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Tokyo to LA Story

How Southern California became the Gateway for a Japanese Global Pop Art Phenomenon

An analysis of the demographic and geographic conditions that have enabled Los Angeles (LA) to become a gateway for imports of Japanese contemporary cultures in the West, illustrated with the case of Japanese contemporary art, and the international success stories of Takashi Murakami and Yoshitomo Nara.

By Adrian Favell

Globalization's most enthusiastic proponents (Lash and Urry 1994, Appadurai 1996, Friedman 2005) often talk about global culture as if, with new technology and ubiquitous media and internet saturation, cultural forms are now effortlessly mobile, and simply flash around the planet at the speed of light. Space and time have collapsed, and we are all allegedly consuming the same global cultural products from Beijing to Bratislava, or Los Angeles to Kuala Lumpur. Trace the actual movements of any particular product, however, and it can be seen it often took many years and any numbers of entrepreneurial hands and minds for a local cultural phenomenon to turn into a global success. Invariably this process involves connections between particular people and places, as well as quite specific dynamics of selection, amplification and transmission. There is a role for global sociology, therefore, to restore empirical good sense to the excesses of global social theory (see Smith and Favell 2007; a parallel agenda can be found in Burawoy 2000). It might aim to trace in very human terms how and why, via social networks, mobile biographies and contingent events, certain cultural products – but not others – have moved around the planet, transcended their origins, changed meanings, and shifted given power hierarchies.

As befits a more global age, it can be particularly interesting to see how certain cultural products have, via these dynamics, moved from peripheral or non-Western locations to the still culturally dominant West. Japanese popular culture is often mentioned in this context as a characteristic new kind of culture of the recent global age, coming out of a geographical and societal source that is neither America nor Europe (Iwabuchi 2002). There has, without doubt, been a craze for Japanese popular culture in the West, centring on the contents and visual industries of *manga/anime*, video games, and character based toys (Kelts 2006, Allison 2006). After the potential of Japan's new "Gross

National Cool" was anointed by the American journalist Douglas McGray (2002), as an alternative source of international "soft power" for a Japan facing steep industrial and financial decline in the post-80s' bubble era, the Japanese government has sought to seize all possible opportunities to promote these cultural products in the West as a way of restoring the brand image of the nation (Shiraishi 1997, Watanabe and McConnell 2008).

Interestingly, the national self-promotion that can easily work with popular forms of culture such as *manga/anime*, is also often linked with certain forms of "high" culture, that seem to draw on or connect in some way with the obvious appeal of such pop culture, and which have also become variably noted or influential in the West in recent years: notably fashion, design, architecture, literature and contemporary art. While there has been much analysis of the meaning and critical significance of these cultural transmissions in contemporary cultural studies (i.e., in Japanese studies, Richie 2003, Looser 2006, Napier 2007), the predominantly textual and semiotic methodologies used by such scholars are not well placed to really get behind the imagery or semantics of globalisation, and reveal the selection mechanisms and business dynamics that might account for how and why some of these cultural products have become globally successful. I here intend to offer a case study that might be a model for a particular kind of alternative global sociology of culture. The success of "Cool Japan" lies neither in the intrinsic "brilliance" of the culture coming out of Japan, nor in a self-evident Western fascination for the orient. It was a phenomenon that had to be fabricated by creators and business entrepreneurs alike.

This article will focus on one particular entry point for contemporary Japanese culture in the West, and one particular story: Japanese contemporary art and its specific LA connection. Los Angeles is the USA's most



important gateway to Asia, and by extension, the West's too. It has played a key part in the incubation, amplification and transmission of nearly all of the contemporary cultural products that have made it out of Japan in the last two decades on to the global stage. Clearly it is not an exclusive gateway – Vancouver, San Francisco, New York in North America, and European cities including (obviously) Paris and London, have all played a part. But LA has been a starting point for the diffusion of many products around the US and, via its central place in the global visual and music industries, the starting point of a global phenomenon. The Tokyo-to-LA story I recount here could have been told through *sushi*, foreign language *manga*, *anime* expos, *izakaya*, street fashion, horror movies, museum architecture, or J-pop – all key elements of the “Cool Japan” package that has seduced the world via a West Coast entry point. Here, though, I focus on just one part of the story – Japanese contemporary art – and the rise of the most visible and highest selling global Japanese artist of the last decade, Takashi Murakami. A place in the story can also be given to Murakami's only real peer as a Japanese artist on a global level, Yoshitomo Nara, as well as the “Tokyo girls” that Murakami has successfully promoted with his production company Kaikai Kiki.

Although contemporary art is obviously a marginal commercial concern in terms of broad currents of global consumerism, Murakami's role in the “Cool Japan” phenomenon is particularly symbolic because of the way his art deliberately packages and sells the street and pop culture of post-bubble 1990s Japan, a strategy that took him to the very top in the recent global art boom. Contemporary art in turn should be taken seriously as a dimension of cultural globalisation because of the way that global art consumption has become such an archetypal bell weather of the cultural tastes, attitudes, lifestyles and hidden fantasies of some of the most *avant garde* and cosmopolitan of contemporary global elites (on this, see Stallabrass 2004, Thornton 2008).

My analysis is contextual and historical. Aspects of Los Angeles' geographical and demographic features provide background conditions, within which specific personalities, network connections and events combine to make a phenomenon happen. My technique is to present the story as a kind of social history, based on interviews with actors involved, ethnographic participant observation in the Japanese art world and its offshore cultural outposts in North America and Europe, and extensive documentary work over a five year period from 2006-2010. The Tokyo to LA story here

is a side shoot of the full study of the Japanese contemporary art world since 1990 that I am writing as a book.

LA as gateway, as amplifier, as incubator

The first point would be to establish the context of arrival of the culture in the West: the fertile soil on to which the seeds fell. Los Angeles has long been recognised as a kind of “offshore Japan”, a city that has been heavily shaped over the years by Japanese populations and Japanese business investment. As such, of course, the Japanese dimension of LA is but one dimension of the city as an extraordinary Asian city, by far the most connected and populous Asian city in North America, with (in particular) its massive Korean, Chinese, Vietnamese and Thai populations. California has a total Asian population of nearly 5 million (over 12%), overwhelmingly concentrated in metropolitan LA (the five counties) and the Bay Area (US Census 2000). This is double the concentration in the New York/New Jersey area, and constitutes about 40% of all Asians in the US. In some cities within these two conurbations, including Irvine, Torrance and Garden Grove in greater LA, populations are as high as 30-35% of all residents. What is more, the growth of these populations is driven by the second and third generation, which means it has a much younger profile than other ethnic groups in California, and across generations is significantly more socially mobile than average. A mark of this is the success of Asian-American children in the Californian public school system. 40-50% of all undergraduate students at the top public college of the area, UCLA, are now Asian, the largest single ethnic group. UC-Berkeley in Northern California has a similar profile.

LA also has the largest, the longest stranding and the most generationally varied Japanese population in the US (Machimura 2001, Minamikawa 2007). It was heavily marked by the sad wartime experiences in detention of the original Japanese resident populations, whose old and once thriving neighbourhoods on the Westside are still visible in outline (Keil 1998: 115-116). While decimated by the war, a second and third generation emerged in the decades after, determined (initially) to assimilate to mainstream American culture at all costs. In the 1980s, then, LA was rebuilt with huge Japanese investment during the Japanese financial bubble. The strange and surreal LA downtown, with its small and vibrant “Little Tokyo” attached, was largely bankrolled by Japanese corporations (Davis 1990: 135-8). Numerous major Japanese corporations set up shop in the south bay cities of Torrance and Carson, zones of



the greater LA area now that have high populations of Japanese expat families, with the shopping malls, schools, business networks, and social associations that come with such high population concentrations. On top of this, most visible in Santa Monica and West LA, there is then a large floating population of younger Japanese part time and irregular visa holders – the international *freeter* generation – using LA as a base to pursue their creative or free western lifestyle dreams. LA shares this population with New York, London and Berlin, in particular, but in LA the population notably has a very high proportion of students who manage to easily get registered with visas through the Californian public college system (Minamikawa 2006).

Los Angeles is the largest port in the US, and the most important physical gateway for products coming in by surface into the US, as well as the West coast's largest airline hub. This has positioned it as the key location for the upcoming Asian century, in terms of the dynamics of Western imports of Asian products. There is a joke among Japanese-American businessmen that Japanese corporations may keep headquarters in New York for prestige purposes and to be close to the financial centre of the US in New York, but they know full well that their markets these days are overwhelmingly in the South West. Other massive Japanese interests such as Toyota, Sony or Family Mart have simply taken up their operations in the Southland. Small and medium sized business people, particularly those in the creative industries, confirm the analysis of human geographers (Scott and Soja 1996, Storper 1997) about the dynamic features for their kinds of businesses of LA's peculiar style of agglomeration. As a city or urban space, LA is distinctively decentred, socially flat, spatially expansive, and network based, compared to the classically centralised, centripetal and hierarchical forms of older industrial and financial cities such as New York and Chicago, that are also turned much more obviously towards Europe in their orientation (Dear 2002, Halle 2003). For all these geographical and demographical reasons, LA has a relative advantage vis-à-vis Asian trade and cultural flows, which it combines with the appeal of endless sunshine and the highly individualistic freedoms of the Californian lifestyle.

The environment thus provides an extraordinarily direct context for the reception, acceptance and adoption of any and all Asian culture and consumption patterns. As the centre of the US film, TV and music industries, LA plays a massive role in amplifying new popular cultures, that often then spread fast to the rest of the US and after the World: this is "Californication", as it is often referred to. Cultural trends imported here

thus stand a good chance of taking off globally. With Asian products, a first degree of direct consumption is guaranteed by the large native foreign Asian populations – who are all well catered to by both foreign and Asian-American businesses. Other populations have then got used to Asian consumption possibilities as a routine feature of Californian life.

These dynamics apply all the more to the voracious appetite mostly younger Americans are developing for Asian youth cultural products of all kinds – from music and computer technology, to films and fashions. Interestingly, it is here that Japanese popular culture has come to be such a key part of the cultural menu of teenage and student populations in California, within which young Asian Americans are such a visible part. Essentially, Japanese pop culture (*manga* and DiY "Do it Yourself" alternative art, *anime*, j-pop, film, TV idols, street fashion and so on) – and increasingly their "copied" Korean and Chinese variants – have become *the* popular culture of young Asian Americans of all national and cultural origins in California. This is a curious feature of Asian American culture in the multi-racial "rainbow" mix of the state (Zhou and Gatewood 2007). It has provided a medium for a kind of "pan-Asian" identity that would never be the case back in Asia, where national and cultural enmities and distinctions still run so high. It is also less the case on the East Coast where the more overtly racialised nature of politics there mean that ethnic and cultural distinctions are preserved more within the different Asian-American groups. In addition, the emergence of this culture attached to a rising pan-ethnic Asian group, has led Japanese popular culture itself to become a marker for a certain kind of "cool" youth culture, among selective younger generations.

Anime expos are a good example. They were essentially first invented and developed as a pop cultural phenomenon by a number of second and third generation Californian Asian Americans, such as the LA based founder or A/X (the largest such expo in the US) and now director of Pacific Media Expo, Mike Tatsugawa. Over a weekend in Anaheim (near Disneyland), 30-40,000 young Americans, of all ages from 12-42 but a median age in the mid to late teens, congregate in celebration of all aspects of Japanese pop culture, as it is being consumed in the major metropolitan centres of the US. They are, unusually, considering the often segregated cultural patterns of the US, very multiracial events: half Asian American, but with substantial numbers of African American and Latino kids, as well as middle class whites. Around half are in some form of *cosplay* or street sub-culture outfit –



a tribal self-declaration of belonging. The population base are young suburban Los Angelenos – smart, somewhat nerdy, city-raised alternative culture kids, who might be quite isolated in their own schools and neighbourhoods with their peculiar cultural fixations, but join the expos to find each other in mass numbers

Roland Kelts speculates in his largely New York centric study of the phenomenon, *Japanamerica* (2006), that the explosion of J-pop culture in the US is an end of millennium, anxiety-driven phenomenon, that made most sense in the US after the shock of 9/11. There is, he argues, a transposition of the post-wartime “Neo-Tokyo” imagination to the devastated psyche of young Americans after the twin towers attack. From a Californian point of view, this distorts the timing of the phenomenon's arrival by 5 to 10 years. It was already happening in California in the mid 90s, and driven much more by its Asian-oriented, multi-cultural, and openly transnational population connections, a social and geographical feature that makes it very different to the older, more nation-centred and more Western-focused cultures of the East coast cities (Favell 2008). Popular culture from Japan is one of the ways in which the often suppressed transnational dimensions of contemporary American society gets expressed. These too are stronger in the West, than the more American nation-state-centred environment of the East, which is so much more influenced by the influence of the national media and political worlds centred on New York and Washington DC.

Transnational California is visible in the small but intense Japanese neighbourhood of Sawtelle in West LA, just west of University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) and the 405 freeway. This was a traditional Japanese LA neighbourhood in pre-war years, and there are still a number of original stores and eating places reflecting this, as well as a couple of large Japanese run garden shops and temples in the residential streets around. In the 1980s, the area was re-launched with corporate money creating a small shopping mall and a *Nijiya* Japanese supermarket, and there has now recently been a third wave of development in the wake of the area becoming a gentrifying hipster zone, with designer stores, *karaoke* bars, and a number of small upscale restaurants. Together, these amenities make it a lively place day and night.

One archetypal Japanese LA story centred here, that is intimately linked to the contemporary art story I will go on to recount, is the emergence of the *Giant Robot* organisation, run out of two shops in Sawtelle by

UCLA graduates Eric Nakamura and Martin Wong. Both are typical 30-40 something second generation Californian Asian Americans – Japanese and Chinese respectively – who do not speak much of their original family language (their parents self-assimilated in the hostile 50s environment) but who have developed a fascination for all things Asian in their teens and student days as a way of reconnecting with the partially lost transnational aspect of their heritage. They launched *Giant Robot* first as a home produced Asian cultural magazine in the mid 90s, then – against the advice of their families and friends – as a shop around 2000, also going glossy at that time with the magazine. Over the years they have expanded their online shopping services, opened a restaurant nearby and a number of other branches in LA and similar hip neighbourhoods in San Francisco and New York. Along the way, the magazine has become one of the most influential independent magazines for breaking Asian popular culture in the US, and the two young entrepreneurs – whose *modus operandi* never rises above the slow drawl of two perpetually grinning West coast slackers – have become much demanded media commentators and consultants on the subject. Among their many successes in launching Asian, and especially Japanese, idols, music, films or cult anime, with books, postcards, vinyl toys, collectibles, t-shirts and art prints packing the stores, was to be part of launching a much broader consciousness of Japanese pop artists at the turn of the century. Centrally, this featured Takashi Murakami and Yoshitomo Nara, who had some of their first English language magazine cover features in *Giant Robot* in early 2001. *Giant Robot* is also one of the key locations in the US stocking both their mainstream and exclusive products.

Giant Robot is a very specialist kind of store. It attracts a very select clientele of affluent, trendy fans who obsessively collect certain cultural products coming out of Asia and, in a trendsetting city like Los Angeles, are the key people who build a word of mouth phenomenon for such products. A shop such as *Giant Robot* – which has spawned numerous imitators in the LA area – is thus a kind of doorway to a hip culture before it goes main stream. This is a place where the phenomenon incubates.

I was a not untypical “fan” when I first discovered Japanese popular culture in LA during the early 2000s: an affluent, thirty-something, self-styled urban hipster, looking for the latest in global culture. *Giant Robot* – both the magazine and the shop – was my guidebook and shop window to a world of amazing new cultural products, that seemed fresh, edgy and like nothing else



being made anywhere on the planet. Within a few months of arriving in LA, with their help, I discovered *Superflat* (of which more below), the street fashion magazine *FRUiTs*, and *izakaya* (in that order). With that, I was hooked. A cult fascination for Japan (which then determined the next ten years or more of my professional life) was born – long before I had ever visited the place. I was just one of many being swept up in the first years of the new millennium by the “J-Wave”: a new consumer of a global phenomenon that entrepreneurs like Nakamura and Wong were building with their own hands and minds.

LA and the irresistible rise of Takashi Murakami and Yoshitomo Nara

No-one would argue against New York being the centre of the global art world, and the dominant location in the field of contemporary art in the US. Los Angeles, though, is the clear second city, and since its legendary rise as an art capital in the 1950s and 60s, the only other city in the US that is internationally important at the same level (Grenier 2007). This is largely to do with the fact that so many important post-war artists decided to enjoy the space and light southern California offers and live and work there. This in turn centres on the huge importance of LA’s art schools where many of them teach: CalArts, Pasadena Arts Center, and UCLA being three of the most important programmes in the country. It has several very important museums, and a thriving small scale gallery world, centred on Culver City, Chinatown and Santa Monica. And, of course – recall all the famous swimming pool paintings of David Hockney – some of the most important global collectors of contemporary art reside in the glamorous hills above Hollywood and the Westside.

Japanese contemporary art is one of the forms of global art that has attracted the passing attention of collectors during these years. But the consciousness of art from Japan – in terms of both art media coverage and auction sales – has been dominated by essentially two names in the 1990s and 2000s: Takashi Murakami and Yoshitomo Nara. Both make a modified kind of Japanese pop art, that reflects Japanese youth culture today, as well as the obsessions of growing up in 1960s and 70s Japan, with its cult TV, comics, toys, and music. It is a colourful, happy, childish kind of art that Western consumers have no trouble in identifying as “typical” of Japanese urban pop and street cultures. Murakami is famous for cartoon-like paintings and sculptures that develop the link between its traditional high art and Japanese-style character branding, locating this in a direct lineage from

Andy Warhol. In his writings he links contemporary Japanese cultural forms to longer standing *ukiyo-e* and *nihon-ga* traditions, arguing for the visionary post-modern “superflat” nature of the Japanese visual arts, notably seen in its talent for blurring art and design. Nara meanwhile produces countless images and sculptures of sad and doleful little children, which embody the character-based aesthetic of cuteness (*kawaii*) and reproduce a world locked into a regressive, introverted childhood. In recent years, these visions have taken architectural form as his shows are made up of built “sheds”, which recreate the childhood, teenage and student den of the artist with all his sprawling collections of toys, records and memorabilia – the obsessions of a typical *otaku* (Japanese version of a nerd).

In the early 1990s, the artists were but two of the many emerging figures coming out of an extraordinary period of creativity in the immediate post-bubble period, after the collapse of the Japanese financial rise in 1990. During a decadent and anxiety-prone period, that mostly occurred before the disaster “zero year” of 1995 (the Kobe earthquake and the Aum sarin gas attack), a whole new generation of artists, designers, writers, musicians, stylists, architects and freelance writers produced a wave of startlingly creative and original ideas that positioned Japan at the cutting edge of numerous global cultural fields – although the West, disillusioned by Japan’s sharp financial collapse, was not looking at the time. This essentially was the origin of the “Cool Japan” products that were, up to ten or fifteen years later, to become such a hot global cultural commodity. Murakami at the time was one of the leading young figures of the *avant garde* Tokyo art scene, while Nara was pioneering an international *freeter* lifestyle (see Mōri in this issue), living as a permanent art student in Germany. In 1992-93, both were around 30 years old, just inventing their signature styles, and about to get their first serious recognition in Japan.

Unusually, for a scene so cut off from the West, there was a young Los Angeles gallerist, Tim Blum – he always calls himself a “dealer” – participating in the emerging contemporary art scene in Tokyo in the early 1990s. With his partner, May, he was helping to run a small Tokyo gallery called Mars. He was a UCLA graduate, and in the late 80s, in his mid-20s, wasn’t sure what kind of cultural field he wanted to go into – other than it should be a mix of literature, film and art. He decides to go to Japan, and it is the contemporary art that seizes him most. While soaking up the extraordinary, vibrant scene there, he writes a manifesto, which, he says, looking back all more or less



came true. In it, he intended to take the Japanese pop and street culture he saw all around him, and market it to the world as expensive high art.

While hanging out in the small world of the Tokyo contemporary art scene, Blum meets an arrogant and very pushy young artist, Takashi Murakami, who was an ever present face on the social scene. They become friends. He also becomes the regular drinking partner of Tomio Koyama, like Murakami a graduate of the elite Tokyo National University of the Arts (Geidai), who was working for one of the most visible of the new Tokyo contemporary art gallerists, Masami Shiraishi. Blum says Koyama “was the window to his world, as I was for him to mine”. They become the crucial LA-Tokyo connection that will provide Murakami and Nara with their first international breaks. Shiraishi, with Tomio Koyama his gallery director at SCAI the Bathhouse (Shiraishi Contemporary Arts Institute), puts on in 1994 and 1995 respectively, the first important solo shows of Murakami and Nara in Tokyo. Meanwhile, armed with these connections, Blum returns to LA and opens the gallery Blum and Poe, in Santa Monica initially, with his best friend from UCLA, Jeff Poe. Murakami and Nara are among the first artists they agree to represent.

Very few other Western gallerists or curators are present in Japan during this crucial early 90s period. One is Alexandra Munroe, who later becomes the most important Japanese art curator in New York. She did an internship at Yokohama Museum with Taro Amano, and wrote one of the first important pieces (1992) on the new scene in Tokyo, identifying Murakami as a key emerging figure. Also writing in English in the same edition was the curator Dana Friis Hansen (1992), who was doing an internship with the most influential curator in Japan, Fumio Nanjo, later to become director of the Mori Art Museum. With Amano Munroe organised *Scream Against the Sky* in 1995, the largest retrospective and catalogue of Japanese modern and contemporary art to date in the West, and will go on to organise Murakami’s *Little Boy* show in New York in 2005. Friis Hansen is behind Murakami’s first big solo museum show in the US in 1999 at Bard College. A third key figure, hanging out in Tokyo like Blum, is the young French gallerist, Emmanuel Perrotin, who later represents Murakami in Europe, and brokers his biggest deals to elite European contemporary art collectors, such as François Pinault.

Murakami and Nara get their first important showings in the US, however, in LA, with Blum and Poe. Both attract press attention, but it is Nara who makes the

biggest impact, with shows of his little kid paintings and sculptures that get rave reviews. Nara’s art is cute, but also there is a disturbing undercurrent of violence, or something sexual underneath, which imparts to Western adult viewers a distinct frisson in this immediately identifiable “Japanese” art. On hand to write about the LA shows in Santa Monica is the Princeton literature PhD, Midori Matsui, who has struggled as an academic with her edgy writing about the more peculiar and sometimes perverse aspects of Japanese boys and girls *manga* culture. She has been cultivating an alternative career back in Japan as an art critic, but with Nara in the US, she finally finds her voice, becoming the main spokesperson for his new kind of “*kowa-kawaii*” (creepy-cute) expressionist art, that encapsulates the fascination and weirdness of the new Japanese pop and street culture. Hipsters in the West, though, are still not yet aware of it. Her writings get published in English and garner serious attention for Nara in the US art press, as well as important echoes back home. Blum and Poe, in particular, are blown away by her “brilliance” – an academic who unusually knows how to write and theorise cogently about art, unlike so much of the pretentious and empty curatorial writing.

Tomio Koyama, meanwhile, has opened his own gallery in Tokyo, taking Murakami and Nara with him from SCAI as his key two signature artists. He breaks from the insular Tokyo pack, with Tim Blum’s encouragement, and decides to show internationally at art fairs in the US, starting with a small international art fair at the famous Chateau Marmont in West Hollywood. Visitors to these art fairs, remember Koyama as a strange, isolated figure: a nerdy looking guy in a suit, selling bizarre Japanese cartoon images. The artists are Yoshitomo Nara and Mr., who is Murakami’s closest associate in his Hiropon (and later Kaikai Kiki) production company. Their work is childish and cute, and some of it, by Mr., is openly paedophile in style. As well as small drawings and paintings, Koyama is selling small toys and fridge magnets by the same artists. To Koyama’s surprise, a handful of LA collectors are completely enchanted by this peculiar Japanese pop art. They include the Norton’s, two of the most important and rich collectors in the Hollywood hills, who both pay several thousands of dollars – beyond Koyama’s wildest dreams – for some of Nara and Mr.’s throwaway work, which they say they will give to their grandchildren. Koyama also goes to Florida, where he sells works by Nara to the famous Rubells, and to Susan Hancock, a debutante collector who has made a fortune in the insurance industry. She will make riches out of her early



purchases of works by Nara and Murakami, and in the late 2000s will go on to open in Culver City, LA, a massive “temple” to Japanese pop art and pop culture at Royal T, a Japanese maid café and installation space, to house her collection.

In 1994-5, Murakami spends one year in New York. It is by all accounts a tough, sobering year, but he makes good gallery connections, and has his Eureka moment as he develops the idea of turning erotic Japanese character toys into huge and immaculate art gallery sculptures in the manner of top New York artist (and big money maker) Jeff Koons. Back in Tokyo, Murakami hires toy makers and designers to help him realise his vision, and sets up a factory and production company. Mr. is his head of staff, and with Mr. they plot some of the key ideas that are to fill his later manifesto. He also opens a small factory operation in New York to help produce his paintings, drawing on the cheap labour provided by the mass of volunteer young Japanese artists in the city temporarily (Lubow 2005).

In 1998, both Murakami and Nara, by chance, spend a few months at UCLA. Nara applies to study there, but he is instead invited to be a guest professor. Through his LA connections, Murakami is invited to lecture at the famous art school. They don't really know each other, and as Japanese visitors, they are thrown together, offered to share a professor apartment in Westwood near the campus. At first quite suspicious of each other, and with very different personalities – Murakami is extrovert, aggressive, and easy-going, Nara is shambling, shy and intense – they eventually hit it off and start plotting a “new pop revolution”, that is going to destroy and transform the dominant conservative Japanese art world from the outside. While Murakami is busy lecturing and theorising, Nara has a lot of free time to drive around in a battered car and buy records and collectibles in LA, which is for him a pop cultural paradise.

Murakami is a little envious of Nara at this stage. Although Nara is not yet huge as a gallery artist, his book of poems and images from his first show, *In The Deepest Puddle*, have become cult items back in Japan. After LA, Nara essentially moves back to Japan – he is kicked out of Germany as an unwanted resident, and is starting to get hassled at borders by customs. An independent publisher, FOIL, headed by Masakazu Takei, has agreed to pick up his new book, *Slash With A Knife*. Nara's most famous image in his early work is a little girl glowering angrily with a knife in her hand. There is a thriving small book publishing industry in

Tokyo, and a voracious appetite for cult reading among teenagers and students. Nara's work is particularly successful because of the ease in which it translates onto the printed page – the reproduction makes no difference at all, indeed he is as easy to copy as Hello Kitty. *Slash with A Knife* become a smash hit word of mouth and cult bestseller. Overnight, Nara becomes a kind of pop star in Japan – mobbed at signings, and especially adored by girls. This annoys Murakami intensely, who is always driven by his “asshole competitiveness”, as he readily admits. He only gets the geeky intellectual theory types following him. Both artists, though, are artists whose names explode about the time of Web 2.0, because of the ease with which their work converts high art into cheap pop collectibles, such as T-shirts, postcards, books, toys, and little pieces of stationery or jewellery.

Murakami and Nara celebrate the downgrading of art in the age of mechanical reproduction, inverting Walter Benjamin's gloomy philosophy. Even poor young fans should always be able to buy a piece of me, says Nara. He doesn't even mind the illegal copies, as long as the Nara images are multiplying. There is also another LA connection. The Japanese T-shirt entrepreneur, Yoshi Kawasaki, who runs a T-shirt printing business which uses the famous T-shirts by American Apparel in downtown LA as its source, signs Nara on a franchise deal to produce his images as T-shirts. These are a global hit, selling for \$40-\$50 dollars apiece in hipster stores and museum shops the world over. Around 2000, Nara finds a fan website about him by a young girl fan called “naoko”. He starts writing a blog, in his usual naïve diary style. He gets thousands of hits. Preparing for his first big solo show back in Japan (Yokohama, 2001), he asks fans to send him any copies they have made using his images. Expecting a few, the post is overwhelmed with thousands of packages of cuddly toys made out of Nara's pictures. He decides to just put them all in the show under his own name. The show in Yokohama garner's the biggest ever number of visitors to a contemporary show in Japan, around 300,000: a record at the time, which Nara will break several times during the decade (Tezuka 2010).

Meanwhile, in 1999, while getting his first serious museum attention in the US, Murakami organises in LA an exhibition of some of his young female protégés, who work for him as staff at Kaikai Kiki under the title *Tokyo Girls Bravo*, borrowed from a famous cult manga of the 1980s by Kyoko Okazaki. The show takes place at George's in Santa Monica, owned by cult designer Adam Silverman and Beastie Boys rapper Mike D, after first being shown in Tokyo at the art store Nadiff. The



four girls – Aya Takano, Chiho Aoshima, Ai Yamaguchi and Aki Fujimoto – all make colourful, somewhat weird and disturbing, Japanese *manga*/sci fi style girly “bedroom” art. It is very cute and seductive “eye candy”, as one LA curator, Catherine Taft, describes it. Again, like Nara and Mr., it is childish, futuristic, yet strangely sexualised cartoon art, and again the kind of thing that *avant garde* Americans can readily identify as typical yet edgy Japanese pop culture, further fuelling the Western imagination of “Neo-Tokyo” inspired by successful *anime* films such as *Akira* and *Ghost in the Shell*, cult items that have only slowly made into the mainstream and are still fresh from their global breakthroughs. Matsui is the main mouthpiece for the ideas behind this presentation (see Matsui 2005); Murakami is the Svengali character who organises it all. *Tokyo Girls Bravo* goes on to several versions, and the promotion of young female prodigies becomes a successful sideline of the Kaikai Kiki operation. In 2009-10 Matsui was still presenting this kind of work as the best of Japanese contemporary art in her touring version of *Micropop*.

LA thus plays a key role in amplifying Murakami and Nara. But it leaves aside all the other figures involved in the early 90s art explosion in Japan. What happens next is the key moment in the amputating - and flattening - of this local culture for simplified global consumption.

Rewind to Japan in the 90s. In late 1999, at Mito Museum, the most influential pop art critic of the decade in Japan, Noi Sawaragi, an early conspirator with Murakami, organises *Ground Zero Japan*, a retrospective of the most important currents in Japanese contemporary art since the 1980s, which explicitly grapples both with Japan’s troubled post-war experience with Asia and America, as well as the introspective “digging in the dirt” brought on by the catastrophes of 1995. Murakami is featured alongside other obviously important artists with similar themes such as Kenji Yanobe, the hugely influential 80s artist Shinro Ohtake, and earlier 50s and 60s artists who also prefigured the pop art of the 90s, Taro Okamoto and Tadanori Yokoo. By most accounts, though, the show is dominated by the “war paintings” series of Makoto Aida, an artist of the same 60s generation as Murakami, who many in Japan see as the most important of the 1990s. Aida is an artist who draws on the most extreme and dangerous edges of Japan’s peculiar *otaku* cultures, both its obsessive *lolicon* (Lolita complex) fetish for young girls, and its passive-aggressive hostility to the overbearing dominance of American political and popular culture in the Japan they grew up in. Notably,

there is nothing *kawaii* about Aida’s art: it is uncompromising and brutal, often ugly and in-your-face, although also often hilariously funny, in the tradition of earthy Japanese stand up comedy. Aida is put on the cover of the last *Bijutsu Techō* art journal of the millennium, as the artist of the 90s, a special edition that features Sawaragi’s show, and also Murakami’s current work on various character and toy productions.

Murakami, meanwhile, is hugely active as a curator and organiser in Tokyo, and in early 2000, he presents his own retrospective and summation of the contemporary art scene in Japan as he sees it: *Super Flat*. He has borrowed the title from Tim Blum, who offered it as his first reaction to the planned show. Murakami puts on the show at Parco, a famous department store in a down town of Tokyo, Shibuya, which often has commercial art and design shows. He ignores the mainstream Japanese contemporary art scene in his selection, barring one famous *manga*-style painting by Aida, and one cute painting by Nara (which both become signature images of *Superflat*). He himself only contributes the poster for the event, covered in his trademark eyeballs. Rather, Murakami chooses to present the best of Japanese contemporary as a show of outsider artists, well known commercial designers, and other pop culture icons, with himself as the orchestrator and theorist. It is a controversial snub to the scene and art system that has made him. There are his Kaikai Kiki girls, all unknowns he has plucked from art or design schools, and trained in his company. He invites commercial designers Hiro Sugiyama (Enlightenment) and Groovision to produce branding style images. And he features the superstar “girly” photographer, Hiromix, famous for her cheeky photos of Shibuya girl life in the streets and back in her bedroom, as well as cult DJ/musician, Cornelius.

When Blum and Poe see the show they are ecstatic, and they know that they have to bring it to LA. What is an obvious enough commentary on Japanese pop/street culture in the Tokyo context could be dynamite in the serious white cube context of the Western art scene, they think – a transvaluation of low pop art into high *avant garde* art world fashion, that is currently also taking place with graffiti art and fashion designers in the West. They also enlist the very influential and respected LA curator Paul Schimmel to their plans. Schimmel has a long term scholarly interest in Japan, and is the chief curator at the Arata Isozaki designed Museum of Contemporary Art in LA (MOCA), a first division US museum, which has always had special Japanese links. Together, they put in motion plans to bring *Superflat*, as it is re-christened, to LA in early 2001,



to be followed by a major show *Public Offerings*, at MOCA, curated by Schimmel, that will feature some of the early work of Murakami and Nara, with a historical context setting essay by Matsui (2001).

This is where I enter the story. It is a sunny day in early 2001, shortly after I have decided to move to the city. I am driving up La Brea towards Hollywood, when I start to notice rows of cute, colourful characters smiling blankly down at me from streetlamp billboards. These are “Chappies”, a Japanese design brand, advertising a show at MOCA on contemporary Japanese art. I have a latent “thing” about Japan; this looks great, so I go immediately to the great blue whale in West Hollywood (the Pacific Design Center), where the show is taking place. It’s a typical Western seduction. I’ve never been to Japan at this point, and I have no clue what is authentic and representative or not. Over two floors, the show is a sensory overload of childish art, dream characters, and *pachinko* (pinball machine) style lights and noise. It offers that familiar promise of an alternative Asian modernity which first time visitors looking for Neo-Tokyo always experience. There’s also a lot of sex in the show (although not so much in the catalogue), and no end of images of young Japanese girls. But it’s all cartoonish, colourful and fun: something like being teleported unprepared in the middle of Akihabara on a busy Sunday afternoon, with curator Murakami as the laughing *otaku* guide. I totally love the show, and my thoroughly enchanted ideas of Japan, like Roland Barthes, are cemented well before I’ve ever travelled there.

I am only one viewer among nearly 100,000 that see the show in this small annexe of MOCA. But this is West Hollywood, and it is a very select crowd: the show is the talk of the town. It is, in other words, a smash hit in the global pop cultural capital of the world: a parallel phenomenon, with a different demographic, to the explosion in anime expos. LA loves Murakami’s vision of Japan, and - like California roll, invented in downtown LA - the rest of the world will soon know about it. Finally, then, Murakami, masterminded by Blum and Poe, and Tomio Koyama – who has always been like Jay Jopling to Murakami’s Damien Hirst – is ready for worldwide take over. This time, he starts making serious sales to the pop art collectors in the hills, including the most important one of all, Eli Broad, as well as serious waves over in the elite East coast art media. Moreover, back home – what matters most to Murakami - Japan starts to take notice of a new Japanese star with his *gaisen kōen* (triumphant performance abroad) in the US. LA, then, becomes the launch pad of Murakami’s stratospheric decade in the

2000s. 2001 is dubbed by the Japanese press, “the year of Narakami”, after their triumphant solo shows at Yokohama and the Museum of Contemporary Art Tokyo. *Superflat* tours in the US then goes to Paris in 2002 (as *Coloriage/Kawaii!! Summer Vacation*) to similar acclaim. The American media, meanwhile, has noticed *Superflat*, and the fashion and music worlds starts to show interest in this new whiff of Tokyo cool. Also in 2002, Marc Jacobs, a friend in New York, offers him the leads to a job re-designing the Louis Vuitton handbag, “Takashi-style”. The bag is a smash hit: a must have item on Tokyo’s Omotesando, New York’s 5th Avenue and, most importantly, at the Venice Biennale. In early 2003, back in Tokyo, Roppongi Hills hire him to brand the about-to-open towers. He puts happy flowers, mushrooms and cartoon dinosaurs all over the shiny new tower, shopping mall and entertainment complex, which has just wiped out 12 hectares that was once a popular working class neighbourhood.

Around this time, some of Murakami’s works start selling internationally for over half a million dollars. Marc Jacobs’ favourite model Sophia Coppola, makes *Lost in Translation*, the film starring Bill Murray that seems to capture the essence of the new American fascination for Japan that is about to explode. She and her LA friends head over to Tokyo to film the same signifiers of an imaginary Japan that Murakami has presented in his shows. The *New York Times* begins its serial obsession with all that is cool in Tokyo; the Japan Society starts sending an endless stream of over-excited American journalists paid to go and write about the secrets of the creative new Japan – ten years after the real boom.

The global capital, New York, has to be next. It is Alexandra Munroe’s turn to show the best of Japanese contemporary art on the biggest stage of all. She knows full well from a Japanese art historical point of view that the show that should be put on in New York is *Ground Zero Japan*. She holds talks with Sawaragi, but his ideas are too difficult, and the show is too focused on introspective national Japanese concerns (Sawaragi 2006). The alternative is Murakami’s tourist friendly *Superflat*, with Blum and Poe taking care of logistics, Schimmel providing curatorial reputation, and Midori Matsui providing the ideas. Murakami too goes into theoretical overdrive, guaranteeing to provide a catalogue that will be a virtual sociology of post-war Japanese culture and society – for impressionable foreigners. He is only too well aware of the modifications and careful translations needed to present a “soy sauce” culture successfully to gullible Americans (something he discusses openly for Japanese



readers in his bestselling self-help book *The Art Entrepreneurship Theory* (Murakami 2006). And so by 2005, Murakami is back in New York, having persuaded the otherwise conservative minded Japan Society and big Manhattan corporations to foot the bill for the show, that is eventually titled *Little Boy*, after the bomb that flattened Hiroshima. This is an even grander re-run version of *Superflat*, that will put plastic dung-making elephants in Central Park, hilarious “Mr Pointy” installations outside the Rockefeller centre, dubious images of young girls by Mr. on pristine New York art walls, and give birth to an elegant catalogue that is practically a DIY sociology of post-war Japan, written through the eyes of 1960s and 70s nerds. Murakami is the talk of the town, celebrated alongside all things truly Japanese by hip New Yorkers, along with their vintage sake bars and dragon roll sushi.

The history and key figures of the early 90s Tokyo art scene are largely airbrushed out of the catalogue, as well as its earlier antecedents in 80s DiY pop art. A lot of the texts and selection for *Superflat* and *Little Boy*, for instance, are in many ways Aida-light: *otaku*, *lolikon* visions modulated and calibrated for the sensitive tastes of star-struck Los Angelenos and politically correct New Yorkers. Makoto Aida remains largely unknown in the West, save for the scandal at the Witney in 2003 around the showing of his famous (in Japan) work, *A Picture of an Air Raid on New York City*, from 1996, which depicts on Japanese screens, a moebius loop of Mitsubishi Zeros, bombing a New York skyline in flames, five years before something like this actually happened. Murakami, on the other hand, has successfully packaged the creative fruits of the spectacular early 90s cultural boom in Tokyo for a western audience, putting his own name in the lights as the brand and originator. It is Paul Schimmel who organises the big global retrospective tour in 2008 that starts at MOCA in LA, with lines around the block, before going to Brooklyn, Frankfurt and the Guggenheim Museum at Bilbao. He calls it ©MURAKAMI, as if to make the blatant point. The rest, as they say, is art history.

Epilogue

It's another sunny day in LA, late autumn 2009. Tim Blum and Jeff Poe are opening their new Chelsea-sized gallery space in Los Angeles in Culver City. Since they first moved here, about ten years ago, the neighbourhood has become a hip art gallery magnet zone. As Jeff Poe put it about their original gallery across the road: this may not be New York, but so many

of the artists and collectors live here, and "we have a buck point five a square foot on this place for the next five years". They are by now by far the biggest players on the local scene. The opening celebrates all their top artists, and there are of course some choice works by their lucrative Japanese stars, Murakami and Nara, on show. There is an original painting of the Tokyo *Super Flat* catalogue, and a lovely new clay cast of one of Nara's characters. Upstairs, the collectors can also still pick up some cute work by Murakami's favourite Tokyo girls, Chiho Aoshima and Aya Takano, whose careers are still doing nice internationally.

Murakami and Nara both swing by to join the party – there is a lot to celebrate. Murakami often appears with the pretty and tall Chiho Aoshima as his escort. Murakami has recently moved to the biggest gallerist-dealer of all in New York, Larry Gagosian. Blum and Poe are selling his paintings for over a \$1 million apiece. They have themselves become A-list international art dealers, with an always important booth at the Basel or Frieze art fairs. In May 2008, just before the big financial crisis hit, Murakami sold his 8 foot plastic sculpture of a cartoon boy masturbating (*My Lonesome Cowboy*) for \$15 million at Sotheby's New York. He has had a number one record and video in the US and the UK with Kanye West (*Graduation* in 2007), he has made videos with Britney Spears, has had the final room in a massive post-Warhol retrospective at the Tate Modern in 2009 (*Pop Life*), and filled the *Palais de Versailles* in Paris with his sculptures in late 2010, en route for an even bigger show in the Middle East Kingdom of Qatar in 2012. In 2009, he was nominated to the top 100 most influential persons in the world today by *Time* Magazine, the only fine artist to make the list.

Nara, too, has a quite stratospheric 2000s. He has remained with Tomio Koyama and Blum and Poe. While Murakami was garnering scandalous headlines in Paris, Nara capped his decade – in which he became undoubtedly the most loved and most seen contemporary artist in Japan – with a big retrospective style show at the Asian Society in New York. He also garnered himself some cult credibility by spending two nights in jail for graffiti and resisting arrest in the New York subway. His *A-to-Z* has toured the world, and his paintings, sculptures and installations are ubiquitous at museums and very high selling items at art fairs the world over. Moreover, unlike Murakami, his images have penetrated deep into popular culture, such that on Spitalfields market in London today, you can pick up £1 miniature copies of Nara's beloved little kid paintings, alongside similar copies of the work of cult graffiti artist, Banksy.



Nowadays, Murakami and Nara can look back and see their “new pop revolution” largely fulfilled. Back home, Murakami has GEISAI, an anti art-education system and talent competition, designed to by-pass the Japanese art world, and make stars of his own selected protégés. The organisation draws directly on the organisational model of the massive popular anime expos in Japan, such as Comiket. He has plans for a museum in Tokyo, which will cement his name forever in the Japanese art history books. He consistently snatches the media attention for his stunts and his out-of-nowhere discoveries, away from the best efforts of the Tokyo world to sustain artists through presenting and building conventional art careers. Meanwhile, Nara, heads his own anti-art system cult, using thousands of unpaid volunteers to help him build his shows of teenage dens full of endless Nara copies. By now, they cannot really talk to anyone else in Tokyo except each other: Murakami still calls Nara to discuss his next (maybe foolish) big business move. As far as the western art world is concerned, leaving aside the older, grand ladies of the 1960s, Yoko Ono and Yayoi Kusama, and perhaps a couple of older names such as On Kawara, Tadashi Kawamata or Hiroshi Sugimoto, Takashi Murakami and Yoshitomo Nara are basically the only two Japanese contemporary artists that anyone has ever heard of. They are the only two, for example, that appear in the regular Taschen art book round ups of *Art Now*, and the only two with auction prices anything like top Western (and Chinese) artists. When there are shows of new Japanese contemporary art in the West, the only theme curators know to use is something reflecting Japanese pop culture as it imagined in the West, that is, framed in terms of *manga*, *anime*, *kawaii* or *moé* (*otaku* expression for “adorable”) the themes made famous by Murakami’s curated shows.

At Blum and Poe’s new place there is something else new to toast. Murakami has just been nominated, in a special edition of the London art magazine, *Art Review* (Nov 2009), as the 17th most important figure in the global art world. He is the 3rd ranked global artist (only Nauman and Koons supersede him), and only one of three non-western names. In the same list, Blum and Poe clock in at number 31; Paul Schimmel at number 82. The gallerists have good reason to laugh. The cover of the magazine is a painting of a strange hobo character with the word “SUCK-SESS” on his shirt by their own artist, Nigel Cooke. The original is hanging for sale in the opening of the gallery today.

This is Murakami’s American team as immortalised in the “studio visit” chapter of Sarah Thornton’s *Seven*

Days (2008: 180-217). She flew with them from Tokyo to Toyama, accompanying Murakami, with Blum and Poe and Schimmel, as well as UCLA PhD researcher and junior curator Mika Yoshitake, to see the work on progress on his big silver leaf Oval Buddha sculpture at a big foundry there. Murakami sat playing video games in first class upfront, with the gallerists a little way back, and the curators and writer at the back in economy. But it is those sitting behind Murakami who have been pulling the strings – at least Stateside. When Schimmel saw the silver Buddha for the first time he was effusive in praise: “Un-fucking believable!!” he cried. Perhaps he also know that it was going to be too big to fit inside the Brooklyn Museum, while it would look great bang at the centre of the cavernous Little Tokyo MOCA annexe.

It is Schimmel’s name as a curator that is now most linked with Murakami. Schimmel thinks that the ©MURAKAMI show will cement Murakami’s place in art history as the ultimate step in art as commerce and branding. They put a Louis Vuitton shop inside the show, after all. Beyond this, Schimmel sees Murakami’s influence all over the world, especially in the commercial pop art coming out of emerging countries in Asia. Moreover, Schimmel thinks his (vastly expensive) forays into anime production, in honour of his hero Hayao Miyazaki, are going to create a whole repertoire of animated archetypes that will secure his long term global art influence. The crowds for the Murakami show at least helped bring in some money to the MOCA coffers. The museum has been close to bankruptcy. They have just persuaded one of New York’s key gallerists, Jeffrey Deitch, to become the museum director at MOCA. Deitch is also a big fan of Japanese contemporary pop art: he has bankrolled Mariko Mori’s expensive productions for years. It’s an unheard of move to step across the floor from the commercial to public art world. Hey, only in LA. But that’s a whole other story.

Murakami and Nara, like Deitch, like Gagosian, like nearly everything in the American art, pop music, film or TV industries, is a New York-LA or LA-New York story. It’s like the TV show *Friends* or the David Letterman show. The backdrop is New York but the filming is all taking place in LA. Whether it is hip hop, graffiti, skateboarding, or – in this case – Japanese contemporary pop art, the global diffusion of these cultural trends has to be traced from and through the interactions of these two global cultural capitals. Given its geographical position, and social composition, LA is now taking a certain lead in the 21st century as we move further into the Asian century.



Takashi Murakami, the son of a taxi driver from Tokyo, made it big by this route. Only time will tell whether he, or his one other Japanese peer in the global art world today, Yoshitomo Nara, have done enough to make it into the pages of a future global art history. The curators, gallerists and writers behind the phenomenon will, of course, be forgotten, as will the many other talented and creative individuals who together created the extraordinary cultural boom in Japan in the early 1990s, which, a decade later, was being successfully marketed in the West as “Cool Japan”.

In a “flat world” of the kind imagined by global theorists such as Thomas Friedman, the only art history or cultural analysis we should expect to see is a “superflat” – i.e., very superficial – one. A good example is Alison Gingeras's semiotics based analysis of Murakami in the catalogue for *Pop Life* (2009). Gingeras, not coincidentally, is employed by François Pinault to manage his collection and maintain value on expensively acquired toys such as *My Lonesome Cowboy* - a position apparently not in conflict with her role as an academic curatorial writer. A sociology of the global art world can help demystify these kinds of accounts, of which there are no end in the copious literature that surrounds Murakami's work.

Still, at a time when everything else globally speaking for Japan has been in decline, it perhaps has not hurt too much for the land of the rising sun – which was once the land of the Asian industrial and technological future, but no more – to be represented abroad by endless cute cartoon girls and colourful, shiny, happy flowers. For the world to see anything else in Japan, it will need a new set of cultural entrepreneurs and clever global business minds to help the world discover something new. As with the characters presented here, they will need to be able and willing to communicate, amplify and diffuse their vision of Japan across the vast expanses of miscommunication and failed translation that still characterise much global culture on our allegedly superflat and globalised planet.

Note on research

This essay draws on numerous interviews and meetings conducted in the US and Japan during the years 2006-2010. I list the most relevant ones below in alphabetical order by name, role, and date of first meeting. The sources are multiple and confused, and I apologise for any errors in my interpretation. I also draw upon the extensive printed and filmed

documentation available about and by Takashi Murakami and Yoshitomo Nara, as well as all relevant catalogues of exhibitions mentioned in the text. Background research on Japanese LA was also conducted by Misako Nukaga, and over the years I have been very grateful to receive invaluable research and translation assistance from Kristin Surak, Misako Nukaga and Motoko Uda. I also gratefully acknowledge financial support from a Japan Foundation Center for Global Partnership Abe Fellowship, which enabled research in Los Angeles and Tokyo in 2006-7.

Abe Hiroshi, architect & professor, UCLA, 05/11/09
Aota Ai, cultural entrepreneur, LA, 15/01/07
Ben at *Nucleus* gallery, Alhambra, LA, 13/01/07
Blum Tim, art dealer, LA, 30/01/07
Borden Betty, cultural promoter, Japan Society, New York, 31/10/06
Brown Scott, cultural entrepreneur, owner *Spicy Brown* T-shirts, LA, 03/06/06
D'Heilly David, writer and curator, Tokyo, 16/09/08
Ely Julian, advisor, Japanese consulate, LA, 21/07/06
Erber Douglas, President, Japan America Society of Southern California, business assoc., LA, 13/06/06
Fraser Honor, gallerist, LA, 07/11/09
Hancock Sue, collector & owner of *Royal-T* gallery and maid café, Culver City, LA, 26/04/08
Hashimoto Satoru, Japanese American Business Association, UCLA Anderson School, LA, 22/01/07
Hayato Mitsushi, Japanese American Business Association, UCLA Anderson School, LA, 22/01/07
Higashi Shige, publisher, *Cultural News* (Japanese LA cultural newspaper), LA, 21/07/06
Hiro Rika, curator, Getty Museum and LA correspondent, *Bijutsu Techō*, LA, 14/03/08
Hiromi at *Digital Manga*, LA, 26/01/07
Horibuchi Seiji, CEO, Viz Media, San Francisco, 21/07/06
Inoue Shiro, CEO, Famima Inc., Torrance, LA, 17/01/07
Ito Mimi, cultural commentator & media studies professor, USC, LA, 13/05/06
Kamada Yasuhiko, Japanese Consulate office, LA, 24/01/07
Kappos Marina, LA and New York based artist, 11/05/07
Kawamoto Mamiko, cultural business promoter, JETRO office, LA, 30/04/08
Kawamura Yuniya, cultural commentator and professor, Fashion Institute, New York, 15/03/08
Kawauchi Taka, cultural entrepreneur & art producer, New York, 02/11/09
Kelts Roland, New York based writer, 14/03/08



Kinsella Sharon, cultural commentator, artist & visiting professor, Boston, 23/10/06
Kowasaki Yoshi, cultural entrepreneur, 2K T-shirts, LA, 26/01/07
Koyama Tomio, gallerist, Tokyo, 24/08/07
Kozyndan, LA based artists & couple, 22/02/07
Kushida, designer & CEO, S-Inc. and H-Naoto fashion brand, LA, 30/01/08
Legno Simone, LA based designer of *Tokidoki*, 31/01/07
Machida Yuki, cultural business promoter, JETRO office, LA, 02/07/06
Macias Patrick, writer and cultural entrepreneur, CEO, jaPRESS, San Francisco, 16/02/08
Marx David, writer and owner of *Neo-Japonisme* website, Tokyo, 18/04/07
Matsuo Michiya, LA correspondent, *Sankei Shimbun*, LA, 15/03/08
McGray, Douglas, journalist, *Wired* magazine, San Francisco, 29/01/07
Miller Laura, cultural commentator & professor, Chicago, 13/05/06
Nakamura Eric, cultural entrepreneur, co-owner and editor, *Giant Robot*, LA, 21/07/06
Nakamura Hiromi, curator, Tokyo Metropolitan Museum of Photography, 15/05/07
Nanjo Fumio, director, Mori Art Museum, Tokyo, 23/07/07
Nishihara Min, freelance writer and journalist, LA, 07/11/09
Noya Yaz, CEO Tofu Records (Sony), LA, 22/01/07
Okinaka Bobby, cultural entrepreneur, *Tokyo à la Mode* website owner, LA, 23/07/06
Paine Emi, owner, *Rimo* fashion store, Sawtelle, LA, 22/01/07
Poe Jeff, art dealer, LA, 24/01/07
Ritter Gabriel, LA based curator & UCLA PhD, 05/11/09
Rivadeneira Jamie, cultural entrepreneur, owner Japan-LA shop, Melrose, LA, 13/03/08
Ross Jeremy, TokyoPop (manga), LA, 14/03/08
Schimmel Paul, chief curator, Museum of Contemporary Art, LA, 04/05/09
Shiomi Audrey, journalist, *Sankei Shimbun*, LA office, 17/01/07
Shiraishi Masami, gallerist & CEO SCAI The Bathhouse, Tokyo, 10/05/07
Shiraishi Saya, consultant on Japanese cultural exports & professor, Tokyo University, 19/03/07
Sone Yutaka, LA based artist, 07/11/09
Suzuki Sarah, curator, Museum of Modern Art, New York, 04/11/09
Tain John, curator, Getty Centre, LA, 14/03/08
Takei Masakazu, publisher and gallerist, FOIL, Tokyo, 15/05/07

Takizawa Yosuke, marketing, *Janime* magazine & Oneann Inc., LA, 26/01/07
Tanaka Katsu, cultural entrepreneur, owner *Just Be Complex/Compound* gallery, Portland, 21/06/06
Taniguchi Yoshihiro, cultural entrepreneur, owner *Dig Me Out* magazine, Osaka, 13/01/07
Telles Richard, gallerist, LA, 21/01/07
Taft Catherine, LA based curator, 22/07/06
Tatsugawa Mike, cultural entrepreneur, founder A/X & Pacific Media Expo, LA, 27/10/06
Tezuka Miwa, curator, Asia Society, New York, 03/11/09
Thornton Sarah, writer and art correspondent, *The Economist*, 09/02/09
Tomii Reiko, writer & curator, New York, 02/11/09
Uchida Akatsuki, freelance journalist visiting LA, 27/10/06
Whitney Paul, cultural business promoter, Japan Publicity Inc., Torrance, LA, 19/07/06
Wan Alan, LA cultural entrepreneur, owner *Robocon*, 03/06/06
Wong Martin, cultural entrepreneur, co-owner & editor, *Giant Robot*, LA, 30/04/08
Yamazaki Hirokazu, cultural entrepreneur, co-owner Modé Tea, LA, 01/03/08
Yoshitake Mika, LA based curator & UCLA PhD, 20/07/06

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