

## **Transnationalism and Entrepreneurial Art Theory on a Global Stage**

By James Jack

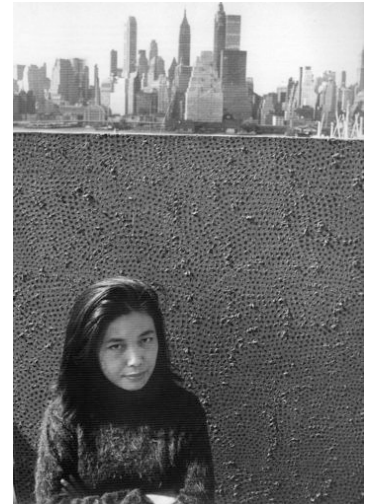
Today I would like to investigate the motivations and realities of contemporary Japanese artists that choose to live and work outside Japan. This paper will address the ways Japanese artists represent themselves to foreign spectators in urban centers of the art world such as New York. It will assess Murakami Takashi's Entrepreneurial Art Theory, the idea that art and business are inextricably connected, and examine its applicability to emerging Japanese artists who position themselves in the West. It is my thesis that there is no simple explanation for why Japanese artists position themselves and their work outside Japan, but rather a bricolage of factors that drive them toward a transnational stage. Furthermore this paper will suggest that Japanese artists are active creators not only their work but also their artistic careers for international audiences.

This paper will focus on the ways contemporary Japanese artists negotiate their identity while they are abroad and sketch a brief outline of how this relates to their representation of "self" at home. Herein transnationalism will refer to the social movement that arises from the dissolution of boundaries between nations as people from different countries become more interconnected. For example artists such as Cao Fei create projects suited for a specific city for an exhibition, but have a larger connective vision through the modes of connection available on the internet; in particular Second Life in the case of this emerging Chinese artist.

A brief sketch of two Japanese artists who left Japan to pursue their career in New York during the postwar period will paint the scenery that lies behind Murakami Takashi's theories as well as the realities of emerging Japanese artists who work abroad today. Kusama Yayoi represents a trend among postwar Japanese artists to seek recognition outside Japan, and one of the first to be fully conscious of her

Japaneseness in relation to the hierarchies of the Western art establishment. Kusama remembers yearning to live in New York as soon as the Japanese surrendered to the U.S. in 1945. She “immediately wanted to go to New York...to be free, to build up my art, to build up my philosophy.” After a brief stint in Seattle she settled in New York by 1958 and experimented with radical performances, obsessive installations, and other works that both reflected and contributed to the cultural milieu of the time.

While interviewing a number of artists in New York and Tokyo this year, I realized one of the most commonly held beliefs among contemporary Japanese artists is a similar feeling of freedom that Kusama wrote about in the 1950s. What exactly is this experience of “freedom” that Japanese artists experience outside Japan? Could it be a mythology? The ways that emerging Japanese artists participate in the discourse of creative freedom will run throughout the forthcoming investigation of two emerging artists, namely Harima Midori and ON Akiyoshi Megumi.



Kusama’s success was composed not only of her provocative works, but also her awareness of the apparatuses of the Western art world. Her striking presentation of “Japan” is clearly evidenced in this film *Walking Piece* from 1966 in which she strolls the streets of Manhattan clad in kimono toting a parasol. This work clearly shows her ability to dance within the Western gaze and use it for her own purposes. By the late 1960s she was circulating her own press releases for performances such as the *Naked Orgy Happening* staged in a number of high profile locations around New York. Kusama’s early performance works instigated a dynamic between Japanese artists and Western viewers that is being re-defined by emerging Japanese artists today.

For Kusama as well as other postwar Japanese female artists such as Kubota Shigeoko the myth of freedom outside Japan gave them the opportunity to experiment while in Japan her happenings were deemed too scandalous for Japanese. In fact Yoshimoto Midori has noted that since the 1960s ambitious female artists have made a pattern of leaving Japan to pursue their career abroad. Kusama’s early performance works

in New York instigated a dialogue between Japanese artists and Western viewers that is being re-defined by emerging Japanese artists today. As emerging Japanese artists become aware of their identity outside Japan they are faced with a complex set of issues related to how they negotiate their life and work on a global stage.

One of the complex results of globalization, a force that brings artists all over the world closer together, is that artists move freely across national borders, thus developing a reflexive awareness of one's relationship to other cultures and subcultures across the globe. For example Kaihatsu Yoshiaki noticed a great change in his work after he left Japan as he, "began to create works that were more consciously Japanese." What exactly does it mean to "create works that are more consciously Japanese," and how do emerging Japanese artists engage in discourses of Japaneseness? The desire to participate in the discourses of cosmopolitanism is one of the strongest motivations of Japanese artists who work in diverse urban centers such as New York, Beijing, and London. A young Japanese artist who recently moved to New York, Harima Midori notes that she has learned the necessity of engaging with global art criticism and realized that it is crucial for her to know the position of her work in an international context since she left Japan. What role does this understanding of the global context for artwork play in the career trajectories of Japanese artists today?

Many of the emerging Japanese artists who I spoke with work outside Japan in order to become part of an international community and network with other people who share a similar approach to art. None of the artists I spoke with consider it a necessity to work outside Japan in order to participate in international exhibitions, yet they are all working outside Japan for what they consider to be circumstantial reasons. Identity is a fluid concept that changes depending on where an artist lives, where they are producing artwork, and where the work is being displayed. As Shih has noted subjectivity is affirmed by transformative identity,<sup>1</sup> thus an artist's self-representation shifts according to who and what is being seen. For example ON Akiyoshi Megumi developed specific performances that deal with Americanisms when she moved to New York in 1999, initiating a series of *ON Gallery* performances in which she donned a costume that functions as a public



<sup>1</sup> Shu-Mei Shih, *Visuality and Identity* (Berkeley: UC Press, 2007): 22.



gallery. In America she gravitates towards symbolic sites, conjuring the American Dream with backdrops such as the Statue of Liberty and Times Square. In creating a transitory display of art on her body ON uses her presence itself to negotiate a foreign country, taking art for a walk in public spaces where she is seeing the world and being seen by it. Her original motivation to live in New York was curiosity, but she now sees the career opportunities and networks that are available outside Japan.

It is also a characteristic of the Japanese art world that once an artist has been recognized abroad they gain domestic acclaim, well illustrated by the career of Ono Yoko and Ambe

Noriko.

I want to draw a brief comparison of *ON gallery* with Kusama's *Walking Piece* in order to note their different strategies of representing selfhood and Japaneseness. Kusama uses her body as a site for adornment along the lines of what may be expected of an exotic Japanese woman while ON uses her body as a site to address the limitations of the gallery system. ON has executed these performances in Shanghai, Dubai, New York and Tokyo—taking the urban environment of each city as a space to play with the accessibility of art and the relationship between artist and viewer. Under the mythology of American freedom ON developed the concept for this performance, and now continues to forge new relationships with viewers in social spaces of cosmopolitan areas across the globe. In contrast Kusama's performance only makes sense in a Western urban environment where her kimono is viewed as exotic, foreign and referencing Japan as a nation.

The most difficult city for ON Akiyoshi Megumi to perform in was the place where she grew up, Tokyo, because she knows how cold, shy, and uninvolved Japanese people can be. As she rode the subway and walked around Ginza she found that people were more receptive to her performance than she had anticipated. ON's work comes to life in a social space that is created somewhere in between the viewer's curiosity and her display. The ON gallery/museum lives in a transnational space that doesn't fit easily within the borders of any nation, but rather it is a space that is created each time she dons the costume and interacts with people in cosmopolitan



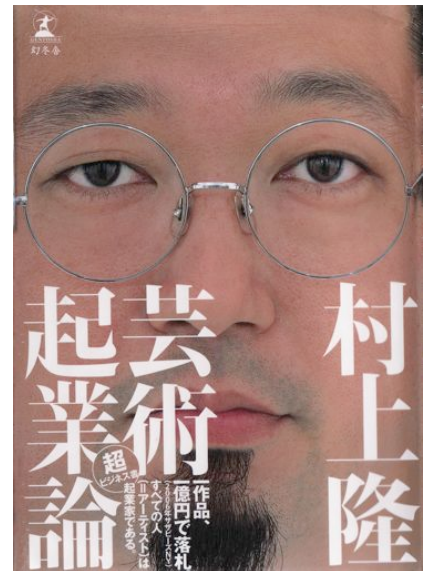
environments. This is one of the distinguishing features of Japanese artists in the 21<sup>st</sup> century: namely that their work is not fashioned exclusively for one cultural viewing environment, but rather it is a concept that takes on new meanings each time it is performed. Thus ON's work is a critique of the commodification, valuation, and privatization of art—trends that are equally part of American and Japanese culture, thus suggesting the possibility of a transnational artistic language.

The questions of how to represent oneself to global audiences has been recently addressed by Murakami Takashi in his book *Art Entrepreneurial Theory*, wherein Murakami comments on the influences of globalization on contemporary Japanese artists who grew up in Japan.

His book is composed of four chapters:

- 1- Entrepreneurship through Art
- 2- (Japanese) Art needs to open itself to the world
- 3- The discipline of creating value in art
- 4- How to reach the limits of one's ability<sup>2</sup>

Although this paper briefly addresses the concept of Entrepreneurship through Art as it relates to developing a career outside Japan, the relationship between business and art is beyond the scope of my current investigation. Chapter 2 is the most useful to us as we examine the case of Japanese artists who live and work outside of the nation's borders. When



Murakami says, *kaikoku ga kanarazu*, or Japan needs to open itself to the world, he is reenacting the drama of Japan opening its doors to the world in the Meiji period. This drama fuels his argument that Japanese history is pervaded with followers and very few revolutionaries. He reduces domestic postwar Art movements to a continuation of the follower mentality and only sees value in work that has been addressed by critics in the West.<sup>3</sup> What he does not adequately address is the scaffolding that underlies the spectatorship and criticism of Japanese artists in the West. I would like to suggest that Japanese artists are the agents for their representation of self for both domestic and international audiences. Thus there is no single trajectory for determining the significance of a work, as Murakami would have us believe, but rather

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<sup>2</sup> All translations from Japanese are done by the author.

<sup>3</sup> "The postwar Japanese art world was making the work of imitators." Murakami Takashi, *Entrepreneurial Art Theory* (Tokyo: Gentosha, 2006): 77.

a multiplicity of meanings depending on context.<sup>4</sup> So how does Murakami's theory relate to the situation of contemporary artists who position themselves outside of Japan?

At this point it is helpful to think of contemporary Japanese artists as transnational citizens who happen to be working in a particular city at a given time. Both emerging artists I discuss herein consider their status in New York to be circumstantial and could return to Japan or move to another city just as easily as they moved to New York. All of the emerging Japanese artists I spoke with said there are more career opportunities in New York than in Tokyo, but the subtext that lies behind this assumption needs to be probed. The desire to engage with a center of the art world in the 50s and 60s motivated artists such as Kusama and Kubota, but the motivations of artists who move abroad today are less clearly defined and characteristically transitory.

The epitome of Murakami's definition of success is expressed in the art fair he created ten years ago, Geisai, which is staged annually in Tokyo. His purported aim is to raise Japanese artists to compete



on a global stage,<sup>5</sup> but in actuality the art fair displays his superficial definition of what it means to be a successful artist in Japan. Ironically he has created a cult of imitators who "follow his revolution against 'followers.'" It still remains to be determined if the opportunities at Geisai are putting emerging Japanese artists on the global stage or not, but nonetheless they are gaining media attention and selling art domestically. What

still needs to be assessed is the pattern of representation that is 'performed' by Murakami in his exhibitions, art fairs and commercial media image.

Murakami's ideas have a large impact on emerging Japanese artists whether they like his work or not, because they are inextricably connected with the package of globalization. Despite this, not all artists accept his approach. One Japanese artist in New York, Katsuhiko Saiki negates all categorization as an exterior phenomenon,

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<sup>4</sup> "Artwork that isn't recognized globally has no significance." Murakami, 80.

<sup>5</sup> "(Japanese) Artists must compete on the world's stage!" Murakami, 112.

I have never considered my work to represent Japan in any respects. Categorization is a determination from outside. Nationality is also determined from outside.

Katsuhiro points toward a reflexive definition of the artistic self that cannot be easily labeled by critics and other artists. As we look at the statements of emerging Japanese artist Murakami's sweeping theory does less to elucidate the state of the Japanese art world and displays more evidence of his subjective position as a Japanese artist who has learned to play the game of global art discourse. Amidst a rising sameness of global culture today, the larger question is how do Japanese artists define their individual style and negotiate their identity on a global stage today?

Emerging artists have difficulty answering the question of whether they are a Japanese artist, an American artist, an international artist or a hybrid. One Japanese artist who has recently moved to New York, Harima Midori, noticed that her identity changes depending on the social context and location she is in, considering herself, "a little bit of both, or more like lacking both." This interstitial space is one of the key distinctions between Japanese artists of the postwar period and the transnational artists who work outside Japan's borders today. Another distinction is the relationship these emerging artists have to the homeland. Contrary to other Japanese female artists in the 1960s who became expatriates such as Kubota Shigeiko, Harima is "flexible" and "optimistic" about returning to Japan in the future and ON is continually doing projects in Japan that bring her back for months at a time. These artists have a shifting sense of self that cannot be summarized by sweeping theories, but rather it must be understood via a particular installation in time and space.

For Harima this feeling of distance has been present since her childhood, growing up in a Japanese exterior but feeling the influence of American culture from the inside. This distance between America as a center of the globalizing world and Japan became integral to the installation works Harima has been pursuing since she left Japan. In her recent work *America*, we see a thin cloth that encircles an orderly pack of coyotes, overtly referencing the work *I like America and America likes me*, where Beuys trapped himself in a gallery with a coyote. In referencing a German artists' clash of nationhood from the 1970s Harima uses her outsider status



to playfully address Americana on multiple levels. This installation probes beneath the veneers that are presented as “American culture” in Japan, while subtly contributing to the creation of a mythology of American culture.



Japanese artists are now dealing with global realities that speak the language of a transnational art discourse. Contemporary Japanese art curator Eric Shiner sees a fundamental difference between the approach of contemporary Japanese artists in New York and Murakami’s method. Rather than hiding behind “a thin surface of happiness” known as Superflat, artists such as ON Akiyoshi Megumi incorporate urban realities such as loss directly into their work.<sup>6</sup> This situation is remarkably different from the international art discourse of the 1960s where artists often functioned as individuals who stand in for a national identity, as has been thoroughly elucidated by Bergreen in the case of the Osaka Expo 70.

As artists choose and are chosen by viewers they engage they participate in he discourse of global recognition. Contrary to Murakami’s claim, becoming an internationally recognized artist is not a universal goal for all emerging Japanese artists, but rather it is mythology similar to the earlier mythology of freedom discussed in the earlier case of the 1960s. As Japanese artists engage in global exhibitions and position themselves on the world’s stage, they adapt their work to new cultural and social spaces, thus forging a new “self” in each environment where they live and work.

Harima Midori’s recent installation *Negativescape* is a merry-go-round of intercultural communication, constantly moving and defying categorization in the marketplace. This installation consists of a sculpture that exists for an image to be projected on, a reversal of the usual process of building a structure and then adding the surface to it. This piece addresses the underlying structures of perception that influence our relationship with objects and ultimately with the world, using the merry-go-round as a cavernous space where nothing is quite what it seems to be. By distorting the perspective of the viewer and

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<sup>6</sup> “The artists included here, do not hide behind the blank face of an imaginary character, nor do they dwell on the otaku insecurities of Murakami and his followers. Instead they instill their work with the very loss that informs it, they take the inequities of life and present them as they are. To avoid the topic of loss with a thin surface of happiness is, for them, missing the point.”  
Eric Shiner, *Making a Home: Japanese Contemporary Artists in New York*, (New York: Japan Society Press, 2007): 24.

obscuring the projected image Harima points toward a space that cannot be categorized in the politics of identity and Japaneseness. She could just as easily have made this installation in Japan, and could easily make it in any country where she has the space and resources to re-create it. The merry-go-round provided a mobile circle structure that would reflect monochromatic images and express the multiplicities of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

I have posed more questions than can be answered in the scope of this presentation because this is my approach to contemporary art. I would like to raise points of debate without labeling artists and categorizing their artworks. Brief examples of how postwar Japanese artists have represented their Japaneseness to Western audiences from the 1960s have provided the background for a more comprehensive investigation of emerging Japanese artists today. In conclusion, emerging Japanese artists who work abroad are both subjects of larger forces of globalization and agents of their own representation in Western exhibitions. Emerging Japanese artists are not the recipients of globalization and capitalism, but rather their art expresses a negotiation of larger forces of change. From our examination of Murakami's Entrepreneurial Art Theory we see that he too expresses the forces of globalization, but does so with a tendency to sum up complicated issues with sound bytes that generalize his personal experience to be universal. Contemporary Japanese artists who exhibit and show outside Japan do not fit within Murakami's theory; but rather they are actively creating a subjective global identity in the 21<sup>st</sup> century in cosmopolitan centers of the art world.

