

ALSO BY SARAH THORNTON

---

*Club Cultures: Music, Media and Subcultural Capital*

SEVEN DAYS IN THE  
**Art World**

SARAH THORNTON



W. W. NORTON & COMPANY NEW YORK LONDON

Copyright © 2008 by Sarah Thornton

All rights reserved

Printed in the United States of America

First Edition

For information about permission to reproduce selections from this book,  
write to Permissions, W. W. Norton & Company, Inc.,  
500 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10110

For information about special discounts for bulk purchases, please contact  
W. W. Norton Special Sales at [specialsales@wnnorton.com](mailto:specialsales@wnnorton.com) or 800-233-4830

Manufacturing by Courier Westford

Book design by Chris Welch

Production manager: Devon Zahn

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data  
Thornton, Sarah.

Seven days in the art world / Sarah Thornton. — 1st ed.  
p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-393-06722-4 (hardcover)

1. Art—Marketing. 2. Art—Exhibitions.

3. Art—Competitions. 4. Art criticism. I. Title.

N8600.T485 2008

709.05—dc22

2008035056

W. W. Norton & Company, Inc.

500 Fifth Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10110

[www.wwnorton.com](http://www.wwnorton.com)

W. W. Norton & Company Ltd.

Castle House, 75/76 Wells Street, London W1T 3QT

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 0

For Glenda and Monte



---

TAKASHI MURAKAMI

Oval Buddha, 2007

6

---

The Studio Visit

9:04 A.M. The glossy red marble lobby of the Westin Tokyo, like most hotels in the city, is dotted with stewards who bow their heads as guests walk by. Tim Blum and Jeff Poe, whom I last saw in Basel, stand by the front doors with their arms folded, their feet planted firmly apart. They glare at me through their Ray-Bans when I arrive a few minutes late, then we set off on our day trip to see an important new work. For seven years the Los Angeles dealers have been observing the artistic evolution of Takashi Murakami's *Oval Buddha*. It still needs to be covered in platinum leaf, but the sculpture, with the budget of a small independent Hollywood film, is otherwise finished. The eighteen-foot-tall self-portrait is sitting in a foundry in Toyama, an industrial town on the northwest coast of Japan, awaiting an audience.

“Haneda Airport, please,” says Blum in fluent Japanese. The taxi is polished black on the outside with the conventional white lace seat covers on the inside. The driver is wearing white gloves and a surgical face mask. He looks like an extra in a bioterrorism B movie, but here it's the sartorial norm for those with colds and

bad allergies. On the back of his seat, a sign informs us that our driver's hobbies are (1) baseball, (2) fishing, and (3) driving.

Poe is sitting in the front seat. He has jet lag and a hangover. Blum and I have taken the back. Blum lived in Japan for four years. "I really enjoy speaking the language," he tells me. "It's theater to me. I would have loved to have been an actor." He is tanned and has a week's worth of stubble. He wears a skull ring that sometimes brings him good luck. "Schimmel says that I look like a deranged movie star," he adds, flashing his white teeth self-mockingly. While Blum may be a generic leading man, Poe resembles the Dude as played by Jeff Bridges in *The Big Lebowski*.

Paul Schimmel, the chief curator of the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles, will also be flying to Toyama today. His solo retrospective of Murakami's work, entitled "© MURAKAMI," opens in four months and is supposed to culminate with *Oval*. Blum leans toward the front seat. "Schimmel has been quadruple-dipping!" he complains with a half-laugh. "First we donate a hundred thousand dollars toward the exhibition. Second, Larry, Perrotin, and we pay for the advertising." He is referring to Murakami's New York and Parisian dealers, Larry Gagosian and Emmanuel Perrotin. "Third, we have to air-freight *Oval* so it arrives on time. And fourth, we're expected to buy a few twenty-five-thousand-dollar tables for the gala." Blum turns to me. "Ask Poe about money. That's a trauma. He hates to spend."

Poe slowly shakes his head without lifting it from the headrest. "Schimmel has made history repeatedly," he says in a monotone. "He's done some scholarly shit and some spectacular shows. It's money well spent—peanuts compared to what we've poured into fabricating *Oval*." Poe swigs his spring water, then hugs the

two-liter bottle. "*Oval* has enormous significance to us, and not just because it's the gallery's biggest-budget production to date." When Blum & Poe opened in 1994, the partners sold Cuban cigars out the back of the gallery to help make ends meet. Even in 1999, when they showed Murakami's work in an "Art Statements" booth at Art Basel, they had to ask people from other stands to help them lift the work because they couldn't afford installers. "Seeing this piece," continues Poe, "will be emotional."

A living artist's first major retrospective is a time of reckoning, not just for critics, curators, and collectors but for the artist himself and his dealers. According to Blum, it is not surprising that the forty-five-year-old Murakami should be "validated" in a foreign land. "Japan is a homogeneous culture. They don't like it when someone sticks out too much. They want to pound 'em back in." Blum looks out the window as we drive through an intersection with dizzying electronic signage. "The status of creativity is much lower here," he continues. "The art market is weak, and there isn't a well-established museum network for contemporary art. Dissemination is difficult."

In order to maximize his impact and pursue all his interests, Murakami runs a company called Kaikai Kiki Co., Ltd., which has ninety employees in and around Tokyo and New York. The company is involved in what his dealers call an "insane" range of activities. It makes art. It designs merchandise. It acts as a manager, agent, and producer for seven other Japanese artists. It runs an art-fair-cum-festival called Geisai, and it does multimillion-dollar freelance work for fashion, TV, and music companies. (When said in reverse, Kaikai Kiki forms a Japanese adjective, *kikikaikai*, which is used to refer to uneasy, strange, or disturbing phenomena.)

"Takashi is an incredibly complicated man, but he's not pre-

cious, and there's no horseshit," says Blum. "His father was a taxi driver, but Takashi has a PhD . . . and he has curated a truly epic trilogy of exhibitions exploring Japanese visual culture." The third exhibition, entitled "Little Boy: The Arts of Japan's Exploding Subculture," which was installed at the Japan Society in New York in 2005, won several awards.

One of Murakami's most visible commissions has been for the accessories giant Louis Vuitton. In 2000 the company's artistic director, Marc Jacobs, asked Murakami to reenvision "monogram canvas," the company's century-old signature pattern in which the beige and brown initials *LV* float in a field of four-petal flower and diamond shapes. Three Murakami designs were put into production, and one of them, "multicolor," which used thirty-three candy colors on white and black backgrounds, was so successful that it became a standard line. Murakami then turned the tables on the big brand by pulling it into his own oeuvre with a series of paintings that consist of nothing but the multicolor *LV* pattern. "The Vuitton paintings are going to be important later on," declares Poe. "People just don't realize it yet. They look at them as branding and that's boring, but they're as *superflat* as anything he's done," he says, using Murakami jargon to refer to the way the artist's works flatten the distinctions between art and luxury goods, high and popular culture, East and West.

As we drive by a canal and catch a glimpse of the red-and-white Eiffel-like structure called the Tokyo Tower, I ask, What is a dealer's role in the studio?

"When people think of artists' studios, they imagine Jackson Pollock dancing around a canvas," says Poe grumpily from under his beige baseball cap. "Dealers are editors and conspirators. We help determine what gets shown and how it gets shown, and we help put art in production." Poe turns around and looks

at Blum, then at me. "At the end of the day, our business is to sell symptoms articulated as objects," he declares. "I like to think that I have a more honest relationship with our artists than some other dealers, but I don't want to be anyone's shrink."

**Two days** ago I visited Murakami's three Japanese studios. My interpreter and I took a train to the prefecture of Saitama, then a taxi past vibrant green rice paddies and residential streets to the main painting studio, a barn-shaped space with beige aluminum siding. Half a dozen bicycles with baskets and a taxi with its engine running were parked outside. Murakami was on his way out, having just finished his daily inspection. He looked glum. He wore what would turn out to be his uniform of the week: a white T-shirt, baggy army-green shorts, and white Vans without socks. His long black hair was tied up in a samurai bun. I confirmed our interview scheduled for later that day at Motoazabu, his central Tokyo design headquarters. He nodded solemnly and left.

The painting assistants looked like they'd just been chastised. This morning, as always, the staff had arrived by 8:50 (no one is ever late in Japan) and started their day by swinging their arms to recorded piano music for ten minutes of *rajio taiso*, or calisthenics. It's a national ritual in which they've partaken since primary school. When Murakami is there, he joins in. By 9:30, when I arrived, twelve employees were dotted around a white room the size of a long tennis court. Three of them were working on a triptych of circular paintings whose grimacing flower characters also appear in the Murakami-designed opening credits of a popular Japanese TV drama. It needed to be completed for a press conference in three days. Some of the black lines were

muddy and wobbly—"not crisp enough." Some colors were dim and streaky—"not dense enough." The platinum leaf was flaking off in parts. Plus the triptych needed to be finished "NOW!" One of the painters told me that she has a recurring dream in which Murakami is yelling at her. "He is always angry," she explained with a shrug. "The atmosphere is usually intense."

One man took a photo of the first canvas with a small digital camera. Murakami is a stickler for documenting every layer of a painting, so he can follow the process even when he is out of town and look back on the layers to reproduce similar effects in future works. Two women had laid the second and third paintings flat on a long trestle table. One sat cross-legged on the floor with her eyes two inches away from the picture's edge. She had a thin round bamboo brush in her left hand and a Q-tip tucked into her hair. The other, an artist named Rei Sato, knelt on the floor, reapplying platinum particles. They were all wearing standard-issue brown plastic sandals and white cotton gloves with the thumbs and forefingers cut out. No one had more than a speck or two of paint on his or her clothes. They worked in silence or in their own iPod worlds. When I asked Sato if there was any room for creativity in the work, she replied, "None at all." However, she is one of the seven artists represented by Kaikai Kiki and would be showing her own art in a group show in Spain. "My work is completely different. It's deliberately rough!" she added with glee.

I walked around the room, snooping in corners, and discovered a plastic crate full of ten-inch-square mushroom paintings. Murakami has created four hundred different mushroom designs, so the exam given to new staff to test whether they are ready to wield a brush in his name is to paint a mushroom. Deeper in the room, I came upon a phalanx of small, round, blank canvases that had received twenty thin layers of gesso primer so they

would be as flat as glass. On the ground, leaning against the wall, was another battalion of works-in-waiting. A total of eighty-five canvases were on the way to becoming what Murakami casually calls "big-face flowers" but are officially titled *Flowers of Joy*. Gagosian Gallery sold the fifty on display in its May 2007 show for \$90,000 apiece. (The official price was \$100,000, but everyone who's anyone gets a 10 percent discount.)

At the very back of the space was a notorious unfinished work—sixteen large panels shamefully stacked with their faces to the wall, half hidden under translucent plastic sheets. In fact, this entire studio was set up only six months ago to accommodate this very piece. Commissioned by François Pinault, the influential collector who owns Christie's auction house, the painting was to be the fourth work with 727 in its title (the first is in the collection of New York's Museum of Modern Art, while the second belongs to hedge-fund manager Steve Cohen). Like the other 727 paintings, it was supposed to feature Mr. DOB, Murakami's postnuclear Mickey Mouse character, as a god riding on a cloud, which can also be interpreted as a shark surfing on a wave, inspired by Hokusai's famous nineteenth-century woodblock print *The Great Wave of Kanagawa*. Murakami's sixteen-panel magnum opus was meant to line the atrium of Pinault's Palazzo Grassi museum during the opening days of the Venice Biennale, but a few skilled staff walked out on Murakami at a crucial time and the project had to be put aside.

"Takashi's being late on a painting for Pinault is like Michelangelo's being late for the pope!" was the oft-repeated quip, originally made by Charles Desmarais, the deputy director for art at the Brooklyn Museum, where the Murakami retrospective would travel to in April 2008. (After that the show would open at the Museum für Moderne Kunst in Frankfurt and the Guggenheim

Bilbao in Spain.) Later that day, in his finely sliced, sashimi-style English, Murakami described his predicament in another way: “I was in big tension. They was too much tired. Every day upset. They thought, ‘Fuck you, Takashi.’ I thought, ‘Oh my god, I cannot make the work.’ But I cannot say anything to Monsieur Pinault. It was a very tough time.”

Murakami has a painting studio in New York that mirrors this one in many respects. Linked by e-mail, iChat, and regular conference calls, it too is tidy, white-walled, and silent except for the whirl of the ventilation and the occasional blow-dryer being used to dry paint. I visited twice—once in April, when everyone was working around the clock in preparation for Murakami’s Gagosian show, and once in mid-May, when people had more time to talk. On the second visit, I watched Ivanny A. Pagan, a Puerto Rican–American painter who’d recently graduated from art school. On a stool beside him were three little plastic pots. “Green three twenty-six, yellow sixty-nine, and orange twelve. It’s paint by numbers with a twist,” he told me. “I don’t want to discriminate on the basis of color, but the yellows are sticky! They’re mean because they show the brushstrokes.” He paused to sweep his brush through a tight spot on an op-art-inspired “midsized flower ball,” then added, “You would think that synthetic paint would be uniform, but all the colors are different.” Murakami is insistent that no trace of his or any other painter’s hand should be seen in the work. “We’re out of Q-tips today and I have a dust problem,” Pagan said with a heavy sigh. “It is frowned upon to touch the painting,” he added as he readjusted his gloves. “About ten days before the Gagosian show, Takashi came into the studio. Most of us were new recruits, so we had never met him. It was pretty stressful. We had to redo all fifty small flower faces.” Pagan dipped his bamboo brush in water and dried it on his jeans.

“Thankfully, the painting director here, Sugimoto-san, has been working with Takashi for ten years. She’s so technically precise, it’s spectacular. She can refine paintings in a flash.” For Pagan, going to the opening of the Gagosian show was “like seeing the work for the first time.” He couldn’t believe it. “I worked on one of those flower balls for over a month, but with the varnish on it, under the lights, it was a completely different experience. We’d applied layer upon layer of paint, but for the general public I’m sure it looked like it had just arrived on the canvas.”

Murakami is unusual among artists in acknowledging the collective labor inscribed in his work. For example, with *Tan Tan Bo* (2001), a three-panel painting of the ever-mutating DOB character, which MOCA is using for its magazine advertisements (in this work, DOB looks like a saucer-eyed intergalactic spaceship), the names of the twenty-five people who worked on the piece are written on the back of the canvas. Other paintings credit upwards of thirty-five names. Similarly, Murakami’s desire to help his assistants launch their own careers is unusual. Many artists loathe losing good help and, more important, the *appearance* of creative isolation is central to their credibility.

**After** a few hours at the Saitama painting studio, two PR women, my interpreter, and I piled into a seven-seater Toyota chauffeured by one of the nonpainting assistants, a cool dude in a fedora and vintage fifties glasses, to go to the site of Murakami’s original studio, which he set up with three assistants in 1995. Initially called the Hiropon Factory, in homage to Warhol’s Factory and his manufacturing model of art production, it was renamed Kaikai Kiki in 2002, when Murakami reconceptualized his entire operation along the lines of a marketing and communications



company. While the Sega Corporation has Sonic the Hedgehog and Nintendo has Super Mario, Kaikai Kiki was named after the mascots that appear on its letterhead and cultural goods. Kaikai is an anodyne white bunny, while Kiki is a wild three-eyed pink mouse with fangs. Both characters have four ears each, a “human” pair and an “animal” pair, suggesting that the company is all ears.

Our fifteen-minute journey, which passed modest but respectable homes with bushes pruned like bonsais, ended on a gravel driveway surrounded by a handful of dismal prefabricated buildings, self-seeded trees, and weeds. In addition to providing two workspaces, the location plays host to Murakami’s archive, two greenhouses containing his cactus collection, and a grand platform of pink lotuses in waist-high ceramic planters. The lotuses were so out of keeping with their humble environment that they looked as if they’d just landed there.

In the first airless building, three studio assistants listened to a Japanese pop-rock radio station, JWAVE, as they prepared to paint a smaller-than-life-sized fiberglass sculpture entitled the *Second Mission Project Ko* (often called *SMPKo*<sup>2</sup>), a three-part work in which Miss Ko, a manga fantasy of a girl with big eyes and breasts, a tiny pointed nose, and a flat, aerodynamic belly, metamorphoses into a flying jet. The work is in an edition of three with two artist’s proofs (called APs). The first three editions had already been sold; this first AP needed to be finished in time for the MOCA show. Miss Ko’s head, hair, torso, legs, and labia were laid out separately on what looked like two operating tables. At one table, two women were cutting tape into precise shapes to cover her for spray-painting. In another part of the small room, a man was testing different shades of white for a Bride of Frankenstein-style lightning streak in her hair. Against

her Barbie-pink skin, he examined swatches of creamy white, gray-white, blinding fluorescent white, and a fourth white that lay in between. He chose the two he thought worked best and said, “Murakami-san makes the final decision.” When I asked what he thought of Miss Ko’s looks, he said, “She is a masterpiece of media-world beauty, but she’s not what I want personally in a woman.”

Murakami’s editions are differentiated not only by number but by color. The first sculpture of an edition might contain three hundred colors, while the third might feature as many as nine hundred. Murakami complicates, tweaks, and perfects the works as he goes along, playing with pigment not just as an aesthetic category but as a racial one. Some sculptures and paintings come in albino, Caucasian peach, olive brown, and jet-black versions. Later, Murakami would tell me that he thinks of Japanese skin color as “plum.”

In the next building we politely removed our shoes, only to barge in on seven women eating rice dishes out of Tupperware containers. The Kaikai Kiki merchandise staff members were having their daily communal lunch. I was told they’d set up a temporary merchandise showroom elsewhere, so we walked across the gravel to another cardboard box of a building, where I found Mika Yoshitake, Paul Schimmel’s assistant for the MOCA show, shuffling in slippers through a sea of T-shirts, posters, postcards, pillows, plastic figurines, stickers, stuffed monsters, mugs, mouse pads, key chains, catalogues, cell-phone covers, badges, tote bags, handkerchiefs, decorative tins, notepads, and pencils. To one side, next to its original white pyramid packaging, was a notable gem—a ten-inch-high plastic sculpture called *Mister Wink, Cosmos Ball*. Perhaps owing to his computer-universe sensibilities, Peter Norton (of Norton Utilities) was an early adopter

of Murakami's work, and back in 2000, he and his then wife, Eileen, commissioned an edition of five thousand *Mister Winks* to send to friends and business acquaintances as Christmas presents. This clowny egghead character sitting in a sloppy lotus position with upturned palms was the first incarnation of *Oval*.

"We're going to have a room in the exhibition devoted to merchandise," said Yoshitake with a mildly pained expression. "Paul wants nothing to do with the details. I'm choosing which three hundred items get shipped to L.A." Yoshitake grew up in California and has Japanese parents. She was working on a PhD on Japanese conceptual and process art at the University of California at Los Angeles when she was poached by the museum. (Later Schimmel would tell me, "Among the art historians at UCLA, I'm like the Antichrist. I lure their best students to the dark side!") With her art-historical knowledge and language skills, Yoshitake became an essential link between MOCA and Kaikai Kiki. "Initially, I didn't much like Takashi's work," she told me. "I'm interested in ephemerality and entropy in art. I'm not a big 'object person.' But Takashi's art has grown on me." Yoshitake held a clipboard in one hand and played with her bead necklace with the other. "I've come to love the DOB character," she continued. "Especially when he is on a self-destructive rampage of consumption and excess." Yoshitake had revised her opinion about pop artists. "I used to assume that they didn't have anything substantial to offer and that their main goal was to surround themselves with fame and fortune," she said. "But Takashi's got bigger ambitions. His works are not just superficial icons. His use of parody and nonsense give a critical edge to all that spectacle and branding."

After a noodle lunch, we headed to Murakami's slick headquarters in a three-story office block in Motoazabu. It was at least

an hour's drive, past more rice paddies and light industrial facilities, over a major river and along an elevated highway engulfed in soundproof fencing to the plush neighborhood, not far from the designer stores of Roppongi Hills. Once there, we ascended to the studio in an elevator. When the doors drew apart, we faced a stainless steel and glass door for which a fingerprint scan and a four-digit PIN number were required. Once we were across the threshold, the swath of bare white walls and well-sanded wood floors initially evoked a gallery back room, but on closer inspection it was clearly a high-security digital design lab. The second floor housed two boardrooms and two open-plan office areas. The third floor was architecturally much like the second, except that's where the real creative work was being done. While on my quick tour, I caught a tantalizing glimpse of a 3-D computer rendering of *Oval Buddha* rotating on a pedestal, but before I could get a good look I was whisked away by the PR woman.

Murakami roamed the third floor barefoot, evidently happier than he'd been that morning, swiftly answering questions from his staff. His workstation, a sixteen-foot-long table, was situated in the center of a large room, surrounded by his team of four designers and five animators, all of whom sat with their backs to him, their gazes purposefully directed at their white-rimmed twenty-inch screens. At the hub of his table was a Mac laptop around which were scattered stacks of blank CDs, art magazines and auction catalogues, empty takeout coffee cups, and a box of mini-KitKats. On a counter at the end of the room, a triptych of face clocks told the time in Tokyo, New York, and L.A. Above them were three full-sized color printouts of the flower triptych I'd seen in progress at the painting studio.

Had Murakami been sitting in his swivel chair, Chiho Aoshima would have been sitting within reach of his right hand.

Although her location would suggest that she was working on one of Murakami's projects, Aoshima was actually putting the final touches on a picture for an upcoming show of her own work in Paris. Aoshima used to run Murakami's design department, but the thirty-three-year-old artist quit to devote herself full-time to her own art. Unlike Warhol's Factory, where, in the words of the art historian Caroline A. Jones, women were "expected to work hard for no pay, suffer beautifully, and tell all," six of the seven artists whose independent careers are promoted by Kaikai Kiki are female.

At the appointed time, Murakami settled into his swivel chair in a half-lotus position, one leg up, the other dangling, ready for a conversation. He offered me green tea and apologized for his English, admitting that even in Japanese, he had "no power to communicate in words. That is why I twist to the painting." Nevertheless, he believes in the influence of media coverage and acknowledges that the studio visit is an important art world ritual for promoting art. Murakami told me that he was working on thirty or forty different projects that day. "My weak point—I cannot focus on just one thing. I have to set up many things. If just looking at one project, then immediately get the feeling it boring." At the end of last year, Murakami was so exhausted that he spent ten days in the hospital. "That was very stressful. I bring my computer. Many assistants come to my room. Finally doctor said too much crowd, waste of money, you must go home."

What kind of a boss are you? I asked.

"I am a very bad president," Murakami responded without hesitation. "I have low technique for driving the company. I don't really want to work in a company, but I have big desire for making many pieces. Operating the people and working on art are completely different. Every morning, I upset people," admitted

the unrelenting aesthetic micromanager. "I used to think that my staff were motivated by money, but the most important thing for creative people is the sense that they are learning. It's like video game. They have frustration with my high expectations, so when they get my 'yes' for their work, they feel like they've won a level." He stroked his goatee. "I'm thinking a lot about how to connect with people who are under thirty in Japan. I have to communicate with a video game feeling."

Murakami had pulled the elastic band out of his hair and put it around his wrist while he was talking; his hippie mane now hung down his chest. "At the design stage, I think they do input their ideas," he said. Murakami's work starts as a paintbrush drawing on paper, which his assistants then scan into the computer using the live-trace tool of Adobe Illustrator CS2, then they fine-tune the curves and zigzags with different techniques. "I don't know how to operate Illustrator, but I will say 'yes, yes, yes, no, no, no' when I check the work," he said. Vector art software like Illustrator, which allows the user to stretch, contort, and scale up images without any degradation, has transformed the design industry, but relatively few fine artists use it. Photoshop, which is used by artists such as Jeff Wall and Andreas Gursky, has revolutionized contemporary photography, but the bulk of painting and sculpture production remains doggedly low-tech. At Kaikai Kiki, the artwork's design goes back and forth between Murakami and his computer-literate assistants until he is satisfied with the picture. By the time the design is sent to the painting studio for execution, there is little room for interpretation, except perhaps in the process of turning digital colors into real-world paint mixes.

The situation is not quite as straightforward with sculpture, where the transition to an object with actual length, width, and depth requires substantially more intermediate analysis and clari-

fication. For *Oval*, Murakami's first metal sculpture, the artist used his regular fiberglass fabricating company, Lucky Wide, to make variously scaled models, then a foundry called Kurotani Bijutsu (*bijutsu* means "art") to cast and assemble the piece. Murakami told me that the production of *Oval* was initially so strained that many sculptors quit, and one even had a stroke. "This piece have the grudge of those sculptors," he explained. "*Oval* is haunted with a very dark energy. It is part of its success. Probably you can experience that feeling when you see it.

"An artist is a necromancer," said Murakami. Even with the translation support of almost all the bilingual people in the room, the statement was cryptic. A dark wizard? A high priest? Someone who can talk to the dead? Murakami's work bears witness to his many years as an *otaku* science-fiction geek and obsessive manga fan. In Japan, these geeks have a reputation for being socially dysfunctional, sexually frustrated young men who live in a fantasy world. As Murakami explained, "We define *subculture* as a cool culture from abroad, but *otaku* is an uncool indigenous culture. My mentality came from those animation geeks. I idled my time, imagining that Japan was a Philip K. Dick world." Murakami absentmindedly put his hair back up in a slightly cock-eyed bun. "An artist is someone who understands the border between this world and that one," he continued. "Or someone who makes an effort to know it." Certainly Murakami's work sits between many universes—art and cartoon, yin and yang, Jekyll and Hyde—but nowadays the artist is by no means an aimless dreamer. "I change my direction or continue in same direction by seeing people's reaction," he admitted. "My concentration is how to survive long-term and how to join with the contemporary feeling. To focus on nothing besides profit is, by my values, evil. But I work by trial and error to be popular."

I asked Murakami, an avowed Warhol fan, what he did not like about the American pop artist. Murakami frowned and groaned. "I like everything," he finally offered, a Warholian answer if ever there was one. "Warhol's genius was his discovery of easy painting," he continued. "I am jealous of Warhol. I'm always asking my design team, 'Warhol was able to create such an easy painting life, why our work so complicated?' But the history knows! My weak point is my oriental background. Eastern flavor is too much presentation. I think it is unfair for me in the contemporary art battlefield, but I have no choice because I am Japanese."

When I quoted Warhol's famous line "Being good in business is the most fascinating kind of art . . . Making money is art and working is art and good business is the best art," Murakami laughed and said, "That is a fantasy!"

In his very early years, Murakami resisted using Warhol's signature silkscreens in favor of entirely handpainted work, but he relented as a means of broadening his repertoire of styles, playing with repetition and improving his productivity. Now the two artists' silkscreen techniques diverge greatly. Where a Warhol four-foot flower painting (from 1964) would typically use one screen, Murakami's meter-in-diameter flower-ball works use nineteen. Moreover, whereas accidents, fades, and spills were accepted, even sought after, by Warhol, the level of meticulous craftsmanship in Murakami's work is, as one critic put it, "absurdly high." Murakami closed his eyes. "Absurd? Yes, I think so." He nodded slowly, with a grimace. "And painful!"

A studio is supposed to be a site of intense contemplation. Murakami does not have a preferred thinking space or somewhere that he feels is the heart of his studio. "Anywhere, anytime," he said frankly. "I take a deep breath, send oxygen to my brain, meditate for a few seconds, and get to work. After

this meeting, I have to redo my drawing for Kanye West's new album jacket. No time to worry about where I am." Murakami was referring to *Graduation*, the hip-hop artist's third album, for which he also designed the singles covers and an animated music video. Murakami explained how the collaboration evolved in simple terms: "Kanye was big fan of my big breast sculpture. He learned my work and asked me to make designs." The "big breast sculpture" is *Hiropon*, a painted fiberglass work completed in 1997 of a blue-haired girl with gargantuan breasts from which milk gushes in such abundance that the flow encircles her body like a skipping rope. "These past few weeks was really happy me," continued Murakami, "because I found a good communication style with professional animation people." Murakami had outsourced the execution of the work. "Deadline is coming soon and production cost is fixed. Kanye's company people is very serious. A little stressful but I am enjoying."

When it comes to sleeping, Murakami is equally indiscriminate about place. The artist has no home per se, just a bedroom only a few yards from his desk here. He also has a sparse bedroom in his New York studio and mattresses in corners at his two Saitama locations. He works long hours seven days a week but naps two or three times a day. Murakami is a nonconformist in many ways, but he is utterly conventional when it comes to his Japanese work ethic, for Kaikai Kiki is typical of the nation's notoriously demanding corporate culture.

Murakami's bedroom didn't look much like a bedroom at all. At first glance it was hard to find the bed, a navy couch with a foam pillow at one end and some crumpled-up fabric that could have been a pair of boxer shorts at the other. One wall was glass, and although the room couldn't be seen directly from the communal spaces, it offered little in the way of privacy. On white

shelves, a large vintage Hello Kitty, a green blob monster covered in eyes, a soft-porn maid figure, and plastic versions of characters from the paintings of Hieronymus Bosch fought for attention. The DVDs of Hayao Miyazaki—the director of *Spirited Away* and other critically acclaimed animated features is one of Murakami's heroes—sat in an orderly row, while a wide range of art books (about colorists like Henri Matisse and masters of deformation like Francis Bacon) was mixed in below. As we parted that day, Murakami told me, "I threw out my general life, so that I can make a concentration for my job. You maybe expecting more romantic story?"

Of all the studios and live-work spaces I've visited, the one that came to mind was that of another ascetic bachelor without a lounge to relax in. When I was doing background research in Los Angeles for the second chapter of this book, I visited Michael Asher at his bungalow apartment on the outskirts of Santa Monica. When he ushered me into what would have been the living room, I found myself in a sea of waist-high black filing cabinets. The walls were white and, with the exception of a few lists and Post-it notes, completely unadorned. The only places to sit were some tattered office chairs that had lost most of their stuffing.

Although Murakami's complex, transnational, multistudio setup couldn't be further away from the Post-Studio, periphery-embracing, anticraft ethos of CalArts, the Japanese artist and the Californian conceptualist share a keen sense of discipline. And even if some aspects of Murakami's practice hark back to the painting atelier of Peter Paul Rubens while other facets embrace a digitally designed future, his art has an intellectual drive that engages with contemporary conceptual art.

**That night** I had supper at a superb hole-in-the-wall sushi restaurant where no one spoke English except the four museum people I was meeting there. Paul Schimmel, Mika Yoshitake, Jeremy Strick (the director of MOCA), and Charles Desmarais (from the Brooklyn Museum) all sat in a row and drank Murakami's favorite tippie, shochu (Japanese gin) on ice. I sat next to Schimmel and across from our sushi chef, who had two gruesome scars where he'd sliced the knuckles off his left hand. Schimmel is originally from New York, but the jovial fifty-two-year-old has lived in Los Angeles for twenty-six years and had the top curatorial job at MOCA for seventeen. Known for his rigorous and speculative exhibitions, Schimmel supports Murakami with missionary fervor. "Takashi's masterpieces are unimaginably challenging," he told me. "He has put gazillions of hours and beyond reasonable intelligence into his works. His intent is to make something for all ages, and you can see it."

Schimmel likes to think that curators don't so much "validate" artists as "illuminate" them. "The mere announcement of a solo exhibition can have an impact on an artist's market, but sometimes that doesn't sustain itself until the show is up," he explained. "The authority of the institution is no guarantee of success. Big institutions can have a negative impact on artists' careers. Sometimes you see all the work together—boom, boom, boom—and it doesn't make things better." Schimmel devoured a portion of golden sea urchin, then knocked back the seaweed broth in which it had been floating. "To really illuminate, you have to put aside institutional prerogatives. You have to bend the will of the museum to accommodate the artist's vision. MOCA does that. There is no *one* MOCA way."

Schimmel likes to mutate his curatorial style with each exhibition. "The truth is, I hate the word *branding*," he told me. "I'm a

late-seventies counterculture guy and an old-fashioned art historian, but my eighteen-year-old son is into branding. I understand that it's deeply meaningful to the younger generation and it's integral to Takashi's work . . . You can't ignore the elephant in the room." A plate of something covered in green slime arrived; Schimmel eyed it with open curiosity. "To experience Takashi, you have to experience the commercial elements in his work," he said, talking with his mouth full. "Collectibles, whether they are luxury goods or merchandise, represent a fulfillment. It completes the intimate circle. Takashi understands that art has to be remembered and memory is tied to what you can take home."

Art bloggers will no doubt be appalled by the inclusion of a fully functioning Louis Vuitton boutique within the MOCA show, but it's Murakami's version of "institutional critique," and Schimmel defended it. "It was difficult for a museum to relinquish this sacred ground, but it was absolutely the right thing to do in this instance," he said. "They'll be selling a limited line of goods especially produced for the show." The restaurant was stuffy, and Schimmel wiped the sweat from his brow with his napkin, then looked at me earnestly. "I've never found choosing a controversial artist to be anything but the right choice. If there is already absolute consensus, if there is nothing you can do in terms of illumination, why do it?"

**A studio** isn't just a place where artists make art but a platform for negotiation and a stage for performance. The following day I was back at the Motozabu studio to sit in on meetings between Murakami and the museum folk. In the larger of the two white-walled boardrooms, Murakami sat directly across from Schimmel at a long wooden table lined with twenty black

leather chairs. Flanking the artist were two beautiful, bilingual thirty-year-old women: Yuko Sakata, the executive director of his New York operations, and Yoshitake, MOCA's project coordinator. Sitting on either side of Schimmel were Desmarais and I.

The first item on the agenda was the exhibition catalogue. Murakami, in his T-shirt and shorts, hair up, started leafing through the glossy page proofs. The first page of the catalogue showed a work from 1991 that appropriated the marketing campaign of Japanese toy manufacturer Tamiya. It read: *TAKASHI: FIRST IN QUALITY AROUND THE WORLD*. The piece's form was alien to what would become Murakami's visual language, but the content was spookily spot on. "It shows chutzpah. That is the trajectory," said Schimmel as he hovered over the proofs.

"What you want to look for is everything. Color. Cropping. Tell us," said Schimmel to Murakami respectfully. "Some reproductions were so bad that we moved them from being a full page to a quarter page. And we've still only got fifty percent of the loan forms back." The curator groaned, then addressed the group. "Takashi has difficult collectors. I met one in Venice who was so pissed off with him that the collector didn't want to lend his painting to our show." While artists usually waive payment for reproductions in small catalogues devoted to private collections, Murakami had insisted that this collector pay him a fee to photograph a work that hung on the collector's living room wall. Schimmel garnered sympathy and eventually convinced the collector to make the loan by saying, "Let me show you our nightmare contracts!"

Murakami is dedicated to ensuring his rights as an artist and controlling the dissemination of his oeuvre, so MOCA's "© MURAKAMI" activities are kept in check by four documents, including a copublishing agreement for the catalogue, an image-

licensing agreement for the publicity, and a data treatment memorandum related to the use of super-high-resolution files to make things like merchandise. Unusually, the museum also issued a seven-page letter of agreement outlining a breakdown of responsibilities and stipulating that Murakami had, as Schimmel put it, "final right of approval on all aspects of everything."

Murakami turned to the next double-page spread: *Time Bokan* (1993), a manga-inspired mural of a white mushroom-cloud-cum-skull on a crimson background. Here the artist had clearly found his stylistic stride and personal repertoire of images. Murakami argues in essays and exhibitions that it's popular cultural forms rather than art which have rehearsed the most traumatic experiences of the Japanese nation and cites as evidence the blinding flashes, B-29-like spaceships, unnaturally fast-growing plant life, and "monsterization" through radiation exposure that pervade Japanese comics and animated films. Earlier Schimmel had told me, "The bomb that landed on Nagasaki was originally destined for the town where Takashi's mother lived. He grew up being told, 'If Kokura had not been cloudy that day, you would not be here.'"

Eighty pages went by in which Murakami circled specks of dust and other tiny flaws with a red ballpoint pen. He wrote vertical lines of Japanese script down the side of the page that said things like "more pink" and "enhance the silver in the gray." The meeting trundled along until we came to a double-page spread affording four views of a sculpture called *Flower Mantango*. "This work is a tour de force," said Schimmel, pressing both hands flat on the table. "It's an amazing accomplishment—to take lines like that into three dimensions. It's so complex, and the colors are equal to the armature." Murakami got up abruptly and walked out of the room. We all looked at each other, perplexed. "Boredom?"

joked Schimmel nervously. After a minute Murakami returned with a video camera trained to his eye and asked Schimmel if he could please repeat his praise for the camera. “Ah. Um. What did I say?” said Schimmel. I read back his words from my notes, and he recited his lines for the Kaikaï Kiki archive.

Some twenty pages later, Schimmel pointed to the only photo in the entire catalogue that offered a view of the production process—a shot of a twenty-three-foot Mr. Pointy at the fabricator’s—and asked, “Do you like seeing it in the studio setting or do you think we should silhouette it? It might look better on a white background.” Murakami’s own catalogues tend to explore social contexts, artistic tangents, and historical precedents, whereas Schimmel’s concentrate on the object itself. Murakami took off his glasses to look at it closely and then said unequivocally, “I like to see the artist’s reality.”

The catalogue meeting concluded smoothly. Murakami said, “It is much good,” and Schimmel responded with a relieved “*Arigato*.” Deluxe bento boxes had been placed on the table, and Murakami passed them around. Jeremy Strick had come into the meeting just before we adjourned. Over lunch, he told me that in his job as museum director, “studio visits are more a pleasure than an obligation” and that “it’s a privilege to see incomplete work.”

When we’d finished eating, we slid down the long table to the location of a dollhouse-sized model of the Geffen Contemporary building, 35,000 square feet of flexible warehouse exhibition space that Schimmel called “the heart and soul of the museum.” In it were miniature versions of ninety artworks as Schimmel planned to show them. “It will have a wonderfest temple quality,” explained the curator. Murakami smiled as he peered into the model. In among the art, you could see the merchandise

room and the Louis Vuitton boutique. Schimmel had created a few “completely immersive environments” with the use of Murakami’s flower and jellyfish-eye wallpaper. He’d also recreated Blum & Poe’s 1999 Art Basel booth, which was entirely devoted to Murakami’s work. “We’re remaking historical installations,” said Schimmel. “And gesturing to a commercial art fair from within the museum.”

The pair had already worked out most of the kinks, so this last inspection by the artist was meant to be little more than a rubber stamp. Murakami put his hand on his cheek, laughed, pointed at a room, and laughed again, but as he studied the installation, a storm slowly brewed in his face. Yoshitake and Sakata looked at each other, then back at Murakami, as they waited for a reaction. Schimmel was uncharacteristically silent. Murakami tugged at his goatee, then reached into the model, picked up the six-inch-high Styrofoam version of *Oval*, and dropped it into the middle of the largest room in the show. Schimmel took a deep breath. “The exhibition crew sent me with one mission—don’t let him move *Oval*,” he said. “That’s an expensive move. It probably requires a second crane and headaches all round for the crew.”

“I say ‘concern,’ but it is your show,” said Murakami.

“To be honest,” said Schimmel, “I think it’s the right decision. The scale is right. The themes work.”

“Paul, you are the chef,” said Murakami with a nod. “I lend my ideas and my pieces, but you cook the exhibition.”

“I’m going to see what I can do,” replied Schimmel.

Murakami put his hands together as if in prayer and made a quick but emphatic bow from his seat.

On the way out of the boardroom, Schimmel told me, “An artist’s confidence in a curator is essential to making a great solo show. Takashi brings a lot of baggage. He runs an organization



that is not dissimilar in size and scope to MOCA. There is no infantilizing the artist, no ‘we know best for you.’” Schimmel chuckled. “When it became clear to Takashi that I had joined his staff, the empowerment was unlimited!” Murakami’s generosity in allowing others their creative say would seem to be in inverse proportion to his legal rights. “I’ve actually been surprised that he hasn’t been more particular about the selection of individual works,” added Schimmel. The outer office was quietly busy; the admin staff glanced up as we walked past. “Timing is crucial for monographic exhibitions,” Schimmel continued. “With retrospectives of an artist’s most highly regarded works, as opposed to project-oriented solo shows, you get the sense that there is a moment when suddenly a single artist’s oeuvre can be immensely satisfying.”

A good retrospective combines familiarity and the unknown. “So a curator needs good access to all the material, and he has to join the artist in taking risks,” explained Schimmel. “Takashi’s ambition bowls me over. He takes everything he’s got and says, ‘Let’s double up.’ That’s what he’s done with *Oval*.” Schimmel hadn’t yet seen the work. Based on photos, he thought it could be the artist’s most important sculpture to date. “To see an artist’s single greatest achievement at the end of the retrospective—now that is how you want to end it.” We arrived at the elevator, and Schimmel ran a hand through his salt-and-pepper hair. “The best solo shows come when an artist and curator are connected and highly invested,” he admitted. “When their reputations depend on it . . . when they’re both putting their careers at stake.”

**Our taxi** finally draws up outside Haneda Airport, a bright and breezy example of modernist architecture. Although it han-

dles only domestic flights, it is one of the five busiest airports in the world. As we line up to check in, I notice that Blum’s and Poe’s passports are smothered with stamps that testify to the constant travel required to keep up with the globalization of their business. The predatory eagle on their navy covers contrasts dramatically with the symbol of national identity that adorns the Japanese passport—the chrysanthemum. Murakami’s flower paintings are often considered the least edgy part of his oeuvre. Apparently Schimmel once called the small flower faces “bon-bons,” to which Pinault’s consultant, Philippe Ségalot, replied, “But they are *dee-licious*, just like chocolate croissants. You can’t help but have one.” However, when one considers that Murakami has taken a national icon and endowed it with a gaping orifice in a culture where a wide-open mouth is considered rude, the image comes across as a little more challenging.

We get our boarding passes, and as we head to the gate we discuss Murakami’s workspaces. “When I go into a studio, I look at absolutely everything,” says Poe in his lazy California drawl. “Supplemental information is incredibly important. If there is a truth there, it’s not just in the work but in how they work, how they act, who they are. It’s tough with Takashi now because that information is spread out over so many locations, and half of it is on his hard drive.” Once in the departure lounge, the dealers take seats. “The Motoazabu studio sends a message. It says, ‘We’re not some messy workshop. We’re a clean, pristine, professional business.’” Poe pauses, then adds, “Of course, the organization is totally dysfunctional, but that’s not the signifier.”

Murakami and his entourage of Kaikai Kiki staff arrive. Not far behind them march the four American museum people. The hellos are warm. Blum and Murakami hug, then natter in Japanese. The artist tells me, “It is good to come back to the friend-

ship with Tim.” For the third day running, he’s wearing the green shorts, but he’s upgraded the T-shirt to a short-sleeved shirt and a beige Yamamoto-style linen jacket. Poe gets into a conversation with Schimmel. Yoshitake has a list of things to cover with Sakata. Strick and Desmarais, having gone native, flash their digital cameras with Japanese abandon, while a young man with greasy shoulder-length hair records all the encounters on video for the Kaikai Kiki archives. The flight to Toyama is called; we join a disciplined queue of Japanese salary-men to board the Boeing 777. The All Nippon Airways flight attendants have giant purple bows tied around their necks and mauve makeup. The service has a hyperreal quality, as if they were scripted stewardess-characters in a computer game.

The seating assignment offers a near-perfect representation of the hierarchies of the art world. Murakami sits by himself in 1A, a window seat in business class. He reads the newspaper, then watches what he calls a “really maniac, totally geek animation” on his Mac. Blum and Poe sit in 2C and 2D. The MOCA people are in economy, row 18. Desmarais is nearby, in 19. The six Kaikai Kiki staff members are aligned in row 43. Apparently Murakami, sensitive to the symbolism of the situation, asked Yoshitake to tell him who was the highest-ranking person from MOCA. When told that it was the director of the museum, he asked her whether Jeremy Strick would like his seat. Yoshitake assured the artist that Strick would be fine in economy.

Out the window, a plane with Pokemon on its tail descends as we ascend over Tokyo’s hazy sprawl, soaring past miles of docks lined with shipping containers, then inland above the clouds on a northwest course, two hundred miles to Toyama. Murakami’s characters often look like they are flying or floating; even his sculptures seem to defy gravity.

When I was in the offices of *Artforum* a few months ago, senior editor Scott Rothkopf was working on his essay for the “© MURAKAMI” catalogue. It wasn’t the first time he’d written about Murakami’s work. Four years earlier, during the 2003 Venice Biennale, he’d been struck by the artist’s omnipresence. “Everywhere I looked, there was Murakami,” Rothkopf told me. “Not only did he have two magnetic works in the ‘Painting from Rauschenberg to Murakami’ exhibition at the Museo Correr, but you could see the Murakami handbags through the window of the Louis Vuitton store, and African immigrants were selling copies in the street. Collectors were carrying real ones; tourists carried fake ones. Murakami had taken over the Biennale, almost like a virus. He couldn’t have planned it, but you could see his work flowing through the global art and fashion marketplace. It was as if he’d injected dye into the system.” Rothkopf’s review of the Biennale resulted in an *Artforum* front cover for Murakami, or at least for the handbags that sported his pirated designs.

“Takashi’s practice makes Warhol’s look like a lemonade stand or a school play,” declared the young art historian. “Warhol dabbled in businesses more like a bohemian than a tycoon and hatched a brood of ‘superstars,’ but none of them could sustain their status outside his Factory.” Unlike Warhol’s other artistic heirs, who pull the popular into the realm of art, Murakami flips it and reenters popular culture. “I was taught that one of the defining premises of modern art was its antagonism to mass culture,” said Rothkopf. “If I wanted to be accepted more readily by the academic establishment, I could argue that Takashi is working within the system only to subvert it. But this idea of subversive complicity is growing stale, and more importantly, I just don’t believe it’s a viable strategy.” Rothkopf concluded, “What makes Takashi’s art great—and also potentially scary—

is his honest and completely canny relationship to commercial culture industries.”

**I’d heard** that Murakami referred to his Louis Vuitton work as “my urinal,” so I thought I’d ask his boss on the project for a reaction. Marc Jacobs was in his office at the Paris headquarters of Louis Vuitton when I caught him on the phone. In our preliminary chat, he was careful to describe Murakami as an artist, not a designer. “It’s not like he sent me a sketch of a handbag or anything,” he explained. “Takashi created the art that we applied to these products. The documents we received were in the format of a canvas. In fact, they looked a lot like the LV paintings that he went on to make.” When I confronted Jacobs with the urinal line, he took an audible puff on his cigarette. Jacobs understands the art world—he collects, he attends the auctions, he visits the Venice Biennale—but the same might not be said for his LV customers. “I’m a big fan of Marcel Duchamp and his ready-mades,” he said coolly. “Changing the context of an object is, in and of itself, art. It sounds like a put-down, but it’s not.” Given that Duchamp’s “urinal” (officially titled *Fountain*, from 1917) is one of the most influential works of the twentieth century, one might argue that Murakami is in fact glorifying his LV affiliations. Certainly Jacobs was looking forward to seeing the LV boutique installed in MOCA and happy to have Murakami describe it as a ready-made. “It’s not a gift shop—it’s more like performance art,” he told me. “Witnessing what goes on in the boutique in the context of an art exhibition is as much an artwork as the art that went into the bags.”

**Toyama Airport** is little more than an airstrip with a handful of gates where all flights come from Tokyo. It’s a short walk through the building to the line of black Crown Super Saloon cars that will take us to the foundry. Standing beside each car is a driver in a blue suit, pilot cap, and white gloves, anxious to open the door lest we leave fingerprints on the polished paintwork. Blum, Poe, and I get in the second car of a convoy so formal that onlookers might assume we are part of an official diplomatic delegation.

“*Oval* has been gestating for so long, I can’t quite believe it’s finished,” says Blum with a deep sigh of relief. “It’s been an intense trip.” As we weave through the outskirts of Toyama, a blue-collar town where discount stores have oversized street signs and telephone wires swing from poles, I ask how they go about underwriting fabrication. “We have no contract,” explains Poe. “Everything is an oral agreement. Kaikai Kiki will say, ‘The budget will be  $x$ ,’ and if you are a dumbshit, then you presell based on that figure. When the budget gets to be  $x$  times two or three, you cannot go back to Takashi and try to renegotiate because . . . well let’s just say you would *not* want to be in the room for that discussion. So we do not price the piece until it is finished and installed, wherever that may be. We know from experience: never, *ever* presell the work.”

The fleet cruises along a flat plain of farmhouses and factories and comes to a halt at the turquoise gate in the chain-link fence that surrounds the foundry. As we get out of the cars, we are hit by the smell of burning. At this moment, as Old World industry meets New World art, no one is quite sure what the protocol should be. The managers of the foundry and the fabricators, Lucky Wide, are on their feet, wondering whom to welcome first. A project director from Kaikai Kiki New York and an exhibition

technician from MOCA, who arrived earlier in the week to watch the eight parts of the sculpture being craned into place, don't so much greet us as wander over to join the party. Ten foundry employees stand in a line with hands behind their backs, not sure where to look, while a reporter from the Toyama newspaper and his photographer stand by, waiting for their story to unfold.

While Blum and Poe hang back, waiting for Murakami, I notice that Schimmel has wasted no time. I follow the curator into the building and look up at *Oval Buddha*. The Humpty Dumpty-ish character sits on a tall pedestal in a half-lotus position, one leg up, the other dangling, with a spiral inscribed on his belly. He's crowned with a supernova explosion of hair, and he's literally two-faced. In front, he has a goatee much like Murakami's own and an undulating, half-frowning, half-smiling mouth. In the back of his head is a furious mouth with a double row of sharklike teeth. His back sports a protruding plated backbone. It has to be one of the largest self-portraits ever made, but somehow the gesture doesn't suggest self-aggrandizement but rather a feeling of absurd enlightenment.

"Unfuckingbelievable!" says Schimmel, his face wiped clean with surprise. "Fantastic," he mutters as he notices that the entire structure sits on a squashed elephant. "I think that once Takashi accepted that it was a self-portrait, he was able to take it further. He's been concealing his identity until now." Schimmel walks right up to the base of the sculpture and stands under its huge overhanging head. "The improbability," he says looking up. "So precarious, so emblematic. It could fall over from the weight of ambition. It's either a disaster waiting to happen or it's . . . brilliant." By now everyone else is walking slowly around the work. "In terms of showstoppers, I got lucky. They'll be praying to this thing in five hundred years!" he announces. The cura-

tor walks over to Murakami, who stands with his hands on his hips, soberly inspecting the changes that have been made since he last saw the work, two weeks ago. "Takashi," he says, "you've taken on the twelfth century. This is breathtaking. We're going to do our very best to accomplish the best location for it." The Kaikai Kiki cameraman rushes over, but it is unclear whether he manages to capture the moment.

I stroll over to Strick, who is looking pensive, and ask him what he is thinking. "What's the members' opening going to be like? And the gala? What will be the conversation among artists? How will this change what people think about Murakami?" replies the museum director. "Every sector of the audience is in communication. Reactions are reinforced. At a certain point a consensus is formed. Sometimes it takes a while, but a work like this, which is so powerful and unexpected—it will make an impression very quickly. People will be surprised and talk about it."

Yoshitake looks baffled. "I don't know. Is it sacrilegious?" she wonders aloud. Certainly this bipolar character couldn't be further away from Zen. "The Buddha is a transcendent being whose serenity is meant to reassure us that everything will be okay in our next lives, but this creature is disturbing." The PhD student stares at the work, grappling with its connotations. "I think it's the only truly post-atomic Buddha I've seen," she adds. "Takashi is not an overtly political artist . . . but it's interesting that he is making work like this for an American audience at this time."

Poe looks satisfied. "We're gonna make an edition of ten on a domestic scale. That's the next project. Love that!" he says. "People should be able to live with *Oval*. The references and meanings are still there." Blum walks over. The partners stand, feet planted on the ground, arms across their chests, as if they are staking out territory in a tough schoolyard. "It's as entertaining as fuck. So

entertaining that it may get backlash,” says Poe. “I just hope it fits on the plane when it’s crated. At the moment we’ve only got two inches of clearance.”

The fabricator opens a box of platinum leaf to show the Toyama reporter. It costs three dollars for a 10-centimeter-square sheet. Thinner than flaking skin, it blows into an unusable crinkle in the wind. “The true unveiling will be in L.A. at MOCA,” declares Blum. “The platinum will create a significant change in impact. We’ve never done platinum leafing of this complexity. That’s a big unknown.”

Murakami walks over and adopts his dealers’ posture. They talk. Afterward the artist makes the rounds, having a word with everyone. When he gets to me, I compliment him on the work’s sublime sense of humor. “I love this tension,” he says as he looks at the group circling around his work. “Not nervous, because I saw it two weeks ago. Already in satisfaction that quality is good. Each part has many stories.”

In ten years’ time, what will you remember most about today? I ask.

“Head of factory. Old guy was very quiet. Just watching to our job. But finally he’s smiling,” says Murakami. “Also old fabricator tell me, ‘Thank you so much. You gave us a really good experience.’ And then the young fabricator, Mr. Iijima, the director of the sculpture—for first time, his face has confidence.”

Murakami looks at his work like a loving parent regarding a child who didn’t come in first. “But for me,” he continues, “my feeling is, ‘Oh my god, it’s so small!’ I say to each fabricator, ‘Hey, next time, scale is double or triple, please.’” Murakami curves his lips, self-consciously mimicking the expression of *Oval’s* front face. “Do you know the Kamakura Buddha?” he asks. The Great Buddha of Kamakura is a forty-four-foot-high bronze sculpture

cast in 1252. Buddhist statues tend to be housed in temples, but the Kamakura’s buildings were washed away by a tsunami in 1495 and since then the Buddha has stood in the open air. “This sculpture is in the mentality of Japanese people,” says the artist. “I’m happy with *Oval Buddha* but thinking to next change. Not ambition. Really pure feeling. Instinct. Next work must be much bigger. Much complicated. That is my brain.”