artnet

Print Article

Takashi Murakami at the press launch for "©Murakami" at the Brooklyn Art Museum

Installation view of "©Murakami" at the Brooklyn Art Museum

Installation view of work in "Take Your Time" at the Museum of Modern Art

THE RISE OF THE SUPERARTISTS
by Ben Davis

What do Olafur Eliasson and Takashi Marakami have in common? One is a neo-Light-and-Space artist who proffers installations with a nebulous environmental theme. The other is the Andy Warhol of Japanese cartoons. Eliasson is a lofty Apollonian. Murakami is an edgy Dionysian.

Yet -- aside from the fact that they are both just concluding high-profile mid-career surveys at big New York institutions -- the similarities between the two are also obvious. Both run art factories, where they oversee teams of assistants who produce their expensive works: Eliasson in Berlin, Murakami in Toyko and New York. Both command huge followings, inside and outside the art world.

A more obvious response might be that what they have in common is Louis Vuitton. Murakami has famously hitched his star to the luxury brand, giving it a makeover and plopping functional boutiques in the middle of his museum retrospective. Eliasson, for his part, was called in to create holiday display installations in all 350 global Vuitton locations in 2006.

You could also point out that both artists have lent their talents to car companies. Murakami did so in 2005, with his design for the prototype Nissan Pivo. Eliasson, more recently, created a BMW "art car" which he froze under a casing of ice, a statement about the German manufacturer's commitment to the environment which featured as the centerpiece of his touring retrospective when it debuted at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.

Yet beyond and behind all this, there is something else, an actual stylistic continuity that it is important to see beneath the distinct themes of their different oeuvres. Eliasson and Murakami, along with Damien Hirst and Cai Guo-Qiang, form nothing less than the cutting edge of a contemporary avant-garde. Hirst, Murakami, Eliasson and Cai are the Pablo Picasso, Georges Braque, Juan Gris and Fernand Léger of an artistic sensibility that will likely be remembered as one of the essential stylistic developments of the day -- the rise of the "superartist." Jeff Koons is this phenomenon's Paul Cézanne. Warhol is its Manet.

All of these figures are, of course, phenomenally successful. But it is not just their concurrent success that justifies grouping them. The characteristics of the "superartist," as I have argued with respect to the young artist Shaun El C. Leonardo [see "Man and Superman," Sept. 27, 2007], may be based on an ability to penetrate the media, but they also constitute a real axis of esthetic invention.

First of all, as each of these figures has evolved, their work has increasingly refused to be constrained by the narrow confines of the art community. The very nature of their practice, and its status as art, depends on its interweaving with wider media. From figures of narrow significance within a certain tradition they have evolved into cultural impresarios, bringing their trademark art sensibility to cartoons, clothing lines and commissions for tourism boards.

Louis Vuitton boutique featured as part of "©Murakami" at the Brooklyn Art Museum

Olafur Eliasson's *Eye See You* at a Louis Vuitton boutique, 2006

Takashi Murakami's Nissan Pivo, with his new Pivo-chan character

Olafur Eliasson's *Your mobile expectations: BMW H2R project* (2007) at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art

This then rebounds on what they do within the art world, affecting its definition and presentation. "Superart" has a populist touch, and appreciation of the work tends to be an appreciation of being part of a collective, as opposed to an individual, esthetic experience, just as the works themselves tend away from personal statements and towards blank social referents -- death, change, media, atmosphere. Experiencing the wonder, shock or enthusiasm of other viewers is part of the game. Hence, the Ripley's Believe It or Not spectacle of Hirst's diamond-clad skull, and the long lines awaiting it, the ephemeral bliss of Cai Guo-Qiang's pyrotechnics, the way Murakami's sculptures and paintings catalyze manga-mania, the amusement-park enthusiasm of crowds observing each other within the haze of Eliasson's artificial sun at the Tate Modern.

Ordinarily, when critics speak of the art world as part of the "culture industry," they are guilty of a loose use of concepts. The notion of the "culture industry," as famously put forward in Horkheimer and Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, refers to a specific, Taylorized mode of industrial creativity, characteristic of Hollywood. It is pitched against the tradition of individual expression that it has been the art world's historical vocation to preserve -- albeit in a form that is increasingly self-contradictory. However, with the superartists, who function more and more like "imagineers," who cut their work to the specifications of giant institutions, whose work is indivisibly associated with production by their own boutique design studios, "visual art" becomes less and less distinct from mass culture, and the idea gains more traction (though Horkheimer and Adorno's totalizing, "resistance is futile" rhetoric is still a fairly unhelpful way to analyze such phenomena).

(As an aside, I would add that if it seems that the superartist field is particularly male-dominated -- even given the famous male bias of the art world in general -- this probably stems from the same reasons that there are disproportionately few successful female architects or film directors: It is just hard to convince the moneymen to get on board with a woman's ambitious vision.)

When I have discussed the "superartist" concept with people, their first reaction is usually to treat it an evaluative category (as in, "But Eliasson is really quite soulful," or "It's true -- Murakami is a hack"). In fact, it is a descriptive category. These artists are simply capturing a contradictory set of contemporary cultural developments -- on the one hand, they reflect the increased mainstream currency of contemporary art, and a popular hunger for meaningful experience; on the other, this is bound up with museums' need for the media-frenzy of prefab blockbusters and the desire of corporate sponsors to use art to put on a human face.

Still, some evaluation is in order. So I will say that, of Eliasson and Murakami, I believe that Murakami better grasps the implications of what he does. Eliasson's recent retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art was titled "Take Your Time," a phrase clearly meant to pitch the show as a defense of the subjective experience of art in response to the go-go-GO temporality of commercial culture, preserving the temple-like esthetic austerity of MoMA. However, Eliasson's practice, based on a technocratic manipulation of perceptual effects, does not really lend itself to this kind of appreciation. The "time" of the title is the objective time of science, warning viewers to let their retinas adjust to whatever environmental manipulation the artist is plunging them into. You experience, above all, admiration for Eliasson's engineering prowess.

Murakami, on the other hand, seems much more at home with his superartist status, perhaps because he hails from a country that has a weak contemporary art market in the first place, meaning that he has always conceived of himself as transcending its narrow confines.

Construction site for new performing art center in Reykjavik, with cladding designed by Olafur Eliasson

Takashi Murakami's *Miss ko2 (Project ko2)* (1997), installed at the Wonder Festival in the summer of 2000
Photo by Kazuo Fukunaga

Olafur Eliasson
The Weather Project
2003
Tate Modern

"One-hundred percent yes," was his Warholian answer when, on the occasion of his "©Murakami" show at the Brooklyn Museum, someone from *New York* magazine asked if his partnership with Vuitton affected his art practice. More importantly, however, Murakami accurately pitches his promiscuous style of artistic spectacle as a product of a specific, interpenetrating alignment of economy and culture -- the definitive characteristic of "superartistry" -- rather than disguising it as an autotelic form of perceptual investigation, as Eliasson tends to do.

The same interviewer asked Murakami what he would do if the bottom fell out of the art market. "I'll keep making art -- paper and pen," he replied. "I'll make small things." So all hail to the superartists, as long as they last.

BEN DAVIS is associate editor of *Artnet Magazine*. He can be reached at bdavis@artnet.com

Actress Kim Cattrall takes in Olafur Eliasson's *I Only See Things When They Move* (1997) at the Museum of Modern Art

Snapshot of Takashi Murakami and rapper Kanye West in front of *Hiropon*
From www.kaikaikiki.co.jp