

# BEYOND CUTE

BY JANET KOPLOS

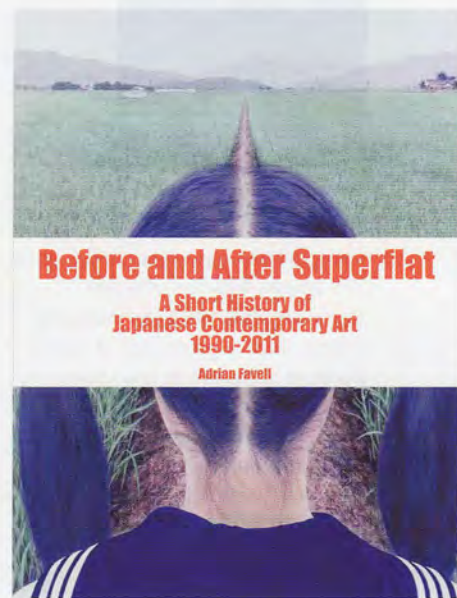
THIS BOOK WAS written for me—or those like me who wish they better knew the ins and outs of the Japanese art world of the last 20 years. The surprise, however, is that it's written by an English sociologist who lives and teaches in France. Adrian Favell sees his profession as an advantage. He notes in the acknowledgments section, for example, that his five-year research project was nonhierarchical: he interviewed everyone from gallery assistants to museum directors. His emphasis is on context, although art objects them-

selves are not overlooked. That's an interesting approach, since most Japanese insiders have been relatively close-mouthed. Either there has been a change in recent years or Favell is particularly adept at drawing people out—or at reading between the lines.

The book, he concedes, is an interpretation. Based on my experience living in Japan in the 1980s, I'd say that his view of Japanese thinking and practice is fairly reliable, but it's best to read skeptically. Favell writes in a conversational style, not an academic one, yet he seems driven to use every bit of the material he's gathered, pouring on numerous Japanese terms and vast quantities of names, some of which could have better appeared in footnotes (there are none!).

Those complaints noted, the author clearly knows what he's talking about. Moreover, he conveys a sense of intense concern, even if he repeats a few common mistakes, such as calling Fumio Nanjo “arguably the most powerful name in the Japanese artworld” (it sounds like an item on an *ARTnews* list). He is more accurate when he goes on to say that the curator/museum director is “one of the very few globally recognized names from Japan.” (Nanjo's Western language skills are part of the reason.) Favell contends that Japanese work shouldn't be ignored just because all the money is in China now; rather, he asserts, Japan can be a model of art's survival in difficult times.

He opens with Takashi Murakami, describing the artist's exceptional ability—and consuming desire—to organize and publicize. “He had been tempted,” Favell writes, “by the role of impresario and star-maker: the power he could exercise by plucking unknown young artists out of school for his company and productions.” Among Murakami's



**Before and After Superflat: A Short History of Japanese Contemporary Art 1990-2011**, by Adrian Favell, Hong Kong, Blue Kingfisher Ltd, 2011; 246 pages, \$24.95 paperback.

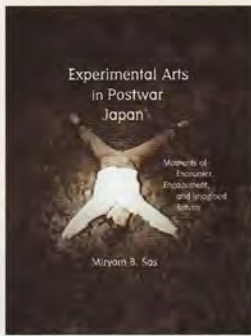


Yoshitomo Nara: *Light My Fire*, 2001, acrylic and cotton on carved wood, 74 by 68 by 43¼ inches. Courtesy Yoshitomo Nara: *The Complete Works*/ Chronicle Books, San Francisco.

subsidiary enterprises are Kaikai Kiki, a firm that promotes emerging artists, mostly young women; and Geisai, an art fair for amateurs, which he parlayed into a multi-million-dollar operation for a few years. Some readers will grit their teeth and mutter that Japanese art is more than Murakami. But Favell soon gets there.

He brings in Yoshitomo Nara, whom he treats somewhat more warmly—or at least he notes that other observers consider Nara more genuine. Favell has his doubts. He repeatedly mentions that Nara, famous for his paintings of malevolent little girls, is past 50 now. (Nara himself, speaking

## IN BRIEF



**Experimental Arts in Postwar Japan: Moments of Encounter, Engagement, and Imagined Return**, by Miryam Sas, Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Asia Center, 2011; 300 pages, \$39.95 hardcover.

Surveying the 1960s to the early 1980s, Sas, a professor of comparative literature at the University of California, Berkeley, discusses Japanese experimental arts in light of contemporary critical theory. Topics include underground theater, experimental film and video, Butoh dance and photography.



**Manga and the Representation of Japanese History**, edited by Roman Rosenbaum, London, Routledge, 2012; 276 pages, \$135 hardcover.

Contributors examine manga from the perspectives of literary studies, politics, history, semiotics and other disciplines, always with an eye to its astonishing postwar popularity and its ability to reimagine history and make the fantastic seem real.



**Bye Bye Kitty!!! Between Heaven and Hell in Contemporary Japanese Art**, by David Elliott and Tetsuya Ozaki, New Haven, Yale University Press, 2011; 136 pages, \$35 paperback.

This catalogue for the 2011 exhibition Elliott curated at New York's Asia society surveys 15 artists, age 27-45, who together reveal his wide-ranging view of the contemporary Japanese art scene—one that emphasizes subtle irony and subversive techniques over the *kawaii*, or “cute,” esthetic advocated by Takashi Murakami.



**Yoshitomo Nara: The Complete Works**, Yoshitomo Nara, San Francisco, Chronicle Books, 2011; 816 pages, \$250 hardcover.

Comprising two 400-page volumes bound in fabric bearing designs by the artist, this midcareer catalogue raisonné encompasses more than 4,500 paintings, drawings, prints, sculptures and photographs, as well as texts by Nara himself, writer Banana Yoshimoto, artists Takashi Murakami and Hiroshi Sugito, and critic Midori Matsui.

at the Japan Society in New York a decade ago, was quick to cite his age and emphasize that he is not part of the *otaku* [social nerd] generation that Murakami mirrors; he was influenced instead by earlier manga and anime.) Nara's popularity started with his books, and he developed a fan base of volunteers who contributed to his installations—something that strikes Favell as exploitative.

The third 1990s star introduced is Mariko Mori, whom Favell receives with even more ambivalence than he does Murakami and Nara. Of her breakthrough photographs he writes:

There was costume play, transformed identity, elements of performance and weird sex tourism, as well as the self-conscious 'neo-pop' reflection on Japanese culture. It was work that exposed openly the male gaze and sex drive . . . behind the (limited) appreciation of much Japanese contemporary art, as well as capturing the mid-1990s 'post-human' moment.

The author considers this work one-dimensional and gives Mori little credit, since she is part of one of the richest families in Japan and could afford very high production values from the beginning. Mori's increasingly complex projects and her shift toward spiritualism—phony or half-baked in Favell's view—he treats as contributing to a relatively rapid artistic decline, and he disposes of her in just a few pages.

FAVELL DESCRIBES government attempts to capitalize on these three global art celebrities to promote a “Neo-Tokyo” or “Cool Japan” image that might attract tourists and thus bolster the damaged Japanese economy of the '90s. That's believable, but he then goes on to claim—based on mind-reading, apparently—that the bureaucrats involved were themselves “secret *otaku*” (presumably sharing an obsessive taste for cartoons, pop culture, toys and images of young girls at once coy and lascivious). He cites a widespread “contempt for America and an underlying nationalist resentment of the West”—a sweeping judgment that he does not support with evidence. At other points, he describes the *New York Times* as having a “serial obsession with all that is cool in Tokyo” and claims that the Japan Society “kept sending an endless stream of over-excited American journalists paid to go and write about the secrets of the creative new Japan.”

**THE GOVERNMENT SOUGHT TO PROMOTE A “NEO-TOKYO” OR “COOL JAPAN” IMAGE THAT MIGHT ATTRACT TOURISTS AND THUS BOLSTER THE DAMAGED ECONOMY OF THE '90S.**

Language like this, lively and entertaining as it is, provokes one to ask how Favell knows. (Was he on similar press junkets? Did he discuss U.S.-Japanese relations in Shinjuku bars?) Or it comes across as intended to show his own hipness and insider knowledge, and is off-putting. The stories are great, with a you-are-there quality, but the freewheeling style has also gotten the author into trouble. Nara sent a long list of objections to Favell's blog on the Japanese site ARTiT, and Favell subsequently published

and Yoko Ono, and noting that an older generation of art stars such as Tadanori Yokoo were all graphic designers, he really does not account for the movements and ideologies that preceded the last two decades. Yet it's hardly the case that interesting artists emerged out of nowhere in 1990-

in the '60s, a fairly grandiose claim. Here is how he evokes the stress that the artists endured:

The experience of coming of age around 1995 and after was nothing short of disastrous. They left school or university to a world in economic shock. The opportunities had dried up. No one was hiring. The wild ambitions of 80s Japan had all disappeared.

Tsuyoshi Ozawa:  
*Vegetable Weapon:  
Sauri Fish Ball Hot  
Pot/Tokyo, 2001,*  
C-print, 44½ by  
61½ inches.

Below, view of  
Yukonori Yanagi's  
installation *Hero Dry  
Cell "Solar Rock,"*  
2008, granite, tatami  
mats, water, lightbulbs  
and mixed mediums;  
at Inujima Art Project.  
Courtesy Miyake  
Fine Art. Photo Road  
Izumiyama.



a dozen or so clarifications and corrections; one loose characterization in the book, he admits, was “a throwaway remark that should be removed.”

Favell tends to write, especially at the beginning of his text, as if nothing happened before 1990. Other than mentioning the continuing visibility of Yayoi Kusama

2011. Instead, as he explains it, the economic boom of the '80s led, despite an intervening crash, to a cultural boom in the '90s, a creative ferment “driven by a generation who grew up in the bubble, but who now found their creativity liberated by the post-Bubble chaos.” He compares the environment to Paris and Berlin in the '20s and California

Favell focuses on a group of students who attended Tokyo National University of Fine Arts and Music, the country's most prestigious art school, in the late '80s. He says that their dynamism was born of frustration: “practically no contemporary gallerists [were] willing to nurture new artists, and at that point in time, virtually no art museums [were] showing international contemporary art.” That may be a complaint of the era's youth, but I'd call it a gross exaggeration. These (then) young people, most of them members of The Group 1965 (named after the year of their birth), offer several distinct alternatives to Murakami, who is just three years older. Their lesser fame is due primarily to their work's lack of a single brandable style. Unfortunately, that makes it hard to keep them straight in the discussion, and the illustrations—mostly black-and-white snapshots of the people, except for a 16-page color signature of artworks in the center of the book—do not overcome that liability. But then, this isn't mainly about the art.

Among these interesting figures is Masato Nakamura, who has organized various sorts of social interventions—from public performances to nonprofit art centers—as a means of changing



Tabaimo: *BLOW*, 2009, video installation, approx. 3¼-minute loop. Courtesy James Cohan Gallery, New York/Shanghai. Photo Jason Mandella.

society. Another is Tsuyoshi Ozawa, whose series have included boxes functioning as mini white-cube galleries, hung in public spaces or worn as backpacks; photographs or drawings of the endearing little statues of the bodhisattva Jizo found in numerous locations; and a Soy Sauce Museum of masterpieces reproduced in the namesake condiment.

At the heart of Favell's argument is Makoto Aida, who he says was, by popular consensus, the most important Japanese artist of the '90s. But Aida's dealer, who insisted on representing him exclusively, was reluctant to sell his work in the West, which may make some future retrospective easier to organize and explain but severely limited the artist's international recognition. Aida may be best remembered in New York for his huge painting of Japanese warplanes circling over Manhattan, which was shown at the Whitney Museum in 2003. Mocking his nation's sexism, Aida once proposed "to solve future

global food shortage by promoting a line of miniature edible artificial girls that would be served as Japanese culinary delicacies."

The book recounts, among other topics, the Mori Museum's 2001 hiring of the first foreign director of a major Japanese museum, David Elliott—a surprising attempt at internationalization. Favell also addresses the Yokohama Triennale, a late effort in the global game, hobbled by Japanese politics since its inauguration in 2001; Tokyo's Museum of Contemporary Art, founded in 1995, which suffers even more direct interference by the Tokyo government; the surplus of starchitect-designed museums with inexperienced staff and no collections; and civic-spirited efforts by developer, gallerist and public art impresario Fram Kitagawa "to bring art, visitors and investment" back to a declining region and reconnect people with nature in the Echigo-Tsumari Art Triennale. He also takes up the youngest generation of

successful Japanese artists, exemplified by the video-maker Tabaimo (b. 1975), who represented Japan at the 2011 Venice Biennale. Favell claims that artists born after the early 1970s, "the zero zero generation," are more at ease with the world and have a "less anguished relationship with national culture and identity than older generations." More provocatively, he says they have initiated a feminization of the Japanese art scene.

One can easily argue with Favell's assertion that "the staleness of the Western vision of Japanese contemporary art was already apparent . . . [in] . . . the recycling of Nara's greatest hits at [New York's] Asia Society in the Autumn of 2010," a ridiculous assertion devaluing a retrospective of significant work little seen in the U.S. He may be more justified in accusing Murakami of himself infantilizing Japanese culture—a charge the artist has repeatedly leveled against the West, even using it as grounds for the special-pleading "Little Boy" exhibition he curated for the Japan Society in New York in 2005. Elsewhere, Favell writes, regarding Kusama and Murakami: "the artwork-as-branding blurred the line between art experience and commerce, and might cheapen the experience of art. It was never clear the audience could tell the difference." But here he is applying a Western attitude toward art and business not shared in Japan.

Favell ends by noting that Japan's "dignified and calm response to the terrible catastrophes of 2011 [earthquake and nuclear meltdown] demonstrated its resilience in adversity." This, he claims, may "offer a much better guide to the uncertainties and fragilities of the 21st century than the rampant, unsustainable visions of globalization that drove the last two previous decades." There is real sense in this and many other Favell aperçus. For all its arguable judgments and assertions, his volume is a wonderful addition to the Japanese art bookshelf. ○

**JANET KOPLOS** is the author of *Contemporary Japanese Sculpture* (Abbeville, 1991) and coauthor, with Bruce Metcalf, of *Makers: A History of American Studio Craft* (University of North Carolina Press, 2010).