

For Immediate Release

Little Boy:
The Arts of Japan's Exploding Subculture

An Exhibition and Public Art Works
Curated by Takashi Murakami

Organized by Japan Society in collaboration with Public Art Fund
April 8-July 24, 2005

New York, NY, April 6, 2005 – The Japan Society in collaboration with the Public Art Fund presents Little Boy: The Arts of Japan's Exploding Subculture, a major exhibition at the Japan Society Gallery and an installation of artworks in New York City's public spaces and mass transit system in Spring 2005. The exhibition explores the phenomenally influential manifestations of otaku culture -- the subculture of "geeks" or "pop culture fanatics"-- a fantasy world where apocalyptic imagery, fetishistic commerce, and artistic vanguards meet. The otaku culture, which emerged in the early 1980s, is obsessed with darkly fantastic science fiction, video games, comic books (manga) and film animation (anime). Little Boy features works by leading creators of these popular forms as well as paintings, sculpture, and installations by contemporary Japanese Neo-Pop artists whose work draws from otaku culture. The exhibition, public art projects, and accompanying book create a dynamic arena in which to discover what Japanese critics, artists and intellectuals consider the most exciting and challenging cultural developments in Japan today.

Curated by celebrated artist Takashi Murakami, Little Boy is the final installment of his Superflat trilogy, a series of exhibitions that have introduced a new wave of Japanese art and explored the interrelationships between vanguard art, manga and anime, and their forerunner, Ukiyo-e woodblock prints. The earlier exhibitions (Superflat at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles in 2001; Coloriage at the Fondation Cartier de l'art contemporain, Paris in 2002) presented a visual logic for popular Japanese arts based on their "flat," cartoon-like style and fascination with supernatural realms. As the final installment of the "Superflat" trilogy, Little Boy goes beyond the spectacular optics of Japan's popular cultures to identify the darker fantasies of Japan's postwar graphic subculture, and draws on historical source material to illuminate the complex cultural, political and social conditions that shape the work of Japanese artists today.

"What marks Murakami as both so crucial and controversial a force is his position that both reflects and critiques the cultural and political trends that have given rise to Japan's otaku subculture and its related Neo-pop movement in contemporary art," remarks Alexandra Munroe, Japan Society's Vice President of Arts and Culture and Director of Japan Society Gallery. "Little Boy: The Arts of Japan's Exploding Subculture invites the artist into the museum to demonstrate his vision of Japan today. This is the reverse of the norm, where academically-trained curators shape the cultural discourse; here, Murakami presents us with his views from within the national psyche."

ABOUT THE EXHIBITION

The project's title, Little Boy, refers to the codename for the atomic bomb dropped on Hiroshima in 1945. Murakami's interpretation of Japan's popular culture and graphic arts of the past three decades is rooted in his country's memories of the war and in the evolution of Japan's understanding of its postwar condition. In Murakami's view, the specific historical events and processes that inform otaku culture include military aggression and defeat in the Pacific War (1932-1945); the devastation of the atomic bomb; Japan's military and political dependence on the United States; and, the replacement of a

traditional, hierarchical Japanese culture with a disposable consumer culture ostensibly produced for children and adolescents. The title also refers to the infantilization of the Japanese culture and mindset, evident in the fixation on cartoon imagery, “cute” products and young markets – a result, Murakami argues, of Japan’s economic and political dependence on the west. These unresolved conflicts, Little Boy suggests, are the explosive context of Japan’s pop culture.

To most Japanese, the term “Little Boy” conjures memories of catastrophic defeat. Murakami explores how cartoons and animation have been appropriated by artists as a means to resolve the trauma of atomic war, the devastation of defeat, and what he calls the “unmoored, apolitical state” that has emerged since. Focused often on apocalyptic imagery, with frequent references to atomic explosion and futuristic annihilation/salvation, the cartoons that dominate Japan’s media and entertainment industries provide a screen that both exaggerates and diminishes the real history that they function to suppress.

The exhibition features some 1,500 objects including over 600 original drawings and cells by Japan’s leading anime and manga artists Tohl Narita, Sh•ji •tomo, and Hideaki Anno and Takai Arai; 320 vintage Japanese toys from the Kitahara Collection; and hundreds of merchandise items representing such famous characters of postwar and contemporary Japanese film, TV and anime culture as Doraemon, Godzilla, and Hello Kitty.

Murakami’s selection of TV and film animation for the exhibition Little Boy includes some of the most well-known and popular anime of postwar Japan. To a remarkable extent, imagery of atomic bombs, toxic wastelands, and mass destruction dominate these cartoon narratives. In the 1970s TV series Time Bokan, each episode of time-machine travel concludes with a bright orange atomic explosion, wiping out the villains who then re-appear in the following week’s episode. The manga and feature film anime Akira, one of the greatest hits in anime history, witnesses the obliteration of Tokyo and a spectacle of human destruction that unfolds against a dystopian background of civil chaos. Finally, Neon Genesis Evangelion, which appeared in 1997 and is the cult anime of otaku, chronicles social and psychological disintegration as unremitting apocalypse descends over a once-demolished future Tokyo, now peopled with sinister robotic creatures. Evangelion is represented in the show by five pachinko machines whose pinball narrative represents the characters and struggle at the center of this cult phenomenon. In Little Boy, Murakami demonstrates how the national experience of nuclear disaster has created a graphic subculture obsessed with what has been termed the “post nuclear sublime.”

The exhibition presents iconic images drawn from Japanese popular culture juxtaposed with major works by contemporary Japanese artists, including Murakami, whose painting Time Bokan (named after the TV anime), represents a mushroom cloud, expresses the graphic obsession that defines the exhibition. Here, Murakami appropriates the central image of a famous children’s cartoon whose horror of a national disaster and global threat becomes so abstracted, so “flattened” as to be rendered “cute.”

Related to these narratives are Japanese special-effects (tokusatsu) monster films that repeatedly feature creatures born of radioactive mutation. Perhaps the most famous example is Godzilla, the Tokyo-devouring monster who awakens after eons of sleep beneath the sea by a hydrogen bomb explosion. His radiation-induced malformation and his nightly attacks that reduce the city to ashes, became a symbol of Japan’s vulnerability and essential state of terror in the postwar decades. The exhibition features clips from the classic Godzilla film plus a host of vintage Godzilla models, including one that over four feet tall.

Monstrous abstraction of organic life also feature in the works Neo-pop artists such as Kenji Yanobe and Noboru Tsubaki. Like Murakami, Yanobe and Tsubaki draw their imagery from Japan’s postwar anime culture, rendering global catastrophe in large-scale, cartoonish installations.

The image of “little boy” in Murakami’s work also personifies the culture of “cute” (kawaii) that dominates popular culture in Japan. The most famous icon of Japan’s “cute” culture is Hello Kitty, one of the most popular characters ever merchandised. The exhibition will feature an installation of Hello Kitty products as

well as a selection of hundreds of toys produced in the 1960s and 1970s, on loan from the largest private collection in Japan devoted to such merchandise.

Young artists whose visual effects are drawn from kawaii culture include Chinatsu Ban, Yoshitomo Nara, Chiho Aoshima, and Aya Takano. In all these works, kawaii elements – sweet, saturated color; cartoon-like forms; oversized heads of wide-eyed, baby-faced figures – are subtly distorted to reveal sinister goings-on. Nara's idiosyncratic sculptures and paintings of stunted children on the verge of violating themselves or others express the bewildered emptiness at the core of Little Boy's thesis, what Murakami calls "the tragic apocalyptic paradise that is Japan today."

PUBLIC ART FUND INSTALLATIONS

Public art installations will appear at staggered intervals throughout the run of the exhibition. A major sculptural installation by Chinatsu Ban will be presented at Doris C. Freedman Plaza at 60th Street and Fifth Avenue. Art will be brought into the subway when the complete advertising space of Manhattan's Union Square subway station features computer-generated mural paintings by Chiho Aoshima. A banner designed by Takashi Murakami will wrap the entire façade of the Japan Society's building on 47th Street. Additional Public Art Fund installations will be announced.

"Public Art Fund's 2003 collaboration with Murakami on the presentation of Reversed Double Helix at Rockefeller Center was the beginning of a lasting dialogue with the artist," says Tom Eccles, director of the Public Art Fund. "We are thrilled to work with him again, and with the the Japan Society for the first time, to expand this exhibition beyond the gallery into New York's dynamic public spaces. Several of the artists who are creating off-site works – including Ban and Aoshima – have emerged from Murakami's Kaikai Kiki workshop in recent years to pursue their own singular aesthetics."

THE CURATOR-TAKASHI MURAKAMI

Artist and curator Takashi Murakami (b. 1962, Tokyo) has emerged over the last decade as one of Japan's most inventive and influential artists, and enjoys international critical acclaim and popular fame. Murakami operates the Kaikai Kiki Factory in suburban Tokyo and in Brooklyn, New York, where artists under his tutelage produce paintings, sculptures, and other works informed by Japan's distinctive popular culture of manga and anime.

Murakami's ambitious work as a curator and cultural impresario has made him one of Japan's most provocative public intellectuals. Among the first Japanese critics to argue persuasively that contemporary mass culture be taken seriously as both sign and instrument of society, he has also devised a controversial, historical provenance for manga and anime. For Murakami, these idioms are not simply derivative of American pop culture, but belong to Japanese pictorial traditions that emphasize line, color, and lively flat surfaces in lieu of fictive, "Western" pictorial space. It is within this native, "Superflat" matrix that Murakami places manga, anime, his own work, and that of contemporary Neo-pop artists.

Takashi Murakami holds a BFA and a Ph.D. in traditional Japanese painting (nihon-ga) and an MFA from National University of Fine Arts and Music, Tokyo.

EXHIBITION CATALOGUE

Co-published by Japan Society and Yale University Press, and edited by Takashi Murakami, the 320-page bilingual catalogue features over 500 illustrations. The book includes an extensive essay on Japanese culture by Murakami and an introductory essay by Alexandra Munroe. Also featured are essays on Japanese Neo-Pop art and otaku culture by leading contemporary art critics Noi Sawaragi and Midori Matsui. Otaku writers Kaichiro Morikawa and Toshio Okada (known as "Otaku King") debate the genre's meanings in "Otaku Talk," a dialogue moderated by Murakami, who also edited the catalogue's extended entries. Critic Katy Siegel's essay positions Murakami's Superflat thesis in an international context of postwar and contemporary Pop art, and Tom Eccles recounts the Public Art Fund projects in his essay, "Murakami's Manhattan Project." Designed by Goto Design, the catalogue has worldwide distribution.

ORGANIZERS & SPONSORS

This exhibition is sponsored by Microsoft.

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The exhibition installation is designed by Tim Culbert and Celia Imrey of Imrey Culbert LLP, New York. Exhibition graphics are designed by Takaya Goto and Lesley Chi, Goto Design, New York.

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COOL JAPAN: OTAKU STRIKES! SEASON OF PROGRAMMING

Little Boy is the centerpiece of Japan Society's Spring 2005 season, titled Cool Japan: Otaku Strikes! an integrated offering of arts programs at Japan Society that explores the impact of Japan's otaku subculture on the most innovative film, performance art and commercial design in Japan today. A film and video series will screen works by Kazuyuki Izutsu, Tatsuya Mori and Naoto Takenaka. A performing arts series features the talents of the Rinko-gun Theater Company and playwright/director Yoji Sakate; offers an onkyo marathon with Japan's most revolutionary composer/musicians, curated by Carl Stone; and introduces a work-in-progress, Deadly She-Wolf Assassin at Armageddon!, written by Fred Ho and Ruth Margraff, with music and concept by Fred Ho – an homage to the 1970s samurai manga and movie series Lone Wolf and Cub (Kozure Okami). A series of three public lectures and discussion panels featuring leading historians of Japanese art, history and contemporary culture explore particular aspects of Japanese art within the context of its historical and continually thriving popular culture. In addition, the Museum of Modern Art will present a Japanese anime film series in conjunction with the Cool Japan season.

JAPAN SOCIETY GALLERY is among the premier institutions in the U.S. for the exhibition, research and publication of Japanese art. Extending in scope from prehistory to the present, the Gallery's exhibitions have covered topics as disparate as classical Buddhist sculpture and contemporary photography. The Gallery presents two major exhibitions each year, working with leading museums in Japan, the U.S., Asia and Europe to bring together objects of cultural significance, historical importance and high aesthetic value.

In conjunction with exhibitions, Japan Society Gallery publishes scholarly catalogues and organizes educational programs, including lectures, guided tours and symposia of international importance. Through these activities, the Gallery contributes to the scholarship, connoisseurship and appreciation of the art and culture of Japan and East Asia.

Japan Society Gallery has done exceptional work in recent years under the leadership of Alexandra Munroe, who won first prize for Best Show Originating in New York City by the International Art Critics Association for YES YOKO ONO. Furthermore, last year's Early Buddhist Art from Korea and Japan won

widespread critical and popular acclaim: The New York Times selected the exhibition as the Number One Best Show of 2003 in its year-end roundup.

PUBLIC ART FUND is New York's leading presenter of artists' projects, new commissions, and exhibitions in public spaces. For more than 25 years the Public Art Fund has been committed to working with emerging and established artists to produce innovative exhibitions of contemporary art for neighborhoods throughout New York City. By bringing artworks outside the traditional context of museums and galleries, the Public Art Fund provides increased access to the art of our time and provides artists with a unique opportunity to expand their artistic practice.

Under the leadership of President Susan K. Freedman and Director Tom Eccles, the Public Art Fund has greatly expanded its reach. In recent years, the Public Art Fund has brought landmark temporary installations to New York City's diverse public spaces including Julian Opie's *Animals, Buildings, Cars and People*, currently on view at City Hall Park through October 2005; an exhibition of Franz West's sculpture at Lincoln Center (2004); Janet Cardiff's *Her Long Black Hair*, an audio walk through Central Park (2004); Mariko Mori's *Wave UFO* in the heart of midtown Manhattan (2003); Takashi Murakami's *Reversed Double Helix* at Rockefeller Center in 2003 and Jonathan Borofsky's *Walking to the Sky* at the same location in 2004.

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Japan Society is located at 333 East 47th Street, between First and Second Avenues. For more information, call (212) 832-1155 or visit the website at www.japansociety.org. Japan Society Gallery hours: Tuesday – Thursday, 11 am – 6 pm; Friday, 11 am – 9 pm; Saturday and Sunday, 11 am – 5 pm. Closed on Mondays and major holidays. Admission: \$12; \$10 for seniors and students with ID; free for children 16 and under and members.

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