

Rethinking Murakami Takashi's Art Practice: Artists' Survival and Restructuring of the Art World

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Abstract | Discussions on Murakami Takashi have revolved around the two axes that are often considered to sharply contradict one another—the artist's commercial success and formalistic or artistic value of his works. Murakami himself, however, did not see the two as conflicting or incompatible. By the time he entered the contemporary art world as an artist, the art market's speculative nature had intensified and Japanese art world was experiencing a greater crisis caused by the collapse of Japan's bubble economy under the power of globalization. These changes in the art scene drove Murakami and his contemporaries into an unprecedented crisis of surviving as artists. Despite the significance of the issue as it challenges the art market and artistic values, Japanese mainstream art world has long been almost indifferent to it. Nor had this issue been discussed in art criticisms or artist studies, even in those on Murakami Takashi. With a recognition that it would not be possible to fully understand Murakami's commercial success or artistic accomplishments without taking into consideration the issue of artist survival, this study sought to examine anew the trajectory of Murakami's thoughts and activities. This is to avoid reaching a hasty conclusion that condemns the artist as only commercial, and to more closely scrutinize how the global market transformed conditions for artists' survival, how it has grown by commodifying and exploiting art, and how artists have positioned themselves and operated within the market. To this end, this article extended from typical analysis of Murakami's works to encompass his omnidirectional activities as an artist, curator, writer, critic, art educator, entrepreneur, and more, and reviewed his statements made through various media. By doing so, this study highlighted how the artist constantly surfaced the issue of sustaining artists, not as a group of multiple individuals but as a collective group, and acted out in various ways to restructure the art world.

Keywords | survival of artists, Superflat, Japanese modern and contemporary art, global art market, myth of artist, Kaikai Kiki Co. Ltd., Geisai

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Introduction: Market and Critique, and the Issue of Artists' Survival Lost in Between

Murakami Takashi is a Japanese artist prominent for his artistic and commercial success in the global art market. His fame led to a considerable volume of studies on his career even in Korea since the mid-2000s. While these works span as broad a range of fields as the radius of Murakami's activities, more critical discourses focus either on criticisms of the artist's commercial success or survey of his and other neo-pop artists' works in context of Japanese cultural studies. The latter has sought to dissect the characteristics of postwar Japanese culture by examining its contemporary art with regard to otaku culture or "Cool Japan" strategy, eventually to conclude that at the core there exist memories of war and atomic bombs (Kim Min-su 2011; Choe T'ae-man 2012; Choi Jaehyuk 2018; Kim Il-lim 2019; Arai 2019). Such researches in Japanese cultural studies are engrafted to those in art history or art criticisms that seek to understand formation and external representation of "Japanese contemporary art" as an institutional category through exhibition histories and critical discourses, or that pay attention to how Japanese contemporary art reconnects to Japanese art history. And within this context, Murakami Takashi has been discussed as an important turning point or a symbolic figure of Japanese contemporary art (Matsumoto 2006; Sawaragi 2008; Ikegami 2011; Kuraya 2013; Ko Tong-yön 2013; Choi Jaehyuk 2019; Arai 2019).

The point to be noted here is how these critical discussions differ in their evaluations of Murakami Takashi. There is in fact a kind of tension between the two axes, one that criticizes Murakami's commercial success and the other that recognizes the critical significance of his works in Japanese art and culture. The former assumes the artist's commercial success to have derived from his conformation to the capitalist logic of the art market.¹ Against such criticisms, a Japanese art critic Sawaragi Noi countered that condemning of Murakami as a symbolic figure of the global art market's speculative capitalism erases his critical significance in Japanese contemporary art. Sawaragi defines "Neo-pop" as a group of artists who "emerged upon the paradoxical and critical self-

1. For example, Chin Hwi-yön (2008, 115-17) points out how boundaries between fine art and design, high art and low art are blurred, and that art is being disrupted by capital. She expands to criticize Murakami as a contemporary artist who turns art into a commodity or a product of capitalist desire through an ambiguous combination of subculture and art. Kim Min-su (2011, 116-19) believes that Murakami's works "penetrate the essence of 'art as speculative objects'" and are "tailored to the secondary market of auction houses and art museums," responding to the structural changes of the art world after neoliberal globalization.

identification against war paintings and art of world expositions (*banpaku*) by which they were at the same time most strongly influenced,” as well as a new trend of “pop art affected by postwar Japanese subcultures.” The critic goes on to highlight that “*manga* and *anime*, in which the images of these artists are rooted, are themselves heavily influenced by war paintings and exposition art and imply their historical origin in ‘war.’” With this regard, Sawaragi emphasized that what should be sought for in Neo-pop artists is “a self-referential and paradoxical critique of postwar subculture,” and argued that it is unfair to associate Neo-pop and Murakami Takashi to a critique of global or speculative capitalism (Sawaragi 2008, 151). Considering how Sawaragi had constantly expressed his doubts on the detrimental relationship between art and the state, Murakami and Neo-pop artists for him were probably significant in that they were not mobilized by the state system as in war paintings or exposition art, and rather daringly summoned the history of “impure” art that had long been considered absent by Japan’s art institutions of the modern and contemporary period. In this respect, Sawaragi underlines that Murakami’s collusion with capital was a way of distancing himself from the cultural administration of the Japanese state (152).

However, Sawaragi later changed his position and criticized Murakami’s “Superflat” art aimed at the global market for its omission of melancholy and historical scars of Japanese subculture, as well as for its distortion of reality (Sawaragi 2010). The shift in his stance reconfirmed the incompatibility of art works’ commercial success and critical/artistic values, and this polarity has greatly influenced the way Murakami Takashi was evaluated. However, to the artist himself, these two values were not seen as conflicting or incompatible. This was not because he blindly exalted and followed the global art market dominated by speculative capital. In fact, at the time he began his career as a professional artist, the art market’s speculative nature had intensified and the Japanese art world was facing a crisis generated by collapse of the bubble economy under the power of globalization. Such circumstances consequently drove Murakami and his generation of artists to an unprecedented difficulty to sustain themselves as artists. In this changing environment, the issue of artists’ “survival” became a primary one that penetrated the art market and artistic values. Nevertheless, as had been pointed out by Murakami Takashi, the mainstream art world, that is, art universities, art critics, and art markets were all too incompetent or indifferent to deal with this newly emerging issue of artists’ survival. As a result, this urgent matter came to only hover around like a shadow or a ghost, failing to be fully discussed. What caused Sawaragi Noi, who had watched Murakami and other Neo-pop artists from more closely than anyone

else, to waver within the dichotomous criterion is not unrelated to such limitations of the evaluation framework. And these limitations arguably derive from the fact that evaluations on the artist's commercial success or artistic achievements have been made while circumventing the critical issue of artists' survival. In this regard, this study seeks to reconsider the trajectory of Murakami's thoughts and activities in terms of the artist survival issue that had long been neglected by the previous examination of the artist.

“Superflat” as a Survival Story of an Art Refugee

1. Criticizing the Structure of Japanese Art World: Collapse of Japanese “Art Industry” and Perception of Oneself as an “Art Refugee”

Murakami Takashi studied traditional Japanese painting (*Nihonga*) in Tokyo University of the Arts and received a doctoral degree. However, the artist later recounted on how he “loathed doing art in Tokyo.” This was because, to Murakami who aspired to do “contemporary art,”² Tokyo was experienced as a place where one “could not in the least feel the sense of ‘now’ even in contemporary art” (“Artist interview Murakami Takashi” 1997, 70). Murakami reminisced on the time as follows.

Nihonga was not a genre where potential talent could blossom. Content-wise, the paintings were inferior imitations of Impressionist works. It was all politics, with a few artists, cherry-picked by galleries and award organizations, constantly vying for power; getting tangled in such politics, young artists had no room to exercise their talents. It was an environment far removed from art, but during the height of Japan's bubble economy, its market moved similar kinds of money as the contemporary art world today. . . . At the time, there wasn't a market for contemporary art in Japan, and if you were to choose it as your path, you had to be prepared to accept poverty. Yet it attracted me because its landscape looked liberating—free of politics, factions, and frictions. (Indrisek 2019, unpagged)

Multilayered situations of the Japanese art world that was perceived by Murakami as a “political landscape”—lack of place for young artists, their alienation from the art market and support programs, their poverty intensified

2. In Korea, the term “contemporary art” is translated as the art of current period. The word is used to more consciously distinguish between modern art (*kūndae misul*) and contemporary art (*hyōndae misul*) with the latest trends that have yet to receive any art historical evaluation. Murakami, on the other hand, coherently render the term into “*gendai bijutsu*.”

by the absence of contemporary art market (Ko Tong-yön 2018, 31, 59-60)—led the artist to identify himself as an “art refugee” (*ā-to nanmin*) from the beginning of his career (“Murakami Takashi x Nara Yoshitomo” 2001, 133). Such perception developed into a more solid theory in his “A Theory of Super Flat Japanese Art” (*Sūpā furatto Nihon bijutsuron*; Murakami 2000a). In this essay, Murakami asks questions like “What is Japanese society looking for in artists?” and “What sort of structure determines artists’ actions?” to elaborate on the changes in the postwar art world. According to his words, the late-1960s’ art boom fueled by economic growth led to a gradual increase in sales of Japanese and Western-style paintings, ceramics, and crafts. However, enthusiastically organized exhibitions of artworks from the West sponsored by a number of department stores and newspapers at the period magnified the disparity between the West and Japan in terms of the quality of Western-style paintings, yielding questions on whether Japan needed Western-style painters. During the 1980s’ bubble economy, although art prices in general continued to display an upward trend, Japanese people began to recognize the “price disparity between the world and the Japanese market” through frequent contact with international art market news that became more accessible through a growing popularity and cheaper price of overseas travels. The Japanese art world at the time, however, failed to notice such changes.

Industries of Japanese and Western-style paintings were only preoccupied with the money game and rushed to protect their systems and organizations, and creation of visions and values for the present and the future [that people sincerely hoped to see] was lost in oblivion. As a result, the existing art industry collapsed with the bursting of bubble economy. “Art” began to disappear. (Murakami 2000a, 17)

As can be seen above, Murakami defined Japanese art world system as an “art industry,” and argued that the collapse of its structure caused art itself to disappear in Japan. He believed that the Japanese art world, which had been obsessed with the growth of art industry and rising prices of artworks backed by economic growth to the extent it neglected artistic values and future vision of art, inevitably reached a point of total catastrophe when the bubble burst. There, it faced the collapse of precarious art industry and disappearance of art on the whole that had subsisted within it. This was, in short, a catastrophe brought about by the art industry’s unhealthiness, and its cause could historically be traced back along the lineage of Japanese modern art that blindly followed and replicated Western art history. The current structure of Japanese art world that Murakami experienced at the time as “politics, faction, and friction” stemmed

from this modernization of Japanese art, and was thus perceived not as a tradition to be inherited, but a “bad place” to be overcome and broken through (Sawaragi 1998). As a matter of fact, Murakami had to witness from his starting line as an artist the collapse of even this dreadful place upon which Japanese artists stood on.

The shock derived from changes in the capitalist economy. The collapse of the Japanese bubble economy revealed in devastating ways the unsustainability of Japanese art industry in its current form, and various players of art institution that had shaped the art world since modernization were losing their effectiveness amidst the turbulence of globalization. In this calamitous situation where artists could no longer rely on the existing system, the issue of artists’ survival could not be but raised to an unprecedented degree. Murakami’s perception of himself as an “art refugee” was thus an expression of the awareness that he can no longer find a basis in Japan’s mainstream art world upon which to identify and sustain oneself as an artist both historically and contemporaneously.

2. Creation of a Superflat Japanese Art History: Legitimizing the Subculture Industry and Shifting the Attention to the Artists’ Survival

For Murakami Takashi, who from early on perceived himself as an “art refugee” after witnessing the collapse of established art industry and concept of art, becoming an artist itself was a task that required new history, industry, and concept for Japanese art. For the artist, the “now” of contemporary art in the early 1990s was dynamically in operation outside Japanese art scene. From the outset, he sought for presentness and potential for contemporary art in subculture industry that rallies otakus or fanatics. Murakami, as a self-described “anime geek,” considered subculture industry not as something that exists external to art, but as something that reflects the contemporaneous reality that Japanese art world lacked. His earlier works *Signboard Tamiya* (1991) and *Signboard Takashi* (1991) manifest what Murakami captured from this industry. *Signboard Tamiya* is an appropriation of the logo of a plastic model and minicar manufacturer that the artist first became familiar with as a child. He explained how the brand’s ambitious motto, “First in Quality Around the World,” struck him, because, in the same way that postwar Japan had lost confidence in itself as a defeated nation, he himself had very little confidence as an artist. Tamiya’s slogan encouraged him to aspire for “world-class quality,” and *Signboard Takashi* was an embodiment of such determination (Kirsch 2008). In a roundtable discussion the following year, Murakami referred to this work and disclosed his will to produce “art enthusiasts” in Japanese art world, confessing that if they

had existed, he would not have had to be so conscious of those in other fields (“Tokushū Poppu / neo-poppu” 1992, 74). *Signboard Takashi*, in this regard, was not a mere manifestation of an individual’s modest wish to become a world-class artist, but of a greater ambition to transform Japanese contemporary art into a global business for enthusiasts by embodying the grammar of subculture industry and to establish the preeminent brand of “Takashi” within it.

One of the reasons I do art is because, while spending a hundred million yen on a film would just result in one of the many, spending the same amount making art in Japan may lead to something explosive. And in this way, Japanese art world can acquire reality. It would however be meaningless to produce art of conventionality. I want to make art that is exceptional (*chōzetsuteki*). . . . And therefore, I am interested in the market as much as I am in artmaking. Art as an arena that yields explosive outcomes from opportunities, manpower, or money that were put in at the most pertinent timing. (“Tokushū Poppu / neo-poppu” 1992, 74)

To Murakami, “exceptional art” was something that constantly renews its “world’s best quality” by striving to satisfy its fastidious consumers, or enthusiasts. And therefore, the art market and consumers/fans were its prerequisites. Accordingly, he believed that it is crucial to first break down the boundary or barrier between art and the market and “flatten” the threshold to attract large-scale capital to art, the genre with higher input-to-output ratio than film. That is, he regarded that the task of acquiring market reality should be prioritized over all else to overthrow the banal art world of Japan and create a space for contemporary art to explode. Such notion involves the artist’s enthusiasm for a qualitative shift of Japanese art industry achieved by attracting capital from beyond the existing boundaries of the industry. This shift took shape through a project that established the legitimacy and authenticity of such exceptional art upon historical necessity, that is, through writing a new version of Japanese art history. Murakami abandoned existing institutional frameworks of Japanese art history and created “the lineage of Superflat” that proposed new concepts, categories, and histories of contemporary art.

As is well known, this “lineage of Superflat” originates from the *Lineage of Eccentrics* (*Kisō no keifu*, 1970/1988) proposed by a Japanese art historian Tsuji Nobuo (Choi Jaehyuk 2019). Murakami described Tsuji’s concept of “eccentricity” (*kisō*) as “a revolutionary concept in understanding postwar Japanese art history” (Murakami 2000a). In *Lineage of Eccentrics*, Tsuji sought to shed light on “a lineage of artists from the Edo period with expressionistic tendencies, that is, those who produced eccentric and fantastic images.” Murakami noted that

Tsuji, while “praising them as the avant-garde of their day,” suggested their works’ similarity to contemporary comic books and poster art, and thus argued how the features displayed in these “eccentric artists” matched perfectly with the ways Japanese TV animation were composed (Murakami 2000a, 9). By directly associating Tsuji’s “eccentric artists” from the Edo period with the masters of Japanese animation he had been fascinated with since childhood, Murakami proposed a new history of Japanese art that was heterogenous to the existing history, or more precisely, that erased established history of Japanese modern art altogether.

In particular, Murakami credits the 1970s’ effect animator Kanada Yoshinori (1952-2009) and his disciples as figures who adopted the “eccentric” composition in animation. As such, the axis that historically connects the “eccentric” painters of the Edo period to postwar animators is established through a historical process of art being incorporated to entertainment in postwar Japan. He believed that the avant-garde art movement that arose in the realm of fine art in the 1960s began to lose its subversive energy with the 1970 World Exposition in Osaka (*Osaka Bankoku Hakurankai*), and its artists “entered the mass society as entertainers.” It was the time when a number of artists shifted beyond art to literature or film, or successfully took up a sideline in multiple genres. Many avant-garde artists who had “seriously contemplated on the relationship between Japanese society and ‘art’” also “moved their artistic pursuits to popular media, . . . and entered Japanese society” (Murakami 2000a). In this way, Murakami Takashi reinterpreted the Osaka World Exposition, which is often considered as the historical end of the avant-garde art movement, as a positive turning point, and argued that the history of Japanese avant-garde art continued in the entertainment industry. Upon a firm belief that the entertainment industry was a creative sphere equipped with reality that previous art forms lacked, Murakami attributed the authenticity of Japanese avant-garde art to the animation of Kanada Yoshinori. This was, in a way, a historicization of his own Superflat theory in which he synthesized the two-dimensional flat aesthetics of animation and Edo period paintings by setting Japanese animation masters as his artistic teachers and through them rediscovering Japanese tradition, not of the higher culture of the Edo period, but of popular paintings and folkloric monsters (*yōkai*). Murakami, in this way, synthesized and completed a new Japanese art history that begins with the “eccentric painters” of the Edo period and continues through the 1960s’ avant-garde art movement and to the 1970s’ animation industry. The artist also added that this Superflat history of Japanese art was the legitimate successor of Japanese avant-garde and the only “-ism” that Japan created, as well as the driving force that had continually produced the avant-

garde to the present day (Murakami 2000a, 11).

Having assigned the animation industry the legitimacy of Japanese avant-garde art, Murakami Takashi relentlessly searched for alternatives of the collapsed art industry in this field by tenaciously benchmarking its working mechanism and creative system. In particular, he paid attention to how Kanada had created a method that both improved harsh production environment of limited budget and time that threatened animators' survival and maximized artistic creativity.³ That is, Murakami wished to place at the center of new Japanese art history Kanada, a figure who actively recognized and improved the animation industry's inferior structural conditions such as low wages and depletive working conditions that risked the sustainment of animators, and at the same time also managed to produce artistic outcomes. In this context, Murakami's "lineage of Superflat," as a rewritten history of Japanese contemporary or avant-garde art from the viewpoint of an art refugee, is a fruit of the artist's struggle to fully address and provide solutions and prospects for the issue of artist survival.

3. Defying the Global Art Market: Geopolitics of Superflat and Cultural Politics of "Exporting Japanese Art"

Murakami Takashi sought for artist's way out not only in subculture industry but also beyond the national borders of Japan in the international art scene. In an interview he had upon his return to Japan after spending the mid-1990s in New York, Murakami disclosed his earnest plan to "bring the center of the world art to Tokyo" ("Artist interview Murakami Takashi" 1997, 70). This statement is suggestive of the Japanese art world that sensitively responded to the geopolitical shift of power that occurred immediately after the end of the war through which "New York became the center of world art." Japanese art circle at the time considered the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) to be one of the significant factors that put New York on such position. And upon an urgent need for modern art museums in Japan, The Museum of Modern Art, Kamakura (1951) and Tokyo National Museum of Modern Art (1952) were consecutively established, followed by a nationwide boom in construction of

3. On this, Murakami commented as follows: "In the field of Japanese television animation, low wages and inferior conditions of employment led to a shortage in workers. These, combined with insufficient budget and limited time, made it difficult to yield a seamless outcome. Meeting deadlines was always a huge challenge. However, the art form began to draw attention of a number of fanatical supporters who came to consider television animation as a special means of expression." (Murakami 2000a, 11)

modern art museums that continued to the bubble economy. The geopolitical perception of “the center and the periphery” also powerfully operated for Murakami who had experienced the New York art scene since the 1990s. The magazine *Art Notes* (*Bijutsu Techō*) published details of the artist’s plan along with the interview under the title, “The Day Tokyo becomes the Center of Art” (*Tokyo ga āto no chūshin ni naru hi*). Shortly thereafter, Murakami further theorized this plan and declared it “Tokyo Pop”:

Because postwar Japan depended its survival and growth on the US, “meaninglessness” was the only way man lived by then. People were taught to live without thinking about anything. Its society and class system had been dismantled, and a system was forced that did not nurture “adults.” Collapse of the bubble economy was the predetermined outcome of the game in which only the US could win. From this point on, the father America has disappeared, and the child Japan is growing up. . . . childlike and irresponsible values, a horizontal society where class conflict is absent, amateurism . . . these previously negative elements have now become positive ones that have begun to establish a new world of creation. (Murakami 1999, 68-69)

The US-Japan relationship was defined by the historical construct of “the victorious-the defeated,” and it was experienced as a relationship between an adult/father and a child. As long as the US-centered world order was in place, such trauma of defeat could not be removed. However, a series of events in the 1990s—the collapse of Japan’s bubble economy, the end of the Cold War, and situations that demonstrated changes in the US-Japan relationship such as the Clinton administration’s hardline trade policy against Japan and threats on the US-Japan security alliance—led Murakami to transform Japan’s negative features into new opportunities for creation. As in his reference to “Tokyo Pop” as “Po+Ku,” combining “otaku” and “pop,” “otaku” as a metonymy for a child (Japan) that has not grown up now became the most creative artistic subject.

“The Superflat Manifesto” (*Sūpā furatto sengen*; Murakami 2000b), published in the following year, further expanded on Murakami’s geopolitical ambition to turn Tokyo into a center of the world art. Here, the artist’s enthusiasm was translated into a temporal axis of a developmentalist historical perception that defined Japan as the “future of the world.” Murakami was convinced that Japan cannot but only be the future of the world from globalization of its subculture industries such as those of entertainment, game, and animation (Murakami 2000b, 4). From such futuristic perspective, the old hierarchy of high (art) and low culture (subculture industry/otaku culture), or the geopolitical and cultural hierarchy of the center (the West) and the periphery (Japan) were those that would inevitably be reversed, and further, redefined. Japanese

subculture industry was no longer the preserve of socially marginalized otakus, but became one of the sources for the most futuristic inspirations at the center of the world art.

Such vision of his necessitated a task of effectively placing Japanese art within the historical context of Western art. Murakami believed that "If we maintain our current ways, we will lose out to the British and the US that conceptualized Pop. This cannot be! Without a catchphrase, we cannot convincingly present the unique sensibility of Japanese art to the world" (Murakami 2006, 86-87). He considered that "the art world value is determined by 'whether or not history would unfold from the piece,'" and it was thus necessary for him to "destroy and reconstruct the rules of Western art history and add [new] rules" (79-80). The destruction and reconstruction of Western art history was in all respects aimed at inscribing the presence of Japanese art. Murakami regarded that "If we could relativize culture, explain the artistic background, and contextualize it within Western art history and provide a framework for understanding, then the audience in the US would also come to appreciate Japanese art" (86). To this end, Japanese artists had to become "revolutionaries." For Murakami, "great art" was something that "revolutionizes ideas beyond genres." Revolution here indicated something that was "received by the majority" by providing "a shock, a discovery, a sense of reality that shakes up entrenched conventions or beliefs." And in this regard, only the revolutionary works could go down in history (76-77). This history of Japanese art newly written by Murakami and based on his ideas of Superflat was thus a project that aimed to establish a foothold for Japan's art refugees to enter the Western-centric art world, that is, "to pave a way for exporting Japanese art overseas" (86-87).

As the artist's manifesto suggests, this was a highly cultural and political endeavor. *Little Boy: The Arts of Japan's Exploding Subculture* (2005, Japan Society, New York), an exhibition curated by Murakami himself that concluded the Superflat trilogy, called attention to why otakus who "had not grown up" could not but only be legitimate artistic subjects, especially in Japan as a defeated nation, and thereby intervened in the "politics of memory"⁴ that had developed in the West since the end of the Cold War. However, while Murakami

4. Politics of memory was the context that made Murakami's *Little Boy* exhibition possible. The discourse was sharpened through a series of events including the controversy and eventual reduction in exhibition budget of Smithsonian's National Air and Space Museum for its plan to include *Enola Gay*, the B-29 that dropped the atomic bomb ("Little Boy") on Hiroshima, and photos of destroyed Hiroshima in its commemorative exhibition of the end of the Second World War, *The Last Act: The Atomic Bomb and the End of World War II*; a controversy surrounding the designation of the Hiroshima Atomic Bomb Dome as the World Heritage in 1996; and 2003 Smithsonian public exhibition of *Enola Gay*.

criticized the Western war violence, he remained silent about Japan's war of imperialist aggression, and despite criticisms on this matter, he never modified his perspective or position. This was because his geopolitical concerns and resulting politics of memory were based on the dichotomy of the center (the West) and the periphery (Japan), and as his self-identification as an art refugee and search for the way out also moved along the coordinates of the desperate art industry of Japan and its alternative in the global (or Western) art world. In other words, as the expression "exporting Japanese art" suggests, at the core of Murakami's geopolitical concerns was the search for ways for Japanese artists to commercially succeed in global art market, as an alternative to the domestic one.

When considered in this context, Murakami's persistent translation of contemporary art into *gendai bijutsu* is of profound significance. Terry Smith in his book pointed out how contemporary art dominates art market in general, and how the most dramatic sales of contemporary art take place in auction houses, the secondary market. The history of the phenomenon could be traced back to the US after World War II when a new market was formed that exchanged contemporary American art at higher prices as those of early modern European art with Sotheby's New York holding its first "Post-War and Contemporary Art" sale in 1959. In the 1970s, along with Sotheby's establishment of a department dedicated to contemporary art, its counterpart Christie's New York also began its contemporary art sales, and in 1988 created separate departments respectively of postwar art (1945 to the late 1960s) and contemporary art (works dating from the prior twenty-five years). These changes reflected how contemporary art auctions had become a surefire of maximizing investment value through short-term market gains, as well as a driving force for rapid growth of art market that outpaced the corporate or stock market profits. As a result, by the 1980s, the market for "contemporary art" came to conversely define art history. The secondary market (auction houses) that had previously traded in historical commodities rapidly became "primed" with the expansion of trade in recent, even new, art. This trade had previously been the domain of the primary market (galleries) (Smith 2013, 187-200).

Murakami's identification of contemporary art with recent art, and his reliance on art historical evaluation as a key factor to an artist's survival, suggest that he was an artist who accurately understood, learned, and practiced changes and characteristics of the global art market. In other words, his creation of a new art historical discourse that intervened in Western art history and targeted the contemporary art market was his way of surviving in the market. Also, as David Joselit (2022) points out, "success as an artist . . . requires that a quantum

of 'Chineseness' or 'Africanness' or 'Russianness' be easily communicated in any particular work (127-28), Murakami processed "Japanness" into an exchangeable commodity in the global art market by connecting it to the context of the "politics of memory." And he was successful. This success in fact implies greater aspects of the global art market. It is that, in it, critical cultural politics can also hog the limelight as a commodity. Art market is already equipped with such flexibility and inclusivity to thoroughly commodify critical cultural politics and even criticisms on the market itself. And therefore, the line between commercial and critical artists could no longer be determined by their market success or failure. This extinction of the boundary is evinced also by Murakami's success in the art market as an artist of critical pursuits.

Becoming an "Art Enterprise" and Structural Reform of the Art World

1. Beyond the Myth of Artist and Becoming an "Art Enterprise": "Power of Money" and Founding of Kaikai Kiki

In a compilation of his thoughts and experiences, *The Art Entrepreneurship Theory* (*Geijutsu kigyōron*, 2006), Murakami Takashi describes how he came to value the "power of money":

You need to have at least a minimum understanding on how you cannot continue creating art without necessary funding. . . . Until the age of thirty-six, I went through a penniless period when I would receive expired lunch boxes from back of convenience stores. It was the time when I could not pack and send out completed works without finding boxes from liquor stores or supermarkets. It is like that when you have no money. Whatever you do, it strangely takes time. To save that time, you need the power of money. . . . Because I realized in those deprived years the obvious fact that doing art requires money and time, I became sensitive to financial issues. I am often criticized for "being fussy about money" for an artist, but I regarded that it was something the ignorant cannot comprehend. (Murakami 2006, 26-27)

Contrary to such a painful reality of an individual artist, Japanese mainstream art world's blind belief in the "purity of art" often led artists to overlook the "power of money" that is in fact essential to art production. Above all, Murakami strongly criticized the perpetuating myth of artists in Japan where the "pure artistic spirit" was often associated with one's poverty, so that Van Gogh became a revered model, and where the poverty was even honored as "justice." Murakami's

critique of the myth expanded to that of art school education and art magazines. For him, the mainstream art world was deceptive in that it sustains “a space of illusive ideal in which everyone manages to maintain a long, albeit unimpressive career without any evaluation from the world.” It was also a structure in which “artists could survive like well-tamed livestock,” and therefore allowed its members, “even the unskilled ones, to safely exist as ‘free artists’ to their death” (Murakami 2006, 28-29). This belief of his was quite a solid one. He further went to ascribe the reason for the art world’s atrocious structure to Japan’s identification of the self as the defeated, even to bring in the term “*heiwa boke*” (literally, peace idiot)⁵ that is often used in Japanese rightist criticism on postwar democracy. In his view, such mentality was problematic in that it infused Japanese society with a vague American illusion of “dreams come true” that led to a lower quality labor and greater indolence, and in Japanese art circle, a constant reproduction of a structure fettered by the myth of artist (Murakami 2012a, 2-3). Murakami particularly criticized how “*heiwa boke*” outlook of the mainstream art world created a climate in which artists disregarded fierce competitions and became content with their position as “followers” rather than “revolutionaries.” This was because, contrary to his own emphasis on the necessity of Japanese artist becoming revolutionists, Japanese milieu never “considered artists as such,” and the postwar art industry of Japan continued to produce only the works of followers. He asserted that followers were meaningless in art industry, and one of the reasons included their financial sense of being satisfied with “pennies.”⁶

However, with no one telling him the “real” structure of the art world industry, Murakami had to “survive by learning from the failures of art universities, and discover on [his] own the essence of art making” (Murakami 2006, 31). From his experience of being enrolled at the Tokyo University of Fine Arts and granted a doctoral degree in Japanese paintings, the artist could identify weaknesses of art schools. And he entered the art industry to learn on his own the industry structure as its “member,” eventually to realize that at the core lied the “power of money” (61). Murakami believed that as “the art world itself is of well-defined

5. *Heiwa boke* is a slang term used criticize or mock Japanese people of the postwar period for their lack of interest in accurately understanding global and domestic conflict and security issues, with an illusion that peace will continue indefinitely or without any sense of crisis. More specifically, it is a polemical term that problematizes how, due to Article 9 of the postwar Japanese constitution which renounces war, Japan and Japanese people who became estranged from war came to be unaware, uninformed, or ignorant on the international level.

6. Murakami insisted that “a follower can make pennies, but pennies are pennies. With pennies, you cannot survive in future, and it’s only a few that are happy” (Murakami 2006, 76-77).

commercial acts" (47), the key to structural solution lied in recognizing that "artists are also merchants (*shobainin*)" (50) and striving with apt "business" or "management sensibility." He argued that "artists make a living by selling their works, which is not so different from usual business," and that "money is the most comprehensible axis of evaluation" (45-46). Murakami asserted that even in New York, the world's artistic center, there is a structural logic at work that "if it doesn't sell, it's not worthy of appreciation in the Western art world" (38). In fact, from the moment he created the character "Mr. DOB," Murakami had devised a plan to commercialize art through characters as in the business model of Japanese subculture industry ("Murakami Takashi supesharu" 1999, 134-35). He continued to observe and analyze not only the management strategies of subculture and entertainment industries such as those of animated films, music, and movies, but also of other general corporations, in order to thoroughly practice "becoming an enterprise." The scope of the act was not limited to word-of-mouth marketing, publicity planning, and securing of investment, but also included staff training such as on "proper greeting" and work manual development,⁷ organizational management, and personnel system, evincing Murakami's will to internalize the entire corporate management approach.

Most of all, for Murakami, collaborative production and division of labor were corporate management principles that had to be internalized primarily for artists' mutual survival and eventually for the future of Japanese art. He believed that "it takes a tremendous amount of ability to fire a shot that reverberates the sensibilities of today's people who are paralyzed by amusements," so "unless you are a genius, the only way to do this is to do it collectively" (Murakami 2006, 59). From the moment he turned to contemporary art, he took this collective approach, and it was therefore not new or unfamiliar to him. The artist modelled traditional "workshop system" as well as the production systems of animation and comic book industries to establish a system of collective production based on division of labor (63-64).⁸ He then gradually corporatized the system to establish an "art enterprise."

7. For more detailed discussions on working manual and staff education, see Murakami (2012a).

8. For this, Murakami has often been criticized for being "an artist who doesn't draw or create things himself," and for breaking the old myth or belief that "artist = a condescending individualist" (Murakami 2010, 145). Murakami stated, "I have neglected the artisanal element. It is not because I am oriented toward concepts, but because I have been able to learn by making with other means, and thus for me, collaboration is more natural for me" ("Tokushū Poppu / neopoppu" 1992, 69). Even today, the Kaikai Kiki Co., Ltd. in its website emphasizes that the system of collective production has an art historical legitimacy and is common in industries such as those of comic books, animation, film, and fashion.

Murakami Takashi founded the Hiropon Factory in 1996 first as a volunteer-assistant system for producing his own works.⁹ In 2001, the Factory expanded to employ fifty staffs, and became a limited liability company named Kaikai Kiki Co., Ltd. with extra roles of managing and promoting Japanese artists. Today, the company is headquartered in Tokyo, with a production studio in Saitama, a café and gallery in Nakano-ku, Tokyo, a CG animation facility in Sapporo, and offices in Kyoto. It operates a number of studios and galleries overseas in cities like New York, Brooklyn, and Taiwan. It is a large-scale art enterprise with 250 domestic and international employees, and the number increases to over 350 when including dedicated outsourced creators.¹⁰ Murakami became the CEO to spearhead this corporatized art production system. Beyond the production and sales of Murakami's works, the company aims to become a "creative enterprise" unrivaled in the field of contemporary art.¹¹

To Murakami who began his career in contemporary art when the bubble economy collapsed, and to art students and young creators who aspire to become artists, Kaikai Kiki was hardly an evil commercial enterprise that represented marketization of contemporary art. This is because its central task was, in fact, artist management that supports next generation artists' education and promotion, and creates opportunities for them. Rather, Murakami once problematized the fact that, just as the conventional art world and art market leaned on the "myth of the artist as a condescending individualist" and turned a blind eye to the plight of the majority of art workers, many of whom are art refugees or the oldest gig workers, so too have Japanese companies been built on the devaluation of artistic labor (Murakami 2006, 73-74). In this sense, Kaikai Kiki's emphasis on management of young artists could be understood as a critical pursuit against the established art world and corporate culture, as well as a search for the collective survival of art refugees.

9. *Art Notes* appraised the Hiropon Factory to be a "high-level technical group and a treasure trove of talented young artists" who produce Murakami's works ("Artist interview Murakami Takashi" 1997, 70).

10. Kaikai Kiki website. <https://www.kaikaikiki.co.jp/>. Accessed October 24, 2022.

11. "I want to build a blue-chip company that creates entertainment with art that investors could invest at ease. For example, if the Guggenheim were to open a museum in Las Vegas, it would need a certain 'program.' Creators and companies capable of providing such programs like blockbuster exhibitions [would be in need]. I want to study the history of how Dream Works or Gainax evolved and become a creative company of another direction." (Fujitsu 2001, 190)

2. Restructuring the Japanese Art World: Creation of a Japanese-Style Structure against Globalization and “Geisai”

In 2000, shortly before his founding of Kaikai Kiki, Murakami initiated a large-scale artist incubation project called *Geijutsu Dōjō*, inspired by a traditional training model called *dōjō* that involve immersive and experiential learning. This in 2002 evolved into “Geisai” (short for *geijutsu sai*, or “festival of arts”) and continues to today. The artist once described the project as an “art refugee camp” (“Murakami Takashi x Nara Yoshitomo” 2001, 133). Its motivation was a desperate one to revolutionize the art world structure such as that of art universities and art markets, and to translate and introduce the “Western,” or global art market model to Japan (Ebisawa, Hoshina, and Murakami 2009, 67). For the artist, the Western art market was a “vibrant place where museums and art markets intertwine, always on the lookout for emerging artists, creating trends and embossing artists’ personalities through campaigns” (67). In an effort to establish such art market in Japan, Murakami organized *Geijutsu Dōjō*. It was a three-day art school that included an exhibition on the last day through which the best of the participants was selected and made a debut in the art world. The following year, the event was renamed *Geijutsu Dōjō Grand Prix*, and took on an open format without any restrictions on participants’ qualifications, unlike *Yomiuri Independent* which was the central exhibition of the Japanese avant-garde in the 1960s. In addition, an online bulletin board called “*Geijutsu Dōjō* BBS” was created on the Hiropon Factory website to encourage anonymous discussions on art theory. If any of the participants were interested in pursuing contemporary art as a career, the person was invited to join the Hiropon Factory.¹²

In 2002, the first Geisai was staged in an art fair format that incorporated festival elements from comic book and animation events. Held at the Tokyo Tower Amusement Hall, the fair consisted of “amateur booths” selling works by 638 art students and creators without prior professional art education, and “professional booths” displaying works from well-known galleries and art shops. Works were actively traded in this successful event that received over 3,500 visitors over the course of two days. “Amateur” booths featured paintings, illustr-

12. These art training studios were also inspired by the popularity of martial arts studios in Japan. Originally, like art schools, martial art studios were elite educational centers that taught only professional skills and theories, and sought to differentiate themselves from leisurely sports; however, with the rise in popularity of martial arts, their numbers sharply increased, and they soon transformed into a system open to anyone. This “structure of open education supported by the market” has become a model for new art schools that connect the art market with its players (artists) (Motohashi 2001, 112).

ations, animations, and games, while professional booths were dominated by Neo-pop works mainly from Tomio Koyama Gallery presenting works by its Murakami Takashi and Nara Yoshitomo, and Mizuma Art Gallery its Aida Makoto. Moreover, Murakami introduced competitive elements—an award system and a “gallery battle.” The former incorporated “scout judges” as in audition programs and involved jurors such as Sawaragi Noi, Kusama Yayoi, Hibino Katsuhiko, and actor Asano Tadanobu, the figures one can rarely encounter in general contest exhibits, therefore providing many “art refugees” a chance to make their debut. The “gallery battle” was an event where the hospitality and display of Tomio Koyama Gallery and Mizuma Art Gallery were compared and evaluated directly by the audience. In addition to these events, Murakami hosted monthly “Geisai University” and reinforced the project’s aspect as an art school.

Hara Hisako positively commented on the event as “Murakami’s way of restructuring the art world” by “challenging the existing system” and through “an experiment that disrupted the entry threshold of the Japanese art market” with its co-display and sales of works from both professional dealers such as galleries with those from art students and creators in the same venue, the format of an open-entry contest that included the on-the-spot critiques by judges, its embracement of a variety of works without forcing any art world values and thus creating a space for networking and exchange among artist and creators, and finally, its development of potential audience that led to an astounding number of audience (Hara 2002, 128-32). Such response demonstrates how this project through which Murakami provided opportunities for training in contemporary art and professional debut outside conventional system of art schools and art market has greatly resonated with the Japanese art world.

Sawaragi, on the other hand, discussed how this project should be taken seriously by art officials in Japan, because the fact that a project of such a grand-scale was organized by a single individual artist reflects the extent of his despair and anger. In this regard, the critic pointed out that with the collapse of the domestic economic base supporting arts, Japanese contemporary art also has been absorbed into global capital and international context, and after the 9/11, globalization has taken on a biased form that is far from equal opportunity. According to Sawaragi’s words, it was with this situation in mind that Murakami, who already achieved an international fame, obstinately took the financial risk to organize Geisai in order to restructure the Japanese art world and to “resist the situation where the fragile Japanese art world becomes absorbed into the turbulence of globalization, losing the initiative to create the context of contemporary art and end up becoming a mere component of the global art market.”

That is, it was summons of Geisai to “build a line of defense against globalization by consolidating the potential of art rooted in Japan” (“[GEISAI-2] Tettei tōronkai” 2002, 159-60).

Following Sawaragi's comments, Murakami also manifested his motivation for Geisai in an interview, that “despite the risk of low-profit,” he planned for the event to establish a “Japanese-style” structure to counter the Western-style art market, motivated by a concern that “the Japanese art industry would disappear without a new structure” (“Murakami Takashi intabyū” 2003, 93). Here, the “Japanese-style” structure could be understood as a model that is associated with his Superflat theory. Murakami wished to create a “substructure” that would allow Japanese contemporary art to resist globalization represented by international art fairs, by combining comic books or animations fair format that guaranteed popular success through their resonance with the public and strong base of supporters such as otaku, with more historical format of Japan's alternative art contest exhibitions. And as the result came “Geisai” (Sawaragi 2007, 122). Murakami sought a way to ensure his own country's art scene to subsist under pressures of globalization and global art market, and to this end, concluded that structural reformation of the Japanese art world was in urgent need. This required avoid repeating errors of Japanese modernization that took Western art as its norm, and rather fundamentally reforming the product of the modernization which were Western art concepts and institutions.

“Geisai” began with Murakami Takashi's hypothesis that there is no art (in the same sense as in the West) in Japan. Then, what should be done? One option is to approximate the standards of Western art. But this has been a goal since the Meiji period that still failed to be accomplished after a centennial. Thus, it could be concluded to be something fundamentally unreasonable. Hence, there is no other way but to move the opposite direction and create an art of one's own. . . . And therefore, the method Murakami chose to transform the concept of art from the ground up, understanding art in its broadest sense to include institutions. . . . This is “Geisai”—and in that sense, Murakami did not abandon being an “artist” who creates art to become an institutional reformer, as to him, this institutional transformation was also a part of his activities as an artist. (Sawaragi 2007, 121-22)

An artist cannot simply remain as a “maker of art” in a situation where a fundamental and overall reformation of the concept and system of art established after modernization is demanded. Sawaragi had quite accurately pointed out that it was not that Murakami transformed from an artist to a reformer, but that his institutional reform itself was in fact a part of his artistic practice. As evidenced by the fact that Geisai began as a project to foster young Japanese

artists, these institutional reforms were directly related to the substructure that determined the sustainability of Japan's emerging or future artists. And it was through the event that Murakami attempted for a radical reform of the substructure to prevent globalization from threatening Japanese artists' survival as artists, and to equip them with capabilities to lead the global art market. The fact that Murakami did not cease the project despite the incalculable deficit demonstrates that the artist's perception on "power of money" was not oriented to a personal success in the market. His mobilization of not only his individual assets but also entire resources of his Kaikai Kiki Co., Ltd. can also be understood in the same vein. In doing so, Murakami became a figure who embossed the "power of an artist" in Japanese art world that transcends the "power of money" of globalization and global art market.

3. Restructuring the Global Art Market: Artists' Struggle for the Market Power and "New Day"

Murakami's restructuring of the Japanese art world was in fact a springboard for his broader target, the global art world and art market. Murakami argued that the US and the British created a structure where an individual could only succeed in art via a thorough pursuit of capitalist economy. This was because the naked face of international contemporary art scene involved a desperate struggle between artists for abundance away from poverty on the battlefield called the capitalist economy (Murakami 2010, 38-39). Unlike Japan where "artists could sustain their lives like domesticated livestock," the art world Murakami experienced in New York was "a competitive society of a winner and loser culture" (Murakami 2006, 26-31). Becoming an artist meant that one had to engage oneself in a frantic game of survival in the winner-takes-all society filled with competitions, that is, the global art world or art market. Murakami describes the cruelty of this "competitive society" through his eyewitness account of a fat rat and a small mouse.

Twelve years ago when I was in the US, I often discovered rats in subway stations. Fat rats would chase away the smaller ones. They monopolized food. And the same thing happened in the reality of this artistic center that I witnessed. It was a heartless society where only the fat rats survive. . . . I believed that, in the US, I had no choice but to become a fat rat myself. Protect food from smaller rats. You become desperate for survival. Although, as an individual from another town, I could do nothing but escape in face of a cat. I feel the same way now as I did then about risking my life for art. There is nothing but a will to survive. (Murakami 2006, 48-49).

In this cruel reality where there was only a battle for survival and no communal solidarity between the fat rat and the small mouse, a society of endless competition that render even the fat rat to strive desperately, Murakami was enraged that artists always remained to be small mice. This was due to the fact that the relationship was not an equal one between artists and those super-rich collectors (buyers), galleries and consultants (agents) that run the art market. Murakami's strong criticism on such unequal and unreasonable relationship between galleries and artists in *The Art Entrepreneurship Theory* reflects such resentment. The artist problematized the way galleries took a cut of profits while barely sharing the costs of producing works, and questioned whether "Isn't the risk for artists too big" compared to that of galleries "that had nothing to lose if it fails." He concluded, "I thought it was natural for artists and gallerists to share both the risk and success, but this was not the case in this industry," and the artist's status in the art world was nothing more than "a pawn in a long game." Threatened by such circumstances, Murakami came to a conclusion that in order to "avoid rendering young artists prey to gallerists," artists needed "an agency to represent their [artists'] own interests, much like in the Hollywood industry of the 1980s when actors' guarantees hiked after lawyers got involved in the scene" (Murakami 2006, 66-67). Murakami was certain that only if when the sector of artist management existed separately from galleries could artists avoid becoming "prey" to gallerists ("Murakami Takashi intabyū 2003, 92). As a way of addressing the structurally low place of artists in the global art market, the artist established an art enterprise that performed artist management, Kaikai Kiki, and also separately founded and operated galleries.

Ever since, Murakami has continued to monitor trends in the global art market and explore strategies to raise the status of artists in the market. Meanwhile, the Great East Japan Earthquake and the Fukushima Dai-Ichi Nuclear Power Plant explosion on March 11, 2011 led the artist to recognize anew the social role of artists and take on a new challenge to raise the status of artists in the market. These two were not separate to Murakami who actively responded to the shock of the earthquake and tsunami. Recalling his past activities of "anti-nuclear struggles," Murakami established a strategy to take the center of the global art market as a platform to denounce the irresponsibility and absence of Japan as "the state." The idea was to capitalize on his own high profile and influence in the global art world.¹³ Just then, Christie's Chairman François-Henri

13. Murakami's position to perceive the Great East Japan Earthquake as an extension of his critique of postwar Japan as a "national state" and connect it to the motivation for organizing "New Day" is described in Fujitaka (2012, 23-29). With regard to his "anti-nuclear struggle," Murakami stated: "The nuclear explosion reignited the work I was immersed in before my debut. I was personally

Pinault approached Murakami with an offer to help in any way he could, and Murakami immediately decided to organize a large-scale charity auction titled “New Day: Artists for Japan” (2011) at Christie’s in New York, to mourn for and support the victims of the Great East Japan Earthquake.

At this occasion that was realized with Murakami’s overall involvement from securing auctioned items and eliciting cooperations from Christie’s and the Gagosian Gallery, contributed works by Murakami himself as well as by Anselm Kiefer, Cindy Sherman, Jeff Koons, Zeng Fanzhi, Nara Yoshitomo and more, as well as by several Japanese artists managed by Kaikai Kiki Co., Ltd., were sold at record-breaking prices far above the estimates. On the whole, the auction fetched nearly 8.76 million dollars to achieve a great success as a charity event. Fujimori Manami who wrote a local report on the occasion delivered news in a thrilled tone of Murakami’s success in organizing an “unprecedented” artist-led auction at “the world’s premier auction house” that brought together “big collectors and powerful dealers.” He added, “the power of art is ultimately the power to move people, that is, the power of influence. Artists hold the power that is more valid than the power of money reflected in artwork prices” (Fujimori 2012, 10-16).

Murakami described this artist-led auction as “the culmination of everything I have learned about networking and negotiation over the past twenty years.” This was driven by a recognition that “how to engage with the auction system, which is the end point of the art market structure, is a mission assigned to me, Damien, Koons, and artists of the generation” (Fujitaka 2012, 24). In relation to this “mission,” Murakami referred to Damien Hirst’s 2008 auction. On September 15, 2008, only few hours before the Lehman Brothers’ filing for bankruptcy which triggered a global financial crisis, Hirst organized an auction to sell his own work and broke the record for the highest price ever paid for a single artist. This unconventional move by a surviving artist to sell his work directly at a secondary market, auction, bypassing the primary market of galleries, made Hirst a target of criticism by art market insiders (“Damien Hirst” 2015). Murakami, however, took a different view. This was because he perceived Hirst’s artist-led auction as a challenge to improve the position of the artist in the art market by maximizing the artist’s control or influence in the primary and secondary markets. In the end, Murakami echoed Hirst’s failure and succeeded in creating an artist-led auction that satisfied both the primary market (galleries) and the second market (Christie’s) as well as the participating artists. For examples,

involved in the anti-nuclear struggle, but I became frustrated and became an artist. I had already experienced the futility of anti-nuclear activities without any kind of tactics. Therefore, I came up with a way to use my own status as an artist in New York to import it back” (Murakami 2012b, 637).

“New Day,” which was held during the normally lowest-selling “morning sale” time slot, mobilized “evening sale” artists to generate large sales, and attracted active participating from collectors in Asia with a time difference from New York, leading Christie’s to hail it as “the first truly global auction” (Watanabe 2012, 20-21). Gagosian, Perrotin, and Kaikai Kiki Galleries to which Murakami himself belongs to also encouraged their clients from around the world to participate in the event, bringing in an estimated 700 million yen. In this way, Murakami created a successful example of an artist gaining dominance in the global art market, spanning both the primary and secondary markets.

Conclusion: Globalization, Revolution for Survival as an Artist, and the Zombified Art World

This study sought to examine through Murakami’s words and activities the conditions and perceptions under which Murakami Takashi’s perpetual question of “how should an artist survive in the contemporary art world” formed, as well as his own answers to the issue. Since the late 1980s when Murakami began his career as an artist, the art world has more than ever been greatly affected by changes in the capitalist economy system. The bursting of Japan’s bubble economy and globalization that Murakami faced more directly and intensively caused the art world’s subordination to the capitalist system. As is reflected in Murakami’s criticisms on the myth of artist that prevailed in the Japanese art circle and art institutions and postwar Japanese system that sustained artists like domesticated livestock, it was very difficult for artists to sustain their career within the existing structure established by the mainstream Japanese art world. Still, this issue of “survival” could not be but be raised to an unprecedented level in such a catastrophic situation, and Murakami’s idea of “art refugee” derived from this context.

For Murakami, artists could sustain themselves in the professional world only by discarding the myth of artists that considers poverty as a virtue, and by acutely recognizing and acquiring the power of money. In this sense, Murakami could be described as an artist who actively learned from and internalized the logic of globalization. Furthermore, Murakami wished to respond to and overcome the survival crisis faced by both the Japanese art world that collapsed with globalization and its artists, by adopting a step ahead strategy of globalization. That is, he pursued to become, not a follower, but a revolutionary of globalization. For the artist, the task involved destroying established structures and rules of the past and the present, and creating new ones that were more

radical than the globalization at hand, in order to avoid being swept away by the latest wave and helplessly conform to the critical situation in the art world. His Superflat theory and related exhibitions, establishment of the art enterprise Kaikai Kiki, and the organization of Geisai that were simultaneously emitted in the early 2000s were in fact manifestations of the artist's revolutionary practice.

What should be noted is that the axis running through these reformative practices was the issue of sustaining artists. For Murakami, the fact that artistic production and institutional reformation were inseparable and in line with one another derives from a catastrophic situation where conditions for artistic production—art world structure and institution—had collapsed. In such circumstances, artists had to create on their own not only artworks, but also the structure and institutions of the art world, or the basis of their survival. In fact, their production of art works was rather regulated and tailored by their activities for creating a new art world structure. Naturally, these institutional or structural reforms of the art world in general were aimed at reinforcing and stabilizing the position and power of artists who had been structural underdogs of the system. A new structure would be meaningless if it would still threaten artists' survival, failing to address the situation where young artists were subjected to politics of the mainstream art world, where artists were treated as pawns or preys in the art market, or where the base of Japanese artists disappear under the pressure of the global art market in context of globalization. Therefore, Murakami established himself an enterprise to respond to the art market that an individual artist could not bear on his own, and through it directly managed artists while also establishing and operating galleries. He also became directly involved in art education and organized Geisai, an event that provided personal art training and linked it directly to the art market and art criticism, eventually to successfully create a new Japanese art history and establish the legitimacy of Japanese contemporary art in the international art world. As for the global market, Murakami strived to take a position to create and lead the rules of the market so that, within the relationship with the primary market (galleries) as well as the secondary market (auction houses), artists would no longer be a pawn on the chessboard. In short, Murakami struggled for structural reformation of the art world by artists and for artists. And it was ultimately aimed at acquiring power with which an artist could create a new rule of the game where it is artists who win in the international art market, the stage of globalization. In 2014, in a speech at the Asia Society's Art Gala during Art Basel Hong Kong, Murakami strongly criticized the global art market by summoning Damien Hirst's 2008 auction at the Sotheby's. In response to reproaches against Hirst, Murakami stated that it was his "duty" to "stand up to those who criticize, . . . and to vividly depict realistic scenery" of the art

market, that is, which he described as a world “full of zombies” (Murakami 2014). When asked after the event who he was referring to as “zombies,” Murakami replied, “Me! Everyone in the business” (Pechman 2014). After the 2008 auction, prices for Hirst’s work plummeted and had not recovered even by 2014, but those for Murakami’s continued to rise over the same period. Murakami, however, demanded for the value of Hirst’s first historical attempt of artist-led auction be appreciated, rather than his own commercial success. This was because the collapse of Hirst’s market value and its prolongation were not irrelevant to the unchanged art market structure that preys on artists as well as the institutional exclusion of certain artists by central members of the market. Moreover, while it was the capitalist economy unbridled by globalization that created a speculative contemporary art market that offers high short-term returns on investment, an individual artist, Damien Hirst, came to be blamed for such situation. In this sense, Murakami can be understood to have raised his voice for the reformation of the global art market for sustaining artists or against current system that hinders artists’ struggle for the market power. For him, the success of an artist could not only be determined by his works being traded in the market as a high-priced commodity. It may be that what he wished to insist was that the only urgent prescription for artists’ survival was to end the world of zombies that multiply by devouring living artists. But as is reflected in his description of himself as “already” a zombie, Murakami is also a conspirator himself. His radical strategies for structural reform against the globalization of the art market have conversely become an engine that accelerated and reinforced globalization. As a result, the global art market came to present a more apocalyptic scenery in which art refugees become zombies themselves, and living corpses representing the survival of artists. In this sense, rather than hastily labeling Murakami Takashi as a commercial artist, it is important to closely examine how the global art market is changing the conditions of artists’ survival, how it is feeding on art and growing, and how artists position themselves and operate within it.

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