way, drag performances expose as a myth the idea that gender identities are biologically determined, or indeed ontologically grounded in anything other than a '*stylized repetition of acts*.'[23]

Applied in the domain of culture, Butler's performative theory of identity provides further support for the idea that Morimura's self-portraits challenge the notion that there exist stable grounds or fixed points of reference by which the parameters of cultural expression are defined and standards of cultural authenticity and uniqueness guaranteed. Indeed, the startling juxtapositions and substitutions of 'Western' and 'Japanese' signs, in works like *Portrait (Futago)*, represent 'culture' less as a preordained reflection of immutable essences than a product of creative free-play. As cross-cultural hybrids, Morimura's self-portraits seem to deny that 'Japanese-ness' or 'Western-ness' are anything but collections of free-floating, cultural signifiers, the combinations and permutations of which are potentially unlimited. Later, I will further discuss this aspect of Morimura's pictures, examining the proposition that their hybridity reflects the so-called 'imploded' nature of the postmodern world. However, for the purposes of the present discussion, my intention is to stress that the jarring collision of different elements, in images like *Portrait (Futago)*, underpins the ambiguous nature of Morimura's work. For it is apparent that *Portrait (Futago)*'s 'cross-dressing' in the domain of culture results not in synthesis or unity (i.e., resolution of identity) but rather fracture and dissonance (i.e., identity left in a state of suspension). In Morimura's own words: 'East meets West in my work, but I haven't made an attempt to merge the two worlds. They exist in opposition.'[24]

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[23] Ibid, p.179.

[24] Morimura quoted in Carol Lufty, 'Gaining Face, Japanese Artists Emerge,' *Art News*, v89, n3, March 1990, p.147.

Indeed, Morimura has described his self-portraits as expressions of 'psychological… imbalance… [the] picture of things gone amiss… distorted, disturbing and strange serves as a psychological portrait of myself having been strongly influenced by Western culture, despite having been born and raised as a Japanese man.'[25] The work he invokes in relation to this comment is *Daughter of Art History (Princess A)* (1990, fig 1.3), (after Velázquez' painting *Infanta Margarita* (1656)) – an attribution that seems entirely appropriate. In common with *Portrait (Futago)* and *Portrait (Van Gogh)*, *Princess A* is also a photograph of a 'wearable painting' comprising a dummy costume and a painted backdrop into which Morimura has inserted his carefully made-up face. Reiterating *Portrait (Futago)*'s brash appearance, *Princess A* subjects Velázquez' painting to various exaggerations. For example, Morimura-as-Margarita poses in a dress embellished with kitschy, metallic gold sleeve attachments, this ensemble surmounted by a bright red and gold hairpiece. However, the most disorienting aspect of *Princess A* is that, in place of the dainty little girl portrayed by Velázquez, Morimura substitutes his own outsized hands and head, and his large-nosed facial features. In addition to all the other boundaries disturbed by the *Art History* self-portraits, *Princess A* blurs the sacrosanct distinction between child and adult, thus generating an image of profound ambivalence where cuteness is revealed to exist in precariously close proximity to the grotesque.

Given Morimura's characterization of his work as 'psychologically imbalanced,' one might be tempted to read works like *Portrait (Futago)* as expressions of various identity crises – whether personal, pertaining to Japan's cultural identity, or to the status of

[25] Morimura, 'About My Work,' p.114.

artists and art objects in an age where notions of authorship and authenticity have been undermined. Indeed, regarded as photographic appropriations, the degree to which Morimura's self-portraits destabilize origins and essences harmonizes with those aspects of art practice Douglas Crimp identified as *postmodern* in his essay 'The Photographic Activity of Postmodernism' (1980). Crimp invoked the appropriations of Edward Weston's works made by Sherrie Levine in 1980 and Cindy Sherman's *Untitled Film Stills* of the late 1970s to support his contention that postmodern photography was defined by the awareness that photographs were, firstly, 'always… *re*presentation… appropriated, *stolen*.'[26] Secondly, Crimp pointed out that photographic images expose the 'the fiction of the self… [revealing] the supposed autonomous and unitary self [to be]… nothing other than a discontinuous series of representations, copies, fakes.'[27]

At the same time it is also clear that, far from being unremittingly negative, sceptical or obsessed with theory, Morimura's self-portraits evince his delight in playfully and humorously undermining all manner of sacred cows in the domain of culture. In this respect, they may be linked to Osaka (his hometown) with its reputation as Japan's traditional centre of comedy – the birthplace of *rakugo* (comic monologues) and present-day home to many of Japan's most famous *manzai* (stand-up comics who perform as duos or larger groups).[28] Moreover, the prevailing atmosphere of arch

[26] Douglas Crimp, 'The Photographic Activity of Postmodernism' in Douglas Fogle, *The Last Picture Show: Artists Using Photography 1960-1982*, exh. cat. (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 2003) (originally published in *October*, n15, Winter 1980), p.206.

[27] Ibid, p.207.

[28] For a typical characterization of Osaka's status as Japan's centre of comedy see Ohta Fusae, 'Omoroi Osaka,' *Japan Quarterly*, Tokyo, v47, i3, July – September 2000, pp.27-8. Munroe (p.342) also links Morimura's work to Osaka's reputation as Japan's traditional centre of 'low' culture.

humour, artifice and duplicity in works like *Portrait (Futago)* seems less evidence of a postmodern identity crisis than an expression of that sensibility described by Susan Sontag in her essay 'Notes on "Camp" ' (1964).[29] For, as Sontag suggests, ambiguity and playfulness are the hallmarks of camp – a perspective that sees 'everything in quotation marks' and understands 'Being-as-playing-a-role.'[30] There is an evident consonance between Sontag's observations and Morimura's assertion: 'Art is basically entertainment… Even Michelangelo and Leonardo da Vinci were entertainers. In that way, I am an entertainer and want to make art that is fun.'[31]

In light of my characterization of Morimura's self-portraits as cultivating ambiguity in order to maximize possibilities for creative expression, it seems worthwhile at this point to consider Norman Bryson's essay 'Morimura: 3 Readings' (1995) – the very title of which acknowledges the multivalent nature of Morimura's work. In his first reading Bryson adopts a position typical of early Western responses to Morimura's *Art History* self-portraits – viewing them as symbolic acts of possession that disturb Western constructions of other and same, thus delivering implicit challenges to Western cultural imperialism. Using *Portrait (Futago)* as a basis for discussion, Bryson begins with the observation that Morimura pantomimes both white *and* black figures in Manet's painting. In the

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[29] My supervisor, Dr. Morgan Thomas, suggested reading Morimura's self-portraits in relation to Sontag's account of camp.

[30] Susan Sontag, 'Notes on "Camp" ' in *Against Interpretation and other Essays* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1967, originally published in *Partisan Review*, 1964), p.280.

[31] Morimura quoted in Monty DiPietro, 'Yasumasa Morimura at the Tokyo Museum of Contemporary Art,' *Assembly Language Tokyo Avant Garde Culture*, nd., c.1998, <www.assemblylanguage.com/reviews/Morimura.html> (27 May 2005).

process, the artist's double self-portrait disrupts a hierarchical, binary structure so familiar, so *natural* to Western viewers that its racist undertone is often overlooked. Namely, the deferential submission of black bodies to white bodies, and the relation of black 'other,' ancillary or periphery to white centre or 'same.' On this basis, Bryson suggests that Morimura's re-enactment exposes a complacent 'blind spot' in latter 1980s Western cultural criticism; the degree to which, thoroughly ensconced as an emblem of nineteenth-century class structure and the male gaze, the relation of *Olympia* to the issue of race, and the legacy of Western imperialism, had been neglected.[32] Bryson also suggests that *Portrait (Futago)*'s combination of a wedding kimono and a *maneki neko*, and its allusion to the professional occupation of the courtesan in *Olympia*, presents an image of Japan-as-geisha. This stereotypical construction reveals to what extent Western discourses have traditionally gendered Japan as a feminine other and thus the 'natural' object of Western military, commercial, and sexual exploitation. In Bryson's view, the popularisation of such myths in the Western imagination is epitomized by the likes of Puccini's *Madama Butterfly* (1900), an operatic tragedy that follows the ill-fated love affair between a geisha and a philandering American sailor.[33]

However, as indicated by his subsequent readings, Bryson recognizes that characterizing Morimura's work solely as 'cultural criticism' is too simplistic. This is apparent from his second take on Morimura's photographs. Bryson suggests that the jarring juxtapositions of cultural signifiers, in Morimura's pictures, reflect a contemporary global reality within which images are endlessly

[32] Norman Bryson, 'Morimura: 3 readings,' *Art and Text*, n52, 1995, p.75.

[33] Ibid.

reproduced, transformed and exchanged – a phenomenon Bryson dubs the 'image-stream.'[34] In this context, Bryson asserts: 'fixed identity is a concept about as obsolete and archaic as the organic national culture or the free-standing nation state.'[35] On this basis, one might argue that it is excessively limiting to interpret Morimura's self-portraits as occupying an adversarial position in order to resist the marginalisation of Japan as other/periphery to a Western same/centre. Indeed, it is apparent that such a view of Morimura's work inevitably and ironically reifies the West as 'centre' (and Japan as 'periphery') insofar as Western culture (even regarded in the negative) continues to be the primary object of discourse. To the contrary, Bryson's second reading implies that it may be more fruitful to regard Morimura's self-portraits as playing with the categories of 'centre' and 'periphery' in precisely the same way they suspend determinations in the domains of race and gender. In his third reading, Bryson takes his ideas one further step – proposing that the characteristically postmodern undermining of cultural essentialisms enacted in Morimura's pictures is less a reflection of cultural criticism than the workings of global capital. Although Bryson acknowledges that the *Art History* self-portraits do indeed parody the 'colonial imaginary and its psychosexual obsessions,'[36] he also suggests that they invite consideration as miming in microcosm (and not necessarily in any critical sense) aspects of the contemporary, global economy. I will return to Bryson's second and third readings later.

That the *Art History* self-portraits are not necessarily motivated by a sense of adversarial criticism is borne out by an examination of

[34] Ibid, p.77.

[35] Ibid.

[36] Ibid, pp.77-8.

Morimura's *Portrait (Six Brides)* (1991, fig 1.4), a re-enactment of Rossetti's *Beloved* (1865-66). At first glance this work seems to restate *Portrait (Futago)*'s 'critical' position. Hence, in common with his re-enactment of *Olympia*, Morimura subjects Rossetti's painting to a process of 'Japanization,' replacing the flowers at the upper right of *Beloved* with cherry blossoms, and further orientalizing the already Chinese-inflected feather and comb hairpiece of Rossetti's central figure through the addition of tassels and a miniature, gold temple. Moreover, *Six Brides*' golden chalice (substituted for the less elaborate ornament in *Beloved*) reflects a studio interior, the walls of which are embellished with Japanese ideographs. Finally, in common with *Portrait (Futago)*, *Six Brides* re-enacts a Western painting that represents an African figure deferentially submitting to a white woman occupying the central focus. To this extent, Morimura's re-enactment of *Beloved* seems to support interpretations of the *Art History* self-portraits as denunciations of Western racism and imperialism.

On closer inspection, however, it becomes evident that the overall tone of *Six Brides* differs significantly from that of *Portrait (Futago)*. Specifically, the air of outrageous parody that distinguished Morimura's earlier self-portrait is much less obvious in his re-enactment of Rossetti's painting. *Portrait (Futago)* declares its drag performance *as drag* (that is, its status as a caricature) by placing a kitschy blonde wig, lipstick and false eyelashes on a body immediately recognizable as male. Indeed, Barbara Wagner has observed how Morimura emphasizes his biological maleness by shifting the edge of the red and gold background screen slightly leftwards (in relation to its analogue in *Olympia*) so that its stridently vertical form is positioned directly over his concealed

genitalia.[37] By contrast, although *Six Brides* clearly deviates from *Beloved*, Morimura's multiple self-portrait echoes as well as parodies the harmonious composition, vivid colours and decorative richness of Rossetti's painting. In view of its lavish and meticulous construction (something shared by *Portrait (Futago)* regardless of its satirical or grotesque aspects), *Six Brides* seems less a pejorative satire of Western cultural imperialism than confirmation of Morimura's comment (made in a 1990 interview) that the *Art History* photographs were intended 'to pay homage to the history of painting.'[38]

One might also view *Six Brides* as prefiguring Morimura's latter 1990s characterization of his self-portraits as acts of 'becoming' by which he expressed something approaching 'love' for his subjects, as opposed to being primarily motivated by 'a spirit of criticism.'[39] Such an attitude is especially present in Morimura's *Actress* images, or his re-enactments of Frida Kahlo's self-portraits – for example, *An Inner Dialogue with Frida Kahlo (Four Parrots)* (2001, fig 1.5), where Kahlo's fairly understated *Me and My Parrots* (1941) is given the art equivalent of a fashion industry 'make-over' and re-imagined as a brightly coloured, tropical scene. In works such as

[37] Barbara Wagner, 'Gender – Double Trouble and Transgression: Yasumasa Morirmura's appropriation of a desirable body,' *Meowpower Feminist Journal Online*, v1, i1, December 2004, <http://meowpower.org/archives/december04/rmpioa3.html> (27 May 2005).

[38] Morimura in conversation with Akira Tatehata, 'On Criticism and the Lover, An Interview With Yasumasa Morimura,' *Art and Text*, n36, May 1990, pp.105-6.

[39] Yasumasa Morimura, *Sous le Manteau*, Galerie Thaddaeus Ropec, exh. cat., Paris, 1997, np, quoted in Yoko Hayashi, 'Morimura Yasumasa, Self-Portrait as Art History, Escalating 'I,' Simulating the Museum' in Museum of Contemporary Art, Tokyo, *Morimura Yasumasa: Self Portrait as Art History*, exh. cat., trans Stanley N. Anderson (Tokyo, 1998), pp.66-7.

these, Morimura's emulations of feminine glamour (achieved through costume, make-up, pose, gesture and facial expression) are sufficiently convincing that their 'drag' status is not immediately apparent. This suggests that Morimura's re-enactment of *Beloved* is less an act of resistance against the gendering of Japan as the West's feminine other than a willing embrace of femininity (Western or otherwise) as a means of self-expression. Indeed, Morimura's feminine masquerade invites consideration in terms of cultural difference when one considers that there are precedents in Japan for this kind of role-playing – for example, the tradition of *onnagata* (female impersonators) in *kabuki*. I will return to this point later.

That Morimura's *Art History* self-portraits may be playing with the very categories of 'centre' and 'periphery' in precisely the same way they suspend determinations in the domains of race and gender suggests that, even if they do possess a critical dimension, this is just as likely to be directed 'against' Japan as the West. One might, therefore, interpret Morimura's photographs as metaphorical occupations of *Japan's* other, from which position of imaginary exteriority they parody Japanese culture. Something of this sort is suggested by the circumstances surrounding *Portrait (Futago)*'s latter 1988 debut at Tokyo's Gallery NW House. As Janet Koplos relates, accompanying Morimura's re-enactment of *Olympia* were a trio of self-portraits based on Manet's *Fifer* (1866): *Portrait (Shōnen 1)* (1988, fig 1.6), *Portrait (Shōnen 2)* (1988, fig 1.7), and *Portrait (Shōnen 3)* (1988, fig 1.8). The latter two of these images presented the artist, *sans* trousers, with disembodied, alien hands (readily identifiable as those belonging to *Portrait (Futago)*'s figures) groping between his legs. The domestic target of Morimura's outrageous satire becomes evident when one considers that the *Fifer* was also the signature image utilized in the advertising

for a near-contemporaneous, blockbuster exhibition of Western *Japonisme* held at the Tokyo National Museum of Western Art.[40]

Either of Manet's paintings invite consideration as emblems of this 1860s craze in Europe. In an analysis equally applicable to Manet's *Fifer*, Theodore Reff has highlighted the formal characteristics of *Olympia* reminiscent of Japanese *ukiyo-e* woodblock prints: abrupt transitions between fields of un-modulated colour, the employment of spatially flattened forms and (particularly visible in the figures), the containment of shapes within clearly drawn contour lines.[41] Given Manet's borrowings from Japanese prints, Morimura's photographic re-enactments invite interpretation as *re-appropriations* staged, as Benjamin Weil puts it, in order to reclaim 'an alien heritage as his own.'[42] However, in the context of the Tokyo *Japonisme* exhibition, it is also tempting to read *Portrait (Futago)* and the *Portrait (Shōnen)* self-portraits in light of Hisashi Muroi's observation that, since the Meiji Restoration, Japanese cultural institutions have continuously sought to 'assimilate… Western art… with the aim of reaching [that implicitly superior] standard and then exceeding it.'[43] Muroi's statement is corroborated by James Roberts who notes that, even in the 1990s, entrance examinations for Japanese arts institutions typically demanded proficiency in drawing from classical plaster casts. Once enrolled, students were expected to choose between *Nihonga* (traditional Japanese painting) or *Yōga* (Western style oil painting or sculpture – usually in a conservative, nineteenth century vein). As Roberts

[40] Koplos, ibid.

[41] Reff, pp.78-9.

[42] Weil, ibid.

[43] Hisashi Muroi, 'Transit Zone, Modern Japanese Art,' *Art and Text*, n.40, 1991, p.55.

further relates, the extensive support base enjoyed by these institutionally sanctioned modes of art practice contrasted with the dearth of similar structures for contemporary Japanese art.[44] Viewed from this perspective, Morimura's Manet re-enactments admit interpretation as protesting the neglect of contemporary Japanese art by local institutions, whilst also highlighting the irony of a Japanese arts establishment granting legitimacy to a model of Japanese-ness grounded in Western myth.

1.3 Experimenting Possibilities: Morimura's Female Impersonations

Thus far, I have highlighted the ambiguous nature of Morimura's *Art History* self-portraits. Although these works function as emblems of cross-cultural exchange and cultural difference, at the same time their jarring juxtapositions of cultural signifiers playfully subverts essentialist notions of identity. The same applies to Morimura's *Actress* series female impersonations. As lavish pantomimes of iconic Western femininity, created by a non-Western artist, these works reflect and reify the global ubiquity (i.e., trans-cultural omnipresence and 'reality') of such identities. At the same time, however, the status of Morimura's pictures as parodies and performances slyly exposes the ephemeral and fantastical nature of the identities placed in play. A typical example is *Self-portrait (Actress) / after Marlene Dietrich 1* (1996, fig 1.9), where Morimura pantomimes Dietrich's role as the cabaret singer Lola Lola in Josef

[44] James Roberts, 'A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Consumer' in Tate Gallery, Liverpool, *A Cabinet of Signs, Contemporary Art from Post-Modern Japan*, pp.19-23. For further testimony addressing the conservative nature of the Japanese arts establishment, and the absence of institutional recognition/support for Japanese contemporary art (at least prior to the 1990s), see Lufty (p.144), and Keiko Sei, 'Japanese CMs, A Mirror For The 1990s,' trans Alfred Birnbaum, *Art and Text*, n36, May 1990, p.27.

von Sternberg's film *The Blue Angel* (1930, fig 1.10). In common with the *Art History* self-portraits, *Marlene Dietrich 1* presents an unsettling combination of mimicry and deviation by which it courts ambiguity, blurs boundaries in the realms of race and gender, and places in question the distinction between copy and original.

As a comparison with *The Blue Angel* still reveals, Morimura captures the nuances of Dietrich's pose, costume and demeanour with uncanny accuracy. Poised on a barrel, top hat askew, Morimura-as-Lola Lola casts an insouciant glance over his bare right shoulder whilst clasping both hands around his right leg, lifting this limb in relation to the left so that his right foot dangles idly against his left knee. The artist's costume evinces a similar attention to detail, closely reproducing the cut and folds of Dietrich's dark, velvet dress, exposed frilly petticoat, garters and sheer stockings, as well as the shape and satin finish of her top hat, sash, cuffs and high-heeled shoes. Finally, through a combination of carefully applied make-up, a curly wig and lighting, Morimura even produces a passable rendition of his subject's head and face.

However, *Marlene Dietrich 1* also deliberately deviates from the source of its inspiration. Perhaps the most obvious divergence is that Morimura has translated von Sternberg's black and white film into colour. The soothing blue and gold tonalities of Morimura's self-portrait are further enhanced by his substitution of a soft background illumination in place of the harsh frontal glare of *The Blue Angel* scene. This gentle backlighting casts Morimura's face and body in shadow – a tactic that not only imbues his self-portrait with an air of contemplative distance but also enhances the credibility of his feminine masquerade. The background of *Marlene Dietrich 1* is similarly restrained. Morimura eliminates *The Blue Angel*'s extra performers and painted *faux*-Baroque backdrop, transforming its

busy, brightly lit, stage environment into a crepuscular, temple-like space. At right, a rank of pillars recedes into the distance – a classical allusion by which *Marlene Dietrich 1* declares the star of *The Blue Angel* to be a veritable screen goddess. On close inspection, Morimura's subtle adjustments to Dietrich's pose make the elevation of her character from lowly cabaret singer to pop-culture icon all the more convincing. In *The Blue Angel* still, Dietrich's body is inclined towards the spectator, affording a tantalizing glimpse of her crotch and thus emphasizing her sexual availability. Morimura subverts this air of brazen confrontation by rotating his body slightly anti-clockwise, presenting it in near profile. This side-on attitude complements the isolating and centring of the artist's figure within the picture space, thus generating an air of formality, monumentality and self-containment befitting his vision of Dietrich as a screen idol.

That *Marlene Dietrich 1* is, to some degree, an act of homage is evident from the way Morimura sanitizes the more obviously tawdry aspects of the *Blue Angel* scene and by the same token exalts Dietrich's mythic status. Moreover, the artist's self-portrait evinces the same meticulous attention to detail and high production values that characterize works like the aforementioned *Portrait (Futago)* and *Six Brides*. However, whilst not as overt a caricature as *Portrait (Futago)*, it is apparent that *Marlene Dietrich 1* does indeed indulge in a degree of parody. This is particularly evident from Morimura's manipulations of scale. Thus, compared with the original image where Dietrich assertively plants a stocking-clad foot firmly on the ground, Morimura employs an oversized barrel that leaves his feet dangling hilariously in mid air. In this way, *Marlene Dietrich 1* seemingly pokes fun at the notion of larger-than-life 'giants' of the silver screen and slyly implies that such celebrity is, quite literally, 'baseless.'

This oscillation between homage and parody, mimicry and deviation underscores the ambiguity of *Marlene Dietrich 1* – something further compounded by the equivocal nature of its subject. For it is important to recognize that neither 'Dietrich' nor even 'Morimura' are on display in this image but rather 'Morimura-as-Dietrich.' Indeed, strictly speaking, it is not even Dietrich 'herself,' who Morimura mimes in *Marlene Dietrich 1*, but rather Dietrich-as-Lola Lola (where Lola Lola, as a cabaret singer, is also presumably performing a role). Implicit, in this regressive series of nested identities, is the notion that there exists no original or essential self but merely an endless series of role-plays. In other words, like the *Art History* self-portraits, *Marlene Dietrich 1* represents identity as a performance. As Butler points out, this kind of activity generates the 'effect' of an essential self – but exhibits this '*on the surface* of the body, through the play of signifying absences that suggest, but never reveal, the organizing principal of identity as a cause.'[45] In using the expression 'signifying absences,' I take Butler to be referring to the (potentially infinite) set of possible *other* identities in relation to which a particular *same* is defined. This seems to be an application of Ferdinand de Saussure's influential idea, in his *Course in General Linguistics* (1916), that words do not carry intrinsic meanings but rather signify on the basis of their differences: 'language has neither ideas nor sounds that existed before the linguistic system, but only conceptual and phonic differences that have issued from the system.'[46] In relation to *Marlene Dietrich 1*, therefore, the identity 'Morimura-as-Dietrich' *means* in terms of what it is *not*, what is

[45] Butler, p.173.

[46] Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, 3rd ed, edited by Charles Bally and Albert Sechehaye in collaboration with Albert Reidlinger, trans Wade Baskin (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1966, originally published as *Cours de linguistique générale* (Paris: Payot, 1916), p.120.

absent from it, or possibly repressed within it. On this basis, 'Morimura-as-Dietrich' does not express an essential self but rather represents identity as an effect or process in a system of differential relations.

Earlier, I pointed out that it would be misleading to regard Morimura's *Art History* self-portraits as evidence of a postmodern identity crisis. The same observation might be made of the *Actress* pictures, which radiate less a sense of *crisis* than Morimura's evident *enjoyment* in immersing himself in a series of extravagant fantasies. In this respect, the *Actress* self-portraits harmonize with Sontag's definition of camp not only as understanding 'Being-as-playing-a-role' but also as a sensibility more closely aligned with pleasure than judgement.[47] On this basis, Morimura's pictures are less concerned with theoretical demonstrations of the evaporation of origins and essences characteristic of postmodernity (something he seems to take for granted) than with *exploiting* the creative potentials thus enabled. For example, in a 1997 interview, Morimura estimated that he had performed 'Two or three hundred' different roles.[48] More recently, he asserted: 'Through my art, I feel like a pioneer experimenting… possibilities.'[49]

As the *Actress* self-portraits demonstrate, *cross-dressing* is intrinsic to many of the 'possibilities' Morimura seeks to explore. In my previous discussion of *Six Brides*, I suggested that this aspect of Morimura's masquerades invites consideration in terms of cultural

[47] Sontag, p.291.

[48] Morimura quoted in Judy Annear, 'Peepshow, Inside Yasumasa Morimura's Looking Glass,' *Art Asia Pacific*, n13, 1997, p.45.

[49] Morimura quoted in Olivia Sand, 'Yasumasa Morimura,' *Asian Art Newspaper*, February 2003, <www.asianartnewspaper.com/iss0302/art_2.htm> (3 June 2005).

difference insofar as there are precedents in Japan for this kind of role-playing. Perhaps the most obvious parallel, one that has been acknowledged by several commentators, is with the tradition of *onnagata* in *kabuki*.[50] According to Donald Shively, whilst cross-dressing was an aspect of *kabuki* theatre from its inception, the *onnagata* tradition arose in response to the banning of female performers in 1629. This was one of many restrictions imposed by the authorities in an attempt to restrain *kabuki's* inherent extravagance and sensuality, and to combat the perceived threat it posed to public order and morals. Nevertheless, from its origins in early 17th century Japan, *kabuki* quickly developed into a pop-culture phenomenon that attracted fanatical followings from all strata of Japanese society.[51] The representation, by *onnagata*, of a highly stylised, hyper-femininity, distinguished by close attention to nuances of make up, costume, gesture and facial expression, is also evident in Morimura's female impersonations. Moreover, *kabuki's* combination of mass appeal, glamour, celebrity, transvestism and spectacle clearly resonates with the subject matter of the *Actress* self-portraits.

Consonances between Morimura's gender-bending and *onnagata* notwithstanding, Kaori Chino, in her essay 'Gender in Japanese Art' (1993), cites even earlier examples of female impersonation in Japan. She relates the activity to Heian period (794-1185) formations of cultural identity where 'Japanese-ness' was defined in

[50] For parallels drawn between Morimura's work and *onnagata* see Francesco Bonami, 'Yasumasa Morimura, Double Exposure,' *Flash Art*, v25, n163, March-April 1992 (p.83), Susan Snodgrass, 'Yasumasa Morimura at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago,' *Art in America*, v80, n5, May 1992 (p.133), and Roy Exeley, 'Morimura's Smile,' *Creative Camera*, i357, April – May 1999, p.40.

[51] Donald H. Shively, '*Bakufu* Versus Kabuki,' in Samuel L. Leiter (ed), *A Kabuki Reader, History and Performance* (New York and London: M.E. Sharpe, 2002), pp.33-48.

terms of a continuum between a public, masculine façade and a private, feminine inner self. This was reflected in language where Chinese ideographs, termed 'men's hand' (*otoko-de*), were used in writing documents of a public or official nature. 'Women's hand' (*onna-de*) or *hiragana* (a developing phonetic alphabet utilizing simplified forms of the original Chinese characters) was reserved for 'Japanese poetry, fictional tales, and private diaries.' Whilst it was considered seemly for Japanese women to use *onna-de* only, Japanese men employed either 'hand' in accordance with the public/private nature of their communications.[52] Moreover, referring to the 'feminine' (i.e., 'delicate,' 'light,' 'harmonious') attributes of Japanese painting up to the Meiji period, Chino suggests that Japan's ruling class privileged femininity as the hallmark of social refinement and sophistication. Masculinity, by contrast, carried connotations of vulgarity, foreign-ness and barbarism.[53] In essence, Chino suggests that gender indeterminacy was, firstly, a convenient tactic by which Japanese males asserted their social freedom and political dominance in the context of Japan's patriarchal society. Secondly, the embrace of femininity functioned as a psychological coping mechanism by which Japanese men sublimated their sense of cultural inferiority in relation to the 'great foreign country,' i.e., China.[54]

Chino briefly reiterates these ideas in her later essay 'A Man Pretending to Be a Woman: On Yasumasa Morimura's Actresses' (1996), suggesting that, by employing *Western* models as a basis for

[52] Kaori Chino, 'Gender in Japanese Art' in Joshua S. Mostow, Norman Bryson, and Maribeth Graybill (eds), *Gender and Power in the Japanese Visual Field* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2003, first published in English in *Aesthetics* n7, March 1996), pp.22-5.

[53] Ibid, pp.27-31.

[54] Ibid, p.27.

his pantomimes, Morimura effectively parodies the assumption of feminine identities by courtly males in the context of Heian period Japan. Indeed, Chino speculates that Morimura's sending up of a practice 'historically... sanctioned by society... as an accepted mannerism' partly explains negative responses excited by the *Actress* works among contemporary Japanese men.[55] In this respect, she provides an interpretation of Morimura's female impersonations complementary to that advanced by Bryson (where Morimura's gender bending was viewed as a satire of Western constructions of Japan as its feminine other). The existence of two such disparate (yet equally reasonable) readings – Chino's proceeding from a Japan-as-centre position, Bryson's from a West-as-centre position – attests to the multivalent nature of Morimura's self-portraits and the manner by which they playfully suspend determinations across multiple domains. That caution is indicated, in ascribing a 'fixed position' to Morimura's work, is further apparent when one compares Chino's basically affirmative reading of the *Actress* self-portraits with the much more negative review article by Jan Avgikos: 'Yasumasa Morimura, Luhring Augustine' (1997).

Responding to Morimura's claim that the *Actress* self-portraits are devoted to the expression of 'beauty,'[56] Chino freely admits that she finds the images beguiling and goes so far as to describe them as acts of homage by which Morimura expresses 'love' for his subjects.[57] Whilst acknowledging that the *Actress* pictures could be

[55] Kaori Chino, 'A Man Pretending to Be a Woman: On Yasumasa Morimura's *Actresses*' in Yokohama Museum of Art, *Morimura Yasumasa, The Sickness unto Beauty – Self-Portrait as Actress*, exh. cat., trans Reiko Tomii and Yōichi Ōhashi (Yokohama, 1996), pp.158-9.

[56] Morimura quoted in Chino, 'A Man Pretending to Be a Woman: On Yasumasa Morimura's *Actresses*,' p.157.

[57] Chino, 'A Man Pretending to Be a Woman: On Yasumasa Morimura's *Actresses*,' p.160.

construed as appropriating femininity, Chino suggests this potentially negative aspect is mitigated by their power to deflect the objectifying, heterosexual male gaze. Comparing the *Actress* self-portraits with Andy Warhol's 1960s silkscreen paintings of Marilyn Monroe, Chino observes that Morimura invites the male gaze with his *own* glamorously attired and made-up body 'then the next moment laughs it away, and finally nullifies it.'[58] By contrast, Warhol's ironic dissections of Monroe's status as a pop-culture commodity unavoidably reiterate the process of her objectification. Moreover, Chino suggests that, viewed as critiques of feminine stereotypes, the *Actress* pictures circumvent certain limitations of their immediate antecedents: Sherman's *Untitled Film Stills*. Chino's point is that, insofar as Sherman's pictures exhibit a biologically *female* body, they are still, potentially, objects of consumption for heterosexual males. On this basis, Chino concludes that the *Actress* images possess utility for feminism and that Morimura 'sides with women not merely in his appearance but in his thought.'[59]

However, Avgikos' *Artforum* review – one of the harshest appraisals of Morimura's work ever published – amply illustrates the polarization of critical responses excited by the *Actress* series. In stark contrast to Chino's positive reading, Avgikos denounces the *Actress* works for what she perceives as a failure to 'interrogate… cultural conventions.'[60] For the sake of argument, one might accept this claim and suggest that, whilst Chino may reasonably interpret Morimura's role-playing as disrupting the process of objectification,

[58] Ibid, pp.160-1.

[59] Ibid.

[60] Jan Avgikos, 'Yasumasa Morimura,' *Artforum*, v35, i8, April 1997, p.91.

merely because the *Actress* self-portraits potentially discomfort heterosexual male spectators does not automatically imply that they actually challenge feminine stereotypes, or that they necessarily side with women in a feminist sense. Indeed, reiterating the point I made earlier, the campy atmosphere of a work like *Marlene Dietrich 1* suggests that Morimura is less concerned with questioning forms of femininity, by which women in Western patriarchy have been objectified and oppressed, than with indulging a fascination with glitz, spectacle and celebrity.

Adopting a psychoanalytical perspective, Avgikos claims that the *Actress* self-portraits constitute a narcissistic, Freudian game, the object of which is not the celebration of *femininity* but rather the constant reification of 'the sign of the phallus.'[61] On this basis, she condemns Morimura for exploiting and fetishizing his subjects in a 'drama of the castration complex [where]…women are no more than puppets whose only significance is their lack.'[62] *Self-portrait (Actress) / Black Marilyn* (1996, fig 1.11) exemplifies those aspects of the *Actress* series to which Avgikos objects. By virtue of a series of jarring inversions, *Black Marilyn* transforms Monroe's famous subway updraft scene, in Billy Wilder's film *The Seven Year Itch* (1955, fig 1.12), into a grotesque parody. Thus, Morimura reverses the direction of Monroe's classic pose, gazing over his right shoulder rather than his left. In a similar fashion, he inverts the colour of Monroe's dress, exchanging white for black. However, the most provocative divergence is the exposure of Monroe's 'sex.' In *The Seven Year Itch*, Monroe's character restrains her billowing dress with both hands – seemingly oblivious to on-lookers. By contrast, Morimura solicits the viewer's gaze, reaching into his

[61] Ibid.

[62] Ibid.

blouse with his left hand whilst hiking up the hem of his dress with his right. This premeditated action exposes a dildo protruding from a ball of black fur – the whole unlikely assemblage attached to his crotch over the top of a pair of black, fishnet tights.

Although, in *Marlene Dietrich 1*, Morimura's celebration of glamorous femininity does indeed seem to evince that 'love' for his subjects by which Chino characterizes the *Actress* self-portraits, it is difficult to see this sentiment in *Black Marilyn*. I would argue, rather, that the flaunting of the dildo and the groping of his right breast emphasize Morimura's complete 'mastery' over the body exhibited – this self-control being absent in *The Seven Year Itch*'s stereotypical vision of a woman in thrall to irrepressible sexual impulses. Thus, it is not femininity that *Black Marilyn* appears to exalt but rather Morimura's possession and domination of a female body. Nevertheless, if some of Chino's assertions regarding the *Actress* images are contestable then so too are certain of those made by Avgikos. It should be recognized that a work like *Black Marilyn* is not typical of the *Actress* pictures as a whole, most of which follow *Marlene Dietrich 1*'s formula of glamour seasoned with light-hearted parody. Although Avgikos is correct in her observation that phallic symbols recur throughout the *Actress* series (consider, for example, *Marlene Dietrich 1*'s top hat and row of marble pillars, or the ray-gun dildo brandished by Morimura-as-Barbarella, in *Self-portrait (Actress) / after Jane Fonda 2* (1996, fig 1.13), where he re-enacts Fonda's title role in Roger Vadim's cinematic sex farce of 1968), her reading of them as glorifications of masculinity 'on behalf of… [Morimura's] male audience'[63] does not tell the whole story. Perhaps the most persuasive testimony, in this regard, is Chino's account of the reception that greeted the *Actress* works

[63] Ibid.

following their initial publication, between August 1994 and July 1995, as a twelve-part series, entitled *Descent of the Actresses*, in the popular Japanese magazine *Panja*. As Chino notes, *Panja*'s predominantly young, male readers never failed to vote Morimura's drag performances onto the magazine's monthly 'most-boring list.'[64] Furthermore, one should bear in mind Chino's point that it is *Morimura's* body on show in the *Actress* images. Hence, whatever exaltation or parody he indulges ultimately rebounds on himself as much as his subjects. Morimura's employment of such obvious and ridiculous props for the phallus (a dildo sprouting from a black muff, a raygun, etc…) implies that, even if the *Actress* masquerades affirm his masculinity, they are also simultaneously lampooning it and placing it in question.

As the preceding discussion demonstrates, particular *Actress* series images both support and contradict the analyses given by Chino and Avgikos. This conundrum reflects the tendency of each writer to assign Morimura's work a determinate position or align it with a particular 'side.' Hence, he is either 'for' femininity or 'for' masculinity; either he is exploiting female bodies for the edification of heterosexual males or he is performing female roles in order to undermine the gender prejudices of the same. Yet, as I have thus far suggested, one of the key characteristics of Morimura's self-portraits is that they resist such unitary interpretations, deliberately cultivating ambiguity in order to maximize possibilities for creative expression. In the midst of the binary logic that distinguishes the commentaries offered by Chino and Avgikos, Sontag's *Notes on Camp* again provides a useful 'third' perspective from which to view Morimura's work. For, as Sontag points out, camp is a sensibility that deliberately avoids taking sides – it functions as 'a

[64] Kaori Chino, 'A Man Pretending to Be a Woman: On Yasumasa Morimura's *Actresses*,' p.157.

solvent of morality… [that] neutralizes moral indignation, sponsors playfulness.'[65]

Indeed, Morimura's assertion: 'My purpose is not merely to perform the act of playing a woman. Nor do I make photographic self-portraits simply to fulfil my wish to become a woman,' and his stated desire to 'explore the "neither-male-nor-female waterline"… using cross-dressing,'[66] suggests that the limited either/or categories of male/female, masculine/feminine are precisely what he seeks to disturb and transcend. *Marlene Dietrich 1* is a particularly apt demonstration of Morimura's activities in this area. As Rebecca Kennison observes, gender bending was a feature both of Dietrich's on-film personas and her private life, and has subsequently become integral to her status as a cultural icon. The costume she wore in *The Blue Angel* was her own design – inspired by gay and lesbian drag in 1920s Berlin (the top hat reflects lesbian *haute couture* whilst garters were apparently *de rigueur* for gay men in drag).[67] On this basis, *Marlene Dietrich 1* not only salutes Dietrich's feminine glamour and celebrity but also her status as a transgender role model; a fellow 'experimenter of possibilities.'

1.4 Reflections in the Bubble

In this final section, I conclude my discussion of Morimura's work by relating it to social, political and economic currents in early 1990s Japan, and the wider, media-saturated, global environment.

[65] Sontag, p.290.

[66] Yasumasa Morimura, 'About My Work,' p.119.

[67] Rebecca Kennison, 'Clothes Make the (Wo)man: Marlene Dietrich and "Double Drag" ' in Michelle Gibson and Deborah T. Meem (eds), *Femme/Butch, New Considerations of the Way We Want to Go* (New York, London, and Oxford: Harrington Park Press, 2002), pp.149-52.

Revisiting a theme introduced in my discussion of *Portrait (Futago)*, I suggest that, despite their 'wearing [of] Western art history,' Morimura's self-portraits are not directed exclusively at the West but also reflect on Japan. In so doing, his masquerades naturally invite consideration as emblems of cultural difference. A particularly good illustration of these ideas is provided by *Blinded by the Light* (1991, fig 1.14), which re-enacts Bruegel's *Parable of the Blind* (1568). Judy Annear interprets this image as a satire of the 'consumer madness' that characterized Japanese society during the heady period of the latter 1980s Bubble economy.[68] Whilst it seems reasonable to assert that consumerism is an important theme in Morimura's picture, I would argue that *Blinded by the Light* is better regarded as a multivalent catalogue of social ills, alluding to various crises Japan experienced in the wake of the Bubble's early 1990s collapse.[69]

Making the same kinds of substitutions that characterize his other *Art History* self-portraits, *Blinded by the Light* replaces Breugel's six sightless peasants with a similarly posed train of figures, some of whom appear to symbolize aspects of contemporary Japanese society. In Breugel's painting, the peasants have apparently strayed from the path of righteousness indicated by the church in the upper right background. The implication is that their blindness is spiritual as well as physical and that their headlong tumble into the ditch at lower right symbolizes a fall from grace. Therefore, by analogy, *Blinded by the Light* represents early 1990s Japan as a country that,

[68] Judy Annear, 'Yasumasa Morimura,' Queensland Art Gallery, *Second Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art*, exh. cat., Brisbane, 1996, p.68.

[69] Concise summaries of Japan's Bubble economy are given in Dennis B. Smith, *Japan Since 1945. The Rise of an Economic Superpower* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1995, pp.159-61), and Richard McGregor, *Japan Swings, Politics, Culture and Sex in the New Japan* (St. Leonards, NSW: Allen & Unwin, 1996), pp.19-21.

having lost its moral compass, is plunging out of control. Like Breugel's peasants, the Japanese people blindly follow where they are led, oblivious to their impending demise.

The rotund, upturned figure at the lower right of Morimura's multiple self-portrait provides compelling evidence that 'Japan,' 'money' and 'collapse' are indeed among its primary concerns. This character wears a kamikaze-like chest band and blindfold emblazoned with the Rising Sun symbol and Japanese ideographs, whilst his moustache confers a passing resemblance to the recently deceased Emperor Hirohito. 1000-yen notes (Japan's most common currency denomination) explode from the figure's bloated (i.e., bubble-like) clothing and choke the human skull surmounting his walking stick. On his right foot, 'Hirohito' wears a *torii*-shaped sandal – a reference to the entrance markers of Shinto shrines. Hence, this equation of 'money' and 'Japan' also implicates commerce in the 'death' or 'sacrifice' of traditional values. Alternatively, it is tempting to interpret Morimura's picture as linking the demise of Japan's Bubble economy with the end of the Showa era of economic expansion – a period defined by Japan's imperialist ventures in Asia during the 1930s and 1940s, and following its defeat in the Pacific War, subsequent emergence as a world economic superpower.

Yet another reading of Morimura's hapless 'Hirohito' figure is that he parodies contemporary Japanese politics. His 'fall' mirrors that of those politicians at the centre of a seemingly endless series of corruption scandals that accompanied Japan's economic upheavals of the early 1990s. As Dennis Smith and Jon Woronoff observe, nearly all the major players in Japan's ruling Liberal Democrat Party were incriminated, eventually leading to a historic electoral

defeat in 1993 (the LDP had been in power since 1955).[70] Japan's internal political turmoil was further highlighted by its indecisive response to contemporary international events such as the Gulf War of 1991 – a state of affairs to which Morimura's soldier character alludes. Gavan McCormack notes that, under immense US pressure to contribute troops to the Gulf conflict, Japan's government was racked by internal dissent insofar as such a move clearly contravened Article Nine of its post-war constitution – a provision whereby Japan not only forever renounced war but also the maintaining of any military establishment. As McCormack further elaborates, the very existence of Japan's so-called Self-Defence Force (created with US complicity in the Cold War era) had, in fact, long been a source of domestic political instability and national soul-searching.[71] Morimura's soldier underscores the equivocal status of Japan's military: blinded by his hand grenades he is unable to act, his rifle is merely a wooden toy and he is led by those equally misguided.

References to Japan's post-Bubble economic and political crises notwithstanding, the figure occupying the central focus of *Blinded by the Light* provides compelling support for Annear's suggestion that Japanese consumerism is the primary target of Morimura's parody. Yet another of his ubiquitous female impersonations, Morimura's character is dressed in a black and gold Chanel suit (embellished with a Louis Vuitton pattern), and draped liberally in extravagant jewellery. She brandishes a Louis Vuitton handbag and

[70] For details of the various corruption scandals that marked Japanese politics between the latter 1980s and mid 1990s see Smith (pp.146-53), and Jon Woronoff, *The Japanese Social Crisis* (Houndsmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Macmillan Press, New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997), pp.77-81.

[71] Gavan McCormack, *The Emptiness of Japanese Affluence* (New York: M.E. Sharpe, 1996), pp.190-5.

umbrella, and bows under the weight of shopping bags emblazoned with various brand logos. In a manner reminiscent of Ashley Bickerton's mid 1980s sign paintings, Morimura reproduces Nina Ricci, Louis Vuitton and Hermes, and humorously misspells Tiffany as 'Tofunny.' Annear interprets Morimura's shopper as a quintessential 1980s 'fashion victim'[72] – a reading supported by the appearance of the same character in Morimura's contemporaneous self-portrait: *Elder Sister* (1991). As Friis-Hansen observes, *Elder Sister* was one of a series of images lampooning the commodity fetishism of brand-obsessed Japanese women.[73] Although Friis-Hansen characterizes Morimura's pantomime as a parody of an 'idle wife,' it is just as likely that he is satirizing the new class of unmarried, working women (exemplified by the stereotypical 'Office Lady' or OL) who emerged as a significant consumer force in Japan during the 1980s. Commentators such as Woronoff and Richard McGregor point out that, despite suffering material disadvantage and sexual discrimination in Japan's male-dominated management culture, these young women possessed unprecedented disposable income, typically lavished on overseas travel and foreign luxury brands.[74]

Revisiting another topic introduced in my discussion of *Portrait (Futago)*, *Blinded by the Light* also pictures the complicity of art and commerce. This is apparent from the inclusion of Morimura's surname among the brand labels on the Elder Sister's red shopping bag and by the substitution of his own face for that of the writer

[72] Annear, 'Yasumasa Morimura,' ibid.

[73] Dana Friis-Hansen, 'Empire of Goods, Young Japanese Artists and the Commodity Culture,' *Flash Art*, n163, March – April 1992, p.79.

[74] For accounts of the spending power, commodity fetishes and life-styles of Japan's so-called 'Office Ladies' see Woronoff (p.232-7), and McGregor, pp.221-9.

Soseki Natsume on the banknotes. As Friis-Hansen observes, these Morimura-notes reference a controversial 1960s series of works by Genpei Akasegawa (that similarly utilized imitation 1000-yen bills) and also feature in a number of other early 1990s creations – notably *Yen Mountain* (1991, fig 1.15).[75] In this piece Morimura's simulated currency is stacked on a lacquer tray to form a Mt. Fuji-esque pyramid. Capped by a golden, Buddha-like *maneki neko*, the assemblage evidently reiterates *Blinded by the Light*'s satirical combination of divinity (i.e., Emperor Hirohito, *torii*-shaped sandals) and cash, thus implying that, in Japan, God = money.

I have observed, earlier, that the composite status of Morimura's self-portraits tacitly undermines the notion that culture is an expression of essences or fixed points of reference. Instead, Morimura's pictures represent 'Japanese-ness' and 'Western-ness' as collections of free-floating cultural signifiers, the combinations and permutations of which are potentially without limit. The degree to which *Blinded by the Light* freely mixes and matches various elements is evident from the aforementioned imposition of Morimura's face on the 1000-yen notes, the multiplicity of logos on the Elder Sister's red shopping bag, and the fact that her red and gold Chanel suit is embellished with a Louis Vuitton pattern. However, what particularly defines Morimura's multiple self-portrait as an exemplar of cultural 'cross-pollination' or *hybridity* is that it employs digital editing technology to combine photographic representations of the artist's face and body with mechanically reproduced portions of the source painting.[76] This is a feature of several 1990s *Art History* works, one that distinguishes them from

[75] Friis-Hansen, 'Empire of Goods,' p.79.

[76] For Morimura's account of his late 1980s adoption of digital image editing technology see Tatehata, 'On Criticism and the Lover,' p.104.

pieces such as *Portrait (Futago)* or *Six Brides* where the source image is completely recreated from scratch.

In his 'Morimura: 3 Readings,' the issues of cross-cultural exchange and hybridity inform the second and third parts of Bryson's article (particularly his 'second' reading of Morimura), and are also alluded to by Muroi in his short essay 'Art as Rotten Flesh, Beyond New Territorialisations' (1994). Extending the account I gave of it earlier, the essence of Bryson's second reading is that the jarring juxtapositions and bizarre transformations characterizing Morimura's *Art History* works mirror the operations of the global 'image-stream.' Divorced from cultural or historical contexts, images are continuously paraded, exchanged, broken down – and these disparate fragments merged to generate hitherto unprecedented forms. Moreover, as Bryson also observes, the image-stream demonstrates how technologically advanced communications and transport networks have effectively contracted time and space, thus generating a condition of 'cultural implosion.'[77] To illustrate his argument Bryson invokes Morimura's serial re-enactment of Cranach's *Judith and Holfernes* (c.1530): *Mother (Judith 1)* (1991, fig 1.16), *Mother (Judith 2)* (1991, fig 1.17) and *Mother (Judith 3)* (1991, fig 1.18). Here the original painting is subjected to a series of successively outlandish metamorphoses, alluding in the second picture to Arcimboldo's 'vegetable heads' and culminating in the third photograph's representation of Judith as a golden-skinned samurai-cum-geisha.

In his third 'reading,' Bryson further extends his analysis of Morimura's work, suggesting that the artist's self-portraits do not

[77] Bryson, 'Morimura: 3 readings,' p.77. Bryson is alluding to the term 'cultural implosion' in Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media, The Extensions of Man* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1995 (1964)), pp.3-5.

merely mimic global exchanges of *images*, but also the operations of global *capital*. On this basis, Bryson suggests that, whilst works like *Portrait (Futago)* may be legitimately interpreted as critiques of Western racism and imperialism, such assessments fail to embrace their total function. Bryson speculates that the perspective in Morimura's pictures may be 'a *later* era of global capital looking back on an *earlier* one' (i.e., the capitalism exemplified by state run monopolies such as the British East India Company in the colonial era).[78] In support of this proposition, Bryson observes that Morimura's practice mimes the niche-marketing strategies of trans-national conglomerates. Hence, for the United States: the overtly politically correct Manet re-enactments, and for the United Kingdom: Pre-Raphaelite appropriations (such as *Portrait (Six Brides)*, exhibited at the Tate Gallery, Liverpool in the aforementioned show *A Cabinet of Signs*).[79] Additional evidence for Bryson's idea that Morimura targets his work for specific international audiences is the artist's claim that his sales figures reflect the state of the global economy.[80]

Like Bryson, Muroi similarly relates Morimura's self-portraits to the deluge of images that permeate contemporary consumer culture, linking this aspect of the artist's production to currents in postmodern Western thought. Muroi begins by acknowledging that Morimura's photographs have excited comparisons with so-called Simulation Art (a 1980s movement exemplified by Bickerton's aforementioned paintings of corporate logos, or the industrially

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[78] Bryson, 'Morimura: 3 readings,' p.78.

[79] Ibid, pp.78-9.

[80] Kay Itoi, 'Beauty Is Commotion,' interview with Morimura, c.2001, <www.artnet.com/Magazine/features/itoi/itoi8-3-01.asp> (27 May 2005) (article published in abridged form as 'Japan's Man of Many Faces,' *Newsweek International* (Atlantic Edition), August 6, 2001).

fabricated and/or readymade sculptures of Haim Steinbach and Jeff Koons). [81] The theoretical basis of Simulation Art was provided by Jean Baudrillard's influential book *Simulations* (1983). In this work, Baudrillard claims that the postmodern, post-industrial world is one in which 'reality' is no longer grounded in unique or original material objects but is rather 'produced [via]… simulation… from matrices, memory banks and command modules.'[82] In consequence, Baudrillard suggests that simulation amounts to 'the generation by models of a real without an origin or [material] reality: a hyperreal.'[83] The 'hyperreality' of Morimura's self-portraits is underpinned by Yoko Hayashi's observation that their 'source' materials are not, typically, the 'original' artworks but rather reproductions in art books and magazines.[84] In other words, it is not unique, material *objects* (i.e., fixed origins or reference points) to which the artist's photographs refer but rather the globally ubiquitous codes of representation within which *images* are exchanged, transformed and reproduced *en masse*.

However, Muroi also suggests that Morimura's self-portraits depart from Bickerton *et al* in that they are motivated less by a spirit of criticism than a 'desire to erase the Self and melt into the flood of imagery that characterizes life in contemporary consumer society.'[85] On this basis, Muroi interprets Morimura's self-portraits as visual metaphors for the 'flesh of the world,' as conceived by Maurice

[81] Hisashi Muroi, 'Art As Rotten Flesh, Beyond New Territorialisations,' *Midwest*, n5, Dunedin Public Art Gallery, 1994, p.35.

[82] Jean Baudrillard, *Simulations* trans Paul Foss, Paul Patton, and Philip Beitchman (New York: Semiotext(e), 1983), p.3.

[83] Ibid, p.2.

[84] Hayashi, 'Morimura Yasumasa, Self-Portrait as Art History, Escalating 'I,' Simulating the Museum', p.62. See also Lufty, p.147.

[85] Muroi, 'Art As Rotten Flesh, Beyond New Territorialisations,' p.35.

Merleau-Ponty in his book *The Visible and the Invisible* (1964).[86] According to Merleau-Ponty, the 'flesh' is neither material, nor a collection of facts, nor even an object of cognition. Rather it is 'a sort of incarnate principle... the possibility and exigency for... what makes the fact be a fact... makes the facts have meaning' – whilst, in itself, resisting determination *as* fact, that is, through reflection.[87] To some degree this immaterial 'flesh' harmonizes with the virtual (i.e., hyperreal) nature of Morimura's images. However, it is Merleau-Ponty's characterization of the 'flesh' as 'the formative medium of the object and the subject' [88] with which Muroi is primarily concerned. To the extent that Morimura's self-portraits bear witness to the implosion and commingling of subjects and objects, self and world, Muroi suggests that they resonate with Merleau-Ponty's conception of the 'flesh' as an elemental unity within which such dichotomies are simultaneously enabled and dissolved.

Although Muroi presents some interesting perspectives, I would argue that his (admittedly brief) discussion oversimplifies Morimura's work. In the first place, Muroi's assertion that Morimura does not seek a critical position in his self-portraits is excessively totalising. As I have suggested previously, works such as *Portrait (Futago)* and *Blinded by the Light* invite interpretation as cutting satires of, variously, Western cultural imperialism, Japan's conservative arts establishment and post-Bubble woes, and the complicity of fine art and commerce. However, I acknowledge that Morimura's penchant for parody does not necessarily amount to a

[86] Ibid.

[87] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, ed Claude Lefort, trans Alphonso Lingis (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1968, originally published as *Le Visible et l'invisible*, Editions Gallimard, 1964), pp.138-40.

[88] Ibid, p.147.

thoroughgoing criticism. This is particularly evident in pieces like *Portrait (Six Brides)* or the *Actress* self-portraits. Their camp humour and visual extravagance supports Morimura's claim that he is motivated more by 'love' for his subjects than 'criticism,' and that 'entertainment' is an important aspect of his art-making. More problematic is Muroi's allegation that Morimura's self-portraits evince a desire to 'erase the Self' as a prelude to disappearing oppositions and difference in general. Reiterating a point made earlier, I would suggest that the overt fracture and dissonance characterizing many of Morimura's images reifies rather than effaces difference. Moreover, Muroi's suggestion that Morimura wishes to vanish his ego overlooks the narcissistic overtones inherent in the status of the artist's pictures as *self*-portraits – not to mention Morimura's assertion: 'My work… serves as a means to explore, and express my personality.'[89] Insofar as Morimura's self-portraits reflect intercultural hybridisation and implosion, Muroi's deployment of concepts like 'hyperreality' and 'the flesh' is reasonable. However, I would argue that, whilst Morimura's photographs harmonize with such ideas, they visualise less a *vanishing* of identity and difference than the *suspension* of such terms in a space of indeterminacy. It is precisely this kind of ambiguity Morimura cultivates in his work in order to maximise possibilities for creative free-play.

In concluding my analysis of Morimura's self-portraits, I have a final point to make – one that introduces a theme for further discussion in the following chapters. I suggest that the relationship between Morimura's work and the system of global exchanges (i.e., the 'image-stream,' trans-national flows of people, products and capital), as well as the properties of this system itself, can be

[89] Morimura quoted in Sand, 'Yasumasa Morimura', ibid.

usefully illuminated by invoking the idea of *immanence*. Here I am thinking of immanence in a dual sense – firstly as implying *inherence* and secondly implying *pervasiveness*. The former meaning illustrates the relationship of Morimura's work to the system of global exchanges insofar as Morimura's photographs are considered to exist within (i.e., are contained by or emerge as an effect of) the system. The latter meaning characterizes the nature of the system itself, implying that it is an omnipresence in relation to which it may make no sense to speak of an 'outside.'

This vision of Morimura's work, and the system within which it operates, seems implicit in Bryson's remark that Morimura's cultural critique does not proceed 'from any moral ground above or outside the system'[90] and Muroi's declaration that that there is no 'outside' to the world Morimura re-inscribes with his 'rotten flesh.'[91] Both the form and content of Morimura's self-portraits supports such readings. As appropriations/simulations, his photographs generate 'new' images by re-combining pre-existing elements of the system from a position *inside* the system. Moreover, whilst a work like *Portrait (Futago)* seems to mock the complicity of fine art and commerce, in *Blinded by the Light* the superimposition of Morimura's face on the 1000-yen notes reflects the immanence of commercial structures. Indeed, like Warhol's advocacy of 'business art,'[92] Morimura's niche-marketing activities reveal his pragmatic acceptance of capitalism as a given – that is, the existence of a system so pervasive and universal that it makes no sense to speak of transcending it or operating 'outside' its compass.

[90] Bryson, 'Morimura: 3 readings,' p.78.

[91] Muroi, 'Art As Rotten Flesh, Beyond New Territorialisations,' p.37, p.35.

[92] Andy Warhol, *The Philosophy of Andy Warhol (From A to B and back Again)* (London: Pan Books, 1976), p.88.

Hence, *Blinded by the Light*'s 'critique' as such is levelled not at global capitalism but rather at those too stupid to work this system to their own advantage and who are thus doomed to be, not consumers *in* the system, but consumed *by* the system.

In this respect, Morimura's art-making resonates with Steinbach's admission that the New York Simulation artists took 'pleasure in objects and commodities…[and were] complicit with the production of desire… [rather] than being positioned somewhere outside it' (i.e., seeking a transcendent position from which to make 'objective' criticism).[93] Indeed, I would suggest that the relinquishing of an urge to transcendence, in favour of a pragmatic acceptance of one's encapsulation within structures regarded as immanent, seems to be a feature of the paradigm shift between modernism and postmodernism. Exemplified by Baudrillard's hyperreal world of simulation and Merleau-Ponty's notion of the 'flesh,' this 'immanent' perspective is also implicit in certain statements Derrida makes in *Of Grammatology*. For example: 'The movements of deconstruction do not destroy structures from the outside. They are not possible… except by inhabiting those structures… Operating necessarily from the inside, borrowing all… the resources of subversion from the old structure,' [94] and his famous pronouncement: '*Il n'y a pas de hors-texte*' (there is no outside-text).[95] As various commentators point out, Derrida is not necessarily denying the existence of a transcendent reality 'outside' systems like language so much as asserting that such a reality is *inconceivable* (i.e.: unable to be coherently thought where, in

[93] Haim Steinbach cited in Peter Nagy, 'From Criticism to Complicity,' *Flash Art*, n.129, Summer 1986, p.46.

[94] Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, p.24.

[95] Ibid, p.158.

Derrida's view, 'thought' = 'something inescapably mediated by language').[96] In the following chapters, I will revisit the notion of immanence in my discussion of Mori's work – particularly her visualisations of high technology and her incorporation of Buddhist ideas – and in relation to Murakami's suggestion that Japanese art and society are 'superflat.

[96] For analysis of the meaning (and common misconceptions) of Derrida's statement '*Il n'y a pas de hors-texte*' see Joseph Margolis, 'Philosophical Extravagance in Merleau-Ponty and Derrida' in M.C. Dillon, (ed), *Écart and Différance, Merleau-Ponty and Derrida on Seeing and Writing* (Atlantic Highlands, New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1997, p.116), and John D. Caputo (ed), *Deconstruction in a nutshell, A Conversation with Jacques Derrida*, (New York: Fordham University Press, 1997), pp.79-80.

Figure 1.1 Yasumasa Morimura, *Portrait (Futago)* 1988

Figure 1.2 Yasumasa Morimura, *Portrait (Van Gogh)* 1985

Figure 1.3 Yasumasa Morimura, *Daughter of Art History (Princess A)* 1990

Figure 1.4 Yasumasa Morimura, *Portrait (Six Brides)* 1991

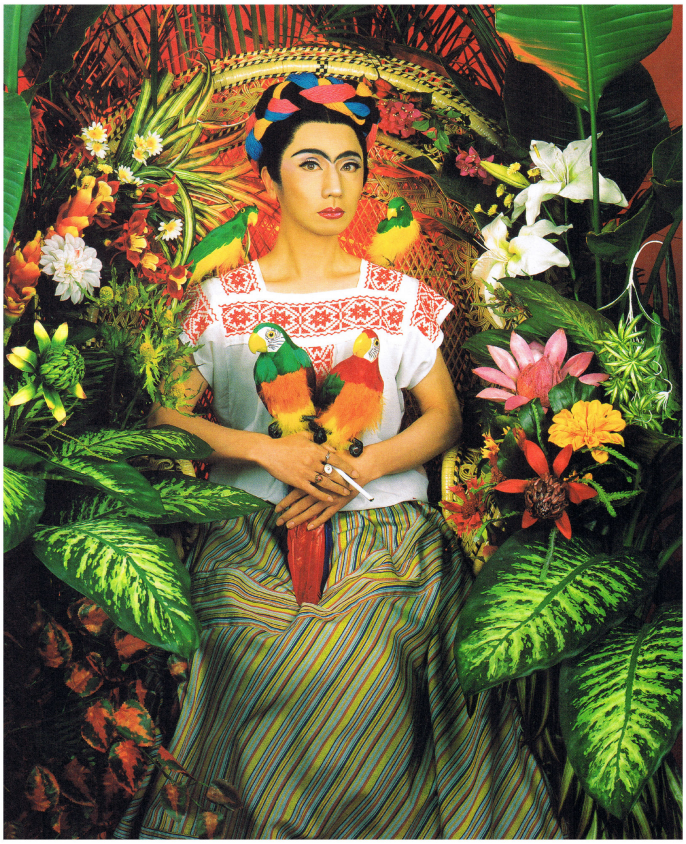

Figure 1.5 Yasumasa Morimura,
An Inner Dialogue with Frida Kahlo (Four Parrots) 2001

Figure 1.6 Yasumasa Morimura, *Portrait (Shōnen 1)* 1988

Figure 1.7 Yasumasa Morimura, *Portrait (Shōnen 2)* 1988

Figure 1.8 Yasumasa Morimura, *Portrait (Shōnen 3)* 1988

Figure 1.9 Yasumasa Morimura,
Self-portrait (Actress) / after Marlene Dietrich 1 1996

Figure 1.10 Josef von Sternberg, *The Blue Angel* 1930

Figure 1.11 Yasumasa Morimura, *Self-portrait (Actress) / Black Marilyn* 1996

Figure 1.12 Billy Wilder, *The Seven Year Itch* 1955

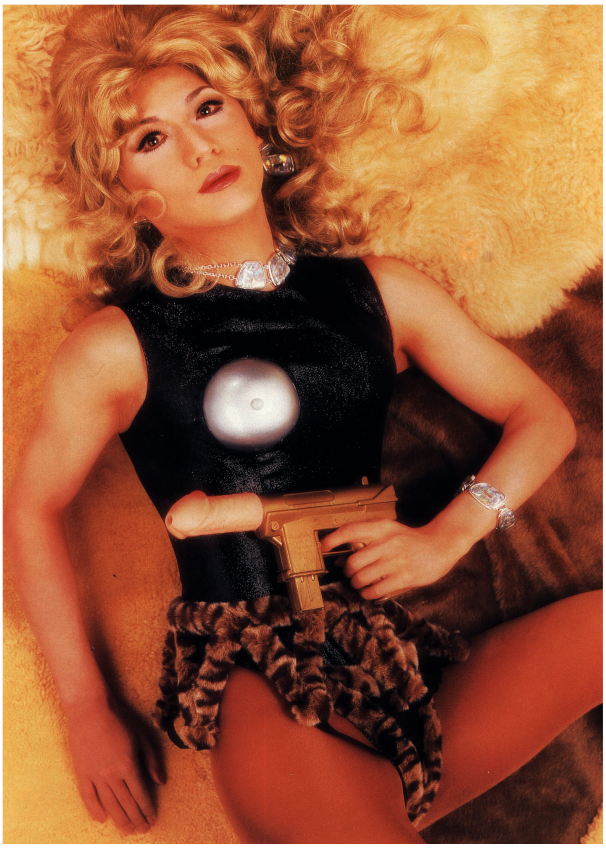

Figure 1.13 Yasumasa Morimura,
Self-portrait (Actress) / after Jane Fonda 2 1996

Figure 1.14 Yasumasa Morimura, *Blinded by the Light* 1991

Figure 1.15 Yasumasa Morimura, *Yen Mountain* 1991

Figure 1.16 Yasumasa Morimura, *Mother (Judith 1)* 1991

Figure 1.17 Yasumasa Morimura, *Mother (Judith 2)* 1991

Figure 1.18 Yasumasa Morimura, *Mother (Judith 3)* 1991

Chapter Two

Mariko Mori, Visions of Unity

2.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I examine aspects of Mariko Mori's work, ranging from her 1994-96 series of self-portraits as a cybernetic being to her latest large-scale project – the spectacular, US$1.5 million 'meta-machine' *Wave UFO*. I argue that *unity* or *oneness* is a primary theme in her art-making. Perhaps the most obvious union, alluded to in Mori's photographs, films, and sculptural installations, is that between human beings and technological structures. Furthermore, in light of the Eastern religious iconography present in her work after 1996, Mori's utopian vision of a united and technologically deified humanity is one that simultaneously fuses science and religion, future and tradition, matter and spirit. Insofar as her early pictures are set in Japanese locales and refer to Japanese pop culture, and given that her later productions cite traditional Japanese expressions of Buddhist and Shinto ideas, Mori's work invites consideration in terms of cultural difference. Conversely, in visualising human beings immersed within an encompassing techno-holism, other examples of her art tend flatten out or efface difference and thus admit interpretation as metaphorical allusions to processes of globalisation.

2.2 Ghosts in the Machine

In Mori's photographic self-portraits of 1994-96, she appears as an alluring, cybernetic being, posing in identifiably Japanese urban and/or technological environments. One of the last of these images is *Last Departure* (1996, fig 2.1) – a large-scale photographic

tableau set in the futuristic International Departures Hall of the recently completed, eighteen trillion yen, Kansai International Airport.[97] *Last Departure*'s pictured convergence of human beings and high technology illustrates the importance of *unity* or *oneness* as primary themes in Mori's work. The artist's attire reflects this combination of natural and manufactured elements. Comprising a short skirt with flaring waist attachments, bulbous collar, form-fitting stockings and knee-high boots, her costume is fabricated from shimmering, seamless, synthetic materials suggestive of moulded metal or plastic. Such allusions to a technologically augmented or cybernetic body are reinforced by the obvious artificiality of Mori's platinum blonde wig, glittering, metallic contact lenses, 'cute' cat's-head-shaped silver hairpiece and stiff-limbed, doll-like posture. The melding of humanity and technology is also implied by the multiplication of the figures (the production of exact replicas being a signature feature of high technology) and the correspondence between figures and setting. Materializing in triplicate beneath a pair of propeller-like arches, Mori's cyborg alter egos manifest as natural extensions of the futuristic architecture – humanoid translations of structures that, already, marry the highly finished and precisely engineered forms of modern industry with the serpentine rhythms of the organic realm. Thus, the divergent movement of Mori's v-shaped collar and waist adornments mirrors the sweeping, wing-like forms of the Kansai airport's interior ceiling decorations, whilst the pristine, metallic look of her outfit harmonizes with the high-tech materials employed in her surroundings: glass and stainless steel. There is also a consonance between the blue, white and silver tonalities of the artist's costume and the colours utilized in the encompassing space. These formal

[97] For a brief account of the Kansai airport development see McCormack, pp.25-6.

congruities create the impression that Mori's cool and sensual cyborg-selves are at one with this hi-tech environment.

In the previous chapter, I argued that Morimura's self-portraits could be interpreted as representing the immanence of global systems of exchange. In an analogous fashion, *Last Departure* reflects the immanence of technological structures insofar as it pictures the immersion of humanity within a technological system that quite literally has no 'outside.' This is suggested, firstly, by the presence of the crystalline sphere suspended between the palms of the central figure. On close inspection, one realises that the interior of the glass ball contains a fourth version of Mori's cybernetic persona. Poised with arms outstretched, this representation of the artist (and the Kansai airport interior) in miniature immediately evokes Leonardo da Vinci's well-known drawing *Vitruvian Man* (c.1490).[98] As far as cross-cultural exchanges between Japan and the West are concerned, this is a typical example of Mori's occasional quotations from Western art. However, as David Kemp has observed, Leonardo's drawing is often interpreted as a symbol of unity; a cosmic totality immanent in the proportions and symmetries of the human body.[99] On this basis, the reflection, in the crystal ball, of *Last Departure*'s figure and setting generates an exemplary identity between inside and outside, micro and macro. This implies that the technological environment is an all-encompassing wholeness, which presents the same appearance (or, at least, exhibits the same basic structures and laws) regardless of the perspective (position, scale) from which it is viewed. This isotropy

[98] Jonathan Wallis, 'Mariko Mori: Art in Search of an Enlightened Future' (Ph.D. dissertation, Temple University, Philadelphia, 2004, p.308), also invokes Leonardo's drawing in his discussion of the spherical meditation chamber inside Mori's *Dream Temple* installation.

[99] David Kemp, *Leonardo da Vinci, The Marvellous Works of Nature and Man* (London: Dent, 1981), pp.115-7.

is further emphasized by the myriad reflections of the Kansai airport interior in the polished floor and glass siding of the walkway. Although the initial impression is one of bewildering fracture and complexity, it is also apparent that these multi-angled, interpenetrating mirror images transmit nothing from 'outside' the scene. Indeed, they seem to deny the very notion of 'outside-ness,' functioning as a series of visual 'conversations' by which the architecture 'speaks to itself' and thus continuously reiterates its status as a self-sufficient unity.

At first glance, *Last Departure* seems to celebrate the meeting between humanity and high technology – elevating this union to the status of a religious experience. Dominated by soaring airfoils, the Kansai airport architecture generates cathedral-like allusions to flight, freedom and material transcendence. Echoing these aerodynamic forms, Mori's costume transforms her into the equivalent of a cyber-deity or guardian angel who facilitates entry into a technological paradise. Indeed, the ghostly, de-materialised aspect of the two flanking figures accentuates their status as emblems of technologically enabled spiritual transformation. This is even more apparent in the closely related audio-visual piece *Miko no Inori* (1996, fig 2.2), where against the same Kansai airport backdrop, Mori's glamorous cybernetic character wields *Last Departure*'s microcosmic crystal ball in a series of eroticised and ritualistic gestures. *Miko no Inori* is usually translated as 'The Shaman Girl's Prayer' – *inori* signifying 'prayer' or 'supplication,' whilst in relation to the notion of cultural difference *miko* carries connotations specific to Shinto, implying a 'shrine maiden' or 'medium' who channels *kami*. In the broader context of Mori's art-making, this conflation of futuristic fantasy and Japanese religious tradition clearly prefigures her audio-visual spectacular *Nirvana* and sculpture-cum-space-machine *Wave UFO*.

Nevertheless, in contrast to the pronounced techno-optimism of Mori's later creations, *Last Departure* tempers its utopianism with a discernible irony. The manner by which the central cyborg brandishes the crystal ball suggests that humanity is quite literally 'in the hands' of technology; the compass of human existence is entirely defined and regulated by the technological environment. On this basis, the ghost-like, flanking figures are less avatars of humanity's technologically assisted apotheosis than virtual reality surrogates by which the impossibility of attaining genuine material transcendence is confirmed. The role of technology as a socially conditioning (if not potentially totalitarian) force is also evident in the way the trio of cyber-Moris behave as sentinels, regulating access to the technological realm beyond. Moreover, the shell-like carapaces and clone-like sameness of the artist's figures bestow on them a distinctly insectoid aspect; soldier 'ants' guarding the portal to a technological hive. As Michael Cohen has observed, the full materialisation of the central, crystal-ball-bearing figure is reminiscent of the way icons on a computer desktop are illuminated by the passage of a mouse pointer.[100] Thus, in a similar fashion to a computer operating system, Mori's multiple self-portrait presents the 'user' with only a limited menu of choices. The implication is that, in a technological society, human beings are empowered to act only within the parameters defined by the technological system.

Last Departure's ambivalent representation of the convergence of human beings and high technology suggests that it is a transitional piece in Mori's oeuvre – one that retains the ironic and socially critical aura of the 1994-95, Tokyo-based, cyborg self-portraits with which she first achieved international recognition. These pictures

[100] Michael Cohen, 'Mariko Mori, Plastic Dreams in the Reality Bubble,' *Flash Art*, n194, May – June 1997, p.96.

were produced following Mori's return to Japan after several years working and studying in the West. As she has acknowledged, their emphasis on the costumed body is a feature that reflects her background in modelling and fashion design.[101] At the same time, however, Mori has also described these images as reassessments of the group-oriented, conformist culture from which, in the late 1980s, she had felt 'compelled to escape.'[102] Furthermore, these works invite consideration in relation to the notion of cross-cultural exchanges between Japan and the West insofar as their socially analytical tenor reflects Mori's 1992-93 involvement in the Independent Study Program at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York – a nine-month course in which theory and criticism were highlighted.

Play With Me (1994, fig 2.3) is typical of the Tokyo-based photographs. As in *Last Departure*, Mori pictures herself as a glamorous, cybernetic being poised at the entrance to a technological interior. However, the venue to which she mediates admittance is no spectacular 'temple of technology' but rather the seedy premises of a computer game store such as one might encounter in Tokyo's discount electronics Akihabara district. Moreover, in contrast to *Last Departure*'s cyborg priestesses, *Play With Me* casts Mori in the less exalted role of cybernetic streetwalker. Stationed alongside a Sega arcade machine, she directs a shy, soliciting glance towards two male customers at the left of the picture, tacitly inviting them to 'score.' Furthermore, Mori's comment that her Tokyo-based pictures 'metaphorically question

[101] Mariko Mori in conversation with Kunie Sugiura, *Journal of Contemporary Art Online*, 1998, <www.jca-online.com/mori.html> (15 March 2006).

[102] Ibid.

women's position in Japan and elsewhere,'[103] encourages one to interpret *Play With Me* as a feminist statement. The same applies to her pantomime of a roboticized 'Office Lady' in *Tea Ceremony III* (1995, fig 2.4), or a sailor-suited, cyber-teen prostitute in *Love Hotel* (1995, fig 2.5).

In relation to *Play With Me*, Mori commented: 'A lot of so-called otaku shop at that store… They are more interested in cartoon characters than real girls. That's why I wanted to stand there.'[104] By *otaku*, Mori means Japan's obsessive male fans of science fiction-flavoured *manga*, *anime* and computer games. In the popular imagination, *otaku* seek sexual satisfaction with virtual females partly because they are too socially inept and alienated to form relationships with real women, and partly out of a nihilistic indulgence of abjection and *dame* (being 'useless' or 'no good').[105] Insofar as it satirizes *otaku* techno-fetishes, *Play With Me* invites consideration as an emblem of cultural difference; Mori's character closely resembles that class of cyber-heroines who became prominent in Japan's *anime* subculture during the 1990s. This phenomenon has been acknowledged by commentators such as Susan Napier and Sharalyn Orbaugh – both of whom invoke, as a

[103] Mori quoted in Kathleen F. Magnan, 'The Cyber Chic of Mariko Mori,' *Art Asia Pacific*, v3, n2, 1996, pp.66-7.

[104] Mori quoted in Sarah Bayliss, 'An Appreciation of Cute Finds a Niche in High Art,' *New York Times*, December 6, 1998, p.2.43.

[105] For accounts of the origins and defining features of Japan's *otaku* subculture see Sharon Kinsella, *Adult Manga, Culture & Power in Contemporary Japanese Society* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2000, pp.128-31), Takashi Murakami, 'Impotence Culture – Anime' in Des Moines Art Center, *My reality : contemporary art and culture of Japanese animation*, exh. cat. (Des Moines, Iowa, 2001, pp.60-5), and Murakami (moderator), Toshio Okada and Kaichirō Morikawa, 'Otaku Talk,' trans and annotated by Reiko Tomii in Murakami (ed), *Little Boy, The Arts of Japan's Exploding Subculture*, exh. cat., trans Linda Hoaglund *et al* (New York: Japan Society, and New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2005), pp.165-81.

prime example, the cyborg police assassin Motoko Kusanagi in *Ghost in the Shell* (fig 3.12, originally created by Masamune Shirō as a *manga* in 1991, and subsequently produced as a 1995 *anime* feature film directed by Mamoru Oshii, and a 2002 *anime* television series directed by Kenji Kamiyama).[106] In Chapter Three, I provide a more in-depth account of how *otaku* subculture and *anime* characters may function as indicators of cultural difference.

To the extent that Mori's mid 1990s cyborg self-portraits fantasize a melding of human beings and technological structures, they reflect certain 'realities' – not only of contemporary urban Japan but also Japan's immersion within the wider, postmodern world. In this respect, Mori's mid 1990s cyborg self-portraits function as potential indicators of cross-cultural exchange insofar as they reveal how interactions between 'separate' cultural entities (i.e., Japan and the West) are subject to contemporary processes of globalisation. In relation to this idea, one early commentary addressing Mori's production that seems particularly worthy of consideration is Paul Miller's essay 'Across the Morphic Fields: The Art of Mariko Mori' (1996). In a manner reminiscent of Bryson's association of Morimura's self-portraits with the workings of the postmodern 'image-stream,' Miller places Mori's work in the context of the contemporary, global 'information… sphere.'[107] Furthermore, in the

[106] For discussion of *Ghost in the Shell's* Kusanagi character as emblematic of 1990s Japanese cyber-heroines see Susan J. Napier, *Anime, from Akira to Princess Mononoke, Experiencing Contemporary Japanese Animation* (New York: Palgrave, 2001, pp.104-16), and Sharalyn Orbaugh, 'Busty Battlin' Babes: The Evolution of the *Shōjo* in 1990s Visual Culture' in Joshua S. Mostow, Norman Bryson, and Maribeth Graybill (eds), *Gender and Power in the Japanese Visual Field* (University of Hawai'i Press, 2003), p.216, p.219, p.222. See also the *Ghost in the Shell* official website, <www.manga.com/ghost> (2 February 2007).

[107] Paul D. Miller, 'Across the Morphic Fields, The Art of Mariko Mori' in Lia Gangitano and Steven Nelson (eds), *New Histories*, exh. cat. (Boston: Institute of Contemporary Art, 1996), p.138.

same way that Bryson relates Morimura's *Mother (Judith)* series to the startling juxtapositions and bizarre transformations that characterize daily exposure to electronic media, Miller links Mori's 1994-95 Tokyo-based tableaux to the 'bewildering maze of… phantasmal… meanings… [generated by] the electronicized world culture.'[108] Implicit in Miller's assessment of Mori's pictures as rendering 'the surface beneath the surfaces, the place where myths come from,'[109] is the view that reality is nothing but 'surface' – a play of free-floating signifiers divorced from any fixed frame of reference. To this extent, Miller's interpretation of Mori's photographs parallels Bryson's vision of Morimura's pictures as bearing witness to the postmodern destabilisation of origins and essences. However, whilst Bryson construes Morimura's self-portraits as being concerned with the nature of identity in the abstract, reflecting on 'the life of the image, and our life *in* the image' at the close of the twentieth century,[110] Miller regards Mori's pantomimes as being more directly engaged with the 'reality' of contemporary, urban Japan. At the same time, one of Miller's primary claims is that, as a consequence of Japan's immersion within global networks of information exchange, this urban 'reality' has become profoundly mutable and ambiguous. With their surreal disjunctions of fact and fantasy, the material and the virtual, Mori's cyborg self-portraits dramatize this state of equivocation.[111]

Play With Me substantiates Miller's reading to the extent that it interposes Mori's *anime*/computer game-inspired character into a

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[108] Ibid, p.139.

[109] Ibid.

[110] Bryson, 'Morimura: 3 readings', p.76.

[111] Miller, pp.139-40.

contemporary, urban setting where the fragmentary clutter of people, products, advertising placards and price signs already signals a thorough intermixing of concrete reality with a realm dominated by fantasy and abstraction (i.e., *anime* images, monetary transactions). Indeed, as Richard Vine has suggested, the placement of Mori's cyborg persona next to the Sega video machine immediately suggests the irruption into material reality of an entity that normally inhabits the virtual domain.[112] *Last Departure* similarly contrasts real and virtual by juxtaposing the fully materialized, centre figure with two spectral companions. In the context of electronic media, Mori's flanking cyber-ghosts are akin to the diffracted side-lobes or harmonics of a fundamental frequency, thus suggesting processes of information duplication and transmission. At the same time, *Last Departure* differs from *Play With Me* in that the 'reality' it pictures is one where the categories 'material,' 'virtual,' 'fact' and 'fantasy' have been sufficiently destabilized that meaningful distinctions between them no longer obtain. *Play With Me*'s jumble of predominantly *katakana*-based price signs, posters depicting *anime*-style characters, and inclusion of a Sega video game machine underpins its representation of a specific milieu (i.e., post-Bubble Akihabara) and lampooning of a distinct class of Japanese consumers (i.e., *otaku*). However, this stress on particulars is largely absent from Mori's Kansai airport-based tableau. To reiterate the point I made earlier, *Last Departure*'s formal isotropy, identical cyborg inhabitants and harmonious integration of figures and setting combine to produce a generalized vision of unity and wholeness within which differences are effaced.

In this respect, Mori's multiple self-portrait invites interpretation as picturing a later phase of the human/technological convergence

[112] Richard Vine, 'Mariko Mori at Deitch Projects and other venues,' *Art in America*, v84, n9, September 1996, p.107.

pantomimed in the Tokyo-based images. For example, in *Play With Me*, a still-extant dissociation of human and technological domains is implied by the obvious gap separating her cyborg character from the two male shoppers, the sheer incongruity of her appearance, and most of all by the fact that neither customer acknowledges her importunate gaze. At the same time, the work ironically denies the possibility of any such separation insofar as *Play With Me*'s two male customers eschew a 'real-world' encounter with Mori's cybernetic prostitute in favour of the *virtual* pleasures offered within the computer game store. *Last Departure* evidently takes this state of affairs to its inevitable conclusion. Impassive, remote and self-contained, Mori's cybernetic triplets inhabit an environment where human beings, flawed, eccentric and uniquely individual, have been completely absorbed into a techno-holism dominated by inhuman standards of perfection and conformity.

Although Miller emphasizes the surreal fracture and heterogeneity of Mori's Tokyo-based self-portraits, the fact that he relates her images to the 'electronicized world culture' raises issues associated with globalisation. Of particular relevance, in this regard, is his suggestion that Mori's cybernetic masquerades emerge from the information sphere's 'fractal stew' and reflect the similarly 'fractal geometries of the information-laden urban landscape.'[113] Such terminology implies that the spaces of postmodernity (whether real or virtual) present the same appearance, or manifest the same properties, regardless of the viewer's frame of reference (i.e., geographical location, cultural perspective). As Miller also suggests, this fractal quality is temporal as well as spatial so that, over time, both physical reality and cyberspace tend to throw up structures whose appearance evokes a continuous sense of *déjà vu*. Thus, in a

[113] Miller, pp.143-4.

work like *Play With Me*, neither Mori's cyborg character, nor the multiplicity of pop-culture motifs can be traced back to determinate points of origin in space or time. Instead, these features reflect the continual permutations and exchanges of signifiers occurring within the information sphere itself. Miller's commentary implies that, in the data-drenched contemporary world, linear systems of logic have been superseded by holistic networks of cross-references. From this perspective, cross-cultural exchanges are not so much interactions between autonomous existences than warps and folds characterizing the ever-shifting (yet ever-the-same) immanent geometry of a culturally amorphous, global fabric or field.

To an even greater extent than *Play With Me*, *Last Departure* reflects processes of globalisation and thus substantiates Miller's 'fractal' reading of Mori's Tokyo-based self-portraits. The generalized nature of the Kansai airport-based tableau, and its effacing of differences between human beings and high technology, evidently resonates in the cultural domain. For what *Last Departure*'s *airport* setting underscores is the degree to which certain features of high technology (advanced communications and transport networks, the transformation and extension of human bodies through technology-based interventions) have become truly *global* phenomena. This global outlook complements Mori's depiction of the immersion of human beings within an immanent techno-holism, and thus explains why perhaps, in stark contrast to Morimura's ironic and discordant images of 'psychological... imbalance,' *Last Departure* exhibits little such chimerical fracture. Indeed, with the exception of the Leonardo citation, and the Kansai airport setting notwithstanding, Mori's picture evinces no outward signs of cross-cultural exchange, nor indeed of any cultural specificity, Japanese or otherwise.

In this regard, *Last Departure* epitomizes aspects of cultural experience in the global age. As Mori has observed, regardless of whether one is in Asia, Europe or America, eating and accommodation arrangements are often so similar that 'You can't tell where you are. Popular culture has flattened everything out.'[114] Insofar as Mori's work mirrors the proliferation and hybridisation of signs across cultural boundaries, it participates in this process of globalisation – a complicity Mori openly acknowledges.[115] Indeed, one might legitimately interpret *Last Departure* as an early representation of the ideal of global citizenship Mori expressed in the statement accompanying her *Nirvana* installation at the 1997 Venice Biennale – a template for a postmillennial, post-human future where, in her own words, the challenge is for 'the power and the energy of the human spirit... [to] unify the world in peace and harmony without any cultural or national borders.'[116] Among Japanese artists, Mori is not alone in extolling the virtues of a culturally non-specific internationalism. For example, Tatsuo Miyajima (whose 'gadgets' and LED-based pieces also embrace technology) has expressed his desire to be a 'borderless person.'[117] Morimura has justified his choice of photography on the basis that it is a culturally non-aligned medium.[118] In Chapter Three, I will

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[114] Mori interviewed by Eleanor Heartney, 'Mariko Mori: In Search of Paradise Lost,' *Art Press*, n256, April 2000, p.40.

[115] Mori acknowledges this complicity with processes of globalisation in the interview conducted by Heartney, 'Mariko Mori: In Search of Paradise Lost,' ibid.

[116] Mori, 'Artist Statement' in *XLVII Esposizione Internazionale d'Arte: Futuro Presente Passato*, exh. cat., Biennale di Venezia and Milan, 1997 (p.424), reproduced in Dominic Molon, 'Countdown to Ecstasy' in Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, and Serpentine Gallery, *Mariko Mori*, exh. cat. (Chicago and London, 1998), p.11.

[117] Tatsuo Miyajima quoted by Mary Haus, 'Tatsuo Miyajima, Dreaming by Numbers,' *Art News*, v90, n9, November 1991, p.80.

[118] Morimura quoted in Lufty, p.147.

discuss how Murakami seeks to create a kind of universal art by appealing to the idea of a 'superflat' reality in which 'distinct' cultural entities (Japan, the West) are considered to exist, already intermixed, within an immanent global field.

2.3 A Slice of Heaven

The themes introduced by *Last Departure* are continued in Mori's spectacular 3D film *Nirvana* (1997, fig 2.6) and the closely related, large-scale photograph *Pure Land* (1997, fig 2.7). Reiterating Mori's concern with unity and humanity's techno-apotheosis, these slightly later works are distinguished by their incorporation of Eastern religious iconography. Indeed, *Nirvana* and *Pure Land* invite consideration as emblems of cultural difference insofar as they cite specific examples of traditional Japanese, Buddhist art. As Jonathan Wallis, Carol Eliel and Jerry Saltz observe, *Nirvana* begins with a fairly conventional image of creation – a cosmic explosion from which emerge seven balls of light. Bearing an elaborate headdress, and garbed in a richly decorated silk kimono equipped with wing-like shoulder attachments, Mori materializes within one of these glowing spheres. Divesting herself of this transparent shell, she scatters lotus petals into the surrounding air whilst gliding over a vast, primordial landscape consisting of a body of water in the foreground and mountains in the background. The remaining six balls of light whirl about the artist, each manifesting a cute, pointy-headed 'space alien' equipped with various instruments recognizable as those used to create traditional Buddhist and Shinto music.[119] To a soundtrack Rachel Schreiber characterizes as

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[119] Since it was not possible to experience *Nirvana*'s 3D, cinematic wizardry firsthand, I have distilled my account of Mori's film from reproductions of video stills and descriptions given in Wallis (pp.219-20), Carol S. Eliel, 'Interpreting Tradition: Mariko Mori's Nirvana' in Museum

'Eastern-inspired techno,'[120] Mori chants softly: '*Kamitachi ni aitai*' (I want to meet the divine beings), whilst performing a series of *mudras* (sacred hand gestures). Indeed, Wallis identifies one of the *mudras* in *Nirvana* as the *Amida Raigo-in* (Welcoming to Paradise).[121] Still surrounded by her celestial accompanists, Mori comes to rest suspended above a lotus blossom in the middle of the oceanic expanse. Spheres of light enter her torso from which emerges a glowing egg that transforms into a lotus bud-shaped (or *hōshu*-like) crystal. The crystal levitates between Mori's hands, and out into the space of the audience. The sequence concludes as it began with Mori's character and her musical attendants dissolving back into an undifferentiated, whiteness.

In common with *Last Departure*, *Nirvana* and *Pure Land* exhibit a number of formal attributes that invite one to interpret them as fantasies of unity or wholeness. In the first place, the flesh and clothing of Mori's deity figure glows with the same salmon pink and golden hues that suffuse the background landforms, water and sky. As with *Last Departure*, this tonal harmony produces a consonance between figure and setting, implying that Mori's character is an integral feature of her surrounding environment. Moreover, the reflection of the distant mountains and sky in the foreground body of water suggests not only a proximate encounter between heavenly and earthly realms but also the efficacy by which one mode of being may be 'translated' into the other. That is, their reciprocal existence within a single, supervening order. In both *Nirvana* and *Pure Land*,

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of Contemporary Art, Chicago, and Serpentine Gallery, *Mariko Mori* (pp.30-1), and Jerry Saltz, 'A Zone of Her Own,' *Village Voice*, v44, i16, April 27, 1999, p.147.

[120] Rachel Schreiber, 'Cyborgs, avatars, laa-laa and Po: the work of Mariko Mori,' *Afterimage*, v26, i5, March – April 1999, pp.10-12.

[121] Wallis, p.228.

this commerce between spiritual and material domains is further emphasized by Mori's goddess figure who extends her *hōshu*-equipped left hand towards the viewer in a gesture of invitation. Mori's manipulations of the *hōshu*, not to mention *Nirvana*'s depiction of the artist and her musician-attendants materializing within transparent orbs, reiterates the crystal ball motif employed in *Last Departure* and *Miko no Inori*. As noted previously, this formal device fomented an air of immanence by generating an identity between interiority and exteriority, microcosm and macrocosm. However, if *Last Departure* pictures the immanence of globally ubiquitous technological structures then *Nirvana* and *Pure Land* fantasize an immanence of a more cosmic variety. *Nirvana*'s 3D video trickery adds yet another dimension to this collapsing of perspectives into an all-encompassing wholeness. Insofar as the *hōshu* emerges from Mori's body and levitates into the space of the spectator, it seems to erase distinctions between (i.e., *fuse* or *unify*) spirit and matter, virtual and real, viewer and viewed. A final formal indicator of unity (particularly evident in *Nirvana* by virtue of its temporality but also discernible in *Pure Land*) is the emphasis on cycles or circularity. Thus, Mori's film ends as it begins – with an undifferentiated void. At various points, in the *Nirvana* sequence, the artist's character is encircled by her musical entourage – an orbital relationship clearly pictured in *Pure Land*. Further references to circularity include the halo-like ribbon that rings Mori's head and shoulders and the wheel-shaped, henna dye patterns on her palms.

As I suggested earlier, *Last Departure*'s vision of cyborg priestesses guarding the entrance to a technological paradise established humanity's technologically assisted apotheosis as one of Mori's basic themes. However, if the highly regimented, chilly blue and silver techno-hive depicted in Mori's Kansai airport-based tableau looked distinctly dystopian, then by contrast the expansive natural

settings and warm, golden illumination of *Nirvana* and *Pure Land* radiate an air of unbridled utopianism. This more positive attitude is reinforced by the substitution of a sextet of huggable, pastel-hued and distinctly baby-like 'aliens' in place of the earlier picture's remote and menacing cyborg sentries. Moreover, compared with *Last Departure*, where intimations of flight and freedom are the exclusive province of the awe-inspiring architecture (i.e., the technological superstructure), *Nirvana* and *Pure Land* invest these qualities in beings who exist on a human scale and with whom the spectator can readily engage. Not the least of these is Mori's goddess character whose benevolent summons contrasts sharply with the confrontational attitude of *Last Departure*'s cybernetic gatekeepers.

In relation to Mori's developing concern with unity or oneness, it is also significant that the transformation imagined in *Nirvana* and *Pure Land* is not achieved through technological interventions alone but from the *blending* of technology with nature and spiritual tradition. Hence, in both works, Mori harmoniously combines a primeval landscape (according to Lisa Corrin, a region adjacent to the Dead Sea[122]) and a kimono-clad deity figure with synthetic elements such as the plastic lotus flower and the space-alien musicians, whose *anime*-style bodies exhibit the unblemished, generalized appearance typical of computer-generated characters. In this respect, *Nirvana* and *Pure Land* reflect Mori's conviction that the future of technology is to 'coexist with nature,'[123] as well as her stated desire to develop a utopian vision of the future by drawing

[122] Lisa Corrin, 'Mariko Mori's Quantum *Nirvana*' in Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, and Serpentine Gallery, *Mariko Mori*, p.24.

[123] Mori interviewed by Neville Wakefield, 'Momentous Mori,' *Interview*, v29, i6, June 1999, pp.106-9.

upon traditional ideas, and to effect a 'fusion [of]… science and religion… through art.'[124]

In keeping with their blending of various elements, *Nirvana* and *Pure Land* also contain multiple religious references. For example, Wallis observes that Mori's headdress and kimono (identical in both works) reproduce garments worn during Shinto rituals.[125] Similarly, Eliel suggests that the artist's self-representation, as a deity figure hovering over a body of water, admits interpretation as a visualisation of the Shinto creation myth where the sun goddess *Ama-terasu-o-mikami* touched her spear to the surface of the ocean and brought forth the islands of Japan.[126] Although Eliel's observation is made in relation to *Pure Land* (which contains a spit of land along its lower right boundary), her comment applies equally well to *Nirvana*. However, as the titles *Nirvana* and *Pure Land* indicate, the primary religious references in these works are Buddhist. Moreover, insofar as both works cite Buddhist ideas and iconography in a specifically *Japanese* context, they invite consideration as emblems of cultural difference. Thus, as both Wallis and Eliel acknowledge, Mori's deity figure closely resembles depictions of *Kichijō-ten* – the Buddhist goddess of wealth, beauty and good fortune.[127] Familiar examples include the eighth century painting in Yakasushi-ji Temple, Nara (fig 2.8), and the late twelfth century – early thirteenth century painted wood sculpture in Jōruri-ji Temple, Kyoto (fig 2.9). Mori's character clearly echoes *Kichijō-ten's* signature halo, extravagant headdress and richly

[124] Mori quoted by Eliel, p.28, p.19.

[125] Wallis, p.221, p.223.

[126] Eliel, p.30.

[127] Wallis (pp.225-7), and Eliel, p.31.

ornamented, flowing robes – not to mention the *hōshu* crystal that the goddess proffers in her left hand.

The title of *Pure Land* refers to the Buddhist school Dennis Hirota describes as the most widely followed in present-day Japan.[128] As Daisetz Suzuki points out, whilst Pure Land thought previously existed in India and China, entering Japan (along with Zen Buddhism) in the Nara period (646-784), its contemporary form owes much to the twelfth century formulations of the Japanese scholar/monk Hōnen and his disciple Shinran. Suzuki also notes that, in comparison with Zen's emphasis on *Jiriki* (self-reliance), Pure Land Buddhism teaches a doctrine of *Tariki* (Other-Power) whereby Enlightenment is attained through an unreserved surrender to the Amida Buddha. In Suzuki's view, this whole-hearted attitude of capitulation is epitomized by Shinran's advocacy of the *ōchō* – a credo that encourages one to abandon linear systems of logic in order to make a leap of faith into the unknown.[129] Although, as illustrated in the previous section, confusing the boundaries between fantasy and reality has been a perennial aspect of Mori's creative production, her early pieces leavened such flights of fancy with a degree of analytical, social criticism. By contrast, *Nirvana* and *Pure Land*, with their more loosely structured otherworldly environments, and weightless, magical figures that coalesce from and dissolve back into light, seem to exemplify the *ōchō*-like unmitigated embrace of illogic, fantasy and mysticism that Suzuki describes. Whilst this aspect of Mori's work invites consideration as a

[128] Dennis Hirota, 'Introduction' in Hirota (ed), *Toward a Contemporary Understanding of Pure Land Buddhism, Creating a Shin Buddhist Theology in a Religiously Plural World* (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 2000), p.2.

[129] Daisetz T. Suzuki, *Japanese Spirituality*, trans Norman Waddell (Tokyo: Japan Society for the Promotion of Science, 1972, originally published as *Nihon-teki reisei*, 1944), pp.17-20, pp.24-5, n8-10.

reflection of cultural difference, one might well bear in mind Dale's observation (which I noted in the thesis Introduction) that such identifications of 'Japanese-ness' with 'illogic' are typical of the *nihonjinron*. Hence, the fantastic aspects of *Nirvana* and *Pure Land* may reveal more about *how* Japanese-ness has been traditionally constructed than in *what* precisely Japanese-ness might consist.

As well as alluding to the mystical or philosophical aspects of Pure Land Buddhism, *Nirvana* and *Pure Land* also reproduce Pure Land iconography. One such motif is the quirky, flower-like, glass and plastic assemblage that, in both works, sits on the Dead Sea shoreline. As Elizabeth ten Grotenhius notes, accounts of the Western Paradise (or Pure Land), over which the Amida Buddha presides, refer to gem trees made from precious metals, crystal, and coral.[130] However, in the context of traditional Japanese Pure Land painting, the substantial body of silk scroll works depicting raigō provides an even more compelling source for *Nirvana* and *Pure Land*. As Jōji Okazaki points out, these images portray the Descent to Earth of Buddhist deities and bodhisattvas (usually the Amida Buddha and an entourage of bodhisattva musicians) who greet pious adherents at the moment of their death, transporting the faithful back to Paradise on lotus thrones.[131] A well-known example is the thirteenth century *Descent of Amida and the Twenty-five Bodhisattvas* (fig 2.10) in Chion-in Temple, Kyoto. In Okazaki's view, this piece exemplifies so-called 'swift *raigō*,' reflecting the assurance in Buddhist scripture that the transition between this life

[130] Elizabeth ten Grotenhius, 'Introduction' in Jōji Okazaki, *Pure Land Buddhist Painting*, trans Grotenhuis (Tokyo and New York: Kodansha International, 1977, originally published as *Jōdo kyōga*, Tokyo, 1969), p.15.

[131] For a general account of *raigō* imagery and illustrations of typical works see Okazaki, p.94, pp.103-7, pp.117-21, p.186.

and the next is almost instantaneous.[132] Hence, its figures descend along a dramatic diagonal, vapour trails testifying to the speed of their passage. With their whirling alien attendants, scooting along on effervescent rafts of blue bubbles, Mori's film and photograph reproduce this feature of *raigō* imagery in a light-hearted vein.

Although *Nirvana* and *Pure Land* recapitulate *Last Departure*'s themes of unity, immanence and human apotheosis, in tenor and content they are quite different. Both works appear to substantiate the view, held by commentators such as Dominic Molon and Wallis, that Mori's post-1996 production evinces a conceptual shift, exchanging the irony and social criticism of her cyborg self-portraits in favour of a utopian idealism and a Buddhist-inspired, esoteric mysticism.[133] Indeed, the degree to which Mori appears to abandon criticism in favour of an escapist (and possibly *ōchō*-like) embrace of fantasy has encouraged writers like Dave Beech to denigrate her film as little more than an intellectually feeble, New Age indulgence that substitutes technical gloss in place of genuine content.[134]

However, such negative appraisals of Mori's production are not universally held. One commentary, in particular, that credits Mori's work with some visual intelligence is Robert Fouser's 'Mariko Mori, Avatar of a Feminine God' (1998). Fouser's position differs from those outlined above in that he considers *Nirvana* to be a logical development of her earlier self-portraits – one that shares, and brings to a point of culmination, their feminist-inspired criticism

[132] Ibid, pp.126-7, p.130.

[133] With respect to the notion that Mori's post 1996 work is distinguished by a conceptual shift see Molon (pp.6-8), and Wallis, pp.176-7, pp.188-90.

[134] Dave Beech, 'Mariko Mori, Serpentine Gallery,' *Art Monthly*, n219, September 1998, pp.35-6. For a similarly sceptical appraisal of *Nirvana* see Katie Clifford, 'Mariko Mori, Brooklyn Museum of Art,' *Art News*, v98, i7, Summer 1999, p.152.

of Japan's post-Bubble consumer culture. In the first place, Fouser suggests that Mori's Tokyo-based images as a 'sex robot' constitute a 'visual *mappō*,' documenting the transformation of the upper middle-class, Yamanote district (where Mori grew up and went to high school during the 1980s economic boom period) into a darker, post-Bubble state where 'Yamanote trendiness was infiltrated by sex-industry voraciousness.'[135] By *mappō* (or 'last law') Fouser is alluding to the decadent condition of the so-called *masse* (or Latter-day) world prior to the arrival of a future Buddha.[136] Secondly, Fouser interprets Mori's self-portraits as drawing a parallel between the phenomenon of consumer programming and the endless iterations of human lives ordained in Buddhist eschatology. In both cases, human beings are caught within a worldly cycle of desire and suffering. Like Morimura's *Elder Sister*, Mori's cyborgs pantomime the fate of Japanese women seduced by the fantasies peddled in the realms of fashion and commerce. However, whilst Morimura directs his parody at brand-fixated Japanese *women*, Mori's cyborg self-portraits, in Fouser's view, critique the *system* in which they are enmeshed, revealing how 'the desperate pursuit of the "right image" alienates women from themselves, turning them into automatons.'[137] On this basis, Fouser reads Mori's goddess/bodhisattva character, in *Nirvana* and *Pure Land*, as a vision of female emancipation. The future Buddha is represented as a 'feminine god' who embodies the liberation of Japanese women from their enslavement within Japan's capitalist patriarchy.[138]

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[135] Robert Fouser, 'Mariko Mori, Avatar of a Feminine God,' *Art and Text*, n.60, February – April 1998, p.35.

[136] For an account of terms like *mappō* and *masse* see Suzuki, pp.48-9, p.56, n13.

[137] Fouser, p.35.

[138] Ibid, p.36.

Although Fouser's essay is one of the more thoughtful and original assessments of Mori's work, it invites criticism on a number of counts. Whilst I acknowledge that Buddhist images and ideas permeate Japanese culture, Fouser's characterization of Mori's 1994-96 cyborg self-portraits as comprising a 'visual *mappō*' seems a little strained – especially when one considers that, compared with *Nirvana* and *Pure Land*, the earlier pictures lack any obvious Buddhist content. Indeed, Mori's admission that *Miko no Inori* constituted the thematic 'turning point… that led to… Nirvana'[139] seemingly dates her focus on Eastern esoteric philosophy *after* the creation of the Tokyo-based self-portraits. Whilst Fouser's interpretation is attractive insofar as it bestows a semblance of thematic continuity on what is actually a fairly diverse body of work, one might question whether his account amounts to more than interesting speculation. Had Mori been a practicing Buddhist (like Miyajima for example, whose work will warrant a mention in the following section) this would have lent Fouser's construction greater credence. However, as Lisa Corrin points out, Mori's knowledge of such matters stems not from any long-term religious affiliation, but rather from *ad hoc* research derived from picture books, museum exhibits and 'informal visits to… sacred sites.'[140]

Also problematic is Fouser's suggestion that *Nirvana* constitutes the latest chapter in a series of critiques of post-Bubble, Japanese materialism. It is true that Mori has voiced anti-materialist sentiments on a number of occasions – notably in an interview conducted by Eleanor Heartney where Mori expresses a desire to challenge global capitalism, implicating it in the destruction of

[139] Mori quoted in Kathryn Hixon, 'Future Perfect: An Interview with Mariko Mori,' *New Art Examiner*, v26, n4, December 1998 – January 1999, p.45.

[140] Corrin, p.20, n5.

human societies and the environment.[141] Moreover, given their blending of the natural and the synthetic, future and past, science and religion, one could legitimately interpret Mori's post-1996 creations as implementing her oft-repeated view that the panacea for present-day materialistic excess lies in re-connecting with nature, tradition and spirituality.[142] On the other hand, qualifying Fouser's claim that Mori's million-dollar, cinematic spectacle challenges consumerism, Japanese or otherwise, is the fact that trans-national, commercial interests were involved in its realization.[143] Setting the tone for her subsequent projects, *Nirvana* counted among its corporate sponsors Shiseido Co. Ltd, the CSK Sega Group and the GIT Corporation – the latter responsible for the work's cutting edge, 3D video system.[144] This level of complicity with big business seems incompatible with Fouser's reading of *Nirvana* as a denunciation of commercial evils. Indeed, Beech's observation that Mori's creation looked more like an 'enviable trade show' exhibit than an artwork reveals to what extent Mori's audio-visual piece invites interpretation not as a critique of consumer culture but rather as a complaisant monument to capitalist excess.[145] For, confronted by the banner-like, three by six metre, golden-hued expanse of *Pure Land*, or dazzled by the spectacular 3D visual effects of *Nirvana*, surely the overwhelming *material* extravagance of these works

[141] See Mori's comments in the interview conducted by Heartney, 'Mariko Mori: In Search of Paradise Lost,' p.39.

[142] See Mori's comments in Hixon (p.45), and Heartney, 'Mariko Mori: In Search of Paradise Lost,' pp.38-40.

[143] The figure of $US 1 million is cited in Wallis, (p.213), and Saltz, p.147.

[144] For a detailed summary of those individuals and corporations involved in the creation of *Nirvana* see Mariko Mori, 'Artist's Acknowledgements,' in Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, and Serpentine Gallery, *Mariko Mori*, p.93.

[145] Beech, p.35.

speaks to the viewer most eloquently. Regardless of Fouser's preferences or Mori's public testimony, the sheer visual richness of *Nirvana* and *Pure Land* inevitably colours whatever anti-materialist sentiments they might espouse. Fouser speculates that, with its inoffensively cute, *anime*-style musicians, and use of motifs like bubbles, crystals and flying figures, *Nirvana* satirizes the insubstantial lightness of Yamanote culture and its 'celebration of the momentary effect of the image.'[146] However, given the air of exuberance that permeates Mori's film and photographic tableau, their function seems less parody than affirmation. Mori's opulently costumed re-visioning of *Kichijō-ten* – a goddess of wealth and good fortune after all – further emphasizes the materialistic cast of her New Age utopia.

In this respect, *Nirvana* and *Pure Land* contrast with *Last Departure* where Mori's depiction of humanity's immersion within technological (i.e., material, worldly) structures is distinctly ambivalent. Indeed, I suggested that the Kansai airport-based tableau exuded irony insofar as its trio of cyber-angels, posed in a techno-paradise, actually exposed the *impossibility* of attaining genuine material transcendence. However, such currents are noticeably absent from *Nirvana* and *Pure Land*. In both pieces, the deification of humanity no longer demands a relinquishing of materiality. Mori's allusions to *raigō* imagery notwithstanding, these works do not fantasize material *transcendence* so much as the harmonious *integration* of matter and spirit. To some degree, this reinforces their status as emblems of cultural difference. As Hirota points out, one interpretation of Shinran's reformulation of Pure Land thought is that birth in the Pure Land equates to the 'attainment of the transcendent in the present.' In other words,

[146] Fouser, p.36.

Enlightenment is considered to be a practical goal of worldly existence.[147] From such a perspective, Mori's pantomime of a thoroughly materialistic deity figure is neither contradictory nor ironic. Far from criticizing materialism, *Nirvana* and *Pure Land* fantasize a paradise in which material enjoyment carries divine sanction. Indeed, given the technically slick, advertisement-like aspects of her film and photographic tableau, Mori's vision of 'Enlightenment' invites interpretation less as a representation of material transcendence than a celebration of freedom or redemption from consumer guilt. The immanent quality of the fantasy world, within which Mori's vision of human apotheosis takes place, is apparent in that her 'Nirvana,' realized through technological wizardry, and liberally sprinkled with pop-culture references (techno music, *anime*-style figures), is less a yearning for an esoteric *other world* existing outside space and time, than an affirmation of *this world*, transformed from within.

2.4 Aliens Among Us

Thus far, I have discussed how Mori's work depicts a convergence between human beings and high technology, and in so doing, expresses her preoccupation with unity or oneness. I have also highlighted the change in the tenor of Mori's work – the degree to which she has exchanged negative criticism, of contemporary systems of technology and capital, in favour of an inspirational affirmation of a utopian future where techno-materialism is fused with, and thus ostensibly redeemed by, a Buddhist-inspired, New Age spirituality. A fusion of Western-style modern science with

[147] Hirota, 'Images of Reality in the Shin Buddhist Path, *A Hermeneutical Approach*' in Hirota (ed), *Toward a Contemporary Understanding of Pure Land Buddhism, Creating a Shin Buddhist Theology in a Religiously Plural World*, p.41. For Hirota's comments on the practical, world-based aspects of Shinran's thought see also p.2, p.39.

Eastern-inspired religious mysticism is particularly apparent in Mori's last major project to date: *Wave UFO* (2003, fig 2.11). Reiterating the creative formula she established with *Nirvana*, Mori's 'space machine' is a corporate-sponsored, visually spectacular work that blends high technology with Buddhist esoteric philosophy.[148] As Susan Freedman and Tom Eccles point out, *Wave UFO* constitutes a 'futuristic counterpart' to its immediate and more traditionally styled predecessor: *Dream Temple* (1999, fig 2.12) – a hi-tech re-visioning of the Nara-based, eighth century, Buddhist *Hōryūji Yumedono* (or Hall of Dreams).[149] In common with *Dream Temple*, *Wave UFO* exchanges self-representation, intrinsic to Mori's pre-1999 still and/or motion picture-based masquerades, in favour of elaborate, sculptural, installation work. *Wave UFO* also reiterates *Dream Temple*'s womb-like, interior space within which visitors observe a short, audio-visual presentation distinguished by abstract imagery and special effects. In this respect, both works are reminiscent of Mori's previous creations, recapitulating *Last Departure*'s figure-in-a-capsule motif and *Nirvana*'s incorporation of hi-tech, cinematic spectacle.

Mori has asserted: 'Through *Wave UFO* it is my wish that all the people in this world will connect with one another, crossing political and cultural borders.'[150] This sentiment encourages one to view the work as a reflection on the nature of cross-cultural exchange. In fact,

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[148] Julie V. Iovine, 'If Martians Went to Design School,' *New York Times*, May 8, 2003 (F4), reports that, whilst Mori would not disclose the exact cost of *Wave UFO*, the artist remarked it was insured for US$1.5 million. For a list of *Wave UFO*'s corporate sponsors see Kunsthaus Bregenz, '*Wave UFO* Project Team,' *Mariko Mori, Wave UFO*, exh. cat. (Köln, 2003), p.169.

[149] Susan K. Freedman and Tom Eccles in Kunsthaus Bregenz, *Mariko Mori, Wave UFO*, p.141.

[150] Mori, artist statement in Kunsthaus Bregenz, *Mariko Mori, Wave UFO*, p.43.

as borne out by the extensive list of credits in *Wave UFO*'s accompanying exhibition catalogue, the installation's realization involved an interdisciplinary team of over one hundred designers, fabricators and technical specialists from both Japan and the West.[151] This internationalist ethos is further emphasized by the formal attributes of the work. Insofar as it is a streamlined, aerodynamic form, *Wave UFO* reiterates Mori's longstanding preoccupation with the imagery of flight and thus, in common with *Last Departure*'s airport setting or *Nirvana*'s collection of levitating figures, invokes the notion of border crossings in general. Moreover, as a precision-engineered, prefabricated, modular construction, *Wave UFO* makes no obvious cultural allusions, exemplifying instead the ubiquitous products and processes of global industry. It therefore eschews the overtly *Japanese* references evident in *Nirvana* and *Dream Temple*, apparently revisiting *Last Departure*'s vision of a world in which cross-cultural exchanges are not so much interactions between discrete and self-sufficient cultural entities than warps and folds within the immanent geometry of a culturally amorphous, global holism.

By virtue of its iridescent, 'holographic' paint scheme,[152] *Wave UFO* assumes a hallucinatory aspect – an object only partly materialized within (and thus implicitly not entirely of) this world. In this respect, Mori's creation seemingly revives the satirical dimension of her 1994-96 cyborg self-portraits insofar as its expression of global unity is simultaneously an evocation of an alien spacecraft. The cross-cultural dynamic between Japan and the West is playfully equated with popular Hollywood films where spaceships

[151] Mori's *Wave UFO* collaborators are listed in Kunsthaus Bregenz, *Mariko Mori, Wave UFO*, p.169.

[152] Jeffrey Deitch, 'Mariko Mori, Inner Space' in Kunsthaus Bregenz, *Mariko Mori, Wave UFO*, p.143.

are sites of fantasized encounters with extraterrestrials. In many of these movies (for example, Fred F. Sears' *Earth versus the Flying Saucers* (1956) or Roland Emmerich's *Independence Day* (1996)), aliens are portrayed as hostile invaders, wreaking havoc on American soil. However, given Mori's dedication of her installation to 'all of us who share the planet Earth, for our mutual understanding, freedom, and equality,'[153] it is clearly her intention to subvert such negative associations.

Indeed, *Wave UFO*'s vision of intercultural détente and harmony, as well as its air of gentle parody, is reiterated by a conceptually related work: *Oneness* (2003, fig 2.13). This piece comprises six identical space aliens, each standing about 1.3m tall and fabricated from *technogel* – a translucent, flesh-like, synthetic material. Posed on a flat, circular support, the figures form a ring, standing hand-in-hand, facing outwards. According to the notes provided for the Deitch Projects exhibition where *Oneness* was first shown, visitors were invited to hug the sculptures whereupon their eyes would light up and their plastic 'hearts' would beat. Enfolding all six aliens simultaneously caused the base to illuminate.[154] The heavily lidded, Asian-looking eyes of *Oneness*' technogel effigies underscore their function as emblems of inter-cultural exchange. 'Alien-ness' is tacitly conflated with Orientalism/Japanese-ness – an association further emphasized by the big-headed, *anime*-style design of Mori's figures and by their close resemblance to the sextet of otherworldly musicians in *Nirvana*. Given that both *Oneness* and *Wave UFO* initially showed in *Western* venues, they evidently function as

[153] Mori, artist statement in Kunsthaus Bregenz, *Mariko Mori, Wave UFO*, p.43.

[154] Deitch Projects, *Mariko Mori, Oneness*, exh. notes, 2003, <www.deitch.com/artists/sub.php?artistId=15> (15 March 2006). See also Barbara Pollack, 'Mariko Mori,' *Art News*, v102, i7, Summer 2003, pp.153-4.

humorous parodies of Western constructions of Oriental exoticism.[155] At the same time, Mori's idealistic dedication of *Wave UFO* to the people of a united planet Earth suggests that her installation is less a satire addressed to one particular cultural group than a debunking of the notion (in the context of the aforementioned immanent global holism) of outside-ness or otherness in general. On this basis, *Oneness* and *Wave UFO* invite interpretation, not merely as exercises in the technologically assisted embrace of otherness, but also as sites where technology reveals an already extant fusion of other and same.

As well as evoking Hollywood images of extraterrestrial craft, *Wave UFO* also resonates with examples of Western modernist sculpture. In a formal sense, the ovoid shape and highly finished, metal-hued surface of Mori's installation is reminiscent of Constantin Brancusi's pre-World War I creations – notably his polished bronze *Sleeping Muse* (1910). Indeed, in common with Morimura's re-enactments of Manet's *Japonisme*, *Wave UFO* and *Sleeping Muse* define a history of reciprocating, cross-cultural exchanges between Japan and the West. This is evident from Margit Rowell's observation that the peerless finish and elemental quality of *Sleeping Muse* owed something to Brancusi's experience of gilded Buddha statues in French museums, many of which were Japanese in origin.[156] These formal affinities are accompanied by thematic

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[155] As noted by Eckhard Schneider, Freedman, and Eccles in Kunsthaus Bregenz, *Mariko Mori, Wave UFO* (pp.140-1), *Wave UFO* was initially exhibited in Austria's Kunsthaus Bregenz in February 2003, travelling to New York under the auspices of the Public Art Fund in May. According to the dates given in Deitch Projects, *Mariko Mori, Oneness*, the debut of *Oneness* was concurrent with the installation of Mori's space machine in the glass-walled atrium of a corporate building at 590 Madison Avenue.

[156] Margit Rowell, 'Brancusi: Timelessness in a Modern Mode' in Friedrich Teja Bach, Margit Rowell, and Ann Temkin, *Constantin Brancusi 1876 – 1957*, exh. cat. (Philadelphia Museum of Art Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1995), pp.42-4.

consonances. As a cast-metal dreaming head, transubstantiated by the appearance of an inner light, *Sleeping Muse* seems the literal embodiment of Brancusi's theosophist-influenced belief in what Friedrich Teja Bach characterizes as the 'unity of matter and spirit.'[157] *Wave UFO*'s eyeball-like appearance, conveyed by the embedding of its transparent, elliptical entrance port within a larger, oval concavity, similarly encourages one to interpret it as a *visionary* artwork concerned with the identity or correspondence of inner (spiritual) and outer (material) worlds. In this respect, Mori's installation promulgates a primary theme of the more overtly Buddhist-inspired *Nirvana*. Further support for such a reading is provided by Mori's statement for *Wave UFO* where she presents a vision of the universe as a living, cosmic totality. Observing that the cycle of birth and death on Earth mirrors the cycle governing the birth and death of stars, and that the elements from which the Earth and its human inhabitants are composed were created and disseminated in stellar explosions, Mori is encouraged to postulate the existence of an 'infinite connection, a single life that unites the whole universe.' Moreover, in characterizing this 'life' as an eternal 'energy' or 'all-encompassing… cosmic consciousness,' Mori implies that this living universe is not governed by blind contingency but is, in a sense, self-aware and self-determined.[158]

Insofar as *Wave UFO*'s vision of cosmic unity is expressed in the form of a spacecraft, it recapitulates a theme familiar in Mori's previous work: the merging of natural and artificial existences, exemplified by the convergence of humanity and high technology.

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[157] Friedrich Teja Bach, 'Brancusi: The Reality of Sculpture' in Bach, Rowell, and Temkin, *Constantin Brancusi 1876 – 1957*, p.26.

[158] Mori, artist statement in Kunsthaus Bregenz, *Mariko Mori, Wave UFO*, p.43.

Thus, whilst *Wave UFO* is ostensibly a machine, it also resembles a living organism adapted to a liquid environment. This is implied by its uplifted 'tail,' as well as by its eyeball-shaped entrance port. The commingling of synthetic attributes with allusions to the biological realm continues inside Mori's installation which contains integrated seating for three occupants in technogel couches.[159] As a metallic body capsule, *Wave UFO* generalizes the armoured suit motif of Mori's cyborg self-portraits (e.g., *Play With Me*) and thus similarly bears comparison with the cyber-suited characters ubiquitous in Japanese *anime* features – for example, the aforementioned *Ghost in the Shell*. To this extent, *Wave UFO* invites consideration as an indicator of cultural difference. Indeed, the trope of the cybernetically encapsulated body, enacted in *Dream Temple* and *Wave UFO*, has precedents in the work of other Japanese artists. The Gutai group provides one noteworthy example in the form of Atsuko Tanaka's *Electric Dress* (1956) – a costume created from coloured electric light bulbs. As well as prefiguring Mori's sartorial concerns, by transforming its wearer into a being of light Tanaka's work also anticipates Mori's preoccupation with technologically enabled material transcendence. An even closer analogue to *Wave UFO* is Kenji Yanobe's *Tanking Machine* (1990). As Gunhild Borggreen relates, Yanobe's massive, and rather clunky, device comprises a steel isolation tank, half-filled with a body-temperature saline solution, within which participants can be submerged in a simulation of uterine experience.[160]

Whilst the 'unity' performed in works like *Oneness* or *Tanking Machine* occurs between material bodies, *Wave UFO* seems to

[159] Deitch, 'Mariko Mori, Inner Space,' p.143.

[160] Gunhild Borggreen, 'Gender in Contemporary Japanese Art,' in Mostow, Bryson, and Graybill (eds), *Gender and Power in the Japanese Visual Field*, pp.189-91.

transcend physiology in order to effect a fusion between different minds and/or spirits. Thus, as outlined in the exhibition catalogue, with the aid of sensor-equipped headsets, participants are connected to a 'brainwave analyser' that projects a real-time, computer-generated display on the dome-shaped ceiling of the installation's interior (fig 2.14). The display is split into three 120º segments, each containing two pairs of globular structures, themselves enclosed within an external boundary of shifting yellow lines. The smaller and innermost pair of cells within each segment are termed Coherence Spheres. These objects are silvery in hue and denote the degree to which the left and right hemispheres of the subject's brain are, in Mori's parlance, 'synchronized.' When this condition is achieved they merge to form a dumbbell shape. Located beyond the Coherence Spheres are a larger pair of ovoids which change colour according to the frequency patterns prevailing within the participant's cerebral lobes. Different colours are taken to correspond to varying states of wakefulness.

In a manner reminiscent of fairground amusement rides or games of skill, *Wave UFO* challenges its passengers to attain a state of collective mental harmony at which point the Coherence Spheres of all three subjects coalesce, forming a glowing annulus redolent of the archetypal, Buddhist *ensō* form (a traditional symbol for wholeness or completion).[161] Three minutes are allotted for the interactive, brainwave sequence after which time participants view a pre-programmed, three and a half minute cinematic feature: *Connected World* (fig 2.15). This work closely resembles the short

[161] *Wave UFO*'s interactive brainwave analyser and computer generated display is detailed in Kunsthaus Bregenz, *Mariko Mori, Wave UFO*, pp.46-51. Significantly, Heartney, 'Dream Machine,' *Art in America*, v91, i9, September 2003 (p.53), reports that, according to a technician operating the installation in New York, this collective synchronization had never been observed.

film (entitled *4'44"*) created for the single-person, spherical meditation chamber inside the *Dream Temple* installation.[162] Western cinema again appears to be a source of inspiration for Mori – both audio-visual pieces evidently citing the 'Star Gate' sequence towards the end of Stanley Kubrick's film *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968). In common with *2001*, *Connected World* and *4'44"* feature shifting, opalescent, ovoid forms contained within a light-filled, liquid environment. These abstract images evoke, variously, cellular meiosis and star formation, and thus draw parallels between creation processes on scales both microscopic and cosmic. Precisely such an identity is implied by Mori's statement for *Wave UFO* where she asserts: 'every living being exists within an infinite relationship' and: 'we all share a single life that has united the whole universe since time immemorial.'[163]

Such sentiments emphasize the metaphysical dimension of Mori's later work and reveal to what extent *Wave UFO* promulgates *Nirvana*'s 'fusion [of]… science and religion… through art.' As Corrin points out, in her essay 'Mariko Mori's Quantum *Nirvana*' (1998), Mori initially expressed this vision of an organic, cosmic unity in notes that formed the basis of an April 1998 lecture at the New York Museum of Modern Art, and in her short manifesto 'The Eternal Law' (1998). Particularly noteworthy was Mori's assertion of what might be termed the *immanent unity* of all things: 'The whole contains individual parts, each of which in turn contains the

[162] The primary reference for Mori's *Dream Temple* installation is Fondazione Prada, *Mariko Mori: Dream Tem*ple, exh. cat. (Milan, 1999), unpaginated. See also Wallis, pp.306-15.

[163] Mori, artist statement in Kunsthaus Bregenz, *Mariko Mori, Wave UFO*, p.43.

whole,'[164] and her related conception of the universe as a 'perpetual… efflux… [of] spiritual energy.'[165] These declarations harmonize with *Last Departure*'s vision of the immersion of human beings within globally ubiquitous, technological structures (i.e., Miller's 'fractal… information… sphere'), and *Nirvana*'s fantasy of the fusion of material and spiritual existences within a similarly immanent, all-encompassing wholeness. The essence of Corrin's discussion is that Mori's statements, taken in conjunction with the fusion of Buddhist esoterica and high technology visible in *Nirvana* and *Dream Temple*, suggest that her work reflects, if not exploits to expressive effect, evident parallels obtaining between Eastern mysticism and modern physics.[166] As Corrin acknowledges, Fritjof Capra has most popularly addressed this topic in *The Tao Of Physics* (1975). Capra highlights the 'basic oneness of the universe' revealed by quantum physics, and the mystical view, common to Hinduism, Taoism and Buddhism, that all phenomena are 'interdependent and inseparable parts of [the]… cosmic whole… different manifestations of the same ultimate reality.'[167] Indeed, given that the foundations of quantum theory were largely established by Western scientists in the 1920s, one could construe Mori's fusion of Buddhist-inspired mysticism and modern physics to be yet another example of the way her work both reflects and embodies relationships between Japan and the West.

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[164] Mori, unpublished notes prepared for a lecture presented at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, April 27, 1998, quoted by Corrin, p.22.

[165] Mori, 'The Eternal Law,' trans Reiko Tomii, in Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago and Serpentine Gallery, London, *Mariko Mori*, p.41.

[166] Corrin, pp.22-4.

[167] Fritjof Capra, *The Tao of Physics, An Exploration of the Parallels Between Modern Physics and Eastern Mysticism*, 2nd ed (Boulder: Shambhala, 1985 (1975)), p.68, p.130.

Mori is not the only Japanese artist whose work responds to affinities between varieties of Eastern esoteric thought and modern physics. Munroe discusses the emergence of a so-called 'School of Metaphysics' in 1960s Japan, the members of which were preoccupied with precisely such subject matter.[168] Among the more recent proponents of this movement is Miyajima whose creations (largely based on LED counters) prefigure Mori's utilization of hi-tech devices. Exemplary is Miyajima's installation *Running Time* (1994), which comprises thirty LED counter-equipped toy cars (Miyajima refers to these as U-cars or Uncertainty Cars in acknowledgement of Werner Heisenberg's quantum mechanical Uncertainty Principle) continuously rebounding off each other in an electronic dance. According to Miyajima's testimony, the sequences of his LED counters deliberately omit the number '0' – a symbol which he associates with the Buddhist concept of death (i.e., the aforementioned *ensō* form). This feature emphasizes to what extent his U-cars symbolize an organic unity in which quantum probability-ballistics and living processes are intimately related. In a manner that echoes Mori's cosmic utterances, Miyajima identifies the defining characteristics of this ultimate reality as profound interconnectivity and perpetual flux.[169]

Regardless of precedents set by Capra and Miyajima, in Corrin's view the writer to whom Mori's work seems especially close is David Bohm, particularly his essay 'Postmodern Science and a Postmodern World' (1988). The crux of Bohm's discussion is that modern physics has overturned the mechanistic worldview of

[168] Munroe, pp.222-3.

[169] Miyajima, untitled artist's statement in Queensland Art Gallery, *Third Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art*, exh. cat. (Brisbane, 1999), p.214.

nineteenth century science, supplanting the atomistic model of the universe with a field-based conception of reality as a 'seamless… flowing wholeness.'[170] To illustrate this point, Bohm draws an analogy with holography where each component of a three dimensional image can be manipulated to reproduce the whole. On this basis, he proposes an immanent model of reality whereby the entirety of the universe is considered to be enfolded within each of its constituent elements – a condition Bohm refers to as a 'holomovement' or 'implicate order.'[171] In Bohm's view, this notion of implicate order has utility in providing a panacea for the 'fragmentary thinking … [and] disharmonious… destructive partial activities' typified by postmodern relativism. Indeed, Bohm asserts that one is ethically compelled to understand the universe as an undivided wholeness insofar as those who feel at one with the world are less likely to abuse it.[172] In drawing such close parallels between Mori and Bohm, Corrin imparts to Mori's work a similar moral efficacy. On this basis, Corrin concludes that Mori is to be applauded for advancing beyond 'exhausted, primarily Western categories of thinking in order to arrive at enlightened responses to [existential] questions.'[173] To the extent that Mori's vision of cosmic oneness is informed equally by quantum physics and Buddhist philosophy (i.e., science and religion), Corrin characterizes it as being concerned with the attainment of a 'quantum nirvana.'[174]

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[170] David Bohm, 'Postmodern Science and a Postmodern World' in Charles Jencks (ed), *The Post-Modern Reader* (New York: St. Martin's Press, London: Academy Editions, 1992, originally published in David Ray Griffin (ed), *The Reenchantment of Science, Postmodern Proposals*, Albany, 1988), p.387.

[171] Ibid, p.389.

[172] Ibid, p.390.

[173] Corrin, p.24.

[174] Ibid.

Corrin's assessment seems compatible with *Nirvana*'s fantasized unity of material and spiritual existences, and its utopian vision of a veritable 'heaven on earth.' *Wave UFO* evinces a similarly earnest, proselytising idealism – one that, to some extent, is more thoroughly and effectively implemented than in any of Mori's previous work. The culturally non-aligned stance of Mori's meta-machine complements its intended purpose: the technologically mediated meeting of minds across 'political and cultural borders.' However, regardless of the inspirational and affirmative aspects of these artworks, certain questions remain. Earlier, I alluded to concerns of this nature, pointing out that, as an extravagant visual spectacle created with the assistance of commercial interests, *Nirvana* could be viewed negatively as a complaisant monument to material excess. Even more than Mori's 3D film, *Wave UFO* – culturally neutral, created and exhibited in conjunction with a cast of international corporate sponsors – admits interpretation as a hi-tech banner for global capital. In this respect, both works contrast with *Last Departure*'s representation of humanity's techno-apotheosis, the ambivalence of which signalled the presence of a critical awareness on Mori's part that such utopian visions exact a toll – in freedom, individuality, and cultural distinctiveness. For all their idealism, it is this critical awareness that seems to be lacking in Mori's later creations where, as Beech suggests: 'Conflicts aren't resolved but wished away.'[175] Whilst it is necessary to acknowledge the role played by dreams and visions in bestowing value and meaning on human existence, the techno-Enlightenment fantasized in works like *Nirvana* and *Wave UFO* is problematic insofar as Mori's focus on a utopian *end* (i.e., awareness of cosmic unity), threatens to overshadow the *means* which might achieve this.

[175] Beech, p.36.

Figure 2.1 Mariko Mori, *Last Departure* 1996

Figure 2.2 Mariko Mori, *Miko no Inori* 1996

Figure 2.3 Mariko Mori, *Play With Me* 1994

Figure 2.4 Mariko Mori, *Tea Ceremony III* 1995

Figure 2.5 Mariko Mori, *Love Hotel* 1995

Figure 2.6 Mariko Mori, *Nirvana* 1997

Figure 2.7 Mariko Mori, *Pure Land* 1997

Figure 2.8 *Kichijō-ten* (8th century), Yakasushi-ji Temple, Nara

Figure 2.9 *Kichijō-ten* (late 12th century – early 13th century),
Jōruri-ji Temple, Kyoto

Figure 2.10 *Descent of Amida and the Twenty-five Bodhisattvas* (13th century), Chion-in Temple, Kyoto

Figure 2.11 Mariko Mori, *Wave UFO* 2003

Figure 2.12 Mariko Mori, *Dream Temple* 1999

Figure 2.13 Mariko Mori, *Oneness* 2003

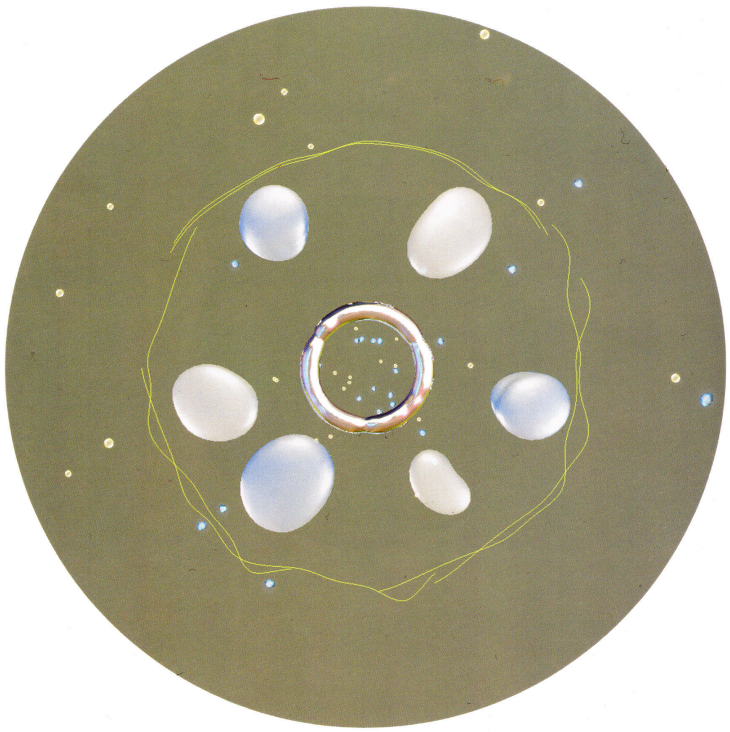

Figure 2.14 Mariko Mori, *Wave UFO* (synchronization)

Figure 2.15 Mariko Mori, *Wave UFO, Connected World* 2003

Chapter Three

Takashi Murakami: Superflat Universality

3.1 Introduction

Takashi Murakami's contemporary fame derives from a trio of international group exhibitions presented between 2001 and 2005 where, in the multiple guises of artist, art writer and curator, he promoted his own work, and that of other Japanese artists and creative collectives, under the common rubric 'superflat.' This buzzword functions variously as a stylistic descriptor, a brand label and a cultural theory. The relevance of superflatness to a study concerned with cultural difference and cross-cultural exchange is evident from Murakami's seemingly paradoxical assertion, in his book *Super Flat* (2000), that superflatness signifies a 'uniquely Japanese sensibility,'[176] and yet is an 'original concept of Japanese who have been completely Westernized.'[177] Furthermore, in Murakami's view, superflatness is a cultural reality that reflects a merging of 'distinct layers into one,'[178] and thus evokes the levelling of hierarchies and blurring of boundaries characteristic of postmodernism and globalisation. Even more than Morimura or Mori, Murakami exploits this contemporary reality, producing work amenable to consumption by diverse audiences irrespective of cultural context (i.e., high art, popular culture, Japan, the West). Hence, in being superflat, Murakami's art is also distinguished by its proximity to commerce and its drive towards *universality*. In the following chapter, I will examine these topics, devoting particular

[176] Takashi Murakami, *Super Flat*, exh. cat. (Tokyo: Madra Publishing Company, 2000), p.25.

[177] Ibid, p.5.

[178] Ibid.

attention to artworks featuring Murakami's *Mr. DOB* character, his series of *anime*-inspired life-size sculptures created between 1997 and 1999, and his recent collaborations with Louis Vuitton.

3.2 *Mr. DOB*: Superflat and Japanese

From a purely formal perspective, one of the most striking features of a typical *DOB* series image like *Jump* (1999, fig 3.1) is its *flatness*. The red ground of the work exhibits a near-perfect consistency of colour, emphasizing its planarity and denying any sense of movement into an illusory, atmospheric interior space. Planarity is also stressed by the sharply demarcated, flat zones of pure colour that define the primary motifs in the screen print: a tiny *Mr. DOB* jetting ecstatically atop a vertical spray of white liquid. Furthermore, *Jump* disposes forms orthogonally – yet another formal device that encourages the gaze of the observer to traverse its *surface*. This kind of pictorial construction is apparent in many other *DOB* series images. A good example is the large acrylic painting *Castle of Tin Tin* (1998, fig 3.2) where the vertical tower of morphing *DOB* creatures is counterbalanced by horizontal streams of multicoloured bubbles. When confronted by images such as these, one can understand why Murakami's work was originally characterized (by his Los Angeles dealer Tim Blum) as 'superflat, super high quality, and super clean.'[179] At the same time, however, Murakami's pictures are not absolutely flat. In *Jump*, for example, *Mr. DOB* is viewed from 'below.' His left foot (implicitly projecting 'out' of the picture plane towards the spectator) is larger than his right, and his left arm is hidden 'behind' his body. The illusion of

[179] Murakami attributes this statement, and the coining of the superflat buzzword, to Tim Blum in the interview conducted by Cheryl Kaplan, 'Takashi Murakami, Lite Happiness + The Super Flat,' *Flash Art*, v34, n219, July – September 2001, p.95.

bulbous forms, careening about in a three-dimensional environment, is even more obvious in works like *Castle of Tin Tin* or *Double Helix Reversal* (2001, fig 3.3).

Indeed, in *Super Flat* Murakami describes planarity as one of several formal devices that, in a superflat image, enable the viewer to synthesize a pictorial unity from what is, otherwise, a collection of discontinuous fragments disposed on a two-dimensional surface. In the context of a study concerned with the notion of cultural difference, it is significant that Murakami claims (invoking an idea originally suggested by the art historian Nobuo Tsuji in *The Lineage of Eccentricity* (1972)) this to be 'an extremely Japanese... approach to images,' discernible both in traditional Edo-period painting and contemporary Japanese animation.[180] Among the various Edo-period works which Murakami addresses in *Super Flat* are Itō Jakuchū's eighteenth century hanging scroll *A Group of Roosters* (fig 3.4) and Kanō Sansetsu's *Pheasant and Plum Tree* (1631, fig 3.5). In Murakami's opinion, these pictures possess two primary formal characteristics. Firstly, they encourage the eye of the spectator to wander along successive, layered, pictorial planes. Secondly, they employ distinctive motifs by which these piecemeal motions are arrested – a formal mechanism that, in Murakami's words, allows one to 'fix the image and make the layers of the zigzagging scan fuse into one.'[181] In Jakuchū's painting, therefore, the vertical array of roosters depicted in profile induces the onlooker's gaze to zigzag from side to side – a movement abruptly halted in the lower portion of the image by the bird that faces directly outwards. Similarly, in Sansetsu's work, the fugitive movement of the observer's eye along

[180] Murakami, *Super Flat*, p.15, see also p.9.

[181] Ibid, p.9, p.11.

the gnarled tree trunk is intermittently held and released by the scattered peony blossoms.

As Murakami further explains, the 'eccentric' compositional devices employed by artists such as Jakuchū and Sansetsu are also evident in the work of Japanimation pioneers – particularly the distinctively writhing explosion effects created by Yoshinori Kanada in films like *Galaxy Express 999* (1979, fig 3.6). Murakami observes that, in common with their Edo-period formal precursors, *anime* artists such as Kanada dispense with single-point perspective – instead, their images are constructed along orthogonal axes in a manner that disperses the 'power' of visual motifs towards the corners of individual frames and thus stresses planarity.[182] Although Murakami's text is not entirely clear on this point, he seems to be comparing the layering of pictorial planes, in works by Jakuchū and Sansetsu, with the sequence of frames in an animated film. Thus, when Murakami refers to the 'strange style of timing structure in Japanese television animation,'[183] I take him to be drawing a parallel with the distinctive stop-start movements of the gaze induced by the works of Edo-period 'eccentrics.' The strange timing, to which Murakami refers, is evident in the 'movements' of figures and objects in low-budget, 24-frames-per-second *anime* where unnaturally long pauses are interleaved with abrupt transformations. In a manner analogous to the way one views Edo-period 'eccentric' images, it is almost as if the eye of the spectator (or rather animator) 'lingers' at some points, then suddenly skips forward several frames.

DOB series works, like *Jump*, evidently incorporate many of the formal features outlined above. Echoing the decorative quality of

[182] Ibid, p.13, p.15.

[183] Ibid, p.9.

the wandering tree-form in Sansetsu's panel painting and the creeping tendrils of a Kanada-esque fireball, *Jump*'s meandering line of spray leads the eye of the spectator along a path complicated by various stops and starts. The 'speed' of this passage slows in the lower third of the painting, where the white jet is both thinner (i.e., further away) and more convoluted, and increases again as the spray burgeons beneath the leaping *DOB*. In *Castle of Tin Tin*, a more complex work, a veritable roller coaster ride of multiple pictorial traverses confronts the viewer. Engaged by the sweeping, orthogonal peregrinations of multicoloured bubbles and the wildly oscillating corkscrew of pink spume, the eye of the observer experiences a succession of visual accelerations and decelerations. Furthermore, both pictures exhibit the fragmentary spatial structure that Murakami described in his account of works by Jakuchū and Sansetsu. For example, in *Jump* the *Mr. DOB* figure and the meandering line of spray are not united by any logical, spatial relationship such as that defined by single-point, linear perspective. Indeed, the jet of creamy fluid appears to generate independent spatial frames with every twist and turn of its jinking trajectory. Similarly, in *Castle of Tin Tin*, the space occupied by the tower of morphing *DOB*s seems incompatible either with that defined by the ascending spiral of spray or the horizontal ejecta of bubbles. Other *DOB* series works present similar spatial conundrums. Thus, in *Double Helix Reversal*, the ears of Murakami's mutated *DOB*-figures seem to occupy different spaces from the heads onto which they are attached. *DOB*'s trademark 'D' and 'B' ear embellishments are warped into semi-abstract, calligraphic squiggles, seemingly disposed across hemispherical surfaces. At the same time, the ears and mouths of the *DOB* creatures open like windows onto internal vistas defined by undulating waves of colour. Ultimately, what allows one to resolve the image into a pair of bodiless *DOB* monsters is the manner by which the largest of their multitudinous

eyes connect with and thus capture the spectator's gaze. Applying Murakami's analysis of the formal features of superflatness, this seems to be an example of the visual 'mechanism' by which images can be 'fixed,' and their fragmentary layers and spaces 'fused' into a coherent whole.

In *Super Flat*, Murakami asserts that Japanese 'Society, customs, art, culture: all are extremely two-dimensional,' and states his desire for the reader to 'experience the moment when the layers of Japanese culture... fuse into one.'[184] On this basis, a work like *Jump* invites consideration as an emblem of cultural difference not only for promulgating Japanese visual traditions but also to the extent it embodies certain characteristics that, in Murakami's view, define contemporary Japan's superflat society. For example, insofar as *Jump* links Edo-period painting with *anime*, it confuses boundaries/collapses hierarchical distinctions between 'high' and 'popular' culture. In this respect, it both reflects and creatively exploits the vagueness and ambiguity that surrounds Japanese conceptions of art. Murakami devotes considerable discussion to this topic, in *Super Flat*, pointing out that, in contemporary Japan, distinctions between traditional words like *geijutsu* (which may be translated as 'technique and learning,' or 'the technique of creating beautiful things') and *bijutsu* (the term developed by the Meiji government to define Western 'fine art' practices) have 'become very minute.'[185] In the *Super Flat* exhibitions of 2000 and 2001 Murakami illustrated this reality by including Kanada's *anime Galaxy Express 999*, Bome's *anime*-inspired *bishōjo* (beautiful little girl) figurines, examples of fashion designer Masahiro Nakagawa's

[184] Ibid, p.5.

[185] Ibid, p.15. Murakami cites Nariaki Kitazwa, *Me no shinden* (The Temple of the Eyes, Bijutsu Shuppan-sha, 1989), pp.145-8.

20471120 brand, and an installation by SLEEP – a collective that features a pop vocalist and a hair stylist among its membership.[186]

Murakami's observations are not made in isolation. As I noted in the thesis Introduction, art historian and curator Fumio Nanjo has observed that, prior to the Meiji Restoration, the category of 'fine art' did not exist in Japan. According to Nanjo, in the minds of many present-day Japanese people 'art' signifies a basically decorative practice as opposed to one devoted to critical introspection – a state of affairs he attributes to a traditional absence, in Japan, of distinctions between 'art' and 'craft.'[187] In her article 'Japanese CMs, A Mirror For The 1990s' (1990), Keiko Sei also makes this point, asserting: 'in Japan... the whole fine art/applied art dichotomy never existed to begin with.'[188] In Sei's opinion, the historical fluidity of Japanese conceptions of art is epitomized, in the contemporary era, by a thorough intermixing of fine art and commerce. To illustrate this idea she invokes the phenomenon of 'museum' sections in Japanese department stores – venues that, in the early 1990s at least, frequently offered better facilities than public institutions.[189] Indeed, as Murakami recalls in his essay 'Superflat Trilogy. Greetings, You Are Alive' (2005), the *Super Flat* cycle of exhibitions began, in 2000, with a pair of shows in Parco department store galleries.[190]

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[186] For details of these artists and exhibits see Murakami, *Super Flat*, p.115, p.125, p.131.

[187] Nanjo, 'Afterward, Nature and Culture in Japan,' p.13.

[188] Sei, p.27.

[189] Ibid, pp.26-7.

[190] Murakami, 'Superflat Trilogy. Greetings, You Are Alive' in Murakami (ed), *Little Boy, The Arts of Japan's Exploding Subculture*, p.156.

Complementing his vision of contemporary Japanese society as superflat, a major feature of Murakami's art-making is its melding of art and commerce, and impetus towards universality. *Mr. DOB*, for example, not only operates in a fine art context but also functions as an exercise in merchandizing. As Margrit Brehm and Michael Darling point out, Murakami's character features on inexpensive, mass-market paraphernalia like posters, plush toys, T-shirt designs, watches, mouse pads and key chains.[191] In this respect, *Mr. DOB* reflects Murakami's stated intention to explore the ' "secret of market survival," or the "universality" of characters like Mickey Mouse, Sonic the Hedgehog, Doraemon, Miffy, Hello Kitty.'[192] Further emphasizing the proximity of Murakami's art-making to the world of commerce, works featuring *Mr. DOB* (whether fine art items or T-shirts) are mass produced by studio assistants in Murakami's Hiropon Factory. Launched in Tokyo in 1996, the Hiropon Factory opened a New York branch in 1998, and in 2001 transformed into the Kaikai Kiki Co. Ltd – this name change signalling, in Murakami's view, a shift in emphasis from thinking 'collectively about Pop Art' to creating 'art products.'[193]

A work like *Jump* exemplifies Murakami's 'art product' philosophy on several levels. In the first place, it is a multiple, produced in an

[191] For discussion of Murakami's merchandising activities see Margrit Brehm (ed), *The Japanese Experience, Inevitable*, exh. cat. (Kraichtal: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2002, p.55), and Michael Darling, 'past+present+future' in Museum of Contemporary Art, Tokyo, *Takashi Murakami. Summon Monsters? Open the door? Heal? Or Die?* exh. cat., trans Hisako Miyazaki *et al* (Tokyo, 2001), p.65.

[192] Murakami, 'Life as a Creator' in Museum of Contemporary Art, Tokyo, *Takashi Murakami. Summon Monsters? Open the door? Heal? Or Die?* pp.131-2.

[193] Murakami in an interview conducted by Hélèn Kelmachter, 'Interview with Takashi Murakami' in Fondation Cartier pour l'art contemporain, *Takashi Murakami: Kaikai Kiki*, exh. cat. (Paris, 2002, p.93), quoted in Brehm, p.55.

edition of 50. Secondly, it closely reiterates the composition of an early, larger-scale *DOB* series painting: *ZuZaZaZaZaZa* (1994). Moreover, as suggested by the detailed Hiropon Factory staff testimonials given in the exhibition catalogue *Takashi Murakami. Summon Monsters? Open the door? Heal? Or die?* (2001), *Jump*'s leaping *Mr. DOB* is probably not a 'freehand' creation but most likely derives from a digital database containing literally hundreds of characteristic body shapes, poses and facial expressions. Transferred as outlines onto silkscreen, these forms are subsequently printed on canvas or board and then painstakingly hand-painted in a palette of carefully mixed, standard colours.[194] Taken together, these attributes demonstrate how Murakami rationalizes his art-making in order to achieve both reproducibility and consistency.

Although the 'production line' manner, by which works like *Jump* are created, superficially resembles the *modus operandi* of Warhol's factory, the account of Hiropon Factory operations given by its 'manager' Chiko Nishimura suggests that Murakami's atelier is an incommensurately more sophisticated and focussed operation.[195] Moreover, whilst Murakami's utilization of studio assistants and professional subcontractors is also a feature of work created by Morimura and Mori (not to mention Western artists like Jeff Koons), Hiropon Factory practice is distinguished by the sheer diversity of its production and the range of potential consumers it

[194] For detailed information regarding the execution of Murakami's paintings see the following staff testimonials in Museum of Contemporary Art, Tokyo, *Takashi Murakami. Summon Monsters? Open the door? Heal? Or Die?*: Takumi Kaseno, 'Paintings 1' (pp.78-9), Yasumi Tei, 'Mixing Colours' (pp.82-3), Irabecky 'Bucho', Making the Basis of the Digital Drawings' (pp.84-5), and Chiho Aoshima, 'Digital Drawings,' pp.86-7.

[195] For an indication of the commercial focus and professionalism that distinguishes Murakami's Hiropon Factory see Chiko Nishimura, 'Management' in Museum of Contemporary Art, Tokyo, *Takashi Murakami. Summon Monsters? Open the door? Heal? Or Die?* pp.108-9.

seeks to attract. A particularly good illustration of this is provided by Murakami's *anime*-style figure *Miss ko*^{2} (1997, fig 3.7). In the same year that a life-sized sculpture of *Miss ko*^{2} sold at Christie's for US$567 500, the same character was also available as part of the artist's *Superflat Museum* (2003, fig 3.8) *shokugan* (food toys) collection. In this form, *Miss ko*^{2} appeared as a detailed, plastic miniature, packaged with gum or candy, and priced around US$3.[196]

As the candid disclosures of his studio operations given in the *Summon Monsters* catalogue suggest, Murakami is unconcerned by the commercial dimension of his art-making and, if anything, regards the professionalism of his artistic ventures with a sense of pride. The sheer pragmatism underlying Murakami's fusion of art and commerce is apparent from his statement (in an interview conducted in early 2000): 'What I have done so far was to make a living. And I was highly strategic about what kind of paintings I should make for that purpose.'[197] As various commentators acknowledge, Murakami's spectacular, late 1990s rise to international notice can be attributed to highly astute and focussed career management. For example, referring to the organization of the United States *Super Flat* touring shows of 2001, Kitty Hauser asserted: 'never has a self-proclaimed art movement had better market coverage from the outset or more successful niche marketing at every level.'[198] In an article addressing Murakami's hugely

[196] For details of the Christie's auction see Carter B. Horsley, 'Post-War and Contemporary Art, Christie's, May 14 2003' in *The City Review* ezine, <www.thecityreview.com/s03ccon1.html> (25 November 2005). With regard to Murakami's *Superflat Museum* see Okada, Morikawa, and Murakami, 'Otaku Talk,' p.180, p.185, n41.

[197] Murakami interviewed by Mako Wakasa, 'Takashi Murakami,' February 24 2000, *Journal of Contemporary Art Online* (2001), <www.jca-online.com/murakami.html> (7 April 2005).

[198] Kitty Hauser, 'Superflat: Kitty Hauser on fan fare,' *Artforum International*, v43, i2, October 2004, pp.129-30.

lucrative collaboration with Louis Vuitton (to be discussed in greater detail later), Jim Frederick observed: 'Few artists this side of Andy Warhol and Jeff Koons... have spent as much time strategizing their careers, calibrating their output according to the laws of supply-and-demand – all the while keeping an eye on how the mandarins of culture perceive their mercantilist ways.'[199]

At the same time, Murakami's thoughtful commentary in the *Super Flat* catalogue suggests that, in addition to seeking commercial success, he is also something of a culture critic. Indeed, noting that *DOB* is short for 'dobozite' or dobojite' – Japanese slang terms for 'why?' (*doshite*) – Darling interprets the character as expressing a 'core of questioning' in Murakami's art-making that reveals an 'innately critical stance toward Japanese, and indeed international contemporary culture.'[200] Darling's reading is supported by Murakami's testimony according to which the *DOB* character, with his ears characteristically emblazoned with 'D' and 'B,' was initially an expression of outrage at the vogue, in early 1990s Japan, for slogan-based art that slavishly imitated the work of Western artists like Jenny Holzer and Barbara Kruger.[201] Indeed, given the degree to which *DOB* series works like *Jump* draw parallels between Edo-period painting and contemporary Japanimation, one might read them in a similar fashion to Morimura's Manet re-enactments – as critiques of Japan's post-Meiji Restoration importing of Western culture that, at the same time, attempt to reassert the Japanese cultural identity thus displaced.

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[199] Jim Frederick, 'Move Over, Andy Warhol: painter, sculptor, cartoonist and handbag king Takashi Murakami hits it big by marrying art and commerce,' *Time International*, v161, i21, May 26 2003, p.42.

[200] Darling, 'past+present+future,' pp.65-6.

[201] Murakami, 'Life as a Creator,' pp.132-3.

This is one of the interpretations advanced by Midori Matsui in her essay 'Toward a Definition of Tokyo Pop: The Classical Transgressions of Takashi Murakami' (1999). Echoing Murakami's own acknowledgements in *Super Flat*, Matsui construes Murakami's practice to be a logical extension of ideas originally mooted by Tsuji. On this basis, Matsui reads Murakami's work as, in part, an attempt to reinstate the decorative aesthetic advocated by Tsuji in his book *A Perspective for Japanese Art* (1992). In her account of this text, Matsui highlights Tsuji's claim that a decorative sensibility was deeply ingrained in Japanese culture within which, originally, clear distinctions between painting and craft did not exist. However, following the adoption of the Western idea of fine art in the Meiji era, the formerly harmonious relationship between these aspects of Japanese cultural production was complicated by the imposition of artificial hierarchies of aesthetic value. Observing that, in the contemporary era, the privileging of fine art over decorative design had been discredited, Tsuji stated: 'I truly hope that decoration will liberate itself from the curse of "pure art" and regain its innate ability to assert both realms in singular works of art.'[202] In light of Tsuji's exhortation, Matsui interprets Murakami's work both as an expression of admiration for what she terms Japan's 'radically decorative heritage,'[203] and a response to Tsuji's assertion that the cultural vitality of traditional Japanese art survives in postwar *manga* and *anime*.[204]

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[202] Nobuo Tsuji, *Nihon Bijutsu no mikata* (A Perspective for Japanese Art, Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1992, pp.24-5, p.47) quoted in Midori Matsui, 'Toward a Definition of Tokyo Pop: The Classical Transgressions of Takashi Murakami' in Center for Curatorial Studies Museum, Bard College, *Takashi Murakami, The Meaning of the Nonsense of the Meaning*, exh. cat. (New York: Harry N. Abrams Inc., 1999), pp.23-4.

[203] Matsui, p.24.

[204] Tsuji, *Nihon Bijutsu no mikata* (A Perspective for Japanese Art, p.93) quoted in Matsui, pp.23-4.

At first glance, Murakami's attempt to express a 'unique Japanese sensibility' in his work seems to align it with the concerns of the *nihonjinron*. As I observed in the thesis Introduction, Dale characterizes the claims made in these popular discourses of Japanese identity as the logically incoherent, 'commercialised expression of modern Japanese nationalism.'[205] However, Matsui's reading of Murakami's work suggests that such attributions might be excessively simplistic. In Matsui's opinion, the complexity and sophistication of Murakami's practice is evident from its 'conscious exposure of the contradiction that many aspects of postwar Japanese culture – including *anime* – are a consequence of Japan's cultural colonization… Everything [in Japan] is a reaction to and a modification of a received foreign culture. For centuries the major influence was China; since the later nineteenth century it has been the West.'[206] In other words, Murakami's assertions of Japanese-ness reflect his understanding that cultural identity is an *effect* or emergent quality of ongoing cross-cultural exchanges rather than an expression of immutable and self-sufficient cultural essences. In the context of postmodernism, this vision of cultural identity evidently resonates with that expounded by Western writers such as Derrida. Consider, for example, Derrida's assertion that 'identity is not the self-identity of a thing… but implies a difference within identity… the identity of a culture is a way of being different from itself… having an opening or gap within itself… Once you take into account this inner and other difference, then you pay attention to the other

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[205] Dale, p.14.

[206] Matsui, p.21.

and you understand that fighting for your own identity is not exclusive of another identity, is open to another identity.'[207]

Derrida's admonishment follows logically from the application of his neologism *différance* to the terms of culture and identity. A detailed exposition of *différance* is beyond the scope of this study, suffice to say that Derrida regards it as the *originating movement* or *condition of possibility* of all differential systems. This is evident from his characterization of *différance* as a 'systematic play of differences [where]... Such a play… is no longer simply a concept but the possibility of conceptuality, of the conceptual system and process in general.'[208] *Différance* thus implies that identity is not an expression of essence but rather must be considered as the nascent product of a pre-existing play of differences. Therefore, applying this idea to *cultural* identity, it is unsurprising that Derrida views the characteristics of a cultural same as an effect of already existing, reciprocating, differential relationships with cultural others so that, to some degree, otherness is always an integral part of the same. Indeed, Derrida goes so far as to assert that it is 'an ethical and political duty… to take into account [the] impossibility of being one with oneself.'[209]

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[207] Derrida, 'The Villanova Roundtable, A Conversation with Jacques Derrida,' pp.13-14.

[208] Derrida, 'Differance,' in Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena, And Other Essays on Husserl's Theory of Signs*, p.140. Derrida's essay is, perhaps, his clearest exposition of *différance* and his vision of it as an enabling condition of differential systems in general. For further illuminating discussion of *différance* as an 'originating movement,' see also Walter A. Brogan, 'The Original Difference' in David Wood and Robert Bernasconi (eds), *Derrida and* Différance (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1988), pp.31-9.

[209] Derrida, 'The Villanova Roundtable, A Conversation with Jacques Derrida,' pp.13-14.

The vision of cultural identity expressed by writers such as Matsui and Derrida provides a way to make sense of Murakami's apparently paradoxical claim that superflatness is an 'original concept of Japanese who have been completely Westernized.' At the same time, Matsui's suggestion that Murakami's work reflects a 'particularly Japanese way of translating and naturalizing imported creative codes,'[210] is potentially problematic. Similarly troubling is Murakami's analogous claim, in his lecture 'The Super Flat is the Spirit of the Japanese' (1999), that the superflatness of premodern, Japanese painting was expressed in the way Chinese precedents were appropriated and modified – something Murakami characterized as a 'parasitic practice that finally overtakes and transforms the body of its host.'[211] Comments of this sort evidently reiterate a longstanding claim of the *nihonjinron* whereby the 'uniqueness' of the Japanese 'national essence' is expressed in the very *manner* by which cultural otherness is assimilated. As Dale explains, from such a standpoint, the changes that follow the incorporation of foreign ideas and practices into Japanese culture tend to be construed as nothing more than the 'unfolding or efflorescence of what was already there.'[212]

3.3 Impotence and Repression: Murakami's *Anime* Sculptures

Thus far, I have suggested that Murakami's *Mr. DOB* character and superflat construct function as emblems of cultural difference.

[210] Matsui, p.21.

[211] Murakami, 'The Super Flat is the Spirit of the Japanese,' lecture delivered at the Mitaka Centre for Art, 7 March 1999, paraphrased in Matsui, p.23.

[212] Dale, p.49.

However, I also observed that this 'difference' was an emergent property of an inherently dynamic system of cross-cultural exchanges rather than an expression of fixed and self-sufficient cultural essences. On this basis, 'Japanese-ness' is necessarily defined in relation to cultural others. Historically, China fulfilled such a role, today it is the West. In the following discussion, I extend this idea to Murakami's three-piece sculpture *Second Mission Project ko²*, the components of which represent stages in the metamorphosis of a female cyborg into a fighter jet. Comprising *Second Mission Project ko² (human type)* (1999, fig 3.9), *Second Mission Project ko² (ga-walk type)* (1999, fig 3.10), and *Second Mission Project ko² (jet airplane type)* (1999, fig 3.11), the *Second Mission Project ko²* sequence was the last and most elaborate of a series of *anime*-styled, life-size sculptures that Murakami created between 1997 and 1999. These works were produced in close collaboration with various specialist subcontractors – notably Kaiyodo (Japan's largest manufacturer of model kits) – and may be regarded as scaled up versions of the *bishōjo* figurines produced by Bome (Kaiyodo's chief designer).[213]

Avidly collected by *otaku*, for whom they function as fetish objects, Bome's 'garage kits' are hyper-sexualised, three-dimensional versions of female characters inhabiting Japan's subculture of *manga*, *anime* and computer games. According to the *Summon Monsters* catalogue, Kaiyodo produced precisely such a limited edition 'garage kit' to accompany the full-sized *Second Mission*

[213] For a comprehensive account of Murakami's series of *anime*-style sculptures see Murakami, 'Life as a Creator,' pp.137-44. In the same publication see also the testimonies given by Kaiyodo's Managing Director, Shuichi Miyawaki (pp.90-1), modellers and fabricators Bome (p.93), Tohru Saegusa (p.93), and Fuyuki Shinada (pp.96-7), and *Second Mission Project ko²* producer Masahiko Asano (pp.94-5).

Project ko² (human type).[214] This emphasizes how, in common with his *DOB* series works, Murakami's sculpture constitutes a convergence (or superflattening) of fine art and popular culture, fine art and commerce, fine art and industry. Indeed, Murakami's assertion that his *anime*-styled figures aimed to take such objects 'out of the context of *otaku* [subculture] and into the context of art'[215] highlights his preoccupation with creating universal 'art products' amenable to consumption by diverse audiences.

With regard to cultural differences and cross-cultural exchanges between Japan and the West, *Second Mission Project ko²* invites consideration in two main respects. In the first place, Murakami's three-piece sculpture reproduces signature features of the class of cyber-heroines that became prominent in Japan's *anime* subculture during the 1990s. Earlier, I acknowledged this phenomenon in my discussion of Mori's *Play With Me*, referring to commentaries by Napier and Orbaugh, and observing that both authors cited, as a prime example, the cyber-cop Motoko Kusanagi from *Ghost in the Shell* (fig 3.12). Secondly, insofar as it distils and exaggerates aspects of *otaku*/*anime* subculture, *Second Mission Project ko²* illustrates claims, made by Murakami and the culture critic Noi Sawaragi, to the effect that *anime* and its associated *otaku* fandom reflect an infantile sensibility and sense of impotence characteristic of contemporary Japanese society at large. Sawaragi, in particular, attributes this state of affairs to Japan's post-World War Two domination by the United States and an accompanying institutional repression of Japanese cultural memory. In this respect, Murakami's

[214] For details of Kaiyodo's reduced-scale model kit of *Second Mission Project ko² (human type)* see Museum of Contemporary Art, Tokyo, *Takashi Murakami. Summon Monsters? Open the door? Heal? Or Die?* p.153.

[215] Murakami, 'Life as a Creator,' p.137.

three-piece sculpture reiterates what is implicit in his *DOB* series works and superflat construct – namely, that many aspects of contemporary Japanese culture are a product of Japan's cultural colonisation by the West.

Ghost in the Shell's Motoko Kusanagi is but one of several *anime* cyber-heroines with which Murakami's *Second Mission Project ko²* may be usefully compared. Indeed, perhaps even closer to the spirit of Murakami's transforming sculpture are the adolescent characters 'Chise,' from Shin Takahashi's apocalyptic, yet also rather elegiac *She, the Ultimate Weapon* (released as a *manga* in 2000 and then as a television *anime* series in 2002, fig 3.13), and 'Rei Ayanami,' from Hideaki Anno's bleak and psychologically complex *anime Neon Genesis Evangelion* (broadcast on Japanese television between 1995 and 1996, and released as a feature film in 1997, fig 3.14).[216] The particular resonance of the Ayanami character with Murakami's figure project is evident from his testimony, in the *Summon Monsters* catalogue, that at the same time Kaiyodo collaborated in the fabrication of *Miss ko²*, the firm also sought to capitalize on the contemporary popularity of *Evangelion* by producing a series of thirty life-size Ayanami figures.[217] As indicated by the 1:4 scale *Rei, wishing for your access to her* (2000, fig 3.15), yet another version of Ayanami (eroticised with a large bust and skimpy clothing in accordance with *otaku* fetishes) featured among Bome's *bishōjo* figurines included in the *Super Flat* touring exhibitions of 2000 and 2001.

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[216] For an in-depth analysis of Anno's *Neon Genesis Evangelion* see Napier, pp.96-102. For plot synopses and character profiles relating to Takahashi's *She, the Ultimate Weapon* see *Madman.com*, <www.madman.com.au/saikano/index2.html> (27 December 2006).

[217] Murakami, 'Life as a Creator,' pp.140-1.

Murakami's sculpture most immediately mirrors such *anime* heroines in that it depicts a sexually charged, cybernetic female whose body is subjected to a violent, invasive and dehumanising transformation. This is particularly evident in *Second Mission Project ko^2 (ga-walk type)* where the body of the young woman is literally dismembered. Her naked torso is detached from its lower limbs and slid forward so that her explicitly detailed genitalia are aimed directly at the audience. This metamorphosis is completed in *Second Mission Project ko^2 (jet airplane type)* where the figure's armoured limbs and back form the fuselage of a fighter jet. In the aforementioned *anime* features, transfigurations of this sort are epitomized by the scene in *Ghost in the Shell* where Kusanagi's cyborg body, already damaged in a furious gun battle, is penetrated by tentacle-like power cables and data shunts as a preliminary to 'uploading' her 'ghost' (i.e., consciousness) into cyberspace. In *She, the Ultimate Weapon*, Chise's adolescent body is rent by the metal forms of missile launchers and projectile weapons, whilst cutting surfaces sprout from her back in a grotesque parody of angel wings. Similarly, *Evangelion*'s Ayanami is invariably depicted with a bandaged head and body – injuries that reflect the physical and psychological trauma she experiences through her cybernetic encapsulation within an Evangelion: a giant, semi-sentient, robotic 'suit.'

In representing female bodies as both cybernetic and subject to radical transformation, *anime* cyber-heroines tacitly equate femaleness with ambiguity and mutability. This identity is further reinforced by the tendency of such characters to intermix adult characteristics with those typically possessed by adolescents or children, and in their blurring of gender boundaries. *Evangelion*'s Ayanami, represented both as a uniformed schoolgirl – spindly and physically undeveloped – and a busty, body-suited cyber-vamp,

provides a particularly vivid illustration of this oscillation between child and adult. Similarly, in *She, the Ultimate Weapon* Chise alternates between uniformed Junior High School student and a more adult role as cyber-warrior. Kusanagi's cyborg body exemplifies the manner by which *anime* cyber-heroines confuse gender boundaries. Whilst undeniably female in form, its metallic composition and sculpted athleticism suggests less a yielding feminine 'softness' than a masculine 'hardness' and impenetrability. In piloting an Evangelion, Ayanami similarly 'puts on' a shell of masculinity. The wide variety of guns and beam weapons wielded by Kusanagi, Ayanami and Chise (designed to 'penetrate' the defences of their adversaries) further emphasize their assumption of masculinity.

Second Mission Project ko^2 (human type) echoes the manner by which *anime* cyber-heroines blur the boundaries between child and adult. Like many cartoon characters (Japanese or otherwise), the head of Murakami's figure is visibly oversized, a feature that immediately confers on the work a cute, childlike aspect. These allusions to childhood are further reinforced by the sculpture's unruly mop of green hair, swept up in a stylised ponytail, and by her heart-shaped, elfin face – embellished with a pointed chin, tiny smiling mouth, button nose and huge, limpid, wide-open eyes. At the same time, the body of *Second Mission Project ko^2 (human type)*, which is nude from her shoulders down to her upper thighs, exhibits the full breasts and limb-to-torso proportions of a female adult. The apparently contradictory co-existence of adult and childlike features is further evident in the demeanour of Murakami's figure. At once guileless and coquettish, the ebullience of *Second Mission Project ko^2 (human type)*'s leaping pose conveys a sense of innocent *joie d'vivre*, yet also seems calculated to draw attention to her outthrust breasts whilst coyly masking her genitals behind the

curve of her raised left thigh. In a similar manner, the figure actively solicits the gaze of the spectator, yet combines this open invitation with the downcast expression of a bashful child.

Also in common with *anime* cyber-heroines, Murakami's *Second Mission Project ko²* sequence undermines gender boundaries by representing the transformation of a hyper-feminine, female body into a war machine. Hence, in *Second Mission Project ko² (ga-walk type)*, the figure's nude torso forms a distinctly phallic protuberance that resembles nothing so much as the barrel of a gun. The 'nosecone' of *Second Mission Project ko² (jet airplane type)* is rendered in the shape of an outsized pointing 'finger' embellished with bright red nail polish – a combination of phallic attributes with allusions to feminine glamour that invites comparisons with Morimura's *Actress* self-portraits (e.g., *Black Marilyn*). This blurring of distinctions between masculine and feminine, male and female recapitulates a key feature of Murakami's slightly earlier sculpture *Hiropon* (1997, fig 3.16). As Amanda Cruz observes, whilst *Hiropon's* grotesquely big-breasted form is ostensibly female she lacks genitalia, compensating for this by exhibiting distended, penis-like nipples. According to Cruz, Murakami credits the erotic *manga* of Henmaru Machino (wherein representations of young women often sprout penises from various body parts) as the source of his inspiration.[218] A good example is Machino's *Green Caterpillar's Girl* (1999, fig 3.17), included in the *Super Flat* exhibitions of 2000 and 2001.

In his essay 'Life as a Creator' (2001), Murakami asserts that *Hiropon*'s distorted physiognomy metaphorically illustrates 'the

[218] Murakami in conversation with Amanda Cruz, 23 February 1999, cited in Cruz, 'DOB in the land of Otaku' in Center for Curatorial Studies Museum, Bard College, *Takashi Murakami, The Meaning of the Nonsense of the Meaning*, p.18.

depth of Japan's subculture… the excesses of its art, the psycho-sexual complexes of the Japanese, and the increasingly malformed *otaku* culture!'[219] Although one might not necessarily accept Murakami's comments without question, a psychoanalytical reading of the *Second Mission Project ko²* sequence is illuminating. The manner by which Murakami's three-piece sculpture exposes *otaku* fetishes follows from its status as a scaled-up, hyper-feminine *bishōjo* action figure that, nevertheless, manifests phallic attributes. This gender indeterminacy suggests that *bishōjo* figurines function as metaphorical 'screens' onto which *otaku* 'project' the narcissistic fantasies they indulge in preference to pursuing relationships with (as Mori puts it) 'real girls.'

Applying the psychoanalytical formulations of Jacques Lacan, Murakami's sculptures might be regarded as satirizing *otaku* 'castration anxiety' where, the phallocentrism of Lacan's ideas notwithstanding, castration does not imply a literal 'cutting off' of the penis but rather refers to a sense of insufficiency or disempowerment. In Lacan's theory of ego formation, this sense of lack necessarily accompanies the entry of subjects (male or female) into a social reality mediated by the structures of language (something Lacan terms the Order of the Symbolic). It is equivalent to the relinquishing of a pre-linguistic or infantile conception of the self as an autonomous and undivided wholeness (Lacan refers to this mode of awareness as the Order of the Imaginary), and the realization and/or acceptance that the mature self is inextricably defined in terms of others.[220] On this basis, *Second Mission Project*

[219] Murakami, 'Life as a Creator' in Museum of Contemporary Art, Tokyo, *Takashi Murakami. Summon Monsters? Open the door? Heal? Or Die?* p.141.

[220] An in-depth account of Lacanian psychoanalysis is beyond the scope of this study. A very condensed summary of Lacan's theory of ego formation and the castration complex is given in Jacques Lacan, *Écrits, A Selection*,

ko[2] invites interpretation as a comment on the tendency of *otaku* to immerse themselves in hermetically sealed fantasy worlds, identifying with emblems of ambiguity and mutability (i.e., *bishōjo*), as opposed to accepting the compromises and responsibilities intrinsic to adulthood. That is, sacrificing individual autonomy and self-sufficiency (which, in any event, only exist in a mythological Imaginary form) in order to function in a wider social 'reality' with its attendant power structures and regulatory controls (i.e., laws, ethical codes – and their symbolization in language).

Murakami's inclination to indulge in what might be described as cultural psychoanalysis is even more apparent in his writing for the *Little Boy* catalogue. Here, he discusses *otaku*/*anime* subculture alongside various manifestations of cute (*kawaii*) and 'lethargic' (*yuru chara*) imagery in Japan. As Murakami acknowledges, exemplifying the former is Sanrio's ubiquitous *Hello Kitty* – a clear source of inspiration for *Mr. DOB*'s more *kawaii* incarnations such as *Mean of Blue* (1998, fig 3.18). Murakami illustrates *yuru chara* by invoking the goofy mascots typically used to promote Japanese regional organizations and events.[221] Combined with the nihilistic embrace of social inadequacy and alienation by *otaku*, Murakami speculates that the cultural prominence, in Japan, of *kawaii* and *yuru chara* characters demonstrates a 'sexual incapacity, or a sense of impotence… [that stands] in for the Japanese themselves: once

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trans Alan Sheridan (London: Tavistock Publications Ltd, 1977, originally published as *Écrits*, Éditions du Seuil, 1966). The relevant essays are 'The mirror stage as formative of the function of the I' (1949, pp.1-7), and 'The signification of the phallus' (1958, pp.281-91). A good introduction to Lacan's ideas is Sean Homer, *Jacques Lacan* (London and New York: Routledge, 2005). See particularly pp.24-6, pp.33-45 for an account of Lacan's theory of ego formation, the Imaginary and the Symbolic, and pp.51-60 for Lacan's interpretation of the phallus and castration.

[221] Murakami (ed), *Little Boy, The Arts of Japan's Exploding Subculture*, pp.44-7, pp.82-7.

everything had been blown away in... [an atomic] flash, an infantile and impotent culture gained strength under the rubric of an unfounded, puppet infrastructure. What emerged was a culture frozen in its infancy…'[222]

Murakami's comments suggest that he regards *otaku*/*anime* subculture as a barometer for Japan's psychic climate overall. On this basis, the infantile and narcissistic denial of reality indulged by *otaku* mirrors the behaviour of the Japanese people as a whole. Whilst one might challenge the validity of making such a sweeping generalization, it is possible to situate Murakami's ideas in the context of a wider cultural debate that emerged around the time Japan's Bubble economy attained its apogee. Orbaugh, for example, cites a number of commentators whose condemnations of Japan's hyper-consumerism implied that the Japanese national character was 'selfish, irresponsible, weak, and infantile.'[223] Also relevant, given the *anime* cyber-heroines and *bishōjo* action figures on which Murakami's *Second Mission Project ko*^{2} is based, is Orbaugh's observation that, in the minds of these (mostly male) writers, such consumer excess was linked to a feminisation of contemporary Japanese society – a phenomenon epitomized by the pervasiveness of *shōjo* (literally 'little female') imagery in Japan's visual culture. Thus, Naoto Horikiri wrote: 'I wonder if we men shouldn't now think of ourselves as "shōjo," given our compulsory and excessive consumerism,'[224] whilst Eiji Ōtsuka asserted: 'The Japanese are no longer producers. Our existence consists solely of the distribution

[222] Murakami, 'Earth in my Window,' in Murakami (ed), *Little Boy, The Arts of Japan's Exploding Subculture*, pp.137-8.

[223] Orbaugh, p.204.

[224] Naoto Horikiri, 'Onna wa dokyō, shōjo wa aikyō' (For women it's bravery, for girls it's charm) in Masuko Honda *et al* (eds), *Shōjo ron* (Tokyo: Aoyumisha, 1988, pp.40-1), trans John Treat, quoted in Orbaugh, p.203.

and consumption of "things"… continually converted into signs without substance… such as information, stocks or land. What name are we to give to this life of ours today? The name is "shōjo." '[225]

However, where Murakami's perspective differs from such writers is that he does not attribute contemporary Japan's social malaise to consumerism *per se*. Indeed, given the pronounced commercial focus of his art-making, this would be a profoundly ironic position for Murakami to take. Rather, he relates such consumer excess to the psychic legacy of Japan's World War Two defeat and subsequent re-structuring/cultural domination by the United States. In this regard, the writer to whom Murakami seems most closely allied is Sawaragi – an affinity evident from Sawaragi's contribution to the *Little Boy* catalogue: 'On the Battlefield of the Superflat, Subculture and Art in Postwar Japan' (2005). In the first place, harmonizing with Murakami's comment about Japan's 'unfounded puppet infrastructure,' Sawaragi links the superflatness of present-day Japan to the dismantling or levelling of wartime institutions (such as the monopolistic *zaibatsu* industrial conglomerates) that characterized the US-led policy of democratisation and restructuring during Japan's post-World War Two occupation.[226] Secondly, Sawaragi asserts that accompanying the imposition of this foreign value system was a repression of the memory of the war – an activity in which mainstream Japanese institutions were complicit. In consequence, the Japanese people embraced what Sawaragi terms an 'imaginary reality' – the internal contradictions of which are exemplified by the paradoxical co-existence of Japan's so-called

[225] Eiji Ōtsuka, *Shōjo minzokugaku* (*Shōjo* ethnology) (Tokyo: Kōbunsha, 1991, p.18), trans John Treat, quoted in Orbaugh, p.204.

[226] Noi Sawaragi, 'On the Battlefield of the Superflat, Subculture and Art in Postwar Japan' in Murakami (ed), *Little Boy, The Arts of Japan's Exploding Subculture*, p.188.

Peace Constitution and US-sponsored armed forces, and by the frenetic property speculation that supported Japan's economic Bubble until its demise in the early 1990s.[227]

Echoing the psychoanalytical flavour of Murakami's writing, Sawaragi suggests that the fantasies of catastrophe and apocalypse, so prevalent in *manga* and *anime*, demonstrate how Japan's repressed cultural memory (both as an aggressor and as a victim in the Pacific War) 'maintains the potential to force itself out into this world whenever and wherever it finds the slightest opening.'[228] Among the many examples Sawaragi invokes to illustrate his argument is Yoshinobu Nishizaki's landmark animated television series *Space Battleship Yamato* (1974-75), in which a Japanese battleship, sunk in World War Two, is raised up from the bottom of the sea, converted into a spaceship, and used to spearhead resistance against hostile aliens. A particular feature of *Space Battleship Yamato* is that, in a clear reference to the atom bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the alien invaders have irradiated the entire surface of the Earth with 'planetary bombs' (i.e., nuclear weapons). As Sawaragi further points out, in a manner that recalls the firebombing carried out by American B-29s in World War Two, the devastation of Tokyo by alien attackers (whether these 'aliens' are demons or extraterrestrials) is a scenario endlessly repeated in *manga* and *anime*. It is, for example, central to both Katsuhiro Ōtomo's *anime* film *Akira* (1988) and Anno's *Evangelion*.[229]

The writing of McGregor and McCormack provides support for Sawaragi's assertion that Japan's postwar political and cultural

[227] Ibid, pp.202-3.

[228] Ibid, pp.204-5.

[229] Ibid, pp.194-7.

institutions have both denied and repressed memories of the nation's era of militarism. Both commentators detail the notorious reluctance of Japanese officialdom to acknowledge and/or provide restitution for human rights abuses such as the sexual slavery of Korean 'comfort women' by Japan's military during the Pacific War, or atrocities such as the Nanjing Massacre of 1937.[230] The perpetuation of an 'imaginary reality' is further exemplified by the claims of certain conservative politicians that Japan had not acted aggressively towards its Asian neighbours but rather had fought a defensive action against Western imperialism. McGregor, for example, reproduces a speech, given by Seisuke Okuno in 1995, in which Okuno described Japan's World War Two defeat as 'regrettable' and tacitly defended Japan's actions on the basis that 'people in Asia were able to be liberated from colonial rule by the whites and achieved their independence.'[231] Moreover, substantiating the implication, in Sawaragi's discussion, that contemporary Japanese society is, to a significant degree, a product of postwar Western interventions, McCormack highlights the complicity of the United States in Japan's failure to confront its militarist past. In McCormack's view, such an avoidance of reality originated with the US-influenced Japanese Constitution of 1946. This legislation granted immunity to (and in fact confirmed the legitimacy of) Emperor Hirohito, in whose name Japan's imperialist expansion had been promulgated.[232]

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[230] For discussion of the reluctance of the Japanese government to recognize the claims of former Korean 'comfort women' see McGregor (pp.166-72), and McCormack, pp.247-50. For discussion of denials or distortions of the Nanjing Massacre by Japan's officialdom see McGregor (pp.149-54, pp.182-3) and McCormack, pp.227-9, pp.236-7.

[231] Seisuke Okuno, from a speech presented at 'A Celebration of Asian Nations' Symbiosis – A Tribute, Appreciation, Friendship' (Tokyo, 1995), quoted in McGregor, p.156.

[232] McCormack, pp.187-8.

3.4 Branding and Immanence: Murakami and Louis Vuitton

Thus far, I have considered Murakami's work in terms of its superflatness and impetus towards universality. On this basis, I have observed how his 'art products' blur boundaries and level hierarchies in various domains (i.e., Japan and the West, high and low culture, fine art and commerce). In so doing, Murakami's work functions in multiple contexts and attracts diverse audiences. In relation to the thesis themes of cultural difference and cross-cultural dynamics, I have also suggested that Murakami's work reflects an awareness that Japanese-ness and Western-ness are not expressions of autonomous and immutable essences but rather qualities that emerge, already intermixed, in a system of ongoing cross-cultural exchanges. In this concluding section, I revisit these ideas, devoting particular attention to the relationship between Murakami's work and the world of commerce. Particularly relevant are the phenomenally successful designs Murakami produced in collaboration with the Louis Vuitton fashion house. These debuted on various Louis Vuitton handbag lines in 2003 (e.g., the *Eye Need You* bag (2003, fig 3.19)), and soon also appeared on various Louis Vuitton fashion accessories such as wallets and jewelery.[233] In common with his *DOB* project and *anime*-style figures, Murakami's collaborations with Louis Vuitton form a continuum ranging from merchandise to 'fine art.' Exemplifying the latter, and providing a suitable anchor for the following discussion, is the painting *Eye Love Monogram* (2003, fig 3.20).

[233] According to Miles Socha, 'The IT Bag,' *Women's Wear Daily*, December 9 2003 (p.15), sales of the Murakami handbags were around 160 000 units in 2003, revenues from which exceeded US$300 million or about 10% of total Louis Vuitton earnings.

Murakami's picture juxtaposes three primary elements: Louis Vuitton brand symbols, stylised cherry blossoms and *anime* eye motifs. Rendered in various hues, and set against a uniformly toned background, these emblems generate a regularly patterned surface – a depth-denying geometric array that, by implication, extends without limit beyond the extremities of the picture space. Like *Jump*, *Eye Love Monogram* exhibits planarity without being absolutely flat. A feature of the painting is that its various elements appear to scintillate beneath the gaze of the spectator. The employment of contrasting colours, and the manner by which the cherry blossoms and *anime* eyes are displayed both as positive and negative forms, generates a field of alternatively advancing and receding oscillations in a shallow depth. This movement conveys the impression that *Eye Love Monogram* does not dispose different elements within a single plane so much as superimpose several independently existing arrays. In this respect, Murakami's painting seems to epitomize his characterization of superflatness as a fusing of different layers into one.

By smoothly interleaving Louis Vuitton logos, cherry blossom symbols and *anime*-style eye motifs, Murakami's picture also enacts a superflat blurring of boundaries/levelling of hierarchical distinctions between commercial design, traditional Japanese art (or high culture) and contemporary Japanese art (or popular culture). Moreover, in keeping with Matsui's reading of Murakami's work, *Eye Love Monogram*'s stylised cherry blossoms reassert and revalidate Japan's 'radically decorative heritage,' whilst at the same time the juxtaposition of cherry blossoms and Louis Vuitton logos reflects the reality that many aspects of contemporary Japanese society are a product of cross-cultural exchanges with the West. Hence, even as Murakami's painting reifies Japanese-ness, it

suggests this cultural identity emerges already hybridised with an 'other' (i.e., the West) within an embracing global cultural fabric or field. In being superflat, therefore, *Eye Love Monogram* presents cultural signifiers as 'distinct' existences that, at the same time, are already integrated or intermixed within a common order or framework.

In this respect, Murakami's painting demonstrates how his superflat rubric raises the possibility of bridging the 'impasse' between Morimura's cross-cultural appropriations (where East and West tend to be visualised as jarring irreconcilables) and Mori's techno-fantasies (where Japanese and Western cultural distinctiveness tends to be disappeared within a culturally amorphous global holism). However, as I have already observed, regardless of the contrasts that distinguish their treatments of cultural difference, the work of Morimura and Mori harmonizes in representing postmodern, global reality as an encompassing immanence. Recall, for example, Morimura's niche-marketing activities, and the superimposition of his face on *Blinded by the Light*'s 1000-yen notes. These reveal his pragmatic acceptance of a position immanent to (i.e., inhering in) commercial structures as well as the immanence (i.e., omnipresence) of such structures themselves. This dual notion of immanence is also evinced by Mori's *Nirvana* – a celebration of material wealth, created in partnership with big business, which translates the Enlightenment-in-the-world credo of Pure Land Buddhism into a vision of an earthly consumer paradise.

By virtue of its superflat 'fusing of layers into one,' *Eye Love Monogram* invites similar readings. On a purely formal level, this is suggested by the surface scintillations and almost crystal lattice-like isotropy of Murakami's painting – attributes that emphasize its lack of a central focus. Instead, *Eye Love Monogram*'s constituent

elements are organised in such a way that no particular component is privileged over any other: Louis Vuitton logos, stylised cherry blossoms and *anime* eyes are suspended within a white field that extends to infinity beyond the edges of the picture space and thus, implicitly, has no 'outside.' As a creative exercise that embraces both fine art production and merchandising, Murakami's collaboration with Louis Vuitton (not to mention his *Mr. DOB* character and *anime*-style sculptures) illustrates how his work occupies a position immanent to commerce. That global capitalism is, itself, an immanence seems implicit in *Eye Love Monogram*'s endless reiterations of Louis Vuitton logos within an infinite and isotropic field. The omnipresence of the Louis Vuitton brand symbol in the superflat space of Murakami's painting is analogous to the trans-national ubiquity of Louis Vuitton products (and thus the pervasiveness of commercial systems of exchange) in the 'real' world.

One commentary that specifically invokes the notion of immanence, in relation to Murakami's work, is Marc Steinberg's 'Characterizing a New Seriality: Murakami Takashi's DOB project' (2003). In Steinberg's view, 'the significance of Murakami's work... lies not in its critique of commodity culture – with the position of transcendence vis-a-vis the object which the notion of critique often implies – but in its exploration of its logic from a position immanent to it.'[234] This statement resonates with Bryson's assertion that Morimura's work does not proceed 'from any moral ground above or outside the system.' Although Steinberg focuses on the *Melting DOB* paintings produced between 1999 and 2001 (of which *Castle of Tin Tin* and *Double Helix Reversal* are close stylistic relatives),

[234] Marc Steinberg, 'Characterizing a New Seriality: Murakami Takashi's DOB Project,' *Parachute: Contemporary Art Magazine*, n110, April – June 2003, p.100.

his article is entirely relevant to a discussion addressing Murakami's collaboration with Louis Vuitton.

The 'commodity logic' to which Steinberg refers is that exemplified, in the current age of 'information capitalism,' by the phenomenon of branding. Steinberg contrasts this logic with that operative in the industrial era where the creation of relations *between objects* in a *particular* series was paramount (for example, a particular make of automobile might be available in a range of colours). However, what characterizes the commodity logic of the post-industrial epoch is the tendency to generate relations *between different series*. Thus, as in the case of *DOB* mouse pads, T-shirts and watches – or Louis Vuitton hand bags, wallets and suitcases, various distinct commodity series are united under a brand name that is, itself, not a concrete object but a label or sign.[235]

Steinberg's account of seriality draws on Greg Lynn's analysis of the difference between 'discrete' and 'continuous' series, and the distinction, made by Gilles Deleuze, between 'static' and 'dynamic' repetition. Particularly relevant, to a discussion concerned with the implications of immanence, is Lynn's observation that, in comparison with the linear and predictable structure of a discrete series, relations between successive objects in a continuous series cannot be 'calculated outside the series itself.'[236] Analogously, Deleuze asserts that a static repetition 'refers back to a single concept, which leaves only an external difference between the ordinary instances of a figure,' whilst a dynamic repetition is 'the repetition of an internal difference which it incorporates in each of

[235] Ibid, pp.92-3.

[236] Greg Lynn, *Animate Form* (New York: Princeton University Press, 1999, pp.33-4), cited in Steinberg, p.96.

its moments, and carries from one distinctive point to another.'[237] In other words, the logic that governs Lynn's 'continuous series' or Deleuze's 'dynamic repetition' is not amenable to analysis from positions external to the system in which such series or repetitions take place (indeed the very possibility of adopting such an 'outside' perspective seems to be denied). Rather, one is required to explore the behaviour of such a system from a position immanent to (i.e., as an *inherent* part of) the system. Alternatively, one can regard the *system* as immanent (i.e., *pervading*, *omnipresent*) insofar as it lacks an 'outside.'

Steinberg coins the terms 'discrete-static' to describe the mathematically predictable logic of seriality operating in the industrial era, and 'continuous-dynamic' to describe the intrinsically non-linear and indeterminable mode of seriality dominant in the contemporary, post-industrial epoch. The linchpin of his essay is that each of these commodity logics exerts a distinct 'aesthetic-effect.'[238] In Steinberg's view, Warhol's work exemplifies the aesthetic-effect of discrete-static seriality: a single image is reproduced in a range of different colours. However, in subjecting *Mr. DOB* to a process of continuous deformation, from the cute (i.e., *Mean of Blue*) to the grotesque (i.e., *Castle of Tin Tin*), Murakami's paintings manifest the aesthetic-effect of continuous-dynamic seriality. Steinberg points out that, considered in its entirety as an exercise in merchandising, Murakami's *DOB* project exemplifies the continuous-dynamic commodity logic of branding. However, the *DOB* series paintings 'exceed the functioning of… other [*DOB*] commodities… in subsuming transformations between different

[237] Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans Paul Patton (New York: Colombia University Press, 1994, p.20), cited in Steinberg, ibid.

[238] Steinberg, p.98.

objects into a single plane of experience – the picture plane.'[239] That is, Murakami's *DOB* paintings express, in a single medium, metamorphoses that normally obtain between different media – for example: that distinguish various *DOB* product lines.

Although Steinberg does not explicitly acknowledge the immanent nature of the system within which objects expressing the logic of continuous-dynamic seriality arise, this follows from his observation that cuteness and monstrosity do not exist as opposite poles in Murakami's *DOB* paintings but are rather 'continuous… within a single logic of deformation.'[240] The crux of Steinberg's discussion is that, as visual metaphors for the reality defined by information capitalism, Murakami's *DOB* series paintings portray identity as a continuous variation within an 'encompassing' framework rather than an expression of immutable essence.[241] This idea harmonizes with the notion that Murakami's work is superflat insofar as it presents cultural identities as distinct existences that, nevertheless, emerge already entangled with cultural 'others' within a global fabric or field.

The logic of continuous deformation, identified by Steinberg, seems intrinsic to Murakami's transforming sculpture *Second Mission Project ko*^{2} and is also visible in the Louis Vuitton-inspired works. Consider, for example, the transition from the white ground and planar array of *Eye Love Monogram* to the dark ground and non-Euclidean geometry exhibited by the screen print *Sphere (black)* (2004, fig 3.21). However, where the *DOB* series images exhibit a certain compositional freedom (albeit, a 'freedom' constrained by

[239] Ibid, p.102.

[240] Ibid, pp.105-7.

[241] Ibid, pp.106-7.

their reliance on computerised templates and carefully calculated palettes of standard colours), works like *Eye Love Monogram* seem much more deterministic. In my discussion of *Jump* I described how the leaping *DOB*, surmounting an apparently random line of spray, constituted a kind of pictorial exclamation mark by which, in Murakami's words, the spectator could 'fix the image.' That is, synthesise a unity from an otherwise discontinuous collection of fragments. By contrast, *Eye Love Monogram*'s picture space – at once orderly and symmetric, yet also a field of continuous scintillation – contains no such central point of reference. Confronted by such a visual *fait accompli*, the spectator is not challenged to 'synthesise a unity' so much as required to simply accept the work at 'face value.' On this basis, Murakami's Louis Vuitton-inspired paintings function, not only as visual metaphors for the commodity logic of 'information capitalism,' but also invite interpretation as symbolizing the relations of power that obtain in capitalist societies.

In his book *The System of Objects* (1968), Baudrillard addresses the idea that, in consumer societies, fashion functions as a mechanism of control. Baudrillard argues that fashion is an effect of marketing whereby, in the manufacture of mass-produced consumer goods, 'marginal differences' are highlighted in order to endow such items with an aura of exclusivity and to present the purchaser with an illusion of choice. In Baudrillard's view, this reveals how fashion appeals to the notion of individual freedom of expression in order to mask the 'basic ideological concept of a society which "personalizes" objects and beliefs solely in order to integrate persons more effectively... in the overall economic order.'[242]

[242] Jean Baudrillard, *The System of Objects*, trans James Benedict, (London and New York: Verso, 1996, originally published as *Le système des objets*, Editions Gallimard, 1968), p.141.

Murakami's *Eye Love Monogram* design vividly illustrates how fashion manipulates the consumer by appealing to notions of individuality in the way Baudrillard describes. In the first place, the *anime* eye motifs emphasize the status of the Louis Vuitton handbags as coveted consumer items; the wearers of the handbags are meant to be 'looked at,' to gain social prestige and be objects of envy. At the same time the wearers are, quite literally, objectified insofar as they become passive vehicles for the propagation of the brand. The very name of the design: 'Eye Love,' whilst referring to the conjunction of *anime* eyes and Louis Vuitton logos intrinsic to the design, is a tacit declaration of brand allegiance: 'I love Louis Vuitton.' In effect, the purchaser of a Louis Vuitton handbag (or, to some degree, an *Eye Love Monogram* series painting) has, in the name of 'self-expression,' actually acquiesced to the appropriation of their agency and identity by the brand.

In his essay, Steinberg revisits Baudrillard's ideas in light of the continuous-dynamic commodity logic that operates in the era of information capitalism. Hence, whilst not explicitly referring to *fashion*, Steinberg draws a parallel between the continuous metamorphoses characterizing the logic of branding and that logic discussed by Deleuze, in his short article 'Postscript on the Societies of Control' (1990), as underpinning relations of power in the post-industrial epoch. The immanent nature of such mechanisms of control seems implicit in Deleuze's observation that corporations, schools and the military no longer exist independently of each other but rather constitute 'metastable states coexisting in one and the same modulation, like a universal system of deformation.'[243]

[243] Gilles Deleuze, 'Postscript on the Societies of Control,' *October*, v59, Winter 1992, p.5 (originally published in *L'Autre journal*, n1, May 1990), cited in Steinberg, p.106.

Eye Love Monogram invites a Deleuzian interpretation on several levels. As I have already suggested, the endless reiteration of Louis Vuitton logos, in Murakami's painting, seems to metaphorically allude to the omnipresence of global capitalism, whilst the deterministic nature of the work's highly ordered pictorial field can be regarded as an abstract visualisation of relations of power and control. Moreover, the manner by which *Eye Love Monogram*'s various elements cycle through a range of colours, and scintillate between positive and negative forms – all the while retaining their structural integrity as 'LV' emblems, cherry blossoms and *anime* eye motifs – exemplifies the behaviour of Deleuze's 'metastable states.' Finally, as a comparison of the planar *Eye Love Monogram* and the spherically warped *Sphere (black)* reveals, the blank 'ground' of Murakami's Louis Vuitton-inspired paintings functions in a manner analogous to Deleuze's encompassing 'universal system of deformation.'

Earlier, I pointed out that Murakami's vision of Japanese-ness and Western-ness emerging, already intermixed, within a system of ongoing cross-cultural exchanges was implicit in *Eye Love Monogram*'s superflat interleaving of Japanese (i.e., cherry blossoms, *anime* eyes) and Western (i.e., Louis Vuitton logos) cultural signifiers. However, in the context of a study concerned with cultural differences between Japan and the West, the relevance of Murakami's Louis Vuitton-inspired paintings is not only a function of their form and content but also their exhibition and reception. Significant, in this regard, is Arthur Lubow's observation, in his article 'The Murakami Method' (2005), that, at the same time (early 2005) the Tokyo-based Mori Arts Centre showcased *Louis Vuitton: Universal Symbol of the Brand* (including examples of Murakami's designs), Murakami was also exhibiting a pair of

smiling, cartoon cherry sculptures in the nearby Roppongi Hills Louis Vuitton store. Hence, 'in Tokyo, an art museum was displaying luggage... [and] a luggage shop was exhibiting art – and nobody thought anything out of the ordinary.'[244] Indeed, Lubow cites Murakami's Tokyo dealer Tomio Koyama claiming: 'In Japan a gallery has no meaning, and a Louis Vuitton shop is a more powerful place to see something'[245] and reproduces Sawaragi's comment: 'This back and forth doesn't seem unnatural to us... We have had a long history of museums with department stores as a venue.'[246] As I pointed out earlier, the *Super Flat* exhibitions were initially launched in Parco department store galleries.

However, as Lubow also notes, in the West Murakami's Louis Vuitton-inspired works attracted much negative comment from gallery visitors and art critics.[247] On initial inspection, this adverse reaction seems surprising when one considers that, superficially, the Louis Vuitton-inspired paintings, sculptures, and media works recapitulate Warhol's 1962 exhibition of paintings of Campbell's soup cans and exemplify Warhol's claim that 'Business art is the step that comes after Art.'[248] At the same time, it is evident that the situations of the two artists are not precisely synonymous. Unlike Warhol, who (in 1962 at least) had no formal business relationship with the Campbell company, Murakami's *Eye Love Monogram* paintings were exhibited at a time when he was, in effect, an employee of Louis Vuitton. Hence, whilst Warhol's pictures can be

[244] Arthur Lubow, 'The Murakami Method,' *New York Times Magazine*, April 3 2005, p.50.

[245] Tomio Koyama quoted in Lubow, p.50.

[246] Sawaragi quoted in Lubow, p.50.

[247] Lubow, p.57.

[248] Warhol, p.88.

described, justifiably, as critical appropriations of consumer culture, the status of paintings like *Eye Love Monogram* is considerably more ambiguous; are these images to be taken as genuine cultural criticism, or are they elements in a Murakami-Louis Vuitton marketing campaign?

However, even if Murakami's Louis Vuitton-inspired paintings are essentially a marketing exercise, it should be recognized that this does not necessarily differentiate them from other contemporary artworks exhibited in dealer galleries or public institutions. Indeed, it is conceivable that Murakami's negative reception in the United States had less to do with his work's superflat merging of fine art and commerce than with the exposure of certain cherished illusions this activity entailed. Specifically, the mythological notion that fine art is an exalted form of expression, embodying truths and values that transcend the vulgarities and compromises associated with pecuniary exchange. It is this kind of mythologizing that Baudrillard decries, in his provocative essay 'The Conspiracy of Art' (1996), where he argues that it is precisely for the benefit of the market that the arts continue to be surrounded by an aura of privilege. In Baudrillard's view, the hypocrisy of such myth-making is evident in that much contemporary art (responding to the scepticism and pessimism characterizing certain postmodern discourses) has embraced a 'perverse aesthetic' of irony and abjection – or, to use Baudrillard's term, 'nullity.' At the same time, however, this work continues to be exhibited in prestigious venues, sells for high prices and attracts serious criticism. Baudrillard concludes that such a state of affairs reveals to what extent artists, dealers and institutions are engaged in a 'conspiracy' to promote 'nullity as a value' – an activity that demonstrates the power of the market to perpetuate itself by transforming everything (whether criticism of its own

machinations, or even the notion of 'nullity' itself) into forms of commercial exchange.[249]

Baudrillard's argument harmonizes with what is implicit in Murakami's superflat art – namely, that fine art production and merchandising are not fundamentally irreconcilable but rather form a continuum of practices within an encompassing framework (i.e., the system of global exchanges of information, people, products and capital). In other words, distinctions between 'fine art' and 'merchandise' do not reflect absolute or objective differences but rather boundaries and hierarchies imposed and maintained artificially. From such a perspective, nothing in principle prevents Murakami's collaboration with Louis Vuitton from both *criticizing*, and yet simultaneously, *participating* in consumer culture. Indeed, superflatness seems to deny the possibility of occupying any position 'outside' the system of global exchanges of which consumer culture is part. It tacitly asserts that, in criticizing commodity culture, one is already engaged with it – that is, one never reflects on commercial structures without already being deeply enmeshed within/emerging out of those structures. Whilst genuine cultural differences account for the contrasting modes of exhibition and reception of Murakami's Louis Vuitton-inspired paintings (i.e., Japan is 'superflat,' the West is not… yet), at the same time the formal characteristics of these works underline the point I have attempted to make throughout this chapter and which intrinsic to Murakami's superflat rubric. Namely, that cultural differences do not inhere in self-sufficient and immutable *essences* but rather express the *effects* of warps and folds in a global fabric, or alternatively, crosscurrents flowing, already intermixed, within a

[249] Baudrillard, 'The conspiracy of art' in *The Conspiracy of Art, Manifestos, Interviews, Essays*, ed. Sylvère Lotringer, trans Ames Hodges (New York and Los Angeles: Semiotext(e) 2005, originally published as 'Le Complot de l'Art,' *Libération*, Paris, May 20 1996), pp.27-9.

global field. Thus, whilst one tends to speak of Japan and the West as if they are autonomous existences, such practical terminology fails to encompass the complex nature of cultural identity in the contemporary epoch. Murakami's work demonstrates an understanding of this situation; Japan and the West are presented as entities that come into being already inextricably intertwined, and which *mean* not by virtue of *what* they are (i.e., as if they were essences) but rather *how* they are (i.e., as the nascent products of a pre-existing play of differences).

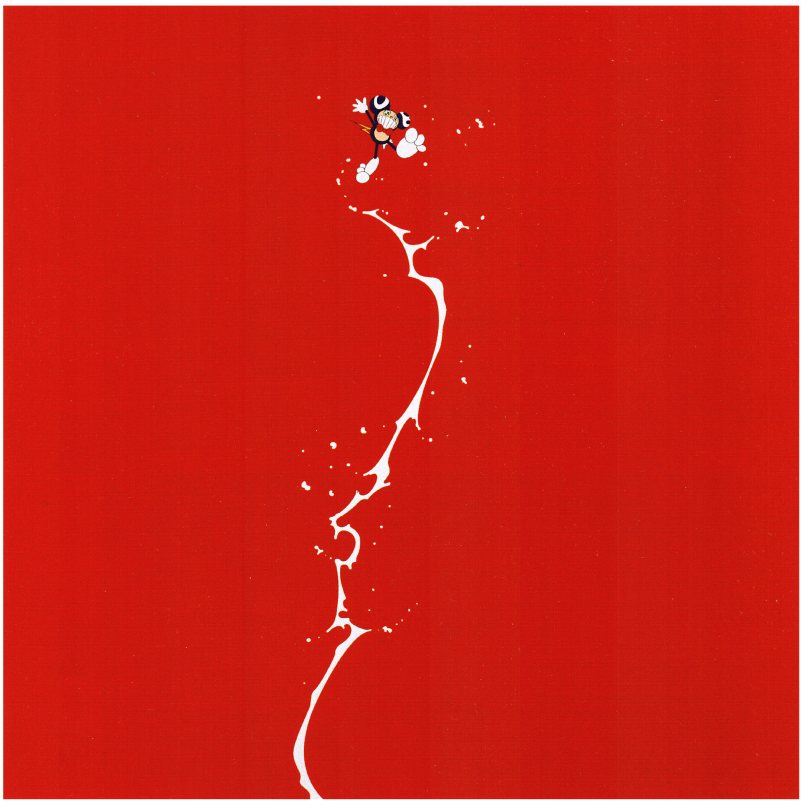

Figure 3.1 Takashi Murakami, *Jump* 1999

Figure 3.2 Takashi Murakami, *Castle of Tin Tin* 1998

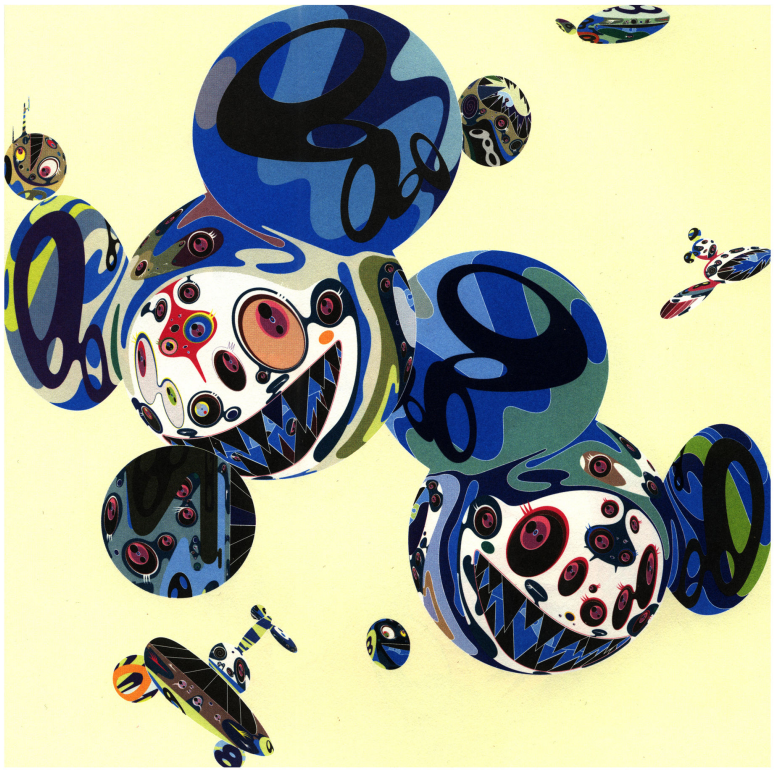

Figure 3.3 Takashi Murakami, *Double Helix Reversal* 2001

Figure 3.4 Itō Jakuchū, *A Group of Roosters* 18th century

Figure 3.5 Kanō Sansetsu, *Pheasant and Plum Tree* 1631

Figure 3.6 Yoshinori Kanada, *Galaxy Express 999* 1979

Figure 3.7 Takashi Murakami, *Miss ko²* 1997

Figure 3.8 Takashi Murakami, *Superflat Museum* 2003

Figure 3.9 Takashi Murakami,
Second Mission Project ko² (human type) 1999

Figure 3.10 Takashi Murakami,
Second Mission Project ko² (ga-walk type) 1999

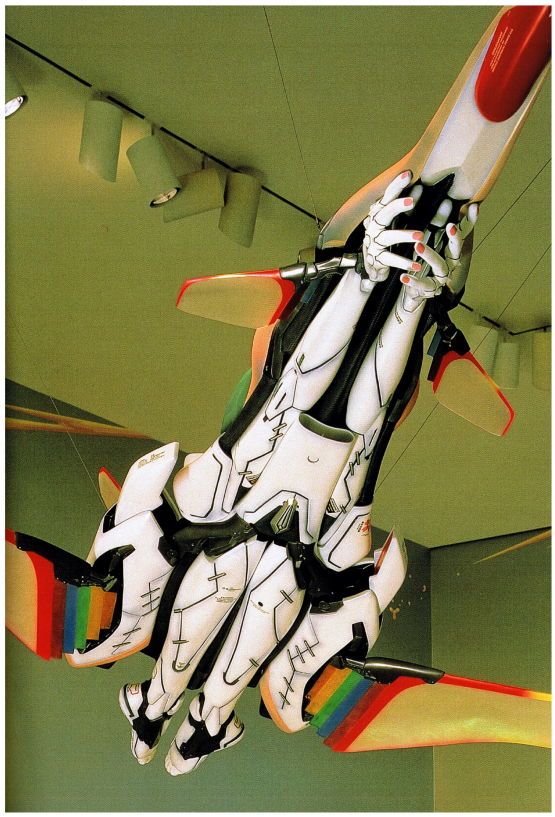

Figure 3.11 Takashi Murakami,
Second Mission Project ko² (jet airplane type) 1999

Figure 3.12 top: Kenji Kamiyama, *Ghost in the Shell: Stand Alone Complex* 2002,
middle: Terminal Miko Productions, *Motoko Kusanagi* c.2004-06,
bottom: Mamoru Oshii, *Ghost in the Shell* 1995

Figure 3.13 Shin Takahashi, *She, the Ultimate Weapon* 2002

Figure 3.14 Hideaki Anno,
Neon Genesis Evangelion 1995-96 (Rei Ayanami)

Figure 3.15 Bome, *Rei, wishing for your access to her* 2000

Figure 3.16 Takashi Murakami, *Hiropon* 1997

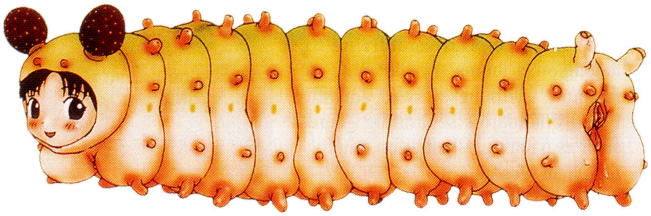

Figure 3.17 Henmaru Machino, *Untitled (Green Caterpillar's Girl)* 1999

Figure 3.18 Takashi Murakami, *Mean of Blue* 1998

Figure 3.19 Louis Vuitton,
Eye Need You bag in *Eye Love Monogram* canvas 2003

Figure 3.20 Takashi Murakami, *Eye Love Monogram* 2003

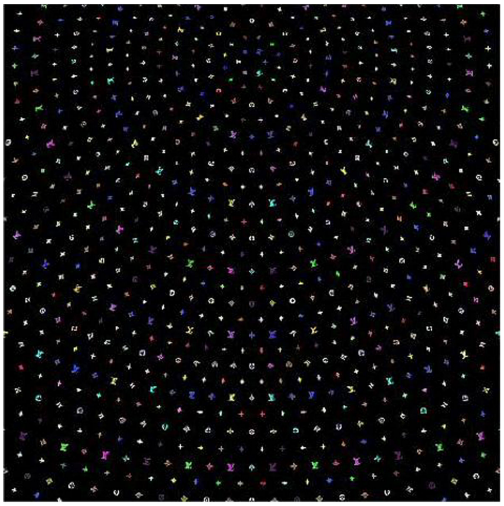

Figure 3.21 Takashi Murakami, *Sphere (black)* 2004

Conclusion

This thesis has presented a comparative study of three contemporary Japanese artists whose work illustrates the complexity and sophistication that has greeted postmodern challenges to notions of essence and authenticity in a technologically transformed world shaped by unprecedented global flows of information, people, products and capital. In relation to the notion of cross-cultural dynamics and cultural difference, the work of Morimura, Mori and Murakami illustrates that, whilst it is reasonable to speak of distinguishable cultural identities like 'Japan' and 'the West,' precisely what such labels signify is open to question. Indeed, when considering the notion of cross-cultural exchange or cultural difference, it may be more illuminating to think not *what* but rather *how* these identities are. That is, how they are constructed or how they emerge – and how they exist as dynamic entities subject to change over time as opposed to being static fixtures in a timeless, a-historical substrate.

This vision of identity as something in play – a process or performance rather than the expression of immutable origins or essences – is exemplified by Morimura's photographic self-portraits. In Chapter One I discussed a selection of works, from his *Self-portrait as Art History* and *Self-portrait as Actress* series, suggesting that Morimura's jarring juxtapositions of 'Japan' and 'the West,' 'male' and 'female' tacitly reified the existence of such identities whilst, at the same time, leaving their precise nature suspended in a space of indeterminacy. In cultivating ambiguity, Morimura's self-portraits invite multiple interpretations. Thus, whilst it is reasonable to view pictures like *Portrait (Futago)* or *Blinded by the Light* as 'cultural critiques' (both of the legacy of Western cultural imperialism and post-Bubble Japanese

consumerism), other works such as *Six Brides* and *Marlene Dietrich 1* seem to emphasize Morimura's campy indulgence of glamour, comedy and entertainment. This reveals to what extent his pictures exploit postmodern crises of identity in order to maximise possibilities for creative free-play. Regardless of whether they are bizarre cross-cultural pastiches or transgender explorations, in presenting an ever-shifting series of identities, Morimura's self-portraits avoid 'taking sides' whilst allowing (indeed insisting) that 'sides still exist for the taking.'

The bizarre juxtapositions of cultural signifiers in Morimura's self-portraits provide a visual metaphor for the technologically mediated system of exchanges that characterizes the contemporary epoch. Whilst the disjunctive nature of his work tends to highlight difference, insofar as all the faces in Morimura's pictures are his own, they invite interpretation as bearing witness to the levelling or effacing of difference that accompanies processes of globalisation. In Chapter Two I suggested that Mori's work, with its persistent theme of oneness or unity, was particularly amenable to such a reading. This is not to imply Mori's work is irrelevant to a discussion concerned with cultural difference. Her photographic self-portraits as a cybernetic being clearly picture aspects of hi-tech contemporary Tokyo, whilst her self-representations as a Goddess figure (in film-based works like *Nirvana*) refer to the traditional iconography and philosophy of Pure Land Buddhism in a specifically Japanese context. However, the fantasy of humanity's technologically assisted apotheosis, pictured in *Last Departure* and literally enacted in *Wave UFO*, functions as a metaphor for globalisation insofar as these works depict a vanishing of distinct and autonomous identities (whether of individuals or cultures) into a supervening *immanence*. Whilst Morimura's self-portraits also proceed from an understanding of the omnipresence of global

systems of exchange, Mori's harmonious and utopian vision of an isotropic world that looks the same from any vantage point, and within which each 'part' reflects the 'whole,' contrasts dramatically with Morimura's archly discordant vision of global reality.

In Chapter Three I further explored the idea that the system of global exchanges is an immanence in my discussion of the 'superflat' and 'universal' aspects of Murakami's work. In particular, I sought to resolve his seemingly paradoxical assertion that superflatness signifies a 'uniquely Japanese sensibility' and yet is an 'original concept of Japanese who have been completely Westernized.' Implicit, in Murakami's *DOB* series paintings or *anime*-style sculptures, is a reassertion of Japanese identity (i.e., the 'tradition' of formal decoration that links Edo-period painting to *manga* and *anime*) nevertheless cognizant of the contradiction that many aspects of contemporary Japanese culture are a product of cross-cultural exchanges with the West – however much this reality may be distorted, repressed or denied. Moreover, Murakami's conception of superflatness also provides a way to reconcile the thematic impasse between the work of Morimura (where cultural differences tend to be reified) and Mori (where cultural differences tend to be effaced). This is evident in the Louis Vuitton-inspired artworks, where Murakami represents Japanese and Western cultural signifiers as scintillations suspended within an isotropic, and infinitely deformable, medium. Murakami's vision of a superflat cultural reality is, therefore, one in which Japan and the West admit consideration as distinguishable cultural existences that, at the same time emerge, already entangled, within the ever-shifting (yet ever-the-same) immanent geometry of a global fabric or field.

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