

## **REVOLT, DYSFUNCTION, DEMENTIA: TOWARD THE BODY OF “EMPIRE”** **OTORI HIDENAGA**

### Introduction

During the 1990s, Japan experienced a dramatic change in its cultural environment, accompanied by an extremely rapid popularization of the Internet. As it became more and more clear that we were heading toward the end of the Cold War structure, evidenced by the disappearance of the Soviet Union and the collapses of East European socialist regimes—before and after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989—the term globalization emerged as a keyword for understanding this new world. The world was entering an age of globalization and we started to live in that age. It was not so easy, however, to define this age. Nevertheless, as the world started to grow out of the framework of modern nation-states, we began to feel that there was some interconnectedness between our everyday life and what was happening outside of Japan. The postmodernization of society brought about by the Internet started to bend in a different direction, and in this more recent cultural, political, and economic development, Japanese culture began to experience a major transformation. People have been, anxiously and with some hope, trying to grasp the nature of this transformation.

In this new cultural context, domestic cultural producers—not even counting those who often go abroad and make those sites their primary places of activity—started to gaze beyond their own national borders. It is not difficult to find artists whose creativity is apparently informed by strategies for or against the process of globalization. And even when their work does not appear to show any direct concern for globalization per se, one could say it still represents a gesture of refusal toward it. In either case, the chances that Japanese cultural producers travel abroad to show their work in art exhibitions or in theaters have increased exponentially in recent years, and this phenomenon is very new in Japan’s cultural history.

In terms of contemporary visual art practices, we have more opportunities to see work from abroad than ever before, especially through such grand-scale exhibitions as the First Echigo-Tsumari Art Triennial (2000) and the First Yokohama Triennale (2001). However, for theater, the situation is rather ambiguous. In contrast to the flourishing of gigantic international visual art exhibitions, the Tokyo International Festival for Performing Arts, which was first held in 1994 after the so-called bubble economy had come to an end, was forced to minimize its scale after 1997, when the economic recession started to impact many aspects of Japan’s cultural sphere. In fact, the festival is no longer even “international,” though it continues to define itself as such. Despite claims that we can see theater from any part of the world, it is not so easy to invite contemporary theater works from abroad these days, and it has become increasingly difficult to keep up-to-date on the latest trends in theater outside of Japan. There are two reasons for this. One is purely economical, the other more cultural. People in Japan, especially theater audiences, lost interest in keeping up with trends outside of Japan as the number of domestic theater productions increased dramatically throughout the decade. And most of these productions were created according to these insular concerns, as if responding to that lack of interest on the part of their audiences in what was happening abroad.

Somewhat paradoxically, however, during the 1990s, the number of Japanese theater companies touring to foreign countries dramatically increased, aided by active funding organizations. As a result, there is the impres-

sion that internationalization of Japan's contemporary theater has accelerated. If we consider the proliferation of international cultural exchange in the past decade, it seems natural for us to assume that practitioners of theater, visual arts, photography, and film in Japan are not creating their work in a domestic vacuum. But those cultural trends do not necessarily suggest that cultural producers are responding to the process of globalization. To respond to the process of globalization means to reflect in the work, one way or another, an understanding of this new twist that is postmodernization. Or it means to comment on various issues of the globalization process that have come into focus in artists' own representational practices. At minimum, the work should make us think about how humans are situated within the context of globalization.

From this standpoint, one could argue that very few practitioners in Japan are responding to the process of globalization. But I can think of some who, rather than merely responding to the process, are methodologically and strategically manipulating the paradigms of this universal change. This distinction is in fact very subtle, and I would like to discuss Japan's contemporary art practice—in theater, dance, and visual arts—in the age of globalization by analyzing the responses and the strategies of some key practitioners.

The first name that comes up is that of Murakami Takashi, who deals with these issues in a very explicit manner. There is an important and essential discourse going on around Murakami's work, and that discussion itself is worth considering. So I will open the issue of globalization in Japan's art practices by exploring aspects of Murakami's work and the abundance of cultural theory that it has inspired.

#### Murakami Takashi and a New Phase in Japanese Cultural Theory

The importance of Murakami lies in the fact that he has come up with a very articulate strategy for addressing how Japanese culture can find its way in the age of globalization. I consider the appearance of such an artist exceptional in recent Japanese history. There have been heated debates about his strategy among influential Japanese critics, both for and against his work, and key participants in this debate include historian of thought Asada Akira, philosopher Azuma Hiroki, and visual art critic Sawaragi Noi. In their discourse on the postmodernization of Japan, ideas are summoned from theorists ranging from Jacques Derrida, Alexandre Kojève, and Jacques Lacan to Clement Greenberg and Yasuda Yojuro. We have not witnessed such a phenomenon around art practices in Japan since the 1980s, though there was a similar vital period of critical discourse in the 1960s. It is undoubtedly true that the active participation of important critics from a variety of disciplines contributes greatly to the radicalization of Japan's contemporary visual art practices.<sup>1</sup>

We can find the beginnings of this debate in a text by Sawaragi, in which he observes a new trend in Japan's visual art practices in the 1990s:

We can detect their point of departure in Otaku culture of manga, animations, monsters, and video games. We must be mindful of the fact that those subcultural genres have their origin in America ... [that] their creative activity began precisely when their minds were occupied by things American and when they "recognized" that they were standing in the middle of "occupied ground."<sup>2</sup>

Sawaragi goes on to discuss Murakami as the one who started to work from such a location and describes the strategy of his Signboard Takashi from 1993:

Murakami's aim was to expose American occupation within Japan by recycling such subcultural designs.

What comes to the surface through Murakami's ingenious manipulation is the significance of this trademark, which usually goes unnoticed because it is so self-evident. It is a paradox that made-in-Japan products, which boast the world's finest quality, could only come into being because of an Americanized class of people who prefer plastic models over menko (Japanese pasteboard cards) or beedama (glass beads). Murakami points to a paradoxical problem whereby the "quality" of such products can only be tested in a place half-colonized by America.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, literary critics such as Suga Hidemi and Fukuda Kazuya have come into the debate, making it even more interesting, as will be discussed later.

<sup>2</sup> Sawaragi Noi, Japan, Contemporary, Visual Art (Tokyo: Shincho-sha, 1998), p. 52; first published serially in Bijutsu Techo 48, no. 727-49, no. 742 (July 1996-June 1997). Unless otherwise noted, all translations of material quoted from Japanese sources are by Uchino Tadashi.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 85-86.

In this way, Sawaragi locates Murakami's and others' work in its self-referentiality. In addition, Murakami and others would, through incessant contact with trends in American art practices, succeed in opening a circuit toward American curators and audiences. And by devising a logic to affirm such a nearly self-inflictive self-awareness, they would become widely and enthusiastically accepted in Japan.<sup>4</sup>

We can find a similar circuit and logic in Murakami's "Super Flat Manifesto" (April 2000), published in the catalogue accompanying his Superflat exhibition.<sup>5</sup> The manifesto starts with the phrase "The world of the future might be like Japan," and Murakami goes on to declare that he hopes "to reconsider 'super flatness,' the sensibility that has contributed to and continues to contribute to the construction of Japanese culture, as a world-view, and show that it is an original concept that links the past with the present and the future."<sup>6</sup> It is "an original concept of Japanese who have been completely Westernized," but this concept, he declares, will dominate the world. The super flat is a very privileged space, from which Japanese culture has been generating itself, and this space will provide a model for any future space. Murakami thus discovers flat space as an essential characteristic of Japanese culture, and, by using this as an underlying concept, he goes on to create concrete art works. Accordingly, even though the world he creates can only begin to exist on Americanized soil, Japanese contemporary visual art practices can be recognized with a surprising degree of affirmativeness.

The young critic Azuma Hiroki has endorsed this affirmativeness, from the "shaky foundation of an amateur's intuition," by drawing "from Murakami's two-dimensional work some sort of philosophical proposition."<sup>7</sup> Azuma defines the characteristic of postmodernity as the "dysfunction of castration," referring to Lacanian notions, and, using a Derridian theoretical framework, goes on to discuss the issue as a transition from the predominance of the gaze to that of "the ghost" and as an appearance of "the postal." Lacanian "castration" is, according to Azuma, "to abandon a direct tie to the image (the direct gratification of desire) and come to recognize one's own gaze. It is nothing less than to adopt a mechanism by which to adjust one's own gaze to that of society's (to see things from society's perspective) ... the 'ghost' exists between presence and non-presence as an intermediate sign between the image and symbol. 'Postal' refers to dysfunction of the symbolic realm."<sup>8</sup>

An iconographic world develops from castration's dysfunction, according to Azuma, when the modern and the perspectival gaze are both totally disrupted, and there is no longer a gaze but only a multitude of eyes. We can certainly see such eyes in Murakami's work, and we should recognize the "postal" in them. Azuma takes as an example Murakami's Dokomademo Fukaku (In the Deep DOB) and relates it to Lacan's analysis of Holbein's The Ambassadors:

... the multitude of eyes in In the Deep DOB—the very ambiguity of these distorted anime signs—corresponds to the painting's deficiency of space, to its equation of gaze with castration's dysfunction. The Ambassadors "imaged" the establishment of linear perspective's gaze (of lifelike space), and turned it around in a lack of eyes (in the space of death). In contrast, In the Deep DOB "images" the dysfunction of linear perspective's gaze—the failure of castration—in a proliferation of ambiguous eyes: not the vital eyes of the living or the sunken sockets of the dead, but "spectacle" eyes. In postmodern society, where the mechanism of castration—which provided a clear division between the world of children and the world of adults, of the realm of images and the realm of symbols—no longer functions, the world of the living is no longer secure. Instead we have only a growing proliferation of eerie signs for "eye."<sup>9</sup>

Azuma then concludes that Murakami's super-flat world responds to this transition from modernity to postmodernity. What is important about Azuma's theorizing is that the discussion of castration's dysfunction gradually slides into the affirmation of a system—"a proliferation of signs." And such a manipulation of logic, which

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4 For example, the exhibitions The Year of Zero at Art Tower in Mito, curated by Sawaragi; Murakami Takashi at Tokyo Metropolitan Museum of Contemporary Art; and Nara Yoshitomo at Yokohama Art Museum all enjoyed unprecedented levels of attendance for contemporary art exhibitions.

5 Murakami Takashi, "Super Flat Manifesto," in Superflat (Tokyo: MADRA Publishing Co., 2000).

6 *Ibid.*, p. 5.

7 Azuma Hiroki, "Super-flat Speculation," in Superflat, p. 145.

8 *Ibid.*

9 *Ibid.*, pp. 149, 151. Lacan's discussion of Holbein is included in Jacques Lacan, The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-analysis, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York and London: Norton & Company, 1978).

is slippery in its very nature, in order to establish affirmativeness is precisely what critics were engaged in during the 1990s. In Azuma's thinking, there is none of the critical consciousness that should arise when we find that the construction of a system can be only dysfunctional. According to Azuma, we did not have a satisfactory development of a project called modernity and therefore were able to preserve a multilayered view of the world, as opposed to the rise of one-point perspective as the predominant way to look at the world. If this is true, Lacanian concepts such as "the fragmented body" or "a primordial Discord," which Lacan worked out in the very process of transition from the world of images (the Imaginary) to the world of symbols (the Symbolic), cannot and should not emerge here.

If such an image/concept does not appear in Murakami's work, we must then say that Murakami's work has nothing to do with the Lacanian world, and in fact it may be that a Lacanian analysis of Murakami's work is irrelevant from the beginning. Indeed, Lacan describes the type of image that would appear in the transition from the Imaginary to the Symbolic, which is completely different from what Azuma describes. Taking up the work of Hieronymus Bosch, Lacan identifies the concept that would emerge in the crack of the Symbolic:

This fragmented body... then appears in the form of disjointed limbs, or of those organs represented in exoscopy, growing wings and taking up arms for intestinal persecutions—the very same that visionary Hieronymus Bosch has fixed, for all time, in painting, in their ascent from the fifteenth century to the imaginary zenith of modern man.<sup>10</sup>

In the process leading toward the stabilization of the modern, such iconographic representations might remain concealed in the cultural depths, but they sometimes come out through the crack of the Symbolic as a potentially very dangerous element. We must recognize that the Symbolic always embodies such crisis, as does the modern, and therefore has dysfunctionality as its essence. **This crisis becomes ubiquitous in the dysfunctioning of the modern, a state that we call postmodern.** Azuma's discourse is arguably too naive for this kind of paradox, and naturally some critique arises. This critique is perhaps best articulated by Asada Akira, who writes, in "Irony of Super-flat," that:

It is a sociological fact that such a phenomenon that could only be seen as infantilization within a Lacanian framework is widespread, especially in contemporary Japan, and undoubtedly Murakami Takashi's *Super-flat* is one of its more radical examples. But shouldn't we say that we have had such a symptom for a long time? In fact, in a short lecture I gave in the U.S. in 1987, entitled "Children's Capitalism and Japan's Postmodernism," I said that **in Japan's postmodern culture we neither have the elderly who believe in transcendental values nor the matured who have internalized some definite values as subjects but only children who are engaged in relativistic games,** and went on to say that if capitalism is accompanied by the process of infantilization, Japanese children's postmodernism anticipates the future of the world. Of course, it was an apparent parody told in the subjunctive or the conditional mood as a rhetorical response in the linguistic game against those Hegelians who claimed the world history had come to an end in Europe or in the U.S., therefore variegated with a sense of irony, including that of self-scorn. What Murakami Takashi wants to say now in his "Super-flat Manifesto" is probably the same. But when he declares "Japan may be the future of the world, and Japan is now Super-flat," it is difficult to sense a sharp irony any more. Is it too mean to say that this is only a self-affirmation based on "super-flat," therefore naive, irony and a self-assertion of J-Art, which stays at about the same level as J-Pop?<sup>11</sup>

Thus Asada looks at the self-affirmation of "J" in contemporary visual art practice in Japan together with Azuma's theory, and points out that in the case of Murakami, there still is a sense of irony there.<sup>12</sup> I myself have to acknowledge the permeation of "J" in Japan, and we cannot deny that there is a popularization of contemporary visual art that can be identified as a "Murakami Takashi boom" in this movement of "J." And this is possible because Murakami's work is shifting from irony to self-affirmativity. Whether or not there is a sense of irony in his self-affirmation, the more important issue is that such a theory came into existence not through domestic insularity but through Murakami's global sphere of activity. Murakami's notion of super-flat is said to have some connection with Robert Rauschenberg's two-dimensional "Flatbeds," and we must remember Sawaragi's point that Murakami's concepts derive from a sense of the history of American modernist painting, where flatness or two-dimensionality was highly prized. I personally think that we should also consider

10 Jacques Lacan, "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience," in *Écrits: A Selection*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York and London: Norton & Company, 1977), pp. 4-5.

11 Asada Akira, "Irony of Super-flat," in *Nami (Wave)* (Tokyo) (June 2000), pp. 44-47.

12 The term "J" started to be used very frequently during the 1980s. It is the first letter of Japan and, as will be discussed in more detail later, it connotes a lightness of Japanese culture in the 1980s.

Murakami's "Super Flat Manifesto" as a theory of super-two-dimensionality that is indeed a response to Clement Greenberg's theory, which placed the essence of modern painting in its two-dimensionality. Regardless, the concept of super-flat is called upon variously as something that already existed in Japanese culture, as something that would surpass preceding theories, as something that would surpass all Euro-American visual art practices and theories. The concept of super-flat, as long as it is articulated within such a web of relations, is not only postmodern but also very modern in its consciousness of the historical and the geographical.

Thus Japan's contemporary visual art practice is viewed with some reverence by Euro-American curators for its relationship to contemporary Euro-American visual art practice. In the dysfunctioning of the economy in post-bubble Japan, visual art practices seem to be functioning all too well. This rosy vision, however, does not reflect the true status of Japan's contemporary society. **The current status of Japan's culture and body is, for me, far beyond the state of dysfunction and is indeed in the state that only can be called "dementia."** And some critics have realized that it is more crucial to explore the relationship between Murakami's work and the body of dementia. **It is no wonder, then, that psychiatrists are the ones who are responding most vividly to this unusual condition, whereby not the mind but the body is in the state of dementia.** Kayama Rika, a psychiatrist, writes about certain aspects of the body in dementia, before going on to analyze Murakami's work:

A lot of things have happened in the world. But we must not forget that many things have happened in Japan, too. Just during the last month of summer, we have seen the following cases: two young men, both fans of *shojo* (young girl) animation to the degree that they have published a little magazine and created a Web site, kidnapped an elementary-school student; numerous sex workers wearing sailor blouses and "loose socks" (both typical garments of female high school students) for their "guests" were killed in a fire in a building housing a number of independent business institutions in Shinjuku; and a seventh-grade girl was handcuffed and left alone on a highway only to be run over by a truck and killed, in which case the suspect was a junior high school teacher who loved telephone sex clubs.

Our prime minister, experiencing the highest approval rating ever, published a collection of his own portrait photographs and publicly praised, with a smile, his son, a would-be celebrity who did not finish a college degree.

There is something maddening about all of this.<sup>13</sup>

Since the Aum Shinri-kyo terrorist gas attack on the Tokyo subway in 1995, we have witnessed many such maddening scenes in Japan. While a high school student in Columbine, Colorado, was engaged in random shooting of his classmates, a man suffering from dementia was randomly stabbing passers-by in downtown Tokyo, and another was driving his car right up to a railroad platform and randomly running over passengers. What characterizes these people is that throughout their bodily rampages they never even thought about running away from the scene of the crime. Kayama's examples make it clear that these tendencies are rampant. What is interesting is that Kayama is trying to analyze Murakami's work in relation to such social phenomena, drawing parallels between this type of criminal behavior and the Murakami Takashi boom. For Murakami, as well as for those who overindulge in animations and computer games, reality and fantasy are indistinguishable. The difference is that criminals actually do commit crimes whereas Murakami stays one step on this side of the line. They engage in the same kind of behavior, but Murakami does it not as a crime but as "beauty." He seems deeply committed to such a world, and keeps producing *bi-shojo* (beautiful girl) characters, which continue to be attractive to those on the verge of bodily dementia, according to Kayama. She says:

The most important question is what exactly is the difference between the two: those who are dominated by the sense of dissociation or depersonalization and go on so easily to step over the "traces of stages" and commit something "terrible"; and Murakami, for whom it has somehow become possible to go and come back through several dimensions so freely. ... The I who can kneel down for the other side—the Lacanian "Real"—is the very factor that keeps Murakami a visual art world hero, who is only exposed to a favorable wind and never considered an antisocial entity.<sup>14</sup>

Lacan again. Kayama also thinks that Murakami is trying to touch the Real in his work, and in this sense, her gaze toward Murakami has a certain affinity with Azuma's. Unfortunately, Kayama here does not analyze how this is realized in Murakami's work in concrete and structural terms. But when we consider what compels crim-

<sup>13</sup> Kayama Rika, "Murakami Takashi: What Wind Is He Exposed To, Favorable or Adverse?" in *Eureka* (October 2001), p. 114.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 118.

inals to move from the world of animation and costume play to the murder of bi-shojo within the notion of aggressiveness that leads a person to the Lacanian Real, Kayama seems to understand that in Murakami's work the Real does not emerge from the cracks of the Symbolic, but rather resides behind the crackless facade.

The Japanese are so attracted to Murakami's work for different reasons than an American curator, for instance, is interested in it. Japanese fans of Murakami are sympathetic to the world Murakami depicts in his work, and for them it is not in the least important whether or not Murakami's world expresses an ironical attitude toward Japanese culture. They indulge themselves in this world with complete ahistoricity, and there is no consciousness of cultural theories, theories about Japan, or its relationship to American culture. In this sense, they are only practicing a Japanese version of postmodernism, which Asada calls "infantile." In the meantime, curators in Euro-American contexts are looking at the ways whereby a new trend in Japanese culture is structurally and self-consciously reestablished within Murakami's work, and they are interested in the relationship between characteristics of Murakami's work—as analyzed by a Japanese art critic, a philosopher, or a psychiatrist—and Japanese culture at large, or in characteristics of Japanese culture as inscribed in Murakami's work.

Clearly, a complex discursive space is being formed around and about Murakami. There are interesting articles and essays written about Aida Makoto and Otake Shinro as well, but they do not comprise an equally multilayered and complex discursive space. Fukuda Kazuya, a literary critic, says that Otake's "junk" installations and house-paint drawings of Nihon-kei (Japanese landscape) are good because they are garbage. He locates the spirit that sustains Otake's work within the tradition of waka (a Japanese poetry form), and also relates this very spirit to the philosophy of Yasuda Yojuro, a theorist of the Japanese Romantics. According to Yasuda, in the tradition of waka, that is to say, in the essence of Japanese culture, there is a maxim, "Shindemo-yoi" (I am ready to die). This is not Shinuga-yoi (You should die), Shindara-yoi (Why don't you die?), or Shineba-yoi (I forgive you if you die). There is no comparative or conditional meaning in the phrase "I'd rather die." It is simply a philosophy of determination that has been reached in an absolute solitude. It is in this context that Fukuda says "they are good because they are junk," and it is different from saying "they are good even though they are junk."<sup>15</sup> Fukuda's phrase is absolute in its affirmativeness. Thus Otake's work is absolutely affirmed, and cannot be destabilized by critique of any kind. There is no possibility for us to raise a critical assessment of the work, and we, including Asada and Azuma, can only make an agreeable response like "Maybe..." This is no way to initiate a critical discourse.

For Aida Makoto's A Picture of New York Air Bombed there might be some war veteran somewhere who finds satisfaction in seeing New York set on fire by Japanese Zero fighters. But for most, seeing such an unethical, inhuman, and aggressive picture leaves us only with a bad taste. We can hardly find any sense of Japanese reality in it, and the artist himself does not feel there is any connection to the real. About Mutant Hanako, a comic strip in which the U.S. is called "the country of evil," Aida says: "There may be a few people [by people he means Japanese] left who feel pleasure in such an exaggerated phrase as 'Savage Americans and Brits,' and I enlarge this pleasure as if through a microscope, expecting this to serve to neutralize a poison."<sup>16</sup> It is very doubtful how many Japanese are feeling such a pleasure, and how many of them need to be neutralized of its poison.

Of his works that might enrage some feminists, Aida says, "My works are not too erotic. Compared to erotic manga magazines sold in the streets, I cannot be too vulgar. I shouldn't say it myself, but it is because I am well-bred, and my upbringing prevents me from going that far."<sup>17</sup> He thus admits his work is tepid and suggests that what is realized is only the satisfaction of a small desire. No political or economical issues arise from his work, and he emphasizes that his work is produced in the strictly private sphere of the hobbyist. He claims a position that dislocates him from any connection to the others, and so, following this position, even though he creates radical visual images, this creation can only be understood as a practice of what Alexandre Kojève

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<sup>15</sup> The latter phrase, as we know, could be applied to much contemporary art practice, and if we elaborate the phrase a little more, it becomes a feasible theory of avant-garde art. For instance, de Duve's theory of visual art—"something that can be anything"—is written in this vein; see Thierry de Duve, "N'importe quoi," in Kant after Duchamp (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1966).

<sup>16</sup> Aida Makoto, "Japan, Future, Visual Art," featured interview in Bijutsu Techo (December 1999), p. 22.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 23.

calls “Japanese snobbism.”<sup>18</sup> There is an obvious difference between Murakami, who strategically brings forward the notion of Japanese snobbism and whose work invites critical debate about the structure and the effectiveness of his strategy, and Aida Makoto, who is a super-self-complacent, anticritical practitioner of snobbism.

Critics talk not only about Murakami but about the current situation of Japanese culture and thus are able to refer to its development in the context of globalization, and to explore a new dimension of postmodernity in its global deployment. It is unusual that, in this type of theoretical discussion and debate, contemporary visual art practice has emerged as the most important arena in Japan’s modern and contemporary cultural history. There were moments, in the late 1960s to 1970s, when such a situation was observable in and around poetry and theater practices: for instance, Suzuki Tadashi’s theories on the body and acting were analyzed with reference to Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s *Phenomenologie* and *L’Oeil et l’esprit*; or Terayama Shuji’s work was not able to be analyzed without making connections to surrealism, Marcel Duchamp, and Raymond Roussel; or discussions on Terayama’s work spanned from Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze to the anthropological explorations of Claude Levi-Strauss and Marcel Mauss. **The emergence of a dialogic discussion via critical language concerning Murakami’s work makes it possible to imagine a future development of Japan’s contemporary visual art practice.**

### “J” and Some of Its Aspects

The J-literature boom of the 1980s resulted from the strategy of reaffirming Japan’s contemporary literature, which had incessantly been losing substance, and responded to the devaluation of Japan’s cultural sphere by calling contemporary literature not “Japanese” but “J” (though many readers at the time thought the letter J stood for Japan).

A decade later, Suga Hidemi, a literary critic, proposed a radical interpretation of J. In his view, **J stood not only for Japan but also for junk** (he would later say that it can also mean *jouissance*, or joy). He declared that J-literature was not worth reading and went on to posit that after the failed revolution of 1968 Japanese culture became junk and that what we have now is a mere remnant of the junk.<sup>19</sup> It is easy to link his theory to that of Fukuda Kazuya. Whereas in Fukuda’s discourse the junk character is affirmed (“It is good because it is junk”), Suga critiques it by referring to Wallerstein’s world-system theory, among others. It was Wallerstein who wrote that liberalism, which had enjoyed a healthy growth after the French Revolution in 1789, started to suffer a complete collapse after 1968.<sup>20</sup> As a result, **we came to a situation in which the border between high art and low art was erased and a new possibility for the avant-garde arose. According to Suga, however, what was brought about was only the fall of high art, and the world itself turned into junk; politically speaking, the left disappeared and only the right survived.** In short, Suga’s critique posits J-culture within a global trend, and he tries to see its contemporaneity. The very fact that artworks have turned into J is evidence that artists are fully entrenched in the processes of globalization.

Suga’s theory evoked a very strong response. Uchino Tadashi, a theater critic, finds Suga’s approach relevant to the analysis of the process of decline in Japan’s theater culture—the same transition to J (junk)—that started in the latter half of the 1980s, slowed down a little at the beginning of the 1990s, and was accelerated after 1995. In Japan’s theater culture today we can observe a severe bipolarization between the many theater collectives that insistently adhere to the insularity of J and those few exceptions, such as dumb type and Gekidan Kaitaisha, that strengthen a diasporic position when faced with the pressures of globalization.

In his “‘Empire’ and Theatre: Against Neo-liberalism,”<sup>21</sup> Uchino insists that after September 11, we need to think about the question of contemporary forms of representation in terms of Hardt and Negri’s notion of Empire.<sup>22</sup>

18 See Alexandre Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel: Lectures on the Phenomenology of Spirit*, comp. Raymond Queneau, ed. Allan Bloom, trans. James H. Nichols Jr. (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1980).

19 Suga reaches this conclusion by outlining the development of Japan’s contemporary visual art practices after 1968. See Suga Hidemi, “Revolution of 68 in Japan,” *SAP: Saison Art Program Journal* 1 (1999), pp. 86–103.

20 See Immanuel Maurice Wallerstein, *After Liberalism* (New York: New Press, 1995).

21 See Uchino Tadashi, “‘Empire’ and Theatre: Against Neo-liberalism,” *Performing Arts* 1 (June 2002).

22 See Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2000).

He goes on to argue that the issue of globalization must be discussed in relation to an emerging sovereignty of the politico-economical and the sociocultural. Assuming that issues of neo-liberal sovereignty can only be observed in local practices in local contexts, Uchino tries to analyze some aspects of Japan's theater culture as a localized form of practice. In his view, it is possible for theater practitioners to "consciously deal with issues that a neo-liberal sovereign technology imposes on them (how they present themselves depends on each localized context)." Furthermore, "J theatre practitioners, having lived in the accelerated permeation of neo-liberalism, especially after 1995, should have acquired ways and methodologies to observe, feel and dramatize/theatricalize aspects of neo-liberal powers of sovereignty in their everyday life, precisely because they have enclosed themselves in the 'J'-infused everyday-lifeness."<sup>23</sup> What Uchino discovers by exploring the depths of J-theater practices is the very fact that there is no possibility of these forms breaking out and coming to the surface. Rather, those theater works only look to "affirm the status quo, being filled with naturalized masculine violence and sexual desire," faithfully reproducing images of Japan as propagated by the mass media.<sup>24</sup> And he goes on to locate these facts within the cultural-theory framework:

These new "J" theatre practices are exploring their own aesthetic identities ("aesthetics of junk") by inoculating different theatre histories with a sense of arbitrary violence (or to follow Alexandre Kojève and Azuma Hiroki, in a manner of an "animal"). But it is an inescapable fact that all these young "J" theatre practitioners are political only to the extent that they "play with" the institution of theatre. Many levels of their sense of violence (in acting, in inoculating theatre histories, as a theme) are only a "mirror-up-to-nature" kind of reflection of the world. They cannot interpret the issue of violence in terms of the radical brutalization of a controlling power structure in society. They apparently show a sense of resistance to a mainstream theatre culture by intellectually manipulating institutions and conventions of theatre thus making their own excessive junk. The biggest problem for them is that they cannot critically assess their own position as being within the framework of theatre, and theirs can only represent various senses of violence as a reflection of the age, and can only repeat mediated images such as "Japanese society, which is now totally falling apart."<sup>25</sup>

What Uchino is getting at is that theater culture in Japan after the 1960s apparently entered a distinctively different phase. Theater in the 1960s was a revolt (the most important work of Hijikata Tatsumi, an initiator of Butoh, was entitled The Revolt of the Body), followed by the theater in the 1980s in which young theater practitioners were firmly determined to smoothly glide the surface, being able to live in the fantasy of postmodernism. Japan's version of postmodernism in the 1980s was to live not in the dysfunctional, in what Jean Baudrillard called the "cracked front glass," but to keep the surface as smooth as ever, enjoying the lack of depth. In the late 1980s, they grew tired of gliding the surface and began to collapse, while Japan's youth theater also began to collapse. During this time we were able to see only a few theater practices expressing the dysfunctional. The monumental work in this vein was dumb type's S/N (1993-1995). In this beautiful multimedia performance work, performers tackled the major issue of AIDS, while also problematizing the fictionality of gender, national borders, and sexuality. It questioned all existing institutionalized frameworks and was thus a very political performance. Furthermore, people who were HIV positive participated in the performance, and the performance itself was designed to tread a very delicate and ambiguous line between the real and the fictional. After Furuhashi Teiji, the director, died of AIDS in 1995, dumb type seemed to founder. We came to lose one of our most important performance groups, which could represent dysfunctional bodies so powerfully. In the meantime, Gekidan Kaitaisha started to make Foucauldian "de-spectacles" at the beginning of the 1990s and went on to present (not represent) "bodies under siege" and Freudian "war bodies" on stage. The group was completely ignored and isolated in Japan, and they were forced to move their center of activity abroad, to Euro-American countries, Asia, and Oceania, as if they were cultural refugees. They, too, realized the state of dysfunctional bodies on stage, but such a provocative theater practice seems to be in the minority. With the exception of dumb type and Gekidan Kaitaisha, there is virtually no theater work in Japan today that interprets postmodernity as a social phenomenon that begins from the point of the world as dysfunctional and then tries to critically engage that issue. In such a void, what Uchino calls J-theater—that which lacks all sense of critique—came into being.

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<sup>23</sup> Uchino, "'Empire' and Theatre," p. 198.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p. 202.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., pp. 203-204.



### From Dysfunction to Dementia in Theater and Dance

After 1995, our body came to experience a more difficult state than simply being dysfunctional. Being dysfunctional means that there is something wrong with the function, but it is somehow still functioning. It was possible, therefore, for Furuhashi, with his own dysfunctional body, to create *S/N*. His death seemed to herald a shift in which the world was not even dysfunctional anymore. Something more drastic than being dysfunctional has arrived, and at least in Japan, bodies are behaving very strangely in the streets. This is what Kayama was referring to in her essay on Murakami. And I would call these bodies, “bodies of dementia,” which came after the representation of the dysfunctional and are now emerging in representational genres. But if those representations are emerging as something lacking any sense of critique, the bodies themselves are, in a sense, in a state of dementia by lacking any circuit for self-examination. That is why, even if the bodies in J-theater practices are “bodies of dementia,” they are only simplistic reflections of the bodily dementia that we are experiencing in Japanese culture at the moment. I would take Uchino’s analysis to mean as much. In fact, not only in theatrical expressions but in our everyday lives, more and more people are satisfied simply with having their desires fulfilled, without any consideration for self-reflective thinking. In such a state, the status quo is silently affirmed, and those desires are never articulated in terms of history, culture, and society.

We can understand the emergence of this kind of non-self-critical circuit by looking at Paul Virilio’s analysis of acceleration. He writes in *Politics of the Very Worst* (1996) that in contemporary society, which was made possible by the extreme progress of speed, human beings lack the ability to respond to the emergence of absolute speed:

Because the nature of absolute speed is also to be absolute power, absolute and instantaneous control, in other words an almost divine power. Today, we have achieved the three attributes of the divine: ubiquity, instantaneity, immediacy; omnivoyance and omnipotence. This is no longer a question of democracy—this is tyranny. Multimedia confronts us with a question: will we be able to achieve a democracy of real time, live time, a democracy of immediacy and ubiquity? I don’t think so, and those who are quick to say yes cannot be very serious.<sup>26</sup>

According to Virilio, there is a loss of space and time in the globalized world, and the lack of distance not only oppresses us with its instantaneity but deprives us of our self-critical circuit since we have to think with our bodies. But we humans do not know how to respond with our own bodies, and we can only go mad in such a situation. It must be noted, however, that what happens here is not that our minds go mad. Dr. Caligari’s madness in the 1920s, for instance, can only be nostalgic. What goes mad are our bodies, and this occurs without being filtered through our minds. Freud once said that to realize the pleasure principle we need a certain amount of oppression of our libido, but in the current situation, libido is completely oppressed, and when it is completely oppressed, it looks for an extremely violent burst to the surface. In such a scenario, the system of the symbolic is completely destroyed, and the body transfers itself from the dysfunctional to the demented.

It is so easy to lose a sense of history and geography when there is a lack of distance. Many have described postmodernism as the end of history, but if the world is in the state that Virilio outlines, then what we have been experiencing is not the end but the loss of history. Of course, geography is lost as well. I refer to this latest phase of globalization as the emergence of “Empire,” following Hardt and Negri. In this absence of outside (there is no distance, so there can’t be an outside), in this singular dominance of power (in which otherness is lost as well as the possibility of dialogue), there is still an attempt at restoring history and geography by discovering a circuit for self-reflection—a process of restarting our memory. Walter Benjamin wrote about the notion of “awakening,” and this concept is useful as we struggle to devise a strategy for deconstructing the contemporary myth that, in our discussion, is none other than globalization and Empire. Benjamin asserts the importance of “awakening” as an action for restoring history:

Here it is a question of dissolution of “mythology” into the space of history. That, of course, can happen only through the awakening of a not-conscious knowledge of what has been.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>26</sup> Paul Virilio, *Politics of the Very Worst*, ed. Sylvère Lotringer, trans. Michael Cavaliere (New York: Semiotext[e], 1999), p. 17; originally published as *Cybermonde: la politique du pire* (Paris: Editions Textuel, 1996).

<sup>27</sup> Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, Mass., and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), p. 458.

If we continue to engage ourselves in such an endeavor—to awaken a “not-conscious knowledge”—we may be able to acquire the possibility of connecting to otherness, even in this drastic transition toward total homogeneity that is the process of globalization. In order for us to start engaging in such an endeavor, the analysis of what is currently happening is indispensable. And if we are to participate in such a project, speaking here specifically in terms of theater and dance practices, which situate the body in its representational center, the notion of dementia must become our shared theme. We must soberly accept the situation and articulate it clearly. We must live the state of dementia in our own selves.

The fact that, after 1995, artists such as Pina Bausch and Sasha Waltz started to express a sense of jouissance and “the body of dementia” in their work shows that they had anticipated, and now certainly fully understand, the coming of a new phase. In Japanese performing arts, collectives such as Gekidan Kaitaisha, through the negotiation of bodies in a state of war on stage, were able to present us with images of “war bodies,” and they are now trying to connect with the notion of “the body of dementia.” If we go back to the origins of theater and think in terms of Greek tragedy, it is worth noting that heroes of Greek tragedy who tried to revolt against the order of the gods invariably lost the battle because of their sheer powerlessness. Perhaps the same fate awaits Kaitaisha’s actors in their battle against globalization and Empire. But at least, like the heroes of Greek tragedy, they resist the order of the gods and seek new ways of resisting, all of which is continuously enacted on the stage. We might do well to remember that in ancient Greece genius (meaning linguistic spirit as opposed to mythology) was inscribed within Greek tragedy. As we begin to witness the first attempts at negotiating with the body of dementia, we should remain hopeful.

In theater, where still very few attempts are being made to create a new kind of representation, critics such as Uchino (I would also include Unakami Hiromi, a theater director, who attempts to analyze contemporary Japanese culture through a critical lens) are starting to develop a detailed discussion of what is going on, referring to wider contexts of contemporary visual art and literary practices. This shows, however feeble it may be at the moment, that there is a connected response to globalization between performative and discursive practices. To move from the proliferation of noncritical J-theater practices to serious responses to globalization means to negotiate with the world, to move from a self-inflictive, self-affirmative practice to a realistic art practice. To support such a movement is my motivation to keep working as a critic. Rather than continuing to ignore the issue of globalization, we need to collapse the mythological order of Empire from within and inscribe a new antimythological genius, a linguistic spirit, within our culture. Active criticism may at least be able to open up avenues to lead us there.

Translated from the Japanese by Uchino Tadashi